

Research paper

Perspectives of Chinese British adolescents on sexual behaviour within their socio-cultural contexts in Scotland

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What is known on this subject

- Over one-quarter of young people in Britain become sexually active before the age of 16 years, but sexual behaviour varies between different ethnic groups.
- Young people of South Asian origin living in the UK are more likely to hold transitional attitudes to sex and experience sexual intercourse at a later age than those from other ethnic groups.
- Adolescent sexual behaviour is often formed within social and cultural contexts.

What this paper adds

- Traditional views of sexual behaviour were common within the Chinese British families.
- Similarity in sexual attitudes and behaviour among Chinese British young people and their friends was evident, but differences were also found.
- Sexual knowledge acquired at school was valued, as a variety of barriers prevented parents from communicating sex-related topics effectively, but the safe sex strategy was criticised by parents.
- It is important to examine adolescent sexual behaviour within the socio-cultural contexts of young people's own points of view to facilitate the development of greater culturally-competent practice.

ABSTRACT

Early sexual initiation and unwanted teenage pregnancy are issues of concern in many western countries. Adolescent sexual behaviour varies between different ethnic groups. However, little is known about the processes that produce such differences, particularly amongst Chinese British people. This paper reports the attitudes of Chinese British adolescents on sexual behaviour within their socio-cultural contexts. Using an ethnographic approach and snowball sampling, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 20 adolescents and 20 parents. Traditional sexual attitudes were common within the families, and parental sexual values were found to be important.

Similarities in sexual values and behaviour among friends were apparent, but differences were also

found. Sexual knowledge acquired at school was thought necessary because a variety of barriers prevented parents from communicating sex-related topics effectively. However, the 'safe sex' strategy was criticised by parents, who thought sex education would work more effectively if it was provided within a moral context by teaching young people the option of sexual abstinence. The paper suggests that the exploration of adolescent sexual behaviour within socio-cultural contexts is important for the development of greater culturally-competent practice.

Keywords: adolescents, Chinese British people, qualitative approach, sexual attitudes, sexual behaviour, socio-cultural context

Introduction

Adolescent sexual behaviour is an issue of concern in many western countries. A national survey in Britain reported that over one-quarter of 16–19 year old respondents had become sexually active before the age of 16 years (Wellings *et al*, 2001). A recent Scottish survey revealed similar findings, reporting that nearly one-third of 15 year old school children had had sex (Currie *et al*, 2008). However, differences between ethnic groups have been reported. For example, young people of South Asian origin living in the UK were more likely to hold traditional attitudes and experience sexual intercourse at a later age than those from other ethnic groups (Wellings *et al*, 1994; Bradby and Williams, 1999).

Adolescent sexual behaviour tends to be negotiated within social and cultural contexts (Wellings *et al*, 1994; Sterling and Sadler, 2008). Family life often plays a unique and significant role. Perceived maternal/parental disapproval of teenage sex was often associated with later sexual initiation, fewer sexual partners, more-consistent contraceptive use, and reduced teenage pregnancy (Dittus and Jaccard, 2000; He *et al*, 2004). Adolescents whose parents discussed sex with them were more likely to mirror their values and initiate sexual intercourse when older (Jaccard *et al*, 1998; Vesely *et al*, 2004). However, some studies found such impacts only among those who talked about values and beliefs at home, suggesting the importance of parental values (Miller *et al*, 1999; Romo *et al*, 2002).

Parental influence generally decreases as young people get older, whereas friends become increasingly important in guiding behaviour with regard to smoking, drinking and sex (Whitbeck *et al*, 1999; He *et al*, 2004). Several studies found that adolescents were more likely to consider friends as their major source of sexual information instead of parents (Todd *et al*, 1999; Currie *et al*, 2008). Similarity in sexual attitudes and behaviour among friends is common. Kinsman *et al* (1998) reported that adolescents who perceived their friends to be sexually active were more intent on having sex and changed their sexual behaviour to reflect their perceptions of peer norms. Sexually experienced young people often reported their friends as having had sex (Santelli *et al*, 2004; Hampton *et al*, 2005).

Adolescents often receive little sex education at home (Weaver *et al*, 2002). Barriers such as embarrassment, limited communication skills, and parents' lack of sexual knowledge often hinder them from getting their views across (Mturi and Hennink, 2005; Mbugua, 2007). The provision of sex education at school is, therefore, important in leading to greater sexual knowledge, use of contraception, and reduced pregnancy rates (Paine-Andrews *et al*, 1999; Wight *et al*, 2002). However, some studies have challenged these findings

(DiCenso *et al*, 2002; Somers and Evans, 2002). Failure to consider crucial variables outside of school influence, and the methodological difficulties of conducting research in this area may contribute to such inconsistencies.

The spheres of family, friends, and school can impact on adolescents in complex ways concurrently, but most research has only looked at isolated factors. Studies have not often explored sexual behaviour from young people's own point of view. Furthermore, there is little evidence available to inform the development of greater culturally-competent sex education and associated services for Chinese British youth. Nearly a quarter of a million Chinese people were resident in Britain, according to the 2001 Census, representing 0.42% of the population (Office for National Statistics, 2001). Little is known about their views on teenage sex. This paper reports findings from a PhD study examining the attitudes of Chinese British adolescents on sexual behaviour from the perspectives of both children and parents (Yu, 2004).

Methods

Research approach

An ethnographic approach was adopted for this study. This is because it emphasises an understanding of people's attitudes, values, and behaviour in social and cultural contexts through the native's point of view (Spradley, 1979). Insights were also drawn from phenomenology, exploring lived experiences from the participants' point of view, and grounded theory, allowing themes to emerge from data. These approaches allowed participants to express their perspectives openly and the researcher to describe the socio-cultural contexts in which young people formed their sexual values and behaviour.

Participants and sampling

The participants were 20 adolescents (ten males, ten females) and 20 parents (15 mothers, five fathers) living in Scotland. Tables 1 and 2 describe their demographic details. The adolescents were aged 16–19 years and had never married. Excluding those under 16 years avoided ethical dilemmas regarding the possible disclosure of underage sex. At 16, young people are legally able to give their informed consent to participate without their parents' giving permission. Participants were either British born or had moved to Britain before the age of five years. Seven teenagers took part with mothers or both parents. Two participated with their siblings. The remaining participants were not related to each other. The parents were first-generation Chinese British, all had British-born teenage children,

Table 1 Demographic information about the adolescents

Demographic information	Adolescents	
	Male (<i>n</i> = 10)	Female (<i>n</i> = 10)
Age at the interview (years)		
16	3	5
17	1	2
18	3	1
19	3	2
Born in Britain	9	9
Religion		
Christian	6	6
Buddhist	1	1
Dao	–	1
Atheist	3	2
Current status		
At university	4	3
At secondary school	5	7
Working	1	–
Living at home	9	9
Living with one parent	2	–
At least one parent had worked or was working in the catering trade	9	9

and most were Cantonese speakers born in Hong Kong.

Initially, a number of Chinese communities were approached to enable the researcher to become familiar with the world of the potential participants. This facilitated the development of ideas about where and how to recruit participants. There were no databases available to identify people who met the sample criteria. Snowball sampling was used because of the sensitive nature of the topic and the small size of the Chinese population in Scotland. Multiple snowballs were developed through contacting various Chinese associations, Chinese churches, friends, and Chinese students at Scottish universities. Issues surrounding sampling, rapport and language have been discussed by the author elsewhere (Yu, 2009).

Data collection and analysis

Participants were interviewed alone, at a time and location convenient to them. Each interview lasted about 40–60 minutes. All 20 adolescent participants

Table 2 Demographic information about the parents

Demographic information	Parents	
	Fathers (<i>n</i> = 5)	Mothers (<i>n</i> = 15)
Age at the interview (years)		
In their 40s	4	11
In their 50s	1	4
Age moved to Britain		
In their teens	2	6
In their 20s	2	6
In their 30s	1	3
Length of residence in Britain (years)		
12–20	1	4
21–30	3	8
Over 30	1	3
Country of origin		
Hong Kong	5	12
Mainland China	–	1
Taiwan	–	1
Singapore	–	1
Religion		
Christian	5	11
Buddhist	–	2
Dao	–	1
Atheist	–	1
Education		
University	2	2
Secondary	–	8
Primary	3	5
Divorced	–	2
Working in the catering trade	3	8

were interviewed in English. Table 3 shows the languages used in the interviews with the 20 parents who took part. There was little problem for the researcher, who was a Mandarin speaker, and who was able to communicate with the parents. Most Cantonese speakers were able to speak some Mandarin. Chinese characters were also used to enhance understanding when necessary, as written Chinese language is intelligible to all literate speakers of any dialect.

The interviews were transcribed and translated verbatim by the researcher. The transcripts were not back-translated; however, some strategies were used to enhance the reliability of the translation. The researcher went back to participants to clarify some

Table 3 Language of interviews with the parents

Language of interviews	Native language	
	Mandarin (<i>n</i> = 2)	Cantonese (<i>n</i> = 18)
Mandarin	2	10
English	—	5
A mixture of Mandarin, Cantonese and English	—	3

vague comments in the interviews. When difficulties emerged in accurately interpreting meanings, she discussed the issues with participants, local Chinese people, friends and supervisors, taking care not to break confidentiality. Data were stored in NUD*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data: Indexing, Searching and Theorizing) computer software package and analysed thematically with guidance from Spradley (1979) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). Categories and subcategories were created to organise the data, suggested by the interview questions and themes that emerged from the data such as 'language barriers' and 'parents' lack of time'. A conceptual map was developed to interpret the data.

Ethical considerations

The research ethics committee of the Department of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Stirling, approved this research. All participants gave their informed consent prior to interviews, and young people did so independently of their parents. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time without giving reasons. Confidentiality and anonymity were preserved. Participation was voluntary and no incentives were offered.

Strong emotions could accompany the interview process as personal issues related to sex were explored. To safeguard the teenagers, the contact details of two alternative support services, independent of the researcher, were offered before the interviews. A Chinese researcher and a lecturer in sexual health at the University of Stirling were available to provide emotional support. The telephone number for Childline was also given. This is a free, 24-hour helpline for children and young people in trouble and danger.

Findings

A variety of views on adolescent sexual behaviour were reported, and four key themes identified: attitudes towards sexual behaviour, communication about sex and values within families, interactions with friends and sex education in school. Each is discussed below highlighting the perspectives of the two sample groups.

Attitudes towards sexual behaviour: perspectives of adolescents

A traditional view of sexual behaviour was repeatedly reported, where love, trust, commitment, and marriage were all seen to be important. Those with this view disapproved of adolescent sex, believing that sex should not happen outside a lasting relationship or marriage 'because when you are young, you don't have a great responsibility, you don't have many, many choices' (adolescent 9, 17 year old male).

The influence of religious beliefs on their stances on sex and marriage was noted. Premarital sex was regarded as inappropriate and against their religion, as adolescent 15 reported:

'I think as a Christian I should follow the Christian rules. I'll probably have to wait for marriage first.' (adolescent 15, 16 year old male)

Occasionally, teenage sex was thought acceptable although casual sex or one-night stands were still disapproved of. Taking precautions was considered essential to avoid the unwanted consequences of having sex:

'I think it's perfectly normal [to have sex], but it is also better to, like to take precautions, like contraception and stuff, because we are not old enough to cope with such a large responsibility, like babies and stuff.' (adolescent 5, 16 year old male)

No matter which view the adolescents took, they all stressed the importance of not rushing into having sex until they were ready for it. When being asked to explain the meaning of readiness, adolescent 11's account was typical:

'Ready? Mentally, mentally, if you feel that you are willing to do this with this person, because you actually do like them, and not because you want to try it, or you want to do it because your friends are doing it.' (adolescent 11, 16 year old female)

Knowing the possible consequences of having sex was seen as important, such as getting sexually transmitted diseases, becoming pregnant, having children, and

therefore having to leave school. Sex was thought to be a deterrent to educational aspirations because:

'If they test they are actually pregnant, then the whole school life has gone. They have to leave school, and it's really early to be doing now.' (adolescent 18, 16 year old female)

Young people appeared to be tolerant of their peers having sex, saying that they did not expect others to share the same values, because 'people do it anyway, and I just accept what they are doing. We can't, like, stop them from doing it anyway' (adolescent 19, 16 year old male).

Gender double standards were rooted in youth culture. Some female adolescents used terms such as 'cool', 'boast', 'show off', or 'honour' when talking about boys who had sex, while they described sexually active girls as 'contaminated' or 'not good'. Adolescent 1's report reflected this issue:

'If you have sex with someone, and that guy left all right, then another guy who comes along knows that you had sex before. They would think like, "oh, contaminated, you are contaminated" ... but guys, it's just like, "oh, I sleep with this girl. I've done this and that", and they think it's a good thing, you know.' (adolescent 1, 18 year old female)

Some male adolescents implied that their major concern was of getting sexually transmitted diseases, reporting that girls had more disadvantages and therefore should be more responsible for sex. Although agreeing with this view, female adolescents believed that women were more capable of refusing unwanted sex.

No males reported being sexually active, but two females did. One had engaged in sex with her current boyfriend when 17 and the other lost her virginity to her ex-boyfriend at age 15. Both felt that they were ready for sex. Others described various reasons for not having sex, including not feeling ready for it, not considering sex essential in a girl/boyfriend relationship, or preferring to wait until after marriage.

Attitudes towards sexual behaviour: perspectives of parents

Parents often believed that sex should be reserved for marriage. Age was not thought to be the key factor. Sex outside marriage was not acceptable, as mother 5 said:

'In Britain, 16 is the legal age for sex. I think teenagers should not have sex at that age because they are too young. They should wait until they are married.' (mother 5, in Chinese)

They stressed the influence of Chinese culture on their values and considered the views of British people to be in opposition to their own, reporting:

'There are some teenagers with babies where we live. We Chinese people think it's too early because you are not

mature ... Their thinking is different from ours.' (father 19, in Chinese and English)

Christian parents highlighted the impact of religious beliefs and often associated this influence with Chinese culture, as father 19 explained:

'You shouldn't lose your virginity, isn't it, before you get married? That's the Chinese culture and religion as well.' (father 17, in English)

Parents also expected their children to do well at school. Dating or having a steady girl/boyfriend was therefore discouraged. In a few cases, premarital sex was thought acceptable but only in a loving relationship in which the intention was to get married.

Communication about sex and values within families

The transmission of parental values was complex. For the adolescents, family communication was usually only 'something trivial' (adolescent 10, 18 year old male), 'random things' (adolescent 15, 16 year old male), or 'nonsense' (adolescent 18, 16 year old male), whereas topics such as their social life, personal relationships, and sex were not often discussed. Adolescent 2, who had a good relationship with her parents, reported:

'I tell my mum everything, well almost everything. So there isn't anything that's difficult to tell my mum, unless it's, like, I have a boyfriend or anything.' (adolescent 2, 16 year old female)

Sometimes, basic family communication was limited even leaving aside sex-related topics. Language barriers were often mentioned. Young people considered English to be their first language and often felt that they did not know enough Chinese vocabulary to speak to their parents at all on certain topics, as the following excerpts suggested:

'When it's more complex, it's kind of difficult to speak Chinese.' (adolescent 4, 18 year old male)

'I am not really good at Chinese. So sometimes I've got to use English words, but they don't understand me, so I am going to talk to somebody else.' (adolescent 19, 16 year old male)

Both parents and adolescents felt too embarrassed to discuss sex, saying 'we Chinese are too conservative to talk about sex' (mother 11, in Chinese). Parents' lack of time for their children was also detrimental. Most adolescents interviewed had at least one parent involved in the catering business. Working six days a week from late afternoon to midnight, these parents did not have sufficient time for their children. 'You should spend a lot more time with your family' said adolescent 3, a 19 year old male, disappointed that his parents did not

spend enough time with him or his sisters when they were young. It was found that the more time spent with parents, the greater the positive impact on the relationship. For example, adolescent 11, who used to get a lift to school from her brother and who saw her parents on only two days a week, described how the relationship with her parents improved after they began to take her to school:

‘So every morning in these 20 minutes in the car, we talk a lot more than we used to. And I think that’s how we’ve become a lot closer.’ (adolescent 11, 16 year old female)

Cultural differences between the generations also played their part in reducing communication and creating misunderstanding. These adolescents were growing up in Britain, while their parents had been brought up in different mainstream cultures. This may have caused some conflicts between them, as mother 4 explained:

‘If we bring them up in the Chinese way, they would not accept that, as they are growing up here ... There is a distance between us, so that sometimes we have arguments or conflicts.’ (mother 4, in Chinese)

Young people tended not to talk about their values with their parents, to avoid disagreement. Religious participation appeared to play a role in promoting some understanding within families, as reported by adolescent 11 whose family had practised Daoism for four years:

‘I think everything started going to our religion. It made a big difference to their real thinking because they listened to a lot more in classes, and they really kind of opened up a lot more.’ (adolescent 11, 16 year old female)

Interactions with friends

Most young people had close friends, around their age and of the same gender. They often shared interests with friends from diverse backgrounds and did not think that their Chinese background had a negative impact on making friends. Some participants, however, reported that their background seemed to make communication with non-Chinese people a little difficult, indicating:

‘They tend to talk about, like different things, and probably because my English is not that good that I can’t really talk to them that much. And it just seems that we are different.’ (adolescent 16, 17 year old female)

She actually spoke fluent English but the ‘we are different’ was a factor repeatedly mentioned. For example, adolescent 19, who felt it easy to talk to his Chinese friends at church, described his British friends as ‘... just crazy. They may go out a lot. They party. They drink and stuff’. In such cases, a shared cultural identity and values provided common ground for friendships.

Most male adolescents regarded keeping in touch as an important part of maintaining friendship and spent most of their time on sports and computer games. They talked about girls sometimes but ‘we’d rather talk about PlayStation’ (adolescent 19, 16 year old male). They thought that their friends, especially Chinese friends, tended to keep their girlfriends to themselves. Those in a relationship often felt embarrassed talking about their girlfriends with friends who were single. Friends’ acceptance and a development of shared values through evaluating friends’ perspectives were sometimes considered important because:

‘... you know what other people think and it’s not just your ideas. Or like, you share different opinions, and then you might find out that I wasn’t right, or make sure which part was wrong.’ (adolescent 3, 19 year old male)

They thought that their friends understood them more than their parents and preferred to get advice from close friends if there were any problems in relationships:

‘Because parents, they are a bit misunderstanding, misleading, and they wouldn’t like it. So I think my friends would be a good idea to talk to them.’ (adolescent 18, 16 year old male)

Most female adolescents enjoyed socialising with friends and their conversation amongst themselves revolved around ‘mostly boys’ (adolescent 2, 16 year old female). Perceptions of possible parental rejection appeared to lead them to look for advice and support from friends. When asked about her parents’ attitudes towards teenage sex, adolescent 1 said that she would be chopped to pieces if her parents knew she had been sexually active. She continued:

‘I think if you are married, then you are a real adult and it’s a normal thing that might happen at that time. So you can talk to them about it. But before that age you would think everything should be just covered up until after you are married.’ (adolescent 1, 18 year old female)

Uniformity of sexual attitudes was common among friends. Those who held on to a traditional view of sex perceived their friends to be the same. Adolescent 8 reported ‘my friends think the same as me that we are too young to be even thinking about having sex’. On the other hand, those with an ‘open view’ thought their friends held a more sexually liberal view. Adolescent 11, who had a sexual experience at age 15, illustrated her friends’ attitudes thus:

‘They know they shouldn’t be doing it, if you know what I mean, just in case, if they do get pregnant or something happens ... I think people now are quite open-minded about sex, actually having sex and stuff.’ (adolescent 11, 16 year old female)

Mixed views of friends were also reported. Some considered sex as something ‘amazing’ or ‘cool’, while

others thought it an 'important' or 'big thing' (adolescent 7, 19 year old male). Adolescent 19, who believed in 'no sex before marriage', spoke of his friends' openness, 'Oh, they say that they can't wait to have sex'. He explained that these school friends did not go to church. When asked about the view of his church friends, he replied, 'I don't really talk to them about sex because we have the same views anyway'. This phenomenon was repeatedly reported by Christian adolescents, who thought their Christian or Chinese friends were against sex before marriage, whereas other non-Christian, school and British friends considered it acceptable.

Participants often gave quite a brief answer about their friends' sexual behaviour, considering it confidential. Sexually inexperienced young people tended to report that their friends had not had sex yet, although sometimes they might have friends who were not virgins, but these were often not close friends.

Sex education in school: perspectives of adolescents

All the adolescent participants received some sex education at school. This was highly valued because sex, as a 'taboo subject' (adolescent 10, 18 year old male), was not discussed openly at home. Most young people thought they had gained accurate and sufficient information about the physical changes of puberty at school. Some girls felt embarrassed telling their mothers about their first periods, as menstruation often had not been talked about at home. Lessons on the risks of having sex were considered very important:

'... because it lets us know what would happen if we did do something wrong, like, having sex and stuff like that, because [of] the results like pregnancies or HIV, AIDS.' (adolescent 9, 17 year old male)

Some participants also looked to other sources, saying that 'there're a lot, like, magazines and websites you can go to if we're unsure and you want to know more' (adolescent 14, 17 year old female). Sex education was considered less interesting if the values talked about by teachers were inconsistent with those of their friends or wider society, as adolescent 3 criticised:

'The resources they used at school, a lot of the times are quite old and not up to date, because like 10 years ago, you talk about sex severe, like, no, don't do that, but now it's like a little easier.' (adolescent 3, 19 year old male)

Some adolescents suggested that this education should be provided before they had acquired relevant sexual knowledge, in order to make it more attractive. Female participants particularly stressed the importance of knowing more about contraception. This was

not surprising, given their major concerns about pregnancy, as adolescent 1 said:

'... because what happens if, you know, when things happen, and then you don't have a clue, and then you get yourself a really big mess. Especially, if you're Chinese, you know how disgrace your family, if you're pregnant.' (adolescent 1, 18 year old female)

Being Chinese might become a factor promoting the practice of safe sex; however, young people expressed little concern about sexual abstinence itself.

Sex education in school: perspectives of parents

Most parents expressed the difficulties in providing sex education for their children themselves and valued this education at school, as mother 13 reported:

'It's good to have sex education at school because being Chinese we don't discuss it at home.' (mother 13, in Chinese)

Parent-child discussion about puberty was not always thought necessary, as some parents assumed that schools had covered the topic well. However, they criticised the safe sex strategy, saying that school taught their children too much about how to avoid getting pregnant or catching diseases, but very little about how to refuse sex. As mother 20 replied:

'In this country they are free, very free ... They don't discourage them to do this sex thing. They just say that you have the safe sex.' (mother 20, in English)

Parents stressed that sex education would work more effectively if it was provided within moral and religious contexts by teaching young people the option of sexual abstinence.

Discussion

This paper has reported the perspectives of Chinese British youth on sexual behaviour. The commonly held traditional view concurs with studies of British South Asian youth and young Chinese people in the US, Canada, and China (Wellings *et al*, 1994; Meston *et al*, 1998; Okazaki, 2002; Higgins and Sun, 2007). The impact of religious commitment on sexual values and activity was reported. Religion *per se* was important because religious teaching about sex and marriage had a direct effect on their values. The religious environment at home was also crucial as parent-child interactions were greater in homes where religious activities, such as going to church together and praying, took place. Time with their friends who went to the same church also reinforced sexual values taught by the

church. This study, therefore, extends previous findings that regular church attendance with friends was related to later sexual initiation (Mott *et al*, 1996), and supports studies that reported the positive influences of various religions on teenage sexual behaviour across diverse ethnic backgrounds (Bradby and Williams, 1999; Le Gall *et al*, 2002; Odimegwu, 2005).

For some participants, adolescent sex was thought acceptable. This view suggests the presence of individual variation within the group and reflects the common sexual attitude in British society, where the majority accepts pre-marital sex in a loving relationship (Wellings *et al*, 1994, 2001). Tolerance to others having sex was found, but the boundary between participants' own sexual behaviour and that of their friends or adolescents in general was clear. Similar findings were reported by Zhang *et al* (1999). Sexual double standards based on gender were seen, confirming work indicating its existence in western society, at either the societal or the individual level (Milhausen and Herold, 1999; Jackson and Cram, 2003).

This study has also demonstrated the complex socio-cultural contexts in which the young people shape their own views. Parent-child communication on sex-related topics was limited due to a variety of barriers experienced by these families, in common with people of other groups (Mturi and Hennink, 2005; Mbugua, 2007). However, they faced additional obstacles including parents' lack of available time, language barriers, and the diverse sexual values between generations. This suggests the importance of parental values for adolescents, rather than communication *per se*. These findings also challenge previous studies of parent-child communication, which do not even consider parental sexual values (Miller *et al*, 1998; DiClemente *et al*, 2001). Any understanding of parental influences would be problematic if it does not consider these values.

However, the influence of friends was also important. The majority of the young people were close friends with others of the same gender and cultural background. Similar patterns have been reported by Way and Chen (2000). Christian adolescents tended to have close friends from the same church, suggesting that future research needs to move beyond merely examining the influences of friends at the same school (Udry and Billy, 1987). Young people often spent limited time with their parents, but a considerable amount with their friends. This might be further explained by parents' lack of accessibility and language barriers within families. They were often more willing to talk to their friends about sexual issues than to their parents, a point raised by adolescents in other studies (Lefkowitz and Espinosa-Hernandez, 2007; Currie *et al*, 2008).

Similarity in sexual attitudes and behaviour among friends was evident. Sexually inactive participants tended to have friends holding traditional views, while those

who were permissive or sexually active indicated that some of their friends had experienced sex. This perception is similar to that reported by Schuster *et al* (1998) and Santelli *et al* (2004). They might also have some friends who exhibited differing views or behaviour, but the boundaries were clear between friends in general and closer friends, and they avoided selecting such peers as close friends. This suggests the need for future studies to pay more attention to the values and behaviour of close friends, rather than friends or peers in general.

Sex education in school was regarded as necessary and crucial, as Chinese families experienced a variety of difficulties in talking about sex at home. Parents did not think of themselves as effective educators, as was found in a study by Cui *et al* (2001). Some young people also looked to other sources where they felt that schools did not provide sufficient information. This may explain why adolescents tend to regard friends and media as the main sources of sexual knowledge, as reported by others (Todd *et al*, 1999; Somers and Gleason, 2001). Parents, on the contrary, thought that schools provided too much factual information, but not enough on sexual abstinence. However, this suggestion does not easily blend in with the current UK policy that emphasises a safe sex strategy to tackle the high rates of adolescent pregnancy (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999; Scottish Executive, 2005).

Limitations

Due to the difficulties in recruitment and the use of snowball sampling, participants in the study exhibited similar characteristics within their groups. Most young people had at least one parent involved in the catering trade, and most participants were connected to Chinese churches. As the study was based on this specific group, Chinese people from other backgrounds may have different views. There was also less coverage of fathers' perspectives and influences. Future research needs to have a balanced sample by engaging fathers more. However, this study is a starting point in an under-researched area and has laid important groundwork for additional research.

Implications and conclusion

There are a number of implications for research, practice, and policy. First, family, friends and school have multiple meanings for young people. Future research should move beyond examining a variety of variables separately to using a comprehensive approach that considers adolescent sexual behaviours within their social and cultural contexts. Second, professionals who are involved in sex education and associated services should be culturally competent. This competence implies

an understanding of, and respect for, perspectives of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. School programmes need to increase engagement with parents through seeking their views, offering them opportunities to participate, and supporting them in overcoming barriers to parent–child communication about sex. Lastly, future research should encourage minority ethnic people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to express and promote their views.

In conclusion, the exploration of adolescent sexual behaviour within socio-cultural contexts is important for the development of greater culturally-competent practice. The insights gained from this study can benefit the Chinese community and other minority ethnic groups in Britain and beyond.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

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