

**TEENAGE ROMANCE AND SEX:
THE RELATIONSHIP CONTEXT OF SEXUAL ACTIVITY**

**Abstract Submitted to the 2004 Annual Meeting
of the Population Association of America**

Wendy D. Manning

Peggy C. Giordano

Monica A. Longmore

**Department of Sociology &
Center for Family and Demographic Research**

Bowling Green State University

Bowling Green, OH 43403

419-372-2850

wmannin@bgnet.bgsu.edu

This research is supported by a grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (HD36223).

TEENAGE ROMANCE AND SEX: THE RELATIONSHIP CONTEXT OF SEXUAL ACTIVITY

Short Abstract

The majority of teenagers report having sex during their high school years and the literature in demography and other social sciences emphasizes the timing of first sexual experience and contraceptive use. Remarkably little attention has been paid to the relationship context of sexual activity. We initially investigate the norms surrounding dating and sexual activity and determine how these norms influence adolescent sexual behaviors. We then examine relationship features of both romantic and nonromantic sexual relationships, and identify similarities and differences in these types of relationships. We draw on data derived from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS). These data are unique and include both survey data from 1316 7th, 9th, and 11th graders and in-depth interviews from 100 survey respondents. This paper builds on prior work by using multi-method approach to examine the nature of adolescent sexual relationships.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

The majority of teenagers report having sexual intercourse during their high school years (e.g. Warren et al. 1998). Extensive social science research has been dedicated to the incidence and correlates of adolescent sexual activity. Despite the potential importance of the transition into sexual activity, remarkably little is known about the normative climates within which these behaviors develop, and the meaning(s) of such behaviors to the adolescents themselves.

Prior work emphasizes that most teenagers (three-quarters) have their first sexual encounter within the confines of a romantic relationship (e.g., Elo, King, & Furstenberg 1999; Manning, Longmore, & Giordano 2000), but over three-fifths of sexually active teens eventually have had sex with nonromantic partners (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano 2002). Researchers have expressed concern about teenage nonromantic sexual relationships because of risks of sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancy, and emergence of short term sexual relationships that lack commitment (e.g. Ford, Sohn, & Lepowski 2000; Manning et al. 2000; Norris, Ford, Shyr, & Schork 1996; Ott, Adler, Millstein, Tschann, & Ellen 2002). Our paper elaborates on this body of work by analyzing newly gathered survey and in-depth interview data with teenagers. We focus on three research questions. First, we explore the norms surrounding dating

and sexual activity. Second we determine how these norms influence adolescent sexual behaviors. Third, we explore the nature and quality of both romantic and nonromantic sexual relationships, and assess distinctions and similarities in these types of relationships.

Background

A key feature of adolescence is the development of romantic relationships. Heightened interest in and involvement with the opposite sex has long been considered a hallmark of the adolescent period (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan 1994; Sullivan 1953). These relationships have an important developmental role as they help set the stage and build skills for later intimate relationships.

Behaviorally, there appears to be typical patterns of dating and sexual activity that provide some indication of the normative climate. For example, a sequence of dating and sexual activity occurs such that teenagers commonly begin dating before they ever have sexual intercourse (Longmore, Manning, and Giordano 2001). Also, many dating teens do have sex with their boyfriends or girlfriends, approximately two-fifths of teenagers in romantic relationships had sexual intercourse with their partner (Carver et al. 2003). Yet we know little about what adolescents view as appropriate relational and sexual activities within dating relationships. Norms are standards that specify how one should behave under certain circumstances, usually reflecting a group's value system. Norms are especially useful in ambiguous situations in which an individual is uncertain how to behave. It is through this normative climate that adolescents learn how to develop their own relationships. We argue that the normative climate surrounding adolescent relationships may set the stage for understanding adolescents' own sexual behaviors. However, norms are most useful for deciphering public behaviors; thus we may find that norms are not as useful for understanding behaviors that typically occur in private.

Sexual activity during adolescence has become statistically normative (Alan Guttmacher Institute 1994; Warren et al. 1998), and as a result researchers are calling for more detailed conceptualizations of adolescent sexual activity (e.g., Miller, Forehand, and Kotchick 1999; Santelli, Robin, Brener, and Lowry 2001; Whitaker, Miller, and Clark 2000). Research that focuses on the meanings of sexual partners indicates that adolescents distinguish between groups of sexual partners: steady, casual, and one-night stands (Ellen, Cahn, Eyre, and Boyer 1996). Yet, sexual activity outside of formal dating relationships is a little researched dimension of adolescent life.

Only a few studies examine *adolescents'* non-romantic sexual experiences. There is evidence, however, that significant numbers of adolescents do engage in non-romantic sex. Analyses of the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth indicate that one-quarter (23 percent) of adolescent girls reported their first sexual experience with someone

whom they just met, with individuals with whom they were “just friends” or had gone out with “once in a while” (Elo et al. 1999; Manning, et al. 2000). Even though most teens have a romantic first sexual partner, over three-fifths (64%) of sexually active adolescents have had a non-romantic sexual partner at some point (Manning et al. 2002). Moreover, Ford et al. (2001) report that one-fifth of teenage sexual relationships are with non-romantic partners. Thus, we need to broaden our view of the relationship context of teenagers’ sexual experiences and reconsider our conceptualizations of adolescent sexual relationships.

Prior studies stress the positive features of romantic relationships and emphasize that romantic relationships are the “best” context for sexual activity. Researchers seem to express some relief that most teenagers have their first sexual experience in romantic relationships. For example, “Thus it appears for the most part, even though adolescents are indulging in sexual behavior, it is in the context of a committed relationship (Graber, Britto, and Brooks-Gunn 1999, p. 371). Some research seems to apply an adult model by almost equating the positive features of marriages to adolescent dating relationships. Yet researchers have also documented more problematic features, including the use of violent “conflict tactics,” (Giordano, Manning and Longmore, 2002; Hagan and Foster, 2001), and links to psychological distress (Joyner and Udry, 2000).

Most prior studies that examine the relationship context of sexual behavior are motivated by questions about which types of relationships lead to greater contraceptive or condom use. Prior research shows that the associations between type of sexual relationship and contraceptive use are often contradictory. Some studies report that teens in romantic relationships more often use contraception (Ford et al. 2001; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Swain 1988), other researchers find no association (Ku et al. 1994; Manning et al. 2000; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku 1991), and other work reports negative associations between relationship type and contraceptive use (Ellen, Cahn, Eyre, & Boyer 1996; Landry and Camelo 1994; Ott et al. 2002; Plichta et al. 1992). In some cases these findings differ according to sexual history, gender, age, but still no consistent pattern of results emerges. It is possible that these disparate findings stem from an oversimplified distinction between romantic and nonromantic relationships. The relationship dynamics in romantic and nonromantic sexual relationships may not be as distinct as characterized by a simple romantic and nonromantic dichotomous classification.

Current Investigation

Our research addresses three basic questions about teenagers’ sexual relationships. First, we assess the normative climate and values surrounding sexual activity in dating relationships. Our goal is to learn from adolescents what they view as appropriate relational and sexual activities within dating relationships. Our pre-test work indicated

that a particularly critical area for further investigation relates to youths' beliefs about exclusivity and commitment. Thus, for example, we inquire about acceptability of dating concurrency, sexual concurrency (cheating), and conditions under which it is acceptable to have sex (e.g. links between love and sex). Few data sources have such rich information about the sexual norms that surround adolescent romantic relationships.

Second, we examine teenagers self reported sexual behaviors in romantic relationships and evaluate how norms influence sexual behaviors in dating relationships. Similar to other studies, we examine teen's sexual behavior (intercourse and other sexual behaviors). Unlike other data sources that rely on starting and ending dates of dating relationships to measure concurrency or cheating, we measure concurrency and cheating by asking respondents directly about their own behavior and their boy/girlfriends' behavior. For example, "Sometimes people see more than one person at a time. Since your relationship with ___ started how have you seen another guy/girl? How often has ___ seen another guy/girl?" We ask a similar question sequence about having sex. We also inquire about their partner specific contraceptive use, condom use, and consistency of condom use.

We focus specifically on how adolescent norms influence their sexual behaviors. An underlying assumption in much work on adolescent sexual activity is that norms have strong influences on adolescent sexual behavior, but this basic assumption is rarely tested. It is important to note that norms typically are most powerful at guiding *public* behavior. This suggests that norms may not be particularly powerful predictors of private behaviors, such as adolescent sexuality. We evaluate how teens' sexual norms are related to their own sexual behavior in dating relationships.

Third, we investigate how the qualities and features of adolescent romantic and non-romantic sexual relationships are similar and different. We argue that we need to move beyond research whose interest in relationship type rests solely on how it is tied to other events (contraceptive use) and begin to explore the nature of adolescent relationships. In fact, understanding the nature of adolescent relationships will help us to understand those links between different types of sexual relationships and contraceptive use.

We believe that a useful initial distinction exists between romantic and nonromantic sexual partners. However, in reality some features are shared across these ideal types. We argue that even nonromantic sexual partners share some type of relationship and the nature of this relationship warrants attention. The classification of sexual partners into those two categories (romantic and nonromantic) may be obscuring similarities across these relationships. Indeed, we may be applying an adult model of relationships to adolescent sexual experiences. We evaluate the ways that romantic and nonromantic sexual relationships are similar and different, allowing assessments of whether and how

the distinction between romantic and nonromantic is meaningful or alternatively, requires conceptual redefinition.

Our data permit a more in-depth inquiry into various contexts within which teenage sexual relationships may occur. We inquire about how teens categorize their sexual relationships, as occurring with “someone they didn’t know, an acquaintance, a friend, a former girl/boyfriend, someone they went out once in a while, a girl/boyfriend, other, or a best friend.” The in-depth qualitative data suggest that involvement with former girl/boyfriends and with friends are particularly important contexts in which sexual intimacy occurs. To help understand the meaning of these sexual relationships we consider the following three domains: duration, demographic asymmetry, and relational asymmetry. We also asked about the link between sex and the nature of the relationship. For example, adolescents in both non-romantic and romantic relationships are asked to report whether they felt closer to their sexual partner after they had sex. We also ask teens who had non-romantic sexual partners whether they/partner were interested in developing a more traditional romantic relationship. Finally, we tap into motivations for sex that include: self exploration, relationship based, peer pressure, and developmental considerations.

Data and Analysis

Our research uses primarily survey data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS). The TARS is well suited for this paper because the survey includes rich, detailed questions about the nature and meanings of adolescent relationships. This project was designed from the outset to provide a multidimensional portrait of the nature of adolescents' dating and other sexual experiences. Extensive structured data were collected from a stratified random sample of over 1316 adolescents. The sample of 1,316 teenagers was drawn from the enrollment records for 2000 of all youth in the 7th, 9th, and 11th grades in Lucas County, Ohio. This encompassed 62 schools across 7 school districts. The sample includes oversamples of African American and Latino adolescents. The sociodemographic characteristics of Lucas County closely parallel those of the nation with regard to race and ethnicity, median family income, education levels, and housing costs. Based on Census data the populations of the MSA of Toledo and the nation are similar in terms of race (13% in Toledo and 12% in U.S. are Black); education (80% in Toledo and 84% in U.S. are high school graduates); median income (\$50,046 in Toledo and \$50,287 in U.S.); and marital status (73.5% in Toledo and 75.9% in U.S. are married couple families).

National data sources often include attention to dating (NSFG, NSFH, NLSY, NSAM, Add Health) but focus on timing of dating (or sex) and do not provide detailed assessments of the subjective qualities and dynamics of adolescent relationships that motivate behavior. For example, measures of duration are often used to provide

indirect assessments of closeness, but particularly for teenage relationships levels of intensity and volatility, as well as longevity are critical to consider. We consider our analysis of the TARS data to be an important adjunct to analyses that maximize the strengths of larger data collections.

In addition to the survey data, we incorporate in-depth interviews with a subset (n=100) of the respondents who had participated in the structured interview. These were scheduled separately, taped and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Respondents were selected based on their race/gender characteristics, and having a minimum level of dating experience. The sample included 51 girls and 49 boys. Of these 40 were white, 33 were African American, 26 were Hispanic, and one was other (Filipino). The interviews lasted, on average, 60 minutes. In-depth interviews are an excellent method for exploring perceptions, behavioral patterns, and their cognitive justifications, ultimately helping to illuminate the processes that quantitative social science seeks to uncover (Weiss 1994). The interviews provided a detailed portrait of the respondent's dating and sexual history, with a particular emphasis on the meaning, character and salience of the various relationships from the respondent's point of view. We generate abstracts for each in-depth interview that encapsulates the respondents' sexual behaviors and attitudes. We also code the in-depth interviews which is an intensive analytic task that captures the meaning of textual data from the interviews. Coding consists of marking portions of text (often overlapping) with categories from the codelist (a group of concepts that represent phenomena). We searched for instances in which the issue of sexual activity was raised by the respondent and in response to the question about their sexual histories.

The multi-method strategy of using a qualitative component in tandem with a larger quantitative study has advantages over free-standing quantitative data collection. Thus, we are able to use both the quantitative (numeric) and qualitative (textual) data to investigate further the meaning of the romantic and sexual relationships. This multi-method approach adds to prior work that has been restricted to a more narrow range of relationships (e.g., casual vs. main partnerships), and an even more narrow range of relationship dynamics (e.g., use of condom, duration of the relationship, demographic asymmetries).

Our analyses of adolescent norms rests on the full sample of adolescents (n=1,316) with specific analyses of differences according to age, race, gender, dating and sexual history. We rely on the qualitative data to help inform us about norms that we are not tapping with the survey data. This portion of the analyses is largely descriptive and we will use t-tests to examine mean differences in normative orientations.

We then examine how norms influence sexual behaviors within current or most recent romantic relationships (n=966). We estimate separate logistic regression models to predict how norms influence whether or not teenagers have "fooled around - more

than just kissing and making out, but not sexual intercourse” with their boyfriend/ girlfriend, had sexual intercourse with their boyfriend/ girlfriend, or had concurrent dating or sexual relations. The qualitative data will be used to help determine whether and through what specific mechanisms teens perceive sexual norms or values as influencing their sexual decision-making.

Finally, we will use logistic regression to determine whether the qualities and features of romantic and nonromantic relationships significantly differ. These analyses that distinguish romantic and nonromantic relationships will rely on 413 sexually active teenagers. The qualitative data will shed light on the ways in which non-romantic sexual relationships are defined and managed and how they fit into the larger pattern of adolescents’ relationship “careers.”

REFERENCES

- Alan Guttmacher Institute. 1994. *Sex and America's Teenagers*. New York: Alan Guttmacher Institute.
- Brooks-Gunn, J. and G. Duncan. 1994. "Poverty and Adolescence." Pp. 16-17 in *Vision 2010: Families and Adolescents*, edited by S. Price, P. McKenry, and S. Gavai. Minneapolis, MN: National Council on Family Relations.
- Carver, K., K. Joyner, and J. R. Udry. 2003. "National Estimates of Adolescent Romantic Relationships." *Adolescent Romantic Relations and Sexual Behavior, Theory, Research and Practical Implications*. Pp. 23-56. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Ellen, J., S. Cahn, S. Eyre, and C. Boyer. 1996. "Types of Adolescent Sexual Relationships and Associated Perceptions About Condom Use." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 18:417-21.
- Elo, I. T., R. Berkowitz King, and F. F. Furstenberg, Jr. 1999. "Adolescent Females: Their Sexual Partners and the Fathers of Their Children." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61:74-84.
- Ford, K., W. Sohn, and J. Lepowski. 2001. "Characteristics of Adolescents' Sexual Partners and Their Association with Use of Condoms and Other Contraceptive Methods." *Family Planning Perspectives* 33:100-105&132.
- Ford, K. and A. Norris. 2000. "Patterns of Union Formation Among Urban Minority Youth in the United States." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 29:177-88.
- Graber, J. A., P. R. Britto, and J. Brooks-Gunn. 1999. "What's love got to do with it? Adolescents' and young adults' beliefs about sexual and romantic relationships." *The development of romantic relationships in adolescence*. Pp. 364-395. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Giordano, P. C., W. D. Manning, and M. A. Longmore. "The Romantic Relationships of African-American and White Adolescents/" Under Review *Social Science Quarterly*. (August 1, 2003).
- Hagan, J. and H. Foster. 2001. "Youth Violence and the End of Adolescence." *American Sociological Review* 66:874-99.
- Ku, L., F. Sonenstein, and J. Pleck. 1994. "The Dynamics of Young Men's Condom Use During and Across Relationships." *Family Planning Perspectives* 26:246-51.

- Landry, D. J., and T. M. Camelo. 1994. "Young Unmarried Men and Women Discuss Men's Role in Contraceptive Practice." *Family Planning Perspectives* 26:222-27.
- Longmore, M. A., W. D. Manning, and P. C. Giordano. 2001. "Preadolescent Parenting Strategies and Teens' Dating and Sexual Initiation: A Longitudinal Analysis." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 63:322-35.
- Manning, W. D., M. A. Longmore, and P. C. Giordano. 2000. "The Relationship Context of Contraceptive Use at First Intercourse." *Family Planning Perspectives* 32:104-10.
- Manning, W., M. Longmore, and P. Giordano. 2002. "Adolescents' Involvement in Non-Romantic Sexual Activity." Center for Family and Demographic Research Working Paper 2002-03, Bowling Green State University.
- Miller, K. S., R. Forehand, B. A. Kotchick. 1999. "Adolescent sexual behavior in two ethnic minority samples: The role of family variables." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61:85-98.
- Norris, A., K. Ford, Y. Shyr, and M. A. Schork. 1996. "Heterosexual experiences and partnerships of urban, low-income African-American and Hispanic youth." *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes and Human Retrovirology* 11:288-300.
- Ott, M., N. Adler, S. Millstein, J. Tschann, and J. Ellen. 2002. "The Trade-Off Between Hormonal Contraceptives and Condoms Among Adolescents." *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 34:6-14.
- Pleck, J. H., F. L. Sonenstein, and L. C. Ku. 1991. "Adolescent Males' Condom Use: Relationships between Perceived Costs-Benefits and Consistency." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53:733-45.
- Pleck, J. H., F. L. Sonenstein, and S. O. Swain. 1988. "Adolescent Males' Sexual Behavior and Contraceptive Use: Implications for Male Responsibility." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 3:275-84.
- Plichta, S. B., C. S. Weisman, C. A. Nathanson, M. E. Ensminger, et al. 1992. "Partner-Specific Condom Use Among Adolescent Women Clients of a Family Planning Clinic." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 13: 506-11.

- Santelli, J., L. Robin, N. Brener, and R. Lowry. 2001. "Timing of Alcohol and Other Drug Use and Adolescent Sexual Risk Behaviors Among Unmarried Adolescents and Young Adults." *Family Planning Perspectives* 33:200-205.
- Sullivan, H. 1953. *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*. New York: Norton.
- Warren, C. W., J. S. Santelli, S. A. Everett, L. Kann, J. Collins, C. Cassell, L. Morris, and L. Kolbe. 1998. "Sexual Behavior Among U.S. High School Students 1990-1995." *Family Planning Perspectives* 30:170-172,200.
- Weiss, R. S. 1994. *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. NY, NY: Free Press.
- Whitaker, D. K. Miller, and L. Clark. 2000. "Reconceptualizing Adolescent Sexual Behavior: Beyond Did They or Didn't They?" *Family Planning Perspectives* 32:111-17.