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SPCH 1318

Let's Talk About Sex: Communicating Past Sexual Relationships with Current Partners

The purpose of this study is to examine how individuals discuss previous sexual relationships with current partners. Over the past 16 weeks I have studied, in depth, about communicating past sexual relationships with current partners. Everyone views sex differently, and I am interested in studying how the awkward “what have you done” conversation that goes on to happen in relationships. Previous studies have been done to show how people receive the information; Lancaster, Ball, Borchert, and William (2016) studied how people deal with their partners information-management strategies when learning about their partners past sexual relationships. This current study is to see what it is like from the side of giving the information. I chose this topic because I am interested in discovering the best way to maintain strong healthy relationships throughout a lifetime.

Method

Participants

Participants included 10 college students (four males, six females), all but two attend Collin College. Ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 29 years old. Of the 10 participants, six were in a serious relationships ranging from two weeks to two years; three were married

ranging from two to four years; and one did not report his/her relationship status. All 10 participants responded that they were heterosexual.

Procedures and Instrumentation

Data collection occurred during week nine of a 16-week semester. Participants were directed to answer five open-ended survey questions. These open-ended questions asked participants to explain how they told their current partner about their past sexual relationships. This survey also asked five demographic questions asking the participants age, gender, relational status, and sexual orientation. No students completed surveys in my presence. Of the 10 participants, I knew all of them personally.

Data Analysis

When evaluating each survey, I went through each question and each participant separately. I placed similar answers in the same pile for each question. Once finished reading each participant's answers I created a code for each pile on a notecard. For participants who had answers along the lines of "telling the truth" or "just wanting to be honest" I created the code "honesty" for that one group of participants. Once finished with question one, I proceeded to questions two, three, four, and five with the same concept of coding with notecards.

Results

Question one asked participants what they say to their current partner about past sexual relationships. Three codes emerged from this question: honesty, topic avoidance, and trust issues. Eight participants fell under the code of honesty, one under topic avoidance, and one under trust issues. Of the eight participants who fell under honesty, participant nine indicated, "...went through our past history for the sole purpose of being open and honest..." Participants four and eight indicated that they felt honesty was the best way to communicate the information. Of the one who fell under topic avoidance participant two indicated, "...I would like to avoid the situation all together." Of the one who fell under trust issues, participant three said, "I will usually tell them how many I have been with if I trust them."

Question two asked participants how long they waited to tell their partners. Three codes emerged from this question: relational status, early in the relationship, and seriousness of the relationship. One participant fell under relational status, four fell under early in the relationship, and five fell under the seriousness of the relationship. Participant one fell under relational status and said, "...if it is becoming more than friends or more than a crush I give small clips but if I am dating someone I would disclose what I have done." Participant two and three both fell under early in the relationship. Participant two said, "...something you would want to talk about towards the beginning of the relationship. The farther the relationship goes on, the less and less I want to know about it" and participant three stated, "I feel I am not being honest if I do not tell them at the beginning of the relationship." Participants four, seven, and eight fell under the code of once a relationship becomes serious. Participant four said, "...until I know I won't be judged or left", participant seven said, "As soon as a relationship starts to become serious where marriage is a real option", and participant eight stated "...happens during the talk about boundaries."

Question three asked participants how they bring up the topic. Four codes emerged from this question: gender specific topic, unnecessary topic, casual conversation, and sexual instigation. One participant fell under gender specific topic, two participants fell under unnecessary topic, five participants fell under casual conversation, and two participants fell under sexual instigation. Of the one participant who fell under gender specific, participant one indicated, "I feel like as a female I am not the one who brings it up." Participant four, who fell under unnecessary topic stated, "I generally try to avoid the topic unless it seems necessary." Of the five participants who fell under casual conversation, participant 10 said, "Just laid it out there." Of the two participants who fell under sexual instigation, participant five said, "We were making out and things escalated and then he wanted to know about each other's past."

Question four asked participants why they tell their partner. Of the 10 participants answers, only two codes emerged from this question. The first code was no secrets and the second was self assurance. Eight participants fell under no secrets and two participants fell under self assurance. Of the eight who fell under no secrets, participant seven said, "To better your relationship as well as show that you have nothing to hide" and participant nine said, "Honesty, no secrets, and to show that we are imperfect people that have made interesting choices." Of the two who fell under self assurance, participant six said, "I told my partner, so he could know more about me, know my morals, and know the true me."

Question five asked participants if they had anything else to add, only two participants recorded an answer. Therefore, only two codes could emerge, awkward and sincerity. Participant five, who fell under awkward said, "the convo is awk". Participant four, who fell under sincerity said, "Past sexual relationships are a big part of you. There's a reason you have never slept with

anybody or a reason you have slept with a lot of people. Sharing about past sexual relationships is difficult and awkward either way.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to find out how individuals communicate their past sexual relationships with their current partners. Lancaster, Ball, Borchert, and William's (2016) journal concluded that individuals tend to have a negative attitude about discussing past sexual relationships. “This current study showed the negative and positive emotions in the context of information-management efforts regarding a current partner's past relationships...this current study provided support for this claim in the case of the experience of negative emotions” (Lancaster, Ball, Borchert, & William, 2017, p. 66). I found this study to contradict what I found in the current study. Being honest was a common theme for most participants, all but one felt it was an important topic in a relationship. I found that nine of the 10 participants were not ashamed of their past sexual activities, I found that to be quite interesting. I believed I would find more participants not wanting to discuss their past sexual relationships. Only two participants fell under that code, self assurance. Participant four said, when answering question four, “To explain the type of person I was in my past...I carry a lot of shame because of that...” It was interesting to see how most participants were open in their relationships when discussing past sexual relationships. When in a committed relationship, couples are more likely to disclose more information with one another than couples who are not in a committed relationship (Denes, 2012). This shows that couples who are in serious relationships tend to have more in-depth

conversations about disclosure. The current study shows that most individuals want to be honest with their partners about their past.

Interestingly, most participants wanted to discuss their past sexual activities during the beginning of the relationship, most participants wrote that they would share this information within the first month of the relationship. I also found that most participants saw this conversation to be more casual than serious. Participant three said, "It's usually a normal discussion between us. It's never weird or awkward." Eight participants felt that everything should be out in the open and that it helps the relationship. Participant two indicated, "I believe one of the main keys to a healthy relationship is being open and honest about anything and everything." In this current study, I found that most individuals still value trust in a relationship.

We can learn from this current study that every human makes mistakes and deserves to have somebody to love them. Self-disclosure of past sexual relationships is a necessary part of relational development. This current study helps to prove that being honest can lead to stronger healthier relationships throughout a lifetime.

References

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