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# The role of romantic attachment security and dating identity exploration in understanding adolescents' sexual attitudes and cumulative sexual risk-taking



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## ABSTRACT

This study addressed how two normative developmental factors, attachment and identity, are associated with adolescents' sexual attitudes and sexual risk-taking behavior. The sample consisted of 2029 adolescents (mean age = 16.2 years) living in the Southeast United States. Path analysis was used to test the hypotheses. Higher levels of attachment anxiety predicted more dating identity exploration and less healthy sexual attitudes. Higher levels of attachment avoidance predicted less dating identity exploration and indirectly predicted less healthy sexual attitudes through dating identity exploration. Females with dating or sexual experience showed the weakest associations between the attachment dimensions and dating identity exploration. More dating identity exploration predicted healthier sexual attitudes; this association was strongest for non-virgins. Finally, higher levels of attachment avoidance were associated with higher cumulative sexual risk scores, but only among non-virgin males. Results are interpreted in light of theory and research on attachment, identity exploration, and adolescent sexual relationships.

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During middle adolescence, developmental processes co-evolve as youth engage in the formation of identity, the initiation of romantic relationships and the exploration of emerging sexuality (Montgomery, 2005). The literature typically neglects the normative aspects of development that coincide with sexual development (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Drawing upon theories of attachment and identity formation, scholars recently have argued the importance of considering associations among intimacy and identity in adolescence (Pittman, Keiley, Kerpelman, & Vaughn, 2011). In this study we address linkages among romantic attachment, identity exploration, sexual attitudes and behaviors.

## Identity and intimacy in adolescence

Two central tasks of adolescence are the formation of identity and the development of intimate relationships (Arseth, Kroger, Martinussen, & Bakken, 2009; Dyk & Adams, 1987). Both attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969) and Erikson's (1968) psychosocial stage theory of development have their roots in relationships during early childhood, however, attachment theory emphasizes that the capacity for intimacy stems from the infant–caregiver relationship, whereas Erikson's

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theory highlights identity formation during adolescence with intimacy rising in prominence in early adulthood. Looking across these theories, some scholars argue that identity and intimacy development co-occur during adolescence (Montgomery, 2005; Pittman et al., 2011). Indeed, research shows that an adolescent's feelings of closeness, support, or security within close relationships, whether family, peer or romantic, are associated with efforts to form an identity (Avila, Cabral, & Matos, 2012; Kerpelman et al., 2012; Pittman, Kerpelman, Soto, & Adler-Baeder, 2012). Other studies show an association between psychosocial intimacy and identity constructs (e.g., Archer & Grey, 2009; Montgomery, 2005). The co-development of identity and intimacy overlap particularly in the domain of dating relationships and both identity exploration and attachment security may have implications for decisions about how and with whom to explore emerging sexuality (Kerpelman, McElwain, Pittman, & Adler-Baeder, 2013; Tracy, Shaver, Albino, & Cooper, 2003).

#### *Romantic attachment security*

Romantic relationships in adolescence may best be understood using adult attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Accumulated experiences in close relationships shape mental perceptions of one's relationship security and worthiness of love and maintain individual differences of thinking, feeling, and behaving in those relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment security may influence the motives adolescents have for engaging in sexual and romantic relationships, and can be assessed on two continuous dimensions of avoidance and anxiety, where higher avoidance and anxiety indicate lower security (e.g., Schachner & Shaver, 2004). Avoidance is defined as a fear of emotional intimacy and the maintenance of distance in romantic relationships. Higher avoidance is linked to partner choice based on sexual attractiveness, and uncommitted sexual relationships (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2004; Schachner & Shaver, 2004), and is associated with detrimental sexual health outcomes such as having casual sex and not using contraceptives (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2005; Tracy et al., 2003).

Anxious attachment is indicated by a lack of confidence that one's love for a partner is reciprocated, and a corresponding tendency to keep partners engaged in a relationship at any cost (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). High anxiety is tied to sexual motives that emphasize satisfying the partner and preventing abandonment (Davis et al., 2004; Schachner & Shaver, 2004; Tracy et al., 2003), and in adolescence is associated with high rates of sexual activity but low efficacy in controlling sexual encounters (Tracy et al., 2003). Young adults with more attachment anxiety have negative attitudes towards condoms and use them less frequently (Feeney, Peterson, Gallois, & Terry, 2000). Although both attachment dimensions have implications for adolescent sexual activity, literature on attachment and sexuality emphasizes adults (e.g., Feeney et al., 2000; Impett & Peplau, 2002). Furthermore, adolescent attachment may be associated with intervening factors that are more proximal to sexual behavior including identity exploration in the dating domain (Pittman et al., 2012) and sexual attitudes (Feeney et al., 2000).

#### *Dating identity exploration*

Exploration of one's dating identity involves examining personal philosophies, beliefs, and values about what it means to be a part of a romantic relationship and views of one's current or future dating relationships (Bartoszek & Pittman, 2010; Grotevant, Thorbecke, & Meyer, 1982; Pittman et al., 2012). More identity exploration, in general, is linked to more adaptive planning and mental strategies for success in social situations (Nurmi, Berzonsky, Kinney, & Tammi, 1999). Perhaps exploration of the dating identity promotes a more gradual trajectory in relationship development such that increasingly intimate behaviors emerge as commitment becomes established. Such trajectories that build intimacy slowly are associated with less engagement in risky sexual behaviors (De Graaf, Vanwesenbeeck, Meijer, Woertman, & Meeus, 2009). Thus, dating identity exploration may be a protective factor for sexual outcomes (Kerpelman et al., 2013), yet few studies consider dating identity in the examination of adolescent sexual attitudes and behaviors (Bartle-Haring, 1997). Furthermore, it is possible that dating identity exploration influences adolescent sexual attitudes that, in turn, are a more proximal influence on sexual behavior.

Taken together, both identity and romantic attachment may have a role in explaining adolescent sexual attitudes and behaviors, and recent studies of high school-aged adolescents show greater attachment anxiety and lower attachment avoidance are associated with more exploration of the dating identity (Kerpelman et al., 2012; Pittman et al., 2012), which in turn is associated with more committed relationships before having sex (Kerpelman et al., 2013). These developmental factors have clear relevance for understanding adolescents' sexual attitudes and behaviors.

### **Sexual attitudes and behaviors**

Youth have attitudes about sex regardless of their level of sexual experience, and attitudes about sexual relationships may influence partner selection, motives for engaging in sexual activity, and sexual behaviors within relationships. When adolescents believe having sex is a good way to begin a relationship, they have sex early in a relationship hoping it will promote commitment (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). In contrast, believing that sex should occur in an already committed relationship is associated with delayed first intercourse and more consistent condom use (Parkes, Henderson, Wight, & Nixon, 2011). Sexual beliefs pertaining to perceived costs and benefits of having sex predict the use of sexual relationships to improve social status (Collins, 2003); for example, believing that having sex makes an adolescent an adult predicts sex outside of

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