

The Influence of Transition Events on the Sexual Initiation of Filipino Youth

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The first sexual experience of an individual represents an important and oftentimes defining milestone in his lifecourse. To an adolescent, sexual initiation may act as a demarcator of his entrance into adulthood and may contribute to “a redefinition of ones’ identity from a child into a developing adult and to a reconfiguration of significant interpersonal relationships, including those with family members, peers, and sexual intimates” (Upchurch, Levy-Storms, Sucoff & Aneshensel, 1998). Sexual activity during adolescence, however, can be a life-altering and destabilizing experience if the young person is not yet physically matured and emotionally and psychologically prepared to deal with its possible adverse consequences. For instance, early transition to sexual activity marks the beginning of exposure to potential risks of unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

Sexual initiation does not happen in isolation of other events in the lives of young people. Research studies from diverse cultural settings consistently show that the transition to adulthood is marked by a series of interrelated events. These transition events may serve as precursor events that either facilitate or delay the transition to sexual activity. For instance, studies have established that early departure from home and school hasten sexual debut. Similar studies linking the timing of sexual activity with the timing of other transition events, however, are largely limited.

It is against this backdrop that the present study was conceptualized with the end in view of contributing to the growing understanding of the complex social issues that influence sexual behavior. It also aims to broaden the current body of knowledge regarding the sexual behavior of young Filipinos by examining the correlates of sexual initiation, particularly other adolescent transition events. Specifically, the study aims (1) to describe the timing of the sexual initiation, specifically its age pattern across selected characteristics of young people, (2) to examine the factors that affect early sexual initiation, specifically, the influence of the major transition events and, (3) to examine the temporal order of transition to sexual activity vis-à-vis other potentially disruptive events, namely initiation to smoking, drinking and drug use. All analyses are made separately by gender since it is well established that the patterns of sexual behavior as well as expectations and values regarding sex differ markedly for males and females.

Data are drawn from the Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Survey (YAFS) conducted in April to June 2002. It is the third in a series of nationally-representative cross-sectional surveys on adolescents jointly undertaken by the University of the Philippines Population Institute and the Demographic Research and Development Foundation. The main objective of the survey is to elicit information on the knowledge, attitude and behavior of Filipino youth in a wide range of sexual and non-sexual issues along with the institutions which are believed to influence these behaviors. The individual respondents consisted of 19,728 males and females 15-27 years old. The ages of the respondents at the time of initial occurrence of major events in

their lives (e.g., age first left parental home, age started working, age started reading/watching pornographic materials) were elicited in the survey. These comprise the age at entry marking the transition to these events.

Seven key transition events classified into two groups are examined in this study. The first set of transition events are classified as “normative events” and include home-leaving, school-leaving and employment. These are major events in the lifecourse that nearly all individuals are expected to undergo and are considered traditional markers of the transition to adulthood but may be detrimental to young people if they occur too early. The second group, called “non-normative events,” consists of initiation to smoking, drinking, drug use and exposure to pornographic materials. Not all individuals are expected to take up these behavior and most young people negotiate adolescence without traversing these events. The latter events, however, have greater potential to be disruptive of the lives of adolescents than the normative events.

The timing of sexual initiation

The timing of sexual initiation is examined using survival analysis method. The analysis focuses on the age patterns in sexual initiation disaggregated across categories of three selected characteristics of young people: gender, type of place of residence and economic status. The analyses are done separately by context of sexual initiation, i.e., either premarital or marital. The life table approach is used to estimate the probabilities of sexual initiation by single age. The results are depicted in figures showing the cumulative proportions of young people who have experienced sex for ages 13 through 27 and in the age-specific hazard rates of initiating sex.

The results show that the likelihood of sexual initiation generally increases with advancing age with the rates of both premarital and marital sexual onset peaking at ages 18 to 20. Marked differences are noted across gender with males dominating premarital sex initiation while females overtaking males in sexual onset within marriage. Overall, males have their first sexual experience substantially earlier than females. By age 20, 44.7% of males and half (22.1%) of this figure for females have engaged in premarital sex. By age 27, the proportions had increased to 66.4% and 40.4%, respectively. Unlike gender, however, place of residence and economic status do not appear to be differentiating factors in the timing of initiation of sexual activity, be it premarital or marital.

Factors affecting sexual initiation: a multivariate analysis

Multinomial logistic regression analysis is employed to estimate the effects of a number of factors on the probability of engaging in early sexual initiation, engaging in late sex or not having sexual experience at all. Early sexual initiation is defined in this study as commencing sexual activity below age 20 for females and below age 19 for males. Early sex accounted for about 60% of the sexual experiences of both sexes. Two sets of these multivariate models are estimated, one for each gender. The explanatory variables are categorized into two major groups: socioeconomic characteristics of the youth and transition events. Four socioeconomic characteristics are included in the model, namely, exposure to urban areas, economic status

(measured by a wealth index ranging from 1 to 5 and is treated as a continuous variable with 1 signifying membership in the poorest quintile and 5 referring to membership in the wealthiest quintile), whether or not the respondents were raised by both parents and whether or not they have peers with premarital sexual experience. Seven time-varying covariates are included in the model --- the three normative events (home-leaving, school-leaving and employment) and the four non-normative events (smoking, drinking, drug use and exposure to pornographic materials).

The multivariate analysis is based on event history methodology to allow for the inclusion of these time-varying variables in the model. For this purpose, a person-years file is created containing a set of yearly intervals in which respondents were at risk of having sexual intercourse. Using the person-years file and a multinomial logistic regression procedure, a discrete time approximation to a continuous-time hazard rate model is estimated using the procedure outlined by Allison (1984) and patterned after the studies conducted by Choe, Hui-Sheng, Podhista & Raymundo (2001) and Choe & Raymundo (2001).

The results of the multinomial logistic regression analysis show that nearly all of the explanatory variables are significant predictors of the timing of sexual initiation. Urban exposure is positively associated with sexual activity for both males and females although the effect on the timing varies by gender. Males who had lived in an urban setting recorded higher likelihood of engaging in early sex than late sex whereas their female counterparts are more likely to engage in later sexual activities. In contrast, economic status does not show a significant influence on males' timing of sexual activity, and although statistically significant, the magnitude of the effect on females is quite small.

Being raised by both parents appears to be a deterring factor of female sexual initiation, regardless of the timing. While parental presence is associated with a reduction in the likelihood of early onset of sex among males, it appears to be a positive factor on later sexual initiation. Peers, on the other hand, recorded consistent influence on both male and female youth. For both sexes, having friends with premarital sexual experience would more likely lead to sexual initiation during adolescence, be it early or late. Worth noting is the adverse effect of having peers with premarital sex experience on earlier sexual debut which is about six times larger for males than females.

The protective influence of the family is also discernible in the effect of living away from home. As expected, home-leaving experience hastens the sexual debut of males and females and even the late sexual initiation of the latter as well. For males, however, the effect on later sexual onset is not statistically significant.

The impact of school-leaving on sexual initiation is quite substantial especially among women. Young females who had dropped out from school are 30 percent and 10 percent more likely to engage in early and late sex, respectively, than those who had stayed in school. Among males, departure from school displays contrasting effect on the timing of sexual involvement. While school-leaving surprisingly inhibits male from engaging in sex at an early age, it appears to encourage late sexual initiation. A similar pattern is observed in the effect of work

experience on the timing of sexual onset for both males and females. Being employed reduces the probability of engaging in early first sex but increases the likelihood of later sexual activity.

The adverse effect of smoking, drinking and drug use on men's early sexual initiation is clearly manifested. Young males who have tried smoking are more likely to have early or late sexual debut than those who have not. The same pattern holds true for alcohol drinking and drug use. However, among females, the coefficients of both smoking and drinking variables are not in the expected direction. Females who smoked are more likely to engage in early sex but are less likely to have late sexual experience. On the other hand, females who have tried drinking are surprisingly less likely to engage in early sex but have higher tendency for later sexual debut.

Of the three substance use behaviors, smoking, drinking and drug use, it is the last one which exerts the largest effect on the timing of sexual initiation. Unlike smoking and drinking which showed inconsistent pattern for the two genders, drug use increases the likelihood of engaging in early and late sex for both males and females. Regardless of gender, young people who had used drugs are 16 percentage points more likely to have early first sex than those who had never used drugs.

The most pronounced gender pattern disparity can be seen in the effect of exposure to pornographic materials on sexual initiation. As expected, being exposed to x-rated books and movies raises the tendency of young Filipino males to engage in sex regardless of the timing of the intercourse. In sharp contrast, such exposure lowers the likelihood of initiating sexual activity among females.

Predicting the timing of sexual initiation versus other risky behavior

The influence of the timing of three non-normative events (smoking, drinking alcohol and drug use) is examined in greater detail. This is done by comparing life table estimates of the timing of transition to first sex for three age markers (ages 15, 18 and 21) with three time-varying covariates, namely age at first smoking, age at first drinking and age at first drug use.

The linkages between smoking, drinking and drug use as potential risk factors for early sexual initiation are corroborated by the data which demonstrate that substance use is a precursor to sexual activity especially among males. Early onset of smoking, drinking and drug use among young men produces elevated probabilities of initiating sex. Males who started smoking cigarettes at age 15 are predicted to initiate sex at much higher rates than those who first smoked at later ages. By age 20, more than half of young men who have tried smoking at either 15 or 18 years old are predicted to have had sexual intercourse. In contrast, only 37.9% of males who began smoking at age 21 are sexually experienced by age 20. Similarly, the probabilities of initiating sex are lower among men who delayed drinking to age 18 and lowest among those who postponed the event to age 21 compared to those who started drinking much earlier.

However, for females, the patterns for smoking and drinking are not as conclusive. The data show that early age at initiation of smoking and drinking do not necessarily translate to higher likelihood of sexual debut among women. Initiation of smoking at ages 15 and 18 do not

exhibit marked differences on the likelihood of sexual intercourse across all ages of young women. Delaying the onset of smoking to age 21, however, produces lower probability of sexual initiation although by age 26, regardless of the timing of the initial smoking activity, 80% of females have become sexually active. In terms of alcohol drinking, regardless of the age at which young females started drinking, the probability of sexual onset generally remains the same although commencing drinking at age 21 exhibit slightly lower likelihood of sexual onset across ages.

Delaying use of drugs, however, is found to be associated with later sexual activity. The levels are more elevated compared to those displayed by initiation of smoking and drinking substantiating the much closer linkage between drug use and sexual activity reported in the literature. In contrast with the gender-disparate findings exhibited by smoking and drinking, the timing of drug use exerts similar impact on the timing of sexual initiation for males and females. As expected, delaying experimentation with drugs would lead to lower likelihood of sexual interaction. Among males, the widest gap (more than 20%) is found at age 20 between initiation of drug use at age 18 and age 21. Three-fifths of men who had tried using drugs at 18 years old are sexually experienced by age 20 compared to only two-fifths of males who initiated drug use three years later. Similarly, women who used drugs at age 18 posted a probability of sexual initiation at age 20 (61.7%) which is 23 percent higher than those who began drug use at age 21 (38.6%).

The study provides new information on critical issues surrounding the first sexual experience of Filipino youth by advancing the understanding of changes in the timing and context of sexual debut in the country and examining the factors underlying previously established links. The study has shown that delay of onset of sexual activity could be achieved if precursor events such as home-leaving, exposure to pornographic materials and substance use are postponed to a later age or not initiated at all.

References

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