Student Article

British-born Chinese teenagers: The influence of Chinese ethnicity on their attitudes towards sexual behavior

Juping Yu, MSc, PhD
Department of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

Abstract

This paper explores the influence of ethnicity on attitudes towards sexual behavior of British-born Chinese teenagers. Using an ethnographic approach and snowball sampling, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 20 British-born Chinese teenagers and 20 Chinese-born parents. The parents highlighted the influence of Chinese culture and religion on their sexual values and wanted to convey these values to their children. Although direct communication about sex-related topics was rare within these families because of a number of barriers, the parents used other strategies to pass on their values. The paper concludes that sexual values within families and the influence of culture need to be considered in order to provide culturally competent health services. Chinese parents need extra support and help to discuss sex-related topics and pass on their values, which encourage teenage sexual abstinence. Considering the fundamental influence of the parents, this support will be crucial.

Key words

British-born Chinese teenagers, Chinese ethnicity, ethnographic approach, sexual attitudes, sexual behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual attitudes and behavior have changed dramatically during the past 50 years. In Britain, very few people believe that sex should not take place before marriage, irrespective of age, and over one-quarter of young people are sexually active before the age of 16 years (Wellings et al., 1994; 2001). Sexual attitudes and behavior vary among teenagers from different ethnic groups. Asian young people (Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Indians) in the UK are more likely to have a conservative view and are less likely to become sexually active at an early age (Wellings et al., 1994; Bradby & Williams, 1999). However, British-Chinese people, making up 0.42% of the UK population (Office for National Statistics, 2004a), are not included in such studies.

Recent policy and practice places emphasis on the accessibility and cohesion of sexual health services for everyone, including those from minority ethnic communities (Scottish Executive, 2005). However, there has been little evidence to inform the development of greater cultural competence in nursing practice for British-Chinese people. Beyond sensitivity and an awareness of cultural differences, cultural competence stresses the willingness and ability to interact with people from all cultural groups. This paper reports the impact of ethnicity on attitudes towards sexual behavior of British-born Chinese teenagers and makes recommendations for nursing practice.

Studies of young Chinese people in the USA (McLaughlin et al., 1997) and Canada (Meston et al., 1996; 1998) have reported ethnic differences in sexual attitudes and behavior, but have not explored these in depth. Modood et al. (1994) argue that the family is a repository of culture and has a profound influence on the ethnicity of children. The family provides an environment in which children initially form their sexual values (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Parental sexual values play a unique role in the socialization of their children in becoming sexual human beings (Miller et al., 1999). Perceived parental disapproval of teenage sexual activity has been linked to reduced sexual involvement, unwanted teenage pregnancy, and number of sexual partners (Resnick et al., 1997; He et al., 2004). Permissive parental views, by contrast, are associated with less restrictive attitudes and a greater likelihood of the sexual initiation of teenagers (Fingerson, 2005). Religious commitment and participation can play a critical role in forming sexual values and morality for both parents and children (Thornton & Camburn, 1987; 1989).

Language and communication are essential for reproducing cultural values, including sexual values (Ahmad et al., 1998). Moore et al. (1986) argue that the communication of parental values is one of the primary ways that parents socialize their children. Teenagers with high levels of parent-child communication are found to be less likely to misperceive maternal sexual values (Jaccard et al., 1998), more likely to have sexual attitudes similar to their parents (Fisher, 1988) or are more likely to delay sexual initiation (Hutchinson, 2002; Vesely et al., 2004).
However, little direct parent–child communication about sex-related topics has been reported (Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999; Weaver et al., 2002). Factors, such as embarrassment and lack of sexual knowledge, influence such communication (Walker, 2001; O’Donnell et al., 2003; Mturi & Hennink, 2005). Children’s normative behavior is also defined by observing their parents’ behavior (Coleman, 1995). Sexual values can be conveyed through non-verbal communication, such as parental role-modeling and supervision. Higher levels of parental monitoring are related to later sexual initiation (Li et al., 2000a,b; Borawski et al., 2003).

Ethnicity appears to be influential, but the literature has not explored this in depth due to its emphasis on quantitative approaches. In addition, British-born Chinese teenagers have not been included in previous studies. It is necessary to explore their views on how and why ethnic influences operate. This paper focuses on two questions by drawing findings from a PhD study that explored the attitudes towards sexual behavior of British-born Chinese teenagers (Yu, 2004):

- What are the sexual values within British-Chinese families?
- How does Chinese ethnicity impact on the sexual values of the teenagers?

METHODS

Research approach

Given the nature of the phenomena to be studied, the overall aims of the research, and the state of existing knowledge, a qualitative ethnographic approach was considered appropriate. This approach is concerned with understanding and describing why and how an individual’s behavior is influenced by their surrounding culture (Fetterman, 1998; Roper & Shapiro, 2000). The use of this approach allowed the researcher to explore the views on how and why ethnic influences operate. This paper focuses on two questions by drawing findings from a PhD study that explored the attitudes towards sexual behavior of British-born Chinese teenagers (Yu, 2004):

Sample

The participants were 20 teenagers (10 boys and 10 girls) and 20 parents (15 mothers and five fathers, aged 42–55 years, living in Britain for 12–37 years). The teenagers were British-born, aged 16–19 years, never married, and whose parents were of Chinese origin. All parents had British-born Chinese teenagers. The participants included two teenager–parent pairs, five teenager–mother pairs, and two sibling pairs, and the rest were from different families. As a result of the sensitive topic of sex and the small Chinese population in Scotland, snowball sampling was applied. Chinese language schools, Chinese churches, Chinese women’s groups, the General Consulate of China in Edinburgh, and friends of the researcher were approached.

Data collection

Twenty teenagers and 20 parents were interviewed separately and in privacy. Each interview lasted ≈ 40–60 min. All the teenagers and five of the parents were interviewed in English. Fifteen parents were interviewed in Mandarin, or a mixture of Mandarin, Cantonese, and English. All interviews, except for two, were recorded. Two mothers did not agree to the recording and detailed notes were taken instead. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, including those in Chinese.

People who attended Chinese churches were most willing to help. As a result of time and resources constraints, half of the teenagers and most parents were from Chinese churches. As 21.56% of Chinese people in Britain are Christians (Office for National Statistics, 2004b), the sample was representative only of Christian Chinese.

Data analysis

The transcribed interview data were organized using NUD*ST software and analyzed thematically, guided by Spradley (1979), Dey (1993), and Strauss and Corbin (1998). Meaningful data were taken from the transcripts and organized by categories and subcategories, suggested by interview questions and themes that emerged from the data, such as “language barriers”. A conceptual map was developed to interpret the data. The field notes and the process of translation helped to interpret the data and stimulate critical thinking. The procedures allowed the researcher to check for internal validity and to obtain solid interpretations of the data.

Ethical considerations

The research was approved by the research ethics committee of the Department of Nursing and Midwifery at the University of Stirling, UK. The study was ethically sensitive due to the nature of the topic and the involvement of both teenagers and parents. General ethical principles in social research were applied. The teenagers and parents were asked to sign a consent form separately and were interviewed in privacy. The study excluded people who were deemed legally incapable of consent, such as those who were psychologically handicapped. Confidentiality and anonymity were preserved. The teenagers’ comments were not disclosed to their parents and vice versa. Each teenager was given a support sheet with the contact details of the two support workers and “Childline”, a free, 24 h helpline for children and young people. If a teenager felt upset, someone beyond the researcher would be available to provide sufficient support.

KEY FINDINGS

The following themes emerged from the interviews with the teenagers and parents about their sexual values and the impact of Chinese ethnicity.

Sexual values between generations

The predominant theme that emerged from the data was the conservative view of sexual behavior. The teenagers with this view believed that sex was not for fun or something one
should do in teenage years. Sex was something special and related to love, trust, commitment, and/or marriage:

I wouldn’t go having sex until I am sure I’ve met the right guy or until I am married or whatever (19 year old girl).

Similarly, parents said that sex should be left until after marriage. Age did not matter and sex outside marriage was not acceptable. They related their conservative values to Chinese culture and considered the perceived permissive views of British people in opposition to Chinese values. They saw teenage sex, teenage pregnancy or teenage mothers in their everyday life and were worried about these influences on their children, especially on their daughters:

I am worried about my own daughter. We are Chinese. Maybe, we are behind the times. We are not Westerners. We believe that we should not have sex before marriage (mother in Chinese).

Religion also played an important role. Teenagers thought that premarital sex, a key concern for them, was against their religion:

I guess being a Christian, you are kind of brought up, no sex before marriage (18 year-old boy).

Christian parents highlighted the impact of religious beliefs and tended to combine the influence of religion and Chinese culture:

It’s different between those who believe in Jesus and those who don’t. I think non-Christian Chinese people also don’t want their children to have sex at an early age (father in English/Chinese).

Exceptionally, teenage sex was deemed acceptable, as long as safety was considered, but none of the teenagers approved of casual sex or one-night stands:

I think it’s fine if you do it. I don’t think it’s a big deal as long as you know what is happening, and what is your plan, and all the stuff you need to use (19 year-old boy).

However, no matter which views they had, the teenagers all referred to a need for readiness. Physical, mental, and social readiness for sex were considered important. They thought that teenagers were not mature enough to deal with sexual relationships and stressed the impact of early sexual activity on physical and psychological development. The teenagers understood that getting diseases, becoming pregnant, having babies, and leaving school could all happen as a result of sexual engagement. Educational aspiration was seen as a major reason for not pursuing relationships:

It’s not important just now because I’ve got the rest of my life to like, go over there, but it’s education, if you don’t really have it, you know (16 year-old boy).

Parents presented similar views, saying that sex was related to pregnancy, which would greatly influence their children’s success in education. They expected their children to concentrate on their studies; therefore, dating or having a steady girlfriend/boyfriend was discouraged.

Transmission of cultural and sexual values

Barriers to communication about sex-related issues

Direct communication about sex-related topics was rare within these families. Four obstacles contributed to this phenomenon. First, the parents’ lack of available time, as the teenagers saw it, was a major problem they faced. Eighteen teenagers had at least one parent involved in the catering trade: 12 of the parents that were interviewed actually worked there. These parents worked 6 days per week from late afternoon to midnight. The time they spent with their children was therefore relatively limited. The families rarely had time to do things together, such as talking, going out for a meal or shopping:

My dad got old ideas. Like, he still thinks that his job is to provide for family. But, that means he doesn’t spend any time with us. You know what I mean? (19 year-old boy).

Parents were aware of the impact of their working pattern on parent–child interaction and tried to spend more time with their children by getting up early in the morning to take their children to school and picking them up in the afternoon before they went to work.

Second, language barriers were reported. The teenagers regarded English as their first language, which they spoke to most people, except their parents. They perceived that their parents’ English was not good enough to understand “too big words” or that their parents were not willing to speak English. Teenagers mainly learned Chinese at home and lacked the Chinese vocabulary needed to discuss sex-related topics:

If some sort of, like a big topic, I haven’t spoken to them. I don’t really know the language to describe it . . . I probably feel more comfortable talking to my friends because they speak English (19 year-old girl).

The teenagers found few problems in talking about daily life, yet found it difficult to discuss topics, such as puberty, personal relationships, and sex-related topics. The parents’ ability to speak and understand English and preference for speaking Chinese influenced the quantity and quality of parent–child communication.

Third, embarrassment was another barrier. The parents said, “We Chinese are too conservative to talk about these things”. The teenagers also felt too embarrassed to discuss these topics with their parents:

I don’t think many people would talk about it with their parents. I think it will be very embarrassing, even if they get on well with their parents (19 year-old boy).

Lastly, different values between the generations had an impact. The teenagers had been brought up in Britain, while their parents came from Hong Kong, Taiwan or mainland China. Growing up in different mainstream cultures caused conflicts in sexual values. The teenagers avoided discussing their values at home because they did not want to end up in an argument:
Strategies used to pass on cultural and sexual values

The parents highlighted the influence of Chinese culture on their sexual values and wanted to pass on these values to their children. Although direct communication about sex-related topics was rare, the parents tended to use other strategies to convey their values.

First, parents highlighted the importance of speaking Chinese as a way of maintaining their children’s Chinese identity. Speaking Chinese with their parents, but English with their siblings, was a typical picture of the languages that the teenagers used at home. The teenagers considered their parents’ English was poor, so that they had to speak Chinese with them. However, proficiency in English did not always mean that the parents would speak English to their children. The parents thought if they did not speak Chinese, their children would have a limited chance to practice the language:

I tend not to speak English with them, so that they will speak fluent Cantonese. Because they speak English no problem, if I don’t speak Chinese with them at home, they would just forget (mother in English).

Even if they were proficient in English, the parents preferred to speak Chinese with their children in order to pass on their own values. However, this language preference could affect communication about sexual issues, as teenagers felt the lack of a shared language with their parents.

Second, the parents warned their children about inappropriate behavior in order to pass on their sexual values. Commenting on television programs assisted their communication about sexual values:

If there is something on the news about teenagers, then we start talking about it. But if not, we don’t talk about it (16 year-old girl).

Praying together was regarded as an important interaction between the generations. Spiritual life and everyday life were shared within families through prayers:

We share something. They tell us lots of things; then, we pray together (mother in Chinese).

Through commenting on television programs and praying together, parents let their children know about their values.

Third, parental supervision emerged as an important practice for the parents to transmit their values. The parents highlighted perceived cultural differences in parenting and indicated the importance of bringing up children in the context of Chinese culture:

Sometime, they would say, “Oh, my friends, they are allowed to go anywhere”, you know, like the Scottish friends. I say, “Well, different culture, they have different background to be brought up” (mother in English).

The parents monitored their children’s outings closely. The teenagers normally informed their parents of their whereabouts and got home on time to avoid worrying them. The parents also supervised their children’s friendships. The teenagers felt that their parents were more concerned about their friends’ behavior rather than their ethnic backgrounds:

She [his mum] always says, “Watch what kind of people you are mixing with and make sure they are good people or they are not bad people” (16 year-old boy).

The teenagers also reported that their parents preferred them to make Chinese friends. The parents showed this preference because of the shared culture and perceived differences in sexual behavior between Chinese people and Western people. Regarding the gender of friends, the teenagers believed that their parents did not mind if they made friends in general, as long they were not girlfriends/boyfriends:

My parents are a wee bit more, they think twice about me making, like, close friends with male friends rather than female friends (19 year-old girl).

The parents strongly disapproved not only of their daughters, but also their sons, having girlfriends/boyfriends. They thought that their children were not mature enough to deal with a relationship, although they might not discourage them from having friends of different genders:

“I don’t want you pa tuo [dating] at the moment”. And they say, “Oh, of course, I am not”, you know. I say, “Well, I mean if you are, I cannot stop you, but I would like to stop” (mother in English).

DISCUSSION

These findings provide insight into the sexual values within British-Chinese families and the influence of culture. Sexual behavior outside marriage is considered highly inappropriate in most Asian cultures (Okazaki, 2002). The conservative views within the British-Chinese families support studies of Asian teenagers in the USA (Feldman et al., 1999; Okazaki, 2002), Canada (Meston et al., 1996; 1998), and Britain (Welling et al., 1994; Hennink et al., 1999). Parents, in particular, highlighted the fundamental influences of Chinese culture on their sexual values, which were opposed to the perceived permissive views of Western people. The parents argued that they had shaped their sexual values based on Chinese culture before moving to Britain and that these values were not easy to change, even though they had been living in Britain for 20 or 30 years. These findings support studies of South Asians in Australia (Ghuman, 2000), where some external signs of ethnic identity became eroded over time, but where deeply held internal traditional values proved much more resilient. In addition, religion played a role in the sexual values of the participants. This impact supports studies of families across various ethnic backgrounds (Paul et al., 2000; Le Gall et al., 2002). The religion per se was important, but the religious environment within these British-Chinese families was critical. Religious activity, such as religious participation and
praying together, reinforced parent–child interaction. This might have made the teenagers more willing to share parental values.

Direct communication about sex-related issues was found to be rare within these Chinese families. This is in agreement with studies of wider populations (Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999; Weaver et al., 2002). Embarrassment in discussing these topics and a lack of knowledge and skills have been widely reported (O’Donnell et al., 2003; Mturi & Hennink, 2005); however, a number of barriers might be specific to British-Chinese families. First, the parents’ lack of available time influenced parent–child interaction, communication, and relationships. The long and unsociable working hours of British-Chinese people involved in restaurants/takeaway outlets have been found (Song, 1997; Raschka et al., 2002), but the impact on parent–child communication about sex-related topics has not been reported.

Second, the present data suggest that there was a lack of a shared language between the generations related to the parents’ limited ability in English or the language preference at home. Poor proficiency in English among first-generation British-Chinese people, especially women, has been reported (Kwan & Holmes, 1999; Chan, 2000). This has affected every aspect of their lives, including communication with their children (Raschka et al., 2002). In the current study, the parents wanted to maintain their children’s ethnicity through speaking Chinese at home, irrespective of whether they were good at English themselves. Although the teenagers had few problems in everyday conversation, they did not have the relevant Chinese vocabulary to discuss sex-related topics. This lack of a shared language reflects a study of South Asian families in Britain (Atkin et al., 2002).

Third, divergent sexual values held between the generations resulted in impacts as reported by DeSantis et al. (1999) and Le Gall et al. (2002). The teenagers perceived that their parents held traditional Chinese sexual values that were different from theirs. Such a perception drove the teenagers away from discussions with their parents in order to avoid an argument. This also was found to be the case by Shoveller et al. (2004).

Although these barriers prevented parent–child communication, the parents tended to use other strategies to pass on their values. First, speaking Chinese was regarded as an important tool to maintain their children’s ethnicity. This supports studies where parents highly valued the maintenance of their ethnic languages (Modood et al., 1994; 1997). Language and communication are essential for reproducing cultural values (Ahmad et al., 1998). The use of Chinese languages assisted the parents in conveying their cultural values and helped the teenagers explore Chinese culture and share it in common with Chinese friends.

Second, television programs played a role. The parents discussed stories on television, such as if “it was a good case or a bad case.” This strategy also was used by parents in other studies (Rosenthal et al., 1998; Mturi & Hennink, 2005). Parents can influence their children’s responses to the media and, thus, moderate its impact (Greenfield, 2004). The current study shows the role that the media plays in promoting parent–child communication about the sensitive topic of teenage sexual behavior.

Third, the monitoring of outings and friendships was regarded as important. The parents highlighted the different perspectives of Chinese and Scottish parents regarding their children’s behavior and expected their children to behave differently from their Scottish peers. Their children were not expected to go out often, stay out too late, and have girlfriends/boyfriends or sex at an early age. Being aware of their parents’ expectations, the teenagers were restrained in their outings or relationships. These findings are consistent with studies of immigrant Chinese families in the USA (Gorman, 1998).

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

This study is a starting point in an under-researched area. The conclusion is tentative due to the specific characteristics of the participants. However, the key findings from the discussion reflect the fundamental influence of Chinese culture. The religious beliefs per se and the religious environment at home contributed to the understanding of sexual values within these Chinese families. However, being Chinese was influential. Therefore, to some extent, the sample might be representative not only of Christian Chinese, but of the Chinese population more generally in the UK.

This paper presents a challenge to nursing professionals. There are two key implications. First, conservative sexual attitudes suggest a need for nurses to support sexual abstinence and to assist teenagers in developing skills to delay sexual engagement. Recent policy and practice place emphasis on safe-sex strategies to prevent the negative consequences of having sex, such as teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, but not on sexual abstinence. Nurses need to be aware of and respect service users’ values, even though they might be inconsistent with mainstream values. The impact of culture, religion, family, and parents shown in this study indicates that these are important elements in prevention strategies that can be used to promote teenage sexual health.

Second, this study has indicated that these minority ethnic families have had specific difficulties, such as the parents’ lack of available time, language barriers, and divergent sexual values between the generations. Nurses need to rethink the role of parents and understand how Chinese parents cope with teenage sexual behavior. The additional barriers they encountered suggest that Chinese parents need extra support. Considering the importance of parental sexual values, nurses can encourage Chinese parents to spend more time and develop a common language with their children. Programs promoting sexual knowledge and communication skills for Chinese parents also would be useful in order to help the parents understand how to convey their values more effectively.

This paper has reported an understudied area. The insights given have implications for the development of nursing practice, which should respond to both cultural diversity and family values, and can benefit not only the Chinese community but also other minority ethnic groups in Britain and other countries.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was funded by a departmental studentship from the Department of Nursing and Midwifery at the University of Stirling and was supervised by Professor Tricia Murphy-Black and Professor Alison Bowes. I would like to express my deep thanks to my supervisors and the department. I am also very grateful to all the teenagers and parents who participated in this research and those who helped me to approach the Chinese families. Lastly, many thanks go to Professor Maggie Kirk for her valuable comments on this paper.

REFERENCES


