ADOLESCENT IDENTITIES AND SEXUAL BEHAVIOR: AN EXAMINATION OF ANDERSON'S 'PLAYER' HYPOTHESIS

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the research on adolescent sexuality has focused on the role of parents and peers as influences on sexual decision-making. More recently, researchers have become interested in romantic relationship experiences themselves as also constituting an important site of learning and socialization (Furman and Schaffer 2003; Giordano, Longmore, and Manning 2006). This social view of sexuality is consistent with a symbolic interactionist perspective, but this perspective also recognizes the highly reciprocal character of social influence processes (Mead 1934). As adolescents traverse this formative period, they begin to forge particular identities that serve to structure social experiences and, in turn, influence the character of sexual attitudes and behaviors. At one end of the spectrum, for example, some youths may consider themselves shy-types who feel awkward and inhibited around members of the opposite sex. This type of identity should tend to delay movement toward sexual intimacy, even in the presence of network characteristics that tend to be associated with sexual onset. At the other end of the spectrum are identities such as the 'player,' a social type described in detail by Anderson (1989, 1999) in his ethnographic study of life in an inner-city neighborhood in Philadelphia.

Anderson developed the idea that poverty among African-American youth encourages a view of sex as a means of masculine-identity construction instead of as an integral component of a romantic relationship. He argues that among disadvantaged males, the peer group de-values relationship qualities such as love and commitment and instead promotes the view of sex as a game where women are the tokens and the competition is against other males to gain social status. Although Anderson's ideas are well known and often cited by scholars and the general public alike, surprisingly few studies have directly examined this identity status. This is an important avenue of research to pursue, however, because the constellation of attitudes described (disingenuous feelings toward one's romantic/sexual partners) and behaviors hypothesized to be associated with them (large numbers of sexual partners) may place such individuals –and importantly their partners—at significantly higher risk of HIV, STDs, and unplanned pregnancy

when compared to their more typical adolescent counterparts who either have not had sex at all or who have more limited experience with a stable partner (see Carver, Joyner, and Udry 2003 for an excellent overview of patterns of sexual behavior evident within a national probability sample of adolescents). Although Anderson hypothesized that the 'player' identity is associated with poverty and minority status, we actually know little about the social characteristics of individuals who self-identify as players or about the specific attitudes and sexual behaviors that are associated with personal endorsement of this social identity.

The current study relies on structured and qualitative data drawn from the first and third waves of the Toledo Adolescent Relationships study (TARS) (n=1,114; 538 are males). We first investigate the social characteristics of male adolescents who self-identify as players in order to evaluate Anderson's claim that this social role is inextricably linked with poverty and minority status. The TARS data are a useful supplement to Anderson's ethnography, as this sample includes but is not limited to disadvantaged adolescents. A second phase of the analysis examines the attitude and behavioral repertoires that connect to the player identity. As an example, Anderson suggested that such youths care more about male peers than about their heterosexual partners, but these and other attitudes described have not been systematically investigated using a large scale survey. Similarly, we expect that the behaviors of youths who consider themselves 'players' will include greater sexual risk-taking, but this has not been empirically established, and the specific forms of sexual risk taking have not been identified. Because Anderson hypothesized that a primary goal of the player is to have sex with as many young women as possible, we will assess the degree to which endorsement of this identity is associated with: an earlier age at first sex, higher numbers of sexual partners, reports of concurrency (cheating), and greater likelihood of engaging in 'hook-ups' or one-night stands. An important goal of this analysis will be to determine whether the player identity contributes significant variance in levels of such reported sexual risk-taking behaviors, after traditional predictors (e.g., demographic characteristics, measures of non-traditional family structure, low

parental monitoring, lack of attachment to school, liberal peer attitudes and prior sexual behavior)

have been taken into account. Finally, we supplement these quantitative analyses with excerpts

from in-depth qualitative interviews completed with a subset of the respondents who participated

in the TARS study. These youths include individuals who self-identify as players, those whose

behaviors, relative to similar aged- peers, would appear to qualify them for this label, and others

who position against such an orientation.

BACKGROUND

Adolescent Social Identities as a Cognitive Filter for Sexual Decision-Making

As noted briefly above, much of the research on adolescent sexual behavior has emphasized

parent and peer influences on adolescent sexual behavior (Huebner and Howell 2003; Borawski

et al. 2003; Sieving, Eisenberg, Pettingell, and Skay 2006) and there is also increased interest in

the ways in which dating experiences influence sexual decision-making (Florsheim 2003;

Longmore et al. 2004). Yet an exclusive focus on network influences neglects the potentially

important role of the adolescent's own emerging identity as an influence on these same behaviors

and decision-making processes. This is an ironic omission, as it is well recognized that identity

development is a key task of the adolescent period.

One aspect of the self-concept that has been studied extensively is adolescent self-esteem

(Rosenberg 1979). This construct focuses on the individual's overall sense of worth, and while

early on scholars and practitioners hypothesized that low self-esteem should be associated with

earlier sexual debut, research has generally documented that this global evaluative dimension is

not a strong predictor or consequence of sexual behavior (Longmore et al. 2003; Meier 2003;

Rudolph et al. 2003; see also the review by Goodson et al. 2006).

Gecas and Longmore (2003) note that more recent theory and research on self processes

has shifted from global representations of the self to the goal of understanding the *content* of

adolescents' social identities. Following Gecas and Burke (1995), we define identities as self-

characterizations and characterizations made by others, which influence behavioral choices. We use the term *social* identity to emphasize that identity is the product of social interaction. Rosenberg and Kaplan (1982:210) state: "Social identity elements are… more than simply an arbitrary set of tags or labels affixed by society to individuals for classificatory convenience. People so labeled are treated differently by others, are subjected to different social expectations, are socialized in different ways, and have different opportunities – in short, undergo different life experiences." This definition departs from approaches that conceptualize personality features as emerging early on and exhibiting a high degree of constancy over the life course (e.g., Erikson 1968). An explicitly social view of identity highlights that through interaction with key significant others such as parents, peers, and romantic partners, young people begin to develop more stable, coherent self views. In contrast to stable trait or dispositional orientations, however, we assume that because social identities arise from interacting with significant others, they are malleable and subject to change, re-evaluation, or redirection (Burke 1991, 2006).

Apart from acknowledging their general importance, attention to the specific *contents* of identities in connection with the dynamics of sexual behavior has not been extensively investigated (for an exception see Buzwell and Rosenthal, 1996). However, Matsueda and Heimer's (1997) research on delinquency provides a useful example of this line of inquiry, as these authors focused on the impact of one's social identity on another set of behaviors in adolescence—delinquency involvement. Matsueda and Heimer highlighted the importance of role-taking and identity processes to understand ways in which an adolescent begins a delinquent or trouble-making lifestyle. They hypothesized and demonstrate empirically that the reflected appraisals of others influence self-definitions and identities, which in turn strengthen certain lines of action. Role-taking processes thus are implicated not only in engaging in delinquent behavior, but in the development of an identity as the kind of person who causes trouble, takes risks, or is a delinquent type. Through recurrent sequences of interaction, then, these views of self begin to solidify and delinquent conduct becomes a more integral part of the adolescent's behavioral

repertoire. These ideas are consistent with and indeed were influenced by Mead's (1934) and

Cooley's ([1902] 1970) notions that reactions or feedback from significant others provide the

basis for individuals' self-views.

Matsueda and Heimer's focus on identities is important as it suggests that self-views

provide a cognitive filter for decision-making as the adolescent moves into the future and

predictably encounters new situations. In our view, these basic insights can be extended to

increase our understanding of the adolescent's life course patterns of sexual behavior (for a more

detailed discussion of our theoretical perspective see Longmore, Giordano, and Manning 2006).

Below we further explore the player identity as one constellation of attitudes toward the self that

Anderson argues is associated with poverty and minority status and in turn with greater sexual-

risk taking.

Anderson's Player Hypothesis

Anderson (1989) clearly linked the player role or persona, as briefly described at the outset, to the

conditions of inner city life, particularly for young African American males. He argued that lack

of access to meaningful employment paths and careers and a general lack of opportunities for

success along traditional lines serve to heighten the emphasis on 'scoring' with women as a way

of 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987; Messerschmidt 2000), and of demonstrating

competence with one's peers:

> To an inner-city black male youth, the most important people in his life are members of
> his peer group. They set the standards for his conduct, and it is important for him to live
> up to those standards, to look good in their eyes. The peer group places a high value on
> sex, especially what many middle-class people call casual sex…Thus a primary goal of
> the young man is to find as many willing females as possible… the young man must also
> prove he is getting it. Consequently, he usually talks about girls and sex with every other
> young man who will listen (61).

Anderson observed these attitudes among young males living in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood in Philadelphia. However, it has not been established whether such attitudes are found only within disadvantaged contexts and/or among young African American males. For example, some other ethnographic studies of predominantly white, middle class youth have suggested that the male peer group fosters attitudes that are strikingly similar to those Anderson described, and have also posited that the opinions of male friends matter more than relationships formed with young women (Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995; Wight 1994; Kimmel 1994). Further, Anderson himself did not argue that this pattern was ubiquitous in the area he studied, recognizing that some boys did have caring feelings for their girlfriends. Nevertheless, the argument as developed and popularized hints at the predominance of this player orientation in disadvantaged neighborhoods, as reflected in Anderson's observation that boys who did express caring sentiments were often subject to teasing or ridicule from friends. Thus, an empirical assessment of the distribution/patterning of this identity is a logical next step- is the player persona a social identity primarily adapted by disadvantaged minority males, as Anderson hypothesizes? How often do male adolescents not living in poverty self-report such an identity status?

Subsequently, for those respondents who do identify as players, we will examine specific attitudes Anderson hypothesized to be associated with such a self view. Specifically, we assess and compare responses of self-identified players with those of male respondents who do not endorse this identity status on: a) level of agreement about the game aspect of heterosexual socializing (i.e., enjoying the chase more than the relationship), b) degree to which such individuals frequently talk to their friends about their sex lives, and c) whether such youths are more likely to agree with the notion that friends are more important than girlfriends. In analyses that explore the behavioral realm, we assess whether the player status is associated with: a) earlier age at first sex, b) higher number of sexual partners, c) concurrency and d) participating in one night stands. Multivariate models are then estimated, allowing us to determine whether the player

identity contributes to high risk sexual behavior (these analyses focus on number of sexual partners in the past 24 months), once traditional predictors of adolescent risk behavior have been taken into account. Our view is that even if demographic factors such as poverty and minority status emerge as significant predictors of this identity status, a significant relationship between endorsement of this identity and sexual risk-taking in models that control for these demographic characteristics and prior behavior suggests a substantively distinct influence of this identity status.

Finally, our analysis of the in-depth narratives elicited from a subset of the respondents highlights the ways in which such youths understand and give meaning to these identities. Of particular interest are feelings of ambivalence about the role, and factors that are associated with shifts toward or away from this orientation/self-view. These areas of ambiguity and shifts of perspective are important to understand and document, as they may provide a basis for developing prevention/intervention efforts aimed at further reducing the social rewards and thus the likelihood that young men will adapt the player role.

DATA and METHODS

Data

This study uses survey and narrative data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS). The TARS data are well suited for this analysis because they elicit detailed information on adolescent dating and sexual experiences, and include attitude and identity items that relate to aspects of Anderson's argument. Such attitude and identity items are not available in other large scale youth surveys, such as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). In 2001, individual interviews were conducted with a stratified random sample of over 1,316 adolescents drawn from the year 2000 enrollment records of all youth in the 7th, 9th, and 11th grades in Lucas County, Ohio. The sampling frame encompassed 62 schools across seven school districts. School attendance was not a requirement for participation in the study, and most interviews took place in respondents' homes. The sample includes oversamples of African

American and Hispanic adolescents. Based on Census data, the sociodemographic characteristics of Lucas County appear to closely parallel those of the nation in terms of race (13% in Toledo and 12% in the U.S. are African American); education (80% in Toledo and 84% in the U.S. are high school graduates); median income ($50,046 in Toledo and $50,287 in the U.S.); and marital status (73.5% in Toledo and 75.9% in the U.S. are married couple families). In addition to wave one data, we rely on attitudinal, behavioral and identity items from the third wave of interviews (n=1,114). The analytic sample is all male respondents (n=532) who had valid data on key focal variables.

In addition to the survey data, we also draw on excerpts from in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted with a subset (n=51) of the male respondents who participated in the structured interviews. The in-depth interviews were generally scheduled separately from the structured interview, and were conducted by a full time interviewer with extensive experience eliciting in-depth, unstructured narratives. Areas covered in general parallel the structured protocol, but allow a more detailed consideration of respondents' complete romantic and sexual histories. The interview generally began with an exploration of the dating scene at the high school the respondent attended, and subsequently moved on to a more personal discussion of the respondent's own dating career ("Maybe it would be a good idea if you could just kind of walk me through some of your dating experiences—when did you first start liking someone?"). Probes were designed to elicit detail about the overall character and any changes in a focal relationship, and about the nature of different relationships across the adolescents' romantic and sexual 'careers.' The resulting relationship narratives were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. We relied on Atlas ti software, a "code-based theory builder" to assist with coding and analysis of the qualitative data. This program was useful as it facilitated organization of text segments into conceptual categories and refinement of the categories, while retaining the ability to move quickly to their place within the more complete narrative. We also relied on shorter 2-3 page summaries for some aspects of our analysis.

In the current study based on a combined analytic approach, we do not attempt an overview of the qualitative data, as the systematically collected structured data and related analyses adequately depict aggregate trends. Here we generally limit our discussion of the qualitative material to the narratives of those who describe themselves as players or indicate that others do so, or who specifically describe attitudes and self-views that are congruent with or alternatively reflect a departure from this constellation of attitudes and behaviors. The qualitative data are particularly useful as they provide a window on temporal shifts in such attitudes and highlight factors that respondents associate with these identity changes (that is, either in the direction of acquiring or attempting to discard this identity, or developing feelings of ambivalence about the label).

Measures

Dependent Variables

Player identity. Respondents were asked about a number of identity statuses and the degree to which others would describe them in this manner (see Matsueda 1992). Wave one interviews contain items asking respondents the degree to which other people would describe [them] as "smart," "moody," and "a hell-raiser," [along with 11 other items]. The wave three protocol again asked about these characteristics, but also included the degree to which "other people would describe [me] as a player." Using this measure, 21% of our analytic sample, or 112 respondents, agree or strongly agree that people would describe them in this way. This somewhat indirect index focused on the reflected appraisals of others (Matsueda and Heimer 1997; Cooley [1902]1970) leaves open the question of whether the respondent's own assessment is consistent with this label, but does accord with our interest in adolescent social identities. We rely on the qualitative data to develop a more nuanced portrait of the distinction between self and other attributions and to identify other ambiguities surrounding the label.

Number of Sexual Partners in past 24 months. We ask respondents: "How many sexual partners have you had in the past 2 years or 24 months? On average, respondents report 3 sexual partners in the past 24 months. In multivariate analyses we categorize those respondents who have a high number of sexual partners in terms of those who are in the top quartile of the sample (five or more sexual partners). About 8.46% of the sample report having had five or more sexual partners in the past 24 months.

Social and Demographic Variables

Race/ethnicity is self-reported. For present analyses, race/ethnicity is a four category variable coded as: white non-Hispanic, African American, Hispanic, and other. In analyses, race/ethnicity is dummy coded with white serving as the reference category.

Age is calculated as the date of birth subtracted from the date of the second interview. Respondents' average age at wave 1 is 15.4 and the range is 12-19 years. Wave 3 average age is 18, and the range is 15-22.

Attachment to school is a scale composed of two questions: (1) "Good grades are important to me;" and (2) "I try hard in school." Responses for the scale range from 2 to 10 (alpha = .66). The mean score is 8 reflecting high attachment to school.

High Poverty Neighborhood is calculated using census data. It is a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent lived, at the time of the first interview, in a neighborhood where greater than 20 percent of the neighborhood lived below the poverty level.

Mother's education refers to the highest educational level achieved by the respondent's mother, as reported by the mother at the time of the first interview. If there is only one parent figure in the household, his or her education level is used. The response categories are less than 12 years of education (12.78%), high school graduate (30.83%), and more than 12 years (56.39%).

Parental monitoring is a summated five-point scale in which respondents indicate how often parents let them make their own decisions about: (1) "the time you must be home on weekend nights;" (2) "the people you hang around with;" (3) "what you wear;" (4) "your social life;" (5) "who you can date;" and (6) "how often you can date." High scores reflect high parental monitoring. Scores range from 6 to 30 and the mean is 21.7 indicating perceptions of high parental monitoring.

Family structure is a four category variable that indicates whether the teen lived, at the time of the first interview, in a married two biological family (56%), single parent family (21.6%), stepparent family (13%), or some other family type (9%).

Player Attitudes

Measures of player attitudes, measured at wave 3, refer to the extent to which respondents agree with the following statements. *Enjoy the chase* refers to agreeing with the statement "When it comes to girls, I enjoy the chase more than the relationship." *Talk to Friends about sex often* refers to responses to the question: "How often do you talk to your friends about your sex life?" *Friends come before girlfriends* refers to agreement with the statement: "Girlfriends come and go, but friends are always there for you." The items are dummy coded to reflect greater agreement with player attitudes.

Player Behavior

Age at first sex is measured by asking respondents whether they have ever had sexual intercourse, and if so, when they had sex for the first time, how old were they. The average age at the time of first sexual intercourse is 15 years.

Number of Non-Dating Sexual Partners asks respondents the number of non-dating sexual partners they have had in the past 24 months.

One Night Stands asks respondents the number of one night stands they have had in the past 24 months.

Liberal Peer Attitudes. "My friends think it's okay to date more than one person at a time." Dummy variable coded 1 if respondent agrees or strongly agrees.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all variables included in the analyses. As shown in the table, about 21% of all male respondents either agree or strongly agree that people would describe them as players. Table 2 presents results of a logistic regression predicting endorsement of the player identity. The results of this analysis show that African American male youth in the sample are more likely than white respondents to agree that people they know would characterize them as a player. This racial gap persists net of sociodemographic background, family, peer attitudes, and prior behavior. The effect is reduced substantially but remains statistically significant. In addition, at the zero order, residing in a poor neighborhood is also associated with this social identity. These data provide support for Anderson's hypothesis. However, it is important to note the overall distributions among male respondents who participated in the TARS study. Among the 21% of males who self-identify as players, only about one third are African American respondents residing in a poverty level neighborhood. These are important aspects of the patterning of this social identity, as they document that the identity is not ubiquitous among disadvantaged African American males; conversely a majority of the players in the TARS sample do not have this sociodemographic profile. Of the other covariates in the model, prior sexual behavior (wave 1 sexual partners) and liberal peer attitudes are associated with endorsement of the label. Young men who are in a social network that supports the player identity (peer attitudes) are more likely to report having the identity.

Next we consider the attitude and behavior correlates linked with self-identification as a player (see Table 3). As the results in table 3 indicate, players are more likely than their non-player counterparts to agree that they "enjoy the chase more than the relationship," and are also more likely to indicate that they frequently talk to their friends about their sex lives. It is again

important to highlight that even though player status is associated with a higher level of agreement with these items, a majority of players did not agree that they enjoy the chase more than the relationship and did not indicate talking often to their friends about their sex life. Focusing on the relative salience of the peer group, players and non-players did not differ significantly in endorsement of the notion that friends are ultimately more important than girlfriends. This appears to be a generally prevalent sentiment for this adolescent age-group, perhaps reflecting the results of prior research indicating that, on average, durations of friendships most often do exceed average durations of romantic relationships (see e.g., Furman, Brown, and Feiring 1999). It is possible that other measures of peer group salience/importance might capture this set of attitudes more effectively.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Turning to the sexual behavior experiences of respondents who agree with this self-characterization, the player identity is tied to sexual behaviors (see Table 3). Players report significantly earlier age at first sex and greater number of sex with partners they were not dating. Players also were more likely to indicate that they had cheated on a partner within the past 2 years. Consistent with this, players have a greater likelihood of participating in a 'one-night stand.' Thus, players are more likely to engage in behaviors that resonate with the player identity. However, not all players had a one night stand, 55% did not. Because these behaviors heighten risk for sexually transmitted infections and the pregnancy and risk of female partners.

We next estimate a series of models to evaluate how player identity is tied to sexual frequency. Future analyses will test how the player identity is linked to other sexual behaviors. Initially, Table 4 presents the odds ratio of having a high number (5+ sexual partners) in the last 2 years. The zero-order model shows that African American youth are more likely to have many sexual partners. A prosocial indicator (school engagement) is tied to lower levels of sexual

activity. As expected older boys are more likely to have more sexual partners. In terms of family measures, family structure and monitoring are weakly tied to sexual activity. Respondents who have peers with more liberal attitudes are more likely to have many sexual partners. The player identity and prior sexual behavior are both associated with high odds of frequent sexual activity.

Model 1 in Table 4 includes all the sociodemographic characteristics, family indicators, peer attitudes, and player identity. These results indicate that the race gap in frequent sexual behavior is mediated by the player identity indicator. Model 2 replaces the player identity with a measure of sexual behavior during the first interview wave (3 years prior to the current interview). Prior sexual behavior is significantly associated with frequency of sexual behavior. The race differential is reduced from the zero-order model and remains only marginally significant. Model 3 includes both prior behavior and player identity. It is notable that the effects of identity and prior behavior are both statistically significant in this model. Thus, these appear to be somewhat independent constructs but player identity has a stronger effect than prior behavior.

The final model in Table 4 includes an interaction of race and ethnicity with the player identity. The interaction terms are not statistically significant and indicate that the player identity has the same effect on sexual behavior for both black and white teens. Thus player identity is tied to frequent sexual activity for both white and African American teens but there is not a differential effect. Similarly, the main effects of race in Model 4 indicate the effect of race and ethnicity for teens who do not possess the player identity. African American and white teens who do not have a player identity have similar odds of having many sexual partners.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

An analysis of in-depth 'relationship and sexual history' narratives

We build on the quantitative findings to develop a more nuanced understanding of male sexual behavior. The content of the in-depth interviews we elicited from a subset of the respondents

generally accord with the findings described above, but introduce additional elements of complexity to our understanding of boys' own relationship to this role. That boys brought up this social type within the context of their own unstructured narratives itself highlights that the social identity is a salient feature of adolescent social life, even for boys who do not identify with this label ("I'm not like some player…"). These relationship and sexual history narratives also make even more clear (relative to the quantitative analyses) that this is a label that is social in origin— that is, it is an identity that is dependent upon the attributions of others, and the willingness/desire of female partners to socialize with these young men (influenced by and influencing the young man's own emerging attitude/behavior repertoire, as documented above). This contrasts with some other adolescent identities, for example, "studious," that may emerge in a more direct fashion as a result of individual proclivities or at least that can be enacted relatively independently (intelligent, studies diligently).

Much has been written about how young men who are accorded this social identity receive positive support from male peers, even as young women who date widely or have "too many" sexual partners are accorded a range of negative labels (Andrinipoulos, Kerrigan, and Ellen 2006; Whitehead 1997). Male respondents who participated in the TARS study often reflected on the positive aspects, but focused not only on how this impressed male peers, (as Anderson emphasized), but on the way that this affirmed their desirability in the eyes of young women:

> There are some girls that would, just do anything, to be the one known to be the one that messed around with you! There's a lot of girls that do that, they'll use me as a trophy. [Girls] wanted to show me off, like this is who I am with… It's just sort of cool, cause sometimes when girls like you, they want everybody to know you, they want to introduce you to everybody, cause they like you so much…they want just the hottest, dude they can find, and be able to say this is mine. [Julian]

This is an interesting excerpt as it indicates Julian's view about a level of objectification on the part of young women with whom he has associated. In addition, however, his narrative places

emphasis on the ways in which (from his own perspective) his extensive dating life is a process heavily influenced by if not set in motion by the girls he dates, rather than by his own actions. This serves to bolster his positive self-image, and circumvent potentially negative attributions associated with the player type.

Another way in which boys construct a positive sense of self around the player role is closely connected with the adolescent phase of the life course itself. As young people, boys [and girls] focus on the reality that they are too young to be married, and may extend this to include the view that long-term involvement with one girl in high school is not necessary or desirable. As an example, one young man who resonated with the player label told the interviewer that his uncle specifically counseled him to 'play the field' upon entering high school, rather than becoming tied down with one girl. Daniel, a 15 year, reflected a similar sentiment, as he explained why he broke it off with a girlfriend: *I was too young. I don't want to date that long. That's like married almost...I was too young to, I was youn*g...

Another way in which the young men distanced themselves from the negative connotations of their player status is their focus on the association of this label with lying and other disingenuous interactions with the young women they dated. Thus, some boys agreed that they dated many girls, but to the degree that they maintained a level of honesty, went on to develop the argument that they were not 'true' players (here play is used as a verb, as in one who 'plays' girls):

> Cause I'm you know, typically a like a kind of like a male whore at my school, lots of people don't know me that good. Just cause they see all these girls that want me, they assume that I mess around with all of them and that I'm just some player.
>
> Are you a player?
>
> I don't think I am, no cause like I said a player is a kind of guy that would lie to a girl and lie to uh more than one. Like how they like them, I don't do that.   [David]
>
> People thought, you know, people heard it so much that they just thought it was true…that I was a player…That all I wanted to do was girls and such…. No I mean, I just

wanted, I mean yeah, I mean if I could have all the girls I would take all the girls you know, but… they know I wasn't going to play them, um because I wouldn't want to be played myself, you know.   [Andrew]

In the above quotes, youths recognized their player status within the social milieus of their high schools, but managed to maintain a positive self-view by emphasizing their overall desirability with women, their level of honesty or up-front qualities, or by positioning this role as simply an appropriate phase for this period in their lives. Other youths indicated that they had been player-types at some point in their relationship 'careers,' but now rejected this role as fundamentally unsatisfying:

Like I was telling myself, when I was involved with three girls… I didn't like it…what I was doing. You know. I didn't like the fact that I was hurting other girls that I liked. Kind of playing them I guess. Kind of like in school I used to kind of get a label. Like like a player, Like the guys would say it because it's cool and like the girls would say it cause it was bad and you know what I mean. And like I didn't like that, so like I don't know. Like having a relationship now is pretty important to me…   [Jermaine]

I really didn't like being like that…I had felt dirty and low when I was…when I had friends with benefits. It just wasn't…it was just not me. I've always been raised the gentleman type and it's just like I'm out here being like other guys just…I was looking for whatever and I felt bad about it…   [Todd]

Yeah, in my mind yes, I knew it was wrong. [I: But you did it anyways?] Yeah. I don't know why…   [Jason]

Respondents who describe temporal shifts in their orientation do not always identify specific factors associated with these shifts; some, however, some attributed an increase in sexual experimentation or "playing around" to a period after a breakup or other romantic disappointment. For example David expressed extremely negative attitudes toward women at the time of his first in-depth interview, and told the interviewer he was not interested in a long-term or intimate relationship. He linked these negative attitudes to a recent bad dating experience, and indicated that he now preferred "friends with benefits" and other casual sexual liaisons:

There are no decent girls out there..You can't convince me… they're all ho's…they're all dirty sluts. I don't like them…I'm not dating another girl.

Further illustrating the malleability of the player role, however, is the change in attitudes apparent

in a subsequent interview with David, conducted some three years later in connection with the

third wave of interviews:

> And everything that she wants to hear is everything that I want to tell her so it's not just
> me feeding her lines, it's me feeding her lines from the bottom of my heart so that is what
> is so good about it. And the only way that my day will get any better today was if I was
> able to see her. [this relationship has] made me sincerely believe in true love.   I mean I
> text message her stuff knowing that when she gets it, she's smiling and laughing and I
> know it and that just entices me to try to be even happier with myself and happier with
> her. …. I need her because she makes me happy and she needs me because I make her
> happy. And I know that because she's told me that.

> And um, there is not a minute that I don't fall asleep thinking about her. I wake up
> thinking about her and that is how true love and marriage should be. I mean maybe not to
> the extent it is right now but if I can keep a tenth of what we have right now for the rest
> of our lives, we're going to be fifty times better than ninety percent of the marriages who
> stay together out there, which aren't a lot.

It is apparent that the relationship David describes is relatively new (he pointed out that the two

had not yet become sexually intimate, in itself surprising given his prior sexual history). Yet

David also referenced specific supportive actions on the part of his girlfriend that suggested a

more multifaceted or substantial relationship that could prove a positive influence (and in turn

solidify his non-player status). Yet while this shift in orientation can be seen as heavily

influenced by the new girlfriend he has acquired, it is also important to note that the narrative

reflects on this romantic development as part of a larger set of life course changes and associated

"cognitive transformations." (see Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). David indicated

that until recently he had been a "hard partier," another identity that coordinated well with his

player status:

> I got a DUI in July… And that kind of turned my whole world around. Um, well I got a
> DUI, I got possession of marijuana, drug paraphernalia and I got caught with Oxycontin.
> I, um the girl that I was with at the time, she was bad news and all this other stuff….I
> only started being an adult the last four or five months. Um, I didn't know what real
> living was up until then. And real living is a lot different than what I was doing… Yes, I
> was just tired of being miserable. I since then stopped hanging out with a lot of my
> friends from back then. I changed my girlfriend. My girlfriend now maybe wants to
> drink once on the weekend, maybe at that…she's a good girl… And um so she's kind of
> helped me out. I'm a good person, I'm going places in life… You know I've made my

share of mistakes but I'm all positive person.

This is an instructive excerpt, as it demonstrates that the player identity is not a stand-alone aspect of the self-concept, but may link to other identities and associated behaviors that can either foster or discourage the player lifestyle. Other respondents who noted changes over time did not necessarily anchor such changes to a specific event or new relationship, but nevertheless indicated that these shifts were a part a more general process of growing up and associated changes in their orientation:

> That's how I am now…It's about more than just sex. You know I want somebody to spend time with settle down with…Settle down, be with one person. Be, you know, as you get older, start to get more mature and you get tired of always being a game and telling lies to this girl and this girl.

Certainly not all of the respondents we interviewed described changes in their player status over time. Further, it is quite possible that as these young people move into their 20's we will observe an escalation in player-like behavior, or late entries into this lifestyle (i.e., individuals who, during adolescence, reported little of this behavior and/or indicated disagreement with such attitudes, but whose increased maturity (and perhaps confidence in the heterosexual realm) is associated with more, rather than less player behavior. Yet it is interesting to note that even the most unapologetic players within the sample frequently included some mention of a desire to eventually develop a more meaningful long-term romantic relationship:

> I'd like to have a girl but I haven't found her yet.   [Donny]

> I don't want to get with some girl, where I'm going to want to cheat on her, and all of the other girls and all that stuff. So I guess Im just going to wait for the you know, if I want to be with you know the kind of girl you wouldn't want to do that to~ like she's so so shes a good girl! The kind you can trust, so you want to be trusted back.   [Greg]

> I got, yeah there's like a lot of girls I could have right now, but I don't know there's always something wrong…I'm waiting until I find the most absolute, perfect everything in this girl.   [Jon]

These quotes also reflect a degree of ambivalence about the role, as they suggest boys' own recognition that a continual succession of casual liaisons might not prove to be the most fulfilling

strategy for their own happiness and future well-being. However, previous research has

highlighted that such high and perhaps unrealistic expectations may limit young men's abilities to

develop and benefit from involvement in an intimate relationship that inevitably involves a

partner who is less than 'absolutely perfect.'

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we focused on Anderson's depiction of the player, a social type he encountered

frequently in his ethnographic work in a disadvantaged area of Philadelphia. Relying on a diverse

sample of teens living in a Midwestern urban/suburban area, we also found that a significant

number of male respondents identified on some level with this label. The quantitative analyses

document that, consistent with Anderson's hypothesis, disadvantaged African American male

adolescents are significantly more likely to agree that others would describe them as players; yet

the data also highlight that this social identity transcends the confines of disadvantaged

neighborhoods and minority populations—69% who agreed that others would describe them as

players were not disadvantaged African American youths. This is of particular interest, given that

the term 'player' was initially popular and may have its origins as a term used within African

American communities (Anderson 1989:155). The analyses also show that, with some exceptions

(the idea that male friends come before girlfriends), many of the attitudes Anderson associated

with the player role are significantly associated with endorsement of this identity. Perhaps more

important, youths who indicate that others would describe them in this fashion actually do engage

in significantly more sexual risk-taking than their counterparts who do not resonate with this

label. Further, identification with the label remains a significant predictor of high risk sexual

behavior, even after traditional predictors have been taken into account. Finally, interactions of

race/ethnicity by player status indicate a similar effect across these groups in the influence of this

identity on the number of recent sexual partners.

The in-depth interview data add to this portrait by suggesting several ways in which

youths maintain a positive self-image while being associated with this label. Although Anderson emphasized that boys are accorded high status when they are known as players, our own interviews suggest areas of ambivalence about the role. Thus, players often protest that the label is one that has been given them by others, emphasize that this is simply an index of desirability/popularity with young women, or point out that young men of their age are too young to settle down. Others highlight their honesty with women as a way of diminishing the more negative connotation of a player as one who lies to or 'plays' the young women with whom he associates.

Other narratives highlighted malleability or shifts in boys' player status over time, as respondents pointed out social experiences that either fostered the development of this orientation, or facilitated movement away from it. A number of boys included quite negative descriptions as part of their discussions of this 'phase' (I felt dirty, I knew it was wrong). These areas of ambivalence are important to understand and research in more detail, since they suggest that boys who fit this attitude/behavior profile are not destined to pursue this lifestyle indefinitely. The narratives also suggested the possibility of cohort changes in the perceived social desirability of the player within contemporary youth culture, although these data do not allow us to document this directly. For example, one boy noted that being called a player was not bothersome, but that recently he had been referred to as a "male whore" by a few girls in his high school. He not only disliked this label, but indicated that he had begun to re-think some of his own actions in light of hearing that this negative label had been applied to him.

Our view is that prevention/intervention efforts could benefit from a stronger relationship emphasis, as contrasted with the relatively more common strategy of focusing on health beliefs and risks. As Eyre and colleagues (1998) have noted, teens are quite interested in dating and relationships, while prevention efforts that have focused on knowledge of health risks have frequently been shown to be rather limited in their effectiveness. The results of the current study suggest the value of engaging students in discussions about reputation and social roles such as the

player, including attention to issues such as the double standard, and cheating as well focusing on the dynamics of a particular relationship (e.g., the timing of sex within a relationship or how sex influences relationship dynamics). This will also ideally include attention to the role of peer groups, as interactions with friends and the wider network of peers undoubtedly (as Anderson suggested) helps to foster and sustain social rewards for such behaviors. Additional research is needed on these processes. It is especially important to focus on those young men who reject such an orientation and evidence a different relationship profile, even within disadvantaged contexts. Girls who engage in high risk sexual behavior have been the subject of some research attention, but additional research is needed not only on predictors and behavioral profiles, but on the ways in which girls understand their own behavior and identities. This is particularly important since youth culture and the wider society has traditionally accorded low status and even 'deviant' labels for girls who have evidenced more openly sexual attributes and behavioral styles (Eder etal. 1995).

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Table 1. Means/Percentages of Dependent and Independent Variables for the Total Sample and Separately for Players and NonPlayers

	Total	Players	NonPlayers
	Mean/%	Mean/%	Mean/%
Dependent Variables (W3)			
Self-Identifies as 'Player'	21.05%	--	--
High Number of Sexual Partners	8.46%	25.00%	4.05%
(5+ in past 24 mo.)	x=3.02	x=5.07	x=2.48
Sociodemographic Characteristics			
Race/Ethnicity			
White	63.72%	42.86%	69.29%
Black	22.74%	45.54%	16.67%
Hispanic	7.52%	4.46%	8.33%
Other	6.02%	7.14%	5.71%
Respondent's Age (W3)	18.17	18.30	18.15
Attachment to School (W1) (2-10)	8.09	8.00	8.11
Disadvantaged Neighborhood (W1)	26.32%	39.29%	22.86%
Family Characteristics			
Mother's Education (W1)			
Less than high school	12.78%	17.86%	11.43%
High School	30.83%	35.71%	29.52%
High School and beyond	56.39%	46.43%	59.05%
Parental Monitoring (W1) (6-30)	22.62%	22.66%	22.61%
Family Structure (W1)			
Single Parent	21.62%	30.36%	19.29%
Married Biological/Adoptive Parents	56.02%	43.75%	59.29%
Step Parents	13.16%	12.50%	13.33%
Other	9.21%	13.39%	8.10%
Liberal Peer Attitudes			
Friends think okay to date more than one (W3)	35.71%	60.71%	29.05%
Prior Behavior			
Previous Sexual Partners (W1) (0-23)	0.80	1.63	0.58
N	532	112	420

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study, Waves 1 and 3

Table 2. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Player Identity

Predictor	Zero Order Odds Ratio	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Sociodemographic Characteristics				
Race/Ethnicity				
(White)				
Black	4.42 ***	3.24 ***	3.76 ***	2.88 ***
Hispanic	0.87	0.64	0.75	0.62
Other	2.02 †	1.76	1.61	1.55
Attachment to School (W1) (2-10)	0.96	0.95	0.93	0.97
Disadvantaged Neighborhood (W1)	2.18 ***	0.84	0.88	0.84
Respondent's Age (W3)	1.05	1.03	1.00	1.00
Family Characteristics				
Mother's Education (W1)				
Less than high school	1.29	1.03	0.99	1.00
(High School)				
High School and beyond	0.65 †	0.76	0.65 †	0.73
Family Structure (W1)				
Single Parent	2.13 **	1.23	1.36	1.20
(Married Biological/Adoptive Parents)				
Step Parents	1.27	0.79	0.93	0.76
Other	2.24 *	1.25	1.28	1.06
Parental Monitoring (W1) (6-30)	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.99
Liberal Peer Attitudes				
Friends think okay to date more than one (W3)	3.78 ***	2.61 ***	--	2.57 ***
Prior Behavior				
Previous Sexual Partners (W1) (0-23)	1.23 ***	--	1.15 **	1.14 *
Intercept	--	0.12	0.35	0.21
Model X²	--	63.101 ***	56.176 ***	70.18 ***
Degrees of Freedom	--	13	13	14.00

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study, Waves 1 and 3

Note: Reference category in parentheses. N=532.

† *p* <.10   **p* <.05   ***p* <.01   ****p* <.001

Table 3. Distribution of Attitudes and Behaviors

	Total	Players	NonPlayers
	Mean/%	Mean/%	Mean/%
Player Attitudes (W3)			
Agrees to "Enjoy the Chase"	20.49% ***	37.50%	15.95%
Talk to Friends about Sex Life Often	31.02% ***	44.64%	27.38%
Friends come before Girlfriends	70.49%	71.43%	70.24%
Player Behavior (W3)			
Age at First Sex (years)	15.72 *	15.21	15.93
No. Partners (Not Dating) in Past 24 mo.	1.43 ***	3.25	0.95
Has Cheated (in past 2 years)	18.61% ***	41.07%	12.62%
One Night Stand (in past 2 years)	23.50% ***	45.54%	17.62%
		112	420
N	532	(21.05%)	(78.95%)

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study, Waves 1 and 3

Note: Mean/% = mean or percent; N = number

 **p<.01, ***p <.001 difference between players and nonplayers

Table 4. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Higher Number of Sexual Partners (5+ in past 24 months)

Predictor	Zero Order	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Sociodemographic Characteristics					
Race/Ethnicity					
(White)					
Black	2.79 **	1.29	1.51	1.11	1.02
Hispanic	1.29	1.12	0.87	1.09	1.28
Other	2.28	2.20	1.88	1.94	2.44
Attachment to School (W1) (2-10)	0.83 *	0.90	0.90	0.91	0.91
Disadvantaged Neighborhood (W1)	1.80 †	0.85	0.77	0.80	0.80
Respondent's Age (W3)	1.39 ***	1.38 **	1.28 *	1.33 *	1.34 *
Family Characteristics					
Mother's Education (W1)					
Less than high school	1.52	1.57	1.45	1.56	1.57
(High School)					
High School and beyond	0.75	0.93	0.81	0.85	0.85
Family Structure (W1)					
Single Parent	1.81	0.99	1.07	0.95	0.93
(Married Biological/Adoptive Parents)					
Step Parents	2.59 *	1.84	1.51	1.76	1.75
Other	1.77	0.56	0.58	0.42	0.44
Parental Monitoring (W1) (6-30)	1.06 †	1.04	1.01	1.02	1.02
Liberal Peer Attitudes					
Friends think okay to date more than one (W3)	5.78 ***	3.53 **	4.26 ***	3.45 **	3.47 **
Identity					
Self-Identifies as 'Player' (W3)	7.90 ***	6.26 ***		5.84 ***	6.05 ***
Prior Behavior					
Previous Sexual Partners (W1) (0-23)	1.31 ***		1.22 ***	1.19 **	1.19 **
Interaction of Race and Player Identity					
Black*Player Identity					1.14
Hispanic*Player Identity					0.61
Other*Player Identity					0.63
Intercept	--	0.00 ***	0.00 **	0.00 ***	0.00 ***
Model X²	--	73.07 ***	59.07 ***	81.94 ***	82.23 ***
Degrees of Freedom	--	14	14	15	18

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study, Waves 1 and 3

Note: Reference category in parentheses. N=532. Values in Table are Odds Ratios.

† *p* <.10   *p* <.05   **p* <.01   ***p* <.001