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PREVIEW

**COMMUNITY AND MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ADOLESCENT
SEXUAL ABSTINENCE**

by

Mary Cope Nelson

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Interdepartmental Area of Human Resources and Family Sciences

Under the Supervision of Professor Douglas Abbott

Lincoln, Nebraska

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Community and Media Influence on Adolescent

Sexual Abstinence

BY

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Community and Media Influences on Adolescent Sexual Abstinence

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University of Nebraska, 1997

Advisor: Douglas A. Abbott

Many studies have shown that unmarried teen sexual activity is frequently harmful to teens and society. Thirty years of sex education programs have failed to decrease harmful consequences of teen sex. This study found evidence that this failure results from building programs on the following false assumptions: 1) teen sexual activity is natural and inevitable, 2) negative consequences of teen sex are preventable, 3) adolescents are primarily rational, and 4) accurate information equals a decline in harmful behavior.

Past studies have investigated family, peer and intrapersonal influences on sexual activity. The present study adds the concepts of teen perception of community norms, and media (television, music, and movies) as additional sources of influence. Specifically, this study sought to answer the questions: 1) does teen perception of community norms about adolescent sexual activity influence self-reported sexual abstinence/experience; 2) does the quantity and/or quality of television, music and movies affect sexual abstinence/experience; and 3) what factors, or combination of factors are most likely to result in teen sexual abstinence. Constructs included in the model were family influences, peer influences, teens moral view of unmarried sexual

activity (risks/rewards), community influences, media influences, and self-reported age of first sexual intercourse.

A survey questionnaire was given to 444 undergraduates at a midwestern university. Analysis of variance, regression, factor analysis, and discriminant analysis was used for data analysis. Community influence and aspects of television, music and movies influences were significant components of a model of adolescent abstinence. Parental, peer and moral view constructs were also significant. Although many variables significantly affected abstinence, the following variables were found to have greatest weight relative to the model as a whole: age teen first dated, television quality (night/day soaps, MTV, talk shows) number of movies, fear of negative emotional consequences (moral view), and peer example.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

Chapter I: Introduction

Adolescent sexual activity is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon presenting some unique problems to researchers. Although sexual activity is often classified as deviant behavior in adolescents, it differs from other problem behaviors, such as violence and illegal drug use, in that these are seen as harmful for all humans at all times, while sex is recognized as a normal and helpful part of a mature, loving adult relationship..

Researchers who study teen sexual issues have also been hampered by the lack of theoretical consensus regarding the cause of the problem (Olsen, Jensen, & Greaves, 1991). While some accept adolescent sexual intercourse as a given and focus on decreasing negative consequences (i.e. contraception, abortion etc.), others view sexual activity as developmentally inappropriate for teenagers (Olsen, 1988; Sainsbury, 1993).

Although sexual behavior in general, and adolescent sexual behavior in specific, has been the focus of much research; few studies have specifically targeted adolescents who are not sexually active. This seems to reflect a general research bias towards creating models studying deviancy and comparing it to healthy behavior, rather than the other way around. Be that as it may, the purpose of this work is to extend and clarify theory in the area of adolescent sexual abstinence.

Additionally, most past researchers and sex educators have focused exclusively on the adolescent's personal world (beliefs, feelings, family, and peers) and have excluded broader cultural forces. The disappointing results of thirty years of efforts in teen sexual education warrants including larger cultural forces in research models, as well as examining the basic assumptions of sex education programs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this work is to extend and clarify theory in the area of adolescent sexual abstinence. Although family, peer, and various intrapersonal influences on adolescent sexual activity have been examined in the past, little work has been done on broader cultural influences. The present study attempts to help fill that gap by adding the concepts of adolescent perception of community sexual expectations, and exposure to media as other sources of influence. Specifically, this study seeks to answer three major questions: 1) is there a connection between adolescent perception of community norms and adolescent sexual abstinence/activity, 2) is there a connection between the media and sexual abstinence/activity, and 3) what other factors, including parental, peer and teen moral view of sex, or combination of factors are most likely to result in teen sexual abstinence.

Definition of Terms

Adolescence refers to the chronological time span from twelve or thirteen to the early twenties, "with wide individual and cultural variations" (Muus, 1968, p.4). The college students surveyed were asked specifically about their environment, beliefs and behavior of their high school years

Parental Influences in this study refer to the indirect and direct influences parents have on their children's sexual behavior. These include parental rules and restrictions, parental sexual expectations for their adolescents, parental sexual modeling, parental sexual standards, family structure, and family closeness.

Parental Rules and Restrictions refer to the "effective monitoring and supervision" (Simons, Whitbeck, Conger & Conger, 1991, p. 660) by parents of adolescent time, activities and peers. It also refers to parental rules governing privileges that allow youth interaction with peers and cultural experiences, and the amount of time the adolescent perceives he/she spends on household chores.

Parental Sexual Expectations refers to the youth's perception of his parents' approval or disapproval of their own adolescent child's sexual activity (Baker, Thalberg, & Morrison, 1988), and whether or not they expect the child to be abstinent.

Parental Sexual Modeling refers to the youth's perception of his parents' personal sexual rules and behavior, specifically whether or not the parent would have sex out of marriage, and what kind of relationship would be necessary for this to occur.

Family Structure refers to the parents' marital history. The most common division of family structure is between two-parent or one-parent homes, but includes the categories of single, married, divorced, remarried, or cohabitating.

Family Closeness in this study, refers to how much the adolescent likes being with his family and how often he/she can talk to his family about things that are important to him.

Peer Influence refers both to the adolescent's perception of the sexual behavior of best friends, and the pressure by friends to have sexual intercourse (Hayes, 1987).

Moral View of Sex is the adolescent's perception of the right or wrong, or "helpful or harmful" (Scoresby, 1989) consequences of unmarried teenagers having sex. Some

researchers call this the cost and rewards of sexual behavior (DiBlasio & Benda, 1992). This also includes the youth's personal sexual standard of when she/he thinks sexual intercourse is appropriate, as well as the youth's view of the overall (help/hurt) morality of teenage nonmarital sex.

Community Influence refers to the youth's perception of the local dominant cultural norms for adolescent sexual intercourse. These norms include the general community attitude about when sex is appropriate as well as the perceived acceptability of teen sex, and problems caused by teen sexual activity. The important influences in a community vary from place to place and therefore "community" will be partially self-defined by the adolescent and may include neighborhood location, church, race, and or ethnicity.

Media Influences in this study refers to the amount and different categories of television, music and movies. This not only pertains to the quality and quantity of the above media exposure on the youth, but the youth's perception of the media's treatment of sexual issues and the overall influence on sexual values and behavior.

Sexual Activity is defined in this study as sexual intercourse. While it is expected that the vast majority of adolescents will interpret this to mean vaginal intercourse between male and female, some adolescents may broaden the definition to include same sex, and or oral and anal intercourse. However, no further definition will be given in order to avoid normalizing or suggesting additional sexual behaviors to some teens.

Sexual Abstinence is defined as not having had sexual intercourse.

Distinctions will be made between those who had never experienced sexual intercourse,

and those who experienced sexual intercourse once during the high school years and then decided to abstain from further sexual experience for a certain period of time.

Delimitations and Limitations

Because of the sensitive nature of the survey and current community concerns regarding sexual behavior, no school board contacted was willing to allow high school students to participate. For similar reasons, the Institutional Review Board of the University of Nebraska-Omaha ruled that only college students over the age of nineteen could be surveyed. Therefore, the decision was made to survey college students nineteen and older. It was reasoned that most college students are either still adolescents, or close enough to adolescence to be able to accurately report the thinking and behavior of that time period. Additionally, since adolescence is often extended in the western world, surveying college students instead of high school students includes the thinking of older adolescents. It is not known if young adolescents would respond similarly. Since it is likely that older teens have fewer restrictions and supervision than younger teens, reasons for sexual abstinence or activity may differ over time. This study was not intended to measure those specific age differences.

Although a college sample excludes adolescents who do not try college, the vast majority of high school graduates in Nebraska go on to college. Therefore, this sample, though limited in some respects, should provide good information about adolescents. Also, because the research sample was taken from one large Midwestern university, the findings may not apply to all groups of adolescents. This study is also subject to those weaknesses inherent in cross-sectional sampling of the population.

Significance of Study

This study could assist educators, researchers and community leaders in several ways. First, this research studies factors that contribute to a helpful and healthy adolescent behavior: sexual abstinence. This focus on the "good" teenager is a shift away from a Freudian inspired tradition of studying pathology. This is philosophical shift and may influence others to focus on positive teen living. Second, chapter II presents a comprehensive review of research supported consequences of adolescent sexual activity. It also analyzes in a new way the professional assumptions of past sex education programs and the results of those programs. This information could be very helpful both to creators and teachers of sex education programs. Third, the research moves beyond the small personal world of the adolescent by including broader community and cultural influences. This is also a small step in the difficult task of measuring effects of a vast and complex media system. Finally, this study may provide professionals with greater understanding of adolescent abstinence/activity and the factors and combination of factors that contribute to abstinence.