

Premarital sexual relationships: Explanation of the actions and functions of family

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sexual behaviors of adolescents and youth are categorized as one of the main health priorities of a society because of high prevalence of human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and unwanted pregnancies. Family is an important environment that is associated with a range of social and emotional behaviors of children. This study was aimed at explaining the actions and functions of families in youths' engagement in sexual relations.

Materials and Methods: Twenty-six single males and females of 18-24 years who were living in Isfahan participated in this qualitative research study. The participants had begun to have some form of sexual activities. Twelve other participants including parents, teachers, school counselors, clinical psychologists, family counselors, and health care providers also took part in the study. Data collection method was based on semi-structured interview and observing the sexual actions and interactions of youths at different levels. In order to analyze the data, the researcher used constant comparison analysis of investigation.

Results: The results showed that five main concepts are involved in the formation of sexual relations before marriage, including "parents' child-rearing practices", "parents' interactions", "children's economic support", "religious beliefs," and "sexual awareness".

Conclusions: Based on the prominent role of the family in shaping sexual relations before marriage, it is necessary to educate and support families and also revise the neglected aspects.

Key words: Adolescents, family actions, premarital sexual relationship, sexual behavior, youth

INTRODUCTION

Today, due to the advances in technology and its impact on the quality of life, addressing the health and its influencing factors has become important. Also, providing health for the society is considered as one of the main issues in any country. Sexual behaviors of adolescents and youth are categorized as one of the main health priorities of a society because of the high prevalence of human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and unwanted pregnancies.^[1,2]

Based on different research studies, it is estimated that about 50% of the 35.3 million population of those who are infected with HIV have got infected before the age of 25 years.^[3]

Each day, some 500,000 young people, mostly young women, are infected with an STI (excluding HIV); among these infections, hepatitis B, genital herpes, and genital warts are not curable.^[4] Research studies show that the rate of STIs, such as genital warts, chlamydia, and gonorrhoea, among teens and young adults is greater.^[5] Besides that, unwanted pregnancies which are caused due to premature and unprotected sexual contacts in teenagers and youth would bring unsafe abortions and their heavy and long-term consequences which are either physical or mental. Sometimes, it would even bring death to such mothers.^[2]

Over the past few decades, a significant number of adolescents and youth in most Western countries have experienced premarital sexual relations. The studies in Northern Europe and North America have shown that 50% of women have reported sexual contacts by age 17, and this percentage is increased to 70% by age 20.^[6] National surveys have revealed that premarital sex is less in Asia in comparison to the developed countries. However, smaller in-depth studies focusing on youth have indicated that their sexual activity has clearly increased.^[7]

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Although sexual behavior in teenagers and youth is mostly due to the effect of sexual hormones, the role of psychosocial factors such as media, friends and peer group, drugs and alcohol, and family cannot be denied.^[8]

Family is the important environment which influences a large number of social behaviors in children. One of the functions of family is socialization of children. In the socialization process, children learn values, beliefs, and the accepted behavioral criteria of their society.^[9]

Family is an organized system which affects children. The daily routines of families and their relations and contrasts are regarded as a resource which has an effect on the growth of children. A healthy family creates a healthy structure and provides the opportunity for growth and development of children. In contrast, any problem in the family functions creates problem in the members' behavior.^[10]

In different research studies, the family environment is regarded to have an important role which defines the involvement of teenagers and youth in sexual relations. Manning *et al.* in their research study investigated the role of family on the sexual socialization and its relation with teenagers' sexual behaviors.^[11] Based on the work of Mazengia and Worku in a district in the northeast of Ethiopia, it was concluded that children's and parents' inappropriate relationships are regarded as an independent predictor for early sexual relations in youth.^[12]

In Iran also, there have been some studies on family and its role in the appearance of behavioral and risk-taking problems in teenagers.^[13,14] But it seems that there has not been any focused and comprehensive research study on the role of family functions in shaping premarital sexual relations.

Like in other countries, Iranian youth are also at the risk of experiencing and involving in sexual relations. Research studies have reported that risky sexual behaviors have been observed among the young people of the country. In recent years, HIV incidence has increased through sexual transmission.^[15]

Taking into account such observations and also the data gained from Iran's statistical center in the year 2012 which show that 15 million of Iran's population (about 20%) are in the age group of 15-24 years,^[16] taking care of youth's sexual and reproductive health becomes a matter of huge importance. So, it is important to perform qualitative research studies to be able to prevent and control premarital sexual relations and inhibit risky sexual behaviors and their consequences.

In this research study, the actions and functions of family in shaping premarital sexual relations among youth are discussed.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This qualitative research study is part of an expanded qualitative research study conducted to explain the patterns of risky sexual behavior in adolescents and youth, and with the aim of explaining the functions of the family in shaping premarital sexual relations.

Participants

The study participants were 26 single men and women, of age 18-24 years. They were living in Isfahan. We selected the participants based on the criteria that they had begun to have some form of sexual activities, and volunteered to participate in the study.

Potential participants were enrolled from the university campus, parks, and gyms because a large youth population could be found in these places. The participants' selection was based on purposeful sampling, and was continued by using network sampling technique. There was an equal distribution of women and men; moreover, the researcher used different parks and gyms around the city to be able to choose people of different economic and social status.

In order to reach to an expanded amount of information regarding the topic of the study and the aspects which may not have been scrutinized, 12 other participants including parents, teachers, school counselors, clinical psychologists, family counselors, and health care providers (nurses, midwives, and obstetricians) were enrolled in the study. To choose these participants, two methods of sampling including purposeful sampling (at first) and maximum variation sampling (people of different educational levels and professions) were applied.

Approval for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Isfahan University of Medical Sciences. Informed consent, anonymity, information confidentiality, and the right of research withdrawal at any time were assured.

Data collection

Face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Most of the interviews were conducted in one session. The session with those participants who provided thorough information about the topic was divided into two or three sessions to avoid it being long and boring. Duration of the interviews varied from 45 to 135 min. The interviews were lengthened to reach the needed amount of saturation and richness.

Interviews were started with the main question, "what do you think about friendship and relationship between a single woman and man before they get married?" Later, the participants' responses guided the interview process.

As the interview continued, it became more specialized and the content of the questions was the formation of sexual relations in youth, family functions, and other topics of related content.

The research environment was suitable for qualitative studies and was based on natural settings. All the interviews were conducted in an agreed place such as parks.

We found our potential key informants (one male and three females) after interviewing 10 individuals. They were more informed about the topics of the study and knew many young men and women who had already initiated sexual activity. In other words, these four participants were considered as the means to connect to the youth network. They showed their capability of being familiar with the culture of sexuality in terms of language of use, slang, and so on. They had a chance to observe sexual interactions among their peers and the circumstances which were impossible to be observed by the researchers.

The key informants also helped the researcher in finding further participants who had already started their sexual relations.

In this study, the first investigator also observed the youth in different fields besides the interview process. The first investigator also used key informants in observing acts, behaviors, talks, communications, and sexual interactions in different natural environments such as internet cafe, coffee shop, restaurant, shopping center, park, cinema, bus, gym, university, and recreational complex. The key informants were asked to write whatever it seemed to have a sexual nature among youth. They were asked to write these topics with a detailed look irrespective of any interpretation. The key informants were trained to write field note and the reflective journal on a daily basis. They reported 40 episodes of field observation.

Data analysis

Shortly after an interview was conducted, the script of the recorded interviews was transcribed word by word by the first investigator. The scripts and the recoded observations of the field work were analyzed by constant comparison analysis. All the new data were compared with the existing data in order to understand the differences and similarities of the incidents. In this way, the acceptable points were identified.

Data credibility was reassured with long-lasting involvement (16 months) with the participants and in the process of data collection. Besides the data collection duration, we created a rapport by a friendly relationship with the participants and close relationships with the key informants to have a trustful data collection procedure.

In order to truly and deeply understand the participants' accounts, the researcher reread the data at least three times in different situations. The first investigator also tried to search and analyze the contrastive evidence by interviewing youth of different layers of the society. Investigation within different social and economic situations was carried out to collect various and rich data.

Discussion sessions with five different participants were conducted to collect their final views about the topic in order to fulfill member checking. Data confirmation was made possible by external checking. During the external checking procedure, three university professors including an expert in the field of sexual behavior, nursing, and clinical psychology, who were knowledgeable in qualitative data analysis, assisted the first investigator to confirm the data. They first rechecked the coded scripts, and mentioned their opinions about the coding method; later they suggested their own code lists.

Data transferability was made possible by the findings reviewed by four young people (including two young males and two young females) who had similar characteristics as the participants of the study but did not take part in the study. These people found the findings similar to those behavioral patterns they used to observe in their real life. Furthermore, we used external audit method of investigation to address the matter of dependability. This means the data analysis was done by an expert researcher who was not related to the study.

RESULTS

Out of 26 single youths of 18-24 years of age who participated in the study, 15 participants were females and the rest were males. Also, 15 people were students, 6 were employed, 1 was jobless, and 4 people were employed students. There was also a group of 12 participants (4 parents, 2 teachers and counselors, 1 clinical psychologist, 1 family counselor, 1 nurse, 2 midwives, and 1 gynecologist) who participated in the study.

Data analysis showed that family and its characteristics are categorized as one of the main factors in shaping premarital sexual relations. It also showed that five main concepts are involved in shaping premarital sexual relations in youths,

including “parents’ child-rearing practices,” “parents’ interactions”, “children’s economic support”, “religious beliefs”, and “sexual awareness”.

Parents’ child-rearing practices

Most participants agreed upon the fact that children need to receive emotional support from their family. They also mentioned that lack of friendship-based relations between parents and children, lack of love-based home environment, contempt and reproach, excessive command and prohibition, one-way relations, humiliating criticisms (especially in gatherings), inferiority, loneliness, hopelessness, ostracism (especially in teenagers) guide them toward having friendship with opposite sex.

A 21-year-old female stated:

“The family that doesn’t have a friendly based environment ... or the ones who don’t provide a happy environment ... the child moves to have opposite sex friendship”.

A participant mother mentioned:

“... the children who have emotional gaps from their parents ... those who have selfish and illogical parents ... those who behave like a boss with their child ... such behaviours are really important in having opposite sex friendships”.

As another reason, not receiving emotional support from parents is effective in guiding the children toward having friendship with opposite sex. In this regard, girls also need to have their fathers’ emotional support and love. If this love and support is not answered, they will tend to have friendship with opposite sex to fill the emotional gap. Females believe that in the case of lack of emotional support from father, the girl will accept any type of emotional behavior from boys and also accept his request for sexual relationship.

A 23-year-old female stated:

“... if families don’t take care of their children’s needs of emotion and love or they don’t give enough attention, their children will be attracted to outside sources ... when they meet the first boy who is interested in them, they accept. This happens in young ages most of the times (because the children are not yet mature enough). Girls of such families accept such boys at the very young ages and this relationship leads to unwanted ways (sexual relations)”.

Participants also talked about the girls’ restrictions in the ways of dressing, relationships, and makeup. The females emphasized that they are even restricted on their behaviors with relatives. They said such behaviors have changed the boys as an unknown creature for them and girls start having opposite sex friendships (at younger ages) to know boys better.

A 23-year-old female stated:

“Most of the times, families of our society raise girls in a completely closed environment. Girls are always told not to make friendship with him/her, do this, don’t do that, don’t take him/her into account,... girls think that they can have friendship with opposite sex and their parents don’t understand...”

From another point of view, participants mentioned that if all the needs of a child can be satisfied in a family, and parents accept them all, the child will grow up as an expected child. Growing up as an expected child brings the idea that she/he is also free in satisfying the sexual needs and there is no bound.

A 21-year-old female stated:

“I had a high school friend and she was also into her parents’ spotlight. They were always doing her things, helping her, satisfying all of her desires, and she finally went to have sexual relationship”.

Participants frequently focused on the children’s freedom and lesser parental control in family situations. They believed that the reason to have opposite sex friendship is not enough investment by the parents on their children’s freedom and amusement, along with the decrease of parental control which opens the way to have such relationships. Participants said that parental control has decreased because both parents are working or the father has to work excessively to satisfy the economic needs of the family. Other reasons include parents’ separation, parents’ addiction, children’s separation from family because of work or studies (studying or working in a place other than their home city), and the acceptance of such relationships by some parents.

A 23-year-old male stated:

“... well, for a father who works two working times, his only mental problem is working and money making... paying the bills, mortgages, and such things.... It rarely happens that he can think of children’s issues... he has no time to think about such issues.... Sometimes it happens that parents know that their son has a normal relationship with a girl (not a sexual relationship), they say ‘that’s okay, they are ordinary friends... let them continue’”.

Some of the participants referred to the importance of parental roles in maturing and nurturing children’s personality. They believed that making a healthy personality is the main factor in prevention of unhealthy behaviors and premarital sexual relationships.

A 24-year-old male said:

“... in general, the personality which parents create for their children is really important... for example, a family

that raises the child as a mature, and educated one, she/he will never get the wrong way or get involved in an illegal sexual relationship”.

Participants also referred to the economic status, beauty, and such matters. They said the girls who compare their family in different issues with their friend's family and see that theirs is in a weaker position think that the chances of getting married are little. In this way, they attempt to have opposite sex relationships (and even sexual relationship) to add to their chance of marriage. In this regard, a psychologist said:

“Some girls who think that their family status is not in the right position and they can't get married with good cases ... they think it's a good way to start opposite sex friendships and if he asked to have sex ... they accept. Girls think in the case of acceptance to have sexual contact, the boy will get involved with them and finally they can get married”.

Parents' interactions

Some of the participants referred to the conflicts between parents, unhealthy emotional relationships between parents, and their separation or divorce. They said that the gap of emotional needs which are caused in such families because of divorce, struggle, and conflicts makes the youths to start having opposite sex relationships. Mostly, girls in such cases attempt to have sexual relation to continue the relationship.

A 23-year-old male said:

“... when parents are divorced or they are in a frequent struggle/conflict... the emotional and kindness that exists in many families will be absent and this guides the young to have sex”.

Children's economic support

Majority of the participants focused on children's economic needs (mostly girls' economic needs). They believed that youth's economic dependence on their parents has increased in comparison to the past. This is because many more youths are interested in furthering their education at the universities. In so doing, their chance of having full-time or part-time jobs has decreased. The participants frequently mentioned the problem of youths wanting to satisfy their economic needs. The reason that families cannot allocate enough investments for youths is because of the existence of economic hardship for parents, extravagancy, excessive needs, and unexpected needs. Participants believed that girls in our society are not that free in satisfying their economic needs in comparison to boys, and this makes them more dependent on their parents. When girls' economic needs cannot be satisfied, they have to rely on the opposite sex friendships, especially relationship with boys who spend money like water. Girls sometimes have

to have friendship with several boys simultaneously. In this case, they even have to accept boy's sexual request to prolong the friendship.

A 21-year-old female said:

“... Some of my friends were making friendship with boys to be satisfied economically. To be satisfied economically, they had to prolong the relationship... to prolong the relationship, they had to accept boy's sexual requests”.

Sexual awareness

Majority of the participants said that they do not receive sex-related information from their parents. They said talking about such topics is a taboo in families. Also, children do not receive sufficient information in this regard. What they may receive is a surface knowledge, sometimes late or even after their own experience. So, to satisfy their sexual desires, youths have to get involved in friendship with opposite sex and have sexual relationship without sufficient information.

A 24-year-old male said:

“... well, if there will be any discussion in this topic, then that's only a little. And that discussion is from same sex parents, for example, a mother to her daughter or a father to his son, only a little. Parents say, you are religiously mature you must do this and do that ... you must take care of such things ... if this happened ... you must behave like that. Parents never scrutinize such things for their youths to let them be educated”.

A participant midwife said:

“It is important to educate children in sexual topics. But because there is no education in this regard from parents (either to girls or boys), they have to act unconsciously”.

Religious beliefs

Participants named religious beliefs as a restraining factor. Participants also focused on the role of family in shaping a voluntary belief in religion since childhood and its continuity to the rest of life. Participants mentioned that a weaker religious belief among youths is caused because of a weak family performance in this regard. They believed that fading behavioral beliefs such as honor, personal modesty, chastity, and not respecting the boundaries of relationship with opposite sex lead to premarital sexual relationships.

A 23-year-old male said:

“... many youths are not in any bound with their religious beliefs. Family has also never wanted to have moral youths. If families try to empower their children religiously ... they have prohibited their children from such friendships”.

A participant father said:

“... if our child is really in bound with religion (not at face, not a surface follower), say pray, fast, (all these actions by heart and only because of God, not because of parents' words), she/he will never get involved with the idea of sex for the sake of pleasure”.

DISCUSSION

What participants referred to as a necessity for the existence of emotional relationship and emotional support in families (especially for girls) shows the importance of the existence of a positive emotional atmosphere in families to satisfy children's mental health and in the prohibition of their opposite sex relations to reach satisfaction and love. In this study, the participants also focused on the problems of lack of emotional support (especially from fathers' side) which can decrease girls' protection (especially younger ages) from sexual requests obtained from boys' side.

In Cornell and Halpern-Felsher's study, family problems were regarded as the reason for youths attempting to get involved in sexual relationships.^[17] Fekadu observed that overcoming loneliness and relationship with boyfriend is regarded as the psychosocial factor which leads to starting premature sexual relationships in girls.^[8]

Hockenberry and Wilson believed that those teenagers who feel that they are in a close relationship with their parents will better grow psychosocially. The researchers also believed that they have better behavioral qualifications and will be affected lesser by their peer pressures. Such teenagers are not that willing to get involved in risk-taking behaviors (like early sexual relationships).^[18]

The results showed that single parent families (because of separation/divorce) and families with parents having conflicting relationships are more in danger of having teenagers who are interested in opposite sex friendships. The reason of such friendships is that the youths want to stay away from the tensions in their families. This happens mainly in girls, but they attempt to have sexual relationship with boys mainly to not to lose the relationship.

Cherie and Berhane, in a research study conducted in Addis Ababa among the youths of 15-24 years of age, found that living with both parents is the factor that protects the children from not involving in premarital sexual relationships.^[19]

It seems that it is possible to avoid behavioral problems and premarital sexual relationships by creating emotional relationships, attachment, and commitment between family members. Girls can satisfy their emotional needs, especially through their father.

When youths seek emotional support from their parents, they expect to receive an equal emotional support irrespective of their gender. Participants focused on the restrictions laid by parents for girls in their dressing, behavior, friendship, makeup, and nearly everything.

In a study conducted in Philippines in 2005, it was observed that boys received more freedom from their parents and girls were restricted and protected.^[20]

Participants believed that illogical family restrictions for girls make them greedy with regards to interaction with boys and this brings unhealthy relationships.

Participants also said giving freedom without boundary and not controlling the youths in a suitable way make them interested in having opposite sex friendship and sexual relationship. Studies show that freedom without boundary is regarded as one of the main social threats for teenagers.^[21] In doing so, risk-taking behaviors such as substance use and early sexual relationships will be increased.^[18]

It seems that creation of a bounded freedom for children can prevent any irrelevant restriction and closes the doors of misuses. In this way, parents can logically control their children.

In this study, the effective role of family in children's personality growth was focused. A strict personality is regarded as an internal factor that prevents the person from having premarital sexual relationships. Results of the study show that girls with low self-esteem and negative self-concept attempted to have premarital sexual relationships.

High self-esteem, which makes the core of personality health, is regarded as an important protective factor against risk-taking behaviors. Also, the teenagers with positive self-concept and who are feeling proud in a positive way can stand against the challenges of their age better. They can also be more independent.^[22]

As Mckinney *et al.* believed, teenagers and youths who have high self-esteem make a delay in their sexual relationships.^[23] Cornell and Halpern-Felsher also showed that low self-esteem is the reason for attempting to have sexual relationship.^[17]

It is clear that the cause of many personality traits and behaviors must be sought within the family. It is possible to educate parents (by the help of counselors and psychologists) to let them grow their children's personality and increase their self-esteem.

The results show that parents have a negligible role in offering sex-related information to their children. That is why,

children attempt to have sexual relationship without having the necessary information, and this puts them in danger.

The results of the qualitative study by Koohestani *et al.* in Arak showed that boys aged 15-24 years were not receiving the needed sexual information. Most of the boys said they became curious about sexual issues in their teens and this curiosity aroused many questions in them.^[24]

In many developing countries where sex-related topics are a taboo, children rarely talk about such issues with their parents. They have to gain information from their friends and peers who themselves are not educated in this topic.^[25] The teenagers who do not have truthful information in this regard tend to get involved in irresponsible sexual behaviors.^[26]

To promote the reproductive health, it is necessary to educate in a true way. Reproductive health is regarded as a main part of human health. So, it is important to educate parents with truthful and enough information regarding sexual issues. This can have positive effects on youths' sexual attitudes and values. In this way, youths' involvement in unconscious sexual relationships will be decreased.

Results reveal that not taking the economic needs of girls into account (because of any reason) lead them to have friendship with the opposite sex. In this way, girls have to accept boys' sexual requests to be satisfied economically. In different studies, the important effect of economic issues on girl's acceptance of sexual relations has not been denied.^[7,19,27]

Sem and Wirtu, in a study among high-school teens of Ethiopia, concluded that the economic needs and hardships of gaining money and gifts (such as makeup kits, toiletries, dress, and accessories) are categorized as the reasons that girls get stuck in the pressure of premarital sexual relationships.^[25]

The results of Zade Mohammadi and Ahmad Abadi's study also showed that the economic status of a family is regarded as one of the defining factors in sexual risk-taking behavior. In this regard, teens from families that are economically backward experience early sexual relationships more than others.^[28]

It seems that the economic factor has a huge importance in girls' involvement in the relations in which their economic needs will be satisfied. It seems that in this way, their needs will be satisfied in a false and immediate way. It is estimated that trying to add to the content of a family by funding the organization of family support and developing social structures which socially empower women can prevent girls from having premarital sexual relationships.

The weakness of religious beliefs due to poor family performance was also focused in this study. Brewster and Tillman showed in their study that not being familiar with religious values and beliefs since childhood is associated with youths' involvement in sexual relationships.^[29] Thus, religious beliefs in teenagers and adults are regarded as a protective factor against risk-taking behaviors and delinquency. This factor has an inverse relationship with early sexual activities.^[30]

Studies show that youths who have no religious affiliation will start their sexual relationships earlier. In contrast, teens with religious beliefs that are abstinent will get involved in premarital sexual relationships with a lower probability.^[31]

It seems that in the current society of Iran, which has moved from traditional era to modernism that has been facilitated by mass media such as satellite and internet and is also renewed with modern thinking (such as personal freedom), the possibility of involvement in sexual relationships is more. So, it is tried to internalize religious beliefs and values either in personal or social lives of youths and teens through their families to prevent them from having premarital sexual relationships.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, participants defined the important role of family in shaping premarital sexual relationships. It is clear from the findings that it is necessary to let families receive the needed support and education in this regard, so that families can review the neglected aspects by the rich Islamic and Iranian culture.

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