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The Effects of Past Sexual Experience on Current Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of past sexual experience on the quality of current romantic relationships. Survey participants responded to survey items that measured level of emotional attachment their current romantic relationship. Participants indicated the number of sexual partners they had prior to their current romantic relationship. It was expected that an increased number of previous sexual partners would negatively influence emotional attachment in current romantic relationships. However, there was not a significant relationship between number of previous sexual partners and level of emotional attachment in current romantic relationships. Results suggested that past sexual experience may not be an important factor in determining the quality of current romantic relationships.

Romantic relationships are a popular topic of study in the field of psychology; however, little research has been conducted to investigate the role of sexual experience in bonding in the context of romantic relationships. In a study conducted by Hiller (2004) it was reported that "attachment formation [in humans] has been associated with hormones involved with sexual behavior, pregnancy, birth, and lactation: these [hormones] include oxytocin, vasopressin, prolactin, and endogenous opioids" (p. 396). This conclusion suggests that physiological processes that occur during sex may play a role in the formation of a bond between two people. The purpose of my research is to investigate the relationship between previous sexual experience with other partners and the level of emotional attachment/bonding in current romantic relationships. It is hypothesized that with an increased number of past sexual partners there will be decreased emotional attachment/bonding for participants currently in a romantic relationship.

Method

118 students enrolled in General Psychology at Boise State University self-selected through an Internet-based program called Experimetrix to participate in this study. The participants completed an omnibus survey including four original items to measure emotional attachment/bonding in a current romantic relationship. See Table 1 for survey items with means and standard deviations for participants currently in a romantic relationship. After the survey session, participants were debriefed, given an opportunity to ask questions, and given credit towards the exposure to research requirement for their General Psychology course.

Results

Correlation analyses provided the following conclusions regarding relationship between the number of previous sexual partners and agreement scores for items measuring emotional attachment. There is not a significant relationship between the number of previous sexual partners and agreement score for the item "My partner and I share a strong bond," $r(48) = -.11$, n.s. There is not a significant relationship between number of previous sexual partners and agreement score for the item "I care a lot about my current romantic partner," $r(47) = -.11$, n.s. There is not a significant relationship between number of previous sexual partners and agreement score for the item "I can imagine being with someone other than my current romantic partner," $r(48) = -.03$, n.s. There **is** a significant relationship between number of previous sexual partners and agreement score for the item "The person I lost my virginity with will always mean the most to me," $r(46) = -.41$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

The results of this study did not support the prediction that having previous sexual partners would have an adverse effect on the quality of current romantic relationships in area of emotional attachment. It was hypothesized that an increased number of previous sexual partners would result in survey responses that indicate a decreased level of emotional attachment in current romantic relationships. However, the results indicate that there is not a significant relationship between number of previous sexual partners and agreement with survey items that indicate emotional attachment in current romantic relationships. The only exception is that there is a significant relationship between number of previous sexual partners and agreement with the statement "the person I lost my virginity with will always mean the most to me." This could be interpreted such that with an increased number of sexual partners there is a decrease in the importance of one's first sexual partner. This study expanded on the findings of the study conducted by Hiller (2004) regarding the role of physiological processes that occur during sexual activity in human bonding by looking at the effects of exposure to multiple sexual partners on the strength of the human bonding process. The findings from this study do not support or refute the findings from the study by Hiller (2004). This study's findings may have been influenced by a small sample size and the limited amount of previous sexual experience represented by the relatively young sample. Future research should further investigate the relationship between previous sexual experience and ability to bond in a current romantic relationship with a larger and relatively older sample.

Table 1
Survey Item Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD)

Survey Items	*M*	*SD*
1. My partner and I share a strong bond.	4.22	.96
2. I care a lot about my current romantic partner.	4.47	.78
3. I can imagine being with someone other than my current partner.	2.55	1.26
4. The person I lost my virginity with will will always mean the most to me.	2.27	1.34
5. How many sexual partners did you have prior to your current relationship?	3.00	3.37

Notes. Survey items 1-4 were answered using a 5-point agreement scale with 1=*strongly disagree* to 5=*strongly agree*. Item 5 was answered with a fill-in answer.