

Running Head: SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY AND BEHAVIOUR

The Role of Past Sexual Experiences on Changing Patterns of Sexual Subjectivity,
Sexual Agency and Psychosocial Well-Being

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The Role of Past Sexual Experiences on Changing Patterns of Sexual Subjectivity, Sexual Agency and Psychosocial Well-Being

Abstract

Some past studies suggest that sexual experience in adolescence may accompany greater sexual health. Yet, the majority of past research on female adolescent sexuality portrays sexual exploration as a source of problems rather than an integral dimension of positive and healthy sexual development (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004). Further, there has been little study of how sexual behaviours, other than sexual intercourse, may influence or be influenced by co-occurring sexual self-perceptions and well-being. In the current longitudinal study (2 waves, 6-month lag), females' (N = 380, M age = 17.9 years, SD = 1.2) patterns of sexual subjectivity, sexual agency and psychosocial well-being over time were examined by comparing groups defined by their past sexual experience: (1) age at first sexual intercourse; (2) self-masturbation; and (3) noncoital orgasm. Findings showed that inexperienced virgins were lowest in sexual subjectivity with higher sexual subjectivity progressing systematically upwards across the groups ending with the highest sexual subjectivity among girls with earlier onsets of first intercourse, and these patterns of differences did not change over time. However, girls who commenced first sexual intercourse at early and middle ages increased in self-esteem over time, compared to the normative nonvirgin and virgin groups. Another major finding showed that sexual body-esteem and self-esteem changes over time differed when the combined masturbation and orgasm groups were examined. Specifically, results showed that girls who significantly increased in sexual body-esteem and self-esteem either reported experiences of masturbation and orgasm *or* reported neither sexual experience, while girls who had experienced one but not the other experience did not change over time

Research Aims

To compare patterns of change in:

- (a) sexual subjectivity (five elements of sexuality-related cognitions – sexual body-esteem, entitlement to sexual pleasure from oneself, entitlement to sexual pleasure from a partner, self-efficacy in achieving sexual pleasure, and sexual self-reflection),
 - (b) sexual agency (self-silencing in intimate relationships and resistance to sexual double standards), and
 - (c) psychosocial well-being (self-esteem, identity achievement, happiness)
- between groups defined by their level of sexual experience (age at first sexual intercourse, self-masturbation, noncoital orgasm).

Participants

- Of the original 449 participants, 380 (85%) female participants completed the repeat assessment at time 2 (T2). Participants were between the ages of 17 and 22 (M age = 17.9 years, SD = 1.2)
- 80% Caucasian/White.
- 85% reported their sexual orientation as being heterosexual.
- 83% reported experience with sexual intercourse.

Measures

Five Sexual Experience Groups:

1. Inexperienced virgins (no experience with any genital sexual experience; n = 39)
2. Experienced virgins (experience with one or more genital sexual experience; n = 82)

3. Normative nonvirgins (age at first intercourse ≥ 17 years; $n = 99$)
4. Middle nonvirgins (age at first intercourse = 16 years; $n = 92$)
5. Early nonvirgins (age at first intercourse < 16 years; $n = 67$)

Two Self-Masturbation Experience Groups:

1. No experience ($n = 170$)
2. Experience ($n = 210$)

Two Noncoital Orgasmic Responsiveness Groups:

1. No experience ($n = 152$)
2. Experience ($n = 228$)

Sexual Subjectivity: Sexual subjectivity was measured with the Female Sexual Subjectivity Inventory (FSSI) (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, in press). Three elements were assessed (α ranged from .77 to .89):

- (1) sexual body-esteem: self-perceptions of sexual attractiveness and desirability.
- (2) sexual desire and pleasure: consisting of three scales assessing entitlement to sexual pleasure from oneself, entitlement to sexual pleasure from a partner, and self-efficacy in achieving sexual pleasure.
- (3) sexual self-reflection: reflection of one's sexuality, sexual behaviour and experiences.

Sexual Agency. Self-Silencing in intimate relationships assessed with the Silencing the Self subscale of the Silencing the Self Scale (Jack & Dill, 1992; $\alpha = .78$). **Resilience to sexual double standards** assessed with The Double Standard Scale (Caron, et al., 1993; $\alpha = .72$).

Psychosocial Well-being. Self-esteem assessed with Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979; $\alpha = .82$). **Identity achievement** assessed with the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (Rosenthal, Gurney & Moore, 1981; $\alpha = .71$). **Happiness** assessed by one item, "How happy or unhappy have you been in the last month?". Response on an 11-point scale from *extremely happy* to *extremely unhappy* (11).

Results

Change in sexual subjectivity, sexual agency and psychosocial well-being as a function of sexual experience groups (TABLE 1):

- Inexperienced virgins were lowest in sexual subjectivity with higher sexual subjectivity progressing systematically upwards across the groups ending with the highest sexual subjectivity among girls with earlier onsets of first intercourse. These patterns of differences did not change over time.
- Over the 6-month period, sexual agency and two aspects of psychosocial well-being (i.e., identity and happiness) did not change.
- However, there was a significant 2-way interaction between time and group when the dependent variable was self-esteem. As can be seen in Figure 1, paired-sample t-tests showed that the EARLY AND MIDDLE NONVIRGIN groups significantly increased in self-esteem, whereas the virgin groups and normative nonvirgin group did not change in levels of self-esteem over time.

Change in sexual subjectivity, sexual agency and psychosocial well-being as a function of self-masturbation and noncoital orgasm groups (TABLE 2):

- **Self Masturbation:** The pattern of sexual subjectivity, sexual agency and psychosocial well-being did not change for the two self-masturbation groups.
- **Noncoital orgasm:** Similarly, the pattern of sexual subjectivity, sexual agency and psychosocial well-being did not change for the two noncoital orgasm groups.
- **Three-way interactions between time, self-masturbation and noncoital orgasm groups:** Results showed **two** significant 3-way interactions: when the dependent variable was sexual body-esteem (**see Figure 2**) and when the dependent variable was self-esteem (**see Figure 3**). There were significant increases in sexual body-esteem and self-esteem within the groups of girls who *had* experienced *both* self-masturbation and noncoital orgasm and girls who *had not* experienced either of these behaviors.

Summary and Conclusions

Sexual intercourse experience and sexual subjectivity: As in past studies (Bingham & Crockett, 1996; Jessor et al., 1983), the present findings also suggest that earlier¹ sexual intercourse did not undermine well-being and, in fact, may have been linked to increased self-esteem. This finding suggests that under some conditions early sexual intercourse does not inherently lead to negative outcomes. Much more research is needed to understand these conditions.

Self-masturbation, noncoital orgasm, and self-esteem: In response to adolescent sexuality experts (see Haffner, 1998) who have criticized research for the exclusive focus on sexual intercourse, and the neglect of other sexual behaviors that may affect sexual health outcomes, we also focused on masturbation and noncoital orgasm experiences of girls. When the combined history of self-masturbation and noncoital orgasm was examined, two possible developmental pathways leading to increases in sexual body-esteem and self-esteem emerged. The first combination (i.e. experience with self-masturbation and orgasm) may mark sexual accomplishment, while the second (i.e., no experience with either self-masturbation or orgasm) may mark sexual abstinence. For the girls with mixed experiences (i.e., self-masturbation but not orgasm, or orgasm but not self-masturbation) perhaps there is a sense of *tried but failed* indecisiveness and/or uncertainty that are not consistent with positive changes in sexual body-esteem and self-esteem.

Although few changes in sexual subjectivity and girls' well-being were found over the 6 months of this study, those changes that were identified were complex and thought-provoking. Taken together, it was most interesting to note that females who engage in self-masturbation and can achieve noncoital orgasms were initially highest (or similar) to other groups of girls, and significantly increased in self-perceptions of attractiveness and sexual desirability. Much more research is needed to examine the developmental interface of sexuality-related cognitions and emotions, and a range of sexual behaviours.

1. It is important to note that the current research did not investigate the impact of 'very early' sexual conduct and early experiences of sexual abuse.

Table 1.
 Comparisons of longitudinal sexual subjectivity, sexual agency, and psychosocial well-being patterns among sexual experience groups ($N = 380$)

Measured variables	Inexperienced Virgins ($n = 39$)		Experienced Virgins ($n = 82$)		Normative (≥ 17 years) ($n = 99$)		Middle ($= 16$ years) ($n = 93$)		Early (< 16 years) ($n = 67$)		Group F (4,374)	Time \times Group F (4, 374)
	$M (SD)$		$M(SD)$		$M (SD)$		$M(SD)$		$M (SD)$			
	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2		
Sexual Subjectivity												
1. Sexual Body-Esteem	2.81	3.02	2.84	3.03	3.23	3.34	3.21	3.41	3.22	3.41	3.69**	.32
2. Sexual Desire and Pleasure												
2a. Entitled -sex pleasure oneself	2.32	2.22	2.93	2.42	2.94	2.97	3.22	3.27	3.24	3.27	6.19**	.68
2b. Entitled -sex pleasure partner	3.20	3.36	3.77	3.84	3.87	3.83	3.93	3.88	4.03	3.93	6.54**	1.25
2c. Self-efficacy in sexual pleasure	2.39	2.38	2.81	2.80	2.98	3.27	3.19	3.43	3.31	3.53	14.38**	2.07
3. Sexual Self-Reflection	2.39	2.38	2.81	2.80	2.98	3.27	3.19	3.43	3.31	3.53	16.97**	.39
Sexual Agency												
Self-silencing in intimate relations	2.54	2.55	2.49	2.54	2.52	2.39	2.31	2.24	2.20	2.23	3.23*	1.10
Resistance to sex double standards	3.73	3.68	3.84	3.88	3.87	3.91	3.97	4.03	4.02	4.06	2.96*	.40
Psychosocial Well-Being												
Self-esteem	3.04	3.06	2.97	2.97	2.98	3.04	2.91	3.06	2.94	3.05	.19	2.65*
Identity Achievement	3.73	3.75	3.72	3.68	3.69	3.73	3.57	3.70	3.77	3.90	.94	1.88
Happiness	6.62	6.43	6.42	6.13	6.71	7.05	6.44	6.63	6.01	6.33	1.58	1.00

Note. ANCOVA results are reported. Age was the covariate. T1 = Time 1. T2 = Time 2, assessed 6-months after T1.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 2.
 Comparisons of longitudinal sexual subjectivity, sexual agency, and psychosocial well-being patterns among self-masturbation and noncoital orgasm groups ($N = 380$)

	Self-Masturbation						Noncoital Orgasm					
	No ($n = 170$) M		Yes ($n = 210$) M		Group F (1, 375)	Time × Group F (1, 375)	No ($n = 152$) M		Yes ($n = 228$) M		Group F (1, 375)	Time × Group F (1, 375)
	T1	T2	T1	T2			T1	T2	T1	T2		
Sexual Subjectivity												
1. Sexual body-esteem	3.04	3.19	3.13	3.26	.64	.03	3.00	3.11	3.18	3.34	4.42	.56
2. Sexual desire and pleasure												
2a. Entitled - sex pleasure oneself	2.12	2.18	3.58	3.48	190.08**	3.52 ^a	2.73	2.65	2.96	3.02	8.76**	3.03 ^b
2b. Entitled - sex pleasure partner	3.66	3.61	3.96	3.95	14.91**	.19	3.78	3.70	3.84	3.86	1.75	1.36
2c. Self-efficacy in sexual pleasure	2.83	3.01	3.07	3.25	6.70**	.00	2.79	2.90	3.10	3.35	16.36**	2.32
3. Sexual Self-Reflection	2.99	3.05	3.38	3.35	15.53**	1.42	3.01	2.96	3.36	3.44	22.55**	3.03 ^b
Sexual Agency												
Self-silencing in intimate relations	2.43	2.43	2.39	2.35	.62	.44	2.50	2.49	2.33	2.29	5.54*	.13
Resistance to sex double standards	3.81	3.84	3.96	3.98	5.02*	.06	3.80	3.82	3.96	4.00	6.92**	.02
Psychosocial Well-Being												
Self-esteem	2.95	3.03	3.00	3.02	.15	2.45	2.98	3.00	2.97	3.05	.16	1.72
Identity Achievement	3.74	3.80	3.66	3.69	1.71	.34	3.71	3.72	3.68	3.76	.07	1.59
Happiness	6.43	6.75	6.62	6.36	.19	4.84*	6.73	6.56	6.31	6.55	.96	2.41

Note. ANCOVA results are reported. Age was the covariate. T1 = Time 1. T2 = Time 2, assessed 6-months after T1. $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ $a_p = .06$ $b_p = .08$

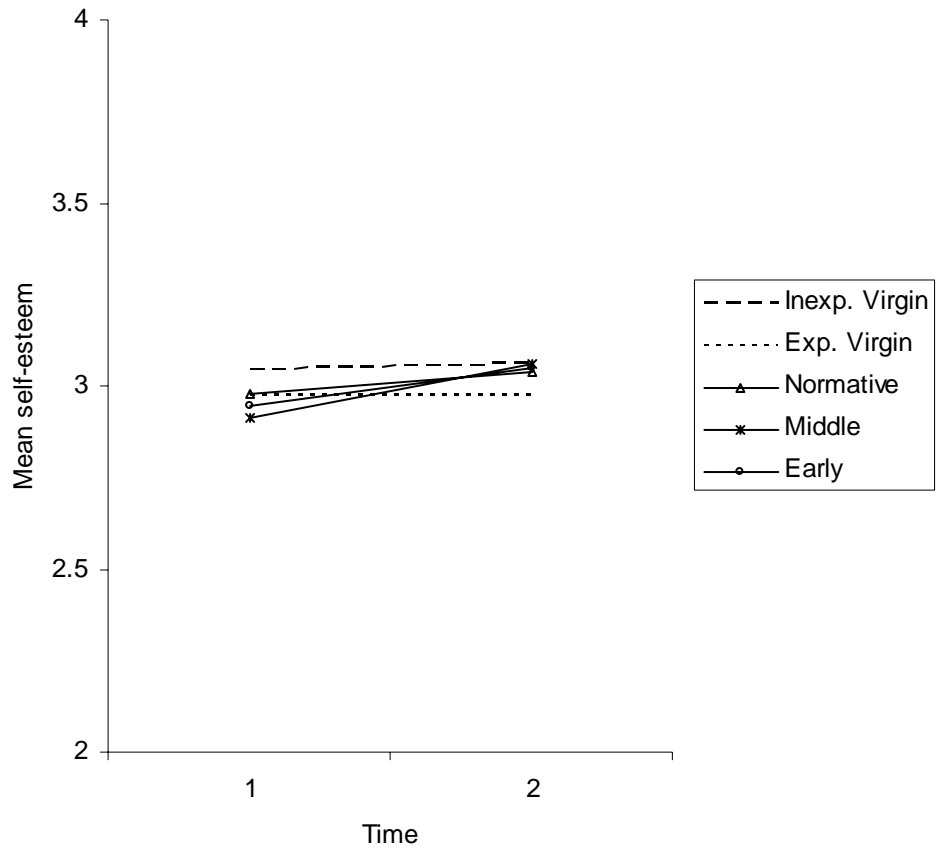


Figure 1. Time 1 and time 2 mean self-esteem scores for the five sexual experience groups.

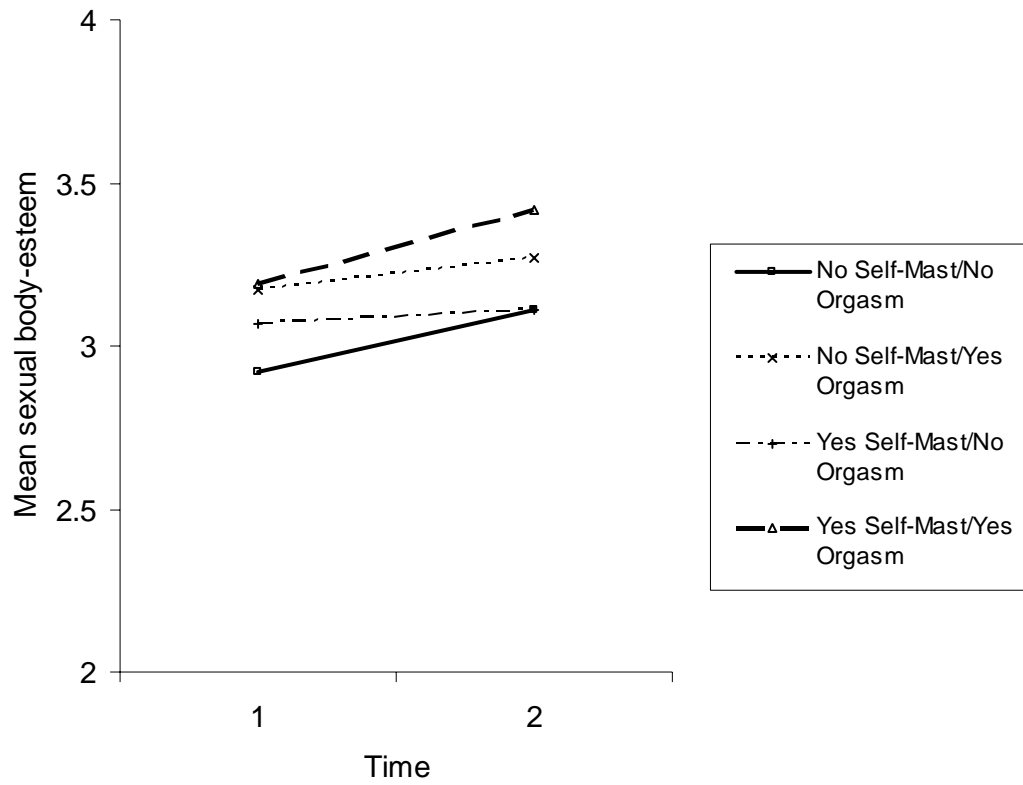


Figure 2. Time 1 and time 2 mean sexual body-esteem scores for groups with or without experience of self-masturbation and noncoital orgasm.

Note. Self-Mast = Self-masturbation. Orgasm = Noncoital orgasm

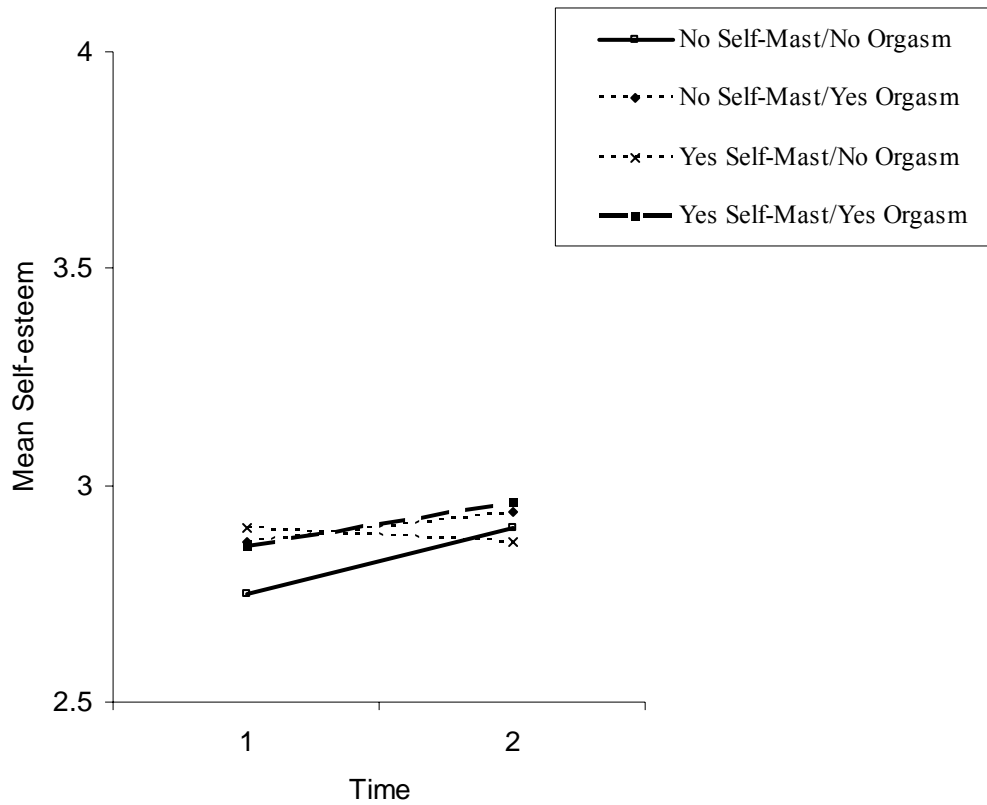


Figure 3. Time 1 and time 2 mean self-esteem scores for groups with or without experience of self-masturbation and noncoital orgasm.

Note. Self-Mast = Self-masturbation. Orgasm = Noncoital orgasm