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NEWS RELEASE

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## University of Lethbridge researchers find sexual competition isn't always against only your own gender

If the proliferation of dating apps and websites in our western culture is any indication, finding and keeping a mate can be a fairly daunting, difficult and sometimes discouraging task. But take heart, at least the competition for your prospective mate is largely limited to your own gender because as University of Lethbridge researchers found in at least two disparate non-Western cultures, the competitive field is much broader.

Scott Semenyna, a PhD student in Dr. Paul Vasey's Laboratory of Comparative Sexology, is the lead author on a paper just published in [PLOS One](#), a peer-reviewed open access scientific journal published by the Public Library of Science. The paper, [Inter-sexual Mate Competition in Three Cultures](#), examines when women engage in sexual competition for a man with female rivals, as well as with male rivals.



“Sexual competition typically occurs among members of the same sex. Women compete with other women, and men with men, to attract the most appealing opposite-sex partners,” says Semenyna, who will defend his PhD thesis this fall. “Same-sex attracted individuals also exist, such as gay men, making it possible that women and gay men might engage in sexual and romantic competition.”

These interactions are relatively rare in western cultures such as Canada, where only 15 per cent of women report having competed with gay men over the same object of desire. And even in these instances, such competition is generally not taken seriously. The same cannot be said for two other cultures Vasey's group studied, Samoa and the Istmo Zapotec of southern Mexico. In both of these cultures, feminine, same-sex attracted males regularly adopt gender identities outside the man or woman binary. These individuals are known as *fa'afafine* in Samoa, and *muxe* in the Istmo Zapotec.

Vasey's research group found that a sizable proportion of Samoan women (43 per cent) reported having competed against a *fa'afafine* for the sexual attention of a man, while an even larger number of Istmo Zapotec women (85 per cent) reported having competed against a *muxe*.

"We know these cultures have these non-binary genders that engage in this type of competition," says Semenyna. "I think the biggest surprise was in the Istmo where a quarter of the women had no response to the *muxe* flirting with their husbands or their boyfriends, mostly because they thought their partners would not be interested in that. When I read the narratives though, I saw a certain level of naiveté because, in reality, lots of men were interested."

The tactics these unfamiliar rivals use to try and poach and/or keep mates aren't unfamiliar at all and have been used since the beginning of time. The *fa'afafine* and *muxe* frequently use flirtatious and sexually alluring tactics to try and entice men away from their female partners, whereas the women engage in guarding and emotionally punitive behaviours with their partners.

"Part of our findings are an acknowledgment that individuals who are same-sex attracted are not removed from broad mating interactions, they are actually embedded right in it," says Semenyna. "It's not like they are on the sidelines, they can be active participants. There are more studies in my dissertation that revolve around this area. One is women's responses to infidelity, including infidelity that might occur with a female versus infidelity that would occur with a male."

And while this behaviour is not as common in western cultures, its framework can be applied here and is something Semenyna may look at for future study.

"In a western frame, it's much more likely taking place between a heterosexual man and a bisexual woman, or even a lesbian woman, just because female bisexual behaviour, identity and attraction seem to be quite a bit more common in western culture," he says.

He is also looking ahead to his post-doctoral studies, which will be conducted in Vasey's lab, and examining competition between bisexual women and men for the same woman. Semenyna will be the first post-doctoral fellow at the U of L to obtain post-doctoral funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

"The work is important because it demonstrates that reproductive and non-reproductive sex develop and evolve in concert, and each can influence the other," says Vasey. "Consequently, our research on inter-sexual mate competition can help furnish transformative new insights into sexual selection, as well as the processes that underpin mating systems."

Vasey adds that “psychologists have expressed a pressing need within the pages of the leading scientific journal, Nature, to conduct research on non-student, non-Western populations, to replicate that research, to triangulate it in disparate populations, and then relate such work to comparable research on non-human species using both field and laboratory approaches. This is a herculean task, but one my lab has been working hard to fulfill.”

For a look at the full paper, visit the [PLOS One journal](#).

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