Reviewer's report

Title: Mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters: gender differences in the determinants of parent-child communication about sex

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Reviewer: Stephen Nkansah-Amankra

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Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?

No new and specific research questions were posed by the investigators, but the central controlling ideas of the paper—the thesis was understandable, even though some concepts were not well articulated. First, in the background to the study, the authors made value-laden statements that were not really scientific in outlook. For example, in paragraph two (page 4), where the authors wrote the need “…to have more honest conversations with their parents………” Honest conversation may not necessarily lead to the building appropriate knowledge competency or development of skills sufficient for appropriate behavior change. Indeed, honest conversation can lead to reinforcing of sexual and cultural stereotypes that inhibits appropriate behavior change for improved health. It is not clear how the authors defined the meaning of the honest conversation. I presumed the investigators probably meant appropriate communication. I believe clarifying this would situate the background information in a more scientific context.

Second, the use of other expressions sounds patronizing in the context of communication. For example, the authors consistently mentioned “talk” instead of communication when making reference to parents-adolescent interactions. Much of lack of clear findings about the relationship between parent-adolescent communications on human sexuality is because communication is often conceptualized as simply a ‘talk’. The impression here is that behavior change could result because parents have ‘talked’ to adolescents about sex or not. This is inaccurate, and there are problems with this conceptualization of communication as “talk”. In the first place, this conceptualization ignores specifics of topics sexual health topics discussed which may be critical for behavior change. For example, parent-adolescent communication on masturbation, puberty, relationships building (sexual decision making skills in relationships), and condom use skills could each be considered as discussion about human sexuality, but only condom use (skills) and relationship competencies potentially leads to behavior change. Such conceptualization of parent-adolescent communication as “talk” seriously ignores critical elements of the communication process. For example, timing of parent-adolescent communication, the breadth of communication, parents competencies (and levels of comfort) in communicating
sexual health messages and the interaction of the communication process with peer influences or culture are all ignored when communication is construed simply as “talk”. Most importantly, the investigators did not provide the needed background information on the extent to which parental attitudes and behaviors influence the context of parent-adolescent communication for improved behavior change. Parent-adolescent communication is important, but how does the context of parent’s attitude, behaviors and cultural orientation influence the communication process? Providing such background information would situate the study in a context of how and why parent-adolescent sexuality communication often fails.

On P4 (second paragraph), here it is inaccurate to assert that little is known about the reasons for the gender differences in parent-adolescent communication. Of course, the findings have been inconsistent, which suggests the need for further investigations.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?

No, it is not clear how the sample was selected before randomization. The reader only gets a slight idea about the source of the data. It is not clear whether the analysis used was a survey designed data (that is, not a simple random sampling, or sampling with weights from different strata). It may not efficient to conduct a national survey with simple random sampling. The study must be described in detail. For example, the reader is not sure of the characteristics of the parents in terms of education, area of residence (urban or rural), occupational type, religiosity/spirituality, religious typology and perhaps ethnicity. Each of these factors is likely to confound the relationships among parent-adolescent communication about sex and sexuality.

A major construct of the study, parent-child communication was not clearly explicated with items measuring the construct. And, how were the items that presumably were measuring parent-child communication validated? Have the items been used in similar studies? It is important to reference these studies.

The investigators also proposed using Health Belief Model (HBM) as an underlying theory for the study. However, the relevance of this theory in terms of parent-adolescent communication was well described in the background. Under these circumstances, it is not clear how the relevant constructs of HBM are related to the major constructs of the study.

In the multivariate analysis, how were the modeling of the data construed? The investigators did not make effort to describe in detail the procedures or rational for variable selection and whether the best fitting model was the basis of the final discussion. Please, explain.

• Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
No. In many areas the reporting was not clear. The writing also needs thorough editing. For example, P10 (paragraph 1) sentences are awkward. The meaning of these sentences is missing.

6. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

• No, the title is actually misleading. The main substantive issue dealt with in the study was parent-child communication about human sexuality and not necessarily about sex per se. The study was not just mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. It is about situating relationships among these individuals and parental contexts that lead to improved communication on human sexuality and eventually adoption of behaviors consistent with improved health for adolescents. I believe these are not captured accurately by the title of the study.

• The conclusion of the study does not really communicate any important findings from the study. The first sentence of the conclusion sounds weak in meaning. What is the significance of this sentence for theory or practice? What are these gender differences in parent child communication? What does this difference suggest in terms of study’s objectives? In general, the conclusion must tie up with the objectives or purpose of the study.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

'I DECLARE THAT I HAVE NO COMPETING INTERESTS'