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## Patterns of interaction in adolescent romantic relationships: Distinct features and links to other close relationships

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### Abstract

This study examined the similarities and differences between adolescents' interactions with romantic partners and those with friends and mothers. Thirty-two adolescents were observed interacting with a romantic partner, a close friend, and their mother. Adolescents and romantic partners engaged in more conflict than adolescents and friends. Adolescents' affective responsiveness was less positive with romantic partners than with their friends. Additionally, the dyadic positivity was lower in romantic relationships than in friendships. More off-task behavior occurred in romantic relationships than in mother–adolescent relationships. Romantic partners were also less skillful communicators and had lower levels of affective responsiveness than mothers. Adolescents perceived more support and fewer negative interactions in romantic relationships than in relationships with mothers. Consistent with expectations, adolescents' interactions with romantic partners were associated with those with friends and mothers. Thus, romantic relationships are characterized by distinct patterns of interaction, yet also are associated with other close relationships.

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## Introduction

One of the most striking developments in adolescence is the emergence of romantic relationships. By 15–16 years of age, the vast majority of adolescents have had some experiences with dating (Furman, Sadbury, & Ho, 2007). Although these relationships are often short-lived, contemporary theoretical perspectives on adolescent development recognize romantic relationships as central in adolescents' social worlds (see Furman, Brown, & Feiring, 1999). Tenth graders report interacting more frequently with romantic partners than with mothers or friends (Laursen & Williams, 1997). Moreover, other-sex peers occupy much of adolescents' attention even when they are not interacting with them. Romantic relationships are a frequent topic of conversation among most adolescents and their peers (Eder, 1993). High school students also spend between 5 and 8 h per week thinking about actual or potential romantic partners (Richards, Crowe, Larson, & Swarr, 1998).

In the last decade, investigators have begun to study romantic relationships more extensively (see Collins & Steinberg, 2006). Some investigators have documented similarities and differences between adolescents' *perceptions* of romantic relationships and other close relationships (e.g. Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1992). However, we know relatively little about how *patterns of interaction* in romantic relationships are similar or different from interactions with parents and peers. Similarly, adolescents' romantic relationships are commonly hypothesized to be influenced by relationships with parents and peers (e.g. Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1994), but as yet research has not examined whether such links exist in actual patterns of interaction. Thus, the first purpose of the present study was to examine the similarities and differences between adolescents' interactions with romantic partners and those with friends and mothers. The second purpose was to examine adolescents' perceptions of their relationships to determine whether differences in the patterns of interactions with romantic partners, friends and mothers are similar to differences in the perceptions of these relationships. Finally, the third purpose of the study was to examine the associations between interactions and perceptions of romantic relationships and those of friendships and mother–adolescent relationships.

### *Similarities and differences among adolescents' relationships*

Romantic relationships and relationships with parents and friends differ in several important respects. A defining feature of relationships with peers, which includes both romantic partners and friends, is their egalitarian nature (Hartup, 1989). Each person has relatively equal status and power. In contrast, adolescents' relationships with parents are asymmetrical, with parents having more power and authority. Additionally, unlike the obligatory nature of relationships with parents, romantic relationships and friendships are voluntary and can be terminated by either person. As a consequence of these characteristics, adolescents' romantic relationships and friendships are expected to entail more negotiation and give-and-take than relationships with parents. In contrast, parents may be more likely to be authoritative or perhaps coercive.

In a related vein, parents are responsible for monitoring adolescents' behavior and disciplining them when needed. Relationships with parents can be conceptualized as *homeostatic systems*, with a primary concern for maintaining balance (Larson, 1983). When an adolescent deviates from rules or expectations, she or he receives negative feedback with the goal of bringing the behavior

back in line with expectations. In contrast, interactions with romantic partners and friends do not have such societal expectations. Instead, affiliation, companionship, and recreation are primary functions of friendships and romantic relationships (Furman & Wehner, 1994). Peers are expected to have a good time. Accordingly, friendships and romantic relationships appear to function as *positive feedback systems* (Larson, 1983). In such systems, a person's behavior is typically amplified or elaborated upon, moving the interchange further along in a particular direction. For instance, humorous comments may cycle back and forth. Such feedback provides optimal conditions for enjoyment, but can also lead to a loss of control. For example, humorous exchanges can become increasingly loud and rowdy. Consistent with this conceptual framework, adolescents report more positive affect when with peers than when with family members (Larson & Richards, 1991). When with their peers, adolescents report feeling more open and free than when with family; additionally, the feedback communicated by peers is more positive and the talk less serious (Larson, 1983). Affective experiences in romantic relationships have not been directly examined, but adolescents perceive other-gender peers as the most common source of both positive and negative affect (Wilson-Shockley, 1985 as cited in Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999). Socializing on weekend nights with several other-gender peers or a romantic partner is particularly associated with positive affect (Larson & Richards, 1998).

Less has been said about the theoretical differences between romantic relationships and friendships. Davis and Todd (1982) proposed that romantic relationships primarily differ from friendships in terms of their passionate aspects, including fascination with the other, sexual desire, and exclusiveness of the relationship. These characteristics introduce unique issues for adolescents to negotiate and may explain the more heightened emotionality of other-sex vs. same-sex interactions (Wilson-Shockley, 1985 as cited in Larson et al., 1999). Giordano, Manning, and Longmore (2006) also proposed that emotionality would be heightened, as romantic relationships represent a new, distinct interpersonal arena that is much less comfortable and settled than that of friendships. Another differentiation between romantic relationships and friendships is that many romantic relationships develop into attachment relationships but only a small minority of friendships is believed to ever become full-blown attachment relationships (Ainsworth, 1989). Similarly, over the course of the development of an enduring romantic relationship, individuals become more invested in the relationship and the relationship begins to resemble other closed-field or obligatory relationships, such as those with parents (Laursen & Jensen-Campbell, 1999). However, these descriptions of differences in attachment and obligation are in reference to committed late adolescent and adult romantic relationships and may not be applicable to romantic relationships in middle adolescence (Furman & Wehner, 1994). On the other hand, most adolescent, as well as adult, romantic relationships are characterized by exclusivity, which distinguishes them from friendships (Giordano, Manning et al., 2006).

Although romantic relationships may have distinct features from parent–adolescent relationships and friendships, all of these close relationships are typically characterized by some degree of support and conflict. Several investigators have examined differences in perceptions of these key relationship qualities. High school students report that their same-sex friend is the most supportive person in their social network; mothers and romantic partners are rated as next most supportive; fathers, siblings, grandparents, and teachers are seen as less frequently supportive (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Similarly, friendships are perceived to be more intimate than romantic relationships (Werebe, 1987). In terms of conflict, adolescents perceive it to be more

common in relationships with parents than with romantic partners or friends (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Laursen, 1995; Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1992). Typical tactics for resolving conflict also appear to differ between parent–adolescent and peer relationships. Coercive power techniques are reported to occur more commonly in adolescents' conflicts with parents, whereas mitigation or disengagement occurs more commonly with friends (Adams & Laursen, 2001).

Collectively, these findings suggest that romantic relationships have some similarities with other close relationships, but they have distinct features, even in terms of common dimensions, such as support, conflict, and affective expression. The preceding studies, however, used questionnaires, interviews, or experience sampling reports, and thus all relied on the participants' reports of their experiences. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have compared middle adolescents' interactions with romantic partners and adolescents' interactions with parents or friends. Observational methodology has several important advantages over survey methods. Primarily, observations utilize objective measurements of observed behavior rather than self-perceptions of the behaviors of interest. They also provide an outsider's (vs. insider's) perspective on the relationship (see Furman, Jones, Buhrmester, & Adler, 1988; Olson, 1977).

### *Patterns of association*

Although adolescents' interactions with romantic partners appear to have distinctive features from other close relationships, a number of developmental theories anticipate similarities in adolescents' behavior in different close relationships. Such associations have been hypothesized to occur through a variety of mechanisms, including the carryover of skills acquisition, imitation, emotion regulation, behavioral contagion, and mental representations of relationships (see Elicker, Englund, & Sroufe, 1992). Consistent with these ideas, there is some evidence for linkages among adolescents' behavior with parents, friends, and romantic partners. Ratings of perceived social support and negative interactions in adolescents' relationships with romantic partners, friends, and parents are moderately related (Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Furman, 1999; Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchev, 2002). However, the question remains as to whether adolescents' observed interactions with romantic partners are associated with their parallel interactions with mothers and friends. Moreover, Giordano, Manning et al. (2006) have suggested that relatively little carryover may occur because of the differences in the nature of the relationships.

### *Current study*

The major purpose of the current study was to examine how interactions in romantic relationships are similar or different from interactions in friendships and mother–adolescent relationships. We examined four dimensions of interactions designed to assess key qualities of close relationship interactions: (a) affective responsiveness, (b) conflict, (c) communication skills, and (d) off-task behavior. Prior work has primarily compared the focal adolescent's behavior toward different partners, but we also compared the different partners' behavior toward the focal adolescent as their behavior may differ as well. Additionally, we examined the overall positivity of each dyad's interaction. Hypotheses and analyses focused on the differences between romantic relationships and the other two types of relationships; comparisons between friendship and mother–adolescent relationships are reported elsewhere with the full sample, including the large

number of participants who did not have a current romantic relationship (see Furman & Shomaker, 2007).<sup>1</sup>

Consistent with the literature review, we expected to find that patterns of interactions in romantic relationships would have distinct features and differ from friendships and mother–adolescent relationships on several of the observed dimensions. *We hypothesized that affective responsiveness in romantic relationship interactions would be more positive than that in mother–adolescent interactions.* Consistent with prior research and theory on other peer relationships, romantic relationships were expected to operate as positive feedback systems, characterized by high levels of positive affect and responsiveness to the other (Larson, 1983). Affiliative processes are also central in adolescent romantic relationships, providing opportunities for mutually positive interactions (Furman, 1999).

*Conversely, we expected that there would be greater levels of off-task behavior in romantic relationship interactions than in mother–adolescent interactions.* As a positive feedback system, romantic relationships also create opportunities for positive affect getting out of control and discussions becoming tangential or off topic. We particularly anticipated that mothers would be less off task than romantic partners, both because they are more mature and because of their responsibilities to socialize their offspring.

*We also hypothesized that mothers would display better communication skills than romantic partners.* We anticipated that mothers would have more mature and effective communication skills and thus, be able to better scaffold the interchange than a romantic partner. No prediction was made with regard to the adolescents' communication skills in interactions with mothers and romantic partners. On the one hand, mothers' skillfulness could foster skillful communication by adolescents; on the other hand, adolescents may feel greater motivation to communicate more positively and skillfully with a romantic partner, because these relationships are voluntary in nature.

*We hypothesized that there would be lower levels of conflict in romantic relationship interactions than in mother–adolescent interactions.* This prediction is consistent with past questionnaire data which finds that adolescents perceive conflict to be both more common and more coercive with parents than romantic partners (Adams & Laursen, 2001; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Laursen, 1998). In light of the above hypothesized differences, we also expected that the general positivity of the dyad would be greater in romantic relationship interactions compared to mother–adolescent interactions.

Differences were also expected between friendships and romantic relationships. *Specifically, we predicted that levels of affective responsiveness would be not as positive in romantic relationships interactions as in friendships.* Friendships are typically longer, more supportive, and more intimate than romantic relationships in middle adolescence (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Werebe, 1987), providing adolescents and their friends with more opportunities to learn responsiveness and sensitivity to each other.

*By the same reasoning, we predicted that levels of communication skills would be lower in romantic relationship interactions than in friendship interactions.* Additionally, adolescent heterosexual

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<sup>1</sup>Those who were observed or not observed with a romantic partner did not differ on the observational dimensions we examined in friendships and mother–adolescent relationships. Thus, the observational data regarding these two relationships do not appear to be limited to those with romantic relationships.

romantic relationships are typically one of the first contexts in which adolescents learn to establish intimacy and connectedness with the other sex. Boys and girls enter adolescence with different interactional styles, such that girls are more likely to use enabling styles that facilitate interactions, whereas boys tend to be more directive (Maccoby, 1990). Such differences in styles may clash and make communication more challenging and awkward in heterosexual romantic relationships (Giordano, Longmore & Manning, 2006).

*By a similar rationale, we expected that conflict would be greater in romantic interactions than in friend interactions.* As noted previously, adolescents are relatively inexperienced with interacting with the other sex and face new, unique challenges that require negotiating in romantic relationships (e.g., exclusiveness, fascination, sexual desire). *In light of the above hypothesized differences, we anticipated that the dyadic positivity in romantic relationship interactions would not be as great as in friendship interactions.*

The second purpose of the study was to examine the similarities and differences in adolescents' perceptions of their relationships. Based on prior work (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Werebe, 1987), *we hypothesized that friends would be perceived to be more supportive than romantic partners. We also hypothesized that adolescents would perceive fewer negative interactions in their relationships with romantic partners than mothers (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Laursen, 1995; Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1992).*

The third purpose of the study was to examine the associations among interactions with romantic partners and those with friends and mothers. In general, *we anticipated that corresponding dimensions of adolescents' behavior in the different interactions would be moderately related.* These links have been proposed theoretically, and existing empirical work is consistent with such expectations.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 32 adolescents (23 girls, 9 boys), their close friends, romantic partners, and mothers. The participants were drawn from a total sample of 200 adolescents who were participating in a longitudinal study investigating the role of close relationships in adolescent psychosocial development and adjustment. We limited this sample to adolescents who were observed interacting with all three people (mother, friend, and romantic partner). Most of the other participants were excluded because they did not have a current romantic relationship or did not have one of sufficient duration to meet the criteria for being observed (3 months or longer).

The adolescents in the resulting sample were in the 10th grade and ranged from 14 to 16 years of age ( $M = 15$  yr, 4.5 mo,  $S.D. = .55$ ). They were recruited from a diverse range of neighborhoods and schools in a large metropolitan area in the western United States. Participants, their friends, and their mothers represented a socio-economically diverse population. For instance, mother's education level ranged from less than high school to a doctorate degree. Sixty-three percent of mothers had at least some undergraduate college. Approximately 69% of participants were living in two-parent families. The remaining 31% were residing with one parental figure. The

self-identified racial/ethnic background of the participants was: 66% Caucasian, 9% African American, 6% Asian American, 9% Hispanic, 3% Native American and 6% Biracial.

Adolescents were asked if they had a romantic relationship of 3 months or longer, and the partner was contacted if they did. If adolescents did not have a current relationship or did not have one of sufficient duration, they were re-contacted 4 and 8 months later to see if they did. All relationships were heterosexual. Romantic partners ranged in age from 15 to 19 years ( $M = 16$  yr, 2.5 mo,  $S.D. = 1.13$  mo). Their racial/ethnic identity was similar to the focal adolescents. Relationship length averaged 7.13 months ( $S.D. = 3.89$  mo).

Each adolescent was asked to name a close friend. Close friends were 14–19 years of age ( $M = 15$  yr, 8 mo,  $S.D. = .95$ ). The mean duration of friendships was 4 years, 11 months ( $S.D. = 44.25$  mo). The majority of adolescents and their peers were same-sex friends ( $n = 26$ ); a minority were other-sex friends ( $n = 4$ ).<sup>2</sup> Friends' racial/ethnic identity and socio-economic background were similar to the focal adolescents. Participants, mothers, friends, and partners were financially compensated for participating.

### *Procedure and Measures*

Adolescents participated in a series of laboratory sessions in which they were interviewed, completed questionnaires, and participated in videotaped interactions. Sessions were counter-balanced and separated by at least a week.

*Dyadic interactions.* Adolescents and their partner, friend, or mother were videotaped participating in a series of six 5-min interactions, designed to assess the attachment, caregiving, and affiliative behavioral systems. As a warm-up task, the pair planned a celebration. In the next two tasks, each person discussed a problem he or she was having outside of their relationship. In the fourth task, the pair discussed a personal goal that the adolescent was working toward. Next, the two discussed a problem inside their relationship, which both had selected as a significant conflict. Finally, as a wrap-up task, the dyad discussed past good times in their relationship. In the present study, the warm-up and wrap-up segments were not coded. To minimize halo effects, each segment was coded at a different time.

The *Interactional Dimensions Coding System* (IDCS; Julien, Markman, & Lindahl, 1989) was used to assess qualities of adolescents' interactions during each task. Coders rated the adolescent and the other person separately. The IDCS was originally designed to assess adult couples' interactions during a problem discussion and was slightly modified to make the scales more applicable to an adolescent population. We also added a scale, task avoidance, to assess avoidance of the assigned discussion topic or task. Coders rated each person's affect and behavior on 10 scales on a five-point Likert scale with half-point intervals (1 = extremely uncharacteristic to 5 = extremely characteristic). Two scales tapped affect (positive affect, negative affect); four scales assessed content (problem solving, denial, dominance, task avoidance); and four scales tapped both affect and content (support-validation, conflict, withdrawal, communication skills).

<sup>2</sup>No differences were found in the mean levels of interaction in same- and other-sex close friendships. As the sample size could have masked such differences, we conducted a similar analysis with the full sample of participants who were observed with a close friend ( $N = 160$  same-sex dyads, and  $N = 24$  other-sex dyads). None of the scores differed on factors.

Additionally, five scales assessed the dyads' characteristics: (a) positive escalation, (b) negative escalation, (c) mutuality, (d) relationship quality, and (e) relationship satisfaction. Ratings of interactions were averaged across the four tasks.

On the basis of principal axis factor analyses with oblique rotation, we derived four composites each for the focal adolescent and partner from the 10 scales: (1) off task, containing task avoidance and problem solving (negative loading), (2) conflict, containing denial, dominance, and conflict, (3) communication skills, consisting of withdrawal (negative loading) and communication skills, (4) affective responsiveness, consisting of positive affect, negative affect (negative loading), and support-validation. Additionally, we derived a dyadic positivity composite from the five dyadic scales of positive escalation, negative escalation (negative loading), mutuality, relationship quality, and relationship satisfaction. Composites were calculated by averaging across scales.

Interactions were rated by coders naïve to other information about the participants. Inter-rater agreement was checked on 11% of all tasks coded in the overall sample. Intra-class correlation coefficients for composites ranged from .65 to .80.

*Network of Relationships Inventory: Behavioral Systems Version.* Participants completed a 34-item questionnaire that assessed 12 provisions of close relationships (Furman, 2000). As part of the measure, participants described relationships with the three individuals whom they interacted with in the observations. Five components of social support related to attachment, caregiving, and affiliation were assessed: (a) participant seeks safe haven, (b) participant provides safe haven, (c) participant seeks secure base, (d) participant provides secure base, and (e) companionship. Three components of negative interactions were assessed: (a) conflict, (b) antagonism, and (c) criticism. Each component was measured by three items rated on a five-point scale ranging from *little or none* (1) to *the most* (5). Consistent with prior research (Furman, 1996), principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation revealed that the eight scales for each relationship loaded on two factors—support and negative interactions. Accordingly, social support and negative interaction factors were derived for each relationship by averaging the scales loading on the factor ( $M$  alpha = .93). Supplementary analyses revealed that these social support composites were highly related ( $r > .95$ ) to the support composites of the original Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), which included a different, but overlapping, set of social provisions.

## Results

### *Differences in interactions*

We examined the effects of relationship type (romantic, friend, mother–adolescent) and person (focal adolescent vs. other person) in a series of two-way repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA). The dependent variables were the four sets of focal adolescent and other persons' dimensional scores (affective responsiveness, off-task behavior, communication skills, and conflict). Dyadic positivity was examined in a one-way repeated measures ANOVA with relationship type as the within-subject factor. Scores were pooled across gender, as preliminary analyses revealed no significant main effects or interactions with gender.



As the focus of the current report is on the distinct features of romantic relationships, significant main effects of relationship type were followed up with two planned comparisons—(a) romantic relationship vs. friendship and (b) romantic relationship vs. mother–adolescent relationship. Significant interaction effects of relationship type by person were followed up with: (a) simple main effects analyses of the adolescents' scores in the three relationships; significant effects were followed up with two planned comparisons (adolescent with romantic partner vs. adolescent with friend and adolescent with romantic partner vs. adolescent with mother) and (b) simple main effects analyses of the three other people's scores; significant main effects were followed up with two planned comparisons (romantic partner vs. friend and romantic partner vs. mother). Significant interaction effects of relationship type by person were also followed up with paired-sample *t*-test comparisons of the focal adolescent's score and the other person's score in each of the three relationships (e.g. adolescent with romantic partner vs. romantic partner).

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the different dimensional scores. Although differences among all relationship types (i.e., romantic, friend, mother–adolescent) are reported in the table, we only discuss the focal comparisons between romantic relationships and other relationships in the current report. Friendship and mother–adolescent comparisons including the larger sample are reported elsewhere (see Furman & Shomaker, 2007).

The analysis of the affective responsiveness dimension scores revealed a main effect of person, Wilks' lambda = .77,  $p = .005$ , which was qualified by an interaction between person and relationship type, Wilks' lambda = .36,  $p < .001$ . Follow-up analyses indicated a main effect for the adolescents' scores, Wilks' lambda = .69,  $p = .004$ . Adolescents' affective responsiveness was more positive with friends than with romantic partners. In turn, adolescents' affective responsiveness with romantic partners was more positive than their affective responsiveness with mothers. Follow-up analyses also revealed a main effect for the other person's scores, Wilks' lambda = .76,  $p = .02$ . Romantic partners' affective responsiveness was less positive than mothers' affective responsiveness, but did not differ from friends' affective responsiveness.

Table 1

Means and standard deviations of observational dimensions for adolescent and other person

	Adolescent with romantic partner	Adolescent with friend	Adolescent with mother	Romantic partner	Friend	Mother
Affective responsiveness	3.20 (.45) b	3.44 (.48) a	2.93 (.67) c	3.20 (.52) b	3.31 (.49) b	3.56 (.49) a
Off-task behavior	2.38 (.53) a	2.45 (.58) a	2.20 (.30) b	2.52 (.51) a	2.46 (.48) a	1.93 (.26) b
Communication skills	3.62 (.55) b	3.76 (.52) b	3.49 (.62) b	3.48 (.58) b	3.62 (.51) b	4.08 (.40) a
Conflict	1.55 (.35) a	1.32 (.22) b	1.64 (.50) a	1.50 (.38) a	1.25 (.21) b	1.45 (.33) a
Dyadic positivity	2.96 (.49) a	3.33 (.42) b	3.06 (.66) a			

Note:  $N = 32$ . The numbers in the final row (dyadic positivity) are the means and standard deviations for the dyads—not the adolescent herself. Follow-up analyses compared the adolescents' scores with the three partners; significant differences are indicated by different letters. Similarly, follow-up analyses compared the scores of the three partners; significant differences are indicated by different letters.

Finally, paired-sample *t*-test comparisons revealed that adolescents' affective responsiveness with their mothers was less positive than their mothers' affective responsiveness. Adolescents' and romantic partners' affective responsiveness in their interactions did not differ, nor did the adolescents' and their friends' affective responsiveness differ in their interactions with each other.

The analysis of off-task behavior revealed a significant main effect of relationship type, Wilks' lambda = .49,  $p < .001$ , and a significant interaction between relationship type and person, Wilks' lambda = .44,  $p < .001$ . Simple main effects for both the adolescent and the other person's scores were found in follow-up analyses, Wilks' lambdas = .78 and .37,  $ps < .02$ , respectively. As predicted, adolescents were significantly more off-task with romantic partners than with mothers; romantic partners were significantly more off-task than mothers. Paired-sample *t*-tests indicated that adolescents displayed more off-task behavior during their interactions with mothers than their mothers did. Adolescents' off-task behavior with romantic partners and friends did not differ, nor did the off-task behavior of their romantic partners and friends differ.

The analysis of communication skills revealed a main effect of relationship type, Wilks' lambda = .81,  $p = .05$ , which was qualified by a significant interaction between relationship type and person, Wilks' lambda = .44,  $p < .001$ . In this case, no differences were found in adolescents' communication skills with different partners, but there was a significant effect for the other person's scores, Wilks' lambda = .51,  $p < .001$ . As predicted, mothers' communication skills were greater than romantic partners'. Also, paired-sample *t*-tests indicated that mothers' communication skills were greater than their adolescents' communication skills with them. Friends and romantic partners' communication skills did not differ from each other, nor did they differ from the focal adolescents' communications skills with them.

The analysis of conflict revealed a main effect of relationship type, Wilks' lambda = .61,  $p = .006$ . There was no significant interaction. As predicted, comparisons indicated that more conflict occurred in romantic relationships than in friendships. Contrary to expectations, conflict in romantic relationships and mother–adolescent relationships did not significantly differ. Additionally, a main effect of person was found, Wilks' lambda = .68,  $p = .001$ . The focal adolescents overall engaged in more conflict than those with whom they were interacting.

The analysis of dyadic positivity revealed a significant main effect of relationship type, Wilks' lambda = .70,  $p = .005$ . As predicted, follow-up analyses indicated that there was less dyadic positivity in romantic relationships than friendships. Contrary to expectations, the dyadic positivity of romantic relationships and mother–adolescent relationships did not differ significantly.

### *Differences in perceptions of relationships*

Differences in adolescents' perceptions of support and negative interactions in their three relationships were examined in two one-way repeated measures ANOVA. Significant effects were followed up with two planned comparisons—(a) romantic relationship vs. friendship and (b) romantic relationship vs. mother–adolescent relationship. Scores were pooled across gender, as preliminary analyses revealed no significant main effects or interactions with gender. [Table 2](#) presents the means and standard deviations of adolescents' perceptions of support and negative interaction in the different relationships.

The analysis of perceived support revealed a main effect of relationship type, Wilks' lambda = .51,  $p < .001$ . Adolescents perceived more support in their romantic relationships than

Table 2  
Means and standard deviations of perceptions of relationships with others

	Romantic partner	Friend	Mother
Support	3.96 (.69) a	3.33 (.98) b	3.09 (1.10) b
Negative interaction	1.59 (.59) b	1.70 (.77) b	2.31 (1.03) a

Note:  $N = 26$ . Significant differences are indicated by different letters.

in their relationships with either their friends or mothers. The analysis of perceived negative interactions also revealed a main effect of relationship type, Wilks' lambda = .66,  $p = .007$ . Adolescents reported fewer negative interactions in their romantic relationships than in their relationships with mothers. No difference was found between perceptions of negative interactions in romantic relationships and friendships.

These findings regarding perceptions of negative interactions differ from the findings regarding observed conflict. In the observations, romantic relationships and mother–adolescent relationships did not differ in conflict, but more conflict occurred in romantic relationships than in friendships. The observational and questionnaire conflict factors, however, were not identical in content. Whereas the observational factor included dominance and denial as well as conflict, the questionnaire factor included annoyance and criticism as well as conflict. We conducted supplementary analyses to explore the possibility that these different findings were due to differences in the composition of the observational and questionnaire conflict measures. Consistent with results at the factorial level of negative interactions, we found a significant effect of relationship type on NRI conflict scale scores, Wilks' lambda = .63,  $p = .002$ ; contrast analyses revealed that conflict was perceived to be greater in mother–adolescent relationships than romantic relationships and friendships which did not differ ( $M$ s = 2.42, 1.51, and 1.65, respectively). Similarly, supplementary analyses of just the observational conflict scale score revealed similar findings as those obtained with the observational conflict factor. A significant effect of relationship type was found, Wilks' lambda = .69,  $p < .001$ . Contrast analyses revealed that romantic relationships had higher rates of conflict than friendships ( $M = 1.56$  vs. 1.21), but did not differ from mother–adolescent relationships ( $M = 1.56$  vs. 1.71). Thus, the difference in the observational and questionnaire findings regarding conflict does not appear to reflect a difference in the composition of the observational and questionnaire factors.

### *Relations across relationships*

Next, we examined the relations between the observational dimensions for romantic relationships and the corresponding dimensions in relationships with friends and mothers. Table 3 presents the pattern of correlations. Consistent with expectations, adolescents' off-task behavior and communication skills with romantic partners were significantly related to the respective dimensions in their interactions with friends. Similarly, adolescents' levels of affective responsiveness, off-task behavior, communication skills, and conflict with romantic partners were related to these respective dimensions in their interactions with mothers. No associations were found between the positivity of the romantic dyad and the other dyads. Also, there were not any

Table 3  
 Pattern of associations among corresponding variables in the three relationships

	Adolescent with romantic partner and friend	Adolescent with romantic partner and mother	Romantic partner and friend	Romantic partner and mother
Affective responsiveness	.31 <sup>†</sup>	.35*	-.14	.02
Off-task behavior	.41*	.54**	.22	.18
Communication skills	.46**	.48**	-.05	.06
Conflict	.03	.41*	.07	.30 <sup>†</sup>
Dyadic positivity	.16	.22		
NRI support	.11	.34 <sup>†</sup>		
NRI negative interactions	.62**	.28		

*Note.* The numbers in the final three rows are the correlations between the dyadic scores and the NRI relationship scores for the different relationships (i.e. the final three rows of the first column are correlations between friendship and romantic relationship scores).

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ .

significant relations between the romantic partner's behavior and the friend's or mother's behavior on corresponding dimensions.

Table 3 also depicts the pattern of correlations among the corresponding perceptions of relationships. Adolescents' perceptions of negative interactions in friendships and romantic relationships were significantly related, but otherwise their perceptions of different relationships were not related.

## Discussion

Romantic relationships are characterized by distinct patterns of interactions and differed from either mother–adolescent relationships or friendships on all dimensions. Some differences were consistent with what was expected from past work, but other findings were unanticipated and shed new light on the nature of adolescent romantic relationship.

Romantic relationships differed from mother–adolescent relationships on three dimensions—off-task behavior, communication skills, and affective responsiveness. Interactions in romantic relationships were more off task than those in mother–adolescent relationships. Mothers were more skillful communicators and had more positive affective responsiveness than romantic partners. In line with Larson (1983), we conceptualized romantic relationships as positive feedback systems. Romantic partners may amplify each other's behavior leading to excessive humor or laughter; the task itself may get forgotten in such interchanges and become less important than the positivity of the interaction. This description is also consistent with recent qualitative work finding that adolescents' discussions of conflict with romantic partners were much more concrete, brief, and superficial than conflict discussions among young adult romantic

partners (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). In contrast, mothers and adolescents appeared to approach discussions of goals and problems in a more focused manner, perhaps because of the mothers' adult status and socialization responsibilities as parents. Consistent with our expectations, mothers also displayed greater communication skills than romantic partners. Such differences could have stemmed from either their greater maturity or their focused approach to discussion tasks.

We had not anticipated that mothers' affective responsiveness would be more positive than romantic partners. In fact, we expected the reverse based on the idea that peer relationships function as positive feedback systems. Mothers' greater positive affective responsiveness toward adolescents during interactions may reflect more skillfulness in providing support and being sensitive and responsive to their child's expressed needs (Reis & Patrick, 1996). Interestingly, mothers' high levels of affective responsiveness were not characteristic of the adolescents with their mothers. Indeed, adolescents' affective responsiveness toward mothers was less positive than that of mothers' responsiveness toward them. Additionally, adolescents' affective responsiveness during interactions with mothers was less positive than during their interactions with romantic partners or friends. This pattern of findings suggests that adolescents are more likely to reciprocate levels of positive affect with peers—both romantic partners and friends, whereas a mismatch may occur in the level of positive affect and responsiveness between adolescents and their mothers, with mothers being more positive than adolescents.

Romantic relationships differed from friendships on three dimensions—affective responsiveness, conflict, and dyadic positivity. As predicted, levels of affective responsiveness were not as positive in romantic relationships as in friendships. Adolescents' friendships were longer and may have provided more opportunities to learn responsiveness and sensitivity to each other. Adolescents and their romantic partners also experienced more conflict during interactions, perhaps because of the new, passionate characteristics of these relationships that require negotiation and which differentiate romantic relationships from other peer relationships (Davis & Todd, 1982). For example, other-sex friends can trigger feelings of jealousy by a romantic partner that a friend may not feel (Roth & Parker, 2001). Conflicts also may occur around the amount of time spent with friends, rather than with a partner (Zani, 1993). The finding that dyadic positivity is greater in friendships than romantic relationships is not surprising given the differences in affective responsiveness and conflict. In theory, lower levels of positive affective responsiveness and higher levels of conflict in adolescents' romantic relationships may lead to less mutuality and positive connectedness. Alternatively, more difficulty establishing dyadic positivity in newly evolving romantic partnerships could either lead to conflict and lower affective responsiveness or exacerbate it.

### *Perceptions of relationships*

Differences were also found in adolescents' perceptions of their relationships. In particular, adolescents perceived more support in their romantic relationships than in their other relationships. This finding is not fully consistent with the observational findings. Although we did not assess support per se in the observations, one might expect that friends would be perceived as more supportive because of the greater observed dyadic positivity in friendships than in

romantic relationships. Adolescents may idealize their romantic partners, and overestimate their supportiveness in their perceptions of their relationships (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996).

Mother–adolescent relationships were comparatively high in conflict on both the observational and questionnaire measures, and friendships were comparatively low on both the observational and questionnaire measures. Romantic relationship relationships, however, were comparatively high on the observational measure, but low on the questionnaire measure. Supplementary analyses suggested that the difference in the pattern of findings with the observational and questionnaire measures could not be attributed to the differences in the content of observational and questionnaire factors as the findings were also different at the scale level for the observational and questionnaire conflict measures. Instead, the differences appear to reflect differences in perceptions and structured interactions. Adolescents may downplay the frequency of their negative interactions with romantic partners because such interactions may be more threatening to these relatively fragile relationships.

Alternatively, it is possible that the perceptions of support and negative interactions in romantic relationships are relatively accurate representations of their relationships, and instead their interactions in the structured tasks may not fully reflect the pattern of interactions in the relationship (see Furman et al., 1988). In the present study, the different types of dyads were all presented with the same set of issues to address in the structured observations (e.g. discuss a problem outside the relationship, discuss a goal, and discuss a problem in the relationship). In natural settings, however, these general issues may arise with different frequencies in the different relationships. Adolescents may avoid conflicts with romantic partners and friends. The specific kinds of problems they discuss may also vary across relationships (Laursen, 1995). Thus, one would not expect perceptions, structured interactions, and naturalistic interactions to correspond fully (Furman et al., 1988). Each type of data provides a distinct perspective on the relationship, and all three are required to understand the characteristics of romantic relationships.

### *Associations among relationships*

The third purpose of the study was to examine the associations among interactions with romantic partners and those with friends and mothers. Consistent with expectations, adolescents' communication skills and off-task behavior during observed interactions with romantic partners were associated with teens' communication skills and off-task behavior with friends and mothers. Additionally, adolescents' affective responsiveness and conflict in romantic partner interactions were associated with such behaviors with mothers. These findings are consistent with the theoretical idea that adolescents' experiences in their relationships with friends and parents may carryover to some extent to their romantic relationships (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1994). Indeed, longitudinal links exist between patterns of adolescents' interactions with parents or friends and subsequent patterns of interactions with romantic partners in adulthood (e.g. Andrews, Foster, & Capaldi, 2000; Capaldi & Clark, 1998; Capaldi, Dishion, Stoolmiller, & Yoerger, 2001; Conger, Cui, & Bryant, 2000; Roisman, Madsen, & Hennighausen, 2001). Such carryover may occur for a variety of theoretical reasons, including skills acquisition, imitation, emotion regulation, behavioral contagion, or mental representations of or expectations about relationships (see Elicker et al., 1992). The present data are cross-sectional in nature, however, and it is possible that their interactions with romantic partners may influence their interactions with

friends or parents. Moreover, the existing longitudinal research has typically examined relationships with parents or friends at one time and relationships with romantic partners at a later time. Thus, we do not yet know about the contribution of adolescent romantic relationships to subsequent relationships, including romantic relationships. In fact, although we theoretically would expect parent and friend relationships to influence romantic relationships, inferences about these influences are premature as we have not fully examined the possible links. The current results draw attention to important covariation among adolescents' concurrent experiences in relationships with romantic partners, friends and mothers, and highlight the need to account for each of the different types of relationship effects on the quality of future relationships.

### *Limitations and future directions*

Although the present study included almost 100 half-hour observations, the sample size of 32 is small. Accordingly, the significant results that were obtained are likely to be relatively large, robust ones (Meehl, 1967). At the same time, it is likely that some differences in interactions, particularly subtler ones, may not have been detected and will require larger samples to observe. Additionally, the participants who were observed were only a small proportion of the overall sample because relatively few had romantic relationships that qualified at the time of the data collection (10th grade). In future work, it would be important to look for qualifying romantic relationships over a wider time span so as to obtain a higher proportion of participants.

In the same vein, gender differences in patterns of interaction may be more apparent in larger samples of particular types of relationships. Indeed, many theories would expect girls and boys to behave somewhat differently in emerging romantic relationships, as they enter these relationships with different experiences and expectations pertaining to communication and emotion (e.g., Giordano, Longmore et al., 2006).

In the present study, we examined patterns of interactions in the close relationships of 10th grade adolescents. Future work should examine patterns of interactions in younger and older adolescents. Marked developmental changes are expected to occur in adolescent relationships, especially romantic relationships (see Bouchey & Furman, 2003; Collins, 2003), and thus, the similarities and differences among various relationships are likely to change. Research is also needed on the full of diversity of romantic interactions, including those from a specific ethnic group or homosexual couples. In a related vein, it would be important to examine how romantic relationships change as the duration of the relationship increases. The average length of the current participants' relationship was 8 months, but we may anticipate different patterns of interaction if the relationships had been of several years duration. For example, romantic relationships may more likely develop into attachment relationships, and patterns of communication may be more intimate, supportive, and effective with age and longer duration of relationship. Additionally, conflict may be addressed differently as adolescents perceive romantic relationships to be more stable and less susceptible to dissolution (Laursen & Jensen-Campbell, 1999). Finally, it would be important to examine the differences between romantic relationships and additional close relationships, such as those with fathers. Such a line of research will continue to shed light on the role that adolescent romantic relationships occupy in adolescents' social networks, and how the role of romantic relationships may change with development. Certainly, the present findings already illustrate that linkages exist among

adolescents' interactions with romantic partners, friends, and mothers. Yet, romantic relationships also appear to be characterized by meaningful, distinct patterns of interactions.

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