



Centering Desire as a Causal Element in Sexual Minority Adolescent Sexual Decision-Making

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MCH Concern

There is a considerable amount of literature that has explored the decision-making and sexual health of sexual minority youth. However, one key element has been subtracted from public health discourse, tool development and project implementation: sexual desire. Fine and Tolman have argued the case for inclusion of desire in the discussion of and education about young women’s sexuality, and we argue that their assertions are equally relevant to sexual minority youth. Beyond the literature, public health practice as a field has centered negative social and health consequences, such as alcohol use or HIV/AIDS, as both inputs and outcomes of interest when considering the sexual behavior of sexual minority youth. Incorporating desire could allow public health practitioners to develop more accurately targeted programs that acknowledge the reality of sexual minority youth and support them in understanding risks while affirming desire.

Citations

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4. Stephenson, Kyle R., Tierney K. Ahrold, and Cindy M. Meston. "The association between sexual motives and sexual satisfaction: Gender differences and categorical comparisons." *Archives of sexual behavior* 40.3 (2011): 607-618.
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Example Research Application

Desire may function as both a mediator and confounder in the relationship between certain exposures of interest and sexual health outcomes. Assessing desire may help researchers identify relevant subpopulations to help target effective interventions. There are some validated scales, including the Sexual Desire Inventory, designed to assess individual’s sexual desire. For example, if you were studying PReP adherence in young people, adding in questions about the role that desire is playing in their sexual decision-making can help assess whether the reasons underlying sexual behavior affect adherence. Individuals having sex to be connected with a partner may have different adherence patterns than people who are having sex primarily to satisfy a partner’s needs or because being sexually active is an important part of their identity. By not accounting for pleasure, current research is limited in its utility because it is missing a large component of real-life sexual experience.

Recommendations for MCH Professionals

- Consider desire in the development of research and programs
- Include positive sexual outcomes in research with sexual minority youth
- Avoid framing sex as a strictly negative health behavior
- Acknowledge that desire is an important (and normal) piece of sexual behavior and that successful interventions must help people balance the risks with the rewards of sexual activity

Example Program Application

A funder might be interested in developing a health marketing intervention to encourage sexual minority youth to drink less as a way to reduce risky sexual behavior. Messaging developed without the consideration of might over-emphasize the role of alcohol in the casual pathway for the risky behavior and cause messaging to miss the target, for example: “You’re messy when you drink”. Acknowledging the reality of desire as a factor in sexual decision making would lead to potentially more accurately targeted messaging, for example: “He likes you better sober”.

Hypothetical Causal Diagram

Desire as a confounder of the association between alcohol consumption and risky sexual behavior

