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Wanting Sex and Wanting to Wait: Young Adults' Accounts of Sexual Messages from First Significant Dating Partners

This study provided a qualitative analysis of 79 young adults' descriptions of sexual and relational messages they received from their first significant dating partner. For both men and women, the most frequent theme concerned the negotiation of first sexual intercourse with that partner; other themes differed by gender. Women reported receiving messages from male partners that indicated a high interest in sexual activity as well as pressure to engage in sexual activity. Women's responses to these messages often involved giving in to unwanted sexual activity. Men reported receiving messages from female partners concerning setting sexual boundaries; they responded to these messages with both acceptance and frustration. Accounts of first significant dating relationships also included discussions of having learned from these relationships, suggesting that experiences with first significant dating partners may have lasting sexual and relational influences. These results suggest the presence of complementary gendered messages that contribute to the reproduction of compulsory heterosexuality, gendered power imbalances, and sexual coercion.

Key Words: *adolescence, romantic relationships, sexual coercion, sexual roles, sexual socialization*

INTRODUCTION

In developed western societies, adolescence or young adulthood are the typical periods for beginning dating and for experimenting with a variety of sexual behaviors (Connolly and Johnson, 1996; Furman and Wehner, 1997). Because adolescents often lack personal experience on which to base a sexual or relational identity, their behaviors within these initial dating relationships are often based on expectations and imagined experiences about the self in romantic situations (Miller and Benson, 1999) and are characterized by sexual exploration (Brown,



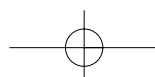
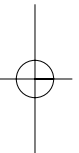
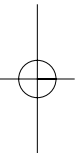
1999). Thus, adolescents are highly subject to external, social influences and look to others for cues regarding appropriate and desired sexual behaviors (Brown, 1999). Examining the messages that adolescents and young adults receive about sexuality and romantic relationships, and the sources of these socializing messages, can help increase our understanding of sexual and romantic relationship development during adolescence and young adulthood.

Numerous studies have shown that parents, peers, and the media are important sources of sexual socialization (e.g. DiIorio et al., 2003; Ward, 2003; Wood et al., 2002); however, it is also likely that adolescents turn to their dating partners for cues regarding appropriate sexual behavior. Because dating partners are active participants in processes of sexual exploration (Tolman, Striepe et al., 2003), it is plausible that their influence would be stronger than that of other, less direct, sources of sexual socialization. Another unique characteristic of interactions with dating partners (as opposed to interactions with other peers, or with parents) is that they provide a venue for enacting and practicing sexual roles that were previously learned from other sources (Brown, 1999).

The potential socializing role of dating partners would thus seem to be an important area of study. However, the socializing role of dating partners has received little research attention to date. Instead, research has typically focused on either adolescent women's or men's attitudes and behaviors in isolation (see Tolman, Striepe et al., 2003), rather than studying the interaction between the two partners.

One exception is the body of research that examines partner interactions within sexual relationships using the framework of sexual scripts. Among other topics, these studies specifically explore gender based sexual negotiation and sexual coercion within heterosexual relationships. For example, past studies have found that men have higher sexual expectations than women for first dates (Morr and Mongeau, 2004), that strategies for initiating sex are stereotyped as being used predominantly by men, (McCormick et al., 1984; O'Sullivan and Byers, 1992), that disagreements regarding sexual intimacy more frequently involve reluctant females rather than reluctant males (O'Sullivan and Byers, 1995), and that young adults have difficulty distinguishing seduction scripts from rape scripts, as in both types of scripts men tended to use manipulative techniques to obtain sex (Littleton and Axsom, 2003). Feminist theorists argue that the ways in which sexual encounters are scripted make it difficult for women to express sexual agency or desire (O'Sullivan and Byers, 1993) and to say no to unwanted sex (Frith and Kitlinger, 2001). Indeed, one study found that even when women express verbal or non-verbal refusals, 25 percent of these refusals are met with verbal or behavioral coercion from the male partner (Byers and Lewis, 1988).

While highly informative, this research has typically focused on participants' perceptions of researcher-constructed scenarios, rather than allowing participants to report on their own sexual interactions and to articulate the meaning and importance of these interactions. Additionally, most of the sexual scripts research has emphasized specific sexual behaviors as opposed to having conducted a more





general, open-ended inquiry into messages or cues communicated by a dating partner. Such an inquiry would be important, in that it would shed light on the potential role of dating partners as active sexual socialization sources and would allow for the continued exploration of the potential gendered nature of sexual role expectations within heterosexual dating partnerships. With the present study, we seek to increase our understanding in both of these areas.

Gender plays an important role in adolescent dating relationships, such that acceptable (hetero)sexual behaviors and norms, or sexual roles, follow gender-based patterns (e.g. Gagnon and Simon, 1973). The result of these gender-based sexual roles is that young men and women feel pressure to be masculine or feminine; this pressure traditionally results in sexual role expectations that make heterosexuality compulsory and uphold male dominance (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1993; Rich, 1980). Tolman, Striepe et al. (2003) proposed that gendered sexual roles are complementary. Under this framework, masculine and feminine ideologies are integrated, such that constructions of male and female sexuality 'fit together to reproduce particular and limited forms of sexuality that are deemed to be "normal," all in the service of reproducing and sustaining compulsory heterosexuality' (p. 11). More specifically, "'normal" heterosexuality is predicated on masculinity conceptualized as active, persistent and powerful, and on femininity as passive, receptive and responsive to male sexuality' (Hird and Jackson, 2001: 28). Indeed, research with participants from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds has indicated that young women's and men's experiences in relationships often include the enactment of complementary gender roles (e.g. Tolman, Spencer et al., 2003).

Feminist scholars in particular have done much to illuminate the ways in which gender shapes young women's sexuality (e.g. Fine, 1988; Jackson and Cram, 2003; Phillips, 2000; Rubin, 1990; Tolman, 2002). Through focus groups and individual interviews with adolescents, researchers have been identifying recurrent themes in young women's narratives of their own and their peers' experiences with heterosexual relationships. In particular, these studies with women of diverse backgrounds have revealed how current heteronormative configurations of sexual norms provide little space for female sexual desire and agency (Fine, 1988; Jackson, 2005; Thomson and Holland, 1993; Tolman, 1994), produce attitudes and behaviors that reinforce a sexual double standard (Jackson and Cram, 2003; Rubin, 1990), and ultimately reproduce male dominance and coercion in sexual relationships (Phillips, 2000; Tolman, Spencer et al., 2003; Tolman et al., 2004).

In a complementary fashion, heteronormative scripts shape young men's sexuality as well. They promote hyper-heterosexuality as an indicator of masculinity (Kimmel, 1997), with sexual intercourse being a mechanism through which males can establish both masculinity and heterosexuality. For example, in focus group studies with adolescent boys and girls, their responses suggested that they believe the male sex drive is constant, active, and strong, that it is difficult for young men to constrain their sex drive, and that female partners are responsible

for controlling it (Hird and Jackson, 2001). In another study, adolescent boys reported constant and intense pressure from peers to engage in heterosexual behaviors, including sexually aggressive behaviors, to increase popularity or avoid teasing from peers (Tolman et al., 2004). Additionally, the adolescent boys' requisite public (hetero)sexual assertiveness seemed to act as a condition to prove heterosexuality and deny homosexuality, which simultaneously establishes their masculinity.

In summary, adolescence frequently includes introductions to heterosexual relationships. The interactions within these relationships are likely influential in adolescent and young adult sexual and romantic relationship development (Brown, 1999). Theorists suggest that interactions within dating relationships follow norms set forth by institutionalized compulsory heterosexuality that promotes complementary gender-based patterns of sexual behavior (Frith and Kitzinger, 2001; Rich, 1980; Tolman, Striepe et al., 2003) and research supports these types of anticipated gendered sexual behaviors in real or artificial sexual interactions (Littleton and Axsom, 2003; Morr and Mongeau, 2004; O'Sullivan, 2005). Thus, exploring potential roles of dating partners as sources of sexual socialization and exploring the content of dating partner interactions can contribute to a greater understanding of sexual roles within these relationships and adolescent sexual development in general.

Although research concerning any type of dating partner would likely be illuminating, understanding the role played by an adolescent's first significant dating partner seems especially important. The first significant relationship, in particular, may be highly influential in shaping sexual and relational development and the roles and norms that are first adhered to may become the model in all subsequent relationships. Thus, in this study, we chose to focus on adolescents' initial dating partners from significant relationships. Because of the gendered nature of sexual roles, we also chose to interview both men and women.

The Present Study

Our first goal in conducting this research was to explore the potential socializing role of first significant dating partners by examining and describing the content of the messages that young adults recall receiving from these partners. Dominant and repeated themes can reveal focal topics of conversation or negotiation within these relationships; their presence provides evidence that dating partners' beliefs and desires have an effect on their partners. Additionally, analyzing the content of dating partner messages can provide information regarding sexual role expectations in adolescents' early relationship experiences. We anticipated that the content of these reported messages would follow certain themes or patterns, which would help identify salient aspects of the participants' interactions with their first significant dating partners. We were also interested in how participants responded to messages received from dating partners.

Because this was an exploratory study, we felt that it was especially important



to understand how young adults narrate their own experiences within these interactions as opposed to asking participants to respond to topics chosen by the researchers. As such, we were interested in exploring this topic through a qualitative inquiry that encouraged the participants to recount their experiences in a way that would enable the dynamics and complexities of the situation to be heard and examined. The use of qualitative data allows for a discussion and analysis of these experiences in more detail than in some previous studies. Therefore, we chose to conduct interviews with young adults in which we asked them to recount the messages, if any, they remembered receiving from their first significant dating partners.

METHOD

Participants

The study was conducted at a public university on the west coast of the USA during the 2003–04 academic year. Participants were recruited from lower-division psychology courses and received course credit for their participation. Participation included volunteering for a two-hour interview and questionnaire study titled 'Communicating about Sexuality'.

In total, 89 people participated in the interview study. Of the 89 participants, 79 indicated past and/or current involvement in a significant heterosexual dating relationship and were included in the present analysis. Sixty one percent of these participants were women ($n = 48$) and 39 percent were men ($n = 31$). Participants ranged from 18 to 23 years old ($M = 18.9$). Most participants ($n = 48$) were in their first year of college; the rest of the sample comprised 16 sophomores, eight juniors, and seven seniors. Almost all participants reported their sexual orientation as 'exclusively heterosexual' ($n = 58$) or 'predominantly heterosexual' ($n = 18$). Two participants identified as 'bisexual' and one as 'other'. The sample was also predominantly (about 50%) European American ($n = 45$). The sample also included 14 Asian American, six Latino/a or Mexican heritage, four African American, and 10 bi-racial or multi-racial participants. About 25 percent of participants ($n = 20$) identified their religious affiliation as Catholic, 21 percent ($n = 17$) as Christian, 8 percent ($n = 7$) as Jewish, 4 percent ($n = 3$) as Hindu, 10 percent ($n = 8$) as 'other', and 30 percent ($n = 24$) as 'none'. Over 90 percent of participants ($n = 73$) were raised in the state of California and 83 percent ($n = 66$) were raised with both their mother and father as their primary caregivers. Participants' parents were highly educated: 41 mothers and 46 fathers had graduated from college and an additional 22 mothers and 29 fathers had obtained a graduate degree.

In the interviews, all men described encounters with female dating partners and all women described encounters with male dating partners. For 23 participants, the first significant dating partner was also their current partner; the other 56

participants were no longer involved with the first significant dating partner that they discussed in the interview. Seven of the first significant dating partners were partners the participant started dating in middle school, 62 in high school, four the summer before college, and six in college. The average length of time from the beginning of the significant relationship under discussion ranged from four months to five years ($M = 38$ months). The relationships lasted from one month to five years ($M = 14.6$ months). Many (women: $n = 28$; men: $n = 19$) of the significant relationships under discussion were those in which the participant first had sexual intercourse.

Materials and Procedure

Data were collected through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews that took place in a private laboratory room at the university and lasted between 30 and 70 minutes. Prior to being interviewed, participants were informed about the study procedures and provided written informed consent. Participants were assured that the information they would reveal in the study was confidential and that neither their names nor their partners' names would be used. The interviewers were European American women slightly older than the participants and consisted of the first author and two female research assistants. The research assistants had been trained to be aware of the sensitivity of the topics discussed and to be responsive to any indications from the participants that they were uncomfortable with the questions. The research assistants received feedback from the first author concerning the interviews they conducted.

The data analyzed for this study were drawn from one portion of the interview. Other portions of the interview included questions about messages received from parents, same-sex friends, and the media, as well as other questions about dating and sexuality; responses to these questions were not analyzed for the present study. Demographic and sexual and relationship experience information was assessed with a questionnaire following the interview. Participants' first significant dating partners were established prior to the interview by asking participants to list all past dating partners and then to name their *first, significant* dating partner. The word 'significant' was used to guide the participant to choose a person with whom they likely shared an important physical or emotional connection within an established romantic relationship. To begin a conversation regarding partner messages, participants were asked, 'What were some of the messages you received about sexuality from your first significant dating partner?' This question was designed to elicit recollections of experiences in which the participant's partner relayed information about sexuality, and left open so as to allow participants to interpret the content and meaning of the term 'messages'. If asked to clarify, the interviewer informed the participant that they could discuss either verbal (explicit) or non-verbal (implicit) messages, or both. Responses to this initial question were followed with additional scripted questions that were designed to clarify responses and to elicit specific examples (see Table 1).



TABLE 1
Interview Protocol

What were some of the messages about sexuality you got from your most significant partner? Please describe an example of when/how this message was conveyed.

How were your views about sexuality the same or different from this dating partner's views?

Did you find yourself changing your actions or beliefs because of this dating partner?

Were the messages received from your dating partners different than from the messages from your friends? How?

Did you find yourself acting differently/saying different things to your friends and dating partner? How?

Was your overall relationship with this partner positive or negative? What made it this way?

Was your physical relationship with this partner positive or negative? What made it this way?

Note: This section of the interview followed sections concerning messages received from parents and messages received from same-sex friends.

Interviewers could also ask unscripted follow-up questions in order to clarify or expand participants' responses.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and then checked twice for accuracy. After excluding 10 participants without significant dating partners, the portion of the interview in which participants spoke about messages from their first significant dating partner was extracted and subjected to multiple readings. Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which stresses the inductive development of analytic categories, the next step of the analysis involved reading these selections more closely for emergent themes. This method of analysis was chosen because it optimizes the use of qualitative data through thematic analysis while also attending to the complexities of the participants' accounts and the meaning participants give to their experiences. We noted both patterns of meaning and inconsistencies within and across the interviews. Finally, transcripts were reviewed to assess the presence or absence of the inductively determined themes. In using this approach, we remained cognizant of the context within which the narratives were given and attentive to our own subjectivity as psychological researchers; both are likely to affect the generation of themes and data analysis more generally (e.g. Charmaz, 1983).

RESULTS

In the four sections that follow, we describe the themes that emerged within participants' accounts regarding messages from first significant dating partners. The first section addresses the emphasis on sexual intercourse that was present in both men's and women's accounts. The second and third sections detail messages women received from their male partners and the fourth section details messages men received from their female partners. The fifth section addresses the theme of learning that emerged in both men's and women's accounts when reflecting on their relationship experience. Excerpts of transcripts have been selected for presentation as illustrations of broader thematic patterns we observed across the interview transcripts; names assigned to participants are pseudonyms.

Emphasis on Sexual Intercourse

Although participants articulated a number of different messages received from their dating partners, the central framework for the discussion (for both men and women) was the decision of whether and when to engage in intercourse. When responding to the initial question, 'What messages did you receive about sexuality from your first significant dating partner?' most participants (87%, $n = 69$) seemingly interpreted 'sexuality' to mean sexual intercourse and proceeded to recount messages surrounding the negotiation of intercourse. As is the case in the following example, reported messages typically involved conversations or actions that either led up to having sexual intercourse with their partner or that led up to a decision to not have, or to postpone, intercourse. In response to the initial question, Brian explained:

Well, I guess when I first got together she really, like we had never had sex. And were like, 'I'm not going to have sex until I fall in love' or like whatever, and then it kind of changed once we got really serious and we were together for awhile. And then, I don't know, I guess we figured we'd have sex. We were both virgins and I guess it wasn't as big of a deal.

It is important to note that the overwhelming emphasis on sexual intercourse was not prompted by the interviewers, and indeed, during earlier portions of the same interview in which participants were asked to report parental and peer messages about sexuality, participants were encouraged to (and did) incorporate broad definitions of sexuality. However, regardless of not being prompted to speak about sexual intercourse and having used expanded definitions of sexuality in the first portions of the interview, participants overwhelmingly emphasized sexual intercourse when asked about dating partner messages. Thus, the following discussion of sexual messages from first significant dating partners emphasizes the negotiation of sexual intercourse because of the responses received from the participants.

*“He Really Wanted It”: High Male Sexual Interest*

Whether in initial statements or within later discussions of partner messages, 92 percent of female participants ($n = 44$) reported having received messages from male partners conveying interest in sexual activity, typically sexual intercourse. Messages of sexual interest were frequently promptly evident in female participants' responses. Many female participants answered the initial interview question with a short and direct indication of male partner interest, such as: 'He wanted to sleep with me', 'He was really interested in sex', and 'He was for it, definitely'. These immediate, succinct responses suggest that male interest in sexual activity, especially sexual intercourse, was a clear and memorable message.

Beyond their initial statements, most female participants elaborated, sometimes at length, on the fact that their male partner indicated high levels of sexual interest. Their accounts included descriptions of various methods that male partners used to convey this interest. Most frequently, sexual interest was relayed by male partners through a physical desire for sexual activities. For example, Kelly said:

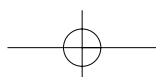
He loved sex. He was really open with it and just, I think it was in the first month of knowing each other, and he just kind of put out his whole, like how he thought he was like the sex god and how he loves sex. He made it very clear that that's what he liked.

Male partners also framed desire for sexual interactions as a method of relationship building. For example, Jackie explained:

He always talked about like, you know, like, you can show your love through sex and all that kinda stuff, you know, and that it's just an important part of our relationship to him.

Female participants not only frequently received messages of sexual interest from their male partners, but also constructed a gendered explanation for these messages. Female participants would state that their boyfriends' expressions of desire were normal, and a result of being male. Several participants simply explained that their boyfriend 'was just like a regular guy and wanted sex' or that 'since he's a guy, he wanted to . . . like earlier than I did'. Jennifer gave a more extensive explanation of how her boyfriend's high sexual interest was linked to expected male roles in relationships:

Well, I think that [his message] was, 'I want to have sex.' You know, but I think that I knew, and he knew, that he wasn't ready for sex. And so I would openly say that I'm not ready for sex and I don't think that you're ready for sex and even if you are ready for sex, I am not ready and I don't want to have sex. But I think that [asking for sex] is something that guys think about. They think that they have to ask, you know, in every relationship, and that they felt like they had to ask for it, like just in case, like, that there was a glimmer of hope that it would happen.



In response to sexual interest from their male partners, most female participants indicated that they considered engaging in their partner's desired sexual activity for his benefit. For example, one woman explained, 'He was really anxious, like, to have sex. It made me think, like, to make a relationship better it would make him happy if I did it.' Other participants reported giving in to their partner's expressions of interest, such that they engaged in unwanted sexual activity. An example of this came from a woman who commented, 'There will be times when he will be more into it than I am, but I'll just go along with it anyway.' Similarly, Anna explained:

Well, we were both really young so we wanted to wait, and since he's a guy, he wanted to [have sex] earlier than I did, which was kind of awkward and weird, so we both waited for a while. I probably had sex earlier than I would have wanted to, but given the circumstances, I did feel okay with it because we had been together for like two or three years. But I think that if it was someone like me, who was like, 'I definitely want to wait until I'm 18', then we both definitely would have waited.

All participants who reported high sexual interest on the part of their male partner indicated that their choice to engage in the sexual activity was based on their partner's interest, on continuing the relationship, or on pleasing the partner rather than on their own sexual desires or interest. In addition, some participants simultaneously articulated that this partner verbally or physically pressured them into sexual intercourse; this theme is explored further later.

Although high male sexual interest was by far the dominant pattern evident in females' accounts, low male sexual interest was discussed in four women's accounts. Instances in which men were not interested in sex typically involved men withholding sexual activity until marriage because of religious convictions, rather than a lessened physical desire. For example, in speaking of her boyfriend's desire not to have sexual intercourse, one woman explained that 'in the Mormon religion you are not supposed to do basically anything, like just kissing, so he would do anything but sex'. In the few instances where male partners expressed a lack of interest, female participants responded with both surprise and acceptance. Upon finding out that her boyfriend did not want to have sex until marriage, another woman explained that she 'was really surprised because I didn't know that guys felt like that and stuff. I thought it was kind of strange when we talked about it and stuff, but I was like, that's cool.'

'Don't Be a Baby About It': Male Sexual Pressure

Another common theme in female participants' accounts of messages from male partners was pressure to advance sexual activity, which generally included engaging in sexual intercourse. This theme emerged in 56 percent of participant's accounts ($n = 27$). A general example of this is evident from Marisa who indicated that:



He was like, well, you have to have sex. He was really negative, and I don't know, more forceful and stuff. He was like three years older than me, and so he would just be like, 'it's not a big deal, don't be a baby about it'. Because, like, I was 15 and he was 18, which is a big age difference, and then it's like with him, I was just like, well, he's older, I don't want to lose him. And he was like, 'you know, well, other girls do it'. He was just mean about it, basically.

Though not always described in detail, participants' recounted various types and various levels of sexual pressure. Some participants indicated receiving mainly physical pressure, while most indicated that the pressure was verbal. As expected, physical pressure manifested during sexual interactions. For example, one woman explained, "He pressured me, like, when we would kiss he would try to take things further like that. We would never really talk, he would never say like, 'let's have sex'. It was just his actions.' Repeated verbal requests for sexual intercourse were frequently accompanied by statements attempting to convince the participant that having sex would be a good indication of love and trust, that it would make him happy, and that it would not hurt. For example, Kara spoke about her boyfriend who 'wasn't the best guy ever'. She continued:

He always made me feel really bad, I was scared. He would guilt trip me if I didn't want to have sex, and he was like, 'come on, you know I love you so much, I do all these things for you, I don't know what's your problem'. [Sex] definitely wasn't a beautiful thing, or even a good thing. It was kind of more like about power; it just ended up making me feel bad.

It is also important to recognize that four of the 48 women described experiences that meet the legal definition of rape. For example, Sandra said this about her first boyfriend:

He was really trying to get me to have sex. He would just always try to have sex with me, like any chance we had alone, he would say 'come on, let's have sex'. Sometimes he would try to start taking my clothes off and I would be like, 'no'. At that time, I wanted to wait until I was married and I didn't want to have sex. I was afraid of sex, I was 13. Except, I started drinking and doing drugs, and so one night we were really messed up and I just passed out and he pretty much just did what he wanted with me. I remember I woke up and I was just bleeding and so I figured that was a sign and then my friend later told me what happened.

Messages of sexual pressure from male partners frequently also included complaints that waiting to engage in sexual activity was unfair to them, as well as threats of leaving the relationship if the sexual activity did not occur. One participant reported that although her boyfriend was willing to wait for sexual intercourse, he indicated that she would need to engage in every other behavior (i.e. oral sex) or else he would leave the relationship. In response to sexual pressure, several participants indicated that they chose to have intercourse before being 'ready' because of a fear that their boyfriend would cheat on them or move on to another girlfriend who would have sex. For example, Lena said:

I felt a pressure to be more sexual. I was worried that if we were not going the distance that he would be going somewhere else. I was like, well, I will keep him interested basically, so I think I moved faster and farther than I would have normally.

Women's responses to reported messages of sexual pressure included perceiving it as negative and describing it as 'bad', 'scary', 'difficult', or 'intimidating'. In addition, almost all women who reported being pressured by their male partner also indicated that their overall sexual relationship with this person was negative, with several participants explicitly stating that the pressure was the reason the relationship was negative. For example, regarding her sexual relationship, one woman indicated that 'it was negative because he was always feeling like we had to do more'. Another woman also indicated that her sexual relationship was negative because 'it was more about making him happy then making myself happy and enjoying it'.

The theme of sexual pressure not only materialized in women's accounts through reports of sexual pressure, but also in reports of a *lack* of sexual pressure. Suggesting that a lack of sexual pressure is noteworthy, 14 women explicitly reported that their partner did not pressure them, or that he engaged only in light pressure that easily enabled them to avoid unwanted activity. For example, Jenna explained that her boyfriend was 'really good about that stuff, I mean it took six months to get past kissing; he wasn't pressuring anything, or me'. Another woman spoke of her boyfriend's sensitivity regarding her virginity loss, explaining:

he didn't want to force anything. He was very aware [that I was a virgin] and he didn't just want to take it away. You know, it wasn't his goal to sleep with as many people or anything, he was just very, very sensitive.

Most of these situations were seen as surprising, pleasantly unexpected, and indicative of a 'good guy' (i.e. one different than the 'normal' guy).

In general, participants seemed to expect pressure and held a low standard concerning what kind of pressure was unacceptable. In particular, participants seemed to narrate an either/or situation. Either the sexual interaction involved no physical force and therefore wasn't scary, or it was negative and involved rape or attempted rape. This left little room for participants to recognize that intermediate forms of pressure or sexual coercion exist. For example, Amy explained that she was happy with her first sexual relationship because:

We were always safe and it was always a happy thing. It was never a forceful or scary thing and I was always glad because I would rather experience this with someone that is happy and non violent than someone maybe who does something to me like rape, something very negative.

Additionally, six women gave contradictory information regarding sexual pressure. These participants both reported a lack of sexual pressure *and* provided

information that indicated that they actually did receive some form of light pressure or that they felt guilt for not engaging in sexual activity when their partner wanted to. For example, Lisa explained:

We were very comfortable with each other about talking about things. It was okay to say 'no, I don't want to go any further'. At the same time, he was always feeling like we had to do more. He had to ask about sex, you know. I was comfortable with saying no, but I definitely had to say no, you know.

'Oh, I'm Not Ready': Female Boundary Setting

As the themes of sexual interest and pressure emerged within women's accounts, men's accounts of messages from first significant female dating partners evidenced a complementary theme of boundary setting on sexual activity. Interestingly, unlike the clear and immediate reports of sexual interest and pressure in female participants' narratives, boundary setting messages were not as clearly articulated in men's accounts. Nonetheless, this overarching theme was evident throughout many of the men's accounts; 64 percent ($n = 20$) of men narrated a situation in which their female partner set up limits or boundaries on sexual activity until age or relational criteria had been met, or until they were 'ready'.

Two ways in which sexual boundary setting typically manifested were through messages of nervousness about sexual activity and messages establishing relational criteria. First, male participants frequently reported that female partners expressed nervousness about sexual activity. Most of these messages came from inexperienced female partners and were associated with having sexual intercourse for the first time. Men recounted specific discussions in which their female partners indicated discomfort discussing the prospect of having sex, nervousness about potential pain during intercourse, and regret or confusion following intercourse. For example, Matthew explained:

She and I were both inexperienced at the time. There were a couple of times when things were heading that way and she put a stop to it. She was kind of nervous, especially when our first time happened, and she generally was very nervous about the subject. It's not like she thought sex was bad in any way, she was nervous about actually going through with it. At first it took us a long time for our relationship to reach that point and by then she was much more comfortable with me.

Another message that was frequently conveyed through female partners' boundary setting was that certain relational criteria needed to be met in order for sexual activity to progress. Relational criteria typically included wanting to wait to have sexual intercourse until marriage, until the partners were in love, or for the 'right person'. Other criteria were time related, such that a relationship had to last a particular length of time before sexual intercourse could occur. For example, one man explained, 'I started talking about sex and stuff and she was like – she didn't want to have sex at that time, she wanted to wait more until later when the

relationship was longer.' Commitment to the relationship was also typically a necessary criterion, such that female partners frequently expressed that they would not engage in casual sex, or sex outside of a relationship. Men reported that female partners indicated establishing these relational criteria to avoid being hurt after having had intercourse, either by him leaving her or cheating on her. For example, Greg reported:

She told me that she doesn't have sex with people when she goes out with them until she knows, like, 'that's her man'. She said that to kind of put up a boundary so I didn't try to have sex with her, even though she wanted to have sex with me, but she didn't want to do something like that and then have me go to college because she is afraid she'll get hurt. So when she started making out with me I wouldn't try to go farther because she doesn't want to get hurt if I go away. If she has sex with somebody, she wants to keep going out with them and be in a relationship.

Messages of nervousness and relational criteria from female partners were frequently explained by men as being associated with either negative family experiences or religious convictions. One man explained that his girlfriend's nervousness about sex was because her father was a convicted child molester and that despite her not having been molested by him, that it was 'bad for your psychological make-up'. Another man stated that his partner was hesitant to get into a relationship, to open up to him, and to trust him because of her parents' divorce and because 'her previous boyfriend had kind of screwed her over'. In describing boundary setting relating to religious convictions, Carl spoke about his girlfriend's conflicting messages about sexual activity resulting from 'the Catholic thing'. He explained:

Part of her kind of wanted to wait and really wishes she had. But we were both pretty comfortable in deciding that that was a good thing to do. But then sometimes she would get really sad and say things like 'I'm going to hell' but she didn't even fully believe in God so it was kind of strange. She would feel guilty and like 'what I am doing is wrong' and then she also had the same basic urges that everyone has so she would kind of think different at different times.

Men's responses to boundary-setting messages from female partners included accepting her boundaries, respecting her for wanting to wait, and being frustrated at having to wait. Upon the female partner's request to 'wait', male participants frequently indicated acknowledging her request and noting a desire to not pressure her into something that she was not ready for. Male participants also indicated having increased their respect for their female partner when they found out she wanted to wait to have intercourse. For example, in response to his girlfriend's boundary setting messages reported above, Greg said:

I thought that was fine. That is one of the things that made me more turned onto her because she is not a slut. She isn't going to go out with someone and have sex with them - I like that. I know that I might be kind of contradicting myself,

'cause I am okay with having sex with a girl if I don't go out with her, but uh, with her it's different. With those girls that I am okay with having sex with that I don't want to go out with, I don't necessarily have a deep connection with them. And with her, I have a deep connection so that is why I would like to go out with her and have sex with her and told her like, if we go out, I'll definitely be faithful to you. That is why I say I am okay with her beliefs about it.

On the other hand, although male participants often indicated their response to boundary-setting messages was being willing to wait, some also expressed their desire for further or faster sexual intercourse. For example, one man initially explained that he 'waited and then when she was ready, then we had sex', but later relayed his frustration with this process. In reference to the quality of his sexual relationship he said, 'I'm a teenage guy, so it was kinda frustrating for the first few months 'cause, I mean, we'd make out and that's all we would have done until like a month and a half, and that was kinda getting frustrating.'

Although most male participants spoke of female partners who were fearful of or disinterested in sexual intercourse, six men described female partners who were open to and interested in sexual activity. For example, one participant spoke of his eighth-grade girlfriend who 'expressed that sex would be something that she would be open to'. Another man indicated that his partner 'would definitely take the dominant role in any sort of sexual encounter'. Male participants also acknowledged that most of the female partners who were interested in sexual activity were more sexually experienced than they were, although occasionally a female partner's interest was framed as willingness to learn and experiment.

Learning from Early Sexual Relationships

Of the 79 male and female participants, 31 (15 women; 16 men) specifically indicated having 'learned' from their first significant dating partner and through relational experiences with that person. As opposed to the themes discussed thus far in the article, this theme did not emerge as a topic of partner messages. In other words, 'learning' from the relationship was not a message that participants reported receiving from a partner; rather it emerged as participants spoke about their relationships and reflected on the impact of the messages they received. Notably, participants included this information on their own, as the interview protocol did not contain a direct question about learning. Participants were most likely to mention learning from their past relationship or partner when asked whether or not their overall relationship and sexual relationship was positive or negative. Participants reported having learned from relationships that were seen as overall positive, as well as those that were seen as negative. Additionally, having learned something was typically cited as one of the positive elements of an overall negative relationship.

Participants reported different types of learning experiences, including learning basic sexual activities, such as kissing, as well as learning through sexual experimentation with more unconventional activities, such as using bondage or

role playing. Much of the reported sexual learning seemed to take place between two sexually inexperienced people. Learning in this context may represent exploration or catching up with more experienced peers. For example, Jerry narrated:

I think we really learned a lot from each other and I guess we experienced new things and how to deal with it and stuff like that. She lost her virginity to me, I lost my virginity to her, but we learned together.

Participants also reported learning what sexual behavior is not acceptable. For example, one man explained how he learned what *not* to do from his girlfriend's negative reaction following his attempt to emulate sexual behavior he had seen in pornography.

Participants also indicated having learned about relational issues and that these lessons would be applied to later partner choices and relationships. For example, one woman mentioned that her first boyfriend helped her to know 'what I want and don't want in a person' and another woman said, 'the relationship was good training for a real relationship'. One man indicated that from his partner he, 'learned a lot about people and a lot about relationships', which in turn affected his outlook on relationships in general. Another participant, Sara, said this about her relationship:

That is where I learned all my ideals about how it should be between a man and a woman, how to be equal, and feel like an equal with somebody and how it's not like anyone is controlling anybody and you come together while still being separate individual people.

Participants also indicated that they learned about themselves in their first significant relationship and, as a result, altered their personal qualities. This frequently included learning about oneself and one's role as a partner in a relationship. For example, two women directly indicated that, 'I learned a lot about myself being in a relationship' and, 'I learned a lot about myself, and about myself with males'. This also took the form of learning or changing one's behavior patterns more generally. A male participant explained:

I changed a lot from her, before I was off the wall and annoying and she helped calm me down and I became much more patient. 'Cause she really took a lot of patience and sometimes, she would start crying and freaking out after sex for no reason so I would always try and be there. I would get upset at first, but then I had to learn patience because I really did care about her and want to help her and I knew that yelling wouldn't help, so I did learn a lot. I changed a lot as a person from her. Even the most awful experience you could possibly have you at least learn something from it.

Overall, on multiple occasions, both male and female participants indicated having learned from their partner and the relationship about sexual behavior, relational behavior, and themselves.



Summary

Participants' accounts of messages from first significant dating partners most frequently emphasized sexual intercourse and differed by gender. Messages women reported receiving from male partners focused on interest in and progression of sexual activity. First, many women indicated that their partner expressed a great interest in sexual intercourse, as well as other sexual activities. Second, women reported varying degrees of pressure from male partners that ranged from initiation of sexual activity to verbal or physical pressure and coercion or even rape. Messages men reported receiving from female partners commonly focused on setting up boundaries for sexual activity. Boundaries were set through messages regarding nervousness or fear about sexual activity and through establishing age or relational criteria that needed to be met prior to engaging in particular sexual activities. In all three of the gender divergent themes, several participants relayed counter-examples to the prevalent themes. Despite thematic differences in reported messages, both men and women frequently mentioned having learned about personal, relational, and sexual issues from their first significant dating partner.

DISCUSSION

One of the goals of this study was to explore the potential role of dating partners in sexual and relational development. Our results suggest that adolescents do receive and recall messages about sexuality from first significant dating partners. Moreover, as our participants reflected on these relationships, many of them specifically stated that they had learned about sex and relationships from their first significant dating partners, even though our interview protocol did not ask directly about learning. Thus, while it has been well established that adolescents look to parents, friends, and the media for information about sexual and romantic relationships (e.g. DiIorio et al., 2003; Ward, 2003; Wood et al., 2002), results from this study are some of the first to suggest that adolescents also look to dating partners for such information.

Content of Messages

Given that participants were able to recall and recount messages about sexuality from first significant dating partners, it is important to understand the content of these messages. First, the emphasis on negotiations concerning sexual intercourse in most participants' initial responses indicates that interactions regarding sexual intercourse are salient elements of initial heterosexual relationships for both genders during adolescence. Prominence given to heterosexual intercourse has been previously documented. For example, McPhillips et al. (2001) described an existing 'coital imperative' based on their review of interviews with men and

women who reaffirmed the prioritization of heterosexual intercourse over and above other sexual practices. Results from the present study similarly indicate that within their most significant relationships, both young men and women seemed to believe that the most important interaction between themselves and their partners was the decision to engage in sexual intercourse.

Examinations of the message content also revealed complementary gender-based themes that followed patterns suggested by other researchers (e.g. Frith and Kitinger, 2001, Tolman, Striepe et al., 2003). Female participants typically remembered and emphasized traditionally masculine attitudes, values, and behaviors from male dating partners, such that men were assuming an agentic, pro-active, sexually driven role. Female participants' immediate and repeated mention of male partners' messages of sexual interest suggests the prominence of these messages. Additionally, their reports of messages of sexual interest and their explanation that these messages were a result of their partner's 'being a guy', suggest their belief in a sex-driven masculine ideology. The presence of this belief is important, as research has shown that over and above subscription to feminine ideology, subscription to traditional masculine ideologies among adolescent women has been found to be instrumental in their participation in conventional relational roles that undermine their agency (Tolman, 2005).

Female participants' accounts also frequently included discussions of sexual pressure. Many participants reported clear messages of sexual pressure and coercion from male partners, while others included ambiguous reports of pressure, such that they hesitated to name their partner's behavior as 'pressure'. Downplaying sexual pressure or coercion in adolescent romantic relationships is a seemingly common phenomenon (O'Sullivan and Allgeier, 1998; Phillips, 2000), which manifested in this study when women specifically reported not being pressured into sexual activity, but simultaneously articulated repeated messages of sexual interest that encouraged them to engage in particular behaviors sooner than they would have otherwise.

Researchers have also previously identified the complexities of sexual interactions as they pertain to sexual coercion (O'Sullivan, 2005), noting the variety of points along the continuum of sexual pressure, including disagreements pertaining to discrepant desired levels of sexual activity (O'Sullivan and Byers, 1995), 'consensual unwanted sex' (Impett and Peplau, 2003; Muehlenhard and Peterson, 2005), and 'rape by acquiescence' (Gavey, 1993). This research can help explain the ambiguities in the women's narratives of sexual pressure. In particular, feminist researchers have argued that the concept of 'wanting' sex is complex and multidimensional. Wanting sex and consenting to sex are independent states; it is possible to want sex (and engage in it) without consenting to it, as well as to consent to sex that is unwanted (Muehlenhard and Peterson, 2005). Women, more than men, report consenting to unwanted sex and their reasons for doing so include the desire to promote or experience intimacy in an ongoing relationship as well as to keep a partner from committing infidelity or from terminating the relationship (Impett and Peplau, 2003; O'Sullivan and Allgeier,

1998). In our study, it is possible that the women who gave conflicting or ambiguous accounts of pressure from their partners were women who had consented to unwanted sex. Because the sex had been unwanted, some level of pressure or persuasion had been necessary to convince them to engage in sex, and that pressure was salient to the women (i.e. they were aware that it was not their own desire that had led to the sexual activity). But because they had consented, they minimized the intensity, frequency, or importance of their partner's pressure (i.e. there was a sense in which the pressure was irrelevant, because in the end they had consented to the sex).

Male participants reported different, yet highly complementary and also highly traditional messages from female partners. While male partners were establishing their (hetero)masculinity through expressions of high sexual interest (Kimmel, 1997; Tolman et al., 2004), female partners were balancing this approach with their own traditionally gendered displays of feminine virtue, namely, reining in male sexual desire and setting boundaries on sexual activity. Although the feminine 'gate-keeper' role cannot be described as passive, it focuses on constraining rather than liberating desire and behaviour, and leaves little room for the woman to explore and nurture her own sexual desire. In that sense, it supports the traditional feminine norms that dictate an absence of sexual desire, a lack of sexual agency, and a passivity concerning one's own sexual pleasure (Fine, 1988; Martin, 1996; O'Sullivan and Byers, 1993; Tolman, 2002).

The traditional, gendered nature of the content of the messages reported by participants is in some ways unsurprising. The experiences described by participants in the present study closely resemble patterns of sexual behavior identified by previous research (e.g. Byers, 1995). On the other hand, some studies have found less adherence to traditional sexual roles, at least in committed relationships (O'Sullivan, 1995; O'Sullivan and Byers, 1992). In addition, we might predict that feminist and other cultural messages extolling equality between the sexes and female empowerment (including, and perhaps especially, in the domain of sexuality) would result in a modified set of gendered scripts and messages for young people in the early 21st century. This might especially be true for the participants in this study, who chose to attend a university known for its liberal, progressive politics and who, therefore, can be assumed to be more politically liberal than many of their peers.

In spite of the possibility that other messages could have emerged, our findings suggest that traditional scripts are still the predominant messages in the early stages of first significant relationship, even among college students at a generally 'liberal' institution. There are several possible explanations for participants' reported strong adherence to traditional sexual roles. First, intensification of gender roles, particularly within the peer group, is typical during adolescence (Galambos et al., 1990; Hill and Lynch, 1983). Furthermore, Feiring (1999) suggests that gender identity in romantic relationships is likely to increase as the salience of romantic relationships increases during late adolescence. Second, as the relationships under discussion in this study were early, initial relationships in

which the partners did not yet have much experience negotiating heterosexual relations, both partners were likely to lack alternative scripts. As a result, one would expect that they would fall back on prevailing norms because of the stress of the new situation and a desire to appear 'normal' and attractive to their new partner.

The theme of 'learning' that emerged within the participants' narratives was particularly interesting. Though not a reported message from a dating partner, participants' reflections on their relationships frequently resulted in a claim that the relationships was informative in a variety of ways. While it is likely that participants indeed did learn, or change, as a result of their relationship experiences, this somewhat vague expression is likely masking much more complex meanings and motivations. For example, indicating having 'learned' from the relationship was used both in the context of overall negative, as well as positive, relationships. Potentially, participants used this description to justify having stayed in a bad relationship or as a way to represent increased sexual knowledge and experience. It may also represent having gained knowledge into imbedded cultural meanings, included gaining understanding regarding the expected roles of men and women in relationships, one's expected or desired future roles in sexual encounters, and expected or desired future roles of one's sexual partner. As this was an unanticipated emergent category in our study, future research into the roles of dating partners in sexual development should directly examine this issue to better understand the meaning of 'learning' to participants. Nonetheless, participants' reports of learning from their relationships, and the general ability to easily recount messages received from dating partners, suggest that dating partners are important sources of sexual socialization.

We would also like to acknowledge the small number of participants who narrated experiences that did not follow the dominant themes. While male sexual interest and sexual pressure were the dominant narratives, several women discussed partners who were placing boundaries on sexual activity or were careful to make sexual experiences consensual and comfortable, suggesting that these women were given greater spaces for sexual agency. Male participants' narratives also revealed experiences in which female partners were agentic in sexual activities, again providing an alternative to the dominant narrative and suggesting that partner interactions and messages are not homogeneous. It is also notable that several topics that may have been expected to appear in these narratives did not. In particular, participants did not discuss messages from partners regarding safe sex, condom use, or previous sexual experience. It is possible that these types of health-related interactions may have occurred with dating partners, but that the participants chose not to recount these topics in their narratives because they were not salient to the participant. It is also possible that the messages of sexual interest, sexual pressure, or relational criteria were more salient. On the other hand, it is also possible that the participants did not have health-related discussions with dating partners.

While overall participants' accounts suggest that dating partners play a role in

sexual socialization, it is possible that what is occurring in the context of these relationships would be better considered sexual role enactment rather than sexual role socialization. In this case, partners would not be individually passing on messages to each other, but simply enacting prior messages that they have internalized from other sources. For example, the messages reported by these participants are somewhat similar to those participants also report receiving from parents and friends. In this study, female participants reported that their male dating partners are pressuring for sex. It is possible that young men may have received or were currently receiving pressure from their friends to have sex, which adolescents have previously reported (Fay and Yanoff, 2000), and that they are then enacting similar pressure within their relationships. If not from friends, girls are likely to be receiving messages from parents to wait to have sex until they are a certain age, married, or in a serious relationship; all of these are common messages female adolescents report receiving from parents (DiIorio et al., 2003).

We suspect that early significant dating partners hold dual roles, such that they are providing both an arena for experimentation with roles learned from other sources (sexual role enactment) and an arena to re-evaluate those roles and learn new ones (sexual role socialization). Thus, we believe that the two things simultaneously occurring in these relationships are the enactment of gendered sexual roles as well as the development and reinforcement of gendered sexual roles through reciprocal socialization between dating partners, both of which likely contribute to sexual development. Further research is needed to disentangle these two possibilities and to understand their relative importance in early sexual encounters.

Methodological and Analytical Considerations

The present study was one of the first to examine the potential socialization role of dating partners in adolescent sexual and relational identity development. Nonetheless, there were several limitations to our methodology that future studies could help address. First, retrospective self-reports are subject to a number of influences that may impact the validity of responses. Here, messages from first significant dating partners are likely colored by more recent relationship experiences, thus further assessment at the time of the first relationship would be informative. Furthermore, asking broadly about 'messages' from partners generates a wide variety of responses based on the unique interpretations of the participants regarding what is recollected and reported. Providing participants with more specific parameters for recollecting messages (e.g. asking specifically and separately about implicit, explicit, and behavioral messages), or using a specific memory prompt, such as one eliciting self-defining memories (Thorne and McLean, 2002) would provide a less complex set of narratives that may reveal more information about the role of first significant dating partners in sexual development. However, despite retrospective recall issues and the confla-

tion of 'messages' with 'memories', the narratives participants reported regarding partner messages were likely highly salient experiences, as young adults often report romantic relationships as self-defining memories (McLean and Thorne, 2003). Furthermore, the methodology used in this study allowed for the participants to import their personal meaning making on the explicit or implicit messages they recall receiving from their partner, which is important for understanding what these interactions mean to them.

It is also important to remember that the social context of the interview and the experiences and feelings brought to the text by the interviewers and the researchers/coders necessarily affected the process of theme identification and interpretation. Researchers do not operate independently from social context and are unable to attain 'objectivity' in any absolute sense. For example, as feminists, we may be particularly tuned into sexist interactions in reading the texts. Additionally, as European American researchers, we may have missed themes related to culture and ethnicity, especially because there were relatively few Asian and Latina/o participants. We thus recognize the importance of similar studies being conducted by researchers who have different backgrounds and experiences, and who operate from a variety of theoretical frameworks. Such research will help to uncover the full breadth of themes that are inherent in the sexual interactions of first significant dating partners.

Future Directions

As the data presented here reveal, first significant dating partners relay memorable sexual messages, and thus may be important sources of socialization. Further research should be conducted to more fully understand the impact of first significant dating partners on adolescent sexual development. Several lines of inquiry seem particularly promising. The present study focused on heterosexual encounters. Research on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youth is necessary in order to assess whether the findings reported here will generalize to these other populations. It seems likely that first significant dating partners will be important sources of sexualization for all adolescents; however, the specific socializing messages may be different for queer youth, in part because same-sex partnerships may experience different gender dynamics in sexual roles (Huston and Schwartz, 2002).

Similarly, socializing messages may vary based on social class and/or among ethnic groups. Research has found differences regarding parental and peer messages between European American and Latina/o and African American populations, including differences in the topics that are discussed and the influence of the messages (Crawford et al., 1993; DiIorio et al., 2003; Fox and Inazu, 1980). Additionally, working-class and poor young adults, women in particular, are often stereotyped as more promiscuous and less relationally oriented (Wilcox et al., 1996). Examining messages between dating partners from working-class backgrounds may help address some of these stereotypes. As research on partner



interactions does not frequently include race- or class-based analyses (O'Sullivan, 2005), it would be useful to include more diverse populations in future studies on this topic.

Another avenue for future research is to explore potential differences in the socializing messages conveyed by first significant dating partners as compared to subsequent dating partners. It is plausible that the focus on negotiating the timing of intercourse is especially salient when one is a virgin, and that negotiations with subsequent partners might have less psychological importance. In addition, the malleability of one's sexual identity may decrease as one gets older; thus, the overall impact of messages from first significant dating partners may be greater than that of messages from subsequent dating partners. Longitudinal research would be especially useful in testing this hypothesis.

Implications and Conclusions

The majority of reported messages in this study reinforced traditional masculine and feminine sexual ideals including: the man as sexually driven, the man as sexual initiator, and the woman as sexual gatekeeper. These gendered roles offer a complementary pattern of sexual behavior where the male advances sexual activity and the female resists the advances, which follows norms of compulsory heterosexuality that maintain and promote gender and sexual power imbalances in relationships (e.g. Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002). Reproducing compulsory heterosexuality in initial relationships has particularly damaging repercussions for the women in these relationships. In particular, the urgency and consistency of male sexual interest may get in the way of women acknowledging and developing their own desire. If in responding to a male partner's unceasing interest in sexual activity, his female partner is consistently put in the role of trying to slow things down, she almost certainly must continuously stifle her own desire. In this sample, almost half of the women reported sexual pressure and others reported repetitive expressions of sexual interest that occasionally led to unwanted sexual activity. While most of the reported pressure wasn't categorized by participants as problematic behavior, and did not reach the level of rape or even sexual coercion, the participants nonetheless regarded sexual pressure as negative.

Because early relationships are a place to learn how to act in sexual relationships, enacting traditional gendered roles in early heterosexual dating relationships could have long-term effects. Once both parties involved have confirmed and experienced behaviors in compliance with traditional norms, these patterns of sexual and romantic interactions can become solidified and re-enacted in future relationships. This re-enactment is frequently to the detriment of both partners, but particularly so for women because sexual encounters that follow these patterns compromise women's sexual agency and ignore their sexual desire. Additionally, rape, though beyond normative and socially sanctioned behavior, is likely one of the most detrimental derivations and consequences of the traditional gendered sexual scripts that place men in the role of furthering sexual activity,

and that equate masculinity with being sexually driven and sexually experienced.

To progress beyond the current climate of compulsory heterosexuality and traditional gendered roles, adolescents must possess alternative roles and scripts for initial heterosexual dating experiences. Educators and parents must understand that adolescents are entering into initial relationships without personal experience, and must therefore rely on prevailing norms and messages in their interactions with dating partners, the enactment of which then further reinforces these problematic norms. Preparing adolescents for first significant sexual relationships by talking with them about possible sexual and relational roles may circumvent problematic interactions that evolve from enacting strict gendered roles in sexual dating relationships.

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