

Adolescents' Self Identities and Sexual Debut

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Adolescents' Self-Identities and Sexual Debut

Recent trends in American adolescents' reproductive health and fertility-related behaviors include earlier sexual debut (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2002), a greater number of sexual partners (Abma and Sonenstein 2001), increased involvement in non-dating sexual experiences (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano forthcoming), high rates of unplanned pregnancy (Martin et al. 2003), and premature parenthood (Darroch and Singh 1999). Thus, the need to understand the malleable factors that can result in a decrease in sexual risk is critical. One fruitful approach is to focus on the interplay of adolescents' identities that may influence sexual decision-making.

It is well accepted that social relationships and associated demographic background provide influence adolescents' social development. Indeed, extensive bodies of research demonstrate that parental and peer attitudes and behavior strongly influence adolescent sexual behaviors, and researchers recognize that romantic partners, too, are an influential domain within which adolescent social development takes place (Furman, Brown, and Feiring 1999; Giordano, Longmore, and Manning, 2001). However, these social groups provide not only definitions that influence sexual decision-making, but also play a critical role in basic processes of identity formation. That social groups influence self-views, and that such identity processes are important to adolescent development is also well-accepted, but research that derives from these key assumptions is undeveloped. In this proposed study we use a symbolic interactionist theoretical framework to investigate the links between social relationships, identities and consequential choices about sexual debut that take place during the adolescent period. A symbolic interactionist framework departs from psychological or psychoanalytic approaches to identity that tend to conceptualize features of the personality as emerging early on and exhibiting a high degree of constancy over the life course. An explicitly social view of identity argues that through interaction with key significant others including parents, peers, and romantic partners, young people begin to develop more stable, coherent views of themselves.

Also in contrast to 'stable trait' views, we assume that as identities arise from social interactions, these self-views are highly malleable and subject to redirection. This focus on the intersection of the self-identities and social interactions, thus, represents an exciting avenue not only for conducting basic research, but for the design of more successful interventions that target potentially problematic adolescent behaviors, such as early sexuality, and sexual behaviors associated with sexually transmitted infections including HIV.

Our study examines how adolescents' self-identities are associated with sexual debut. Additionally, an important aspect of this study is to explore ways in which such key demographic variables as gender, age, race/ethnicity, and social class influence the character of these identities, and consistent with our symbolic interactionist theoretical framework, their meaning and salience to the individual. An important theoretical point, which we can also test empirically, is that self-identities are subject to change. We hypothesize that adherence to "riskier" self-identities will be associated with sexual debut. Our study uses two waves from a longitudinal study of adolescents' relationships with parents, peers and romantic partners (the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study) (n=1,316). We note that the unique measures of self-identities used in this study, do not exist in any other major data set that focuses on adolescents' reproductive behavior including the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) and the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG).

BACKGROUND

Adolescent Sexual Activity

Although the percentage of adolescents who are sexually experienced is declining, half of all high school age adolescents have had sexual intercourse (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2004), with a comparable proportion of high school senior girls (62%) and boys (61%) being sexually experienced (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2004). Additionally, despite recent decreases in adolescent pregnancy and parenthood (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2004;

Darroch and Singh 1999; Martin et al. 2003), U.S. rates are, still, much higher than other industrialized countries (Singh and Darroch 2000), reflecting the fact that U.S. adolescents are not consistent contraceptive users (Longmore, Manning, and Giordano 2003). Particularly disconcerting are trends indicating earlier ages of sexual onset, and more frequent sex partners at earlier ages than in prior years (Abma and Sonenstein 2001). Perhaps the greatest cause for concern is that, as a group, adolescents and young adults increasingly are vulnerable to exposure to heterosexually transmitted HIV risk. Recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data (2002) show that while HIV incidence rates are declining generally, new cases of HIV among youth are not declining. Since 1990, the number of documented AIDS cases among U.S. adolescents has more than tripled; and one-quarter of the new HIV infections in the U.S. are estimated to occur among youth between ages 13 and 20 (Office of National AIDS Policy 1996). Further, the high incidence of death from HIV infection in the age range 25-44 likely reflects the reality that many adults were exposed to HIV during their adolescent years. A better understanding of influences associated with adolescents' premarital sexual behavior is essential to developing strategies that may further reduce rates of unintended pregnancy, childbearing, and sexually transmitted infections including HIV.

Self-Identities

Prior research (e.g., Adams et al. 2003; Heimer and Matsueda 1997, Matsueda 1992; Matsueda and Heimer 1997) has emphasized the role that self-identities play in influencing risk behavior, such as delinquency. Following Gecas and Burke (1995) we define self-identity as self-characterizations and characterizations made by others, which influence behavioral choices. Especially useful for understanding adolescent premarital sexual behavior are the works of sociologically-oriented identity theorists (e.g., Cooley 1902, Gecas 1982; Gecas and Burke 1995; Longmore 1998; Stryker 1980, 1991) who emphasize the social nature of identity processes.

Attention to the content of adolescents' self-identities, their relationships to parental and peer influences, and dating and sexual partner dynamics, is undeveloped. It is critical to consider self-identity processes because they play an important, but not well understood, motivational role, and they represent a relatively more fruitful and malleable arena (relative to peer, family or demographic factors) around which to build prevention/intervention efforts. It is also important to incorporate findings from previous studies examining social influences (i.e., parents, peers, and romantic partners) and adolescent premarital sexual behavior. With these key ideas in mind, we review empirical findings on self-identities. We acknowledge that this literature, while suggestive, provides a limited view of the content of, and formation processes associated with, self-identities. To enhance understanding of formation processes we rely on theoretical insights from Symbolic Interactionism reviewed in the next section.

Although intimacy initiation is a core developmental task associated with adolescent identity formation (Florsheim 2003; Furman, Brown, and Feiring 1999), empirical studies examining premarital sexual behavior on identity are limited. Adolescents' self-identities and sexual behavior are investigated rather infrequently, superficially, and in a disjointed fashion. This, in part, reflects the philosophical, theoretical, and non-empirical roots associated with the sociological approach to self-identity (e.g., Cooley 1902; Mead 1934). Much research ignores the specific content of self-identities. We argue that it is essential to move beyond evaluative components (i.e., self-esteem, self-efficacy), although we have examined self-evaluations in prior work (e.g., Rudolph, Longmore, Giordano, and Manning 2004; Longmore et. al 2003, 2004). Prior studies, including our own, which concentrate on evaluative components of the self-concept such as self-esteem and self-efficacy fail to consider the degree to which the self is composed of specific, multifaceted identities that guide and direct action. Our goal, then, is to understand the content of self-views associated with early entrance into sexual behavior.

Summarizing much of the empirical literature on self-identities, the studies typically are useful for highlighting adolescence as a period of sexual identity exploration (Russell and

Consolacion 2003; Russell and Joyner 2001), associated with definitions of masculinity and femininity (e.g., Stets and Burke 2000, Lucente 1996; DeLamater 1987), and for emphasizing relationships between sexual self-identities and problematic sexual behavior. These prior studies, however, have limited generalizability. The majority are based on small samples, data are cross-sectional, and although these studies are suggestive especially regarding the centrality of self-identities, they do not always examine identity in its broader meaning. Especially problematic is that most do not provide a theoretical framework in which to interpret and understand the meaning of findings.

Symbolic Interactionism as a Conceptual Framework

Our theoretical perspective, known as structural symbolic interactionism (Gecas 1982; Stryker 1980) emphasizes the reciprocal nature, meaning, and impact of self-identity and behavior, which are rooted in the individual's location in the social structure (i.e., demographic background), and influenced by significant others (i.e., parents, peers, and romantic partners). Our basic premise is that it is developmentally appropriate for adolescents to actively seek out relationships, which support self-identities they are considering or trying to establish. As such, these self-identities may find expression in premarital sexual behavior. We expect that identities sought by adolescents will foster a coherent, unified set of self-images and associated sexual activities congruent with social niches (e.g., "hell raiser," "popular with the opposite sex"). We apply a conceptual framework that improves our understanding of how self-identities might influence sexual behavior.

Symbolic Interactionists have specified testable generalizations to capture the process by which social relationships affect the individual's behavior. As such, the symbolic interactionist approach is useful for understanding how social groups influence self-identities and why self-identities should influence behavior. Mead (1934) and Cooley (1902) both state that reactions or feedback from significant others provide the basis for individuals' self-views.

Of relevance here, are the content of individuals' self-identities, which result from assimilating the reflected appraisals of significant others. We argue that adolescents develop distinct self-characterizations in the romantic, as well as other, arenas based on their behavior, some of which reflects identity exploration. Key here is that in turn, romantic self-identities can influence the quality of adolescents' dating relationships (Connolly and Konarski 1994; Kuttler, LaGreca and Prinstein 1999). Furman and Schaffer (2003, p. 3) in an overview of dating/romantic relationships state that such relationships play an important role in the general course of adolescent development, but also specifically in the domains of self-identity formation, transformation of family relationships; the development of close friendships, the development of sexuality, and academic achievement and career aspirations. Matsueda and Heimer (1997) demonstrate using longitudinal data that certain self-views are associated with delinquency, even after well-known social predictors and prior behavior are taken into account. Based on these ideas, we wish to assess aspects of identity that are related to a greater willingness to engage in first sexual intercourse. The symbolic interactionist framework assumes that identities and associated behavior patterns have meaning and significance for the individual.

We argue that the knowledge base to support preventive/intervention efforts that include self-identities is suggestive, but far from comprehensive. Especially lacking in prior work is a theoretical understanding of self-identity processes that may be associated with premarital sexual behavior. It is interesting to note that even within the study of adolescent development more generally, knowledge about peer and family influences on premarital sexual behavior is quite well-developed, while research on adolescents' self-identities is less developed. Our objectives are to draw from, continually integrate, and thus contribute to knowledge in both the theoretical literature on adolescent self-identity processes and the premarital sexual behavior literature. We argue that self-identities are an important mechanism for understanding how sociodemographic background and social relationships influence sexual debut. This work has potential application to adolescent fertility health programs.

Data

We use two waves of the TARS (n = 1,177) data. The first wave was conducted in 2001 and the second was conducted in 2002. We first review background information on the original TARS, waves 1 and 2. The initial sampling universe for TARS consisted of all students enrolled in Lucas County schools in 7th, 9th, and 11th grades in the fall of 2000. Interviews were conducted in respondents' homes. In general, TARS replicated the sampling strategy used in the Add Health, and there are areas of comparability with this larger data collection effort (including some measurement overlap). The National Opinion Research Center (NORC), the research firm responsible for the sampling strategy developed for Add Health, collaborated on the development of the Toledo sampling strategy and subsequent weights.

Located in northwest Ohio, Lucas County contains 21 high schools (Quality Education Data 1997). The Toledo public school district, an urban school district, is the largest encompassing 70 percent of the students in Lucas County. We obtained complete lists of all students enrolled in the school district; largely because these records are available to the public under Ohio state law (thus 100% of schools contacted agreed to provide us with the needed information including enrolled students' names, addresses, gender, and race/ethnicity). The sociodemographic characteristics of Lucas County closely parallel the sociodemographic characteristics of the nation, especially with respect to race and ethnicity, median family income, educational levels and housing costs. For our study, African-American and Hispanic adolescents were over sampled.

The first-wave of completed in-home interviews were conducted with 1,316 adolescents, including 48.6% males, and 51.5% females. With respect to racial and ethnic identification, 62.9% respondents identified themselves as white; 24.8% as African-American, 11.3% as Hispanic, and 2.0% as "other."

MEASURES

Dependent Variable. The dependent variable is whether or not teens initiated sex between interview waves. Responses are coded 0 = no and 1 = yes.

Self-Identities. We ask the extent to which adolescents agree that they could be described as: (1) “flirty,” (2) “troublemaker,” (3) “funny,” (4) “moody,” (5) “something of a hell-raiser,” (6) “smart,” (7) “people-pleaser,” (8) “well-liked,” (9) “needs counseling,” (10) “good-looking,” (11) “sexy” or “hot”, (12) “partier,” (13) “popular with males,” and (14) “popular with females.” These content areas were based originally on work by Matsueda and Heimer (1997) examining high risk problem behavior including delinquency, and we have used them in our other projects including the Toledo High Risk Study.

Sociodemographic Variables. We include gender, age, race, family structure, mother’s education, number of siblings in the household and importance of religion measured at wave 1 as indicators of sociodemographic background. Gender is a dichotomous variable. We calculate the adolescent’s age from the reported birth data and the interview date.

Race/ethnicity is self-reported and coded as: white non-Hispanic, African-American, and Hispanic. Family structure is a four category variable that indicates whether the teen lives in a two biological family, single parent family, stepparent family, or some other family type.

Mother’s education is coded as less than 12 years, 12 years, 13-15 years, and 16 or more years of education. Number of siblings refers to the number of siblings in the household at wave 1. Religiosity is measured by responses to a question asking about the importance of religion from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (very important).

Analytic Strategy

To examine the relationship between self-identities and sexual debut, we begin with adolescents who had not experienced sexual intercourse at the wave 1 interview. We predict the odds of experiencing sexual intercourse between interview waves based on logistic regression models.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The majority of respondents (79%) have some experience dating. At wave 1, however, only 32 percent had experienced sexual intercourse. We find that 8 percent of the 7th graders, 33 percent of the 9th graders and 55 percent of the 11th graders report having had sexual intercourse prior to the wave 1 interview. These levels mirror national estimates. We find that one quarter of teens who were virgins at wave 1 initiated sexual intercourse between interview waves.

We report preliminary findings on the content of self-identities (the only identity measure available in the data already collected) based on cross-sectional and longitudinal data. An exploratory factor analysis of 14 self-identities (e.g., smart, funny, sexy, etc.) indicates that white adolescents' identities appear to have two factors, which we describe as "good-looking and popular" versus "troublemaker." However, when we examine these identities by race/ethnicity, we find that three factors underlie the larger set of 14 identities for African-Americans and Hispanics: "sexy/flirty," "troublemaker," and "funny/well-liked."

We have also begun preliminary analyses of change and stability in the content of these 14 identities across waves 1 and 2. We find that some identities are quite stable. For example, 90 percent of adolescents who identify as being "funny" at wave 1, also report being "funny" at wave 2. Similarly, 86 percent of adolescents who identify as "smart" at wave 1 claim the same identity at wave 2. Other identities are more fluid. For example, 64 percent of adolescents who identify as a "partier" at wave 1 claim that identity at wave 2. Similarly, 71 percent of "flirty" adolescents at wave 1 state that they are "flirty" at wave 2. Our results indicate that other identities are less stable; only half of adolescents who were "troublemakers" or "hell raisers" at wave 1 claim that same identity at wave 2 – possibly suggesting movement away from more disquieting self-identities. These preliminary results are important because they demonstrate that identities that link the social and behavioral self (e.g., "troublemaker") are potentially quite

malleable--as contrasted with self-views that could be considered aspects of one's personal style (e.g., "funny").

Our preliminary analyses indicate that certain identities are associated with initiating sexual activity. Among adolescents who were virgins at wave 1, we estimated how their identities at wave 1 are associated with whether they initiated sex between interview waves. We find that net of traditional demographic predictors (e.g., gender, race, age) of sexual activity, identities such as "flirty," "trouble-maker," "hell-raiser," "good-looking," "sexy," "partier," and "popular with males" are related significantly to initiation of sexual activity between interview waves.

Our next analyses will focus on how the broader social networks influence the initiation of sexual behavior. We test whether the significant effects of self-identity persist once we include key social relationship variables. We will also evaluate whether the effects of identity change according to gender and age. We expect that identities will have greater effects among older adolescents as well as boys as opposed to girls.

DISCUSSION

Our work contributes to a growing body of literature that focuses on understanding adolescents' motivations for early sexual involvement. Many of the prevention and intervention programs in the U.S. are based on rational or decision making models which we contend are not well suited to the adolescent period. We emphasize that often adolescents' first sexual experiences may reflect a 'trying out' of identities. Thus, adolescents may not be assessing positive returns in the manner suggested by rational choice models. We argue that motivation with respect to adolescent first sexual intercourse is best understood in terms of identity affirmation. As adolescents are 'trying out' various identities, behaviors that affirm salient identities will be maintained and will have subsequent influences on behavior. Our preliminary analyses find that indeed identities do influence sexual debut. Our next step, however, is to examine these same relationships controlling for a variety of social relationship variables in

addition to our core demographic variables. These will include: parenting socialization techniques, peer attachment, school and neighborhood variables, and parental and peer beliefs regarding approval of sexual activity, as well as partner variables such as relationship duration, communication, and expressions of love.

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