

Working Paper Series

To Do It or Not To Do It Is Not The Only Question: Early Adolescent Girls' and Boys' Experiences with Dat- ing and Sexuality

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**TO DO IT OR NOT TO DO IT IS NOT THE ONLY QUESTION:
EARLY ADOLESCENT GIRLS' AND BOYS' EXPERIENCES
WITH DATING AND SEXUALITY**

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Abstract

In this paper we provide a 'snapshot' of under-investigated aspects of sexuality among early adolescent girls and boys in order to contribute to a broadening articulation of sexual health during adolescence. Survey reports of dating, non-coital sexual behaviors and experience of those behaviors, sexual-self concept, and reasons to initiate or delay sexual intercourse were obtained from 8th graders (148 girls, 133 boys; 58% White, 20% Latino/a) in a northeastern school district. Findings are described with attention to gendered cultural scripts prescribing different experiences of sexuality for girls and boys. Results indicate that the majority of boys and girls were dating and have had experiences of holding hands and kissing by the 8th grade; fewer youth have participated in sexual touching or intercourse. Both girls and boys frequently endorsed relational (as opposed to instrumental or passive) reasons for their dating and sexual choices. However, several patterns suggest that the gendered script is manifest in the behavior, experiences, and developing sexual selves of early adolescents, particularly among the Latino/a youth. Findings are discussed as they contribute to the goal of fostering sexual health for adolescent girls and boys from diverse backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

Research on adolescent sexuality has often focused solely on the initiation of sexual intercourse — to ‘do it’ or not — rather than investigate a range of adolescent sexual choices and experiences. As called for by Haffner (1998), we seek to contribute to a more comprehensive inquiry of adolescent sexuality that includes a range of sexual behaviors, as well as adolescents’ reasoning about and experiences of these behaviors, and of themselves as emergent sexual beings. Because the meaning of sexual experiences is strongly gendered in our society, we examine patterns of behavior and attitudes separately for boys and girls to explore the distinctly gendered expectations that girls and boys encounter and the degree to which their sexual attitudes and behaviors resist or conform to those socially prescribed expectations.

Despite calls for a broadening of our view of adolescent sexuality (Jorgensen, 1983), investigations have been dominated by studies using debut and frequency of sexual intercourse as the sole measures of sexual behavior (see Morris, 1992 for review). The narrow focus on intercourse behavior alone stems, in part, from public health concerns with possible consequences of sexual intercourse: teen pregnancy and STDs (Durbin, DiClemente, Siegel, & Krasnovsky, 1993; Zabin, 1990), and the inclusion of early intercourse in a constellation of risky or deviant behaviors during adolescence (Jessor & Jessor, 1975). The study of intercourse alone, however, may reify its status as what we mean when we think of “sex,” as well as perpetuate a limiting study of sexuality solely for the purposes of reducing risk. While risk-reduction is a worthy goal, this framework misses the opportunity to develop models of healthy sexuality or acknowledge sexuality as an important aspect of identity and relational development

during adolescence (Erikson, 1963; Haffner, 1998; Noam & Fischer, 1996). Knowing about adolescent girls’ and boys’ sexual experiences other than intercourse, as well as their reasoning about whether and when to engage in intercourse, may contribute both to diminishing risk as well as to our capacity to foster improved sexual health during and beyond adolescence.

Understanding the Sexual Lives of Early Adolescents

Despite earlier initiation of sexual intercourse in recent decades (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996), the numbers of early adolescents engaging in intercourse remain low. Reports from the NLSY97 data indicate that by 13 years of age, 17% of boys and 13% of girls in the U.S. have experienced intercourse (Michael & Bickert, 2001). Presumably youth are engaging in sexual activities such as kissing or touching — touted by ‘safe sex’ models as important and pleasurable alternatives to intercourse — but the scientific literature is relatively silent on the subject. Studies that have included sexual behaviors other than intercourse typically report them in order to document the progression of sexual behaviors leading up to intercourse (Furstenburg, Morgan, Moore, & Petersen, 1987; Halpern, Joyner, Udry, & Suchindran, 2000; Smith & Udry, 1985) rather than to investigate adolescents’ experience of these behaviors as formative in and of themselves. There is reason to believe, however, that they are salient and important events to the adolescent (Alapack, 1991).

Promoting the development of healthy sexuality during adolescence depends upon a deeper understanding of the reasoning accompanying adolescents’ decisions to engage, or *not* engage

in sexual behaviors, as well as their experience of themselves as sexual beings, and their subjective experience of their behaviors. As with the study of sexual behaviors other than intercourse, the individual's experience of sexuality has not commonly been a focus of inquiry. Studies that have incorporated these issues will be reviewed in the next section.

The Script of Sexuality for Boys and Girls

An important influence on the choices and experiences of sexuality among adolescents is the gendered script available to them (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). The dominant sexual script for boys includes the message that boys should be (hetero)sexual, motivated by their desire for physical satisfaction rather than intimacy with their partner, that male sexual arousal is difficult to contain or redirect, and that sexual activity is proof of manhood (Moore & Rosenthal, 1992). In contrast, the dominant message for girls is to be sexy but not sexual. Girls risk negative reputations ("slut") if they do engage in sexual activities, and are therefore discouraged from experiencing, accepting, or acting upon their sexual feelings (Tolman, 2002). The script dictates that girls engage in sexual behavior to maintain their relationships, and as an expression of intimacy and connection, rather than for physical release. Simply stated, sex is 'good' for boys and 'bad' for girls according to the dominant script.

These messages are often apparent, if not overtly interpreted as such, in research on adolescent participation in sexual intercourse. Kowaleski-Jones and Mott (1998) noted gender differences in the individually-based predictors of intercourse, such that girls were more likely to have intercourse if they were more depressed, perceived less control over their lives, and had lower self esteem; for boys these trends were typically reversed. Sexual involvement outside of a committed relationship is

also subject to this double standard; Moore & Rosenthal (1993) describe how one-night-stands are mildly disapproved of for boys, but 'really bad' for girls as reported by youth in their sample. Girls are also likely to experience more peer pressure to wait to have intercourse than do boys (De Gaston, Weed, & Jensen, 1996). With respect to the *experience* of intercourse, Rosenthal and colleagues (1997) report that 85 percent of girls in their sample (aged 12-15) felt themselves to have been "too young" at the time of their first experience of intercourse. Research programs, in line with the script, do not generally ask this question of boys.

As most studies focus on intercourse, empirical attention to the question of how the script influences other aspects of sexuality has been slender. Gendered differences in the links between sexual and emotional intimacy are likely to be related to differences in definitions of relationships, and choices made within them. Consistent with this reasoning, Rosenthal, Moore and Brumen (1990) found that young women are more likely to 'romanticize' relationships, whereas boys and men are encouraged to downplay relationships, or represent them as 'casual'. Clearly, the pathway towards sexual activity, as well as the experience and consequences of engaging in it, can differ greatly depending on heterosexual gender expectations perceived by the individual.

Early Adolescence as a Time to Study Sexual Development

Early adolescent girls and boys are thought to be particularly prone to internalizing and enacting these gendered norms (Galambos, Almeida, & Petersen, 1990; Hill & Lynch, 1983). As early adolescents are beginning to venture into the social world of heterosocial and sexual relationships, they are more prone to rely on the scripts than they may be once they have their own experiences to help guide their choices and changing self definition.

Thus, we would expect to find the effect of gendered scripts to be strongly demonstrated in early adolescent sexual activities and self-concept. Additionally, although most early adolescents are not engaging in intercourse, it is worthwhile to understand their reasoning about this decision as well as the ways they *are* experimenting with their sexuality and working towards the development of their sexual identity.

Goals of the Present Study

We seek to extend the information-base regarding girls' and boys' sexuality by asking about a range of social and sexual behaviors, as well as the reasoning and quality of experience that accompanies them. We ask these questions of early adolescents in order to better trace the developmental progression of behaviors, experiences, and decision-making in these realms.

While our primary interest is in understanding the similarities and differences between girls' and boys' experiences, it is also important to understand how these patterns vary among ethnic groups. Previous research and theory suggest that the gendered script may be particularly strong among Latino/a youth, for whom the sexual conservatism of Catholicism is intersected by the values of 'machismo' – which strongly sanctions the roles described above for male sexuality and sexual behavior. Therefore, boys and girls with Latin American ancestry may be particularly prone to respond in 'script confirming' ways in their initial forays into sexual behavior. Recent data on the initiation of intercourse supports this hypothesis in demonstrating that Latina girls were among the least likely and Latino boys were among the most likely to report early ages of initiation (Upchurch, Levy-Storms, Sucoff & Aneshensel, 1998). Therefore, we expect the script will be more evident in the data from Latino/a adolescents than among whites.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

The entire 8th grade in one northeastern urban school district was recruited for participation in a longitudinal study of gender ideology and sexual health. One hundred and forty-eight girls and 133 boys (93% compliance for girls and 81% for boys) participated in the first wave of data collection (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). The sample represents a range of ethnic group membership and socioeconomic circumstances of the families. About one-fifth of the youth reported Spanish as the primary language used at home, another 9% reported other primary languages in the home. Fifty-seven percent of the girls and 50% of the boys identified their religious affiliation as Catholic.

A pencil and paper survey instrument was administered during the fall of the school year. Written permission was obtained from each child's parent or guardian (Spanish permission slips were sent out as needed). Bilingual students and mainstreamed Latina/os were offered the option of completing the survey in Spanish with a Spanish-speaking researcher present (7% of sample took this option). Students had over an hour to complete the surveys in their extended classroom periods; most needed approximately 45 minutes.

Measures

Girls and boys were asked about a range of events, feelings, and motivations regarding social and sexual experiences within the following broad domains. The majority of these questions are taken from the literature (Card, 1993) or were constructed for this study based on previous insights regarding important aspects of early adolescent relationships gleaned from qualitative studies (e.g., Tolman, 1994).

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

	Girls	Boys
Race/Ethnicity		
Black, African American, Caribbean	4.1%	1.5%
White	52.0%	60.2%
Hispanic/Latino	19.6%	19.5%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.7%	2.3%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	.7%	1.5%
Bi/Multi-racial or ethnic	16.2%	9.2%
Other	2.1%	3.0%
Missing	2.7%	3.0%
Socioeconomic Status		
Family ever received assistance	50.3%	33.8%
Family currently receiving assistance	28.9%	17.3%
Missing	7%	7%
Religiosity		
“Somewhat” or “Not at all Important”	62.8%	60.9%
“Important” or “Very Important”	35.2%	33.1%

Experiences with dating. Information regarding the context of their involvement in dating activities included duration of relationships and whether they were currently in a dating relationship (“going out” as they described it). Youth were also asked to select from among several personal and social reasons for their decision to begin their first relationship. Reasons included reference to wanting relationships, curiosity, and peer pressure.

Sexual behaviors, reasoning, and experiences. Youth indicated which of a series of sexual behaviors they had engaged in, and of these, which they would like to repeat in the future. Sexual behaviors included holding hands, kissing on the mouth, and being touched or touching someone underneath their clothing, or without clothes on. Youth were also asked whether they had experienced sexual intercourse, and indicated their reasons for having sexual intercourse (specific to those who had), or actual or potential reasons for not doing so. The item stems were worded as follows: “A good reason for me not to have sex is... (check all that apply)” and “The reason I had sexual intercourse

the first time was... (check all that apply).”

Those youth who had experienced intercourse also evaluated their experience of it via a check-list of possible responses. The items included in each of these sets of questions appear in Tables 5 and 6.

Sexual self concept. We used an abbreviated version of the Sexual Self Concept Scale (Winter, 1988), which was originally developed to understand the relationship between contraceptive use and sexual self concept. Seven of the 14 items were selected to inventory participants’ comfort with their own sexual feelings and expression, including desire and masturbation. Sample items are “I feel it’s normal for me to have sexual feelings” and “It is ok for me to enjoy kissing someone I like.” Items related to contraceptive use were set aside for this wave of data collection in order to make the scale more relevant to limited early adolescent experiences. Responses are on a four-point Likert scale from *disagree a lot* to *agree a lot*. Items were averaged to create a composite measure of sexual self concept ($M = 3.11$, $SD = .50$).

Demographic characteristics. Ethnicity and socioeconomic status were tested for evaluation of group differences. Within the sample, two ethnic groups were represented in large enough numbers to allow for comparison of patterns in the data (58% white and 20% Latino). We used reports of current family assistance, including welfare receipt and/or eligibility for free or reduced lunch as our proxy of socioeconomic status (25% reported receiving some form of assistance at the time of the survey).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics are presented for girls and boys, and further broken down within ethnic group when differences were observed. Group comparisons were conducted using t-tests and analysis of covariance to examine patterns within gender and ethnic group controlling for effects of socioeconomic status when sample size allowed for such investigations.

Experiences with Dating

Seventy-eight percent of girls reported having had dating experiences by the fall of 8th grade. One-third of the girls in the sample were currently in a relationship at the time of administration. The length of their relationships ranged from less than

a week to 6 years (5 months on average). Girls most frequently reported “interest in the other person” (62%) and “wanting to get to know the person better” (41%), rather than responding to a wish “to be taken care of” (12%) or to “not be the only one without a boyfriend” (10%) when describing their reasons for initiating the relationship (see Table 2).

Eighty-two percent of boys reported having dating experiences by the fall of their 8th grade school-year. Just over one-third (39%) of the boys in the sample were currently “going out” with someone at the time of the administration. The length of their relationships ranged from less than a week to 15 months (2 months on average). Boys most frequently endorsed “liking the person” (61%) and “wanting to know them better” (40%) and least frequently endorsed wishes for being “taken care of” (6%) or to “not be the only one without a girlfriend” (7%) (see Table 2).

As can be seen in Table 2, the pattern of endorsements is very similar across boys and girls. The sole significant difference in frequency of endorsement is that white girls endorsed the item “so I wouldn’t be the only one without a boyfriend” significantly more than Latina girls (15% and 0%, respectively $t = 3.23, p < .01$).

Table 2. Reasons to Date: Percentages Endorsed by Girls and Boys

Reason	Girls N = 116	Boys N = 111
I liked the person more than I had ever liked anyone before	62	61
I wanted to get to know the person better	41	40
I wanted to have someone to do things with	31	28
I felt like I should be in a relationship	28	23
The person pursued me and I thought ‘why not?’	18	18
I was curious	12	20
To have someone take care of me	12	6
So I wouldn’t be the only one without a boyfriend/girlfriend	10	7

Sexual Behaviors

Table 3 lists the percentage of girls and boys who reported engaging in specific sexual behaviors by ethnic group, and the results of ANCOVAs used to test main effects of gender and ethnic group membership, as well as their interaction, controlling for SES. A small number of students who reported being in relationships had not engaged in any physical/sexual activity ($n = 6$). Similar patterns of participation were evident among girls and boys across ethnic group for holding hands and kissing – the majority of adolescents reported and having engaged

in these behaviors. Significantly more boys than girls reported engaging in mutual touching and intercourse; however, these effects were driven by the differences in reports of the Latino/a adolescents. The significant interaction¹ of gender and ethnic group membership for each of these latter behaviors indicates the lowest percentage of participation among Latina girls and the highest percentage of participation among Latino boys; white girls' and boys' rates were in the middle, and, two of the three pairs were not significantly different from each other.

Table 3. Percent Engagement in Sexual Behaviors by Gender and Ethnic Group

Sexual Experience	Girls		Boys		F test Significant effects
	White N = 75	Latina N = 22	White N = 74	Latino N = 22	
Holding hands	85	91	77	77	$F = 1.02$
Kissing on the mouth	65	73	74	90	$F = 1.73$
Being touched under one's clothes or with no clothes on	35	18	35	59	$F = 2.10 +$ [gender = 6.24*] [gender x ethnic = 6.08*]
Touching someone else under their clothes or with no clothes on	31	18	47	64	$F = 3.68^{**}$ gender = 14.46*** gender x ethnic = 3.18 +
Sexual intercourse	11	0	13	55	$F = 10.67^{***}$ gender = 27.85*** ethnic = 4.86* gender x ethnic = 2.10***

+ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 4 presents the proportion of those who would like to repeat various experiences by gender and ethnic group membership. Cell size for sexual touching among Latinas was too small (n = 5) to test ethnic differences on these experiences. Overall, rates of interest in repeating sexual activities were high; all were over 60% and most were over

80%. Analyses reveal significant differences in rates by gender for hand holding and sexual touching. Girls were significantly more likely to report wanting to hold hands again than were boys, and significantly less likely to report wishing to repeat experiences of sexual touching than were boys. Whites were more likely to wish to repeat hand holding than were Latino/as.

Table 4. Percent of Adolescents Interested in Repeating Each Sexual Behavior by Gender and Ethnic group

Sexual Experience	Girls		Boys		F tests Significant effects
	White% (n)	Latina% (n)	White% (n)	Latino% (n)	
Holding hands	97 (64)	80 (20)	84 (57)	61 (18)	F = 4.45** Gender = 6.14* Ethnic = 10.25**
Kissing on the mouth	96 (49)	94 (17)	95 (57)	80 (20)	F = 1.56
Being touched under one's clothes or with no clothes on	67 (31)		93 (47)		F = 3.47* Gender = 5.33*
Touching someone else under their clothes or with no clothes on	62 (29)		93 (55)		F = 5.82** Gender = 14.22***

Note. Results for touching are reported by gender only, as cell sizes are too small to test differences by ethnicity.

+ p < .10 ; *p < .05 ; **p < .01 ; ***p < .001

Reasons Not to Engage in Intercourse

Reasons not to engage in intercourse are listed by gender and ethnic group with the results of ANCOVAs testing for gender and ethnic differences, and their interaction (Table 5). Frequently endorsed reasons among girls were: being “not ready” or “too young”, “waiting for the right person”, fears of pregnancy and AIDS, and

parental upset. Among boys, frequently endorsed reasons were: “waiting for the right person” and fear of AIDS and pregnancy, and parental upset. Girls and boys across ethnic group were equally likely to report not having intercourse for the following reasons: “waiting for the right person”, fears of pregnancy or AIDS, and because of religious proscriptions.

Table 5. Reasons Not to Engage in Intercourse: Percentages and ANCOVA Results

Reasons	Girls		Boys		Full model	F tests		
	White n = 75	Latina n = 23	White n = 76	Latino n = 22		Gender	Ethnic	G x E
I think I am not ready to have sex	90	72	52	27	12.26***	30.09***	8.29**	
I am waiting for the right person	89	78	76	64	2.30			
I am afraid I might get (a girl) pregnant	73	87	71	64	.89			
I am afraid of getting AIDS	88	87	74	82	1.40			
I am too young to have sex	80	83	47	41	7.42***	23.89***		
My friends think its wrong to have sex	39	64	9	0	14.73***	54.18***	7.94**	
My parents would be upset	87	100	65	55	8.90***	29.23***	4.32*	
I would be embarrassed	38	70	21	18	6.25***	20.98***	4.19*	5.55*
My religion says its wrong	31	38	26	10	1.18			
I do not have a boy/girlfriend	66	18	46	45	3.87**	8.17**	6.84*	
My girl/boyfriend does not want to have sex	43	27	62	19	2.95**	7.15**		

+ p<.10 ; *p<.05 ; **p<.01 ; ***p<.001

Significantly more girls than boys endorsed 5 of the 11 items: “I’m not ready”, “I’m too young”, “my parents would be upset”, “My friends think it’s wrong to have sex”, and “I would be embarrassed”. On the latter two items a significant interaction was also detected; these reasons were most frequently endorsed by Latina girls and least often endorsed by Latino boys. The pattern was similar, but less dramatic among white girls and boys. In addition, two main effects for ethnic group were found; across gender, whites endorsed the following items more often than did Latino/as: “I’m not ready” and “my girlfriend/boyfriend does not want to have sex”. Finally, on the item “I don’t have a boyfriend/girlfriend,” an interaction effect was present, such that white girls were most likely and Latina girls were least likely to endorse this item.

Reasons to Engage in Sexual Intercourse

Table 6 lists the reasons to engage in intercourse endorsed by the small sample of girls and boys who have done so, as well as the experience of first intercourse. These data are not statistically analyzed, given the very small sample size; they are presented within gender only (all of the girls, and 45% of boys who report sexual intercourse identified as white). Across gender, the most frequent reason given was “because I liked/loved the person” and among the least frequently endorsed item was “to fit in with my friends”.

Experience of Intercourse

Among this small sample of girls, the experience of intercourse was given mixed reviews (see Table 6).

Table 6. Reasons for Initiating Intercourse and Experience of Intercourse (Percentages)

	Girls (n=11)	Boys (n=35)
<u>Reasons to initiate sexual intercourse</u>		
Because I liked/loved the person	73	70
To find out what it feels like	64	49
Because my boyfriend/girlfriend wanted to	46	64
To get it over with/so I wouldn't be a virgin	36	12
I don't know/ It just happened	36	15
I thought I had to	27	12
I felt desire	36	58
To fit in with my friends	9	12
<u>Experience of sexual intercourse</u>		
It made me feel closer to the other person	73	69
I wished I had waited	82	16
I was scared	55	16
I really liked it	46	84
It made me feel like more of a woman/man	18	50
It was with someone I had a close relationship with/ knew well	100	56
I didn't like it	9	0

The most frequently endorsed items were: "it made me feel close to the other person", "it was with someone I had a close relationship with" and "I wished I had waited". Roughly half of girls reported that they were "scared" and that they "really liked it." Few girls reported that they "didn't like it" and that it "made me feel more like a woman."

The boys' profile indicated a largely positive experience. The most frequently endorsed items were: "I really liked it" and "It made me feel closer to the person." Roughly half of boys reported that they "felt like more of a man" and that the experience was "with someone I had a close relationship with." Few boys reported feeling "scared," wishing "I had waited" and no boys indicated that "I didn't like it."

Sexual Self Concept

We examined mean scores on the summary sexual self concept scale by gender and ethnic group, controlling for SES. Main effects for both gender and ethnicity were significant, such that boys and whites reported higher self concepts than did girls and Latino/as [white boys $M = 3.34$, Latino boys $M = 3.02$, white girls $M = 2.99$, Latina girls $M = 2.89$; $F = 10.32$, $p < .001$; $F(\text{gender}) = 10.76$, $p < .01$; $F(\text{ethnic}) = 8.56$, $p < .01$]. Sexual self concept was positively related to participation in sexual behavior (a sum score of sexual behaviors excepting intercourse, i.e., holding hands, kissing, mutual touching) as assessed via partial correlation controlling for gender and SES ($r = .35$, $p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

This study extends previous work in the area of adolescent sexuality by reporting information on sexual behavior, reasoning, and experiences not solely focused on intercourse, and by attending to the ways that the experience of sexuality is gendered.

The majority of adolescent boys and girls in this sample have begun their forays into dating and sexual activities by the beginning of the 8th grade. Most have some dating experience, and most have experienced hand holding and kissing by this age. Fewer have engaged in more intimate sexual behaviors, with more Latino boys reporting sexual touching and intercourse than did white boys, or girls of either ethnicity. Estimates for intercourse are marginally higher than those of other samples (e.g., Michael & Bickert, 2001), driven by the high rates of intercourse reported by the relatively small number of Latino boys in this sample. However, they do correspond with the sanctioning of boys' sexual behavior, perhaps particularly within some Latin American cultural contexts. These behavioral reports also go hand-in-hand with adolescents' developing sexual self-concepts, such that increasing comfort with oneself as a sexual person is associated with more reported participation in sexual behaviors. Not surprisingly, seeing oneself as a sexual person, entitled to sexual thoughts and feelings, is linked to having sexual experiences, although the direction of the effect is unclear from these data. That white boys (and not Latinos) report the highest sexual self concept, but not the most sexual behavior may be due to cultural variations in the sanctioning of some of the items on the scale. For example, Latino boys may be less likely to endorse masturbation, or "having questions about sex," as these items go against Catholic teachings and machismo, respectively.

Top-ranked reasons to engage in dating relationships or sexual intercourse, as well as top-ranked reasons *not* to engage in intercourse, were relational (e.g., liking someone, feeling close to the person and wanting to increase the closeness, or because they were "waiting for the right person"). While this is an anticipated finding among girls, it is not in keeping with expectations generated from the script for boys. That boys, too, are relationally motivated does find company in previous reports using qualitative data from this group and others (Garbarino, 1999; Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso, Harmon, & Striepe, in press; Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso, & Porche, 2003), and points to the importance of giving boys and girls opportunity to express their experiences in ways both conforming and not conforming to gendered stereotypes.

Beyond these relational motivations, several other aspects of adolescents' reasoning about their choices yielded interesting information. The majority of boys and girls noted concerns about unwanted outcomes of intercourse (pregnancy or AIDS) as reasons to decide against it, and many cited parental distress as important to their decisions. Early adolescents are knowledgeable about the potential negative consequences of sexual intercourse, and understand that this knowledge is important to their decisions to not engage in intercourse at this age. Additionally, parents, and perceived parental responses, remain influential in adolescents' choices. That the majority of girls cited being "too young" and "not ready" for intercourse may reflect both the scripted expectations, as well as the social and biologic reality that girls bear a disproportionate amount of the responsibility for pregnancy, if one should occur, and thus there is more to be "ready" for. However, it should be noted that roughly half of White boys felt themselves to be "too young" and "not ready" as well. Latino boys' less frequent endorsement of these reasons fits with social

pressures to demonstrate machismo, whether due to a genuine sense of preparedness, or social pressure to present oneself as such within this group. Overall, the majority of girls and boys are in agreement with researchers and parents in believing that 8th grade is generally too early to be engaging in intercourse.

The rationale against intercourse presented here also lines up with expectations from the script in several ways. Girls, and particularly Latina girls, more often indicated that their friends “think it’s wrong to have sex” as a reason to choose against it than did boys, and were more likely to note that they would “be embarrassed”. Within the script, girls have something to be embarrassed about if they have sex, whereas boys do not, and girls have both the investment in maintaining relationships by not generating conflict within them (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), as well as the possibility that more of their friends may indeed frown upon intercourse as a choice as compared to boys (Billy & Udry, 1985).

With respect to girls’ and boys’ *experience* of their sexual behaviors, the point where the script becomes salient is with behaviors “after” kissing—that is, sexual touching, and intercourse. Perhaps a silver lining of the popular short-hand that “sex equals intercourse” is that it has allowed behaviors relatively further from this prototype, such as kissing, to be less laden with the connotations of sex, and therefore allowed it to be more freely enjoyed by girls. The overwhelming majority of boys and girls who have experienced kissing wish to repeat the experience, suggesting that they enjoyed it and feel comfortable with enjoying it. Girls less often reported interest in repeating experiences of sexual touching than do boys, suggesting greater dislike, discomfort, or perhaps ambivalence about enjoying the experiences. The script is also born out in boys’ reported rates of touching somewhat more often than they have

been touched—in line with the idea of boys as sexual actors and initiators, and girls as passive recipients of sexual advances.

Although the numbers of youth in this sample who reported on their experiences of intercourse are too low to be considered more than speculatively, the script receives support in that boys present intercourse in almost entirely favorable terms, whereas the girls present a mixed review. In particular, the finding that boys reported the experience of intercourse made them “feel like a man” whereas girls were less inclined to find the experience as central to womanhood is suggestive of the differences in the meaning of the event across gender. Clearly, the reasons that youth engage in behaviors, their experiences of these behaviors, and the correspondence to their self-definition remains a puzzle with several pieces yet to be fit in.

Implications

When viewing these data with an eye towards refining intervention efforts, several themes should be noted. First, while there is not an ‘epidemic’ of intercourse happening at this age, clearly it is not too early to discuss sexuality. These youth appear at least cursorily to be informed of some of the concrete risks of intercourse (e.g., pregnancy or disease) and, at this age, many girls’ and boys’ behavior is compatible with an ‘abstinence’ view of addressing these risks. However, over time these risks do not weigh heavily enough against the countervailing interest in initiating intercourse for most people, so understanding the motivations for being sexual become important, and helping adolescents to develop the capacity to assess their motivations is useful. Similarly, while parents may worry about a ‘slippery slope’ whereby any sexual behavior (e.g., kissing) will lead quickly to other, more proscribed behaviors, this fear appears unwarranted from this data. Whereas many adolescents are engaging in low level sexual

activities, most are not reporting intercourse. Continuing to disentangle sexuality from sexual intercourse is important for the promotion of sexual health among adolescents and adults alike.

These data also suggest that kissing is a relevant and worthwhile behavior to discuss in the 8th grade. Among both girls and boys, these 8th graders seemed to be kissing, like to kiss, and feel okay about kissing – so, they are meeting some of the goals of being sexually healthy with this behavior. It is critical that discussions of sexuality meet teens “where they are,” rather than focusing solely on intercourse and its hazards—which may seem remote to many at this age. Discussion of the behaviors that youth are gaining some experience with, and focusing on what makes these pleasurable, how to decide when you want to do what, and how to discuss sexual decision-making with a partner, should serve adolescents well both in the short run, and in providing them a real and relevant model for assessing their readiness for other sexual behaviors later.

Additionally, acknowledging the importance of relationships for both boys and girls is critical to education on sexuality. Helping adolescents acknowledge and make sense of their interest in the social aspects of sexual behaviors will help them make choices about how they want to participate in relationships – including issues of communication, trust, fidelity, and expressions of closeness (Kellar-Guenther, 1999).

Finally, the scripts about sexuality can vary across individuals, as demonstrated here by examination of gender and ethnic group membership of these adolescents. Promotion of, and definition of sexual health may also vary by social context, and should be considered when designing direct education or intervention. As one example, intervention efforts would do well to be aware of the pressure on male Latinos to present themselves as assured and

knowledgeable about sexuality and consider that this could manifest as reluctance to ask questions or express curiosity overtly, which would need to be accommodated and/or usefully challenged in work with this group.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study begins to fill in several existing gaps in our understanding of adolescents’ relational and sexual lives, it is also a first look that could be refined and improved upon in several ways. As previously noted, given the low numbers of these early adolescents who have engaged in intercourse, the findings reported for those who have had intercourse need to be viewed as speculative and to be compared to data from representative and larger samples when such data become available. It will also be important to examine responses by other relevant background factors such as broader inclusion of ethnic groups, or family circumstances, such as family structure, or aspects of parent-child relationships. It is also important to continue to acknowledge and improve upon the ‘short cuts’ that we take as researchers in attempting to represent the complexity of phenomena such as these. For example, we used gender as a proxy for how much individuals have internalized the scripted messages about sexuality that are directed towards their gender, and represented people from diverse heritage under the categories of “white” and “Latino.”

While the data on early adolescent experiences and reasoning, as well as their sexual self concept are relatively novel in the literature, these measures only begin to tap into the range and quality of experiences or attributions possible. As with any close-ended survey instrument, adolescents were limited to those responses offered to them, which may or may not have been relevant to their own experience. In particular, more of the items

included aspects of the female script, and therefore limited exploration of more masculine rationales. For example, adolescents were not asked whether a motive for dating was “because I wanted to be sexual with this person.” Future studies would do well to offer an expanded version of these choices; indeed, we have refined these measures in current data collection efforts.

Additionally, many of the experiential questions reveal a new layer of questions; for example, the item “I am not ready” could have very different individual meanings attached – boys and girls may feel not yet ready for sexual intercourse for different reasons. Qualitative studies (Tolman, 2002; Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso, & Porche, 2003) can play a critical role in refining and providing important context within which to understand the results obtained here. Finally, we are in the process of analyzing longitudinal data with this sample in order to examine the unfolding of adolescent sexuality over time, rather than limit it to an 8th grade ‘snapshot.’ This will allow for

examining the progression of, and the experience of, sexual behaviors over time, as well as how these link with other aspects of development.

Conclusions

The more we know about the range, quality, and meaning of girls’ and boys’ sexual and relationship experiences, the better able we are to promote healthy relationships and sexual lives within and beyond adolescence. The current data present a picture of early adolescent sexuality that is not solely about intercourse, deviance, or risk, and that suggests that relational reasons are primary in the sexual choices adolescent girls and boys are making. This study points to the importance of understanding adolescents’ choices and experiences within the broader scope of their lives, demonstrating that the gender and ethnic membership of the adolescent has important bearing on their experiences, and on their capacity to develop a healthy sense of their sexuality during and beyond their adolescent years.

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(Footnotes)

¹ Interaction effect of marginal significance ($p < .10$) for touching someone.
Data fit overall trend.