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A true love story

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Chapter 5

Young People's Everyday Romance and Sexual Experiences in relation to Sex-related Conversations with Parents: A Matter of Timing?

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Abstract

This study builds on existing research into how young people's emergent sexual development (i.e. romantic developmental stage) is connected to parent-child sex-related communication (i.e. avoidance versus disclosure). Over the course of one year, a total of 21 young people (*age range* 12-17.5) reported in longitudinal qualitative diaries about their (1) everyday sexual experiences and (2) sex-related conversations with their parents. Using a mixed-methods approach, the results showed that less experienced participants reported more avoidance of parent-child sex-related conversations than more experienced participants. The sex-related conversations of more experienced participants were mainly about overt experiences (e.g. everyday issues with their romantic partner), while the conversations of less experienced participants were characterized by covert experiences (e.g. opinions about romantic relationships in general). These results suggest that the degree to which young people feel comfortable talking about sexuality with their parents partly depends on when the conversation takes place during a young person's romance and sexual development.

Keywords: Parent-child conversations, Sexuality, Romance, Diary study

Introduction

It is generally acknowledged in the Netherlands and other countries that the exploration and experimentation of romance and sexuality is part of young people's lives (Tolman & McClelland, 2011; Vasilenko, Lefkowitz, & Welsh, 2014). As the development of romance and sexuality begins to emerge, young people have to develop skills for dealing with new challenges and social interactions. To handle these relatively new situations, young people may talk to their parents for support and guidance in their sexual development (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006). In fact, family-based sexuality education is an important method through which young people obtain information about sex-related issues (European Expert Group on Sexuality Education, 2015).

However, sexuality is a very personal and sensitive topic to talk about, for parents and for young people. For example, a large-scale survey of 2808 Dutch high school students concluded that only 33% of students who had been victims of unwanted sexual experiences talked about these experiences with their parents (Timmerman, 2004). Avoidance of conversation is a typical characteristic of sex-related conversations (Afifi, Joseph, & Aldeis 2008; Widman, Choukas-Bradley, Helms, Golin, & Prinstein 2014).

There is a widespread belief that Dutch society is more open to the discussion of sex and sexuality than other countries (Braecken, 1994; Weaver, Smith, & Kippax 2005) such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Schalet, 2011). Schalet's comparative study showed that, in contrast to US and UK families, most Dutch parents accept sexual experiences between young people when they are in steady relationships and use contraception (Schalet, 2011). Furthermore, the study showed that Dutch parents think it is important to talk about sexuality with their children, whereas American parents prefer to avoid these sensitive conversations. Despite these interesting insights, we know little about how young Dutch people's conversations with their parents take place in real-life. Therefore, this study elaborates on our current knowledge of young people's willingness to talk about sexual issues in everyday conversations with their parents. Using a diary method, we will explore whether and how talking about sexuality with parents is related to young people's romantic and sexual experiences.

Young people's sexual development

There is considerable variability in when young people first engage in romantic or sexual activity. For example, although the average age in the Netherlands of first sexual intercourse is 16.6 years, half of 16 to 17-year-olds have never had sexual intercourse (de

Graaf et al., 2012). Despite these individual differences, young people aged 12 to 18 are increasingly engaging in romantic and sexual activities. In the Netherlands, the majority of 18 to 20-year-olds have had at least one romantic relationship (87%) and have engaged in sexual intercourse (77%) (de Graaf et al., 2012).

Most studies of young people's sexual development share a focus on a limited definition of sexuality, primarily including intercourse-related behaviour and negative health outcomes (such as consequences of no condom use). Unlike these previous studies, this study used a more complex definition of sexuality, one which included implicit representations, such as thoughts, fantasies, desires and beliefs, as well as romantic and intimate topics without any explicit sexual goal (WHO 2012). The focus of our study was on young people's own unique perceptions of sexuality: how young people experience sexuality in everyday life. We thus also included those young people who had initial fantasies outside of a manifest romantic or sexual interaction.

Theories on romantic and sexual development include young people without manifest experiences. Three stages can be roughly distinguished: an initial stage of romantic fantasies, a middle stage of short-term dating and a final stage of consolidation into a dyadic romantic bond (Connolly & McIsaac 2011). Young people develop their romantic experiences from an internal orientation towards romantic and sexual affiliations (i.e. the initial stage), through diverse romantic and sexual interactions (i.e. the middle stage), into more manifest dyadic romantic bonds (i.e. the final stage). The romantic bond can subsequently be dissolved and the young people will then find other romantic partners through further romantic and sexual affiliations and interactions, and so on. The development of romance and sexuality is an ongoing process which changes over the course of a (young) person's life.

Conversations with parents and young people's sexual development

Numerous studies investigated the relationship of parent-child sex-related conversations and young people's sexual outcomes. Literature reviews have shown that parent-child conversations about sex or contraception are associated with a rising age of first sexual intercourse and greater condom use (Commendador, 2010; Markham et al., 2010). A recent Dutch longitudinal study among 12 to 18-year-olds showed that sex-related conversations with parents are negatively related to peer pressure to have sex (Van de Bongardt et al., 2014). Other studies have shown no association between parent-child communication and sexual behaviour in samples of 11 to 17-year-old Latin Americans, 14 to 15-year-old European Americans and 16 to 19-year-old Australians (Guzmán et al., 2003; McNeely et al., 2002; Troth & Peterson 2000), and a few studies which used a

national representative sample of young people in the Netherlands and United States of America reported that parent-child conversations about sex, protection and contraception are related to higher levels of sexual activity among young people (De Looze, Constantine, Jerman, Vermeulen-Smit, & Ter Bogt 2014; Deptula, Henry, & Schoeny 2010). Results on how parental sex-related communication is related to young people's sexuality have therefore been inconsistent (see also Dilorio et al., 2003; Jaccard, Dodge, & Dittus 2002).

Longitudinal studies showed that openness in parent-child sex-related conversations increases as young adults (18 to 25-years-old European Americans) grow older (Lefkowitz, 2005; Morgan, Thorne, & Zurbriggen, 2010). This association could reflect an increased willingness or need to discuss sexual topics with parents when young people have greater experience with sexuality (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Morgan et al., 2010). In fact, parents are inclined to adapt their communication to the personal experiences of their children. Parents who believed that their children were dating or were sexually active talked more about sex with their children among samples of North American parents of 12 to 16-year-olds and 13 to 17-year-olds, and Latina/Hispanic American 20 to 45-year-old women being interviewed about their youth (Beckett et al. 2010; Eisenberg et al. 2006; Raffaelli, Bogenschneider, and Flood 1998). Research showed that American mothers of 14 to 17-year-olds were prone to disclose information about condoms when they thought that their children's friends were sexually active (Miller & Whitaker, 2001).

As has been mentioned above, previous studies all have in common that they focus on a limited definition of sexuality, primarily including explicit sexual behavior and negative health outcomes. Furthermore, longitudinal studies addressing the relationship between young people's various sexual experiences and parent-child sex-related communication have been scarce. To explore the relationship between parent-child conversations about sexuality and young people's emergent sexual experiences, we used a longitudinal qualitative diary study.

We believe that a diary method is most suitable for capturing real-life implicit and manifest sexual experiences in young people. Emergent sexual experiences are difficult to measure using traditional survey methods because of the covert nature of many experiences (e.g. desires and wishes). In addition to manifest romantic relationships, other forms of sexual experiences are also part of emergent sexual development (e.g. thinking about someone special). Another reason for using diary reports to study young people's romantic and sexual experiences is that diaries measure events and feelings on the spot. Consequently, recall error is less of a problem (Nezlek, 2011). Asking participants to report on conversations over the previous week, on a regular basis and over a long period increases the chance that most real-life experiences and conversations will be captured.

The current study

This study represents a first explorative step towards examining how young people's stage of romantic development is related to openness to talking about sex-related experiences with parents over the course of a year. We study young people's emergent sexual experiences, broadly defined, from young people's own perspectives. In a diary study young people reported on 1) personal sexual experiences, and 2) everyday sex-related conversations with parents.

Method

Participants

Data for this study were collected as part of the larger Project STARS (Studies on Trajectories of Adolescent Relationships and Sexuality), a longitudinal research project on romantic and sexual development of Dutch adolescents. The initial sample of participants in the diary study consisted of 66 participants who had parental consent and volunteered to participate in the study (48 girls, 18 boys; *Mean* = 15.3; *range* = 12–17.5). We used a subsample of 21 young people for our analysis (19 girls; 2 boys). These 21 participants were involved in this study because they reported personal sexual experiences *and* at least one sex-related conversation with their parents in their diaries over a period of one year. At the start of the study, the 21 participants averaged 15.5 years of age (*range* = 13–17.3). Fourteen percent of the participants were enrolled in pre-vocational secondary education, 29 percent in senior general secondary education, and 57 percent in pre-university education. These are the three main types of high school in the Netherlands. All the participants had been born in the Netherlands and reported their sexual orientation as (predominantly) heterosexual. Overall, the participant characteristics of the research sample ($n = 21$) did not differ with regard to age from the initial sample ($n = 66$) ($t(8) = 0.791$, $p = 0.432$). However, more girls in the research sample ($n = 21$) reported sex-related conversations compared to the initial sample ($n = 66$) ($\chi^2(1, N = 66) = 4.892$, $p = 0.027$).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from secondary schools in large cities and small municipalities in the northern Netherlands. Participation was voluntary and the selection criterion was being a high school student (aged between 12 and 18) because sexual development emerges during this period through exploring manifest experiences (e.g. de Graaf et al., 2012). Six high schools known to the first author (via acquaintances and colleagues) were approached by email and telephone and through school visits. The schools were representative for the three main education levels for high schools in the Netherlands. In addition to written and oral information about the research project, motivated young people were invited to volunteer to participate in the study and were asked to return a registration form. Motivation was important since the study design was time-consuming and intensive (i.e. regular reports over one year). Only participants with written permission from their parents/guardians could participate in the study.

To collect information on everyday sexual experiences and parent-child conversations about sexuality over the course of a year, participants were asked to complete a total of eighteen diaries divided over three waves (i.e. W1, W2 and W3) of data collection periods of six weeks, each separated by a two-month break. Each diary consisted of two parts: 'Personal sexual experiences' and 'Everyday sex-related conversations with parents'. We carried out three separate data collection periods because we did not want to overburden the participants. Participants were asked to enter their answers to questions in an online weblog diary via a secure survey website. Email addresses and usernames were collected separately to guarantee anonymity. Participants who forgot to complete a diary (e.g. in the second week) were given the opportunity to complete a diary at an additional week (i.e. the seventh week).

Participants were allowed to ask questions and request advice or help after each diary entry, for ethical reasons. This support was provided in close collaboration with a mental health institute so e-health or referral to a support service could be offered if required. The few participants who asked questions were not included in our study's 21-member sample. To increase participant motivation, the researcher remained in contact with the participants by email. The researcher sent out newsletters, Christmas wishes, and personally answered incoming emails. After each data collection period, the participants were rewarded for their participation with increasing sums (EUR 5 at W1; EUR 7.50 at W2; EUR 10 at W3). Prior to data collection, the study was approved by the Ethical Committee for Psychology of the University of Groningen.

Table 1. Codes for Part 1 'Personal sexual experiences': romantic developmental stages ($\kappa = 0.9$)

Coding category	Explanation	Narrative example
Initial romantic developmental stage	Diary reports reflecting romantic affiliations without explicit contact with a significant other	'I think I am in love! Though, we never talked with each other... (sadly!).'
Middle romantic developmental stage	Diary reports reflecting romantic affiliations with explicit contact with a significant other	'I met a boy who I really like and he wanted to kiss me, but in the end we didn't.'
Final romantic developmental stage	Diary reports reflecting experiences within a romantic relationship	'I met up with my boyfriend today, but I do not know whether I still like him.'

Notes. κ =inter-rater reliability measured by Cohen's Kappa.

Table 2. Codes for Part 2 'Everyday sex-related conversations with parents': Avoidance or Disclosure ($\kappa = 0.88$).

Coding category	Explanation	Narrative example
Avoidance	Participants showed a reluctance to talk to their parents about sexuality.	'I tried to end the conversation. I did not want to talk about it.'
Disclosure	Participants were willing to talk to their parents about sexuality.	'I just talked to my mother about it.'

Notes. κ =inter-rater reliability measured by Cohen's Kappa.

Semi-structured diary

Because of the innovative nature of the diary study, a pilot study was conducted using a sample of 183 young people at a pre-vocational secondary school who completed the diary once without any financial compensation for their participation. The results showed that the participants understood the questions and were motivated to report private personal experiences. Minimal revisions were made to the wording of the questions used in this study.

Data collection started with a short questionnaire to collect demographic information, such as age, gender and education. The diary consisted of two parts. In the first part, 'Personal sexual experiences', participants were invited to write about a recent personal sexual experience: 'The following questions are about what was most on your

mind in the previous week regarding falling in love, flirting, going out, having sex, intimacy, having a romantic relationship and/or everything related to that. Thus, write about something that is on your mind, that you are thinking about, which evokes strong feelings in you.’ The participants were given open-ended prompts to describe their sexual experience. The relevant measures here were the sex-related topic and what the participant desired and did during the event, or wished for and wanted to do in the case of an internal experience, such as a thought or desire.

Likewise, participants were asked to describe conversations with their parents about their sexual experiences in the second part ‘Everyday sex-related conversations with parents’. The participants were given open-ended prompts to describe their conversation. The relevant measures here were the conversation topic and what the participant desired and did during the conversation.

Data analysis

Quantitative analyses were performed using t-tests and chi-square analyses to test differences between subsamples. With respect to hybrid qualitative/quantitative analyses (i.e. mixed-methods approach), Constant Comparative Method (CCM) was used to code and analyse the detailed diary descriptions of specific topics and emerging dimensions (Boeije, 2010). The Constant Comparative Method is a stepwise comparison of the content of diaries, yielding their main themes and patterns. The CCM was applied independently to the two diary parts. The qualitative analysis involved three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The first step is to select a small part of the whole sample for open coding, which resulted in tentative codes for every diary report. The second step – ‘axial coding’ – involved applying the tentative codes to the rest of the sample. The third step – ‘selective coding’ – involved structuring the data by focusing on the study aims. We identified the importance of the themes by calculating the frequency of the codes, resulting in core categories. The core categories will be explained separately for the two parts of the diary study.

Part 1 ‘Personal sexual experiences’

Every diary entry about sexuality, broadly defined, was coded as Sexuality (WHO, 2012). All reports that could not be coded as Sexuality were coded Other (e.g. accounts of peers or school).

All Sexuality reports were selected for further coding. Recall that each participant made diary entries several times during the year. They described several sexuality

experiences, i.e. diary reports. Each diary report on sexuality was coded as an experience in one of the three romantic developmental stages, that is 1) initial stage, 2) middle stage and 3) final stage (see Table 1 for explanation and narrative examples). Participants may have only reported on experiences within one romantic developmental stage (e.g. initial experiences) over the year, but they may also have reported on more than one romantic developmental stage (e.g. initial and middle experiences). The one-year diary reports permitted each participant to be classified against several romantic developmental stages.

Part 2 'Everyday sex-related conversations with parents'

Each diary report of a conversation represents how a participant experienced a conversation. As with Part 1, all the parent-child conversations were coded as Sexuality or Other (e.g. conversations about school). The sex-related conversations were the focus of analysis. All the sex-related conversations were coded as avoidance or disclosure (see Table 2 for coding categories, explanation and narrative examples). Avoidance covered diary reports describing participants trying to avoid conversation and feeling reluctant to talk to their parents. Disclosure covered participants describing talking to their parents within a conversation. Since every participant made several diary entries during the year, each participant described several sex-related conversations. Every participant was ultimately classified by the number of avoidance or disclosure conversations reported during one year.

The validity of the hybrid qualitative/quantitative analysis (i.e. mixed-methods approach) was managed by discussion of whether the coding terms reflected the contents. Diary reports were coded by one of the authors and an undergraduate student. Inter-observer reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa. The codes for the first and second parts were considered reliable with $\kappa = 0.9$ for romantic developmental stages, and $\kappa = 0.89$ and $\kappa = 0.88$ for conversation topic and avoidance or disclosure, respectively.

Sexual experiences and sex-related conversations with parents

To examine the relationship between sexual experiences and parent-child conversations about sexuality, we developed a typology of the combination of romantic developmental stage and openness of sex-related conversations (i.e. disclosure versus avoidance) for each participant. Quotations from individual participants are denoted by numbers, from P01 for participant 1, to P21 for participant 21.

Results

'Personal sexual experiences'

In the first part of the diary the 66 participants wrote about everyday sexual experiences. Although we explicitly asked participants to write about the sex-related topic that was most on their minds, they also wrote about other topics (e.g. peers). A total of 53 (80%) participants wrote at least once about a personal sexual experience during the research period. Personal sexual experiences were reported in 35 percent of all the diary reports.

'Parent-child sex-related conversations'

In the second part of the diary the 66 participants reported on the topics they talked about with their parents. In addition to sex-related conversations, participants also wrote about other conversation topics with their parents (e.g. school). A total of 21 (32%) participants wrote at least once about a sex-related conversation with their parents. A total of 59 percent of the conversations which these participants ($n = 21$) reported were about a sex-related topic.

Table 3. Typology of Romantic Developmental Stage (from Part 1 'Personal sexual experiences') and Disclosure/Avoidance (from Part 2 'Everyday sex-related conversations with parents')

Typology	n	Percentage
Experienced-Disclosure	12	57%
Inexperienced-Avoidance	7	33%
In/Experienced-Avoidance/Disclosure	2	10%
Total	21	100%

Notes. Inexperienced=low romantic developmental stage. Experienced=high romantic developmental stage.

Sexual experiences and sex-related conversations: a typology

We now turn to the central part of the study, which relates young people's personal experiences to everyday sex-related conversations using the subsample of 21 participants who reported at least one conversation about sexuality over the course of one year. The 21 participants did not differ from the participants who did not report a sex-related conversation regarding their number of diary reports in general ($M = 13.1$, $SD = 2.9$ vs. $M = 13.7$, $SD = 3.4$; $t(64) = -0.728$, $p = 0.112$). However, the selected subsample ($n = 21$) reported significantly more personal sexual experiences than the participants who did not report a parent-child sex-related conversation ($M = 8$, $SD = 3.5$ vs. $M = 3$, $SD = 3.5$ respectively; $t(64) = -4.429$; $p = 0.001$).

The participants' personal sexual experiences ($n = 21$) were used to classify each participant to a romantic developmental stage. This classification resulted in participants who reported on 1) initial and middle stage experiences; 2) only middle stage experiences; 3) middle and final stage experiences; and 4) final and initial stage experiences. In addition, the participants' reports of sex-related conversations were divided into avoidance or disclosure, which resulted in three groups: 1) disclosure, 2) avoidance and 3) a mix of avoidance and disclosure during one year. Combining the two categorizations, the 21 participants were classified into three combinations (types): Experienced-Disclosure, Inexperienced-Avoidance and In/Experienced-Disclosure/Avoidance (see Table 3). 'Experienced' and 'Inexperienced' refer to higher and lower romantic developmental stages, respectively.

Type 1: Experienced-Disclosure. Most of the participants were categorized as Experienced-Disclosure ($n = 12$). The age range in this group was 14 to 17 years old. One participant was aged 14, eight participants were aged 15 to 16, and three participants were aged 17. 'Experienced' means that the participants' everyday sexual experiences were coded at relatively higher romantic developmental stages (Part 1 'Personal sexual experiences'). Except for one participant, all the participants could be coded as at least a middle romantic stage (stage 2). Furthermore, almost everyone had experiences from the final romantic stage (stage 3), meaning that participants were reporting everyday sexual experiences with their romantic partners. For example, the diary reports of a fifteen-year-old girl were coded as an experience in the final romantic stage because she mentioned her feelings about her romantic partner (P07):

[What was it exactly about?] 'I do not know whether or not I still love my boyfriend because my feelings for him are diminishing and I do not know how to cope with this. (...) I am afraid I will regret breaking up.'

Another fifteen-year-old girl in the Experience-Disclosure group wrote of experiences which could be classified in middle and final stages of romantic development. First, an example of a middle stage report (P03):

[What was it exactly about?] 'I was previously rejected by a boy and he is still on my mind. But I have met another boy. However, he rejected me too. And now the first boy is single again and we are in touch.'

Later on, the same fifteen-year-old girl mentioned getting into a romantic relationship and this report was coded as a final stage of romantic development (P03):

[What was it exactly about?] 'Well, we went steady. We started a relationship. (...) I hung out with him and just clung onto him.'

With respect to sex-related conversations, participants in the Experienced-Disclosure Group consistently disclosed information to their parents (Part 2 'Everyday sex-related conversations'). A characteristic of sex-related conversations within this group was that the specific topics of conversation referred to overt experience of sexuality, such as meeting a romantic partner. For example a fifteen-year-old girl reported (P07):

[What was the conversation exactly about?] 'My parents are going away for the weekend, and I will have to sleep over somewhere else. "I'll ask a friend", I said. My father answered with: "You can also go to your boyfriend's." The conversation that followed was about being allowed to sleep over at my boyfriend's house. I wanted it to be Friday already! And I accepted their suggestion.'

The conversation could also be about an evaluation of an *overt experience* with respect to a romantic partner. A fifteen-year-old girl reported (P03):

[What was the conversation exactly about?] 'We talked about that that boy is an asshole and it would be better for me to break up with him. (...) I wished everything to be okay and I cried with my dad.'

Type 2: Inexperienced-Avoidance. The conversation patterns of seven participants were classified as Inexperienced-Avoidance. The age range in this group was 13 to 17 years old. Two participants were aged 13 to 14, three participants were aged 15 to 16 and two participants were aged 17. 'Inexperienced' refers to participants who reported sexual experiences about initial (stage 1) and middle romantic stages (stage 2) (Part 1 'Personal

sexual experiences'). No participant referred to having a steady romantic relationship (i.e. final romantic stage, stage 3). For example, a sixteen-year-old girl reported an experience at the initial stage of romantic development (P11):

[What was it exactly about?] 'I was thinking about a boy who I like a lot. I want to contact him. I think that if I bump into him, I will start a conversation with him.'

In another diary report the same girl (P11) continued to describe experiences at the first stage of romantic development. The following example shows that after a few weeks, she still liked the same boy (P11):

[What was it exactly about?] 'I was thinking about that boy again. I really like him. I was thinking about what he looks like and what he does. (...) I think I will try to talk to him if I bump into him.'

Another example of an experience coded to the initial development stage is from another girl. A sixteen-year-old girl reported that she had feelings for a classmate (P16):

[What was it exactly about?] 'I really like this nice classmate (a lot of people like him). But I am too insecure to think he would like me. I wish that I was not so insecure and that everything would go the way I want it to go.'

With respect to sex-related conversations, these participants experienced talking about sexuality in terms of avoidance (Part 2 'Everyday sex-related conversations'). They did not want to talk about sexuality. By focusing on the sex-related conversations, it appeared that participants in the Inexperienced-Avoidance Group reported briefly about *covert experiences*, and that they did not refer to any specific conversation. The topics were described in general terms. A sixteen-year-old girl reported a parent-child conversation about a *covert* experience which she avoided by saying nothing (P11):

[What was the conversation exactly about?] 'About whether I like somebody and what I think about romantic relationships. (...) For us to talk about another topic: I didn't want to talk about it. I said nothing.'

Another example is a sixteen-year-old girl who reported talking about a *covert experience* (P16):

[What was it exactly about?] 'Whether I liked/like somebody. Actually, I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't answer the questions.'

It seems that the parent wanted to know whether their child liked somebody and what the child's thoughts were about romantic relationships in general. The parent did not refer to any event in real life as a starting point for discussing these topics.

Type 3: In/Experienced-Disclosure/Avoidance. The sexual experiences of two participants could be coded high and low on the romantic developmental stages and were referred to as 'In/Experienced'. The girls in this group were 15 years old. At the beginning of the research period, both participants reported experiences within a romantic relationship (Part 1 'Personal sexual experience'). However, during the research period they broke up with their romantic partner. Afterwards, they reported initial romantic experiences bringing them back into the lower romantic developmental stage. An example of an experience of breaking up is from a fifteen-year-old girl (P04):

[What was it exactly about?] 'I ended the romantic relationship with my boyfriend, but now I have doubts about whether I want him back or not. (...) I am going to think about what I want and I will try distance myself from my ex-boyfriend.'

During the research period, the same fifteen-year-old girl (P04) reported in the diaries about liking a new person. This report was coded as an initial romantic stage experience (P04):

[What was it exactly about?] 'I thought a boy was interesting. But now I hear that he likes another girl. It confuses me.'

Participants in the In/Experienced-Disclosure/Avoidance Group reported conversations with their parents which shifted from disclosure (when they were at the high romantic developmental stage) to avoidance (when they were at the low romantic developmental stage). The participants disclosed information about the *overt experiences* of breaking up with their boyfriend, yet they avoided talking about the *covert experiences*

of being in love. The fifteen-year-old girl who broke up with her boyfriend disclosed this *overt* experience to her mother (P04):

[What was the conversation exactly about?] 'I told my mother that I'd broken up with my boyfriend and why I broke up. I wished she'd already known so that I wouldn't have to tell her. But I just told her the whole story.'

Another conversation reported by this fifteen-year-old girl was about a *covert* topic, which the girl tried to avoid (P04):

[What was the conversation exactly about?] 'My parents were checking whether I liked somebody or not. (...) I laughed a little bit and hoped the conversation would be over soon.'

The other fifteen-year-old girl in the In/Experienced-Disclosure/Avoidance Group who broke up with her boyfriend first talked with her mother about advice (*overt topic*) on how to end the romantic relationship (P06):

[What was the conversation exactly about?] 'We talked about how I could break up with my boyfriend. What I could say and how I could say it. (...) We talked about how to handle this situation well and what I should do. I think it is devastating to hurt someone so much, just because I do not want to be unhappy myself.'

After a while the same fifteen-year-old girl (P06) fell in love with someone else and she did not want to talk about this *covert* topic with her parents (P06):

[What was the conversation exactly about?] 'My parents know, embarrassingly enough, that I like someone because I blushed when my sister talked about him. (...) Well, I love to talk about him all day, only not with my parents. I do not want them to know. I tried to ignore the conversation.'

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to focus systematically on the everyday lives of young people using a diary method and relate young people's everyday sexual experiences to openness in parent-child sex-related conversations longitudinally, over a period of one year. Overall, the results indicate that young people's ease in discussing sexuality with their parents in everyday life is associated with their stage of romantic and sexual development. Three groups of participants could be identified: young people in the early stages of romantic and sexual development (lower romantic developmental stages), who tended to avoid sexuality-related conversations with their parents; experienced young people (i.e. at higher romantic developmental stages), who disclosed sex-related conversations with their parents; and a mixed group.

This diary study adds to the explicit sex-related focus of earlier research showing that young people's real-life romance and sexuality experiences, including internal and romantic aspects of sexuality, are related to different parent-child sex-related conversations. These results reinforce earlier questionnaire research with an intercourse-related focus which found that parents generally tend to adapt intercourse-related topics of communication to the personal experiences of their children (Beckett et al., 2010; Miller & Whitaker, 2001; Raffaelli et al., 1998).

The variability in ages between less and more experienced young people underlines the importance of stage-appropriateness (alongside age-appropriateness) in informal and formal sexual education efforts. For example, our study results show that some young people need guidance in handling 'adult-like' romantic relationship issues (e.g. breaking up) at a relatively young age. Young people differ in the type and number of their sexual experiences and consequently the guidance they need.

The participant groups not only differed with respect to their romantic and sexuality stages, but also with respect to the sex-related topics they communicated with their parents. More experienced young people reported mainly discussing *overt experiences* (e.g. meeting a romantic partner). In contrast, less experienced young people mainly reported *covert experiences*: about parents asking generally about the young person's thoughts and opinions about having a crush on somebody. Our study suggests that young people see these initial sexual experiences as private: no one is entitled to know what is going on in their minds. Consequently, young people may find it difficult and may not want to talk about these issues. These findings about disclosing overt and avoiding covert experiences in sex-related conversations with parents underline recent

questionnaire research which found that young people were more prone to disclose overt experiences, for example daily issues about their romantic partner, than covert experiences, such as having a crush (Daddis & Randolph, 2010).

Given the place of sexuality in young people's everyday lives based on the diary reports, our results showed that sexuality is not the most important topic but merely one of many that young people are concerned about. The young people who reported at least one sex-related conversation provided more reports of personal sexual experiences than the participants who never reported a sex-related conversation. The results suggest that sexuality plays a more significant role in the lives of young people who talk with their parents about sex-related topics. These young people may feel a greater need to discuss sex-related topics with their parents, or their parents may be more aware of young people's concerns about sexuality. Consequently, the initiation of an everyday conversation about sexuality is more likely to occur. Informing parents about the timing of young people's romantic and sexual development could be suitable a first step improving family-based sex education.

Although Dutch society is well known for its open sexual culture (Schalet, 2011), our study suggests that young people in the Netherlands tend to avoid conversations about sex with parents. Only one third of our Dutch sample reported a sex-related conversation. Further, the focus on conversations about romantic topics seems to suggest that the romantic aspects of sexuality are more regularly discussed with parents than explicit sexual topics (e.g. condom use). Guiding parents towards talking about romantic issues (in addition to explicit sexual topics) with their children could be an important second step in family-based sex education.

The small number of conversations about sexuality with parents may also underline the importance of formal sex education in general. Although parents are important sources of information and counsel for young people's emerging sexual development (especially for younger age groups), children may not be keen on talking with their parents about such a private topic as sexuality. They may prefer to talk with strangers about personal issues (European Expert Group on Sexuality Education, 2015). In this sense, a legal requirement to provide formal sexuality education to young people could be of great importance in assisting young people's healthy sexual development.

Limitations, strengths and conclusions

Our findings need to be considered in light of its limitations. First, due to the small sample size and methodology chosen, this study is descriptive in nature. Although this study consisted of a small sample and relatively short diary reports, the reports of the young

people who did report sex-related conversations do provide us with insight into how conversations are experienced in real life and how they are related to young people's romantic development. This study enabled us to classify the participants into less and more experienced sexual groups. The groups differed clearly with respect to how they experienced conversations with their parents. Nonetheless, replication of this study using a broader sample and different methodology is essential.

Second, with respect to other methodologies, combining diaries with interviews could elicit more in-depth stories. However, sex is a private topic, especially for young people. Therefore, it would not be surprising to find that many young people are reluctant to answer questions on intimate and sexual matters, particularly in interview situations where the interviewer is an adult (parent, teacher or other professional) (Timmerman, 2009). Using diary methods provided insight into young people's anonymous expressions and perspectives on these sensitive topics without the possible influence of researchers.

Third, to provide ideas of what topics participants could write about, some topic examples were included in the open-ended questions. It is possible that participants were primed to write specifically about the example topics. The diaries contained accounts of topics and unique everyday experiences which were both related and unrelated to sexuality, indicating that the participants wrote about any recent experience which was of fundamental importance at that time. Therefore, we can assume that the diary reports reflected participants' everyday lives.

Fourth, most participants reported having had no sex-related conversation with their parents during the research period. We think that the participants were not reluctant to report a sex-related conversation, as they actively volunteered to participate in the study and were generally very open in writing about sex-related issues in the other part of the study (Part 1 'Everyday sexual experiences'). A young person may have had conversations about sexuality but not remember them, or they may not have been profound enough to report. As conversations about sexuality do not occur regularly, it is not surprising that many participants did not report a conversation with their parents about sexuality.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study could help support sexuality education by including a reflection on personal experiences of current or future romantic relationships and sexuality, in addition to a narrow view of sexuality which includes the biology of the human body and safe sex. Parents are encouraged to talk to their children about sexuality early in life, when they are young and not involved in romantic relationships (Eisenberg et al., 2006; European Expert Group on Sexuality Education, 2015). Our study showed that talking about sexuality in the early stages of romantic development is quite difficult in real life. This is an important finding for educational

efforts to help parents to talk with their children about sexuality. Once we know more about the romantic aspects of sexuality and the early stages of sexuality development, we can fully implement these findings in sex education programmes.