

**A Social-Ecological Perspective on Vulnerable Youth: Toward an
Understanding of Sexual Development Among Urban African American
Adolescents**

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Abstract

The authors employ a social-ecological framework to aid our understanding of the complex array of factors in the immediate and broader environment that influence adolescent sexual development. Further, sexual development is viewed as normative and critical to positive growth. The authors provide an overview of the Two-Cities Study, a multi-stage qualitative investigation that aims to contribute to an understanding of sexual development and to illuminate gender differences in sexuality. The current studies focus on urban African American youth living in low-income neighborhoods, offering new data on sexual development among these youth.

Two Cities Study

The Two-Cities Study is a multistage qualitative investigation of male and female African American adolescents, age 15 to 17, residing in low-income neighborhoods of Chicago and San Francisco. The study has basic and applied goals. The articles in this special issue are based on Stage 1 data collection, which examines adolescent sexuality within a broad social-ecological framework. Subsequent stages focus on progressively more applied issues in sexual health, with the goal of identifying strategies for intervention to enhance sexual health competency. In addition to understanding sexual development of youth in low-income neighborhoods, the study also seeks to illuminate gender differences in sexuality. The sexual health disparities among African American youth provide a public health impetus for the project as whole.

Social-Ecological Framework

Adolescence is a period of physical and social sexual development, and teens in the middle years of adolescence (15–17 years) evidence significant transitions during this time period. Research in this area cross cuts biological, psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. Social-ecological models (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Swanson, Spencer, dell'Angelo, Harpalani, & Spencer, 2002) provide a general framework for examining the multiplicity of factors that shape interpersonal sexual development. Within these types of models, broader environmental and cultural factors, community and interpersonal elements, psychological, and to some extent, biological maturation influence development through complex interacting systems.

An underlying assumption of our work is that interpersonal sexual

development may differ based on the environmental and cultural context of the adolescent. Within low-income African American neighborhoods, prior work underscores the social heterogeneity of the population (Anderson, 1999; Jarrett, 1997) that may, in turn, affect variations in interpersonal sexual development. For instance, for those who foresee few opportunities for achieving adult status through traditionally sanctioned economic routes, sexual debut and early parenthood may be desired. Alternatively, those who perceive of early parenthood as limiting may make different choices.

This type of heterogeneity in sexual development may give rise to differences in interpersonal sexual competence as reflected in the individual's current and future interpersonal sexual quality and sexual health (Russell, 2005). In this context, development of sexual competence influences and is influenced by the development of other social relationships in adolescence, such as friendship groups and dating relationships. At the community level, adolescent sexual competencies are also shaped by larger social networks including family, age-mates, school, religion, medical services, media/internet, and nonfamilial significant others (e.g., coaches and family friends). These networks may influence and be influenced by the larger cultural context. These broader contextual and community influences may affect interpersonal and psychological factors that, in turn, contribute to variations in dyadic sexual behavior. Experience with dyadic sexual interactions in turn influences the development of sexual competence in positive and negative ways.

Study Design: Summary

Our multistage design has a number of goals: (1) Stage 1, the basis of the

current special issue, utilizes a directed approach to qualitative research in which a social-ecological framework provides important concepts that frame our interviews. However, the qualitative nature of the interviews allow for exploration and discovery of concepts and relationships not articulated by this framework or prior research. Thus, Stage 1 is basic research and broader in conceptual scope than later stages. (2) Stage 2 (in progress) builds on Stage 1 and focuses the inquiry toward practical strategies that might be employed in facilitating positive interpersonal sexual competencies, primarily in the arena of sexual health. (3) Stage 3 focuses the inquiry further by examining adolescents' and local sexual health care providers' responses to prior findings and proposed strategies for positive sexual development. Qualitative research methods are highly appropriate for this first stage of research because (1) they are well suited for investigating new research topics in understudied populations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Padgett, 2008), (2) they have been used successfully in basic and formative intervention research in the fields of HIV prevention in ethnic minority adolescent populations (Champion & Collins, 2010; Wingood & DiClemente, 2008), and (3) they allow for the exploration of cultural and environmental factors unique to the population.

The goal of such qualitative investigations is not to estimate the prevalence of phenomena (themes) or empirical relationships between variables (themes), but to describe variation in the phenomena of study (dependent variables), as well as patterns of factors that may influence this variation (independent variables) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A key concept in this regard is that of saturation, wherein the sample frame is developed in an effort to describe the range of variations in

phenomena. In the absence of probability-based sample frames, investigators employ various strategies to approximate saturation while recognizing that the sample frames are potentially biased. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable, particularly in terms of the prevalence of any one variant. For instance, in the article by Reed et al. (this issue), the percentage of respondents reporting concurrent sexual partners should not be taken as an indicator of the actual prevalence of this behavior in the population. In qualitative research, there is often a deemphasizing of percentages and counts of particular themes and an increased emphasis on articulating the qualitative variations in those themes.

To better achieve saturation, we introduced a number of design features that include (1) multiple cities and multiple data collection sites within different areas of the neighborhoods that reduce systematic bias in the data as a function of setting specific factors (Harris, 2010), (2) a relatively large sample size for a qualitative study ($N = 81$) that included both sexually experienced and sexually inexperienced youth and included both genders, and (3) the interdisciplinary triangulation offered by our multidisciplinary team of investigators (Padgett, 2008) (with expertise in human development, public health, medical anthropology, clinical-community psychology, and health psychology), all of whom have extensive experience working in the African American community. To augment the reliability and validity of findings, we used ethnic minority interviewers with extensive experience conducting clinical/qualitative interviews in African American communities. Interviews were carefully monitored by study investigators for quality, as well as to adjust the interview to capture important emergent themes.

Data were professionally transcribed and transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by comparing them to the digital recordings of the interviews. Data were coded in a multistep process (e.g., see Brink, 1991; Stern, 1991) including the following: (1) a series of team meetings were held to review a subset of transcripts and devise preliminary codes that were revised and augmented over the course of coding the entire data set; transcripts coded in the early part of this process were recoded as needed; (2) All codes were entered into NVIVO and provided the basis for extracting portions of transcripts related to overarching themes (e.g., statements regarding the neighborhood and local environment); (3) For specific analyses underlying individual articles, additional codes were developed by the authors of those articles; (4) These article-specific codes were applied to transcripts by multiple coders and the results compared to determine if similar sets of themes were identified; disagreements were resolved through consensus discussions among coders or with the larger research team. (The goal of these reliability analyses was to ensure the adequacy of the code definitions and identification of thematic variations.) This last step in the coding process is different from that employed in quantitative coding in that all discrepancies between coders are reconciled. Findings at various stages of this coding process were presented to the research team to examine coders' interpretations of specific passages. All articles used content analyses as an analytic strategy that reflects a qualitative emphasis on phenomenological meaning (i.e., the respondents experience and perceptions of phenomena) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For instance, when authors refer to messages on dating or sexuality from various sources, these reflect respondents'

perceptions of the messages, not necessarily the messages that were sent. The Dolcini et al. (this issue) article builds on the content analysis to conduct pattern analyses using charting techniques and case analysis to represent major themes in the data. All of these derived analytic strategies were also subject to reliability checks by study investigators.

Overview of Articles

The four articles included in this issue address a variety of issues relevant to sexual development among urban African American youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. In the Choby et al. (this issue) article, we explored the interrelationship between the neighborhood environment and familial responses to that environment, which in turn may affect sexual development. Youths' perceptions of their neighborhood were related to sexual attitudes and sexual debut; sexually experienced females had more negative perceptions of their neighborhoods, and some females viewed violence as a reason to have sex. Sexually experienced youth also had fewer familial strategies. Our results suggested that the strategies that families employed to mitigate the risks of living in resource-poor neighborhoods may delay sexual debut among African American females. Interestingly, the number of strategies (rather than the type of strategies) identified was related to delayed sexual debut. This suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy for creating a structured and safe environment that will affect this important developmental milestone. The results of this study are consistent with the broader role of positive parenting strategies on adolescent sexual development (Aral, Adimora, &

Fenton, 2008; Miller, Benson, & Galbraith, 2001).

Families also influenced sexual development through their impact on adolescents' dating relationships. Harper et al. (this issue) examined this issue among sexually experienced youth and showed that the messages came from a variety of different family members, including parents, siblings, aunts/uncles, grandparents, and cousins, thus highlighting the importance of extended family and its impact on dating. Youth received a broad array of messages, sometimes conflicting, that influence various phases of dating relationships. For example, some messages, even within a single family, promoted sexual health whereas others promoted sexual risk within the context of dating. Further, messages from family tended to reinforce gender roles; males were often encouraged to be sexually active and assertive, and females were generally encouraged to be passive and subtle in their dating relationships.

Although these studies emphasized the importance of familial influences, it is well recognized that adolescents receive sexual information from a much larger variety of sources. Dolcini et al. (this issue) examined the sexual information networks that youth are embedded in within their community. They examined network quality, variations in network messages, and the perceived utility of these messages. Four general network themes were identified and representative case examples were described. These included teens who were connected to rich-diverse networks that provided much more than simple admonishments to use condoms and avoid pregnancy, but also included rehearsals of positive behaviors in a network generally supportive of positive sexual health outcomes.

Other network types included those that were sparser and less complex in the messages/lessons being conveyed, albeit generally the messages were consistent, as opposed to networks in which teens received inconsistent messages, or highly negative messages about sex that may ill prepare them for sexual relationships. Messages from parents and sex education programs had the most utility, whereas messages from the Internet and religion had the least utility. Although there were many commonalities in sources of information across gender, females were more likely to have received information from medical professionals, with sexually experienced females almost universally reporting this experience. These findings suggest that males may benefit from greater access to sexual health information from their medical providers. Finally, recognizing that obtaining a phenomenological perspective on sources requires examining the entire network, we identified the patterns of networks in our sample noting how the various patterns may affect sexual development during adolescence.

Last, Reed et al. (this issue) examined possible antecedents of sexual partnering, with a focus on a specific subpopulation of sexually experienced teens who reported having multiple sexual partners that overlap in time (a subset of respondents examined in Harper et al.). This particular pattern is known to influence STI transmission and is illustrative of the complex social-ecological influences on dyadic sexual behavior that may affect the development of sexual competence. Gender patterned differences in social status, developmental beliefs, and perceived sexual needs (e.g., pleasure seeking) represented underlying motivations influencing partner acquisition. Revenge and economic gain were

reported by both genders as motivations for partner acquisition.

In Reed et al.'s analysis, norms regulating double standards for sexual conduct were commonly reported and are discussed in terms of status effects and normative conflicts that, in turn, may affect sexual and relationship competency. For example, the double standard creates demands on males to conceal the truth about their behavior from their main sexual partners and leads adolescent females to deny or resign themselves to unhealthy sexual practices related to their male partners' behavior. None of these outcomes bodes well for developing satisfying love relationships in adulthood.

Imbedded within the double standard are conflicting developmental norms, with some norms emphasizing the need to freely explore sexuality during adolescence, whereas other norms focused on assuming adult roles that include monogamy and commitment. Although substantial gender differences in socialization and in messages were found with regard to concurrent relationships, and concurrency was more common and more acceptable for males, it is important to note that males and females received conflicting messages in this regard. These conflicts lead to negative relationship dynamics including concealing the truth and resigning one's self to unhealthy conditions. Moreover, such conflicting normative expectations create the conditions for developing relationship interaction styles that foster poor communication and mistrust.

Comparing Harper et al. and Reed et al., we see that the theme of conflicting messages arose in both analyses. The conflicts observed with respect to dating are magnified in the subset of respondents who report concurrent sexual partners.

Future work should explore the processes by which adolescents select among these conflicting messages and the factors that affect the selection process.

Collectively, these articles provide important new data on sexual development among urban African American youth. In part, they found different socialization practices and expectations for different segments of the population, showing significant individual differences in the perception of the quality of neighborhoods and in advice from relatives and peer groups. This work also provides insight into how information networks may shape youths' orientation to sex and knowledge of sexual health practices. Recognizing individual differences among vulnerable youth increases our understanding of normative sexual development and provides direction for future sexual health related research, as well as more informed positive youth development interventions in these and other vulnerable populations.

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