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Intimate Justice

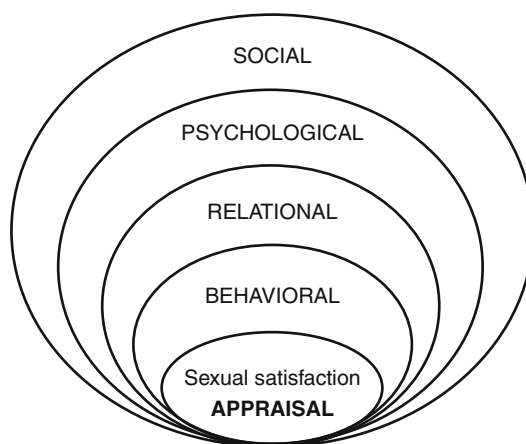
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Introduction

Intimate justice is a theoretical framework that links experiences of inequity in the sociopolitical domain with how individuals imagine and evaluate the quality of their sexual and relational experiences. Developed initially to guide research on sexual satisfaction (McClelland, 2010, 2011), intimate justice encourages researchers to question how social conditions, such as racial and gender-based stereotypes (Fasula, Carry, & Miller, 2012) and sexual stigma (Herek, 2007), impact what individuals feel they deserve in their intimate lives. In addition to theorizing the impact of social conditions on deservingness, intimate justice encourages a critical engagement with research methods. Specifically, intimate justice argues that research on individuals' evaluations of their lives – and specifically their levels of satisfaction, well-being, and happiness – should be assessed using measures and methods that always consider both potential group differences and the social conditions that may influence these appraisals.

For example, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) men and women contend with social stigmas related to their sexuality and sexual behaviors and are not afforded the same sexual rights in the political domain as heterosexuals. Other examples of relationships potentially affected by dynamics of disadvantage might



Intimate Justice, Fig. 1 Ecological model illustrating social and psychological antecedents of sexual satisfaction appraisals

include undocumented women in intimate relationships with US citizens, as well as men and women with histories of violence or sexual abuse, just to name a few. Given these and other contexts in which sexual relationships and activities occur, individuals' sexual expectations may significantly vary from, for example, peers who face fewer limits on their sexual rights (e.g., Diamond & Lucas, 2004). Intimate justice asks researchers to methodologically consider how biographies and structural contexts move under the skin and into the bedroom, influencing how individuals think, feel, and experience their intimate lives. In other words, individuals' expectations for sexual fulfillment precede satisfaction ratings (see Fig. 1). Notably for psychologists who are interested in satisfaction scores, these varied criteria and the role of expectations remain unmeasured in conventional satisfaction research designs.

Without a framework of intimate justice, researchers risk misrepresenting self-report ratings as if the scale anchors were the same, thus missing potential research and/or intervention opportunities. McClelland (2010) argued that it is not enough to examine whether sexual outcomes are distributed equally; we must also inquire as to the nature of the benchmarks being used and the history of the groups and individuals being assessed—and, with this information

as central, then evaluate how each is deciding what is “good enough.” McClelland offered three suggestions for how researchers might use intimate justice to help guide data collection and data analysis. These included the following: (1) measure entitlement to sexual pleasure alongside sexual satisfaction, (2) study what people imagine when responding to Likert and similar scales (e.g., McClelland, 2011), and (3) attend to construct validity issues, specifically how researchers measure a phenomenon of interest, and consider whether one’s measures attend to potential preexisting social inequalities.

Definition

Intimate justice has roots in several related theories developed in feminist and anti-discrimination research. In particular, four theories are linked and extended in the theory of intimate justice. These include *thick desire* (Fine & McClelland, 2006), a theory which links sexual well-being with economic, educational, and social conditions; *relative deprivation* (Crosby, 1982), a theory which describes how inequity becomes normalized, particularly through self-blame; *sexual stigma*, a theory for understanding how hetero-normative public policies negatively impact the development of LGBTQ lives (Herek, 2007); and, finally, *social comparison* (Major, McFarlin, & Gagnon, 1984), a theory which attends to how individuals rely on social cues to determine the extent to which they are content or deprived. Intimate justice links these four theories in order to highlight the synergy of this previous work and to draw attention to several dimensions relevant to the study of sexuality: the sociopolitical conditions of sexual development, psychological self-evaluation processes, and norms concerning the distribution of justice. Together, these dimensions ask us to attend to the development of intimate and sexual expectations in disparate sociopolitical conditions and to address the inherent challenges of assessing normalized conditions of injustice in research settings.

Keywords

Sexual satisfaction; life satisfaction; happiness; expectations; deservingness; measurement; construct validity

Traditional Debates

Developed initially to study the assessment of sexual satisfaction, intimate justice is embedded within debates in the larger field of life satisfaction. For example, Cantril’s Self-Anchoring Ladder (1965) was an early methodological innovation that asked participants to rate their overall sense of well-being and, additionally, to define their own scale anchors. Cantril (1965) argued that by providing their own low- and high-scale anchors (“best possible life” and “worst possible life”), participants’ well-being scores would be a reflection of their own self-defined criteria. More recently, researchers have relied on subjective evaluations of life satisfaction using items such as “In most ways my life is close to my ideal” (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). There is some controversy in the field as to where imagined ideals are generated, i.e., within oneself or in relationship to social norms. Researchers who have developed and led the development of the study of subjective well-being have argued that satisfaction appraisals are self-generated: “how satisfied people are with their present state of affairs is based on a comparison with a standard which each individual sets for him or herself; it is not externally imposed” (Diener et al., 1985, p. 71). This definition of life satisfaction sets the individual within a self-imposed set of criteria. In response to this definition, others have argued that this definition does not sufficiently address the degree to which sociocultural contexts affect individuals’ expectations for and evaluations of life satisfaction (Henderson, Lehavot, & Simoni, 2009; McClelland, 2010).

At the level of satisfaction in the sexual domain, the field of sexual satisfaction research has been plagued by inconsistent definition and

measurement, hindered in part by the assumption that definitions of satisfaction are self-evident. Schwartz and Young (2009) argued that “the word satisfaction can be defined in various ways and satisfaction may mean different things to different people, [but] ...because of a presumption that everyone knows what it means. . .much of the literature on sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction never really defines the word” (p. 1). Across the body of research in this field, sexual satisfaction has been defined in terms of positive affect associated with one’s sexual relationship, the level of reward one feels in relationship, as well as orgasm frequency.

Critical Debates

Similar to the research on life satisfaction, some have argued that sexual satisfaction is “a universal human experience” (Štulhofer, Buško, & Brouillard, 2010). However, others have argued that universal definitions overlook several types of social and relational inequities. For example, Tolman and colleagues developed a model of sexual health for young women that places sexual health “in relation to multiple contexts, including dating and romantic relationships, social relationships, and sociocultural-sociopolitical factors” (2003, p. 8). McClelland (2011) argued that descriptions of sexual satisfaction as universal overlook issues related to power, violence, and the opportunity structures surrounding sexuality and partnership. Given that sexual experiences and relationships are deeply lodged within sociopolitical contexts, it is important to examine whether sexual satisfaction is the same psychological phenomena across individuals who have different experiences and access to rights within the sexual domain.

In an effort to systematically describe the limitations of current research on sexual satisfaction, McClelland (2009) offered a contextual model of sexual satisfaction appraisals. This model includes four levels of antecedents

(social, psychological, interpersonal, and behavioral) that precede a person’s judgment as to their level of sexual satisfaction. For example, sexual inequalities experienced at the social level (e.g., marriage restrictions) may be translated into individual psychologies in the form of sexual expectations, which in turn influence sexual relationships and experiences and, ultimately, how sexual satisfaction is evaluated. Ecological models, such as the one presented in Fig. 1, have encouraged the development of research that emphasizes the role of cultural, political, social, and dyadic contexts in psychological phenomena (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Tolman, Striepe, & Harmon, 2003).

Researchers working on issues related to satisfaction, well-being, and happiness – in and out of the sexual domain – are encouraged to consider three elements of satisfaction appraisals: the role of sociopolitical antecedents and anticipated consequences of satisfaction ratings, the development of expectations for well-being, and lastly, how expectations affect an individual’s evaluation of the quality of his or her life. In short, when collecting and analyzing data on how people rate their satisfaction and well-being, researchers should increasingly attend to relational, structural, and historic dynamics within and surrounding the individual in order to systematically reflect these conditions in their data and findings.

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Online Resources

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Introjection

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Introduction

Introjection is a psychoanalytic concept referring to the psychic process whereby objects from the external world – prototypically parental objects – are taken into the ego, internalized. It is most frequently defined in opposition to projection – the expulsion of unpleasant impulses, often through negation or repudiation – and usually denotes a merging with the object, a movement from difference and distinctness to sameness; as such, introjection is closely associated with psychoanalytic formulations of identification (see Freud, 1921, pp. 47–53). Introjection is a phantasmatic process – it is not real objects that are taken in – that finds its bodily analogue in orality, ingestion, as opposed to excretion. At a basic level, then, it is through introjection that a subject is able to assert, “I am like this” (I have taken this in, I am identified with it), and through projection, “I am not like that” (I have spat that out, excreted it) (Freud, 1925).

The two processes of introjection and projection are not easily separable, though. To say, “I am not like that” – the classic example being a son saying, “I am nothing like my father” – often points to who or what one fears oneself to be but would really rather not acknowledge (Freud, 1925). Conversely, to declare, “I am like this,” is to signal precisely the otherness that constitutes one’s identity, the objects from outside of oneself taken in through introjection. There is, then, in the notions of introjection and projection, a fundamental blurring of the “interiority” of psychic reality and the real “external” world: on the one hand, within the subject are introjected objects or parts thereof, *others*, and one is, at the very core, alien to oneself; on the