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To Know You is (Not) to Want You: Mediators Between Sociosexual Orientation and Romantic Commitment

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Abstract Past studies have indicated that individuals with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation (SO; ‘unrestricted’ reflects comfort with sex outside the confines of a committed relationship) emphasize attractiveness and desirability when pursuing romantic partners. Additionally, SO is related to decreased commitment, and ultimately increased infidelity, in a current romantic relationship. Thus, the current study investigates potential mediators between sociosexual orientation (SO) and romantic commitment. Perceptions of a romantic partner’s characteristics such as physical attractiveness, various personality traits, and perceived similarities were examined as mediators. The findings indicate perceived social skills, intellect, and perceived similarities with the partner were all significant mediators between SO and commitment. Additionally, physical attractiveness was a marginally significant mediator. The final mediation model suggests that individuals with unrestricted SOs may have lower commitment in their current relationships because participants with an unrestricted SO, compared to participants with a restricted SO, rated their partners as having fewer social skills, less intellect, and also fewer similarities between themselves and their partners.

Keywords Romantic relationships · Sociosexual orientation · Commitment · Attraction

As relationships are an important part of what it means to be human (Baumeister and Leary 1995), close relationship research has often focused on commitment in a relationship. Researchers have painstakingly attempted to measure and predict commitment, as well as discover its behavioral antecedents and consequences (see Le and Agnew 2003 for a review). More recently, the relationship research has begun to investigate the influence of an individual difference variable, namely sociosexual

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orientation, as a major determinant of commitment (Mattingly et al. 2011). However, as this variable is a relatively new addition to the close relationship research, its influence and role in the commitment process remains unclear.

Sociosexual orientation (SO) is an individual difference that reflects one's willingness to engage in sexual behaviors outside of a committed or emotionally bonded relationship (Simpson and Gangestad 1991). The trait is measured on a continuum and ranges from restricted to unrestricted. Individuals with an unrestricted SO do not need a committed relationship in order to have sex, whereas individuals with a restricted SO prefer to first develop a strong emotional bond, or romantic commitment, prior to engaging in sexual activity. Additionally, unrestricted individuals tend to report more sexual partners, anticipate more future sexual partners, and also fantasize about sex more often than individuals with a restricted SO (Simpson and Gangestad 1991).

As this trait is defined by differences in relationship-related variables, it is not surprising that SO is also connected to major relationship outcomes. For example, an unrestricted SO is negatively related to commitment, or a long-term orientation in a romantic relationship (Jones 1998; Rusbult and Buunk 1993; Simpson and Gangestad 1991). Moreover, unrestricted SO is related to increased instances of infidelity (Barta and Kiene 2005; Ostovich and Sabini 2004; and Seal et al. 1994), another important factor in relationship research. Recently it has been argued that SO is actually the mediator between relationship commitment and infidelity; that is, individuals with an unrestricted SO have lower commitment in their current relationships which then prompts acts of infidelity (Mattingly et al. 2011). Although these findings highlight an important factor in the infidelity literature, there remains a deficit in the current relationship literature regarding the connections between unrestricted SO and lower levels of commitment (Simpson and Gangestad 1991). Individuals who commit infidelity during their committed relationships are not necessarily the same as individuals who do not need to be in a committed relationship to have sex (individuals with an unrestricted SO). Although empirically and perhaps logically related, individuals with an unrestricted SO and 'cheaters' are not synonymous. Simply, although the relationship between low commitment and infidelity is fairly clear, the relationship between SO and commitment remains blurred. Thus, this study focused only on the link between SO and commitment.

To help further this body of literature, the current study investigated factors that are potential mediators between SO and commitment. A romantic partner's attractiveness, personality traits, and similarities (in beliefs and values) are all desirable attributes which have been shown to predict high commitment in a romantic relationship (Buss and Barnes 1986; Green et al. 1984; Walster et al. 1966). However, this may not be the case for individuals with an unrestricted SO; previous literature indicates an unrestricted SO is associated with lower relational commitment (Jones 1998; Simpson and Gangestad 1991). Thus, the current study examined the interplay between SO and participants' perceptions of their current romantic partners, on the outcome of commitment to the relationship.

Physical attractiveness, a traditionally sought partner trait (Buss and Schmitt 1993), is particularly relevant to SO. Individuals with an unrestricted SO, as compared to those with a restricted SO, often seek shorter term relationships (Simpson and Gangestad 1991), and thus tend to emphasize physical attractiveness in a mate (Regan et al. 2000), even to the exclusion of other important characteristics of a romantic partner (Simpson and Gangestad 1992). This preference for attractiveness is so powerful that regardless of one's biological sex, individuals with an unrestricted SO, tend to choose attractive

partners over partners with high resources in a forced-choice paradigm (Simpson and Gangestad 1992). This is an important distinction as innumerable past studies have shown that generally females tend to prefer high resource (e.g., stable career and family oriented) mates, over physical attractiveness (see Buss 1998 for a review).

In combination with attractiveness, a partner's pleasant personality is also incredibly desirable. However, there appears to be a distinction in preferences based on whether an individual is pursuing a short term or long term relationship. Specifically, individuals pursuing long term relationships report valuing social characteristics such as sense of humor, kindness, responsibility, affection, and being understanding over physical attractiveness (Lundy et al. 1998; Regan et al. 2000; Schmitt et al. 2001). Although the vast majority of the sexual selection literature has not directly measured SO, Simpson and Gangestad (1991) provided evidence of individuals with an unrestricted SO to have the tendency to engage in shorter term relationships. Also, Simpson and Gangestad (1992) provided evidence that unrestricted individuals tend to choose romantic partners who are higher in attractiveness as opposed to social characteristics, whereas restricted individuals tend to choose partners with higher social characteristics as opposed to attractiveness. However, it remains unclear whether unrestricted individuals seek highly physically attractive partners so intensely that personality characteristics are under-emphasized or trivialized and thus perceive fewer desirable personality characteristics of a partner, compared to restricted individuals?

Finally, past studies have shown that we, as human beings, perceive a higher quality of relationship and rate a partner's attractiveness (both physical and general) higher, if our partner has similar qualities to ourselves. These specific similarities are when a partner has attitudes, values, emotions, backgrounds, and love styles, which mimic our own (Hendrick et al. 1988; Morry et al. 2011). Thus, partners do tend to have similar qualities, especially as compared to randomly paired strangers (Bradbury and Karney 2010; Morry et al. 2011). Highly similar partners are especially preferred when one is pursuing a long term relationship. Instances of highly similar partners have been found to increase commitment and satisfaction in romantic relationships (Bradbury and Karney 2010; Morry et al. 2011). As SO plays a role in commitment (Mattingly et al. 2011) and the desired length of the relationship (Simpson and Gangestad 1991), subjects' perceptions of partners' similarities to themselves, were also of particular interest in our study.

To add to the literature regarding the association between SO and relationship commitment, this study examined perceptions of partner attributes (i.e., attractiveness, social skills, and similarity) as potential mediators. It was predicted that the factors which are usually associated with increased commitment would mediate the relationship between SO and relationship commitment. Specifically, it was expected that individuals with an unrestricted SO would perceive their current romantic partners as less attractive, less socially skilled, and less similar to themselves, which in turn leads to lower commitment.

Method

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students ($N=84$; Males=18, Females=66) who had been in a relationship for a minimum of three months ($M=20.66$ months, $Med=10$

months, $SD=26.20$ months, ranging from 3 to 144 months). Participant ages ranged from 18 to 51 ($M=20.66$, $SD=5.57$). Participant ethnicities, as reported, were Caucasian ($n=72$), African-American/Black ($n=5$), Asian/Pacific Islander ($n=3$), Hispanic ($n=2$) and other ($n=2$). Finally, participants reported their relationship status as dating casually ($n=5$), dating exclusively ($n=59$), dating regularly ($n=3$), engaged ($n=8$), married ($n=2$), and other ($n=7$). When asked to specify “other,” as their relationship status, most of these participants (all but one) reported cohabitation.

Measures and Procedure

Participants completed a series of questionnaires which examined the nature of their current romantic relationship, their SO, perceptions of their partner’s traits, and various demographics. Measures were investigated as follows:

Sociosexual Orientation The Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI; Simpson and Gangestad 1991) is a seven item measure, which assesses an individual’s willingness to engage in sexual relations. The first four items ask participants about their past, current, and future sexual relations (e.g., With how many different partners have you had sex?). Additionally, participants are asked their perceptions of sexual behaviors outside of a committed relationship (e.g., Sex without love is ok) on a nine point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 9 (Strongly Agree). Scores are then summed, with higher scores indicating an unrestricted orientation and lower scores indicate a restricted orientation. This scale shows adequate reliability in the current sample ($\alpha=0.84$).

Attraction The Ideal Standards Scale (ISS; Regan 1998) asks participants to rate how well varying characteristics (e.g., physically attractive) describe their current partner using a 10-point Likert scale (1=does not describe at all; 10=describes very well). The overall scale showed adequate reliability in the current sample ($\alpha=0.85$). Additionally, this scale breaks down into six subscales: Intellect (e.g., intelligent; $\alpha=0.83$), Social Skills (e.g., good sense of humor; $\alpha=0.77$), Social Status (e.g., wealthy; $\alpha=0.72$), Attractiveness (e.g., sexy; $\alpha=0.68$), Power (e.g., dominant; $\alpha=0.59$), and Family (e.g., wants children; $\alpha=0.39$). Due to the low reliability of the Family subscale, it was not included in the analysis.

Similarities A perceived similarities scale was created for the purpose of this study, in which participants are asked to rate the similarity between self and romantic partner on 11 characteristics on a seven-point Likert scale (1=Not Similar to 7=Very Similar). The characteristics were compiled via a pilot test in which individuals were asked what items they felt were important for a couple to have in common. The various characteristics collected in the pilot were then combined to represent the final 11 characteristics on the scale: temperament, attractiveness, hobbies and interests, mood, work ethic, patience, religion, ethnicity, political views, socio-economic status, social skills. Scores for each of the items are summed, and higher scores indicate higher levels of similarity between oneself and one’s romantic partner. The scale, overall, shows adequate reliability ($\alpha=0.75$).

Commitment The Commitment subscale of the Investment Model (Rusbult 1983) asks participants to rate their agreement with seven statements (e.g., I want our relationship to last) using a nine point Likert scale (0=do not agree at all; 8=agree completely). The items were averaged with higher scores indicating higher levels of commitment. The scale shows adequate reliability within the current sample ($\alpha=0.78$).

Results

The first step in our analysis was to verify previous literature in determining if the mediating variables correlated with an existing relationship between SO and commitment. A Pearson’s *r* correlation was conducted and verified previous findings in that all variables were significantly related ($ps<0.05$; Table 1) except for the attraction subscale of Power. Thus, Power, and Family, were both excluded from the remaining mediation analysis.

Our hypothesis that SO on commitment being mediated by attraction, personality, and similarities has been tested by a multiple mediation analysis, via a SPSS macro provided by Preacher and Hayes (2008). As our sample had less than 100 participants, we bootstrapped the indirect effects of SO on commitment . The bootstrap estimates, based on 5,000 bootstraps and 95 % confidence intervals for each of the mediators in the analysis, are presented in Table 2.

The total effects ($-0.0443, p=0.0001$) and the direct effects ($-0.0234, p=0.0395$) indicated that attraction and perceived similarities did, in fact, mediate the relationship between SO and commitment. The total indirect effect (point estimate= $-0.0209, p<0.015$), or the difference between the total effect and the direct effect, was significantly different from zero. Specifically, the mediational analyses indicated that Social Skills, Intellect, and Similarities were significant mediators ($ps<0.05$). Additionally, Physical Attractiveness was a marginally significant mediator ($p=0.052$). The Social Status mediator did not have a significant direct effect on commitment, and thus was dropped from the final model (Fig. 1.)

Table 1 Correlations between commitment, SO, attraction, and similarity

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Commitment	–						
2. SO	-0.398***	–					
3. Social skills	0.531***	-0.387***	–				
4. Intellect	0.287**	-0.494***	0.461***	–			
5. Physical attractiveness	0.397***	-0.287***	0.302**	0.448***	–		
6. Social status	0.319**	0.334**	-0.316**	0.474***	0.468***	–	
7. Power	0.064	-0.033	-0.077	0.085	0.325**	0.458**	–
8. Similarities	0.539***	-0.453***	0.642***	0.480***	0.384***	0.334***	0.063

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

Table 2 Mediation of the effect of sociosexual orientation on commitment through attraction and similarity

	Point estimate	Product of coefficients		Bootstrapping					
				Percentile 95 % CI		BC 95 % CI		BCa 95 % CI	
				SE	Z	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
Social skills	-0.0120	0.0059	-2.0364	-0.0254	0.0005	-0.0387	-0.0031	0.0277	0.0010
Intellect	0.0135	0.0069	1.9657	-0.0011	0.0299	-0.0281	-0.0008	0.0162	0.0332
Physical attraction	-0.0061	0.0038	-1.622	-0.0156	0.0002	-0.0006	0.0312	-0.0162	0.0003
Interpersonal skills	-0.0037	0.0035	-1.0540	-0.0133	0.0022	-0.0164	0.0000	-0.0158	0.0016
Similarity	-0.0127	0.0063	-2.0099	-0.0263	-0.0004	-0.0155	0.0017	-0.0263	-0.0003
Total	-0.0209	0.0086	-2.4428	-0.0399	-0.0041	-0.0259	0.0000	-0.0395	-0.0025

BC bias corrected, BCa bias corrected and accelerated, 5,000 bootstrap samples

Discussion

The current study examined mediators between SO and commitment in a current romantic relationship. As expected, and in support of past findings, individuals with unrestricted SOs were less committed to their current relationship. Importantly, the results indicate that various personality characteristics, such as social skills (e.g., good sense of humor) and intellect (e.g., intelligence), as well as perceived similarities were significant mediators between SO and commitment. Physical attraction was a trending mediator. Simply, the final mediation model suggests that individuals with an

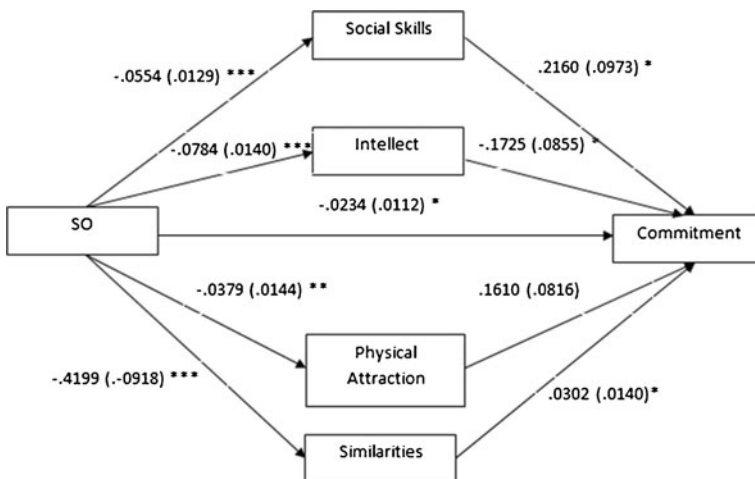


Fig. 1 Coefficients and standard error estimates of the final multiple mediation model (* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$)

unrestricted SO are less romantically committed because they perceive their partners as having fewer social skills, less intellect, and fewer similarities.

This study has identified links between two, seemingly, counter-intuitive findings in the past literature; individuals with an unrestricted SO seek out highly attractive romantic partners (Regan et al. 2000), however, they are less committed in those relationships (Simpson and Gangestad 1991) and ultimately more likely to cheat (Mattingly et al. 2011). In this study, SO was significantly, negatively, correlated with every partner attribute in the analysis except for one (i.e. Social Status). That is, our findings indicate that individuals with an unrestricted SO report perceiving fewer similarities between themselves and their partners, as well as perceiving their partners as having fewer social skills, intellect, and physical attractiveness, even though physical attractiveness has been shown to be an important and sought after attribute (Simpson and Gangestad 1991).

It is important to note that these latter findings are not in opposition with Simpson and colleagues' (2004) or Simpson and Gangestad's (1991, 1992) results. It does not refute the notion that individuals with an unrestricted SO pursue mates who are highly attractive often under-emphasizing other important attributes. However, it leads us to question whether they attain desirable partners? Perhaps, unrestricted individuals seek desirable mates, but do not acquire them. Perhaps, unrestricted individuals pursue, and choose, relationships in which lower levels of commitment are justifiable. That is, if the relationships are going to be fleeting anyway, the importance of desirability is minimal. Or, perhaps, unrestricted individuals pursue desirable mates, but then devalue the partner as the relationship continues. The current study only investigated individuals who were already in a committed relationship, for a minimum of three months. Future studies should investigate the association between SO and perceptions of a partner over time (i.e., initially there may be positive perceptions but these perceptions diminish over time).

The opposite relationship was found between SO and social status, in that the more unrestricted one's SO, the more social status the partner was perceived to have. Social status described by Regan's Ideal Standards Scale (Regan 1998) includes high social status, popular, material possessions, wealthy, and good earning capacity. This connection arguably makes sense. If one is purely seeking a short-term relationship, then a partner with monetary potential may be highly advantageous. Furthermore, these results support the notion that individuals with an unrestricted SO tend to pursue partners who possess higher social visibility (Simpson and Gangestad 1992). However, social status was not related to commitment, thus was not deemed a significant mediator in the analysis.

Although this research does shed some light on the nature of the association between SO and commitment, it does not provide a fully comprehensive picture. For example, the nature of gender differences is an important aspect to examine in this area. Although a considerable number of past studies have indicated that male SO is significantly more unrestricted than female SO, how these two factors interact is interesting (Ostovich and Sabini 2004). The traits important in mate selection often vary by the biological sex of the pursuer (Buss 1989; Buss and Barnes 1986). That is, males tend to pursue highly attractive (i.e., healthy) partners, while females tend to pursue partners with higher resources (e.g., a stable career and family orientation). Although the purpose behind this trend has been argued from many viewpoints (e.g., socio-cultural, evolutionary),

the findings are relatively prolific in the relationship literature. Past research conducted by Simpson and Gangestad (1992) investigated the within sex variability of SO, and found that males follow the traditional mate selection pattern, regardless of their SO. Females, on the other hand, indicated a stronger preference for attractiveness over resources, as their SO becomes more unrestricted. However, the authors also found that when given a forced choice, there is no interaction between sex and SO on preferences of attractiveness or resources. That is, regardless of one's sex, individuals with an unrestricted SO, compared to restricted individuals, choose attractive partners over high resources partners. Based on these past findings and a serious lack of statistical power for the males in this sample, an interaction investigating gender was not conducted in the current study. However, future research endeavors should attempt to take this important variable into consideration.

This research is important because it answers a very interesting question: how SO is related to commitment. Unrestricted individuals may be more inclined to cheat due to low commitment (Mattingly et al. 2011), but these results suggest that the low commitment may actually be a result of negative perceptions of the partner. This makes logical sense when examining some of the factors that best predicts commitment (i.e. satisfaction and quality of alternatives; Rusbult 1983; Le and Agnew 2003). Strong commitment is a direct result of high satisfaction and a low quality of alternatives (see Le and Agnew 2003 for a review). If an individual perceives the partner as undesirable then satisfaction is decreased while the perceived quality of alternatives is increased. In conjunction with the findings from Mattingly and colleagues (2011) the connection between SO and infidelity becomes more clear. Potentially, at some point in the relationship, an individual with an unrestricted SO perceives the partner as less desirable and thus becomes less committed, which in turn leads to romantic cheating.

There is more research to be conducted in the association between SO and outcomes in a relationship. For example, do these individuals seek out relationships with partners who they deem as highly physically attractive, but lack positive social characteristics, on purpose? That is, do unrestricted individuals try to find a partner who lacks long term potential (i.e. as a self-fulfilling prophecy)? Or, is it possible that unrestricted individuals are considered unattractive to potential partners, especially those potential partners who are pursuing long term relationships, and thus unrestricted individuals pursue attractive partners but are unable to actually ascertain them? Or do unrestricted individuals tend to devalue a partner throughout the duration of the relationship?

The current study shows that there is a connection between SO and commitment through perceptions of the romantic partner. More research is needed to examine the possible mediators of SO's relationship to perceptions of current partners, commitment, and infidelity. As individuals with unrestricted SOs may not be pursuing long-term commitments yet often pursue attractive mates, the specific timing of the realization that one's partner is undesirable is of the utmost importance.

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