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## British-born Chinese teenagers: The influence of Chinese ethnicity on Their attitudes towards sexual behaviour

### ABSTRACT

#### Objectives

This paper draws findings from a PhD study to explore the influence of ethnicity on attitudes towards sexual behaviour of British-born Chinese teenagers with the aim of informing culturally competent health services. In particular, it discusses specific aspects of culture and family, sexual values between generations and how parents pass on their sexual values.

#### Design

The research applied an ethnographic approach and snowball sampling was used to recruit the informants. Data were collected through ethnographic interviews with 20 British-born Chinese teenagers and 20 Chinese-born parents.

#### Findings

The teenagers and parents presented a dominant conservative view and a less typical permissive view of teenage sexual behaviour. The parents highlighted the influence of Chinese culture 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 due to a number of barriers, the parents used other strategies, including maintaining Chinese language at home, warning about sex or commenting on television programmes and monitoring their children's behaviour, to pass on their values.

#### Conclusion

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.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been increasing concern about the negative consequences of early sexual initiation, such as teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. In Britain, over one quarter of young people are sexually active before age 16 and the median age of sexual initiation is 16 (Wellings *et al.* 2001). Early sexual initiation is associated with several health and social problems, such as more lifetime partners, less regular contraception use and higher rates of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Willings *et al.* 1994; Kupek 2001; Edgardh 2002).

Sexual attitudes and behaviour vary among teenagers from different ethnic groups. In Britain, Asian young people (Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Indians) are more likely to have a conservative view about sexual behaviour and less likely to become sexually active at a young age, compared to those from other ethnic groups (Rudat *et al.* 1992; Wellings *et al.* 1994; Bradby & Williams 1999). However, young British-Chinese people are excluded from such studies. Chinese people (247,403) currently make up 0.42% of the UK population (Office for National Statistics 2004a), and 29% of these were born in Britain (Office for National Statistics 2004b). Recent policy and practice place emphasis on accessibility and cohesion of sexual health services for everyone, including those from minority ethnic communities (Scottish Executive 2005). However, there is no evidence to inform the development of culturally competent services for British-born Chinese teenagers. Beyond sensitivity and awareness of cultural differences, cultural competence places emphasis on the willingness and ability of interacting with people of all cultural groups. In order to provide such services, further research is needed to explore the perspectives of British-born Chinese teenagers. This paper draws upon findings from a PhD study (X 2004) exploring the impact of ethnicity on attitudes towards sexual behaviours of British-born Chinese teenagers and aims to inform health services and practice.

A few studies of young Chinese people in other western countries, such as in the USA (Huang & Uba 1992; McLaughlin *et al.* 1997) and Canada (Meston *et al.* 1996, 1998), have reported ethnic differences in sexual attitudes and behaviour, but have not explored this in depth. Modood (1994) and others have argued that the family is a repository of culture and has profound influence on ethnicity of children. The major influence of family on teenage sexual attitudes and behaviour is taken for granted (Katchadourian 1990). The family provides an environment in which children initially form their sexual values (Moore & Rosenthal 1993; Coleman & Hendry 1999). Miller *et al.* (1999) have suggested that parents, especially parental sexual values, play a unique and significant role in the socialisation of their children becoming sexual human beings. Studies have shown that perceived parental disapproval of teenage sexual activity or risky behaviours reduced sexual involvement, pregnancy, number of sexual partners or engagement in risky sexual behaviours (Luster & Small 1997; Resnick *et al.* 1997; He *et al.* 2004). In contrast, permissive parental views are associated with less restrictive attitudes and greater likelihood of sexual initiation of teenagers (Thornton & Camburn 1987; Small & Luster 1994).

Language and communication are essential for reproducing cultural values, including sexual values (Modood *et al.* 1994; Ahmad *et al.* 1998). Moore *et al.* (1986) have argued that communication about parental beliefs and values is one of the primary ways of parents socialising with their children. Research has reported that teenagers with high levels of parent-child communication are less likely to misperceive maternal sexual values (Jaccard *et al.* 1998) and more likely to have sexual attitudes similar to

their parents (Fisher 1985, 1988), be virgins or delay sexual initiation (Hutchinson 2002; Vesely *et al.* 2004).

However, studies have found that there is little direct communication about sex-related topics between generations (Rosenthal & Feldman 1999, Weaver *et al.* 2002). Factors, such as embarrassment and lack of sexual knowledge, influence such communication (Jaccard *et al.* 2000; Walker 2001; O'Donnell *et al.* 2003). Coleman (1995) have argued that children define normative behaviour by observing their parents' behaviour. Parental sexual values can be conveyed by non-verbal communication, such as parental role modelling and supervision. Studies have found that higher levels of parental monitoring or following family rules regarding sex and dating are related to later sexual initiation (Miller *et al.* 1999; Li 2000a, 2000b).

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 been excluded from previous studies. It is necessary to explore their views and how and why ethnicity operates. This paper concentrates on the questions:

- What are the sexual values of British-born Chinese teenagers and Chinese-born parents?
- How does Chinese ethnicity have an impact on the sexual values of these 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. Ethnography is concerned with understanding and describing why a group of people do what they do, and how an individual's behaviour is influenced by their surrounding culture (Fetterman 1998; Roper & Shapira 2000). This approach allowed the researcher to explore attitudes towards sexual behaviour of British-born Chinese teenagers.

### Sample

The criteria for selection of the teenagers were:

- Either male or female
- Aged 16 to 19
- Unmarried
- Born in Britain, or moved to Britain before age 5
- With both parents of Chinese origin
- Currently living in Scotland

The parents were those who had British-born Chinese teenagers.

Due to the sensitive topic of sex and the small Chinese population in Scotland, snowball sampling was considered as the most suitable method of recruiting the informants. Initially, Chinese associations, such as Chinese language schools, Chinese churches, Chinese Women's Groups and the General Consulate of China in Edinburgh, were contacted to 'get into the world'. Subsequently, recruits came from some of these organisations.

### **Data collection**

Ethnographic interviews were conducted with 20 teenagers (10 boys and 10 girls, aged 16 to 19) and 20 parents (15 mothers and 5 fathers, aged 42 to 55) in informants' homes, Chinese churches, a hotel lounge, tea room and a restaurant. The interviews lasted about 40 minutes to an hour. Two teenagers took part with both their parents and five with their mothers. They were all interviewed separately. All the teenagers and 5 parents were interviewed in English and 15 parents were interviewed in Mandarin, or a mixture of Mandarin, Cantonese and English (indicated after quotations). All interviews, except for two, were recorded. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, including those in Chinese. Eighteen teenagers were living with two parents. Parents' length of residence in Britain ranged from 12 to 37 years.

People in churches were the group most willing to help. Due to constraints of time and resource, half of the teenagers and most parents were from Chinese churches. As only 21.56% Chinese people in Britain are Christians (Office for National Statistics 2004c), the sample was representative only of Christian Chinese.

### **Data analysis**

Transcribed interviews were organised in NUD\*ST software. The data were analysed thematically, guided by Spradley (1979), Dey (1993) and Strauss & Corbin (1998). Meaningful data were taken from the transcripts and organised by categories and sub-categories, suggested by interview questions and themes that emerged from data, such as 'language barriers'. A conceptual map was developed to interpret the data.

Throughout the process of analysis, some strategies suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) were applied to make sense of the data, such as, noting themes, seeing plausibility, clustering, counting, making comparisons, splitting, splicing, factoring, making relationships and finding intervening categories. In addition, the field notes and the process of translation helped to interpret the data and stimulate critical thinking. The procedures followed allowed the researcher to check internal validity and to obtain solid interpretations and explanations of the data.

### **Ethical considerations**

The research was approved by the Departmental Research Ethics Committee in the Department of Nursing and Midwifery at the University of X. The study was ethically sensitive due to the topic and the involvement of both teenagers and parents from a minority ethnic group. All information given included both an English version and a Chinese version. Informants were given an opportunity to ask questions before they signed the consent forms. Anonymity and confidentiality were stressed. Teenagers' comments were not disclosed to their parents and vice versa. The provision of two support workers was considered. If a teenager felt upset, they would be available to talk to the teenager.

### **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 teenage sexual behaviour. 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.

*Well, I think if you've found the right person, then I could understand you have sex with them and if they think they'll spend the rest of their life with them. ...I wouldn't go having sex until I am sure I've met the right guy or until I am married or whatever, you know.*

*(Girl17, aged 19)*

Similarly, the parents repeatedly reported that sex should be left until after marriage. Age did not matter and sex outside marriage was not acceptable. Parents related their conservative sexual values to Chinese culture, and considered the perceived permissive views of British people opposed to Chinese values. Living in Britain, 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 always see teenagers with big tummies in front of my restaurant. I am worried about my own daughter. I don't agree with that. We are Chinese. Maybe, we are behind the times. We are not westerners. We believe that we should not have sex before marriage.*

*(Mother5, \*Chinese)*

Exceptionally, permissive views were reported. Although none of the teenagers approved of casual sex or a one-night stand, teenage sex was not unacceptable for a minority, as long as safety was considered.

*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.*

*(Boy7, aged 19)*

However, no matter which views they had, they all referred to a need for readiness. Physical, mental and social readiness for sex were all considered important. The impact of early sexual activity on physical and psychological development was stressed. The teenagers and parents felt that teenagers were not mentally mature enough to deal with mental and emotional aspects of sexual relationships. The teenagers understood that getting diseases, becoming pregnant, having babies and leaving school could all happen as a result of sexual engagement. Education was a major reason for not having a girl/boyfriend or sex.

*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. Oh, I would get a job first and then you go for it because girls want money. They want money first, then they go shopping, clothes, shoes and make-up.*

*(Boy19, aged 16)*

The parents presented similar views, saying that sex was related to pregnancy, which would militate against the success of their children's education. They expected their children to concentrate on their study to get into university. Therefore, dating or a steady girl/boyfriend was discouraged in these families.

## **Transmission of cultural and sexual values**

### *Barriers to communication about sex-related issues*

The literature suggested that communication about sex-related topics is regarded as an important way for parents to convey sexual values. However, direct communication about these topics was rare within these families. Four obstacles contributed to this phenomenon.

First, parents' lack of available time, as they saw it, was the major barrier. Eighteen teenagers had at least one parent involved in the catering trade, and twelve parents interviewed actually worked there. These parents worked six days a week from late afternoon to midnight. The time spent with their children, therefore, was relatively limited. Usually, apart from Mondays or Tuesdays when parents had a day off, the families rarely had time to do things together, such as talking, going out for a meal or shopping. A 19-year-old boy complained:

*My dad got old ideas. Like, he still thinks that his job is to provide for family. So like he should work all the time and get the money. But that means he doesn't spend any time with us. You know what I mean? ... Like nowadays, sometimes, people say that you should have sometime for work, but you should spend a lot more time with your family.*

*(Boy3, aged 19)*

The 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. Born in Britain, 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 and too difficult words', or that their parents were not willing to speak English. Teenagers learned Chinese mainly from their parents. They felt it difficult to discuss a topic not being spoken about by their parents, as they did not have enough Chinese vocabulary to discuss it.

*Most of my Cantonese is developed from speaking to my parents. So 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.*

*(Girl20, aged 19)*

*Sometimes I don't have the vocabulary to use, to speak to them. When it's more complex, it's kind of difficult to speak Chinese.*

*(Boy4, aged 18)*

There was little problem in talking about daily life, nonetheless it was hard to discuss topics, such as puberty, personal relationships and sex-related topics. The ability in English and preference for Chinese influenced the quantity and quality of parent-child communication.

Third, embarrassment was another barrier. The teenagers felt too embarrassed to discuss these topics to 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.  
(Boy3, aged 19)*

Similarly, the parents repeatedly noted that 'we Chinese are too conservative' to talk about these things.

Lastly, different values between generations had an impact. For instance, Girl17 said:

*I think it's because back then when my parents got married, things would be a lot different. ... But now it's a lot different. You could be with someone for ten years and you don't need to get married. ... So it's maybe because our views are quite different, so I don't really want to talk to them about it, because they would just say what they think is right, but I won't think it's right.  
(Girl17, aged 19)*

The teenagers were brought up in Britain, while their parents were born and brought up in Hong Kong, Taiwan or Mainland China. Growing up in different mainstream cultures caused conflicts in sexual values and the teenagers avoided discussing their values with their parents because they did not want to end up with 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 British-born children. Although direct communication about sex-related topics was rare, the parents used other strategies to convey their values.

First, the parents highlighted the importance of speaking Chinese as a way of maintaining their children's Chinese identity.

*My parents, usually Chinese, but mixed with a bit of English as well, and with my brother, it's usually English, mixed with a bit of Chinese.  
(Girl17, aged 19)*

This was a typical picture of the languages teenagers used at home. They considered their parents' English was poor, so that they had to speak Chinese with them most of the time. However, proficiency in English did not always mean that parents would speak English to their children. The parents felt that if they did not speak Chinese at home, their children would have a limited chance to learn and practise 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.  
(Mother16, \*English)*

Even if they were proficient in English, the parents preferred to speak Chinese with their children in order to pass on their Chinese values. However, this language preference could, as discussed above, affect communication about sexual issues, as

the teenagers felt that they did not have a shared language with their parents to discuss these issues.

Second, the parents warned their children about inappropriate behaviour in order to pass on their sexual values.

*They've never spoken about it. The only thing they just say being careful.  
(Boy3, aged 19)*

Media in the form of television played a significant. Commenting on television programmes assisted communication about sexual values between generations.

*We don't often talk about it, but let's say if there is something on the news about teenagers, then we start talking about it. But if not, we don't talk about it.  
(Girl8, aged 16)*

Similarly, parents reported that they let their children acknowledge their values by discussing television programmes. By hinting, warning about sex or commenting on television programmes, the teenagers became aware of their parents' values.

Third, parental supervision emerged as an important practice for parents to transmit their values. Parents highlighted perceived cultural differences in parenting and indicated the importance of bringing up children in the context of Chinese culture. They generally tried to let their children know how to behave in Chinese ways.

*If I say no, they cannot go. ... 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.  
(Mother15, \*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. Parents also supervised their children's friendships. They normally knew their children's friends, especially close and Chinese friends. Teenagers reported that their parents were more concerned about their friends' behaviour rather than their ethnic backgrounds. For example, when asked if their parents encouraged them to make friends with non-Chinese people, they said:

*I just make friends on my own. So they don't really look into that sort of side.  
(Boy4, aged 18)*

*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.  
(Boy18, aged 16)*

Exceptionally, they reported that their parents preferred them to make Chinese friends. The parents also showed this preference because of the shared culture and perceived differences in sexual behaviour 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 girl/boyfriends.



*My parents are a wee bit more, they think twice about me making, like, close friends with male friends rather than female friends.  
(Girl20, aged 19)*

The parents strongly disapproved not only of their daughters, but also their sons having girl/boyfriends. They felt that their children were not mature enough to deal with girl/boyfriend relationships, although they might not discourage them from making 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. But I don't want you to start, and then end up with problems. (Mother16, \*English)*

## **DISCUSSION**

These findings provide insight into sexual values within British-Chinese families and the influence of culture. Widespread conservative views of the teenagers and parents are consistent with other literature. Sexual behaviour outside marriage is considered highly inappropriate in most Asian cultures (Okazaki 2002). The present study provides some support for studies of Asian teenagers in the USA (Feldman *et al.* 1999; Okazaki 2002), Canada (Meston *et al.* 1996, 1998), and Britain (Wellings *et al.* 1994; Hennink *et al.* 1999). The 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. Born and growing up in the Chinese cultural environment, they argued that they had shaped their sexual values based on Chinese culture before moving to Britain. These values were not easy to change, even though they had been living in Britain for twenty or thirty years. These findings support studies of South Asians in Australia (Ghuman 2000), where some external aspects of ethnic identity were eroded over time, but the inherent traditional values were more resistant to change.

The transmission of cultural and sexual values was complex. Direct communication about sex-related issues was rare within these Chinese families, which is similar to other studies (e.g. Rosenthal & Feldman 1999; Weaver *et al.* 2002). However, although the feeling of embarrassment is widely reported (eg. Huchinson 2002; O'Donnell *et al.* 2003), a number of barriers may be specific to British-Chinese families.

First, parents' lack of available time influenced parent-child interaction, communication and relationships. Long and unsocial working hours of British-Chinese people involved in restaurant/takeaways have been reported by others (Song 1995, 1997a, 1997b; Raschka *et al.* 2002).

Second, the present data suggest that there was a lack of shared language between generations to discuss sex-related issues, due to the parents' limited ability in English and the language preference at home. Poor proficiency in English among first generation British-Chinese people, especially women, has been widely reported (e.g. Kwan & Holmes 1999; Chan 2000), as affecting every aspect of their life, including communication with their children (Raschka *et al.* 2002). In the present study, the parents wanted to maintain their children's ethnicity by speaking Chinese at home, whether or not they were good at English themselves. Although the teenagers had

little problem in everyday conversation in Chinese, they found it difficult to discuss topics such as sexual issues, because they did not have relevant Chinese vocabulary to express their views. This lack of a shared language reflects a study by Atkin *et al.* (2002) of South Asian families in Britain.

Third, different sexual values between generations had an impact, as reported in the literature (e.g. DeSantis *et al.* 1999; Le Gall *et al.* 2002). The teenagers perceived that their parents, brought up in a different cultural context, held traditional Chinese sexual values. The perception of not being accepted by their parents drove them away from such discussion, similar to those reported by Shoveller *et al.* (2004).

Although these barriers prevented communication within the families, the parents used other strategies to pass on their values. The parents held strong Chinese values and wanted to pass on these to their children by speaking Chinese at home, warning about sex, commenting on television programmes and monitoring their behaviour.

First, speaking Chinese was regarded as an important tool to maintain their children's ethnicity. This supports studies (e.g. Modood *et al.* 1994, 1997), where parents highly valued the maintenance of their ethnic languages. Language and communication are essential for reproducing cultural values (Modood *et al.* 1994; Ahmad *et al.* 1998). The use of Chinese language assisted the parents to convey their cultural values and helped the teenagers to explore Chinese culture and share the culture with their Chinese friends.

Second, television programmes assisted communication about sexual values. The parents discussed stories on television, such as if 'it was a good case, or a bad case.' This strategy was also used by parents in studies of Kahn (1994) and Rosenthal *et al.* (1998). Collins *et al.* (2003, 2004) and Greenfield (2004) have suggested that parents may influence their children's responses to the media, and thus moderate its impact. The current study has confirmed the role of the media in promoting parent-child communication about the sensitive topic of teenage sexual behaviour and parents' role in children's responses to the media.

Third, monitoring outings and friendships was regarded as important. The parents highlighted the different perspectives of Chinese and Scottish parents on children's behaviour, and expected their children to behave differently from their Scottish peers. For example, their children were not expected to go out a lot, stay out too late, or make girl/boyfriends or have sex at a young age. Being aware of their parents' expectations, the teenagers were restrained in their outings or making friends with the opposite gender. These findings are consistent with studies of immigrant Chinese families in the USA (Lin & Fu 1990; Gorman 1998).

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Sexual attitudes of British-born Chinese teenagers and the influence of Chinese culture have not been explored in previous research. This study is a starting point in an unresearched area. The conclusion may be tentative because of the specific characteristics of the sample. However, key findings from discussion reflect the fundamental influence of Chinese culture. Being Chinese was influential. Therefore, to some extent, the sample may be not representative of only Christian Chinese. This paper presents a challenge to health professionals. They need to be culturally competent through respecting the sexual values of British-Chinese families,

understanding how parents and Chinese culture have an impact and promoting interaction with Chinese people. Findings discussed in this paper have a number of implications.

First, the dominant conservative sexual attitudes suggest the need for health professionals to support sexual abstinence and to assist teenagers to develop skills to delay sexual engagement. Recent policy and practice place emphasis on safe sex strategy to prevent the negative consequences of having sex, such as teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, but not on sexual abstinence. To provide culturally competent services, health professionals need to be aware of these values and privilege service users' values, which may be inconsistent with mainstream values. The impact of culture, family and parents shown in the study indicates that these are important elements in prevention efforts, which can be used to promote the delay of sexual initiation.

Second, the study has indicated that these minority ethnic families have had specific difficulties in addressing teenage sexual behaviour. These Chinese families experienced further difficulties, such as parents' lack of available time, language barriers and different sexual values between generations. Health professionals need to rethink the role of parents and understand how Chinese parents cope with teenage sexual behaviour. The additional barriers encountered by the parents in this study suggest that Chinese parents need extra support. Considering the importance of parental sexual values, health professionals can encourage Chinese parents to spend more time and develop a common language with their children. Education programmes on sexual knowledge and communication skills for Chinese parents would be also useful. These programmes could help parents to understand how to address teenage sexual behaviour and to convey their values effectively.

This paper has reported an understudied area. The insights given have implications for the development of services, which can respond to cultural diversity, and which can benefit not only the Chinese community but also other minority ethnic groups.

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