

Sexual Intimacy in Dating Relationships

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The patterning of sexual interaction in male-female dyads and the links between sexual behavior and emotional intimacy were investigated as part of a two-year study of college dating couples. Despite generally permissive and egalitarian attitudes, traditional sexual role playing in which the man encourages intercourse and the woman limits the couple's sexual intimacy was common. Three types of couples were compared: sexual traditionalists who abstained from coitus, sexual moderates who had coitus only after emotional intimacy was established, and sexual liberals who had coitus prior to developing emotional intimacy. Findings are discussed in terms of the psychological meaning of sexual behavior for young adults.

The impact of sexual behavior on the development of close, male-female relationships is not well understood. Social scientists have carefully scaled sexual attitudes and counted the frequency of various sexual acts. Indeed, Margaret Mead has noted that since Kinsey, "the language of tables and variables . . . has replaced Latin as the acceptable language for the discussion of sex" (1959, p. xvi). Seldom, however, have researchers explored the psychological meaning of sex for participants or the effects of sexual behavior on interpersonal relationships. In addition,

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research on premarital sex has typically focused on the attitudes and experiences of individuals, rather than on sexual interaction in couples (Kirkendall & Libby, 1966; Avery & Ridley, Note 1). In this study, we emphasize a dyadic approach to studying premarital sex in dating relationships. Two central issues guiding our inquiry were (a) the nature of sexual role playing in couples, and (b) the links between sexual behavior and emotional intimacy.

Sexual Role Playing

Traditional sex roles prescribe that men and women play different roles in sexual interactions. Men are expected to initiate sex, while women are expected to set limits on the couple's sexual intimacy (Bernard, 1966; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Safilios-Rothschild, 1977). For young men, seeing "how far you can get" often serves to affirm masculinity, to acknowledge the woman's sexual attractiveness, and to test her virtue. "The boy demonstrated his desirability by demanding more and more erotic satisfaction," Mead suggested, "while the girl demonstrated her sureness of her own popularity by refusing his request" (1959, p. xv). The woman's role as limit-setter is consistent with her presumed lesser interest in sex and her greater stake in preserving a good reputation and avoiding pregnancy.

Ehrmann's (1959) extensive study of dating couples, conducted more than two decades ago, substantiated this view of sexual role playing. Men typically exercised "positive control" in the relationship by initiating sex; women exercised "negative control" by refusing sex. Ehrmann found that both types of control were important. Some couples did not progress beyond petting because the man did not try to go farther. In many other couples, coitus did not occur because the woman used her veto.

More recent research on individual attitudes and sexual experience has documented an increasing convergence between the sexes over the past decade (Hunt, 1974; Hopkins, 1977). Both men and women are becoming more permissive in their attitudes, and young women are narrowing the gap with men in their sexual attitudes and behavior. It is not clear, however, whether these changes at the individual level have affected the patterning of sexual interaction in couples. There is at least some evidence—*anecdotal and systematic*—that traditional role playing persists, with men being more concerned with encouraging intercourse and women with avoiding it (McCormick, 1975; Safilios-Rothschild, 1977). Our study investigated this issue directly.

Sexual Behavior and Emotional Intimacy

Our second major goal was to examine links between the patterning of sexual behavior and the development of love and commitment in dating relationships. In recent years, increased sexual permissiveness (Hunt, 1974) has affected couples in two important ways. A greater proportion of unmarried couples are engaging in coitus, and intercourse is occurring at earlier stages in the development of a relationship. The impact of these changes is unknown, however. One view suggests that intercourse is an effective means of building emotional intimacy. An opposing position argues that premarital sex, or at least "instant sex" early in a relationship, may short-circuit intimacy and hinder the development of greater closeness and commitment.

Turner (1970) has noted that "the effects of sex relations depend on the meaning that people learn to attach to sex and not upon any natural or innate significance" (p. 324). In a society such as ours where competing meanings for sex are available, young people's own interpretations of their sexual behavior are of special importance. Interviews we conducted with college couples in our sample illustrate this diversity of meanings. For one couple, coitus was viewed as "an outward sign of cementing our relationship," while for another couple "it was part of our getting to know each other initially." A third couple felt that "we're better staying away from it right now." We sought to identify patterns that characterize orientations towards love and sex among young couples, and to investigate whether such patterns affect the development of commitment over a two-year period.

A related concern was possible sex differences in links between sex and emotional intimacy. Sexual intercourse has traditionally had different meanings for the two sexes (Safilios-Rothschild, 1977). Young women have traditionally been taught that love provides both the justification and meaning for sex. Women have been expected to postpone intercourse until marriage, or at least until a serious, committed relationship. Men, in contrast, have traditionally been permitted a greater variety of sexual meanings. In casual relationships, men could emphasize experimentation and "sex for fun"; in a committed relationship, sex was to be associated with love.

A two-year study of college-aged dating couples provided an opportunity to investigate these interrelated issues: the persistence of sexual role playing, the links between sexual behavior

and emotional intimacy, and possible differences in the sexual attitudes and experiences of men and women.

METHOD

Data reported in this paper come from a two-year study of the development of dating relationships (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976) begun in the spring of 1972. Participants were members of 231 college-aged dating couples recruited by letters mailed to a random sample of 5000 sophomores and juniors, half males and half females, at four colleges in the Boston area, and by advertising on campus. The colleges, chosen with a view towards diversity, included a large private university, a small private college, a Catholic university, and a state college for commuter students. (Details of recruitment and characteristics of the sample are described more fully in Hill, Note 2.)

When the study began, the modal couple was a sophomore woman dating a junior man. About half the participants' fathers had graduated from college and about one-fourth of the fathers held graduate degrees. About 44% of the respondents were Catholic, 26% were Protestant, and 25% were Jewish, reflecting the religious composition of the colleges in our sample. Virtually all participants (97%) were white. About 25% lived at home with their parents, another 35% lived in apartments or houses by themselves or with roommates, and 38% lived in college dormitories.

At the beginning of the study, the couples had been dating for a median period of about eight months—a third for five months or less, a third between five and 10 months, and third for longer than that. In three-fourths of the couples, both persons were dating their partner exclusively, but only 10% of the couples were engaged, and relatively few had concrete plans for marriage. One-fifth of the couples were living together "all or most of the time," and 60% were seeing one another daily.

Data Collection

At initial testing sessions, both members of each couple independently completed identical versions of a 40-page questionnaire concerning their background, attitudes, and dating relationship. Follow-up questionnaires were administered six months, one year, and two years after the initial session. Four-fifths of the original participants returned the two-year mail questionnaire.

To supplement these data, a smaller number of individuals and couples were interviewed over the course of the study.

Several sections of the initial questionnaire were devoted to sexual attitudes and behaviors. To assess attitudes towards sexual permissiveness, questions similar to those used by Reiss (1967, 1971) were employed. Students were asked, "How acceptable do you personally think it is for unmarried men and women to have sexual intercourse in each of the following cases?" They rated on 9-point scales the acceptability of intercourse for men and for women with "a casual acquaintance" and with "someone he/she is in love with." Measures of interest in sexual activity included ratings of the importance of "desire for sexual activity" as a dating goal, and open-ended statements about the "best things" in this relationship. Questions about previous sexual experience concerned the age of first necking, petting, and intercourse, and the number of previous coital partners.

If students were having coitus in their current relationship, they were asked when they first had coitus with this partner, their frequency of intercourse in the past month, their own and the partner's perceived sexual satisfaction, and which partner was more interested in coitus. Students not having coitus with the current partner were asked questions about reasons for not having intercourse, and about their own and the partner's perceived interest in having coitus.

SEXUAL ATTITUDES AND EXPERIENCE

Initial analyses examined students' attitudes towards premarital sex. There is abundant evidence that during the past 20 years, attitudes expressed towards premarital sex have become more permissive (Hunt, 1974; Lewis & Burr, 1975; Reiss, 1971; Whatley & Appel, 1973). This trend is reflected in the attitudes of our sample. Nearly 80% of students indicated that it is "completely acceptable" for couples who love each other to have intercourse (i.e., 80% circled 9 on a 9-point scale; the overall mean was 8.5). Attitudes towards sex with a casual acquaintance were less permissive, however. Only about 20% of students endorsed casual sex "completely"; the overall mean was 4.7 on a 9-point scale. Women were significantly less favorable towards casual sex than men (mean of 4.1 vs. 5.3, $p < .001$).

Most students rejected a double standard of sexual conduct. Fully 95% of men and women advocated identical standards for men and women in love relationships. For sex with a casual

acquaintance, 82% held identical standards for both sexes. When students held different attitudes for the behavior of men and women, however, they almost always took a more permissive attitude towards men. For instance, women's overall ratings of casual sex were 4.4 for men and 3.9 for women ($p < .001$); men's ratings of casual sex were 5.5 for men and 5.1 for women ($p < .001$).

Consistent with traditional sexual role playing, men in our sample appeared to emphasize sex more than women did. In open-ended descriptions of the "best things" in the current relationship, twice as many men as women mentioned sex (16% vs. 7%). Men rated the "desire for sexual activity" significantly more important as a dating goal than did women (mean of 5.4 vs. 3.1 on a 9-point scale, $p < .001$). Sex was rated as the most important goal or was tied for first place by a significantly greater proportion of men than women (28% versus 9%, $p < .001$).

Several studies (reviewed by Hopkins, 1977) have indicated that men and women are becoming more similar in their sexual behavior. Our data are consistent with this general pattern. When the current relationship began, significantly more women than men were virgins (38% versus 26%, $p < .05$). But, since men in the sample were an average of one year older than their girlfriends (mean of 20.9 vs. 19.9, $p < .001$), the tendency for men to have greater experience presumably results in part from their greater age. Relationships in which the man is older than the woman are typical, and help preserve a norm of relatively greater male sexual experience. Among sexually experienced students, however, men and women did not differ significantly in their number of prior sexual partners. In general, dating partners tended to be matched in the extent of their prior sexual experience. When the current relationship began, 68% of the couples had similar sexual histories in the sense that both were virgins or both were sexually experienced.

When our study began, 82% of the couples had had intercourse in the current relationship. Since we specifically recruited couples who were "going with" a dating partner, our 82% figure is undoubtedly higher than the percentage of all college students who have had sexual intercourse. Men in our sample expressed somewhat greater interest than women in intercourse. Among the 42 couples who had not had coitus, men expressed a stronger desire to have intercourse with this partner than women did (mean 6.7 vs. 4.3 on 9-point scale, $p < .001$). Students who were having coitus were asked to indicate which partner was "more interested

in having sexual intercourse." Many students (47%) reported that both partners were equally interested. But when they reported unequal interest, it was most often (40%) the man who had greater interest than the woman. Only 13% of students indicated that the girlfriend was more interested in sex than the boyfriend. Obviously, it is difficult to know whether these data indicate true differences in actual sexual interest or male-female differences in willingness to admit being interested in sex. In either case, however, they reflect the traditional pattern of men professing greater interest in sex than women.

In summary, students in our sample report generally liberal attitudes towards premarital sex, especially in a love relationship. Most of the students in our sample have had coitus with their current partner. In addition, about 74% of men and 62% of women have had intercourse with one or more other partners. We find considerable similarity in the attitudes and sexual experiences of men and women. Nonetheless, men do report somewhat greater interest in sex than do women.

SEXUAL ROLE PLAYING

If the traditional pattern of sexual role playing—the man initiates sexual activity, and the woman sets limits for the couple—still holds, it should be reflected in two major ways. First, in couples who do not have intercourse, the woman's attitudes and preference for abstaining from coitus should be the controlling factor. Second, in couples who do have coitus, the woman's attitudes and preferences should be the major determinant of how early in the relationship coitus first occurs.

Abstaining Couples

The 42 couples (18% of total sample) who abstained from coitus provide evidence that when a couple does not have intercourse, the woman's attitudes are usually the major restraining force. As noted above, men in these abstaining relationships typically wanted to have sex; women were significantly less interested. Students were well aware of their partner's views. Women's estimates of their boyfriend's desire for coitus (mean 6.9) and men's estimates of their girlfriend's desire (mean 5.2) reflect women's lesser interest ($p = .002$). In addition, the correlation of own estimate of partner's interest in sex and partner's self report was .53 for women and .35 for men ($p < .05$ for both).

The reasons students gave for not having coitus followed a similar pattern. Students rated the importance of four possible reasons for their not having intercourse: "Partner does not wish to have sexual intercourse at the present time," "It is against my moral or religious convictions," "It is too early in our relationship," and "I am concerned about the possibility of pregnancy." Fully 64% of the men indicated that their girlfriend's desire not to have intercourse was a major reason for the couple's abstinence. In contrast, significantly fewer women indicated that their boyfriend's reluctance to have sex played a role: only 11% listed this as a major reason ($p < .001$). Women were significantly more likely than men to say that sex violated their ethical standards (31% of women versus 11% of men rated this as a major reason, $p < .05$). Women were also more likely to say that it was too early in the relationship for sex, although this difference was not statistically significant (22% of women versus 14% of men rated this as a major reason.) Finally, nearly half the men (46%) and women (47%) listed fear of pregnancy as a major reason.

As expected, abstaining couples held more conservative attitudes about sex than other students. Both men and women in these couples were significantly less permissive than other students in their standards of sexual conduct for both single men and women, both in casual and love relationships.

In line with their more restrictive standards, abstaining couples had significantly less prior sexual experience. In general, the prior experience of both partners was highly related to sexual behavior in the current relationship. When both partners began the current relationship as virgins ($n = 29$), only 50% of the couples had intercourse. At the other extreme, when both partners were sexually experienced ($n = 104$), virtually all couples (94%) had intercourse. More interesting are couples where one partner was experienced and the other was a virgin. In such cases, the woman's experience was a stronger predictor of the couple's sexual behavior than the man's. Virginal men do not appear to resist the sexual opportunity provided by a sexually experienced girlfriend. In every single case where a male virgin dated an experienced woman ($n = 19$), the couple had coitus. In contrast, when a virginal woman dated an experienced man ($n = 43$), a third of the couples abstained. In other words, intercourse is least likely if both partners are virgins, somewhat more likely if only the woman is a virgin, and a virtual certainty if the woman is experienced—regardless of the man's experience.

More generally, *characteristics of the woman were better predictors*

of whether a couple had coitus than characteristics of the man. For example, whether a couple had coitus was significantly related to the woman's religious background. About 27% of Catholic women abstained from intercourse, compared to 16% of Jewish women and a mere 2% of Protestants ($p < .001$). There was no relationship between the man's religion and sexual abstinence. Women in abstaining couples were more conservative than other women in several ways. They scored significantly higher on a 10-item sex-role traditionalism scale ($p = .002$). Although they did not differ in the level of education they sought, abstaining women were more likely to pursue traditionally feminine careers such as nursing or education. All of this is reflected in their self descriptions as adhering to a "traditional lifestyle" rather than an "alternative lifestyle" ($p = .01$). None of these relationships held for men.

In summary, our data indicate that whether a couple has intercourse or not is much more closely related to the woman's attitudes and prior experience than to the man's. In this sense, women in our sample appear to have negative control that can limit sexual behavior in the couple.

Timing of First Intercourse

Another indication of female control is the extent to which the woman determines the timing of first intercourse in the current relationship. While the decision whether to have intercourse with a dating partner may once have required time and soul searching, this appears to be less true today. For many couples (41% of the total sample), first intercourse took place within a month after they started dating. Other couples postponed intercourse until the relationship was more firmly established. Analyses compared characteristics of men and women who had coitus within a month of their first date ("early-sex" couples) with those who had sex later in their relationship ("later-sex" couples). As expected, both men and women in early-sex couples were significantly more accepting of casual sex and indicated that sex was a significantly more important reason for dating than did members of couples who had intercourse later.

More important to our discussion of sexual role playing are several findings (see Table 1) indicating that the woman has greater impact than the man on the timing of coitus. For women only, timing of first intercourse was related to conservatism on several measures. Early-sex women described themselves as significantly lower in religiosity. They were also significantly less likely to be

TABLE 1
WOMEN IN COUPLES HAVING COITUS EARLY VERSUS LATER

	Early Coitus (N = 90)	Later Coitus (N = 92)
Self-rating on religiosity (9-point scale)	3.4	4.2
Preference for being full-time housewife in 15 years (mean rank among 4)	2.8	2.3
Preference for being single career woman in 15 years (mean rank among 4)	3.0	3.5
Authoritarian submission (10 items)	1.8	2.3
Adherence to alternative lifestyle (9-point scale)	6.2	5.3
Self-ratings (all 9-point scales)		
Creative	6.4	5.9
Intelligent	7.0	6.6
Self-Confident	5.8	5.0
Desirable as a date	6.8	6.2

Note. All early-late differences significant at $p < .05$ or better. Similar analyses for men failed to reach statistical significance. (Early = within one month of first date.)

Catholic. Although early-sex women did not score lower on a measure of general sex-role traditionalism, they were personally less interested in being a full-time housewife, and more open to the possibility of being a single career woman. Early-sex women scored significantly lower on a 10-item scale of authoritarian submission. They appear to have higher self-esteem as reflected in higher self-ratings on creativity, intelligence, self confidence, and desirability as a dating partner. Early-sex women were also more likely to describe themselves as adhering to an "alternative lifestyle" rather than to a "traditional" one. For men, none of these measures differentiated between early-sex and later-sex couples.

The previous sexual experience of both partners affected the stage at which a couple first had coitus. Again, however, the woman's experience had greater impact. If the woman was sexually experienced, the couple had intercourse within an average of two months, regardless of the man's experience. If the woman was a virgin, the average was over 8 months, depending on whether the man was experienced (mean of 6 months) or the man was a virgin (mean of 12 months). An analysis of variance indicated that the main effect of the woman's experience was significant ($p < .001$); the main effect of the man's experience was not significant; and the interaction approached significance ($p = .06$). In general, then, it appears that characteristics of the woman,

including her attitudes and previous experience, are stronger determinants of the timing of first coitus in a relationship than are characteristics of the man.

Persistence of the Traditional Pattern

In saying that women have greater influence on the extent and pacing of sexual intimacy, we do not necessarily mean that couples make formal decisions about sex, or that women are consciously aware of their influence. Rather, we mean that characteristics of the woman have greater impact on the final outcome. The process through which this occurs may vary from couple to couple. Some women with less permissive attitudes may explicitly resist increasing sexual intimacy. In other couples, the man's awareness of his girlfriend's attitudes or inexperience may moderate his insistence on increasing sexual intimacy. Such men may delay suggesting coitus out of concern for their girlfriend or because they personally prefer a slower pace. It is also likely that some women who did have coitus felt under pressure from the boyfriend to do so (Bernard, 1966), but did not resist the man's influence.

In summary, our students differ from those studied 20 years ago by Ehrmann (1959) in two principal ways. First, virtually all men in our sample appear to exert positive control by initiating sex. Men's interest in sex and willingness to suggest intercourse at some point in a premarital relationship are relatively constant factors in contemporary dating. Second, a smaller proportion of women today exercise total veto against coitus or insist on a long-term relationship as a prerequisite for intercourse. But in spite of these changes, traditional sexual role playing remains quite common among students in our sample. Men continue to exert positive control; they play the role of sexual initiator. This does not mean, of course, that women have no part in initiating sex. Women may indeed communicate, often subtly, that they are interested and willing. Women continue to hold negative control, however; they can reject the man's advances or slow the pace of increasing sexual intimacy.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR AND EMOTIONAL INTIMACY

To understand the relationship between sexual behavior and emotional intimacy in dating couples, it is crucial to recognize the diversity of orientations represented in our sample. From interview data we identify three patterns linking sex and love

in a dating relationship, and compare couples in the early-sex, later-sex, and abstaining groups to evaluate the usefulness of our typology. Our analyses examine the relationship between sexual behavior in the relationship and the development of commitment over a two-year period, and consider possible male-female differences.

Links between Sex and Love: Three Orientations

Sexually traditional couples. A minority of couples adheres to a traditional pattern of sexual behavior. For them, love alone is insufficient justification for sexual intercourse; the more permanent commitment of marriage is a necessary prerequisite. For traditionals, abstaining from coitus is a sign of love and respect, an indication that the basis of the relationship goes deeper than physical attraction. These students may adhere to either of two sexual standards described by Reiss (1967): a single standard of abstinence for both sexes or a double standard of greater sexual permissiveness for men. Traditional men are likely to express greater interest in sex than traditional women. While traditional women are typically virgins, traditional men may have had some limited sexual experience. Although refraining from intercourse, traditional couples are likely to engage in petting short of coitus.

Paul and Peggy illustrate this pattern. Peggy is firmly opposed to premarital sex for herself. Raised a devout Catholic, Peggy believes that intercourse before marriage is wrong. She explained that she "can't imagine anything that would cause me to change my mind. Even if I were engaged, I wouldn't feel right about having sex." Many of Peggy's girlfriends are having sexual affairs, which Peggy accepts "for them." It's not right for Peggy, however, and she believes that Paul respects her views. For his part, Paul indicated that he would like to have intercourse with Peggy. They have engaged in extensive petting, and sometimes enjoy lying together nude. Paul commented that he sometimes finds these sexual activities more frustrating than satisfying, but added that intercourse "just isn't all that important for me." He says of Peggy, "She's more conservative than I am. I'm trying to gradually win her over to my way of thinking."

Sexually moderate couples. In a more moderate pattern, sex is permissible if a man and woman love each other; a long-term commitment is not necessary. These students adhere to the sexual standard Reiss (1967) has called "permissiveness with affection." For them, love is a prerequisite for sex; sex is primarily an expression of emotional closeness. While men may present them-

selves as more interested in sex than women and may typically initiate sexual activity, both partners have a primary concern with the emotional bonds of the relationship. Since it takes time for love to grow, "instant sex" is incompatible with this orientation. Moderate couples move gradually towards sexual intimacy, but they do not view marriage as a prerequisite. Whereas the orientation of traditionalists is typically based on moral principles (e.g., premarital sex is wrong), the orientation of moderates is based on a romantic view of sex as an expression of love and caring.

Tom and Sandy illustrate this pattern. Before they met, Sandy was a virgin, while Tom had had coitus with three different women. Three weeks after their first date, Tom told Sandy that he loved her. She was in love, too, and their relationship grew quickly. In a few months they were spending weekends together at one of their dorms. They slept in the same bed, but did not have intercourse. Although Tom was very attracted to Sandy, he was slow to initiate intercourse. "I didn't want to push it on her," he said. "I felt that we shouldn't have sex until our relationship reached a certain point. [Sex] is something I just can't imagine on a first date." Just before becoming engaged, Tom and Sandy first had intercourse with each other. For Tom, "Sex added another dimension to our relationship; it's a landmark of sorts."

Sexually liberal couples. A third group of students approves of more casual sex, adhering to the sexual standard that Reiss (1967) has termed "permissiveness without affection." The attitude of this liberal group is that while sex with love is desirable, sex without love is also acceptable. In this sense, liberals are flexible in their views of intercourse. They are capable of enjoying casual or "recreational" sex, and may consider intercourse an expected part of a dating relationship. They are also capable of seeing intercourse as an expression of emotional sharing and intimacy. In general, liberals seem more interested in "eroticism" than moderates or traditionalists, and they view intercourse as an acceptable activity without necessarily requiring the added significance of love.

Our interview with Diane and Alan illustrates his orientation. Before they met, both Diane and Alan had had intercourse with several partners. About two weeks after they started dating, Alan asked if Diane would like to make love. She declined, saying she wasn't ready yet, but implying that she would be soon. Since they were alone in Alan's apartment, she jokingly suggested that he go "exhibit himself" across the room so she could get used to his body. They spent the weekend together, and by Sunday

Diane felt ready for coitus. Diane told us that she and Alan were not in love when they first had intercourse. Nonetheless, she enjoyed the sex and felt it was "part of our getting to know each other. It led to an obvious closeness." Diane and Alan view sex as fun, and the events surrounding first intercourse suggest this playful orientation. For them, sex served as a way of developing a closer relationship. Within several months, both were in love, and their relationship continued for several years.

In summary, the central distinction between these three orientations concerns the links between sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy. For traditionalists, emotional intimacy develops in the context of limited sexual activity. Sexual intercourse is tied not only to love, but to a permanent commitment as well. A strong element in this orientation is a belief that premarital intercourse is morally wrong. For moderates, emotional intimacy sets the pace for sexual intimacy. As feelings of closeness and love increase, greater sexual exploration is possible. Moderates are oriented towards romanticism, they emphasize emotional closeness and love in their relationship. In contrast, liberals are more oriented towards eroticism. They view sex as a legitimate dating goal. For them, sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy need not be related. Sex can be enjoyed in its own right, or sexual intimacy can be seen as a route to developing emotional intimacy.

Comparing the Three Orientations

To examine the applicability of our typology, we used the timing of intercourse in a relationship as a rough index of the couple's orientation towards sex and love. Couples who have intercourse in early stages of a relationship are likely to be our sexual liberals. Couples who progress more slowly towards coitus are likely to have a more moderate orientation. Finally, couples abstaining from coitus probably include traditionalists who oppose premarital sex. Abstaining couples may also, however, include moderates who are not yet sufficiently in love, or mismatched couples in which one partner is ready for coitus but the other is not.

The timing of intercourse is a particularly useful index of couple sexual orientation because it is a dyadic measure, rather than simply an index of the individual attitudes of each partner. Based on our earlier discussion of sexual role playing, however, it seems likely that women may have somewhat more influence than men in determining this general couple orientation.

Timing of first intercourse. A major difference between early- and later-sex couples concerns the sequencing of the development of sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy in their relationship. For later-sex couples, emotional intimacy precedes sexual intimacy. For instance, later-sex couples report first having intercourse an average of six months after they started going together. In contrast, for early-sex couples, the emotional intimacy connoted by "going together" was not a prerequisite for intercourse. Among early-sex couples, first coitus preceded going together by an average of one month. By the beginning of our study, couples in both groups had had intercourse and defined themselves as "going together." What impact did the sequencing of these two events have on their relationships?

As expected, later-sex couples reported greater emotional closeness (see Table 2). When the study began, both men and women in later-sex couples had higher scores on Rubin's (1970) love scale than did students in early-sex relationships. Later-sex students reported feeling significantly closer to their partner and knowing their partner better. A significantly higher proportion of later-sex students said they were "in love" with their partner. Perhaps because of their greater love, later-sex couples gave much

TABLE 2
COUPLES HAVING COITUS EARLY VERSUS LATER

	Men's Reports		Women's Reports	
	Early Coitus	Later Coitus	Early Coitus	Later Coitus
<i>Emotional Intimacy</i>				
Love scale	6.7	7.3**	6.9	7.4*
Self-report of closeness	7.5	8.1**	7.6	8.1**
"How well do you know your partner?"	7.2	7.7**	7.4	7.8*
Couple is "in love" (% yes)	65%	84%**	65%	80%**
Probability of marrying partner (9 = 90-100% probability)	3.7	6.1**	4.5	6.1**
<i>Sexual Attitudes</i>				
Acceptability of intercourse for a woman with a casual acquaintance (9 = completely accept)	6.2	4.5**	5.4	3.4**
Importance of sex as a dating goal	6.4	5.2**	4.0	2.7**
How satisfying is intercourse with partner	7.7	7.7	7.8	7.2**
Feel guilty about having intercourse with partner (1 = never, 9 = always)	1.5	2.2*	1.9	2.8**

Note. All items are 9-point scales unless otherwise indicated; $N = 90$ early-sex couples and 92 later-sex couples. (Early = within one month of first date.)

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

higher estimates of the probability of marrying their current partner.

Two processes may operate to preserve this link between later sex and greater love. First, the belief that love alone justifies sex may affect behavior. Later-sex couples may delay coitus until their relationship is emotionally close. Second, it seems likely that for later-sex couples, having had coitus may also heighten perceptions of love through a process of self-attribution (Rubin, 1973). After engaging in coitus, a person may then be motivated to determine and clarify the causes of his or her behavior. Whereas members of early-sex couples may be most likely to attribute their behavior to sexual desires, later-sex couples may be more likely to infer from their behavior that they are in love.

Early-sex couples are more oriented towards eroticism, in the sense of having more liberal sexual attitudes and being more sexually active in their behavior (see Table 2). As suggested earlier, these students had relatively positive attitudes towards casual sex, and gave greater importance to sex as a dating goal. Early-sex students were the most sexually experienced students in our sample. When the current relationship began, only 12% of men and 12% of women in early-sex couples were virgins, compared to 35% of men and 45% of women in later-sex couples ($p < .002$ for both comparisons).

In the current relationship, early-sex couples reported having intercourse significantly more often than later-sex couples (median of 4-5 versus 2-3 times per week.) Similarly, early-sex couples had a significantly higher preferred sexual frequency. While few students reported feeling guilty about intercourse with their partner, guilt was significantly more common among later-sex couples. Finally, the less permissive attitudes and more limited experience of later-sex couples may help explain why later-sex women reported lower sexual satisfaction than early-sex women or than men in either group.

Despite the sexual permissiveness of early-sex students, we found little evidence that they were promiscuous. Students were asked whether they had had intercourse with someone other than their primary dating partner during the past two months. Early- and later-sex students did not differ in their responses; only about 13% of men and 15% of women had had coitus with someone else. (Among abstaining couples, the comparable figures were 21% for men and 11% for women.)

Abstaining from coitus. In general, abstaining couples were likely to have less serious relationships. Although it was a prereq-

uisite of participation in the research that one partner say the couple was "going together," 22% of women and 15% of men not having coitus denied going with this partner—compared to less than 5% of members of couples having intercourse. Abstaining students were also significantly less likely to say that they and their partner were "in love." Specifically, 51% of women and 55% of men in abstaining couples indicated they were in love, compared to 72% of women and 74% of men in couples having intercourse ($p = .002$ for both comparisons).

As expected, students who were in love gave different reasons for abstaining from sex than students who were not in love. For instance, of abstaining women who were in love, 38% said intercourse would violate their moral or religious beliefs. For these traditional women, love is not an adequate justification for intercourse. Among abstaining women who were not in love, the most frequent explanation (37%) was that it was "too early" in the relationship. This suggests that these may be sexually moderate women who would permit intercourse if the relationship were closer or more committed.

Which couples are more successful? Our data document three rather different orientations towards sex and emotional intimacy in contemporary dating couples and indicate clearly that no one pattern is more or less likely to foster satisfaction or permanence during a two-year period. Members of early-sex, later-sex, and abstaining couples did not differ significantly in their general satisfaction with the relationship. It is true that moderate later-sex couples reported greater love for their partner than either early-sex or abstaining couples. But this is primarily a difference in relative emphasis. Many early-sex couples and a sizeable proportion of abstaining couples were also very much in love. In similar fashion, although early-sex women reported somewhat greater sexual satisfaction, many women in the later-sex group indicated that they were "completely satisfied" sexually as well. Students in these three groups had differing attitudes, lifestyles, and goals for dating relationships. But when asked, "All in all, how satisfied would you say you are with your relationship?," students in all groups gave similar evaluations (mean of 7.3 on 9-point scale).

The most clearcut evidence that all three patterns can lead to close and committed relationships is provided by followup data. We found no relationship at all between whether a couple had early-sex, later-sex, or abstained and their dating status two years after our initial testing. At that time information was available for 221 of the original 231 couples. Individuals in each type

of couple were equally likely to have broken up (46%), continued dating (34%), or gotten married to each other (20%). We found no evidence that early sex necessarily short-circuits the development of lasting commitments, nor that sexual abstinence or moderation consistently increases or decreases the development of a lasting relationship.

Male-female differences in love and sex. It has frequently been suggested that sex and love are more closely related for women than for men. Ehrmann (1959) concluded in the 1950s that "female sexual experience is primarily and profoundly related to being in love; . . . male sexuality is indirectly and less exclusively associated with romanticism" (p. 337). This general sex difference may be less pronounced among the couples in our sample than among those studied by Ehrmann 20 years ago. Generational changes towards increased sexual permissiveness and male-female convergence in attitudes and behavior may have diminished the traditional sex difference. Further, Ehrmann indicated that the sexes are more similar in the context of close love relationships such as the ones we studied than in more casual relationships.

Our analyses focused on four possible areas of female-male difference: (a) attitudes about sex, (b) the relationship between the timing of intercourse in a relationship and emotional intimacy, (c) the link between love and sexual satisfaction, and (d) the impact of loss of virginity by men and by women.

First, as noted earlier, both men and women generally agreed that sex is acceptable in a love relationship. The sexes diverged somewhat, however, in attitudes about sex in a casual relationship, with women taking a less permissive stance. Similarly, women were less likely than men to rate sex as an important dating goal, and more likely to cite lack of emotional commitment ("it's too early in our relationship") as a reason for abstaining from coitus. These small but consistent differences suggest that women more often than men view love as an essential prerequisite for sexual intercourse.

Second, it might be expected that sexual abstinence or the timing of first intercourse in a relationship would be related more closely to measures of love for women than for men. This prediction was not supported. We found large differences between early-sex, later-sex, and abstaining couples on several measures of love and emotional intimacy. But within each group men and women did not differ significantly from each other.

Third, it might be expected that sexual satisfaction would be more closely associated with love for women than for men.

Again, no evidence to support this hypothesis was found. One rather general question asked, "How personally satisfying to you is having sexual intercourse" with your partner? Reports of sexual satisfaction were equally related to love scores for both men ($r = .30, p < .001$) and women ($r = .25, p < .001$). A similar pattern emerged for the relationship between sexual satisfaction and other measures of emotional intimacy, such as feelings of closeness or the probability of marriage. Separate analyses for early-sex and later-sex couples again found a similar pattern.

Contrary to expectation, the general level of sexual satisfaction reported by women was lower in later-sex couples than in early-sex couples. Since sexual satisfaction is correlated with love, we might expect later-sex women to be more sexually satisfied, due to their somewhat higher love scores. But later-sex women also had more conservative sexual attitudes, were less sexually experienced, and reported greater guilt—all of which may have contributed to their lower satisfaction. In sum, we found that sexual satisfaction was related to love about equally for men and women.

Fourth, we expected that loss of virginity by a woman is more closely linked to love and commitment than is loss of virginity by a man. The transition to nonvirginity is a more important developmental turning point for a woman than for man (Bernard, 1975). Carns (1973) found that college women are significantly more likely than college men to encounter disapproving reactions if they reveal their loss of virginity to friends or others. For women, reactions were most positive when first coitus occurred in a love relationship, rather than in a more casual context. In contrast, men received most approval when first coitus was with a "casual date, pick-up, or prostitute," and least approval when it occurred with a loved partner. As a result, women might be more cautious in selecting a partner for first sex than men. And both men and women might attribute greater significance to the act of first coitus for a woman.

Our data (Table 3) support this prediction. Women reported significantly more love for a man if he was their first sexual partner. Similarly, men reported greater love for a woman who lost her virginity with him than with a previous partner. In analogous fashion, the woman's loss of virginity was related to such other measures of emotional intimacy as estimates of marriage probability, feelings of closeness, and overall satisfaction with the relationship. In contrast, a man's loss of virginity was not related to any measure of emotional intimacy. It is interesting to note, however, that despite the higher love of couples where the woman

TABLE 3
COUPLES HAVING SEXUAL INTERCOURSE: COMPARISONS BY WHETHER THE WOMAN WAS OR WAS NOT INITIALLY A VIRGIN

	Woman Was Virgin	Woman Was Not Virgin
Rubin's love scale		
Woman's score	7.6	6.9**
Man's score	7.4	6.9*
Probability of marriage (9 = 90-100%)		
Woman's estimate	6.6	4.7**
Man's estimate	6.2	4.3**
Self-report of closeness		
Woman's report	8.2	7.6**
Man's report	8.0	7.7
Overall satisfaction with the relationship		
Woman's report	7.8	7.5*
Man's report	7.6	7.3

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

lost her virginity, such couples were neither more nor less likely to stay together over a two-year period.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our analysis has sought to identify different patterns of sexual intimacy among college dating couples. The elements distinguishing these patterns include such individual characteristics as sexual attitudes and prior sexual experience, and such dyadic characteristics as the timing of first coitus and the maintenance of commitment over a two-year period. The causal relationships among these variables are complex and difficult to disentangle. It is likely, for instance, that permissive sexual attitudes foster intercourse early in a relationship, but it is also probable that having coitus early affects one's attitudes.

Why Does Sexual Role Playing Persist?

Why, despite generally permissive and egalitarian sexual attitudes, does the traditional sexual pattern of male initiative and female resistance continue among our couples? Gagnon and Simon (1973) suggest that all sexual behavior is governed by social scripts, rules of conduct that "define the situation, name the actors, and plot the behavior" (p. 19). Sexual role playing provides a familiar, understandable, and well-rehearsed set of guidelines for male-female interactions. If partners did not share common rules, interactions might be awkward. Rules about sex

help two people coordinate a complex and mutually dependent activity.

Equally important, sexual scripts enable people to define and interpret sexual behavior. According to Turner (1970), "the sex act as physiological experience is subordinated to its personal and social meaning" (p. 322). In sexual interactions, people make statements about their individual and social identities, and they also make inferences about the sort of people their partners are. In the early stages of a relationship, people may be especially eager to discern their partners' motives and dispositions (Jones, Kanouse, Kelley, Nisbett, Valins, & Weiner, 1972; Kelley, 1967).

In close relationships, Kelley (Note 3) argues, "the same rules are used by actors in their self-presentation as are used by their partners (or other observers) in interpreting their actions" (p. 21). Over time a couple may develop their own idiosyncratic rules for interpreting each other's behavior, and so sexual role playing may decline. Initially, however, reliance on shared rules learned from the culture will be important. As a result, even egalitarian students who in principle reject traditional rules may find sexual role playing useful at the outset of a new relationship.

Violations of sexual role playing, like any out-of-role behavior (Jones & Davis, 1965), are often seen as highly indicative of a person's character. Safilios-Rothschild (1977) suggests that women are reluctant to take the initiative in sex because they may "feel uncomfortable when they take an active sexual role [and] are concerned about appearing to be oversexed, demanding and . . . threatening" (p. 112). Our interview with Tom illustrated the negative evaluation placed on women who overtly make the first move towards coitus:

I dated a girl once and—talk about the best way to damage a guy's ego—she pulls me into bed with her the first night, something you just don't imagine doing on a first date. As it turns out, half way through the first date I decided I didn't like her, and it was a really distasteful experience.

The woman's sexual assertiveness led Tom to infer that she wasn't the "sort" of woman he would like. By playing the "male role" of initiator she robbed Tom of his male prerogative and control, and thus "damaged" his ego (Komarovsky, 1976). Even for the nontraditional woman who rejects sexual roles, violating rules of sexual role playing is likely to lead to unfavorable inferences about her motives and personality. Since both the man and woman have a stake in making their initial interactions pleasant and comfortable, such risky behavior is usually avoided.

For men, in contrast, short-term deviations from expected role behavior may be interpreted positively, as a sign that the man's interest in the relationship goes beyond sex. One writer has advised using this as a deliberate strategy: "If you really want to make sure you'll go to bed with a girl, take her out to dinner, go to a movie, take her home—and say good night. She'll be so shocked that you'll be sure of complete success by the second date." (Schoen, 1976, p. 204) For a man to avoid intercourse over too long a period, however, might imply that he doesn't find his partner attractive, or that he isn't "masculine." Thus even sexual traditionalists who endorse premarital chastity may feel awkward about their sexual abstinence. Mark, one of the sexually traditional men in our sample, was a virgin, and his fiancée approved of his virginity. Nonetheless, Mark intimated to his male friends that he was sexually experienced in order to save face and avoid their ridicule. Mark commented, "You tell somebody you're a virgin at 22 and they don't believe you."

In essence, our argument is that sexual role playing provides dating partners with a common standard to use in interpreting behavior and making inferences about a person's motives and dispositions. While some aspects of sexual role playing can be modified—how quickly the game is played, with how many different partners it is repeated, at what age the game is first begun—the basic form remains unchanged. A consequence is that male-female differences in sexual behavior are perpetuated despite changing attitudes about the value of traditional roles.

A Dyadic Approach to Studying Sexual Behavior

While several writers (Avery & Ridley, Note 1; Kirkendall & Libby, 1966) have stressed the importance of understanding sex in the context of interpersonal relationships, most research on premarital sexual behavior has studied individuals. Our relatively large and heterogeneous sample of couples, drawn from several colleges and universities, is unusual. At the same time, results of our study should not be generalized to all college students. Several sorts of students were omitted from our sample: students who were not dating, students who preferred to date casually, "going-together" couples who preferred not to participate in couples research, or students in same-sex relationships. Minority students are also virtually absent from our sample. Caution is warranted in interpreting some of our findings and assessing their generalizability (see Hill, Note 2).

At the same time, our couples approach has several advan-

tages. The use of independent reports from both members of a couple probably increases accuracy. For instance, individual students taking part in a study of sex may exaggerate (or underreport) the extent of their sexual experience. Obtaining independent reports from both partners should minimize distortions, and provides an opportunity to check the reliability of reports by comparing answers of both partners. Further, embedding inquiries about sex in a larger set of questions about a person's background, attitudes, and dating relationship may help make sex a less salient topic. A couples approach encourages both the participants and the researchers to view sexual behavior as one of many interdependent elements in people's relationships.

Finally, individual and dyadic approaches to sex research can lead to different conclusions. Based on their individual attitudes, students in our sample appear liberal and egalitarian. Men and women are quite similar in their sexual attitudes and experiences. When we examine the pattern of interaction in couples, however, we find clear evidence that traditional sexual role playing persists. Permissive sex attitudes and increased frequency of premarital coitus have apparently not changed the basic script for sexual interaction in dating couples.

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