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TIME

FROM THE MAGAZINE

Sunday, Aug. 27, 2006

The Secret Love Lives of Teenage Boys

Social scientists who study young love are discovering that contrary to popular belief, male adolescents don't just want to have fun

By LEV GROSSMAN

In 1995 Peggy Giordano did a study of high school yearbooks. She was leafing through one when something caught her eye about the notes people had written there, something about their rawness and their honesty. "I was amazed at some of the messages that the boys were writing to girls," Giordano says. "They seemed to be so emotional and so heartfelt. It didn't seem to jibe with the picture of boys' only wanting one thing and objectifying young women."

Giordano is not the typical target audience for a mash note written in a yearbook. She's a professor of sociology at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, and the object of her most recent investigations is not the kind of thing you would think social scientists spend their time on. Her quarry, sociologically speaking, is the elusive, zealously guarded heart of the modern-day teenage boy. Giordano--an author of such articles as "A Conceptual Portrait of Adolescent Romantic Relationships" and "Hooking Up: The Relationship Contexts of 'Nonrelationship' Sex"--believes something most people don't: not only do adolescent boys have hearts, but they're also the biggest romantics around.

It's a theory that runs counter to the story our culture usually tells us about teenage boys--that they have abandoned dating and monogamy for hooking up and "friends with benefits." But Giordano believed the prevailing wisdom was wrong, and in 2001, with the help of two colleagues, professors Wendy Manning and Monica Longmore, she set out to test it.

But how? The existing sociological literature wasn't much help. "There really hasn't been much on romantic relationships" among adolescents, Giordano says with a sigh. "And what there has been is really much more focused on sex itself." Moreover, the earlier work all seemed to be missing a crucial element: past sociologists had compiled reams of data about behavior--what teens do--but not much about what that behavior meant to

them--what teens actually feel. Giordano didn't just want to know if a boy told his girlfriend he loved her. She also wanted to know if he really meant it.

But she was aware that not all stereotypes about teenage boys are wrong: they scare easily; they're reluctant to talk about their emotions, and when they do, they're not particularly good at it. So when Giordano and her colleagues decided to undertake a large-scale study of the secret love life of teenagers, they approached their subjects the way you would treat warriors of the Yanomamo: with scientific objectivity and extreme caution.

For a staging ground, the researchers chose nearby Lucas County, a largely urban county in Ohio that contains Toledo. Using school records, they assembled a finely calibrated random sample of 1,316 boys and girls drawn from the seventh, ninth and 11th grades. Finding their subjects was one thing; getting the kids to talk openly was another. A certain amount of tact would be essential. "It's sort of creepy to be talking to a woman interviewer about your sex life," admits Giordano, who is 58. Each interview was started by one of Giordano's staff, who after a few minutes would hand the interviewee a laptop computer preloaded with questions. "I was really not in favor of the laptop administration because I'm coming out of a tradition where you really want to look the person in the eye," Giordano says. But teenagers today are used to reading on a monitor and pouring their hearts out onto a keyboard. "Basically the kids really like it," says Giordano. "They're from that generation, so they just roll with it."

For the interview questions, Giordano and her colleagues could draw on the wisdom of generations of sociologists, whose calling in life is to take messy, intimate personal experiences and social attitudes and turn them into discreet, orderly, crunchable numbers. A question designed to gauge how attached a teen is to his or her partner might offer choices such as "I would rather be with X than anyone else," "I am very attracted to X," "X always seems to be on my mind" and so on. The researchers then used the responses to analyze each subject's feelings about his or her love life. Each teenager was assigned scores in categories like "communications awkwardness," "confidence in navigating romantic relationships," "heightened emotionality," "influence" and "power." Having translated the interpersonal dynamics of puppy love into cold, hard numbers, Giordano could then add them up, read the results and draw her conclusions.

One thing she learned was that she was right. On the love scale, boys scored equally with girls. They were at least as emotionally invested in their romantic relationships as their partners. About 100 of the boys and girls were randomly chosen for additional, in-depth, face-to-face interviews that were taped. The responses were revelatory in their passionate forthrightness. "You think of it as this way: [Would] you give up your whole life, you know ... to save Jenny's life?" one boy said, trying to explain his feelings about his girlfriend. "I'm like a little girl in a

relationship," another boy confided. "[At first it] just seemed like every time I was around her I couldn't talk. I was getting butterflies in my stomach, I was just, like, discombobulated or something." Such sentiments were echoed across race and ethnic lines.

And here's something that surprised even Giordano: both boys and girls agreed that girls have the power in heterosexual relationships, including when it comes to sex. "She wanted to do it more than I did," said an 18-year-old male. "She said that I wasn't mature enough and, you know, all that stuff ... I was too young, I was scared, I didn't know what I was doing, I wasn't ready for it ... [But] she was my girlfriend, and that's what she wanted." The picture of young love that was developing was so different from society's perceptions that Giordano went over the data with extra care. "I would have to think every once in a while, am I just wrong here?" she says. "And then I would think, O.K., let me think about all the different men and boys that I know. They're really nice. I would have to add it up, just think about all the people, you know? It's really a question of numbers."

There were exceptions, of course. Take "Donny," a boy who filled the classic role of the player. At 17, he estimated that he'd had 35 sexual partners, some of whose names he couldn't recall. He had cheated on his girlfriends. He confessed to some physical abuse of them. But the really notable thing about Donny was how few Donnys there were. Fewer than a quarter of the boys surveyed felt that other kids thought of them as players. "That number of [Donny types] is in fact smaller than everybody believes," Giordano says.

It seems as if popular culture is waking up to the reality of the emotionally responsive male. Willowy, sensitive actors like Tobey Maguire and Topher Grace are looming larger on marquees. For every Charlie Sheen, there's a Jon Cryer. The irony is that boys seem to be the last ones to get the news. "It's like a shared misunderstanding," Giordano says. "One of the boys said that he'd never talk to his friends this way, the way that he talked to the interviewer, because those boys don't have the feelings that he has."

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