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**AFFAIRS OF THE HEART:  
QUALITIES OF ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS  
AND SEXUAL BEHAVIOR**

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**August, 2007**

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**ABSTRACT**

We know more about parent and peer influences than about the ways in which specific qualities of adolescent romantic relationships may influence sexual decision-making. Using data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study, we focus on communication processes and emotional feelings, as well as more basic contours of adolescent romantic relationships, including power and influence dynamics. Results suggest that relationship qualities matter for understanding teens' sexual behavior choices. Indices reflecting variations in communication and level of emotional engagement significantly influence the odds of sexually intimate involvement short of intercourse, as well as the likelihood of sexual intercourse. Findings indicate a similar effect of these relationship qualities on male and female reports of sexual intimacy. Influence and power dynamics within the relationship were not related to the likelihood that boys reported sexual intimacy or intercourse. However, girls who perceived a more favorable power balance within the relationship were less likely to report sexual intercourse than their female counterparts who perceived a less favorable power balance. Recognizing that the results capture reciprocal influence processes, longitudinal and qualitative data are used to further explore the complex nature of these associations.

## **AFFAIRS OF THE HEART:**

### **QUALITIES OF ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUAL BEHAVIOR**

Researchers have increasingly explored the character of adolescent romantic relationships, and scholarly as well as popular interest in teen sexual behavior has continued unabated. Yet as Furman (2002) recently noted, little research connects what have developed as two rather distinct traditions in the adolescence literature (see also Rostosky, Welsh, Kawaguchi, & Galliher, 1999). It is well recognized that social dynamics influence adolescent behavior, yet more research has been conducted on family and peer influences (East, Felice, & Morgan, 1993; Longmore, Manning, & Giordano, 2001; Whitaker & Miller, 2000; Whitbeck, Conger, & Kao, 1993) than on the relationship contexts within which these intimate behaviors unfold.

The current study relies on a symbolic interactionist framework and associated measurement emphasis. This theoretical perspective suggests the need to consider adolescents' own subjective experience of romantic relationships, and develops the idea that these behaviors (as all actions) acquire meaning and significance through interaction and communication with others (Mead, 1934). Clearly, much learning with regard to issues of sexuality takes place within the confines of family and friendship. Yet adolescent dating relations are also social relationships, and such liaisons grow in salience and importance during this phase of the life course (Sullivan, 1953). Thus, it is useful to conceptualize sexual behavior as more fully situated within the particular relational contexts within which it potentially but not inevitably takes place. Consistent with a symbolic interactionist perspective, we focus heavily on *communication* and *emotion* as central to constructions of meaning, and extend the symbolic interactionist framework to encompass dynamics such as *power and influence* (see e.g., Sprey, 1999).

In this analysis, we rely on structured interview data collected in 2001 with 1,321 adolescents as part of the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS). Focusing on teens with dating experience (n = 956) and respondent reports about their current or most recent romantic relationship, we assess whether specific relationship qualities and dynamics are associated with the likelihood of engaging in intimate sexual behaviors, net of traditional predictors such as demographic characteristics, parental monitoring,

sexual behavior of the respondent's peers and the youth's own prior sexual experience. We also include a longitudinal component based on data from the second wave of interviews conducted approximately one year later (n= 1,177), and draw upon in-depth relationship history narratives collected from a subset of the respondents (n = 100) in order to further explore relationship-sexuality connections. A secondary objective of these analyses is to determine whether the influence of relationship processes appears to be uniquely gendered. Prior research and theorizing leads to the expectation that qualities that reflect greater perceived intimacy within the relationship may be more important for explaining the sexual behavior choices of female when compared with male adolescents, and that power and influence dynamics may also operate differently for male and female respondents. That is, a more favorable perceived power balance may decrease the odds of sexual intimacy for girls, but increase the odds for boys.<sup>1</sup>

## **BACKGROUND**

Research on adolescent sexuality has often adapted a problem behavior lens, focusing on predictors used to explain behaviors such as delinquency and drug use. For example, researchers have documented that non-traditional family structure, lack of supervision, and lower parental attachment are associated with an earlier age of sexual onset (Cohen, Farley, Taylor, Martin, & Schuster, 2002; Davis & Friel, 2001; Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992). Aside from using similar predictors, research that actively links sexual behaviors to delinquency, drug and alcohol use, smoking and school dropout also perpetuates the problem behavior or risk perspective (Jessor, 1998; Rosenbaum & Kandel, 1990).

Numerous studies have also focused on peer influence processes, both as predictors of sexual behavior, and as influences on the meanings of this involvement. Research has documented that having sexually active friends is related positively to the onset of sexual intercourse (Bearman & Brückner, 1999; Miller et al., 1997), and ethnographic studies have also highlighted that views about romance and sexuality are heavily shaped by peer interactions. Qualitative research in particular has often focused on

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<sup>1</sup> Our focus in the current analysis is on sexuality within a dating context, as prior research suggests that a high percentage of first intercourse experiences and a majority of all sexual behavior occurring during adolescence involves a dating partner (identifying reference). Nevertheless, recent research also suggests that a significant percentage of adolescents also eventually garner sexual experience outside the traditional romantic context, thus we explore these "non-relationship" liaisons in more detail in other analyses (identifying references). We note also that the number of youths who indicated a gay or lesbian identity at the time of the first and second wave interviews is too small to allow for a separate analysis. However, we are currently analyzing the social network and dating experiences of bisexual and homosexual teens, relying on data from all four waves of TARS interviews.

distinctively gendered meanings about romance and sexuality that stem from peer socialization (Martin, 1996). This research has stressed that male adolescents are frequently encouraged to think of romance as a competitive game where sex is of primary importance (Anderson, 1989; Wight, 1994), while girls are socialized to value romance and the development of intimacy (Eder, Evans, & Parker, 1995). Maccoby (1990) and other scholars have suggested that the competitive interaction style boys hone within the peer group also influences the character of male-female interactions, including inequalities of power within these relationships (see also Thorne, 1993).

### **A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective on Adolescent Romantic Relationships**

Symbolic interactionist theorists have noted that all but the most habitual of actions acquire new meaning in light of the interactive contexts within which they occur (Mead, 1934). Thus, while parents may have a general interest in delaying their adolescent child's sexual involvement, and peers (especially male peers) may encourage sexual experimentation and "gamesmanship," it is not likely that couple level behaviors are completely predetermined by the preferences of these more distal reference groups. In general recognition of the importance of romantic relationships in the lives of adolescents, researchers have begun to examine these relationships more closely (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999), and developmental psychologists in particular have focused on the nature and quality of early romantic ties (see e.g., Florsheim, 2003). However, studies investigating the character of these early relationships have not often examined links to sexual involvement (Furman, 2002).

Prior research has documented that dating, having a boyfriend/girlfriend or 'going steady' are significant predictors of adolescent sexual debut, as this provides the concrete opportunities within which sexual behavior becomes a realistic possibility (Cavanaugh, 2004; Cooksey, Mott, & Neubauer, 2002; Halpern, Joyner, Udry, & Suchindran, 2000; Little & Rankin, 2001; Thornton, 1990). However, beyond simply entering the dating world, it is important to determine whether the adolescent's subjective experience of the relationship influences sexual behavior choices. Cleveland (2003) relied on data from adolescents as well as their partners and found that the risk profile of the partner added to the odds that sex had occurred, even after the respondent's own risk profile had been taken into account. These

findings highlight that both partners that comprise the couple are important to consider, but nevertheless focuses primarily on what each adolescent brings to the relationship, rather than on characteristics of the relationship itself. In addition, this approach sustains the conceptualization of adolescent sexual behavior as fundamentally a risky or problem outcome.

Rostosky et al. (2000) have been critical of the degree to which researchers have essentially pathologized adolescent sexuality, and have investigated the connection between such relationship qualities as commitment and the frequency of intimate sexual behaviors within middle and late adolescent relationships. In support of this broader view of sexuality, the researchers documented that perceived commitment was related to ‘lighter’ forms of sexual intimacy (e.g., fondling), but was not significantly related to variations in the frequency of sexual intercourse. The current study builds on this prior work by specifying multiple qualities and dynamics of adolescent romantic relationships, and assessing whether variations in these subjectively held perceptions are systematically associated with sexual behavior choices. Our objectives differ slightly from those of Rostosky et al. in that our primary interest is in whether adolescents in a dating relationship have moved to particular levels of sexual intimacy, rather than the frequency with which such behaviors occur. However, consistent with the emphases of these researchers, we preserve the distinction between what may be consider ‘lighter’ forms of sexual intimacy and sexual intercourse itself. Below we focus on the specific dimensions that we assess in more empirical detail in our analyses.

### **Communication Processes**

Researchers have found that as interactions proceed from a superficial to a more intimate basis, the level of *intimate self-disclosure* within the relationship serves as a “barometer” of the state of the relationship (Jourard, 1971). The opportunity to share confidences with another is a basic reward and feature of close attachments (McCall & Simmons, 1966). As such communications reflect and undoubtedly themselves heighten perceived closeness, our hypothesis is that higher levels of self-disclosure will be associated with greater odds of engaging in sexually intimate behavior, including sexual intercourse. The rationale underlying this hypothesis is straightforward: through recurrent interaction and communication, young

people begin to perceive certain relationships as significant and close. Those who subjectively experience intimacy of communication with a given partner may construct a view of this relationship as especially meaningful, and in turn become more likely to move to higher levels of behavioral intimacy as well.

A related but conceptually distinct aspect of communication, particularly during adolescence, is perceived awkwardness. Almost by definition, adolescents lack an extensive backlog of experience in conducting male-female relationships, and familiarity with sexually intimate behaviors as well. Thus, a certain amount of social and communication awkwardness often accompanies involvement in this new form of relationship (Brown, Furman, & Feiring, 1999). Our hypothesis is that these feelings of awkwardness should serve as an inhibitor of sexual intimacy even where other factors such as peer norms or low parental supervision might generally predispose teens to sexual involvement.

### **Emotional Processes**

Researchers across a number of disciplines have recently given increased attention to the role of emotions in understanding human behavior (Katz, 1999; Pacherie, 2002; Turner, 2000). Girls are typically depicted as highly invested in and responsive to interactions within romantic as well as within other social contexts (Gilligan, 1982; Thompson, 1995). Thus suggesting that girls may be influenced in their sexual decisions by feelings for their current partner is hardly a novel assertion. However, prior analysis of the TARS data documented that boys often reported strong emotional connections to their partners and emotional engagement in these relationships (authors, 2006). These results accord well with Rostosky's (1999) finding that male and female respondents in their sample did not differ in reported levels of commitment, and with results of in-depth interviews described by Tolman et al. (2004). A next step is to determine whether specific forms of emotional engagement are associated with adolescent sexual behavior choices, and whether such relational features are more pivotal for understanding girls' relative to boys' behaviors.

Intimate self-disclosure and communication awkwardness can be considered indices of closeness or intimacy, but ultimately refer to the amount of talk and comfort with it that occur within the relationship. Thus, in assessing overall feelings of intimacy, we also include attention to even more basic dimensions,



including the feeling that one is *cared for* by another, along with the level of *intensity* of the relationship. It is also useful to consider feelings that are relatively unique to the romantic context, including *love* and the perception of *sexual chemistry*. In general, consistent with our expectations regarding communication processes, we hypothesize that stronger emotional feelings and more positive subjective views of the relationship will be related to the likelihood of sexual intimacy, even after traditional predictors of adolescent sexual behavior have been taken into account. Based only on the ethnographic research reviewed at the outset, we might expect that these relational factors would be more strongly related to girls' than boys' sexual behavior choices. However the aggregate portrait that emerges from prior analyses of the TARS data and other researchers' recent findings (e.g., Tolman et al., 2004) provide a caution to this line of theorizing. Our provisional hypothesis is that few gender differences will emerge in the nature of the association between such factors as love and caring and the likelihood that intimate sexual behavior occurs within a particular relationship.

### **Influence and Power**

Our discussion of relationship qualities has focused on communication processes and emotional feelings that can be considered distinct yet related dimensions of intimacy and closeness. However, such relationships vary further in their power and influence dynamics. To the degree that the partner is viewed as a significant source of *influence* in the life of the adolescent, this should operate in a manner similar to the other dimensions of intimacy outlined above: perceiving the partner as a significant 'reference other' should be associated with higher odds of sexually intimate involvement. Consistent with prior sociological treatments, however, it is also useful to distinguish such influence processes from *power*, often defined as the ability to overcome some resistance or exercise one's will over others (Weber, 1947).

Some researchers have suggested not only that power is gendered within relationships, but that this may influence the nature of sexual decision-making. While the idea of greater male power in relationships was originally discussed in connection with adult marital relations, the notion of gendered inequalities of power has also developed as a fairly common theme within the adolescence literature (Eder

et al., 1995; Thorne, 1993; Martin, 1996; Thompson, 1995). However, Galliher et al. (1999) relied on a multi-method approach, including self-reports and observations, and found that most couples described themselves and were observed as involved in egalitarian relationships. Recent analyses of aggregate trends using the TARS data yielded a generally similar portrait, in that a majority of adolescent respondents described egalitarian decision-making processes. However, analyses of total scores on the power scale used indicated that male respondents scored significantly lower than their female counterparts (items referenced who had the most “say” in those instances where the partner disagreed). These findings may reflect that adolescent males are relatively more engaged in these relationships, while being less confident than some previous characterizations would lead us to expect. In addition, structurally based sources of inequality (e.g., greater access to labor force participation, women’s heavy investment in childrearing) are, during the adolescent period, still at a distance.

Risman and Schwarz (2002) posit that cohort shifts in gender and power relationships may also have occurred, and forge the link to sexual behavior patterns. They document recent declines in rates of adolescent sexual behavior, and theorize that girls may have become increasingly less dependent on their relationships with males (e.g., higher rates of college attendance and labor force participation), potentially providing more of a sense of autonomy with regard to sexual decision-making. These researchers did not measure power directly, however, suggesting the need to examine whether and how power is related to adolescents’ sexual decisions.

If we assume that girls, on average, may have a somewhat stronger interest in delaying sexual intercourse (due to concerns over reputation, pregnancy, and in general a preference for having sex within a more intimate relationship context), a reasonable hypothesis is that those who believe that they have less power will be more likely to report having sex with a given partner. This would also be generally congruent with Galliher’s (1999) finding that young women who perceive less decision-making power report lower psychological well-being. In turn, this could be associated with lower self-efficacy with respect to the process of negotiating comfortable levels of sexual intimacy with their partners (see Longmore, Manning, Giordano, & Rudolph, 2004). This hypothesis undoubtedly represents an

oversimplification of these processes, however, as it assumes young women's constant interest in delaying sex, and young men's uniform interest in moving forward. Qualitative researchers in particular have increasingly questioned the idea that girls lack "sexual desire," (Tolman, 2005), and recent research has also depicted increasingly complex views of boys' perspectives (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006; Tolman et al., 2004; Wight, 1994). Because power has been accorded such a central role in discussions of male-female relationships and sexuality, we believe that it is important to include attention to this dynamic in our examination of links between relationship qualities/processes and sexual behavior outcomes. However, our hypotheses with regard to power are more provisional than those focusing on communication and emotion, as outlined above.

### **DATA**

The Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS) sample (n = 1,321) was drawn from the year 2000 enrollment records of all youths registered for the 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grades in Lucas County, Ohio, a largely urban metropolitan environment that includes Toledo. The sample universe encompassed records elicited from 62 schools across seven school districts. The stratified, random sample was devised by the National Opinion Research Center, and includes oversamples of African American and Hispanic adolescents. School attendance was not a requirement for inclusion in the sample and most interviews were conducted in the respondent's home using preloaded laptops to administer the interview.

From the total sample of 1,321, we focus the cross-sectional analysis on 956 respondents who reported either that they were currently dating or had recently dated (last year). We limit our analysis to 954 respondents who report valid responses on the relationship qualities measures of interest. Within this dating sample, 28% (n = 270) reported having had sexual intercourse with this partner. Our analysis of sexual intimacy (other than intercourse) is limited to respondents who had not had sexual intercourse with the focal partner (n = 684). Of the total who had not had intercourse, 36% (n = 250) report being sexually intimate (beyond kissing/making out) with the partner. The second wave interview was completed in 2002 and 1,177 (or 89% of the wave 1 sample) interviews were conducted. The analytic sample for the longitudinal component consists of those respondents who reported currently dating at time one, but who

had not yet had sex within the context of the focal relationship (n = 300). At wave two, 24% (n = 72) reported that they eventually had sex with their wave 1 dating partner, while 76% (n = 228) did not.

## MEASURES

### Definition of a Romantic Relationship

We developed a simple definition that precedes the romantic relationships section of the interview schedule: "Now we are interested in your own experiences with dating and the opposite sex. When we ask about 'dating' we mean when you like a guy, and he likes you back. This does not have to mean going on a formal date."<sup>2</sup> We conducted all analyses using only the responses of youths reporting about a current partner, as well as combining these with reports about their most recent partner. As the results do not differ substantially, we report results from the combined analysis.

### Dependent Variables

The respondent was asked about three levels of sexual intimacy, including whether they had a) kissed or 'made out' with the partner, b) fooled around with X, defined as "more than kissing/making out but not sexual intercourse," and c) sexual intercourse with X. A definition of sexual intercourse was also provided: "sometimes this is called "making love," "having sex," or "going all the way." Given the ubiquitous nature of kissing among dating couples, we limit our multivariate analyses to two behaviors, sexually intimate behavior and sexual intercourse. For the longitudinal analyses, we used the partner name referenced in wave one to link to sexual information provided about this relationship context at wave two. These analyses are restricted to whether sexual intercourse occurred, since this step in the relationship is sufficiently concrete that it may be less subject to recall problems.

### Measures of Relationship Qualities/Dynamics

**Communication Processes.** To measure *intimate self-disclosure* we rely on a revised version of West and Zingle's (1969) self-disclosure scale. This five-item index asks respondents to report about how often (from 1 (never) to 5 (very often)) they communicate with the partner about a range of topics, e.g.,

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<sup>2</sup> This introduction and definition was selected after extensive pre-testing, and, we believe, reflects contemporary trends in dating that are less focused than in earlier eras on formal activities. In addition, the latter type of definition is strongly class-linked, and would tend to exclude lower SES youth. Our definition also differs from that used in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), where respondents

“something really great that happened, something really bad that happened, your private thoughts and feelings” (alpha = .87). To measure *communication awkwardness* we use items drawn primarily from Powers and Hutchinson's (1979) personal report of spouse communication apprehension items, revised for the younger sample. Respondents indicate agreement (from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)) with four items: “Sometimes I don’t know quite what to say with X,” “I would be uncomfortable having intimate conversations with X,” “Sometimes I find it hard to talk about my feelings with X,” and “Sometimes I feel I need to watch what I say to X” (alpha = .71).

**Emotional Processes.** A sense of *caring* is measured by the single item indicator, “my partner cares about me,” while *intensity* of the relationship is measured by the item, “My partner and I are practically inseparable.” To measure *love*, we use items drawn from Hatfield and Sprecher's (1986) passionate love scale, including: “I would rather be with X than anyone else;” “I am very attracted to X;” and “X always seems to be on my mind” (alpha = .85). *Sexual chemistry* is measured by the item “The sight of X turns me on.” Respondents indicate level of agreement (from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree)).

**Power and Influence Dynamics.** *Influence* items were developed from a similar scale originally used to measure peer influence (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Pugh, 1986), and reflect the level of agreement (1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree)) that respondents have been influenced by or actually changed things about themselves due to their relationship with the partner. Items include: “X often influences what I do;” “I sometimes do things because X is doing them;” and “I sometimes do things because I don’t want to lose X’s respect” (alpha = .71). A higher score reflects the perception of greater partner influence. *Power* is measured using a version of Blood and Wolfe’s (1960) decision power index revised for use with this younger sample. Questions focus on the likelihood of getting “one’s way,” given some disagreement. The scale includes an overall assessment (“If the two of you disagree, who usually gets their way?”) and also items that reference specific situations (“what you want to do together,” “how much time you spend together,” “how far to go sexually”). Responses include X more than me, X and me about

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are asked whether they currently have a “special romantic relationship.” We wished to avoid selecting on a relationship the respondent specifically defines as special, since understanding the patterning of relationship qualities is a primary objective of the study.

the same, me more than X. Higher scores on this scale reflect greater perceived power relative to the partner (alpha = .77).

### **Control Variables**

The distribution of control variables is presented in Table 1. In addition to *gender* (female = 1) and *age*, models include dummy variables for *race/ethnicity* (African American and Hispanic, and white were created). We also include dummy variables reflecting variations in *mother's education* (less than 12, greater than 12, where 12<sup>th</sup> grade completion is the reference category), a strategy that allows for the observation of non-linear effects. This measure is derived from a questionnaire completed by parents, rather than from youth reports.<sup>3</sup> *Family structure* is represented in the models as a set of dummy variables (single parent, stepparent, other, where married biological is the reference category). *Parental monitoring* is included, as prior work has shown that this is often a significant predictor of sexual behavior. Monitoring is measured by a six item scale completed by the parent that includes items such as: “When my child is away from home, s/he is supposed to let me know where s/he is,” “I call to check if my child is where s/he said,” “My child has to be home at a specific time on the weekends.” Responses range from 1 (none of the time) to 4 (all of the time) (alpha = .73). A measure of *peers' sexual behavior* is included that asks respondents: “How many of your friends do you think have had sex?” Responses include none, one, a few, some, most of them or all of them (0-6). *Prior sexual intercourse* is measured at wave one by a question that indicates whether the teen had ever had sex prior to their focal relationship.

### **Analytic Strategy**

Using data drawn from the first wave of interviews, we estimate a series of logistic regression models exploring the association between each relationship quality or dynamic described above (e.g., intimate self-disclosure) and whether or not the adolescent reports that the relationship had become sexually intimate. We analyze sexually intimate behavior and sexual intercourse separately.<sup>4</sup> Next we estimate full models that include the effects of demographic variables (race, age, gender), family factors (family

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<sup>3</sup> The parent, most often the mother, typically completed the paper/pencil questionnaire while the youth entered information onto the laptop.

<sup>4</sup> We estimated all models focused on sexually intimate behavior other than intercourse first by restricting these analyses to those who had not yet had intercourse with the partner, and also relaxing this restriction. Results do not vary substantially; thus we present results based on the more restricted sample group.

structure, parental monitoring, parental education), peer behavior (respondent's estimate of the number of friends who have had sex), and the respondent's own prior sexual history.<sup>5</sup> Supplemental models include only the control variables and then add the relationship quality measure to evaluate whether the relationship quality measure adds to the fit of the model. Next we introduce gender by relationship quality interaction terms into each model (e.g., gender by intimate self-disclosure) to determine whether relationship processes appear to have a stronger connection to the sexual behavior choices of female relative to male respondents. Although not a central focus here, we also estimate models that include age by relationship quality interactions in order to test for developmental differences in the influence of these couple dynamics.

Our longitudinal assessment focuses on those currently dating adolescents who had not yet had sexual intercourse with this partner at the time of the first wave of interviews. We examine whether reports of relationship quality from wave one emerge as significant predictors of having sex between the waves of interviews with that partner (as reported at wave 2). This is obviously a more selective sample of youths, but this strategy does allow a prospective examination, where sexual intercourse itself cannot be a source of the variation observed in the character of these relationship quality reports.<sup>6</sup> We also draw upon the qualitative data to further explore relationship-sexuality connections from the perspective of adolescents themselves. These open-ended "relationship history narratives" in general are used to illustrate the statistical results, and to refine our understanding of these complex relationship dynamics. A strength of the narrative histories is that they allow the adolescent to reflect not only on multiple aspects of a particular relationship, including how a given relationship changed over time, but often to compare across relationships.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Because this is a cross-sectional examination, we recognize that sexual involvement may influence reports about relationship quality—these dynamic processes are undoubtedly reciprocal. However, as these associations have not been examined in detail in prior research, it is an important first step to document whether any association is observed, and to determine whether these associations continue to be significant, after relevant family, peer, and individual (demographic, prior sexual history) controls have been introduced.

<sup>6</sup> We cannot conduct similar analyses of sexual intimacy because retrospective questions at wave 2 are not available.

<sup>7</sup> The in-depth interviews were generally scheduled separately from the structured interview, and were conducted by a full time interviewer with extensive experience eliciting in-depth, unstructured narratives. Areas covered in general parallel the structured protocol, but allow a more detailed consideration of respondents' complete romantic and sexual histories. The interview began by exploring the dating scene at the respondent's high school, and subsequently moved to a more personal discussion of the respondent's own dating career. The prompt stated: Maybe it would be a good idea if you could just kind of walk me through some of your dating experiences. When did you first start liking someone? Probes were designed to elicit detail about the overall character and any changes in a focal relationship, and about the nature of different relationships across the adolescent's romantic and sexual career. The resulting relationship narratives were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. We relied on Atlas ti software to assist with coding and analysis of the qualitative data. This program was

## RESULTS

As many of the hypotheses outlined above revolve around the role of perceived intimacy/closeness with the partner, the qualitative interviews provide concrete illustrations that adolescents themselves often do accord meaning and significance to these early relationships. In the quote below, Brianna's description contrasts with views of adolescent romantic relationships as typically superficial and transitory (Merten, 1996) and early on lacking in intimacy (Schulman & Scharf, 2000):

Sometimes, like, I think high school love... people say it's like puppy love...but I think it's, like, probably more real than, like, other love, you know?...cause you have so much more time, no responsibility and stuff and you can just get to know like this person...I think it's because you're not crowded with other things in the world, you know? You don't have all these other things that you have to do. I mean, you can focus more attention on that person; you give more to that person. Like, marriages fail because people get crowded out by other things that are going on in their lives and they don't spend any time with people. They don't try as hard but, like [during adolescence] you don't have anything else. [Brianna]

Brianna argues that this phase in the life course provides more freedom and time to explore relationships (*just get to know this person*); yet clearly not all relationships are equally significant or meaningful. To illustrate, another young woman reflected on her relationship with an early boyfriend: *It was weird cause like I thought I liked him so much and then I remember he got a new haircut and I was like, "Oh, ah I don't really like that." Then all of a sudden like I didn't like him anymore.* The structured responses allow us to assess in a more systematic fashion whether variations in these subjectively experienced features of the adolescent's current or most recent relationship are significantly related to sexual decision-making.

### Communication

Table 2 presents results for the relationship between self-disclosure and communication awkwardness and the odds of sexual intimacy within a focal relationship. We distinguish zero order and multivariate cross-sectional results and also include separate models focused on sexual intimacy and sexual intercourse. The last two columns present results of sexual intercourse for the longitudinal analyses. Zero order cross-sectional results indicate that *intimate self-disclosure* is related to increased odds of sexually intimate

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useful in the organization of text segments into conceptual categories and refinement of the categories, while retaining the ability to move quickly to the location of the text within the more complete narrative. We also relied on shorter 2-3 page summaries for some aspects of our analysis.



behavior as well as sexual intercourse. As shown in model 2 (columns 2 and 4), variations in levels of intimate communication continue to be significantly related to the odds of adolescents reporting both types of sexually intimate behavior within the focal relationship, even after parent variables (family structure, parental monitoring) peer orientation (how many the respondent believes have had sex), sociodemographic characteristics of the adolescent (race, gender, age, mother's education) and whether the adolescent had sex in a prior relationship have been taken into account.<sup>8</sup> A supplemental model was tested that indicates that the addition of self-disclosure adds significantly to the fit of these models (results not shown). To investigate whether intimate self-disclosure was similarly related to the experience of sexual behavior for girls and boys, we estimated models that included self-disclosure by gender interaction terms. These interaction terms were not statistically significant, indicating a similar effect of self-disclosure on the likelihood of reporting both levels of sexual intimacy for girls and boys (results not shown). A model including an age by self-disclosure interaction is marginally significant for sexual intercourse ( $p < .06$ ), indicating a somewhat greater effect of intimate disclosure for older respondents. We then estimated similar models relying on the smaller subset of youths who were currently dating at wave 1 but had not yet had sex with their partner. Results presented in columns five and six of Table 2 indicate that when viewed in a longitudinal perspective, self-disclosure levels predict later sexual intercourse at the zero order, and are marginally related ( $p < .10$ ) once controls had been introduced. In the longitudinal examination, a gender by disclosure interaction term was not significant, again suggesting a similar influence of intimate self disclosure on the likelihood of sex for male and female respondents.<sup>9</sup>

Results in Table 2 also indicate that higher levels of perceived *communication awkwardness* with the romantic partner are, as hypothesized, associated with lower odds of sexual intimacy and sexual intercourse. An interaction term added to this model is not significant, indicating a generally similar effect for boys and girls. An age by communication awkwardness interaction is marginally significant ( $p$

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<sup>8</sup> Of the covariates, age, liberal peer attitudes, and prior sexual experience are associated with increased odds of sexual intercourse, and low parental education is marginally related. Age and gender are significant in the model focused on sexual intimacy. As our primary focus is on the relationship quality indices, we do not discuss covariates in the remaining models. Results are similar, although in some instances family structure is significant.

< .10) suggesting a somewhat weaker effect of awkwardness among older respondents. The last columns present results of the longitudinal analysis of the effect of communication awkwardness. In this analysis, variations in perceived communication awkwardness are not related to the later likelihood of having sexual intercourse. We do not conclude from this finding that communication awkwardness is unimportant as a relationship dynamic within adolescent romantic relationships, as some individuals who felt uncomfortable with particular partners may have broken up prior to becoming sexually intimate (as reflected in the cross-sectional results), and these individuals would not be included in this longitudinal sample. From a theoretical standpoint, and consistent with the cross-sectional results, we would argue that both of these dynamics may figure into the development of a relationship that includes sexual intimacy. Adolescents who describe intimacy in communication (high levels of self-disclosure) are providing an index of the closeness of the relationship, a feeling that makes sexual intimacy seem appropriate or ‘right.’ Both male and female adolescents made many references to intimacy of communication as a key aspect of their feelings of closeness to their partner:

Like, okay, with me, like, if me, if me and Jesse, if we have a problem we don’t go to somebody else, I’ll go straight to him! And you know, I mean, I know, I know he’s going to tell me the truth, he’s not going to lie to me. And I know, like we can, we can talk about it and talk about what had happened and talk about what, makes us mad or whatever and talk about what we can do next time... And like, I think I can talk to him, about anything, anything at all. Yeah, yeah, he talks to me all the time! I don’t know he just...he’s probably the most important person in my life ever! [Christy]

I’d say your girl — not only she is your girlfriend, but one of your best friends. So, you could talk, tell each other everything. We basically just talked about everything, whatever came up at the time, I mean, it could be, anything from personal, to school, to what you did over the weekend. We just, discussed every different topic you could think of. [David]

At the same time, low levels of perceived awkwardness remove barriers that may be connected to the adolescent’s lack of sophistication and prior sexual experience:

I was real cool with her, and I knew it, I wouldn’t, it wouldn’t be no problem, for me to be with her, because I know her, you know like that, and it wouldn’t be no, kind of embarrassment if something went wrong! ....We laughed about it, you know, while getting into it, we laughed about it, you know, ask little questions, it be questions here and there, like that. [Jeremy]

## **Emotional processes**

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<sup>9</sup> Age by relationship quality interactions were not significant in any of the longitudinal analyses.

Next we consider even more basic features of the relationship, focusing on emotional processes. Table 3 presents results for level of caring and feelings of intensity, while Table 4 includes results of analyses focused on qualities that could be considered more unique to the romantic context: love and sexual chemistry. The cross-sectional results focused on caring and intensity are strong and consistent: As shown in Table 3, higher levels of perceived caring and relationship intensity are significantly associated with the odds of reporting both forms of sexual intimacy, at the zero order, and after traditional predictors of sexual behavior have been taken into account (models 2 and 4). Models introducing the relationship indices last in the sequence indicate that these variables contribute significantly to model fit. Gender and relationship qualities interaction terms were not statistically significant, suggesting a similar relationship between perceived caring and intensity of the relationship on boys and girls' likelihood of engaging in sexually intimate behaviors with the focal partner, including sexual intercourse. The longitudinal results predicting later intercourse are also significant at the zero order and in multivariate models—caring and intensity as assessed at wave one are associated with greater odds of reporting that sexual intercourse occurred between waves 1 and 2.

Results shown in Table 4 reveal a generally similar portrait. In the cross-sectional models, higher scores on the passionate love scale and on the item indexing sexual chemistry are significantly related to both forms of sexual intimacy, at the zero order and once controls are introduced (models 2 and 4). However, a gender and sexual chemistry interaction term was statistically significant: girls' level of perceived sexual chemistry was significantly related to the odds of sexual intercourse, but variations in boys' reports of sexual chemistry were not significant predictors (results not shown).<sup>10</sup> In the longitudinal models predicting later intercourse, passionate love is only marginally significant at the zero order, and not significant in the multivariate model. Sexual chemistry is significant at the zero order, but only marginally significant once controls are introduced. None of the age interactions were significant in the above models. In addition, none of the gender by relationship qualities interactions are statistically

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<sup>10</sup> The coefficient for girls is .48 ( $p < .05$ ); for boys the coefficient is .10 (n.s.). Prior literature has depicted boys as highly interested in sex and in gaining sexual experience; thus it is possible that girls' views are more pivotal as a source of variation in what eventually takes place within the couple context. This does, however, provide a caution to prior research, often based on small convenience samples, as this research stresses either that girls are often out of touch with their sexual feelings, or that their feelings are not an important aspect of the sexual-decision making process (Holland, Ramazanoglu, & Thomson, 1996).

significant in these longitudinal analyses, again reflecting a degree of similarity in the effect of these dynamics for the longitudinal subsample.

The above results document an association between dimensions of closeness/ intimacy within the relationship and the likelihood of involvement in greater levels of sexual intimacy. Respondents who participated in the in-depth interview sometimes forged this link explicitly. Rob, for example, was asked directly about the conditions under which he would become sexually intimate:

Me, personally? It's if I love them or not. It's just not — 'cause I know, it's kinda of old fashioned! (laughing)... I uh...well, the way I look at it, a lot of people say your friends will always be there. But... I mean... it's mostly the opposite. Your friends come and go. Because I have a lot of friends come and go. Nicole's been with me the whole time. [Rob]

Other respondents mentioned the importance of having a partner who has always been “there” for them, a reference that indicates a relationship characterized not only by intimate talk, but also by high levels of social support. For example, Jude noted, *She's more there for me. She'll, she'll always be there for me, that'll probably be somebody I'd grow old with.* This excerpt conveys Jude's strong feelings for his romantic partner, even as it reveals the highly subjective nature of his viewpoint. While Jude currently believes that his girlfriend is someone he could grow old with, the average durations of adolescent romantic relationships indicate that this might not in the long run prove to be an accurate assessment (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Such shifts over time are also more apparent in the context of the qualitative interviews, as some respondents describe former boyfriends. For example, Dana stated, *At the time, at the time it was actually really important, I thought. But now that I look at it, it wasn't...*

Another set of themes in the narratives that accord well with the quantitative results reflect the element of ‘sorting’ involved in adolescent relationships. An aspect of viewing one relationship as especially close and meaningful, is recognizing that not all relationships contain these positive features. Indeed, the narratives sometimes reflect elements of ambivalence about the opposite sex, and areas of gender mistrust. For example, adolescent girls' may accept the societal view that boys “only want one thing,” yet develop very positive feelings about a particular boy. In these cases, the young women have attempted to and apparently believe that they have separated “the wheat from the chaff” where boys are

concerned. These elements of ambiguity are revealed in Sarah and Ashley's narratives, as both emphasize the degree to which their own boyfriends should be viewed as different from 'average boys':

He really wants a relationship. . . I mean he's really good at the relationship so...that makes me more like trusting guys and thinking guys are changing, but still I know they're out there and they just want one thing... [Sarah]

And we started going with each other. But he's not, I can't compare him to anybody else cause he acts different than those average boys that try to talk to me. He's different. Like, some guys like they'll talk to me and then, when I talk to them on the phone, like, "oh when can I have sex with you," and this, that, and the other. I'm like, "excuse me, [if] that's the only reason why you wanted to get my number, then you could have just not tried to talk to me at all." [Ashley]

These views that a given partner represents a departure from the norm contributes to the likelihood of constructing the relationship as something special, a dynamic that increases the feelings of trust/closeness that make greater sexual intimacy more likely. Although it is more intuitive to envision this as a dynamic involved in girls' sexual choices, our analysis of boys' relationship history narratives also reveals some indications of this sorting process in boys' choice-making as well:

She was like... moving too fast... Like she want to have sex with me in the car and I'm like, "No," and then she starts touching me and trying to unbutton my pants. I'm like, "I'm cool, I'm cool, I got to go." And I did that and I left... I was just I don't know, she wasn't the girl that I wanted to have sex with... She wasn't the right girl... I mean I can handle my own you know but I just... it shock, surprised me a little bit was just like well I can't do this and I left. I just told her she was too much... for me, too wild... [Aaron]

### **Power and influence**

Table 5 presents results of a set of analyses focusing on perceptions of influence and power within adolescent romantic relationships and whether these perceptions are systematically linked with sexual behaviors. As results in models 1 and 2 of Table 5 show, reports of the partner's influence are positively related to sexually intimate behaviors (not sexual intercourse) at the zero order and in the model introducing the other controls. Further analyses indicates that the effect of influence is positive for girls and not for boys. In contrast, power is not related (columns seven and eight) to sexual intimacy and the effect is similar for girls and boys.

Perceptions of partner influence are not related to the odds of sexual intercourse, when examined either cross-sectionally or longitudinally. In the cross-sectional analyses, the gender by power interaction term is statistically significant and the effect of influence is similar for girls and boys. Specifically, girls

who score higher on perceived power have lower odds of sexual intercourse.<sup>11</sup> This interaction term is not significant at the bivariate level, but becomes significant when prior sexual history is introduced into the model. Further analysis reveals that the effect of power is primarily observed among girls who were virgins prior to entering the current relationship. For girls who report having sex in a previous relationship, variations in levels of power do not influence the odds of having sex in the focal relationship. It is also important to highlight that regardless of their sexual status or histories, girls' power scores are higher than those of comparably situated boys. Further, variations in boys' own reports of the power balance in the relationship were not related to the likelihood of having sex within the context of their current/most recent relationship. Age by power and influence interaction terms were also not significant in these models.

In the longitudinal analysis a gender by power interaction is not significant, but the gender by influence interaction indicates a gendered pattern: Among girls, higher levels of perceived partner influence at time 1 were associated with a greater likelihood that the relationship went on to include sexual intimacy; for boys higher levels of perceived partner influence were related to a reduced likelihood that sexual intimacy occurred within the focal relationship.<sup>12</sup> These interaction results are intriguing, suggesting the need for more research on decision-making power and influence processes and how these distinct dynamics connect to adolescents' sexual decisions. It may be that girls who are virgins have an especially strong awareness of their roles as gatekeepers of this decision; conversely the lower power scores of girls who had sex for the first time accords with research documenting that the transition to first sex increases depression levels and lowers self-esteem for girls but not boys (Longmore et al., 2004). Nevertheless, there is a need to specify what aspects of the transition are associated with boys and girls' changes in feeling/perspective, and perhaps for some youths, a shift in the actual power balance.

In order to further explore the linkages between perceived power and sexual decision-making, particularly in relationship to gendered processes, we examined additional relevant quantitative and qualitative data. As one of the items comprising the power scale references decision-making about

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<sup>11</sup> The coefficient for girls is  $-.22$  ( $p < .05$ ); the coefficient for boys is  $.04$  (n.s.).

sexuality specifically, we examined the distributions of responses to the question: “When the two of you disagree about how far to go sexually, who usually gets their way?”<sup>13</sup> A majority of all teens, male and female, indicate either that they have not disagreed about how far to go sexually (35%), or reported equal power (31%). Only 8% of females and 12% of males thought that the male in the relationship had more power or ‘say’ in this area. The content of many of the relationship history narratives tends to reinforce the notion that girls’ perspectives are important to the decision-making process:

So, if a girl says yes and a guy says no, it's a maybe. If a guy doesn't know and a girl says yes, it's yes. If a guy says yes, and a girl says yes, it's yes. If a girl says no and a guy says yes, it's no. If a girl doesn't know, and a guy says yes, it's no. If a girl, then, if a girl says yes and a guy says yes, it's yes. I think it's more that way, so I think the women have more control because their opinion matters more in that situation. [Brett]

Brett’s narrative is instructive in simply elaborating the large number of possible combinations of interest where sexual decisions are concerned; yet the main point of his description appears to be that girls’ perspectives are more pivotal in understanding what eventually takes place. One potential limitation of relying on narrative accounts, particularly in assessing power and sexuality connections, however, is that it is well recognized that narratives involve a reconstruction of the past that tends to place the individual in a relatively favorable light (Neisser, 1994). Thus it seems unlikely that boys would develop a narrative account that reflects elements of ‘pushing’ or coercion, and girls may also be reluctant to admit that boyfriends’ advances derive from an uneven power balance. Yet the number of narratives reflecting perceived mutuality and the detail included about this provide indications that many adolescents involved in intimate relationships do not themselves envision these dynamics in ways that outside observers might characterize them (i.e., the idea that males generally have more power in these relationships and use it to gain sexual access):

That was something that I had been saving. I really wanted to save it for marriage, but I was curious and and um...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 because she wanted to wait until marriage, but we had decided and we was both curious I guess and so it just happened. [Tim]

Actually, it was at times, where we both wanted it, then there was that times when we both said “we think we should wait”. You know, because, there were times where I’d be like “well, you

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<sup>12</sup> The coefficient for girls is .20 ( $p < .05$ ); for boys the coefficient is .18 ( $p < .07$ ).

<sup>13</sup> Responses include: a) the couple are in agreement; b) both partners have equal power; c) the partner has more power; or d) the respondent has more power.

know, you know I might feel at this time like, you know, we need have sexual whatever” then she’ll be like “well, no, I think we just need to wait a little longer”. You know, then, she might say “okay, well I feel it’s time” and I’ll be like “well, no, I think we need to wait a little longer.” [Kevin]

A number of other male and female respondents describe a dynamic in which girlfriends had apparently initiated the move toward sexual intimacy:

Well she put the moves on me really you know what I’m saying, she kind of like, she actually put the moves on me, you know, like I said I was shy but then I mean I wasn’t shy. [Pat]

Actually I put the pressure on him...we never had sex which I wanted to just because, like, that was like my first love. I loved him so much and he wanted to wait ‘cause he was a virgin actually until this year. [Caroline]

We didn’t have sex until like four months of us going out...I was a virgin I was scared...It was kind of a gradual build up...I was like “What if the condom breaks?”...and she was like “Don’t worry it’s not going to break.” [Jon]

It changed over time because I guess she was more mature than I was and I guess I wasn’t on her level you know because she wanted to do it more than I did... I didn’t know what I was doing, I wasn’t ready for it...I think I felt like I was too young...She was my girlfriend and that’s what she wanted... [Dave]

Uh, I [initiated it] actually...I think that if you’re in a relationship where the guy is kinda pushing you into sex it’s really not much of a relationship. I mean I think there’s a difference between initiating something and pushing someone into something. You know coming up with the idea and forcing it on someone...I haven’t been in that many relationships and most of the girls I hang out with are very straight forward and won’t let people push them around. So I don’t really have much exposure to that kind of thing. [Jennifer]<sup>14</sup>

The quotes above are useful in pointing up a range of dynamics, and at least in terms of adolescent self-reports, did not routinely reference a pattern of overt male power assertions. However, more research is needed on power and sexual decision-making because even though overt pressure on the part of the male partner may occur relatively infrequently, psychological and other consequences are often significant for the young women involved in these situations. Self-reports of sexual pressure and even coercion within youth and college samples vary, but such statistics support the idea that a significant number of young women have experienced these dynamics at some point in their lives (see especially Blythe, Fortenberry, Temkit, Tu, & Orr, 2006). In support of this longer viewpoint, evidence of this kind

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<sup>14</sup> These narratives highlight the degree to which sexual decisions (issues of timing, sensitivity, responsiveness to the partner’s view) are *themselves* sometimes viewed by teens as important “qualities of the relationship.” Jennifer for example, forged this connection when she noted that, *where the guy is kinda pushing you into sex it’s really not much of a relationship*, or when Ashley, quoted earlier suggested that she dismissed boys who clearly only wanted her number for “one reason.” This type of direct link between relationship qualities and sexual behavior



of pressure is also more likely to emerge from descriptions of young women's *past* relationship histories, as contrasted with descriptions of the current partner. For example, Meghan, an 18 year old respondent, described a relationship with another student which did involve considerable sexual pressure and associated psychological distress:

He would pressure me to where I would get PO'd and then I just would forget it and just do it, just so he'd leave me alone. Cause he'd bug me and bug me and bug me until I did it. So I'm like, okay, but I didn't expect it to continue on after the first time. And it just continued and continued until finally my mom found out about it and then she put it to an end, which thank God she did. [Meghan]

In this instance, Meghan's mother eventually obtained a restraining order against the young man in order to protect her from his repeated attempts to contact her and resume the relationship. Aside from these clear-cut cases, some traditionally gendered dynamics may connect to decisions that are narrated as mutual or even female-initiated. For example, some young women may have initiated sex as a way to cement relations with a particular boy, while others may have responded to subtle rather than obvious or overt coercion from their boyfriend.

### **The Reciprocal Relationship between Relationship Qualities and Sexual Behavior**

The magnitude of the associations revealed in the cross-sectional results described above likely reflects that some portion of this association stems from *effects* of sexual behavior on such features of the relationship as perceived intimacy of communication and caring. Indeed, in response to a direct question in the structured interview about the influence of sex on the relationship, over 60% of the boys and 80% of the girls reported that sex had brought them somewhat or much closer to their partner. Jordan's narrative provides an illustration of this idea of reciprocal effects, in this case on levels of intimate self-disclosure:

Yeah, yeah it was like, I say, when we was together, we would talk, and, but we wasn't saying some of the stuff but after, we got real close, and after, you know what I'm saying, we got together, or had sex, or whatever, it was like, it was just, like you could just say whatever! Anything! She, I felt like saying something to her, and I say it... We, not as freely, but after that, it just changed, like we got a little bit more closer! And, for, for uh... and felt, like a little bit more comfortable around each other. That's how it was. [Jordan]

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adds to our understanding of adolescents' perspectives, as the structured analyses necessarily focused on more generic features of the relationship and their association with sexual intimacy.

The idea that for some couples sex enhances overall intimacy adds to the notion that sexual behavior can have positive meanings for the adolescents involved, and highlights further some of the limitations of the ‘risk’ theoretical framework. Jordan clearly perceived an increase in intimate self-disclosure after he and his partner had sex. We do not believe, however, that the associations documented in the quantitative analysis should be considered primarily a consequence rather than a cause/precursor of sexual intimacy. The longitudinal assessment provides some support for this view. In addition, from a theoretical standpoint, if all of the variation in relationship quality reports were due to effects of sexual behavior itself, this would require us to accept that these relationships were viewed by the young people as in no way special or significant, but only became so upon introducing sex into the relationship.

## **DISCUSSION**

While adolescent sexual behavior is heavily influenced by such social dynamics as parenting practices and the orientations of one’s peers, these results suggest that specific qualities of romantic relationships are also important to a comprehensive understanding of intimate sexual behaviors. The results show that qualities such as intimate self-disclosure, caring and other forms of emotional engagement are positively related to the odds of sexual behavior. Such findings complicate the view of sexuality as but one of a roster other problem outcomes such as drinking, drug use and delinquent behavior, as they indicate that relationship dynamics that are considered “good,” healthy or even prosocial are significant predictors of sexually intimate behaviors, including sexual intercourse.

These findings are also inconsistent with recent media treatments (Denizet-Weis, 2004) that have decried the end of formal dating and romance, suggesting that most sexual activity among contemporary teens occurs within the context of casual relationships characterized by little caring or commitment. Prior research (e.g., Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2005) shows that many adolescents do eventually gain sexual experience that could be considered “non-relationship” or casual sex, but this is not the most common context for sexual involvement. Within the dating world itself, our results show that qualities that generally reflect higher levels of intimacy significantly increase the likelihood of sexually intimate behaviors. More research is obviously needed across the range of different contexts in which sex occurs,

including a better understanding of how these relationship forms sequence/interrelate across the life course. High risk liaisons will undoubtedly continue to be an important research focus because of the social and health implications of involvement in short term, low commitment relationships. Nevertheless, the findings described above are also potentially important, because they highlight that many of these relationships have positive significance and meaning for the youths involved in them. These findings are thus congruent with a symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective on human behavior, but also have policy implications. Specifically, the results suggest the need to incorporate discussions of relationships into programs focused on sexual risk-taking, as an important supplement to curricula that currently emphasize the risky or potentially health compromising nature of this activity (e.g., programs focused on the “Health Beliefs Model”—see e.g., Becker, 1988).

It is also important to note that in many instances we did not find a strong pattern of gender differences in the effects of relationship qualities. This provides evidence that boys as well as girls are influenced in their sexual decisions by relationship centered processes and dynamics. These findings thus temper the view that girls develop and make choices on the basis of their connections to others, while boys are primarily interested in achieving autonomy. The idea that boys have relatively little interest in romance is not supported by previous analyses of these data (authors, 2006), and the present analysis contributes beyond this prior work by documenting that both boys’ and girls’ perceptions of relationship qualities/dynamics are significantly linked to sexual behavior. Potentially important exceptions are the findings with regard to gendered effects of power and influence. A majority of youth, regardless of sexual history, describe a situation of relatively equal power or one favoring girls in an unequal power balance; yet the lower scores of girls who transitioned to first intercourse with a focal partner suggest that this relational dynamic does not follow the pattern of gender similarity observed in assessments of the influence of overall closeness or intimacy. More frequent assessments are needed in order to fully understand the sequencing of power and sexual decisions as influenced by respondent gender. The finding that girls’ reports of sexual chemistry are stronger predictors in the cross-sectional investigation is also somewhat at odds with prior research emphases, and also warrants additional research scrutiny. In

this analysis, only a few age interaction terms were statistically significant, but more research is needed that could provide a more nuanced understanding of developmental changes in the impact of these and other relationship qualities.

This study is limited by our focus on youths residing in a single geographic region. And while we believe that respondents' subjective experiences are important to understand, this focus also has limitations, in that objective measures/observations (e.g., of power dynamics) might reveal a different pattern of results. Couple level data would also be a useful supplement to the individual reports we focused upon in this analysis. In future research, it will also be useful to focus more attention on problematic features of romantic relationships, such as conflict, jealousy, and cheating behaviors (see e.g., Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). As Roll and Millen (1979) noted, there is a tendency in many studies of close relationships, to see the world through "rose-colored glasses;" that is to focus only on the positive side of close relationships. Yet where the referent is sexuality, sociologists have often adopted a risk or social problems orientation, or have tended to study only outcomes such as teen pregnancy and relationship violence. Research that incorporates the full range of relationship qualities, including positive, negative, and conceptually neutral dynamics will be most helpful. This multi-dimensional approach is needed to document the specific conditions under which adolescent romance is associated with outcomes such as depression or violence, and when these relationships may foster positive emotions, identity development, and as indicated in these results, the development of sexual intimacy.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Characteristics of the Sample**

	Cross-Sectional	Longitudinal
Sexual intimacy <sup>a</sup>	36%	
Sexual intercourse	28%	24%
<i>Relationship Variables</i>		
Self-disclosure	13.70	14.28
Communication awkwardness	9.95	9.50
Caring	4.12	4.23
Intensity	2.82	2.91
Love	10.65	11.13
Sexual chemistry	3.49	3.44
Influence	6.47	6.50
Power	8.19	8.36
<i>Control Variables</i>		
Gender		
(Male)		
Female	.49	.58
Age	15.37	15.06
Race		
White	.65	0
Black	.23	.23
Hispanic	.12	.06
Family structure		
Two biological parents	.45	
Single parent	.26	.23
Step-parent	.17	.17
Other parent	.12	.12
Parental education		
Less than 12 years	.13	.11
12 years	.30	0
More than 12 years	.57	.56
Monitoring	20.63	21.03
Peer attitudes	3.10	2.67
Sex prior to relationship	.26	.14
N	954	300

<sup>a</sup>Limited to only those who have not had sexual intercourse (N = 684)

Note: Distributions are weighted.

**TABLE 2**  
**Qualities of Communication and the Likelihood of Adolescent Sexual Behavior: Self-Disclosure and Communication Awkwardness**

	Self-Disclosure						Communication Awkwardness					
	Cross-Sectional				Longitudinal		Cross-Sectional				Longitudinal	
	Sexual Intimacy <sup>a</sup>		Sexual Intercourse		Later Intercourse		Sexual Intimacy <sup>a</sup>		Sexual Intercourse		Later Intercourse	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Self-disclosure	.14***	.13***	.13***	.10***	.09*	.07 <sup>+</sup>						
Communication awkwardness							-.16***	-.16***	-.15***	-.14***	-.03	-.00
Gender												
(Male)												
Female		-.44*		-.16		-.22		-.32 <sup>+</sup>		-.06		-.13
Age		.31***		.39***		.23 <sup>+</sup>		.34***		.41***		.25*
Race												
(White)												
Black		-.16		.07		-.14		-.29		.03		-.23
Hispanic		.12		.07		.07		.13		.09		-.01
Family structure												
(Two biological parents)												
Single parent		.38 <sup>+</sup>		-.08		.72 <sup>+</sup>		.34		-.12		.67 <sup>+</sup>
Step-parent		.01		.15		1.09*		-.03		.16		1.08**
Other parent		.28		-.42		-.44		.20		-.47		-.45
Parental education												
Less than 12 years		-.01		.58 <sup>+</sup>		-.03		-.04		.59 <sup>+</sup>		-.06
(12 years)												
More than 12 years		-.13		-.27		-.28		-.11		-.27		-.26
Monitoring		.02		-.05		.07		.03		-.05		.07
Peer attitudes		.11 <sup>+</sup>		.54***		.37***		.13 <sup>+</sup>		.56***		.39***
Sex prior to relationship		.10		1.19***		.09		.06		1.18***		.07

<sup>a</sup>Limited to only those who have not had sexual intercourse (N = 684)

<sup>+</sup>p ≤ .10; \*p ≤ .05; \*\*p ≤ .01; \*\*\*p ≤ .001

**TABLE 3**  
**Emotional Processes and the Likelihood of Adolescent Sexual Behavior: Caring and Intensity of the Relationship**

	Caring						Intensity					
	Cross-Sectional				Longitudinal		Cross-Sectional				Longitudinal	
	Sexual Intimacy <sup>a</sup>		Sexual Intercourse		Later Intercourse		Sexual Intimacy <sup>a</sup>		Sexual Intercourse		Later Intercourse	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Caring	.50***	.48***	.63***	.60***	.39*	.48*						
Intensity							.22**	.25**	.44***	.41***	.28*	.35**
Gender												
(Male)												
Female		-.31 <sup>+</sup>		-.13		-.18		-.24		-.06		-.12
Age		.32***		.41***		.22 <sup>+</sup>		.34***		.42***		.27*
Race												
(White)												
Black		-.29		.00		-.17		-.33		-.11		-.35
Hispanic		.06		.04		.07		.05		.01		-.11
Family structure												
(Two biological parents)												
Single parent		.34		-.10		.68 <sup>+</sup>		.30		-.13		.71 <sup>+</sup>
Step-parent		.02		.22		1.18**		-.03		.15		1.05*
Other parent		.21		-.44		-.55		.14		-.51		-.61
Parental education												
Less than 12 years		-.10		.53 <sup>+</sup>		-.08		-.08		.46		-.09
(12 years)												
More than 12 years		-.15		-.28		-.32		-.04		-.22		-.28
Monitoring		.03		-.04		.07		.03		-.04		.08
Peer attitudes		.14*		.57***		.39***		.14*		.55***		.39***
Sex prior to relationship		.09		1.20***		.15		.12		1.25***		.17

<sup>a</sup>Limited to only those who have not had sexual intercourse (N = 684)

<sup>+</sup>p ≤ .10; \*p ≤ .05; \*\*p ≤ .01; \*\*\*p ≤ .001

**TABLE 4**  
**Emotional Processes and the Likelihood of Adolescent Sexual Behavior: Love and Sexual Chemistry**

	Love						Sexual Chemistry					
	Cross-Sectional			Longitudinal			Cross-Sectional			Longitudinal		
	Sexual Intimacy <sup>a</sup>		Sexual Intercourse	Later Intercourse		Sexual Intercourse	Sexual Intimacy <sup>a</sup>		Sexual Intercourse	Later Intercourse		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Love	.18***	.17***	.15***	.13***	.10 <sup>+</sup>	.09						
Sexual chemistry							.55***	.49***	.49***	.31**	.30*	.30 <sup>+</sup>
Gender												
(Male)												
Female		-.31 <sup>+</sup>		-.07		-.12		-.19		.02		-.04
Age		.33***		.41***		.25*		.33***		.41***		.26*
Race												
(White)												
Black		-.26		.04		-.16		-.25		.02		-.21
Hispanic		.10		.06		-.01		.07		.05		-.04
Family structure												
(Two biological parents)												
Single parent		.38		-.13		.69 <sup>+</sup>		.38 <sup>+</sup>		-.12		.75 <sup>+</sup>
Step-parent		.08		.22		1.12*		.09		.22		1.15**
Other parent		.26		-.48		-.49		.41		-.40		-.36
Parental education												
Less than 12 years		-.01		.61*		.01		.02		.63*		.01
(12 years)												
More than 12 years		-.07		-.24		-.27		-.06		-.24		-.31
Monitoring		.02		-.05		.07		.04		-.04		.09
Peer attitudes		.12 <sup>+</sup>		.55***		.37*		.10		.55***		.38***
Sex prior to relationship		.10		1.19***		.07		.08		1.16***		.05

<sup>a</sup>Limited to only those who have not had sexual intercourse (N = 684)

<sup>+</sup>p ≤ .10; \*p ≤ .05; \*\*p ≤ .01; \*\*\*p ≤ .001

**TABLE 5**  
**Influence and Power and the Likelihood of Adolescent Sexual Behavior**

	Influence						Power					
	Cross-Sectional				Longitudinal		Cross-Sectional				Longitudinal	
	Sexual Intimacy <sup>a</sup>		Sexual Intercourse		Later Intercourse		Sexual Intimacy <sup>a</sup>		Sexual Intercourse		Later Intercourse	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Influence	.06*	.07*	.00	.06	.02	.04						
Power												
Gender												
(Male)												
Female		-.14		.06		-.06		-.20		.09		.00
Age		.34***		.43***		.25*		.34***		.42***		.25*
Race												
(White)												
Black		-.25		.01		-.20		-.26		.02		-.15
Hispanic		.12		.12		.05		.08		.11		.02
Family structure												
(Two biological parents)												
Single parent		.28		-.17		.63		.28		-.17		.66
Step-parent		.02		.14		1.09**		-.00		.12		1.08**
Other parent		.16		-.51		-.44		.16		-.52		-.44
Parental education												
Less than 12 years		.00		.60 <sup>+</sup>		-.06***		.03		.64*		-.02
(12 years)												
More than 12 years		-.04		-.24		-.27		-.05		-.22		-.29
Monitoring		.03		-.05		.07		.03		-.05		.08
Peer attitudes		.14*		.56***		.39*		.15*		.57***		.39***
Sex prior to relationship		.16		1.19***		.10		.10		1.18***		.09

<sup>a</sup>Limited to only those who have not had sexual intercourse (N = 684)

<sup>+</sup>p ≤ .10; \*p ≤ .05