

12th Annual Sexuality, Marriage, and Family Studies Research Symposium Abstracts

Title: What Can Public Health Learn from the Sexuality Narratives of Young Women?

Author: Jennifer McCorriston (Ph.D. Public Health Science)

Abstract:

Public health often uses objective measures of sexual health and sexuality to assess disease prevalence and levels of risk, which is then used to help inform health promotion efforts. However, the World Health Organization's definition of sexuality suggests that public health, in research and practice, would benefit from including affirmative aspects of sexuality and subjectively assessing how sexuality is constructed within political, social and cultural contexts. The purpose of this study is to understand how young women in Ontario conceptualize their sexuality so that public health can better inform initiatives and policies to meet their needs.

Thirteen women, aged 18-24, participated in photo-elicitation narrative interviewing. Thematic analysis revealed that society, including families and health care providers, often want young people to label their sexuality to understand and support them, but this often has more detrimental effects by limiting their expression of various facets of their sexuality. Young women also reported that health care providers and health education in schools almost exclusively focus on anatomy, reproduction and preventing risk behaviours, without any acknowledgement of sexual pleasure and desire. Finally, women in this study suggest that healthcare, education and media's concentration on sexual violence often creates fear and self-responsibility for young women, instead of addressing root causes of gender inequality.

Overall conclusions reveal that public health should continue to advocate for comprehensive and accessible sexual education in schools and more robust sexual health training for health care providers. Moreover, public health can take a greater leadership role in the community to counter gender norms, beliefs and social structures that contribute to and promote gender inequality and sexual violence.

Title: Wise Women / Wicked Witches

Author: Alicia Hois (Ph.D. candidate in Library & Information Science)

Abstract:

Women's bodies have been a battleground of morality for centuries, and that is clearly exemplified in the witch-hunts of early modern Europe. During these hunts, the women deemed as witches were often targeted because of their knowledge and utilization of female sexuality. Women were subjected to intense scrutiny based on religiously-enforced beliefs (largely stemming from the *Malleus Maleficarum* – the witch-hunter's manual), that also have deep roots in Capitalism – the rise of the latter coinciding with the witch-hunts.

Pulling from scholars like Federici and Foucault, the connections between power, knowledge, and sexuality during the witch-hunts is evident. We can see that women's bodies were systemically demonized and assaulted under the guise of purification, but with the actual intent of sending a message of hopelessness to anyone considering resisting patriarchal order. Additionally,

considering many of the witches were single, older, wise women, we can understand the witch-hunts as an attack on women's collective memory and knowledge, limiting their ability to be self-sufficient.

Ultimately, by studying how women used their own bodies, how their bodies were used against them, and how perceptions of women's bodies shaped the course of the witch-hunts, I hope to emphasize how witches' bodies can provide insight into the societal structure of early modern Europe, and demonstrate how these same dynamics can be recognized to this day.

Title: Rethinking Casual Sex Relationships: Lessons from a Young Researcher

Author: Gen Iozzo (B.A. SMF student)

Abstract:

As a young adult, the messaging I have primarily received about casual sex is that it is meaningless, lacking in intimacy, and a placeholder for romantic coupledness; however, my research shows that the reality is far more complex. In this presentation, I will share key lessons from my experience researching Non-Couple Sexual Relationships (NCSRs) as a young adult scholar, offering insights from the preliminary results of a qualitative metasynthesis on NCSRs. I will reflect on my journey with the subject, what drew me to it, how my understanding has evolved, and why studying casual sex is both important and challenging.

Through interactive elements and audience engagement, we will explore how the couple norm shapes hookup culture and NCSR behaviours, reinforcing casual sex as detached while suppressing communication and relational maintenance. I will also highlight how hookup pathways are fluid and nuanced, challenging the idea that NCSRs have a predictable script. The presentation will also examine how women and LGBTQ+ individuals are at the forefront of reshaping these norms, advocating for greater agency, equity, and emotional openness. However, this work comes at a cost: marginalized groups often bear the burden of challenging oppressive structures, educating others, and navigating the emotional labour of making casual sex more ethical and inclusive.

This presentation highlights both barriers and possibilities for change, emphasizing the need for a collective shift in how we approach casual sex. If we move beyond the idea of NCSRs as inferior to romantic coupledness, what new possibilities emerge?

Title: Femmephobia on Post-Secondary Campuses: Examining the Relationship Between Experiences of Femmephobia and Well-Being

Author: Kinzey Brosseau (B.A. Psychology student)

Abstract:

Femmephobia refers to the systemic devaluation, regulation, and policing of femininity and feminine-coded traits, interests, and expressions, targeting individuals who are perceived to identify, embody, or express femininely, regardless of their gender identity and sex assigned at birth. While research has explored related forms of oppression, such as sexism, heterosexism, cisgenderism, etc., femmephobia remains an underexamined phenomenon, particularly in post-secondary settings. Post-secondary institutions play a critical role in shaping identity, social

belonging, and professional development, yet they can also reinforce normative gender expectations that marginalize femininity and feminine-coded expressions.

This study explores how post-secondary students experience and respond to femmephobia and examines its relationship to well-being and other outcomes. Previous research on experiences of femmephobia has revealed several sexual and relational outcomes (Hoskin, Serafini, & Gillespie, 2023). The current study employs a mixed-methods approach, which includes a replication of the Hoskin et al. (2023) focus on people's responses to a femmephobic incident in terms of amplifying, suppressing, or not changing their feminine expressions. The current study also expands on this work by broadening the sample beyond women, focusing on university students' experiences, and assessing outcomes related to well-being. By addressing gaps in the literature, this research seeks to provide insight into how femmephobia operates in academic environments and how it may influence students' well-being, sense of self, and academic and relational campus experiences. Findings from this study may inform institutional policies, mental health support, and gender-inclusive practices to foster a more affirming university climate.

Title: The Impact of Childhood Maltreatment and Sexual Abuse on Physical Intimacy and Emotional Avoidance: Exploring Physical Touch and Relational Well-being

Author: Kethmi Egodage (M.A. Clinical Psychology student), Uzma Rehman (Ph.D. Clinical Psychology), and Noémie Bigras (Ph.D. Psychology)

Abstract:

Does childhood maltreatment and abuse (CMA) affect a person's ability to physically connect with their intimate partners as an adult? While avoidance of negative emotions is a recognized sequelae of CMA, little research examines how CMA can impact the avoidance of positive emotions. This current study extends past work by examining whether a fear of positive emotions (FOP) may influence CMA survivors' capacities to engage in physical touch in relationships.

Using standardized measures, 172 participants (100 cisgender women) reported on CMA, FOP, and physical touch anxiety. Mediation analyses revealed that FOP mediated the link between CMA and physical touch anxiety for both genders. However, for men, this link persisted even when controlling for FOP, whereas for women, the association depended on FOP being present as a mediator.

These results suggest that, while the effects of CMA may similarly affect physical intimacy capacities across genders, the mechanisms that govern this relationship might differ or have different impacts. As such, these gendered results will influence my continued follow up investigations into the impacts of CMA on physical touch and its mechanisms to inform inclusive, trauma-sensitive interventions to empower survivors to regain control over their wellbeing and contribute to improving mental and relational health outcomes.