

Investigating the Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing the Sexual Knowledge,
Attitudes and Behaviors of Greeks and Greek-Cypriots

By

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PREVIEW

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“After people are clothed and fed, then they think about sex.”

-- Confucius (551-479BC)

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ABSTRACT

Human sexuality is a multifaceted, vital part of being human; it is a complex mixture of biological responses, psychological meaning and societal/cultural overlays. Past research has identified culture as the key influence in defining the appropriate ways of behaving and thinking about sexuality. Understanding the delicate intricacies, including the knowledge, attitudes and behaviors, involved in sexual development, has allowed for the development and improvement of educational systems and programs targeting young people.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the association between gender, ethnic identity, acculturation and religiosity, and sexual knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors among a specific cultural group: namely Greeks. This was accomplished by administering a survey instrument, The Sexual Knowledge, Attitude, and Behavior Test, to Greeks within the community (N=260) and in Introductory Psychology classes at local colleges. Participants comprised three different groups namely Greeks, Greek Migrants and Greek Immigrants. The first group (Greeks) was comprised of Greek-Cypriots born and raised, and still living, in Cyprus and who were or who are currently attending university/college in Cyprus, in addition to various members within the community. The second group (Greek Migrants) was comprised of Greek-Cypriot students born and raised in Cyprus and who were currently living in and/or attending university/college in the U.S.A. The third group (Greek Immigrants) included Greek-Cypriot students born and raised in the U.S.A and who were or are currently attending university/college in the U.S.A.

Findings indicated that Greek Immigrants (GI) display greater overall sexual knowledge, than Greek Migrants (GM) and Greeks (G). Significant differences were found regarding attitudes towards pre-marital sex, sexual coercion, masturbation, homosexuality, pornography and abortion. Greeks demonstrated more liberal attitudes towards pre-marital sex whereas Greek Immigrants and Migrants demonstrated more liberal attitudes on all other subscales. Significant differences were also found for two endorsed behaviors with GI reporting higher frequency of masturbating alone and more G reporting talking to parents about sex. Regarding gender differences, males expressed more liberal attitudes about pre-marital sex, masturbation, pornography and abortion whereas their female counterparts expressed more liberal attitudes towards sexual coercion and homosexuality. Females also demonstrated greater sexual knowledge. Significant interactions were noted between gender, ethnicity and sexual attitudes with GI females expressing more liberal attitudes regarding homosexuality. Significant differences were found between GI and GM based on acculturation, with GI identifying greater with US Culture. A significant correlation was found for GI between US Cultural Identity and Masturbation, English Language Competence and Sexual Coercion, Masturbation and Pornography. GM demonstrated significant correlations between US Cultural Identity and Sexual Coercion, English Language Competence and Masturbation, Homosexuality and Pornography. Finally, significant interactions were found between religiosity and Greek Identity on the pre-marital sex, masturbation and pornography subscales.

Results suggest that select socio-cultural variables such as gender, ethnic identity, acculturation and religiosity may influence the sexual knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the sampled groups. Results are discussed in terms of practical application of the findings and future research possibilities.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sexuality develops in the context of personality characteristics such as temperament, attitude, abilities and fears, as well as socio-cultural forces like family values and societal norms. Sexuality is usually not considered a primary component of personality although sexual trait terms are very useful in describing oneself (Garcia & Carrigan, 1998). In 2000, Schmitt and Buss identified 7 sexual dimensions of person description: sexual attractiveness, relationship exclusivity, gender orientation, sexual restraint, erotophilic disposition, emotional investment, and sexual orientation. Schmitt and Buss (2000) explain these dimensions as a hierarchical model of personality in which specific behavioral responses (level 1) form person habits (level 2) which in turn represent unique facets (level 3) of dimensions (level 4).

These dimensions work to influence one's sexual behavior. Socio-sexuality is a personality dimension that assesses the willingness to partake in sexual relations outside of a committed relationship; it is the requirements that one must fulfill or possess to enter into a sexual relationship. Jones (1998) discusses two types of socio-sexuality: unrestricted and restricted. A person with an unrestricted socio-sexuality is one who doesn't think that sexual relations need to be restricted to a relationship with psychological closeness. In contrast, someone with a restricted socio-sexuality requires psychological closeness for sexual relationships to develop.

Statement of Purpose

With the sexual revolution of the 20th century, sexual attitudes and behaviors have shifted from the conservative and inhibited to greater expressive freedom. A cross-temporal meta-analysis of 530 studies regarding sexual attitudes and behaviors found that attitudes regarding pre-marital sex became more lenient and feelings of sexual guilt had decreased over time (Wells & Twenge, 2005). In addition, substantial changes were noted such that both genders displayed greater sexual activity over time. The dynamics of sexual socialization, the types of messages given regarding sexuality, and the factors influencing these messages come from one's culture. What happens though when a family or an individual moves from one culture to live in a different one? How do familial and gender roles change and what is the impact on sexuality? How are the dynamics of sexual socialization and the messages regarding sexuality different or altered from those present in the original culture?

The present study examined the extent to which various socio-cultural factors, such as ethnic identity, acculturation, religion and gender, influence changes in sexual attitudes and behaviors and how much of the change is accounted for by the host culture. The study drew on the work done by Koutrelakos (2004), and expanded upon the work done by Georgiou, Modinos, A., Papageorgiou, Papantoniou, and Peristianis (2005) and Leiblum, Wiegel, and Brickle (2003), with particular focus on the Greek-Cypriot population. Subsequently, the study provides information which can be utilized to better determine future educational initiatives.

Guiding Theory for This Study

The study of human sexuality as it is understood today is a relatively young science. Even younger is the study of adolescent sexuality issues, attention first being paid in the 1970's (Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg, 1989). Research has indicated that to better serve, educate, and provide an impetus for change, adolescents and young adults must be studied in a way that resembles the interdisciplinary nature of the collective history of sexology. The focus of this research is on the issues affecting young adult sexuality. Differences in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors will be assessed within a group (Greeks) on the basis of the contextual characteristics including age, gender, ethnic identity, religion and religiosity and acculturation.

The social learning theory and social constructionist approach will be used as the guiding theories for this study. The social learning theory emphasizes cognitive activity such as anticipations, thoughts, and plans in addition to rewards and punishments. According to this theory, children acquire gender roles appropriate in society via reinforcement of gender-appropriate behavior (Molina, 1999). Behaviors of people that are respected and considered models can also be mimicked, and therefore learned. The social constructionist approach, introduced by Foucault (1977), argues that though social forces define, regulate, and categorize human behavior, the individual plays an active role in his/her sexuality.

Research Questions

Based on the literature research questions and hypotheses were generated:

1. What differences are noted between the groups on the Sex, Knowledge and Attitude Test for Adolescents (SKAT-A) assessing sexual knowledge, attitudes, and

behaviors? The level of knowledge about sexual practices and related issues, as well as the expressed attitudes and reported behaviors among the groups, will differ significantly.

2. What is the relationship between gender and sexuality as assessed by the Sex, Knowledge and Attitude Test for Adolescents (SKAT-A)? Significant differences are expected between men and women with regards to their sexual attitudes and sexual knowledge.

3. What is the relationship between Greek identity and sexuality, as assessed by the Abbreviated Multidimensional Acculturation Scale (AMAS-ZABB) and the Sex, Knowledge and Attitude Test for Adolescents (SKAT-A), respectively? Significant differences are expected between Greek-Cypriot students born and raised in the U.S.A and who were or are currently attending university/college in the U.S.A (Greek Immigrants) and Greek-Cypriot students born and raised in Cyprus and who were currently living in and/or attending university/college in the U.S.A (Greek Migrants) such that Greek Immigrants will identify with U.S. culture and Greek Migrants will identify with Greek culture.

4. How does the level of religiosity relate to one's sexual attitudes and sexual knowledge? Religiosity is expected to have a significant relationship with sexual attitudes and knowledge with differences noted between the three groups.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Sexuality is a multifaceted, vital part of being human; it is a complex mixture of biological responses, psychological meaning and societal/cultural overlays; it is described as the way in which we experience and express ourselves as sexual beings (Rathus, Nevid, & Fichner-Rathus, 1993; as cited in Molina, 1999). The study of sexuality, as it is today, is a relatively new science, gaining great attention during the 40's. It began in the 19th century and was dominated primarily by physicians since they were considered to be the experts on bodily functions; they were therefore considered the experts on sexual activities. Most physicians had specialized knowledge regarding sexual health such as sexually transmitted diseases, however limited knowledge was observed regarding other sexual topics such as sexual expression and behavior. The topic of sexual activities, then and now, is a sensitive subject to examine and Alfred Kinsey was the first to enter this minefield. Alfred Kinsey's work, which brought a taxonomic approach to sexual expression, was a decisive factor in changing attitudes towards sex (Bullough, 1998). Today sociologists study sexuality in a scientific way in an attempt to report and analyze current sexual behavior.

There are many factors that help develop our sexuality and the study of human sexual behavior and human sex differences has been approached from many vantage

points. This study focused on four such factors including gender, ethnic identity, religion and acculturation. Reference is also made to the development of behaviors and attitudes.

Gender

The major influence on individual sexuality is gender; whether one is male or female will greatly influence how one's sexuality develops and what attitudes are formed with respect to it. Issues related to sexuality and gender, have been found to be a source of conflict for youth within their communities, and have been implicated in suicide attempts (Gilchrist & Sullivan, 2006). However, male and female bodies do not automatically result in what is socially known as "men" and "women." The differences between men and women, such as gender identities, meanings assigned to each, cultures and social divisions, are social constructions arising from historical conditions, power relations and ongoing social processes (Nagel, 2000). As such, particular forms of sexual behaviors or practices, specific kinds of sexual desires and the type of sexual man or woman is not automatically predicted by one's anatomy. The construction of an individual's identity is complex, fluid and changing with undeniably dominant cultural constructions related to what is appropriate feminine and masculine behavior (Connell, 2002).

Research has shown that women exhibit more responsible, conventional and idealistic attitudes whereas men are more permissive, instrumental and control- and power-oriented (Hendrick, Hendrick, Slapion-Foote, and Foote, 1985). Baumeister (2000) argued that women are more influenced by cultural and social factors than men are, with lower attitude-behavior correlations in sexuality for women than men,

and attributed these differences to evolutionary forces. Hyde and Durik (2000) presented a counter-argument suggesting instead a multifactor socio-cultural model proposing that men have more power than women on many levels, and that groups with less power, such as women, tend to adapt to the group with more power. Education however has increased women's power, and gender roles shape behavior with heterosexuality being a more important element of the male role. Andersen, Cyranowski, and Aarestad (2000) also in response to Baumeister (2000), suggest that women's sexual attitudes, behaviors and responses are driven by different biological drives than men's; however, female socialization is more communal, emphasizing nurturing, empathy, and the provision of social and emotional support. As Irvine (1990) stated: "...it is crucial to recognize that sexual behavior proceeds in markedly disparate cultural circumstances where male sexuality is encouraged and idealized while women's is denigrated and undermined" (p. 22). Sexual reputations and relationships are also seen as important components, but of unequal significance, for both genders. Females feel pressure to safeguard their reputations whereas men are under the pressure to demonstrate theirs. In addition, females are more likely to think of sex as a way of maintaining, keeping and developing a relationship (Hillier et al., 1999; as cited in Gilchrest & Sullivan, 2006). Even in the most conservative and homogenous communities, identities and behavior patterns are fluid to some degree, and heavily influenced by daily discourses, interactions and experiences.

Buss (1989) states that both men and women are concerned with a mate's attractiveness and resourcefulness but differ in how much importance they place on each. It is noted that males have minimal criteria for sexual desire, which is simply a

woman's anatomy. As long as they are young enough to care for children and look healthy, then they are satisfied. There is, however, a cultural influence, certain characteristics that are considered attractive by the culture, which men will (or rather have to) consider. According to Taflinger (1996), men will desire any woman that fulfills physical criteria but will pursue only those that satisfies both societal and/or cultural criteria too, such as wit, intelligence, career, etc. To quote Buss (1989) "male mate preferences and standards of female beauty should evolve to reflect the physical and behavioral cues that signify female reproductive capacity...Physical appearance probably provides the strongest set of cues, and these include features such as clear, smooth and unblemished skin, lustrous hair, white teeth, clear eyes, and full lips" (p. 34).

For females the criteria are more profound. Because of the limited offspring she can produce, a female must secure sufficient resources for her offspring. Hence, her criteria include signs indicating control or potential control over necessary resources and related personality traits such as ambition and diligence (Buss, 1989).

Based on the evolutionary theory, after a male has applied physical criteria, he moves to the social; first discovering if the female satisfies what he considers the right societal criteria and then "tries to determine if he satisfies what he thinks she thinks are the right societal criteria" (Taflinger, 1996, "Social Basis of Human Behavior: Sex," para. 19). The female then evaluates those men who contact her (or she contacts) to see if they meet her criteria. This whole procedure is done through conversation and is known as dating.

Within the socio-cultural view, mate selection criteria are viewed as resulting from the interaction of class and gender inequalities, sexual power relation and patriarchal ideology (Eagly & Wood, 1999; as cited in Todosijevic, Ljubiakovic, & Arancic, 2003) and the attributions to male and female social roles. It is suggested that women seek to exchange their appearance and nurturance for characteristics associated with male roles. Based on the feminist theory, social constructionism emphasizes male subjugation of women and how women respond to their oppressed position in society (Vohs, 2004).

A study examining predictions from evolutionary and socio-cultural perspectives on sex differences in mate selection criteria done in Serbia, demonstrated that the statistically significant differences tended to favour the evolutionary perspective (Todosijevic et al., 2003). Specifically, males perceived traits such as thinness, strength, fearfulness, self-pity, fragility, aggressiveness and beauty as more (or less) desirable than women. They were also less troubled by negative character traits of a potential partner, whereas women were less concerned with a partner's physical appearance. Daly and Wilson (1983) stated it simply when they said "...men date largely for sexual reasons, while women are more concerned to evaluate a man's prospects as a long term mate" (p. 304).

Human sexuality has also been described as a "marketplace in which men seek to acquire sex from women by offering other resources in exchange" (Vohs, 2004, p. 2). Within the economic approach, sexual negotiations are placed in the context of a cultural system in which men and women play different roles of buyer and seller. Gary Becker (1976; as cited in Vohs, 2004), defined human behavior as

having four main assumptions. The first assumption states that behavior is interconnected in the market system where individual choices are shaped by costs and benefits in the context of stable preferences. Second, scarce but desirable resources are allocated by price shifts and other market influences. Third, sellers of goods or services compete with each other, and fourth, people seek to maximize their outcomes. This theory of social exchange is cultural in the sense that it examines how behavior is shaped by the market, and other aspects of the collective network, in which natural motivations and tendencies will provide a foundation for sexual economy.

The social exchange theory, as it is applied, to sex analyzes the costs and benefits of various interpersonal behaviors which form a useful basis for making predictions about how people will think, feel, and act (Vohs, 2004). Vohs explains that sex is a female resource because cultural systems endow female sexuality with value and therefore sexual intercourse by itself is not an equal exchange but rather an instance of the man getting something of value from the woman. This idea is illustrated in Symons (1979; as cited in Vohs, 2004) who observed that “everywhere sex is understood to be something females have and males want” (p. 253); a meaning in all cultures and historical eras. In addition, Wilson (2002; as cited in Vohs, 2004) stated that “if the culture offers sexual access and does not require in exchange personal commitment, a lot of men will take sex every time” (p. 15).

Ethnic Identity

Although current research focuses on race, ethnicity, and nationalism as separate concepts, the three can be seen as intimately related – as different facets of

the same phenomenon: the phenomenon of multiculturalism or diversity. According to Longmore (1998), identities can refer to “both self-characterizations that individuals make in terms of the structural features of group memberships, such as various social roles, memberships, and categories, and to the various character traits an individual displays and others attribute to an actor on the basis of his or her conduct or behavior” (p. 53). Part of the self-identification is related to ethnicity. Ethnicity is viewed as a set of socially constructed boundaries in political, economic, cultural, social, and moral time and space (Nagel, 2000). It is a broad concept encompassing race which generally refers to visible distinctions (usually skin color) among populations, and it can be a signifier of not only racial differences, but differences in language, religion, region or culture too. Nationalism, on the other hand, is a particular kind of ethnically based social identity or mobilization that generally involves politics and is rooted in cultural distinctiveness and a unique history. As stated by Cornell and Hartmann (1998; as cited in Nagel, 2000), “Race is more likely to be an assigned attribute, and ethnicity is more likely to be volitional” (p. 110). Therefore, ethnicity, is situational, changeable, and emergent and can be both performed as when a group gets together in ethnic presentation of themselves and performative where the ethnic boundaries are constituted by daily reminders of how people are different. However, the fact that ethnic identity is crucial to the self-concept and psychological functioning of the individual is widely accepted; the greater one’s ethnic identification, and the better one’s social-psychological well-being (Phinney, 1990; as cited in Martinez & Dukes, 1997).