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The role of extended family in diverse teens' sexual health

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Abstract

Despite increasing extended family involvement in childrearing, particularly in minority families, few studies investigate their role in talking with teens about sex or how this relates to teens' sexual behavior. This mixed methods study assesses extended family sexuality communication through a survey of 1492 diverse middle school students and interviews with 32 students. Logistic regression shows that participants who report having had sex are more likely to report talking with extended family than those who report not having had sex. Interview themes explored reasons for and content of teen sexuality conversations with extended family. More sexually active teens' reporting communication with extended family is interpreted as extended family members gaining importance in sexuality communication as teens become sexually active.

Today's adolescents experience development against a changing demographic backdrop, where nuclear families are no longer the statistical norm (Blackwell, 2010). Adolescents often rely on nontraditional communities for support, including extended family and "fictive kin," who can serve as core parts of the family unit, particularly among African American and Latino families (Jones & Lindahl, 2011; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Despite these demographic shifts, most research on family sexuality communication has focused on the parent-teen dyad, typically mother and teen (see DiIorio et al., 2003). While parents play an important role in sexuality communication (Albert, 2010), less than half of teens report having these conversations with their parents (Robert & Sonenstein, 2010). Emerging studies suggest that teens, particularly urban, minority youth, often identify extended family members as supports and resources for sexuality communication (Crohn, 2010; Harper et al., 2012; Teitelman, Bohinski, & Boente, 2009), although little is known about the content or process of these interactions. More information is needed to understand sexuality communication among adolescents whose family systems are not well-represented by

existing research, who teens talk to about sex, how it relates to teen sexual behavior, and why teens talk with extended family members about sexual issues.

In this paper the importance of nonparent kin in minority families' social ecology guides our use of the term "extended family" to encompass the larger family context of who teens identify as family, which can include both family members, such as stepparents, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and involved nonfamily members, such as godparents or close friends of the family.

Role of Extended Families in Teen Development

Extended family can play a central role in teens' development, particularly among minority adolescents. Jones and colleagues found that 97% of single African American mothers identified another adult or family member as involved with child-rearing (Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterrett, & Chester, 2007). Similarly, the Latino cultural value of *familismo* encompasses close connections, including extended family and nonfamily members who are central to children's upbringing (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Levitt et al., 2005; Pernice-Duca, 2010). Findings for the role of extended family relationships in teen development show that supportive relationships with nonparental adults are associated with reduced sexual risk-taking behaviors, including less frequent sex, fewer sexual partners, more frequent condom use (Ahrens et al., 2008) or less likelihood of being diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection (STI; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010). In contrast, some studies of sibling relationships have found that older siblings can negatively influence their younger siblings' sexual risk behavior, for example resulting in higher frequency of sex and having sex without contraception (East & Koo, 2005; Whiteman, Zeiders, Killoren, Rodriguez, & Updegraff, 2013).

Sexuality Communication with Extended Family

A number of studies report on why some young people are reluctant to talk with their parents about sex, with teens describing these conversations as socially inappropriate or embarrassing, and expressing concern that they will disappoint their parents, who might judge them or worry about their sexual behaviors (Crohn, 2010; Geurrero & Affifi, 1995). Studies have identified stepmothers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and family friends as nonparental sources of sexual information (Harper et al., 2012; Teitelman, Bohinski, & Boente, 2009). Some studies suggest that adolescents seek extended family as a more comfortable alternative to parents (O'Sullivan, Meyer-Bahlburg, & Watkins, 2001; Teitelman et al., 2009) as they begin to explore sexuality and relationships (Crohn, 2010). These findings fit with developmental theory, which suggests that increasing autonomy and agency, and growing social networks in adolescence (Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003; Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006) are likely to expand opportunities to engage with extended family networks. This research implies that extended family members may play a different role for teens' sexuality communication than do parents. Specifically, distinctions from parental roles may allow teens to feel comfortable bringing questions and concerns to extended family members that they would not raise with parents. Alternately, extended family members may provide different perspectives and approaches than parents, potentially

complementing and enhancing parents' conversations with teens about sex and relationships. However, the vast majority of research on family sexuality communication takes place with parents (see DiIorio et al., 2003), and exploration is needed to see how the content and process of extended family sexuality communication are similar to and different from teens' conversations with parents.

Only a few studies have explored associations between extended family sexuality and communication and teens' sexual health, including health-promoting attitudes, self-efficacy, and behavior. A survey study of Black and White teens found that learning about sex from grandparents was associated with reduced self-efficacy beliefs around having sex, which the authors identify as protective, while learning about sex from cousins was associated with positive beliefs about sexual behavior (e.g., sex would make you feel good about yourself) (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2009). A study of Midwestern high school students found that teens who reported talking about safer sex with both parents and older siblings reported less risky attitudes about sexual behavior, such as a belief that it's better to delay sex until you're older, as well as greater self-efficacy in talking with a partner about using condoms than teens who did not report having these conversations (Kowal & Blinn-Pike, 2004). However, to our knowledge, only one study examines relationships between extended family sexuality communication and teens' sexual *behavior*. This study of 8th and 9th grade Latino students found that comfort in discussing sexuality with family was associated with reduced likelihood of having sex and older age of first sex (Guzman et al., 2003). This finding suggests that comfort in talking with family about sex can be protective, as early initiation of sex predicts greater likelihood of STIs and unintended pregnancy (von Ranson, Rosenthal, Biro, & Succop, 2000). However, this study cannot discern the unique role of extended family communication, as it assesses the combined influence of both parents and extended family. Overall, these studies indicate links between extended family sexuality communication and teen sexual health constructs, but provide little information regarding its associations with teen sexual behavior or why teens talk with their extended families about sex and relationships.

Theoretical Approach

We approach the process of extended family interaction about sex through a lens of Bronfenbrenner's *Process-Person-Context-Time Model* (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This theoretical framework identifies individual, systemic, and interactive factors that shape development over time. We assess *process* factors through (1) a quantitative examination of associations between extended family sexuality communication and teen sexual behavior, and (2) a qualitative exploration of how teens describe this communication. We seek to understand ways in which adolescents, on the *person* level, may take active or passive roles in engaging in sexuality communication with extended family members. We recognize the shifting demographic *context* by, rather than imposing a definition of family, asking teens to identify as extended family members those who play an important role in their sexual communication networks. Finally, we understand extended family sexuality communication as shifting in *time* with normative changes in adolescents' sexual behavior, and growing capacities and desire for autonomy and agency as well as expanding social networks (Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003; Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006).

The Current Study

The first goal of this mixed-methods study is to assess the association between adolescents' sexuality communication with extended family and their reports of having had sex in 8th grade. We view these associations through a developmental lens to understand the importance of this communication for teens who are and who are not sexually active. Therefore, the quantitative research question is: Do teens who have had sex talk more with extended family members than students who have not had sex? Based on increasing autonomy, agency, and expanded networks during adolescence, we hypothesize that teens who report having had sex are more likely to report communication with extended family members. The second goal of this study is to begin exploring the content and process of these conversations. The qualitative research questions are: 1) Why do teens talk with extended family about sex? and 2) What aspects of sexual behavior and health do they talk about with extended family?

Methods

This study used a sequential exploratory research design, which involved the initial use of qualitative data to inform quantitative research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This method was chosen because exploration was needed to better understand the concept of family sexuality communication. The understanding gained from qualitative interviews was then applied to the quantitative survey. In this case, qualitative findings on the importance of extended family sexuality communication from the 7th grade interviews led to the addition of items addressing this content area to the 8th grade survey.

Survey Participants

The quantitative sample was drawn from a longitudinal evaluation of *Get Real: Comprehensive Sex Education that Works*, a comprehensive middle school sex education curriculum developed by Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts. *Get Real* is a three-year program in grades 6, 7, and 8 that is designed to provide accurate, culturally sensitive, and age-appropriate information about healthy relationships. The program's goals include enhancing relationship and communication skills, and shows preliminary effectiveness in delaying sex for 6th graders (Erkut et al., 2013). The *Get Real* curriculum draws from cultural-ecological perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 2002). Its model of change emphasizes relationship skills and communication as a means to translate intentions into healthy sexual behavior. The understanding that multiple contexts shape teens' sexual behavior serves as a rationale for the inclusion of family activities with each lesson, designed to support communication about sex and relationships between teens and their parents or caregivers. Twenty-four schools in Eastern Massachusetts agreed to participate in the evaluation of the 3-year curriculum and were randomly assigned to intervention and control conditions. Survey data were gathered in each grade, with data from 8th graders collected in spring 2011 and 2012.

All schools chose passive parental consent at 8th grade. Twelve parents opted out and 5 additional students decided not to take the survey; they spent supervised time elsewhere. The survey took about 45 minutes to complete. Evaluation team members introduced the study

and were available to answer questions and collect completed surveys. Students' names were replaced by barcode numbers, used to link surveys over the course of the longitudinal evaluation. Identifying information was separated from survey responses and kept in a locked cabinet.

The analysis sample used in this study was limited to 8th grade students who had completed the section of the survey on communication about sex ($n = 1494$, 92% of the 1626 students who took the 8th grade survey). The sample was 53% female, with a mean age of 13.95 years ($SD = .68$). Average grades received in 8th grade were mostly Bs or mostly Bs and Cs. Twenty-one percent of teens reported that they had had sex. Most reported feeling close to parents and almost half (49%) reported living in a two-parent family. The median household income was \$52,978 ($SD = \$25,465$), based on Census data. The sample was 32% Latino, 30% Black, 20% White, 15% Biracial, and 4% Asian (see Table 1). Twenty-one percent of participants reported having had vaginal sex. Forty seven percent of participants were in the control group.

Survey Measures

Sexual activity—Students were asked yes/no “Have you ever had sex?” A definition was included: “Having sex means when a boy puts his penis inside a girl’s vagina. Some people call this ‘making love’ or ‘doing it.’”

Age—Age was calculated using date of birth.

Race/ethnicity—Students who chose any single category for race/ethnicity were identified with that group (i.e., Black, White, Asian, Latino). Those who reported being biracial or chose more than one race were coded as biracial/multiracial. Consistent with Census definitions that Hispanics can be of any race (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & M. Albert, 2004) students who self-identified as Latino with or without another racial identification were coded as Latino.

Two-parent family—Students were provided multiple response options to “Who do you live with?” two parents in one place, one parent, two parents in different places, grandparents or other family members, or other. Those who chose “two parents in one place” were coded as having a two-parent family structure.

Median household income—Household income level was obtained for the Census tract associated with the address the student provided in the eighth grade survey. For students whose street address was not available, the median household income for the tract where their school was located was used as a proxy. This variable was somewhat positively skewed as the majority of the sample came from families with modest incomes.

Grades—Response categories for typical grades were 1 = Mostly As, 2 = Mostly As and Bs, 3 = Mostly Bs, 4 = Mostly Bs and Cs, 5 = Mostly Cs, 6 = Mostly Cs and Ds, 7 = Mostly Ds, 8 = Mostly Ds and Fs.

Parent/guardian closeness—Students answered “How close do you feel to your mother or female guardian?” and “How close do you feel to your father or male guardian?” (1 = not at all to 5 = very much), and responses were combined.

Social desirability—An abbreviated version of Baxter and colleagues’ (2004) social desirability index was used. Item scores were summed, with higher scores representing more socially desirable responses.

Extended family sexuality communication—Extended family sexuality communication was determined by the question “Which adults in your family have you talked to about sex? Check all that apply.” Response options ranged from immediate family members (e.g. mom and dad) to extended family members (e.g. aunt and uncle). To include kinship networks who may not be related to the teen, we also included a parallel question about whether teens had talked with a “friend of the family” about sex. Responses were used to develop profiles of family communication described in the analysis section.

Survey Data Analysis

Missing data on the covariate variables used for the survey data analysis were imputed using the NORM software program (Schafer, 1997). Our imputation model included gender, age, race, social desirability, grades, family structure, sex by 6th grade, parent education, and parent closeness, variables related to the likelihood of having missing data or to the variables to be imputed (physical maturity, parental supervision, knowing a teen parent, repeating a grade, immigration status of the adolescent and his/her parents, intentions to have sex in middle school (grades 6–8), school attachment, dating rules, age composition of friendship group, language use, and school attended).

In order to make statistical comparisons between parent and extended family communication about sex, we combined all parent/guardian communication into one category and all extended family communication into another to develop four communication profiles to test the differential likelihood of having had sex across students who talked to 1) parents only, 2) extended family only, 3) parents and extended family, or 4) neither. This analysis was estimated in a logistic regression model conducted in a structural equation modeling framework to adjust for the clustered design of students within schools. Covariate effects included gender, age, race/ethnicity, two-parent family, median household income, poor grades, parent/guardian closeness, and social desirability. Covariate effects are assumed to be the same for all students and therefore are constrained to be equal across the four groups.

To ensure that participation in the sex education intervention (which included parent activities, but did not include an extended family component) did not influence study associations, we conducted regression analyses with and without group status (intervention vs. comparison group) as a covariate. Group status did not change the model, so was left out of the final analysis. Due of the small number of Asian American participants in the survey for making racial group comparisons, we assessed the similarity in rates of sexual behavior between these and other racial/ethnic groups in our sample. Rates of having had sex for Asian American participants (6%) were similar to those of White participants (5%), and significantly different from those of Black, Latino, and Biracial participants (all 26%) (Chi

square = 68.73, $p < .001$). Therefore, we combined the Asian American and White groups for the analyses.

In order to test gender differences in the relationship between who teens talks to about sex and having had sex, gender interaction was tested by allowing the effects of gender on having had sex to vary across sexuality communication profile groups. Gender interaction was not statistically significant. Therefore, we report combined results for boys and girls.

Interview Participants

Three schools in the intervention group, demographically representative of the larger survey sample, were selected for inclusion in interviews. Given the focus of the larger study on assessing effects of a sex education program, only schools in the intervention group were included in interviews. We recruited a convenience sample of 32 7th-grade students in spring 2011. Only students with active parental consent could participate. Each school determined how to distribute invitations and consent forms (handed out by staff or researchers, or sent home). Of 177 students invited to participate, 38 returned a parental consent form, on which four withheld consent. The 34 remaining students were contacted (two were not reached), and 32 (94%) agreed to participate and completed interviews. Interviews took approximately 30 minutes and were conducted either at school or on the phone. Participants created their own code names to protect confidentiality; those pseudonyms are used here.

The qualitative sample was 56% male; it was 33% Latino, 37% Black, 18% White, and 12% Biracial. Additional descriptive information was obtained from interview participants' 8th grade survey responses. Of the 32 interview participants, 25 completed an 8th grade survey. The mean age was 13.96 years ($SD = .46$). Average grades received were mostly Bs or mostly Bs and Cs. Twenty-four percent of teens reported that they had had sex by 8th grade. Most reported feeling close with parents and over a third (40%) reported living in a two-parent family. The median household income was \$43,546 ($SD = \$15,624$). All interview participants lived in Boston.

Interview Instruments

Interview questions addressed sexuality communication with extended family members. They included, "Are there other people who you think of as family who you talk to about sex and relationships? It could be someone like a cousin, aunt or uncle, godparent, or a friend of the family. What makes them a good person to talk to about this topic?"

Interview Data Analysis

A content analysis approach was used to code narrative interview data for overarching themes (Patton, 2002). In the first round of coding, overarching themes were identified through the first author's reading of transcribed interviews. After a theme was identified, additional examples were sought in other interviews. The first author developed a codebook that described themes and subthemes. Responses were coded "1" if a theme was present and "0" if a theme was absent. The most common themes were retained in the analysis. Themes were not mutually exclusive; therefore each response could be coded multiple times. Interrater reliability was established to protect against respondent and investigator bias. To

do this, the third author coded a random selection of one half of the data and compared these with the first author's coding responses. Interrater reliability of codes was calculated using Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula in which reliability equals the number of agreements divided by sum total of agreements and disagreements. After the first round of coding, intercoder reliability was .84. Next, the first and third authors discussed disagreements and clarified coding definitions, then both authors re-coded the remainder of the interviews. Intercoder reliability for this round was .94, determined to be an adequate level of agreement. NVivo version 8 was used for qualitative analysis.

Results

Survey

The most frequently reported conversations were with mothers (56%), followed by cousins (32%), fathers (29%), and friends of the family (23%). For girls, mothers (63%) were selected most often, followed by cousins (34%) older sisters (24%), friends of the family (25%), or fathers (18%). For boys, mothers were selected most frequently (48%), followed by fathers (41%). Boys also reported having conversation with their cousins (30%), older brothers (24%), and friends of the family (21%).

Overall 59% of teens reported talking with at least one extended family member about sex and relationships. Almost a quarter of the full sample (21%) reported they talked to their parents only, 18% talked to their extended family only, 41% talked to parents and extended family, and 21% talked to neither parents nor extended family (see Table 1).

The results of the multiple groups logistic regression model estimating the differences in the likelihood of having had sex for teens with different profiles of communication are shown in Table 2. Participants who were male, older, non-white/Asian, who got lower grades, and who were less close to their parent(s) were more likely to have had sex. Living with both parents was not a significant predictor of the likelihood of having had sex.

To test whether the likelihood of had having sex varies across participants with different profiles of sex communication, we conducted a Wald test of each pair of thresholds shown in Table 2 (functionally equivalent to the reverse of an intercept term for the logistic regression). These comparisons and the associated odds ratios, along with the raw and covariate-adjusted proportions of each group having had sex are shown in Table 3.

This table shows that there is a statistically significant difference in the likelihood of having had sex between participants across groups, with the exception of those who talk to parents only and those who talk to neither, who have statistically indistinguishable likelihood estimates ($OR = 0.84$, $Wald = 0.61$, $df = 1$, ns). Participants who talk only to extended family members were the most likely to have had sex (predicted likelihood = 0.37) and those who talked only to parents were least likely (predicted likelihood = 0.17). Participants who talked to extended family only were 2 1/3 times more likely to have had sex ($OR = 2.33$, $Wald = 20.01$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) than those who talked only with parents.

Interviews

Participating teens reported talking about sex with parents, grandparents, stepparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, cousins, and friends of the family. Of the 32 teens in the study, 23 (72%) reported talking with at least one extended family member about sex and relationships. Two main themes emerged from the data: why teens talk with extended family members about sex and relationships, and the content of these conversations (see Table 4 for frequencies of each theme). As mentioned earlier, teens are identified by the code name they chose for themselves, as well as their self-identified racial/ethnic background.

Teens identified reasons why they talk with extended family members: 1) Trust and connection; 2) Knowledge & experiences; 3) Discomfort talking with a parent. The most common subtheme for why teens talk to extended family relates to feelings of *Trust and connection* (reported by 15 participants), including describing family members as “a good listener” or someone “I feel close to.” Leila, an African American participant, described why she talked with her older sister about sex and relationships: “when I’m talking, she lets me talk. She doesn’t interrupt and she doesn’t say everything. And like if I said something, she wouldn’t judge me.” A Black female participant, Student, described her mother and grandmother, “my mom listens and then she just gives feedback or advice. My grandma does the same thing, and they also make it like so I understand it, so I actually get something out of the conversation.” Tony, a Latino respondent, described his older brother and grandmother as people he feels comfortable talking to about sex,

because they’ve been close to me for a lot of my life, and my brother is like a mentor to me so I feel like I can like share things with him that I don’t share with a lot of other people.

The second subtheme, *Knowledge and experiences* (reported by 10 participants), reflects teens seeking out family members they felt they could learn from, both from their perceived knowledge of certain topics (e.g., HIV, protection methods) and their life experiences. Bentley, a biracial Black and Native American participant, described his uncle, “he’s a police officer, and so he taught me some stuff... like the rules of the road and stuff, like—if you had a girlfriend and how to treat her.” Isaiah, a White participant, talked about what makes his stepfather a good person to talk to about sexual issues, “He went through this stuff when he was young, so he knows all about this stuff... he went through really bad things when he was young and did wrong stuff with girls.” Finally, Stephen, a Black, Haitian respondent, shared why he talks with his older cousin, “because he’s in a relationship, and he’s the only one I can ask personal questions.”

The third subtheme, *Discomfort talking with a parent*, was reported by only 6 participants, but teens who discussed this often described in detail how they navigated talking about sex within parent and extended family relationships. Participants described discomfort in talking with parents, and described differences in how family members reacted to sexual topics. McLovin, a Cape Verdean participant, contrasted his relationships with his mother and his uncle,

To be honest. I just go up to him (my uncle), talk to him, we laugh and have fun. And when I go to my mom, it’s just like, we talk, no laugh, no nothing. We talk and then it’s

over. There's no fun with my mom. It's just like, I don't want to say strict, but it's just weird... I think she just has that fear that I can have sex and she doesn't want me to.

Some participants talked about ways other family members could serve as intermediaries to their parents. John, a Puerto Rican respondent, described his relationships with his godbrother,

He's always there just like my mom, but there's certain stuff I can't tell my mom like that I do wrong or whatever. But then at the same time when I tell him he tells her, and then sometimes she doesn't really get mad at me.

Sasha, White participant, described why she prefers to talk with her older sister, rather than her mother, about relationships,

sometimes my mom she like goes and tells everybody, and that gets me embarrassed. Because it's just between me and her. It was just about like boys and stuff, but then she told like my grandma and my aunt. And I was like, 'Oh my god, I told you not to tell anybody. I'm embarrassed.'

The second main theme relates to the content of participants' conversations with extended family members. Five subthemes emerged from teens' descriptions of what they talked about: 1) Dating and relationships; 2) Having sex; 3) Teen pregnancy and parenthood; 4) Protection methods; and 5) Homosexuality. Within these content areas, participants varied in how they described the roles of extended family, ranging from discouraging to guiding to more information-based support. The subthemes of *Dating and relationships* and *Having sex* included both discouraging and guiding roles for extended family members, while the *Teen pregnancy and parenthood* subtheme included only interactions discouraging teen pregnancy. The *Protection methods* subtheme focused on providing information and the *Homosexuality* subtheme focused on sharing experiences.

Under the subtheme of *Dating and relationships*, Bentley provided an example of a more proscriptive message as he described a conversation with his grandmother,

I had a girlfriend and she was like, 'You do?' I was like, 'Yeah.' And she was like, 'What does a girlfriend mean?' I was like—I scratched my head. She was like, 'If you don't know what it means, then you don't need to have one.'

Sara, a White respondent, described a conversation where her older cousin took on more of a peer or mentor role, "We do talk about like dating and like... I asked her once if it was weird that I never dated anyone, and she explained to me that no, it's not."

Distinctions between proscriptive or guiding roles are also evident in how participants described conversations with extended family members about *Having sex*. Zeek, a biracial, Black and Puerto Rican respondent, described how his uncle discouraged him from having sex, "He said 'Don't, I repeat, don't do anything or think of anything you are going to regret. Because thoughts turn into actions. Actions turn into consequences. Consequences turn into spiraling downward.'" In contrast, Stephanie, a Black participant, described her sister in more of a supportive role:

My sister, she asked me one day, ‘Oh, are you still a virgin?’ And I was like, ‘Yeah,’ and she was like, ‘Okay, well if you ever think about having sex, make sure you tell me and then we can work out a way to tell Daddy and stuff like that.’

Conversations about *Teen pregnancy and parenthood* were proscriptive and focused on delaying pregnancy and parenthood. For example, Fastfive, a Latino participant, described a discussion with her grandmother, “When we are watching *Sixteen and Pregnant*, she asks me how old they are. I say, “Sixteen or Seventeen.” And she’s like, “See, I don’t want you doing that. I don’t want you to have kids so early.” Student talked about her grandmother’s perspective on teen parenthood,

She just doesn’t want us to be like young and doesn’t have like a job and like a stable home and like have a boyfriend who doesn’t want the kid. She just wants just to be like both people to be like committed and we have jobs and we actually want it. It’s not like an accident.

Participants’ descriptions of conversations about *Protection methods* largely focused on the importance of using protection (primarily condoms) and information about how to use them. Daswanya, a Black respondent, reported what her older cousin shared with her, “If you ever do want to have sex, you have to use protection.” Zeek described a conversation with his Uncle, “He says if used correctly (a condom), it’s ok, but you can’t use two because they will have friction, they will rub together and have heat and they will break. You’ll both be screwed over.”

Finally, three participants described conversations with extended family members about *Homosexuality*. All cases involved discussion of or with a gay family member. Chris, a Black/West Indian respondent, shared what his older brother told him about coming out, “he told me how he told my parents, like at first, the first hearing they were shocked, and my father was crying but he got over it because we have to accept him either way.” Tony talked about a conversation with his Uncle, “my uncle is gay so um he talks to me about it and how long it took him to tell everybody.”

Discussion

Our results indicate that almost 60% of urban teens in our sample talk with extended family members about sex. Further, teens who report having had sex are more likely to say they talk to extended family members than those who report not having had sex. Teens who talk only to extended family members are more than twice as likely to report having had sex than those who talk to parents only about sexual issues. These findings suggest that extended family members may gain importance in sexuality communication as teens become sexually active, consistent with developmental trends toward becoming more agentic (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006) and widening social circles (Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003). As teens become sexually active, they may seek out guidance from extended family members, while avoiding parents, who often provide more proscriptive messages, such as discouraging sex and identifying moral reasons to delay sex (DiIorio et al., 2003). This interpretation is consistent with prior findings that teens identify extended family as a more comfortable alternative to parents, who they fear will respond negatively to their sexual behaviors

(Crohn, 2010; Teitelman et al., 2009). Citing reasons for talking with extended family about sex, interviewed teens elaborated on feelings of connection and perceptions of them as resources. They also identified avoidance of sexual topics with parents. Participants also identified a broad range of topics discussed, including dating and relationships, having sex, and sexually transmitted infections. These findings begin to flesh out the content and process of teen sexuality communication with extended family.

The mixed-methods findings from this study can be mapped onto Bronfenbrenner and Morris' *Process-Person-Context-Time Model* (1998) as described in Tudge and colleagues' writing about the application of Bronfenbrenner's theory to empirical work (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). The **process** aspect of the model entails that development occurs through repeated interactions between an individual and his or her environment, in this case a teen's communication with family about sex and relationships. While the quantitative results identify the existence of an association between extended family sexuality communication and sexual behavior, the qualitative findings reveal *why* teens talk with extended family members. We interpret teens' explanations as reflecting a sense of active agency in reaching out to extended family members, rather than being passive recipients of their messages. This contrasts with findings from research on parent-teen sexuality communication which often focuses on what parents *tell* teens about sex and relationships (e.g., DiIorio et al., 2003).

At the **person**-level, which addresses how teens shape their contexts, we find that teens co-determine whom they talk to and which content is discussed. The qualitative findings also emphasize variability in teens' motivations and the content areas of their conversations. The range of responses suggests that teens perceive extended family roles in sexuality communication in a variety of ways, from passing on traditional parental messages (e.g., wait to have sex) to more peer roles (e.g., it's ok if you don't have a boyfriend yet) to being sources on factual information (e.g., if you use two condoms, they will break).

The role of extended family in teens' sexuality communication highlights the importance of **context** in shaping teens' development. We place the need for this study in light of the changing demographics of the U.S., and the increasing presence of families who do not fit the nuclear family mold (Child Trends, 2010). The teens in this study, who are all urban, largely Black and Latino, and come from working and middle-class backgrounds, represent groups that embody these demographic trends. Indeed, half of the sample does not live in a two-parent household. The close relationships with extended family members described by teens in this study also fit with research documenting the importance of "kin" and broader family networks in childrearing among Black and Latino families (Jones et al., 2007; Sue & Sue, 2003).

Finally, while **time** was not assessed in this study, we see a developmental framework as critical to interpreting study results, with the importance of extended family communication about sex consistent with adolescents' growing capacities for outreach and agency in seeking resources and support. As teens get older, sex becomes more normative, along with motivation and capacity for agency. These combined factors may lead to increases in teens' outreach to extended family as a resource for guidance, support, and information. Teens'

reports of avoiding talking with parents about sex may also represent normative changes of development, reflecting concerns about parents' responses to their sexual behavior (Crohn, 2010).

Implications

Extended family members are rarely studied as resources for teens' sexuality communication. Traditionally, sex education programs have focused on parents as the primary sex educators of their children (Kirby & Miller, 2002). While the findings from the current study do not contradict that assertion, they suggest that for urban teens, as they become sexually active, extended family may become a central resource. Therefore, sex education programs should not assume a sole focus on parents. Less than half of teens report having conversations with their parents about sex and birth control (Robert & Sonenstein, 2010). In school-based sex education programs that include assignments for teen-parent communication, between 50–75% of teens complete at least one family activity (Blake, Simkin, Ledsk, Perkins, & Calabrese, 2001; Grossman, Frye, Charmaraman, & Erkut, 2013). Expanding opportunities for teens to talk with extended family may increase teen-family communication and lead to fuller participation in family activities. This is particularly important for teens who are uncomfortable talking with their parents about sex. Specifically, curricula can have students create a list of which trusted adults in their family circle they feel comfortable talking to about sexual issues.

Extended family members may also benefit from increased access to accurate information about sex to pass on to related teens. While it may be difficult for schools or programs to reach out directly, providing information online or through pediatricians targeted to extended family as a resource for communication about sex and relationships may increase their access to accurate information and guidance for talking with teens about sexual health issues. Pediatricians identify parental guidance on teen sexual risk reduction as an important aspect of their own work with adolescent patients (Miller et al., 2008), but may not be aware of high levels of extended family involvement in sexuality communication among urban, minority groups. By expanding their approach to include the larger family system as a partner in sex education, individuals and programs that support teen sexual health may gain access to a largely unrecognized family resource for teens' sex education.

On a policy level, debates about what constitutes appropriate and effective sex education continue, with variation across states on the specific requirements and expectations, many of which dictate some level of parental involvement in sex education programs (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014). While some research documents the effectiveness of parent sexuality communication in reducing teen risk behavior (DiIorio et al., 2003), studies that investigate the potential protective role of extended family sexuality communication are needed to shape policy and programming that is grounded in a broader view of contemporary family ecology.

Limitations

While this study provided a multi-faceted perspective through a mixed-methods approach, the data were cross-sectional, and therefore cannot provide causal explanations for teen

sexual behavior. The sequential exploratory design of the study allowed for inclusion of items in the 8th grade survey that addressed extended family sexuality communication, but earlier waves of survey data did not include these items. We interpret the findings that the teens who talked with extended family were more likely to have had sex as part of a developmental process in which adolescents increase their social circles, become more agentic, and grow less comfortable talking with parents as they become sexually active. However, it is also possible that unmeasured aspects of extended family sexuality communication, such as its content or process, are more permissive than communication with parents. For example, while parental messages discouraging sexual activity have been associated with teens' delaying sex (Trejos-Castillo & Vazsonyi, 2009; Usher-Seriki, Bynum, & Callands, 2008), messages from extended family members may be different, and less tied to healthy teen behaviors. However, findings for associations between extended family support and reduced risky sexual behavior (Ahrens et al., 2008; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010) suggest that extended family members may serve as a health-promoting influence.

Conclusions are also limited by the fact that all data are self-reports. The quantitative sample is made up of urban teens, primarily from Black, Latino, and White, working and middle class backgrounds, and findings may not extend to other groups, particularly those that are less likely to identify close extended family relationships. Further, the survey definition of sex does not include non-vaginal sexual behavior and therefore does not address associations between extended family communication and non-vaginal sex, which limits application of study findings to lesbian, gay, and bisexual teens. Collection of data from the Boston area also limits the generalizability of study findings to middle school students in other parts of the country.

Although students who volunteered for interviews were drawn from the larger survey sample, they represent a convenience sample. The inclusion of only participants from the intervention group in the interviews is an additional limitation. While the intervention was not designed to promote extended family sexuality communication, participants' exposure to classroom lessons as well as family activities (intended for teens and their parents or caregivers) may have influenced how they understood or described extended family sexuality communication. Further, the response rate for the interview study was low, which is likely due to two primary factors. First, most consent forms were distributed to teens and may not have reached parents. Second, the sensitive nature of the interview content may have discouraged participation. The low response rate is a limitation of the study, as participating teens were not a representative sample and may have been more conscientious in bringing consent forms home and more comfortable in talking about sex than teens who did not participate. Interview participants reported similar rates of sexual behavior to the larger sample (24% vs. 21% in survey sample), but reported greater levels of extended family communication (72% talked at least one extended family member as opposed to 59% of the larger sample). Despite these limitations to generalizability, participants' interview responses provide a new level of depth to understanding what teens talk about with extended family members and why teens seek them out for sexuality communication.

Future Research

Longitudinal studies tracking extended family communication over time as well as its ongoing associations with teen sexual behavior are needed to understand its role in adolescent development and its potential protective influence on teen sexual behavior. While the quantitative data provide a preliminary picture of associations between extended family sexuality communication and teen sex, further qualitative research is needed to better understand the content and process of extended family sexuality communication across different demographic groups. Research is also needed that examines sexuality communication from multiple perspectives. Given that parent and teen dyads often perceive their communication about sex differently from one another (Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007), it would be useful to understand extended family sexuality communication from the perspectives of parents and other family members. Future research could also explore parents' roles in teens' extended family sexuality communication, and whether parents deliberately encourage these conversations as a way to provide additional resources or support to their teens, as identified in a study of parents who had children at an early age (Grossman, Charmaraman, & Erkut, in press).

These results suggest that extended family is part of many urban teens' networks of sexuality communication, and this communication has implications for teens' sexual behavior. A developmental lens can highlight the roles of parent and extended family communication about sex as adolescents become sexually active. While prior research has focused on parents' passing on proscriptive messages, the current study suggests that teens play an agentic role in seeking out information and guidance on a range of sexual and relationship topics. The changing face of American families requires a more multi-faceted and systemic approach to family interactions moving beyond a dyadic model to begin to understand the complexity of teens' family resources. Given the critical role of families in supporting teens' healthy sexual development, this knowledge can provide meaningful guidance on how preventive and intervention programs can address and support the realities of sexuality communication in teens' families.

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Table 1

Descriptive statistics for analysis variables

	Girls			Boys			Full Sample		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	791	13.87	0.64	703	14.04	0.71	1494	13.95	0.68
Median household income	688	\$54,294	\$28,131	535	\$51,286	\$21,465	1223	\$52,978	\$25,465
Lower grades	791	3.19	1.77	703	3.82	1.90	1494	3.48	1.86
Parental closeness	791	4.11	1.07	703	4.45	0.87	1494	4.27	1.00
Number of sexuality communication partners	789	2.94	2.26	689	2.70	2.41	1478	2.83	2.33
	<i>n</i>	%		<i>n</i>	%		<i>n</i>	%	
Had sex	791	13		703	30		1494	21	
Female	–	–		–	–		1494	53	
Biracial	791	17		703	14		1494	15	
Latino	791	31		703	33		1494	32	
Black	791	29		703	31		1494	30	
Two parents at home	791	49		703	49		1494	49	
Social desirability bias	791	17		703	24		1494	20	
Sexuality Communication Profile									
Parents only	791	22		703	20		1494	21	
Extended family only	791	19		703	17		1494	18	
Both	791	43		703	38		1494	41	
Neither	791	16		703	25		1494	21	

Table 2

Results of logistic regression models predicting the probability of having had sex

	1. Parents Only		2. Extended Family Only		3. Both		4. Neither	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Threshold	1.57	0.15	0.55	0.09	0.81	0.07	1.40	0.17
(Same for all Sexuality Communication Profiles)								
Covariate Effects	<i>B</i>		<i>SE</i>		<i>OR</i>		<i>LL</i>	
	<i>B</i>		<i>SE</i>		<i>OR</i>		<i>LL</i>	
Female	-0.70		0.10		0.50		0.41	
Age	0.27		0.07		1.31		1.15	
Biracial	0.63		0.15		1.88		1.40	
Latino	0.53		0.14		1.70		1.29	
Black	0.54		0.16		1.71		1.25	
Two parents at home	-0.17		0.09		0.85		0.72	
Median household income	-0.04		0.02		0.96		0.92	
Social desirability bias	-0.02		0.10		0.98		0.81	
Lower grades	0.08		0.02		1.09		1.05	
Parental closeness	-0.12		0.05		0.89		0.81	

Note: *OR* = Odds Ratio, *LL* = Lower Limit, *UL* = Upper Limit. Bolded effects signify $p < .05$.

Raw and covariate-adjusted percentages of students having had sex and pairwise comparisons, by sexuality communication profile

Table 3

	% Had Sex			Reference Category			
	n	Raw	Adjusted	1. Parents only	2. Extended family only	3. Both	4. Neither
1. Parents only	311	9%	17%	OR Wald (1)			
2. Extended family only	266	31%	37%	OR Wald (1)	0.36 *** 35.13		
3. Both	611	27%	31%	OR Wald (1)	0.47 *** 21.79	1.30 * 5.20	
4. Neither	306	14%	20%	OR Wald (1)	0.84 0.61	2.33 *** 20.01	1.79 ** 10.47

Note: These odds ratios have been calculated from the following model estimates - Parents Only: Threshold = 1.57, *SE* = 0.15; Extended Family Only: Threshold = 0.55, *SE* = 0.09; Both: Threshold = 0.81, *SE* = 0.07; Neither: Threshold = 1.40, *SE* = 0.17.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Table 4

Talk with extended family members about sex and relationships (> 1 code possible)

	<i>n</i>	% of Theme	% Overall
Reasons why teens talk with extended family members			
Good connection with family member	14	61	44
Learns from family member's knowledge or experience	10	43	31
Doesn't want to talk with a parent	6	26	19
Content of conversations with extended family members			
Dating & relationships	15	65	47
Having sex	9	39	28
Teen pregnancy & parenthood	7	30	22
Protection	8	35	25
Homosexuality	3	13	9