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Keeping the Spark Alive: Being Motivated to Meet a Partner's Sexual Needs Sustains Sexual Desire in Long-Term Romantic Relationships

Amy Muise[1], Emily A. Impett[1], Aleksandr Kogan[2], and Serge Desmarais[3]

Abstract

How can couples keep the sexual spark alive in long-term relationships? The current study draws upon existing research and theory on both communal relationships and approach-avoidance models of social motivation to test the hypothesis that individual differences in the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs, termed *sexual communal strength*, predict heightened feelings of sexual desire in long-term partnerships. In a 21-day daily experience study of 44 long-term couples, individuals higher in sexual communal strength engaged in daily sexual interactions for approach goals, and in turn, reported high levels of daily sexual desire. Sexual communal strength also buffered against declines in sexual desire over a 4-month period of time. These associations held after controlling for general communal strength, relationship satisfaction, sexual frequency, age, and whether or not the couples had children. These findings demonstrate the utility of extending theories of communal motivation to the sexual domain of relationships.

Keywords

sexual desire, communal strength, approach-avoidance motivation, sexual goals, long-term couples

> During the first year of the wedding, put a quarter in a jar each time you make love. Then during the second year, take a quarter out each time you make love. At the end of the second year go to a good restaurant with what's left . . . —Anonymous

Popular perception suggests that marriage (or a long-term partnership) marks the end of sexual desire in a relationship. Indeed, research reveals that sexual desire typically peaks in the early stages of relationships and then decreases over time (see reviews by Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999; Impett, Muise, & Peragine, in press). Lower levels of desire among long-term couples have been attributed to habituation to a partner, the decreased importance placed on sex in longer relationships, and lifestyle changes such as parenthood and age (Call, Sprecher, & Schwartz, 1995; Liu, 2000). Not all couples experience these declines, however, and some are able to maintain strong feelings of passion and desire for several decades (Acevedo & Aron, 2009).

In the current study, we draw upon research on communal relationships (Clark & Mills, 2012) and approach-avoidance theories of motivation (Gable & Impett, 2012) to understand *who* is most likely to maintain sexual desire in long-term relationships and *why* such individuals are able to do so. Our central prediction is that the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs, termed *sexual communal strength*, fuels desire on a daily basis and over time in long-term partnerships. We further predict that people high in sexual communal strength experience greater sexual desire because they are motivated to engage in sex for approach partner-focused reasons, such as to please their partners and to enhance intimacy in their relationships.

Sexual Desire Over the Course of a Relationship

Sexual desire is often highest in the early stages of a relationship and declines over time (Sprecher & Regan, 1998). Baumeister and Bratslavsky (1999) suggest that desire is highest in new relationships when intimacy is increasing rapidly as partners get to know each other, and decreases over the course of the relationships as levels of intimacy become more stable. Declines in desire among long-term couples have also been attributed to habituation to a partner and the decreased

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importance placed on sex in longer relationships (Levine, 2003; Liu, 2000). Only a small number of studies have considered sexual desire specifically, but similar declines have been demonstrated in sexual frequency and quality over the course of a relationship (Call, Sprecher, & Schwartz, 1995; Klusmann, 2002; Liu, 2003). Despite this, declines in sexual desire are not inevitable (Acevedo & Aron, 2009), and almost no research has considered the factors that enable couples to maintain desire over the long term.

Understanding the factors that contribute to the experience of sexual desire in romantic relationships has important implications for the overall quality and functioning of romantic relationships. People who report higher levels of sexual desire have fewer thoughts about leaving their current relationship (Regan, 2000) and report being more satisfied in their relationships (Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004). Apt, Hurlbert, Pierce, and White (1996) created profiles of satisfaction based on a cluster analysis of women's marital and sexual satisfaction ratings and found that sexual desire was the single best discriminator between classification profiles. Sexual desire was significantly lower in the group that showed severe dissatisfaction with their relationship and highest in the group that reported high relationship and sexual satisfaction. Although having children influences levels of sexual desire, relationship satisfaction is more closely associated with sexual frequency than the presence of children (Call et al., 1995). Further, relationship satisfaction was associated with sexual desire maintenance in a sample of women who were 12 weeks and 6 months postpartum, a time when desire declines are typical (De Judicibus & McCabe, 2002). Given the importance of sexual desire for the maintenance of satisfying relationships, it is imperative to investigate factors that help couples maintain desire over the course of their relationship. Applying a communal approach—giving benefits based on the partner's needs and without expectation of direct reciprocation (Clark & Mills, 2012)—to sexual relationships provides one promising avenue for understanding how we can promote and enable couples to ultimately sustain sexual desire in long-term relationships.

A Communal Approach to Sexual Relationships

One way researchers have characterized close relationships is based on a communal-exchange distinction (Clark & Mills, 1979; Mills & Clark, 1982). In communal relationships, individuals feel a sense of responsibility for meeting their partners' needs and provide benefits to their partners noncontingently based on these needs. In contrast, in exchange relationships, benefits are given to a partner with the expectation that similar benefits will be returned. Although this initial research has documented broad differences between communal and exchange relationships, more recent work in this area has shown that across close relationships, people vary in the extent to which they feel responsible for meeting a partner's needs. Individual differences in the motivation to respond noncontingently to a specific partner's needs are referred to as *communal strength* (Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004). For example, one person might be willing to move to another city so that his or her romantic partner can take a new job (high communal strength), whereas another may consider the move too high a price to pay for maintaining the relationship (low communal strength). Individuals high in communal strength tend to provide more help to friends in need (Mills et al., 2004), are more emotionally expressive (Clark & Finkel, 2005), and offer more support in response to a partner's anger (Yoo, Clark, Lemay, Salovey, & Monin, 2011).

Romantic partners indicate that following communal norms (i.e., giving benefits to improve a partner's welfare), as opposed to exchange norms (i.e., giving benefits with the expectation that similar benefits will be reciprocated), is ideal in long-term relationships as they create opportunities for mutually enjoyable activities that meet both partners' needs (Clark, Lemay, Graham, Pataki, & Finkel, 2010). In addition, communally motivated individuals reap important benefits for the self, such as experiencing more intrinsic joy, delight, and satisfaction when making costly sacrifices for a romantic partner (Kogan et al., 2010). These findings are part of a growing body of research demonstrating that the benefits of giving are attributed to the desire to provide care to close others as opposed to the desire to receive care in return (e.g., Canevello & Crocker, 2010). Individual differences in communal strength should be particularly relevant to the sexual domain of relationships. Given that a partner's sexual needs and desires play a role in an individual's decision to pursue sex in established relationships (see Impett & Peplau, 2003 for a review), the extent to which an individual feels responsible for meeting a partner's sexual needs may be particularly salient for the experience of sexual benefits. As such, in the current study, we examine whether being communally motivated to meet a partner's sexual needs is associated with increases in an individual's own level of sexual desire.

Approach Sexual Motivation

We draw upon approach-avoidance theories of social motivation (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006; see review by Gable & Impett, 2012) to further suggest that a critical reason why sexual communal strength fuels sexual desire concerns people's reasons or *goals* for engaging in sex with an intimate partner. Existing research applying approach-avoidance theory to sexuality distinguishes between two broad classes of sexual goals (Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998; Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005). When people engage in sex for approach goals, they seek to obtain positive outcomes such as their own physical pleasure (a self-focused goal) or a partner's pleasure (a partner-focused goal). When engaging in sex for avoidance goals, however, they seek to avert negative outcomes such as their own stress or anxiety (a self-focused goal) or a partner's disappointment or anger (a partner-focused goal). Recent work has shown that sexual goals that involve a focus on the partner as opposed to the self are particularly strong in established, committed relationships (Cooper, Barber, Zhaoyang & Talley, 2011).

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People who are high in communal strength are motivated to care for their partners' needs without the expectation of immediate returns (Mills et al., 2004). To date, no research has explicitly explored the association between communal strength and approach-avoidance motivation in relationships. However, previous research suggests that the motivation to meet a partner's needs is a key component of communal strength and that high communal strength should be associated with a heightened motivation to pursue and create positive outcomes for one's partner and one's romantic relationship. For example, when people are led to desire a communal relationship, as opposed to an exchange relationship, they pay closer attention to a partner's needs (Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986). In addition, in comparison to those who are low in communal strength, people high in communal strength focus more on giving emotional support, physical help, and advice to their friends (Mills et al., 2004), and one important factor in maintaining a communal relationship is being motivated to focus on and support a partner's needs (Clark & Mills, 2010). Therefore, we expect that this other-oriented relationship focus will lead people to engage in sex for approach goals that are focused on the partner such as increasing a partner's pleasure or building relationship intimacy.

Insomuch as sexual communal strength is associated with partner-focused approach motivation, engaging in sex for approach goals should fuel desire in long-term relationships. Indeed, three studies with college students provide initial evidence that approach sexual goals are associated with heightened sexual desire (Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008). In the current study, we extend this initial work and investigate for the first time whether certain individuals are more likely to experience and sustain sexual desire in long-term romantic partnerships.

The Current Study

To test our predictions regarding the role of sexual communal strength in fueling sexual desire in long-term partnerships, we conducted a 21-day dyadic daily experience study with a 4-month longitudinal follow-up. We predicted that individuals who are high in sexual communal strength would report engaging in sex to pursue partner-focused approach goals. In turn, we expected that engaging in sex for approach goals would promote daily sexual desire. We also expected that individuals with high sexual communal strength would be buffered against experiencing declines in desire over time. Finally, we also expected that high levels of sexual communal strength would fuel sexual desire even beyond the influence of other commonly studied predictors of desire in long-term relationships including gender, relationship duration, relationship satisfaction, sexual frequency, age, and the presence of children in the household.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Our sample included both members of 44 heterosexual couples ranging in age from 23 to 60 ($M = 35.4$, $SD = 9.7$ years). Most (82%) participants were White. All of the couples were living together, and most (68%) were married. The couples had been involved in their relationships from 3 to 39 years ($M = 11.1$, $SD = 8.8$). Approximately half of the couples had children (48%), and of these, most had one or two children ($M = 1.8$, $SD = 1.1$).

Both members of the couple were instructed to begin the study on the same day and to complete each diary in private. On the first day, the couples completed a longer background survey, and then completed a 10-min survey each night for 21 consecutive days. Participants completed an average of 17.7 (of 21) daily surveys for a total of 1,560 days. Each partner was paid $40 for participating. Sixty-eight (77%) of these participants completed a 10-min follow-up survey 4 months after the completion of the daily diary study.

Person-Level Relationship and Sexuality Measures

In the initial online survey, both members of the couple individually completed several relationship and sexuality scales, all measured on 5-point scales. General *communal strength* was measured with the Mills et al. (2004) scale. Participants responded to 10 questions such as "How large a cost would you incur to meet a need of your partner?" ($\alpha = .77$). *Sexual communal strength* was measured with 6 items adapted from Mills et al. to capture the motivation to respond to a romantic partner's *sexual* needs. The items included: "How far would you be willing to go to meet your partner's sexual needs?" "How readily can you put the sexual needs of your partner out of your thoughts?" "How high a priority for you is meeting the sexual needs of your partner?" "How easily could you accept not meeting your partner's sexual needs?" "How likely are you to sacrifice your own needs to meet the sexual needs of your partner?" "How happy do you feel when satisfying your partner's sexual needs?"($\alpha = .77$). *Relationship satisfaction* was assessed with 5 items from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998) such as "Our relationship makes me happy" ($\alpha = .94$). *Quality of alternatives* was assessed with 5 items from Rusbult et al. (1998) such as "My needs for intimacy, companionship, etc., could easily be fulfilled in an alternate relationship" ($\alpha = .88$). *Sexual desire* was measured in the background and follow-up surveys (both αs = .96) with 25 items from the Hurlbert Index of Sexual Desire (Apt & Hurlbert, 1992) such as "My desire for sex with my partner is strong."

Daily-Level Sexuality Measures

Each day, participants indicated whether or not they engaged in sex with their partner. Participants reported engaging in sex an average of once per week over the 21-day study ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 2.33$, Range = 1–10 days). Each time they engaged in sex, they completed measures of sexual goals and sexual desire. Sexual goals were measured with 23 items (Cooper et al., 1998), including six self-focused approach goals (e.g., *to pursue my own sexual pleasure*, $\alpha = .80$), six partner-focused approach goals (e.g., *to please my partner*, $\alpha = .92$), five

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self-focused avoidance goals (e.g., *to relieve stress*, $\alpha = .70$), and six partner-focused avoidance goals (e.g., *to prevent my partner from becoming upset*, $\alpha = .89$). Sexual desire was measured with the item "I felt a great deal of sexual desire for my partner today" (Impett et al., 2008).

Results

We analyzed the data using multilevel modeling in the hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) computer program (Version 6.08; Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, & Congdon, 2004). We used a three-level model to simultaneously control for dependencies in the same person's reports across days and dependencies between partners (Gable & Poore, 2008; Kogan et al., 2010). We tested our mediational hypotheses with methods developed for the analysis of multilevel data (Zhang, Zyphur, &Preacher, 2009), and used the Monte Carlo Method for Assessing Mediation (MCMAM; Selig & Preacher, 2008) with 20,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) to test the significance of the indirect effects. Significant mediation is indicated when the confidence interval does *not* include zero.

Our first prediction concerned the association between sexual communal strength and daily sexual desire. As we hypothesized, those who were higher in sexual communal strength reported higher levels of daily sexual desire, $b = .90$, $t(80) = 4.37$, $p < .001$. We also tested partner-focused approach goals as the mechanism for this association. Indeed, individuals who were higher in sexual communal strength were more likely to have sex for partner-focused approach goals, $b = .62$, $t(80) = 3.42$, $p = .001$. Sexual communal strength was not significantly associated with self-focused approach goals, $b = .15$, $t(80) = .56$, $p = .58$, self-focused avoidance goals, $b = -.21$, $t(80) = -1.02$, $p = .31$, or partner-focused avoidance goals, $b = -.19$, $t(80) = -.82$, $p = .42$, indicating that people higher in sexual communal strength are oriented toward meeting their partner's sexual needs, and not toward seeking their own pleasure or avoiding negative outcomes for either themselves or their romantic partner. In turn, partner-focused approach goals were positively associated with daily sexual desire, $b = .33$, $t(80) = 3.52$, $p = .001$, and this partially accounted for the link between sexual communal strength and daily desire, indirect effect 95% CI [.07, .39]; direct effect = .73, $t(80) = 3.35$, $p = .002$.

Our second prediction was that high levels of sexual communal strength would buffer against declines in desire over time. As expected, sexual communal strength significantly predicted sexual desire at the 4-month follow-up controlling for sexual desire at the baseline of the study, $b = .53$, $t(60) = 3.19$, $p = .003$. To further understand the nature of this association, we compared people who were "high" (i.e., 1 *SD* above the mean) versus "low" (i.e., 1 *SD* below the mean) in sexual communal strength. Figure 1 displays the sexual desire of these two groups of individuals at the two time points in the study. First, participants who were low in sexual communal strength had lower levels of desire ($M = 2.62$, $SE = .09$) than did participants high in sexual communal strength ($M = 2.95$, $SE = .09$) at the baseline of the study, $t(86) = 2.59$, $p = .01$.

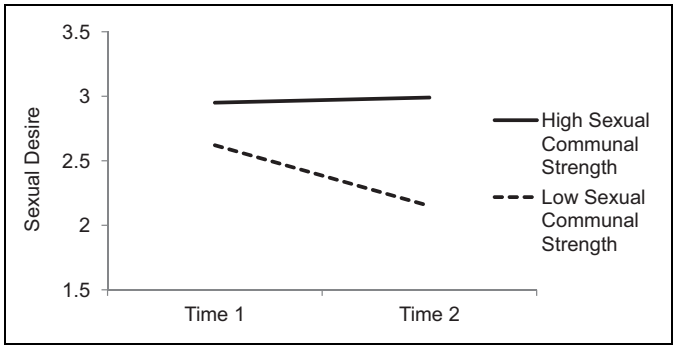

Figure 1. Changes in sexual desire from background to follow-up in people high compared to low in sexual communal strength.

Second, whereas individuals low in sexual communal strength declined in sexual desire over the course of the study, $b = -.47$, $t(61) = -3.95$, $p < .001$, those high in sexual communal strength maintained desire over a 4-month period, $b = .04$, $t(61) = .32$, $p = .75$.

Ruling Out Alternative Explanations

In order to rule out several alternative explanations for our findings, we conducted additional analyses to control for potential confounds. Sexual communal strength was significantly correlated with communal strength ($r = .59$, $p < .001$), suggesting that individuals who are more generally oriented toward meeting a romantic partner's needs also have a greater willingness to meet their partner's sexual needs. Therefore, we conducted a subsequent set of analyses to control for general communal strength. When we did so, all of the reported daily and longitudinal associations remained significant, suggesting that our effects tap communal motivation in the context-specific domain of sexuality. We also controlled for the romantic partner's sexual communal strength (although this was not significantly correlated with actor's sexual communal strength, $r = .16$, $p = .12$) to further ensure that our effects are not simply a function of having partners who are highly motivated to care for one's own sexual needs, and all of the reported effects remained significant.

We also explored the possibility that people high in sexual communal strength are more motivated to meet their partner's needs because they perceive fewer quality alternatives to their current relationship. In fact, sexual communal strength was marginally correlated with perceived quality of alternatives ($r = -.20$, $p = .06$), but the associations between sexual communal strength, approach sexual goals, and sexual desire remained significant after controlling for perceived quality of alternatives. We also tested the possibility that a discrepancy in partners' perceived quality of alternatives fuels sexual communal strength (the partner who perceives fewer quality alternatives is more motivated to meet the sexual needs of a partner who feels that he or her has higher quality alternatives). To do so, we created an interaction term between partners' perceived quality of alternatives, but this was not a significant predictor of sexual communal strength, suggesting that sexual communal

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strength is not the result of differences between partners' perceived quality of alternatives.

We conducted another set of analyses in order to control for several commonly studied predictors of desire, including gender, relationship duration, relationship satisfaction, sexual frequency, age, and whether or not the couples had children (e.g., Call et al., 1995). Men ($M = 4.81$) were higher in sexual communal strength than women, $M = 4.47$; $t(86) = 3.32$, $p < .001$, and longer relationship duration was associated with higher sexual communal strength ($r = .23$, $p = .04$). Sexual communal strength was associated with higher relationship satisfaction ($r = .38$, $p < .001$) but was not associated with sexual frequency ($r = .03$, $p = .81$), number of children ($r = .18$, $p = .10$), age ($r = 13$, $p = .24$), or partner's age ($r = 14$, $p = .22$). All of the daily and longitudinal effects of sexual communal strength on sexual desire remained significant after controlling for each of these factors. Further, none of these variables moderated any of our effects, suggesting that high levels of sexual communal strength fueled sexual desire regardless of gender, age, relationship duration, how frequently couples engaged in sex, how satisfied they were, and whether or not they had children.

Finally, sexual communal strength was not significantly associated with a partner's daily sexual desire, $b = .13$, $t(76) = .54$, $p = .58$, ruling out the possibility that high sexual communal strength is simply the result of having a partner who is high in desire and therefore has more intense sexual needs. There were also no significant interactions between partners' sexual communal strength scores in predicting either daily sexual desire, $b = .08$, $t(76) = .64$, $p = .52$ or sexual desire at the 4-month follow-up, $b = .11$, $t(60) = 1.36$, $p = .18$.

Discussion

In this 21-day daily experience study of long-term couples, we found that individuals who are motivated to meet their romantic partner's sexual needs experienced sexual benefits for the self. Higher levels of sexual communal strength promoted greater daily sexual desire, and this was partially attributed to the tendency of people high in sexual communal strength to pursue sex for partner-focused approach goals. In addition, people higher in sexual communal strength at the beginning of the study maintained higher levels of sexual desire over a 4-month time period, whereas people lower in sexual communal strength experienced declines in sexual desire over time that tend to be more typical of long-term couples.

A Communal Approach to Sexual Relationships

The current study highlights the utility of considering communal motivation in the specific domain of sexuality. Previous work has conceptualized communal strength as a global relationship variable. The present findings demonstrate that beyond this global motivation, individuals have domain-specific motivational tendencies with profound relationship consequences. Being motivated to meet a partner's sexual needs is beneficial to the self—a finding that is consistent with research suggesting that more communally motivated people reap important benefits because of their desire to meet the needs of others, and not because of a desire to receive care in return (Canevello & Crocker, 2010; Kogan et al., 2010).

The current study is also the very first to document an empirical link between communal strength and approach motivation. Based on previous research and theory on communal relationships showing that communally motivated individuals focus more on a partner's needs (Clark et al., 1986; Clark & Mills, 2010) and are highly motivated to give benefits to close others (Mills et al., 2004), we had expected that individuals high in communal strength would be approach motivated. Indeed, we found that people higher in sexual communal strength have stronger partner-focused approach sexual goals, which in turn fueled their sexual desire for a long-term partner.

Approach Sexual Motivation

In line with the growing body of literature on the benefits of approach-motivated sex (e.g., Impett et al., 2008), the current findings indicate that approach partner-focused sexual goals are a critical mechanism that link sexual communal motivation to sexual benefits. These findings provide the first clue as to *why* individuals who are highly motivated to care for their partner's sexual needs experience boosts in their own feelings of sexual desire. In addition, this research provides a critical extension of Impett et al.'s (2008) previous work on approach motivation and sexual desire in undergraduate dating couples to a sample of married and cohabitating couples. Indeed, approach sexual goals fuel sexual desire, not only in shorter term relationships in which sexual desire is likely at its peak, but more critically in long-term relationships in which many couples struggle with issues of low sexual desire (e.g., Sprecher & Regan, 1998).

Future Directions

The current findings raise several important questions for future research. Although we have demonstrated the utility of applying theories of communal motivation to the sexual domain of relationships, the current research does not inform how exchange norms and dynamics in long-term relationship influence sexual desire. Clark and colleagues (2010) report that communal norms (as opposed to exchange norms) are rated as ideal and are more often reported in long-term relationships. At the same time, couples report sometimes following exchange norms more than desired and communal norms less than desired. Baumeister and Vohs (2004) propose a theory of sexual economics that demonstrates the utility of applying exchange theory to sexual interactions in heterosexual relationships and suggest that, because men typically have higher sexual desire than women, sex is a female resource that can be exchanged for other resources. As such, one motive for engaging in sex may be to receive something of comparable value in return. Currently, this theory is focused on early relationship

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negotiation, and it is not clear how it extends to long-term relationships or to feelings of sexual desire, but considering how exchange goals for sex are associated with sexual desire in established couples is an important avenue for future research.

Another relevant avenue for future work in this area is a consideration of the factors that promote sexual communal strength in relationships. Recent research suggests that expressing gratitude to a relationship partner promotes communal strength (Lambert, Clark, Durtschi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010). One direction for future research is to consider how feelings of gratitude are linked to sexual aspects of the relationship. Expressions of gratitude for a romantic partner may be one way to promote sexual communal strength, and in turn, sexual desire, in intimate relationships. Clark and Mills (2010) also suggest that self-disclosure is a key aspect of communal relationships. Therefore, disclosure about sexual needs, wants, and desires may be an important way to promote sexual communal strength in ongoing relationships. Future research would benefit from an exploration of the relational factors that may promote and boost sexual communal strength in long-term couples.

Implications and Conclusion

Feelings of sexual desire for a partner have important implications for relationship quality. People who report higher levels of sexual desire are typically more satisfied with their relationships (Apt, Hurlbert, Pierce, & White, 1996; Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004) and have fewer thoughts about leaving their current partner (Regan, 2000). In addition, low sexual desire can be detrimental for intimacy and stability in a relationship (McCarthy, 1999) and is the most common reason couples seek sex therapy (Beck, 1995) . Despite this, few studies have investigated the factors that promote sexual desire, especially in the context of established relationships. In conclusion, although declines in sexual desire over the course of a relationship are typical, they are not inevitable (Acevedo & Aron, 2009). The current study is the first in the literature to identify *who* is most likely to maintain desire over the course of a relationship and provide initial evidence that being motivated to meet a partner's sexual needs can help keep the spark alive in long-term relationships.

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