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The Complexities of Adolescent Dating and Sexual Relationships: Fluidity, Meaning(s), and Implications for Young Adults' Well-Being

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Abstract

The complexity of adolescents' dating and sexual lives is not easily operationalized with simple indicators of dating or sexual activity. While building on prior work that emphasizes the "risky" nature of adolescents' intimate relationships, we assess whether a variety of indicators reflecting the complexity of adolescents' relationships influence early adult well-being (i.e., depressive symptoms, self-esteem, gainful activity, intimate partner violence, and relationship quality). Our analysis of longitudinal data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study showed that the number of adolescent dating and sexual partners does not uniformly influence indicators of young adult well-being, which is at odds with a risk framework. The number of dating partners with whom the individual was sexually active, and not the number of "casual" sex partners, increased the odds of intimate partner violence during young adulthood. Relationship churning and sexual nonexclusivity during adolescence were associated with lower relationship quality during young adulthood. Sexual nonexclusivity during adolescence influenced self-reports of depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem among young adults. Future research should develop more nuanced conceptualizations of adolescent dating and sexual relationships and integrate adolescent dating and sexual experiences into research on early adult well-being.

In contemporary American society, dating and sexual relationships play a key role in adolescent development (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Furman & Rose, in press). These relationships loom large in the minds and lives of teenagers (Brown, 1999; Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006). Although there is overlap, adolescents' dating and sexual relationships are not synonymous. As such, researchers coming from different scholarly traditions tend to focus on either adolescent dating *or* involvement in sexual activity, but often do not consider the convergence, or lack thereof, in these concepts. Building on prior research, we move beyond these dichotomies by empirically exploring those dating and sexual relationships that overlap and those that do not. We initially examine adolescents' self-reports of their number of dating partners and number of sex partners. We then consider the following more nuanced indicators: (a) "dating" versus "casual" sexual partners; (b) relationship churning, which refers to breaking up and getting back together with the same partner, including having sex with an "ex"; (c) and involvement in dating relationships that are not sexually exclusive. Next, we assess how these kinds of experiences may influence young adults' well-being as measured by emotional and behavioral indicators.

Although the literatures on adolescents' dating relationships and sexual activity developed separately (Furman, 2002), both tend to emphasize the problematic consequences of teens' intimate relationships. For example, researchers who examine dating from a life course perspective tend to superimpose an adult/marriage sensibility on these youthful relationships by focusing on the travails of teen dating breakups (e.g., Joyner & Udry, 2000), and by extension the importance of stable relationships. Viewing adolescents' intimate relationships from such a lens leads to the conclusion that relationship stability and partner consistency likely have positive outcomes including greater "romantic competence" (e.g., Clausen, 1991; Madsen & Collins, 2011) and, perhaps, better well-being later in the life course. In addition to emphasizing that stability and partner consistency may be better, researchers from both dating relationship and sexual activity perspectives often conceptualize adolescents' intimate relationships as an arena ripe for the development of problem behaviors such as delinquency, truancy, substance use (e.g., Jessor & Jessor, 1977), pregnancy (Kirby, Lepore, & Ryan, 2005; Scott et al., 2011), and dating violence (Halpern, Spriggs, Martin, & Kupper, 2009; Valois, Oeltmann, Waller, & Hussey, 1999). We refer to this conceptualization as a risk framework in that researchers tend to emphasize the "risk" of one or more negative outcomes associated with either dating or sexual activity.

Despite the prevalence of a risk perspective in research on dating and sexual relationships, our criticism of this approach is twofold. First, simple categorizations (e.g., dating relationships or sexual activity) do not adequately describe the complexity and variation inherent in contemporary teens' intimate relationships. Second, focusing on problematic aspects may limit our understanding of whether early experiences are consequential for later well-being because the initial premise is that teens' relationships are inherently "risky."

In this chapter, we selectively review prior literature to assess our current understanding of adolescents' dating and sexual activity with a focus on large-scale surveys of American youths. We present new findings based on data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), which is a five-wave study focusing on the influence of intimate partners on the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. These analyses allow us to move beyond dichotomous descriptions of adolescents' romantic and sexual relationships by examining number of dating and casual sexual partners, breaking up and getting back together multiple times with the same partner, and sexually nonexclusive relationships. Because the data are longitudinal, we consider how earlier experiences may affect indicators of well-being among young adults. We conclude by describing next steps for research on the consequences of adolescents' intimate relationships for young adults' well-being.

Estimating the Prevalence of Adolescents' Dating and Sexual Relationships

Although dating relationships are common among American adolescents, agreement on how to define whether teens are "in a relationship" can be challenging for scholars, in part, because teens' responses may vary depending on the present-day meaning of particular terms. Based on the 1994–1995 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), for example, by age 18, 69% of male and 76% of female respondents indicated that they were involved in a "*romantic relationship*" (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Similarly, Monitoring the Future (MTF) data indicated that in 2001, 86% of high school seniors had *ever dated*. Yet, by 2011 this rate decreased to 66% (Child Trends, 2013). Thus, it is unclear whether there is a true decrease in the number of teens who have ever dated, or if the term dating itself no longer resonates with young people. Nevertheless, a conservative estimate based on these national surveys is that the majority of Americans have been involved in a romantic or dating relationship by the end of their teens.

Researchers also grapple with estimating how many dating partners most teens have, and how long relationships last. Analyses of the Add Health, for example, show that adolescents who have had a "romantic relationship" report an average of three to four partners (Cui, Ueno, Fincham, Donnellan, & Wickrama, 2012; Meier & Allen, 2009). Moreover, relationships appear to be relatively short, lasting on average about 12 months (Carver et al., 2003; Cui, Fincham, & Durtschi, 2011). These estimates, however, belie the complicated nature of many teens' relationships. Relationship churning refers to partnerships in which individuals break up and get back together, sometimes dating or having sexual relationships with other partners between the breakups. In the TARS, 44% of young adults recalled multiple episodes of breaking up and getting back together with intimate partners (Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013). Thus, estimating numbers of dating partners and beginning and ending points to teens' relationships is a murkier task for researchers than it might appear at first glance.

Adolescents have not only dating relationships but also sexual relationships. Estimates indicate that sexual activity is common, with about 70% of individuals reporting sexual intercourse by their late teens (Child Trends, 2013; Finer & Philbin, 2013). Moreover, among sexually active youths, estimates fall within the range of one to three sexual partners, with 61% of female and 52% of male adolescents reporting one to three lifetime partners (Abma, Martinez, & Copen, 2010). These estimates, however, do not indicate whether the sexual activity occurs within a dating or a casual sexual relationship, or both, and whether relationships are sexually exclusive.

Currently, there is substantial concern among both the public and scholars regarding the rise of a "hooking up" culture, which allegedly promotes low commitment sexual relationships or casual sex (Lyons, Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2014). Measures of these experiences in the literature focus on first sex with a casual partner, as well as ever having a causal sexual experience. Based on the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), about three quarters of young women and more than half of young men report that first sexual intercourse occurred within the context of a romantic or dating relationship (Gibbs, 2013; Martinez, Copen, & Abma, 2011). Thus, a sizeable minority of teens experienced first sexual intercourse outside a dating relationship. Moreover, over half of sexually active teens in the Add Health data report *ever* having had sex with individuals with whom they were not dating (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2005). While the rates of nonrelationship sexual debut and subsequent activity are high, these experiences are typically not "one-night stands" with strangers (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). Instead, many of these sexual experiences are with someone the teenager dated in the past or considered a friend. The assessment of casual sex becomes more complicated when there is overlap across dating and sexual categories, for example, adolescents may be involved with casual sexual partners in tandem with dating partners. Estimates vary, depending on the data and sample, but it appears that about 30% of teens in dating relationships are not sexually exclusive (e.g., Rosenberg, Gurvey, Adler, Dunlop, & Ellen, 1999).

In summary, the contemporary adolescent life course often involves sexual activity outside of the traditional dating context, though not necessarily with a stranger or hookup. The fluidity of adolescent relationships, however, challenges traditional perspectives on the meaning and measurement of dating and sexual relationships. Relationship churning and sex outside the confines of dating relationships, two indicators typically not examined in the literatures on dating relationships or sexual activity, may affect how adolescents subsequently manage their intimate relationships and may influence well-being.

Consequences of Dating and Sexual Relationships for Adolescents

Although adolescent dating experience can positively influence self-evaluations (Long, 1989), both initiating dating relationships and breakups may increase depressive symptoms (Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Joyner & Udry, 2000). Dating may increase antisocial outcomes including juvenile delinquency, substance use, truancy (Cui et al., 2012; Davies & Windle, 2000; Meeus, Branje, & Overbeek, 2004; Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebbenbruner, & Collins, 2001), and teen dating violence (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001).

Much of the literature on teen sexual activity also focuses on problematic outcomes. Similar to studies on dating, research demonstrates that teen sexual activity is often associated with depressive symptoms (e.g., Hallfors, Waller, Bauer, Ford, & Halpern, 2005; Kosunen, Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, & Laippala, 2003; Rector, Johnson, Noyes, & Martin, 2002). Researchers examining unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections during adolescence often describe sexual activity as "sexual risk taking" and conceptualize such risk taking as one component of a broader "problem behavior syndrome" (Jessor & Jessor, 1977; Kirby et al., 2005; Scott et al., 2011). As such, studies report associations between adolescents' sexual activity and cigarette, drug, and alcohol use (e.g., Adimora, Schoenbach, Taylor, Khan, & Schwartz, 2011; Hagan & Foster, 2001; Howard & Wang, 2004), relationship violence (Halpern et al., 2009; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001), and low educational attainment among women (Sabia & Rees, 2012).

Limited studies focus specifically on the well-being implications of casual sex partnerships or sex that occurs outside the scope of a dating relationship. From a risk perspective, a pattern of sexual activity outside of dating relationships may reflect a dyadic attachment style that lacks intimacy and commitment. Results of studies examining the association between number of casual sex partners and psychological well-being, however, are mixed. Some work finds no association between casual sexual experiences and depression (Eisenberg, Ackard, Resnick, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2009; Monahan & Lee, 2008), but other research reports a significant link between involvement with casual sex partners and depressive symptoms (e.g., Fielder & Carey, 2010; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Owen & Fincham, 2011). Yet there does not appear to be a significant association between number of casual sex partners and self-esteem (Fielder & Carey, 2010) or frequency of casual sex and self-affirmation for women (Vasilenko, Lefkowitz, & Maggs, 2012). Lyons and colleagues (2014) find that a significant share of men and women liked and enjoyed their casual sex relationships. These findings counter the literature emphasizing the risky consequences of casual sex.

Thus, prior research on the implications of adolescent dating and sexual relationships on well-being typically draws on a risk framework, with number of either dating or sexual partners as indicators of “risk.” From our perspective, this framework provides a narrow view of adolescent dating and sexual experiences. Our work extends the notion of “risk” by considering not only the number of dating and sexual partners but also the nature of those partnerships by examining dating sexual and casual sexual partners, relationship churning, and sexual nonexclusivity. We concur with Fortenberry (2003) who argues that researchers tend to problematize all adolescent sexual activity. Perhaps some kinds of relationships are riskier for well-being, so it may be useful to consider a broader range of intimate relationships rather than focusing solely on dating or sexual activity. Moreover, unlike many other adolescent risk behaviors (e.g., drug use), sexual activity becomes developmentally appropriate and eventually is an expected part of a healthy adulthood (Longmore, Manning, Giordano, & Rudolph, 2004). Thus, we argue that research should be more specific about the types of dating and sexual relationships that may influence well-being.

Current Investigation

We investigate whether a range of dating and sexual experiences during adolescence influence young adult outcomes. We assess whether the numbers of dating partners, sexual partners (dating and casual), casual sexual partners, as well as relationship churning, and sexual nonexclusivity among 18–19-year-olds (in 2006) influence five indicators of well-being measured five years later (in 2011). From a traditional risk framework, we expect that more dating and sexual partners represent relationship “baggage” and will detrimentally affect well-being. Furthermore, we move beyond prior work and consider how the specific nature of sexual partnerships—dating and casual, relationship churning, and sexual nonexclusivity—influences young adults’ well-being. We explore how these more nuanced indicators may be associated with young adults’ well-being.

Data

The TARS provides a unique perspective by focusing on dating and sexual relationships during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The initial data ($n = 1{,}321$) are from a stratified, random sample of adolescents who registered for the 7th, 9th, and 11th grades in

Lucas County, Ohio, in the year 2000. The respondents did not need to attend classes to be in the original study and were interviewed outside of the school setting. The advantage of this approach is that it provides a more representative sample of adolescents, not just those who regularly attended school. We followed the initial set of respondents over the course of five interviews for the next 10 years.

To assess whether adolescent dating and sexual relationships influence early adult well-being, we drew a subset of the initial data collection with an analytic sample ($n = 324$) of 18–19-year-old respondents from the fourth interview (2006). This allows us to access a full cumulative set of adolescent sexual and relational experiences from early adolescence (ages 12–13) to late adolescence (ages 18–19). The study's longitudinal design permits an assessment of intimate experiences based on reports at each interview rather than relying on a single retrospective report. The well-being indicators are from the fifth interview (2011), when respondents were ages 22–23.

We include six indicators of dating and sexual experiences during adolescence. *Number of dating partners* refers to the total number of relationships, adjusting for relationships that lasted across multiple interviews. *Number of sex partners* draws on the item: “When we refer to sex in the next questions, we mean vaginal sex. In your lifetime, how many sex partners have you had?” *Number of casual sex partners* refers to the question: “How many different people of the opposite sex have you had vaginal sex with that you weren't really dating or going out with?” *Number of dating sex partners* is the difference between the total number of sex partners and the number of casual sex partners. For our analyses assessing the impact of *relationship churning*, we classified individuals in four different categories. We code respondents into the first category, Churning, if they broke up and got back together with their current or most recent partner or have had sex with their ex-dating partner. The second category, Stably together, includes respondents in a current relationship and who never broke up with this partner. The third category, Stably apart, includes respondents who report on a prior relationship in which they only broke up once and did not get back together. The fourth category, Nondaters, references respondents who did not have a recent or current dating partner. Analyses included three dummy coded variables (Churning, Stably apart, and Nondaters), with Stably together as the reference group. *Sexual nonexclusivity* includes three categories. The first category, Sexually nonexclusive, refers to respondents' self-reports of their own and/or partners nonexclusivity, and/or involvement in sexually nonexclusive relationships. The second category, Sexual exclusive, indicates being in a sexually exclusive relationships and neither partner had sex with someone else during the relationship. A third category, Nondaters, includes respondents who are not in a current/most recent relationship. Dummy codes for Sexually nonexclusive and Nondaters were entered in analyses, with Sexually exclusive as the reference group.

Respondents answer questions to assess *depressive symptoms* (Radloff, 1977), *self-esteem* (Rosenberg, 1979), *gainful activity* (a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent is currently in school and/or employed full-time), *intimate partner violence* (yes/no in current or most recent relationship; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), and *relationship satisfaction* (Rust, Bennum, Crowe, & Golombok, 1986).

We present a series of bivariate models demonstrating the association between the well-being indicators and each dating and sexual activity measure separately. We estimate ordinary least squares regression models for continuous indicators of well-being (depressive symptoms, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction) and logistic regression models for dichotomous well-being indicators (intimate partner violence). In the multivariate regressions, we include the measure of the dependent variable from the first interview along with *gender*, *age, race/ethnicity* (White, Black, Hispanic, and other), *family structure* (two biological parents, single parent, stepparents, or other), and *mother's education* (less than high school, high school graduate, some college, or college or more).

Depicting Adolescents' Dating and Sexual Experiences

When asked in 2006, nearly all (95%) 18–19-year-olds in our sample had dated (Table 4.1). The average number of dating partners is about 4 with a range of 0–9 partners. Moreover, over 70% report that they have had sex. The average number of sex partners is slightly more than 3 with a range from 0–15. Among sexually active 18–19-year-olds, the mean number of partners is nearly 5. Thus, we confirm that dating among American teens is nearly ubiquitous, but teens differ in their numbers of dating partners. The majority of 18–19-year-olds have some sexual experience, but there is a vast range in numbers of sexual partners.

Dating and sexual activity, however, frequently co-occur. Over half of 18–19-year-olds, 54%, report sexual activity with their current or most recent dating partner (results not shown). Yet the number of sexual partners that individuals were dating (*dating sexual partners*) is nearly two, indicating that sex activity does not occur in every dating relationship.

Casual sex is also common. About half of sexually active teens report having had sex with individuals with whom they were not dating. The mean number of casual sex partners is 1.5 in the sample. In the subset reporting casual sexual activity, the average number of casual sex partners is 3.

Among those who have dated, we find that nearly two fifths, that is, 38% report experiences with relationship churning, that is, breaking up and getting back together, or engaging in sexual activity with an ex-dating partner. Over one quarter, 28%, of adolescents report that they are not in sexually exclusive dating relationships. The majority however, 59%, report that their dating relationship is sexually exclusive.

Adolescents' Dating and Sexual Experiences and Young Adults' Well-Being

Table 4.2 includes a series of bivariate models indicating the association between each dating and sexual activity indicator and well-being separately. Unless noted in the text the significant bivariate associations persist with the inclusion of sociodemographic characteristics and outcome variables assessed at the first interview. We find that young adults' self-reports of depressive symptoms and self-esteem are not significantly associated with their number of dating and sexual experiences during adolescence. Late adolescent experience with sexual nonexclusivity, however, is associated significantly with higher levels of depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem in early adulthood.

Number of sex partners (casual and dating) and relationship churning are negatively associated with young adults' gainful activity (participation in either higher education or full-time employment). Further investigation with multivariate logistic regression models, including sociodemographic characteristics and grade point average, finds that the number of dating and sexual partners during adolescence is not significantly associated with gainful activity at ages 22–23 (results not shown). The bivariate association between number of partners and gainful activity is a function of disadvantaged socioeconomic background among those reporting greater numbers of partners, rather than a direct effect of adolescent sexual and dating relationships on young adults' gainful activity.

Nearly one quarter of the sample reports experiences with intimate partner violence with their current or recent partner at ages 22–23. At the bivariate level, numbers of dating and sexual partners (casual and dating) during adolescence are positively associated with the odds of early adult intimate partner violence. In multiple regression models, controlling for sociodemographic characteristics and teen dating violence, the number of dating partners, and the number of sexual dating partners remain significant predictors of higher odds of young adult intimate partner violence (results not shown). These results suggest that greater dating experience is a risk factor for intimate partner violence, but involvement in casual sexual relationships is not a risk factor. Additionally, at the bivariate level, relationship churning and sexual nonexclusivity are not significantly associated with intimate partner violence.

Finally, the number of sexual partners, specifically dating sexual partners, relationship churning, and sexual nonexclusivity are negatively associated with relationship satisfaction in early adulthood. Multivariate models (not shown) indicate that these associations persist even after the inclusion of demographic control variables.

Conclusion

Consistent with prior research, we found that the majority of adolescents report dating and sexual experience at some point during adolescence. Specifically, our estimate of dating, 95%, is higher than estimates from some studies, perhaps because our measure is from four waves of data. Moreover, our multidimensional measure focuses on relationships rather than terms such as "romantic" or "dating," which may not resound with contemporary American teens. The wide variation in the number of partners indicates a range of dating and sexual experiences.

We also demonstrate that adolescent dating and sexual relationships are fluid. Common experiences during adolescence, for example, include having several dating sexual partners, having casual sex, experiencing relationship churning, and having a dating relationship that is not sexually exclusive. Our work does not provide a comprehensive assessment of the full range of adolescent dating and sexual experiences, but does introduce several ways of reconceptualizing adolescent dating and sexual relationships. We concur with Lefkowitz, Gillen, and Vasilenko's (2011) assessment that future research needs to contextualize sexual activity, and research needs to move beyond studies that "separate the sexual from the relationship" (p. 225). Thus, these patterns of dating and sexual experiences suggest that high levels of instability and variation in types of relationships should be acknowledged and further integrated in future studies of the implications of dating and sexual experiences for adolescents as well as later in the life course.

We build on prior work that uses a risk framework by examining the number of dating and sexual partners as risks for poorer well-being among young adults. A risk framework suggests that these adolescent relationship experiences may be a form of “relationship baggage” that could have negative consequences for well-being. The longitudinal framework of the current study enabled us to examine specific consequences of variations in the nature of adolescent dating and sexual experiences for young adult well-being. The traditional indicators of number of dating partners and number of sexual partners were not significantly associated with depressive symptoms or self-esteem, which is at odds with a risk framework. Yet the number of sexual partners is associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction as well as higher odds of intimate partner violence among young adults. The more nuanced indicators show that associations between sexual partnerships and well-being are not limited only to casual sexual partners but also relate to dating sexual partners. Notably, relationship churning and sexual nonexclusivity resulted in lower levels of young adult relationship satisfaction. It is possible that certain individuals are prone to relationship strain, indicated here by churning and nonexclusivity in adolescence, and lower relationship satisfaction in early adulthood. It is also possible that experiencing relationship strain during adolescence carries over into adult dating relationships. Finally, although the number of sexual partners is not associated significantly with psychological well-being, sexual nonexclusivity is associated with greater depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem in adulthood. It appears that the type rather than the number of dating or sexual relationships has a lasting influence on psychological well-being. These findings suggest that there is a need for a risk framework that accounts for the nature as well as the number of dating and sexual relationship experiences.

In our analyses, informed by a risk framework, we focus on the negative processes tied to young adult relationships. However, a distinct framework requiring different indicators is that youthful dating and sexual experiences may be positive, or at minimum, normative steps in the developmental process. In our study, we do not include measurement of these processes, but it is possible that earlier relationship experiences may generate changes in attitudes and relationship goals resulting in better partner choices and different approaches to one’s conduct within later relationships. Scholars studying adolescent relationships often emphasize that dating teaches teens how to “do” romance; that is, how to build relationship skills (Furman & Simon, 1999; Laursen & Jensen-Campbell, 1999). Adolescent dating relationships thus may provide numerous opportunities to learn about positive relationship dynamics as well as challenges in sustaining relationships such as negotiating roles, disagreements, breakups, conflict, and jealousy. Our work cannot empirically evaluate this notion of skill-building, but leads us to speculate about the potential resilience provided by prior relationship experiences. Perhaps longitudinal data that include indicators of relationship competence or direct questions about lessons learned from earlier dating experiences might be fruitful. Most likely countervailing forces are operating where prior relationships may present some risk for healthy adult relationships and at the same time may offer valuable lessons carried forward into adulthood.

Much prior research imposes an adulthood lens regarding relationships that focuses on duration and stability. Our findings showcase that this frame cannot be simply supplanted onto adolescents. We find that the fluidity of adolescent relationships is not well captured by the high number of dating or sexual partners because of the frequency of relationship churning. Consistent with the notion that adolescence is a period of exploration, we also find that it is common to break up and get back together. Thus, the concept of relationship duration—relying on a conceptualization of relationships as clearly dichotomized: together or broken up—may be problematic. Yet to assume that relationship churning occurs only in adolescence would be shortsighted. For instance, marital separations often involve periods of reconciliation (Binstock & Thornton, 2003), and two fifths of young adults experience relationship churning (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013). A challenge remains to assess the meaning of relationship churning to adolescents. A risk framework would suggest that relationship churning has a negative influence on subsequent well-being as it may lend itself to high levels of conflict (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013). At the same time, relationship churning could demonstrate successful negotiation of relationship strains and indicate a renewed commitment. Relationship churning may be developmentally appropriate during adolescence as youths learn how to navigate the start and endings of relationships. Our results show that adolescents may go through periods where it is difficult to define their relationships and our theories as well as measurement may not capture the reality of their experiences.

Our work demonstrates that experiences in adolescent dating and sexual activity carry over into adult relationships. Prior studies of young adults emphasize that each phase of the life course represents a new set of relationship challenges. Although this depiction may be accurate, this perspective implies that relationships in each stage of the life course are unaffected by previous relationship experiences. Hartup (1986) states that adolescent relationships "serve as important templates or models that can be used in the construction of future relationships … [thus] consequences of earlier relationships can frequently be detected in later ones" (p. 2). Most studies of adolescent development consider adolescent relationships as an endpoint of research, rather than constituting a set of experiences that uniquely influence and structure subsequent life course trajectories. Data collections that span adolescence and young adulthood provide unique opportunities to assess the long-term implications of adolescent dating and sexual relationships.

This study has not focused on important differences for subgroups of adolescents based on sexual orientation, gender, race/ethnicity, and social class. We control for several of these factors in the multivariate models, but this approach does not acknowledge that the patterning and meaning of adolescent dating and sexual relationships may differ for different populations of adolescents. An important next step is to directly assess the distinctions in the consequences of varying adolescent dating and sexual activity across a broad spectrum of adolescents.

Thus, our work calls for new conceptualizations of adolescent relationships. It is important to move beyond basic indicators of number of partners as indicators of relationship instability and consider relationship churning. We argue for new measurement of adolescent relationships that captures complexity and fluidity. Couples going through periods of disruption may continue to have sex, which represents an untapped area for research on sexual risk taking. Moreover, programs directed at safe sex practices and teenage pregnancy prevention may need to focus on the importance of contraceptive use during potentially emotionally turbulent periods, such as during breakup periods with ex-boyfriends or ex-girlfriends. New directions for research on adolescence require theoretical and empirical work that directly confronts the meaning of flux in adolescent relationships.

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Table 4.1

Descriptive Statistics of Adolescent Dating and Sexual Relationships (18–19 Years Old) and Young Adult Well-Being (22–23 Years Old) ($n = 324$).

	Means/Percentages	*SD*	*Range*
Dating and Sexual Relationships			
Ever dated	94.75%		
Ever sexual intercourse	70.37%		
Ever casual sexual intercourse	48.77%		
Number of dating partners	4.16	2.12	0–9
Number of sexual partners	3.39	4.11	0–15
Number of casual sexual partners	1.48	2.45	0–9
Number of dating sexual partners	1.93	2.27	0–13
Relationship churning			
Churning	38.27%		
Stably broken up	12.65%		
Stably together	36.42%		
Nondater	12.65%		
Sexual nonexclusivity			
Sexually nonexclusive	28.40%		
Sexually exclusive	59.26%		
Nondater	12.35%		
Young adult well-being			
Depressive symptoms	2.51	1.39	1–8
Self-esteem	4.07	0.63	1–5
Gainful activity	75.62%		0–1
Intimate partner violence	22.84%		0–1
Relationship satisfaction	3.48	0.57	1–5

Table 4.2

Coefficients for the OLS Regression of Adolescent Dating and Sexual Relationships on Young Adults' Well-Being ($n = 324$).[a]

	Depressive Symptoms[b] *B*	*Self-Esteem*[b] *B*	*Gainful Activity*[c] *B*	*Intimate Partner Violence*[c] *B*	*Relationship Satisfaction*[b] *B*
Number of lifetime dating partners	−0.04	0.02	0.04	0.19^{**}	0.00
Number of lifetime sexual partners	0.02	−0.00	-0.08^{**}	0.09^{**}	$-0.02^{\dagger}$
Number of lifetime casual sexual partners	0.02	−0.01	-0.13^{**}	0.11^{*}	−0.02
Number of lifetime dating sexual partners	0.02	−0.00	-0.13^{*}	0.19^{***}	-0.04^{**}
Relationship churning					
Churning	0.20	−0.03	-0.64^{*}	0.07	-0.17^{*}
Stably broken up (Stably together)	−0.07	−0.05	$-0.76^{\dagger}$	−0.15	−0.12
Non-dater	$0.57^{\dagger}$	-0.28^{*}	−0.26	$-1.10^{\dagger}$	−0.08
Sexual non-exclusivity					
Sexually non-exclusive (Sexually exclusive)	0.60^{***}	-0.20^{*}	−0.17	0.36	-0.21^{**}
Non-dater	0.71^{**}	-0.32^{**}	0.23	$-0.95^{\dagger}$	−0.05

Note. Relationship predictors are from Wave 4 (ages 18–19) and outcomes are from Wave 5 (ages 22–23).

[a] All models represent bivariate results of the association of each dating and sexual indicator and well-being.

[b] Models estimated using OLS regression.

[c] Models estimated using logistic regression.

$^{\dagger}p < .10$;

$^{*}p < .05$;

$^{**}p < .01$;

$^{***}p < .001$.