



Original article

Assertive Communication in Condom Negotiation: Insights From Late Adolescent Couples' Subjective Ratings of Self and Partner

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Assertive communication has been associated with higher levels of condom use among youth using self-report survey methodology. The purpose of this study was to examine the subjective ratings of assertiveness among young, romantically involved couples in the context of a condom negotiation task.

Methods: Using an innovative video-recall procedure, 32 couples (64 youth) engaged in a videotaped condom negotiation task and then rated self and partners' level of assertiveness. Both individual ratings of assertiveness and couple-level assertiveness were assessed using dyadic hierarchical linear modeling.

Results: Individuals' assertiveness was positively associated with condom use. Unexpectedly, the overall level of assertiveness in couples showed a curvilinear association with condom use. Very high and very low assertiveness was associated with lower condom use, whereas moderate levels of assertiveness were associated with higher condom use.

Conclusions: Moderate levels of assertiveness during condom negotiation may facilitate condom use in young couples. Increasing condom use among romantic partners may require developing interventions that strengthen youths' ability to engage in assertive communication strategies that balance emotional intimacy with self-advocacy.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Assertive communication among young couples has been associated with increased condom use as measured by self-report. This study measured youths' assessment of their own and their romantic partners' assertive behavior during a condom negotiation task. Couples with very high or very low assertiveness were less likely to use condoms. Attention to relationship dynamics is important for assisting youth to negotiate condom use effectively.

Close to half of U.S. youth have engaged in opposite-sex sexual intercourse before graduating high school [1] and more than 90% by the age of 24 years [2]. For urban youth of color, particularly black and Latino youth living in areas with high sexually transmitted infection (STI) and HIV seroprevalence, this developmentally normative sexual behavior occurs

amid increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases. For example, *Chlamydia trachomatis* infection among black women aged 14–19 years is nearly seven times higher than among same-age white females [3], and 57% of new HIV infections among youth are seen in black and Latino individuals [4]. Consistent condom use decreases the risk of many STIs and over the past two decades, condom use has increased among youth of all racial and ethnic backgrounds [5]. However, some reports suggest that condom use has either leveled off or decreased, particularly among black and Latino youth [6].

For many youth, sexual intercourse occurs within the context of romantic or serious relationships [7]. Youth are three to four

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times more likely to use condoms consistently with partners they consider casual than with serious partners with whom they consider to be in a romantic relationship [8]. Although condoms are often used at the start of the relationship, use decreases precipitously, often over the course of a few weeks, once the relationship becomes steady [9]. The use of condoms in an established relationship is often seen as a barometer of the type and strength of the relationship [10]; youth who are uncertain of their partners' commitment level report infrequent condom use [11].

Youth who communicate or negotiate condom use with partners are more likely to use them consistently [12], yet less than half of youth report feeling comfortable discussing or advocating for condoms with their partner [13]. Few youth report discussing condom use before sexual intercourse [14], and close to half of youth report consenting to unprotected sex with a partner even when they wanted to use a condom [15,16].

Assertiveness is a key determinant of communicating the desire for condom use [17]. Typically, it includes behaviors such as actively disagreeing, expressing positive or negative personal rights and feelings, and standing up for one's self without attacking another [18]. Assertive behaviors measured in condom use studies have included the frequency of talking to a partner about AIDS or condoms [19], using direct verbal requests to use a condom [16], and high levels of comfort and self-efficacy during condom negotiations [12,20]. In general, youth who are less assertive with their sexual partners about condom use are less likely to use them or use them consistently [16,20]. Female youth tend to report lower rates of assertiveness than males [16], resulting in lower rates of condom use, particularly in relationships with older sexual partners [21,22].

For romantic partners, assertive communication regarding condom use is particularly challenging as it is often interpreted as questioning the trust and level of commitment of the partner [23]. Avoiding the topic of condoms may serve as a means of maintaining a highly valued relationship [24]. Effective assertiveness may be more challenging for at-risk female youth as mental health issues such as depression have been associated with low condom use and challenges in communicating about condom use with sexual partners [25]. However, the use of condoms among romantic couples is strongly warranted as youth typically engage in serial monogamy and concurrent sexual partnerships [26] and do not test regularly for STIs or HIV [4]. Effective assertiveness within relationships requires a balance of self-advocacy and maintenance of emotional intimacy; youth must learn to advocate for their own needs while maintaining feelings of intimacy within the relationship [27].

Thus, although assertiveness has been associated with higher rates of condom use among youth, significant gaps remain. The vast majority of the literature on assertiveness as a correlate of condom use has focused mainly on self-advocacy in negotiating for condom use. Moreover, most reports rely exclusively on individual self-report with little consideration of relationship dynamics. Finally, studies examining assertiveness rarely distinguish between casual and romantic partners [28]. Research is needed that samples both members of a couple to gain a better understanding of these dynamics as they relate to condom negotiation and assertiveness. For the present study, we sought to recruit romantic partners who did not consistently use condoms, to capture the naturalistic conversations of these couples while discussing condom use.

Based on previous research, we hypothesized that individuals' self-reported assertiveness during a condom negotiation task

with a romantic partner would be associated with condom use. We also hypothesized that the overall level of assertiveness in a couple would be positively correlated with the couples' reported condom use. We used a video-recall procedure [29], an innovative methodology for assessing youths' subjective understanding of their feelings and behaviors during a videotaped interaction with their romantic partner.

Methods

Participants

Youth were recruited at multiservice community based organization (CBO) in New York City that provides social, educational, physical (including reproductive), and mental health services, for youth aged 21 years and younger who are at-risk for school dropout, homelessness, substance abuse, and mental health problems. Youth were recruited with institutional review board–approved flyers posted around the center in two steps. First, youth were initially eligible for participation if (1) they reported involvement in a heterosexual dating relationship for at least 3 weeks; (2) one member of the dating relationship was aged 16–21 years; (3) they reported engaging in penile-vaginal intercourse with the current partner without the use of a condom on at least one occasion during their relationship; and (4) they were interested in participating in a research project with the current partner. Second, youth who met the initial eligibility criteria were asked to have their romantic partner contact the study team to be screened for eligibility and agree to participate. Of 293 youth who were screened, 49 couples (98 youth; 33.4%) met eligibility criteria. The primary reasons for youth ineligibility ($N = 195$) included not having a romantic partner (53.8%), both partners reported using condoms on every occasion (14.3%), had not engaged in penile/vaginal sex with this partner (13.3%), did not have an opposite sex partner (9.6%), and would not participate in research with their current partner (9.2%). Six of the 49 couples were no-shows, and between screening and assessment, seven couples broke up. Thus, 36 couples (73.4% of eligible couples) participated between August 2006 and May 2007. Two couples refused to participate in the videotaping, and technical problems were encountered with the videotapes of two other couples. Data are reported for 32 couples (64 participants).

Procedures and measures

Couples came to the research facility together and individually signed informed consent. All procedures were approved by the National Development and Research Institutes institutional review board, which included approval to enroll youth younger than 18 years without parental consent. Each participant received a stipend of \$50 for their participation in approximately 2 hours of data collection. Videotapes were checked for clear evidence that couples were not in a romantic relationship, but no evidence was found.

The assessments were conducted in the following three phases: (1) a survey; (2) a videotaped interaction task; and (3) a video-recall task. In Phase 1, participants separately completed a survey using audio-assisted questionnaire development software [30] on a laptop computer.

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