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Abstract

At a Hispanic-serving university in deep South Texas, USA it was found that both male and female students tended to have fairly conservative attitudes regarding human sexuality, with females being more traditional and restrictive than males. Males sometimes were oriented toward freedom to have sexual pleasure. The results are consistent, for the most part, with evolutionary psychology theory, and also reflect a conservative tendency either in a. Hispanics, b. today's college students, or c. both. This conservatism was truer for women than for men in this study. The issue of attitudes vs. behavior is discussed.

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I have been doing studies on human sexuality attitudes of male and female Hispanic college students (e. g. Dantzker & Eisenman, 2003, in press; Eisenman & Dantzker, 2004). I report here some of the findings from an in press study (Dantzker & Eisenman, in press) and present some ideas of mine about what it all means. Also employed are concepts from evolutionary psychology, which is a relatively new theory in psychology that provides insights not otherwise available (Buss, 2004).

The University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) has more students of Mexican American background than any other college in the United States: 88% of the approximately 17,000 students attending UTPA are Hispanic. Most live in the Rio Grande Valley area of the United States (which is also 88% Hispanic), a region in deep South Texas (actually in deep Southeast Texas, although no one ever uses that phrase), although a few live in Mexico and commute to classes. The school itself is only about 20 minutes from the Mexican border. The university also produces more bilingual teachers than any other university in the United States.

Evolutionary Psychology

Evolution is the unifying theory in biology. In psychology, evolutionary psychology seems to explain a great deal that other theories miss. From an evolutionary psychology standpoint, men and women have different needs, as they try to maximize the survival of themselves and of their offspring into future generations. For men, the optimal strategy to insure their genes going into future generations is to impregnate as many women as possible, leading to a permissive attitude toward sex. Also, men should seek out partners who have youth, health and beauty. Women, on the other hand, get pregnant, and could not effectively employ the male strategy. Their passing on their genes to future generations is best assured by finding a male companion who possesses status and money, and who will invest in taking care of her and her offspring. Thus, women should be less permissive about sex than men, and should be more selective in who they wish to have sexual relations with. All of this is unconscious (Eisenman, 2001a), in that people do not necessarily consciously recognize these desires. In fact, they may try to go against them, such as by using birth control to prevent pregnancy. But, at the very least,

even when humans do not engage in overt behavior that fits with evolutionary psychology predictions, they should have attitudes shaped by the evolutionary realities of adaptation and natural selection (Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992; Buss, 2004; Eisenman, 2001a, 2001b; Pratto, Sidanius, & Stallworth, 1993; Wilson, 2000). The study reported below is from Dantzker and Eisenman (in press).

Method

Questionnaire. To study sexual attitudes, a 38-item questionnaire on human sexuality attitudes (originally 42 items, but 4 have since been eliminated) was developed by Dantzker and Eisenman (2003; Eisenman & Dantzker, 2004). The statements were reviewed by both researchers as well as by a psychology colleague who specializes in attitudinal research and who had recently completed a study on college students' use of the internet as it pertains to sex. It was agreed that on its face, the statements would measure what was being sought, i.e., the students' perceptions regarding a variety of sexual activities and behaviors.

Participants. A 38-item questionnaire about sex, developed by M. L. Dantzker and R. Eisenman, was administered by instructors in three undergraduate classes. Informed consent was obtained and students were advised that they did not have to participate. Some demographic questions appeared on the questionnaire, as well as 38 items on sexual matters. Upon completing the survey the students were asked to either leave it on their desk or return it directly to the instructor.

A total of 126 surveys were distributed and returned. There were 56 males and 70 females in the sample. For ethnicity, 114 identified themselves as Hispanic, 8 as non-Hispanic, and 4 did not answer this question.

Results

To examine the relationship by gender for each statement, Chi Square was used, degrees of freedom=4 ($df = \text{rows} - 1 \times \text{columns} - 1$), using SPSS. A 2x5 Chi Square was employed (2 genders: male or female x the 5 items on the 1-to-5 scale). Comparing the mean scores for each statement by gender, a statistically significant difference for 19 of the 38 statements was found.

Among the 19 statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) of the means by gender, 8 found males to be more agreeable to the statement than females. These statements included the idea that:

- Premarital sex is acceptable for males
- Oral sex before marriage is acceptable
- Males should have sexual experience prior to marriage
- Forcing a person to have sex if spouse is OK
- Marriage should not stop person from having sex with other people
- “Topless clubs” are acceptable places for adult entertainment
- Condoms interfere with the pleasures of sex
- Prostitution should be legalized in all states

Females agreed with 11 statements more than males, to a statistically significant extent ($p < .05$). These ideas included:

- When growing up, parents told me premarital intercourse is unacceptable
- When growing up, parents told me any type of sexual behavior before marriage is unacceptable.
- Sex should only occur with a person you love
- Lust and love are two different emotions
- If I were to have sex, I would always practice safe sex
- Clubs that promote all nude dancing should not be allowed to exist
- Magazines such as Playboy are demeaning to women
- Magazines like Playboy are pornographic and should not be published
- Pornographic material causes males to become sexually aggressive
- Masturbation is wrong
- I would be jealous if my partner had sexual intercourse with someone else

Discussion

The results were generally consistent with previous research comparing Hispanic male and female college students on our human sexuality attitude questionnaire (Dantzker & Eisenman, 2003; Eisenman & Dantzker, 2004).

Women More Restrictive Than Men. Our results suggest that Hispanic women in our sample were more restrictive in their sexual beliefs than Hispanic males. Hispanic males here were more oriented to experiencing the pleasures of sex without censorship, even to the point of thinking—at least more than the women—that it is all right to force one’s spouse to have sex. However, it should be noted that both males and females tended to disagree with this attitude. It is just that the males disagreed with it less than the females (and to a statistically significant extent). Many of the findings of the present study show sex differences among these mostly Hispanic college students, but the differences are small, and the sexes mostly agree with each other regarding the attitudes expressed on our sex attitudes scale. For example, while men are more likely than women to say it is OK to force one’s spouse to have sex, men are actually opposed to this, although less so (and to a statistically different “lessness”) than women.

Even if men were in favor of forcing a spouse to have sexual intercourse, this would not necessarily contradict evolutionary psychology theory, at least not as seen by some theorists. Thornhill and Palmer (2000) see rape as one way that men can send their genes into future generations. Spreading one’s genes into future generations is a cornerstone of most evolutionary psychology theory. However, not all agree with this explanation for rape; there are alternative explanations, even among some evolutionary psychology theorists as well as other theorists, that do not see rape stemming from a desire to spread one’s genes into future generations (Etaugh & Bridges, 2006).

Conservative Attitudes. It would appear that there continues a conservative attitude about sex by college students regardless of gender, albeit this was among Hispanic students who, culturally, are a conservative group (Baron, Johnson, & Byrne, 1997). The items where the males were more agreeable tend to be suggestive of a “macho” or “machismo” viewpoint. On the items where the females were more agreeable, we found that females placed more emphasis on avoidance or censorship of certain sexual behaviors. The results are very consistent with Stevens, Caron, and Pratt (2003) who found that college students have turned more conservative in their sexual attitudes, and who also found that religion influences sexual attitudes to be restrictive. Our

sample is comprised mostly of Hispanics, and at this university we have found that two-thirds of the students are Roman Catholic. Catholicism teaches very restrictive views about sex. Also, many who are not Catholic are members of conservative religious groups. So, we should, perhaps, expect Hispanics to hold many conservative attitudes about sex.

Attitudes vs. Overt Behavior. However, these students may show more inhibition in attitudes than in overt behavior, if attitudes are defined as cognitive beliefs as opposed to behavior. Hispanics have previously been found to engage in high risk sexual behaviors, such as multiple partners, not using condoms, etc., leading to a high rate of HIV/AIDS in Hispanics that is three times greater than the HIV/AIDS rate of Anglo Americans (Fierros-Gonzalez & Brown, 2002). Or, perhaps the students here would not engage in such risky behaviors, but some Hispanics would. Perhaps the Hispanics most likely to engage in risky drug or sexual behavior are those who are less educated. Further research could clarify which people would and would not engage in risky behaviors.

Although there could have been a very small number of students who were Hispanic but not Mexican American, either all or the vast majority were likely Mexican-American, based on demographic data at the university and in the region. Hardly anyone here is Cuban or Puerto Rican, although there is occasionally a nonMexican student from Central or South America.

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