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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ADOLESCENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEX: FINDINGS FROM A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION WITH ADOLESCENTS FROM BANGALORE, INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence as a developmental period is marked by physical, emotional, cognitive and psychosocial changes. While these changes are predictable in that all individuals go through them, adolescence still proves to be a challenging period for all involved. Many adolescents display what is often considered 'problem behaviour.' These behaviours include (but are not limited to) lying, stealing, truancy or poor academic performance, smoking, drinking alcohol, drug abuse and early sexual activity. Of these various behaviours, the least explored in the Indian context remains adolescent sexual behaviour.

According to Fishbein and Ajzen's Theory of Reasoned Action (1975 & 1980), behaviour has three components to it-behavioural intention, attitudes and subjective norms, with an individual's behavioural intention depending on the person's attitude towards the behaviour and subjective norms. So while intention to commit an action might increase the likelihood of that behaviour's occurrence, beliefs about the consequences of that action as well as perceived expectations and the intention to comply with those expectations are factors that ultimately determine whether certain behaviour is displayed.

The theory of reasoned action has been utilized by several researchers in evaluation studies as well as to make predictions about various aspects of planned behaviour. One such area of

ABSTRACT

Sex remains largely a taboo topic in India. As a consequence, much of the work that has been done in the area of adolescent sexuality in India focuses on the sexual behaviours of adolescents or alternatively on attitudes towards and awareness of sexually transmitted diseases. The aim of this paper was to gain insights into the attitudes of adolescents towards sex through a focus group discussion. Using convenient sampling, adolescent boys and girls between the ages of 17 to 19 were identified to be a part of the focus group discussion; the group comprised of 5 girls and 4 boys. The topics discussed pertained to premarital sex, attitudes of parents and peers towards sex, influential factors in the formation of sexual attitudes and concerns that adolescents have regarding sexual behaviour. The participants' responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, and the following themes emerged- Issues connected to the two generations, issues connected to gender, definition of love versus definition of sex, influence of parents, peers, self, media and other factors on adolescent sexual attitudes, deterrents to teen sex, issues and solutions.

study is sexual behaviour. Gillmore *et al* on applying this theory to the understanding of teen sexual behaviour found that paths from intentions to behaviour and from norms and attitudes to intentions were significant, as were paths from outcome and normative social beliefs to attitude and norm, respectively. A study by Buhi and Goodson designed to understand why adolescents initiate sexual activity at early ages revealed that intention, perceived norms and time home alone emerged as stable predictors of sexual behaviour outcomes. Kashima *et al* applied the theory of reasoned action to better understand condom use among adolescents and found when behavioural conditions including the availability of a condom and an agreement with the partner to use it were satisfied, intention interacted with past behaviour to predict actual behaviour. A meta-analysis by Albarracin *et al* on the theory of reasoned action as a model of condom use showed that in keeping with the theory's predictions, condom use was related to intentions, intentions were based on attitudes and subjective norms, attitudes were associated with behavioural beliefs and norms were associated with normative beliefs.

In keeping with the theory of reasoned action, this paper focuses on adolescent sexual attitudes and explores some of the subjective norms acting on adolescent sexual behaviours, as an understanding of these could assist us in our efforts to better deal with risky sexual behaviour in adolescence. By considering adolescents' own subjective evaluations of what this period entails, the pressures they are under and the

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challenges they face, the researchers hope to get a better understanding of what is considered one of the major developmental tasks of adolescence- sexuality

METHODOLOGY

Aim

To conduct a focus group discussion with adolescents from Bangalore, India, to gain insights into their attitudes towards sex.

Objectives

1. To identify any areas or questions of interest pertaining to adolescent sexual attitudes.
2. To identify underlying themes related to attitude towards sex.

Sampling

Convenient sampling was used to identify the 9 adolescents- 5 girls and 4 boys, who were chosen to be a part of the focus group discussion.

The inclusion criteria for choosing the participants was that they needed to be between the ages of 17-19, studying in the ISC stream of higher secondary education, i.e., either in Grade 11 or 12. They were all from single sex schools, i.e., girls were from all-girl schools and the boys from all-boy schools. All participants had been residing in Bangalore, India for at least 5 years.

Procedure

The focus group discussion was held in a casual setting with minimal distractions, to ensure the participants felt comfortable. They were requested to be open in sharing their thoughts and were assured that their responses were only going to be used for research purposes.

Specific questions asked:

Is there a difference between you and your parents' view of sex? What do you attribute these differences to?

1. How different are we?
2. What according to you make us different?

Do you think your attitudes towards sex are similar to those of your peers? If yes, why? If no, why not?

1. What are the factors that are more/most influential in the formation of your attitudes towards sex?
2. In India there seems to be a conflict on whether premarital sex is acceptable or not. What does your generation think about it?

Do you think being in a romantic relationship could have/had any bearing on your attitude towards sex?

Influence of peers

What are some of the concerns/challenges adolescents have regarding sex/sexual behavior?

How do you deal with the same?

1. Do you think that the concerns adults have regarding adolescents' sexual behavior is misguided or not required?
2. What is your take on whether this is a problem or not?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following are the themes that emerged from the answers provided by the participants in the discussion setting:

Issues connected to the two generations

The participants were all in agreement about the existence of a generation gap between them and their parents and were equally certain that this gap exists between every generation. They were of the opinion that generation gaps will always exist and anticipated that it would probably be the same when they had kids of their own. "The generation gap will continue to exist because kids will continue to push their limits with the opposite sex which will continue to shock the older generation and the behaviour will always surprise them."

They had some interesting insights on the nature of generation gaps:

- "Generation gaps exist within this generation itself. Kids are dating and getting physical at a much younger age."
- "Even in generation gaps there are differences. It's probably easier for us to talk to our parents than it was for them to talk to theirs."

They attribute the present generation gap to the advent of media, urbanization and Westernization as these have brought with them increased exposure. "It is only this generation in India that has been exposed to sex. This makes everyone want to try it, but it will taper off."

Issues connected to gender

According to the participants, there are major differences in how boys and girls are treated. "It all boils down to the different positions enjoyed by men and women in society."

It would appear that differences in attitudes towards sex exist even among peers. "Girls get judged for having sex until everyone else does it; boys get praised if they indulge in anything sexual." In terms of peer pressure, "The pressure to have sex (peer pressure) is more on boys."

Differences exist at an individual level as well. "Boys are more casual about sex but they have sex with someone they like (it isn't just about the sex)."

Definition of love versus definition of sex

From the responses generated it appears that adolescents today have a more pragmatic approach to sex. "Sex does not mean that you will love each other after the act is done."

They are able to separate the act from the emotions typically associated with it and allow for other factors to drive their actions:

- "Sex is fuelled by attraction and passion and not only by love and commitment."
- "Sex could represent anything- passion, emotions, influence of alcohol."

Of the nine respondents, only one believed that "Sex is the highest form of commitment", while the majority opinion was that "Emotional commitment is much higher than sexual commitment."

In their opinion, the age of the individual is a significant factor in determining his/her attitude towards love and sex. "When kids are younger they are more easily influenced and less mature. This makes the concept of "love" easily attainable to them and thus sexual activity may take place due to the belief of being in love."

Influence of parents, peers, self, media and other factors on adolescent sexual attitudes

The participants were asked about the various factors that influence their sexual attitudes. Their responses indicate that many of these factors are either directly or indirectly connected to one another and therefore the impact they have is often compounded.

Parents have a significant role to play in their child's developing attitudes. "Parents can influence you both by not saying anything and also by forbidding it (sex) because it causes rebellion. Either way they influence their child's attitude towards sex."

Peers play a very important part in the life of an adolescent because they provide the much sought after social validation every adolescent yearns for. The amount of influence a peer group has differs according to gender and peer groups seem to have more of an impact on girls than boys:

- "Peer groups matter more to girls. Their friends' opinions are a source of worry for girls."
- "Girls have an air of superiority about them- they will judge other girls and think they have higher values until they begin to indulge in the same activities."

How do girls deal with this? "You're safe as long as you're in the middle- You're not the first person, neither are you the last person in your group to have sex."

In addition to social validation, peer groups also allow for new learning:

- "Indirect education takes place everywhere including schools. Conversations about sex take place in schools, and the type of friends one makes in school will affect how one sees things."
- "Younger kids are influenced by the dating scenario among their seniors."

The influence of a peer group is tempered by one's sense of self- "How you evaluate yourself is very important when it comes to forming attitudes. It depends on how you have achieved that sense of self-esteem", as well as by the popularity you enjoy among your peers. When it comes to the mediating effect of popularity, both whether you're popular- "If you're popular your peers' opinions don't matter. Why? You're popular so it doesn't matter whether you're having sex, or, now that you're popular you can have sex."- as well as how you're popular "How you're popular has a bearing on peer influence. Am I popular because I've had sex or have I had sex because I'm popular?" matter.

The participants were of the opinion that media has an impact on attitudes towards sex- "Gradually you want to do the things you watch and listen to", and seemed to see it as a positive- "Not being able to talk to adults shouldn't be an issue because the internet and media covers it." They felt that "Early exposure (media) to sexual behaviour leads people to have extreme views or opinions. Either you're totally against it or you're not." Contrary to popular belief, they opined that "Social media pressure is not as much as real peer pressure. But it does depend on how easily influenced a person is and on how addicted a person is to social media."

The underlying factor though and possibly the most influential is the age of the individual:

- "The amount of impact anything has on you is directly related to how old you are."
- "The presence of a significant other influences a person's opinion about sex. The later it happens the more it is your choice. When you're younger influence plays a more important role."
- "Dating, especially when you're a younger boy makes you more popular so you get more attached to the girl, but sex really isn't on your mind."

Deterrents to teen sex

The participants were very clear about what causes adolescents to abstain. "The fear of getting pregnant deters girls from having sex- not the necessity of being a virgin bride."

Issues

The participants showed remarkable awareness of the situation as it pertains to teen sex. According to them, "The biggest concerns adolescents have regarding sex are pregnancy, AIDS, STDs, communication or the lack of it thereof (with parents)." To them the problem lies in the fact that sex is a taboo topic

and that neither their parents nor the education system are willing to address the issue:

- “The acceptable age to have sex will continue to decrease but it will never be okay in the eyes of society to talk about it, regardless of age.”
- “Even if parents know you have a girlfriend they aren’t going to talk to you about sex.”
- “The education system in India teaches us nothing about sex.”

Solutions

The following are the solutions the participants came up with:

- “The responsibility to change the attitude towards sex lies with the adults. They need to bridge the gap in communication.”
- “Adults should talk about safe sex rather than not to have sex.”
- “It helps to be able to talk to adults about sex. It’s easier to talk to them when you think they will relate to you and understand you.”
- The role of ‘other adults’- “Other adults can influence you if they’re open and not hypocritical and if you trust and like them you’re more likely to listen to what they have to say.”
- “The attitude towards sex will have to change. Society will have to be more open to it.”

CONCLUSION

The focus group discussion provided interesting insights into how adolescents view sex and the subjective norms that could influence adolescent sexual behaviours. The participants’ responses to generational differences regarding sex and sexual activity suggest they believe the generation gap to be normal. Adolescents expect to have differing views from their parents and they expect their parents to disapprove of their choices, which could be why parents, even if they attempt to communicate with their adolescents about matters related to sex, have a hard time getting through to them.

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With respect to gender differences, their responses suggest that they are aware of the different societal standards for boys and girls when it comes to being sexually active.

This could be the reason why more girls than boys deny or under-report sexual activity, making it impossible to get an accurate picture of adolescent sexual activity in India.

Their pragmatic evaluations of what it means to be sexually active could mean that we need to amend our approach to adolescent sexual behaviour if we want to effect any sort of change. The participants’ responses have also allowed us to identify the factors that increase as well as decrease the likelihood of adolescents becoming sexually active, and their suggested solutions on how to address teen sexual behaviour could prove useful in determining the future course of action.

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