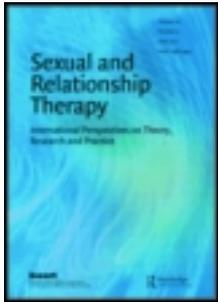


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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Sexual and Relationship Therapy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csmt20>

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Available online: 30 Jan 2012

To cite this article: Sarah H. Murray, Olga Sutherland & Robin R. Milhausen (2012): Young women's descriptions of sexual desire in long-term relationships, *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, DOI:10.1080/14681994.2011.649251

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2011.649251>



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Young women's descriptions of sexual desire in long-term relationships

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(Received 9 September 2011; final version received 5 December 2011)

The aim of this study was to gain a greater understanding of how women in emerging adulthood describe and make sense of their experience of sexual desire in long-term relationships. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with women in long-term relationships (2.5 years or longer) in emerging adulthood (ages 18–29) regarding their experiences of sexual desire. In order to ensure a range of experiences, we recruited two groups of women: those who were “wondering where the passion has gone” and those who felt “the passion was still alive”. Data were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. Women provided various explanations for why they continued to experience high desire or experience a decrease in desire. Similarities and differences between the two groups of women are explored and implications of this study's results are discussed.

Keywords: sexual desire; women; long-term relationships; descriptions

Introduction

Considerable theoretical and empirical attention has been devoted to sexual desire in the sexuality research (Levine, 2002). Researchers have explored women's sexual desire from a number of perspectives, including redefining the construct of desire based on women's descriptions (Brotto, 2010), investigating factors that might predict desire (Carvalho & Nobre, 2010), proposing ways to maintain desire in romantic relationships (Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008) and investigating treatment interventions for low desire (Korda, Goldstein, & Goldstein, 2010). Despite this work, there remains a great deal of ambiguity regarding the definition, operationalization and conceptualization of women's sexual desire (Basson, 2002).

It has been proposed that it is important to understand desire contextually – as a feature of a romantic, intimate relationship rather than at an individual level (Jurich & Myers-Bowman, 1998; Levine, 2003; Schnarch, 2000; Tiefer, 2001). In other words, an individual's experience of sexual desire both influences and is influenced by the other individual in the relationship, among other factors (e.g. socio-political). For example, low sexual desire is frequently the result of a desire discrepancy between individuals of a dyad rather than an individual's problematic low level of desire (e.g. Hurlbert, Apt, Hurlbert, & Pierce, 2000). Therefore, investigating women's experiences of sexual desire in their relationships can help clarify not only the nature of desire, but also the perceived influence of romantic relationships on sexual desire.

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Relationship length, one feature of a romantic relationship, can impact how desire might be experienced. At the beginning of a relationship sexual desire is often high because of the need to connect intimately with one's partner (Levine, 2003). However, researchers are divided regarding whether women's desire is maintained beyond the beginning phase of a new relationship (Granvold, 2001; Impett et al., 2008; Kleinplatz & Menard, 2007) or if it decreases as a relationship progresses (Basson, 2000; Klusmann, 2002; Murray & Milhausen, in press). Asking women directly about their understandings and experiences of sexual desire and changes in desire over time can help to better understand how women experience desire in long-term relationships (Schwandt, 1994).

A few researchers have offered qualitative descriptions of women's experiences of sexual desire when quantitative methods and brief surveys did not seem to provide clear answers to these questions (e.g. Brotto, Heiman, & Tolman, 2009; Logan & Buchanan, 2008; Sims & Meana, 2010; Tolman & Szalacha, 1999; Wood, Koch, & Mansfield, 2006). For example, suggesting that little is known about what women attribute their low sexual desire to, Sims and Meana (2010) interviewed 19 married women between the ages of 26 and 40 about their causal attributions for decreased sexual desire. These researchers concluded that the women in their study believed the institutionalization of marriage, over-familiarity with their partner and de-sexualization of roles (e.g. wife, mother, professional) all negatively impacted their ability to experience sexual desire. Further the researchers concluded that low sexual desire should be considered a relational matter.

The researchers of the aforementioned studies, however, interviewed women who were either peri- or post-menopausal (Brotto et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2006), adolescents who were not in relationships (Logan & Buchanan, 2008; Tolman & Szakacha, 1999) or only those who experienced a decrease in sexual desire (Sims & Meana, 2010). Post-menopausal women have been a popular group to study as hormones are related to sexual desire and estrogen and testosterone are in lower production during and after menopause (Birnbaum, Cohen, & Wertheimer, 2007). However, younger women should not be assumed to lack complexity in their experiences of sexual desire and their understandings of these experiences warrants attention. To date, descriptions of these experiences by young women who are in relationships are scant.

Emerging adulthood is a recently proposed developmental stage that is said to occur between adolescence and adulthood: a stage that generally encompasses individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 (Arnett, 2000). Premarital sex and cohabitation in this period is widely accepted (Arnett, 2007). These romantic relationships also tend to stress monogamy (Schmookler & Bursik, 2007) and may be in preparation for marriage (Carroll et al., 2009). Therefore, focusing attention on the more intimate details of these relationships and the sexual relationships that occur in this context could yield some crucial information regarding this developmental age group.

The aim of this study was to gain a greater understanding of how women in emerging adulthood describe and make sense of their experience of sexual desire in long-term relationships. We were particularly interested in how women understood changes in their sexual desire as their relationship progressed. As women may continue having high levels of desire or experience a decrease over the course of their romantic relationship, we asked women to self-select into one of two study groups

during recruitment: those who were “wondering where the passion has gone” and those who felt the “passion is still alive”. Admittedly, sexual desire is not experienced at a dichotomous level (i.e., either high or low), however, these groups were created to ensure a range of experiences in desire. Further, it has been suggested that a phenomenon can be better understood by studying “extreme end-points” as this attends to diversity and variability in human experience (Kleinplatz & Menard, 2007; Valsiner, 2000). Overall, we sought to better understand the ways in which women in emerging adulthood experience sexual desire and describe changes in desire in their long-term relationships.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 20 English speaking women in long-term relationships of at least 30 months and in emerging adulthood (between the ages of 18 and 29 years old). An effort was made to attract participants who were graduate students and those in the work force (two common characteristics of emerging adults: Arnett, 2000) rather than only undergraduate students. The demographics for the study sample are presented in Table 1.

The required sample size in qualitative research is determined not *a priori* but through the process of data collection and analysis, typically by reaching saturation, the point at which coding additional data would only replicate existing analytic conclusions (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Saturation requires the judgment of the researcher to determine if, and when, it has been reached (Charmaz, 2003; Daly, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Saturation in this study was reached at 10 women in the high desire group and 10 women in the low desire group.

Procedure

Participants responded to one of two flyers placed around the community (e.g. in coffee shops) or circulated electronically (e.g. through graduate student listservs,

Table 1. Participant demographics by group.

	Passion is alive	Passion has gone	<i>t</i> -test	<i>p</i> -value
Age: years (SD)	24.00 (2.11) range 21.0–26.0	24.80 (2.53) range 22.0–29.0	–.77	> .05
Relationship length: months (SD)	66.10 (25.03) range 32–120	53.50 (13.91) range 33–82	1.39	> .05
Female Sexual Function Index (SD)	32.22 (2.25)	24.45 (4.14)	2.83	> .05
Desire domain (SD)	7.60 (1.71)	5.10 (1.45)	3.54	< .05
Birth control pills (% yes)	60	50	–	–
Ethnicity (% Caucasian)	60	90	–	–
Education (% graduate students)	80	70	–	–
Living situation (% shared residence)	60	70	–	–
Relationship status (%)				
Married	30	10	–	–
Common-law	10	30		
Seriously dating	50	60		

business email lists). Flyers stated: “Have you been in a relationship for a while? Is the passion still alive?” or “Have you been in a relationship a while? Wondering where the passion has gone?” Posters were placed in the same locations so women could choose which study group best represented their experiences. Interested participants were screened by email to determine if they met eligibility criteria: between the ages of 18 and 29, in a relationship of at least 30 months, heterosexual and having no children. Women who had children or were currently pregnant were excluded as having children is considered a characteristic of adulthood, thus women with children would not meet the inclusion criteria for emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). The study of how individuals of other sexual orientations and types of relationships describe their sexual desire, though of equal importance, falls outside of the scope of this research.

Eligible participants were scheduled for an interview at the university campus. Participants completed a consent form approved by the University Research Ethics Board. Participants then completed a demographic questionnaire and the Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI; Rosen et al., 2000). Following this, the women were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted for 51 minutes on average, with a range of 39–76 minutes. After the interview, participants were debriefed and asked if they had any questions or concerns. For their participation, participants received a \$10 gift card redeemable at establishments in the region (e.g. Second Cup, Chapter’s). Interviews were conducted between October 2009 and February 2010.

The semi-structured interviews were comprised of questions focusing on the woman’s relationship with her partner and its impact on her sexual desire. Also, women were asked about their definitions of desire to ensure a common understanding before proceeding with the main study interview questions. Specifically, the following questions, which were slightly modified in each interview, were posed: “What does sexual desire mean to you?”; “What about the study criteria ‘the passion is still alive’ (or ‘wondering where the passion has gone’) seemed like a good fit with your experience?”; “What is it like for you to experience high (or lower levels) of sexual desire?”; “How do you experience sexual desire in the context of your relationship?”; and “How do you think that your experience of sexual desire has changed, if at all, over the course of your relationship?”

Data analysis

Data collected from the interviews were analyzed using a social constructionist version of grounded theory methodology (GTM) (Charmaz, 2003; Daly, 2007). Grounded theory methodology was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a systematic way to gather and analyze data in order to generate theory grounded in empirical data. This traditional form of GTM was based on positivist beliefs that researchers could hold an objective stance and not influence the data. However, the social constructionist version acknowledges that researchers hold certain beliefs and values that will shape both the process and outcome of research (Charmaz, 2003).

Coding was done line-by-line and through constant comparison between different participants and indicators (Charmaz, 2003). *Open coding* refers to selecting words or phrases to describe the data, which is intended as a way to “open up” and examine the data by trying out different meaningful labels (Daly, 2007). Frequent references to certain indicators begin to create *concepts* (a label or name associated

with an indicator or indicators) and then *categories* (the grouping of similar but not identical concepts under a more abstract heading) (LaRossa, 2005). *Axial coding* follows open coding and consists of intense analysis done around one category at a time to begin the process of arriving at a theoretical explanation (Daly, 2007; LaRossa, 2005). Although GTM allows for the creation of a formal theory, at this stage we focused on understanding the meaning making behind the themes rather than on developing a theory of sexual desire trajectories.

Once categories were developed, they were reviewed with the second and third authors to ensure a common understanding of the categories and discuss discrepant interpretations. Disagreements over categories led to further analysis and discussion (e.g. reading text surrounding a quote to clarify participant meaning, reading all quotes in a category to ensure all reflected a shared meaning). The investigators revisited the revised categories to determine if consensus could be achieved. At this stage, some categories were absorbed by larger, more encompassing categories or were considered insubstantial and removed from the analysis. Only a few categories were adjusted for these reasons. No categories were completely removed due to disagreement between the researchers.

Results

The passion is still alive

The 10 women included in this study who identified with the phrase “passion is still alive” explained that they continued to experience higher levels of sexual desire in their intimate relationships for various reasons. The explanations women gave were organized into four categories that were not mutually exclusive: (1) feeling that sexual desire for one’s partner had *increased* over the years they were together, (2) experiencing ebbs and flows in sexual desire over the course of one’s relationship but overall finding it satisfactory, (3) experiencing a decrease in sexual desire over the course of one’s relationship but viewing it as a natural progression in a relationship and, finally, (4) identifying as sexual beings with high level of sexual desire set before one entered into a relationship.

Desire increasing as relationship progressed

Some women described that their sexual desire evolved over the course of their relationship. A few women described that the increase in their sexual desire occurred as they became closer and more intimate with their partner and as they experienced a deepening knowledge of who their partner was as a person. One woman explained:

For me the intimacy is important to desire. And I think intimacy comes with time. And so I’m actually finding now, that I desire more and I feel like I’m recognizing that that’s got to do with intimacy. So . . . the stability and the intimacy and the familiarity and that really deep knowledge of a person is sexy and passionate for me. (Laura, 21)

Another woman conveyed that the reason her sexual desire had increased over time with her partner was due to her own sexual maturation and comfort with her sexuality in addition to the growth she and her partner experienced together as a couple. She indicated that once she became more aware of herself as a sexual being and more knowledgeable about her sexual needs, she was able to translate that into

more desire for her partner. Simultaneously she describes she and her partner as a unit, developing more satisfying ways of connecting sexually. She conveyed:

I think it's gone up, definitely up, because, it's been five years and I think I've changed a lot as a person in the last five years. So when we first started going out, we were so young, we weren't having great sex... I was more afraid of being judged by my boyfriend. Like 'oh my god he's going to think I'm a slut' if I like this or whatever, and over the years I've learned to accept myself and I guess also we've evolved. Like we've probably figured out more things that we like doing than we used to. So I can definitely say that for me now, it just keeps getting better. (Catherine, 23)

There were a few women in this group who described experiencing an increase in their sexual desire over the course of their relationship largely because of increased intimacy or because the length of their relationship allowed space and time for them to learn and better understand their sexual needs. In both instances women described their own experiences of sexual desire were tightly intertwined with a longer relationship with one romantic partner.

Ebbs and flows in their sexual desire

Some women in this group saw their desire as fluctuating, that is, being high and satisfactory at times but also involving some low points. Despite these fluctuations, women generally described being quite satisfied with their sexual desire and sexual relationships. One woman conveyed:

Sometimes it'll be like I really want him, I really want to be with him all the time. Sometimes not so much if I'm really busy with school. Sometimes he is on my mind a lot. When we are away from each other it's really hard. So I guess it goes like this [waves hand up and down] but it remains fairly high. So I think that for, you know, being such a long relationship we're pretty good. (Jill, 23)

The woman above described that though she experienced some ebbs and flows in desire throughout her relationship, her desire was still quite high overall. There were also women who described experiencing fluctuations in their sexual desire over the course of their relationship, but explained that at the time of the study their sexual desire was at a satisfying level. For example, another woman in this group explained:

During the 10 years we've been together there have been highs and lows in terms of the sexual desire. And it has its peaks and its lows. Currently, I'd say for the past six months, we've been at a very good place in terms of the sexual relationship. (Megan, 28)

In other words, the experience of high sexual desire for some of these women was described as being related to timing – had the study occurred at a different point in time, they may have identified with the low desire group. Describing sexual desire as a transient state rather than a fixed level was common among this group of women.

Decrease in desire not troublesome

Some women in this group described having an intense, passionate start to their relationship but indicated that their sexual desire had decreased over time. However, the women in this group, even when they described experiencing a decrease in sexual

desire, indicated that they were not troubled by this decrease. Rather, some women explained that they expected to experience a decrease in desire, to some degree, as their relationship progressed. One woman explained how her experience of decreased desire was more of a qualitative change:

I don't think that it has decreased it has more evolved, kind of. You know, when you're first dating, you can't get enough of each other. You're constantly going at it, and everything's new. And so, when we were teenagers we were skipping class to go make-out, stuff like that. And now, you know, we have priorities. It's not like we're going to skip class to make-out but we still make time for each other, and it just kind of works into our lives better. So I mean just because we're not constantly going at it, that it's not still really good. (Emma, 26)

Not all women in this group explained that their low points in sexual desire were completely non-troublesome. One woman explained her experience with these low points in her sexual desire as being very frustrating, but temporary:

There are points where it doesn't work, ever. And those periods go on and on and on, even though it may only be for a couple of weeks. And then there are times where everything is perfect and we desire each other at the same time and want the same things and then there are other times where we're on different pages completely. And he'll want one thing and I'll want another thing. Or I'll be thinking about something and he'll want to have sex and I'll be completely uninterested. (Laura, 21)

Even though women in this group indicated that the frequency of sexual activity in their relationship had decreased and that perhaps the intensity that accompanied sexual activity had reduced, they still felt that they had a satisfactory level of passion and desire in their relationship with their partner. Some women in this group conveyed that the change from high levels of passion at the beginning of a relationship to lower levels later on was inevitable and this was not something to be concerned over.

Women identifying as sexual beings

While most of the interviews focused on the experience of sexual desire within the women's long-term relationships, some women also described their sexual desire as something that existed within them and was separate from their relationship with their partner. A few women described themselves as highly sexual beings and indicated their partner was not responsible for how and when they experienced desire. One woman explained that the desire she experienced in her relationship was, in part, due to the individual level of desire that she brought into her relationship. She stated: "I think that sort of drive was set before I started engaging with partners" (Shruti, 22). Another woman, when asked why she identified with the phrase "the passion is still alive", explained that it was, in part, due to her own sexuality. She mentioned: "I've always been very sexual and I've always thought about sex. I would literally never not. And not a lot of girls admit to that and not a lot of women admit to it" (Catherine, 23).

While most women discussed sexual desire in the context of their relationship, it should be noted that women in this study, particularly in the "passion is still alive" group, may represent women who are more comfortable and open with their sexuality. Thus, these women may experience satisfying levels of sexual desire

because of their own values regarding sex and sexuality and not how they interact with another person.

Wondering where the passion has gone

The 10 women who identified with the phrase “wondering where the passion has gone” explained that they experienced lower levels of sexual desire in their intimate relationships for various reasons. The explanations women gave for identifying with this group were organized into the following four categories that were not mutually exclusive: (1) experiencing a troubling decrease in sexual desire, (2) never having a high level of desire with one’s partner, (3) feeling that one still had a high level of sexual desire but that it was no longer for their partner and (4) feeling one was no longer young enough to expect high levels sexual desire.

Sexual desire decreased

Due to the name of the group “wondering where the passion has gone” it was expected that many women would describe having high desire at one point but losing it over time. Many women in this group indeed endorsed this experience. Specifically, one woman in this group explained that although her sexual desire for her partner was currently low, it had been higher earlier in their relationship. She stated:

I would certainly say that’s changed over time. When we first started going out it was not that sort of platonic thing. Like, even two or three years into the relationship it was still like “wow this is great”. I couldn’t wait to go see him. And when I’d go visit him we’d spend a large part of the weekend having sex and that kind of stuff. And now, it’s like “meh”, you know. It’s certainly something that’s changed over time. (Trina, 23)

The women in this group varied in the degree to which they described being troubled by the decrease in their sexual desire. Some women said they felt frustrated by low desire when they could not explain or understand why it was low. One woman explained that when she understood why she was not feeling desire, often because of external reasons, low desire was not troublesome to her. However, when she could not explain why she was not interested in sex, even if she felt a situation was opportune to engaging in sexual activity, this bothered her. She conveyed:

Sometimes I’m troubled by it. It really depends on what the cause of it is, I guess. If it’s a matter of time and being busy then I understand why it’s so low. But I get troubled by it, I guess, when I have the opportunity and the time and the effort that I could put forth and I don’t have the desire, I guess that’s when it bothers me. (Natalie, 25)

It was common for women in this category to explain that they were troubled by their low sexual desire in part because of how they felt, but also because they believed their low sexual desire negatively impacted their romantic partner. Some women explained that it was their partner’s frustration about their level of sexual desire that made them feel their sexual desire might be a problem. One woman explained:

I’m dissatisfied. I mean, [sexual encounters] should be more frequent because they used to be more frequent. It’s hard to say. So yeah, I’m dissatisfied with the frequency of the desire, and I’m dissatisfied... I’m dissatisfied that my partner is dissatisfied. It’s very frustrating. (Marcie, 24)

Never had sexual desire in current relationship

There were a couple of women in the “wondering where the passion has gone” group who explained that, rather than experiencing a decrease in their sexual desire, desire was something they never had in their romantic relationship. Instead of having a relationship that started with a sexual spark one woman said: “it really wasn’t a spark, it was more, we, I call it, it was like a little smolder” (Natasha, 29). Another woman in this group expanded on her experience of never having a high level of sexual desire in her relationship with her partner:

Well even just, even like comparing, there is always the TV relationship where everything is perfect and there’s no issues. But even comparing, like we were never super passionate, even when we started dating. But, I don’t know, but it’s dropped off from that. So like if we started at a three on a scale of one to ten, we’re now at a one. So I don’t know if we ever will be, I don’t think either of us have that personality, or that desire to have that. (Danielle, 28)

Only a couple of women described rarely having sexual desire present in their romantic relationships. The women who indicated their sexual desire was never very strong indicated it was a combination of their identity (e.g. not being an overly sexual person or not valuing sex as an important part of an intimate relationship) and the relationship dynamic with their romantic partner.

Have desire but not for partner in relationship

A few participants described experiencing a decrease in sexual desire for their partner, but still indicated they felt sexual desire spontaneously within themselves or for other people. In other words, these women explained that their ability to experience sexual desire was still quite satisfactory, but they felt that no longer experiencing a satisfying level of desire for their current partner was a problem. One woman described:

If I want to have sex and I’m like, turned on, and that kind of thing, it’s not necessarily because of something he’s done. It’s more something, like, internal in my mind. So, usually, when I’m turned on it’s because I want to have sex and it’s not something that he’s necessarily done. (Erica, 23)

Another woman described that she had difficulty experiencing sexual desire for her partner but that her sexual desire in general had not declined. She explained that she was easily aroused by her own thoughts or by other people, just not her romantic partner:

My frequency of arousal has changed only slightly I would say from before, probably because there is less opportunity in the way I would be aroused from different people. And now I can get aroused by them but I can’t act on it, so that’s changed. But that is only very slightly. Like I can still get turned on at the same sort of rate I could have before. I can still experience the same sort of level of pleasure as I could before. But what I find it’s not necessarily my partner that is the one that stimulates it. (Lily, 26)

The women in this group might still retain the ability to experience sexual desire but their stimulation may come from outside their relationship.

Not young anymore

Some of the women in this group indicated that their age hindered their ability to experience high levels of sexual desire. When asked whether she still experienced sexual desire one participant responded: “Like no, it’s not like we’re crazy 19-year-old kids anymore” (Carly, 21). Another woman in this group similarly expressed that her age was likely part of the reason her desire had decreased and the frequency of her sexual activity with her partner had subsided:

We definitely have less sex than we did when we first started dating. That could be because we first started dating when we were around 19, 20, 21, so that could be a highly sexual age for our area where we live. (Jane, 24)

Finally, another woman in this category explained that the level of sexual desire women may experience in their early-20s is not something that can be expected in ones’ mid-20s or as a relationship progresses. She described:

Well when we first started dating, it was probably a pretty typical 21-, 22-year-old relationship where we were all over each other all the time. Which is, well typical, or I think at least that’s pretty typical. You can’t keep that up forever, I don’t think. (Bethan, 26)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to gain a greater understanding of how women in emerging adulthood describe and make sense of their sexual desire in long-term relationships, specifically focusing on changes in sexual desire as their relationship progressed. A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with women who identified with one of two study phrases: “the passion is still alive” or “wondering where the passion has gone”. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using grounded theory methodology.

Many women in both study groups experienced a decrease in sexual desire over the course of their relationships. This result is strongly supported by previous research on women’s sexual desire in long-term relationships (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Klusmann, 2002; Levine, 2002; Murray & Milhausen, in press). However, the current study suggests that a woman’s satisfaction (or distress) is not due to the absolute level of desire she experiences, but rather due to the degree to which she conceptualizes the decrease as normative or problematic. For example, women in the low desire group indicated that a decrease in desire was troublesome, whereas women in the high desire group expressed that this decrease was to be expected and said it did not negatively impact their sexual satisfaction.

Further, some women in the high desire group experienced ebbs and flows in their sexual desire over the course of their relationships but were not concerned about their level of desire or its varied trajectory. Women’s descriptions of fluctuations in their sexual desire may explain inconsistent results from previous studies that indicate desire remains high (Granvold, 2001; Impett et al., 2008; Kleinplatz & Menard, 2007) or decreases (Basson, 2000; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Klusmann, 2002; Levine, 2002; Murray & Milhausen, in press) as a relationship progresses. This study suggests that it is unlikely that sexual desire represents a linear progression over the course of a relationship. Increased awareness regarding changes

in sexual desire in longer-term relationships could help women and couples manage expectations and perhaps prevent feelings of distress.

Some women in the low desire group explained that their decrease in desire was only problematic because they perceived this decrease to negatively affect their partner. Desire discrepancy is receiving increasing attention in sexuality research (e.g., Davies et al., 1999; Mark & Murray, in press). The results of this study lend further support that women's sexual desire may be perceived as problematic simply because it is lower than the partner's desire, rather than being a problem with a woman's desire level in and of itself. Therefore, therapeutically or medically treating a woman alone for low desire may be ignoring the potential route of the problem.

Some women in the high desire group indicated that they experienced increased levels of desire for their partner over the years they were together. The assumption that sexual desire will inevitably decrease appears, then, to be a generalization. There is some literature to suggest that sexual desire can exist in long-term relationships and regardless of age (Granvold, 2001; Impett et al., 2008; Kleinplatz & Menard, 2007). Sand and Fisher (2007) found that some women still experienced spontaneous sexual desire in long-term relationships. Similarly, 26% of the women in Klusmann's (2002) study indicated that they wanted to "have sex often" even after three years. One explanation, as suggested by Kleinplatz and Menard (2007), is that an intense emotional connection with a partner can improve sex. Generalized assumptions about changes in desire, therefore, may not fit for all women in long-term relationships.

A few women in the low desire group indicated they felt they were no longer young enough to expect high levels sexual desire. During adolescence hormones are in high production, fueling the want to engage in sexual activity (Levine, 2002). Over time, sexual needs tend to decrease and feelings of sexual desire become more sporadic and less intense (Levine, 2002). Nonetheless, some 20-year-old women in this study indicated they felt they no longer experienced the level of desire they used to. Given the age of participants it is unlikely that their low desire is attributable to hormonal or other biological causes (though this cannot be ruled out because detailed medical histories were not collected). Despite this, some participants ascribed their low desire to physiological changes. Likely a range of factors, including relationship length and other relational and socio-cultural variables, impact women's desire and how they make sense of it (Tiefer, 2001). Further research on women's own understandings and attributions for their low (or high) desire is needed.

Asking women about their experiences of sexual desire in the context of their relationships was expected to generate responses that were connected to one's partner, yet many women indicated that their desire was linked to individual or "internal" factors. Some women in the low desire group indicated that their sexual desire remained high, but was no longer for their partner. Other women in the high desire group indicated that it was due to their own level of desire that they brought into their relationship. Researchers investigating highly sexual women also found that women in their study demonstrated sexual agency that was not dependent upon their partner (Wentland, Herold, Desmarais, & Milhausen, 2009). That some women felt their desire was satisfactory but no longer for their partner, supports taking a relational approach to the study of sexual desire (Tiefer, 2001). Also, while relational contexts are quite important to women's experiences of sexual desire, individual factors should not be overlooked.

An effort was made to determine a common understanding of sexual desire at the early stages of the interviews through a brief discussion between the women and the first author. Yet, occasionally, some women used language outside of the term “sexual desire” at various points throughout their interview. The word *desire* is synonymous with wish, want, crave, yearn, ache, need and hunger, while alternative expressions for sexual desire include libido, sexual appetite, lustfulness, passion and sexual drive (Levine, 2002). In the present study, women referred to sexual frequency, thoughts of sex, passion, arousal and feeling turned on in lieu of the word desire. When women used these words or phrases, the first author would ask the woman a clarifying question about whether she was referring to sexual desire (as we had previously discussed) or if she was discussing a different construct. In each case, women said they still were discussing what they considered to be desire. This suggests that women’s sexual desire is complex and using one word to capture a nuanced construct may be limiting. Further, it supports past research that suggests that sexual desire and subjective sexual arousal are closely intertwined (e.g., Graham, Sanders, Milhausen, & McBride, 2004).

Though this study makes many contributions to the literature on sexual desire among women, there are some notable limitations. We chose to create two groups of women: those who believed the “passion was still alive” and those who were “wondering where the passion has gone”. It is likely that some women feel their experience of sexual desire is not adequately captured by either of the two study phrases and therefore they did not respond to recruitment efforts. It should be noted, also, that many women who participated in the study indicated that while they identified with one study group at the time of the interview, they felt at another time in their relationship they might identify with the other group. It is likely that, for many women, sexual desire is fluid, with women experiencing ebbs and flows in their sexual desire in response to relational and other contextual factors. To capture this variation, future researchers might choose not to have women identify with one group or another. Additionally, the posters were aimed at recruiting women who did experience higher levels of desire at one point in their relationships. Future research that also includes women who never experienced high levels of sexual desire (lifelong low sexual desire) would be of value.

The study is limited in that it included mostly white heterosexual women, who were, generally, highly educated. Thus, the results may not apply to a more diverse group of women, including those with a variety in socio-economic status, education levels and sexual orientations and identities. This is of particular importance as the women in the high desire group varied more in their ethnicity than the women in the low desire group who were prominently Caucasian (see Table 1). Thus, ethnicity, race and religion, among other variables, may be impacting how one experiences and understands their sexual desire. Further this study focused only on women and research into the complexities and nuances of men’s sexual desire is largely absent. Further research on men’s desire, in general, is also recommended.

A final limitation of this study concerned the methodology. Grounded theory methodology stipulates that analysis should occur as interviews are being conducted in order to theoretically sample questions, issues and populations, to aid in reaching saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Due to time restraints, analyzing and interviewing were not conducted concurrently. Instead, the audio-recordings from the interviews were reviewed at various stages throughout the interviews in order to determine which questions needed to be further examined and revised. The interview

guide was adjusted slightly to incorporate the necessary additional questions. This step of GTM, however, was not conducted to the recommended standard (Daly, 2007).

Despite these limitations, this study has a number of strengths. Younger women's experiences and understandings have been largely ignored in sexual desire literature in favor of studying female sexuality during or following menopause, when women typically experience a more dramatic decrease in sexual desire (Birnbaum et al., 2007; Pitkin, 2009). However, women of all ages seem to vary in their experiences of sexual desire. Overlooking young women's experiences of desire due to the assumption they have high levels of desire may be detrimental to women's experiences that do not meet these expectations. Sexual desire is complex at any age and needs to be understood for all women, not just those entering menopause. This study also added rich information regarding women's sexual desire in general. A number of existing studies have suggested that sexual desire changes for women in long-term relationships, but this was the first study to ask women directly about how these changes are experienced and how sexual desire is understood in their relationships.

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