

Masculinity in Adolescent Males' Early Romantic and Sexual Heterosexual Relationships

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Masculinity in Adolescent Males' Early Romantic and Sexual Heterosexual Relationships**ABSTRACT**

There is a need to better understand the complex inter-relationship between the adoption of masculinity during adolescence and the development of early romantic and sexual relationships. The purpose of this study was to describe features of adolescent masculinity and how it is expressed in the contexts of early to middle adolescent males' romantic and sexual relationships. Thirty- three 14-16 year old males were recruited from an adolescent clinic serving a community with high STI rates, and were asked open ended questions about their relationships-- how they developed, progressed, and ended. Participants described a high degree of relationally-oriented beliefs and behaviors related to romantic and sexual relationships, such as a desire for intimacy and trust. They also described a more limited degree of conventionally masculine beliefs and behaviors. These often co-existed or overlapped. Implications for the clinical care of similar groups of adolescents are described.

Keywords: adolescent; male; relationships; adolescent development; masculinity; sexual behavior

Introduction

Prevailing dominant masculine values in our culture (hegemonic masculinity) suggest adolescent males want sex, not relationships.[1, 2] This assumes males' masculinity is similar to hegemonic adult masculinity, and focuses on characteristics such as sexual prowess, objectification of women, and an incapacity for intimacy in romantic and sexual relationships. However, recent research with adolescent males suggests that values and behaviors related to sex and relationships are likely more complex.[1, 3] The purpose of this study was to describe features and desires of early to middle adolescent males in the context of their romantic and sexual relationships.

Masculinity is a set of shared social beliefs about how men should and should not present themselves. Contemporary hegemonic adult masculinity often focuses on characteristics that negatively influence close relationships, such as aggression (including sexual aggression), a primary desire to satisfy sexual drives, and the objectification of women; characteristics such as the desire and capacity for intimate companionship within a romantic relationship and the ability to express emotions are considered un-masculine.[4-7] However, some aspects of masculinity, such as protecting loved ones, support relationships.[8]

Understanding adolescent masculinity is important to males' health. Research links masculine values with a variety of negative sexual health behaviors and outcomes in adolescents. Adhering to more hegemonic masculine norms is associated with more sexual partners, less intimate relationships with those partners at last intercourse, less consistent condom use, and less belief in male responsibility to prevent pregnancy. However, the majority of studies adopt conceptual frameworks, constructs and measures from studies of masculinity in adults, and then apply these adult frameworks to adolescent males.[4, 9-12]

Prevalent thinking suggests masculine behaviors are “neither biologically determined nor unique,” but instead are learned behaviors that begin in early childhood and continue into adulthood.[4, 13-15] Adolescence is an important time for this type of social learning because of the developmental transitions, including the onset and intensification of romantic relationships.[16] For males it is a period of learning masculine social norms in romantic relationships within a highly gendered peer culture.[17-19]

Existing research on adolescent sexual and romantic relationships suggests adolescent masculinity may be more complex than typically portrayed. For example, several studies report that early to middle adolescent males frequently want closeness in romantic relationships. In a multiethnic sample of ninth grade males, intimacy ranked above sexual pleasure and social status as an important relationship goal.[20] In a study of adolescent romantic relationships, males and girls reported similar levels of emotional engagement.[21]

Although relationships are a central component of both theory and research on masculinity in adults, less data are available on the interaction between masculine beliefs and relationships among adolescents. A qualitative study of eighth grade males’ relationships highlighted a complex interaction between their desire for intimacy and the pressure to conform to traditional masculine norms, such as the need to maintain emotional distance and the view of sexual relationships as competitive endeavors.[3] Among 10th grade males, getting to know one’s partner was the most commonly endorsed reason for dating; relational motives, such as liking or loving the person were the most common motivations for sex.[22] These findings imply the need to better understand features of adolescent masculinity and its complex inter-relationship with the development of early romantic and sexual relationships. The purpose of this

study was to describe features of adolescent masculinity and how it is expressed in the contexts of early to middle adolescent males' romantic and sexual relationships.

METHOD

Participants

Thirty-three 14-16 year old adolescent males were recruited during routine medical visits at a community adolescent clinic as part of a larger study of relationship development and sexually transmitted infection (STI) risk in adolescent males. The clinic serves low-income, Medicaid-eligible, predominately African American adolescents with high rates of early sexual onset. After parental permission and adolescent consent, adolescents chose a private interview location either a private room at the clinic, or a scheduled interview at the adolescent's home or a library. Although the various sites of the interviews offered varied degrees of absolute privacy, interviews were conducted privately without interruption and without any obvious possibility of being overheard. Approval was obtained from the Indiana University Institutional Review Board.

Interviews

To decrease limitations due to a priori assumptions about how participants conceptualized relationships and masculinity, exploratory ethnographic interviews elicited adolescents' social knowledge related to relationships and sexual behavior.[20, 23] One hour face-to-face interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. A male interviewer conducted all interviews and participants were compensated \$20 per interview. Data for these analyses were drawn primarily from baseline interviews; in some cases, a second interview 6-9 months later was referenced to clarify experiences and opinions.

The interview guide covered young men's relationship and sexual experiences, with a focus on their most recent partners. Open-ended questions were asked about their relationships, how they developed, progressed, and ended. Personal narratives and stories were encouraged to illustrate their points. The interviewer listened for shared content and meaning, and asked participants to refine their responses. The interview guide started with an open-ended question such as, "In as much detail as possible, can you tell me about your most recent girl/boyfriend?", with sample follow-up questions, "How did it start?", "How did you let them know you were interested?", "What kinds of things do you do together?", and "How has the relationship changed over time?" Participants were also asked about individuals they were interested in, and individuals that they had sex with.

Data Analysis

Textual data were analyzed by identifying shared concepts and models of social cognition held by social groups. [24, 25] Rather than applying pre-specified conceptual frameworks for gender and masculinity, we instead examined relationship and masculinity issues that arose in the young men's stories. Transcribed interviews topics were indexed based on a literature review, field notes, and a preliminary read of the transcripts. Through close reading of the transcripts by indexed topics, conceptual categories were developed. Once a category was provisionally defined, additional examples were sought during subsequent readings. Examples of categories included vulnerability, emotional closeness, intimacy, and "being burned". We determined the consistency of each category through repeated comparisons and developed a list of its properties. These categories were organized into a model of adolescent masculinity. Interviewing and analysis were intertwined in an iterative process; investigators met frequently to discuss emerging concepts. We assessed validity and reliability by (1) testing preliminary

models against analysis of subsequent interviews, and (2) having three authors (D.B., J.R., and M.O.) analyze the transcripts, resolving differences by discussion.

RESULTS

Participants

Participants' mean age was 14.9 years. Ethnicities included African American (n=30), white (n=2) and Latino (n=1);, sixteen were sexually experienced at baseline. A total of 4 participants, tested positive for STIs (2 Chlamydia, 2 Trichomonas). All participants except one identified as heterosexual. This participant identified as bisexual, but only described romantic and sexual relationships with other males. Two additional participants reported experimental sexual behaviors with other males (1 oral sex, 1 kissing), but described only relationships (romantic or sexual) with females. Because only one participant described relationships with males, we limited our analysis to those describing relationships with females.

Overview

Participants described a range of beliefs, desires, and behaviors related to relationships and sex. These included desirable partner characteristics, intimacy and closeness, trust, vulnerability, protection and caretaking, a lack of gamesmanship, female initiation of relationships, and little objectification of females or homophobia.(see Table 1) Results are organized following the progression of the participants' relationships, from the development to the breakup.

Desirable Partner Characteristics

Most romantic and sexual partners were similar in age to participants, generally within one or two grades in school. Exceptions were both older and younger. Both sexually inexperienced and sexually experienced participants sought romantic nice looking partners with

“good personalities”, a sense of humor, and future goals. “Wife” or “Wifey” were terms frequently used for envisioned long term relationships with a respected and trusted female.

Respect and trust were important characteristics of this special female, as demonstrated by the following two participants:

Interviewer: What makes you more interested in her being your girlfriend ...?

Participant: It's important to have a girl that is special, that can be your wife, that you can trust.

I: How do you know when to trust her?

P: When you can tell her things that you don't tell other people and it doesn't get back to anyone. (15 y/o sexually inexperienced)

Participant: "That's wifey material you know?"

Interviewer: What do you mean by wifey?

P: Well you can have a girl that is good looking that maybe you want to have sex with, but she can't be your wife. If she is just willing to have sex then that is not ok. You need someone who carries themselves well, who respects themselves, I mean that is going to be the mother of your children some day."(16y/o sexually experienced).

Female Initiation of Relationships

Females initiated romantic relationships, most participants reported. Particularly for first and early romantic relationships, the girl generally either asked the participant outright to be her boyfriend, or prompted the participant to ask her to be his girlfriend. Sometimes intermediaries, such as friends, would tell the participant that the girl wanted him to ask her out. The following two quotes illustrate female partners initiating romantic relationships.

Interviewer: And how did you know that you wanted to have this girl become your girlfriend?

Participant: I really didn't know, she just asked me...We was in class and ... then she had brought up that she [be] liking me for awhile,... and then she was like “do you want to go out with me?” And I was like yeah. (14y/o sexually inexperienced)

Interviewer: How did you start dating?

Participant: Well, guess, she started, she wanted to, she said she like me and stuff and I guess she said that she wanted a relationship so we got into a relationship.(15yo sexually experienced)

Intimacy, Closeness and Trust

Participants wanted meaningful relationships. Their descriptions of early romantic relationships emphasized a desire for closeness, intimacy and trust. Almost all reported a desire to develop closeness, connect to, and have a meaningful friendship with potential partners, whether or not sex was part of the relationship. Their experiences of intimacy within these relationships included disclosing likes or love, revealing their private feelings or sharing details about themselves or their family. Many described behaviors that facilitated feelings of intimacy, such as talking on the phone every day, or walking their partners to class,

Participants placed great importance on trust in relationships. Disclosure and sharing about difficult families and home situations appeared to be an important marker for trust and increasing intimacy in a relationship. In narratives, relationship dissolution was linked to trust issues (see below).

Sex in the Contexts of Relationships

Sex was desired in the context of a meaningful relationship. We observed this desire for relationally meaningful sex among several subgroups of participants: (1) males who had never had sex, (2) males who had sex, but only ever had a single girlfriend, and (3) males who emphasized “caring”. Among young men in these groups, relationships were “ready” for sex if there was appropriate friendship, trust, and commitment:

“I want to have that experience [sex], but I want it to mean something. I want it to be something we both want to do, not because we just want the experience of doing it. I want to look back on that and see like, I really care for her and not look back on her like, oh , I had sex with her.” (15 year old, sexually inexperienced)

“It just made me feel like I could trust her more now ... because I like have a deep relationship with her now. Basically it was like having sex with her, now I have a more deeper relationship with her...It just seemed like we connected in some kind of way.” (15 year old, recently sexually experienced)

Few participants described sex as the main goal of opposite sex interactions, few described relationships solely as a means of obtaining sex, few described trying to trick or talk a partner into having sex, and few evidenced pride and boastfulness about numbers of sexual conquests. Most participants did not use the words such as “player” or “scoring” to describe their behaviors, and many criticized the behavior of treating sex as a game and their lack of respect.

Vulnerability

Participants described feelings of vulnerability in two areas - relationships and sex. The intimacy and closeness of romantic and sexual relationships left participants feeling vulnerable to social harms. Social vulnerabilities included embarrassment or losing face in front of their peers, feeling disrespected, and having their confidence betrayed. For example, several participants described feeling hurt and vulnerable when presented with proof that a girlfriend was flirting with or “talking to” other males when the participant was not around, on seeing a girlfriend identify herself on her Facebook page as interested in another male, and having a girl spread rumors about the participant (see discussion of relationship dissolution below).

A second area of vulnerability was the lack of knowledge about sex and concerns about their own capacity to sexually perform. For sexually inexperienced participants, or participants who had only limited sexual experiences (one or two partners, one or two episodes of sex), sex was viewed as a competency, rather than as a game or an opportunity. A sexually inexperienced 15 year old stated, “Sex is one of the main things that I am insecure about,” and a 16 year old (also

sexually inexperienced) stated, *“I just am not ready for it [sex] yet. I mean I do [want sex], but I don’t think I am there yet. I just wouldn’t feel very comfortable doing it.”*

The Role of Protector and Caretaker

Many participants emphasized their role as protecting their girlfriend, particularly from unwanted sexual touching and innuendo from other males. A 15 year old who was not yet sexually experienced became angry when other males tried to flirt with and touch the girl: *“I said ok, if you want to be my girlfriend then I should be able to defend you if guys touch your butt.”* Others avoided certain relationships because of perceived or actual high degrees of protecting efforts that included constant vigilance and potential fighting.

Several males described their role in the relationship as taking care of their girlfriend. This involved listening to her problems, cheering her up, and being generally helpful. Sometimes this was a one-way interaction. For example, the participants received confidences, but did not necessarily confide in girlfriends. They generally described their role in helping their partner meet some type of need, whether emotional, financial, or social.

Female Initiation of Early Sexual Experiences

Female partners initiated the sexual act by an obvious, but non-verbal signal in early sexual experiences, most participants reported. Some examples were reports of female partners displaying a condom; others described partners taking her clothes or underwear off. Frequently, participants were surprised by their female partner’s initiation of sex, as described by this 15 year old sexually experienced male:

“like one time, we was kissing and she grabbed my, my penis, and... Well it was a surprise to me because I never really had it done to me, I wasn’t really expecting her to do that.”

A smaller number of participants described more verbally assertive female partners. A 15 year old sexually experienced participant described a party when a girl asks him to have sex:

“She just said ‘ I want to have sex with you ’ and I was like ‘ I don ’t understand. ’ And she was like ‘ I am for real, ’ and I was like ‘ uh, I can ’t do that. ’ But, if a girl take it to the next level, a boy is not going to back down on that.... so she started feeling on me and I was like, uh, I can ’t stop her from feeling on me... So then I took it from there.”

“Being Burned”: Relationship Dissolution due to Distrust

Usually, relationships ended due to distrust. For distrust, we observed two distinct patterns. The first pattern, “being burned,” was common, and consisted of trusting until that trust was betrayed. In their narratives, participants’ early desires for intimacy, high importance of trust, and feelings of vulnerability were linked to betrayal, or “being burned.” Ways of “being burned” included betrayal of confidences or personal information, experiences of disrespect, and infidelity. Examples included having a girlfriend talk or flirt with other males, rumors and gossip, or having a girlfriend kiss, touch, or engage in sexual behavior with other males. Here a 16 year old sexually experienced participant describes his initial attachment, and then emotional response to having a partner break up with him:

I got attached to her....I was kind of depressed because I wanted to be with her, ... and it kind of hurt because that was the first time I ever sat and cried over a female and really felt that much.... (16 year old, sexually experienced)

A subset of these participants justified a lack of emotional involvement in subsequent relationships by a past experience of being “burned,” as described by this 16 year old sexually experienced participant:

Interviewer: *[You describe yourself as] emotionless.- Is there a time when you are with any of these girls that you have had an emotion, any emotion?*

Participant: *Well yeah. That was back in school like 14, 13. I had my heart broke that’s why I’m the way I am now.*

Interviewer: *And you haven’t had it broken since?*

Participant: Nope. Nope 'cause I won't allow it...I just know what to do now and what to say and teach myself a different way of goin' to females." (16 year old sexually experienced)

Less common was general distrust of everyone: *"I don't know, I don't trust. I really don't trust girlsI don't trust anybody really."* (15 year old, sexually experienced).

Homosexuality and Homophobia

Most participants denied any perceived or actual homosexual behaviors. For example, all denied any episodes of group masturbation, even while watching pornography together. Several directly and specifically said they would never have sex with male, when queried broadly about their sexual limits. Few participants expressed overt homophobia. One 16 year old sexually inexperienced participant linked performing oral sex on a female to homosexuality: *"And, I'm not putting my mouth where some other guy's penis has been. That's gay!"*

Little Gamesmanship, Objectification of Women, or Players

Very few participants described sex as the main goal of opposite sex interactions and relationships. Few described trying to trick or talk a partner into having sex, or evidenced pride and boastfulness about numbers of sexual conquests. Those who did were all older and sexually experienced participants. One described himself as having no emotional involvement and viewed female partners more as sexual objects than as individuals; the rest limited this type of gamesmanship around sex and sexual objectification to female side partners or concurrent partners. Participants frequently remarked that female side partners were also primarily interested in sex.

Discussion

This qualitative study advances our understanding of adolescent males' early relationships in two important ways. First, close relationships were important to participants. Consistent with other studies of younger adolescent males [20, 21], participants in our study desired trusting, intimate, and caring relationships. Participants expressed vulnerability and dependence, which are thought to be characteristics of relationships that, if met with caring and pro-social responses, can increase intimacy and attachment.[26] This contrasts with descriptions of older adolescent males [23].

Second, we observed only limited endorsement of many hegemonic masculine beliefs, such as male as the aggressor/initiator, relationships focused around sex, and an unwillingness to become emotionally close. The one area in which we observed high agreement with more hegemonic masculine beliefs were that the male should be a protector and take care of their female partner. It is notable that this is a relationally oriented masculine belief, and can be consistent with other relational beliefs expressed by the participants, such as the desire for intimacy and closeness, and the importance of trust.

The ability of the qualitative approach to produce rich descriptions and explore nuances is a strength, but also a limitation, in its use of a small ethnically and socioeconomically homogeneous sample from a medium sized Midwestern city. Results are transferrable to the extent that they are applied to similar populations of adolescent males. A second limitation of our study is the cross-sectional nature of the analysis. Learning and development during adolescence is a continuous process. A third limitation is that the sites of interviews offered varying degrees of absolute privacy. Lastly, employing a male interviewer offered the possibility of enhancing

the portrayal of hegemonic masculine values.

Although a snap-shot in time, our findings demonstrate that even high risk males have limited expression of more hegemonic masculine values and high expression of relationally oriented values. This study expands on the body of literature by providing a mapping of masculine values within early relationships as they develop. Together with existing literature, these findings suggest that there may be an “adolescent masculinity”, in which relationally oriented values are more prominent. This study could also guide future research in this area, particularly investigations of adolescent males’ perceptions of masculinity portrayed by their peers or interaction of the participants with no, some, or extensive sexual experience.

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Table 1. Characteristics “Observed”		
Purely relationally oriented characteristics	Overlapping characteristics	Purely conventional masculine characteristics
Desire for intimacy and closeness (common)	Protection (many)	Emotional distance—in context of being “burned” (many)
Feelings of vulnerability (common)	Care taking (many)	Gamesmanship (not seen)
High importance of trust (common)	Potential for fatherhood—as a sign of relational commitment, rather than as a symbol of masculinity	Objectification of women (very little)
Sex in the context of relationships (many)		Male as initiator (not seen)
		Homophobia (very little)