Correlates of Sexual Risk Taking Behavior in Young Adults
Geneviève Laberge¹, Yvan Lussier¹ & Natacha Godbout²
¹Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, ²Université du Québec à Montréal

ABSTRACT

The entrance into the sexually active life during adolescence is an integral part of normal development. Despite the normality of sexual experiences in teenagers, some behaviors could be detrimental to the overall health of adolescents and young adults. Risky sexual behaviors are defined as all sexual behaviors which increase the likelihood of negative consequences such as contracting a sexually transmitted disease (STD) or having an unwanted pregnancy (Marcus et al., 2011). Some studies tried to find key variables that influence the occurrence of risky sexual behaviors. Researchers found that insecurity of attachment has a detrimental impact on young adults’ sexual activities (e.g., Gentzler & Korns, 2004; Tracy et al., 2003). Others observed that personality variables also affect the emission of such behaviors during young adulthood (Cooper, 2010; Miller et al., 2004). The objective of the present study is to understand the links between intrapsychical variables (insecurity of attachment and personality), alcohol consumption, and sexual risk taking among adolescents and young adults. The sample consisted of 403 young adults aged between 16 and 26 years old. Results showed that only 7.3% of our participants did not engage in any of the twenty-three risky sexual behaviors in the past six months. Nearly 68.5% of our sample had at least one vaginal intercourse without a condom, 77.4% had given or received fellatio and 66.5% had given or received cunnilingus without protection at least once time during the past six months. Structural equation modeling highlighted that insecure attachment and personality variable lead directly and indirectly via alcohol consumption - to a high-risk sexuality. Results highlight significant differences between boys and girls, and the possibility that young adults may not be fully aware of the impacts of their risky sexual behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

• In Quebec, young adults aged 15 to 24 years old represent a particularly vulnerable group to STD (Lambert & Minzunza, 2010; Rotermann & McKay, 2009).
• Nearly 75% of college students had at least one sexual intercourse under the influence of alcohol during the last year (Lambert et al., 2007).
• Risky sexual behaviors are positively correlated with neuroticism and extraversion, but negatively correlated with conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness (Cooper, 2010; Gute & Eshbaugh, 2008; Miller et al., 2004).
• Highly avoidant adults tend to have more sexual experiences outside of the context of committed relationships and more casual partners. They also consume alcohol or drugs more often before or during sexual acts (Gentzler & Korns, 2004; Tracy et al., 2003).

OBJECTIVE

The present study aims to test empirically an integrative model of the relation between sexual risk taking, alcohol consumption, attachment and personality among late adolescents and young adults.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

• 403 French-Canadian aged between 16 and 26 years old
• 309 women and 94 men

MEASURES

• Experiences in close relationships (ECR, 36 items) (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998)
• NEO Five-factor Inventory (NEO-FFI, 60 items) (Costa & McCrae, 1992)
• Sexual Risk Survey (SRS, 23 items) (Turcik & Garske, 2009)
• Alcohol consumption (AUDIT, 10 items)

PROCEDURE

Participants, studying in high school (last year) or college, were approached in their classrooms. They responded individually to the questionnaires and returned them by mail.

RESULTS

In the past 6 months :
• 11.5% of participants did not take any sexual risks with uncommitted partner
• 85.4% of participants had risky sex acts like fellatio, cunnilingus or vaginal sex without protection
• 81.0% had impulsive sexual behaviors
• 23.0% performed risky anal sex acts
• 19.3% had intentions to engage in risky sexual behaviors

Correlations between sexual risk taking, alcohol, attachment and personality in women

<table>
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<th>Conscientiousness</th>
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<th>Extraversion</th>
<th>Anxiety of abandonment</th>
<th>Avoidance of intimacy</th>
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Tests of multi-group invariance highlighted 4 significant differences accross gender (see coefficients in bold).

In risky sexual behaviors (%): 39 virgins (9.7%), 362 nonvirgins (90.3%) The mean age of first sexual intercourse is 16.11 years old (SD = 1.83)

DISCUSSION

• Results of the structural equation model revealed that anxious attachment is positively associated with risky sexual risk taking in men, but not in women. Anxiously attached men are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors, while anxiously attached women are more likely to drink alcohol and then have risky sexual behaviors.
• Gender moderates the path leading from intimacy avoidance to alcohol consumption. Then, alcohol consumption is related to sexual risk taking.
• Openness is positively associated with sexual risk taking in men, but not in women. Openness is related to intellectual curiosity and less worry about the outcome.
• Consciousness seems to be a protective factor against alcohol consumption and sexual risk taking, especially for women. However, in men, the link between consciousness and sexual risk taking is mediated by alcohol consumption. Consciousness is related to motivation in goal-directed behaviors (Trobst et al., 2002). It is possible that for women the principal goal is to meet a stable partner, preventing them from sexual risk taking.
• Limitations and further research: This study highlights the difficulty of dealing with skewed distribution of risky sexual activities. Longitudinal design would be required.