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## Identity, Peer Relationships, and Adolescent Girls' Sexual Behavior: An Exploration of the Contemporary Double Standard

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### Abstract

The idea of a sexual double standard emphasizes that men have more sexual freedom, while women are subject to social sanctions for the same behaviors. The current research uses a sample of adolescent women to examine the social consequences of reporting a greater number of sex partners. We explore the broader social costs and low self-worth associated with a high number of sex partners, and also focus on characteristics of the adolescents' close friends. The analyses of quantitative data (n=600) provide support for the emphasis on the adolescents' immediate network of friends: friends' attitudes and behaviors were significant predictors of respondents' own sexual experience, while those reporting a higher number of sex partners did not report a lack of popularity, desire for more friends, or lower self-esteem. In-depth relationship history narratives collected from a subset of respondents (n=46) provide additional context for the quantitative results. Women often recognized the existence of a double standard on a societal or school level, but support or acceptance provided by the more immediate network of similarly situated friends serves as a buffer against such negative attributions. The findings suggest that programs targeting sexual behaviors should focus on how peer norms influence girls' sexual choices.

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The double standard is a well-recognized cultural phenomenon, however some researchers have suggested that gendered sexual standards of behavior may be undergoing change and increasing in complexity (Marks and Fraley, 2006; Milhausen and Herold, 2001; Moore and Rosenthal, 1994; Risman and Schwartz, 2002; Tolman, 1996). The classic definition of the sexual double standard focuses on the ways in which young men are socialized to value sexual experience and young women learn to emphasize committed relationships (Reiss, 1960). It is believed that in general this inhibits young women's sexual behavior, particularly 'promiscuous' behavior, by making it socially costly. Accordingly, women who do not fit the conservative ideal are subjected to negative social sanctions/censure. Some

research has suggested that this classic pattern may be eroding (Crawford, 2003; Gentry, 1998; Marks and Fraley, 2005; Marks and Fraley, 2006), but more research is needed that investigates not simply whether the sexual double standard exists but also the social and identity implications of departing from its basic tenets.

In this study we focus on young women who report a higher number of sexual partners relative to their similarly aged counterparts. We rely on quantitative (n=600) and qualitative (n=46) data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), and investigate two related research questions regarding the social and identity statuses of young women who represent a range of sexual experience. First, consistent with the idea of social censure stemming from the traditional double standard, do young women who report a high number of sexual partners report lower popularity or other peer deficits as a result of the double standard? Further, and consistent with this idea of negative ‘reflected appraisals’ from others, do these young women report lower self-esteem than their more sexually conservative counterparts? We test these associations both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. The cross-sectional assessment documents whether there is a significant association between number of sex partners and perceived popularity with peers, dissatisfaction with number of friends, and level of self-esteem. A longitudinal analysis adds to the portrait by investigating whether the number of sex partners is associated with lower peer popularity as reported one year later.

We also focus the analysis on the attitudes and behaviors of the adolescent’s more immediate circle of friends. This *social network* emphasis suggests that young women who report a higher number of sexual partners may not experience the kinds of social costs or deficits described above (perceptions of being unpopular, low self-esteem), in large part because they receive support and reinforcement from their friends, whose attitudes about sexuality are similar to their own. This notion is more consistent with the tenets of symbolic interaction, which emphasizes the localized or ‘situated’ nature of action (Mead, 1934) as well as social learning theory (Sutherland, 1947), which stresses the role of intimate others in fostering particular patterns of behavior—even those that may be considered ‘deviant’ by the wider society. The latter approach emphasizes the diversity of normative climates that exist within the larger peer system, and the key role of friends as sources of reference as well as support. Thus, it is possible that such friends provide a buffer against negative attributions from the wider peer group as well as actively fostering/reinforcing these behaviors. We examine the association between adolescents’ reports about the liberal/conservative attitudes and sexual behaviors of their friends and their own sexual behavior (number of partners). We explore these issues further through an analysis of in-depth “relationship history narratives” elicited from a subset of the respondents. These qualitative data allow us to suggest implications of the quantitative results taken as a whole—specifically how the general idea of the double standard and the potential for negative social costs coexists with more localized understandings/perspectives about the behaviors of one’s immediate circle of friends, as well as one’s own sexual experiences.

### **Prior Research on the Double Standard**

The sexual double standard has evolved over time. Early on, it was considered inappropriate for women to engage in sexual activity outside of marriage (Crawford, 2003; Reiss, 1960). Some researchers have argued that the sexual double standard has changed somewhat, but is still in place (Risman and Schwartz, 2002; Millhausen and Herold, 1999). Maccoby (1998), for example, suggested that teenage boys who gain considerable sexual experience do not run the same risk of being labeled deviant as do their female counterparts. More specifically, young women who had a high number of sex partners were socially reprimanded for their behavior and young men were rewarded (Milhausen and Herold, 1999).

Some research has examined the prevalence of the sexual double standard among samples of American youth. Moore and Rosenthal (1994) focused on the attitudes of 16-year-olds and found that over half of their sample judged girls and boys similarly regarding the issue of having many sex partners (respondents were asked the general question, “What do you think about girls/boys who sleep around?”). Although this suggests some movement away from a clear double standard, nevertheless a relatively large percentage of teenagers do evaluate males and females differently, with girls most often viewed or judged in a negative manner. One limitation of their study is that it asked respondents to reflect on a hypothetical individual, rather than on one’s own behavior or that of friends and classmates.

Another study by Jackson and Cram (2003) relied on focus groups of late adolescent girls. The young women in their sample noted that women are typically labeled ‘sluts’ for the same sexual behavior that would earn boys the label ‘stud.’ Although this reflects a continued double standard, as in the Moore and Rosenthal (1994) study, these respondents rarely used experiences from their own lives to explain how the double standard affects them personally. And, while the above studies find support for the survival of the double standard, other research suggests that this gendered normative system may be eroding. Oliver and Hyde (1993) compiled research conducted between 1966–1990 relating to this issue and determined that attitudes toward premarital sexual behavior are becoming more similar across gender in more recent studies. Further, using a sample of college students and patrons at a bar, Milhausen and Herold (2001) reported that while men were significantly more likely to endorse the sexual double standard, this nevertheless reflected only a minority of men. The authors stated that most men and women endorsed a single standard that judged men and women’s sexual behavior equally.

Some of the variability in results of prior research may be related to variations in methodological approaches across the various studies. Crawford (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of research on the double standard and reported that experimentally designed studies were more likely to indicate less support for the existence of the double standard. In contrast, qualitative approaches such as interviews and focus groups tended to reveal that it survives. Marks and Fraley (2006) examined the possible role of confirmation bias in studying the sexual double standard. The researchers concluded that their participants recalled information from a given vignette that confirmed the sexual double standard more often than any other details. This suggests that studies which are only focused around the simple measure of the respondent’s perception that the double standard exists may be limited and not tap into the actual ways individuals understand the sexual behavior of male and female teen and what sexual activities mean within the context of their own lives.

Recently, Kreager and Staff (2009) drawing on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), focused on adolescents’ own sexual behaviors, and found that those women with many sex partners do report fewer friends, while this association was not found for male respondents. This tends to support the idea of the survival of the double standard, particularly the notion of social costs levied against girls’ whose sexual behavior exceeds normative levels. However, this association with number of friends was found only for those female respondents who reported more than eight partners, a subgroup that comprises about 2% of the sample. In addition, the friends’ nominations were limited to those in schools participating in the survey, which may not provide a comprehensive portrait of the adolescent’s complete social network. The current study contributes beyond this prior work by considering the broader implications of girls’ sexual behaviors for peer status/regard as measured by perceived *popularity* as well as girls’ own reports of the adequacy of their friendship networks (*desire for more friends*). The analysis also examines the role of friends’ attitudes and behaviors (*friends’ liberal sexual attitudes*;

*friends' number of sexual partners*) as well as the identity implications (*levels of self-esteem*) of reporting a larger number of sexual partners.

### **Distinguishing the wider peer group from one's intimate circle of friends**

The symbolic interactionist perspective provides a useful orienting framework for the current study, as this theoretical tradition emphasizes that meanings are typically 'situated' or localized within particular social settings (Mead, 1934). Similarly, social learning theories stress that the face-to-face interaction and communication within intimate personal networks fosters particular patterns of behavior, even where these may diverge from broad cultural mandates or understandings. Thus, while broad normative standards are critical to consider, micro-level interactions are also important to a comprehensive understanding of sexual behavior. A kind of deficit hypothesis follows logically from the notion that a single standard of behavior is acceptable for young women: those who violate the double standard by having sex with a relatively high number of sex partners should be less popular than their more sexually conservative counterparts, and may suffer from low self-esteem that is associated with internalizing the negative views of others.

A focus on the more immediate network of friends, in contrast, emphasizes the potential for heterogeneity in girls' perspectives and behaviors. For example, Tolman (1996) reported that some young women have a positive view of their own sexuality and essentially 'pushed back' upon or resisted any negative attributions from others. Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2006) also criticized the negative focus of much of the research on female sexuality, highlighting instances in which young girls may develop a healthy and positive way of creating a sexual self. For example, they noted that the peer group is an importance source of reference during adolescence, which may support or actively promote sexual activity.

### **The Current Study**

In the current analysis, we explore the variability in number of sex partners girls report, to determine whether those who report a greater number of partners report lower popularity with friends, experience perceived deficits in the number of friends or lower self-esteem. These relationships would be consistent with the basic notion of a double standard, and the perspective that there are social costs levied against young women who violate these conservative standards. We concentrate on the perspectives and behaviors of young women in the current analysis because: a) the double standard notion emphasizes costs to young women rather than men, and b) we have focused specifically on young men's sexual attitudes and behaviors in prior analyses (Author, 2006; 2009).

Because cross-sectional analyses undoubtedly capture reciprocal processes (less popular girls may have more partners and then experience even more decline in popularity), we also examine these associations longitudinally. Our models show how sexual behavior and popularity at wave one influence popularity one year later (wave two). This analysis provides an indication of a decline in popularity that is more readily theorized as a consequence rather than a cause of the behavior of interest.

Our analysis also evaluates variability across the sample in peer normative climates, consistent with the idea of variability in friends' support for and encouragement of these sexual behaviors. A social learning approach leads us to expect that those who report a higher number of sex partners will have friends with more liberal sexual attitudes and a higher level of sexual experience themselves. The symbolic interactionist version of social learning theory also highlights the importance of identity formation processes, as self-views reflect an internalization of prior social experiences. Thus, rather than conceptualizing the self only in positive or negative terms (the self-esteem notion), theories of symbolic

interaction stress that the self is comprised of multiple content areas (Matsueda, 1992), including one's sexual self (Author et al., 2009). These sexual self views need not be viewed from a negative lens, but simply as self-definitions that reference the heterosexual realm. For example, young women who believe that they are "sexy" or "hot" may carry a level of confidence about their interactions with young men, and engage in more activities (flirting, attending parties) that provide greater opportunities for sexual involvement. Thus, we expect that endorsement of such identities will be associated with a higher number of sex partners, controlling for traditional correlates. The analysis thus focuses on different aspects of the adolescent's social world, and distinct features of identity. While we have suggested that the social deficit approach focuses on different dynamics than the social learning perspective (e.g., perceived popularity with peers vs. the attitudes and behaviors of close friends), support for one set of relationships does not automatically rule out support for the other. For example, it is possible that young women who report a larger number of sexual partners score lower on perceived popularity, but also are more likely to have close friends with more liberal attitudes and behavioral repertoires. Such a finding would be consistent with some research on early peer deficits and attachment processes, where it is argued that those who rank low in prestige or popularity with peers may gravitate toward others who tend to reinforce antisocial norms and behaviors (Asher and Coie, 1990).

The in-depth qualitative data we also elicited from a subset of the respondents provide a more multilayered view of young women's perspectives on the double standard. The qualitative data allows us to further explore the implications of the quantitative findings as a whole, including dynamics linked to the idea of social deficits/costs as well as those typically associated with a social learning framework. Specifically, we contrast general understandings about the double standard as a social phenomenon that exists at the societal or school level, with girls' perspectives on the acceptability of their own behavior and that of their immediate circle of friends.

## Data and Method

This paper draws on the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS). The original sample collected quantitative information on a stratified, random sample of 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grade adolescent boys and girls in Lucas County, Ohio with an over sampling of the African American and Hispanic populations with a final sample size of 1,316 total youths from the Toledo area, which includes 678 girls. The sample was drawn from the enrollment records of Lucas County, Ohio, however, school attendance was not a requirement for inclusion in the sample. The data collection of wave I was June 2001- February 2002. Wave II was collected about a year later during the timeframe of August 2002-June 2003. At wave II, 603 girls (89 percent of the wave 1 respondents) were interviewed and our analysis is based on 600 girls with valid data on the dependent and independent indicators.

Forty-six female respondents were interviewed to provide an in-depth portrait of each respondent's romantic relationships and sexual behavior history. These young women were randomly selected from those within the larger quantitative survey sample who reported at least some dating experience. The qualitative sample is more likely to be older and is more sexually experienced compared to the larger quantitative sample as a result of this sample selection criterion. However, the qualitative sample is not statistically different on any of the major independent variables considered in the current analysis, when compared to the larger quantitative sample. The in-depth interviews were conducted by a highly trained professional interviewer, who used a semi-structured guide designed to capture the adolescent respondent's views on dating and sexuality in general (including perspectives on the double standard), as well as about their own sexual, dating, and romantic relationship

history narratives. Participants received a compensation of 25 dollars. The in-depth interviews occurred during the time period of November 2001 through April 2002.

TARS is an appropriate dataset for these analyses because the interview protocol includes respondents' subjective views of broader social concerns such as popularity, measures of friends' attitudes and behaviors, as well as several indices tapping identity domains (self-esteem, as well as sexual identities). Further, unlike the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health), the TARS is not a school-based sample. This is of value because young people who do not attend school report may report a larger number of sexual partners, and all respondents are able to nominate friends, regardless of whether or not they attend the same school.

The quantitative analysis focuses on two dependent variables. The first is a continuous variable of *number of lifetime sex partners* at wave I. The second is a binary variable measuring perceived *unpopularity with females* as reported at wave II. This was constructed from responses to the item: "Others would describe you as popular with females." If the respondent either strongly disagreed or disagreed they are coded as 1, otherwise they are coded as 0.

There are three measures of social deficits/costs associated with having a larger number of sexual partners: perceived lack of popularity, desire for more friends, and self-esteem. For the longitudinal analysis self perceived *unpopularity with females* at wave I is based on the question: "Others would describe you as popular with females" (if the respondent strongly disagreed or disagreed with the question they are coded as 1 otherwise they are coded as 0. We code the popularity variable in this manner to capture the young women who resonate fully with the unpopular identity. Although the protocol also includes a question about popularity with males, we did not include this item as respondents might have referenced a form of popularity that relates to their sexual success rather than the notion of peer esteem. *Perceived lack of friends* is based on the question: "I wish I had more friends" with a five scaled response ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree. A six item scale is used to measure *self-esteem* (Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenbert, 1995) with questions like, "I can do things as well as other people." Higher scores reflect higher self-esteem.

We use four items to measure the norms and behaviors of friends and identity content that we argue may be associated with a greater number of sexual partners. *Friends' liberal attitudes* (range =3–15; alpha=.36) is a three item scale that taps i friends' liberal attitudes toward sex with questions like: "My friends think it's okay to have sex with someone you are not actually dating." Higher scores reflect more liberal attitudes toward sex. *Friends' sexual behavior* is measured by the questions: "How many of your friends do you think have had sex" with answers ranging from 1= "None" to 6= "All"; and *sexualized identity* is measured with two items ("I am flirty" and "I am sexy or hot"). Respondents provide response categories that range from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree.

Although not a central focus, but often related to sexual activity, models also include control variables related to adolescent sexual behavior. These variables include *academic achievement*, which is measured by asking: "What grades did you get in school this year" (1=mostly A's to 9= mostly F's)? *Involvement in school activities*, which is measured by asking: "How much were you involved in school related activities and sports" with responses ranging from 1=Not at All to 5=Very Involved. *Age* is measured as a continuous variable. *Race* is classified into four categories: white, Black, Hispanic and Other Race. The 2000 block level census data are used to calculate whether respondents live in communities with 20 percent or more households *living in poverty*. *Family structure* is coded as two

biological parents, single parent, step parents, and other family forms. *Mothers' education* includes less than high school degree, a high school degree or GED, some college and a bachelor's degree (see table 1).

### Analytic Strategy

The analytic strategy is first to estimate a model using ordinary least squares regression to investigate the association between the independent variables and the continuous measure of number of *lifetime sex partners* at wave I. We initially test zero-order models and then estimate models including all the covariates. We focus on the social deficit and social network indicators. The second set of analyses relies on logistic regression to predict wave II popularity. Logistic regression is an appropriate method because popularity is a binary variable. This model includes wave I number of sex partners and wave I independent variables to predict wave II popularity with females.

The qualitative data were transcribed verbatim into a text document in preparation for analysis, and number of sexual partners and other demographic data are tabulated and recorded for each respondent who participated in this qualitative component of the study. Our analyses of the in-depth interviews began with a period of open-coding, and comparisons of narrative content of the young women who reported a greater number of sexual partners with those reporting few or no partners. We examined the sections of the narratives that concerned the social climate at their school or in their neighborhood, and the respondents' views about sexual norms, including the double standard. We also focused on respondents' views about their friends' sexual behaviors, as well as how the women described their own sexual identities and behaviors. Although all of the narratives were useful, we focused particular attention on the narratives of the young women who had actually reported on the structured interview that they had experience with a relatively larger number of partners. After carefully reading all the narratives a code list was created with the research questions in mind. Examples of codes are, "friends sexual behavior", "friends with benefits relationships", "girls are critical", "sexual double standard in school" and "talk to friends about relationships." The data were then coded using Atlas ti, a qualitative database, to help organize and classify the narratives into the conceptual codes. Next, we sorted the groups of similar codes together (e.g. "friends sexual behavior" "talk to friends about sex") to develop further understanding about the domains of interest. However, a useful feature of Atlas ti is that this program enables the researcher to quickly reference the full narrative based on a specific code found in the interview. This is particularly important in relation to the current analysis, as we were able to link specific respondents' more general views about the double standard and their more localized perspectives on their own behavior and that of their friends. In short, the narrative data provide a person-centered approach to understanding the interconnected nature of the social dynamics that were essentially unrelated 'variables' for the purpose of the quantitative analysis.

### Results

The mean number of *lifetime sex partners* is less than one (.89) for the full sample, with a range of 0–36. The majority of girls perceived themselves as popular both at Time 1 (85%) and Time 2 (82%). At time 1, the mean of the self-esteem measure is 23.5 (range 9–30) and the mean for the item indexing a desire for more friends is 2.59 (range 1–5). The sample has a mean of 7.33 for friends' liberal attitudes, suggesting a trend toward more liberal peers. The mean for number of friends having sex is 2.85 (range 1–6). Respondents report a mean of 3.14 for the self identity of flirty and 3.29 for sexy (range 1–5). Table 2 presents the zero-order (column 1) and multivariate (column 2) ordinary least squares models predicting the number of lifetime sex partners. The mean number of partners is 0.9 (SD=2.4). We first focus on the social deficit indicators, perceived popularity, desire for more friends, and self-

esteem. The zero-order and multivariate results show that perceived popularity and desire for number of friends are not significantly related to girls' reports about their number of lifetime sex partners. Further, results show that self-esteem is not associated with the number of lifetime sex partners. This is not consistent with the notion of high social costs, or a devalued or stigmatized identity, at least as measured by the idea of lower self-esteem.

The indicators associated with the social networks hypothesis are friends' liberal sexual attitudes, sexual behavior of friends, and the sexualized identity indicator. Friends' liberal sexual attitudes and sexual behavior of friends are significantly and positively related to the number of lifetime sex partners reported in zero-order and multivariate models. In addition, "sexy" is no longer significant in the multivariate model with the addition of friends' liberal sexual attitudes. We find that respondent's endorsement of the flirty identity is not significantly tied to the number of sex partners. A more detailed analysis (available on request) that uses logistic regression with a dichotomous dependent variable of four or more sex partners suggests that flirty identity is significantly related to the number of sex partners at the zero-order level, but not in the full model. These cross-sectional results are consistent with the basic tenets of social learning theory, and provide some support for conceptualizing identity in terms of its content areas, rather than solely in terms of positive/negative evaluations (i.e., the self-esteem notion).

### Longitudinal Assessments

Results of longitudinal analyses are reported in Table 3. To determine whether the number of lifetime sex partners reported at wave I is associated with a reduction in popularity at wave II, we rely on the former as a predictor of the latter. Net of perceived popularity with females as reported at wave I, the number of lifetime sex partners also reported at wave I is not significantly related to subsequent popularity, as measured at wave II. This finding suggests that within this sample of adolescents, whether we examine the issue cross-sectionally or longitudinally, the number of lifetime sex partners does not seem to be associated with self perceived lower peer regard, as would be predicted by the basic logic of the sexual double standard, and the idea of social costs levied against young women who violate such norms. In addition, the findings highlight identity and social network variations within the sample that are linked to behavioral differences across the sample.

Although not a primary focus of this investigation, we also attempted to replicate Kreager and Staff's (2009) finding regarding the relationship between sexual behavior and number of friends reported. Supplemental analyses of the TARS data indicate that girls with a high number of sex partners at wave I are less likely to report five or more friends at wave II. However, there is not a significant relationship between number of sex partners and the likelihood of reporting having a few friends compared to reporting five or more friends. It is also interesting to note that across several dimensions of relationship quality (e.g., time spent with friends, levels of intimate self-disclosure to friends), girls who report a larger number of sexual partners do not score significantly lower on frequency of interaction with friends or intimacy of communication relative to their more sexually conservative counterparts (analyses available upon request).

### The Meaning(s) of the Double Standard

Our analyses of the qualitative data provide a more nuanced picture of the double standard, one that generally accords with the quantitative results, but shows distinctions between girls' knowledge and even acceptance of these broader normative prescriptions on the one hand, and the behaviors of friends and their own sexual experiences on the other. Sections of the narratives focusing on the double standard suggest that these gendered normative standards survive on many levels, and even those young women who report a relatively large number



of sexual partners do not fully reject its basic tenets. Yet differences across various reference points are important to consider. Thus, while young women spoke eloquently about the general existence of two standards of sexual comportment, they reserve more harsh attributions for unknown or little known others who casually violate these standards. As discussions turned to the behavior of intimate friends, and particularly respondents' own behavior, a more measured and complex set of meanings/explanations or 'disclaimers' (Scott and Lyman, 1968) often emerged. The qualitative findings complement the quantitative findings in that young women who reported a high number of sex partners did not typically develop a narrative about being unpopular or stigmatized, a desire for more friends, feelings of loneliness or low self-worth. However, they often referenced the behavior of friends within their own networks. Thus, it is likely that adolescents focus most heavily on this immediate network as a source of reference and influence, which then serves as a form of social support and as a buffer against negative attributions associated with their own behavior.

### The Double Standard as a Cultural Reality

During the in-depth interviews respondents were asked a straightforward question regarding the double standard and whether they think it still exists. Results of the qualitative data show that many adolescents in the sample do recognize the survival of the sexual double standard. However, when the girls discuss the meaning of the sexual double standard, it is often viewed as a known, taken-for-granted societal reality or social dynamic that occurs in the larger school environment. When asked about why girls get a bad reputation for sexual behavior, but boys do not, Sara, an 18-year-old with 7 lifetime sex partners, states: *I mean, we've (girls) gotten a bad rap ever since Eve took the apple... People can break it down all the way back then.* Sara believes that the sexual double standard is as old as the human race. Similarly, Emma, a 17-year-old with a more limited range of sexual experiences (1 partner), notes:

When the girl does it just to get that name for herself or just make her well known to other people then that would make a bad name for yourself but the guys do it more...I think that stereotype is true but I don't think it is fair.

Emma notes that if girls engage in the same behavior and with the same motives as young men, they are judged more harshly, and also suggests that this norm is unjust. Others like Kayla, a 17-year-old virgin, recognize that the sexual double standard is strong at the societal level. She states:

...I think it's because of the way that we were raised! You know, with the whole, American culture, you know? You'll see it on TV and everything, you know guy, you know -- and like movies, "Oh, you scored last night! That's great! But when it goes back to the girl, she's a "whore!" She put out too early...

Across a range of different levels of sexual experience, then, most young women reflect a keen awareness of the core elements of the double standard in pointing out that women are held to different normative standards compared to men. They also reflect on social labeling processes, in that men are subject to social rewards for engaging in behavior that is likely to garner a bad reputation or even labels such as 'whore' when enacted by women.

When girls are asked to provide specific examples that relate to their school environment, however, these statements are often vague or abstract, not referencing particular girls—especially the respondent's friends or their own behavior. Kimberly, a 17-year-old with 2 lifetime sex partners, says:

The girls I've seen now in schools, you know me being a senior and seeing the younger girls, they just put themselves out there like that just to get like attention

from the boys and I don't know maybe they're working to get a like relationship with 'em or they just do it just because that's what they feel...I don't know. I think it's nasty.

This senior female does judge harshly the younger girls who “put themselves out there” in ways that are too overtly sexual. The narrative also suggests that she has a different orientation. Thus, it is interesting to note that Kimberly is currently dating a boy who started out as a “friends with benefits” relationship, suggesting the idea that multiple—and sometimes contradictory—meanings can be associated with the double standard concept.

This notion is also illustrated by Marie, a 17-year-old, who castigates other girls who gain a negative reputation linked to their sexual behaviors: *Cause there are some girls out there that deserve it. Like, they just don't care...And, then like, that gets put on all girls 'cause we're girls.*” In this instance it is useful to examine the results of Marie's structured interview, which indicate that she has had four sex partners. Thus, while castigating other girls, Marie herself scored over one standard deviation above the mean in sexual experience relative to other young women who participated in the TARS study. These two quotes show that the sexual double standard may exist on a societal or school level, but often erodes, or gains a layer of complication when the referent is one's own behavior or that of intimate friends.

### The Meaning of the Sexual Double Standard on the Peer Level

Numerous scholars have pointed out that a key benefit of friendships during the adolescent period is the level of support they provide (Mortimer and Call, 2001). And, as Youniss and Smollar (1985) and others have pointed out, peers, relative to one's parents or other adults, are less likely to be judgmental, a social dynamic that creates many opportunities for frank dialogue and exploration of issues, including issues of sexuality. When asked how she felt about girlfriends who want to participate in sexual behavior as much as boys do, Stephanie, a 17-year-old with 6 lifetime sex partners, refers to her friend as an example and says:

I: Do you think there are girls out there that are like I'd take it (sex) all day long if I could get it, too?

R: Um ... And I respected that and I never talked about somebody.

I: So you respected that that's okay that they are like that?

R: Um huh. Yeah..., and that's my friend.

I: And that has nothin' to do with how (you feel about her).

R: Nope. 'Cause I'm not sleeping with her so I don't care.

Clearly, Stephanie does not view her friend negatively because she has engaged in such behaviors. And, while we cannot clearly document all of the selection and influences processes involved, Stephanie's own sexual experience level coordinates well with that of her friend, providing an additional motivation to avoid levying any sort of negative social sanction or disapproval of her friend's behavior. This fits well with the quantitative results reported in Table 2. Along similar lines, Alexis, a 17-year-old with 1 lifetime sex partner, describes how her peer group does not talk about or judge their female friends for the sexual activities in which they participate:

...No I think my friends are all pretty much, we're all pretty much alike. We just kind of I don't think that we brown nose in other people's business. You know we go on about our way and um our business is our business... You know if Paula's out doing somebody it's not my business. And I don't take pride in you know sharing it with other people.

Alexis' statement reflects that she does not judge her friend for the sexual behavior in which she may be involved. Even more importantly she feels the need to uphold certain rules of friendship, which do not include giving the friend a derogatory name or spreading rumors about her. Another participant, Amber, a 17-year-old with 2 lifetime sex partners, reports that her peer group, principally the soccer team, offers a safe place to discuss romantic and sexual activity:

R: ...Like, personally, just on the soccer team, like, yea. Like, on the soccer team, we talk about that all the time... Oh, very open. Like girls who had...they're, like, very curious.

I: And so people are accepting of them?

R: Oh, yea. People are very accepting

I: Okay and...they don't get a negative reputation?

R: Nope, not at [high school name].

Amber feels she can look to her peer group as an opportunity to discuss issues around sexuality without running the risk of getting a negative reputation. Since the peer group is often a safe haven relative to the "wider circle" of peer associations, this is a place for girls to explore their own and others' sexual feelings and experiences in ways that to an extent suspends or "bracket off" double standard concerns. This idea is consistent with the quantitative findings demonstrating concordance between adolescent respondents' own behaviors and those of their friends, and results that do not dovetail with the "social costs/deficits" hypothesis.

### **Maintaining a Positive Self Image in Response to the Sexual Double Standard**

Most girls could describe the negative sexual double standard in some fashion, but a subset of girls we interviewed has actually engaged in behaviors that could potentially garner a negative reputation. As suggested above, one way in which such negative attributions are avoided is by affiliating with other young women who share similar attitudes, and often a similar behavioral profile. However, in addition to carving out compatible peer affiliations, the relationship and sexual history narratives provide some indications of ways in which girls construct positive meanings about their own identities, including their sexual self-images. Jade, an 18-year-old with 2 lifetime sex partners, states: *I guess they don't want to seem like a slut, you know? No one wants to be thought of like that...I mean, if I hear something about a girl that she had sex with three different guys, you know, on the same night, I'm gonna label her as a slut.* This respondent recognizes there are certain behaviors that can cause a female to be called a 'slut,' but mentions an extremely liberal reference point (having sex with three different partners on the same night) that ensures that her own behavior can be seen in a more positive, conservative light.

Aside from this type of bar-setting as a way of distancing from negative attributions, several girls focused on the inappropriate, hurtful actions of boyfriends as a catalyst for their own behaviors. For example, several female respondents state that they have had sex with two young men at the same time because their boyfriends cheated first or were not around. Rachel a 17-year-old with 7 lifetime sex partners explains how she started cheating on her partner:

I: So who started kind of cheating on who first?

R: Well as far as sex I believe he did.

I: But how about emotional?

R: ...Oh he did.

I: Okay. And so then did you start going out with other guys after he spent time with other girls?

R: Yeah towards the end of our relationship, yes.

Marissa, a 17-year-old with 13 lifetime sex partners, explains why she was having sex with two different individuals at the same time for a period of time: *We were supposed to be going together but that's why I kind of started messing with someone else, because he was never around. When he did come around, it was just sex. So I was like why should I go with him if I can just get that anyway.* Marissa thus focuses on her boyfriend's bad or uncaring actions as a justification for her own behavior.

While Marissa and Rachel focus on ways in which their boyfriends fall short as a justification for their activities, some young women within the sample focus on their own sexual desires in a generally positive way (see especially Tolman, 1996). Several of the teenage girls indicated that they have had sex because they were interested to see what sex was like or emphasized that they are still young. Alexis, a 17-year-old with 1 lifetime sex partner, explains: *I don't know what I mean I don't [know why] I slept with Joe. Maybe it was curiosity.* Amber, a 17-year-old with 2 lifetime sex partners, describes her sexual relationship with her boyfriend: *"It was to where two or three times a day... Yea, seriously like my sex drive is like a guy.* This quote and the rest of her narrative comments make clear that Amber was generally unapologetic about enjoying her sexuality; yet vestiges of the double standard are apparent in her reference to her sex drive as being "like a guy." This is somewhat reminiscent of quotes from male respondents described in a previous analysis, where these young men did not believe that their strong feelings for girls were experienced by other males-- thus they made numerous references to being 'like a girl in the relationship,' or 'on their monthly cycle' when talking about their breakups (Author et al., 2006).

Another 'disclaimer' that appears in the narratives relates to the presence of alcohol in sexual situations. Amber, for example, recalled having sex with a particular boy because they were drunk: *...So it wasn't, like, fun. If I wouldn't of had beer, I would have been pissed...I would have been like, Oh, you suck. This is terrible...Like he didn't know what he was doing.* This narrative account is of interest, however, because Amber did not reference moral issues, but merely that her partner was sexually incompetent.

Other girls view sex from an instrumental point of view—a dynamic that reflects both non-traditional and traditional elements. For example, some young women indicated that having sex with a particular partner might increase the young man's interest, or extinguish his interest in another girl. Julia, a 17-year-old with 10 lifetime sex partners, says: *I figured I don't know it was a kind of bad decision on my saying like "Well, if if I actually do get physical with him that he will like me more than her."* Julia thinks sex is one of the strategies she could use to make sure the young man likes her over her friend who also likes him. Along similar lines, some girls state that they use sex as a way of trying to get back or maintain a romantic relationship they already have. When asked why she initiated sex with an ex-boyfriend, Marissa, a 17-year-old with 13 lifetime sex partners, states that even though she knew they were not committed to each other they had sex anyway. She says: *I wanted it but I felt maybe we were back together.* Thus, such behaviors could be constructed by outsiders as "non-relationship sex," but in these instances girls held more traditional beliefs about cementing or rekindling a romantic attachment.

Another related non-traditional situation that retains traditional elements involved young women who had multiple sex partners, but claimed to have strong feelings for all of them.

Nicole, an 18-year-old with 8 lifetime sex partners, was dating three different partners at the same time and was sexually intimate with two of them. When asked about why she found herself in this situation she said:

I really thought I liked all these people. You know what I mean? Like, I really thought you know it wasn't like, I'm with you and I just want to mess around with and I don't really have any feelings for (the other two guys)...the reason I messed around was because I really liked like, Mike, and I really liked Timmy, and I really liked Sam, but it was like, I didn't want to let any of them go, 'cause I really liked all of them and I didn't want to hurt any of them feeling, feelings. It wasn't like I was just doing it, 'cause you know, I didn't care... that was the problem, I cared for them all too much and shouldn't have.

Because Nicole really liked and cared for all of these young men that she was dating, she did not consider this to be a case of “messaging around” - behavior that would place her on more tenuous footing with respect to her own self-image.

## Discussion

Excerpts from the qualitative narratives reveal that across a range of levels of sexual experience, young women do recognize the survival of a double standard of sexual behavior. Further, while some noted that it was “unfair” for others to judge young women according to a different standard, others seemed to accept the inevitability of this gendered pattern, and often provided negative descriptions of young women whose behavior veered from what is considered acceptable within their school or neighborhood (e.g. using terms such as ‘slut’, or describing such behavior as “nasty”). Yet both the quantitative and qualitative data we analyzed suggest a more complex portrait: girls who report a relatively large number of sexual partners do not in turn perceive lower levels of popularity with other girls, deficits in the number of friends they have, or lower self-esteem relative to their less experienced counterparts. These findings are consistent whether we examine such relationships cross-sectionally or longitudinally. The latter analyses provide a useful addition to existing literature, as prior work often relies on cross-sectional analyses (Gentry, 1998; Jackson and Cram, 2003), which leads to questions about the direction of effects. Such findings thus provide some contradictory evidence regarding the basic notion that violating the sexual double standard is associated with heavy social costs.

Yet the quantitative results also show that it is important to take into account the diversity of peer climates, as friends' liberal attitudes and sexual behavior emerge as significant predictors of variations in the number of sexual partners adolescent respondents reported. We find these relationships are statistically significant in cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses. Consistent with these findings, the qualitative results highlighted that while these young women may show disdain or otherwise negatively label others in the wider circle of peers (e.g. “those sophomore girls”), they are reluctant to do this where the referent is their friends or their own behavior. This suggests that similarly situated friends may serve as a source of support or buffer against negative attributions that may take the form of gossip or other labeling that occurs within the context of the broader school normative climate. Such findings, particularly the longitudinal results, are consistent with a social learning perspective.

Research has shown that adolescents often seek out friends with similar characteristics (i.e. the idea of selection), but also become more similar over time (Kandel, 1978). Through daily interaction and communication, attitudes and behaviors tend to become more concordant. Thus, while it is unlikely that adolescents ever become inured to the larger societal or school based messages they receive about the double standard and a range of

other norms, the close friendship network represents a more immediate source of reference and influence. According to social learning theory, the individual not only models the behavior of social intimates, but learns a broader set of attitudes and justifications that render the behavior understandable, appropriate or even desirable, under the circumstances (Harris, 1977; Sutherland, 1947). We highlighted a number of accounts or disclaimers adolescents' drew upon to explain their own behavior as well as that of their friends (the role of curiosity or youthfulness, sexual encounters that occurred on the rebound, or the idea of caring for all of one's partners). The basic tenets of social learning and symbolic interaction theories more generally suggest that these linguistic strategies and stated motivations are unlikely to have been individually constructed, but instead may have been shaped through interactions with intimate others. In addition, intimate social ties are implicated in the process of constructing a positive identity, even where behavior may not be consistent with the broader normative climate. For example, young women who considered themselves 'sexy' or 'hot' were more likely to report a greater number of sex partners. Additional research is needed on the content areas that comprise adolescents' identities, particularly those that connect to potentially risky behavior (see Matsueda, 1992), and on the role of peer and other interactions in fostering and reinforcing such self-views.

The current findings are based largely on the adolescent's own perceptions or understandings, as contrasted with objective information, such as the number of friend nominations used by Kreager and Staff (2009). They found that female respondents who reported having a large number of sexual partners received fewer school-based friend nominations relative to respondents with fewer partners (and our own analyses of the TARS data indicated that number of sex partners was inversely related to having five or more friends). Yet the perceptual data we describe above adds to this emphasis on objective information, as the youths themselves did not perceive that they would like more friends, or that they were unpopular with other girls. Similarly, such girls did not score lower than their more sexually conservative counterparts on various indices of relationship quality. Future research should explore both objective characteristics and subjectively experienced aspects of girls' friendship and other peer relationships. It is possible, for example, that young women who are more sexually active have somewhat different frames of reference socially- and are more likely to choose some friends as well as romantic partners from outside the immediate school context. The finding that involvement in school activities was negatively related to number of sexual partners is suggestive in this regard. Thus, more research is needed on what constitutes girls' and boys' 'normative climate,' including the possibility of systematic differences related to social class, race/ethnicity or age related changes in these points of reference.

It is especially important to document developmental changes in the ways in which adolescents understand and react to the tenets of the double standard as they navigate the transition to adulthood. Researchers have noted that within the contemporary context, increased average ages at marriage have resulted in an elongated period of dating and sexual involvement, and we know little about factors linked to variations in sexual behavior that unfold during the period of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Bailey, Fleming, Henson, Catalano, & Haggerty 2008). This is a potentially consequential phase in the life course, where parental controls are reduced, normative proscriptions such as the double standard may change in character, and reliance on peers' opinions itself becomes a less central preoccupation.

A limitation of the current study is that data were collected within a single geographical area. Another issue is our reliance on subjective measures of popularity, and respondent reports about their friends' sexual attitudes and behaviors. In addition, future research could be directed to analyses focused specifically on the ways in which experiences associated

with social class and race/ethnicity influence endorsement of the double standard, as well as the social contexts and individual meanings of sexual behavior.

Much prior social and demographic research has focused on what adolescents do sexually, and on the fertility and other health related consequences, but there has been less research on what these behaviors and experiences mean to the young people involved. Thus, this study adds to prior research that has examined the correlates of number of lifetime sex partners (e.g., Manlove, et al, 2008; Siebenbruner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Egeland, 2007), and links to pre-marital pregnancy as well as sexually transmitted infections (e.g., Bruckner, Martin, & Bearman, 2007; DiClemente et al., 2005). These behaviors can accurately be described as risky or problem behaviors, but a comprehensive perspective will include attention to the role of positive experiences (intimate ties with similarly situated friends) and meanings of the behaviors themselves. This more complex perspective on sexuality can also be useful in the design of more effective sexual education and prevention programs (Moore and Rosenthal, 1994). For the most part, sexuality that is discussed in formal school settings focuses heavily on the biological side of sex (Fine, 1988), as well as attempting to heighten students' knowledge and awareness of various kinds of risks (West, 1999). While some sex education programs have started to include issues such as social pressures and peer influences on sexual behavior, the main focus of such courses is still about the sexual act itself, rather than on the social contexts within which these behaviors occur (Kirby, 2003). It would be useful for educators developing programs targeting risky sexual behaviors of adolescents to include attention to peer norms and issues of identity, as against approaching the topic strictly as a health issue. However, parents and others who emphasize issues of reputation as a way to deter young women from sexual involvement may confront that in many instances sexually active girls do not describe their own behavior through a pejorative, 'deficit' or stigmatized lens.

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**Table 1**

## Univariate Statistics of Dependent and Independent Variables

	Mean	SD	Range	Percent
<b>Dependent Variables</b>				
Number of Lifetime Sex Partners T1	0.89	2.41	0–36	
Time 2 Unpopular with females				
Popular				82%
Unpopular				18%
<b>Independent Variables</b>				
<i>Social Deficit</i>				
Self-Esteem	23.51	3.83	9–30	
Time I Unpopular with females				
Popular				85%
Unpopular				15%
Wish for more friends	2.59	1.19	1–5	
<i>Social Network</i>				
Liberal friends' attitudes	7.33	2.45	3–15	
Number of friends having sex	2.85	1.71	1–6	
Flirty	3.14	1.17	1–5	
Sexy	3.29	1.08	1–5	
<b>Controls</b>				
Grades	3.49	2.01	1–9	
Involved in school activities	2.67	1.43	1–5	
Age	15.22	1.72	12–19	
White				65%
Black				22%
Hispanic				11%
Other Race				2%
Neighborhood Poverty				
In 20% or Higher Neighborhood				27%
Not in 20% or Higher Neighborhood				73%
Two Biological Parents				49%
Single Parent				26%
Step Family				14%
Other Family				11%
Mother High School Grad				33%
Mother Less than High School				12%
Mother Some College				33%
Mother College				22%

Note: N=600

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study

**Table 2**

Zero-order and Full Model Predicting Number of Lifetime Sex Partners for Adolescent Girls

	Zero-Order		Full-Model	
	B	p	B	p
<b>Intercept</b>			0.05	
<b>Independent Variables</b>				
<i>Social Deficit</i>				
Self-Esteem	- 0.01		0.00	
Unpopular with females	0.29		- 0.09	
Wish for more friends	- 0.01		0.09	
<i>Social Network</i>				
Friends' liberal attitudes	0.28	***	0.13	***
Number of friends having sex	0.63	***	0.47	***
Flirty	0.13		0.02	
Sexy	0.20	*	0.00	
<b>Controls</b>				
Grades	0.84	***	0.69	*
Involved in school activities	- 0.23	***	- 0.17	*
Age (White)	0.40	***	- 0.19	
Black	0.06		- 0.46	
Hispanic	0.29		- 0.05	
Other Race	- 0.16		- 0.29	
Neighborhood Poverty (Two Biological Parents)	0.00		0.00	
Single Parent	0.79	**	0.38	
Step Family	0.12		0.01	
Other Family (Mother High School Grad)	0.02		- 0.03	
Mother Less than High School	0.51		0.14	
Mother Some College	0.24		0.35	
Mother College	0.02		0.30	
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>			0.24	

Note: N=600

\*\*\*  
p<.001;\*\*  
p<.01\*  
p<.05

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study

**Table 3**

Zero-order and Full Model Predicting Number of Time 2 Popularity Adolescent Girls

	Zero-Order		Full-Model	
	B	p	B	p
<b>Intercept</b>			- 4.05	
<b>Independent Variables</b>				
Number of Lifetime Sex Partners T1	0.03		- 0.02	
<i>Social Deficit</i>				
Self-Esteem	- 0.05		0.00	
Unpopular with females	1.69	***	1.69	***
Wish for more friends	0.19	*	0.24	*
<i>Social Network</i>				
Friends' liberal attitudes	0.01		- 0.09	
Number of friends having sex	0.10		- 0.01	
Flirty	0.07		0.23	*
Sexy	- 0.03		- 0.09	
<b>Controls</b>				
Grades	0.11	*	0.16	
Involved in school activities	- 0.24	***	- 0.20	*
Age (White)	0.14	*	0.11	
Black	0.51	*	0.25	
Hispanic	0.34		- 0.14	
Other Race	- 14.19		- 14.30	
Neighborhood Poverty (Two Biological Parents)	0.02	*	0.01	
Single Parent	0.47		0.32	
Step Family	0.13		- 0.03	
Other Family (Mother High School Grad)	0.40		- 0.12	
Mother Less than High School	0.76	*	0.62	
Mother Some College	0.25		0.17	
Mother College	- 0.07		0.02	
-2LL			492.95	

Note: N=600

\*\*\*  
p<.001;\*\*  
p<.01\*  
p<.05

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study