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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the actual behaviors or problems which college students are experiencing, as opposed to their general attitudes concerning sexuality. The study surveys sexual behavior in college students, including usage of sexual enhancements (such as pornography, provocative dress, and sadomasochism), "safe sex" practices, HIV awareness, and reported experience of sexual dysfunction. A confidential questionnaire composed of author-devised questions and questions adapted from previous surveys by Hernandez & Smith (1990) and Spencer and Zeiss (1987) was administered to 127 randomly selected subjects. The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MC-SDS, 1960) was administered concurrently, in order to assess the extent of social desirability contamination of the sexual behavior measures. The surveys were individually administered using procedures to safeguard confidentiality. Reported HIV awareness (80%) made respondents cautious about sex, females being more concerned than males. 75% of respondents said they were likely to use a condom during intercourse. High scoring individuals on the Marlowe-Crowne were more likely to encourage partners to wear provocative lingerie or costumes, suggesting possible contamination. Almost twice as many males as females view x-rated films or engage in sadomasochistic practices, and more males than females report feeling comfortable viewing such films with their partners. (MSF)

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## Self-Reported Sexual Behavior in College Students

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**ABSTRACT:** This study surveys sexual behavior in college students, including usage of sexual enhancements (such as pornography, provocative dress, and sadomasochism), "safe sex" practices, HIV awareness, and reported experience of sexual dysfunction. A confidential questionnaire was administered to 127 randomly selected subjects. Previous surveys by Hernandez & Smith (1990) and Spencer & Zeiss (1987), and author-devised questions, were combined in order to compose this questionnaire. The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MC-SDS, 1960) was administered concurrently, in order to assess the extent of social desirability contamination of the sexual behavior measures. The surveys were individually administered using procedures to safeguard confidentiality. Reported HIV awareness practices and use of sexual enhancements will be discussed separately for male and female subjects. The intended purpose of this study was to determine the actual behaviors or problems which college students are experiencing as opposed to their general attitudes concerning sexuality.

## Introduction

With concern rapidly growing about the occurrence of AIDS and the need for safe-sex practices among college students, it is no wonder that our society is focusing less research attention on means to enhance and enjoy sexual relationships. Greater emphasis has come to be placed upon protection as opposed to pleasure. College students are quickly becoming a high-risk group. Approximately 2 out of every 1,000 college students are infected with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) (Painter, 1989 as cited in Carroll, 1991). Sexual experimentation among students threatens to increase this figure, if appropriate safeguards are neglected.

In a study done by Keeter and Bradford in 1988, college students' knowledge regarding HIV transmission was assessed. It was found that students are indeed quite knowledgeable about modes of HIV transmission and dangerous sexual practices (Livingston, 1990). Therefore, the increasing incidence of AIDS on college campuses is not a result of students being uninformed, but instead due to their lack of personal concern about acquiring the disease. In fact, of the students studied by Strunin and Hingston (1987), 54% of them reported that they were not worried about catching AIDS. Also, among these same students, only 15% of them reported changing their sexual behavior in response to their fear of contracting this deadly virus (Livingston, 1990).

There appear to be gender differences among the students who are taking precautions. As was the case before the threat of AIDS,

males continue to tend to have more sex partners than females (ASHA, 1989 as cited in Herold & Mewhinney, 1993). Although males tend to engage in more casual sex encounters, females are more likely to make use of condoms. Females evaluate condoms more positively and report they are less likely to engage in sex without one, even "in the heat of passion" (Herold & Mewhinney, 1993).

Fortunately, there is anecdotal evidence that even "in the heat of passion", some students are making a wise decision to refrain from engaging in sexual activity until protection is available or until more is known about the partner's sexual history. This increase in sexual caution has been accompanied by perceived decrease in sexual spontaneity and originality. Retaining a sense of sexual excitement while practicing appropriate safeguards is a challenge for many of today's college students. While this may not seem to be a serious problem, the reality is that if students fail to find means to enliven their prudently cautious sex lives, they may abandon safeguards and endanger themselves and others. Until students locate a long-term sexual partner for a monogamous relationship, they need to develop ways of assuring safety without destroying sexual passion.

Little research has been conducted examining the use of sexual enhancements among college students, although such practices might help to offset the negative sexual impact of safe sex practices, keep monogamous relationships exciting, and thereby reduce HIV transmission risks. There have been numerous studies that deal with adults' feelings about or responses to certain sexual enhancements or activities. Ritts and Engbretson (1991) found that

60% of their subjects were in favor of legal adult video rental. Zillman and Bryant (1988) found that pornography viewing had a strong impact on self-assessment of sexual experience and satisfaction with an intimate partner, among both males and females.

However, few of these studies deal with actual behaviors and practices. Hatfield, et al (1988) examined gender differences on what is desired in the sexual relationship by asking questions about desire for love, intimacy, initiative, and variety, but no specific references were made to any outside "object" enhancements other than certain sexual acts or attitudes regarding sexual activity.

Since some have also wondered if a convergence of health-related sexual fears and performance pressures are increasing rates of sexual dysfunction among young adults, this study also will examine reported performance problems and sexual expectations. Although many studies have been done on sexual dysfunctions, very few have been targeted at the college population. Studies have shown that the shifting role of women in today's society may be a contributing factor to the increased incidence of male sexual dysfunction. Presumably, women who are sexually assertive are too demanding and chide their partners for poor sexual performance, and these tauntings can cause sexual dysfunctions in some males. These women are females who have chosen not to adopt the traditional female role and have been found to engage more frequently in sexual activity, in a wider variety of sexual activities, and derive more pleasure from their activities. With this change in role, perhaps

women are setting their expectations too high and are finding it more difficult to find a partner that will satisfy them (Spencer & Zeiss, 1987). In addition, because of the fact that so many individuals become sexually active at such a young age these days, it is important to explore whether the onset of sexual dysfunction is earlier and whether young women are more susceptible to sexual dysfunction than men.

The present study sought to determine the "safe sex" and sexual enhancement (such as pornography, provocative dress, and sadomasochism) practices of college students, and to assess the frequency of reported sexual dysfunction. By examining these, we hope to begin to reconcile both the positive and negative aspects of today's college student sexual relationships.

## **Methods**

### Participants

Fifty-four males and 72 females ages 17-23 participated as subjects either through enrollment in an introductory psychology class or by means of random assignment. All were undergraduates at a small liberal arts college in southeastern Pennsylvania.

### **Measures**

A sixty-one statement questionnaire composed of 5-point Likert items was administered to determine the usage of safe sex and

sexual enhancement practices, and HIV awareness. Demographic questions concerning sex, age, class, relationship status, and sexual activity were also included in the survey.

Roughly half of the questions were author-devised; the rest were adapted from items used in the work of Hernandez and Smith (1990), and Spencer & Zeiss (1987) which originally targeted cognitions and behaviors of college students. Emphasis was placed upon 5 cognitive measures: sexual motivation in dating, intended condom use, caution about sex and dating in relation to AIDS issues, respect for partners who wished to delay sexual activity, and sexual expectations of self and partner. The behavioral items analyzed were experience of arousal and orgasmic difficulties, frequency of condom use, advising abstinence and/or condom use to friends, and practicing how to use a condom.

The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (1960) is a 33, true-false item, self-report inventory intended to assess socially acceptable response bias. High scores indicate a greater tendency to endorse socially acceptable items on paper and pencil tests. College students' test-retest reliability on this measure has been reported to be quite high ( $r = .88$ ; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960).

#### Procedure:

The survey was administered to two sets of populations, the first being an Introductory Psychology class and the second a randomly selected subset of the student body. The in-class survey was administered anonymously; responses were recorded on computer scanned forms. The randomly selected individuals had the survey

delivered to their residence and were allowed approximately 20 minutes for completion. The survey was distributed in an unmarked manila envelope along with a computerized form. Subjects were told not to put their names on either the envelope or the response form in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Upon the experimenter's return, the subjects placed the sealed envelopes into a pre-filled collection box.

## Results

### Social Desirability Findings

Subscale scores for social desirability responding, sadomasochistic practices, provocative dress preferences, and pornography viewing were calculated for all subjects by adding the directionally adjusted items measuring these dimensions. There were no significant relationships between scores on the Marlowe-Crowne and any of the three sexual enhancement subscales (sadomasochistic practices:  $r = .03$ ; provocative dress:  $r = .002$ ; and pornography viewing:  $r = .09$ , n.s.).

A median split performed on the Marlowe-Crowne scores yielded two social desirability response groups (low and high). T-test comparisons revealed no significant group differences on any of the 8 items assessing sexual enhancements. The only significant group difference found between the low and high social desirability response groups involved the item assessing preference for partners to wear provocative lingerie. Here, subjects in the high social desirability response group were significantly more likely to encourage their partners to wear such items (high  $x = 2.00$ ,

s.d. = .94, n = 44 vs. low: x = 1.42, s.d. = .61, n = 48;  
t = 3.49, p < .01).

### Sexual Dysfunction Findings

Although the majority of the subjects reported they never experience any difficulty becoming sexually aroused, 30% said that at least sometimes they did experience some difficulty, with about a quarter (26%) of those experiencing difficulty being males. When asked if having good sexual experience is related to giving your partner an orgasm, over 1/3 (39%) of the population answered "never", 46% of them being females and 1/3 being males. One half of all respondents reported sometimes defining good sex in terms of their partner's orgasm. However, when asked how important their own orgasm was, only 21% responded it was of great importance to have an orgasm. Forty-five percent answered that their orgasm was of some importance, and 1/3 responded that it was not very important at all. When asked if a good lover is one who is "always ready, has multiple orgasms and can last all night", 61% answered "yes", (77% of these respondents being males and 51% being females).

### Sexual Enhancement Findings

When subjects were asked how often they watch X-rated videotapes with their partner, 13% of the females and 24% of the males responded that they sometimes watched them, while 86% of the females and 70% of the males said they never had. When asked how comfortable they felt watching pornographic tapes with their

partner, 20% of females and 33% of males said they felt very comfortable, while 49% of females and 37% of males responded that they felt very uncomfortable.

In regard to provocative dress preference, 21% of females and 49% of males responded that they sometimes like for their partner to wear provocative lingerie, costumes, or outfits as part of foreplay. When questioned about sadomasochistic behaviors, 18% of females and 36% of males said that they sometimes include restraint or bondage as part of lovemaking, while 11% of females and 26% of males reported that they sometimes engaged in spanking or hitting activities during lovemaking.

#### Safe Sex HIV/Findings

A large majority of our sample, (80%) reported that the topic of AIDS has made them cautious about sex. Only 13% described themselves as not cautious. Females appear to be more concerned than males; 88% of the women said AIDS made them cautious, while only 71% of the men reported this. For both males and females of those who are cautious, most are extremely likely to use condoms during intercourse, (63% of the females and 58% of the males).

When the entire sample was considered, of those subjects who chose to respond to the item assessing their likelihood of using a condom during intercourse, 75% responded likely, while 25% said they were unlikely to do so. The fact that roughly a quarter of this sample did not plan to use condoms during future intercourse was of some interest.

Of those subjects who chose to respond to the item assessing

the willingness to wait to have sex until one feels safe about their partner's sex history, 75% said they are willing to wait, while 25% responded that they are unwilling to wait. The majority of those extremely willing to wait were 74% females versus 26% males.

Fifty-six percent of the sample reported current involvement in a monogamous relationship. Of those in a monogamous relationship, 48% said they are absolutely certain that their partner is not infected with HIV. Another 48% are fairly sure their partner is HIV negative, and 2% said they know their partner is infected.

When asked about the basis for their conclusions about their partner's HIV status, the subjects show variable responses. Only 3% actually saw their partner's lab report. Four percent relied upon information from their partner's blood donation and learned that they were HIV positive. Only 7% relied upon information deduced through employment or military testing. Sixteen percent knew their partner had been tested six months after their last prior sexual contact. Fifteen percent were not notified following a blood donation. Approximately one quarter, (26%) of the sample, based their beliefs about their partner's HIV negatively on the fact that their current sexual partner did not previously have intercourse.

#### **Discussion**

Preliminary analyses were conducted to address the concern that responses to the sexual enhancement and AIDS-related items may have been contaminated by social desirability response. The

absence of a relationship suggests that social desirability responding did not contaminate accuracy of self-report, except in regard to the question assessing provocative dress preference. It was discovered that high scoring individuals on the Marlowe-Crowne were more likely to encourage their partner to wear provocative lingerie or costumes (indicating possible contamination). This may be because encouraging a partner to wear lingerie is viewed as a socially acceptable practice and the respondents may have felt personal pressure to respond as such.

Almost twice as many males admitted to sometimes viewing X-rated tapes as females, and a greater number of males also reported feeling more comfortable viewing such tapes with their partner. This may be related to the specific content of pornographic films, which are often strongly geared toward male audiences, and which frequently place females in more submissive and exploited roles. The male response rate was also approximately twice that of females to questions which dealt with provocative dress preference and sadomasochistic behaviors, possibly because of physiological differences underlying sexual responsivity between the sexes or socialized differences in sexual preference. Such findings could also reflect females' reluctance to engage in "unacceptable" sexual behaviors.

This study found some evidence of sexual difficulty among today's college students, although even episodic problems were only reported by a minority (roughly one third). In line with other research, more females than males reported arousal difficulties. These findings fail to support the notion that females have higher

expectations of their sexual partners than do males. Additional research should assess the reliability of the present findings, and detail the sources of perceived sexual dysfunction found in this study.

Even with the vast amount of information that is circulated about AIDS and HIV transmission, college students seem to disregard the warning messages. The results of the present survey suggest that alarmingly many of these subjects are not taking adequate sexual precautions. Their attitudes are often discrepant with their actual behavior. It is frightening that college students do not fully understand the extent of this epidemic, where no one is immune or invincible.

More research needs to be conducted on the actual sexual practices of college students. Future results could be used to identify needs for educational services on both high school and college campuses.

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