Exploring Social Sexual Scripts Related to Oral Sex: A Profile of College Student Perceptions

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Young adults and college students report engaging in oral sex at rates likely startling to counselors and sex educators. In a national survey of 10,208 young people age 15-19, more than half of male (55%) and female (54%) respondents reported engaging in oral sex (Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005). Richters, de Visser, Rissel, & Smith (2006) found that almost a third (32%) of respondents reported oral sex as part of their last sexual encounter, revealing that many young people and college students are having oral sex.

College students’ perceptions and behaviors are shaped, in part, by peer perceptions (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). Sexual Script Theory further situates perceptions of sexual interactions within the social context explaining that social cultural messages shape sexuality (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). Consequently, what is perceived to be “real” sex is shaped by one’s society. Thus, understanding sexual scripts impacting the college age population is critically important for counselors working with these clients.

Although this understanding is important, little is known about how young people perceive oral sex and what meaning they attribute to it. In an effort to better understand college student perceptions and the social sexual scripts impacting these perceptions, this study sets forth a profile of undergraduates who agree with the assertion “oral sex is not sex.” This profile is intended to help counselors identify young adults potentially more likely to engage in oral sex. Hopefully by more fully understanding the characteristics of college students agreeing that oral sex is not sex, counselors will be able to plan and implement counseling services and educational strategies likely to reach this population. It is critically important that counselors seek to understand how college students perceive the act of oral sex because recent research suggests that young people perceive oral sex as safe, with few potential health risks (Halpern-Felsher, Cornell, Kropp & Tschann, 2005). However, engaging in oral sex may expose individuals to the risk of viral and bacterial infections, including chlamydia, gonorrhea and herpes (Edwards & Carne, 1998a, 1998b). In order to be best prepared to share information with college students in developmentally-appropriate ways, counselors must first understand what these students believe to be true about oral sex. This study is intended to aid in that understanding.

Study data were taken from a sample of 783 undergraduates at a southeastern university (76.4% females and 25.4% males, respectively). Respondents self-identified as 79.5% European American, 15.7% Blacks (African-American, African Black, or Caribbean Black), 1.9% Biracial, 1.7% Asian, and 1.3% Hispanic. Within the sample, 95% identified as heterosexual, 2.9% identified as bisexual and 2% identified as homosexual. The mean age of the sample was 19 years-old. Pearson product moment correlations and non-parametric statistics, including cross-classification and Chi Squares were calculated to assess relationships among demographic characteristics and selected domains.

Over half (62%) of the sample agreed with the statement, “If you have oral sex, you are still a virgin.” In comparing the characteristics of those who agreed and disagreed, a number of statistically significant relationships emerged. A profile of undergraduates agreeing that oral sex is not sex included being an underclassman, European American, and self-identifying as religious. Recognizing undergraduates who are more likely to agree with the assertion that oral sex is not sex will enable counselors and sex educators to provide targeted, specific education experiences to this population. However, although certain statistical differences existed among participants who believed that oral sex is not sex, over 60% of the total participant group in this study agreed that oral sex is not sex. Consequently, the findings of this study support the need for broad education about the risks and realities of oral sex for all college students.


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