

Unreciprocated Love or Sexual Attraction: Which is Most Upsetting?

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ABSTRACT

The present research sought to determine whether or not there are sex differences in reactions to an inequity in one partner's love or sexual attraction towards her/his partner. Study 1 used a categorical measure where participants were asked to indicate which scenario, partner is less sexually attracted to you than you are to her/him, and partner loves you less than you love her/him was most upsetting. Study 2 used a continuous measure where participants were asked to rate the level of upset associated with those same two scenarios. Based on prior research examining deficits in emotional and sexual access and prior research examining the role of emotional and sexual actions in reconciliation, an inequity in love between partners was hypothesized to be chosen as most upsetting (Study 1) and rated as more upsetting (Study 2) for both sexes. The results were consistent with the hypothesis for Study 1 only. No significant differences occurred for Study 2. These findings are discussed in terms of prior research on love and reconciliation.

KEYWORDS

Love, Sexual Attraction, Upset

Prior research shows that emotional commitment, emotional access, and love are important factors for relationship maintenance (Buss, 1988; Wade, Auer, & Roth 2009; Wade, Mogilski, & Schoenberg, 2017; Wade & Mogilski, 2013). In addition to these emotional factors involved in sustaining a relationship, sexual attraction, sexual access, and sexual equity have also been found to be important for sustaining a relationship (Buss, 1989a; Wade & Brown, 2012; Wade & Mogilski, 2013). But, due to differing parental investment concerns sex differences occur. Men are faced with finding women who are the best possible mates for bearing their offspring, and women are faced with finding men who are most willing and best able to invest in their offspring (Buss, 1989a, Trivers, 1972). As a consequence of this desire, men choose mates based on fertility and reproductive potential cues and

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sexual access (Buss, 1989a, 2006). Buckle, Gallup and Rodd (1996) and Betzig (1989) report that men place a premium on women's capacity to reproduce. Consistent with this, Shackelford and Buss (1997) report that competition among men for sexual access to reproductively valuable women is more intense than competition among women for reproductively valuable men. Thus, perhaps not surprisingly, Sprecher and Cate (2004) report that men are less satisfied overall when their wives are sexually withholding. Similarly, Buss (1989b) reports that men report the greatest anger and upset over women who accepted resources from them but failed to provide sexual access in return. Consistent with this, Felmlee, Sprecher, and Bassin (1990) report that sexual intimacy is a positive predictor of relationship stability.

Further testaments to the importance of sexual access are that marriages that involve successful reproduction are more likely to continue (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977; Waite & Lillard 1991), and some societies allow mate expulsion, that is, divorce, on the basis of a partner's refusal to have sex (Betzig, 1989). However, women typically desire a larger parental investment from their male partners (Trivers, 1972). Consequently, women also desire a long-term commitment from their male partners (Buss, 1989a), and a commitment is a product of emotional involvement (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992). Therefore, a male partner's willingness to share their feelings/show their love for their partner or are committed (emotional accessibility) should be most important for women's relationship terminations decisions. Recent mate expulsion research indicates that indeed men find deficits in sexual access, which follows from sexual attraction, to be more important for sustaining relationships and women find emotional access, which involves communicating love, to be more important for mate expulsion decisions (Wade & Brown, 2012).

Based on the aforementioned research and differing parental investment concerns for men and women, one might expect that finding out that one's partner loves one less than she/he loves the partner would be more upsetting to women, and finding out that one's partner is less sexually attracted (interested in having sex with) to her/him than she/he is to the partner would be more upsetting to men. However, prior research examining love and reconciliation (Wade, et al., 2009; Wade et al., 2013) indicates that both sexes find emotion and love related actions as most effective overall for reconciliation with a partner and for communicating love to a partner. Therefore, it is not clear whether the aforementioned sex difference regarding inequity in love and sex between two partners would occur. But, this has not been examined to date. Since mate expulsion is adaptive in some contexts (Wade & Brown, 2012) it is important to further our understanding of the factors involved in sustaining a relationship. Thus, the present research addresses the issue of whether unreciprocated love or unreciprocated sexual attraction is more upsetting to a partner in two studies. Study 1 used a categorical measure paradigm, while Study 2 used a continuous measure paradigm. Based on research documenting commitment based love acts and reconciliation behaviors as being more important for communicating exclusivity to a partner, and for facilitating reconciliation with a partner than sex based love acts and reconciliation behaviors, an inequity in love between partners was hypothesized to be more upsetting to both men and women.

METHODS

Participants

Both studies employed samples from a private University in the northeastern United States. Some participants took part in the research as part of the requirements of the introductory psychology course. Other participants were recruited online via the Facebook posts to the authors' Facebook pages and to various Facebook psychology research participation solicitation groups. Study 1 included 36 men and 58 women, ranging in age from 18-56, $M = 20.37$, $SD = 3.97$. The sample was 86% White, 2% Black, 4% Asian, 4% Hispanic, and 4% Other. Study 2 included 27 men and 74 women, ranging in age from 18-39, $M = 20.78$, $SD = 4.66$. The sample was 70% White, 10% Black, 6% Asian, 10% Hispanic, 1% Native American, and 3% Other. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Bucknell University.

Procedure

Participants from the introductory psychology course and from Facebook in each study were given a link to an online survey developed using Qualtrics. The survey link directed participants to an informed consent statement. Some participants in Study 2 who were from the introductory psychology course were given surveys in person and asked to complete them also. These participants were first asked to complete an informed consent statement and then they were given the paper survey to complete. Upon giving their informed consent, participants in each study were directed to demographic questions asking: their age, sex, and race, whether they have ever been in a sexual relationship, their current relationship status, their sexual orientation, whether or not they are currently using hormonal birth control, and any medications that they are currently using. Next, participants in each study received the following instructions:

Please think of a committed romantic relationship that you have had in the past, that you have now, or that you would like to have. Imagine that there is a problem in your relationship. Study 1 employed a forced choice paradigm where participants were randomly presented with the following two scenarios and were asked to:

"Please indicate which of the following scenarios is more likely to upset you".

- (1) Your partner does not find you as sexually attractive as you find him/her (your partner is less interested in sex with you than you are with him/her).*
- (2) Your partner does not love you as much as you love her/him.*

Study 2 employed a continuous measure paradigm where participants were randomly presented with the same two aforementioned scenarios and participants were asked to:

Please indicate how upsetting each of the following scenarios is to you via 7-point Likert-scales (1= not very upset to 7 = very upset).

Following the presentation of the scenarios, participants were presented with a short form of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972) in order to allow for control of socially desirable response biases. Next, participants received the debriefing statement.

RESULTS

Chi-squares computed across sex of participants for Study 1 revealed no significant effect for sex of participant, but a significant difference between scenarios occurred, $X^2(94) = 46.34, p < .0001$. The inequity in love scenario was chosen as more upsetting (80 cases vs. 14 cases). Additionally, responses to the social desirability scale in Study 1 were summed to create an overall score and correlations between that score and scenario choices were computed. The correlation between the social desirability score and the scenario choice was not significant, showing that socially desirable responding was not a problem in Study 1. For Study 2, once again responses to the social desirability scale were summed to create an overall score, and a 2(sex) x 2(scenarios) mixed model repeated measures ANCOVA with the social desirability score included as the covariate was computed. The ANCOVA did not reveal any significant effects, See Table 1. Additionally, no significant effects were obtained for sexual orientation, birth control usage for women, sexual relationship experience, or current relationship status.

Table 1. Responses to scenarios as a function of sex of participant

Sex	Scenario	
	Partner loves you less	Partner is less sexually attracted to you
Male	5.38 (1.37)	4.69 (1.37)
Female	5.73 (1.41)	5.37 (1.36)

Note: higher numbers mean more upsetting, standard deviations are in parentheses.

DISCUSSION

The results were consistent with the hypothesis for the categorical paradigm (Study 1), but not for the continuous measure paradigm (Study 2). The results of Study 1 can be explained in terms of the prior research showing that love acts that are emotionally based are most effective for showing love to a partner (Wade et al., 2009) and are most effective overall for reconciling with a partner (Wade, et al., 2013). An inequity in a partner's love may be most upsetting for both men and women because love is important to both sexes. Women want an emotionally accessible partner (Wade & Brown, 2012; Wade & Mogilski 2013), and prior research shows that men report being in love with their partner to their partner earlier than women do (Ackerman, Griskevicius, & Li, 2011; Brantley, Knox, & Zusman, 2002; Kanin, Davidson, & Scheck, 1970).

These findings may differ from the findings regarding mate expulsion decisions where sexual access deficits are more important for men's decisions and emotional access deficits are more important for women's decisions because the focus of the present research was on how upsetting inequities in sexual attraction and love were on the part of a partner rather than on which of the two aforementioned inequities would lead to mate expulsion. The findings from the present research suggest that different dynamics may be involved with being upset over inequities in sexual attraction and love with a partner versus deciding to expel them when there are inequities in love and sexual attraction.

No significant differences may have occurred for Study 2 because the continuous measure paradigm may not have been viewed as realistic. Shackelford, et al., (2004) report that "given the methodological problem of ceiling effects often encountered when using a Likert-type format in these contexts, forced-choice methods provide the opportunity to discover actual differences that might otherwise be obscured." Therefore, one can conclude that consistent with research on communicating love and reconciliation, men and women are most upset by inequities in love with a partner rather than with inequities in sexual attraction with a partner as seen in Study 1.

Limitations and Future Research

The present research used samples that were largely composed of white college aged individuals. Since life history, and whether one has children, can affect mating strategies (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000), and other ecological variables such as one's age (Alley, 2000) can affect mating strategies, additional research is needed with older samples. Additionally, since culture can influence evolutionary adaptations (Buss, 1995; Crawford & Anderson, 1979; Symons, 1995; Wade, 2003) and evolutionary adaptations can influence culture (Murray & Schaller, 2010; Schaller & Murray, 2011) additional research with cross-cultural samples is needed.

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