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## Between closeness and autonomy. The role of self-differentiation in the sexual functioning of young women

### Między bliskością a autonomią. Rola zróżnicowania Ja w funkcjonowaniu seksualnym młodych kobiet

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#### Abstract

**Introduction and objective:** Despite several studies investigating satisfaction in romantic relationships, researchers are still looking for factors that can explain the longevity of relationships but also provide for the right therapeutic effects for couples experiencing a crisis in their relationship. One of the less empirically explored factors affecting satisfaction in romantic relationships, and especially sexual satisfaction, is the level of differentiation of self. **Materials and methods:** In order to verify the presented theoretical assumptions, a study was conducted in which a range of variables related to the quality of romantic relationships were introduced, and then their correlation with the level of self-differentiation of young women was analysed. **Results:** Autonomy, understood as the ability to maintain one's boundaries, is an aspect of self-differentiation that has a particularly positive impact on the quality of sexual life – on satisfaction and assertiveness, motivation, consciousness, and esteem. **Conclusion:** The findings of the study provide an important contribution to the knowledge of women's sexual functioning and, in addition, can be used as guidance for therapeutic effects in the event of difficulties, such as anxiety, lack of motivation or desire, experienced in relationships.

**Keywords:** woman's health, sex partners, couple therapy

#### Streszczenie

**Wprowadzenie i cel:** Pomimo wielu badań nad satysfakcją ze związku romantycznego badacze wciąż poszukują czynników, które mogą wyjaśnić trwałość relacji, ale także zapewnić odpowiednie efekty terapeutyczne dla par przeżywających kryzys w związku. Jednym z mniej zbadanych empirycznie czynników wpływających na satysfakcję ze związku romantycznego, a zwłaszcza satysfakcję seksualną, jest poziom zróżnicowania Ja. Konstrukcja ten stanowi podstawę myśli systemowej w terapii par. **Materiał i metody:** W celu weryfikacji przedstawionych założeń teoretycznych przeprowadzono badanie, w którym wprowadzono różne zmienne związane z jakością życia seksualnego, a następnie przeanalizowano ich związek z poziomem zróżnicowania Ja młodych kobiet. **Wyniki:** Autorki interesowało, czy poziom zróżnicowania Ja będzie związany z jakością życia seksualnego młodych kobiet. Autonomia, rozumiana jako umiejętność zachowania swoich granic, jest aspektem samozróżnicowania, który ma szczególnie pozytywny wpływ na jakość życia seksualnego – na satysfakcję seksualną i asertywność, motywację oraz samoświadomość seksualną. Badanie pokazało, że wraz ze wzrostem poziomu zróżnicowania Ja wzrasta też jakość życia seksualnego wśród młodych kobiet. **Wnioski:** Wyniki te stanowią ważny wkład w wiedzę na temat funkcjonowania seksualnego kobiet, ponadto mogą stanowić wskazówkę co do efektów terapeutycznych w przypadku trudności, takich jak niepokój, brak motywacji seksualnej czy chęci do podejmowania aktywności seksualnej w związku. W świetle prezentowanego badania zasadne jest zastosowanie technik terapii systemowej w pracy psychoseksuologicznej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zdrowie kobiet, seksualność partnerów, terapia pary

## INTRODUCTION

Relationship longevity and satisfaction form the basis for building a proper rapport centred on trust and openness. They also create a bond that allows dealing with crises and difficulties that arise in any romantic relationship. Therefore, sexual satisfaction is considered to be an essential factor for the durability of relationships, as it is strongly linked to the level of quality of life as well as mental, physical, and general well-being (Firoozi et al., 2016; Sánchez-Fuentes and Sierra, 2015; Sánchez-Fuentes et al., 2014; Solomon and Theiss, 2008).

One of the less empirically explored factors affecting satisfaction in romantic relationships, and especially sexual satisfaction, is the level of differentiation of self. The concept is based on Bowen's family systems theory, and refers to the ability to be close to others, while maintaining one's autonomy in the relationship (Bowen, 1978; Kerr and Bowen, 1988). For Bowen's theory, the following concepts are essential: self-differentiation, triangles, emotional system nuclear family, family projection process, emotional cut-off, transmission process multi-generational, position among siblings, and social regression (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 2006). All the factors of Bowen's systems theory are interrelated, and form a whole, with each of them playing a significant role. Nevertheless, taking into account the current trends in psychosexual therapy, the differentiation of self in the broadest way to explain functioning in a couple, including the sexual sphere. Differentiation of self is defined as the ability to maintain a balance between emotional and intellectual functioning, and between the degree of intimacy and autonomy in relationships (Timm and Keiley, 2011). Consequently, two aspects of self-differentiation should be highlighted. At the intrapsychic level, self-differentiation refers to the ability to distinguish intellectual and emotional processes, which means being able to differentiate between thoughts and feelings, and to choose actions accordingly (Jankowski and Hooper, 2012). At the interpersonal level, however, self-differentiation refers to the ability to establish intimate relationships with others, while maintaining one's autonomy (Lampis and Cataudella, 2019). Self-differentiation can range from high ("balance") to low ("fusion" or "cutoff") (Goff, 2010; Titelman, 2014). Different authors distinguish the following aspects of self-differentiation: emotional dependency, triangulation with a sense of responsibility for parents, emotional cutoff from parents, autonomy beliefs, emotional cutoff from the partner, fusion with parents, and fusion with the partner involving the blurring of boundaries (Kriegelewicz, 2010).

The level of self-differentiation explains how people function in their relationships, especially in highly emotional situations. Individuals with a lower level of self-differentiation in the intrapsychic component have more difficulties remaining calm (Peleg-Popko, 2002), and they are less capable of emotional regulation (Skowron et al., 2004). This makes it more challenging for them to assess the reality in

a balanced way, to consider how to better handle life stressors, and to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty (Rodríguez-González, 2014). People with a lower level of self-differentiation in the interpersonal component tend to fuse with others, dominate others or isolate others emotionally by cutting them off, either as a response to stress or as a coping mechanism. Studies on the level of self-differentiation indicate the importance of this aspect of functioning in the context of strong anxiety or negative emotions, but also lower marital satisfaction and fulfilment in relationship with others. Those with a higher level of self-differentiation can cope better with difficulties but also with conflict situations in personal relationships (Oliver and Berástegui, 2019; Skowron and Schmitt, 2003).

In the context of human sexuality, the literature on the subject matter points to the importance of intimacy and desire in relationships, as they play a key role in sexual satisfaction (Breznyak and Whisman, 2004; Nobre and Pinto-Gouveia, 2008). Studies show that intimacy, referred to as the ability to make emotional disclosure, be close, express feelings, and confirm trust, is one of the most important factors relating to a couple's satisfaction (Pascoal et al., 2012; Patrick et al., 2007). Only a few studies indicate, however, that self-differentiation contributes to intimacy, closeness and desire in romantic relationships (Ferreira et al., 2013; Hardy and Fisher, 2018; Schnarch, 2009). The connection stems from the ability to create close bonds based on trust and self-autonomy, which is significantly determined by the level of self-differentiation. People with a high level of self-differentiation are able to deepen their relationship and desire by moving from the infatuation phase, where desire often involves a high degree of passion, to the commitment phase, where the sense of security and proper attachment is conducive to the deepening of the sexual relationship. Self-differentiation also makes it easier for the couple to communicate problems, needs, and sexual fantasies with each other, thus leading to greater sexual satisfaction (Schnarch, 2009; Timm and Keiley, 2011). Studies by Perel (2007) confirm a link between self-differentiation and sexual satisfaction. It turns out that couples with a balanced self-differentiation can cope better with the need to recognise mutual autonomy which, at the same time, promotes greater desire between partners. Fusion with the partner, which involves lower self-differentiation, can lead to the weakening of desire and, therefore, reduce sexual satisfaction. However, it should be noted that some people may interpret fusion with another person (the partner) as a model for a proper and strong relationship. This does not change the fact that a proper commitment process seems to depend on the degree of self-differentiation.

The study reported below sought to explore the link between the level of self-differentiation and sexual functioning among women. We were interested in whether the overall level of self-differentiation and its aspects that are directly linked to romantic relationships affect the quality of sexual life. The choice of women for the study was dictated

by the specificity of their sexuality, in particular their emotional involvement in the relationship and responsiveness to sexual stimuli.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

SPSS version 27 was used to carry out statistical analyses. The analysis plan was based on the hypotheses and the most effective ways of testing them. Pearson's correlations and regression analysis were done to measure the relationships between the study variables.

The study was conducted online, using Google questionnaires, between April and May 2022. Participants were informed of the anonymity of the study and the requirement to provide their consent. The invitation to participate in the study was extended to sexually active women, which was the study condition. The study group consisted of 100 women between the ages of 20 and 25. The study was conducted online and participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous.

### Measures

The Relation Questionnaire by Krieglewicz (2010) was used to analyse the level of self-differentiation in the study group. The questionnaire was designed to measure self-differentiation as a multi-dimensional construct evaluating the overall level of the variable and its individual aspects. The questionnaire consists of 69 items in 7 subscales: Emotional dependency (tendency to emotionally overreact to different aspects of the relationship, sense of over-responsibility for others, unstable and relationship-dependent self-esteem, strong urge to meet the needs of others), Triangulation with a sense of responsibility for parents (excessive involvement in and responsibility for the relationship with parents), Emotional cutoff from parents (denying the importance of parents, expressing own independence), Autonomy (stable sense of self, recognising and respecting differences between self and the partner, expressing and identifying one's needs and beliefs, pursuing one's goals, even with the disapproval from the partner and others), Emotional cutoff from the partner (keeping a significant emotional distance in the relationship, setting clear boundaries, or avoiding close romantic relationships), Fusion with parents (difficulty with emotional separation from parents, automatically complying with their demands, and their compulsory approval), and Fusion with the partner (blurring of boundaries, lack of own autonomy and individuality, strong need for unanimity, building self-esteem based on the romantic relationship). The respondents evaluate the statements on a 6-step scale, where 1 means "completely false" and 6 means "completely true". The questionnaire is a reliable tool. The internal compatibility of  $\alpha = 0.90$  was obtained for the entire questionnaire and between 0.74 and 0.89 for its constituent scales.

The sexual functioning of the study subjects was assessed using the Polish-language version of the Multidimensional

Sexuality Questionnaire (MSQ) (Snell et al., 1993) in the translation by Kowalewska et al. (2019). The original version of MSQ 47 consists of 60 basic statements that concern the topic of sexual relationships, and one additional statement used to determine whether the participant responded to all the items based on their current sexual relationship, past sexual relationship, or imagined sexual relationship. The basic 60 items constitute 12 subscales: Sexual Esteem (generalised tendency to positively evaluate one's capacity to relate sexually to another person), Sexual Preoccupation (tendency to become absorbed in, obsessed with, and engrossed with thoughts about the sexual aspects of life), Internal Sexual Control (belief that the sexual aspects of one's life are determined by one's own personal control), Sexual Consciousness (tendency to think and reflect about the nature of one's sexuality), Sexual Motivation (desire to be involved in a sexual relationship), Sexual Anxiety (tendency to feel tension, discomfort, and anxiety about the sexual aspects of one's life), Sexual Assertiveness (tendency to be assertive about the sexual aspects of one's life), Sexual Depression (tendency to feel depressed about the sexual aspects of one's life), External Sexual Control (belief that human sexuality is determined by influences outside of one's personal control), Sexual Monitoring (tendency to be aware of the public impression that one's sexuality makes on others), Fear of Sexual Relationships (fear of engaging in sexual relations with another individual) and Sexual Satisfaction. The internal consistency of the MSQ subscales (measured with Cronbach's alpha) ranged from 0.71 to 0.94, with an overall average of 0.85.

## RESULTS

The study involved a total of 101 women with an average age of 25 years ( $M = 24.72$ ; standard deviation,  $SD = 4.53$ ). Most of the female subjects were in a domestic partnership (64.4%), some were married (19.8%), while the smallest group of women (15.8%) consisted of sexually active single women. The vast majority of women declared to be heterosexual (80%), a decisive minority was bisexual (13%) and homosexual (7%). More than half of the women had been in a relationship for about a year (65%), some women for 1 to 5 years (29%), and the smallest group were women who had been in a relationship for more than 5 years (6%).

### Level of self-differentiation and sexual behaviour

First, it was examined whether the overall level of self-differentiation was related to sexual behaviour in the study group. The correlation analysis showed that as the women's self-differentiation increased, so did their sexual esteem, internal sexual control, sexual consciousness, sexual assertiveness, and sexual satisfaction. This means that in the study group, a higher degree of self-differentiation was linked to better sexual functioning. Taking into account the aspects of sexual behaviour that may indicate sexual difficulties,

| Aspects of sexual functioning   | Pearson's <i>R</i> coefficient |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Sexual Esteem                | 0.34***                        |
| 2. Sexual Preoccupation         | 0.19                           |
| 3. Internal Sexual Control      | 0.34**                         |
| 4. Sexual Consciousness         | 0.20*                          |
| 5. Sexual Motivation            | 0.02                           |
| 6. Sexual Anxiety               | -0.48***                       |
| 7. Sexual Assertiveness         | 0.40***                        |
| 8. Sexual Depression            | -0.39***                       |
| 9. External Sexual Control      | -0.41***                       |
| 10. Fear of Sexual Relationship | -0.20*                         |
| 11. Sexual Satisfaction         | 0.38***                        |
| 12. Sexual Monitoring           | -0.49***                       |

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Tab. 1. Correlation between the overall level of self-differentiation and aspects of sexual functioning in the study group

it was determined that a lower level of self-differentiation promotes greater sexual anxiety, sexual depression, external sexual control, fear of sexual relationships, and is also linked to stronger sexual monitoring. The most robust link was obtained for the aspect of sexual monitoring and sexual anxiety (about  $r = 0.5$ ;  $p < 0.001$ , which should be considered a moderate correlation). As assumed, the level of self-differentiation was linked to the quality of sexual behaviour. The results of the correlation analysis are shown in Tab. 1.

### Impact of self-differentiation on sexual behaviour

Several linear regression analyses were carried out to assess the impact of self-differentiation on sexual behaviour in the study group, which was intended to assess the predictive

power of the variable on various aspects of sexual behaviour. The regression assumptions concerning normal distribution and residue analysis were met for all regression models.

The results showed that self-differentiation significantly affected sexual satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.34$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). This variable explained 14% of the variation of the dependent variable ( $F(1,99) = 16.177$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Further analyses revealed a significant negative impact of self-differentiation on sexual monitoring ( $\beta = -0.49$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Self-differentiation explained 24% of the variance of the dependent variable ( $F(1,99) = 31.018$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). A higher level of self-differentiation resulted in lesser control of one's sexuality. A similar effect of self-differentiation was noted in the case of sexual anxiety ( $\beta = 0.48$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), an independent variable explained 23% of the dependent variable ( $F(1,99) = 29.717$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). The above results give rise to the conclusion that the sexual functioning of the female subjects can be explained through the level of their self-differentiation.

### Autonomy and emotional cutoff from the partner as a predictor of sexual functioning

Taking into account various aspects of self-differentiation, we decided to examine to what extent the aspects claimed in the literature as the most and least beneficial for the quality of romantic relationships would affect sexual functioning. Thus, autonomy, forming the basis for a fulfilling relationship, had an impact on almost all aspects of sexual functioning in the study group. Interestingly, in the context of fusion with the partner, this aspect of self-differentiation had a significant and positive impact only on sexual satisfaction in the study group. The results of the regression analysis are shown in Tab. 2.

|                                   |                              |                       |  |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| Autonomy                          | Sexual Satisfaction          | $\beta = 0.38^{***}$  | $F(1,99) = 16.611$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.14$ |
|                                   | Sexual Esteem                | $\beta = 0.33^{**}$   | $F(1,99) = 11.049$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.10$ |
|                                   | Sexual Monitoring            | $\beta = -0.32^{***}$ | $F(1,99) = 11.215$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.09$ |
|                                   | Fear of Sexual Relationships | $\beta = -0.26^*$     | $F(1,99) = 6.977$ ; $p < 0.05$ ; $R^2 = 0.06$  |
|                                   | Sexual Anxiety               | $\beta = -0.36^{**}$  | $F(1,99) = 14.349$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.12$ |
|                                   | Sexual Depression            | $\beta = -0.36^{***}$ | $F(1,99) = 15.151$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.12$ |
|                                   | Sexual Preoccupation         | $\beta = -0.27^{**}$  | $F(1,99) = 7.535$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.06$  |
| Emotional cutoff from the partner | Sexual Satisfaction          | $\beta = -0.51^{***}$ | $F(1,99) = 33.128$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.24$ |
|                                   | Sexual Motivation            | $\beta = -0.38^{***}$ | $F(1,99) = 16.278$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.13$ |
|                                   | Sexual Esteem                | $\beta = -0.39^{***}$ | $F(1,99) = 18.104$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.15$ |
|                                   | Sexual Consciousness         | $\beta = -0.38^{***}$ | $F(1,99) = 16.301$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.13$ |
| Emotional dependence              | Sexual Satisfaction          | $\beta = -0.31^{**}$  | $F(1,99) = 10.236$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.09$ |
|                                   | Fear of Sexual Relationships | $\beta = 0.22^*$      | $F(1,99) = 4.888$ ; $p < 0.05$ ; $R^2 = 0.04$  |
|                                   | Sexual Anxiety               | $\beta = 0.37^{***}$  | $F(1,99) = 15.724$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.13$ |
|                                   | Sexual Depression            | $\beta = 0.31^{**}$   | $F(1,99) = 10.451$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.09$ |
|                                   | Sexual Assertiveness         | $\beta = -0.36^{***}$ | $F(1,99) = 14.338$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.12$ |
|                                   | Sexual Esteem                | $\beta = -0.35^{***}$ | $F(1,99) = 13.680$ ; $p < 0.01$ ; $R^2 = 0.11$ |

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

152 Tab. 2. Results of regression analysis

## DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, the impact of self-differentiation on sexual satisfaction has been confirmed in a few studies. Therefore, the findings of our study are an important contribution to the knowledge of women's sexual functioning. Several important conclusions have been drawn from the analysis, which can be a basis for further, more in-depth and broader research.

Above all, our study shows that the level of self-differentiation plays an important role in sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships and affects the quality of sexual functioning. This is particularly important, as in previous studies this link is often indirect (Ferreira et al., 2013). Autonomy, understood as the ability to maintain one's boundaries, is an aspect of self-differentiation that has a particularly positive impact on the quality of sexual life – on satisfaction and assertiveness, motivation, consciousness, and esteem.

These conclusions are also confirmed by other studies revealing that autonomy as a dimension of self-differentiation strengthens desire in relationships (Ferreira et al., 2015). The aspects demonstrating a low level of self-differentiation, such as emotional dependency or, on the contrary, emotional cutoff, reduce sexual satisfaction and affect all aspects of sexual functioning, leading to fear, depression, and reduced sexual assertiveness. In our opinion, the results relating to fusion with the partner were particularly important. The literature on the subject matter yields conflicting results regarding fusion and satisfaction for couples (Perel, 2007). On the one hand, it shows a low level of self-differentiation due to the lack of autonomy, and on the other hand, it can be interpreted by the partners as closeness and intimacy. In our study, it transpired that fusion with the partner did not correlate with less sexual satisfaction. Perhaps over time, adjustment and commitment are interpreted as intimacy, and fusion is viewed as closeness in the relationship. In our view, it would be interesting to introduce into the model a variable in the form of types of commitment, and to determine whether fusion is not related to satisfaction among people with a fear-type commitment, where sexual proximity is often a barometer and indicator of the quality of the relationship. Nevertheless, the findings of our study provide an important contribution to the knowledge of women's sexual functioning and can be used as guidance for therapeutic effects in the event of difficulties, such as anxiety, lack of motivation or desire, experienced in the relationship.

Psychosexual therapy is still developing, and our conclusions can be a preliminary step towards further extended research in this area, which could ultimately determine both clinical attitudes and tools.

Our study, despite its advantages, is not free from limitations. First of all, it was carried out on a small group of subjects, undifferentiated by sex. Increasing the size of the group would result in more robust results, and furthermore would allow for more advanced analyses, such as based on

longevity or type of relationship. The sexuality of women and men is different, therefore a comparison of these groups could lead to interesting conclusions. Given the limitations of our study, we believe that the results presented do not give rise to hard conclusions and predictions, but nevertheless validate further research in this area.

### Conflict of interest

*The authors do not report any financial or personal connections with other persons or organisations which might negatively affect the contents of this publication and/or claim authorship rights to this publication.*

### Author contributions

*Original concept of study; Writing of manuscript; Analysis and interpretation of data; Final approval of manuscript; Collection, recording and/or compilation of data; Critical review of manuscript: JG, BPW.*

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