
ORIGINAL RESEARCH—PSYCHOLOGY

Age of First Sexual Intercourse and Acculturation: Effects on Adult Sexual Responding

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Although age of first intercourse and the emotional aspects of that experience are often a target in assessment because they are thought to contribute to later sexual functioning, research to date on how sexual debut relates to adult sexual functioning has been limited and contradictory.

Aim. The goal of this study was to explore the association between age of first intercourse and adult sexual function in a sample of Euro-Canadian and Asian Canadian university students. In addition, culture-based comparisons of sexual complaints were made to clarify the role of culture in sexual response.

Methods. Euro-Canadian (N = 299) and Asian Canadian (N = 329) university students completed the Golombok-Rust Inventory of Sexual Satisfaction and the Vancouver Index of Acculturation.

Main Outcome Measures. Self-reported sexual problems and bidimensional acculturation.

Results. Ethnic group comparisons revealed that Asians reported more sexual complaints including sexual avoidance, dissatisfaction and non-sensuality. Among the women, Asians reported higher scores on the Vaginismus and Anorgasmia subscales whereas the ethnic groups did not differ on the male-specific measures of sexual complaints. In the overall sample, older age of first intercourse was associated with more sexual problems as an adult, including more sexual infrequency, sexual avoidance, and non-sensuality. Among the Asian Canadians, less identification with Western culture was predictive of more sexual complaints overall, more sexual noncommunication, more sexual avoidance, and more non-sensuality. For Asian women, acculturation interacted with age of first intercourse to predict Vaginismus scores.

Conclusions. Overall, these data replicate prior research that found that a university sample of individuals of Asian descent have higher rates of sexual problems and that this effect can be explained by acculturation. Earlier sexual debut was associated with fewer sexual complaints in adulthood. **Woo JST, and Brotto LA. Age of first sexual intercourse and acculturation: Effects on adult sexual responding. J Sex Med 2008;5:571–582.**

Key Words. Age of First Intercourse; Sexual Debut; Acculturation; Culture; East Asian Culture; Sexual Function

Introduction

Age of first sexual intercourse has long been a subject of great interest not only within the scientific and public health communities but also in popular culture and is probably among the most documented statistics in sexuality research [1]. Despite this, ongoing national surveys of sexuality-related behaviors in Canada have focused predominantly on negative sexual outcomes of early sexual debut such as sexually transmitted infec-

tions (STIs) and teenage pregnancy. Unlike countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, comprehensive nationwide studies of normative sexual and reproductive behavior are not regularly conducted in Canada, severely limiting the ability to study trends in Canadian sexual practices [2–6].

At present, the 1996 National Population Health Survey (NPHS) provides the clearest picture of long-term trends in age at first intercourse [7]. The NPHS is a longitudinal study

launched in 1994 in which extensive information on a wide range of health-related topics was collected from approximately 17,000 randomly selected Canadians every 2 years. Evidence from this study revealed a long-term trend of declining median age at first intercourse for both men and women who were 15 to 54 years of age at the time of the study, falling from 18 to 17 years of age for men, and from 20 to 17 years of age for women over the course of 40 years [2]. Of particular interest are the convergence in age at first intercourse between the genders, and the subsequent reversal of historical patterns in the cohort born between 1977 and 1981 in which a greater proportion of women than men reported having experienced intercourse by age 15 (25.6% vs. 19.5%) [2]. In fact, 13.4% of women reported having had their first intercourse experience before age 15, compared with 10.5% of men [2].

The implications of these findings are of great concern for many reasons. First, there is uncertainty about whether young teenagers have reached the level of emotional maturity necessary to foster good sexual health [8,9]. The working definition of sexual health used by the World Health Organization states that among other elements, "sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being related to sexuality" [10]. Because intense emotions are intimately and inextricably linked to intercourse except under unusual circumstances, one might conclude that it would be beneficial for young adolescents to delay intercourse until they possess the capacity to understand the possible consequences of intercourse and the ability to make reasoned decisions based on sound information regarding sex [11,12].

Apropos concerns regarding the capacity of young teenagers to cope with the emotions that usually accompany sexual behavior and the increasing proportion of girls experiencing their first intercourse before the age of 15, research indicates that affective responses to the experience of first intercourse may be more negative for women than men [13]. To date, empirical research on affective responses to first intercourse has focused mostly on women and the results have been remarkably consistent across studies and across time, notwithstanding the significant sexuality-related sociocultural changes that have occurred in the past few decades. Although positive reactions such as pleasure have been reported, women's affective reactions to first intercourse have been predominantly negative, with disenchantment, disappointment, fear, guilt, anxiety, and embarrass-

ment among the reactions that have been reported in earlier research [14–22]. In contrast, the handful of studies that have surveyed men's affective reactions to first intercourse have found that men generally view their first intercourse experience positively and that the experience is commonly associated with satisfaction, excitement, thrill, and happiness [18,19,23,24]. These findings have also been borne out in more recent studies that directly compared the reactions of men and women to first intercourse, with women found to experience significantly more guilt, fear, embarrassment, sadness and nervousness, and less pleasure, satisfaction, and excitement than men [25–28].

One particular concern regarding the declining age at first intercourse is linked to the well-researched negative outcomes of early intercourse debut. The occurrence of first intercourse in girls before the age of 16 has been associated with a host of problems such as a significantly higher incidence of unintended pregnancies, a higher probability of becoming a teenage mother, and increased substance abuse compared with girls whose first intercourse occurs after the age of 16 [29–32]. From a population health perspective, age at first intercourse can be used as a proximate indicator of the number of sexually active teenagers in the population, which is useful information in planning sex education curricula in view of the sobering pattern of STIs in Canada. The most recent data on STIs indicate that young people in the 15–24-year-old age group are disproportionately affected by chlamydia and gonorrhea, the two most commonly reported STIs in Canada; individuals within this age group accounted for about two-thirds of the reported cases of chlamydia and almost half of the reported cases of gonorrhea in 2004 [33].

While much research has framed age at first intercourse within the context of negative outcomes of sexuality such as incidence of STIs, unwanted pregnancies, and interventions to prevent such outcomes, there is a dearth of knowledge on how age at first intercourse relates to adult sexual functioning [29,34–48]. Given that a number of studies have found a link between sex guilt and sexual function shortly after the experience and that guilt is one of the emotions frequently associated with first intercourse, it is possible that any deleterious effects of first intercourse on sexual function may persist in the longer run if the individual is unable to effectively work through the experience and thus experiences guilt [26,49–52]. Moreover, what mediating role other emotions such as fear, anxiety, nervousness, and

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