

The Lived Experiences of Sexual Desire Among Chinese-Canadian Men and Women

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How North American Chinese conceptualize and experience sexual desire is not well understood, and may have implications for understanding cross-cultural differences in sexual functioning. This study examined narratives of sexual desire among Chinese men and women in Canada. Ten each of Chinese men (age: $M = 24.0$, range = 18–42) and women (age: $M = 23.5$, range = 19–38) took part in semi-structured interviews in which they were invited to share personal accounts of sexual desire. A phenomenological analysis of participants' responses showed men and women described desire as having genital, nongenital-physical, and cognitive-emotional components. Chinese cultural prohibitions against sexuality, particularly pronounced in women, were a common inhibitor of desire. Relationship factors appeared as a frequently endorsed context and target of desire. These findings suggest that relationship context is of paramount importance in Chinese individuals and that previous findings of low sexual functioning in this group may be due to inhibition from cultural factors. However, the experience of desire in Chinese individuals is also in many ways similar to that of existing conceptualizations from Western samples.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing ethnic diversity of Western nations necessitates expanding our understanding of how different ethnic groups experience sexuality. According to the 2011 Canadian census, visible minorities comprised 19.1% of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2015). People of Chinese descent are one of the fastest growing ethnic groups and one of the largest contributors to immigration in North America. These demographics suggest that scientific attention toward understanding the sexual health of Chinese individuals is crucial for meeting the health needs of this expanding population. Specifically, elucidating how various aspects of sexual functioning, such as sexual desire, are experienced by Chinese individuals will meet the needs of clinicians to truly deliver culturally competent care (Atallah et al., 2016; Bhavsar & Bhugra, 2013).

Evidence of ethnic differences in sexuality and sexual functioning has steadily accumulated. Several nationwide surveys, including the Study of Women's Health Across the Nation in the United States (Cain et al., 2003) and the British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles in Great Britain (Fenton et al., 2005), have examined the relationship between ethnicity and sexual health variables. Many smaller studies have also investigated the influence of ethnicity on sexual behaviors and attitudes (e.g., Ahrold & Meston, 2010; Brotto, Chik, Ryder, Gorzalka, & Seal, 2005; Brotto, Woo, & Ryder, 2007; Feldman, Turner, & Araujo, 1999; Meston, Trapnell, & Gorzalka, 1996, 1998; Regan, Durvasula, Howell, Ureno, & Rea, 2004). These studies have consistently found that individuals of East Asian descent (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) report less sexual knowledge, more sexually conservative attitudes, later onset of partnered sex, less sexual experience, and more sexual difficulties compared to individuals from other ethnic groups, most commonly those of Caucasian descent.

Cultural (as opposed to genetic) factors have emerged as a significant mediator of these ethnic differences. Studies have often examined acculturation, the process by which individuals born into one culture take on the attitudes and behaviors of another, in Chinese individuals living in Western nations. Among East Asian university students in Canada, greater length of residency in Canada was associated with sexual attitudes more similar to those of their Caucasian peers (Meston et al., 1996, 1998). More recent investigations of acculturation utilize a bidimensional model (Berry, 1997), which recognizes that mainstream acculturation (i.e., the adoption of the host culture) occurs independently from heritage culture adherence (i.e., the identification with the culture of one's ancestors). In this model, higher mainstream acculturation predicted better sexual functioning in East Asian men and women, while heritage acculturation at times had a moderating effect (Brotto et al., 2005, 2007). This model has also been found to uniquely predict other sexuality variables, such as sexual cognitions, sexual guilt, and sexual attitudes (e.g., Ahrold & Meston, 2010; Brotto, Woo, & Gorzalka, 2012; Koo, Stephens, Lindgren, & George, 2012; Morton & Gorzalka, 2013; Woo, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2012).

One significant limitation of the existing literature is that studies have utilized Western-based measures of sexual functioning, knowledge, and behaviors, which have been validated in primarily Caucasian populations, thus raising concern about the applicability of such instruments to other cultural groups. Although some have examined these sexuality measures in cross-cultural groups, they have focused on issues of reliability but not validity (Rosen, Cappelleri, & Gendrano, 2002). It is possible that some of the observed ethnic group differences may reflect either genuine differences in sexual difficulties due to Chinese culture, or they may result from the use of measures in a population where their validity has not been thoroughly established. As well, many existing cross-cultural studies have been limited in their ability to explain the specific cultural factors that maintain differences in functioning, perhaps due to a lack of clear knowledge of the way in which Chinese individuals experience various aspects of their sexuality.

Sexuality in Chinese Culture

Sexuality through the lens of Chinese culture represents an integration of both traditional and modern attitudes. Like many historical societies, traditional Chinese culture included prohibitive beliefs and attitudes against sexuality. Some influential belief systems in Chinese history included the Yin-Yang doctrine (Ng & Lau, 1990), Neo-Confucianism (Bond, 1991), and

Chinese Communism (Evans, 1995). These philosophies often prescribed nonreproductive sexual activity and open expressions of sexuality as being unhealthy, disruptive to social and familial harmony, or counterrevolutionary and shameful, respectively. However, diversity in these frameworks also existed; for example, the rise of Communism led to more egalitarian roles for women (Evans, 1995). As well, traditional Western and Christian sexual prohibitions were also present through colonial times, particularly in Hong Kong and Taiwan (Ng & Lau, 1990).

Since the 1980s, changes in government policies have allowed for rapid increase in Western influences, which has led to liberalization in sexual practices and attitudes (Pan, 1994; Xiao, Mehrotra, & Zimmerman, 2011). Greater emphasis on romantic love and sexual enjoyment has particularly increased among the young, urban population. Many Chinese individuals today appear to experience aspects of individualistic North American culture such as the importance of emotional expression and personal fulfillment, as well as aspects of collectivistic Chinese culture, namely the importance of social obligation and conformity (Higgins et al., 2002). With these shifts in cultural values around sexuality, it is likely that attitudes toward sexuality among Chinese individuals may similarly be shifting.

Understanding Sexuality with Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methods are useful for investigating poorly understood constructs (Schwandt, 1994), and may be ideal for characterizing the experiential aspects of sexual functioning (Seal, Bloom, & Somlai, 2000; Tolman, Hirschman, & Impett, 2005). Qualitative research seeks to examine the lived experiences of the participants, rather than constructs predefined by researchers. A phenomenological approach, which uses semi-structured interviews to elicit participants' narratives, is especially suitable for studying sexual experiences (van Manen, 1990). Experiences of sexual desire are of particular interest in the current study. It is the domain most susceptible to difficulties among men and women in North America and Europe (Mitchell, Mercer, Wellings, & Johnson, 2009; Shifren, Monz, Russo, Segreti, & Johannes, 2008). Also, desire can be assessed regardless of the individual's sexual behavior, making it suitable for analysis in Chinese individuals who may have lower levels of sexual activity than Caucasian samples.

Investigation of sexual desire benefits from a qualitative methodology, as it is a complex experience that can be expressed differently between individuals (Giraldi, Kristensen, & Sand, 2015). For example, Regan and Berscheid (1996) had undergraduate participants give essay answers to the question "What is sexual desire?" They found no single definition of desire, but participants primarily described the state of desire as a subjective psychological experience instead of a physiological or behavioral one. Women were found to be more likely to note emotional intimacy as a goal of desire, while men were more likely to cite sexual activity. Brotto et al. (2009) used semi-structured interviews to examine the experiences of desire among middle-aged Caucasian women. Participants' narratives converged on key themes, such as physical, genital, and cognitive-emotional experiences, and emotional connection as a target of desire.

The goal of the current study was to explore the lived experiences of and personal meanings attached to sexual desire among a sample of individuals of Chinese descent living in Canada. Given that our goal was to identify emergent themes from their shared stories, a qualitative approach was the logical choice for methodology. We intended on using the findings to consider

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

		Men (n = 10)	Women (n = 10)
Place of birth	Canada	3	0
	China (Mainland)	3	7
	China (Hong Kong)	0	2
	Malaysia	1	0
	Taiwan	3	1
Age	<i>M</i> (Range)	24.0 (18–42)	23.5 (19–38)
Years of education	<i>M</i> (Range)	15.2 (13–17)	15.5 (12–20)
Relationship status	Single	6	5
	Casual relationship	1	2
	Committed relationship	3	3
Current relationship length (months) ^a	<i>M</i> (Range)	33.1 (3–66)	23.6 (5–60)
Sexual orientation ^b	0	8	7
	2	0	1
	3	0	1
	6	1	1
	Declined to respond	1	0

Notes. ^aThis measure excludes single participants. ^bThis measure rated on a scale of 0 to 6, with 0 = *exclusively heterosexual*, 1 = *predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual*, 2 = *predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual*, 3 = *equally heterosexual and homosexual (bisexual)*, 4 = *predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual*, 5 = *predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual*, 6 = *exclusively homosexual*

whether Western notions of sexual desire may or may not be pertinent to the experiences of East Asian individuals.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were Chinese individuals ($N = 20$; 10 men and 10 women) living in a large cosmopolitan city in Western Canada. Participants were recruited through flyers posted in the community and were compensated \$10.00 for participating. All participants self-identified as being of Chinese ethnicity, and spoke both Mandarin Chinese and English. Neither country of birth nor time spent in Canada was used as inclusion criteria given our wish to accommodate the existence of large populations of overseas Chinese individuals with a wide range of birth nations and to avoid imposing arbitrary criteria for being “sufficiently Chinese.” As well, specific criteria for age, sexual orientation, relationship status, and other demographic variables were avoided in order to better represent the diversity of the Chinese population in Canada (Table 1).

We elected to use the term *gender* instead of *sex* throughout our interviews and when analyzing the transcripts given that, in addition to biological sex differences, we expected group differences associated with differential socialization based on gender identity in both Canadian and Chinese society. We reserved the term *sex differences* for discussing relevant evolutionarily- or physiologically-based differences in mating strategy.

Measures

The Female Sexual Function Index

The FSFI (Rosen et al., 2000) was administered to female participants to assess sexual functioning using a Western-based instrument. The FSFI subscales include desire, arousal, lubrication, orgasm, satisfaction, and pain. In predominantly Caucasian samples, it has been demonstrated to reliably distinguish between women with and without sexual dysfunctions (Wiegel, Meston, & Rosen, 2005). In our sample of women, the arousal, lubrication, orgasm, and pain subscales had good to excellent reliabilities, with Cronbach's alphas of .97, .92, .86, and .99, respectively. The desire and satisfaction subscales had poor reliabilities in this sample, with Cronbach's alphas of .22 and .21, respectively.

The International Index of Erectile Function

The IIEF (Rosen et al., 1997) was administered to male participants to assess sexual functioning using a Western-based instrument. Subscales include erectile function, orgasm, desire, intercourse satisfaction, and general satisfaction. In primarily Caucasian samples, it has been shown to reliably distinguish between men with and without sexual dysfunctions. In our sample of men, erection, orgasm, desire, and intercourse satisfaction subscales had good to excellent reliabilities, with Cronbach's alphas of .94, .98, .89, and .90, respectively. The overall satisfaction subscale had moderate reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of .79.

The Vancouver Index of Acculturation

The VIA (Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000) was administered to assess participants' level of acculturation to the mainstream (Canadian) culture and to their heritage (Chinese) culture. Previous studies involving Asian-Canadian men and women have shown acculturation to predict sexual attitudes and functioning beyond length of residency in Canada, with higher mainstream acculturation predicting better sexual functioning (Brotto et al., 2005, 2007). In our sample, the heritage acculturation and mainstream acculturation subscales had good reliabilities, with Cronbach's alphas of .81 and .91, respectively.

Procedure

Prior to giving consent, participants were provided with written and verbal descriptions of the study. Each participant was then individually interviewed in English for 45 to 60 minutes. Interviewers were gender-matched to the participants. The overarching question that guided the interviews was "What is the lived experience and meaning of sexual desire in Chinese men and women?" Follow-up questions arose from participants' responses and requested clarification or invited additional details and examples (e.g., "What was happening for you in that situation?"). Questions were framed in an open-ended manner, aimed to elicit responses based on participants' own frameworks of understanding. They were based on questions used previously to explore experiences of desire in Caucasian women in order to facilitate comparisons with existing qualitative data (Brotto et al., 2009). Notably, we did not explicitly ask about the role of culture, as we

TABLE 2
Guiding Research Questions Used in Interviews

1.	Can you describe how you experience sexual desire?
2.	Think of a specific time when you experienced sexual desire. Focus your attention on what that experience was like. Can you tell me a story about a time you felt feelings you called sexual desire?
3.	Sexual desire can mean many different things for different people. How do you know when you are experiencing sexual desire?
4.	Some people talk about specific things that trigger the experience of sexual desire, whereas others do not. What kinds of things spark sexual desire for you?

did not wish to impose any specific interpretation onto their experiences at the interview stage. A list of guiding research questions are presented in [Table 2](#).

After the interview, each participant completed a short survey containing a demographic questionnaire and the measures described above in order to better characterize their reported sexual functioning and cultural background. Participants were fully debriefed at the end of their participation. All procedures were approved by the university behavioral research ethics board.

Data Analysis

Quantitative questionnaires

Subscale scores were calculated on the FSFI and IIEF for women and men, respectively. As well, VIA mainstream and heritage acculturation subscale scores were calculated separately by gender. Cohen's *d* was used to estimate effect sizes when comparing our samples to those from published norms on each questionnaire (Rosen et al., 1997, 2000).

Qualitative interviews

All recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, then transcripts were analyzed using a phenomenological approach, with the goal of exploring a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of experienced sexual desire. Our analysis process was based on Marshall and Rossman's (1999) framework for qualitative methods. Prior to the analysis, the coders refamiliarized themselves with the study's objective of understanding Chinese individuals' lived experiences of sexual desire. At this point, we examined our own biases and preconceptions that may skew the analysis; for example, we discussed the origins of our own understanding of desire and identified aspects that were derived from past research and theory based on largely Caucasian populations and Western cultural values. The investigators then read the transcripts independently in a first pass without coding to gain initial impressions. On the second pass, passages that related to desire and that contained ideas discussed by more than one participant were noted. On the third pass, coders examined the previous notes and documented emerging themes from narratives—for example, themes such as “physical experiences of desire” or “the importance of romantic relationships.” On the fourth pass, detailed codes were constructed from another close reading, which were followed by discussion and agreement among the investigators; the themes that emerged are highlighted in [Table 2](#). Finally, using the agreed-upon codes specifically for these themes,

TABLE 3
Sexual Functioning for Women (FSFI) and Men (IIEF)

		M	SD	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Female—FSFI	Desire	6.10	1.10	-.22
	Arousal	11.60	5.48	-.72
	Lubrication	13.30	6.48	-.79
	Orgasm	9.30	4.52	-1.48
	Satisfaction	6.80	2.10	-1.05
	Pain	6.70	6.00	-1.20
	Total	20.25	6.79	-.98
Male—IIEF	Erectile Function	12.70	10.35	-.93
	Orgasmic Function	6.90	4.15	-.35
	Sexual Desire	6.60	1.58	-.13
	Intercourse Satisfaction	4.50	5.87	-.84
	Overall Satisfaction	6.00	1.33	-.87

Note. FSFI = Female Sexual Function Index; IIEF = International Index of Erectile Dysfunction. Cohen's *ds* were calculated by comparing sample statistics to published norms (Rosen et al., 2000; Rosen et al., 1997). Negative Cohen's *ds* indicate lower reported sexual functioning compared to norms.

specific excerpts from the transcripts that related to each theme were identified; examples of these excerpts are presented in the results narrative.

We used two standard methods to establish agreement between the three coders' interpretations of the participants' narratives. First, we identified passages that were coded identically by all investigators. Secondly, we used a process wherein we discussed differences in coding and resolved them as a team using the guidelines for analysis we developed for each theme. A specific score for interrater reliability was not calculated, as it is common practice in qualitative analysis for investigators to engage in a dialogic process of agreement during interpretation in order to obtain as high rates of agreement as possible by the end of data analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). As with most phenomenological research, the small sample size imposes limitations on the ability to generalize regarding group differences, particularly given the wide range of within-gender differences possible. Therefore, differences between men and women were considered meaningful only when a coded theme was discussed by the majority of participants in one gender but none of the participants in the other, and the reviewers through dialogic discussion reached an agreement regarding how the theme presented differently in the two groups. We were able to reach consensus in all cases.

RESULTS

Sexual Functioning and Acculturation

At baseline, the women were on average lower on overall sexual functioning and all subscales of the FSFI, except desire, compared to published norms (Rosen et al., 2000) (Table 3). Based on scores on the sexual desire domain, two of the 10 women scored below the clinical cutoff for hypoactive sexual desire disorder (Gerstenberger et al., 2010). Eight out of the 10 women scored

TABLE 4
Mainstream and Heritage Acculturation (Vancouver Index of Acculturation) of Women and Men Participants

		M	SD	Norm M	Norm SD	Cohen's d
Mainstream	Women	5.76	1.38	6.25	1.34	-.16
	Men	6.90	.80	6.25	1.34	.21
Heritage	Women	6.92	.92	6.93	1.37	.003
	Men	6.99	.93	6.93	1.37	-.02

Note. Cohen's *ds* were calculated by comparing sample statistics to published norms available for participants in Study 3 of Ryder et al., 2000. Negative Cohen's *ds* indicate lower reported acculturation compared to norms.

below the sexual dysfunction clinical cutoff (i.e., within the clinical range) developed by Wiegel et al. (2005). The men were on average lower on all subscales of the IIEF compared to published norms (Rosen et al., 1997). In both men and women, the desire subscales were the ones least different from norms. Our sample had VIA scores comparable to published VIA data taken from a representative sample (Ryder et al., 2000) (Table 4).

Qualitative Themes

We used the research questions outlined in Table 2 to organize subthemes that emerged from the narratives. A list of research questions and major themes within these questions are presented in Table 5. Excerpts that support each theme/subtheme are presented with pseudonyms and the participant's actual age.

RQ1: What is the experience of sexual desire?

All participants were able to describe experiences of sexual desire in their narratives regardless of gender, age, relationship status and history, and acculturation levels. Experiences of sexual desire were captured by the following categories: nongenital-physical experiences, genital experiences, and cognitive-affective experiences.

Nongenital-physical experiences

The majority of men (70%) and women (90%) made reference to nongenital-physical experiences as part of their sexual desire. Most of these experiences pertained to physiological arousal, such as increased heart rate, sweating, hotness in the body, and feeling that they had increased "energy":

Physically speaking, I will feel my body is pretty hot. I will feel like my body is you know, stimulated or something like that. It's more physical feeling like my body will feel hotter, just like after finishing a workout or something like that. (Limin, woman, age 25)

TABLE 5
Coding Scheme Used to Explore Participants' Narratives of Desire

<i>Research Question</i>	<i>Subthemes</i>	<i>Operational Definition</i>
1. What is the experience of sexual desire?	(a) Physical	(a) Descriptions of desire that refer to embodied nongenital experiences
	(b) Genital	(b) Descriptions of desire that refer to genital sensations or reactions
	(c) Cognitive-affective	(c) Descriptions of desire that refer to thoughts, feelings, and motivations
2. What is the meaning of sexual desire?	(a) Chinese culture	(a) References to Chinese culture to explain or justify desire
	(b) Natural human behavior	(b) References to human nature or physiological need to explain or justify desire
3. What are the triggers of sexual desire?	(a) Individual	(a) Triggers and inhibitors of desire outside of the person's relationship circumstances
	(b) Relational	(b) Triggers and inhibitors of desire emerging from a romantic relationship context
4. What are the objects of sexual desire?	(a) Physical-behavioral	(a) Descriptions of desire for sexual intercourse or physical intimacy
	(b) Emotional-relational	(b) Descriptions of desire for emotional intimacy or romantic relationship

Genital experiences

Many participants made references to genital experiences in their discussions of sexual desire. The majority of men (80%) reported penile erection as a part of their experience of desire, and most of women (60%) reported vaginal itchiness, tingling, tightness, and lubrication:

Just whenever I have an erection due to like hot girls or my girlfriend. (Charlie, man, age 27)

It just feels like needing to breathe deeply. Just feel itchy down in the vagina area and that kind of things. . . . (Jenny, woman, age 38)

Cognitive-affective experiences

Affective and cognitive aspects of desire were also described by most participants. Men (50%) and women (90%) described feelings of psychological arousal, such as of excitement, nervousness, anxiety, tension, or a "high":

Just like pleasant. It's a positive feeling. It's like nothing negative. I guess it makes you high in a way and it then just makes you excited. (Jianmin, man, age 21)

Half of the participants (50%) of each gender also described feelings of happiness during sexual desire:

I was happy but that's as far as emotional components . . . I was feeling rather nervous because I wasn't sure about like what his particular expectations were. So it was happiness and nervousness, yeah. (Luiyang, woman, age 19)

Another aspect of sexual desire frequently reported by women (70%) and sometimes by men (30%) was relaxation, satisfaction, and a state resembling mindfulness where one was “being in the moment,” feeling free from worries, and ignoring other matters:

I wouldn't be having stress. I would mainly maybe forget the task that I need to be doing, or the study or homework I was supposed to do . . . It's as if time goes by quicker. (Guodong, man, age 19)

Some participants, particularly women, also reported that restrictive negative thoughts and emotions regarding sexuality surfaced during sexual desire. Almost all women (90%) and some men (30%) endorsed, to varying levels of intensity, that sexual desire could cause embarrassment and social judgment:

I do nothing. I don't express [sexual desire] to other people. I don't want other people to know I am desirable or I am having the desire towards them, or towards my boyfriend. I want to keep myself a lady . . . A lady means you should not pay too much attention to those sexual activities, or sex. And you cannot talk more about it in public places. (Zhangjing, woman, age 23)

RQ2: What is the meaning of sexual desire?

Two major aspects emerged in how participants understood their sexual desire: Chinese cultural attitudes toward sexuality, and sexual desire as a natural drive.

Chinese culture

The influence of Chinese culture on sexual desire was explicitly discussed throughout the narratives of many of the women (60%) but none of the men. Women spontaneously included culture in their narratives of sexual desire. None of the references made to culture characterized sexual desire as something positive or to be encouraged. Culture was always alluded to as a restriction on sexual thoughts and expression, with desire being framed as embarrassing, shameful, or strange:

I am the traditional type. I feel embarrassed to feel the desire. Maybe it's Chinese culture. (Yue, woman, age 21)

One common theme pertaining to culture was that it imposed a strict timeline on expression of sexual desire. Some women (40%) explained that expressing sexual desire was not appropriate at the start of a relationship, and should best be postponed until after one is in a relationship or marriage, especially if it involved sexual intercourse:

I guess I'm still like influenced from the traditional Asian culture . . . I want to move to live with my boyfriend but like my mother and even his mother would disagree because we are not engaged, we are not getting married. (Limin, woman, age 25)

Natural human behavior

In contrast to cultural restrictions on the experience and expression of sexual desire, participants also expressed the belief that sexual desire was an aspect of human nature. Both men (80%) and women (50%) described their sexual desire as natural, innate, animalistic, part of human nature, a “physical need,” a “hunger,” or a “thirst”:

I'd say it's part of being human, it's this feeling of physical desire. (Raymond, man, age 22)

RQ3: What are the triggers of sexual desire?

Participants identified two categories of triggers of sexual desire: individual and relational. Individual triggers were defined as those that can occur regardless of the person's relationship circumstances, while relational triggers were defined as those emerging only from the context of a romantic relationship.

Individual

Individual triggers included sexually explicit material, setting/environment, physical appearance of other individuals, and emotional state. The most commonly mentioned external predictor of sexual desire for both men (70%) and women (90%) was exposure to erotic content, mainly in the visual form of pornographic videos, pictures, and written text. Women (20%) and men (50%) also reported physical attractiveness of another individual as a trigger to sexual desire.

Participants also described that their environment influenced whether they experienced sexual desire. Being at places where one expected to meet a sexual or romantic partner, such as bars, clubs, and parties, triggered sexual desire for some men (40%), but not for any of the women. However, once sexual activity was initiated, both men and women described privacy as necessary to maintain desire, as sexual acts were deemed private.

Emotions were also reported in the narratives as individual modulators of desire. Most men (70%) and women (90%) characterized the feelings of love and happiness as triggers to sexual desire. Some women also stated that sadness (30%) and anger (10%) inhibited it. In women (60%) and men (30%), stress was described as dampening sexual desire, while sexual activity conversely helped to reduce stress.

Relational

Most men and women described sexual desire as having a relational and interpersonal aspect, and sexual desire was attributed as arising from within the context of a romantic relationship for many participants. Specifically, most women (70%) and some men (40%) reported that sexual desire occurred either only or most strongly within an intimate and romantic relationship:

Felt different? I don't think so actually because for me the sexual desire is always like when I was with my boyfriend. So I think I'm quite a committed person I guess. (Limin, woman, age 25)

This also included the importance of shared interests and personality compatibility in instigating sexual desire:

For me, in terms of the sexual desire, I have to know the person, for starters. And, I know them well, they probably share the same interests. . . . It takes time to establish." (Tommy, man, age 19)

The majority of men (60%) and women (80%) noted that partner behavior and reactions were important modulators of sexual desire. In addition, 60% of women but none of the men described romantic and caring gestures as triggers of sexual desire. Some women (40%) portrayed partner familiarity as a trigger of sexual desire:

At the very beginning of our relationship. . . . I don't think I will have much sexual desire 'cause at that stage we are still kind of getting to know more about each other. (Limin, woman, age 25)

RQ4: What are the objects of sexual desire?

Most participants clearly articulated specific objects or targets of their sexual desire (i.e., what they desired when they experienced sexual desire). Objects of desire often were either focused on physical-behavioral or emotional-relational factors. Objects in the former category were centered on sexual behavior and physical intimacy, while objects in the latter were related to enhancing emotional intimacy or shared experiences with a partner.

Physical-behavioral

For objects of desire directly related to sexual intercourse, most men (80%) and women (70%) discussed sexual intercourse or vaginal penetration as a target of their desire. Desire for sexual intercourse was often stated in a definitive and concise manner, although some participants produced more elaborate descriptions:

Probably just like want to have sex with someone. (Feng, woman, age 20)

Oh, you want something to put in the vagina. I think that's the most straightforward . . . Even if he didn't put his thing in there, he really just put his finger or maybe a toy or whatever that can help. (Jenny, woman, age 38)

Comparatively fewer men (40%) and women (30%) expressed orgasm or ejaculation as an object of sexual desire. Of those who did, most mentioned either the "high" or "good" feelings of the orgasm itself, or the relaxation and release from sexual tension that followed, as the primary positive aspects of orgasm:

We know that ejaculation feels really, really good. So I think that also leads to the part where, if I like this girl, I would like to first touch her around a bit, and then eventually, maybe, we can get to the ejaculation part which feels really good. (Raymond, man, age 22)

Forms of physical intimacy other than sexual intercourse were also reported. Most men (70%) and women (70%) described physical and erotic touch, hugging, kissing, or cuddling as an object of desire. These were often stated alongside narratives of desire for emotional intimacy:

What does it mean to be with someone intimately, physically? You know, it could be something like, as much as I really want to kiss that person because their lips are nice? It could be like wanting to hold them in my arms? It could be wanting to have sexual intercourse . . . (Marcus, man, age 42)

Emotional-relational

Most men (80%) and some women (30%) reported that a partner with whom to have an intimate emotional connection or a romantic relationship with was an important object of desire:

Well to say it broadly, if it's sexual desire, commonly you probably want love? Well the way I see it, the issues are like first you want to be friends with them? Like, just get to know them . . . Then maybe love? Relationship? Something like that? (Qingyun, man, age 22)

A minority of men (30%) and women (20%) described engaging in shared nonsexual activities with a romantic partner as an object of desire:

Thoughts are mainly like fantasy, like if I was to get into a romantic relationship with them, and [do] things we would do if we're in a relationship. Even though it may seem impossible, just like a dream or a fantasy . . . Like going out for dinner and just conversation. Maybe some activity like sports, something like that. (Jianmin, man, age 21)

Women (60%) and men (30%) also talked about longing for and fantasizing about a relationship with a potential partner as the first stage in their sexual desire:

Fantasy, basically like if I was to get into a relationship, like a romantic relationship with them, and basically just things we would do if we're in a relationship. (Jianmin, woman, age 21)

Two women also reported that their sexual desire included a wish to further solidify the relationship through marriage and childbearing:

I just feel the feeling that I want him. I want to marry him at that time. I have the feeling that I want to marry him, have the desire. So I think the sexual desire is associated with the marriage. (Yue, woman, age 21)

DISCUSSION

Our sample had levels of mainstream and heritage acculturation typical of Chinese Canadians (Ryder et al., 2000). Results on standardized measures of sexual functioning showed lower levels of most aspects of sexual functioning for our participants compared to norms based on sexually healthy Caucasian samples; however, desire appeared to be the most similar to norm levels for both men and women. Participants described their experience of sexual desire as having genital, nongenital-physical, and cognitive-emotional components. Individual factors, such as erotic media and emotional state, and relational factors, such as a stable romantic context, emerged as important triggers of sexual desire for both men and women. Cultural prohibitions placed upon sexuality, particularly among women, and fear of social judgment were cited as inhibitors of desire. Major meanings ascribed to desire included Chinese cultural perspectives of the appropriateness of sexual desire (particularly among women), and that sex is a natural human behavior. Frequently endorsed targets of desire were either physical-behavioral, such as sexual intercourse, or emotional-relational, such as obtaining a romantic relationship.

Experiences of Sexual Desire

Despite past findings that individuals of Chinese descent on average report lower levels of sexual desire compared to their Caucasian counterparts (Brotto et al., 2005, 2007; Cain et al., 2003; Laumann et al., 2005), all of our participants were able to describe experiences of sexual desire in rich detail. Participants described nongenital-physical, genital, and cognitive-affective experiences of sexual desire. This is consistent with past studies where middle-aged Caucasian women with sexual arousal disorder, another population reported to have lower sexual functioning, were also able to provide detailed narratives on how they experience and express sexual desire (Brotto et al., 2009). This was also supported by our participants' scores on the IIEF and FSFI,

which showed that sexual desire, as opposed to other aspects of sexual functioning, in our sample was relatively similar to that of sexually healthy Caucasian men and women. This suggests that Chinese individuals in our study were not lacking in their ability to experience sexual desire as part of their sexual response cycle. However, the proportion of women endorsing nongenital-physical experiences was greater than the proportion of women endorsing genital and cognitive-affective experiences, and was also more frequent than in past qualitative research with Caucasian women (Brotto et al., 2009).

Many women who described genital experiences did so with hesitation and nervousness during the interview. The discomfort with discussing genital experiences, along with the dominance of nongenital-physical descriptors, may reflect difficulty with disclosing strong cognitive-affective or genital aspects of desire. They may have also been less aware of their genital sensations due to fewer prior opportunities to discuss or explore those experiences. This is consistent with observations of how Chinese individuals with depression tend to describe their symptoms more often along physical, rather than psychological domains (Kleinman, 1982), and this may have implications for the validity of assessments for sexual desire disorders, which tend to focus more on the psychological experiences. These patterns appear to be consistent with Bancroft and Janssen's (2000) dual control model, where sexual difficulties can result from lack of sexual excitation or excessive sexual inhibition. Specifically, poorer sexual functioning reported in past quantitative studies may reflect high sexual inhibition, as opposed to impoverished sexual excitation.

Meaning of Sexual Desire

The majority of women made references to Chinese culture, which in their narratives were associated with sexual prohibition. These references were generated spontaneously, as the interviewers did not explicitly ask about culture. Women expressed concerns that their sexual desire would lead to social condemnation, embarrassment, and being perceived as "unladylike." In no case was Chinese culture discussed as a factor that would facilitate or support experiences of desire. Cultural condemnation of engagement with sexuality may explain, at least in part, the persistent finding that East Asians show lower levels of sexual functioning, sexual experience, and sexual knowledge compared to other ethnic groups (Brotto et al., 2005, 2007; Cain et al., 2003; Laumann et al., 2005; Meston et al., 1998). One possible mechanism is an inhibition toward exploring and engaging with their sexuality in their personal lives, leading to reduced activity, knowledge, and confidence. Another mechanism may be that they are less likely to report their sexual activities to other people for fear of judgment, particularly to those in a position of perceived authority such as clinicians and researchers.

Of note, none of the men discussed Chinese culture in their narratives. This gender difference may be due to the fact that our sample of men were more mainstream acculturated than the women, and thus they may have taken on more of the liberal attitudes toward sexuality common in Canadian culture. Another possible explanation is that Chinese culture, like Western culture, may not place the same expectations and gender roles upon men and women. Chinese culture, being patriarchal (Ho, 1986), attaches greater importance to women's virginity and purity while it is more encouraging of men to demonstrate sexual prowess. Gender differences in sexual agency, defined as the ability of individuals to engage with sexual experiences desired by oneself instead of prescribed by others (Tolman, 1994, 2002), may also be higher in Chinese men compared to

Chinese women, as is the case in North American culture. Gender differences in how cultural factors relate to experience and expression of desire is an important topic of further investigation, as the small sample size of the current study precludes broader generalizations in this area.

Some participants, including men, also described sexual inhibitions without relating them directly to Chinese culture. These inhibitions are, as in the case of cultural prohibitions, primarily centered in social condemnation, such as fear of judgment or other consequences from more “traditional” parents or friends. Culture may therefore have played a crucial underlying role in the formation of such an understanding. Prohibitions around the experiencing and expression of sexuality, and fear of embarrassment and social judgment that would be a consequence of violating such prohibitions, therefore appeared prevalent among both men and women.

Despite the social constraints placed on sexual desire, many participants, particularly men, expressed the belief that sexual desire was a physiological need and part of human nature. They suggested that although sexual desire was socially condemned, they perceived it as natural in themselves and a potential positive experience. This dialectic inherent to desire suggests, perhaps, that while sexuality may not be opposed at an individual level, prohibitions may be collectively reinforced by cultural beliefs. This might be reflective of a process like pluralistic ignorance, wherein the majority of group members reject a norm, but each person incorrectly assumes the majority of the others in the group accept it, and therefore continue to claim that they themselves support that norm (Lambert, Kahn, & Apple, 2003; Prentice & Miller, 1993; Shelton & Richeson, 2005). This duality, particularly in the participants who reported both cultural prohibitions as well as emphasizing the importance of sex to human nature, seems to further support that low sexual functioning among Chinese individuals is due to high inhibition rather than low excitation as per the dual control model.

Triggers and Contexts of Sexual Desire

Relationship themes were a prominent context for sexual desire. Many participants stated that their sexual desire was strongest when they were with their romantic partner or that desire was only present when they were in a committed relationship. As well, among women in particular, another person’s physical attractiveness only worked to elicit desire if that person was a partner, but not a stranger. This finding is in contrast to recent findings that young, predominantly Caucasian women showed no difference in subjective or genital arousal in response to sexual stimuli involving strangers or long-term partners (Chivers & Timmers, 2012). In addition to relationship status, more specific aspects of the relationship, such as romantic gestures, loving conversations, and shared interests were also important triggers. The response and interest of the sexual partner was also described as an important factor in modulating sexual desire. These relational factors are consistent with past findings in Caucasian samples (Brotto et al., 2009) and support the growing consensus that sexual desire is an interactive process between persons. However, the relative importance of relationship themes appears to be much more prominent among the current participants than in previous Caucasian samples. This contrast is also further supported by Higgins et al. (2002), who found that Chinese young adults in Hong Kong were generally disapproving of sexual activity outside a committed romantic relationship.

One very frequently reported individual trigger of sexual desire was exposure to pornography and erotica. The percentage of women who cited erotic material as a trigger for desire was higher than previously reported lifetime usage rates of pornography among women (Carroll et al., 2008;

Hald, 2006). Given that pornography may be used in private, it is possible that erotic materials, along with masturbation, may be an avenue for experiencing and fulfilling sexual desires with a lower risk of negative social repercussions. Similarly, despite some men reporting that public venues such as clubs and parties were conducive to eliciting desire, expressions of desire via sexual activity were only possible when some form of privacy was available. It is possible that due to the prohibitions against sexuality endorsed by Chinese individuals, expression of sexual desire becomes something that can only be experienced in private, with a trusted, socially accepted, and reciprocating, committed romantic partner.

Objects of Sexual Desire

Relational factors were also prevalent as objects, or targets, of sexual desire. Desire for a romantic relationship, a romantic partner, or love in general was endorsed by men and women. More specific but related objects, such as emotional intimacy and a companion with shared beliefs and values, were also often described. The prevalence of romantic relationships as a target, particularly for men, may be related to Chinese attitudes against sexuality outside of committed relationships (Higgins et al., 2002). If direct expressions of sexual desire are discouraged through social norms, sexual desire may potentially be discussed and experienced in the form of romantic and relationship pursuits. The formation of a romantic relationship may also be the first step toward being able to engage in sexual intercourse. It is also possible that Chinese culture's greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships allows men to engage with or discuss the romantic aspects of their partner-seeking more easily than the sexual aspects.

Many men and women described sexual intercourse as an object of desire. Both genders often initially provided a very concise definition of desire as wanting sexual intercourse, and only provided more elaborate and nuanced responses as the interview deepened. Desire for positive physiological sensations associated with orgasm and/or ejaculation was rarer and appeared later in the interviews, but generally contained more detailed and affect-laden descriptions. Given the aforementioned inhibitions toward sex, one possible interpretation of the participants' initial reticence is that they were uncomfortable at first with detailed disclosure about the nature of their desire, particularly to the interviewer who may be perceived as an authority figure. Better articulation of their experiences may also have arisen as they reflected more on the subject.

General Discussion

We found that genital and intercourse-related aspects of sexual desire were less often articulated compared to relational and physical aspects. Commonly used broad measures of sexual functioning, such as the FSFI and IIEF, generally present desire items alongside other questions that inquire mostly about genital and intercourse aspects of sexual functioning. This raises the possibility that the typical questionnaire may prime Chinese participants to consider only genital or intercourse-related aspects of sexual desire instead of focusing on relational, cognitive-affective, or nongenital-physical aspects. Chinese participants may therefore underreport their levels of desire on contemporary Western-based measures of desire, which would produce inflated rates of sexual difficulties. Although further research is needed to understand the impact this might have on the reporting of sexual desire and sexual functioning, inquiring about

the nongenital-physical experiences and relationship context of desire appears important in assessing Chinese individuals in research or clinical practice. These findings also highlight the potential impact of group membership in other ethnic minorities and different social classes in the assessment and conceptualization of desire. Importantly, they suggest that future studies that investigate diverse social or cultural groups should be attentive to the different ways members of those groups experience sexual desire, and be aware of the limitations inherent in using measures based on traditional conceptualizations that may produce inflated rates of sexual difficulties.

However, we also found that Chinese cultural prohibitions against sexual expression and fear of social judgment in relation to sexual expression were palpable for our participants, suggesting that such inhibitions may be a significant deterrent to the experience of desire. In support of this view, past research has found higher levels of maladaptive sexual beliefs, sexual guilt, and other cognitive-affective factors associated with poorer sexual functioning among East Asian individuals compared to their Caucasian counterparts (Morton & Gorzalka, 2013; Woo, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2011; Woo et al., 2012). These inhibitions may compromise the development of healthy sexual functioning, as well as reduce the willingness of those experiencing dysfunctions to seek treatment (Tan et al., 2007). Addressing culturally-based challenges in discussing sex and targeting factors that maintain these inhibitions can be useful interventions in treating sexual difficulties in Chinese patients (Atallah et al., 2016). Clinicians working with Chinese patients as with all social or cultural-minority groups, will need to balance being willing to ask about cultural issues despite concerns regarding political correctness, and being sensitive to the importance of both the patient's cultural identities and to the patient's individual experiences that may be unrelated to broader cultural factors.

These findings also suggest that sexual inhibition may be a more important contributor, compared to lack of sexual excitation, to sexual difficulties among many Chinese individuals, particularly if their difficulties appear to stem from integration of their sexuality with traditional cultural attitudes. Examining inhibitions, particularly those stemming from cultural prohibitions, may be particularly important in understanding difficulties with desire. In addition, perhaps even more so than with Caucasian patients, investigation of relationship issues and functioning may be particularly pertinent with this group. However, that is not to say that lack of sexual excitation and sexual difficulties arising outside of romantic relationships cannot exist in Chinese individuals. The bulk of the participants' narratives suggest that at an idiographic level, the experiences of sexual desire among Chinese individuals in our sample are not qualitatively different from that of Caucasian individuals, despite the large group differences seen at a nomothetic level in previous quantitative studies. In fact, a proportion of Chinese individuals may not agree with Chinese culture's attitudes toward desire, perhaps similarly to the diversity of viewpoints on desire in Western culture (Tolman, 1994).

Limitations

There are limitations to this study that should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. The male participants lived longer in Canada on average, had more participants who were born in Canada, and had higher mainstream acculturation; these differences may have explained some of the variation in responses between genders. As well, due to the variety of birth nations and acculturation levels within the small sample, we are not able to generalize the findings to any

particular subgroup of Chinese individuals. The current sample primarily consisted of younger adults with a small number of older individuals. Since many factors related to sexual desire and sexual functioning in general change across the life span, the results reported here may not generalize to any specific age group. The sample was small, and further research, including the use of quantitative methods, will be required to verify many of the themes identified in this group.

We notably did not inquire directly about culture to avoid priming participants' own narratives about their sexual experience, in the same vein as avoiding asking specifically about topics like genital experiences or the importance of relationships. This does limit our ability to directly interpret the role of culture in the sexual desire of these individuals; however, this does not preclude a clear understanding of the personal experience of desire in these Chinese individuals, and reduces the chance that their narratives are confounded by an overemphasis on their status as visible ethnic minorities in Canadian society.

The current study used a qualitative methodology to examine the experiences, objects, contexts, and meanings of sexual desire in a sample of Chinese men and women living in Canada. It provides some evidence that lower levels of sexual functioning, and desire in particular, in Chinese individuals may be explained by reduced validity of existing measures in this population. It also suggests that Chinese culture inhibits desire through fear of social judgment, which can lead to poorer sexual functioning. Further research is needed, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, to fully disentangle these two effects. In the meantime, our results suggest that researchers and clinicians should recognize that Chinese culture may have a profound impact on sexual desire and that they should be cautious when applying standardized sexual desire measures to Chinese individuals. These issues specific to Chinese-Canadians are also relevant for ongoing research on how membership in other sociocultural-minority groups may impact experience and understanding of sexuality compared to traditional conceptualizations.

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