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Adolescents' Sexual Relationships:

Boy/Girlfriends, Ex's, Friends and Others

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Abstract

The majority of teenagers report having sex during their high school years and the bulk of the literature emphasizes the timing of first sexual experience and contraceptive use. Remarkably little attention has been paid to the relationship context of sexual activity. We draw on data derived from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS). These data are unique and include both survey data from 1,316 7th, 9th, and 11th graders in Toledo, Ohio and in-depth interviews from 100 survey respondents. Adolescents have traditional norms about the relationship context for sexual activity. Yet over half of sexually active teens have had sex outside of dating relationships. These sexual partners are typically friends they have known for a long time or ex-boyfriends or ex-girlfriends. As a result, the age asymmetry is greater among dating than non-dating sexual partners. Contrary to public belief, teens with non-dating sexual partners sometimes desire more traditional relationships and report that sex made them feel closer to their sexual partner. However, greater percentages of dating partners feel close after having sex than non-dating sexual partners. Also, dating sexual partnerships are more public than non-dating sexual relationships. Both dating and non-dating sexual relationships lack exclusivity, approximately half are seeing someone else. Adolescent sexual relationships are complex and a simple dating vs. non-dating (or casual vs. main) dichotomy does not appear to reflect adolescents' interpretations of their relationships. We find considerable overlap in these two types of sexual relationships.

ADOLESCENTS' SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS: BOY/GIRLFRIENDS, EX'S, FRIENDS, and OTHERS

It is well known that about half of teenagers report having sexual intercourse during their high school years (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2002; Warren et al. 1998). Extensive social science research has studied the incidence and correlates of adolescent sexual activity. Despite the potential importance of the transition into sexual activity, remarkably little is known about adolescents' attitudes towards sexual behavior and the meaning(s) of such behaviors to the adolescents themselves.

Adolescents' dating and romantic relationships, whether or not they are sexual, are important to understand because they set the stage for building relationship skills that are critical for later adult intimate relationships. One key question, then, is what is the nature of these early relationships? Prior work suggests that most teenagers (three-quarters) have their first sexual encounters within the context of dating relationships (e.g., Elo, King, and Furstenberg 1999; Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2000). Yet over three-fifths of sexually active teens eventually have had sex with partners they are not dating (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2005). Researchers as well as the general public have expressed concern about teenage non-dating sexual activity that occurs outside the context of conventional dating relationships because of the perceived greater risks of sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancy, as well as the perceived negative socioemotional and developmental implications of sexual

relationships that lack commitment (e.g., Ford, Sohn, and Lepkowski 2001; Manning et al. 2000; Norris, Ford, Shyr, and Schork 1996; Ott, Adler, Millstein, Tschann, and Ellen 2002). Yet surprisingly few studies have compared both dating and non-dating sexual experiences among adolescents.

In this paper we focus specific attention on a wider range of dyadic contexts within which sexual behavior occurs. We include attention to both dating and non-dating liaisons. A key premise of our research is that even sexual activity that occurs outside of a dating context involves some type of relationship and thus the consequences of its specific qualities and dynamics warrant closer empirical scrutiny. We use newly gathered survey and in-depth relationship history narratives to study the nature and quality of adolescents' sexual relationships, and assess distinctions and similarities in dating and non-dating relationships. Given traditional gender scripts, we expect to observe gender differences in the norms and meanings of sexual behavior within dating and non-dating sexual partnerships.

BACKGROUND

The key feature of the adolescent period is the individual's involvement in dating and romantic relationships (e.g., Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 1994; Sullivan 1953). A typical developmental sequence is for teenagers to date before experiencing first sexual intercourse (Longmore, Manning, and Giordano 2001). While acknowledging that many teens have sex within the context of dating relationships with their boyfriends or girlfriends, not everyone does so. Carver et al. (2003) report that only about two-fifths of teenagers who were dating had sexual intercourse with their boyfriends or

girlfriends.

Not surprisingly, the focus on sexual activity that occurs within the context of dating relationships is due, in part, to its prevalence as well as its potential role in building intimacy skills that may be carried forward to adult relationships. However, part of this focus might simply be researchers' own biases. Researchers seem to express some relief that most teenagers have their first sexual experiences within the context of dating relationships. For example, Graber, Britto, and Brooks-Gunn (1999, p. 371) exemplify this 'sense of relief' in the following passage: "Thus it appears for the most part, even though adolescents are indulging in sexual behavior, it is in the context of a committed relationship." Unfortunately, by simply focusing on sex within the context of dating relationships, it is unclear how adolescents perceive non-dating (i.e., casual) sexual relationships, whether they engage in such relationships, with whom, and in what ways such relationships are similar or dissimilar from conventional dating relationships.

Interestingly, researchers know considerably more about adolescents' self-reported sexual behavior compared with adolescents' views of appropriate relationships for sexual activities or sexual standards. In a classic study on American norms associated with sexual activity, Reiss (1964) developed and later revised (Reiss 1989) a scale to measure attitudes toward premarital sexual permissiveness. Reiss argues that sexual standards can be best measured by asking individuals about acceptance of coitus under the following conditions: in love, strong affection, moderate affection, or no affection (Reiss 1989). Some researchers have proposed alternative

scales that assess sexual permissiveness attitudes associated with varying stages of the dating relationship (e.g., first date, casually date, seriously date, pre-engaged or engaged) and report greatest acceptance of sexual intercourse for engaged couples and high levels of support for sex among seriously dating and pre-engaged couples (Sprecher, McKinney, Walsh and Anderson 1988). These findings based on college students suggest relatively conservative standards or norms surrounding the acceptability of sexual activity. Similarly, although researchers have examined adults' views of the acceptability of teenage sexual activity (e.g., Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), few recent empirical studies have examined teenagers' own views of appropriate relationships for sexual activity.

Additionally, adolescents' sexual relationships are gendered in important respects. Although perhaps less than in previous generations, adolescent girls are concerned more so than boys with protecting their reputations (Schlossman and Cairns 1993), and still experience the most direct consequences of sexual activity that results in pregnancy including primary child care responsibilities and lower educational attainment. Moreover, scholars have argued that girls are socialized to feel sexually ambivalent, apart from the consequences associated with pregnancy (Attie and Brooks-Gunn 1989). In contrast, there is a stronger cultural expectation for boys to gain sexual experience seemingly at any costs. Indeed, qualitative studies have shown gender distinctions in orientations toward relationships and sex. Girls commonly are depicted as focusing on relationships and boys on sex (e.g., Anderson 1998; Eder, Evans and

Parker 1995). By extension, it is often thought (although not necessarily examined empirically) that boys are more likely to engage in non-dating sexual activity.

We, like other scholars, however, argue for the value of more detailed conceptualizations of adolescent sexual activity as opposed to merely distinguishing between sex that occurs within and outside the context of dating relationships (e.g., Miller, Forehand, and Kotchick 1999; Santelli, Robin, Brener, and Lowry 2001; Whitaker, Miller, and Clark 2000). Findings from clinical samples, for example, suggest that adolescents' views are more complex and that they often distinguish between at least three types of sexual partners: steady, casual, and one-night stands (Ellen, Cahn, Eyre, and Boyer 1996). Yet, sexual activity outside the context of conventional dating relationships is rarely researched using larger, more representative samples.

Although only a few studies empirically examine adolescents' non-dating sexual experiences, we can draw the following conclusions. First, significant numbers of adolescents engage in non-dating sexual encounters. The majority (64%) of sexually active adolescents in the first wave of the Add Health have had a non-dating sexual partner at some point (Manning et al. 2005). Second, although most teens initiate sex with dating partners (e.g., Cooksey, Mott, and Neubauer 2003; Elo et al. 1999; Manning et al. 2000), a significant minority have their first sexual experience within the context of a non-dating relationship. Analyses of the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth indicate that one-quarter (23%) of adolescent girls reported their first sexual experience with someone with 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).

One consequential outcome, however, in which we are reluctant to draw conclusions concerns whether adolescents are more likely to use contraceptives with dating as opposed to non-dating sexual partners. Prior research findings on contraceptive use and relationship type are contradictory. For example, some studies report that adolescents who have sex within the context of dating relationships more often use contraception (e.g., Ford et al. 2001; Pleck, Sonenstein, and Swain 1988); some scholars find no association (e.g., Ku et al. 1994; Manning et al. 2000; Pleck, Sonenstein, and Ku 1991), and others report negative associations between relationship type and contraceptive use (e.g., Ellen, Cahn, Eyre, and Boyer 1996; Landry and Camelo 1994; Ott et al. 2002; Plichta et al. 1992). In some cases differences in findings are due to differences in sexual history, gender, and age, but still no consistent pattern of results emerge. We argue that these disparate findings may stem from an oversimplified distinction between dating and non-dating sexual relationships.

Perhaps, most importantly, although the above studies are key for providing a sense of the prevalence of contraceptive use within the context of non-dating sexual activity, this line of research does not address the meanings of these sexual relationships to adolescents themselves. For example, the work on adolescent sexual risk behavior, especially work that stresses the health implications of unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, often places teenage sexual behavior in the context of a broader problem behavior syndrome, which typically links sexual activity to illicit drug and alcohol use (e.g., Hagan and Foster 2001). Fortenberry (2003) notes that researchers emphasize the number of partners, frequency of sexual intercourse, and lack of condom

use, thus, 'problematizing' adolescent sexual activity. Fortenberry further concludes: "Although seldom included in recent scientific literature, an assumption that adolescent sex is inherently promiscuous lies not far beneath the surface" (p. 294). This problem oriented perspective downplays the fact that there may be developmental value of sexual activity comparable with that associated with dating sexual activity. Unlike other risk behaviors such as drug, alcohol, and cigarette use, adolescent sexual activity can be developmentally appropriate (Longmore et al. 2004). Rather it is assumed that sexual liaisons that occur outside the context of conventional dating relationships are not as meaningful to adolescents as those that occur within dating relationships. However, a first step is to understand such activity from the perspective of adolescents themselves.

We argue that non-dating sexual partnerships reflect some level of relationship, one that can be assessed with regard to varying meanings, interpretations, and consequences. It is important to broaden researchers' views of the relationship contexts of adolescents' sexual experiences whether they are within or beyond the context of dating relationships. Thus it is important to examine ways that these relationships are similar and dissimilar. For example, researchers have noted that dating relationships are important for adolescent development in a number of different ways. Dating provides numerous opportunities for relationship-skill building, a forum for intimate self-disclosure, and dating partners are important as reference others and sources of social support (Furman and Wehner 1994; Giordano, Longmore, and Manning 2004;

Miller and Benson 1999). At this point, we don't know whether such functions are filled by non-dating sexual experiences.

Second, the sexual aspects of dating relationships are considered important in their own right, but may also allow members of the couple to express and further develop feelings of intimacy within the relationship. In contrast, popular treatments of sexual behavior that occur outside of the traditional dating context, including slang terms for such involvements (e.g., one-night stands or hook-ups) presumes that such relationships are by definition short-lived, non-exclusive, and shallow, and that the sole objective is one-time sexual activity. Thus, both relationships are forums for sexual intimacy, but it is unclear whether this is the only function performed by non-dating sexual activity.

Third, principles of homophily (like attracts like), which operate in the choice of dating partners may not be as characteristic of non-dating sexual encounters. If sex is the primary purpose of the liaison, the idea of shared interests or characteristics would be of less importance than when young people are attempting to develop a (presumably) more well-rounded dating relationship.

A final comparison is whether dating and non-dating sexual relationships are relatively private affairs, or an integral part of the adolescent's social life. Here, we expect that non-dating sexual liaisons would emerge as relatively more private, while dating partners would be a larger part of the adolescent's public self – that is, a relationship that is known to friends and significant others such as parents (Brown, Mory, and Kinney 1994) – although for both types of relationships, the extent to which

the sexual nature of relationships is known by significant others is unclear, and perhaps, varies by type of significant other (e.g., parent versus best friend).

CURRENT INVESTIGATION

Our research addresses two questions: (1) what are the sexual norms (or standards) surrounding adolescents' sexual relationships; and (2) what are the qualities and features of adolescents' dating and non-dating sexual relationships? Given gender differences in sexual behavior and the assumed differences in sexual norms, we present results separately for girls and boys.

First, we provide a descriptive base in which to understand the relationship context of adolescents' sexual activity by presenting results about sexual standards. Using measures that are comparable to Reiss' (1989) sexual permissiveness scale, we ask respondents about the acceptability of sexual activity with someone they love, are committed to, or do not know very well.

Second, distinguishing initially between dating and non-dating sexual partners, we examine for each type of relationship: (a) duration prior to sex, and (b) age heterogamy. We next turn to the respondent's view of his/her non-dating and dating relationship in terms of (a) whether sex made him/her feel closer, (b) whether he/she wanted the relationship to become a conventional dating relationship (boyfriend/girlfriend), (c) whether the relationship was public, (d) whether the relationship was exclusive, and (e) frequency of sexual activity.

This study of the similarities and differences in dating and non-dating sexual relationships will allow assessments of whether and how the distinction between dating

and non-dating is meaningful, or alternatively, requires further conceptual redefinition. We expect that non-dating sexual partnerships will be of shorter average duration and reflect greater age heterogamy than conventional dating relationships, indeed it is possible that the existence of age heterogamy is a primary rationale for the relationship being a non-dating versus dating relationship. We further expect that sexual activity should be viewed as an action which enhances intimacy in the case of the dating context, but not necessarily the non-dating context. Finally, non-dating sexual partnerships are expected to be less public and less often exclusive than dating sexual relationships.

DATA and METHODS

Data

Our research uses survey and narrative data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS). The TARS data are well suited for this paper because they include rich, detailed information on the nature and meanings of adolescents' relationships. The TARS data collection was designed from the outset to provide a multidimensional portrait of adolescents' dating and other sexual experiences. National data sources that include adolescents often include attention to dating (e.g., National Survey of Family Growth, National Survey of Families and Households, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, National Survey of Adolescent Males, National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health), but focus on the timing of dating or sexual experiences or sexual debut; as such these data sets do not provide detailed assessments of the subjective qualities and dynamics of adolescent relationships, which motivate

behavior including sexual behavior. We consider our analysis of the TARS data to be an important adjunct to analyses that maximize the strengths of larger data collections.

Data were collected from a stratified random sample of over 1,316 adolescents drawn from the enrollment records for the 2000 academic year of all youth in the 7th, 9th, and 11th grades in Lucas County, Ohio. The sampling frame encompassed 62 schools across seven school districts. Students did not have to attend school to be included in the study. The sample includes oversamples of African American and Hispanic adolescents. Based on Census data the sociodemographic characteristics of Lucas County appear to closely parallel those of the nation in terms of race (13% in Toledo and 12% in the U.S. are African American); education (80% in Toledo and 84% in the U.S. are high school graduates); median income (\$50,046 in Toledo and \$50,287 in the U.S.); and marital status (73.5% in Toledo and 75.9% in the U.S. are married couple families).

The analytic samples vary depending on the research question. The analysis of sexual standards is based on 1,305 teens who provided valid responses to these questions. The analysis of sexual behavior is based on all respondents (n=1,316) and adolescents who are sexually active (n=413). Our analysis of recent sexual partnerships draws on 119 adolescents who reported having sex outside of a dating relationship in the last 12 months and 272 adolescents who report having sex with their boyfriend or girlfriend in the last 12 months.

In addition to the survey data, we analyze in-depth face-to-face interviews with a subset (n=100) of the respondents who had participated in the structured interview. 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 provide 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. These interviews were scheduled separately, taped and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Respondents were selected based on their race/gender characteristics, and having had some dating experience. The sample included 51 girls and 49 boys. The interviews lasted, on average, 60 minutes. We generate abstracts for each in-depth interview that summarize the respondents' sexual behaviors and attitudes. We also code the in-depth interviews by marking portions of text (often overlapping) with key categories from the code list. Specifically, we searched for instances in which the issue of sexual activity and/or sexual norms was raised by the respondent and in response to the question about their sexual histories.

This multi-method strategy of using a qualitative component in tandem with a larger quantitative study has advantages over free-standing quantitative data collection. This multi-method approach adds to prior work that has been restricted to a narrow range of relationships (e.g., casual vs. main partnerships), and an even narrower range of relationship dynamics (e.g., use of condom, duration of the relationship, age gap in sexual partners).

Measures

Sexual standards are measured using responses to three statements on when it

would be appropriate to have a sexual relationship. First, "A person should only have sex with someone they love." Second, "I would have to be committed to a girl/guy in order to have sex." Third, "I would feel comfortable having sex with someone I was attracted to, but did not know very well." The response categories range on a five point scale, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

We include two measures of sexual behavior. We ask respondents whether they have ever had sexual intercourse. We also inquire about the relationship with their sexual partners. Respondents are asked whether their sexual relationships occurred 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." Respondents who gave any response besides girlfriend or boyfriend are coded as having sex outside of a dating relationship. In addition, respondents who state they "had sex with someone they considered a friend," "had a relationship that was strictly sexual," "had sex with someone while they were seeing someone else," "had sex with an old boy/girlfriend," "hooked up with someone to have sex just that one time," reported having sex with "someone that you weren't really dating or going out with," or claimed to have had sex with someone besides a boy/girlfriend are coded as having a non-dating sexual partner. Adolescents are classified as having sex with a dating sexual partner if they had sexual intercourse with someone they were dating.

In addition to whether the relationship is a dating or non-dating relationship, we measure two other relationship qualities: (a) duration of the relationship (how long they knew their sexual partner before having sex), and (b) age heterogamy. We also assess

respondents' orientation toward a relationship using three measures. The first measure is based on a question that asks whether having sex made the respondent feel closer to his/her sexual partner and the response categories included "much less close, somewhat less close, no change, somewhat closer, or much closer." We inquire whether the respondent desires a conventional dating relationship by asking "did you want ___ to be your girl/boyfriend?" We measure the public nature of the relationship by asking respondents with non-dating sexual partners "did you tell your friends about the relationship" and teens were asked of their current dating sexual partner "Have you told other people you are a couple."

We establish the frequency of sex based on the response to "How many times did you have sex with ___?" and the response categories are "only that one time" and "more than once." Finally, we measure exclusivity in non-dating sexual relationships by asking two questions: "Were you seeing anyone else at this time?;" and "To your knowledge was ___ seeing anyone else at this time?" These are coded to create a four category variable: both seeing someone else, respondent seeing someone else, partner seeing someone else, neither seeing someone else. We ask parallel measures of dating partners: "Since your relationship with ___ started, how often did you see another guy/girl" and a similar question was asked about the respondent's boy/girlfriend seeing someone else. The response categories are: never saw another guy/girl, and ever saw another guy/girl.

RESULTS

Sexual Standards about Relationship Contexts for Sexual Activity

Drawing on the notion of sexual permissiveness and degree of commitment in a relationship (Reiss 1989),¹ we examine teenagers' views regarding acceptable relationship contexts for sexual activity. Our results depict a generally conservative normative climate about the appropriate contexts in which they would have sex. In Table 1, respondents indicate how strongly they agree that they should only have sex with someone they love. About half (54%) of boys and two-thirds (69%) of girls believe they should only have sex with someone they love.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The second relationship context focuses on commitment. As shown in Table 1, nearly two-thirds of boys and three-quarters of girls agree or strongly agree that they would have to be committed in order to have sex with someone. Thus, having a commitment to a potential sexual partner appears to be more important than 'being in love' with a potential partner. Again the findings reflect a more conservative norm for girls than boys. This gender distinction is demonstrated by the following quote from a young man who articulates a traditional gender script in which girls expect sex to be associated with commitment.

...A lot of girls from xxxx, are just like, I don't know, it's not that there in it for sex, but, they, they, they think that like, have sex, it comes with like, you know, a lifetime relationship, you know what I, I mean? Like a lifetime commitment. Which, it should, but, but...

¹ We focus on bivariate gender differences and find that the observed gender differences persist net of sexual experience, age, and race/ethnicity (results not shown).

Third, most teenagers (boys and girls) would not feel comfortable having sex with someone they do not know very well. However, a greater proportion of boys (18%) than girls (4%) agree or strongly agree that it is okay to have sex with someone that they do not know well. One young woman's comments reflect this traditional gender script by emphasizing that girls focus on relationships and boys focus on sex.

... like for guys sex plus love equals sex and for girls sex plus love equals love and it's so true. It just like ... and it doesn't always have to be sex, but it's just like that sort of thing. Girls do it in hopes of a relationship...

However, it is important to underscore that the vast majority of both boys (i.e., 82%) and girls (i.e., 96%) do not endorse having sex with someone they do not know very well.

Sexual Partnerships

Distinct from sexual standards, we consider adolescents' actual behavior. About one-third (32%) of respondents in our sample of 7th, 9th, and 11th graders reported ever having had sexual intercourse (Table 2), with slightly more boys than girls reporting that they had experienced sexual intercourse. Similar to other studies, most adolescents had their first sexual experience with a boy/girlfriend. Sexually active girls more often than boys had their initial sexual experience with a dating partner.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Although most teenagers initiate sex with dating partners, many eventually have sex outside of a dating relationship. We find that 60 percent of sexually active teens have had sex outside the context of a dating relationship (Table 2). This is more common among boys; nevertheless over half of sexually experienced girls report non-

dating sexual experience.

A general concern about sexual activity that occurs outside the context of dating relationships is that it occurs with strangers or with partners that the teenager does not know very well. Our results, however, do not support this concern. Table 2 shows that many teenagers who have sex outside of a dating relationship do so with a friend (74%). Again, these percentages are slightly higher among boys than girls. In the narrative data, a young man explains his non-dating relationship with his friend in the following way:

Uh...we had just known each other for awhile, we were both virgins, and...We were just talking about you know like she was asking me, you know, "have you ever had sex?" And I was like, "no. Have you ever?" "No." And we just went to her house one day and we just started kissing and hugging and one thing led to another...I wouldn't really consider dating her, but... I'm not exactly sure. She's never tried to, you know, ask me out or anything like that...I've known her for so long, you know, I really know her. I know a lot about her and I just, I don't know, I just don't consider her girlfriend material...It's like, you know, we, we've known each other for so long, you know, we always talk to each other, you know, anytime I feel down or she feels down we just talk to each other, you know, about our problems or whatever else.

The respondent does not view his sexual partner as "girlfriend material;" yet he describes not only a relatively long term relationship, but makes reference to relationship dynamics that are typically associated with dating relationships, including intimate self-disclosure and mutual social support. Moreover, these relationship-building skills are often viewed as two of the most important qualities of dating relationships (Giordano et al. forthcoming).

Further supporting the idea that non-dating sexual partners typically are not strangers, over three-fifths (62%) of teens who have had sex outside a dating context

report having sex with an ex-girl or boyfriend, with a greater proportion of boys than girls having sex with an ex-dating partner. In the qualitative interviews, one young man describes sex with his girlfriend after they broke up as just happening in the following way:

“Well it [sex] kind of happened like towards the end when we were both friends.”

The desire to maintain a friendship with an ex-partner creates numerous opportunities to maintain contact, some of which may eventuate in one or more sexual encounters after the couple has broken-up. Similar to the well acquainted friends described above, ex-dating partners are likely to be on relatively intimate terms from a relationship standpoint.

Relationship Qualities. Whereas the prior analyses were based on whether adolescents ever engaged in dating or non-dating sexual experiences, we turn to more detailed findings that characterize the nature of teen’s relationships in the last 12 months with sexual partners. In addition to type of relationship, we include the duration of the relationship prior to having sex, and age heterogamy.

Similar to our prior findings regarding ever having non-dating sexual experiences in the last 12 months, most teenagers (61%) report having had sex with a friend or ex-girl or boyfriend. One-quarter had sex with an acquaintance and relatively few had sex with someone they did not know (6%). Although anecdotal evidence might suggest that boys are more likely to have sex with someone they do not know, it is notable that boys and girls report similar percentages regarding sexual activity with

friends, ex-dating partners, acquaintances, and strangers in the past twelve months.

In the qualitative data, a young man describes how his non-dating sexual relationships began. He had discussed with his sexual partner whether they wanted a relationship and decided to just remain friends who have sex or 'friends with benefits'.

After we started sleeping together then that's when the conversation about us having a relationship came up. Then that's when we both decided that you know, well, she said she really wasn't looking for a relationship, you know, she just liked the person that I was and the type of friendship we had. So we were able to like talk to one another about each other's other friends, but you know, we still had the sexual contact relationship too.

At what point in a relationship do adolescents have sex? Duration is measured in terms of how long the respondent knew his/her sexual partner before having sex. Very few respondents reported having had sex with someone they just met. Only 9% of teenagers who had sex with non-dating partners just met their sexual partner and 4% who had sex with dating partners had just met. The modal response is less than one-month. On average, teens report knowing their dating and non-dating sexual partners for approximately the same amount of time. However, examining longer durations of 12 months or more, one-third of teens knew their recent non-dating partner for 12 months or more, but only 11% of teens with a recent dating sexual partner knew their partner for 12 months or more. Girls report knowing their partners longer than boys before having sex.

We next examine age heterogamy. Greater age gaps between sexual partners are of concern because they suggest greater power imbalances. We expected larger age differences among non-dating sexual partners. Most teens (62%), however, had a non-

dating sex partner who was almost the same age (one year gap). Teens who had sex with dating partners had greater age differences. Only 9% had a non-dating sex partner who was four years younger or older. There is a significant gender difference in the age gap with girls have greater age differences than boys.

Relationship Orientations and Expectations. We next focus on the respondents' relationship orientations and expectations with recent non-dating and dating sexual partners. The measures of relationship orientations include: how sex changed the relationship, desires to form a conventional dating relationship, the public nature of the relationship, sexual frequency, and exclusivity.

We first examine perceptions of how having sex changed the relationship. Not surprisingly, two-thirds of teens who had sex with a dating partner felt closer after having sex, although nearly one-quarter (22%) felt that sex had not changed their relationship and 11% reported that they felt less close after having sex.

One-third of teens who had sex with a non-dating partner also indicated that they felt closer to their partner after having sex. Conversely, half of teens who had a non-dating sexual partner stated that sex did not change their relationship and 15% felt less close after having sex. Thus, similar to dating, non-dating sexual activity often results in an adolescent feeling closer to his/her sexual partner.

We find few gender differences in orientation and expectations among teenagers who had non-dating sexual partners and significant gender differences among teens who had sex with boyfriends or girlfriends. Specifically, similar percentages of boys and girls who had non-dating sexual partners report feeling closer after having sex.

Girls (76%) more often than boys (57%) who had sex within dating relationships report that having sex made them feel closer to their boy/girlfriend. We are not able to measure whether their partner reciprocated these feelings about how sex influenced their relationship. Similarly, very few teenagers who had sex with their boyfriend or girlfriend reported that sex made them feel less close, although boys (17%), more often than girls (7%), report that sex made them feel less close.

In the qualitative interviews, many young men and women discussed how sex with their boyfriend or girlfriend made them feel closer to one another. For example, one young man had wanted to wait until marriage to have sex, nevertheless he felt that sex brought them together.

Uh...I felt like I had this, like we had a connection and um that was something that I had been saving. I really wanted to save it for marriage, but I was curious and I was like ... and she was special enough to me that I could give her this part of my life that I had been saving and um she had felt the same way...

The following young woman seemed to want to be closer after sex and for her sexual partner to become her boyfriend. However, he was not interested in this type of relationship and seemed to want to be with his friends.

... it was like we were both young but it was I wanted something more from him as far as a relationship was concerned ... it was a mental thing like I wanted to be closer with him and everything, I wanted us to like go places together and stuff like that. See he wasn't really on it he was all always worried about kicking it with his friends and stuff like that.

The above narrative reflects a rather traditional gender script, yet in some narratives it is the male partner who expresses a desire for greater closeness.

Yeah, actually after we had sex he wanted to get my phone number and he wanted to start talkin' and I told him no. And he was like what? You know? He was totally shocked. You know that I just had sex with him and didn't want to have anything to do with him.

Among the non-dating sexual relationships, we also asked whether the respondents wanted their sexual partners to become traditional dating partners (i.e., boyfriend or girlfriend). One-third of teenagers wanted to develop a boyfriend or girlfriend relationship with their sexual partner. Statistical tests indicate that boys are as likely as girls to want to date their recent non-dating sexual partner.

Unlike having a boyfriend or girlfriend, a non-dating sexual partnership is likely to be relatively private. We find that two-thirds of teens with non-dating sexual relationships in the past 12 months have told their friends about the relationship. Boys and girls are similarly likely to tell their friends about their recent non-dating sexual relationship. However, we cannot determine whether telling their friends contained an element of bragging about sexual conquests or sharing details about relationships. In contrast, most teens (92%) who are dating their sexual partners report having a public relationship; in other words, they told others they were a couple.

We attempt to understand the nature of the relationship by asking whether the respondent only had sex one time with this non-dating partner. About half of these non-dating relationships involved only one sexual episode while the other half of teens had more than one sexual experience together. We do not observe a gender difference in frequency of sex with sexual partners.

We next examine exclusivity among sexual partners. Our question about non-

dating sexual partners refers to “seeing someone else” which could be dating or sexual. In our sample, about half (47%) of the respondents and partners are not seeing anyone besides their non-dating sexual partner. This finding suggests that half of non-dating sexual partnerships could be viewed as exclusive, at least on the part of the respondent. The remaining half are not exclusive; that is, the respondent is having sex with his or her partner and seeing someone else.

Our measurement of exclusivity for dating sexual partnerships is based on whether the respondent or their boyfriend/girlfriend is “seeing someone else” and among these teens “seeing” someone may less often involve sex. We find that over half of adolescents who had sex with a boyfriend or girlfriend report having exclusive relationships. Among both types of sexual relationships, we find that boys more often than girls have concurrent relationships.

Finally, we examine whether the nature of non-dating sexual relationships (e.g., acquaintance versus friend or ex-girlfriend and someone they went out with once in a while) are related to the relationship qualities and orientations/expectations. We find that, generally, teenagers who report that they just met their sexual partner, did feel that sex made them closer, but were not seeking a traditional dating relationship (results not shown). Additionally, teens who report having sex with acquaintances typically knew them for shorter durations and more often just had sex one time compared with teens who report having sex with friends. However, in terms of the other indicators it appears that adolescents who had sex with an acquaintance view their relationship in similar ways as teens who had sex with a friend (results not shown). Most of the labels

provided in the literature to describe a non-dating sexual partner are not associated consistently with the nature of the relationship with their sexual partner.

DISCUSSION

This paper attempts to broaden our understanding of teenage sexual relationships. We demonstrate that teenagers report conservative standards or norms regarding the appropriate contexts for sexual activity. For example, the majority of boys (54%) and girls (69%) think an individual should only have sex with someone he/she loves, and relatively few adolescents (11%) think it is okay to have sex with someone they do not know well. These findings dovetail with findings based on Reiss' sexual permissiveness scale, and suggest that there may not be a strong difference in sexual behavior between love versus committed relationships. ²

Teens' sexual behavior does not necessarily adhere to their reported standards. Zabin et al. (1984, p.181) examine sexual attitudes and sexual behaviors among adolescents and state: "It would appear that the majority of young people already have values and attitudes consistent with responsible sexual conduct, but not all of them are able to translate these attitudes into personal behavior." Our findings mirror their results from over two decades ago.

Our results confirm the conclusion from other studies that show teens are having sex outside of dating relationships. Our findings indicate that adolescents who have had sex with non-dating partners typically are not engaging in one-night stands or sex with individuals they do not know. Rather, adolescents having sex outside of the

dating context are having sex typically with friends or ex-girl/boyfriends. It seems that most teenage sexual experiences are among boys and girls who know one another and have known one another for some time. Further evidence indicates that many of these non-dating sexual partnerships are associated with hopes or expectations that the relationship will lead to a more conventional dating relationship. For instance, we find that about half of both boys and girls want to be in a boy/girlfriend type of relationship with their non-dating sexual partners and one-third felt that having sex made them feel closer to one another.

With regard to gender similarities and differences, we find that boys and girls have some unique views about, and experiences with, sexual relationships. As expected, boys are more open to sex outside of conventional dating relationships. In fact, their behavior matches these norms: boys more often than girls have non-dating sexual partners. However, we should be cautious about overgeneralizing these gender findings. For example, many boys (54%) believe an individual should have sex with someone only if in love, one-third of boys have had sex with only romantic partners, and boys express desires for their non-romantic sexual partners to become girl/boyfriends. These findings are consistent with Giordano et. al.'s (2004) work that argues a simple traditional gender script does not uniformly apply to adolescent romance because adolescent boys and girls often share similar views about and experiences in their dating relationships.

Our results suggest that a more nuanced view of adolescent sexual relationships

² However, our measure did not refer to being "in love" rather simply loving their sexual partner.

is key to understanding adolescent behavior. A simple dichotomy does not adequately reflect teenagers' interpretations of their relationships. For example, two-thirds of teens who had sex with their boyfriend or girlfriend felt that sex made their relationship closer and one-third of teens who had sex with non-dating partners felt that sex made their relationship closer.

Regarding further research, there are several important next steps. First, adolescents living in Toledo, Ohio probably share similar views and behaviors about dating and sexual activity as adolescents in other parts of the country. Although Toledo's demographic profile reflects that of the U.S. in general, it should be empirically determined whether these findings can be generalized to a larger geographic area. Second, research should be expanded to include older adolescents. Our sample is limited to 7th, 9th, and 11th graders and we may find slightly different results if we extend the analyses to an older age group, such as seniors in high school or one year beyond high school. Third, researchers should further examine how adolescents' views of their sexual relationships are associated with healthy sexual behavior. Teenagers may view ex-boyfriends and girlfriends or other friends as relatively 'safe' sexual partners, and as a result they may not be accurately assigning appropriate levels of sexual risk. For example, sexual partners who are known for only very short time periods may cue vigilant condom use, while sexual partners who are known for longer durations may not trigger careful condom use. Our findings may have implications for programs that assist teens in developing healthy relationships. Adolescents may not be as forthcoming about sexual activity that occurs outside of dating relationships,

nevertheless there is a need for discussions on safer sex practices even if a partner is well known. These results support efforts to provide teens with the tools to help them navigate these complex relationships.

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TABLE 1. Adolescent sexual standards about appropriate contexts for sexual activity

Sex with someone they ...	% AGREE		
	TOTAL	BOYS	GIRLS
Love*	61.7	53.8	69.0
Committed*	67.4	59.6	74.7
Do Not Know Well *	11.0	18.0	4.3
N	1,305	633	672

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study

* $p < .05$ gender difference

TABLE 2. Sexual behavior and relationship contexts

	TOTAL	BOYS	GIRLS
Ever have sexual intercourse *	31.6	34.2	29.1
N	1,316	638	678
First sex with dating partner *	72.7	62.4	84.2
Ever have sex outside of a dating relationship*	60.5	68.0	52.0
N	413	217	196
Ever Non-dating Sex			
% Friend	73.6	75.7	70.6
% Old girl/boyfriend	62.4	65.5	57.8
N	250	148	102

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study

* $p < .05$ gender difference

TABLE 3. Features of Recent Sexual Relationships (last 12 months)

	NON-DATING			DATING		
	TOTAL	BOYS	GIRLS	TOTAL	BOYS	GIRLS
Relationship Qualities						
Relationship Type	*					
Didn't Know	5.9	7.2	4.0			
Acquaintance	22.7	21.7	24.0			
Friend	47.0	44.9	50.0			
Ex-girl/boyfriend	14.3	15.9	12.0			
Went out with once in a while	7.6	5.8	10.0			
Other	3.3	4.3	0.0			
How Long Knew Prior Sex	*			*		
Just Met	9.2	14.5	2.0	4.4	6.6	2.2
Days – One Month	42.0	44.9	38.0	36.4	44.1	28.7
2-5 Months	12.6	10.1	16.0	33.1	28.7	37.5
6-11 Months	3.4	2.9	4.0	14.7	11.8	17.6
12 or more Months	32.8	27.5	40.0	11.4	8.8	14.0
Age Asymmetry	*			*		
Same – One Year	62.2	68.1	54.0	52.6	69.1	36.0
One-Three Years	28.6	30.4	26.0	32.7	29.4	36.0
Four + Years	9.2	1.4	20.0	14.7	1.5	27.9
Relationship Orientation						
Sex Change Relationship				*		
Closer	32.8	31.8	34.0	66.6	57.4	75.7
No Change	52.1	52.2	52.0	21.7	25.7	17.6
Less Close	15.1	15.9	14.0	11.8	16.9	6.6
Want Partner Boy/Girlfriend						
Yes	34.2	31.3	38.0			
No	65.8	68.7	62.0			
Tell Friends ^a						
No	32.8	34.8	30.0	8.4	6.3	10.1
Yes	67.2	65.2	70.0	91.6	93.7	89.9
Sex only that one time						
No	47.9	47.8	48.0			
Yes	52.1	52.2	52.0			
Exclusivity	*			*		
Both seeing others	11.8	10.1	14.0	21.8	24.8	18.8
Respondent seeing someone else	29.6	39.1	14.0	13.6	21.8	5.8
Partner seeing someone else	12.6	5.8	22.0	8.5	7.5	9.4
Neither seeing others	47.1	44.9	50.0	56.1	45.9	65.9
N	119	69	50	272	136	136

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study

Bold font and * indicates significant gender difference $p < .05$

^a Among dating sexual partners the question was only asked of most recent or current dating partner (Total n=179, boys n =80 and girls n=99) and the question wording is “Told others you were a couple.”