

1 CHAPTER 4
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4 **The Rocky Road of Adolescent**
5 **Romantic Experience: Dating**
6 **and Adjustment**
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18 **INTRODUCTION**
19

20 Adolescent romantic relationships have long been a centerpiece of our media
21 culture. Romeo and Juliet and Dante and Beatrice are classic love stories that
22 have enchanted generations of individuals. Today's movies are full of similar
23 tales, such as that between Jack Dawson and Rose DeWitt Bukater in the movie
24 Titanic. In effect, these relationships are depicted in idealized terms. They are
25 seen as very special and essential in one's life. In fact, many young adolescent
26 girls say that they expect to be in love all the time (Simon, Eder, & Evans, 1972).

27 Although our own adolescent relationships may not have been as idealized,
28 many of us still reflect on them with fondness. They were important and
29 exciting experiences in our adolescence. In fact, adolescents will commonly
30 neglect their close friends in order to spend time with a romantic partner (Roth
31 & Parker, 2001). Consistent with this depiction, social scientists have found
32 that adolescents have more strong positive emotions about the other sex than
33 about family, same-sex peers, or school (Wilson-Shockley, 1995). Although no
34 direct evidence exists, we believe that homosexual youth may have more
35 strong positive emotions about same-sex relationships than about other key
36 relationships.

37 Romantic partners also increasingly become sources of support. For example,
38 in an earlier study (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992), we examined age dif-
39 ferences in perceptions of support in different relationships. Mean ratings of
40 support for relationships with romantic partners, same-sex friends, mothers,
41 siblings, grandparents and teachers at four different grades are shown in
42 Table 4.1. Not surprisingly, fourth grade children (10–11 years) were unlikely
43 to report having a romantic partner, and those who said they had a romantic
44

Table 4.1 Mean levels of support for close relationships at four grade levels

	Grade			
	4	7	10	13+
Romantic Partner	2.77 _{4,c}	3.08 _{2,b,c}	3.19 _{2,a,b}	3.50 _{1,a}
Same-sex friend	3.41 _{3,a,b}	3.61 _{1,a}	3.57 _{1,a}	3.37 _{1,b}
Mother	3.90 _{1,a}	3.51 _{1,b}	3.32 _{2,c}	3.42 _{1,b,c}
Father	3.89 _{1,a}	3.39 _{1,b}	2.98 _{3,c}	3.16 _{2,c}
Sibling	3.43 _{2,3,a}	2.99 _{2,c}	3.11 _{3,b,c}	3.22 _{1,2,b}
Grandparent	3.64 _{2,a}	3.01 _{2,b}	2.75 _{4,6,c}	2.68 _{3,c}
Teacher	2.61 _{5,a}	1.86 _{3,b}	1.93 _{5,b}	—

Note. The numbers in subscripts indicate the rank order of the means across relationships within each grade. The letters in subscripts indicate the rank order of means across grade levels within each type of relationship. Means with different letters or numbers are significantly different from each other.

relationship did not see it as particularly supportive. Similarly, seventh grade adolescents (13–14 years old) reported that these relationships were not as supportive as their relationships with parents, although the ratings were similar to those given to relationships with siblings and grandparents. Tenth grade adolescents (15–16 years of age) saw them as more supportive than other significant relationships except their same-sex friendships. College males (19 years of age) reported that romantic relationships were their most supportive relationship, whereas college females said that the romantic relationship was among their most supportive relationships. A similar pattern is emerging in the longitudinal research described subsequently in this chapter. In the tenth grade, same-sex friends are seen as the most supportive, followed by mothers and romantic partners. By the twelfth grade, romantic partners and same-sex friends are perceived as the most supportive people in the network.

Similarly, when asked about the advantages of romantic relationships, high school adolescents most commonly mention support, companionship, and intimacy (Feiring, 1996; Hand & Furman, 2005b). In fact, more adolescents mentioned support and companionship as advantages of romantic relationships than as advantages of same- or other-sex friendships. Not surprisingly, physical intimacy and caretaking were also seen as distinct advantages of romantic relationships.

Not only are romantic relationships perceived quite positively, but they are also thought to contribute to psycho-social development in several important domains (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). They are a primary context for the development of sexuality. The majority of adolescents first have intercourse with someone they are going steady with or know well and like a lot (Abma, Chandra, Mosher, Peterson, & Piccinino, 1997; Rodgers, 1996). Adolescent experiences may also serve as the foundation for subsequent romantic relationships, including marriage (Erikson, 1968; Furman & Flanagan, 1997; Sullivan, 1953). Although theorists have emphasized the effects peers have on romantic relationships (e.g. Brown, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1992b), it seems

1 likely that romantic relationships will influence peer relationships as well
2 (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). In fact, romantic experience is positively related to
3 peer social competence (Neeman, Hubbard, & Masten, 1995). Romantic
4 experiences may also promote autonomy as adolescents increasingly rely
5 less on parents (Dowdy & Kliwer, 1998; Gray & Steinberg, 1999). Finally,
6 they may contribute to different facets of identity, including sexual orienta-
7 tion, sex-role identity, and romantic self-concept (Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

8 In contrast to the preceding positive portrayal of romantic relationships and
9 their contributions to development, adolescent romantic relationships have
10 also been associated with adverse consequences. Just as members of the
11 opposite sex are the most common source of strong positive emotions, they
12 are also the most common source of strong negative emotions (Wilson-
13 Shockley, 1995). In fact, romantic breakups are one of the strongest predictors
14 of depression, suicide attempts and suicide completions (Brent et al., 1993;
15 Joyner & Udry, 2000; Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999). Teen
16 pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases are also risks that come with
17 romantic experiences, as having a romantic relationship is the strongest
18 predictor of intercourse and its associated risks (Blum, Beuhring, & Rinehart,
19 2000). Romantic partners are the perpetrators of between one-half to
20 two-thirds of sexual victimization incidents in late adolescence (Flanagan &
21 Furman, 2000). More than 25% of adolescents are victims of dating violence or
22 aggression (see Wolfe & Feiring, 2000), and dating violence precedes serious
23 marital violence in 25% to 50% of cases (Gayford, 1975; Roscoe & Benaske,
24 1985). Between 10 and 15% of 16 and 17 year girls experience sexual violence
25 (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001); such physical or sexual violence is
26 associated with significantly greater risk for substance usage, unhealthy
27 weight control, sexual risk behavior, pregnancy, and risk of suicide (Silverman
28 et al., 2001). Those who are dating are more likely to use alcohol and drugs
29 (Aro & Taiple, 1987; Thomas & Hsiu, 1993). Those who are dating are more
30 likely to be in social contexts where substance use occurs, and resisting offers
31 of drugs from a romantic partner is particularly difficult to do (Trost, Langan,
32 & Kellar-Guenther, 1999).

33 The long list of risks associated with adolescent dating and romantic
34 relationships raises serious concerns about the consequences of dating and
35 romantic experiences. In fact, one would have to wonder why any parent
36 would permit an adolescent to date if it were this risky? One would even have
37 to ask why an adolescent would want to date if, as some have argued, it leads
38 to depression (Joyner & Udry, 2000). On the other hand, if dating and romantic
39 relationships promote psycho-social development, parents may want to
40 encourage their adolescents to date and have romantic relationships. These
41 different descriptions of the potential impact of adolescent romantic experi-
42 ences may not only seem confusing to a parent, but present a complex picture
43 for social scientists to interpret. Is one of these characterizations inaccurate or
44 can the different descriptions be reconciled?

45 Neeman et al. (1995) observed that romantic relationships require some
46 social skills, which may have been learned in other peer relationships. At the

1 same time, romantic relationships often involve a significant amount of time,
2 and may take away from the time needed in other domains of life. Aside from
3 Neeman et al.'s ideas, the seeming discrepancy in the portrayal of romantic
4 relationships has received little attention in the literature. In part, this is
5 because most investigators only examined a limited number of indices of
6 adjustment, and may not have observed such a discrepancy in their own work.
7 In any case, we will argue that descriptions of romantic experiences that only
8 stress their potential benefits or only focus on their risks do not provide a
9 complete picture of the impact of romantic experiences. Dating and romantic
10 relationships may bring both potential benefits and potential risks. In fact, the
11 risks and benefits are likely to occur simultaneously because of the social
12 context in which romantic experiences are embedded. We present results from
13 two large-scale studies of dating and adjustment. These studies illustrate that
14 when one looks at a range of different outcomes simultaneously, dating yields
15 both benefits and risks. Additionally, they demonstrate that the benefits and
16 risks depend upon the timing and nature of dating. Finally, we discuss how
17 other dimensions of romantic experience may be important, and point out
18 several issues to consider in assessing effects of romantic experience.
19

20 21 **TWO EMPIRICAL STUDIES OF DATING AND ADJUSTMENT**

22
23 Currently, we are conducting a longitudinal study of romantic relationships,
24 other close relationships, and adjustment. Participants were 100 females and
25 100 males who were initially recruited when they were in the tenth grade (14 to
26 16 years old). By design, the ethnicity of the sample closely approximated that
27 of the United States; specifically, the sample was 70% Euro-American, 12.5%
28 African-American, 12% Hispanic, 2.5% Asian, and 3% Other/Biracial. We
29 recruited the participants from a range of schools and neighborhoods to obtain
30 a diverse community sample. Consistent with our goals, the mean scores on
31 most measures of adjustment, substance use, and sexual activity closely
32 approximate the means of normative samples or large surveys.

33 The participants also had a range of different dating and sexual experiences.
34 Approximately 85% of the 10th grade participants reported that they had
35 begun dating; 75.5% had had a romantic relationship of one month duration or
36 longer. In the 10th grade, 31% of the participants reported that they had
37 engaged in sexual intercourse. The vast majority of the participants reported
38 that they were heterosexuals, although approximately 6% of the 10th graders
39 reported that they were sexual minorities or questioning their sexual orienta-
40 tion. These participants were included in the analyses, as most of them had
41 dated as well.

42 In the first year of the study the adolescents participated in either two or
43 three laboratory sessions, depending upon whether they had had a romantic
44 relationship or not. Separate interviews were conducted to assess their
45 experiences and views or representations of their relationships with parents,
46 friends, and past and present romantic partners (if applicable). Additionally,

1 they were observed interacting in a series of structured tasks with their
2 mother, with a close friend, and with a romantic partner (if applicable).
3 Participants used a computer assisted self-interviewing program to answer
4 questions about sensitive topics, such as sexual activity, substance use, and
5 criminal behavior. Other questionnaires were completed between sessions.
6 Parents, friends, and partners also completed questionnaires.

7 In the second wave of data collection a year later when most were in the
8 11th grade, the participants were interviewed about their romantic relation-
9 ships, completed questionnaires, and were observed with a romantic partner
10 (if applicable). Parents and friends completed questionnaires. All 200 adoles-
11 cents participated in this second wave.

12 In each wave of data collection, we gathered a number of measures of
13 adjustment and other psycho-social constructs that were thought to be
14 relevant to dating. The key constructs we assessed were: externalizing
15 symptoms, internalizing symptoms, scholastic competence, substance use,
16 genital sexual behavior, non-genital sexual behavior, peer acceptance, friend-
17 ship competence, romantic competence, peer acceptance, and physical appear-
18 ance. Externalizing symptoms were assessed by having the participant
19 complete the Youth Self-Report (Achenbach, 1991) and the mother and friend
20 complete the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991). Internalizing
21 symptoms were assessed by having the participant complete the Youth Self
22 Report (Achenbach, 1991), Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Rush, Shaw, &
23 Emery, 1979), and Spielberger (1983) Trait Anxiety Inventory. Substance use
24 was assessed by participant and friends' report of the frequency of alcohol use,
25 frequency of drug use, and substance use problems (Eggert, Herting, &
26 Thompson, 1996). Genital sexual activity was assessed by measuring the
27 frequency of intercourse and oral sex, and risky sexual activity, whereas
28 non-genital sexual activity was assessed by measuring the frequency of
29 necking ('making out'), light petting, and heavy petting (Furman & Wehner,
30 1992b; Metzler, Noell, & Biglan, 1992). Scholastic competence was assessed by
31 self-reported grade point average, and participants', mothers', and friends'
32 reports of scholastic competence using Harter's (1988) Adolescent Self-
33 Perception Profile. We also assessed social acceptance, friendship competence,
34 romantic competence, and physical attractiveness by having the participant,
35 mother, and friend complete the pertinent scales on Harter's Adolescent Self-
36 Perception Profile. As these descriptions illustrate, we included at least three
37 indices of each general domain, using multiple reporters when appropriate.
38 Confirmatory factor analyses revealed that these different indices of each
39 domain loaded on a common latent factor. We standardized the scores on the
40 measures and averaged them to derive the composites discussed here.

41 42 43 **Dating and the Timing of Onset of Dating**

44
45 First, we examined whether those 10th graders who had already begun dating
46 and those who had not differed on the various indices of adjustment and

peer-related social behavior. Dating was defined quite broadly as spending time with someone you are seeing or going out with. Whereas dating was once a formal, prearranged occasion, it is typically quite informal among adolescents in the United States now. Accordingly, we included informal, spontaneous instances as well as prearranged dates. We also included both dyadic dating and group dating.

We also examined the timing of the onset of dating as that too has been linked to various adjustment indices. For example, romantic experiences in late childhood or early adolescence are associated with substance use, minor delinquency, disordered eating tendencies, and lower levels of academic achievement (Aro & Taiple, 1987; Cauffman & Steinberg, 1996; Neeman et al., 1995). At the same time, those who are romantically involved at an early age are also more socially accepted (Neeman et al., 1995). We designated those who began dating in the 6th grade or before as early daters ($n = 54$; 27%), as this yielded a group comparable in size to those who had not begun dating and could ultimately be considered late starters ($n = 32$, 16%). The remaining participants who had begun dating in the 7th to 10th grade ($n = 114$, 57%) were designated to be typical onset daters.

Figures 4.1 and 4.2 present the mean scores for the three groups. We found significant differences between daters and nondaters on most of the indices of psycho-social adjustment and competence. Daters had significantly more externalizing symptoms. No differences were found in internalizing symptoms

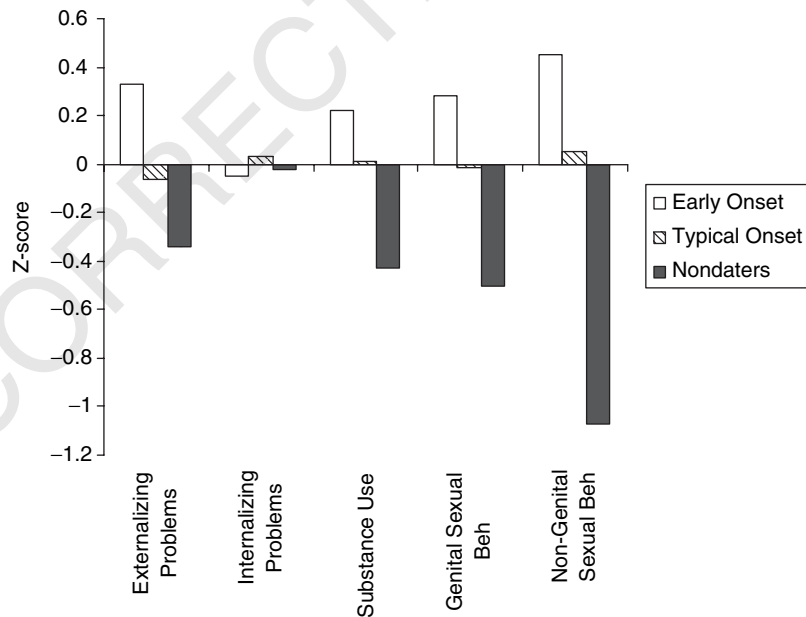


Figure 4.1 Differences among early onset daters, typical onset daters, and nondaters in symptoms and risky behaviors

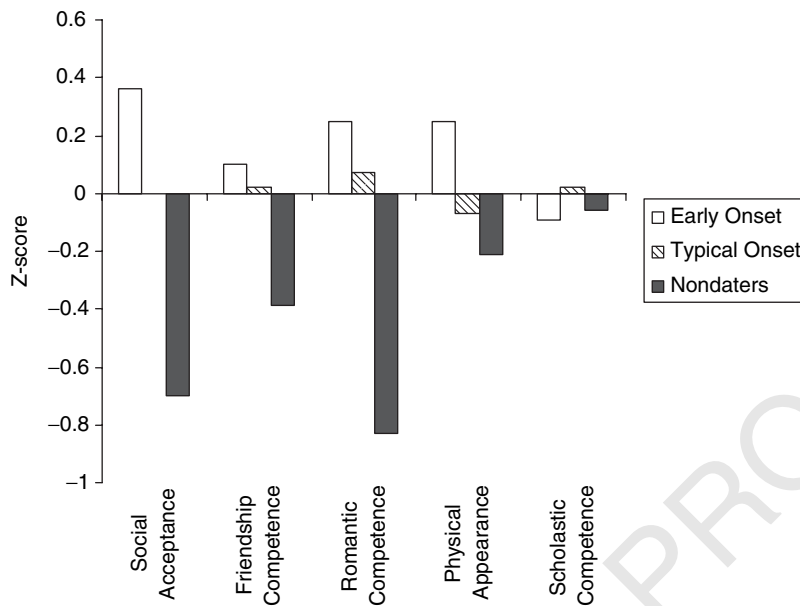


Figure 4.2 Differences among early onset daters, typical onset daters, and nondaters in interpersonal competence

or scholastic competence. Consistent with prior work (Aro & Taiple, 1987), daters engaged in more substance use. Not surprisingly, they also engaged in more non-genital and genital sexual activity. At the same time, daters also were higher in social acceptance, friendship competence, and romantic competence.

Differences were also observed between those who started dating at an early age and those whose timing was more typical. The early onset daters were higher in externalizing problems and nongenital sexual behavior than the typical onset daters. At the same time, the early onset daters were rated as more socially accepted and more physically attractive. Thus, consistent with the literature's general portrayal of dating and the timing of dating, we found links with indices of psycho-social competence as well as risky or problematic behaviors.

Of course, the findings are cross-sectional in nature. It seems at least as plausible that externalizing symptoms may lead to dating as the reverse. Similarly, friendship competence and social competence could as easily lead to dating as the reverse. In fact, one might be tempted to think that the characteristics of the adolescents who date, rather than the experience of dating, may be responsible for the associations as differences were found between the early and typical onset dating groups as well between these two groups and nondaters. For example, youth who engage in delinquent behavior or otherwise act out may be more likely to enter the dating arena earlier, perhaps because of familial conflicts. Similarly, those who are

1 more socially accepted and attractive may be prominent in the peer group
2 and thus may be more likely to date earlier (Dunphy, 1963; Franzoi, Davis,
3 & Vasquez-Suson, 1994). On the other hand, the nature of dating experi-
4 ences in early adolescence is likely to be qualitatively different from that in
5 middle adolescence, and those differences in the nature of the dating experi-
6 ence could contribute to the differences in adjustment. For example, females'
7 early dating partners are commonly older males, who may be more likely to
8 exploit the young adolescents (Pawlby, Mills, Taylor, & Quinton, 1997). Thus,
9 we cannot tell whether the differences in adjustment reflect the experiences
10 of dating or the characteristics of those who start dating early or some third
11 factor.

12 In any case, these findings provide an interesting contrast to an earlier study
13 of a relatively similar sample of 208 adolescents who were in the 12th grade
14 (ages 16 to 19). In that study, assessment of adjustment was not as extensive as
15 the current study. Participants completed the Brief Symptoms Inventory,
16 which assesses nine types of symptoms (Derogatis, 1993). Unlike the other
17 study where daters reported greater symptomatology, those who had had
18 only minimal or no experience dating reported greater numbers of symptoms
19 on three of the nine scales (depression, interpersonal sensitivity, and psycho-
20 toicism). These findings have led us to hypothesize that beginning dating at the
21 time when most peers begin is associated with better adjustment than either
22 an early or late onset of dating. Early onset may be linked with externalizing
23 problems and substance use, whereas late onset may be associated with
24 internalizing problems and low interpersonal competence.

25 26 27 **Dimensions of Dating**

28
29 It is also important to recognize that the distinction among early daters, typical
30 onset daters, and nondaters is a simple division that is inherently limited in
31 nature. Adolescents who are dating may vary widely in the degree and nature
32 of their experiences. Some may have dated only one or two times, whereas
33 others may have had long-term relationships or a number of different
34 relationships. In the first study of 10th graders, we administered a Dating
35 History Questionnaire to examine a range of aspects of romantic experience
36 (Furman & Wehner, 1992a). We asked if they had experienced each of 16
37 romantically relevant events and what grade they had first experienced them.
38 The list of 16 ranged from activities that typically occur earlier in adolescence
39 (e.g. mixed gender parties) to those that typically occur at older ages (e.g.
40 committed relationships). Emotional experiences, such as crushes or being in
41 love, were also included. As with our other measures, the questions appear to
42 be appropriate for both sexual minorities and heterosexual youth. It is,
43 however, likely that some activities that are more relevant to sexual minorities
44 may not have been included, for example, internet contacts, participation
45 in gay lesbian bisexual and transsexual clubs, and passionate friendships
46 (Diamond, 2000; Diamond, Savin-Williams, & Dubé, 1999).

Table 4.2 Correlations of dating dimensions with adjustment composites

	Romantic Experience	Casual Dating	Serious Romantic
Externalizing Problems	.29**	.36**	-.13
Internalizing Problems	-.01	-.01	.02
Scholastic Competence	-.09	-.19*	-.08
Substance Use	.39**	.24**	-.15 ⁺
Genital Sexual Behavior	.44**	.47**	.11
Nongenital Sexual Behavior	.67**	.52**	.20*
Social Acceptance	.36**	.17*	.13
Friendship Competence	.18*	.03	.01
Romantic Competence	.54**	.19*	.48**
Physical Appearance	.17*	.18*	.23**

** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. ⁺ $p < .10$.

Because of the limitations of using a simple dating/nondating dichotomy, we summed the number of different experiences participants had had to derive a continuous index of romantic experience. The pattern of relations with the different adjustment composites are presented in the left hand column of Table 4.2. The results were similar to those obtained with the dating/nondating dichotomy. That is, greater romantic experience was associated with more externalizing problems, substance use, and non-genital and genital sexual activity on the one hand, and greater social acceptance, friendship competence and romantic competence on the other hand. It was also associated with physical attractiveness, a finding that had not appeared with the simple dichotomous measure. In fact, the magnitude of most relations was generally a little stronger with the romantic experience measure rather than the dichotomous dater/nondater measure. Thus, it would seem best to conceptualize and measure romantic experience as a continuous variable.

A more detailed examination of the characteristics of romantic experiences revealed a more differentiated picture. Specifically, we asked a series of questions about the nature of their experiences. These questions were found to load on two factors: (1) a Casual Dating factor, whose specific indices were the number of individuals dated in the last year, the total number of individuals dated, grade of onset of dating, perceptions of oneself as a 'player,' number of people cheated on, and number of people who had cheated on them; and (2) a Serious Romantic factor, whose specific indices were length of relationships, proportion of relationships that were long, and dating satisfaction. The proportion of time dating and overall amount of romantic experience loaded on both, suggesting that these indices reflected the sheer quantity (vs. nature) of dating. Factor scores were derived by standardizing and averaging the scales that uniquely loaded on each factor.

As shown in Table 4.2, the casual dating factor was related to the same indices of externalizing symptoms, substance use, and genital and nongenital

1 sexual activity that overall romantic experience was; additionally, it was
2 associated with poor scholastic competence. These findings are consistent
3 with prior research in which the number of dating partners an adolescent had
4 had in the prior year was correlated with externalizing and internalizing
5 symptoms, poor academic performance, and poor emotional health (Zimmer-
6 Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2001). At the same time, the casual dating
7 factor was also related to social acceptance and romantic competence,
8 although not friendship competence.

9 On the other hand, the serious romantic dimension was not as strongly
10 related to these various indices of problematic adjustment (see Table 4.2). Only
11 the association with nongenital sexual activity was significant, and, in fact, the
12 serious romantic dimension tended to be negatively related to substance use.
13 Moreover, the serious romantic dimension was strongly related to romantic
14 competence. We also did median splits on the two dimensions and categor-
15 ized participants into the resulting four groups. Those who were high on
16 casual dating and low on serious romantic experiences were higher in exter-
17 nalizing symptoms, substance use, and genital sexual behavior than those low
18 on casual dating and high on serious romantic experiences. The primary
19 difference in social acceptance was between those who were low on both and
20 the other three groups. Similarly, the primary difference in physical attrac-
21 tiveness was between those who were low on both the casual and serious
22 versus those who were high on both. The overall pattern of results suggest that
23 the dimensions of casual dating and serious romantic experience may either
24 have distinctly different impacts on adolescents, or the characteristics of
25 adolescents who have primarily serious or casual relationships are quite
26 different.

27 28 29 **Changes in Romantic Experiences and Adjustment**

30
31 The analyses that have been presented to this point have been cross-sectional,
32 thus limiting any inferences about directionality of effect. To examine direc-
33 tionality, we analyzed whether the degree of romantic experience was
34 predictive of changes in adjustment indices from the first wave of data
35 collection to the second wave of data collection a year later. Conversely, we
36 examined whether adjustment was predictive of the amount of romantic
37 experience by the second wave after controlling for scores on the romantic
38 experience dimension in the first wave. These analyses were limited to those
39 variables, which covaried with romantic experience at wave 1.

40 Romantic experience at wave 1 predicted increases from wave 1 to wave 2
41 in genital and non-genital sexual behavior, and romantic competence (see
42 Table 4.3). Conversely, genital sexual behavior and romantic competence at
43 wave 1 predicted increases in romantic experience, and non-genital sexual
44 activity tended to predict changes in romantic experience over that year as
45 well. Romantic experience at wave 1 predicted increases in substance use, but
46 substance use did not predict changes in romantic experience over the year.

Table 4.3 Prediction of changes at wave 2 from wave 1 romantic experience or adjustment composite

Adjustment Composite	Romantic Experience Predicting Change In Composite	Composite Predicting Change in Romantic Experience
Externalizing Problems	.02	-.01
Substance Use	.20**	.01
Genital Sexual Behavior	.26**	.08
Nongenital Sexual Behavior	.30**	.17**
Social Acceptance	-.01	.19**
Friendship Competence	.00	-.00
Romantic Competence	.22**	.19**
Physical Appearance	.01	.15**

Note. The middle column depicts the standardized betas for romantic experience in a regression equation predicting changes in the outcome variables listed in the right column. The right column depicts the standardized betas for the outcome variables predicting changes in romantic experience from wave 1 to wave 2.
 ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. † $p < .10$.

On the other hand, social acceptance and physical appearance predicted changes in romantic experience, but romantic experience did not predict increases in either of the two. Finally, externalizing symptoms and friendship competence each covaried with romantic experience at wave 1, but neither predicted increases in romantic experience, nor did romantic experience predict increases in them. The diversity of the pattern of relations illustrates the critical importance of examining the pattern of relations longitudinally before making assertions about the healthy or unhealthy effects of dating or other social experiences.

Substantively, it appears that reciprocal links may occur when the two constructs are closely related to each other. Romantic experience may readily lead to sexual activity, which may in turn lead to increased romantic experience. Similarly, romantic experience may typically promote feelings of romantic competence, which may in turn promote romantic experience. These links between romantic experience and romantic competence are certainly not surprising but do suggest that adolescents may be acquiring skills and knowledge from their experiences that may carryover to subsequent relationships, or at the very least, they are acquiring some sense of confidence.

In other instances, one variable seems to serve as a context for the other one. For example, dating may lead to increased drinking, perhaps because of the social nature of dating life in adolescence. Similarly, peer acceptance and physical attractiveness may provide opportunities for individuals to become romantically involved with others. These findings are consistent with prior work, showing links between friendships and subsequent romantic relationships (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000).

What might account for the absence of predictive links between romantic experience and the externalizing symptoms and friendship competence variables? Perhaps a third factor is responsible for the covariation. Perhaps

any effect of one variable on the other requires more time than a year to occur. Or perhaps the causal action has occurred earlier in development, and the pattern reflects a current state of stasis. For example, antisocial youth may become prematurely involved in romantic activities at an early age as a way of acting out, but such externalizing behavior may not continue to foster further romantic experiences when they have reached high school.

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND EXPERIENCE

In the present chapter, we have focused on the links between dating and adjustment. This, however, does not provide a full picture of romantic experiences and their potential links with adjustment. Collins (2003) proposed examining five features: involvement, quality, partner selection, content and cognitive and emotional processes. Our own work has been guided by a similar framework depicted in Table 4.4.

The first additional feature to examine is the quality of the romantic relationship. As has been found with other close relationships (see Adler &

Table 4.4 Dimensions of romantic relationships and experience

Romantic experience
Dating/NonDating
Timing of Onset of Dating
Casual Dating
Serious Romantic Relationships
Romantic Relationship Qualities
Support
Negative Interactions
(or Control/Dependency)
Behavioral Systems (Interaction Content)
Affiliation
Sexuality
Attachment
Caretaking
Partner Characteristics
Gender, Age, and Other Demographic Characteristics
Prosocial or Antisocial Characteristics
Similarities/Dissimilarities
Views
Working Models of Romantic Experiences
Romantic Styles
Rejection Sensitivity
Dating Anxiety
Related Experiences
Other Sexual Activity
Friendships (Other-Sex Friendships/Passionate Friendships)
Specific Events

1 Furman, 1988; Furman, 1996), support and negative interactions are two key
2 dimensions of romantic relationships. We have also further differentiated
3 negative interactions into participant controlling-partner dependent and part-
4 ner controlling-participant dependent dimensions (Furman, 2001). We have
5 hypothesized that the importance of relationship quality will change devel-
6 opmentally. In early and middle adolescence, having a romantic relationship
7 may be more important than its actual quality (Brown, 1999). Consistent with
8 this idea, Daniels and Moos (1990) found depressed early adolescents obtained
9 fewer social resources from their friends than non-depressed ones, but no
10 differences were found in the resources obtained from their romantic partners.
11 Yet, at the end of high school, the links between relationship dysfunction and
12 depression have been found to be stronger in romantic relationships than in
13 friendships (Daley & Hammen, 2002). Thus, adjustment and romantic rela-
14 tionship quality should become more closely connected later in development.
15 Consistent with this idea, we found ratings of partner controlling-participant
16 dependent and perceived negative interactions to be associated with greater
17 symptomatology in our prior study of 12th grade adolescents (Furman, 2000),
18 but we find relatively few links with romantic relationship quality in the study
19 of 10th graders (see Laursen's commentary for further elaboration). In fact, we
20 find relationship quality to only be related to romantic competence and not
21 the other indices of competence or risky behavior examined in this chapter.
22 These findings are similar to those reported by Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2001)
23 who found middle adolescent romantic relationship quality to be associated
24 with romantic competence and social acceptance, but not with indices of
25 emotional health, symptomatology, and scholastic performance.

26 With regard to the content of romantic relationships, we've proposed that
27 romantic relationships become key contexts for the affiliative, sexual, attach-
28 ment, and caregiving systems (Furman & Wehner, 1994; Furman, 1998). Early
29 romantic relationships are expected to be characterized primarily by affiliation
30 and sexual activity, but in late adolescence or adulthood partners may begin to
31 serve as key attachment figures, and individuals may provide caregiving for
32 their partners. The links to adjustment are likely to vary substantially as a
33 function of the nature of the relationship.

34 Additionally, the characteristics of the partner may play a major role in
35 shaping the nature of the relationship and its potential impact on adjustment.
36 For many years, social psychologists have examined the links between
37 interpersonal attraction and similarity in adults (see Berscheid & Reis, 1988).
38 In young adulthood, a partner who is similar may promote continuity in
39 adjustment, whereas a dissimilar one may lead to changes in the course of
40 development and adjustment (Quinton, Pickles, Maughan, & Rutter, 1993). For
41 example, a supportive, prosocial adult can disrupt patterns of childhood
42 conduct disorder, whereas a deviant/antisocial one may promote its conti-
43 nuity. As yet, however, we know relatively little about how the characteristics
44 of partners in adolescence may affect the relationship or adjustment.

45 One of the key elements of our framework is views or cognitive representa-
46 tions of romantic relationships, the self in that type of relationship, and the

1 partner in that kind of relationship (Furman & Wehner, 1994; Furman & Simon,
2 1999). These views are conceptualized as expectations regarding intimacy and
3 closeness. Views are expected to influence a person's behavior toward a
4 romantic partner and serve as a basis for predicting and interpreting the
5 partner's behavior. In past research, we have found that adolescents' romantic
6 views are related to their views of friendships and to some degree their views
7 of their relationships with parents (Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchey, 2002).
8 More recently, we have found that views, especially female's views, are linked
9 to patterns of interactions with romantic partner (Furman & Simon, 2004). To
10 date we know little about the links between adjustment and romantic views. In
11 our study of 12th grade adolescents, however, we found that preoccupied
12 views were associated with greater symptomatology and lower self-esteem,
13 whereas dismissing views were associated with poor school performance.

14 Several related phenomena also entail examination, most especially sexual
15 behavior. Ironically, the research fields of sexual behavior and romantic
16 relationships have remained largely isolated from each other. We know
17 surprisingly little about how the romantic partner characteristics or romantic
18 relationship qualities influence sexual activity; in fact, we still know much
19 more about how a parent or friend affects sexual behavior than how a partner
20 does. With the emerging interest in romantic relationships, one might have
21 expected this oversight to be corrected, but relationship researchers have
22 primarily focused on other characteristics, such as conflict or intimacy. In
23 effect, romantic relationships are studied as if they are platonic in nature.
24 Clearly, however, sexual behavior and romantic experiences are closely related.
25 As described previously, sexual activity and romantic experience were found
26 to be linked, each predicting changes in the other. Moreover, genital and non-
27 genital sexual behavior and substance use were similarly linked, underscoring
28 the potential impact of sexual behavior on psycho-social adjustment.

29 It is also important to remember that sexual activity is not constrained to
30 romantic relationships or even short-term dating partners; in our study of
31 12th grade adolescents, we found that over 90% engaged in light sexual
32 activity with their closest other sex friend, with whom they had never had a
33 romantic relationship; 26% engaged in light petting, and 15% engaged in
34 heavy petting, oral sex, or intercourse (Hand & Furman, 2005a). The devel-
35 opmental significance of this activity remains uncharted.

36 More generally, work is needed on relationships that share some similarities
37 with romantic relationships. For heterosexual youth, these would be other-sex
38 friendships; for homosexual youth, these would be same-sex friendships,
39 particularly passionate friendships (Diamond, 2000; Diamond, Savin-
40 Williams, & Dubé, 1999). Such individuals may not only become romantic
41 partners in some instances, but also they can be a conduit to other potential
42 romantic partners (Connolly, Furman, & Konarsky, 2000) and an important
43 source of information about romantic relationships (Hand & Furman, 2005b).
44 It will be important to discern what the unique contributions of dating and
45 romantic relationships provide, and what contributions they may provide as
46 part of the peer social arena.

1 Finally, it is important to differentiate between the general influence of
2 having a romantic relationship, and particular experiences or qualities of a
3 relationship. Physical violence, sexual victimization or breakups may occur in
4 the context of romantic relationships, but these events, rather than having a
5 relationship per se, may underlie certain effects. For example, Joyner and
6 Udry (2000) reported that those who had a romantic relationship were more
7 depressed than those who had not. However, when the effect of having a
8 breakup is controlled for, the difference is substantially attenuated, suggesting
9 break-ups are likely to be the responsible mechanism, not the simple existence
10 of a romantic relationship.
11

12 THE ANALYSIS OF EFFECTS

13
14
15 In the present chapter, we have primarily examined the effects of dating on
16 adjustment by conducting a series of regression analyses. As additional waves
17 of data are completed, we will be able to conduct latent growth curve models
18 to identify either the predictors or consequences of both the average level of
19 dating activity and changes in dating activity (i.e. the intercepts and slopes).
20 Such an approach will provide a means for assessing an alternative, yet
21 complementary, model of change (Curran, 2000; Curran & Willoughby, 2003).

22 One issue that warrants further consideration is the time between assess-
23 ments. Yearly assessments may not be ideal for some questions. For example,
24 although longitudinal studies have commonly found a link between deviant
25 peer association and substance use, one of the most compelling demonstrations
26 of such is Dishion and Medici Skagg's (2000) finding that substance use in a
27 particular month covaried with exposure to peer problem behavior in
28 that month. Some effects of romantic experience may be short lived and missed
29 if the time-lag between assessments is too long (Collins & Graham, 2002).
30 Some of the effects of dating may be a function of the current status, and not the
31 typical status in a year. Links of these kinds would require alternative strategies
32 of data collection, such as daily diaries or experience sampling methods.

33 On the other hand, some effects may take longer than a year or may require
34 repeated exposure. For example, one poor relationship may have no effects or
35 at least no long-term effects, but a string of failed relationships might.

36 It is important to remember that adolescents vary substantially in the timing of
37 their romantic experiences. As shown here, the timing of experiences is as-
38 sociated with various indices of adjustment. On the other hand, having certain
39 experiences may be comparable even if the exact time of the experience is
40 somewhat different. For example, those who have had a serious relationship
41 may be comparable in some respects, even if they vary somewhat in the age of
42 that experience. If we are to understand the influence of romantic experiences,
43 we need to find means of being sensitive to the variability in the timing. Other-
44 wise, similarities (or differences) in the trajectories of experience may be masked.

45 Finally, inferences about causality from correlational data are inherently
46 limited, whether the data are longitudinal or not. Experimental studies would

1 be ideal, but it is difficult to imagine manipulating romantic experiences or
2 relationships. The pragmatic and ethical considerations would be challenging
3 to say the least. However, intervention programs for preventing partner
4 violence or treatments of dysfunctional relationships may provide experimen-
5 tal opportunities to examine the links among variables (e.g. Wolfe, Wekerle,
6 & Scott, 2003). One could also include assessments of romantic experiences in
7 other interventions with adolescents.
8
9

10 CONCLUSION

11
12 In summary, we believe that dating and romantic experiences cannot simply
13 be characterized as simply having positive or negative effects. Some of the
14 variables associated with romantic experience are indices of social competence
15 and others are risky behaviors. Moreover, some of these variables do not
16 appear to be causally affected by romantic experience, but are simply
17 correlated with romantic experience (e.g. friendship competence and externa-
18 lizing symptoms). In other instances, the causal paths may be in the other
19 direction; for example, it appears that social acceptance and physical attrac-
20 tiveness are more likely to lead to romantic experience than the reverse.
21 Furthermore, the seeming effects of romantic experience are also varied in
22 nature. In some cases, reciprocal relations exist, such as between sexual
23 behavior and romantic experience. In other instances, dating seems to serve
24 as a context for certain events to occur, such as substance use.

25 Importantly, the links between romantic experiences and adjustment are
26 qualified by the nature of the experience. For example, casual dating experi-
27 ences and serious romantic involvement were found to be related differently
28 to our adjustment indices. The variation in outcomes is likely to be even
29 greater when we take into account the full range of dimensions of romantic
30 experiences described previously.

31 Thus, if a parent were to ask us if dating and romantic experiences were
32 fraught with risks or full of potentials for positive growth, we would not
33 answer with a simple yes or no. An answer that both are true would be
34 accurate, but an even better answer would be that the effects depend heavily
35 on the kinds of experiences or relationships their adolescent has.

36 In effect, we believe that dating and romantic experiences are like learning
37 how to drive an automobile. Driving can be fun and rewarding, and it can lead
38 one to places we want or need to go to. At the same time, it entails some risk
39 whenever we turn the ignition key and start the car. Such risks are particularly
40 likely to occur when we are young and inexperienced. And the degree of risk
41 will depend on the nature of our car and how we drive it. We have learned a
42 lot about how to make automobiles and roads safe. Our challenge as scientists
43 is to identify the factors that lead to healthy and unhealthy romantic experi-
44 ences, so that we may promote safe drives on the rocky road of adolescent
45 romantic experience.
46

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