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Permissiveness

Premarital Sexual Permissiveness Scale

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The Premarital Sexual Permissiveness Scale (PSPS) was developed to assess people’s attitudes about the acceptability of premarital sex at different levels of relational development (Sprecher, McKinney, Walsh, & Anderson, 1988). It was modeled after the Reiss (1964, 1967) Premarital Sexual Permissiveness Scale, but with sexual behaviors and relationship stages that my colleagues and I believed would more adequately measure variation in sexual permissiveness. Multiple-item scales, such as the PSPS, are more discriminating measures of sexual standards than the single items often found in national studies, such as the one used in the General Social Survey: “If a man and a woman have sex relations before marriage, do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, not wrong at all or don’t know.” That is, people may be accepting of premarital sex under some relational conditions (e.g., a serious, committed relationship) but not others (e.g., casual dating), and the PSPS can assess this interesting variation.

In addition, multiple versions of the scale can be administered, either with the same participants or with different participants, with each version focusing on a different target in the scale items. This allows the investigator not only to examine a sample’s general sexual permissiveness but also to examine how sexual permissiveness may vary for different targets. The most common comparisons that have been made are standards for self versus standards for others and standards for males versus females (i.e., a double standard).

Description

The original version (Sprecher et al., 1988) of the PSPS was created containing 15 items that asked about acceptance of three sexual behaviors (heavy petting [touching of genitals], sexual intercourse, and oral-genital sex) for each of five relationship stages (first date, casually dating, seriously dating, pre-engaged, and engaged). Not surprisingly, people were found to be least accepting of premarital sex at the first date stage, and most accepting at the engaged stage. With each increasing relationship stage, more acceptance was expressed. Variation in acceptability was also found among the sexual activities. People were most accepting of heavy petting; and sexual intercourse was viewed as slightly more acceptable than oral-genital sex.

In some of my research (Sprecher, 1989) I found that the “pre-engaged stage” (defined further as “seriously discussed the possibility of getting married”) was dropped. In addition, in recent research, I have reduced the scale to only the sexual intercourse items.

Response Mode and Timing

In our research, the scale items of the PSPS are followed by a 6-point response scale. The response options are Agree Strongly, Agree Moderately, Agree Slightly, Disagree Slightly, Disagree Moderately, Disagree Strongly. Interpretation of results is facilitated by reverse coding the responses so that the higher number indicates greater acceptance.

The scale, even if it is administered multiple times, does not take long to complete. The version that includes five items takes 1 to 2 minutes to complete.

Scoring

To create a total score presenting degree of sexual permissiveness, a mean of the items is recommended (although a sum is also all right). If multiple versions are included (i.e., a version for self, a version for a male target, a version for a female target), it is recommended that a total score be computed separately for each version. Also, as noted above, it is recommended, for ease of interpretation, that the response options first be reverse scored so that the higher number indicates greater agreement.

Reliability

The scale has high internal consistency. With unpublished data collected from over 6,000 undergraduate students at a Midwest university, Cronbach’s alpha for the 5-item subscale measuring acceptability of sexual intercourse for the self was .82.

Validity

Construct validity is evidenced by findings of expected differences between male and female participants (e.g., Sprecher, 1989; Sprecher et al., 1988). That is, men are found to be more permissive than women, especially at the stages of first date and casually dating. In addition, in unpublished data, the subscale of acceptability of sexual intercourse for the self was found to be significantly and positively correlated with the sexual attitude items from the Sociosexuality Orientation Inventory (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991).

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Other Information

If the researcher has the space for only a few items of the scale, my suggestion is that the three items asking about acceptability of sexual intercourse for first date, casual dating, and serious dating be selected. The greatest variation is found for the items asking about first date and casual dating.

Although the scale has been used primarily to examine young adults’ attitudes about their own and peers’ sexual activity prior to marriage, it could also be used in other ways, including to assess parents’ attitudes about their adult children’s sexual behavior (e.g., “I believe that sexual intercourse is acceptable for my son when he is casually dating”).

Researchers interested in assessing premarital sexual attitudes may continue to adapt and modify the scale, to explore other interesting nuances of sexual attitudes.

References


Exhibit

Premarital Sexual Permissiveness Scale

Following are the items for sexual intercourse in reference to the self.

Directions. For each of the following statements, indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with it. These statements concern what you think is appropriate behavior for you.

Response option: The following response options follow each item.

1 Agree Strongly
2 Agree Moderately
3 Agree Slightly
4 Disagree Slightly
5 Disagree Moderately
6 Disagree Strongly

The items:

1. I believe that sexual intercourse is acceptable for me on a first date.
2. I believe that sexual intercourse is acceptable for me when I’m casually dating my partner (dating less than one month).
3. I believe that sexual intercourse is acceptable for me when I’m seriously dating my partner (dating almost a year).
4. I believe that sexual intercourse is acceptable for me when I am pre-engaged to my partner (we have seriously discussed the possibility of getting married).
5. I believe that sexual intercourse is acceptable for me when I’m engaged to my partner.

*The researcher may also ask about the acceptability of other sexual behaviors. For example, the researcher may include similar items that ask about acceptability of heavy petting (e.g., touching of genitals) and oral-genital sex for the five different relationship stages, as was done in Sprecher et al. (1988). Furthermore, the researcher may ask about acceptability of sexual behaviors for different targets—for example, for a male and a female (see Sprecher, 1989; Sprecher et al., 1988). An example item to measure standards for a female would be “I believe that sexual intercourse is acceptable for a female who is seriously dating her partner.” An example item from the male version is “I believe that sexual intercourse is acceptable for a male who is engaged to his partner.”