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Sowing wild oats: Valuable experience or a field full of weeds?

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Abstract
In this study, the association was explored between the number of sexual partners individuals had in their lifetimes and martial outcomes. The research objective was to test whether the number of sexual partners was associated with sexual quality, communication, relationship satisfaction, and relationship stability, while controlling for relationship length, education, race, income, age, and religiosity, using the two competing theories of sexual compatibility and sexual restraint. The results, with a sample of 2,654 married individuals, indicated that the number of sexual partners was associated with lower levels of sexual quality, communication, and relationship stability, providing support for the sexual restraint theory. Gender was not significantly associated with the patterns in the model but age cohorts did have different patterns.

For years, the phrase "sowing wild oats" has been used in reference to the premarital sexual and impulsive activity of young adults. However, what exactly does the phrase mean? An investigation of this question reveals some notable changes in how individuals use the phrase and whether they viewed "sowing wild oats" as a positive or negative developmental behavior. The phrase refers to a European grass species with the formal name *Avena fatua*, which is often called "wild oats." Farmers for centuries have hated this plant because it is a useless weed whose seeds are difficult to separate from those of valuable cereal crops. Thus, the phrase sowing wild oats applied to young people who wasted their time in idle pastimes (Wikipedia, 2011). However, modern uses of the phrase often cast the saying in a positive light. The term is now commonly used to refer to a useful, and perhaps even needed, part of youth development where young people get promiscuous and impulsive behaviors out of their systems before "settling down" into adult responsibilities and relationships (Aarons, 1970; Moffitt, 1991).

Theoretically, these two interpretations of the phrase "sowing wild oats" seem to be based on divergent perspectives of healthy sexual development. The modern use of the term implies a "get it out of your system" hypothesis that contends that individuals need to experience and learn from a variety of sexual partners and activities to prepare for a more stable and lasting marriage. This perspective views sexual experimentation as a normative and productive part of adolescence and young adulthood that fosters personal growth and self-awareness, while creating a needed level of "sexual experience" that will help young people be prepared for marriage when it comes.

However, the traditional use of the term "sowing wild oats" implies that sexual promiscuity might create unrecognized problems, like a field full of weeds, that will emerge later in committed marriage relationships. This perspective implies a

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"get it *into* your system" hypothesis that suggests that numerous sexual experiences in "relationships without strings" (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2002) might lead to the accumulation of attitudes about sex that fragments this intimate behavior from its relational context and creates a "wildness" in the partners that might make staying in a committed relationship less likely.

Although there is theoretical rationale behind both perspectives on the consequences of "sowing wild oats," there is little empirical examination of the matter. The focus of this study is to examine the understudied association between premarital sexual experience and later marital outcomes. In particular, we explore how the number of sexual partners prior to marriage is associated with current relationship functioning for husbands and wives. We conceptualize the prevailing divergent perspectives on premarital sexual experience within a broader examination of the merits of sexual compatibility theory versus sexual restraint theory (Busby, Carroll, & Willoughby, 2010) to help uncover whether sexual experiences with previous partners are potentially helpful, not influential, or damaging to current marriages.

Review of the literature

Although many aspects of intimacy and sexuality factor into couple interactions and progression, engaging in sexual intercourse and the loss of one's virginity remain a particularly important behavior for many individuals (Carpenter, 2001; Else-Quest, Hyde, & DeLamater, 2005). In a meta-analysis of sexual behavior studies conducted in the United States from 1943 to 1999, Wells and Twenge (2005) indicated that the average age of first intercourse has been decreasing for both genders and is currently at about 15 years of age for both men and women. The authors have found that approximately 85% of Americans approve of sexual relations prior to marriage and equal numbers of both men and women report that they have had premarital sex (Billy, Tanfer, Grady, & Klepinger, 1993; Tanfer & Cubbins, 1992). As rates and acceptance of premarital sex have increased in recent decades (Kan, Cheng, Landale, & McHale, 2010), more individuals are engaging in sex with multiple partners prior to transitioning into long-term committed relationships such as marriage.

Having multiple premarital sexual partners is now the norm in most Western cultures (Jonason & Fisher, 2009; Santelli, Brener, Lowry, Bhatt, & Zabin, 1998). Most young adults also now report desiring to have multiple sexual partners per year (Fenigstein & Preston, 2007) and in a sample of college students, Pedersen, Miler, Putcha-Bhagavatula, and Yang (2002) found that men, on average, desired to have 10 lifetime sexual partners while women desired to have 4.

Although scholars have long understood that sexual functioning and intimacy are key aspects of relationship progression and outcomes, surprisingly few studies have sought to understand empirically how the number of previous sexual partners may influence current marital trajectories and outcomes. However, some previous findings have provided evidence that multiple premarital sexual partners may inhibit healthy relational progression and lead to couple instability. Several authors have found that when women have premarital sexual partners other than their future spouse, the risk for marital instability increases (Heaton, 2002; Kahn & London, 1991; Paik, 2011; Teachman, 2003). Despite these findings, there are still major questions as to how previous sexual partners may influence current relationships and little evidence to support either the claim that previous sexual experience may enhance or diminish long-term current relationship success. In a more direct test of how sexual partners influence current relationships, Paik (2010) found a link between the number of sexual partners since age 13 and current relationship quality in a sample of 682 individuals currently in a romantic relationship. A weak negative effect was found, implying that having more previous sexual partners was associated with lower reports of relationship quality in current relationships.

Other findings linking sexual dynamics and expectations to couple functioning provide some clues as to how previous sexual partners

may influence current relationships. Previous sexual experience has been found to influence an individual's desirability as both a potential dating and marital partner (Williams & Jacoby, 1989). Nevertheless, findings in this area have long been inconsistent with some authors' finding that individuals with few sexual experiences are more desirable as marriage partners, whereas other studies have failed to replicate this finding (Garcia, 2006; Sprecher, Regan, McKinney, Maxwell, & Wazienski, 1997). Despite these contrary findings regarding the directionality of the association, it does appear that previous sexual experience is a component of how individuals are evaluating current and potential dating and marital partners. Further evidence is found in additional scholarship where the authors discovered that romantic couples tend to report similar levels of previous sexual experience (Garcia & Markey, 2007), suggesting that individuals may tend to select partners with similar sexual histories. Paik (2010) likewise suggested that individuals with previous sexual intercourse experience may be more prone to select into relationships that are either more focused on the physical components of the relationship or have increased instability. However, in a more recent analysis on the effect of multiple sexual partners on marital instability, Paik (2011) pointed out that associations between the number of premarital sexual partners and instability held even when accounting for numerous controls, suggesting that premarital sexuality may also have a causal influence on future marital outcomes.

One important component of understanding the potential effect of sexual partners on relational outcomes is gender. Gender differences in how men and women engage in and are affected by sexual encounters have long been documented by sexuality scholars (Peplau, 2003). For example, men are generally viewed as placing more importance on sex and are more focused on the physical aspects of the relationship (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001). Men also tend to prefer women with less sexual experience as martial partners (Garcia & Markey, 2007). In general, men tend to have more lifetime sexual partners (Jonason & Fisher, 2009) and engage in more casual sexual behaviors than women (Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006). In contrast, women tend to show a decreased desire for multiple sexual partners and report preferring one sexual partner at a given time (Fenigstein & Preston, 2007) and place more importance on the emotional aspects of intimacy (Basson, 2002). Garcia and Markey (2007) found that discrepancies between married couples in their prior number of sexual partners were related to decreased marital satisfaction among women but not men. In terms of the relational impact of sex, gender differences also appear. McNulty and Fisher (2008) found that men's sexual satisfaction in a relationship is closely tied to the actual frequency of intercourse, whereas this was not the case with women. Because of this consistent trend of finding differences between men and women regarding how sexual behavior influences their behavior and relational well-being, we expect that the associations between previous sexual partners and current relationship outcomes will differ between men and women.

Beyond gender, previous researchers have found that sexual quality and sexual satisfaction are consistently linked with relationship processes such as communication and outcomes such as relationship stability and satisfaction (Byers, 2005; Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Liu, 2003). Although there is little in this literature that directly measures prior sexual experience, there is at least one study (Busby et al., 2010) that did use the number of sexual partners as a control variable and showed that it was linked with sexual quality. Additionally, control variables that are common in the relationship and sexuality literature include relationship length, religiosity, education, income, age, and race (Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Regnerus, 2007; Sprecher & McKinney, 1991).

Focus of the study

These reviewed studies, along with several theoretical ideas presented in other published work, can be used to organize an empirical and theoretical approach to the topic.

Busby and colleagues (2010) have proposed that existing perspectives of sexuality in relationship development offer two differing paradigms on the impact of sexuality on relationship formation—a sexual compatibility perspective and a sexual restraint perspective.

Sexual compatibility theory

The first theoretical perspective of couple sexuality could be referred to as the *sexual compatibility model*. In this model, sexual interaction is seen as essential during the couple formation process as it allows partners to assess their compatibility with one another in the important area of sexual functioning. "Sexual chemistry" is frequently emphasized as an important relationship characteristic for people to find in romantic relationships, especially one that might lead to marriage (Cassell, 2008).

When the sexual compatibility theory is applied to relationships, it is usually with the idea that sexual behaviors in the early stages of the relationship can improve closeness and help the couple discover if they are compatible before the relationship progresses too far. If couples do not test their sexual compatibility they may be at risk for establishing a relationship that will not satisfy them and thereby undermine their relationship stability (Cassell, 2008).

Although testing sexual chemistry *within* a premarital relationship is the primary proposition of sexual compatibility theory, a secondary hypothesis of this perspective is that greater sexual experience *prior* to exclusive coupling will increase individuals' likelihood of eventually partnering with a sexually satisfying partner. This *sexual experience hypothesis* contends that sexual experience with multiple partners helps individuals gain greater appreciation of the range and possibilities of sexual partners and behaviors. By experimenting with these possibilities, individuals will discover their personal sexual preferences and be able to seek them out in exclusive dating and eventually in marriage. Consequently, partners will be better able to evaluate current partners for their "sexual compatibility."

Sexual restraint theory

In contrast to perspectives of sexual compatibility, a *sexual restraint model* holds that sexual involvement during couple formation processes, particularly in the early stages, may be detrimental to overall relationship development. The primary idea in this theory is that the sequencing of sexual behavior matters (i.e., sex precedes commitment vs. commitment precedes sex). If couples delay or abstain from sexual intimacy during early couple formation this may facilitate the development of other areas of the relationship such as communication (Busby et al., 2010). This developmental difference from the sexual chemistry approach may be critical as couples move past an initial period of physical attraction and excitement into a relationship more characterized by companionship and friendship. In contrast, early sex might increase the risk for individuals within the relationship to have a commitment that is based primarily on physical aspects of the relationship (Metts, 2004; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006).

With regard to sexual experimentation, sexual restraint theory suggests that having sex with multiple partners prior to exclusive coupling and marriage may have unintended effects. Rather than creating sexual experience that promotes better couple formation, such experiences may actually hinder couple formation and decrease satisfaction and stability in later marriage. The primary explanation for why this could occur lies in the highly symbolic nature of sexual intimacy and possible distortions multiple partner sexuality may introduce to the sexual symbolism of married couples. This can happen at the individual and partner levels. At the individual level, uncommitted sexual experience may foster and reinforce sexual attitudes that are not compatible with enduring marriages (e.g., the thrill of first sexual experiences and nonmonogamous sexual experiences). At the partner level, spouses may question what the sexual part of their relationship means to their experienced partner, perhaps questioning whether such behaviors represent permanence and commitment, or if such behaviors are more self-serving in nature. Also, doubts surrounding comparison

with pervious partners can emerge, which may disrupt sexual symbolism in the marriage.

To date, there has been little empirical examination of the merits of sexual compatibility versus sexual restraint theory. Two exceptions to this are recent studies done by Busby and colleagues (2010) and Sassler, Addo, and Licher (2012) who empirically explored the sexual chemistry hypothesis by examining the premarital sexual timing patterns of married couples. These authors found that the longer a couple waited to become sexually involved while dating, the better their relationship was after marriage. These patterns were statistically significant even when controlling for a variety of other variables such as education, religiosity, and relationship length.

Although Busby and colleagues (2010) examined the sexual chemistry hypothesis of sexual compatibility theory, they did not examine the sexual experience hypothesis in their study except as a control variable. The focus of this study was to examine whether data evaluating the number of sexual partners prior to marriage support this hypothesis or if patterns of sexual restraint are supported.

Research questions

On the basis of the literature and theory previously reviewed, we developed a structural model illustrated in Figure 1 that describes how premarital sexual experience might influence marital outcomes, following the patterns outlined in previous research (Busby et al., 2010; Sassler et al., 2012). As seen in the model, we propose that the number of premarital sexual partners will influence both the sexual quality of a relationship and the communication expressed in the relationship and that all of these variables will influence relationship satisfaction and perceived stability. Both sexual quality and communication have been linked together and to relationship satisfaction in previous research (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Sassler et al., 2012) and the link between sexual experience and different levels of sexual quality and communication is suggested by sexual restraint theory. We include relationship length, education, income, race, and religiosity as control variables in this study because research demonstrates that these variables can influence sexual practices in relationships (Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Busby et al., 2010; Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). Gender is also likely to influence many of the variables in the model, so we evaluated whether the path coefficients were significantly different for males and females (Kaestle & Halpern, 2007).

According to sexual compatibility theory, we would expect that fewer sexual partners would be negatively related to sexual quality and communication as well as relationship satisfaction and perceived stability. This means that the less sexual experience a person has prior to their marital relationship the worse would be their sexual quality, communication, satisfaction, and perceived stability in marriage. On the other hand, if the results are consistent with sexual restraint theory, we would expect that having fewer sexual partners would lead, on average, to better marital outcomes. We examined two research questions:

1. Does the number of sexual partners influence important relational outcomes such as communication, sexual quality, and relationship satisfaction and stability?
2. Does gender influence the effect of the number of sexual partners?

Method

Sample and procedures

The sample from this study came from the participants (12,120) who completed the RELATE Questionnaire (Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001) between 2006 and 2011. All participants completed an appropriate consent form prior to the completion of the RELATE instrument and all data collection procedures were approved by the institutional review board at the authors' university.

Individuals in a variety of relationship types completed RELATE including those who were casually dating, those who were

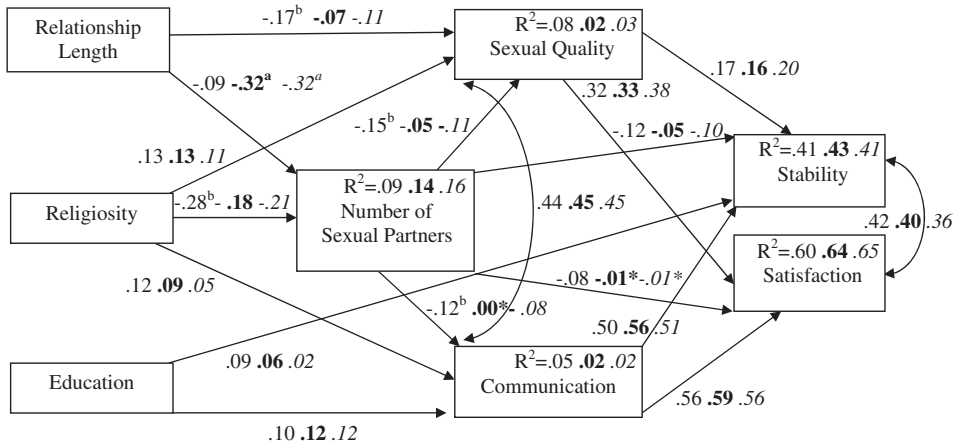

Figure 1. Amos results for the hypothesized model for each of the three age cohorts. *Note.* Asterisk indicates that the coefficient was *not* significant at $p < .01$. Group A (normal text): ages 18–30; Group B (bold text): ages 31–41; and Group C (italic text): ages 42 and above. Superscript letters indicate which groups are significantly different from the coefficient under consideration at $p < .05$.

married, or those who were just acquaintances. Because of the nature of the variables analyzed in this study, and our interest in the influence of the number of sexual partners on marriage relationships, only individuals who were married were retained in the sample. This resulted in a final sample of 2,659 individuals.

Seventy-seven percent of the sample was Caucasian, 7% African American, 6% Latino, 4% Asian, 4% biracial, and 2% "other." The mean age of the participants was 37.54 with a standard deviation of 10.98 and a range of 18–78. The educational level of the sample was 7% with a high school diploma or less, 25% had attended some college but not earned a degree, 7% had earned an associate's degree, 21% had earned a bachelor's degree, 12% attended graduate school but not earned a degree, and 28% had earned a graduate degree. The relationship length of the participants was < 1 year for 16% of the sample, 1–2 years for 14%, 3–5 years for 18%, 6–10 years for 17%, 11–15 years for 10%, 16–20 years for 9%, 21–30 years for 13%, and > 30 years for 3% of the sample. Four percent of the sample had experienced at least one divorce. Twenty percent of the sample was Catholic, 31% was Protestant, 27% listed another religion such as Jewish, Buddhist, LDS, Islamic, or "other" with no one group except "other" being larger than 5% of the total sample, and 22% listed "none" as their religion. Sixty-one percent of the sample was female and 39% was male.

Measures

The RELATE is an approximately 300-item online questionnaire designed to evaluate the romantic relationships of individuals. The questions examine several different contexts such as the individual, cultural, family (of origin), and couple in order to provide a comprehensive evaluation of challenges and strengths in their relationships. Participants completed RELATE online after becoming aware of the questionnaire from a variety of sources including an instructor of a class (25% of the sample), a therapist (23%), after searching for it on the web (9%), from a friend or family member (14%), from an print or online ad (12%), or from "other" sources (17%).

The scores for participants on all the scales in this study were mean scores when more than one question was combined. Except for the questions on the number of

sexual partners, and the control variables, questions were answered using 5-point Likert response choices, where 1 indicated *never* and 5 indicated *very often* for most questions except the relationship satisfaction scales where 1 indicated *very dissatisfied* and 5 indicated *very satisfied*.

Number of sexual partners

This item asked individuals: "With how many people have you had sexual relations (including your current partner if applicable)?" Although the term "sexual relations" is less precise than sexual intercourse, this term was selected because couples are known to engage in a variety of sexually intimate behaviors other than sexual intercourse, such as oral sex, and the research to date does not indicate that one type of sexual behavior has a different influence on relationships than other types (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Regnerus, 2007). Also, the existing research indicates that most individuals consider all these types of behaviors as "sex" (Regnerus, 2007). Twelve people indicated that they had more than 100 sexual partners but their responses were suspect ranging from 101 to 8,000, so we elected to eliminate these individuals as outliers. This variable was continuous with a mean of 8.64 and a standard deviation of 12.04 and a range of 1–100. Additionally, after 15 partners the frequencies became irregular in that numbers that were multiples of 5 such as 20, 25, 30, had far more responses than would be expected while the numbers in between were slowly diminishing in count. For example, 14 people indicated they had 18 sexual partners, 2 people indicated they had 19 sexual partners, but 87 people indicated they had 20 sexual partners. This led us to believe that memories were less reliable after 15 partners and participants were largely estimating how many partners they had in multiples of 5. Consequently, we used a common method used to address variables with non-normal distributions by multiplying the number of sexual partners by the logarithmic function in SPSS (Osborne, 2002) and used the result as the variable "number of sexual partners" in the analyses of the model in Figure 1.

Sexual quality

The Sexual Quality scale consisted of three questions about the sexual relationship: how satisfied participants were with their sexual intimacy, how often sex was a problem in their relationship, and how frequently they had sex with their partners. All variables were coded in such a way that higher values were equivalent to higher sexual quality. The internal consistency α coefficient for the Sexual Quality scale was .71. This scale has been used in previous studies that have demonstrated that it has a strong association with relationship outcomes (Busby et al., 2010).

Communication

The Communication scale consisted of 28 items evaluating how well participants and their partners were able to express empathy and understanding to each other, how well they were able to send clear messages, how often they were prone to be critical, and how often they were prone to defensive communication. All items were coded so that a higher value was equivalent to better communication and reliability was strong ($\alpha = .87$). In terms of test–retest and validity information on this scale, the communication items have been shown to have test–retest values between .70 and .83 and were appropriately correlated with a version of a commonly used Relationship Quality measure as predicted (Busby et al., 2001). These scales have been shown in longitudinal research to be predictive of couple outcomes and are sensitive to change in couple intervention studies (Busby, Ivey, Harris, & Ates, 2007).

Relationship satisfaction

This scale consisted of questions about how satisfied participants were with five different areas including the time they spent together, the love they experienced, the way conflict was resolved, the amount of relationship equality they experienced, and satisfaction with their overall relationship. The internal consistency α was .84. Additional test–retest reliability estimates in past research were between .76 and .78 (Busby et al., 2001). Validity data have also shown the strength

of this scale indicating that it is highly correlated with existing relationship quality and satisfaction measures both in cross-sectional and longitudinal research (Busby et al., 2001; Busby et al., 2007).

Relationship stability

This scale consisted of three questions that asked respondents how often they thought their relationship was in trouble, how often they thought of ending the relationship, and how often they had broken up and gotten back together, with higher scores indicating greater relationship stability. These items were adapted from earlier work by Booth, Johnson, and Edwards (1983). The internal consistency α was .81. Previous studies have shown this scale to have test–retest reliability values between .78 and .86, to be appropriately correlated with other relationship quality measures, and to be valid for use in cross-sectional and longitudinal research (Busby, Holman, & Niehuis, 2009; Busby et al., 2001; Busby et al., 2007).

Control variables

The Religiosity scale consisted of three questions that evaluated how often respondents attended church, how often they prayed, and how often spirituality was an important part of their life. The internal consistency α coefficient for the Religiosity scale was .87. Additional research has shown this scale to have test–retest reliability scores of .86–.88 (Busby et al., 2001). Relationship length was also used as a continuous control variable in this study. Individuals were asked to indicate how long they had dated before marriage and in another question how long they had been married to their partners. These two questions were summed to create a total relationship length variable. Responses ranged from < 1 to > 40 years.

Income, education, age, and race were also used as control variables and were single-item demographic variables. Race was dummy-coded with Caucasians as the reference group. Income and education were used as continuous variables.

We expected that many of the control variables were not significantly related to the relationship outcomes in this study, so we conducted preliminary multiple regression analyses to explore which control variables should be retained in the analysis of the model. The only control variables that had a significant influence on at least one of these couple outcomes were religiosity, age, relationship length, and education. These variables were retained and included in the structural equation model (SEM) analysis but we needed to manage age in a unique manner as describe in the next section.

Analysis strategy

Initially, we conducted a multigroup analysis comparing the model in Figure 1 for males and females. We did not find any significant differences for gender, so we do not present these results in any detail and instead focused our multigroup analysis on different age cohorts as presented in the next paragraph.

We found that age was highly correlated with relationship length (.70) and this created problems in the model. Therefore, to adequately investigate both age and relationship length we left relationship length in our model as a continuous variable and we divided our sample into three approximately equal-sized groups based on our age variable. The first age group consisted of participants from the ages of 18 to 30 ($n = 834$), corresponding to the emerging adult population, the second age group was participants from the ages of 31 to 41 ($n = 939$), and the third age group were those older than 41 ($n = 881$). This was justified as a strategy because the recent literature has documented how age is associated with several important variables that might influence the model in this study (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Kan et al., 2010). In particular, with the emerging adult population age at marriage has increased and age at first sex has decreased in recent decades. These trends may be creating a cohort effect where younger participants in our sample might have been more likely to initiate sex sooner and because they married later than previous cohorts potentially have a higher likelihood of more sexual partners by the time they married.

The evaluation of the model in Figure 1 was conducted with Amos version 20.0 (Arbuckle, 2010). Although error terms were included for each of the endogenous variables listed in the figure, they were not drawn into the SEM analysis to simplify the figures.

We report several fit measures to assist in the evaluation of how well our hypothesized model replicates the sample data. To select the fit measures we followed the recommendations of McDonald and Ho (2002) and Kline (2005) to include both absolute fit indexes and incremental fit indexes.

Results

A correlation matrix is included in Table 1. These results show that the number of sexual partners has a significant association with all the outcomes in the model and all the control variables except education. These results also illustrate the strong associations between the different outcomes in the study.

The analysis of the model presented in Figure 1 for the overall sample before the coefficients were constrained to be equal between the three age groups indicated that the model was an excellent fit to the data with the exception of the chi-square statistics, which is sensitive to sample size (McDonald & Ho, 2002). The sample size for the SEM analysis was 2,654. The chi-square with 24 *df* was 76.08 and was significant ($p = .001$), the Tucker–Lewis index was .96, the comparative fit index was .99, while the root mean square error of approximation was .03.

When comparing multiple groups, we used Amos to constrain the path coefficients to be equal for all three groups and then it was possible to see if the model fit was significantly worse under these constraints. In this instance, if the chi-square statistic was significantly worse than the chi-square for the unconstrained model it would be possible to say that the path coefficients were different for participants in the three age groups. Amos also provided pairwise comparisons between each set of coefficients so we could see where the differences were located. The chi-square difference comparing the unconstrained and constrained models was 93.66 and was significant ($p < .001$), indicating that the path coefficients were not the same for the three age cohorts.

Figure 1 shows the standardized path coefficients for the variables in the model for each of the three age cohorts excluding the pathways for the control variables that were not significant for all three age groups. Overall, of the 17 estimated coefficients in the model, there were significant differences between the age cohorts on 5 of the coefficients. In terms of the control variables, religiosity had a negative association on the number of sexual partners and a positive association on sexual quality for all three groups. Relationship length had a negative association on sexual quality and on the number of sexual partners for two of the three groups. Education had a significant association on relationship stability and on communication but there were no differences between the three age cohorts.

The number of sexual partners had a negative association on sexual quality and relationship stability for all three age groups. For two of the three age groups the number of sexual partners had a negative association on communication and for the youngest age group a negative association on relationship satisfaction. The size of the coefficients for the number of sexual partners was strongest for the emerging adult cohort and weakest for those in the middle age group. Both sexual quality and communication had strong associations with relationship satisfaction and stability for all three groups. The squared multiple correlations for the endogenous variables in the model demonstrated that the variables explained between 40% and 65% of the variance for relationship stability and satisfaction. Although the associations between sexual quality and communication and satisfaction and stability were strong, the correlations in Table 1 indicated that there were still substantial distinctions between them in that less than half of the variance in relationship satisfaction, and relationship stability could be explained by these bivariate associations. In addition, other studies using these variables (Busby et al., 2001; Busby et al., 2007) have demonstrated that these variables are distinct and load on separate factors.

Table 1. *Correlations, means, and standard deviations for the scales used in this study*

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.	Number of sexual partners (log)	—							
2.	Sexual quality	−.14	—						
3.	Communication	−.10	.46	—					
4.	Relationship stability	−.17	.43	.62	—				
5.	Relationship satisfaction	−.13	.62	.72	.67	—			
6.	Religiosity	−.24	.14	.11	.09	.09	—		
7.	Relationship length	−.12	−.19	−.01[a]	−.02[a]	−.08	.08	—	
8.	Education	−.01[a]	.08	.10	.12	.07	.01[a]	.09	—
	Mean	0.69	3.52	3.50	3.83	3.35	2.99	12.51	6.71
	Standard deviation	0.45	1.09	0.62	0.91	1.01	1.12	9.66	2.08

Note. All other correlations were significant at $p < .01$.
[a]Not significant.

Discussion

The findings from this study demonstrate that the number of sexual partners participants had was negatively associated with sexual quality, communication, and relationship stability, and for one age cohort relationship satisfaction, even when controlling for a wide range of variables including education, religiosity, and relationship length. It appears from these findings that the influence of the number of sexual partners is strongest for the emerging adult cohort but it is similar for males and females.

The sexual restraint theory is one possible explanation for these findings. According to the sexual restraint ideas (Busby et al., 2010) sexual experiences with multiple partners may establish patterns that are difficult to change in marriage. It may be that those who are sexual with many partners have learned to overemphasize the physical aspects of a relationship at the expense of other variables such as communication. The negative association between the number of sexual partners and communication may be indicative of this process.

In the sexual quality area, where the association with the number of sexual partners is the strongest, the negative association may be a result of multiple partners and sexual experiences raising expectations that undermine the current sexual quality in marriage. Rather than providing more meaningful experience, understanding, and eventually higher levels of quality in the sexuality area, having multiple sexual partners appears to be associated with poorer sexual quality in marriage. It may be that once someone has been sexual with a number of people the need for variety increases. These findings regarding sexual quality may interact with the communication findings as it is likely difficult to discuss sexual concerns because of the sensitive nature of the topic, especially if partners are at least thinking about previous sexual partners and preferences or mentioning them. However, the mechanisms for how previous sexual partners negatively influence a current sexual relationship are not clear from this study and need more attention with better measures of sexual quality as well as the inclusion of intervening variables that may help explain the associations between these two variables.

In no instance was increasing the number of sexual partners associated with better results for the relationship outcome variables for any of the age cohorts. These findings also provide additional support for previous scholarship, suggesting that multiple premarital sexual partners may be associated with increased marital instability (Paik, 2011; Teachman, 2003). This study is also the first to confirm this association for men as well as women. It is worth noting in this study the larger influence that previous sexual partners has on relationship stability than it has on

satisfaction. As Teachman (2003) suggests, multiple breakups and previous relationships may exert their strongest influence on current stability because partners are better and faster at moving toward and through breakup. This may help them recover faster after a breakup, but it does not seem to help people stay together better than if they had experienced fewer breakups. What we do not know in this study is how many of these sexual experiences occurred within an exclusive or significant relationship as many could have been brief hookups. It would be important in future research to distinguish between the number of sexual experiences in and outside of exclusive relationships.

Although the sample was not representative, it was sizable and national in scope. However, a sample closer to a nationally representative sample may yield different findings and this should be explored in future research. It may also be that because we used only a married sample it is biased toward those who stayed married and are consequently more stable. It may also be that people in more stable relationships are more likely to underreport previous sexual partners, though there has been no research to explore this potential bias. More comprehensive measures of the relationship outcomes might also result in different findings. Additionally, although the results for the number of sexual partners are significant for each of the relationship outcomes, the sizes of the path coefficients are not large in comparison to the sizes of the associations between communication and the two relationship outcomes, suggesting that past sexual experience is only one of many variables that is associated with the quality of marriage relationships.

Even with the limitations of this study, it is noteworthy that one variable based on experiences often many years in the past could still have a significant association with important marriage processes. One explanation for these findings could be that the sowing of wild oats does leave weeds that crop up and interfere with the confidence partners have with each other and their relationship stability. According to the theoretical principles of sexual restraint, it appears that what participants get into their systems through sexual experiences with multiple partners is more negative than the value that may accrue as a result of getting more sexual knowledge and experience. Perhaps as Stanley and colleagues (2006) indicate, the power of sexual experiences can interfere with good decision making. It may also be the case, as suggested by Paik (2011), that premarital sexual experiences influence expectations and perceptions regarding relationships and marriage, and may result in individuals selecting others with extensive sexual histories into marriages which are more prone to increased conflict and less satisfaction.

As hinted at previously, much more research needs to be conducted with couples to verify some of these possible explanations for the findings in this study through both longitudinal and qualitative studies. In particular, researchers need to continue to try and isolate the influence of the number of sexual partners as compared to the influence of the number of the overall relationships. Also, qualitative research that investigates how people interpret previous sexual histories would be extremely helpful in dissecting the meaning people make about sexual experience and how this changes their current relationships. Finally, exploring how couples communicate about their previous sexual experiences and how this influences their current relationships is crucial for clarifying the reasons for findings such as those in this study.

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