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Adolescent Women's Daily Academic Behaviors, Sexual Behaviors and Sexually-Related Emotions

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Keywords

academic behavior; sexual behaviors; romantic and sexual relationships; sexual emotions

Background

Emerging literature suggests that young women's romantic/sexual relationships may play an important role in their academic success. Romantic relationships and partnered sexual behaviors normatively increase during adolescence, and schools serve as primary venues for meeting and interacting with different partners.^{1,2} These relationships allow young women to develop different skills, such as emotional management, interpersonal communication and behavior inhibition,¹ which are also positively linked to school engagement and test/course scores.³ In turn, young women's educational achievements, such as GPA or standardized test scores, are positively linked to their ability to delay sex, to use condoms and contraception consistently, and to choose healthy relationships.⁴

One possibility is that the emotional and behavioral content of romantic relationships could impact aspects of young women's academic performance. For example, one study demonstrated that adolescent women's grades were positively linked to their partner's

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Implications and Conclusions: Young women's daily reports of skipping school and failing a test were significantly linked to sexual behavior and sexual emotions reported on that same day. Our findings provide support for the fact that romantic/sexual partners may influence young women's academic experiences.

grades, net of parent, peer and personal academic orientation.⁵ Other literature has suggested that romantic partners also bear important influence on long term educational persistence and completion into emerging adulthood.⁶ To date, however, reliance on global measures prevents detailed understanding of how and when *specific* academic experiences link to *specific* romantic/sexual experiences, and whether these associations could vary over different school days. Existing diary research link daily academic experiences and individual emotions,⁷ and our work links daily sexually-related individual and partner-specific emotions to partner-specific sexual behaviors.^{8,9} These studies could suggest that young women's day-to-day experiences at school impact the way they report feeling about any romantic partners, or the behaviors they engage with a romantic partner. Accordingly, using diary data collected from adolescent women, the objective of this exploratory study was to examine how two common academic “warning” behaviors – failing a test and skipping school – might be associated with differences in daily sexually-related emotions and partner-specific sexual behaviors.

Methods

Data were collected as part of a larger longitudinal cohort study of sexual relationships and sexual behaviors among young women in middle- to late-adolescence. Participants (N=387; 14 to 18 years at enrollment; 90% African American) were adolescent women receiving health care as part of the patient population of primary care adolescent clinics in Indianapolis, IN. These clinics serve primarily lower- and middle-income communities with high rates of early childbearing and STI. As part of this larger study, young women completed daily diaries tracking sexually-related emotions, partner-specific sexual behaviors and academic behaviors. This research was approved by the institutional review board of Indiana University/Purdue University at Indianapolis. Each participant provided informed consent, and research participation permission was additionally obtained from each participant's parent or legal guardian.

Measures

Academic behaviors included: *skipped school* and *failed a test* (both no/yes). Sexual behaviors were: *vaginal sex* and *condom use* (both: no/yes). Sexually-related emotions included: *positive mood* (3-items; $\alpha=0.86$; e.g., “I felt happy”) *negative mood* (3-items, $\alpha=0.83$; e.g., “I felt unhappy”), *feeling in love* (single, 5-point Likert-type item), *sexual interest* (single, 5-point Likert type item), *partner support* (5-items; $\alpha=.95$; e.g., “He let me know he cared about me”) and *partner negativity* (5-items, $\alpha = .93$; e.g., “He made me feel bad about myself”).

Statistical Procedure

Chi-square tests evaluated relationships between daily academic and daily partnered sexual behaviors. GEE ordinal logistic (sexual interest and feeling in love) or linear regression (positive and mood, partner support and negativity) assessed mean differences in sexual emotions when academic behaviors did and did not occur. The latter models controlled for young women's age and race/ethnicity. All analyses were conducted in SPSS (version 21.0).

Results

Partnered Sexual Behaviors

Skipping school on a given day was associated with *more frequent* vaginal sex (Table 1: 13.5% vs. 5.4%; $p<.000$) and *less frequent* condom use (13.8% vs. 33.1%; $p<.000$). There was no differences in the prevalence of vaginal sex on days with (6.4%) and without (5.8%) reports of failing a test ($p=0.386$); however, when sex occurred, condom use was *less frequent* (6.9%) when a young woman failed a test as compared to when she did not (27.1%; $p<.05$).

Sexually-related emotions

Days on which young women reported skipping school and/or failing a test were significantly associated with *greater* negative mood, sexual interest, and feeling in love as well as with *lower* positive mood. In addition, skipping school was associated with significantly *higher* levels of partner support. Partner negativity did not differ with skipping school or failing a test.

Discussion

This study contributes to existing literature^{4-6,8,9} by demonstrating that young women's daily reports of skipping school and failing a test were significantly linked to more frequent vaginal sex, less frequent condom use, as well as to different sexual emotions, on that same day. While we are unable to disentangle the within-day causal order of partnered behaviors and academic experiences, our findings raise the possibility that the emotional and behavioral experiences in young women's romantic/sexual relationships may impact young women's reaction to academic events, particularly in instances where an event is more salient to her or to her partner. For example, that condom use decreases after failing a test because a young woman feels supported and loved by her partner. Conversely, the same pressure exerted by a boyfriend to skip school may also influence her to eschew condom use when sex occurs. Additional data are needed to specifically articulate the dynamics of a given relationship's influence on young women's day-to-day academic decisions. Such information will be important to the informed design of both educationally-related and sexual risk-related intervention efforts.

Our findings should be interpreted in light of other limitations. While data are partner-specific, the analyses presented here do not incorporate information relative to a given relationship's history prior to a given day. In addition, we do not have data available on the academic habits of a young woman's partner. Moreover, we know little about how academic behaviors and romantic/sexual relationships may interact among young women choosing same-sex partners, or both same- and opposite-sex partners.

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Table 1
Event Level Association between Academic Behaviors and Sexual Behaviors and Emotions among (N=387) Adolescent Women.

	Skipping School (N=820)		Failed a Test (N=1371)	
	No	Yes	No	Yes
Sexual Behaviors (Yes)				
Vaginal sex	5.4%	13.5%	5.8%	6.4%
				X ² (df) or b(SE)
				0.78(1)
Condom use	13.8%	33.1%	27.1%	6.9%
				3.46(1) [*]
Sexually Related Emotions (Mean, SD)				
	No	Yes	No	Yes
				b(SE) or Odds Ratio (95% CI)
Positive Mood	9.25 (3.87)	8.60 (3.51)	9.25 (3.35)	8.48 (3.72)
				-0.78 (0.29) ^{***}
Negative Mood	5.64 (3.03)	6.39 (3.06)	5.64 (3.03)	6.59 (3.30)
				0.94 (0.21) ^{***}
Sexual Interest	1.54 (1.10)	1.92 (1.30)	1.55 (1.10)	1.63 (1.10)
				1.31 (1.05 – 1.64) [*]
Feeling in Love	2.31 (1.65)	2.67 (1.73)	2.31 (1.65)	2.65 (1.66)
				1.33 (1.06 – 1.61) [*]
Partner Support	1.29 (1.02)	1.72 (1.21)	1.29 (1.72)	1.43 (1.71)
				1.94 (1.03) [^]
Partner Negativity			0.41 (1.02)	0.39 (0.99)
				0.06 (0.21)

[^] p<.10

^{*} p<.05

^{**} p<.01

^{***} p<.001