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## THE SLIPPERY NATURE OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: ISSUES IN DEFINITION AND DIFFERENTIATION<sup>1</sup>

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In the introductory chapter of our volume on adolescent romantic relationships (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999), we suggested that studying these romantic ventures is somewhat like chasing a greased pig. The adolescent peer culture is notoriously evanescent. Romantic relationships can be short-lived. They can end and restart—repeatedly. The norms regarding what these relationships are supposed to be like keep changing. Once upon a time ago, the boy asked the girl out in advance for a formal date on a Saturday night. That still happens, but it only constitutes a small proportion of romantic interactions. When adolescents tell peers that they “hooked-up” with someone, they are leaving some ambiguity about exactly what happened, often intentionally. In effect, dating and adolescent romantic relationships are notoriously slippery.

Happily, we social scientists are capturing some of these slick little beasts. Giordano, Manning, and Longmore’s chapter (this volume) illustrates the progress being made in understanding adolescent romantic relationships. Their research program has many of the cutting-edge features of contemporary romantic research, including large-scale representative sampling, the integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches, the consideration of partner influences, and the examination of subjective relationship factors. The sophistication of their approach has yielded a range of interesting findings, from surprising asymmetries in power to the demonstration of the unique influence of romantic partner delinquent behavior on adolescent problem behavior, to the importance of relationship dynamics in sexual encounters.

Unfortunately, in the process of capturing some of these little darlings, Giordano et al. also have revealed something else. Relationships are not all the same animal. In the process of chasing these relationships, it appears that we have caught a number of different phenomena. Some, in fact, seem rather mysterious and almost exist to thwart anyone who likes simple answers.

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<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by National Institute of Mental Health grant 50106 (W. Furman, P.I.).

In this chapter, we focus on some key issues and distinctions needed if we are to understand these mysterious relationships and the role they play in development. We first discuss the similarities and differences between friendships and romantic relationships and the ensuing implications for understanding their links. We then focus on some definitional issues and discuss the critical implications they have for interpreting the results we obtain. Finally, we discuss related relational phenomena, such as friends with benefits.

### *Friends and Lovers*

One of the key points that Giordano et al. make is that romantic relationships are distinct from friendships on a number of dimensions. They propose and show that romantic relationships are characterized by greater social and communication awkwardness, heightened emotionality, asymmetries, and issues of exclusivity. The effort to delineate these differences is a healthy tonic to the field of peer research. In the not so distant past, romantic relationships and platonic other-sex friendships were combined into a single category of other-sex friendships. Same-sex romantic relationships seem to have been simply ignored, a problem that unfortunately remains to some degree (Diamond, 2003).

In our own work (Hand & Furman, 2004) we also have looked at the differences between friendships and romantic relationships. When we have asked adolescents about the advantages and disadvantages of same-sex friendships and romantic relationships, we have found that physical intimacy, caretaking, and love and romance were mentioned more often as advantages of having romantic relationships than friendships. Another advantage is that having a romantic relationship eliminated the pressure to find someone to date or go out with. On the other hand, adolescents also mentioned that having a romantic partner constrained one's freedom in some way or another, came at some emotional or material cost, and involved some risk or vulnerability.

Some similarities may be found in the characteristics identified by the adolescents we interviewed and those in Giordano et al.'s framework. Adolescents' preferences to love and romance probably reflect the heightened emotionality that Giordano et al. discuss; the restrictions of autonomy are linked to the issues of commitment. At the same time, the lists do not overlap fully. Social scientists and adolescents seem to characterize these relationships in somewhat different terms. A comprehensive picture will require incorporating both perspectives (see Furman, Buhrmester, & Adler, 1988). The inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative data, as Giordano et al. plan in their TARS project, is one way to obtain such multiple perspectives.

In our study, we also asked adolescents about the advantages and disadvantages of other-sex friendships in addition to same-sex friendships and romantic relationships. Once again, the adolescents described these relationships

somewhat differently. In particular, they thought that these relationships were especially valuable in terms of providing insight into the other sex and opportunities for perspective-taking. At the same time, they also commonly reported being confused about the nature and direction of the relationship, and about whether it was a friendship or a budding romantic relationship. Clearly, each of these three relationships is distinct from the others. Not only will it be important to differentiate between friends and romantic partners, but among different types of friendship. In fact, it appears that other-sex friends may play a particularly important role in fostering the emergence of heterosexual romantic relationships (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000). Perhaps same-sex friendships play a similar role for lesbian, bisexual, and gay youth. Certainly, we will need to consider the gender and sexual orientation of the adolescent, as the functions and nature of these different relationships are not likely to be the same for these different groups of adolescents (Diamond, Savin-Williams, & Dube, 1999).

At the same time, the differences between romantic relationships and friendships should not be overstated. The majority of our adolescents reported that intimacy was an advantage of same-sex friendships and romantic relationships; negative interactions were a disadvantage of all three relationships.

Moreover, it is important to remember that a comparison of the characteristics of various types of relationships addresses a separate question from whether the characteristics of adolescents' different relationships are related to each other. The mean levels of a characteristic for adolescents in general can be different for two relationships, but the ratings of the characteristics for individual adolescents can be correlated with each other. For example, in general adolescents may communicate more awkwardly with romantic partners than with friends, but adolescents who are very awkward in communicating with romantic partners may also be likely to be awkward communicators with their friends. Those who are not as awkward with romantic partners may not be very awkward with friends as well. The chapter by Collins and van Dulmen (this volume) provides a thoughtful review of the literature on the relationship between the characteristics of adolescents' romantic relationships and other close relationships. The Giordano et al. chapter provides an important complement, emphasizing the discontinuities. Giordano et al. argue that romantic relationships are "something of a new ballgame." In our own theory (Furman & Wehner, 1994), we too have argued that romantic relationships are not a simple recreation of past relationships. As Giordano et al. note, the relationships are somewhat different in nature and entail new experiences. And of course, the specific partners are different in the different types of relationships. That other person—be it a parent, friend, or romantic partner—also shapes the particular nature of the relationship experience. In fact, Giordano et al. demonstrate that the partner's academic behavior and delinquency were related to the adolescent's own behavior in these domains.

At the same time, the relationships do share some common properties and what has been found, as Collins and van Dulmen (this volume) show. Thus, we would like to suggest that romantic relationships may be a new game, but some of the rules and skills are the same. In effect, the challenge is to identify and understand exactly what carries over, when it does, and for whom, in addition to what does not, when it does not, and for whom it does not. Different peer relationships have both similarities and distinct features, and we need to integrate them in our theories and research.

### *Defining Romantic Relationships*

Giordano and her colleagues observed that romantic relationships have been defined differently by different investigators. For example, in TARS they defined romantic relationships broadly as “when you like a guy [girl] and he [she] likes you back” (Giordano et al., this volume, p. 124). In our ongoing longitudinal study (Project Star), we too use a broad definition of romantic relationships. Specifically, we inquire about relationships in which participants have been dating for one month or longer. Dating is defined broadly as spending time with someone you are going or going out with. Like Giordano et al., we explicitly note that dating does not have to mean going out on a formal date. Similarly, the relationships are not restricted to “schmoopy” ones (lovesick or mushy relationships). In contrast, the classic Add Health study inquired about “special romantic relationships.” Add Health also includes “liked relationships,” although these only comprise a small proportion of the relationships examined—see Carver, Joiner, & Udry [2003] for details.)

Although some definitional differences can have little impact, we believe that the definition one has can have a significant effect on the results we obtain and their interpretation. Giordano et al. note that the proportion of individuals currently in a relationship differs substantially between Add Health and their TARS study. For example, in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Add Health finds 17% are involved, whereas TARS reports 32%. In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, Add Health finds 32% involved, and TARS reports 41%. In the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Add Health finds 44% are involved and Giordano et al.’s TARS project finds 30%. Similarly, we find 68% have been involved in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. In fact, the differences are greater than this, as TARS and Project Star examined the proportion of relationships in the last 12 months, and Add Health looked at 18 months.

The lengths of the relationships also differ as a function of the definition. In our study, the median length of relationships is 4 months; in Add Health it is 20+ months for 16+-year olds. The Add Health length may be higher in part because their group contains older participants as well as ones of comparable ages to those in our study; the median length for their 14- and 15-year olds, who are younger than our participants, is 7.9 months, which is still greater than our length. Interestingly, a little more than half of the Add Health relationships are not

reciprocated (Carver et al., 2003). As they noted, the relationship may be interpreted differently by two people; the partner may not consider it to be a special romantic relationship, and may not report it even if they are dating each other.

A major strength of Add Health is that it is a national sample. It is possible that some of the differences could stem from differences between Toledo and Denver and other parts of the country, but both TARS and our study obtained estimates that were very similar to Add Health on related variables such as the proportion of adolescents who are sexually active. Thus, it appears that the findings in Giordano et al. and our study include relationships not included in Add Health.

One of the strengths of Giordano et al.'s work is that they have successfully used both definitional approaches. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. By using a narrow definition of romantic relationships, an investigator may be more likely to focus on the important relationships that are likely to have an impact on adolescents' lives. For example, using the Add Health data, Haynes, Giordano, Manning, and Longmore (2003) found that romantic partners' delinquency was linked to adolescents' delinquency, net of other predictors. This finding provides a nice contribution to the delinquency literature, which had almost exclusively focused on friends' delinquency in adolescence. Would we find such links if we included the shorter, "nonspecial" romantic relationships? It is quite possible that we could because individuals are generally attracted to those who are similar to themselves. On the other hand, we may not, especially if we were examining partners' unique contribution or their impact on delinquency at a later point in time. In other words, it is unclear if a one- or two-month relationship will influence how delinquent one is after the relationship has ended.

Regardless of what proves to be the case in this particular instance, the general point is the same. The advantage of focusing on the romantic relationships most likely to be influential is counterbalanced by the need to determine the generalizability of the findings. If we use a narrow definition, we may have findings that only apply to a subset of romantic relationships; if we use a broad definition, we may miss findings that only apply to a smaller array of romantic relationships. Ideally, an investigator would have information to generate multiple definitions to determine how to carve up the domain of romantic relationships into coherent sets, and to determine the subsets of relationships to which certain findings apply. To the best of our knowledge, this has not been done yet.

Up to this point, we have discussed how definitions might influence comparisons among different romantic relationships. For instance, in the previous example we were examining the delinquency of adolescents with highly delinquent romantic partners compared to those with partners low in delinquency. The definitional issues also have implications for comparisons between adolescents with romantic relationships and those without. If a narrow definition is of interest, our comparison group contains individuals with romantic relationships that do not meet the narrower definition. For example, the comparison group with the Add

th definition would contain those with only “nonspecial” romantic relationships as nonromantic relationships. The narrow definition can prove to be valuable use with “special” or other narrowly defined relationships differ from those other romantic relationships as well as those without relationships. The narrow definition can mask findings if those with special and nonspecial relationships are similar to each other than they are to those without relationships.

Either way, it is important that we be clear about the nature of the comparison. For example, using the Add Health data set, Manning, Longmore, and Giordano (in press) and others (Grello, Welsh, Harper, & Dickson, in press) observed that a significant amount of sexual activity occurs outside of special romantic relationships. Some of this activity may occur in other nonspecial romantic relationships and not just with nonromantic or casual partners. Note, for example, in their TARS study, Giordano et al. report that the adolescents had known nondating sexual partners as long as their romantic sexual partners. They argue that one-night stands and fleeting relationships are not particularly common. These findings and precise descriptions of our comparison groups are important counterbalances to recent media descriptions that stress how pervasive sexual sex seems to be among adolescents.

### ***Sex and Romance***

These considerations of relational definition and context also underscore the importance of examining both sexual behavior and romantic experiences simultaneously. As Giordano et al. observed, the link between the two has not received much attention (see Furman & Shaffer, 2003). We know remarkably little about the role that partner and relationship characteristics play in sexual behavior (vice-versa). Studies simultaneously examining sexual activity and relationship context may help identify what factors are responsible for particular effects. Grello et al. (in press) nicely illustrated this point by using the Add Health data set to examine the effects of dating, sexual intercourse in special romantic relationships, and sexual intercourse outside of these relationships. The transition to dating and sexual intercourse in special romantic relationships was not associated with increases in depression, but those who engaged in sexual intercourse outside of these relationships were more depressed both before and after the transition. Without examining both the characteristics of the relationship and sexual behavior, they did not have identified this pattern.

Examination of the relational context of sexual behavior also aids our understanding of the related phenomena of friends with benefits, bed buddies, or friends with benefits (see Hand & Furman, in preparation). In effect, these friendships and acquaintanceships entail some form of sexual contact on some occasions. Although distinctions among them are somewhat vague, friends with benefits seem to be relationships that meet other functions as well as sexual pleasure and flirtation, whereas the latter two are more likely to be acquaintances in

which sexual behavior is a primary purpose. These kinds of relationships have not received much attention to date, yet we think they have the potential to shed light on both adolescent sexuality and the development of romantic relationships.

Fortunately, Giordano et al. and others are beginning to gather information about these relationships. First, they appear to be the context for the majority of sexual behavior that occurs outside romantic relationships. Giordano et al. report that over 70% of the partners defined as “non-dating” sexual partners were a friend, acquaintance, or ex-boyfriend. Moreover, the length of time they had known these individuals was similar to the time they had known their dating partners. Although they do not involve the commitment or expectations regarding future contact that romantic relationships usually do, they are not exactly the one-night stands sometimes depicted in the media.

Adolescents’ reports regarding the characterizations of these partners, the timing of the behaviors, and motivations for sexualized behaviors have important implications for better understanding functions of sexual behavior in adolescent relationships. For instance, we find that friends who doubled as sexual partners were sometimes past romantic or desired future partners, as was also the case for 34% of the Add Health participants described by Giordano et al. Similarly, we found that sexual activity occurred more often during ambiguous phases of the relationship than during clear friendship phases (Hand & Furman, in preparation). These findings suggest a possible relationship changing purpose to sexual activity with friends. Also, both Giordano and her colleagues and we find that a number of our adolescents reported that sexual activity with nonromantic partners served intimacy-building functions. In the future, further work on friends with benefits and the contextual factors surrounding sexual behavior may help us better understand the role of sexuality in the formation of romantic relationships and the role of sexuality outside of relationships.

### *Conclusion*

In summary, Giordano et al. have demonstrated the importance of differentiating romantic relationships from other peer relationships and considering the functions and context of relationships in so doing. As with all good research, the findings raise as many questions as they answer. We suggest that we could further profit by additional comparisons among different types of friendships, such as same-sex friendships, other-sex friendships, and friends with benefits. Each is interesting in its own right as well as important to the development of romantic relationships. Given the range of these different types of relationships, careful consideration must be afforded to definitions and their implications for interpretation. Further integration of sexuality and romantic relationships will also enhance our understanding of both. After all, romantic relationships are not platonic relationships, and sex does not happen in a vacuum. In effect, Giordano et al. have

not only helped in capturing the greased pig called romantic relationships, but they have led us to recognize that other animals out there are just as slippery and just as important to catch.

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