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Plurality and prevalence of sexual motivations in a sample of young francophone adults



Pluralité et prévalence des motivations à la sexualité dans un échantillon de jeunes adultes francophones



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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Understanding the motivations that lead to the adoption of sexual behaviors is of major interest to both the individual and public health.

Objectives. – This work (i) questions the reasons that lead students from two French universities to adopt sexual behaviors, (ii) examines the motivational similarities and differences between men and women, (iii) compare the results to data from north American subjects.

Method. – In total, 657 subjects (526 women; 131 men, mean age: 22.6 years) were requested to take part in an online study investigating sexual behaviors. Reason for Having Sex Questionnaire (Meston & Buss, 2007), was used as a basis for the identification of sexual motivations.

Result. – On average 53.05 different motivations led to the adoption of sexual behaviors. Significant differences of men/women were found between men and women (72% significant differences in $p < 0.05$) but mainly of small amplitude ($d < 0.33$: 58.33%). Men and women also differ in the structure of interrelations between motivations and by the role played by the different motivations. Overall, female motivational system is more sectorized and more organized than the male system, which seems more resilient (density of interrelations Men: 46.3%; women: 34.2%; distance between motivations: 5.44 vs. 3.86, $p < 0.001$, $d = 2.07$). Cultural comparisons showed significant differences of low to moderate amplitude between young adult students in France and those who come from North American universities. Gender differences in sexual motivations for sex were more marked in France than in the US.

Conclusion. – Our results argue for a bio-psychosocial and systemic approach of sexual motivations. Theoretical, methodological and practical perspectives are envisaged.

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R É S U M É

Introduction. – Comprendre les motivations qui conduisent à l'adoption de comportements sexuels revêt un intérêt majeur tant pour l'individu que pour la santé publique.

Objectif. – Ce travail (i) interroge les raisons qui conduisent des étudiants issus de deux universités française à l'adoption de comportements sexuels, (ii) étudie les points communs et divergences motivationnelles entre les hommes et les femmes, (iii) compare les résultats aux données de sujets nord-américains.

Méthode. – Au total 657 sujets (526 femmes ; 131 hommes, âge moyen : 22,6 ans) ont été sollicités pour participer à une étude en ligne sur les comportements sexuels. Le Reason for Having Sex Questionnaire (Meston & Buss, 2007), a servi de base au recensement des motivations sexuelles.

Principaux résultats. – En moyenne 53,05 motivations différentes ont conduit à l'adoption de comportements sexuels. Des différences hommes/femmes significatives (72 différences significatives à $p < 0,05$) mais majoritairement de faible amplitude ($d < 0,33$: 58,33 %) sont relevées. Hommes et femmes se distinguent également par la structure des interrelations entre motivations et par le rôle joué par les différentes motivations. Globalement, le système motivationnel féminin est davantage sectorisé et organisé

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que le système masculin qui, lui, semble plus résilient (densité des interrelations hommes : 46,3 % ; femmes : 34,2 % ; distance entre motivations : 5,44 vs 3,86, $p < 0,001$, $d = 2,07$). Les comparaisons inter-culturelles montrent des différences significatives d'amplitude faible à modérée entre les jeunes adultes étudiants en France et ceux issus d'universités nord-américaines. Les différences hommes-femmes en termes de motivations à la sexualité sont plus marquées en France qu'aux États-Unis.

Conclusion. – Nos résultats plaident en faveur d'une approche bio-psychosociale et systémique des motivations sexuelles. Des perspectives théoriques, méthodologiques et pratiques sont envisagées.

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1. Introduction

The study of sexual motivations – the reasons for engaging in sexual intercourse (Mark, Herbenick, Fortenberry, Sanders, & Reece, 2014) – is recent (Stephenson, Ahrold, & Meston, 2011). It is necessary to document these motivations with the aim of understanding and preventing risk behaviors for health (Brousseau, Hébert, & Bergeron, 2012; Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998; Ellickson, Collins, Bogart, Klein, & Taylor, 2005; Hatfield & Bensman, 2012; Péloquin, Brassard, Lafontaine, & Shaver, 2013). This work aims to examine the reasons why young adults from two French universities are led to adopt sexual behaviors.

2. Review of the literature

The literature underlines a multiplicity of motives, which can lead to adopting sexual behaviors (Gouvernet, Combaluzier, Chapillon, & Rezrazi, 2016; Hatfield, Luckhurst, & Rapson, 2012). Studies on the psychological and social bases of sexual motivations have been conducted in order to identify them (Cooper, Barber, Zhaoyang, & Talley, 2011; Gouvernet, Combaluzier, Chapillon, & Rezrazi, 2015; Impett, Gordon, & Strachman, 2008; Schachner & Shaver, 2004), and the main field of current research is actually focused on male-female differences. The variability of the motivations between men and women is often underlined (Meston & Buss, 2007; Peplau, 2003). Men would be more often motivated by physical relations focused on the self or by relations that arise by chance. Women prefer the emotional and dual dimensions of sexual intercourse. Certain authors have adopted an ethological perspective in which theories of evolution favored a biologicistic approach to sexual motivations to explain these results (Buss, 2003). Others have emphasized cultural dimensions. However, at present, an interactionist biopsychosocial perspective is favored (Hatfield, Luckhurst, & Rapson, 2010; Mark et al., 2014; Tang, Bensman, & Hatfield, 2012). In particular, socio-cultural norms would not have the same impact on men and women. Women would be particularly more sensitive to the influence of environmental and cultural factors than men who would have a less fluctuating functioning (Peplau, 2003).

The multiplicity of the approaches adopted and the a priori of researchers have affected the way of studying or defining sexual motivations (Stephenson, Ahrold, & Meston, 2011). For example, a one-dimensional concept of sexuality confounding the desire to have sexual intercourse and consent is frequent (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). However, one cannot necessarily be reduced to the other (Impett & Peplau, 2003; Impett & Tolman, 2006). Like simulated orgasms (Cooper, Fenigstein, & Fauber, 2013), one can engage in sexual intercourse by altruism, out of fear of negative consequences, or to intensify one's own motivations and desires (see also Brenot, 2012, 2013). So-called a-theoretical approaches have been proposed in order to compensate for these biases. In this case, categorizations are based on the creation of typologies of motivations via responses to open questions addressed to a large cohort of subjects. The questionnaires are constructed a posteriori

on the basis of the responses obtained. The items are then grouped using exploratory factor analyses or principal component analyses.

An example of the approach a posteriori is given by Meston and Buss (2007). Their project consisted of creating a taxonomy – considered as the most complete at present (Hatfield et al., 2012) – of the factors that motivate sexual intercourse. First, they analyzed the statements of 444 subjects (203 men, 241 women) ranging in age from 17 to 52 years regarding all of the reasons, which could have led or could lead these subjects or their friends/acquaintances to engage in sexual intercourse. This approach resulted in the identification of 237 different motivations that were used to compile a taxonomy of sexual motivations, the YSEX. Psychometric analyses conducted on the responses of 1549 students (503 men, 1046 women, mean age: 19 years) to this list led to breaking down the group of 237 motivations into 13 categories of motivations: Reduction of stress, pleasure, desire, looking for an experience, resources, social status, revenge, utility, love and commitment, expression of emotions, improving self-esteem, pressure, and keeping one's partner. The motivations specific to each sex and those with the lowest factor weight were deleted so that Meston and Buss' final taxonomy includes 140 different sexual motivations.¹

3. The present study

A review of the literature shows three main limitations of the existing works (Gouvernet et al., 2016; Hatfield et al., 2010, 2012):

- the studies mainly deal with samples of North American students ranging in age from 18 to 25 years. Thus it is necessary to determine if the results obtained with these subjects can be generalized to other cultures (Hatfield et al., 2012; Tang et al., 2012). If a comparison between western and eastern subjects has recently been proposed (Tang et al., 2012), to our knowledge, comparisons between different western countries are nonexistent. However, comparative data between cultures have shown differences between the attitudes, representations and sexual behaviors of North Americans and those of other countries and cultures in western countries (Mackay, 2001; Wellings et al., 2006; Wylie, 2009);
- the results concerning the differences between men and women should be considered with precaution. Effectively, the differences are less marked when the attention is focused on the principal motivations and not on all of the motivations. Moreover, the results between the studies are not always similar. The significance of the results (p -value) of the comparisons between male and female sexual motivations must not overshadow the weak magnitudes of the differences (calibrated effect: d). From this point of view, the studies on motivations are close to those focusing more globally on sexuality (Petersen & Hyde, 2010):

¹ In their paper, Meston and Buss mention 142 motivations in the final version of their taxonomy. However, an examination of this (Meston & Buss, 2007, pp. 503–507) shows that 2 motivations are reported twice. When these “duplications” are deleted, the final version has 140 items.

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