

Stability and Change in Sexual Practices among First-Year Australian University Students (1990–1999)

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A questionnaire on sexual attitudes and behavior was administered to first-year students at Macquarie University in Sydney every year from 1990 to 1999 ($N = 4295$ aged 18–19; 72.5% female). Responses to questions about experience of different sexual practices (tongue kissing, oral sex, and vaginal intercourse) with regular and casual partners were analyzed for trends. Over half of the students each year (on average 64% of the men, 57% of the women) had experience of oral sex or vaginal intercourse. More male than female students reported experience of each practice, especially with casual partners. Rates for female students increased significantly over the 10-year period for all practices except tongue kissing with a regular partner and vaginal sex with a casual partner; rates for male students were apparently steady. Results are consistent with evidence from other sources of an increase in the acceptability of oral sex (both fellatio and cunnilingus) in recent decades and of increasing similarity between young men's and women's reports of sexual experience.

KEY WORDS: sex behavior; adolescents; Australia; oral sex; coitus.

INTRODUCTION

Health education targeted at gay men in Australia since the 1980s has promoted oral, manual, and other non-penetrative sexual practices as well as recommending condom use for anal intercourse. However, the advice given to high school students and the general public has tended to focus simply on condom use, thus giving the implicit message that the only relevant or important kind of sex is the sort one needs a condom for—vaginal or anal intercourse. Oral and non-penetrative sex have not been explicitly promoted. But has young people's sexual practice changed?

Claims that young people's sexual behavior has been changing over recent years are common (Donovan, 2000), but longitudinal studies—or even cross-sectional data based on similar methods and similar samples

used at different times—are scarce (Noone, Chalmers, Hollinsworth, McIntyre, & Cant, 1999; Peipert et al., 1997; Schmidt, Klusmann, Dekker, & Matthiesen, 1998; Schmidt, Klusmann, Zeitzschel, & Lange, 1994). Most studies of young people focus on sexual risk for sexually transmitted infection or pregnancy rather than on types of sexual practice (Brener et al., 2002).

In Australia, there have been numerous surveys of high school (Cubis, Lewin, & Raphael, 1985; Dunne, Donald, Lucke, Nilsson, & Raphael, 1993; Dunne et al., 1994; Kang & Zador, 1993; Lindsay, Smith, & Rosenthal, 1997, 1999) and university students (Rosenthal, Smith, Reichler, & Moore, 1996; Turtle et al., 1989) and a few of other young people (Grunseit & Richters, 2000; Hillier et al., 1998; Smith & Rosenthal, 1997; Tresidder, 2003), but few surveys have been repeated over an extended period to allow an analysis of change over time (Rosenthal et al., 1996; Rosenthal, Smith, & Lindsay, 1998).

Cubis et al. (1985) focused on predictors of pregnancy rather than on sexual practice in general, though non-coital practice was mentioned, dividing sexual experience into “major” (i.e., intercourse) and “minor” in answer to the question “Have you had any sexual

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experience with a partner other than intercourse (e.g., cuddling, petting, etc.)?” Oral sex was not specifically mentioned. In this sample of teenagers aged 14–16 inclusive in 1983, 27% had had intercourse.

Dunne et al. (1993) reported on the 1992 high school survey, which covered all high school years from Year 7 to Year 12 (approximate ages 11 to 18) and most Australian states. The questionnaire asked about “sex”—by implication intercourse—but not explicitly about oral sex. Among Year 12 students (aged 16–18), 84% of the males and 90% of the females had experienced tongue kissing, and 78% of the males and 81% of the females had experienced sexual touching; 49% of the males and 47% of the females had “had sex.” This finding is consistent with a gradual progression at the individual level from kissing through touching or genital fondling, with many, indeed the majority, of final-year students not yet coitally experienced. Lindsay et al. (1999) reported on the 1997 high school survey, finding that 88% of Year 12 students had experienced passionate kissing, 79% had experienced sexual touching, and 48% had had sexual intercourse. No difference in these rates compared with 1992 was apparent.

A study of out-of-school youth in 1994 revealed higher rates of sexual participation and risk-taking among 16-year-olds: 84% of the girls and 78% of the boys had had vaginal intercourse (Tresidder, 2003; Tresidder, Macaskill, Bennett, & Nutbeam, 1997). Many of these young people were also homeless, some as a result of abuse. A national survey of technical college students in 1995 found that leaving school later was predictive of later age at first intercourse (Grunseit & Richters, 2000). Thus, research on senior high school and university students is likely not to be generalizable to all other young people of the same age. Technical college students, many of whom leave school after Year 10, and who spend time in the adult environment of the workplace rather than being full-time students, may represent an intermediate group between students who leave early and those who complete high school.

One phenomenon that contributes to the correlation between school leaving age and first intercourse is “schoolies week.” In the after-examination period of early summer, thousands of school leavers descend on the beach holiday region of Surfers Paradise in Queensland, with the intention of getting drunk and often of having sex (Smith & Rosenthal, 1997).

Studies of high school students are constrained in the questions they can ask about details of sexual practice by the need to avoid offending school authorities and parents. We therefore lack information about oral sex among adolescents and its place in the “script” for sex

among those embarking on their sexual lives. The recent Australian national sex survey (Smith, Rissel, Richters, Grulich, & de Visser, 2003) revealed clear differences between age cohorts in their range of sexual practices, in particular whether they practiced oral sex (fellatio or cunnilingus) (Rissel, Richters, Grulich, de Visser, & Smith, 2003a). Because it was cross-sectional, however, its ability to distinguish between secular change and age effects was limited.

In response to the advent of AIDS, surveys of the sexual attitudes and behavior of students at the University of Sydney and at Macquarie University (also in Sydney) were initiated in the late 1980s (Rodden, Crawford, Kippax, & French, 1996; Turtle et al., 1989; Van de Ven, Kippax, Crawford, & French, 1997; Van de Ven, Turtle, Kippax, Crawford, & French, 1996). This led to the development of a questionnaire that with minor modifications was administered to the incoming first-year class in behavioral sciences at Macquarie University every year from 1990 to 1999.

In this analysis, we used the 10 years of data to see whether there were discernible trends over time in the proportion of students reporting that they had ever experienced a range of sexual practices, including oral sex and vaginal intercourse.

METHOD

Participants

From 1990 to 1999, we surveyed first-year students in behavioral sciences at Macquarie University (in Sydney) on their attitudes to and knowledge of HIV/AIDS and their relevant risk behaviors. Respondents were studying behavioral sciences as part of degrees in arts, science, or economics. This analysis was restricted to students aged 19.5 years or younger to capture young school leavers.³

Over the decade, a total of 4295 students aged 18–19 took part in the survey during a compulsory lecture in March (the start of the academic year). Both day and evening students were surveyed. The number of respondents in each year ranged from 172 to 563 for

³On the basis of data on course year and age, we aimed to select students who had probably left school the previous year, without excluding those who were older than the minimum age for completing six years of high school because they had changed schools, repeated a year or come from another state or country. We therefore included all students up to 19 and 6 months, rounding their ages to the nearest whole year, calling those aged 17 years 7 months to 18 years 6 months “18-year-olds” and those aged 18 years 7 months to 19 years 6 months “19-year-olds” (Rodden et al., 1996).

female students and 57 to 280 for male students. Female students constituted 72.5% ($n = 3113$) of the total number of respondents; this represented the sex distribution of first-year behavioral science students. Very few of the students who were present in the lecture theatre (less than 1%) refused the survey altogether. Students absent from the lecture were not surveyed.

Across the 10-year study period, the majority of students were from Anglo-Australian backgrounds: 83% (range, 75.9% to 86.4%) were born in Australia and 91.4% spoke English at home (range, 85.1% to 91.6%).

Procedures

Questionnaires were distributed by research staff in a large lecture theatre and were completed anonymously and collected immediately. The survey was approved by the Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee (Human Subjects).

Measures

The questionnaire contained items on sexual attitudes and experience and knowledge related to HIV/AIDS risk and avoidance (National Centre in HIV Social Research, 2001). The key question used for this analysis was "Which of the following have you ever done?" of the following four practices: tongue kissing; oral/genital sex (your mouth/your partner's genitals); oral/genital sex (your partner's mouth/your genitals); and vaginal intercourse. ("Touching sexual organs with the hand" and anal intercourse were also included, but results are not presented here.)⁴ For each practice, separate responses were invited for "with a regular partner" and "with a casual partner." "Regular" and "casual" were not defined, but use of the questionnaire over the years showed that students understood these terms and, at least in the early years, distinguished between the safety of sex acts done with regular and casual partners (Crawford, Turtle, & Kippax, 1990; Rodden et al., 1996). Mindful that many students would be sexually inexperienced, and of the intermittent nature of many adolescents' sexual interactions, we offered the response options "I've never done this," "I used to do this but don't any longer," "I sometimes do this," and "I don't understand this." Students

who checked the box against "I used to do this" or "I sometimes do this" were categorized as having experience of a practice.

The oral sex responses were recoded into new variables for cunnilingus and fellatio, i.e., the cunnilingus variable was generated from female students' responses about receiving oral sex and male students' responses about giving oral sex, and the fellatio variable from male students' responses to receiving oral sex and female students' responses about giving oral sex (Gagnon & Simon, 1987). All students were included in this analysis, regardless of whether they identified as heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual.⁵ Respondents were also asked how many sexual partners they had ever had.

Analysis

To test whether differences over time were statistically significant, a regression analysis was performed for each practice. This was done using survey year as an independent variable in a set of logistic regression analyses with age and sex as covariates. Odds ratios were calculated to show the increase (or decrease) in odds of reporting having engaged in a practice per unit increase in the independent variable (year of survey). In the case of binary variables (such as sex), this was the odds of engaging in the practice associated with the category dummy coded 1 (e.g., for sex, female was coded 1 and male was coded 0) compared with the reference category. An experiment-wise alpha of .05 was used, which meant the criterion for significance for each regression was .006 after a Bonferroni adjustment to allow for the number of tests (eight).

RESULTS

All except 100 students gave a response to at least one of the listed sexual practices of tongue kissing, oral sex, and vaginal intercourse, giving a sample size of 4195. Missing data for each practice ranged from 7% (for vaginal sex with a regular partner) to 12.5% (for cunnilingus with a casual partner). However, missing data varied from year to year. In 1998, up to 33.1% of responses were missing (vaginal sex with a casual partner) and in

⁴A question about "mutual masturbation" or manual sex (stimulating partner's genitals with the hand) was also asked, but was not included in the trend analysis because the wording and position of the question was not consistent from 1990 to 1999. Few respondents reported experience of anal intercourse, so numbers were small and varied erratically from year to year (between 2.6% and 7.4%).

⁵A subanalysis (not reported here) found that very few students (around 2 per cent) each year identified as other than heterosexual. The majority of them were bisexual women, who were at least as likely to have sex with opposite-sex partners as their counterparts who identified as heterosexual. Exclusion of this group from analysis very slightly changes the reported odds and p values, but does not change the general direction and significance of the results reported here.

Table I. Proportion of Students Having Participated in Each Sexual Practice, Pooled for 1990 to 1999, by Sex

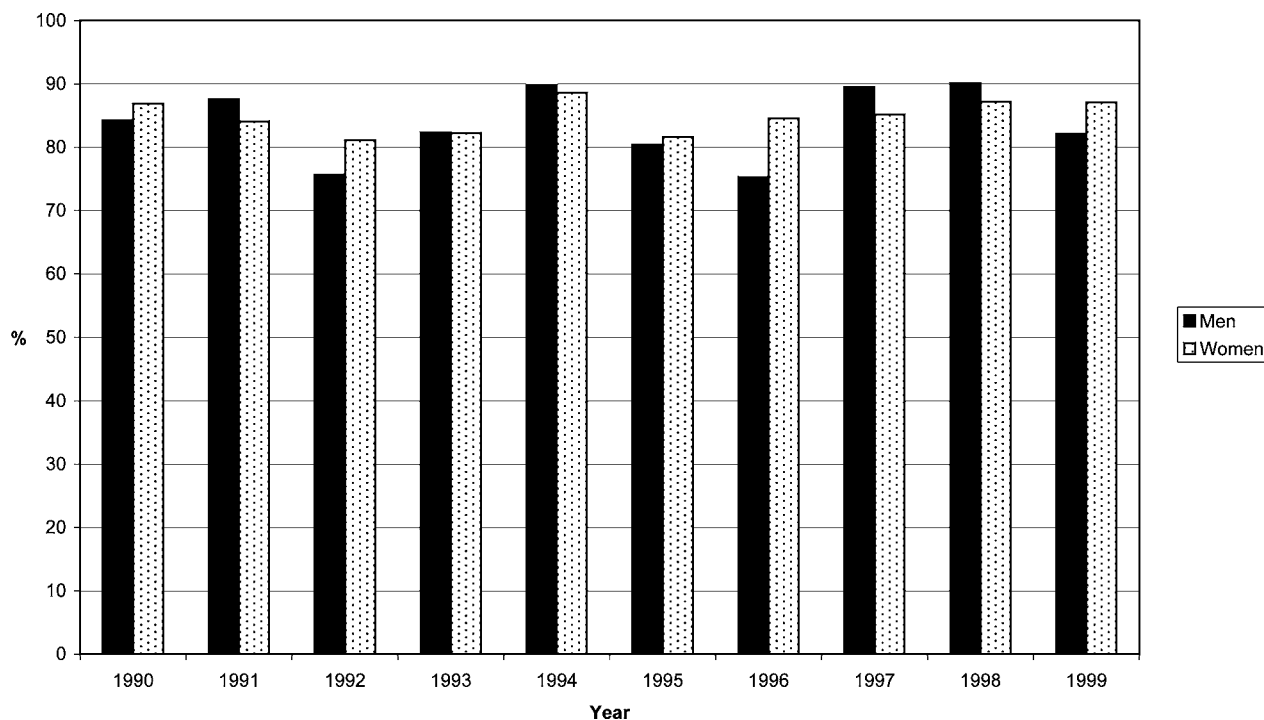
Practice	Male students		Female students		χ^2	<i>p</i>	Effect size Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%			
Tongue kissing with regular partner	1072	83.2	2914	84.6	1.07	ns	
Tongue kissing with casual partner	1056	75.1	2774	69.9	10.09	<.001	.12
Fellatio with regular partner	1069	50.5	2927	48.3	1.52	ns	
Fellatio with casual partner	1041	36.4	2730	18.1	141.37	<.001	.42
Cunnilingus with regular partner	1076	50.7	2907	47.8	2.76	ns	
Cunnilingus with casual partner	1031	32.8	2725	18.2	92.07	<.001	.34
Vaginal sex with regular partner	1071	53.7	2922	46.8	16.37	<.001	.14
Vaginal sex with casual partner	1037	39.3	2724	15.8	239.77	<.001	.54

1999 up to 22% (cunnilingus with a casual partner). It is not clear why there was such a high proportion of missing values for some practices in some years, as the layout and wording of the question did not vary. It is likely that some students who had not experienced a practice simply left the question blank, but why this should change from year to year was not clear. Where appropriate, trend analyses were conducted with and without the relevant year to examine whether this changed the results; no significant change was observed.

Table I shows the combined proportions of male and female respondents from 1990 to 1999 who reported that

they had experienced each sexual practice. Male students generally reported higher rates of experience of each of the eight sexual practices over the 10 years of surveys, especially with casual partners. Over the 10 years, on average 64% of the men and 57% of the women each year reported that they had experienced oral sex (given or received) or vaginal intercourse with a regular or casual partner; 57% of men and 48% of women had experienced vaginal intercourse.

Figures 1–8 show the proportion of students reporting having experienced each practice from 1990 to 1999, separately for male and female students. There

**Fig. 1.** Tongue kissing with regular partner.

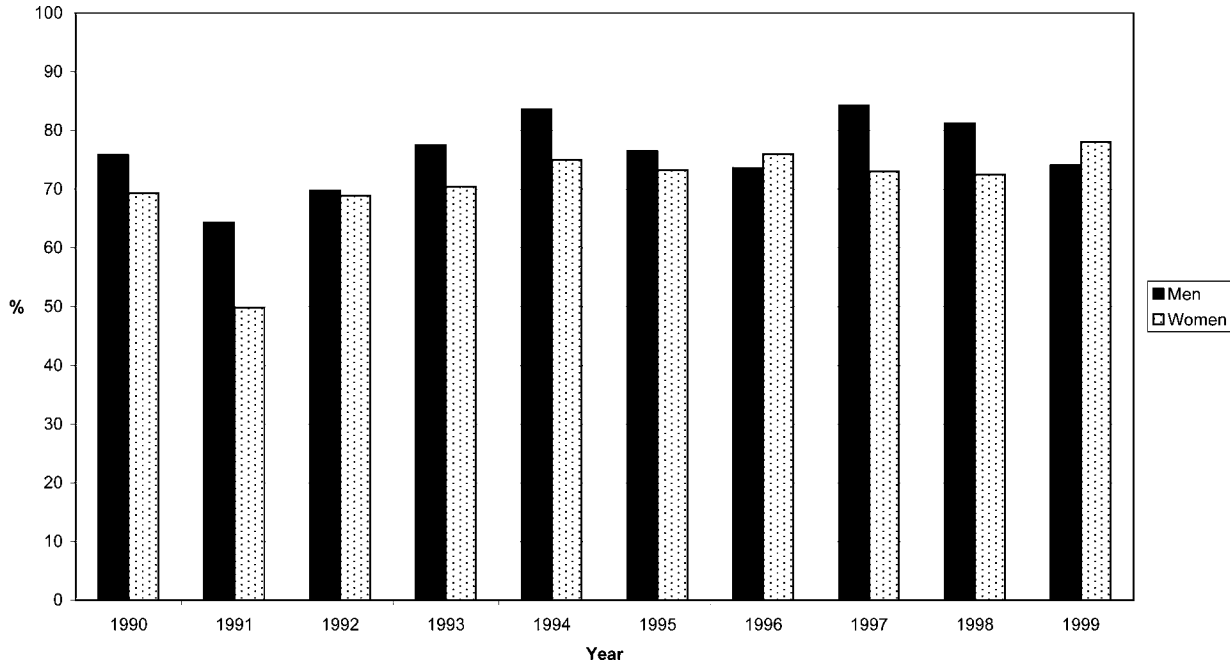


Fig. 2. Tongue kissing with casual partner.

was some change—mostly an increase—across the years of the survey in the reported rates of experience for most of the practices. The differences appear to be more consistent for female students. For example, 69% of

young women in 1990, 75% in 1994, and 78% in 1999 reported the experience of tongue kissing with a casual partner. For the young men, the corresponding proportions were 76%, 84%, and 74%. Further, for female students,

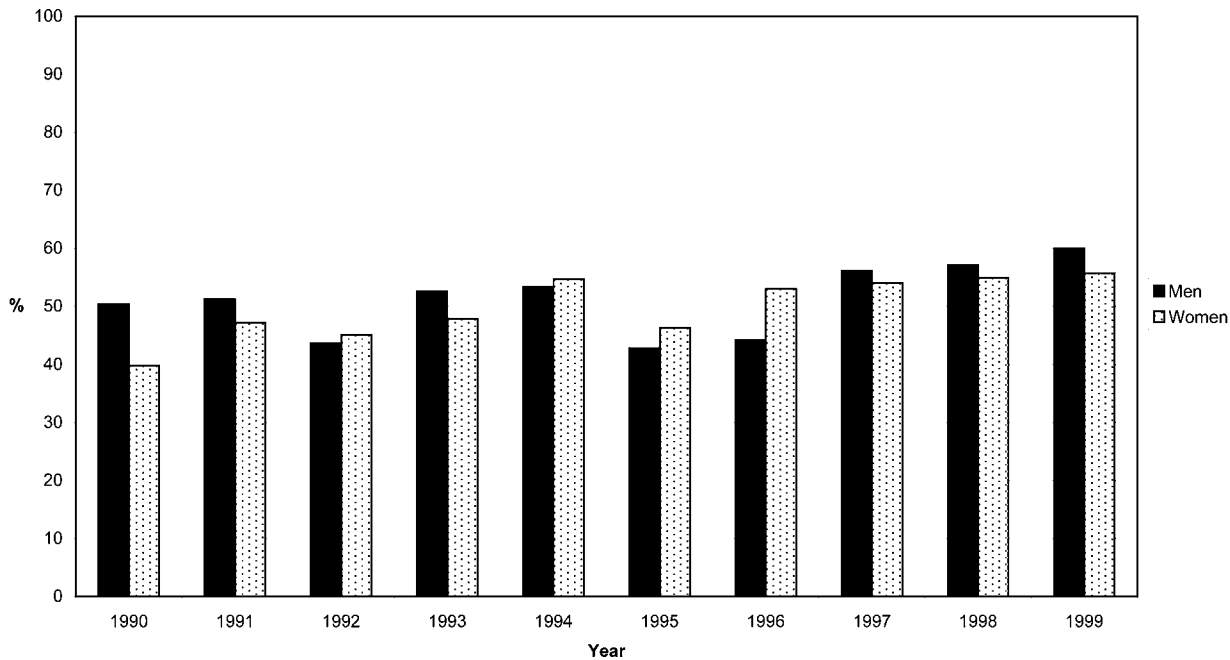


Fig. 3. Fellatio with regular partner.

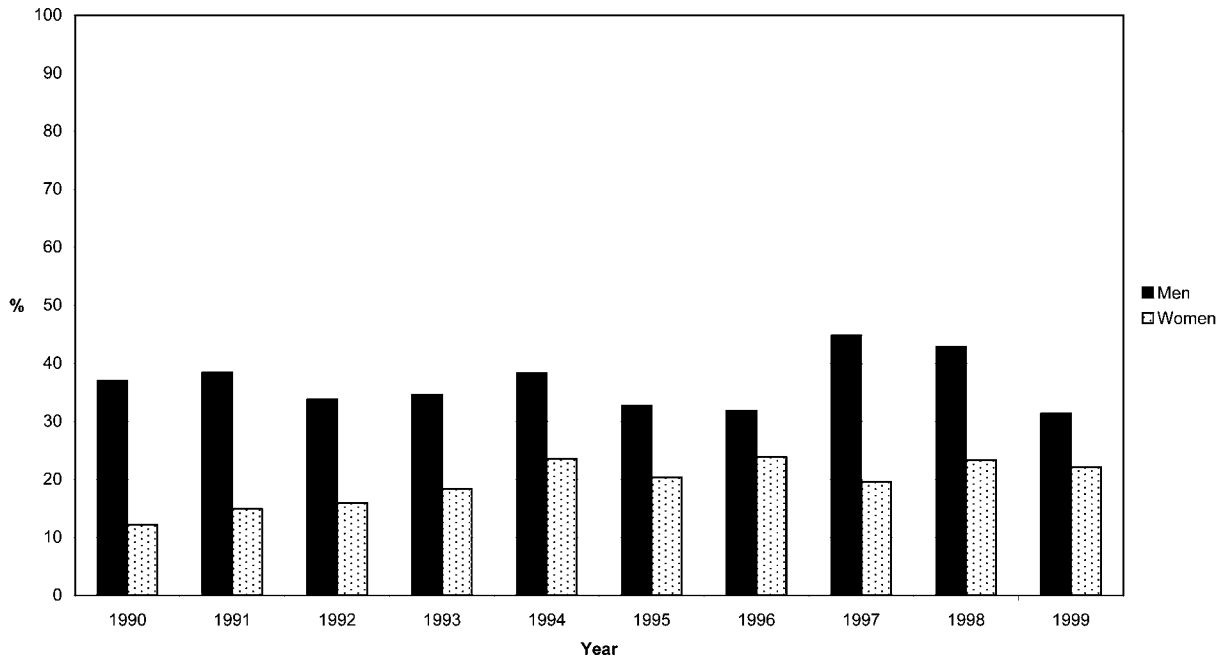


Fig. 4. Fellatio with casual partner.

experience of cunnilingus with a regular partner rose by 16 percentage points between 1990 (41%) and 1999 (57%), and experience with casual partners rose from 14% to 23%. Fellatio with a regular partner increased 16

percentage points in the 10 years from 1990 (40%) to 1999 (56%), and from 12% to 22% with casual partners over the same period. For some practices (e.g., cunnilingus and fellatio with a regular partner), more young men

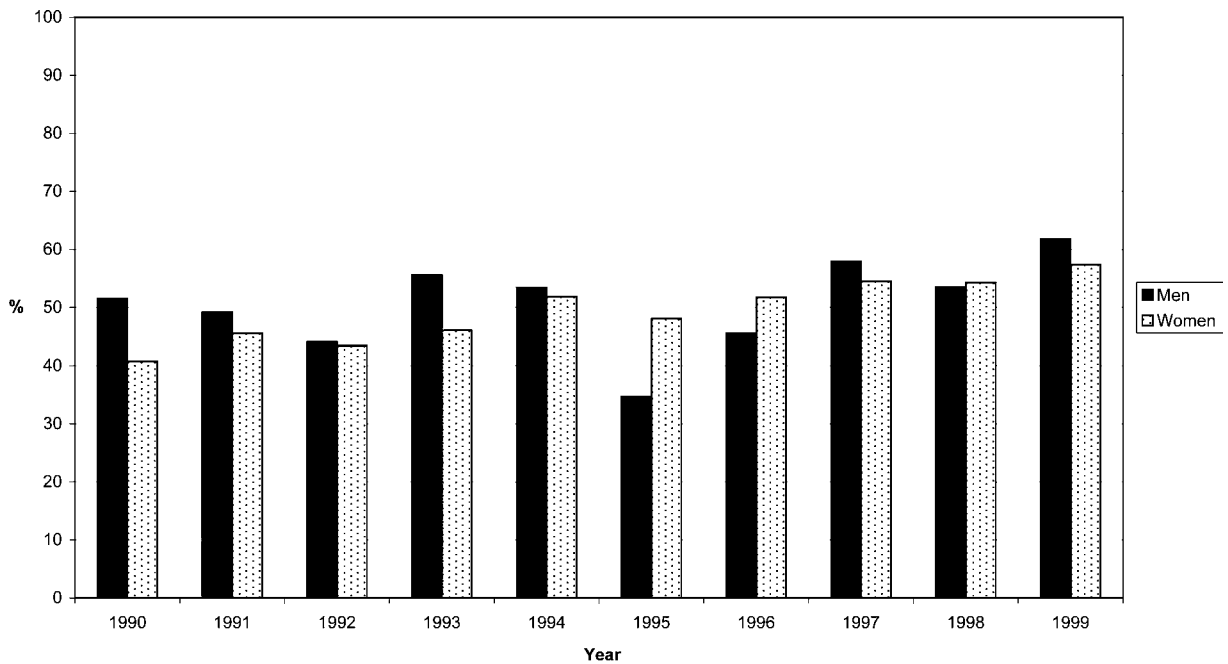


Fig. 5. Cunnilingus with regular partner.

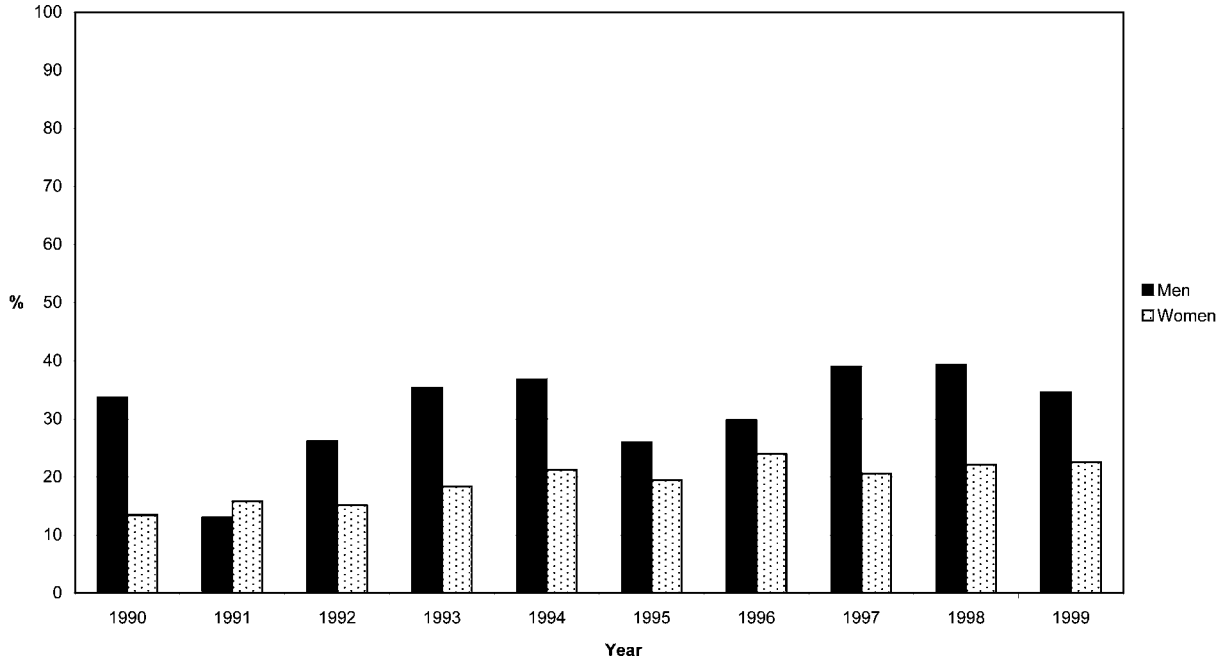


Fig. 6. Cunnilingus with casual partner.

reported experience in 1999 than in 1990, as may be seen in Figs. 3 and 5, but there was considerable variability in the intervening years compared with the relatively steady rise observable for the young women. It is likely that the

low number of male students in each year contributed to this variation. To summarize, the young men were somewhat less likely than the young women to report having no partners at all, and about twice as likely to

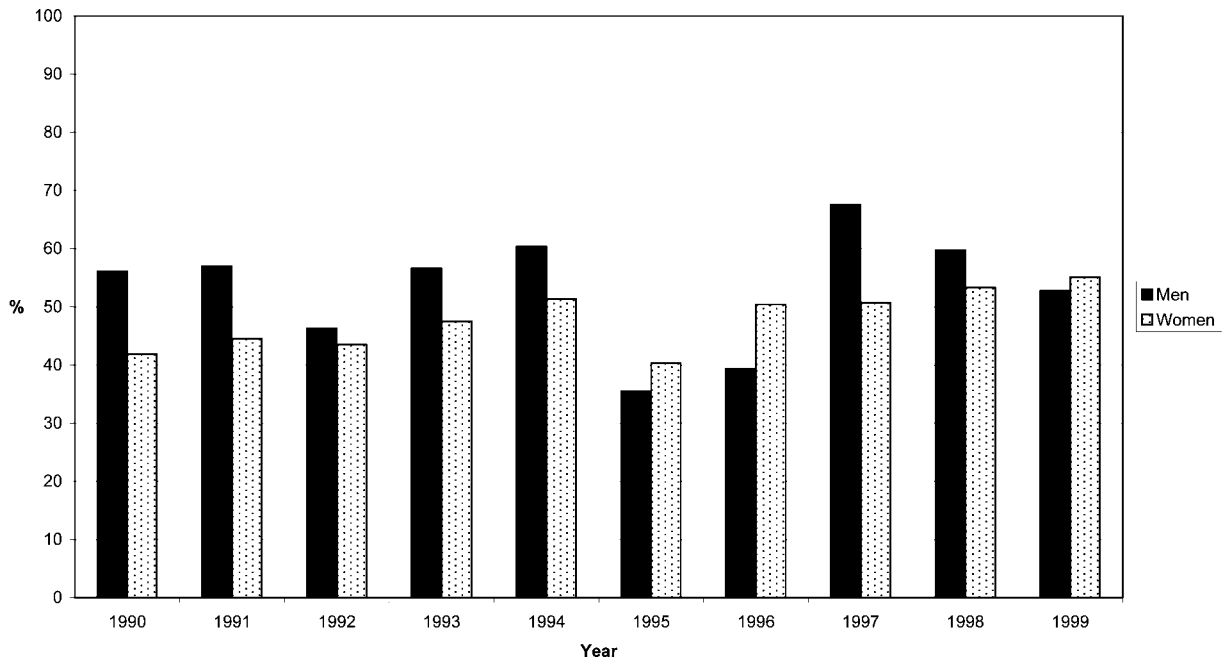


Fig. 7. Vaginal intercourse with regular partner.

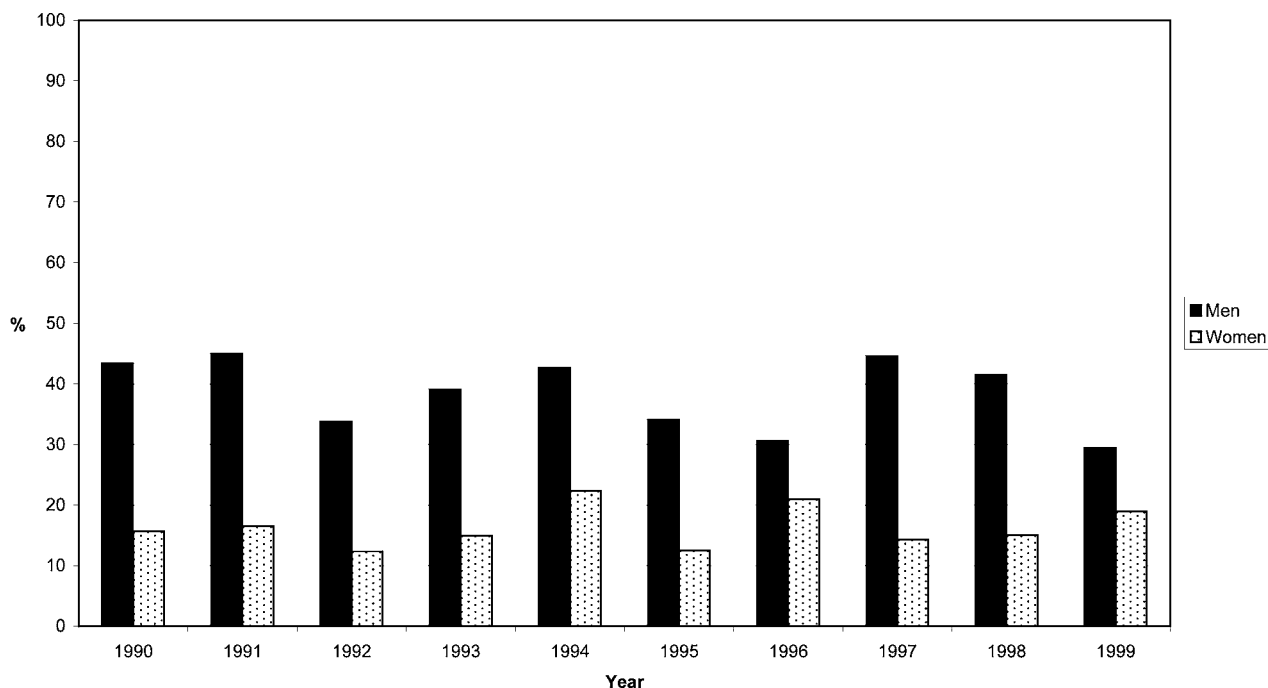


Fig. 8. Vaginal intercourse with casual partner.

have partners they regarded as casual. As for the trend over the years, the men's figures were somewhat labile, and the women's showed a moderate but fairly steady decrease in the percentage who reported no partners at all, from 53% in 1990 to 39% in 1999. The small percentage of students reporting higher numbers of partners (five or more) showed no clear trend over time.

To test whether the differences across the years were statistically significant, a regression was performed for each practice. The results are displayed in Table II.

Table II shows that there were significant increases in the proportion of students participating in a range of sexual

practices with both regular and casual partners between 1990 and 1999. Six of the eight sexual practices showed significant linear increases over time. For example, the odds for reporting experience of fellatio with a regular or with a casual partner increased by 5% per year, as it did for cunnilingus. The only exceptions to this trend were for tongue kissing with a regular partner and vaginal sex with a casual partner, for which the effect of survey year did not reach statistical significance.

There were also a number of significant results for sex. For tongue kissing, fellatio, cunnilingus, and vaginal sex with a casual partner, and for vaginal sex

Table II. Main Effects Analyses of Experience of Sexual Practices by Sex, Age, and Year of Survey 1990 to 1999 (odds ratios are adjusted)

Variable (reference category) Practice	Year		Sex (male)		Age (age 18)	
	Odds ratio ^a	<i>p</i>	Odds ratio	<i>p</i>	Odds ratio	<i>p</i>
Tongue kissing with regular partner	1.01	ns	1.12	ns	1.26	.009
Tongue kissing with casual partner	1.07	<.001	0.75	<.001	1.13	ns
Fellatio with regular partner	1.06	<.001	0.92	ns	1.57	<.001
Fellatio with casual partner	1.05	<.001	0.38	<.001	1.41	<.001
Cunnilingus with regular partner	1.06	<.001	0.89	ns	1.54	<.001
Cunnilingus with casual partner	1.06	<.001	0.45	<.001	1.42	<.001
Vaginal sex with regular partner	1.04	.002	0.77	<.001	1.58	<.001
Vaginal sex with casual partner	0.99	ns	0.29	<.001	1.57	<.001

^aIncrease in the odds of having participated in the sexual practice per year (adjusted for age and sex).

with a regular partner, female students had lower odds of reporting engaging in these practices than male students. For example, female students had less one-third the odds of reporting vaginal sex with a casual partner, and three-quarters the odds of reporting vaginal sex with a regular partner, compared with male students. With one exception, where there were significant differences between the sexes, the practices were with casual rather than regular partners.

DISCUSSION

These surveys of university students were originally carried out to investigate knowledge about and experience of HIV risk practices among young Australians. Because we collected data in the same way over 10 years we were able to identify current trends in sexual practice among the students. Although the experience of tongue kissing with a regular or casual partner was very common (around 80% of respondents), less than 60% of these first-year students had experienced oral sex or vaginal intercourse. This was a considerably lower proportion having sexual experience by their late teens than other groups in Australia such as technical college students, among whom 83% of 18-year-olds had had intercourse in 1995 (Grunseit & Richters, 2000). Among prison inmates, 46% had had intercourse before they turned 15 (Butler, 1997). In the national household survey, among those aged 16–19 inclusive, 50% of male and female respondents had had oral sex, and 59% of male and 56% of female respondents had had vaginal intercourse (de Visser, Smith, Rissel, Richters, & Grulich, 2003). Our university findings were also similar to Australian final-year high school samples, among whom about half of those aged over 17 had had intercourse (Dunne et al., 1994; Rosenthal et al., 1998).

Generalizability

Are these results generalizable to other Australian university students? Macquarie University is a suburban campus with a high proportion of middle-class students still living with their parents. It is possible that homosexually inclined students and more sexually adventurous students might be more likely to have left home to attend an inner-city university. The proportion of students from backgrounds of low socioeconomic status is lower at Macquarie than at other universities. However, we sampled from a similar population each year, so (given the very low refusal rate) our trend analysis is likely to be robust. Nonetheless, our capacity to detect clear trends

may be limited by the smaller number of male students in each year. The graphs seemed to show linear increases in some practices for men, but the low numbers may have hampered their detection in the statistical analyses (Type II error).

Regular and Casual Partners and Sexual Exclusivity

More students had had sex with regular than with casual partners. Further, more men than women reported sex with casual partners, though this may be partly because men and women have different ways of categorizing partners as “regular.” Young people who consider a relationship to be “regular” are likely to regard it as sexually exclusive: 95% of our respondents in 1998 and 1999 expected that in a relationship with a regular partner they would be “strictly faithful” and “not play around” (unpublished data). This criterion for a regular relationship may be related to the young men’s greater willingness to label partners as casual.

Where there were significant differences in practices between the sexes, the practices were generally with casual rather than regular partners. This is in keeping with other research, which has found that women are less likely than men to engage (or to report engaging) in casual sexual encounters (de Visser et al., 2003). We suspect that the greater tendency of men to report casual partners is only partly related to the possibility that men actually have more casual encounters (a conclusion that would require the corresponding conclusion that in a closed heterosexual population the women with high partner numbers with whom the men have their “extra” encounters are undersampled). Australians’ firm commitment to sexual exclusivity in regular relationships (Rissel, Richters, Grulich, de Visser, & Smith, 2003b, 2003c) means that young men who wish to avoid breaking this rule while still pursuing sex with a number of women (as encouraged by the wider culture and often by their peer groups) are required to define some of their partners as “casual” in order to avoid cognitive dissonance or guilt. Presumably, the women interpret a few days of being pursued culminating in a single sexual encounter not as casual sex but as a regular relationship (or possible future regular relationship) gone wrong. Berg (1994) posited that heterosexual women, rather than pursuing casual sex, engaged in a “constant process of trying out potential lifetime partners. While these one night stands may look just like casual sex from the outside or with hindsight, at the time, they may be perceived very differently: the beginning of the rest of your life, so to speak” (p. 5). This hypothesis needs further exploration through in-depth research.

Changes in Sexual Practice and the Role of Oral Sex

The similarity between men's and women's reports of practices engaged in with regular partners, and the percentage reporting cunnilingus and fellatio, tends to confirm both the validity of the questions and the reciprocity of heterosexual practices in regular relationships as noted by Messiah, Blin, Fiche, and the ACSF Group (1995).

Perhaps the most interesting finding of this analysis was the increase over the decade in the probability of women having experienced almost all the sexual practices, along with a lack of significant change in the same practices among the young men. For example, the odds of young women reporting having experienced tongue kissing with a regular partner, fellatio with a regular or casual partner, and cunnilingus with a regular or casual partner, increased by 7 to 8 per cent per year among female students. None of these practices showed a significant change over time for the male students. Yet, the changes observed demonstrate that for young women at least, there was, in general, increasing sexual participation and a wider range of practice among these university students. The changes were consistent with the finding from the national household survey ($n = 19,307$ aged 16–59) that median age at first intercourse has been declining gradually since the 1950s and that the age difference between men and women is disappearing (Rissel et al., 2003a).

There were larger increases over the decade in experience of oral sex than of vaginal sex (Figs. 3–8). For example, the proportion of all students reporting vaginal intercourse with a regular or casual partner in 1999 was 7.3% higher than in 1990. For oral sex with a casual or regular partner for all students, the increase between 1990 and 1999 was 17%. This raises the question of whether the greater increase in the proportion of students who reported experience of oral sex compared with the proportion reporting vaginal intercourse was an enlargement of sexual repertoire among the sexually experienced students or whether oral sex was increasingly practiced by students before they had had intercourse, perhaps as a safer alternative. The proportion each year who had experienced oral sex (given or received, with a regular or casual partner) but not intercourse ranged from 7.5% in 1990 to 13.5% in 1995, with a mean of 9.3%, but showed no discernible regular change over time between 1990 and 1999. Therefore, it would appear from our data that oral sex is not so much replacing or preceding vaginal sex as simply becoming more common.

What is driving this change in experience of oral sex is open to speculation. Over the decade, there seems to have been a repositioning of oral sex as mainstream

sexual practice, such that it makes an appearance earlier in people's sexual careers. This may be a function of a general move towards sexual liberalism or perhaps as a response to the hazards of the transmission of HIV through penetrative sexual practices. In the Australian national survey, Rissel et al. (2003a) found that nearly a quarter of respondents aged 16 to 19 reported first oral sex at an earlier age than first intercourse. Older respondents were much less likely to report this (12% of respondents in their 20s and 2% of those in their 50s). It is possible that the greater cultural salience of "loss of virginity" may have led older respondents to remember first intercourse and forget any oral sex that preceded it, even though older people are more likely to regard oral sex as constituting "sex" (Richters & Song, 1999; Rissel et al., 2003b). On the other hand, it may demonstrate that oral sex is enjoying greater legitimacy and acceptability in recent times among young people. The very fact that we were able to ask about it could be seen as evidence for its greater acceptability in recent years, as earlier studies were not explicit about what practices were covered by terms such as "petting." However, Roberts, Kippax, Sponberg, & Crawford (1996), after interviewing 73 university students in depth about sexual practice, found considerable ambivalence about cunnilingus: "although giving oral sex to women was seen by the university students . . . as a required part of 'modern' and 'enlightened' sexual experience, it was never mentioned with pleasure or excitement" (p. 111).

Schmidt (1999) has suggested that in the long-term social change towards what Giddens (1992) called the "pure relationship" it is no longer specific non-coital practices once seen as perversions (or pre- or extramarital partners, or same-sex partners) that are unacceptable, but rather failures of negotiation within the relationship—breaking the individual contract. In this moral system, a range of sexual practices and partners (of either gender) are acceptable as long as the terms of the understanding with the partner are not broken. Schmidt (1995) proposed that "today's boys feel less overwhelmed by urgent sexual needs than their counterparts did twenty years ago" (p. 17) and the corollary of this is that young women are more able to express their own sexual agency with relative sexual safety. Hence, young women are more able to engage in practices once associated with "bad" women and more able, one presumes, to report their sexual activities honestly in surveys.

CONCLUSION

The significant change in young university women's sexual behavior brings it closer to men's. An Australian survey of technical college students in 1995 also found no

evidence for the previously consistent difference between men's and women's reports of their sexual histories (Grunseit & Richters 2000). We may be seeing the end of the era in which "nice girls" did not do "that sort of thing." The difference that remains is one in the categorization of partners as regular or casual. Rather than saying that young women are less likely to have sex with casual partners, it might be more accurate to say they are unwilling to classify anyone with whom they have had had vaginal intercourse or oral sex as a "casual partner." This is in accordance with dominant mores expressed by parents, other adolescents, and the popular media that premarital sex is acceptable, even desirable, among the over-16s, but should be confined to "relationships." The schoolyard is still ready to label any girl a "slut" if she openly challenges this norm. The details of how these differences in interpretation or labeling are played out between the sexes require further investigation. The tendency, notorious in young women's magazines, for men to appear "commitment-phobic" may reflect a reluctance on the part of the young men to find themselves in a "regular relationship" simply because they have had sex with someone. Whatever the reasons, our results are consistent with a lessening of the sexual double standard.

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