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Original Research

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Tell Me More: Parent–Child Sexual Talk and Young Adult Sexual Communication Satisfaction With Romantic Partners

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Abstract

Young adults (18–30) tend to show insufficient levels of communication about sex with their romantic partners, despite its many benefits to relationships among this age group. Learned sexual shame and guilt can play a role in inhibiting sexual communication with partners, and early messages about sex from parents stemming from narrow cultural boundaries of communication may play a role in fostering sexual shame and guilt from a young age, potentially influencing later sexual communication patterns with partners. We sought to identify whether a significant relationship existed between the sexual communication participants received from parents while growing up and their current sexual communication satisfaction, relational satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction with romantic partners. Path analysis revealed a significant, positive link between parent–child sexual communication and current partner sexual communication satisfaction while controlling for all other variables and length of relationship. ANOVA analyses revealed greater reported sex guilt among males and highly religious participants. Correlation and regression analyses yielded significant, positive relationships between former parent–child communication quality and current young adult sexual satisfaction with partner. Clinical implications and research directions are discussed for increasing open parent–child sex communication.

Note: We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kelsi N. Wilson, East Carolina University, Rivers West Bldg. RW134 Greenville, NC, USA 27858, kelsinwillis@gmail.com

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Introduction

Young adults' romantic relationships play a foundational role in their development, health, and lifelong relationship patterns (Landor & Winter, 2019), and are, therefore, an important target for study. Researchers have found that both relationship quality and overall sexual health in young adults can be improved by effective sex communication with partners (Landor & Winter, 2019). Indeed, communication about vulnerable topics such as sex and intimacy is thought to be one of the most important contributors to strong relationships (Jones, 2016; Timm & Keiley, 2011). However, researchers agree that such communication is not happening to the degree needed among this population (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010), potentially limiting relational depth and promoting sexual taboos (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010; Jones, 2016). Learned shame and guilt surrounding sexual topics may be a significant contributor to this deficiency, inhibiting young adults from having intimate conversations with partners that are needed for strong and lasting relationships (Abrego, 2011; Powers, 2017).

Early messages about sexuality from parents and caregivers heavily influence sexual scripts and attitudes in children (Ballard & Senn, 2019) and may go on to impact long-term views of sexuality (Powers, 2017). Because negativity and silence around sexual topics from parents can breed shame and discomfort in offspring (Day, 2019; Goldfarb et al., 2018), they may also conversely play a role in increasing comfort levels in discussing sexual topics with romantic partners (Powers, 2017). A closer look at this connection is needed to determine possible points of intervention.

Past research supports that young adulthood occupies a critical place in the developmental trajectory, as individuals balance conflicting needs of autonomy and connection amid social pressures (Watkins & Beckmeyer, 2020). Strong romantic relationships contribute to overall life satisfaction in young adults (Xia et al., 2018). Their tendency to have more committed, intimate, and dyadic relationships compared with their experience as adolescents marks a pivotal point for learning healthy relationship patterns (Meier & Allen, 2009).

Research indicates that limited or shame-filled sexual communication from parents to children impacts the way these children engage in sexual decision-making (Abrego, 2011; Ballard & Senn, 2019; Powers, 2017). Negative parental attitudes surrounding sex and messages of shame and guilt can translate to internalized negativity and shame in children (Lim, 2019; Powers, 2017; Totonchi, 2015), as well as socializing their identity as sexual beings in a negative way (Ballard & Senn, 2019). Resulting sexual shame can lead to riskier sexual behavior, distorted perceptions of sexual experiences, and lower engagement in sexual behaviors (Day, 2019; Totonchi, 2015). Moreover, parents' punitive or uncomfortable responses to sexual topics may ultimately propel messages of sexual shame and silence into future generations and reinforce the taboo culture (Jones, 2016; Totonchi, 2015).

In this study, we sought to identify the association between early parent–child sexual discussion and later satisfaction of young adult partners with sexual communication, relationships, and sex. Furthermore, we wished to understand the role of sexual shame and guilt in this relationship as well as how these variables are impacted by participants' primary source of information about sex to identify potential points of intervention for reducing sexual shame and increasing relational and sexual health among young adult couples.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations Emphasizing Socialized Creation of Meaning

Together, two theories guide our study—Arnett's (1995) Broad and Narrow Socialization Theory and Symbolic Interaction Theory (Rose, 1962). Both emphasize the role of early experiences in shaping meaning and acceptability of behaviors through social interactions and thus serve as appropriate foundations that inform our study design. According to Arnett's broad and narrow theory of socialization (1995), the culture in which one is raised often promotes boundaries of normalcy and acceptability within which individuals can navigate personal choices. For example, a culture with broad socialization of sexual openness may include wider limits of what topics can be discussed and with whom, while those with narrow limits may discourage open discussion of sex and focus solely on abstinence (Ballard & Senn, 2019). The role of family in socialization, while central, is heavily impacted by its surrounding culture, and therefore a culture with narrow limits on sexual openness may result in parents' feelings of discomfort or awkwardness in approaching these topics with children (Ballard & Senn, 2019). By extension, we may reason that this may promote a cultural cycle in which early messages of shame result in constraining discussion of these specific topics with romantic partners.

Relatedly, symbolic interaction theory promotes the idea that meaning is created through shared experience with others and is passed on through symbols in social interactions (Rose, 1962; Yeager, 2016). Shame is seen as particularly powerful in humans due to their social nature, and threats of rejection may have a particularly powerful influence on behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. Scheff (2003) called shame the "master emotion," which can act as a signal that one's bond to others is threatened. Based on this premise, we predicted that shame and guilt play a significant role in the way messages are internalized from a young age and later go on to influence behaviors and thoughts, in this case regarding communication about sex. In short, the emphasis of socialization by family and culture from Arnett's theory and the significance of social interaction in influencing meaning in symbolic interaction theory aptly combine to create a sound theoretical foundation from which we constructed our research questions and design.

Sexual Communication

Sexual communication consists of the quality, frequency, and content of self-disclosure which may include sexual preferences, level of desire, attitudes, and values (Mallory et al., 2019). The way couples communicate about sex heavily impacts both sexual and relationship satisfaction levels (Jones, 2016; Montesi et al., 2010; Timm & Keiley, 2011). Moreover, hindered sexual communication can result in sexual dissatisfaction, sexual problems, relationship difficulties (Jones, 2016), insecure attachment styles, and sexual problems (Mallory et al., 2019).

Young Adult Sexual Communication

Open sexual communication is significantly linked to healthier sexual behavior in young adults (Alvarez et al., 2014), as well as a variety of benefits. Studies indicate that both relationship quality and overall sexual health in young adults can be improved by effective sex communication (Montesi et al., 2010; Landor & Winter, 2019). Additionally, greater comfort talking about sex among young adults is associated with later sexual debut, greater likelihood of using contraceptives, and less risky sex in general (Landor & Winter, 2019). Research also shows that young adult conversations about sex are linked with lower rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and unwanted pregnancies (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010; Landor & Winter, 2019). Because about half of new STIs each year occur among young adults, as well as disproportionate rates of unwanted pregnancies, this population is an important target for increasing these conversations (Landor & Winter, 2019). Despite these benefits, many researchers agree that such conversations are not taking place at adequate rates among young adults (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010; Goldfarb et al., 2018). For example, Landor and Winter (2019) examined connections between relationship

quality and comfort communicating with partners about sex in 339 young adult women and found that only half reported comfort discussing sexual topics with current partners (Landor & Winter, 2019).

Previous researchers have found that young adults discuss topics such as whether to engage in sexual activity or ways to prevent sexual risks more than relational and meaning aspects of sex, although the latter topics are deemed more satisfying by this population (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010). Other sexual topics observed include sexual pleasure, interest, and desire, and technology-centered communication such as sexting (Alvarez & Villarruel, 2015; Burkett, 2015).

Faulkner and Lannutti (2010) interviewed 132 young adults regarding satisfying and unsatisfying aspects of sexual communication, and participants reported feeling less satisfied after talking to a partner about sexual acts with past partners, sexual risks, pregnancy worries, and preventative health care such as condoms. Conversations that were categorized as satisfying included discussing when to engage in sex, pleasure, desire, preferred techniques, meaning of sex for each partner, messages of love and respect in connection with sex, and integrating personal faith and sexuality (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010). Interestingly, some of the conversations classified as most satisfying (including meaning and relational aspects) are the same topics deemed by other researchers as rarely discussed by partners (Day, 2019). This may point to the risk and vulnerability involved in approaching meaningful and delicate topics in sexual contexts, despite the potential satisfying and connecting benefits. Indeed, young adults would very likely benefit from learning to discuss these satisfying topics with greater regularity, given the reported positive sexual and relational outcomes of engaging in satisfying sexual communication, including benefits of increased understanding, decreased discomfort, and heightened intimacy (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010).

Barriers to Sexual Communication: Shame and Guilt

Sexual communication may be inhibited by high anxiety surrounding one's sexual performance or sexual topics, learned expectation of rejection, relationship problems, lack of trust, and an avoidant attachment style (Jones, 2016). Past experiences of rejection and attachment injuries may lead individuals lower in attachment security to self-disclose less than secure individuals (Jones, 2016), indicating that those in this category may show especially low communication. Cultural norms, including the view that sexual topics are taboo, inhibit many in individualistic and collectivistic cultures alike, and socialized gendered messages may hinder men from feeling free to speak of emotionality in sexual contexts and cause women to internalize blame, shame, and objectification, potentially further hindering their talk on the subject (Jones, 2016). Finally, sexual problems in the relationship may increase shame and lead couples to avoid sexual communication, creating a negative cycle of increased sexual problems and decreased communication (Mallory et al., 2019).

Accordingly, the experience of both shame and guilt surrounding sex or sexuality may often be at the root of inhibited sexual communication (Day, 2019; Jones, 2016; Totonchi, 2019). Sexual shame relates particularly to the evaluation of oneself as defective, negative, or unworthy when in the context of sexual topics, behavior, or thoughts (Lim, 2019), while sex guilt has been described as a "self-imposed punishment, for either actually violating or expecting to violate 'proper' sexual conduct" (Hackathorn et al., 2016, p. 157). Sexual shame and guilt often begin from a young age as children develop their gender identity and may be bred from a multitude of surrounding influences (Ballard & Senn, 2019). Parents' perceived evaluation can play a heavy role in sowing high levels of internalized shame (Lim, 2019). Messages from parents such as "don't touch that" or negative reactions to questions about sexual anatomy or feelings results in learned negativity surrounding sexuality (Totonchi, 2015).

According to past findings, religious individuals tend to report higher levels of sex guilt; while this pattern emerges particularly among those who are unmarried (potentially due to constraints regarding sex outside of marriage), religious married individuals have also shown higher levels of sexual anxiety and guilt than their nonreligious counterparts, suggesting that perhaps some religions play a role in restricting sexual enjoyment

by discouraging pleasurable aspects of sex and emphasizing only procreation (Leonhardt et al., 2020). Hackathorn and colleagues (2016) used a questionnaire among 258 participants and found that sex guilt mediated the relationship between religiosity and sexual satisfaction among unmarried participants. Their results are an indication that those who internalize religious teachings to a greater degree show less sexual satisfaction and higher sex guilt (Hackathorn et al., 2016). Based on such findings, we may expect those raised in more religious households to show higher levels of sex guilt which may negatively impact both sexual communication and satisfaction.

Parent–Child Sex Communication

As noted, early communication from caregivers about sexual topics may reduce or enlarge messages of shame surrounding these topics in children, thereby playing a significant role in their later sexual experiences (Totonchi, 2015). Reported current trends indicate very low incidences of open sexual communication between parents and children (Padilla-Walker et al., 2020; Pariera & Brody, 2017). While most parents in one study shared that they felt sexual communication was of great importance for the safety of their children, very few reported engaging in open sexual discussion (Wilson et al., 2010). This may be due to several potential barriers parents often experience, including lack of experience in how to conduct such conversations, feelings of discomfort or shame, or assumptions that such conversations will occur naturally at a later point (Goldfarb et al., 2018). Adolescents and emerging adults report that silence from parents on sexual topics communicated a message of disapproval and negativity, but that they were left on their own to interpret the reasons for these reactions (Goldfarb et al., 2018). Ironically, vague or conflicting messages surrounding sex have been found to be associated with younger and riskier sexual behaviors (Ballard & Senn, 2019).

Of those parents who do report engaging in parent–child conversations about sex, a majority only have one specific "talk" during children's early adolescence with little to no ongoing discussion (Padilla-Walker et al., 2020) and often limit discussions to safety themes such as birth control, abstinence, condom use, or anatomy (Powers, 2017; Wilson et al., 2010), but neglect emotional, relational, and positive aspects of sex (Ballard & Senn, 2019). Furthermore, much of reported sex communication between parents and offspring are reportedly negative, behavioral, and punitive, viewing adolescent sexuality as deviant (Ballard & Senn, 2019). Children learn messages from either parents' punitive reactions or silence regarding sexual topics, which they often generalize to internalized negative attitudes about sexuality in general (Totonchi, 2015).

Conversely, open channels of communication about sexuality have far-reaching impacts on children and adolescents, including being central to later and safer sexual experiences in adolescents (Ballard & Senn, 2019; Powers, 2017). Positive relationships and closeness between parents and children are associated with more open communication about sexual topics (Holman & Kellas, 2015; Powers, 2017; Wilson et al., 2010), as well as delayed sexual debut and safer sex behavior in general (Abrego, 2011). One study by Rogers et al. (2015) sampled 55 adolescents and their parents and found that harsher messages from parents against sexual engagement was associated with higher levels of sexual activity in adolescents, while high-quality sexual communication was linked with lower levels of risky sexual involvement. It may be concluded that adolescents may be resistant to harsh or negative delivery of sexual information and would benefit from more thoughtful discussion. Such outcomes are consistent with findings that greater comfort and friendliness in talking about sex made a significant difference in adolescents' safe behavior and willingness to go to parents with questions (Pariera & Brody, 2017; Wilson et al., 2010). Furthermore, receiving positive messages about sex from parents resulted in a higher likelihood of enjoying their first sexual experiences (Pariera & Brody, 2017).

Finally, past researchers have found that young people themselves report wanting more communication from their parents about sex, particularly regarding relational aspects (Goldfarb et al., 2018; Pariera & Brody, 2017). In a recent study, Goldfarb et al. (2018) asked 74 emerging adults about messages received prior to their first sexual experience and found dominant themes of the difficulty, infrequency, and unsatisfying

nature of sex communication from parents. In addition to reporting messages from parents of negativity surrounding sex, not wanting to know about their children's sexual lives, and emphases on abstinence and protection, participants reported wanting more guidance in sexual matters from parents in relational and emotional aspects of sexuality (Goldfarb et al., 2018). In a sample of 441 young adults in another study, participants reported beliefs that parents should discuss most topics with children by age 12–13 and that the most frequent topic addressed by parents should be that of dating and relationships (Pariera & Brody, 2017).

Because a cited theme of the research is discomfort in talking to children about sex stemming from a lack of role models from their own parents (Ballard & Senn, 2019), it may be that the opposite is also true—children who receive open communication about sex from parents may develop healthy working models for sex communication and thus will go on to display higher levels of open and comfortable sex communication with both future partners and their own children. A shift towards treating adolescent sexuality as a normal and positive part of development may increase open and positive sexual communication between parents and children (Ballard & Senn, 2019) and impact the way those adolescents go on to communicate in healthy ways about sex long term.

Purpose of the Study

Communication between parents and adolescent children on sexual topics is thought to connect with later openness with peers and romantic partners (Key, 2016). Given the limited research linking early parent–child sexual communication and later sexual communication with partners, a study is needed that more comprehensively examines factors associated with this link and considers impacts on romantic relationship functioning (e.g., relationship and sexual satisfaction). In this study we seek to explore the consequences of high- and low-quality sexual communication between parents and children in predicting quality of romantic partner sexual communication, as well as connections with sexual and relational satisfaction.

Research Questions

1. Is source of sexual knowledge significantly linked with self-reported current sexual communication satisfaction?

2. What is the relationship between gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religiosity and parent–child sex communication patterns? What is the relationship between gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religiosity and parent–child sex guilt?

3. Is parent–child sex communication significantly associated with later romantic partner sexual communication satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, relational satisfaction, or sexual guilt, controlling for length of the romantic relationship?

Hypotheses

1. Based on low reported rates of parent–child sex communication (Wilson et al., 2010) and culturally narrow constraints surrounding sexual openness (Ballard & Senn, 2019), we anticipated young adults would report receiving the most information about sexuality from media and internet usage. However, we predicted that participants who had received sexual knowledge predominantly from parents, friends, or partners would report the highest levels of sexual communication satisfaction.

2. Based on existing literature, we predicted that lower-quality parent–child sex communication would take place between parents and participants that are male, non-heterosexual (Goldfarb et al., 2018),

and high in religiosity (Day, 2019). We also predicted that females, participants that are non-heterosexual, and participants reporting higher religiosity would report higher levels of sex guilt, consistent with previous findings (Day, 2019; Goldfarb et al., 2018).

3. Based on the importance of early messages impacting later development and relationships emphasized in socialization and symbolic interaction theories (Arnett, 1995; Yeager, 2016), we hypothesized that greater quality of parent–child sexual communication would predict higher satisfaction with romantic partner sex communication later in life. Given previous connections between sexual communication with relational and sexual satisfaction (Jones, 2016; Timm & Keiley, 2011), we anticipated that parent–child sexual communication would also predict higher relational and sexual satisfaction. Finally, we predicted that sex guilt would show a negative association with all other variables in the study based on previous findings that sex guilt negatively impacts sexual and relational aspects of life (Day, 2019) and based on previous connections between absent or ineffective parent–child sex communication and sexual shame (Totonchi, 2015).

Methods

Participants

Data for this study were obtained via Qualtrics surveys given to young adults between the ages of 18–30. Although Arnett defined young adulthood as "a period from the late teens through the twenties, with a focus on 18–25" (Arnett, 2000, pp. 469), others have more recently defined this period as the ages between 18–30, given the most recent trends of delaying marriage, childbearing, and career initiation for many (Lee et al., 2018). Participants were recruited using a link shared on social media and disseminated by professors to students inviting young adults to participate in a study about communication in romantic relationships. Participants who completed the survey were placed in a raffle for a $25 gift card to Amazon. To qualify for the study, participants needed to be between the ages of 18–30 and in a committed, romantic relationship. Questions at the beginning of the survey verified age and relational status.

A total of 281 survey responses were recorded, of which 233 were retained for analysis. Those who were disqualified and subsequently removed included participants who reported not being in a current romantic relationship, those under the age of 18 or over the age of 30, and those who did not complete at least 60% of the survey.

Data Collection

Upon receiving East Carolina University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board approval (#20-003013), researchers disseminated a 76-item questionnaire designed to measure constructs of interest for the current study. Participants completed informed consent documentation before taking the survey, which included demographic information and relevant questions, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, religiosity, relationship status, length of relationship with partner, and whether self and partner were currently sexually active. Participants were also asked from which source they received most of their sexual knowledge, with options including talking with a parent, talking with friends, talking with a boyfriend or girlfriend, school-based curriculum, TV/movies/media, searching online, church/religion, or other. The remainder of the survey consisted of existing reliable and valid measures described below.

Measures

Contributors to Sexual Knowledge

One survey item instructed participants to select where they received most of their current sexual knowledge.

Participants were asked to select one of the following: "talking with a parent," "talking with friends," "talking with a romantic partner," "school-based curriculum," "TV, movies, or other media," "searching online," "church/religion," or "other."

Sexual Communication Satisfaction

Satisfaction with communication about sexual topics with partners was measured using the 22-item Sexual Communication Satisfaction Scale (Wheeless et al., 1984). The scale includes questions such as "I tell my partner when I am sexually satisfied" and "I am satisfied with my ability to communicate about sexual matters with my partner" and is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Certain items were reverse scored to cross-check validity. Greater scores suggest increased reported satisfaction. This scale has shown internal reliability of .94 in previous studies (Wheeless et al., 1984) and currently demonstrated good reliability (α = .82) among our sample.

Relationship Satisfaction

Participants were given all four questions from the shortened Couples Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007), which captures romantic relationship satisfaction. Of the four questions, two were scored on a scale ranging from 0 ("not at all true") to 5 ("completely true"). This measure has shown strong convergent validity and construct validity with other reliable scales measuring relationship satisfaction (Funk & Rogge, 2007). A sample item reads "I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner." The other two were scored on a scale from 0 ("extremely unhappy") to 6 ("perfect"), a sample of which states, "Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship." Higher scores indicate greater satisfaction in one's romantic relationship. Reliability was strong in this study (α = .92).

Sexual Satisfaction

Sexual satisfaction between partners was measured using the New Sexual Satisfaction Scale-Short Form, a 12-item version adapted from the original 20-item version (Štulhofer et al., 2010). For all items, participants were given the instructions, "thinking about your sex life during the last six months, please rate your satisfaction with the following aspects," with possible responses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not at all satisfied") to 5 ("extremely satisfied"). Items on the short form included "the way I sexually react to my partner," "the frequency of my sexual activity," and "the pleasure I provide to my partner." Higher scores convey greater sexual satisfaction. Reliability of this scale was excellent (α = .93).

Parent–Child Sex Communication

Communication between participants and their parents about sex when they were children or adolescents was measured using the Family Sex Communication Quotient, an 18-item scale developed by Clay Warren (2011). This scale measures three dimensions of parent–child sex communication, including comfort, information, and value, all of which were combined in a singular score as recommended (Warren, 2011). A 5-point Likert scale offers responses from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Items included "I feel free to ask my parents questions about sex," "the home should be a primary place for learning about sex" and "I feel better informed about sex if I talk with my parents." Items were translated into the past tense and participants were asked to answer according to their experience during adolescence and childhood (i.e. "I felt free to ask my parents questions about sex while growing up"). Specified items were reverse scored to prevent user bias. Greater scores convey a parent–child pattern with higher comfort and value in communication about sex. The modified version of this scale demonstrated good reliability (α = .89).

Sexual Guilt

Sexual guilt in each participant was measured using the Revised Mosher Sex Guilt Inventory, a ten-item version of the original Mosher Sex Guilt Inventory (Janda & Bazemore, 2011). Sample questions include "When I have sexual desires, I enjoy them like all healthy human beings" (reverse scored) and "Sex relations before marriage should not be recommended." All items included a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1

("strongly disagree") to 7 (strongly agree"). Certain items were reverse scored to cross-check scale validity. Higher scores indicated greater sexual guilt in participants. This measure was formerly found reliable (Janda & Bazemore, 2011) and showed good reliability (α = .71) in the present sample.

Data Analysis

Univariate, bivariate, and multivariate analyses were conducted to answer our research questions. Univariate analyses (e.g., frequencies, means, standard deviations, range) were initially conducted to summarize and observe patterns in the data. Group differences across variables were then examined utilizing ANOVA procedures, including differences by gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion. Next, bivariate analyses included correlations between all study variables and are presented in a correlation table. Significant bivariate associations informed variables for inclusion in multivariate analyses. Multivariate analyses (i.e., multiple regression) were conducted to examine links between constructs of interest. Finally, we fit a path model using Mplus Version 7 to simultaneously examine links between parent–child communication and multiple dependent variables, controlling for length of the romantic relationship.

To answer our research questions, we first examined frequencies of sources of sexual information. We then examined group differences by audience on sexual communication satisfaction with current romantic partner utilizing ANOVA procedures. To determine whether parent–child sex communication is significantly associated with later romantic partner sexual communication satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relational satisfaction, we conducted bivariate correlations followed by hierarchical regression analyses. Finally, we conducted ANOVA analyses to determine whether parent–child sex communication patterns or sex guilt differ by gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religiosity of the child.

Results

Demographic information can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographic Difference Frequencies for Study Variables. (*N = *226)*

Variable	N	%
Gender		
Male	94	41.6
Female	130	57.5
Nonbinary/third gender	2	.9
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	201	88.9
Gay/Lesbian	3	1.3
Bisexual	16	7.1
Pansexual	3	1.3
Other/Prefer not to say	2	.9
Relationship status		
Married	79	35.0
Cohabiting	46	20.4
Not married or cohabiting	101	44.6
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaska Native	8	3.5

Asian	14	6.2
Black or African American	18	8.0
Hispanic or Latino	17	7.5
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	4	1.8
White	165	73.0
Religiosity		
Strongly disagree	30	13.3
Disagree	31	13.7
Neither agree nor disagree	57	25.2
Agree	61	27.0
Strongly agree	45	19.9

To answer our first research question, we examined responses regarding the source from which participants received the majority of their current sexual knowledge. The most frequently cited source was participants' romantic partners (27.9%) followed by friends (25.7%), online searches (17.3%), talking with a parent (11.1%), school-based curriculum (8.4%), TV/movies/entertainment (6.6%), other (2.7%), and finally church/religion (.4%). Next, to examine whether these sources were associated with sexual communication satisfaction with current partner, we conducted one-way ANOVAS for sexual communication satisfaction by source of sexual knowledge. Resulting means showed no significant differences on sexual communication satisfaction by group, suggesting unexpectedly that, in this sample, source of sexual knowledge showed no impact on sexual communication satisfaction.

Next, to answer our second research question, we conducted additional ANOVA analyses to identify group differences in parent–child communication quality and sex guilt. Parent–child communication scores showed means of 52.5 for males, 50.3 for females, and 64.5 for non-binary/third gender, revealing a higher mean for non-binary/third gender; however, none of these differences were significant in this sample, and the very small sample size of the non-binary/third gender group should be considered. Additionally, ANOVA results revealed no significant group differences in parent–child communication quality by race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religiosity.

When examining differences in sex guilt by groups of religiosity, we found a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by one-way ANOVA ($F(4,205) = 3.248$, $p = .013$). Tukey's post-hoc analyses revealed that those who considered religion a significant part of their upbringing ($M = 3.67$) were significantly more likely than those who did not at all consider religion a factor in their upbringing ($M = 3.08$) to experience higher levels of sex guilt ($p = .04$).

One-way ANOVA analyses also produced a significant difference in sex guilt by gender ($F(2,209) = 12.43$; $p < .001$), with Tukey's post-hoc probing unexpectedly revealing that males ($M = 3.70$) showed higher levels of sex guilt than females ($M = 3.16$). Because only two people reported a third/nonbinary gender, significant differences could not be identified between this group and other groups. No significant differences were found in sex guilt means by either race/ethnicity or sexual orientation.

To answer our final research question regarding potential links between parent–child sex communication and later romantic partner sexual communication satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, relational satisfaction, and sexual guilt, we first examined descriptive statistics and correlational analyses (see Table 2). Parent–child communication quality was significantly and positively correlated with sexual satisfaction ($r = .15$, $p < .05$) and sex guilt ($r = .19$, $p < .01$).

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for Study Variables. (*N = *226).*

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
Age	-						
Relationship length	.14*	-					
Sexual communication satisfaction	-.10	.10	-				
Relational satisfaction	-.07	.25**	.69**	-			
Sexual satisfaction	-.04	.05	.64**	.65**	-		
Parent–Child communication	.11	-.18**	.09	-.03	.15*	-	
Sex guilt	.33**	-.07	-.39**	-.32**	-.20**	.19**	-
M	23.49	20.01	78.46	19.47	45.63	51.43	3.39
SD	3.37	23.69	10.95	4.35	8.28	12.62	0.85
Range	18-30	1-120	42-102	7-25	18-60	22-89	1.20-5.60

Note. *M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation*
*†p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01.*

We next conducted regression analyses, controlling for length of romantic relationship, to investigate relationships among the variables of interest. Results revealed that greater parent–child communication about sex during adolescence and childhood was significantly positively associated with greater sexual satisfaction with a partner in young adulthood (β = .11, *p* <.05) and somewhat unexpectedly, was significantly, positively associated with greater sex guilt in young adulthood, controlling for length of the relationship (β = .01, *p* <.05; see Table 3). Regressions revealed no significant links between parent–child communication about sex and romantic partner communication satisfaction, nor with overall romantic relationship satisfaction.

Table 3. *Summary of Regression Analyses Linking Parent–Child Communication About Sex With Romantic Partner Communication Satisfaction, Overall Relationship Satisfaction, Sexual Satisfaction, and Sexual Guilt in Young Adulthood, Controlling for Romantic Relationship Length (*N= *233)*

	Comm Satisfaction		Rel Satisfaction		Sexual Satisfaction		Sexual Guilt	
Variable	B	SE B	B	SE B	B	SE B	B	SE B
Constant	72.48	3.43	18.09	1.32	39.32	2.57	2.79	.27
Rel length	.06†	.03	.05	.01	.04	.03	-.00	.00
Parent–Child sex comm	.10	.06	.01	.02	.11*	.05	.01*	.01
R2		.023		.08		.03*		.04*
F change in R2		2.46		.11		5.60*		6.51*

Note. Comm = Communication; Rel = Relationship
B = Unstandardized Coefficient; SE B = Standard error of the unstandardized beta coefficient.
Romantic relationship length is in months.
*†p < .10; *p < .05*

To further examine potential links among our constructs of interest, we fit a path model to simultaneously examine links between parent–child communication and our multiple dependent variables, controlling for length of the romantic relationship. Data were analyzed using Mplus Version 7, and missing data were handled using full information maximum likelihood (FIML). All constructs were allowed to covary with one another, as were residuals of the dependent variables. Goodness of fit was evaluated using the chi-squared statistic, the comparative fit index (Bentler, 1990), the root mean square error of approximation (Bentler, 1995), and the standardized root mean square residual (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Figure 1 shows the fully saturated model (i.e., a perfectly fitting model with zero degrees of freedom; Cook & Kenny, 2005) and reveals significant links among constructs of interest. Parent–child sex communication was significantly positively linked with later reports of sexual communication satisfaction between partners ($\beta = .18$, $p<.01$) and sexual satisfaction ($\beta = .18$, $p<.01$), controlling for all other pathways and for relationship length. The model did not reveal significant links between parent–child sex communication and relationship satisfaction or sex guilt.

Discussion

Previous research indicates that quality sexual communication is an important contributor to young adults' relationships and sexual satisfaction (Landor & Winter, 2019) and that such communication is often deficient in young relationships (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010). Additionally, experiencing high amounts of sex guilt, which may be learned or exacerbated by parental messages and cultural upbringing (Ballard & Senn, 2019; Lim, 2019), and may play a role in inhibiting sexual communication and limiting sexual and relational satisfaction (Day, 2019). Indeed, according to symbolic interaction theory, interactions with others, including romantic partners, friends, and parents, play a heavy role in shaping and reinforcing meaning (Yeager, 2016), suggesting that negative or inhibited attitudes about sex from parents could influence later perception of sex, as well as the ability to communicate effectively about sexual topics. Thus, understanding the link between parental messages and attitudes about sex and young adult sexual communication patterns marks an important area for study.

We discovered several significant associations in this study, including a positive link between open parent–child communication about sex and satisfaction with sexual communication in current romantic relationships. This discovery carries implications for increasing relational health of current and future generations through targeting the way parents discuss sexual matters with their children and adolescents. Additionally, we found a positive association between the parent–child communication quality participants reported receiving as children/adolescents and current sexual satisfaction. Results also revealed an unexpected significant association between parent–child communication quality and sex guilt in the correlational and regression analyses, but this connection was no longer present when other variables were introduced to the model, suggesting that the variability in the link may have been attributed to other variables. Finally, group differences revealed that participants who were male and those reporting higher importance of religion in their upbringing scored higher on the sex guilt measure.

Integration Into the Current Literature

The Importance of Parent–Child Sexual Communication for Later Romantic Relationships
Based on our results, it seems that when parents talk openly with their children about sexual topics, these children later report enjoying more satisfying sexual communication with their romantic partners. Additionally, participants who reported perceptions of open and frequent communication patterns about sex during their childhood and/or adolescence reported higher sexual satisfaction in their current committed relationship. Although results from our correlation and regression analyses indicated that open discussion between parents and children about sex was linked with greater sex guilt in those children as adults, the more conservative findings from the path model found no such link.

Meaningful communication about sexual topics between young adult romantic partners marks a vital sign of relational thriving, particularly among an age group wherein relational behavior lays a cornerstone for future patterns (Alvarez et al., 2014; Landor & Winter, 2019). The association found in this study implies the heavy role early experiences may play on certain relational behaviors, such as open communication about sexual issues. Taken from a symbolic interaction theoretical view, we may reason that early sexual symbols that are positive and open in nature create meaning with reduced shame attached, allowing for increased vulnerability and risk-taking with partners in disclosing sexual needs, issues, or preferences (Scheff, 2003; Yeager, 2016). Indeed, consistent with previous studies, it may be that open parental communication reduces potential barriers such as shame, stigma, or silence and instead increases feelings of confidence, competence, or security regarding sexual topics, thus facilitating open discussion with one's partner (Goldfarb et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2010).

We also found a positive link between early parent–child communication quality about sex and current sexual satisfaction with one's partner. This finding aligns well with the aforementioned, in that satisfaction with sexual communication has often been linked to sexual satisfaction (Timm & Keiley, 2011), and offers further positive ramifications. Because young adulthood marks a crucial time for laying a strong foundation for a lifelong relationship trajectory, satisfying sexual experiences with committed romantic partners are important to strengthening relationships, increasing quality of life, and bettering young adults' likelihood of communicating openly with partners about sex, thereby furthering the positive cycle of increased satisfaction (Jones, 2016; Landor & Winter, 2019; Powers, 2017).

Various explanations for this association may exist. Open and positive communication about sex from parents is believed to have a significant impact on children's perceptions and comfort regarding sexual topics (Pariera & Brody, 2017). Indeed, a former study found that positive messages about sex from parents resulted in a higher likelihood of enjoying first sexual intercourse (Pariera & Brody, 2017). Learned positive symbols associated with sex may reduce anxiety or shame while participating in sexual acts, thereby increasing sexual satisfaction in general (Ballard & Senn, 2019; Scheff, 2003). This provides compelling support for the idea that those who internalize more positive messages about sexuality from a younger age may continue to enjoy more satisfying sexual experiences during adulthood.

Additionally, there is evidence from previous research that positive and open communication about sexual topics between parents and children is associated with lower levels of sexual activity during adolescence and less risky sexual behavior overall (Rogers et al., 2015). It may be that young adults who have engaged in less risky behavior experience fewer negative consequences that may impede satisfaction (such as STIs, previous traumatic abortions, etc.) and thus may more easily enjoy greater satisfaction in sexual experiences. In short, these findings point to the importance of parent–child communication in influencing important aspects of young people's sexual lives. By increasing openness and quality of sexual communication with their children, parents can seemingly make a significant impact on the way their children are able to experience satisfying intimate experiences with romantic partners later, almost surely contributing positively to their development and well-being. In a culture where sexual shame and stigmas are so prevalent, these findings have significant implications for buffering shameful messages and promoting sexual and relational health in current and future generations.

Source of Sexual Knowledge

We sought to discover whether an association existed between participants' source of sexual knowledge and their current satisfaction with sexual communication. Our results revealed no significant group differences in participants' satisfaction with their sexual communication between groups of reported sexual knowledge source. Perhaps participants misinterpreted the meaning of "current sexual knowledge" and rated the most

recent source rather than the most important source of cumulative knowledge. However, it was notable that young adults reported receiving their sexual knowledge predominantly from romantic partners and friends.

Although only 17% of our sample did so, we initially hypothesized that young adults would turn most frequently to online sources for sexual knowledge due to trends of cultural shame surrounding sexual topics and online access among this age group (Burkett, 2015). Previous researchers report that many young people receive most of their sexual knowledge from friends and media sources (Lagus et al., 2011). In a previous study by Rothman et al. (2021), young adult participants reported online pornography as the most cited source of sexual knowledge, while adolescent participants in the same study reported parents and friends as the predominant source. Such varied results warrant further exploration. It is unclear whether our results suggest that new trends are moving young people away from online sources and toward relational sources of sexual knowledge or whether some other factor may be at play. Future research may shed further light on this finding and its consequences.

In another interesting result in this study participants reported turning to friends for sexual information nearly as frequently as romantic partners. This trend may point to greater than realized tendencies of young people to seek sexual knowledge from peers and partners, which may be as pivotal as discussion with parents. Future work should consider the ramifications of receiving sexual knowledge from platonic friends versus romantic partners. Previous studies reveal college students reporting friends as their main source of sexual knowledge and even preferring to discuss sexual matters with friends over partners (McManus & Lucas, 2018). McManus and Lucas (2018) found that college-aged students who discussed sexual matters with friends perceived greater support when doing so with goals to improve their relationships and knowledge. This may indicate that one's intent when turning to friends for sex-related support may predict whether the effects will be beneficial or not. More research is needed to understand such implications.

Group Differences in Sex Guilt

Because both symbolic interaction theory and Arnett's broad and narrow theory of socialization suggest social and environmental contributors to meaning (Arnett, 1995; Yeager, 2016), we expected to discover some difference in participants' level of sex guilt according to family of origin environment and social locations. As expected, we found that those who reported growing up in more religious settings reported significantly higher levels of sex guilt than those who reported religion playing an insignificant role in their upbringing. There may be several explanations contributing to this finding. First, many religions teach the sinful nature of sex (particularly unmarried sex) and thus those brought up in religious environments may well have internalized that sexual thoughts, behaviors, and desires are inappropriate or sinful, increasing guilt surrounding such acts (Day, 2019; Hackathorn et al., 2016; Leonhardt et al., 2020). Alternatively, participants who consider religion an important factor in their lives may attach a specific meaning to sex, i.e., as something precious, godly, or sacred, and thus experience higher levels of guilt when varying from internalized norms or values. Finally, the Revised Mosher Sex Guilt Inventory used to measure sex guilt in this study includes questions such as "sex relations before marriage should not be recommended" and "sex relations before marriage help people adjust" (Janda & Bazemore, 2011), items which may also measure values about premarital sex connected to religious beliefs and thus may make it more likely that highly religious people score higher on this scale simply by nature of values held. Further research on this connection may help to identify the mechanism by which religiosity increases tendencies to experience sex guilt, as well as the impact of religiosity on sexual communication and sexual satisfaction with partners.

An unexpected finding in our study showed males reporting higher sex guilt scores than females, contrary to our hypothesis and previous findings. This result was surprising given what has been reported in the literature about male and female socialization regarding sexuality (Goldfarb et al., 2018). While researchers have often tied women to sexual shame (Jones, 2016), this finding may be supported by several explanations. Researchers have found differences in the way sexual guilt and shame are often experienced between men and

women, finding that men tend to attach such shame to repressed emotional expression, pressure to perform, and fear of failure, while women may suffer from pressure to achieve socialized standards of beauty as well as effects of oppression, objectification, and abuse (Day, 2019). It may be that in this study, sex guilt items measured more of the former manifestations of sex guilt, as questions did include some action- and performance-based items such as those regarding masturbation and "unusual" (as defined by the measure) sex practices. Indeed, some previous research does indicate that males' and females' attitudes towards masturbation and premarital sex tend to differ (Totonchi, 2015), and thus a closer look at such differences may help shed light on this finding.

Limitations

Although this study makes a meaningful contribution to what is known regarding parent–child sexual communication and adult romantic relationship functioning, several study limitations warrant attention. First, the sample was not as diverse as originally intended. The sample was predominantly heterosexual and white and may not be representative of the diverse population from which it was drawn. Consequently, caution should be used when generalizing these findings to all young adults. Furthermore, participants were recruited through social media, meaning that those who were exposed to the study tended to be connected to one another and thus may hail from similar groups, areas, religious organizations, etc. To correct both limitations in future studies, random sampling is encouraged. Finally, caution should be used while interpreting results as all were within one standard deviation of the mean. Future analysis with a larger sample size may clarify relationships and provide stronger results, as well as increase accurate representation of the young adult population.

All measures were self-report and relied on perception. In particular, the measure of childhood parent–child sex communication was retrospective and potentially subject to recall bias. It may be that retrospective perceptions of parent–child sexual communication were influenced by current comfort with sexual communication, rather than the other way around. For example, young adults who feel greater comfort communicating sexually may be more likely to reflect positively on parenting practices, while those with poor communication may feel inclined to place blame on parents. It may be more beneficial to measure sexual communication quality from parents to adolescents as reported in real time and observe long-term impacts on sexual communication and satisfaction using a longitudinal design. Additionally, measuring sexual communication from both adolescents and parents may strengthen accuracy of measurement and shed light on any perceived discrepancies between the two, illuminating the most appropriate path for intervention.

It is important to note that adolescents receive information about sex from many sources, as supported by frequency analyses in this study. It is therefore impossible to fully disentangle effects from each of these sources from one another, and thus connections between parent–child sex communication and romantic partner sexual communication satisfaction and sexual satisfaction should be viewed with caution and the understanding that other variables may play a role in the relationship.

Finally, upon further analyzing our measure of sex guilt, we noted that although this measure has been previously validated and used to measure the sex guilt construct, some items seemed to better capture specific sexual values rather than the construct of guilt sought to measure. Because the original version of this scale was developed over 50 years ago (Janda & Bazemore, 2011), it may be that the idea of sex guilt has evolved and no longer represents what it was once thought to capture. Moreover, while our measures did capture important variables, numerous constructs were not measured that may have strengthened the study. Because previous research indicates that parent–child closeness influences openness about sexual topics (Holman & Kellas, 2015), it may be worthwhile to observe relationships between parent–child relationship quality and other variables examined in this study to identify new directions for intervention. Additionally, communication style and parenting practices may also merit future inclusion.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The association between reported parent–child sex communication quality and current sexual communication satisfaction in young adult relationships holds implications for parents, educators, and clinicians alike. Targeting the way parents communicate with their children about sexual topics may mark an important area for intervention to increase quality of children's future relationships. Clinicians and educators may work to help parents overcome common obstacles such as feelings of incompetence and lack of modeling (Abrego, 2011; Wilson et al., 2010) by educating parents and children together, thereby bringing sexual topics into the open and lessening shame. Furthermore, educating parents about positive consequences of open sexual discussion (including those named in the present study) may help to reduce hesitation based on fears of encouraging risky sexual behavior in their children (Wilson et al., 2010).

Several strategies and interventions have found success in increasing parental openness about sexual topics. Parents have reported that increasing their own knowledge on sexual topics and creating opportunities to start sexual conversations (i.e., using movies, television, asking about their children's sexual education classes, etc.) was helpful in overcoming common barriers to sex-related discussion with children (Meyer, 2014; Wilson et al., 2010). Meyer (2014) sent educational text messages about sex to 51 pairs of Latinx and Black mothers and their adolescent children at least once per week for six months, after which adolescents and mothers reported higher rates of sexual communication and more topics discussed. The Families Matter! Program offered curriculum-based interventions to caregivers of 9–12-year-old youth in Tanzania, which resulted in increased parent–child sex education discussions and improved responsiveness about these topics in parents (Kamala et al., 2017). Such findings indicate existing support for the effectiveness of educational interventions among parents and children.

Despite these benefits, many programs seem to be focused on decreasing teen pregnancy, STIs, and other sexual health risks for adolescents (Kamala, 2017; Newby et al., 2011; Sutton et al., 2014). While some may include aspects of promoting positive sexual health in their programs (Crocker et al., 2019), very few appear to have the motive of increasing quality of sexual satisfaction, communication, or relational health of adolescents as they emerge into young adulthood. The association between parent–child communication and later sexual satisfaction points to the importance of implementing programs and interventions that focus not only on educational material for physical benefits, but that also include emotional, relational, and attitudinal aspects to improve quality of sexual and relational lives long-term. Because adolescents themselves have reported desiring more guidance from parents in navigating relational and emotional areas of sexuality and relationships (Goldfarb et al., 2018), it is likely that such changes would be well received and that many significant benefits would ensue from helping parents employ consistent, meaningful discussion on the positive aspects of sexuality.

Findings surrounding differences in reported sex guilt levels by gender and religiosity may reveal interesting implications for researchers and clinicians alike. Previous research has mainly focused on effects of sex guilt on women, including findings that women high in sex guilt tend to engage in less sexual intercourse, masturbation, and pornography consumption and show a lower likelihood of using contraceptives and/or visiting a gynecologist (Lanciano et al., 2016; Totonchi, 2015). Less research exists regarding the effects of high sex guilt on men, and the present study marks a need for increased investigation of causes and impacts of sexual guilt in males to view whether similar effects may exist as well as potential interventions.

Conclusion

Healthy sexual communication between partners is critical to young adult romantic relationship development and satisfaction and therefore warrants further attention from researchers and clinicians. Positive and clear messages from parents about sexual topics can not only lower sexual risk-taking but may also invite healthy

communication patterns about sex with romantic partners. Although we must cautiously interpret some results due to potential retrospective bias or potential alternate links, results of this study may reveal important links between parents' ability to speak openly and appropriately with their children about sex and those children enjoying better sexual communication and sexual satisfaction with their adult partners years later. Researchers and clinicians may continue to explore this relationship and encourage more open and positive parent–child conversations about sex through education and programs. Additionally, further research on the impacts of sex guilt in males and religious individuals may help to clarify associations found in this study and prevent negative impacts. What is evident, however, is that early dialogue about sexual topics with parents seems to meaningfully impact individuals and their romantic partners into early adulthood and perhaps beyond.

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