

Sex without Sin? Sexual Self Esteem, Sex Ed, & Sexual Morality



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Abstract

The objective of these studies is to determine contributing factors of sexual well-being and establish new measures of sexual education curriculum, sexual morality, and sexual activity. Study 1 investigates dimensions of sexual education and reveals virginity status and sexual agency curriculum account for 10.5% of variance in sexual self-esteem. Study 2 explores dimensions of sexual morality and the relationship between sexual education and sexual morality.

Introduction

Research regarding the development of sexual self-concept, sexual morality, and sexual agency is limited. Thus, investigation is needed to improve sexual education (SexEd) to integrate morality and actual adolescent behaviors, promoting healthy development and an overall understanding of their sexual self-concept. Sexual self-concept includes our openness to new experiences, evaluations of ourselves as good or bad, and the feelings of stress and anxiety we have about interacting sexually¹. Study 1 hypothesizes more recent SexEd would be more likely to have curriculum about handling sexual situations (i.e., sexual agency curriculum). Studies comparing Abstinence-Only to more Comprehensive SexEd (CSE) find CSE leads to more positive results, e.g., less teen pregnancy and other sexual health benefits², and improve intrapersonal skills³. Study 1 reexamines SexEd as a continuum, rather than a dichotomous set of curricula. Study 1 determines whether current reports of sexual self-esteem would correlate with having had sexual agency curriculum. Study 2 explores the interaction of sexual morality to further explain variance in sexual self-concept, an exploratory investigation of morality around sexuality began.

Methods

College students complete an online survey integrating the Sexual Self-Concept Scale¹, Moral Foundation Vignettes⁴, and a range of items to construct scales for SexEd curriculum, sexual morality, and sexual activity.

- Study 1, n = 195
- Study 2, n = 191

To measure the variability of CSE, participants were asked to rate items from a large set from it "never being mentioned in class" to being "one of the central themes". An exploratory factor analysis revealed 3 underlying dimensions (Figure 1).

Item	F1	F2	F3
HIV	0.809		
STDs	0.795		
Consequences of STDs	0.779		
Treatment of STDs	0.692		
Preventing STDs	0.652		
Preventing Pregnancy	0.583		
Pregnancy	0.549		
Penis		0.838	
Testes		0.773	
Male Reproductive System	0.720		
Vagina	0.624		
Female Reproductive System	0.600		
Erection	0.598		
Vulva	0.583		
Sex Intercourse	0.552		
Clitoris	0.471		
Consent			0.835
Sex Assault/Rape			0.808
Sex Abuse			0.739
Age of Consent			0.710
Saying No			0.625
Sex Orientation			0.509
Identify Specific Situations			0.456
Gender ID			0.448
Virginity			0.430
Insisting on Contraception			0.403

FIGURE 1. SexEd Curriculum
Consequences of Sex: $\alpha = .933$
Factual Anatomy: $\alpha = .921$
Sexual Agency: $\alpha = .928$

Results

Study 1

In Study 1, the sexual agency dimension shows a slight negative correlation between age of the participants and the sexual agency score, younger participants had larger amounts of variability, while older participants experienced less agency as part of their SexEd (Figure 2). Hierarchical linear regression (Table 1) suggests virginity status accounts for 8.2% of variance, and sexual agency curriculum in SexEd for an additional 3.2%, with a $\Delta R^2 = 10.5\%$. Demographics and other aspects of SexEd did not account for significant variance.

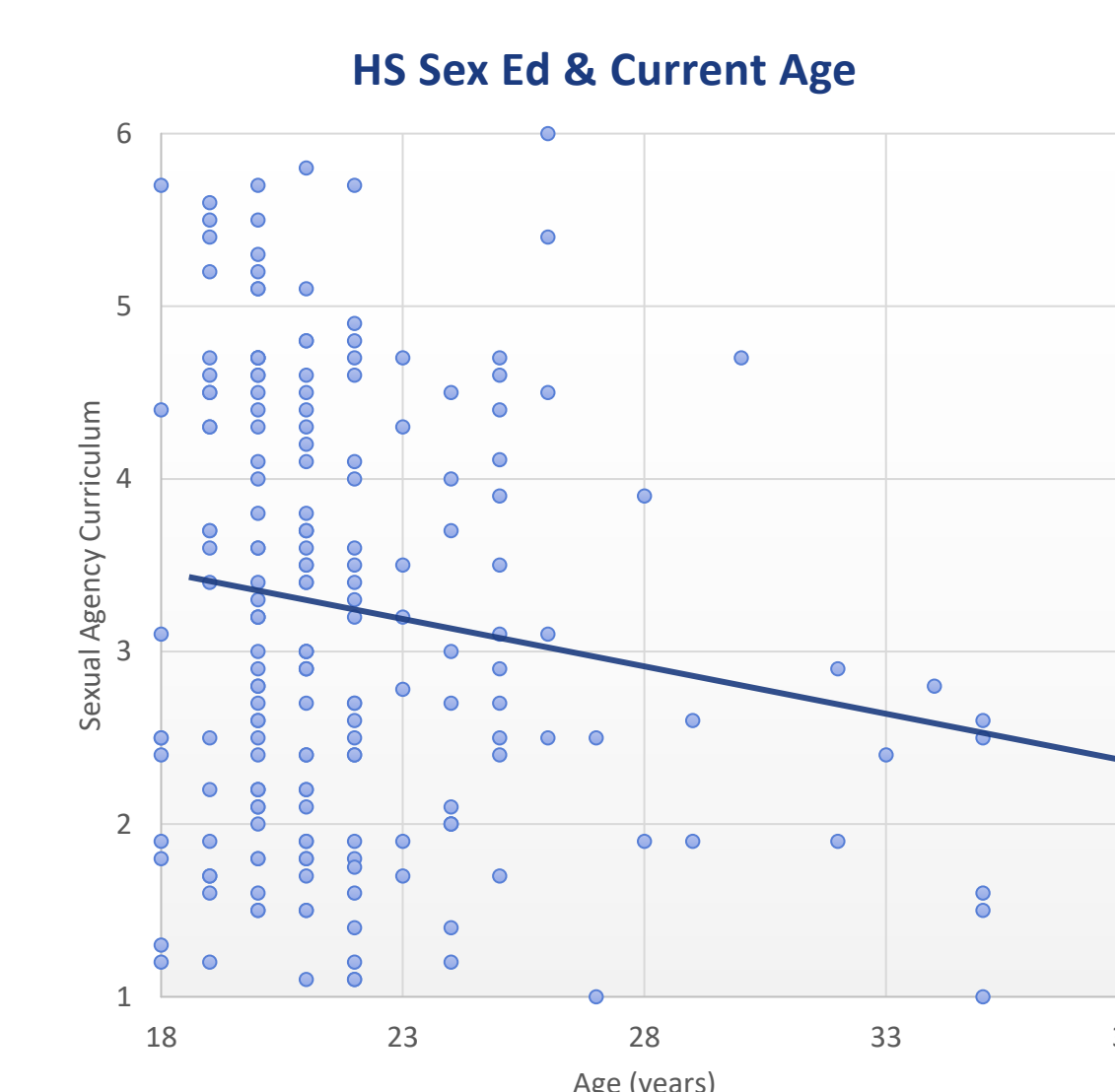


FIGURE 2. Generation of Sex Ed
 $r = -.168$
 $p = .02$

SEXUAL SELF ESTEEM				
Step	Predictor	Std. B	sig	ΔR^2
4	Gender	0.086	0.465	
	Age	0.009	0.101	
	Race (multi-racial)	0.045	0.375	
	Race (caucasian)	-0.025	0.761	
	Race (not mutli, caucasian, or latine)	-0.014	0.957	
	Race (not specified)	-0.142	0.132	
	Virginity	-0.243	0.001**	.082
	Sexual Orientation	0.139	0.931	
	Frequency of Sex Ed in HS	-0.022	0.763	
	Sex Ed Learning Negative Consequences	-0.093	0.320	
	Sex Ed Learning Factual Anatomy	0.008	0.930	
	Sex Ed Learning Sexual Agency	0.230	0.015*	.032
				0.149
				0.105
Total Adjusted R ²				

TABLE 1. Sexual Self-Esteem:
Virginity Status & Sexual Agency Content
 $\Delta R^2 = 10.5\%$

Study 2

Initial exploratory factor analysis uncovers 3 central themes of sexual morality (Figure 3). Preliminary analysis shows no significant correlation between gender and sexual morality. Participants that are more politically conservative ($r = .303^{**}$), virgins ($r = .181^*$), or heterosexual ($r = .236^{**}$) consider sexual liberties to be more wrong. Repeating the same analysis from Study 1, including the Sexual Morality Scales on a fifth level, replicated our previous results, virginity status and sexual agency curriculum were the only significant predictors of sexual self-esteem, and contrary to our hypothesis, the 3 morality variables did not account for additional variance.

Item	F1	F2	F3
Watching gay porn.	0.784		
Chatting with someone about sex online (i.e., cybersex).	0.771		
Having sex with many people all together.	0.756		
Having a one night stand.	0.723		
Watching porn.	0.715		
Masturbating in bed.	0.712		
Giving a stranger oral sex.	0.704		
Playing strip poker.	0.700		
Dating a stripper.	0.700		
Making home-video porn.	0.693		
Same-sex intercourse.	0.690		
Having a friend with benefits (i.e., non-romantic sexual relationship).	0.682		
Being polyamorous (i.e., multiple intimate relationships and everyone consenting).	0.681		
Sexually experimenting with a same-sex friend in college.	0.680		
Sending nude photos of yourself.	0.679		
Removing a condom during sex without asking the partner.	0.588		
Cheating on your spouse when you are in love with someone else.	0.553		
Having sex with a first cousin.	0.519		
Being sexually unfaithful.	0.474		
Dating multiple people at the same time without letting them know.	0.472		
Staying in an unhappy marriage.	0.458		
Polygamous marriage (i.e., marriage of more than two people).	0.453		
Stopping birth control to trick someone into getting pregnant.	0.424		
A woman having an orgasm.	-0.471		
Getting a divorce because you were cheated on.	-0.574		
Using a condom during sex.	-0.595		
People of different ethnicities having sex.	-0.622		
Women using birth control.	-0.631		
People of different races having children together.	-0.742		
People of different races getting married.	-0.765		
Watching child pornography.			0.600
Filming people having drunk sex and posting it on social media.			0.596
Beating up your romantic partner.			0.573
Watching people undress without their knowledge.			0.542
Cheating on your partner when no one finds out.			0.446
Using sex as a means to an end (e.g., using sex or sexuality to manipulate someone).			0.440
Someone who has an STI can have sex without telling their partner(s).			0.409
Making someone have sex with you.			0.398
Tying someone or being tied up or using handcuffs can be fun and kinky.			-0.397
Stripping for your partner (e.g., girlfriend or husband).			-0.411
Spanking for sexual pleasure.			-0.473

FIGURE 3. Sexual Morality Scale
Sex Liberty: $\alpha = .965$
Partner Love: $\alpha = .869$
Sexual Harm: $\alpha = .839$

Discussion

Both Study 1 and Study 2 find that virgins had lower sexual self-esteem. The primary finding of both studies is that what mattered most in predicting sexual self-esteem was virginity status and what was taught in SexEd classes, specifically sexual agency curriculum. Though sexual morality does not account for more variance in sexual self-esteem, there are significant correlations between SexEd content and the participants' sexual morality. SexEd that focuses on the consequences of sex relates to stronger moral feelings concerning partner love (Figure 4), while SexEd that emphasizes sexual agency relates to slightly more morally conservative feelings toward sexual liberty (Figure 5). This suggests that lessons in SexEd concerning interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships influence how individuals view sexual interactions as more morally compelling. The correlation (Figure 2) from Study 1 suggests high school SexEd has incorporated lessons on how to navigate sexual experiences in more recent years. Early sexual experiences help establish the sexual self-concept, which then guides future sexual behaviors¹. We conclude that CSE programs should continue incorporating sexual agency content so youth may develop a stronger sense of self-efficacy as they mature sexually and encounter sexual situations.

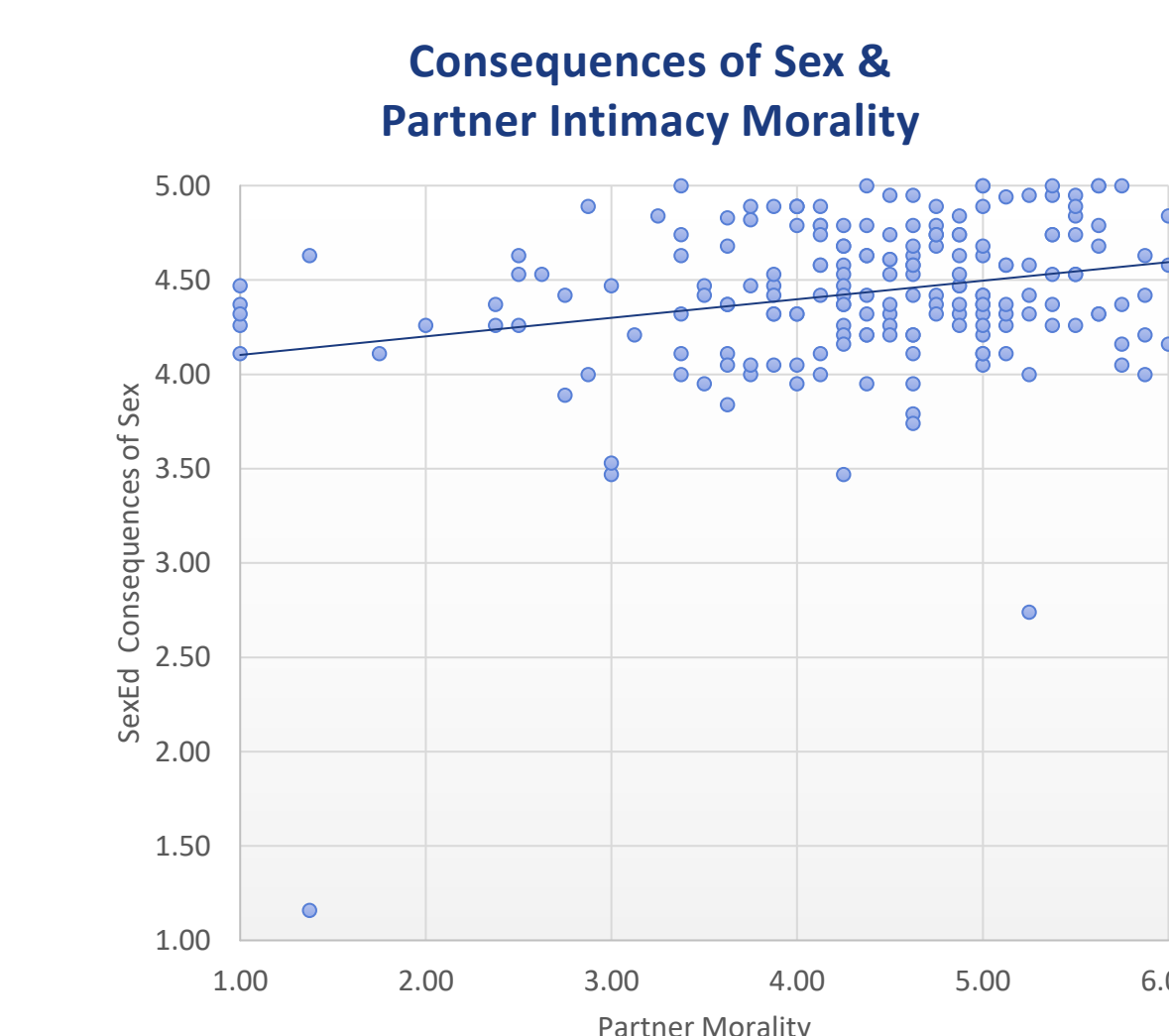


FIGURE 4. SexEd: Consequences of Sex & Sexual Morality: Partner Love
 $r = .249^{**}$ $p = .01$ w/o outlier $r = .17$

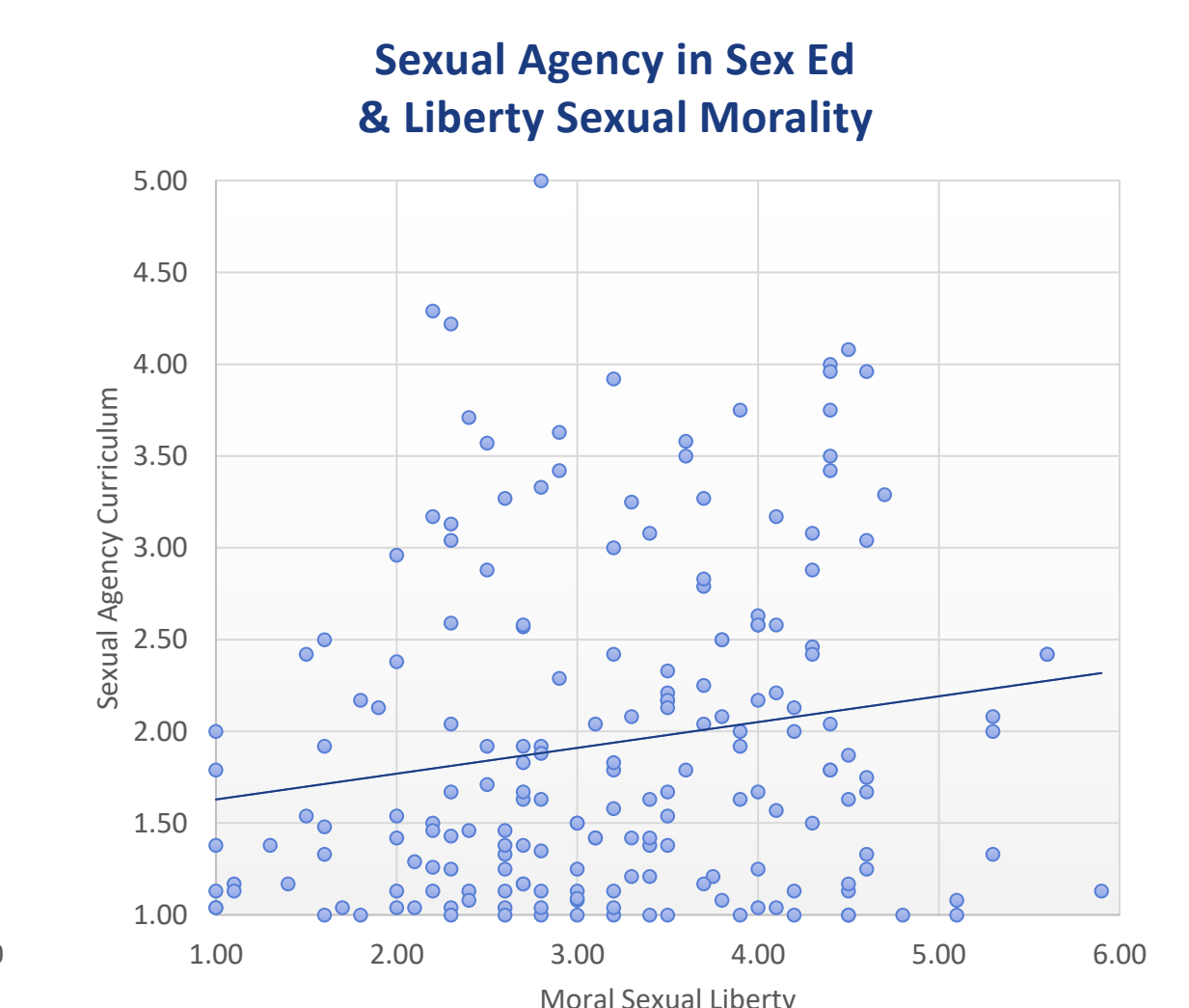


FIGURE 5. SexEd: Sexual Agency Content & Sexual Morality: Sexual Liberty
 $r = .168^*$ $p = .05$

Future Work

Future research concerning youth sexual health may consider the impact of social media and families on sexual agency.

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Citation, Abstract, & Correspondence

This research aims to identify factors influencing sexual well-being and establish novel measures for sexual education curriculum, sexual morality, and sexual activity. Adolescent sexual self-concept development, sexual morality, and sexual agency have received limited attention in previous studies. Study 1 introduces reliable measures and investigates factors contributing to sexual well-being. Participants complete an online survey featuring the Sexual Self-Concept Scale, Moral Foundation Vignettes, and new items for the sex education curriculum, sexual morality, and sexual activity scales. Factor analysis reveals three highly reliable scales: negative consequences of sex, factual knowledge about anatomy, and sexual agency (e.g., consent). Older students were less likely to receive sexual agency education. Hierarchical linear regression of sexual self-esteem suggests being a virgin during college predicts lower sexual self-esteem (8.2% of variance) and high school curriculum including agency predicts higher sexual self-esteem (additional 3.2% of variance). Study 2 examines dimensions of sexual morality by assessing perceptions of specific sexual acts. Factor analysis identifies three dimensions: sexual exploration beyond conventional boundaries, importance of intimacy and partner satisfaction, and non-consensual harm versus consensual BDSM behaviors. Sexual morality dimensions were unrelated to sexual self-esteem, contradicting hypotheses. Participants considering sexual liberty less moral were more likely to be conservative, virgins, and straight. Students exposed to consequences-focused sex education valued intimacy, and those receiving agency-focused education viewed sexual liberty as more moral.

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