

# The Gender Role Motivation Model of Women's Sexually Submissive Behavior and Satisfaction in Heterosexual Couples

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## Abstract

Previous findings suggest that women are more likely than men to take on the submissive role during sexual activities (e.g., waiting for their partner to initiate and orchestrate sexual activities), often to the detriment of their sexual satisfaction. Extending previous research on gender role motivation, the authors recruited 181 heterosexual couples to examine scripted sexual behavior, motivation for such behavior, and relationship outcomes (sexual satisfaction, perceptions of closeness, and relationship satisfaction) for both women and their partners. Using the actor–partner interdependence model, path analyses revealed that women's submissive behavior had negative links to personal sexual satisfaction and their partner's sexual satisfaction but only when their submission was inconsistent with their sexual preferences. Moreover, the authors show there are negative downstream consequences of diminished sexual satisfaction on perceptions of closeness and overall relationship satisfaction for both partners in the relationship.

## Keywords

gender roles, sexual satisfaction, sexual desire, sexual assertiveness, gender differences

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Traditional gender role scripts guide and constrain men and women's behavior across a wide range of contexts, and the sexual relationship is no exception. In fact, some research suggests that the heterosexual romantic context may be one in which men and women feel particularly compelled to enact traditional gender roles (Hundhammer, 2007; Morier & Seroy, 1994; Zanna & Pack, 1975; see Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2011). Traditional sexual scripts prescribe heterosexual men to take on the more dominant role in sexual interactions, whereas heterosexual women are expected to be submissive (Gagnon, 1990; Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992; Schwartz & Rutter, 2000; Sprecher & McKinney, 1993). More specifically, the submissive sexual script for women prescribes that women submit to their partner's desires and wait for men to initiate and orchestrate sexual activities (Gagnon, 1990; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992; Schwartz & Rutter, 2000). The dominance script for men involves taking on the more directive role as the partner who initiates and determines the nature of the sexual interaction, such as selecting which sexual activities occur (Gagnon, 1990; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992; Schwartz & Rutter, 2000).

Across the past few decades, researchers have documented increases in women's levels of sexual assertiveness, with women now initiating sex more often, especially in long-term romantic relationships (Kamen, 2003; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992; Segal, 1995, 1997). Despite these moves toward more egalitarian scripts, most men and women in heterosexual relationships continue to follow the traditional sexual script of male dominance and female submission, whereby men initiate and lead sexual activities while women wait to be approached (Clark, Shaver, & Abrahams, 1999; Laner & Ventrone, 1998; Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2007; Ortiz-Torres, Williams, & Ehrhardt, 2003; Rose & Frieze, 1993; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Vannier & O'Sullivan, in press; Wingood &

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DiClemente, 2000). Given the glamorization of traditional gender roles and scripts in popular culture (e.g., Baker, 2005; Kim et al., 2007), the continued prevalence of the traditional script is hardly surprising.

The high prevalence of traditional sexual scripts does not necessarily represent the sexual relationship that men and women actually desire. Nor does it mean that traditional scripts result in the most satisfying and authentic relationships. On the contrary, increasing evidence suggests that adherence to traditional sexual scripts and gender norms predicts lower sexual satisfaction among women (e.g., Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez, Crocker, & Boike, 2005; Sanchez, Kiefer, & Ybarra, 2006). Women who take on the submissive sexual role report that they feel less freedom and choice in their sexual relationships (i.e., lower *sexual autonomy*; Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2006). Thus, the submissive sexual script for women often leads to their greater engagement in unwanted sexual behavior (Impett & Peplau, 2003). As a result of reduced sexual autonomy, women's submissive behavior interferes with their sexual arousability, ability to orgasm, and overall sexual satisfaction (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2006). In other words, prior research finds that the traditional heterosexual script may harm women's ability to have sexually satisfying and pleasurable experiences. However, the impact of women's submissive behavior on their male partners' sexual experience remains unknown. Thus, one of the primary goals of this study is to examine whether women's adherence to the traditional submissive script also interferes with the sexual satisfaction of their male partners. We propose that women's submissive behavior will negatively affect men's sexual satisfaction because men may (correctly) perceive their partner's sexual dissatisfaction, which will adversely affect their own sexual experience. Moreover, we test whether women's genuine desire to adhere to a submissive script buffers the negative consequences of submissive behavior for women and their partners.

### **Why Would Women's Submissive Behavior Adversely Affect Men?**

Although traditional scripts direct behavior in heterosexual exchanges, increasing evidence suggests that men's actual preferences do not coincide with the traditional script. In fact, most research finds that men often prefer less submissive sexual partners despite women's beliefs to the contrary (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Hatfield, Sprecher, Traupmann-Pillemer, Greenberger, & Wexler, 1988; Jessor, 1978). Most heterosexual men report dissatisfaction with their role as the primary initiators of sexual activities and indicate preferences for female partners who equally participate in the initiation of sexual activities (e.g., Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005). Moreover, men's preference for sexual partners who are less submissive (e.g., who initiate sexual activities)

reflect men's desire to feel sexually desired by their partners, and women's submissive behavior is perceived as a lack of sexual interest (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005).

Men's masculinity is tied to their sexual prowess, which includes their ability to provide an orgasmic and sexually satisfying experience for their partner (Basow, 1992; Masters & Johnson, 1976). As a result, men report putting more effort into sexually satisfying their partners and tend to focus more on the sexual aspects of the relationship, whereas women are more focused on the emotional aspects of the relationship (Colson, Lemaire, Pinton, Hamidi, & Klein, 2006; Hatfield et al., 1988; Simms & Byers, 2009). Because women who engage in submissive behavior also report interference with orgasm and arousal, men who have submissive partners may perceive themselves as inadequate sexual partners who cannot please their partners. Indeed, prior work suggests that men's sexual confidence is undermined when women do not initiate sexual activities (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005). We propose that women's submissive behavior will lead to lower sexual satisfaction for their partners because men perceive women's sexual dissatisfaction, which undermines their sexual experience. If true, this would be particularly important to identify because of the pervasiveness of the female submissive script.

In contrast to men, we expect that women may be less affected by their partner's submissive behavior. Although women may similarly want to have sexually desirous and satisfied sexual partners, they tend to inaccurately perceive their partner's sexual desires by assuming that men are almost always interested in sex (Edwards & Barber, 2010; Miller & Byers, 2004; Purnine & Carey, 1997; Simms & Byers, 2009). In general, women tend to overestimate their partner's sexual desire, relying largely on stereotypes of men's insatiable sexual appetites (e.g., Miller & Byers, 2004). Thus, women may not interpret men's submissive behavior as a sign of low sexual desire or interest because men are perceived as having very strong sexual libidos regardless of their behavior. Thus, we expected stronger partner effects for men, such that women's submissive behavior would predict lower levels of sexual satisfaction among men.

### **The Gender Role Motivation Model**

Engaging in behavior that matches personal standards is known to predict positive outcomes across a variety of domains. For example, self-regulation theory has demonstrated that when behavior matches personal standards and preferences, behaviors elicit positive affect and self-esteem (Carver & Scheier, 2000). In contrast, when motivation for behavior is driven by outside pressures, people experience less enjoyment during the activity, find tasks more energy depleting, and experience lower subsequent intrinsic motivation for the task (e.g., Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Muraven, Gagne, & Rosman, 2008; Ryan, Mims, &

Koestner, 1983). Similarly, gender normative behavior that is consistent with personal desires predicts more positive outcomes than pressured gender normative behavior (Good & Sanchez, 2010).

Along the same vein, the traditional sexual script may be consistent or inconsistent with personal sexual desires. Thus, in the present study, we apply a motivational framework to understanding the costs of gender role conformity for sexual satisfaction. In the current study, we specifically examine whether genuine desire for partner dominance buffers women and their partners from the typically negative effects of sexually submissive behavior. When sexually submissive behavior is consistent with a woman's personal desires, rather than a result of gender normative pressure, it is not a sign of low sexual autonomy. In prior work, pressured gender role consistent predicts lower self-esteem whereas gender role behavior that is autonomously chosen predicts higher self-esteem (Good & Sanchez, 2010). Thus, we did not expect that women who genuinely desire men to initiate and lead the sexual experience would show lower sexual satisfaction because their submissive behaviors are consistent with their sexual preferences. Likewise, when women's sexually submissive behavior is intrinsically motivated, their male partner's sexual satisfaction should not be adversely affected. When sexually submissive behavior is pressured, women are less satisfied and their partner's satisfaction likewise declines, but when the women's submissive behavior is internally driven, neither partner's sexual satisfaction should be negatively affected.

### Downstream Negative Consequences of Diminished Sexual Satisfaction

Sexual satisfaction may be an important route by which people maintain closeness and intimacy within their romantic relationships. Evidence repeatedly demonstrates that greater sexual satisfaction predicts greater satisfaction and commitment in the overall relationship for both men and women (Edwards & Booth, 1994; Hassebrauck & Fehr, 2002; Henderson-King & Veroff, 1994; Sprecher & Cate, 2004). Although the causal pathways between sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction are likely bidirectional, research has specifically shown that changes in sexual satisfaction correspond with changes in relationship satisfaction and stability (e.g., Sprecher, 2002; Sprecher & Cate, 2004). Indeed, sexual satisfaction may promote perceptions of closeness and intimacy for both men and women; however, the magnitude of the relationship between sexual satisfaction and perceptions of closeness may be stronger for men because they place a greater emphasis on the sexual aspects of the relationship as an indicator of the quality of their romantic relationship than do women (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Sprecher, 2002). The stronger effect of men's

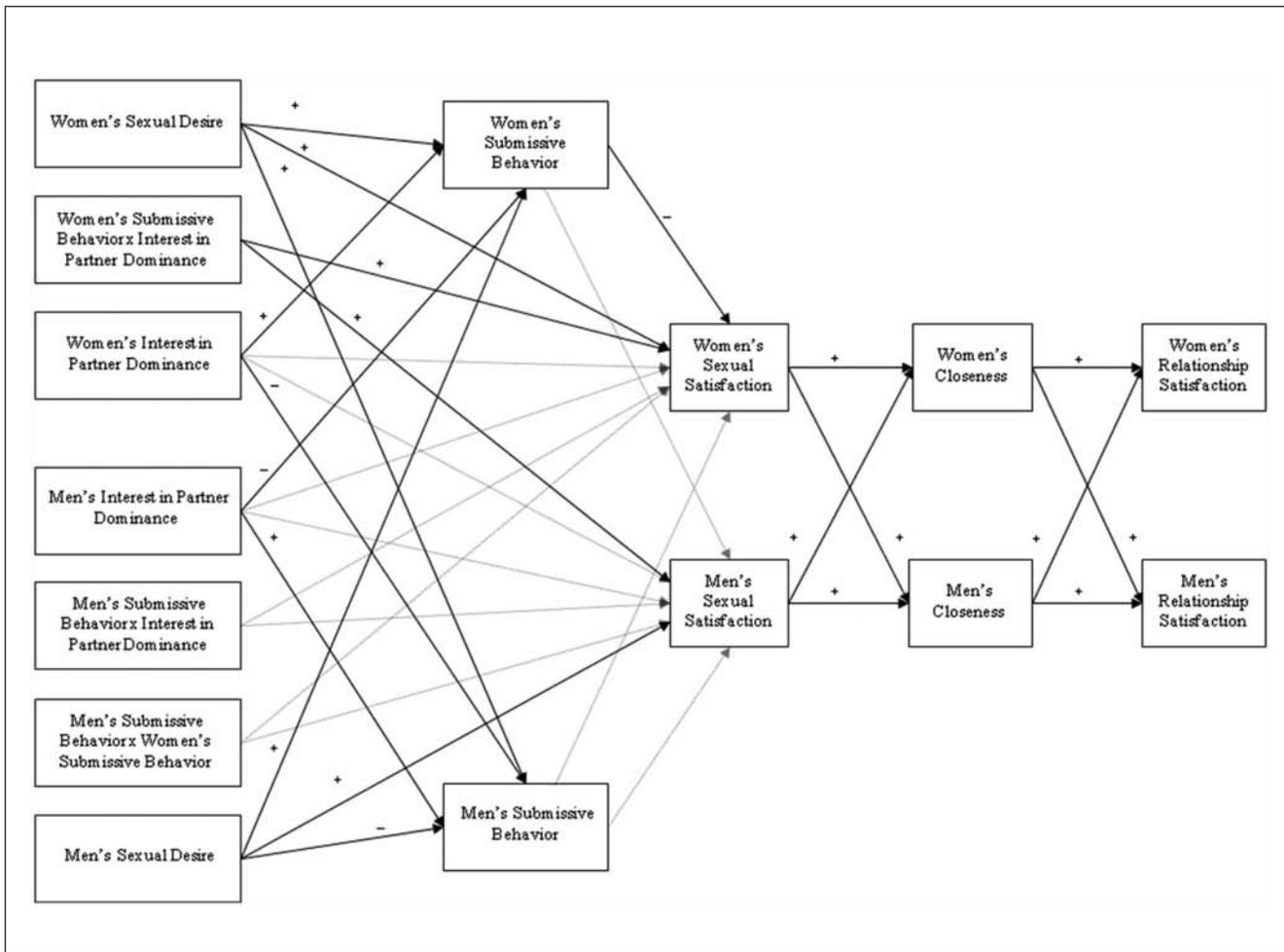
sexual satisfaction on their perceptions of relationship quality is often attributed to their greater interest in sex relative to women (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001). Because men are socialized to be both highly sexual and sexually agentic, sexuality and masculinity may be uniquely intertwined, such that having fulfilling sexual relationships may be particularly important for men (Fergus, Gray, & Fitch, 2002; Potts, 2000; Zilbergeld, 1992). For men, we expected their own sexual satisfaction to be more strongly related to their perceptions of closeness within the relationship compared to women. In turn, perceptions of closeness are expected to be a significant predictor of overall relationship satisfaction for both men and women, as the fulfillment of relationship needs has been shown to predict attachment security in relationships (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000).

### Overview of the Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to further examine the links between women's sexually submissive behavior and sexual satisfaction for both women and their male partners. To do so, we treated the dyad as the unit of analysis, utilizing the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000) to examine both the effects of the participants' own motivations and behaviors (*actor effects*) as well as the effects of their partners' behaviors and motivations (*partner effects*) on their sexual satisfaction. Despite the interdependent nature of gender norms and sexual behavior, studies have yet to examine gender conformity in couples utilizing a dyadic approach (e.g., Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2006). Thus, the present study improves on this limitation—providing a much richer context for examining women's sexually submissive behavior. Moreover, this study provides an opportunity to examine whether women's submissive behavior may not be what men want because men too may experience less satisfying sexual experiences if their partners are not freely choosing to engage in submissive behavior.

The APIM model was tested via path analysis to estimate the partner and actor effects simultaneously while accounting for the interdependence among the key outcomes of interest. Figure 1 displays the hypothesized path model. First, this model tests whether actor and partner interest in having partners who are sexually dominant predicts submissive behavior. In other words, we test whether women's sexual desire for their partner to take on the dominant role predicts greater submissive behavior among women and less submissive behavior among their partner. Simultaneously, we test these effects for men (i.e., whether men's desire for the partner's dominance predicts more submissive behavior on the part of men and less submissive behavior on the part of their partners).

Second, we test whether women's desire for partner dominance mitigates the negative effects of women's sexually



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized model  
 All tested paths are shown, but hypothesized significant paths are shown in bold.

submissive behavior on their sexual satisfaction and that of their partners. To test the moderating role of interest in partner dominance on submissive behavior, we tested the interaction of women’s submissive behavior and women’s interest in partner dominance on women and men’s sexual satisfaction. We expected that women’s submissive behavior would predict lower sexual satisfaction for women and their partners when the submissive behavior was inconsistent with their own sexual desires. Though we primarily hypothesized effects of women’s submissive behavior and interest in partner dominance on sexual satisfaction, we included effects of men’s submissive behavior and interest in partner dominance to account for the interdependence of sexual behavior in couples. In addition, we included the interaction of men’s and women’s submissive behavior to rule out an alternative possibility that complementariness may prove beneficial to sexual satisfaction.

Third, we test whether men’s sexual satisfaction had a stronger effect on their perceptions of closeness compared to women. Simultaneously, we examine the partner effects of

sexual satisfaction on perceptions of closeness. That is, we examine whether having a sexually satisfied partner fosters personal perceptions of closeness. Fourth, we examine the extent to which perceptions of closeness felt by the self and partner predict overall relationship satisfaction. This study represents the first test of whether women’s submissive sexual behavior has costs for their partners’ sexual satisfaction (partner effects) as well as their own levels of sexual satisfaction (actor effects). Moreover, this model is the first to simultaneously test the downstream negative consequences of adherence to the traditional sexual script on perceptions of closeness and relationship satisfaction.

**Method**

*Participants and Procedure*

Couples who had been involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship for at least 6 months were recruited from the Rutgers University community for a study about couples

( $N = 181$  couples). Each couple earned \$50 and an entry into a \$200 lottery prize. On average, participants had been involved in their romantic relationship for 21 months. Participants' average age was 20 years old, reflecting the university setting of recruitment. Both relationship partners filled out identical measures in separate testing rooms in the laboratory. Participants filled out questions about their romantic relationship, followed by questions about their sexual relationship. Within each section of the survey, questions were presented in a random order. Six couples were excluded because they indicated not engaging in sexual activities with their partners. For the following analyses, we report on a subset of measures distributed during the session.

## Materials

**Submissive behavior.** Participants completed four items designed to tap sexually submissive behavior, used and validated in prior research (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Kiefer, Sanchez, Kalinka, & Ybarra, 2006; Sanchez et al., 2006). On a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), participants were asked the extent to which they agreed with the following four statements: "I tend to take on the more passive role during sexual activity," "I tend to take on the submissive role during sexual activity," "I am the passive one in our sexual relationship," and "I tend to take on the more dominant role during sexual activity" (reverse scored). The scale was found to be reliable among men ( $\alpha = .83$ ) and women ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

**Interest in partner dominance.** Participants completed three items designed by the investigators to tap desire for a sexually dominant partner. On a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), each partner was asked the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: "I find it arousing when my partner is the aggressive one in bed," "I think it is sexiest when my partner takes control in bed," and "I think it is very exciting when my partner leads our sexual experiences." The scale was found to be reliable among men ( $\alpha = .79$ ) and women ( $\alpha = .71$ ).

**Sexual satisfaction.** We administered the Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction–Revised (Lawrance & Byers, 1998). Participants were instructed to rate their sexual relationship on five separate 7-point scales with the following anchors: *good–bad*, *pleasant–unpleasant*, *positive–negative*, *satisfying–unsatisfying*, and *valuable–worthless*. In addition, we also included one item that specifically asked, "How pleasurable or enjoyable is your sex life now?" on a scale from 1 (*not very pleasurable*) to 7 (*highly pleasurable*). The scale was found to be reliable among men ( $\alpha = .87$ ) and women ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

**Perceptions of closeness.** We administered the Relatedness Needs Scale–Revised for romantic relationships to measure perceived closeness (see La Guardia et al., 2000). Specifically, participants were asked the following questions designed to measure the extent to which their needs for closeness and intimacy were met in their relationship: "When I am with my partner, I feel a lot of closeness and intimacy," "When I am with my partner, I feel loved and cared about," and "When I

am with my partner, I feel a lot of distance in our relationship" (reverse coded). The scale was found to be reliable among men ( $\alpha = .83$ ) and women ( $\alpha = .74$ ).

**Relationship satisfaction.** To measure relationship satisfaction, we administered Hendrick's (1988) 7-item relationship assessment scale. This scale includes items such as "In general, how satisfied are you in your relationship?" on a scale from 1 (*not satisfied*) to 7 (*very satisfied*) and "How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?" on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*very often*). The scale was found to be reliable among men ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and women ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

**Sexual desire.** Given that interest in a dominant sexual partner may be conflated with the participant's sexual interest and desire more generally (i.e., those who find submission arousing may find all behaviors arousing), we administered the Sexual Desire and Interest subscale from the short form of the Sexual Functioning Questionnaire (Keller, McGarvey, & Clayton, 2006) to use as a control variable. The following items were included: (a) "How frequently do you engage in sexual thoughts?" on a scale from 1 (*less than once a month*) to 4 (*5 or more times a week*), (b) "Do you enjoy books, movies, and artwork with sexual content?" on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a great deal*), and (c) "How much pleasure or enjoyment do you get from thinking about or fantasizing about sex?" on a scale from 1 (*no pleasure*) to 4 (*a great deal of pleasure*). The scale was found to be adequately reliable among men ( $\alpha = .69$ ) and women ( $\alpha = .65$ ).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Paired  $t$  tests revealed that on average women reported more sexually submissive behavior, lower sexual desire and satisfaction, and greater relationship satisfaction compared to their male partners (see Table 1). Moreover, we found interdependence among dependent variables such that sexual satisfaction ( $r = .23, p = .003$ ), perceptions of closeness ( $r = .38, p < .001$ ), and relationship satisfaction ( $r = .52, p < .001$ ) were positively correlated within the dyad and therefore interdependent among couples, whereas submissive behavior was negatively interdependent ( $r = -.20, p = .007$ ; see Table 2). In other words, men and women who reported greater submissive behavior tended to have partners who reported less submissive behavior. The interdependence among the dependent variables of interest violated the assumption of independence that traditional analytic methods assume. Thus, we used multilevel modeling to control for the nonindependence among the variables, utilizing APIM (Kashy & Kenny, 2000). All variables were standardized (using  $z$  scores) before subjecting them to path analysis and creating interaction terms. To control for possible effects, we added sexual desire as a predictor in the model. Relationship length was not a meaningful predictor in preliminary analysis and thus was not included in subsequent path analyses.

**Table 1.** Gender Differences Within Couples

Variable	Men		Women		Sex difference	
	M	SD	M	SD	t	d
Submissive behavior	2.80	1.32	4.05	1.45	7.63***	.90
Desire for partner dominance	5.53	1.29	5.69	1.14	1.24	.13
Sexual satisfaction	5.25	0.84	5.05	0.94	2.41*	-.22
Perceptions of closeness	6.16	1.02	6.29	0.84	1.52	.14
Relationship satisfaction	5.82	0.90	5.97	0.82	2.29*	.17
Sexual desire	4.00	0.96	3.55	1.08	-4.57***	-.44

Effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) represent participant sex differences. Positive effect sizes indicate higher means for men than women; the reverse is true for negative effect sizes. Conventional small, medium, and large effect sizes for *d* are .2, .5, and .8, respectively (Cohen, 1988).

\**p* < .05. \*\*\**p* < .001

**Table 2.** Study 2 Bivariate Correlations Among All Couple Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Men's interest in dominant partner	—											
2. Women's interest in dominant partner	.00	—										
3. Men's submissive behavior	.19*	.09	—									
4. Women's submissive behavior	-.22**	-.14†	-.20*	—								
5. Men's sexual satisfaction	.02	.11	-.21**	-.22**	—							
6. Women's sexual satisfaction	.01	.33***	-.01	-.19*	.23**	—						
7. Men's perceptions of closeness	-.07	.07	-.09	-.15*	.24**	.09	—					
8. Women's perceptions of closeness	.09	.07	-.01	-.17*	.08	.20**	.38***	—				
9. Men's relationship satisfaction	.04	.07	-.07	-.10	.19*	.14†	.70*	.46***	—			
10. Women's relationship satisfaction	.05	.09	.03	-.18*	.05	.26**	.37***	.71***	.52***	—		
11. Men's sexual desire	.11	-.01	-.18*	-.20*	.71***	.12	-.16*	-.09	-.17*	-.12**	—	
12. Women's sexual desire	.01	.35***	-.06	-.06	.22**	.66***	.02	.02	.06	.02	.18*	—

†*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001

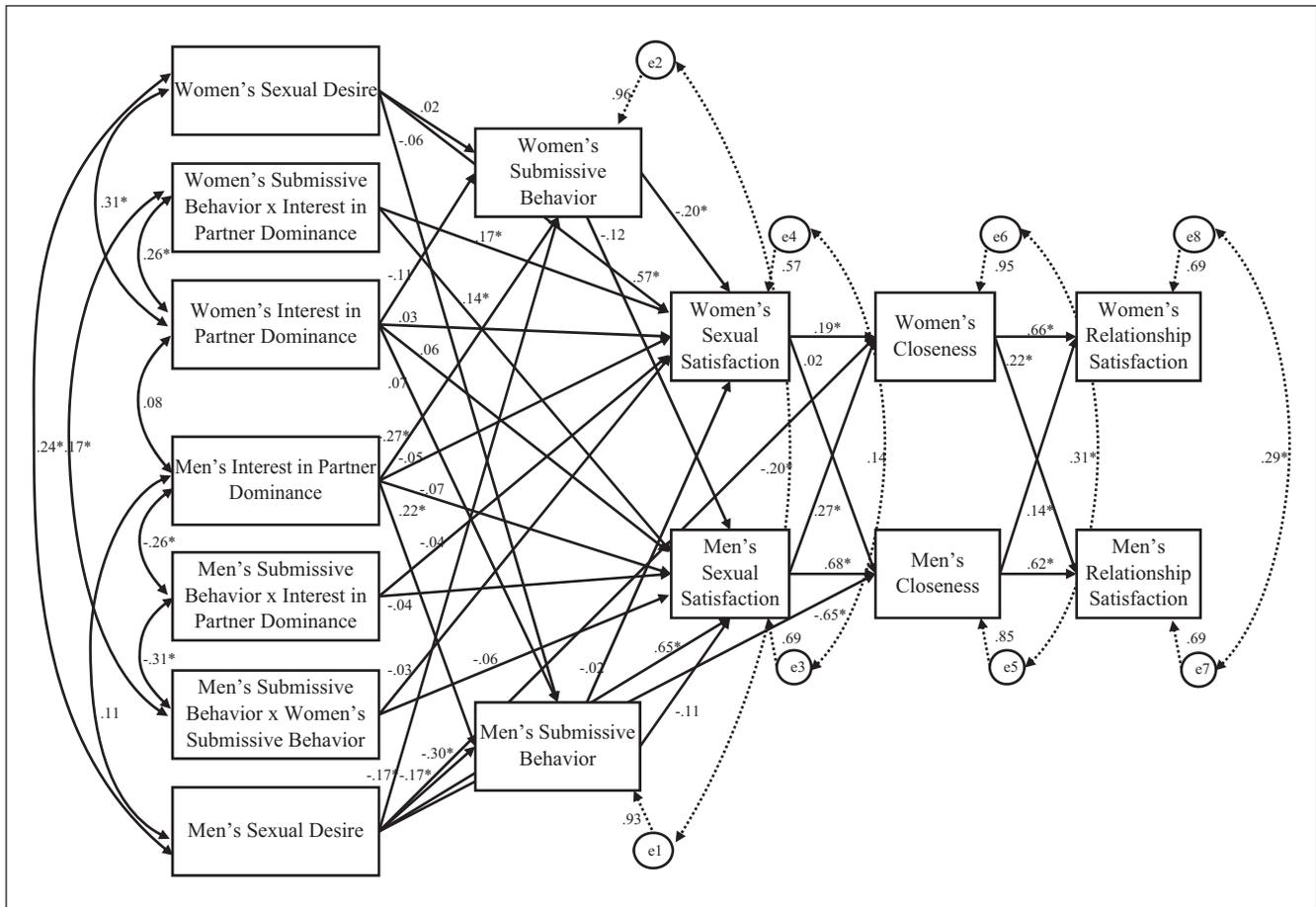
**Testing the Hypothesized Path Model**

Path analysis was conducted with EQS software 6.1 (Bentler, 1995; Bentler & Wu, 1995; refer again to Figure 1). Lagrange statistics were examined to determine whether additional paths should be added to improve the fit of the model. As a result, paths were included from men's sexual desire to both their own perceptions of closeness and their partner's perceptions of closeness. No other adjustments were made from the original hypothesized paths. According to past research on model fit (see Hu & Bentler, 1999), good fitting models have comparative fit index (CFI) and nonnormed fit index (NNFI) values that exceed .95. In addition, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value should be less than .06. Accordingly, the resulting path model was a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2 = 68.90$ ,  $df = 59$ ,  $p = .17$ , CFI = .98, incremental fit index = .98, NNFI = .97, RMSEA = .03 (90% CI = .00, .06). See Figure 2 for the full model results and Figure 3 for the condensed model that prominently shows the significant paths. Given the already complicated nature

of the path model and the good fit of the model, we do not report on alternative models.

**Men's Interest in Partner Dominance and Sexual Desire Predict Women's Submissive Behavior**

Results demonstrate that men's interest in having a sexually dominant partner and men's overall level of sexual desire predicted less submissive sexual behavior among their partners. In other words, women engage in less submissive behavior if they have male partners who have strong sexual desires or who are aroused by sexually dominant partners. Contrary to predictions, women's personal interest in partner dominance was unrelated to their own submissive behavior or the submissive behavior of their partners. Men's submissive sexual behavior was related to their own levels of sexual desire and interest in partner dominance. Men who had higher levels of sexual desire were less likely to engage in submissive



**Figure 2.** Full gender role motivation model

All paths and correlations are shown. Standardized betas are shown.

\* $p < .05$ .

behavior. Moreover, men's interest in their partner's engagement in sexual dominance predicted their own submissive behavior. These findings suggest that women's submissive behavior is largely predicted by their partner's interests and desires, whereas men's submissive behavior is largely predicted by their own interests and desires.

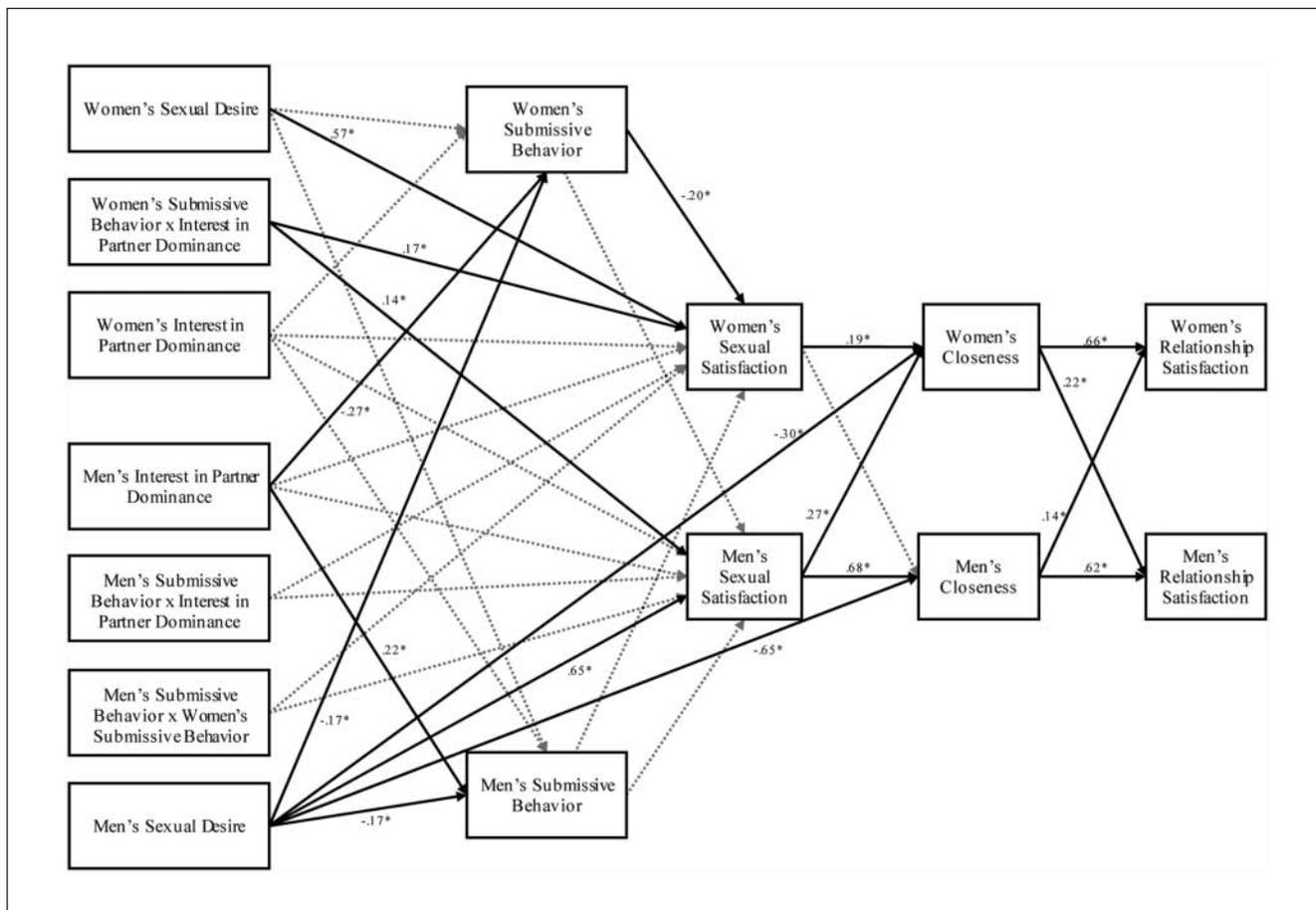
### Women's Submissive Behavior Predicts Sexual Satisfaction Depending on Interest in Partner Dominance

As expected, women's submissive behavior negatively predicted their own sexual satisfaction; however, these effects were mitigated by interest in partner dominance, as can be gleaned from the significant interaction term predicting women's sexual satisfaction. In addition, the interaction of women's submissive behavior and their own interest in partner dominance was predictive of their partner's sexual satisfaction. We plotted these interactions one standard deviation

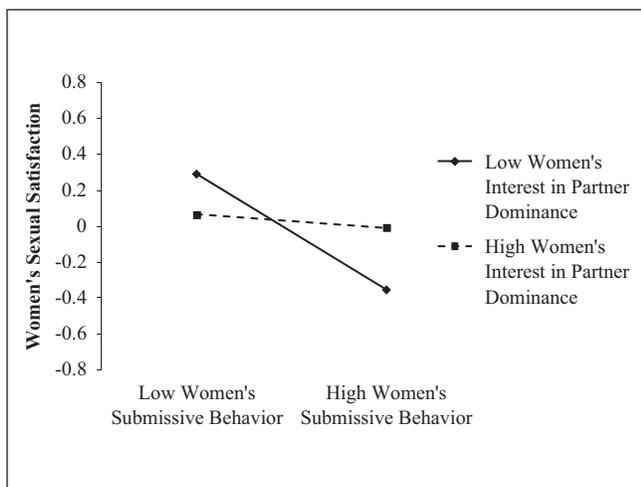
above and below the mean in Figures 4 and 5, respectively. Simple slopes analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed that for women who had a high desire for partner dominance, their submissive behavior was unrelated to their own sexual satisfaction ( $\beta = .04$ , *ns*) and that of their partners ( $\beta = .01$ , *ns*). In contrast, for women who had a low desire for partner dominance, their submissive behavior was negatively related to their own sexual satisfaction ( $\beta = -.35$ ) and that of their partners ( $\beta = -.24$ ). These findings suggest that when women behave in accordance with the submissive role with little desire to do so, the submissive sexual script has negative consequences for both the self and partner.

### Sexual Satisfaction Predicts Relationship Outcomes

As predicted, both men's and women's levels of sexual satisfaction were related to their own perceptions of closeness; however, the magnitude of this effect was stronger for men ( $\beta = .68$ ) compared to women ( $\beta = .19$ ). In addition, men's



**Figure 3.** Simplified gender role motivation model  
 Only paths are shown. Standardized betas are shown. Significant paths are in bold.  
 \* $p < .05$ .

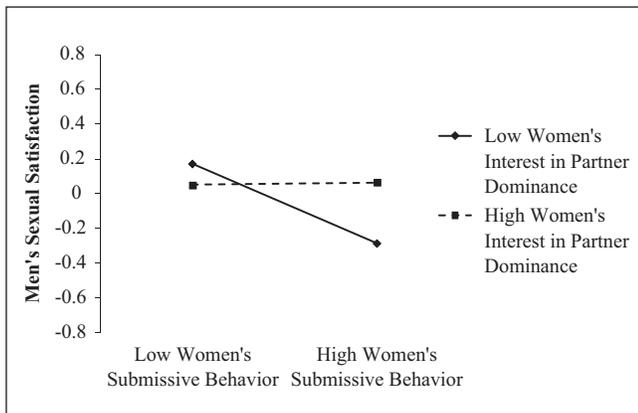


**Figure 4.** Interaction of women's submissive behavior and women's interest in partner dominance on women's sexual satisfaction  
 All variables were standardized via z scores.

level of sexual satisfaction was related to women's perceptions of closeness. Women who had more sexually satisfied partners reported greater feelings of closeness to their partner. This partner effect was not significant for men (i.e., women's sexual satisfaction did not predict men's feelings of closeness to their partner). Finally, we found significant actor and partner effects for the relationship between perceptions of closeness and overall relationship satisfaction. For both men and women, perceiving closeness in the relationship predicted greater overall relationship satisfaction for themselves and their partners. These findings suggest that diminished sexual satisfaction will have negative downstream consequences that may ultimately hamper perceptions of intimacy and satisfaction in the relationship.

### Discussion

On one hand, conforming to gender norms allows men and women to avoid the social penalties that accompany being perceived as deviant and thus socially undesirable to others



**Figure 5.** Interaction of women's submissive behavior and women's interest in partner dominance on men's sexual satisfaction  
All variables were standardized via z scores.

(Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Rudman, 2010; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Rudman & Glick, 2001). On the other hand, conforming to a gender normative sexual script may hamper sexual and relationship satisfaction. The current study is the first to examine how gender-stereotypic sexual behavior influences sexual satisfaction for heterosexual couples (i.e., both women and their male partners). In line with gender norms, women were more likely to report sexually submissive behavior than men. This replicated previous work suggesting that women are likely to adopt the submissive sexual role (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2006). Results also replicated previous findings that women who adopt a submissive role report lower sexual satisfaction (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007). Novel to this study, we found that women's engagement in submissive behavior was related to their partners' levels of sexual desire and their partners' interest in partner dominance. Women were less likely to engage in submissive behavior if their male partner had a strong overall sexual desire and an interest in partner dominance.

This study is also the first to test a gender role motivation model of sexual behavior. Specifically, we examined whether women's interest in partner dominance mitigated the negative relationship between submissive behavior and sexual satisfaction for both themselves and their partners. For women, sexually submissive behavior may often result from gender scripts about how men and women should behave (see Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007). Indeed, our findings suggest that women's submissive behavior is more often related to their partner's sexual desires than their own personal preferences. But when women engage in sexually submissive behavior out of a personal preference rather than external pressure, it does not necessarily reflect a lack of sexual autonomy. Indeed, results confirmed the gender motivation theory of sexual behavior, such that women who report greater interest and desire for partner dominance (i.e., submissive behavior is consistent with personal desires) do not show

lower sexual satisfaction when they engage in submissive behavior. In contrast, for women with low interest in partner dominance (i.e., for whom submissive behavior is inconsistent with personal desires), submissive sexual behavior predicted lowered sexual satisfaction. Future research should examine whether sexual autonomy operates as a mediator of this moderation pattern, such that women who engage in unwanted submissive behavior may experience a lack of sexual agency and an inability to communicate their sexual desires with their partners.

Also novel to the present study, we found that men experience lower satisfaction when paired with women who engage in sexually submissive behavior with little desire to do so. These partner effects for men suggest that men may accurately perceive women's sexually submissive behavior (when it is not motivated by their desire for male dominance) as a lack of sexual satisfaction. Future studies should determine the mechanism through which these partner effects occur by including measures that assess men's perceptions of women's behavior, desire, and sexual satisfaction. Men's greater accuracy in perceiving their partner's sexual satisfaction may be important in explaining why women's behavior has a more powerful effect on men's outcomes than men's behaviors have on women's outcomes (Edwards & Barber, 2010; Miller & Byers, 2004; Purnine & Carey, 1997; Simms & Byers, 2009). Moreover, if men's sexual satisfaction is strongly tied to their perceptions of sexual prowess (Basow, 1992; Masters & Johnson, 1976), men's beliefs about manhood and masculinity may also play a crucial role in determining the magnitude of these partner effects.

The present results are consistent with a growing body of research demonstrating the utility of a motivational framework for predicting the impact of gender conformity on the self (e.g., Good & Sanchez, 2010; Guerrero-Witt & Wood, 2010). Uniquely, our study extends this framework to one's partner as well. Our findings suggest that women's personal desire for a sexually dominant partner may buffer them and their partners from the negative consequences typically associated with female sexual submission. Thus, adherence to gender role scripts is not linked to negative outcomes when women enjoy gender role consistent behaviors. Importantly, the data do not suggest that submissive sexual behavior that is consistent with personal desires actually benefits women. On the contrary, results suggest that those women who have lower submissive behavior and lower interest in partner dominance experience the highest personal levels of sexual satisfaction and partner satisfaction (see Figures 4 and 5). These findings are not surprising given that engaging in dominant behaviors such as initiating sex and sexual positions may be most rewarding. Engaging in dominant behaviors allows both people to exercise greater choice and preference in sexual encounters. Even animal models suggest that dictating sexual encounters can elicit greater pleasure; female rats who take on more dominant roles (i.e., dictate the pace of copulation) tend to experience the

most pleasure in reward centers of the brain (Jenkins & Becker, 2003). Thus, when preferences and behavior align with what is often the most rewarding sexual position (i.e., the dominant role), personal sexual satisfaction may be highest.

Also of note, the results suggest evidence of matching in couples, such that higher sexually submissive behavior in one member of the dyad (most often women) was paired with partners who were less sexually submissive. However, no evidence was found for a buffering role of complementarity; in other words, having a dominant sexual partner did not moderate the effects of personally adopting a submissive sexual role for either women or men. Though couples may pair in accordance to similar gender role attitudes by finding partners who also prefer traditional sexual scripts, these findings suggest that conformity to gender role scripts among both members of the dyad does not buffer couples from the negative consequences of women's adherence to the sexually submissive role.

The current study is not without its limitations. For example, this study relies on retrospective self-reports of sexual behavior. Reflections on past behavior may be biased by memory and social desirability.<sup>1</sup> Thus, future studies should examine reports of sexual behavior using event-contingent diary data sampling methods to capture the contextual variations in gender-stereotypic sexual behavior and improve accuracy in self-reports (e.g., Smith, 2007). Moreover, the measure of sexually submissive behavior did not specifically identify the sets of submissive behaviors that are most problematic to sexual satisfaction (e.g., failure to verbally communicate sexual desires, lack of sexual initiation behavior, or submitting to unwanted sexual behavior). This is an important avenue for future research, which might help distinguish between submissive behaviors that are less energetic and autonomous from those that are signs of sexual preferences and enthusiasm. In addition, our work cannot test the causal pathways between sexual behavior and relationship outcomes given the correlational nature of the design. However, there is good reason to believe that gender-stereotypic behavior, in part, drives sexual behavior given that girls in their first sexual experiences tend to conform to norms of sexual submissiveness, before they possess a history of sexual experiences on which to base sexual satisfaction (Martin, 1996). In other words, they show submissive sexual behavior (e.g., lack of sexual initiation, submitting to partner desires even when inconsistent with personal preferences) before they experience sexual dissatisfaction. Even so, the relationship between sexually submissive behavior and sexual satisfaction is likely bidirectional, and future research should investigate this possibility.

Although these data provided preliminary evidence of the gender motivational model of sexual behavior, the present data did not measure *perceptions* of partners' sexual behavior or sexual satisfaction. Measures of these constructs in the future may help identify the mechanisms underlying the

partner effects. Notably, women who acted in accordance with the submissive sexual script (especially when they had little desire to do so) had partners with lower sexual satisfaction. One possible mechanism underlying men's dissatisfaction with partners who reluctantly follow these scripts may be that men *perceive* their partner's decreased sexual satisfaction and potentially their partner's lower sexual autonomy. Thus, future research should assess perceptions of partner's motives as well as perceptions of partner's sexual satisfaction and pleasure.

In general, men and women show behavior that is consistent with traditional sexual scripts (Clark et al., 1999; Laner & Ventrone, 1998; Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2007; Ortiz-Torres et al., 2003; Rose & Frieze, 1993; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Vannier & O'Sullivan, in press; Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). Self-reports find robust differences between men and women's sexual behavior such that women consistently report greater submissive sexual behavior than men (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007). Men commonly report taking greater initiative in sexual encounters throughout relationships and also view their sexual selves as more aggressive and dominant than women (for a review, see Impett & Peplau, 2003; Peplau, 2003). Yet these scripted roles do not always reflect the roles that men and women *want* to occupy, and when that is the case, they have negative consequences for men's and women's sexual experiences. The current research further demonstrates the downstream consequences of such scripts for relationship satisfaction. This suggests that men as well as women have a stake in loosening restrictions typically placed on women's sexuality, as both partners' sexual satisfaction may be hampered by women's adherence to the traditional submissive role.

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### Note

1. One measure of social desirability was included in the subset of questions (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). We did not have

sufficient sample size to include measures of social desirability of both partners in the path model. Preliminary actor-partner interdependence model mixed-model analyses showed that the hypothesized effects were significant for both men and women while controlling for social desirability.

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