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The Effects of Parental Upbringing on Collegiate Sexual Activity

Courtney Watson, Psychology

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Lisa Schulte, Psychology

Abstract
The present research examined the effects of parental openness and support on the sexual activity of college students. The effects of parental reaction to collegiate sexual activity were also examined. It was hypothesized that students with supportive and open parents would engage in sexually responsible behavior. On the other hand, students with parents who were not open and unsupportive were expected to describe a negative parental reaction to their sexual histories. Although the study found no significant effects in relation to sexual activity, results indicated significant effects of parental openness on parental reaction. Further research is needed to examine a larger sample and to investigate what type of parenting leads to more sexually responsible college students.

Key Terms: Sexual Responsibility, Collegiate Sexuality, Parental Openness, Parental Support

Sexual desires are as innate as the desire for food and shelter. One of the most basic instincts, the continuation of our species relies on procreation. All animals engage in sexual activity to pass on their genes, and it is the individuals with the most offspring who are deemed successful by evolutionary standards. Because copulation is an inherent human desire, coupled with the fact that coitus (vaginal-penile intercourse) is a pleasurable experience, it sensibly follows that emotional response to sexual activity would be positive. Yet, the development of a healthy sexuality is a process complicated by a variety of factors. First, the media is saturated with sexual content: in commercials, billboard ads, and news reports. The commonly used phrase “sex sells” suggests a more liberal and accepting approach to sexuality within American society today (Brown, 2002). Thus, sexuality is portrayed in a highly desirable light. For the most part, the more prominent American religious denominations take a conservative approach to sexuality (United States Census Bureau, 2008), where sexual experimentation, masturbation, premarital sex, and other sexual exploration are deemed inappropriate and highly discouraged. Similarly, religiosity is continuously cited as a major contributor to erotophobia, a negative disposition towards sex and sexual stimuli, and general discomfort with sexuality (Cate & Christopher, 1984; Fisher & Hall, 1988). Secondly, familial environment plays an important role in the sexualization of adolescents (Cate & Christopher, 1984). On the one hand, some individuals are raised with a parenting style that emphasizes erotophilic tendencies, a positive disposition towards sex and sexual stimuli, such as exhibiting comfort with sexuality, openness in talking about sex, and positive attitudes regarding sexual content. In contrast, other individuals are raised by parents with erotophobic tendencies such as exhibiting discomfort with sexuality, reluctance and avoidance of sexual topics, and negative attitudes regarding sexual content (Byrne, Fisher, Kelley & White, 1988). These factors, in conjunction with the degree of erotophilia within the household in which one lives, can promote or hinder sexual growth.
Literature Review

The type of relationship individuals have with their parents is noted as a paramount factor in sexual decision-making (Cate & Christopher, 1984; Forehand & Kotchick, 1999; Rodgers, 1999). Parental erotophobia and/or erotophilia greatly influence the sexual activity of youth. For instance, Forehand and Kotchick (1999) found that the more a mother communicated with her child the fewer sexual partners the child had. In addition, the mother’s views on sex were directly related to how often her child engaged in sexual activity and how many partners the child had. Parental monitoring has also been found to have an effect on sexual activity; the more a parent knows about their child’s whereabouts and the company the child keeps, the more likely the child will be sexually responsible (Rodgers, 1999). In addition, Fisher and Hall (1988) found that parental attitudes about sexuality were significantly similar to those of their children.

College is commonly considered a time of freedom and experimentation. College students gain a certain freedom not previously held while under the watchful eyes of their parents. For instance, Murry (1994) noted parental supervision makes daughters less likely to engage in sexual activity at an early age. In addition, with the necessary use of technology on college campuses and the ever increasing prevalence of sexual content found though media outlets, college students are exposed to a high level of sexually permissive content (Brown, 2002). According to Cate, Long, Angera and Draper (1993), the more sexually permissive young adults are, the more likely they are to engage in sexual activity. More than ever, sexuality is emerging as an important aspect of college life. Bell and Coughhey’s (1980) research indicated that premarital sexual activity increased in college women over the span of thirty years. They concluded that lessened restrictions on college females, where they were allowed male visitation in the dorms, access to birth control and newly relaxed gender roles, fostered a more sexually admissible environment. Today, students’ premarital sexual experiences are even more prevalent.

While overall parenting styles (i.e. democratic, authoritarian or permissive) are important in considering sexuality, this study focused exclusively on parental support and openness and their effects on the sexuality of college students. For the present research, an open parent was defined as a parent who has an open line of communication with his/her child. The content of the parent-child communication, whether positive or negative, was not used to determine openness. A supportive parent was considered to be one who offers assistance when needed, whether financial or emotional, for the benefit of their child. Thus for the purposes of this study, a parent who reluctantly provides support for their child was still considered a supportive parent. Sexual activity was defined as: coitus, oral stimulation, and anal stimulation. Sexual responsibility was defined in the study as the consistent use of condoms, avoiding contraction of sexually transmitted infections (STI), and having less than seven total sexual partners. Another important aspect of parental upbringing is parental reaction to sexual history, where sexual history is any sexual activity that has occurred in the subject’s past. Subjects may believe that their parent will have negative, positive or neutral reactions after discovering the detail of their sexual history. Investigating the effects of family involvement on college students’ sexual activity, this research hypothesized that individuals who have open and supportive parents will engage in sexually responsible behavior. In addition, this study hypothesized that parents who are not open and unsupportive will have a negative reaction to their child’s sexual history.
Method

Participants

Participants were 84 undergraduates attending a Southeastern university. All participants were African American. The majority of subjects (63 percent) were female. A little more than half of the participants reported being close to their mothers (58 percent), and 27 percent reported being close to both parents. Sixty-six percent of the subjects were single, and 26 percent reported being in a committed relationship. More than three-fourths of the participants reported having engaged in coitus (76 percent), 63 percent of participants reported engaging in oral sex, and eight percent of the participants said that they engaged in anal sex. The mean number of sexual partners was 4.22 (SD=4.39). A general assessment of sexual responsibility as related to condom usage and contraction of a STI is provided in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>General Assessment of Sexual Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unprotected Sex</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STI Contraction</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually Responsible*</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 11 participants did not respond

When inquiring about how subjects felt about their sexual activity, 76 percent used a positive word (e.g. “safe”) and 16 percent used a negative word (e.g. “regretful”). Forty-five percent of participants believed their parent would use a positive word in response to their sexual history, and 44 percent said their parent would use a negative word.

Materials

A 35-item survey assessing parental openness, parental support, and sexual responsibility was administered. Demographic items assessed gender and to which parent the subject felt closest (e.g. mother, father, or both parents). Parental openness was assessed with the use of six items (e.g. “If you engage in oral sex, do your parents know you about it?”, “Have you discussed condom usage with your parents?”). An additional item asked participants to rate their relationship with their parents on a scale (1 = “talk about anything” to 7 = “don’t talk about personal issues”). The questions were scored and a midpoint of 11.5 was derived allowing for those who scored above the midpoint to be classified as having an “open parent” and those who scored below the midpoint to be classifies as having a “parent who is not open.” Appendix A shows the 35-item survey.

Five questions determined parental support. For instance, “How supportive are your parents of your personal decisions?”, where responses ranged from “very supportive” to
“unsupportive” and “Rate what your parent(s) approval of your sexual practices would be,” where higher scores indicated disapproval. Questions such as, “My parents always have my best interest at heart” were also included. Responses ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” The questions were scored, and a midpoint of 13.5 was derived leaving those who scored below the midpoint to be classified as having an “unsupportive parent” and those who scored above the midpoint to be classified as having a “supportive parent.”

Sexual responsibility was determined with four questions (e.g. “How many sexual partners have you always used a condom with?”, “Have you ever contracted a STD?”). A midpoint of seven was determined based on the participants’ scores. Those scoring above seven were determined to be sexually irresponsible and those who scored seven and below were determined to be sexually responsible. To determine parental reaction to sexual history, items such as “My parent would be happy about my sexual history” and “My parent would NOT be embarrassed by my sexual history” were used. Selections of “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” indicated a positive reaction, and those of “Strongly Disagree” or “Disagree” indicated a negative reaction. An open-ended question was also provided for subjects to describe in their own words their parent’s response to their sexual history. Due to the fact that a negative response indicated disagreement with the participant’s sexual past, and a neutral response did not indicate a strong adverse parental reaction to the child’s sexual history, neutral or indifferent responses to the open-ended question were classified as positive.

Results
A two way ANOVA was performed to determine the effects of parental openness and parental support on collegiate sexual responsibility. Results for both parental openness ($F(1) = 1.20, p > .05$) and parental support ($F(1) = .36, p > .05$) were non-significant. Means are presented in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental Openness and Support on Sexual Responsibility</th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>no</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$m$</td>
<td>$sd$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parent supportive</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parent open</td>
<td>5.31</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because there were no parents who fell into the category of not open and supportive, an interaction effect could not be examined.

A two way ANOVA was performed to determine whether parental openness and parental support were related to a positive or negative parental response to a participant’s sexual history. Results for parental openness and parental reaction were non-significant ($F(1) = .89, p > .05$). Results for parental support and parental reaction were significant ($F(1) = 4.13, p < .05$). This suggests that parental support is a good indicator of parental reaction to a participant’s sexual history. Means are presented in Table 3.
## Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental Openness and Support on Parental Reaction</th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>no</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>m</td>
<td>sd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parent supportive</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parent open</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to empty cells in the SPSS results, an interaction effect could not be examined.

### Discussion

In determining whether parental support indicates a positive or negative parental reaction in response to a participant’s sexual history, the results were statistically significant. Interestingly, the means disprove the hypothesis. With higher numbers indicating a negative reaction to a participant’s sexual history, supportive parents were perceived to have more negative reactions. Perhaps individuals whose parents are supportive of their sexual activity tend to be more sexually responsible, but also more sexually experienced (Forehand & Kotchick, 1999). Cate and Christopher (1984) found as one’s sexual experience increases, the importance of affection in sexual decision-making decreases. When considering this, perhaps those students whose parents were supportive also had more sexual encounters with low affection and intimacy, activity that they felt their parents would view unfavorably. In addition, increased sexual experience may correlate with sexual irresponsibility, especially if an individual has a high number of sexual partners. The more sexual partners one has, the greater the opportunity to engage in unprotected sex and possibility of STI exposure.

The hypothesis that parental support and parental openness would be indicators of sexual responsibility was not supported. This study’s findings are contrary to past research (e.g., Forehand & Kotchick, 1999). However, trends in the current data do support past research. Overall, participants whose parents were not open and not supportive were less sexually responsible than those whose parents were open and supportive. This is consistent with the hypothesis that sexual responsibility is more common among those who have parents who are more open and supportive. The findings related to parental openness as an indicator of parental reaction to the sexual history were also non-significant. This suggests that there may be no difference in parental reaction, positive or negative, among parents classified as open versus not open.

There were several limitations to the present research. The fact that all participants were African American college students limits external validity of the present findings. Also, the small sample size should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. The university at which the study was performed could also have an environmental influence on the sexual activity of its students. All participants attended a black, catholic institution. The number of sexually inexperienced students participating in the study might be attributed to the fact that conservative parents may be more likely to send their children to such an institution. Students whose parents
are conservative, are more likely to be conservative as well, and conservative students are less likely to engage in sexual activity or sexually risky behavior (Fisher & Hall, 1988). Another limitation of the study, then, is that religiosity was not measured and could not be investigated as a possible confounding variable.

This study can be expanded in several ways. For instance, an investigation questioning whether parents who send their children to college are more supportive of their children in general should take place. If supportive (as compared to unsupportive) parents are more likely to send their children to college, this might indicate that the current research does not contain an adequate sample of unsupportive parents for analysis. In addition, perhaps different results would be derived if the study was repeated and the subject pool was limited exclusively to individuals who had sexual experience. Future research could continue the examination of past findings to discover exactly why those with parents who are open and supportive have more sexually responsible children. The results of such research could be used in parenting classes helping parents understand what they should do to ensure their child engages in sexually responsible behavior. Information related to what keeps youth sexually responsible can also be important in sex education courses.
References


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Appendix A

1. Gender:_____________________

2. Relationship status:
   a. Single
   b. Causal uncommitted relationship
   c. Committed relationship
   d. Engaged
   e. Married

3. Which parent are you currently closest to?
   a. Mother
   b. Father
   c. Both
   d. Other: __________________________

4. Relationship with parent(s):
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   talk about avoid certain don’t talk about
   anything topics personal issues

5. How supportive is your parent(s) of your personal decisions?
   a. Very supportive
   b. Somewhat supportive
   c. Somewhat unsupportive
   d. Unsupportive

6. Would you say your sexual practices are influenced more by your parents or yourself?
   1 2 3 4 5 6
   Self Parent

7. Rate what you believe your parents approval of your sexual practices would be?
   1 2 3 4 5 6
   Approve Disapprove

8. Do you engage in vaginal-penile sex? Yes or No

9. Do you engage in oral sex? Yes or No

10. Do you engage in anal sex? Yes or No

11. Do your parent(s) know if you engage in vaginal-penile sex?
    a. Yes
    b. No
c. Do not engage

12. Do your parent(s) know if you engage in oral sex?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Do not engage

13. Do your parent(s) know if you engage in anal sex?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Do not engage

14. How often do you engage in unprotected sex?
   a. Never
   b. Rarely
   c. Sometimes
   d. Most times
   e. Always

15. How many sexual partners have you had? ____

16. How many sexual partners have you always used a condom with? ____

17. Have you ever contracted a STD? ____ If so, how many times? ____

18. Have you discussed condom usage with your parent(s)? Yes or no?

19. Have you discussed STD testing with your parent(s)? Yes or no?

20. At which point do you feel you were more under the influence of your parents: high school or college?

21. How many sexual partners had you had by the end of your senior year in high school?

22. How similar is your sexual experience now to what it was in high school?
   
   1  2  3  4  5
   Same   Different

23. How would you describe your sexual relationships in college?
   a. One monogamous relationship
   b. A series of short monogamous relationships
   c. A series of short uncommitted relationships
   d. Various uncommitted occurrences
   e. No sexual relationship

24. In one word how do you feel about your sexual history?
25. In one word how would your parent(s) feel about your sexual history?

26. My parents would NOT be disappointed in my sexual history.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Disagree
   d. Strongly Disagree

27. My parents would describe my sexual history as normal.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Disagree
   d. Strongly Disagree

28. My parents would be proud of my sexual history.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Disagree
   d. Strongly Disagree

29. My parents would NOT be embarrassed about my sexual history.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Disagree
   d. Strongly Disagree

30. My parents would be happy about my sexual history.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Disagree
   d. Strongly Disagree

31. My parents would be indifferent about my sexual history.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Disagree
   d. Strongly Disagree

32. My parents would describe my sexual history as safe.
   a. Strongly Agree
   b. Agree
   c. Disagree
   d. Strongly Disagree