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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Perceptions of Peer Sexual Behavior: Do Adolescents Believe in a Sexual Double Standard?

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: The purpose of the study was to (1) examine attitudes of adolescents toward peer models having sex or choosing abstinence, and (2) determine whether a “double standard” in perception existed concerning adolescent abstinence and sexual behavior.

METHODS: Adolescents (N = 173) completed questionnaires that included 1 of 6 randomly assigned vignettes that described male and female peer models 3 ways: (1) no information about model’s sexual behavior, (2) model in love but choosing abstinence, and (3) model in love and having sex. Participants read the vignette to which they had been assigned and responded to statements about the peer model. Data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance.

RESULTS: Results did not show evidence of a sexual double standard among male participants, but did show some evidence of a sexual double standard among female participants. Additionally, both male and female participants evaluated more harshly peer models that were having sex than peer models that chose abstinence.

CONCLUSIONS: Findings provide insight concerning the lack of a sexual double standard among male participants, the existence, to some degree, of a sexual double standard among female participants, and demonstrate the existence of a social cost to both young men and young women for choosing to have sex.

Keywords: child and adolescent health; human sexuality; reproductive health; community health.

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In spite of calls for schools to adopt comprehensive sexuality education, most school-based sexuality education course work tends to focus on encouraging young people to abstain from sexual activity (see state requirements for sexuality education).¹ For many abstinence education programs, the focus continues to be abstinence from sex until marriage.^{2,3} These programs often convey the message that sex outside of marriage contaminates the person in gender-specific ways, that is, girls have less value and will be less desirable for marriage.⁴ Hendricks and Howerton⁴ and McClain⁵ have also indicated that much of the

sexuality education provided to young people in this country promotes a sexual double standard, wherein girls and women are gatekeepers who have the responsibility for controlling the sexual lust of boys and men, because boys and men are irresponsible (“boys will be boys” mentality).

Abstinence education may instruct young people to wait until marriage before having sex, but that is not the message they receive from the media. Although sex has seemingly always been a part of popular culture,⁶ today’s television, movies, and the Internet provide young people a ubiquitous exposure to sexual mes-

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sages and sexual images. For example, Strasburger⁷ reported that the average American youth was exposed to 14,000 sexual references, innuendos, and behaviors on television annually. Hust et al⁸ reported on the frequency and content of sexual health messages in media popular with young people and found that sexual health messages comprised less than 1% of the content. When these sexual health messages were analyzed qualitatively one of the main findings was that the messages reinforced traditional gender stereotypes that boys/men seek sex and girls/women are responsible for protection against pregnancy.

Although young people are heavily exposed to sexual messages in the media, they are not simply passive recipients. Lipkins et al⁹ found that the majority of the teens in their study were actually engaged in sending sexual messages via cell phones or e-mails. A total of 66.6% of the young women and 72.7% of the young men reported they participated in sexting—sending sexual messages or images.

It is also clear that the vast majority people in the United States (men and women alike) do not wait until marriage to have sex. In several rounds of the National Survey of Family Growth, Finer¹⁰ found that 99% of the respondents indicated they had participated in sexual intercourse by age 44, and 95% had done so before marriage. This near universal participation in premarital sex is not a new phenomenon but appears to have been normative behavior for decades. Finer¹⁰ indicates that even among women who were born in the 1940s, nearly 90% reported having sex before marriage.

Given this background of abstinence messages in the classroom, sex in the media/sexting, and historically a belief (not always consistent with behavior) that one should not have sex until marriage, we wondered how young people evaluated adolescents who were having sex in romantic relationships and whether they evaluated them differently than they did adolescents in romantic relationships who had chosen to wait until marriage to have sex. Many people would characterize abstinence as unrealistic; however, it seems that young people who make that choice should be supported. On the other hand, should young people who do become involved in sexual relationships be ostracized? Are young people who make similar decisions evaluated differently on the basis of their sex? Is there a sexual double standard?

Attitudes About Having Sex or Choosing Abstinence

Examples of research concerning attitudes about having sex or choosing abstinence are described below. These include a national survey, a qualitative study involving low-income students from the Midwest, and a fairly large quantitative survey conducted in Florida.

The national survey was concerned with the attitudes of adolescents and their parents about sex

and abstinence.¹¹ Researchers found 62% of the adolescents surveyed indicated somewhat strong or strong agreement that engaging in sexual intercourse is something only married people should do. However, when asked to indicate their degree of agreement/disagreement with the statement “It is against your values for you to have sexual intercourse before marriage,” a smaller percentage (53%) somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement. Older adolescents and men were more likely to express more liberal views regarding their personal values relative to sex before marriage than were younger adolescents and women. Hispanic, non-Hispanic black, and non-Hispanic white adolescents expressed similar views with 52%, 53%, and 54%, respectively indicating agreement that it was against their personal values to have sex before marriage.

The qualitative study was conducted by Ott and Pfeiffer.¹² They interviewed 22 young people 11-14 years of age, mostly African American, who were recruited during visits at a community hospital pediatric clinic, and whom they characterized as “high risk” for early sexual involvement. The researchers identified 3 groups of study participants: (1) “That’s Nasty”—This was the youngest group, mean age 11.4 years. Group members expressed positive attitudes toward abstinence and negative attitudes toward having sex. Most participants said sex should be reserved for marriage or at least an exclusive relationship. (2) Curious—The mean age of this group was 13.4 years. These participants expressed interest in sex, viewed abstinence positively, but also viewed sexually experienced adolescents as well-liked and admired. (3) Normative—This group was comprised of only 14-year-old participants. They viewed sexuality as a normal part of life and sexual behavior as a normal part of their lives. Girls in this group talked about managing curiosity about sex with potential social disapproval. Boys talked about the social gains from having sex and how abstinence was viewed as a social stigma.

The quantitative study by Smith et al¹³ involved a survey of 2480 students, ages 13-16, the vast majority of whom were white, concerning their attitudes toward abstinence. Female respondents had positive attitudes toward all 6 abstinence attitude items. Male respondents had positive attitudes toward 5 of the 6 items. For all 6 items, however, there were statistically significant sex differences in abstinence attitudes, with female respondents expressing greater support for abstinence across all 6 items.

In none of the research we reviewed concerning adolescent attitudes toward having sex or choosing abstinence did we find studies in which researchers had compared students’ evaluation of hypothetical models that were having sex, with evaluations of models who were choosing abstinence. Thus, we believed that

such a study would add important new information about how adolescents who are having sex and adolescents who are choosing abstinence are viewed by others.

Sexual Double Standard

The notion of a sexual double standard specifically refers to a greater acceptance of men engaging in various sexual behaviors than of women who are engaging in the very same behaviors. Crawford and Popp¹⁴ reviewed 30 studies that had been published since 1980 and indicated they found evidence of a continued sexual double standard, that is, standards of sexual permissiveness for men that were different from standards of sexual permissiveness for women. As the researchers noted, almost all of the “experimental” studies involved North American college students. Thus, these studies were not necessarily representative of other populations. The researchers also reviewed a number of qualitative studies. These studies used more varied samples, for example, teenagers, middle school students, and urban young people ages 9-10 and 13-14.

One of the studies included in the Crawford and Popp¹⁴ report involved middle school students who were observed over a 3-year period using a variety of data sources.¹⁵ The researchers found that girls were sometimes negatively labeled for showing an interest in sexuality, while boys were never negatively labeled for similar behavior.

Since the publication of Crawford and Popp’s¹⁴ article, a number of other published studies have investigated the existence of the double standard, with somewhat mixed results.¹⁶⁻²² For example, Fugere et al¹⁸ and Young et al²¹ found strong support for a sexual double standard among male research participants, but not among female participants. Jonason and Marks¹⁹ found evidence of a sexual double standard when the model evaluated was engaged in an uncommon sexual act (a threesome) but not when the model was engaged in a monogamous sexual relationship. They did not report whether there was a double standard when participant sex was considered. Other researchers did not analyze data by sex of participant¹⁶ or found no evidence of a double standard.¹⁷ Again, however, the vast majority of these “post-Crawford and Popp” studies have involved college students. Two that did involve younger adolescents were the studies by Kreager and Staff²⁰ and Lyons et al.²²

Kreager and Staff’s²⁰ research used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). The researchers used peer acceptance as their outcome variable. Students in the study nominated their 5 best male and 5 best female friends from a roster of all students enrolled in the

respondent’s school and in a sister middle school or high school. An individual’s peer acceptance score was the total number of friendship nominations from other students. The predictor variable was the respondent’s self-reported total of lifetime sexual partners. Results indicated that greater numbers of lifetime sexual partners was positively associated with boys’ peer acceptance, but negatively associated with girls’ peer acceptance.

Lyons et al²² indicated they explored the double standard using data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study, but they only included data from girls. They found perceived popularity, desire for more friends, and self-esteem were not related to the number of reported sexual partners, but did not examine whether such a relationship existed for boys. In-depth interviews with a subset of the female respondents, however, indicated these girls recognized that a sexual double standard did exist.

Purpose of the Study

The current body of research concerned with the sexual double standard has been overwhelmingly focused on college students. Previous research has also generally neglected the context of the relationship; for instance, both the study by Kreager and Staff²⁰ and the study by Lyons et al²² used the number of reported sexual partners as the study predictor variable, but did not consider whether sex occurred in the context of a romantic/loving long-term relationship or whether it was a brief, casual encounter. Additionally, in light of the focus on abstinence education, it is interesting that researchers have not examined the issue of romantically involved adolescents who have decided to abstain from sex, versus romantically involved adolescents who are having sex. Thus, in addition to examining attitudes of adolescents toward those who are having sex and those who are choosing abstinence, an additional purpose of this study was to determine whether a “double standard” existed for adolescents when examining abstinence or sexual behavior in the context of a romantic relationship (ie are young men and women who are participating in the same sexual or abstinence behaviors evaluated differently relative to selected character traits?).

Hypotheses. Based on the work of Fugere et al¹⁸ and Young et al,²¹ we believed (1) male participants would demonstrate evidence of a sexual double standard relative to Likability, Positive Character, and Negative Behavior scores; and (2) there would be no evidence of a sexual double standard among female participants relative to Likability, Positive Character, or Negative Behavior scores.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were adolescents, largely Hispanic, living in New Mexico, a state that is a consistent national leader in teen pregnancy rate, who had been recruited by community contractors to participate in a state funded life skills/community service/teen pregnancy prevention program. This 52-hour program took place after school. Participants who completed at least 80% of the program received up to a \$200 stipend, as per required by the state-funded project.

Six different communities in counties that had high teen birth rates were involved. Community contractors did their best to make all young people and parents in their community aware of the program. All participants who enrolled in the program and completed this pretest questionnaire did so with parental consent and gave assent. It should be noted that the results in this report are based on the pretest data from that larger project.

Instrumentation

The testing instrument used in this study was a self-report questionnaire. Each questionnaire included a vignette describing a 15-year-old adolescent. This was either a female model "Maria" or a male model "Jose." There were 6 different versions of the vignette, 3 for the female model and 3 for the male model. Thus, there were 6 different forms of the questionnaire. Each form was identical to the 5 other forms, except for the differences in the vignettes as described below.

The Basic Vignette (Female model)—"Maria is a 15-year-old high school student. She works out most days and is above average in fitness. Most people would consider her attractive. She is a good student and has a 3.4 grade point average (GPA). Maria gets along well with her parents and has lots of friends at school. She does not smoke or drink."

The Basic Vignette (Male model)—"Jose is a 15-year-old high school student. He works out most days and is above average in fitness. Most people would consider him attractive. He is a good student and has a 3.4 GPA. Jose gets along well with his parents and has lots of friends at school. He does not smoke or drink."

The "basic" versions of the vignette above included no mention of sex. Additional vignettes were labeled "abstinence" or "having sex" In the "abstinence" versions of the vignette the following information was added to the "basic" vignette: "Maria (or "Jose") and her boyfriend Jose (or "his girlfriend Maria") are in love but have decided to wait until they are married before they have sex." In the "having sex" versions the following information was added to the "basic" vignette: "Maria (or "Jose") and her boyfriend Jose (or "his girlfriend Maria") are in love. For the last 3 months they have been having sex."

Each participant read the version of the vignette that was included in his/her questionnaire, and rated the model in the vignette (Maria or Jose) using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree") to indicate degree of agreement/disagreement with each of 14 statements describing personality and character traits. The statements comprised 3 scales: a Likability scale, a Positive Character trait scale, and a Negative Behavior scale.

The items comprising the 3 scales are shown in Table 1. The Likability scale included 4 items. Possible scores on the scale ranged from 4 to 20, with higher scores indicating greater perceived Likability. The Positive Character scale was comprised of 6 items. Possible scores on the scale ranged from 6 to 30, with higher scores indicating a more favorable evaluation regarding perceived character traits. The Negative Behavior scale consisted of 4 items. Possible scores on the scale ranged from 4 to 20, with higher scores indicating a less favorable evaluation regarding negative behaviors.

The 3 scales were adapted from those used by Young et al.²¹ In their study of college students these researchers conducted a confirmatory factor analysis for each scale and found that all items for each scale loaded on a single factor. For all 3 scales all items loaded at 0.762 or above. Cronbach's alpha was 0.748 for the Likability scale, 0.893 for the Positive Character scale, and 0.891 for the Negative Behavior scale. Changes made to the scales for this study included: 1 new item ("is a happy person") was added to the Likability scale, 1 item ("is the type of person I want for my friend") was moved to the Likability scale from the Positive Character scale, 1 item ("is an honest person") that had appeared in both the Likability and Positive Character scales was deleted from the Likability scale and retained in the Positive Character scale, and 1 new item ("is a person who makes good decisions") was added to the Positive Character scale.

Procedure

Following IRB approval, community contractors from 6 different communities in New Mexico recruited adolescents, age 12-17 years, to participate in a larger teen pregnancy prevention project. This report is based on a portion of the baseline data collection from that larger project. Participants were randomly assigned to 1 of the 6 different forms of the questionnaire. The 6 forms were identical, except for different vignettes. Participants completed the questionnaire in a small group setting. An adult leader read the items from the questionnaire aloud as the participants followed along on their questionnaires. Because not all participants in a given group setting were assigned the same vignette, participants were asked to read the vignette on their own; then the adult leader read

Table 1. Scale Items and Factor Loadings for Likability, Positive Character, and Negative Behavior

Scale and Item Loading	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha
Likability		
Jose/Maria is a person with a good sense of humor	0.603	0.702
Jose/Maria is a likable person	0.749	
Jose/Maria is the type of person I would want for a friend	0.829	
Jose/Maria is a happy person	0.732	
Positive Character		
Jose/Maria is an honest person	0.696	0.850
Jose/Maria is a trustworthy person	0.815	
Jose/Maria is a dependable person	0.752	
Jose/Maria is a responsible person	0.809	
Jose/Maria is a person with high moral and ethical standards	0.692	
Jose/Maria is a person who makes good decisions	0.762	
Negative Behavior		
Jose/Maria is the type of person who would probably embezzle money from his/her employer	0.550	0.767
Jose/Maria would probably rob his/her best friend blind if he/ she thought he/she could get away with it	0.845	
Jose/Maria would probably cheat on an exam if he/she thought he/she would get a better grade	0.838	
Jose/Maria is the type of person who will probably cheat on his/her spouse	0.834	

the personality/character statements, as well as the remainder of the questionnaire. All data presented here were collected during late fall 2013 and spring 2014.

Data Analysis

Statistical procedures included frequency counts, factor analysis, and 2×3 (model sex \times vignette type) analysis of variance (ANOVA). The ANOVA was conducted separately for male participants and for female participants. All 3 scales, Likability, Positive Character, and Negative Behavior, were included in these analyses. All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Academic Software.

RESULTS

Frequency Counts

Data were obtained from 217 participants. Of this number 173 responded to all background questions concerning ethnicity, sex, and age, and also responded to all items for each of the 3 scales. Of these 173 respondents 87 (50.8%) were female participants, and the majority indicated they were of Hispanic origin (67%). They ranged in age from 12 ($N = 50$, 28.9%) to 17 ($N = 19$, 10.9%). This report is based on data from these 173 participants who provided complete data.

Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analyses (Table 1) confirmed the existence of 3 factors: Likability, Positive Character, and Negative Behavior. In each analysis varimax rotation was selected as an option, but because only 1 factor was present, rotation was not possible. All items comprising the Likability scale loaded at 0.603 to 0.829. All items comprising the Positive Character

scale loaded at 0.692 to 0.815. All items comprising the Negative Behavior scale loaded at 0.550 to 0.845. Items comprising the 3 factors, along with factor loadings for each scale item, and Cronbach's alpha for each scale, are shown in Table 1.

ANOVA—Female Participants

Among female participants there were statistically significant main effects for vignette type for both the Likability scale and the Positive Character scale. Regarding Likability, female participants who read the “having sex” vignettes evaluated the models less favorably than female students who read the 2 “abstinence” vignettes ($p = .037$). Regarding Positive Character, female participants who read the 2 “having sex” vignettes evaluated the models less favorably than female participants who read the “abstinence” vignettes ($p < .001$) or the “basic” vignettes ($p < .001$). There was no difference by vignette type for Negative Behavior scores ($p = .205$).

Among female participants there was not a statistically significant main effect for model sex for any of the scales (Likability, $p = .974$; Positive Character, $p = .506$; Negative Behavior, $p = .950$). There was not a significant vignette by model interaction for Positive Character or for Likability, but Figure 1 shows there was a significant interaction effect for Negative Behavior ($p = .043$). Female participants who read the “basic” vignette, in which Maria was the model, evaluated her more favorably than female participants who evaluated Jose in the same vignette. Female participants who read the “abstinence” vignette, and those who read the “having sex” vignette in which Maria was the model, evaluated her less favorably than female participants evaluated Jose in the same vignette. Table 2 shows differences in scale scores by

Figure 1. Female Participants: Negative Behavior Scores

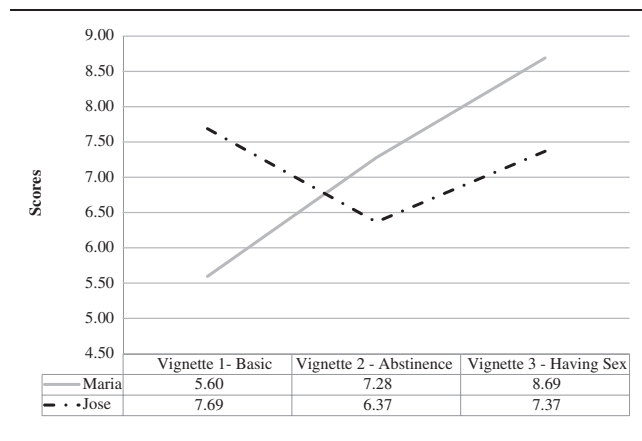


Table 2. Results Showing Differences in Scores by Vignette Type for Female and Male Participants

Female Participants (N = 86)			
Mean Scores By Vignette Type			
	Basic	Abstinence	Have Sex
Likability	15.50	16.54*	14.50
Positive Character	29.82	29.88	23.69 [†]
Negative Behavior	6.57	6.62	8.03

Male Participants (N = 87)			
Mean Scores By Vignette Type			
	Basic	Abstinence	Have Sex
Likability	15.48	15.97	14.18
Positive Character	27.83	28.77	22.96 [‡]
Negative Behavior	8.31	7.50	9.78 [§]

*The score for the Abstinence vignette is significantly different from the Have Sex Vignette score ($p < .05$).

[†]The score for the Have Sex vignette is significantly different from both the Abstinence Vignette score and the Basic Vignette score ($p < .05$).

[‡]The score for the Have Sex vignette is significantly different from both the Abstinence Vignette Score and the Basic Vignette score ($p < .05$).

[§]The score for the Abstinence Vignette is significantly different from the Have Sex Vignette.

vignette type. Table 3 shows mean scale scores by model sex in combination with vignette type.

ANOVA—Male Participants

Among male participants there were statistically significant main effects for vignette type for both the Positive Character scale and the Negative Behavior scale. Regarding Positive Character, male participants who read the “having sex” vignettes evaluated the models less favorably than male participants who read the “abstinence” vignettes ($p < .001$) or the “basic” vignettes ($p < .001$). Regarding Negative Behavior, male participants who read the “having sex” vignettes evaluated the models more negatively than male participants who read the “abstinence” vignettes. ($p = .037$). There was no difference by vignette type for Negative Behavior scores ($p = .076$).

Table 3. Mean Scale Scores by Model Sex in Combination With Vignette Type (Female Participants*)

Mean Scale Scores						
Vignette Type	Likability		Positive Character		Negative Behavior	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Basic						
Maria	16.00	2.78	30.13	3.56	5.60	2.29
Jose	14.90	2.69	29.46	7.69	5.27	4.32
Abstinence						
Maria	16.71	1.49	31.14	2.61	7.28	3.77
Jose	16.47	3.32	29.42	5.33	6.37	3.06
Have Sex						
Maria	13.87	3.59	23.56	4.50	8.69	3.00
Jose	15.12	3.20	23.81	5.18	7.37	3.03

*For both Likability and Positive Character, higher scores indicate a more favorable evaluation. For Negative Behavior, lower scores indicate a more favorable evaluation.

Table 4. Mean Scale Scores by Model Sex in Combination With Vignette Type (Male Participants*)

Mean Scale Scores						
Vignette Type	Likability		Positive Character		Negative Behavior	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Basic						
Maria	14.69	4.23	27.61	7.75	8.15	4.20
Jose	16.12	2.96	28.00	5.23	8.44	3.81
Abstinence						
Maria	15.58	2.15	28.88	6.88	3.02	3.72
Jose	16.46	3.84	28.61	5.79	8.33	3.70
Have Sex						
Maria	13.77	3.03	21.61	4.35	8.61	3.38
Jose	14.53	3.54	24.13	4.97	2.98	10.27

*For both Likability and Positive Character, higher scores indicate a more favorable evaluation. For Negative Behavior, lower scores indicate a more favorable evaluation.

Among male participants there was not a statistically significant main effect for model sex for any of the scales (Likability, $p = .155$; Positive Character, $p = .450$; Negative Behavior, $p = .091$). Neither was there a significant vignette by model interaction for any of the scales. Table 2 shows the differences in scale scores by vignette type and Table 4 shows mean scale scores by model sex in combination with vignette type.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine whether a “double standard” existed for adolescents when examining abstinence or sexual behavior in the context of a romantic relationship. Results showing a significant model sex by vignette interaction would show that male models and female models were evaluated differently for engaging in the same behaviors, thus providing evidence that a double standard did exist. Results for male participants, however, did not show a significant model sex by

vignette type interaction for any of the 3 scales. Thus the first hypothesis, that male participants would show evidence of a sexual double standard was not supported. The results for female participants showed no significant interaction effect for Positive Character or Likability, but did show a significant model sex by vignette type interaction effect for Negative Behavior; indicating for 1 of the 3 measures a double standard did exist. Thus, the second hypothesis, that female participants would not show evidence of a sexual double standard, was only partially supported.

Additional findings among male participants were statistically significant differences by vignette type for both the Positive Character scale and the Negative Behavior scale. Additional findings among female participants were statistically significant differences by vignette type for both the Positive Character scale and the Likability scale. In all cases participants who read the “having sex” vignettes evaluated the models less favorably.

The results provided limited evidence for a sexual double standard. There is stronger evidence, however, that both male and female participants found the models in “having sex” vignettes to be character deficient compared with models in the other vignettes. Additionally, female participants found the models in the “having sex” vignettes to be less likable and male participants found them to be more likely to engage in negative behaviors.

Importance and Contribution of Findings

Apparently no previous studies have examined peer evaluations of teens that are having sex or choosing abstinence, nor whether or not a sexual double standard exists relative to such evaluations. A number of research studies concerning the sexual double standard have been conducted among college students, but little work has used a younger adolescent population. The work by Kreager and Staff²⁰ is interesting because (1) it involved the evaluation of actual people, rather hypothetical models and (2) it did not involve participants rating others using an attitude or perceptions scale, but simply asked participants to choose their 5 best male friends and 5 best female friends from a roster of students enrolled in the participants’ school and in a sister middle school or high school. The results did show evidence of a sexual double standard. A greater number of lifetime sexual partners was positively associated with peer acceptance for boys, but was negatively associated with peer acceptance among the girls. Participants may have had a number of friends they knew from groups or organizations other than these schools, but identifying such friends was beyond the scope of the study. Neither did the researchers examine any evaluation criteria other than making the best friend list. Additionally,

because the measure of one’s sexual behavior was based on student self-report, the researchers could not know whether participants were aware of the sexual behavior of those who were listed on the student roster. Nevertheless, the study provided an interesting view of social acceptance, and did confirm, within the context of the study, the existence of a sexual double standard.

Our study did not use a measure of popularity and relate it to actual behavior of participants, as did Kreager and Staff.²⁰ Rather, we asked participants to evaluate hypothetical models. Had we taken an approach similar to that used by Kreager and Staff²⁰ we might have achieved similar results.

Lyons et al²² indicated they examined the existence of a sexual double standard using both quantitative data and in-depth interviews. Since, however, despite the authors claim, the quantitative portion of their study uses only data from girls to examine whether constructs such as popularity were related to the number of reported sexual partners. Thus, the study as designed could not detect whether or not a double standard existed. The researchers reported that during in-depth interviews, which were also conducted only with girls, participants recognized that a sexual double standard did exist. It is not clear how the interviewers addressed the issue of a possible double standard with participants.

In contrast to the previous 2 studies, this study involved hypothetical models, and a clear evaluation based on degree of agreement/disagreement with statements about that model. Participants rated only the model in the vignette to which they had been randomly assigned. Thus, they were not making comparisons to other models or vignettes. In fact, participants were not aware the study involved any other vignettes different from the one to which they were assigned. Nevertheless, the models in the 2 having sex vignettes were evaluated less favorably by both male participants (relative to Positive Character and Negative Behavior) and female participants (relative to Positive Character and Likability), indicating that among our study participants there is a perceived social cost to adolescents for having sex, even in the context of a loving relationship. In addition, results for the female participants regarding the Negative Behavior scale showed a model sex by vignette type interaction effect, showing that the female participants displayed a double standard. This was an unexpected finding. In the basic vignette Maria, the female model, was evaluated more favorably than Jose, the male model. In abstinence vignette Jose is evaluated more positively than in the basic vignette, but Maria is evaluated more negatively. In the having sex vignette both Maria and Jose are evaluated less favorably than in the abstinence vignette, but Maria is rated substantially less favorably

than Jose. The fact that both the “abstinent Maria” and the “having sex Maria” were evaluated less favorably than the “basic Maria” makes these interaction results difficult to interpret.

Limitations

When interpreting the results of this study, the reader should take study limitations into account. Participants consisted of adolescents from a single state, but who are not necessarily representative of all adolescents in that state, or adolescents in general. Additionally participants in the study may differ from adolescents who knew about the teen pregnancy prevention project and chose not to participate; perhaps impacting the generalizability of study results.

The majority (67%) of the participants identified as Hispanic; thus, results may differ from those that might have been obtained from samples with different ethnic compositions. Previous research concerning ethnicity and the sexual double standard is limited but Castaneda and Collins²³ reported that their research did show a double standard by ethnicity with low acculturated Mexican-American participants rating female models who introduced condoms more promiscuous than male models who introduced condoms. No measure of acculturation was included in this study.

The study involved the evaluation of a hypothetical model depicted in a short vignette. This may differ from participants’ actual evaluation of a real person. The study does have a heterosexual bias. The 4 vignettes involving couples either having sex or making a decision to abstain from sex all involved heterosexual couples, and thus, may not be applicable to lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT) couples. The analysis did not take into account the participants’ personal sexual behavior. For example, participants who were having sex in the context of a romantic relationship, and participants who were in a romantic relationship but had committed to abstinence, may have evaluated the models differently from those who had not had these experiences.

Conclusions

The results of this study do provide insight concerning the apparent lack of a sexual double standard among male participants, and the existence of a double standard among female participants concerning “negative behavior,” in the situations depicted in the study vignettes. They also demonstrate the existence of a social cost to both young men and young women for choosing to have sex, even within the context of a loving relationship. Young people who believe they will be negatively evaluated for their behavior may be reluctant to ask questions or attempt to access reproductive health information for

fear their behavior will be exposed. They may also lack the social support that is critical for adolescents as they navigate personal decision-making. These results may be of value to sexuality educators, adolescent health care providers, and youth development workers, and have implications for teen pregnancy prevention and reproductive health education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL HEALTH

An important part of education about reproductive health is giving young people the knowledge and skills they need to make good decisions about sex, including postponing sexual involvement, practicing safer sex, developing healthy relationships, and avoiding teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.²⁴ In their zeal to accomplish this, some school-based educational programs and educators may emphasize abstinence to the degree that they inadvertently, or in some cases by intent, project the idea that young people who are having sex are deficient in character and/or are somehow less than those who choose abstinence. This is a wrong-headed approach and provides a grave disservice to young people who are exposed to this type message.

The messages conveyed in school health education classes and in other interactions with students and parents should indicate all students are valued, supported, and provided with the information they want and need, with the goal of increasing protective factors to reduce adolescent risk behaviors. For example, in discussing abstinence, sexual activity and contraceptive use we can convey the following ideas: (1) Whereas we believe that, for a number of reasons, abstinence is a good choice for young people, we also acknowledge that almost everyone, at some point in his or her life enters a relationship that involves sex. (2) Whenever that might be, contraceptive issues and protection issues are important considerations. That is why, in addition to providing students information about abstinence, we should also provide students with accurate information about condoms and contraceptives. (3) In doing so, we are not assuming that students are currently having sex, or that they should be having sex. However, like a lot of other things learned in school, students may not necessarily need this information now, but will probably need it at some point in their lives.

It is important for schools to provide the structure and the classroom environment that gives support to young people who choose to abstain from sexual involvement. It is equally important, however, that schools provide the same type of supportive environment for young people who do not choose to abstain; and provide all young people with the knowledge and skills they need to make thoughtful,

informed decisions about sexuality that will keep them safe and help them develop healthy relationships.

Clearly the results of our study demonstrated that among our participants, young people who were having sex were viewed negatively, in ways that seemed to have nothing to do with sexuality, when compared with young people who chose abstinence. Thus, one important use of the results of this study and the same or similar vignettes might be to generate classroom discussion about the possible social costs of having sex and the importance of respecting others, whether or not the decisions they make are different from the ones we make for ourselves.

Finally, schools should be a place where teachers, administrators and staff, and fellow students provide all young people with unconditional positive regard. This may be a goal that will be difficult to reach, but it is one to which our schools should aspire.

Human Subjects Approval Statement

This study received approval from the Institutional Review Board at New Mexico State University, application # 10173, approved May 17, 2013.

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