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# The Relationship of Sexual Values and Emotional Awareness to Sexual Activity in Young Adulthood

Richard S. Balkin, Michelle Perepiczka, Ruth Whitely, and Sandy Kimbrough

*A sample of 170 college freshman completed assessments related to emotional awareness, sexual values, and levels of sexual activity. There was a significant relationship between sexual values and sexual activity. Abstinence values appear to be important in the decision to engage in sexual activity.*

Sexual values have been found to influence sexual behavior (Blinn-Pike, 1999; Miller, Norton, Fan, & Christopherson, 1998). The decision to initiate sexual activity appears to be multifaceted, including interpersonal, intrapersonal (Cauffman & Steinberg, 1996; Michels, Kropp, Eyre, & Halpern-Felsher 2005), environmental (Forste & Haas, 2002), and spiritual factors (Meier, 2003; Ott, Pfeiffer, & Fortenberry, 2006). Evidence also supports the idea that emotional intelligence, and specifically emotional awareness, is linked to the quality of interpersonal relationships in young adults and adolescents (Davidson & Gottlieb, 1955; Harrod & Scheer, 2005; Livingstone & Day, 2005; Moriarty, Stough, Tidmarsh, Eger, & Dennison, 2001; Shaughnessy & Shakesby, 1992). In light of the links that have been established between sexual behavior, sexual values, and interpersonal relationships, research is needed to assess the sexual activity of young adults as it relates to their emotional awareness and sexual values. The purpose of this study is to fill this gap in the hope of providing clinicians and young adults with a means to conceptualize decision making related to sexual activity within the young adult population. An overview of research specifically focused on identity development, emotional development, sexual values, and sexual activity research related to young adults is presented to address how emotional awareness and sexual values may be pertinent to the decision of young adults to be sexually active.

## IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNG ADULTS

Young adult development is multifaceted. Several developmental perspectives have described the various aspects of the process. For instance, Erickson (1963,

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1968, 1982) outlined psychosocial identity formation as the central theme underlying adolescent development in the period leading up to adulthood. Individuals struggle to overcome the conflicts between identity, referring to an inner sense of wholeness within the self, and identity diffusion, referring to uncertainty about oneself and behaving aimlessly. Occupational, ideological, and sexual issues are focal points of an identity crisis. Individuals strive to achieve a congruent outward expression of the inner self and to fit in with society.

Young adults must rely on the competence, purpose, and determination they have gained by overcoming crises in prior stages of development to successfully overcome identity diffusion (Erickson, 1968, 1982). Identity is created when people are able to (a) make decisions and behave according to their own value system, (b) connect previous experiences and goals for the future to decisions made in the present, and (c) balance their own expectations for their life and the expectations that others have for them.

While Erickson (1963, 1968, 1982) highlighted a psychosocial model of development in stages, Havighurst (1972, 1975) emphasized developmental tasks. According to Havighurst (1972), inner forces, such as somatic maturity and personal goals, and outer forces, including pressure from society, work collaboratively to form tasks for individuals to overcome during adolescence and young adulthood. Havighurst (1972, 1975) further stated that the central focus of these tasks is to provide a means to achieve a sense of self-esteem, obtain the required skills to develop oneself in the future, and identify with one's inner identity.

An alternative view of young adult development is Marcia's (1966, 1980) descriptive model. Marcia (1966, 1980) categorized approaches that adolescents and young adults use to address identity conflicts, yet did not include tasks or crises to overcome. The four categories outlined in Marcia's (1966, 1980) model account for different pairings of high and low levels of commitment to and exploration of identity development. Each category results in a particular type of progress through adolescence. Individuals may change the category they subscribe to at any time by altering levels of commitment and/or exploration. The goal is to autonomously discover and use one's unique identity. *Identity diffusion* relates to low levels of commitment to and exploration of one's identity. Someone operating from this status would avoid the conflict entirely and not find resolution. *Identity foreclosure* consists of high levels of commitment on the part of a person to creating an identity and low levels of exploring what fits for that person. This stage is often typified by introjection of the beliefs of family or friends because of the priority the young adult places on them. The opposite of identity foreclosure is *identity moratorium*, which is the stage at which one has a low level of commitment and high level of exploring an identity. Adolescents and young adults may become stuck in this developmental stage because they become lost in the process of trying out different identities and fail to choose. The stage of *identity achievement* results in successful identity development because high levels of both exploration and commitment are present. For instance, through exploration people discover an identity that is a good fit, and they commit to it.

Self-in-relation is another contrasting identity development model that is based on the theory that adolescents' complex relationships and connections with significant others have a role in shaping their identity (Gilligan, 1993; Jordan, Kaplan, Baker-Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). Gender differences exist in this theory of development. For example, young women strive for attachment (Gilligan, 1993) and seek to use their strengths within the context of relationships (Jordan et al., 1991). Young men may work toward attaining individuation, gaining independence, and separating themselves from others (Gilligan, 1993; Jordan et al., 1991). As a result, identities develop quite differently for young men and women during adolescence and young adulthood.

Society places pressure on females to focus on becoming women in terms of their relationships with males (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). The process may create a need for females to please others, become dependent on relationships, and require love (Gilligan, 1993). This may create problems for girls and young women who desire to be independent because separation from relationships is threatening when one's identity is tied to establishing connections with others. Males may experience an opposite push to avoid relationships, thus intimacy becomes threatening for males.

## **EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNG ADULTS**

Crow and Crow (1956) connected identity development with emotional development and described emotional development as a long-term process that begins at birth and matures in adolescence or early adulthood. It is the process of strengthening one's ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions (Salovey & Sluyter, 1997) and is linked with identity (Erickson, 1963, 1968, 1982) as well as psychosexual development (Gilligan, 1993; Havighurst, 1972; Jordan, Walker, & Hartling, 2004).

Emotions experienced in young adults differ from those of adolescents. For instance, feelings of young adults may be more consistent, as opposed to the situation with adolescents who may allow emotions to build up then be released through outbursts instead of coping with emotions as they arise. Young adults may often be able to distinguish the difference between various feelings. In addition, young adults may develop more complex concepts about emotions, such as recognizing that emotional patterns and multiple emotions can be aroused from the same stimulus at the same time (Cruze, 1953; Saarni, 1999).

Social experiences influence the emotional development of young adults. Rogers (1962) reported that young adults learn through social experience and receiving feedback from others how to discriminate between what is and is not considered socially acceptable behavior when expressing emotions, as well as appropriate situations for expressing emotions. Saarni (1999) stated that young adults also learn how to better cope with their emotions (e.g., using exercise as

an emotional outlet) from significant others who model this behavior in their life or educate them on coping techniques. Regulating emotions and adjusting behavior to avoid unwanted social consequences becomes a focal point and force of motivation for adolescents (Rogers, 1962; Saarni, 1999).

Concurrently, young adults may begin to be aware of emotions that are incongruent to a given situation, for instance, being overly dramatic (Cruze, 1953; Saarni, 1999). They begin to regain control through this insight. Crow and Crow (1956) described an increase in age and change in interests or attitudes as other factors leading to further progress in emotional development in young adults. As these changes occur, stimuli that arouse emotions change as well.

To understand differences in emotional development, Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, and Palfai (1995) highlighted emotional awareness as a teachable aspect of emotional intelligence. According to Salovey et al., the ability to reflect on and manage various emotional states is defined by how individuals understand and cope with various states of feelings. To assess the emotional awareness in the current study, we used the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (Salovey et al., 1995). The Trait Meta-Mood Scale has three subscales based on corresponding factors: (a) Attention to Feelings, (b) Clarity of Feelings, and (c) Mood Repair. The Attention subscale concerns the extent to which individuals take into consideration their emotions; the Clarity subscale concerns the ability to make sense out of an emotional state; the Repair subscale concerns the ability to mend unpleasant mood states. Respondents to the Trait Meta-Mood Scale rate their agreement with 48 statements using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Sample items include “I pay a lot of attention to how I feel,” for measuring attention; “I am rarely confused about how I feel,” for measuring clarity; and “I try to think good thoughts no matter how badly I feel,” for measuring repair (Salovey et al., 1995, pp. 152–153).

## SEXUAL VALUES AND SEXUAL ACTIVITY

Attitudes about sexual behavior appear to be influenced by religion, relationships, and self-esteem. Sexual attitudes are consistently influenced by religious practice. Religious participation encourages a value system that promotes sexual abstinence (Oman, Veseley, Kegler, McLeroy, & Aspy, 2003; Werner-Wilson, 1998). Positive social networks, specifically positive peer role models and religiosity, are indicators of sexual abstinence for youth and young adults across developmental age levels.

Parent–child relationships also influence a person’s sexual attitudes. Open, respectful, and mutually understanding mother and teen relationships have a positive influence on intergenerational transmission of sexual permissiveness and liberality (Taris, 2000). Perceptions of parents’ values also positively influence intergenerational transmission of permissiveness (Shelley, 1981; Taris, Semin, & Bok, 1998). Conversely, no direct correlation was found between mother

and child interactions or father and son communication regarding permissive parental attitudes about sexual values or behavior (Lehr, Demi, DiIorio, & Facticeau, 2005; Taris, 2000).

Peer influence is also related to sexual values and sexual activity of young adults. Kirby (2002) found the following traits to be influential risk factors for youth and young adults who choose to engage in sexual behavior: (a) friends who are older than the individual, (b) peers who have poor grades and/or a high level of nonnormative behavior, (c) friends with lower achievement orientation, (d) peers who drink alcohol, (e) friends with permissive attitudes toward premarital sex, and (f) peers who are sexually active. Maxwell (2002) reported that youth were 1.9 times more likely to engage in sexual activity if a friend was sexually active, and Treboux and Bush-Rossnagel (1990) found that female adolescents were influenced more by friends than were male adolescents. Moore and Rosenthal (1991) also noted that individuals' *perceptions* of their peers' sexual values and sexual behaviors were more influential to youth than was any *actual* behavior that may have taken place.

Particular types of relationships with friends influence a person's values as well. For instance, individuals who are considered popular in a group of friends or those who engage in fights are at risk for developing promiscuous sexual values and behaviors. Other relationship risk factors are (a) involvement in a long-term romantic relationship, (b) involvement in a romantic relationship with an older peer, and (c) exclusive dating that does not include socializing with other couples. In contrast, close relationships with friends who have close relationships with their own parents were found to be an influential factor in adolescents' choice to abstain from sexual activity (Kirby, 2002).

Sexual attitudes about appropriate sexual behaviors influence self-esteem. For instance, if an individual believes that sexual intercourse is acceptable, then positive self-esteem ensues. Conversely, when an individual believes intercourse is unacceptable, it may have a negative effect on self-esteem (Werner-Wilson, 1998). Meier (2007) did not find significant differences between male and female adolescents related to the age at which they first engaged in sexual intercourse.

In the current study, sexual values were assessed through a 12-item measure developed by Miller et al. (1998) to explore adolescents' values about the appropriateness of adolescent sexual intercourse. The 12 items in our study were adapted from this measure. The term *young adult* replaced terms such as *teen-age*, *teens*, and *kids* in items to address the target population of this study. The subscale uses a 5-point Likert-type rating scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Sample items include "I think it is OK for young adults my age to have sex" and "Having sexual intercourse is something only married couples should do" (Miller et al., 1998, p. 35).

Through the use of a demographic questionnaire, the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (Salovey et al., 1995), and the sexual abstinence values measure (Miller et al., 1998), the following research questions were addressed in the current study:

- (a) To what extent do sexual values differ based on gender and sexual activity level?
- (b) To what extent does emotional awareness relate to sexual activity? and
- (c) To what extent does emotional awareness relate to sexual values?

## METHOD

### Participants

For this study, college freshmen were recruited during their initial semester from required introductory freshman orientation classes at a southern, regional university. The sample consisted of 174 volunteer participants who remained anonymous. Of this sample, 82 (47.1%) respondents were men and 92 (52.9%) were women. The average age of participants was 18.32 years ( $SD = 1.36$ ).

Of the 173 participants who indicated their race, 111 (64.2%) reported being White, 39 (22.5%) African American, 13 (7.5%) Hispanic/Latino(a), 3 (1.7%) of Asian descent, and 7 (4.1%) of another ethnic background not listed in the questionnaire. Of the 152 participants who indicated their religion, 134 (88.2%) reported being Christian, 2 (1.3%) Muslim, 1 (0.7%) Hindu, 3 (2.0%) Buddhist, and 12 (7.9%) either another religion (e.g., Wicca) or no religion (e.g., atheist). Of the 160 participants who reported sexual orientation, 155 (96.9%) reported being heterosexual, 3 (1.9%) lesbians or gay men, and 2 (1.3%) being bisexual.

All participants reported their level of sexual activity with respect to sexual intercourse. Of the 174 participants, 53 (30.5%) reported never having had sexual intercourse, 44 (25.3%) reported having had sexual intercourse but not engaging in intercourse at the time of the study, 64 (36.8%) reported engaging in sexual intercourse (at the time of the study) but limiting their activity to monogamous relationships, and 13 (7.5%) reported engaging in sexual intercourse (at the time of the study) and not limiting their activity to monogamous relationships. (Percentages have been rounded and may not total 100.)

### Instruments

*Demographic questionnaire.* Respondents provided information related to gender, age, race, ethnic/cultural background, sexual orientation, primary religious orientation, and level of sexual activity. Level of sexual activity was identified by marking one of the following categories: (a) I have not had intercourse; (b) I have had intercourse, but I am not engaging in intercourse currently; (c) I engage in intercourse but limit my activity to monogamous relationships; and (d) I engage in intercourse and do not limit my activity to monogamous relationships.

*Trait Meta-Mood Scale (Salovey et al., 1995).* The Trait Meta-Mood Scale is a measure that relates the attitudes toward mood and the various ways of coping with mood to qualities related to emotional awareness. The instrument consists of three subscales: (a) Attention, (b) Clarity, and (c) Repair. Reliability estimates for the scale range from .82 to .87. There is strong evidence of internal structure from both exploratory and confirmatory procedures that identified a three-factor solution

in the development of this scale. Higher scores on the three subscales are indicative of higher levels of emotional awareness (Salovey et al., 1995).

*Sexual abstinence values measure* (Miller et al., 1998). The measure was initially developed as part of a study analyzing pubertal development, parent/adolescent communication, sexual abstinence values, sexual intentions, and sexual behavior. For the purposes of this study, only the sexual abstinence values measure was used, and the measure was adapted to measure abstinence values for young adults. Cronbach's alpha for the initial measure was .85. For validity, exploratory factor analysis demonstrated evidence of internal structure. The instrument showed strong content evidence as well. High scores are indicative of more conservative values related to the appropriateness of sexual activity, whereas lower scores are indicative of more liberal values related to the appropriateness of sexual activity (Miller et al., 1998).

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited from critical thinking courses in the College of Education and College of Arts and Science. Volunteer participants took approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete the demographic questionnaire and two aforementioned instruments. SPSS was used to conduct analyses to identify relationships between emotional awareness and sexual activity and to identify differences in sexual activity based on sexual values.

**RESULTS**

To ascertain whether results would be generalizable to young men and women who had indicated various categories of sexual activity, a chi-square analysis was conducted on gender and sexual activity at the .05 level of significance. There was a statistically significant relationship,  $\chi^2(3, N = 174) = 10.30, p = .016$ , with a relatively small effect size,  $\phi = .24$ . Significantly more young women abstained from intercourse than did young men, and significantly more young men engaged in intercourse outside of a monogamous relationship than did young women (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1**

**Frequencies and Percentages of Sexual Activity Across Gender**

Gender	No Intercourse		Not Active		Active With Monogamy		Active Without Monogamy	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Men	19	23.2	20	24.4	32	39.0	11	13.4
Women	34	37.0	24	26.1	32	34.8	2	2.2

*Note.* Participant responses regarding sexual activity: no intercourse = I have not had intercourse; not active = I have had intercourse, but I am not engaging in intercourse currently; active with monogamy = I engage in intercourse but limit my activity to monogamous relationships; active without monogamy = I engage in intercourse and do not limit my activity to monogamous relationships.



A 2 × 3 factorial analysis of variance was conducted to analyze differences in gender and sexual activity with respect to sexual values. Model assumptions were evaluated and met. There was no statistically significant interaction in gender and sexual activity across sexual values,  $F(3, 166) = 0.90, p = .443$ . There was not a significant main effect for gender,  $F(1, 166) = 0.09, p = .771$ . Although, a moderate effect size was evident, Cohen's  $d = .61$ , with young women more strongly endorsing conservative values regarding sexual activity than did young men. A statistically significant difference in sexual activity across sexual values was evident,  $F(3, 166) = 24.63, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .31$ ; a large effect was evident with sexual activity levels contributing to 31% of the variance across sexual values. A post hoc analysis was conducted to determine statistical and practical significance between each of the sexual activity groups (see Table 2). Moderate to large effect sizes were evident in all comparisons.

Emotional awareness for participants was also examined by identifying differences in sexual activity levels based on emotional awareness defined by three subscales: (a) Attention, (b) Clarity, and (c) Repair. Assumptions of multivariate normality, homogeneity of covariances, and linearity were met. A multivariate analysis of variance was conducted with an alpha level of .05. There were no statistically significant differences among sexual activity levels with respect to the emotional awareness subscales,  $F(9, 404.15) = 0.98, p = .455, \lambda = .95$ , indicative of a small effect size.

Because sexual values appeared to be an important component in evaluating differences in sexual activity, the relationship of sexual values to emotional awareness was also explored. A multiple regression analysis was conducted with an alpha level of .05. Assumptions for linearity, normality, and homoscedasticity were evaluated and met. There was not a statistically significant relationship

**TABLE 2**

**Post Hoc Analysis and Effect Size of Comparisons of Sexual Activity Levels Across Sexual Values**

Group <sup>a</sup>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1		2		3		4	
			MD	<i>d</i>	MD	<i>d</i>	MD	<i>d</i>	MD	<i>d</i>
1. No intercourse	3.86	0.78	—	—	0.55*	0.86	0.87*	1.36	1.61*	2.52
2. Not active	3.33	0.63			—	—	0.32*	0.50	1.06*	1.66
3. Active with monogamy	3.02	0.50					—	—	0.74*	1.16
4. Active without monogamy	2.28	0.57							—	—

Note.  $n = 170$ . MD = mean difference;  $d =$  Cohen's  $d$ .

<sup>a</sup>Participant responses regarding sexual activity: no intercourse = I have not had intercourse; not active = I have had intercourse, but I am not engaging in intercourse currently; active with monogamy = I engage in intercourse but limit my activity to monogamous relationships; active without monogamy = I engage in intercourse and do not limit my activity to monogamous relationships.

\* $p < .05$ .

between sexual values and emotional awareness,  $F(3, 168) = 1.95, p = .124, R^2 = .03$ , indicative of a minimal effect size.

## DISCUSSION

It was not a surprise that there were differences in participants' sexual activity related to gender and sexual values. Differences in sexual activity were apparent with significantly more women abstaining from sexual intercourse and significantly more men engaging in sexual intercourse outside of a monogamous relationship. However, there was not much discrepancy between men and women who either had previously engaged in sexual intercourse but were not currently active or who had engaged in sexual intercourse in monogamous relationships. This finding was comparable to that of Meier (2007), who studied first sexual contact for adolescents and found little overall difference in the point at which male adolescents and female adolescents first engaged in sexual intercourse. However, by distinguishing levels of engagement in sexual intercourse, gender differences were evident regarding abstaining from sexual intercourse or engaging in sexual intercourse outside of monogamous relationships.

Furthermore, in the current study, college freshman who endorsed more conservative sexual values tended to be less sexually active; more liberal sexual values were attributed to increased sexual activity. Women were more likely to endorse more conservative sexual values than were men, and this was reflected in the data collected in our study. Over half of the women in the sample (63.0%) either abstained from sexual intercourse or were not sexually active at the time of the study; whereas men who either abstained from sexual intercourse or were not sexually active at the time of the study made up less of the sample (47.6%).

Emotional awareness cannot be linked to the decision to engage in sexual intercourse or to the sexual values adopted by the individual. This finding is not consistent with what has been hypothesized by previous researchers who linked emotional awareness and emotional intelligence to the decision to engage in sexual activity (Davidson & Gottlieb, 1955; Harrod & Scheer, 2005; Livingstone & Day, 2005; Moriarty et al., 2001; Salovey et al., 1995; Shaughnessy & Shakesby, 1992). The results of this study indicated only a nonsignificant, minimal relationship between emotional awareness and sexual activity.

Sexual values appear to be an important aspect of the decision to engage sexual activity. Individuals who were associated with higher levels of sexual activity also exhibited lower scores on the sexual values measure and more permissive attitudes toward sexual activity. Sexual values were highly predictive of sexual activity, and this is consistent with what has been reported in the literature (Blinn-Pike, 1999; Miller et al., 1998; Oman et al., 2003; Werner-Wilson, 1998).

### Implications for Counseling

The decision to become sexually active is highly personal (Cauffman & Steinberg, 1996; Michels et al., 2005), and counselors should be aware that emphasis on

clients' emotional awareness in an effort to influence their decision to initiate and engage in sexual behavior may have minimal impact. In this study, the decision to engage in sexual intercourse was not related to the level of emotional awareness of the respondents. In other words, although some young adult clients may admit to struggles with the decision to be sexually active, focus on the awareness of feelings related to sexual activity may not be conducive to promoting the decision to engage in sexual intercourse.

However, young adults' sexual values do appear to have substantial impact on the decision to engage in sexual activity. A significant relationship was established between the decision to be sexually active and the participants' endorsed sexual values related to sexual intercourse. Thus, focusing on clients' sexual values may be beneficial when discussing their decision to be sexually active.

Multiculturally competent counselors should be aware of the role of sexual values within various cultures respecting gender, ethnicity, religion, and so forth (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2009; Kim, Cartwright, Asay, & D'Andrea, 2003; Levitt & Balkin, 2003).

In addition to being aware of clients' sexual values related to sexual activity and respecting diverse viewpoints, counselors should also be aware of their own sexual values and take care not to impose their values on clients (American Counseling Association, 2005). Counselors may be limited when counseling sexually active young adults, especially when discrepant views are apparent in the client–counselor relationship. Although addressing client sexual values with respect to sexual activity may be an effective intervention, counselors should be aware that using interventions to change clients' sexual values as a means to alter sexual activity may be an ethical conflict.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

We sought to address the gap in the literature related to sexual activity, sexual values, and emotional awareness in young adults. Few researchers have addressed these issues as they pertain to young adulthood, and this study was particularly unique in that various levels of sexual activity were identified for purposes of the study. This study was limited in sample size, as moderate levels of practical significance were noted with the absence of statistical significance. Thus, larger sample sizes are encouraged if this study is to be replicated because analysis may then be more likely to result in statistically significant findings. Future research should use a larger sample size if moderate effect sizes are to be deemed as statistically significant. This study was also limited to one location of a southern, regional university. A more geographically comprehensive sample would be desirable. Moreover, the results of this study were not congruent with the multitude of theoretical articles related to emotional intelligence and awareness and their potential impact on sexual behavior. Further research is necessary to substantiate the findings of this study. Additional research on the promotion of sexual values is warranted, especially the way in which these values pertain to sexual behavior.

Because sexual values appeared to have an important impact on the decision to engage in sexual activity, interventions designed to address sexual values may be helpful in decreasing pregnancies in adolescents and young adults.

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