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Influences on Sexual Partnering Among African American Adolescents With Concurrent Sexual Relationships

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Abstract

Adolescents often engage in concurrent sexual partnerships as part of a developmental process of gaining experience with sexuality. The authors qualitatively examined patterns of concurrency and variation in normative and motivational influences on this pattern of sexual partnering among African American adolescents (31 males; 20 females), ages 15 to 17 years. Using content analysis, gender and contextual differences in social norms and motivations for concurrency were explored. Findings describe the normative influences on adolescent males and females with regard to sexual concurrency and the transfer of these norms from one generation to the next.

Sexual partnering is a key developmental task of adolescence that sets the groundwork for future adult romantic/marital relationships and more proximally may influence adolescent sexual health and social relationships. The patterns of sexual partnering among adolescents can be quite diverse, ranging from very infrequent sex to having multiple sexual partners over short periods of time (e.g., weeks to months).

Among these patterns, individuals with multiple overlapping sexual partners (i.e., sexual concurrency) contribute to the spread of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Aral, 2010; Aral, Adimora, & Fenton, 2008; Kretzschmar, White, & Carael, 2010). Sexual concurrency is common among heterosexual adolescents (Ford, Sohn, & Lepkowski, 2002; Jennings, Glass, Parham, Adler, & Ellen, 2004), including African American youth (Crepaz et al., 2006; Kelley, Borawski, Flocke, & Keen, 2003; Kerrigan et al., 2007), and is more likely to occur among heterosexual males than females (Crepaz et al., 2006; Harper, Gannon, Watson, Catania, & Dolcini, 2004; Kerrigan et al., 2007). Independent of other epidemiological factors, sexual concurrency may account for the high STI rates among heterosexual African American teens (e.g., Ellen, Aral, & Madger, 1998).

African American adolescents are disproportionately affected by STIs and by HIV. For example, the gonorrhea rate for African American female adolescents (age 15–19) is 16.7 times higher than the rate for White adolescents in the same age group, and 38.3 times

greater for African American adolescent males than the rate for same-age White males (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2010). Further, although African American adolescents, age 13 to 19 years, comprise 17% of the U.S. population of adolescents, they represent 75% of the HIV infections in this age group (CDC, 2009). These health issues underscore the importance of understanding sexual partnering processes. This study focuses on the social norms and motivating factors that influence sexual concurrency.

Developmental Context

By age 18, a majority of adolescents have transitioned to interpersonal sexual activity (e.g., Crepaz, Hart, & Marks, 2004; Tolman, Striepe, & Harmon, 2003). Although most have transitioned to having sex, adolescents may receive a confusing mix of normative proscriptions regarding sex: for instance, to delay maturity (Marcell, Raine, & Eyre, 2003) on the one hand, and, at the same time, conform to adult role expectations (e.g., sexual fidelity; see Russell, 2005). In addition to mixed messages, there is also recognition of a gap between physical maturity and adult sexual and relationship roles that occurs during adolescence (Russell, 2005). It is unclear how such discordant normative expectations play out in the sexual lives of adolescents and, in particular, how they affect sexual partnering, including concurrency.

Little of what adolescents learn about sexual relationships stems from observation of more experienced positive role models. Primarily, adolescents learn from their information networks about sexual health (see Dolcini et al., this issue), rather than how to engage in sex with another person in a mature mutually satisfying manner (L. Abraham, 2011; Russell, 2005). Learning about interpersonal sexual activity tends to occur over a series of trial-and-error experiences with other teenagers. In effect, adolescents are faced not only with a confusing array of adult-child normative expectations, but also with a poor knowledge base with which to work through the confusion.

Normative/Motivational Determinants of Sexual Partnering

At present, theories of adolescent development are relatively silent on the subject of specific patterns of sexual partnering. Prior studies provide various clues (e.g., observed gender differences in concurrency), but, for the most part, this is a relatively unknown subject of study from a developmental perspective. From a developmental viewpoint, this topic falls within broader issues concerning cross-generational propagation of norms (e.g., Carey, Senn, Seward, & Vanable, 2010; Miller, Benson, & Galbraith, 2001). Past work has identified norms governing sexual boundaries within relationships and exceptions to those boundary rules (Andrinopoulos, Kerrigan, & Ellen, 2006; Grieb, Davey-Rothwell, & Latkin, 2011; Kelley, Borawski, Flocke, & Keen, 2003; Kerrigan et al., 2007; Lenoir, Adler, Borzekowski, Tschann, & Ellen, 2006; Towner, Dolcini & Harper, 2011). This body of work has also focused on how gender-related norms concerning sexual double standards, status, and reputation (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Crawford & Popp, 2003; Kerrigan et al., 2007; Kreager & Staff, 2009; Marcell et al., 2003), emotions (e.g., Andrinopoulos et al., 2006; Ott, 2010; Tolman, 2002), and economic conditions (Lightfoot & Milburn, 2009) may influence partnering among heterosexual African American adolescents. Nonetheless, there is relatively little information on sexual concurrency from an individual developmental perspective.

This Study

Despite the disproportionately high burden of STIs among African American adolescents and the prevalence of sexual concurrency among adolescents, there is a paucity of information on the social context in which sexual concurrency occurs. Further, there is a paucity of data on the differential contexts within which male and female adolescents form

beliefs and experience sexual partner concurrency. To address these gaps, this investigation used social norm and motivational frameworks as a general guide, in conjunction with an exploratory qualitative methodology, to examine individual variations in concepts and processes that may explain sexual concurrency. It is not our intent to study monogamy or the differences between people who are monogamous and non-monogamous. Rather, our focus is on adolescents in sexually concurrent relationships and the factors that motivate and support this behavior pattern.

Method

This study is part of a larger community-based qualitative investigation examining the sexual lives and beliefs of urban African American adolescents (see Catania & Dolcini, this issue). Interviews, which took place in spring and summer 2010, were conducted in predominantly African American neighborhoods in two cities where epidemiological data suggests adolescents have high rates of HIV/STIs. All sponsoring institution's Institutional Review Boards approved the study.

Sample

Of the 95 adolescents screened for eligibility, eight were ineligible and six declined to participate, leaving 81 participants (40 females, 41 males). As this analysis pertained to sexual concurrency, our analyses were limited to the sexually experienced males ($n = 31$) and females ($n = 20$), all of whom were between ages 15 and 17.

Procedures

Prior to conducting interviews, interviewers completed training on the study background and the use of the eligibility screener and interview protocol. After demonstrating proficiency using the protocol, interviewers recruited potential participants from youth-serving community-based organizations. To identify potential participants, research staff used several approaches, including nomination by agency staff, snowball sampling, and approaching adolescents who appeared to fit the eligibility criteria. Youth appearing to fit the study requirements were screened for eligibility. Eligibility for participation included: being African American, heterosexual identified, and age 15 to 17.

When possible, participants were interviewed by gender and race-matched interviewers. Prior to the interviews, written, informed parental consent and adolescent's assent were obtained from all participants. Semistructured interviews that lasted between 1 to 2 hours were conducted in a private space at the community organizations. All participants received \$40 remuneration. Throughout data collection, research staff held regular meetings to monitor and advise on field activity. Digitally recorded interviews were deidentified, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy.

Measures

The interview protocol was piloted on adolescents in each city to assess its length, flow, and wording. The final protocol was refined to account for participant feedback ($n = 8$) in these pilot interviews. The final protocol elicited information pertaining to gender-based beliefs and behaviors related to sex and sexuality that may be amenable to intervention. For the purposes of this analysis, data related to the social, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of sexual concurrency were examined. Questions focused on (1) how adolescents described their various types of sexual partners; (2) the extent to which participants engage in sexual concurrency; (3) identifying motivations for participating in sexual concurrency; (4) describing social norms related to sexual concurrency, their interplay and transmission

across generations; and (5) description of respondents' views on the sexual health aspects of sexual concurrency (e.g., risk management strategies).

Analysis

Transcripts were read in their entirety, and two analysts independently developed case summaries (including illustrative quotes) for each participant. The summaries described participants' perceptions of the acceptability and consequences of sexual concurrency, perceived peer norms related to sexual concurrency, and people within their social networks who influenced their perspectives on sexual concurrency. After the transcripts were summarized, analysts reviewed summaries and came to consensus regarding each case.

Following this, conventional content analysis was used to identify themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Summaries were open coded to identify information pertaining to sexual concurrency. Coded data were then placed into a matrix to identify patterns in the distribution of themes (as columns) across the data corpus, while preserving the integrity of each case (as rows; Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, one column displayed each participant's views on the acceptability of sexual concurrency. One analyst identified themes and constructed the initial matrix. A second analyst independently reviewed one half of the summaries and created a replicate matrix to assess the degree to which the data were reliably categorized. Interrater reliability for categorizing the themes was high ($r = .88 - .96$) and coding discrepancies were discussed by the analysts until a consensus was reached. Sorting cases by themes revealed gender differences in participants' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to sexual concurrency.

Results

Our results are divided into several sections: frequency of sexual concurrency in our sample, explication of the normative and motivational determinants of sexual concurrency, and the potential health consequences of these determinants. We first discuss adolescents' labeling of different types of sexual partners to contextualize the quotes that follow and as an exemplar of how normative sexual concurrency is within these adolescents' sexual culture.

Labeling Sexual Partners

Males and females used a variety of terms to distinguish between sexual partnerships. These are described in Table 1. Both genders distinguished a primary or "main" sexual relationship, (i.e., boyfriend/girlfriend), from secondary or casual partners with a wide range of often derogatory terms (e.g., "sideline," "dip," "stain," "stunt," or "bop"). Within this dichotomy of partners there also were various stratifications that distinguished romantic-love relationships from those involving an exchange of some type, or a more purely physical relationship that may or may not be mutual. As one male participant commented: "There's like your main, only, the one that you're really interested in. And there's your other ones on the side, like you're just having sex with, or just to get money out of 'em or something like that."

Sexual Concurrency: Frequency

Nearly one half of all males (44%) had concurrent sexual partners while in their most recent dating relationship. Some males had sex once with someone other than their girlfriend; others described multiple concurrent sexual partners. One male, for instance, stated that he "had sex with like two or three other girls" while with his most recent girlfriend. Fewer females reported sexual concurrency: 20% of female participants had concurrent sexual partners during their most recent dating relationship. Patterns of concurrency varied from those reporting multiple overlapping sexual relationships wherein the partners did not know

the respondent was having sex with all of them, to respondents who reported having sexual encounters involving multiple partners during one encounter (e.g., [Female Respondent] “Me and my friend and her baby daddy ... had a little threesome or whatever”).

Sexual Concurrency: Peer Norms and Socialization

Our data suggest that social norms governing sexual partnering are gender stratified and dependent on the relationships’ status with the partner. Males and females perceived sexual concurrency to be prevalent, suggesting the presence of reference group norms that support concurrent sexual relationships. For example, as one male participant stated: “Nobody is really, like, faithful, not in these days.” Another male participant noted, “Ain’t ever seen no faithful, good relationship.” Similarly, a female participant observed, “most people do, they have more than one partner.” Among those with concurrent partners, more than two thirds reported that concurrency was acceptable. These observations, however, belie the complexity of the underlying norms and the reported prevalence of concurrency among females in our sample.

At the intimate partner level, acceptability and prevalence of concurrency were expressed differently. Among all sexually active respondents, more than one half of all males thought it acceptable to have concurrent sexual partners while in a serious dating relationship. These males believed in a norm of sexual concurrency, that is, that they were “free to have sex with others.” As one explained, “You can choose what you like. You could have your girlfriend and have sex with her. Or you could do—have your other one on the side and have sex with them.”

However, very few females felt concurrency was acceptable when in a dating relationship. One female respondent indicated that she knows “a lot of girls be tired of their boyfriends cheating.” Another female expressed her concerns with concurrency by attributing her acquisition of two STIs to her boyfriend’s sexual concurrency: “I was hearing this stuff, oh yeah, they say, ‘he slept with her, he slept with her,’ and he end up giving me two STDs.” Females described sexual concurrency as acceptable only under circumstances indicative of relationship discord, such as when they were not on “the right terms” with their boyfriends, were about to break up, or when “they’re [boyfriends] cheating and you’re cheating too ... You have an open relationship.” Although some females were accepting of concurrency, sexual concurrency was typically not acceptable within the bounds of a romantic boyfriend relationship. Female respondents also described peer norms among females that were less supportive of sexual concurrency. For example, most females had friends who “just stick to one [sexual partner]” and hung out with people who “believe in you only have one sex partner at a time.”

Within romantic boyfriend relationships, females were suspicious that their boyfriends were having sex with others. One half of all females expressed uncertainty over whether their boyfriends had concurrent sexual partners. A few described circumstantial evidence that their boyfriends had other sexual partners. As one stated,

I think he do [have another sexual partner], but he be lyin’. Because the only reason why I think he do is ‘cause he had this box of Magnums in his drawer and we don’t use condoms.... And the box was gone and he was like somebody be stealin’ his condoms. So I asked his sister. I’m like, “You steal your brother’s condoms?” She like, “I stole one.” ... So what did he do with all these condoms?

Males recognized that adolescent females may not be approving of their sexual concurrency and took pains to avoid detection through a code of silence. They thought having a concurrent sexual partner was “cool as long as you don’t get caught” and described lying to their girlfriends about their sexual concurrency.

Male respondents did not like to think their girlfriends were having sex with others and devised rationalizations for this belief and strategies for detecting infidelity. For example, one male, when asked whether his girlfriend had sex with anyone besides himself, said, “No, I don’t think she is. She not. I know she isn’t.” Males perceived that their girlfriends did not have concurrent sexual partners for a variety of reasons, including being shy, attending the same school, being a virgin when they started dating, being carefully monitored when in proximity to other males, and being chosen as a girlfriend because she could be trusted to not to have sex with other males. Further, males believed that they could detect sexual concurrency through behavioral or physical signs from their partner. One male, for example, stated “She’ll have a sneaky look on her face, and then I’ll know what she been doing.... And that’s when you know she’s having sex with somebody else.” Males also believed sexual intercourse would feel differently if their partner was having sex with someone else: “If her vagina hole, was like, bigger, you can tell she’s having sex with another person.”

Some males also reported being enforcers of these gendered norms by trying to limit the possibility of their girlfriends’ having other sexual partners. They insisted girlfriends dress conservatively, stay away from their opportunistic male friends, not be affectionate with other males, and in some cases, not talk with other males:

That’s what I learn from my friends, to not let your girl talk. ‘Cause my friends’ girls, they be trying to talk to me and I just learned. You feel me? That’s why I told my girl not to talk to none of my friends ‘cause my friends’ girls, they be trying to.

Males checked to “see if she’s [his girlfriend] stunting” and if they are “the only person she’s [a girlfriend] talking to.” Females were warned by their boyfriends that they had “better say no” to boys’ advances or else they would “be cheating.” Males made it clear that they will not tolerate sexual concurrency from their girlfriends and implied that their girlfriend having sex with others would result in the end of the relationship. If a girlfriend had other sexual partners, males were “not gonna sit there and waste my time on her.” In contrast, females did not usually view their boyfriends having concurrent sexual partners as grounds for ending the relationship.

Among males, having other sexual partners was unacceptable for main girlfriends, though tolerated among sidelines: “Because if you’re having sex with someone else, then you’re not my girl. You’re just another girl I talk to.” Male participants expressed the often observed double standard regarding sexual concurrency in dating relationships:

I’m having a girlfriend because I want somebody—a girl—like, I want a real relationship. And if I want a real relationship with you, and you doing something with other people, then we can’t have that. Then if she’s doing that, then she could just be another girl that I just have fun with or something. Nothing serious.

Another male commented: “For a dude I don’t really think it’s like a number. If you have sex with ‘em, you have sex with ‘em. But a girl? I really think she should just have sex with one person.”

These data suggest that, although males, and to a lesser extent females, practice sexual concurrency and believe it is common, concurrency is generally not a well-accepted practice in a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship. In effect this creates the commonly expressed view that a double standard exists for sexual fidelity, perhaps a more common belief among males than females, but it exists among both genders. As we see later, there is dissonance between reference group norms governing the double standard within romantic-dating relationships, and norms governing role behavior within the romantic-dating relationship.

Concurrency: Norm Transmission and Socialization

Social norms are organic in nature. That is, they are transmitted from generation to generation, transform over time, and shift from one developmental period to another. In our society, adolescence is viewed as being a time of exploration, a time to make mistakes, and a time of fewer interpersonal and economic commitments. This view reflects a developmental age-graded norm that eventually gives way in adulthood to a new age-graded norm that calls for increasing interpersonal and economic responsibility and greater commitment, particularly within close romantic relationships.

Participants described ways in which adults and family members influenced their beliefs regarding sexual concurrency. More than three fourths of females heard from a variety of adult sources that they should not have concurrent sexual partners. In particular, females received these messages from sisters, grandmothers, and doctors; many learned to value having one sexual partner from their mothers. One female's mother relayed the message that having concurrent sexual partners "was nasty" and another was taught to "carry herself with class" by not "running around trying to be with every boy." Females also believed that their parents would be upset if they had multiple sexual partners: "A lot of parents don't like when their daughters have sex.... Your mom, like my mom, would rather me have sex with one person than two or three or ten or nine."

In contrast, males were more likely, but not exclusively so, to report that adults conveyed a value of sexual concurrency. When males described family members promoting one sexual partner, they cited "mostly girls," such as aunts, mothers, and sisters. Approximately one third of males described parents who promoted having only one sexual partner. These males were told by parents, "you can't be a player," "not to roam," and "you can't do your girl like that [cheat on her]." Notably, none of the male participants whose parents promoted having one sexual partner described a concurrent sexual partner in their most recent relationship.

Many males, however, reported mixed socialization messages regarding the acceptability of sexual concurrency from adult males:

I have good and I have bad advice. The good advice I can get: Stay faithful. Just don't go messing around or just don't monkey with another monkey's monkey or something like that from an older person. Or I have the bad advice, like, man, girls, man, they gonna come and go, so you should just go do whatever you need to do.

More than two thirds of males described adult males who condoned or promoted sexual concurrency. Fathers, uncles, and older brothers or cousins modeled (e.g., through their actions) sexual concurrency or spoke approvingly of males' sexual concurrency. Twelve of 14 males with concurrent sexual partners in their most recent relationship described ways in which adult males promoted sexual concurrency. These males looked up to their fathers for getting "lots of girls," learned from older cousins "how to have a lot of girls and not get caught" and heard from uncles with multiple sexual partners that they "need one girl for this, one girl for this, another girl for this."

Together, these findings suggest that gendered norms are transmitted from generation to generation along gender lines, older males to younger males, and older females to younger females. Females are to prize fidelity and avoid a loss of status associated with being sexual with too many males, and males are encouraged by adults to be both faithful and to explore. This latter circumstance indicates socialization to the double standard by emphasizing that faithfulness to a main partner is important while exploring your sexuality with other partners is also important. To balance these competing socialization themes, males and to some extent females, conceal the truth or accept the myth that all is "ok" in their close-dating relationships.

Motivations for Sexual Concurrency

The motivations for sexual exploration with multiple partners are multilayered. Broadly, motivational themes observed in our sample were developmental, social (e.g., status gain), pleasure and emotion focused (e.g., love), and material in nature.

Developmental motives—Males and females mentioned developmental themes:

1. being too young to settle down with one partner at this stage in their lives (e.g., [Male respondents] “too young to be faithful,” “not ready for all that [dating],” and did not want “to hear about a relationship right now.”)
2. seeking sexual experience through variety (e.g., [Male respondents]: “get tired of the same person, tired of the same vagina, over and over.”; “I see it [having multiple partners] as like a new videogame, or a game. Once you beat the game, you flip it, like a guy with a girl. Once he plays it and gets bored of it, he still wants that game but he also wants another and maybe a couple more. So, he can also go back to each one he wants.”)
3. an inability to say no to their biological urges (e.g., [Female respondent]: “Cause I’m always horny, I need somebody to do it with. My boyfriend’s not around all the time”; [Male respondents]: “When your penis gets hard, your brain gets soft, and that’s definitely what happens”; “If a woman is flinging the pussy at you, you’re not gonna be faithful.”).

These themes illustrate a number of developmental concepts including (1) age appropriate behavior—adolescence is a time for exploration and less responsibility while monogamy and responsibility are something to delay until adulthood, (2) developmental tasks—learning about one’s self, gaining experience and competence, and (3) developmental fallacies—that teens have biological urges that are difficult to control. These themes have gender components as well. For instance, males are more likely to report a belief in the fallacy that teen males in particular cannot control their sexual urges.

Social motives Achieving status—For males, chief among the social motives for having multiple/concurrent sex partners was to manage one’s social status in the peer hierarchy, either to gain status or protect against a loss of status through management of one’s reputation. Males were the most expressive about the importance of having lots of sexual partners to one’s peer group status, by successfully competing for sex partners, and also through providing sexual partners to others. In terms of gaining status: “Males will look at what they’re getting because like males it’s a reputation. Like the more vagina you get the better you are.” Another male participant observed:

They’ll [other guys] look at it as if the amount the girls that they get. “Oh, I got all these girls and you just got that one girl.” And they’ll be like, “Oh, I got all these girls and you just got that one girl and you not even getting none from that one girl.”

Males described learning from their friends the importance in the social hierarchy of having lots of sex partners. Males who have multiple sexual partners were “great,” “tight,” “cool” and “smooth,” because they’re “getting that pussy,” which is “what you supposed to do.” Males with multiple sexual partners “get credit or praise for having sex with a lot of different people” and they “probably have more respect” than males who do not have sex. For a male, in his friend’s eyes, “it’s important for him to have girls, but not girlfriends.” There is a loss of status if a male is not having lots of sex: “Like you’re dry. You ain’t having sex. You ain’t getting wet . . . you ain’t having no sex, like you don’t fit in,” and his friends “cap on him,” that is, tease him and publically humiliate him.

Social motives: Achieving status - competition and sharing—Status is gained not just through having lots of sex partners, but also through competitive gaming within one's group. For instance, as one male respondent stated: “[We] make deals and stuff about who can hit that and who can hit this. Like and if they do it, then they win money out of it.” One female described how her male friends “bet on girls” as to whether “I can get her ... I could talk to her.” One female had been gambled on by males; her female friends later told her, “The boys was betting on you to see who you was going to do first.” Providing sexual partners for friends was also a way to gain status because it indicates a level of male potency and attractiveness beyond others in the group. In this regards, some males reported setting their friends up with females they described as “easy”:

She came to my house with her friend and I was supposed to be having sex with her friend, but her friend had left and she was like, “Oh, I wanna have sex.” She was really trying to and she didn't make me horny or nothing, so I really called my friend ... I was like, “Just come over here, bro.” ... Once he came over here, I guess him and her started having sex.

Social motives: Status & protection of reputation—Protecting one's social status through social impression management of one's reputation was most important for females. Having too many partners was perceived as being associated with a loss of status and potential ostracization from female and male peer groups. Females with multiple sexual partners or who were assumed to have multiple sex partners were subject to a variety of negative consequences. They received a “bad name,” “title” or “reputation.” Peers spread rumors that they were pregnant or had STIs. Other females did not want to be their friend because they “might try to get with my man” or they were concerned about stigma by association. For example, one female described why her friends shunned a female known to have multiple partners:

Because they don't want it to, like, seem like that's what they're doing too. Like the image off of them—like, “Oh. Well, she's having sex with the whole football team. I bet you they are too, because they hang with her.”

Males may sexually harass or physically accost females with a reputation for having multiple sexual partners. One participant described how females with lots of sexual partners are treated by males: “they go be disrespectin' her, like, grabbin' her, feelin' on her, and stuff like that, just all type. They will do anything just to have sex with her basically.” Another noted that these females tend to be treated “disrespectful” and that males “feel on her, guys be feelin' on her.” Males may “touch her when they want to” and “don't have no respect for her.” Males also refused to date females with a reputation for having a lot of sexual partners. Males wanted to say, “He the only one that's hittin' that. And nobody else did but him.” One male described choosing girlfriends based on the number of sexual partners they have had. He asked them:

“How many dudes you have sex with?” If she say over five, I'll be like ... I don't want her to be my girlfriend.... But if she say probably like three, then I'll probably mess with her. I want that to be my girlfriend.

Social motives: Revenge—Revenge was also seen by some as a motive for having concurrent sexual partners. As one female stated, “Since you cheated on me, I'm gonna cheat on you and we be even.” This reasoning was occasionally provided by participants who claimed that they otherwise would not have had concurrent sexual partners:

I was messing around with her [my last girlfriend] because—I did it because she was messing around with me ... because the only time I would do that to a female was if I knew she was doing that to me.

Pleasure motive—The pleasure motive for having sex was a common theme. In many instances, pleasure is seen as an overriding factor that trumps health concerns, and social norms regarding monogamy. With regard to pleasure and health, one male with a history of having concurrent sexual partners stated: “They [males] don’t care about catching something. They just want to f***.” With respect to monogamy, one female commented, “I had a friend like that and I asked her, like, ‘why do you always cheat?’ [She said] ‘Cause I’m always horny, I need somebody to do it with. My boyfriend’s not around all the time.” A male respondent observed, “I can’t be faithful right now. I just got so much lust. I’m a lust-filled person. I don’t know. I be tweaking all day.”

The pleasure motive is also invoked as a reason for giving into social pressures to have sex. As one male described: “I think girls are peer pressured into doing that [having multiple partners] ... I won’t say provoked, but I’ll say like she will feel—she feel like it’s not right for the boy not to have his pleasure.”

Love, affection, attention motives—Emotion-based motives for having multiple sex partners are typically invoked in situations where the person feels a deficit in social acceptability or love from others. One female respondent commented; “I used to have sex with boys, thinking they would love me ... If I have sex with him then he’ll love me more.” In particular, females who were less popular or considered less attractive were described as resorting to having multiple sexual partners to obtain attention from males in hopes of obtaining some measure of love and affection. Several female respondents commented:

Some girls be ugly and they feel like since nobody wants to talk to them they’ve got to make themselves known and they get known if they’re bussing [having multiple partners] ... Most of the girls that they call hos and stuff, they’re ugly, and they’ll do it with anybody to like get attention and stuff.

In addition, one female noted that it was the absence of love that gave her reason to have other sex partners: “Like, if it’s not those words, ‘I love you,’ I can’t be faithful at all.”

Material motives—Material gain also motivated having concurrent sex partners for a small minority of participants. Several females described having had sex in exchange for pay or gifts, and a few indicated that they also have friends who have engaged in sex for pay. As one female admitted: “I ain’t gonna lie, I did it a couple of times ... it [sex] is a fast way to make money, I guess.”

Public Health & Sexual Concurrency

Some respondents understood that having lots of sex partners may have sexual health consequences. As noted previously, one female respondent attributed her acquisition of two STIs to her boyfriend’s sexual concurrency. Participants desired that their main dating partners not have other sexual partners because of fear of STIs (“disease travels”), particularly if he or she doesn’t like to use condoms: My boyfriend does not like condoms at all ... I know he’s not gonna use a condom with this other girl and you don’t know what she been doing, and she probably had sex with somebody that had AIDS and then you don’t use a condom and then you give it to me ... all three of us is gonna have AIDS.

Males also acknowledged the risks in that males maintained that having multiple sexual partners was acceptable if they “protect themselves,” “strap up,” “use a condom,” “stay protected,” or “cover [their] jimmy.”

Respondents utilized a number of risk management strategies to protect themselves from STIs/HIV. These were generally used with secondary partners but not main partners (e.g., “If it ain’t your main girl, you just can’t go in raw.”). Male respondents noted that

concurrent sexual partners posed no health risks as long as they used condoms with their “sidelines,” did not have sex with “dirty girls,” or had known their sidelines for “a couple of days [presumably to determine their risk status].” The decision of whether to use condoms often depended on risk management strategies based on assumptions including the belief that one’s sexual partner is a virgin or monogamous. For example,

R: I still use ‘em, but—I use them often, but if I’m with a girl and I know she a virgin I wouldn’t use it, or one of my main girls I wouldn’t use one.

I: Okay. So why not with those girls?

R: Cause I know these girls are the ones I wanna use them with. The only one they’re talking to is me. I know that for sure. The only one they’re talking to is me, so I ain’t got to worry about that with them, but if it’s like a girl I’m talking to and she’s like a bus [someone who has multiple sex partners] or something, of course I’m gonna use a rubber. I gotta use one.

That assumptions around a partner’s faithfulness are sometimes flawed are evident from one male’s admission that: “I don’t have girlfriends. I have friends with benefits, where they probably think they’re my girlfriend, but they’re really friends with benefits.”

Within primary dating relationships, basic sexual health principles are balanced against normative expectations regarding appropriate behavior in an intimate relationship. In general, participants described unprotected intercourse as normative in dating/romantic relationships. One female participant stated, “Most of the time when you got a boyfriend, you all do have unprotected sex because that’s supposed to be your boyfriend.” Another female pointed out that [when having sex with a boyfriend] females, “ain’t supposed to do it [have sex] with a condom.” More than one third of participants described inconsistent condom use with their boyfriend/girlfriend and well over one half of the participants with a history of sexual concurrency abandoned condom use in dating relationships.

For example, one female with a long-term boyfriend indicated had concurrent sexual partners and described infrequent use of condoms: “But with my partner that I’m with now—we don’t use condoms. We probably use condoms probably on a scale out of our whole relationship, it probably like four condoms out of 3 years.”

Females viewed unprotected sex as a sign of trust and commitment. As one explained, “I have had sex, I have said that I don’t want to have sex before with a condom. That’s me feeling like I’m the only female he be having sex with.” Given the association of condom use with casual sex, discussing condom use was often perceived as an accusation or admission of concurrency. For example, several females described their anger at the prospect of their boyfriends urging condom use:

I’d think he’s cheating, because if I don’t wanna use one, and he do, then I’d think there’s something wrong with that. What boy would just be like, “okay, no, we have to wear a condom,” unless he messing around? I’d be ready to fight.

Some males held similar beliefs; as one noted, a girlfriend’s insistence on condom use may make him “assume that she’s cheating.” In general, adolescents are commonly faced with the dilemma of having a partner they (1) suspect of having sex with others; (2) are required to pretend being “mutually monogamous” with, and trust; and (3) engage in a symbolic act of love, by “not using condoms” or because it just “feels good.” Together the findings suggest that these teens confront the discordance between social norms in a manner that puts them at risk for health problems. That is, in balancing dissonant norms that support sexual exploration with different partners, and those governing romantic dating relationships, teens

subject themselves to potential harm. Resolving this dissonance produces for some a sense of hedonistic fatalism.

Discussion

Overview

Many participants were keen observers of the rules of conduct and motivations determining sexual partnering patterns. They also were aware of some of the sexual health risks of sexual concurrency but either misjudged or ignored their risks.

In general, our findings support prior work indicating that sexual concurrency patterns among African American teens are stratified by gender and relationship status; males are more likely to report sexual concurrency, and males and females view close dating relationships as a reason for limiting (or pretending to limit) concurrency (Andrinopoulos et al., 2006; Kelley et al., 2003; Kerrigan et al., 2007; Lenoiretal., 2006).

Norms and Socialization Processes

These findings describe the normative influences on adolescent males and females with regard to sexual concurrency and the transfer of these norms from one generation to the next. Respondents reported receiving socializing messages from adults, including older siblings, about sexual concurrency (Carey et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2001). These messages conveyed that (1) it is less acceptable for females to have multiple sex partners, particularly when in romantic dating relationships and (2) females in violation of this norm may lose social status (see Crawford & Popp, 2003; Kreager & Staff, 2009). Thus, the expected behavior and the sanctions for failure to follow those expectations are communicated from adults to teens.

Normative exceptions may emerge when relationships are in transition to another potential status. Female respondents, for instance, reported concurrency outside dating relationships to be acceptable primarily when the relationship is in discord. Males are socialized to a dissonant set of normative expectations. On the one hand there are normative expectations from adults to be faithful, and on the other hand there is an expectation that adolescence is a time to explore their sexuality. Sex with a variety of partners was seen by some males as an acceptable form of exploration, even while expecting faithfulness from main sexual partners (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Kreager & Staff, 2009).

Some of the participants reported adults in their families who modeled these same expectations and behaviors (Miller et al., 2001). Females are socialized to expect fidelity from boyfriends. However, this socialization does not preclude being acutely aware of the fact that males may not live up to this ideal (Grieb et al., 2011; Towner et al., 2011). Prior work (Kreager & Staff, 2009) shows that adolescent males with large numbers of sexual partners do not lose status among girls. As seen in this study, girlfriends sometimes chose to ignore, deny, or resign themselves to their partner's infidelity, thus allowing the male to retain his status.

As the older generation transfers normative expectations about sexual partnering to the younger generation, these norms are adopted and enforced by the teen's peer groups. Peer groups enforce gender-stratified partnering norms through status hierarchies that reward males with more sexual partners but sanction females who have multiple partners (Coleman, 1961; Crawford & Popp, 2003; Kreager & Staff, 2009). As mentioned previously, partnering norms in romantic dating relationships echo these normative patterns. Some of our male respondents expected their girlfriends to be faithful and took steps to enforce this

expectation, while maintaining a code of silence around their own concurrent sexual activities.

This set of circumstances not only reflects socialization to the double standard (see Anderson, 1992, 1999; Andrinopoulos et al., 2006; Carey et al., 2010; Harper et al., 2004), but may also be construed as placing males in a double bind. That is, some males not only believe it is important, at some level, for close romantic couples to be committed and faithful, but also believe it is important for males to explore sex with other partners. To balance these competing demands, adolescent males, and to some extent females, conceal the truth and accept or are resigned to the reality of this double standard. Competing norms also place females in a potentially stressful approach-avoidance situation. That is, some of the female adolescents in our study attempted to seek out and maintain a close intimate relationship, despite having a great deal of uncertainty about young men's faithfulness (also see Andrinopoulos et al., 2006; Kerrigan et al., 2007). These normative conditions place adolescents in a difficult situation that has long-term consequences for relationships. That is, some adolescent couples are socialized to conceal the truth from each other, practice denial and pretense, and feel suspicious of one another's true motives and behavior.

In terms of sexual health, our findings suggest that teens deal with the discordance between social norms in a manner that places them at risk for health problems. For males, norms governing sexual exploration conflict with norms governing faithfulness and trust in close relationships. The resulting pretense of faithfulness and concealed truths results in poor condom use with main partners that places those partners at risk for STIs and HIV (T. Abraham, Macaudo, Erickson, & Singer, 2011; Bauman & Berman, 2005). For some males, there is an attempt to manage these risks by using condoms with secondary partners. Females, on the other hand, have to confront the conflict between being socialized to seek out close romantic relationships in which trusting one's partner equals not using condoms, while suspecting that their partners are unfaithful. As others have noted, this pattern of findings could result from norms supporting a heterosexual double standard that requires female adolescents to choose between sexual health and being valued by their partner (Crawford & Popp, 2003).

Motivations for Sexual Concurrency

Our norm relevant observations need to be viewed in conjunction with the multiple motivational factors identified as potential antecedents of sexual concurrency. We identified a number of broad motivational themes that are developmental, social, pleasure and emotion focused, and economic in nature.

Social status was identified as a common theme that intertwines with normative expectations for appropriate role behavior. Prior work confirms these findings in showing that adolescent males experience a higher status among their peers with increasing numbers of sexual partners (Coleman, 1961; Kreager & Staff, 2009). Our findings suggest that, not only is there is a clear system of status gain for males associated with having multiple sexual partners, there is also a gain in status associated with supplying others with partners; competitive sexual gaming is an extension of this status system that entails wagering on sexual conquests. Status and gaming elements of adolescent male sexuality have been described previously (Anderson, 1999; Marcell et al., 2003).

Prior work on sexual conduct and status among females is more mixed. Females may experience either a loss or gain in status depending on complex conditions (Kreager & Staff, 2009). For instance, Kreager and Staff (2009) found that having large numbers of sexual partners reduced one's status for females of high socioeconomic status (SES), but there was no relationship between the number of partners and social status for low-SES females. These

results suggest that there may be more complex relationships between social status and sexual behavior among low-SES females. For instance, prior work suggests that youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods may draw upon different reference group norms and sexual scripts that support teen age pregnancy and early intercourse, as well as chastity and delayed pregnancy (Anderson, 1999; Harding, 2007). Our findings support prior work that suggests that social status and sexual conduct are linked for some low-SES adolescent females, although what distinguishes differences in achieved status among females with similar levels of sexual experience is not immediately evident. Other factors, such as physical attractiveness, are associated with social status among adolescent females (Kreager & Staff, 2009) and may moderate the relationship between sexual experience levels and social status.

Developmental motives may also be important factors in sexual concurrency. For instance, prior work suggests that as adolescents experience the transition from childhood to adulthood, they confront conflicting age-relevant norms regarding expectations to initiate intimate love relationships (Ott, 2010), to delay maturity by not rushing into commitments (Marcell et al., 2003), and to explore one's sexuality through seeking variety in sexual partnerships (Moffatt, 1989). These conflicts are apparent for males and females. In essence, social norms encourage young men and women to drink deeply of what life has to offer, while admonishing them to adopt adult role behavior. This places young people who explore their sexuality with a diversity of partners in a position of having to pretend to enact conventional adult role behavior. Unfortunately, this "pretend game" may have serious health and long-term relationship implications. Participants in this study who reported concurrent sexual partners were sometimes aware of the conflicting demands but seemed unable to effect positive changes that would reduce potential health consequences of their behavior.

Another developmental theme concerned the belief that teens have little control over their sexual urges; males and females reported this belief, but this belief was more often expressed by males. There is no scientific basis for the belief that adolescents have uncontrollable sexual urges. Such developmental fallacies, however, reinforce cultural beliefs that teens, particularly males, are biologically driven to have lots of sex partners.

Sexual pleasure and needs for love, affection, and attention (Ott, 2010; Tolman, 2002) have been identified as motivations for adolescent sexual behavior and may also affect sexual concurrency. In addition, pleasure seeking and believing that sex can satisfy emotional needs may also affect sexual exploration. Although sexual pleasure was mentioned by males and females in this study, it more frequently came up among males. Emotional needs as motivators for sexual concurrency were more often attributed to females. These may not, however, be true gender differences in sexual motivations. Both genders have pleasure and emotional needs that are met in their respective sexual encounters (Ozer, Dolcini, & Harper, 2003), whether with main or secondary partners. Differences between males and females in ability to disclose these different types of motivations (Tolman, 2002), however, may carry into adulthood.

Revenge and economic/material gain were also identified as potential motivators of sexual concurrency. Participants' economic constraints is likely one factor that underlies the trading of sex for economic gain and has its own emotional and health risks beyond those attributable to sexual concurrency. Prior work has also identified drug use and childhood sexual abuse as antecedents of participating in the sex in exchange for goods or money (Finkelhor, 1994). Revenge as a motivator is also common in our culture (Frijda, 1994). The interrelated concepts of betrayal and revenge are not well understood in this population segment, nor are their effects on sexual development. How these matters are resolved may have long-term implications for their adult relationships.

Limitations

Participants were obtained from community-based organizations (CBO), some of which sponsor HIV/STI prevention programs. Although not all participants went through these prevention programs (see Dolcini et al., this issue), the process of diffusion might lead anyone passing through the CBO to believe that the socially appropriate thing to say is that one uses condoms and limits sexual partnering. Alternatively, given the propensity of males to laud concurrency and females to be stigmatized for it, it seems possible that some males may have overrepresented and females may have underrepresented their experiences with concurrent sexual partners. That said, our data are similar in general to patterns observed in larger population-based surveys (e.g., males report more sexual concurrency than females). With opportunistic samples, specific figures should not be generalized, although the patterns identified may suggest important directions for future research. Further, as with all studies utilizing retrospective interviews, there may be some recall bias. The aims of this study were relatively broad and did not focus exclusively on sexual concurrency. Nevertheless, there was a rich harvest of information on the topic. A more focused interview might elicit additional themes.

Intervention Implications

Given the multifaceted influences on adolescent sexuality and sexual partnering, it is imperative to consider adolescent sexual behavior (such as sexual concurrency) and risk contextually. By addressing the distinctively gendered developmental and social contexts within which sexual concurrency occurs among adolescents, this study has added insight into the challenges faced by efforts to change sexual partnering patterns. For instance, norms linked to other social and developmental processes may be difficult to change, particularly when norms promoting sexual concurrency are transmitted to males by family members. Moreover, several ineffective strategies for risk management are very entrenched (e.g., assuming virginity; you don't need to use condoms with a main partner if you are using them with secondary partners). Last, the array of motivational forces that may impinge on sexual partnering practices may require complex intervention strategies. For example, modifying the role of sexual partnering in the achievement of social status and helping teens cope with sexual pleasure and emotional needs in healthy ways are complex intervention goals. Providing alternatives to using sex for status attainment may be appealing, but such efforts need to be grounded in a better understanding of the multiple factors influencing status achievement (e.g., violent behavior, attractiveness, athleticism, school performance) among the different segments of African American adolescents in low-income neighborhoods.

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Table 1**Terms Participants Used to Describe their Sexual Partners**

Partner types	Terms for partners
Boyfriends and Girlfriends	baby, boo, boyfriend, boyfriend 1, girl girl, girlfriend, hubby, husband, lover, my main, main chick, main girl, main girlfriend, my girl, my guy, my man, partner, papi, wife, wifey
Casual sex partners and secondary sex partners	bf, beneficial friend, bus, bitch, bop, boyfriend 2, buzz, buzz down, busted, busted baby, bust down, companion, cuddy- buddy, dip, friend with benefits, f***(ing) buddy, ho, honey stain, gutter, gutter bitch, one night stand, other dude, rip, shorty, sex buddy, sideline, side boyfriend, side girlfriend, sideline ho, stain, slut, stunt, whore
Sex for pay	bottom bitch, hooker, pimp, prostitute, trick, sponsor, sugar daddy

Note: Most terms for casual sex partners were terms used by males to describe females (e.g., busted, bus, gutter, bop, etc.). A few terms (e.g., friend with benefits, stunt, sideline) were used to describe both male and female casual sex partners. Very few terms (boyfriend 2, other dude) were used solely to describe male casual sex partners.