

ADRIANNA KACZUBA

University of Lodz, Institute of Psychology

OLGA ZWARDOŃ-KUCHCIAK

University of Lodz, Institute of Psychology

LOVE ON THE SCHOOL CORRIDOR – CHARACTERISTICS OF ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS¹⁾

Abstract: The current study aimed to examine how students and teachers perceive romantic relationships formed by adolescents. To this end, a measure was constructed based on Osgood's semantic differential and comprising 11 dimensions. One hundred and thirty-five participants – 74 students and 61 teachers – took part in the study. The results showed that both students as well as teacher rated adolescent

romantic relationships rather positively, and their perceptions are similar. However, statistically significant differences were noted for four out of 11 dimensions. The greatest differences concerned the ratings of the length of adolescent romantic relationships.

Keywords: romantic relationships, adolescents, students, teachers

INTRODUCTION

What role do intimate romantic relationships play in life? The answer can be considered from many perspectives. Intimate relationships are related to the partners' mutual perception of each other's behaviors as intimacy (Harvey, 1995). Meanwhile, the term "romantic" can be taken to denote the relatively short developmental phase of a relationship where passion co-occurs with intimacy, and the partners' commitment emerges towards the end (Wojciszke, 2003). Psychological science underscores the significant influence of such relationships on personal wellbeing. For example, research points to a greater sense of happiness among people maintaining intimate emotional relationships with others (Myers, 2004). On the one hand, a partner's support can positively impact self-esteem via its protective character (Murray, Griffin, Rose, & Belavia, 2003), and on the other, it can help overcome obstacles. It also facilitates coping with stress (Myers, 2004).

Correspondence address: Adrianna Kaczuba adrianna.kaczuba@uni.lodz.pl, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8605-7889>; Olga Zwardoń-Kuchciak ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8463-0496>.

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ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS IN ADOLESCENCE

Although the developmental perspective places the task of “choosing a life partner” in the stage of early adulthood (see Havighurst, 1972, 1980, 1997, qtd. in Turner & Helms, 1999), forming romantic relationships is one of the chief characteristics of social development already in adolescence, especially in its later stages (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; see Sullivan, 1953). According to the literature, this comprises the period between 16 and 20/22 years of age, that is, the end of childhood (Brzezińska, 2005). Wyndol Furman and Laura Shaffer (2003) pointed out that competences in forming intimate emotional relationships in adulthood are dependent on the experiences accumulated during adolescence. Moreover, the greater this experience, the more socially necessary skills a given person can develop. A lack of positive experiences in establishing satisfying relationships in adolescence can lead to a sense of alienation or loneliness (Demirli, Çokamay, & Artar, 2017).

According to studies carried out in the United States, 75% of eighteen-year-olds have already experienced romantic commitment in a relationship with a significant other, and 60% of this age group was in a long-term relationship (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Thus, it is no surprise that dating or current “crushes” are one of the most frequent topics of conversations between adolescents (Thompson, 1994). Adolescents in romantic relationships also experience more frequent conflicts. The dominant forms of resolving these conflicts are: compromises (among older adolescents and adolescent girls) and direct expressions of anger (among boys, Bird & Harris, 1990; see Feldman & Gowen, 1998). However, it is worth noting that these behaviors play a significant role in normative socialization processes, facilitating adolescents’ development of emotional coping skills, among others (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Moreover, experiences (especially first-time ones) in forming romantic relationships can also shape expectations about subsequent partners and relationships (Wojciszke, 2003). For example, a study by Hanna Liberska (2001) showed the wide range of differences among Polish youth in late adolescence regarding their expectations about future spouses. In her study, the boys expected their future wives to possess similar characteristics to them (with the exception of the professional sphere), whereas girls preferred their future husbands to surpass them in terms of abilities.

In sum, according to Harry Stack Sullivan (1953), forming romantic relationships allows adolescents to experience both intimacy and sexuality, and, additionally, to experience intimacy beyond same-sex relationships (which form the basis of dyadic relationships in earlier stages of development).

ADOLESCENTS AND RELATIONSHIPS – THEORY AND PRACTICE

As adolescents grow up, conversations about emotional and intimate life are often marginalized in their family homes. However, this does not mean that their need to discuss these issues decreases. The Internet often becomes a source of information instead (Bieńko, Izdebski, Wąż, 2016). Research shows that already from childhood on, individuals learn scripts, which then become the basis for understanding such phenomena as dating or relationships. Ready-made scenarios of “love life” can be shaped by information gathered from, for example, the media (Serewicz & Gale, 2008). As a result, young people’s knowledge about sexual life and functioning in relationships

is insufficient, which is evidenced by, for example, studies carried out by the CBOS Public Opinion Research Center (2008, 2009, 2010) as part of subsequent editions of the Campaign for Conscious Parenthood (*Kampania na Rzecz Świadomego Rodzicielstwa*). The consequences of such a state of affairs include: unplanned teen pregnancies, discontinuing education, or experiencing various psychological sequelae, for example, depression (see Vance, 1985).

However, it is worth mentioning that both specialists in this area as well as adolescents themselves agree that the school could play a role in preparing for mature functioning in relationships and appropriate family planning. Sexual education is highlighted both for adolescents as well as their parents, in areas of, among others, support in responsible decision-making in the sphere of romantic life (see Weissbourd, Peterson & Weinstein, 2013). However, the reality of the school environment often does not meet expectations. Classes on adolescent sexual development and related emotional and social areas (so-called *preparation for family life, wychowanie do życia w rodzinie*) are often treated as less important than other subjects, are ignored altogether, or are taught by persons qualified in entirely different areas (Bieńko et al., 2016). Additionally, adolescents themselves note that the curriculum might require changes. They point towards the need to emphasize aspects of “preparing for family life” which concern functioning in intimate social relationships, for example, forming and ending romantic relationships, instead of predominantly focusing on self-control and “making appropriate decisions now and in the future” (Podstawa programowa, 2018, p. 12) without explaining their characteristics and what they concern (Weissbourd et al., 2013).

When considering the challenges of educating adolescents on mature and responsible functioning in intimate relationships, issues other than teachers’ appropriate theoretical background seem pertinent from the psychological perspective. Assuming that school can be one of the chief sources of knowledge and practice in functioning in intimate social relationships for adolescents, understanding the attitude of both the students and the teachers towards the various aspects of the issue of relationships becomes crucial. In light of a limited number of prior studies, it seems especially interesting to examine how the representatives of the school environment perceive adolescents’ first romantic relationships as a starting point for further explorations of this topic. Exploring this issue may facilitate greater self-awareness, both among students motivated towards self-reflection, as well as among teachers, who will have the opportunity to modify the curriculum to the real interests and experiences of their pupils. From this perspective, these activities present an opportunity to join theory and practice in the school environment. Moreover, undertaking a deepened analysis of the topic of adolescents’ first experiences in the sphere of romantic relationships might also foster the deeper understanding of such relationships in adulthood (see Furman & Schaffer, 2003).

Considering the above, the current empirical study focused on the analysis of the characterization of adolescent romantic relationships by students and teachers in high schools and technical high schools. It must also be noted that “school relationships” described in the current study are treated as a form of representing “romantic relationships formed by adolescents” in a social space, whereas the context of the study (the school) is characterized by a high perceptive availability of the studied phenomenon for both groups. These terms are considered synonymous by the authors and are used interchangeably throughout the text. The authors aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. Which characteristics of adolescent romantic relationships are ascribed by students, and which by teachers?
2. Do students differ significantly from teachers in the way of characterizing adolescent romantic relationships?

Regarding the first research question, results of existing analyses do not allow for formulating a direct hypothesis on the way in which students and teachers characterize adolescent relationships. Thus, it can be assumed that this question has an exploratory character, and its answer will be sought in the current project. Studies related to the second research question show that adolescent girls engage in relationships in order to satisfy, among others, their need for intimacy in a more mature way than do boys (who are often motivated by sex), which results in higher commitment on the part of girls. In turn, this can lead to greater costs of such relationships experienced by adolescent girls (Joyner & Udry, 2000). On the other hand, the correlation between adolescents' commitment to romantic relationships and lower academic achievement (Quatman, Sampson, Robinson, & Watson, 2001) might be related to a negative assessment of such relationships on the part of the teachers. On this basis, the following hypothesis was formulated concerning the second research question:

H1: Students perceive adolescent romantic relationships in a more beneficial way than do teachers.

METHOD

In order to answer the above research questions, the authors utilized a specially designed measure based on Osgood's theory of the semantic differential. This quantitative method allows for assessing a given phenomenon or the attitude towards it (Mayntz, Holm, & Hübner, 1985). The rating procedure involves placing the verified phenomenon on a two-dimensional scale comprised of a pair of antonymous adjectives (e.g., *unseemly* – *seemly*). The semantic differential as a research method is rated positively by scientists in terms of objectivity, reliability, as well as validity. Moreover, it allows for making adjustments as necessary within the scope of a given study, which was done by the authors who carried out a pilot study ($N = 91$ adolescents, see Kaczuba & Zwardoń-Kuchciak, 2019) which allowed for designing the final version of the measure, consisting of a 5-point scale and 11 dimensions (Cronbach's $\alpha = .63$), distinguished by a group of competent judges (representing both students and teachers):

Dimension 1. *unseemly/seemly* – the behavior of a school couple causes (or not) distaste among people in their surroundings.

Dimension 2. *acceptable/unacceptable* – the school relationship is accepted (or not) by the school community.

Dimension 3. *ostentatious/not ostentatious* – the school couple behaves discretely (or not).

Dimension 4. *stable/unstable* – the adolescents forming a school couple are loyal to each other (or not).

Dimension 5. *long/short* – the school relationship can be of a long or short duration.

Dimension 6. *attractive/unattractive* – the adolescents forming a school couple are perceived as attractive (or not).

Dimension 7. *popular/unpopular* – the adolescents forming a school couple are popular (or not) in their school environment.

Dimension 8. *sociable/unsociable* – the school couple maintains (or not) relationships with their peers.

Dimension 9. *well fit/poorly fit* – the adolescents forming a school couple “fit” each other (or not).

Dimension 10. *having a positive influence on the partners/having a negative influence on the partners* – the adolescents forming a school couple have a positive (or negative) influence on each other.

Dimension 11. *engagement/disengagement* – the adolescents forming a school couple of committed (or not) to the partner and their relationship.

The cut-off point for each of the dimensions is the middle point of the scale (in this case – 3). It is chosen by those participants who are unable to unequivocally describe their position (positive or negative) about the phenomenon in question on each dimension. The ratings made on the scale (closer to/further away from the cut-off point) can be used to make inferences about the strength of the participants’ choices. In other words, the further away from the cut-off point and the closer to an endpoint of the scale, the stronger the participants’ belief that a given adjective appropriately describes the corresponding phenomenon.

PROCEDURE AND PARTICIPANTS

Before taking part in the study proper, consent for the underaged adolescents’ participation in the study was obtained from their legal guardians. Next, those interested in participation – teachers and students – gave their e-mail addresses to the authors, who then sent them a direct link to an Internet questionnaire which took around 10 minutes to complete. Each participant was given the right to voluntary participation, the option to withdraw their participation at any moment (without having to provide reasons and without consequences), as well as anonymity. Submitting a completed questionnaire was taken as synonymous with accepting the terms of participation in the study. The study was carried out in accordance with the rules of psychological research.

The study involved 135 participants, aged from 17 to 64 years ($M = 30$; $SD = 14.87$), recruited from high schools and technical high schools. The participants were divided into two groups: students and teachers. The student group ($n = 74$) was comprised of 39 girls and 35 boys aged 17–19 years ($M = 18$; $SD = .55$), whereas the teacher group ($n = 61$) was comprised of 31 women and 30 men, whose age ranged from 29 to 64 years ($M = 46$; $SD = 8.60$). The teachers’ professional experience ranged from 2 to 40 years ($M = 19$; $SD = 8.35$).

RESULTS

In order to answer the first research question concerning the characteristics of adolescent romantic relationships attributed by students and teachers, the distribution of the means in both groups was analyzed. The obtained results are presented in Figure 1, where 3 is the neutral value, while the left- and right-hand spaces denote the opposite ends of each dimension.

The analysis of the results obtained in the student group shows that they perceive their peers’ romantic relationships as: seemly ($M = 3.22$; $SD = 1.23$), acceptable ($M = 2.04$;

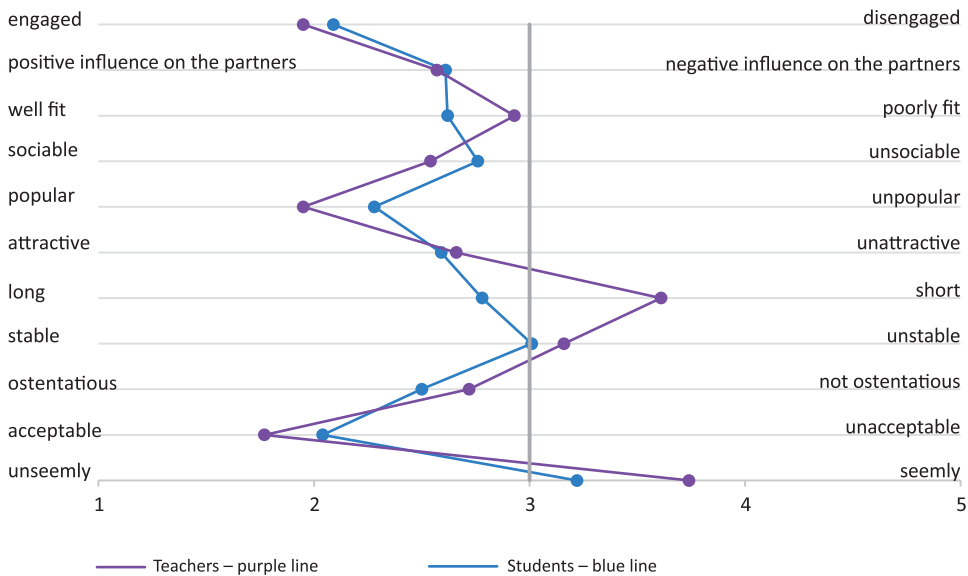


FIGURE 1. Characteristics ascribed to adolescent romantic relationships by students and teachers.

Source: own elaboration.

$SD = 1.11$), unstable ($M = 3.01$; $SD = 1.23$), long ($M = 2.78$; $SD = 1.18$), attractive ($M = 2.59$; $SD = 1.05$), popular ($M = 2.28$; $SD = .83$), sociable ($M = 2.76$; $SD = 1.22$), well fit ($M = 2.62$; $SD = 1.08$) having a positive influence on the partners ($M = 2.61$; $SD = 1.09$) and engaged ($M = 2.09$; $SD = .87$, see Figure 1). Simultaneously, the students reported that their peers engaged in romantic relationships are ostentatious ($M = 2.50$; $SD = 1.25$). Neither dimension reached the extreme value and the obtained values oscillated around the cut-off point (i.e., 3 on the scale). The teachers' responses were more varied. Representatives of the faculty rated adolescent romantic relationships on the 11 dimensions of the semantic differential in the following way – according to them, school relationships are seemly ($M = 3.74$; $SD = 1.01$), acceptable ($M = 1.77$; $SD = .86$), attractive ($M = 2.66$; $SD = .92$), popular ($M = 1.95$; $SD = 1.00$), well fit ($M = 2.93$; $SD = .79$), sociable ($M = 2.54$; $SD = 1.07$), having a positive influence on the partners ($M = 2.57$; $SD = 1.00$), and engaged ($M = 1.95$; $SD = .76$). Similar to students, teachers also perceived school relationships as ostentatious ($M = 2.72$; $SD = 1.12$), as well as unstable ($M = 3.16$; $SD = .93$) and short ($M = 3.61$; $SD = .82$).

In order to answer the second research question concerning the differences in characterization of adolescent romantic relationships by students and teachers, it was first examined whether the distributions of each variable differed from the normal distribution to a statistically significant degree. Using the Shapiro-Wilk test allowed for confirming the normal distribution of each variable ($p > .05$), and thus, parametric tests were used in the subsequent analyses. An analysis of the distribution of the means was carried out using Student's independent-samples t test. Taking the mean values into account, teachers rated adolescent romantic relationships more favorably than did students on the following dimensions: 1 (seemly), 2 (acceptable), 3 (ostentatious), 4 (stable), 6 (attractive), and 9 (well fit). On the other hand, the students rated adolescent romantic relationships higher on the following dimensions: 7 (popular), 8 (sociable),

10 (having a positive influence on the partners), and 11 (engaged). Statistically significant differences in the ratings were observed for the following dimensions: 1 (unseemly – seemly) 5 (long – short), 7 (popular – unpopular), and 9 (well fit – poorly fit; see Table 1). Cohen's *d* effect sizes were, respectively: Dimension 1 – .4; Dimension 5 – .8; Dimension 7 – .3, and Dimension 9 – .3, which allows for concluding that the effect size was moderate. The effect size was large only for Dimension 5.

TABLE 1. Descriptive statistics and *t*-test values in the study groups

Number	Dimension (pair of characteristics)	Students		Teachers		<i>t</i>
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
1.	unseemly – seemly	3.22	1.23	3.74	1.01	-2.649**
2.	acceptable – unacceptable	2.04	1.11	1.77	.86	1.584
3.	ostentatious – not ostentatious	2.5	1.25	2.72	1.12	1.069
4.	stable – unstable	3.01	1.23	3.16	.93	.785
5.	long – short	2.78	1.18	3.61	.82	4.745***
6.	attractive – unattractive	2.59	1.05	2.66	.92	.335
7.	popular – unpopular	2.28	.83	1.95	1.00	2.099**
8.	sociable – unsociable	2.76	1.22	2.54	1.07	1.076
9.	well fit – poorly-fit	2.62	1.08	2.93	.79	-1.935*
10.	positively influencing the partners – negatively influencing the partners	2.61	1.09	2.57	1.00	.188
11.	engaged – disengaged	2.09	.87	1.95	.76	1.004

$p < .05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$; $p < .001^{***}$

Source: own elaboration.

Note. Mean values below 3 indicate the adjective on the left end of the dimension, while mean values above 3 indicate the adjective on the right end.

DISCUSSION

Adolescence is a time of intensive emotional and social development. Young people undergo dynamic changes, not only biologically, but also psychologically. They start searching for their Self, turning to their nearest environment. The most important place to observe these changes is the school environment, which is the focal point of adolescent social life (Obuchowska, 2002; Oleszkowicz & Senejko, 2011).

The aim of the current study was to explore romantic relationships between adolescents from the perspective of two groups – students and teachers. Two research questions were posed. The first concerned the characteristics chosen by both students and teachers to describe romantic school relationships. The second question focused on determining whether significant differences in the way students and teachers characterize romantic adolescent relationships occur. An initial review of the collected data revealed that the answers to the questions posed are not unambiguous, while a detailed analysis of the results of the conducted research yielded a rather complex picture of the current study's subject.

Answering the first of the formulated research questions, students perceived adolescent romantic relationships: seemly, acceptable, ostentatious, unstable, long, attractive, popular, sociable, well fit, having a positive influence on the partners in the relationship, and engaged in the relationship. It is worth noting that, from among the terms indicated, only two can be considered negative (i.e., ostentatious, unstable). The analysis of the results on each of the presented dimensions also demonstrated that the students' assessments were closest to the ends of the scale for the terms: acceptable, engaged, and popular. The teachers assessed the romantic relationships of young people as: seemly, acceptable, ostentatious, unstable, short, attractive, popular, sociable, well fit, having a positive influence on the partners in the relationship, and engaged in the relationship. Therefore, three negative terms appeared in this group (ostentatious, unstable, short). In the teacher group, just as in the student group, the assessments were the closest to the ends of the scale for the terms: accepted, engaged, and popular. Therefore, when analyzing the respondents' answers on the individual dimensions, it seems that the representatives of both groups rather agree in their perception of romantic school relationships. Both teachers and students are convinced that adolescent relationships are accepted by the school community, that the people forming such couples are popular in their environment, and that young people in these relationships are interested in the partner and the relationship they form. However, the students' assessments of relationships were found to be more focused around the cut-off point (i.e., 3 on the scale), while the teachers' responses were much more varied, creating a more elaborate structure (more responses on the ends of the scales). This may be due to the fact that student respondents are in the process of shaping their opinions and are still searching for answers. As Erik Erikson (1968; qtd. in Bee, 2004) noted, the key task in adolescence is to overcome the identity crisis – above all, by integrating the knowledge about one's own Self and determining one's identity and values.

A comparison of the characteristics of romantic school relationships chosen by students and teachers allowed to answer the second research question on the differences in ratings between the groups. The analysis of the results showed that in the case of four dimensions (out of 11), intergroup differences were statistically significant. The most divergent ratings concerned the stability of adolescent relationships. This was the only dimension where the students' and teachers' responses were closer to the opposing ends of the scale – for teachers, adolescent relationships are short, and for students, they are long-term. This discrepancy can be interpreted in two ways. First, teachers may have a different perception of relationship stability than students. Life experience may be important in this context, in that a teacher may describe a 10-year relationship as lasting, but a student might consider a 6-month relationship lasting. It should be noted, however, that the measure used in the study is based on the intuitive nature of judgments, which made it impossible to verify such an explanation, which is worth remembering when planning further studies in this area. Second, teachers are also likely to be less involved in their students' relationships (compared to the students themselves), and thus may not know their real length. Moreover, teachers usually only observe adolescent relationships in schools, while students gather experience from such contexts as parties, social gatherings, or personal testimonies of other adolescents. Adolescent relationships were also seen as significantly less unseemly by teachers than by students. This difference may result, for example, from the different levels of emotional maturity between teachers (adults) and students (adolescents), where the second group may not yet be ready to observe public displays of affection in their closest envi-

ronment (cf. Obuchowska, 2002; Oleszkowicz & Senejko, 2011). However, analyses of students' online activity (e.g., online storytelling) indicate their significant openness to erotic content, and even interest in topics considered taboo (e.g., incestuous relationships). At the same time, they point to gaps in their knowledge in the area of sex education (Marcinkowska, Joško, & Kosmalska, 2011).

Teachers and students also differed significantly in the intensity of the assessment of adolescent relationships as popular in the school environment. The former group rated higher (in both cases, however, the results remained closer to the end-of-scale *popular*). This difference may result from the participants' different understanding of this dimension and giving it positive or negative connotations. This seems plausible inasmuch as both teachers and students have rated school couples as ostentatious. This may indicate that they perceive popularity negatively, which is worth considering in further research. Differences were also observed on the dimension of relationship fit, where students, as opposed to teachers, were more likely to consider relationships as well fit. When interpreting these results, it is again worth noting that the students are more involved in school life and thus know it from the "inside out." Moreover, student ratings of partner fit can also be more accurate, as they are based on detailed knowledge of specific cases rather than just impressions – as is probably the case with teachers. The differences in the presented results may also refer to social identity theory (Wojciszke, 2014), where special attention is given to the distinction between own and "other" groups and the consequences arising from such a division. From an individual perspective, this means defining oneself and making judgments in categories determined by one's group of reference, thus creating a conceptual classification of the social world (Warمیńska, 1999). However, in the group perspective, it results from interpersonal relations, creating a kind of symbolic model characterized by the expressed values, symbols, and ideas. Therefore, it can be concluded that the main explanatory mechanisms of the obtained results are the above-mentioned differences in perspectives ("us-them") between students and teachers, greater perceptual accessibility of the examined phenomenon, especially in the school community, and different emotional involvement of both groups.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF RESEARCH

In sum, adolescence is undoubtedly a time of very intensive development, both mentally and socially. From this perspective, it seems especially important to follow adolescents' needs and expectations regarding the role of teachers as supporters in the process of "entering adulthood". It is worth noting that despite the differences in perspectives between students and teachers, their perceptions of romantic adolescent relationships seems to be similar. The obtained results indicate an area which – in this case – seems to undermine the pattern of *generational conflict* between teenagers and adults. This conclusion builds optimism about the possibility of establishing cooperation between these two groups, for example, during the aforementioned preparation for family life classes. Moreover, the benefits of this cooperation can be mutual.

It should also be stressed that the current study is not without limitations. It is worth noting that the time of conducting the study partly coincided with the teachers' strike (taking place in Poland in the spring of 2019). This situation, associated with high tensions and emotions among students and teachers, may have affected the

number of participants in the study as well as their responses. Therefore, subsequent studies should involve larger samples. A limitation of the present study is also the lack of differentiation of the forms of relationships judged by the respondents (e.g., heterosexual and homosexual couples), which is worth considering in future studies. Further research could also incorporate verifications of the impact of additional variables – especially in teacher groups – for example, personality variables, demographic factors (number and age of children), the classes they teach, or whether they are homeroom teachers (*wychowawcy klas*). It would also be interesting to examine the trends highlighted in the current study in students from younger age groups (e.g., early adolescence, i.e., in the first high school grade or the last grade of primary school). Finally, the current research project should be treated as an introduction to subsequent studies, and the current results are a guideline for further exploration.

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- temu, 5 ponad 5 lat temu i 13 ponad 10 lat temu; [1 CBOS survey, April 2008, in-depth interviews with 30 adolescent mothers from different regions of Poland, 14 women gave birth in the last 12 months, 6 not later than 5 years ago, 5 more than 5 years ago and 10 more than 10 years ago conducted for the organizers of the Campaign for Conscious Parenthood “When $1 + 1 = 3$ ”, 2 CBOS survey, March/April 2009, in-depth interviews with 30 adolescent fathers from different regions of Poland, 7 men became fathers in the last 12 months, 5 men not later than 5 years ago, 5 more than 5 years ago and 13 more than 10 years ago] <http://www.newsweek.pl/polska/edukacja-seksualna-w-polsce-czyli-1-1-3,59080,1,1.html>, www.swiadome-rodzicielstwo.com [accessed: 15.08.2019].
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