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From secrecy to openness: sexual satisfaction in couples from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

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ABSTRACT

Research on sexual satisfaction does not always account for religious populations that may only engage in sexual experiences with one partner throughout the lifespan. Scales for assessing sexual satisfaction have been developed from generalized inclusion criteria that do not accurately represent highly religious communities, such as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Latter-Day Saints). Researchers conducted a phenomenological study exploring contributing factors to sexual satisfaction within the Latter-Day Saints community. Twelve heterosexual couples ($n=24$) took part in semi-structured interviews centered on sexual satisfaction in their relationships. The results were categorized into 7 themes: *individual well-being, consistency, satisfaction with context of the sexual experience, positive perception of partner's experience, emotional connectedness, overall relationship satisfaction, and openness to sexuality*. Special attention was given by participants to the role of openness in sexual satisfaction and the need to transform the cultural notion of secrecy around sexuality. The implications of this study should be considered by mental healthcare professionals working with individual or couple clients identifying as members of the church who report sexual difficulty.

LAY SUMMARY

This study is about sexual satisfaction for couples who identify as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Twelve couples participated in in-depth interviews. Researchers identified 7 factors that contribute to sexual satisfaction. This study provides mental healthcare workers with information on how they can help these couples increase sexual satisfaction in their relationship.

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Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints; religion; sexual satisfaction; sexuality

Introduction

Although the topic of sexual satisfaction has been widely studied, there is limited literature regarding factors that lead to sexual satisfaction for couples who identify

as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The only study examining sexual satisfaction among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints population made use of the New Sexual Satisfaction Scale (NSSS) (Stulhofer et al., 2010), to determine the level of sexual satisfaction (Francis et al., 2019). In the study that led to the development of the NSSS, the only sexuality-based inclusion criteria were the requirement that participants identified as sexually active. Assessment of sexual satisfaction in Latter-Day Saint couples using the NSSS scale is problematic in that it limits the generalizability of the results due to the fact that there is a significant difference in sexual values and practices within this population. Members of the Latter-Day Saint community are encouraged to be abstinent prior to marriage and often only have one sexual partner throughout their lifespan. Since these values differ from the vast majority of participants in most sexual satisfaction studies and from the many in the general population as a whole, a qualitative study was needed to better assess factors that lead to sexual satisfaction within this population.

Please note that in this study researchers will refrain from using the abbreviation “LDS” when referring to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints or its members, as leaders of the religion have asked that the church be referred to by the full name and members be referred to by the term “Latter-Day Saints” (Walch, 2018). The only instance where LDS is used in this article is in the results section when participants used the term themselves during interviews. As researchers, we chose not to change or alter the language used by participants in the study and therefore left the term LDS in those sections.

Sexual satisfaction

Sexual satisfaction can be defined as the degree to which one is satisfied with their sex life (Pinney et al., 1987). Higher sexual satisfaction has shown to improve the overall quality of one’s life (Penhollow et al., 2009) and is a predictor of relationship quality in couples (Valvano et al., 2018). Historically the Sexual Satisfaction Index (SSI) (Hudson et al., 1981) has been the primary tool for clinicians to assess sexual satisfaction. Recently professionals have developed the New Sexual Satisfaction Scale (NSSS) (Stulhofer et al., 2010). This scale assesses sexual satisfaction using five dimensions: sexual sensations, sexual presence and awareness, sexual exchange, emotional connection and closeness, and sexual activity (Mark et al., 2014). Although the NSSS scale assesses for five dimensions, sexual satisfaction may be impacted by other factors including life circumstances (Larson et al., 1998), health concerns (Ambler et al., 2001), interpersonal factors (Sprecher, 2002), and family of origin beliefs and values (Copen, 2009).

Religiosity and sex

Although it is known that family of origin influences sexual satisfaction and religion, studies have yet to determine a direct relationship between religion and sexual satisfaction. Previous researchers have provided examples of how religion can have an influence on sexual attitudes and number of sexual partners (Lefkowitz et al., 2004).

In one study, the researchers suggested that sexual satisfaction may be impacted by integration of religion into daily life (Mcfarland et al., 2011). Though researchers have proposed the possibility of religion influencing sexual factors, most studies measure religion using just a single variable measure (Mackey & O'Brien, 2005). Narrowing down religiousness to a single variable, such as church attendance, is highly problematic and is not a comprehensive or thorough way of measuring religiosity.

Many western religious views about sex are based on the assumption that the main purpose of sex is for procreation not pleasure with abstinence from sexual activity commonly viewed as one of the highest virtues among religious populations (Bullough, 2001). This assumption largely contributes to the sexual education practices in highly religious communities. A large portion of Western religions do not condone premarital sex or having multiple sexual partners. Stigma around these practices encourages religious people to practice abstinence, fearing the potential of bringing community shame upon oneself and one's family (Quinn, 2017).

Despite numerous negative views about sexual activity among religious communities, faith driven values may still contribute to higher sexual satisfaction. Researchers have shown sexual satisfaction to be higher in religious couples than in non-religious couples; researchers attribute this primarily to common values, such as commitment and practice of religious activities that may promote relationship maintenance by providing a dedicated time for spousal interaction (Dew et al., 2020; Mcfarland et al., 2011). Additionally, shared religious values may lead couples to invest greater time, energy, and resources into their sexual relationship (Hernandez et al., 2011).

Though religious people tend to be older when they engage in sexual intercourse for the first time, a significant number still engage in premarital sex (Bearman & Bruckner, 2001; Landor & Simons, 2014). People from varying religious groups may be more or less likely to abide by religious standards dependent on the religion itself, however members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints tend to be more likely to abide by religious standards because adherence is required for participation in certain religious ceremonies (Hinckley, 1995).

Religion and sexual education

Abstinence as part of sexual education continues to be a topic of controversy in religious communities. Though abstinence-only sex education programs have been funded by the United States (US) government and mandated in 48 of the 50 states, their effectiveness has been strongly critiqued (Stanger-Hall et al., 2011). Abstinence-only programs are the current standard for sex education in public schools in Utah, a state where over half of the population are Latter-Day Saints (Steadman et al., 2014). Students participating in formal sex education in school may be seeking out information about sex from other sources.

Researchers suggest that pornography can act as sexual education and increase comfort level with sex (Watson & Smith, 2012). Watching pornography may introduce new ideas for sexual exploration between couples (Cranney & Štulhofer, 2017). A positive association was found between pornography acceptance within couples and sexual

satisfaction (Brown et al., 2017). This may be due to the ability of sexually explicit material to function as a form of sexual education. Although acceptance of pornography can influence sexual satisfaction, other findings show that religious women have a drastically lower use of sexually explicit material than non-religious women. Researchers propose the lower use of sexually explicit material is due to feelings of guilt related to religious beliefs (Cranney & Štulhofer, 2017). The access of explicit sexual content, even for educational purposes, is largely frowned upon by many religious communities, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Jones, 2018).

The church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-Day Saints

Similar to other western religions, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints encourages abstinence from sex before marriage (Hinckley, 1995). However, unlike religious views previously mentioned, the church teaches that the value of sex extends beyond procreation. Latter-Day Saints leaders consistently emphasize the importance of sex for relationship satisfaction and connectedness (Holland, 1998).

Sex outside of marriage is considered misuse of sexual activity as a gift to humankind (Hinckley, 1995). Consequences of sexual activities outside of marriage can result in exclusion from certain religious ceremonies in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Negative consequences of sexual misuse can lead to high levels of guilt, and greater sexual guilt has been directly tied to lower sexual satisfaction (Leonhardt et al., 2020). For this purpose and perhaps more, the Latter-Day Saints community is often considered strict and rigid as it pertains to sexual practices (McConkie, 1966). The dichotomy of strict consequences of sex before marriage, followed by the encouragement of sexual intimacy within marriage, may leave couples unprepared to make the transition from abstinent to sexually active.

Sexual satisfaction among Latter-Day Saints

Most studies conducted on religiosity and sexual behavior have focused on non-marital sexuality (Freitas, 2008). Much of the literature excludes religious people who adhere to abstinence standards and refrain from sexual activity with more than one partner. This includes a large percentage of members in the Latter-Day Saints community and only one study has been conducted to measure sexual satisfaction within the population (Francis et al., 2019), which was a quantitative internet-based study measuring sexual satisfaction of 266 participants from the state of Utah. Perceived partner satisfaction was the top predictor of sexual satisfaction for Latter-Day Saint couples (Francis et al., 2019). The authors suggest that Latter-Day Saints place high value on the interpersonal aspects of the sexual relationship, which contributes to their own satisfaction.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints typically marry at a younger age and have fewer partners than non-religious couples, which could lead to a decrease in sexual satisfaction, as higher age has been correlated with increased sexual satisfaction, especially for females (Francis et al., 2019). One study found that when grouped by inhibited sexual desire and non-inhibited sexual desire, Latter-Day Saint women were more often in the inhibited group (Stuart et al., 1987).

There is limited information known about sexual satisfaction in Latter-Day Saints couples. In the present study the authors sought to examine how sexual satisfaction is uniquely experienced by Latter-Day Saints couples. Little information is known about conservative Christian couples who abstain from sex until marriage and their subsequent experiences with sexuality. This is particularly true for Latter-Day Saint couples. Our purpose in this study was to explore the lived experiences of couples raised in this faith and to explore contributing factors to their sexual satisfaction.

Materials and methods

Given the absence of previous research on sexual satisfaction within the Latter-Day Saint community, discovery-oriented phenomenological methods were used in this investigation. Qualitative phenomenological research focuses on understanding experiences instead of testing a hypothesis or theory (Polkinghorne, 1989). Random sample participants are neither appropriate nor advisable due to the nature of investigative phenomenological research (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Participants' lived experiences should be accurately represented.

Participants and procedures

Participants were married, heterosexual couples who identified as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, snowball sampling, and convenience sampling methods. Participants were recruited from Latter-Day Saint Facebook groups and other social media. Some participants were referred to the researchers by their friends and family who had participated in the study. Participants confirmed they met the inclusion criteria via self-report prior to participating in interviews. Twelve heterosexual couples participated in the study, totaling 24 participants ($n=24$). Characteristics of the participants are found in tables 1 and 2.

Interviews were conducted over the phone or video conferencing between May and August of 2020. Each partner was interviewed separately for about 20-30 minutes. Afterwards, the couple participated in a couple interview for 20-30 minutes.

Table 1. Individual characteristics.

Characteristic	Sample (N=24)
Age range	
Husbands	23-44 (28.7)
Wives	22-44 (26.1)
Race	
Asian/Pacific Islander	1
Caucasian	18
Hispanic/Latino	3
Multiracial	1
Native American	1
Education	
High School	2
Associate's	7
Bachelor's	10
Advanced	5

Table 2. Couple characteristics.

Characteristic	Sample (N=12)
Household Income (U.S. dollars)	
\$20,000 or less	4
\$20,000-\$50,000	2
\$50,000-\$75,000	1
\$75,000-\$100,000	4
\$100,000+	1
Children (n)	
0	7
1	2
2	1
3	2
Length of Marriage (years)	
0-5	8
6-10	2
11-14	2

The interviews were semi-structured, totaling 60-90 minutes each. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Once interviews were transcribed, the data was coded for common themes by each researcher. An example of questions from the interview guide are: *What factors contribute to your sexual satisfaction as a couple? How would you describe your first sexual experience? What are your current religious beliefs about sex?*

Data analysis

After conducting interviews and transcribing the data, researchers coded each interview line-by-line and segment by segment. Line-by-line coding summarizes each line and helps researchers gain a deeper understanding of the data prior to grouping the results (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Once open coding was completed, researchers started grouping the data into common themes. Each researcher then engaged in axial coding to create categories for the resulting themes. Researchers engaged in this process individually then came together to compare findings. Researchers regularly discussed their findings with an advisor who oversaw the project. The advisor helped researchers formulate additional questions and provided feedback throughout each stage of data collection and data analysis.

Trustworthiness and rigor

Anfara et al. (2002), outlines processes researchers should follow in order to ensure proper trustworthiness and rigor are achieved in qualitative research. To demonstrate transferability, the researchers provide thick, rich descriptions of each theme. To demonstrate dependability, both researchers participated in memo writing. Memoing or keeping a research journal helps to organize the researcher's thoughts and check common themes during the interview and coding process. The researchers met regularly with a research advisor to analyze interviews, compare findings, and to discuss any discrepancies in the coding process.

The researchers are recent graduates of a master's level couple and family therapy program who were under the supervision of a faculty mentor. Two of the researchers

have a particular interest in the topic of sexuality within the Latter-Day Saints community and identify as members The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The other author does not identify with any specific religion. In qualitative research it is imperative that the researchers use reflexive practices to maintain awareness of their role in the research process (Watt, 2007, p.82) Qualitative researchers are encouraged to focus on how their “outer view” and “inner view” interact with the research process (Roger et al., 2018, p.533) In the present study researchers practiced reflexivity using journaling, notes, and met together often as a mentor and research team.

Results

Participants described contributing factors to sexual satisfaction within the context of their relationships. The results are categorized into 7 themes: *Individual well-being, consistency, satisfaction with context of the sexual experience, positive perception of partner's experience, emotional connectedness, overall relationship satisfaction, and openness*. Our participants gave special attention to relational factors and factors that do not specifically take place during the sexual experience. The study that led to the development of the NSSS predominantly included factors that occurred within the context of sexual experience (Stulhofer et al., 2010). Our participants emphasized how the qualities of their personal and relational lives outside of their sexual relationship as impactful of sexual satisfaction. The themes will be defined and elaborated upon in further detail below, as well as divided into subcategories as necessary.

Theme 1: Individual Well-Being

Participants consistently reported individual well-being as an influential factor to sexual satisfaction within their relationships. Participants who addressed the theme of individual well-being focused on sexual satisfaction in instances that contributed to their overall sex life. The couples in our study were especially cognizant of their own well-being as well as their partners. As described by participants during the study, individual well-being refers to each husband and wife's individual state of being, both physically and mentally. Although both husbands and wives reported individual factors influencing their sexual satisfaction, participants especially highlighted the importance of the wife's individual well-being. Contributing factors to individual well-being included *appropriate energy level, physical wellness, pleasurable mood, and positive self-image*.

Participants disclosed that individual energy level and physical wellness impact the couple's ability to engage in satisfying sexual activities. One wife commented, “A big contributing factor is if we're not tired. We feel more satisfied when we have energy to participate and spend time together.” Regarding factors of individual mental health, mood and self-image were consistently mentioned by participants. One husband stated, “When both of our needs are met, it becomes satisfying for both of us.” Although couples often reflected on particular sexual instances, they all reported individual well-being as important to their overall sexual satisfaction.

Theme 2: Consistency

Consistent frequency of sexual intercourse was another theme found in the study; however, this theme was discussed most often by husbands. Participants defined consistency as recurring and regular engagement in sexual activity between a couple. Satisfactory consistency depended on each individual couple and their unique preferences. Our participants stressed the need for a determined frequency to feel collaborative and mutually maintained throughout the entirety of the relationship. When one couple was asked about contributing factors to their sexual satisfaction, the husband reported, “Frequency, I suppose. A certain amount of regularity is appreciated.” Another husband mentioned consistency when answering the same question: “Frequency and having a pretty general routine is nice.” While determination of frequency remained subjective to the couple’s personal preference, need for collaboration and maintained consistency was stressed by all participants who mentioned frequency.

Theme 3: Satisfaction with context of the sexual experience

Participants’ satisfaction with the context during their sexual experiences proved to be a significant contributor to overall sexual satisfaction. For this study, participants defined context as each partner’s contentment with the events during or directly preceding the physical act of sexual intercourse. Similar to our previous themes, the results reported for context of the sexual experience were also relationally oriented. The sexual experiences that were most frequently reported as influential of satisfaction were *appropriate amount of foreplay, mutual partner involvement, and presence of orgasm*.

For sex to be enjoyable, many couples reported needing sufficient foreplay prior to intercourse. Although both husbands and wives drew these conclusions, the participants were almost always referring to wives when discussing foreplay. Several husbands reported being in tune to their wife’s physical needs. When describing what contributes to his wife’s satisfaction, one husband stated, “I think foreplay. Just anything building up to it like soft touches, talking, cuddling, things like that.” During the act of sexual intercourse, on the other hand, many couples mentioned the desire for mutual or equal involvement. Another participant reported, “If both parties are excited and involved, it’s much more satisfying.”

The final contextual factor during a sexual experience that participants reported as influential is the presence of an orgasm during sex. One husband summarized this by stating, “Making sure it’s shared pleasure is important. Like, making sure it’s not just one of us reaching climax or orgasm, but both are kind of benefiting from it or gaining from it.” These contextual events were consistently echoed by both husbands and wives throughout the interview process.

Theme 4: Positive perception of partner’s experience

Couples reported increased sexual satisfaction from having a positive perception of their partner’s experience; both a physically and emotionally. Positive perception of

partner is often mentioned in sexual satisfaction literature when referring to the act of sexual intercourse. Adversely, our participants discussed aspects of perception that are influenced by their partner's behavior outside of sex. Sexual satisfaction was reported to increase when participants had a positive perception of their partner's experience in three areas: *attraction to the other, genuine desire for sex, and satisfaction level during intercourse.*

Prior and during the act of sex, couples described the need to feel their partner is physically attracted to them. One wife stated, "I'm satisfied when I'm feeling like he finds me attractive." A husband reiterated this by explaining the need to express his attraction level to his wife. He said, "I think when she knows that I am trying, that's important. If I'm complimenting her appearance, that helps." Participants also described the perception of their partner's genuine desire for sex as a contributing factor to their satisfaction. One husband explained, "I think that mutual desire is important to satisfaction. I mean, I don't want pity sex." Another husband elaborated, "If I feel like she's having sex just to make me happy, that hurts me and makes me not sexually satisfied."

Finally, the perceived satisfaction level during sexual intercourse was discussed by couples as impactful of sexual satisfaction. A husband stated to his wife during their couple interview, "When I can physically see you getting turned-on, that's really good for my personal sexual satisfaction because I feel like I'm doing a good job." Perceived partner satisfaction during intercourse was one of the most frequently answered responses when asked what factors contribute to their sexual satisfaction, particularly for husbands.

Theme 5: Emotional connectedness

Nearly every couple who participated in the study mentioned the role of emotional connection in sexual satisfaction. These couples defined emotional connectedness as having a deep feeling of connection through love, acceptance, and trust for one another. One husband reported, "The amount of connection in our relationship is important. A big thing for me is I feel connected to her and it doesn't just feel like a disconnected experience where we are going for physical pleasure without emotional connection." Wives also felt strongly about emotional connection. When asked about contributing factors to sexual satisfaction, one wife replied, "Probably vulnerability and trust, where I can be 100% myself. He's very accepting and open to anything I bring to the table. It's that trust, vulnerability, and acceptance. We have to be in a really good emotionally connected place." Emotional connectedness, with an emphasis on fostering trust within the relationship, was proven to be a significant factor in sexual satisfaction for couples.

Theme 6: Overall relationship satisfaction

Overall relationship satisfaction was consistently reported as impactful of participant's ability to be sexually satisfied. As stated throughout this section, placing value on relational factors makes Latter-Day Saint-identifying individuals stand out among

those who have participated in previous sexual satisfaction studies. From the descriptions of our participants, overall relationship satisfaction is one's fulfillment with the relationship, including both contextual and emotional components. The three most reported contributing factors to overall relationship satisfaction were: *quality time outside of sex, effective communication, and low conflict*.

Participants expressed how spending quality time with their partner outside of sex was helpful in increasing sexual satisfaction. One wife reported, "Sometimes I'd like to spend time with him, but I'd rather watch a movie or do something together, you know? I want to feel loved outside of the bedroom before I can enjoy our sex life." In addition to quality time, effective communication was also repetitively mentioned during the interview process. One participant said, "I think it helps to make sure we're communicating, and each other's needs are met. When we feel emotionally stable and happy together in other ways, it makes the sex better." Both factors above were reported to contribute to the last factor: low level of conflict in the relationship. Multiple couples suggested that relational cohesion and low levels of conflict bettered their sex lives. One wife said, "When we're not fighting, it allows us to be vulnerable with each other. If we're satisfying each other in our relationship, we're more sexually satisfied." All three contributing factors to overall relationship satisfaction were not only reported as influential of sexual satisfaction, but also the ability for participants to be satisfied in the other 6 themes.

Theme 7: Openness to sexuality

The theme most unique to participants in the study was the emphasis on openness to sexuality. Every couple who participated in the study described having to transform the Latter-Day Saint cultural notion of secrecy around sexuality to openness about sexuality in order to achieve sexual satisfaction. Using the data obtained from participants, openness to sexuality is defined as the ability to be receptive without judgement to new ideas and new experiences. Although there are many contributing factors to openness to sexuality, the most reported were *willingness to experiment, communication of sexual preferences, and engagement in post-sex feedback*. There was an extensive amount of information on the topic of sexual openness. A large part of the data for this theme was provided through explanations of the negative impact of secrecy. For this reason, we have created two larger subcategories for this section. First, we will elaborate on the negative impact of the Latter-Day Saint cultural notion of secrecy around sexuality. We will then transition into the results on the positive impacts of openness to sexuality and how that contributes to sexual satisfaction. The primary areas of focus when discussing the negative impacts of secrecy were *discomfort around the topic of sex, shame-based education, difficulty transitioning into sex life, and limited access to sexual education*.

The negative impact of secrecy about sexuality

Participants overwhelmingly reported that the culture of secrecy around sex created a lack of comfort, transparency, acceptance, and education. One husband described how his experience with discomfort around sex impacted his sexual satisfaction into

adulthood. He said, “There is so much that not only wasn’t discussed, but also wasn’t willing to be discussed because it was uncomfortable for other people.” Many participants reported this discomfort as a result of shame-based education implemented when discussing sex in church related forums. One wife addressed the shame-based education by saying:

“Even if they say not to have sex and that’s a good idea, the way the church approaches it is so problematic to so many, especially women. It’s hard for me to give them credit for a good idea when it comes from harmful rationale.”

Husbands reiterated the negative impact of a shame-based approach. One explained, “Through missionary service, I struggled with shame around sexual feelings and attraction. Even to a degree early in our marriage, I continued to struggle. I enjoyed our sexual relationship, but it took time to fully morph out of that.” This husband was not alone in struggling with the transition into sexuality post-marriage. Another husband stated, “I noticed a handful of times in our marriage where those shameful thoughts have just popped into my head during sex and suddenly, I would feel this shameful feeling. How are you supposed to turn that off?” The concept of shame-based education was especially impactful for the women in the study. One wife stated, “I remember within the first couple years of marriage having times where I felt guilt or shame over wanting to feel sexually satisfied and identifying as someone who enjoys it, wants to have it, and it’s something women do.”

The final factor stressed by participants when discussing the Latter-Day Saint culture of secrecy around sex was having limited access to sexual education. Participants correlated their lack of accurate and inclusive sexual education to lower sexual satisfaction. Couples especially emphasized the importance of implementing sexual education from a young age. One participant explained:

“Abstinence only education does a terrible job of teaching boys and girls any sort of empowerment tools. It sets us up to fail from the beginning. Having all my education come from a very strict school or LDS background; I didn’t stand a chance against very real problems. Consent? – I didn’t even know what the word meant.”

Another participant reiterated, “I think people should be more open to talking about sexuality in the church. Kids are pretty young when exposed to things about sexuality. If they can’t trust leaders or parents, it’s difficult for them when they need help”

Participants consistently reported that the lack of understanding around sex hindered their ability to prioritize sexual satisfaction. One wife stated, “Sex can be taught with appropriate boundaries, but if you shut it down and leave people uneducated, you don’t empower them or give them any knowledge.” For the couples in the study, it was necessary for them to transform the Latter-Day Saint cultural notion of secrecy around sex prior to even exploring the idea of sexual satisfaction.

The positive impact of openness to sexuality

Every couple reported the requirement of transitioning to an open perspective on sexuality before being able to increase sexual satisfaction. For the participants, having

an open perspective included *willingness to experiment, communication of sexual preferences, and engagement in receptive post-sex feedback*. When asked what contributes to their sexual satisfaction, one husband expressed, “I would say experimentation with different things to know what we like. Whether that’s sex positions, toys, clothing, or anything like that. It’s about trying something new and finding out what work for us.” Communication of likes and dislikes was also a factor in sexual satisfaction. One wife stated to her husband, “Communication is important, and being able to talk about anything that makes us uncomfortable or (practices) that we like.”

Open communication, or post-sex feedback, was established as crucial for many couples. When discussing feedback, receptiveness of their partner was particularly emphasized. One wife reported, “Not taking offense to something like, ‘hey that hurt, that was too sensitive,’ or ‘that wasn’t as nice as this’ is definitely really helpful.” There was an overwhelming amount of data supporting the need to disabuse the notion of sexual secrecy within their religious culture before achieving sexual openness, therefore increasing sexual satisfaction. A final summative statement from one wife participant encompasses this idea:

“Re-writing the LDS narrative of sex helped me feel comfortable discussing satisfaction with my partner. We had to understand that we both came into marriage as sexual beings with sexual identities, then use our marriage to facilitate and bless that. We needed to recognize that just because we got married, we didn’t suddenly become sexual creatures. We had sexual needs even before we got married.”

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the contributing factors to sexual satisfaction for Latter-Day Saints couples differ from the ones reported by participants in the study that developed the NSSS (Stulhofer et al., 2010). The five dimensions of the NSSS include: sexual sensations, sexual presence and awareness, sexual exchange, emotional connection and closeness, and sexual activity (Stulhofer et al., 2010). When exploring the contributing factors to sexual satisfaction in Latter-Day Saints couples, we categorized our findings into seven themes: *individual well-being, consistency, satisfaction with the context of the sexual experience, emotional connectedness, overall relationship satisfaction, and openness to sexuality*. After comparing the five dimensions of the NSSS with the contributing factors reported by the participants of this study, we found several notable differences.

The biggest contrast between the results of our study and the ones found in Stulhofer et al. (2010) is that the NSSS focuses predominantly on factors that take place during sexual interactions. Conversely, our participants’ most reported factors surrounding the relational interactions as a whole. Reported factors from our study that are not addressed in the NSSS include overall relationship satisfaction and emotional connectedness, specifically outside of the context of sex. Stulhofer et al. (2010) reported that individual well-being, such as mood, was initially reported as contributable to sexual satisfaction for their participants, however the item was ultimately not categorized into one of the five conceptualized dimensions. Our study, however, found that participants strongly emphasized the importance of their own and their partner’s individual well-being. This may be due to the value these couples

place on having satisfactory marital life outside of sex before being able to achieve sexual satisfaction. Although aspects of sexual openness like creativity and experimentation were accounted for in the NSSS, the aspects of sexual openness that the participants of this study found most important were not included (Stulhofer et al., 2010). The ability to be open about topics of sexuality and be receptive to feedback was mentioned recurrently throughout our interview process. This may be due to sexual openness not being assumed in Latter-Day Saints culture as it may be by others in the overarching sexually active population.

Sexual education was a prominent theme in the findings. All participants described unique challenges associated with learning about sex and their own sexuality within a conservative religious framework. This is consistent with past research on sexual education in religious communities. Coleman and Testa (2007) found that religious students tend to score lower on sexual health tests than students who identify as non-religious. Conservative attitudes towards sex, access, and self-perceived needs have all been reported as possible influential factors to sexual education and satisfaction (Causarano et al., 2010).

The participants of this study discussed a culture of secrecy around sexual topics in their homes, communities, and church groups. This includes a lack of information about topics of sexuality such as: anatomy, consent, sexual attraction, the mechanics of intercourse, and comfort with individual sexuality. Several participants reported difficulty knowing where to find information about these topics, as well as shame around seeking that information. It is important to note that the lack of research on sexuality within the Latter-Day Saints population has led to a lack of research-based tools and resources for those who would like to access this information. Many of the participants from this study fall into this category; expressing a need and want for sexual information that is applicable to them and their relationship.

As an important part of developing familiarity with sexual satisfaction in general, participants reported needing to disabuse the cultural notion of secrecy around sexuality within the Latter-Day Saints culture. This theme came about indirectly throughout the interview process as participants shared their lived sexual experiences, particularly those pertaining to sexual education. Though the shift was not a central feature of our research question, the importance of it was reiterated by our participants. The mechanism by which this shift takes place remains to be explored. Future researchers should focus on exploring the shift from sexual secrecy to openness, possibly moving in a direction towards developing a grounded theory on the process.

Implications

There are several implications for therapists or counselors working with members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints around topics of sexuality. Members of this faith may show the need for their overall relational interactions to be satisfactory before being able to obtain satisfaction in their sex lives. Creating a safe place for openness about sexuality to occur within the therapy room could be a crucial element in aiding progression of sexual relationships for these clients. For relational therapists, our research suggests that Latter-Day Saint couples will need to feel comfortable addressing the relationship outside of sex while also learning to be vulnerable with their partner when discussing sex. Members of the community

may experience several barriers to discussing sexuality in the context of therapy including feelings of shame and discomfort around the topic.

These findings also indicate that Latter-Day Saint clients may benefit from psychoeducation focused on sexual knowledge and the intersection of sexual satisfaction and relational satisfaction. Emphasis in this area will most likely include helping clients shift from secrecy to openness and addressing any feelings of shame. For example, many individuals may feel that sexual desires they have are inappropriate or shameful. As a result, they may avoid having discussions with their partner about their sexual desires and preferences, discussions that could improve their sexual and relationship satisfaction. Clinicians can help normalize sexual desires clients experience and can help facilitate discussion and open communication regarding sexual preferences in the couple relationship. Creating an open dialogue between partners will not only help the couple improve their sexual satisfaction but could also improve their communication and the overall quality of their relationship.

Other clients may prefer to discuss sexuality from a religious context. Therapists should also be aware that within the Latter-Day Saint community clients may greatly vary in their values about sex and sexuality. Therapists may find it helpful to construct a sexual genogram when working with Latter-Day Saint clients to learn more about factors that impact each partner's views and beliefs about sexuality.

Future research

Prior to this study, only one study was found on the topic of Latter-Day Saints members and sexual satisfaction (Francis et al., 2019). This area of research is largely unexplored and therefore may be a topic which would benefit many people in the Latter-Day Saint community. The implications of this study center around it being one of the first of its kind. Discovering the importance of openness to sexuality as reported by the participants in this study is valuable not only in clinical settings, but for future researchers as well. Future directions in this area should focus on broadening the sample size to include more participants. Future researchers could also explore the positive and negative effects of openness to sexuality in comparison to secrecy. Researchers could focus on topics such as how sex education experiences differ in the Latter-Day Saints communities based on geographic area or what type of information about sex would most benefit members of the community.

Limitations

A limitation of our research includes a small sample size ($n=24$). Although our research is exploratory and lower participant numbers are not uncommon in qualitative research, additional studies with a greater number of participants would be beneficial. Since certain aspects of sexuality may be considered taboo within this community, finding participants willing to discuss their sexual activity with researchers can be a difficult process. Though our sample mirrors the ethnic representation within the overall Latter-Day Saint population, the smaller size limits the generalizability of results for ethnically diverse members, however our study is still the first of its kind and does provide valuable data from which researchers may build. Another limitation is

that many of the participants were young, and recently married or had no children. Participants who had been married longer or have more children may have some differing experiences and might be worth investigating in a future study. One benefit of having many participants who have been married for fewer years is that they may have a fresh perspective on transitioning from sexual secrecy to openness due to more recently making the transition to sexual activity. Last, our participants tended to be those who had some type of college degree. Future researchers should explore experiences of individuals or couples within differing educational backgrounds.

Conclusion

Results of our study could prove useful to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints who are seeking information around sexuality, sexual satisfaction, and sexual openness. Generalizing the findings of this research to other populations is not suggested, as phenomenological research is meant to gain insight and understanding of a specific population, however it is possible that religious communities who have similar values regarding sexuality may have similar experiences. In our study we challenged the notion of one singular scale to assess aspects of sexuality for all groups of people. Members of the Latter-Day Saint community generally take a more conservative stance when it comes to discussing sexuality, even when there is a high desire for accurate and accessible information on the topic. Our findings suggest that disabusing the cultural notion of secrecy within the community may not only be beneficial to its members, but also extremely necessary in achieving sexual satisfaction when engaging in marital sexual experiences. Receptiveness in the Latter-Day Saint community could promote conversations about sexuality in a way that would support members in the unique challenges that arise at the intersection of faith and sexual satisfaction.

Acknowledgments

We wish to submit an original research article entitled “From Secrecy to Openness: A qualitative Study on Factors Contributing to Sexual Satisfaction in couples from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints” for consideration by the journal of Sexual and Relationship Therapy. We confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere. We have no conflicts of interest to disclose, and the data has not been fabricated to support our conclusions. Each of the participants in this study completed an informed consent and the study was approved by the local Institutional Review Board.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest pertaining to this study.

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