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Intimacy, Sexual Desire and Differentiation in Couplehood: A Theoretical and Methodological Review

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The scientific community underlines that one of the main challenges for couples is the effect of time on sexual desire. Some studies suggest that although some dimensions associated with intimacy tend to increase during the relationship, sexual desire and the related constructs tend to decrease. Some researchers have recently suggested that couples' relationships with high degrees of sharing and fusion might be particularly detrimental for the sustenance of sexual desire. However, the authors found no empirical or theoretical studies that investigate the relations between intimacy and desire. Recovering the concept of differentiation as a possible influencing variable between intimacy and desire, this article develops reflections on this theme, which is of paramount relevance for the couple viability.

The couples' relationship is a highly significant factor affecting well-being and physical or mental health (Hinchliff & Gott, 2004; Hook, Gerstein,

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Detterich, & Gridley, 2003; Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008) and the increasing rates of divorce have raised interest in issues regarding couple viability (Narciso & Ribeiro, 2009). In this article, we focus on intimacy and sexual desire as central pieces in the puzzle of couple relationships, and we reflect on the relevance of the differentiation of self construct in relating these pieces.

Couple intimacy is important for adjustment and psychological well-being, given that intimate relationships and their components buffer daily stress (Narciso & Ribeiro, 2009; Prager, 1997). The construct of sexual desire is also useful to the understanding of the couple, because maintaining a satisfactory level of sexual desire has been empirically identified as one of the main factors that contribute to couple satisfaction, strongly affecting the continuity of the relationship (Hinchliff & Gott, 2004; Impett et al., 2008; McCarthy, Ginsberg, & Fucito, 2006). Several researchers have been calling for more studies of intimacy and desire in couple relationships, particularly in what concerns the research sample diversity and representativity (e.g., most studies only use college-aged participants); the relational approach (i.e., most studies only focus on the individual as the unit of analysis); and the identification of couple patterns and resources that increase the quality and durability of the couple's relationship and that might contribute to empirically based couples' interventions (Regan & Berscheid, 1999; Schnarch, 1991; Stenberg & Barnes, 1988). However, sexuality within the context of a couple relationship is still a neglected theme in scientific research (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000).

The research literature reflects several inconsistencies regarding the definitions and interactions of *intimacy*—which is often confused with closeness—and *sexual desire*—which is often confused with sexual arousal or passion (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999; Hinchliff & Gott, 2004; Impett et al., 2008; McCarthy et al., 2006; Narciso & Ribeiro, 2009; Regan & Berscheid, 1999; Sternberg, 1988). These inconsistencies contribute to the difficulties in the psychometric assessment of these specific concepts and, consequently, to the comprehension of its change through time (Hook et al., 2003; Narciso & Ribeiro, 2009).

Regarding the effect of time in couplehood, several main ideas are common in research and clinical literature: the inevitability of a strong decrease in sexual desire through the relationship (e.g., Impett et al., 2008; Regan & Berscheid, 1999), concurrent with the increase in intimacy (e.g., Acker & Davis, 1992; Chelune, Robison, & Kommor, 1984; Hatfield & Rapson, 1993b; Sternberg, 1988); and the importance of emotional intimacy as the path to a fulfilled sexuality (e.g., Levine, 1991; Narciso & Ribeiro, 2009). However, the relation between intimacy and desire is not explicit, and we found no empirical studies that clearly investigate this relation.

A few clinical researchers have recently suggested that some styles of intimacy—characterized by high levels of fusion and low levels of

autonomy—could be particularly damaging to the preservation of a satisfactory level of sexual desire (Perel, 2008; Schnarch, 1991). A *fusional intimacy* and a high level of sexual desire are claimed as the quintessence of the romantic love paradigm. However, they appear to be, in the long run, incompatible. An innovative conceptualization proposes, as an essential paradox, the idea that a certain distance is a precondition for a level of intimacy that allows for the survival of sexual desire (Bataille, 1968; Knee, Canevello, Bush, & Cook, 2008). This distance is referred by Schnarch (1991) as integrated in the construct of *differentiation*, and by Perel (2008) as the concept of *otherness*. The ability to maintain a resilient sexual desire (McCarthy et al., 2006) might be enhanced by this individual and relational factor: differentiation (Kerr & Bowen, 1979, as cited in Schnarch, 1991). However, these proposals still lack a clear empirical support, given that most of these ideas steam from theoretical works instead of research and the construct of differentiation itself still has some lack of empirical support. In this article, we aimed to (a) illustrate the different definitions of *intimacy* and *sexual desire*; (b) provide an overview of the state of the art, in research and clinical literature, regarding the relations between intimacy, desire, and related constructs; (c) survey the different clinical and empirical arguments regarding the usefulness of the differentiation construct in understanding these relations; and (d) propose reflections and clues for future research and interventions.

Intimacy

Defining Intimacy

The diversity of intimacy definitions can be organized as having characteristics of a state or a process and also by providing a relational or individual perspective (Narciso & Ribeiro, 2009). In addition, one can think of the variety of intimacy definitions as having a componential or an essential quality. For instance, Narciso's (2001) proposal, a multiprocess, dynamic, and interactional perspective, might illustrate a componential definition because it grows out of the metaphor of a relational textile composed by several intertwined threads (components), such as self-disclosure and sharing, emotional support, trust, interdependence, and mutuality, along with a perimeter lining, consisting of affection and sexuality. Wilner's (1982) or Papouchis' (1982) definitions illustrate a more essential or whole character of intimacy. Also, although some authors include sexuality as a component in their definitions of intimacy, others clearly distinguish it and yet others consider sex to be the factor that shapes and mirrors intimacy (Narciso, 2001).

In surveying the diversity of intimacy definitions, Baumeister and Bratslavsky (1999), found three common factors: self-disclosure (expressing relevant feelings, which implies a feedback of the significant others, in which one feels validated and understood) closeness (belief that the other

knows the self well and has positive feelings toward the self) and expression of affection (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999; Clark & Reis, 1988; Reis & Patrick, 1996). Hence, they proposed an integrated definition of *intimacy* that includes the concepts of mutual self-disclosure, favorable attitudes or affection and communication of that affection. However, in a study later aimed at evaluating psychometric tools that claimed to measure intimacy, Hook and colleagues (2003) found that love and affection, personal validation, trust, and self-disclosure were the common components of intimacy, as assessed by such instruments.

Costa (2005) noted that such definitions of *intimacy* should conceptualize it as multisystemic process, inter- and intrapersonal, and should always take into account a developmental perspective. Papouchis' (1982, p. 348) definition of *intimacy* fulfills this idea by saying that in order to be intimate, a person needs to have a high enough level of personal development so that his or her individual identity is not threatened when he or she is in an intimate relationship with a partner.

Another soft spot on intimacy definitions is the unclear distinction between *intimacy* and *closeness*, seldom used interchangeably. They are distinguishable by the fact that intimacy lies in the realm of mutual self-disclosure, affection, and validation, whereas closeness is more related to being with the other (Narciso & Ribeiro, 2009), frequency of contact, or even physical proximity.

Assessing Intimacy

As expected, considering the diversity of intimacy definitions, there are several psychometric tools to assess this construct. Hook and colleagues (2003), based what most theorist agree to be the four main features of intimacy (mentioned earlier), designed a comparative study between intimacy scales: Miller Social Intimacy Scale (R. S. Miller & Lefcourt, 1982), Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships Scale (Schaefer & Olson, 1981, in Hook et al., 2003) and Fear of Intimacy Scale (Descutner & Thelen, 1991, as cited in Hook et al., 2003), concluding that the intimacy construct would only be fully assessed as a multidimensional construct if the three scales were used together, given that none of the scales would evaluate the four main dimensions of intimacy by itself.

Concerning the assessment of intimacy in terms of gender differences, similarities are higher than the differences but women tend to emphasize affection and its expression, whereas men tend to emphasize sexuality and physical proximity, and there are no differences regarding self-disclosure and trust (Hook et al., 2003; Narciso & Ribeiro, 2009). However, most studies have been using a conceptualization of intimacy that favors a perspective on the basis of women's relational advantages, probably silencing the unique

attributes and meanings of the men's conception of intimacy (Perel, 2008; Prager, 1997).

Sexual Desire

Defining Sexual Desire

The issue of sexual desire as a scientific question surfaced after Kinsey's (1970, 1972) and Masters and Johnson's (1966) studies, through Kaplan's (1974, 1984) proposal regarding the existence of something before the sexual response cycle presented by her predecessors (excitement, plateau, orgasm, resolution). She proposed a new cycle (desire, excitement, orgasm), raising the interest on more subjective topics related to sexuality (Regan & Berscheid, 1999).

What is sexual desire? It is distinguishable, although often confused from sexual arousal, which is constituted by a physiological component, characterized by the physical manifestations from and with the sexual act, and also by the subjective experience of the genital and physiological changes (Green & Mosher, 1985, as cited in Regan & Berscheid, 1999; Levine, 2002). The time factor helps distinguish between this subjective component of sexual arousal and sexual desire, since subjective sexual arousal occurs contemporaneously to the sexual act, while sexual desire can happen outside the sexual act and it is not dependent on the genital response (Regan & Berscheid, 1999). These experiences—subjective sexual arousal, sexual desire, and the sexual act—co-occur frequently (Basson, 2001, 2002; Laan & Both, 2008).

Reviewing the diversity of sexual desire conceptions, Regan and Berscheid (1999) consider that in general, they fit into two perspectives: (a) *motivational*, which considers desire to be a motivational state that directs the individual action to the pursuit of sexual activity opportunities that translate, if satisfied, into pleasure (Gonzaga, Turner, Keltner, Campos, & Altemus, 2006); and (b) *interpersonal*, which is focused on the broader relational context, suggesting that desire is an externally generated phenomenon primarily focused on a partner, originated by an external source and highly affected by situational conditions (Fish, Fish, & Sprenkle, 1984; Regan & Berscheid, 1999).

As an alternative to the external/internal dichotomy, the clinical integrative model of Levine (1991, 2002) states that sexual desire is an intensely personal subjective experience that is the product of the interaction between the neuroendocrine, the cognitive, and the motivational processes on one hand and the contextual, social, and cultural processes on the other. Levine's model considers that sexual desire fluctuates along a spectrum and is characterized by strong individual differences in intensity, between sexes and according to age.

In Kaplan's (1974) triphasic model of sexuality, the different levels of intensity of each phase (desire, excitement, orgasm) are not distinguishable. Additionally, the model places desire only before the physiological response, ignoring the desire one may feel during the excitement stages (Schnarch, 1991). So one can ask, "What is being measured? Sexual arousal or sexual desire?" In contrast, in its quantum model of sexual function and dysfunction, Schnarch (1991) integrated the physiological and psychological dimensions of the sexual response, including thresholds for sexual response, thus offering a model that works in a continuum of stimulation and avoids compartmentalization of stages. This model has some similarities with the recent models regarding the cycle of female sexual response (Basson, 2001, 2002; Laan & Both, 2008) because it considers sexual desire to be concomitant and not only precedent to the other phases of the sexual response cycle. Hence, according to these models, sexual desire contributes to the progression of the cycle itself and is retroactively reinforced by the other stages. These models diverge from the genital focus of previous ones, concentrating on the interactions between desire, intimacy, meaning of sexual stimuli and receptivity.

The sexual response cycle disorder regarding low sexual desire is defined, according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed., text rev.; American Psychiatric Association, 2002) as hypoactive sexual desire disorder, and it consists of two main criteria: (a) the absence or impairment of sexual fantasies and desire of sexual activity; and (b) resulting in an accentuated ill-being or interpersonal difficulties. This definition appears inadequate, namely because the frequency of desire previous to the sexual act is variable, even in persons with no sexual complaints. Hence, several researchers call for a redefinition of this inclusion criteria on *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* and propose a greater attention to subjective experiences of sexual encounters along with a vision that includes the multidimensional and interactional nature of sexual desire within the sexual response cycle (Basson, 2001, 2002; Toledano & Pfaus, 2006).

Assessing Sexual Desire

Sexual desire is assessed through diaries, interviews, physiological measures and questionnaires or scales. It is still common, although severely criticized, to access desire by the frequency of sexual behaviors (Regan & Berscheid, 1999). In general, the available psychometric instruments do not discriminate between sexual desire and sexual arousal, although sexual desire is a dimension of several psychometric tools assessing sexual function. To our knowledge, there are only two that are specifically designed to solely assess sexual desire instead of also assessing sexual arousal or other dimensions of the sexual experience. The Sexual Desire Inventory is focused on self and

dyadic sexual desire (Spector, Carey, & Steinberg, 1996). The Hurlbert Index of Sexual Desire, is more directed at individuals living in a couple (Apt & Hurlbert, 1992). Regarding gender differences, men tend to report higher levels of sexual desire in frequency and intensity (Peplau, 2003; Regan & Atkins, 2006).

Development and Transformations of Sexual Desire and Intimacy

Sexual desire has an important role in couples' relationships and it might function as a barometer of several relational aspects (Levine, 2002), although some believe sexual desire to be a pathway of itself, not always contingent to the changes in the relationship (Perel, 2008; Schnarch, 1991). However, none of these claims have been empirically tested. In general, there is a decrease in sexual desire through the relationship, and this decrease is associated with a decrease in couple satisfaction (Basson, 2002; Regan & Berscheid, 1999). The individual perception of a low desire might bring on serious consequences by the associated perception of dysfunctionality, which lowers sexual self-image and further diminishes sexual desire (Basson, 2001).

There are no empirical studies, to our knowledge, that relate intimacy and sexual desire, only clinical speculations. Thus, we now report on several studies that relate similar constructs. Although not investigating intimacy and sexual desire but instead romantic love and sexual desire, Gonzaga and colleagues (2006) suggested two schools of thought regarding this relation. Among the researchers who study love relationships, it is mostly consensual that romantic love provides the ideal setting for the development of intimacy, whereas sexual desire (and associated feelings, such as passion) fulfills an initiator role, by motivating sexual interest, which allows for the raise in proximity and development of romantic love (e.g., Hatfield et al., 1984, Hatfield & Rapson, 1993a; Hendricks & Hendricks, 1992, as cited in Narciso & Ribeiro, 2009; Sternberg, 1986). On a different level, researchers that follow an evolutionary approach, related to attachment processes, consider that romantic love is integrated into the pair-bonding motivational system of connection, hence contributing to create a relationship that lasts necessary time to raise offspring (e.g., Diamond, 2003, Hazan & Shazer, 1987). According to this view, romantic love and sexual desire serve different functions (pair-bonding and sexual activity) and operate within different systems (biological and motivational), which is somewhat supported by the fact that these two forces are related to different physiological and chemical processes[1] (Diamond, 2003; Gonzaga et al., 2009).

We stated earlier that one of the concepts most associated with sexual desire is the concept of *passion*, defined as a state of high physiological arousal (Hatfield & Rapson, 1993a), a state of intense desire of union with the partner (Walster, 1981, as cited in Sternberg, 1986), or even an emotion

in itself (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999). Sexual desire and sexual attraction appear to be the two central components of passion (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999; Hatfield, 1984). Again, there is a strong inconsistency in the use of these terms, given that most studies continue to attribute the same meaning to different variables (sexual desire, passion, sexual activity).

Baumeister and Bratslavsky (1999) theoretically investigated the changes in intimacy and its influence on passion, and although they do not consider sexual desire per se, it is clearly an important contributing for the understanding of development and transformations of intimacy and sexual desire through time. They proposed that passion is a function of change in intimacy, that is, passion reflects the subjective perception of positive change (rise) in intimacy.[2] Thus, the high passion feeling occurs only when one feels that intimacy with the partner is rising quickly. When intimacy is felt as stable (at a high or low level), passion tends to zero. This relation is consistent with the differential development of passion and intimacy through time, already described in the literature—which reflects the impossibility of a linear relation between them. Hence, passion rises quickly in the beginning of a relationship, whereas intimacy rises rapidly in the beginning but then reaches a plateau (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999). This idea is yet to have a direct empirical validation; however, it has indirect empirical support from the studies of Blumstein and Schwartz (1983, as cited in Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999), who showed that the decrease in sexual activity in long-term relationships is not just explained by aging because there is an increase in sexual activity in second marriages. There are also indicators that intimacy does not decrease through the relationship and that it might even increase (Acker & Davis, 1992). Although Baumeister and Bratslavsky (1999) considered that it is difficult for a couple in a high and stable level of intimacy to be able to sustain passion, they recognize the possibility that it can happen in occasional moments of increasing intimacy. These can be moments of shared positive and intense experiences that allow intimacy to grow (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983, as cited in Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999). For instance, after a fight, there could be an increase in passion caused by the positive change in intimacy—the reconciliation.

Narciso and Ribeiro (2009) suggested similar moments—shared, positive, and intense experiences—in their conceptualization on the development of intimacy. They considered that in the beginning of the relationship, there are mainly primary and secondary feelings (Damásio, 2000) with a characteristic of "explosion," shown by an intense desire of fusion with the other, in what the researchers considered to be an adequate representation on passion. As the relationship develops, "endurance feelings" become predominant and are characterized by high stability, lower intensity, and a focus on the shared identity of "us." The primary and secondary feelings still occur but intermittently, as the couple continues to succeed in the articulation of different, and sometimes contrasting, processes (see Figure 1).

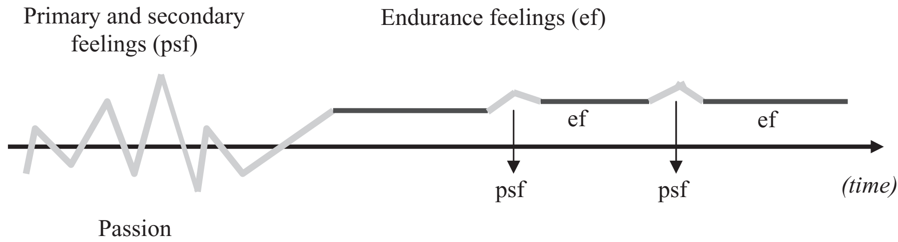

FIGURE 1. Narciso and Ribeiro's (2009) conceptualization on intimacy and associated feelings (ef = endurance feelings) and passion and associated feelings (psf = primary and secondary feelings). Adapted and reproduced with authors' permission.

Also, age and length of relationship seem to influence the development of intimacy and sexual desire. Hinchliff and Gott (2004), in one of the rare qualitative studies with long-term marriages (average relationship length of 43 years), reported that participants showed high levels of diversity and creativity in how they adapted to the transformations in their sexuality, particularly with the decrease in sexual desire, and increase of intimacy. They also found several descriptions of a deeper and more complete sexuality, such as loss of sexual performance abilities and diversification of what was considered *sexual activity*, including several alternatives to intercourse considered positive by the participants (Hinchliff & Gott, 2004).

Perel (2007) launched several questions particularly focusing on the apparent antagonism of sexual desire and intimacy: "Why doesn't good intimacy always lead to good sex?" or "Why do couples who claim to love each other so much are at loss with desire?" She claimed, contrary to other theoretical researchers (e.g., Levine, 2002), that sexuality is not a metaphor for the relationship because it stands on its own parallel narrative and it does not only mirror what is happening in the relationship. According to her clinical experience, many couples who improve significantly in therapy regarding issues of intimacy do not get the somewhat expected improvement regarding sexual desire. The intimacy of modern couples, focused on the romantic ideal of fusion, is considered by Perel (2007) as an environment that does not foster sexual desire, suggesting that desire lives through the unknown and the unpredictable. *Otherness* (Perel, 2007) refers to the notion of an emotional space, between the self and the other, an ability to see the other as someone close and intimate but different from oneself, with characteristics such as autonomy and independence (Perel, 2007).

The processes leading from *otherness* to *fusion*, and consequent decrease of sexual desire in explained by Perel (2007): The beginning of the relationship is characterized by a perception of insecurity and danger, which potentiates sexual desire. Here, there is a high otherness, which brings some insecurity and increases the need for closeness and predictability, in order to diminish the associated risks. This quest for security through *eradication*

of separation (Perel, 2007), frequently results in fusion, or in a poorly differentiated relationship. In this phase, there is also a great need to please the partner, putting one's needs second, which might also contribute to the creation of *comfort love* (Perel, 2007). Comfort love does not contain the needed ingredients for sexual desire to arise: games, transgression, eroticism, and risk. Through time, this fusion contributes to the establishment of a routine that, associated with the fear of the otherness, translates into a strong decrease in sexual desire. However, these proposals by Perel (2007) have not yet received empirical support.

One of the great challenges for modern couples seems to be the articulation of the security-predictability needs and the curiosity-discovery needs: Perel (2007) mentioned the reconciliation of the erotic and the domestic, whereas Narciso and Ribeiro (2009) mentioned the dialectic *stability-change*. Hence, there should be an effort, which might come up as an investment, to embrace curiosity for the partner's otherness. These paradoxical processes seem to be intrinsically related to the concept of couple differentiation, which we subsequently discuss.

Couples Differentiation as a Paradox

According to Bowen (1979), two forces coexist in equilibrium: (a) *togetherness*, motivating the organism to connect, to create dependency, and to follow other organisms; and (b) *individuality*, which drives the organism to follow its own directives as a distinct and independent entity. The dynamics between these two forces shape the nature of one's relationships and one's own ability to moderate this equilibrium. This ability might be viewed as the differentiation of self—the ability to keep a separate sense of self while in a close relationship with a significant other. It also implies the ability to not react to that person's emotional reactivity and to self-regulate emotions in order to be able to use judgment (Bowen, 1979; Kerr & Bowen, 1988, as cited in Schnarch, 1991; Schnarch, 1991).

Although the concept of differentiation of self was proposed in the context of parent–child relationships (Bowen, 1979), it is also applicable to couples' relationships. Although ideally one should arrive at a marriage-type relationship with a high level of differentiation, this is unlikely, according to Schnarch (1991, 2009), who considers marriage—instead of parent–child relationships—to be the real challenge for the development of differentiation because it offers the individual more opportunities to regulate the distance-fusion equilibrium.

Schnarch (1991, 2009) distinguished between *self-validated intimacy*, in which the person has the ability to self-soothe, and *other-validated intimacy*, in which the person is dependent on the partner for comfort and validation, and proposes that the desire for intimacy is sometimes rooted in the search for a reflected sense of self, in an attempt to reduce stress

by being validated by the other—a sign of low differentiation. Several researchers have considered that a high level of differentiation is positively associated with well-being (Jacobson, Follette, & McDonald, 1982; Jacobson, Waldron, & Moore, 1980; Skowron et al., 2008). Differentiation and couple satisfaction seem to be strongly and positively associated (Jacobson et al., 1982; Jacobson et al., 1980; Peleg, 2008; Skowron, 2000), although one of the more recent studies has not found such relation (Patrick, Sells, Giordano, & Tollerud, 2007). Schnarch (1991) explained the influence of couples satisfaction by considering that more differentiated individuals have a higher tolerance for intimacy—the ability to comfortably and clearly keep one's identity while revealing central aspects of oneself, which implies a sense of internalized self-worth and the ability for self-soothing. Although Bowen (1989) and Schnarch (1997) considered that partners tend to have similar levels of differentiation, that claim is not supported by empirical research, as shown by the works of Skowron (2000) and the research review on Bowenian theory made by S. Miller, Anderson, and Keala (2004).

Differentiation is a clearly multidimensional concept as proposed by Bowen (1979) and the Differentiation of Self Inventory, developed by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) is consistent with this idea; it evaluated four dimensions of the construct: *emotional reactivity*, *I-position*, *cut-off*, and *fusion with others*. This measure is considered to be a reliable instrument for the assessment of differentiation (with the exception of the fusion-with-others subscale), as it is also Haber's Level of Differentiation of Self Scale (1993, as cited in S. Miller et al., 2004).

Considering this relation between differentiation (and otherness) and intimacy, it is interesting to find that some definitions of intimacy, do incorporate this concepts as a characteristic of intimacy. We might call this specific type of intimacy, so different from more common definitions, a *differentiated intimacy*. For example, Wilner (1982) defined *intimacy* as the experience of the partner's wholeness, for which we consider that there must be a distance to experience such wholeness. Also, Papouchis (1982, p. 348) defined *intimacy* as an ability to see the partner as a separate entity, with specific characteristics and to trust this intimate other enough to reveal him or her our own private world in a collaborative manner; so that our deep sense of integrity, identity, and wholeness is not threatened by this intimate relationship. A *differentiated intimacy* clearly integrates the vision of the intimate other as a separate person, with *otherness*, instead of the more traditional romantic ideal of the *fused* "1+1 = 1" couple.

But how does differentiation contribute to the relationship between intimacy and sexual desire? Schnarch (1991) considered that there is a systemic recursivity between low differentiation, erotic difficulties and intimacy problems. Differentiation seems to be a prerequisite for a level of self-disclosure and self-validation or self-comfort that allows one to express his or her own

eroticism in the intimate relationship (Schnarch, 1991, 2009), hence diminishing the constant need for other-validated intimacy. Consequently, couples with low levels of differentiation might often experience low sexual desire and sexual boredom, which could function as a systemic defense against intimacy (Schnarch, 1991, 2009). In contrast, highly differentiated couples might be able to establish true mutuality, thereby facilitating, for example, bonds outside the relationship without the consequent anxieties, which might, in turn, increase the sense of separateness and heighten sexual desire.

The articulation between intimacy and sexual desire seems to be related to the perception of risk in an intimate relationship (Pilkington & Richardson, 1988) that is, the individual's degree of sensibility to the dangers associated with intimacy. The authors show that people who have the perception a greater degree of risk in intimacy tend to be less extroverted, with lower self-esteem and with higher levels of jealousy and feelings of possession toward the partner.

In a different study, Murray et al. (2006, as cited in Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008) stated that in order to effectively negotiate interpersonal life, people need a regulating system to balance the tension between their connectedness and self-protection goals. This system, which appears to be related to differentiation in its core, allows people to maintain a couple life, which involves an ability to trust someone, to self-comfort, and to avoid rejection. As people with low self-esteem easily attribute a rejection characteristic to ambiguous situations, they have a biased risk regulation system, and disproportionately generate self-protection responses and the chronic expectations of the partner's response calibrate this regulation system (Murray et al., 2008). Hence, it seems that people with low self-esteem might function in reaction to the partner's attitude regarding the satisfaction of their needs for comfort. Thus, many self-fulfilling prophecies might arise because the frequent self-protection attempts could, in a systemic way, result in a behavior that mines the responses of a otherwise accepting partner. In support of this idea, Knee and colleagues (2008) characterized relationship-contingent self-esteem as a dysfunctional pattern in which one does not have an internalized sense of self independence from the relationship, and so one needs to perceive a positive relationship in order to feel a positive self. Consequently, such a relationship-contingent self-esteem might also contribute to the already mentioned other-validated intimacy.

The relation between risk management and differentiation can be illustrated by one of the two choice dilemmas proposed by Schnarch (1991, 1997)—one wants to feel validated by its partner for its inner self, but one does not want to expose that self before the assurance that it is accepted. This dilemma mirrors the level of differentiation needed for a high tolerance to intimacy and its risk. Such risks, a founding part of a successful intimate relationship, can involve exposure, rejection, loss of control and betrayal (Hatfield, 1984).

Involvement in risky situations usually includes some level of anxiety and low differentiation is associated with low ability to buffer the anxiety that comes with the vulnerability experienced when we desire the partner openly (Schnarch, 1991). The capacity for self-comfort, a central concept in differentiation theory, seems to be an essential base for a confidant sexual desire.

Conclusion

Through this ride along theoretical and empirical perspectives on intimacy, sexual desire and differentiation and their complex relationships with one another, we have identified several inconsistencies that are far from resolution, which is not surprising considering their complexity, but might nonetheless be improved with more adequate research. Negative changes in sexual desire might negatively affect couple satisfaction and well-being but we have also seen that through creativity (Hinchliff & Gott, 2004) the couple might also find unique and rewarding ways to cope with such changes. We also reported on theoretical works that propose that through differentiation of the self, the couple could successfully cope with such changes (Perel, 2008; Schnarch, 1991, 2009). We suggested the concept of *couple differentiation*, which we find useful to this discussion, and possibly essential for the dynamic of couple processes', for its characteristics in terms of personal and couple development and by containing in itself the essence of the fusion-distancing dynamic, a component that might potentiate sexual desire in long-term couples (Schnarch, 1991). Accordingly, we considered the concept of otherness to be relevant, not because it reflects a distance imbued with individualist values, but because it allows the conscience and acceptance of an "I" and a "you" that are singular and unique, and without this, the "we" cannot fully emerge. The absence of a sense of otherness might lead to a state of fusion, where the "I" and the "you" are enmeshed, which is poorly compatible with the individual and relational well-being. As so, we have seen that sexual desire might be affected by this dynamic, implying an essential distance between the partners (Heider, 1958, as cited in Regan & Berscheid, 1999).

How, then, can the apparently diverging paths of intimacy and sexual desire be reconciled? Due to the already mentioned physiological characteristics of these processes (Gonzaga et al., 2006), and their seemingly deterministic character, this is a complex challenge. We do, however, highlight one factor—couple differentiation—that could work as a moderator or mediator variable on the relation between intimacy and sexual desire. At a global level, there are strong evidences for the high association between couple satisfaction and sexual satisfaction (Apt et al., 1996), but there are suggestion that this relation might not be direct, that is, the presence of mediation or moderating variable might occur. Could that variable be couple differentiation? Differentiation is not yet a well-researched construct and many

question the validity and universality of this and other Bowenian constructs. Although some Bowenian constructs such as triangulation, the differentiation similarity hypothesis and sibling position have come under criticism for their lack of empirical support, differentiation is considered to have robust empirical support (S. Miller et al., 2004). It is our view, however, that the differentiation within the couple still lacks empirical evidence and it might even be confounded by attachment.

Although Schnarch (1991) and Perel (2008) mentioned that sexuality and sexual desire have their own narrative, not always dependent on intimacy, they continued to invest in intimacy-focused interventions as one of the cornerstones of couples intervention, because its promotion is one of the most important ways of strengthening and improving the relation (Schnarch, 2001). As we see it, couple intervention should look at this dynamic as interdependent, considering the complexity of this processes and their systemic nature.

Bowen (1979) and Schnarch (1991, 2009) give extra attention to the ability to maintain judgment and rationality while the partner is expressing anxiety. However, we consider that the ability to move between two states—letting oneself be invaded by the other's emotionality, or emotionally remove oneself might indicate a useful couple differentiation. By coming very close to the other's deep feelings, while keeping the ability of introducing distance, one can experience the basic assumption of differentiation: the ability to keep a solid sense of self while in deep intimacy with the other.

Perel (2008) stated that today the expectations surrounding couplehood are extremely high and the romantic partner is the main responsible for providing answers to all the needs of the individual. This idea is particularly relevant to the aforementioned notions of risk management, because if one expects all their needs to be satisfied by one person, the vulnerability and the inherent risk of rejection are high, and one might feel more prone to protect itself from these risks (Murray et al., 2008). However, it is precisely in long-term relationships that one needs to put aside many of the self-protection goals and risk substantial dependence (Murray et al., 2008). The concept of relationship-contingent self-esteem is also useful to understand the dynamic between otherness and fusion. Knee and colleagues (2008) stated that this type of pattern promotes the decrease of the perception of otherness and autonomy, along with the increase of fusion and the retroactive decrease of the abilities for empathy and a healthy closeness. One of the keys to facilitate this process might be differentiation, through its articulation between both needs in the relationship, which might implicate high self-esteem.

In summary, through the analysis of theoretical perspectives and empirical studies, we have identified some critiques regarding the state of the art of research in the area and some clues for further investigations: (a) the conceptual confusion between different constructs (e.g., intimacy and closeness; desire and passion) is a damaging influence on psychometric tools, contributing to some issues regarding their validity, as it was discussed in

the assessment sections of this article; (b) the focus on the individual, instead of the couple, in most empirical studies, impoverishes the resulting conceptualizations, since it does not address the couples complexity; (c) The massive use of college-age participants, chosen for their availability, comes at great costs, given that this theme is naturally situated through adult life and not with its full complexity during the teenage years; (d) the focus on sexual dysfunction and genital function instead of desire, pleasure, and other subjective components of sexuality is, at best, reductive, although practical. One should note that there seems to be a positive change with Schnarch's (1991), Laan and Both (2008), Perel (2008) and Basson's (2001, 2002) proposals, who adequately illustrate the complexity and subjectivity of the sexual experience in couplehood; (e) in terms of methodological strategies, we agree with Basson (2001) and Perel (2007) regarding that the focus on female representations of intimacy (instead of male) and male representations of sexuality (and not female), might bias the data collection strategies in intimacy research; (f) we consider that an investment in qualitative and longitudinal studies would strongly contribute to the increase in knowledge and understanding of the dynamics and the development between these constructs (intimacy, desire) through time, allowing a greater access to the couple's complexity. This would further contribute to the suggestion of empirically supported couple intervention strategies; and (g) we consider the concept of differentiation to be a potentially integrative construct, synthesizing several theoretical approaches, and possibly contributing to the understanding of the circular dynamics between trajectories of couple intimacy and sexual desire, namely on the development from a fused intimacy to a differentiated intimacy. The usefulness of this construct should be empirically studied, because for now we only know it is positively related to marital satisfaction. The inclusion of this construct in future, preferably longitudinal, research is highly promising, as it might offer us a more comprehensive view of the processes and the diversity that frames the interactions of couple intimacy and sexual desire.

NOTES

1. Whereas processes related to romantic love (intimacy, attachment) are associated with the release of oxytocin, prolactin and vasopressin, the ones related to sexual behavior and sexuality occur within the presence of dopamine and noradrenalin (Tobeña, 2006).
2. $P = \int (di/dt) + C$. Passion (P) varies as a function of the perceived change in intimacy (di) through time (dt), along with other constant variables (C).

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