

Original research articles based on limited empirical data

Couples' social skills in couples of different sexual orientations

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Abstract

Sexual orientation and romantic relationships are topics of interest presently. However, there are few studies that focus on the Couples' Social Skills (CSS) of homosexual couples. In Latin America, the only instrument assessing these skills is based on studies that include heterosexual couples only. Thus, the objectives of this study are: (a) estimating new psychometric evidence for the Couples' Social Skills Inventory (CSSI) in heterosexual couples and homosexual couples; (b) assessing the invariance of the measurement model generated by the CSSI, as a function of gender and sexual orientation; and (c) characterizing and identifying specificities of the couples' social skills repertoire in relation to gender and sexual orientation. A total of 596 individuals, 210 in homosexual relationships and 386 in heterosexual relationships (mean age of 26 and 39 respectively) responded to the CSSI-Villa&Del-Prette. Exploratory structural equation modeling with the *Weighted Least Square Means and Variance Adjusted* estimation method and polychoric correlation matrices were used. Descriptive and inferential analyses were also performed (Student's t-test and MANOVA). The invariance of the CSSI for gender and sexual orientation was confirmed, while homosexual couples had higher means for the total repertoire of marital social skills and for the Assertive Reciprocity, Assertive Self-Affirmation, and Emotional Responsiveness subclasses. For these same variables, women had higher means than men. These data encourage future studies and programs, taking the variables gender and sexual orientation into account, as well as specific sociocultural variables involving these types of relationships.

Keywords: social skills, couple, gender diversity, sexual and gender minorities, interpersonal relations

HABILIDADES SOCIAIS CONJUGAIS EM CASAIS DE DIFERENTES ORIENTAÇÕES SEXUAIS

Resumo

As temáticas orientação sexual e relacionamento amoroso são tópicos de interesse atual. Contudo, há poucos estudos focando nas habilidades sociais conjugais (HSC) de casais homossexuais. Na América Latina, o único instrumento que avalia estas habilidades baseou-se em estudos apenas com casais heterossexuais. Deste modo, são objetivos deste estudo: (a) estimar novas evidências psicométricas para o Inventário de Habilidades Sociais Conjugaes (IHSC) em casais hetero e homossexuais; (b) avaliar a invariância do modelo de medida gerado pelo IHSC em função do gênero e orientação sexual; e (c) caracterizar e identificar especificidades do repertório de habilidades sociais conjugais em casais em relação ao gênero e orientação sexual. 596 indivíduos, sendo 210 em uma relação homossexual e 386 em um relacionamento heterossexual (média de idade de 26 e 39 anos, respectivamente) responderam ao IHSC. Foi empregada a modelagem de equação estrutural exploratória com método de estimação *Weighted Least Square Mean and Variance Adjusted* e matrizes de correlações polícóricas. Análises descritivas e inferenciais também foram realizadas (t-Student test e MANOVA). Verificou-se a invariância do IHSC quanto ao gênero e orientação sexual embora casais do mesmo sexo tenham apresentado médias maiores para o repertório total de HSC e nas subclasses Reciprocidade Assertiva, Autoafirmação Assertiva e Responsividade Emocional. Nestas mesmas variáveis, mulheres obtiveram médias maiores do que os homens. Estes dados instigam para estudos e programas futuros, levando em consideração as variáveis de gênero e orientação sexual, assim como de variáveis socioculturais específicas que envolvem estes tipos de relação.

Palavras-chave: habilidades sociais, casal, diversidade de gênero, minorias sexuais e de gênero, relações interpessoais

HABILIDADES SOCIALES DE PAREJA EN PAREJAS DE DIFERENTES ORIENTACIONES SEXUALES

Resumen

La orientación sexual y las relaciones amorosas son temas de actualidad. Sin embargo, existen pocos estudios centrados en las Habilidades Sociales de Pareja (HSP) de parejas homosexuales. En América Latina, el único instrumento que evalúa estas habilidades se basó en estudios con parejas heterosexuales únicamente. Los objetivos de este estudio son: (a) estimar nuevas evidencias psicométricas para el Inventario de HSP (IHSP) en parejas heterosexuales y parejas homosexuales; (b) evaluar la invariancia del modelo de

medición generado por el IHSP, en función del género y la orientación sexual; y (c) caracterizar e identificar especificidades del repertorio de HSP en las parejas en relación con el género y la orientación sexual. Un total de 596 individuos, 210 en relaciones homosexuales y 386 en relaciones heterosexuales (edad media de 26 y 39 años) respondieron al IHSP. Se utilizaron modelos exploratorios de ecuaciones estructurales con el método de estimación Weighted Least Square Means y Variance Adjusted y matrices de correlación polícórica. También se realizaron análisis descriptivos e inferenciales (prueba t de Student y MANOVA). Se confirmó la invariancia del IHSP para género y orientación sexual, aunque las parejas homosexuales tuvieron medias más altas para el repertorio total de HSP y para las subclases Reciprocidad Asertiva, Autoafirmación Asertiva y Respuesta Emocional. Para estas mismas variables, las mujeres tuvieron medias más altas que los hombres. Estos datos alientan futuros estudios y programas, teniendo en cuenta las variables género y orientación sexual, así como variables socioculturales específicas que involucran este tipo de relaciones.

Palabras-clave: habilidades sociales, pareja, diversidad de género, minorías sexuales y de género, relaciones interpersonales

Maintaining a healthy relationship requires more than just love; it involves a combination of several factors and behaviors. While love is a crucial foundation, it alone may not be sufficient for a successful and lasting relationship (Beck, 1988). Several authors have explored this topic, and the consensus is that love needs to be complemented by other essential components to achieve a healthy relationship (Beck, 1988; Gottman & Silver, 2015). One of these complements is the couples' social skills (Villa & Del Prette, 2013). However, one question remains: Do heterosexual and homosexual couples present differences in couples' social skills?

The literature presents data regarding the effect of prejudice and stigmatization on non-heterosexual people. Stressors related to non-heterosexual sexual orientations are associated with greater conflict and instability in relationships (Khaddouma et al., 2015). Homosexual couples are subjected to sociocultural experiences of prejudice and stigma, which can influence their relationships (Meyer, 1995; 2003). Therefore, supportive strategies are important to address these additional challenges.

A review study carried out by Kurdek (2005) on homosexual North American couples found that, when compared to heterosexual couples, homosexual couples (gays and lesbians) tend to assign household labor more fairly, resolve conflict with constructive strategies, experience similar levels of satisfaction, and perceive less support from family members but more support from friends. The author of this study also found that couples in heterosexual relationships have greater relationship stability. A significant question raised by Kurdek is not stability itself, but the preservation of the relationship even without institutional support, considering that cultural variables (e.g., prejudice against sexual and gender diversity) can hinder the free expression of homosexual relationships. This understanding is also shared by other authors (such as Catelan & Costa, 2020), who highlight the problem of stigmatization of homosexual relationships in some settings.

In a comparative study conducted with 40 couples in homosexual relationships and 40 in heterosexual relationships in the United States, Gottman et al. (2003) found differences in these relationships. Through observational analysis and mathematical modeling, the authors identified that when discussing the relationship, homosexual couples used fewer defensive strategies, were less hostile or domineering, and showed more use of humor and affection.

Other authors mention additional differences. Mosmann et al. (2010), for instance, compared 298 Brazilian subjects in heterosexual relationships with 111 in homosexual relationships, finding indicators of greater marital cohesion and adaptability in homosexual couples. According to these authors, children, marriage institutionalization, gender role flexibility, and affection are some of the variables that could explain this result.

Couples' social skills refer to behaviors that promote a connection between couples, being the opposite of violence (Cardoso & Costa, 2019). These skills encompass various social behaviors valued within an affectionate and sexual relationship, which tend to enhance satisfaction and the overall quality of the relationship (Cardoso & Del Prette, 2020; Villa & Del Prette, 2013). Among the behaviors that researchers have identified as crucial for marital

relationships, the following stand out: sexual assertiveness and sexual skills (Farah & Vaziri, 2011; Sánchez-Fuentes et al., 2014), communication (Gottman & Rushe, 1995; Gottman & Silver, 2015), emotional expressiveness and empathy (Abedi et al., 2016; Shahid, & Kazmi, 2016), proactive and reactive self-control (Villa & Del Prette, 2013), problem solving (Cardoso & Del Prette, 2017; SadeghiFard et al., 2016), empathy and assertiveness (Cardoso & Del Prette, 2017; Del Prette & Del Prette, 2021).

A literature review carried out in Brazil on the specificities of the couples' social skills repertoire did not find any studies identifying similarities or differences between heterosexual and homosexual couples (Cardoso & Del Prette, 2017). Furthermore, it was found that studies are mostly based on heterosexual couples who are married or in stable relationships.

Although sexual orientation and romantic relationships are topics of interest in Brazil and internationally, there are no instruments supported by validity studies to assess couples' social skills in homosexual relationships. To date, the only Brazilian instrument that assesses these skills is focused on the population of heterosexual couples (Villa & Del Prette, 2013).

Heterosexual and homosexual couples are subjected to different socio-cultural contingencies, which can negatively or positively impact their skills. It is relevant to identify similarities and differences in the couples' social skills repertoire of heterosexual and homosexual couples and in the resources and needs of these populations, considering that potential intervention or couples therapy programs should be planned according to the needs of the target audience (Markman et al., 2019). The aims of this study were: (a) to investigate new psychometric evidence for the Couples' Social Skills Inventory (CSSI-Villa&Del-Prette) in heterosexual and homosexual couples; (b) to evaluate the invariance of the measurement model generated by the CSSI-Villa&Del-Prette as a function of gender and sexual orientation; and (c) to characterize and identify specificities of the couples' social skills repertoire in couples according to gender and sexual orientation. Based on these data, this study may indicate whether different guidelines or goals are needed for couples' social skills training programs directed toward this population. The hypothesis was that there would be differences in the couples' social skills repertoires of heterosexual and homosexual couples.

Method

Participants

A total of 596 Brazilian individuals participated in this study, originating from two separate samples. One sample was constructed in 2019 and consisted of 210 participants in homosexual relationships, men ($n = 84$) and women ($n = 126$), with a mean age of 25 ($SD = 6.31$), living in the cities of São Carlos (SP), São Luís (MA), São Paulo (SP), Brasília (DF), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Fortaleza (CE) and Porto Alegre (RS). The other included 386 individuals, men ($n = 193$) and women ($n = 193$), with a mean age of 39 ($SD = 9.65$), who were in heterosexual relationships. The data for the sample of heterosexual couples (64.77%) originated from another study conducted

in 2013 by Villa and Del Prette. Consequently, it was not possible to obtain additional profile information.

Data collection procedure

The data were collected in two steps. The first step consisted of retrieving the data from the study by Villa and Del Prette (2013) regarding the heterosexual couples sample. The instruments were administered in person with people in affective-sexual relationships, recruited in churches, clubs, teaching institutions, and residences. The final data collection step was conducted by the first author of this study with individuals in homosexual relationships.

The couples in homosexual relationships were recruited through social media and digital platforms of higher education institutions, which composed a convenience sample. The instruments were administered in person to people in affective-sexual relationships by the first author of this study and/or research assistants who were previously trained to administer the instruments with couples (psychologists and Psychology students in the final semester of their undergraduate courses). Data collection was conducted in places that were convenient and with easy access for the participants, such as universities, clinics, and shopping malls. The couples attended the data collection locations together; However, they responded to the instrument individually, without their partners.

Ethical aspects

This study followed the guidelines of the National Health Council, in accordance with the guidelines and regulatory standards for research involving human subjects (Resolution 466/2012 and Resolution 512/2016) and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Federal University of São Carlos (CEP-UFSCar) under CAAE Protocol: 02167618.9.0000.5504 and Authorization No. 3.145.835. All the participants in this research were volunteers and signed a consent form.

Instruments

Couples' Social Skills Inventory (CSSI-Villa&Del-Prette). The CSSI-Villa&Del-Prette (Villa & Del Prette, 2012) is a self-report instrument that allows the skills performance in intimate partner relationships to be characterized in relation to different demands (i.e., sexuality, daily tasks, and organization). It consists of 32 items, each describing a situation of social interaction and a potential reaction to it. This allows resources and deficits in the repertoire of affectively committed couples to be identified, through a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 0 to 4. In a recent psychometric study, with a sample of 2707 respondents from different parts of Brazil, of both sexes, aged between 16 and 85 ($M = 35.27$; $SD = 12.78$), Del Prette et al. (2019) performed a factor analysis, based on polychoric correlations (Exploratory Structural Equation Modeling, ESEM), which retained 28 items, and presented a four-factor structure: Emotional Self-Control ($\alpha = .75$, items: 5, 6, 13 and 18); Assertive Reciprocity ($\alpha = .71$, items: 1, 4, 7, 8, 22, 24, 28, 31 and 32); Assertive Self-Affirmation ($\alpha = .70$, items: 2, 10, 14, 19, 21, 23, 26 and 30); and Emotional

Responsiveness ($\alpha = .81$, items: 9, 15, 16, 20, 25, 27 and 29). The factor structure showed configural and scalar invariance between sexes and age groups. The four-factor structure version was used in this study; However, all 32 items were analyzed.

Data analysis procedure

Exploratory Structural Equation Modeling (ESEM) with the Weighted Least Squares Means and Variance Adjusted (WLSMV) estimation method and polychoric correlation matrices was used to estimate evidence of validity based on internal structure. As this method proposes integrating confirmatory and exploratory models, it used the number of factors found by CSSI-Villa&Del-Prette. A saturated model, in which all items can be correlated with all factors, was estimated, and measurement model invariance was assessed as a function of the participants' gender and sexual orientation. The models were assessed using the fit indices available for the Mplus 7.4 software, which were χ^2/df ratio, CFI, TLI, and RMSEA (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). According to the literature, CFI and TLI cutoff points above .90 and .95 are considered adequate and excellent, respectively. RMSEA values of .08 and .05 are considered adequate and excellent fit indicators, respectively (Marsh, 2007).

The SPSS (Version 26.0) software was used to organize the data. Subsequently, descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations for general and factor scores of the couples' social skills) and inferential statistics (Student's *t*-test and MANOVA) were carried out to assess the differences between the subsamples of homosexual and heterosexual orientations. Additionally, the effect size measures Cohen's *d* for Student's *t*-test, and eta squared (η^2) for MANOVA were assessed. Values above 0.2 were considered to have a small effect, above 0.4 a moderate effect, and above 0.8 a large effect to interpret measures according to Cohen's *d*. For the η^2 measure, values above .01 were considered as having a small effect, above .06 a moderate effect, and above .14 a large effect (Cohen, 1988).

Results

Evidence of validity and invariance of the Couples' Social Skills Inventory as a function of sexual orientation

The results of the ESEM indicated good fit indices for the CSSI-Villa&Del-Prette measurement model to the data of the current total sample: $\chi^2 = 393.496$, $df = 272$, $\chi^2/df = 1.44$, CFI = .969, TLI = .956, RMSEA = .031 (90% CI .024-.037). Table 1 presents the estimated model with factor loadings.

Table 1*Factor model of the Couples' Social Skills Inventory*

CSSI-Villa&Del-Prette Items	F1. Emotional Self-Control	F2. Assertive Reciprocity	F3. Assertive Self-Affirmation	F4. Emotional Responsiveness
1. Talking about any subject	.094	.322	.265	.145
2. Refusing partner imposition	.018	-.086	.530	.003
4. Thanking compliment	.073	.627	-.147	-.011
5. Containing speech interruption	.489	.075	.009	-.156
6. Remembering agreements	.594	.079	.011	-.062
7. Expressing affection	-.096	.528	.252	.032
8. Apologizing for mistakes	.068	.514	-.097	.198
9. Perceiving emotional change and calming down	-.050	-.048	-.153	.665
10. Stopping unwanted caressing	-.224	.223	.444	-.055
13. Expressing disagreement	.546	.113	.175	.057
14. Asking to change unwanted subject	.053	-.101	.529	.127
15. Reacting to partner's altered speech	-.032	.013	-.295	.530
16. Controlling aggressiveness when criticized	.400	.114	.171	.462
18. Asking clarification questions	.422	.158	.117	.284
19. Expressing displeasure	.210	.069	.484	.057
20. Solving common problems	.010	.149	.101	.578
21. Asking for help	.040	.144	.382	-.106
22. Complimenting	.064	.711	.038	.050
23. Refusing sexual intercourse	-.130	.131	.572	-.060
24. Expressing well-being	-.074	.621	.075	-.015
25. Dealing with mockery	-.203	.158	-.073	.352
26. Reacting to unfair assessment	.066	.013	.487	.028
27. Expressing different opinion	.228	-.065	.182	.576
28. Showing support	.082	.372	.238	.145
29. Dealing with intense discussion	.174	.136	-.225	.452
30. Asserting opinion	.175	-.039	.502	.015
31. Express satisfaction with sexual caressing	-.029	.401	.142	.028
32. Expressing understanding and support	.025	.436	.002	.292
Correlation between factors				
F1. Emotional Self-Control				
F2. Assertive Reciprocity	.275			
F3. Assertive Self-Affirmation	.282	.513		
F4. Emotional Responsiveness	.249	.513	.220	

As shown in Table 1, the grouping of items is equivalent to those found by CSSI-Villa&Del-Prette. Factor 1 corresponds to the factor originally called Emotional Self-Control, F2 to Assertive Reciprocity, F3 to Assertive Self-Affirmation, and F4 to Emotional Responsiveness. The items did not present loadings equal to or greater than .300 in more than one factor, proving

to be good representatives of the factors they were intended to assess. The only exception was item 16, intended to assess F4 Emotional Responsiveness (loading = .462), which also presented a factor loading in F1 Emotional Self-Control (-.400). Considering the negative relationship between the content of the two factors and that the higher loading found is in accordance with the theoretical hypothesis, the item was maintained as a representative of only F4.

The correlations between factors were all significant and ranged from low to moderate in magnitude, indicating that there was no overlap between the constructs assessed by the factors. The highest correlation found was between Factor 3 Assertive Self-Affirmation and Factor 4 Emotional Responsiveness ($p = .513$), which is in line with the theoretical proposition since these factors bring together items that correspond to two categories of skills that need to be performed together in interpersonal relationships (assertiveness and empathy). The factors showed good reliability indicators, namely: $\omega = .690$ and $\alpha = .680$ for F1, Emotional Self-Control; $\omega = .850$ and $\alpha = .848$ for F2, Assertive Reciprocity; $\omega = .749$ and $\alpha = .747$ for F3, Assertive Self-Affirmation; and $\omega = .730$ and $\alpha = .730$ for F4, Emotional Responsiveness.

The invariance indicators of the measurement model were estimated as a function of gender and sexual orientation. The results indicated total and gender invariance with adequate fit indices for the configurable models: WLS $\chi^2(df) = 1.26$; CFI = .961, TLI = .956, RMSEA = .033 (90% CI .025–.041), and WLS scalar model $\chi^2(df) = 1.21$; CFI = .958, TLI = .945, RMSEA = .030 (90% CI .022–.037), given the low variability found between the fit indices, ΔCFI and $\Delta\text{RMSEA} < 0.01$. However, partial invariance as a function of sexual orientation was found, ensuring equivalence of the factor structure, and grouping of items between groups (configural model): WLS $\chi^2(df) = 1.25$; CFI = .963, TLI = .948, RMSEA = .024 (90% CI .024–.040), but, with higher-than-expected variability in relation to the scalar model (items intercept), WLS $\chi^2(df) = 1.41$; CFI = .919, TLI = .915, RMSEA = .042 (90% CI .036–.048), i.e., $\Delta\text{CFI} = .04$ and $\Delta\text{RMSEA} = -.009$. A higher-than-expected value was found for the CFI index only, since the variability of the RMSEA index $< .01$ suggests measure invariance also for the scalar level.

Differences in the couples' social skills repertoire according to gender and sexual orientation

Table 2 presents descriptive and comparative data of means between groups in relation to gender and sexual orientation. It includes differences in these variables using Student's t-test and effect size (Cohen's d).

Table 2

Descriptive statistics and comparison of means in relation to the couples' social skills repertoire, gender, and sexual orientation

CSS and Gender	Mean (SD)		t(df)	p	Cohen's d
	Men	Women			
Emotional Self-Control	19.1 ± 4.64	18.4 ± 4.73	1.58 (460)	.115	0.147
Assertive Reciprocity	24.5 ± 6.15	26.7 ± 5.68	3.89 (459)	<.001	0.364
Assertive Self-Affirmation	11.2 ± 3.14	12.1 ± 2.79	3.04 (466)	.003	0.282
Emotional Responsiveness	28.9 ± 5.81	30.4 ± 4.68	3.06 (460)	.002	0.286
Couples' Social Skills	91.6 ± 15.44	96.0 ± 13.02	3.27 (439)	.001	0.312
CSS and Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	Homosexual	t(df)	p	Cohen's d
Emotional Self-Control	18.5 ± 4.82	19.0 ± 4.54	-1.11 (460)	.268	0.104
Assertive Reciprocity	24.5 ± 6.05	27.2 ± 5.57	-5.02 (459)	<.001	0.470
Assertive Self-Affirmation	11.4 ± 3.12	12.1 ± 2.76	-2.53 (466)	.012	0.236
Emotional Responsiveness	28.5 ± 5.92	31.3 ± 3.85	-5.76 (460)	<.001	0.539
Couples' Social Skills	90.5 ± 14.64	98.2 ± 12.78	-5.78 (439)	<.001	0.553

Regarding gender, women presented significantly higher means than men in all categories of couples' social skills and in the general repertoire, except for the category of Emotional Self-Control. When considering the sexual orientation of the couples, homosexual couples also had means significantly higher than heterosexual couples, for all skill categories and general repertoire, except for Emotional Self-Control skills. The effect size was moderate for all variables, except "Emotional Self-Control" and "Assertive Self-Affirmation", which displayed a small effect size. The MANOVA was used to identify the difference in means between the four groups (heterosexual men, gay men, heterosexual women, and lesbian women). Table 3 presents the data.

Table 3

Analysis of the difference in means between sexual orientation groups

Sexual Orientation	Mean (SD)				F	p	Eta ²
	Heterosexual Men	Gay Men	Heterosexual Women	Lesbian Women			
Emotional Self-Control	18.42 ± .42	19.74 ± .51	18.38 ± .42	18.52 ± .42	1.729	.160	.012
Assertive Reciprocity	23.13 ± .52	26.48 ± .64	25.62 ± .52	27.75 ± .53	13.466	.001	.085
Assertive Self-Affirmation	10.58 ± .26	12.17 ± .32	12.07 ± .26	12.00 ± .26	7.770	.001	.051
Emotional Responsiveness	27.26 ± .46	31.21 ± .56	29.54 ± .46	31.32 ± .46	15.755	.001	.098
Couples' Social Skills	86.91 ± 1.23	98.55 ± 1.51	94.14 ± 1.23	97.93 ± 1.25	17.257	.001	.106

Table 3 presents significant differences for four variables: Assertive Reciprocity, Assertive Self-Affirmation, Emotional Responsiveness, and Couples' Social Skills. Considering these results, Tukey's post-hoc test was used for peer-to-peer comparisons. This demonstrated that lesbian women, gay men, and heterosexual women showed statistically higher means than heterosexual men in the total couples' social skills repertoire. All the differences found showed moderate effect sizes, except for "Emotional Self-Control", which showed $\eta^2 = .012$, i.e., a small effect size; and "Assertive Self-Affirmation", which showed $\eta^2 = .050$, at the upper limit of a small effect size.

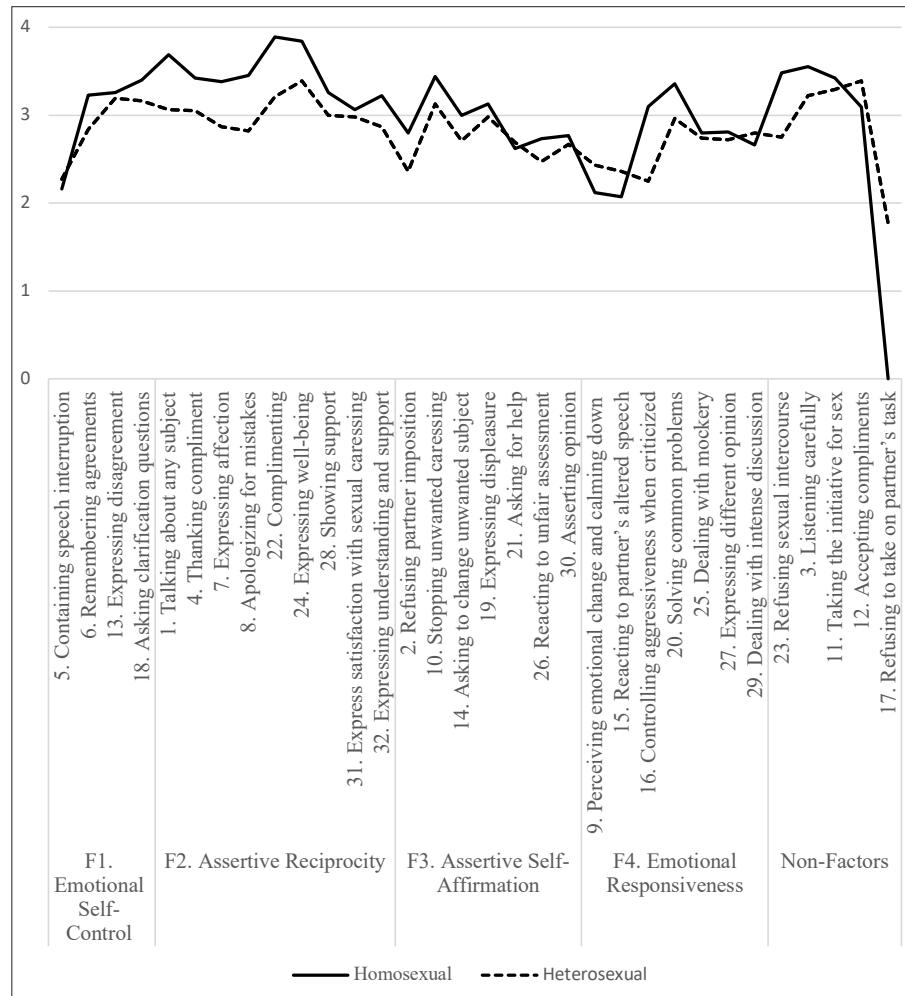
For Factor 1, "Emotional Self-Control", there were no statistically significant differences in the means between groups in terms of understanding the couples' social skills by categories. For Factor 2, "Affective Reciprocity", lesbian women showed significantly higher means than heterosexual women and heterosexual men. Gay men and heterosexual women also had significantly higher means than heterosexual men. For Factor 3, "Assertive Self-Affirmation", lesbian women, gay men, and heterosexual women presented statistically higher means than heterosexual men. For Factor 4, "Emotional Responsiveness", lesbian women had statistically higher means than heterosexual men and women, while gay men and heterosexual women presented statistically higher means than heterosexual men in this category of skills.

Similarities and differences by item of the Couples' Social Skills Inventory

A graph with the responses of the couples (Figure 1) was prepared to visually identify the pattern of similarities and differences between the two groups regarding the items of the Couples' Social Skills Inventory. Homosexual couples presented significantly higher means for Emotional Self-Control (items 6 and 18), Assertive Reciprocity (items 1, 7, 8, 22, 24, and 32), and for the items that were not grouped into factors (3, 11, 12, and 23). Homosexual couples also showed significantly higher scores in items 2, 10, and 26 (Assertive Self-Affirmation factor) and items 16, 20, 27, and 29 (Emotional Responsiveness factor). Heterosexual couples had significantly higher mean scores in item 25 (Emotional Responsiveness factor).

Figure 1

Mean scores of heterosexual and homosexual couples in couples' social skills



Regarding the skills considered more difficult to exercise, heterosexual couples presented significantly lower means for items 2 and 26 (Assertive Self-Affirmation factor); items 9, 15, and 16 (Emotional Responsiveness factor); and item 17 (non-factor). Heterosexual couples also showed significantly lower means for items 2 and 26 (Self-Assertive Assertion factor); item 16 (Emotional Responsiveness factor); and items 03, 11, 17, and 23 (non-factor).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to seek new evidence of the Couples' Social Skills Inventory in a sample composed of heterosexual and homosexual couples; to evaluate the invariance of the

CSSI-Villa&Del-Prette measurement model as a function of gender and sexual orientation; and to characterize and identify specificities in the couples' social skills repertoire of heterosexual and homosexual couples. Various statistical procedures were used in order to achieve these goals.

Using the ESEM method, it was found that the item grouping was equivalent to the theoretical proposition (Del Prette & Del Prette, 2021; Villa & Del Prette, 2013), and to empirical results found in previous studies that evaluated the internal structure of the CSSI-Villa&Del-Prette (Del Prette et al., 2019). These results show the stability of the internal structure when evaluating a new population stratum, i.e., homosexual participants.

It is important to highlight the indicators of invariance of the CSSI-Villa&Del-Prette in different groups (gender and sexual orientation). These results ensure the equivalence of the inventory either between men or women, or homosexual and heterosexual individuals. According to Wang et al. (2017), parameter invariance indicates that the observable variables of an instrument are equivalently correlated with the latent variables between the groups. It is important to invest in studies like this to ensure that potential differences across groups are linked to real differences in constructs and not to the characteristics of the instrument. Testing the invariance of instruments is fundamental to prevent biased results when proposing comparisons between groups or within a specific group.

When comparing groups as a function of sexual orientation, the CFI showed variability ($\Delta = .01$) between the metric and the scalar model, suggesting non-invariance of the scalar model. However, the RMSEA supported the equivalence of the model. As discussed in the literature, measurement invariance is a complex technique and must, therefore, be evaluated through different indices (Chen, 2007). Accordingly, although the results of this study are considered adequate, future studies should seek new evidence of the measurement invariance of the model proposed by the CSSI-Villa&Del-Prette (e.g., including transgender people).

Differences were found between heterosexual and homosexual couples regarding the assessment of the total repertoire of couples' social skills. This result is consistent with some studies, indicating that homosexual couples tend to excel in certain skills (i.e., communication and expression of affection) when compared to heterosexual couples (Beltrán, 2020; Gottman et al., 2003; Kurdek, 2004; 2005; Mosmann et al., 2010). Some hypotheses that can explain this result are related to the similar subjective and socialization experiences that homosexual couples might have. Social interaction with people of the same gender might be a factor that contributes to this result since both people in a homosexual relationship tend to have been raised with the same social expectations regarding gender. A gay man or a lesbian woman, for instance, tends to show more empathy for their partner due to their own personal socialization experiences in terms of sexual orientation. Cardoso, Murta, and Del Prette (2023) discuss the role of culture in the exercise of couples' social skills in heterosexual and homosexual couples. According to these authors, gender stereotypes are among the variables that influence the behavior of marital partnerships, and learning appropriate skills is culturally encouraged depending on the sex assigned at birth.

This hypothesis is in accordance with the results of this study, since men presented lower mean scores in the general scale for couples' social skills than women. However, specific studies on the general social skills repertoire (i.e., those exercised in different contexts, in addition to couples' relationships), with the SSI2-Del-Prette (Del Prette & Del Prette, 2018), showed that men display higher mean scores in assertive conversation skills, affective-sexual approach, self-control, and social resourcefulness (Del Prette & Del Prette, 2018). Expression of positive feelings was the only category in which women had higher means of general social skills (Del Prette & Del Prette, 2018).

When comparing the studies on the SSI2-Del-Prette (Del Prette & Del Prette, 2018), the results obtained by Villa and Del Prette (2013) and the data of this study showed some particularities. Men presented higher means in the categories of general social skills. However, women displayed higher means for couples' social skills. These are specific contexts, and couples' relationships are more intimate spaces in terms of affection, requiring more self-awareness from partners. This fact may explain these specificities, as culturally there is greater reinforcement of women's emotional expressiveness than men's. Furthermore, the domestic space has always been considered a "feminine" domain, while the social space has been historically attributed to men (Friedan, 1974).

Also, in relation to couples' social skills, the study by Villa and Del Prette (2013) found that men and women have specific expectations regarding their partners' skills. Women reported greater marital satisfaction when men exercised more couples' social skills, especially in the categories of assertive conversation, expressiveness/empathy, and assertive self-affirmation. In turn, the marital satisfaction of men was more associated with women's exercise of proactive self-control, reactive self-control, and expressiveness/empathy skills. Furthermore, the literature has no similar data to identify these specificities in homosexual couples. In the present study, however, it was found that, in terms of sexual orientation, gay men, lesbian women, and heterosexual women presented, in this order, higher means for couples' social skills than heterosexual men.

Among the subclasses of couples' social skills (factors), only Emotional Self-Control did not display statistically significant differences between the couples participating in the study. This category of skills involves basic elements of everyday marital communication (e.g., containing speech interruption, asking questions, disagreeing, remembering agreements, and controlling aggression). Couples are subjected to everyday situations that require these skills, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Therefore, it is understandable that there were no significant differences.

A heteronormative and sexist culture can also contribute to the fact that the other categories of couples' social skills that received lower scores by heterosexual men are punished when exercised by them. Heterosexual men displayed the lowest means in the categories of couples' social skills. This result may be in line with the gender socialization process that men are subjected to (McDermott et al., 2012). Culture contributes to the construction of beliefs,

emotions, and behavior, according to an individual's gender. An example of this is discussed by McDermott et al. (2012) when addressing anger management. According to these authors, while women tend to internalize anger, men externalize this emotion more often because it is socially acceptable. The data found in this study suggest interventions that can be carried out specifically to address masculinities and emotional expressiveness with this audience. By participating in the training, men can be encouraged to develop critical thinking about gender stereotypes, expression of feelings, and emotional connection.

Regarding the specificities in the skill categories, lesbian women displayed higher mean scores for the couples' social skills of Assertive Reciprocity and Emotional Responsiveness. This result may be associated with the fight for women's rights against social oppression, which might contribute to exercising this skill in homosexual relationships. The assertiveness (and assertive reciprocity) category corresponds to fighting for rights, as well as to responding assertively when communicating with others. The concept of female sorority might be one of the explanatory variables for these results, as it is linked, among other things, to an empathetic and affectionate attitude of one woman toward another (Leal, 2019). Evaluating the repertoire of assertive social skills in women, Teixeira (2015) discusses the positive relationship between assertiveness and higher education levels among women, as well as the culture that punishes the exercise of these skills by them. Historically, women have been immersed in periods of oppression, and assertive expression was (and in some cultures still is) seen as inappropriate. The feminist movement has adopted a libertarian stance, enabling women to establish social positions themselves and assert their voices as autonomous individuals (Sant'Anna, 2014; Wolf, 2020). Fighting for the same cause can be one of the explanatory variables for this result.

Gay men had higher mean scores in the assertive self-affirmation skill category and in the total repertoire of couples' social skills. Assertively positioning oneself within a sexist society is a way of fighting for rights and was also identified as a skill found in the relationships of gay men. Society tends to teach that this type of relationship is "wrong/a sin" and that gay men will not be accepted simply because they are gay. The performance of couples' social skills could be related to at least two hypotheses: (1) affirmation of the relationship in the face of social pressures for it not to work, and (b) apprehension of losing one's partner and not encountering another individual with a perspective compatible with the desired relationship model (e.g. serious, stable, and steady relationships versus transitory relationships and casual sex). Both hypotheses require skills to maintain the relationship.

Regarding the items of the CSSI–Villa&Del–Prette a pattern was found in the responses (see Figure 1). Therefore, in addition to the statistically significant differences found in the factors, as previously discussed in this study, the items presented similar patterns. Despite the differences between the two groups, the items in which both had higher or lower means were basically the same. The exceptions were items 16 (controlling aggressiveness) and 32 (expressing understanding and support), which homosexual couples had higher means and heterosexual couples had lower means; and item 12 (accepting compliments), which heterosexual couples had

higher means and homosexual couples had lower means. These results can provide some guidance and help in proposing goals for intervention programs.

Due to this standard variation in responses, an experience with a single program may achieve the intended goals, i.e., improving the performance of couples' social skills. On the other hand, considering the specificities and contingencies to which these two groups are subjected, the approach to these skills and concepts must be contextualized. According to Catelan and Costa (2020), the search for treatment by non-heterosexual couples can be similar (e.g., various relationship problems) or different/specific (e.g., concealing their sexuality or non-acceptance of their relationship by family members). Scholars on sexual diversity and gender affirm that interventions with the LGBTQIA+ population should be based on affirmative sexuality practices and multicultural competencies. In other words, they should be based on skills aimed at connecting with the cultural specificities and identity of each person assisted. Particularly, they should not reproduce stigma (Catelan & Costa, 2020; Leite & Catelan, 2020; Pachankis, 2014; Pachankis et al., 2015; Proujansky & Pachankis, 2014). This includes not "fitting" homosexual couples to heterosexual couples or using practices to correct the sexual orientation of non-heterosexual couples (Vezzosi et al., 2019). One of the concepts that needs to be addressed in interventions with sexual minority couples is Minority Stress (Meyer, 1995; Meyer, 2003), including strategies to manage prejudice, affirm relationships, and guarantee the basic human rights of the relationship in society.

Final Considerations

This study contributed to understanding the specificities of the repertoire of couples' social skills in heterosexual and homosexual couples. In addition, the goodness of fit of the Couples' Social Skills Inventory was evaluated for the samples investigated. The data of this study must be analyzed considering its limitations and contributions. There were limitations associated with the variables investigated because information such as relationship length, socioeconomic category, education level, and having or not having children was omitted. Including this information in future studies may complement the results regarding the relationships of these variables with the couples' social skills performance. Another limitation of the study is related to the comparison of samples from different time periods: a portion of the data was collected in 2013 with heterosexual couples, while the other portion was gathered in 2019 with homosexual couples. Considering that social skills are influenced by the context, it is plausible that these couples may have enhanced their repertoire due to cultural changes over the years. Consequently, future studies could explore these comparisons with couples within the same timeframe. Other studies could also investigate the couples' social skills of trans couples. This is a population that is immersed in specific processes of stigma and prejudice. The results could contribute toward developing interventions aimed at this audience.

Identifying these skills in microcultures is another possibility for future studies. Villa, Del Prette and Del Prette (2007), for instance, assessed the couples' social skills and religious

affiliation of couples, without specifying their sexual orientation. Including homosexual couples in this investigation and verifying how much these couples are subjected to minority stress, mediated or not by religious variables, could help to understand the functioning of couples and how couples' social skills are reinforced or not in the sociocultural context they belong to.

Studies analyzing other variables that could potentially mediate the performance of couples' social skills (e.g., attachment styles and early maladaptive schemas) could also be interesting in order to more broadly comprehend the phenomenon. Understanding how attachment styles and early maladaptive schemas relate to couples' social skills could provide ways to prevent maladaptive relational patterns in early developmental stages. Assessing schemas and schema modes could provide the therapist/facilitator with important information about cognitive and behavioral variables related to resources or deficits in couples' social skills. In summary, the data found in this study, far from exhaustive, open space for discussions on the theme of couples in relation to sexual diversity, gender, and performance of couples' social skills, based on the commitment to social responsibility and social competence requirements in human relationships.

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