

THE RELATIONSHIP CONTEXT OF SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

**Young Adults' Romantic Views as Predictors of Condom
Use and Pressured Sex**

by

Gaynor L. Edwards, B.A. (Hons)

This thesis is presented for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
at Murdoch University.

2010

School of Psychology
Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

.....

Gaynor L. Edwards

THE RELATIONSHIP CONTEXT OF SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR
Young Adults' Romantic Views as Predictors of Condom Use and Pressured
Sex

Gaynor L. Edwards

Murdoch University

PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

ABSTRACT

The current thesis focused on the relationship context of sexual behaviour, and on how the romantic views held by young adults related to sexual compliance.

Romantic views explored included rejection sensitivity, expectations of a partner's desires to use condoms, and romantic views related to power in relationships.

Romantic views were hypothesised to relate to both condom use and pressured sex in a variety of relationship contexts. Furthermore, gender was examined as a factor that may shape the sexual behaviour of young adults.

Study 1 used a pre-existing American data set to test the relationship between fears of rejection and sexual behaviour among single young adults ($n = 387$).

Rejection fears related to experiencing more pressured sex, expected sex, and less condom use, consistent with a rejection sensitivity model. Furthermore, fears of rejection interacted with relationship importance, such that rejection fears predicted more pressured sex among those placing low, but not medium or high, importance on relationships.

Studies 2, 3, and 4 used a purpose-built online survey with Australian university students (18-25 years, n = 1144) who reported on their relationships and sexual behaviour in diverse relationship contexts. Study 2 focused on condom use as a form of sexual compliance in romantic and casual relationships, taking into account whether individuals wanted to use condoms, and whether they thought their partners did. Rejection sensitivity predicted condom use when individuals' condom use desires were at odds with those they thought their partners held. Specifically, rejection sensitive individuals used condoms less, if that was what they thought their partners wanted, supporting the importance of contextual factors when linking personality dispositions to behaviour. The importance of gender was also highlighted, with women over-represented relative to men among those who reported wanting to use condoms more often than they thought their partners did.

Consistent with the common perception that men are less responsible than women when it comes to condom use, Study 3 hypothesised that in romantic relationships young adults would expect men to want to use condoms less than women. Results showed that although men and women did not significantly differ in their own level of condom use desire, women thought that men wanted to use condoms less than men reported wanting to use condoms themselves, suggesting that gender stereotypical views about condom use do exist, but that such views may not be accurate.

The final study explored how emotional intimacy power related to different sexual experiences for men and women. Participants reported how invested they were in the romantic or casual relationship, and how invested they thought their partners were. Using a measure of individual relationship power, and consistent with predictions, individuals with more power used condoms in a manner more consonant

with their own desires. Experiences of pressured sex were contrary to the hypothesis, with men, but not women, with more power experiencing more pressured sex. It is possible that sexual behaviour may be used as an exchange process between couples, with sex representing something that women give to men, and condom use representing something that men give to women.

In summary, all four studies suggest that young adults have relationship consequences in mind, particularly their own need to belong, when negotiating sexual behaviour in both romantic and casual relationships. The findings have theoretical implications that generally support models of rejection sensitivity, cognitive-affective personality factors, and power-dependence relations. Importantly, the findings also have clinical implications for sexual health initiatives and therapeutic work with individuals and couples.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my primary supervisor, Professor Bonnie Barber. I have been very fortunate to have learnt from such a knowledgeable and wise supervisor.

I am also very grateful to Dr. Suzanne Dziurawiec for her invaluable input throughout the last few years, and in particular, her comments on the final drafts of this thesis.

Thank you also to Bonnie and Suzanne for their support, encouragement and enthusiasm throughout this time. It has really been a pleasure to work with you both.

I would also like to thank my colleagues, and friends, from Murdoch University. These friends have made the last few years a very memorable and enjoyable time of my life. I would like to thank Bree Abbott, Corey Blomfield and Renee Carey in particular, for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of my chapters.

I could not have completed this thesis without the time of the participants who responded to my survey. Thank you to those who responded to the survey and shared the intimate details of their lives.

I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers who offered valuable suggestions on ways to improve the chapters of this thesis.

Finally, I would like to thank Graeme and my family, Rod, Joan, Blake, and Nana, for their support, and for always believing in me.

LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This thesis comprises the following publications:

1. Edwards, G.L. & Barber, B.L (in press). The relationship between rejection sensitivity and compliant condom use. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*.
2. Edwards, G.L. & Barber, B.L (2010). Women may underestimate their partners' desires to use condoms: Possible implications for behaviour. *Journal of Sex Research*, 47, 59-65.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|---------|
| Abstract..... | ix |
| Acknowledgements..... | ix |
| List of Original Publications..... | ix |
| CHAPTER ONE..... | 1 |
| Overview | |
| CHAPTER TWO..... | 16 |
| Introduction | |
| Rejection Sensitivity and Other Views of Romantic Relationships..... | 21 |
| Rejection Sensitivity and Relationship Importance..... | 25 |
| Rejection Sensitivity and The Context Surrounding Condom use..... | 33 |
| Romantic Views and Gender..... | 38 |
| Romantic Views and Power..... | 42 |
| The Current Thesis..... | 48 |
| Preface to Chapter Three..... | 66 |
| CHAPTER THREE..... | 69 |
| Study 1: The romantic views of single young adults: Rejection fears are linked to sexual compliance | |
| Preface to Chapter Four..... | 97 |
| CHAPTER FOUR..... | 101 |
| Study 2: The relationship between rejection sensitivity and compliant condom use. | |
| Preface to Chapter Five..... | 128 |
| CHAPTER FIVE..... | 131 |
| Study 3: Women may underestimate their partners’ desires to use condoms: Possible implications for behaviour. | |
| Preface to Chapter Six..... | 153 |
| CHAPTER SIX..... | 155 |
| Study 4: Who’s got the upper hand? Emotional intimacy power predicts different sexual experiences for men and women. | |
| CHAPTER SEVEN..... | 190 |
| General Discussion | |
| Theoretical Implications..... | 193 |
| Rejection Sensitivity..... | 193 |
| Gender..... | 196 |
| Power..... | 197 |
| Relationship Type..... | 199 |
| Clinical Implications..... | 200 |
| Limitations..... | 203 |
| Future Research..... | 207 |
| Concluding Remarks..... | 209 |

Appendix A: MSALT survey items

Appendix B: Online survey

Appendix C: Bivariate associations between romantic views and sexual behaviour