

# **Young People's Perceptions about Premarital Sex, Perceived Parent Values about Sex and Premarital Sexual Behaviour in Ghana**

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## **Introduction**

Over the years, perceptions about premarital sex have been changing and acceptance of premarital sex is becoming more evident (Wells & Twenge, 2005; Zhang & Beck, 1999). Premarital sex among young people exposes them to teenage pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS (Anarfi, 1997; Li et al., 2015; Okigbo & Speizer, 2015). This is especially alarming since about half of new HIV/AIDS infections occur among young people between the ages 15 and 24 and particularly worrying in sub-Saharan Africa where about 43 percent of the population is less than 15 years (PRB, 2014) and more than one third is between the ages 10-24 years (UNFPA & PRB, 2012).

In Ghana, a little over a third (34%) of never married women and 30 percent of never married males between the ages 15 and 24 had ever had sex. Of these, however, only about 3 out of every 10 females and 45 percent of males reported the use of a condom at last sexual intercourse (GSS, GHS, & ICF Macro, 2009). This calls for serious considerations into young peoples' perceptions and attitudes about sex. Studies concerning young people's perception about premarital sex have shown that young people with favourable perceptions about sex are more likely to engage in premarital sex (Tang et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2007; Wells & Twenge, 2005).

It is important to note that young people's perceptions however, do not develop in isolation. One's social space plays an important role in shaping beliefs and perceptions. Studies have shown that adolescents' perceptions of their parents' values about sex are instrumental to their sexual development (Somers & Anagurthi, 2014) and these values are likely to shape adolescents' own perceptions. This suggests the importance of studying not only the young person's perception about premarital sex but also what their perceived parents' values/perceptions about sex are in addition to other family specific situations such as relationship quality and financial support.

This study therefore focuses not only on young peoples' perception about sex but what they think their parents' perceptions about sex are and explores other family context variables in two urban communities in Ghana. Our study is particularly timely since studies of this nature have had small representation in the literature on sub-Saharan Africa and more especially in Ghana in order to design and develop context specific intervention programs.

## **Data and Methods**

This study analysed data from Wave 3 (2013) of a three wave Longitudinal Cohort Study (LCS) involving young people from two towns in Ghana. Agormanya, one of the study communities has suffered a severe localized HIV epidemic believed to have been driven at least in part by the circular migration of young women from this community to Abidjan, the capital of Cote d'Ivoire, during the 1980s and early 1990s (Agyei-Mensah, 2001, Decosas, 1996 as cited in Bingenheimer & Reed, 2014) and Juapong the second community has a lower HIV/AIDS prevalence rate.

1030 unmarried adolescents between the ages of 13 to 25 are examined. To examine young peoples' perception about premarital sex, four items were put together with a Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) of 0.88 (eg: It is alright for people to have sex before marriage if they are in love.). Their perceptions about what adults in their family think about young people engaging in sex were also explored. Nine items are studied ( $\alpha=0.81$ ) (eg: Adults in your family would disapprove of you having sex.). Responses given were: 'Very true' 'Somewhat true' and 'Not at all true'. Some items were reverse coded and factor analysis was used to create three categories of first, young persons' perception about premarital sex and the second being their perceived parent perception about sex. The three categories are '1' Unfavourable, '2' Neutral and '3' Favourable perceptions about sex.

Other predictor variables explored are gender, age, years of schooling, locality, alcohol consumption and religiosity. In addition to these, other family related variables like relationship quality with adult in the family, financial support, household wealth and living arrangement are examined. Premarital sex, the outcome variable is measured as dichotomous with 0 indicating "NO" and 1 "Yes". Binary logit regressions are used to examine the relationship between youth perception about premarital sex and their perceived parent perception and sexual initiation.

## **Results**

Preliminary results indicate that the mean age of young people in our sample is 18.20years. Nearly three out of every five young people in our sample have engaged in premarital sex. There are more females (51.93%) than males with the mean years of schooling of all young people being 7.36 years. About 58.56 percent of young people held unfavourable attitudes towards premarital sex while a little over one third (32.88%) of adolescents held favourable attitudes about premarital sex. However, with perceived parent perception about sex, 13.50% held unfavourable attitudes about sex but more than half (54.85%) held neutral attitudes about perceived parent perception about sex. With the same proportions of young people who held favourable perceptions about premarital sex also holding similar perceived parent perceptions about sex.

Table 1 examines three models in order to understand the association between young people's perception about sex, their perception about their parents' values about sex and these associations with premarital sex. In Model 1, only young people's perception about sex is examined. Young people with Neutral attitudes about sex were more likely to have had sex than those with Unfavourable attitudes about sex. Adolescents with Favourable attitudes about sex were more than 7 times as likely as those with Unfavourable attitudes to have initiated sex. As adult financial support decreases, young people are more likely to have initiated sex.

In Model 2, only young people's perceptions of their parents' sexual values are examined. It is observed that young people who reported that their parent held Neutral values about sex were significantly less likely to have initiated sex than those who perceived parents had Unfavourable attitudes about sex. As relationship quality and financial support decreases, young people are more likely to have had sex ( $p < 0.1$  and  $p < 0.001$  respectively).

To understand the influence of young people's perception about sex and their perceptions about their parents' values about sex, these two variables were simultaneously included in the analyses and other socio-demographic characteristics were controlled for in Model 3. First, young people who have Neutral perceptions about premarital sex were more likely to have had sex but those who have Neutral perceptions about their parents' values about sex were significantly less likely to have initiated sex than those who held Unfavourable attitude about sex. Young people who reported that their parents' values about sex were Favourable showed marginal significance ( $p < 0.1$ ) in the likelihood of having had sex compared to those reported Unfavourable attitudes. However, if young people hold Favourable perceptions about premarital sex themselves, they were more than six times as likely to have initiated sex as those who held Unfavourable attitudes about sex ( $p < 0.001$ ).

In all three models, with increasing age young people were more likely to have had sex. In addition, females are significantly more likely to had initiated sex than males in all three models and young people who never consumed alcohol were less likely to have engaged in premarital sex ( $p < 0.05$ ). With every additional year of schooling, adolescents were less likely to have initiated sex.

These preliminary results indicate that both adolescent perception about sex and what they think their parents' perception about sex are significantly associated with sexual initiation. Nonetheless, the direction in which these two predict young people's sexual initiation is directly opposite. Further analysis will therefore examine the interaction effect between young people's perception and perceive parents' values about sex. In

addition, further social and family context variables like friendship networks and behaviour control variables will be explored.

Table 1: Odds ratios (and standard errors) from logistic regression analysing the association between adolescents'/young people's and perceived parent perception about sex and premarital sexual behaviour

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
<b>Adolescent Perception About Sex</b>						
Unfavourable <sup>a</sup>	1.000	-	-	-	1.000	-
Neutral	1.895*	0.590	-	-	1.842 <sup>+</sup>	0.612
Favourable	7.639***	1.551	-	-	6.525***	1.464
<b>Perceived Parent Perception About Sex</b>						
Unfavourable <sup>a</sup>	-	-	1.000	-	1.000	-
Neutral	-	-	0.379***	0.103	0.472**	0.136
Favourable	-	-	0.769	0.219	0.554 <sup>+</sup>	0.169
Relationship Quality	1.006	0.337	1.931 <sup>+</sup>	0.656	1.277	0.463
Financial Support	1.958***	0.348	1.638**	0.294	1.665**	0.314
Household Wealth	1.170	0.546	0.825	0.385	0.903	0.450
<b>Living Arrangement</b>						
Both Parent <sup>a</sup>	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-
Mother Alone	1.043	0.280	0.967	0.253	0.938	0.266
Father Alone	0.825	0.341	0.667	0.275	0.812	0.345
Other	0.858	0.208	0.806	0.192	0.830	0.211
<b>Religious Attendance</b>						
Regularly <sup>a</sup>	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-
Less	1.412	0.341	1.857*	0.444	1.574 <sup>+</sup>	0.407
Never	1.456	0.570	1.806	0.681	1.540	0.620
<b>Community</b>						
High HIV Prevalence <sup>a</sup>	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-
Low HIV Prevalence	0.839	0.161	0.730	0.138	0.894	0.181
Age	1.582***	0.068	1.617***	0.069	1.607***	0.073
Years of Schooling	0.928*	0.028	0.937*	0.028	0.932*	0.030
<b>Alcohol Consumption</b>						
Very Regularly <sup>a</sup>	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-
Never	0.046*	0.062	0.054*	0.064	0.045*	0.061
Somewhat regularly	0.158	0.219	0.260	0.313	0.170	0.239
<b>Gender</b>						
Males <sup>a</sup>	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-
Females	3.382***	0.679	3.361***	0.669	3.664***	0.779

OR=Odds Ratio, SE=Standard error, a=Reference category \*\*\*<0.001 \*\*<0.01 \*<0.05 +<0.1

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