

Adolescents' Sexual Relationships and Young Adults' Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of variations in adolescents' sexual experiences on consequential personal and relational outcomes during emerging adulthood including self-esteem, depressive symptoms, gainful activity, and intimate partner violence. The analyses are based on the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS) (n = 376). Data for the focal independent variables are from the fourth interview (2006), when respondents were ages 18-19. The subsequent outcomes are from the fifth interview (2011), when respondents were ages 22-23. Results reveal no significant associations between number of sex partners, number of casual sex partners, number of dating partners during adolescence, and depressive symptoms, nor gainful activity during young adulthood. The number of dating partners is positively associated with self-esteem and intimate partner violence net of the other covariates. The findings are important because they suggest that some conventional wisdoms regarding adolescent sexual involvement may not provide an accurate portrait of the consequences of these experiences.

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Romantic and sexual relationships play a key role in adolescent development (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Moreover, these relationships loom large in the minds and lives of teenagers themselves (Brown 1999; Eder 1993; Giordano, Longmore, and Manning 2006). Yet the norms that traditionally supported more formal, regulated patterns of love, sex and romance have weakened, making the world of romantic and sexual relationships more uncertain and risky for adolescents (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Bulcroft et al. 2000). As a result, relative to the recent past, adolescents are involved in a wider array of dating and sexual relationships. Depending on the sexual experiences in which adolescents are involved, there may be different implications for relationship health and well-being during emerging adulthood, the next stage in the life course.

In assessing the consequences of adolescents' involvement in intimate relationships, life course scholars often superimpose an adult lens, which emphasizes the importance of stable union formation on youthful relationship processes. Reliance on this kind of lens (e.g., Clausen, 1991) leads to the conclusion that relationship stability and fewer relationships, by definition, will be associated with positive outcomes including greater "romantic competence" and better well-being later in the life course. Conversely, scholars focusing on teen sexual activity and anti-social behaviors often view intimate and sexual relationships from a deficit or risk approach. Thus, rather divergent perspectives have focused on the consequences of adolescent romantic and sexual relationships, a point also made by Furman (2002) in noting that the romantic

relationships and sexuality literatures have for the most part developed as separate areas of scholarship. Nevertheless, both perspectives tend to focus on problematic aspects of romantic and sexual relationships. In the current paper, we review a range of adolescent romantic and sexual relationships, and suggest limitations of problematizing all aspects of these early sexual and romantic experiences. Our work extends beyond prior studies by integrating the literatures on adolescent dating relationships and life course perspectives on adolescent sexual relationships.

Building on findings from the literature, this paper presents analyses from the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS), which examine the influence of variations in adolescents' sexual experiences on consequential personal and relational outcomes during emerging adulthood including self-esteem, depressive symptoms, gainful activity, and intimate partner violence. The TARS is a stratified, random sample of adolescents registered for the 7th, 9th, and 11th grades in Lucas County, Ohio, based on enrollment records from the year 2000. Data for the analytic sample (n = 376) are from the fourth interview (2006), when respondents were ages 18-19; these data retrospectively access cumulative adolescent sexual and relational experiences. The subsequent outcomes are from the fifth interview (2011), when respondents were ages 22-23. We examine how adolescent romantic and sexual experiences are related to our key indicators of well-being during young adulthood.

BACKGROUND

Adolescent dating, sexual activity, and non-dating sexual experience

In recent years, scholars have documented growing diversity in adolescents' involvement in dating and sexual relationships. Some adolescents report being involved in traditional dating

relationships (with and without sexual activity), and some report involvement in non-dating sexual relationships. For example, drawing on the 1994-1995 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) school-based sample, Carver, Joyner and Udry (2003) reported that 69% of adolescent boys and 76% of adolescent girls had a dating or romantic relationship by age 18. Similarly, Monitoring the Future trend data demonstrated that in 2001, 86% of high school seniors had ever dated; yet ten years later, in 2011, the number of high school seniors who reported that they ever dated decreased to 66% (Child Trends 2013). This decrease might suggest that conventional dating has become less normative among adolescents in recent years.

Regarding sexual activity, studies based on the 2006-2010 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) indicate that 61% of male and female 18 year olds and 71% of 19 year olds have had some sexual experience (Finer and Philbin 2013). These findings are consistent with those from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) in which 63% of 12th graders in 2011 reported ever having had sexual intercourse (Child Trends 2013). Similarly, the TARS data indicate that 63% of respondents had ever had sexual intercourse by age 18.

The relationship context of adolescent sexual activity has received increased attention. Of special interest is involvement in ‘hook ups’ among adolescents. Yet it is important to note that sexual intercourse typically occurs within the context of a committed relationship (Gibbs 2013; Martinez et al. 2011). Based on the Add Health, most adolescents (67%) who have dated also have had sex within their romantic relationship (Raley, Crissey and Muller 2007). Gibbs (2013) analyzing the TARS data found that about three-quarters of adolescent girls and just over half of adolescent boys reported sexual activity within the context of a dating relationship. This suggests, then, that much of adolescents’ sexual activity occurs with known boyfriends and girlfriends.

A substantial minority (twice as many adolescent boys than girls) of adolescents, however, report that their first sexual experience occurred outside the context of a committed relationship. Moreover, by late adolescence over one-quarter of Add Health respondents had a nonromantic sexual relationship (Raley, Crissey and Muller 2007) with the level among sexual activity adolescents surpassing 60% (Manning et al. 2005).

The relationship context of sexual behavior is tied to some extent to risk factors; for example, adolescents who report troubles in school are more likely to have had casual sex (Manning et al. 2005). Yet a more detailed examination indicates that these sexual relationships are typically not one-night stands with someone the teenager has just met. Instead, the bulk of these non-relationship sexual experiences are with someone the teenager had dated in the past or someone who is considered a friend. Furthermore, some of these relationships evolve into dating relationships and can lead to sexual partners feeling closer to one another (Manning et al. 2006). However, extensive sexual experience outside of dating relationships may establish patterns that carryover into adulthood. For example, having many casual sexual partners or adopting a ‘player’ orientation during adolescence may influence the character of adult intimate unions.

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

Implications in Young Adulthood

We explore empirically the degree to which early experiences such as having sex outside a traditional dating context have implications for later emotional well-being and relationship quality. Our view is that these experiences do not reflect fundamental deficits in relationship

skill-building, but may be considered normative steps in the transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

Scholars who study adolescent romantic relationships often emphasize that dating teaches teens how to ‘do’ romance; that is, how to be the expert in their own relationships. Laursen and Jensen-Campbell (1999:64) convey this idea of relationship skill building in the following way: “Brief romantic encounters provide adolescents with opportunities to practice exchange rules and refine personal resources prior to initiating relationships that entail commitment and reproduction.” Adolescent competence in the relationship domain may lead to more intense dating or more positive experiences in adulthood because teens work through their relationships, which are still subject to change and re-direction as youths encounter new romantic and dating experiences. For example, breaking up allows teens to learn how to end romantic relationships and to know that they can emotionally survive the experience. Giordano et al. (2006) interviewed a young man who let a relationship drag on even after he wished to break up. Eventually, he started dating someone else before he had ended the prior relationship (In his words: “I just couldn’t do it”). As the young man observed the way this made his first girlfriend feel, he began to recognize that, “If I’m feeling a certain way I should just tell them and not just sit there and wait and wait and not tell her.” Dating relationships thus provide numerous opportunities to learn about positive relationship dynamics, such as intimate self-disclosure and caring, as well as difficulties that romantic partners frequently encounter—differences of perspective, break-ups, conflict, and jealousy.

Prior studies, primarily from the life course perspective, have considered how adolescent relationship experiences, specifically whether the relationship involved sexual activity, influenced young adult transitions to cohabitation and marriage. Raley et al. (2007) report that

those teens who had dating relationships that involved sexual activity more often transitioned to cohabitation or marriage in early adulthood compared with teens who had non-sexual dating relationships. Thus, early sex activity is an important element of dating relationships that influences early union formation.

Meier and Allen (2007), examining the Add Health, report that teens who had any sexual activity reported a greater numbers of relationships in early adulthood, as well as higher odds of having cohabited or married. Meier and Allen's (2007) Add Health study includes the number and duration of relationships and measures relationship progression or regression as movement along a continuum toward stable and steady relationships (more than three months in duration). They find that teens in stable relationships at wave 1 and 2 of the Add Health were more likely to have ever been married six years later. The effect of being in stable and steady relationships at waves 1 and 2 of the Add Health was initially related to whether teens had cohabited, but this was explained by the level of sexual involvement with their partners. This is not surprising because two-thirds (65 percent) of the respondents in stable relationships had sexual intercourse. An avenue for future work is to consider in more detail other ways in which the timing and meaning of sexual activity during adolescence influences adult intimate unions.

Current Investigation

Our key research question asked whether variations in adolescent sexual activity influenced well-being outcomes during early adulthood. Our work builds on prior studies in several key ways. A limitation of prior work is the lack of a range of sexual experiences, apart from whether an individual was sexually active, which may also influence young adults' well-being. Many studies based on the Add Health suffer from this limitation. In the current investigation we

examine the influence of (1) number of dating partners, (2) number of sex partners, and (3) number of casual sex partners on well-being outcomes during young adulthood.

Investigations generally have focused on two young adult outcomes: early union formation, and number of sex partners, but have not systematically explore a range of well-being indicators associated with young adulthood. We examined the following outcomes: depressive symptoms, self-esteem, gainful activity and intimate partner violence. In our multiple regression and logistic regression models we control for the following covariates: gender, age, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure while growing up.

METHOD

Data

This study analyzed data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), a longitudinal study of 1,321 Toledo-area adolescents who were in 7th, 9th, and 11th grade in the fall of 2000. The stratified random sample, drawn from school enrollment records of seven Toledo-area school districts, totaling 62 schools, in Lucas County, Ohio, over-sampled Black and Hispanic students. Unlike other data sets that necessitated students to be in school for inclusion in the sample, TARS only required students to be registered, allowing truant or otherwise absent students to participate. Respondents participated in structured in-home interviews through the computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI) technique using pre-loaded computer questionnaires. Separately, at the time of the first interview a parent/guardian answered questionnaires about themselves as well as the focal child (91% of parent respondents were mothers).

The analytic sample consisted of 324 respondents who were ages 18 to 19 at the time of the wave 4 interview and had valid responses on the outcomes at wave 5. The TARS data were

from a stratified, random sample; thus, each respondent had a unique probability of inclusion. We calculated survey weights based on the probabilities, which allowed us to transform point estimates into values that were more representative of a national sample. The outcome variables, depressive symptoms, self-esteem, gainful activity, and relationship violence, are from the fifth wave of data. The focal independent variables assessing number of sexual and dating partners were based on wave 4 reports, which asked about sexual activity during the prior two years. The control variables for family background including mother's education and family structure were measured at the first interview.

Measures

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

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

Gainful activity was a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent was employed full-time or enrolled in school at the time of the wave 5 interview. Respondents were asked,

“How far have you gone in school?” Next, respondents were asked about their employment status. Those who responded that they were currently in school and/or employed in a full-time position were coded as gainfully active.

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

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

Analytic Strategy

We estimated zero-order regression models for the two continuous outcomes—depression and self-esteem. Next we estimated a series of models that included each of the focal independent variables (number of sex partners, number of casual sex partners, and number of

dating partners) individually net of other covariates, and a final model with all three focal variables and controls. In addition to the focal variables, these models also included controls for corresponding wave 1 measures of depression and self-esteem. Subsequently, zero-order logistic regression models were estimated for gainful activity and intimate partner violence. Similarly, we estimate a series of models examining associations between gainful activity, intimate partner violence, focal variables, and covariates. Models predicting gainful activity and intimate partner violence included controls for wave 1 reports of respondent's GPA and parental coercion (JEN, we did not say this earlier) respectively.

Preliminary Results

Descriptive results included in Table 1 indicate that respondents report an average of 3.39 lifetime sex partners with male and female respondents reporting 3.84 and 2.99 respectively. The mean number of casual sex partners during the 2 years prior to the interview was 1.48 and the mean number of dating partners was 2.02.

Table 2 presents the zero order associations between depressive symptoms, the focal variables (number of sex partners, number of casual sex partners, and number of dating partners), and other covariates. As shown in the first column, the zero order models do not indicate any significant association between the focal variables and depression. The respondent's earlier report (wave 1) of depressive symptoms was related to depressive symptoms at wave 5. Models 1, 2, and 3 of Table 2 examine each of the focal variables individually in a model with covariates. In the models predicting depression, none of the focal variables were significantly related to wave 5 depressive symptoms net of covariates. Finally, model 4 includes all three focal variables with covariates. Results reveal no significant associations between number of sex partners, number of casual sex partners, number of dating partners, and depression.

Tables 3-5 present the results in a similar manner for models predicting self-esteem, gainful activity, and intimate partner violence. Similar to the results for depression, the zero order models between self-esteem and the focal variables do not indicate any significant associations (Table 3). Additionally, models examining number of sex partners and number of casual sex partners net of covariates in separate models suggest that these variables are not related to self-esteem. In model 3, however, the number of dating partners is positively associated with self-esteem net of the other covariates. This finding holds in model 4 with the addition of number of sex partners and number of casual sex partners to the model.

Table 4 examines the relationships between the focal independent variables and gainful activity. At the zero order, number of sex partners is marginally significant indicating a negative association between number of sex partners and gainful activity. None of the other focal variables are significantly associated with gainful activity. Subsequent models examining number of sex partners, number of casual sex partners, and number of dating partner separately (with controls) reveal no significant situations. Finally, the final model (model 4) which includes all three focal variables and controls suggests that number of sex partners, number of casual sex partners, and number of dating partners are not associated with wave 5 reports of gainful activity.

The final table, table 5, examines these associations in models predicting intimate partner violence. At the zero order, both number of sex partners and number of casual sex partners were significantly associated with self-reports of partner violence. These findings suggest that higher numbers of sex partners and casual sex partners are related to increased odds of partner violence. In subsequent models, after controlling for other factors, only number of sex partners remained significantly associated with intimate partner violence. In model 2, the addition of family structure to the model explained the effect of casual sex partners on partner violence. At both the

zero order and in model 3, the findings reveal that number of dating partners was not related to partner violence. In the final model, net of number of casual sex partners, number of dating partners, and other covariates, the lifetime number of sex partners remains a significant predictor of intimate partner violence.

CONCLUSION

Although theorizing about adolescent relationships has often focused on the problematic aspects of teen sexuality, recent research has shown that a majority of adolescents gain romantic and sexual experience during this period. The longitudinal framework of the current study enabled us to examine specific consequences of variations in the nature of these experiences for four indices of later young adult well-being: depression, self-esteem, involvement in gainful activity (employment or enrollment in higher education) and intimate partner violence. Results of our analyses indicate that reporting a higher number of dating partners, sexual partners, or even casual sexual partners was not associated with higher levels of depression, lower self-esteem, or a reduced likelihood of involvement in gainful activity as a young adult. Analyses documented an association between a higher number of sexual partners and later reports of intimate partner violence, but this relationship was attenuated with the addition of a control for family structure.

Taken together, these results are consistent with the need to reorient our perspectives on youthful relationship and sexual experiences to include to the notion that these may be positive or at a minimum normative steps in the developmental process. Certainly, the current analysis did not focus on detailed qualitative differences in the nature of these experiences, as for example, prior research has shown that coercive sexual experiences may have lasting negative

impacts both for emotional well-being and other indicators of a successful adult transition. This suggests the importance in future research of including more attention to the qualitative aspects of dating and sexual experiences, including perceived motives, the levels of intimacy that characterized these experiences, as well as the presence of conflict and other negative dynamics.

The current findings, however, are important because they suggest that some conventional wisdoms regarding sexual involvement during this phase of life may not provide an accurate portrait of either the origins or meanings of these experiences. Prior research relying on the TARS data showed that during the adolescent period, a greater number of sexual partners was not associated with having fewer friends or lower self esteem (Lyons et al. 2012). The current results are congruent with these earlier findings, but provide a longer window of assessment across a wider range of outcomes. This suggests that prevention programs directed to issues of teen sexuality and safe sex practices will need to develop relatively nuanced approaches that are reflective of the reality that relationships and sexuality can be associated with positive meanings as well as heightened physical and (under some conditions) emotional risk.

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Table 2. Depressive Symptoms (n = 324)^a

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

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

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

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

Table 3. Self-Esteem (n = 324)^a

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

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

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

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

Table 4. Gainful Activity (n = 324)^a

	Zero	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	order				
	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
Number of sex partners (lifetime)	0.948†	0.984			1.402
Number of casual sex partners (past 2 years)	0.903		0.945		0.874
Number of dating partners (past 2 years)	0.990			1.050	1.082
GPA (wave 1)	1.552***	1.383**	1.378*	1.390**	1.379*

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

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

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

Table 5. IPV (n = 324)^a

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

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

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

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

Table 1. Descriptives (n = 324)

	Total (n = 324)			Men (n = 151)	Women (n = 173)
	Mean	SD	Range		
Number of sex partners (lifetime)	3.39	4.11	0-15	3.84	2.99
Number of casual sex partners (past 2 years)	1.48	2.45	0-9	1.84	1.18
Number of dating partners (past 2 years)	2.02	1.64	0-6	2.29	1.78

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study