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A true love story

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Chapter 1

General Introduction

Consider the following examples of two 15-year-old girls describing an everyday sexual experience while progressing in their sexual development:

Cynthia: "I've never had a date and I've never kissed anyone: What's wrong with me? (..) I asked my parents what they thought was wrong with me."

Isabella: "I don't know whether I still like my boyfriend. We're together for one year now. I think I'm in love with him, but I also want to date other boys just like a friend of mine does."

Several considerations with respect to young people's sexual development can be drawn from these examples. First, both girls differ substantially in their progression of their sexual development. Cynthia has never had any contact with a potential romantic partner. In sharp contrast, Isabella has been going steady with her boyfriend for one year, which resembles a serious adult-like romantic relationship. These differences reflect the large inter-individual variations in sexual development. There is considerable variability in terms of when young people first engage in romantic or sexual activity. A large representative study in the Netherlands showed that, although the average age in the Netherlands for first sexual intercourse is 16.6 years, half of 16- to 17-year-olds have never had sexual intercourse (De Graaf, Kruijer, Van Acker, & Meijer, 2012). Second, in these examples the sexual development of both girls encompasses internal representations: The girls describe their experiences of sexual development in terms of thoughts and feelings. Third, the examples illustrate that sexual development is a social process. Both girls describe their experiences in reference to their proximal social relationships (e.g., peers and parents). The examples reflect the complex interactions between young people's internal representations and external social context, while progressing in their sexual development.

The focus of this dissertation is on the emergent sexual development of young people aged 12 to 17 years. Previous research has rarely focused on young people's emergent sexual development (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). To provide a complete picture of how young people develop sexually throughout adolescence, knowledge concerning the beginning of this development is of fundamental importance. The onset of sexual development is characterized by internal representations, because, typically, manifested interactions have not (yet) occurred between the young person and a (potential) partner. Initial internal thoughts and feelings are not easily revealed in traditional questionnaire research, because questionnaires prefer to focus on concrete, explicit behaviors.

Over the last few decades, many researchers have acknowledged that (emergent) sexual development is a normative transition within adolescence and a central aspect of human life. Although sexual development is a lifelong process, in adolescence, sexual experiences can change rapidly. Young people have to deal with relatively unfamiliar situations (e.g., making initial contact with a potential romantic partner). These situations may evoke insecurities. Parents have a chance to guide their children in their sexual development by talking with them about romance and sexuality (Dilorio, Pluhar & Belcher, 2003; Van de Bongardt, De Graaf, Reitz, & Deković, 2014). Parents are motivated more and more (by science and practice) to talk with their children about sexuality at a young age (European Expert Group on Sexuality Education, 2015). Therefore, more information about the emergent stages of sexual development could be of relevance in terms of sex education programs.

This dissertation's exploratory and descriptive research extends the existing research by means of a focus on young people's everyday experiences of sexuality, and the role played by conversations between parents and children about these everyday sexual issues. The aim of our study is to explore young people's emerging sexual development by using a mixed-methods diary study over a two-year period. Everyday experiences were explored by using an extended definition of sexuality.

An elaborated definition of sexual development

Social context of sexual development

The definition of sexual development is based on an extensive review of the literature on young people's sexual development (Van Geert, 2009). In line with the World Health Organization (2012), we view sexual development as a broadly defined concept. Sexual development is influenced by transactions of various factors within the social context (WHO, 2012; Bronfenbrenner, 1994): The social context influences the sexual development of the young person, and, likewise, the sexual development of the young person influences the social context. "Social context" is defined as the direct experience of interactions in real life, or the experiences within the home or school system, and, more indirectly, as the influences of the socioeconomic status of the parents or the society, in which the young person is living. In short, sexual development depends on the intertwining of biological, social, cultural, and individual factors. A young person's actions and interactions with others in real life constitute a platform where these factors meet.

Although global averages have been published for boys and girls, and for different educational levels, the process of sexual development – that is, how different factors are related to sexual development – is unique for every young person (Moore & Rosenthal,

2006). Sexual development is a social learning process, wherein the young person plays an active role in the interaction with his or her environment (Rademakers & Straver, 1986; Boelhouwer, Brouwer, Scholte Lubberink, & Van Geert, 2014). Young people decide about sexual activities, depending on their emotions, wishes, and feelings of competence in social interactions. In a sequence of these interactions, the young person learns new meanings and a new way to interact. In order to study these interactions, the focus needs to be on young people's everyday experiences in real life.

Operationalization of sexual development

This dissertation has operationalized sexual development in the context of everyday experiences. Everyday experiences of sexual development include: 1) romantic topics in addition to explicit sex-related content, and 2) internal representations (e.g., thoughts and fantasies) and manifest behaviors (Edwards & Coleman, 2004; Hilber & Colombini, 2002).

First, although it is generally acknowledged that romance and sex are two intensely related topics (Lefkowitz, Gillen, & Vasilenko, 2011), researchers tend to study these concepts separately. There is a large body of research on young people's sexual development. These studies mainly focus, however, on intercourse-related behaviors (see for an overview Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). In addition to research on sexual development, there is less but still substantial research on young people's romantic development. Research on romantic development tends to concentrate exclusively on manifest experiences such as dating and romantic relationships (see for an overview Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009).

Sexual development consists of explicit sex-related aspects of sexuality (e.g., sexual fantasies and behaviors) as well as romantic aspects, such as being attracted to someone or experiences within the romantic relationship (Lefkowitz et al., 2011). A young person may have a crush on a potential romantic partner without explicit sexual fantasies, and vice versa. Young people may be attracted to engage in sexual intercourse outside the context of an intimate relationship (Paul & Hayes, 2002). In fact, research has shown that a sizeable component of sexual development involves the romantic (or relational) aspects of sexuality (De Graaf et al., 2012; Lefkowitz, Boone, & Shearer, 2004; Simon, Eder, & Evans, 1992).

Second, a majority of the studies on sexual behavior have focused exclusively on whether young people have had sexual intercourse (e.g., Schwartz, 1999; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). However, sexuality encompasses internal representations of (future) sexual encounters (e.g., fantasies, desires, and feelings of uncertainty) in addition to various sexual behaviors with others (e.g., French kissing, sexual intercourse) (Edwards

& Coleman, 2004; Lefkowitz, 2002; WHO, 2012). Research showed, for example, that girls' sexual cognitions change before they have their first sexual intercourse (O'Sullivan & Brooks-Gunn, 2005). Non-sexually active young people may not be engaging in sexual acts with others, but they do have sex-related thoughts, feelings, fantasies, and desires. To obtain a complete picture of emergent sexual development, it is crucial to focus on manifest behaviors *and* internal representations.

The role of sex-related conversations with parents

It is generally acknowledged that parents are important sexual socialization agents (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006). Sexual socialization is described as the process, by which knowledge, attitudes, and values about sexuality are acquired (Epstein & Ward, 2007; Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006; Ward, 2003; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001). It is a complex, multidimensional process that occurs gradually over a period of years and involves coordinating input from several sources. In addition to parents, young people receive information and messages from other socialization sources, such as peers and (social) media (Doornwaard, Moreno, van den Eijnden, Vanwesenbeeck, & Ter Bogt, 2014; Ladin L'Engle, Brown, & Kenneavy, 2006; Potard, Courtois, & Rusch, 2008; Sieving, Eisenberg, & Pettingell, 2006; Rodgers & Rowe, 1993; Ward, 2003). Parents' role as sexual educators is more explicit and intentional than the role of peers and (social) media. They have the chance to educate and socialize their children directly by providing information, and by helping young people to interpret messages about how to handle their romantic and sexual feelings, attitudes, and behaviors. By communicating and discussing values, norms, and opinions with their child, parents have the opportunity to guide and socialize their children on their way to becoming sexually healthy adults.

Young people's sexuality in the context of the Netherlands

The data collection of this diary study took place in the context of the Dutch culture. The Netherlands is known for its pragmatic and liberal sex-positive government policy, achieving generally better sexual health statistics than the United States of America or the United Kingdom (Parker, Wellings, & Lazarus, 2009; Weaver, Smith, & Kippax 2005). In a qualitative study, results have shown that Dutch parents tend to take their children's feelings of love seriously (Schalet, 2011). Unlike American parents, Dutch parents seem to accept their children's sexual activities, as long as they are having a serious romantic relationship and they practice safe sex. One of the main differences between the Netherlands and the USA is that Dutch parents normalize while American parents

dramatize young people's sexual development (Schalet, 2011). The results of this dissertation should be interpreted in the context of Dutch society.

Project STARS

The research that was conducted for this dissertation was part of the first longitudinal study on adolescent sexual development in the Netherlands: Project STARS (Studies on Trajectories of Adolescents Relationships and Sexuality). Project STARS consisted of four research groups, with each focusing on their own specific aspects of romantic and sexual development: individual characteristics (Baams, Overbeek, Dubas, & Van Aken), the social contexts of parents and peers (Van de Bongardt, Reitz, & Deković), internet use (Doornwaard, Van den Eijnden, Vanwesenbeeck, & Ter Bogt), and this dissertation's theme, everyday (i.e., real-life) experiences using weblog diaries (Dalenberg, Timmerman, & Van Geert). Together, these studies contribute substantially to existing knowledge about young people's sexual development in the Netherlands.

Mixed-methods diaries

In the past decade, researchers have undergone a transition in the methods that they use to study the romantic and sexual experiences of young people, shifting the focus away from questionnaires toward observational methods, interviews, and other qualitative methods (Collins et al., 2009). This dissertation has used mixed-methods diaries to capture young people's everyday experiences of their sexual development (see also Boelhouwer et.al., 2014). Sexuality is an extremely privacy-sensitive topic for people, especially for the participants in our research: young people who are just starting to explore their sexual development. We considered that a diary study was a good method for revealing young people's emerging sexual development for several reasons. First, diaries provide young people with the freedom to share their experiences on a regular basis. In this sense, recall error is less profound in diaries than in questionnaires (Nezlek, 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). Second, the diaries give young people a chance to write about their sexual development on their own, at a time and place that suits them best. Accordingly, they enjoyed more privacy this way and were more anonymous in this diary research than they would have been in, for example, an interview setting (Timmerman, 2009). Third, the diaries made it possible to reveal young people's internal representations of their everyday lives vis-à-vis sexual development – impossible to capture with observational methods. Finally, the diary method did not use a pre-described list of topics, which is typically the case in questionnaire studies. Instead, the diaries offered an open format

that gave participants the opportunity to express their sexual development in their own words. The salience of the reports recorded in the diaries contributes to their accuracy. Personally relevant experiences are remembered better than general experiences (Nezlek, 2011). In this way, we were able to gain insight into young people's emerging romantic and sexual development from the unique viewpoint of young people themselves.

This dissertation consists of four diary studies among a total of 306 young people (12-17 years old). A segment of these young people filled out diaries in six waves (i.e., data collection periods) over a two-year period. We decided to use waves that were separated by a two-month break, because we did not want to overburden the participants. Every wave consisted of six weeks. In the data collection period, the young person was asked every week to describe: 1) a recent experience with respect to (his/her) romantic and sexual development, and 2) a recent sex-related conversation with their parents.

Research question and overview of the dissertation

To gain more insight into young people's emerging sexual development, this study focused on young people's everyday experiences. This dissertation answers the central question: How does young people's emerging sexual development progress (by focusing on young people's everyday experiences) and in what way do everyday conversations with parents play a role in this development? To answer this research question, we carried out four studies outlined in this dissertation. These empirical papers are divided into two parts.

The first part consists of two chapters focusing on everyday experiences in young people's romantic and sexual development. Chapter 2 presents a pilot study, first, to explore young people's everyday romantic and sexual experiences, and, second, to test the feasibility of the diary method in terms of capturing these romantic and sexual experiences so that adjustments could be made before a two-year diary data collection period started. Chapter 3 describes a second study using the two-year diary data. This chapter focuses on young people's trajectories of sexual behavior, based on the progression from less to more intimate sexual behaviors longitudinally. This chapter also explores the differences in everyday experiences between these trajectories.

The second part consists of two chapters focusing on everyday conversations between parents and young people about romantic and sexual issues. Chapter 4 reports the findings of an exploration of everyday conversations between young people and their parents. We examined the topics and quality of naturally occurring sex-related conversations with parents. Topics about romance and sexuality were compared to other topics between young people in general and, more specifically, within the lives of young people during the period of one year. Chapter 5 describes the timing of conversations

about romance and sexuality between young people and their parents in the everyday lives of young people. By exploring the diary reports of everyday experiences of romance and sexuality, *and* the reports of sex-related communication between young people and their parents, this chapter shows how young people's emergent romance and sexuality development (i.e., romantic developmental stage) is connected to sex-related conversations with parents. Finally, in Chapter 6, the findings of the empirical studies are summarized, and implications of these findings for future research are discussed.

PART I

**Young People's Everyday Romantic and Sexual
Experiences**

