



ELSEVIER

 JOURNAL OF
**ADOLESCENT
 HEALTH**

www.jahonline.org

Original article

Adolescent Susceptibility to Peer Influence in Sexual Situations


 Laura Widman, Ph.D.^{a,b,*}, Sophia Choukas-Bradley, M.A.^b, Sarah W. Helms, Ph.D.^b, and Mitchell J. Prinstein, Ph.D.^b
^a Department of Psychology, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina^b Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Article history: Received June 26, 2015; Accepted October 29, 2015

Keywords: Sexual risk taking; Sexual behavior; Peer influence; Social norms; Susceptibility; Adolescence

 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: One consistent predictor of adolescents' engagement in sexual risk behavior is their belief that peers are engaging in similar behavior; however, not all youth are equally susceptible to these peer influence effects. Understanding individual differences in *susceptibility* to peer influence is critical to identifying adolescents at risk for negative health outcomes. The purpose of this project was to identify predictors of susceptibility to peer influence using a novel performance-based measure of sexual risk taking.

Methods: Participants were 300 early adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.6$ years; 53% female; 44% Caucasian) who completed (1) a pretest assessment of demographics, sexual attitudes, and hypothetical scenarios measuring the likelihood of engaging in sexual risk behavior and (2) a subsequent experimental procedure that simulated an Internet chat room in which youth believed that they were communicating with peers regarding these same hypothetical scenarios. In reality, these "peers" were computer-programmed e-confederates. Changes in responses to the sexual scenarios in the private pretest versus during the public chat room provided a performance-based measure of peer influence susceptibility.

Results: In total, 78% of youth provided more risky responses in the chat room than those in pretest. The most robust predictor of this change was gender, with boys significantly more susceptible to peer influence than girls. Significant interactions also were noted, with greater susceptibility among boys with later pubertal development and African-American boys.

Conclusions: Results confirm that not all youth are equally susceptible to peer influence. Consistent with sexual script theory, boys evidence greater susceptibility to social pressure regarding sexual behavior than girls.

© 2016 Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine. All rights reserved.

**IMPLICATIONS AND
 CONTRIBUTION**

This experimental study simulated an Internet chat room to examine teens' susceptibility to peer influence regarding sexual behavior. African-American boys, boys with later pubertal development, and youth who expected sex to increase their popularity were particularly susceptible to sexual pressure. Findings may help to target interventions for high-risk youth.

Adolescence is a critical period for the formation of intimate relationships when youth learn to develop and maintain intimacy, explore desires, and negotiate sexual relationships [1]. However, this period of exploration can also be a period of sexual risk taking involving high rates of unprotected intercourse and

short-term partnerships that increase exposure to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) [2]. In the United States, 15- to 24-year olds represent 25% of the sexually experienced population, yet they acquire half of all STDs [3]. Furthermore, as many as 15% of sexually active girls aged 15–19 years become pregnant annually [4]. Identifying the factors that contribute to risky sexual decision-making is critical for prevention efforts, particularly during early adolescence, when partnered sexual behavior often is initiated.

 * Address correspondence to: Laura Widman, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695.
E-mail address: lmwidman@ncsu.edu (L. Widman).

One consistent factor that impacts adolescents' behavior is peer influence in the form of perceived risk behavior among peers [5,6]. Health behavior theories (e.g., reasoned action model [7], social cognitive theory [8]) highlight the critical influence of perceived peer norms on decision-making. Developmental research also demonstrates that changes in brain reward circuitry may contribute to a peak in the salience of peer norms during early adolescence [9–11]. Although peer influence has been documented for a broad range of behaviors (e.g., substance use, deviance) [12], peer influence may be especially relevant for sexual risk behavior, which by definition involves interpersonal processes. Indeed, a systematic review of the predictors of youth sexual behavior concluded that adolescents' perceptions of sexual behaviors among their peers were a robust predictor of their own sexual intentions and behavior [13].

Although perceived peer norms are clearly important to peer influence processes, not all youth are equally susceptible to peer influence. Some youth perceive risky behavior among peers but remain resilient to peer pressure, whereas others are more vulnerable to conformity demands [5,12,14]. Unfortunately, most of the work on adolescent sexual behavior has examined a direct link between norms and behavior, without considering individual differences in susceptibility to those norms. Or, when susceptibility has been measured directly, it often has been assessed by self-report (e.g., asking youth how susceptible they believe they are), introducing biased estimates, and limiting our understanding of this construct [12,14].

In recent years, novel experimental paradigms have been developed to directly observe susceptibility to peer influence without relying on self-report [12,14,15]. One approach utilizes a computerized procedure wherein adolescents believe that they are interacting in Internet chat rooms with same-age peers (actually preprogrammed e-confederates) [12]. First, youth complete a private pretest questionnaire about their likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors. Then, during the chat room, they respond again "publicly," after watching the e-confederates endorse high-risk responses. The change in responses from pretest to the chat room setting is operationalized as a measure of peer influence susceptibility. Recent longitudinal work utilizing this experimental approach demonstrated steeper trajectories in the number of intercourse partners among youth high in peer influence susceptibility who also perceived more sexual partners among their peers [16]. This highlights the critical importance of understanding susceptibility as a unique individual factor that can impact sexual decision-making over time.

Which adolescents are most susceptible to peer influence? Although research indicates that susceptibility is important in adolescent sexual development and associated with subsequent sexual risk behavior [16], to our knowledge, no studies have examined the factors that predict susceptibility to sexual pressures. Yet, identifying these factors may aid in more effective early interventions for youth by targeting individuals most at-risk for conformity and tailoring interventions specifically to bolster resilience skills.

Purpose/Hypotheses

This study examined predictors of adolescents' susceptibility to peer influence in sexual situations (such as when receiving sexual pressure from a partner or when an opportunity arises for casual sexual activity), using the previously described

experimental "chat room" paradigm [12]. This study had the following two primary purposes: (1) to describe patterns of susceptibility to sexual risk behavior within a diverse sample of early adolescents and (2) to examine predictors of peer influence susceptibility. Based on prior research and theory, four predictors of susceptibility were examined: gender, race/ethnicity, pubertal development, and sexual outcome expectancies.

First, we examined gender as the primary predictor of susceptibility. Extensive theory and research address the role of gender in adolescent sexual behavior and peer relations, indicating that susceptibility may be higher among adolescent boys than girls. For example, the peer relations literature highlights that boys, more than girls, tend to be oriented to group versus dyadic interactions [17,18] and are more strongly motivated by status-oriented versus connection-oriented goals [18]. In addition, contemporary sexual scripts encourage males to pursue sexual activity, with expected peer rewards; in contrast, girls receive complex messages about appropriate sexual behavior, discouraging the accumulation of "too many" partners [19]. Moreover, evolutionary theory suggests that males are strongly motivated to increase social status to gain access to sexual partners, such that status goals and sexual goals may become inextricably linked [20]. Collectively, these theories indicate that susceptibility to peer influence regarding sexual behavior should be significantly stronger among boys than girls.

Second, we examined racial/ethnic differences in susceptibility. Prior work on racial/ethnic differences in sexual behavior has demonstrated that African-American youth often initiate sexual activity at earlier ages but use condoms as often or more often than their Caucasian peers [2]. However, ethnic differences in susceptibility to sexual peer influence have not been explored. African-American adolescents self-report lower levels of susceptibility to general peer influence [11], and a separate body of work on substance use suggests that Caucasian youth may be more susceptible to peer norms regarding alcohol use than African-American or Latino youth [21,22]. Based on this related work, we hypothesized that Caucasian adolescents would demonstrate more susceptibility to peer influences regarding sexual behavior than their African-American or Latino peers.

Third, we examined pubertal development. Across the pubertal transition, adolescents experience substantial changes related to sexual maturation, increases in sexual desire, and increased attention from potential romantic or sexual partners [23]. At the same time, adolescents become acutely attuned to social cues from peers more broadly and highly motivated to engage in behaviors that may be met with social rewards [9]. These processes may be particularly salient for adolescent girls, as early pubertal timing has been linked to peer socialization with more developmentally advanced peers, older relationship partners, and early age of sexual debut [24]. Although these factors suggest that susceptibility to peer influence should increase as adolescents proceed through puberty, alternatively it is possible that early adolescents who are less developed may face heightened conformity demands. In particular, later developing boys may have heightened motivation to publically assert their sexual desires to prove their developing masculinity [25]. Given these competing possibilities and limited prior work on which to base a priori hypotheses, we included the role of pubertal development on susceptibility as an important exploratory aim.

Finally, adolescents' sexual outcome expectancies—beliefs about the positive personal or social rewards for sexual behavior [26]—were examined. Youth who believe sexual

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10511548>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10511548>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)