

Adolescent Romantic Relationships and Experiences

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### Adolescent Romantic Relationships and Experiences

For many years the study of peer relationships was focused exclusively on platonic peers. Virtually nothing was known about romantic relationships or romantic experiences prior to age 18 except for a few scattered studies on dating preferences or functions (e.g. Hansen, 1977; Roscoe, Diana, & Brooks, 1987).

That so little was known about these relationships is ironic given the centrality of romantic experiences in adolescents' lives. More than half of adolescents in the United States report having a special romantic relationship in the past 18 months (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). High school students typically say that they interact more frequently with their romantic partners than they do with parents, siblings, or friends (Laursen & Williams, 1997). Moreover, even when not interacting with them, adolescents also think about their romantic partners for many hours each week (Richards, Crowe, Larson, & Swarr, 1998). Romantic experiences are believed to play important roles in the development of an identity, the transformation of family relationships, the development of close relationships with peers, the development of sexuality, and scholastic achievement and career planning (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Evidence is mounting that, contrary to widespread skepticism, such experiences are also linked to individual adjustment and may influence the nature of subsequent romantic relationships (Collins, 2003; Furman, 2002; Furman, Ho, & Low, 2007).

Happily, interest in romantic relationships has blossomed in the last decade. Several edited volumes have been published (Crouter & Booth, 2006; Florsheim, 2003; Furman, Brown, & Feiring, 1999; Shulman & Collins, 1997) and a number of research laboratories are studying the nature of adolescent romantic relationships and experiences.

This emerging body of literature on romantic relationships and experiences is the focus of this chapter.

We define romantic relationships as mutually acknowledged on-going voluntary interactions; in comparison to most other peer relationships, romantic ones typically have a distinctive intensity, which is usually marked by expressions of affection and current or anticipated sexual behavior (Collins, 2003). Of course, some behaviors are simultaneously affectionate and sexual in nature.

It is important to recognize, however, that the study of adolescent romance entails more than examining the characteristics of specific dyadic relationships. Over the course of time, most people have a number of different romantic relationships. As discussed subsequently, the number of romantic relationships, as well as the characteristics of romantic relationships, has been found to be related to psychosocial development and adjustment. Moreover, romantically relevant experiences occur outside the context of ongoing dyadic relationships. Fantasies and one-sided attractions may occur, as well as interactions with potential romantic partners or brief romantic encounters (e.g. "hooking up" and "dates") (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999). We use the term *romantic experiences* to refer to this broad range of experiences and cognitions, including both those within and outside of particular dyadic relationships. This term incorporates a broad and heterogeneous range of activities and cognitions, but we believe that it has heuristic value both by providing a term for the general domain of romantically relevant experiences and by encouraging investigators to examine a wide range of potentially important phenomena.

Our definitions of romantic relationships nor romantic experiences do not refer to the gender of the individuals, as we intend to include same-gender, as well as other-gender, romantic relationships and experiences. The literature on same-gender romantic experiences is more limited (see Diamond, Savin-Williams, & Dubé, 1999), but we incorporate such literature when available, and note its absence otherwise. The existing literature is also constrained by the fact that almost all of the research has also been conducted in industrialized societies, most typically in North America. Although the experience of love may be universal (Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992), romantic experiences, especially adolescent romantic experiences, are likely to be determined largely by the cultural context in which they occur (see Brown, Larson, & Saraswathi, 2002).

Although we believe that most investigators have similar conceptualizations of romantic relationships, little attention has been given to how romantic relationships should be operationally defined. Typically, investigators have simply asked participants if they have a romantic relationship, and the participants decide on the basis of their own definition. In some cases a brief description is provided (e.g. “when you like a guy [girl] and he [she] likes you back.” [Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006, p. 13]) or a minimal length is required (e.g. at least a month long). Further attention should be given to the operational definition of romantic relationships as differences in definition affect estimates of the frequency and duration of romantic relationships and perhaps even the findings that are obtained (see Furman & Hand, 2006). For that matter, we know surprisingly little about how adolescents themselves decide whether and when they are in a romantic relationship.

In the sections that follow, we discuss the key issues in the field, examine relevant theory and review the empirical literature. Because the topic is still relatively new, we conclude by describing the limitations in our knowledge and identify important directions for subsequent research and theory.

### Central Issues

As noted in the prior section, romantic experiences are believed to influence the course of a number of developmental tasks, such as the development of sexuality, identity development, or the development of close relationships with peers (see Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Adolescents' romantic experiences, however, undoubtedly vary substantially. Some may be extensively involved in romantic relationships, and others may have minimal romantic experience. The quality and content of the relationships may vary substantially as well. Consequently, the specific effects of romantic experiences on psycho-social development will depend on the particular experiences an adolescent has

Thus, a fundamental issue in the field is to identify the dimensions along which romantic experiences can vary. We are guided by a framework which delineates five features of romantic experiences (Collins, 2003). The first and most commonly examined feature is romantic involvement or experience. This feature incorporates such elements as whether or not a person dates, when s/he began dating, the duration of relationships, the frequency and consistency of dating and relationships. The second feature is partner selection—i.e. the characteristics of the person they are dating or having a relationship with. The third feature is the content of the relationship—what the dyad does (and does not) do together and how they spend their time. The fourth feature is the quality of the romantic relationship, such as the degree of support or conflict in the

relationship. The final features are the cognitive and emotional processes associated with the relationship. The cognitive processes include perceptions, attributions, and representations of oneself, the partner(s), and the relationship(s). Emotional processes include the emotions and moods elicited by and in romantic encounters or relationships, as well as the use of romantic relationships to process (or avoid) emotions elicited by other aspects of one's life. Emotions elicited by the absence or demise of a romantic relationship can also be highly salient. Of course, the cognitive and emotional processes in a relationship are closely related to each other.

The recognition of the variability of romantic experiences leads quite naturally to the three central issues that the theorists and researchers have examined. First, what is the developmental course of romantic experiences? How do the features change or remain the same? Second, what are the causes and consequences of individual differences in romantic experiences? What leads adolescents to have different experiences, and what impact do such differences have on them? Third, how are experiences in other relationships associated with romantic experiences? How do experiences with parents or peers affect romantic experiences? In the sections that follow, we focus on the theory and research relevant to these three central issues.

### Relevant Theory

The theoretical formulations that have guided the current flowering of research on adolescent romantic relationships ground romantic relationships in the normative social experiences of adolescence. Three overlapping traditions have been especially important: attachment theory, Sullivanian and behavioral systems approaches, and symbolic interactionism.

*Attachment Theory*

Attachment formulations emphasize the strong emotional ties between parents and their offspring. The construct of attachment in infant-caregiver relationships refers to a relatively distinct connection which supports infants' efforts to feel safe from threatening conditions and to be regulated emotionally. According to Ainsworth (1989), infant behaviors with attachment partners are prototypes of attachments at every age, including those that occur outside of the biological family. These relationships illustrate four defining criteria for differentiating attachment relationships from other close relationships: proximity seeking; safe-haven behavior (turning first to the other person when facing a perceived threat); secure-base behavior (free exploration in the presence of the other person); and distress over involuntary separations. Attachment theorists propose that committed adult romantic relationships typically meet these criteria (Shaver & Hazan, 1988). In fact, a romantic partner is expected to be the primary attachment figure for most adults. However, adult romantic attachments differ from infant attachments to a caregiver in that the attachments are usually reciprocal, with each person being attached to the other and serving as an attachment figure for the other. Adult romantic attachments also involve sexual behavior. In light of these differences, Shaver and Hazan (1988) hypothesized that romantic love involves the integration of the attachment, caregiving and sexual/reproductive behavioral systems.

Romantic partners are not usually expected to be the primary attachment figure until late adolescence or adulthood as this shift in attachment objects requires a cognitive and emotional maturity that rarely is achieved before then (Ainsworth, 1989). In fact, most adolescent romantic relationships are unlikely to meet all the criteria of an

attachment relationship. At the same time, attachment-related functions begin to be redistributed to close peer relationships, such as friendships or romantic relationships. Hazan and Zeifmann (1994) proposed that attachments are transferred component by component from parents to close friends and romantic partners. Specifically, first proximity seeking toward close peers occurs, then safe haven behavior, and finally separation protest and secure base behavior .

A key hypothesis of attachment theory is that a history of sensitive, responsive interactions and strong emotional bonds with parents facilitates adaptation during the transitions of adolescence – transitions that permit functioning in friendships and romantic relationships, while simultaneously transforming existing bonds with parents into more age-appropriate ones (Allen & Land, 1999). Two largely compatible explanations have been offered for links between attachments with caregivers and those in later extra-familial relationships. One is a carry-forward model, in which functions and representations of caregiver-child attachment relationships (*internal working models*) organize expectations and behaviors in later relationships (e. g., Waters & Cummings, 2000), including selection of partners congruent with past partners (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988). A second is the premise that relationships with caregivers prior to adolescence expose individuals to components of effective relating, such as empathy, reciprocity, and self-confidence, which shape interactions in other, later relationships (e. g., Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988). In turn, childhood and adolescent friendships serve as templates for subsequent close relationships outside of the family (Youniss, 1980). Thus, both processes lead to the expectation that a foundation of emotional and behavioral interdependence in early life is a significant forerunner of one's romantic



relationships in adolescence and adulthood. In the subsequent section on key studies, we discuss the research examining continuity across relationships.

*Sullivanian and Behavioral Systems Theory.*

Sullivan (1953) proposed five basic needs that motivated individuals to bring about certain interpersonal situations that promoted positive affective states or decrease negative affective states: (a) tenderness, (b) companionship, (c) acceptance, (d) intimacy, and (e) sexuality. Each need is associated with a key relationship that typically fulfills this need. The need for tenderness emerges in infancy and is met through relationships with parents. In childhood, the need for companionship emerges. Initially companionship occurs with adults and is subsequently transformed into companionship with peers during the early school years. Additionally, as children become increasingly involved in the peer world, the need for acceptance by one's peers develops. In preadolescence, the need for intimate exchange emerges and results in the establishment of "chumships," which are typically close same-gender friendships. Chumships serve as a foundation for later, more sexually charged intimate relationships with romantic partners. According to Sullivan, friendship in pre-adolescence and adolescence meets a basic psychological need to overcome loneliness – an idea that is similar to the recent proposal that humans have an evolved need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). By overcoming loneliness through close friendships with same-gender peers, adolescents develop the psychological capacity to achieve intimacy. With the onset of puberty at adolescence, sexuality, or true genital lust, emerges; moreover, adolescents gradually become interested in achieving intimacy with a romantic partner that is similar to the

intimacy achieved in chumships. The task of late adolescence is to establish a committed relationship.

Building upon the insights of attachment and Sullivanian theorists, Furman and Wehner's (1994) behavioral systems theory proposes that romantic partners become major figures in the functioning of the attachment, caregiving, affiliative, and sexual/reproductive behavioral systems. The attachment, caretaking, and sexuality systems have received considerable theoretical attention by attachment theorists, but the affiliative system has not. The affiliative system refers to the biological predisposition to interact with known others, and is hypothesized to underlie the capacities to cooperate, collaborate with another, and co-construct a relationship. Affiliation and sexuality are expected to be the central systems in romantic relationships initially, but eventually the attachment and caregiving system become salient as well.

Behavioral systems theory would expect a moderate degree of consistency between romantic relationships and relationships with peers and parents. When the different behavioral systems are activated, adolescents are likely to be predisposed to respond to romantic partners as they have in other relationships. At the same time romantic relationships are not expected to be simple replications of other relationships because the qualitative features of romantic relationships typically differ in some respects from those with friends or parents. Additionally, the adolescent's partner and her past and present experiences, as well as those of the adolescent, affect the nature of the relationship (Kelley et al., 1983/2002; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000)

*Symbolic Interactionism*

Symbolic interactionists emphasize that the meanings of romantic experiences emerge from the communication and interactions within romantic relationships (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006). The meanings that emerge are likely to emerge from the immediate “on site” experiences, rather than from prior experiences with peers or parents (Giordano, et al., 2006). These distinctive meanings may be quite different from the meanings of prior relationship experiences, because romantic relationship experiences are relatively private and not very scripted. In effect, the adolescent is shaped by these ongoing dynamic processes (Mead, 1934).

In addition to these broad theoretical perspectives, the Furman et al. (1999) edited volume contains a series of conceptual papers focusing on particular facets of romantic experience. Similarly, classic approaches, such as social learning theory or life-span developmental systems perspectives, have guided some research (e.g. Capaldi, Shortt, & Kim, 2005). At the same time, some theories, such as social exchange theory and evolutionary theory, have been very prominent in research on adult romantic relationships, but as yet have received little attention in research on adolescent relationships (Laursen & Jensen-Campbell, 1999). More generally, it would be fair to say that the development of theories of romantic experiences is still in a rather rudimentary stage. Only a few theories have been proposed and these have primarily focused on particular issues, such as the links between romantic experiences and other relationship experiences. Further theoretical development is essential to future progress in the area.

### Key Studies

*The Developmental Course of Romantic Experiences*

Romantic experiences and relationships change substantially over the course of development, yet it is important to emphasize that there is not a single pattern of romantic development. In most industrialized societies, adolescents vary in when they develop romantic interests, begin to date, or establish a romantic relationship. Not only does the timing differ, but the degree of romantic involvement varies as well. Some youth may have relatively few or intermittent romantic experiences, whereas others may be seeing someone or have a romantic relationship most all of the time. Even the sequence of romantic experiences varies. Typically, early romantic relationships are relatively short-lived, but some long-term relationships may occur early on. We address the correlates of such variability in romantic involvement in the subsequent section on individual variations.

*Romantic-relationship activity.* Variability notwithstanding, adolescent romantic experiences tend to follow a common course. The commonalities were first described in Dunphy's (1963) five stage model of peer group development, which invoked the differing types of peer clusters discussed by Brown (Chapter 22, this volume). In the first stage, preadolescents and adolescents commonly participate in cliques of four to six same-gender friends. In the second stage, boy and girl cliques began to interact with each other. In the third stage, a mixed-gender crowd emerges, and the higher status members of the earlier cliques begin to date each other and form mixed-gender clique. In the fourth stage, the mixed-gender peer crowd is fully developed, and several mixed-gender cliques have emerged as dating becomes more widespread. In the fifth stage, the crowd begins to disintegrate as adolescents have paired off and formed loosely associated groups of couples. A similar, but less elaborated, three-stage account has been proposed

by Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, and Pepler (2004). First, adolescents engage in affiliative activities in a group context (e.g., go to dances and parties). Second, they begin to go out on a “date” with someone as part of a group. Finally, they begin to form dyadic romantic relationships.

Empirical findings on heterosexual adolescents are generally in accord with these models. Prior to adolescence, interactions typically occur with peers of the same gender and most friendship pairs are of the same gender (Bukowski, Gauze, Hoza, & Newcomb, 1993; Kovacs, Parker, & Hoffman, 1996; Maccoby, 1988). Early adolescents think more about members of the other gender, although mixed-gender interactions do not usually occur often until later (Blyth, Hill, & Thiel, 1982; Richards, et al. 1998). Consistent with Dunphy’s (1963) model, the number of close other-gender friends is predictive of having a larger other-gender network, which in turn is predictive of the establishing a romantic relationship (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000). Although popular adolescents generally date more frequently than other adolescents (Franzoi, Davis, & Vasquez-Suson, 1994), the percentage of adolescents who report having a romantic relationship increases across adolescence (Carver, et al. 2003). For example, 36% of thirteen year olds, 53% of fifteen year olds, and 70% of seventeen year olds report having had a “special” romantic relationship in the last 18 months. 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).

Less is known about the developmental course of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth’s romantic experiences. Approximately 93% of sexual minority adolescent boys report having had some same-sex activity and 85% of sexual minority adolescent girls

report having had some same-sex activity (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Same-gender dating can be uncommon in locations where there are fewer potential partners or fewer who are openly identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual (Diamond, et al., 1999), but the number of romantic relationships is comparable to the number for heterosexual youth for those who are involved in organizations for sexual minorities (Diamond & Lucas, 2004). Gender variations are marked. Approximately 42% of girls and 79% of boys report some sexual activity with a member of the other sex (D'Augelli, 1998), and the majority of sexual minority youth report dating members of the other-sex (Savin-Williams, 1996). Such dating can either provide a cover for a minority sexual identity or help clarify one's identity (Diamond, et al., 1999). Finally, the average age of a "serious" same-gender relationship is 18 years (Floyd & Stein, 2002).

These statistics provide an incomplete picture, however, as substantial variability exists in the timing and sequencing of different experiences. For example, most sexual minority adolescent males were first sexually rather than emotionally attracted to a male, whereas sexual minority adolescent females were evenly divided between first having had an emotional or sexual attraction to another female. Boys' same-gender sexual contact was most commonly with a friend, whereas girls' same-gender relationships were with a romantic partner (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). The trajectories and sequencing of experiences also vary substantially within gender (Floyd & Stein, 2002).

A cautionary note is that one's sexual identity and the gender of the person one is attracted to can be quite fluid and change over time, especially for women (Diamond, 2000, 2003). In fact, it is important to recognize that same-gender attraction, sexual behavior, and identity are not perfectly correlated with one another (Savin-Williams,

2006). Thus, 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.

*Relationship content, quality, and cognitions.* In the preceding section, we described common developmental changes in the degree of involvement in romantic experiences and the social context in which such relationships occurred (e.g. group dating vs. dyadic dating). Developmental changes also occur in the content and quality of romantic relationships, as well as the perceived benefits to the people involved. Consistent with the proposal that relationships are initially affiliation-based (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1994), middle adolescents most commonly report companionship to be the advantage of having a boyfriend or girlfriend (Feiring, 1996), whereas late adolescents and young adults emphasize the possibility of having a special relationship, perhaps one that can become a permanent partnership (Levesque, 1993). Late adolescents also mention companionship and excitement less frequently as advantages (Shulman & Scharf, 2000). On the other hand, attachment, caregiving, and intimacy become more salient in late adolescence or early adulthood. Perceptions of support increase with age (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992), as do interdependence and closeness between romantic partners (Laursen & Williams, 1997; Zimmer-Gembeck, 1999). Adolescents begin to use peers, including romantic partners, as a safe haven, and subsequently as a secure base (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). Only long-term romantic partners and friends, however, are likely to serve as secure bases (Fraley & Davis, 1997; Hazan & Zeifman, 1994).

Co-existing with these normative transformations within and between relationships are important signs of convergence of cognitions about differing types of relationships. Specifically, representations of parent-adolescent relationships, friendships and romantic relationships are interrelated and appear to become more interrelated with age (c.f. Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchey, 2002 & Treboux, Crowell, Owens, & Pan, 1994). Perhaps the growing importance of romantic relationships makes the common relationship properties across types of relationships more apparent than before.

With respect to emotions associated with romantic experiences, other-gender peers are the most common source of positive affect for heterosexual youth (Wilson-Shockley, 1985 as cited in Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999). Such positive emotions are especially likely to occur when socializing on weekend nights with a romantic partner or several other-gender peers (Larson & Richards, 1998). The amount of time spent with other gender peers and romantic partners in particular increases over the course of adolescence (Laursen & Williams, 1997; Richards, et al., 1998).

Emotional feelings of love also seem to change developmentally. In particular, as adolescents get older, they report that they first fell in love at a later age, suggesting that their definition of love has changed (Montgomery & Sorell, 1998; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). Some earlier infatuations or “puppy loves” may no longer be considered true loves, even though they were significant at the time.

As romantic experiences become common, the risks associated with them also increase. Physical and relational aggression by romantic partners increases from early to middle adolescence (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kuper, 2001; Pepler, Craig, Connolly, Yuile, McMaster, & Jiang, 2006). Similarly, sexual harassment of both same-



gender and other-gender peers increases over early adolescence; and these higher levels persist in middle adolescence (McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2002; Pepler, et al., 2006). Finally, sexual victimization is also relatively common throughout much of adolescence, with estimates for girls ranging from 14% to 43% (Hickman, Jaycox & Aronoff, 2004).

### *Individual Differences in Romantic Experiences*

Individual differences in romantic relationship experiences typically are embedded in experiences in both current close relationships and the history of close relationships that each participant brings to them (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002). The contributions of family and peer relationships to individual differences are especially evident from research on the development of romantic relationship quality and the cognitive and emotional features of relationships (Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2001, 2004). For example, the cognitive and behavioral syndrome known as rejection sensitivity is believed to arise from experiences of rejection from parents, peers, and, possibly, romantic partners. Rejection sensitivity in turn predicts expectancies of rejection that correlate strongly with both actual rejection and lesser satisfaction in adolescent relationships (Downey, Bonica, & Rinçon, 1999). Two strands of literature focus, respectively, on relationships with peers and relationships with parents as significant forerunners of variations in romantic experiences during adolescence.

*Relationships with peers.* The potential role of friends in the development of romantic relationships is both fundamental and multifaceted. Friendships and romantic relationships share common ground in that both are voluntary, and 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; Feiring, 1996; Furman, 1999; McNelles & Connolly, 1999; Shulman, Laursen, Kalman, & Karpovsky, 1997; Shulman, Levy-Shiff, Kedem, & Alon, 1997). 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; Shulman et al., 1997b). The fact that almost half of best friends are romantic partners is, from a developmental perspective, unsurprising (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1993).

Research findings, though not yet extensive, have confirmed the relevance of friendship to individual differences in romantic relationships. Cognitive representations of friendships and the perceived qualities and patterns of interactions in friendships are associated significantly with corresponding characteristics of romantic relationships (Connolly, et al., 2000; Furman & Shomaker, in press; Furman, et al., 2002). Hostile talk about women with friends is predictive of later aggression toward female partners (Capaldi, Dishion, Stoolmiller, & Yoerger, 2001).

Less is known about the links between romantic experiences and other aspects of peer relations. Having a larger number of other-sex friends in one's network is linked to both dating currently and in the future (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000; Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Kuttler & LaGreca, 2004). Those who are liked by many of their peers (i.e. popular and controversial adolescents) date more frequently (Franzoi, Davis, & Vasquez-Suson, 1994). Social competence with friends and peers is also a reliable

forerunner of romantic relationship involvement in early and middle adolescence and romantic relationship quality in early adulthood (Neeman, Hubbard, & Masten, 1985).

Relatively little is known about the links between sexual minorities' peer relationships and romantic relationships. Those who have had more romantic relationships worry more about losing friends, although the size of the network is not predictive of the number of romantic relationships (Diamond & Lucas, 2004).

*Relationships with parents.* The unquestionable importance of peers does not preclude other influences on the development of romantic relationships. Parent-adolescent relationships contribute to behavioral, cognitive, and emotional patterns that have been linked to later behavior with romantic partners. Secure working models of parents are linked to subsequent capacity for romantic intimacy (Mayseless & Scharf, 2007), whereas avoidant styles are linked to less positive romantic relationships in early adulthood (Collins, Cooper, Albino, & Allard, 2002). Nurturant-involved parenting in adolescence is predictive of warmth, support, and low hostility toward romantic partners in early adulthood (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005). Similarly, the degree of flexible control, cohesion, and respect for privacy experienced in families is related positively to intimacy in late-adolescent romantic relationships, with especially strong links emerging for women (Feldman, Gowen, & Fisher, 1998). Parent-adolescent conflict resolution is also associated with later conflict resolution with romantic partners (Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2001).

By contrast, unskilled parenting and aversive family communications are predictive of aggression toward romantic partners in late adolescence (Andrews, Foster,

Capaldi, & Hops, 2000; Capaldi & Clark, 1998). Similarly, the degree of negative emotionality in parent-adolescent dyads is predictive of negative emotionality and poor quality interactions with romantic partners in early adulthood (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Kim, Conger, Lorenz, & Elder, 2001; Overbeek, Stattin, Vermulst, Ha & Engels, 2007). In fact, parenting style in adolescence contributed more substantially to the quality of early adult romantic relationships than did either sibling relationships or the models provided by parents' own relationships (Conger, et al., 2000). Family stress and family separation are also risk factors for early romantic involvement (Connolly, Taradash, & Williams, 2001), which in turn is associated with poor adjustment (Aro & Taipale, 1987; Cauffman & Steinberg, 1996; Grinder, 1966; Neeman et al., 1995). The quality of these apparently compensatory early involvements, however, is typically poorer than that of romantic relationships for youth with more beneficent family histories (Collins & Van Dulmen, 2006).

A growing number of studies have documented connections between even earlier parent-child relationships and romantic relationships. The history of parent-child relationships in infancy and early childhood significantly predicts the stability and quality of adolescent and young adult romantic relationships (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007). Closeness to parents in childhood is even a forerunner of long-term effects on relationship satisfaction in adulthood and marital stability (Belt & Abidin, 1996; Franz, McClelland, & Weineberger, 1991). Thus, a critical mass of findings now implicates familial experiences in childhood and adolescence in the foundations of romantic experiences in the second and third decades of life.

*Networks of relationships.* Research simultaneously examining the contributions of relationships with both parents and peers to adolescent romantic experiences is at a relatively early stage. Similarly, few investigations have examined how all three forms of relationships are linked to development or adjustment, although the number of interesting and potentially important scientific questions that could be addressed by such research attests to the significance of the topic.

The importance of multiple social relationships is apparent in research on social contacts, both human and inhuman (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). Varied relationship partners provide distinctive benefits (Hartup, 1993; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). Typical exchanges within each of these types of dyads differ accordingly. In comparison to childhood relationships, the diminished distance and greater intimacy in adolescents' peer relationships may both satisfy affiliative needs and contribute to socialization for relations among equals. Intimacy with parents provides nurturance and support, but may be less important than friendships for socialization to roles and expectations in late adolescence and early adulthood (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997).

Although each type of relationship has distinct features, their features and benefits overlap (Hartup, 1993; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). Moreover, as the preceding sections illustrate, the links between qualities of friendships and romantic relationships, as well as between family and romantic relationships, are equally impressive (Collins, Hennighausen, et al., 1997). Because the peer and family domain are linked and often similar in nature, family and peer influences may act in concert with one another (Laursen, Furman, & Mooney, 2006). For example, both a stable family life and a

nondeviant peer group reduce the likelihood that a high school youth will have an antisocial partner in early adulthood (Quinton, Pickles, Maughan, & Rutter, 1993). Additionally, family and peer influences may moderate each other; for example, 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 (Meeus, Branje, & Overbeek, 2004). Similarly, young adults who make the transition from best friend to romantic partner as the primary intimate relationship show increased and more stable commitment to their partner and display fewer emotional problems (Meeus, Branje, van der Valk, & de Wied, 2007).

The nature and processes of these developmentally significant interrelations of relationships promise to become an increasingly prominent focus of future research. In a recent essay Collins & Laursen (2000, p. 59) proposed that “affiliations with friends, romantic partners, siblings, and parents unfold along varied and somewhat discrete trajectories for most of the second decade of life and then coalesce during the early 20s into integrated interpersonal structures.” The initial differentiation process is essential to a range of adolescent developmental achievements – autonomy, individuation, identity, and sexuality – in appropriately distinct settings, whereas the coalescing relationships of the third and fourth decades of life undergird the psychic and social integration that support adult functioning. In this perspective, romantic relationships are not merely reflections of the impact of parent and peer relationships, but are integral to systems in which all three types of relationships mutually influence one another and jointly contribute to developmental outcomes (for a recent example, see Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2007).

*Personal Characteristics.* Although work has now examined the role relationships with peers and parents play in romantic experiences, surprisingly little work has looked at how the characteristics of the adolescent are related to romantic experiences. Initial findings imply that adolescent relationships parallel adult relationships in the relevance of individual partners' self-esteem, self-confidence, and physical attractiveness to romantic experiences (e. g., Connolly & Konarski, 1994; Pearce, Boergers, & Prinstein, 2002).

One topic that has received significant attention is the links between psychosocial adjustment and romantic experience. Social competence is related to dating and romantic experience (Furman, Ho, & Low, 2007; Neeman, Hubbard, & Masten, 1995; Davies & Windle, 2000). On the other hand, alcohol and drug use, poor academic performance, externalizing and internalizing symptoms, poor emotional health and poor job competence are also linked to romantic experience, especially in early adolescence (Aro & Taipale, 1987; Davies & Windle, 2000; Furman, et al., 2006; Thomas & Hsui, 1993). The mixed nature of these correlates may reflect the fact that romantic experiences are embedded in the peer social world, and thus linked to both peer competence and risky behavior. Much of the literature, however, is cross-sectional and thus could reflect the effects of romantic experience on adjustment, rather than the reverse. In fact, dating or romantic experience in late childhood and early adolescence is predictive of subsequent misconduct and poor academic performance (Neeman, et al., 1995); Romantic experience is linked to depression for some youth, such as those who with a preoccupied attachment style (Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, &

Fincham, 2004) or those engaging in casual sex (Grello, Welsh, Harper, & Dickson, 2003).

Most of this literature has focused on the amount of romantic experience (or in some cases simply whether one has begun dating or not). Much less is known about the links with other dimensions of romantic experiences. Negative romantic interactions are, however, predictive of depression (La Greca & Harrison, 2005). In fact, romantic breakups are one of the strongest predictors of depression, suicide attempts and suicide completions (Brent et al, 1993; Joyner & Udry, 2000; Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999). In one of the few studies to examine multiple dimensions simultaneously, Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2001) found psychosocial adjustment to be related differently to romantic experience, overinvolvement, and the quality of romantic relationships. Clearly future studies need to pay greater attention to the different dimensions of romantic relationships and experience.

#### Future Directions

Research on adolescent romantic relationships and experiences has made great strides in the last decade, yet it is evident that much work remains to be done. Three topics warranting particular attention are partner characteristics, similarities and differences between romantic relationships and other relationships, and the role of context.

*Partner Characteristics.* Partner characteristics, one of the five features of Collins' (2003) framework of romantic experiences, play a still unspecified role in the significance of romantic relationships in adolescent development. Adolescents report that they would like partners who are intelligent, interpersonally skillful, and physically



appealing (Hansen, 1977; Regan & Joshi, 2003; Roscoe, Diane, & Brooks, 1987). Girls tend to have slightly older partners, whereas boys tend to have similar aged partners (Carver, et al., 2003); partners are usually similar in race, ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics (Carver et al., 2003; Furman & Simon, in press). Similarity also exists in attractiveness, adjustment, and peer network characteristics (see Furman & Simon, in press). Although these studies provide information about what the partner or desired partner is like, we know much less about the influence of the partner on the relationship. Only a few studies have examined adolescent couples' interactions, which would provide a means of identifying the potential influence of partner characteristics on romantic relationships (see Furman & Simon, 2006; Galliher, Welsh, Rostosky, & Kawaguchi, 2004; Harper & Welsh, 2007).

In a related vein, a number of studies have examined the links between peer relations or parent-child relationships and romantic experiences, but we know surprisingly little about the influence of romantic relationships on subsequent romantic experiences. Self-reports of the quality of adolescents' relationships with different romantic partners are moderately consistent (Connolly, et al, 2000; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003), but otherwise we don't know how much carryover occurs from one adolescent romantic relationship to the next or how much a new partner may lead to a different experience.

*Romantic relationships and other peer relationships.* As described in a prior section, the qualities of relationships with peers are predictive of the quality of relationships with romantic partners, but relatively little is known about the similarities and differences in the characteristics of friendships and heterosexual romantic

relationships. In early and middle adolescence, same-gender friendships are perceived to be more supportive and intimate than heterosexual romantic partners (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Werebe, 1987). Perceptions of the frequency of conflict are similar (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Laursen, 1995), although observed rates of conflict in interactions are greater in heterosexual romantic relationships (Furman & Shomaker, in press). Observed affective responsiveness and dyadic positivity are also less in romantic relationships (Furman & Shomaker, in press).

Even less is known about the similarities and differences between other-gender friendships and heterosexual romantic relationships. Early adolescents report that other-gender friendships are primarily characterized by affiliation, whereas romantic relationships are marked by intimacy and passion as well (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999). Middle adolescents report that companionship, support, emotional intimacy and physical intimacy are more commonly benefits of romantic relationships than of other-gender friendships (Hand & Furman, under review). By contrast, other-gender friendships are more commonly seen as a means of learning about other-gender peers and their perspective; adolescents may believe that they are expected to know about the other gender when interacting with a romantic partner. With regard to costs, romantic relationships are often seen as limiting autonomy, whereas other-gender friendships can be confusing.

These initial findings are intriguing, but it will be important to obtain more information about the similarities and differences in different peer relations as a window into understanding the functions of different relationships in the broad social network. It would be particularly valuable to examine the relationships of sexual minority youth,

both for the sake of inclusiveness and because empirical evidence would help separate out the influences of relationship type and gender of partner.

Some other forms of seemingly related peer relationships also have been relatively neglected. For instance, passionate friendships have been described as having the emotional intensity of romantic relationships, but lacking the sexual activity (Diamond, 1998; Diamond et al., 1999). Such relationships are believed to be particularly significant in the experiences of lesbians and perhaps gay youth (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Additionally, relatively little is known about “friends with benefits,” in which two peers periodically engage in casual sex without a monogamous relationship or any kind of commitment.

*Context.* Previously, we noted the absence of research on romantic experiences in different cultures. In fact, relatively little work has examined the role of contextual factors in general. A limited amount of work has examined African-American youth’s romantic relationships (e.g. Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2005); even less is known about other ethnic groups’ romantic relationships or interracial relationships (Vaquera & Kao, 2005). Similarly, we know surprisingly little about romantic experiences in rural settings, the role of local neighborhood or community norms, or religious values. The absence of work on contextual factors is particularly ironic, as it is obvious that romantic experiences, especially in adolescence, are strongly influenced by such factors

*A final note.* As the preceding comments suggest, what we have learned has been based on a relatively select group of adolescents who do not fully represent the range of romantic experiences. Much of the existing work has only examined romantic relationships, and we know less about how these relationships fit into adolescents’ social

world and overall experiences. Addressing these issues will provide us a more complete picture of adolescent romantic experiences.

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