

Seminar on Sexual and Reproductive Transitions of Adolescents in Developing Countries

Cholula, Mexico, 5-9 November 2006

Organized by the IUSSP Scientific Panel on Adolescent Life Course in Developing Countries

LONG SUMMARY REPORT

The IUSSP Scientific Panel on Adolescent Life Course in Developing Countries, in collaboration with the Center for Demographic, Urban, and Environmental Studies, El Colegio de Mexico, held a seminar on “Sexual and Reproductive Transitions of Adolescents in Developing Countries” in Cholula, Mexico, on 5-9 November 2006. The seminar was supported by funds provided by UNFPA and the IUSSP.

The goal of the seminar was to bring to bear scientific evidence on policy and practice to improve the reproductive health and well-being of adolescents. The seminar aimed to advance research on some difficult methodological and substantive issues in the area of sexual and reproductive transitions of adolescents, building on a 2005 NAS report that provides a comprehensive assessment of evidence on this subject for developing countries.¹

The 29 papers that were accepted for presentation at the seminar addressed issues such as advances in the methods and concepts used to measure the transition to adulthood, the role of attitudes and intentions in guiding sexual and reproductive transitions, the interaction of school enrollment and other transitions, and the experience of sexual, marital and childbearing transitions among young people. Most papers were distributed before the seminar, and significant time was devoted to the discussion of each paper. The final day of the seminar largely focused on a discussion of the research and policy gaps highlighted by the seminar papers.

Participants of the seminar had different backgrounds: they included demographers, sociologists, economists, epidemiologists, urban planners, anthropologists, and health service researchers. They came from all regions: Latin America (8), Asia (7), Sub-Saharan Africa (4), North America (8), other developed countries (2). All career stages were represented and about one-third of participants were junior scholars. Approximately one-quarter of the participants were male (7). In addition, three participants did not present papers but filled the roles of discussant, panelist or chair.

Advances in Methods and Concepts

The first session of the seminar provided a framework for discussing transitions during adolescence and early adulthood, acknowledging that some transitions that are problematic for younger adolescents may be healthy and normal activities for older adolescents and young adults. In order to consider the age appropriateness of sexual and reproductive health activities, four criteria were proposed: (1) physiological readiness, including the female body’s readiness for childbearing, (2) cognitive capacity, in particular the ability to engage in critical thinking, (3) the local context in which a young person lives, and (4) international standards such as those defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

¹ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2005). *Growing up Global: The Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries*. Cynthia B. Lloyd (ed.), Washington DC, The National Academies Press.

A second paper stressed the importance of measuring a key supporting dimension of the transition to adulthood, the development of agency, that is, the ability to make strategic life choices and exert influence over issues that matter to one's own welfare. Agency is multi-dimensional and difficult to capture as it emerges during the transition to adulthood. In order to develop a common set of dimensions relevant to both young men and women that allows us to track changes in young people's ability to make decisions about their lives, this paper proposed operationalizing agency into three dimensions: (1) an experiential dimension, including decision-making and freedom of movement, (2) a perceptual dimension, such as a young person's sense of self-worth, attitudes, and other proxy measures, and (3) an awareness dimension focused on young people's awareness of world around them, exposure to new ideas, and knowledge of available services.

Significant attention was also given to improving the measurement of interrelationships among the different adolescent transitions, sexual and reproductive as well as in other areas such as schooling and work. A few seminar papers analyzed the interaction of transitions and emerging changes in the life course pathways that are available for young people to follow, seeking to take into account the endogeneity of many transitions with each other. For instance, one paper attempted to overcome the problem of simultaneity of schooling and other transitions by considering education as behaviorally determined and with both a direct effect and instrumental effect on the timing of transitions into marriage and childbearing. Another paper integrated qualitative and quantitative data in order to make more robust arguments and provide insights into the heuristics and meanings that young people give to their actions and experiences.

Presenters also discussed methods for improving the reporting of sensitive behaviors and for reaching vulnerable or stigmatized populations. One cross-national study examined the use of Audio-Computer Assisted Survey Instruments (ACASI) to increase the reporting of sexual behaviors, through reducing the sensitivity that may arise in a face-to-face interview. They suggested that the use of headsets and touch pads for self-administration of sensitive questions increased the privacy of reporting, standardized the way that questions were asked, and facilitated self-administration of surveys regardless of literacy levels. Another paper experimented with respondent-driven snowball sampling and time location sampling strategies in order to draw a sample of men who have sex with men in Mexico. These conceptual and measurement approaches have the potential to improve our ability to gain better information and greater insight into the sexual and reproductive transitions of adolescents in developing countries.

Attitudes and Intentions

The local and national contexts of sexual and reproductive transitions emerged as important domains for understanding the attitudes of young people towards sexuality and the reasons that young people reported for initiating sexual activity and the use (or non-use) of condoms and contraception. Religion was found to be as an important factor across a number of countries, such as Indonesia and Kenya, because of the ways in which it constrained national policies and programs for providing information and services for young people, as well as how it shaped young people's attitudes toward sexuality.

Many of the findings point towards a need for more information regarding the extent to which adolescent sexual activity occurs within the context of relationships, with particular attention needed on the roles that relationship duration and stability play in young people's decision-

making processes. Romantic love was cited both as a reason why young people decided to begin premarital sex and as a justification for condom non-use. Studies from Vietnam, Argentina, and Brazil all mentioned the association of condom use with promiscuity and the lack of condom use within young people's relationships as an expression of trust and love. These studies and others reflected an increased recognition of the role that courtship processes within the transition to marriage serve as contexts for sexual activity. Interventions that attempt to reframe condom use as a normal part of loving relationships may potentially have a very strong effect.

In addition to the role of relationships, papers also addressed the role of young people's values and attitudes in shaping their likelihood of initiating sex and using condoms. A study of Mexican high school students found that young people with more liberal attitudes toward sexuality were more likely to have ever had sex, although there was no significant association with condom use. In contrast, the same study found that young peoples with attitudes of greater gender equality were more likely to use condoms.

Finally, many papers addressed the intergenerational transmission of attitudes and knowledge. Given that many young people today are growing up in social, economic, and cultural contexts that differ significantly from the contexts in which their parents grew up, the role of parent and child interaction is particularly salient. A paper from the Philippines found low levels of agreement between parents and their children over whether or not they had ever spoken together about sex; this study highlighted not only the different meanings and expectations that parents and their children may have about such conversations, but also questioned what the best sources of information about sexual and reproductive health for young people might be. These studies all gave attention to the need for policies that encourage more supportive parental attitudes and parents' involvement in their children's lives. In communities where parents are the standard source of information, interventions that teach parents how to talk to their children about sex might be effective. However, findings presented from a peer-led study in Recife, Brazil, emphasized the success of young adult peer leaders in educating both adolescents and older adults about condom use and reproductive health matters.

Schooling and Adolescent Transitions

While acknowledging the importance of the interaction between schooling and other adolescent transitions, papers addressing this topic found it to be very difficult to empirically overcome the joint decision-making processes that go into decisions about educational attainment and the timing of marriage and childbearing. Papers presented evidence that school enrollment may delay premarital sex and the timing of marriage and childbearing, although considerable methodological issues remain. Investments in improving one outcome, such as schooling duration, might also influence other outcomes, such as the timing of sexual debut, in ways that we are still attempting to understand.

Part of the interest in learning more about the interaction between schooling and other transitions is directed towards understanding what dimensions of schooling have the greatest influence on other domains of life. Beyond imparting knowledge and skills, schooling enhances young people's agency, attitudes and aspirations, access to resources, and subsequent opportunities. Furthermore, research also suggests that classroom and school experiences play an important role in shaping the likelihood that a young person will engage in higher risk sexual behaviors.

Sexual Behavior Transitions

Considerable attention has already been given in the literature to adolescent sexual behavior. The papers presented at this seminar added new insights by contextualizing sexual behavior within changing social norms and attitudes about sexuality and by focusing on the behavior of young people living in populations with heightened risk. Religion and perceptions of peer behavior help to frame the contexts in which young people make decisions about sexual activity and influence the availability of services for young people.

One presentation found that, in Mali, “pioneering” behavior that goes against traditional norms, such as delaying marriage or engaging in premarital sex, was associated with higher human capital, more education, and lower levels of religiosity. When contexts are changing, it is difficult to know whether behaviors that break traditional norms are a source of social problems or just an adjustment to new social conditions. Another presentation found that female circumcision was not associated with the regulation of sexual behavior in Burkina Faso in the ways in which it was locally believed to do. These findings suggest that policies that are driven by empirical evidence may help to reshape traditional norms that limit the rights and agency of young people.

Other presentations focused on the sexual behavior of young people living in vulnerable populations. Of particular interest were the reproductive health transitions of young people living in communities with high HIV prevalence rates or with histories of poor maternal and child health. Others used cross-national data from sub-Saharan Africa to critique the belief that poverty leads to sexual permissiveness. By noting variation across Zambia, Kenya, and Mali, one paper reaffirmed the need for studies to embed empirical relationships within local social systems and economic circumstances; these efforts will help policy makers develop programs that are relevant to young people in vulnerable populations.

Finally, a few papers assessed the effects of different kinds of sex education interventions on various outcomes including knowledge and behavior. Studies in Brazil, Mexico, and China all reported on assessments of the impact of such programs, and how dimensions of program design influenced outcomes. Other papers had conclusions related to the need to improve adolescents’ knowledge of sexual and reproductive health -- for example, the paper on adolescent fertility in Colombia highlighted the need for broader coverage and quality of sex education, using both formal and informal channels.

Marriage and Childbearing Transitions

Changes in marital behaviors may reflect changes in family organization, fertility, gender norms and sexual behaviors. In particular, changes in the balance between formal marriage and consensual unions may signal shifts in attitudes or resources. A study of consensual unions in Burkina Faso found that there was little difference in the stability of consensual unions and formal marriages over a three year period, with many consensual unions “ending” in marriage. Seminar participants found this to be a very interesting topic and called for more research addressing the differences between formal marriages and consensual unions, in particular as they relate to behaviors that facilitate HIV transmission and the relative experiences of men and women.

One paper addressed the experiences of married adolescents living in vulnerable populations, such as slum-dwellers in urban Bangladesh. Issues of housing and job insecurity and experiences of violence are often exacerbated by low levels of female agency. Participants noted that the role of adolescent childbearing even within marriage may be contradictory - potentially increasing social support but also possibly increasing vulnerability.

Lastly, two papers addressed the intentionality of adolescent childbearing and the need for studies to contextualize the choices of young women within their local circumstances. One paper reviewed the evidence regarding adolescent childbearing in Argentina, and found that a high proportion of adolescent mothers had not wanted a baby and that while about 60 percent were cohabiting with their partner shortly after the birth of their child, 40% were not. A study of adolescent fertility in Colombia found that young women attached different meanings to motherhood according to their socio-economic status.

Summary

The seminar made significant advances in research on adolescents' transition to adulthood in the developing world. It provided a developmental framework that is extremely useful for studying adolescent sexual and reproductive health; and it clarified the concept of agency is an important dimension of the transition to adulthood, and examined measurement of the concept. The seminar also provided a forum for the presentation of papers that addressed the complex issue of interrelationships between the various transitions that adolescents make, in terms of methodology, and with particular attention to schooling. In addition, new data collection approaches for improving reporting of sexual behavior were presented.

The seminar also focused on policies and programs to improve adolescents' sexual and reproductive health in a number of ways. Papers that directly assessed the impact of different types of interventions in different settings were presented: these ranged from community-based interventions to school-based, and from local to national studies. The importance and means of communicating research evidence and their implications to broader audiences was a topic of open discussion. Several authors and discussants commented on the implications of findings for policies and programs, and this topic was the subject of one of the two concluding panel sessions.