Understanding Heterosexual Chinese College Students’ Intention to Adopt Safer Sex Behaviors

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This study aimed to examine Chinese college students’ safer sex behaviors and to explore whether or not the Theory of Reasoned Action would be useful in understanding AIDS/HIV-prevention behaviors of Chinese students. A total of 455 Chinese college students (161 males and 294 females) in Hong Kong participated in the study. Results revealed that 24% of the students were sexually active during the surveyed year, with only 38.2% of them reporting regular condom use. About one-third of the students intended to experiment with casual sex in the future, but only 64% would use condoms regularly if they were to have future casual sexual encounters. Results indicated that the Theory of Reasoned Action was most applicable in understanding Chinese college students’ intention to use condoms in future casual sexual encounters, rather than in current and future regular sexual activities. Specifically, students who intended to use condoms in future casual sexual encounters tended to have accurate AIDS/HIV information, show little prejudice against people with AIDS/HIV, demonstrate greater concern about contracting AIDS/HIV, feel confident in condom use, and have positive attitudes toward safer sex behaviors. Gender disparity was also noted in the pattern of associations between safer sex behaviors and various psychological variables. Limitations of the present study and implications for future research were also discussed.

Researchers have argued that college students are at a particularly high risk for AIDS/HIV infection. College students are usually between 18 and 25 years old, ages when many people feel relatively immortal and immune to disease or accident. For most college students, they are away from home and parental control for the first time. Thus, the first few years of college are often a time for sexual experimentation and sexual irresponsibility (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1988; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 1991; DiClemente, Forest, & Mickler, 1990; Reinsich, Hill, Sanders, & Ziembka-Davis, 1995; Sheer & Cline, 1994). For example, 70% to 80% of the college students in the United States reported being sexually active, with one third of them never using condoms and only 20% or less using condoms regularly (Ratliff-Crain, Donald, & Dalton, 1999; Sheer & Cline, 1994). According to a newly released report by the Joint United Nations Program on AIDS/HIV and the World Health Organization (1999), one third of the 33 million people living with AIDS/HIV in the world are young people aged 15 to 24. Researchers have also suggested that many of those who are currently diagnosed with AIDS/HIV were probably infected during their college years (Schenken, 1989; Yzer, Fisher, Bakker, Siero, & Miovic, 1998).

There is a paucity of studies that examine safer sex behaviors among Chinese college students in Hong Kong. Of the few studies in this area, results indicate that safer sex behaviors are largely uncommon among Chinese college students. For example, Ling (1993) found that about one quarter of the sexually active college students in Hong Kong did not use any condoms or other contraceptive methods during sexual activities. This researcher also found that even among those college students using contraception, a great proportion reported using unsafe methods in terms of protection against STDS and AIDS/HIV, such as coitus interruption, rhythm, pills, and post-coital douche. More recent data on condom use of Chinese college students in Hong Kong are not available.

The high-risk status of Chinese youths is also reflected by the official statistics. According to the Joint United Nation Program on AIDS/HIV and the World Health Organization’s report (1999), the estimated HIV prevalence rates in Hong Kong for young people aged 15 to 24 range from 0.02% to 0.03% for females and 0.07% to 0.18% for males. These rates are higher than the rates estimated for Chinese youths in mainland China, which are 0.02% to 0.05% for females and 0.05% to 0.14% for males. In other words, about 1 in every 3,214 to 5,000 college-aged females and 1 in every 555 to 1,400 college-aged males in Hong Kong may be currently infected with HIV. About 80% of the people infected with AIDS/HIV in Hong Kong in 1999 were age 19 or younger at the time of reporting (Chin, 1999).

This study aimed to explore safer sex behaviors of Chinese college students in Hong Kong and to understand factors that are related to their intention to adopt AIDS/HIV-prevention behaviors. Results of the present study provide pertinent information for designing and implementation of AIDS/HIV prevention programs in Hong Kong.

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Over the years, different models have been drawn upon to predict safer sex behaviors. Among them, the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA: Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Fishbein