

Parent Communication and College Students' Sexual Attitudes

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Abstract

The high teenage sexual activity and pregnancy rates in America are generally attributed to ineffective communication of sexual information (Mueller & Powers, 1990). Contemporary adolescents are faced with potentially severe consequences for engaging in risky sexual behaviors; research suggests that parents are a primary source of influence on adolescent sexual attitudes and behavior (Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004). The central research question in this study was, “Is there a relationship between parent communication styles about sex and college students’ attitudes about sexually responsible behavior”? This non-random pilot study was done at a small Midwestern university, where N = 141 undergraduate male and females were surveyed. Data were statistically analyzed using frequencies, mean comparisons, and a reliability analysis. Observed results supported our hypothesis that participants who reported open communication styles with parents demonstrated higher levels of knowledge and comfort about sexual topics than participants who reported avoidant communication styles. Practitioners can utilize this information by educating and encouraging the use of open communication by parents. For future research, the authors recommend a randomized and more diverse sample be used.

Sexual education has historically been a conflicting topic among adolescents, researchers, health care providers, and parents. The common questions that arise from these groups are: who should be allowed to teach such subjects, what information is current and accurate, and how can these topics best be presented to young adults without encouraging them to participate in unsafe sexual behaviors? According to Mueller and Powers (1990), the high teenage sexual activity and pregnancy rates in America are generally attributed to ineffective communication of sexual information. Contemporary adolescents are faced with potentially severe consequences for engaging in risky sexual behaviors and research suggests that parents are a primary source of influence on adolescent sexual attitudes and behavior (Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004). A review of the current literature regarding parent-adolescent communication, the authors were led to ask: Is there a relationship between parent communication styles about sex and college students' attitudes about sexually responsible behavior? Parent communication style is defined as the way a parent verbally and paraverbally interacts to signal how content should be taken and interpreted (Miller, 2002). Additionally, sexually responsible behavior is defined as understanding and having an awareness of one's sexuality and sexual development, respect for one's self and partner, ensuring that pregnancy occurs only when welcomed, and the ability to make appropriate sexual and reproductive health choices (Coleman, 2002). College students ages 18-26 were surveyed in order to gain insight on how intra-familial communication about sexually related topics affected their attitudes about sexually responsible behavior.

Literature Review

The review of literature on the subjects of parent communication styles regarding sex related topics and adolescent attitudes regarding sexually responsible behaviors yielded a variety of results. The majority of articles focused on adolescents and their degree of sexual activity, use

of contraception and knowledge of sexual matters, degree of parental involvement in sexual education, style of parent communication on sexually related topics, and the content of conversations that occurred between the parent and the adolescent during conversations about sexually related topics. The articles focused on parents, adolescents and pre-adolescents. The samples in the literature studied adolescents with varying sexual experiences. A large void that exists in this area of research is the study of college aged students. College students have not been the center of many studies in the past; it has been adolescents (pre-teenagers and teenagers) who have been the main focus of research topics related to sexual responsibility. Despite a lack of recent research, many of the older studies provided good predictions of the consequences of sexual communication later in life. In addition to the studies of parent/child communication, the authors focused on other topics such as family structure, family intervention, and family environment

Dittus, Miller, Kotchick, & Forehand (2004) reported on the ever-growing rate of sexually transmitted diseases and found that effective sexual communication, monitoring and parental involvement led to a decrease in sexual risk-taking behavior of children. One interesting detail about this study is that similar to the Fitzharris and Werner-Wilson (2004) study, parents' conflicting perceptions were also recognized to be a possible barrier to open communication. Many parents had preconceived notions of what might cause the adolescent to participate in or think about sexual activities. For example, parents were more likely to think that open communication was the cause of *increased* sexual activity. In this article, the *Parents Matter Program* (PMP) is described and evaluated. The *PMP* is based on a variety of social and behavioral theories such as social learning theory, problem behavior theory, reasoned action theory, and the social cognitive theory. Each of these theories contributes to the basic principles

involved in human development. The *PMP* intervention has three components: risk awareness, positive parenting, and sexual communication. The goal behind this program—led by research and theory—is to increase effective parenting practices and parent-adolescent communication about sex-related topics to promote healthy decisions and decrease sexual risk taking behavior.

Fitzharris and Werner-Wilson (2004) illustrated how parents significantly influence the perceptions of teenage sexuality. They presented a vast amount of prior research that supported the significance of parental communication (or lack thereof). The authors also outlined three levels of communication about sexuality. The first level was defined as “The Big Talk” and usually included factual, biological information. The second level was labeled “Tea Talks,” which were conversations on topics such as birth control, abortion, and pregnancy. The third level dealt with social issues such as homosexuality, adultery, and rape. In another study mentioned within the article, there were five types of communication styles that had been identified as having been used by mothers: avoidant, reactive, opportunistic, child-initiated, and mutually interactive. It was stated in the article that parents who discuss sexuality with their adolescent child seem to significantly affect the child’s sexual attitudes and behavior. Although communication was a main component of discussion, barriers were a topic within the article that had great depth. The ongoing conflict of how parents perceive sexuality versus what they teach to their adolescent was discussed. The positive aspect of this study was that the sample included adolescents and their parents, so both perspectives were portrayed. Important findings presented were that adolescents are getting far less communication than they hope for, and the majority of adolescents reported feeling that sexual conversations with their parents were far too opinionated, uncomfortable, and biased. Parents, on the other hand, felt the discussions they had with their children were informing, factual, and safe. Conflicts with the amount of sexual

discussion taking place between the parent and the adolescent were very apparent. This was portrayed as the “Rashomon effect,” which the researchers describe as a conflict of experience of sexual communication between the parent and adolescent. Further results indicated that sexual communication should occur more frequently and have predetermined goals, steps, and methods.

Miller (2002) studied three different components that influence sexual and contraceptive behavior. These include family structural influences, parent/adolescent relationships, and biological influences. All three of these ideas had significant links to sexual behaviors, including parent/child communication, which relates closest to the topic we wish to study. The article concluded that open, warm and frequent discussion of sexual matters was more likely to delay sexual activity and lower teen pregnancy rates. Contrarily, controlling and invasive parental involvement was found to increase sexual activity and teen pregnancy rates, likely a result of rebellion.

Mueller and Powers (1990) intended to link the style of parents’ communication about sexual matters to the behaviors of the recipients. Participants were asked to describe their parents’ communication style from a list of adjectives (e.g. friendly, open, dramatic, etc.) and then describe their own sexual behaviors at different ages. Behavioral questions related to sexual activity, the use of birth control methods, and whether or not they felt comfortable asking their parents questions relating to these topics. In general, the students who described their parents as using a friendly, impression leaving, or attentive approach resulted in higher rates of contraception use and lower rates of sexual activity at an earlier age. Those who described parents’ communication style as dramatic, contentious, and open reported higher rates of sexual activity in junior high and lower rates of contraceptive use. The “friendlier” styles may be interpreted as more supportive and thus have a greater impact on sexual behavior than styles

interpreted negatively. The negative approaches may also be perceived as controlling, causing adolescents to want to rebel against parental wishes.

Past research has shown that parent-child communication regarding topics of sexuality is of fundamental importance. Thus far the majority of the articles supported the notion that parents have a significant impact on the way adolescents view sex. Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson (2004) reported that by talking about sexuality and risky behaviors, parents give their adolescents the ability and knowledge needed to make safe decisions regarding their sexuality. All the articles reviewed were concerned mainly with adolescents and pre-adolescents. This leaves room for studying college age students, who are more likely to be sexually active than adolescents. Additionally, they may also have formed their own standards for sexual behavior, but still consider the type of communication with their parents about sex related topics (or lack thereof) to have a significant impact on their attitudes towards their own sexuality. We intend to investigate how or if college students' parents' style of communication about sex related topics influenced their current attitudes and practices in order to better understand the effects of parent communication on this particular group of individuals. The large gap in research on college age students has motivated us to gain further insight on this particular age group.

Theoretical Framework

The question of whether or not parental communication styles about sex related topics has an effect on college students' attitudes about sexually responsible behavior relates directly to the Family Systems Theory (Strong, DeVault, & Cohen, 2008). The Family Systems Theory links sociology and family analysis and explains that one's family weighs strongly on his or her behaviors and feelings. Although this theory does not specifically refer to parent communication

styles, it does identify patterns of interaction as having long term effects on an individual's behavior.

In application to the research question, the Family Systems Theory would predict that the communication style of the parent would have a direct effect on an individual college student's attitude about sexually responsible behavior. Based on the Family Systems Theory, it can be predicted that intrafamilial communication has long term effects on an individual's thoughts and behaviors. More specifically, it is believed that individuals with parents who practice an open communication style regarding sexual topics are more apt to be informed and engage in fewer high-risk sexual behaviors compared to those whose parents are avoidant in their approaches to sexual topics.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this pilot study was to gain insight on how intrafamilial communication affects college students' attitudes about sexually responsible behaviors. The participants of this study included male and female students at a small Midwestern University ranging in age from 18 to 26. With this information, the researchers will be able to increase the awareness of effective communication of sexually related topics among college age students, researchers, health professionals, parents, counselors, first year experience mentors, and the general public. The central research question in this study was, "Is there a relationship between parent communication styles about sex and college students' attitudes about sexually responsible behavior?" The authors predicted a positive relationship between parental communication styles about sexually related topics and the college student's attitudes about sexually responsible behaviors. This hypothesis is based on review of the current literature as well as the Family

Systems Theory, which predicts that intrafamilial communication has effects on individuals' long term thoughts and behaviors (Strong et al., 2008).

Method

Participants

The site of this study was a small Midwestern university. Participants were $N = 141$ undergraduate students. Three classes were sampled—two general education and one major oriented. There were 80 females in this sample and 61 males. Of the males, 24 were age 18-19, 21 were age 20-21, 15 were age 22 or 23, and one was age 24-25. Of the females, 14 were age 18-19, 35 were age 20-21, 4 were age 22-23, and one was age 24-25.

Research Design

The purpose of this survey research was to be able to generalize from a sample to a similar larger population so that some inferences could be made about some characteristic, attitude, or behavior of the population (Babbie, 1990). The survey design type was a cross sectional design because it sought to determine the occurrence of attitudes by taking a cross-section of the population that was studied at one point in time. The form of data collection used was a survey that was administered by the authors. The justification for the use of this method was that it enabled the authors to retrieve an equitable amount of male and female responses. This design type was also efficient because it ensured prompt responses and was cost efficient. The population of our study was the university student population; the sample was male and female students primarily in general education classes. This population was easily accessible to the authors. The sampling design was a non-random purposive study because the authors had a purpose in selecting classes from a university online listing that were assumed to have an equitable amount of males and females. The authors did not randomize in order to be inclusive in

the classroom. The authors completed the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) training in order to address the issue of ethical protection of human subjects; furthermore our study was approved by the IRB.

Data Collection Instrument

To investigate the relationship between parent communication styles and college students' sexually responsible behaviors and attitudes, a survey was designed. The survey instrument included a letter of implied consent which also described the study, defined terms, described risks and benefits of participation, time commitment, confidentiality, contact information of the authors and their supervisor, reinforced voluntary participation, and gave more specific instructions for completing the survey. The authors included two questions concerning demographics—age and gender. Parent communication style was a category used to compare groups. The survey instrument included ten closed-ended statements based on a five point Likert scale, measuring the intensity of the participants' attitudes ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). The questions were derived from literature reviews and theory regarding what communication styles were common among families and their consequences. The survey instrument has both face validity and content validity. The face validity of this survey is demonstrated through the logical connection that the survey questions have to the research question. The content validity of this survey is demonstrated through a connection to previous literature and the clear conveyance of the broad nature of the topic. To further ensure that the survey instrument was valid, it was piloted to three undergraduate college students and one university alumni. Their feedback concluded that the survey questions were direct, clear, and appropriately stated.

Procedure

To collect the data for this research, the researchers pre-selected courses from an online course listing at a small Midwestern university which we believed to have an equitable amount of males and females. The authors did not randomize in order to be inclusive in the classroom. The authors contacted the professors of these classes by email, notifying them of our study and research purpose, and asked permission to sample their classes. After hearing back from three professors of various departments, the authors set up meetings with each professor to discuss survey protocol in which we read the survey, answered questions, and explained the procedure of the surveying process. On the day of surveying, the authors arrived at the site fifteen minutes early to set up and answer any final questions from the professor. Once we were given permission to begin, we introduced ourselves and the purpose of our research, stressed the importance of voluntary participation, informed the students of their right to withdraw or refrain from participating, and read the implied consent portion of the survey. Upon answering questions about the implied consent, specific instructions were given to tear off and keep the implied consent portion of the survey. We explained the format of the survey, informed the participants to select one style of communication they felt their parents used regarding sexual topics, and how to use the Likert Scale on which the rest of the survey was based. Surveys were distributed and a class volunteer was nominated to inform us when all surveys were turned in. The authors then left the classroom with the professor to reduce any potential pressure. Once informed of survey completion, the authors collected the surveys and thanked the class for their participation. Completed surveys were kept in a secure and locked location of one author's home until data analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

The data was cleaned and checked for any missing data. The cleaned surveys were then coded with acronyms for each variable. The demographic variables of age and gender were the first two questions on the survey. The independent variable was parental communication style regarding sexually related topics (*STY*). The remaining survey statements were the dependent variables and were also given acronyms: to determine if the student felt that they made sexually responsible decisions (*RSD*), if they are comfortable discussing the use of contraceptives (*DIS*), if they opposed the use of contraceptives (*OPP*), if they utilized campus resources advocating safe sex practices (*UTI*), if their parents frequently discussed sexual matters with them (*FDS*), if parental sex education was accurate (*SACU*), if parental education on contraceptives was accurate (*CACU*), if parents had an impact on sexual decisions of the participant (*IMP*), if parents would support the participants use of contraceptives (*PSU*), and if the participant is comfortable asking the parent questions regarding sexuality (*PCOM*). The computer program *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)* was used to analyze the data. The specific level of analysis in this study was the individual. Because we compared groups based on parental communication style regarding sexually related topics, our data analysis included frequencies, cross-tabulations, mean comparisons, as well as a reliability analysis: Chronbach's alpha. Significance testing was not performed because of the nonrandom nature of the pilot study.

Results

The computer program *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)* was used to analyze the data that was collected. The analyses performed on our variables were frequencies, cross-tabulations, mean comparisons, and a reliability analysis. The first analysis was a frequency distribution which indicated that there was no missing data from our surveys. Upon organizing the collected surveys, the authors found that only two individuals reported forceful

communication styles. This small ratio of participants would not have yielded any significant data, so it was decided that these two responses be eliminated. Thus, the focus of the study became open and avoidant communication styles.

Cross-tabulations were performed with the independent variable (*STY*). For (*FDS*), (*SACU*), (*CACU*), and (*PCOM*), there was a difference between the groups, with those of open communication style having agreed or strongly disagreed in greater numbers. The variable (*DIS*) also demonstrated a difference between groups, with those having reported an avoidant communication style disagreeing with the statement. Both groups responded to (*UTI*) with large numbers of undecided responses. The dependent variables showing limited or no difference between groups were (*RSD*), (*OPP*), and (*IMP*). For the variable (*PSU*), there were slightly higher levels of positive responses from those reporting open communication, and higher levels of uncertainty from avoidant respondents.

Table 1

Percent Responses for Survey Item by Parent Communication Style

RSD: I make responsible sexual decisions

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Open	4.8%	2.9%	6.7%	35.6%	50.0%	100.0%
Avoidant	2.9%	2.9%	8.6%	34.3%	51.3%	100.0%

DIS: I am comfortable with openly discussing the use of contraceptives

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Open	1.0%	2.9%	11.5%	28.8%	55.8%	100.0%
Avoidant	0.0%	14.3%	14.3%	25.7%	45.7%	100.0%

OPP: I oppose the use of contraceptives

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Open	72.1%	8.7%	13.5%	1.0%	4.8%	100.0%
Avoidant	77.1%	5.7%	11.4%	0.0%	5.7%	100.0%

UTI: I utilize resources on campus or within the community that advocate safe sex practices

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Open	19.2%	22.1%	25.0%	18.3%	15.4%	100.0%
Avoidant	17.1%	22.9%	37.1%	8.6%	14.3%	100.0%

FDS: My parents frequently discussed sexual matters with me

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
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	Disagree		Agree			
Open	16.3%	33.7%	19.2%	24.0%	6.7%	100.0%
Avoidant	48.6%	34.3%	14.3%	0.0%	2.9%	100.0%

SACU: The information about sex that my parents provided me with was current and accurate

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Open	5.8%	6.7%	25.0%	35.6%	26.9%	100.0%
Avoidant	20.0%	8.6%	40.0%	22.9%	8.6%	100.0%

CACU: The information about contraceptives that my parents provided me with was current and accurate

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Open	4.8%	5.8%	23.1%	33.7%	32.7%	100.0%
Avoidant	22.9%	8.6%	31.4%	31.4%	5.7%	100.0%

IMP: My parents have had an impact on the sexual decisions that I have made

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
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Open	16.3%	16.3%	20.2%	28.8%	18.3%	100.0%
Avoidant	22.9%	17.1%	20.0%	20.0%	20.0%	100.0%

PSU: My parents would support my choice to use contraceptives

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Open	3.8%	2.9%	9.6%	25.0%	58.7%	100.0%
Avoidant	8.6%	2.9%	17.1%	22.9%	48.6%	100.0%

PCOM: I am comfortable asking my parents questions regarding sexual topics

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Open	10.6%	16.3%	28.8%	24.0%	20.2%	100.0%
Avoidant	37.1%	31.4%	8.6%	11.4%	11.4%	100.0%

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Survey Items by Parent Communication Style

RSD: I make responsible sexual decisions

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
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Open	4.23	1.04	4.00
Avoidant	4.29	0.96	4.00

DIS: I am comfortable with openly discussing the use of contraceptives

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Open	4.36	0.87	4.00
Avoidant	4.03	1.10	3.00

OPP: I oppose the use of contraceptives

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Open	1.58	1.08	4.00
Avoidant	1.51	1.09	4.00

UTI: I utilize resources on campus or within the community that advocate safe sex practices

	Mean	Standard	Range
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	Deviation		
Open	2.88	1.34	4.00
Avoidant	2.80	1.26	4.00

FDS: My parents frequently discussed sexual matters with me

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Open	2.71	1.20	4.00
Avoidant	1.74	0.92	4.00

SACU: The information about sex that my parents provided me with was current and accurate

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Open	3.71	1.11	4.00
Avoidant	2.91	1.22	4.00

CACU: The information about contraceptives that my parents provided me with was current and accurate

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Open	3.84	1.10	4.00
Avoidant	2.89	1.25	4.00

IMP: My parents have had an impact on the sexual decisions that I have made

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Open	3.16	1.35	4.00
Avoidant	2.97	1.47	4.00

PSU: My parents would support my choice to use contraceptives

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Open	4.31	1.03	4.00
Avoidant	4.00	1.26	4.00

PCOM: I am comfortable asking my parents questions regarding sexual topics

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Open	3.27	1.26	4.00
Avoidant	2.29	1.38	4.00

A reliability analysis was run to determine whether or not our variables were a reliable index to measure our concept: the relationship between parent communication styles and college student's attitudes about sexually responsible behavior. Chronbach's alpha is a reliability measure and in our analysis, it was calculated to be 0.67. This value indicated that our survey items were a reliable measure of our concept, however if the variable (*OPP*) was omitted, our reliability would rise to 0.72.

At the end of the survey instrument, several participants included valuable qualitative comments, which will be presented in the discussion section.

Discussion

We found mixed results in support of our hypothesis that individuals in a home environment promoting more open communication styles regarding sexual topics are more apt to be informed and engage in less high risk sexual behaviors compared to those individuals living in home environments avoidant in their approaches to sexual topics. Mixed results may be due to a lack of understanding of some of the concepts presented, such as the communication styles and their specific qualities, a reluctance to answer honestly to some of the survey statements (in particular *RSD*), as most students would be reluctant to admit to making irresponsible sexual

decisions. Finally, participants may not have understood the significance of their honest responses, and that we rely on honesty to examine our data. We will first discuss each dependent variable in relation to the independent variable of Parent Communication Style (*STY*), if there is a difference between groups, and how findings either concur or disagree with the literature and/or theoretical framework. We will then address the limitations to the study, implications for practitioners, implications for future research, and give our concluding remarks.

Our first statement dealt with the making of responsible sexual decisions. The vast majority of respondents from both avoidant and open communication styles expressed agreement to our statement which did not agree with the literature (Dittus et al., 2004) which found that more avoidant communication yielded higher levels of sexual irresponsibility. In terms of frequent discussion of sexual matters in the home, more respondents from the avoidant communication category acknowledged a lack of communication in their home; this was in correspondence with much of our literature, which all found open communication to include more frequent sexual discussions in the home. Regarding the opposition of contraceptives, there was no major difference between the responses of open or avoidant communication styles. Both communication styles overwhelmingly disagreed with this statement. This topic was not discussed in any literature but was included because contraceptive use is a fundamental part of sexual conversations and protection. The next statement sought information on the utilization of campus and community resources (i.e. student health center, Planned Parenthood agencies, etc.) which promote safe sex practices, and interestingly, the responses were overwhelmingly undecided. This was in complete opposition to the literature (Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004; Miller, 2002) which attributed more open communication styles to frequent contraceptive use and utilization of community resources. When given two statements regarding the accuracy of

contraceptive and sexual education that adolescents received from parents, open communicators responded more positively to these statements than their avoidant counterparts. This finding was also supported by our literature (Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004) which stated that adolescents' perceptions of education regarding sex and contraceptives received from parents are often different from that of the parents (adolescents tend to see their parents as less accurate and meaningful sources of information.) The next statement questioned the impact of parents on participants' sexual decisions. Results indicated that participants who reported avoidant communication styles disagreed slightly more with this statement. The results of this statement neither supported nor opposed the literature as the relationship was weak. Following this was a statement that questioned the prediction of parental support with regard to contraceptive use. Although participants who reported open and avoidant communication styles responded positively to this statement, there were much higher rates of uncertainty in the answers of reported avoidant communication participants. The results of this statement support our literature (Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004; Miller, 2002) which explained that less frequent communication (avoidant) leaves the child uncertain about their parents' opinions about some sexual matters. The final statement questioned the participant's level of comfort discussing sexual topics with their parents; participants who reported open styles of communication responded more positively. The results of this final statement supported all of our literature. All of these sources concluded that frequent and open communication about sexual topics will create an environment in which the child is more comfortable asking questions of the parents.

In relation to our theory, the statements regarding the frequency of sexual discussion in the home and parental influence on sexual decision making are specifically related to the Family Systems Theory (Strong et al., 2008). The results show that regardless of communication style,

parents had somewhat of an impact on the impressions of parent communication and the sexual decisions made by the participants. Specifically, the theory predicts that patterns of communication, in this case the style of sexual communication, will have long term effects on an individual's feeling and behaviors. Overall, the majority of our questions relate to the Family Systems Theory, but the two aforementioned statements are especially related.

Qualitative Comments

From the qualitative comments provided by our participants, the authors found several interesting patterns. From examining the responses from avoidant communication style participants, two main themes were identified: parental disapproval of sexual decisions and the retrieval of sex information from other sources. In context to the first theme, one statement in particular struck the authors' interest: "I would get judged, thought of differently, but still loved if my parents knew my sexual lifestyles." As the Family Systems Theory predicts, this demonstrates that even at an adult age, there is still parental influence affecting participant's perceptions of their own sexual identity. Research also suggests that children who perceive their parents to be less accepting of certain sexual behaviors tend to also view their own decisions in a more conservative frame of mind (Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004).

In context of the second theme: retrieval of sexual information from other sources one participant mentioned getting information "on my own." Another participant mentioned being "well educated by the school about sex and contraceptives" despite the lack of communication in the home. Alternative sources of sex and contraceptive education were not discussed in the literature directly because the literature focused mainly on parent communication. Despite the lack of information in our literature, it is still important to recognize outside sources of information.

The main theme of the qualitative comments from participants who reported open communication styles was a general acceptance and comfort level in discussing sexual topics with their parents. Participants showed gratitude for the ability to talk so openly with their parents. Along with that, there was a general knowledge of the risks associated with unsafe sexual practices. This directly correlates to the research by Mueller and Powers (1990) which found that contraceptive use might be greater when parents communicate information in an open manner and that college students are cognitively ready to accept responsibility for their actions.

Limitations

One of the greatest limitations in our study was that the sample lacked diverse perspectives. The authors surveyed at a small, predominantly white university which could have had an effect on the types of responses that were received. Another limitation to our study was that the sample was not randomized; the authors' initial purpose was to get equitable amounts of males and females which affected the classes that were selected to be surveyed. The non-randomization was also due to time constraints, the availability of potential participants, and the need to be inclusive in the classroom. A nonrandom pilot study limits us from generalizing to the larger population of students.

Implications for Practitioners

The results from this study suggest that there is a relationship between open communication and positive responses to survey statements. Open communication styles tended to yield more positive results, particularly in terms of the comfort level in discussing sexual matters with parents and peers and accuracy of sexual and contraceptive education. The concept of open education needs to not only be provided to parents, but also to health practitioners and professionals working with this age group. Parents need to be informed about current trends and

possibly be better educated on sex themselves in order to comfortably and accurately discuss sexual topics with their child. Frequency of sexual discussion is also a large area of concern; parents must be informed that a discussion happening sporadically or in lieu of an event in their teen's life is a less effective way of communicating. Since our results clearly show that parent education is not a sole factor of decision making, more efforts need to be made to better educate incoming college students about sex and contraceptives. From our findings on resource utilization, it is vitally important that community resources are promoted and better advocated to this particular population. Such efforts might be attained through advertisements and programming.

Implications for Future Research

If this study were to be replicated in the future, a few adjustments should be made to the survey as well as the sampling process. Regarding the survey structure, the statement [OPP] should be omitted from the survey. When omitted, the Chronbach's alpha would increase from .672 to .724. It seemed that this variable had minimal relevance to the other variables perhaps because the opposition to contraceptives does not necessarily have implications about parental communication. Finally, before distributing the survey, it should be ensured that the participants fully understand the concepts about which they will be answering questions. This can be done by reading and providing examples of each of the communication styles, as well as explaining other potentially confusing terms.

Conclusion

As an outcome of this study, it is hoped that open communication styles will be promoted and better understood by parents and practitioners alike. It is also vitally important for professionals, personnel working with college age students, and community resource centers to

better educate college students on safe sexual practices in order to prevent unwanted pregnancies, reduce rates of sexually transmitted infections, and increase students' comfort levels in discussing these issues with their sexual partners. It cannot be expected that parents be the sole educators on this topic. In application to the results of this research, students who cited open communication styles in the home reported receiving more accurate information and higher levels of comfort discussing sexual topics not only with parents, but with potential partners. The authors strongly believe that with the work of parents, practitioners and resource centers, a better effort can be made in ensuring education, thus decreasing high risk sexual behavior. As a result of this study, the authors would like there to be action taken by the previously mentioned groups to open the lines of communication in hopes of decreasing the negative consequences associated with such high risk sexual behaviors.

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