

Identity, Peer Context, and Adolescent Girls' Sexual Behavior

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The sexual double standard is a well-recognized cultural phenomenon, which may be undergoing change and increasing in complexity (Marks and Fraley 2006; Moore and Rosenthal 1994; Risman and Schwartz 2002; Tolman 1996). The classic definition of the sexual double standard focuses on the ways in which young men are socialized to value sexual experience and young women learn to emphasize committed relationships. Further, it is believed that young women who do not fit the conservative ideal are subjected to societal sanctions/censure, which inhibits premarital sexual behavior by making it too costly. Previous research has suggested that this classic pattern may be eroding (Crawford 2003; Gentry 1998; Marks and Fraley 2006), but it is unclear how young women, themselves, pattern their own sexual behavior in response to the erosion of the sexual double standard. We explore the identities and concerns of girls who vary in their levels of sexual experience, and also contrast attributions they make about friends and peers to young women's own experiences and self-attributions. Our mixed method approach uses quantitative as well as qualitative data to examine in more detail how teenage girls describe their understanding of the sexual double standard as it affects their own sexual lives.

The current study includes two ways of investigating social concomitants and costs (e.g. reputational concerns) for young women, which may result from the sexual double standard. First, we explore whether interpersonal and social psychological factors are associated with adolescent girls' reports of number of lifetime sexual partners. We are specifically interested in understanding how interpersonal and social psychological factors including identity, peer, and school characteristics might distinguish those adolescent girls who report a larger number of

sexual partners from their less experienced counterparts. To the degree that the sexual double standard is in place, albeit less pervasive than in the past, we expect that a negative self image and less popularity will be associated with adolescent girls reporting a greater number of sexual partners and report less popularity with peers. Conversely, according to the traditional sexual double standard, young women's negative sexual behavior should have long-term effects on their popularity to the extent that the wider social circle of same-sex peers becomes aware of a young woman's sexual activity. It is expected that adolescent girls with a larger number of sexual partners will have lower popularity among female peers.

Alternatively, a social learning explanation highlights the impact of associating with liberal peers, rather than the idea of personal and reputational deficits. Social learning theory (Bandura 1977) emphasizes that individuals are directly influenced by close relationships. As such, a teen's sexual behavior can be supported through role-modeling and positive reinforcement to the extent that the behavior is validating the values of the collective. We expect that young women whose friends are receptive to girls' premarital sexual behavior (i.e., dismissive of the traditional double standard) will adhere to more of a recreational sexual script as evidenced by disregarding the more traditional double standard.

Studying specific components of the double standard (i.e. is there a social cost to girls' sexuality?) and girls' understanding of their own experiences is important for several reasons. First, there is a great deal of social and demographic research on what adolescents do sexually, and the fertility-related consequences, but there is little research on what these behaviors and experiences mean to young people. Thus, this study adds to prior research that has examined correlates of number of lifetime sexual partners (Manlove, Logan, Kristin, Ikramullah: 2008; Siebenbruner, Zimmer-Gembeck, and Egeland 2007), and the literature emphasizing sexual

identities of heterosexual females (e.g., Tolman, 1996 Rosenthal) and obstacles encountered when trying to explore alternative notions of sexuality that go against the traditional sexual double standard. Second, adolescent sexual activity is associated with increased risk of pregnancy as well as sexually transmitted infections (Bruckner, Martin, and Bearman 2007) DiClemente, Crosby, Wingood, Lang, Salazar, and Broadwell 2005). Increasing our scholarly understanding of the meaning of adolescent sexual behaviors to adolescent girls, themselves, potentially can assist scholars in understanding why young people participate in potentially risky behaviors such as multiple sexual partners. Third, the sexual identity construction that occurs in adolescence is likely to be related to later adult psychological development and well-being (Arnett 2000). Personal ideas about the self connect the past, present, and future of the individual (Mead 1934; Côté 2000). Observing how young women make sense of their sexual lives can potentially lead to insight about the healthy development of sexuality throughout the life course. Finally, understanding the current trends, attitudes, and realities of adolescent girls' sexual behavior can be useful in the design of more effective sexual education and prevention programs (Moore and Rosenthal 1994). For the most part, sexuality that is discussed in the formal school setting only addresses the biological side of sex, as well as attempting to heighten students' knowledge and awareness of various kinds of risks (West 1999). While some sexual education programs have started to include issues such as social pressures to have sex, the main focus of such courses is still about the sexual act itself not the social context of teenage sex (Kirby 2003). Adolescent girls are not taught about the meaning of sex or allowed to address their own socially constructed meanings of sexual behavior (Roth, Brooks-Gunn 2003 Fine 1988). Studying adolescent sexuality and specifically the sexual double standard can help in creating better school-based sexual education programs by providing the knowledge of what are

not just biological cost to young women who participate in sexual activity but also the social cost.

The symbolic interactionist perspective provides a useful organizing framework for the current study, as this perspective focuses heavily on the connections between the meaning construction process and behavior, and also highlights the importance of the developing identity to both the construction of meanings and the behavioral choices actors make. This framework is social psychological in nature, which is useful in explaining behavior trends in social terms. The perspective also recognizes that messages received from others are important to definitions of behaviors as appropriate or inappropriate (consistent with the classic idea of the double standard), but also underscores that individuals actively create and recreate meanings that fit with their own unique situations. In-depth qualitative data are particularly well suited for exploring the potential for a more contemporary and complex view of what constitutes the double standard in contemporary contexts.

In sum, we determine whether reports of a high number of sexual partners are predicted by adolescent girls' negative views about their own identity and social deficits within their larger female peer group, consistent with the basic thrust of the double standard. We also examine the social costs hypothesis longitudinally, by examining the degree to which reports of number of sexual partners predict a lower level of popularity one year later. An alternative hypothesis, guided by social learning theory, is that girls who have friends with more accepting attitudes and more liberal sexual behaviors themselves will be more likely than others to report a higher number of sexual partners.

Data and Method

To test our hypotheses we use quantitative and qualitative analysis. The current project uses data collected in 2000 for the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS). The original sample collected quantitative information on a stratified, random sample of 7th, 9th, and 11th grade adolescent boys and girls in Lucas County, Ohio with an over sampling of the African American and Hispanic populations with a final sample size of 1,316 total youth from the Toledo area, which includes 678 girls. At wave II, 603 (51%) girls were interviewed and our analysis is based on 600 girls with valid data on the dependent and independent indicators. Fifty-one females were interviewed to provide an in-depth relationship history, which provides the data for the qualitative component of the current project. These data are complimentary to the quantitative findings as they allow individuals the opportunity to provide a more nuanced explanation for their understanding and experience with the sexual double standard. This is an appropriate dataset for these analyses because it provides detailed measures of identity, including not only the more traditional self-esteem measure, but measures of identity content, peer behavior and attitudes. Further, unlike the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health), the TARS is not a school-based sample. This is of value because excluding individuals who are not currently attending school may be eliminating the extreme cases regarding sexual behavior. Finally, TARS provides both quantitative and qualitative data which is crucial to both document the trends of adolescent girls' sexual behavior and the meaning they give to such behavior.

For the quantitative analysis there are two dependent variables. The first is a continuous variable of *number of lifetime sexual partners* at wave I (mean =.9; range 0-36). This is an initial specification of the dependent variable and other ways of measuring sexual behavior will be

assessed such as number of casual sexual partners and categorical indicators of sexual behavior. The second is a binary variable measuring *popularity with females* as reported at wave II. This was constructed from responses to the item “Others would describe me as popular with females.” If the respondent either strongly disagree or disagree they were coded as 1 (18%) otherwise coded as 0 (82%).

There are three key independent identity measures and four measures of peer processes. A six item scale is used to measure *self-esteem* (mean 23; range 0-30). *Sexualized identity* is measured with two items (“I am flirty” and “I sexy or hot”). Respondents provide response categories that range from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree (Flirty mean=3.14; Sexy mean=3.29; range 1-5) *Popularity with females* is based on the question “Others would describe you as popular with females” (if the respondent strongly disagreed or disagreed with the question they were coded as 1 else they were codes as 0). We did not use popularity with males because that could be confounded with the fact that girls might become popular with males if they have sex with them which would not be a true measure of popularity. At wave I, 15 percent indicated that they were not popular. *Perceived lack of friends* is based on the question “I wish I had more friends” with a five scaled response ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree (mean=2.58; range 1-5). Two measures indexing the normative climate within the friendship network, *friends sexual behavior* is measured by the questions “How many of your friends do you think have had sex” (mean=2.85; range=1 “none” to 6 “all”) and *friends liberal attitudes* (mean =10.66; range =3-15) a three item scale to tap into friends’ liberal attitudes toward sex.

Although not a central focus, but often related to sexual activity, models also include controls for academic achievement and involvement in school activities, age, race, individuals living in poverty in the community, family structure and mothers’ education.

The analytic strategy is first to estimate a model using ordinary least squares regression to investigate the association between the independent variables and number of lifetime sexual partners at wave one. Given the distribution of the dependent variable, additional analyses will be conducted that account for the skewed nature of the dependent variable (e.g. tobit models or multinomial logistic models). We initially test zero-order models and then estimate models, which include all the covariates. The second set of analyses relies on logistic regression to predict popularity. Logistic regression is an appropriate method because popularity is binary variable. This model includes wave I number of sex partners and wave I independent variables to predict wave II popularity with females which is a binary variable.

Preliminary Results

At wave I, 28 percent of girls in the sample have had sex with a range of 1-36 lifetime partners. The mean number of partners overall is 0.9 and among sexually experienced girls it is 3.17. Of the girls that have had sex, 35% (N=59) of girls have had sex with only one partner, 25% (N=41) with two, 10%(N=17) with three and 30% (N=51) with four or more.

Table 1 presents the zero-order and multivariate ordinary least squares model and indicates that self-esteem is not associated with the number of lifetime sexual partners, but is associated with a more sexualized identity of “sexy” but not “flirty.” In terms of the peer indicators, popularity with females at wave I is not associated with number of lifetime sexual partners and neither is the desire to have more friends. Continuing with the wave I model, number of friends who have had sex and liberal peer attitudes are significantly associated with number of lifetime sexual partners.

Table 2 predicts popularity at wave II. Net of wave I popularity with females, lifetime sexual partners at wave I does not predict popularity at wave II. This finding suggests that

within this sample of adolescents, there does not appear to be self-perceptions of lower peer regard, as would be predicted by the basic underpinnings of the sexual double standard. This is consistent with the cross-sectional portrait. To further explore questions of identity and the social context for adolescent girls' sexual behavior choices, qualitative in-depth interviews are utilized.

Preliminary results of the qualitative data show that many adolescents in the sample did recognize the existence of the sexual double standard. As one girl states, "When the girl does it just to get that name for herself or just make her well known to other people than that would make a bad name for yourself but the guys do it more...I think that stereotype is true but I don't think it is fair." This statement does contain a slight linguistic 'hedge' in suggesting that such different standards are not 'fair,' but these accounts contain numerous negative references to women who exceed norms for number of partners, for being too overt with their sexuality. What is of perhaps greater interest, however, is that while these ideas exist as a sort of abstract understanding, or as something that is part of a particular school climate, the young women we interviewed were less likely to levy harsh judgments about those close to them (their own friends), or about themselves. For example, one respondent describes how her peer group does not talk about or judge their female friends for the sexual activities they may participate in. "...No I think my friends are all pretty much, we're all pretty much alike. We just kind of I don't think that we brown nose in other people's business. You know we go on about our way and um our business is our business... You know if Sara's out doing somebody it's not my business. And I don't take pride in you know sharing it with other people." This respondent's statement reflects that she does not judge her friend for her sexual behavior, and also indicates that a part of friendship is not gossiping about the other's activities. Results show that respondents have

multiple strategies for indicating why their own behavior is appropriate or understandable (e.g. highlighting that it is/was only a phase, or highlighting that girls have a right to be as sexual as boys). Further analyses of the qualitative data will investigate whether some type of typology can be applied to adolescent girls and link these findings more closely to the quantitative results.

DISCUSSION

Our mixed method approach to the contemporary meaning of the double standard contributes to prior work on girls' sexual behavior in several ways. First, the cross-sectional results suggest that girls' self esteem and popularity are not significant independent variables that predict number of lifetime sexual partners at wave 1. This suggests that, at least at the level of the respondent's own self-perceptions, the sexual double standard may not be as strong or socially costly as previous depictions might lead us to suspect. Second, prior work often relies on cross-sectional analyses (Gentry 1998; Jackson and Cram 2003) leading to questions about causal pathways. In the longitudinal analyses we find that lifetime sexual partners do not appear to have a cumulative effect on female popularity. This means that the sexual double standard may not be as strong a predictor of cumulative social cost for girls as it has in prior generations. Third, our results indicate that individuals tend to be associated with peer groups that can provide them with a social climate that supports and even fosters a particular type of sexual conduct. This finding supports a social learning rather than a social deficit approach to girls' sexual behavior choices. Finally, the sexual double standard is complex, because many girls in the context of their in-depth narratives continued to reference the double standard, and in some instances to make negative attributions about girls who exceed the normative standard. This was the case, even as they developed more complex views about the behaviors of friends, as well as about their own identities and sexual experiences.

Thus, in future research, it is important to examine the sexual double standard as a broad social phenomenon, but also observe how it influences or may be resisted by girls' and boys' own behavior and identity construction. Overall, this work supports a social learning approach to girls' sexual experiences rather than a social deficit approach, recognizing that while adolescent girls may find peer support for their behaviors, these actions may nevertheless be associated with significant costs (risk for STD's, unwanted pregnancy). It is also important to document developmental changes in the ways in which adolescents understand and react to the tenets of the double standard, as they navigate the transition to adulthood.

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Table 1. Zero-order and Full Model Predicting Number of Sexual Partners for Adolescent Girls

	Zero-Order		Full-Model	
	B	p	B	p
Intercept			0.05	
<i>Identity</i>				
Self-Esteem	-0.01		0.00	
Flirty	0.13		0.02	
Sexy	0.20	*	0.00	
<i>Peer</i>				
Popular with female	0.29		-0.09	
Wish for more friends	-0.01		0.09	
Number of friends having sex	0.63	***	0.47	***
Liberal friends' attitudes	0.28	***	0.13	***
<i>School</i>				
Grades	0.84	***	0.69	*
Involved in school activities	-0.23	***	-0.17	*
<i>Controls</i>				
Age	0.40	***	-0.19	
(White)				
Black	0.06		-0.46	
Hispanic	0.29		-0.05	
Other Race	-0.16		-0.29	
Neighborhood Poverty	0.00		0.00	
(Two Biological Parents)				
Single Parent	0.79	**	0.38	
Step Family	0.12		0.01	
Other Family	0.02		-0.03	
(Mother High School Grad)				
Mother Less than High School	0.51		0.14	
Mother Some College	0.24		0.35	
Mother College	0.02		0.30	
R ²			0.24	

Note: N=600 ***p<.001; **p<.01 *p<.05
 Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study

Table 2. Zero-order and Full Model Number of Time 2 Popularity Adolescent Girls

	Zero-Order		Full-Model	
	B	p	B	p
Intercept			-4.05	
Number of Sex Partners T1	0.03		-0.02	
<i>Identity</i>				
Self-Esteem	-0.05		0.00	
Flirty	0.07		0.23	*
Sexy	-0.03		-0.09	
<i>Peer</i>				
Popular with female	1.69	***	1.69	***
Wish for more friends	0.19	*	0.24	*
Number of friends having sex	0.10		-0.01	
Liberal friends' attitudes	0.01		-0.09	
<i>School</i>				
Grades	0.11	*	0.16	
Involved in school activities	-0.24	***	-0.20	*
<i>Controls</i>				
Age	0.14	*	0.11	
(White)				
Black	0.51	*	0.25	
Hispanic	0.34		-0.14	
Other Race	-14.19		-14.30	
Neighborhood Poverty	0.02	*	0.01	
(Two Biological Parents)				
Single Parent	0.47		0.32	
Step Family	0.13		-0.03	
Other Family	0.40		-0.12	
(Mother High School Grad)				
Mother Less than High School	0.76	*	0.62	
Mother Some College	0.25		0.17	
Mother College	-0.07		0.02	
-2LL			492.95	

Note: N=600 ***p<.001; **p<.01 *p<.05
 Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study