



College-bound teens' decisions about the transition to sex: Negotiating competing norms

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ABSTRACT

The influence of parents, close friends, and other peers on teens' sexual behavior has been well documented. Yet, we still know little about the processes through which these reference groups' oftentimes competing norms impact teens' own sexual norms and behaviors. Drawing on qualitative data from 47 interviews conducted with college-bound teens, we investigate the processes through which perceived parental, close friend, and other peer norms about sex influenced teens' decisions about whether and when to have sex. Although virtually all teens perceived that most of their peers were having sex and that parents were almost universally against teen sex, some teens had sex and others did not. Our findings demonstrate that teens who remained virgins and those who were sexually active during high school often negotiated different sets of competing norms. Differences in understandings of age norms, in close friends' sexual norms and behaviors, and in communication about sex with parents, close friends and other peers were related to different levels of sexual behavior for teens who otherwise shared many similarities in social location (e.g., class, race, and educational status). While virgins reported an individualized process of deciding whether they were ready for sex, we find that their behavior fits within a traditional understanding of an age norm because of the emphasis on avoiding negative sanctions. Sexually experienced teens, on the other hand, explicitly reported abiding by a group age norm that prescribed sex as normal during high school. Finally, parents' normative objections to teen sex – either moral or practical – and the ways they communicated with their teen about sex had important influence on teens' own sexual norms and behaviors during high school.

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1. Introduction

In the United States and many other developed countries, most young people today will have sex before they finish high school (Darroch, Singh, Frost, & Team,

2001; Regnerus, 2007; Risman & Schwartz, 2002). Sexual transitions are important events in teens' lives that may lead to positive outcomes, such as identity development and emotional autonomy from parents (Dowdy & Kliever, 1998); or negative outcomes, such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or unintended pregnancies in the absence of contraception. Adolescence is, therefore, a crucial time for teens to have accurate information about sex. Most teens report that they would prefer to communicate about sex with their parents (Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998), yet many feel they do not get enough information (Hutchinson

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& Cooney, 1998; Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994). Previous research has found no clear relationship between parental norms and communication about sex and teen sexual behavior (Whitaker & Miller, 2000). However, we know that teen sexual behavior is strongly imbedded in peer social networks (Vacirca, Ortega, Rabaglietti, & Ciairano, 2011) and influenced by peers' behaviors (Kinsman, Furstenberg, & Schwarz, 1998; Sieving, Eisenberg, Pettingell, & Skay, 2006). Some scholars have argued that teen sexual behavior is jointly influenced by parents and peers (Jaccard & Dittus, 1993; Whitaker & Miller, 2000), but few studies have analyzed the influence of these often competing reference groups. Therefore, to better understand the multiple influences on teen sexual norms and behaviors, we focus on parents', close friends', and other peers' communication and norms about sex during high school.

Prior research has demonstrated a strong relationship between teens' perceptions of family and peer norms about the appropriateness of teen sex and their own sexual behavior (see Kirby, 2001a for a review). Yet, we still know little about the ways in which socio-demographic and family factors are translated into micro-level processes, such as decision-making about sex (Gillmore et al., 2002). Furthermore, social influences, especially peer norms, are important determinants of teens' sexual behavior, yet the processes through which norms influence behavioral change are not well understood (Kinsman et al., 1998; Sieving et al., 2006). Analyzing 47 qualitative interviews with college-bound teens, we draw on the life course theoretical perspective to highlight teens' subjective understandings and internalizations of the appropriate timing of sex and the ways these understandings are influenced by parents, close friends, and other peers through communication and sanctioning. In this way, we respond to the call from Elliott (2010, p. 208) for research investigating "how youth interpret their parents' lessons about sexuality and the meanings young people give to sexuality."

Studying college-bound teens is valuable as we can be reasonably sure that for these teens, in particular, sex has at least some potential consequences that they would want to avoid given their college plans. It is likely that higher socioeconomic status (SES) teens are encouraged by parents, teachers, and peers to postpone family formation until they have completed their education and begun their careers, an expectation defined by Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) as the *self-development imperative*. However, these college-bound youth have also inherited the culture of "hooking up" that characterizes a more casual attitude toward sexual behavior on many college campuses today (Armstrong, Hamilton, & England, 2010; England, Shafer, & Fogarty, 2008; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Understanding the ways that college-bound teens actually understand and respond to sexual norms during high school can provide some insight into the ways that such competing norms influence (or fail to influence) sexual attitudes and behaviors.

We did not set out to compare teens who were virgins throughout high school with those who were sexually active; rather, this distinction emerged inductively as

fundamental for understanding norms and communication about teen sex.² Even though both sets of teens perceived that most of their peers had sex before leaving high school and virtually all of their parents disapproved of teen sexual activity, some teens became sexually active and others did not. Teens with different levels of sexual experience understood the appropriate timing of sex in different ways based on the content and type of social norms they were subjected to and perceived as important. In essence, despite similar contexts and social locations, these college-bound virgins and sexually experienced teens negotiated and drew on different sets of norms from parents, close friends, and other peers in deciding whether or not to have sex during high school.

2. Background

2.1. Teen sexual behavior in U.S. context

This project draws on data collected in the United States, a context in which many adults are uncomfortable with the idea of teenagers having sex (Fields, 2008; Schalet, 2004, 2010a,b). A highly visible consequence of teen sex, teen parenting, has been viewed as a major social problem in the U.S. for decades. There are many aspects of the U.S. cultural landscape that set it apart from other developed countries with respect to teen sex and pregnancy. For instance, American teens' contraceptive use lags compared to their peers in other developed countries (Darroch et al., 2001), and in many areas of the United States, reproductive health services and contraceptives are not readily available to women (Jones, Zolna, Henshaw, & Finer, 2008). These circumstances have contributed to the U.S. having one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy and birth in the fully industrialized world (Perper & Manlove, 2009), although teen childbearing is more prevalent among lower-SES subpopulations (Holcombe, Peterson, & Manlove, 2009) and teens who identify as African American, Latina, and Native American (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2009).

Scholars have noted other differences in norms about teen sex between the United States and other developed countries. For example, in a study of Dutch and American teen girls' sexual subjectivities, Schalet (2010a,b) found notable differences in girls' sexual agency and pleasure: American teen girls' sexual relationships were much more likely to be contested by parents such that these teens were essentially forced to differentiate between their roles as "good daughters" and "sexual actors" (p. 325). Schalet argues that these cross-cultural differences are related to variations in parental beliefs about whether teen girls are capable of engaging in the types of relationships that legitimate heterosexual sex. The level of parental disapproval of teen sex in Schalet's study reflects the

² In a closed-ended question during the background section of the interview, teens self-defined as having been "sexually active" in high school versus not. Thus, we are not categorizing teens by their experience with a specific behavior, such as penile-vaginal intercourse, but by their own definition of "sex."

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