

## GENDER, ETHNICITY, AND THE DEVELOPMENTAL TIMING OF FIRST SEXUAL AND ROMANTIC EXPERIENCES

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One of the most important tasks faced by adolescents and young adults is the formation of romantic relationships. Little is known, however, about the developmental timing of early relational experiences. This study investigated the age at which an ethnically diverse sample of young adults ( $N = 683$ ) experienced their very first date, love, serious relationship, kiss, and act of intercourse. Most had experienced each event by the end of high school, with first dates and kisses occurring at earlier ages than falling in love or intercourse. Gender and ethnic differences were found. For example, young men began dating at earlier ages than did young women. Asian American participants were less sexually and romantically experienced, and had their very first sexual experiences at an older age, than African American, Latino/Hispanic, and Caucasian/non-Hispanic White participants. Interestingly, there were no differences in first romantic love experience. Almost all men and women within each ethnic group had fallen in love at least once, typically around age 17; this suggests that romantic love is a common human life event and that it first occurs during the developmental period spanning late adolescence and early adulthood.

Adolescence is a time of sexual and romantic awakening (see Christopher, 2001; Collins & Laursen, 2000). Developmental theorists posit that one of the most important tasks faced by adolescent boys and girls is the formation of romantic relationships (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Sullivan, 1953), and empirical research provides evidence that dating is an important component of this life stage (e.g., Dowdy & Kliever, 1998; Thornton, 1990). Researchers interested in

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the nature of early romantic attachments have tended to focus on the sexual aspects of these relationships, in part due to the potentially negative consequences of adolescent sexual activity (e.g., pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease; Sagrestano & Paikoff, 1997; Zelnik & Kantner, 1980). Some have focused on sexual attitudes, finding that many high school and college students believe that sexual intercourse is an important and appropriate element of dating relationships (Sprecher, McKinney, Walsh, & Anderson, 1988), and that intercourse can bring a dating couple closer together and increase the partners' feelings of emotional connection and commitment (Muram, Rosenthal, Tolley, Peeler, & Dorko, 1991). Other researchers have focused on sexual behavior, conducting large-scale surveys and finding that American adolescents are becoming sexually active at increasingly younger ages (see Paikoff, McCormick, & Sagrestano, 2000).

Social and behavioral scientists have explored a variety of individual-level factors that are associated with sexual experiences during adolescence and young adulthood. Two in particular - gender and racial/ethnic affiliation - have received the most attention. Studies reveal that boys and young men often report higher rates of intercourse experience than do girls and young women. For example, Paikoff and colleagues (2000) found that the majority of early adolescent (i.e., 12- to 14-year-old) boys and girls who participated in their study had the opportunity to engage in various sexual activities, with more boys (30%) than girls (14%) experiencing intercourse. Levels of adolescent sexual intercourse experience also vary among different ethnic and racial groups within the United States. In their review of the literature, Miller and Leavitt (2003) reported that 79% of African Americans and 54% of Latino/as between the ages of 15 and 19 have had sexual intercourse, compared to 37% of Euro-Americans and 16% of Asian Americans. These researchers further noted that African American teenagers became sexually active at an earlier age than did teenagers from other ethnic groups (also see Strunin, 1991; Zelnik & Kantner, 1980).

Because most research in this area has focused on sexual intercourse, little is known about other (and not necessarily sexual) aspects of early romantic attachments. For example, do some relational events first occur earlier than others? It seems likely that young adults would experience less "serious" interpersonal events, such as a first kiss or a first date, at younger ages than they would experience such events as sexual intercourse or falling in love. Thus, the primary purpose of the present descriptive study was to identify the age at which young men and women first experienced a variety of relational events, including going on a date, embarking on a serious romantic relationship, falling in love, kissing, and engaging in sexual intercourse. Additionally, some of these events may be more common than others (e.g., more young adults may have experienced a first date or first kiss than have experienced a serious romantic

relationship or intercourse). Therefore, a secondary aim was to examine the proportion of individuals who have experienced the various romantic and sexual events under investigation. Finally, insofar as gender and ethnicity may serve as important moderators of interpersonal experiences, a third goal of this study was to examine whether the prevalence and timing of first relational experiences differed as a function of these group variables.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

A convenience sample of 683 men and women (336 men, 347 women) participated in this study (average age = 24.84 years). Participants were of diverse ethnicity: 54.8% Latino(a)/Hispanic, 15.5% Caucasian/non-Hispanic White, 13.5% Asian/Asian American, 12.0% African American, 2.6% Middle Eastern, 0.4% Native American/American Indian, and 1.2% Other. All were self-reported heterosexuals.

### PROCEDURE

Participants were recruited from introductory social science courses at a large western university. Participants completed the study in groups of 2 to 5, while seated at individual desks separated from each other by at least one other (empty) desk. Upon arrival at the research site, potential participants were informed that the present study concerned relationship events that they might or might not have personally experienced. Participants were asked to answer each question honestly, were assured of anonymity, and were asked to simply leave an item blank if they felt uncomfortable responding to it.

In addition to demographic items (i.e., current age, gender/sex, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation), the questionnaire asked participants to indicate whether or not they had ever been on a date, had a "serious" romantic relationship, been in love, been kissed, and had sexual intercourse. Participants who responded affirmatively were asked to indicate the age at which they had experienced these events. Participants received up to 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. When they were finished, they were instructed to place their questionnaires in a locked box located near the entrance to the research site. Although research indicates that "important" relationship events are easily recalled (see Berscheid & Regan, 2004), during the debriefing session each participant was asked whether he or she had experienced any difficulty answering the questionnaire items. No participant reported any difficulty; most spontaneously stated that the events in question were memorable and could be recalled easily and clearly.

## RESULTS

Participants reported having experienced a number of romantic and sexual “firsts” during their high school years (see Tables 1 and 2). Almost all (96.2%) had gone on a first date, which typically occurred during early high school (average age = 15.83 years). Most (84.8%) also reported having been “in love” at least once, and indicated that the average age at which they first fell in love was 17.47 years. A majority (83.9%) had had a “serious” dating relationship; this developmental milestone occurred somewhat later in life, when the participants were 18.02 years of age. More participants had kissed (90.5%) than had engaged in sexual intercourse (75.8%). They reported having their first kiss when they were about 15.38 years old, and experiencing their first episode of sexual intercourse when they were 17.34 years old.

**TABLE 1**  
PERCENTAGES OF PARTICIPANTS REPORTING ROMANTIC/SEXUAL “FIRSTS” BY GENDER

	Men (Total $n = 336$ )		Women (Total $n = 347$ )		Total (Total $N = 683$ )	
	%	$N$	%	$N$	%	$N$
Date	95.8	322	96.5	335	96.2	657
Kiss	88.4 <sub>a</sub>	297	92.5 <sub>a</sub>	321	93.2	618
In Love	81.5 <sub>a</sub>	274	87.9 <sub>a</sub>	305	84.9	579
Serious Relationship	81.5	274	86.2	299	83.9	573
Sexual Intercourse	78.9 <sub>a</sub>	265	72.9 <sub>a</sub>	253	75.8	518

<sub>a</sub> The percentages in this row are significantly different at  $p < .05$ .

**TABLE 2**  
AGE IN YEARS AT WHICH PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED ROMANTIC/SEXUAL “FIRSTS” BY GENDER

	Men	Women	Total
Kiss	15.16	15.58	15.38
Date	15.44 <sub>a</sub>	16.20 <sub>a</sub>	15.83
Sexual Intercourse	17.09	17.61	17.34
In Love	17.33	17.58	17.47
Serious Relationship	18.29	17.77	18.02

<sub>a</sub> These means are significantly different at  $p < .05$ .

## GENDER DIFFERENCES

A series of  $z$ -tests for proportions revealed that significantly more women (87.9%) than men (81.8%) reported having been *in love* at least once ( $z = 2.31$ ,

$p < .05$ ). More women (92.5%) than men (88.4%) also reported having ever *been kissed* ( $z = 1.83, p < .05$ ). However, a significantly greater proportion of men (78.9%) than women (72.9%) reported having engaged in *sexual intercourse* ( $z = -1.82, p < .05$ ). Equal percentages of men and women indicated having experienced the other two romantic experiences (i.e., *date, serious relationship*). The only significant difference between men and women in terms of the age at which they first experienced the various events concerned the first date; men reported having gone on their first date at a younger age than did women (15.44 vs. 16.20 years;  $t[639] = -2.09, p < .05$ ).

### ETHNIC DIFFERENCES

As illustrated in Table 3, each group of participants demonstrated a similar pattern of relational experience such that higher percentages reported having experienced a first date and kiss than a serious relationship, love, or intercourse. Due to the small numbers of Middle Eastern, Native American, and Other participants, these groups were excluded from comparative analyses. A series of  $z$ -tests for proportions revealed that Asian Americans were less sexually experienced than were participants from the other ethnic groups. Specifically, significantly more Caucasian/non-Hispanic White (84.9%), African American (82.9%), and Latino(a)/Hispanic (75.9%) participants than Asian American participants (64.1%) had engaged in intercourse ( $z$ s = 3.38, 2.79, and 2.30,  $ps < .001, .005, \text{ and } .05$ ). A similar pattern was found for the other sexual act - kissing. A greater proportion of African American (92.7%), Caucasian/non-Hispanic White (92.5%), and Latino(a)/Hispanic (91.7%) participants than Asian American participants (82.6%) had been kissed ( $z$ s = 2.00, 2.12, and 2.60, all  $ps < .01$ ). One other ethnic difference was found with respect to sexual experience; more Caucasian/non-Hispanic White (84.9%) than Latino(a)/Hispanic (75.9%) participants had engaged in intercourse,  $z = 1.97, p < .05$ .

TABLE 3  
PERCENTAGES OF PARTICIPANTS REPORTING ROMANTIC/SEXUAL "FIRSTS" BY ETHNICITY

	Latino(a)/Hispanic (Total $n=374$ )		White/Caucasian (Total $n=106$ )		African American (Total $n=82$ )		Asian American (Total $n=92$ )	
	%	$N$	%	$N$	%	$N$	%	$N$
Date	97.3 <sub>a</sub>	364	98.1 <sub>b</sub>	104	97.6 <sub>c</sub>	80	90.2 <sub>abc</sub>	83
Kiss	91.7 <sub>a</sub>	343	92.5 <sub>b</sub>	98	92.7 <sub>c</sub>	76	82.6 <sub>abc</sub>	76
In Love	85.6	320	91.5 <sub>ab</sub>	97	80.5 <sub>a</sub>	66	81.5 <sub>b</sub>	75
Serious Relationship	84.8 <sub>a</sub>	317	90.6 <sub>b</sub>	96	87.8 <sub>c</sub>	72	72.8 <sub>abc</sub>	67
Sexual Intercourse	75.9 <sub>ab</sub>	284	84.9 <sub>ac</sub>	90	82.9 <sub>d</sub>	68	64.1 <sub>bcd</sub>	59

Note: Percentages that share a subscript within the same row are significantly different.  $Z$  and  $p$  values are given in the text.

Fewer Asian Americans also reported having experienced the romantic interpersonal events of a first date and a serious relationship. Specifically, a greater proportion of Caucasian/non-Hispanic White (98.1%), African American (97.6%), and Latino(a)/Hispanic (97.3%) participants than Asian American participants (90.2%) reported having gone on a first date ( $z_s = 2.42, 1.99,$  and  $3.09, p_s < .01, .05,$  and  $.005$ ). Similarly, more Caucasian/non-Hispanic White (90.6%), African American (87.8%), and Latino(a)/Hispanic (84.8%) participants than Asian American participants (72.8%) had been involved in a serious romantic relationship ( $z_s = 3.26, 2.46,$  and  $2.69, p_s < .001, .01,$  and  $.005$ ).

Finally, more Caucasian/non-Hispanic White (91.5%) participants than African American (80.5%) and Asian American (81.5%) participants reported having been in love ( $z_s = 2.21$  and  $2.08, p_s < .05$ ).

**TABLE 4**  
AGE IN YEARS AT WHICH PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED ROMANTIC/SEXUAL "FIRSTS" BY ETHNICITY

	Latino(a)/ Hispanic	White/ Caucasian	African American	Asian American
Kiss	15.20 <sub>ab</sub>	14.52 <sub>ac</sub>	14.83 <sub>d</sub>	17.60 <sub>bcd</sub>
Date	15.75 <sub>ab</sub>	14.53 <sub>acd</sub>	17.53 <sub>bc</sub>	16.12 <sub>d</sub>
Sexual Intercourse	17.33 <sub>ab</sub>	16.97 <sub>c</sub>	16.31 <sub>ad</sub>	18.85 <sub>bcd</sub>
In Love	17.48	17.62	17.25	17.40
Serious Relationship	17.91	17.56 <sub>a</sub>	18.00	19.05 <sub>a</sub>

*Note:* Means that share a subscript within the same row are significantly different. *T* and *p* values are given in the text.

Ethnic differences in the age at which the relational events were experienced were also found. As illustrated in Table 4, Asian American participants experienced their very first kiss at an older age (17.60 years) than did Caucasian/non-Hispanic White (14.52 years), African American (14.83 years), and Latino(a)/Hispanic (15.20 years) participants ( $t[166] = 6.27, t[141] = 5.01,$  and  $t[391] = 6.06,$  all  $p_s < .001$ ). In addition, Caucasian/non-Hispanic White participants had their first kiss at a younger age than did Latino(a)/Hispanic participants (14.52 vs. 15.20 years;  $t[166] = 2.10, p < .05$ ). A similar pattern was found for first intercourse; Asian American participants engaged in sexual intercourse for the very first time at a later age (18.85 years) than did African American (16.31 years), Caucasian/non-Hispanic White (16.97 years), and Latino(a)/Hispanic (17.33 years) participants ( $t[124] = 5.25, t[147] = 4.03,$  and  $t[340] = 4.18,$  all  $p_s < .001$ ). Latino(a)/Hispanic participants had their first intercourse experience later than did African American participants (17.33 vs. 16.31 years;  $t[166] = 2.10, p < .05$ ).

With respect to first romantic experiences, Caucasian/non-Hispanic White participants went on their first date at a younger age (14.53 years) than did African American (17.53 years), Asian American (16.12 years), and Latino(a)/Hispanic (15.75 years) participants ( $t[124] = -2.59$ ,  $t[182] = -4.40$ , and  $t[458] = -4.87$ ,  $ps < .05$ ,  $.001$ , and  $.001$ ). Latino(a)/Hispanic participants began dating at an earlier age than did African American participants (15.75 vs. 17.53 years;  $t[431] = -2.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Finally, Caucasian/non-Hispanic White participants had their first serious relationship at a younger age than did Asian American participants (17.56 vs. 19.04 years;  $t[161] = -2.77$ ,  $p < .01$ ). There was no difference among participant groups in the age at which they first fell in love.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the age at which men and women first experience a variety of romantic and sexual events. Our results clearly indicate that the developmental period spanning adolescence and young adulthood is marked by the initiation of such interpersonal, dyadic activities as dating, forming romantic relationships, and sexual intercourse. The majority of participants reported that they went on a date, established a “serious” romantic relationship, fell in love, and engaged in sexual activity (i.e., kissing, intercourse) for the very first time during their high school years (spanning ages 15-18). Research on the developmental progression of adolescent sexual behavior, although limited, suggests that many adolescents experience a progression from kissing and light petting to heavy petting and various forms of intercourse (Brook, Balka, Abernathy, & Hamburg, 1994; Paikoff et al., 2000). Our own results support and extend this earlier work. Specifically, we found that first kisses and dates tended to occur earlier (around ages 15 to 16) than did such romantic and sexual events as falling in love, engaging in sexual intercourse, and establishing a serious romantic relationship (these events occurred around ages 17 to 18 for most of our sample).

Another goal of this study was to examine whether or not there were gender differences in the developmental timing of first relational events. Few differences were found between young men and women in terms of the age at which they first experienced romantic and sexual events. However, significantly more women than men reported having been in love, whereas significantly more men than women reported having engaged in sexual intercourse. These differences may reflect the different socialization processes that influence the mating behavior of males and females across the lifespan. For example, a consideration of sociocultural script theory (e.g., Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Reiss, 1967, 1981) and social learning theory (e.g., Hogben & Byrne, 1998; Mischel, 1966) suggests that the different patterns of reinforcement and punishment that men and women

receive for their interpersonal behavior, coupled with the existence of normative beliefs about maleness and femaleness (e.g., men are sexual beings, women are romantic beings; men should seek, whereas women should restrict, sexual activity), may encourage men to focus on obtaining sexual experience and women to focus on obtaining romantic experience (e.g., love) during adolescence and young adulthood.

Ethnicity was also associated with the prevalence and timing of first relationship experiences. In accord with previous research (Miller & Leavitt, 2003), Asian Americans were less sexually experienced than were non-Asians. Significantly more African American, Caucasian/non-Hispanic White, and Latino(a)/Hispanic participants had been kissed and had engaged in sexual intercourse than had Asian American participants. Asian Americans were also less romantically experienced than were their non-Asian counterparts; fewer reported having experienced such romantic events as a first date or serious relationship. In addition to lower levels of sexual and romantic experience, Asian American participants also had a later sexual debut than had other participants. For example, African American, Caucasian/non-Hispanic White, and Latino(a)/Hispanic participants reported having their very first kiss between the ages of 14 and 15; Asian American participants kissed for the first time at a significantly older age, when they were almost 18. It is possible that the difference in romantic and sexual experience between Asian and non-Asian participants reflects the different socialization patterns that characterize the various ethnic groups living in the United States. For example, the social and cultural norms prevalent among groups with traditional, collectivist backgrounds (e.g., Asian, Middle Eastern) regulate adolescent mating behavior and inhibit premarital romantic and sexual expression more strongly than do the norms prevalent among other groups (see Goodwin, 1999; Hatfield & Rapson, 1996).

A few other ethnic differences were also found. For example, in accord with earlier research (e.g., Phinney, Jensen, Olsen, & Cundick, 1990), African American participants had the earliest sexual debut, and their first intercourse experience occurred significantly earlier than did the first intercourse experience of both Latino(a)/Hispanic and Asian American participants (but not earlier than Caucasian/non-Hispanic White participants). In addition, Caucasian/non-Hispanic White participants went on their first date at an earlier age than did the other three groups of participants, a finding which may reflect the fact that dating is a more central feature of the courtship system among Euro-American subcultures than among others (Cate & Lloyd, 1992).

One final result deserves mention. Little is known about the developmental timing of romantic love. Some theorists and researchers posit that romantic attraction can occur across the lifespan (Regan & Berscheid, 1999; Smith, Snow, Ironsmith, & Poteat, 1993); however, there is very little empirical evidence about



when such feelings first arise. The results of this study revealed that although more Caucasian/non-Hispanic White participants had fallen in love than African American and Asian American participants, almost all of the young men and women within each ethnic group had fallen in love at least once (proportions ranged from 80-91%). In addition, there were no differences among the various groups in terms of the age at which participants first fell in love (at around age 17). These findings provide evidence that this particular romantic experience is strongly associated with, and first occurs during, the period of life spanning late adolescence and early adulthood. Moreover, these results support the hypothesis that romantic love is a pan-cultural universal and a common event in the lives of most men and women (see Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992; Regan, 2003).

This study has several limitations, including unequal sample sizes among participant ethnic groups and the use of only four ethnic groups for comparative analyses. Nonetheless, the results as a whole reveal that the developmental period from mid to late adolescence to young adulthood is a time of romantic and sexual awakening, and that both gender and ethnicity are associated with the prevalence and timing of first relationship experiences.

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