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**IDENTITY, PEER RELATIONSHIPS, AND ADOLESCENT GIRLS'  
SEXUAL BEHAVIOR: AN EXPLORATION OF  
THE CONTEMPORARY DOUBLE STANDARD**

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### **Abstract**

The idea of a sexual double standard emphasizes that men have more freedom regarding their sexual behavior, while women are subject to social sanctions for the same behaviors. The current research uses a contemporary sample of adolescent women to examine social concomitants and consequences of reporting a greater number of sexual partners. A social deficit hypothesis emphasizes low self-esteem and social costs associated with a greater number of sexual partners, while a social network hypothesis focuses on the norms and behaviors of girls' friends as significant predictors. The cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses of quantitative data (n=600) provide support for the social network hypothesis: friends' attitudes and behaviors were significant predictors of respondents' own levels of sexual experience, while those reporting a higher number of sexual partners did not report a lack of popularity, desire for more friends, or lower self-esteem. In depth-relationship history narratives collected from a subset of these respondents (n=51) provide a more complex perspective on the survival of the double standard. Young women often explicitly recognized the existence of a double standard on a societal level or as phenomenon within their school, but reflected greater acceptance where the referent was their friends' behaviors or their own conduct.

## Introduction

The double standard is a well-recognized cultural phenomenon, however some researchers have suggested that gendered sexual standards of behavior may be undergoing change and increasing in complexity (Marks and Fraley 2006; Milhausen and Herold 2001; Moore and Rosenthal 1994; Risman and Schwartz 2002; Tolman 1996). The classic definition of the sexual double standard focuses on the ways in which young men are socialized to value sexual experience and young women learn to emphasize committed relationships (Reiss 1960). It is believed that in general this inhibits young women's sexual behavior, particularly 'promiscuous' behavior, by making it socially costly. Accordingly, women who do not fit the conservative ideal are subjected to negative social sanctions/censure. Some research has suggested that this classic pattern may be eroding (Crawford 2003; Gentry 1998; Marks and Fraley 2005; Marks and Fraley 2006), but more research is needed that relies on a contemporary sample of young women.

In this study, we rely on quantitative (n=600) and qualitative (n=51) data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS) to explore the relationship between girls' social network experiences and identities and their sexual behaviors. Assumptions associated with the double standard are that girls whose behaviors exceed normative standards for sexual behavior are likely to face social censure, and, consistent with negative 'reflected appraisals' from others, may have lower self-esteem than their more sexually conservative counterparts. This notion fits with a *social deficits* perspective on girls' sexual behaviors. The cross-sectional assessment documents whether there is a significant association between number of sexual partners and a) perceived popularity with peers, dissatisfaction with number of friends, and level of self-esteem. A longitudinal analysis adds to the portrait by investigating whether the number of sexual

partners is associated with lower peer popularity as reported one year later. A contrasting approach to sexual behavior, derived from symbolic interactionist approaches to social learning (a *social network* approach) emphasizes that interacting with friends who have more liberal attitudes and behaviors is likely to be significantly associated with girls' own behavioral choices. These analyses include other identity and peer context variables that potentially complicate the view of social deficits as either origins or consequences of young women's sexual choices. We explore these issues further through an analysis of in-depth "relationship history narratives" elicited from a subset of the respondents. These qualitative data allow us to explore in more detail how a contemporary sample of young women understand the general concept of the double standard, but also the ways in which their own behaviors, as well as those of classmates and friends connect to this more abstract set of behavioral proscriptions.

Studying specific components of the double standard (i.e., is there a social cost to girls' sexuality?) and girls' understanding of their own and others' experiences is important for several reasons. First, there is a great deal of social and demographic research on what adolescents do sexually, and on the fertility-related consequences, but there is little research on what these behaviors and experiences mean to the young people involved. Thus, this study adds to prior research that has examined the correlates of number of lifetime sexual partners (Manlove et al. 2008; Siebenbruner, Zimmer-Gembeck, and Egeland 2007), the literature emphasizing sexual identities of heterosexual females (e.g., Tolman, 1996) and obstacles encountered when trying to explore alternative notions of sexuality that go against the traditional sexual double standard. Second, adolescent sexual activity is associated with increased risk of pregnancy as well as sexually transmitted infections (Bruckner, Martin, and Bearman 2007; DiClemente et al. 2005). Furthering our scholarly understanding of the meaning of adolescent sexual behaviors to

adolescent girls, themselves, potentially can assist researchers in understanding why young people participate in possible risky behaviors such as having multiple sexual partners. In addition, the sexual identity construction that occurs in adolescence is likely to be related to later adult psychological development and well-being (Arnett 2000). Personal ideas about the self connect the past, present, and future of the individual (Mead 1934; Côté 2000). Observing how young women make sense of their sexual lives can lead to insight about the healthy development of sexuality throughout the life course. Finally, understanding the current trends, attitudes, and realities of adolescent girls' sexual behavior can be useful in the design of more effective sexual education and prevention programs (Moore and Rosenthal 1994). For the most part, sexuality that is discussed in formal school settings focuses heavily on the biological side of sex (Fine 1988), as well as attempting to heighten students' knowledge and awareness of various kinds of risks (West 1999). While some sex education programs have started to include issues such as social pressures and peer influences on sexual behavior, the main focus of such courses is still about the sexual act itself, rather than on the social contexts within which these behaviors unfold (Kirby 2003). The current study can provide knowledge about the realities of young women's sexual lives and inform policy regarding sex education research.

## **Background**

### *Prior Research on the Double Standard*

The sexual double standard has evolved over time. Early on, it was considered inappropriate for women to engage in sexual activity outside of marriage (Crawford 2003; Reiss 1960). Some researchers have argued that the sexual double standard has changed somewhat, but is still in place (Risman and Schwartz 2002; Millhausen and Herold 1999). For example,

Sprecher and Harfield (1996) state the sexual double standard is more likely to exist when young women are engaging in sexual behavior while not in a committed relationship. Other research like Maccoby (1998) noted that teenage boys who gain considerable sexual experience do not run the same risk of being labeled deviant as do their female counterparts. More specifically, young women who had a high number of sexual partners were socially reprimanded for their behavior and young men were rewarded (Milhausen and Herold 1999).

Some research has examined the prevalence of the sexual double standard among samples of American youth. Moore and Rosenthal (1994) focused on the attitudes of 16-year-olds and found that over half of their sample judged girls and boys similarly regarding the issue of having many sexual partners (respondents were asked the general question, “What do you think about girls/boys who sleep around?”). Although this suggests some movement away from a clear double standard, nevertheless a relatively large percentage of teenagers do evaluate males and females differently, with girls most often viewed or judged in a negative manner. One limitation of their study is that it asks respondents to reflect on a hypothetical individual, rather than on one’s own behavior or that of friends and classmates.

Another study by Jackson and Cram (2003) relied on focus groups of late adolescent girls. The young women in their sample noted that women are typically labeled ‘sluts’ for the same sexual behavior that would earn boys the label ‘stud.’ Although this reflects a continued double standard, as in the Moore and Rosenthal (1994) study, these respondents rarely used experiences from their own lives to explain how the double standard affects them personally. And, while the above studies find support for the survival of the double standard, other research suggests that this gendered normative system may be eroding. Oliver and Hyde (1993) compiled research conducted between 1966-1990 relating to this issue and determined that attitudes toward

premarital sexual behavior are becoming more similar across gender in more recent studies. Further, using a sample of college students and patrons at a bar, Milhausen and Herold (2001) reported that while men were significantly more likely to endorse the sexual double standard, it was still only a minority of men. The authors stated that most men and women endorsed a single standard that judged men and women's sexual behavior equally.

Some of the variability in results of prior research may be related to variations in methodological approaches across the various studies. Crawford (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of research on the double standard and reported that experimentally designed studies were more likely to indicate less support for the existence of the double standard. In contrast, qualitative approaches such as interviews and focus groups tended to reveal that it survives within the context of everyday interactions. Marks and Fraley (2006) examined the possible role of confirmation bias in studying the sexual double standard. The researchers concluded that their participants recalled information from a given vignette that confirmed the sexual double standard more often than any other details. This suggests that studies which are only focused around the simple measure of the respondent's perception that the double standard exists may be limited and not tap into the actual ways individuals understand the sexual behavior of males and females and what sexual activities means in their own lives.

Findings examining sexual behavior patterns of teens tend to lend some support to the idea of greater heterogeneity in standards of sexual behavior. For example, Author (2005), rely on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) reported that nearly 44 percent of young women had experienced nonromantic sexual activity. Thus, in a nationally representative sample almost half of the sexually active adolescent females had sexual activity in a non-committed relationship. If, consistent with the double standard notion, sex

within a traditional dating context is the only socially acceptable option for young women, then, it appears that a relatively large percentage of teens have violated this cultural mandate.

Building on this research, the current study further explores the social and individual meanings of these sexual behaviors.

### *A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective on Sexual Behavior*

The symbolic interactionist perspective provides a useful orienting framework for the current study as this theoretical tradition emphasizes that meanings are constructed or situated within particular social frameworks (Mead 1934; Sutherland 1934). Thus, while broad normative standards are critical to consider, micro-level interactions are key to learning about the world and about the self. A kind of deficit hypothesis follows logically from the notion that a single standard of behavior is acceptable for young women: those who violate the double standard by having sex with a relatively high number of sexual partners should be less popular than their more sexually conservative counterparts, and may suffer from low self-esteem that is associated with internalizing the negative views of others.

The concept of social networks, in contrast, emphasizes the potential for heterogeneity in girls' perspectives and behaviors. For example, Tolman (1996) reported that some young women have a positive view of their own sexuality and essentially 'pushed back' upon or resisted any negative attributions from others. Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2006) also criticized the negative focus of much of the research on female sexuality, highlighting instances in which young girls may develop a healthy and positive way of creating a sexual self. For example, they noted that the peer group is an importance source of reference during adolescence, which may support or actively promote sexual activity.



## The Current Study

*The Social Deficit Hypothesis.* In the current analysis, we explore the range of variability in number of sexual partners girls report, in order to determine whether those who report a greater number of partners have lower self-esteem. Also, a higher number of sexual partners will be associated with lower popularity with friends or a perceived deficit in the number of friends they have. This relationship would be consistent with the basic notion of a double standard. Because these cross-sectional analyses undoubtedly capture reciprocal processes (less popular girls may have more partners and then experience even more decline in popularity), we also explore these associations longitudinally in models that predict time II popularity from time I sexual behavior reports, controlling for time I popularity. This provides an indication of a decline in popularity that is more readily theorized as a consequence rather than a cause of the behavior of interest.

*The Social Network Hypothesis.* Our analysis also examines the range of variability across the sample from the perspective of a symbolic interactionist version of social learning theory. Consistent with the emphases of traditional social learning theories, this alternative perspective leads us to expect that those with more sexual experience will not report lower levels of popularity, or a need for more friends. Instead, those who report a high number of sexual partners will have friends with more liberal sexual attitudes and a higher level of sexual experience themselves. The symbolic interactionist version of social learning theory also highlights the importance of identity formation processes, as self-views reflects an internalization of prior social experiences. In contrast to the notion of an internalization of negative self-views, however (i.e. the hypothesis of low self-esteem that follows from the deficit hypothesis outlined above), we focus on the self as comprised of multiple content areas, including the sexual self (Author et al. Forthcoming). These sexual self views need not be viewed from a negative lens,

but simply as self-definitions that reference the heterosexual realm. Young women who believe that they are “sexy” or “hot” may carry a level of confidence about their interactions with young men, and engage in more activities (flirting, attending parties) that provide greater opportunities for sexual involvement. Thus, we expect that endorsement of such identities will be associated with a higher number of sexual partners, controlling for traditional correlates.

The in-depth qualitative data we also elicited from a subset of the respondents provide a more multilayered perspective on the double standard. This analysis provides an important supplement to the quantitative results, and compares the meaning construction process as it relates to girls’ own behavior, that of friends, classmates, and gender norms within the larger society. A more complicated understanding of the double standard that includes individual characteristics as well as social network influences enables us to test the complex nature of the sexual double standard not just the a singular or abstract understanding of it. In the current project we include individual and peer related responses to maintaining a self-image under the current sexual double standard.

### **Data and Method**

This paper draws on the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS). The original sample collected quantitative information on a stratified, random sample of 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grade adolescent boys and girls in Lucas County, Ohio with an over sampling of the African American and Hispanic populations with a final sample size of 1,316 total youth from the Toledo area, which includes 678 girls. At time II, 603 girls (89 percent of the time 1 respondents) were interviewed and our analysis is based on 600 girls with valid data on the dependent and independent indicators. Fifty-one females were interviewed to provide an in-depth romantic relationships and sexual behavior history which provide the data for the qualitative component of

the current project. These data are complimentary to the quantitative findings as they allow individuals the opportunity to provide a more nuanced explanation for their understanding and experience with the sexual double standard.

TARS is an appropriate dataset for these analyses because it provides detailed measures of identity, including not only the more traditional self-esteem measure, but measures of identity content, peer behavior, and attitudes. Further, unlike the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health), the TARS is not a school-based sample. This is of value because excluding individuals who are not currently attending school may be eliminating the extreme cases regarding sexual behavior. Finally, TARS provides both quantitative and qualitative data, which is crucial to both document the trends of adolescent girls' sexual behavior and the meaning they give to such behavior.

For the quantitative analysis there are two dependent variables. The first is a continuous variable of *number of lifetime sexual partners* at wave I (mean =.89; range 0-36). The second is a binary variable measuring *unpopularity with females* as reported at wave II. This was constructed from responses to the item "Others would describe me as popular with females." If the respondent either strongly disagreed or disagreed they were coded as 1 (18 percent), otherwise they are coded as 0 (82 percent).

There are three key social deficit measures: popularity, perceived need for more friends, and self-esteem. *Unpopularity with females* at time II is based on the question "Others would describe you as popular with females" (if the respondent strongly disagreed or disagreed with the question they were coded as 1 (15 percent) else they were codes as 0 (85 percent). We coded the popularity variable in this manner to capture the young women who really resonated with the unpopular identity. We did not use popularity with males because that could be confounded with

the fact that girls might become popular with males if they have sex with them which would not be a true measure of popularity. At wave I, 15 percent indicated that they were not popular.

*Perceived lack of friends* is based on the question “I wish I had more friends” with a five scaled response ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree (mean=2.59; range 1-5). A six item scale is used to measure *self-esteem* (Rosenberg et al. 1995) (mean 23.51; range 9-30) with questions like, “I can do things as well as other people.” Higher scores are associated with higher self-esteem.

We use four items to measure social network and identity of the respondent. *Sexualized identity* is measured with two items (“I am flirty” and “I sexy or hot”). Respondents provide response categories that range from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Flirty mean=3.14; Sexy mean=3.29; range 1-5). Two measures indexing the normative climate within the friendship network, *friends sexual behavior* is measured by the questions “How many of your friends do you think have had sex” (mean=2.85; range=1 “none” to 6 “all”) and *friends liberal attitudes* (mean =7.33; range =3-15; alpha=.36), a three item scale that taps into friends’ liberal attitudes toward sex with questions like, “My friends think you should only have sex if you are married.” Higher numbers are associated with more liberal attitudes toward sex.

Although not a central focus, but often related to sexual activity, models also include control variables. These variables include academic achievement which is measured by asking: “What grades did you get in school this year” (mean=3.49; 1=mostly A’s to 9= mostly F’s)? Involvement in school activities was measured by asking: “How much were you involved in school related activities and sports” with responses ranging from 1=not at all to 5=very involved (mean=2.67). Age is measured as a continuous variable (mean=15.22 range 12-19). A respondent’s race was classified into four categories: white (65 percent), Black (22 percent),

Hispanic (11 percent) and Other Race (2 percent). The 2000 block level census data are used to calculate whether respondent live in communities with 20 percent or more households living in poverty (27percent). Family structure is coded as two biological parents (49 percent), single parent (26 percent), step parents (14 percent), and other family forms (11 percent). Mothers' education includes less than high school degree (12 percent), a high school degree or GED (33 percent), some college (33 percent) and a bachelor's degree (22 percent) (see appendix table).

#### *Analytic Strategy*

The analytic strategy is first to estimate a model using ordinary least squares regression to investigate the association between the independent variables and the continuous measure of number of lifetime sexual partners at wave I. We initially test zero-order models and then estimate models, which include all the covariates. We focus on the social deficit and social network indicators. The second set of analyses relies on logistic regression to predict wave II popularity. Logistic regression is an appropriate method because popularity is a binary variable. This model includes wave I number of sex partners and wave I independent variables to predict wave II popularity with females.

The qualitative data was transcribed verbatim into a text document in preparation for analysis. After reading through all the in-depth interviews once, a code list of the major themes was created. The data were then coded using Atlas ti to help organize and classify the narratives into the conceptual codes. Further, Atlas ti enables the researcher to quickly reference the full narrative based on a specific code found in the interview.

## Results

Table 1 presents the zero-order (column 1) and multivariate (column 2) ordinary least squares models predicting number of sexual partners. The mean number of partners is 0.9 (SD=2.4). We first focus on the social deficit indicators, perceived popularity, desire for friends, and self-esteem. The zero-order and multivariate results show that perceived popularity and desire for number of friends are not significantly related to girls' reports about their number of lifetime sex partners. Further, results show that self-esteem is not associated with the number of lifetime sexual partners. This is not consistent with the notion of high social costs, at a devalued or stigmatized identity, at least as measured by the idea of lower self-esteem.

The indicators associated with the social networks hypothesis are friends' liberal sexual attitudes, sexual behavior of friends, and sexual identity. Friends' liberal sexual attitudes and sexual behavior of friends are significantly positively related to the number of lifetime sexual partners reported in zero-order and multivariate models. In addition, those who agree that others would describe them as "sexy" have a significantly greater number of sexual partners in the zero-order model and are explained by friend's liberal sexual attitudes in the multivariate model. We find that respondent's endorsement of the flirty identity is not significantly tied to number of sexual partners. A more detailed analysis (available on request) that uses logistic regression with a dichotomous dependent variable of four or more sexual partners reports that flirty is significant at the zero-order level, but not in the full model. These cross-sectional results are more consistent with the basic tenets of social learning theory, particularly symbolic interactionist versions.

### *Longitudinal Assessments*

Results of longitudinal analyses are reported in Table 2. To determine whether number of sexual partners reported at wave I is in effect associated with a reduction in popularity at wave II, we rely on the former as a predictor of the latter. Net of perceived popularity with females as reported at wave I, number of lifetime sexual partners also reported at wave I is not statistically significantly related to subsequent popularity, as measured at wave II. This finding suggests that within this sample of adolescents, whether we examine the issue cross-sectionally or longitudinally, number of sexual partners does not seem to be associated with lower peer regard, as would be predicted by the basic underpinnings of the sexual double standard. In addition, the findings highlight identity and social network variations within the sample that are linked to behavioral differences across the sample.

### *The Meaning of the Double Standard*

Our analyses of the qualitative data provide a more nuanced picture of the role of the double standard in girls' lives, one that generally accords with the quantitative results, but complicates the findings. Within the context of girls' more complete romantic and sexual histories, discussions of the double standard indicate that these gendered normative standards survive on many levels. Yet differences across various reference points are important to consider. Thus, while young women spoke eloquently about the general existence of two standards of sexual comportment, they reserved more harsh attributions for unknown or little known others who freely violated these standards. As discussions turned to the behavior of intimate friends, and particularly respondents' own behavior, a more measured and complex set of meanings/explanations/disclaimers often emerged.

*The Meaning of the Sexual Double Standard on the Abstract Level.*

During the in-depth interviews respondents were asked a straightforward question regarding the double standard and whether they think it still exists. Results of the qualitative data show that many adolescents in the sample do recognize the survival of the sexual double standard. However, when the girls described the sexual double standard as being real it is often viewed as a known societal reality or a social dynamic that occurs in the larger school environment. When asked about why girls get a bad reputation for sexual behavior, but boys do not, Sara an 18-year-old with 7 lifetime sexual partners states: *I mean, we've (girls) gotten a bad rap ever since Eve took the apple... People can break it down all the way back then.* Sara believes that the sexual double standard is as old as the human race. Similarly, Emma, a 17-year-old with 1 lifetime sexual partner notes:

When the girl does it just to get that name for herself or just make her well known to other people then that would make a bad name for yourself but the guys do it more...I think that stereotype is true but I don't think it is fair.

Emma notes that girls are judged differently for the same behavior compared to males and she also notes that it is unjust to females. Others like Kayla, a 17-year-old virgin recognize that the sexual double standard is strong at the societal level. She states:

...I think it's because of the way that we were raised! You know, with the whole, American culture, you know? You'll see it on TV and everything, you know guy, you know -- and like movies, "Oh, you scored last night! That's great! But when it goes back to the girl, she's a "whore!" She put out too early...

Clearly, Kayla describes core elements of the double standard in pointing out that women are held to different normative standards compared to males. Also she reflects on social labeling processes, in that males are subject to social rewards for engaging in behavior that is likely to garner the label 'whore' when enacted by women.



Other girls, when asked to describe the sexual double standard, provide examples that relate to their school environment; however, these statements are also often vague or abstract, not referencing particular girls—especially the respondent’s friends or their own behavior.

Kimberly, a 17-year-old with 2 lifetime sexual partners says:

The girls I’ve seen now in schools, you know me being a senior and seeing the younger girls, they just put themselves out there like that just to get like attention from the boys and I don’t know maybe they’re working to get a like relationship with ‘em or they just do it just because that’s what they feel...I don’t know. I think it’s nasty.

This senior female does judge harshly the younger girls that “put themselves out there” in ways that are too overtly sexual. The narrative also suggests that she has a different orientation. Thus, it is interesting to note that Kimberly is currently dating a boy who started out as a “friends with benefits” relationship, suggesting the idea that multiple—and sometimes contradictory—meanings can be associated with the double standard concept.

This notion is also illustrated by Marie, a 17-year-old, who castigates other girls who gain a negative reputation linked to their sexual behaviors: *Cause there are some girls out there that deserve it. Like, they just don’t care...And, then like, that gets put on all girls ‘cause we’re girls.*” In this instance it is useful to examine the results of Marie’s structured interview, which indicate that she has had four sexual partners. Thus, while castigating other girls, Marie herself scored over one standard deviation above the mean in sexual experience relative to other young women who participated in the TARS study. These two quotes show that the sexual double standard may exist on a societal or school level, but often erodes, or gains a layer of complication when the referent is one’s own behavior or that of intimate friends.

#### *The Meaning of the Sexual Double Standard on the Peer Level*

Numerous scholars have pointed out that a key benefit of friendships during the adolescent period is the level of support they provide (Mortimer and Call 2001). And, as

Youniss and Smollar (1985) and others have pointed out, peers, relative to one's parents or other adults, are less likely to be judgmental, a social dynamic that creates many opportunities for frank dialogue and exploration of issues, including issues of sexuality. When asked how she felt about her friend Sierra's sexual behavior Stephanie, a 17-year-old with 6 lifetime sexual partners says:

R: Yea, and that's my friend

I: And that has nothin' to do with how (you feel about her)

R: Nope. 'Cause I'm not sleeping with her so I don't care.

Clearly, Marie does not view her friend negatively because she has engaged in such behaviors. And, while we cannot clearly document all of the selection and influences processes involved, Marie's own sexual experience level coordinates well with that of her friend Sierra, providing an additional motivation to avoid levying any sort of negative social sanction or disapproval of her friend's behavior. This fits well with the quantitative results reported in Table 1. Along similar lines, Alexis, a 17-year-old with 1 lifetime sex partner, describes how her peer group does not talk about or judge their female friends for the sexual activities in which they participate:

...No I think my friends are all pretty much, we're all pretty much alike. We just kind of I don't think that we brown nose in other people's business. You know we go on about our way and um our business is our business... You know if Paula's out doing somebody it's not my business. And I don't take pride in you know sharing it with other people.

Alexis' statement reflects that she does not judge her friend for the sexual behavior in which she may be involved. Even more importantly she feels the need to uphold certain rules of friendship, which do not include giving the friend a derogatory name or spreading rumors about her.

Another participant, Amber, a 17-year-old with 2 lifetime sex partners, reports that her peer group, principally the soccer team, offers a safe place to discuss romantic and sexual activity:

R:...Like, personally, just on the soccer team, like, yea. Like, on the soccer team, we talk about that all the time... Oh, very open. Like girls who had...they're, like, very curious.

I: And so people are accepting of them?

R: Oh, yea. People are very accepting

I: Okay and...they don't get a negative reputation?

R: Nope, not at [high school name].

Amber feels she can look to her peer group as an opportunity to discuss issues around sexuality without running the risk of getting a negative reputation. Since the peer group is often a safe haven relative to the "wider circle" of peer associations, this is a place for girls to explore their own and others' sexual feelings and experiences in ways that to an extent suspend or "bracket off" double standard concerns. This idea is consistent with the quantitative findings that the social network is important in the sexuality construction process.

#### *Maintaining a Positive Self Image in Response to the Sexual Double Standard*

Most girls could describe the negative sexual double standard in some fashion, but may have actually engaged in behaviors that could potentially garner a negative reputation. As suggested above, one way in which such negative attributions are avoided is by affiliating with other young women who share similar attitudes, and often a similar behavioral profile.

However, in addition to carving out compatible peer affiliations, the relationship and sexual history narratives provide some indications of ways in which girls construct positive meanings about their own identities, including their sexual self-images. Jade, an 18-year-old with 2 lifetime sexual partners, states: *I guess they don't want to seem like a slut, you know? No one wants to be thought of like that...I mean, if I hear something about a girl that she had sex with three different guys, you know, on the same night, I'm gonna label her as a slut.* This respondent recognizes there are certain behaviors that can cause a female to be called a 'slut,' but mentions

an extremely liberal reference point (having sex with three different partners on the same night) that ensures that her own behavior can be seen in a more positive, conservative light.

Aside from this type of bar-setting as a way of distancing from negative attributions, several girls focused on the inappropriate, hurtful actions of boyfriends as a catalyst for their own behaviors. For example, several female respondents state that they have had sex with two young men at the same time because their boyfriends cheated first or were not around. Rachel a 17-year-old with 7 lifetime sex partners explains how she started cheating on her partner:

I: So who started kind of cheating on who first?

R: Well as far as sex I believe he did.

I: But how about emotional?

R: ...Oh he did.

I: Okay. And so then did you start going out with other guys after he spent time with other girls?

R: Yeah towards the end of our relationship, yes.

Marissa, a 17-year-old with 13 lifetime sexual partners, explains why she was having sex with two different individuals at the same time for a period of time: *We were supposed to be going together but that's why I kind of started messing with someone else, because he was never around. When he did come around, it was just sex. So I was like why should I go with him if I can just get that anyway.* Marissa thus focuses on her boyfriend's bad or uncaring behavior as a justification for her own activities.

While Marissa and Rachel focus on ways in which their boyfriends fall short as a justification for their activities, some young women within the sample focus on their own sexual desires in a generally positive way a point highlighted by Tolman (1996). Several of the teenage

girls explain that they have had sex because they were interested to see what sex was like or that they are young. Alexis, 17-year-old with 1 lifetime sex partner explains: *I don't know what I mean I don't [know why] I slept with Joe. Maybe it was curiosity.*” Amber, 17-year-old with 2 lifetime sex partners describes the sexual activity between her and her boyfriend: *“It was to where two or three times a day...Yea, seriously like my sex drive is like a guy.* This quote and the rest of her narrative comments make clear that Amber was generally unapologetic about enjoying her sexuality; yet vestiges of the double standard are apparent in her reference to her sex drive as being “like a guy.” This is somewhat reminiscent of quotes from male respondents described in a previous analysis, where these young men did not believe that their strong feelings for girls were experienced by other males-- thus they made numerous references to being ‘like a girl in the relationship,’ or ‘on their monthly cycle’ when talking about their breakups (Author et al. 2006).

Another ‘disclaimer’ that appears in the narratives relates to the presence of alcohol in sexual situations. Amber, for example, recalled having sex with a particular boy because they were drunk: *...So it wasn't, like, fun. If I wouldn't of had beer, I would have been pissed...I would have been like, Oh, you suck. This is terrible...Like he didn't know what he was doing.* This narrative account is of interest, however, because Amber did not reference moral issues, but merely that her partner was sexually incompetent. In the total sample, 7.67 percent (N=46) state that they have gotten into a sexual situation that they later regretted because of their drinking.

Other girls view sex from an instrumental point of view—a dynamic that reflects both non-traditional and traditional elements. For example, some young women indicated that having sex with a particular partner might increase the young man’s interest, or extinguish his interest in another girl. Julia, a 17-year-old with 10 lifetime sexual partners, says: *I figured I don't know it*

was a kind of bad decision on my saying like “Well, if if I actually do get physical with him that he will like me more than her.” Julia thinks sex is one of the tools she could use to make sure the young man likes her over her friend who also likes him. Along similar lines, some girls state that they use sex as a way of trying to get back or maintain a romantic relationship they already have. When asked why she initiated sex with an ex-boyfriend, Marissa, a 17-year-old with 13 lifetime sexual partners, states that even though she knew they were not committed to each other they had sex anyway. She says: *I wanted it but I felt maybe we were back together.* Thus, such behaviors could be constructed by outsiders as “non-relationship sex,” but in these instances girls held more traditional beliefs about cementing or rekindling a romantic attachment.

Another related traditional/non-traditional situation involved young women who had multiple sexual partners, but claimed to have strong feelings for all of them. Nicole, an 18-year-old with 8 lifetime sexual partners, was dating three different partners at the same time and was sexually intimate with two of them. When asked about why she put herself in the situation she said:

I really thought I liked all these people. You know what I mean? Like, I really thought you know it wasn't like, I'm with you and I just want to mess around with and I don't really have any feelings for (the other two guys)...the reason I messed around was because I really liked like, Mike, and I really liked Timmy, and I really Sam, but it was like, I didn't want to let any of them go, 'cause I really liked all of them and I didn't want to hurt any of them feeling, feelings. It wasn't like I was just doing it, 'cause you know, I didn't care... that was the problem, I cared for them all too much and shouldn't have.

Because Nicole really liked and cared for all of these young men that she was dating, she did not consider this to be a case of “messing around,” a behavior that would place her on more tenuous footing with respect to her own self-image.

## Discussion

Our mixed method approach to the contemporary meaning of the double standard contributes to prior work on girls' sexual behavior in several ways. The sexual double standard exists on an abstract level and appears to be understood by adolescent girls. However, the findings of this analysis highlight that girls themselves construct a multifaceted understanding of the self through personal experiences and peer networks, and not only in response to an abstract understanding of the sexual double standard.

Our work does not provide strong support for a social deficit approach to understanding girls' sexual behaviors. Both cross-sectional and longitudinal results suggest that girls' self esteem and popularity are not significantly related to number of lifetime sexual partners reported at wave I. This suggests that, at least at the level of the respondent's own self-perceptions, the sexual double standard may not be as strong or socially costly as previous depictions might lead us to suspect. Second, prior work often relies on cross-sectional analyses (Gentry 1998; Jackson and Cram 2003) leading to questions about the direction of effects. However, longitudinal analyses indicate that number of lifetime sexual partners does not appear to have a cumulative effect on female popularity or self-esteem as reported one year later. These findings thus provide some contradictory evidence regarding the basic notion that violating the sexual double standard is associated with heavy social costs. The qualitative data add another layer of complexity to the quantitative results, as the in-depth narratives do contain numerous references to social dynamics and labeling processes that are consistent with the double standard. However, these data suggest that, particularly when the referent is the behavior of friends or their own conduct, young women may be more accepting of a range of alternative identities and actions. Indeed, the narratives illustrate that young women often rely on friendship networks as a safe place to discuss sexual

behavior free of judgment, a finding that does not fully accord with the social deficit/social costs model.

The study results are more consistent with a social network or situated meanings perspective on the sexual double standard. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that peer group attitudes and behavior are significant correlates and predictors of young women's own sexual behavior. Peer group norms do vary; thus particular social climates provide support for and even foster a particular type of sexual conduct. This finding is consistent with a social learning rather than a social deficit approach to girls' sexual behavior choices. More specifically, our qualitative results underscore that the contemporary sexual double standard is complex and multilayered. Individuals recognize the existence on the societal or school level however the structure and validity of the double standard dramatically weakens as the young women reference peer or their own sexual behavior. This suggests that the sexual double standard, though it still exists in the abstract, may not have a ubiquitous influence on the sexual attitudes and behaviors of contemporary young women.

It would be useful to explore the social context of sexual behavior, including the double standard, using other measures of peer status or popularity, and relying on larger, nationally representative samples. In addition, future research could be directed to analyses focused specifically on the ways in which experiences associated with social class and race/ethnicity influence endorsement of the double standard, as well as social and individual meanings of sexual behavior. It is also important to document developmental changes in the ways in which adolescents understand and react to the tenets of the double standard, as they navigate the transition to adulthood. The many references to 'sluts,' 'whores,' and 'nasty' behaviors of some girls shows that these labels still have significance for adolescent girls. Yet girls who actually



reported a greater number of sexual partners did not report lower levels of popularity with peers, dissatisfaction with the number of friends they have, or low self-esteem compared with their more sexually conservative counterparts. In contrast, the social network findings (friends' attitudes and behaviors were significantly associated with girls' own sexual behavior reports) highlight the need to consider peer norms and contexts as a more immediate source of reference and influence. In addition, young women who considered themselves 'sexy' or hot were more likely to report a greater number of sexual partners. This finding suggests that the reflected appraisals of others need not be uniformly negative (as in the notion of low self-esteem fostering or as a consequence of these behaviors), and highlights the need for additional research on the content areas that comprise adolescents' self-views. The qualitative data are consistent in pointing to a number of 'disclaimers' or rationalizations that allow women to maintain a positive view of self, while reporting a larger (than average) number of sexual partners.

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest a normative climate that is in flux, and, indeed the existence of multiple normative climates. It would be useful for educators developing programs targeting risky sexual behaviors of adolescents to include attention to peer norms and issues of identity, as well as to the health-compromising nature of some sexual behavior patterns. In addition, parents and others who emphasize issues of reputation as a way to deter young women from sexual involvement may confront that in many instances sexually active girls do not see their own behavior through this negative, 'deficit' or stigmatized lens.

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Table 1. Zero-order and Full Model Predicting Number of Sexual Partners for Adolescent Girls

	Zero-Order		Full-Model	
	B	p	B	p
<b>Intercept</b>			0.05	
<b>Independent Variables</b>				
<i>Social Deficit</i>				
Self-Esteem	- 0.01		0.00	
Unpopular with female	0.29		- 0.09	
Wish for more friends	- 0.01		0.09	
<i>Social Network</i>				
Liberal friends' attitudes	0.28	***	0.13	***
Number of friends having sex	0.63	***	0.47	***
Flirty	0.13		0.02	
Sexy	0.20	*	0.00	
<b>Controls</b>				
Grades	0.84	***	0.69	*
Involved in school activities	- 0.23	***	- 0.17	*
Age	0.40	***	- 0.19	
(White)				
Black	0.06		- 0.46	
Hispanic	0.29		- 0.05	
Other Race	- 0.16		- 0.29	
Neighborhood Poverty	0.00		0.00	
(Two Biological Parents)				
Single Parent	0.79	**	0.38	
Step Family	0.12		0.01	
Other Family	0.02		- 0.03	
(Mother High School Grad)				
Mother Less than High School	0.51		0.14	
Mother Some College	0.24		0.35	
Mother College	0.02		0.30	
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>			0.24	

Note: N=600 \*\*\*p<.001; \*\*p<.01 \*p<.05

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study

Table 2. Zero-order and Full Model Number of Time 2 Popularity Adolescent Girls

	Zero-Order		Full-Model	
	B	p	B	p
<b>Intercept</b>			- 4.05	
<b>Independent Variables</b>				
Number of Sex Partners T1	0.03		- 0.02	
<i>Social Deficit</i>				
Self-Esteem	- 0.05		0.00	
Unpopular with female	1.69	***	1.69	***
Wish for more friends	0.19	*	0.24	*
<i>Social Network</i>				
Liberal friends' attitudes	0.01		- 0.09	
Number of friends having sex	0.10		- 0.01	
Flirty	0.07		0.23	*
Sexy	- 0.03		- 0.09	
<b>Controls</b>				
Grades	0.11	*	0.16	
Involved in school activities	- 0.24	***	- 0.20	*
Age	0.14	*	0.11	
(White)				
Black	0.51	*	0.25	
Hispanic	0.34		- 0.14	
Other Race	- 14.19		- 14.30	
Neighborhood Poverty	0.02	*	0.01	
(Two Biological Parents)				
Single Parent	0.47		0.32	
Step Family	0.13		- 0.03	
Other Family	0.40		- 0.12	
(Mother High School Grad)				
Mother Less than High School	0.76	*	0.62	
Mother Some College	0.25		0.17	
Mother College	- 0.07		0.02	
-2LL			492.95	

Note: N=600 \*\*\*p<.001; \*\*p<.01 \*p<.05

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study

## Appendix. Univariate Statistics of Dependent and Independent Variables

	Mean	SD	Range	Percent
<b>Dependent Variables</b>				
Number of Sex Partners T1	0.89	2.41	0-36	
Time 2 Unpopular with females				
Popular				82%
Unpopular				18%
<b>Independent Variables</b>				
<i>Social Deficit</i>				
Self-Esteem	23.51	3.83	9-30	
Time I Unpopular with female				
Popular				85%
Unpopular				15%
Wish for more friends	2.59	1.19	1-5	
<i>Social Network</i>				
Liberal friends' attitudes	7.33	2.45	3-15	
Number of friends having sex	2.85	1.71	1-6	
Flirty	3.14	1.17	1-5	
Sexy	3.29	1.08	1-5	
<b>Controls</b>				
Grades	3.49	2.01	1-9	
Involved in school activities	2.67	1.43	1-5	
Age	15.22	1.72	12-19	
White				65%
Black				22%
Hispanic				11%
Other Race				2%
Neighborhood Poverty				
In 20% or Higher Neighborhood				27%
Not in 20% or Higher Neighborhood				73%
Two Biological Parents				49%
Single Parent				26%
Step Family				14%
Other Family				11%
Mother High School Grad				33%
Mother Less than High School				12%
Mother Some College				33%
Mother College				22%

Note: N=600

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study