

# Sexual Compliance: Gender, Motivational, and Relationship Perspectives

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*This paper provides a systematic review of research on sexual compliance in heterosexual relationships. Three perspectives shed light on which individuals are the most likely to comply with a sexually interested partner's desire for sex and why. A gender perspective highlights the common male-female asymmetry in compliant sexual behavior and identifies factors that contribute to women's greater likelihood of being the sexually compliant partner. A motivational perspective distinguishes between approach and avoidance motives for compliance and considers the possible consequences of these motives for emotional reactions, sexual risk taking, and sexual violence. A relationship maintenance perspective views sexual compliance as illustrative of broader patterns of sacrifice in committed relationships. Each perspective suggests important new directions for empirical research.*

Sexual interactions require partners to coordinate their individual preferences and actions. As James Thurber and E. B. White (1950) commented over five decades ago, "while the urge to eat is a personal matter which concerns no one but the person hungry . . . the sex urge involves, for its true expression, another individual. It is this 'other individual' that causes all the trouble" (pp. 161-162).<sup>1</sup> Sex and relationship researchers have investigated various kinds of "trouble" that partners can create for each other in their sexual interactions.

In this paper, we consider situations in which one partner does not cause but actually avoids a "troubled" interaction by putting the other partner's sexual desires ahead of his or her own and willingly engaging in unwanted sex. For example, instead of turning a cold shoulder to her amorous husband, a wife may respond warmly to his sexual overtures even though she is exhausted from work and not in the mood for sex. This general pattern has been referred to as sexual compliance or consensual unwanted sex (e.g., Impett & Peplau, 2002b; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; S. J. Walker, 1997). Our goal in this paper is to analyze why partners in heterosexual relationships engage in compliant sexual interactions and why it is more often the woman who complies with the man's sexual initiative.

We begin the paper by reviewing research describing the nature of sexual compliance. Then, we examine sexual compliance from three perspectives. First, using a gender perspective, we review research documenting gender

differences in rates of sexual compliance and consider how this gendered pattern may be affected by male-female differences in sexual interest, initiation, and compliance. Second, using a motivational perspective, we distinguish between approach and avoidance motives for compliance and consider the possible consequences of these motives for emotional reactions, sexual risk taking, and sexual violence. Finally, using a relationship maintenance perspective, we consider how sexual compliance may promote the development and stability of male-female relationships. From this perspective, sexual compliance is an example of broader patterns of sacrifice in relationships. In each section, we consider limitations of the current data and suggest directions for future research.

The topic of sexual compliance is important for several reasons. Research on this topic sheds light on gender differences in sexuality, including sexual desire, initiation, and compliance. Research on sexual compliance provides further insight into the motivational basis of sexual interactions and supports a growing body of research showing that women and men engage in sexual activity for a variety of reasons other than to satisfy a sexual urge or to pursue sexual pleasure (e.g., Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998; Impett, 2002). Because many people are sexually compliant in the context of intimate relationships, research on this topic also points to ways in which sexual interactions are shaped by relationship concerns. Further, although nonconsensual or coerced sex typically has negative consequences, it is possible that complying with an intimate partner's desire for sex can, on occasion, have positive consequences. Little is known about when this might occur. Finally, research on sexual compliance has implications for understanding sexual violence and sexual risk taking.

## WHAT IS SEXUAL COMPLIANCE?

When partners differ in their sexual interest, the stage is set for possible conflict. Early in a dating relationship, disagreements may arise about the timing of first sex with a new dating partner. For example, before they engage in

<sup>1</sup> Books such as *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* by Eric Schlosser (2001) and *Sex for One: The Joy of Selfloving* by Betty Dodson (1987) cast doubt upon both of these claims.

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sexual intercourse for the first time, college women expect to be dating about twice as long as men do (Cohen & Shotland, 1996). In more established dating or marital relationships, the issue may be whether to engage in sexual activity on a particular occasion or which specific activities will take place (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Byers & Lewis, 1988; Carlson, 1976; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1996).

There are many possible reasons why an individual might not want to engage in sex on a particular occasion. Although lack of sexual desire is a common reason, it is certainly not the only reason. Sometimes people may be sexually aroused or interested but still prefer not to have sex because it's too early in a new relationship, because they don't want to lead a new partner to misinterpret their level of interest in developing a relationship, because they fear pregnancy, or because they dislike the particular sexual activity being suggested.

Several resolutions of differences in sexual interest are possible. The sexually interested partner might refuse to accept "no" as an answer and use psychological pressure or physical force to gain compliance. The sexually uninterested person might prevail, ignoring or resisting the partner's signals of interest or persuading the partner to wait until another time. A third possible outcome, and the focus of this paper, occurs when the uninterested person recognizes the partner's desire and voluntarily consents to engage in sex.

It is sometimes difficult to determine whether an individual has freely consented to engage in sex (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Muehlenhard, Powch, Phelps, & Giusti, 1992; Schulhofer, 1998). At one extreme, a sexually interested person may use threat of harm or actual physical force to gain unwilling compliance; such cases clearly constitute nonconsensual sexual coercion or rape. In the middle are ambiguous cases in which a sexually interested person uses psychological pressure to convince a partner to engage in sex (Lewin, 1985), illustrated in this account written by a teenage girl:

The guy was someone who every girl in school wished she could have. Most every girl envied me . . . . When the situation got real heavy, I told him that we needed to cool off. He told me that he was sick of my childishness and that he didn't have to be there. He implied that he could have anybody he wanted. I knew it was true . . . . I hesitated because I was scared that he might leave me this time and go find someone else. I let him go ahead. (Muehlenhard & Schrag, 1991, p. 119)

At the other extreme, an individual does not want sex but responds positively to a partner's sexual initiation under no duress or coercion. This behavior is clearly consensual and represents the prototype of compliant sex. Researchers studying sexual compliance have excluded situations involving threat or physical harm but have sometimes included instances in which the uninterested partner felt some degree of psychological pressure to have sex. Sexual compliance should not be confused with situations of "token resistance," in which a person responds "no" to an expression of sexual interest but really means "yes" and

intends to eventually engage in sexual activity (Muehlenhard & Hollabaugh, 1988; Shotland & Hunter, 1995). In contrast, sexual compliance refers to situations in which a person indicates "yes" to a sexually interested partner when, for any number of reasons, he or she does not really want to engage in sex.

There may be important differences among the types of relationships in which compliant sex may occur. The factors influencing a sexually inexperienced teenage girl who agrees to sex in hopes of developing a relationship with a popular boy may be quite different from those influencing a wife's response to her husband of 20 years. In this review, we will try to encompass a range of different relationship contexts. However, it should be noted that most empirical studies of compliant sex have involved younger heterosexual dating couples and, less frequently, younger married couples.

### A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON SEXUAL COMPLIANCE

Although both men and women consent to sexual activity that they do not personally desire, women are more often the compliant partner. In a recent study, Impett and Peplau (2002a) asked an ethnically diverse sample of college students in dating relationships the following question: "Have you ever been in a situation in which you did not want to have sexual intercourse, your partner initiated it, and you were receptive (in other words you agreed to have sex even though you did not want to)?" Among participants who had already had sex with their current partner, 65% of women but only 40% of men answered "yes" to this question. Similarly, in a daily diary study of college students in dating relationships, 50% of women and 26% of men reported consenting to unwanted sexual activity with their dating partners at least once during a 2-week period (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998).

Two additional studies bear on the issue of gender differences in sexual compliance. In one study (Sprecher, Hatfield, Cortese, Potapova, & Levitskaya, 1994), college students were asked if they had ever experienced the following situation: "You were with a person who wanted to engage in sexual intercourse and you did not want to, but for some reason you indicated that you did want to. In other words, you indicated 'yes' and you meant 'no.'" Among those who reported previously engaging in sexual intercourse at least once, 55% of women and 35% of men reported consenting to unwanted sexual intercourse at least one time. In the marital context, Carlson (1976) found that 84% of wives and 64% of husbands reported that they usually or always participated in sexual activities when their partners wanted to and they did not.

Most research on consensual unwanted sexual interactions has relied on predominantly U.S. samples. One notable exception revealed interesting cultural differences. Sprecher et al. (1994) surveyed college students in the United States, Russia, and Japan about their experiences with consensual unwanted intercourse. Results showed that 25% to 35% of American men, Japanese men and

women, and Russian men and women reported saying "yes" to unwanted sex. In contrast, nearly twice as many American women (55%) reported saying "yes" to unwanted sex at least once in the past. In a study conducted in Germany, only about one third of college women reported that they had ever consented to unwanted sex (Krahé, Scheinberger-Olwig, & Kolpin, 2000). Sprecher et al. (1994) offered several possible reasons for American women's greater reports of sexual compliance, including the idea that American men may be especially sexually persistent and the suggestion that American women may no longer possess the traditional "excuses" for avoiding sex outside of marriage that may be available to women in other cultures. More cross-cultural research on compliant sex would be useful.

Although most studies show that more women than men have engaged in compliant sex, one study raises questions about the generalizability of this conclusion. O'Sullivan and Allgeier (1998) found greater female compliance in their 2-week diary study, but no gender differences in the number of times men and women reported engaging in sexual compliance in the year prior to the study or during their lifetime. This study suggests that over a long enough time span, virtually everyone will be sexually compliant at least once. Women and men may nonetheless differ in their frequency of compliance. This issue could be clarified with a study that measures sexual compliance in a variety of ways (e.g., different time frames, different data collection methods, etc.), assesses the extent to which the various measures are intercorrelated, and systematically compares women's and men's responses to each measure.

In summary, with one exception, empirical studies conducted in the U.S. have consistently shown a gender difference in reports of compliant sex. Among younger adults, roughly twice as many women as men report complying with a partner's sexual initiatives when they have little or no desire. This gender difference may be somewhat smaller among married couples, may differ in other cultures, and may vary as function of the measure of compliance used. In this paper, we analyze several ways in which gender shapes compliant sexual interactions in male-female relationships.

There are at least three central elements to compliant sexual interactions. First, the stage is set by a situation in which partners have differing desires for sex: At a particular time, one partner is interested, and the other is not. Second, the more interested partner must take the lead in communicating his or her desire to the other partner verbally or nonverbally. Third, the uninterested partner's reaction is pivotal: Does this partner comply with the request or, instead, ignore or reject the request? As detailed below, gender is implicated in each stage.

### ***Sexual Desire: Are Men More Interested in Sex Than Women?***

Do men experience greater sexual desire than women? This was the view espoused in 1886 by Krafft-Ebing

(1886/1950, p. 14): "Man has beyond doubt the stronger sexual appetite of the two." He added that normal women have "little sensual desire." There is considerable empirical research investigating possible gender differences in sexual desire. Currently, reviewers of this literature differ in their conclusions. In their book, *Lust: What We Know About Human Sexual Desire*, Regan and Berscheid (1999, p. 59) concluded that the evidence "remains mixed with respect to sex differences in actual frequency of sexual desire." They noted that little is currently known about gender differences in the intensity (as opposed to the frequency) of desire. In contrast, a recent comprehensive review of empirical studies by Baumeister, Cantanese, and Vohs (2001) concluded that regardless of how it is conceptualized, men have greater sexual interest than do women:

Men have been shown to have more frequent and more intense sexual desires than women, as reflected in spontaneous thoughts about sex, frequency and variety of sexual fantasies, desired frequency of intercourse, desired number of partners, masturbation, liking for various sexual practices, [and] willingness to forego sex. (p. 242)

Here are some illustrative findings supporting the case for gender differences. When asked to rate the strength of their sexual drive, college men (Beck, Bozman, & Qualtrough, 1991), middle-aged men (Pfeiffer, Verwoerd, & Davis, 1972), and men in their 80s and 90s (Bretschneider & McCoy, 1988) report higher levels of sexual desire than do their female age mates. Another index of sexual desire is whether a person reports having sex as often as he or she would like. Both in the early stages of dating relationships (McCabe, 1987) and in marriage (Julien, Bouchard, Gagnon, & Pomerleau, 1992), men are more likely than women to report having sex less often than they desire. In a sample of college students, only 2% of men reported that they never wanted or needed sex compared with 19% of women (Carroll, Volk, & Hyde, 1985). Another way to operationalize the strength of sex drive is to assess the number of different sexual practices that an individual is drawn to, such as intercourse, oral sex, anal sex or group sex. In the U.S. National Health and Social Life Survey, men rated 13 out of 14 sexual practices as more appealing than did women, often by substantial margins (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994).

Several explanations have been offered for men's presumed greater sex drive. Some researchers (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2001) have invoked biological perspectives, such as the possible role of androgens and other hormones in enhancing men's sex drive. Others have proposed that men and women are socialized to approach sex differently. Schneider and Gould (1987, p. 141) are typical in characterizing traditional scripts as dictating that "men always want and are ready for sex . . . women learn not to be sexual." Another sociocultural perspective is that many cultures strive deliberately to suppress female sexuality (e.g., Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). In summary,

gender differences in sexual interest and desire, whatever their source, may contribute to the gendered pattern of compliant sex.

### *Taking the Lead to Initiate Sexual Interactions*

For compliant sex to occur, the more interested partner must take the lead in communicating his or her desire to the other person either verbally or nonverbally. Research has consistently shown that men initiate sex much more frequently than do women. Studies of diverse relationships including heterosexual dating (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992), cohabitation, and marriage (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Byers & Heinlein, 1989; Carlson, 1976) find that men report initiating sex about twice as often as their female partners or age mates report initiating sex. This gender difference has been documented in a large-scale survey (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) and in studies using daily report methods to minimize retrospective bias (e.g., O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992). In one daily diary study, married and cohabiting individuals completed a brief questionnaire for 7 consecutive days (Byers & Heinlein, 1989). Both male and female participants reported that men initiated sexual activity on more days than did women (mean of 2.3 vs. 1.2 initiations). In addition, twice as many women (23%) as men (10%) never initiated sexual activity at all during the 1-week period.

Several explanations have been offered for the gender difference in sexual initiation. First, men may initiate sex more often because they have a stronger sex drive than do women (Baumeister et al., 2001). Support for the association between sexual desire and initiation comes from a study showing that women with high sexual desire are more likely to initiate sex than women with low sexual desire (Hurlbert, 1991). Another explanation is that both men and women act in accordance with conventional scripts that cast men as the initiators of sexual activity (Muehlenhard, 1988; Shotland & Craig, 1988). When asked to describe a typical script for a first date, heterosexual college students consistently depict the man as the proactive partner who takes the lead not only in asking the woman out but also in initiating sexual contact (Rose & Frieze, 1993). Even young adults who endorse feminist attitudes expect that men will be more likely than women to initiate sex (McCormick, 1979). In a study asking college students to rate the value of various behaviors in marriage or long-term relationships, women thought it was much more important for a male partner to initiate sex than for the women themselves to initiate sex (Regan & Sprecher, 1995). Furthermore, in another study, the majority of college women (59%) indicated that men and women should initiate sex an equal number of times in a sexual relationship, but a substantial minority indicated that men should initiate sex more often than women (Carroll et al., 1985). The percentage of women (38%) who indicated that men should initiate sex more often than women was even larger than the percentage of men (16%)

who indicated that men should initiate more. Thus, men may feel that they have to initiate sex to fulfill traditional sexual scripts or because they think that women expect them to initiate. Sexual scripts depicting men as initiators may also make it difficult for women to take the lead in sex. Compared with college men, women have reported feeling less comfortable initiating sex not only with a new sexual partner but also with a romantic partner (Grauerholz & Serpe, 1985).

In summary, current research finds that men are more likely than women to initiate sexual activity, both in the early stages of a new relationship and in on-going dating and marital relationships. To be sure, many women do initiate sex, but they do so less frequently than their male partners. It would be useful for research to assess whether contemporary sexual scripts are changing so that it is more acceptable now than in the past for women to initiate sex, perhaps especially in committed relationships.

### *Willingness to Comply With a Partner's Request*

Earlier, we reviewed research indicating that the majority of dating and married women willingly engage in sex that they do not want, at least on occasion. These studies have shown that roughly twice as many women as men report complying with a partner's desire for sex when they are not personally interested. Here we consider possible explanations for this gendered pattern of sexual compliance.

*Differential opportunity.* A first question is whether women are more likely than men to comply simply because they are presented with more opportunities for compliance or whether women are actually more willing than men to comply with requests for unwanted sex. Available studies demonstrate that men are more likely than women to initiate sexual activity and that consequently women are given more opportunities to comply or turn down a sexual overture. In a study of college students, for example, 89% of participants reported experiencing a dating situation in the previous year in which a man desired a higher degree of sexual involvement than did his female partner; only 56% reported situations in which a woman desired a higher degree of sexual involvement than did her male partner (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1996). Given enough time, virtually all heterosexual couples may experience instances in which the man wants sex and the woman does not and vice versa. A study of married couples by Carlson (1976) is informative. In this sample, roughly 75% of both husbands and wives reported at least one occasion in which the wife desired sex when the husband did not. Note, of course, that one in four husbands had never had the opportunity to comply with or reject a sexual request from his wife when he was personally not interested in sex. In contrast, 94% of husbands and 96% of wives reported at least one occasion when the husband desired sex and the wife did not. Virtually all wives had one, and probably many, opportunities to comply with or reject an unwanted sexual overture.

Given an opportunity to engage in unwanted sex with a relationship partner, are women and men equally likely to

comply versus reject the request? Put another way, do women and men differ in their *rates* of compliance, defined as the frequency of complying with a request for unwanted sex divided by the frequency of opportunities to comply during a specified time period? The best evidence currently available on this point comes from Carlson's (1976) study of married couples. When asked how they react when their spouse desires sex and they do not, 84% of wives compared with 64% of husbands reported that they "usually" or "always" participated in the sexual activities.

These data suggest that wives do comply at higher rates than husbands, although it should be noted that a majority of men in this study complied with their wives' requests for sex as well. Further research on rates of sexual compliance is needed. New studies might profitably investigate contemporary dating and marital relationships and would benefit from the use of methods other than retrospective, global reports. Although opportunity may provide a partial explanation for the observation that women are more likely than men to engage in compliant sex, we believe that it does not tell the whole story. We now turn to other factors that may also contribute to gender differences in sexual compliance.

*Ease of influence.* Are there general male-female differences in compliance that may spill over into the sexual domain? Traditional gender roles cast men as independent agents and women as submissive followers. Eagly's (1987) systematic meta-analyses of the available empirical evidence, based largely on studies of interactions among strangers in the lab, found a small overall tendency for women to be more easily influenced than men. The magnitude of this gender effect was typically quite small (effect sizes range from  $d = .16$  to  $.26$ ) and varied across historical time period and setting. In general, people comply more on "matters in which their own sex is thought to be relatively uninterested and inexpert" (Eagly, 1978, p. 97). Eagly further suggested that women with more traditional gender attitudes and women who are especially concerned with maintaining smooth interpersonal relations may be more likely than other women to comply.

*Beliefs about male sexuality.* Another reason women may be particularly likely to comply is the belief that men have stronger sexual desires than they do. In one study, 63% of teenage boys and girls judged the male sex drive as "uncontrollable" as opposed to 13% who judged the female sex drive as "uncontrollable" (Moore & Rosenthal, 1993). In another study, nearly half of teenagers agreed that "guys have a greater physical need for sex than girls do" (Zellman & Goodchilds, 1983, p. 55). If girls and women perceive that male sexuality is uncontrollable, they may believe that it is useless or unreasonable to refuse a man's sexual overture (Gilbert & Walker, 1999). Across a number of studies, a quarter to a third of women reported engaging in sexual intercourse because they thought that the man was too aroused to stop (e.g., Koss & Oros, 1982; Miller & Marshall, 1987). Further, a girl or woman may fear that her male partner will turn to other women if she

does not provide the sex that "he needs." A college woman who participated in our research explained, "I feel he needs to get the sexual urge out of his system and I feel bad rejecting him constantly" (Impett & Peplau, 2000, p. 6). Research might profitably test whether individual differences in beliefs about men's sexuality are reliably associated with sexual compliance in male-female relationships (cf. Clements-Schreiber, Rempel, & Desmarais, 1998).

*Gender roles.* Conventional gender roles may also foster greater compliance among women. Research demonstrates that women are generally more likely than men to provide social support to others and to take major responsibility for caregiving in the family (e.g., Crawford & Unger, 2000). From this perspective, it is a woman's responsibility to be aware of and responsive to her partner's needs. Many of the reasons that women give for complying with unwanted sex seem consistent with this responsibility. In several studies, women emphasized wanting to satisfy a partner's needs, promote intimacy, avoid tension in a relationship, and avoid rejecting a partner (Impett & Peplau, 2002b; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Shotland & Hunter, 1995). Currently, there is little systematic evidence about the impact of traditional gender roles on compliant sexual behavior. One study found no association between compliant sex and measures of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998).

People may also endorse norms about sexual rights and obligations in male-female relationships. Traditionally, marriage laws have not placed limits on husbands' sexual "rights" in marriage; only in recent years have laws acknowledged the possibility of marital rape and women's right to refuse sex. More informal norms may also be influential. Once dating partners become sexually involved, they may believe they have established a sexual precedent so that subsequent sex is expected (Shotland & Goodstein, 1992). Women who want a monogamous sexual relationship may feel obligated to be sexually available to their partners. A woman in one of our studies commented, "His sex drive is much higher than mine, and to ensure fidelity, I have more sex than I desire . . . That way, he won't have to find it elsewhere" (Impett & Peplau, 2000, p. 6).

*Orientation toward sexuality.* Sexual compliance can also be viewed in the context of broader gender differences in orientations toward sexuality. In general, women tend to have a relational or partner-centered orientation to sexuality and men a recreational or body-centered orientation (DeLamater, 1987; Hatfield, Sprecher, Pillemer, Greenberger, & Wexler, 1989; Leigh, 1989). DeLamater (1987) reviewed research indicating that young women tend to have a relational orientation, in which sexuality is seen as an integral part of an ongoing, emotional relationship. Young men are more likely to have a recreational orientation toward sex, in which most women are potential sex partners and no particular emotional relationship is needed as a prerequisite for sex. Further, women hold less permissive attitudes than men do toward casual sex without a committed relationship, and

the size of this sex difference ( $d = .81$ ) is fairly large (Oliver & Hyde, 1993).

In research asking young adults to define sexual desire, Regan and Berscheid (1995, 1996) concluded that men were more likely to "sexualize" and women to "romanticize" the experience of sexual desire. For example, more men (70%) than women (43%) believed that sexual desire was aimed at the physical act of sex. In contrast, more women (35%) than men (13%) cited love or emotional intimacy as the goal of sexual desire. One young man equated sexual desire with uninhibited sexual intercourse; a young woman explained that it was "a longing to be emotionally intimate and to express love to another person" (Regan & Berscheid, 1999, p. 75). In short, for many women, sexuality is linked to having a close, intimate relationship. In this context, it makes sense that women may be more likely than men to resolve a dilemma about unwanted sex by taking their partners' welfare into account. This idea is consistent with other research showing that women are generally more likely than men to take the wishes and opinions of their partners into account when making decisions (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). More systematic empirical research on this issue would be valuable.

*Power and dependence.* Another possible explanation for women's greater rates of compliance concerns gender differences in power (Muehlenhard & Schrag, 1991). Although many contemporary couples endorse the ideal of equality in their relationships, not all couples want or achieve this goal (Peplau & Campbell, 1989). For example, in their large-scale study of American couples, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that a 64% majority of heterosexuals described their marriage as egalitarian, but a substantial 28% minority reported that the husband had greater power. Only 8% reported that the wife had greater power. To the extent that women have less power in their relationships, they may be more vulnerable to male influence. Both men and women sometimes find themselves committed to an unhappy relationship, trapped by a lack of better alternatives, the time and resources they have already invested, their religious principles, or their responsibilities for dependent children (e.g., Impett, Beals, & Peplau, 2001; Rusbult, 1983). Feminist scholars have emphasized that women are often affected more strongly by these issues than men. As Muehlenhard and Kimes (1999, p. 239) noted, "If a woman believes, perhaps correctly, that refusing to have sex with her husband will lead to divorce and that divorce will lead to economic hardship, perhaps even homelessness, . . . how free is she to refuse sex?" It is also possible that some women consent to unwanted sex because they fear physical abuse from a male partner. L. E. Walker (2000) reported that some battered women engaged in—or even initiated—unwanted sex because they feared their husband's violence. In extreme situations, compliance may be viewed as a survival strategy.

So far, we have emphasized the gendered nature of compliant sexual behavior. We reviewed research documenting that women engage in unwanted sex more often than men.

We examined ways in which women's greater compliance may be linked to underlying sex differences in sexual desire, in taking the lead in sexual interactions, and in factors contributing to compliance. At this point, it is important to note that none of these gender differences is absolute; they are all relative differences. Men do sometimes engage in compliant sex. Women do take the sexual initiative and may, sometimes, try to persuade or pressure a reluctant male partner to have sex (Clements-Schreiber et al., 1998; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993). Lacking recent empirical studies of the rates of compliant sex among women and men, it is difficult to estimate the magnitude of this gender difference. Having considered the ways in which gender affects the patterning of compliant sex in male-female relationships, we now turn to a broader discussion of individuals' motives for engaging in compliant sexual behavior.

### A MOTIVATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON SEXUAL COMPLIANCE

In this section of the paper, we first present research that has investigated the reasons why people choose to engage in unwanted sex. Then, drawing on ideas and concepts from general theories of motivation (e.g., Carver & White, 1994; Gray, 1987), we distinguish between approach and avoidance motives for compliance. We believe that this distinction provides important insights into the varied emotional and health-related consequences of consensual unwanted sex.

#### *Reasons for Sexual Compliance*

Several studies have investigated the reasons why people choose to comply with a partner's unwanted sexual initiative (Impett & Peplau, 2002b; Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Poppen & Segal, 1988; Shotland & Hunter, 1995).<sup>2</sup> In these studies, participants rated the importance of several possible reasons for engaging in unwanted sex. Although the reasons varied in content and number from study to study, several common themes emerged. These included the desire to gain sexual experience, to feel attractive, to impress one's peers, to gain approval from a partner, and to promote intimacy in a valued relationship.

Two studies examined college men's and women's reasons for engaging in unwanted sex. Muehlenhard and Cook (1988) assessed 51 different reasons, some of which are relevant to this paper because they implied that participation was consensual. The two most common reasons reported by both men and women were enticement (e.g., "The other person was trying to turn you on by touching you") and altruism (e.g., "You wanted to satisfy your partner's needs").

<sup>2</sup> Some of the incidents of unwanted sexual activity reported by Muehlenhard and Cook (1988) and Poppen and Segal (1988) probably do not meet our definition of compliant sex. That is, some of the incidents may involve participants initiating (instead of consenting to) unwanted sex, and others may constitute non-consensual sexual coercion or rape. Nevertheless, we included these studies in our review because many of the reasons for unwanted sex provided by participants in these studies are similar to those provided in other studies that focus more specifically on reasons for consenting to unwanted sex.

Interesting gender differences also emerged. More men than women reported engaging in unwanted petting or intercourse to gain sexual experience (51% vs. 34%), to impress peers (25% vs. 9%), and to gain popularity (12% vs. 6%). More women than men said they had complied for altruistic reasons (62% vs. 54%) or because they feared that their partner would terminate the relationship (32% vs. 17%). In general, college men were more concerned than women with how they would appear to their friends, whereas women were more concerned than men with the welfare of their partner or the future of their relationship.

Poppen and Segal (1988) also surveyed college students about their reasons for engaging in unwanted sex. Some of these reasons involved aspects of coercion and thus implied that participation in sex was nonconsensual. Other reasons that implied consensual participation included wanting to feel desirable, pressure from peers, and feelings of inadequacy. Almost 50% of participants indicated that they had engaged in unwanted sex because they wanted to feel desirable. In addition, peer pressure was also cited, with more men (31%) than women (16%) indicating that they had consented for this reason.

Two studies of reasons for engaging in unwanted sex focused exclusively on women. Shotland and Hunter (1995) asked female college students if they had ever engaged in compliant sex for each of 18 reasons. Reasons reported by 50% or more of the compliant women included not wanting to disappoint a partner, not wanting to lead a partner on, not wanting to stop an aroused partner, not wanting a partner to think that she did not want sex, and not wanting to destroy the mood. Forty percent of the compliant women indicated that they complied because they had already had sex with these particular partners, and 21% reported complying because they were afraid that their partners would stop going out with them.

In one of our studies, college women in dating relationships indicated which of 15 reasons influenced their decisions to consent to unwanted sex with their current dating partners (Impett & Peplau, 2000). They also provided open-ended responses about their experiences. The most common reasons included wanting to satisfy a partner's needs and to promote intimacy in the relationship. In an illustrative statement, a young woman in a long-term dating relationship explained,

I am in a very loving and nurturing relationship with the person I will eventually marry and I wanted to satisfy the desire for intimacy. I believe that intercourse is one way we can express love rather than only physical desire. So, even though I am tired, I want to show him my love constantly. He would do the same for me. (Impett & Peplau, 2000, p. 7)

Another reason listed by many women in this study concerned fears that partners would lose interest in them if they did not comply. One woman wrote, "He told me that one thing he hated about his ex-girlfriend was the fact that she wasn't sexual. I am afraid that if I come off like I am not sexual, he won't want to be with me" (Impett & Peplau, 2000, p. 6).

Finally, O'Sullivan and Allgeier (1998) surveyed male and female college students currently involved in committed dating relationships. Participants kept diaries of their sexual interactions for two weeks. Of those who reported engaging in compliant sex at least once during the two-week period, relatively equal percentages of men (38%) and women (43%) reported that they had done so to satisfy a partner's needs or promote intimacy in the relationship. More men (48%) than women (15%) indicated that they had complied to avoid relationship tension.

In summary, research has begun to chart the variety of reasons why people willingly engage in compliant sex. Common reasons included desires to gain approval from a romantic partner or peers, as well as more self-focused reasons such as desires to gain sexual experience or to feel more desirable. It appears that college men may be more concerned than women with impressing their peers, and women may be more concerned than men with pleasing a partner and promoting intimacy in a relationship. There is some suggestion, however, that these gender differences may diminish or even disappear in the context of committed relationships.

There are several limitations to this research. All studies have relied on relatively young college student samples. Research on motives for engaging in sex more generally (as opposed to compliant sex) has found that motives may differ across the course of the lifespan. For example, having sex to impress one's friends has been shown to occur largely among adolescent males and may decline with age (Cooper et al., 1998). In addition, Sprague and Quadagno (1989) asked adults ages 22 to 57 to choose their usual motive for engaging in sexual intercourse. Among the younger participants, more men than women listed obtaining a physical release as their usual motive, and more women than men listed showing love for a partner as their usual motive. However, these gender differences declined with age and actually reversed around age 40. Future research would benefit from examining motives for unwanted sex in non-college-student samples varying in age or duration of the relationship.

Another limitation is that each research team has used their own list of reasons for unwanted sex, making it difficult to summarize across studies. Those interested in creating an empirically derived set of reasons should consider developing a comprehensive list of reasons, based on past research and theory, and then testing these reasons in a large enough sample to permit statistical examination of clustering factors.<sup>3</sup> The development and testing of a new and more comprehensive measure of motives for compliant sex in diverse samples would permit more accurate conclusions about the influence of such variables as gender and age on reasons for compliant sex.

<sup>3</sup> Interested researchers can examine the construction of two recent scales that measure general motives for engaging in sex rather than motives for compliant sex (Cooper et al., 1998; Hill & Preston, 1996).

### *Approach and Avoidance Motives*

Previous research on motives for engaging in unwanted sex has been empirically based and aimed at describing the content of common reasons for compliance. Here we draw on general theories of motivation to provide new insights into the reasons why people consent to unwanted sex. A distinction made by many theories of motivation is whether an individual acts to obtain a positive outcome or to avoid a negative outcome. Behaviors undertaken in the pursuit of positive or pleasurable experiences have been labeled *approach motivated*; those that involve the avoidance of negative or painful outcomes have been termed *avoidance motivated* (e.g., Carver & White, 1994; Gray, 1987). Cooper and her colleagues (1998) used this distinction to create a 29-item scale assessing approach and avoidance motives for sex in general. Research by Cooper et al. (1998) and Impett (2002) has found that people typically report engaging in sex for approach reasons such as pursuing sexual pleasure or promoting intimacy in a relationship. Avoidance reasons for sex such as coping with feelings of loneliness or fearing that a partner will lose interest are less common.

To date, researchers have not used the approach-avoidance distinction to study reasons for consenting to unwanted sex. We believe that avoidance motives will be more salient in reports about compliant sex. An individual who does not want a particular sexual experience but knows that his or her partner does is likely to consider the possible negative consequences of rejecting the partner's sexual request. To examine this possibility, we categorized the reasons for compliant sex reported in two studies (Impett & Peplau, 2002b; Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988). We found that in both studies, approach and avoidance reasons were listed about equally often. This contrasts with research on general sex motives, where approach reasons tend to predominate.

### *Situational and Dispositional Influences on Motives*

People's reasons for engaging in compliant sex are undoubtedly influenced by both situational and dispositional factors. Some situations draw attention to avoidance motives: A woman with a physically abusive boyfriend might feel that she has to comply to prevent her partner from becoming angry and violent. A man whose girlfriend constantly threatens to leave him may comply with a sexual overture to avoid a breakup. Other situations make approach motives more salient: A married man who has just come home from a 2-week business trip may be distracted by problems at work but comply with his wife's sexual initiation to rekindle passion and reestablish intimacy. A wedding anniversary may remind an overworked young mother of the importance of her marriage and highlight approach reasons for sexual compliance. In short, there are many possible situational influences on whether people engage in unwanted sex for approach or avoidance reasons.

There may also be dispositional influences on the tendency to construe situations in approach or avoidance terms. Of particular relevance to compliant sex may be individual differences in attachment style. Attachment research suggests that on the basis of past experiences, individuals may develop relatively stable ways of relating to others in intimate relationships (see Bartholomew, 1993, for a review). Individuals who are securely attached generally feel quite comfortable with closeness and are confident that romantic partners will accept and care for them. Anxiously attached individuals, on the other hand, are generally insecure about others' responses and fear separation and rejection by romantic partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Thus, anxiously attached individuals may be relatively more likely than securely attached individuals to engage in sex for avoidance reasons such as fears that their partners will lose interest in them or end the relationship.

Results from our study of college women in dating relationships showed that anxiously attached women were more willing to consent to unwanted sex than were securely attached women (Impett & Peplau, 2000). Their reasons for sexual compliance also differed. Compared with secure women, anxiously attached women were significantly more likely to cite two avoidance reasons. First, more than twice as many anxious women as securely attached women cited fears that their partners would lose interest in them (42% vs. 18%). Second, about twice as many anxiously attached women as securely attached women consented because they feared their partners would threaten to end the relationship (21% vs. 10%). Future research is needed to replicate and extend these findings about attachment style and motives for engaging in compliant sex. Studies of other dispositional constructs such as rejection sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996) would also be valuable.

### *Temporal Changes in Motives*

In responding to a partner's request for unwanted sex, people can have multiple motives, some favoring compliance and some favoring turning a partner down. In compliant sexual interactions, people may use a sort of psychological algebra to weigh the costs and benefits of a particular sexual decision. A man might be aroused and want to engage in sex with his date but feel reluctant because he does not want to lead the woman to believe that he is interested in pursuing a committed relationship. A married couple, eager to become parents, may not want to have sexual intercourse today but may do so anyway because it's the "right time" of the month.

Motives for engaging in sex can change in the course of interacting with a partner. Indeed, a common way for a sexually interested person to communicate his or her desire to a partner is through seduction, an effort to arouse desire in the other person (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993). In an early study, McCormick (1979) asked college students to write essays describing how they would influence a person they had been dating to have sexual intercourse with



them for the first time. Participants described how they might change a partner's attitude from reluctance to acceptance. The most common strategy reported by a majority of both men and women was what McCormick called "seduction." One respondent explained,

First of all I would put on some soft music and offer [my date] some wine, then I would start kissing [her] gently and caressing [her] body. Then I would give [her] a massage with oil. Then I would let [her] give me a massage with oil. (McCormick, 1979, p. 203)

The college students in McCormick's study were, to some extent, matching their sexual strategies to their assumptions about the partner's motives. Perhaps to reassure a reluctant partner that it wasn't too soon to have sex for the first time, some respondents used an approach McCormick called "relationship conceptualizing": "I would tell my date that we have a very strong, close relationship and that it is time to express it through sexual intercourse" (p. 203).

In a study of college women's experiences of sexual compliance, many women reported that their initial lack of sexual desire sometimes changed as a result of a partner's actions (Impett & Peplau, 2000). One woman wrote, "I may not have been in the mood initially, but my partner got me in the mood." Individuals can also influence their own sexual desire, through the use of arousing fantasies or actions. Another woman in the study reported, "You can arouse desire in yourself by acting as though it is there." In summary, people can have multiple reasons for engaging in sex, and these reasons can change over the course of a sexual encounter.

### *Consequences of Approach Versus Avoidance Motives*

The approach-avoidance distinction may also provide insights into the consequences of decisions to comply with a partner's sexual request. A married woman who complies with her husband's sexual initiative to show her love and concern may feel very different about the experience than a woman who complies to avoid a potentially violent argument. We will now consider how different motives may influence emotions, sexual risk taking, and violence in intimate relationships.

*Emotions.* Nonconsensual forced sex is typically associated with severe negative emotional experiences (Arata & Burkhart, 1995). In contrast, people who engage in compliant sex do not necessarily suffer negative consequences. In a study of college students in committed dating relationships, only 29% of men and 35% of women reported experiencing any form of emotional discomfort as a result of consenting to unwanted sex (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). Negative emotions included feeling disappointed in oneself or feeling uncomfortable about engaging in meaningless sex.

The distinction between approach and avoidance motives may help to clarify the varied emotional reactions to compliant sex. Approach motives are likely to foster positive emotional reactions. A woman who complies with sex to demonstrate her love and support for her husband is

unlikely to feel emotional discomfort and may instead feel glad that she has been supportive and excelled in her role as a wife. In contrast, avoidance motives may have less positive emotional consequences. A young teenage girl who has sex to keep her popular older boyfriend from abandoning her may feel momentary relief from anxiety but may also feel disappointed in herself for giving in to her boyfriend's desires or experience diminished self-esteem. A recent pilot study of college students' experiences found that different motives for sexual compliance were associated with different emotional reactions (Impett & Peplau, 2002a). For example, consenting to sex to express love for a partner was associated with subsequent feelings of love and passion. In contrast, consenting to sex to prevent a partner from becoming angry was associated with feelings of shame, anger, and fear. Further research about the impact of sex motives on the emotional consequences of compliant sex is needed.

*Sexual risk taking.* Motives for compliance may help explain why some individuals fail to protect themselves from STDs and unwanted pregnancy. Approach reasons, such as seeking sexual excitement or pleasure, may lead people to initiate risky sex. Indeed, one of the most robust findings is that people high in the personality trait of sensation-seeking—that is, people who are drawn to stimulating experiences—engage in more sexually risky practices than people low in sensation-seeking (see Hoyle, Fejfar, & Miller, 2000, for a review). In contrast, certain avoidance motives may lead people to comply with a risky sex offer. For example, some people may use sex as a way of escaping such aversive states as feeling inadequate or worrying about conflict with a partner. In a study of sexually experienced adolescents and young adults, Cooper et al. (1998) showed that engaging in sex for avoidance reasons, such as concerns that a partner would become angry or withdraw love, was associated with more lifetime risky sexual practices, less effective birth control use, and more unplanned pregnancies. Further, women who consent to sex to keep their boyfriends from losing interest may be afraid to suggest the use of a condom for fear of offending or upsetting their partners (Impett, 2002; Miller, Bettencourt, DeBro, & Hoffman, 1993). Future research on sexual risk taking would benefit from considering the influence of these and other avoidance reasons on risky sexual behavior.

*Sexual violence.* Motives for compliance may also have implications for women's vulnerability to violence by a male partner. Two studies have shown that women's sexual compliance is linked to an increased risk of experiencing sexual aggression. In one study (Krahé et al., 2000), college women who had consented to unwanted sex at least once in the past were roughly three times as likely as women who had never complied to report that they had been sexually victimized with force or while in an incapacitated state. Similarly, Shotland and Hunter (1995) found that women who had consented to unwanted sex at least once in the past were more likely to have been raped

under the influence of alcohol or drugs than women who had never engaged in sexual compliance. In these studies, the causal connection between sexual violence and sexual compliance is not clear. In some cases, previous experiences with a coercive male partner may lead a woman to develop compliant sexual strategies as a way of avoiding potential conflicts. In other cases, a woman who is highly dependent on her partner and complies to prevent the relationship from ending may be more easily victimized by this same partner or future relationship partners. Either way, avoidance motives are implicated. Future research would benefit from examining the influence of approach and avoidance motives on the link between sexual compliance and sexual victimization.

In summary, people's reasons for engaging in unwanted sex may influence the consequences of their actions. It appears that engaging in unwanted sex for avoidance reasons may result in emotional discomfort, sexual risk taking, and sexual violence. In the final section of this paper, which addresses relationship maintenance, we consider potential positive consequences of engaging in sex for approach reasons.

#### A RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE PERSPECTIVE ON SEXUAL COMPLIANCE

Research on close relationships provides another useful framework for understanding sexual compliance. Even among happy couples, partners sometimes encounter situations in which the best choice for each person is different. Because partners' behavioral preferences are not always compatible, conflicts are inevitable, and their successful resolution can affect the quality and longevity of the relationship (e.g., Holmes & Murray, 1996). Researchers have identified a variety of relationship-maintaining behaviors that partners can use to protect their relationship from conflicts and disagreements. Of particular relevance to our topic is research on sacrifice, that is, an individual's willingness to forego his or her immediate self-interest to promote the well being of a partner or a relationship (Van Lange et al., 1997). Sacrifices can range from such major decisions as relocating to a new city so that one partner can take a better job to more mundane but potentially recurrent decisions, such as agreeing to watch a partner's favorite television show. Similarly, agreeing to have sex when you're really not "in the mood" can be conceptualized as a sacrifice.

##### *Does Commitment Increase the Likelihood of Compliant Sex?*

Research derived from interdependence theory has documented that an individual's feelings of commitment to an intimate partner influence his or her willingness to make sacrifices (Van Lange et al., 1997; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). In general, the stronger an individual's commitment, the more likely he or she is to make sacrifices for a partner. Commitment represents the intent to persist in a relationship, including long-term orientation

toward the future of the relationship and feelings of psychological attachment (Rusbult, 1983). Feelings of commitment are believed to reflect three factors (e.g., Impett, Beals, & Peplau, 2001; Rusbult, 1983). First, when people are satisfied with a relationship and believe that it provides many benefits and few costs, they want it to continue and they feel greater commitment. Second, when they have invested many resources such as time, effort, or money in a relationship, they tend to feel greater commitment. Finally, potential alternatives to a current relationship make a difference. An individual who fears being alone and believes that a better partner would be hard to find will feel greater commitment to an existing relationship. In the context of a committed relationship, partners may consider having unwanted sex a small price to pay for preserving a valued relationship. Further, an individual who believes that his or her own commitment to a relationship is greater than the partner's may be particularly likely to make sacrifices. For instance, a woman who knows that her husband has a roving eye and meets many attractive women at work may be especially likely to consent to unwanted sex as a way of making their relationship rewarding to him and keeping his commitment.

In a first effort to test the association between commitment and sacrifice in the sexual domain, we investigated the experiences of 125 college women in established dating relationships (Impett & Peplau, 2002b). We hypothesized that women who perceived their own commitment to be substantially greater than their boyfriends' commitment would be more willing to consent to unwanted sex than would women who perceived equal levels of commitment or thought their boyfriends were more committed than they were. This prediction was confirmed: The more a woman felt that she had greater commitment than her partner, the more willing she was to consent to unwanted sex. It appears that these women, who wanted their relationships to continue but were unsure of their boyfriends' commitment, saw sexual compliance as one possible way to keep their boyfriends' interest and to maintain their relationships.

This study leaves important questions unanswered. Which aspects of commitment—satisfaction, investments, or alternatives—make a difference in a woman's willingness to comply with her partner's sexual initiative? Was her willingness to please her partner based on her desire to protect a happy relationship, a desire to protect her investments, her awareness that she lacked alternatives, or all three? Similarly, was her concern about her partner influenced by a desire to increase his satisfaction, to encourage him to continue to invest in the relationship, to discourage his attention to alternative partners, or all three? Future research would benefit from a closer examination of these issues.

##### *Does Compliant Sex Increase a Partner's Commitment?*

Do acts of sacrifice actually serve to maintain the relationship, as the actors intend? Research on dating and married couples has shown that when individuals per-

ceive that their intimate partner has made an important sacrifice for them, they become more committed to maintaining the relationship (Wieselquist et al., 1999). There can be a sequence of events in which a committed individual sacrifices for a partner, the partner perceives this sacrifice, and in turn, the partner becomes more committed to the relationship.

Does a similar commitment-enhancing cycle occur when individuals engage in sex for the sake of a partner? In the first step of the cycle, a committed individual has to willingly engage in unwanted sexual activity with his or her partner, a phenomenon that we have documented in this review. In the second step, the partner has to perceive the sacrificial act. Do dating and marital partners know when their partners are uninterested but nonetheless comply with their sexual requests? In a diary study of college students in dating relationships, O'Sullivan and Allgeier (1998) found that many participants reported some occasions on which they believed that their partners had little sexual desire during a sexual encounter, and nearly two thirds of the sample believed that their dating partners had consented to unwanted sexual activity in the past. The researchers reported the following:

As discrepancies in desire levels between committed sexual dating partners are relatively common . . . there may be a reciprocal agreement that the less ardent partner will accept unwanted advances on occasion, even feign desire in the sexual activity, unless he or she experiences strong inhibitions at a given time about doing so. (p. 241)

If individuals recognize when their partners are less than desirous during sexual encounters, do they then become more committed to their relationships as the research on general acts of sacrifice suggests? Research has not yet addressed this fascinating question. On the one hand, sexual sacrifice might be more likely to increase commitment than nonsexual sacrifices such as attending a boring concert or visiting disliked in-laws. Each of these sacrifices communicates that the uninterested person cares for the partner, but sexual sacrifice has the added benefit of providing a potentially pleasurable and intimate experience. On the other hand, recognizing that a partner is not really interested in your favorite opera or does not like your relatives is very different from recognizing that a partner is not interested in having sex with you.

To understand the impact of sexual sacrifice on a relationship, it may be useful to consider the sexual motives of both partners simultaneously. For instance, a husband who wants to have sex for self-focused reasons concerning physical gratification may care little about his wife's motives for complying with his sexual advances. In contrast, for a husband who seeks sexual intimacy to validate his sense of masculinity and attractiveness, knowledge that his wife finds him sexy and wants to have intercourse may be of great importance. Future research will benefit from considering the compatibility of partners' motives and possible ways in which sexual sacrifices may differ from other types of relationship sacrifices.

A few observations about sexual compliance as a way to foster commitment early in a dating relationship may be in order. Although some women are reluctant to engage in sex until they have received adequate assurance of a dating partner's commitment (Carroll et al., 1985), others may view sex as a way of eliciting stronger commitment from a male partner. In a study of college students' motives for engaging in short-term, casual sexual encounters (i.e., casual sex), 44% of women but only 9% of men indicated that they engaged in sex to increase the probability of a long-term commitment from their sexual partners (Regan & Dreyer, 1999). Does this compliance produce the desired effect?

Recent research by Haselton and Buss (2001) suggested that it may not. In two studies with college students, men and women experienced different affective responses to first-time sexual intercourse with a dating partner. Both sexes reported that sex led to greater feelings of emotional involvement in the relationship. Nonetheless, compared with men, women reported feeling greater love and commitment after sex than before. In contrast, compared with women, men reported finding their partners less physically attractive and sexy following intercourse than before. This latter finding about diminished attractiveness was most pronounced among college men who had had the greatest number of sex partners in the past. College men were also significantly more likely than women to say that they tend to lose sexual interest in a sex partner after a few months of regular sexual intercourse. The researchers urged caution in interpreting these initial research findings. Nonetheless, these results suggest that the emotional consequences of first-time sexual intercourse may differ for women and men. For women, sexual compliance may not be a generally effective strategy for promoting relationship development and commitment.

In addition to possible links between sexual compliance and commitment, are there other possible benefits of sexual sacrifice? Based on social exchange theory, sex can be conceptualized as one of many resources that partners can trade in intimate relationships. Although people typically disdain thinking about close relationships in exchange terms, partners often do reciprocate favors and kindnesses toward each other. Sprecher (1998, p. 37) noted that "When people do something special for their partner in the sexual area of the relationship (e.g., an erotic massage, having sex when not in the mood to accommodate one's partner), they may get reciprocation in another area of the relationship." In close relationships, resources are to some extent substitutable, and so a sexual favor may be reciprocated in nonsexual ways. Pleased and grateful for his wife's willingness to experiment with a new sexual activity, a husband may volunteer to do the grocery shopping or take the kids to the park. Interdependence theorists such as Kelley (1979) go beyond exchange ideas to consider the ways partners interpret each other's actions. A central idea is that we pay special attention to instances in which a partner's actions depart from their personal self-interest, and we often seek to explain such behaviors. Deciding that

a partner is accommodating our sexual desires to show love and concern is far different from believing that a partner is complying to obligate us for the future.

In summary, research on close relationships provides new and valuable insights into sexual compliance. There are still many unanswered questions about sexual compliance as a form of sacrifice. Does sexual compliance actually benefit relationships, and if it does, under what circumstances? It seems likely that when sexual sacrifice is mutual and reciprocal, or part of a broader pattern of fair exchange, it can increase intimacy and commitment between partners. But, when one partner continually sacrifices for the sake of the other, problems may arise. S. J. Walker (1997, p. 164) noted that this issue may be especially relevant for women: "As long as young women feel compelled to sacrifice their own needs to meet their partners', they cannot develop their sense of self and equality cannot be accomplished." Future research testing and extending ideas from theories of relationships would be valuable.

### A FINAL WORD ABOUT GENDER

It is widely believed that women are less interested in sex than men and so must be coaxed into sexual encounters by their amorous male partners. The British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1929) opined that "Marriage is for women the commonest mode of livelihood, and the total amount of undesired sex endured by women is probably greater in marriage than in prostitution" (pp. 121-122). In discussing our research on compliant sex with college men, a common response is, "Unwanted sex? I can't think of a time when I did not want sex." Just as men are seen as always eager and ready for sex, women are often depicted as begrudgingly agreeing to sex in order to keep peace in their relationships. In 2001, the Oprah Winfrey television show devoted two episodes to "wives who don't want sex." In these programs, Oprah suggested that millions of American women have apparently lost their sexual desire. No companion show for husbands who have lost their sexual desire has been planned.

In contrast to these popular views, sex research paints a more nuanced view of male-female differences. Among younger adults, roughly twice as many women as men say they consented to unwanted sex with a date or spouse (Impett & Peplau, 2002a; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Sprecher et al., 1994). But it is important not to overstate these gender differences. Men also comply with a partner's sexual overture when they have little or no desire. In fact, if given enough time in a long-term relationship, the majority of men report "usually or always" having sex when their wives desire it and they do not (Carlson, 1976). During midlife and beyond, more men than women report engaging in sex to show love for their partners (Sprague & Quadagno, 1989). Research points to important gender differences but also to considerable overlap between the sexes in their decisions to engage in compliant sex and their reasons for doing so.

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