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Feelings of regret following uncommitted sexual encounters in Canadian university students

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In this study we explored the prevalence of regret following uncommitted sexual encounters (i.e., casual sex that occurs with someone once and only once or with someone known for less than 24 hours) among 138 female and 62 male Canadian university students, who were approximately 21 years of age. The majority of participants self-reported that they had experienced feelings of regret after an uncommitted sexual encounter. We found women reported feeling significantly more regret than men. However, men’s regret was more closely tied to physical attributes than women’s regrets. Regret was also influenced by the quality of the sex: high-quality sex rarely led to regret, while the reverse was true for poor-quality sex. In keeping with past studies, intoxication by alcohol and/or drugs was often listed as a source of regret by both men and women.

Keywords: sexual regret; intoxication; uncommitted sex; students; Canada

Introduction

The primary goal of this paper is to report the results of an investigation into Canadian university students’ regret following an uncommitted sexual encounter. Although there has been considerable research on sex differences in college students’ sexual behaviour, there has been relatively less examination of sex differences in experiences of sexual regret that occurs within the context of a brief, uncommitted relationship that occurs only once. We apply the term uncommitted sexual encounters (USEs) to these relationships and examine them in three ways. First, we investigate whether men and women experience regret stemming from USEs differently and propose that their regret originates from distinct sources. Second, we explore how the quality of sex, a neglected area of research, relates to the experience of regret following USEs. Third, we examine intoxication while engaging in a USE as a specific source of regret.

Defining uncommitted sexual behaviour

There exists a variety of ways to refer to brief, uncommitted sexual encounters. Researchers have generally referred to them as ‘casual sex’ which is, for example, sexual intercourse that occurs during a first meeting within a relationship that may or may not continue (Edgar and Fitzpatrick 1993). Alternatively, there are ‘one-night stands’, which...
typically describes a relationship that progresses no further than sexual intercourse (Campbell 2008). There are also ‘friends with benefits’, which is when two individuals have sex within the context of a non-romantic friendship (e.g. Bisson and Levine 2009). Similarly, a ‘booty call’ refers to acquaintances who engage in recurring sexual activity but without intent of any long-term emotionally-based relationship (Jonason, Li, and Cason 2009). Last, there are ‘hook-ups’, which refers to an interaction of two people engaging in ‘sexual behavior for which there is no future commitment’ (Lambert, Kahn, and Apple 2003, 123). In spite of this assortment of terms, researchers do not always provide an explicit definition (Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000). To make matters more confusing, the terms have considerable variance within the users; for example, young adults may define hook-ups as behaviours ranging from kissing to sexual intercourse with friends, acquaintances or strangers (Bogle 2008). Also, the terms rest on an assumed understanding of what behaviours actually constitute ‘sex’, for which there is considerable disagreement (e.g. Randall and Byers 2003). Culture and context, including moral risks and risks of disease or pregnancy, also influence how people define sex or what it means to engage in activity that is ‘unprotected’ (e.g. Wynn, Foster, and Trussel 2010). To minimise some of these issues, we use the term uncommitted sexual encounter (USE), defined as follows:

- An uncommitted sexual encounter is when individuals engage in sexual behaviour with no future commitment expected and is comprised of at least one of the following activities: (1) vaginal, anal or oral sex (giving or receiving) with someone once and only once or (2) vaginal, anal or oral sex (giving or receiving) with someone known less than 24 hours.

Sexual regret

Regret is a negative emotion and is often accompanied by self-blame (Gilovich and Medvec 1995). It is typically categorized into either regret from inaction or regret from action. While regrets of inaction (having not done something) characteristically last longer than regrets of action (having done something), regrets of action are more emotionally powerful (Gilovich and Medvec 1995). Several studies have offered compelling evidence that shows the sexes differ in their experience of sexual regret (e.g. Dickson et al. 1998; Oswalt, Cameron, and Koob 2005). In general, men are more likely to experience regrets of inaction, wishing they had engaged in a particular sexual behaviour, while women are more likely to experience regrets of action, wishing they had not engaged in a particular sexual behaviour.

Caron and Moskey (2002) were among the first to examine sexual experiences in which one or both of the partners later regretted the encounter. Six major categories of sexual regret emerged among the 392 stories they collected: it was a disappointing first time (25%), it was unprotected sex (22%), I was cheating on my partner (17%), I was drunk (16%) and it resulted in ruined friendship (11%). Of particular relevance to the current study is sexual regret from engaging in a ‘one-night stand’ (17%). Oswalt, Cameron and Koob (2005) found that 72% of sexually active university students regretted at least one sexual encounter. The three most common reasons closely reflect those of Caron and Moskey (2002): participants’ actions were inconsistent with their personal values (32%), participants’ decisions were influenced by alcohol (28%) and participants failed to use condoms (25%).

In their study of college women, Eshbaugh and Gute (2008) discovered sexual regret was more pronounced if there was a history of experiences involving sexual intercourse rather than oral sex. They proposed that this discrepancy resulted from the majority of students not feeling that oral sex counts as ‘having sex’. However, the reduced guilt
associated with a non-coital encounter suggests that women may be underestimating the health risks associated with oral sex (Eshbaugh and Gute 2008). Similarly, Fielder and Carey (2010a) report that women, but not men, experience higher rates of psychological distress if their behaviour included penetrative sexual activity. Interestingly, Paul, McManus and Hayes (2000) indicate that both men and women who had ever engaged in an uncommitted, brief sexual activity, at any point in their life, had lower self-esteem than individuals who had not.

In their qualitative examination, Paul and Hayes (2002) found that the most common feelings after an uncommitted brief sexual interaction were ‘regret and disappointment’ (35%) followed distantly by ‘good or happy’ (20%). In their sample, women were significantly more likely to report feeling ‘regret and disappointment’ afterwards, while men were more likely to feel ‘satisfied’. However, while the responses may vary by sex, Garcia and Reiber (2008) found men and women have very similar motivations for participating in these behaviours including: physical gratification (89%), emotional gratification (54%), to initiate a traditional romantic relationship (51%), it was unintentional (33%), others were doing it (8%) and peer pressure (4%).

In the current study, we report rates of sexual regret following USEs from a sample of Canadian university students. We make specific predictions regarding sex differences in the influence of additional factors including self-attributed reasons for regret, quality of sex and influence of intoxication. In terms of sex differences in sexual regret, we predict men will be less likely to regret engaging in a USE than women (Hypothesis 1). In terms of evolutionary psychology, according to Buss (2003), sex differences in mating strategies are intrinsically linked to the parental investment associated with gestation and child rearing. Women have substantially higher rates of parental investment than men and, consequently, should be far more selective and seek partners who will provide paternal care and resources. Eshbaugh and Gute (2008) found that women have significantly less regret associated with non-coital USEs than those involving sexual intercourse, supporting this position – while the former are risky in numerous ways, they do not carry the same risk of pregnancy. Also consistent is the finding that men express greater comfort than women about engaging in these types of relationships (Cohen and Shortland 1996; Lambert, Kahn, and Apple 2003; Reiber and Garcia 2010). Sexual double standards in the norms of sexual behaviour afford men greater freedom to engage in ‘casual’ sexual encounters (Herold and Mewhinney 1993). The fact that women feel more sexual guilt and regret than men may result from a failure to adhere to established social gender norms (Simon and Gagnon 1986). As such, reasons for regretting a sexual encounter may differ between men and women based on traditionally gendered stereotypes (Crawford and Popp 2003).

Social role theories are most often used to explain sex differences in sexual regret (Bogle 2008; Edgar and Fitzpatrick 1993). However, as demonstrated above, it is possible to rely upon both parental investment theory and social role theory to investigate USEs (Eshbaugh and Gute 2008; Garcia and Reiber 2008) as each addresses a different level of analysis. Using terms from classical ethology (Tinbergen 1963), parental investment theory is an example of an ultimate level of explanation, while social role theory is an example of a proximate level, although each leads to the same prediction. Accordingly, we suggest that women will experience more regret than men. However, in keeping with parental investment theory, we further predict that men will regret USEs more for physical or biologically-relevant reasons (e.g. I was not physically attracted to the person). Likewise, we predict that women will regret USEs more for emotional reasons, such as wanting their experience to be more special and hoping that it would lead to a future relationship, which it did not (Hypothesis 2). This prediction is consistent with Paul and
Hayes (2002) report that men and women’s positive descriptions of their ‘best’ USEs vary with respect to relative attention paid to physical and emotional aspects of the encounter by each sex. This hypothesis is further grounded in the parental investment literature, which has demonstrated that men place more importance on the quantity of mates, whereas women consider the quality of mates (e.g. Buss [2003] for a review). Given fundamental sex differences in zygotic parental investment, women must be careful to select a mate who is willing to invest in themselves and any children. Thus, while men should be more concerned with the physical aspects of an encounter, women should be more concerned about the emotional aspects, assuming that emotional loyalty is a proxy measure of the dedication of resources, time and parental assistance.

**Quality of sex**

Another goal of the current study was to determine whether the pleasurable quality of the sexual activity (i.e. good sex versus bad sex) influences whether an individual experiences regret after engaging in a USE. An extensive review of the literature failed to yield any prior knowledge on this relationship, therefore, as an exploratory variable, participants were asked in an open-ended format to elaborate on how the quality of sex influences their feelings of regret following a USE. It is possible that regret following a sexually gratifying USE may be reduced if the experience was, at the very least, momentarily pleasurable.

Both female and male orgasm is almost always associated with a ‘good sex’ script. The hormone oxytocin is released by an orgasm, indicating that, especially for women, good (i.e. orgasmic) sex is likely linked to bonding and potentially with forming a long-term romantic relationship (Fisher 2009). For women, the link between an orgasm, oxytocin release and relationship formation may be particularly salient, considering their relatively lower frequency of orgasm from sexual activity, as compared to men (Meston et al. 2004).

Although oxytocin has less influence in men, in spite of being released during orgasm (Riley 1988), it does promote pair bonding in conjunction with the hormone vasopressin (Insel et al. 1998). Thus, it is possible that men would also desire a future relationship with their sex partner following high-quality sex if they believe that it will lead to future sexual encounters. Indeed, men typically attribute more importance to sexual pleasure and relief of sexual tension as motivations for engaging in sex, while women feel emotional connection is more important (Leigh 1990). Taken together, these results suggest that both men and women inherently value the perceived quality of sex with a partner and hence we predict that both will feel less regret over high-quality (psychophysically arousing and pleasurable) versus poor-quality sex (Hypothesis 3).

**Intoxication and sexual behaviour**

Last, we were interested in whether intoxication during a USE impacts on college students’ experiences of sexual regret. The majority (approximately 85%) of Canadian university students drink alcohol and consumption on Atlantic Canadian university campuses suggest that 24.5% of students are heavy, frequent drinkers (characterized by consuming more than five drinks on the days they drink, with weekly drinking), while an additional 22.5% are heavy, infrequent (i.e., less than weekly) drinkers (Adlaf, Demers, and Gliksman 2005). Alcohol consumption and intoxication are related to more frequent incidents of sexual behaviour, more intent to seek out and initiate sexual encounters (Dusenbury et al. 1994) and greater number of sex partners (Kaly et al. 2000). Furthermore, Flack and colleagues (2007) report on a sample of undergraduate students where those who have experienced
unwanted sex are more likely to report a history of having engaged in casual sex and drinking alcohol more frequently than those who have not.

In their study of sexual regret in undergraduate students, Caron and Moskey (2002) found 16% of participants indicated that they regretted a sexual experience because they had been intoxicated, while nearly half (49%) of all regrettable sex encounters involved alcohol use. These findings have been echoed in other studies. For example, approximately one-third of undergraduate participants attribute an ‘unintentional’ (i.e., due to drugs and/or alcohol) motivation for a hook-up (Garcia and Reiber 2008). Therefore, we predict that among men and women who experience regret after engaging in USEs, intoxication will be identified as a reason for their regret, but given it is a regret of action (i.e., alcohol consumption and sexual engagement) this effect will be more pronounced for women (Hypothesis 4).

Although the primary focus of the current study is to explore relative sex differences with respect to regret following a USE, we also report the general influence of reasons for regret, the influence of the quality of the sex and role of intoxicants. General reports of these factors and how they may influence the outcomes of contemporary sexual activity for both men and women is important for future research and sexual health education.

Methods

Participants

A total of 62 men (age in years, $M = 21.34$, $SD = 2.89$) and 138 women (age in years, $M = 20.46$, $SD = 2.32$) participated in this study. All were undergraduate students enrolled in a psychology course at a university in eastern Canada and they received a small course credit for their participation. The study was approved by the university’s Research Ethics Board. Approximately 82% of students indicated that they were Canadian-born. The majority of participants (54%) identified belonging to a Christian denomination, followed by 36% who said they were non-religious.

Of the men, 45% reported they were currently single, 5% casually dating, 43% dating one person in a committed relationship, 5% engaged and 2% married/common-law. For women, 20% were single, 11% dating casually, 60% dating one person in a committed relationship, 4% engaged and 5% married/common-law. Of those in committed relationships, the average length (in months) for men was $M = 25.52$ ($SD = 27.79$, $Md = 19.5$) and for women, $M = 22.04$ ($SD = 19.79$, $Md = 17.63$).

Participants identified their sexual orientation based on the Kinsey Scale (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948). The majority of men (87%) and women (85%) identified themselves as exclusively heterosexual, with only a minority of men (3%) and women (2%) identifying as exclusively homosexual.

To avoid ambiguity, participants were provided with a definition of sex partner, such that: ‘A sexual partner is an individual with whom you have engaged in any of the following behaviours: oral contact with your genitals, or oral contact with other person’s genitals, or someone with whom you have engaged in penile-oral intercourse, or someone with whom you have engaged in penile-vaginal intercourse’. For their number of lifetime sex partners, women had fewer than men ($M = 5.75$, $SD = 5.43$, $Md = 4.5$, range $0–37$; versus $M = 10.18$, $SD = 14.97$, $Md = 5$, range $0–95$, respectively). A total of 7% of men and 8% of women reported never having sex. The rest of the women reported first engaging in sexual activity at an average age, in years, of $M = 15.64$ ($SD = 1.87$), while men were slightly older, $M = 16.17$ ($SD = 2.53$). The sexes were similar in their first age of sexual intercourse (men $M = 16.94$, $SD = 2.20$; women $M = 16.24$, $SD = 1.74$).
Participants were also provided with the definition of a USE, as stated earlier in this paper. Given the topic of our study, we excluded the 19 (31%) men and 46 (33%) women who reported that they had not experienced any USEs for the remaining analyses. Of those who had experienced at least one USE in their life, men reported a range of 1–19 encounters ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 4.86$, $Md = 3$) and women reported a range of 1–22 encounters ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 3.46$, $Md = 2$ – note that of those who said they had engaged in a USE, 10 men and 15 women did not report the number). There was no sex difference in number of USEs, independent samples $t(108) = 1.81$, $p = .08$ (note here that we used Levene’s correction for inequality of variance and that unless otherwise stated, all $t$-tests are for independent samples, two-tailed and with a significance criteria of $\alpha = .05$).

Lastly, as a result of the potential confound of consensual versus forced sex, we asked participants if the USE represented nonconsensual sex (i.e., rape, sexual force, being taken advantage of) but no participants replied in the affirmative. Also, no participants reported receiving a sexually transmitted infection or becoming pregnant because of a USE.

**Measures and procedures**

After providing informed consent, participants completed a brief demographic survey and our Uncommitted Sexual Encounter Survey. All surveys were completed in a quiet room of a private laboratory on an individual basis to maximise the privacy of responses. Upon completion, participants sealed the surveys in an envelope and returned it to the researcher, at which point they were debriefed. In light of the nature of this study, participants were also provided with information on sexual health and counselling resources.

In the Uncommitted Sexual Encounter Survey, participants identified whether they had ever experienced sexual regret following a USE and, if so, why. They were provided with 10 options to choose from, checking all that applied and then could select ‘other’ and write in a response. The options were based on a small act nomination survey amongst students at the same university and the pre-existing literature. These options were conceptually divided into physical and emotional reasons. Physical reasons were: it was not sexually gratifying, I was not physically attracted to the person and it was unprotected sex. Emotional reasons were: it was my first time and I wanted it to be more special, I was cheating on my partner, it ruined our friendship, I hardly knew the person, it made me feel guilty but I am not sure why and I was hoping that it would lead to a future relationship and it did not. To address Hypothesis 3, we also included an item (I was intoxicated with drugs and/or alcohol) that does not clearly fit physical or emotional reasons for regret.

A five-point scale ascertained how often participants experience regret following their USEs, with the anchors 1 = never and 5 = always. Participants were also asked whether the quality of the sex during a USE influenced their feelings of regret (yes/no format) and then to elaborate on their responses in an open-ended format.

Participants were instructed to reflect upon their feelings if the quality of sex in a USE was ‘good’ versus ‘bad’. The instructions stated, ‘After an uncommitted sexual encounter in which the sex was good, how do you usually feel? Please check the one most appropriate response.’ The adjectives, collected from our earlier review of the literature, were: satisfied, confident, happy, disappointed, ambivalent, emotional, indifferent, confused, embarrassed or other. The same wording and adjectives appeared for poor-quality sex, except the word ‘good’ was substituted with ‘bad’.

The last items on the Uncommitted Sexual Encounter Survey assessed the co-occurrence of USEs and use of alcohol and/or drugs. Participants were asked if they had ever engaged in a USE while intoxicated and then the degree to which their intoxication...
influenced their decision to engage in their most recent encounter (1 = barely at all, 2 = a little bit, 3 = a moderate level and 4 = very much). As a follow up to this item, participants reported their general level of intoxication for the majority of their USE experiences (1 = sober, 2 = mildly intoxicated, 3 = very intoxicated and 4 = extremely intoxicated).

Results

Overall sexual regret

Of those who have had a USE (43 men and 92 women), a majority of men (72%) and women (78%) report an experience of regret afterwards. When asked to report how often they experienced feelings of regret, women ($M = 2.88, SD = 1.29$) reported experiencing more frequent regret than men ($M = 2.42, SD = 1.05$) on the 5-point scale, ($t[133] = 2.05, p = .04, d = 0.39$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Physical versus emotional causes of regret

We then examined only those who had experienced regret following a USE. For the three physical reasons for regret, women selected fewer reasons in total ($M = 0.61, SD = .69$) than men ($M = 0.93, SD = 1.01$), which was significantly different, $t(133) = 2.16$, $p = .03, d = 0.37$ (see Figure 1). Chi-square analysis per item revealed that men (30%) were more likely than women (12%) to regret a USE because of a lack of physical attraction, $\chi^2 = 6.70, df = 1, p = .01, \phi$ (phi coefficient) = 0.30, but there was no significant difference for the remaining two items. This finding provides weak support for Hypothesis 2. Of the total of six emotional reasons for regret, however, there was no significant sex difference, as men selected $M = 1.41 (SD = 1.64)$ and women $M = 1.53 (SD = 1.38), t(133) = 0.42, p = .67, d = 0.08$. Chi-square analysis on each item revealed no significant sex differences in reasons for regret.

Quality of sex and regret

Quality of sex influenced feelings of regret for approximately a third of the women (29 of 90) and half of the men (18 of 43). No sex differences were detected for the proportion
who reported that the quality of the sex influenced their feelings of regret following a USE ($\chi^2 = 1.47$, $df = 2$, $p = .48$, $\varphi = 0.02$). Further, an examination of the open-ended responses for those participants reporting that their regret was influenced by the quality of the sex typically indicated that high-quality sex relieved negative feelings associated with the USE while poor-quality sex increased resentment and a feeling of wasting one’s time and effort. On the basis of the adjectives, quality of the sex and feelings after the encounter showed noticeable trends, such that good sex resulted in positive emotions (e.g. feeling satisfied or happy) while bad sex was associated with negative emotions (e.g. disappointment or embarrassment). Paired-samples $t$-tests comparing the percentage of participants who selected each adjective for good versus poor quality sex provided supports for this claim, see Table 1. Therefore, hypothesis 3 was supported.

**Intoxication and regret**

A total of 56% of men and 55% of women agreed that intoxication by alcohol and/or drugs caused them to feel regret following a USE; there was no significant sex difference, ($\chi^2 = 0.002$, $df = 1$, $p = .97$, $\varphi = 0.12$). The majority of men (93%) and women (81%) reported being under the influence of alcohol during at least one USE, which was not significantly different ($\chi^2 = 3.23$, $df = 1$, $p = .07$, $\varphi = 0.14$). Likewise, for drugs, 38% of men and 33% of women reported being under the influence, which was not significantly different ($\chi^2 = 0.33$, $df = 1$, $p = .57$, $\varphi = 0.08$).

Both men ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.97$) and women ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.05$) reported the degree of their intoxication as having moderately influenced their decision to engage in their most recent USE, but the sex difference was not significantly different, $t(131) = 1.05$, $p = .29$, $d = 0.21$. Furthermore, when asked to describe their state of intoxication for the majority of their USEs, women said it had slightly, but not significantly, less influence than men ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.05$ versus $M = 2.42$, $SD = .83$, respectively), $t(132) = 1.20$, $p = .23$, $d = .22$. Interestingly, 27% of participants reported

<table>
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<th>Poor-quality sex % participants</th>
<th>$t$-value</th>
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<td>.00</td>
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<td>.00</td>
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Note: Self-reported feelings after high-quality versus poor quality sex; paired-samples $t$-tests, $df = 104$ (note the smaller $n$ due to missing data).
they were *sober* for most of their USEs, as compared with 27% mildly intoxicated, 35% very intoxicated and 9% extremely intoxicated.

**Discussion**

The current study documents the prevalence of regret following USEs, and sex differences in these experiences, among Canadian university students. We report on additional factors that may influence regret following a USE, including attribution of physical and emotional sources of regret, quality of sex and intoxication.

Our first hypothesis, that men would, on average, report less regret than women following a USE, was supported. In fact, we found that the majority of *both* men and women report at least some previous experience of regret following a USE. This result indicates that although USEs may be fairly normative in terms of occurrence, there are also substantial negative feelings afterwards, for both men and women.

This finding is in agreement with hypotheses drawn from both parental investment theory and social norms theory. As reviewed, women have higher levels of parental investment compared to men and the associated biological costs of casual sex are therefore also higher (e.g. Buss 2003). Similarly, the sexual double standard and gender norms may cause women to feel more negatively about casual sex (e.g. Herold and Mewhinney 1993; Crawford and Popp 2003).

Although our finding was statistically significant, there is growing evidence of convergence of young men’s and young women’s sexual behaviour in most developed countries. As Petersen and Hyde (2010) report, norms related to sex are becoming less traditional and overt female sexuality is increasing, which is reflected in their convergence with male sexual behaviours. Likewise, Roese and colleagues (2006) study report that, ‘Women and men tend to be similar in many life domains in terms of a tendency to emphasize regrets centering on promotion rather than prevention failure’ (2778). They conceptualise promotion as that related to dejection, while prevention is related to anxiety.

We also note that the type of regret and the specific underlying reason matters and future hypotheses need to capture these nuances. Using evolutionary psychology-informed hypotheses, Roese et al. (2006) obtained a sex difference in regret by examining it in relation to promotion and prevention. They found, ‘Of the various ratings of regret intensity and frequency, by far the largest sex difference occurred on the items centering on promotion-focused sexuality. Men are vastly more likely than women to regret not trying harder to have sex or to regret missing an opportunity for sex’ (779).

As well as supporting our hypothesis, our finding is interesting because it sheds light on a rather unsettling fact. While both sexes are engaging in what are presumably normative sexual experiences, the fallout of these encounters can be rather negative and perhaps more unpleasant than individuals realize. Previous studies have demonstrated a pluralistic ignorance effect with respect to both men and women holding false beliefs that others are more comfortable with uncommitted sexual behaviours than they themselves are, possibly influencing engagement in USEs (Lambert, Kahn, and Apple 2003; Reiber and Garcia 2010). This points to a need for further and more diverse attention to the impact of USEs on the physical and mental health of individuals, as recommended by Heldman and Wade (2010).

Our second hypothesis was that the sexes would vary in what they attribute as the sources of their sexual regret, with women more likely to attribute emotionally rooted sources and men more likely to attribute physically rooted sources, was only weakly supported. Our findings suggest that men and women regret USEs for a variety of reasons...
and although men did select more physical reasons for regret than women, attribution to individual sources did not vary much by sex. However, men did report regret significantly more frequently than women for a lack of physical attraction (physical source). This result is supported by Paul and Hayes’ (2002) qualitative finding that men’s sources of regret tended to focus on choosing a bad USE partner, while women’s sources tended to focus on shame and self-blame. This finding suggests specific sources of regret may vary as a result of individual differences or certain interactions unique to particular USE experiences, where sex functions as an intrinsically linked covariate rather than a primary factor.

Our third hypothesis was that both men and women would report less regret for high-quality sex. This hypothesis was supported: nearly a third of women and half of men report that the quality of sex in a USE may influence regret. We suspect this result occurred because a psychophysically positive sexual experience (i.e., ‘good’ pleasurable sex) may mitigate any predispositions for regret. High-quality sex may lessen negative feelings and promote positive feelings, thus obscuring any regret. On the other hand, a poor-quality sexual experience (i.e., ‘bad’ unfulfilling sex) may intensify any negative feelings and reduce positive feelings. There are a variety of both bodily and psychological motivations, emotions and feelings (e.g. arousal, fear, euphoria, self-esteem) that are concomitantly engaged during sexual activity and which may be differentially highlighted because of the quality of the sexual encounter.

Our fourth and final hypothesis was that both men and women would attribute intoxication as a common source of regret, but that women would do so more commonly. This hypothesis was partially supported in that many participants reported intoxication by alcohol and/or drugs during a USE as a source of regret, however it does not appear that this effect is more pronounced for women. The inherent loss of inhibitions associated with heavy alcohol consumption, and the occurrence of USEs, as well as alcohol use and substance use among young adults today, makes this particularly striking with respect to facilitating unwanted sex (e.g. Flack et al. 2007; Paul and Hayes 2002). We note that the rates of alcohol intake might be related to the fact that we examined USEs, while rates might be lower for other forms of interaction, particularly where one knows the individual (e.g. within a ‘friends with benefits’ relationship).

There are several limitations with respect to the current study and, thus, several avenues for future research. First, we did not examine whether individuals regret USEs in relation to specific experiences, including the context of the relationship with the partner. For instance, it is still unclear how positive and negative affect results from particular USEs and how individuals vary in their reactions to these particular experiences; we do not know why an individual might enjoy one experience and regret another. With respect to the partner, Fielder and Carey (2010b) report that college women engage in sexual activity most often with friends (47%), followed by acquaintances (23%) and then strangers (23%). It is possible that regret functions in tandem with the type of pre-existing relationship one has with the partner. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the fact that the definition we used in our study pertained to behaviours they had performed once only, which would preclude uncommitted sexual behaviours that occur more frequently. Also, as in most research that relies upon specific terminology, we cannot be certain that participants used only our definition when responding to the questions. We note that this concern is the reason we used a new term (USE), rather rely upon existing ones that may be ambiguous (e.g. ‘hookup’ or ‘one night stand’) or already have specific meaning to the student.

A second issue is that our research relies upon retrospective reporting, rather than asking students after they immediately engaged in a USE. Thus, it is possible that data obtained closer to the actual experience would be different from that we obtained. Future
research may try to examine the effect of time on experiences of regret and pay special attention to how regret is used to make future decisions. Strong headway has been made in understanding how people misrepresent their sexual experiences and factors such as assurances of confidentiality, positive rapport between the interviewer and respondent seem to assist with obtaining accurate data and improving respondent satisfaction (e.g. Mitchell et al. 2007). What is needed next is to use these techniques to examine the effects of accuracy within a retrospective reporting paradigm.

A third consideration is that our work examines Canadian students. Most of the reviewed research pertains to American and to a lesser extent Canadian students, rarely did we find data on populations outside of these geographic areas, which is a potential gap deserving future research. It may also be useful to examine specific-cultural subgroups within larger populations. Recent historical and sociological shifts in uncommitted sexual behaviour reflect a shift in the social sexual scripts on most college campuses in the USA (Bogle 2008), but it remains unknown how these shifts are observed within specific cultural sub-groups inside or outside of this population.

The potential influence of culture deserves special mention. As Byers, Henderson and Hobson (2009) review, research has shown that university students in Australia, Canada, the USA and the UK have considerable differences in the way they define ‘having sex’. If students show such differences in what they consider as sexual behaviour, they may also vary in what causes regret or in how often they experience this feeling. However, such research demands a reasonable sample size, which is a limitation of our work. Although our sample size allowed for statistical testing, a larger sample size will allow for further exploration of sex differences among those who have experienced regret following a USE and numerous variables, including individual differences.

Another area for future research is that the physical and emotional reasons explored here were unlikely to be comprehensive and, thus, there may be aspects that we did not consider. For example, degrees of regret may vary with respect to ideal outcomes and perceptions of desires for subsequent interactions including the possibility of a romantic relationship. Regret also likely is influenced by sexual attitudes or morals. Therefore, future work is needed to clarify the role of additional sources of regret in terms of individual differences, sex differences and the uniqueness of each USE.

Our findings have important implications for expanding the current literature on factors influencing responses to USEs but, more generally, the results provide insight into the sexual behaviour of today’s young adults. Based on our sample of Canadian university students, women reported experiencing more regret than men. We address the issue of quality of sex as an important contextual factor for sex research, specifically with respect to lack of commitment in some sexual encounters. This study also highlights the role of alcohol with respect to the sexual patterns of young adults. The high rates of regret following USEs amongst both men and women, in addition to the high rates of intoxication implicated in these situations, points to an urgent need for further research and educational programme development for the health and safety of sexually active young adults today.

References


Résumé

Dans cette étude, nous avons exploré la prévalence des regrets ressentis après les rencontres sexuelles sans engagement (c’est à dire basées sur des rapports sexuels avec quelqu’un, une fois, et seulement une fois, ou avec quelqu’un que l’on connaît depuis moins de 24 heures) parmi 138 étudiantes et 62 étudiants canadiens fréquentant l’Université et âgés d’environ 21 ans. Dans leur grande majorité, les participants ont auto-déclaré qu’ils avaient éprouvé des regrets après des rencontres sexuelles sans engagement. Nous avons découvert que la prévalence de ces regrets était significativement plus élevée parmi les femmes que parmi les hommes. Cependant, chez les hommes, les regrets étaient plus étroitement liés aux capacités physiques que chez les femmes. Le regret était également influencé par la qualité des rapports sexuels. Des rapports satisfaisants étaient rarement source de regret, contrairement aux rapports médiocres. En accord avec précédentes études, l’intoxication par l’alcool et/ou les drogues a souvent été citée comme source de regret pour l’ensemble des participants.

Resumen

En este estudio analizamos la prevalencia de remordimientos tras encuentros sexuales sin compromiso (es decir, relaciones sexuales casuales que ocurren con alguien una sola vez o con una persona que se conoce desde hace menos de 24 horas) entre 138 mujeres y 62 hombres universitarios de una universidad canadiense, que tenían aproximadamente 21 años. La mayoría de los participantes informaron que habían sentido remordimientos después de un encuentro sexual sin compromiso. Observamos que en los informes, las mujeres sentían muchos más remordimientos que los hombres. Sin embargo, el remordimiento de los hombres estaba más estrechamente vinculado a los atributos físicos que el de las mujeres. El remordimiento también estaba influído por la calidad del sexo; las buenas relaciones sexuales casi nunca llevaban a sentir remordimiento, mientras que lo contrario ocurría en el sexo de escasa calidad. En consonancia con estudios previos, tanto los hombres como las mujeres indicaron que muchas veces lamentaban las relaciones que ocurrían cuando estaban intoxicados por alcohol o drogas.