

---

# PARENTAL COMMUNICATION ABOUT SEX AND MOTHERHOOD TRENDS AMONG STUDENTS AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

---

**Beauty Makofane and Toks Oyedemi\***

Communitas  
ISSN 1023-0556  
2015 20: 159-180

## **ABSTRACT**

*Pregnancy among teenagers and unmarried young adults is common in South Africa. This presents challenges and concerns due to the association with lower socio-economic status, lack of paternal support and commitment among male partners, disruption of schooling that potentially accompanies pregnancy, and many others. It also raises critical sociological and communication questions: Do parents talk to their children about sex-related issues? What are the young adults' idea of love, sex and relationships? What are the patterns of motherhood and pregnancy among university students? Many studies have explored teenage pregnancy in South Africa, but there is limited focus on young adult students at universities, especially rural universities. Through a survey of 150 students at the University of Limpopo in South Africa, this study shows that parental communication about sex is not a popular communicative practice among many students, and for those whose parents have talked to them about sex, the parental communication tends to have limited influence on the students' attitude to safe sex. In this study, for a third of the students who are mothers the concerns about young motherhood continue to shape their economic and socio-cultural experiences.*

**Keywords:** motherhood, parent-adolescent communication, teenage pregnancy, university students, South Africa, sex-related issues

---

\* Beauty Makofane (makofanephodiso@gmail.com) is a postgraduate student in the Department of Communication, Media and Information Studies in the School of Languages and Communication Studies at the University of Limpopo in South Africa. Toks Oyedemi (Toks. oyedemi@ul.ac.za) is a lecturer in the same Department.

## INTRODUCTION

Pregnancy among teenagers and unmarried young adults is common in South Africa (Jewkes *et al.* 2001; Wood & Jewkes 2006). A study by Jewkes, Morrell and Christofides (2009) notes that about 30% of teenagers in South Africa claim to have been pregnant (cf. Holt *et al.* 2012; Ardington *et al.* 2012). Although this rate has been gradually decreasing over the years, it is still high (Willan 2013). For instance, a study by the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) at the University of Cape Town shows that teenage childbearing (13-19 years) has decreased from 30% in 1984 to 23% in 2008. For years pregnancy among teenagers and unmarried young adults has been predominantly portrayed as a social problem in many countries such as the United States (Geronimus 1991; Stepp 2013), Britain (Chevalier & Viitanen 2003) and South Africa (Macleod 1999; Willan 2013). The concerns are usually because of its association with lower socio-economic status, the disruption of the teenagers' education and schooling, access to health care resources, and quality of life of the children. In South Africa, adolescent pregnancy remains a critical problem and many teenagers still report unwanted pregnancies (Wood & Jewkes 2006). Historical accounts of studies indicate that many young South Africans engage in sexual risk-taking, unprotected sex, low levels of condom and contraceptive use, and often have concurrent partners (Buga, Amako & Ncayiyana 1996; Ehlers 2003; Hoffman-Wanderer *et al.* 2013).

Many socio-cultural pressures and beliefs influence teenage pregnancy. Some teenagers are encouraged to become pregnant by their partners to prove their love, some are pressurised to prove their womanhood through fertility, others are encouraged by grandmothers to produce a baby for the home, and mothers often voice the assumption that teenage pregnancy is infinitely preferable to the possibility of infertility caused by contraceptive use (Wood, Jewkes & Maepa 1997). The baby is usually accepted into the mother's family and looked after by elder women; the mother is often able to return to school. But the trend in teenage pregnancy may be decreasing, as indicated in some studies. The 1998 South African Demographic and Health Survey (SADHS) indicates that 35% of women had a child by the age of 19 (Department of Health 2002), while in the 2003 SADHS survey this had decreased to 27% (Department of Health 2007). According to Moultrie and McGrath (2007), teenage fertility fell by 10% between the 1996 and 2001 census. Statistics South Africa (2013) stated in the General Household Survey 2012 that the prevalence of pregnancy among 19-year-olds fell from 12.7% in 2010 to 10.25% in 2012.

The study of teenage pregnancy and motherhood among unmarried young adults can be engaged from the acknowledgement of the reconfiguration of family structures in today's postmodern society. The postmodernist view of self and

self-culture provides an analysis that single parenting may be a conscious self-decision. But for students who are parents, social concerns are always about the implications for both the single parent and the child, and increasingly, the role of the state. The South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) 2012 report indicates that 34% of South African children live with both their parents, compared to 39% who live with their mothers only, while 3% live with their fathers only, and 24% live with neither of their parents. In South Africa, some 81% of Indian children live with both their parents, followed by 78% of White children, and 51% of Coloured children. Only 28% of African children live with both their parents. At 41.9%, African children comprise the highest rate of children that live with their mothers only, 34% of Coloured children live with their mothers only, 16.1% of White children and 11.2% of Indian children (SAIRR 2012). The SAIRR (2012) report states that research has shown that young girls who grow up without fathers tend to experience lower self-esteem, higher levels of risky sexual activities, and more hardships in romantic relationships. The report also indicates that these girls are more likely to fall pregnant early, bear children outside of marriage, marry early, or divorce their partners. The SAIRR report acknowledges that children who grow up in functional families with both parents may benefit from the parents' modelling behaviours, and are able to teach their children about relationships, especially the emotional and financial responsibilities of having children. This therefore assumes the importance of parent-child communication about sex and relationships.

Another issue about pregnancy among teenagers and young adults is the concern about low socio-economic status and poverty. Statistics South Africa's 2012 report on the social profile of vulnerable groups in South Africa states that 65.1% of children live in low-income households with a per capita income of less than R650 per month. This level of economic stress and poverty explains why South Africa's social grant support is one of the largest social assistance systems in the world. The child support grant, together with the old age grant, constitute about 75% of total grant spending (South Africa.info 2014). Data shows that since 2003 the percentage of children who benefit from grants has increased from 15% in 2003 to more than 59.2% by 2011 (Statistics South Africa 2012).

Considering all these trends and the concerns about teenage and young adult pregnancy, specifically the role of family in sex education and in modelling standards about relationships, this research examines parental communication about sex with young adults at the University of Limpopo in Mankweng, South Africa. This study examines the extent of youth's communication with parents about sex, and how this may influence the youth's attitude to sex, pregnancy, love and relationships. In doing this, some critical research questions are engaged: What are the current trends of motherhood and pregnancy among students

at this university? Do their parents communicate to them about love, sex and relationships? Does this communication impact the attitude of youth towards love, sex and relationships? What are the opinions and attitude of youth to love, sex and relationships? This study intends to provide an understanding of pregnancy and motherhood trends and the attitude to sex-related matters among a relatively more educated and more mature cohort of young people than the commonly studied 13 to 19 year cohort of teenagers.

## **UNDERSTANDING SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS AND ATTITUDES TO PREGNANCY AMONG YOUTH**

### **Factors that motivate sexual relationships among the youth**

Low socio-economic status and poverty seem to be influencing factors in sexual relationships among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa. Luke (2003) observes that most studies on sexual relationships among adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa indicate that relationships with older partners and those that involve economic transactions are common and are associated with unsafe sexual behaviour. The receipt of financial benefits is a major motivation published in research as young women often are at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. In a study in rural Uganda, 75% of female participants stated that the expectation of gifts was the main reason they had sex (Moore & Biddlecom 2006).

This trend is also present in South Africa. For example, Wood and Jewkes (1998) observe that major contributing factors to teenage pregnancy are the economic pressures due to poverty and intergenerational sex between partners. Poverty is a major social concern in South Africa, and it affects many youth. Poverty is often the reason for the commodification of sex in which women in poor circumstances agree to sexual relationships with men in exchange for financial support (Adams & Marshall 1998; Hallman 2004). Financial benefit is, however, not the only motivation for sexual encounters; love is another reason given by females for engaging in sexual intercourse (Kelly & Parker 2000). In an earlier study by Bardwick (1999) it was reported that female students justified their participation in premarital intercourse as a commitment to their partners. In this regard, women see sexual intercourse as an important medium for communicating love in a relationship.

Peer pressure also contributes to the decision made by many youth to have sexual intercourse (Selikow *et al.* 2009). Buga *et al.* (1996) state that both girls and boys experience the same peer pressure to be sexually active. For many young men, the pressure has to do with proving their masculinity by having multiple sex partners; this wins a young man status and admiration. According to MacPhail and Campbell (2001), some boys encounter negative pressure towards the use of condoms, and girls sometimes encounter pressure from sexually experienced peers

who sideline them from sexual discussions because they are considered inexperienced and young (Wood *et al.* 1997). A study by the Southern African HIV and Aids Information Dissemination Service (SAfAIDS 2011) indicates that peer pressure is a major cause of teenage sexual relationships and adolescent pregnancies. Adolescent girls often face peer pressure from their boyfriends and on social networks to engage in sexual intercourse. SAfAIDS (2011) notes that an early sexual debut has become a trend in most societies and this often pressurises adolescent girls to engage in sexual intercourse because of the fear of being stigmatised by their peers. As a result, many girls become pregnant as they are not fully aware of the consequences of sexual intercourse and the use of contraception.

### **The youth's attitudes towards sex and teen pregnancy**

The study by Mothiba and Maputle (2012) on teenage pregnancy in the Limpopo Province of South Africa confirms the observation that there are several factors associated with the increased risk of an early pregnancy. These include lack of knowledge about sex and how to use contraceptives, barriers to access contraceptives, including negative attitudes of health staff, peer pressure, sexual coercion, low self-esteem, low educational expectations, poverty, family breakdown, and heightened sex-based messages in the media.

Panday *et al.* (2009) observe that there is a changing attitude to sex and pregnancy among youth. In the early 1990s, youth's attitude commonly indicated that pregnancy was welcomed, specifically among young black women and their families. Pregnancy was seen as a sign of love, womanhood and fertility, and potential bride wealth as a groom pays a higher bride price for impregnating a woman prior to marriage. Young men, on the other hand, felt pride in bearing a child as a sign of their masculinity. These observations were noted in many studies in the early to late 1990s (cf. Preston-Whyte & Zondi 1991; Caldwell & Caldwell 1993; Jewkes *et al.* 2001). One of these studies, by Wood *et al.* (1997), indicates that young men in South Africa wanted to have sex at an early stage of a relationship and produce children as a sign of masculinity, especially those in rural areas, claiming they have been taught to do so from the initiation schools. However, as Panday *et al.* (2009) argue, with a shifting socio-economic landscape and increasing access to education many youth are becoming more ambitious, especially those in urban areas, and socio-cultural beliefs about sex and pregnancy are gradually changing.

Pettifor *et al.* (2005) provide empirical evidence of this in a study that shows that two-thirds of adolescents who have ever been pregnant in South Africa report their pregnancies as unwanted. Despite what seems to be a normalisation of teen pregnancy in black and Coloured communities in South Africa as a result of the high prevalence of pregnancy in these groups, and to some extent previous cultural

acceptance, early childbearing is highly stigmatised. Girls are confronted with trauma, fear, shame, and embarrassment of having to reveal an early pregnancy to family, partners and peers (Panday *et al.* 2009).

The analysis of teenage pregnancy tends to concentrate on negative social and economic factors that contribute to teenage pregnancy. However, there are many instances that female adolescents view immediate pregnancy and parenthood in a positive light (Panday *et al.* 2009). This claim is supported by various international research studies indicating that some adolescents intentionally become pregnant (cf. Unger, Molina & Teran 2000; Cater & Coleman 2006; Condon & Corkindale 2000). In this regard, as Cater and Coleman (2006) argue, becoming pregnant is a positive decision that offers a sense of purpose and future direction, especially as a way of correcting negative childhood experiences that are characterised by dysfunctional family relationships and poor academic experiences.

### **Parent-child communication and self-development**

Stanoff (2010) observes that the quality of the parent-child relationship is important for promoting positive developmental outcomes. Open communication, close parent-child relationships, and active involvement in the adolescents' daily life increase children's well-being. This observation highlights the importance of parent-child communication in the development of youth's attitude to sex and relationships with others. Studies have shown that parental communication is positively related to adolescent social and psychological growth (Lambert & Cashwell 2004). The argument about parental communication and youth's development largely stems from the importance of communication with others in self-development.

Mead's (1934) seminal analysis of the self provides a critical observation in personal identity and self-development. In Mead's analysis, self is developed in the process of communication with others. Mead identifies two types of others whose communication influences how people see themselves and what people generally believe is possible and desirable for them (Wood 2011). One is the "particular others", who are specific significant people in our lives, such as mothers, fathers, siblings, peers and those whose communication are significant in our formative years. The other is the "generalised other", which is made up of the views of society and social communities we belong to (Mead 1934; Wood 2011). The generalised others include institutions such as the school system, the media and religious institutions. For many people, family communication is often the first and most important influence on self-development; it dominates the early years and sculpts the foundations of the development of the self (Bergen & Braithwaite 2009;

Wood 2011). Issues of identity, ego development, self-development, and self-esteem are important in developing and maintaining relationships.

Communication with others, family, peers, and society in general, is important in the development of these critical identity markers. Young adults who are self-assured about the self and identity are more confident in their readiness for intimacy and commitment. Those lacking confidence in their identities tend to be easily influenced and may isolate themselves. These attitudes are consequently carried into sexual relationships and activities. Some studies have found that low self-esteem is connected with relationship formation, onset of sexual activity, and rate of multiple sexual partners (Favara 2013; Goliath 1995; Perskel *et al.* 1991). Perskel *et al.* (1991) observe that those with low self-esteem may tend to be more concerned about what others think or say about them than their own feelings. They may engage in sexual activities for fear of rejection by their partners, more so than those with positive self-concepts. An increase in self-esteem tends to decrease the probability of not using condoms or the occasional use of condoms (Favara 2013).

Stanoff (2010) observes mixed findings in the literature on parent-child sexual communication. Generally, literature supports the assumption that parental communication plays an important role in reducing risky sexual activities (Kirby & Lepore 2007; Miller *et al.* 2001), and it is also related to more effective contraceptive use (DiClemente *et al.* 2001; Levin & Robertson 2002). However, some studies have also shown that the amount of parental communication is related to a likelihood of adolescents engaging in sexual intercourse (Bersamin *et al.* 2006; Clawson & Reese-Weber 2003). Some studies report no link between parental communication and adolescent sexual activity or contraceptive use (Clawson & Reese-Weber 2003; McNeely *et al.* 2002). These different findings may be mediated by the quality and quantity of the communication and the relationship between youth and parents (Miller *et al.* 1998; Nelson *et al.* 1999; Resnick *et al.* 1997). Mothers tend to play a more important role in communicating with their adolescents than fathers (DiIorio *et al.* 1999; Miller *et al.* 1998). Nolin and Peterson (1992) report that in their sample of adolescent boys and their parents, only half of the parents had engaged in a conversation with their sons about sex, socio-sexual issues, or contraception.

Considering the concerns about teenage pregnancy in South Africa, it indicates a need for further academic inquiry in exploring parental communication about sex. Also, noting the high regard for traditional and commonly held cultural beliefs in South Africa, this study is necessary in order to explore how this may affect parent-child communication among university students, who are largely transitioning to adulthood.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted through a survey of students at the University of Limpopo, a university with predominantly black students. This explains the fact that 99.3% of the survey respondents are black. The respondents were chosen randomly through convenience sampling from the first level of study to honours level. The sample comprised of 150 students consisting of 36 first-year students, 42 second-level students, 46 third-level, 12 fourth-level and 14 students from the honours level. After gaining permission from lecturers, questionnaires were distributed to students who willingly volunteered to participate in the study immediately after their classes. An informed consent letter was attached to each questionnaire, which served as an assurance to the respondents that their participation is voluntary and they are at liberty to decline. The letter also assured the students that no names or personal identifiers were required in the survey, and that information from respondents would be kept private and confidential.

The questionnaire was designed to measure the pattern of parental communication about sex, the students' opinions about sex, love, pregnancy and marriage, the trend of motherhood, and the rate of pregnancy among the students. The respondents were predominantly black students (99.3%) and unmarried (only 4% were married). There was diversity in other elements of the demographics of the respondents, as illustrated in Table 1:

**TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHICS OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS**

Gender	%	Race	%
Female	60.0	Black African	99.3
Male	40.0	Coloured	0.7
Age		Level of study	
Below 18	1.4	Year 1	24.2
18-21 yrs.	47.3	Year 2	28.2
22-26 yrs.	44.6	Year 3	30.9
27-30 yrs.	4.7	Year 4	7.4
30 and above	2.0	Honours	9.3
Place of residence		Who do you live with?	
Urban (city)	7.4	Living with single mothers	33.6
Rural area (village)	60.8	Living with single fathers	12.3
Semi-urban	15.5	Living with both parents	32.2
Semi-rural	16.2	Living with grandmother	8.2
		Other relatives	13.7

The data from the survey were analysed descriptively, which involved measuring occurrences and distribution of data based on the answers to questions in

frequencies and percentages. The findings are presented in this pattern with occasional use of tables and figures for illustration.

## **FINDINGS**

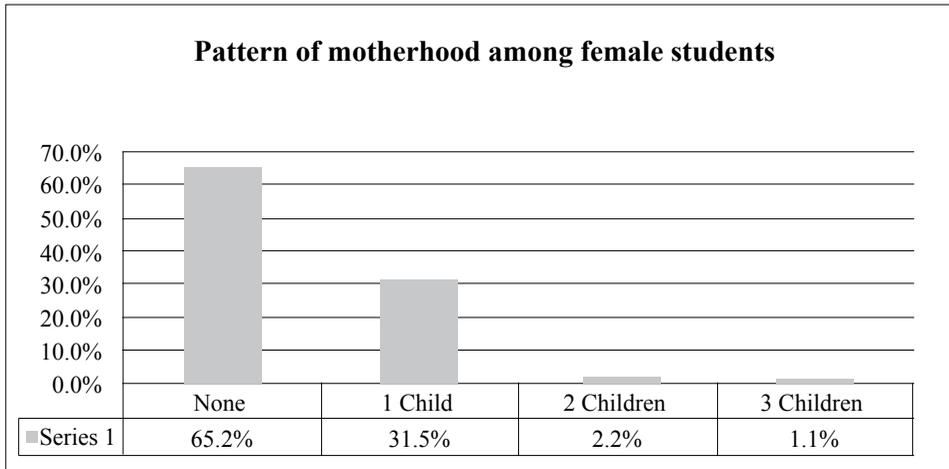
### **Pattern of pregnancy among students**

#### *Current trend of motherhood and pregnancy among students*

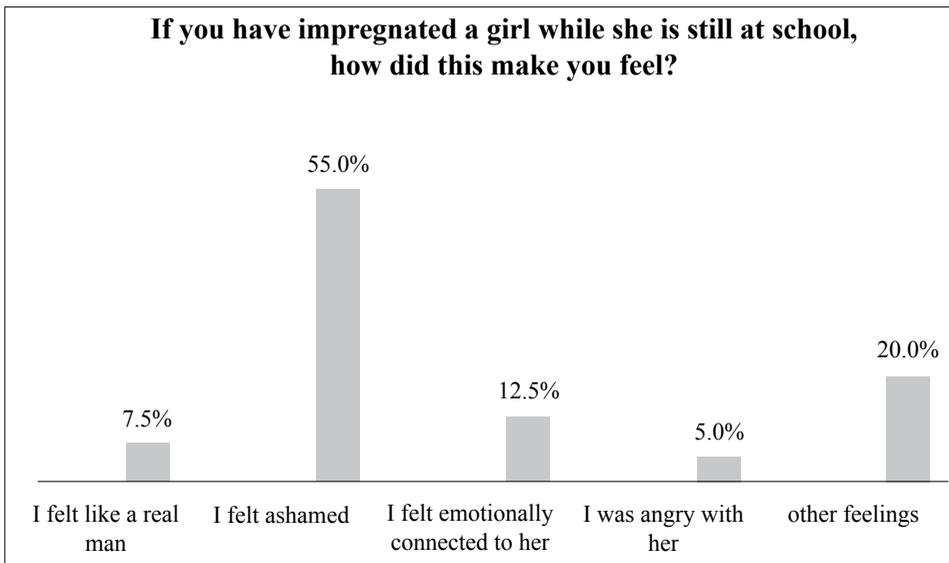
The majority of the students in this survey did not have children and were not pregnant at the time of this study, but about a third (30%) of them have children, with a quarter (25.7%) having one child, 2.7% having two children, and 1.4% having three children. The results of the survey show that 96% of the student respondents stated that they were not pregnant during their participation in the survey, and only 0.8% of the respondents reported being pregnant, with 6.3% of the male students claiming to have impregnated their girlfriends at the time of the survey. However, 37.3% of the students acknowledged they have a female friend who is a student and pregnant, 30.8% have a male friend who is a student and has impregnated his girlfriend. The students who would like to become pregnant and those that acknowledged that it is possible they will become pregnant before they finish their studies account for a quarter of all the students. Specifically, 15% of the students stated that they would like to become pregnant before they graduate from the university, and 10% stated that there is the possibility they may become pregnant before they complete their studies and graduate.

Although the majority of the students said they did not have children and were not pregnant during the study, it was observed that a substantial amount of the students were mothers. Specifically, a third (34.8%) of the female students have children, with 31.5% having one child (see figure 1). More than half of the students (56.1%) stated that their mothers are unemployed, with 12.9% temporarily employed, and 41.4% said their fathers are permanently employed, with 8.1% temporarily employed. This perhaps explains why 55.6% of the students' families collect childcare grants and 25.9% of the students said their families receive old age pensions. These findings support national data that child support grants, together with the old age grant, constitute about 75% of total grant spending in South Africa (South Africa.info 2014). This economic stress and low economic status may not only have implications for the teenage and young adult pregnancy trend, but also for the quality of life for the babies born in this social class. For example, more than half (57.1%) of the female respondents who have children reported that their children live with their mothers (the child's grandmother), 5.4% of them said that their children live with their fathers (the child's grandfather), and 8.9% said their children live with the family of the father. Only 23.2% stated that they live with their children, most likely with other family members, since they are all students and still at university.

**FIGURE 1: RATES OF FEMALE STUDENTS WITH CHILDREN**



**FIGURE 2: ATTITUDES OF MALE STUDENTS TOWARDS THEIR PREGNANT GIRLFRIENDS**



*Attitude of male students towards their pregnant girlfriends*

The study shows that male students tend to have a negative attitude towards their pregnant girlfriends. Findings show that more than half (55%) of the male

students reported that they felt ashamed after impregnating a girl who was still at university. This challenges the cultural assumption of young men being expected to be proud of fathering a child, even if it is at an early age, as a sign of manhood (cf. Wood *et al.* 1997); only 7.5% of the male respondents whose girlfriends were pregnant felt like “a real man” (see figure 2). The “other feelings” include those who broke up with their girlfriends, realised they made mistakes, have other forms of regret and detached attitudes.

## Attitude of youth to love, relationships and sex

### *Opinions about love*

The results of the survey indicate that slightly more female students than male students believed there is true love and claimed to have loved someone genuinely. The data shows that 87.8% of the female respondents believed there is true love and 83.3% of them said they have loved someone genuinely. On the other hand, 83.3% of the male respondents believed there is true love, and 72.9% of them said they have loved someone genuinely.

**TABLE 2: STUDENTS’ OPINIONS ABOUT LOVE**

	Yes		No		Maybe/ Possibly	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Do you believe there is true love?	83.3%	87.8%	16.7%	12.2%	0%	0%
Have you ever loved someone genuinely?	72.9%	83.3%	8.5%	4.4%	18.6%	12.2%

### *Opinions about sex*

Most of the student respondents (81.3%) believed that if you love someone you should have sex with them. The study shows that 72% of all the respondents believed that sex before marriage should involve the use of protection. More female students (79.3%) were of the opinion that sex before marriage should involve the use of protection all the time, and 66% of male students shared the same opinion. An interesting acknowledgment among the students is that 12% of them stated that one should use protection for pre-marital sex, but acknowledged that this is impossible all the time. More male students (18.6%) than female students said that it is impossible to use protection all the time in pre-marital sex (see table 3).

**TABLE 3: OPINIONS ABOUT SAFE SEX**

Do you think sex before marriage should involve the use protection?	Male	Female
No	3.4%	2.3%
No, if you have a steady partner	11.9%	10.3%
Yes, all the time	66.1%	79.3%
Yes, but it is impossible	18.6%	8.0%

## Pattern of parental communication about sex and relationships

Findings from this study show that parental communication about sex and related matters is not a common activity among many of the families in the population studied. Many students at this rural university who participated in the study have not spoken to their parents about sex, protection (contraceptive use and condoms), abstinence, pre-marital sex, choosing a partner, dating and relationships. The findings from this study indicate that slightly over half (56.1%) of the students have spoken to their parent about sex, but few have spoken to their parents specifically about pre-marital sex (38.6%) and about choosing sexual partners (33.6%). However, about half of the students (54.1%) have talked with their parents about contraceptive and condom use. The study also shows that 43.9% of the students have not spoken to their parents about sex, many of the students have not spoken with their parents specifically about pre-marital sex (61.4%) or about choosing sexual partners (66.4%) (see table 4).

Of all the students that have had discussions about sex and related matters, most of them (68.3%) have only spoken to their mothers (see table 5). This confirms findings from other studies that mothers tend to play a more prominent role in communicating about sex with their children than fathers (DiIorio *et al.* 1999; Miller *et al.* 1998).

**TABLE 4: PATTERN OF PARENTAL COMMUNICATION ABOUT SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS**

Have you ever spoken to your parents about	Yes	No
Sex?	56.1%	43.9%
Contraceptives (pills and condoms)?	54.1%	45.9%
Abstinence?	53.7%	46.3%
Sex before marriage?	38.6%	61.4%
Choosing sexual partners?	33.6%	66.4%
Your relationships with someone you are dating?	47.9%	52.1%

**TABLE 5: PARENTAL COMMUNICATION ABOUT SEX-RELATED ISSUES BY GENDER OF PARENTS**

Which of your parents have you talked to about love, sex, relationships and marriage?	Percentages (%)
Mother	68.3
Father	9.5
Others	22.2

The students also offered explanations as to why their parents have not spoken to them about sexual matters. Some of the students assumed that their parents had not spoken to them about it because the parents were of the opinion that such discussions may encourage their children to experiment with, and engage in, sexual activities. The following are direct extracts from the students' responses:

“My parents have not spoken to me because they think it will encourage me to explore it” (Respondent 18).

“Maybe they think if we discuss it, they will be encouraging it” (Respondent 102).

Others indicated cultural values as the reason for their parents not communicating with them, and them not being able to talk to their parents, about sex:

“They are more traditional and find it hard to talk about such stuff with their children” (Respondent 133).

“Our culture does not allow us to engage our parents about sex” (Respondent 111).

The respondents further indicated that another reason their parents had not spoken to them about sexual issues was because they could be embarrassed and uncomfortable discussing this with their own children; their parents might also think that talking about sex could make their children disrespect them:

“It is not easy to talk to your children about this kind of issues; I think they have their reasons” (Respondent 11).

“It is not something that our parents are comfortable to talk about. They warn us about boys but never about sex” (Respondent 22).

Some respondents also indicated that their parents might think they were still too young for sexual intercourse and discussions on sexual matters. The following responses bear witness to this:

“I think [this] is because they think that I am still young [to be] having sex or that I am old enough to be responsible” (Respondent 24).

“They think I'm still young” (Respondent 12).

### **Parental communication about sex and youth's attitude to sex and relationships**

A key finding in this study is that whether or not parental communication about sex had taken place appears to be insignificant in relation to attitudes toward pre-marital sex. The findings indicate that 85.4% of the students who had spoken to

their parents about sex believed that if you love someone, you should have sex with him or her. Also, 81% of those who had not spoken to their parents about sex shared the same belief. In fact, more students who had not had discussions about sex with their parents believed that one should use protection all the time when engaging in pre-marital sex than those who had spoken to their parents about sex. Also, more of the students who had not spoken to their parents about sex believed that they may not become pregnant with their current partners while still at university, than those who had communicated with their parents about sex. Specifically, 76.6% of those who had not spoken to their parents about sex believed that pre-marital sex should always involve the use of protection, compared to 71.6% of those who had spoken to their parents about sex. Furthermore, 80% of those who had not had parent-child communication about sex believed that they may not become pregnant with their boyfriend or girlfriend, compared to 70.7% of those who had parent-child communication, who believed that they may not become pregnant. In fact, most of the students who believed that they may become pregnant with their boyfriend or girlfriend are those who had had parent-child communication about sex (see table 6).

**TABLE 6: PARENTAL COMMUNICATION AND YOUTH'S ATTITUDE TO SEX**

	Have you spoken to your parents about sex?	
	Yes	No
<b>If you love someone, will you have sex with him or her?</b>		
Yes	85.4%	81%
No	14.6%	17.5%
Maybe	0%	1.6%
<b>Do you think sex before marriage should involve the use of protection?</b>		
No	3.7%	1.6%
No, if you have a steady partner	12.3%	9.4%
Yes, all the time	71.6%	76.6%
Yes, but it is impossible	12.3%	12.5%
<b>Do you think you may get pregnant with your boyfriend or girlfriend?</b>		
Yes, I would like to	19.5%	8.3%
No	70.7%	80%
Maybe	9.8%	11.7%

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study shows that the pattern of motherhood is high among the student respondents from this predominantly black rural university. A third of the female students who participated in this study have children. Although most of the students were not pregnant during the period this study was conducted, about a third of the female students had friends who were pregnant then, and about a third of the male students had friends who had impregnated their female partners. While studies have shown a decrease in the rate of teenage pregnancy in South Africa (cf. Willan 2013; SALDRU 2012), this study supports the commonly presented data that about 30 per cent of teenage girls in South Africa claim to have been pregnant (Jewkes *et al.* 2009; Holt *et al.* 2012; Ardington 2012).

Contrary to other studies and cultural beliefs that young men perceive their ability to impregnate a woman as a sign of proving their masculinity (cf. Wood *et al.* 1997), many young men in this study were ashamed of the fact that they impregnated their girlfriend while still at university; some were angry that their girlfriends became pregnant and generally do not see impregnating a girl as a sign of their masculinity. Only 7.5% stated that they felt like a “real man” after impregnating a girl. Perhaps, as Panday *et al.* (2009) argue, this change in attitude may be due to the shifting socio-economic landscape and increasing access to education among many youth, making them more ambitious. However, this may not be true for all young adults, as those students who would like to become pregnant and those who believed that it was possible they would become pregnant before they finished their studies together accounted for a quarter of the students in this study. Perhaps this may be due to the acceptance of teenage pregnancy in some communities, as other studies have acknowledged (cf. Makiwane 1998).

Parental communication about sex may not be present in many South African homes, at least among families of black youth from rural areas. This statement is supported by the findings of this study as more than three-quarters (77%) of the respondents were from villages and semi-rural areas. A high number of the students had not spoken to their parents about sex and pre-marital sex. While one may suggest that parents face cultural and social taboos about this form of interpersonal communication, the findings of this study showed the limited impact of such communication on youth’s attitude to sex. Irrespectively, parental communication remains important. As scholars have observed (Bergen & Braithwaite 2009; Wood 2011), family communication is usually the first and most influential on the self-development of many young adults, since it dominates the early years and sculpts the foundations of the development of the self and self-esteem among teenagers. Studies have shown that self-esteem plays a huge role in decision-making about sexual activities (Favara 2013; Goliath 1995; Perskel *et al.* 1991). This study also supports previous findings that mothers tend to play a bigger role

in communicating with their adolescents than fathers (DiIorio *et al.* 1999; Miller *et al.* 1998). Fathers, when present, need to play an active role in modelling behaviour and engaging with their children on issues of pre-marital sex and its implications.

Contrary to some previous studies (cf. Diclemente *et al.* 2001; Resnick *et al.* 1997; Whitaker & Miller 2000) that report that parental communication will reduce the likelihood of youth engaging in sexual activities, this study finds that whether or not parental communication about sex had taken place, it appears to be insignificant in relation to attitudes toward pre-marital sex and safe sex, at least in the population used for this study. Assumptions about what influences youth's attitude to sex may be due to the increasing tendency towards the postmodernist ideology of self-culture, where young people make their own decisions irrespective of parental communication. Also, a likely assumption about what influences attitudes to safe sex is the ubiquitous public awareness campaign about sexually transmitted illnesses (STIs) and HIV. This notwithstanding, there is still a challenge around issues of safe sex, STIs and HIV. For instance, these findings show that some of the respondents (19% male and 8% female) believed that using protection all the time in pre-marital sex is impossible. Also, considering that men tend to play a dominating role in sexual encounters, these findings may have serious implications for the transmission of STIs.

Although this study does not specifically engage the link between teenage pregnancy and the child support grant, it is clear that many young mothers depend on the child support grant. In fact, half of the students in this study (49.7%) believed that the child support grant provided by government encourages young unmarried adolescents to become pregnant. This has the capacity to negatively impact South Africa's budgetary allocation for many national social and economic programmes. The percentage of children who benefit from grants increased from 15% in 2003 to more than 59.2% by 2011 (Statistics South Africa 2012), and child support grants together with the old age grant constitutes about 75% of total grant spending in South Africa (South Africa.info 2014).

Finally, parental communication has value in shaping adolescents' development of the self and self-esteem. Also, since sex education is important for adolescents, parental communication should form part of this education, in addition to those available in many formal settings such as schools and religious institutions. Ultimately, decisions about sexual activities are made by the youth themselves. Nonetheless, sex education is an appropriate intervention in ameliorating some of the concerns that come with teenage pregnancy and young motherhood, such as its impact on a cycle of generational poverty, its association with lower socio-economic status, the disruption of the teenagers' education, and the quality of life for both teenage mothers and their children.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, H. & Marshall, A. 1998. Off-target messages: Poverty, risk and sexual rights. *Agenda* 39: 87-92.
- Ardington, C., Branson, N., Lam, D., Leibbrandt, M., Marteleto, L., Menendez, A., Mutevedzi, T. & Ranchold, V. 2012. *Revisiting the 'crisis' in teen births: What is the impact of teen births on young mothers and their children?* A Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit Policy Brief. University of Cape Town.
- Bardwick, J.J. 1999. *Psychology of women*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Bergen, K. & Braithwaite, D.O. 2009. Identity as constituted in communication. In: Eadie, W.F. (ed.). *21<sup>st</sup> century communication: A reference handbook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bersamin, M.M., Walker, S., Fisher, D.A. & Grube, J.W. 2006. Correlates of oral sex and vaginal intercourse in early and middle adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 16: 59-68.
- Buga, G.A.B., Amako, D.H.A. & Ncayiyana, D.J. 1996. Adolescent sexual behaviour, knowledge and attitudes to sexuality among school girls in Transkei, South Africa. *East Medical Journal* 73: 95-100.
- Caldwell, J.C. & Caldwell, P. 1993. The South African fertility decline. *Population and Development Review* 19(2): 225-262.
- Cater, S. & Coleman, L. 2006. *'Planned' teenage pregnancy: Perspectives of young parents from disadvantaged backgrounds*. Bristol: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Chevalier, A. & Viitanen, T.K. 2003. The long-run labour market consequences of teenage motherhood in Britain. *Journal of Population Economics* 16(2): 323-343.
- Clawson, C.L. & Reese-Weber, M. 2003. The amount and timing of parent-adolescent sexual communication as predictors of late adolescent sexual risk-taking behaviors. *The Journal of Sex Research* 40: 256-265.
- Condon, J.D. & Corkindale, C.J. 2000. Australian adolescents' attitudes and beliefs concerning pregnancy, childbirth and parenthood: The development, psychometric testing and results of a new scale. *Journal of Adolescence* 24: 729-742.
- Department of Health. 2002. *South African Demographic and Health Survey 1998*. Pretoria: Department of Health.

- Department of Health. 2007. *South African Demographic and Health Survey 2003*. Pretoria: Department of Health.
- Diclemente, R.J., Wingood, G.M., Crosby, R., Cobb, B.K., Harrington, K. & Davis, S.L. 2001. Parent-adolescent communication and sexual risk behaviors among African-American adolescent families. *Journal of Paediatrics* 139(3): 407-412.
- DiIorio, C., Kelley, M. & Hockenberry-Eaton, M. 1999. Communication about sexual issues: Mothers, fathers and friends. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 24(3): 181-189.
- Ehlers, V.J. 2003. Adolescent mothers' utilization of contraceptive services in South Africa. *International Council of Nurses* 50: 229-241.
- Favara, M. 2013. *Is self-esteem a 'double-edged sword'? Self-esteem and the onset of adolescent sexual activity*. Institute for the Study of Labour. Discussion paper No. 7171. [Online]. Available at: <<http://ftp.iza.org/dp7171.pdf>> [Accessed on 18 November 2014].
- Geronimus, A. 1991. Teenage childbearing and social and reproductive disadvantage: The evolution of complex questions and demise of simple answers. *Family Relations* 40: 463-471.
- Goliath, C.G. 1995. *Secondary school pupils' perception of Aids and Aids education*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. University of Port Elizabeth.
- Hallman, K. 2004. *Socioeconomic disadvantage and unsafe sexual behaviors among young women and men in South Africa*. Working Paper 190. New York, NY: Population Council.
- Hoffman-Wanderer, Y., Carmody, L., Chai, J. & Rohrs, S. 2013. *Condoms? Yes! Sex? No! Conflicting responsibilities for health care for professionals under South Africa's framework reproductive health*. Cape Town: The Gender, Health & Justice Unit, University of Cape Town.
- Holt, K., Lince, N., Hargey, A., Struthers, H., Nkala, B., McIntyre, J., Gray, G., Mnyani, C. & Blanchard, K 2012. Assessment of service availability and health care workers' opinions about young's sexual and reproductive health in Soweto, South Africa. *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 16(2): 283-294.
- Jewkes, R., Morrell, R. & Christofides, N. 2009. Empowering teenagers to prevent pregnancy: Lessons from South Africa. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 11(7): 675-688.

- Jewkes, R., Vundule, C., Maforah, F. & Jordaan, E. 2001. Relationship dynamics and teenage pregnancy in South Africa. *Social Science and Medicine* 52: 733-744.
- Kelly, K. & Parker, P. 2000. *Communities of practice: Contextual mediators of youth responses to HIV/Aids*. Pretoria: Department of Education.
- Kirby, D. & Lepore, G. 2007. *Sexual risk and protective factors: Factors affecting teen sexual behavior, pregnancy, childbearing, and sexually transmitted disease: Which are important? Which can you change?* Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.
- Lambert, S.F. & Cashwell, C.S. 2004. Preteens talking to parents: Perceived communication and school-based aggression. *The Family Journal* 12: 122-128.
- Levin, M.L. & Robertson, A.A. 2002. Being prepared: Attitudes and practices related to condom carrying among minority adolescents. *Journal of HIV/AIDS Prevention and Education for Adolescents* 5: 103-121.
- Luke, N. 2003. Age and economic asymmetries in the sexual relationships of adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa. *Studies in Family Planning* 34(2): 67-86.
- Macleod, C. 1999. Teenage pregnancy and its 'negative' consequences: Review of South African research. Part 1. *South African Journal of Psychology* 29: 1-7.
- MacPhail, C. & Campbell, C. 2001. 'I think condoms are good but, aai, I hate those things': Condom use among adolescents and young people in a southern African township. *Social science and medicine* 52(11): 1613-1627.
- Makiwane, M.B. 1998. Adolescent pregnancy and reproductive health in Transkei. *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 2: 41-48.
- McNeely, C., Shew, M.L., Beuhring, T., Sieving, R., Miller, B.C. & Blum, R. 2002. Mothers' influence on the timing of first sex among 14-and-15-year-olds. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 31: 256-265.
- Mead, G.H. 1934. *Mind, self, and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, B.C., Benson, B. & Galbraith, K.A. 2001. Family relationships and adolescent pregnancy risk: A research synthesis. *Developmental Review* 21: 1-38.
- Miller, K.S., Dorsey, S., Forhand, R. & Ham, A.Y. 1998. Family communication about sex: What are parents saying and are their adolescents listening. *Family Planning Perspective* 30(15): 218-222.
- Moore, M.A. & Biddlecom, A. 2006. *Transactional sex among adolescent in Sub-Saharan Africa amid HIV epidemic*. New York: Alan Guttmacher Institute.

- Mothiba, T.M. & Maputle, M.S. 2012. Factors contributing to teenage pregnancy in the Capricorn district of the Limpopo Province. *Curationis* 35(1): Art. #19.
- Moultrie, T.A. & McGrath, N. 2007. Teenage fertility rates falling in South Africa. *South African Medical Journal* 97: 442-443.
- Nelson, B.V., Patience, T.H. & MacDonald, D.C. 1999. Adolescent risk behaviour and the influence of parents and education. *Journal of American Board of Family Practice* 12(6): 436-443.
- Nolin, M.J. & Peterson, K.K. 1992. Gender differences in parent-child communication about sexuality: An exploratory study. *Journal of Behavioural Science* 21(4): 447-469.
- Panday, S., Makiwane, M., Ranchod, C. & Letsoalo, T. 2009. *Teenage pregnancy in South Africa - with a specific focus on school-going learners*. Child, Youth, Family and Social Development, Human Sciences Research Council. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.
- Perskel, A.K., Strebel, A. & Joubert, G. 1991. The psychology of Aids transmission: Issues for intervention. *South African Journal of Psychology* 21: 148-152.
- Pettifor, A.E., Rees, H.V., Kleinschmidt, I., Steffenson, A.E., MacPhail, C., Hlongwa-Madikizela, L., Vermaak, K. & Padian, N.S. 2005. Young people's sexual health in South Africa: HIV prevalence and sexual behaviours from a nationally representative household survey. *AIDS* 19: 1525-1534.
- Preston-Whyte, E. & Zondi, M. 1991. Adolescent sexuality and its implication for teenage pregnancy and Aids. *Continuing Medical Education* 9: 1389-1394.
- Resnick, M.P., Bearman, P.S., Blum, R.W., Bouman, K.E., Harris, K.M. & Jones, J. 1997. Protecting adolescents from harm: Family findings from the national longitudinal study on adolescent health. *Journal of Health* 278(10): 823-832.
- SAfAIDS. 2011. Addressing adolescent pregnancy challenges in Southern Africa in the era of HIV. [Online]. Available at: <<http://safאים.net/files/Adolescence%20and%20Preg%20Position%20Paper.pdf>> [Accessed on 16 November 2014].
- SAIRR (South African Institute of Race Relations). 2012. *Fast Facts No 9/2012. Family coming to the fore*. [Online]. Available at: <[http://irr.org.za/reports-and-publications/fast-facts/fast-facts-2012/files/September\\_2012.pdf/view](http://irr.org.za/reports-and-publications/fast-facts/fast-facts-2012/files/September_2012.pdf/view)> [Accessed on 13 November 2014].

- SALDRU (Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit). 2012. *Revisiting the 'crisis' in teen births: What is the impact of teen births on young mothers and their children?* [Online]. Available at: <<http://opensaldru.uct.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11090/7/policy-brief-01.pdf?sequence=1>> [Accessed on 30 April 2015].
- Selikow, T., Ahmed, N., Flisher, A.J., Mathews, C. & Mukoma W. 2009. I am not 'umqwayito': A qualitative study of peer pressure and sexual risk behaviour among young adolescents in Cape Town, South Africa. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health* 37(2): 107-12.
- SouthAfrica.info. 2014. *Increases in old age, child support grants*. [Online]. Available at: <<http://www.southafrica.info/business/economy/policies/budget2014h.htm#.VGS5gt6Se7k>> [Accessed on 13 November 2014].
- Stanoff, N.M. 2010. *Parent-adolescent sexual communication and adolescent cognitive processes on sexual risk among European American female adolescents*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of California, Riverside.
- Statistics South Africa. 2012. *Social profile of vulnerable groups in South Africa*. [Online]. Available at: <<http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-19-00/Report-03-19-002011.pdf>> [Accessed on 13 November 2014].
- Statistics South Africa. 2013. *General Household Survey, 2012*. [Online]. Available at: <<http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P0318August2012.pdf>> [Accessed on 13 November 2014].
- Stepp, L.S. 2013. Rural America has a teen pregnancy problem. [Online]. Available at: <<http://edition.cnn.com/2013/02/27/opinion/stepp-teenage-pregnancies/>> [Accessed on 13 November 2014].
- Unger, J.B., Molina, G.B. & Teran, L. 2000. Perceived consequences of teenage childbearing among adolescent girls in an urban sample. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 26; 205–212.
- Whitaker, D.J. & Miller, K.S. 2000. Parent-adolescent discussion about sexual risk behaviour. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 15(12): 251-273.
- Willan, S. 2013. *A review of teenage pregnancy in South Africa – Experiences of schooling, and knowledge and access to sexual and reproductive health services*. [Online]. Available at: <<http://www.hst.org.za/publications/review-teenage-pregnancy-south-africa-experiences-schooling-and-knowledge-and-access-se>> [Accessed on 13 November 2014].

- Wood, J.T. 2011. *Communication Mosaics: An introduction to the field of communication*. (Sixth edition). Boston, MA: Wadsworth.
- Wood, K. & Jewkes, R.1998. *Love is a dangerous thing: Micro-dynamics of violence in sexual relationships of young people in Umtata*. Pretoria: Medical Research Council Technical Report.
- Wood, K. & Jewkes, R. 2006. Blood blockages and scolding nurses: Barriers to adolescent contraceptive use in South Africa. *Reproductive Health Matters* 14(27): 109-118.
- Wood, K., Jewkes, R. & Maepa, J. 1997. *Adolescent, sex and contraceptive experience: Perspectives of teenagers and clinic nurses in the Northern Province*. Pretoria: Centre for Epidemiological Research in South Africa.