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A true love story

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Chapter 6

Summary, Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter is based on:

Dalenberg, W.G., Timmerman, M.C., Kunnen, E.S., & Van Geert, P.L.C. (verwacht in 2016). De Romantische en Seksuele Ontwikkeling van Adolescenten in het Dagelijks Leven. *Tijdschrift voor Seksuologie*.

The studies presented in this dissertation addressed the topic of the everyday sexual and romantic development of young people aged 12 till 17. The background and outline are presented in Chapter 1. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on young people's everyday experiences of sexual and romantic development by studying the content of diary reports on sexual and romantic issues and the way it relates to two-year sexual behavior trajectories. Chapters 4 and 5 address the role of young people's conversations with parents about sexual and romantic topics by analyzing the frequency and content of everyday sex-related conversations with parents and how they relate to young people's everyday sexual and romantic development. In the current chapter, the findings of the studies are summarized, and the strengths, limitations, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Aim of the Dissertation

This dissertation is the first to systematically study young people's emergent sexual development in their everyday lives. Previous research on sexual development mainly focused on sexual behavior and the risks of sexual behavior, such as sexually transmitted diseases. In contrast, this dissertation has used an extended definition of sexuality that entails internal representations in addition to manifest behavior, and includes not only sex-related topics, but also romantic aspects of sexuality.

The aim of this dissertation was to explore how young people's sexual development unfolds in everyday life and in what way everyday conversations with parents play a role in this development. The studies are divided into two parts: (1) everyday experiences of sexuality; and 2) everyday conversations with parents about sex-related issues.

Summary of Main Findings

PART I: Young people's Everyday Romantic and Sexual Experiences

Chapters 2 and 3 examine young people's everyday experiences of romantic and sexual development. Chapter 2 comprises a cross-sectional study designed to explore similarities and differences between young people's romantic and sexual experiences, as well as to examine a mixed-methods diary study to make adjustments to the content of the diaries and study design before a two-year data collection was started. Inspired by the Romantic Developmental Stage theory (Connolly & McIsaac, 2012; Meier & Allen 2009), everyday experiences were able to be themed into experiences within an initial romantic developmental stage (e.g., having a crush on someone), a middle stage of interactions

(e.g., initial contact), or a final stage of being in an actual romantic relationship (e.g., meeting a romantic partner). In addition, everyday sexual behaviors (e.g., from French kissing to actual intercourse) were also explored in the study.

In general, girls, older, and more experienced young people reported significantly more about their everyday romantic and sexual experiences as compared to boys, younger, and less experienced young people, respectively. Girls spontaneously report more about romantic and sexual experiences than boys do, although boys, who do report about romantic and sexual topics, express topics similar to those reported by girls: The girls in this study did not report more about romantic topics than boys did, nor did boys report more about sexual activities than girls. This is contrary to what is generally thought and what is expected from (previous) research literature (Doornwaard, Moreno, Van den Eijnden, Vanwesenbeeck, & Ter Bogt, 2014; Feiring, 1996; Mclsaac, Connolly, McKenney, Pepler, & Craig, 2008; Montgomery, 2005). It seems that in *everyday life* boys and girls do not differ in their qualitative expressions of romantic and sexual experiences.

Furthermore, findings demonstrated that Making Contact is a frequent theme in the everyday lives of young people's romantic and sexual development. Moreover, this theme is expressed differently for each romantic and sexual experience; it appeared that young people who actually interact with a potential partner have more positive feelings than young people who have only initial romantic affiliations without any contact with a potential romantic partner. These results are similar to previous international research (Jackson, Jacob, Landman-Peeters, & Lanting, 2001; Nieder & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001a; Richards, Crowe, Larson, & Swarr, 1998). The preliminary results obtained in Chapter 2 were useful in order to revise the diary method and supported the use of mixed-methods diaries to reveal young people's perspectives on everyday romantic and sexual experiences.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the findings of Chapter 2 by examining the speed of progression of young people's sexual behavior trajectories (i.e. from less to more intimate sexual behavior) in relation to their everyday expressions of their sexual development. Previous studies on progression of sexual behavior were cross-sectional and retrospective (De Graaf et al., 2009; Thompson, 1990; Rademakers & Straver, 1986). To extend existing research, we used longitudinal questionnaires to identify and cluster sexual behavior trajectories. Two sexually active trajectories were identified; fast versus gradual trajectories, and one sexually non-active trajectory. Subsequently, we used a diary method to uncover everyday sex-related experiences.

It was demonstrated that the sexual lives of both sexually active *and* sexually non-active young people were characterized by desires and uncertainties. However, active and non-active young people differed in their expressions of these experiences. Sexually non-

active young people experienced their sexual development only on a romantic level, whereas sexually active young people experienced their sexual development on a romantic as well as on a physical sexual level.

Another important finding was that young people in a fast trajectory (i.e. fast development from French kissing to fondling underneath the clothes over a two-year period) experienced less desire for actual sexual behavior in their everyday lives than young people in a gradual trajectory (i.e. gradual development from French kissing to fondling beyond the clothes during two years). A possible explanation may be that “fast” young people have less time to develop their desires for sexual contact before actually performing these sexual behaviors. As a consequence, they may experience less autonomy in their sexual development. This is in line with previous research that showed that feelings of desire are associated with a less negative reaction to a recent sexual experience (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2014). Future research could examine whether taking their time to develop sexual desires is important for young people in order to experience more intentional (instead of spontaneous) sexual behavior, and, maybe as a consequence, a more positive sexual development.

Finally, in line with scientific literature, we discovered that young people experience everyday issues of their sexual development mostly in relation to their peers (e.g., talking with peers about romantic experiences or comparing themselves to peers), more than to other people in their social environment (Lefkowitz et al., 2004; Simon et al., 1992). Chapter 3 showed that peers do not always have a negative effect on young people’s sexual development (e.g. pressure from peers to have sex). Peers can not only function as a source of uncertainty, but also of support or stimulation in everyday issues regarding sexual development.

PART II: Young People’s Everyday Conversations with their Parents about Romantic and Sexual Issues

Earlier research studied young people’s everyday conversations with parents about sex-related issues using a questionnaire to examine how much young people talk with their parents about these topics at one point in time, retrospectively. Chapters 4 and 5 explore real life conversations in everyday life. On a weekly basis, young people wrote about their everyday conversations with their parents during one year.

Chapter 4 shows that, overall, girls reported significantly more everyday sex-related conversations with their parents than boys. In addition, most of the everyday sex-related conversations of the girls were with their mothers. These results were compatible

with previous questionnaire research using one point in time (De Looze et al., 2014; Dilorio et al., 2003; Gillmore et al., 2011; Widman et al., 2014).

Our results revealed that approximately one-third of the young people reported at least one conversation about romantic and sexual issues in one year time. This is far less than was expected from the questionnaire research (De Graaf, et. al, 2012; De Looze, Constantine, Jerman, Vermeulen-Smit, & Ter Bogt, 2014). Possibly, when asked retrospectively, young people think that they have more sex-related conversations with their parents than that they actually do in everyday life. This result could also point out the importance of formal sex education: Maybe young people rather talk with other people than with their parents about sex-related issues.

In line with earlier Dutch studies (De Graaf, et. al., 2012; De Looze, Constantine, Jerman, Vermeulen-Smit, & Ter Bogt, 2014), Chapter 4 showed that everyday sex-related conversations with parents involved mainly romantic topics (e.g., initial romantic experiences and romantic relationships). This finding demonstrates that previous questionnaire research about parent-child communication, which mainly studied intercourse-related topics, might have missed a great deal of everyday parent-child conversations about sexuality.

This chapter revealed that sex-related conversations elicited more avoidance behavior compared to conversations about other topics. The longitudinal diaries enabled exploration within individual lives on how avoidance is related to sex-related conversations compared to other conversations. Some young people consistently evaluated talking about sexuality as being equal to talking about other topics; others showed a consistent pattern, where talking about sexuality with their parents elicited avoidance behavior (while other topics eliciting approach behaviour in those individuals); a few revealed a mixed pattern of avoiding and disclosing sex-related issues. These idiosyncratic conversation patterns revealed that the sex-related topic does play an important role in how easy it is to talk about romantic and sexual issues with parents, although, not in every young person's life.

Chapter 5 elaborated on the findings of Chapter 4 and examined 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, young people reported in longitudinal qualitative diaries about their (1) everyday sexual experiences and (2) sex-related conversations with their parents.

The results showed that less experienced participants (i.e. lower romantic developmental stage) reported more avoidance of parent-child sex-related conversations than more experienced participants (i.e. higher romantic developmental stage). 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).

This chapter shows that *emergent* sexual development, including internal and romantic aspects of sexuality, is associated with different types of parent-child sex-related conversations. In this way, this study reinforces earlier questionnaire research with an intercourse-related focus which showed that parents adapt intercourse-related topics of communication to the personal experiences of their children (Beckett et al. 2010; Miller and Whitaker 2001; Raffaelli et al. 1998). In conclusion, the degree to which young people feel comfortable talking about sexuality with their parents partly depends on the timing of the conversations during a young person's romantic and sexual development.

Strengths and limitations

In addition to the specific strengths and limitations that have been mentioned in each of the separate chapters, there are some general strengths and limitations of this dissertation as a whole. A main strength and innovative aspect of this research is the fact that diaries were used over a two-year period. It lies at the very heart of the social sciences to be interested in how people experience their world in everyday life. Diaries measure real-life experiences soon after they have occurred. Questionnaires, on the other hand, are often retrospective and mainly consist of a pre-established list of topics. Diaries are attuned to the participants' worlds and experiences, offering an inside view of how young people experience their romantic and sexual development in everyday life. We believe that our diary study represents a valuable tool for studying young people's everyday experiences within their romantic and sexual development.

The second major strength of this study is the use of an elaborated definition of sexuality. In research into young people's sexual development, the dominant focus is on explicit sexual behaviors (particularly intercourse), risks of these behaviors (e.g., sexually transmitted diseases) and how to prevent these risks (e.g., condom use). As a consequence of the elaborated operationalization of sexual development, however, we were able to gain insight into a broad spectrum of young people's romantic and sexual experiences. Our study samples included, among others, young people who are sexually non-active (in addition to those who are sexually active) and young people undergoing initial romantic experiences (in addition to experiences within romantic relationships).

There are also limitations of the dissertation as a whole that need to be addressed. First, the results of this dissertation are limited to the context of the diary method. It should be noted that young people wrote consciously about their experiences in the

diaries. We are aware that studying similar topics using other methods such as interviews will produce other information. However, explicitly asking young people about their experiences may stimulate young people to think about issues they might never have thought about otherwise; this is especially the case with a topic as sensitive as sexuality is. In order to fully study young people's perspectives of their sexual development, we opted for as little interference as possible and used an anonymous diary study. That said, using other methods to study the everyday life experiences of young people's sexuality would be interesting. For example, Experience-Sampling Methods studying the dynamics of behavior in a real-world setting or video-taped interactions of conversations between young people may be promising directions for future research (Shiffman, Stone, & Hufford, 2008; Van de Bongardt Reitz, Overbeek, Boislard, Burk, & Deković, 2015).

Second, although self-reports are a mainstream method for studying young people's behavior, they have drawbacks to the extent that participants may not report some experiences or behaviors because of socially desirable answers, or because the experience is too private to report. However, the longitudinal design of the study made it possible to exclude young people with inconsistent reports. Furthermore, the diary aspect of the research gave young people the freedom to write about recently experienced topics which they considered of personal importance. The salience of the reports recorded in the diaries contributes to their accuracy. Personally relevant experiences are remembered better than general experiences (Nezlek, 2011).

Third, it is difficult to know in what way the experience of keeping a diary influences sexual development. We do know that young people rated the reports relatively high in importance (on a likert-scale 1-10). However, we do not have information on how much the everyday experiences, described in the diaries, influenced the two-year sexual behavior trajectories, or which everyday events were of major influence relative to other events. For now, we can argue that the understandings of their everyday experiences are the result of what from the perspective of the young person was of major importance, even when other occurrences also took place at the same time.

Finally, the conversations with the parents are reported only from the perspective of the young person. Previous research has shown that young people and their parents differ with respect to their perceptions of sex-related conversations (Xiao, Li, & Stanton, 2011). Including parents in studies could be of added value in future research. For example, parents may think they communicate effectively with their children, while their children's opinion is that they do not. In this way, young people might miss guidance and support from their parents, both when it comes to interpreting negative sex-related messages from, for example, social media (and media generally), or to handling their romantic and sexual feelings, attitudes, and behaviors.

Integrative findings

This dissertation is one of the first to systematically explore young people's sexual development as it emerges, incorporating not only manifest and explicit physical but also internal and romantic aspects of sexuality. Using a diary study, we examined the personal lives of young people and gained information on how young people experience their romantic and sexual development. The explorative results about sexual development, as experienced in young people's everyday lives, can serve as suggestions for future research.

First, the romantic and sexual development of young people in the context of everyday life can be described as a *true love story*. The everyday experiences about sexuality were mainly about romantic aspects of sexuality instead of topics with an explicit sexual goal (i.e., intercourse-related topics). In addition, a great deal of romantic and sexual development occurs before intercourse-related activity. This dissertation was an initial attempt to reveal the, normally invisible, feelings and thoughts that comprise young people's sexual development. In particular, the internal and emerging aspects of sexuality (e.g., liking someone, being in love) encompass a large number of the reports in the diaries of young people. Despite the scant attention that has been paid to this research topic (Collins et al., 2009), this dissertation shows that young people's emergent sexual experiences (e.g., liking someone, being in love) are of great importance in their sexual development.

Second, romantic and sexual development is fairly diverse. This dissertation has shown that young people's sexual worlds are very different from each other. How young people develop sexually depends on varying personal and contextual factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Van Geert, 2003). The words of the young people in this dissertation serve to illustrate this variation. For example, our research shows that the romantic developmental stage is important when it comes to how young people experience their romantic and sexual development and whether or not young people talk with their parents about sex-related issues. The explorative results can serve as a starting point for future research to further study these individual differences and subjective experiences of young people's romantic and sexual development.

Finally, the intensive longitudinal quantitative and qualitative methods used in this dissertation offer a plethora of fresh knowledge with respect to young people's romantic and sexual development. Behavior, norms, and opinions of young people are formed through step-by-step interactions in real-life (Van Geert, 2003). Therefore, it is important to deepen our understanding about the everyday lives of young people. After all, it is easier to influence young people at the start of this period so that they develop a positive

and healthy sexual development than it is by the time young people have already formed their behavior, norms, and opinions.

Concluding remarks

The explorative research made it possible for us to capture young people's emergent sexual development in real life. Our hope is that this research will be extended with the use of an elaborated definition of sexuality in future research. Our research results may serve as a guide for practical applications (e.g., sex education programs) – one that incorporates a more extensive view than the human body and safe sex, and includes personal, everyday experiences of the romantic issues of sexuality.

APPENDICES

