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I Hear Something Different: Differences in Gender Messages from Parent-Child Communication about Sex with Late Adolescents

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Introduction

Many researchers have discussed the differences in parent-child communication with daughters versus parent-child communication with sons (Guilamo-Ramos et. al., 2007; Henrich et. al, 2006; Sneed, 2008). Communication about sex with adolescents can be difficult and uncomfortable for both parents and children. Previous researchers have indicated an interest in parent-child communication about sex because such discussions between parents and adolescents have been proven to assist with delaying or lessening the effects of adolescent sexual risk behavior (Guilamo-Ramos, Dittus, Jaccard, Goldberg, Casillas, & Bouris, 2006; Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Dittus, & Bouris, 2006; Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Dittus, Bouris, Holloway, Castillas, 2007; Henrich, Brookmeyer, Shrier, & Shahar, 2005; Hutchinson, 2002).

While there may be powerful implications for parent-child communication about sex with adolescents, the effects may be more powerful for female adolescents than for male adolescents. Specifically, when parents discuss sexual behaviors or sexual risk behaviors with their adolescents, females might be receiving more prohibitive messages than their male counterparts. However, little attention has been paid to the differences in parent-child communication about sex with daughters versus parent-child communication about sex with sons. The effect of differing messages can be powerful when considering the impact the messages can have on an adolescent’s sexual choices or relationships. According to Guerrero and Afifi (1995), gender of the parent is crucial in understanding parent-child interactions. In this vein, the gender of the child should also be considered in an effort to determine if there are discrepancies in the messages males receive and the messages that females receive about appropriate sexual behaviors. While there is a plethora of literature addressing mother-child and father-child differences in communication with their adolescents, there is little literature addressing “sex
“sex talk” messages received by children (from parents) according to the child’s sex. In other words, previous literature has focused on the sex of the parent in great detail with little attention to the sex of the child receiving “sex talk” messages. This topic is of importance because due to varying social constructions and social norms, males may be receiving different messages than their female counterparts.

The purpose of this paper is to explore differences, if any, in parental sex talk with male adolescents versus parental sex talk with female adolescents. In essence, the study should expose if parents talk about sex differently with their female children versus their male children.

Research questions guiding this paper include:

RQ1: Is there a mean difference in “sex talk” conversations between adolescents and mothers based on the sex of the child?

RQ2: Is there a mean difference in “sex talk” conversations between adolescents and fathers based on the sex of the child?

What follows is a literature review of “sex talk” messages received from parents by adolescent males versus “sex talk” messages received from parents by adolescent females. Understanding a potential discrepancy in messages to adolescents can assist parents with understanding the role they have in their adolescent’s positive or negative sexual behavior outcomes. If parents understand the impact that they can have on their child’s ideas about sex then parents have motivation for conveying equal messages in conversations about sex, no matter the sex of the child receiving the messages.
Literature Review

“Sex Talk” Messages Received by Adolescent Males versus Adolescent Females

Several studies indicate the likelihood that males engage more frequently in sexual behaviors in comparison to females (DeGaston, Weed & Jensen, 1996; Miller & Forehand, 1999; Somers & Paulson, 2000). This may be due to the ways in which parents discuss sexual encounters with daughters versus with sons; as well as the quantity of sex talk conversations with daughters versus sons. McKee, Forehand, Miller, Whitaker, Long, and Armistead (2007) found that as mother gender role beliefs were more egalitarian, there was a higher likelihood of parent-pre-adolescent conversations about sex. Therefore, as mothers hold equal gender beliefs, mothers are more likely to have sex talk conversations with their children. However, it is not noted whether these sex conversations from mother to child have different implications for females versus males.

Gender of the child does indeed make a difference in parent-child communication about sex (Wilson and Koo, 2010). Specifically, prior research has revealed that mothers and daughters are likely the family members who engage in “sex talk” (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Heller, Robinson, Henry, & Plunkett, 2006; Kim & Ward, 2007; Laursen & Collins, 2004; Nolin and Petersen, 1992; Tobey, Hillman, Anagurthi, & Somers, 2011; Wilson & Koo, 2010). In other words, mothers (in comparison to fathers) have a higher likelihood of discussing sex with their children and daughters (in comparison to sons) have a higher likelihood of being the recipient of sex conversations with parents. When sons do receive more sexual communication than females, it is primarily from the father (Hillman, Anagurthi, & Somers, 2011).
According to Nolin and Petersen (1992), sons may be susceptible to casual sexual encounters due to lack of conversation with parents. For example in their study, Nolin and Peterson (1992) found that mothers and fathers were more likely to have “sex talk” with their daughters. Such a finding is root to the question “why do sons receive less “sex talk” with parents in comparison to daughters?” In this vein, sons are less likely to learn about sexuality in a family context, less likely to discuss sexual topics with the same sex parent, and less likely to learn family norms appropriate for sexual behavior (Nolin & Petersen, 1992).

Explanations to the question posed above vary from comfort in talking about sex to a perceived need to discuss sex with children. For example, parents may be more comfortable in speaking with their daughters about sex rather than their sons (Nolin & Petersen, 1992; Wilson & Koo, 2010). Specifically, mothers identified menstruation as a sort of opening to establish rapport and discuss other sex related topics later in the female’s life. However, there was concern that such a landmark event in a male’s life was not present (Nolin & Petersen, 1992). Further, parents report that “hey, I do not have a daughter, so I don’t have to worry (Nolin & Petersen, 1992). Other parents admitted that parent-child sex conversations were a conscious or unconscious attempt to control their daughter’s behaviors (Nolin & Petersen, 1992).

Females are more likely to receive sexually prohibitive messages about sexual encounters in comparison to their male counterparts (Kapunggu, Baptist, Holmbeck, McBride, Robinson-Brown, Sturdivant, Crown, & Apaikoff, 2010; Kim & Ward, 2007; Martin & Luke, 2010). Mothers are more likely to discuss topics such as dating, when to have sexual intercourse, paternal and peer attitudes about sex, reasons for not having sex until older (Kapunggu, Baptist, Holmbeck, McBride, Robinson-Brown, Sturdivant, Crown, Apaikoff, 2010); as well as
relationships, morality, bodies, which sexual behaviors are wrong (Martin & Luke, 2010), and asking their child to wait to have sex (Wilson & Koo, 2010) with daughters than with sons.

Males typically receive the greatest amount of sex communication regarding condom use (Kapunggu, Baptiste, Holmbeck, McBride, Robinson-Brown, Sturdivant, Crown, & Apaikoff, 2010), while daughters are likely subjected to their parents thoughts on how she should behave sexually (Kapunggu, Baptiste, Holmbeck, McBride, Robinson-Brown, Sturdivant, Crown, & Apaikoff, 2010) and which sexual behaviors are wrong (Martin & Luke, 2010). Sex conversations may occur in this manner due to parents’ beliefs that sexual activity as a teenager could have harmful effects for daughters rather than sons, parents having a higher expectation that sons will have sex as a young teen and that talking about sexual topics would have less positive outcomes for males than for females (Wilson and Koo, 2010). Further, parents are more likely to disapprove of their daughters being sexually active as a teenager (Wilson & Koo, 2010).

Males admit that there is pressure from friends to “score,” and females associate emotions and closeness with sexual encounters (Nolin & Petersen, 1992). Many females in the Nolin and Petersen (1992) study perceived the male as the initiator for sex. For example, many girls express that “it just happened,” while males more than likely had sexual intentions (Nolin & Petersen, 1992). When considering messages that students receive from peers, Kapunggu, Baptiste, Holmebeck, McBride, Robinson-Brown, Sturdivant, Crown, and Apaikoff, (2010) found that the most highly discussed concept among adolescent males and their peers was what their peers thought about sex. The least discussed topic among adolescent males was what their fathers thought about sex. For females, the most highly discussed sexual topic with peers was condoms and the least discussed topic with peers was spontaneous erections.
Method

Participants

Of the 205 surveys distributed, only 198 participants correctly completed the questionnaires. Participants were undergraduate students in Communication Studies courses from a large southwestern university. Participants were males (N=95, 48%) and females (N=102, 51.5%) between the ages of 18 and 24 (M=20.34, SD=1.17), an age group considered late adolescence. Racial backgrounds of the participants included African American (N=41, 20.7%), Asian (N=21, 10.6%), Caucasian (N=106, 53.5%), Hispanic (N=22, 11.1%), and other (N=8, 4%). Each participant reviewed and signed a consent form and assurance of confidentiality was noted.

Procedure

Participants were solicited from undergraduate courses in Communication Studies and offered extra credit for participation in the study. Students were given a list of available times that the principle investigator would be in the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) lab. The CMC lab is a computer lab within the department of Communication Studies with computers stationed in cubicles allowing for privacy when completing the survey. Upon student arrival to the CMC lab, the principle researcher reviewed the informed consent form with the potential participant and the signature of the participant was required before the participant was assigned to a computer station.

Measures

Each participant completed a revised version of the Parent-Teen Sexual Risk Communication (PTSRC) scale (Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998). Parent-Teen Sexual Risk Communication was measured with adapted items identified by Hutchinson and Cooney (1998).
For the current study, there were two sections with 13 questions each, which made a total of 26 items for the measure. The first section (items 1-13) had questions concerning amount of adolescent sexual communication information received from the mother; and the second section (items 14-26) had questions in reference to the amount of adolescent sexual communication received from the father. Participants answered questions ranging from 1 (none) to 5 (extensive). In the current measure, sexual communication was measured separately for each parent, thus there was a score for parent-child communication with the mother, determined by answering 13 items and a separate score for parent-child communication with the father, determined by answering an additional 13 questions. Questions for the instrument require a selection of five answers ranging from 1, nothing/none to 5, extensive/everything (Hutchinson, 2002). The PTSRC measure has an alpha reliability score of $\alpha=.90$ for mothers and fathers (Hutchinson, 2002; Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998). The current measure was reliable for both mother-child ($\alpha=.93$) and father-child ($\alpha=.94$) communication.

**Data Analysis**

An independent sample t-test via SPSS for windows was used to determine RQ1, whether there is a mean difference in “sex talk” conversations between adolescents and mothers based on the sex of the child, and RQ 2, whether there is a mean difference in “sex talk” conversations between adolescents and fathers based on the sex of the child.

**Results**

RQ1: The mean score for topics of sexual nature for males and mothers in the sample is 2.43 (SD=.99) while the mean score for females and mothers in the sample is 2.98 (SD=.98). The levene’s test for equality of variances indicates that the two sub-samples do not have significantly different variances ($F=.052, P=.820$); therefore the independent samples t-test with
equal variances assumed can be used. The t-test indicates that the mean score for topics of sexual nature discussed by mothers for males and females in the sample are statistically different from one another ($t(202)=-4.008; p=.000$). Specific topics discussed by the mother with significant gender differences (females having higher means) were: menstruation ($p=.000$), how babies are made ($p=.001$), her own sexual experiences ($p=.001$), how she felt the child should behave sexually ($p=.000$), postponing or not having sex ($p=.000$), peer pressure from dating partners ($p=.000$), and how to resist sexual pressure from peers ($p=.000$).

**RQ2**: The mean score for topics of sexual nature for males and fathers in the sample is 2.13 (SD=1.00) while the mean score for females and fathers in the sample is 1.63 (SD=.83). The levene’s test for equality of variances indicates that the two sub-samples do have significantly different variances. Thus, the independent sample t-test with unequal variances can be assumed. The t-test indicates that the mean score for topics of sexual nature discussed fathers for males and females in the sample are statistically different from one another ($t(189.482)=3.834; p=.000$). Specific topics discussed by the father with significant gender differences (with males having higher means) were: human sexuality (global) ($p=.000$), how babies are made ($p=.000$), his own sexual experiences ($p=.001$), how he felt the child should behave sexually ($p=.007$), contraception ($p=.000$), STDs ($p=.000$), HIV/AIDS ($p=.000$), ways to protect yourself from STDs ($p=.000$), and condoms ($p=.000$).

**Discussion**

Results for the current study indicated that mothers and daughters, in comparison to mothers and sons, are more likely to discuss topics of sexual nature. In addition, fathers and sons, in comparison to fathers and daughters, are more likely to discuss topics of sexual nature. As noted by Guilamo-Ramos (2007) mothers are more likely than fathers to be the source of sexual
topics. When comparing overall conversations with mothers in comparison to overall conversations with fathers, mothers did have a higher frequency of conversation of sexual nature when compared to father. Prior research (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Heller, Robinson, Henry, & Plunkett, 2006; Laursen & Collins 2004) has also shown that adolescents are more open with their mothers rather than fathers when it comes to such topics as sexual risk behavior. Therefore, the higher mean for mother-child communication within this study is consistent with prior research.

However, results from the current study indicate that the frequency of discussion may be a determinant of the parent and/or child’s gender. This higher mean of father-son communication is relevant to the argument by Laursen and Collins (2004) that sons, rather than daughters, are more likely to feel close to their fathers. In addition, there were specific topics which both parents discussed with their daughters more so than their sons. Such findings suggest that females may be receiving more prohibitive messages than their male counterparts when it comes to sex conversations with parents. The findings of this study as well as previous literature highlight sex differences that are important when considering parent-child communication about sex.

Limitations

In this study, I specifically focused on quantity of parent-child communication about sex; however, quality of parent-child communication as measured by the feeling of closeness to the parents may have a direct influence on adolescents as well (Dittus, 2004; Henrich et al., 2005). Quality in this instance is measured by the depth of the conversation versus how many times the conversation occurred. In the current study, the closeness of the parent-child relationship was not measured. Future research should measure the perceived amount of closeness between
adolescent participants and their parents in order to determine the general quality of communication in the parent-child relationship.

In order to determine quality of communication, parent and child perspectives should be noted. In the current study, only the perspective of the adolescent was used as data for the study. According to Laursen & Collins, (2004) parents and children have varying perspectives about their communication with each other. Understanding varying perspectives will allow researchers to better address the differences in opinion about communication for parents and children. Last, this study had a nuclear family focus and as families increase in diversity, it is important to have research which reflects those family changes.

**Conclusion**

Within this study, sex of the child and parent and perceived gender of the child and parent proved to have an effect on the type of sexual topics discussed. Thus sex and gender of the child and parent can be important to consider regarding the level of communication between parents and children. Future research should seek to clarify the findings of this study in an attempt to better prepare parents for conversations about sex with their children.
References


