



**WHAT IS SEX?
STUDENTS' DEFINITIONS OF HAVING SEX, SEXUAL PARTNER,
AND UNFAITHFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR**

Hilary E. Randall E. Sandra Byers
Department of Psychology
University of New Brunswick
Fredericton, New Brunswick

***ABSTRACT:** In this study 164 heterosexual Canadian university students were asked about their definitions of the terms having sex, sexual partner, and unfaithful. Students were asked to indicate which from a list of 18 sexual behaviours they would include in their definition of each of the three terms. Significantly more behaviours were included in students' unfaithful definition than were included in the sexual partner definition and significantly more behaviours were included in the sexual partner definition than in the having sex definition. For example, while less than 25% of participants considered oral genital behaviour to be having sex, more than 60% thought that the giver or receiver of oral sex was a sexual partner, and more than 97% considered a partner who had oral sex with someone else to be have been unfaithful. Similarly, while masturbating to orgasm in the presence of another was considered to be having sex by less than 4% of participants, 34% reported that this behaviour was sufficient to consider that person a sexual partner and 95% considered it to be unfaithful. Students were more likely to include a behaviour in their definitions if orgasm occurred than if orgasm did not occur. There were no significant gender differences. Multiple regression analyses revealed that older and less sexually experienced students reported a broader definition of sexual partner than did younger and more sexually experienced students. The implications of these findings for sex research and sexual health promotion are discussed.*

Key words: Sexual behaviour definitions Having sex Sexual partner Unfaithful
Canadian university students

INTRODUCTION

Sex is a term that is frequently used, and yet poorly defined. Ambiguity about the definition of the term contributes to concern about the validity of self-reported sexual behaviour (Carpenter, 2001; Cecil, Bogart, Wagstaff, Pinkerton, & Abramson, 2002; McConaghy, 1999). Respondents may use their own idiosyncratic definitions of sex and therefore respond to research questions based on different opinions about what behaviours constitute sex (McConaghy, 1999; Richters & Song, 1999). The lack of clarity concerning the definition of this term can cause further challenges when attempts are made to define and study other terms related to sexual behaviour such as *sexual partner*, *virgin*, or *unfaithful* (Blower & Boe, 1993; Carpenter, 2001; Stevens-Simon, 2001; Woody, Russel, D'Souza, & Woody, 2000).

Recently, researchers in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia have investigated university students' definitions of having sex. These studies found that students differ in their opinions of what sexual behaviours constitute having sex (Pitts & Rahman, 2001; Richters & Song, 1999; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). While the vast majority of respondents (more than 97%) in these three studies included penile-vaginal intercourse in their definition of sex, fewer (between 70% and 90%) respondents considered penile-anal intercourse to constitute having sex. Oral-genital behaviours were defined as sex by between 32% and 58% of respondents. Richters and Song (1999) noted that, in their Australian sample,

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Hilary E. Randall, Department of Psychology, University of New Brunswick, P.O. Box 4400, Fredericton, New Brunswick E3B 6E4. Email: w7zz@unb.ca



the occurrence of orgasm slightly increased the likelihood that a behaviour was included in their respondents' definitions of having sex. However, the authors did not test these differences statistically. Further, although these studies examined a range of sexual behaviours, researchers have not investigated self-stimulation (masturbatory) behaviours while in the presence of a partner, or in telephone or computer contact with a partner.

The main goal of this study was to determine Canadian university students' views about what behaviours constitute having sex including the extent to which orgasm influences their definitions. We also examined students' definitions of two other sex-related terms that have not been examined and that are of importance to both the promotion of student's sexual health, and to the validity of certain areas of sex research: *sexual partner* and *unfaithful* sexual behaviour. In particular, we were interested in whether students vary in their definitions of having sex, sexual partner, and unfaithful sexual behaviour. In addition, we wanted to examine the possible influence of orgasm on the breadth of student's definitions. We predicted that students would be more likely to include a sexual behaviour in their definition of having sex if orgasm occurred, than if orgasm did not occur.

FACTORS PREDICTING STUDENTS' DEFINITIONS OF SEX

It is likely that individual characteristics affect the definitions of sex adopted by university students. For example, both Pitts and Rahman (2001), in their British sample, and Sanders and Reinisch (1999), in their American sample, found that male students demonstrated a broader definition of having sex than did female students. That is, male students tended to include a greater number of sexual behaviours in their definitions. This finding may help to explain the frequent, and as yet inadequately explained, finding that men consistently report a greater number of lifetime sexual partners than do women (Pitts & Rahman, 2001). Age has also been found to be a factor in students' definitions in that older students in the Australian sample were found to demonstrate a broader definition of having sex than younger students (Richters & Song, 1999). However, a number of characteristics that may influence students' definitions have not yet been examined.

Pitts and Rahman (2001) proposed that a possible reason for men's broader definition of sex might be their greater erotophilia, that is their more positive orientation toward sexual stimuli (Fisher, Byrne, White, & Kelley, 1988). However, the authors did not empirically examine the proposed relationship between erotophobia-erotophilia and definitions of sex. Greater erotophilia has been shown to be associated with a number of sexual behaviours including more frequent sexual fantasy, greater response to erotica, and increased tendency to learn and teach others about sex (Fisher et al., 1988). Therefore it is reasonable to ask whether this dimension could relate to students' sexual definitions in that men's greater positive affect towards sexuality may result in their inclusion of a greater number of sexual behaviours in their definition of sex.

Similarly, sexual socialization influences from both parents and peers may influence the breadth of students' definitions of sexual terms. For example, students who experience more sexually permissive influences may demonstrate a less restricted (less narrow) view of the "acceptability" of the various sexual behaviours and therefore have a broader range of behaviours that they consider to be part of "having sex." Sexually permissive influences are those that encourage sexual involvement in a wide variety of relationships, both casual and long term. Conversely, non-permissive influences are those that discourage casual sex and promote either abstinence or sex within a long-term loving relationship only, and are often associated with greater religious involvement and with more traditional attitudes about sex (Lottes & Kuriloff, 1998; Woody et al., 2000). Further, women have been found to report greater non-permissive sexual influences than do men (Lottes & Kuriloff, 1998).

Finally, student's definitions of having sex may reflect their past sexual experiences. Men typically report a broader range of sexual experience than do women (Coward-Steckler & Pollack, 1998; Stevens-Simon, 2001). Compared to less experienced students, students who seek out sexual experiences find sex more pleasurable and are more likely to engage in sex recreationally (Knox, Sturdivant, & Zusman, 2001). Therefore, students with a broader range of sexual experiences may subscribe to a broader definition of having sex that encompasses all of the

various behaviours they have engaged in. For example, a student who has experienced oral-genital sexual behaviour may be more likely to include that behaviour in their definition of sex.

The second goal of this study was to examine a number of potential predictors of the breadth of students' definitions of having sex including, age, gender, sexual experience, erotophobia-erotophilia, and sexual socialization (sexually permissive influences). We predicted that students who were older, male, more erotophilic, more sexually experienced, and who had had more sexually permissive influences would demonstrate a broader definition of sex. No predictions were made regarding the breadth of students' definitions of *sexual partner* and *unfaithful* sexual behaviour because they are exploratory variables.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 167 university students (63 men and 104 women). In order to increase the homogeneity of the sample, three students were dropped from the study because they identified themselves as gay/lesbian or bisexual. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 62 men and 102 women, all of whom self identified as heterosexual. The age of students ranged from 17 to 31 years ($M = 19.5, SD = 2.2$). Most students (87.8%) were in their first or second year of university and almost all (95.7%) had grown up in Canada. Most of the students (62.8%) were in a romantic relationship at the time the study was conducted.

MEASURES

The Demographic and Dating History Questionnaire (Renaud & Byers, 1999) was used to collect demographic data including age, ethnicity, religiosity, sexual orientation, relationship status, education level, dating history, and sexual experiences.

The Sexual Definition Survey-Expanded was used to assess the breadth of students' definitions of sex. This measure was adapted from Sanders and Reinisch (1999). Participants indicate the behaviours they consider to be "having sex" by responding to the following question: *Would you say that you had*

sex with someone if the most intimate behaviour you engaged in was... (options given)? Sanders and Reinisch provided a list of 11 sexual behaviours. The list of sexual behaviours was expanded for the current study. First, in order to examine the effect of the occurrence of orgasm on students' definitions of having sex, the phrases *...resulting in orgasm*, and *...not resulting in orgasm* were added to each of the following sexual behaviours to create parallel items: touching the genitals, penile-vaginal intercourse, oral contact with the genitals, and penile-anal intercourse (e.g., *penile-vaginal intercourse resulting in orgasm; penile-vaginal intercourse not resulting in orgasm*). This resulted in 15 items that were then arranged in random order. Second, in order to expand on the research of Sanders and Reinisch (1999), three additional items were included as the final items on the questionnaire: masturbation in each other's presence, masturbation while in telephone contact with each other, and masturbation while in computer contact with each other. Students indicated either yes (1) or no (0) to each of the behaviours presented to indicate whether or not they would include that behaviour in their definition. Data were summed such that the total score represents the total number of behaviours included in student's definitions of sex, ranging from 0 (no behaviours included) to 18 (all behaviours included). In addition, in order to compare definitions of items that included orgasm to those that did not, the six items that included the occurrence of orgasm were summed separately, as were the six parallel items that stated that orgasm did not take place. Chronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the 18 items in the current sample was .86.

Two additional measures were developed for this study in order to assess the breadth of students' definitions of sexual partner and unfaithful sexual behaviour. Both measures followed the same question and response format as the Sexual Definition Survey-Expanded. On *the Sexual Partner Definition Survey*, students were asked: *Would you say someone had been one of your sexual partners if the most intimate behaviour you engaged in was... (options given)?* On *the Sexual Infidelity Definition Survey*, students were asked: *Would you say that your partner had been "unfaithful" with another person if the most intimate behaviour they engaged in was... (options given)?* Chronbach's



alpha reliability coefficients in the current sample were .90 and .96, respectively.

The Sexual Socialization Instrument (SSI; Lottes & Kuriloff, 1998) was used to measure both parental and peer sexual socialization influences. Participants indicate the attitudes of their parents and peers on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Total scores range from 20 to 100 with higher scores indicating greater permissive parental and peer sexual influences. This scale has been shown to have adequate internal consistency. The test-retest reliability has been found to be somewhat low at .47 for the Peer scale and .55 for the Parental Scale (Lottes & Kuriloff, 1998).

The Sexual Opinion Survey (SOS) (Fisher, 1998; Fisher et al., 1988) was used to assess approach to (erotophilia) or avoidance of (erotophobia) sexual stimuli. Participants indicate their level of agreement with each of the 21 statements on a 7-point Likert scale that ranges from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Scores range from 0 to 126 with higher scores indicating greater erotophilia. The SOS has shown to have good internal consistency and test-retest reliability. Construct validity has been demonstrated in that the SOS has been shown to correlate with related personality constructs and behaviours (Fisher et al., 1988).

The Cowart-Pollack Scale of Sexual Experience (Cowart-Steckler & Pollack, 1998) was used to assess student's level of sexual experience. It consists of separate 30-item checklists for men and women comprised of a wide range of sexual activities. The scale was validated on heterosexual students. Students indicate which of the listed behaviours they have engaged in. The scale has been shown to have high reliability.

PROCEDURE

Following ethics approval, students were invited to participate in the study via announcements made in undergraduate psychology and kinesiology classes and by sign up sheets posted in the psychology department. Students were given one participation point for their participation. The students were administered the questionnaires in small groups. They were seated at divided cubicles to ensure privacy.

Students were first asked to read and sign an informed consent form that contained information about the study and assured students that their responses were anonymous and would be kept confidential. Next the students completed the questionnaire booklet. The *Demographic and Dating History Questionnaire* appeared first; the *Sexual Definition Survey* and the *Sexual Partner Definition Survey* were presented next (counter balanced in their order of appearance to control for carry over effects) separated by the *Sexual Opinion Survey* and the *Sexual Socialization Instrument* (also counter balanced in their order). Finally, the *Sexual Infidelity Definition Survey* was presented followed by the gender-appropriate version of the *Cowart-Pollack Scale of Sexual Experience*. After completing the questionnaire booklet, students were given a debriefing statement that provided them with additional information about the study and references for related readings.

RESULTS

STUDENTS' DEFINITIONS

The percentage of students who included each of the listed behaviours in their definitions of having sex, sexual partner, and unfaithful sexual behaviour are listed in Tables 1 – 3, respectively. In terms of the definitions of having sex, the most frequently included items were penile-vaginal intercourse with orgasm, penile-vaginal intercourse without orgasm, penile-anal intercourse with orgasm, and penile-anal intercourse without orgasm in that order (see Table 1). More than 90% of students endorsed penile-vaginal behaviour, and over 75% of students endorsed penile-anal behaviour as having sex. The majority of students did not include the other behaviours in their definitions of having sex. For example, oral sex was considered to be having sex by less than one-quarter of students. Very few students (2% - 14%) considered sexual touching or masturbatory behaviours (in each others presence, on the telephone, or on the computer with another) to be having sex.

When defining *sexual partner*, almost all (more than 96%) of students included penile-vaginal behaviour in their definition, and more than 88% included penile-anal behaviour (see Table 2). Approximately two thirds of students considered oral contact with their own or a

**Table 1** Percentage of Students who Include Each Behaviour in their Definition of Having Sex

Behaviours	Females	Males	Overall
Deep kissing/ tongue kissing	1.9	3.2	2.4
Oral contact with breasts/ nipples	2.9	6.5	4.3
They have oral contact with your breasts/nipples	3.9	4.8	4.3
They touch your genitals-with orgasm	11.0	9.7	10.4
They touch your genitals- no orgasm	8.8	6.4	7.9
Oral contact w/ their genitals with orgasm	22.0	24.0	22.8
Oral contact w/ their genitals- no orgasm	21.0	18.0	19.5
They have oral contact w/ your genitals w/ orgasm	24.0	23.0	23.2
They have oral contact w/ your genitals- no orgasm	23.0	16.0	20.1
Touching their genitals with orgasm	15.0	13.0	14.0
Touching their genitals- no orgasm	7.8	9.6	8.5
Penile-vaginal intercourse with orgasm	97.0	98.0	97.6
Penile-vaginal intercourse- no orgasm	96.0	90.0	94.0
Penile-anal intercourse with orgasm	83.0	84.0	83.3
Penile-anal intercourse- no orgasm	80.0	77.0	79.0
Masturbating to orgasm in each other's presence	3.9	3.2	3.7
Masturbating to orgasm while in telephone contact with each other	2.9	1.6	2.4
Masturbating to orgasm while in computer contact with each other	2.9	1.6	2.4

Note: $N = 164$ (62 males, 102 females)

partner's genitals sufficient to consider that person a sexual partner. Approximately half of students considered sexual touching sufficient to consider someone a sexual partner. One third of students considered masturbating to orgasm in each other's

presence sufficient to make that person a sexual partner. A smaller portion of students considered masturbating to orgasm while in telephone contact or computer contact to be sufficient to consider someone a sexual partner.

Table 2 Percentage of Students Who Include Each Behaviour in their Definition of Sexual Partner

Behaviours	Females	Males	Overall
Deep kissing/ tongue kissing	7.8	9.7	8.5
Oral contact with breasts/ nipples	29.4	27.4	28.7
They have oral contact with your breasts/nipples	30.7	19.4	26.4
They touch your genitals-with orgasm	62.7	51.6	58.5
They touch your genitals- no orgasm	53.9	38.7	48.2
Oral contact w/ their genitals with orgasm	66.7	64.5	65.9
Oral contact w/ their genitals- no orgasm	64.4	56.5	61.3
They have oral contact w/ your genitals w/ orgasm	70.6	66.1	68.9
They have oral contact w/ your genitals- no orgasm	65.7	56.5	62.2
Touching their genitals with orgasm	61.8	50.0	57.3
Touching their genitals- no orgasm	48.0	37.1	43.9
Penile-vaginal intercourse with orgasm	98.0	100	98.8
Penile-vaginal intercourse- no orgasm	98.0	93.5	96.3
Penile-anal intercourse with orgasm	91.1	88.7	90.2
Penile-anal intercourse- no orgasm	88.1	90.2	88.9
Masturbating to orgasm in each other's presence	36.3	30.6	34.1
Masturbating to orgasm while in telephone contact with each other	20.6	19.4	20.1
Masturbating to orgasm while in computer contact with each other	15.7	14.5	15.2

Note: $N = 164$ (62 males, 102 females)



A substantial majority of students included all 18 items as *unfaithful* behaviour (see Table 3). In fact, 90% of students included sixteen or more of the listed items. Although somewhat fewer students included masturbating while in telephone or computer contact with another person in their definitions, three-quarters of students included *all* of the listed items as unfaithful behaviour.

A 2 (gender) x 3 (definition) repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to determine whether the breadth of men's and women's definitions of *having sex*, *sexual partner*, and *unfaithful* behaviour differed from each other. There was a main effect for definition, $F(2,161) = 1294.59, p < .001$. Mean comparisons indicated that students included a significantly greater number of items in their *unfaithful* definition ($M = 17.4$) than in either their *sexual partner* ($M = 9.7$) or their *had sex* ($M = 4.9$) definitions. In addition, the number of items included in the sexual partner definition was significantly greater than the number of items in the *had sex* definition. Neither the main effect for gender nor the interaction was significant.

Six listed sexual behaviours had parallel items stating that orgasm either occurred or did not occur. To determine whether the occurrence of orgasm

influenced student's definitions, a 2 (gender) X 2 (orgasm) repeated measures MANOVA was conducted. The occurrence of orgasm was found to significantly influence whether a behaviour was included in the three definitions, $F_{\text{mult}}(3, 160) = 8.70, p < .001$. Follow up ANOVA'S indicate that students were significantly more likely to include a behaviour if orgasm resulted than if orgasm did not result, for each of *having sex*: $F(1,162) = 9.68, p < .005, (M = 2.28$ without orgasm, $M = 2.50$ with orgasm); *sexual partner*, $F(1,162) = 22.58, p < .001, (M = 3.94$ without orgasm, $M = 4.36$ with orgasm); and *unfaithful*, $F(1,162) = 4.36, p < .05, (M = 5.91$ without orgasm, $M = 5.96$ with orgasm). The main effect for gender and the gender by definition interaction were not significant.

PREDICTING SEXUAL DEFINITIONS

Three separate multiple regression analyses were performed to examine variables related to the breadth of student's definitions of having sex, sexual partner, and unfaithful sexual behaviour. Gender, age, sexual experience, erotophobia-erotophilia, and sexual permissiveness served as the predictors.

These variables did not significantly predict the definitions of *having sex*, $R^2 = .05, F(5,157) = 1.73, p > .05$, or of *unfaithful* sexual behaviour, $R^2 = .04$,

Table 3 Percentage of Students who Include Each Behaviour in their Definition of Unfaithful

Behaviours	Females	Males	Overall
Deep kissing/ tongue kissing	92.2	88.7	90.9
Oral contact with another's breasts/ nipples	98.0	90.3	95.1
They have oral contact with your partner's breasts/ nipples	96.1	93.4	95.1
They touch your partner's genitals-with orgasm	99.0	98.4	98.8
They touch your partner's genitals- no orgasm	97.1	96.8	97.0
Oral contact w/ another's genitals with orgasm	99.0	98.4	98.8
Oral contact w/ another's genitals- no orgasm	98.0	96.8	97.6
They have oral contact w/ your partner's genitals with orgasm	99.0	98.4	98.8
They have oral contact w/ your partner's genitals- no orgasm	98.0	96.8	97.6
Touching another's genitals with orgasm	98.0	98.4	98.2
Touching another's genitals- no orgasm	97.1	96.8	97.0
Penile-vaginal intercourse with orgasm	100	98.4	99.4
Penile-vaginal intercourse- no orgasm	99.0	98.4	98.8
Penile-anal intercourse with orgasm	99.0	98.4	98.8
Penile-anal intercourse- no orgasm	99.0	98.4	98.8
Masturbating to orgasm in each other's presence	95.0	93.5	94.5
Masturbating to orgasm while in telephone contact with each other	83.3	88.7	85.4
Masturbating to orgasm while in computer contact with each other	78.4	79.0	78.7

Note: $N = 164$ (62 males, 102 females)



$F(5,158) = 1.47, p > .05$. However, they were found to be significantly related to the definition of *sexual partner*, $R^2 = 0.14, F(5, 158) = 4.92, p < .001$. Examination of the zero-order correlations showed that students who had a broader definition of sexual partner were older, had less sexually permissive influences, and less sexual experience ($r = .19, -.19$, and $-.22$, respectively). However, only age and sexual experience were uniquely associated with the breadth of the definition ($sr = .27$ and $sr = -.21$, respectively).

DISCUSSION

We assessed students' definitions of three terms commonly used in sexuality research and sexual health promotion: *having sex*, *sexual partner*, and *unfaithful*. Contrary to our predictions, we did not find significant gender differences. Although, our results are consistent with research that has shown that men's and women's attitudes toward sexuality have been converging (Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Wilson and Medora, 1990), it may be that young men and women hold similar definitions of having sex, sexual partner, and unfaithful. Nonetheless, while our results apply equally to fairly young male and female university students, the extent to which men and women in the general Canadian population agree in their definitions of sexual terms is not known. Future research also needs to examine the opinions of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students as well as students from various socio-cultural communities.

STUDENTS' DEFINITIONS

Consistent with past research, we found that a large majority of students share the view that if a behaviour involves the genitals of **both** partners—whether penile-vaginal or penile-anal—the individuals are having sex (Bogart, Cecil, Wagstaff, Pinkerton, & Abramson, 2000; Pitts & Rahman, 2001; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). In contrast, few students included a behaviour in their definition of having sex if it involves the genitals of only one person. For example, only about one in five students included oral-genital behaviours and about one in ten students included genital fondling in their definition of having sex.

We extended past research by examining students' definitions of the terms *sexual partner* and *unfaithful* behaviour in addition to the term *having sex*. These

results demonstrate the dangers of generalizing results from one sexual definition to another. Students clearly used different criteria when forming their definitions of having sex, sexual partner, and unfaithful behaviour. That is, according to the student definitions, an individual does not have to have had sex, nor to have had an extra-dyadic sexual partner, to be considered to have been unfaithful to the relationship. Similarly, many students included some behaviours in their definitions of unfaithful and sexual partner, but not having sex.

We were not very successful at identifying intrapersonal factors that determine how students define each of these terms; none of gender, age, socialization, erotophobia-erotophilia or sexual experience predicted students' definitions of *having sex* or *unfaithful* behaviour. Age and sexual experience accounted for only 14% of the variance in *sexual partner*. It is possible that students' definitions of having sex are largely contextual. In other words, there appears to be high agreement that if certain behaviours occur, the individuals involved are *having sex* and *being unfaithful*; otherwise they are not.

Apparently, the current sexual script defines having sex narrowly and many behaviours that students might agree are sexual activities are nonetheless not *having sex*. In contrast, students define being unfaithful very broadly with virtually any sexual activity that violates the assumption of sexual and/or emotional exclusivity being viewed as unfaithful behaviour. There was more variability in students' definitions of *sexual partner*, however. Clearly students were considering more than just the behaviours engaged in when defining sexual partner because many students would count someone as their sexual partner even if they did not (by their own definition) have sex with that person. Similarly, the occurrence of orgasm increased the likelihood that students would include specific behaviours in their definitions. It is possible that the emotional component of a sexual partnership, which we did not assess, is as important to the breadth of student's definitions as is the physical sexual acts shared. For example, orgasm may increase feelings of intimacy toward the person and thereby increase the likelihood that a behaviour is counted as sex (Bogart et al, 2000; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). It is



also possible that some students subscribe to a goal-directed view of sex in that if orgasm is not “achieved” then the sexual act has not been “completed”.

Some of the variability in defining sexual partner was explained by student characteristics and past experiences. Specifically, older and less sexually experienced students endorsed broader definitions of sexual partner. It is possible that these students subscribe to a broader definition of sexual partner because they feel self-conscious about their limited sexual experience given their age. By subscribing to a broader definition they can include more people in their list of sexual partners, and thus see themselves as more sexually experienced. In contrast, younger, more sexually experienced students may limit the behaviours they include in their definition of sexual partner as a way of keeping their number of sexual partners down. Future research needs to investigate the match between particular sexual experiences and students’ definitions by using parallel measures. For example, are students who have engaged in fellatio more or less likely to include this behaviour in their definitions?

Another interesting possibility is that students’ attitudes toward sexuality (and hence their definitions of sexuality-related terms) may be changing and, as a result, younger students’ subscribe to a narrower definition of sexual partner. Future research needs to examine whether these types of societal views towards sexuality are changing.

PHONE SEX AND COMPUTER SEX

We extended past research by examining how phone sex and computer sex fit within students’ definitions as both behaviours are increasingly common. Recent research found that more than 40% of young adult university students reported that they had masturbated while in electronic contact with another person (Boies, 2002). Students were largely in agreement that neither phone sex nor computer sex fit their definition of having sex and that the persons who engage in these behaviours are not sexual partners. Nonetheless, the vast majority of our participants view these behaviours as being unfaithful. Thus, physical contact is apparently not necessary to label a behaviour as unfaithful. In fact, the other person does not even have to be in the same room. Alternately, the finding

that most students see any sexual behaviour with another person (including phone sex and computer sex) as unfaithful suggests that it is the sense of betrayal (and accompanying jealousy) that stems from the partner’s choice to spend time and share affection with another person, rather than the nature of the behaviour that is central to their definition of unfaithful behaviour (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988). It is also possible that some students would consider any type of masturbation or sexual fantasies involving other people to be unfaithful; however, we did not examine fantasy behaviours in our study. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that people in relationships who engage in phone sex or computer sex because they do not consider it to be *having sex* or the other person to be a *sexual partner*, can nonetheless expect that their partner will likely view these behaviours to be unfaithful to the relationship.

CONCLUSION

There was no consensus on definitions of the terms *having sex* and *sexual partner* even among our fairly homogeneous sample of Canadian university students. This has important implications for both sex research and sexual health promotion. That is, sex researchers cannot assume that participants subscribe to a particular definition of any sexual term, as participants may have a different definition of the terms having sex or sexual partner than the researcher does. It is also quite likely that the participants will differ amongst themselves in their definition of this term. To improve consistency in responses to questions involving the use of sexuality-related terms, researchers need to operationally define these terms so that the specific *behaviours of interest* are made clear. Failure to do this may decrease the accuracy of research results due to individual variation in definitions. Further, as the definition of *unfaithful* was found to be broader than the definition of *sexual partner*, which in turn was found to be broader than the definition of *having sex*, sex researchers cannot assume that an individual’s definition of one sexual term is necessarily the same as their definition of *other* sexual terms. For example, the response to the question “How many different people have you had sex with?” might be different than to the question “How many sexual partners have you had?” or “How often have you been unfaithful to your partner?”

Similarly, professions providing health care and promoting safer-sex need to be specific with respect to the terms and phrases they use when inquiring about individuals' sexual histories and assessing their potentially at-risk sexual behaviours. To get a clear picture of their risk, it is not enough to simply ask students if they are having sex or how many sexual partners they have had (Stevens-Simon, 2001; Voeller, 1991). Rather, health care providers and safe-sex promoters need to refer to specific sexual behaviours when discussing the risks of contracting sexual transmitted infections with clients (and appropriate safer sex measures). Just telling youth to "use a condom when you have sex" will not meet their complex sexual health information needs as they may misinterpret these instructions as only referring to anal or vaginal intercourse resulting in orgasm. Our results show that most students define having sex as vaginal, and to a lesser extent, anal intercourse, and that they are less likely to include even these activities in their definition of having sex if orgasm does not occur. Similarly, they may not include persons with whom they have engaged in behaviours other than vaginal or anal intercourse (e.g., oral-genital sex) in determining their number of sexual partners even those engaging these behaviours may have put them at risk for a sexually transmitted infection. Our finding that roughly 20% of participants did not count penile-anal intercourse as having sex is of particular concern to efforts to prevent HIV/AIDS and hepatitis considering the increased risk of transmission associated with the behaviour (Voeller, 1991). Media campaigns aimed at reducing the risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections amongst young people also need to be more specific and explicitly refer to the sexual behaviours of interest. The more clear, detailed, and specific we are when describing sexual behaviours and the corresponding safer-sex precautions, the more effective our sexual health promotion efforts with youth are likely to be.

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