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**THE COMPLEXITIES OF ADOLESCENT SEXUAL AND RELATIONSHIP BIOGRAPHIES:
FLUIDITY, MEANING(S), AND IMPLICATIONS FOR WELL-BEING**

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The Complexities of Adolescent Sexual and Relationship Biographies:

Fluidity, Meaning(s), and Implications for Well-Being

Romantic and sexual relationships are a key part of adolescent development (Collins, Welsh, and Furman 2009). Moreover, these relationships loom large in the minds and lives of teenagers themselves (Brown 1999; Eder 1993; Giordano, Longmore, and Manning 2006). Yet the norms that traditionally supported more formal, regulated patterns of love, sex and romance have weakened, making the world of relationships more uncertain and risky (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Bulcroft et al. 2000). As a result, relative to the recent past, adolescents experience a wider array of dating and sexual relationships. Depending on the sexual and romantic experiences in which adolescents are involved, there may be different implications for their young adult health and well-being. Traditionally, either a risk framework or an adult or marriage perspective has been superimposed on these youthful relationship processes.

In assessing the consequences of adolescents' involvement in intimate relationships, life course scholars often superimpose an adult lens, which emphasizes the importance of stable union formation on youthful relationship processes. Reliance on this kind of lens (e.g., Clausen 1991) leads to the conclusion that relationship stability and fewer relationships, by definition, will be associated with positive outcomes including greater "romantic competence" and better well-being later in the life course. Weis (1998) contends "patterns of sexual and intimate interactions are largely learned within the context of adolescent experiences, and these are likely to be extended into adulthood" (p. 122). Conversely, scholars focusing on teen sexual activity and anti-social behaviors often view intimate and sexual relationships from a deficit or risk

approach. Involvement of adolescents in dating and sexual relationships is viewed as a precursor to problem behaviors, such as delinquency (Jessor and Jessor 1977). Thus, rather divergent perspectives have focused on the consequences of adolescent romantic and sexual relationships, a point also made by Furman (2002) in noting that the romantic relationships and sexuality literatures have for the most part developed as separate areas of scholarship. Nevertheless, both perspectives tend to focus on problematic aspects of romantic and sexual relationships. In this chapter paper, we review a range of adolescent romantic and sexual relationships, and suggest limitations of problematizing all aspects of these early sexual and romantic experiences. Our work extends beyond prior studies by integrating the literatures on adolescent dating relationships and life course perspectives on adolescent sexual relationships.

This chapter reviews findings from the literature and presents new analyses from the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS). The TARS examines the influence of variations in adolescents' sexual experiences on consequential personal and relational outcomes during emerging adulthood including self-esteem, depressive symptoms, gainful activity, and intimate partner violence. The TARS is a stratified, random sample of adolescents registered for the 7th, 9th, and 11th grades in Lucas County, Ohio, based on enrollment records from the year 2000. Data for the analytic sample (n = 324) are from the fourth interview (2006), when respondents were ages 18-19; these data retrospectively access cumulative adolescent sexual and relational experiences. The subsequent outcomes are from the fifth interview (2011), when respondents were ages 22-23. We provide descriptive analysis of sexual and romantic relationship experience and examine how adolescent romantic and sexual experiences are related to our key indicators of well-being during young adulthood.

Adolescent romantic and sexual lives.

In recent years, scholars have documented growing diversity in adolescents' involvement in dating and sexual relationships. Some adolescents report being involved in traditional dating relationships (with and without sexual activity), and some report involvement in non-dating sexual relationships. For example, drawing on the 1994-1995 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) school-based sample, 69% of boys and 76% of girls had a romantic relationship by age 18 (Carver, Joyner, and Udry 2003). The term romantic relationship may not appropriately describe all adolescent relationships and other data sources reference dating more generally. Monitoring the Future data demonstrated that in 2001 86% of high school seniors had ever dated and decreased to 66% in 2011 (Child Trends 2013). The longitudinal data in the TARS allows an assessment of dating experience based on reports at each wave rather than rely on a single retrospective report and is not limited to just adolescents in school. Analysis of the TARS data indicates that nearly all, 95%, of 18-19 year olds had ever dated in 2006 and among daters the mean number of dating partners in the past two years was 2.3. In the literature, dating itself is not considered problematic unless sexual activity is included as part of the picture.

Regarding sexual activity, studies based on the 2006-2010 National Survey of Family Growth indicated that 61% of 18 year olds have had sex and 71% of 19 year olds (Finer and Philbin 2013). These findings are consistent with Youth Risk Behavior Survey findings in which 63% of 12th graders in 2011 ever had sexual intercourse (Child Trends 2013). Similarly, the TARS data indicates that 70% of respondents had ever had sexual intercourse by age 18. The number of sexual partners during adolescence includes a broad range with an average of 3.4 sexual partners among 18-19 years in 2006 and a mean of 4.8 partners among sexually active

teens. The greater the number of sexual partners may operate as an indicator of promiscuous behavior that could be tied to greater risk and problem behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use.

The relationship context of adolescent sexual activity has received increased attention of special interest is involvement in 'hook ups' or casual sex experiences among adolescents. Yet it is important to note that sexual intercourse in adolescence typically occurs within the context of committed relationships. Based on the Add Health, most adolescents (67%) who have dated also have had sex within their romantic relationship (Raley, Crissey and Muller 2007). First sexual intercourse most often occurs within a committed relationship, about three-quarters of females and just over half of males doing so (Gibbs 2013; Martinez, Copen, and Abma 2011). Thus, a substantial minority (more males than females) of adolescents started their sexual biographies outside the confines of relationship. Using TARS data and determining sexual partnerships at each wave we find that by late adolescence about half of sexually active teens have had sex with someone they were not dating. In other words 70% of sexually active adolescents had sex outside of a relationship context. The mean number of casual sex partners overall is 1.5 and among TARS respondents who reported having casual sex is 3.3. The relationship context of sexual behavior is tied to some extent risk factors (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2005).

A more detailed examination indicates that these sexual relationships are typically not one-night stands with someone the teenager has just met (Manning, Giordano, and Longmore 2006). Instead, the bulk of these are sexual experiences with someone the teenager had dated in the past or considers a friend. Furthermore, at times these relationships evolve into dating relationships and can lead to sexual partners feeling closer to one another (Manning et al. 2006). However, extensive sexual experience outside of dating relationships may establish patterns that

carryover into adulthood. For example, having many casual sexual partners or adopting a ‘player’ orientation during adolescence could influence the character of adult intimate unions.

These statistics do not reflect the notion that the contours of adolescent relationships are fluid, with variable meanings along with blurry starting and ending points. At times these relationships defy neat categorization. In the TARS data the mean duration of adolescent dating relationships was about six months. Most 18-19 year olds (82%) who have dated experienced a relationship break up. While breaking up is a common experience for adolescents, our research has also documented a significant amount of relationship churning (breaking up and getting back together) as well as having ‘sex with an ex’ (Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, and Longmore 2013). Two-fifths of 18-19 years olds had broken up and gotten back together making it difficult to discern relationship starts and ending points. Further, about one-quarter (23.8%) of respondents who have ever dated had sex with an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend. Thus, it is challenging to classify the relationship and sexual experiences of adolescents.

Summarizing, then, a feature of the contemporary adolescent life course is involvement with sexual activity outside of the traditional dating context. Yet prior work also finds that many adolescent relationships often contain some traditional elements, and may occur as part of a pattern that includes involvement in traditional dating relationships. The fluidity of adolescent relationships challenges some of the traditional perspectives on the meaning and implications of dating and sexual relationships.

Implications in Young Adulthood

We review the literature and explore empirically the degree to which such early experiences as number of sex partners, number of dating partners, and number of sex outside a traditional dating context have implications for later emotional well-being, gainful activity, and relationship

quality. Results generally do not support the risk conceptualization, namely that these experiences do not reflect fundamental deficits in relationship skill-building, but can be considered normative steps in the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Scholars who study adolescent romantic relationships often emphasize that dating teaches teens how to 'do' romance; that is, how to be the expert in their own relationships. Laursen and Jensen-Campbell (1999:64) convey this idea of relationship skill building: "Brief romantic encounters provide adolescents with opportunities to practice exchange rules and refine personal resources prior to initiating relationships that entail commitment and reproduction." Adolescent competence in the relationship domain may lead to more intense dating or more positive experiences in adulthood because teens work through their relationships, which is still subject to change and re-direction as youth encounter new romantic and dating experiences. Furman and Simon (1999) argue that exposure to romantic relationships allows teenagers to develop important skills that help understand partners' motivations and behavior. Furman and Simon (1999) contend that this more sophisticated reasoning may be facilitated by the development of romantic relationships during adolescence, rather than through a series of more fleeting sexual liaisons. Giordano et al. (2006) interviewed a young man who let a relationship drag on even after he wished to break up. Eventually, he started dating someone else before he had ended the prior relationship ("I just couldn't do it."). As the young man observed the way this made his first girlfriend feel, he began to recognize that, "If I'm feeling a certain way I should just tell them and not just sit there and wait and wait and not tell her." Dating relationships thus provide numerous opportunities to learn about positive relationship dynamics, such as love, intimate self-disclosure and caring, as well as challenges in sustaining relationships such as negotiating roles, disagreements, break-ups, conflict, and jealousy.

Sexual relationships during adolescence provide opportunities for teens to connect and relate to others, provide companionship, negotiate and explore their sexual identity, learn how to establish sexual intimacy, and show maturity (Diamond et al. 1999; Russell and Sigler- Andrews 2003). Yet much of the literature on teen sexuality has adopted a problem-oriented emphasis. Research on adolescent sexual risk behavior that stresses the health implications of unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections often describes teenage sexual behavior as a component of a broader problem behavior syndrome and typically links sexual activity to cigarette, illicit drug, and alcohol use (e.g., Hagan and Foster 2001; Jessor and Jessor 1977). A pattern of non-romantic sex may suggest that an adolescent is developing a dyadic attachment style that lacks intimacy and commitment. Fortenberry (2003) noted that researchers emphasize the number of partners, frequency of sexual intercourse, and lack of condom use, thus, “problematizing” adolescent sexual activity. Fortenberry further concluded, “Although seldom included in recent scientific literature, an assumption that adolescent sex is inherently promiscuous lies not far beneath the surface” (p. 294). The risk emphasis has some limitations when applied to sexual behavior, however. Unlike other risk behaviors such as drug, alcohol, and cigarette use, sexual activity eventually becomes developmentally appropriate, and an expected part of intimate relationships (Longmore, Manning, Giordano, and Rudolph 2004).

Prior studies, primarily from the life course perspective, have considered how adolescent relationship experiences, specifically whether the relationship involved sexual activity, influenced young adult transitions to cohabitation and marriage. Meier and Allen (2007) report that teens who had any sexual activity in adolescence had greater numbers of relationships in early adulthood, as well as higher odds of having cohabited or married. Raley et al. (2007) report that those teens who had dating relationships that involved sexual activity more often

transitioned to cohabitation or marriage in early adulthood compared with teens who had non-sexual dating relationships. Thus, early sex activity is an important element of dating relationships that influences early union formation. Marriage in the early twenties is off-time when the average age at first marriage is 27 for women and 29 for men (US Bureau of the Census 2011) and early marriage is tied to higher odds of divorce (Teachman 2002). Yet, the average at first cohabitation is age 22 (Manning, Brown, and Payne 2013) so cohabitation in the early twenties may not be viewed as a problematic outcome.

In this chapter we present additional findings from analyses of the TARS data. We evaluate the sexual and dating experiences of 18-19 year olds in 2006 and indicators of well-being measured in 2011.ⁱ The models include basic sociodemographic indicatorsⁱⁱ along with measures of the dependent variable at wave 1 (respondents were ages 12-13).

Depressive symptoms are on average low (2.5 on a scale from 1 to 8) and are not associated with the focal adolescent sex and romantic relationships variables (number of sex partners, number of casual sex partners, and number of dating partners) at the zero-order (Table 1). The respondent's earlier report (wave 1) of depressive symptoms was related to depressive symptoms at wave 5. The subsequent models (Models 2-5) that include the sociodemographic indicators reveal no significant associations between number of sex partners, number of casual sex partners, number of dating partners, and depression.

The level of self-esteem is moderately high (4.1 on a scale from 1 to 5). Similar to the results for depressive symptoms, the zero-order models between self-esteem and the focal variables do not indicate any significant associations (Table 2). Additionally, models examining number of sex partners and number of casual sex partners net of sociodemographic covariates in separate models suggest that sexual experiences are not related to self-esteem. In Model 3,

however, the number of dating partners is positively associated with self-esteem net of the other covariates. This finding holds in Model 4 with the addition of number of sex partners and number of casual sex partners to the model. It appears that more experience in the dating realm is associated with greater self-esteem.

Gainful activity taps the education and employment of young adults and 75.6% of the 18-19 year olds were either in school or employed. Table 3 shows that at the zero-order, number of sex partners and number of casual sex partners are negatively associated with gainful activity. Subsequent models including the sociodemographic controls reveal that number of sex partners, number of casual sex partners, and number of dating partners are not associated with wave 5 reports of gainful activity.

Finally, Table 4 presents the associations between adolescent sexual and romantic relationships and intimate partner violence. Nearly one-quarter (22.8%) of the sample experienced IPV with a current or recent partner at wave 5. At the zero order, both number of sex partners and number of casual sex partners were significantly and positively associated with self-reports of partner violence. In subsequent models, after controlling for other factors, number of sex partners remained significantly associated with intimate partner violence. At both the zero order and in model 3, the findings reveal that number of dating partners was not related to partner violence.

CONCLUSION

Although theorizing about adolescent relationships has often focused on the problematic aspects of teen sexuality, recent research has shown that a majority of adolescents gain romantic and sexual experience during this period. The longitudinal framework of the current study enabled us to examine specific consequences of variations in the nature of these experiences for four

indices of later young adult well-being: depression, self-esteem, involvement in gainful activity (employment or enrollment in higher education) and intimate partner violence. Results of our analyses indicate that reporting a higher number of dating partners, sexual partners, or even casual sexual partners was not associated with higher levels of depression, lower self-esteem, or a reduced likelihood of involvement in gainful activity as a young adult. Analyses documented an association between a higher number of sexual partners and later reports of intimate partner violence, but this relationship was attenuated with the addition of a control for family structure.

Taken together, these results are consistent with the need to reorient our perspectives on youthful relationship and sexual experiences to include to the notion that these may be positive or at a minimum normative steps in the developmental process. Certainly, the current analysis did not focus on detailed qualitative differences in the nature of these experiences, as for example, prior research has shown that coercive sexual experiences may have lasting negative impacts both for emotional well-being and other indicators of a successful adult transition. Given that most teens date or have sex during adolescence, further empirical work that focuses on the specific character of adolescent dating and sexual experiences that are associated with young adult outcomes is warranted. An important next step is to pay more attention to the qualitative aspects of dating and sexual experiences, including perceived motives, the levels of intimacy that characterized these experiences, as well as the presence of conflict and other negative dynamics.

Prior studies of young adults that ignore adolescent experiences are assuming that individuals navigate each new phase of the life course and the relationships that define them are unaffected by previous relationships and experiences. Hartup (1986:2) states that adolescent relationships “serve as important templates or models that can be used in the construction of

future relationships... [thus] consequences of earlier relationships can frequently be detected in later ones.” Most studies of adolescent development processes have considered adolescent romantic relationships as an end-point of research, rather than constituting a set of experiences that uniquely influence and structure subsequent life course trajectories. Data collections that span adolescence and young adulthood provide unique opportunities to assess the long term implications of adolescent sexual and romantic relationships.

The current findings, however, are important because they suggest that some conventional wisdoms regarding sexual involvement during this phase of life may not provide an accurate portrait of either the origins or meanings of these experiences. Prior research relying on the TARS data showed that during the adolescent period, a greater number of sexual partners was not associated with having fewer friends or lower self-esteem (Lyons, Giordano, Manning, and Longmore 2011). The current results are congruent with these earlier findings, but provide a longer window of assessment across a wider range of outcomes. This suggests that prevention programs directed to issues of teen sexuality and safe sex practices will need to develop relatively nuanced approaches that are reflective of the reality that relationships and sexuality can be associated with positive meanings as well as heightened physical and (under some conditions) emotional risk. The challenge is to develop interview protocols that provide a nuanced portrait of the developmental significance of sexual and romantic relationships.

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Table 1. OLS, Depressive Symptoms (n = 324)^a

	Zero order	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
Number of sex partners (lifetime)	0.02	0.00			-0.01
Number of casual sex partners (lifetime)	0.02		0.00		0.02
Number of dating partners (past 2 years)	0.00			-0.02	-0.02
Depressive symptoms (wave 1)	0.21**	0.20**	0.20**	0.20**	0.20**

† p < .01. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

^a Models 1-4 include controls the following covariates: gender, age, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure while growing up.

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

Table 2. OLS, Self-Esteem (n = 324)^a

	Zero order	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
Number of sex partners (lifetime)	-0.00	0.00			0.01
Number of casual sex partners (lifetime)	-0.01		-0.00		-0.03
Number of dating partners (past 2 years)	0.03			0.05*	0.05*
Self-esteem (wave 1)	0.15*	0.14*	0.14*	0.13*	0.13*

† p < .01. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

^a Models 1-4 include controls the following covariates: gender, age, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure while growing up.

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

Table 3. Odds Ratios, Gainful Activity (n = 324)^a

	Zero order	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
Number of sex partners (lifetime)	0.921**	0.972			1.005
Number of casual sex partners (lifetime)	0.879**		0.946		0.947
Number of dating partners (past 2 years)	0.875			0.943	0.964
GPA (wave 1)	1.648***	1.403*	1.400*	1.408*	1.402*

† p < .01. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

^aModels 1-4 include controls the following covariates: gender, age, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure while growing up.

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

Table 4. Odds Ratios, IPV (n = 324)^a

	Zero order	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
Number of sex partners (lifetime)	1.098**	1.086*			1.161*
Number of casual sex partners (lifetime)	1.117*		1.090		0.898
Number of dating partners (past 2 years)	1.046			1.007	0.928
Parental coercion (wave 1)	1.005	1.013	1.020	1.020	1.008

† p < .01. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

^aModels 1-4 include controls the following covariates: gender, age, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure while growing up.

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

ⁱ *Depressive symptoms*, measured using a six-item version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies' depressive symptoms scale (CES-D) (Radloff, 1977), asked respondents how often each of the following statements was true during the past seven days: (1) "you felt you just couldn't get going;" (2) "you felt that you could not shake off the blues;" (3) "you had trouble keeping your mind on what you were doing;" (4) "you felt lonely;" (5) "you felt sad;" and (6) "you had trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep." Responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 8 (*every day*).

Self-esteem was taken as the mean of the following six items from Rosenberg's (1979) self-esteem scale: (1) "I am able to do things as well as other people;" (2) "I feel that I have a number of good qualities;" (3) "I feel I do not have much to be proud of" (reverse coded); (4) "At times I think I am no good at all" (reverse coded); (5) "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others;" and (6) "I take a positive attitude toward myself." Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Gainful activity was a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent was employed (part-time or full-time) or enrolled in school at the time of the wave 5 interview. Respondents were asked, "How far have you gone in school?" Next, respondents were asked about their employment status. Those who responded that they were currently in school and/or employed in a full-time position were coded as gainfully active.

Relationship violence was based on the revised version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus & Gelles, 1990), and consisted of the following 12 items: "thrown something at;" "pushed, shoved, or grabbed;" "slapped in the face or head with an open hand;" and "hit." Responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). These questions were asked in relation to experiences with the current/most recent partner and referenced both victimization and perpetration experiences. Given the nature of the sample, this measure likely captured common couple violence as opposed to intimate terrorism (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). We used a dichotomous measure of relationship violence, in which respondents who experienced any violent behaviors were coded as experiencing violence.

ⁱⁱ *Gender*, a dichotomous variable, indicated whether the respondent was female. *Age* was the difference between date of birth and the fifth interview date. *Race/ethnicity* consisted of four categories: White, Black, Hispanic, and other. *Family structure*, from the respondent's first interview asked, "During the past 12 months, who were you living with most of the time?" Respondents selected one of 25 categories, which we collapsed into four categories: two biological parents, single parent, stepparents, or 'other family'. *Mother's education* included less than high school, high school graduate, some college, or college or more.