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Does learned helplessness facilitate sexual risk taking behaviors among African American young and adolescent females?

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Research has demonstrated that adolescent and young African American females (AAF) face uncontrollable obstacles which interfere with the negotiation of safer sexual behaviors. If these obstacles are perceived as uncontrollable then these females may be at risk for the development of Learned Helplessness (LH). The LH model predicts that these uncontrollable obstacles may lead to deficits in motivational or cognitive decision making, deficits that could influence sexual risk taking behaviors. Therefore, it is important to gain a better understanding of the prevalence of LH in this population. Compared with other races and ethnicities, AAF still accounts for a greater proportion of new HIV diagnoses. If LH exists then the psychological impact of the uncontrollable obstacles prevalent in this group needs to be addressed in order to design cognitive interventions aimed at decreasing sexual risk taking behaviors. Since the concept of LH has not been tested in this particular population, a preliminary pilot study was conducted to initially trail a tool to examine the perceptions of LH in a populace of young, adolescent AAF. A convenience sample of 50 adolescents and young AAF between the ages of 16 and 21 were recruited from two clinics in Southeast Michigan. Results demonstrated a continuum of LH among the participants in the study. This pilot represents an initial attempt to examine if the obstacles that are experienced by adolescent and young AAF result in the perception of LH. Results are important because they validate the use of the Learned Helplessness Survey in this population. Moreover, findings can be used to refine the tool for use in studies aimed at examining the correlation between LH and sexual risk behaviors. Replication will provide empirical basis to be used in the design of culturally specific interventions for adolescent and young AA females.

Biography

Laura Pittiglio is an Associate Professor in the School of Nursing at Oakland University Rochester, MI. Her research interests include coping mechanisms of African American mothers who are living with HIV/AIDS and sexual risk taking behaviors that put young African American women in jeopardy of contracting HIV. Her most recent research is aimed at prevention strategies for sexual risk taking behaviors in adolescent and young African American females.

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