



Brief report: “I can’t talk about it:” Sexuality and self-silencing as interactive predictors of depressive symptoms in adolescent dating couples

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A B S T R A C T

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This longitudinal study examined sexual intercourse within adolescent romantic relationships as a couple-level moderator of the association between adolescent individual characteristics and depressive symptoms. Two hundred nine middle- and older-adolescent dating couples (aged 14–17 and 17–21, respectively) reported on their own self-silencing, depressive symptoms, and sexual behaviors. At Time 1, frequency of sexual intercourse significantly moderated the relationship between self-silencing and depressive symptoms, such that adolescents higher in self-silencing engaging in more frequent sex were at risk for clinically significant levels of depression. Adolescents who were low in self-silencing were not at increased risk for depression, regardless of frequency of sex. Self-silencing also significantly predicted increases in depressive symptoms from Time 1 to Time 2. Implications include the possibility that frequent sex in highly self-silencing adolescents exacerbates psychological depletion believed to link self-silencing to depressive symptoms, and that this depletion compounds over time.

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The ability to discern the factors that indicate normative, healthy sexuality from that which is associated with psychological turmoil, including depression, is a key task of adolescent researchers (Florsheim, 2003; Welsh, Grello, & Harper, 2003). Past research indicates that sexual involvement at a young age and casual sex are linked to depressive symptoms (e.g., Grello, Welsh, Harper, & Dickson, 2003; Joyner & Udry, 2000; O’Beirne & Allen, 1996). Yet, little else is known about the specific nuances of sexual involvement in the context of committed adolescent romantic relationships, or how individual and couple characteristics interact to predict depressive symptoms (Furman & Hand, 2006). Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1980) provides a framework for understanding sexuality in adolescent romantic relationships by suggesting that attempts to negotiate these relationships are likely to be colored by past experiences in close relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1980; Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchey, 2002), that romantic partners may employ working models of attachment to respond with varying levels of anxiety and/or defensive avoidance in regards to intimacy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002), and that the attachment and sexual systems are separate, yet related (Bowlby, 1969/1980). Further, emerging research suggests that attachment insecurity has implications for sexual activity (Birnbaum, Reis, Mikulincer, Gillath, & Orpaz, 2006; Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Little, McNulty, & Russell, 2010).

Self-silencing is linked to the fear of losing significant relationships and seems to globally impact adolescents’ behaviors in romantic relationships (Jack & Dill, 1992; Smith, Welsh, & Fite, 2009). Specifically, self-silencing is a schema for making and

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maintaining intimacy with a specific partner via avoiding or suppressing self-expression (Jack & Dill, 1992), and is associated with increased depressive symptomology in adolescents (Harper & Welsh, 2007; Jack & Dill, 1992). Further, self-silencing may be a psychologically depleting strategy employed by particularly rejection-sensitive adolescents in an attempt to maintain relationships, which leads them to feel depressed (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Harper, Dickson, & Welsh, 2006; Margolese, Markiewicz, & Doyle, 2005; Sund & Wichstrom, 2002).

This model of relationship maintenance likely influences sexual behavior. For example, some adolescents who are insecure in relationships report engaging in unwanted sex to avoid abandonment (Rodgers, 1996; Tracy, Shaver, Albino, & Cooper, 2003) and highly self-silencing adolescents communicate less openly about sex (Widman, Welsh, McNulty, & Little, 2006). The interplay between sexual behavior and self-silencing may exacerbate the depletion of psychological resources associated with depression. However, no known research has examined this question. Building upon Harper et al.'s (2006) findings, we expect that frequent sexual intercourse will moderate the effects of self-silencing, such that adolescents who are high in self-silencing who also engage in more frequent sexual intercourse will be especially likely to experience depressive symptoms.

Method

Sample

The data for this investigation came from the Study of Tennessee Adolescent Romantic Relationships (STARR). The final sample included a total of 209 adolescent couples: 102 middle-adolescent couples (14–17) and 107 late adolescent couples (17–21). Couples were mixed sex and recruited from a previous study on adolescent dating behaviors of over 2200 students attending 17 high schools in eastern Tennessee. Eighty-six percent of individuals from the high school study indicated interest in participating in future research, and those who met the age criteria (target adolescent aged 15 or 16 and dating partner between 14 and 17, or target adolescent aged 18 or 19 and dating partner between 17 and 21) and who reported dating their current partner for at least 4 weeks were contacted regarding their willingness to participate. Among those who did not participate: 27% ($n = 603$) were not currently dating, 26% ($n = 595$) were either too busy or not interested, 17% ($n = 375$) were not able to be reached, 7% ($n = 169$) were dating but did not meet the length of relationship criteria, 6% ($n = 142$) were dating but did not meet the age criteria, and 3% ($n = 73$) had parents who refused to allow participation.

The median age of participants was 17 years. The majority of the sample identified as Caucasian (90.2%), with the remainder of the sample identified as African American (6.5%), Asian (1.0%), Hispanic (0.8%), Native American (0.5%), and Other (0.8%). Approximately half of the sample identified their neighborhoods as suburban (47.5%), followed by rural (31.1%) and urban (21.5%). The highest level of education completed by either parent was used as a proxy measure for socioeconomic status. Slightly more than half (55%) of the participants reported that neither parent had a college degree, while almost half (45%) of the sample reported having a parent with a college degree or higher. The median length of time couples had been dating was 31.5 weeks (about 8 months) with a range of 4 weeks–260 weeks (about 5 years).

Procedure

The sample was recruited as part of a longitudinal study of adolescent romantic relationships. The data reported here is from Time 1 and Time 2. The University Institutional Review Board approved all procedures. At Time 1, adolescent couples came to our facility at their convenience for one 3-h session, and were each paid \$30. Approximately one year after Time 1 participation, adolescents were re-contacted via phone, mail, and email, and asked to participate in a second wave of surveys (Time 2). Written parental consent was obtained for all adolescents still under age 18, and all participating adolescents gave written consent or assent, completed self-report measures via mail or email, and were paid \$15. Of the original 209 couples who participated at Time 1, 197 couples (94%) were represented at Time 2 by one or both members. About half (46.7%; $n = 92$) of the 197 couples who participated at Time 2 reported still dating their partner from Time 1.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire

Adolescents completed a demographic information questionnaire, including their age, gender, number of weeks dating their partner, and parents' highest level of education (1 = *some high school*, 2 = *high school graduate*, 3 = *technical school*, 4 = *some college*, 5 = *college graduate*, 6 = *graduate school*).

The silencing the self subscale (STSS; Jack & Dill, 1992)

The nine-item Silencing the Self subscale from the Silencing the Self Scale was used to assess the extent to which adolescents inhibit self expression in order to avoid conflict or possible dissolution of their current dating relationship (e.g., "I don't speak my feelings in an intimate relationship when I know they will cause disagreement"). Culp (1998) suggests that the subscale best measures self-silencing behaviors, rather than the full scale. Respondents rate how strongly they agree with each statement on a five point scale from 1 *strongly disagree* to 5 *strongly agree*. Scores on this scale ranged from 0 to 45, with higher scores indicating stronger beliefs and behaviors of self-silencing. The internal consistency was acceptable for males ($\alpha = 0.77$) and females ($\alpha = 0.77$).

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