

Sexual Agency Versus Relational Factors

A Study of Condom Use Antecedents
Among High-Risk Young African
American Women

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Purpose

The influence that female partners exert regarding condom use is not well known. This study investigated the relative roles of personal sexual agency and relational factors in determining whether young African American women engaged in unprotected vaginal sex (UVS).

Hypotheses

We hypothesized that young African American women who were relatively higher in sexual agency and who had relatively less relational power would be more likely to engage in UVS.

Sample

Participants were 713 young African American women.

Recruitment sites were an urban, publicly funded, STD clinic, a teen clinic based in a large public hospital, and a family planning clinic (all clinics were located in the same urban area Southern United States). Women were eligible if they were 15 to 21 years old, and reported sexual activity in the previous 60 days. Of 1,558 screened, 874 young women were eligible and were asked to participate in the study. The study achieved an 82% participation rate.

Assessment

Based on evidence suggesting the possibility of more accurate and complete reporting of behaviors, all variables were assessed using audio-computer assisted self-interview (A-CASI) software. By providing a voice track that delivered each question to young women through headphones, A-CASI technology may have reduced problems that otherwise would have been posed by illiteracy.

Constructs

First, an 8-item measure assessed sexual sensation seeking ($\alpha = .71$). Young women responded to short statements using a 4-point response scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” For example, one statement was “I enjoy the thrill of having sex in public places.”

Constructs

A second measure of sexual agency was assessed by a single item, “Stopping to use a condom during sex takes all of the fun out of sex” (response options comprised a 4-point scale as previously described for the measure of sensation-seeking).

Constructs

A third measure of sexual agency was also assessed by a single-item. Young women were asked, “How much pleasure do you get from having vaginal sex?” Response options were provided on a 4-point scale ranging from “none” to “a lot.”

Constructs

The first relational measure assessed young women's perceptions of their power in their relationships with their male sex partners.

Young women responded to statements such as “Having a partner at all times is important to me” using the same 4-point scale previously described.

Constructs

Also, an 8-item measure of fear regarding condom use negotiation was assessed. Young women responded to statements using a 5-point response option ranging from “never” to “always.” Items included, “I have been worried that if I talked about using condoms with my boyfriend or sex partner he would threaten to leave me.”

Constructs

Also, based on previous research suggesting that relational dynamics inhibiting condom use may function when male partners are substantially older, we asked young women to indicate whether their typical male sex partners were 5 or more years older than themselves.

Findings

Nearly four or every five young women ($n = 566$; 79.4%) reported having engaged in penile-vaginal sex in the past 60 days. Of these, the mean number of times unprotected penile-vaginal sexual encounters occurred was 7.00 ($SD = 11.7$). In the dichotomized form, this variable indicated that 48.8% of the 566 young women had engaged in any UVS in the past 60 days.

Findings

Of these, the mean number of times unprotected penile-vaginal sexual encounters occurred was 2.33 (SD = 3.7). In the dichotomized form, this variable indicated that 61.3% of the 537 young women had engaged in any UVS in the past 14 days.

Findings

Finally, the measure of condom use at last sex, by definition, included all young women in the sample ($n = 713$). More than one-half (57.2%) reported that condoms were not used the last time penile-vaginal sex occurred.

Findings

	UVS-60		UVS-14	
	β	P	β	P
• <u>Sexual Agency Measure</u>				
• Sexual sensation seeking	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
• Condoms take fun away	.09	.03	.14	.001
• Enjoy sex	.11	.005	.09	.027
• <u>Relational Factors</u>				
• Power favors male partner	.09	.02	.11	.015
• Fear condom negotiation	.17	.0001	.16	.0001

Findings

	UVS-601		UVS-142		UVS-last3	
	AOR	95% CI	AOR	95% CI	AOR	95% CI
• <u>Sexual Agency Measure</u>						
• Sexual sensation seeking	N/A	N/A	1.46	1.02-2.09	N/A	N/A
• Condoms take fun away	1.76	1.10-2.81	2.14	1.27- 3.61	2.90	1.83- 4.55
• Enjoy sex	1.55	1.11- 2.81	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
• <u>Relational Factors</u>						
• Power favors male partner	1.54	1.07-2.22	N/A	N/A	1.45	1.06-2.00
• Fear condom negotiation	2.42	1.63-3.60	1.96	1.31-2.92	1.68	1.17-2.41
• Older sex partners	1.75	1.05-2.90	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Findings

Two variables were significantly associated with each of these five measures: fear of condom negotiation (a relational factor) and a measure of sexual agency (stopping to use condoms takes the fun out of sex). In essence these two findings can be considered robust in that they held regardless of the recall period used to assess condom use or whether the measure was dichotomized.

Findings

The measure of male-dominated power imbalances (a relational factor) approached this robust nature by achieving multivariate significance for each of the five measures except that pertaining to the past 14 days (dichotomous version).

Findings

Young women's reported enjoyment from sex (sexual agency factor) achieved multivariate significance for three of the five different measures of UVS.

Conclusion

Collectively, the findings suggest that sexual agency and relational factors may indeed be equally important determinates of UVS among young African American women at-risk of STD/HIV acquisition. Thus, intervention programs may benefit these young women by an increasing focus on personal factors relevant to sexual pleasure.