

Gender and the Meanings of Adolescent Romantic Relationships: A Focus on Boys

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Many studies of the adolescent period have focused on peer interactions and relationships, but less is known about the character of adolescents' early dating experiences. Researchers have recently explored girls' views of romance and sexuality, but studies of boys' perspectives are noticeably lacking. Theorizing in this area leads to the expectation that as adolescents cross over into heterosexual territory, boys will do so, on average, with greater confidence, while being relatively less engaged emotionally (i.e., the notion that boys want sex, girls want romance), and ultimately emerging as the more powerful actors within the relationship. This article develops a symbolic interactionist perspective to examine the experiences of adolescent boys and girls in the context of the romantic dyad. It focuses on the nature of communication, emotion, and influence within adolescent dating relationships. Findings based on structured interviews with over 1,300 adolescents provide a strong contrast to existing portraits: among those adolescents who had begun dating ($n = 957$), boys report significantly lower levels of confidence navigating various aspects of their romantic relationships, similar levels of emotional engagement as girls, and greater power and influence on the part of their romantic partners. In-depth relationship-history narratives, elicited from a subset ($n = 100$) of these respondents, provide additional support for the quantitative findings and are useful in the process of reconciling our perspective and results with the emphases of prior research.

Increased interest in heterosexual relationships has long been considered a hallmark of adolescence (Waller 1937; Sullivan 1953). Yet sociological attention to adolescent love and romance is dwarfed by the level of cultural interest, ranging from television and film portrayals to parental concerns about teenage sexuality and pregnancy. Recently, media accounts

have declared the end of dating and romance among teens in favor of casual hook-ups that lack feelings of intimacy or commitment (see, e.g., Denizet-Lewis 2004). A large-scale investigation based on a national probability sample of adolescents contradicts this depiction, however: by age 18 over 80 percent of adolescents have some dating experience, and a majority of

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these liaisons are defined by adolescent respondents as “special romantic relationships” (Carver, Joyner, and Udry 2003). Even relatively young adolescents indicate some romantic relationship experience, and those who do not nevertheless express a strong interest in dating (Giordano, Longmore, and Manning 2001). In spite of the ubiquitous nature of dating relationships during the period, we know little about how adolescents themselves experience the transition from a social life based on same-gender friendships to one that includes romantic involvement (Brown, Feiring, and Furman 1999).

We know much more about the character, meaning, and impact of adolescent peer relations. This research not only underscores that peers and friends are critically important to children and adolescents (see, e.g., Call and Mortimer 2001; Crosnoe 2000; Youniss and Smollar 1985), but it also provides a basis for expecting gender differences in the ways in which adolescents navigate and experience romantic relationships. Maccoby (1990) emphasizes that girls more often forge intimate dyadic friendships and rely on supportive styles of communication, while boys tend to play in larger groups, use a “restrictive” interaction style, and develop a greater emphasis on issues of dominance. In light of these differences, she poses a key developmental question: “What happens, then, when individuals from these two distinctive ‘cultures’ attempt to interact with one another? People of both sexes are faced with a relatively unfamiliar situation to which they must adapt” (Maccoby 1990:517).

Maccoby argues that the transition to dating is easier for boys, who tend to transport their dominant interaction style into the new relationship. This is consistent with other research on peer socialization that also adapts a spillover argument. While girls are socialized to center attention on personal relationships (Gilligan 1982) and romance, boys’ interactions within male peer groups often lead them to define the heterosexual world as another arena in which they can compete and score (Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995). Studies from this peer-based research tradition thus provide a theoretical basis for expecting that as adolescents begin to date, boys will do so with greater confidence and less emotional engagement (i.e., the notion that boys want sex, girls want romance), ulti-

mately emerging as the more powerful actors within these relationships.

Research on peer relationships has been critical to an understanding of the adolescent period, and is important in that it foreshadows some of the origins of problematic features of male-female relationships, including intimate violence and gender mistrust. Yet perspectives about dating are too heavily grounded in studies of peer interactions and concerns, rather than in research on romantic encounters themselves. In addition, prior research has focused almost exclusively on issues of sexuality, while the relational and emotional dimensions of early heterosexual experiences have often been ignored. The symbolic interactionist perspective that we develop highlights unique features of adolescent romantic relationships that provide a rich climate for additional socialization. Our view is that meanings may emerge from interaction and communication within the romantic context that significantly alter or supplant those developed through peer interactions. This perspective fosters a different view of the ways in which gender influences the crossing-over process, and suggests fundamental limitations of the focus on spillover effects. Further, depictions of girls’ experiences, especially concerning issues of sexuality, have become increasingly nuanced, but in prior work boys have often been cast as especially flat or one-dimensional characters (Forster [1927] 1974). Thus, it is important to explore both girls’ and boys’ perspectives on romance, but our central objective here is to address consequential gaps in knowledge about boys’ relationship experiences.¹ The theoretical perspective and findings presented nevertheless have implications for understanding the

¹ This analysis is also limited to a consideration of heterosexual relationships, as we are particularly interested in the process of “crossing over” from a social life based primarily on same-gender friendships to involvement with heterosexual partners. In addition, the number of respondents who self-identify as homosexual or bisexual at wave one is too small to support a separate analysis. Nevertheless, our conceptual framework and associated measurement emphasis could potentially be useful in connection with future investigations that explore the broader relationship contexts within which gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths’ romantic and sexual experiences unfold.

character and range of girls' experiences, and provide a basic foundation for additional research focused specifically on girls' perspectives.

BACKGROUND

PRIOR RESEARCH ON ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Most studies of adolescent life emphasize girls' strong relational orientation (e.g., Gilligan 1982; Martin 1996), as well as fundamental gender inequalities that tend to be reproduced as girls learn to center much time and energy on their romantic attachments (Holland and Eisenhart 1990; Pipher 1994). In a study based on social life within a Midwestern middle school, Eder et al. (1995) conclude that emphases within girls' peer groups (e.g., the notion that one must always be in love, the focus on personal appearance, and concerns over reputation) foster these inequalities and serve to distance young women from their sexual feelings (see also Simon, Eder, and Evans 1992). Within their own peer networks, boys emphasize competition on many levels, and ridicule those who express caring and other positive emotions for girls. Consistent with Maccoby's (1990) spillover hypothesis, then, Eder et al. (1995) argue that these peer emphases influence the character of cross-gender relations: "[M]ost male adolescents and many adults continue to associate excitement with a sense of domination and competition . . . [while] most girls fail to develop a sense of the depth of their inner resources and power and thus remain dominated and controlled" (Eder et al. 1995:148).

Studies that explore girls' early sexual experiences draw similar conclusions about asymmetries of power within romantic relationships. Holland, Ramazanoglu, and Thomson (1996) initially theorize that there is a sense in which female and male adolescents can be considered "in the same boat" due to their relative inexperience. They subsequently discard this notion, however, based on their analysis of girls' and boys' narrative accounts of their first sexual experiences. The authors argue that girls quickly learn that sex is in large part directed to "supporting and satisfying masculine values and needs" (Holland et al. 1996:159). Thompson's (1995) study of girls' sexual narratives develops a more nuanced portrait, by highlighting significant variations in girls' sexual experiences.

Focusing on the highly melodramatic character of many girls' narratives, however, Thompson (1995) concludes that within the contemporary context, the gender gap in orientations toward relationships and sexuality may even have widened. She suggests, for example, that it is no longer as necessary as in earlier eras for boys to engage in preliminary steps of relationship-building to achieve their goal of sexual access, a dynamic that could accentuate rather than diminish traditional differences in perspectives. Interestingly, Risman and Schwartz (2002) have recently developed an alternative hypothesis. Examining aggregate trends that show declining rates of sexual intercourse during the adolescent period, the authors link such changes to "the increasing power of girls in their sexual encounters" (Risman and Schwartz 2002:21), particularly to negotiate the timing and the context within which sexual behavior occurs. Thus, while interpretations of the nature and effects of these dynamic processes differ, prior research points to power as a key relationship dynamic that warrants more direct, systematic scrutiny.

In summary, the emphases of prior studies have been appropriate, as the dynamics highlighted connect in intimate ways to processes that have been limiting or injurious to young women. Areas of concern range from leveled career aspirations (Holland and Eisenhart 1990) to sexual coercion and partner violence (Eder et al. 1995). Nevertheless, this research is itself limited by the focus on the relatively public face of cross-gender relations, such as joking and teasing that occurs within school lunchrooms or during after-school activities. Here the emphasis remains upon the dynamics of the same-gender peer group, providing only glimpses into the more private world of the romantic dyad. Many studies in this tradition also rely on small non-diverse samples, or concentrate on very young adolescents. The heavy focus on issues of sexuality also provides a restricted view of the broader relationship context within which sexual behaviors unfold; that is, of the more basic emotional and other relational dynamics that characterize these relationships. More fundamentally, this portrait of spillover effects does not sufficiently highlight the communicative strengths and relationship competencies that girls bring to these relationships, nor does this literature confront inherent limits to the idea of carry-over effects. These

criticisms apply equally to prior research on boys, where similar themes emerge, even though the research base is even more sketchy and incomplete.

STUDIES OF BOYS' ROMANTIC AND SEXUAL LIVES

Boys have certainly not been ignored in prior research on adolescence. Yet within the many studies that concentrate on boys, romantic relationships have not been a frequent subject. Classic investigations of boys' lives often concentrate on group processes within boys' friendship and peer circles, either as ends in themselves (e.g., Fine 1987), or as peers influence specific outcomes such as delinquency (e.g., Cohen 1955; Sullivan 1989; Thrasher 1927) or the reproduction of the class system (e.g., MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977). These studies do, however, sometimes offer characterizations of boys' romantic attachments. For example, MacLeod (1987) in a classic study of boys' delinquency involvement suggests that "women were reduced to the level of commodities and the discussions sometimes consisted of consumers exchanging information" (MacLeod 1987:280). The relative lack of research on boys' romantic experiences, then, likely stems from scholars' interests in other areas, as well as from their views that male-female relationships are of a limited, or at least a delimited (primarily sexual), interest to adolescent boys themselves. This is consistent with the research reviewed on girls' lives, and again highlights the reach of male peer culture. A consequence, however, is that boys' views about romance are gleaned primarily from analyses of girls' narratives and/or studies based on boys' discourse within the relatively public arena of the male peer group.

A few studies have examined boys' perspectives on romance directly, again often in connection with discussions of sexuality. Wight (1994), for example, observed significant differences in boys' talk about their girlfriends and sex among their peers compared with interviews conducted in more private settings. In the latter context, the working-class Scottish youth whom he studied were much more likely to express insecurities and vulnerabilities regarding the adequacy of their own sexual performances. Nevertheless, Wight (1994:721) also

concludes that only a minority of the boys were engaged emotionally in the relationship aspects of these heterosexual liaisons. He suggests that generally the boys preferred male company and "particularly dislike girls' displays of feminine emotion which make them feel extremely awkward." Despite his more layered view of boys' perspectives, then, Wight's (1994) depiction of boys' attitudes toward romance does not differ greatly from a number of other accounts: "the main excitement of girlfriends is the challenge of chatting them up and getting off with them; once this has been achieved, going out with the girl becomes tedious . . . only a few came close to expressing trust in, or loyalty to, girls in the way they sometimes did for boys" (p. 714). In contrast, Moffatt (1989), relying on older students' written accounts of their sexual lives, found that a significant number (about one third) of the young men's narratives stressed the importance of romance and love in connection with their sexual experiences. It is unclear whether these differences in findings stem from significant age differences across samples, or variations in the methods employed. Thus, it is important to examine specific aspects of the existing portrait of adolescent males' romantic relationship experiences using a larger, more heterogeneous sample of adolescents.

The present study, then, focuses on basic but foundational research questions. Do adolescent boys, as Maccoby (1990) hypothesized, more often than girls express confidence as they cross over to the heterosexual realm? Are adolescent girls more likely to be engaged emotionally, relative to their male counterparts? And, perhaps most central to existing portraits, do boys typically evidence greater power and influence within their early heterosexual liaisons? These questions are interrelated and central to the development of an age-graded, life-course perspective on how gender influences relationship processes.

A NEO-MEADIAN PERSPECTIVE ON ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

In our view, prior work in this area offers an incomplete portrait of the ways in which gender influences the crossing-over process. Further, existing treatments undertheorize the extent to which the romantic relationship itself becomes a potentially important arena of social-

ization and site for the emergence of meanings. These relationships may occasion new perspectives that coexist with, contradict, and even negate previous peer-based messages. Mead's (1934) symbolic interaction theory and recent extensions in the sociology of emotions tradition (e.g., Collins 2004; Engdahl 2004) provide a useful framework for exploring this general idea.²

Two central tenets of symbolic interaction theories are that meanings emerge from the process of social interaction and that the self is continuously shaped by dynamic social processes (Mead 1934). These basic insights foster a highly unfinished, continually emerging view of development, and a caution to the notion that meanings derived from peer interactions are likely to be transported wholesale into the romantic context. As Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine (2002:10) point out, Mead (1934) and later Blumer (1969) emphasized that "social definitions guide action," but also recognized that this involves much more than a "reflex-like application of these definitions."

We have to determine which objects or actions we need to give meaning and which we can neglect. Moreover, we must figure out which of the many meanings that can be attributed to a thing are the appropriate ones in this context. . . . [W]hen we find ourselves in some situations, particularly new and ambiguous ones, we discover that no established meanings apply. As a result, we must be flexible enough to learn or devise new meanings. We have this flexibility because we handle the things we encounter through a dynamic and creative process of interpretation. This process allows us to generate new or different meanings and to adjust our actions accordingly.

Scholars such as Corsaro (1985) highlight these dynamics as a way to understand the character of the parents-to-peers transition that reliably occurs during childhood and adolescence (see also Corsaro and Eder 1990). Researchers point out that parental socialization efforts are

never fully successful, in that young people inevitably produce novel cultural practices through interaction with their peers. These meanings fit the peer context well, as they are a product of this context. Social forces are thus deeply implicated in the production of meanings; and, as these meanings are shared, they become a further source of social solidarity and self-definition (Fine 1987). This meaning-construction process is never fully stabilized, however, because new "hooks for change" continually present themselves within the environment (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). Individuals also possess the unique capacity to develop new plans, including the capacity to carve out new social networks. Yet as Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994) note, these new affiliations will nevertheless in turn have a shaping influence.

These basic insights are integral to many discussions of child and adolescent peer networks, but researchers have not systematically applied the symbolic interactionist or interpretive framework to an understanding of the peers-to-romance transition. It is intuitive to do so for several reasons: First, adolescent romantic relationships definitely qualify as a new situation, one in which interaction and communication hold a central place. Second, the relatively private world of romantic interactions makes it likely that meanings will emerge on site, rather than simply being imported from earlier peer experiences or from the broader culture (see also Simon and Gagnon 1986). The fundamentally reciprocal qualities of dyadic communication enhance these possibilities. Mead ([1909] 1964:101) theorized that the "probable beginning of human communication was in cooperation, not in imitation, where conduct *differed* [emphasis added] and yet where the act of the one answered to and called out the act of the other." Third, scholars point out that contemporary romantic relationships in Western nations lack the heavily scripted qualities that characterized earlier eras or courtship practices within more traditional cultural contexts (Giddens 1992). This too leads us to favor a symbolic interactionist perspective on the meaning construction process. In the following discussion, we explore three basic relationship domains—communication, emotion, and influence—that allow us to develop further this symbolic inter-

² The focus on emotions as an important dynamic within social interactions represents a shift from Mead's original cognitive emphasis, but it can be considered neo-Meadian since his more general ideas (e.g., the concept of role-taking and focus on self-processes) are applicable to understanding the emotional as well as cognitive realms of experience (see Engdahl 2004; MacKinnon 1994).

actionist perspective on adolescent romantic relationships.

COMMUNICATION. We agree with Maccoby's (1990) key assertion that "both sexes face a relatively unfamiliar situation to which they must adapt" (p. 517), but we offer a different perspective on the ways in which gender-related experiences may influence the crossing-over process. Recall Maccoby's suggestion that the transition is easier for boys, who are seen as frequently transporting their dominant interaction style into the new relationship. A competing hypothesis is that because girls have more experience with intimate dyadic communications by virtue of their own earlier friendship experiences, boys must make what amounts to a bigger developmental leap as they begin to develop this more intimate way of relating to another.

Mead (1913:378) pointed out that when engaged in familiar, habitual actions, "the self is not self-conscious." In contrast, on those occasions when the individual's previous repertoire proves inadequate to the task at hand (what Mead termed the "problematic situation"), cognitive processes, including feelings of self-consciousness, are fully engaged. While both girls and boys are likely to experience their initial forays into heterosexual territory as instances of Mead's "problematic situation," this may be even more descriptive of boys' experience, by virtue of the especially strong contrast for boys with the form and content of their earlier peer interactions. Thus, our expectation is that boys, at least initially, will experience a greater level of *communication awkwardness* in connection with their romantic liaisons. Following Mead, this also implies that cues within the new situation will be especially important. Mead noted that while the past (here, youths' understandings derived from peer interactions) is never completely discarded, the current perspective will nevertheless be transformed in light of present circumstances and future plans (Mead 1934; see also Joas 1997:167-98).

Movement into romantic relationships involves more than developing a level of comfort while communicating with the opposite gender. It also requires a full complement of relationship skills, most of them communication based as well. Adolescents must become familiar with the process of making initial overtures,

learn how to communicate their needs to partners, manage conflict, and successfully terminate unwanted relationships. Here, too, young women may be more competent and confident in what we will call relationship navigational skills, as they have experienced generally related social dynamics in prior relationships (e.g., friendship troubles and their repair). In addition, norms about dating behavior have become more ambiguous within the contemporary context, but boys are still often expected to make the initial advances. This provides a further reason for them to be more anxious and less certain about how to proceed.

Adolescents' perceived *confidence navigating relationships* requires systematic investigation, however, as prior research has shown that boys frequently score higher on scales measuring general self-esteem and self-efficacy (Gecas and Longmore 2003). Thus focusing only on the self-esteem literature, and the notion that males occupy a position of greater societal privilege, we might expect boys simply to forge ahead with confidence into this new terrain, with little uncertainty about a lack of expertise or preparation. This is also consistent with the idea that girls may lack confidence in their abilities to make their own needs known in relationships, particularly given socialization practices that heighten girls' sensitivities to and concern for the needs of others (Gilligan 1982).

EMOTION. Researchers have recently accorded greater significance to the role of emotions in human behavior (e.g., Katz 1999; Massey 2002; Turner 2000). Theorists in the sociology of emotions tradition in particular stress the strongly social basis of emotional processes (e.g., Collins 2004; Thoits 1989). Departing from highly individualistic conceptions of emotions, many sociological treatments focus on the ways in which cultural expectations influence emotion-management as well as emotional expression (e.g., Hochschild 1983). This sociological viewpoint resonates with the peer-based literature reviewed earlier, as it stresses that boys are socialized to avoid or deny softer emotions, and are teased and ridiculed by peers if they reveal signs of weakness or emotionality. In turn, this literature suggests that boys learn to devalue relationships that might engender positive emotions, and to objectify and denigrate the young women who are their partners

in romantic interactions. Overall, much previous research provides support for the idea of an emotional closing-off process, as boys are observed making crude comments in the school lunchroom (Eder et al. 1995), describing their romantic relationships as tedious (Wight 1994), or constructing relationships as a game perpetrated on young women for the purpose of sexual conquest (Anderson 1989).

The symbolic interactionist approach, in contrast, suggests that the new dyadic context opens up additional opportunities for role-taking, defined as "putting oneself in another's position and taking that person's perspective" (Shott 1979:1323). Such reciprocal interactions may promote new definitions of the situation, as well as the experience of new emotions. Scholars have recently noted that emotions have clarifying and motivational significance (Frijda 2002), in effect providing valence or energy to new lines of action (Collins 2004). Our central argument, then, is that adolescent romantic relationships become a potentially important arena of socialization and reference, one that fosters new definitions and interrelated emotions. Suggesting that girls typically experience heightened emotionality in connection with their romantic endeavors is hardly a novel assertion. In contrast, however, to the emphases within much of the existing adolescence literature, we argue that boys often develop positive emotional feelings toward partners and accord significance and positive meanings to their romantic relationships. The notion that new attitudes and feelings can emerge from these recurrent sequences of interaction is generally consistent with Thorne's (1993:133) key observation that "incidents of crossing (gender boundaries) may chip away at traditional ideologies and hold out new possibilities."

This educational process and boys' emerging interest, we believe, frequently extends beyond the sexual to include the relationship itself. To the degree that boys engage in a distinctive form of intimate self-disclosure lacking within their peer discourse, and receive both positive identity and social support from a caring female partner, boys in some respects may be seen as more dependent on these relationships than girls, who have a range of other opportunities for intimate talk and social support. Feelings of heightened emotionality or *love* for the partner can be assessed directly, as adolescents are well

placed to comment on their own subjective emotional experiences. Here the private interview provides a useful supplement to observational studies of boys' interactions in public settings, as recent work on gender and emotions underscores that the public face of emotions appears more highly gendered than the personal experience of these same emotions (Fischer 2000). It is also important to obtain systematic assessments across a large, heterogeneous sample of adolescents, as most of the research reviewed earlier indicates that some boys develop caring attitudes toward a partner and positive feelings about their romantic relationships. These researchers frequently assert, however, that this adaptation is characteristic of a small subgroup of male adolescents who represent a departure from the more common and traditionally gendered pattern (Anderson 1989; Eder et al. 1995; Wight 1994).

INFLUENCE. Social interactions are not only implicated in the production of specific emotional feelings, but as some theorists argue, these emotional processes are capable of transforming the self in more fundamental ways (MacKinnon 1994; Engdahl 2004). The social influence literature emphasizes that the more highly valued the relationship, the more individuals are willing to accede to influence attempts in order to maintain or enhance their standing with valued others (Blau 1964). Viewed from a neo-Meadian perspective, however, positive interactions with significant others influence self-feelings (emotions) and attitudes that become catalysts in the truest sense. This neo-Meadian viewpoint encompasses but also extends the notion that change is accomplished primarily as a strategic move to preserve the relationship.

If, on the other hand, positive meanings are largely constructed outside the romantic relationship (e.g., as a source of competition and basis for camaraderie with one's male peers), we may expect the romantic partner's influence to be (and to be viewed as) rather minimal (see Collins 2004:238). This is likely to be the case whether the focus is on change in relationship attitudes/behaviors, influence on other aspects of the adolescent's life, or effects on the young person's emerging identity. Thus the character of communication and levels of emotional engagement in these relationships during ado-

escence are critical dynamics likely to be implicated in the nature and extent of partner influence. Our expectation, following the arguments developed in the previous sections, is that adolescent girls, owing to their greater familiarity with issues of intimacy and skill in communication, will likely make influence attempts, and boys (highly interested/engaged in this new relationship form) will often be receptive to them. Consequently, we do not expect to find significant gender differences in reports of partner influence, as contrasted with the hypothesis of a highly gendered (i.e., boys have more influence) pattern.

Consistent with prior sociological treatments, it is also useful to distinguish *influence* processes, which may be quite subtle, from *power*, often defined as the ability to overcome some resistance or to exercise one's will over others (Weber 1947). Youniss and Smollar (1985) note that much of the time within same-gender friendship relations, reality is "cooperatively co-constructed." This description reflects that the initial similarity of friends favors the development of a relatively egalitarian style of mutual influence. As a close relationship, romantic relations should also entail many instances of cooperative co-construction—but these relationships to a greater extent than friendships also bridge considerable difference. Thus it is not only likely that differences in perspective and conflict will occur, but also that partners will attempt to control or change the other in some way.

It is conventional to argue that structurally based gender inequalities tend to be reproduced at the couple level. On average the male partner acquires more power and control in the relationship (Komter 1989). While these ideas originally were applied to adult marital relations, as suggested earlier, the notion of gendered inequalities of power is also a recurrent theme within the adolescence literature. These power and influence processes require more systematic study, however, because during adolescence, social forces that are generally understood as fostering gender inequalities are still somewhat at a distance (e.g., childbearing, gendered access to the labor force and to other bases of power); thus the reproduction process itself may be markedly less than complete. The symbolic interactionist framework also suggests a more situated, constantly negotiated

view of power dynamics, in contrast to a straightforward male privilege argument (see, e.g., Sprey 1999). The assumption of boys' greater power and control also connects to the largely untested assumptions that: (a) boys, on average, effect a dominant interaction style in these fledgling relationships (our communication hypothesis), and (b) girls are systematically disadvantaged by their greater commitment and emotional investment in their romantic endeavors (our emotion hypothesis). Asymmetries of various kinds (demographic, relational, status) are common within adolescent romantic relationships (see Carver and Udry 1997; Giordano, Longmore, and Manning 2001). Our view, however, is that these imbalances in the contours of the relationship need not—during this phase of life—necessarily and systematically privilege male adolescents. In the current analysis, then, our goal with respect to influence and power is to assess and compare adolescent male and female reports about their romantic partner's *influence attempts*, *actual influence* (as perceived by the respondent), and *perceptions of the power balance* within the relationship (defined as getting one's way, given some level of disagreement).

DATA AND METHODS

DATA

The Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS) sample was drawn from the year 2000 enrollment records of all youths registered for the 7th, 9th, and 11th grades in Lucas County, Ohio, a largely urban metropolitan environment that includes Toledo ($n = 1,316$).³ The sample universe encompassed records elicited from 62 schools across seven school districts. The stratified, random sample was devised by the National Opinion Research Center, and includes over-samples of African American and Hispanic adolescents. School attendance was not a requirement for inclusion in the sample, and most interviews were conducted in the respondent's home using preloaded laptops to administer the interview.

³ All of the schools eventually complied with our requests for these data, as this information is legally available under Ohio's Freedom of Information Act.

From the total sample of 1,316, we focus the present analysis on 957 respondents who reported either currently dating or having recently dated (the previous year).⁴ As shown in Table 1, 49 percent of the dating sample is male, and the average age is approximately fifteen years. The race/ethnic distribution is: 69 percent white, 24 percent African American, and 7 percent Hispanic. In-depth interviews were also conducted with a subset ($n = 100$) of the respondents who had participated in the structured interview. These youths were selected based on their race/gender characteristics, and having indicated some dating experience during the structured interview. This subsample is on average older than the sample as a whole, and includes 51 girls and 49 boys. Of these 40 were white, 33 African American, 26 Hispanic, and one was "other" (Filipino).⁵

MEASURES

DEFINITION OF A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP. We developed a simple definition that precedes the romantic relationships section of the interview schedule: "Now we are interested in your own experiences with dating and the opposite sex. When we ask about 'dating' we mean when you like a guy, and he likes you back. This does not have to mean going on a formal date."⁶ The

interview schedule elicits information about a number of different types of relationships, but the items and scales that we later describe and the accompanying analyses focus on the adolescent's relationship with a current or most recent partner.

RELATIONSHIP QUALITIES/DYNAMICS

COMMUNICATION AWKWARDNESS. To measure feelings of communication awkwardness or apprehension we rely on four items: "Sometimes I don't know quite what to say with X," "I would be uncomfortable having intimate conversations with X," "Sometimes I find it hard to talk about my feelings with X," and "Sometimes I feel I need to watch what I say to X" (Powers and Hutchinson 1979) ($\alpha = .71$).

CONFIDENCE IN NAVIGATING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS. This scale was designed for the TARS study, and it includes three items that tap dating-specific dilemmas and respondents' perceptions of confidence that they would be able to communicate their wishes: "How confident are you that you could . . . refuse a date?" "tell your girlfriend/boyfriend how to treat you?" and "break up with someone you no longer like?" ($\alpha = .72$).

HEIGHTENED EMOTIONALITY. To measure the adolescent's level of emotional engagement we use items drawn from Hatfield and Sprecher's (1986) passionate *love* scale, including "I would rather be with X than anyone else," "I am very attracted to X," "the sight of X turns me on," and "X always seems to be on my mind" ($\alpha = .85$).

INFLUENCE. We distinguish between the partner's influence attempts and perceptions of "actual" partner influence. *Influence attempts* are indexed by these items: "X sometimes wants to control what I do" and "X always tries to

⁴ Furman and Hand (2004) found similarities in dating involvement in TARS and in their own study. Both studies document higher rates of dating involvement by age than are evident within the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). We note that our reports of (for example) sexual intercourse by age parallel those in Add Health, but a higher percentage of respondents at each age report current romantic involvement: 32 percent of 7th, 41 percent of 9th graders, and 59 percent of 11th grade TARS respondents, compared with 17 percent, 32 percent, and 44 percent of Add Health respondents.

⁵ This respondent was excluded from the quantitative analysis, but included in our study of the relationship history narratives.

⁶ This introduction and definition were selected after extensive pre-testing and reflects contemporary trends in dating that are less focused than in earlier eras on formal activities. In addition, the latter type of definition is strongly class-linked, and would tend to exclude lower socioeconomic-status (SES) youth. Our definition also differs from that used in

Add Health, where respondents are asked whether they currently have a "special romantic relationship." We wished to avoid selecting on a relationship that the respondent specifically defines as special, since understanding the patterning of relationship qualities is a primary objective of the study.

Table 1. Means/Percentages and Standard Deviations for the Total Sample and Separately for Boys and Girls

	Total		Boys		Girls	
	Mean/%	SD	Mean/%	SD	Mean/%	SD
Dependent Variables (range)						
Communication processes						
Awkwardness (4–20)	9.87*	3.3	10.10	3.2	9.64	3.4
Confidence (3–15)	10.40*	2.8	9.92	2.8	11.03	2.7
Heightened emotionality						
Love (4–20)	14.13	3.6	13.91	3.5	14.34	3.6
Influence and power						
Influence attempts (2–10)	3.80*	1.7	4.09	1.7	3.51	1.7
Actual influence (3–15)	6.41*	2.5	6.94	2.5	5.89	2.4
Perceived power balance (4–12)	8.23*	1.8	7.63	1.8	8.80	1.7
Independent Variables						
Gender						
Boys	.49	—	—	—	—	—
Girls	.51	—	—	—	—	—
Race						
White	.69	—	.64	—	.66	—
African American	.24	—	.24	—	.23	—
Hispanic	.07	—	.12	—	.11	—
Age (12–19)	15.49	1.7	15.44	1.7	15.54	1.7
Family structure						
Married biological	.46	—	.46	—	.43	—
Single	.26	—	.25	—	.28	—
Step	.16*	—	.19	—	.14	—
Other	.12*	—	.09	—	.15	—
Mother’s monitoring (6–24)	20.55*	2.8	20.17	3.0	20.92	2.4
Peer orientation (1–4)	3.16*	1.9	3.25	.9	3.08	.9
Mother’s education						
<12 years	.11	—	.13	—	.12	—
(12 years)	.32	—	.31	—	.31	—
>12 years	.57	—	.56	—	.57	—
Self-esteem (10–30)	23.80	3.6	23.92	3.4	23.60	3.8
Currently dating						
Yes	.60*	—	.52	—	.67	—
No	.40	—	.48	—	.33	—
Duration of relationship (1–8 months)	4.79*	2.1	4.62*	2.1	4.95	2.1
Sex with romantic partner						
Yes	.28	—	.30	—	.27	—
No	.72	—	.70	—	.73	—
N	957	—	469	—	488	—

Note: Mean/% = mean or percent; N = number; SD = standard deviation.

**p* < .05 difference between boys and girls (two-tailed tests).

change me” (alpha = .77). “*Actual*” influence reflects the level of agreement that respondents have been influenced by or actually changed things about themselves due to their relationship with the partner. Items include “X often influences what I do,” “I sometimes do things because X is doing them,” and “I sometimes do things because I don’t want to lose X’s respect” (alpha = .71). We note that the influence scales

do not require respondents to select who has the most influence in their relationship, but instead to provide an assessment of their perception that partners have made influence attempts and that they have actually made changes or adjustments that they trace to the partner’s influence. We then compare girls’ and boys’ average scores on these indices to gauge perceptions of partner influence.

POWER. The measure of power includes a more direct comparative element, as questions focus on the likelihood of getting one's way given some disagreement. This index is modeled on Blood and Wolfe's (1960) *decision power index* revised for use with this younger sample. The scale includes an overall assessment ("If the two of you disagree, who usually gets their way?") and also includes items that reference specific situations: "what you want to do together," "how much time you spend together," and "how far to go sexually." Responses include "X more than me," "X and me about the same," and "me more than X." Higher scores reflect the adolescent's perception of a relatively more favorable power balance, relative to the partner ($\alpha = .77$).

CONTROL VARIABLES. Although our primary objective is to examine similarities and differences in the experience of romantic relationships as influenced by the respondent's gender, we also include control variables in our models. This allows us to account for possible differences between the gender subgroups on other basic characteristics and features of adolescents' lives, and to assess whether these variables operate as mediators of any observed gender differences. In addition to the influence of other sociodemographic characteristics, gender differences in reports about relationships might be influenced by girls' generally higher levels of parental monitoring (Longmore, Manning, and Giordano 2001), or males' greater levels of involvement with peers (as suggested in the foregoing literature review). It is particularly important to control for self-esteem, as responses to items about relationship confidence or perceived power may be influenced by the adolescent's generally efficacious or confident self-views. This would be consistent with Maccoby's (1990) argument that boys move ahead with confidence into the heterosexual context. Thus we not only assess whether, on average, boys tend to report greater relationship confidence, but also whether high self-esteem accounts for any observed gender difference. During adolescence, romantic relationships themselves vary significantly—both in terms of duration and level of seriousness (Carver, Joyner, and Udry 2003). Thus, our models also include controls for *duration* and whether or not the rela-

tionship has become sexually intimate. Teens with romantic relationship experience who were not dating at the time of the interview reported about a "most recent" partner; thus we also add a control for whether the referent is a current or most recent relationship.

In addition to *gender* (female = 1), controls are added for *race/ethnicity* (African American, Hispanic, and white were created), and *age*. We also include dummy variables reflecting variations in *mother's education* as a proxy for socioeconomic status (less than 12, greater than 12, where 12th grade completion is the reference category), a strategy that allows for the observation of nonlinear effects. This measure is derived from a questionnaire completed by parents, rather than from youth reports. *Family structure* is represented in the models as a set of dummy variables (single parent, stepparent, other, with married biological as the reference category). *Parental monitoring* is measured by a six-item scale completed by the parent, which includes items such as "When my child is away from home, s/he is supposed to let me know where s/he is," "I call to check if my child is where s/he said," "My child has to be home at a specific time on the weekends" ($\alpha = .73$). A measure of *peer orientation* is included, which asks respondents, "During the past week, how many times did you just hang out with your friends?" *Self-esteem* is measured with a six-item version of Rosenberg's (1979) self-esteem scale ($\alpha = .71$). Relationship controls include a measure of *duration* of the focal relationship in months, whether *sexual intercourse* has occurred within the relationship (1 = yes), and whether the relationship is *current* (1 = yes) or most recent.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

We estimate zero-order models with gender and then add the remaining covariates to the model. This includes the social and demographic factors (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, mother's education), other network and individual characteristics (parental monitoring, peer orientation, self-esteem), and features of the relationship described (duration, whether the relationship includes sex, whether the referent is a current relationship). Given the nature of our dependent variables, we use ordinary least

squares (OLS) to estimate our models. Although we do not develop specific hypotheses in this regard, due to the general importance of the adolescent's other social addresses, and the utility of the concept of intersectionalities as developed in prior theorizing about gender, we also test for differential effects of gender based on race/ethnicity, mother's education, and age by sequentially estimating each model introducing a series of interaction terms (gender by race, gender by mother's education, and gender by age). This allows us to document whether observed patterns of gender similarity and difference generalize across various race/ethnic, SES, and age categories. We also examine interactions between gender and other features of the focal relationship, including duration and whether intercourse has occurred, in order to determine whether the findings with regard to gender reflect a consistent pattern across relationships that vary in longevity and level of sexual intimacy. We use a Chow test to evaluate whether the influence of the total set of covariates on relationship qualities is sufficiently different for boys and girls to warrant analysis of separate models.

QUALITATIVE DATA

The in-depth relationship history narratives that we elicited from a subset of the respondents are useful as they serve to validate the quantitative findings, give depth to our conceptual arguments, and provide a starting point for reconciling our results with themes about gender and relationships that have predominated in prior research. Qualitative methods preserve respondents' own language and narrative emphasis, and thus provide an additional vantage point from which to explore the meaning and importance of these relationships from each respondent's point of view (Morse 1994).

The in-depth interviews were generally scheduled separately from the structured interview, and were conducted by a full-time interviewer with extensive experience eliciting in-depth, unstructured narratives. Areas covered in general parallel the structured protocol, but allow a more detailed consideration of respondents' complete romantic and sexual histories. The interview began by exploring the dating scene at the respondent's high school, and

subsequently moved to a more personal discussion of the respondent's own dating career. The prompt stated, "Maybe it would be a good idea if you could just kind of walk me through some of your dating experiences—when did you first start liking someone?" Probes were designed to elicit detail about the overall character and any changes in a focal relationship, and about the nature of different relationships across the adolescent's romantic and sexual career. The resulting relationship narratives were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. We relied on Atlas.ti software to assist with the coding and analysis of the qualitative data. This program was useful in the organization of text segments into conceptual categories and refinement of the categories, while retaining the ability to move quickly to the location of the text within the more complete narrative. We also relied on shorter two-to-three-page summaries for some aspects of our analysis.

Because the current study is based on a combined analytic approach, we do not attempt an overview of the qualitative data, as the systematically collected structured data and related quantitative analyses adequately depict aggregate trends. Here we generally limit our discussion of the qualitative material to narrative segments that (a) illustrate the direction of specific quantitative findings, but that further illuminate them, particularly with reference to the conceptual areas outlined above, and (b) serve to reconcile our results with the perspectives and emphases of prior research. Consistent with our focus in this article, we draw on boys' narratives, recognizing that a comprehensive account of adolescents' heterosexual experiences requires a corollary analysis of girls' perspectives. Other analyses using the TARS data focus specifically on issues of sexuality, both within romantic relationships (Giordano, Manning, and Longmore 2005a) and outside the traditional dating context (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2005).

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all variables included in the analyses. In addition to the focal relationship variables to be discussed presently, results indicate that, consistent with prior research, female respondents score

higher on parental monitoring, relative to their male counterparts. Young women also report relationships of significantly longer duration, and they are more likely to reference a current (rather than "most recent") partner. Male respondents score higher on the measure of time spent with peers, but self-esteem scores did not differ significantly by gender. Table 2 presents results of analyses of boys' and girls' reports of communication awkwardness, confidence navigating relationships, and feelings of love. Table 3 shows results of similar analyses focusing on partner influence attempts and "actual" influence, as well as the perceived power balance within the current/most recent relationship. Results of analyses focused on gender interactions are reported in the text.

COMMUNICATION

AWKWARDNESS. The first column in Table 2 indicates that, consistent with our hypothesis, boys report significantly higher levels of communication awkwardness in connection to their relationship with a current/most recent partner. Within the context of the more complete relationship-history narratives elicited from a subset of the respondents (recall that these youths are, on average, slightly older), these communication difficulties are especially likely to surface in boys' references to the early days of their dating careers or in discussions of how a given relationship had changed over time. Jake, for example, mentioned such communication difficulties in connection to his very first romantic relationship:

Table 2. Communication and Emotion within Adolescent Romantic Relationships

Gender	Communication Awkwardness		Confidence Navigating Relationships		"Love"	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
(Male)						
Female	-.462*	-.195	1.118***	1.208***	.435	-.020
Race						
(White)	—	—	—	—	—	—
African American	—	.300	—	.167	—	-.553*
Hispanic	—	-.098	—	-.053	—	.104
Age	—	-.094	—	.159**	—	.165*
Family structure						
(Married biological)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Single	—	.002	—	-.129	—	-.465
Step	—	-.061	—	.030	—	-.743*
Other	—	.410	—	-.253	—	-.788*
Parental monitoring	—	-.042	—	.033	—	.042
Peer orientation	—	-.160	—	-.022	—	.017
Mother's education						
<12 years	—	.060	—	.258	—	-.055
(12 years)	—	—	—	—	—	—
>12 years	—	-.230	—	.095	—	-.023
Self-esteem	—	-.116	—	.180***	—	.032
Duration of relationship	—	-.249***	—	.026	—	.486***
Sex with romantic partner						
(No)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Yes	—	-.635**	—	.442*	—	.185
Currently dating						
(No)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Yes	—	-1.583***	—	-.311	—	1.786***
F	4.68	11.74	40.89	8.95	3.58	16.42
R ²	.049	.158	.041	.125	.004	.208

Note: Reference category in parentheses. N = 957.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

Table 3. Influence and Power within Adolescent Romantic Relationships

Gender	Influence Attempts		'Actual' Influence		Perceived Power Balance	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
(Male)						
Female	-.583***	-.547***	-1.045***	-1.107***	1.173***	1.215***
Race						
(White)	—	—	—	—	—	—
African American	—	.043	—	-.273	—	.375*
Hispanic	—	-.083	—	-.620*	—	.287
Age	—	-.047	—	-.039	—	-.021
Family structure						
(Married biological)						
Single	—	.067	—	-.206	—	.126
Step	—	-.149	—	-.293	—	.078
Other	—	.260	—	-.060	—	-.005
Parental monitoring	—	-.015	—	-.023	—	.019
Peer orientation	—	.038	—	-.010	—	.066
Mother's education						
<12 years	—	.283	—	.349	—	.433*
(12 years)	—	—	—	—	—	—
>12 years	—	-.093	—	.023	—	.043
Self-esteem	—	-.086***	—	-.112***	—	.024
Duration of relationship	—	.077**	—	.137**	—	-.052
Sex with romantic partner						
(No)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Yes	—	.592***	—	-.092	—	.037
Currently dating						
(No)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Yes	—	-.460***	—	-.084	—	-.023
F	28.0	8.06	44.6	6.38	111.4	9.49
R ²	.029	.114	.045	.092	.105	.132

Note: Reference category in parentheses. N = 957.

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001 (two-tailed tests).

Then I like talked to her on the phone, I don't know it was kind of awkward, like long silences when you're talking and stuff like that, and I don't know, then she like broke up with me a week later . . . [during their conversations] I couldn't like think of anything more to say you know. . . I really didn't know [her]; I really wasn't friends before I asked her out, so it was kind of like talking to somebody I really didn't know . . . [Jake, 17]

Table 2 presents multivariate results, in which other covariates have been taken into account. Gender differences remain significant in a model that controls for race/ethnicity, age, mother's education, family structure, parental monitoring, peer orientation, self-esteem, and whether the relationship had become sexually intimate (results not shown). The gender gap is explained by the other relationship controls

(specifically duration and current dating status), as shown in model 2. This indicates that girls' tendency to be involved in relationships of longer duration and their greater likelihood of referencing a current partner influence the observed gender difference in level of communication awkwardness. The addition of the relationship controls also reduces the effect of age—in the reduced model without relationship controls, age is, as expected, inversely related to perceived awkwardness, but the relationship controls reduce this to non-significance. This suggests intuitive connections between age, relationship seriousness, and perceived awkwardness in communication. Having had sex with the romantic partner is also inversely related to perceived communication awkwardness, but this does not influence the

findings with regard to gender and age (not shown). Turning to gender interactions, additional analyses indicate a significant gender by race interaction—white and Hispanic male respondents score significantly higher on communication awkwardness than their female counterparts, but African American male and female respondents do not show this pattern.⁷ Interactions of age, mother's education and the various relationship controls (duration, having sex, current dating status) with gender are not significant, however, indicating that, for example, duration has a similar effect on boys' and girls' reports about communication awkwardness.

The findings reported provide general support for the hypothesis outlined, but the relationship between gender and communication awkwardness is relatively modest and not significant in the full model. Aside from the gender differences in duration that we noted, several other factors may have influenced these results, and suggest the need to qualify the hypothesis. First, perceived communication awkwardness is a general feature of early romantic relationships, and undoubtedly characterizes girls' as well as boys' feelings about the crossing-over process. In addition, results point to some variations in the gender pattern by race/ethnicity. Finally, youths completing this section of the interview focused on a specific, and most often, ongoing relationship. While adolescent romantic relationships do contain elements of uncertainty and awkwardness, the narratives also show that the perceived ability to "really communicate" with a particular other often develops as an important basis for both boys' and girls' feelings of positive regard. Although we explore these

ideas further in the sections on emotion and influence, quotes such as the following illustrate this countervailing tendency:

A lot of the other girls I met in high school, I felt like I had to hold back from them, you know you just couldn't talk about everything with them. With Tiffany you could. Like she wants to know what is on your mind. And if there is something bothering me, you don't have to dress it up or you know, you can just be straight with her all the time. [Tim, 17]

CONFIDENCE NAVIGATING RELATIONSHIPS. Table 2 also presents the results of analyses examining effects of gender on perceptions of confidence in navigating romantic relationships. This index provides a more general assessment of confidence in navigating various stages of romantic relationships, and is thus not only focused on the current/most recent partner. When we consider this more general scale, male adolescents, consistent with our hypothesis, report significantly lower levels of relationship confidence. Recall that the scale refers to confidence through such items as "to refuse a date," "tell your partner how to treat you," and "break up with someone you no longer like." Gender differences are significant for responses to each of these items examined separately, as well as for the total scale, and gender remains significant in the model that incorporates the control and other relationship variables, as well as self-esteem. As these confidence items were also completed by non-dating youths, we also assessed the perceptions of confidence of youth who had not yet entered the dating world. The gender difference is significant whether we focus on non-daters, daters as shown in Table 2, or consider the total sample of over 1,300 male and female respondents. These findings thus reflect a gendered portrait, but one that contrasts with Maccoby's (1990) hypothesis about boys' relatively more confident transition into the heterosexual arena.

With regard to other covariates, race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status are not significant predictors in this model, but age is positively related to perceived confidence. Self-esteem is also positively related to these assessments of relationship confidence, and focusing on the other relationship controls, having had sex with the romantic partner is related to greater overall feelings of confidence. None of the gender

⁷ Further examination of the means for all groups indicates that African American male respondents perceive significantly less communication awkwardness than African American girls. In general, this fits with Staples's (1981) hypothesis about the greater social and communication ease of African American youths, but we document a significant gender difference in this regard. These distinct patterns highlight the importance of examining the nature of relationship dynamics among diverse groups of teens, since the bulk of prior research on adolescent relationships focuses on samples of white adolescents or largely white samples of college students (see also Carver et al. 2003).

interactions assessed is significant. This indicates a consistent pattern of gender differences across the various race/ethnic groups, and the lack of a significant interaction of gender and mother's education suggests that this gendered confidence gap is found across various levels of socioeconomic status. Further, while age is positively related to perceived confidence, the age by gender interaction is not statistically significant—the observed gender disparity is evident in reports of older as well as younger respondents. Similarly, while teens who had sex with their boy/girlfriend report greater feelings of confidence navigating their relationships, a gender and sexual intercourse interaction term is not significant, reflecting a consistent pattern of gender differences in “confidence navigating relationships,” whether or not the respondents reported that the relationship had become sexually intimate. Duration by gender and self-esteem by gender interactions are also not significant.

As suggested previously, the relationship-history narratives give respondents the opportunity to elaborate on ways in which they have experienced different stages of a number of different relationships (e.g., as they discuss the initial phase of starting a relationship or how they experience a particular breakup). These more wide-ranging discussions align well with the gender differences described earlier. Boys frequently reflect on their lack of confidence when talking about the beginning stages of a relationship, or a desired relationship that never materialized:

I don't know why I'm so scared to let girls know I like them . . . like I said I was always nervous at asking them out but that one experience where I crashed and burned that just killed my confidence completely and I have been scared ever since to ask girls out and stuff . . . [Michael, 17]

This excerpt is useful as it clearly depicts feelings of concern and even inadequacy, feelings that Michael connects to one unfortunate early experience. Michael makes reference earlier within his narrative to what appears to be a generally positive self-image (*I know that I'm like a good-looking guy and everything, but I just get so nervous*), even as he offers a candid description of these relationship insecurities. While Michael's discussion includes the notion that such feelings may abate with time and additional experience (e.g., *I don't know how I'm*

going to be later but hopefully I'll just loosen up), this awareness does not serve to lessen current feelings of discomfort. Undoubtedly, some of these feelings connect to boys' more often being cast in the role of initiators, but the feelings that some boys describe nevertheless provide a sharp contrast to depictions of boys' confident, privileged positions within these dating situations. Young men who do not appear to possess characteristics viewed as desirable within the context of what Waller (1937) termed “the rating and dating complex” were even more likely to include references to a lack of confidence. James, a slightly built sixteen year old, originally from Latin America, stressed that “girls still think of me as a little shy guy and short . . . with an accent . . . young . . . well it's hard for me because I'm not too experienced.” These quantitative and qualitative data thus add to Wight's (1994) observation that adolescent boys frequently experience feelings of anxiety about the adequacy of their sexual performances, as here we document considerable insecurity extending to the broader relationship realm.

The quantitative findings and open-ended narratives also suggest that these feelings of insecurity are not limited to the early stages of the relationship-navigation process. For example, within the context of the structured interview, boys express less confidence about “telling your partner how to treat you,” an interview question that was specifically developed with girls in mind. Further, the narratives provide evidence that corresponds with the item that asks about confidence to “break up with someone you no longer like.” For example, Bobby indicated that he had experienced considerable trepidation about how to go about breaking up with his girlfriend Sara:

It really took me like a while I guess to [break up] because I didn't want to like hurt her so I kinda like waited too long to do it, which was stupid by me. I just kept on like, I couldn't do it. I felt really bad. . . . I just put myself in her shoes and I felt like awful like you know. . . . Just like she saw a girl with my sweatshirt on and she just felt like what the heck's going on and everything just probably went down for her. . . . I couldn't do it, I just kept waiting too long to do it. . . . I didn't want to like hurt her really bad which I knew it would that's why I just kept on waiting so. [Bobby, 16]

Bobby felt sufficiently uncomfortable about the prospect of breaking up that he continued to let things slide rather than speaking directly with Sara about his desire to end the relationship (for example, he repeats some version of "I just couldn't do it" eight times within the longer narrative). From an outsider's perspective, Bobby had rather callously started up a relationship with a new partner, without properly ending things with his current girlfriend. Bobby's own narrative, however, reveals feelings of insecurity and discomfort, concern for Sara's reaction, and intimate connections between these two sets of feelings. This suggests at least the rudiments of a role-taking experience, and the possibility that Bobby has learned important lessons than could be carried forward into the next relationship. When asked about what he had taken from this relationship, Bobby replied, "If I'm feeling a certain way I should just tell them and not just sit there and wait and wait and not tell her." This is consistent with our argument that for adolescent males schooled in the peer dynamics described at the outset, the romantic context itself represents an especially important arena of socialization. Bobby's own narrative does not suggest a complete aversion to such lessons, but at least a general receptivity to learning from them.

EMOTION

An examination of reports of feelings of love across the total sample does not reveal a significant gender difference in these feelings of heightened emotionality in connection with the current or most recent relationship. Recall that the scale contains items such as "I would rather be with X than anyone else," "X always seems to be on my mind," and "the sight of X turns me on." The multivariate model shown in Table 2 mirrors the bivariate findings: boys and girls report similar levels of feelings of love in connection with the focal relationship. Race/ethnicity (African American or Hispanic, relative to white youth) is not related to reports of heightened emotionality at the bivariate level, but being African American emerges as a significant predictor in the multivariate analysis.⁸ The mul-

tivariate results also reveal a developmental trend—age is positively related to reports of feelings of love for the partner. Youths living with both parents relative to those residing in single or stepparent families also scored higher on the love scale, but mother's education is not related to reports of love. Longer-duration relationships are also characterized by higher scores on this scale, and, perhaps not surprisingly, when the current partner is the referent, scores are also significantly higher. Sexual intercourse within the relationship is not, however, related to variations in adolescents' reports of feelings of love. Race/ethnicity and gender interactions are not significant, indicating that the pattern of responses by gender is similar across race/ethnic groups. Analyses indicate no significant gender interaction by mother's education. Duration has a similar effect for boys and girls, and the gender by intercourse interaction is not statistically significant. This indicates that having sex does not exert a differential impact on reports of feelings of love provided by male and female respondents.

It could be argued that the items within the love scale capture feelings of sexual attraction as much or more than a strong emotional connection to the partner, or positive feelings about the relationship. The narratives are thus an important adjunct to the quantitative findings, as they allow us further to explore questions of meaning from respondents' own subjectively experienced and uniquely articulated points of view. Many quotes from the narratives are congruent with the quantitative results, and inconsistent with Wight's (1994) conclusion that boys have little interest in the relationship aspects of these liaisons. One index that adolescent relationships can be said to "matter" to many ado-

graphic, family, and peer controls. African American youth report relationships of longer duration, and relationships are more likely to include sexual intercourse; when these variables are introduced, the African American coefficient becomes significant. These findings suggest that African American youth may accord differential meanings and emotional significance to different types of relationships. The role of race/ethnicity warrants more systematic investigation than we give it in the current analysis (see Giordano, Manning, and Longmore 2005b for an analysis of race/ethnicity effects on romantic relationships using Add Health data).

⁸ We note that no racial/ethnic differences are observed in multivariate models that include demo-

lescent boys is the sheer length of the relationship-history narratives that they often produced.⁹ Here we refer to total length, as well as to lengthy sections discussing particular girlfriends. Will's 74-page narrative contains a very long section about his history with his current girlfriend Jenny, including a detailed story of how they met and a discussion of the various phases within their relationship's development. Will commented directly on the relationship's importance:

I: How important is your relationship to Jenny in your life?

R: About as important as you get. You know, well, you think of it as this way, you give up your whole life, you know, know, to save Jenny's life, right? That's how I feel. I'd give up my whole life, to save any of my friends' life too. But it's a different way. Like, if I could save Jon's life, and give up my own, I would, because that is something you should, have in a friend, but I wouldn't want to live without Jenny, does that make some sense? [Will, 17]

It is important to note that such expressions of positive regard and heightened emotionality are not contained only within the narratives of white middle-class youth, since prior research on African American youth in particular often includes the notion that romance is constructed largely as a kind of disingenuous game or con (e.g., Anderson 1989). Ron and Steve, two African American respondents who participated in the in-depth interview, express intense emotional feelings about their girlfriends:

Yeah, I ain't never, I ain't never like, felt that way about somebody. . . . I tell her that [he loves her] everyday too! Everyday, I see her. [Ron, 17]

I: So, you remember all the dates and stuff?

R: Yeah, I'm like a little girl in a relationship. . . . [at first] just seemed like every time I was around her I couldn't talk, I was getting butterflies in my stomach, I just was like, discombobulated or something. [Steve, 17]

When asked to be more specific about features of the relationship that make it special or

important, many adolescent boys reference themes that have long been emphasized in the literature on intimacy and social support (e.g., Duck 1997; Prager 2000), including opportunities for self-disclosure (see e.g., Tim's quote on page 274), and the importance of having a partner who is always there for them:

Because she was always there for me. Like with everything. Like when my parents separated, she was there for me to comfort me then. And she helped me pull up my grades up to good grades and she was just always there for me. She always comforted me when I needed a hug. [Nick, 17]

We do not believe that such statements were produced primarily to please the interviewer, since the detailed answers frequently reference concrete instances where emotional support was provided. The narrative histories also frequently include descriptions of the endings of relationships. Breakups often involve disillusionment and other negative feelings, but such discussions also telegraph feelings of loss, providing a further indication of boys' own constructions of the meanings of these relationships:

I: I mean a year and three months is a long. . .

R: I'm not doing that good but my friends and my mother, they're helping me.

I: In what ways aren't you doing so well?

R: Ah emotionally. I, I can't sleep. I really can't eat that much.

I: I'm sorry.

R: That's okay.

I: How long and this just happened?

R: About a week.

I: Oh wow. So this is very fresh. . .

I: Do you believe them [friends and mom] that you'll get over it?

R: Yes. Some, someday I'll get over this but hopefully soon. [Eric, 17]

R: She just broke it down to me like, "Yeah, we're at different schools, we're young, we need to see other people."

I: So, why were you upset that you broke up?

R: I don't know. 'Cause I loved her so much. [Derrick, 17]

She kept insisting I wasn't going to work out and I kept insisting I wanted to try it and one night, and like I said I couldn't sleep, and I wrote her a letter, front and back, crying the whole time and then I handed the letter to her the next morning. . . . It was really emotional, like how she hurt me and how it wasn't right. [Cody, 17]

⁹ Martin (1996) makes a similar point in her discussion of the length of girls' romance narratives, but she concludes from her own study that boys "rarely express the feelings of romantic love that girls do" (Martin 1996:68). Our results are not in accord with this conclusion.

These narratives often specifically mention the emotional realm (e.g., “It was really emotional”; “I’m not doing that good”; “my feelings was hurt”), or referenced behavioral indicators of psychological distress (e.g., “can’t sleep,” “really can’t eat”). It is, however, also important to highlight that while Derrick’s narrative communicated that the breakup did have a significant effect on him, he did not possess the social knowledge that other boys may also experience similar emotions (as he attempted to explain his bad mood to his mother, “I’m on my weekly [sic] cycle.”).

INFLUENCE

Table 3 presents results of analyses examining reports of influence attempts, actual influence, and the perceived power balance within the current or most recent romantic relationship, as constructed by these adolescent respondents. Although most of the arguments developed in the existing literature focus specifically on issues of power, it is useful to consider the power results alongside the broader and perhaps ultimately more useful dynamic of interpersonal influence. Power assumes competing interests and only one victor, while influence focuses on whether the individual has taken the partner into account and actually made some adjustments. This need not involve a strong contrary view that needs to be overcome by the assertion of a power privilege. In line with this, recall that the questions about influence do not require the respondent to make a choice about who has the most influence in the relationship, but only to indicate whether and to what degree respondents believe that they have been influenced by their partner. The power items, in contrast, require a specific comparison of the respondent’s own, relative to the partner’s ability to get his or her way in a disagreement.

ATTEMPTED AND ACTUAL INFLUENCE. Results regarding influence attempts indicate a consistent pattern of gender differences: in both the zero-order and multivariate models, male respondents score higher on partner influence attempts. In the multivariate model, lower self-esteem youth report higher levels of partner influence attempts, and all of the relationship

controls are significant: youths involved in more serious relationships (as measured by duration and sexual intimacy) report higher levels of partner influence attempts. Youths also describe former partners as making more attempts to influence, relative to reports about current partners. These relationship covariates have similar effects for boys and girls (results not shown).

More surprising than this pattern, however, is the finding that boys also report higher levels of “actual” influence from the romantic partner. The second set of models in Table 3 show a significant gender gap in reports of “actual” partner influence. In addition to a significant effect of gender, Hispanic youth scored lower on partner influence relative to their white counterparts. Lower self-esteem is associated with greater partner influence, and youths involved in longer-duration relationships also scored higher on “actual” influence. Sexual intercourse was not related to perceptions of partner influence. The interactions of gender with other sociodemographic variables as well as other relationship measures were not significant in this model. Thus, these results indicate that the gender gap is consistent across youths who vary in developmental stage, race/ethnicity, mother’s education, and seriousness of the relationship.

The scales measuring partner influence (attempts and actual) are rather general (e.g., “X influences what I do”), and thus do not provide a full picture of (a) specific mechanisms of influence, (b) the areas or domains in which boys believe they have been influenced, or (c) the nature of their reactions to various influence attempts. Although a comprehensive examination of these issues is beyond the scope of this analysis, the narrative data do provide a more in-depth portrait of these processes.¹⁰ The specific domains referenced within the narrative accounts are of particular interest, because they indicate influence on many potentially important relationship dynamics and behavioral outcomes—ranging from boys’ behavior within the romantic context to academic performance

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of specific mechanisms of influence and reactions to influence attempts, see Trella (2005).

and delinquency involvement. Given boys' initial lack of familiarity and confidence with intimate ways of relating, it is perhaps not surprising to find that some boys indicate that girlfriends had influenced their ability to relate in a more intimate fashion:

Yeah, well it was a while . . . like about three months. Her mom was having problems . . . and so like she just kept talking to me a lot you know what I'm saying, and I listened and I tried to help and I had problems and you know we just, that was somebody we could open up to each other, so it was like I could talk to her and she could talk to me. [Todd, 17]

Todd described a gradual process that began with Caroline's willingness to open up to him about some of her own family problems. Eventually Todd found that he could not only be helpful to her, but that he also increasingly began to talk with Caroline about some of his own problems. Although he does not state this directly, Caroline may have influenced not only his willingness to engage in intimate self-disclosure, but the way in which he chose to handle problems that the two had discussed in this more intimate fashion.

In addition to modifications in their relationship-based selves, a number of the narratives reference specific changes that the youths indicate they had made in other important areas of their lives, shifts in perspective and behavior that respondents specifically connect to the influence of their romantic partners. Consider the following narrative excerpts:

[Julie] makes me want to do better in school and stuff. I want to do well because of her because she is really smart and she's got a real good grade point average. Mine isn't as high as hers so I try to be up there and I don't want to look stupid. I don't think she would want me to be dumb. [Rob, 18]

For like um the past two years, you know that I've been with her it has been, you know, about school. We both are carrying 3.8 averages and stuff. You know we're both kind of you know, kind of pushing each other along like, "you should really go do this." So academically, we help each other like a lot. [Dan, 17]

I don't know it's weird but certain things make me want to go out and do better. I don't know why. . . You know Melanie, Melanie makes me

want to do a hell of a lot better you know . . .¹¹
[Chad, 18]

As the first quote makes clear, Julie is not simply one more friend who has been added to Rob's total mix of definitions favorable to academic achievement, and this hints at potentially distinctive influence mechanisms across types of reference others (notably peers versus romantic partners). Reciprocal role-taking experiences that elicit positive emotions provide an enriched social terrain for further development, as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes reciprocally influence self-views, including views of self in relation to these valued others. Here the positive emotions elicited within the romantic context can be seen as providing energy and valence to compatible or even new lines of action (e.g., Collins 2004). The last quote from Chad nicely evokes this notion of an energizing component.

Theorists have often noted that similar others (e.g., close same-gender friends) are very important as a source of reference. This is a sound assertion, based on basic principles of identification. Nevertheless, relationships based in elements of difference are also potentially important, as contrasts offer more in the way of a developmental challenge (see, e.g., Cooley [1902] 1970:380), and at times a blueprint for how to make specific changes and adjustments (Giordano 1995; Giordano et al. 2002). For example, Todd learns about self-disclosure through his partner's own tendency to self-disclose, as well as her encouragement of his own efforts to do so. Yet describing romantic relationships only in terms of contrasts provides an incomplete portrait of these relationships. If difference were the only dynamic involved, individuals might not be inclined to enter into the type of sustained interaction that results in a social influence process. In short, some level of identification or social coordination necessar-

¹¹ These narratives provide a strong contrast with Frost's (2001) description of boys' singular concern with what peers think of them, citing Kimmel (1994:128–29): "this kind of policing of identity construction, reflects a profound need to be accepted and approved by men: 'There is no strong concern for women's approval as they are in too low a place on the social ladder.'"

ily precedes role-taking and in effect makes it possible (see, e.g., Engdahl 2004; Miller 1973).¹² This neo-Meadian view, along with other sociology of emotions theorizing, tends to position emotions at the center of change processes, as individuals draw inspiration from their points of connection and a new direction via the element of contrast.¹³

PERCEIVED POWER BALANCE. The findings and discussion focus on influence processes that may be subtle and incremental. In the examples relating to school performance, Rob wants Julie to think well of him, and Dan and his romantic partner are even more in tune, both having a strong commitment to keeping up their high grade point averages. Yet not all influence attempts lead individuals in a direction they wish to go. As stated at the outset, many of the significant differences that male and female adolescents bring to romantic relationships are not entirely overcome by a developing mutuality of perspectives that we described in the previous section. When interests clearly diverge, considerations of power become especially important.

Table 3 presents results of analyses focused on the perceived power balance in the current or most recent relationship (who has the most say in a disagreement—overall and in relation to specific domains). In the zero-order model, the gender coefficient is statistically significant; boys' scores are lower, indicating on average a relatively less favorable (to self) view of

the power balance within their relationship. It is important to point out that the modal response to each question is egalitarian (having equal say); thus these findings reflect a significant gender difference where respondents have diverged from this more common response across the four items that make up this scale. We note also, however, that gender differences are significant for each of the items making up the scale (regarding overall say in relation to decisions about what the couple does and how much time they spend together, as well as about how far to go sexually) and for the total scale score.

Turning to the multivariate results, additional statistical analyses reveal that the best fitting model is a separate model for boys and girls (results not shown).¹⁴ Most of the covariates are similar in their effects on reports of power (youths whose mothers have less than a high school degree saw themselves as having a relatively more favorable power position, and African American youth are also likely to describe a relatively more favorable level of power in their relationships). Some gendered effects of covariates, however, are masked when a combined model is estimated. We find that relationship duration does not influence girls' reports, but longer duration of the relationship is related to *less* perceived power in the case of male respondents. In contrast, while sexual intercourse experience was again not related to girls' reports about power, boys who reported that the relationship had become sexually intimate reported a *more* favorable (to self) power balance, compared with the reports of male adolescents whose relationships had not become sexually intimate. It is important to highlight that within models focused only on the subsample of sexually active male and female youths, the overall gender difference remains significant, with boys reporting a less favorable power balance relative to similarly situated girls. Nevertheless, these intriguing interaction results warrant additional scrutiny and exploration, as we did not have a theoretical basis for expecting these patterns. In addition, it is of interest

¹² Our own interpretation of this dynamic differs slightly from Engdahl (2004) and Miller's (1973) emphases, as we posit a level of recognition of these points of connection on the part of the actors involved.

¹³ Research is needed on specific domains (e.g., achievement, delinquency, sexuality), where complex portraits of partner influence and gender effects will undoubtedly emerge. TARS data document effects of romantic partners' grades on respondents' grades, net of peer and parent influences, but we find a stronger effect for boys (Phelps et al. 2006). Using Add Health data, we found an effect of partners' minor deviance on respondents' deviance for male and female respondents, but a stronger effect for girls. Effects of the romantic partner's involvement in serious delinquency were comparable for boys and girls (Haynie et al. 2005).

¹⁴ Based on statistical tests, we do not find support for separate gender models for any of the other relationship qualities (communication awkwardness, confidence navigating relationships, love, and influence attempts or 'actual' influence).

that the two findings operate in an apparently distinct fashion—the association between duration and lower perceived power on the part of boys is somewhat unexpected from a traditional inequality point of view, while the findings regarding intercourse are more consistent with the idea that sexual involvement is a more pivotal event or marker for male adolescents (Holland et al. 1996).

The quantitative findings provide indications that, in contrast to the direction of much theorizing within the adolescence literature, when male and female respondents departed from an egalitarian description of the power dynamics within their relationships, males were more likely to describe a tilt favoring the partner's greater decision-making power. A number of narratives also highlight distinct interests on the part of partners, and a perceived power balance that corresponds with the statistical results:

I guess she was more mature than I was and I guess I wasn't on her level you know because she wanted to do it [have sex] more than I did . . . she said that I wasn't mature enough and you know all that stuff . . . I was too young, I was scared, I didn't know what I was doing I wasn't ready for it. I think I felt like I was too young . . . she was my girlfriend and that's what she wanted. [David, 18]

She's like okay we're going out now, and I tried making plans with my friends, but Amy's like "No we're going out here and we're doing this." I just wasn't going to live with that anymore . . . there was something about her she always wanted to change me. She wanted me to do this and wear this and do that. I was like okay. Whatever. I'd do it but I don't see it [as] right. [Josh, 17]

David's longer narrative confirms that this adolescent did have sex with his girlfriend, even though he felt that he was not "ready for it." Josh also admitted that he often went along with his former girlfriend's preferences, even though his narrative clearly telegraphed that he experienced this power balance in a negative way ("I don't see it as right," "I just wasn't going to live with that anymore"). The latter quote, then, provides support for the direction of the quantitative results, while reflecting the continuing impact of traditional gender scripts.

VARIATIONS

Further support for characterizations emphasized in the peer-based literature can be found

when we confront the variability in boys' orientations and relationship styles evident within the narrative histories. This heterogeneity is necessarily somewhat obscured by our focus here on aggregate trends. A symbolic interactionist framework can accommodate explorations of subtypes and variations, as theorists have emphasized that while interactions influence identities, as identities begin to solidify, they become a kind of cognitive filter for decision-making (Matsueda and Heimer 1997). Over time, these differentiated identities increasingly structure social interaction in line with these self-conceptions. For example, Donny, a 17 year old, had apparently developed a strong identity as a player within his high school. Donny's first sexual experience occurred at an early age, and this respondent estimated about 35 sexual partners. Donny was also unable to recall the names of all of the young women with whom he had become sexually intimate ("I don't know I would have to go through some letters"). While he considered some of these young women girlfriends, he nevertheless often cheated on them, and indicated that he had control within his relationships. Consistent with this portrait, Donny admitted physically abusing at least one young woman he had dated and reacted aversively to the idea of expressing his feelings ("I really don't like talking about my feelings . . . I don't know I just don't like talking about it").

Donny's narrative thus departs significantly from the aggregate portrait that emerges from the quantitative analysis; yet these types of cases and corresponding identities are important, as they are vivid representations of traditional masculinity that virtually demand attention. Thorne (1993) noted the heavy societal and even research focus on what she termed the "Big Man" social type. It has been important to highlight that the aggregate findings and many narratives do not accord with Donny's perspective; indeed a number of boys specifically position away from this social type in discussions of their own self-views. Yet the number of references to players and other traditional gender attitudes itself affirms the continuing impact of such gender scripts:

I rather focus on one girl than a whole bunch because I don't think that I'm like some player or something and I really don't like those people that go out and have a bunch of girlfriends and stuff and

they think that they're some big pimp or whatever. [Michael, 16]

Additional research on masculine styles such as the player are needed, because (a) a host of negative social dynamics are directly and indirectly associated with this orientation, and (b) adolescents apparently believe that this is a more prevalent and highly valued social role than appears to be the case. Such shared misunderstandings are consequential, and are undoubtedly heavily influenced by the character of peer interactions that have been so effectively captured in prior research. For example, Eric explained why he does not engage in intimate self-disclosure with his male friends: "most of them don't, they don't probably think the way I think or have the feelings that I, feelings that I have for girls." We also saw evidence of this in earlier quotes (e.g., Steve's admission that he is "like the little girl in the relationship," or Derrick's reference to negative emotions after his girlfriend broke up with him, "I'm on my weekly cycle."). Undoubtedly differences between discussions within peer settings and the more private experience of these relationships serves to perpetuate boys' beliefs about the uniqueness of their feelings and emotional reactions.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we developed a symbolic interactionist perspective on adolescent romantic relationships that draws on Mead's basic insights, as well as recent treatments of the role of emotions in social interaction and self-development processes. Relying on structured interview data collected from a large stratified random sample of adolescents, we found support for hypotheses that differ significantly from traditional accounts of the role of gender as an influence on the relationship dynamics within these romantic liaisons. Results suggest a portrait of adolescent boys as relatively less confident and yet more emotionally engaged in romantic relationships than previous characterizations would lead us to expect. The findings regarding power and influence are also unexpected from a straightforward gender inequality point of view. Although we did not specifically predict systematic gender differences in reports of power and partner influence, these results do follow logically from our con-

ceptual discussion and fit well with the findings concerning communication and emotion.

As boys make the transition from peers to romance, they lack experience with intimate ways of relating (as evidenced by lower perceived confidence in navigating relationships and at the bivariate level, among white and Hispanic respondents, by greater perceived communication awkwardness), even as they are beginning to develop a high interest and at times strong emotional attachment to certain romantic partners (as evidenced by the absence of strong gender differences on reports of feelings of love for the current/most recent partner). In line with our symbolic interactionist framework, we argued that these relationships set up conditions favorable to new definitions, to the emergence of new emotions, and, at least within these relationship contexts, to glimpses of a different and more connected view of self. The argument that boys move in a straight line toward autonomy, or the declaration that "heterosexuality is masculinity" (Holland et al. 1996) are global assertions that do not take into account the adjustments that boys as well as girls continually make as they begin to forge this new type of intimate social relationship.

Although additional research is needed on these and other relationship processes, we do not believe that the results derive from unique peculiarities of our measurement approach. First, the findings across various indices are themselves quite consistent. For example, differences on the power and influence scales are all significant and vary in the same direction. In addition, findings fit well with observations based on a range of methods employed during preliminary phases of the TARS study (see, e.g., Giordano et al. 2001), and are further validated by the content of in-depth relationship-history narratives that we also collected and drew upon in the present analysis. We also estimated a series of interactions that in most instances support the idea that documented similarities (feelings of love) and differences (boys' lower confidence levels, perceptions of greater partner power and influence) generalize across respondents who vary significantly in race/ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status levels, and age. We also estimated models that contained gender by sexual intercourse and duration interactions, and the lack of significance of these interactions in most models suggests that

the observed gender patterns are not strongly influenced by length of the relationship or whether it had become sexually intimate. Exceptions were associations between sexual intercourse experience and duration of the relationship and boys' reports of power, findings that warrant additional research scrutiny. Finally, controls for variations in family and peer dynamics, other basic features of the relationship, and self-esteem, although sometimes significant, did not strongly influence or attenuate these results.

The symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective described at the outset provides a generally useful framework for interpreting our results. As we have suggested throughout this analysis, it is important to avoid an adult vantage point when focusing on early heterosexual relationships. It is quite possible that as boys gain in social maturity and confidence, and links to traditional sources of inequality become more salient, dynamic features within these romantic relationships will more often and more directly correspond to traditional gender scripts. In line with this idea, prior research has shown that certain transition events such as the move from cohabitation to marriage more often depend on male rather than female preferences (see, e.g., Brown 2000). Another possibility is that the nature of reports of relationship qualities and dynamics we documented in this study reflect cohort changes associated with broader societal level transformations. This interpretation would be consistent with Risman and Schwartz's (2002) recent discussion of apparent temporal shifts in adolescent sexual behavior patterns.

More research is also needed on the heterogeneity within this and other sample groups, as briefly described earlier. Our observations of variation are similar to those described by Moffatt (1989), who found that some university men emphasized love and romance in their personal narratives, while those whom he labeled the "Neanderthals" and "Neoconservatives" held more traditionally gendered views that appeared to influence their relationship styles and sexual behaviors significantly. Since few studies had directly assessed relationship processes during adolescence (and the results provide a strong contrast with key assertions about them contained within the existing literature), our findings should provide a useful

background for exploring such variations in more detail in subsequent analyses.

It would also be useful to examine factors linked to within-individual shifts and variations in the ascendance or movement away from more traditionally gendered patterns and relationship styles (Thorne 1993). This suggests a more situated (again resonant with the symbolic interactionist framework) rather than a fixed or overarching gender inequalities approach to relationship processes. Aside from connections to major life-course transitions, for example, researchers could explore how certain relationship experiences connect to such shifts in perspective. Even within a focal relationship or time period, situations that link to boys' enactment of traditional/nontraditional repertoires need to be further highlighted. As an example, some of the same boys who expressed caring sentiments about their girlfriends undoubtedly make denigrating comments about girls when in the company of their circle of friends. Some boys also described tensions between their wish to spend time with friends and also to be responsive to their girlfriends. The fear of being seen as controlled by their girlfriends and subsequently ridiculed by friends reflects well that boys care very much what their friends think of them (a primary emphasis of prior research), but also what their girlfriends think of them (a conclusion of the present study). In line with this notion, we found that male respondents scored higher on a scale measuring perceived influence from friends as well as on the index of influence from romantic partners (results available on request). The idea of crosscurrents of social influence should in the long run prove more useful than the theme of autonomy so often highlighted as the central dynamic associated with boys' development.

The current analysis focused primarily on boys' perspectives on romance, as this was a particularly noticeable gap in the existing adolescence literature. Nevertheless, a comprehensive understanding of these social relationships obviously awaits more systematic investigations of girls' experiences. Where research has delved into the role of romantic involvement on girls' development, the focus of sociological investigations has, as suggested in the literature review, remained almost exclusively on sexuality or alternatively, negative outcomes—for example, establishing links to depression (Joyner and

Udry 2000) and to relationship violence (Hagan and Foster 2001; Halpern et al. 2001), or pointing out how dating derails young women's academic pursuits (Holland and Eisenhart 1990). The conceptual framework and data presented here provide a starting point for a more multifaceted approach to girls' relationship experiences. Future research linking dating and particular outcomes needs not only to assess whether adolescents have entered the dating world, but also to capture variations in partners' attitude and behavioral profiles, as well as the qualitative features of these romantic relationships. It is important to note that girls' narratives provide support for the direction of the results reported here, while also highlighting significant variations. Some young women described what they viewed as egalitarian relationships or a favorable power balance (e.g., "he wears what I want him to wear"), but others stressed that boyfriends had engaged in a range of controlling, intrusive behaviors. The aggregate findings are an important backdrop for further exploring the impact of these variations, as the subset of girls who describe themselves as having low power may experience this power balance in an especially detrimental way (for reasons highlighted in prior work, and because such girls may compare their own situations to those of other teens whose relationships are characterized by less traditionally gendered dynamics). A full exploration from girls' points of view also requires moving beyond the immediate confines of the dating context to consider some of the indirect ways in which involvement in the heterosexual world influences girls' well-being, including concerns about weight and appearance (Pipher 1994), and connections to relationships with parents (e.g., Joyner and Udry [2000] found that some of the gender difference in the dating-depression link was associated with increases in girls' conflicts with their parents).

Finally, the symbolic interactionist perspective highlights the importance of adolescents' own constructions of the nature and meanings of their relationships. This framework recognizes that many important relationship features are inherently subjective (e.g., adolescents are better positioned than others to comment upon their own confidence levels or feelings of love). It is, however, important to supplement the perceptual accounts described here with findings

based on other methodological strategies. For example, teens may report a relatively egalitarian power balance, or even greater power on the part of the female partner, but laboratory-based studies or other methods may well uncover more traditionally gendered communication and relationship dynamics that are not well appreciated by adolescents themselves. Yet we hope that researchers will continue to explore the subjectively experienced aspects of adolescent romantic relationships, as these provide an important supplement to peer-focused ethnographies and the behavioral emphasis of large-scale surveys such as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health).

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