A fiery conflict: Attachment orientations and the effects of relational conflict on sexual motivation

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Abstract
This study examined the effects of relational conflict on sexual motivation. Sixty-one couples were videotaped while discussing either a major relationship problem or their daily routine. Both partners then completed measures of sexual motives and rated their romantic partner’s sexual attractiveness. Results showed that conflict discussion inhibited relationship-based motives and had an adverse effect on women’s perceptions of partner’s attractiveness, but a beneficial effect on men’s perceptions. Conflict discussion also inhibited self-serving sexual motives such as having sex to obtain relief from stress among people with avoidant partners, suggesting that people are unlikely to turn to avoidant partners for sexual consolation. Implications for understanding the role of the sexual system in regulating reactions to relationship distressful events are discussed.

Relational conflict has long been considered in the clinical literature to contribute to sexual impairment in couple relationships (Kaplan, 1974; McCarthy, 1999). The presence of unresolved relational conflict and associated negative couple processes (e.g., sentiment override, negative reciprocity) may elicit negative affect and cognitions toward a partner, thereby interfering with sexual desire, arousal, and satisfaction. Clinical evidence shows that couples who suffer from sexual dysfunctions are more likely than sexually satisfied couples to experience disagreements (e.g., McCabe & Cobain, 1998) and to rely on destructive conflict resolution strategies (withdrawal, escalation; Metz & Dwyer, 1993). Improvement in couple conflict resolution strategies (e.g., constructive problem solving) can facilitate positive changes in sexual functioning (e.g., Tullman, Dornbush, Gilner, Kolodny, & Tullman, 1981). However, conclusions from clinical observations do not necessarily apply to most couple’s conflict and intimate interactions.

At the same time that conflict may detract from sexual desire and satisfaction, it may also act as an emotional aphrodisiac and present an opportunity for couples to enhance emotional and sexual intimacy. Constructive conflict resolution may lead to emotional relief, affirmation of a couple’s affectional bonding, and expression of positive emotions toward a partner, thereby intensifying partner attractiveness and the desire for sex (Greeley, 1991; Metz & Epstein, 2002). Alternatively, or additionally, conflict may induce negative feelings (e.g., anxiety and anger) and increase arousal. This increased arousal may, in turn, be generalized to sex-related arousal and subsequently heighten sexual desire for one’s partner (e.g., Barlow, 2002; Ridley, Ogolsky, Payne, Totenhagen, & Cate, 2008). Indeed, Christopher and Cate (1985) found that frequency of relational conflict was positively associated with sexual involvement, primarily in the initial stages of relationship development. Nevertheless, other studies either failed to find such an association (e.g., Edwards & Booth, 1994) or found a reverse association (e.g., McCabe & Cobain, 1998).
Our reading of the literature suggests that research has yielded conflicting results about whether, why, and for whom conflict interferes with sexual functioning. These findings are difficult to interpret due to methodological issues, such as correlational designs and failure to consider potential moderators. In addition, most studies focused on general sexual motivation rather than on its varied components. These components include not only perceptions of partner attractiveness and the resulting sexual desire, but also a variety of goals that motivate sexual behavior, which can be captured by differences in approach versus avoidance motivation (e.g., having sex to express love vs. having sex to avoid rejection) or self versus interpersonal focus (e.g., having sex to enhance pleasure vs. having sex to achieve intimacy; Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998). Sexual goals may vary across people and contexts, and lead to distinct sexual and relational outcomes (Cooper et al., 2006; Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005; Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008). The specific sexual goal elicited by conflict may therefore underlie the motivation to engage (or not) in sex and may also help explain why conflict decreases or increases sexual motivation and for whom.

The limitations of previous studies highlight the need for a coherent theoretical framework for understanding the functional significance of sexual motivation within romantic relationships, particularly the interplay between sexual motivation and relational problems (e.g., whether sex compensates for, or reflects, relational difficulties). In this research, we adopted an attachment-theoretical perspective and an experimental laboratory design to rectify past conceptual and methodological problems and to predict whether and for whom perceptions of relational conflict affect sexual motivations. Specifically, we focused on sexual motives that are parsimoniously characterized in terms of underlying differences in self-focus (e.g., having sex to enhance physical or emotional pleasure, having sex to obtain relief from stress) versus interpersonal focus (e.g., having sex to nurture one’s partner, having sex to express emotional value for one’s partner; Hill & Preston, 1996) because of their relevance to attachment processes under threatening conditions (Birnbaum, Weisberg, & Simpson, 2011).

**Attachment and conflict resolution**

According to Bowlby’s (1969/1982, 1973) attachment theory, the attachment behavioral system is an evolved system that increases the individual’s survival chances and future reproductive success by maintaining proximity to protective others (attachment figures) in times of need. Hence, whenever the relationship with an attachment figure is threatened, such as in the case of conflictual interactions with one’s romantic partners, attachment processes are activated (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996) and reactions to these threats are affected by a person’s attachment orientation along the dimensions of anxiety and avoidance (e.g., Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Simpson & Rholes, 1994). A person’s position on the anxiety dimension indicates the degree to which he or she worries that a partner will not be available and responsive in times of need. Anxious attachment is characterized by hyperactivation strategies that intend to get an attachment figure to pay attention and to provide relief from stress. A person’s position on the avoidance dimension indicates the extent to which he or she distrusts a relationship partner’s goodwill and strives to maintain behavioral independence and emotional distance from partners (“deactivation strategies” in Mikulincer & Shaver’s, 2007, terms). People who score low on these dimensions are generally secure and tend to employ constructive and effective affect-regulation strategies (Main, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Given that successful conflict management requires effective regulation of emotions and maintenance of harmonious interactions with a partner despite the presence of relationship stress, it is hardly surprising that insecurely attached individuals have more difficulties in managing relational conflicts than their secure counterparts (e.g., Creasey, 2002; Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 2002). When relational conflict arises, more anxiously attached individuals are more likely
than less anxiously attached individuals to feel anger toward their partner, view him or her less positively, and exhibit relationship-damaging behaviors (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Simpson et al., 1996). More avoidant individuals are more likely than less avoidant individuals to behave in a cold and rejecting manner toward their partners and to emotionally withdraw from their partner. Interestingly, less anxiously attached people view their partner and relationship more favorably after a major relational conflict, possibly because they make more benevolent inferences about their partners and relationships, primarily when resolving a challenging problem in a constructive manner (Simpson et al., 1996).

**Attachment insecurities and the construal of sex**

Research has consistently shown that attachment orientations are also associated with the construal of sexual interactions in close relationships in general and following relational threat in particular (see Birnbaum, 2010, for a review). People who are anxious with respect to attachment tend to rely heavily on sex as a means for satisfying their strong attachment-related needs for security and love (e.g., Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2004). This proclivity takes many forms, such as engaging in sex for a variety of attachment-based reasons (e.g., promoting one’s own sense of closeness, keeping one’s partner in the relationship; Davis et al., 2004; Impett, Gordon, & Stratchman, 2008), experiencing strong sexual motivation in situations that are known to activate attachment needs (e.g., perceived relationship threat; Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003, 2004), and deferring to their partner’s sexual needs in order to please the partner (Davis et al., 2006), especially while facing a relational threat (Birnbaum, Svitelman, Bar-Shalom, & Porat, 2008).

More avoidant individuals, in contrast, feel uncomfortable with the closeness inherently involved in sexual interactions and, therefore, tend to detach sexuality from psychological intimacy, even within the context of ongoing romantic relationships (Birnbaum, 2010). This detached stance is manifested in downplaying sexual motives associated with the promotion of emotional closeness and emphasizing relationship-irrelevant sexual motives (e.g., self-enhancement; see Cooper et al., 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for reviews), experiencing aversive feelings during sex and difficulties in focusing on a partner’s needs (e.g., Birnbaum, Reis, Mikulincer, Gillath, & Orpaz, 2006), and reporting more self-enhancement themes in their sexual fantasies on days characterized by poor relationship quality (Birnbaum, Mikulincer, & Gillath, 2011).

**Gender-specific reactions**

The literature on adult attachment in romantic relationships generally shows few gender differences in reactions to relationship threats. Still, previous studies have found that there are differences in the way men and women respond to relationship conflict, regardless of attachment orientation. Specifically, women are more likely than men to voice their discontent, to criticize their partner, and to use emotional pressure during conflict, whereas men are more likely to use reconciliation or to withdraw from conflict (i.e., the “negative-withdraw” interaction sequence; see reviews by Gottman & Levenson, 1988; Weiss & Heyman, 1990). One of the prominent explanations for these gender differences in the negative-withdraw pattern is that men experience greater physiological arousal during conflict and are slower to return to baseline after conflict as compared to women. Men are therefore more likely than women to use protective mechanisms, such as withdrawal or pacification, to avoid escalating negative affect and the unpleasant physiological arousal associated with conflict (Gottman & Levenson, 1988).

Regardless of conflict, men and women tend to be sexually motivated by different goals and thus to experience sexual activity differently. In particular, empirical studies have indicated that women tend to adopt a more emotional-interpersonal orientation to sexuality. Hence, they are more likely than men to be concerned with their romantic relationships during sexual intercourse and to experience sexual activity as a reflection
of relationship quality. Men, by comparison, tend to adopt a more individualistic-recreational orientation toward sexuality and are therefore more likely to be motivated by physical release and to emphasize the expression and fulfillment of sexual needs (e.g., Birnbaum & Laser-Brandt, 2002; Carroll, Volk, & Hyde, 1985). These gender-specific differences in the nature of sexual experiences, coupled with gender-specific differences in reactions to conflict, may lead men and women to construe sexual activity within the context of conflict differently.

The present research

As reviewed above, research has yielded inconclusive results about whether and for whom conflict contributes to sexual motivation. This study uses attachment theory as a conceptual framework to better understand the effects of relational conflict on sexual motivation. In examining these effects, we also take into account that variations in sexual reactions to relationship conflict may reflect gender-specific differences in the construal of sexual activity.

Our first goal was to examine the role of gender and attachment orientations in moderating the effects of conflict on perceived partner’s sexual attractiveness. We hypothesized that conflict would have a beneficial effect on men’s perceptions of partner’s sexual attractiveness but an adverse effect on women’s perceptions. This hypothesis is based on theory and research suggesting that men’s sexual desire is more likely than women’s to be driven by internal factors (e.g., physiological arousal; Baumeister, 2000), whereas women’s sexual desire is more likely to be responsive to changes in the interpersonal environment (Basson, 2000, 2001; Birnbaum, Cohen, & Wertheimer, 2007; Diamond, 2003). Men may therefore be more likely to transfer the arousal elicited by a conflict to the sexual domain and to perceive their partner as more sexually desirable. Women, by comparison, may be more likely to react to this negative couple interaction with a congruent decrease in perceptions of partner’s sexual attractiveness.

We also hypothesized that perceptions of partner’s sexual attractiveness would remain unaffected by relational conflict among more avoidantly attached individuals, given their tendencies to detach sex from other relationship qualities (e.g., affection, intimacy; Birnbaum et al., 2006) and to cognitively withdraw from conflictual interactions (Simpson et al., 1996). No a priori predictions were made regarding the possible moderating role of attachment anxiety because one could reason that this attachment dimension could be associated with either enhanced or decreased perceptions of partner’s sexual attractiveness following a relational conflict. On the one hand, a conflictual interaction may fuel anxiously attached people’s desire to have sex with their partner as a means of restoring emotional closeness and intimacy (Davis et al., 2003, 2004), and then increase perception of partner’s sexual attractiveness. On the other hand, more anxiously attached individuals are more likely than their less anxious counterparts to conflate sex and other relational experiences, such that negative appraisals of partner’s behavior during a conflictual interaction are more likely to spill over into sex-related cognitions and emotions (e.g., Birnbaum et al., 2006). As a result, anxiously attached people may have more negative perceptions of partner’s sexual attractiveness following a relational conflict.

Our second goal was to predict whether and for whom relational conflict would affect the specific reasons for engaging (or not engaging) in sex. We hypothesized that women would be relatively more sexually motivated than men by relational concerns (providing nurturance, expressing emotional value for the partner), regardless of conflict. We also hypothesized that the typical motivational makeup of avoidant and anxiously attached people would not substantially change following conflict, but probably for different reasons. Highly avoidant people experience a sense of disconnection between sexual
and relationship interactions (Birnbaum et al., 2006). Thus, their reasons for engaging in sex should remain unaffected by relationship distressful events (Birnbaum et al., 2011). Highly anxious individuals evince heightened accessibility to proximity themes and worries, regardless of the "objective" level of threat (Mikulincer, Birnbaum, Woddis, & Nachmias, 2000; Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002). This cognitive and motivational configuration reflects the chronic hyperactivation of their attachment system (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Confronting an actual relationship distressful event should thus barely change highly anxious people’s tendency to use sex to serve these chronically activated attachment-related goals, as indicated by previous research (Birnbaum et al., 2011).

A person’s specific reasons for engaging in sex following conflict may be associated not only with his or her own characteristics, but also with his or her partner’s characteristics. In particular, people may be more likely to use sex to pursue interpersonal and personal goals right after conflict when they perceive their partner as willing and able to support these goals. More avoidantly attached people tend to be relatively uninterested in intimacy, emotionally detached, and unresponsive to their partner’s needs during both conflict resolution discussions (Simpson et al., 1996) and sexual interactions (Birnbaum et al., 2006). We hypothesized that people with more avoidant partners would be relatively less likely to engage in sex to compensate for threats elicited by relational conflicts (e.g., threats to the future of the relationship and to one’s self-image) and to reassure their partner, because they may realize that their detached partner is not likely to respond positively to such advances. Specifically, they would be less likely than people with less avoidant partners to engage in sex to either feel better about themselves (e.g., by getting pleasure or obtaining relief from stress) or to promote intimacy and improve the distressed relationship (e.g., by providing nurturance).

The possible links between partner’s anxious attachment and one’s sexual motives within the context of conflict are far less clear. More anxiously attached people tend to defer to their partners’ preferences in order to please them during sex (Davis et al., 2006). At the same time, however, they may fail to effectively regulate their own attachment insecurities and to be genuinely responsive to their partners’ needs when confronted with relational distress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Hence, it is difficult to predict whether people with anxiously attached partners would have sex to reassure their anxious partner (e.g., by providing nurturance or expressing emotional value) or whether they would turn to their partners for sexual consolation and engage in sex to feel better. We therefore made no specific a priori hypotheses regarding the link between a romantic partner’s attachment anxiety and one’s own sexual motives.

To examine these hypotheses, we conducted a study in which both partners of a romantic couple attended a laboratory session. Couples were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: Half of the couples were videotaped as they discussed and attempted to resolve a major problem in their relationship. The remaining couples served as a control group and were asked to talk about their daily routine. After the discussion, both partners independently completed measures of perceived partner sexual attractiveness and sexual motives. Independent raters then viewed the videotapes and rated the behavior of both members of each couple on dimensions relevant to successful conflict resolution (e.g., warmth and supportiveness; Gottman, 1979). These ratings allowed us to explore whether the potential effects of conflict on sexual motivation were direct or mediated through the quality of interaction during the conflict resolution discussion.

Method

Participants

Sixty-one heterosexual couples participated in this study in exchange for 100 NIS (about US $25). All participants were recruited via flyers or by word of mouth from universities, colleges, community centers, and sport clubs in the central area of Israel. Potential study participants were included in the sample if
they were (a) in a steady monogamous relationship for 3 months or longer and (b) currently sexually active (defined as having had vaginal sex at least once a week in the 2 months preceding the study). Women ranged in age from 19 to 37 years ($M = 24.62, SD = 3.63$) and in education from 12 to 20 years of schooling ($M = 14.13, SD = 2.12$). Men ranged in age from 22 to 38 years ($M = 26.21, SD = 3.77$) and in education from 11 to 20 years of schooling ($M = 14.15, SD = 2.06$). Relationship length ranged from 5 to 207 months ($M = 40.31, SD = 38.72$). Eighty-nine percent of these participants had no children and 11% had one or more children. Thirty-four percent of the couples were married. No significant differences were found between experimental conditions in any of these variables. Moreover, the introduction of each of the sociodemographic or relationship status variables in the main statistical analyses yielded no significant main or interactive effects for these variables.

**Measures and procedure**

Couples who met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate in a study on personality, sexuality, and close relationships were scheduled to attend a laboratory session. When each couple arrived at the lab, they were greeted by the third author (M.A.) who explained that the study involved discussing aspects of their relationship while being videotaped. After signing an informed consent form, couples were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: (a) a relational conflict condition ($n = 31$)—couples were asked to discuss and to try to resolve a major problem in their relationship, and (b) a nonconflictual discussion condition ($n = 30$)—couples were asked to discuss their daily routine. No significant difference was found between these conditions in the length of conversations.

Before the discussion, partners who were assigned to resolve a major relational problem were put in separate rooms where they independently generated three to five issues that had been a recent source of major disagreements in their relationship. Partners were then reunited and were asked to jointly identify the most significant unresolved problem in their relationship. Once both partners agreed on the problem, they were told to think about the last major disagreement they had about this issue and then to discuss it in detail and to try to resolve it. All discussions, which lasted 5–8 min, were videotaped by two cameras mounted in the corners of the room, with one camera pointed at each partner at an angle to allow for full frontal recording. The design of the laboratory sessions followed procedures for studying relational conflict developed by Simpson and colleagues (1996).

After the discussion, partners were led to separate rooms where they privately completed the following measures. Partners first responded to an item that assessed perception of relational conflict (“Please rate the degree of conflict you experienced during the discussion”). This item was answered on a 7-point scale anchored 1 (not at all) and 7 (extremely). Next, participants were asked to think about how they felt right then and to evaluate the sexual attractiveness of their partner by rating him or her on five adjectives used by Birnbaum and colleagues (2011): sexually desirable, sensual, “hot,” attractive, and sexually exciting (e.g., “To what extent do you feel right now that your partner is attractive?”). Ratings were made on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much so). In the current sample, the five items were internally consistent ($\alpha = .84$ for women and .83 for men) and were thus averaged to form a global sexual attractiveness index (see means and standard deviations for men and women in Table 1).

Participants were asked to think about how they felt right then and to complete the Hebrew version of a scale measuring the motives behind the desire to have sex. This scale was adapted from the Affective and Motivational Orientation Related to Erotic Arousal Questionnaire (AMORE; Hill & Preston, 1996) and was previously used by Birnbaum and colleagues. (2011). Two bilingual psychologists (G.E.B. and M.M.) translated this scale into Hebrew, using the forward–backward translation technique. The current version assessed the extent to which participants would have sex for each reason at that
Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and F tests of the study variables according to gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment anxiety</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment avoidance</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived partner attractiveness</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex motives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional value for partner</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>3.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relief from stress</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling valued by partner</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>2.70</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nurturing the partner</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>3.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling pleasure</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>3.45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Judges’ ratings of interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distress expression</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warmth provision</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>3.40</td>
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</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.

moment or in the near future. Specifically, participants indicated how well each of 20 statements described them either currently or in the near future on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (completely true). These statements were selected on the basis of their relevance to attachment processes.

The motives were organized into five scales, each containing four items: Emotional Value for One’s Partner (e.g., “Sharing affection and love during sexual intercourse is one of the most intense and rewarding ways of expressing my concern for my partner”; \( \alpha_s = .75 \) for women and .80 for men), Relief from Stress (e.g., “When I am feeling unhappy or depressed, thinking about sex or engaging in sexual activity will make me feel better”; \( \alpha_s = .87 \) for women and .79 for men), Emotionally Valued by One’s Partner (e.g., “When I need to feel loved, I have the desire to relate to my partner sexually because sexual intimacy really makes me feel warm and cared for”; \( \alpha_s = .83 \) for women and .80 for men), Nurturance (e.g., “The most pleasurable sex I have is when it helps my partner forget about his or her problems and enjoy life a little more”; \( \alpha_s = .79 \) for women and .76 for men), and Pleasure (e.g., “The sensations of physical pleasure and release are major reasons that sexual activity and fantasy are so important to me”; \( \alpha_s = .76 \) for women and .69 for men).

On this basis, five total sex-related motives were computed for each participant by averaging items that belong to each motive (see means and standard deviations for men and women in Table 1).

Next, participants completed a 20-item filler scale on leisure time activities intended to minimize the effects of experimental conditions on responses to the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998) that followed. This self-report scale, which assesses romantic attachment orientations, consists of 36 items tapping the dimensions of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance. Participants rated the extent to which each item was descriptive of their feelings in close relationships on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Eighteen items tapped attachment-related anxiety (e.g., “I worry about being abandoned”), and 18 items tapped attachment-related avoidance (e.g., “I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close”). The ECR was translated into Hebrew by Mikulincer and Florian (2000), who also validated its two-factor structure on an Israeli sample. In the current sample, Cronbach’s were high for the anxiety items (\( \alpha_s = .92 \) for women and .90 for men) and the avoidance items (\( \alpha_s = .91 \) for women and .90 for men). Higher scores indicated greater attachment
avoidance or anxiety (see means and standard deviations for men and women in Table 1). Pearson correlations between anxiety and avoidance were not significant (\( r_s = .16 \) for women and .07 for men). In addition, Pearson correlations between partners’ attachment anxiety and avoidance were not significant, \( r_s = -.09 \) and .10.

Finally, participants were asked to provide demographic and relationship information. Then, partners were reunited and fully debriefed. The experimenter emphasized that all relationships had problems and disagreements from time to time and that points of contention can be a healthy feature of strong, committed relationships. No couple was allowed to leave until the experimenter was convinced that both partners felt good about their experience in the study.

Coding of partners’ behavior during the discussion

Two raters (MA psychology students) who were blind to the hypotheses and to participants’ self-report data independently watched and rated each couple’s discussion. Before making the ratings, raters were given detailed instructions and training on the rating procedure. In the first wave of coding, raters evaluated the behavior of the male and female partners separately. These ratings focused on two dimensions relevant to successful conflict resolution (Gottman, 1979): the extent to which each partner displays high versus low levels of (a) stress and anxiety, and (b) warmth and supportiveness during the interaction. In particular, people who display less warmth and support toward their partners and greater stress and anxiety during conflict discussions tend to engage in more negative interactions that yield poorer resolutions (e.g., Simpson et al., 1996).

Stress–anxiety was assessed by ratings on five adjectives: stressed, anxious, upset, aroused, and hurt. Warmth–supportiveness was assessed by ratings on nine adjectives: supportive, warm, hostile (reverse scored), sarcastic (reverse scored), arrogant (reverse scored), rejecting (reverse scored), understanding, emotionally detached (reverse scored), and cold (reverse scored). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). These adjectives have been used successfully in previous conflict resolution studies (e.g., Simpson et al., 1996). The interrater reliability for each item was good (.79 across the 14 items). On this basis, we averaged raters’ ratings on each adjective. The five stress–anxiety items and the nine warmth–supportiveness items were internally consistent (\( \alpha = .69 \) and .71 for women and \( \alpha = .72 \) and .70 for men) and were thus averaged to form an observer-rated stress–anxiety index and an observer-rated warmth–supportiveness index (see means and standard deviations for men and women in Table 1).

The same raters also evaluated how well each couple interacted during the discussion. Ratings were made on the six items that were used by Simpson and colleagues (1996; e.g., “To what extent did the couple appear to be at ease or comfortable with each other?” and “How much emotionally closer did the couple appear to be by the end of the discussion?”). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). The interrater reliability for each item was good (.75 across the six items). Hence, we averaged raters’ ratings on each adjective. These six items formed an internally consistent scale (\( \alpha = .80 \)) and were thus averaged to form an observer-rated quality of interaction index (\( M = 2.83, SD = 0.76 \)).

Results

Manipulation check

We conducted a two-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA; Conflict Conditions × Gender) on the manipulation check question, “Please rate the degree of conflict you experienced during the discussion” with dyads as the unit of analysis. This analysis yielded only the expected effect of conflict, \( F(2, 118) = 122.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .52 \). Conflict discussion led to higher levels of perceived relational conflict (\( M = 4.48, SD = 1.51 \)) than did the nonconflictual discussion (\( M = 1.66, SD = 1.27 \)). No other significant main or interaction effects were found.
**Table 2. Pearson correlations between attachment scores and other study variables according to gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Participant’s own attachment</th>
<th>Partner’s attachment</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived partner attractiveness</td>
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<td>-.05</td>
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<td>Emotional value for partner</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relief from stress</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>.18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling valued by partner</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nurturing the partner</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling pleasure</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distress expression</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.30*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Warmth provision</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
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<td>Perceived partner attractiveness</td>
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<td>Warmth provision</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.

**Preliminary gender differences**

Table 1 presents *F* ratios examining gender differences in the main study variables. As can be seen, at least in our sample, women scored significantly higher on attachment anxiety than men. Moreover, women reported higher levels of sex motives related to the expression of emotional value for their partner and nurturing the partner than men (see Table 1). Other gender differences were not significant.

**Preliminary correlational findings**

We computed zero-order correlations between all the major variables. As can be seen in Table 2, more anxiously attached women were more likely to report sex motives related to expression of emotional value for their partner, relief from stress, feeling valued by their partner, and nurturing the partner. More anxiously attached men were more likely to report sex motives related to relief from stress and feeling valued by their partner (see Table 2). Avoidant attachment was not significantly associated with sex motives among either women or men (see Table 2). However, more avoidant women were rated by judges as displaying more distress and providing less warmth to their partner during the videotaped interaction (see Table 2). Findings also indicated that the two attachment scores were not significantly associated with perceptions of partner’s attractiveness (see Table 2). Partner’s attachment scores were not significantly associated with all the other variables (see Table 2). Attachment scores were also not significantly associated with judges’ ratings of quality of couple interaction, *rs < −.20*.

The vast majority of the Pearson correlations between perceived partner’s attractiveness, on the one hand, and sex motives and judges’ ratings of the videotaped interaction, on the other hand, were not significant among both men and women, *rs < .19*. The single significant association indicated that women who were rated by judges as expressing more...
warmth toward their partner during the interaction were more likely to perceive their partner as attractive after the interaction, $r(59) = .27$, $p < .05$. In addition, sex motives were not significantly associated with judges’ ratings of the videotaped interaction among both men and women, $r_s < .18$.

**An actor–partner interdependence model (APIM)**

We analyzed the data through regression techniques using the APIM (Campbell & Kashy, 2002; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The APIM is appropriate for use when the dyad (e.g., the romantic couple) is the unit of analysis, variables are measured with respect to both the actor and his or her relationship partner, and tests must be performed both between and within dyads (Kenny, 1996). The APIM deals appropriately with nonindependent data and can test not only whether an actor’s own attributes predict his or her responses (actor effects), but also whether his or her partner’s attributes predict the actor’s responses (partner effects). In this study, for example, an actor effect for attachment anxiety would be evident if an individual’s score on the attachment anxiety dimension predicted his or her specific reasons for having sex, controlling for his or her attachment avoidance and the romantic partner’s attachment anxiety and avoidance. A partner effect would be evident if an individual’s partner’s attachment anxiety score predicted the actor’s specific reasons for having sex, controlling for the partner’s attachment avoidance and the actor’s anxiety and avoidance. In the analyses reported below, actor and partner effects are reported as regression coefficients (see Table 3); all of the independent variables are standardized. All predictor variables were centered on the grand sample mean (see Aiken & West, 1991). These analyses revealed no meaningful interactions between attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety; hence, they are not

**Table 3. Beta coefficients for predicting partner’s sexual attractiveness and sexual motives from relational conflict, attachment orientations, and gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Partner’s attractiveness</th>
<th>Express value</th>
<th>Relief</th>
<th>Feeling valued</th>
<th>Nurture</th>
<th>Pleasure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict × Anxiety</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict × Avoidance</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict × Partner’s Anxiety</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict × Partner’s Avoidance</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict × Gender</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict × Gender × Anxiety</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict × Gender × Avoidance</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict × Gender × Partner’s Anxiety</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict × Gender × Partner’s Avoidance</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.
Attachment, conflict, and sexual motivation

reported. For simplicity, only the significant interactive effects of attachment orientations or gender with conflict are presented and described.

Conflict, gender, attachment, and perceived partner’s sexual attractiveness

Data were analyzed using the APIM that enabled us to test the unique and interactive effects of each partner’s attachment anxiety and avoidance, conflict conditions, and gender on perceived partner’s sexual attractiveness. In the first step, we examined main effects for conflict condition—a contrast code variable comparing the conflict condition (1) with the no-conflict condition (−1), gender—a contrast code variable comparing women (1) with men (−1), and the actors’ and partners’ attachment scores of anxiety and avoidance. The two-way interactions were entered in the second step, and the three-way interactions were added in the third step. Table 3 presents the results of this analysis.

The results revealed a significant interaction between conflict and participant gender. Simple slope analyses indicated that men in the conflict condition perceived their partner as more sexually attractive than did men in the nonconflictual condition, $\beta = .35, p < .01$. In contrast, women in the conflict condition perceived their partner as less sexually attractive than did women in the nonconflictual condition, $\beta = -.14, p < .05$. As predicted, whereas conflict led men to perceive their partner as more sexually attractive, it led women to perceive their partner as less sexually attractive. Other interactive effects were not significant.

Conflict, gender, attachment, and sexual motives

Next, we conducted a series of similar APIM analyses testing the unique and interactive effects of each partner’s attachment anxiety and avoidance, conflict condition, and gender on sexual motives. Table 3 presents the results of these analyses.

The main effect for conflict was only significant on nurturance motives, such that a conflict discussion (as compared to a non-conflict discussion) lessened the desire to have sex to provide nurturance to one’s partner. The two-way interactions for conflict and gender, conflict and attachment anxiety, and conflict and avoidant attachment were not significant for any of the five sex motives (see Table 3).

The interaction between conflict and partner’s attachment anxiety was significant for relief from stress (see Table 3). The conflict discussion lessened the desire to have sex to obtain relief from stress when partner’s anxiety was low, $\beta = -.36, p < .01$, but not when it was high, $\beta = .06, ns$. This interaction was not significant for the other sex motives.

The interaction between conflict and partner’s attachment avoidance was significant for motives of obtaining relief from stress, feeling emotionally valued by partner, and experiencing pleasure. Simple slope analyses indicated that the conflict discussion lessened the desire to have sex to obtain relief from stress and to feel emotionally valued when partner’s avoidance was high, $\beta_s = -.37$ and $-.25$, respectively, $ps < .01$, but not when it was low, $\beta_s = .07$ and .08, respectively, $ns$. The conflict discussion also lessened the desire to have sex for pleasure when partner’s avoidance was high, $\beta = -.23, p < .01$, and increased the desire to have sex for pleasure when it was low, $\beta = .15, p < .05$.

We also found a significant interaction for conflict, attachment avoidance, and gender on relief from stress motives. This three-way interaction is depicted in Figure 1. Simple slope analyses indicated that a conflict discussion lessened women’s desire to have sex to obtain relief from stress when their attachment avoidance was low, $\beta = -.37, p < .01$, and for a lesser degree when it was high, $\beta = -.15, p < .05$. The conflict discussion had no significant effect on men’s desire to have sex to obtain relief from stress regardless of whether their attachment avoidance was high or low, $\beta_s = .06$ and $-.09$, respectively, $ns$.

There was also a significant interaction for conflict, partner’s attachment avoidance, and gender on feeling emotionally valued by partner, and this interaction is depicted in
Figure 1. Slopes of relief from stress motives according to conflict, avoidant attachment, and gender.

Figure 2. Slopes of feeling valued by partner motives according to conflict, partner’s avoidant attachment, and gender.

Figure 2. Simple slope analyses indicated that the conflict discussion lessened men’s desire to have sex to feel emotionally valued by partner when partner’s attachment avoidance was high, $\beta = -.51, p < .01$, but not when it was low, $\beta = -.11$, ns. The conflict discussion had no significant effect on women’s desire to have sex to feel emotionally valued by partner, regardless of whether their male partner’s attachment avoidance was high or low, $\beta s = .05$ and $-.07$, respectively, ns.

Overall, the findings indicated that the conflict discussion lessened the desire to have sex to provide nurturance to one’s partner. Conflict discussion also lessened the desire to have sex to obtain relief from stress in women. However, attachment avoidance inhibited the decline in this specific motivation for sex, such that it was weaker for more avoidant women. As expected, the conflict discussion decreased the likelihood of having sex to feel better (getting pleasure, feeling emotionally valued by one’s partner, and obtaining relief from stress) among people with highly avoidant partners. By comparison, the conflict discussion increased the likelihood of having sex for pleasure among people with less avoidant partners.

Mediation analysis

The significant effects of conflict on sexual motivation may be either direct or mediated through the quality of interaction during the conflict resolution discussion. Two-way repeated measures ANOVAs (Conflict Condition $\times$ Gender) on observer-rated indices of stress–anxiety, warmth–supportiveness, and quality of interaction, yielded no significant main or interactive effects for conflict condition. Therefore, Baron and Kenny’s (1986) first criterion for mediation was not met, suggesting that the effects of conflict on perceived partner’s attractiveness and sexual motives were not mediated by the observer-rated indices. Moreover, additional APIM models conducted on perceived partner’s attractiveness and sexual motives while controlling for variations in each of the observer-rated indices revealed similar coefficients to those reported in Table 3. These findings indicated that the request to discuss a relational problem had direct effects on sexual motivation, regardless of variations in partner’s behavior during the discussion.

We also examined the potential role of perceived partner’s attractiveness as mediating the effects of conflict condition and attachment orientations on sex motives. However, additional APIM models conducted on sex motives while controlling for variations in perceived partner’s attractiveness revealed similar coefficients to those reported in Table 3. These findings indicated that perceived partner’s attractiveness did not mediate the observed effects of conflict discussion and attachment orientations on sex motives.
Discussion

This research uses attachment theory to better predict whether and for whom relational conflict affects sexual motivation. The presence of major relational conflict may generate aversive feelings toward one’s partner, thereby reducing his or her sexual desirability (Kaplan, 1974; McCarthy, 1999). Not all people, however, react to relational conflict in the same way; some may perceive their partner as less sexually desirable and will attempt to avoid having sex with him or her, whereas others may find their partner more sexually appealing and will experience a heightened desire to engage in sex with this desirable partner (e.g., Metz & Epstein, 2002). Thus, the effects of relationship conflict on sexual motivation may depend on individual and couple differences. However, relatively little is known about the factors that contribute to the desire to have sex following relational conflict and the reasons for doing so.

Our research fills these empirical gaps by showing that gender and attachment orientation help explain whether relational conflict decreases or increases perceived partner’s sexual attractiveness and the possible motives behind the desire to engage in sex with this partner. Specifically, relational conflict inhibited relationship-based motives (having sex to nurture one’s partner), regardless of attachment orientation, and had an adverse effect on women’s sexual motivation. In contrast, relational conflict had a beneficial effect on men’s sexual motivation. Additional findings indicated that, as originally hypothesized, relational conflict decreased the likelihood of engaging in sex for self-serving reasons (e.g., experiencing pleasure, obtaining stress reduction, and feeling emotionally valued by partner) among people with more avoidant partners, but increased the likelihood of engaging in sex to feel better (by experiencing pleasure) among people with less avoidant partners.

Relational conflict was found to affect men’s and women’s sexual motivation differently. In particular, relational conflict led men to perceive their partner as more sexually attractive and women to perceive their partner as less sexually attractive. At the same time, women’s expressions of warmth and supportiveness during conflict resolution discussions were associated with enhanced perception of partner’s sexual attractiveness. This gender-specific effect is hardly surprising given that relational context has a more powerful effect on women’s sexual desire than on men’s desire (e.g., Baumeister, 2000; Diamond, 2003). Fitting previous findings (Birnbaum et al., 2007), women tended to react to negative and positive relationship interactions (e.g., major conflict discussion, expression of warmth and supportiveness during the discussion) with a congruent decrease or increase in perceptions of partner’s sexual attractiveness.

These gender differences in conflict effects suggest that different processes underlie men’s and women’s desire to engage in sex following relational conflict. Women’s sexual desire may be influenced by their interpretation of the conflictual event itself and the sexual activity within this specific context. For example, a woman who perceives relational conflict as an indicator of partner’s rejection, as may often be the case in major conflict discussions, may be more likely to avoid having sex with this rejecting partner than a woman who perceives the conflict as an opportunity to instill a sense of intimacy and the sexual interaction as a means to further strengthen the emotional bond between herself and her partner. This conclusion fits well with Basson’s (2000, 2001) model of sexual response, which proposes that for many women the willingness to experience arousal and subsequent sexual desire is governed by intimacy needs rather than by spontaneous urges. Men’s sexual desire, by comparison, may be affected by the arousal per se rather than by the relational context that generates it (Baumeister, 2000).

Attachment orientations were less relevant than gender for explaining the effect of relational conflict on perceived partner’s sexual attractiveness. Nevertheless, partners’ attachment orientations did prove useful in predicting the possible motives behind the desire to engage in sex, thereby demonstrating the value of adopting a dyadic perspective for understanding the effects of conflict on sexual motivation. Relational conflict may threaten the future of the relationship as well as one’s
self-image. As such, conflict may elicit both relationship-based sexual motivations, given that having sex may provide reassurance of a partner’s love and availability, and self-serving sexual motivations (i.e., having sex to feel better), given that having sex may satisfy self-enhancement needs. However, sexual interactions do not usually occur in a “relational vacuum” and people’s motivation to pursue the goals elicited by conflict may at least partially depend on perceiving their partner as willing to support these goals. For example, perceiving one’s partner as unresponsive to one’s needs during either conflict or sex may lessen the desire to have sex with this unresponsive partner to compensate for threats elicited by relational conflicts.

Indeed, as our findings indicated, people with more avoidant partners were relatively less likely to use sex for self-serving reasons following a relational conflict. An avoidant person’s hostile stance during conflictual interactions (Simpson et al., 1996), combined with his or her habitual dismissal of partner’s needs during sex (Birnbaum et al., 2006), may decrease the likelihood that partners will view him or her as a source of consolation during sex and as a responsive figure that can relieve their personal and interpersonal distress. Conversely, partners’ attachment anxiety inhibited the decline in the desire to have sex to obtain relief from sex following relational conflict, possibly because people with anxious partners perceive them as eager to please during sex, primarily under relationship-threatening conditions (Birnbaum et al., 2008). Because we did not measure perceptions of a partner’s responsiveness to sexual goals, further research is needed to address processes underlying sexual motivation in the context of dyadic conflict.

These results should be interpreted in the context of several limitations. For one, both perceived partner’s sexual attractiveness and the desire to engage in sex with this partner are correlated components of sexual motivation. Nevertheless, perceived partner attractiveness and sexual desire are not just different indices of the same phenomenon and should therefore not be equated with each other. Furthermore, we focused on the effect of conflict on sexual motivation rather than on actual sexual behavior. Although the reasons given by people for engaging in sex may shed light on the functional significance of sex in conflict resolution, they cannot be equated with actual sexual behavior (e.g., the same sexual behavior can serve different goals, different sexual behaviors can serve the same goal). Moreover, an individual may want to engage in sex without acting on this desire or may engage in sex without experiencing desire. It is therefore unclear how applicable the findings would be to actual sexual behavior. For example, as our findings show, highly anxious women’s desire to engage in sex was not affected by conflict. At the same time, however, these women might be particularly likely to engage in sex following conflict because of their tendency to consent to unwanted sex out of fear of losing their partners (e.g., Impett & Peplau, 2002). To be sure, engaging in wanted and unwanted sex following relational conflict may hold differential implications for personal and relational well-being that future research should consider when studying the effects of relational conflict on sexuality.

Relatedly, although it is tempting to interpret the meaning of sex within the context of relational conflict as merely a reflection of the motives elicited by conflict, sexual motives tell only part of the story. Equally important are sex-related emotions. Relational conflict may generate both negative (e.g., disappointment, anger, and resentment) and positive (e.g., compassion, optimism) emotions. These emotions may spill over into the sexual realm and thus further affect the overall meaning of the sexual encounter. For example, some people may engage in sex to strengthen the relationship while feeling threatened, whereas others may engage in sex for the same reason while feeling compassion and love. Similarly, it is possible that the discussion of a conflict may not necessarily change sexual motivation in and of itself, but that these changes may also depend upon conflict resolution (i.e., whether or not the conflict was resolved), which we did not assess.

Another limitation may stem from the order of measures. Although couples completed a filler scale, which intended to
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minimize the effects of conflict on responses to the measure of attachment orientations, a conflict might still have some transient effects on responses to the attachment measure. Finally, the present single-time study was conducted under laboratory conditions and it did not assess relational conflict and sexual motivation in their natural dyadic context. The generalizability of the observed effects should be examined in future studies using more ecologically valid designs, such as diary studies that involve repeated assessment of ongoing conflictual interactions and sex-related cognitions, motives, emotions, and behaviors across multiple days.

These limitations notwithstanding, this research is among the first to establish causal links between experimentally manipulated relational conflict and sexual motivation. Our findings provide insight into the stress-regulation function of sex in close relationship by illustrating its complex role in the dyadic process of relational conflict. From an attachment-theoretical perspective, the sexual system may serve attachment-related goals, primarily in situations that call for distress regulation and proximity seeking (Birnbaum, 2010; Davis et al., 2004). As such, engaging in sex following relational conflict has the potential for improving the relationship by promoting intimacy between partners. Still, there are cases in which relationship restoration may not be viewed as feasible (e.g., conflict that poses a major threat to the future of the relationship). In these cases, sex may function to signal incompatibility with relationship goals rather than as a relationship maintenance mechanism, thereby motivating the individual to seek resolution of these interpersonal problems, either with the current partner or by looking for a more suitable partner (Birnbaum & Reis, 2006).

Sex, of course, may be equally devoid of affectional bonding, even within the context of ongoing romantic relationships, as the attachment and sexual systems represent distinctive behavioral systems (e.g., Diamond, 2003; Fisher, Aron, Mashek, Li, & Brown, 2002). Accordingly, sex may be used for the sole purpose of immediate physical gratification and feeling better about oneself.

Our findings suggest that the functional significance of the sexual system for conflict processes is guided by the unique configuration of one’s and partner’s attachment orientations. Whether engaging in sex for specific reasons following relational conflict is actually reflected during daily sexual interactions and whether it indeed promotes personal and relational well-being are questions for future research.

References


