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Trajectories of intimate partnerships, sexual attitudes, desire and satisfaction

N. Ammar^{a,*}, J.-A. Gauthier^b, E.D. Widmer^{a,**}

^a Department of Sociology, University of Geneva, Switzerland

^b Life Course and Inequality Research Centre, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

This research addresses the interrelations existing between trajectories of intimate partnerships and attitudes toward sexuality, sexual desire, and sexual satisfaction. It is based on a dataset of 600 adults aged 25–46 living in Geneva (Switzerland) and uses innovative multivariate techniques for clustering life trajectories. The results emphasize the diversity of men's and women's trajectories of intimate partnerships. Trajectories with frequent and short-term partnerships are associated with recreational attitudes and higher solitary and dyadic sexual desire. In contrast, trajectories featuring few or no intimate partnerships are associated with traditional sexual attitudes and less sexual desire. Women's attitudes toward sexuality are more strongly associated with their intimate trajectories than men's. This suggests that men and women do not develop their sexuality in the same relation with intimacy. The results are referred to the gendered master status hypothesis.

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This article addresses the issue of the interrelations existing between trajectories of intimate partnership and attitudes toward sexuality, sexual desire, and sexual satisfaction. Most life course studies have been concerned with sexuality as far as it endangers the life opportunities of individuals, such as, for instance, by taking them out of the loop of educational training in the case of teenage pregnancy or by putting them at risk of sexual diseases (Crockett, Bingham, Chopak, & Vicary, 1996; Dickson, Paul, Herbison, & Silva, 1998; Dunne et al., 1997; Graaf, Vanwesenbeeck, Meijer, Woertman, & Meeus, 2009; Miller & Moore, 1990). Although a large number of studies exist on the timing of the first sexual intercourse or early sexual intercourse in teenage years and its link with attitudes toward sexuality and current sexual behavior (Bozon, 1993; Crockett et al., 1996; Furstenberg, Morgan, Moore, & Peterson, 1987; Kinsman,

Romer, Furstenberg, & Schwarz, 1998; Mueller, Gavin, & Kulkarni, 2008; Upchurch, Levy-Storms, Sucoff, & Aneshensel, 1998), few studies have focused on the interrelations existing between life trajectories and other dimensions of sexuality than the first sexual intercourse. This research refers specifically to individuals' trajectory of partnerships (such as the number of partnerships, their duration, as well as the frequency and the duration of celibacy) and various dimensions of sexuality, such as attitudes toward sexuality, sexual desire, and sexual satisfaction. We address such issues empirically by using a dataset of adults and innovative multivariate techniques for clustering life trajectories. As sexuality is a social behavior entrenched in intimacy, we expect that trajectories of partnerships developed by individuals over time are related with the ways in which they currently experience sexuality.

1. First sexual intercourse as a central life course transition

Studies dealing with sexuality in a life course perspective mainly focus on the first sexual intercourse and sexual

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +41 223798892.

** Corresponding author. Tel.: +41 223798309.

E-mail addresses: ammar.nadia@gmail.com (N. Ammar), eric.widmer@unige.ch (E.D. Widmer).

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behavior during teenage years (Bozon, 1993, 1998; Dickson et al., 1998; Sennott & Mollborn, 2011; Upchurch et al., 1998; Whitbeck, Conger, & Kao, 1993). They stress that the age at first sexual intercourse is associated with attitudes toward sexuality. Individuals who have had their first sexual intercourse early are more likely to have permissive attitudes toward sexuality. They also have more frequent sexual activities later on, and they develop a greater diversity of sexual experiences (Bajos & Bozon, 2008; Bozon, 1993, 1998). In contrast, individuals who have their first sexual intercourse at a later age tend to give more importance to relational commitment before initiating sexual intercourse (Bajos & Bozon, 2008; Bozon, 1993, 1998; Moore & Davidson, 2006). This suggests that the timing of the first sexual intercourse has an enduring effect on subsequent sexual behaviors. Therefore, trajectories of partnerships that individuals develop throughout their life may be a key factor for understanding their current sexuality. Individuals' sexuality and attitudes toward sexuality are embedded in a series of social practices, social interactions, and social expectations about intimacy and the meaning of partnerships that may develop throughout the life trajectory (Bajos, Ducot, Spencer, & Spira, 1998; Bozon, 2001a; Carpenter, 2010; Gagnon & Simon, 2005; Meggiolaro, 2010). For these reasons, considering the trajectory of intimate partnership of individuals from adolescence to adulthood may be a fruitful way of examining the link between the construction of intimacy, attitudes toward sexuality, sexual desire, and sexual satisfaction.

2. Intimate trajectories and sexuality

Previous research stressed the importance of attitudes toward sexuality for the understanding of sexual behaviors (DeLamater, 1987; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Lefkowitz, Gillen, Shearer, & Boone, 2004; Reiss, 1964). Indeed, attitudes toward sexuality are constructed in relation with social norms and influenced by individuals' experiences (Carpenter, 2010). To some extent, they reflect the subjective definition of what is acceptable or not in terms of sexual activity as well as the types of conditions under which sex should occur, such as within the institution of marriage, in a context of love and commitment to the sexual partner, or for self-entertainment (Gagnon, 1999, 2004; Laumann et al., 1994). Therefore, all individuals do not have the same social representations or the same norms when it comes to sexuality and are not expected to put the same set of values to it (Carpenter, 2010; Gagnon, 2008; Green, 2008a,b; Levine, 2002). In this perspective, it appears that individuals with more permissive attitudes have more frequent and diverse sexual activities (DeLamater, 1987; Gerressu, Mercer, Graham, Wellings, & Johnson, 2008; Laumann et al., 1994; Weinberg, Lottes, & Gordon, 1997) and greater acceptance toward non-coital intercourses and solitary sex (Carvalho & Leal, 2013). In contrast, individuals with more conservative attitudes develop less frequent sexual activities and a lower diversity of sexual practices (Davidson & Moore, 1994; DeLamater, 1987; Laumann et al., 1994; Lefkowitz et al., 2004; Luquis,

Brelsford, & Rojas-Guyler, 2012; Moore & Davidson, 2006; Udry & Campbell, 1994).

Overall, because all attitudes and individual experiences are intertwined (Bergman, 1998; Bohner & Dickel, 2011; Oskamp & Schultz, 2004; Tesser & Shaffer, 1990), there may be a relation between attitudes toward sexuality and trajectories of intimate relationships. Indeed, the development of sexuality in life trajectories may be interpreted as a "career" (Becker, 1973), in which changes of objective statuses, such as partnerships, and changes of perspectives, motivations, opinions, and even desires concerning sex intermingle. Indeed, individuals tend to adjust their attitudes toward sexuality to their experiences of intimate relationships and vice versa (Carpenter, 2010; Meggiolaro, 2010). Accordingly, we expect individuals with intimate trajectories characterized by a frequent shift of partnerships to have more permissive attitudes toward sexuality compared to individuals with long-lasting partnerships.

In addition to attitudes toward sexuality, sexual desire and sexual satisfaction are also central dimensions of sexuality that should be taken into account when dealing with life course, as they are constitutive of self-identity and self-development in contemporary societies (Bajos & Bozon, 2008; Bozon, 2001a; Gagnon & Simon, 2005; Green, 2008a,b). In this regard, studies make a distinction between dyadic sexual desire, the desire to experience sexual activities with a partner, and solitary sexual desire, the desire to engage in sexual activity alone (Spector, Carey, & Steinberg, 1996; Tremblay, 1999). As research results often point out the fact that attitudes toward sexuality are associated to sexual behavior (Lefkowitz et al., 2004; Luquis et al., 2012; Nikken & Graaf, 2013; Weeden & Sabini, 2007), solitary and dyadic sexual desires might be also related to specific sexual attitudes as well as to trajectories of partnerships. For instance, solitary sexual desire and activities are perceived as positive by some individuals, while for others, they are perceived as negative or even shameful sexual activities (Carvalho & Leal, 2013; Costa, Jaspard, Davidson & Moore, 1994; Gerressu et al., 2008; Jaspard, 2005; Kaestle & Allen, 2011). Therefore, we expect that individuals who have developed intimate trajectories characterized by numerous partnerships facilitating permissive attitudes toward sexuality have greater solitary and dyadic desires, while those with few partnerships, which supposedly are associated with more conservative attitudes toward sexuality, might have lower solitary and dyadic desires.

As for sexual satisfaction, several studies claim that it is strongly and positively correlated to commitment beliefs and attitudes toward sexuality focused on feelings of love and partnership (Dzara, 2010; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Higgins, Mullinax, Trussell, Davidson, & Moore, 2011; Sprecher, 2002; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010). However, as far as we know, no research has examined the link between trajectories of intimate partnership and current sexual satisfaction. One may expect individuals with few and long-lasting partnerships in their intimate trajectory to be characterized by stronger commitment beliefs, more relational attitudes, and greater sexual satisfaction.

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