How does adolescent sexual guilt influence the development of self esteem across the transition to adulthood

BARRETT SCROGGS, PH.D.[1], RYAN MADRIGAL, B.A.[2], & NATHANIEL FAFLICK [2]

[1]Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Pennsylvania State University Mont Alto

[2]School of Family Studies and Human Services, Kansas State University

ABSTRACT

Early sexual experiences have been found to be associated with lower levels of well-being; however this relationship has been found to be better explained through the adolescent's perception of their sexual behavior (Vasilensko, Lefkowitz, & Welsh, 2014). The present study explored the implications of adolescent sexual guilt on the development of self-esteem across the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Using secondary data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Harris et al., 2009) the present study found that self-esteem developed in quadratic fashion from adolescence to adulthood. Sexual guilt was significantly associated with lower levels of self-esteem during adolescence. Additionally, adolescent sexual guilt was also associated with lower levels in self-esteem at each of the four time points from adolescence to adulthood although the association between sexual guilt and the change in self-esteem across the transition from adolescence to adulthood was not significant ($p=.135$). The study illustrates the long-lasting influence guilt has on development. Implications for practitioners and parents are discussed.

BACKGROUND

- Early sexual experiences shape adolescent feelings toward their own sexual identity development
- The adolescent's own cognitive processing of their sexual behavior is a better predictor of mental health outcomes than the behavior itself
- Using a life-span developmental framework, the current study analyzes sexual guilt during adolescence and its association with the development of self-esteem across the transition to adulthood.
- *H1: Sexual guilt will be negatively associated with self-esteem in adolescence; H2: Adolescent sexual guilt will also be negatively associated with self-esteem at later time points from adolescence to adulthood; H3: Adolescent sexual guilt will be associated with the trajectory of change in self-esteem across the transition to adulthood*

METHODS

Data and Participants
- Secondary data using 4 waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Harris et al., 2009).
- W1: 7th-12th grade; W2 collected two years later ; W3 ages 18-26 ; W4 ages (24-32)
- Our sample only included individuals ($N =2,565$) who reported having sex prior to Wave 1 (39.4% of the original sample).
- 60% of participants identified as being white.
- 14% indicated at W3 that they were not "100% heterosexual."

METHODS

Measures

Self Esteem (W1-W4)
- "How often in the past week have you felt that you were just as good as other people?"
- Likert-scale from 1 (never or rarely) to 3 (most of or all the time).

Sexual Guilt (W1)
- "If you had sexual intercourse, afterward, would you feel guilty"
- Likert-scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree).

Analysis
- Latent growth curve analysis was conducted to assess the development of self-esteem using the four time points of self-esteem.
- An initial model was constructed holding the middle two time-points constant using nonlinear curve fitting (Meredith & Tisak, 1990)
- Finally, a supplementary model was constructed to include adolescent sexual guilt and gender as predictor variables.

RESULTS

Table 1. **Reports of adolescent sexual guilt, gender, and self-esteem across the transition to adulthood: Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations (N = 2,565)**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
Self-Esteem						
1. Time 1	—					
2. Time 2	.40***	—				
3. Time 3	.24***	.30***	—			
4. Time 4	.22***	.24***	.24***	—		
Predictors						
5. Sexual guilt	-.10***	-.10***	-.08**	-.07**	—	
6. Gender (1=Women)	-.07***	-.06**	-.05*	-.05*	.12***	—
M	1.89	1.91	2.27	2.20	2.56	.49
SD	1.03	1.01	.97	.90	1.10	.50
Range	0 – 3	0 – 3	0 – 3	0 – 3	1 – 5	0 – 1

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001 (two-tailed).

RESULTS

Initial Model
- Mean scores for self-esteem were 1.89 at W1, 1.91 at W2, 2.27 at W3 and 2.20 at W4 supporting the use of a quadratic growth model
- Model fit was good ($\chi2$ [3] = 13.81, $p < .01$, CFI = .98, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .02)

Supplementary Model
- Model fit was good ($\chi2$ [7] = 13.95, $p > .05$, CFI = .99, TLI = .98, RMSEA = .02, SRMR = .02).
- Adolescent sexual guilt was significantly associated with initial levels of self-esteem ($b = -.09$, $p < .001$, $\beta = -.15$).
- Adolescent sexual guilt was associated with decreased self-esteem at each of the later time points.
- Adolescent sexual guilt was not significantly associated with the rate of change of self-esteem ($b = .03$, $p > .05$, $\beta = .07$).
- Identifying as a woman was significantly associated with lower initial levels of self-esteem ($b = -.12$, $p < .01$, $\beta = -.09$) but not on changes in self-esteem ($b = .04$, $p < .05$, $\beta = .04$).

IMPLICATIONS

- If an adolescent's cognitive appraisal of their sexual behavior is negative, they are at greater risk for lower levels of well-being (e.g. self-esteem) throughout the life-span.
- Those working with adolescents should strive to support the positive view of the adolescent's sexual identity as this perception is associated with well-being across the transition to adulthood.
- The goal of conversations surrounding sexual behavior should be to reduce the guilt attached to the sexual behavior.
- Practitioners working with adolescents can use this study as impetus for supportive educational programing surrounding sexuality which can help to reduce stigma and guilt surrounding sexuality.
- Parents and teachers who have discussions on sexuality with adolescents can change that cycle by discouraging guilt. This involves a shift away from viewing sexuality solely through a risk perspective.

PennState Mont Alto

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

For more information: bws74@psu.edu