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Explaining the Effects of Interactions with Friends and Peers on Pre-marital Sexual Relationships among Iranian Youths

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Abstract

Aim: Nowadays, sexual behaviours of the youths have turned into a controversial issue all over the world due to widespread sexually transmitted infections (STIs), human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) and unwanted pregnancies. Regarding the increasing interactions of the youths with their friends and peers in Iranian society in the recent years, this research was conducted to explain the role of friends and peers to establish pre-marital sexual relationships among the youths.

Methods: This qualitative research was conducted on 30 single boys and girls aged 18-24 years, living in Isfahan, Iran, who had already started sexual activities and 17 other participants who were in a way involved in the experienced events by the youths. Data collection was done using semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using conventional content analysis.

Findings: After analyzing the interviews, two sub-categories emerged including "being influenced by friends and peers" and "exchanging sexual information and contents", which were entitled “The effects of youths, interactions with friends and peers” as the main category.

Conclusion: Considering the important role of friends and peers in shaping pre-marital sexual relationships among the youths, providing them with comprehensive educational programs about STIs, HIV/AIDS, and sexual health protection through peer-based educational approach is necessary.

Keywords: Sexual behavior, Pre-marital sex behavior, Peers, Youth, Iran

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Introduction

Today, the health of the adolescents and young people is one of the pillars of public health all around the world. In this respect, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) that was held in Cairo in 1994, emphasized this issue more than ever [1]. In recent years, sexual behaviors of the adolescents and youths 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 [2,3]. The age of puberty has decreased; all over the world boys and girls get married at older ages and perform premarital sex to a greater extent. During the past several decades, a significant number of teens in most of the Western countries have experienced sexual relationships before marriage [4]. Despite the influence of hormonal factors on the adolescents, and youths' sexual behaviors, the role of other psycho-social factors including mass media, drugs and alcohol consumption, and friends and peers cannot be ignored [5,6]. Researchers have shown the importance of susceptibility to peer influence in adolescents' development of sexual behaviors [7]. A study among the youths of the western Ethiopia showed that peers play a role in shaping the sexual behaviors of the youths [8]. There are restrictions, lawful and religious prohibitions and regulations for sexual relations in the Iranian society. However, there are some evidence showing that during the recent years, risky sexual behaviors among Iranian youths have increased [9].

In Iran, several researches have studied sexual behaviors among the youth [10, 11, 12], but the influence of peers on the youths' engagement in sexual relationships are not well addressed. The priority of paying due attention to the sexual and reproductive health of the youth and prevention and control of premarital sexual relationships followed by risky sexual behaviors necessitate a deeper perception to determining the factors of sexual relationship engagement among the youths by qualitative researches. Thus, this research was conducted to explain the role of friends and peers to establish sexual relationships among the youth.

Materials and Methods

The participants of this study were 30 boys and girls of 18-24 years old who were living in Isfahan, Iran, and had already started sexual activities. They voluntarily participated in this study. These participants were accessed through universities, parks, and sport clubs since these locations have high youth population. Purposeful sampling and snowball methods were applied for sampling. It was

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tried to have a balanced sample regarding the gender of the samples. Moreover, parks and sport clubs at different parts of the city were used to access the participants with different socio-economic situations. In order to gain more access to information, 17 other participants including parents, teachers, school counselors, clinical psychologists, family counselors, dormitory staffs, university disciplinary committee head and health service providers (nurse, midwife, medical doctor, and gynecologist) were also enrolled in this study based on the theoretical sampling. Research ethics confirmation (ethical approval code: 390436) was received from the Ethics Committee of Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, and informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and the right of leaving the research at any desired time were preserved.

Data collection procedures

To collect the data; individual interviews (in-depth and semi-structured) were done. Most of the interviews were done at just one session. However, the interviews were held in 2 or more sessions due to the detailed answers of some of the participants and to avoid the participants' tiredness. The interviews lasted from 45 to 135 minutes, and were continued until data saturation.

All the interviews began with one main question "What do you know about relationships and friendships among girls and boys in our society? Please explain it." Then the answers of the participants directed the interview. In addition, as the interviews went on, more detailed questions were asked including: "How sexual relationships are formed among the youths" "the role of peers and friends in the youths' engagement in sexual relationships", and other subjects, which resulted in some data related to the studied subject. In this study, all of the nonverbal behaviors of the interviewees were considered, and field notes were taken in this regard. All of the interviews were done at places, which were agreed on by the interviewee.

Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out manually. The script of the recorded interviews was prepared word by word. These scripts were analyzed through conventional qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is subjective interpretation of the content of textual data through systematic process of coding and identifying themes or patterns [13]. The interviews were read through several times to obtain a sense of their whole. Then the text was divided into meaningful units. The meaningful units were abstracted and labeled with a code. Various codes were compared based on their differences and similarities and

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sorted into two sub-categories, which constituted the manifest content.

Rigor and trustworthiness

To make sure of the credibility of the data, 18 months was spent on data collection. The researcher, after dedicating time to make friendly relationship with the youths, asked them to participate voluntarily in the research. In order to truly understand the participants' sayings, each piece of data was read in different situations for at least 3 times. In this way, the prolonged engagement with the data made the data deep and expanded. The researcher also talked with people of different economic, social and educational levels to increase the credibility of the data.

To approve the credibility of the gathered contents, in another session, the coded interviews were discussed with 5 participants to get their final opinions. So, member checking was done.

Data were confirmed by 3 academic professors who were experts in the fields of sexual behavior, nursing, and clinical psychology, respectively. After reviewing the coded texts, the viewpoints of these people about coding or conceptualization were gathered and the necessary revisions were made.

Data transferability was gained through data revision by 2 boys and 2 girls. They had similar characteristics with the participants of the study but they did not take part in the study.

In order to gain the dependability, external audit was used. Data analysis was made possible through an expert researcher who was not involved in this study. He was considered as an external expert.

Results

Out of 30 single youth participants in the study, 17 were girls and 13 were boys. The other 17 participants (except the young ones) included 4 parents, 2 teachers and school counselors, 1 clinical psychologist, 1 family counselor, 2 dormitory staffs, 1 university disciplinary committee head, 1 nurse, 2 midwives, 1 medical doctor and 2 gynecologists.

After analyzing the interviews, two sub-categories of "being influenced by friends and peers" and "exchanging sexual information and contents" emerged; both of them were entitled as the main category of "the effects of youths, interactions with friends and peers".

Being influenced by friends and peers

The participants narrated that young girls and boys spend a very limited amount of time with their families and they spend most of their time with friends and peers outside the home. They believed that due to lack of planning by the families, they spend their free time with friends

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and peers in parks, shopping malls, etc. Moreover, the participants stated that making friends with those who are involved in friendship with the opposite sex will motivate them to experience it as well. A 19-year-old boy stated:

"… When a girl sees that her friend has a boyfriend and has fun and enjoys herself and chats, she is also impressed and tries to find a boyfriend for herself."

The participants stated the pressure from friends and peers (especially in younger ages) as a main factor for friendship with the opposite sex. A 22-year-old girl said:

"…There is something that should be mentioned; girls, especially in guidance school and even high school, who have boyfriends will encourage their school friends to make friends with the friends of their boyfriends. Let's say they like to be among a group of friends."

All the participants considered the effect of friends and peers for having sexual activities to be very important. The participants counted admiring the advantages of having a relationship with the opposite sex as well as enjoying sexual activities by those who have experienced it to be very effective on increasing sexual motivation among friends. They believed that this issue makes them have tendency toward experiencing sexual relationship (especially in younger ages). One of the midwives participating in this research mentioned:

"…Young people have heard from their friends that free sexual relationships are very enjoyable".

A 20-year-old girl stated:

"… A girl once asked her friend to go and stay the night with their boyfriends. She told her that they will talk, chat, laugh and have fun. So she went that night, and little by little she liked it. She saw the other couples hugging and kissing each other and more; so little by little, she started doing the same until now I can say that she is having sex."

Exchanging sexual information and contents

The participants counted friends and peers as the main and the most accessible source of sexual information and content exchange compared to other sources such as reading books, searching the net, etc. They pointed out that the youths have a tendency toward talk about sexual subjects in their interactions with friends and peers. A 24-year-old boy stated:

"… These days, the young people would prefer to take advantage of their friends' sexual experiences because a boy or a girl may have a friend who has some more sexual experiences and he (she) will try to ask questions about it. …"

The participants narrated that exchanging sexual issues in conversations and dialogues

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among them, in turn, will increase their curiosity and eagerness (especially in younger ages) to watch pornographic movies known as "super or sexy movies". They counted the exchange of sexual issues and information among peers and friends as the most important factor to have exposure to pornographic movies. A 21-year-old girl said:

"…The most important reason for the guys to make them eager for sexual issues, is the side discussions they have; and then they are motivated to watch a couple in those films."

The participants also narrated that, in the interactions of friends and peers, besides having sexual dialogues, they exchange sexual contents via CDs, flash memories and Bluetooth. For this purpose, they make friendship with the opposite sex and start being engaged in sexual relationship. A 23-year-old girl stated:

"… Let's say when friends go out, one of them has downloaded a sexy film from the Internet and offers the friends to watch it or send it to them via Bluetooth."

A 21-year-old girl said:

"… In the students, laptops, sexy movies are available and they watch them together in the dorm."

Discussion

The results of the present research showed that the increase of Iranian adolescents' and youths' interactions with friends and peers, especially during the recent years, has provided them with exchanging sexual contents and information associated with establishing sexual relationships. Based on the results of Rice et al, students who send sexts and students who receive sexts are more likely to report sexual activity [14]. Also the participating young people in the present study had sexual relationships under the influence of their friends and peers.

It is believed that sexual socialization is effective on the adolescent's cognitive capabilities as well as predicting sexual debut via sources such as peer groups [15].

In a study, researchers considered being influenced by the friends as the reason for premarital sexual practices among the in-school youths [16]. Other researchers also determined that the influence of peers as the reason for the adolescents' engagement in sexual situations, with greater susceptibility among boys [17].

Based on the results of the present study, youths will also face peers' pressure for engagement in premarital sex. A cross-sectional study on Ethiopian high school single girls showed that one of the related factors with premarital sexual debut is peer pressure [18]. In this regard, educational planning by Iranian National Youth Organization and the Education and Training Ministry can be

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effective in decreasing youths' sexual engagement; the planners should teach the youth population about life skills such as refusal skills and critical thinking.

Making special efforts and planning by the parents for the adolescents and youths to spend their free time as well as identifying and directing friendship (with the same sex) patterns is highly important. Also making the adolescents and youths familiar with friend selection criteria can play an important role in preventing their engagement in premarital sexual relationships.

Based on the results of the present study, the youth's interactions with friends and peers make them get engaged in premarital sexual relationships that can make them susceptible to HIV/AIDS, STIs and unwanted pregnancies [8]. Therefore, it is possible to persuade adolescents and youths through comprehensive trainings about HIV/AIDS and STIs and let them know about the problems that these diseases can cause. In this regard, empowering and informing the youths about their sex and adopting a responsible decision-making process will move them toward a more responsible approach with regards to their sexual health. Educational programs related to adolescents' and youths' sexual health can be done through peer-based educational approaches to promote their knowledge as well as attitude and behavioral changes using the help of their peers [19].

Layzer et al. found that peer education program can deliver highly reliable sexual health promotion messages in schools [20]. Other researchers have also suggested the role of social networks' members including peers as a role model in educating urban African-American adolescents about sex [21].

The present study had one limitation. Although in the present study attempts were made for selecting samples with the maximum variation, there is a possibility for the participants to be limited to small networks of peers and friends. Despite this limitation, our study has made an important first step toward understanding the role of friends and peers in Iranian youth's premarital sexual relationships.

Conclusion

Regarding the prominent role of friends and peers in the formation of premarital sexual relationships, priority should be given to make the youths familiar with the criteria of choosing friends as well as recognizing and guiding friendship patterns. Furthermore, peer-based educational approaches can provide the youth with the educational programs related to their sexual health and also HIV/AIDS and STIs.

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