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# The Relationship Between Attachment Related Family-of-Origin Experiences and Sexual Satisfaction in Married Couples

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The Relationship between Attachment Related Family-of-Origin Experiences  
and Sexual Satisfaction in Married Couples

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science

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## ABSTRACT

### The Relationship between Attachment Related Family-of-Origin Experiences and Sexual Satisfaction in Married Couples

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Master of Science

This study of married couples examined the relationship between perceptions of attachment related family-of-origin experiences and sexual satisfaction directly and when mediated by marital quality. The sample consisted of 3,953 married couples who responded to the RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE). The nested model showed that more positive overall family-of-origin experiences and parent-child relationships were related to higher sexual satisfaction. When adding marital quality as a mediator, overall family-of-origin experience and the parent-child relationship were predictive of higher sexual satisfaction when mediated by marital quality but removed most direct effects to sexual satisfaction. There was a strong positive relationship between marital quality and sexual satisfaction. No major gender differences emerged and more than 50% of the variance in sexual satisfaction was explained by the full model for both males and females. Results suggest that family-of-origin experiences play an important role in the sexual satisfaction of married couples, especially when mediated by marital quality, and should be considered in treatment, education, and research.

Keywords: family-of-origin, marital quality, sexual satisfaction, attachment

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## INTRODUCTION

Because of existing research on human sexuality (Hawton, 1992; Frieze, 2004), clinicians have become increasingly aware of the need to help clients that desire change in this aspect of their life (Hertlein, Weeks, & Sendak, 2009). Despite the change in societal attitudes and openness regarding sexuality, there is little known about how family-of-origin relationship experiences impact sexual satisfaction in adulthood. This study sought to shed light on the relationship between these two variables.

Hof and Berman (1989) discuss sexuality as a cycle. A person's sexual attitudes and behaviors are impacted by dynamics within the system of a family and inversely, the system is affected by individual family members' sexuality. Scholars have frequently researched how family-of-origin experiences impact marital quality (Martinson, Holman, Larson, & Jackson, 2010; Topham, Larson, & Holman, 2005). Similarly, researchers have investigated the relationship between marital quality and sexuality in marriage (Holman & Birch, 2001; Larson, Anderson, Holman, & Niemann, 1998). However, few studies have focused on the relationship between family-of-origin experience and subsequent sexual experience in marriage (Hof & Berman, 1989). Scholars and theoreticians based in attachment theory rely on the assumption of continuity (Bowlby, 1982) to link family-of-origin experiences and sexuality in adult relationships. This perspective may prove helpful when studying family-of-origin and sexuality.

For example, attachment theory has often been used as the theoretical basis for empirical studies of human behavior (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The theory posits that children learn early in life to trust or not to trust based on their perceived response to their needs. In order to learn, grow, and self-identify, they "attach" themselves to others. Children who learn to trust that needs will be met develop secure attachment styles where they trust those to whom they

have attached, resulting in feelings of comfort, safety, and self confidence. Children who learn that they cannot trust that needs will be met develop insecure attachment styles, resulting in feelings of insecurity and often anxiety (Bowlby, 1982). It is argued that attaching, detaching, and reattaching can occur many times throughout one's life (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Attachment styles developed in childhood are likely related to psychological functioning and attachment styles in adulthood (Bowlby, 1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The way a person experiences romantic love in adulthood is affected by the attachment styles carried with him or her from childhood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988). Two dimensions have emerged from studies regarding adult attachment: avoidance and anxiety (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Avoidance and anxiety have been shown to be related to the sexual relationship of adult couples (Birnbaum, Reis, Mikulincer, Gillath, & Orpaz, 2006; Davis et al., 2006; Butzer & Campbell, 2008). The quality of a couple's sexual relationship is an important factor in overall relationship quality and happiness (Larson et al., 1998; Young, Denny, Luquis, & Young, 1998; Newcomb & Bentler, 1983). It becomes important therefore to discover the dynamics involved in the development of a satisfying sexual relationship.

Empirical examinations of attachment and sexual satisfaction have relied heavily on the assumption of continuity of childhood attachment into adulthood. Studies connect adult attachment anxiety and avoidance to negative sexual functioning and lower satisfaction but no studies make the direct connection of childhood attachment security to adult relationship sexual satisfaction. The purpose of this study was to identify and highlight the direct and indirect impact of the overall family-of-origin experience, perception of parents' marriage, and relationship with opposite sex parent on marital quality and marital sexual satisfaction.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### *Theoretical Framework*

#### *Attachment Theory*

Many of the popular approaches to family therapy are driven by attachment theory (Nichols, 2008). Attachment theory posits that there is a connection between children and parents that affects the child's functioning throughout her or his life. The child experiences the members of the immediate environment and applies meaning to behavior. John Bowlby (Bowlby, 1982) explains:

...an adult animal is pictured as possessing an elaborate behavioural equipment that comprises a very large but finite number of behavioural systems that are organized in chains or hierarchies, or a mixture of the two, and that, when activated, lead to behavioural sequences of greater or less complexity each of which commonly promotes survival of individual and/or species...The precise forms the systems take in a particular individual are, as always a product of gene action and environment. (p. 85)

Here, Bowlby explains the interaction between nature ("gene action") and nurture ("environment") and argues that system patterns and outcome are a result of the interaction of these two worlds. To consider them separately would be to miss part of the puzzle that makes up a family system. The product of this interaction is the individual's ability to respond to stimuli.

In adulthood, the culmination of these interactions affects the marital relationship. Through biological processes and lessons learned from experience, people develop sets of scripts and toolboxes of reactions (Bozon, 2001). These scripts affect how a person will respond when confronted with particular stimuli. For example, if a child experiences rejection from a parent,

she or he may learn to expect rejection and will alter her or his behavior in a manner fitting to deal with the expected rejection.

The styles of attachment learned in childhood might result in attachment anxiety or avoidance in adulthood (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Attachment anxiety is characterized by a negative view of the self. Anxiously attached individuals have an excessive need for others' approval and fear rejection and abandonment. Attachment avoidance is characterized by a negative view of others. Avoidantly attached individuals have an excessive need for self-reliance, fear connection with others, are reluctant to trust closeness, and fear dependence on others. Attachment styles from childhood are carried into adulthood and present themselves in the form of security, anxiety, or avoidance. Despite continuity, it is important to note that attachment styles in adulthood are fluid (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Secure attachments to adults throughout life can modify insecure attachments from childhood. The attachment based perspective is important to studies of family-of-origin and sexual satisfaction because it provides possible explanations for the differences in individuals' sexual experiences. Understanding the subtleties of sexual relationships will increase clinicians' effectiveness in conceptualizing and intervening with adult romantic relationships.

### *Transgenerational Theory*

There are many different schools of thought that claim a relationship between family-of-origin experiences and marital dynamics (Roberto-Forman, 2008). Murray Bowen posited that relational boundaries from childhood contribute to differentiation, defined as a function of tolerance for individual differences and self-expression (Bowen, 1985). It was observed that lack of differentiation was connected to marital distancing and triangulation (Fogarty, 1978; Guerin, 1976). Nagy and others argued with contextual theory that people carry with them

relationship experiences from childhood into adult relationships (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Ulrich, 1981). In object relations theory, it is argued that painful experiences from childhood are repressed and then surface in marriage through projection. Dicks (1963) posited that a trusting marriage allows a person to revisit and resolve painful childhood experiences, ending the pattern of projection. It is clear that many theorists have claimed and found evidence for a relationship between family-of-origin experiences and marital dynamics.

### *Sexual Satisfaction in Marriage*

Sexual satisfaction in marriage is a topic of interest among family scholars (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). Similarly, researchers have explored relationship dynamics predictive of sexual satisfaction at all stages of marriage (Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Matthias, Lubben, Atchison, & Schweitzer, 1997; Larson et al., 1998). Self-esteem, stability, and communication during the premarital relationship have been shown to be predictive of sexual satisfaction in early marriage (Baker, 1986; Larson et al., 1998). For example, Larson and colleagues (1998) administered questionnaires to premarital couples and then assessed sexual satisfaction after one year of marriage. They found the strongest predictors of marital sexual satisfaction for men were wives' self-esteem, wives' open communication, and wives' relationship stability. Women's sexual satisfaction was best predicted by wives' self-esteem, wives' open communication, and husbands' empathic communication.

Sexual satisfaction in marriage during mid to late stages of life has been linked to many factors including attitudes about sex, sexual activity, age, culture, and couple dynamics (Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Matthias et al., 1997). Haavio-Mannila and Kontula (1997) highlighted a variety of predictors of sexual satisfaction in a large Finnish sample ranging in age from 18 to 74. Among the predictors were young age, a sexually

unreserved and nonreligious childhood home, early start of sexual life, high education, sexual assertiveness, considering sexuality important in life, reciprocal feeling of love, use of sex materials, frequent intercourse, versatile sexual techniques, and frequent orgasm.

Another study examining mid stages of life found that cultural differences impacted sexual satisfaction of couples consisting of non-Asian American husbands and Korean wives (Song, Bergen, & Schumm, 1995). In the same study husbands reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction than wives and self-esteem, higher levels of positive regard, empathy, and cohesion were related to higher sexual satisfaction for both husbands and wives. For elderly individuals (mean age 77.3 years) Matthias and colleagues (1997) found that high sexual satisfaction was best predicted by higher sexual activity and positive mental health. In summary, the subject of sexual satisfaction in marriage at all stages of life is rich in terms of empirical information.

#### *Marital Quality and Sexual Satisfaction in Marriage*

The systemic idea that marital quality is associated with levels of sexual satisfaction is heavily supported in research literature (Larson et al., 1998; Young et al., 1998; Newcomb & Bentler, 1983; Frank, Anderson, & Rubenstein, 1979; Health, 1978). Young and colleagues (1998) examined possible correlates of sexual satisfaction in marriage and found overall satisfaction in marriage to be the most highly correlated with sexual satisfaction. It is interesting to note that the highest correlates to sexual satisfaction in their study were non-sexual aspects of the marital relationship such as shared goals, respect, and recreational companionship.

Likewise, Darling, Davidson, and Cox (1991) found that women are more likely to report higher sexual satisfaction when they feel emotionally close to their partner. In addition to the previously mentioned empirical studies, many theoretical models support the link between marital quality and sexual satisfaction. Among them are the Interpersonal Exchange Model of

Sexual Satisfaction (IEMSS) (Lawrance & Byers, 1992; 1995) and the Social Exchange Theory (Sprecher, 1998). The IEMSS proposes that sexual satisfaction is affected by the quality of the nonsexual aspects of the relationship (Byers & Macneil, 2006). The Social Exchange Theory (Sprecher, 1998) offers explanations of how partners' interactions with each other affect their sexual relationship dynamics. The relationship between marital quality and sexual satisfaction is an area that has received much attention from researchers. This research gives evidence of findings highlighting the positive correlation between the two variables.

#### *Family-of-Origin/Attachment and Sexual Satisfaction*

Current literature regarding the impact of family-of-origin experiences on sexuality in adulthood is largely dominated by attachment theory approaches (Birnbaum et al., 2006; Cooper et al., 2006; Mikulincer, 2006). In the late 1980's Shaver and others (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Shaver & Hazan, 1988; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988; see also Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) suggested Bowlby's (1982) ideas on attachment might be extended to better understand romantic love in adult relationships. They posit that attachment style in adulthood is reflective of childhood attachment styles. Research testing these hypotheses provides evidence that more anxious and avoidant attachment styles are negatively related to adult romantic relationship quality including perceptions of the sexual experience. Birnbaum and colleagues (2006) found attachment anxiety to be associated with an ambivalent interpretation of sexual experience, where aversive feelings coexist with sexual excitement and strong desires for sex and love. Attachment avoidance was found to be associated with more aversive responses to sexuality, which may be explained by discomfort with closeness and negative models of others. Another study reported significant association between attachment avoidance/anxiety and emotional, physical, and control aspects of sexual satisfaction (Davis et al., 2006). Similarly, lower levels

of sexual satisfaction were found in a sample of Canadian couples when individuals reported higher levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance (Butzer & Campbell, 2008). In the same study lower levels of sexual satisfaction were associated with more avoidant spouses. These and other studies suggest that adult attachment styles may be used to predict sexual satisfaction.

Inversely, empirical examinations of family-of-origin variables and sexual satisfaction suggest that positive childhood experiences are related to higher levels of satisfaction. Bridges (2000) found that higher levels of physical affection and positive attitudes about sex in the family-of-origin are linked to higher overall sexual satisfaction. Additional research reports father care to be positively related to the feminine dimension of sex-role identification, which was related to higher sexual satisfaction in adulthood (Hingst, Hyman, & Salmon, 1985). These and other studies examine family-of-origin dynamics outside of the attachment perspective. Multigenerational theories argue that family issues from the past are influential but people can come to terms with them and experience healthy functioning in adult romantic relationships (Framo, 1992; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Martinson et al., 2010). Beyond the research from an attachment perspective and the few studies mentioned, there is little research on the association between family-of-origin experiences and sexual satisfaction in adulthood.

#### *Family-of-Origin/Attachment, Marital Quality, and Sexual Satisfaction in Marriage*

As discussed, most of the research examining the direct relationship between family-of-origin experiences and sexuality in marriage is centered on attachment theory. There is some support for the idea that childhood experiences impact sexuality in marriage (Hingst et al., 1985; Shaver et al., 1988; Bridges, 2000) but no studies controlled for marital quality when searching for a direct association. The purpose of this study was to examine aspects of the childhood experience and their direct relationship to sexual satisfaction in marriage, while controlling for

the possibility that the association is mediated by nonsexual aspects of marital quality. Considering the research, it becomes clear that there is a conceptual pathway from family-of-origin to marital quality and then to sexual satisfaction. For this study, marital quality was tested as the mediator (instead of sexual satisfaction) because it was considered a higher level of relationship functioning that includes the sexual and nonsexual aspects of the relationship. It was believed that nonsexual aspects would play the intermediary between family-of-origin and sexual aspects of the relationship. Hypotheses were based on rationale that the family-of-origin experiences measured would affect a person's attitude of relationships, scripts to be used in relationships, and expectations of relationship security resulting in changes in marital quality and sexual satisfaction. The hypotheses examined were: 1) Attachment related family-of-origin experiences and sexual satisfaction in marriage are directly related, specifically, more positive perceptions (more secure attachment) of overall family-of-origin experiences, parents' marriage, and relationship with opposite sex parent are related to higher marital sexual satisfaction, and 2) The relationship between attachment related family-of-origin experiences and sexual satisfaction in marriage is fully mediated by marital quality, specifically, scores for marital quality increase with more positive perceptions of childhood experiences which are related to increased marital sexual satisfaction.

### *Gender Differences*

Much of the research conducted on marital sexual satisfaction has included controls for gender. Overall, men report higher levels of satisfaction than their wives (Song, Bergen, & Schumm, 1995). Men's sexual satisfaction is shown to be largely affected by their spouse's self-esteem, open communication, and relationship stability (Larson et al., 1998). Research links women's sexual satisfaction to their own self-esteem, open communication, their husband's

empathic communication, and the emotional closeness they feel with their partner (Darling, Davidson, & Cox, 1991; Larson et al., 1998). Studies also show similarities in predictors of sexual satisfaction for men and women including self-esteem, levels of positive regard, empathy, and cohesion (Song, Bergen, & Schumm, 1995). This current study attempted to identify gender differences among predictors of sexual satisfaction for married couples.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

For this study, data was analyzed from 3,953 married couples who participated in the RELATIONSHIP Evaluation (RELATE). Mean age for female respondents was 32, ranging from 19 to 83 (see Table 1). Mean age for male respondents was 34, ranging from 20 to 79. In terms of education, 3.7% of women had completed high school and 96.3% had some college or above. For men, 5.4% had completed high school and 94.6% had some college or above. The median personal yearly gross income was \$20,000-\$39,999 for women and men, with 48.7% of women and 31.1% of men reporting income under \$20,000. The sample was predominantly Caucasian. Female respondents identified as 84% Caucasian, 2.9% African (Black), 5% Asian, 3.6% Latino, with very small mixed percentages of others. Male respondents identified as 84.9% Caucasian, 3.2% African (Black), 3.9% Asian, 3.3% Latino, also with small mixed percentages of others. There was an interesting spread of religious affiliation in the sample. Major categories for women were Latter-day Saint (Mormon) (32.4%), Protestant (25.7%), Catholic (15.5%), none (13%), other (9.9%), and Jewish (2%). For men, major categories were Latter-day Saint (Mormon) (32.3%), Protestant (24.9%), Catholic (15.9%), none (15.2%), other (8%), and Jewish (2%).

## *Procedure*

Data was collected using the RELATE questionnaire (Holman, Busby, Doxey, Klein, & Loyer-Carlson, 1997) from 1997 to 2009. The questionnaire is a multidimensional measure consisting of more than 250 items. Couples responded to items about perceptions of themselves and their partner on four major contexts: (a) individual, (b) couple, (c) family, and (d) social. The assessment was accessed online and couples were referred by therapeutic professionals, professors, researchers, and various forms of advertising. Participants were able to choose to receive a printout (also viewable online) showing an evaluation of their responses. The cost of RELATE is \$20 per couple to receive access to the extensive evaluation of responses.

The RELATE measures have withstood rigorous validity and reliability testing, showing test-retest and internal consistent reliability and content, construct, and concurrent validity (Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001). Reliability coefficients for most of the measures scored between .70 and .90 for internal consistency and 2 test-retest samples, including a test-retest of a Hispanic version. Construct validity testing showed that 92 percent of the items loaded on the correct subscale and further investigations of overlap showed appropriate correlations for similar items while still remaining distant (range between .45 and .65). To measure concurrent validity, measures of RELATE were compared with scales from the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS) (Busby, Crane, Larson, & Christensen, 1995). Correlations were strong and in the right direction with every compared subscale. For this particular sample from RELATE, Chronbach's alpha was calculated for all latent variables and observed variables consisting of more than one item (see *Measures* for alpha values). Internal consistency (George & Mallery, 2003) ranged from acceptable (alpha > .70) to excellent (alpha > .90).

## *Measures*

The variables measured using RELATE were perceptions of each partner's own family-of-origin, and reported sexual satisfaction in the marriage with marital quality as a possible mediating variable. Several scales were involved in measuring these variables (see Appendix for full measures). Many scales were reverse-coded so that, in all cases, higher scores reflect more positive responses. To measure perceptions of family-of-origin the scales from the *Family Processes* section were used. The subscales from this section were *Overall Evaluation of Family Processes*, *Parents' Marriage*, and *Parent-Child Relationships* (separate items for mother and father). *Overall Evaluation of Family Processes* (male alpha = .857; female alpha = .886) contained items that were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". An example item from this section read, "From what I experienced in my family, I think family relationships are safe, secure, rewarding, worth being in, and a source of comfort." The use of attachment language contained in these items is apparent (i.e. *safe, secure, anxiety-provoking, inconsistent, unpredictable*).

The items contained in the *Parents' Marriage* (male alpha = .915; female alpha = .915), and *Mother-Child* (male alpha = .741) and *Father-Child Relationship* (female alpha = .815) subscales were measured on the same Likert scale for Overall Family-of-Origin but with an added value of "-1" for "Doesn't Apply". Because this study is interested in sexual measures, only opposite sex parent relationships were considered. A sample item from *Father-Child Relationships* read, "My father and I were able to share our feelings on just about any topic without embarrassment or fear of hurt feelings." Parent-child relationships were measured for only the opposite gender parent for each participant.

The measure of *Marital Quality* (male alpha = .726; female alpha = .754) consisted of three variables: *Relationship Satisfaction* (male alpha = .853; female alpha = .862), *Relationship Stability* (male alpha = .792; female alpha = .801), and *Problem Areas* (male alpha = .806; female alpha = .790). *Relationship Satisfaction* was measured with seven items using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Very Dissatisfied” to “Very Satisfied”. *Relationship Stability* contained three items measured with a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Never” to “Very Often”. An example item read, “How often have you and your partner discussed ending your relationship (or marriage)?” *Problem Areas* contained eleven items (ten when Intimacy/Sexuality is removed for analysis purposes) including areas like “Communication” and “Time spent together”. It was measured with the same scale and range as *Relationship Stability*.

The variable used to measure marital sexuality was *Sexual Satisfaction* (male alpha = .744; female alpha = .741) which was made up of two, one-item measures. Researchers often discuss how to accurately measure sexual satisfaction (Renaud, Byers, & Pan, 1997; Young et al., 1998). They argue that reports of sexual satisfaction are a demonstration of the balance between positive perceptions of sexual satisfaction and the lack thereof. This study used items that allowed participants to respond to both. The first measure, *Sex Problems*, was from the “Problem Areas Checklist” and was based on a Likert scale ranging from “Never” a problem to “Very Often” a problem. The item read, “Intimacy/Sexuality”. The second part of the satisfaction variable was from the “Relationship Satisfaction” section using a Likert scale ranging from “Very Dissatisfied” to “Very Satisfied”. The item read, “The physical intimacy you experience”.

## ANALYTIC STRATEGY

The study was designed to propose and test a model of marital sexuality where the influence of a person's overall perception of family-of-origin, perception of parents' marriage, perception of the father-child or mother-child relationships, and marital quality could be measured simultaneously (see Figure 1). The multivariate-correlational procedure, structural equation modeling (SEM), was utilized for its ability to establish relationships between latent variables given a theoretical perspective (Schumacker & Lomax, 1996). The statistical software program AMOS (Analysis of Moment Structures) (Arbuckle, 2006) was used to analyze direct and indirect relationships for both men and women. To test hypotheses, a nested model was run with family-of-origin variables and sexual satisfaction and a full model including marital quality was also run. Strength of indirect relationships was examined using the Sobel test (see Preacher & Leonardelli, 2006). Standardized effects, unstandardized estimates, and correlations of all observed variables are shown in Table 3 and Figure 1.

Figure 1 is a structural representation of the full conceptual model. SEM includes several measures to test the model's ability to accurately represent the data. "If the model is determined to 'fit' the data well, the relationships depicted are determined to be an adequate representation of those that exist in the data" (Newcomb & Locke, 2001, p. 1226). Hoyle and Panter (1995) suggest that model fit is best reported using both absolute fit and incremental fit indices. They state that chi-square is a good indicator of absolute fit and the Tucker and Lewis Index (TLI) and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) are good indicators of incremental fit. Values for the TLI and CFI range from zero to one with values over .95 indicating a good fit (Byrne, 2001). It is important to note that sample size affects fit measures and should be considered when judging the extent to which they can be trusted. A larger sample size reduces the likelihood of an

insignificant chi-square but increases the accuracy of incremental fit measures such as the TLI and CFI (Hu & Bentler, 1995). In addition to chi-square, TLI, and CFI, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is recognized as one of the most informative criteria in SEM (Byrne, 2001). A RMSEA value below .05 is indicative of a good fit (Byrne, 2001). Due to the large sample size of this study (3,953), chi-square is reported but the other fit measures were used to determine goodness of fit.

## RESULTS

### *Male Model*

The sample size for the male model was 3,953. The model produced mixed results of fit to the data. For the full model, a chi-square of 46.908 ( $df = 9$ ) was significant (.000). The nested model produced a significant (.004) chi-square of 11.212 ( $df = 2$ ). A chi-square difference test suggested that the full and nested models are significantly (.000) different. Because chi-square is affected by the large sample size, other tests were used to determine goodness of fit. For the full model, the TLI (.991), the CFI (.997), and RMSEA (.033) suggest a good fit to the data. For the nested model, the TLI (.991), the CFI (.998), and RMSEA (.034) also suggest a good fit. Eleven percent of the variance in marital quality and 55% of the variance in sexual satisfaction was accounted for by the full model and 5% of the variance of sexual satisfaction was accounted for by the nested model.

### *Direct Paths*

Several significant paths were found in the male models (see Figure 1). In the nested model, higher scores for the mother-child relationship and perception of overall family-of-origin experiences were significantly ( $p < .001$ ) related to higher sexual satisfaction. Perception of parents' marriage was not significantly related to sexual satisfaction. In the full model, the

mother-child relationship and marital quality were significantly related ( $p < .001$ ) suggesting that higher levels of marital quality are related to positive perceptions of a male's childhood relationship with his mother. The mother-child relationship was not significantly related to sexual satisfaction. Interestingly, more positive perceptions of overall family-of-origin experiences were significantly related to both higher marital quality ( $p < .001$ ) and lower sexual satisfaction ( $p < .003$ ). Perception of parents' marriage was not significantly related to either marital quality or sexual satisfaction. Lastly, higher marital quality was significantly ( $p < .001$ ) related to higher sexual satisfaction.

#### *Indirect Paths*

Two indirect relationships were significant. First, the model suggests that positive perceptions of a male's childhood relationship with his mother are related to higher sexual satisfaction when mediated by marital quality (Sobel statistic = 4.33,  $p < .001$ ). Second, perception of overall family-of-origin experiences and sexual satisfaction were positively related when mediated by marital quality suggesting that more positive perceptions of overall family-of-origin experiences are related to higher levels of marital quality which is related to higher levels of sexual satisfaction (Sobel statistic = 13.00,  $p < .001$ ). Sobel tests (see Preacher & Leonardelli, 2006) indicated significant mediating effects in both cases. Correlations of observed variables support this finding (see Table 3).

#### *Female Model*

The sample size for the female model was 3,953. Results of tests for goodness of fit produced similar results to that of the male model. For the full model, a chi-square of 33.355 ( $df = 9$ ) was significant (.000). The nested model produced a non-significant (.612) chi-square of .982 ( $df = 2$ ). A chi-square difference test suggested that the full and nested models are

significantly (.000) different. Because chi-square is affected by sample size, other tests were used to determine goodness of fit. For the full model, the TLI (.995), the CFI (.998), and RMSEA (.026) suggest a good fit to the data. For the nested model, the TLI (1.0), the CFI (1.0), and RMSEA (.000) also suggest a good fit. Nine percent of the variance in marital quality and 52% of the variance in sexual satisfaction was accounted for by the full model and 5% of the variance in sexual satisfaction was accounted for by the nested model.

#### *Direct Paths*

Results for the female model were similar to that of the male model (see Figure 1). In the nested model, higher scores for the mother-child relationship and perception of overall family-of-origin experiences were significantly ( $p < .001$ ) related to higher sexual satisfaction. Perception of parents' marriage was not significantly related to sexual satisfaction. In the full model, the path between father-child relationship and marital quality was significant ( $p < .001$ ) suggesting that more positive perceptions of a female's childhood relationship with her father are related to higher marital quality. The path from father-child to sexual satisfaction was not significant. More positive perceptions of overall family-of-origin experiences were significantly related to higher marital quality ( $p < .001$ ) and lower sexual satisfaction ( $p < .022$ ). Parents' marriage was not significantly related to marital quality but was related to sexual satisfaction near trend level ( $p < .104$ ) suggesting that, for females, more positive perceptions of parents' marriage might be related to higher levels of sexual satisfaction. Also, higher marital quality was significantly ( $p < .001$ ) related to higher levels of sexual satisfaction.

#### *Indirect Paths*

Two indirect pathways were significant. First, the model suggests that positive perceptions of a female's childhood relationship with her father are related to higher sexual

satisfaction when mediated by marital quality (Sobel statistic = 3.67,  $p < .001$ ). Second, and similar to the male model, overall perception of family-of-origin and sexual satisfaction were positively related when mediated by marital quality suggesting that more positive perceptions of family-of-origin experiences are related to higher marital quality which is related to higher levels of sexual satisfaction (Sobel statistic = 11.33,  $p < .001$ ). Sobel tests indicated significant mediating effects in both cases (see Preacher & Leonardelli, 2006). Correlations of observed variables support this finding (see Table 3).

### *Gender Differences*

The male and female full models were analyzed, comparing them for equivalency. When evaluating the similarity of models for different groups, AMOS compares a model where the path coefficients are constrained to be equal between the 2 groups with an unconstrained model where paths are free to vary. A chi-square statistic is produced that is the difference in the chi-square value for the constrained and unconstrained models. If this chi-square difference is significant, the structural models are not considered equivalent for the 2 groups (Arbuckle, 2006). The difference in the chi-square values for the constrained and unconstrained models comparing females and males with 28 degrees of freedom was 99.01, which was significant ( $p < .001$ ), indicating a lack of equivalence for the structural model of the 2 groups.

Of the fourteen path coefficients analyzed for equivalency, only one was significantly different for males and females (4.184, which exceeds the threshold of 1.98). The significant coefficient for the relationship between marital quality and sexual satisfaction was larger for men.

## DISCUSSION

### *Direct Effects (Hypothesis 1)*

The first hypothesis suggested that more positive perceptions of the family-of-origin experience would be related to higher marital sexual satisfaction. The direct paths in the nested model between the family-of-origin variables and sexual satisfaction tested this hypothesis. Significant direct relationships were the same for men and women.

Significant relationships were found between sexual satisfaction and both perceptions of the parent-child relationship and overall family-of-origin experiences. These two measures of family-of-origin use language that relates to childhood attachment. The findings suggest that more secure attachment (higher scores on the family-of-origin measures) is related to higher levels of sexual satisfaction for both men and women. Attachment theory offers a possible explanation for this relationship. Continuity of attachment (Bowlby, 1982) is the idea that children learn to expect certain things from relationships depending on the experiences they have with adult caregivers and carry the expectations and scripts into adult relationships. Previous research assumes continuity (Bowlby, 1982) of attachment (in this case measured by overall family-of-origin and parent-child relationship) and claims a positive association between childhood experiences and sexual satisfaction in adult relationships (Birnbaum et al., 2006; Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Davis et al., 2006). The nested model of this study supports the assumption of continuity.

The full model offers further clarity about the relationship between the family-of-origin variables and sexual satisfaction. Direct paths between perception of the parent-child relationship and sexual satisfaction were not significant in the full model. Interestingly, the relationship between overall family-of-origin experiences and sexual satisfaction was negative

when controlling for marital quality, suggesting that more positive perceptions of family-of-origin are related to lower levels of sexual satisfaction. However, higher scores in both family-of-origin measures were significantly related to higher levels of marital quality. As discussed in subsequent sections, it may be that the model is fully mediated by marital quality. Also, any non-mediated, direct effects of family-of-origin experiences on sexual satisfaction were not clinically significant.

Without evidence of similar findings in other studies, it is difficult to explain what accounts for the negative association of family-of-origin experiences and levels of sexual satisfaction. The IEMSS provides a possible answer with what is termed comparison level or relative sexual rewards and costs (Byers & Macneil, 2006). When combined with the idea that attachment styles can change across relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), the influence of comparison on sexual satisfaction becomes clearer. An analysis of the measures shows that respondents gave a subjective assessment of their experiences which is affected by many factors, including experience and expectations. In comparison to a person with a positive family-of-origin experience, a person who views their family-of-origin experience as negative might consider the same sexual relationship as more positive and satisfying due to the comparative factor. One might say, "This is much safer and more comfortable than what I grew up with; I'm very satisfied." Changes in attachment throughout life may challenge the accuracy of the effects assumed to come from continuity. Further research is needed to determine the extent of the specific factors involved in continuity of childhood attachment across relationships and into adult sexual relationships.

### *Indirect Effects (Hypothesis 2)*

Of particular impact in this study was the variable Marital Quality which was both a significant predictor and mediator in the male and female models. The second hypothesis proposed that marital quality would increase with more positive childhood experiences which would be related to increased marital sexual satisfaction. Lending support to the hypothesis, significant direct paths were found from overall family-of-origin experiences and parent-child relationships to marital quality and from marital quality to sexual satisfaction. The full model accounted for much larger amounts of the variance in sexual satisfaction than the nested model. This finding supports the research regarding the interrelatedness of family-of-origin and attachment, marital quality, and sexual satisfaction (Bridges, 2000; Davis et al., 2006; Larson et al., 1998); however, there is little empirical evidence concerning how family-of-origin variables interact with sexual satisfaction. The results of this study suggest that marital quality is an important mediator of the relationship between childhood family-of-origin experiences and sexual satisfaction in adulthood.

Attachment theory provides conceptual support for the idea that family-of-origin is connected to sexual satisfaction through marital quality (see Bowlby, 1982 and Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The theory posits that children learn how to emotionally and physically relate to those around them through their experiences with family, offering an explanation for the significant indirect paths. Secure attachment (feelings of trust, comfort, safety, etc.) may continue into a marriage, affecting the quality of that relationship and spreading into connected areas such as sexual satisfaction. Inversely, this study suggests that the quality of the relationship may have a strong impact on adult attachment styles developed during childhood.

Negative childhood experiences might be overcome by positive experiences with a spouse, leading itself to increased sexual satisfaction.

There is a long-standing debate regarding the absolute continuity of childhood attachment. Some theoreticians support that attachment from childhood will always affect aspects of adult romantic relationships, including sex. However, others argue that new experiences in adulthood can counter the effects of childhood experiences. This study lends support to the latter argument suggesting that the quality of one's marriage might overpower childhood experiences.

Also worthy of note is the relationship between a child and his or her opposite sex parent. Methods of showing and receiving affection are communicated through interactions and applied to scripts for use in other relationships. The findings of this study point to marital quality as the conduit for scripts learned from the mother-son and father-daughter relationships into sexual satisfaction in adult romantic relationships.

Sobel tests confirmed significance of the indirect pathways from overall family-of-origin and parents' marriage to sexual satisfaction in both the male and female models. Interestingly, perception of parents' marriage was not a significant predictor in the full or nested models suggesting that the way a person views his or her parents' marriage may not be indicative of what is carried into adulthood in terms of scripts and expectations. One point to consider is that this variable measured how participants viewed the degree to which their parents were happy in their marriage and the extent to which participants would like their own marriage to be like that of their parents. Perhaps a measure of parents' marriage using attachment language would be better suited to the model. For example, an item might read, "My parents' marriage was safe and a source of comfort," or "My parents could trust each other in their marriage." Future research

should explore the potential effects of perception of parents' marriage more closely in order to better understand which aspects may be related to marital quality and sexual satisfaction.

### *Gender Differences*

Examinations of gender differences in the literature have produced mixed results. There is some evidence that negative family-of-origin experiences may be harder to overcome for women (Martinson et al., 2010). Also, research has identified some gender differences in predictors of sexual satisfaction (Darling, Davidson, & Cox, 1991; Larson et al., 1998); however, these differences do not seem to outweigh gender similarities. It may be that the sexuality of men and women are similarly affected by family-of-origin experiences and marital quality, as attachment theory does not claim a greater hold on men or women. It is assumed that both genders wish for closeness, security, trust, and consistency in relationships and when they are not present, it is likely that both genders experience increases in attachment insecurity.

The only difference found when comparing the male and female models was the relationship between marital quality and sexual satisfaction. Men had a larger coefficient than women suggesting that the sexual satisfaction of men may be more affected by the quality of their marriage. The difference in the coefficients, although statistically significant, was minimal and points to more clinical similarity than difference. This finding does not support the commonly held belief that women are more affected sexually by non-sexual aspects of the relationship. Larson and colleagues (1998) found interesting and related results that suggest the strongest predictors for sexual satisfaction for men are spouse-centered as opposed to women whose strongest predictors were individual and spouse-centered. Researchers should continue to examine gender in the interactions of family-of-origin, marital quality, and sexual satisfaction in order to further clarify similarities and differences.

### *Overall Model*

Past examinations have provided evidence for a relationship between family-of-origin experiences and marital quality (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and a relationship between marital quality and sexual satisfaction (Larson et al., 1998; Young et al., 1998). This study proposed that the conduit from attachment related family-of-origin experiences to sexual satisfaction may be marital quality. Accordingly, the full model proposed in this study accounted for 11% (men) and 9% (women) of the variance in marital quality. Even more striking, 55% (men) and 52% (women) of the variance in sexual satisfaction was accounted for by the full model. A positive experience with some aspects of one's family-of-origin may be influential to higher marital quality which is likely a large factor in sexual satisfaction ratings. On the other hand, it is possible that a sexual experience may be slightly negatively affected by a more positive experience with one's family-of-origin when controlling for marital quality. Further examinations are needed to investigate the subtleties of the effects of childhood family-of-origin experiences on sexual satisfaction.

### *Implications for Clinical Practice*

This study gives support to the argument that issues with family-of-origin and marital quality should be considered as important parts of treating marital sexual dysfunction and dissatisfaction (Hertlein & Weeks, 2009). Hertlein, Weeks, and Sendak (2009) propose the Intersystems approach to sex therapy; about the approach they state (p. 3), "At its basis, the Intersystems (approach)...sees a connection between an individual's inner and outer worlds, the intrapsychic processes that impact and are impacted upon by a variety of factors, including interpersonal dynamics, physiology, psychology, culture, and social situation." It is imperative

that clinicians understand the connectedness of the different systems impacting the sexual relationship in order to more fully address issues that may be influencing it.

Part of the sex therapy process should include a comprehensive sexual history (Hertlein, Weeks, & Sendak, 2009). This study suggests that part of that history should include a genogram of family history, including sexual and nonsexual aspects. Also, a portion of the sex therapy process may include addressing issues from families-of-origin and maybe even including members from that family system in the therapy process. It is also important for clinicians to understand that the sexual relationship is intertwined with nonsexual aspects of the relationship. Sex therapy should always include work with the entire relationship.

Another implication of the study is that clinicians may wish to consider utilizing therapeutic approaches that connect with the deep influences of emotional connection, attachment, and family-of-origin experience. The finding of marital quality as a strong mediator of family-of-origin and sexuality suggests that issues from one's childhood can be overcome and new experiences can define how one views his or her relationship safety. Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) stems from an attachment basis, claiming that relationships are at the core of the human experience (Makinen & Johnson, 2006). EFT is a brief approach which assists couples and families in exploring and processing negative experiences from past relationships and focusing on building trust and security. New experiences are created giving participants new scripts and expectations. Empirical research has validated the effectiveness of EFT, showing an effectiveness rate of approximately 90% when used with nonviolent clients (Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg, & Schindler, 1999). EFT may be an effective addition to couple and family therapy when sexual topics are the focus (for more information, see the EFT website, [www.iceeft.com](http://www.iceeft.com)).

In addition, there are many courses taught in universities, professional schools, workshops, high schools, and others, which address the topic of marital quality. Part of these courses is often focused on sexual aspects of the relationship. This study provides important information regarding predictors of marital quality and sexual satisfaction. Educators should seek to include family-of-origin as a factor in all aspects of marriage education, including sexuality.

Lastly, it should not be assumed that people are more or less influenced by family-of-origin experiences as a result of gender. Clinician's should consider family-of-origin and marital quality as factors in the sexual experience of both men and women.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

Perhaps the biggest limitations of this study are that it was cross-sectional and childhood measures were based on historical report. A better test of the relationship between childhood experiences or attachment would be longitudinal and begin in childhood, following participants into adult romantic relationships while tracking changes in attachment styles across relationships. However, studies of that magnitude are difficult to conduct while maintaining good validity and reliability. Recent additions to the RELATE questionnaire (see RELATE website) will provide clarity regarding adult attachment styles. Future research will be able to utilize these measures and compare them to the variables of this study. Also, sexual satisfaction was measured by combining two one-item measures (sex problems and sexual satisfaction). Including variables which reflect sexual behaviors (i.e. frequency of sex, promiscuity) and sexual attitudes (i.e. importance of sex) may increase understanding of the relationship between family-of-origin and the sexual experience in marriage.

Another limitation of this study is that it did not control for violence or abuse in childhood or adulthood. The measure for overall family-of-origin experience does not specify what family members or events are involved; the questions allow participants freedom to include all family members (including siblings, grandparents, etc.) and all events that are relevant to their experience. Future examinations of family-of-origin may want to include abuse and violence controls, as well as any number of other specifics, in order to increase understanding about influencing factors and changes across stages of life.

There was some sampling bias which may make generalizability difficult. Many participants were recruited in a university setting and most respondents had some level of higher education. Also, the sample contained a higher percentage of Caucasian participants than the national population and about a third of the participants were religiously affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between family-of-origin experiences and sexual satisfaction and the role of marital quality as a mediator. The study supports traditional assumptions about the direct relationship between family-of-origin and sexual satisfaction but offers a potentially more accurate representation of the relationship by considering marital quality as a mediator. Further research is needed to examine the subtleties of attachment continuity and the specific factors from childhood influencing marital quality and sexual satisfaction in marriage. Finally, clinicians' and educators' conceptualizations should include family-of-origin as a key factor in marital quality and both family-of-origin and marital quality as key factors in the sexual relationship of married couples.

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Table 1. Demographics

	<b>Male</b> n=3,953	<b>Female</b> n=3,953
<b>Age</b>		
Mean	32	34
Range	19 – 83	20 – 79
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Education</b>		
High school diploma or less	5.4	3.7
Some college	38.3	39.4
Associate’s degree	6.2	6.5
Bachelor’s degree	24.9	23.5
Graduate or professional degree, not completed	6.8	9.1
Graduate or professional degree, completed	18.4	17.9
<b>Income</b>		
Under \$20,000	31.1	48.7
\$20,000 – 39,999	18.9	17.9
\$40,000 – 59,999	15.1	13.3
\$60,000 – 79,999	10.6	7.9
\$80,000 – 119,999	11.7	7.6
\$120,000 +	12.5	4.6
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Caucasian	84.9	84.0
African	3.2	2.9
Asian	3.9	5.0
Latino	3.3	3.6
Other	4.7	4.5
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>		
Latter-day Saint (Mormon)	32.3	32.4
Protestant	24.9	25.7
Catholic	15.9	15.5
Jewish	2.0	2.0
None	15.2	13.0
Other	9.7	11.4

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	Male				Female		
	Min - Max	Range	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD
<b>Overall FOO</b>	4 – 20	16	16.50	3.15	16	16.10	3.55
<b>Parents' Marriage</b>	-3 – 15	18	10.22	4.02	18	9.60	4.08
<b>Parent-Child</b>	-3 – 15	18	11.80	2.72	18	10.35	3.49
<b>Satisfaction</b>	6 – 30	28	27.55	5.10	28	27.56	5.38
<b>Stability</b>	3 – 15	12	12.53	2.27	12	12.43	2.38
<b>Problem Areas</b>	10 – 50	40	44.55	6.58	37	44.49	6.63
<b>Sex Problems</b>	1 – 5	4	3.81	6.58	4	3.76	1.16
<b>Sexual Satisfaction</b>	1 – 5	4	3.97	1.11	4	4.02	1.03

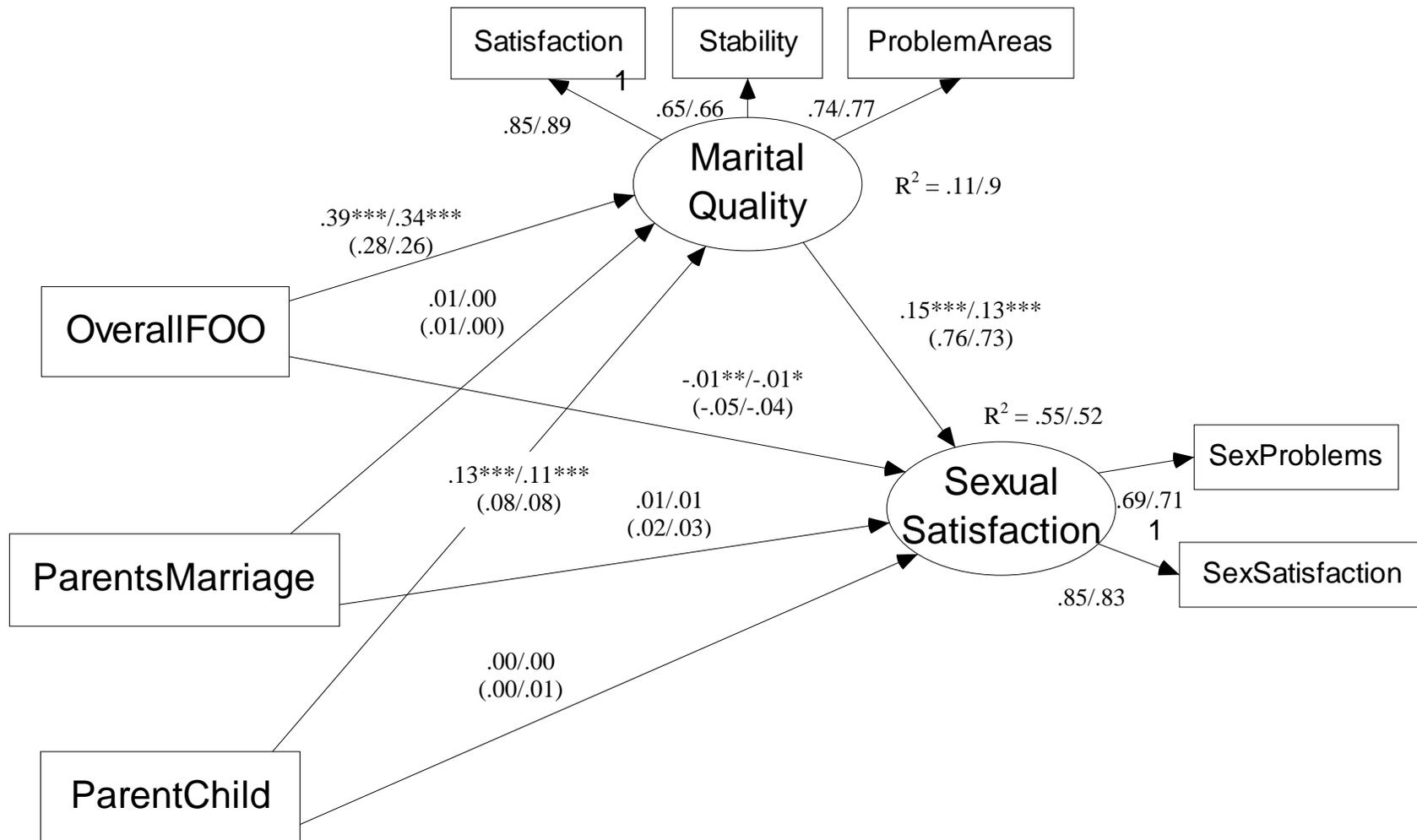
Note: Higher scores reflect more positive responses.

Table 3. Correlations of Observed Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Overall FOO	1.00	.66*	.53*	.24*	.18*	.27*	.16*	.16*
2. Parents' Marriage	.63*	1.00	.54*	.17*	.12*	.19*	.13*	.13*
3. Opposite Sex Parent-Child	.48*	.36*	1.00	.18*	.13*	.18*	.12*	.14*
4. Relationship Satisfaction	.27*	.17*	.19*	1.00	.59*	.68*	.51*	.66*
5. Relationship Stability	.19*	.15*	.12*	.57*	1.00	.50*	.34*	.30*
6. Relationship Problem Areas	.29*	.18*	.17*	.63*	.48*	1.00	.65*	.46*
7. Sex Problems	.17*	.13*	.10*	.50*	.34*	.67*	1.00	.59*
8. Sexual Satisfaction	.18*	.12*	.14*	.70*	.30*	.47*	.59*	1.00

Note: \*  $p < .001$ ; Female correlations above the diagonal, male correlations below the diagonal.

Figure 1. SEM Model with Unstandardized and Standardized Coefficients,  $R^2$ , and Factor Loadings for Male and Female Models



Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; Values reported: males/females. Standardized values in parentheses.  $R^2$  represents the amount of variance accounted for in endogenous variables. The variable *ParentChild* represents participants' opposite sex parent.

## **Appendix**

## **Family-of-Origin Measures:**

### FAMILY PROCESSES

1 = Strongly Disagree    2 = Disagree    3 = It Depends    4 = Agree    5 = Strongly Agree

How much do you agree with the following statements about your family, based on your years growing up?

### Overall Evaluation of Family Processes

108. From what I experienced in my family, I think family relationships are safe, secure, rewarding, worth being in, and a source of comfort.
113. From what I experienced in my family, I think family relationships are confusing, unfair, anxiety-provoking, inconsistent, and unpredictable.
118. We had a loving atmosphere in our family.
122. All things considered, my childhood years were happy.

1 = Strongly Disagree    2 = Disagree    3 = It Depends    4 = Agree  
5 = Strongly Agree    -1 = Doesn't Apply

### Parents' Marriage

109. My father was happy in his marriage.
114. My mother was happy in her marriage.
123. I would like my marriage to be like my parents' marriage.

### Father-Child relationships

110. My father showed physical affection to me by appropriate hugging and/or kissing.
117. My father participated in enjoyable activities with me.
124. My father and I were able to share our feelings on just about any topic without embarrassment or fear of hurt feelings.

### Mother-Child relationships

- 115. My mother showed physical affection to me by appropriate hugging and/or kissing.
- 121. My mother participated in enjoyable activities with me.
- 119. My mother and I were able to share our feelings on just about any topic without embarrassment or fear of hurt feelings.

### **Marital Quality Measures:**

#### Relationship Satisfaction

1 = Very Dissatisfied      2 = Dissatisfied      3 = Neutral      4 = Satisfied      5 = Very satisfied

In your relationship, how satisfied are you with the following?

- 179. The physical intimacy you experience.
- 180. The love you experience.
- 181. How conflicts are resolved.
- 182. The amount of relationship equality you experience.
- 183. The amount of time you have together.
- 184. The quality of your communication.
- 185. Your overall relationship with your partner.

#### Relationship Stability

1 = Never      2 = Rarely      3 = Sometimes      4 = Often      5 = Very Often

Please answer the following questions about your relationship:

- 248. How often have you thought your relationship (or marriage) might be in trouble?
- 249. How often have you and your partner discussed ending your relationship (or marriage)?
- 250. How often have you broken up or separated and then gotten back together?

Problem Areas Checklist

1 = Never      2 = Rarely      3 = Sometimes      4 = Often      5 = Very Often

How often have the following areas been a problem in your relationship:

- 251. Financial matters
- 252. Communication
- 253. Having children
- 254. Rearing children
- 255. Intimacy/Sexuality
- 256. Parents/In-laws
- 257. Roles (Who does what)
- 258. Weight
- 259. Who's in charge
- 260. Time spent together
- 261. Substance/chemical abuse

**Sexuality Measures:**

Problem Areas Checklist

1=Never      2=Rarely      3=Sometimes      4 = Often      5= Very Often

How often have the following areas been a problem in your relationship:

- 255. Intimacy/Sexuality

Relationship Satisfaction

1 = Very Dissatisfied      2 = Dissatisfied      3 = Neutral      4 = Satisfied      5 = Very satisfied

In your relationship, how satisfied are you with the following?

- 179. The physical intimacy you experience.