Experiences of stigma among late virgins: A thematic analysis of virtual spaces and in-depth interviews

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Introduction

Developmentalists have a long tradition of investigating the challenges raised by normative lifecourse transitions, particularly when they occur off-time. With regards to sexual initiation, most research has focused on early onsets, although recent studies have brought attention to the distress and stigma experienced by late virgins in the current context of compulsory sexuality.

Our knowledge remains limited, partly due to the sensitivity of the topic and the difficulty of recruitment with traditional strategies. This hinders our capacity to identify the specific educational and health needs of adult virgins and to provide them adequate care and education.

Methods

- This research is embedded in the phenomenological paradigm (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007).
- Received institutional ethics review board approval.
- A multi-sources multi-methods study has been conducted to overcome the limitations found in single-method studies.
- The five most active VS were selected for content extraction.
- Only virgins’ narratives and interactions were analyzed.
- 98 men, 124 women, 22 n.d (n = 244)

Semi-Structured interviews (n = 26)

- Recruited through social media (Facebook, Kijiji, Reddit), adds in public spaces (bathrooms, cafés, board game, pubs) and with snowball sampling
- Participants aged 20-29 y.o.
- 10 minutes self-administered questionnaire (socio-demographic characteristics, psychosexual trajectory and psychological well-being)
- 90 minutes in-depth interviews (family dynamics, romantic, and sexual experiences, sex education).
- Inclusion criteria: 1) age 20-29; 2) identify as heterosexual; 3) identify as virgin; 4) 11 women; Mage = 26

Results

Two main findings emerge from preliminary thematic analyses. First, the perception of being stigmatized is a core issue, experienced both socially (i.e. being teased and receiving mean-spirited comments) and emotionally (i.e. feeling ashamed and lonely).

Social experience of stigma

“Because when you don’t talk about your sexuality - like many people don’t hesitate to expose it - , once they ask you a question that you don’t want to answer, they tease you by constantly asking if you’re a virgin, if you’ve ever had sex, etc.”

Emotional experience of stigma

“It hurts me not to be within the norm. I feel alone. I try to find what’s wrong and I feel even worse.”

Second, this stigma seems to increase over time, as older virgins report feeling “love-handicapped” and anticipate the thought of disclosing their virginity to a future partner is as humiliating an experience.

Increasing stigma over time

“Only after a while... we’re called abnormal, undesirable, that we don’t know how to love or be loved. It’s insidious because those feelings become more and more significant as time goes by.”

“But I’m at an age where my first time now represents shame, humiliation, something hard to experience, which makes it so that I wouldn’t be able to just do it with anyone because I would need to trust him in order to confess to him that no... I’ve never experienced anything.”

Discussion

This study sheds light on the stigma experienced by late virgins, at both social and emotional levels. An off-time transition to sexual activity (i.e. late virginity) can be a stigmatizing experience, leading to shame, self-blaming, feelings of being abnormal, and sometimes to lying strategies. This perceived stigma seems to be increasing over time.

These findings echo the social clock theory (Freund, & Baltes, 2005), stating that culturally-defined windows for normative transitions, such as sexual activity, serve as a barometer for social acceptance.

Clinical implications

Increasing the visibility of adulthood virgins “Everyone is NOT doing it” (Mullaney, 2006)

Study limitations and Future research

Preliminary phase of the research project, requiring further reflectivity and triangulation.

Quantitative data needed with a larger sample of adult virgins.

References