RESULTS

Descriptive

Slightly more than half of respondents in our sample were female, and seven in 10 were white (Table 1, page 135); participants’ average age was 22 years (range 18–26; not shown). More respondents were in dating relationships than were cohabiting or married, as would be expected for this age-group. Most reported that they loved their partners a lot (88%) and perceived that their partners loved them a lot (89%). Eighty-four percent of participants reported that they and their partners loved each other a lot; this proportion differed significantly by relationship type (76% of those in dating relationships, compared with 89% of cohabiting and 94% of married respondents—not shown).

Almost all respondents reported having had vaginal intercourse in their current relationship; 84–85% reported fellatio and cunnilingus (Table 2). In contrast, only 23% had had anal sex. Males reported a significantly higher level of fellatio than females, and females reported a significantly higher level of cunnilingus than males.

Most respondents had engaged in a broad range of sexual behaviors (Figure 1). Fifty-eight percent had had vaginal sex, cunnilingus and fellatio in their current relationship; 22% had added anal sex to that combination. Just 10% had had only vaginal sex, and smaller proportions had engaged in vaginal sex plus just one type of oral sex.*

Multivariable

Logistic regression models demonstrated that for both males and females, the odds that a type of sexual activity had ever occurred in a relationship were independently associated with the love pattern within the relationship (Table 3). A male had nearly twice as high odds of having received fellatio when the partners loved each other a lot as when neither partner loved the other a lot (odds ratio, 1.8). A female had significantly elevated odds of having received cunnilingus when the partners loved each other a lot or when she felt that her partner loved her (3.3 and 2.6, respectively).

A male had higher odds of having provided cunnilingus when he and his partner loved each other a lot or when he loved his partner a lot than when neither partner loved the other a lot (odds ratios, 3.9 and 5.2, respectively). A female had elevated odds of having provided fellatio when she and her partner loved each other a lot (2.6) or when she loved her partner a lot (2.0).

The odds of having had anal sex were elevated for males who said that they and their partners loved each other a lot (odds ratio, 3.1) or that they loved their partners (5.6). However for females, anal sex was not associated with the love pattern within the relationship.

Several relationship and individual factors also were significantly associated with the types of sexual activities that respondents reported. Older respondents had higher odds of having engaged in fellatio and cunnilingus than younger respondents; older age at first intercourse was associated with reduced odds of having participated in anal sex and, for females, oral sex. Compared with dating respondents, cohabiting females and males had higher odds of having had anal sex, married females had higher odds of having provided oral sex and married males had higher odds of having had anal intercourse. Black and Hispanic males and females had lower odds of having experienced oral sex, and black females had lower odds of anal sex, than their white counterparts.

DISCUSSION

This study supported our hypotheses that different patterns of love between partners predict participation in a variety of types of sexual activities and that the association between love and the sexual content of the relationship is modified by the respondent’s sex. Overall, reports of mutually high levels of loving between partners are associated with a wide range of sexual activities, including oral sex for males and females, and anal sex for males. Reports of loving one’s partner very much are also associated with providing oral sex for that partner, whether that love is perceived to be reciprocated or not.

*The study results are representative of young adults in long-term relationships. Results for the entire young adult weighted sample of Wave 3 of Add Health may be of interest to clinicians working with young adult populations in general. Among these 14,322 respondents, who can be considered representative of young adults in the United States, 48% did not report a current sexual relationship; 45% reported having had vaginal sex, 39% fellatio, 39% cunnilingus and 10% anal sex with a current partner of more than three months.