

Emerging adulthood: An age of sexual experimentation or sexual self-focus?

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Abstract: Emerging adults (EAs) have been theorized as an intensely self-focused and sexually experimental cohort. The aim of this study was to examine the sexual motivations of heterosexual EA couples (aged 18 to 25 years) compared to heterosexual older adult couples (aged 30+ years) to determine if EAs are more self-focused sexual partners than older adults and if the self-focused sexual motivations of EAs lead to sexual dissatisfaction in their respective couple members. A moderated mediation model was proposed, whereby self-focused sexual motivation(s) were hypothesized to mediate the relationship between age and sexual dissatisfaction. Gender was also expected to moderate the relationship between age and sexual motivation in that EA males would gain the highest scores on measures of self-focused sexual motivations, leading to the highest scores of sexual dissatisfaction in their female partners. In line with the predictions, EAs reported the highest self-focused sexual motivation scores. However, contrary to what was expected, lower levels of sexual self-focus at older ages led to higher levels of sexual dissatisfaction in partners.

Acknowledgement: Portions of this article were presented by H.R. Leveque and C.L. Pedersen at the annual Association for Psychological Science meeting in Boston on May 28, 2010.

Introduction

For most individuals, the early 20's are tumultuous years of experimentation, learning, and personal cultivation, a time of life-shaping transformations in the romantic and occupational realms of their lives (Erikson, 1968). Arnett (2000) identified this as a novel phase of development for individuals in their late teens and mid-twenties (ages 18 to 25), labelled "emerging adulthood", and posited that this phase encompassed the "most volitional years of life" (p. 469). Most individuals in this age range actively avoid conforming to permanent adult roles and instead experiment through exploration of their identities. Emerging adulthood thus occurs at a point when individuals are not ready or eligible for adult status, but no longer fit into the teenage bracket (Arnett, 2007; Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell, 2005).

Arnett (2006) identified five chief features of this developmental period of emerging adulthood: (1) identity exploration; (2) instability; (3) self-focus; (4) feeling "in-between" and (5) possibilities. Arnett (2000) conceptualizes emerging adulthood as a

period of identity exploration and intense self-focus and proposes that the identity crisis hypothesized to take place in adolescence (see Erikson, 1968) is more salient in emerging adulthood, a period when individuals test out myriad potential options regarding work, religious or worldviews, and love relationships. Given that romantic attachments are particularly valuable avenues for identity exploration, one might expect that emerging adult romantic relationships would be less stable and more focused on sexual experimentation and personal sexual satisfaction. Twenge (2006) notes that the last three decades have seen a rise in behaviours like casual sex and oral sex among emerging adults and that sexual behaviour has become more recreational, experimental, and self-focused over this period. However, little is known about the extent to which the identity exploration and self-focus presumed inherent in this developmental phase actually affects sexual relationships and intimacy. By the end of the developmental period of emerging adulthood, it is probable that many of these young adults will have incorporated sexuality into their sense of self (Lefkowitz & Gillen, 2006).

What is not known about emerging adulthood is the degree to which self-focus plays a role in the developing sexual lives of emerging adults. This topic is the focus of the present study. The literature review that follows provides background to the topic and to the hypotheses developed and tested here.

Normative sexuality in emerging adulthood

Sexual intercourse is common among emerging adults. Studies of college students indicate that a majority will have had intercourse by the time they graduate (Duberstein Lindberg, Jones, & Santelli, 2008; Kaestle & Halpern, 2007), and that over 86% have engaged in vaginal intercourse by their senior year (Siegel, Klein, & Roghmann, 1999). Oral sex and casual sex are also reported to be normative (Duberstein et al; Kaestle & Halpern). In the case of oral sex, one study of 17- to 25-year-olds found that females were far less likely than males to receive oral sex (96.4% male virgins and non-virgins received oral sex vs. 27.6% female virgins and non-virgins) (Pedersen & Shim, 2008). The expected corollary in this study was that female participants were more likely to perform oral sex compared to males. Kaestle and Halpern found that more than 80% of their emerging adult participants engaged in both vaginal and oral sex, although certain sexual acts, such as oral sex, were more common in the context of a loving relationship.

Casual sex is also considered to be quite common during the emerging adult years. Grello, Welsh, and Harper (2006) found that 52% of emerging adult males and 36% of emerging adult females reported engaging in casual sex. They also found that those emerging adults who were more likely to engage in casual sex began having intercourse at younger ages. Impett and Peplau (2003) found that emerging adult males were more likely to have casual sex to increase popularity and status with peers, while emerging adult females were more likely to have casual sex to increase intimacy between themselves and their partner.

Sexual functioning and satisfaction

Although sexual behaviours such as vaginal intercourse, oral sex and casual sex appear to be normative among emerging adults, less is known about sexual satisfaction in this group. While the idea

of a direct link between sexual functioning and sexual satisfaction has been debated, a number of studies have shown these two variables to be correlated with similar other variables (Badr & Carmack Taylor, 2009; Meston & Lorenz, 2012). Research on sexual satisfaction among emerging adults has commonly centered on sexual dissatisfaction, distress, and dysfunction. For example, O'Sullivan and Majerovich (2008) compared sexual functioning and sexual difficulties among 17- to 21-year-old and 22-to 38-year-old males and females and found no differences based on age, high overall levels of sexual functioning for both groups, but a greater likelihood for females to have experienced sexual pain, a lack of sexual interest, and an inability to reach orgasm. Indeed, dissatisfaction appears to be a typical experience for women regardless of age. In their worldwide examination of 13,882 males and 13,618 females (aged 40 to 80 years), Laumann et al. (2006) found that males consistently reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction than women. Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (2009) confirmed that men aged 45 to 74 years reported engaging in more *sexual* intercourse than women of the same age group. Women were also more likely than men to report experiencing a lack of *sexual* desire and several studies have reported a high prevalence of sexual difficulties specifically among emerging adult women (Bancroft, Loftus, & Long, 2003; Lauman, Paik, & Rosen, 2009; Reissing, Laliberte, & Davis, 2005). In their survey of females aged 20 to 65 years, Bancroft et al. found that older women reported slightly more sexual dysfunction overall, but that younger women in the study (18 to 29 years) reported higher levels of distress surrounding their sexual problems.

The level of reported sexual difficulties among emerging adult women may be due to a number of factors, i.e., they could be less sexually satisfied because of the increased prevalence of casual sex in emerging adulthood, because of the way that oral sex exchanges occur, or because of the continued prevalence of a sexual double standard. With respect to the latter, Milhausen and Herold (1999) found that 95% of the young women in their sample believed that such a double standard still existed for them.

Sexual motivation and reasons for having sex

Other factors, like sexual motivation, may help

explain why emerging adult women have been shown to be a more sexually dissatisfied group, though little research has focused explicitly on the sexual attitudes and motivations of emerging adults (Lefkowitz & Gillen, 2006). Sexual motivations (or the reason(s) why humans have sex) have traditionally been described rather simplistically: Humans engage in coitus because it makes them feel good, because it releases tension, and because it creates offspring (Meston & Buss, 2007). However, more recent research has revealed that humans have sex for myriad and sometimes quite complex reasons; sexual motivations can range from being spiritual to manipulative in nature. For example, people report having sex to feel closer to another person, to make another person jealous, or to enhance their sense of self with regard to physical and emotional pleasure (Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998; Meston & Buss; Patrick, Maggs, & Abar, 2007). There are also widely accepted gender differences with respect to sexual motivation, particularly in the context of a committed romantic attachment (Hiller, 2005). Meston and Buss, and Meston, Hamilton, and Harte (2009) found that women were more likely to report love and commitment as the primary motivators for sex, whereas men reported that the sexual attractiveness of the other person, or a desire to experience more sexual partners, were primary motivators.

With regard to emerging adults in particular, Cooper et al. (1998) found in a sample of 17- to 21-year-olds that self-enhancement motives were more strongly endorsed by males and by those reaching the end of adolescence. Such findings suggest that self-focused motivations are positively correlated with age and may be endorsed more strongly by those on the cusp of what is now conceived as emerging adulthood. Similarly, Patrick et al. (2007) found that males in their freshman year of college were more likely to report self-focused reasons for having sex, whereas freshman year females were more likely to endorse partner focused-reasons to have sex.

Focus of the present study

Research on emerging adulthood suggests that this developmental period is one of intense self-focus and self-exploration. There exists a large divide in terms of the levels of sexual satisfaction for emerging adult males and females. Compared to

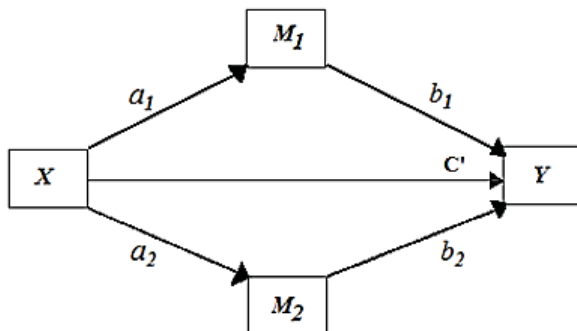
emerging adult males (and older men and women), emerging adult females seem to display higher levels of sexual dysfunction, distress, and dissatisfaction. There also seems to be a divide in terms of sexual motivation. Very generally, emerging adult males are more likely to endorse self-focused reasons to have sex, and emerging adult females are more likely to endorse partner-focused reasons to have sex (Patrick, Maggs, & Abar, 2007). However, Cooper et al. (1998) found that self-enhancement motives were positively correlated with age. This suggests that as adolescents develop into emerging adults, they may become more self-focused and that this self-focus could influence sexual motivation; perhaps, because of the self-focus of the developmental period, and the salience of sexual experimentation, emerging adults are more self-focused sexual partners than older adults. In the present study we were interested in exploring how sexual motivation is related to sexual satisfaction; namely, whether the self-focused sexual motivations of emerging adults lead to the sexual dissatisfaction of their sexual partners.

Stephenson, Ahrold, and Meston (2011) recommended further investigation into the mediators of sexual satisfaction, e.g., relationship contexts, to better understand its link to sexual motivation. The current study compared the sexual motivations of emerging adult couples to those of older adult couples and further explicated the link between motivation and sexual dissatisfaction. Given the demands of the developmental period, we asked whether emerging adults have more self-focused sexual motivations than older adults. We also asked whether emerging adults are more sexually dissatisfied than older adults, and in particular, whether emerging adult females are particularly dissatisfied in this regard. With respect to the potential influence of self-focused sexual motivations on dissatisfaction (see Impett & Tolman, 2006), we sought to determine whether these constructs mediated the proposed relationship between age and sexual dissatisfaction. Finally, we examined the role of gender as a moderator of this relationship as Stephenson et al. found that certain sexual motives were a stronger predictor of sexual satisfaction for women than for men. Further, we examined the role that gender played in light of the aforementioned dichotomy between emerging adult male and female sexual dissatisfaction.

Multiple mediation model

We determined that the most effective way to simultaneously address the research questions raised above was through the use of a multiple mediation model. We explain the model here to provide a context for testing of the hypotheses summarized below. In a multiple mediation model, the effect of *X* on *Y* is said to occur through at least one mediator or *M* (see Figure 1). As both Hayes (2012) and Shrout and Bolger (2002) explain, a mediator model assumes that changes in *X* are associated with changes in *M*, and, further, that changes in *M* are associated with changes in *Y*. Temporally or at least conceptually, *X* precedes *M*, which in turn precedes *Y*. The effect of *X* on *M* is described as *a*, and the effect of *M* on *Y* as *b*. The direct effect of *X* on *Y* is described as *c*, whereas the indirect effect of *X* on *Y* (through the mediator *M*) is described as *c'*. The mediation model essentially compares the relationship between *X* and *Y*, both before and after accounting for the intervening effect of *M*. In other words, it compares *c* with *c'*. If the value of *c'* (but not *c*) equals zero, one can state that the relationship between *X* and *Y* is fully mediated by *M*. On the other hand, if the value of *c'* decreases significantly, but is higher than zero, one can state that the relationship between *X* and *Y* is partially mediated by *M*.

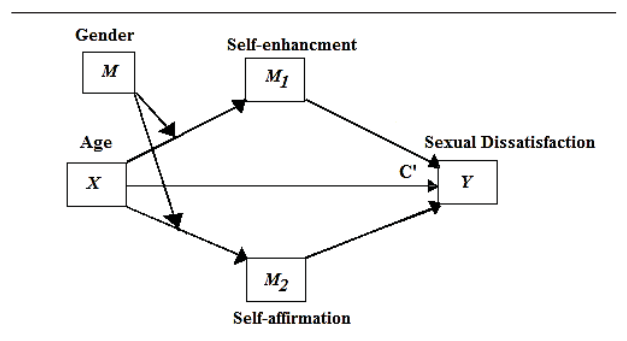
Figure 1 A multiple mediation model whereby the effect of *X* on *Y* occurs through mediators *M1* and *M2* (Hayes, 2012)



The current study assumed that there was a relationship between age and sexual dissatisfaction. Age was proposed to negatively correlate with sexual dissatisfaction (note *C'* in Figure 2). However, the relationship between age and sexual dissatisfaction was hypothesized to be mediated through sexual motivations (marked *M₁* and *M₂* in Figure 2). Namely, self-enhancement motives and self-

affirmation motives (two different self-focused sexual motivations) were hypothesized to mediate the relationship between age and sexual dissatisfaction. We predicted that compared to older adults, emerging adults would be more self-focused sexual partners who would demonstrate greater self-enhancement and self-affirmation motives for sexual behaviour.

Figure 2 Proposed model of moderated multiple mediation



Moreover, this sexual self-focus was expected to effect the sexual dissatisfaction of participants' respective couple members in dyadic romantic relationships. Our study is the first of its kind to address the effect that sexual motivation has on partner sexual dissatisfaction in the context of actual dyadic couplings. We hypothesized that emerging adults, compared to older adults, would report higher overall self-enhancement and self-affirmation motives for sexual behaviour, which would lead to correspondingly greater sexual dissatisfaction in their partner. Moreover, gender was expected to moderate the relationship between age and both self-enhancement and self-affirmation (see Figure 2). In other words, we hypothesized that emerging adult males would report the highest levels of self-enhancement and self-affirmation motives, which would lead, in turn, to the highest levels of sexual dissatisfaction occurring in their partners (Table 1).

Emerging adult females were expected to report moderately high scores on self-enhancement and self-affirmation, leading to moderate sexual dissatisfaction in their partners. Similarly, older adult males were expected to report moderate scores on self-enhancement and self-affirmation, leading to moderate levels of sexual dissatisfaction in their partners. Finally, older adult females were hypothesized to report the lowest levels of self-enhancement and self-affirmation, leading to the

Table 1 Predictions based on proposed model of moderated mediation

Participants	Self-focused sexual motivation	Sexual dissatisfaction (of participants' partners)
Emerging adult males	high	high
Emerging adult females	moderate	moderate
Males 30+	moderate	moderate
Females 30+	low	low

lowest levels of sexual dissatisfaction occurring among their partners. Thus, the proposed relationship was that of moderated multiple mediation.

Methods

Participants

The sample of 30 heterosexual emerging adult couples and 30 heterosexual older adult couples (total $n = 120$) was recruited via snowball sampling facilitated through advertisements in a local newspaper's community announcements section and posters distributed around the university campus of a large Canadian city. Participants were 18-68 years of age, had an average of 6.31 sexual partners, and had been in their relationships for an average of 114.7 months (Table 2). It is of interest that none of the older couples in this sample reported being in "long-term relationships but not cohabitating", although this category made up 50% of the emerging adult group. The percentage of emerging adults in "common-law" and "long-term and cohabitating" relationships was identical to older adults in the sample (see Table 3).

Measures

Demographics

Participants were asked to respond to a five-item survey designed to obtain general information about age, gender, and the type of romantic relationship in which each participant was currently involved (e.g., married, dating). Number of months in the current romantic relationship and the number of sexual partners each participant had to date was also assessed to control both for sexual experience with their current partner and sexual experience overall.

Table 2 Participant demographic information

	Emerging adults $n = 60$	Older adults $n = 60^*$
Mean age	21.8 (18-25)	43.5 (30-68)
Sexual partners to date	2.8 (1-18)	10 (1-60)
Months in current romantic relationship	31.6 (6-88)	197.9 (6-492)

Note: Ranges appear in brackets.

*Two participants in the older adult group did not respond to the "number of sexual partners to date" question in the demographic information section of the questionnaire.

Table 3 Percent of sample in each type of romantic relationship

Type of romantic relationship	Emerging adults	Older adults
Married	13.3	81.7
Common-law	6.7	6.7
Long-term and cohabitating	10	10
Long-term and not cohabitating	50	--
Dating	20	1.7

Sex Motives Scale (Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998)

This 29-item self-report measure was used to assess participants' sexual motivations. Scale items load on six different factors, separating sexual motivation into intimacy, self-enhancement, self-affirmation, coping, peer-pressure, and partner-approval motives. The Sex Motives Scale requires participants to respond to each statement while considering how often they personally have sex for each of the reasons listed. Each item is answered on a 1-5 relative frequency scale with choices ranging from almost never (1) to almost always (5). The self-enhancement and self-affirmation subscales are of particular interest for the purposes of the present study in that they reflect "self-focused" motives for engaging in sexual behaviour, they reside in the approach category of sexual motivation and they are concerned with one's own sexual needs and desires. For example, participants are asked, "How often do you have sex to satisfy your sexual needs?" and "How often do you have sex because you feel horny?"

Cooper et al. (1998) found that individual subscales (motives) were shown to be stable over periods of one year or more. Participants who were in exclusive romantic relationships were found to have more stable motivations than those participants who were not. Further, evidence suggests strong internal consistency reliabilities for the subscales of interest in this study, with self-enhancement ranging between .88 and .90 (Cooper et al.; Impett, Strachman, & Finkel, 2008) and self-affirmation between .84 and .88. In the present study, Cronbach's alphas for the self-enhancement and self-affirmation scales were .80 and .73 respectively.

Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS); Hudson, Harrison, & Crosscup, 1981)

This 25-item self-report scale measures the extent of respondents' sexual satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their relationship with their current romantic couple partner. The ISS instructs respondents to answer each item as carefully as they can while thinking of their level of satisfaction in their sexual relationship. About half of the questions were worded as positive and half negative. Response options ranged from "rarely or none of the time" (1) to "most or all of the time (%). The 12 positive options are reverse coded and responses are quantified to give a possible score range of 0 to 100. A cutting score above 30 is likely to represent a clinically significant problem in satisfaction of the sexual relationship; a score below 30 is likely to indicate sexual satisfaction or lack of a clinically significant problem. In terms of reliability, the ISS consistently produces an alpha coefficient of (at minimum) $\alpha = .90$ (Hudson et al., 1997). The ISS has also been assessed with reference to factorial, content, and construct validity and the measure reliably produces validity coefficients of at minimum $\alpha = .60$. In the present study, the index of sexual satisfaction produced a Cronbach's alpha of .92. In addition, the ISS has been shown to be highly correlated with measures assessing marriage satisfaction (see Bélanger, Laughrea, & Lafontaine, 2001; Hofmeyr & Greeff, 2002).

Procedures

Participants contacted the primary investigator to determine whether they were eligible for participation in the study. Couples were required to be heterosexual and romantically involved for at

least six months. These requirements were initiated to control for participants' scores on measures that would be due to inexperience or unfamiliarity with their partners. After initial contact with the primary investigator, participants were asked to report to the university psychology lab where each couple member completed questionnaires in individual testing rooms. Some couples were visited at their homes, and under the supervision of the primary investigator, were asked to complete questionnaires in separate rooms. The completion of all questionnaires took approximately 20-30 minutes. Presentation of the ISS and Sex Motives Scale was counterbalanced to control for possible confounds related to the order of measure presentation.

Results

The mediating effect of self-enhancement and self-affirmation on sexual dissatisfaction was tested using the bootstrapping method initially adopted by Shrout and Bolger (2002) and expanded upon by Preacher and Hayes (2008). Bootstrapping is a nonparametric technique for calculating different kinds of relationships between variables, such as indirect effects (Hayes, 2012; Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

In an effort to produce the most statistically robust model possible, current relationship duration and number of previous sexual partners were initially included, along with self-focused sexual motives, as mediators in the model, based on their history as predictors of sexual satisfaction. However, evidence of singularity in the data (i.e., multicollinearity) of these variables to self-focused sexual motivations suggested that their addition did not explain any additional variance and that a parsimonious model excluding them as mediators should therefore be considered (see Tabachnick & Fidell, 2006).

Moreover, at a theoretical level we reasoned that these variables could potentially confound the relationship between age and sexual satisfaction, as both have been linked to heterosexual couples' levels of sexual satisfaction. For instance, Heiman et al. (2011) found that greater numbers of sexual partners related to lower levels of sexual satisfaction among the male participants in their study. In contrast, Traen (2010)

found that, compared to just one previous sexual partner, upwards of 10 partners for male participants and 4 partners for females was associated with greater sexual satisfaction. Further, we were concerned that the duration of our participants' relationships would result in either a lack—or abundance—of sexual familiarity and that these alternatives would spuriously associate with age and sexual satisfaction. Indeed, Heiman et al. (2011) reported women in romantic committed relationships between 25 and 50 years to be more sexually satisfied, compared to men with similar relationship durations. Yet in romantic committed relationships lasting 10 years or less, women report less sexual satisfaction than men.

Given the potential of number of previous sexual partners and duration of relationship to confound the mediating effects of sexual self-focus on sexual satisfaction, the present study tested the indirect effect while controlling for their influence. Further, following the advice of Aiken and West (1991) and Hayes (2012), all predictors, mediators, and covariates were centered at zero. See Table 4 for means and standard deviations for age, relationship length, and number of sexual partners following this process.

According to the model, age was proposed to negatively correlate with sexual dissatisfaction (note C' in Figure 2). That is, as participant age increased, it was expected that sexual dissatisfaction would decrease. In contrast to expectations, there was no direct effect of age on partner sexual dissatisfaction, either before or after accounting for the effect of the mediators. Self-enhancement and self-affirmation motives were hypothesized to mediate the relationship between age and sexual dissatisfaction (note M_1 and M_2 in Figure 2). A test of the effect of age on partner dissatisfaction, mediated simultaneously through both self-enhancement and

self-affirmation motives, revealed age to have a small effect on self-enhancement motives, $B = -.12$, $p < .05$. Self-enhancement motives, in turn, had a large negative effect on partner dissatisfaction, $B = -1.06$, $p < .001$. The test of the indirect effect was also significant, as the .95 confidence interval did not include zero (.0039 to .3005; 1000 bootstraps, bias corrected and accelerated; see Table 5). There was no direct or indirect effect of age on self-affirmation motives (see Figure 3).

We also hypothesized (Figure 2) that gender would moderate the relationship between age and both mediators of self-enhancement and self-affirmation motives. While gender did have an effect on self-affirmation motives in that female participants scored higher than male participants, $t(118) = 2.21$, $p < .05$, the interaction of age and gender had no effect on either self-affirmation or self-enhancement motives.

Discussion

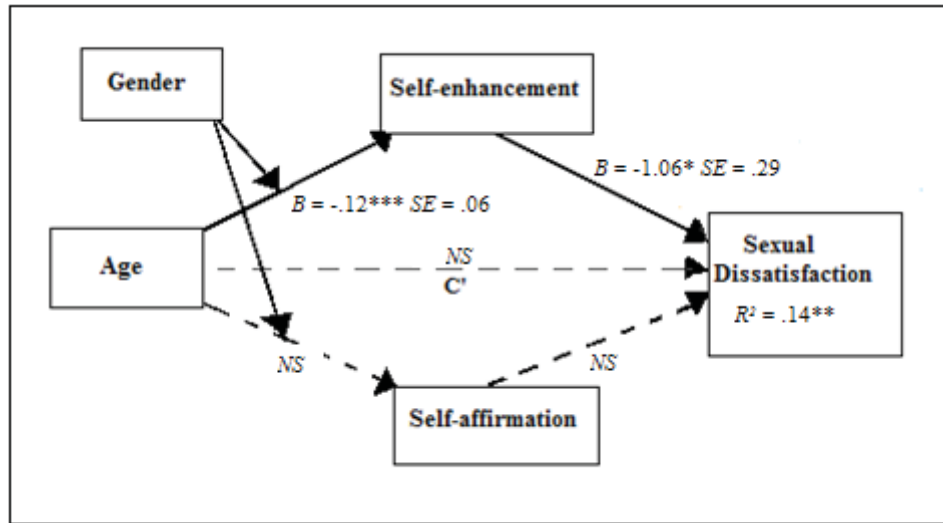
The results of this study revealed no direct effect of age on partner dissatisfaction, either before or after accounting for the effect of self-enhancement motives. That is, contrary to what was predicted, older adult participants were not found to be less sexually dissatisfied than emerging adult participants. When sexual self-focus was assessed through self-enhancement motives for engaging in sexual behaviour, older participants were actually more sexually dissatisfied than emerging adults. Though contrary to our expectations, this finding is in concert with Daniluk's (1998) observations regarding romantic relationships in middle and later adulthood. Daniluk noted that side-effects from certain medications, bouts of poor health, and discrepancies in the levels of sexual interest between partners make it challenging for couples to preserve a level of sexual

Table 4 Descriptive statistic variables centered at zero

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Age	120	-14.61	35.39	-.0017	13.01
Relationship length	120	-109.71	377.29	.0000	126.00
Number of sexual partners	118	-5.31	53.69	-.0049	10.04

Note: Two participants in the older adult group did not respond to the “number of sexual partners to date” question in the demographic information section of the questionnaire.

Figure 3 Moderated multiple mediation test of the relationship between age and sexual dissatisfaction.



Note: * $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .05$. $N = 1000$ bootstrapping re-samples. All coefficients represent un-standardized multiple regression coefficients while controlling for number of previous sexual partners and duration of relationship.

Table 5 Bootstrapped indirect effects of self-enhancement and self-affirmation

	β	SE	LLBCA	ULBCA
Self-enhancement	.12*	.0620	.0339	.3005
Self-affirmation	-.06	.0221	-.0479	.0521

* $p < .05$.

$N = 1000$ bootstrapping re-samples. LLBCA and ULBCA = Lower level and Upper level of bias corrected and accelerated confidence interval for $\alpha = 0.05$.

activity and closeness that is gratifying. Older adult couples in the present study may have faced some of these relationship challenges, which in turn led to their higher levels of sexual dissatisfaction compared to emerging adults.

A test of the indirect effect of age on partner sexual dissatisfaction found that age had a small negative effect on self-enhancement motives, and self-enhancement motives, in turn, had a large negative effect on partner sexual dissatisfaction. As predicted, older adults showed lower levels of sexual self-focus compared to emerging adults. But contrary to what was expected, lower levels of self-enhancement at older ages led to higher levels of sexual dissatisfaction in participants' respective

partners. In terms of the proposed model, sexual self-focus did mediate the relationship between age and sexual dissatisfaction. However, the relationship found between age and sexual dissatisfaction was the opposite of what was expected; participants in the older adult group reported lower scores on self-enhancement, which subsequently led to higher levels of sexual dissatisfaction in their partners. In essence, less sexual self-focus led to greater partner sexual dissatisfaction at older ages. These results suggest that an optimal level of sexual self-focus may be required to maintain partner satisfaction over time. These findings correspond with Stephenson et al. (2011), who found the highest levels of satisfaction in participants who endorsed approach motives somewhat frequently (the domain of approach motives includes what would be considered sexual self-focus). This finding is also in concert with research assessing the positive correlates of the construct of self-enhancement, such as self-esteem and self-promotion (Hepper, Gramzow, & Sedikides, 2010). Perhaps sexual self-enhancement is associated with sexual self-esteem or sexual self-promotion? These positive aspects of sexual self-focus may then lead to positive sexual behaviours and consequently, positive reactions from and experiences with sexual partners. Given that constructs such as self-esteem

and self-promotion have not yet been empirically validated in regard to their relationship to sexual self-enhancement, this is clearly an area for further investigation.

The relationship we found between lower evaluations of sexual self-focus and greater dissatisfaction in our older adult participants may also be explained by varying degrees of salience for different sexual motivations in certain types of romantic relationships. For instance, avoidance motives may be more relevant for couples who have been exclusive for a number of years and are more likely to be dealing with other relationship issues, such as lack of sexual interest or lack of desire (Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005). Couples in our older adult sample had spent an average of 16.5 years together compared to emerging adults, with only 2.6 years together on average. This discrepancy in time spent together may contribute to a change in the importance of sexual motivations. Rather than simply attaining the highest level of sexual satisfaction, other motivating factors like relationship sustainability, intimacy with partners, and maintaining sexual desire and function may be more relevant for older couples in long-term relationships. Further, sexual dissatisfaction is not necessarily indicative of a sexual relationship failing to fulfill the needs of the individuals involved, as it may in part only reflect a lack of capacity for said sexual outcomes.

Another accounting of our results is that the measure used to assess sexual motivation is more sensitive to emerging adult sexual self-focus than older adult sexual self-focus. Further, although Cooper et al. (1998) found that the sex motives they assessed were stable for more than a year, self-enhancement may transform or begin to look different over longer periods of time as individuals learn more about their own sexual wants, desires, and needs. In essence, sexual self-focus may change, develop, or look different at different ages. The older adults in the present study may have had levels of sexual self-focus that were not assessed or monitored through the use of this measure.

The interaction of age and gender had no effect on self-affirmation or self-enhancement motives. In terms of our model, gender did not moderate the

relationship between age and self-focused sexual motivations; emerging adult males did not gain the highest self-focus scores as hypothesized. This is contrary to Cooper et al.'s (1998) and Patrick et al.'s (2007) findings, which revealed that males endorse more self-enhancement motives. However, Cooper et al. analyzed 17- to 21-year-old individuals, and Patrick et al. assessed first-year university students. The present study was the first of its kind to look at sexual motivations of emerging adults while encompassing the entire developmental period (ages 18-25 years), as well as the first to compare emerging adults' sexual motivations to that of older adults.

Gender was found to have an effect on the specific Sex Motives Scale (Cooper et al., 1998) construct of self-affirmation. Both emerging and older adult females scored higher than males overall. Specifically, females in this study revealed higher scores on items such as, "I have sex to reassure myself that I am attractive," compared to emerging and older adult males in the study. These results contradict those of Cooper and colleagues, who found in their study of 17- to 21-year-olds that males endorsed this motive more strongly. This finding suggests that perhaps this sexual motive is more salient for females in long-term, committed romantic relationships, not just females in general. Regardless, this finding is in accord with other research revealing that certain factors, such as pressure from the media, make it difficult for women to connect with their sexual selves and cause them to seek out ways to bolster that particular aspect of self (Daniluk, 1998).

Limitations of the present study

In order to control for sexual experience, couples in the study were required to have been in a relationship with each other for at least six months. Participants' relationships represented several romantic contexts, including dating, long-term relationships, cohabitation, and marriage. However, it may not have been logical to compare relationships that lasted at least six months in emerging adulthood to those that lasted at least six months in older adulthood. After assessing the breakdown of relationship types that occurred among participants in this study, it was determined that no older adult couples were in long-term relationships and not cohabitating. However, that type of relationship made up 50% of those experienced

by emerging adult couples. Furthermore, it must be considered that dating in emerging adulthood may not look the same, or involve the same activities, as dating in older adulthood. It may therefore make better sense to compare these contexts as though they were not equal.

While the current study did reveal that emerging adults scored higher on self-enhancement motives for sexual behaviour, our sample only represents a small segment of the emerging adult population. Because couples were required to be at least six months in a committed relationship for inclusion in this study, emerging adults with multiple partners, unstable relationships, or those who were casually dating were excluded from participation. The inclusion of such emerging adults might have revealed even higher levels of sexual self-focus than we were able to determine. Perhaps different relationship contexts make certain sexual motivations more salient or relevant.

Furthermore, the items in the self enhancement subscale seem to most basically address an interest and desire for sex, not a specific egocentrism towards the sexual act itself that the term "self focus" would suggest. While there were items on the subscale such as "having sex to fulfill one's own sexual needs", the majority of the items were centered on the feelings and sensations sex provides and an interest or excitement for experiencing such sensations. If an interest and desire for sex declines over time, it is easy to see how this could create problems in any dyadic sexual relationship. It is also important to note that our older adult sample consisted of couples that had much longer relationships than our emerging adult sample (16.5 years versus 2.6 years, respectively). Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (2009) report that couples who have been together longer are more likely to face complications in sexual functioning and lower levels of sexual desire. In their study, 59% of women who had been in a relationship for over 40 years experienced a lack of sexual desire. While the average amount of time older couples had been together in the current study was 16.5 years, some couples had been together for over 40 years. If the self-enhancement subscale was most directly measuring an interest and desire for sex, it makes sense that older participants may have experienced a decline in self-enhancement compared

to emerging adults, given the average length of their relationships. Indeed, it could have been this element that contributed to the finding of sexual dissatisfaction increasing over time.

If the self-enhancement subscale most directly addresses an interest and desire for sex, it would be valuable to create another measure of sexual self-focus that defines the construct more specifically. Such a measure could address the composition of sexual self-focus, what effect it has on sexual interactions between partners, and what behaviours relate to it. Certainly, it would be interesting to determine whether sexual self-focus genuinely leads to positive outcomes in sexual satisfaction, as the results of this study indicate. Indeed, measuring sexual motivation in general may need to be examined more closely, as Stephenson et al. (2011) found that certain types of measures based on factor analysis may be more predictive in terms of the relationship between sexual motivations and sexual satisfaction. These authors found that their measure, based on a factor analysis with inter-correlations between variables, accounted for more variance in satisfaction ratings compared to theoretically based measures like the one used in this study.

Conclusions and future prospects

The current study was the first of its kind to compare sexual motivations and levels of sexual dissatisfaction as a function of age and gender, among emerging adult and older adult couples. As mentioned previously, the findings revealed that an optimal level of sexual self-focus may be required for individuals to keep their partners sexually satisfied. Future studies should assess more specifically the positive aspects or outcomes of sexual self-focus and its associated behaviours in order to help individuals acknowledge the reasons why they have sex, and the effect these reasons have on their romantic partners. Not only may it be important to attend to a partner's sexual needs, but also one's own in order to ensure the satisfaction of one's partner. In terms of relationship counselling, new programs may find positive outcomes by considering the role of personal sexual fulfillment as a factor influencing partner satisfaction. Further, learning more about one's sexual motivations may help emerging adults gain a better understanding of themselves as sexual beings and a better sense of their

own sexual self-efficacies. This could potentially diffuse the development of sexual dysfunction, especially for emerging adult females. As Reissing et al. (2005) found, altering one's negative sexual self-schema by increasing sexual self-efficacy could be an effective intervention for preventing sexual difficulties in emerging adult women.

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