

# Coital and Non-coital Sexual Behaviors of White and Black Adolescents

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**Abstract:** As part of a longitudinal study of young adolescents, data were collected in 1980 on the non-coital and coital sexual experiences of male and female adolescents who ranged in age from 12 to 15 at the time of the initial contact. The follow-up data were collected two years later. Both a Guttman-scale analysis and a longitudinal analysis of these data indicate different sexual patterns between White and Black teens; Whites are more likely than Blacks to engage in a predictable series of non-coital behaviors for a period of time before their first intercourse experience. Of the sexual

behaviors studied, the pre-coital experiences of Black teens were less predictable and often involved only necking.

These differences in sexual norms offer a partial explanation for the different pregnancy rates between these two groups. They also suggest that sexual and contraceptive education and counseling need to be cognizant of these differences since pre-coital experience may function as both a mechanism to prolong abstinence and to promote a gradual acceptance of one's sexuality. (*Am J Public Health* 1985; 75:1200-1203.)

## Introduction

The available retrospective literature on White adolescent sexual behaviors suggests that the sequence of heterosexual behaviors progresses through kissing, necking, light petting (i.e., above the waist and/or over clothes), heavy petting, and intercourse.<sup>2-6</sup> The literature on Black adolescent sexual behaviors is more scarce<sup>7</sup> but there is a suggestion that the sequence is not rigid as in Whites and that petting without intercourse is unusual.<sup>8</sup> A constant theme in these previous studies of Blacks is that sexual intercourse, especially among males, is a paramount objective; achievement of status and peer acceptability are noted as accompanying non-virginity.<sup>7,9,10</sup> This importance placed on intercourse, whether as a symbol of peer acceptance, partner commitment, or maturation, is evidently more critical among young Black adolescents than among their White counterparts.

A problem with much of the past research on the sequence of sexual involvement of teens is that it is mostly cross-sectional and limited to older adolescents who are either in college or in their last year(s) of high school. Since heterosexual involvement often begins earlier than this, much of the retrospective reporting on the behavioral sequence is subject to recall bias and other problems inherent in a retrospective approach.<sup>1</sup> An additional problem is the inability to retrieve the time spans between behaviors, especially between the initiation of heterosexual behavior and intercourse. The major purpose of this research is to understand the sequence of sexual behaviors among young adolescents and to determine if non-coital activity among virgins is predictive of subsequent intercourse.

## Methods

Our research uses data from both junior and senior high school students who participated in a prospective study of adolescent sexual behavior in a large southern city. The overall mean age of the students in the first round was 14.1 with over 96 per cent between the ages of 12 and 15; Blacks were approximately four months older than their White same-sex counterparts. The first round of data was collected

in the Spring of 1980, with the follow-up conducted approximately two years later. Questionnaires were self-administered in the homes of the adolescents, with parent approval, and consisted of a variety of questions including data on the adolescent's own attitudes, behaviors and level of pubertal development, as well as the adolescent's perception of various aspects of their friends and parents. A full description of the sample can be found in an article by Billy and Udry.<sup>11</sup>

At both points of data collection, the respondents were asked to identify the non-coital sexual behaviors in which they had participated and whether or not they had ever had sexual intercourse. The questions were worded in a gender-specific fashion but were parallel for both boys and girls. In the first section of the results, five of the non-coital sexual behaviors, intercourse, and a category for none of these behaviors were subject to Guttman Scale Analysis for Round One using a packaged program (SPSS). (Separate analyses have been performed on all of the 11 original non-coital behavior items. The scale properties are not as good as those reported here.) The cut-off employed was "never done" versus "ever done" this behavior. Whites and blacks were analyzed separately.

In the Guttman Scale approach, of those respondents with no missing values behaviors were subject to two analyses; in the first analysis the behaviors were forced to fit the hypothesized sequence presented in Table 1 (necking as the most prominent behavior; intercourse the least). The second analysis allowed the computer program to determine the order of the variables based on the proportion of respondents who responded affirmatively to the behaviors. Only the best-fitting results are reported for each race-sex category.

The second section of the results uses a longitudinal approach to analyze changes in behavior between Rounds One and Two among those respondents who were virgins in Round One. These changes are investigated using the behavioral sequences suggested by the Guttman Scale analysis in the first section.

## Results

### White Adolescent Sexual Behavior

Table 1 presents the results of the white Guttman Scale analysis. The computer-based ordering of these variables was the same as the hypothesized ordering. Generally, the male and female results are the same. Read from the top, the behavior which occurred the least was intercourse (males, 29.3 per cent; females, 11.1 per cent); necking occurred most often (males, 70.1 per cent; females, 63.2 per cent). Feeling different sex organs, directly and indirectly, were intermediate.

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**TABLE 1—Guttman Scale Analysis of White Males (N=492) and White Females (N=516): Per Cent of Respondents Who Did Each Behavior and, of Those Who Did the Behavior, the Per Cent Who Did Not Do All Behaviors Below**

Behavior	Males		Females	
	Per Cent Did This	Per Cent Not All Below	Per Cent Did This	Per Cent Not All Below
Intercourse	29.3	24.3	11.1	28.1
Feel penis directly	34.4	6.5	18.4	13.7
Feel sex organs directly	47.2	8.2	25.8	7.5
Feel breasts directly	51.6	2.4	34.9	1.1
Feel breasts clothed	66.9	6.4	46.7	2.5
Necked	70.1	Not Applicable	63.2	Not Applicable
None of the Above	21.1	Not Applicable	33.7	Not Applicable

**TABLE 2—Guttman Scale Analysis of Black Males (N=182) and Black Females (N=178): Per Cent of Respondents Who Did Each Behavior and, of Those Who Did the Behavior, the Per Cent Who Did Not Do All Behaviors Below**

Behavior	Males		Females	
	Per Cent Did This	Per Cent Not All Below	Per Cent Did This	Per Cent Not All Below
Feel penis directly	48.9	21.4	20.2	38.9
Feel breasts directly	67.0	20.9	25.9	30.4
Feel sex organs directly	70.3	5.5	26.4	17.0
Intercourse	75.8	5.8	40.5	23.6
Feel breasts clothed	81.3	1.4	48.3	10.5
Necked	83.5	Not Applicable	62.9	Not Applicable
None of the Above	5.5	Not Applicable	24.7	Not Applicable

The column marked "per cent not all below" indicates one source of error to the concept of unidimensionality; this is the per cent of respondents who indicated they had done a behavior on the scale, but had not done all of the behaviors below. For example, of the males who have had their penis felt directly by a female, 6.5 per cent of them had not done at least one of the "lesser" behaviors (i.e., sex organs, breasts unclothed or clothed, or necked). The "higher" a behavior on the scale, the greater the chance for error from this source; for example, the only source of error for touching breasts clothed is if the respondent had not necked. Conversely, intercourse errors can come from non-participation in any of the other five behaviors.

The Coefficients of Reproducibility (.94 and .97) and Scaleability (.83 and .90) are considered quite respectable and exceed the recommended minimums. In sum, for White adolescents, from a cross-sectional perspective, the sequence of heterosexual behaviors which they exhibit is similar to reports based on the behaviors of older cohorts referred to in the introduction.

#### Black Adolescent Sexual Behavior

The reported sexual behaviors of the Black adolescents in Round One were also subject to both forms of analysis. The sequence produced via the Guttman Scale technique of proportion responding affirmatively to each behavior is reported in Table 2.

The coefficient of reproducibility for females was .88, slightly below the acceptable .90, that for males .91; the coefficients of scalability, .68 for males and .65 for females, exceed the acceptable level of .60. The analysis which forced the order of behaviors to be same as the White behaviors in

Table 1 produced tables with coefficients of reproducibility and scalability which were far below the acceptable range.

The scale properties in Table 2 are generally acceptable although the coefficient of reproducibility for females is slightly below .90. The order of behaviors for the Black females is the same as the order for the Black males; this order, however, is quite different from the White sequence of behavior. Of major importance is the location of intercourse in this list of behaviors. For both Black males and Black females, a greater per cent indicated that they have had intercourse than indicated any of the unclothed petting behaviors (breasts, sex organs, penis). In addition, the per cent of Black adolescents who indicate participation in the unclothed petting behaviors does not increase at a regular rate; it may be that the "earlier" appearance of intercourse almost, by definition, brings about these other behaviors.

#### Non-coital Sexual Behavior as a Predictor of Intercourse

The different sequences of sexual behaviors for White and Black adolescents indicated by the cross-sectional data were subject to longitudinal analysis to determine if these sequences were predictive of subsequent sexual intercourse. Tables 3 and 4 concentrate on the sexual behaviors in Round Two of those adolescents who were virgins in Round One. Excluded from these tables are any one who claimed "nothing" at Round Two but had claimed any of the behavioral categories at Round One; these "invalid" cases were minimal, representing only 2.1 per cent of the cases eligible for Tables 3 and 4. For White adolescents, the full list of behaviors from Table 1 is presented; for Blacks the table consists of only those behaviors which precede intercourse according to Table 2. In both tables, there are two columns

TABLE 3—Two-year Change in Sexual Behavior among White Adolescent Virgins Who Were 12–15 Years Old at Round One

Round One Most Advanced Behavior:	Round Two					
	Males			Females		
	(N)	Median Behavior*	Per Cent Who Have Had Intercourse	(N)	Median Behavior*	Per Cent Who Have Had Intercourse
None of the below	(87)	Breasts directly	17.2	(145)	Necked	6.9
Necked	(31)	Sex organs directly	32.3	(70)	Breasts directly	11.4
Feel breasts clothed	(62)	Sex organs directly	29.0	(46)	Penis directly	32.6
Feel breasts directly	(21)	Penis directly	28.6	(38)	Penis directly	50.0
Feel sex organs directly	(39)	Penis directly	48.7	(32)	Penis directly	46.9
Feel penis directly	(40)	Penis directly	45.0	(38)	Intercourse	55.3

\*The most advanced behavior experienced by the middle case in each row.

TABLE 4—Two-year Change in Sexual Behavior among Black Adolescent Virgins Who Were 12–15 Years Old at Round One

Round One Most Advanced Behavior:	Round Two					
	Males			Females		
	(N)	Median Behavior*	Per Cent Who Have Had Intercourse	(N)	Median Behavior*	Per Cent Who Have Had Intercourse
None of the below	(9)	Intercourse	55.6	(39)	Nothing	25.6
Necked	(8)	Intercourse	50.0	(24)	Intercourse	58.3
Feel breasts clothed	(11)	Intercourse	90.9	(24)	Intercourse	50.0

\*The most advanced behavior experienced by the middle case in each row.

for each sex: the “median behavior” and the per cent who have had intercourse between Rounds One and Two. For these tables, the “median behavior” is the most advanced behavior experienced by the middle case in that row.

Among White adolescents, the longitudinal results support a steady advance along the behavioral continuum; in general, the median “advance” in behaviors is about 2 or 3 on the scale. For example, of the White females whose most advanced behavior in Round One was necking, the mid-advance in behavior by Round Two was to the behavior of having breasts touched directly. Unclothed petting of any type at time 1 for White females is associated with about a 50 per cent chance of intercourse in the two-year time span between interviews; for White males, this same probability is obtained with below-the-waist petting at time one.

Among Black adolescents, there was no apparent predictable progression in pre-coital sexual activity. Except for the Black females who did not participate in any sexual behavior prior to Round One, in every other category at least one half of the respondents had experienced intercourse by Round Two.

Overall, of the 28 virgin Black males, 67.9 per cent experienced intercourse in the two-year interval compared to 30.7 per cent of the virgin White males. Among Black females, 41.4 per cent make the transition from virginity to nonvirginity; 23.8 per cent of the White females make this transition.

### Discussion

In the area of general heterosexual behavior, White and Black adolescents apparently exist under a different set of normative expectations. For Whites, these expectations follow a more predictable pattern and involve more pre-coital behaviors than occur among Black adolescents. As a result,

these expectations among Whites allow for a longer “preparatory” period before their first act of intercourse and may even provide extended interim periods of abstinence as teens grow older and change partners. Among Black adolescents, however, the normative expectations often result in precipitous coitus.

From a practical perspective, these differences in normative schedules may also impact on the likelihood of contraceptive use. Put simply, a young White virgin who had experienced necking on a date is not likely to immediately proceed to intercourse at the next date; for Black adolescents, however, necking may be one of the few heterosexual behaviors engaged in before intercourse. From the perspective of being prepared for the next behavior, however, boys and girls, both White and Black, may be in the same situation: without contraception. For Whites, the next move if, and when, it occurs, is unaffected by a lack of contraception (i.e., above the waist petting); for Blacks the next move may be unprotected sexual intercourse and a resultant unwanted pregnancy.

The sequence of non-coital petting behaviors engaged in by Whites and extended over a period of time may serve as an adjustment period in which the girl and boy come to recognize the increased likelihood of sexual intercourse. This adjustment period may provide the time needed to not only become mentally prepared for contraception but also to access contraceptive services. In addition, this “delay” period allows the young people to simply become older—a factor which also increases the likelihood of contraceptive access and knowledge. For Black adolescents, however, this general awareness and adjustment process may not have the opportunity to develop; the need to obtain contraception when the most intimate experience the boy or girl may have

had is necking, probably seems pointless from his/her perspective.

These findings indicate that the sexual and contraceptive counseling of teens needs to be sensitive to cultural and ethnic differences in sexual patterns. The lack of Black adolescent involvement in pre-coital petting behaviors places increased importance on reaching these teens very early in their heterosexual relationships. This study also suggests that the role of non-coital sexual behaviors as substitutes or delay mechanisms for coitus needs to be more fully understood.

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