



Adolescent Romantic Relationships

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adolescence, contexts, peers, development

Abstract

In this article, we review theoretical and empirical advances in research on romantic relationships between age 10 and the early twenties. First, we describe key themes in this area of research. Next, we briefly characterize the most influential theoretical formulations and distinctive methodological issues. We then describe research findings regarding pertinent social and developmental processes. We summarize the extensive findings on relationships with parents and peers as a context for romantic relationships. Finally, we characterize the growing evidence that adolescent romantic relationships are significant for individual adjustment and development, and we note promising directions for further research.

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Romantic relationships:

mutually acknowledged ongoing voluntary interactions, commonly marked by expressions of affection and perhaps current or anticipated sexual behavior

Romantic experiences:

varied behavioral, cognitive, and emotional phenomena with romantic content; may or may not include direct experiences with a romantic partner

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Romantic relationships are a hallmark of adolescence. Only in the past decade, however, has scientific interest begun to match the hold of this topic on the popular and artistic imagination. Once regarded as trivial, transitory, or merely artifacts of social dysfunction, adolescent romantic relationships increasingly are regarded as potentially significant relational factors in individual development and well being (Collins 2003, Furman & Collins 2008, Furman & Shaffer 2003). The intellectual forebears of this contemporary perspective come not only from the study of adolescent psychology and development (Smetana et al. 2006), but also

from the remarkable expansion and refinement of scientific research on interpersonal relationships (Reis et al. 2000). The scope and vitality of current research in the area are remarkable. Several edited volumes have been published (e.g., Crouter & Booth 2006, Florsheim 2003, Furman et al. 1999); research laboratories in North America, South America, Europe, Australia, and the Middle East pursue research programs on the nature and processes of adolescent romantic relationships; and the number of journal articles and scientific program slots devoted to the topic have increased annually since 2000.

The term “romantic relationships” refers to mutually acknowledged ongoing voluntary interactions. Compared to other peer relationships, romantic ones typically have a distinctive intensity, commonly marked by expressions of affection and current or anticipated sexual behavior. This definition applies to same-gender, as well as mixed-gender, relationships. The term “romantic experiences” refers to a larger category of activities and cognitions that includes relationships and also varied behavioral, cognitive, and emotional phenomena that do not involve direct experiences with a romantic partner. This category includes fantasies and one-sided attractions (“crushes”), as well as interactions with potential romantic partners and brief nonromantic sexual encounters (e.g., “hooking up,” or casual involvement in activities usually thought to take place with romantic partners, from “making out” to intercourse) (B. Brown et al. 1999, Furman & Collins 2008, Manning et al. 2006). Little research has been devoted to romantic experiences other than actual relationships.

Romantic relationships are more common during adolescence than has usually been assumed. More than half of U.S. adolescents report having had a special romantic relationship in the past 18 months (Carver et al. 2003). The proportions are even higher with more inclusive definitions of romantic relationships (e.g., dating, spending time with or going out with someone for a month or longer) (Furman & Hand 2006). Incidence varies, however, across

the three commonly recognized subperiods of adolescence: early adolescence (typically ages 10–13); middle adolescence (ages 14–17); and late adolescence (18 until the early twenties) (Smetana et al. 2006). For example, 36% of 13-year-olds, 53% of 15-year-olds, and 70% of 17-year-olds report having had a “special” romantic relationship in the previous 18 months. By middle adolescence, most individuals have been involved in at least one romantic relationship (Carver et al. 2003). High school students commonly report more frequent interactions with romantic partners than with parents, siblings, or friends (Laursen & Williams 1997). The percentage of adolescents who report having a romantic relationship increases during the teenage years (Carver et al. 2003).

Research on adolescent romantic relationships has increased more in the past decade than in all of the previous century. Before 1999, the small amount of available information was largely descriptive. The primary foci were adolescents’ perceptions of potential partners and the extent of dating activity; interest in the significance for individual development was limited to the association with maladaptation and negative behavior (see Collins 2003 for a historical perspective). Contemporary researchers have expanded their purview in several respects. First, greater attention has been given to the quality of these relationships and their potential implications for positive, as well as negative, developmental outcomes for adolescents. Second, research questions have been broadened to encompass the processes associated with involvement in and qualities of adolescent relationships (e.g., cognitions and perceptions, emotions, and intimacy). In both of these first two research trends, researchers also have shifted from almost exclusive reliance on questionnaires to incorporating observational methods, detailed interviews, and other methods. Third, research on romantic relationships, like research on adolescents generally, has become more inclusive. Researchers now give greater attention to cultural, racial, and socioeconomic diversity in the characteristics and significance of adolescent romantic relationships. Research on the roman-

tic experiences of nonheterosexual youths is increasing, as well.

In this review, we first briefly describe especially influential theoretical and methodological considerations in current research. We next summarize current knowledge about key features of adolescent romantic relationships: the nature, degree, and timing of involvement in romantic relationships; the nature and psychological significance of relationship quality; the contributions of the characteristics of romantic partners; salient features of the content of these relationships, such as sexual behavior and partner aggression; and the cognitive and emotional processes associated with romantic relationships. For each of these features, we consider both developmental changes and individual differences. We then address the role of relationship networks in adolescent relationships. Finally, we discuss the evidence regarding the psychological and developmental significance of participating in adolescent romantic relationships. The review concludes by identifying especially promising directions for further research.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Theories

The theories that commonly serve as touchstones in current research ground romantic relationships in normative social experiences of childhood and adolescence. They include biosocial perspectives, such as evolutionary theory, more specific formulations emphasizing neuroendocrine functioning, and genetics; ecological perspectives; and interpersonal formulations, such as attachment and interdependence theories.

Biosocial perspectives. Biosocial perspectives emanate largely from evolutionary psychology and research on neuroendocrine processes. A common premise is that changes in social relationships that enhance reproductive

“Hooking up”: casual involvement in activities usually thought to take place with romantic partners (e.g., “making out,” intercourse)

Relationship quality: degree to which partners manifest intimacy, affection, and nurturance

fitness should co-occur with attaining reproductive capability (Weisfeld 1999). This premise undergirds much of the existing research on the implications of pubertal development for the changing distribution of adolescents with adults and peers, especially other-sex peers. Research findings from studies of both human and nonhuman adolescent suggest that reproductive maturation may be inhibited by physical closeness to parents and accelerated by distance from them, which would minimize inbreeding and thereby increase reproductive fitness. Although the timing of puberty is associated with romantic and sexual behavior (e.g., Dornbusch et al. 1981, Ellis 2004), recent research findings raise expectations for more-specific targeted studies of the implications of changes predicted by evolutionary theory to play a role in adolescent romantic relationships (Susman 2006).

A related line of research involves examining neurotransmitters such as oxytocin and vasopressin in relation to the behavioral features of adolescent sexuality and romantic relationships (Reis et al. 2000). Behavioral genetics has not yet been used to inform research on behaviors peculiar to early sexual activity or romantic relationships (Collins & Steinberg 2006). Evolutionary perspectives have guided a significant amount of research on adult romantic relationships (Buss 2005), but the application to adolescent romantic relationships has primarily consisted of theoretical papers (e.g., Laursen & Jensen-Campbell 1999). Thus, research activities derived from biosocial theories of adolescent romantic relationships promise potential growth but have yielded little thus far.

Ecological perspectives. Ecological perspectives emphasize the social and cultural contexts that encourage or constrain close relationships and endow them with meaning and significance. In this view, events that occur in other settings and relationships inevitably affect adolescent romantic relationships, which in turn can impinge on those settings. Among the potentially influential ecological features are histor-

ical, social, economic, political, geographical, cultural, and institutional and community conditions and characteristics that shape proximal experiences (Larson & Wilson 2004). Among the most frequently studied contexts of adolescent romantic relationships are networks of families and peers, ethnic/cultural contexts, religious institutions, and the mass media (e.g., J. Brown et al. 2002, Connolly et al. 2000, Giordano et al. 2005, Rostosky et al. 2004).

Interpersonal perspectives. Interpersonal perspectives emphasize the nature and processes of changes in adolescents' social relationships and the contribution of these changes to individual development. In interdependence models, joint patterns of actions, cognitions, and emotions between two individuals are the primary locus of interpersonal influences (Hinde 1997, Kelley et al. 2002, Laursen & Bukowski 1997). During adolescence, interdependencies in family relationships continue, though often in different forms than in earlier life, and interdependencies with friends and romantic partners become more apparent (Collins 2003). Research inspired by interdependence views typically focuses on the aspects of couple interactions that may favor stability or change in romantic relationships.

A particularly influential interdependence view, attachment theory, holds that a history of sensitive, responsive interactions and strong emotional bonds with caregivers in childhood facilitates adaptation to the transitions of adolescence (Allen & Land 1999, Collins & Sroufe 1999). Mature romantic attachments, however, require the cognitive and emotional maturity to integrate attachment, caregiving, and sexual/reproductive components (Waters & Cummings 2000). Although the necessary maturity level rarely is achieved before late adolescence (Allen & Land 1999), the developmental process begins earlier with a redistribution of attachment-related functions (for example, a desire for proximity, relying on the other person for unconditional acceptance) to friends and boyfriends or girlfriends (Furman & Wehner 1997).

These theories address different levels of analysis and, thus, are complementary rather than mutually exclusive or incompatible. Despite the apparent relevance of biosocial, ecological, and interdependence formulations, however, theories in this area have not developed to the point of widespread influence over research in the area. The time is right for further theoretical development to guide future progress in the area. One fruitful direction may be more integrative theorizing. For example, developmental systems models (e.g., Magnusson & Stattin 1998), though conceptually and methodologically daunting, call attention to the contrasting and the overlapping implications of multiple perspectives for adolescent romantic relationships.

Methodological Issues

Four methodological challenges confront researchers when designing and interpreting studies of adolescents' romantic relationships: (a) issues of operational definition, (b) representativeness of samples, (c) the ephemeral nature and instability of adolescent relationships, and (d) the interdependence of dyadic data.

Operational definitions. Conceptualizations of adolescent romantic relationships have been remarkably consistent across existing studies, yet no standard operational definitions exist nor has the broader domain of romantic experiences been well specified. Researchers typically have asked participants if they have a romantic relationship (or a boyfriend or girlfriend), and the participants decide on the basis of their own definition. A brief description is sometimes provided for clarification (e.g., "when you like a guy [girl] and he [she] likes you back") (Giordano et al. 2006). Researchers often also specify a minimum duration (e.g., at least one month long) in an effort to narrow the criteria (Welsh & Dickson 2005). Differences in definition affect estimates of the frequency and duration of romantic relationships and, very likely, findings from research (Furman & Hand 2006).

Obtaining representative samples. The nature and some features of adolescent romantic relationships may vary across diverse cultural, racial, and socioeconomic contexts. Researchers seek to capture the range of this diversity in their sampling strategies, but the task is difficult. Recruiting from schools is one of the best strategies for obtaining representative samples. However, school administrators are often reluctant to endorse research focused on controversial issues such as adolescent romantic relationships. Creative ways of addressing the concerns of school administrators may be needed to obtain such samples (Welsh et al. 2005). Some researchers attempt to recruit participants from community organizations or locations (e.g., churches, shopping malls); adolescents found in particular community organizations or locations may be less likely than are those recruited from schools to represent the adolescent population. Increasingly, researchers use Internet social networking Web sites (e.g., Facebook and Myspace) to recruit research participants. This strategy potentially offers access to larger numbers of potential participants than the recruiting methods mentioned above. Recent statistics show that 87% of U.S. teens use the Internet, and the number of adolescents using the Internet to communicate continues to increase (Lenhart et al. 2005).

Regardless of how the sample is obtained, adolescents and parents who consent to participate in research on adolescent romantic relationships may differ systematically from adolescents who are unwilling to participate. For example, some researchers have found that ideologically conservative parents and adolescents are often less willing to participate in research on romantic relationships than are more liberal parents. Some researchers address this problem by using samples originally recruited for broader purposes. For example, researchers can use publicly available datasets of nationally representative samples collected to assess adolescent health broadly rather than romantic relationships specifically (e.g., Bearman et al. 1997). Two limitations are inherent in this approach.

One is that researchers are restricted to the variables collected in the original study. The second is that the data likely come only from self-report questionnaires, potentially confounding the findings with common method variance. A variation on this strategy is collecting new data from participants of a previous intensive longitudinal study in which the participants are already committed to the larger developmental project (e.g., Capaldi et al. 2001, Sroufe et al. 2005). The problem associated with this approach is that the intensive data collection typical of well-conceptualized longitudinal studies often necessitates relatively small sample sizes. Thus, the goal of recruiting representative samples typically requires carefully reasoned trade-offs among the strengths and weaknesses of various strategies and detailed reporting of the decision processes associated with a particular study.

Regardless of research design, the possibility of bias from untruthful reporting always looms. It is unclear whether adolescent participants are any more or less likely than those of other ages to either exaggerate or suppress reports of dating, sexual activity, and so forth. Prudent researchers provide for other, as well as self, reports and additional checks on the reliability and validity of data.

Short duration and instability of relationships. Researchers interested in development face the particular challenge of the relatively transitory phenomena of adolescents' romantic relationships (B. Brown et al. 1999). Relationships may come and go before the researcher has had the opportunity to study them. Traditional longitudinal designs typically specify data collection at regular time intervals (often one year) rather than sampling at the time a new relationship emerges. Studies of the initiation, development, and decline of particular relationships are needed, however, to discern how each relationship contributes to choice of partners and behavior in future relationships. Some methodological techniques used to address this complex issue are daily diary studies (Bolger et al. 2003, Downey et al. 1998), regular

brief phone calls inquiring about relationship transitions, and regular intensive relationship histories (Giordano et al. 2006).

Interdependence of data. Romantic relationships are dyadic; thus, data from the two participants are not independent. The recent widespread use of multilevel modeling techniques allows romantic relationship researchers to separate the variance in outcome variables into individual and dyadic components. Such techniques also address the lack of independence in the couple members' responses. Non-independence violates the assumptions of common statistical techniques such as multiple regression by incorrectly estimating error terms (for a definitive treatment of statistical analysis of dyadic data, see Kenny et al. 2006).

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP PROCESSES DURING ADOLESCENCE

A fundamental challenge in research on adolescent romantic experiences is identifying the relevant dimensions of variation. Collins (2003) has delineated five features with documented relevance to the current and/or long-term significance for individual functioning and further development: romantic involvement; partner identity; relationship content; relationship quality; and cognitive and emotional processes in the relationship. Romantic involvement or activity refers to whether or not a person dates, when s/he began dating, the duration of the relationship, and the frequency and consistency of dating and relationships. Partner identity is concerned with the characteristics of the person with whom an adolescent has a romantic experience (e.g., dating). Content refers to what the members of the dyad do and do not do together. Relationship quality pertains to the relative degree of positive, supportive, beneficent experiences as compared to the negative, potentially detrimental ones. Cognitive and emotional processes include perceptions, attributions, and representations of oneself, the partner, and the relationship, as well as the emotions and moods elicited in romantic

encounters and affective statements associated with involvement in and the dissolution of relationships (e.g., depressive symptoms).

Involvement in Romantic Relationships

Becoming involved in romantic relationships and the frequency of romantic experiences are embedded in the adolescent social system. Prior to adolescence, interactions typically occur with peers of the same gender; most friendship pairs are of the same gender (Kovacs et al. 1996). Affiliation with mixed-gender groups typically follows in early to middle adolescence and facilitates the progression from same-gendered friendships to dyadic romantic relationships (Connolly et al. 2004). Across the teenage years, young people spend increasing amounts of time with other gender peers and romantic partners (Laursen & Williams 1997, Richards et al. 1998). By early adulthood, time with romantic partners increases further at the expense of involvement with friends and crowds (Reis et al. 1993).

The timing of involvement is often attributed to the onset of puberty; however, researchers now have demonstrated that gonadarche (development of the gonads, with increased release of estrogen in females and testosterone in males) is distinct from changes that may be relevant to romantic interest. Adrenarche, or the increased activity of the adrenal glands just prior to puberty, appears to be more strongly predictive of sexual interest and awareness than gonadarche, which occurs later (e.g., Halpern 2003, McClintock & Herdt 1996). Moreover, researchers repeatedly have demonstrated the independent contributions of social expectations, especially age-graded behavior norms, to the initiation of dating in Western countries (e.g., Dornbusch et al. 1981). Cultural norms also affect the activities that are expected and approved within dating relationships (Feldman et al. 1999, Seiffge-Krenke 2006, Silbereisen & Schwarz 1998). For example, Asian American adolescents are less likely to have had a romantic relationship

in the past 18 months than are adolescents in African American, Hispanic, Native American, and European American groups (Carver et al. 2003). Latina early-adolescent girls described being more closely supervised in contexts in which they interacted with males than African American early-adolescent girls report. Both Latina and African American early-adolescent girls kept their early boyfriends a secret from their family members, especially their mothers. They explained that they kept these relationships secret because they feared being forced to end the relationship (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg 2003).

Less is known about the developmental course of the relationships of gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents. Among sexual-minority adolescents, approximately 93% of boys and 85% of girls report having had some same-sex activity (Savin-Williams & Diamond 2000). The number of romantic relationships reported by youths involved in organizations for sexual minorities is comparable to the number for heterosexual youths (Diamond & Lucas 2004). The average age of a first "serious" same-gender relationship is 18 years (Floyd & Stein 2002). Same-gender dating can be uncommon, however, in locations where fewer adolescents are openly identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Diamond et al. 1999). In many instances, same-sex romantic attraction puts adolescents at risk for violence; youths who report same-sex or both-sex romantic attraction are more likely to experience extreme forms of violence than are those who report only other-sex romantic interests (Russell et al. 2001).

An important caveat is that the early romantic experiences of many youths include both same-sex and other-sex partners. The majority of sexual-minority youths report dating members of the other sex (Savin-Williams 1996). Approximately 42% of sexual-minority adolescent girls and 79% of sexual-minority adolescent boys report some sexual activity with a member of the other sex (D'Augelli 1998). Such dating can either provide a cover for a minority sexual identity or help clarify one's identity (Diamond et al. 1999). A significant

Gonadarche:

increased release of estrogen in females and testosterone in males

Adrenarche:

increased activity of the adrenal glands just prior to puberty

Field of availability:
range of persons
acceptable as potential
romantic partners;
commonly determined
by community and
cultural norms

proportion of women also characterize themselves as “mostly heterosexual” (Austin et al. 2007). Same-gender attraction, sexual behavior, and identity are not perfectly correlated with one another (Diamond 2003, Savin-Williams 2006); thus, sexual identity and the gender of the person one is attracted to can be quite fluid over time, especially for women. Not surprisingly, then, estimates of the prevalence of homosexuality can range from 1% to 21% depending upon the definition. Such variability underscores the idea that no simple dichotomy exists between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Partner Characteristics

The characteristics of romantic partners contribute to both the distinguishing features and potential developmental sequelae of an adolescent romantic relationship. Little is known, however, about adolescents’ selection of partners or the extent to which partner characteristics are important to the development of each member of the adolescent couple (Furman & Simon 2008). The small amount of available information is largely descriptive. Like adults, adolescents report that their ideal partners are intelligent, interpersonally skillful, and physically appealing (Regan 2003, Roscoe et al. 1987), but the match between ideal and actual partners has not been studied (Collins 2003). For many adolescents, community and cultural norms determine the field of availability, or standards for who is acceptable as a romantic target. Whether relationships conform to a culturally or socially prescribed field of availability affects both the individual and the relationship in multiple ways (e.g., Coates 1999).

Most is known about the demographic match between the two adolescents in a couple. Among heterosexual adolescents, males tend to choose dating partners close to their own age, whereas females’ dating partners are often older than they are. Dating partners are similar in race, ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics (Carver et al. 2003). Recent findings also show young adolescent partners to be sig-

nificantly alike on certain social and psychological characteristics, e.g., popularity, physical attraction, and depressive symptoms (Simon et al. 2008). This “selective partnering” is also evident in patterns of psychological and physical aggression in young at-risk couples (Capaldi & Crosby 1997).

Emotional dimensions of selective partnering generally have been neglected in research. An exception is reports of partner choice among sexual-minority adolescents. Sexual-minority males typically report that they were first sexually rather than emotionally attracted to another male, whereas sexual-minority females were evenly divided between first having had an emotional or sexual attraction to another female or a male, as was the case with their first same-gender sexual partners (Savin-Williams & Diamond 2000). The emotional and sexual attraction processes associated with the demographic correspondence between heterosexual partners is a promising future research direction.

The influence of partner characteristics has thus far been neglected in research. Girls’ working models of romantic relationships are related to their partners’ behavior, as well as their own (Furman & Simon 2006), but it is not clear if these relations reflect “selective partnering” or socialization in the relationship. In one of the few studies to distinguish socialization and selection effects, partners’ popularity, depressive symptoms, relational aggression, and relational victimization reliably predicted changes over time in adolescents’ status on these same variables, controlling for initial similarity between partners. The magnitude and direction of change varied according to adolescents’ and partners’ functioning prior to the relationship, even when best friend characteristics are controlled (Simon et al. 2008). Further research addressing similar questions in later, as well as early, adolescence is needed to fill this gap in the literature.

Content

Relationship content refers to partners’ shared activities. Adolescents engage in distinct

patterns of interaction that differ from their interactions with parents or peers. Interactions with romantic partners contain more conflict than with friends and less responsiveness than either interactions with best friends or those with mothers. Despite these interactional differences, adolescents nevertheless perceived more support from their romantic partners than from their mothers (Furman & Shomaker 2008). One explanation for these unexpected findings may come from studies showing that adolescents project their perceptions of their own behaviors onto their perceptions of their partner's behaviors (Welsh & Dickson 2005). In these studies, adolescent couples, as well as independent observers of their interactions, also tended to describe the couple relationships as egalitarian. In most of the couples, adolescents perceived themselves and their partners as equally contributing emotional resources, sharing power in interaction, and sharing decision-making responsibility. Perceived inequality in these respects has repeatedly been associated with more psychological symptoms in the members of the couple, especially females (Gallagher et al. 2004). Two forms of relationship content have been the focus of considerable popular, as well as scholarly, attention: sexual behavior and aggression between partners.

Sexual behavior. Romantic relationships are the context in which the majority of adolescents' sexual behavior occurs (Manning et al. 2000). Adolescent relationships have rarely been the focus of investigations of sexual behavior, however (Bouchey & Furman 2003, Crockett et al. 2003, Florsheim 2003). Only in the past decade have researchers, under the influence of developmental theories, begun to examine the development of adolescent sexuality from a normative perspective and to investigate the contexts in which sexual behavior occurs (Diamond & Savin-Williams 2003, Florsheim 2003, Welsh et al. 2000). Such studies have shown, for example, that adolescent females perceive strong norms that sexual behavior should occur within the context of romantic relationships and not outside of it.

Themes of shame and degradation are associated with sexual activity outside of romantic relationships, although these themes are less strong for African American adolescents than for European American youths (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg 2003). These views may explain the association between depressive symptoms and sexual behavior outside of romantic relationships in female adolescents and early adults (Grello et al. 2003, 2006).

Normative models also have stimulated research on sexual behaviors other than intercourse. These studies have revealed that "lighter" sexual behaviors such as kissing, holding hands, and hugging are positively associated with positive parent-child relationships and with romantic relationship satisfaction and commitment (Welsh et al. 2005, Williams et al. 2008). An important agenda for future research is examining the developmental significance of these more affectionate sexual behaviors in the context of adolescents' romantic relationships.

The potential significance of sexual behavior for adolescent development depends more than is commonly recognized on the moderating influences of developmental status, the nature of the relationship, and the implicit meaning of sexual activity for the adolescent. For example, engaging in genitally stimulating or "heavy" sexual behaviors in early adolescence is consistently associated with numerous problems (e.g., depression, violence, substance use, hostile family processes, poor academic participation, and poor romantic relationship quality) (Welsh et al. 2005, Williams et al. 2008). However, engaging in these behaviors, including intercourse, within the context of a romantic relationship in late adolescence has not been linked with greater incidence of problems (Grello et al. 2003, Welsh et al. 2005). The subjective meaning of sexual behaviors within romantic relationships varies in different stages of development (Welsh et al. 2000). As romantic relationships become more intimate and committed during late adolescence, sexual behaviors may represent a physical expression of the partners' intimacy and commitment, whereas sexual behavior in early adolescence is more likely to

signify an effort to avoid losing the relationship (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg 2003) or a difficulty communicating about sexual behavior (Widman et al. 2006).

Dating aggression. Aggression between romantic partners is common in both other-sex and same-sex romantic relationships in adolescence. Although estimates vary widely across sample and assessment methods, 10% to 48% of adolescents report experiencing physical aggression in their dating relationships, and one-quarter to one-half of adolescents report psychological aggression (Halpern et al. 2001, 2004; Jouriles et al. 2005). Moreover, although physical aggression was once believed to be primarily inflicted by males upon females, recent investigations reveal either no gender differences or higher prevalence rates for adolescent females as aggressors or initiators of aggression (Archer 2000; Capaldi et al. 2007; Halpern et al. 2001, 2004). The meaning and developmental implications of adolescent female dating aggression, however, likely differs from the implications of male aggression. Further research is needed to examine this particular hypothesis and to examine female dating aggression in general.

Both physical and relational aggression (attempting to cause harm by damaging one's relationships) increase from early to middle adolescence (Halpern et al. 2001, Pepler et al. 2006). Investigations have linked dating aggression in adolescent romantic relationships to parental and peer influences (Arriaga & Foshee 2004, Capaldi et al. 2001, Kinsfogel & Grych 2004). Adolescent males exposed to greater parental conflict are more likely to perceive aggression as justifiable in romantic relationships and report higher levels of verbal and physical aggression in their romantic relationships. Females' aggressive behavior in romantic relationships, on the other hand, is generally not linked with parental conflict (Kinsfogel & Grych 2004), highlighting the different trajectories associated with male and female aggression. Peers also play a formative role in the development of males' dating aggression. Males' aggression

toward their girlfriends is associated with recent hostile discussions about women with close friends (Capaldi et al. 2001). These accumulating findings have prompted researchers to shift their attention from questions of whether and how much aggression occurs in adolescent romantic relationships to examine the processes that account for differential manifestations of dating aggression and the conditions under which it is more or less likely (e.g., Buzy et al. 2004).

Relationship Quality

Relationship quality refers to the degree to which partners manifest intimacy, affection, and nurturance. Low-quality relationships are marked by irritation, antagonism, and notably high levels of conflict or controlling behavior (Gallagher et al. 2004). High-quality relationships characterized by supportiveness and intimacy are associated with measures of functioning and well being for the individuals involved; similarly, quality romantic relationships in adolescence are associated with increased likelihood of positive relationships and relationship commitment in early adulthood (Seiffge-Krenke & Lang 2002). More negative qualities likewise have been linked to varied negative outcomes (for a review, see Furman & Collins 2008). Intimacy is widely regarded as a likely component of relationship quality. However, little research has examined this construct in the context of adolescent romantic relationships.

Longitudinal findings confirm links between the quality of adolescents' relationships and the quality of family relationships from birth forward (Collins & Van Dulmen 2006, Furman & Collins 2008). Qualities of friendships in middle and late adolescence are associated with concurrent qualities of romantic relationships (Collins & Van Dulmen 2006, Furman et al. 2002). The nature and processes of these developmentally significant relations among relationships is a promising area for further study.

Up to now, research findings have revealed more about the observable characteristics of

adolescents' friendships and romantic relationships than about the meaning of deeper, less-discernible qualities such as intimacy. As interest in adolescent romantic relationships increases and diversifies, attention to these subjective features likely will do so as well.

Little is known about the likelihood or the determinants of either successful or unsuccessful adolescent romantic relationships. In particular, it is unclear how serious or long lasting these relationships ideally should be. Most appear to be relatively brief, lasting between 6–12 months, but variation around this norm is considerable (Connolly & McIsaac 2008). Depending on duration and the content and quality of the relationship, adolescent romantic involvement has been found to be associated with both social competence and risk (Furman et al. 2008). A series of very short-term relationships is associated with greater depressive symptomatology (Joyner & Udry 2000) and increased rates of problem behavior in the partners (Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2001). A particularly persistent finding is that teenage relationships that result in early marriage have generally been associated with high risk for marital dissatisfaction and divorce (Karney & Bradbury 1995). At the same time, recent findings show that adolescent relationships of moderate length (e.g., several weeks to several months) appear to be effective preparation for high-quality romantic relationships in early adulthood (Madsen & Collins 2005). Variability in the timing, duration, and quality clearly are significant determinants of the psychological and social impact of teenage relationships and thus warrant additional emphasis in the next phase of research in the area.

Cognitive and Emotional Processes

Concepts of relationships and perceptions of their social functions change with increasing age. In a longitudinal analysis of relationship narratives (Waldinger et al. 2002), the structure and complexity of narratives increased between middle adolescence and age 25, whereas narra-

tive themes were surprisingly similar across the 8- to 10-year gap between waves of the study. A desire for closeness and distance were a dominant theme in the relationships of participants at both ages. In longitudinal research, adolescents increasingly report that their first recognizable feelings of love occurred at a later age than they had reported at earlier time points. This pattern likely reflects changes in personal definitions of love, perhaps resulting from increasing cognitive and emotional maturity and wider experience in relationships (Montgomery & Sorell 1998, Shulman & Scharf 2000).

Heterosexual adolescents report that association with other-gender peers is the most common source of their positive affect (Wilson-Shockley 1985 as cited in Larson et al. 1999; Larson & Richards 1998). Moreover, having a romantic relationship and the quality of that relationship commonly are associated positively with feelings of self-worth (Connolly & Konarski 1994, Harter 1999). By late adolescence, self-perceived competence in romantic relationships emerges as a reliable component of general competence (Masten et al. 1995). At the same time, adolescents in romantic relationships report experiencing more conflict than other adolescents report (Laursen 1995), and mood swings—a stereotype of adolescent emotional life—are more extreme for those involved in romantic relationships (Larson et al. 1999, Savin-Williams 1996). In a widely cited finding, adolescents who had begun romantic relationships in the past year manifested more symptoms of depression than did adolescents not in romantic relationships (Joyner & Udry 2000). Indeed, the most common trigger of the first episode of a major depressive disorder is a romantic break-up (Monroe et al. 1999). Subsequent studies have identified important moderators of this association (e.g., Ayduk et al. 2001, Davila et al. 2004, Grello et al. 2003, Harper & Welsh 2007). For example, break-ups, rather than involvement in romantic relationships per se, may explain the frequent reports of elevated depressive symptoms.

Individual differences in cognitive and emotional processes also play a key role in romantic

Rejection sensitivity: an individual's tendency to anxiously expect, perceive, and overreact to rejection

relationships. A striking case is the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity, which refers to individuals' tendency to anxiously expect, perceive, and overreact to rejection (Downey et al. 1999). This cognitive and behavioral syndrome is hypothesized to arise from experiences of rejection in parent-child relationships and also in relations with peers and, possibly, romantic partners (Downey et al. 1999). Compared to adolescents with low scores on a standardized measure of rejection sensitivity, those with high scores characteristically expect romantic partners to reject them and, indeed, do experience disproportionately frequent rejection. Furthermore, the high-rejection-sensitive individuals report less satisfaction in their relationships and more depressive symptoms (Ayduk et al. 2001, Downey et al. 1999).

Concluding Comment

Although some adolescents at every age experience beginnings and endings of romantic relationships (Connolly & McIsaac 2008), relative contrasts can be seen in the features of relationships in early, middle, and late adolescence. Involvement in dating increases notably between the ages of 12 and 18, and ending a romantic relationship becomes less likely during the same period (Connolly & McIsaac 2008). Early and later adolescents' criteria for partner selections differ, as does the content of exchanges between partners. Perceptions of partner supportiveness, interdependence, and closeness increase with age (Laursen & Williams 1997, Zimmer-Gembeck 1999). Collins (2003) has suggested that a shift occurs between ages 15 and 17 in the features and implications of romantic relationships. This apparent mid-adolescent shift undoubtedly represents an accumulation of gradual changes that appear abrupt because most studies are cross-sectional comparisons of age groups. As evidence of age-related patterns in key aspects of romantic relationships accumulates, however, pressures are increasing for developmental accounts that explain the find-

ings. The eventual explanation almost certainly will implicate cognitive and emotional maturation, achievements regarding identity and autonomy, increasing diversification of social networks, and contextual changes associated with impending adulthood.

INTERPERSONAL CONTEXTS

Romantic relationships occur in multiple contexts, representing varied levels of analysis, and these contexts may shape and constrain the features of relationships, from the timing and forms of involvement to partner choice and permissible activities (Seiffge-Krenke 2006). Evidence of cultural and subcultural variations is cited above. This section is devoted to the most extensively studied contextual influences on adolescent romantic relationships, each partner's current and past experiences with parents and peers (Collins & Van Dulmen 2006, Connolly & McIsaac 2008).

Peer Affiliations and Friendships

The assumption that the peer social system is the staging ground for romantic relationships during adolescence pervades research on the topic. Having a large number of other-gender friends and being liked by many of one's peers in adolescence is correlated with current and future dating patterns (Connolly et al. 2000, Kuttler & LaGreca 2004). General social competence with peers is associated with romantic relationship activity in early and middle adolescence (Furman et al. 2008). Moreover, for early adolescents, having a boyfriend or girlfriend confers social status and facilitates "fitting in." For example, both Latina and female African American early adolescents described wanting to have a boyfriend in order to demonstrate their popularity among their peers. Boyfriends who were attractive, popular, somewhat older than them, or who brought them gifts were especially desired (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg 2003).

The potential role of friendship in the development of romantic relationships is both

fundamental and multifaceted. Relationships with friends function both as prototypes of interactions compatible with romantic relationships and as testing grounds for experiencing and managing emotions in the context of voluntary close relationships (Connolly et al. 2004). Friends also serve as models and sources of social support for initiating and pursuing romantic relationships and also for weathering periods of difficulty in them, thus potentially contributing to variations in the qualities of later romantic relationships (Connolly & Goldberg 1999). Cognitive representations of friendships and the perceived qualities of interactions within them are associated significantly with interactions in romantic relationships (Furman & Shomaker 2008, Furman et al. 2002). Relatively little is known about the links between sexual minorities' friendships and romantic relationships. Number of friends appears to be unrelated to romantic relationship involvement, although those who have had more romantic relationships report more worries about losing friends (Diamond & Lucas 2004).

Contrary to common stereotypes of cross-purposes between parents and peers, the peer and family domains are often similar, and family and peer influences commonly act in concert with one another with respect to romantic relationships. For example, a stable, harmonious family life reduces the risk of affiliation with deviant peers, and the two jointly reduce the risk of choosing deviant romantic partners (Donnellan et al. 2005, Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2001). Family and peer influences also may moderate each other. Parental support is associated with a reduction in criminality for those without a romantic partner, but the support of a partner is the more important factor for those with a romantic partner (Van Dulmen et al. 2008).

Relationships with Parents

Nurturant-involved parenting in adolescence is predictive of warmth, support, and low hostility toward romantic partners in early adulthood. Moreover, the degree of flexible control,

and respect for privacy experienced in families is related positively to intimacy in late-adolescent romantic relationships, with especially strong links emerging for women. Parent-adolescent conflict resolution is also associated with later conflict resolution with romantic partners (Conger et al. 2000, Cui & Conger 2008, Donnellan et al. 2005, Feldman et al. 1998). In contrast, unskilled parenting and aversive family communications are associated with later aggression toward romantic partners, and the degree of negative emotionality in parent-adolescent dyads is correlated with negative emotionality and poor quality interactions with romantic partners in early adulthood (Conger et al. 2000, K. Kim et al. 2001). This association appears to be mediated by negative affect and ineffective monitoring and discipline in parent-adolescent relationships (Conger et al. 2000).

Interactions with parents in earlier periods of development also have been implicated in the stability and quality of early-adult romantic relationships (Simpson et al. 2007). Parent-child relationships appear to account for more variance in romantic-relationship behavior than either sibling relationships or the models provided by parents' own marriages. Contrary to common speculation, the majority of findings from studies that include assessment of sibling relationships have revealed no significant associations with the features of interactions with romantic partners (Conger et al. 2000). Similarly, parental conflict and marital disharmony appear to affect the romantic relationships of offspring indirectly, through the deleterious effects of marital stressors on nurturant, involved parenting (Conger et al. 2000, Cui & Conger 2008). One avenue through which marital stress and parental separation affect adolescents' romantic lives is through increased risk for early romantic involvement, which in turn is associated with poor individual adjustment (Furman & Collins 2008).

Not surprisingly, the characteristics of relationships with parents and with peers become more extensively interrelated with features of

Nurturant-involved parenting: parent behavior marked by warmth, active interest in and acceptance of the adolescent, and encouragement of positive behaviors

romantic relationships during late adolescence and early adulthood (Meeus et al. 2007). Perhaps the growing importance of romantic relationships calls attention to the commonalities across types of relationships. It is equally likely, however, that the correlations among early adults' relationships reflect their common associations with parents and with peers prior to adolescence (Collins & Van Dulmen 2006, Waters & Cummings 2000). The processes that account for these developmentally significant relations among differing relationships are a promising area for further study.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

The developmental significance of romantic relationships depends on the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional processes occurring within the relationship, on the individual characteristics of the adolescents (age, attachment styles, rejection sensitivity, self-silencing, gender), and on the contexts in which they occur (Furman & Collins 2008, Furman & Shaffer 2003). Accumulating findings document statistically reliable associations between adolescents' romantic experiences and multiple aspects of individual development: forming a personal identity, adjusting to changes in familial relationships, furthering harmonious relations with peers, succeeding (or not) in school, looking ahead to future careers, and developing sexuality (regardless of the extent of sexual activity) (Furman & Collins 2008, Furman & Shaffer 2003). The nature and quality of romantic experiences are correlated with self-esteem, self-confidence, and social competence (Pearce et al. 2002; Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2001, 2004). Conversely, anxiety over preserving a relationship often results in self-silencing, in which individuals suppress their thoughts and opinions out of fear of losing their intimate partner and relationship. Self-silencing in turn is associated with poorer communication between partners, higher levels of depressive symptoms, and greater rejection sensitivity

(Harper et al. 2006, Harper & Welsh 2007). Poor-quality romantic relationships are further associated with alcohol and drug use, poor academic performance, externalizing and internalizing symptoms, poor emotional health, and low job competence (Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2001, 2004).

Contrary to widespread skepticism, romantic experiences also appear to be positively related to qualities of romantic relationships in later life. Longitudinal research in Germany showed that quality of romantic relationships in middle adolescence was significantly and positively related to commitment in other relationships in early adulthood (Seiffge-Krenke & Lang 2002). Apparently, romantic relationships can be associated with healthy, normative development in some adolescents and can be symptomatic of pathology in others (Welsh et al. 2003). Better understanding is needed of the factors that differentiate adolescents whose romantic relationships are evidence of normal, developmental processes and those whose romantic relationships are symptomatic of or may cause psychological turmoil (Florsheim 2003).

These cross-sectional correlations plausibly could reflect either the effects of romantic experience on adjustment or the converse. For example, "off-time" dating or romantic experience beginning in late childhood and early adolescence is associated with subsequent misconduct and poor academic performance, which in turn are risk factors for further negative romantic relationships (Furman et al. 2008, Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2001). Similarly, romantic involvement has repeatedly been linked to depressive symptoms, especially for adolescents engaging in casual sex or with a history of unresponsive familial relationships, and these conditions further increase the risk of negative romantic experiences (e.g., Ayduk et al. 2001, Davila et al. 2004, Grello et al. 2003, Harper & Welsh 2007). Inferences of causality aside, current findings provide an impetus for testing numerous hypotheses about the nature and extent of links between features of romantic relationships and individual functioning.

ISSUES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Two recurring themes in this review are that romantic relationships during adolescence are more multifaceted than is often assumed and that their significance for development is multidimensional rather than unidimensional. It is not surprising, therefore, that researchers have had to move quickly to advance beyond the largely descriptive correlational work of the late-twentieth century to the more nuanced research designs that now typify research in the area. Contemporary research on adolescent romantic relationships potentially broadens understanding of the significance of close relationships in the development of individual well being and social competence.

Many questions remain. Research on the interpersonal processes associated with adolescent romantic relationships is still at an early stage. For example, partner characteristics play a still-unspecified role in the significance of adolescent romantic relationships. Adolescents' reports of the quality of their relationships with different partners are moderately consistent (Connolly et al. 2000), but it is unclear how much carryover occurs from one adolescent romantic relationship to the next or how much having a new partner may lead to a different experience. Among the topics that could profitably be considered are the processes associated with continuity and discontinuity of aggression across diverse relationships, including between adolescent partners (Capaldi et al. 2003). In addition, although research findings consistently document the importance of peer relationship quality to romantic relationships, relatively little is known about the similarities and differences in the characteristics of same- and cross-gender friendships and heterosexual romantic relationships (Hand

& Furman 2008). Even less is known about the functional relations between friendships and romantic relationships in sexual-minority adolescents. In general, researchers must integrate behavioral and neurobiological processes into research on adolescent romantic relationships (Bartels & Zeki 2004, Diamond & Lucas 2004).

More extensive and systematic research is needed on the processes and effects of contextual influences on romantic relationships during adolescence, as well, to supplement the existing fragmentary evidence of influences from cultural and community factors. Particularly needed are cross-ethnic and cross-national comparisons regarding the incidence of such relationships, as well as their correlates and the associated processes. Such comparisons, for example, should examine the implications of timing and interpersonal networks on romantic experiences generally and romantic relationships in particular. Similarly, comparative studies of the content of adolescent romantic relationships could be suggestive of explanatory mechanisms for variations across contexts. Collaborations among international teams of researchers could provide especially rich and valuable information (Connolly & McIsaac 2008, Seiffge-Krenke 2006).

The short history of concerted research activity in this area has yielded path-breaking findings and a flexible, broadly applicable conceptual framework and expanded array of research methods and measurement protocols. In the next phase of research, those resources should be used to assemble evidence that more fully represents the range of romantic experiences common to the age period. Addressing these issues will provide us a more complete picture of romantic experiences and their significance for human development.

SUMMARY POINTS

1. Having a mutual romantic interest in or actively dating someone is common in adolescence and of longer duration than is usually assumed. Participation increases steadily throughout adolescence.

2. Since 1999, research on adolescent romantic relationships has shifted from a descriptive focus to an interest in the content and qualities of these relationships and their correlates and potential sequelae for individuals.
3. Interpersonal theories are most evident in previous research. Perspectives from biosocial and ecological theorists have played a role as well. Methodological challenges include establishing workable operational definitions, obtaining representative samples, capturing relationships that are often unstable or of short duration, and applying statistical methods appropriate for nonindependent data sources.
4. The significance to individuals of participating in a romantic relationship during adolescence appears to depend on the timing and duration of the relationship, characteristics of (the) partner(s), content of interactions between partners, quality of interactions, and cognitive and emotional processes associated with the relationship(s).
5. Between ages 15 and 17, notable changes commonly occur in whether one experiences a romantic relationship, the likely duration of the relationship, implicit criteria for selecting a partner, the content of exchanges between partners, and the degree to which of the affected individuals attend to perceptions of closeness, supportiveness, and interdependence between partners.

FUTURE ISSUES

1. Correlations between involvement in adolescent romantic relationships and adolescents' psychosocial maturation, social acceptance, and skills for engaging in relationships have been documented repeatedly, but explanations for these associations are largely speculative. The role of age-graded community and societal norms, in relation to biological maturation, are especially poorly understood. Large-sample longitudinal studies, designed to address developmental change processes, are needed.
2. Families and peers both appear to play a significant role in most if not all constituent processes of adolescent romance. However, the effects vary across features of relationships and between families and peers, depending on the features(s) of interest. Some effects are additive; and some are compensatory. Little is known about how these influences operate, separately and jointly, in romantic relationship processes.
3. Although adolescents report moderately consistent relationship quality with different partners, it is unclear how much carryover occurs from one adolescent romantic relationship to the next.
4. Little reliable evidence is available regarding common assumptions of consistency in aggression across adolescent romantic relationships and between romantic and nonromantic partners.
5. The nature and extent of similarities and differences between the romantic relationships of sexual-minority adolescents and those of heterosexual adolescents have generally been neglected, as have comparisons of cross-ethnic and cross-national samples.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any biases that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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