



Original article

Heterosexual Practices Among Young People in Britain: Evidence From Three National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles



Ruth Lewis, Ph.D.^a, Clare Tanton, Ph.D.^b, Catherine H. Mercer, Ph.D.^b, Kirstin R. Mitchell, Ph.D.^{a,c},
 Melissa Palmer, Ph.D.^a, Wendy Macdowall, M.Sc.^a, and Kaye Wellings, F.Ac.S.S.^{a,*}

^aCentre for Sexual and Reproductive Health Research, Faculty of Public Health and Policy, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, United Kingdom

^bCentre for Sexual Health & HIV Research, Research Department of Infection and Population Health, University College London, London, United Kingdom

^cMRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, Institute of Health and Wellbeing, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom

Article history: Received May 4, 2017; Accepted July 13, 2017

Keywords: Young people; Early adulthood; Heterosexual; Sexual behavior; Oral sex; Anal intercourse; Population survey

 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: To describe time trends and current patterns in sexual practices with opposite-sex partners among men and women aged 16–24 years in Britain.

Methods: Complex survey analyses of cross-sectional probability survey data from three British National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal), conducted approximately decennially 1990–2012, involving interviews with 45,199 people in total.

Results: Birth cohort analysis showed a decline in the median age at first sexual experience and first intercourse since the midtwentieth century and a narrowing of the interval between these events. Comparison of data from Natsals 1, 2, and 3 showed increases in the prevalence of ever experience of oral and anal sex among 16- to 24-year-olds, which were more marked among older respondents in this age group between Natsals 1 and 2, and among younger respondents between Natsals 2 and 3. Among the sexually active, vaginal and oral sex remained the most common combination of practices reported in the past year. The proportion reporting a past-year repertoire of vaginal, oral, and anal sex rose from approximately one in 10 in 1990–1991 to approximately one in four men and one in five women in 2010–2012. In the latest survey, heterosexual experience of practices was positively associated with bisexual attraction among women.

Conclusions: Recent decades have seen an earlier age at initiation of partnered sexual experiences and increased diversity in heterosexual practices among young people. Keeping pace with trends in sexual practices is necessary to safeguard young people's health and to support them in increasing their sexual well-being.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This study uses nationally representative data from surveys of >45,000 people in Britain to document changes in heterosexual practices among young people. The earlier age at initiation of partnered sexual experiences and increased diversity of practices pose not only new challenges but also fresh opportunities for sexual health promotion.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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* Address correspondence to: Kaye Wellings, Ph.D., Department of Social and Environmental Health Research, Centre for Sexual and Reproductive Health Research, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 15-17 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9SH, United Kingdom.

E-mail address: kaye.wellings@lshtm.ac.uk (K. Wellings).

A large body of empirical work has documented marked changes in the sexual behavior of young people over recent decades. Much of this research has focused on vaginal intercourse between men and women, especially the timing and circumstances surrounding its first occurrence. In Britain, for instance, studies have described a decline over time in median age at first

intercourse, a narrowing of the gap between men and women in terms of timing, and increasing use of condoms at first sex [1–3].

Less empirical attention has been paid to sexual practices other than vaginal intercourse, despite evidence of upward trends in oral and anal sex among young people in several countries [4–9]. Recently, however, researchers in the United States have used nationally representative data to gain a fuller picture of patterns of emerging heterosexual behavior among young people, and how they vary by sociodemographic characteristics. For instance, analyses of data from wave IV respondents to the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) reveal striking gender differences in the order in which different practices are initiated, with women more likely than men to initiate vaginal intercourse before other practices and less likely to experience a second new behavior within the same year [10]. Other analyses of this data have also shown the co-occurrence of different practices within adolescents' repertoires of experience to vary by gender. While vaginal and oral-genital contact was the most common combination of sexual practices experienced by age 18 years for both men and women, the next most common combination for men was oral, vaginal, and anal sex, whereas for women it was vaginal intercourse only [11]. Despite the value of gaining a more comprehensive understanding of patterns of sexual behavior among young people, in Britain, analyses of data from population surveys have rarely examined aspects other than the prevalence of discrete sexual practices. Little is known about the average age of first sexual experience relative to first intercourse, nor the combinations of practices that co-occur within repertoires of experience, nor how such patterns are shifting over time.

Documenting changing patterns of emerging sexual behavior is important for several reasons. First and foremost, description of a range of sexual practices and the relationships between them aligns with calls for research that conceptualizes the initiation of sexual activity as a normative developmental process, rather than the conventional framing as "problematic [10,12]." In addition, basic description of behavioral trends also provides important empirical context for examining associations between patterns of emerging sexual behavior and aspects of sexual health and well-being among young people. Such associations have not yet, to our knowledge, been explored within British studies, though research from other high-income countries has found associations between certain patterns of initiation (characterized by factors such as the relative timing, spacing, and sequencing of different sexual activities) and measures of sexual risk behavior and unintended outcomes, including sexually transmitted infection diagnosis, concurrent partnerships, and, among women, unprotected anal intercourse with their most recent partner [13,14]. Beyond dimensions of sexual risk, however, little is known about whether or how patterns of emerging behavior are associated with aspects of sexual experience that foster sexual health and well-being. Research indicates repertoires of practice within a specific encounter can have implications for the quality of a sexual interaction; among women, for instance, receiving manual and/or oral stimulation has been associated with a greater likelihood of achieving orgasm [15,16]. Thus, documentation of a wider range of practices may also lay the empirical foundation for examination of factors associated with sexual pleasure, satisfaction and well-being among young people. Gaining a more complete picture of sexual practices among young people is important, too, for informing efforts to improve sexual health. Population surveys in the United States

[17], for example, have shown oral and anal sex with an opposite-sex partner is more commonly reported by women reporting bisexual attraction than those reporting heterosexual attraction only, which prompts the need for more nuanced targeting.

In this article, we report analyses of data from three British National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal), conducted approximately decennially between 1990 and 2010, with the aim of examining heterosexual experience of practices among young men and women aged 16–24 years. We restricted the analysis to examine practices between men and women only since the number reporting same-sex experience did not allow for detailed analysis. We use data from Natsals 1–3 to examine trends in young people's heterosexual practices in recent decades, including (1) relative timing of first sexual experience and first intercourse; (2) changes in the prevalence of ever experience of different sexual practices; and (3) changes in the combinations of sexual practices engaged in by young people. In addition, we use data from the most recent survey (Natsal-3), to describe patterns of heterosexual behavior among young people, including (4) recency with which different sexual practices feature in their sexual repertoires; and (5) variation in experience of heterosexual practices by reported sexual identity and sexual attraction.

Methods

Data and sample

Natsal surveys were carried out in 1990–1991 (Natsal-1), 1999–2001 (Natsal-2), and 2010–2012 (Natsal-3). In all three surveys, stratified random probability sampling was used to select households, from which one eligible individual, resident in Britain, was selected at random and invited to participate. Similar measures and procedures were used for all three surveys. In Natsal-1, pen-and-paper was used for both the face-to-face and self-completion interviews, with a self-completion booklet for more sensitive questions. In Natsals 2 and 3, participants were interviewed using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) with computer-assisted self-interview (CASI) for the more sensitive questions. Full details of the methodology are published elsewhere [18–20]. Natsal-3 was granted ethical approval by the Oxfordshire Research Ethics Committee A (reference: 09/H0604/27).

In Natsal-1, 18,876 men and women aged 16–59 years were interviewed (1,489 men and 1,888 women aged 16–24 years); the respective figures for Natsal-2 were 11,161 men and women aged 16–44 years (1,231 men and 1,442 women aged 16–24 years) and for Natsal-3 15,162 men and women aged 16–74 years (1,729 men and 2,140 women aged 16–24 years). The overall response rate was 66.8% for Natsal-1, 65.4% for Natsal-2, and 57.7% for Natsal-3 (64.8% among Natsal-3 participants aged 16–34 years).

Measures

Sexual practices with an opposite-sex partner. Variables relating to first sexual experience and first intercourse with an opposite-sex partner were derived from answers to questions asked in the face-to-face (CAPI) section of the questionnaire. All participants were given a show card asking: "How old were you when you first had sexual intercourse with someone of the opposite sex, or hasn't this happened?" and "How old were you when you first had any type of experience of a sexual kind—for example kissing, petting, or feeling one another—with someone of the opposite

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