Family Structure and Music as a Model of Dyadic Behavior

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Abstract

The current study theorized that adult children from non-continuously intact family structures seek models of dyadic behaviors outside of their homes because their family structure lacks the necessary context from which to learn how to behave in a romantic relationship. The present research tested this prediction in two studies. Study 1 surveyed college students from a diverse Southeastern University, and Study 2 surveyed college students from a diverse Southeastern University. In both studies, participants from non-continuously intact homes reported risky sexual behaviors and sexual lyrical content in popular music was able to partially explain the sexual behaviors of participants from divorced, reconstituted families, and never married homes.

Theoretical Background

According to social learning theory, behavior occurs through the attunement of information from the external environment, specifically family and other people. In this way, children develop norms of behavior by observing the actions of others, as well as the consequences associated with those actions. A primary goal of this research was to assess the effects of non-continuously intact family structures on the intimate relationship behaviors of college students. The goal was to learn dyadic behaviors outside of the family unit. It was theorized that music would serve as that substitute.

Coming from a non-continuously intact home has been linked to early dating, becoming sexually active at an earlier age, having an increased number of dating partners, and early chilbirth when compared to those from intact homes. Adult children from non-continuously intact homes may have more difficulty trusting their dating partners and may be less willing or able to commit to long-term relationships when they become adults. Research has found that children from non-continuously intact homes seek models for their future marriages and the institution of marriage when they become adults than those from intact families. Popular music is believed to play a critical role in sexual socialization of young people in that listening to music with sexually explicit lyrics has been associated with a greater likelihood of initiating intercourse during adolescence. Previous research has documented that frequently viewing music videos containing sexual imagery related to more sexually permissive attitudes. From the perspective of social learning theory there is reason to suspect that exposure to explicit sexual content in music lyrics is associated with risky sexual behaviors. Parental guidance is important to reduce the negative effects of these messages.

Method

Study 1

Participants were 366 undergraduate students from a Midwestern public university. Demographic questions included age, sex, race, and biological parents marital status. Questions related to dating and sexual histories included age when participants had their first boyfriend or girlfriend with age responses being 1 (never) to 5 (age 15+ years). Participants were also asked the number of sexual partners they have had (0-10+, 5 for each) and the number of cohabiting relationships they have had (0-4 or more). Participants also reported how often they listened to 20 selected music artists on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being never and 5 being daily.

Exposure to sexual content in music lyrics was based on measures of content analysis using the frequency method for five songs performed by artists of interest to two independent raters. Four artists were selected to represent each music genre (e.g., hip hop, R&B, pop) based on the current popularity of the artist. Each artist were selected from the top-40 charts that had been given air play on radio stations and music television. Ratings coded for the frequency of references to the following: (a) sexual behavior, and (b) sexual talk, and demeaning messages. Inter-rater reliability was significant, (45) = .71, p < .001. Exposure variables for each genre were derived by multiplying self-reported listening with each artist’s average content in song lyrics. Total exposure variables for each genre were created by summing the lyrical content across artists.

Participants answered demographic questions along with questions assessing their dating and sexual history. Demographic questions were the same as in Study 1, and included age, sex, race, biological parents marital status. Questions related to dating and sexual histories included age when participants had their first boyfriend or girlfriend with age responses being 1 (never) to 5 (age 15+ years). Participants were also asked the number of sexual partners they have had (0-10+, 5 for each) and the number of cohabiting relationships they have had (0-4 or more). Participants also reported how often they listened to 20 selected music artists on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being never and 5 being daily.

In Study 1, exposure to sexual content in music was based on measures of content analysis using the frequency method for five songs performed by artists of interest using two independent raters. Four artists were selected to represent each music genre (e.g., hip hop, R&B, pop) based on the current popularity of the artist. Each artist were selected from the top-40 charts that had been given air play on radio stations and music television. Ratings coded for the frequency of references to the following: (a) sexual behavior, and (b) sexual talk, and demeaning messages. Inter-rater reliability was significant, (45) = .71, p < .001. Exposure variables for each genre were derived by multiplying self-reported listening with each artist’s average content in song lyrics. Total exposure variables for each genre were created by summing the lyrical content across artists.

Results

A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted with family structure as the independent variable and age at first boyfriend or girlfriend, number of sexual partners, and number of cohabiting unions as the dependent variables, while controlling for gender and age of participants. The overall MANCOVA was significant for family structure, (F(3, 305) = 4.31, p < .001). Within, marital status = .90. Sexual behaviors based on family structure are depicted in Figure 2.

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted for age at first boyfriend or girlfriend, number of sexual partners, and number of cohabiting relationships. Gender and age were entered first as control variables, followed by family structure (e.g., married, divorced, reconstituted, never married), and sexual content in song lyrics for hip hop, pop, and R&B. Interaction terms of interest can then be found in Table 1.

Discussion

Summary

The current study created sexual lyrical content exposure variables in order to assess how such lyrics influence listeners from various family backgrounds. To alleviate potential concerns with the use of an exposure variable we conducted our analyses using this measure in both Study 1 and Study 2. Additionally, the current study established a more accurate method of determining participants preferred music genre and subsequent exposure to lyrical content. In both Study 1 and Study 2, participants were matched with a preferred music genre based on how they rated popular music artists rather than being asked which music genres they liked the most. Researchers have supported the use of this self-report measure of lyrics because of the listeners reaction to the following: (a) sexual behavior, (b) sexual talk, and (c) demeaning messages. Exposure to sexual content in music lyrics is associated with risky sexual behaviors. Parental guidance is important to reduce the negative effects of these messages.

Limitations of Study

The sample used in this study was a college population and may not be representative of adults from non-continuously intact family backgrounds. Existing research has shown that children from non-continuous intact homes are less likely to attend college because of fewer resources that may be available to them. Also, the surveys for both studies described here were administered online. This may have interfered with how participants responded to the questions. The data analyzed in the current study consisted of single-item, retrospective, cross-sectional data. Because of the nature of cross-sectional data there was no control of the independent variables and there was an increased chance of error. Also, the current study could not change in participants or establish a cause and effect relationship between variables. Due to the retrospective nature of the data, participants may have had difficulty accurately recall their past experiences. The current study attempted to minimize this limitation by providing participants with age ranges as response options.

Implications for Future Research

The current study is the first study to highlight that adult children from non-continuously intact family structures seek models of dyadic behaviors outside of their home because of the confusing messages on how to behave in a romantic relationship they have received from their parents. This study also pointed that popular music artists serve as a model of dyadic behaviors in romantic relationships for these adults. Future research should elaborate on this perspective by comparing other forms of media that may be influential to this audience, such as television programming and popular films. Other aspect of music can be also influential, other than lyrical content. Previous research has documented the sexual content of music videos. Future research could examine how this form of sexual content influence the sexual behaviors of those from non-continuously intact homes.

Table 1. Predicting Sexual Behaviors in Study 1: Hierarchical Regression Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Family Structure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.06</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Predicting Sexual Behaviors in Study 2: Hierarchical Regression Analysis

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Predictor</th>
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<th>Gender</th>
<th>Cohabitation</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>.01</td>
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