

Teaching *Current Directions in Psychological Science*

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Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#). Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

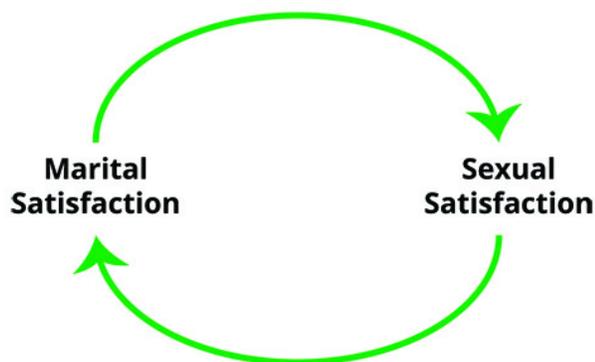
The Two-Way Traffic Between Sexual Relationship Satisfaction

by David G. Myers

[Maxwell, J., & McNulty, J. \(2019\). No longer in a ‘dry spell’: The developing understanding of how sex influences romantic relationships. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 28\(1\), 102-107. doi: 10.1177/0963721418806690](#)

Sexual relations have social significance. We can know all about the physiology of sex — that the spasms of orgasm come at 0.8-second intervals, with blood pressure up 40 or so points and respiration at 40 breaths per minute — yet miss the human bonding that both enables and grows from sexual intimacy. Good sex enhances a loving relationship, and a loving relationship enhances sex.

This “bidirectional” relationship between sexual and relationship satisfaction is the first lesson of research reviewed by Florida State University psychologists Jessica Maxwell and James McNulty (2019). Two longitudinal studies from their lab revealed — consistent with earlier studies — that “higher sexual satisfaction at one time-point predicted increased marital satisfaction 6–8 months later,” and that (albeit with lesser support) “higher marital satisfaction at one time-point predicted increased sexual satisfaction 6–8 months later.” Moreover, the bidirectionality occurs among both women and men, and newlyweds and longer-term couples (Fallis, Rehman, Woody, & Purdon, 2016; McNulty, Wenner, & Fisher, 2016).



At this point, instructors could pause to ask: Why might this be? What might explain each arrow in this simple summary?

Sexual satisfaction → relationship satisfaction. Maxwell and McNulty note that sex helps bond partners by causing them to associate each other with a rewarding experience. “We come to like people who make us feel good, or who are present when we feel good.” Such includes a lingering “afterglow” that predicts enhanced relationship satisfaction (Meltzer et al., 2017). Making love — self-giving, sensitive, joyful, pleasurable love — means more than mere recreation or procreation. It is to know one’s partner intimately and then to link that partner with gratification.

Relationship satisfaction → sexual satisfaction. Marital satisfaction offers a comfortable context for sex. When a romantic relationship is sealed with a secure commitment — when there is minimal anxiety about performance, and when there is an experience-rooted sensitivity to one another’s desires and responses — intimacy can flourish. “Satisfying relationships [infuse] positive affect into sexual experiences,” say Maxwell and McNulty. And when confident of a partner’s acceptance, low body self-esteem is a diminished barrier to sexual frequency and satisfaction (Meltzer & McNulty, 2010). Couples are freer to replicate the story of Eden’s utopia, where the partners “were both naked, and were not ashamed” and delighted in becoming “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24–25).

Maxwell and McNulty also discuss the interaction of personality traits with sexual and relationship satisfaction. And they offer a model that incorporates both automatic (associative) and controlled processing. Even without exploring these workings, an instructor could invite students to respond with clickers, or to anonymously write their answers to two additional discussion questions . . . which (to respect privacy) the instructor might collect and read:

The researchers explored the bidirectional sex ← →love association in committed relationships. Would you guess the same reciprocal influence applies to casual sexual relationships? For example, would you expect the sexual afterglow affect to occur equally after 1-night hook-ups?
Some pertinent evidence:

Some studies indicate that when sex begins after a relationship progresses to a commitment such as marriage, couples experience both greater relationship stability and better sex (Busby, Carroll, & Willoughby, 2010; Galinsky & Sonenstein, 2013).

Although casual sex is, for some, pleasurable and positive (de Jong, Adams & Reis, 2018; Vrangalova, 2014), other research indicates that orgasm occurs more often, and with fewer morning-after regrets, when sex happens in a committed relationship (Garcia, Massey & Merriwether, 2012, 2013).

Would you expect the reciprocal influence of sex and love to differ for heterosexual and LGBTQ relationships?

Rosenfeld (2014) reports that the benefits of commitment — of “vow power” — apply regardless of sexual orientation. If they had married or entered into a civil union, gay and straight couples experienced almost identical stability in their relationships — and, if they had not committed, almost identical instability.

Students surely will welcome psychological insights into sex, love, and relationships. Psychological science confirms the interplay of sex and love. And it reminds us — as we can remind students — that we humans have a “need to belong” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). We flourish when supported by enduring, close, committed, secure, intimate attachments.

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