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Toerien, M. orcid.org/0000-0003-3159-0931, Wilkinson, S. and Choi, P.Y.L. (2005) Body hair removal : The 'mundane' production of normative femininity. *Sex roles*. pp. 399-406. ISSN 0360-0025

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Body Hair Removal: The ‘Mundane’ Production of Normative Femininity

Merran Toerien,^{1,2,4} Sue Wilkinson,¹ and Precilla Y. L. Choi^{1,3}

Although women’s body hair removal is strongly normative across contemporary Western cultures, only two studies of ‘mundane’ depilation have been published, and they were based on data from the US (Basow, 1991) and Australia (Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998), respectively. The present survey, comprised of a sample of 678 women, extends this work. We investigated UK practices, a wider array of body regions and removal methods, and the relationship between depilation and age. Over 99% of participants reported removing some hair, most commonly from the underarms, legs, pubic area, and eyebrows. Shaving and plucking were the most common removal methods. Significant relationships between age and leg, pubic, and facial depilation were found. Results document the normativity of hair removal, and we argue that hair removal is part of the taken-for-granted work of producing an ‘acceptable’ femininity.

KEY WORDS: body hair; depilation; femininity.

Women’s body hair⁵ removal is strongly normative across numerous cultural contexts today. Survey research indicates that the practice is currently prevalent in North America (Basow, 1991) and Australia (Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998). However, accounts of women’s hair removal from such diverse regions as Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome; the Tobriand Islands; Uganda; South America; and Turkey (Cooper, 1971) show it to be neither a modern nor a purely Western invention. Taken together, the long history and the current, documented prevalence of women’s body depilation suggest it to be

of social significance. Moreover, there is strong evidence of a widespread symbolic association between body hair—or its absence—and ideal gender: to have a hairy body is a sign of masculinity; to have a hairless one, a sign of femininity⁶ (Basow, 1991; Basow & Braman, 1998; Cooper, 1971; Ferrante, 1988; Firth, 1973; Greer, 1970; Hope, 1982; Simpson, 1986; Synnott, 1993; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003, 2004). Indeed, the depiction of the female body as depilated, with “smooth unwrinkled . . . skin” (Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998,

¹Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK.

²MRC Health Services Research Collaboration, Department of Social Medicine, University of Bristol, UK.

³Centre for Ageing, Rehabilitation, Exercise and Sport, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia.

⁴To whom correspondence should be addressed at MRC Health Services Research Collaboration, Department of Social Medicine, Canynge Hall, Whiteladies Road, Bristol BS8 2PR, United Kingdom; e-mail: merran.toerien@bristol.ac.uk.

⁵For the purposes of this study, body hair was defined as any hair visible—currently or in the past—on a participant’s body (including the face), other than the head.

⁶We would like to underscore that this dichotomous construction of gendered embodiment, whereby masculinity and femininity are seen as opposites (such that the association between body hair and masculinity means that body hair cannot also be associated with femininity), is not a *necessary* one. Researchers have launched cogent critiques of such thinking. In particular, work on intersex (e.g., Fausto-Sterling, 2000), transgender (e.g., Bornstein, 1994), and androgyny (e.g., Bem, 1978/1987) has challenged the very notion that there exist just two (opposite) sexes/genders. Nevertheless, Western thinking retains a pervasive understanding of femininity and masculinity as opposites (Goodison, 1992). To be masculine is still, in commonsense, to be unfeminine. Thus feminine hairiness becomes, at least symbolically, an oxymoron (Hope, 1982).

p. 873), is part of the current, dominant, mass media image of ideal femininity (Whelehan, 2000).

Yet hairlessness is not the inevitable state of the female body; to be hairless typically requires work (Synnott, 1993). Thus, women's practices of depilation—the work required to produce themselves as hairless—may be understood as one means of *transforming* the body such that it more closely resembles the feminine ideal. As such, hair removal may act as a “structuring device . . . reflect[ing] larger cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity, of sex roles, and of changes in social-sexual status” (Ferrante, 1988, p. 220). This article, in which we highlight the normative status of hair removal in a cultural context not researched before—the UK—presents the results of an investigation of the *work* of hair removal; we argue that this is a significant facet of the production of a socially acceptable femininity.

Few social scientific studies have concerned the practices of women's routine hair removal (Basow, 1991; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998). Somewhat more common are psychological investigations into the impact on women of so-called ‘excess’ hair growth (e.g., Barth, Catalan, Cherry, & Day, 1993; Kitzinger & Willmott, 2002; Rabinowitz, Cohen, & Le Roith, 1983). However, Basow and Braman (1998) have demonstrated that negative evaluations of women's body hair are not confined to ‘excess’ growth. In their study, participants, who were randomly assigned to watch a video-recording of the same bikini-clad woman either with or without visible body hair, judged the woman as less attractive, intelligent, sociable, happy, and positive when hairy than when hairless. The presence of hair on a woman's body, then, may be symbolically—and, importantly, socially—problematic irrespective of whether or not it may be defined as a medical concern. As Ferrante (1988) concluded: “Perhaps it is because the division between masculine and feminine hair growth is physiologically arbitrary yet socially and psychologically rigid that any amount deviating from hairlessness is threatening. A woman never knows when she may have crossed the boundary” (p. 231).

Coupled with socio-cultural emphases on feminine ‘beauty’ (see Wolf, 1991), the above findings suggest that most women within cultures that view body hair as masculine will remove at least some of their hair. The only two published social psychological surveys on women's hair removal strongly support this hypothesis: Basow (1991) found that 81% of the professional North American women in her sample reported removing their leg and/or underarm

hair; and Tiggemann and Kenyon (1998) found that 91.5% of their Australian university student sample removed their leg hair, and 93% removed their underarm hair. Tiggemann and Kenyon also surveyed a group of Australian high school students, and found similar results: 92% reported removing their leg hair, and 91.2% their underarm hair. Industry reports provide similarly high statistics (Hope, 1982); for example, Chapkis (1986) cited the “Epilator 2700” estimate that between 85 and 90% of women have body hair that they would prefer to be rid of. Hair removal, then, may well be “[s]tatistically . . . one of the most frequent ways women alter their bodies to achieve the ideal of youthfulness and attractiveness” (Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998, p. 874). As such, women's depilatory practices not only contribute substantially to the cosmetic industry, but reinforce the view that underpins all the body-changing procedures, from make-up application to cosmetic surgery: that a woman's body is unacceptable if left unaltered (see Basow, 1991; Chapkis, 1986; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998).

This study, together with two previous surveys (Basow, 1991; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998), provides baseline data on women's everyday hair removal practices. We expected that a majority of participants would report removing at least some body hair, thus providing empirical support for an understanding of women's hair removal as a powerful social norm within the UK. Because norms are seldom monolithic, we also expected some participants to report never having removed any body hair. Thus, we investigated one possible explanation for women's non-removal that has not yet been explored: age. Basow (1991) reported being surprised by the number of women (around 20%) in her sample who did not remove their hair. And, indeed, Tiggemann and Kenyon (1998) found a higher rate of removal in their study. Both Basow and Tiggemann and Kenyon suggested that the discrepancy may be because the former study specifically maximised the number of feminist and lesbian participants. An additional reason might be that Basow's study included participants from a much wider age range (20–81) than did Tiggemann and Kenyon's, which focused on undergraduates (mean age of 22.3 years) and school-goers (mean age of 14.3 years). If the norm has become, as may be inferred from Hope's (1982) analysis, increasingly powerful over the past 90 years or so, then we might expect that younger women would be more likely than their older counterparts to have grown up with an understanding of hair removal as virtually de

rigueur. Thus, we investigated whether older participants were more likely than younger participants to report never having removed their body hair.

The main aim of the present study was, then, to extend the previous research on 'everyday' hair removal in three ways: (i) to investigate women's practices regarding their body hair in a different cultural context—the UK—in order to broaden the picture produced by the US (Basow, 1991) and Australian (Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998) surveys; (ii) to provide a more detailed picture of women's hair removal practices than is currently available in the social scientific literature, by investigating a broader range of body regions depilated, and removal methods used, than has been included in previous studies; and (iii) to investigate the relationship between hair removal and participant age.

METHOD

Participants

The final sample totalled 678 women, who were resident in the UK at the time of the survey. A little over one-half of the participants (57.52%) were in full-time education, and the rest (39.51%⁷) were in full- or part-time employment, or otherwise occupied (e.g., as homemakers or volunteers). Participants ranged in age from under 16 to over 70 years: 0.9% were 16 years or younger, 28.0% were aged 17–20 years, 30.8% were aged 21–30 years, 27.3% were aged 31–50 years, 10.8% were aged 51–70 years, and 0.6% were over 70 years of age. Most participants identified as 'White' (84.51%) and 'heterosexual' (91.30%).⁸

Materials

A self-administered, five-part questionnaire was developed following an extensive literature review and refined via a pilot study ($n = 33$). In the present article we report findings from the first three sections, which asked predominantly closed questions

regarding women's body hair removal practices. Participants were required to tick the appropriate boxes and/or to write their answers in the space provided. Questions included:

- (i) Have you ever removed any of your body hair?
- (ii) Approximately how old were you when you first removed any of your body hair?
- (iii) From which parts of your body have you ever removed hair? (Options were: "legs," "underarms," "pubic area," "eyebrows," "other parts of face," and "other").
- (iv) Have you ever bleached or dyed any of your body hair (other than your head hair)? If you answered yes, please specify what body hair you have bleached and/or dyed.
- (v) If you have ever removed hair from your pubic area, from which of the following regions have you ever done so? (Options were: "your 'bikini line,'" "more than your 'bikini line' but less than your whole pubic area," "your whole pubic area," and "other").
- (vi) For each body part from which you've ever removed hair, please indicate all the removal methods that you've ever used. (Options were: "shaving," "hair removal creams," "home waxing," "salon waxing," "trimming," "plucking," "electrolysis," and "other").

The fourth section asked largely open-ended questions, the responses to which have been reported elsewhere (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004), and the fifth consisted of demographic questions.

Procedure

In order to obtain as diverse a sample as possible within the confines of a small-scale study, the questionnaire was distributed in several ways, using a snow-balling approach: (i) through contact persons (e.g., university faculty and women's center managers in several towns and cities across the UK handed out questionnaires to students during lectures and to women attending the centers, respectively); (ii) by mail (e.g., to lesbian and Asian women's groups); and (iii) through advertisements accompanied by copies of the questionnaire (e.g., placed at local leisure centers). Completed questionnaires were returned by contact persons via bulk mail, or posted in a box placed alongside the advertisement. Where bulk return was not possible (e.g.,

⁷Where figures do not total 100% this is due to missing data.

⁸These figures reflect both the fact that only around 7% of people living in Britain are "from an ethnic minority group" (Great Britain Central Statistical Office & Great Britain Office for National Statistics, 2002, p. 30), and a recent UK national survey finding that only "3.4% of women reported some same-sex experience in their lifetime" ("Gay and lesbian information," 2002).

smaller women's groups without administrative support), stamped envelopes were provided for use by individual participants.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using predominantly descriptive statistics via SPSS. Chi-square tests were run to investigate the relationship between age and whether or not participants had ever removed their body hair. Because the numbers of participants in the youngest and oldest age categories (16 years and younger, and 71 years and older, respectively) were small, the original six age categories used in the questionnaire were collapsed into four: 20 years and younger, 21–30 years, 31–50 years, and 51 years and older. This is recommended in cases where expected frequencies are less than five (Brace, Kemp, & Snelgar, 2000), in an effort to avoid multiple low expected frequencies (Cramer, 1994).

RESULTS

The final sample of 678 reflects a return rate of 43.40% (the norm is around 30% for mail questionnaires; Schweigert, 1994). This return rate may well be conservative; given that many of the questionnaires were distributed in bulk, the exact number that actually reached participants is unknown.

Body Areas Depilated

Virtually the entire sample (99.71%) reported having removed some body hair at some time in their lives. The majority (85.25%) recalled beginning to do so by age 16. Almost one-half (49.26%) said that they had begun removing their hair even earlier: by 13 years or younger. Most commonly, participants reported having depilated their underarms (98.67%) and legs (93.66%), followed by the pubic area (85.69%), eyebrows (82.45%), and face (41.30%). Although the Brazilian wax – where only a narrow strip of pubic hair is left – has been described as a “vogue” (Johnson, 2002), the figure for pubic hair removal largely reflects ‘bikini line’ depilation. Less than one-third of participants (31.71%) said that they had ever removed more than ‘bikini line’ hair, and only 4.87% reported ever shaping their pubic hair (e.g., into a heart, arrow, or strip). A

wide range of other body regions were also listed as sites for depilation: nipples/breasts (12.54%), stomach (11.06%), arms (8.11%), and toes (2.36%), as well as chest, fingers/knuckles, hands, neck, back, feet, and nostrils (listed by a total of 2.36%).

Depilatory Methods Used

Almost all participants (97.20%) reported having shaved some of their body hair, which makes shaving the most common depilatory method, followed by plucking (85.10%), removal creams (84.51%), and home waxing (44.25%). Most participants had tried more than one method. Whereas salon waxing had been used by 35.25% of participants, other salon methods were reported by relatively few: 6.78% had tried electrolysis, and only 0.59% had tried laser treatments.

When we considered the methods in relation to each body area, differential popularity of methods was found. Shaving was the most common method ever used for the underarms (94.23% of participants), legs (91.45%), and pubic area (64.01%), followed by removal creams (underarms: 43.36%; legs: 67.26%; pubic area: 46.61%) and home waxing (underarms: 11.06%; legs: 36.87%; pubic area: 20.06%). Plucking was the most common removal method ever used for the eyebrows (80.38%) and face (21.83%), followed by salon waxing (11.06%) and shaving (3.98%) for the eyebrows; and removal creams (9.88%) and home waxing (6.64%) for the face. In other words, the finding that shaving and plucking were the most common methods ever used overall reflects the large number of participants who had used shaving for legs, underarms, and pubic area and plucking for the eyebrows and face.

The Relationship Between Age and Whether Participants had Ever Removed Their Body Hair

Chi-square tests revealed a relationship between age and whether or not participants had ever removed their hair from the following regions: legs, $\chi^2 = 38.01$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$; pubic area, $\chi^2 = 29.24$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$; and face, $\chi^2 = 51.52$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$. Whether or not participants had ever removed their eyebrow hair was found to be independent of age, $\chi^2 = 4.64$, $df = 3$, $p = .200$. To assess exactly where the relationships lay, the contingency tables for each significant chi-square were partitioned into

multiple 2×2 tables (Howitt & Cramer, 2000). To decrease the likelihood of a Type 1 error, which is increased by the number of tests performed, a Bonferroni p -value of $<.008$ ($0.05/6$) was used (Howell, 1997).

For the removal of leg hair, a significant relationship between age and whether or not participants had ever removed their hair was found only when we compared women in the oldest age group (51 years and older) with women in each of the younger age groups. In other words, significantly fewer participants aged 51 years and older (79.22%) said that they had ever removed their leg hair than did those aged 20 years and younger (96.94%), $\chi^2 = 23.42$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$, those aged 21–30 years (97.61%), $\chi^2 = 27.96$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$, and those aged 31–50 years (92.97%), $\chi^2 = 10.45$, $df = 1$, $p = .001$.

Similarly, a significant relationship between age and whether or not participants had ever removed their pubic hair was found to lie only between the oldest age category (51 years and older) and each of the younger three categories. In other words, significantly fewer women in this sample aged 51 years and older (67.53%) said that they had ever removed their pubic hair than did those aged 20 years and younger (91.33%), $\chi^2 = 24.04$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$, those aged 21–30 years (89.47%), $\chi^2 = 19.73$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$, and those aged 31–50 years (83.24%), $\chi^2 = 7.99$, $df = 1$, $p = .005$.

In the case of facial hair removal, a different pattern of relationships emerged: significant relationships were found between age and whether or not participants had ever removed their facial hair when we compared all age categories except the two oldest. Significantly fewer participants aged 20 years and younger (24.10%) reported having ever removed their facial hair than did those aged 21–30 years (38.76%), $\chi^2 = 10.01$, $df = 1$, $p = .002$, those aged 31–50 years (53.51%), $\chi^2 = 34.71$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$, and those aged 51 years and older (63.64%), $\chi^2 = 37.78$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$. Similarly, significantly fewer participants aged 21–30 years (38.76%) said they had ever removed their facial hair than did those aged 31–50 years (53.51%), $\chi^2 = 8.61$, $df = 1$, $p = .003$, and those aged 51 years and older (63.64%), $\chi^2 = 14.05$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$.

Due to the small expected frequencies for non-removal, it was not possible to perform a chi-square test on the relationship between age and whether participants reported ever having removed their underarm hair (see Cramer, 1994). Similarly, too few women said they had never removed any body hair

at all for a chi-square test to be carried out on the relationship between age and hair removal in general.

DISCUSSION

Hair Removal as Normative

As expected, the vast majority of the sample reported having removed some body hair. This result supports and extends previous findings of hair removal as normative (Basow, 1991; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998), and provides data from a new context: the UK. The present finding does not simply reflect an aggregate of small numbers of women removing hair from different body regions. Although many areas were listed as possible sites for depilation, over 90% of participants reported having removed hair from their underarms and legs, and over 80% from their pubic area and eyebrows. Hair removal from these regions in particular, therefore, may be understood as normative. Further, the finding that most participants recalled first removing their hair at around puberty (which is comparable to Basow's, 1991, US data) suggests that the norm assumes relevance for women virtually as soon as they start producing (more) visible body hair. Given that almost all women produce visible hair on the four most common removal regions, the present results strongly suggest a 'mundane' norm for hair removal that is (potentially) applicable to all women within contemporary Western cultures, not just to those who might be defined-by medical, or other, criteria-as 'hirsute.'

The fact that this norm does not, however, extend to all publicly displayed body regions (less than 9% of participants reported removing their arm hair, for instance), or, generally, to men (there is no Western cultural sanction against a man displaying his leg hair, for example), highlights the socially constructed nature of the assumption that body hair is a flaw, unfit for public display: hair per se is not condemned, and may even be considered a source of beauty—at least if carefully shaped, as the eyebrows often are. Clearly, to produce an adequately nuanced analysis of the socio-cultural meanings of the depilation norm, it is necessary to investigate hair removal, not as a single concept, but per body region. The present research extends previous work in the area by providing more detailed baseline data in relation to different body regions.

Methods of Removal

As predicted, shaving was the most common removal method overall, as found also by Basow (1991) and Tiggemann and Kenyon (1998). Plucking (the most common method for eyebrow and facial hair removal) was second most common overall—rather than waxing, as found by Tiggemann and Kenyon, who studied only leg and underarm hair removal. The use of different methods clearly relates to practicalities, such as the amount of hair to be removed, but again these underscore the multi-faceted nature of the norm: it is not simply the case that any hair on a woman's body is deemed socially unacceptable. Some eyebrow hair, but no leg hair, should be visible, which makes shaving (typically) too crude for the eyebrows, and plucking too painstaking for the legs; minimization, rather than total removal, might be acceptable for pubic hair, but not for underarms. Further research on the depilation norm, then, should explore the meanings of these trends. For instance, the tendency for women to pluck, rather than to shave, their faces (despite the fact that shaving is routinely used by men to remove facial hair) may well reflect the fact that hair typically grows back more quickly and more bristly after shaving than after plucking; the cultural assumption that a 'properly' feminine woman would not produce facial hair at all (Brownmiller, 1984; Chapkis, 1986) necessitates not only its removal, but also the avoidance of any signs of removal (such as the 'five o'clock shadow' often evident on men's faces). As Freedman (1986) put it: "having 'unwanted' [facial] hair [is] shameful and removing it [is] equally shameful" (p. 222).

In material terms, the finding that most participants reported having tried multiple removal methods (even on the same body region) suggests that women typically experiment with available products, which provides a lucrative market for depilatory producers. Gillette, for instance, found that "[t]he UK hair-removing market was worth \$120 m [about \$216,468,177] in 1999, including disposable razors, creams and waxes," and predicted an increase of around 42% over the following four years (Gillette pins hopes, 2000). Hope's (1982) investigation of the development of the current US depilation norm provides strong evidence that the norm itself was initially fostered by depilatory marketers, who saw that money was to be made from convincing women that body hair was a flaw. Taken together, the present-day, powerful normative status of women's hair removal, and the wide range of available products,

work to create a world in which 'choice' means 'choice of product' rather than 'choice of whether or not to depilate.'

The Relationship Between Hair Removal and Age

The present study demonstrated a significant relationship between age and whether or not participants had ever removed hair from the legs, pubic area, and face. Participants aged 51 years and older were less likely than younger participants ever to have removed their leg or pubic hair. Participants aged 20 and younger were less likely than older participants ever to have removed their facial hair. Similarly, participants aged 21–30 years were also less likely than older participants to have ever removed their facial hair. The latter two findings probably reflect the fact that, whereas most body hair growth tends to decrease with age, facial hair growth tends to increase (Brownmiller, 1984; Ferriman & Gallwey, 1961). The former finding, however, is incompatible with a similar biological argument; because participants were asked if they had *ever* removed their leg and pubic hair, the results cannot reflect simply a cessation of hair removal following decreased growth. Rather, these findings show that, for the legs and pubic area, participants over 51 years of age were more likely *never* to have removed their hair than were their younger counterparts. This suggests that age is a factor in whether or not women conform to the norm for leg and pubic hair removal, and it raises the possibility that this norm was not as strong when these women were growing up as it is today.

As noted, it was not possible to run a chi-square on the relationship between age and underarm hair removal, or age and hair removal in general, because the expected frequencies for non-removal were too low. This offers further evidence for the normativity of women's hair removal in the UK: overwhelmingly large numbers of participants reported removing some body hair—in particular, hair from the underarms—regardless of age. Tiggemann and Kenyon (1998) noted, similarly, that "[t]he very universality of hair removal in [their] sample made it difficult to identify predictors" (p. 883). The results of the present study, which included women aged under 16 to over 71 years, suggest that Hope's (1982) hypothesis—that hair removal has become a norm for women of all ages—is generally applicable to the UK. At the same time, the fact that sufficient numbers of women reported never having removed hair from the

legs, pubic area, and face for chi-squares to be run suggests that future research into women's reasons for non-removal would benefit from investigating depilation from different body regions separately.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the present study has contributed in three key ways to the small existing pool of literature on women's 'everyday' body hair removal: (i) it provides baseline data on women's hair removal practices from a previously un-researched context: the UK; (ii) it further extends previous research by investigating a broader array of body regions depilated, and removal methods used; and (iii) it investigates one possible reason for some women's non-conformity to the depilation norm: age. The results of the study highlight both the overall power of the norm—only two women of 678 reported never having removed any body hair—and its complexity, and imply that future researchers should take seriously the variations in the social requirements of 'mundane' depilation.

The present study comprises a sample size of more than double that of the two previous surveys conducted (see Basow, 1991; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998). We do not, however, claim that our results represent all British women: the possibility of different body hair norms for women of different cultural or sub-cultural groups warrants further study, as does the extension of this work both to non-Western countries and to those European countries (e.g., Germany, Spain, and France) where—anecdotally at least—the norm for hair removal is reputedly less strong.

Feminist critics of normative femininity have long pointed to the ways in which women are socially required to expend time, energy, and money transforming their bodies to better fit the feminine ideal. The present study has documented some of the most taken-for-granted body-altering practices of our time. Our results testify to the work of femininity. The requirements of this work place women in a double-bind: trivialised for taking them seriously; treated as feminine failures for not doing so (see Bartky, 1998). By refusing to trivialise women's 'beauty' practices, then, we question the narrow definition of 'acceptable' feminine embodiment, which maintains—at the most 'mundane,' and, hence, insidious level—the message that a woman's body is unacceptable if left unaltered.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was funded by the Emma Smith Overseas Scholarship, administered by the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa. The authors would like to thank Joan Chrisler and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. We are also especially grateful to all those who took part in this research.

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