

Concept Analysis of Responsible Sexual Behavior in Adult Women

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ABSTRACT

The concept of responsible sexual behavior is not clearly defined as it applies to adult women who have sex with men. Responsible sexual behavior is a socially desirable and deliberate pattern of behaviors used to promote sexual health, manage risk, and foster respect for sexual partners within the context of community influences. A purposeful redefinition may be necessary to maintain a concept that is useful and effective for evaluating sexual behavior.

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The concept of responsible sexual behavior (RSB) has been used as a health indicator and proxy term for a set of desired behaviors. RSB has been identified in public health literature as a strategy to prevent sexually transmitted infection (STI) and unintended pregnancies (Healthy People 2010, n.d.). These public health challenges are commonly targeted because of health care spending associated with preventable conditions and the potential to influence future health. Currently, 15- to 24-year olds account for half of the 20 million new STIs that occur every year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). STIs are a financial burden for the United States, and screening and treatment of STIs cost approximately \$16 billion annually. Women especially are at increased risk for future complications from STIs, and current estimates suggest that undiagnosed STIs, such as gonorrhea, chlamydia, and syphilis, cause infertility in more than 20,000 women annually (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). In addition to the long-term threat of infertility, acquiring an STI also puts a person at an increased risk for acquiring HIV.

Although some progress has been made to reduce the number of unintended pregnancies, 45% of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned (Finer & Zolna, 2016). In 2010 alone, unintended pregnancies accounted for \$21.0 billion in public expenditures (Gutmacher Institute, 2015b). Unplanned pregnancies result

in greater medical costs related to a delayed start of prenatal care, prolonged exposure to alcohol and cigarette smoke, and premature birth (Logan, Holcombe, Manlove, & Ryan, 2007). In the long-term, children of unplanned pregnancies are more likely to have poor physical health, poor mental health, poorer education outcomes, and impaired mother-child relationships and are more likely to require public funding for health services and housing and food assistance (Logan et al., 2007). Most (66%–81%) unintended pregnancies occur in women between the ages of 18 and 29 years (Finer & Zolna, 2016), which is the same time that many women seek education and employment opportunities to develop financial independence. Unintended pregnancy can threaten these goals, result in a loss of economic security, and negatively affect general health and subjective well-being (Belfield & Bailey, 2011).

RSB was first introduced in Healthy People 2010 as a leading health indicator in response to rising rates of unintended pregnancies and STIs (Healthy People 2010, n.d.). Leading health indicators are public health issues that affect the health of individuals and communities; they are used to establish goals for changes in behavior (Healthy People 2010, n.d.). As a leading health indicator, RSB has been used to measure and promote condom use and abstinence to reduce negative sexual health outcomes. Progress toward the achievement of indicators such as RSB is tracked through objectives that indicate

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In the literature, responsible sexual behavior is often described by discussion of what is considered irresponsible or behavior that should be avoided.

movement toward a quantitative target (e.g., age of first sexual encounter or percentage of consistent condom use; [Institute of Medicine, 2011](#)). After the release of Healthy People 2010, similar goals were included in Healthy Rural People ([Bellamy, Bolin, & Gamm, 2011](#)), Healthy People 2020 ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n.d.](#)), and Healthy Campus 2020 ([American College Health Association, n.d.](#)).

A consensus definition or affirmative indicators of RSB are not readily found in the public health literature. Instead, RSB is primarily described in the negative or by what might be considered irresponsible behavior: having unprotected sex that results in unwanted pregnancy ([National Consensus Process on Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior \[NCP\], 2006](#); [Wylie, 2001](#)), demonstrating “permissive” sexual behavior ([Fabes & Strouse, 1987](#), p. 73), eliminating a pregnancy by termination ([Wylie, 2001](#)), and failing to gain consent during sexual encounters ([Fabes & Strouse, 1987](#); [NCP, 2006](#); [Satcher, 2001](#)). Thus, no clear conceptual definition exists to guide the use of the concept of RSB in health programming and initiatives. The NCP formed a coalition to determine the definition of RSB but failed to reach this goal because members could not first agree on what behaviors constituted sexual intercourse ([NCP, 2006](#)).

The inability to develop a consensus definition of RSB has important implications for health promotion and disease prevention. According to [Rodgers \(2000\)](#), “with a clearly defined concept, it is possible to classify or characterize phenomena and, in turn, to evaluate the strengths and limitations of the concept” (p. 80). Community interventions and individual health counseling require affirmative strategies to promote sexual health. A clear, conceptual definition of RSB is the first step in the development of such strategies. The lack of clarity with regard to RSB may have affected progress toward goals for leading health indicators such as those outlined in Healthy People 2010. Therefore, the purpose of this analysis was to use literature from psychology, education, sociology, nursing, and public health

to develop a conceptual definition of RSB as it applies to adult women who have sex with men.

Methods

A concept analysis is a research synthesis strategy used to resolve problems with the use and understanding of a particular concept. When a concept is clearly understood, it is then possible to appropriately characterize phenomena through research and communicate about the concept effectively. Concept analysis includes a description of the disciplinary contexts in which the concept is used and an examination of the changes in the concept over time. Because RSB is a socially constructed concept, we chose the evolutionary approach proposed by [Rodgers \(2000\)](#) to identify the attributes that define the concept of RSB, to examine the influence of disciplinary context on its use, and to track any changes that have occurred in the concept over time. The evolutionary approach includes systematic sampling and rigorous inductive analysis to produce a synthesis that reflects the development and current use of a concept.

The process of an evolutionary concept analysis involves the selection of a concept of interest, the selection of a setting and sample for data collection, the collection of the data, the analysis of the data, and the identification of the implications of the concept for further development ([Rodgers, 2000](#)). Rodgers’s approach to concept analysis also includes the identification of antecedents (i.e., conditions that must be present for the concept to apply) and consequences (i.e., outcomes of the concept). In Rodgers’s method, concepts are not static over time but evolve and continue to evolve with time. In addition, Rodgers recommended that the investigator identify other terms used in the literature that represent the concept under investigation; these are considered related or surrogate terms. The purpose of this method is not to create a finite definition but rather to gain conceptual clarity and promote understanding ([Montreuil & Carnevale, 2015](#)). Appropriately understanding the concept in turn allows for the evaluation of the concept’s strengths and limitations ([Rodgers, 2000](#)).

Sample Selection

Literature considered for this analysis included published findings of research studies and gray literature such as health campaign announcements, calls to action, and consensus reports. The sample included published literature in the

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