Testing a Theoretical Model of Adolescent Sexual Behavior Among Rural Families in Poverty

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ABSTRACT: This was a study of 357 adolescents, aged 13 to 17 years, who resided in a family receiving AFDC in 10 rural counties in Arkansas. The study had a twofold purpose: 1) to examine what elements of social control, social learning, and strain theories predicted 3 measures of sexual behavior; and 2) to test an integrated theoretical model with 2-stage least squares regression to see if it fit the data on the 3 measures of sex. The measures of sexual behavior were frequency of sexual intercourse in the past year, number of sexual partners in the past year, and number of sexual partners in lifetime. Bivariate analyses revealed that the consistent predictors of the 3 measures of sex were age, gender, attachment to mother, beliefs, parental supervision and punishment, family and friend support, frustration, and use of rationalizations. The theoretical model that fit all measures of sex showed that bonding influences sexual behavior through frustration, and that age, gender and rationalizations directly impact behavior.

Introduction

Adolescent pregnancy has become a major health and welfare problem in the United States (National Association for Welfare Research and Statistics, 1996): For example, three out of four adolescent mothers receive financial assistance from the government before their child enters kindergarten (Nord, Moore, Morrison, Brown, and Myers 1992). In fact, an analysis of welfare spending reveals that about half of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) is paid to mothers who have given birth before the age of 20 years (National...
Association for Welfare Research and Statistics, 1996). Adolescent parents are not only major recipients of welfare, they also are at risk of increased morbidity and mortality and decreased educational and employment opportunities (Hamburg 1986). Only half of adolescent mothers complete high school, and few attend college, compared to youth who delay childbearing (Black and DeBlassie 1985). Lack of education leads to few job opportunities, usually resulting in low wages and little job satisfaction.

Recent national surveys indicate that about 70 percent of females and 72 percent of males are sexually active by 18 years of age (Alan Guttmacher Institute 1995). Whereas adolescents are engaging in sexual intercourse at younger ages with the passage of each decade, research indicates that age is still the strongest, or among the strongest, predictor(s) of frequency of sexual intercourse. Yet, older adolescents are less likely to have unprotected sex acts than younger ones (Newcomer and Baldwin 1992). Hence, youth who begin having sexual intercourse by 15 years of age are twice as likely to become pregnant in the first six months of sexual activity as those who postpone sex until 18 years of age or older (Zabin, Kantner and Zelnik 1979).

Research also indicates that race and socioeconomic status are strong predictors of certain sexual behaviors (Hayes 1987). Racial differences are intertwined with socioeconomic factors. Studies of lower socioeconomic groups reveal that they tend to be less knowledgeable about sexuality and less likely to use contraception, and more likely to have an early onset of intercourse and to give birth than more affluent youth (Banks and Wilson 1989; Newcomer and Baldwin 1992; Pittman, Wilson, Adams-Taylor and Randolph 1992). Other important predictors of adolescent sexual intercourse include living in single-parent families (Benda and DiBlasio 1994; Forste and Heaton 1988; Udry and Billy 1987), large size of family (Hayes 1987; Mosher and Bachrach 1996), parental undereducation (Handler 1990; Mosher and McNally 1991), lack of or too much parental strictness (Miller, McCoy, Olson, and Wallace 1986), little parental supervision and punishment (Benda and DiBlasio 1994), lack of attachment to parents (Miller and Fox 1987; Strouse and Fabes, 1987), less commitment to and beliefs in conventional norms and achievement (DeLamater and MacCorquodale 1979; Jessor and Jessor 1977), low religiosity (Bingham, Miller, and Adams 1990; Forste and Heaton 1988; Plotnick, 1992; Jessor and Jessor 1977), lack of familial and other social support networks (Crockett, Bingham, Chopak and Vis- cary, 1996; Hayes 1987), locus of control and self-esteem (Lefcourt 1976; Miller, Christensen, and Olson 1987; Newcomb, Huba, and