



The developmental association of sexual self-concept with sexual behavior among adolescent women

Devon J. Hensel^{a,*}, J. Dennis Fortenberry^a, Lucia F. O'Sullivan^b, Donald P. Orr^a

^a Department of Pediatrics, Section of Adolescent Medicine, Indiana University School of Medicine, 410 W. 10th Street, Room 1001, Indianapolis, IN 46202, USA

^b Department of Psychology, University of New Brunswick, Keirstead Hall, Fredericton, NB, E3B 5A3, Canada

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Developing a sexual self-concept is an important developmental task of adolescence; however, little empirical evidence describes this development, nor how these changes are related to development in sexual behavior. Using longitudinal cohort data from adolescent women, we invoked latent growth curve analysis to: (1) examine reciprocal development in sexual self-concept (sexual openness, sexual esteem and sexual anxiety) over a four year time frame; (2) describe the relationship of these trajectories with changes in sexual behavior. We found significant transactional effects between these dimensions and behavior: sexual self-concept evolved during adolescence in a manner consistent with less reserve, less anxiety and greater personal comfort with sexuality and sexual behavior. Moreover, we found that sexual self-concept results from sexual behavior, as well as regulates future behavior.

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Introduction

An overview of sexual self-concept and dimensions

The development and consolidation of an understanding of one's self as a sexual person, or sexual self-concept (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994; Cooley, 1902; Cyranowski & Andersen, 1998; James, 1915; Longmore, 1998; Rostosky, Dekhtyar, Cupp, & Anderman, 2008; Snell, 1998; Winters, 1988), is a normative task of adolescence (Gagnon & Simon, 1987; Longmore, 1998; Rostosky et al., 2008). This understanding helps individuals organize and make sense of sexual experience and provide structure to and motivation for sexual behavior (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994; Andersen, Cyranowski, & Espindle, 1999; Birnbaum & Reis, 2006; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Recent work emphasizes the multi-dimensional nature of sexual self-concept, with individuals evaluating themselves across different dimensions (Garcia, 1999; O'Sullivan, Meyer-Bahlburg, & McKeague, 2006; Rostosky et al., 2008; Snell, 1998; Tolman, Striepe, & Harmon, 2003). Many of these dimensions appear in early adolescence, often months or years before any physical sexual contact (Butler, Miller, Holtgrave, Forehand, & Long, 2006; Ott, Pfeiffer, & Fortenberry, 2006).

One dimension is sexual openness, which includes recognition of sexual pleasure or sexual arousal and a feeling of entitlement to pursue specific sexual activities (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005; Nicholson, 1994). Thompson (1995) found a positive relationship between adolescent women's realistic understanding of romance, their anticipation of sexual desire

* Corresponding author. Permanent address: Section of Adolescent Medicine, Indiana University School of Medicine, 410 W. 10th Street, Room 1001, Indianapolis, IN 46202, USA. Tel.: +1 317 274 8812; fax: +1 317 274 0133.

E-mail addresses: djhensel@iupui.edu (D.J. Hensel), jfortenb@iupui.edu (J.D. Fortenberry), osulliv@unb.ca (L.F. O'Sullivan), dporr@iupui.edu (D.P. Orr).

and their being ready to consent to sexual intercourse and to use condoms. Other research has shown that young women with a person-centered focus on sexuality report increased use of condoms and contraception, lower pregnancy rates and later onset of first sexual intercourse (Eng & Butler, 1996; Fine, 1988).

A second dimension of sexual self-concept, sexual esteem, involves positive evaluations of one's sexuality (Snell, 1998), including appraisals of sexual thought, feelings and behaviors (Zeanah & Schwartz, 1996), as well perceptions of body in the sexual context (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005). Generally speaking, adolescents with greater sexual esteem feel more assured in sexual situations, more positive about their sexual activity, and somewhat more likely to use condoms and contraception (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996; O'Sullivan et al., 2006; Seal, Minichiello, & Omodei, 1997). Among late adolescent women, higher general sexual self-concept was associated with more sexual experience, including coitus and more sexual satisfaction, but was not associated with earlier onset of intercourse or with increased number of partner changes (Impett & Tolman, 2006). It may be that young women with higher sexual esteem place higher value on their sexual being and experiences, and by extension are willing to engage a sexual partner in discussing issues related to sexual encounters, such as satisfaction, emotions and willingness to participate in risk (Oattes & Offman, 2007).

A third dimension, sexual anxiety, refers to tension, discomfort, and other negative evaluations of the sexual aspects of one's life (Snell, 1998). Sexual anxiety is associated with greater endorsement of abstinence beliefs, lower perceived sexual readiness or likelihood of intercourse in the near future, as well as with fewer reports of having a boyfriend, having been in love or having engaged in kissing, fondling or coitus (O'Sullivan et al., 2006). In this same study, older adolescents had lower negative sexual affect as compared to younger adolescents, suggesting that reduced negativity about sexual matters aligns with increasing sexual experience, perhaps as an anticipatory effect or increased confidence (O'Sullivan & Brooks-Gunn, 2005). It is unclear, however, how a reduction in sexual anxiety may be influenced by a simultaneous rise in positive sexual self-concept, and how long this effect may last, particularly if sexual activity increases over time.

Developmental change in sexual self-concept and sexual behavior

Sexual self-concept and sexual behavior take on personal salience and social meaning in the post-pubertal period (Carpenter, 2002); even adolescents without direct experience of sexual behavior have a range of models drawn from family members, peers, education programs, and media (Hockenberry-Eaton, Richman, Dilorio, Rivero, & Maibach, 1996; Lindberg, Ku, & Sonenstein, 2000; Steele & Brown, 1995). Sexual self concept may also be influenced by meaningful sexual events occurring in this time frame, such as the initiation of new non-coital or coital behaviors, or the loss of virginity. New behaviors may shape (and reshape) generalizations about the sexual self, which may in turn influence the timing and choice of future sexual behaviors (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996; Houlihan et al., 2008; O'Sullivan & Brooks-Gunn, 2005).

Some research suggests that dimensions of self-concept (e.g., capacity for close friendships and for romantic relationships) show development over time (Shapka & Keating, 2005). Alternatively, negative social attitudes toward adolescent sexuality suggest that specific dimensions of sexual self-concept could decline throughout adolescence, or could decline early and increase later (Harter, 1990). Some studies suggest that specific facets of self-concept are uni-directionally associated with sexual activity. For example, lower levels of general self-esteem predict subsequent sexual activity (Orr, Wilbrandt, Brack, Rauch, & Ingersoll, 1989; Salazar et al., 2005; Spencer, Zimet, Aalsma, & Orr, 2002). Other work demonstrates transaction between general cognition and risk behavior (Gerrard, Gibbons, Benthin, & Hessling, 1996); applied to the current study, sexual self-concept may display similar reciprocity with sexual behavior. Another study (Rostosky et al., 2008) found significant cross-sectional covariation between different dimensions of sexual self-concept, but did not examine any longitudinal associations. Additionally, the practice of sexual behavior may change as perceptions about the acceptability of sexual activity change, or as perceptions about the risks of coitus change. For example, vaginal sex may increase in frequency as young people develop a sexual repertoire guided by larger social scripts of normal and acceptable sexual practices (Gagnon, Giami, Michaels, & de Colomby, 2001).

Despite its developmental significance (Gagnon & Simon, 1987; Longmore, 1998; Rostosky et al., 2008), only a handful of studies have empirically linked adolescent women's sexual self-concept and sexual behaviors; of these, most have examined sexual self-concept as an antecedent to sexual action, minimizing the dynamic reciprocal relationship between the sexual self-concept and specific sexual behaviors (Houlihan et al., 2008; Miller, Christensen, & Olson, 1987). Minimal information exists on how changes in one dimension of sexual self-concept influence changes in other dimensions, and, more commensurate with other work in early adolescent girls (O'Sullivan et al., 2006), whether these effects influence sexual behaviors into middle and later adolescence. Advancing sexual health among adolescent women requires better understanding the mutuality of relationships between aspects of the developing sexual self-concept and the behaviors they influence (Rostosky et al., 2008; Tolman et al., 2003). Using data collected from a longitudinal study of adolescent women's sexual relationships and sexual behavior, the current study explicitly addresses this gap, posing two research questions (RQ):

RQ 1: What is the change in sexual openness, sexual esteem, sexual anxiety and coital frequency over time?

RQ 2: What is the reciprocal influence between sexual openness, sexual anxiety and sexual self-esteem? What is the influence with coital frequency?

To address these research questions, we specify models which empirically document the developmental reciprocity between sexual openness, sexual esteem, sexual anxiety and sexual behavior among adolescent women over a four year time frame.

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