The Relationship between attachment styles and sex guilt among Iranian women

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine the relationship between sex guilt and attachment styles. The data presented here were obtained from a total of 192 married Iranian women who were selected via a multi-cluster sampling method from three universities in Tehran. The subjects’ socio-demographic data, attachment styles (Adult Attachment Styles Index), and sex guilt (Mosher Revised Sex-Guilt Inventory) was gathered. Findings showed significant relationships between sex guilt and secure attachment style (r = -0.265, p < 0.01), Insecure-ambivalent attachment style (r = 0.241, p < 0.01) and insecure-avoidant attachment style (r = 0.257, p < 0.01). Also there were significant relationships between sex guilt and age (r = 0.438, p < 0.01) and marital duration (r = 0.345, p < 0.01). Age, insecure-ambivalent and insecure-avoidant attachment styles were able to predict 25.1 percent of the variance of sex guilt. In conclusion, higher scores in secure attachment styles in women are associated with lower scores of sex guilt and higher scores in insecure-ambivalent and insecure-avoidant attachment styles are associated with higher levels of sex guilt among women. Also, age and marital duration are positively correlated with sex guilt in women.

Keywords: attachment styles, sex guilt, Iranian women.

1. Introduction

Attachment process is an important phenomenon in the process of every individual's development and refers to the strong bond that develops between infant and caregiver. Bowlby (1969) was the pioneer who introduced the concept of attachment process to illustrate this relationship. After him, Ainsworth (1978) continued his work and expanded attachment theory. Hazan and Shaver (1987) developed the adult attachment theory further based on the principles of Bowlby and Ainsworth’s attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1969) to explain how early attachment leads to individual differences in adult social/romantic relationships. Based on Ainsworth’s typology, Hazan and Shaver (1987) developed a simple category index that can classify individuals into three adult attachment styles: secure, anxious (or anxious/ambivalent) and avoidant. After them, Bartholomew suggested (1990) that early attachment relationships have major effects on the formation of later attachment relationships. In recent years researchers have focused on understanding the effects of early attachment relationships on adolescence and on adulthood romantic relationships (Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998). Attachment styles also affect many other psychological and relationship issues. Lopez et al. (1997) believe that the two main emotions which are significantly influenced by attachment styles are guilt and shame. Sex guilt refers to the expectancy for self-punishment (or inwardly directed emotional or behavioral reprimanding) due to a violation of one’s sexual standards of conduct,
and may be shown in the avoidance of sexual contact or inhibition of behavior, as well as in altered thought processes in sexual situations (Mosher & Cross, 1971). Sex guilt affects different aspects of one’s personal life, especially relationships with one’s partner. People who feel guilty always worry about violating moral rules and they feel that they are bad persons when they engage in sexual behavior. Attitude toward sexual issues, such as sex guilt, is one of the most common reasons for sexual dissatisfaction, and sometimes even the formation of sexual dysfunction. This kind of attitudes leads to problems such as premature ejaculation and sexual impotence in men, and low sexual desire and anorgasmia in women (Zhanda, 2005). Because sex guilt has emotional and personality components, it influences not only the individual's perception of sexual behaviour, but can also aid or inhibit the causation of specific sexual behaviours. Thus sex guilt influences the continuation of sexual behaviour (more sex guilt leads to a lesser chance of repeating the behaviour that evokes sex guilt) and may have a negative effect on future sexual function and satisfaction (Moore & Davidson, 1997). Research has shown that discomfort with sexual issues and sexual dissatisfaction (psychological and physiological) are correlated with high levels of sex guilt during first intercourse, high current and future sex guilt, and an increased chance of sexual dysfunction (Moore & Davidson, 1997). Divasto, Pathak & Fishbourn (1981) found a significant reverse relationship between sex guilt and sexual behavior. They also found that there is a significant reverse relationship between age and sexual behavior. On the other hand, studies have shown that women are more prone to feel guilty than men. Bennet-Mcquoid and Bursik (2005) found that women are particularly prone to feelings of guilt and shame, and that men reported more guilt traits. The impact of different attachment styles on various psychological disorders such as depression (Burnette et al., 2009) and chronic pain (Meredith, Onsworth & Strong, 2008) has been studied, but sex guilt is an area which needs more exploration. The relationship between sex guilt and sexual problems has been studied by various researchers, but in the field of the factors that influence sex guilt, there is a dearth of scientific data. Therefore, in this study, we have hypothesized that secure attachment style is positively related to sex guilt in women. Also we hypothesized that insecure-ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles are inversely related to sex guilt in women. The relationship between age and marital duration with sex guilt, were also investigated in the present study. We were also interested in determining the share of attachment styles and age in explaining the variance of sex guilt in women.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were all married student women who were studying at the University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation, Tarbiat Modarres University and Islamic Azad University in both undergraduate and graduate programs, all were 18-40 years old and selected through Multi-Clustering Sampling method. Excluding criteria were: pregnancy, menopause, having a specific disease such as Diabetes, Thyroids, cardiovascular diseases, different types of cancer, central nervous system diseases such as MS, axis I disorders such as mood or anxiety disorders, axis II disorders, consumption of a specific drug (such as a sexual desire stimulant or reducer and psycho-active drugs), consumption of alcohol and narcotics, students in the majors of psychology and counselling (because of familiarity with the variables and questionnaires) and presenting invalid and incomplete information by the subjects.

2.1.1. Measures

Socio-demographic questionnaire. A questionnaire was designed by the researchers to assess demographic data including sex, age, marital status, marital duration, education, university, pregnancy status, consumption of a specific drug, alcohol and narcotic, a specific disease, or mental and personality disorder.

Adult attachment scale. In Iran the adult attachment scale has been developed by Besharat (1999) based on Hazan and Shaver's attachment scale. The scale has two parts of general and specific attachment. It measures three different attachment styles: secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-ambivalent. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for each sub scale (secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-ambivalent) among 240 university students was 0.72, 0.74 and 0.70. Test-retest reliability (with two weeks interval) among a group of 30 university students was 0.92. Content reliability was assessed by correlation among four university professors' opinions and was 0.73-0.76 for secure
attachment style, 0.60-0.70 for insecure-avoidant attachment style and 0.63-0.87 for insecure-ambivalent attachment style which were all significant.

Revised Mosher sex guilt inventory. This inventory consists of 50 questions and was designed by Mosher (1998) in order to assess guilt about sexual issues. It is in the form of a Likert scale (0-6) and measures sex guilt on a range of 0-300. The psychometric properties of this scale have been confirmed in several studies (Mosher, 1998). In Iran, the Cronbach alpha of the questionnaire among 917 university students was 0.87. Test-retest reliability (with a two week interval) among 225 university student was 0.77. Content validity was assessed using the Kendal coefficient among 7 psychology professors and was 0.82. The convergent and discriminate validity of the questionnaire was assessed by performing it simultaneously with sexual and knowledge attitude scales and was confirmed (Besharat, 2010).

2.1.1.1. Data analysis

SPSS 16.0 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) software package was used in the analysis of the data. Descriptive statistical analysis, Pearson correlation, Stepwise Regression, and one-way ANOVA methods were implemented in order to analyze the data.

3. Results

Information regarding age (in years) and marital duration (in months) of the subject is presented in table 1. Also, 67 participants were studying at Bachelor's degree level, 102 were at master's degree level and 23 were at Ph.D. level. The University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation had 82 participating students, 67 were from Tarbiat Modarres University and 43 from Islamic Azad University. To examine three hypotheses of the study Pearson correlation coefficient between the scores of secure, insecure-avoidant and insecure-ambivalent attachment styles with sex guilt was calculated. Pearson correlation coefficient between sex guilt and secure attachment style was (r = -0.265, p < 0.01). It means higher scores in secure attachment style are associated with lower scores in sex guilt. Pearson correlation coefficient between sex guilt and insecure-ambivalent attachment style was (r = 0.241, p < 0.01). It means higher scores in insecure-ambivalent attachment style are associated with higher scores in sex guilt. Pearson correlation coefficient between sex guilt and insecure-avoidant attachment style was (r = 0.257, p < 0.01). It means higher scores in insecure-avoidant attachment style are associated with higher scores in sex guilt. All three hypotheses of the study were confirmed. In order to assess the relationship between age and marital duration with sex guilt, Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated. The results showed a significant positive correlation between age and sex guilt (r = 0.438, p < 0.01) and also between marital duration and sex guilt (r = 0.345 p < 0.01). Correlations among all the variables of the study, Mean, Standard deviation and the absolute range of variables, are presented in Table 1

Table1: Descriptive statistics and inter correlation for study variables

|              | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 6   |
|--------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1.Sex guilt  | 1   |     |     |     |     |     |
| 2.Secure attachment | -0.265** | 1 |     |     |     |     |
| 3.Ambivalent attachment | 0.241** | -0.29** | 1 |     |     |     |
| 4.Avoidant attachment | 0.257** | -0.78** | 0.1 | 1 |     |     |
| 5.Age        | 0.438** | -0.258** | 0.01 | 0.25** | 1 |     |
| 6.Marital duration | 0.453** | -0.2** | 0.04 | 0.2** | 0.725** | 1 |
| M            | 163 |     |     | 14.97 | 26.38 | 41.8|
| SD           | 57  | 5   | 4.8 | 5   | 4   | 36.04|
| Absolute ranges | 24-270 | 6-31 | 6-30 | 7-31 | 18-40 | 2-150|

**P<0.01

Also, in order to assess the differences of sex guilt scores among different attachment styles, one-way ANOVA method was used, and the results indicated significant difference in the scores of sex guilt among different attachment styles [ F = 14.53 (P < 0.0001)]. Also in Post-Hoc (Using Tuki method) there was a significant difference between sex guilt scores of insecure-ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles with those of secure attachment style. In other words, participants who had insecure-ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles, in
To determine the share of attachment styles and age in explaining the variance of sex guilt among women, variables of the study (secure, insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-avoidant attachment styles and age) were entered in Regression analysis (using Stepwise method). The results are shown in table 3.

Table 3: Stepwise Regression analysis results for age and attachment styles predicting sex guilt

|          | Adjusted $R^2$ | F change | $\beta$ | t     | sig   |
|----------|---------------|----------|---------|-------|-------|
| 1        | 0.188a        | 45.71    | 0.438   | 6.7   | 0.000 |
| 2        | 0.239b        | 30.9     | 0.434   | 6.8   | 0.000 |
| 3        | 0.251c        | 22.3     | 0.402   | 6.2   | 0.000 |

Predictors: (constant), age
Predictors: (constant), age, insecure-ambivalent attachment style
Predictors: (constant), age, insecure-ambivalent attachment style, insecure-avoidant attachment style

As it is shown, in the third step, adjusted $R^2$ is 0.251, which means that age, insecure-ambivalent, and avoidant attachment styles can explain 25.1% of the variance of sex guilt.

4. Discussion

As was mentioned earlier, the three hypotheses of the study were confirmed. In other words, higher scores in secure attachment style are associated with lower scores in sex guilt, and higher scores in insecure-ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles are associated with higher scores in sex guilt. This outcome is in line with the study of Lopez et al. (1997). They also found that guilt was significantly related to more secure orientations with regard to the attachment dimension of avoidance/security ($r = -0.22$, $p < 0.01$) and Shame scores were significantly correlated with attachment-related anxiety. They also found that women had higher scores on guilt proneness. Haydon & Shilkert (2001), found that attachment avoidance and anxiety were both positively related to survivor, omnipotent responsibility, and self-hate guilt. Overall, we can assume that people with secure attachment style (in comparison with people with insecure-ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles) experience lower levels of sex guilt. This is probably the result of feeling more security and psychological intimacy in the relationship. On the other hand, people with an avoidant attachment style try to avoid emotional intimacy. This is probably due to discomfort with intimacy and an unwillingness or inability to form close bonds with others. People with an ambivalent attachment style also have higher levels of sex guilt because of their constant fear of rejection and need for intimacy and closeness. Haydon & Shilkert (2001) also found that attachment security enabled comfort with emotional expressiveness in close relationships, but insecure attachment styles - especially ambivalent attachment styles - was related with discomfort with emotional expressiveness, and emotional expressiveness was a strong predictor of sex guilt.

Also we found a significant relationship between age and marital duration with sex guilt, which means that as people age, sex guilt increases. This result is in line with the study of Divasto, Pathak & Fishbourn (1981) who found a significant positive relationship between age and sex guilt. Also we can assume that as people age, they are more interested in religion and spirituality. Starks & Hughey (2003) found that there is a positive relationship between age and religiosity. This inclination toward religion and spirituality has a significant effect on sex guilt, an aspect which needs more investigation. Religion has been strongly linked with sex guilt in the literature. People with
high levels of sex guilt usually are more religious and consider themselves to be more religious than those with lower levels of sex guilt (Moore & Davidson, 1997).

In the regression analyses as we mentioned earlier, age, insecure-ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles were able to predict 25.1% of the variance of sex guilt. Also in Haydon & Shilkert's study (2001), attachment anxiety was the best predictor of sex guilt, followed by secure and avoidant attachment styles.

In all of the findings mentioned above we should bear in mind that sex guilt is a cultural issue. In eastern cultures - especially Islamic cultures - sexual issues are taboo, and people rarely discuss sexual subjects with one another. So, comparing different cultures can lead to interesting outcomes. Also we should notice that our sample group was all women with an age range of 18-40, and results may vary in men and different age ranges. So choosing couple samples from different age ranges is suggested.

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