“Impact of Parents’ Attitudes Towards Sexual Relationship on Adolescents’
Opinions”

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Abstract:

Our research aims to find out the relationship between parents’ attitude and adolescents’ attitude towards sexual relationships. In other words, we try to understand whether parents’ attitude towards sex can influence adolescents’. Our hypothesis is that there is certain influence, but when adolescents grow older, they will tend to rebel against their parents’ views on sexual relationships. In order to evaluate that, we collected the data about both parents’ and children’s attitude through surveying people who are mostly 15 to 18 years old. This should allow us to know the relationship between parents’ and adolescents’ views towards sexual relationships and compare variations between younger and older adolescents.

Based on the data we collected in surveys, we compare adolescents’ attitudes with their parents’ attitude towards sexual relationship. It is shown that parents’ attitude does influence adolescents’ attitude on aspects of the age they have their first intercourse and the frequency they use condom. But the second part of our hypothesis is proven false. Instead of rebelling against their parents, adolescents exhibit almost no change in their attitudes towards sexual relationship as they get older.

Background and significance:

Adolescents, known as individuals between the age of 10 and 18, usually undergo a period of rapid development both mentally and physically, including their ripening secondary sexual
characteristics and maturing cognition of sex. In this unique period, they gradually generate fierce curiosity about sex or things related to sexuality and such kind of curiosity may influence their lifestyle a lot. For example their time for the first intercourse or their attitude towards plural sexual partners which matters a lot in one’s daily life. Also, today adolescents have higher and higher infection rates of HIV and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) than in previous generations (Scott-Sheldon et al., 2008) and the risky sexually activities can lead to a high percentage of unintended pregnancies and STDs, thereby causing huge social problems in the United States (Grunbaum et al., 2004). So the sexual relation has become a big deal and thus we try to find out more about children’s attitude towards sexual relationship, which is based on the factors that could impact adolescents’ opinions towards sex.

There may be variety of factors that affect students’ view such as online media. For example, 20% increase of exposure to media contributes to 14% increase on black teenagers’ risk of having intercourse and 50% of white teenagers’ risk. (D Hollander, 2006). Other factors like gender, religion, and race may also influence adolescents perspectives. For instance, recent survey showed women with no sexual partners in the past year were significantly lower than for women with only male sexual partners in the past year among white (OR = 0.30, 95% CI: 0.22, 0.41) and black (OR = 0.23, 95% CI: 0.15, 0.37) women and marginally lower among Latina women (OR = 0.63, 95% CI: 0.38, 1.03) (Madina Agénora, Nancy Kriegera, S. Bryn Austina, Sebastien Haneused, Barbara R. Gottlieb). But the problem is that these causes are all be well studied and there’s no more we can find out. So we then put our eye on parents’ attitude.
As we know, parents play a significant role in their children’s growth. Their involvement in children’s life have a huge impact in children’ living style, academic performance, thinking style, etc. Therefore, teenagers’ cognition and value towards various events may be shaped by their parents’ attitudes. In the case of our interest, parent-teenager discussions about sexuality and sexual risk do influence teenagers, partly depending on what they say. (Whitaker & Miller & May & Levin, 1999). For instance, “parents’ talking with adolescents about sex and condoms is associated with safer sexual behavior and with a reduced association between adolescents’ own behavior and the adolescents’ perception of their peers behavior.” (J Rosenberg, 2002). According to these research results, parents’ sexual mores may strongly correlate to the formation of adolescents’ cognition of sexuality.

But other studies did not find a consistent relationship between parent–child communication and sexual risk behaviors (Fisher & Kramer, 2000; Jaccard, 1996; Kirby, 2002; Whitaker & Miller, 2000). None of the communication items were related to youth being currently sexually active (Cheryl B. Aspy, Sara K. Vesely, Roy F. Oman, Sharon Rodine, LaDonna Marshall, Ken McLeroy). And these differences in outcomes may be mediated by the quality and quantity of the communication as well as the relationship between the youth and his/her parents (Miller, Forehand, & Kotchick, 1999; Miller, Levin, Whitaker, & Xu, 1998; Nelson, Patience, & MacDonald, 1999; Resnick et al., 1997).
Therefore, whether or not parental influence is the dominant factor that influences adolescents’ views on sexuality is a question worthwhile for research. And we are also interested in what most of parents would attempt to pass on to their children, and how their sharing of these opinions with their teenagers affects the formation of those of their children. Therefore, we choose parents’ attitude as our independent variable.

Our research can probably show how parents' views and their teenagers' views may differ and how that might impact teenagers' attitudes toward sexuality. By generalizing their common attitude towards what their parents suggest about sexuality, the result can show that how adolescents treat their parents’ opinion or indoctrination. Besides, this research may offer inspirations for those who aim to help teenagers elect healthy sexual mores as well as parents who worry about their children’s sexual relationship. The conclusion may help people to understand adolescents’ sexual risk behaviors as well.

**Design:**

In our research, we plan to find out the potential factors that may affect adolescent’s attitude towards sexual relationship. After considering different variables existing in the problem, such as gender, religious belief, race, and so on, we propose to work on how parents’ attitudes towards sexual relationship would possibly affect the ones of their children, since we believe that parental influence may be the dominant factor among all the potential ones.
We use both surveys and interviews to collect data as well as to understand the role parents play in adolescents’ sexual relationship. Control questions are included in both cases to help us isolate parental influence as the only potential factor. The reason why we do not use a field experiment is that our interest--parental influence--is apparently a long-term impact, which cannot be measured in a short-time field experiment. Also, experimental method may cause awkwardness or may offend our sample due to the intimacy of our topic.

Both adolescents in New York City and in China are groups that we aim to survey. Since we are currently in New York City, we choose to distribute questionnaires to adolescents in different parts of the city, including Harlem, Columbus Circle, Soho, and Columbia University. People with different racial identities live across these regions, so, as we suppose, racial diversity of our sample can be achieved. Additionally, we survey people who visit Columbia University or attend the campus tour. By following the schedule of these tours, we may reach many American high school students. For adolescents in China, however, we apply a different method. We employ the strategy of snowball sampling and send out translated online surveys on various social media platforms that Chinese adolescents usually use, like Wechat, Weibo, etc.. Thus, we can easily reach a large amount of samples in a short period of time.

To gain trust from these adolescents, we usually tell them who we are (as students doing research project in Columbia University summer school), our general topic for research (as adolescent
health), and that we will only use their responses for data collection but not for any other purpose. Such statements may help ease their nerve when answering the surveys, and therefore let them respond truthfully.

At first, we attempt to collect data from adolescents aging from 10 to 18, as what “adolescents” is officially defined. However, we change the age range to 13 to 18 as we soon realize that not only are those younger teenagers difficult to find, but they are also too immature to respond to questions about sexual relationship. Therefore, narrowing down the age range would not limit our capability to generalize result but would instead enable us to analyze the variation of adolescents’ opinions towards sex among age.

While our survey questions cover information including race, religious, parents’ status and social surrounding in order to control variables, there are also questions about our outcome of interest (see Appendix 1), which particularly is to what extent do the parents care about children’s sexual relationship and the sexual mores they think teenagers should obey. To collect data effectively about both parents’ and adolescents’ opinions so that we can do further analysis about the relationship between them, we have to determine several indicators to operationalize the independent and dependent variable. As a result, we ask our sample to describe how their parents think of sexual relationship and to what extent would their parents discuss sexual relationship with them. Questions addressing adolescents’ own opinions are included as well. We separate the
survey questions into two parts: one for teenagers who have had sex relations and one for those who have not. It then enables us to compare the ideal sexual relationship that most adolescents want with the actual one they have or the one their parents expect them to have. Thus, with a large enough amount of responses, we can figure out the degree to which adolescents would like to agree with their parents’ views and also some potential factors that lead to such result, which may allow us to prove whether or not our hypothesis--that adolescents would tend to rebel against their parents’ suggestions in the case of sexual relationship--is right or not.

Additionally, we plan to interview 3-5 adolescents in New York City and 3-5 of them in China to better understand how adolescents think about their parents’ influence on their own perspectives of sexual relationship. Due to the fact that our topic, sexual relationship, is too intimate to set up interviews with complete strangers, we would mainly talk to people that we have already known instead and would try to match an interviewee who has the same gender as that interviewer. During the interviews, we would go through a list of prepared questions (see Appendix 2), and we also ask some follow-up questions.
Discussion and conclusion:

In our pilot study, we eventually receive 395 online responses from China and 38 responses in New York City. Four interviews are conducted as well, although due to the sensibility of our topic all four of the interviewees are our friends in China.

After analyzing the data that we obtained from surveys, we found that our hypothesis is true for the first part: indeed, parents’ attitudes towards sexual relationship do have impact on adolescents.

(Figure 1)

According to Figure 1 above, the frequency of parents’ talking about sexual risk with teenagers will affect teenagers’ real or expected usage of condom. The more frequently parents remind adolescents of the importance of condom, the more often adolescents use or expect to use...
condom. This indicates that sex education can possibly help reduce the health problem caused by sexual relation, such as HIVs, etc..

(Figure 2)

We compare whether these adolescents have talked with their parents about topic of sexuality with their expected ages for first intercourse. We have found that either in New York City or in China, the teenagers that haven’t talked with their parents about sex usually prefer having their first intercourse later. Though the numbers of teens whose expect to have first intercourse during high school years are almost the same in either country. There is a sharp contrast in the preference for after marriage. In New York City, approximately 30% of teenagers who have never talked about sex with their parents expect to have first intercourse after marriage, while the proportion in teenagers who have talked is less than 5%. In China, the contrary is not so
impressive, but also show that never talking to parents about sex leads to a older expected age for first intercourse.

(Figure 3)

By comparing the data of the survey in New York City and in China, we see parents’ different treatment towards sex education. In China, 56% of the adolescents we have surveyed indicate that they don’t know when their parents expect them to have first intercourse. While in New York City, only 23% of our objects are not sure about their parents’ expectation. Given that we have a large sample of Chinese people, the result can represent the situation of sex education in China. Provided that we have already found out the significance of parental sex education, Chinese parents need to be open and teach their kids what’s the proper way to face sex relations.

Based on what we observe from our pilot study, we found several problems existed in our design.
First, our sample is unbalanced in many ways, which partly is caused by the limited time and staff that we have. Our sample in both New York City and China are mostly 16 to 18 years old, and there are only a few responses in other age groups, which makes it difficult for us to generalize result for those lacking groups. Also, we have much more responses received from Chinese adolescents than the ones we got in New York City, while NYC adolescents’ background actually varies way more than the one of Chinese. In other words, we may only have a very small amount of samples with Hispanic or African American or White racial identity.

Second, the randomness of our sample selection in China cannot be ensured because people who see and answer the survey are mostly connected to our social network. It is possible for our research group to share certain characteristics, which may probably affect our result. For example, all of us may come from at least a middle class family in China so that we can afford studying abroad, and so do our networks. Perhaps most samples we got are from the same social class, lacking adolescents with different family income or status.

Third, we do not conduct interview with adolescents in New York City because we lack of social connections here. All of us are foreigners, which means we ourselves do not possess knowledge of being a teenager in New York City either. Thus, it becomes hard for us to understand the inner perspectives of NYC adolescents. Another problem with the interviews, which is similar to the
second issue above, is that all interviewees are our friends. Perhaps us being both their friends and the interviewers may have impact on their answers, especially when the interview questions address their relationship with parents and their opinions about sex.

For further research in the future, we would suggest to improve this study design in these following ways.

First and foremost, fundings are necessary and can solve most problems that we encounter in the pilot study. If the research is financially supported, we can then choose several high schools in different parts of New York City and thus get a larger and more diverse sample. We may conduct interview with some of them, preferably with different gender, ethnic, and other identities. We can do the same thing in China if it is necessary.

Another way to improve is to cooperate with some well-known organizations or institutes and send surveys to people through their networks. Such cooperation would not only widen the range of our sample, but also can help us to gain trust from people. Our research results will only be applicable when they tell the truth in surveys and interviews.
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8. Parent–adolescent sex communication in China

Liying Zhang, Xiaoming Li, Iqbal H. Shah, Wendy Baldwin & Bonita Stanton
Appendix 1 Survey Questionnaire

1. Please indicate your gender below. A. Male B. Female

2. Your age __________

3. Please indicate how you identify yourself.
   A. American Indian or Alaska Native
   B. Asian
   C. Black or African American
   D. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   E. White
   F. Hispanic or Latino

4. Do you have any religious preference?
   A. Christian
   B. Catholic
   C. Buddhist
   D. Muslim
   E. Others

5. Please indicate your parents’ marital status (relative to each other). A. Married
   B. Separated
   C. Divorced
   D. Never Married
   E. Widowed
   F. Civil Union/Domestic Partners

6. With whom do you make your permanent home?
   A. Father only
   B. Mother only
   C. Both parents
   D. Legal guardian
   E. Other

7. Have your parents ever talked to you directly about the topic of sexuality? A. Yes, they talk
   about it a lot
   B. Yes, they mention it sometimes
   C. No, but they indicate in some ways
   D. No, they never talk to me about it
8. In what age do your parents expect you to have your first intercourse?  
A. Before high school  B. During high school years  C. During college  D. After college  E. After marriage  F. Not sure  

9. How have your parents talked about a condom (or any kind of birth control) use in sexual relations?  
A. They have often emphasized.  B. They have once reminded.  
C. They haven’t show clear attitude or never talked about it.  

10. To what extent do you agree with their opinions towards sexual relationship?  
A. Totally agree  B. Partially agree  
C. Partially disagree  D. Totally disagree  
E. I don’t know their views.  

11. Have you ever had sexual relation?  
A. Yes  B. No  

Please answer Question 11-16 if you chose A. Yes for Question 11. Please answer Question 17-20 if you choose B. No for Question 11.  

12. How old were you when you had your first intercourse?  

13. How long have you known your first sexual partner when you had sex with him/her?  

14. How often has a condom (or any kind of birth control) been used when you have sex?  
A. Always without any exception  B. Usually but with a few exceptions  
C. Often, depending on the actual case  D. Seldom or never
15. Would you consider maintaining sexual relationships with more than one partner at one time?
A. Very likely if I ever want to  B. Likely but I am not sure
C. Unlikely but it depends  D. Very unlikely

16. When do you think is the most appropriate time to have one’s first intercourse?

17. How old would you have your first intercourse if you can freely choose?
A. Before high school  B. During high school years  C. During college  D. After college  E. After marriage

18. How long would you know your first sexual partner when you are going to sex with him/her?
A. I don’t know him/her at all  
B. Less than a month  
C. Less than three months  
D. Less than a year  E. More than a year

19. How often would you use a condom (or any kind of birth control) if you are going to have sex?
A. Always without any exception  B. Usually but with a few exceptions  
C. Often, depending on the actual case  D. Seldom or never

20. Would you consider to maintain sexual relationships with more than one partner at one time?
A. Very likely if I ever want to  B. Likely but I am not sure  
C. Unlikely but it depends  D. Very unlikely
Appendix 2 Interview Questions

1. Do you usually chat with your parents?
   - if yes: what aspect do you talk about? do you talk about condom or any kind of birth control?
   - if no: is there any event that indicates your parents’ attitude? what do you think is the possible reason you haven’t engaged in such a conversation?

2. What is your parents’ attitude towards topics related to sex?

3. What do you think about sex? (necessary or not)

4. Do you think that parents should talk to their children about sex?

5. Would you tell your parents when you have your first intercourse?

6. Do you think your parents have the right to intervene your sexual relationship?

7. What influence your views on sexual relationship?

8. What do you think about your relationship with your parents? (friends?)

9. What would you do if your sexual partner asks to have intercourse without using birth control?