

# Self-Esteem and Adolescent Sexual Behavior Among Students at an Elite Bolivian School

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## Abstract

*The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between self-esteem and the sexual behavior and intended sexual behavior of adolescents in Bolivia. Students (n = 189) completed a questionnaire designed to elicit information regarding self-esteem, sexual behavior and intended sexual behavior. Results indicated higher home self-esteem for those evidencing greater sexual conservativeness relative to virgin status and sexual situation. Peer self-esteem was higher for those intending to have sexual intercourse before marriage. School self-esteem was higher for those reporting participation in sexual intercourse in the last month. Significant variable x gender x grade interactions were noted for both school and home self-esteem relative to intent to have intercourse before marriage. Significant variable x gender, variable x grade, and variable x gender x grade interactions were noted for home self-esteem and sexual situation. Results highlight the role of the home, school, and peer group in influencing adolescent sexual behavior.*

## Introduction

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between self-esteem and both the sexual behavior and intended sexual behavior of adolescents attending an elite Bolivian school. Educational programs designed to prevent teen pregnancy and postpone sexual involvement often seek to enhance self-esteem as a means of assisting young people to make wise decisions regarding their sexuality. In spite of the seemingly widespread notion that self-esteem plays a role in sexual decision making, relatively few researchers have addressed this issue. Apparently no researchers have studied self-esteem and sexual behavior among Bolivian youth. This study was undertaken as part of a partnership program to assist a Bolivian school in the development of a school health education program.

The literature indicates that at least some aspects of self-esteem are related to early sexual involvement. It is not known, however, if this relationship exists for all aspects of self-esteem. In addition, it is unknown whether self-esteem correlates with differing sexual behavior patterns across a range of ages, cultures, and subpopulations.

### *Self-Esteem: Definition and Measurement*

Among the studies reviewed, there was no consensus as to the conceptualization and operational definition of self-esteem. In fact, few researchers who have examined the relationship between self-esteem and sexual behavior have offered a concrete operational definition for self-esteem. Wells (1976) analyzed the situation, relative to defining self-esteem, as follows: "Because both writers and readers have some intuitive common sense idea of what self-esteem is and what it does, it often seems unnecessary to spell out its nature

and the process by which it operates. Such an oversight can be fairly serious."

Most researchers investigating the relationship of self-esteem and adolescent behavior relative to such activities as sexual activity and drug use have used a generalized, or global self-esteem scale to determine participants' self-esteem (Cole & Slocumb, 1995, Hally & Pollack, 1993, Hollar & Snizek, 1996, Orr et al., 1989, Perlman, 1974, Robinson & Frank, 1994, Stratton & Spitzer, 1967, Walsh, 1991). A few researchers have employed area specific self-esteem scales (Emery, E. M., McDermott, R. J., Holcomb, D. R., and Marty, P. J., 1993; Young, 1989, Young & Werch, 1990. Young, Werch, & Bakema, D., 1989) which measure self-esteem in different aspects of the participants' lives. For the purpose of this study, self-esteem was defined as one's self-evaluation within the context of three specific areas of experience - peers, family and school. *Findings Relative to Self-Esteem and Sexual Behavior*

*Findings Relative To College Students.* In the 1960s Stratton and Spitzer (1967) found that their sexually permissive subjects displayed lower self-esteem, as measured by the Rosenberg self-esteem scale, than those subjects who did not hold sexually permissive attitudes. These authors explained their results by indicating that the lower self-esteem existed among those that were sexually permissive because this attitude was a departure from acceptable societal standards.

In contrast, in a more permissive time, Perlman (1974), also using Rosenberg's scale, found that high self-esteem subjects reported more coital partners than did low self-esteem subjects. This work was supportive of the notion that the relationship between self-esteem and sexual behavior is dependent on the cultural context. MacCorquodale and DeLamater (1979), however, found no significant differences between high

and low self-esteem subjects on the number of coital partners for either male or females. Stimson, Stimson and Dougherty (1980) found that self-esteem, relative to sexual decision making, impacts differently on males and females.

More recently, Walsh (1991) found that high self-esteem males and females, as measured by Rosenberg's scale, had a significantly greater number of sexual partners than their low self-esteem subjects. Self-esteem levels did not differ between female virgins and non-virgins. There was a difference, however, in self-esteem between male virgins and non-virgins, with non-virgins exhibiting greater self-esteem. Vicenzi and Theil (1992) found a nonsignificant relationship between self-esteem and safer sex practices in a small sample (n=49) of college students, while Hally and Pollack (1993) found that college students with a wide variety of sexual experiences scored lower on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale than students with a narrow range of sexual experience. Rosenthal, Moore and Flynn (1991), however, studied a larger group of college students (n=1,788) and found that for both males and females higher risk behaviors were practiced by those with higher levels of self esteem.

Cole and Slocumb (1995), in their study of college males, also found that those with high self-esteem, as measured by the Rosenberg scale, were more likely to practice risky sexual behaviors. Hollar and Snizek (1996), using the Rosenberg self-esteem scale, found that in their sample of college students, both males and females with high self-esteem were found to be significantly more likely to engage in, what they termed, risky forms of conventional sexual behavior. Additionally, those students with high levels of sexual knowledge and high self-esteem were the most likely to engage in risky sexual behavior. In examining the role of self-esteem and participation in risky non conventional behavior, the researchers found that students with low levels of self-esteem were more likely to engage in the behavior than students with high self esteem.

### *Findings Relative To High School Students.*

Miller Christensen and Olson (1987) used the Rosenberg self-esteem scale to examine the relationship of self-esteem and sexual attitudes and behavior among 2,423 high school students attending public high schools in Utah, New Mexico and California. These researchers found that in the total sample, self-esteem was negatively correlated with sexual attitudes and behavior. This was also true among those adolescents who were in conservative groups. Robinson and Frank

(1994) investigated the relationship of self-esteem and sexual activity among a sample of adolescents attending two university-affiliated high schools. They found no significant difference in self-esteem, as measured by the Coopersmith self-esteem scale, between sexually active males and nonsexually active males. Similarly, they found no difference in self-esteem scores between sexually active females and nonsexually active females. The terms "sexually active" and "nonsexually active" were not defined. The researchers also compared the self-esteem scores of virgins and nonvirgins. They found no differences in self-esteem between virgins and nonvirgins, for males or for females.

### *Findings Relative To Junior High Students*

In their study of junior high students from blue collar homes, Orr and his co-workers (1989) found no overall statistical difference in self-esteem of sexually experienced and virginal adolescents. They did, however find that the self-esteem of sexually active girls was significantly lower than that of virginal girls (perhaps reflecting the continued existence of the double standard). In the same year, Young (1989) found that among early adolescents, ages 13-15, virgins displayed higher school self-esteem than non-virgins. Virgins, and non-virgins who had not had sex in the last month, displayed higher levels of school self-esteem, when compared to non-virgins who indicated they had participated in sexual intercourse at least one time in the last month. Home self-esteem and peer self-esteem were not related to participation in sexual intercourse ever or participation in sexual intercourse in the last month.

Benson and Torpy (1995) examined the relationship of self-esteem, and other variables, in self-reported virginity among junior high students (grades 6-8) in Chicago. They found that when considered in the context of a logistical regression analysis, self-esteem was not associated with age at first sexual intercourse.

Based on the above studies, it does not appear that there is conclusive evidence to say that self-esteem is or is not related to sexual behavior. Definitions and measurement of self-esteem (and sexual behavior) have not been consistent from one study to the next. Findings may depend on the aspects of self-esteem under consideration and the group studied. In this study, we utilized an area specific (rather than global) measure of self-esteem. We believed that in doing so we could demonstrate that area specific self-esteem is related to measures of sexual behavior and behavioral intent. We hypothesized that school and home self-esteem would

be higher for adolescents who had not engaged in sexual intercourse ever, for those who had not engaged in sexual intercourse in the last month, for those who indicated a more conservative sexual situation, for virgins who were pleased with their sexual status, and for those who indicated that they did not intend to engage in sexual intercourse before marriage. We also hypothesized that peer self-esteem would be higher for adolescents who had engaged in sexual intercourse, who had done so in the last month, for those who indicated a less conservative sexual situation and for those who indicated an intention to engage in sexual intercourse.

### Method

#### *Background*

For a number of years the College of Education and Health Professions at the University of Arkansas has maintained a relationship with the school at which this study was conducted. Each year at least one faculty member from the College travels to Bolivia to teach a graduate course. Faculty from this school make up a substantial percentage of the students in these courses. In the last two years the College has also established a student internship, with graduate students in Community Health and Kinesiology working with school officials to develop a comprehensive school health education program and a school based physical fitness program. This study was part of the effort to help the school develop a comprehensive school health education program.

#### *Subjects*

Subjects for the study were students in grades 8-12 ( $n = 189$ ) attending an elite school in La Paz, Bolivia. One third of the students were children of Americans living in Bolivia. One half of the students were children of Bolivian parents. The remaining students were children whose parents were from other countries, but were living in Bolivia. Parents' income and education far exceeded that of the average Bolivian.

#### *Testing Instrument*

The testing instrument was a questionnaire that included items designed to elicit information regarding self-esteem, as well as sexual knowledge, attitudes, behavior and intended behavior. Self-esteem was measured using Kelley's short version of the Hare Self-Esteem Scale (Kelley, Denny & Young, 1997). The Hare Self-Esteem Scale (Shoemaker, 1980) is a 30 item scale that includes 10 item subscales for the areas of peer, school and home. Kelley's short form reduces the Hare scale to 18 items, six items in each of the three

subscales, while maintaining the integrity of the original scale. Reliabilities (coefficient alpha) for the sample were Home = .60, Peer = .77, School = .73. Sample items are:(Peer) I have at least as many friends as other people my age. People my age often pick on me. (Home) My parents are proud of the kind of person I am. My parents believe that I will be a success in the future. (School) I am usually proud of my report card. My teachers are usually happy with the kind of work I do. Items are scored on a four point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Some items on each subscale are worded in a manner that requires "reverse scoring". For each subscale the six item scores were summed to provide subscale totals.

Shoemaker's (1980) work with Hare's scale provided empirical support for area specific self-esteem as a valid construct. Other investigations of students in this age group have also used the Hare scale (Emery, McDermott, Holcomb & Marty, 1993, Young & Werch, 1990, Young, Werch & Bakema, 1989). Kelley's work, which details the psychometric properties of the shortened version of the scale, is described elsewhere (Kelley, Denny & Young, 1997).

Items from the questionnaire specifically related to sexual behavior that were included in this study were:

(1) Have you ever participated in sexual intercourse? (Sexual intercourse means the male's penis is in the female's vagina). Possible answers were "yes" and "no". Students responding "yes" were classified as "nonvirgins". Students responding "no" were classified as "virgins".

(2) Have you participated in sexual intercourse in the last month?

Possible answers were "yes" and "no"

(3) What is your current sexual situation?

Possible answers were "I have not had sexual intercourse, and choose not to at this time in my life" (Virgin by choice); "I have not had sexual intercourse, but am ready to change that status" (Virgin, not by choice), "I have had sexual intercourse before, but choose not to at this time in my life" (Nonvirgin, now choosing abstinence); "I have sexual intercourse, but not on a regular basis" (Has sex, not on regular basis); "I have sexual intercourse on a regular basis" (Has sex on a regular basis). Regular was defined as at least once per month.

(4) How do you feel about your current sexual status? Possible answers were: "I have not had

sexual intercourse, and am pleased with that status" (Virgin, pleased); "I have not had sexual intercourse and am displeased with that status" (Virgin, not pleased), "I have had sexual intercourse and am pleased with that status" (Nonvirgin, pleased), "I have had sexual intercourse and am displeased with that status (Nonvirgin, not pleased)."

(5) What do you believe are the chances that you will have sexual intercourse (or have sexual intercourse again) before you are married? Possible answers were: "Definitely not", "Probably not", "50/50 chance", "Probably", "Definitely".

#### *Procedure*

Students voluntarily, and with written parental permission, completed the questionnaire in a regular classroom setting. Complete data were collected from 189 students, for a 90 percent response rate. Data were analyzed using three way (behavior x gender x grade level) analysis of variance to examine differences in self-esteem scores by pattern of sexual behavior.

#### **Results**

Responses were obtained from 189 students. This included 98 students in grades eight or nine (junior high) and 91 students in grades ten through twelve (high school). There were 82 males and 102 females.

Mean self-esteem scores by behavior and behavioral intent are shown in Table 1. There were differences ( $F=3.68$   $p=.05$ ) between virgins ( $n=44$ ) and non-virgins ( $n=136$ ) relative to: Home Self-Esteem (virgins indicated higher Home Self-Esteem). There were also differences in Home Self-Esteem by sexual situation ( $F=3.90$   $p=.01$ ). Virgins who indicated that virginity was their choice, scored the highest on Home Self-Esteem. There were also significant interactions relative to sexual situation and Home Self-Esteem: variable x gender (males who reported regular sexual intercourse had the highest Home Self-Esteem, females who reported having sexual intercourse infrequently had the lowest Home Self-Esteem scores); variable x grade level (junior high students who reported regular sexual intercourse had the highest Home Self-Esteem, with junior high students who reported having sexual intercourse infrequently, scoring the lowest on Home Self-Esteem); variable x gender x grade level (junior high males who were non-virgins choosing not to have sex had the highest Home Self-Esteem and junior high girls who were non-virgins choosing not to have sex had the lowest).

There were also differences in School Self-Esteem by participation in sexual intercourse in the last month ( $F=3.84$   $p=.05$ ). Participants had the highest School Self-Esteem. There were significant differences ( $F=2.41$   $p=.05$ ) in Peer Self-Esteem scores by intent to have sex. Those who indicated that they definitely would have sex before marriage scored the highest on peer self-esteem. Significant variable x gender x grade level interactions were noted for both School and Home Self-Esteem relative to intent to have intercourse before marriage. High school males who said they definitely would not have sex before marriage had the highest School and Home Self-Esteem. High school males who estimated that there was a 50/50 chance that they would have sex before marriage had the lowest School and Home Self-Esteem. See Table 2. Thus, the study hypotheses were only partially supported.

#### **Discussion**

In this study we determined there was a difference in area specific self-esteem scores by selected sexual behavior and behavioral intent items among a sample of students attending an elite Bolivian school. We found differences in Home Self-Esteem by: whether the students had participated in sexual intercourse and their current sexual situation, with higher home self-esteem among virgins and those who were virgins by choice. A significant variable x gender x grade interaction was noted for Home Self-Esteem and intent to have sexual intercourse before marriage. Significant variable x gender, variable x grade, and variable x gender x grade interactions were noted for Home Self-Esteem and sexual situations. Those who indicated a definite intent to have sexual intercourse before they were married scored the highest on Peer Self-Esteem. Participation in sexual intercourse in the last month was related to School Self-Esteem. School self-esteem scores were higher for those who had participated in sexual intercourse in the last month.

Other investigators have studied college students (Cole & Marcus, 1995, Cole & Slocumb, 1995, Hally & Pollack, 1993, Hollar & Snizek, 1996, MacCorquodale & DeLamater 1979, Perlman, 1974, Stratton & Spitzer, 1967, Vicenzi & Theil 1992, Walsh, 1991), and/or used different measures of sexual behavior than we have used in this investigation (Benson & Torpy (1995). Thus, their results are not directly comparable to our findings. Nevertheless, it can be said that among these studies no conclusive evidence was provided as to the relationship of self-esteem and sexual behavior.

Table 1. Mean Score For Self-Esteem Scores By Sexual Behavior Variables<sup>a</sup>

Ever Had Sexual Intercourse			Peer	Home	School
No	Mean		16.23	15.98	13.8
	n		135	134	132
	S.D.		2.12	2.46	1.55
Yes	Mean		16.67	14.76	13.81
	n		42	44	42
	S.D.		2.06	2.99	1.4
Intercourse In Last Month			Peer	Home	School
No	Mean		16.29	15.6	13.61
	n		159	157	153
	S.D.		2.09	2.67	1.56
Yes	Mean		16.82	15.87	14.45
	n		22	23	23
	SD		2.28	2.4	1.16
Sexual Situation					
Virgin by Choice			Peer	Home	School
	Mean		16.12	15.99	13.58
	n		102	102	99
	SD		2.15	2.34	1.56
Virgin not by Choice			Peer	Home	School
	Mean		16.58	15.51	13.91
	n		38	35	34
	SD		1.97	2.69	1.5
Nonvirgin, Now Choosing Abstinence			Peer	Home	School
	Mean		16.14	15.29	13.71
	n		14	14	14
	SD		1.56	3.47	1.86
Has Sex, Not On Regular Basis			Peer	Home	School
	Mean		16.89	14.7	13.9
	n		18	20	20
	SD		2.22	3.18	1.21
Has Sex On Regular Basis			Peer	Home	School
	Mean		17.22	2.73	1.3
	n		9	9	9
	SD		2.73	2.4	1.3

**Table 1. Mean Score For Self-Esteem Scores By Sexual Behavior Variables (con't)**

Feelings About Sexual Status		Peer	Home	School
Virgin, Pleased	Mean	16.36	15.98	13.66
	n	121	120	116
	SD	2.16	2.32	1.57
Virgin, Not Pleased	Mean	15.85	14.91	13.62
	n	13	13	13
	SD	2.34	3.96	1.66
Non-Virgin Pleased	Mean	17.19	15.41	14.4
	n	26	27	25
	SD	2	2.44	0.96
Non-Virgin, Not Pleased	Mean	16	14.17	13.42
	n	11	12	12
	SD	1.18	3.95	1.78

"Each of the three scales consists of six items, with each item scored on a one to five point scale. The mean scores reported here are based on the sum of the six scale items.

Among those researchers that studied non-pregnant adolescents, Miller, Christensen, and Olson (1987) did find self-esteem to be negatively correlated with ever participating in "full sexual relations (sexual intercourse)." The correlation, while statistically significant, was, however, only -.037. Orr and his co-workers (1989) found no overall difference in self-esteem between virgin and nonvirgin junior high students. They did, however, find that the self-esteem of sexually active girls was significantly lower than that of virginal girls. Robinson and Frank (1994) in their study of high school students, found no differences in self-esteem between virgins and nonvirgins, for males or for females. In each of these three studies a global measure of self-esteem, rather than an area specific measure was used.

In using an area specific measure of self-esteem in an earlier investigation, involving early adolescents, the first author of the present study, Young (1989) found a difference in School Self-Esteem (but not Home or Peer Self-Esteem) in both sexual intercourse ever and in recent sexual intercourse. Using an abbreviated version of the same testing instrument, and a larger sample, that included both junior high and high school

students, Young and Denny (1999) found both home and school self-esteem to have a positive effect on sexual behaviors and behavioral intent, but found high peer self-esteem to be linked to increased sexual involvement.

In this study, we were surprised to find school self-esteem to be higher among those who reported participating in sexual intercourse in the last month. These findings may be due to the fact that we were dealing with an elite school with a high overall degree of student competence. Results may have been different had we surveyed public school students. The results also question the conventional wisdom that indicates that good students are less apt to engage in potentially problem behaviors.

Home self-esteem was found to be related to sexual conservativeness, when only behavior main effects were considered. Interaction effects, however, gave a little different picture. Males who reported regularly engaging in sexual intercourse, junior high students who reported regularly engaging in sexual intercourse, high school males who said they definitely would not have sex before marriage, and junior high males who

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Table 2. Results of Analysis of Variance– Self-Esteem by Sexual Behavior

Variables <sup>a</sup>	Variable	F Value	Prob.
Ever Have Sexual Intercourse	Home	3.68	0.05
	Peer .	2.13	0.14
	School	0.01	0.92
Had Sexual Intercourse In Last Month	Home	0.22	0.63
	Peer	2.2	0.13
	School	3.84	0.05
Chance Sexual Intercourse Before Marriage	Home	1.08	0.36
	Variable x Gender x Grade	2.39	0.05
	Peer	2.41	0.05 <sup>b</sup>
	School	1.24	0.29
	Variable x Gender x Grade	2.49	0.04
Sexual Situation	Home	3.9	0.00 <sup>c</sup>
	Variable x Gender	2.79	0.02
	Variable x Grade	3.02	0.01
	Variable x Gender x Grade	2.85	0.03
	Peer	0.96	0.43
	School	0.41	0.80
Feelings About Sexual Status	Home	2.28	0.08
	Peer	1.38	0.25
	School	1.72	0.16

<sup>a</sup>The only interactions shown are those that were statistically significant (P<.05).

<sup>b</sup>Tukey's Studentized Range Test revealed post hoc differences in peer self-esteem for the variable "Intent to have sexual intercourse before marriage" between: (1) those responding "definitely yes" and those responding "probably no" and (2) those responding "probably yes" and those responding "probably no".

<sup>c</sup>Tukey's Studentized Range Test revealed post hoc differences in home self-esteem for the variable "Sexual situation" between those who were "Virgins by choice" and those who "Have sexual intercourse, but not on a regular basis".

were nonvirgins choosing not to have sex reported the highest levels of Home Self-Esteem. Females who reported having sex infrequently, junior high students who reported having intercourse infrequently, high school males who estimated that their was a 50/50 chance they would have sex before marriage, and junior high girls who were non-virgins choosing not to have sex had the lowest levels of Home Self-Esteem. These results seem to suggest that commitment to a behavior - either sex or abstinence, is associated with higher Home Self-Esteem. The lower self-esteem scores may be reflective of a lack of commitment to a behavior, inability to follow through on a commitment, and/or the reinforcement by the home of a sexual double standard. While it is difficult to generalize the results of this study to larger populations and other cultures, within this group, our results highlight the role of the home relative to adolescent sexual behavior. The finding that peer self-esteem was higher for those indicating a definite intent to participate in sexual intercourse prior to marriage seems to indicate, that for many young people within this cultural group, sexual experience may be viewed as a means of being accepted by peers. The results also suggest that efforts to help young people postpone sexual involvement should place emphasis on parental involvement (with parents emphasizing clear standards) and ability to resist peer pressure. Finally, we believe that our results confirm that an area specific measure of self-esteem may have advantages over global measures in studying the relationship of self-esteem and adolescent behaviors, such as sexual activity.

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