



Original article

The Association Between Developmental Assets and Sexual Enjoyment Among Emerging Adults

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: To examine the associations between three key developmental assets and an aspect of sexual health, sexual enjoyment, which has rarely been studied in young adults, although its importance is stressed in all recent sexual health policy statements.**Methods:** Using data from wave III (2001–2002) of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, and multiple logistic and ordered logistic regression, we explored the associations between sexual pleasure and autonomy, self-esteem, and empathy among 3,237 respondents aged 18–26 years in heterosexual relationships of ≥ 3 -month duration. We also examined the distribution of sexual pleasure across various socio-demographic groups.**Results:** Compared with young women, young men reported more regular orgasms and more enjoyment of two kinds of partnered sexual behavior. Sexual enjoyment was not associated with age, race/ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Among women, autonomy, self-esteem, and empathy co-varied positively with all three sexual enjoyment measures. Among men, all associations were in the same direction, but not all were statistically significant.**Conclusion:** A substantial gender difference in enjoyment of partnered sexual behavior exists among emerging adults in the United States. This study is the first to use a representative population sample to find a relationship between developmental assets and a positive aspect of sexual health – sexual pleasure.

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According to national and international health policy documents, sexual pleasure is a key aspect of sexual health across the lifespan [1–3]. Recent research examining the sexual experiences of adolescents and young adults suggests that by this standard, many young women, and perhaps some young men, do not experience a crucial aspect of sexual health [4–8]. In 1995, the National Commission on Adolescent Sexual Health released a document asserting that the process of becoming a sexually healthy adult is inextricably linked with the processes of healthy

psychological and social development, and calling for more research into the links among these domains. Meanwhile, the demand for rigorous study of the positive aspects of sexual health among young people has grown [9–14]. This article answers both calls, presenting and testing a conceptual framework that links specific developmental assets with enjoyment of sexual behavior among emerging adults in the United States.

Adolescents' Subjective Experiences of Partnered Sex

Although studies are limited, the existing published data suggest that substantial gender differences exist in adolescents' experiences of partnered sex. Qualitative studies have reported that young women struggle to recognize their sexual feelings and communicate their wishes assertively, and as a result, often voluntarily engage in sexual behavior without necessarily enjoy-

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Portions of these analyses were presented at the 2009 meeting of the Population Association of America in Detroit.

ing it [7,8,15]. These studies suggest that peer-reinforced social norms, particularly those related to appropriate behavior for girls, contribute to this phenomenon. Quantitative studies, most retrospective and focused specifically on first sex, have supported these findings [4,16]. Young men, in contrast, are more likely to report that their sexual experiences are pleasurable, but they also report that these experiences are highly anxiety provoking [16]. Qualitative studies have reported that male adolescents worry a great deal about their sexual “performance”—both their ability to please their partner and their ability to meet the standards for normative heterosexual behavior enforced by their male peers [5,6,17,18]. Even after the insular high school social context has been left behind, internalized, sexual scripts might persist and interfere with sexual enjoyment.

Developmental Assets and Sexual Enjoyment

There is consensus that successful transition to adulthood is more likely among youth who possess assets, the cultivation of which is the goal of positive youth development [19]. A recent set of reviews of published data reported that many of these assets were associated with reduced risk of some negative sexual health outcomes [9]. These reviews focused on developmental assets drawn from the four categories suggested by Pittman et al: connectedness, competence, confidence, and character [9,20]. Lerner et al added a fifth category, caring, [21] to these. Just as developmental assets may be protective against negative sexual health outcomes, they may also promote or be promoted by positive sexual health outcomes.

To test this, we identified three assets that may be expected to co-vary with sexual enjoyment and for which multi-item measures were available in a nationally representative data set that also contained measures of sexual enjoyment. These assets were autonomy, self-esteem, and empathy. The first two of these assets belong to the category confidence, whereas the third has been alternately assigned either to caring or to competence [19,22,23].

Autonomy, defined as having the strength to follow personal convictions even if they go against conventional wisdom, might increase in emerging adulthood as agency increases [24]. We hypothesize that it co-varies with sexual enjoyment because it may enable communication, experimentation, and reactions that social norms would otherwise inhibit.

Self-esteem, defined as belief in one's own worth, has also been reported to increase during emerging adulthood [24]. We hypothesize that it co-varies with sexual enjoyment because it may enhance the ability of a young adult to acknowledge, communicate about, and negotiate for his or her sexual preferences. Previous studies have reported that self-esteem is inversely associated with susceptibility to peer pressure and positively associated with sexual communication and refusal to have unprotected sex [25,26].

Empathy is defined as the cognitive capacity to take other's perspective, often leading to an emotional response involving congruence with other's emotional state [27]. We hypothesize that it co-varies with sexual enjoyment because it may increase motivation to give sexual (and other kinds of) pleasure to the partner. That pleasure might be enjoyed vicariously by the empathic person, and might also inspire the partner to provide pleasure in return.

To summarize, according to our conceptual model, these three developmental assets may enable young people to experi-

ence higher levels of sexual pleasure. This study is the first to use a population sample to test for associations between developmental assets and sexual enjoyment among emerging adults.

Methods

Data

Data for these analyses were obtained from wave III of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Add Health is an ongoing study of a nationally representative cohort of youth who were in grades 7–12 in the 1994–1995 school year. Of the 20,745 students interviewed in their homes during 1994 and 1995 in wave I, 15,197 were re-interviewed in wave III during 2001 and 2002, when they were 18–26 years old.

The interviews took place in the respondents' homes. The interviewer read the less sensitive questions aloud and entered the responses into a computer. The more sensitive questions, including those used in this study, were administered through Audio-Computer-Assisted Self-Interview; the respondent listened to the prerecorded questions using earphones and then answered the questions by keying directly into the computer [28].

Sample

The 15,197 respondents in wave III were asked to list all sexual or romantic relationships they had been in since June 1995. For each relationship listed, respondents indicated whether that relationship had included sex, which was defined as vaginal, oral, or anal intercourse. Respondents were then asked to classify their sexual relationships by date of most recent sex and to indicate whether they were still in the relationship.

If the respondent was still in that relationship, and the relationship had lasted at least 3 months, and the partner was not of the same gender as the respondent, the respondent was eligible for a special subsample. The survey administered to this subsample included additional items that measured developmental assets and aspects of sexual enjoyment. (Of the 6,979 respondents currently in a relationship with their most recent sex partner, more than 95% had been in the relationship for at least 3 months, and more than 98% were in relationships with other-sex partners). About half of these eligible respondents were randomly selected for inclusion in the special subsample. A small fraction of these respondents were excluded because their relationship did not meet extra criteria intended to select the “two most important relationships” of the respondents. The final subsample consisted of 3,488 respondents. In this study we examined the 93% of the 3,488 with complete sexual enjoyment data ($N = 3,237$). Respondents excluded due to missing data were less likely to have attended college and were more likely to be black, compared to those who had complete data.

The following weighted statistics describe the sample. Women comprised 58.6% of the respondents. The mean respondent age was 22, with more than 98% of the sample aged between 19 and 25. About seven-tenths of respondents (71.2%) described themselves as white non-Hispanic 13.1% described themselves as black non-Hispanic, and almost the same percentage (11.6%) described themselves as Hispanic. About one-tenth (10.2%) had not graduated from high school, one-third had graduated from high school and were not currently in school (32.9%), and the rest were distributed equally between two other groups described by

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