

Sexual networking among some Lagos State adolescent Yoruba students



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Abstract

Adolescent sexual behaviour was studied in order to provide more valid data on the onset of sexual experience and aspects of premarital sexual networking which may influence sexuality in later life. Yoruba students from five secondary schools were surveyed. Almost half the respondents were sexually active and most had more than two sexual partners. Despite this, most respondents favoured premarital chastity for girls. More students had heard of AIDS than STDs but, even so, knowledge of transmission was limited. Yet nearly one-third indicated that they knew of someone with AIDS. The evaluation, however, of premarital chastity as desirable suggests that subsequent sexual behaviour may be amenable to shaping through family-life education, a possible route for AIDS control campaigns.

Introduction

Previous studies of sexual networking have focused on adult subjects, who were requested, among other items, to recall their first sexual experience which, for most people, occurs during adolescence. The subjects of the present study are adolescents. The study of adolescents' sexual behaviour is important. Firstly, compared with studies of adult subjects, it may provide more valid data about the onset of sexual experience, in view of the much reduced time-lag between actual experience and recall. Secondly, it provides information on aspects of premarital sexuality which, despite the tendency towards modification in later life, may influence marital and extramarital sexuality. Thirdly, the findings of studies of contemporary adolescent sexual networking may be compared with those of preceding generations - assuming that there are comparable data for past generations - and thus may be used to confirm or disprove the axiomatic belief that the present generation of young people are more sexually permissive than their counterparts in the past. Fourthly and importantly, adolescents' sexual habits may have greater potential for policy and interventive action than the sexual networking of already formed adults.

Methodology

Sampling

The subjects of the study were 250 Yoruba adolescent students, consisting of 148 girls and 102 boys who were in SS 1 and SS 2 forms in five purposely selected secondary schools in Lagos State. The schools were selected from two locations, namely urban and semi-urban Lagos areas. Urban Lagos was represented by one school each in Onike, Bariga and Suru-Lere whilst two schools in Epe represented semi-urban locations. Apart from location, the gender composition of the schools was a criterion for sampling. The subjects of the study attended three types of schools: two mixed schools, two all-girls schools and one boys school. Convenience determined which five schools were actually chosen out of the several schools representing each category of school gender composition. The location and type of schools are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Location and type of schools attended by subjects

School type	Location of school	No. of subjects
All girls school	Semi-urban (Epe)	50
All girls school	Urban (Onike)	50
All boys school	Urban (Bariga)	50
Mixed gender school	Urban (Suru-Lere)	50
Mixed gender school	Semi-urban (Epe)	50

In the five schools, the indicated number of Yoruba students were randomly chosen out of a larger population ranging from 80 to 300 in different schools. Only Yoruba students were studied partly to ensure relative uniformity on the norm of premarital sex and partly to ensure comparability with the findings of other studies on the Yoruba such as Orubuloye, Caldwell and Caldwell (1990).

Method

The main instrument for the study was a 110-item questionnaire comparable in many respects to those used in the previously cited Ekiti study. A questionnaire was used to improve the validity of the data by decreasing socially desirable responses. This is especially important since the subjects were interviewed on school premises by the junior author. A face-to-face interview situation was found to be inappropriate in interviewing adolescents.

Procedure

The strategy which was adopted in this study for administering the questionnaire was one which had been successfully used by the senior author in relation to another aspect of adolescent life. The reason for briefly describing it is that it provides yet another methodological approach to the study of a sensitive topic such as sexual networking.

Subjects who were chosen by random sampling were invited to one location in each school and the questionnaire was distributed to them. Although the questionnaires contained a description of the purpose of the study, respondents were given opportunities to ask questions, which some of them did: questions such as 'What are you going to use it for?' and 'Who will you give the findings to and what will happen to it?'

Since the questionnaire contained no item requesting information about the subjects' identity it was relatively easy to convince them of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. The advantages of administering the questionnaire in a group situation included greater surveillance to ensure that the subjects' opinions were truly independent. The reliability of the collected data would have been questionable if students had been allowed to complete them outside a controlled situation. The junior investigator established a rapport with the subjects during the introductory phase in which students asked questions which were tactfully and humorously handled; this created a relaxed atmosphere which facilitated the disclosures the students provided.

Some characteristics of the subjects

A majority of the subjects, 72.4 per cent, were born in Lagos whilst the remaining 27.6 per cent were born in other Yoruba states. The states of family origin were as follows: Lagos State 35.2 per cent, Ogun 38 per cent, Oyo 14 per cent, Ondo 16 per cent, and Kwara 3.6 per cent. With respect to the socioeconomic status of their parents, 51.6 per cent of fathers compared to 71.6 per cent of mothers

were self-employed whilst 41.4 per cent of fathers and 23.6 per cent of mothers were civil servants. Of respondents who knew the educational attainment of their parents, one third indicated that their fathers had little or no education, that is less than the old modern III certificate, whilst two-thirds indicated that their fathers had completed secondary education with or without post-secondary qualifications. The percentage of children who did not know their parental education varied between schools; the variation could not be explained by school location or type. About 59 per cent of children came from monogamous homes and about 30 per cent from polygynous homes. A large proportion of the subjects indicated that their mothers occupied the first position among their fathers' wives, 68.4 per cent, rather than other positions, 24.8 per cent. With respect to family size, a greater proportion of the subjects originated from large families as judged by the number of mothers' and fathers' children. Only 26.8 per cent and 14.8 per cent of all subjects respectively indicated that their mothers and fathers had four children or less. For 63.6 per cent and 57.3 per cent respectively of subjects, the number of mother's and father's children was five and more.

Preliminary survey findings

Age at first sexual experience

Two fifths of all subjects indicated that they had sexual experience as shown in Table 2. For 3.6 per cent, sex was experienced at about ten years old and for 36.4 per cent not until the age of 15 and 16 years. For the majority of those who had had sexual relations, love and fun were the most frequently provided reasons for involvement.

Table 2
Premarital chastity and attitudes to it

Question	Urban all boys		Urban Mixed		Urban all girls		Semi-urban all girls		Semi-urban mixed		Total	
	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
Are you a virgin?												
Yes	36	18	56	28	66	33	60	30	52	26	54	135
No	48	24	38	19	28	14	38	19	48	24	40	100
Don't know ^a	16	8	6	3	6	3	2	1	-	-	6	15
Should a girl be a virgin?												
Yes	46	23	54	27	62	31	52	26	44	22	52	129
No	40	20	42	21	34	17	42	21	44	22	40	101
Don't know	10	7	4	2	4	2	6	3	12	6	7	20

^aIn this and later tables 'no response' and 'don't know' are treated as a single category and labelled 'don't know'.

There were no significant differences between children who attended different types of school with respect to age at first sexual experience. On the one hand, there was a tendency for more girls than boys to indicate that they had experienced sex at the age of ten years. On the other hand, girls, especially when they attended all-girls schools, were more likely than boys to indicate that they had never experienced sex.

Of those who responded to the item asking whether they were virgins, the percentage who gave negative responses in all-boys schools exceeded, by at least ten per cent, those of the subjects who gave similar responses in all-girls schools. In the mixed school, in a semi-urban location, the percentage giving negative responses was similar to the percentage giving negative responses in the all-boys urban

school. Neither parental socioeconomic status nor religious participation seemed to be significantly related to age at first sexual relations.

Number of sexual partners

With respect to the number of current sexual partners of respondents at the time of the study, the highest percentage with more than two sexual partners is from the all-boys urban school followed by the semi-urban mixed school. The percentages of girls in all-girls schools who indicated having more than two sexual partners at the time of the study was two to seven times smaller than the comparable percentage of boys in the all-boys urban and semi-urban mixed-gender schools.

The responses to the question on number of sexual partners in the last month did not significantly differ from those on current sexual partners, except in the semi-urban mixed school in which the percentage indicating abstinence decreased when the time frame was a month. It was not clear whether the occurrence of the school holiday during the month of reference contributed to the decrease.

Interestingly, the pattern of responses to the question on the number of sexual partners in the last year was consistent with that which was evoked by the shorter duration. Apparently the number of sexual partners did not increase with relative maturity. In two schools there was a slight decrease in the percentage of subjects reporting more than two sexual partners in the previous year, compared with the time of the study.

With respect to number of partners in a lifetime, 16.8 per cent of all subjects had had one partner and 25.6 per cent more than one; 31.2 per cent said they had no sexual experience and 26.4 per cent did not respond at all to that question. Respondents at urban schools, regardless of school type, manifested a greater lack of response to this item than semi-urban respondents. Perhaps urban students are more research-weary and wary than their semi-urban counterparts.

Attitude to sex

Attitudes of students to sex were tapped by several questions one of which asked whether an unmarried boy or girl should have a sexual partner. Whilst 32 per cent of subjects answered yes, 54.4 per cent said no and the remaining 13.6 per cent were uncertain. The proportion of students who said no exceeded the proportion who had indicated in several related items that they had had sexual experience, suggesting that for approximately 20 per cent of subjects who had experienced sexual relations, their behaviour was not consonant with their attitude. This was confirmed by the trend of responses to a question which asked subjects to evaluate their present sexual behaviour as either good or bad. Only 11.2 per cent of subjects felt that their sex behaviour as reported was good; 88.8 per cent felt it was bad. Several conclusions can be drawn from this.

First, children had been apparently normatively socialized with respect to sexual behaviour but were unable to measure up to the norms for several reasons. The available data cannot fully explain the causes of lack of conformity to norms regarding premarital sex; however, some indications are provided. The pattern of responses to some questions in four schools showed that over half the subjects went out with friends of the opposite sex without any chaperoning and that they visited one another at home. The all-girls semi-urban school was the only school in which only about one third of subjects indicated that they visited opposite-sex friends. Girls in the mixed semi-urban location also indicated that they were restricted from visiting opposite-sex friends. Parents and other agents of socialization in semi-urban locations are likely, in view of the cultural homogeneity and folkways of such settings, to have more opportunities for surveillance of the movements of the young than are provided in the impersonal urban areas, except when they constitute ethnic enclaves.

Another finding was consonant with the generalization that the subjects had favourable attitudes towards premarital chastity even when some of them violated it. The proportion of responses which

favoured the desirability of virginity for girls at marriage exceeded in four schools the proportion of responses which did not favour premarital chastity. In the semi-urban mixed school, there is an even split between attitudes favouring and not favouring chastity. When subjects were directly requested to state whether they would rather be a virgin or not, in the two all-girls schools in urban and semi-urban areas, the pattern of distribution of responses was similar. In the two schools, 74 per cent and 72 per cent respectively indicated preference for premarital chastity whilst 22 per cent of subjects in the two schools indicated that they did not wish to be chaste until marriage.

As many as 64.8 per cent of the subjects thought that there was greater sexual freedom today than in the past whilst only 21.6 per cent held the opposite view. The subjects apparently had identified with the views of their parents on the topic. More boys than girls held the view that their generation was more sexually permissive than past generations.

Health behaviour

The subjects of the study had some knowledge of venereal diseases and AIDS; however, a significantly higher proportion of them had heard of AIDS than had heard of venereal diseases. The finding is attributable to the different focus on the two types of diseases in the mass media; many respondents in all schools - from 62 to 88 per cent - had heard about AIDS from the media. There was in four schools at least a 22 percentage-point differential between the proportion who had heard of venereal diseases and those who had heard of AIDS, as shown in Table 2.

The subjects' knowledge of the cause of venereal diseases was adequate but similar knowledge of AIDS was limited, as shown in Table 3. When asked to indicate the truth or falsehood of the statement that AIDS is caused by blood transfusion, as many as 38 per cent of subjects replied that the statement was false. In the semi-urban schools and two urban schools, 24 per cent and 30 per cent replied false. In the urban all-boys school only eight per cent of respondents erred in the specific knowledge under discussion. On the other hand, when asked to confirm or deny the statement that AIDS is caused by kissing, as many as 46 per cent in the schools agreed with the statement. The least proportion of subjects disagreeing with the statement was 22 per cent.

Table 3
Knowledge of venereal diseases and AIDS, and their causes

Question	Urban all boys		Urban mixed		Urban all girls		Semi-urban all girls		Semi-urban mixed		Total	
	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
Hear of VD?												
Yes	58	29	32	16	66	33	16	8	30	15	40	101
No	38	19	54	27	32	16	72	36	70	35	53	133
Don't know	4	2	14	7	2	1	12	6	-	-	7	16
Heard about AIDS?												
Yes	86	43	68	34	88	44	62	31	74	37	76	189
No	12	6	24	12	8	4	34	17	26	13	21	52
Don't know	2	1	8	4	4	2	4	2	-	-	3	9
AIDS caused by blood transfusion?												
True	82	41	62	31	66	33	64	32	54	27	66	164
False	8	4	30	15	24	12	36	18	38	19	27	68
Don't know	10	5	8	4	10	5	-	-	8	4	7	18
AIDS caused by kissing?												
True	40	20	36	18	46	23	22	11	34	17	36	89

False	48	24	56	28	42	21	54	27	60	30	52	130
Don't know	12	6	8	4	12	6	24	12	6	3	12	31

Except for their replies on blood transfusion and kissing, the majority of subjects seemed to have an adequate knowledge of the causes of AIDS. However, in view of the grave nature of AIDS, it is a matter for concern that one fifth of subjects in two semi-urban schools rejected the statement that AIDS can be transmitted through sex.

Only ten of the subjects (4%) reported being treated for venereal diseases; there was no indication of the kind of treatment but they probably were treated in hospitals. Surprisingly, 80 (32%) of the subjects indicated that they knew someone who had been treated for AIDS; however, only 50 names were provided, there were no names given for the remaining 30 alleged AIDS patients. Most of the respondents who had given names thought that the patients had been treated in hospitals; a small proportion mentioned home treatment. According to the respondents 54 per cent of the AIDS patients were male and 46 per cent female. The location of schools did not have a significant influence on the reported number of patients, nor did it influence their reported gender.

Conclusion

The foregoing findings are preliminary; the analysis is still in progress. However, some evident trends are summarized here.

First, in view of the findings that about 40 per cent of adolescents engage in heterosexual relations and that approximately 75 per cent of those who do so have had more than two sexual partners in their lifetime, there is a need to carry out more research among youth in different communities to determine the pattern of premarital sexuality in Nigeria. Premarital sexuality is an aspect of sexual behaviour which requires study if a fuller perspective on sexual behaviour is to be attained. Secondly, since no age group is immune to venereal disease and AIDS, the findings of such studies would be as relevant as those of adults in any program that contemplates behavioural change in sexual networking. Since adolescents' sexuality has a prognostic value, studies of adolescents are urgently needed to identify and program the behavioural changes that are necessary to curb sexual networking and decrease the risk of venereal disease and AIDS.

Perhaps the most important finding in this study from the perspective of behaviour modification is that young people endorsed premarital chastity and evaluated their sexual behaviour as bad. One of the principles of behavioural modification as advanced by Krumboltz and Thorenson (1969) is that goal setting should be an activity undertaken together by the counsellor and the client.

If young people's rational evaluation of their premarital sexuality is accompanied by desirable emotional consequences then their subsequent behaviour may be amenable to shaping through intensive family life education which properly locates sex within legitimate unions. Moreover, family life education should include self control techniques such as self-monitoring, self-assessment, self-mediation and self-maintenance to facilitate the conformity of adolescents to the norms to which they subscribe.

References

- Krumboltz, J.D. and C. Thorenson. 1969. *Behavioural Counselling: Cases and Techniques*. New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston.