

Is More Sex the Cure for Low Self-Esteem?¹

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Self-esteem is a concept that varies among individuals and can be high or low depending on personal experiences. Experiences such as being in college provide opportunities for self-esteem levels to fluctuate. Research shows that males and females in college tend to have the widest range of self-esteem levels which are generally influenced by social aspects. Research also shows that the college students who are more social and involved in extracurricular activities tend to have higher levels of self-esteem. This study attempted to examine similar factors college students have and how it is affecting their self-esteem. One factor male and female college students have in common is sex. Research states that sexual activity is in fact a dominant part of college life. So the present study sought to determine whether sexual activity was related to levels of self-esteem. To this end, 429 college students were given a survey to measure aspects of their personal lives, self-esteem levels, and sexual activity. Analysis showed that there were positive correlations between self-esteem and athleticism, being in a committed relationship, and sexual activity.

Introduction

Self-esteem is an important construct humans develop throughout their life span. It can be assumed that self-esteem is what drives a person to achievement. Self-esteem could be defined as person's self-concept, or overall idea of their self-worth. Self-esteem could also be described as a unique characteristic that varies among all individuals. People naturally have different personality qualities that can be derived from their overall levels of self-esteem. It can be based on accomplishments, attractiveness, confidence, personality and other qualities a person has although it is not always a reflection of the person's self-worth (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). It can be assumed that a person's own experiences are what influences self-esteem. A person's perception of success and failure can also help define self-esteem (Molden & Dweck, 2006). By simple observation of college students, Molden and Dweck (2006) determined this information by examining the self-esteem levels of students throughout their daily interactions and experiences. The researchers determined college students have a wide range of self-esteem levels, perhaps due to their unique lifestyles and social interactions. Similar to Molden and Dweck's study (2006), the present study will attempt to examine the self-esteem levels of more specific sub-groups of college students.

The transition between high school and college is a prominent example of an opportunity for students to define their own perception of self-esteem. This timeframe in a person's life can potentially be one of the most influential periods that can determine how one portrays themselves. Factors including the beginning of one's college career, striving for good grades, finding a part-time job and especially meeting new people can have great effects on one's sense of self-worth; whether that sense is positive or negative (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger and Vohs, 2003). Sharon Jayson of USA Today (2011) agrees that college students tend to have a rather exclusive lifestyle. In fact, she states one of the dominant parts of college life is sexual activity. A person's experience with sexual activity can be a huge factor associated with self-esteem. An intimate experience such as this can determine whether a person has low or high levels of self-esteem or confidence. It is possible that sexual activity has a more dramatic effect on a person's self-esteem, compared to other social activities.

Sexual activity is an important factor in sexual development, which also can affect future decision making (Fantasia, 2009). Fantasia (2009) determined this when she asked late adolescents to tell stories of what impacted their decision to become sexually active, and how that choice influenced other decisions at that time in their life.

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She discovered that as students are making the transition into the adult world, they find several ways to relieve stress and form relationships. This transition is also an opportunity to experiment with one's sexual interests. Individuals have the ability to view sexual activity as a romantic experience or a casual encounter. Sexual activity, especially sexual intercourse can be an intimate interaction with another person. It has the potential to enhance a friendly relationship or ruin a romantic one. It also has the potential to increase a person's positive or negative view of themselves, depending on the outcome of an encounter. The intimacy of sex provides a chance to explore one's own body as well as another person's. Depending on the individual's own thoughts and feelings, sex can be an opportunity to boost one's self-esteem. For example, women tend to feel more confident if a man suggests having sexual intercourse with her. It gives a woman a sense of self-esteem and beauty (Fantasia, 2009). Levels of self-esteem can also have an effect of the frequency of sex (Small & Luster, 2004). Adolescents with low levels of self-esteem seem to be engaging in more frequent sexual activity. In contrast, adults with high levels of self-esteem seem to be the ones engaging more frequently in sexual activity (Small & Luster, 2004). The present study will attempt to examine the self-esteem levels and sexual activity of college students, who fall in between adolescents and adults.

As previously stated, Jayson (2011) believes sex is a main aspect during the college years. The decision for college students to have sexual interactions with another person is based on personal values and beliefs. While there are different reasons for sexual activity, it is possible for individuals to experience personal feelings of attachment or remorse. Some individuals engage in sexual activity to show love for their partner, others do it in order to gain respect from peers (Small & Luster, 2004). One possible effect of sexual intercourse is a change in self-esteem. A recent study examined the relationship between married women's esteem during sexual activity and their overall self-esteem (Heinrichs, Macknee, Auton-Cuff and Domene, 2009). Heinrichs et al. (2009) explored what factors facilitate or hinder married women's sexual self-esteem. After conducting several interviews among women in

long-term heterosexual relationships, the researchers concluded that women who experience more instances in which their overall self-esteem is boosted, such as appearance compliments, their sexual self-esteem was also increased. Compliments, attention and respect are some of the aspects that facilitate a married woman's sexual self-esteem (Heinrichs et al., 2009). After giving women a number of surveys describing different situations, Heinrichs et. al (2009) discovered that instances involving disrespect, pressure and abuse caused a lower sense of self-confidence and sexual self-esteem.

While Heinrichs et al. (2009) studied the relationship between married women's sexual self-esteem and overall self-esteem they did not look at the factors relating to people who are not in a relationship. According to Hill (2002), some individuals are more likely to be interested in casual sex, rather than being in a sexual relationship with a committed partner. This alone suggests a possible difference between individuals engaging in casual sex versus individuals involved in a relationship. Casual sex is a broad term referring to sexual activity that is done outside of a romantic relationship (Grello, Welsh & Harper, 2006). This type of sex can be with a close friend, acquaintance or stranger. As with all unique characteristics humans possess, it is possible that the emotional effects of casual sex can differ among males and females. Hill (2009) conducted a study in which college students read several hypothetical scenarios involving sexual activity and the partners' behaviors. They were asked to then give their interpretation of the scenarios and discuss their overall feelings. Males who engaged in casual sex reported the fewest symptoms of depression, and females with a history of casual sex reported the most symptoms of depression (Hill, 2002). This research also suggests male college students tend to have more casual sex partners than females (Hill, 2002). According to the information collected in the previous study, many males also have sex in order to increase their sexual experience, peer status and popularity (Hill, 2002). For females, however, emotional investment is far more important, and sexual intercourse is often rewarding in contexts that command intimacy and emotional commitment (Impett & Peplau, 2003). The findings of Hill

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(2002) and Impett and Peplau (2003) suggests that single females engaging in casual sex experience symptoms that potentially decrease self-esteem, while the self-esteem of males seems to be increased.

In addition, Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger and Vohs (2003) took a similar research approach by using a survey to determine the relationship between overall feelings and self-esteem. However, they looked at the correlation between self-esteem and overall happiness, instead of self-esteem and depressive symptoms. Most of their research was based on success and accomplishments in school, work and social interactions due to high self-esteem. The findings of Heinrichs et al. (2009), Hill (2002) and Baumeister et al. (2003) suggests that high self-esteem in adolescents increases the chance of early sexual experimentation, due to their increase in confidence. Baumeister et al. (2003) also determined that adolescent females with high self-esteem are less likely to have bulimia, than those with low self-esteem.

Similar to the research of Baumeister et. al (2003), McClure, Tanski, Kingsburry, Gerrard and Sargent (2010) also studied the relationship between self-esteem and adolescents by conducting a phone survey of 6822 participants. While they did not look at the relationship between self-esteem and sexual activity, they did study the factors associated with low-self-esteem in adolescents. Low-self-esteem in adolescents is associated with obesity, TV time, team sports participation and parenting styles (McClure et. al., 2010). In general, the less social a child is and the stricter their parents are, the more likely they are to experience lower levels of self-esteem. Children with low self-esteem are less likely to form relationships or have close social interactions. According to the survey questions related to self-worth, children seemed to be more susceptible to depression, suicidal thoughts and anxiety during the transition to adulthood (McClure et al., 2010).

Other researchers focusing on adolescence agree that having low levels of self-esteem during adolescent years will potentially cause negative effects on the individual during adulthood (Orth, Robins & Roberts, 2008). They used models, such as the Vulnerability Model and the Scar Model to

help explain in detail the effects low self-esteem have on adolescents and young adults. The Vulnerability Model states that low self-esteem is a risk factor for future depression (Orth, Robins & Roberts, 2008). In contrast, the Scar Model states that low self-esteem, like other correlates of depression, might be a consequence of depression rather than a simple factor causing it. Both of the models suggest adult depression is a common correlate of low-self-esteem during adolescence. Each model was tested using repeated assessments between individuals of 15-21 years old and 18-21 years old. The Vulnerability Model was more accurate than the Scar Model. It showed that low self-esteem predicted subsequent levels of depression, but depression did not predict subsequent levels of self-esteem (Orth et al., 2008).

Based on the research describing relationships between sexually active married women, and self-esteem (Fantasia, 2009), casual sex partners and self-esteem (Grello et al., 2006) and adolescents and self-esteem (McClure et al., 2010), the hypothesis of this study is that there is a relationship between the sexual activity of college students and their self-esteem. Specifically, participants of the study are expected to show higher self-esteem with more frequent sexual activity. Sexually active males, athletes, seniors and those that are single are also expected to show higher self-esteem than females, non-athletes, freshman and those in a relationship. This hypothesis is mainly based on the finding of researchers such as Heinrichs et. al (2009) and Baumeister et. al (2003) who studied the relationship between overall happiness, sexual self-esteem and general self-esteem. This study will examine college students, who fall in between the category of adolescents and married couples.

Method

Participants

In the present study, a convenience sample of 429 college students (188 men, 229 women) ranging from age 18 to 53, from strategically selected college classes were asked to participate in a survey. Classes were chosen in advanced in order to obtain variables such as athletes, freshman and seniors. All students were given the option to participate in the anonymous survey.

Design

A correlational design was used in the present study. Each student participated in the same survey and was compared among each other. The dependent variable is the survey which was the same for all participants. The independent variable will be the males and females, freshman and seniors, athletes and non-athletes and people who are single and people in a relationship.

Materials

A survey consisting of 26 Likert Scale statements, 2 “yes or no” questions and 7 “fill in the blank” questions about sexual activity and self-esteem was constructed. The survey also included personal and educational information.

Procedure

Over the course of one month, the survey was presented in each of the previously selected classes one time. Before the students were asked to participate, they were given a brief preview of the material included on the survey and asked to answer all questions truthfully. They were also asked to refrain from putting their name on the survey. The students were given as much time as they needed to complete the survey. On average, however, students were finished the survey in approximately ten minutes.

Results

A correlation was conducted to determine the relationship between sexual activity and self-esteem among college students. Specifically, the study examined self-esteem and sexual activity among college males and females, athletes and non-athletes, freshman and seniors and people who are single and those in a committed relationship. However, the research only found significant positive correlations ($p < .05$) between self-esteem and athleticism, $r(417) = .155$; self-esteem and relationship commitment, $r(417) = .275$; and self-esteem and sexual activity, $r(417) = .142$.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to determine if sexually active college students have higher-levels of self-esteem versus non-sexually active college students. To break it down even further, previous research suggested the possibility that sexually

active college males, athletes, seniors and those who are single will also show higher levels of self-esteem.

The present study confirmed the hypothesis that there is a relationship between the sexual activity of college students and their self-esteem. However, the research found only positive correlation between self-esteem and athleticism, being in a committed relationship, and sexual activity. This means that generally, college athletes, people in a committed relationship and those who are sexually active are showing higher levels of self-esteem.

According to Jayson of (2011), sex is a dominant part of college life. This is from where the hypothesis from the present study derived. Her research says that “casual sex” is prevalent among single college students, especially males. Research from Hill (2002) agrees with Jayson’s in that males tend to have more “casual” sexual encounters and also tend to show higher levels of self-esteem than females engaging in casual sex. Similarly, Heinrichs et al.’s (2009) research found that women in a committed relationship have more self-esteem with more sexual activity. Therefore the present study explored the probability of gender and relationship status as being a factor that relates to self-esteem levels.

Research from Small and Luster (2004) states that adolescents who are sexually active tend to have low levels of self-esteem and adults who are sexually active tend to have high levels of self-esteem. There was no research indicating any specific studies done to determine a correlation between college students, self-esteem and sexual activity. The present study attempted to incorporate college students, who fall between the category of adolescents and adults.

Because the present study did find a correlation between self-esteem and the sexual activity of college students, it is recommended that further research look at more specific details that could be affecting self-esteem other than gender, athleticism, relationship status and year in school. The present study did not attempt to examine current self-esteem levels and most recent sexual activity. Future research could also examine more details about self-esteem and sexual activity during the past week instead of in general. It is possible

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that due to the nature of the survey, and the maturity level of the participants, some of the data may not be accurate. While collecting data for the previous study, several students refused to take the survey after seeing the questions. They expressed fear of their peers seeing their answers. Future research might include giving the surveys individually or anonymously online, to avoid pressure or influence from peers.

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