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Predicting risky sexual behavior

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A recent study by a team of researchers at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas found that risky sexual behavior can be predicted by cultural, socioeconomic and individual mores in conjunction with how one views themselves.

Katherine Hertlein of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas will present her team's findings at the 63rd annual International Communication Association conference in London. Hertlein and colleagues surveyed over 800 participants and evaluated elements of the likelihood of one's engagement in high-risk sexual behavior. Approximately 120 variables were designed to give information on each area of focus – socio/demographic, active sanctions, cultural, relational and individual factors. The data supports the contention that the sexual script, or how groups are "supposed" at act regarding sex, has a significant impact on the likelihood of engaging in high-risk sexual behavior. The cultural factor, which included gender stereotyping, sexual fantasy, sexual conservatism and pornography usage, proved the most reliable on predicting high-risk sexual behavior.

Individuals who engage in high-risk sexual behavior (HRSB) expose themselves to multiple risks, including those that are social, emotional, and physical in nature. Such risks can include effects to interpersonal relationships, self-esteem and overall well-being and health. With such important effects of engagement, it is imperative that a variety of healthcare providers understand an individual's decision-making process as a way to prevent unnecessary and adverse health, social, and behavioral consequences.

Researchers have limited themselves to testing how specific elements in isolation impact decision-making rather than examining the combined influence of multiple variables on the decision making process. This is problematic because variables such as substance use, relationship exclusivity, moral development, religiosity, and sensation-seeking have been found, in some cases, to mediate the sexual decision-making process. No study to date has included all of these variables in one coherent model. This study was the first of its kind to include a cluster of variables identified in the literature that was included in testing a model of sexual decision-making in cases of high-risk sexual behavior.

"This research can provide information that will inform health educators, public health nurses, HIV/AIDS programs and other community resources as to the motivations and contributing factors inherent in decision-making around engagement in risky sexual practices," said Hertlein. "Further, research findings may contribute to improved outreach, education, preventive efforts, and treatments to help control the spread of sexually transmitted infections."

More information: "Testing a Model Predicting Risky Sexual Behavior," by Katherine Hertlein,Tara Emmers-Sommer, and Alexis Kennedy; To be presented at the 63rd Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, London, England, June 17-21.

Provided by International Communication Association

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