

Summer Fellowship Program – Final Report

Introduction

My Question is about the psychological and neurobiological aspects of human sex and sexuality. To capture this focus, I ask, “How does sex determine our behaviour?” My interest in human sexuality and psychology led me to focus on the psychological mechanisms that people employ in order to acquire sexual and romantic partners. I also wanted to explore issues of mental and physical health associated with sexual relationships. Furthermore, my experiences in Dr. Negar Elmieh’s *Statistics 1* course and Dr. Megan Bulloch’s *Research Methods* course introduced me to the processes involved with research, and piqued my interest in conducting my own research. This combination of academic curiosities led to my project of conducting a psychology survey looking at the hook up culture at Quest University Canada.

Definitions

In academic literature, a “hook up” is a behaviour that falls under the umbrella term of casual sex, but specifically refers to a sexual encounter between non-dating partners that occurs without the expectation of a future romantic relationship (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2009; Bogle, 2008; Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Lambert, Kahn, & Apple, 2003). Other terms used to describe casual sex behaviours include “one night stands”, in which a relationship ends once intercourse has occurred (Campbell, 2008); “friends with benefits”, where two individuals have sex without the friendship developing into a romantic relationship (Bogle, 2008); and a “booty call”, which is when two friends or acquaintances have sex after a night of unsuccessful hooking up (Bogle, 2008; Jonason, Li, & Cason, 2009). Although most researchers include all of these behaviours under the definition of a hook up, some argue that behaviours such as friends with benefits and booty calls imply the expectation of a future intimate relationship, and therefore should not be considered as a hook up (Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006). For the purposes of my own study, I will include friends with benefits and booty call relationships under the hook up definition. Although these relationships imply future hook ups, they do not necessarily imply future romantic relationships, which would exclude them from the general hook up definition.

The “hook up culture” refers to the increased prevalence of hook ups occurring on college and university campuses across North America. Another important aspect of the hook up culture is the openness with which students acknowledge and discuss hooking up (Garcia & Rieber, 2008). Although hook ups have been happening on campuses since at least the mid-1980s (Bogle, 2008), the combination of the increase in hook up prevalence and openness towards hooking up has lead some researchers to believe that hook up behaviour has developed into a cultural aspect of North American post-secondary institutions (Garcia & Reiber, 2008).

Research Justification

For this project, my broad research question aims to uncover the benefits to women of the hook-up culture that has become so prominent in colleges and universities in North America. The hook up culture is described as the social phenomenon in which the majority of college students are engaging in no-strings attached sexual behaviours

with uncommitted partners (Garcia & Rieber, 2008). I chose this research question because I identified it as a gap in the knowledge about casual sex in young adults. There is a lot of research pointing to the costs of casual sex to men and women, as well as the evolutionary benefits that men receive from the popular hook up culture. Sex, however, is an event that typically requires the consent of both partners, and it only makes sense for women to consent to casual sex if they too are benefiting from it somehow. This benefit is not at all clear, and research only points to the large costs to the physical and psychological well-being of women. In order to fully understand this social pattern from an evolutionary perspective, research must aim to uncover both the proximate and ultimate benefits that women receive from the college hook up culture.

Gender Differences in Sexual Strategies

Evolutionary psychology divides sexual strategy into two categories: long-term and short-term mating. Casual sex (i.e., short-term mating) benefits both sexes through the determination of personal desires and desirability. Buss (2003) suggested that casual sex allows individuals to determine their likes and dislikes in sexual partners, as well as to gauge their place on the spectrum of desirability within the mating pool. Both benefits of short-term mating strategies can save humans time and energy because people can more easily determine whether a potential mate will become a successful partner without wasting time or resources on unsuitable mates (Buss, 2003). Given the typical young adult's lack of experience with long-term relationships, as well as the recent gain of independence from parents, these benefits of casual sex are particularly relevant to college and university students.

Many behavioural sex differences result from the physiological characteristics of men and women. For example, males produce vast quantities of sperm without experiencing the commitment of childbirth, allowing men to increase their reproductive fitness by fathering many children (Schmitt, 2005). Women, however, produce approximately one offspring per year due to the biological constraints of pregnancy and lactation. This suggests that women do not benefit from casual sex in the same way as men (Schmitt, 2005). Women can benefit from short-term mating by acquiring the superior genetic qualities in their offspring that they could not otherwise achieve with a long-term partner, and also by securing immediate resources such as protection or monetary goods (Buss, 2003). Men and women share many costs of pursuing short-term mating, such as an increased risk of infections, violence, and negative social reputation (Buss, 2008). Women, however, are often subject to higher costs of short-term mating from consequences such as unwanted pregnancy and withdrawal of resources from long-term mates (Buss, 2008). Women are therefore more likely to experience situations in which the costs of casual sex outweigh the benefits, and will possibly avoid short-term mating as a result.

Theoretical Benefits of Hooking Up

These theories of short-term mating strategies indicate that men are more oriented towards short-term mating and women are more oriented to long-term mating, but also show that short-term mating can benefit women in certain contexts. Research suggests, however, that the hook up culture provides more costs than benefits to women who choose to participate in university and college hook ups. Buss (2008) lists several theories

that describe ways in which women can benefit from short-term mating. This list includes acquiring resources, acquiring a long-term mate through short-term mating, clarifying their preferences in long-term mates, switching from a current long-term mate to a superior long-term mate, and acquiring superior genetics for their offspring (Buss, 2008). Despite the multiple benefits that women could receive from pursuing short-term mating, hooking up does not appear to provide these benefits to female participants.

Research on hooking up suggests that many of the theories listed above do not apply to women who hook up in colleges and universities. Although the empirical evidence on resource accrual in hook ups is limited, the shift from dating to hook ups as the catalyst for relationships indicates that women are not receiving as many resources as they did through traditional dating scripts (Bogle, 2007; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). If hooking up were the new catalyst for long-term relationships, then an obvious benefit would be that women form traditional romantic relationships with their hook up partners. Garcia & Reiber's (2008) study suggests otherwise; when asked their expected outcomes of hooking up, 36% of female participants expected future hook ups, 29% expected nothing more, 27% expected friendship, and 8% expected a traditional romantic relationship. Although 43% of these same women reported a traditional romantic relationship as their ideal outcome, the participants appeared to acknowledge that hooking up does not typically lead to long-term relationships (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). Another theory suggests that women can clarify their preferences for certain characteristics in long-term partners by engaging in short-term mating, but the only research addressing this theory was applied specifically to extra-pair mating (short-term mating that occurs outside of an already-established romantic relationship) (Greiling & Buss, 2000). This study only moderately supported the theory of preference clarification, and the context of extra-pair mating makes this research inapplicable to hook up behaviour (Greiling & Buss, 2000).

Several of the theories for how women can benefit from short-term mating only apply to women situated in current long-term relationships with sexual relationships outside of their romantic relationship. For example, a woman may find herself in a long-term relationship where her partner stops providing resources or become abusive, or generally declines in his value as a long-term mate (Fisher, 1992). She could benefit by engaging in a short-term relationship with another man in order to help stabilize a new long-term relationship before leaving her current one (Greiling & Buss, 2000). Another example is when a woman's long-term mate is infertile or impotent, and she pursues a short-term sexual relationship to improve her rates of conception, or just to find genes superior to those of her husband (Buss, 2008). In this situation, the woman retains the benefits of her long-term relationship, but gains the superior genes from her short-term relationship. Although these theories are both supported by empirical evidence (Greiling & Buss, 2000), they do not necessarily apply to hook ups because the theories rely on the presence of extra-pair mating. Hook ups are not specifically events of extra-pair mating (Bogle, 2008), so theories such as mate switching and superior gene acquisition may not apply to women participating in hook ups.

Implications for Women Who Hook Up

Multiple studies on the emotional effects of casual sex in college students have suggested that hooking up affects men and women differently. Grello and colleagues

(2006) found that men who engaged in casual sex reported the least number of depressive symptoms whereas women who engaged in casual sex reported the highest number of depressive symptoms within his group of participants. In a study examining how types of college relationships influence psychological well being (body satisfaction, self esteem, and depressive symptoms), Eisenberg and colleagues (2009) found that women in highly committed relationships were slightly less depressed than other women, and men who have casual sex were less depressed than other men. This study did not replicate Grello et al.'s (2006) strong correlations indicating gender differences in the emotional effects of casual sex, perhaps due to differing measures of depressive symptoms.

Stinson (2010) suggested that society's double standard of sexual behaviour for women might have promoted the higher number of depressive symptoms found in women who have casual sex. The sexual double standard requires women to meet men's desires for a large number of sexual partners without engaging in "too much" sexual activity. With the posited desire that men should have for large numbers of partners, this is hardly possible (Buss, 2008; Trivers, 1972). Men who choose to seek multiple sex partners tend to gain social status, whereas women who do the same get labeled as a "slut" or "whore", resulting in negative social consequences (Armstrong et al., 2009; Bogle, 2008).

Research indicates that women are not receiving sexual pleasure in college hook ups, which is the benefit that women are most likely to report as a motivation for hooking up (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). Furthermore, when asked about their concern with pleasing their hook up partners, men and women's responses both seemed to question women's entitlement to pleasure in hookups, but did not do the same for men (Armstrong et al., 2012). Backstrom and colleagues (2012) interviewed women about their experiences with cunnilingus during heterosexual hook ups and relationships, and found that oral sex is significantly less reciprocal in hook ups compared to in relationships. The absence of cunnilingus, a sexual behaviour that promotes orgasm in women, in the college hook up script further suggests that female pleasure is not a focus in hook ups (Backstrom et al., 2012).

Past research on hook ups in colleges and universities across North America suggests that there are more costs than benefits to women who choose to hook up. The prevalence of this behaviour suggests that women should benefit from hooking up in some way; otherwise they would choose another way to conduct their sexual behaviour. This idea is further supported by the implications that women face as a result of hooking up. Consequences such as an increased risk of pregnancy, increased risk of contracting HIV or sexually transmitted infections (STI), increased risk of sexual assault and violence, and damaged social reputation are all present during hook ups (Heldman & Wade, 2010). With such high risks, women ought to be benefiting in some way through this behaviour. My study aims to identify these benefits using a survey that will be distributed to a university's student population.

Survey Design

I would like to conduct research that aims to identify the benefits of hooking up to women, but in order to do so, I must first collect information on the hook up scene at Quest University (QU). This portion of my study aims to uncover the nature of hooking up in this specific context. Although QU is similar to other institutions in many ways, its

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small size and approximately 1:1 sex ratio, among other things, may affect behavioural patterns in the student body. Therefore, the majority of my survey aims to describe what hook ups look like at this institution, which will determine how my results can apply outside of this context. In order to achieve a general idea of what hooking up looks like at QU, I designed my survey to collect the following information:

- How many students have hooked up sometime during their experience at QU?
- At what point in their time at QU do students most often hook up (1st year, 2nd year, etc.)?
- How frequently does each of the hook up behaviours (fondling, oral sex, anal sex, vaginal sex) occur during hook ups at QU? Which behaviours are the most and least common?
- How many different hook up partners do people have per semester at QU? How many of their partners are recurring?
- Who do people hook up with (strangers, acquaintances, friends) at QU?

In order to identify the benefits that women could be receiving from hook ups, I have created items that address each of the theories that researchers have proposed as potentially beneficial to women who hook up. I also tried to include items that gather information on individual differences that may play a role in the sexual behaviours people engage in. For example, men and women who grew up in a household with an absent father or present stepfather are more likely to engage in sexual activities at an early age, and also pursue more short-term mating strategies (Ellis, McFayden-Ketchum, Dodge, Pettis, & Bates, 1999). Therefore, I included a question that asks participants about their childhood family situation. This will allow me to rule out the theories that are not supported by the results of my study.

Despite the numerous revisions I've made to my survey, it is still not complete and ready for distribution. Although the majority of the questions are finished, there are still a number of formatting issues that I must resolve in order to produce data that I can analyze. For example, I want to know how people are related to their hook up partners (are they strangers, acquaintances, or friends?), but this becomes difficult because strangers and acquaintances become friends quite quickly in a small population. When trying to collect a detailed sex history, it becomes very difficult to communicate such important distinctions between the participant and the investigator. Regardless of its incomplete state, please refer to the draft of my survey attached to gain an idea of what my participants will go through when completing the survey.

Sampling and Data Collection

A written questionnaire best suits this study for several reasons. Participants will complete written questionnaires in a room monitored by an investigator or research assistant, which allows participants to ask questions regarding question wording. This method also allows for more control over the manner in which people filled out the survey compared to that of an Internet questionnaire, even though Internet questionnaires are easier and less expensive to distribute. The Internet format would allow participants to complete the questionnaire in any setting that they choose, meaning that people could answer the questions in an inappropriate context, or with other people present. Although a common disadvantage of long written surveys is a problem of motivation in participants

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to finish the questionnaire (Cozby, 2009), the personal and somewhat taboo nature of the questions may help combat this issue.

Recruitment will be conducted in a manner that achieves a stratified random sample of the student population by year of study. Due to the lack of a student list by year of study, the sample will be stratified by the selection of specific classes in order to sample an approximately equal number of students from each year of study. Students either select or are placed in classes, and each student has the same chance of taking each class. Therefore, selecting classes and asking the students within those classes to participate will maintain random sampling. Eight classes of first and second year students and eight classes of third and fourth year students will be selected to participate. The classes will be chosen from different fields of study, giving all students an equal chance of being in a selected class.

The tutor of each selected class will be given a script to email out to the class list, which will explain the study briefly, and describe the personal and sexual nature of the questionnaire. The script will advise that students both *with* sexual experience and *without* sexual experience were needed as participants. It will explain that the questionnaire will take about 45 minutes to complete, will not result in payment of any kind, and will not affect the participants' grades. Finally, potential participants will be guaranteed confidentiality for any responses they provide. I have decided to recruit through the university's faculty members rather than presenting the information myself in order to save class time for the selected classes. Additionally, it will be useful to have the faculty endorse my study because it communicates the seriousness and legitimacy of the study to the students.

Of approximately 320 students who will be recruited in their classes, I predict that roughly half of those students will complete the survey, leading to a final sample consisting of 160 students between the ages of 17 and 27 (approximately). I plan to collect the data in late November and early December of 2012. I am also planning to push my data collection back to January and February of 2013 if the responses of the first year students still look empty of experience when I start collecting data in November.

Conclusion

I am very fortunate that I got the opportunity to put time into this project, and feel great about the progress that I made over the summer. Ever since I finished the first draft of my survey, I have been excited to see the results that it will bring in from the student population. Besides knowing all the dirty secrets of the student body, I also look forward to completing such a large project, and perhaps even contributing to the scientific community. Hopefully, any information that results from this project will also be able to benefit the community at Quest University, which has contributed so much to my personal and academic growth.

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