Individual Differences in the Effects of Experimentally Induced Mood on Sexual Desire: Preliminary Findings

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Introduction

Current theoretical models of behavior change are limited in their ability to predict risky sexual behavior, in part because they are based on the assumption that individual’s decisions to engage in these behaviors are rational and intentional.

Recent research on risk taking shows an increased awareness of the relevance of mood and emotions in sexual decision making.

Conventional wisdom holds that negative mood is associated with a decrease in sexual interest and response, but recent studies show that the relationship is more variable, with a proportion of men and women reporting increased sexual interest while in a negative mood state.

Aim of Study

We are interested in how mood, in combination with sexual arousal, may influence sexual desire and behavior. The study presented in this poster is part of a larger research project, funded by NICHD (R01 HD 043699), that evaluates the role of individual differences in the effects of anxiety, depression and positive mood on sexual interest, arousal, and decision making.

Methods

Participants

- Fifty-one men (mean age = 21, range 18-34; all heterosexual) and 53 women (mean age = 21, range 18-38; 50 heterosexual, 3 bisexual), none currently receiving treatment for mood disorders, participated in a laboratory study.

- Participants were selected and recruited after they completed a series of questionnaires about, among other things, the effects of mood on sexuality and the propensity for sexual excitement, sexual inhibition, anxiety, and depression.

- Participants were assigned to either a negative (anxiety - 17 men/17 women, depression - 17 men/17 women) or positive (17 men/19 women) mood induction.

Findings

A 2 (Gender: Men vs Women) x 3 (Mood Induction: Positive, Anxiety, Depression) mixed ANCOVA with Gender and Mood Induction as between-subjects factors and pre-stimulus sexual interest levels as covariate revealed a significant interaction of Gender x Mood (F(2,96) = 3.44, p<.01). Follow-up tests showed a significant main effect of mood, but only for females (F(2,50) = 7.34, p<.05). Women in the positive mood condition experienced higher sexual interest than women who watched the negative mood clips.

A mixed ANOVA on interest ratings during the photo task revealed a significant 6-way interaction of Gender x Mood Induction x PrePost x Condom Availability x Condom Consistency x Number of Partners (F(4,194) = 2.96, p<.05).

For men, a significant 5-way interaction was found (F(4,94) = 3.26, p<.02), and follow-up analyses by mood revealed a significant 3-way interaction of PrePost x Condom Consistency x Number of Partners for mood induction (F(2,32) = 4.31, p<.03) and a significant 4-way interaction of PrePost x Condom Availability x Condom Consistency x Number of Partners for anxiety (F(2,30) = 3.65, p<.04). No significant effects were found for depression.

Conclusions

- The films successfully induced the intended mood states.

- In women, sexual interest was highest after the positive mood induction. Women’s interest in sex with men depicted in the photo series was not modified by their mood.

- In men, levels of sexual interest were not affected by the mood inductions. However, interest in sex with women with a ‘few’ sexual partners increased or decreased after anxiety and positive mood inductions, depending on whether the women were consistent or inconsistent in their condom use, and (for anxiety) whether a condom was available.

- Men’s interest in sex with women with ‘some’ partners increased after anxiety and positive (involving different subjects) mood inductions, regardless of whether women were consistent or inconsistent condom users and (for anxiety) whether condom were available. In other words, men’s tendency for more risky sexual decision making was modified, and in similar ways, by anxiety and positive mood.

- These preliminary analyses involve the effects of mood on sexual interest before subjects were presented with explicit sexual stimuli. Future analyses will evaluate the interaction between mood, sexual arousal, and sexual interest. Also, we will assess individual differences in the relationship among those variables, using a number of relevant measures (e.g., SIS/SES) as potential predictors of such differences.