

Adolescents' Perceptions of Heterosexual Behaviour

Nwagu, E.N.

Department of Health and Physical Education,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate adolescent students' perceptions of what constitute the norm with regards to adolescents' heterosexual behaviours. The study was conducted in Nsukka L. G. A. of Enugu state, Nigeria. The descriptive survey research design was used for the study. The population of the study comprised all secondary school students in government secondary schools in Nsukka L.G.A. of Enugu state, Nigeria. A sample of 600 students was used for the study. Questionnaire was used for data collection. The result of the study shows that the students perceived that most adolescents engage in sexual activities, share sexual partners, and take sex as the basis of all relationships. There were significant differences in the mean perception of; male and female students, junior and senior students and students of various age groups on the item that states that most secondary students' maintain relationship without sex. It was recommended among others that sexuality education should be introduced to children early in life by their parents and teachers before they form negative opinions.

Key Words: Adolescents, Perception, Heterosexual, Education, Norm.

Introduction

Addressing issues relating to adolescent sexuality is critically important to reducing the excessive burden of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) among this group (Kalembo, Zgambo & Yukai, 2013). A common feature of adolescents and other young people in Nigeria is their potential vulnerability to STIs including HIV (Imaledo, Peter-Kio & Asuquo, 2012). Nigeria is one of the countries in the sub-Saharan African region and this region records the highest prevalence of HIV worldwide (UNAIDS, 2012a). The leading route of HIV transmission in Nigeria is heterosexual sex, which accounts for over 80 percent of HIV infections (Federal Republic of Nigeria,

2012). Nearly half (48.6%) of Nigerian adolescents aged 15-19 are sexually active (National population commission 2008) predisposing them to HIV and other STIs. Therefore it is not surprising that it has been reported that 75 percent of all new cases of HIV in the sub-Saharan African region are found among young women and girls between ages 15-24 years (Global Health Council, 2007).

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) reported that there are 1.6 billion people aged 12-24, the largest generation of adolescents and young people ever (UNAIDS, 2012b). Adolescents naturally experience intense increase of sexual urge and they battle with new and often mysterious emotions and thoughts that accompany this

experience (Papathanasiou & Lahana). They consequently adopt attitudes and values that will help them resolve these emotions based on their perception of what constitute the acceptable standard of sexual behaviour. Their perceptions of the norms in terms of sexual lifestyle of other adolescents influence their decision about their own sexual behaviours (Li, Ding, Wu, Rotheram-Borus, & Guo, 2011). This is supported by the research findings of Eggermont (2005) who noted that adolescents who had more sexual experience believed that their peers had significantly more sexual experience. Normative beliefs are an important psychosocial variable linked to individual health-related behaviors (Olds, Thombs, Tomasek, 2005). Therefore, in order to enhance prevention of HIV and other STIs among adolescents, there is need to understand their perceptions of other adolescents' sexual lifestyle.

Efforts at preventing HIV have not given adequate attention to social structures and norms that frame sexual roles and individual behaviour (McLellan-Lemal et al., 2013). Peer sexual norms play an important role in sexual behaviour of adolescents (Sychareun, Thomsen, Chaleunvong and Faxelid, 2013). Literature has shown that certain relational schemas such as; unprotected sex is symbolic of intimacy, romance, and trust; may expose adolescents and other youths to the risk of HIV and other STIs (McLellan-Lemal et al, 2013). By examining such normative beliefs and perceptions, this study has been able to provide a better understanding of the underlying facilitators and barriers to adopting HIV risk-reduction practices and consequentially suggests strategies for

instituting healthy sexual values in adolescents.

The increased involvement of adolescents in premarital sex in Nigeria and many other societies of the world have been associated with weakened traditional values like sex for procreation and increased acceptance of sex for pleasure. The traditional conceptions of linking love and marriage have been challenged and there has been a growing public acceptance of casual sex, multiple sexual partners, and even commercial sex (Li, Ding, Wu, Rotheram-Borus, & Guo, 2011). The cultural practices that encourage virginity before marriage has been eroded and adolescents engage in sexual practices which they perceive to be the norm among their peers. It is not surprising therefore that the level of sexual activity and the incidence of STIs are high among Nigerian adolescents (Temin, Okonofua, Omorodion, Renne, Coplan, Heggenhougen, & Kaufman, 1999; Enebechi, and Nwagu, 2013)

Risky sexual practices among adolescents such as unprotected sexual intercourse result not only to STIs but also to unwanted pregnancy and dropping out of school. Poor education on the other hand reduces the likelihood that young women can develop their full human potential, adapt to changing economic circumstances, obtain well-paying work outside the home, contribute to their family's well-being and play an active role in social development (Sedgh, Bankole, Okonofua, Imarhiagbe, Hussain, and Wulf, 2009). Factors such as the adolescents' age, gender and level of education are capable of influencing adolescents' perception of what constitute the norm among adolescents with regards to their sexual practices.

Purpose of the study

The major purpose of this study was to examine adolescents' perception of the heterosexual behaviour of adolescents. Specifically, the study determined;

1. Male and females students' perception of adolescents' heterosexual behaviour.
2. Junior and senior secondary school students' perception of adolescents' heterosexual behaviour.
3. Perception of students of varied age of adolescents' heterosexual behaviour.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of male and female students about adolescents' heterosexual behaviour?
2. How do junior and senior secondary school students perceive adolescents' heterosexual behaviour?
3. What are the perceptions of students of varied age of adolescents' heterosexual behaviour?

Hypotheses

Three null hypotheses tested at $P \leq .05$ level of significance guided the study.

- Ho₁: The mean perception of male and female students of adolescents' heterosexual behaviour is not significantly different.
- Ho₂: There is no statistically significant difference in the mean perception of junior and senior secondary students of adolescents' heterosexual behaviour.
- Ho₃: The mean perception of students of adolescents' heterosexual behaviour does not significantly differ by age.

Methodology

Design of the study: Descriptive survey research design was used to study

adolescents in public secondary schools in Nsukka L.G.A.

Population for the study: The population for the study comprised 355,028 students in public secondary school in Enugu state of Nigeria. (This data was from the Statistic Unit Post Primary School Management Board – PPSMB, Enugu, 2013).

Sample for the study: One boys', one girls' and one coeducational secondary schools from all the government secondary schools in Nsukka L.G.A. were selected for the study through the purposive sampling technique. From the selected schools, 200 students were select through simple random sampling giving a total of 600 adolescent students.

Instrument for Data Collection: Questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section one was used to collect information about the students' personal data and section two was used to collect information on the students' perceptions of adolescents' sexual behaviour. The instrument was validated by three experts from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (two in the area of Health Education and one in the area of Educational Measurement and Evaluation). After the validation, recommendations of the experts were incorporated into the instrument. Cronbach alpha statistic (coefficient alpha) was use to determine the internal consistency of the instrument. The computation yielded an alpha of .78. This was considered reliable.

Method of Data Collection: Six hundred copies of the questionnaire were distributed by hand. The completed questionnaire was collected on the spot. Four trained research assistants assisted the researcher in the distribution and collection of the data. Of the 600 copies of

the questionnaire, only 579 copies of the questionnaire (96.5 %) were properly completed. Only these were used for data analysis.

Method of Data Analysis: Data were analyzed using mean for the research

questions. The t-test and ANOVA were used to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance.

Findings of the Study

Table 1: Mean Responses and t-test analysis of the differences in the mean perceptions of male and female respondents of Sexual Behaviours of Adolescents.

Item No.	Sexual Behaviour Perception Indices	\bar{x}_1	\bar{x}_2	\bar{x}_g	SD ₁	SD ₂	t-test	p	Remark	\bar{x}_g	t-test
Most secondary school students:											
1.	Engage in sexual activity	3.45	3.47	3.46	.79	.61	-.27	.78	A	NS	
2.	Have only one sex partner	2.75	1.88	2.28	.87	.80	10.10	.00	D	S	
3.	Share sexual partners	3.07	2.98	3.02	1.10	.75	1.02	.30	A	NS	
4.	Use condom for sex	3.44	3.22	3.32	.83	.52	3.16	.00	A	S	
5.	Abstain from sex	2.69	3.10	2.91	1.05	.80	-4.36	.00	A	S	
6.	Maintain relationship with out sex	2.61	3.33	3.00	1.22	.67	-7.26	.00	A	S	
7.	Take sex as the basis of all relationship	2.92	2.90	2.91	1.15	.97	.25	.80	A	NS	

\bar{x}_1 = mean for males; \bar{x}_2 = mean for females; \bar{x}_g = grand mean; SD₁ = standard deviation for male; SD₂ = standard deviation for females. Number of Males =176; females = 207; total = 383

Table 1 shows the grand mean perception of students on all the items. All the items had means above the criterion mean of 2.5 with exception of item 2. The students therefore perceive all the item statements to be correct. They did not disagree that most students have only one sex partner.

The table also reveals that significant differences exist in male and female

students' perception of adolescents' heterosexual behavior with regard to most students having only one sex partner, use of condom, abstinence from sex and maintaining relationship without sex. While the male students perceive that most students have one sex partner ($\bar{x} = 2.75$), female students did not perceive this ($\bar{x} = 1.88$).

Table 2: Mean Responses and t-test analysis of the differences in the mean perceptions of junior and senior secondary students of Sexual Behaviours of Adolescents.

Item No.	Sexual Behaviour Perception Indices	\bar{x}_1	\bar{x}_2	\bar{x}_g	SD ₁	SD ₂	t-test	p	Remark		
									\bar{x}_g	t-test	
Most secondary school students:											
1.	Engage in sexual activity	3.55	3.31	3.46	.60	.83	10.00	.00	A	S	
2.	Have only one sex partner	2.23	2.36	2.28	1.02	.77	1.73	.19	D	NS	
3.	Share sexual partners	3.03	3.00	3.02	.91	.96	.12	.74	A	NS	
4.	Use condom for sex	3.36	3.26	3.32	.55	.87	2.03	.16	A	NS	
5.	Abstain from sex	2.97	2.82	2.91	.95	.94	2.21	.14	A	NS	
6.	Maintain relationship with out sex	3.17	2.73	3.00	.86	1.22	17.00	.00	A	S	
7.	Take sex as the basis of all relationship	2.97	2.82	2.91	1.02	1.12	1.77	.18	A	NS	

\bar{x}_1 = mean for Junior Secondary students; \bar{x}_2 = mean for Senior Secondary students; \bar{x}_g = grand mean; SD₁ = standard deviation for Junior Secondary students; SD₂ = standard deviation for Senior Secondary students. Number of Junior Secondary students = 240; Senior Secondary students = 143; total = 383

Table 2 shows that significant differences exist in junior and senior students' perception of adolescents' heterosexual behaviours in two out of the seven statements. The differences in perceptions are with regard to most students engaging in sexual activity and most students maintaining relationship without sex. Although both junior and senior students perceived that most students engage in sexual activity, the junior students perceived this more ($\bar{x} = 3.55$) than the senior students ($\bar{x} = 3.31$).

Table 3: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of the Mean Perceptions of the Respondents on Sexual Behaviours of Adolescents by Age

Item Non	Sexual Behaviour Perception Indices	\bar{x}_1	\bar{x}_2	\bar{x}_3	\bar{x}_g	F-cal	p	Remark			
									\bar{x}_g	F-cal	
Most secondary school students:											
1.	Engage in sexual activity	3.53	3.41	3.46	3.46	1.18	.31	A	NS		
2.	Have only one sex partner	2.25	2.36	2.17	2.28	1.21	.30	D	NS		
3.	Share sexual partners	3.06	3.07	2.83	3.02	2.01	.14	A	NS		
4.	Use condom for sex	3.49	3.06	3.65	3.32	29.96	.00	A	S		
5.	Abstain from sex	3.25	2.92	2.33	2.91	25.62	.00	A	S		
6.	Maintain relationship with out sex	3.31	3.15	2.17	3.00	40.03	.00	A	S		
7.	Take sex as the basis of all relationship	3.06	2.76	3.00	2.91	3.37	.035	A	S		

\bar{x}_1 = mean Students aged 11 - 14 years; \bar{x}_2 = mean for Students aged 15 - 17 years; \bar{x}_3 = mean Students aged 18 years and above; \bar{x}_g = grand mean; Number of students aged 11 - 14 years = 128; Students aged 15 - 17 years = 177; Students aged 18 years and above = 78; Total = 383

Table 3 reveals that significant differences exist among students of various ages with regards to their perception of adolescents' heterosexual behaviours in four out of the seven statements. The differences in perception are with statements that most students; use condom for sex, abstain from sex, maintaining relationship without sex and take sex as the basis of all relationships.

Discussion of Result

Findings of this study from Table 1 show that the students perceived that most students engage in sexual activity. This explains the rising incident of adolescents' involvement in sexual activities. Research studies have shown that most adolescents in Nigeria are sexually active (Temin, Okonofua, Omorodion, Renne, Coplan, Heggenhougen, & Kaufman, 1999; Enebechi, and Nwagu, 2013). The finding of this study is therefore not surprising because it has been shown that adolescents' perception of what is the norm amongst their peers has great impact on their own behavior (Li, Ding, Wu, Rotheram-Borus, & Guo, 2011). The students also disagree that most students have only one sexual partner ($\bar{x}_g = 2.28$). In other words they perceive that most students have more than one sexual partner. This is a negative perception which is capable of increasing the incidence of sexually transmitted infections. This is because students who have such perception will see nothing wrong in their having multiple sexual partners themselves since this is norm amongst their peers. Such negative

perception poses a challenge to sustainable healthy sexual lifestyle among adolescents. Another negative perception as shown in table 1 is that the students perceived that students share sexual partner. It will not be surprising therefore to find these students also sharing sexual partners since they perceive this as the norm among other adolescents. Sharing of sexual partners however carries the risk of spreading sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.

The students also have some positive perceptions of adolescents' sexual behaviours. The students perceive that most students use condom for sex (Item 4) and that most students maintain relationships without sex (Item 6). This is encouraging and is line with the report of UNESCO, (2009) that a growing number of countries are scaling up sexuality education programmes, including Nigeria. It is also of interest to note that the male students perceived significantly more than the female students ($p = .00$) that most secondary students use condom for sex. This reflects the discrepancy in knowledge, attitude and practices of males and females in issue relating to their sexuality. This is supported by Zimmer-Gembeck and Helfand (2008) who found that males, in addition to being more sexually active, also hold more permissive sexual attitudes than females. In fact the above authors noted specifically that females are more committed to abstinence and less likely to approve of premarital sex than are males.

The result in Table 2 also shows significant differences in the perceptions of junior and senior students on the item 1

(most secondary school students engage in sexual activity and on item 6 (most secondary school students maintain relationship without sex). The junior students perceived that most secondary students engage in sexual activity more ($\bar{x} = 3.55$) than the senior students ($\bar{x} = 3.31$). This negative perception among junior secondary school students is worrisome. The junior students' mean response is contradicted by the high mean perception to item 6 (most secondary school students maintain relationship without sex $\bar{x} = 3.17$) which is significantly higher than senior students mean perception on this item ($\bar{x} = 2.73$). These contradicting mean responses to these two items may indicate that the junior students were unsure of students' involvement in sexual activity and they have not formed an opinion on this. They are therefore more amenable to change since they have not formed a firm opinion. Hence it will be easier to get the junior students adopt positive and sustainable sexual lifestyle than getting the senior students to change from an already established lifestyle.

Table 3 shows significant differences in the perceptions of students of various age groups in four out of the seven items. Three of these four items are positive items and from these positive items, the oldest students perceived most that most secondary students use condom for sex, while the youngest students perceived most that most students abstain from sex and that most students maintain relationship without sex. This is not surprising since sexual experiences increases with age. Again, Eggermont (2005) purported that those adolescents who had more sexual experience believed that their peers had significantly more sexual experience. It is not surprising then

to observe in this study that the oldest students perceived most that most adolescents use condom for sex. This goes to affirm that the older adolescents were sexually active and most of them use condom. On the other hand, the youngest adolescents perceived most that adolescents' students abstain from sex and that most students maintain relationship without sex. This might also be a reflection of the fact that these younger adolescents were not yet sexually active. This is encouraging as UNESCO (2009) noted that one of the challenges of sexuality education is to reach young people before they become sexually active. It is therefore easier to educate the younger adolescents who probably have not become sexually active than the older ones who already have an active sexual lifestyle.

Conclusions

What people perceive to be the norm among their counterparts influences their behaviour. Adolescents who perceive that most adolescents engage in sexual activities and share sexual partners are more likely to engage in such activities than those who do not perceive such. The younger adolescents who perceived that most adolescents' students abstain from sex and that most students maintain relationship without sex are more likely to accept abstinence as an ideal way of life prior to marriage. Therefore sex education should be stated early and should tackle all negative sexual perception that can lead to negative sexual behaviours among adolescents.

Recommendations

- Parents should be involved in sex education of their children. They should commence sex education early

for their children and continue this through the adolescent years. Parenting practices such as monitoring, support, and sexual communication between parents and adolescents should be encouraged because such practices have been shown to positively affect adolescents' sexual perceptions and behaviours (Barber, Stolz & Olsen, 2005; Longmore, Eng, Giordano & Manning, 2009; Markham, Lormand, gloppen,, Peskin, Flores, Low, & House, 2010). The higher the quality of parent-child relationships, the lower the odds of young males having multiple sexual partners. Parents should reinforce traditional moral values that place emphasis on virginity and links love to marriage (Sidze & Defo, 2013).

- Sex education should be encouraged particularly at the basic level of education when children and adolescents are still forming their views about sexual relationships. It should be part of core subjects in the school. Dienye (2011) pointed out that youths fall prey to the consequences of poor sexuality and sex education due to societal reactions to issues that bother on sexuality. Adolescents want to know more about practical issues such as copulation, conception, pregnancy, birth control and sexually transmitted diseases. This will help them to know how to place sex within their own frame of values so that they can be able to establish satisfactory and constructive relationships with individuals of the same sex and the opposite sex. Papathanasiou and Lahana (2007) observed that most young people receive very little help on these issues from the controversial, full

of conflicts and hypocrisy world they live in. Teachers should provide honest answers as well as address negative normative perceptions of students as these are capable of influencing students own behaviours.

- Adequate laws and policies should be put in place to encourage sex education. The sensitive and sometimes controversial nature of sexuality education makes it important that supportive and inclusive laws and policies are in place. These will serve to demonstrate that the provision of sexuality education is a matter of institutional policy rather than the personal choice of individuals (UNESCO, 2009).
- Adolescent involvement in sex education: Teachers should make use of participatory teaching methods that actively involve students and help them internalize and integrate what they have learnt into their way of life. Trained peer educators should be used to give sex education. People are more likely to hear and personalize messages, and thus to change their attitudes and behaviors, if they believe the messenger is similar to them and faces the same concerns and pressures (Sriranganathan et al., 2010).

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