

**Like Spilling Coffee or Tying a Shoe? The Perception of Sexual Compliance in a
Population-Based Sample**

Elin Nynäs 2003467

Master's Thesis in Psychology

Supervisors: Sabina Nickull & Annika Gunst

Faculty of Arts, Psychology, and Theology

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**ÅBO AKADEMI UNIVERSITY – FACULTY OF ARTS, PSYCHOLOGY AND
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Subject: Psychology	
Author: Elin Nynäs	
Title: Like Spilling Coffee or Tying a Shoe? The Perception of Sexual Compliance in a Population-Based Sample	
Supervisors: Sabina Nickull, Annika Gunst	
Abstract: <p>Sexual compliance, that is, consensually engaging in sexual activity with a partner despite the lack (at least in the beginning) of sexual desire, is common in committed relationships and is associated with both positive and negative consequences. Less is known about how severely positive or negative compliance is perceived to be. The current study sought to investigate the perception of sexual compliance in a Finnish population-based sample, through a self-constructed measure where participants were asked to rate whether they would rather comply to sexual activity or experience a set of positive, negative, or neutral hypothetical events. Based on previous research on the association between sexual motives and consequences of compliance, I wanted to assess whether a similar association could be found for perception of compliance. A total of 1,105 participants who had complied to sex with their current sex partner/s were included in the study. One-sample t-tests were calculated to see if there was a difference between preference for the hypothetical events and preference for compliance. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to investigate associations between compliance preference, gender and approach and avoidance motives for sex. The items that were most comparable to complying to sex were “move a chair” and “tie my shoe” for women and “receive a genuine compliment” for men. Women, overall, showed less preference for compliance than men. Corresponding to research on perceived consequences, having more approach motives for sex was associated with a higher preference for compliance over the hypothetical events, while having more avoidance motives was associated with a lower preference for compliance. Although a small fraction of participants did perceive compliance as very problematic, these results indicate that compliance, for most people, is perceived as comparable to everyday events.</p>	
Keywords: sexual compliance, perception of compliance, compliance consequences, approach and avoidance motives, sexuality, population-based	
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**ÅBO AKADEMI – FAKULTETEN FÖR HUMANIORA, PSYKOLOGI OCH
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Ämne: Psykologi	
Författare: Elin Nynäs	
Title: Uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående i ett populationsbaserat finländskt sampel	
Handledare: Sabina Nickull, Annika Gunst	
Abstrakt: Sexuellt tillmötesgående, det vill säga att samtycka till sex med en partner trots att man själv åtminstone till en början inte känner sexuell lust, är ett vanligt fenomen i etablerade förhållanden och är associerat med både positiva och negativa konsekvenser. Hur positivt eller negativt sexuellt tillmötesgående uppfattas vara är ett mer utforskat område. Målet med den här studien var att undersöka hur sexuellt tillmötesgående uppfattas i ett finländskt populationsbaserat sampel. Detta gjordes med hjälp av ett egentillverkat formulär där deltagare med hjälp av en Likertskala fick skatta hurvida de hellre skulle vara sexuellt tillmötesgående eller vara med om olika positiva, negativa eller neutrala hypotetiska scenarion. Eftersom man i tidigare forskning har hittat samband mellan konsekvenser av sexuellt tillmötesgående och motiv för sex ville jag även undersöka om ett liknande samband kunde hittas med uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående. I studien inkluderades 1105 deltagare som hade varit sexuellt tillmötesgående med sin/a nuvarande partner/s. För att undersöka sambandet mellan närmande- och undvikandemotiv, kön och uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående utfördes en multipel regressionsanalys. Skillnader i deltagares preferenser gällande sexuellt tillmötesgående och hypotetiska scenarion undersöktes med hjälp av t-test. De hypotetiska scenarier som var mest jämförbara med sexuellt tillmötesgående var ”flytta en stol” och ”knyta mina skosnören” för kvinnor och ”få en genuin komplimang” för män. Överlag föredrog män oftare än kvinnor sexuellt tillmötesgående över alternativen. I likhet med tidigare forskning fanns det ett samband mellan närmandemotiv för sex och högre preferens för sexuellt tillmötesgående och mellan undvikandemotiv för sex och lägre preferens för sexuellt tillmötesgående. Även om en liten andel deltagare upplevde sexuellt tillmötesgående som väldigt problematiskt, så tyder mina resultat på att de flesta upplever sexuellt tillmötesgående som jämförbart med vardagliga händelser.	
Nyckelord: sexuellt tillmötesgående, uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående, konsekvenser av sexuellt tillmötesgående, närmandemotiv, undvikandemotiv, sexualitet, populationsbaserat	
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Introduction

It is not unusual, whether in new encounters or in committed relationships, that one partner wants to have sex when the other does not (Dewitte et al., 2020). When there is a mismatch in sexual desire between partners, the non-desiring partner has the option to decline or comply to sexual activity. Sexual compliance is defined as consenting to partnered sexual activity despite a lack of sexual desire (Impett & Peplau, 2003; Katz & Tirone, 2009). Sexual compliance is set apart from sexual coercion and assault, since consent is given without direct physical or psychological partner pressure (Quinn-Nilas and Kennett, 2018).

In a study by Katz and Tirone (2009), 37% of participants had complied to sexual activity at least once with their current partner. Similar numbers have been reported by, for example, Vannier and O'Sullivan (46%; 2010) and O'Sullivan and Allgeier (38%; 1998). In research by Himanen and Gunst (2023), in turn, a majority (64%) of participants reported that they had complied in their current or latest relationship, and almost all (93%) reported that they had complied at some point in their lives. Although most research on sexual compliance has focused on heteronormative samples, there is some evidence that compliance is also common in other types of relationships. In one study with a sample of people in non-normative relationships (e.g., LGBTQ relationships, relationships with one or more non-cis partner, or polyamorous relationships), 44% reported that they had complied to sexual activity with their partner at least once (Rubinsky, 2020). Based on these studies, sexual compliance seems to be a common occurrence in committed relationships, and even though they have used convenience samples (and therefore are not generalizable to the general population), they do show that compliance is common in several different samples.

Consequences of Compliance

Previous research has found that sexual compliance can have both positive and negative consequences for the individual and for the relationship. Several studies have examined participants' experienced consequences of sexual compliance. Bay-Cheng and Bruns (2016) used semi-structured interviews to examine young women's experiences of past sexual compliance. Answers were organized into two perspectives – normalizing perspectives, which included answers that indicated that unwanted sexual experiences are good or non-harmful for the relationship, and problematizing perspectives, which included answers that indicated that unwanted sexual experiences are harmful. Of the answers in the study, approximately half were sorted into the normalizing (49%) and half into the problematizing (51%) perspective. In a cross-sectional study by Himanen and Gunst (2023)

with retrospective measures, 22% of participants reported experiencing positive consequences, while 41% reported negative consequences, and 36% reported both positive and negative consequences. Contrastingly, in an older study with a longitudinal design with two data collection points over two weeks, almost all participants (92%) who had complied to sexual activity during the study period reported some type of positive consequences and more than half (59%) some type of negative consequences (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998).

Some cross-sectional research with retrospective measures of sexual compliance has found an association between compliance and lower relationship satisfaction in both heterosexual and non-normative relationships (Katz and Tirone, 2009; Rubinsky, 2020). Rubinsky (2020) also reported that participants who had complied to sexual activity had generally worse mental health than those who had not complied, in a sample of people in non-normative relationships. Similarly, in their longitudinal three-week daily diary study on sexual compliance, Vannier and O'Sullivan (2010) found a significant association between compliance and lower sexual satisfaction among people in heterosexual relationships. One study also found that participants who complied to sex more often had higher levels of cortisol, a physiological marker for stress, in their saliva compared to control subjects whose desired and actual frequency of sexual activity were matched (Hartmann & Crockett, 2016).

The most commonly reported positive consequences of compliance have been consequences related to relationship satisfaction and relationship maintenance, such as partner satisfaction and enhanced intimacy (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998) and feelings of love or attachment (Himanen & Gunst, 2023). Sexual compliance might also, for some, be a useful tool for dealing with desire discrepancy in a relationship (Herbenick et al., 2014). Having experienced compliance has also been described as a possibility for learning assertiveness and self-control (Bay-Cheng and Bruns, 2016).

In the current body of research on sexual compliance, there is some discrepancy in which aspects of compliance are emphasized. There are those who highlight the potential benefits of compliance (e.g., O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998), such as it being a beneficial strategy for dealing with discrepancies in sexual desire, and those who are more skeptical and question whether the possible benefits outweigh the possible harmful consequences (e.g., Katz & Tirone, 2009; Himanen & Gunst, 2023). Scholars who are more critical towards compliance have also noted that even though compliance, by definition, happens without partner pressure, people can still feel pressured to comply due to social and cultural expectations (Conroy et al., 2015). Because of these differing perceptions of compliance, a

more detailed investigation into how people themselves perceive compliance would be warranted.

Worth noting at this point is that many of these studies have used convenience samples recruited from limited populations at universities. Consequently, the included participants have been young, and their relationships relatively short. Additionally, one study was explicitly marketed as a study on sexual compliance, which might have attracted more participants for whom the subject feels extra relevant, for example, those who have had more negative experiences of compliance.

Approach and Avoidance Motives

One possible factor that could explain why some people experience sexual compliance as more positive or more negative are the motives they have for complying. Impett et al. (2005) studied what role approach and avoidance motives for sex play in how sexual activity affects us. When a person is acting on an approach motive, they act with an expectation to gain something positive from the experience, while a person acting on an avoidance motive wishes to avoid unpleasant consequences. Impett et al. (2005) found that sexual activity motivated by approach motives was associated with positive short-term outcomes for the individual and the relationship, while avoidance motives in contrast were associated with negative outcomes for the individual and the relationship in both the short and long term. In line with this, Himanen and Gunst (2023) found that more approach motives were significantly associated with more positive consequences of compliant sex and that avoidance motives were associated with less positive consequences. Katz and Tirone (2009), in turn, also found that avoidance motives for sexual compliance were associated with lower relationship satisfaction but found no association for approach motives for compliance and relationship satisfaction.

Severity of Consequences of Compliance

When studying the consequences of sexual compliance, researchers have focused on different aspects of consequences, such as perceived effects on satisfaction, mood and so on, and used different Likert scales to measure these. Himanen and Gunst (2023), for example, asked participants to rate how compliance had affected mood, self-esteem, relationship satisfaction, intimacy in the relationship, trust in the relationship, feelings of love or attachment, and sexual satisfaction on a scale from 1 = affected very negatively to 7 = affected very positively. In two other studies, participants rated the pleasantness of sexual encounters (with or without compliance) on a scale from 1 = not at all to 7 = very enjoyable

(Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010) and 1 = extremely unpleasant to 6 = extremely pleasant (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). O'Sullivan and Allgeier (1998) also asked their participants to rate to what extent (if at all) romantic interest in their partner changed as a result of the (compliance) experience on a scale from 1 = extreme increase to 5 = extreme decrease.

These measures do tell us something about the direction and extent of consequences, but it is impossible to know how different participants interpret these scales and, therefore, it is difficult to know what, for example, "very" or "extremely" positive or negative answers translate to in real life. Since there are qualitative reports of very negative compliance consequences, such as previously victimized participants experiencing severe emotional consequences such as feelings of detachment and difficulty connecting with others (Bay-Cheng & Bruns, 2016), as well as participants being retraumatized and experiencing flashbacks of past traumatic events (Himanen & Gunst, 2023), it would be of interest to clarify how the general population feel regarding complying to sex.

Gender Differences

Many studies have reported a higher occurrence of sexual compliance among women than among men (e.g., Himanen & Gunst, 2023; Impett & Peplau, 2003) while others have found similar numbers for both genders (e.g., Quinn-Nilas et al., 2013; Quinn-Nilas & Kennett, 2018; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010). Consequences reported exclusively by women have, for example, been negative feelings about oneself, decreased sexual desire and physical pain (Gunst et al., 2023), while reports from men have included risk of contracting STIs, unwanted pregnancy and risk of rape accusations (Quinn-Nilas et al., 2018). Although these studies and populations are not directly comparable, they indicate that women might experience or expect more internal consequences of compliance, while men might experience or expect more consequences related to circumstances outside of themselves.

To my knowledge, no study has previously explored gender differences in the perception of sexual compliance. Other studies have found that women report more anxiety and stronger feelings of upset in response to sexual harassment than men (Berdahl et al., 1996; Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003). In a compliance situation influenced by covert social pressure, or pressure stemming from social and cultural expectations (Conroy et al., 2015), this could lead to women perceiving more threat and, as a result, more negative consequences. However, since data on gender differences regarding severity of consequences of sexual compliance are scarce, it is difficult to draw more than speculative conclusions.

Aims and Hypotheses

The aim of the present study was to use a population-based sample to compare people's attitudes towards sexual compliance in relation to hypothetical events of varying valence to gain a better understanding of how positively or negatively people perceive compliance. I additionally wanted to examine the association between perception of compliance and approach and avoidance motives for compliance, and gender.

Based on the reviewed literature, I posed the following research questions and hypotheses:

Q1: How positive or negative are people's perceptions of sexual compliance in comparison to hypothetical events of varying valence? No hypothesis was formed due to the scarcity of earlier research on the topic.

Q2: Is there an association between perception of sexual compliance and approach and avoidance motives for sex? I hypothesized that (a) individuals with more approach motives will to a higher extent choose sexual compliance over the hypothetical events and that (b) individuals with more avoidance motives will to a higher extent choose the hypothetical events over sexual compliance.

Q3: Is there an association between perception of compliance and gender? I hypothesized that women will to a higher extent choose the hypothetical events over compliance compared to men.

Method

Procedure

The current study was a part of a larger data collection in which data were collected using an online survey created with the software QuestionPro. An invitation to the survey was sent by letter to 30,000 randomly selected addresses via the Finnish population registry. The letter described the contents of the study in broad terms, not specifically mentioning sexual compliance, and included information about data confidentiality and voluntary participation. The invitation was sent to permanent residents in Finland, in the age range of 18 to 50 years, who had Finnish or Swedish listed as their native language. Since previous population-based surveys suggest that men are less inclined to participate in surveys than women (e.g., Johansson et al., 2013), more men ($n = 20,000$) than women ($n = 10,000$) were contacted to obtain a more balanced sample. The data collection lasted from September to October 2023.

At the beginning of the survey, participants received information about the scope of the study and that they will receive questions about themes such as sexual behavior, attitudes, mental health, and intimate relationships. Before starting the survey, participants gave informed consent. Later in the survey, before participants went on to answer questions about sexual compliance, the terms sexual compliance, sexual desire, and sexual activity were defined as

Sexual compliance means consensually engaging in a sexual activity with a partner despite the lack (at least in the beginning) of sexual desire for it. Sexual compliance differs from sexual coercion and assault, as sexual compliance refers to situations where consent has been given voluntarily (either explicitly or implicitly), without any pressure, manipulation, or coercion from the partner. Sexual desire means being interested in and personally motivated to engage in sexual activity, with or without physical reactions (e.g., erection, tingling, lubrication). Sexual activity means a broad range of sexual behaviors which can include, for instance, petting/touching of genitals, oral sex, or penetrative sex.

As an incentive to participate in the study, participants got the option to enter a raffle to win a gift card. At the end of the survey, participants could fill out their e-mail address if they wanted to enter the raffle or were interested in participating in follow-up studies. E-mail addresses were stored separately from survey answers.

Ethical Approval

Before the survey was sent out, the research plan was reviewed and given a favorable evaluation by the Ethics Committee of the Departments of Psychology and Speech and Language Pathology at Åbo Akademi University. In accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, participants received information about data confidentiality and voluntary participation before consenting to participate in the study. They were also informed that they could discontinue the survey at any time without having to state a reason. Links to free mental health support services in Finland were attached at the end of the survey since it also included questions about difficult experiences.

Participants

To be included in the study, participants had to be at least 18 years old and have complied to sex with their current sex partner at least once. In total, 2,163 people responded to the survey. Of these, 548 were excluded because they did not have at least one current sex partner, and 222 were excluded because they had not complied to sex with their current

partner. An additional 276 participants were excluded due to missing data on any of the relevant items. Participants with missing data on questions regarding approach and avoidance motives ($n = 38$) were included in analyses of means but excluded in analyses of connections between motives and preferences. Since respondents belonging to a gender minority group were too few to analyze as a separate group ($n = 6$), these were also excluded from the data. Finally, six participants responded that they had never complied in general but that they had complied with their current partner. Since this does not logically make sense, the decision was made to exclude them from the analyses. In the end, 1,105 participants were included in analyses of means and 1,067 were included in analyses of connections between motives and preferences.

Measures

Participants were asked about sociodemographic information such as age, gender, sexual orientation, level of education, occupation, income, and nationality.

Perception of Sexual Compliance

Inspired by an analytical approach previously used by Yeater et al. (2012) to assess whether questionnaires on more “sensitive” topics (e.g., sex) pose a greater risk to participants than participation in not obviously sensitive research (e.g., cognitive testing), I created a scale to measure how positively/negatively people perceive sexual compliance. The scale consisted of 16 items with hypothetical events which people would usually experience as positive, negative, or neutral. The participants were asked whether they would rather comply to sex with their current partner or experience the described event. The 7-point Likert scale had answer options ranging from 1 = *I would much rather comply to sex than experience the described event* to 7 = *I would much rather experience the described event than comply to sex*. In the middle was the option 4 = *I feel the same about them*.

Four items, such as “having a cavity drilled and filled by a dentist”, were selected from the Normal Life Stressor scale by Yeater et al. (2012). The remaining 12 items were chosen from a standardized list of affect-related events created by Cohen et al. (2018). These included four positive events (e.g., “Watch the sunset”), four neutral events (e.g., “Replace a lightbulb”) and four negative events (e.g., “Lose a friendship”). The items were chosen to provide a representative range of events, from very positive to very negative, while keeping the scale as short as possible. The valence grading of items was based on results from earlier research. The research group went through all items in both lists and selected those that, at face value, seemed most relevant to a Finnish context and to as many people as possible. For

example, to ensure relevance, the item “lose 20 dollars” was changed to “lose 20€”. Items that would seem very unrealistic to most people (e.g., “Win a Nobel Prize”) were not included in the scale. From this point onwards, this scale will be referred to as the “preference scale” or the “preference questions”. All the items can be found in Appendix A. The Cronbach’s Alpha for my sample was $\alpha = .92$, which indicates excellent internal consistency.

Sex Motives Scale

An abbreviated version of Cooper et al.’s (1998) Sex Motives Scale, previously used by Muise et al. (2013), was used to measure approach and avoidance motives for sex. The scale starts with the prompt “How often do you have sex...” and consists of 12 items of which 6 measure approach motives (e.g., “to please my partner” and “to promote intimacy in my relationship”) and 6 avoidance motives (e.g., “to avoid conflict in my relationship” and “to prevent my partner from losing interest in me”). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert-scale (1 = *never or very rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 5 = *always or almost always*) and higher total scores indicate more approach/avoidance motives. The Cronbach’s Alpha for my sample was $\alpha = .77$, which indicates an acceptable internal consistency.

Statistical Analysis

The statistical analyses were done using IBM SPSS Statistics (v. 29) and R Statistical Software (v4.3.1; R Core Team 2023). Sum scores were created for answers on the preference scale (scores ranging from 16 to 112), approach motives (scores ranging from 6 to 30), and avoidance motives (scores ranging from 6 to 30). To examine the first research question, a graph depicting mean scores on the preference scale was created in R using *ggplot2* (v2.0.0; Wickham, 2016) and one-sample t-tests were calculated to compare the item means to the neutral value 4 on the Likert-scale (“I feel the same about them”). Separate t-tests were calculated for men and women. A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between preference questions and approach motives, avoidance motives, and gender. Interaction terms for gender and approach motives, and gender and avoidance motives were added to the regression. Graphs will be made for any significant interaction effects to aid interpretation. Assumptions for the regression were checked and since some outliers were found in the data set, bootstrapping was performed to ensure robust analyses. A dummy variable was created for gender (men = 0, women = 1). Additionally, independent sample t-tests were conducted to compare means for men and women on the preference scale, approach motives and avoidance motives. When checking

the assumptions for the independent sample t-tests, a problem with the normal distribution was discovered, but because of the sufficiently large sample size the decision was made to proceed with the tests (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Of the participants in the study, about half identified as women (52.7%) and half as men (47.3%). The mean age of participants was 34.0 years ($SD = 9.07$), and mean relationship duration was 8.4 years ($SD = 8.15$). More information about the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Woman	582	52.7
Man	523	47.3
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	953	86.2
Bisexual	102	9.2
Gay/lesbian	14	1.3
Pansexual	23	2.1
Asexual	4	0.4
Other	9	0.8
Relationship status		
Dating partner	35	3.2
Committed partner	960	86.9
Several sex/dating partners	35	3.2
Several committed partners	5	0.5
One committed partner and (sometimes) other dating and/or sex partners	66	6.0
Several committed partners and (sometimes) other dating and/or sex partners	4	0.4
Education		

Middle/junior high school (9 years)	37	3.3
Vocational school or high school (12 years)	435	39.4
Bachelor's degree (applied or university)	380	34.4
Master's degree (applied or university)	230	20.8
Licentiate/doctorate degree	22	2.0
Other	1	0.1
Occupation		
Studying	188	17.0
Employed or self-employed	828	74.9
Retired	12	1.1
Unemployed	41	3.7
Other	36	3.3
Monthly gross income		
Less than 500€	85	7.7
500–999€	88	8.0
1,000–1,999€	124	11.2
2,000–2,999€	299	27.1
3,000–3,999€	226	20.5
4,000–4,999€	132	11.9
5,000–5,999€	88	8.0
6,000€ or more	63	5.7
Nationality		
Finnish	1,102	99.7
Other	3	0.3

On average, women had significantly higher scores on the preference scale than men, $t(1,103) = 11.34, p < .001$, indicating that women had a higher preference for the hypothetical events than men. This represented a medium-sized effect ($d = 0.68$). For approach motives, women's scores were significantly lower than men's, $t(1,065) = 4.23, p < .001$, indicating that women on average had less approach motives for participating in sexual activity than men, the effect size was, however, small ($d = 0.26$). Lastly, women had higher scores than men on avoidance motives but this difference was not significant, $t(1,065) = 1.52, p = 0.131$,

and the effect size was very small ($d = 0.09$). A summary of the results of the independent sample t-tests can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Independent Sample T-test Results for Women and Men on the Study Variables

Variable	Women		Men		<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Preference	50.28	19.61	37.42	17.91	< .001	.68
Approach motives	20.76	4.20	21.85	4.25	< .001	.26
Avoidance motives	10.11	4.50	9.70	4.19	.131	.09

Note. Preference = preference for compliance or another hypothetical event, with higher scores indicating more preference for another hypothetical event; higher scores on approach motives indicate having more approach motives for sex; higher scores on avoidance motives indicate having more avoidance motives for sex; hypothetical range for preference = 16 – 112, for approach motives = 6 – 30, for avoidance motives = 6 – 30.

The correlation matrix of the study variables can be found in Table 3. Significant positive correlations were found between avoidance motives and preference questions, avoidance motives and approach motives, and gender and preference questions. Significant negative correlations were found between approach motives and preference questions, and gender and approach motives.

Table 3

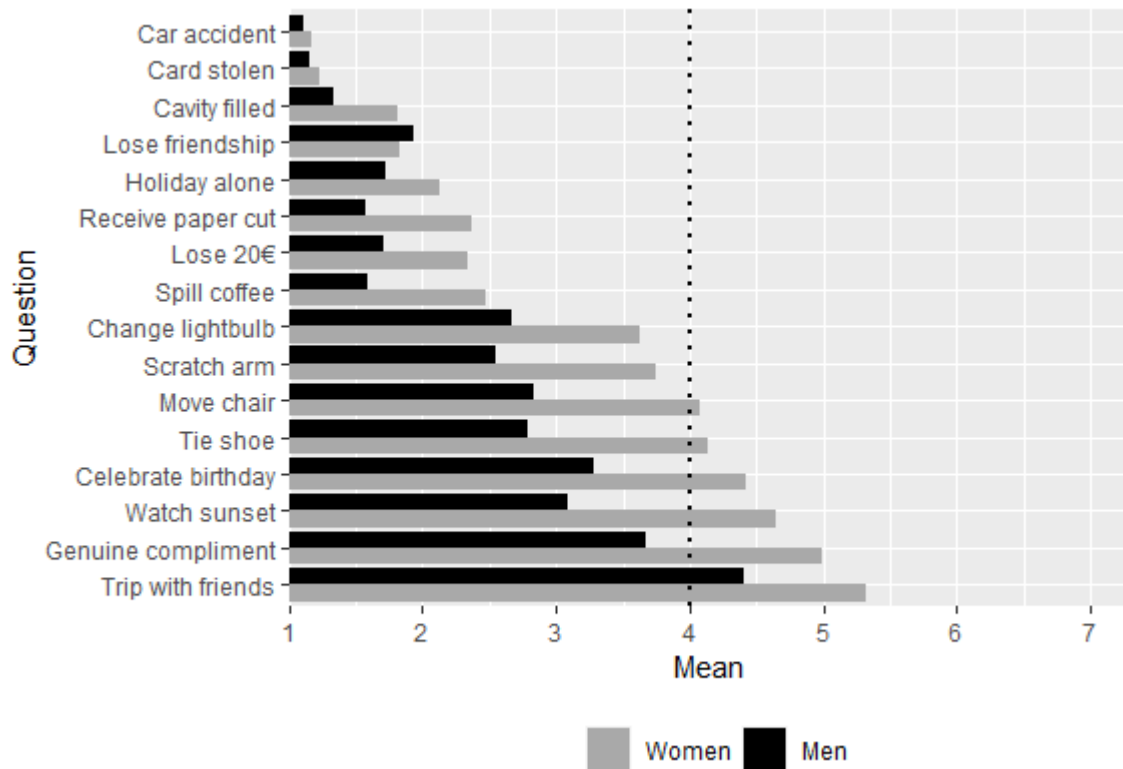
Correlations for Preference for Sexual Compliance or Another Hypothetical Event, Approach Motives, and Avoidance Motives

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Preference	—			
2. Approach	-.200***	—		
3. Avoidance	.114***	.092**	—	
4. Gender	.330***	-.129***	.046	—

Note. $N = 1,067$; dummy variable for gender: men = 0, women = 1; preference = preference for compliance or another hypothetical event, with higher scores indicating more preference for another hypothetical event; higher scores on approach motives indicate having more approach motives for sex; higher scores on avoidance motives indicate having more avoidance motives for sex; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Preference for Sexual Compliance or Another Hypothetical Event

The mean frequency of answers on the preference scale for men and women is depicted in Figure 1. Results of t-tests where item means are compared with the neutral value of the preference scale can be found in Table 4. For most items, sexual compliance was preferred over the hypothetical event. For the last six questions, women, on average, felt the same about compliance and the hypothetical events or a slight preference for the hypothetical events. Men, on average, reported that they would prefer complying to sex over all of the hypothetical events except going on a trip with friends.

Figure 1*Means on the Preference Scale for Each Item by Gender*

Note. Means on the left side of the neutral value (4) are interpreted so that complying to having sex is perceived as more desirable than events listed on the Y axis. 1 = I would much rather comply to having sex than experience the described event; 4 = I feel the same about them; 7 = I would much rather experience the described event than comply to having sex. Items were arranged according to participants' ratings from the most negative events to the most positive events.

Table 4*One Sample T-Tests Comparing Items to Neutral Value (4)*

Item	Men		Women	
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Car accident	1.1 (0.7)	<.001	1.2 (0.8)	<.001
Card stolen	1.2 (0.7)	<.001	1.2 (0.9)	<.001
Cavity filled	1.3 (1.1)	<.001	1.8 (1.6)	<.001
Lose friendship	1.9 (1.7)	<.001	1.8 (1.6)	<.001
Holiday alone	1.7 (1.3)	<.001	2.1 (1.7)	<.001
Receive paper cut	1.6 (1.3)	<.001	2.4 (1.9)	<.001
Lose 20€	1.7 (1.5)	<.001	2.3 (1.9)	<.001
Spill coffee	1.6 (1.3)	<.001	2.5 (1.9)	<.001
Change lightbulb	2.7 (2.0)	<.001	3.6 (1.1)	<.001
Scratch arm	2.6 (2.0)	<.001	3.7 (2.1)	.004
Move chair	2.8 (2.2)	<.001	4.1 (2.2)	.398
Tie shoe	2.8 (2.1)	<.001	4.1 (2.1)	.137
Celebrate birthday	3.3 (2.1)	<.001	4.4 (2.4)	<.001
Watch sunset	3.1 (2.0)	<.001	4.6 (1.8)	<.001
Genuine compliment	3.7 (2.2)	<.001	5.0 (1.9)	<.001
Trip with friends	4.4 (2.1)	<.001	5.3 (1.8)	<.001

Note. Item means are compared with the neutral value of the preference scale, i.e., the answer “I feel the same about them” to the question “Hypothetically, would you rather comply to sex with your current partner than do the following?”. Means lower than 4 indicate that the participants would rather comply than do the hypothetical event and means higher than 4 indicate that participants would rather do the hypothetical event than comply to sex.

Associations Between Preference Questions and Approach and Avoidance Motives and Gender

A summary of the regression model can be found in Table 5. In the multiple linear regression model, approach motives, avoidance motives, and gender significantly explained 15% of the variance in preference questions ($F[5;1,061] = 37.48, p < .001, R^2 = .15$). The interaction effects for gender and approach motives, and gender and avoidance motives were not significant. There was a significant negative association between approach motives and preference questions, a significant positive association between avoidance motives and preference questions, and a significant positive association between gender and preference questions. Since lower scores on the preference scale indicate a preference for sexual compliance over the hypothetical events, in support of my hypothesis, this indicates that having more approach motives for sex is associated with a higher preference for compliance, while having more avoidance motives is associated with a higher preference for the

hypothetical events. In line with my second hypothesis, women had a higher preference for the hypothetical events compared to men.

Table 5

Multiple Regression Results for the Preference Scale

	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	BCa 95% CI		<i>p</i>
				<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
Approach motives	-0.62	-0.13	0.23	-1.11	-0.18	.004
Avoidance motives	0.37	0.08	0.17	0.03	0.70	.035
Gender	16.65	0.42	7.61	1.57	31.42	.023

Note. $N = 1,067$; dummy variable for gender: men = 0, women = 1; higher scores on approach motives indicate having more approach motives for sex; higher scores on avoidance motives indicate having more avoidance motives for sex; B = unstandardized regression coefficient; β = standardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; BCa 95% CI = bias corrected accelerated confidence interval for the regression coefficient; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; $R^2 = .15$.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore how people in a demographically diverse population based Finnish sample perceive sexual compliance in relation to hypothetical events of varying valence. I additionally wanted to study if participants who reported more approach motives preferred compliance to a higher extent compared to participants who reported less approach motives, and if participants who reported more avoidance motives preferred the hypothetical events to a higher extent, and lastly, if women showed less preference for compliance over the hypothetical events than men.

Perception of Compliance

My first research question was how positively or negatively people perceive sexual compliance in comparison to hypothetical events of varying valence. On average, compliance was preferred over most of the hypothetical events. This is in line with previous research that has found compliance to be mostly associated with positive consequences (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998), but contradicts studies where a majority of reported consequences have been negative or mixed (e.g., Katz & Tirone, 2008; Himanen & Gunst, 2023). My results indicate that compliance, for most people, is perceived as comparable to other every-day events. One

possible explanation as to why my sample, compared to studies where people have experienced mostly mixed or negative consequences of compliance, perceive compliance in such a positive way is that our definition of compliance includes instances of responsive desire, which other studies have not done. In our definition of compliance, it was specified that even though one does not feel desire at the beginning of the sexual activity, desire might arise during the activity. This definition was chosen so that all instances where one has chosen to engage in sex without initial desire are included, whether there was a rise in desire during the activity or not. Without this specification, it is more likely that only situations without responsive desire, which are likely experienced as less positive, are thought of as instances of compliance, while situations with responsive desire, which are likely experienced as more positive, are thought of as just “normal” sex.

These results are, however, only generalizable to the general population and it is still possible that specific populations, such as clinical populations that experience some kind of sexual problems, might perceive compliance differently. This is also apparent in the current sample, where some participants, although few, answered that they would prefer very negative events, such as being injured in a car accident, over complying to sex. This indicates that some people do perceive compliance as very negative. It is also possible that individuals who have been previously traumatized by compliance have made the decision to never comply again and therefore have not complied in their current relationship. These hypothetical individuals, and their perception of compliance, are missing from these results, since having complied in your current relationship was a criterion for being included in the study.

When comparing this study to previous studies, one should keep in mind that I have studied the perception of compliance while others have studied consequences of compliance. It is conceivable that a person could have a neutral attitude towards compliance and complying even if there might be consequences in the long term. It is, however, logical to assume that the two are connected in the way that if someone has experienced very negative consequences of compliance, they would probably not prefer compliance in most instances.

Approach and Avoidance Motives

In my sample, having more approach motives for engaging in sexual activity was associated with more preference for sexual compliance over the hypothetical events, while having more avoidance motives was associated with less preference for compliance. This supports my first hypothesis and corresponds with results obtained by Impett et al. (2005) and

Himanen and Gunst (2023), which have found that approach motives are associated with perceiving more positive consequences of sexual activity and sexual compliance, and that avoidance motives are associated with perceiving less positive consequences of the same. My results are, however, only partly in line with those of Katz and Tirone (2009) who only found a negative association between avoidance motives and relationship satisfaction and no association between approach motives and relationship satisfaction.

Interestingly, in my sample, there was a small positive correlation between approach and avoidance motives, indicating that approach and avoidance motives for sex are not opposite to each other. This might be because an approach motive for having sex, for example, “I want to have sex to make my partner happy” easily can be flipped to an avoidance motive “I want to have sex to avoid that my partner gets in a bad mood”. In other words, the same goal might lie behind both an approach and an avoidance motive, the difference lies in whether one views it through a more positive or negative lens.

The fact that my results were significant and went in the expected direction indicates that the preference scale has captured a similar phenomenon, that earlier studies have found regarding consequences of compliance, regarding perception of compliance, even though I chose to explore the subject using a very different approach compared to what has been used before. This speaks to the validity of the preference scale. Worth noting is the fact that the motives used in my measure regards all sex with the partner, and not just compliant sex. It is fair to assume that the level of approach and avoidance motives one has for all sex, compliant sex included, to some extent corresponds with the motives that one has for compliant sex. This approach does not, however, take into account the possibility that an individual might have different motives for sex depending on whether they are complying or not. Because of this the current results might be more modest than if motives had been measured only for compliant sex.

Gender

In support of my second hypothesis, women showed less preference for sexual compliance than men, and even though all participants preferred compliance over the negative hypothetical events, a gender difference can be observed for the positive and neutral hypothetical events. Women, on average, preferred all the positive hypothetical events and a few neutral events over compliance while men only preferred one positive event over compliance. This indicates that neither men nor women, on a group level, perceive compliance in a severely negative way. The women in the study compared compliance to

neutrally valenced events, which could be seen as contradictory to my speculations in the introduction part of this paper, since a more negative attitude might be expected if women through covert social pressure (Conroy et al., 2015) perceived compliance situations as more threatening and as a result experienced more negative emotional consequences of compliance. Surprisingly, the men in the study displayed a very positive view of compliance, preferring it over almost all positive events. Since there is a social perception that having and wanting to have a lot of sex is associated with being more masculine (Quinn-Nilas & Kennett, 2018), a possible explanation is that the male participants have answered the preference questions in a more socially desirable way. The difference in how women and men in this study view compliance could be seen as a reflection of the gender differences in reported consequences of compliance that can be discerned from earlier research, such as women experiencing more internal consequences, for example, negative feelings about oneself (Gunst et al., 2023), and men experiencing more external consequences, for example, unwanted pregnancy (Quinn-Nilas et al., 2018).

Strengths and Limitations

A strength of the current study is that it is one of the few studies on sexual compliance that has used a large population-based sample. The sample also included roughly as many men as women, whereas samples in other studies on compliance have been comprised of mostly women. Even though my sample was comparatively large, some limitations exist. The response rate was low, only about 7%. Possible reasons for the low response rate could be that no reminder letters were sent out due to budget reasons, and that more men than women were contacted in order to obtain a more balanced sample, since studies suggest that men are less inclined to participate in studies than women (e.g., Johansson et al., 2013). There also were not enough participants belonging to a gender minority to include them in the analyses. The proportion of gender minority participants was, however, comparable to that of other Finnish population-based studies, for example, Tybur et al. (2020). This population-based sample is more representative than if I had used a convenience sample, but compared to data from Tilastokeskus (2024), my sample, on average, has a higher education than the general Finnish population in the same age groups. According to recent rankings (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024) Finland is the 8th most gender-equal country in the EU and people from the Nordic countries generally have more liberal attitudes toward sex than other Europeans (Kontula, 2016). This could indicate that Finnish residents have a more positive

view of sex and sexual compliance than residents in many other countries and should be kept in mind since it might affect generalizability to other populations.

In this study, an attempt was made to obtain a picture of how positively or negatively people perceive compliance. The method I used to do this asks participants to compare compliance to other hypothetical events and thus illustrates people's attitudes toward compliance in a more concrete way than in earlier studies. The fact that the association between answers on the preference scale and answers regarding what motives (approach or avoidance) one has for engaging in sex corresponds to earlier research speaks to the validity of the scale. Worth mentioning is that I received some feedback, from about 10 of the 1,105 participants, that the questionnaire, for example, had a difficult layout, simplified matters too much and contained confusing questions.

As in all survey studies, it is possible that participants have not answered questions truthfully or correctly either on purpose or unconsciously. One could, for example, speculate that participants, due to societal and cultural expectations (Conroy et al., 2015), might have given more positive answers that favor compliance and that answers might have been more negative otherwise. Compliance can also be difficult to understand as a concept, and this might be especially important to keep in mind since the survey has been sent to people with different socioeconomic backgrounds. This is an issue not only for participants in compliance studies but for the compliance field as a whole. Different studies have used different definitions of compliance, which makes it difficult to compare results between studies. Another term often used in compliance research is the term "sexual desire", which is often used interchangeably with the term "sexual want" without controlling for whether they actually mean the same thing and are interpreted in the same way. In the future, studies should investigate how these conceptual issues affect results and the conclusions that can be drawn from them. In the compliance field, there is also a need for a more nuanced view of compliance; presently, it is often regarded as a black-or-white matter where one either feels desire or not. It is, however, possible that there is more ambivalence involved in sexual decision-making than current research takes into account.

Future Research and Clinical Implications

In the current study, the included factors approach motives, avoidance motives and gender explained 15% of the variance in how people perceived sexual compliance. This means that there are several other factors affecting the issue. Since there in the current body of research, as well as in the current paper, can be found examples of people experiencing

sexual compliance as severely negative, an important aim of future studies would be to identify factors that constitute a risk for severely negative experiences. One such factor, as suggested by Vannier and O’Sullivan (2010), could be a history of pressured sexual activity in a relationship. By identifying what other factors affect how compliance is perceived and experienced, information on who might benefit from compliance as a tool for dealing with desire problems and who might not, would be available to professionals in the field. In clinical practice, based on the results of this study – that a large part of the general Finnish population compare compliance to neutrally valenced hypothetical events, it would be advisable to put an emphasis on exploring clients’ own perception of compliance, rather than assuming that compliance is intrinsically problematic.

Conclusions

In the current population-based sample, sexual compliance was perceived as comparable to many neutrally and some positively valenced events. Men had a strong preference for compliance, with only one positive hypothetical event being preferred over compliance. Women also preferred compliance over all negative and some neutral events, but in contrast to the men, they preferred all positive and a few neutral events over compliance. Approach and avoidance motives were associated with compliance preference in the expected way, with approach motives being associated with a higher preference for compliance (vs. the hypothetical events) and avoidance motives being associated with less preference for compliance (vs. the hypothetical events). Although these results indicate that most people do not see compliance as a big deal, indications of some people perceiving compliance as severely negative warrant further research.

Summary in Swedish – Svensk sammanfattning

Uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående i ett populationsbaserat finländskt sampel

Sexuellt tillmötesgående innebär att man samtycker till sex trots att man själv inte känner sexuell lust (Impett & Peplau, 2003; Katz & Tirone, 2009). I definitionen av sexuellt tillmötesgående ingår även att samtycke ska ges utan fysiska eller psykologiska påtryckningar från partnern (Quinn-Nilas & Kennett, 2018). Sexuellt tillmötesgående verkar vara ett vanligt förekommande fenomen i alla typer av förhållanden. I tidigare studier har 37–64% av deltagare rapporterat att de varit sexuellt tillmötesgående i sitt nuvarande eller senaste förhållande (Katz & Tirone, 2009; O’Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2010; Himanen & Gunst, 2023; Rubinsky, 2020). I vissa studier har förekomsten av sexuellt tillmötesgående varit högre bland kvinnor än män (t.ex. Himanen & Gunst, 2023;

Impett & Peplau, 2003), medan det i andra inte funnits någon könsskillnad (t.ex. Quinn-Nilas m fl., 2013; Quinn-Nilas & Kennett, 2018; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010).

I tidigare studier har både positiva och negativa konsekvenser av sexuellt tillmötesgående rapporterats. Till de positiva konsekvenserna hör konsekvenser relaterade till tillfredsställelse i och underhåll av relationen såsom ökad intimitet och känsla av kärlek samt starkare anknytning (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Himanen & Gunst, 2023). Sexuellt tillmötesgående kan även vara ett användbart redskap för behandling av lustproblematik (Herbenick m fl., 2014). Till de negativa konsekvenserna hör lägre tillfredsställelse i relationen och mindre sexuell tillfredsställelse (Katz & Tirone, 2009; Rubinsky, 2020; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010), allmänt sämre mental hälsa (Rubinsky, 2020) samt ökade nivåer av stresshormonet kortisol (Hartmann & Crockett, 2016).

En faktor som kan påverka upplevelsen och konsekvenserna av sexuellt tillmötesgående är motiven man har för att delta i sexuell aktivitet. I tidigare forskning har man funnit en koppling mellan undvikandemotiv för sex, alltså att man väljer att ha sex för att undvika någon oönskad konsekvens, och mer negativa konsekvenser av sexuellt tillmötesgående (Himanen & Gunst, 2023; Katz & Tirone, 2009) samt mellan närmandemotiv för sex, alltså att man förväntar sig positiva följder av aktiviteten, och mer positiva konsekvenser av sexuellt tillmötesgående (Himanen & Gunst, 2023). Könsskillnader i konsekvenser av sexuellt tillmötesgående är ett ganska outforskat område, men det finns vissa implikationer på att kvinnor upplever fler interna konsekvenser såsom negativa känslor kring självet (Gunst m fl., 2023) och att män upplever fler externa konsekvenser såsom risk för graviditet eller könssjukdomar (Quinn-Nilas m fl., 2018).

Syfte och ämnesmotivering

Syftet med studien var att, till skillnad från tidigare studier som har tittat på direkta konsekvenser, undersöka människors uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående i jämförelse med olika hypotetiska scenarion med olika valens i ett populationsbaserat sampel. Därtill undersöktes kopplingen mellan uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående och undvikande- och närmandemotiv samt kön. Tre forskningsfrågor ställdes **F1**: Hur positiv eller negativ är människors uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående i jämförelse med hypotetiska scenarion med olika valens? Ingen hypotes ställdes på grund av att det finns så lite tidigare forskning kring ämnet. **F2**: Finns det en koppling mellan närmande- och undvikandemotiv för sex och uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående? Hypotesen var att personer med mer närmandemotiv i större utsträckning skulle välja sexuellt tillmötesgående än de hypotetiska scenarierna samt

att personer med mer undvikandemotiv i större utsträckning skulle välja de hypotetiska scenarierna än sexuellt tillmötesgående. **F3:** Finns det en koppling mellan kön och uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående? Hypotesen var att kvinnor skulle föredra de hypotetiska scenarierna över sexuellt tillmötesgående i större utsträckning än män.

Metod och material

Den nuvarande studien var en del av en större datainsamling där en inbjudan till att delta i studien skickades till 30 000 slumpmässigt utvalda adresser i det finländska populationsregistret. I studien inkluderades respondenter som var 18 år och äldre och som hade varit sexuellt tillmötesgående med sin nuvarande partner åtminstone en gång. I slutändan inkluderades 1105 deltagare i analyser av medeltal och 1067 i analyser av kopplingar mellan motiv och preferenser. Ungefär hälften av deltagarna identifierade sig som kvinnor (52,7%) och hälften som män (47,3%). Medelåldern för deltagarna var 34 år.

Utöver demografisk information om deltagarna samlades information in med hjälp av två frågeformulär. Det första frågeformuläret handlade om uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående och var konstruerat så att deltagarna, på en sjugradig skala, fick svara på om de hellre skulle vara sexuellt tillmötesgående eller vara med om olika hypotetiska scenarion med positiv, negativ eller neutral valens. Exempel på inkluderade hypotetiska scenarier är ”vara med om en bilolycka”, ”byta en glödlampa” och ”få en genuin komplimang”. Skalans upplägg inspirerades av Yeater m fl. (2012). Det andra frågeformuläret var en förkortad version av ”Sex Motives Scale” av Cooper m fl. (1998). Här fick deltagarna ta ställning till frågan ”hur ofta har du sex...” gällande olika undvikandemotiv, till exempel ”för att undvika konflikt i förhållandet” samt olika närmandemotiv, till exempel ”för att främja intimiteten i mitt förhållande”. Frågan besvarades på en femgradig skala.

T-test beräknades för att jämföra medelvärden på uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående-skalan med skalans neutrala värde, samt för att jämföra medelvärden för könen på studievariablerna. För att undersöka kopplingen mellan uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående och närmande- och undvikandemotiv samt kön utfördes en multipel linjär regressionsanalys.

Resultat

I genomsnitt hade kvinnor högre poäng på skalan gällande uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående än män, vilket indikerar att kvinnorna föredrog de hypotetiska scenarierna över sexuellt tillmötesgående i högre utsträckning än männen. Kvinnorna hade också lägre poäng på närmandemotiv än männen, vilket indikerar att kvinnorna hade färre

närmandemotiv för att delta i sexuell aktivitet. En sammanfattning av resultaten från de oberoende t-testen hittas i tabell 2.

En sammanfattning av resultaten från t-testen hittas i tabell 4. Dessa resultat visade att sexuellt tillmötesgående, på gruppnivå, föredrogs över de flesta av de hypotetiska scenarierna. Männerna föredrog endast det hypotetiska scenariot ”åka på en resa med vänner” över sexuellt tillmötesgående. På de sista sex frågorna skattade kvinnorna att de kände ganska lika för sexuellt tillmötesgående och de hypotetiska scenarierna.

Resultaten från den multipla linjära regressionsanalysen finns sammanfattade i tabell 5. I regressionsmodellen förklarade närmande- och undvikandemotiv samt kön 15% av variationen i svaren angående uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående. Det fanns en signifikant negativ koppling mellan närmandemotiv och uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående, en signifikant positiv koppling mellan undvikandemotiv och uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående samt en signifikant positiv koppling mellan kön och uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående. Detta indikerar att fler närmandemotiv för sex är kopplat till en högre preferens för sexuellt tillmötesgående, att fler undvikandemotiv är kopplade till högre preferens för de hypotetiska scenarierna samt att kvinnorna föredrog de hypotetiska scenarierna över sexuellt tillmötesgående i större utsträckning än männen.

Diskussion

Sexuellt tillmötesgående uppfattades i mitt sampel som jämförbart med vardagliga händelser och resultaten stödde hypoteserna angående könsskillnader och motiv för sex. Männerna i studien föredrog sexuellt tillmötesgående över alla hypotetiska scenarier utom ett, medan kvinnorna föredrog alla positiva och vissa neutrala hypotetiska scenarier över sexuellt tillmötesgående. Kopplingen mellan närmande- och undvikandemotiv för sex och uppfattning av sexuellt tillmötesgående gick i den förväntade riktningen – närmandemotiv var kopplade till en högre preferens för sexuellt tillmötesgående (jämfört med de hypotetiska scenarierna) medan undvikandemotiv var kopplade till en högre preferens för de hypotetiska scenarierna (jämfört med sexuellt tillmötesgående). Ett fåtal deltagare uppfattade sexuellt tillmötesgående som jämförbart med väldigt negativa hypotetiska scenarier. Orsaker till detta kunde undersökas i framtida studier.

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Appendix A

Items Included in the Preference Scale

- Spend the holidays alone
- Have a cavity drilled and filled by a dentist
- Lose a friendship
- Celebrate my birthday
- Be injured in a car accident
- Get a paper cut on my thumb
- Scratch my left arm
- Watch the sunset
- Have my credit card stolen
- Spill coffee all over a new shirt
- Move a chair
- Receive a genuine compliment
- Lose 20 €
- Go on a trip with friends
- Tie my shoe
- Replace a lightbulb

Pressmeddelande

Forskare vid Åbo Akademi har visat att finländare uppfattar sexuellt tillmötesgående, alltså att samtycka till sex fastän man inte känner sexuell lust, som jämförbart med andra vardagliga händelser och aktiviteter, såsom att knyta sina skosnören eller byta en glödlampa. Därtill observerades en skillnad i hur män och kvinnor uppfattar sexuellt tillmötesgående. När män behövde välja mellan hypotetiska scenarion och att vara sexuellt tillmötesgående med sin nuvarande partner så skulle de i högre grad än kvinnor välja att vara sexuellt tillmötesgående.

”Resultaten kan bero på att vi i vår definition av sexuellt tillmötesgående inkluderat att sexuell lust kan uppstå efter att den sexuella aktiviteten inletts. I tidigare studier har man bara talat om sex utan lust – med vårt tillägg kan sexuellt tillmötesgående uppfattas som mer positivt. Könsskillnaderna kunde bero på att kvinnor i större utsträckning upplever interna konsekvenser av sexuellt tillmötesgående och männen fler externa. Men här krävs mer forskning innan man kan dra några slutsatser”, säger forskare Nynäs.

Materialet som analyserades i studien samlades in under hösten 2023 av forskare vid ämnet psykologi vid Åbo Akademi genom en enkät som skickades ut till 30 000 hushåll i Finland. Totalt 1105 deltagare uppfyllde inklusionskriterierna för den nuvarande studien.