

Effect of Mother-Daughter Closeness on Adolescents' Expectations of Familial Reaction to Sexual Activity and Pregnancy

Amanda Tennyson Berger, M.A.
The University of Maryland

Background and Overview:

According to the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, nearly half of all U.S. teenage girls have engaged in sexual intercourse. Although recent data have shown a decline in the number of teenage pregnancies to a historic low, over 750,000 teenage pregnancies were reported in 2002; of which, 425,000 resulted in live births, 215,000 in induced abortions, and 117,000 in fetal losses. Teenage sexual behavior and, more specifically, risky teenage sexual behavior remain urgent public health concerns because of the large number of births and high rate of sexually transmitted diseases. By identifying the factors that contribute to teenagers' motivation to engage in risky sexual behavior it may be possible to identify predictors of future initiation of sex and of subsequent sexually-related risks. One such factor may be teens' expectations of their family's reaction to sexual activity and pregnancy.

Model and Hypotheses:

Adolescents' decisions to have sex or to get pregnant may be influenced by whether or not they think these behaviors would upset their families. These expectations of familial reactions may be determined by the closeness of their relationship with their families. Although adolescent sexual behavior and risk-takings are not limited to females, the consequences of sexual activity are fundamentally different for girls; furthermore, the relationship between mothers and daughters is categorically different from that between fathers and daughters. As such, the current study examines whether mother-daughter closeness has an impact on whether or not adolescent girls think their mothers would be upset if they had sex or if their family would be embarrassed if they got pregnant.

It was hypothesized that the closer the mother and daughter, the less likely the daughter would be sexually active. In addition, the closer the mother-daughter relationship, the more likely she would be to think having sex would upset her mother and the more likely she would be to think that getting pregnant would embarrass her family. It was also hypothesized that maternal comfort with sexual communication would mediate the relationship between closeness and motivation to abstain from sex or avoid pregnancy. That is, closeness between the mother and daughter would lead to greater maternal comfort with sexual communication which, in turn, would lead to reporting familial factors as deterrents to having sex and getting pregnant. Finally, it was hypothesized that these relationships would be significant, even when mother's education level and daughter's age, race, and religiosity were controlled.

Data and Methods:

Using the 1994-1995 Add Health survey, nationally-representative data collected from the Wave I Parent Survey and the Wave I and II Adolescent Surveys were analyzed. From the parent data, a scale of maternal comfort with talking about sexual behavior and sex-related risks was created. With this scale, ordinal regression analyses were run with data from the adolescent survey regarding perceived mother-daughter closeness, the factors that underlie their motivation to engage in risky behavior (whether or not it would upset their mothers if they had sex and

whether or not it would embarrass their family if they got pregnant) and with data regarding mother's level of education and daughter's age, race, and religiosity – an index of three variables concerning importance of religion, frequency of prayer, and attendance of religious services. Because this study was only examining the effect that mother-daughter closeness has on girls' motivation to abstain from sexual activity and to avoid risky sexual behavior, only data from adolescent girls with age reported and whose mothers had completed the Parent Survey reported their education level were used (n= 1,977).

Results and Conclusions:

Results indicated that mother-daughter closeness did not have a significant effect on daughters' expectations that getting pregnant would embarrass their family; this model, with and without the mediator of maternal comfort with sexual communication did not yield significant results and, thus, will not be included in the discussion.

On the other hand, mother-daughter closeness *does* have a significant effect on whether or not daughters think it would upset their mother if they had sex, regardless of age, mother's education, religiosity, and race (see Table 1); however, the results were contrary to the hypothesized relationship. Specifically, adolescent girls who are closer with their mothers are 17% *less likely* to think their mothers would be upset if they have sex (see Figure 1). Furthermore, mother's comfort with sexual communication partially mediates the relationship between mother-daughter closeness and daughter's expectations of mothers' opinions of having sex, but to a very small degree (about 2%). These results indicate that there may be additional underlying constructs that mediate this relationship; for example, it is possible that with closer relationships, boundaries between parent and child are more diffuse, which leads to permissiveness of risky sexual behavior. Another possibility is that with higher levels of mother-daughter closeness, daughters are more likely to assume that their mothers will unconditionally accept their behaviors.

As to be expected, as daughters get older, they become significantly *less likely* to report familial opinions as deterrents from sex (34% less likely with each year of age). Surprisingly, though, with higher degrees of religiosity, daughters are, again, significantly *less likely* to report familial opinions as deterrents from sex (10%). On the other hand, with higher levels of mother's education, daughters are 9% *more likely* to report familial opinions as deterrents from sex, though this result was not significant.

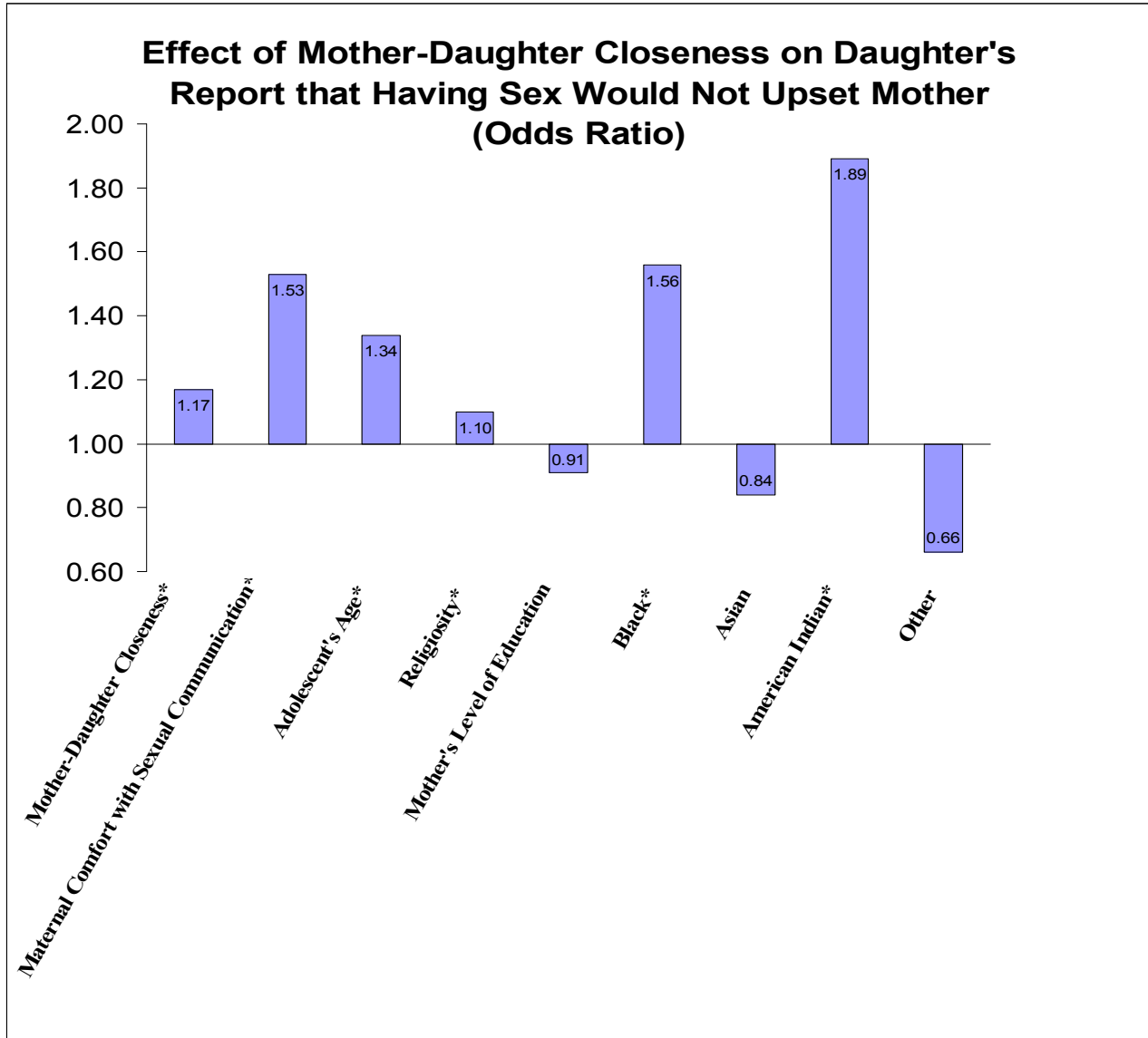
Finally, race seems to be an important variable in this model, as Black and American Indian teens are *less likely* than White teens to say it would upset their mother if they had sex (56% and 89% less likely, respectively) while Asian and other racial groups of adolescents are *more likely* to report familial opinions as deterrents from sex (16% and 34% more likely, though the effects are not significant). The apparent racial effects warrant further investigation in terms of health disparities.

Table 1

Independent Variable	Estimate	Significance
<i>Mother-Daughter Closeness</i>	0.156	0.035*
<i>Maternal Comfort with Sexual Communication</i>	0.422	0.000*
<i>Adolescent's Age</i>	0.289	0.000*
<i>Religiosity</i>	0.095	0.000*
Mother's Level of Education	-0.093	0.081
<i>Black</i>	0.442	0.005*
Asian	-0.173	0.624
<i>American Indian</i>	0.635	0.020*
Other	-0.418	0.081

* significant

Figure 1:



* significant