

Sexual behavior in Costa Rica and the United States[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study examined differences between Costa Ricans and Euro-Americans in perceptions of appropriate sexual behavior and definitions of sex. When compared to Costa Ricans, Euro-Americans were more likely to consider foreplay, oral sex, and intercourse to be appropriate in the early stages of a relationship. Costa Ricans considered these behaviors to be appropriate only after steadily dating someone for 3 months or more. Euro-Americans were more likely to consider anal sex and phone/cyber sex to be appropriate prior to serious commitment (i.e. marriage). Cultural differences were also found in the types of behaviors that were considered to be sex. Costa Ricans defined non-penetrative acts such as foreplay, oral sex, and phone/cyber sex as sex more often than their Euro-American counterparts. In fact, Euro-Americans rarely considered foreplay or phone/cyber sex to be sex and defined oral sex as sex only in certain contexts. Finally, both Costa Rican and Euro-American participants reported having had more lifetime sexual partners than penile–vaginal intercourse partners. Results are discussed in terms of differing cultural values.

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1. Introduction

Sex is universal, but it is also one of the most taboo topics. It is “something nobody talks about, but everybody does something about” (Levinger, 1966, p. 261). Sexual behaviors fulfill a number of needs for both the self and partner: procreation, pleasure, and intimacy. In addition to being a biologically hard-wired function, sex is subject to societal expectations and ideas that profoundly impact our experience (Hofstede, 1998). At times, people are judged based on the number of sexual partners they have had or the behaviors in which they engage. The way that a person thinks about sex feeds myths and misconceptions, governs sexual behavior, and leads to judgments about the self and others (Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kolata, 1995).

Sexual behavior is affected by complex cultural principles that function as guides for cognitive and affective judgments about both people and situations (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961). In the United States, emphasis is placed on individual rights and freedoms rather than the interests of the group (Hofstede, 1991). This individualistic emphasis highlights the role of individual enjoyment and personal choice, while inhibiting concern with the opinion of others. Accordingly, sexual behavior may be considered appropriate earlier in the development of a relationship. Euro-Americans also tend to emphasize traditionally masculine ideals by valuing achievement over affiliation (Hofstede, 1998). Thus, they may rank sexual behaviors as if they were goals to be attained. In the drive to accomplish the ultimate goal of intercourse, less significance may be attributed to other sexual behaviors. Finally, Euro-Americans are often comfortable with unstructured, unknown,

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and surprising situations (Hofstede, 1984). Accordingly, in the United States, some sexual behaviors may exist in what is essentially a normative limbo: sexual, but not classified as sex.

On the other hand, in Costa Rica, the importance of the collective and maintenance of harmony are valued over personal satisfaction (Hofstede, 1991). Costa Ricans also tend to place more importance on traditionally feminine values such as group affiliation (as opposed to personal achievement) (Hofstede, 1998). Because interpersonal bonds are so highly valued in this culture, all sexual behaviors that contribute to relationship enhancement may be similarly emphasized and there may be less variation in the behaviors that are defined as sex. Efforts to preserve relational harmony may encourage the maintenance of traditional gender roles (Raffaelli & Iturbide, 2009). Displays of overt sexuality may be encouraged among men and discouraged among women (Raffaelli & Iturbide, 2009). Costa Ricans also tend to be more uncomfortable with uncertainty than Euro-Americans (Hofstede, 1984). They may fear that engaging in ‘taboo’ sexual behaviors will lead to harsh negative judgments or social ostracism and more contextual constraints may be necessary for a sexual behavior to be considered appropriate.

1.1. Propriety

Expressions of sexual behavior are often influenced by its perceived appropriateness (Davis & Kaats, 1972; DeLamater & Maccorquodale, 1979). Penile–vaginal intercourse is commonly considered a standard sexual behavior for married heterosexual couples. Because it is necessary for procreation as well as for pleasure, it is considered an appropriate behavior for even the most conservative individuals (Michael et al., 1995). On the other hand, many people argue that anal sex and fellatio should be condemned as sodomy (Michael et al., 1995). Frequent engagement in such inappropriate behaviors may lead to a person being judged as immoral or promiscuous. Such labels are not only insulting, but are also linked with other negative attributions. For example, promiscuous females are often thought to be of lower socioeconomic status or to be cognitively and emotionally unstable (Attwood, 2007; Ericsson & Jon, 2006) and promiscuous males are perceived to be untrustworthy and less socially desirable (Jackson & Cram, 2003; Milhousen & Herold, 1999; Perlini & Boychuk, 2006).

College students in the United States still consider premarital intercourse to be more appropriate when a couple is engaged or in love, as opposed to casually acquainted (Wilson & Medora, 1990). Yet, in spite of the harsh consequences associated with engaging in inappropriate behavior, the propriety of a given behavior may change with the context in which it occurs. For example, while baby-boomers commonly perceived oral sex to be more intimate than penile–vaginal intercourse (Jayson, 2005a), young adults in the United States are more likely to view oral sex casually. More than half of 15–19-year-olds report having given or received oral sex and, among adolescents who consider themselves virgins, 25% report having engaged in oral sex (Jayson, 2005b). Many do not consider a relationship to be a precondition for oral sex (Jayson, 2005a).

1.2. Definition of sex

Variations in the perceived propriety of certain sexual behaviors may also influence which behaviors are defined as sex. The word “sex” is often left to the interpretation of the performer or the receiver of the behavior. Young adults generally agree that both penile–vaginal intercourse and penile–anal intercourse can be defined as sex (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007; Randall & Byers, 2003; Richters & Song, 1999; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999; Trotter & Alderson, 2007). However, there is little agreement about the inclusion of other behaviors. Approximately 60% of U.S. Americans do not consider oral sex to be “having sex,” especially if it was the most intimate contact they have had until that moment (Jayson, 2005b; Richters & Song, 1999; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Evidence also suggests that only an estimated 14% of North American students include phone or cyber sex in their definition of “sex” (Randall & Byers, 2003). Thus, the definition of what constitutes sex may vary in accordance with time, situation, and cultural norms.

1.3. Cultural context

Within their cultural context, Euro-American adolescents engage in a variety of pleasurable, non-coital sexual behaviors (e.g. touching and petting, mutual masturbation, and oral-genital contact) as a means of sexual exploration (Woody, Russel, D’Souza, & Woody, 2000). Often these behaviors occur within a short-term context, such as “hooking up” (Woody et al., 2000). The evolution of a concept known as “technical virginity” has also made it possible to define no sexual behavior, other than penile–vaginal intercourse, as sex (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). In this case, behaviors other than intercourse “do not count” and a person who has engaged in these activities is able to deny promiscuity while obtaining sexual pleasure (Jayson, 2005a,b). Thus, while there seems to be a consensus that penile–vaginal intercourse is sex, there is likely to be a wide variation in perceptions of foreplay, oral sex, anal sex, and phone/cyber-sex (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). The frequency of sexual encounters and the duration of the period in which the encounters occurred may also affect whether a person is considered a sexual partner (Cecil, Bogart, Wagstaff, Pinkerton, & Abramson, 2002; Trotter & Alderson, 2007).

Global social change has also resulted in progressive modifications of the traditional sexual dynamics of Costa Rica (Arroba, 2001; Biesanz, Biesanz, & Biesanz, 1999; Mannon, 2006). These shifts may account for a new discourse on sexuality that discourages ties to the old mandate of virginity among Costa Ricans and, in turn, contributes to increases in premarital sexual activity (Arroba, 2001). Nevertheless, as a result of a cultural preference for stability and the strong influence of the Catholic Church, Costa Rican culture remains highly conservative in nature and the incorporation of progressive sexual values has

been less abrupt than among Euro-Americans. The Catholic faith is intricately linked with Costa Rica's cultural heritage. In fact, the country's constitution states that Roman Catholicism is the official religion of the state (Political Constitution of Costa Rica, 1949). Accordingly, the Catholic Church still holds a key voice in matters of politics, education, and morality (Carranza, 2007). Marriage remains the only proper setting for sexuality to develop and public exposure of sexuality that has been lived outside its boundaries (such as unwanted pregnancy) is viewed as sinful and worthy of moral reprobation (Budowski & Rosero-Bixby, 2003). This conservative discourse may affect perceptions of appropriate sexual behavior as well as whether a given behavior should be included in definitions of sex.

1.3.1. Individualism/collectivism

Individualistic cultures, like the United States, characterize people by their personal traits, activities, and possessions (Hofstede, 1991). In these cultures personal needs are asserted over those of the group, and people are encouraged to pursue their own interests (Hofstede, 1991; Stephan, Stephan, & De Vargas, 1996). The self is constructed in terms of the wishes, needs, and aspirations of the individual, rather than as a function of the thoughts or opinions of others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In these cultures, norms suggest that sexual activity is an act of personal freedom and a means for individual pleasure (Michael et al., 1995). The pursuit of sexual pleasure is considered legitimate for both males and females (Radford, 2000).

In contrast, collectivistic cultures characterize people by their association with a group and their contribution to its well-being (Hofstede, 1991). These societies tend to value the interests of the group over those of the individual (Hofstede, 1991; Stephan et al., 1996). Individuals look to one another for behavior guidelines to ensure that conduct conforms to collective standards (Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). Collectivistic cultures, like Costa Rica, are likely to hold more differentiated sex roles and to value chastity in a potential bride-to-be (Best & Williams, 1997; Hofstede, 1998).

1.3.2. Masculinity/femininity

Another cultural dimension is rooted in the degree to which a society emphasizes ambition, performance, and the achievement of goals. Masculine cultures, including the United States, are oriented toward these kind of values (Hofstede, 1991, 1998). Members of these cultures value assertiveness and material success over interpersonal connection and the maintenance of harmony within a group (Hofstede, 1998). Accordingly, in masculine cultures, sex is often seen as an achievement, or an ultimate point of success (Hofstede, 1998; Ubillos, Paez, & González, 2000). For example, in the United States, sexual intercourse can be referred to in sports terms, i.e. scoring a "home run" (CBS Broadcasting Inc., 2009). Euro-Americans also like to think of themselves as highly sexual people and, in efforts to attain the ultimate goal of coitus, sexual gratification may be taken for granted (Michael et al., 1995).

On the other hand, in feminine cultures (i.e. Costa Rica) the focus is on the nurturance of interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging to others (Hofstede, 1998). These cultures also emphasize harmony, belonging, and modesty (Hofstede, 1998; Lustig & Koester, 2002). Members of these cultures value well-being and quality of life for others over performance and personal success (Hofstede, 1998; Ubillos et al., 2000). They also tend to be more communicative and less aggressive than in masculine cultures (Ubillos et al., 2000). Thus, in feminine cultures, sex is likely to be viewed in relational terms—as a way of bonding or strengthening interpersonal connections (Hofstede, 1998).

1.3.3. Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree to which people within a given culture feel threatened by unfamiliar situations and ambiguity (Hofstede, 1984; Ubillos et al., 2000). High uncertainty avoidance cultures, such as Costa Rica, demonstrate a strong desire for predictability. To avoid the discomfort associated with uncertainty, the pursuit of security prevails (Ubillos et al., 2000). Members of these cultures value formal gender roles, are more emotionally expressive, and view non-conformity in terms of impurity and danger (Hofstede, 2001; Ubillos et al., 2000). As a result of a firm adherence to social norms, fewer sexual behaviors are considered appropriate. The emotional expressiveness of these cultures contributes to an understanding of sexual behavior as being intricately linked to intimacy (Ubillos et al., 2000).

Conversely, low uncertainty avoidance cultures, like the United States, worry less about avoiding ambiguity (Ubillos et al., 2000) and have more tolerant social norms (Hofstede, 2001). Members of these cultures are more flexible and accepting of varied sexual behaviors (Hofstede, 1984, 1994) and, thus, more comfortable with an ambiguous classification of non-coital sexual acts. Low uncertainty avoidance cultures also do not value emotional expressiveness (Hofstede, 1984, 1994). Members perceive a greater disconnect between sexual behavior and emotional intimacy and, in turn, consider a wider variety of behaviors to be acceptable in the early stages of a relationship.

1.4. Gender

Previous evidence suggests that women tend to include more behaviors in their definitions of sex than men (Trotter & Alderson, 2007). They are also more likely to consider sexual behavior to be suitable principally within the context of steady dating. In contrast, men are more likely to regard sexual behaviors as appropriate within the context of a casual acquaintance (Knox, Sturdivant, & Zusman, 2001; Wilson & Medora, 1990). They are more willing to have intercourse with someone they have known for 3 h, with two different people within a 6-h period, or with someone they did not love (Knox et al., 2001; Wilson & Medora, 1990). Men also consider both oral sex and anal sex to be more appropriate behaviors than

women, regardless of context (Michael et al., 1995; Wilson & Medora, 1990). Thus, the number of sexual partners a person reports may be influenced by both culture and gender.

1.5. Hypotheses

This study explored cultural differences in the perception of sexual behavior. Euro-American and Costa Rican cultures were selected for comparison because they are believed to differ on the dimensions of individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and levels of sexual conservatism. We hypothesized that, in comparison to Costa Ricans, Euro-Americans would perceive more sexual behaviors to be appropriate earlier in the development of a relationship. We expected Costa Ricans to include more behaviors in their definition of sex than Euro-Americans. Regardless of culture, we also anticipated a disparity between reported lifetime sexual partners and penile–vaginal intercourse partners. Finally, in accordance with previous research, in both cultures, men were expected to report more sexual and intercourse partners than women.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants for this study were 93 Costa Rican psychology undergraduates from the *Universidad de Costa Rica* (39 males, 54 females) and 121 Euro-American undergraduate psychology students from Central Connecticut State University (42 males, 79 females). Students from both universities were asked to identify their ethnicity. All participants who did not identify themselves as Euro-American or Costa Rican were excluded from the analyses. The two universities are 4-year, state-funded institutions, with low tuition. These schools generally attract lower middle or middle-class students within their respective cultures. The majority of participants were between the ages of 17 and 25 (95% of the Costa Ricans and 98% of the Euro-Americans). Costa Rican participants reported a mean age of 20.45 ($SD = 3.53$), while Euro-American participants reported a mean age of 19.48 ($SD = 2.20$). The majority of participants in both samples also described their civil status as single (95% of Costa Ricans and 98% of Euro-Americans).

2.2. Procedure

Participants completed a questionnaire containing three measures. These measures were translated into Spanish by a Costa Rican, and back translated by an American. Before the administration of the questionnaire, the first author compared both translations for accuracy of the constructs and made adjustments where problems arose. Methods of data collection common to each culture were used in order to provide the maximum level of comfort for participants. Students at CCSU completed the survey online in exchange for research credit. Students at the *Universidad de Costa Rica* were contacted in their classrooms and were invited to participate. If they agreed to participate, they were then given the opportunity to complete a paper version of the survey during class time. They completed the paper version of the survey from alternating seats and then it was returned to the experimenter in a closed envelope.

2.3. Propriety

The sexual experience scale developed by Cowart–Pollack (1979) was modified for use in this study. Items that referred to sexual positions as variations of penile–vaginal intercourse were excluded, while items relating to an additional category of interest (phone/cyber sex) were added. Participants were asked: “In your opinion, when is it appropriate for the following behaviors to occur in a relationship?” They then responded in accordance with an 8-point Likert scale. Possible responses included: (a) upon a first meeting, (b) on a first date, (c) when the couple has been dating exclusively for 3 months or more, (d) when the couple has been dating exclusively for a year or more, (e) when the couple is engaged to marry, (f) when the couple is living together, (g) when the couple is legally married, and (h) never. For the purposes of analysis, these were coded into 4 categories: early stages, 3 months to 1 year dating, formal commitment, and never. Higher numbers indicated higher constraints on the relational context in which sexual behavior was considered appropriate. The final scale was composed of 18 behaviors (9 with orgasm and 9 without orgasm), divided into five subscales. The Foreplay Subscale consisted of 6 items, including “Vaginal and/or clitoral hand stimulation by partner with orgasm” (Costa Rican $\alpha = .95$; Euro-American $\alpha = .96$). The Oral Sex Subscale consisted of 4 items, including “Oral stimulation of penis by partner with orgasm” (Costa Rican $\alpha = .97$; Euro-American $\alpha = .98$). The Penile–Vaginal Intercourse Subscale consisted of 2 items, including “Penetration of vagina by penis without orgasm” (Costa Rican $\alpha = .99$; Euro-American $\alpha = .96$). The Anal Intercourse Subscale consisted of 2 items, including “Penetration of anus by penis with orgasm” (Costa Rican $\alpha = .97$; Euro-American $\alpha = .98$). The Phone/Cyber Sex Subscale consisted for 4 items, including “Masturbation while having a telephone conversation with partner, without orgasm” (Costa Rican $\alpha = .95$; Euro-American $\alpha = .92$).

2.4. Definitions of sex

The same adaptation of [Coward–Pollack Sexual Experience Scale \(1979\)](#) was used to explore the definitions of sex. Items were presented in the same order, but participants were asked under what circumstances they would consider each of the behaviors to be 'having sex' and responded on a 4-point scale: (a) yes, in a new relationship, (b) yes, in a long-term relationship, (c) both, and (d) never. During analysis, these responses were coded into one of three categories: never, in some contexts, or always. The reliability for each subscale was also computed: Foreplay (Costa Rican $\alpha = .87$; Euro-American $\alpha = .95$), Oral Sex (Costa Rican $\alpha = .96$; Euro-American $\alpha = .97$), Penile–Vaginal Intercourse (Costa Rican $\alpha = .72$; Euro-American, $\alpha = .70$), Anal Intercourse (Costa Rican $\alpha = .96$; Euro-American $\alpha = .99$), and Phone/Cyber Sex (Costa Rican $\alpha = .96$; Euro-American $\alpha = .98$).

2.5. Demographics

Participants were asked about age, sex, religious affiliation, ethnic background, civil state, nationality, and sexual orientation. Two items in which participants were asked to state the number of people with whom they had had penile–vaginal intercourse during their lifetime and the number of sexual partners they had during their lifetime were also included in this section.

3. Results

3.1. Propriety

To test for cultural differences in the perceived propriety of sexual behavior a MANOVA was run. Results showed a significant cross-national difference in levels of propriety was found $F(5, 188) = 6.02, p < .001$. Euro-Americans perceived all five categories of behaviors as significantly more appropriate within the first couple of dates than Costa Ricans, who preferred sexual behavior to occur within a steady dating relationship: Foreplay, $F(1, 193) = 28.02, p < .001$; Oral Sex, $F(1, 193) = 25.71, p < .001$; Penile–Vaginal Intercourse, $F(1, 193) = 16.50, p < .001$; Anal Intercourse, $F(1, 193) = 4.97, p < .05$; Phone/Cyber Sex, $F(1, 193) = 8.60, p < .05$ (see [Fig. 1](#)).

3.2. Definitions of sex

To test for cultural differences the behaviors that are defined as sex a MANOVA was also run. Results revealed a significant cross-national difference with Costa Ricans perceiving the behaviors to be sex more frequently than Euro-Americans, $F(5, 200) = 24.47, p < .001$. Tests of between subjects effects revealed that Costa Ricans considered foreplay, $F(1, 205) = 80.27, p < .001$, oral sex, $F(1, 205) = 33.68, p < .001$, and phone/cyber sex, $F(1, 205) = 16.50, p < .001$ to be sex more frequently than Euro-Americans. On the other hand, Euro-Americans considered intercourse, $F(1, 205) = 17.36, p < .001$, and anal sex, $F(1, 205) = 7.42, p < .05$, to be sex more often than Costa Ricans (see [Fig. 2](#)).

3.3. Sexual and intercourse partners

Paired samples *t*-tests were run to determine whether there was a disparity between the number of lifetime sexual and penile–vaginal intercourse partners reported by participants. Participants in both cultures reported approximately one more sexual partner than penile–vaginal intercourse partners. More specifically, on average, Euro-Americans reported .90 more lifetime sexual partners ($M = 4.43$) than intercourse partners ($M = 3.53$), $t(81) = 4.80, p < .001$, while Costa Ricans reported 1.24 more lifetime sexual partners ($M = 3.96$) than intercourse partners ($M = 2.72$), $t(81) = 3.48, p = .001$.

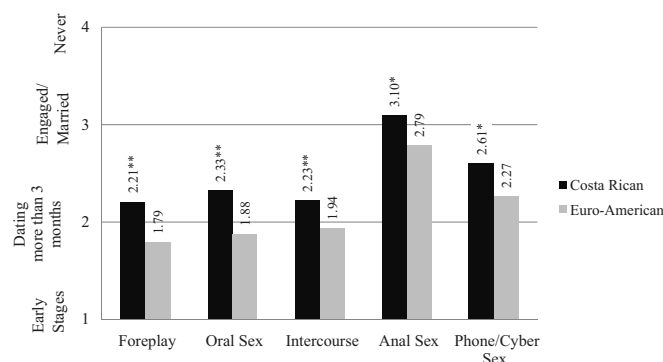


Fig. 1. Levels of appropriateness of sexual behavior in accordance with relationship context according to culture.

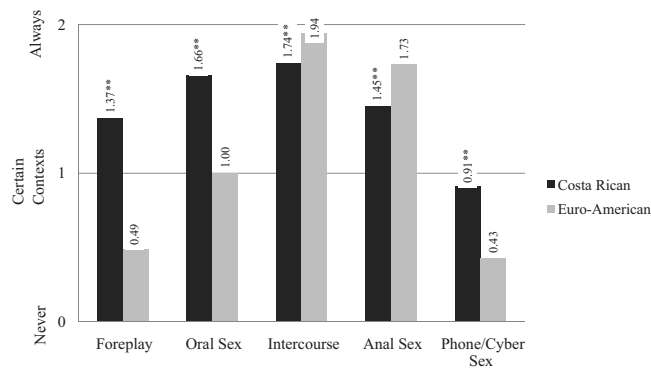


Fig. 2. Preferred relationship contexts in which behaviors are defined as sex according to culture.

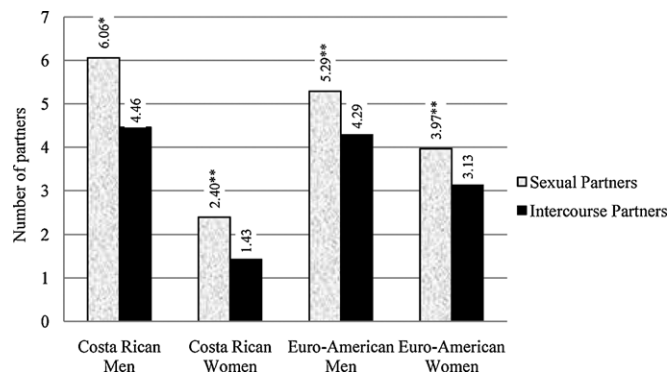


Fig. 3. Reported number of lifetime sexual and intercourse partners reported by culture and gender.

To determine whether there was a significant difference in the number of sexual and intercourse partners reported by gender, independent samples *t*-tests were run for each culture. Costa Rican men ($M = 5.89$) reported more lifetime sexual partners than Costa Rican women ($M = 2.33$), $t(83) = 2.39$, $p < .05$. In Costa Rica, men ($M = 4.22$) also reported more penile–vaginal intercourse partners than women ($M = 1.34$), $t(85) = 2.15$, $p < .05$. However, although Euro-American men ($M = 5.29$) reported slightly more lifetime sexual partners than Euro-American women ($M = 3.99$), this difference was not statistically significant, $t(118) = 1.22$, *ns*. Similarly, there was no difference in the number of penile–vaginal intercourse partners reported by Euro-American men ($M = 4.29$) and women ($M = 3.13$), $t(117) = 1.09$, *ns*.

Finally, a 2 (intercourse/sexual partners) \times 2 (nationality) \times 2 (gender) Mixed Model ANOVA was run. Again, results suggested that, in both cultures, participants reported more lifetime sexual partners ($M = 4.43$) than penile–vaginal intercourse ($M = 3.33$) partners, $F(1, 197) = 33.27$, $p < .001$. However, the magnitude of these results did not differ by culture, $F(1, 197) = .91$, *ns*, gender, $F(1, 197) = 1.02$, *ns*, or both, $F(1, 197) = .371$, *ns*. Tests of between subjects effects indicated that men ($M = 5.56$) reported more overall partners than women ($M = 3.16$), $F(1, 197) = 9.45$, $p < .005$ and that there were no significant differences in the number of partners reported across the two cultures, $F(1, 197) = .62$, *ns* (Costa Ricans, $M = 4.11$, and Euro-Americans, $M = 4.54$). A one-tailed test suggested a marginally significant interaction in the number of partners reported in accordance with culture and gender, $F(1, 197) = 1.99$, $p < .10$, with Costa Rican men reporting the most partners ($M = 5.26$) and Costa Rican women reporting the least ($M = 1.92$) (see Fig. 3).

Correlations between definitions of sex and sexual and intercourse partners during lifetime for both cultures are shown in Table 1.

4. Discussion

As expected, Euro-Americans considered sexual behavior to be appropriate earlier in the development of a relationship than Costa Ricans. Members of both cultures perceived foreplay, oral sex, and penile–vaginal intercourse to be appropriate in less committed contexts than anal intercourse or phone/cyber sex. Furthermore, anal intercourse was considered appropriate only within the most committed relationships. On the other hand, regardless of the context in which they occurred, Costa Ricans were more likely than Euro-Americans to perceive each of the behaviors to be sex. More specifically, Costa Ricans perceived non-intercourse behaviors such as foreplay, oral sex, and phone/cyber sex to be sex more often than Euro-Americans. Euro-Americans generally considered penetrative behaviors (penile–vaginal and anal intercourse) to be sex. Finally, across cultures, participants reported more sexual partners than penile–vaginal intercourse partners.

Table 1

Correlations between definitions of sex, appropriateness of sexual behavior, and lifetime sexual and intercourse partners.

	Lifetime sexual partners	Lifetime intercourse partners	Sex definitions
Costa Rican			
Lifetime intercourse partners	.86**		
Sex definitions	.08	.05	
Propriety	-.02	.05	.05
Euro-American			
Lifetime intercourse partners	.91**		
Sex definitions	-.18*	-.19*	
Propriety	-.25*	-.27*	.30**

* Significant at the .05 level.

** Significant to the .01 level.

4.1. Propriety

On average, Euro-Americans considered foreplay, oral sex, and penile–vaginal intercourse to be appropriate in the early stages of a relationship, whereas Costa Ricans felt that these behaviors were only appropriate within the context of steady dating. This may be because Euro-American cultural relationship norms emphasize personal pleasure, whereas Costa Rican norms stress affiliation (Hofstede, 1998). In Costa Rica, these affiliation norms are often shaped by conservative religious values (Arroba, 2001, 2006; Budowski & Rosero-Bixby, 2003) and the belief that women embody family honor (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Furthermore, Catholic cultures, with high levels of uncertainty avoidance, tend to reject sexual behaviors outside of marriage (Ubillos et al., 2000) or less committed relationships.

Both Euro-American and Costa Rica participants indicated more contextual restraints on the propriety of phone/cyber sex than on foreplay, oral sex, or even penile–vaginal intercourse. These behaviors were only considered appropriate within the context of steady dating or a formal commitment. Since these behaviors do not involve touching another person's body they may imply a level of sterility that somehow disassociates these behaviors from sexuality. However, when compared with Euro-Americans, Costa Ricans were more likely to find phone/cyber sex to be appropriate primarily within the context of a formal commitment. This may reflect the relatively recent integration of this technology into sexual behavior in Costa Rica.

Finally, anal intercourse is not a procreative behavior. As a result, in countries, such as Costa Rica, where cultural norms are strongly shaped by the influence of conservative Catholic values, anal intercourse may be perceived as going against what God intended (Arroba, 2006). Thus, if anal intercourse is ever considered appropriate, the commitment between partners would need to be strong. Accordingly, results from this study indicated Costa Ricans feel that anal intercourse was appropriate only at a high level of commitment (like marriage)—if ever. In contrast, Euro-Americans were somewhat more likely to consider anal intercourse to be appropriate in a steady dating relationship. This may be because Euro-Americans view anal intercourse as a more intimate form of intercourse and, thus, one which is appropriate within a committed relationship.

4.2. Definitions of sex

Both Costa Rican and Euro-American participants consistently defined penile–vaginal intercourse as sex, regardless of context. In addition, members of both cultures considered anal intercourse to be sex. However, Euro-Americans seemed to have a more unambiguous definition of sex, wherein penetrative acts (vaginal or anal intercourse) most clearly constitute sex. This cultural difference could be due in part to the emphasis that sex education in the United States places on penile–vaginal and anal intercourse (Centers for Disease Control, 2002). Low uncertainty avoidance cultures, like the United States, also display a higher tolerance for ambiguity. In turn, this tolerance for ambiguity may enable members to consider non-penetrative behaviors to be sexual, but not sex.

In a masculine, individualistic cultural context (i.e. Euro-American culture) both males and females tend to engage in sexual behavior driven by a desire to seek pleasure and reduce one's stress (Tang, Bensman, & Hatfield, 2012). Furthermore, cultures high in masculinity and low in uncertainty avoidance (such as the United States) tend to place a high value on achievement (Hofstede, 2001). Thus, sexual intercourse may be perceived as a goal to be attained, an ultimate accomplishment, as well as the reinforcement of personal choice (Hofstede, 2001).

In contrast, feminine cultures (i.e. Costa Rica) emphasize affiliation. Accordingly, their members may perceive penile–vaginal and anal intercourse, like other sexual behaviors, to foster the development of intimacy. Evidence suggests that members of collectivistic cultures are less likely to endorse motives such as pleasure-seeking for engaging in sexual behavior (Tang et al., 2012). The motives most commonly expressed by members of collectivistic societies include pleasing others and relationship maintenance (Tang et al., 2012). In Costa Rica, femininity and collectivism are paired with high uncertainty avoidance, which emphasizes a strong need for predictability. For Costa Ricans, including non-penetrative behaviors such as oral sex and foreplay, along with penetrative ones, in a definition of sex, may reduce feelings of anxiety.

Another cultural difference in definitions of sex was evident in regard to foreplay and phone/cyber sex. For Euro-Americans, neither of these behaviors was considered sex, while Costa Ricans considered both to be sex in certain contexts.

Again this could be due in part to masculine or feminine cultural orientations. In masculine cultures, foreplay is more likely to be viewed only as a precursor to the ultimate penetrative objective of a sexual encounter (Gray, 1980). It follows that, for the more goal-oriented Euro-American, foreplay is considered a prelude to the penetrative act of sex, rather than sex itself. In accordance with earlier findings from Trotter and Alderson (2007), phone/cyber sex was also not considered sex by Euro-Americans. Thus, Euro-Americans may perceive phone/cyber sex as extraneous to the penetrative objective of sex. On the other hand, Costa Rican perceptions of both foreplay and phone/cyber sex were highly dependent on the relational context in which the behavior occurred. This may be because Costa Ricans define sex not in terms of a sexual objective (i.e. penetration), but rather in terms of the connection it forms between partners. This need for fostering intimacy functions as a framework in which every sexual behavior has to be included, not only penetrative ones. This inclusive framework may function as a clear guideline which helps reduce feelings of anxiety associated with ambiguity. Such clear definitions for action and thinking are characteristic of high uncertainty avoidance cultures (Ubillos et al., 2000).

Finally, while Euro-Americans perceived oral sex to be sex only within certain contexts, Costa Ricans considered it to be sex almost as often as penile–vaginal intercourse. In fact, for Costa Ricans, oral sex was considered to be sex even more frequently than anal intercourse. In the United States, oral sex has been highly popularized as a recreational activity to foster sexual exploration outside of penetrative sex acts and of long-term relationships that involve commitment (Curtis & Hunt, 2007; Jayson, 2005b). Essentially, Euro-Americans associate oral sex with sexual exploration or foreplay rather than the act of sex itself. On the other hand, many Costa Ricans may perceive it as a forbidden behavior: one that is penetrative and pleasure-seeking, but not procreative. The taboo associated with this behavior may also decrease its usefulness as an intimacy increasing tool. Accordingly, results from the 2010 National Survey on Sexual and Reproductive Health in Costa Rica reported that oral sex and anal intercourse are not practiced as frequently as penile–vaginal intercourse (Ministerio de Salud, 2011).

4.3. Sexual and intercourse partners

Both cultures reported more lifetime sexual partners than lifetime intercourse partners, suggesting that in both cultures penile–vaginal intercourse is not the only behavior that defines a sexual partner. Furthermore, although Euro-American men and women reported a similar number of lifetime partners, Costa Rican females reported significantly fewer partners than Costa Rican males. One possible explanation for this finding is that individualistic cultures, such as the United States, promote the view that sexual pleasure seeking is legitimate for both males and females (Radford, 2000). Another reason that Euro-Americans report a similar number of partners may be the way in which male and female roles are understood in the United States. Feminists within the United States have suggested that, to avoid the development of “unnecessary differences” between males and females, people should overlook differences in the behavior of men and women (Lorber, 1994). Accordingly, experts have noted that levels of premarital sex for women have increased consistently over the second half of the twentieth century, causing the sexual experience gap between the two sexes to narrow significantly (Smith, 2007).

The low number of partners reported by Costa Rican women may be explained by three elements: collectivism, moral conservatism, the cultural ideal of *marianismo*. The close, tight-knit kinship network present in collectivistic countries like Costa Rica reinforces traditional values and conservative codes of conduct, which oftentimes are promoted by religious institutions such as the Catholic Church. In addition, *Marianismo* endorses the Virgin Mary as the ideal woman. It promotes the idea that a woman should be silent and self-sacrificing, almost non-sexual, and morally superior when compared to men (Raffaelli & Iturbide, 2009). Thus, Costa Rican women may report less partners because they filter their own personal histories to appear less sexually active than they really are.

In Costa Rica, the nature of a relationship may also influence whether a woman engages in sexual behavior. Costa Rican women report losing their virginity within a more “serious” relationship, such as their boyfriends and husbands, as opposed to men, who report to lose their virginity with female friends and girlfriends (Ministerio de Salud, 2011). Thus, the relational context may also influence the number of sexual partners reported by women in Costa Rica.

5. Conclusion

This study found that across cultures foreplay, oral sex, and penile–vaginal intercourse were considered appropriate when a couple has, at a minimum, been dating steadily for 3 months to a year. Phone/cyber sex was considered appropriate only within the context of a committed dating relationship and anal sex was considered appropriate within the context of marriage. However, across all categories of sexual behavior (foreplay, oral sex, penile–vaginal intercourse, and phone/cyber sex), Euro-Americans were more likely to consider the act to be appropriate at an earlier stage in relationship development than Costa Ricans. It is clear from this study that not only is the propriety of a given behavior influenced by cultural norms, but that the acts that constitute sex are not the same across cultures. In this case, Euro-Americans seemed to perceive sex in terms of an achievement with the objective of penetration. They did not define foreplay or phone/cyber sex to be sex and only considered oral sex to be sex within certain contexts. On the other hand, Costa Ricans defined foreplay, oral sex, penile–vaginal intercourse, and anal sex as sex in most contexts. For Costa Ricans, phone/cyber sex was also considered sex in some contexts. This study demonstrates the importance of considering culture as a major factor in perceptions of sexual behavior. Both perceptions of the propriety of a behavior as well as whether it is considered “having sex” vary in accordance

with cultural norms. Further research on these areas is needed to enhance our knowledge on how culture shapes current notions of sexual behavior.

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