Family and Peer Networks in Intimate and Sexual Relationships Amongst Teenagers in a Multicultural Area of East London

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Abstract

The Minister for Children has recently suggested on the basis of research evidence that parents need to talk more to their children about sex in order to encourage them to start sex later and improve contraceptive use, with a view to reducing teenage conceptions.

We report here on a mixed-methods project funded by the Teenage Pregnancy Unit and the Department of Health which draws on accounts of young people aged 15-18 from diverse ethnic groups in East London describing their inclination (or otherwise) to talk with parents, other family members, and peers about sex and intimate relationships.

Recent sociological research describes diversity in sexual relationships, family practices and ways in which people love and care for each other, but work addressing ethnicity in these areas has been less well developed.

Drawing on research into ethnicity, youth and identity formation in an urban multicultural area, our work indicates that Black African, Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani young people living in East London talk to a range of people for support in addition to, or instead of parents. Thus, the siblings and extended families to whom they go for advice may well have a role in health promotion as may existing peer networks.

The findings we report here reflect cultural diversity, re-working of cultural traditions and emerging youth identities in multicultural areas. Whilst there may be benefits in some families from more open talk between parents and children about sex, our work suggests that this could helpfully be supplemented by an increased appreciation of what cultural diversity and youth networks can offer.

Keywords: *Teenage Pregnancy; Parental Support; Family and Peer Networks; Ethnicity*

Introduction

1.1 In May 2005, coinciding with an announcement that the government's ambitious target of halving teenage pregnancies by 2010 was unlikely to be met, the Minister for Children and Families, Beverley Hughes was reported in a newspaper interview as saying that without parents' help, there was only a certain amount the teenage pregnancy strategy could accomplish. "[W]e really need parents to...see themselves as making an absolutely unique and vital contribution to this issue ... It is a contribution that I don't think anyone else can actually make". She referred to three pieces of evidence; a 2001 survey which found that 85% of parents believed that there would be fewer teenage pregnancies if parents talked more to their children about sex, relationships and contraception; a 2003 poll which indicated that around half of young people said they had received very little or no information on the issues from their parents, even though their mother and father would be their preferred source of information. Third, and "crucially", according to Ms Hughes, a 2002 study found that, where parents did engage in open discussions about sex and relationships with their children, their offspring had their first sexual experience later and were more likely to use contraception when they became sexually active. In the article, parental discussion was being presented, with the backing of research evidence, as a way of reducing teenage pregnancies (The Guardian 26/05/2005).

1.2 Research has indicated that parent-child communication has a role to play in reducing unwanted teenage pregnancies. While it has been reported that teenagers can have difficulty in communicating with parents about sex (Wight et al 2002), it has also been suggested that open and 'non judgemental' parent-child communication could help reduce unwanted pregnancies (Ingham 2002). This is particularly important when teenagers receive most of their information about sex and relationships from school and friends rather than parents, when sexual health information passed on by peers is not always accurate and when the influence of peer norms and peer pressure amongst some teenagers may lead to unwanted sexual encounters with poor contraception and protection use (Wellings 1994; Aggleton et al 1998; Hughes et al 1999 ; Coleman and Schofield, 2001). The promotion of any apparently research-based intervention to inform policy and practice raises questions about transferring research evidence between differing social and cultural contexts (Arai et al 2005).

1.3 To what extent does parental discussion of sex with their children 'work' for children and families from a range of cultures and settings? And to what degree is the idea that parents should talk more with their children about sex helpful and sensitive to the ways in which families from diverse ethnic backgrounds might handle these issues? This paper draws on accounts of young people from diverse ethnic groups in East London describing their inclination (or otherwise) to talk with parents, other family members, and peers about sex and intimate relationships. It builds on work on health promotion, teenage pregnancy and parental discussion as well as emerging research on diversity and sexual health by exploring these issues amongst a multi ethnic sample (Teenage Pregnancy Unit 2002 ; Swann et al 2003; French et al 2005; Higginbottom et al 2005). Current writing on sexual relationships and family describes a diversification of practices and autonomy in relationship choices, but there is less theorisation of this in relation to ethnicity (Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck Gernsheim 2000). Research influenced by *New Ethnicities* has explored identity formation amongst teenagers from diverse ethnic backgrounds in multicultural spaces and consequently we draw on elements of this in analysis (Hall 1992).

Background

2.1 Research with predominantly White British young people suggests that parents have a role in reducing unwanted teenage conceptions and STIs by communicating openly with their children about sex and relationships (Ingham 1997). Walker (2004) suggests that delayed first intercourse, more effective contraceptive use once intercourse is initiated, and fewer partners, can be expected when parents talk to children openly and confidently about sex (Johnson et al 1994; Wellings et al 2001). She argues for, 'sex education strategies that acknowledge parents' roles and skills and also their diverse, moral, spiritual and ethical values in a range of social contexts' (2004:p.252). Despite an emphasis on diversity, similarities and differences in moral, spiritual and ethical values amongst people from differing ethnic backgrounds in relation to parent-child communication has been little pursued in this context.

2.2 West (1999) describes how few of her sample report being able to talk seriously about sex and relationships with parents. However, only 10 per cent of her sample of 147 young people between 14 and 21 came from minority ethnic groups and her participants were not concentrated in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. The latest NATSAL (National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles) survey conducted between 1999-2001 sampled 11,161 people aged 16-44 and found that contraception and protection use was lower amongst participants who did not discuss sex with parents, and for whom friends and 'others' (outside of school education) were the main sources of information. Nine per cent of respondents were from minority ethnic groups, but cultural and other differences were not analysed on the basis that the sample size was too small for reliable analysis (Johnson et al 2001).

2.3 Sociological research on intimacy has posited increasing diversity in sexual relationships, family practices and the ways in which people love and care for each other in the midst of contemporary cultural, economic and social changes (Beck and Beck Gernsheim 1995; Baumann 2003). Giddens (1992) sees feminism, the lesbian and gay movement and modern contraception as making gender relations more egalitarian and sexuality more 'plastic' by separating sexual behaviour from reproduction although others have highlighted continuing class and gender inequalities (Jamieson 1998). Autonomous choices in sexual expression have been argued to reflect the multiple ways families are constituted and re-constituted through cohabitation, divorce, repartnering, lesbian and gay 'families of choice' and so forth (Morgan 1996; Smart and Neale 1999; Weeks et al 2001).

2.4 Less well covered in the literature have been changes wrought by global migration, settlement and young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds growing up in urban spaces. Whilst agency and autonomy are prominent in writing on intimacy, this has been theorised less in relation to minority ethnic people and in particular teenagers. Cultural studies and sociological writing influenced by the '*New Ethnicities*' frame has explored the experiences of growing up more broadly and engaged with themes of agency, autonomy and diversity (Hall 1992). A central feature of *New Ethnicities* is that people from minority ethnic groups are not defined by dominant reductionist representations of what is understood to be their 'culture'. In this sense

culture is not fixed, but people exercise agency in continually contesting and re-defining it. Hall maintains that *New Ethnicities* was the result of societal change involving migrants and their descendants asserting the diversity of their identities, making autonomous choices and challenging cultural stereotypes. Later writing influenced by *New Ethnicities* has often focused on younger generations and hybrid, syncretic identities formulated in ethnically diverse urban environments (Mac an Ghaill 1999: p137-151). Integral to this is a view of identity formation involving intersecting social characteristics including age, gender and sexuality that are formed in contextually specific ways and challenge dominant reductionism (Brah 1996). Back (1996) and Alexander (1996; 2000) take this fluid view of identity formation in their studies of young people from different ethnic groups growing up in London. Elements of their work de-construct cultural stereotypes and the 'otherness' of teenagers from minority ethnic groups, and describe the creation of hybrid identities in multicultural spaces and the way youth, gender and other social markers intersect with cultural differences. We draw on this analytical frame to balance an appreciation of cultural differences with intersecting dimensions of disability, gender and youth.

2.5 Our paper explores the extent to which parents discussing sex with their children might be a strategy for reducing unwanted pregnancies and promoting sexual health amongst minority ethnic teenagers in an urban setting. In the context of a specific policy issue, we locate our work within concerns around sex, family and growing up in diverse urban backgrounds, linking sociological themes of diversity in sexual relationships and family practices and New Ethnicities.

Our Study

3.1 Young people from minority ethnic backgrounds disproportionately experience unwanted teenage conceptions and STIs, particularly in socioeconomically-deprived urban areas (Evans 1998; Berthoud 2001; Hughes et al 2000; Department of Health 2001; CDSC 2003; HPA 2003). If we are to reduce these inequalities, we need to know more about the networks such teenagers use (or otherwise) for education or support in their relationships. Our research was carried out in the diverse and socioeconomically deprived East London boroughs of Hackney, Newham and Tower Hamlets. National census data produced by the Office for National Statistics for each borough covers ethnicity, religion, population, health, work and housing. (Hackney <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/profiles/00am.asp>; Newham <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/profiles/00bb.asp> and Tower Hamlets <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/profiles/00bg.asp>).

3.2 On the qualitative side, "*It's My Life*" collected data from 126 15-18 year olds interviewed in focus groups. The young people were from a diverse range of ethnic groups and almost half were from groups likely to have particular needs including looked-after teenagers, young people with learning disabilities, young carers, gay, bi-sexual or lesbian young people; or were refugees, asylum seekers or young parents. Teenagers with learning disabilities have been identified as facing particular challenges around sexual relationships and we felt their inclusion particularly important (Kennedy 1996; Corlyon and McGuire 1997). Like other young people, their social identities include ethnicity, gender and youth. Fifteen professionals including teenage pregnancy co-ordinators, youth workers and sexual health workers were also interviewed. These included specialists working with young people with mild to moderate learning disabilities.

3.3 The quantitative side of the work involved wave two of the RELACHS (Research with East London Adolescents:Community Health Survey) study, which gathered data on sexual attitudes and behaviour in 2,675 young people aged 13-16 years in the same geographical areas. We largely report on the qualitative data here supplemented by the quantitative where relevant.

3.4 We ran thirty focus groups of which 16 were single sex and 14 mixed (see Table 1). Twenty-five groups comprised people from different ethnic groups whilst five were from a single ethnic group. In general, youth groups have a less formal atmosphere than schools, with young people at greater liberty to choose activities. In keeping with this, youth workers rather than selecting or helping to select young people, made teenagers aware of our project by, for example, putting up posters in youth centres and community groups. We are aware of a potential response bias in locating this work in locations of choice (youth groups) rather than locations where young people are expected to be universally present (schools). Carrying out fieldwork in locations of choice, however, provided participants with the opportunity to discuss potentially sensitive subjects amongst peers of their choice in a familiar context and avoided the issue described elsewhere where teachers were noted as influencing the selection and/or behaviour of participants (Frosh et al 2002:22).

3.5 Focus groups are 'snapshots of social interaction' (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). By giving teenagers the opportunity to choose whether and with whom they wanted to participate, we aimed to get views from young people interacting in groups of their choice. The gender and ethnicity mix of these groups enabled us to observe the ways in which young people talk about their relationships in environments that reflect their chosen peer groups (often multiethnic and mixed gender) in East London youth centres.

Table 1. Young people participating in qualitative interviews by ethnicity and gender

Ethnicity	Young men	Young women	Total
Indian	2	7	9
Pakistani	2	7	9
Bangladeshi	15	15	30
Asian/Other	0	1	1
Black Caribbean	7	15	22
Black African	6	14	20
Black British	2	2	4
Black Other	3	5	8
Mixed white and Black Caribbean	1	1	2
White British	11	4	15
White Irish	0	1	1
White Other	1	4	5
Total	50	76	126

3.6 Our interviews discussed intimate and sexual relationships with someone you 'fancy' and the family and peer networks used (or not) for support. We recognise that intimacy has a wide meaning. Roeseneil and Budgeon (2004) and Jamieson (1998) underline the ways in which intimacy relates to a range of emotions and practices that are not necessarily sexual or limited to sexual partners. Plummer (1992) and Cusick (2005) also point out that sexual 'stories' are told in a variety of ways with what is intimate, sexual or both subjective. Our discussions with young people covered a range of behaviours that might be considered 'intimate' and/or 'sexual'^[1]

Talking to families – intersections of youth and ethnicity

4.1 Youth as a social marker was important in the way that participants across ethnic groups reported talking to their parents (or not) about their intimate and sexual relationships. With some exceptions, they shared a reluctance to talk to parents and expressed feelings of embarrassment, discomfort and scepticism that parents might be able to understand them and their relationships. In common with research drawing on predominantly White British samples (West 1999) teenagers from different ethnic backgrounds in our study described parents not understanding them or their intimate relationships. One result of the conversational and sometimes empathetic aspect of discourse in the groups may have been the opportunity to raise common concerns about parents' understandings. Thus, despite ethnic differences in ease of talking with parents about sex that we report later in this section, teenagers had shared concerns about generational differences between them and their parents: 'because they [parents] grew up back in the day, innit? And they don't see things the same way' (**Tazz** young man 17 years old, Black Caribbean). There were also shared perceptions about parents not taking their relationships seriously, 'how some parents say they don't believe young children or people can love someone, I hate that' (**Alesha** 15 year old young woman, Black African). We observed cultural differences in the ways misgivings about talking to parents manifested themselves, and report these below.

Black African and South Asian young people

Ethnicity

5.1 The RELACHS findings suggest that those least likely to talk to their parents about sex, and most likely to perceive parental disapproval of their being in a physical relationship, were young people from Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani backgrounds. Difficulty in talking with mothers and fathers about sex was linked for young men with a lower likelihood of having had sex. Believing parents would disapprove of them having a physical relationship was highly protective against having early sex for both young men and young women.

5.2 Black Africans on the other hand, reported higher rates of parental disapproval of these relationships and difficulties talking about sex than Black Caribbeans and White British young people, but this did not mean that they were less likely to have had sex.

5.3 Research with predominantly White British populations suggests that parents talking to children about sex is associated with lower rates of sexual intercourse under the age of 16 (Ingham 1997; Wellings et al 2001) Qualitative data provide a different dimension to these findings and to the RELACHS data.

5.4 In focus groups, teenagers from Black African and South Asian backgrounds added detail to what they would and would not talk about with parents. They would not, they said, normally discuss potential partners or people they fancied but sexual attractiveness as a subject was not always outside the boundaries of family discussion. Some reported they might discuss famous people they fancied with parents: 'Yeah my mum knows almost half the guys that I fancy but like famous people...because then you can like tell them [parents] and they won't do nothing' (**Kareena** 15 year old young woman, Pakistani). Others told us they would feel uncomfortable talking about boys/girls whom they fancied 'in real life' with parents: 'I don't really like talking about things to my mum because I feel really, really uncomfortable I'd rather talk to my friends than my mother and she knows that' (**Sylvia** 15 year old young woman, Black African). Similarly talking about contraception was seen as, 'too embarrassing' (**Sharmin** 16 year old young woman, Bangladeshi).

5.5 Although they might not talk to parents, Black African and South Asian teenagers told us that they drew on support and advice from other relatives about intimate and sexual relationships. Bangladeshi and Pakistani young people especially mentioned members of their extended families: 'Go to your sister-in-law. She'll give you advice' (**Lembu** 15 year old young man, Bangladeshi) or 'a cousin' (**Kareena** 15 year old young woman, Pakistani) even though on occasion their understanding was questioned: 'I talk to my cousin, although she don't understand nothing' (**Malathi** 15 year old young woman, Indian). Sometimes teenagers raised the possibility of talking to older cousins because of their experience: 'a cousin that's old [enough] to give me advice on what to do' (**Figo's Vipus**^[2], 16 year old young man, Black African).

5.6 Older siblings were sometimes seen as protective and there was a gendered aspect to this: 'he [her older brother] would say that he's [potential partner] going to be a bad influence on your life or something like [that] just because I'm his little sister' (**Jamie** 15 year old young woman, Indian) or to discourage relationships because of educational priorities: 'If I went up to my older sister and said 'Oh, I like this guy'. She'd be like 'No, don't go out with him, it's going to affect your education and all this stuff' (**Sara** 15 year old young woman, Pakistani). Issues of confidentiality, trust and understanding seemed to be important considerations for Black African and South Asian teenagers in deciding who in their families to speak to about boyfriends/girlfriends and people they 'fancied'. Alluding to this, a young man told us: 'My cousin-brother, yeah he'd keep it secret, he would keep it secret' (**Bolet** 18 year old young man, Bangladeshi).

Young women

5.7 Bangladeshi, Black African, Pakistani and Indian young people (particularly young women) said that talking to siblings or members of an extended family was a step towards telling parents about relationships: 'I'd tell a big sister, a sister-in-law, a brother, a brother-in-law, someone, I'd get them to sort it out privately [inform parents] and then tell my parents about it [myself]' (**Sara** 15 year old young woman, Bangladeshi). This negotiation was particularly apparent in these young women's descriptions of how they would make decisions about people they saw as possible marriage partners (described below as getting 'serious'). We were told that the point at which a parent is told about a potential partner provides a point at which a young woman's relationship is evaluated as 'marriage potential.' These sorts of discussions may be less frequent in cultures where parents tend to be aware of their teenagers' boyfriends/girlfriends at an earlier stage:

Cynthia: When the time is right, yes you will know when the time is right to go and chat to your mum...because like my sister she didn't tell my mum she had a boyfriend until like, she wait[ed] a little while to see if they were getting serious and then when they finally did get serious and she went and talked to my mum about it and, hopefully, some day I'll do the same thing.

Sylvia: That, that's the kind of, that's how my mum is, it's like, you know, when you are at a certain age, 15 or whatever, you don't know what getting serious with a boy is so, you know, you can't, you can't come to your mum, 'I am serious with a boy' when you don't really know, you haven't been out there and seen how serious things can get.

(**Cynthia** 15 year old young woman, Black African)
(**Sylvia** 15 year old young woman, Black African)

Black Caribbean and White British young people

Ethnicity

6.1 Young people from all backgrounds mentioned not wanting to talk to parents about sex and relationships. However, some Black Caribbean, Black British and White British parents reportedly talk more than other groups to their children about sex and relationships, although as we described below this differs

between young men and young women.

Young women

6.2 According to Holland et al (1996), teenagers are reluctant to talk to parents about sex because of embarrassment and in case their parents think they are sexually active, and these fears are heightened amongst young women. She relates this to greater parental surveillance of the sexual activities of young women than young men. Some Black Caribbean and White British young women we interviewed reported that parents were particularly sensitive, 'especially over the girl' (**Danielle** 15 year old young woman, Black Caribbean) being involved in a relationship or sexually active. This reportedly manifested itself in unwelcome questions. As a result, parents were not told about relationships lest they ask questions: 'Have you had sex with him? What are his intentions?' (**Sam** 17 year old young woman, Black Caribbean). Black Caribbean and White British teenage women also reported being uncomfortable when parents tried to talk openly about sex:

Felicity: She insists on having lengthy sex talks with me at every opportunity...I know the things she is telling me, I don't need to hear them but she thinks it's fantastic.

Zoe: I think in the same way my mum sort of forces that sort of, 'let's talk about condoms darling!' [loud laughter] And she knows I'm embarrassed and actually finds it quite funny and I'm not *that* embarrassed.

(**Felicity** 17 year old young woman, White British)

(**Zoe** 16 year old young woman, White British)

Young Men

As reported elsewhere (Health Education Authority 1999; Walker 2004), young people described parents talking more to daughters than sons about sex and relationships. However our data suggest a subtle difference. Young men identifying as Black Caribbean and White British did report talking to parents about sex, but this tended to be in the context of parents finding out about suspected sexual activity and expressing their discomfort than a 'talking through' of the kind that young women described. Meanwhile, the men portrayed themselves as trying to keep the fact they were having sex from parents. This is in contrast to West's (1999) research with predominantly White British young people in Avon where parents tolerated or covertly encouraged the sexual activity of sons: 'He [his father] does not know I have had sex, I made sure of that, he does not know that' (**Xandu** 15 year old young man, White British). One gave an example of parents finding out about sexual activities and the embarrassment caused:

My mum does know. I mean guess how she found out...she found a condom in my bag [group laughter and gasps] ... 'as if I wasn't aware of the fact. I wouldn't bother with lying, you are having sex aren't you?' [mimicking his mother]– 'No.' [his response] – 'yes you are having sex!' [mimicking his mother again].

(**Matthew** 17 year old young man, Black Caribbean)

Peer Networks

7.1 We describe below the concerns raised by young people from different ethnic groups reflecting youth culture in multicultural East London. They talked about issues including talking to friends, faithfulness, peer pressure and partner selection.

7.2 Young people contrasted a lack of understanding by parents with the benefits of talking relationship/sexual issues over with friends:

Babz: You can either keep it [problems] locked up inside or ...

Lisa: And it'll [problems] eat you.

Tazz: Take them [a friend having a problem] somewhere, and go 'come with me, we gotta talk'.

(**Babz**, 15 year old young woman, Black Other)

(**Lisa**, 15 year old young woman, Bangladeshi)

(**Tazz**, 17 year old young man, Black Caribbean)

7.3 Sometimes they would ask friends of the other sex for advice because of their perceived ability to give

another perspective: 'Most of the time I talk to boys about my problems because they understand and like they don't give you the same solution that you have already thought of, they give you a different solution, "well ok I could try that"' (**Amy**, 15 year old young woman, Black British). Our data and the make-up of focus groups suggest that at least within youth group environments, peer groups for some young East Londoners are not as segmented by gender. In common with Frosh et al (2002) we found mixed gender focus groups comprising diverse ethnic groups were not without heated disagreement (as were single gender groups) but like single gender groups, were often characterised by humour, and open and thoughtful communication about sexual issues and support networks:

Mark: There are a lot of girls out there who are just like boys in the sense that they just want to get sex and that's it, move on. If you find that person then they're like yeah, yeah, yeah come to my house.

Alexis: I feel foreplay leads to sex so I just stay away from it.

Victoria: But with me that hasn't happened and on those occasions I have self control and said to the person, "no, I'm not ready for it now, this is what I feel comfortable doing at this stage of our relationship and that's it."

Mark: Yeah, yeah as long as your strong in yourself innit.

(**Mark**, 16 year old man, Black African)

(**Alexis**, 18 year old woman, Black African)

(**Victoria**, 16 year old woman, Black African)

7.4 A sense of autonomy was central to participants' accounts of peer networks with 'personal choice' a shared value. 'Personal choice' was said to be exercised in matters including partner selection, a young person's rating of a prospective partner's attractiveness and having sex or not. Teenagers frequently told us that if their friend thought their choice of potential partner was unattractive, this would have no influence on whether they decided to approach/or accept approaches from potential partners: 'It wouldn't matter to me. It's you that's going out with her' (**AK47** 18 year old young man, Bangladeshi).

7.5 Young people expressed a sense of 'personal choice' not only in whom they would go out with, but in resisting peer pressure about sexual activity: 'Yeah, you can listen but you don't have to do whatever they tell you' (**Kandee** 16 year old young woman, Black Other). Nonetheless, teenagers reported faithfulness as an area where they might listen to friends either to get more information on a partner or potential partner or in deciding not to pursue the relationship further:

Well you don't have to do anything with her like, just kick back and observe and see how she goes with all of her boys and if she's like that [unfaithful or has multiple partners] really then you'd know innit?...but if she don't act like that just go off [pursue the relationship], play it smart.

(**Kalvin Johnson** 16 year old young man, Black Caribbean)

7.6 That values related to 'faithfulness' were voiced so strongly may relate as much to transgression as to their observance, most commonly expressed in our study by young men or women being described as 'players' (someone with or seeking multiple partners) or being 'played' (meaning being 'cheated' by someone who you thought was 'faithful'). In this particular interaction a 'player' is a young man but young men also described women as 'players'.

Thaskia: He might be a player

Interviewer: What's a player?

Thaskia: Someone that goes out with one girl after another

Yasmin: Yeah, he goes out with one girl but he's got links to other girls too.

(**Thaskia**: 15 year old young woman, Bangladeshi)

(**Yasmin**: 16 year old young woman, Bangladeshi)

7.7 The emphasis on 'personal choice' as a value may be a tacit acknowledgment of problems faced when 'personal choices' come up against normative peer group values around having sex and developing a relationship with someone who was said to be or have been in a relationship with one or more partners. On one level, by emphasising 'personal choice' these participants portrayed this value as more important than 'what others thought' even if friends were listened to. However, this was in the context of focus groups

comprising friends where 'personal choice' was extolled as a value. What happens when 'personal choice' actually comes up against peer norms concerning what a partner should be like or what is 'acceptable' sexual behaviour? This is especially relevant when young people may not be happy with peer norms relating to encouraging sexual activity or pursuing a partner (or not). When confusing feelings of love, lust, betrayal and trust with partners and peers are involved, the relative importance of 'personal choice' and other peer norms may compete.

7.8 In support of this possibility, young people reported that when peer norms about partner choice did not reflect their personal preferences: 'you try and hide your feelings because of this stuff that your friends say, because I think it matters what your friends think' (**Sylvia** 15 year old young woman, Black African). Both professionals and young people raised concerns about the impact of peer norms. Some young women described perceived peer norms about having sex from female friends and boyfriends as unwelcome. Young men also reported being pressured by male peers to have sex.

It was like peer pressure though [losing his virginity]. Well, they were going on about how they had this one, one day and that one the other day, and I'd never had no one, I never used to find young women interesting really, I just like to do my own thing, go and play my ball and all that.

(**Clint** 18 year old young man, Black Caribbean)

Learning disabilities

8.1 Whilst a sense of autonomy, 'personal choice' and an expressed trust in supportive peer networks were norms amongst most teenagers we spoke to, young people with learning disabilities reported barriers in this area. Concerns about confidentiality were apparent in accounts from young people with learning disabilities from all ethnic groups. This was sometimes connected to the age of those they confided in: 'if you tell like the youngest cousin, like ten years old, they don't know, understand, what the secret is' (**Ruari** 17 year old young man, White British). Fear of disclosure to parents by siblings or extended family might be heightened for young people with learning disabilities where cultural attitudes involve parental disapproval of teenage daughters/sons having boyfriends or girlfriends. Illustrating problems of trust within the family, a young Indian man with learning disabilities told us:

Jay Singh: If you want to say something to your little cousins, or aunties or your little brothers or anyone you have to give them sweets first...to keep them quiet, buy them sweets everyday, innit?... Just say, yeah, like if he's my brother yeah, and like if I have a girlfriend and if I say to him don't say nothing to mum yeah and he would go say to mum, 'oh mum my brother's got a girlfriend', end of day you would get *beats*.

James: It's secret, you can't tell someone else.

Jay Singh: It's like your love story innit?

(**Jay Singh** 17 year old Indian young man)

(**James** 17 year old Bangladeshi young man)

8.2 Concerns about support networks are further compounded by accounts from young people with learning disabilities having less extensive friendship networks to draw on than other teenagers we spoke to. A Pakistani teenager with learning disabilities described having trusted a 'friend' only to find that he had spread rumours about her:

Clare: One of my friends saw me and my other half and they went and told that person what's been going on and that person went around saying and telling everybody that this – that they both have been going out, this and that. Trying – spreading *rumours*.

Interviewer: What kind of rumours?

Clare: That they went behind the back stairs, that they going doing things.

(**Clare** 18 year old young woman, Pakistani)

Discussion

9.1 Health promotion and teenage pregnancy work amongst predominantly White British samples provides helpful research evidence suggesting that although sometimes difficult to accomplish, parent-child communication has a role in reducing unwanted teenage pregnancies (Ingham 2002; Wight et al 2002). We

suggest a need to examine additional patterns of communication to address diversity. Hall (1992:258) argues that 'we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture', without being contained by it because we continually contest and rework it. Like Hall, Alexander (2000) maintains that identities of minority ethnic people cannot be reduced or objectified through the lens of cultural difference because, as Back (1996) saw with youth culture, there are shared concerns amongst people from different ethnic groups. Our data reflects these points in the continued relevance of cultural traditions, their contemporary reworking by young people and a multicultural youth culture. Current writing on intimacy describes diversification in sexual lifestyles and family formation, reflecting the exercise of agency and autonomy in relationships. Our data suggest that although problems may exist, teenagers speak about cultural practices and youth networks in ways that support their autonomy and agency when thinking about their relationships.

9.2 Qualitative data suggest cultural factors might militate against Black Africans and South Asians talking to parents about people they 'fancy' or sexual relationships. Our data on this are strongest in relation to Bangladeshis. Survey data associate disapproval of physical relationships by parents with Bangladeshi teenagers with lower rates of reported sexual intercourse. This contrasts with research amongst predominantly White British samples, associating a lower likelihood of having had sex under the age of 16 with constructive dialogue between parents and their children about sex (Ingham 1997). However, whilst pitfalls and obstacles were mentioned Black African and South Asian teenagers describe turning to siblings, in-laws and extended families for support. These findings contrast with both the White British young people we interviewed and West's (1999:535) findings from a predominantly White British sample suggesting that amongst family members, teenagers talked voluntarily only to older sisters. As such the use/non use of extended family networks may illustrate a cultural difference between Black African, Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani groups when contrasted with the White British group.

9.3 Some authors argue that the dominant conception of the family is dyadic, heteronormative and involves married partners cohabitating (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004) but there has been diversification through divorce, remarriage, lesbian and gay families and so forth (Morgan 1996; Weeks et al 2001). Our data suggests that cultural difference adds to diversification through the role of extended families with teenagers from Black African and South Asian backgrounds. What distinguishes extended families from other 'alternative' ways families care is that they do not necessarily involve a 'detraditionalisation' (Giddens 1992) of sexual relationships or family formations. In fact extended families and kinship networks are often seen as traditional. However, the emphasis young Black African and South Asians place on the opportunity to choose particular family members to consult influenced by, 'which one you find closer' (**Alisha** 15 year old young woman, Bangladeshi) resonates with the theme of autonomy central to work on shifts in sexual relationships and family organisation. Although sometimes portrayed as restrictive or coercive, our data is in tune with findings from some South Asian feminists in different contexts noting the positive support family can provide (see for example Ramji 2003). While family members might disapprove of a particular relationship, this does not necessarily imply a lack of support for the young person concerned. The use of these networks reported here suggests that they may provide health promotion opportunities.

9.4 Reflecting the salience of gender across ethnic groups, teenage women's accounts were concerned on one level with what their families would think of them having a partner. What this meant in different cultural contexts when gender intersected with ethnicity differed. Bangladeshi, Black African, Pakistani and Indian young women explained how talking to siblings or members of an extended family was seen as a step towards telling parents about long-term relationships with partners they might marry. This required them to evaluate whether a relationship was 'serious' or not in a way which might be less salient in cultures where parents may be aware of their teenagers' boyfriends/girlfriends earlier. The way that Black African and South Asian teenage women reportedly managed this suggests that potential partners are not necessarily sourced solely through parents and their contacts as is 'traditionally' portrayed. Nonetheless, extended families and siblings were involved, suggesting in common with other research that historically practiced ways of coupling may be being re-worked in diaspora by young Black African and South Asian women sourcing potential marriage partners (Jacobson 1998; Dwyer 2000).

9.5 Teenagers' accounts suggests cultural differences in families' sexual attitudes. Some Black African and South Asian teenagers report ways in which 'fancying' famous people, for instance, was talked about but that their relationships were regulated through a silent, normative assumption of parental disapproval of 'non-serious' relationships. Disapproval was reportedly voiced more frequently by parents of Black Caribbean and White British teenagers. It reinforces the extent to which helping parents talk to daughters/sons about sex and relationships remains relevant and resonates with RELACHS data suggesting Black Caribbean parents from these groups talk to their children about such issues more than the Black African and South Asian groups.

9.6 Although she did not explore sex and relationships Warikoo (2005) argues multi-ethnic teenagers living

in the same areas in London share a youth culture in terms of clothing, music and peer norms. In our study this was reflected in expressed attitudes around faithfulness, personal autonomy, peer pressure and not wanting to talk to parents about people they 'fancied' or sex but telling us that they did gain support from peers around these issues. If teenagers are accessing peer networks, ways of improving the support these can provide is important, particularly around negotiating 'personal choice' against the backdrop of other peer norms concerning sexual behaviour that young people may unwillingly conform to or feel pressured by. Whilst being sensitive to cultural differences, youth group environments may have a more extensive role in health promotion for teenagers (Teenage Pregnancy Unit 2001). They foster an ethos where teenagers' 'voices' are considered, shared and valued with youth workers describing themselves as providing 'informal education' (professional, Black Other) including health-promoting messages in a setting where tolerance is encouraged. Within these environments, it might be possible for teenagers to think through values relating to intimate and sexual relationships and furthering trusting friendships. Data from our focus groups, in common with Frosh et al (2002) suggest that at times this was occurring within mixed gender focus groups. This is in contrast with other research with White British samples in ethnically homogenous areas suggesting a lack of communication between young men and women (Wight 1994). Cultural differences notwithstanding, young people sharing attitudes and concerns is consistent with theoretical approaches arguing against the portrayal of ethnic groups as discrete, and charting the emergence of multicultural youth culture in urban spaces (Alexander 2000; Bradby 2003).

9.7 Particular difficulties were suggested amongst young people with learning disabilities in accessing supportive peer and family networks. Concerns are further heightened when learning disabilities intersect with cultural norms for Black African and South Asian teenagers around avoiding speaking to parents while reportedly not being able to speak to other people or family members. The expressed isolation reflects concerns that opportunities to practice cultural traditions, rework them or draw on supportive youth networks were limited in ways which may undermine their agency. While we have begun to explore support networks for these teenagers from minority ethnic groups, issues of isolation and homophobic bullying remain relatively underexplored. Given studies arguing homophobic bullying of LGB teenagers is widespread, its negative effect on emotional and physical well-being and how this picture is affected by cultural and religious traditions remains a research priority (Warwick, Aggelton and Douglas 2001; Rivers and Duncan 2002).

Conclusion

10.1 Writing on intimacy has stressed agency, autonomy and diversity in family and sexual relationships. Drawing on research influenced by *New Ethnicities* our data suggests different articulations of this in cultural traditions through supportive family networks, their contemporary reworking by teenagers through coupling practices with potential marriage partners and a multicultural youth culture. In addition to encouraging parental communication, supporting family, including extended family and youth networks may have benefits that targeting the parent-child relationship alone in diverse, socioeconomically deprived areas may not. Whilst it might also be helpful for some parents to talk more with their children about sex, this should be allied to an appreciation of what cultural diversity and youth networks can offer.

Notes

¹This proved particularly useful when highlighting that although some young people, including South Asians mentioned having 'sex' less, counselling services and sex education remained relevant for them because some had emotional attachments to boyfriends or girlfriends or were participating in activities that might not include intercourse but have other emotional and sexual health implications (Sinha et al 2005).

² The young people taking part in our research chose pseudonyms they wanted to be known by when we reported our findings. Sometimes they chose the names of rappers, football stars and young women sometimes chose male or gender ambiguous names.

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