

Parent-Child Communication and Adolescent Sexual Behaviour among the Yoruba Ethno-cultural group of Nigeria

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Abstract

Adolescents' sexual behaviour has become a global reproductive health concern especially in the developing countries. Undoubtedly, Parent-Child communication remains a vital means by which parents transmit cultural values and monitor the sexual behaviour of their children. Since the extent of the qualitative manner in which parents are involved in their children's lives are critical factors in the prevention of sexual risk-taking behaviour among adolescents. This paper investigated the characteristics pattern and how the quality of communications processes among the dyads of parents and their adolescent children influence adolescent sexual behaviour among the Yoruba Ethno-cultural group of Nigeria. The sample consisted of 588 adolescents between the age range of 12 and 22. The study found that a higher percentage of the males (79.3%) agreed that their first sexual experience was by choice while (88.9%) of their females counterparts claimed that they were forced into their first sexual debut. It was further revealed that irrespective of gender and sexual experience of respondents the quality of parent-child communication on sexual matters was rated as poor and inadequate among the Yoruba traditional society of Nigeria. A clarion call to all stakeholders was advocated on promoting positive parent-child family interaction as a strategy for breaking the cultural stereotype inhibiting open and receptive parent-child sexual communication for raising sexually healthy adolescents.

Keywords: Adolescents, Parental communication, Sexual discussion, Sex-related matters

1. Introduction and background

Sexual activity places young people in Nigeria and indeed among the Yoruba's at an increased risk of infection with Human Immunodeficiency syndrome virus (HIV), other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), as well as the potential for unplanned pregnancy [1]. The reasons why young people engage in sexual activity are complex and diverse and have been attributed to various social context and familial factors [2, 3]. Contextual factors that increase or decrease susceptibility of young people to these outcomes includes gender dynamics in relationships and within families, poverty, and cultural norms. In spite of the overwhelming evidence [4], of the need to involve parents as part of the comprehensive strategy for improving young people's health and development, there has been conflicting findings on whether parents in traditional African communities with particular reference to the Yoruba Ethno-cultural group of South Western Nigeria engage in sexual-communication with their children and the qualitative merit of the effect of such communication on young people's sexual behaviour. Many parents in Yoruba socio-cultural milieu confuse the concept of sexuality with teaching on sexual intercourse, hence discussion on sex-related matters dovetails, to mere encouragement or admonition to their adolescents to avoid pre-marital sex. This further exacerbates the culture of silence on sex-related matters in many homes as parents do perceive that discussing sex-related matters with adolescents is tantamount to encouraging sexual intercourse among them.

Studies have shown that the recent failures of previous interventions in Nigeria [1] and elsewhere [5,6] to show a positive impact on sexual behaviour of adolescents may be explained in terms of the effects of the prevailing African cultural belief about human sexuality which is shrouded in obscurity and myths. As noted by other authors [7], determinants of sexual behaviour are not only a function of the individual but of structural and environmental factors as well. A large proportion of studies mainly from developed countries have been conducted on how parents influence adolescent sexual behaviour [8, 9, 10 11]. There is also a growing body of literature from sub-Saharan Africa [4, 12, 13, 14] on the role of parents in young people's behaviour. While the above studies have shown some effects, they are too scanty to be conclusive. These studies, have recommended parental involvement in guiding adolescents in making responsible decisions around sex [15, 16]; however, despite these efforts there is an apparent gap in the literature on the status and the quality of parents-child sexual communication among the Yoruba's cultural sub-group of Nigeria. Accordingly, this study investigated Parent-Child Communication and Adolescent Sexual behaviour among the Yoruba Ethno-cultural group of Nigeria.

2. Sexuality among the Yoruba Ethno-Cultural Group of Nigeria

The Yoruba people are one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa. The majority of the Yoruba speak the Yoruba language (Yoruba: *èdèe Yorùbá; èdè*). The Yoruba constitute between 30 and 50 million individuals

throughout West Africa and are found predominantly in Nigeria and make up around 21% of its population [17]. The Yoruba are the main ethnic group in the Nigerian federal states of Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo; they also constitute a sizable proportion of Kwara, Kogi and Edo states of south western states of Nigeria. The dynamics of parent-child relationships and communications is greatly influenced by the culture and social environment in which they are. Parent-child communication on sexual issues remains a challenging issue in Nigeria as well as in many sub-Saharan African countries. Ikpe, in a paper purported to give a historical dimension of human sexuality in Nigeria revealed that discussions pertaining to human sexuality are considered a very sensitive subject. As a result, parents cannot directly discuss sexual matters with their children. He noted that it was “regarded as obscene, the words, as well as the subjects, more often than not centre on or revolve around human genitals, sexual desire, or sexual acts. Forbidding their indiscriminate use, there are taboos that make sex, on which the reproduction of society depends, sacrosanct [18].

The culture of silence surrounding matters pertaining to sex are archetypical of the majority of Nigerian society including the Yoruba ethno-cultural society [15]. Among the Yoruba traditional communities in Nigerian the rules of the game has been to consign sexuality to the realm of marriage. Sexuality has been full of silence and discretions whereby sexual discussions between parents and children have not been possible. Sexual discussions have been, in most instances, closed in languages which are not explicit to the uninitiated, reflecting on matters of human sexuality in traditional societies in Nigeria in the past documents as follows:

“It was a taboo to discuss sexual matters in front of children until they were ready for their passage to adulthood. Although children recognised differences between the genders, they were not supposed to know what the usefulness of such differences was for; except with regard to the allocation of household roles. They were aware that women brought forth babies but how that actually came about was kept a secret” [15]

Parent-child open discussion about sexual matters was regarded as non-conventional among the Yoruba traditional society. Verbal expressions of sexuality come as a rule, in euphemisms. The names of the sexual organs are not mentioned directly. In fact, it was considered obscene for people to identify the private part of the female body *the vagina* by its name rather the female organ is referred to as *oju ara obinrin* (literally, ‘the eye of a woman’s body’) while the male organ is called *nnkan omokunrin* (literally, ‘a man’s thing’). Sexual intercourse and the methods of doing it are not discussed openly with children but it is taught to them cautiously at the appropriate time, in closed groups. This is because some topics are regarded as taboo in African culture [19]. The culture of silence therefore created a communication gap between children and their parents in the family and it accounted for the reason why children were punished for misbehaviours and could not question their parents-especially the girls.

It is however important to note that, arising from, globalisation, modernisation, rapid urbanisation in African societies, the mass media and recent international agenda and consensus goals of development, African conceptions of sex and human sexuality have come under attack [20]. Hence, the negative consequences of sexually transmitted diseases which include, among other things, HIV and AIDS, teenage pregnancies, rape and other forms of violent sexual behaviour demand a re-thinking in the way in which the African people view sex and human sexuality. Consequently, there is a need to transmit proper, accurate and scientific knowledge to young people and for parents to engage in straight talk with their children, of calling a spade a spade. What this means is that there should be an open and frank discussion with children in the home. The genitalia and sexual activities must be called by name as they are and not by euphemistic terms. The stark message which children will receive from parents will equip them with the necessary knowledge they need to live an authentic life which focuses on behaviour change. In order to do this, sex education educators and parents must find a way of addressing young people in a language that they can understand in order to enable them to make informed decisions that can help them to tackle decisively the dreaded consequences of the HIV and AIDS in the world today.

Thus the following questions are addressed in the study:

- i. What is the prevailing characteristic pattern of adolescent sexual behaviour among the Yoruba ethno-cultural sub-group of Nigeria?
- ii. How do adolescents perceive the quality of sexual communication with their parents?
- iii. What is the influence of parental sexual communication on adolescents’ sexual behaviour?

3. Methodology

Survey research design was employed for the study. The population for this study consisted of all the adolescent students in Ondo State secondary schools.

The sample comprised 588 students selected using multistage sampling technique. The first stage involved a random selection of three Local Government Areas representing each of the three senatorial districts in the state. Co-educational secondary schools were purposively selected from each of the three Local Government Areas.

Finally, 200 male and female students were systematically selected from the sampled schools. Altogether a total of 600 questionnaire were administered out of which 588 were returned.

Data were collected using a self-developed questionnaire titled 'Parent-Child Sexual Communication Questionnaire' (PCSCQ). Section A of the instrument elicited information on Parents' demographic data while Section B was a four point Likert scale questionnaire which elicited information on characteristic pattern and adolescent perception of quality of parent-child sexual communication. The instrument was validated using experts judgment. It was also tested for reliability. A reliability coefficient of 0.78 was obtained. The instrument was self-administered and retrieved from the respondents immediately. Data were analysed using chi-square, simple percentages and weighted average.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Characteristic Pattern of Adolescents' sexual activity

Table I showed that a total of 181 adolescents consisting of 97 males and 84 females respectively indicated that they have had sexual experience. The bulk of (31.5%) of the adolescents had their first sexual intercourse between the ages of 12 and 13. This implies that adolescents sexual risk-taking behaviours is most prevalent at this age when majority of them are not psychologically and emotionally matured to handle sexual issues. It was also apparent that male adolescents in the study engaged in sex more than their girls counterparts, the data on intention at first sexual encounter shows that (70.8%) of the males planned to engage in sexual intercourse at first sexual encounter, while only (40%) indicated that they never really intended to have sexual intercourse the first time it occurred. Whereas only (29.2%) of the females premeditated sexual involvement at first sexual encounter while (60%) did not. This finding thus explains why parents in Yoruba traditional societies are usually more protective with their girl child. The observed early involvement of adolescents in sexual intercourse accounts for the high level of vulnerability to STD infection and reproductive health hazards among secondary school adolescents in the study area.

Furthermore, finding indicated that (56.9%) of the respondents reported that they had their first sexual initiation as a result of boyfriend/girlfriend relationship, Play/classmate sexual relationship accounted for 34.8% while those who had their first sexual experience with elderly neighbour/acquaintance accounted for (3.9%). With regards to the circumstance that led to sexual debut, (45.3%) of the adolescents willingly surrender themselves for sexual intercourse, (34.8%) were persuaded, while 19.9% claimed they were forced into their first sexual encounter.

However the gender difference in the circumstance that led to first sexual encounter in this study should be of critical concern because a higher percentage of the males (79.3%) agreed that they had sexual intercourse by choice whereas (88.9%) of their females counterparts claimed that they were forced into their first sexual experience while only (20.7%) of the girls willingly surrender themselves. Voluntary involvement in sex could also be problematic especially among girls, as consent could have been elicited through subtle pressure, gifts and enticement; particularly when viewed against the background of data on type of partnership in sexual act. This finding reveals that female adolescents are at the more vulnerable to risky sexual initiation and experimentation than their male counterparts. This finding thus validated the earlier submission of [21] who noted that young women experience a high risk of unplanned pregnancy and reproductive health challenges.

TABLE 1: Characteristic Pattern of Adolescents' sexual activity

Characteristics	Male (n = 97)		Female (n = 84)		Total (n = 181)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Age at first sexual encounter						
7 yrs & below	7	3.9	5	2.8	12	6.7
8 – 9	9	5.0	5	2.8	14	7.7
10 – 11	18	9.9	13	7.1	31	17.1
12 – 13	29	16.0	28	15.5	57	31.5
14 – 15	20	11.0	15	8.3	35	19.3
16 – 17	14	7.7	18	9.9	32	17.7
Intention at first sexual encounter						
Premeditated	63	70.8	26	29.2	89	49.2
Not premeditated	34	40.0	58	60.0	92	50.8
Partner at sexual debut						
Boyfriend/girlfriend	53	51.5	50	48.5	103	56.9
Playmate/classmate	41	65.1	22	34.9	63	34.8
Elderly neighbour/acquaintance	3	28.6	12	71.4	15	3.9
Circumstance leading to sexual debut						
Willingly	65	79.3	17	20.7	82	45.3
Persuaded	28	44.4	35	55.6	63	34.8
Forced	4	11.1	32	88.9	36	19.9

4.2. Adolescents' perception of quality of parent-child sexual communication

The study also examined the quality of parent-child communication as perceived by their adolescent children. The result as presented in table 2 revealed that 117(19.9%) of the 181 respondents who have had sexual experience affirmed that communication with their parents on sexual issues was not open and receptive while 64(10.9%) claimed otherwise. On the contrary, a significant percentage of 281 (47.8%) of the respondents who have never had sex indicated that sexual communication with their parents was not open and receptive while 126 (21.4%) agreed that sexual communication was open and receptive. What appear worrisome is that majority of the two categories of respondents noted that their parents were not always ready to listen to them. This trend is indicative of the fact that most parents are not accessible to their children even when the children are eagerly willing to spend quality time with them to discuss sexual issues affecting them. This assertion is also corroborated by the result of chi statistics which show commonality in the opinion of the respondents on their perception of the quality of parent-child communication on sexual matters.

While comparing the views of the respondents who have never had sex and those who have had sexual experience, 318 (54.1%) and 129 (21.9%) respectively indicated that they were not satisfied with the quality of sexual communication between them and their parents. In other words, irrespective of whether adolescents have had sexual experience or not respondents rated the quality of parent-child communication as poor and inadequate among the Yoruba traditional society of Nigeria.

TABLE 2: Adolescents' perception of quality of parent-child sexual communication

Characteristics	Never had sex (n = 407)		Have had sex (n = 181)		Total (n = 588)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Open and intimate Parent-child discussion						
(Sexual communication with my parents is not open and receptive)						
Agree	281	47.8	117	19.9	398	67.7
Disagree	126	21.4	64	10.9	190	22.3
<i>Chi-Square=3.607 d.f = 3 P = 0.307</i>						
Parental readiness for sexual communication						
(My Parents are always ready to listen me)						
Agree	157	26.7	72	12.3	229	39.0
Disagree	250	42.5	109	18.6	359	61.1
<i>Chi-Square=1.443 d.f = 3 P = 0.695</i>						
Not satisfied with how me & my parents talk						
(I find it difficult to discuss sexual problems with my parents)						
Not satisfied	318	54.1	129	21.9	447	76.0
Satisfied	89	15.1	52	8.9	141	24.0
<i>Chi-Square=8.285 d.f = 3. P = 0.040</i>						

P<0.05

Conclusion

The mysteries of sex and human sexuality seem to be well spread across Africa. In most African societies and cultures Studies which have been carried out in most African countries have found that both rural and urban parents, and even the professional community, feel that sexuality can only be discussed through a third party, who might be an aunt, an uncle or grandparent.

In this study qualitative data on parent-child communication and adolescents' sexual behaviour have further confirmed that discussions pertaining to human sexuality are considered a very sensitive subject. As a result, parents cannot directly discuss sexual matters with their children. Findings from this study was affirmative that irrespective of whether adolescents have had sexual experience or not respondents rated the quality of parent-child communication as poor and inadequate among the Yoruba traditional society of Nigeria. Despite the effort of international organizations to break the culture of silence as regards sexual communication. However, most of these efforts are targeted at the teachers, learners and other educational practitioner. With all the interventions heard about, a particular group which is very important appears to have been left out, and these are the parents. Parents are the initial foundation of character formation and the primary agent of socialization for adolescents, there is an urgent need therefore for interventions that target this group.

More than ever before there is an urgent need for all stakeholders to focus on how the family can be better repositioned to play it role in raising sexually healthy adolescents. Children are born into the family and their socialization, which includes sexuality, begins from there. Once the family fails in sexual socialization, other institutions in society stand little chance of succeeding.

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