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Investigating Sex Positivity: Does Education and Socialization Increase Sexual Satisfaction in Young Adults

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INVESTIGATING SEX POSITIVITY: DOES EDUCATION AND SOCIALIZATION
INCREASE SEXUAL SATISFACTION IN YOUNG ADULTS

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graduation with Distinction

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*Thank you,
Kendall*

Abstract

This study was designed to investigate a proposed association between exposure to sexual education, positive information, and materials, and an individual's level of comfort, sexual satisfaction, and willingness to discuss sexual topics. This study also looked at the influence of various other variables such as gender, sexual orientation, and relationship status.

Undergraduates at a small, private Midwestern college were surveyed with questions regarding the context in which they were exposed to various sexual topics as well as their current levels of sexual satisfaction and willingness to discuss sexual material with a friend, family member, intimate partner, or a stranger. The survey consisted of four different sections with fourteen questions and one table to complete. The first section of the survey related to the participants' demographic information (urban/rural residence, gender, class standing at the university, sexual orientation, and relationship status). The second section was a table where participants were asked to complete regarding various sexual topics they may have been exposed to at some point (contraception, HIV/AIDS, STIs, pregnancy, anatomy, sexual fantasies, sexual positions, and sexual orientations); they then had to match that information with the location of their exposure (parents, friends, middle school, high school, college, religious institution, porn and other). The third section consisted of multiple Likert scales that asked the participants to record their levels of sexual satisfaction, quality of current intimate relationship(s), and comfort discussing sexual material. The fourth section related to questions about abstinence only education. Participants were asked whether or not they have received abstinence education or abstinence-only education at some point in their lives. The final question asked participants when they believe that individuals should start being exposed to sexual topics (before elementary school, elementary school, middle school, high school, after high school). I found no relationship between sexual

education and sexual satisfaction, nor did I find a relationship between sexual education and level of comfort discussing sexual topics. There was no significant relationship when gender was analyzed. However, the data suggests that there were statistically significant associations between sexual orientation and higher levels of comfort discussing sexual topics; such that non-heterosexual individuals reported lower levels of comfort discussing sexual topics with parents/guardians. The data also suggested that individuals not in relationships had lower levels of sexual satisfaction in comparison to individuals in relationships. These results provide analytic purchase when questioning the relationship between exposure to sexual materials, information, education, and sex-positive orientations.

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Introduction

Sex fascinates and intrigues us; it provokes our thoughts and emotions. Sex assists in the construction of our own identity whether we take part in sexual practices or not. It can be argued that sex, in fact, is one of the strongest forces that constructs each of our lives today. However, the conundrum is that even though individuals socialized within Western cultures live and breathe in a sexually saturated environment, they are nevertheless funneled into a sex-negative mindset. Sex negativity can simply be defined as a force that attempts to frighten, derail, or pathologize any topic that surrounds sexuality. The forces of normalization in our contemporary culture exhort us to see the act of sex as something that is essential to a “normal and healthy” life, and yet we are also socialized to avoid any serious conversation in regards to our own sexual lives or see sex as an outlet for pleasure and desire. The privilege to express desire and pleasure is incredibly gendered, such that women as a whole are, to a greater extent, exempted from the benefits of a sex-positive orientation by virtue of the sexual double standard. The culture, however, is very quick to create and set up guidelines for how our sexual lives should manifest. By simply looking at a favorite television show, hearing a favorite song or interacting with friends, family, and even institutions such as schools we can see many examples of sexual scripts played out right in front of our eyes. Even though the topic of sex dominates our world, we as a culture lack the appropriate tools, vocabulary, models, and learned practices needed to express our sexual selves, to experiment with our sexual identities, and to take action for our own sexual autonomy.

To judiciously analyze this conundrum, we must look at the socializing mechanisms through which contemporary American youth are exposed to sexual information to begin to identify potential associations between sexual satisfaction and education. Most citizens are introduced to sex in the context of their experiences in the educational system, and many usually

take part in some structured form of sexual education. “Sex education programs have been prevalent in the United States for decades” (Cornblatt, 2009) and yet there is a distinct absence of a consistent format for presenting the material. Prior to the 1980s many sex education opponents argued that schools should stay out of such private matters like the sexual lives of their students. However, throughout the 1980s a push to legitimize sex education in schools became visible. The sex education movement continues to gain speed and the most recent national polls show that 93 percent of Americans support “sex or sexuality courses being taught” in high school and 84 percent support such instruction in junior high (Future Of Sex Education, 2011).

Sex education in the United States is currently viewed and analyzed predominately through the lens of a binary system comprised of two methods: “comprehensive sex education” and “abstinence only education.” Not only are there “official” social structures in place to educate youth about the nature of sex, but youth may also be exposed to socializing information about sex via television, music, and many other popular cultural outlets. Because of this lack of consistent education, young persons internalize and may approach sexual encounters with myths, fears, and stigmas attached to the sexual nature of their lives. In particular, one could then expect that such encounters with misinformation and negative messaging may influence potential levels of satisfaction within sexual and personal relationships.

My research explores the potential relationship between young adults’ encounters with sexual information (sex positive literature, comprehensive sexual education, abstinence-only education, and sexually explicit material) and individual sexual satisfaction, as well as overall quality of life. To investigate this question, I surveyed Otterbein College students, and measured the relationship between adequate sexual education and sexual satisfaction, willingness to

discuss sexual topics, and overall quality of life in participants. In doing so, I hope to illuminate the vitally important connections between human development, sexual health, and adequate sexual education. Following an overview of the literature and statements of research questions, I present the methodology section, review the survey results, and conclude with an analysis and discussion of the data.

Overview of the Literature

In order to grasp the full scope of sexual education and supremacies of socialization we must navigate through the discourses that intersect with sex negativity; the United State's deeply rooted fear of sex; the laws currently in place that prohibit sexual pleasure (this is typically gendered); the history of sexual education; the "abstinence – only" paradigm; the hierarchies of sexual bodies; the orgasm gap between men and women; the question of what is good sex, and what is bad sex; and finally statically evidence and rationales reported by leading comprehensive education activists. In reviewing relevant existing literature, I began by exploring the cultural, legal, and institutional sources of sex-negativity. Schwartz (2010) argues Americans are deeply socialized into a fear of sex and pleasure, notwithstanding the mass visibility of sex in pop culture, a more general acceptance for sexual practices, and the fact that a majority of the population is somehow sexually active (Schwartz, 2010). Pop culture is full of flashy shows, titillating advertisements, and exuberant sexual scripts that at first glance might otherwise allude to an intensely sex positive culture. However, there is seemingly no room for American young adults to articulate or act upon those desires. While pop culture in the United States perpetuates sexual liberation and individuality; the reality is that there is incongruence between the two worlds of pop stardom and young adulthood. For example: when schools send young girls home

because they are wearing too revealing clothing. This example shows that structures of power care more about repressing sexuality than education; this is also an exercise in power and compliance.

Access and entitlement to pleasure is also an intensely gendered phenomenon, due in no small part to the lingering sexual double standard. While it is fair to argue that young people, in general, are limited in terms of their allowance to trespass into sexual spheres; young women are especially policed for their sexual behavior or desire for pleasure. As recent as 2010, there have been laws in place that prohibit the use of instruments used to create sexual pleasure.

“Legislators in the states of Alabama, Georgia, Texas, Mississippi, Arkansas and Kansas have put laws into action that claim that vibrators are dangerous to American morality” (Schwartz, 2010). The existence of legal prohibition against female devices intended for auto-erotic stimulation, speaks to a broader cultural fear of not only unpartnered sex, but also sex that occurs outside of the bonds of marriage—whether that comes in the form of a “hook up,” or with the use of a sexual toy to produce pleasure. By the 1960s, young adults became even more sexually liberated, with the rise of feminism, widespread availability of birth control and growth of sex-integrated college party events. Today, sexual behavior outside of traditional committed romantic pair bonds has become increasingly typical and socially acceptable, however still stigmatized (Bogle, 2008).

Even when pleasure is taken out of the equation, American culture generally views non-procreative sex as a threat to the social order. The Texas Education Code, written by legislators, lists directives with regard to sex education. One provision explicitly states that in the classroom, abstinence must be given more attention than any other approach; another requires that it must be presented as the only method 100 percent effective at preventing pregnancy, STDs, HIV/AIDS, and the “emotional trauma” associated with adolescent sexual activity (Vine, 2008). The policy

is immensely problematic since it negates any mandate to teach anything other than abstinence-only education. The potential for pleasure cannot materialize in these classrooms because the conversations centralize around sex as function of procreation instead of the wide range of achievable expressions. If conversations regarding sexual practices and engagement were silenced then other non-normative identities would be made to be nonexistent. Abstinence only education promotes waiting till marriage before engaging in coitus. This ideology reinforces the heteronormative paradigms and silences LGBTQ relationships.

It is also important to note the benefits of adequate sexual education when looking at the hook-up culture in the contemporary U.S. through the lenses of gender and pleasure. In particular, the orgasm gap between men and women within the hook up scene is such that men double women in the number of orgasms achieved in the first hook up. This statistic seems alarming and could be dismissed as attributable to some kind of biological phenomena that suggests that women value love, faithfulness and lifelong commitment more than men, rendering all preconditions for female pleasure (Meier et. al, 2009). However, a more powerful alternative sociological explanation might grapple seriously with the patriarchal influences on sexual education and pop culture. Unstigmatized female pleasure is not readily visible in movies, whereas male pleasure is ever-present. Acts of oral sex performed by women on men are often popularized and glorified.

Indeed, while sex education as whole normally does not address the many facets of oral sex, it does pay a lot of attention to male erection and the male orgasm. Armstrong et. al (2010) report “men receive oral sex roughly 80 percent of the time when heterosexual sexual encounters occur, while women receive it 46 percent of the time heterosexual sexual encounters occur” (Armstrong, 2010). What such findings may suggest is that young men are either not educated on

female pleasure, or that pleasuring a female partner is not part of the social script for acceptable male sexual behavior, and is perhaps only a ‘bonus’ if a female orgasm occurs. Overall, female pleasure and sexual satisfaction is unceremoniously ignored in sexual education programs; under-education and ignorance are the result. Unfortunately, American youth are undereducated on pleasure in general, and pleasure is strictly policed in contemporary American culture. The only type of pleasurable sex that is represented as permissible is sex that leads to reproduction—though this is exclusively within the context of marriage. As a result, such practices produce a plethora of complications for individuals with identified sexual orientations that are denied the right to marry, as well as for others who would uncouple the experience of sexual pleasure from the restrictive cultural mandate for marriage as a precondition for sexual contact.

Within a sex negative society, sexual hierarchies are created to draw and maintain an imaginary line between “good” sex and “bad” sex (Rubin, 1984). Again, only certain types of pleasure-centered sexual acts are widely accepted by our culture, which in turn creates a type of ranking system that labels some acts as acceptable and others as deviant. If we as a culture condemn sexual practices because they challenge “traditional” expectations for sex, then sex becomes a caged animal trapped by its own claws. Throughout sexual education discourses, conversations regarding diversity in sexual practices are limited and highly saturated with judgmental language due to the aforementioned hierarchy in practices.

The Future of Sex Education (FoSE) project was established in 2007 and aimed “to create a national dialogue about the future of sex education and to promote the institutionalization of comprehensive sexuality education in public schools” (Future of Sex Education, 2011). The creators of FoSE consisted of youth advocates and educators that established the National Sexuality Education Standards for Kindergarten through twelfth grade. The rationale to have

sexual education in schools is centered on premise that the United States is facing a sexual crisis among its youth. The US has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the industrialized world. Each year in the US more than 750,000 young women get pregnant and 80 percent of them are unintended. FoSE also released statements regarding sexually transmitted infections:

Furthermore, while young people in the US ages 15-25 only make up one-quarter of the sexually active population, they contract about of the of the 19 million sexually transmitted diseases annually. This equates to one in four sexually active teenagers contracting a sexually transmitted disease each year. And young people ages 13-29 account for about one-third of the estimated 50,000 new HIV infections each year, the largest share of any age group. (Future of Sex Education, 2011).

FoSE, like many other comprehensive sex education programs, addresses mainly the dangers of sex and violence that may come with intimate relationships. While these issues are relevant and incredibly valuable, they stigmatize sex and sexual acts in a negative way that shifts sex from a healthy pleasurable and satisfying experience to one that deserves caution. There is even a special note in the document put out by FOSE that labels one of the “core concepts” as health promotion and disease prevention.

Sexual conversations can stretch far beyond the realms of disease prevention and healthy living, and interestingly enough a recent study suggests that parents in the United States want schools to teach more topics regarding sex (Rabin, 2000). Research in the 2000’s done by Rabin showed that more and more parents are starting to advocate for more educational topics and an expansion of sex education in the United States. Parents for the most part seem to agree that topics like contraception and HIV/AIDs should still be covered, but they also believe training

should extend beyond these basics. Out of all of the parents surveyed 94 percent thought that education programs should include conversations that centered on “the pressure to have sex,” 94 percent thought the emotional consequences of becoming sexually active should be addressed, 88 percent wanted information on how to talk about sex with a partner included, 85 percent desired information on condom use, 84 percent wanted to see birth control covered, 79 percent desired content on abortion, and finally 76 percent wanted to see coverage of sexual orientations (Rabin, 2000). However, while this list is somewhat progressive since it includes topics that address how to talk about sex with a partner, it still focuses on sex as a subject of danger requiring caution. Other than the category of sexual orientation, all additional desired topics focus on pregnancy, prevention, or the pressures and consequences of deciding to be sexually active.

Nearly ten years after the above cited study, Ekstrand et al (2011) investigated to see if young women were satisfied with sexual education system. The results showed that of the women who received some type of sexual education, subjects believed that the topics of assault, sexual harassment, pornography, abortion, emergency contraception, fertility and pregnancy were insufficiently covered (Ekstrand, 2011). Even though sexual satisfaction is not the dependent variable analyzed, it is important to recognize that satisfaction with sexual education in general is affected by the sex-negative assumptions that permeate sexual education system.

Ultimately, the choice to be sexually active has become saturated by fear and myths about what it means to engage in a sexual encounter with another person or persons. ‘Traditional values’ fill our brains, such as the cultural imperative to marry, greater male entitlement to pleasure, the sexual double standard, the privileging of procreative purposes, and the normative centering of the nuclear family. These heteronormative ideologies, which in the

absence of alternative cultural templates and schemas, construct our reality, and predetermines the content and quality of our sexual encounters, and by extension, our sexual selves. While I do not intend to make a critique of individuals for taking part in normative sexual acts and “acceptable behaviors;” however it is a critique of the notion that those normative and acceptable acts are the only option for individuals to work within.

Conversations and programs that focus on abstinence-only education can also be problematic. These types of programs focus on promoting abstaining from all sexual acts over any other type of behavior, and as such, information regarding contraception and practical methods for preventing STI contraction are not included. Abstinence-only intervention is one of the primary ideological sources that provide cultural legitimacy for many religious organizations. These organizations use ancient and literally interpreted scripts to translate how our contemporary sexual lives should be conducted. The aim here is not to launch a discussion on religiosity and whether or not it positively or negatively associates with sexual satisfaction; but instead to provide an analysis regarding what research suggests about abstinence-only education. Jemmott III (2010) defined each of these categories as follows: 1) abstinence-only intervention encouraged abstinence in order to eliminate risk of pregnancy and STIs; 2) safer sex-only intervention encouraged condom use in order to eliminate risk of pregnancy and STIs; 3) comprehensive interventions combined abstinence-only and safer-sex interventions in order to eliminate risk of pregnancy and STIs; 4) Health-promotion control intervention focused on behaviors associated with heart disease. The results found that individuals taking part in abstinence-only intervention programs had lower levels of sexual behavior than the individuals in the safer sex-only intervention, comprehensive intervention, and the health promotion control intervention (Jemmott III, 2010). Problematically, once again there is an emphasis on dissuading

individuals from engaging in sexual activities. To see how both sexual education programs and abstinence only programs operationalize “success” by recording the number of sexual encounters an individual has is an important factor.

Walcott et al (2011) argued that adolescence is a high-risk period for sexual risk-taking behaviors such as early sexual activity (Walcott, 2011). However, an issue arises when that same rationale is used to justify stigmatizing anyone who takes part in non-normative, consensual sexual practices whether that be masturbation, premarital sex, gay sex, non-monogamous sex, queer sex, and many others. In a sex-negative society, sexual acts are judged based on how they compare to normative acts, where instead I argue all consensual acts should be evaluated with a standard that does not foster such hierarchies, in order to avoid the negative consequences of stigma and shame.

Sexual acts should instead be judged based on how partners treat one another during whatever activity goes on, the level of reciprocity and consideration, the absence of coercion, and the quality of pleasure provided to and by all parties that take place in the encounter (Rubin, 1984). These criteria listed by may appear quite benign, but they are actually incredibly radical for a sex-negative society. How can we as a culture expect to foster mutual sexual respect when the playing fields between genders are unbalanced and the discourses of pleasure are ignored? When sex is not seen or discussed from the perspective of pleasure, we instead see it strictly from a biological standpoint and aim only for procreative sex, stigmatizing all other forms of sexual expression.

A more global perspective reveals that there are progressive and innovative programs and policies in place that disrupt the assumption that sex-negativity is normative or inevitable. Germany has had a form of sex education in their public school curriculum since the 1970s and

the teachers are required to teach more than simply biological and anatomical topics regarding sex. The research done to analyze the European sexual education system presents a potential correlation between educating younger children about sex and the relationship it has to healthier sex lives later in life. This can be visibly observed by looking at the Netherlands (a nation enjoying one of the lowest rates of teen pregnancy in the world), which has mandated sex education as compulsory in primary and secondary schools as of 2012 (Cosslett, 2014).

One could argue that varying social and political norms are at work when examining a cross cultural comparison between two countries like the United States and the Netherlands, but it is worth noting that sex education may be a key factor when determining how sexually satisfied and liberated a culture may or may not be. The type of sex education programs that manifest in a given culture might very well be better explained by considering the binary between sex negative and sex positive societies. D.J. Williams et al (2013) theorizes what it means to be a sex positive society here:

From a sex-positive approach, talking about sex is not substantially different from talking about any other topic. When sex is a taboo topic or when it is talked about in whispers or hushed tones (signs of sex negativity), it severely restricts the range of human diversity generally and contributes to marginalization and othering. Regarding sexuality, a fundamental question for social work and other helping professions is: How can society prevent and resolve substantial social problems involving sexuality when sex cannot be discussed openly, honestly, and safely in the first place? (Williams, 2013).

When cultures as a whole cannot move beyond sex-negative institutional messages and the practice of strict policing of sexuality, the full potential for citizens' sexual satisfaction may be compromised. Sex-negative cultures encourage severe self-discipline and avoidance of sexual acts, as well as promoting an environment for prejudice associated with various sexual practices. Sex-positive cultures promise greater emphasis on the pleasurable and non-procreative aspects of sex (Glickman, 2000).

In returning to the central, guiding question of “why is everyone afraid of sex,” the answer is now clear— we currently live in a sex-negative society. Even though American culture is saturated in sex and many people take part in sexual activities, there is still a deep-rooted and pervasive cultural fear.

From here, it is worthwhile to consider whether sex negative societies may encourage citizens to seek sexual satisfaction. Sexual satisfaction may indirectly influence the overall quality of life for people across the world. By using that single point alone it would make sense that sexual liberation and sexual freedom would undoubtedly benefit any individuals who chooses to engage or take part in a sexual practice. If a culture does not support such behaviors, or educates its citizens through a sex negative framework, then the possibility of truly finding sexual satisfaction and pleasure may be preempted.

“The realm of sexuality has created its own form of politics, inequalities, and modes of oppression” (Rubin, 1984), but sexuality also has the potential to be freeing, empowering and life changing—whether that be personally or within an intimate relationship. Sex education is a tremendously powerful force that has the ability to construct reality for so many lives and hopefully the climate can change more towards a sex positive approach.

This overview of the literature sketches underlying ideological tensions regarding sexual education, sexual satisfaction, general well-being, and the role of culture and social institutions in informing the aforementioned variables. My research hopes to address the relationship between the variables identified as salient in the literature: gender, exposure to sexual topics, sexual orientation, relationship status, and others to show an intricate link between sex education and sexual satisfaction. I hypothesize that individuals that received adequate sexual education will report higher levels of sexual satisfaction as compared to the individuals who received inadequate sex education. I also hypothesize that individuals who received adequate sex education will be more willing to discuss sexual material than individuals that received inadequate sex education.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The questions addressed are as followed: 1) Does sexual education and exposure to sexual material relate to sexual satisfaction? 2) Does sexual education and exposure to sexual material relate to levels of comfort discussing sexual topics with others? 3) Do any other variables relate to sexual satisfaction or comfort discussing sexual topics with others (gender, relationship status, and sexual orientation)? These questions are important because they elucidate holes in the contemporary sexual education system as well as question the sex negative systemic structure that consumes the United States. Ultimately, the hole in this discourse is that there remains no substantive research on the sexual lives of young adults in relation to sex positivity. Most research looks at the dangers of sex and the statistics on growing sexually transmitted infections. My hypotheses that will be tested are as followed: 1) individuals with adequate sexual education will report higher levels of sexual satisfaction than individuals with inadequate sexual

education; and 2) individuals with adequate sexual education will report higher levels of comfort discussing sexual topics with others than individuals with inadequate sexual education.

Methodology

Participants

There were a total of 68 students (47 females; 21 males) that took part in this study. All of the students who participated in this study were enrolled in four different integrative studies (general education) courses at a small liberal arts college located in the Midwestern part of the United States. The choice to use integrative studies courses was motivated by my hope to obtain a cross-section of various sexual exposures among my participants. Integrative studies courses attract a wide variety of students in various years, majoring in different disciplines, and therefore presumably provided a semi-representative sample. The project was not designed using random sampling, and therefore does not facilitate generalizable statements about college students in the contemporary United States. The results do, however, provide a point of entry for understanding some of the potential sources of sexual satisfaction and comfort discussing sexual topics for college students at small, Midwestern, liberal arts institutions.

The choice to survey college students derives from the subject I am researching. Sexual satisfaction and sex negativity is incredibly relevant and directly applicable to college students due to their sexually saturated culture. Participants in this study were not forced or required to answer any question on the survey and their grades for their respective courses were not impacted based on their participation on the survey.

Design

One questionnaire was taken online by the participants. The survey consisted of four different sections with fourteen questions and one table to fill out. The first section asked

participants to report demographic information (geographical residence, gender, year in college, sexual orientation and relationship status) (see Appendix B). The second section is a table that the participants were required to fill out regarding exposure to various sexual topics (contraception, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, anatomy of sex organs, sexual fantasizes, sexual positions, and sexual orientations) that they may or may not have encountered in a variety of contexts/institutional locations (parents, friends/romantic or sexual partner, elementary or middle school, high school, college, religious institution, pornography and other) (see Appendix C). The third section consisted of multiple Likert scales that asked the participants to record their levels of sexual satisfaction, and overall life satisfaction. There were also four questions that asked participants to rank their levels of comfort when talking about sexual topics with different groups of people (a parent/guardian(s), a romantic partner(s), a friend(s), and a stranger(s)). On each of these Likert scales participants selected their score of satisfaction or comfort based on a scale from one to seven a (one being either extremely unsatisfied or extremely uncomfortable, and seven being extremely satisfied or extremely comfortable) (see Appendix D). The fourth and final section related to questions about abstinence only education. Participants were asked whether or not they have received abstinence education or abstinence-only education at some point in their lives. The final question asked participants when they believe that individuals should start being exposed to sexual topics (before elementary school, elementary school, middle school, high school, after high school) (see Appendix E).

Results

In order to analyze the results I separated participants into two different categories, one being “adequate sexual education” and the other being “inadequate sexual education.”

Participants were placed into the “adequate sexual education” group if they received education/exposure regarding abstinence, contraception, HIV/AIDs, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), pregnancy, anatomy and physiology of the sex organs and at least one or more of the following: sexual fantasies, sexual positions or sexual orientations in high school.

Participants were placed into the “inadequate” group if they lacked one of the main six topics listed above, or lacked all of the three additional topics. I looked solely at the high school variable since that is the typical time period where sexual education takes place in young adulthood. The choice to only look at the high school variable derived from my assumption that high school is the central location where sexual education and exposure to sexual material happens. Due to the heightened sexual exposures during high school I had guessed that there would be more illuminating results that differentiated “adequate” and “inadequate” sexually education groups.

Hypothesis One: Sex Education & Satisfaction (Figure 1)

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the means of sexual satisfaction between participants placed into the adequate and inadequate sexual education group.

Participants in the adequate sexual education group ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.32$) rated themselves as having a slightly higher levels of sexual satisfaction than the participants in the inadequate sexual education group ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.84$), $t(62) = 1.11$, $p > .05$. The findings were insignificant and rejected my hypothesis that individuals with adequate sexual education would report higher levels of sexual satisfaction than individuals with inadequate sexual education.

Relationship Status & Sexual Satisfaction (Figure 2)

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the means of sexual satisfaction between participants who identified as single and participants who identified as casually dating,

committed relationship, or married. Participants who identified as single ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.44$) rated themselves as having a lower levels of sexual satisfaction than the participants who identified as casually dating, committed relationship, or married ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 1.21$), $t(62) = 6.03$, $p < .001$

Gender & Sexual Satisfaction (Figure 3)

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the means of sexual satisfaction between participants who identified as male and participants who identified as female.

Participants who identified as male ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.35$) rated themselves as having slightly lower levels of sexual satisfaction than the participants who identified as female ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.80$), $t(62) = -.38$, $p > 0.05$.

Sexual Satisfaction & Life Satisfaction (Figure 4)

The mean level of sexual satisfaction reported by participants was 4.70 ($SD = 1.67$). The mean level of overall life satisfaction was 5.13 ($SD = 1.43$). These variables were significantly positively correlated $r(62) = .46$, $p < .001$.

Hypothesis Two: Sex Education & Comfort (Figure 5)

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the means of overall comfort talking about sexual topics with various people between participants placed into the adequate and inadequate sexual education group. Participants in the adequate sexual education group ($M = 19.00$, $SD = 4.71$) rated themselves as having slightly higher levels of comfort talking about sexual topics with various people than the participants in the inadequate sexual education group ($M = 18.44$, $SD = 4.19$), $t(64) = 0.51$, $p > .05$. The findings were insignificant and rejected my hypothesis that individuals with adequate sexual education would report higher levels of comfort talking about sex with various people than individuals with inadequate sexual education.

Sexual Orientation & Comfort (Figure 6)

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the means of level of comfort discussing sexual topics with a parent/guardian between participants who identified as heterosexual and participants who identified as gay, lesbian, asexual, pansexual, or other. Participants who identified as heterosexual ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 2.07$) rated themselves as having a higher levels of comfort discussing sexual material with a parent/guardian than the participants who identified as gay, lesbian, asexual, pansexual, or other ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.67$), $t(64) = -2.27$, $p < .05$.

Comfort Scale (Figure 7)

The mean level of comfort when talking about sexual topics with a parent/guardian was 3.94. The mean level of comfort when talking about sexual topics with a romantic/sexual partner was 5.90. The mean level of comfort when talking about sexual topics with a close friend was 5.96. The mean level of comfort when talking about sexual topics with a stranger was 2.81. The mean comfort score for all levels of comfort when talking about sexual topic was 18.72.

Discussion*Hypothesis One: Sex Education & Satisfaction*

I proposed the hypothesis that individuals with adequate sexual education would report higher level of sexual satisfaction than individuals with inadequate sexual education. As the results delineated, there seemed to be no significant disparity between the individuals that I categorized into adequate sexual education and the individuals that I categorized into inadequate sexual education. While this may reject my hypothesis, it may be an illuminating finding that suggests areas for future research. Before shedding light onto the future, I would like to acknowledge some of the issues and complexities that may have resulted in the null hypothesis.

Since the hypothesis was rejected, this could either mean that my definition of adequate sexual education was problematic and did not capture the full story I was trying to delineate, or that there may have been third variables issues that I had not considered.

The lack of significant findings in relation to sexual satisfaction and education could be critiqued at the level of how I operationalized my variables. By defining “Adequate sexual education” as anyone who received education/exposure regarding abstinence, contraception, HIV/AIDs, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), pregnancy, anatomy and physiology of the sex organs and at least one or more of the following: sexual fantasies, sexual positions or sexual orientations in high school potentially complicated and potentially did not capture the full scope that I had hoped for. If we look solely at the “bonus” sexual education topics (sexual fantasies, sexual positions, and sexual orientations); is it possible that by being educated or exposed to only one of these topics could truly increase the entire playing field that is human sexuality and pleasure? When defining the variables, I had hope to access sex positive thoughts and exposures in the participants’ life however; due to the nature of my data collection I may have not only captured sex positive thoughts and exposures, but also negative ones.

The inevitable fact is that one could have been exposed to negative and even inaccurate information regarding any of the education topics, and still have been coded “adequate” by the instrument design. For example: two different people could have selected that they learned about sexual orientations in during their high school education; however, one of them could have learned that there are diverse sexual orientations that are so often silenced and ignored by mainstream representation. While the second person could have learned that sexual orientations, outside of heterosexual identities, are dangerous and should be condemned. As seen here, both people would have selected the cross-section in the survey between sexual orientations and high

school, which by my definition would make them equals on the adequate chart. This could be an illuminating discovery and site for future research. What kind of survey could be created to capture sex positive thoughts and relationships? Would an alternative methodology be more illuminative? Is it even possible to separate sex positive and sex negative thoughts since each person's social location constructs different meanings surrounding sex? These are directions for future inquiry.

The results showed that individuals with adequate education did not report significantly higher levels of sexual satisfaction. While this was not my prediction, the results do provide insight into how we are socialized into this sexual culture. The fact that there was no disparity in respect to sexual satisfaction between adequate and inadequate sexual education shows that what we are exposed to may not relate to how we interact with our own discourses of pleasure. Arguably, this speaks directly to the population I surveyed. As a small liberal arts college, the students possess a form of class privilege in the sense that they have more access to experiment sexually than bodies that do not possess that privilege. Individuals from class marginal locations generally move into the expectations for contemporary "adult" life (and therefore the expectations for committed relationships) sooner in the life course, and in more 'conventional' fashion (Lareau, 2003). The "hook up" college culture can be linked back to economic and class status since the white, heterosexual, and upper class body predominates in liberal arts classrooms. This concentration of privileged bodies in college might in fact create a sexual culture that deviates from sex shaming and negativity for otherwise stigmatized, more experimental practices. I plan to investigate and explore multiple variables like relationship status, life satisfaction, and gender to see if there are any interconnections with these themes.

Relationship Status & Sexual Satisfaction

One of the conflicting variables that may have interacted with the sexual satisfaction result was whether or not the participants identified themselves as in a relationship or not. The results showed that participants that identified as “single” reported significantly lower levels of sexual satisfaction than any other participant. This complicates the conversation on sexual education since now I have navigated a new path that shows that what young people learn about sex or what sexual material they are exposed to may not be a primary, unadulterated influence or relate directly to their sexual pleasures with a unilinear causal relationship. This dimension of my findings may deviate from the orientation of my original hypotheses about sexual education, however it does correspond with sex negativity and the socialization of sexual relationships.

We are socialized to see sexual pleasure and sexual exploration as a coupled interaction, meaning that in order to achieve sexual pleasure or explore the sexual world there must be another person with. I speculate that we as a culture stigmatize solitary sexual practices and limit the amount of pleasure a person can achieve by “going it alone.” I also speculate that part of the reason that the single people reported lower levels of sexual satisfaction is due to that very paradigm. The internalization of how much sexual pleasure you believe you can achieve (or are entitled to achieve) may override the fact that you are in fact very pleased. Also, the notion that sexual pleasure means taking part in a sexual act with someone else is not always the case. The act of not having sex or taking part in any sexual encounter can be a source of sexual satisfaction. Not participating in sexual acts can be sexually satisfying.

Gender & Sexual Satisfaction

When discussing entitlement to pleasure, gender is an important variable to unpack. The orgasm gap between men and women makes the conversation on sexual satisfaction highly

gendered. Gender is a key variable that could have been a factor influencing the results. By reviewing the literature on this topic, one could hypothesize that women would report lower levels of sexual satisfaction as compared to men. However, the results showed the exact opposite. While the average level of sexual satisfaction was practically the same for both men and women; women actually held a slight higher level. In order to interpret the meaning of this result, we must consider the demographic and culture of the university where I did my research, as well as the impact of contemporary American culture as a whole.

The university where I obtained my data is predominately female (close to 70 percent). While the population size is far from generalizable to the larger culture, I would like to speculate that a similar occurrence is taking place across the landscape of higher education. Imbalanced gender ratios provide fodder for imbalances in sexual power between the genders. I question whether or not the results tell an accurate story in terms of sexual satisfaction. It is very possible that women report high levels of sexual satisfaction or orgasm levels even when they are not experiencing the same levels of frequency as similarly situated men. I argue that most women do not expect to orgasm every time they engage in sexual acts designated for arousal. This notion that women are harder to please sexually is a myth that has become internalized by men and women alike. So if we reflect on the data, it is plausible to say that the women reporting high levels of sexual satisfaction may be reporting their subjective understanding of frequency as informed by broader messages in the dominant culture that suggest women are not entitled to levels of sexual pleasure on par with men's. In other words, low levels of orgasm frequency for female subjects may appear in the data as high reported levels of satisfaction, due to internalized messages about a lack of entitlement to pleasure (and in particular, pleasure that occurs outside of the context of a committed relationship). Thus, many young women may be under the

impression that their sexual satisfaction is quite high, and even stellar, when in fact they are only basing that off the misguided belief that marginal and/or mediocre levels of sexual satisfaction are acceptable and to be expected. Additionally problematic is that such interpretations must be balanced with the imperative of according agency to research subjects.

Sexual Satisfaction & Life Satisfaction

The correlation between the two variables sexual satisfaction and life satisfaction is a complex conundrum. It is fascinating that the link between sexual satisfaction and life satisfaction exists, however I do not plan to make an attempt to argue that one influences the other: whether sexual satisfaction impacts life satisfaction or if life satisfaction impacts sexual satisfaction. Also relevant is a discussion of the relationship between our sexual world and our identities.

The data suggests that there is a correlation between the two variables sexual satisfaction and life satisfaction, however I wonder if that correlation is due to the highly sexually saturated culture we are socialized in. Sex consumes and constructs most institutions that we fluidly travel through (media, fashion, education, politics, economics, etc.) and by mere exposure I would like to consider the possibility that our personhood is tied to our sexual lives. Contemporary U.S. culture is obsessed with naming and, more importantly, distinguishing sexual identities from one another. The sheer fact that individuals who do not possess sexual desires (asexual individuals) must have a sexual identity proves that sex controls and labels our lives. Reflecting back on the data, if individuals fit into privileged sexual lives then that may relate to their overall life satisfaction simply because they have more access to happiness via adopting a social location associated with privilege. The demographics of the participants in my study are predominately of privileged sexual identities (heterosexual), which may have influenced satisfaction scores.

Hypothesis Two: Sex Education & Comfort

I proposed the hypothesis that individuals with adequate sexual education would report higher levels of comfort discussing sexual topics as compared to individuals who had inadequate sexual education. Similarly to the results from hypothesis one, the results showed that individuals in the adequate sexual education category reported similar levels of comfort discussing sexual topics as individuals in the inadequate sexual education category. The highest score a participant could have received on the comfort scale was a 28. The data shows that individuals in the adequate sexual education category scored on average a 19, and individuals in the inadequate category scored on average an 18.44. This finding says something especially illuminating about how people on this campus interact with sexual discourses when interacting with one another. It would appear that regardless to sexual exposure or education, people still have difficulty verbalizing thoughts related to sex or sexuality. In a sex positive culture I would expect to see comfort scores much closer to 28, as well as no variation among whom a person is talking to (parent/guardian(s), sexual/romantic partner(s), friend(s), stranger(s)).

Aside from education, I was curious as whether or not additional factors associated with my subjects' social location and identity may relate to comfort discussing sexual topics. The original null hypothesis provides insight into another significant facet of the small liberal arts university where I did my research. Privileged heterosexual bodies, which are overwhelmingly visible on the campus (and the dominant culture), are allowed access to more than just sexual exploration, but also to the social scripts that promote sexual communication. It is this third variable that opens the door to the identities that have been silenced by heteronormative sex.

Sexual Orientation & Comfort

The campus where I did my research often promotes inclusion and diversity among its students whether that is race related or sexual orientation related. However, the campus itself is far from diverse; racially it is made up of almost 80 percent of white individuals and dominated by individuals who identify as heterosexual. My dataset was comprised of nearly 20 percent of individuals who identified as non-heterosexual, which, is not generalizable to the campus at large due to the fact that my data was not collected through random selection. Heterosexuality is not only the most widely identified sexual orientation, but also the most influential in terms of social constructs. As Ahmed (2014) relates, “There is no doubt that heterosexual happiness is overrepresented in public culture, and that heterosexual love becomes about the possibility of a happy ending; about what life is aimed towards.” Other outcomes are thereby defined as non-normative, problematic, and are thusly stigmatized.

Heteronormativity is the basis for how so many bodies, including non-heterosexual bodies, live out their sexual scripts. If heterosexual sex is seen as the normative practice, then discussions about sex would center on those paradigms. Non-heterosexual individuals would thus be displaced and silenced from the sexual world. By ignoring the notion that non-heterosexual sex scripts exist, we then arguably make the claim that non-heterosexual bodies do not exist. As shown by the data in my research; when the comfort scale is broken down into only the parent/guardian variable we see that non-heterosexual individuals feel significantly less comfortable talking about sexual topics with their parents or guardians. When heteronormative sexual scripts are accepted as the only sexual script we are seemingly muting healthy dialogues between bodies that may or may not take part in those practices.

Comfort Scale

While the mean comfort score for adequate and inadequate sexual education categories was very similar, there was a clear hierarchy of comfort when all four comfort scenarios were broken up. Participants felt the most comfortable talking about sexual topics with close friend followed by their romantic partner. Coming in at third was the level of comfort when talking to parents and bringing up the rear was talking to strangers about sexual topics. When Gayle Rubin argues that in sex negative societies sexual hierarchies are established (Rubin, 1989) it is easy to observe this phenomenon in most of our lives. Branching out from Rubin's argument, it would not be that large of a leap to make the claim that there are sexual hierarchies that influence our ability to verbalize and openly discuss sexual topics. Arguably, in a sex positive culture there would be no disparity between who participants felt for comfortable talking about sexual topics with because sex would be just another outlet for pleasure.

Conclusion

Limitations

Throughout the duration of this research I ran into a few limitations that are relevant for discussion. The first set of limitations applies to the population of the university where I did my research, and the second set of limitations are related to the method I used to collect the data.

The university when I did my research is a small liberal arts college that is largely composed of white, heterosexual, upper class students who are not necessarily generalizable to the larger culture. The class privilege that a lot of the students have has ramifications reflected in the data. Since I did not randomly select students, I am unable to make very broad generalizing statements and can only speculate on various ideas, which consequently means this research lacks strong external validity.

Secondly, the method I used to gather my data was entirely quantitative, which I find deeply limiting. Since I was unable to engage in a conversation about sexual topics with participants I am unsure as to whether or not their exposures to the various sexual education standards I created were positive or negative. The implications of these findings could have altered and drastically changed the results I have presented in this thesis. Again, an avenue for promising future research would include the collection of qualitative, open-ended data.

Final Thoughts

Sex fascinates and intrigues us; it provokes our thoughts and emotions. Sex assists in the construction of our own identity whether we take part in sexual practices or not. It can be argued that sex, in fact, is one of the strongest forces that constructs each of our lives today. However, the conundrum is that even though individuals socialized within Western cultures live and breathe in a sexually saturated environment, they are nevertheless funneled into a sex-negative mindset.

Looking at sexuality and discourses of pleasure through the lenses of sex negativity and sex positivity, I have found important elements missing from the existing literature. Conversations on the success rate of sexual education programs are overwhelmingly measured on the basis of STI and unwanted pregnancy prevention, rather than about the personal satisfaction of the individuals, which problematically defines and reinscribes sex and sexual pleasure as risky and dangerous (Fields, 2008). Popular research in the area of sexual education and socialization in the United States manifests a deeply rooted fear of sex; the laws currently in place that prohibit sexual pleasure; the history of sexual education; the “abstinence – only” paradigm; the hierarchies of sexual bodies; the orgasm gap between men and women; the question of what is good sex, and what is bad sex; and finally statically evidence and rationales

reported by leading comprehensive education activists attest to this reality. These intersecting paradigms lay the groundwork for the research at hand.

I found that the participants in my research that had adequate sexual education were not significantly more sexually satisfied or significantly more comfortable talking openly about sexual topics with others than participants with inadequate sexual education. However, by looking into supplementary variables I have shown interesting findings centered at the intersections of gender and satisfaction; relationship status and satisfaction; and sexual orientation and comfort. These findings suggest that there is still a colossal amount of research to be done in the fields of sexuality and sexual education. The questions I intend to look at in future research are as follows: 1) due to the heteronormative nature of sexual education, do non-heterosexual individuals feel less sexually satisfied or silenced by these institutions; 2) is there a true correlation between sexual satisfaction and overall life satisfaction; and if so, what has constructed this link; 3) is it possible for the United States to reform into a more sex positive culture; and lastly, 4) would a sex positive culture normalize and centralize the essentialist notions around sex; and would that silence or pathologize non-sexual identities?

Sex research needs to continue pushing boundaries and questioning institutions that control and localize power, discipline bodies and identities, and dictate access and entitlement to pleasure. Through this research and future research to come, I hope to add to the collection of data on sexual lives and how bodies interact in various spaces. Young adulthood is a complex and liminal state between two worlds, and adding shame and fear to bodily explorations that can be a source of pleasure seems to be an injustice to not only young bodies, but to all bodies. Sex can be a source of erotic pleasure and/or deepest intimacy, so why would we want to barricade ourselves behind the walls that could liberate and potentially save our lives?

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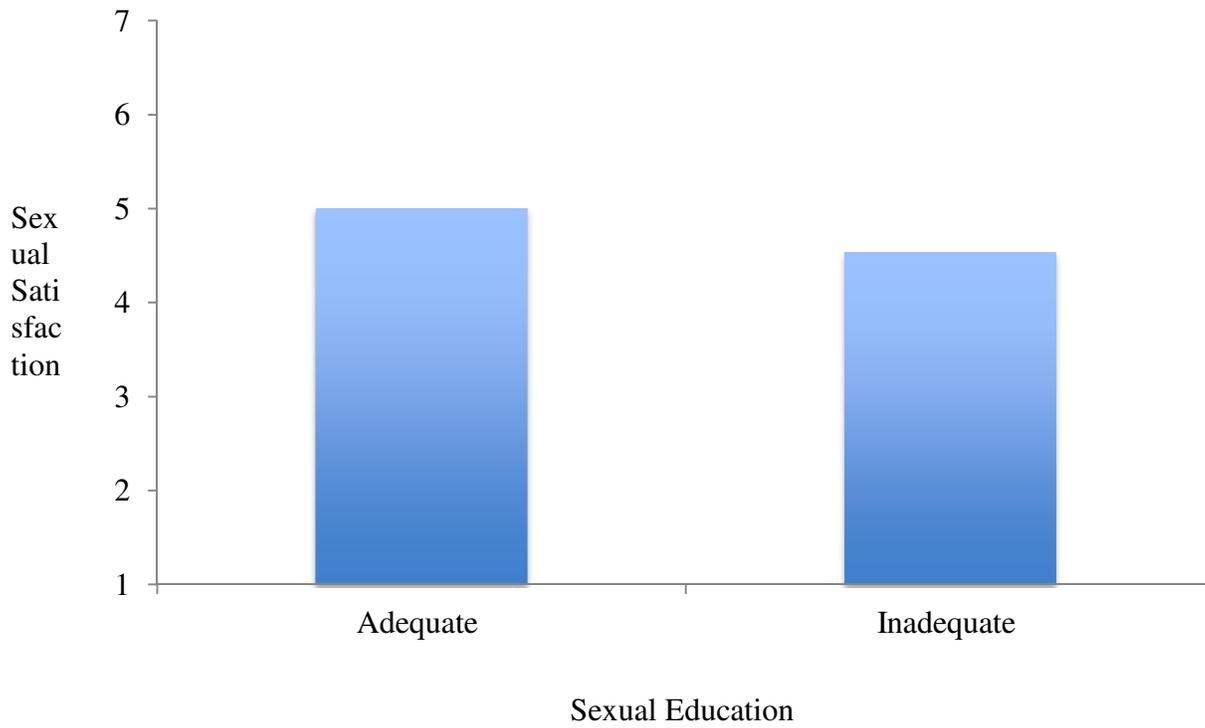
Figures

Figure 1. Average sexual satisfaction as a function of adequate and inadequate sexual education (Adequate N = 27; Inadequate N = 41).

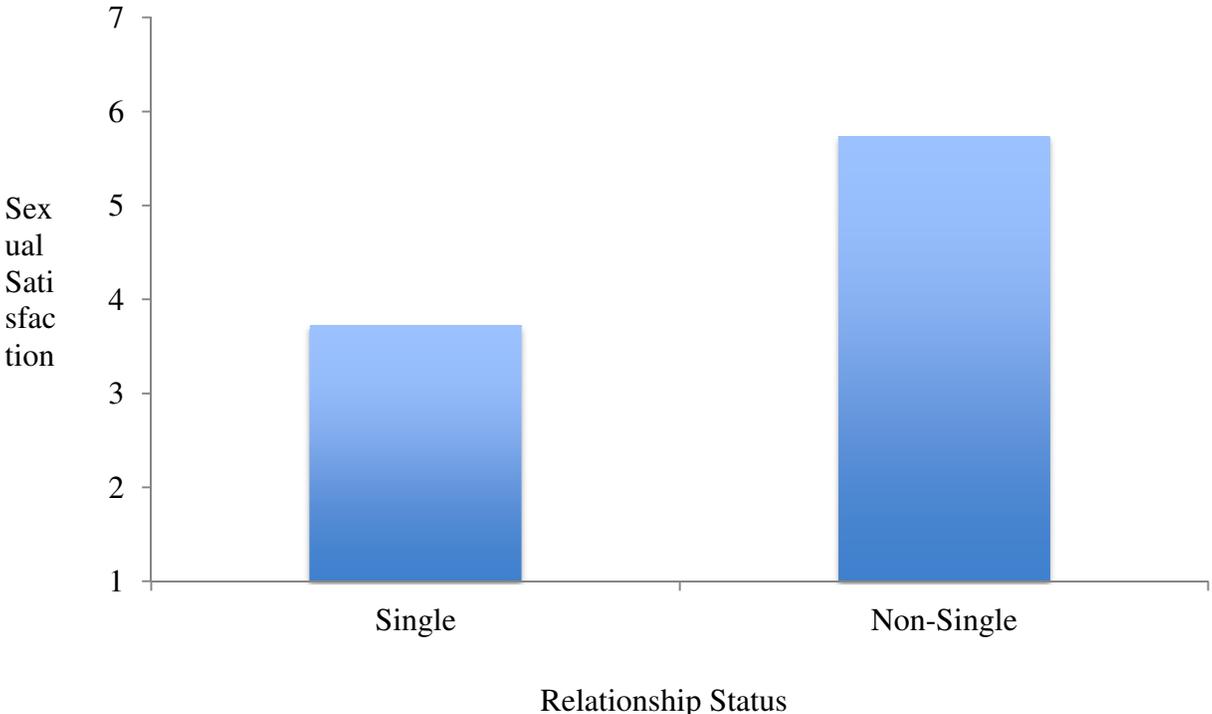


Figure 2. Average sexual satisfaction as a function of single and non-single individuals. (Single N = 37; Non-Single N = 31).

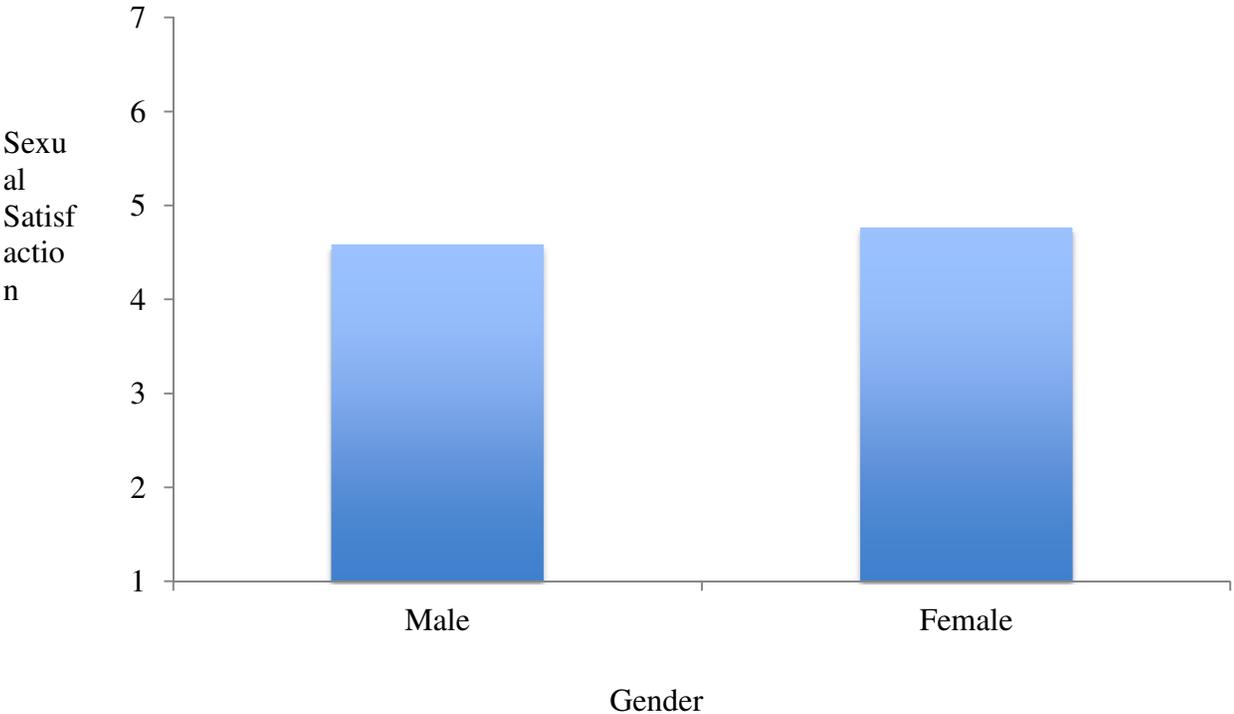


Figure 3. Average sexual satisfaction as a function of gender (Male N = 21; Female N = 47).

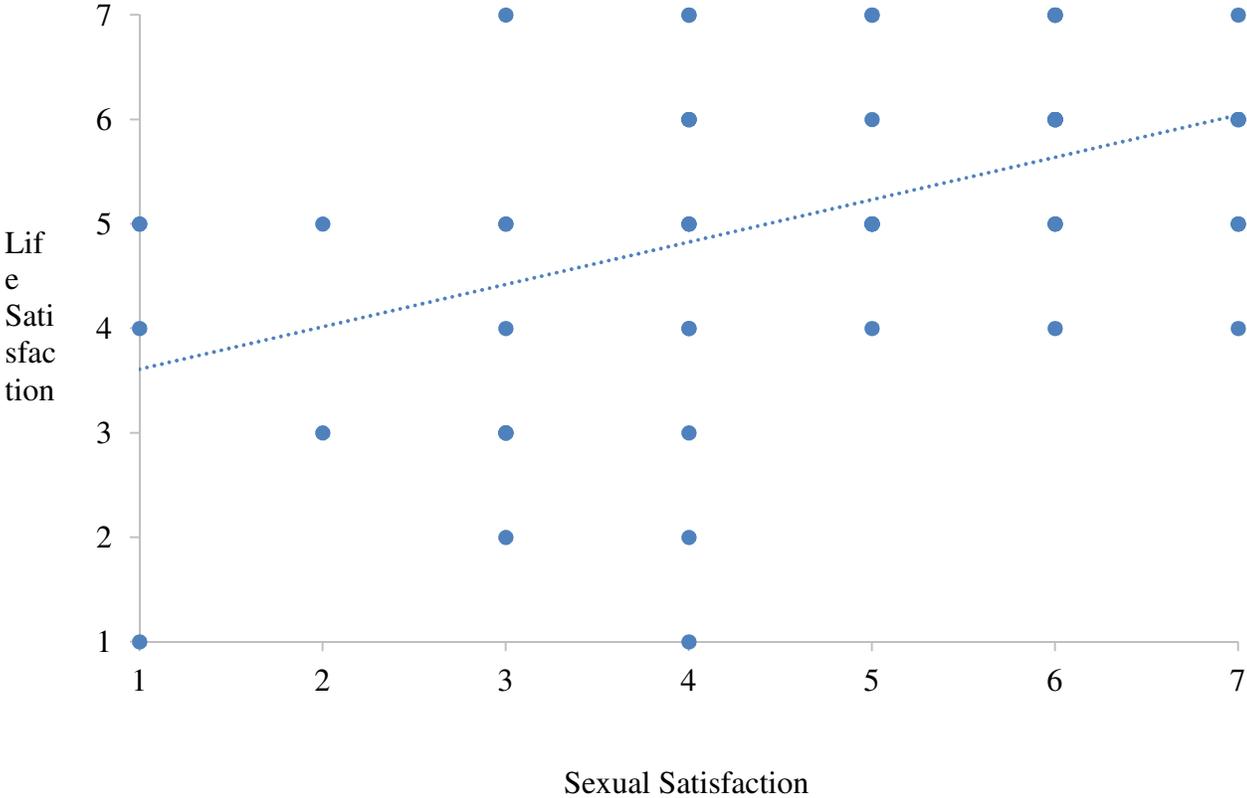


Figure 4. Average life satisfaction score by average sexual satisfaction score (N = 64).

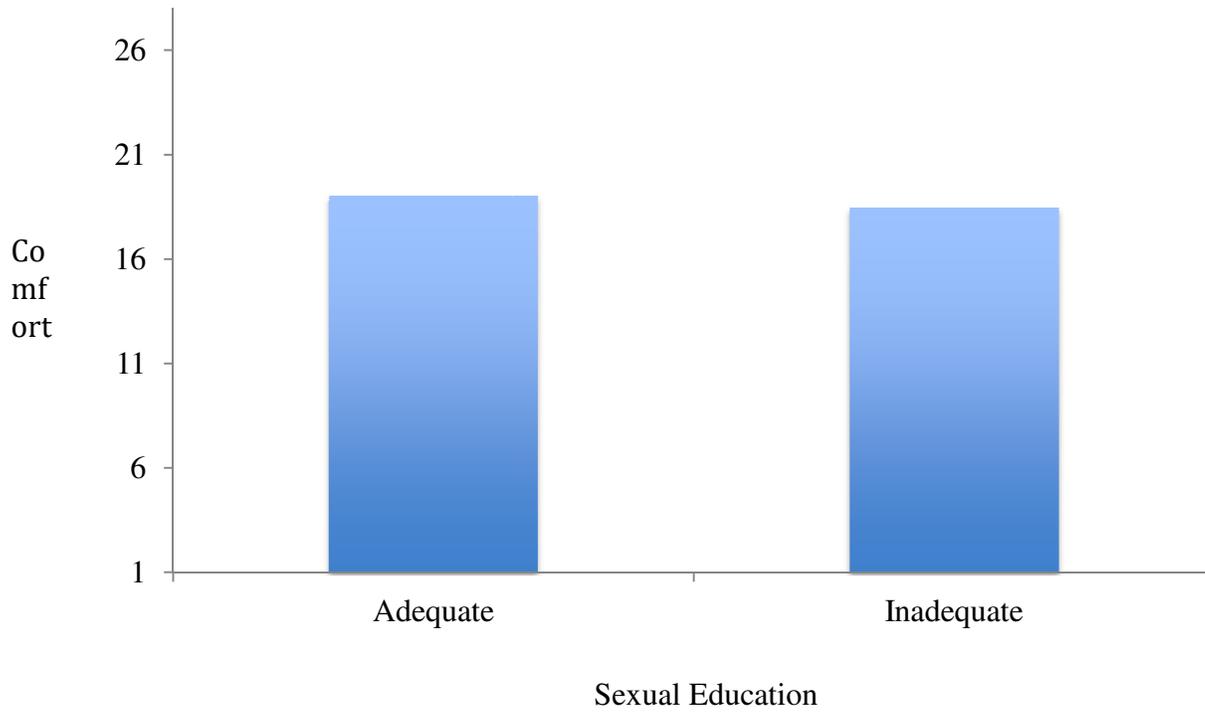


Figure 5. Average comfort talking about sexual topics with others as a function of sexual education (Adequate $N = 27$; Inadequate $N = 41$).

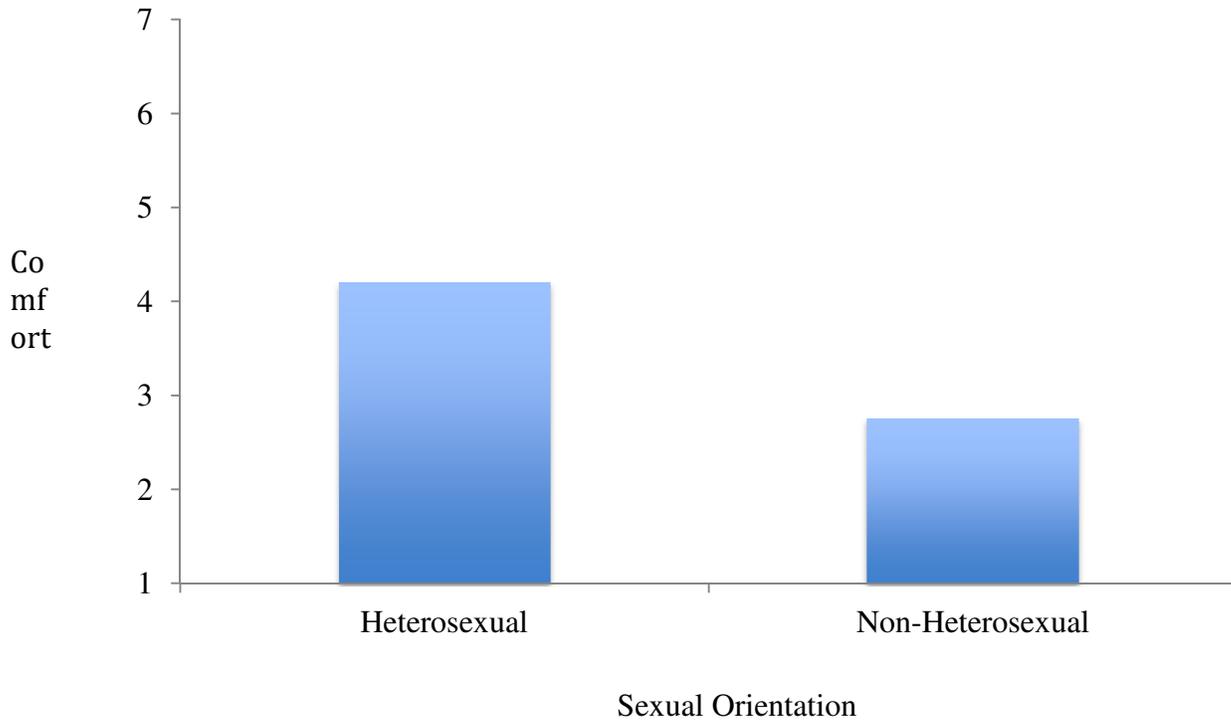


Figure 6. Average comfort talking about sexual topics with a parent/guardian as a function of sexual orientation (Heterosexual N = 56; Non-Heterosexual N = 12).

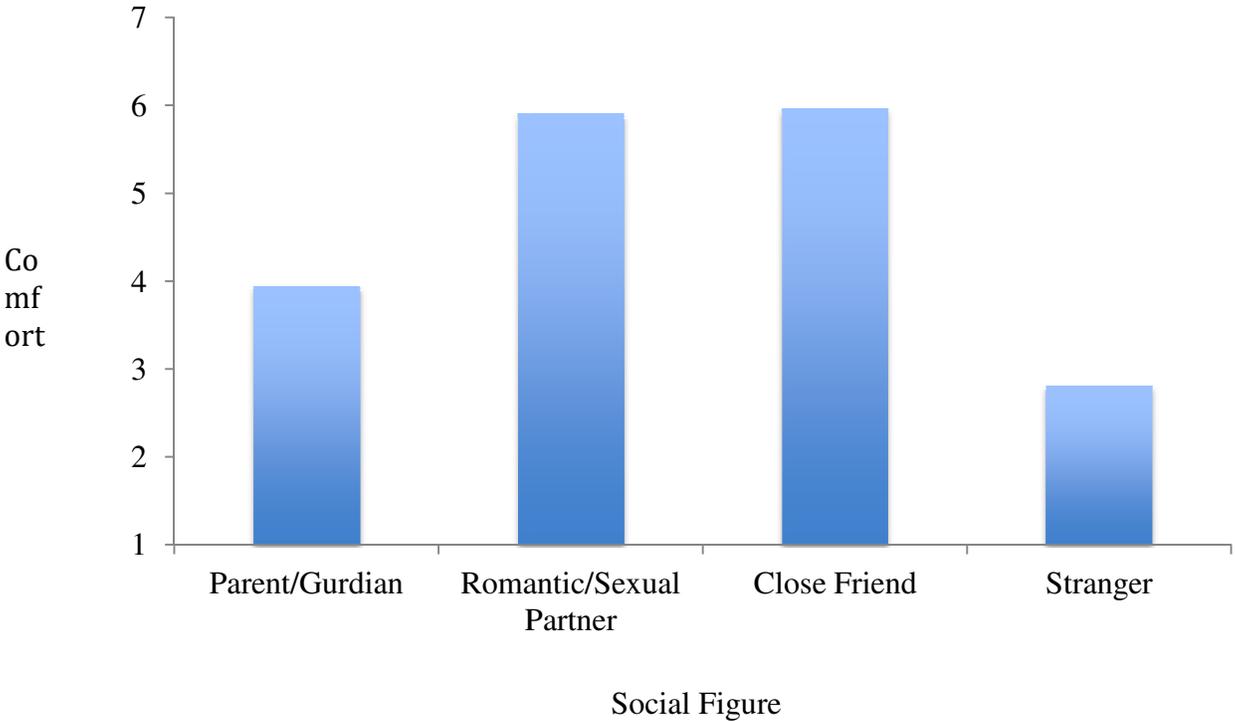


Figure 7. Average comfort talking about sexual topics as a function of social figures (N = 66).

Appendix A: Consent Form

The Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Otterbein University supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Additionally, you may skip any individual item that you do not feel comfortable answering.

I am interested in studying the relationship between sexual education and levels of sexual satisfaction and openness to discuss sexuality with others. You will be participating in an online survey consisting of nine questions related to your previous experience with sexual education. We estimate that this survey will take no more than ten minutes of your time. Although it is not likely, there is a chance that you might feel slightly uncomfortable with some of the questions. You can leave the study at any time without penalty. You may also choose not to answer any questions you are not comfortable with. I believe that the information will be useful in evaluating sexual education programs and their impact on sexual satisfaction later in life.

Your participation is solicited although strictly voluntary. We assure you that your name will not be associated in any way with the research findings. The information will be identified only by a code number.

If you would like additional information concerning this study before or after it is complete, please feel free to contact me by phone, mail or email.

Sincerely,

Kendall Coffman, Principal Investigator
1 S. Grove St., Westerville, OH 43081, Mailbox 11904
Phone: 419-651-2049
Email: kendall.coffman@otterbein.edu

By checking this box I consent to participate in this study, and confirm that I am at least 18 years old.

Appendix B: Demographic & General Questions

- 1) Select description that most appropriately describes where you grew up:
 - a. City
 - b. Suburb
 - c. Rural
 - d. Other (specify if you would like to)

- 2) Select the gender that you most appropriately identify with:
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Other (specify if you would like to)

- 3) Select your class:
 - a. Freshman
 - b. Sophomore
 - c. Junior
 - d. Senior

- 4) Select the sexual orientation that most appropriately describes you:
 - a. Heterosexual or straight
 - b. Gay or lesbian
 - c. Bisexual
 - d. Asexual
 - e. Pansexual
 - f. Other (specify if you would like to)

- 5) Select the relationship status that currently most appropriately describes you:
 - a. Single
 - b. Casually dating
 - c. Committed Relationship
 - d. Married
 - e. Other (specify if you would like to)

Appendix D: Likert Scales of Satisfaction, Overall Life, & Comfort

7) One a scale of 1-7 (1being extremely unsatisfied and 7 being extremely satisfied) please rank you current level of sexual satisfaction.

8) One a scale of 1-7 (1being extremely unsatisfied and 7 being extremely satisfied) please rank you current level satisfaction with your life overall.

9) One a scale of 1-7 (1being extremely uncomfortable and 7 being extremely comfortable) please rank your comfort level when talking to a parent/guardian about sexual topics.

10) One a scale of 1-7 (1being extremely uncomfortable and 7 being extremely comfortable) please rank your comfort level when talking to a romantic partner(s) about sexual topics.

11) One a scale of 1-7 (1being extremely uncomfortable and 7 being extremely comfortable) please rank your comfort level when talking to a friend about sexual topics.

12) One a scale of 1-7 (1being extremely uncomfortable and 7 being extremely comfortable) please rank your comfort level when talking to a stranger about sexual topics.

Appendix E: Questions About Abstinence and Sex Education

- 13) Did you have some form of abstinence education at some point in your life?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
- 14) Did you have abstinence – only education at some point in your life?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
- 15) At what point do you believe individuals should start being exposed to sexuality and sexual topics (ex: sexual orientations, sexual fantasies, sexual desires)?
- a. Before elementary school
 - b. Elementary school
 - c. Middle school
 - d. High school
 - e. After high school