



“I wanted to get to know her better”: Adolescent boys’ dating motives, masculinity ideology, and sexual behavior

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Abstract

Little is known about adolescent boys’ motives for dating, although stereotypical portrayals highlight a desire for sexual behavior. This issue was examined from a normative perspective that connected dating motives to intercourse motives, masculinity, and dating and sexual behaviors. Data from 105 racially and economically diverse 10th-grade boys were analyzed. Results indicated that the most commonly endorsed motives for dating and intercourse focused on the boys’ partners and relationships, and that boys’ motives tended to be consistent across dating and sexual behavior. Peer conformity motives were less frequently endorsed and typically co-occurred with other motives. Findings revealed few connections between motives, masculinity ideology, and sexual behaviors. Discussion highlights the importance of moving beyond stereotypes when examining boys’ romantic and sexual motives.

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Introduction

Popular depictions of the dating and sexual lives of boys and men in American society highlight an interest in promiscuous sexual behavior, direct boys and men to initiate sexual encounters, emphasize women’s bodies as objects, and minimize the importance of the relational aspects of

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romantic relationships. This image is well known in America (Brooks, 1997; David & Brannon, 1976), appears regularly in television programs (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Montemurro, 2003; Ward, 1995) and in sex education websites and curricula (Bay-Cheng, 2001; Fine, 1988), and is regularly incorporated into girls' constructions of their own sexuality (Tolman, 2002). Research findings that adolescent boys consistently offer greater support for pre-marital coitus, report a younger age of first coitus, and report more coital partners than girls provide some support for this image of masculinity, although differences are often small to moderate in size and have become smaller over time (Oliver & Hyde, 1993). Despite this non-relational stereotype and the documented sex differences, participation in ongoing romantic relationships is extremely common (Collins, 2003; Feiring, 1996; Shulman & Scharf, 2000; Wight, 1994).

Given that most boys do participate in romantic relationships, one might ask why they do so. The stereotype and evidence presented above suggest that the primary, and perhaps only, purpose is to obtain access to a sexual partner. However, interviews with adolescent boys provide only partial support for this claim. Boys often reject the stereotype or depictions of their own behavior as stereotypical and instead emphasize motives such as curiosity, companionship, attraction, and occasionally love (Feiring, 1996; Tolman, Spencer, Harmon, Rosen-Reynoso, & Striepe, 2004; Wight, 1994). At the same time, they also report that sexual behaviors from kissing through intercourse are pleasant and desirable, although these behaviors are rarely depicted as the goal of dating (Feiring, 1996; Tolman et al., 2004; Wight, 1994). In this paper, boys' dating motives were explored as a unique element of relational behavior, as well as in connection to both masculinity and sexual behavior.

Motives for dating have rarely been addressed in American research (for parallel discussion regarding the paucity of American research on adolescents' sexual motives, see Hofstede, 1998; Smiler, *in press*). Extant data come from two distinct lines of research. Developmentalists, who were recently encouraged to treat adolescents' romantic relationships as a topic worthy of study (Collins, 2003), have generally examined dating relationships from a normative perspective that highlights affiliative motives and is often rooted in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982). In these studies, sexual behavior is rarely assessed. Additional data have been provided in studies of adolescent sexual behavior. Here, researchers typically adopt a risk-based approach (e.g., Maxwell, 2002; Resnick et al., 1997) in which romantic relationships are often viewed as a setting (and often, a risk) for adolescent sexual behavior.

In this paper, we adopted a "positive" or "healthy" sexual development approach. Here, the term sexual is used broadly to include not only sexual behaviors such as intercourse, but also "pre-coital" behaviors such as kissing and fondling (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005) and intrapsychic factors such as subjective evaluation of one's experiences (Smiler, Ward, Caruthers, & Merriwether, 2005). This perspective recognizes that these behaviors are contextually embedded in a variety of ways, including relationships and gender-related beliefs (e.g., O'Sullivan, 2005). Finally, this perspective argues that sexual development, in terms of both relationships and broadly inclusive sexual behaviors, is a normative developmental task for adolescents (Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Galen, 1998; Haffner, 1998; Russell, 2005; Tolman, Striepe, & Harmon, 2003; Welsh, Rostosky, & Kawaguchi, 2000).

The extant research on boys' subjective experiences of dating suggests several potential motives. In early- and mid-adolescence, boys' choice of partner is more closely related to girls' appearance than their personalities (Shulman & Scharf, 2000; Wight, 1994). This may be related to findings

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