

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Violating Trust? Barriers to Condom Use among Male Adolescents in Steady Relationships in Recife, Brazil

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Background

The role of emotion, trust, and commitment in structuring sexual interaction and affecting HIV-related risks has been often overlooked, but the fact that the same individual behaves differently in a casual and a steady romantic relationship suggests that relationship-specific norms, values, and expectations condition sexual and contraceptive decision-making.

Although adolescents usually recognize that HIV poses a threat for young people in their communities, many find it difficult to perceive themselves at risk. Difficulties to personalize risk are even greater when involved in a steady relationship, because of the conflicting narratives of safe sex and romantic love. Several studies have documented that strong emotional ties and trust in one's partner can act as an important barrier to condom use. This is partly because condoms are often associated with casual sex, promiscuity, infidelity and disease; and AIDS prevention campaigns may have unintentionally reinforced this association.

Objectives

The study aims at providing insights into adolescents' conceptualization of trusted relationships as well as how trust affects HIV risk perception and contraceptive decision-making.

Data

Both quantitative and qualitative data are used. The quantitative data were collected in a specially designed survey carried out in May 2000 on 1,438 male adolescents aged 13-19 residing in *favelas* (urban slum areas) of Recife, Brazil. The survey questionnaire included questions on sociodemographic background, knowledge about sexual matters, HIV risk awareness and beliefs, and attitudes relevant to condom use. The survey also obtained partnership, sexual, and contraceptive histories for participants' last four partners, including the classification of each relationship as casual or steady. Focus groups and in-depth interviews were also conducted.

Methods

A descriptive analysis compares the characteristics of casual and regular partners, the duration patterns of casual and steady relationships, and male adolescents' risk perceptions and sexual and contraceptive patterns in both types of relationships. Logistic regression analysis is used to examine the probability of condom use at last sexual intercourse, focusing on the impact of relationship-specific characteristics.

Results

The analysis shows that the degree of commitment to the relationship affects the rationale and dynamics of contraceptive decision-making. Male adolescents in steady relationships are less likely to use condoms, less likely to regard themselves at risk of HIV infection, more concerned about pregnancy prevention than HIV prevention, and more likely to substitute condoms by other contraceptive methods –mainly the pill– than adolescents in casual relationships.

Although adolescents generally regard steady relationships as low-risk relationships, the dynamics of sexual behavior during adolescence show that frequent partner change in a pattern of rapid serial monogamy is the norm, and that even those relationships labeled as steady are usually temporary and short-lived.

In-depth interviews confirmed that most adolescents defined their relationships differently according to the degree of courting, commitment, and emotional involvement with the partner (*parceira*), distinguishing between casual (*ocasional*) and steady (*firme*) partnerships. Focus-group discussions also revealed that different types of relationships were associated with different social expectations and normative values. Because of the symbolic association of condoms with promiscuity and disease, many adolescents felt that they could not use condoms with their trusted partner without jeopardizing their relationship. They often used unreliable cues to assess risk, such as partner's appearance and reputation, and rarely discussed their sexual histories with their partners in order to make informed decisions about condom use.

Conclusions

In the context of a steady partnership, not only perceived risks tend to be low, but feelings of love and trust could act as a barrier to condom use. However, the meaning and duration of a “steady” relationship during adolescence is very different from that at other life course stages.

Many public health campaigns have overlooked that most adolescents frame their sexual lives as a search for love rather than health, and that many have difficulties to identify their loved ones as potential sources of risk. Prevention campaigns might need to romanticize condom use as a sign of love and trust, to counteract the symbolic association between condoms and promiscuity or infidelity. Also, given that pregnancy prevention appears to be a primary concern in steady partnerships, they might need to place more emphasis on the benefits of dual protection.