



Sexual behaviors and relationship qualities in late adolescent couples

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This study examined the associations between relationship qualities, sexual behaviors, and relationship length in 61 adolescent couples (aged 16–20). For both male and female partners, positive relationship qualities were associated with physical expressions of affection. Perceptions of higher levels of conflict and frustration were associated with more frequent sexual intercourse. Factor analysis and multiple regression indicated that the frequency of sexual behavior and the perception of global relationship quality (support, depth and intimacy) predicted relationship length for these couples. While the frequency of sexual expression was associated with relationship longevity for both male and female partners, positive relationship qualities (depth and intimacy) were additionally associated with relationship longevity for male partners only. Implications of these findings are discussed in light of current gaps in understanding the relational context of adolescent sexual behavior.

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Introduction

The integration of intimacy and sexual expression has been described as a central developmental task of adolescence and young adulthood (Sullivan, 1953; Furman and Wehner, 1994, 1997). While the basic skills for establishing and maintaining mutual, close relationships are learned in early relationships with family and friends, it is during early and middle adolescence that romantic and sexual relationships become the central focus (Furman and Buhrmester, 1992; Feiring, 1996; Laursen, 1996; Laursen and Williams, 1997; Kawaguchi *et al.*, 1998). By late adolescence, it is expected that adolescents have acquired the skills to establish lasting romantic relationships that satisfy primary social needs for affiliation, caregiving, attachment, and sexual gratification (Furman and Wehner, 1994). Thus, according to developmental theory, sexual exploration that takes place in the context of early romantic relationships is normative and defines progress toward the establishment of long-term, committed romantic relationships.

Although this developmental framework emphasizes the importance of the relational context of sexual behavior, sex research has traditionally focused on the individual rather than the dyad (see Orbuch and Harvey, 1991; di Mauro, 1997). “Re-conceiving” sexuality as a social activity that requires interaction necessitates an analysis that moves beyond the individual by examining the interpersonal and relational context of sexual behaviors (Gagnon and Parker, 1995). For adolescents and young adults in western societies, this context is often the romantic relationship (Thornton, 1990; Dorius *et al.*, 1993; Feldman *et al.*, 1995).

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In addition to the lack of attention to the relational context, empirical work has concentrated, not on sexual behavior itself or any potentially positive contributions sexual behavior may make to development, but primarily on the negative consequences of sexual behavior. That is, adolescent sexual behavior has been defined as a significant social problem, leading to a research agenda aimed at controlling or eliminating adolescent sexual behavior, particularly the sexual behavior of adolescent girls (Wilcox, 1999; Welsh, 2000). While we would not minimize the risks of certain sexual behaviors that can lead to negative consequences such as sexually transmitted diseases, early pregnancy, and, with the onset of AIDS, death, we maintain that a complete understanding of adolescent sexuality is constrained by the limitations of a pathology-oriented approach.

In contrast to the individually-focused, pathology-oriented approach to adolescent sexual behavior, the premise of this investigation is that sexual expression in adolescence is normative and may even be associated with desirable outcomes such as increased capacity for intimacy and self-disclosure (Reiss, 1986), self-expansion and integration (Aron and Aron, 1986), and relationship satisfaction and maintenance (Sprecher and McKinney, 1993). These positive outcomes, we hypothesize, are more likely when sexual expression occurs in relational contexts that are perceived as intimate, supportive, and egalitarian.

Therefore, the first goal of this study is to explore the association between sexual behavior and relationship qualities in late adolescent couple members. We further examine the relative importance of sexual expression and relationship qualities in predicting the longevity of these romantic relationships. A few other studies have examined aspects of these associations. For instance, The Boston Couples Study of 231 college-age dating couples, initiated in 1972, found that sexual satisfaction was equally related to the love scores of both male and female partners. Neither the quality of the relationship (higher love score), nor couples' timing of sexual intercourse (early in the relationship, later, or abstinent), however, predicted relationship longevity (Peplau *et al.*, 1997). Likewise, Christopher and Cate (1988) individually interviewed 54 couples and gathered retrospective reports of partners' perceptions of relationship quality (love, conflict, ambivalence, satisfaction) and sexual behaviors at four stages of their romantic relationship. The researchers found that conflict, as well as love, was associated with sexual expression, particularly in the earlier stages of the relationship. More recently, Kawaguchi and colleagues (1997) found that, in a sample of late adolescent and young adult college students, intimacy was most closely associated with affectionate behaviors (hand-holding and kissing) rather than sexual intercourse.

While these studies of sexual expression and relationship quality in late adolescence and young adulthood provide a launching point, the present study expands previous work in two primary ways. First, the present study incorporates a dyadic, rather than solely an individual, level of analysis. Secondly, in addition to obtaining *global* ratings of relationship quality, we gathered *micro-behavioral ratings* of couple members' subjective understanding of relationship quality. That is, we asked couple members to engage in two conversations and then immediately view a videotape of those conversations and rate their own and their partner's level of support, conflict, humor, persuasion, and frustration. By eliciting couple members' own perceptions of their interactions, we acknowledge the existence of multiple realities and extend the literature beyond traditional observational research which relies upon the "realities" of outside observers (see Welsh *et al.*, 1999, for an analysis of systematic differences between the ratings of trained outside observers and the adolescent couple members.)

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