

# ADOLESCENT MALE SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IN WESTERN COUNTRIES: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

**This paper reviews studies which have attempted to explore factors influencing the sexual behavior of adolescent males in Western countries. Literature suggests that these factors relate to sex role definitions, peer group pressure, familial conditions, structural changes, age, social class, education, sexual attitude and motivation, physical attractiveness and religiosity.**

## INTRODUCTION

This paper reviews relevant studies conducted in Western countries with regards to sexual conduct of male adolescents. Given the dearth of similar studies in the Philippines, such a review may provide useful information for a better understanding of the sexual behavior of Filipino adolescent males.

## THE SOCIOPSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY

Adolescence is a period during which young boys experience great and dramatic physiological changes, among which is increased sexual interest and behavior. The heightened sexuality, however, does not seem to be caused simply by an increase in the biological sex drive. Puberty is certainly a signal of maturation of the reproductive system but it is not a reli-

able predictor of either dating behavior or sexual experience. Tremendous variability across societies (and even among groups within a given society) in the expression of sexuality has been observed and thus, biological factors can never be complete explanations of sexual phenomena. Serbin and Sprafkin (1987: 184) attributed the varying patterns of sexual behavior to large individual and cultural differences while De Lamater (1987: 237) stressed the need to take into account the social environment to explain the patterns of the sexual activity of members of a particular society. McKinney et al., (1982: 66) and Roche (1986: 120) specifically pointed out that the existence and frequency of premarital sexual intercourse vary as a function of social and physiological variables.

The sociopsychological perspective therefore looks to society, to the individual's significant groups and to

the person's characteristics for a satisfactory explanation of the sexual behavior of adolescent males. Two key concepts are relevant to the perspective: socialization and role. Socialization is the learning process through which individuals absorb the values, standards, knowledge, skills and beliefs current in the society. Role refers to the set of actions or behavior expected of an individual occupying a particular status.

Everyone in a society learns through the agents of socialization such as family, school, mass media and friends the expectations associated with the various roles (e.g. son, teenage boy). Socialization may be more or less effective depending on the nature of the agents to which the individuals are exposed, their significance to the persons concerned and the amount of conflict between the different agents. During childhood, individuals by and large, have their roles ascribed by others but as they mature and become adolescents, greater opportunities are available not only for a choice of roles but also for a choice of how those roles should be interpreted. The options taken by the individuals hinge on their own personality traits, the particular social context surrounding the issue being faced and the specific opportunities available to them.

## **EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE**

The aetiology of various patterns

of sexual behavior has been implicitly attributed to sex roles in many research efforts (e.g. Bem, 1981; Feather, 1984; Roche, 1986; Howells, 1986). Sex role is defined as the behavior, characteristics, and skills understood or expected to describe and characterize males and females in a particular culture. Specifically, there is evidence to support that beliefs and prescriptions derived from general sex role expectations affect sexual behavior itself. Howells (1986: 270), in a thorough review of studies on human sexuality, found that sex role is largely related to appetitive sexual behavior, that is, the tendency of young men to seek out sexual stimuli.

Sex role guides the sexual activity of adolescent males because it defines specific types of behavior males are expected to perform. For instance, the sex role stereotypes in men cover the notion that males are, and should be, sexually dominant. They should initiate, orchestrate and control the sexual interaction, always be ready to perform, always have an erection, be free of emotional needs during sex and always desire intercourse. Such a role is likely to make males achievement- or conquest- oriented and aggressive in sexual contexts (Lloyd, 1985: 288). Conformity to these role expectations is perceived by adolescents as necessary to maintain their psychological sexual identity (Serbin and Sprafkin, 1987: 182) and such conformity is likely to have profound influence on adolescents' sexual attitudes and be-

havior.

No study has contradicted the influence of sex role on the sexual behavior of young men. However, with regard to the stage at which adolescents learn of their sex role, two conflicting views are evident. One view stresses that the antecedents for sex role can be traced back to childhood (Hollin, 1986: 177). The other viewpoint, while recognizing the foundation laid out in infancy, sees the learning of sex role as a continuing process where the role is formed and reformed in response to changing sociocultural and historical circumstances (Hollin, 1986: 178). While it is true that the development of sex role identity occurs later in childhood - usually before the age of five - the role would only become an issue of real significance as the individual enters adolescence. This is the case because individuals unlearn some of the values and interests of childhood and replace them with adult values and interests. Moreover, evidence of sexuality is often either ignored, denied or punished prior to puberty (Serbin and Sprafkin, 1987: 189; Stebbins, 1990:100).

Studies reviewed by Hollin (1986) reveal that television is a potent source of social influence on sex role development, particularly those television programs characterizing male sexuality by a double standard and by stereotyped definitions of masculine traits and roles. On the specific contributions of parents in reinforcing the sex role

concepts of their male children, one of the studies reviewed by Neubauer and Melzer (1989: 326) found that parents were more likely to restrain their daughters from sexual intercourse than their sons (22 per cent versus 15 per cent) and to allow their sons than their daughters to sleep together with a sexual partner in the parental home. Peer groups also socialize young members about masculinity concepts because they maintain a frame of reference (Gaiser and Muller, 1989: 295) and underline sex role concepts (Coleman and Hendry, 1990:50).

Explanatory factors of role development among men are not only attributed to the media, family and the children and the peer group. The adult world composed of unrelated significant persons also has some bearing on young men's heterosexual orientation. Specifically, males have active premarital intercourse because of their knowledge of and contact with the adult social world which is sexually interested and sexually active. As a consequence, young men feel that they are supposed to be experienced earlier, to be more competent at it, and expected to take a position about sexual opportunities (Juhasz and Schneider, 1987: 583).

The peers and the family exert further influences on adolescent sexuality other than the significant contribution they provide in the sex role development of young people. Data indicate that the sexual attitudes and behavior

of young men could be attributed to the influences of peer groups (e.g. De Lamater; Lloyd, 1985: 288; Hopkins, 1983: 261). Peer pressure — pressure to think or behave along certain peer-prescribed guidelines — is regarded as a prominent attribute of adolescence (Coleman and Hendry, 1990: 120). Adolescents tend to adopt the standards and behavior that they think characterize their peer group. Rodgers and Rowe (1990: 274) found in their study of American college students that the sexual behavior of best friends was predictive of a subject's sexual activity and behavior. The homogeneity of the sexual behavior of peer group members is attributed to the fact that each member wishes to gain the group's approval and acceptance (Coleman and Hendry, 1990: 123). Popularity with peers is important to adolescents and being rejected for simply not conforming to the group's norms, and consequently, being different, are avoided. However, conformity to group pressure is also based on some personal factors. Age is one of those factors: the older the adolescents, the more likely that they are able to resist the pressure of the group (Lloyd, 1985: 208). Other data such as that of Callan *et al.*, (1986: 95) imply a "personal weakness" orientation toward conformity, seeing conformists as being less intelligent or with lower self esteem than non-conformists. Conformity could also reflect adolescents' belief that they are considerate and willing

to weigh up another point of view but it could also be related to self-concept. As a whole, it appears that the act of going along with a group is not just an index of the power of the group and the situation but on some personal traits as well.

Relative to the peer group, the family has a weaker influence on the sexuality of young males (Murstein, 1989: 189). The family as a basic and perhaps the most ubiquitous institution in Western culture, is important to the adolescents for emotional and economic support, as well as for advice and assistance concerning schooling, career or the future (Hurrelman, 1989). On matters involving the actual cultural lifestyle of adolescents, such as those pertaining to identity and leisure needs, and sex and dating, the family does not constitute an effective reference group (Sociological Abstracts, 1987: 968) and the peer group's influence prevails. Moreover, sex is a sensitive topic for discussion among family members.

The family is not the only group expressing a reserved attitude towards sex. Educational and religious organizations, which in general often admit to the fact that adolescents have sexual feelings and desires, tend to communicate an extremely oppressive attitude towards the expression of such desires and provide sexual information in moralistic way that discourages sexual activity in children (Roche, 1986: 108; Serbin and Sprafkin, 1987: 184 and

189).

Two familial factors were found to be associated with the sexual activity of male children: parental control and quality of relationship between parents and sons. Findings indicate that where parental authority is permissive and tolerant of the sexual behavior of male children, adolescents are likely to be engaged in premarital intercourse (Callan, *et al.*, 1986: 240). Permissive parents use little power and show little interest in controlling behavior and this style of parental upbringing, in some families, has given young men a considerable degree of autonomy or freedom (De Lamater, 1987: 239). The survey of Baker *et al.*, (1988: 277) among a sample of 14- to 17- year old males confirmed that parents' approval of their own child's sexual activity continues to be a significant predictor of teenagers' sexual activity. It was also argued that parents' permissiveness was a function of their sons' liberal sexual values; the likelihood that their male children would model such values could be determined by the degree of identification of the child with the parent (Coleman and Hendry, 1990: 90). Apart from the permissiveness of family heads, the quality of the relationship between parents and children likewise determines sexual activity of young men. Adolescents with poor relationships with family heads were inclined to be active in sex (Callan, *et al.*, 1986: 241).

Changes in the social structure in

Western countries were also identified as explanatory variables of the sexuality of adolescent men. Vigorous efforts at promoting delayed marriage widened the gap between puberty and entry into marital union thereby lengthening exposure to premarital sex. The social autonomy of the young at the age of 18 years has increased, allowing more opportunities for sex. The larger society further reinforces these opportunities by opening highly unrestricted avenues for sexual activity. Medical advances and legal changes have made sex potentially safer for adolescents. Most of these changes certainly reflect progress, with the rising rates of premarital sex as unintended by-products (Sociological Abstracts 1987: 967).

### **INDIVIDUAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCES**

The mounting social pressure on adolescent males to engage in active sex does not preclude the fact that there are individual differences to take into account in considering trends regarding sexual activities. These differences pertain to some individual and psychological characteristics of adolescents.

Literature review (Hopkins, 1983: 267; Sociological Abstracts, 1989) indicates that age, social class and education influence sexual behavior. The older the adolescents, the more they are sexually active. Before 1970 men from lower social class were more sexually

experienced than those from the higher class; after 1970, the reverse held true. Adolescents with university education were characterised by more permissive attitudes toward various forms of sexuality (Kon, 1987: 267); however, incidence of premarital intercourse was higher among students with low educational goals and poor school achievement than their counterparts with high educational goals and school achievement (Callan *et al.*, 1986: 240). Related to sexual attitude is the motivation held by an adolescent to engage in greater sexual activity. McKinney *et al.* (1982: 45) stressed that heterosexual fantasies hinge on a variety of reasons: sheer physical enjoyment, expression of love, search for selfhood, proving independence from parents or a spirit of tenderness and excitement. More attractive men (with attractiveness either defined by themselves or others) had more sexual experience than their less attractive counterparts (Hopkins, 1983:). Religiosity was found to be associated with sexual behavior (Hopkins, 1983: McCormick *et al.*, 1985; Story, 1982).

## CONCLUSION

Empirical data support the sociopsychological theory in understanding the sexual conduct of Western young men. Two categories of factors emerged. The first category pertains to society influences: sex role, peer-group pressure, familial condi-

tions, adult social world and some changes in the societal structure. The second refers to individual characteristics such as age, social class, education, sexual attitude and motivation, physical attractiveness, and religiosity.

Data consistently indicated that the cliques, adult world, and mass media influence male role concepts. Peer group is a more dominant reference group relative to family as far as sex is concerned. The social structure of the West appears to be more likely to provide a more conducive environment for premarital sex activities.

Most of the studies reviewed in this paper were based on highly selected cases such as high school and college students and had varying operational definitions of adolescent males; they should then be taken with caution. Although they are Western-based, they may be useful for developing countries such as the Philippines with keen interest in adolescent male sexuality and where a dearth of data on sexual behavior is evident. For example, it may be worthwhile determining whether the identified factors associated with sexual behavior of young males in Western societies hold true in the developing countries.

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