Why don't more young men in the UK become fathers?

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Abstract

Objective – This paper aims to show that, compared with young women, there is an apparent discrepancy in the reported sexual behaviour of young men and records of their fatherhood.

Design – The data come from four studies of the sexual behaviour of young people in various parts of Britain between 1960 and 1990 and from statistics published by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys.

Main results – More of the young men than the young women had been sexually active, and the men had had more sexual partners. Relatively few men under 20, however, are identified as fathers. In 1991 there were 52 396 live births to women under 20 years, but only 12 959 births were attributed to men under 20, and if all those to women under 20 for which the father was not identified are added to this, the total is still only 28 208 – 54% of the number of births to women of that age. Seven possible reasons for the discrepancy are discussed. Data suggest that the two most probable explanations are that there are different patterns of intercourse among young men and women and that the data obtained in surveys are to some extent inaccurate or biased.

Conclusions – Differing behaviours indicate a double standard for men and women. Imperfect information affects predictions about a potential heterosexual HIV epidemic.

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This paper aimed to show that, compared with young women, there is an apparent discrepancy in the reported sexual behaviour of young men and records of their fatherhood. Possible reasons for the discrepancy are discussed and implications considered.

The data

The data come from a number of studies of the sexual behaviour of young people and from statistics published by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys.

The studies reporting the sexual behaviour of young people in various parts of Britain span almost 30 years. Schofield's survey,¹ published in 1965, covered unmarried teenagers aged 15-19 years in seven areas of England. Farrell's study² was undertaken in 1974-75 in

12 areas of England and Wales, chosen with probability proportional to population: it covered young people aged 16-19 years. More recently, Knox *et al*³ looked at people in the west Midlands aged from "under 17" to "46+" but weighted towards younger age groups and presenting the data in such a way that it is generally possible to distinguish men and women in younger age groups. The survey of West *et al*⁴ relates to 18 year olds in Glasgow in 1990.

The discrepancy

All four studies reported that more of the young men than the young women were or had been sexually active. In Schofield's sample, 20% of the young men reported that they had had sexual intercourse compared with 12% of the young women. Among the single people in Farrell's sample, the proportions were 54% for men and 42% for women. The data from Knox's study, which includes the married, show that 66% of men and 49% of women under 19 years report one or more heterosexual partner, and the proportions in the Glasgow sample for all 19 year olds are 72% and 59% with one or more sexual partner. In addition, in the three studies with information on this aspect, more young men than young women reported more than one sexual partner. The estimated proportions in those who had had at least one partner were 75% for men and 42% for women¹; 76% for men and 56% for women³; and 73% for men and 36% for women.⁴

Turning now to births, and looking first at 1975 when Farrell's study² was done, the number of live births in England and Wales to women under 20 years was 63 507, of which 43 015 were legitimate and 20 492 illegitimate. In contrast, the number of live births attributed to men under 20 was 16 116, of which 13 065 were legitimate and 3051 illegitimate but with joint registration.⁵ If all the illegitimate births to women under 20 years are attributed to men of that age this would more than double the births attributed to them but would still only be 58% of the births occurring to women of that age.

By 1991, the most recent year for which data are available,⁶ the ratio between legitimate and illegitimate births, and indeed the way they were described, had changed greatly. The number of live births to women under 20 years was 52 396. Of these only 17% were within marriage, but a further 54% were jointly registered with the father, although outside marriage, leaving 29% registered solely by the mother.⁶ This last proportion compares with

the 32% of live births to mothers under 20 years in 1975 which were classified as illegitimate. So, in 1991, the fathers of 37 147 births to mothers under 20 years were identified and 24% of these fathers were under 20 (12% of those within marriage, 28% of those jointly registered). Altogether 12 959 births were attributed to men under 20 and if all those to women under 20 for which the fathers were not identified are added to this, the total is still only 28 208 – just 54% of the number of births to women of that age.

Possible reasons for discrepancy

One possible reason for this discrepancy is that young men are fathering births to older women who do not identify them as fathers. It seems unlikely that this is happening on a large scale. In 1991 the proportion of sole registrations (that is, those in which the father and his age are *not* identified) fell dramatically – from 29% for mothers under 20 years to 11% of those aged 20–24, 5% for mothers aged 25–29, and 3% for mothers aged 30 or more. In addition, there is a noticeable tendency for identified fathers to be in the same age group or an older one than the mothers: for births to mothers aged 20–24 only 2% of the identified fathers were under 20, 39% were in the same age group, 59% were older. Data from the west Midlands' study³ show that whereas 57% of the male respondents under 18 reported female partners who were also under 18 and a further 29% partners aged 18 or 19, leaving only 14% with partners aged 20 or more, the comparable figures for female respondents under 18 were 20% of the same age, 41% aged 18 or 19, and 39% aged 20 or more.

A second possibility, also related to identifying fathers, is that a sizeable number of the young women under 20 having babies have had more than one partner around the time of conception and tend to attribute paternity to older rather than younger partners. Although, on average, young women report fewer partners than young men, the west Midlands' study³ found that 19% of the sexually active women under 19 reported four or more partners, and a further 37% two or three. The Glasgow survey⁴ suggests rather lower rates: 6% of sexually active 18 year old women reported four or more partners and 29% two or three. For there to be the possibility of choice in the "selection" of the father, the young women would need to have more than one partner in a short period of time and the Glasgow study indicated that less than 1% of the sexually active women reported four or more partners "in the last year" and 12% two or three partners in that time. This suggests some "room to manoeuvre" in this way but not on a large scale.

A third possibility is that pregnancies fathered by men under 20 are likely to end in abortion. In 1990, the most recent year for which figures are available, there were 3422 legal abortions to women under 16 and resident in England and Wales, and 35 520 abortions to women aged 16–19.⁷ It is not known

how many of these conceptions could be attributed to men under 20, but for women they add to the number of pregnancies and so do not reduce the gender differences for potential parenthood.

A further possible explanation is that young men are less fertile than young women. The only data relating to this are birth rates within marriage. These are not very relevant as reasons for getting married may well differ for men and women and at different ages. But for what they are worth they do not support this explanation for the discrepancy. In 1991, for those under 20 the live birth rate within marriage was 264.0 per 1000 married women compared with 308.6 for married men. For those aged 20–24 the rates were more similar: 189.2 and 198.4.⁶

Fifthly, young men may be better than young women at using effective contraception. Again, what data there are do not give much support to this hypothesis. Farrell's study² suggested that among those who were sexually active, similar proportions of young men and young women reported using some contraceptive method both at their first sexual experience and ever. There were some differences in the methods used: men relied more on the safe period and withdrawal, women on the pill. The west Midlands' study³ found that men reported condom usage more often than did women. The Glasgow study⁴ collected data about contraceptive use at first intercourse, ever, and currently. They showed fewer young men than women reporting that their first intercourse was protected by the pill (9% *v* 20%), more that it was unprotected (47% *v* 31%). These gender differences in reported use of the pill also persisted for ever and current use. Currently, more men than women reported using the condom and withdrawal, men were also more likely to report that they had ever used the safe period. So the results from the studies are consistent and do not indicate more effective use of contraception among young men.

Do different patterns of intercourse contribute to the differences between recognised paternity and maternity rates among people under 20? It has already been shown that all the three studies with data about this found that young men reported more sexual partners than young women. Little of this difference could be attributed to the use of female prostitutes by young men according to the west Midlands' study³: only 5.1% of men under 27 on that study reported prostitute usage. Other data about patterns of intercourse from the west Midlands' study³ are unfortunately not broken down by age. They showed that for partnerships (that is, excluding one night relationships and those of duration ≤ 1 month) men and women reported similar frequencies of intercourse. More importantly, they found that short relationships had an excess of low intercourse frequencies and a shortage of high ones. The male respondents reported that for 57% of partnerships of three months duration or less the monthly frequency of intercourse was 1–4, and this proportion fell to 27% for

partnerships of two years duration or more: for females there was a greater decline from 79% to 25%. If young men have more partners than young women they are likely to have partnerships of shorter duration and therefore less frequent intercourse. Schofield¹ too found that girls had sexual intercourse more frequently than boys. This will contribute to the different rates at which the two sexes become parents.

Finally, does the quality of the data obtained in surveys vary between young men and women? Are the men more likely to exaggerate their experiences and the women to be reticent about them? It could be that the response rates vary differentially for the two sexes with men who have had little or no sexual experience and women who have had a lot of experience being less willing to participate in such surveys and so biasing the results. The national survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles in a random sample of nearly 19 000 men and women⁸ showed very similar proportions of men and women aged 16–24 with some sexual experience (80% and 79% respectively) but the mean number of partners in this age range was still much greater for men (5.3) than women (2.8). Further analyses, with a more detailed age breakdown, may illuminate the problem further.

Implications

The most plausible reason for the discrepancy between the reported sexual behaviour of men and women and the differences between them in the rate at which they become parents seems to be different patterns of intercourse. Women under 20 have fewer partners than men of that age, and associated with this are likely to have more stable partnerships and more frequent intercourse. Given this pattern they may also be less likely to use effective birth control. Over contraception, the questions asked on surveys about use at first intercourse and ever

may give a deceptive picture of similar use between the sexes, data are needed about the frequency of unprotected intercourse.

However, it also seems likely that bias in response to surveys and misreporting also contribute to the discrepancy to some extent. Knox *et al* note an absence of prostitutes among the women in their sample³ and suggest that this contributes to the difference in the number of partners reported by male and female respondents.

Almost certainly, both different patterns of sexual behaviour by young men and women and imperfect information about this behaviour contribute to the discrepancy. What is uncertain is the relative size of the contributions and those of the other factors discussed, although those are probably less important. The differing behaviour, as West *et al* put it, indicates a “graphic double standard” for men and women.⁴ The imperfect information has profound implications for predictions about a potential heterosexual HIV epidemic, since “widely varying outcomes follow upon minor adjustments of sensitive parameters”.³ The discrepancy and the reasons for it are not just of academic interest.

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