# Themes in Couples’ Sexual Conflict Discussions

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## Introduction

- Improved sexual communication increases sexual satisfaction, but the communication processes involved have been relatively unexamined through observational research (for an exception, see Rehman et al., 2017).
- Most existing studies rely on self-report data, which fails to capture actual communication behaviours (e.g., Litzinger & Gordon, 2005).
- The purpose of this analysis was to explore themes in observed discussions of couples’ sexual communication.

## Participants

- Four monogamous, cohabitating mixed-sex couples aged 20-32; all Caucasian except one Asian female partner.
- Relationships ranged from 1.5-10 years.

## Procedure

- Individuals were given a list of common sources of sexual conflict and independently rated the degree to which these caused tension in their relationship. The top-rated items were presented to the couple as options for discussion.
- Couples discussed a sexual issue for 10 minutes while videotaped.
- Prominent themes were identified by four coders who watched each discussion, and then through consensus by group discussion.

## Method

### Themes and Exemplar Quotes

- **Expectations of Initiation**: Couples discussed how, when, and by whom they believed sex should be initiated.
  - W₆: It feels like there’s no effort you’re putting in… You just expect me to do it… I’ll do it if you present it differently - like you want it without have it at.
  - M₆: I want you to just tell me, go sit down, this is how it’s going to be.
  - M₆: Every time I kiss you, you think I’m trying to have sex with you. It may be the case, but it doesn’t mean that I’m pushing it on you. Of course I’m open to it if you want to, but I’m not forcing you.

- **Sexual Initiation Rejection**: Three partners expressed negative feelings when their sexual initiation was rejected, or when rejecting partner initiation.
  - M₆: It’s just at the initial second of being turned down, it’s like I guess I’m lacking somewhere.
  - W₆: Then I feel bad if I stop and you feel rejected.
  - M₆: You’ve rejected me enough for two lifetimes.
  - W₆: Whenever you say no…
  - M₆: It’s not all because of you.
  - W₆: Are you sure? Because that’s what it feels like when you say no.

- **Gendered Assumptions about Sex Drive**: Some partners attributed rejection of sex to differences in partners’ sex drives and assumed men generally have higher sex drives than women.
  - M₆: Maybe it’s because it’s me as a person. Biologically, I’m hypersexual… It’s just my biological resources telling me be man, have woman.
  - W₆: It’s normally the guy… you’re the one who’s supposed to want it.
  - W₆: It’s generally expecting you to [initiate] knowing men have a higher sex drive…
  - W₆: We probably need to schedule in [sex] because we’re both so busy. Feels unromantic.
  - M₆: I want to have more sex and a more adventurous lifestyle… We know what each other likes - it’s can we find new and exciting ways to utilize that information.
  - W₆: We used to be spontaneous. What happened?

- **Spontaneity, Excitement, and Romance**: Couples described desire for exciting, spontaneous, or romantic sex lives and viewed a lack of these aspects as problematic.
  - W₆: We can make [scheduling sex] romantic.
  - W₆: It’s like a date night.
  - M₆: I need to realize if I want the amount to go up of anything happening, there needs to be more of an effort on my part.
  - M₆: You have to explore [what you like], be a willing participant and not be squeamish about it and not get embarrassed.

- **Attributions**: Some couples made attributions about the source of the sexual concern as either being themselves, their partner (blaming), or external circumstances.
  - M₆: Changes in my sex drive when my stress levels went through the roof for work.
  - W₆: We became more active on the weekends… maybe we’d have sex on the afternoons, but because we’ve been skiing all day…
  - M₆: [Your low sex drive] could also be part of the lifestyle you lead now, where you’re a little bit older, a little bit more inactive.
  - W₆: I don’t know if it was the antidepressants, but my sexual drive dropping [sic] off the face of the Earth for 3 years.

## Changes in Sex Over Time

- Couples tended to view the frequency and quality of sex as fluctuating throughout the relationship.
  - M₆: When our relationship first started, [sex was] bunny rabbit style…[Now, it] comes back up for a week or two and peter out.
  - W₆: We kind of go in waves… we’ve had phases of amazing and slower.
  - M₆: We had points where we had really hot sex but they were just pockets.

- **Problem-solving**: Couples proposed positive/constructive (M₆/W₆) and negative/unconstructive (M₃, M₄) solutions to sources of tension.
  - M₆: We can make [scheduling sex] romantic.
  - W₆: It’s like a date night.
  - M₆: I need to realize if I want the amount to go up of anything happening, there needs to be more of an effort on my part.
  - M₆: You have to explore [what you like], be a willing participant and not be squeamish about it and not get embarrassed.

## Conclusions

- Couples experienced tensions related to sexual frequency, rejection of sexual initiation, and lack of sexual desire.
- Discussion themes related to coping with rejection, concerns about lacking sexual excitement, and dissatisfaction with frequency or quality of sexual activity.
- Partners tried to understand the causes of their sexual issues, which resulted in attributions that could reduce distress (e.g., blaming circumstances), or attributions that could increase distress (e.g., self or partner blame).
- Couples observed how their sexual relationships had changed over time, and some proposed solutions to their problems, but these solutions were not always constructive.

*All authors contributed equally to this study*