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ADVICE FROM YOUTH: SOME LESSONS FROM THE STUDY OF ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Our research program has focused on middle school and high school adolescents' social networks and more recently on adolescents' romantic relationships. The adolescents in our studies have taught us a number of lessons about studying personal relationships. We use examples from our research to illustrate these lessons and discuss their implications for studying adult, as well as adolescent, relationships. In particular, adolescents have taught us to recognize the multi-leveled nature of networks and to distinguish among the interactional, dyadic relationship, group and overall levels of networks. The diversity of adolescent relationships presents researchers with the methodological and conceptual challenge of identifying and taking into account the similarities and differences among relationships. Research with adolescents also makes one appreciate the developmental transformations that relationships undergo. We describe changes in the absolute level and relative level of characteristics, the stability and centrality of characteristics, and their structure. We discuss implications of the idea that development occurs at the individual level, and distinguish between developmental trajectories and the timing of such trajectories.

KEY WORDS • adolescence • attachment • development • romantic relationships • social networks

Being told I would be expected to talk here, I inquired what sort of a talk I ought to make. They said it should be something suitable to youth —

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something didactic, instructive, or something in the nature of good advice. Very well . . . Always obey your parents, when they are present. This is the best policy in the long run, because if you don't they will make you. Most parents think they know better than you do, and you can generally make more by humoring that superstition than you can by acting on your own better judgment. Be respectful to your superiors, if you have any, also to strangers, and sometimes to others. If a person offends you, and you are in doubt whether it was intentional or not, do not resort to extreme measure; simply watch your chance and hit him with a brick . . . Leave dynamite to the low and unrefined (p. 564).

Mark Twain (1882/1963) *Advice to Youth*

Mark Twain, Polonius, a fabricated Kurt Vonnegut, and many others have given advice to youth — sometimes with tongue in cheek, but often earnestly and wisely. In many ways, social scientists studying adult relationships have also given advice to those of us studying children's or adolescents' relationships. Such advice has not usually taken the form of lectures (or humor!), but instead it has been in the form of insights about relationships that are not only applicable to the adult relationships they were studying, but to children's and adolescents' relationships as well. For example, adult relationship research is often more theoretically driven than relationship research on children and adolescents where basic descriptive information is still being gathered; these theories of adult relationships, however, may shed new light on children's or adolescents' relationships (Furman, 1993).

In the present paper, we would like to return the favor in a small way and describe some of the lessons the middle school and high school adolescents in our studies and other developmental studies have taught us about studying relationships. Generally speaking, these lessons address the complexity of individuals' social networks and the developmental transformations in relationships and networks across the life-span. Portions of these lessons will be familiar to a number of adult investigators (and, in fact, are evident in their research), but we hope that these observations about middle school and high school adolescents' relationships may trigger further consideration of these issues in studying relationships throughout the life-span.

The research program

We begin with a brief overview of our research program, which has had two primary emphases. In our earlier work, we focused on children and adolescents' *network of relationships*. Some of our work focused on the peer group in the network (Gavin & Furman, 1989), but most of it focused on the close dyadic relationships in the network. We developed a Network of Relationships Inventory to assess perceptions of social support, negative interactions and relative power in close relationships (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). (Parenthetically speaking, our list of social support provisions was based on Weiss', 1974, theory, one of many instances in which we've used the adult relationship literature as a springboard for our own work.)

We examined age and sex differences in perceptions of relationships, documenting that in adolescence, individuals increasingly rely on same-sex friends and then later on romantic partners (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Harmonious relationships (e.g. those with frequent support and infrequent negative interactions) were found to be associated with several indices of adjustment, but the links differ depending upon the specific relationship and domain of adjustment (Furman, 1987). For example, harmonious relationships with mothers, siblings, friends and romantic partners were related to general self-perceptions of adjustment, whereas harmonious ones with mothers and teachers were related to school adjustment. In a subsequent observational study, we examined the predictors of harmony in relationships with mothers and with best friends (Gavin & Furman, 1998). Those in harmonious relationships of either kind had more similar needs to their partners and perceived them to be better at meeting their needs than those in disharmonious relationships. Attunement, positive affect, and negotiation of power were also greater in harmonious relationships with both mothers and friends. Harmonious mothers and daughters had more similar interests than disharmonious ones, but harmonious and disharmonious friends did not differ, perhaps because both groups had relatively similar interests. Taken together, these studies have provided information about the different relationships in social networks and individual and developmental differences in these relationships.

More recently, we have focused on *adolescent romantic relationships*, a topic that has received surprisingly little attention. We proposed a behavioral systems conceptualization of romantic relationships, which hypothesizes that a romantic partner can become a major figure in the functioning of the attachment, caregiving, affiliative and sexual behavioral systems (Furman & Wehner, 1994). That is, an individual may seek out a romantic partner at times of distress, and may provide caregiving when the partner is distressed. The person may also turn to the partner for companionship, affiliation or friendship (Furman, 1998). Finally, the person may also seek sexual gratification from a partner. This conceptualization is partially based on attachment theorists' idea that romantic relationships involve the integration of the attachment, caretaking and sexual system (Ainsworth, 1989; Shaver & Hazan, 1988), but it also incorporates the neo-Sullivanian idea that these are egalitarian peer relationships in which cooperation, mutualism, reciprocal altruism, and co-construction of a relationship occur as well (Buhrmester & Furman, 1986; Furman, 1998). Our inclusion of these affiliative features in the conceptualization leads to the important argument that friendships and peer relationships, as well as parent-child relationships, play a central role in the development of romantic relationships (Furman, 1998). Theoretical papers have also been written on the nature of cognitive representations of romantic relationships (Furman & Simon, 1998) and on the influence of early romantic relationships on subsequent ones (Furman & Flanagan, 1997). We have argued that one's representations of a current relationship are influenced by representations

of early relationships, but are also influenced by current experiences in relationships with romantic partners, peers and parents. Working models — at least secure ones — are open to new information and undergo transformations accordingly.

In our research to date, we have examined the links among representations of relationships with parents, friends and romantic partners (Furman, 1998; Furman & Wehner, 1994), and have examined age differences in perceptions of romantic relationships and their correlates (Furman & Wehner, 1997). In several projects, we have found that cognitive representations of friendships and romantic relationships are related, and that the peer group may influence romantic relationships by serving as a setting or context for the emergence of heterosexual romantic relationships (Connolly et al., 1998, Furman, 1998). As will be discussed subsequently, our results suggest that the nature of the links among different relationships seems to differ across ages (Furman & Wehner, 1997).

Currently, we are gathering observational, interview and questionnaire data from a diverse sample of high school students. The project examines patterns of interaction in romantic relationships, the links among different relationships, past and present romantic experiences, the role of romantic partners, the potential influence of parental marriages and other factors that may influence the qualitative features and timing of romantic relationships.

Our research with adolescents has taught us a number of ‘lessons’ about social networks and development that we believe may be useful to investigators studying relationships at other points in the life-span. In the sections that follow, we describe these ‘lessons’ and their potential ramifications. In short, these lessons address: (i) the multi-level nature of individuals’ social networks; (ii) the variety of relationships within a given level of the social network; (iii) changes in the mean level of particular relationship features across the life-span; (iv) developmental changes in the stability and centrality of relationship features; (v) qualitative or structural changes in specific relationships over the course of development; and (vi) the individual organism and the timing and trajectories of social development.

The nature of social networks

Adolescents’ social networks are quite complex in nature and, thus, require examination at multiple levels. We distinguish among four different levels of analysis (Buhrmester, 1983; Furman, 1989): (i) the interactional level, (ii) the dyadic level, (iii) the group level, and (iv) the global network level. Interactions refer to specific encounters between individuals. Dyadic relationships subsume such interactions, but they entail more than particular interactions as they are ongoing frameworks for emotions, cognitions and interactions.

Peer groups, cliques, or families include sets of relationships, but they

entail more than the dyadic relationships themselves. Finally, the global network incorporates all of these relationships.

The different levels are not reducible to one another and, thus, reflect somewhat different aspects of a person's social world. Consider the dyadic and group level. Some children may have close friendships, but not be well accepted in the general peer group; conversely, some may be accepted in the peer group, but not have close friendships (Parker & Asher, 1993). Friendships and peer groups may serve different functions. Friendships may provide opportunities for affection, intimacy and reliable alliance, whereas peer groups may provide a sense of belonging or inclusion (Furman & Robbins, 1985). Similarly, friendships may provide opportunities for intimacy skills, whereas leadership skills may be acquired in group interactions (Buhrmester & Furman, 1986). Finally, the developmental course of the two are somewhat different. Perceptions of supportive interactions with close friends are greater in early and middle adolescence than in pre-adolescence (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992), yet similar perceptions of positive interactions in one's clique or group are lower at this age than before (Gavin & Furman, 1989). Although being part of a popular group is more important in early and middle adolescence, such participation is associated with more negative interactions and greater conformity (Gavin & Furman, 1989). Whereas these studies document the difference between groups and dyadic relationships in childhood and adolescence, the conceptual distinction seems equally applicable to other points in the life-span.

The other levels in a network are also not reducible to each other. As noted previously, relationships entail more than the set of interactions. One's perceptions of a relationship may not only be based on the interactions that occur, but also on what does not occur. Silence or what is not said may affect our emotions and cognitions about the relationship. Even if the interactions are positive and the silences are unlike those written by Harold Pinter, a person may not feel very close to someone seen only infrequently. Similarly, the global network is not a simple aggregation of dyadic relationships and groups, as one's perceptions of a network are influenced by what is not in the network as well as what is in it. Adults, as well as adolescents, are unlikely to have very positive perceptions of their social networks when there is no romantic relationship and few friends.

The distinctions among interactions, relationships, groups and networks underscore the importance of examining the different levels. Our impression, however, is that the distinctions among these different levels are often not made. For example, the role of social support has received much attention in the literature. Yet with a few notable exceptions (Prociano & Heller, 1983; Sarason et al., 1995), researchers have not examined the qualitative and functional features of support at the different levels of the social network. In a related vein, we may not only want to look at the exigencies during which support is sought, but also the ongoing interchanges from which a willingness to seek support may arise (Leatham & Duck, 1990).

Furthermore, it appears that some levels of the network have not received as much attention in different areas. For example, adolescent peer groups have received a significant amount of attention (Brown, 1990), but we believe that adult groups have not been studied as extensively. Although they may not be as cohesive or salient in adulthood, peer groups or cliques still exist, as well as families and organized groups, such as church or work groups. Conversely, we researchers studying adolescence have made fewer efforts to examine the global level of the network than its specific components.

Research will also want to examine the links among the different levels. Groups are sets of dyadic relationships, and both are elements of the general network. Thus, one would expect specific components of the network to be predictive of perceptions of the overall network. In fact, those components that are strongly related may have more important roles in determining overall perceptions. In one study (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987), we examined companionship and intimacy at the dyadic and global level at three ages. In general, those dyadic relationships in which companionship and intimacy occurred more frequently tended to be the ones that were more correlated to global perceptions of these characteristics. For example, fifth graders reported frequent companionship with parents and same-sex friends, and the degree of companionship with these individuals was predictive of global ratings of companionship. In some instances, however, the mean ratings and correlations yielded different information. For example, fifth graders' ratings of intimacy were greater for parents than same-sex friends, but ratings of same-sex friends were more related to global ratings of intimacy. We suggested that the mean ratings may reflect perceptions of how much time they spent with someone, whereas the correlations may indicate how important that time was for satisfying a general social need. These findings are intriguing, but more research is needed to specify the links between characteristics of specific network components and global perceptions of the general network. It would be important to examine these links at different ages or points in development. For example, intimacy with parents, friends and romantic partners in romantic relationships are all predictive of global ratings in middle adolescence (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987), but we know less about whether all remain predictive later in adolescence or adulthood.

Different levels of the network are interrelated in other ways as well. For example, we found that adolescents with cliques that contain larger numbers of opposite-sex peers were more likely to have a romantic relationship in the subsequent year (Connolly et al., 1998). This finding illustrates how the network serves as a context for the development of particular relationships, a lesson that seems equally relevant for relationships at all ages. As Milardo & Wellman (1992) so aptly put it, 'the personal is social' (p. 339). Conversely, changes in dyadic relationships may lead to more general changes in the characteristics of social networks. For example, forming a friendship with a popular peer typically leads to an increase in one's popularity in the general peer group (Eder, 1985). Friendships also

appear to affect status in adults' peer groups at work, though often adversely (Dillard & Miller, 1988; Zorn, 1995).

Finally, just as individuals have networks of their relationships, they may also have cognitive networks of relationship representations. For example, cognitive representations of the various close relationships in one's social network could be conceived as a hierarchically organized network of relationship views (Collins & Reed, 1994; Furman & Simon, *in press*). At the bottom of the hierarchy are views of particular relationships, in the middle are types of relationships (e.g. romantic relationships), and at the top is a general model of close relationships. Such hierarchical models seem sensitive to both the interrelatedness of relationship experiences and their distinctiveness, but the specific nature of the ties remains to be determined empirically.

Thus, these findings and examples illustrate the potential of examining the links among different levels in a network. However, relatively little is generally known about links such as the links between marriages and networks (Milardo & Allan, 1997), at any age. A closer examination of the interplay between specific network components and the general network will also be important for understanding the contextual dynamics of relationship development and change, a point returned to subsequently.

The variety of dyadic relationships

Much of the research has focused on either characteristics of the overall network or the characteristics of one particular dyadic relationship. Social networks, however, encompass a wide range of different dyadic relationships. Such diversity may be especially salient in adolescence as parent-child relationships undergo transformations and friendships and then romantic relationships become particularly salient.

Research needs to take into account the range of different relationships as they may play different roles in psycho-social development and adjustment. For example, we found that the characteristics of relationships with mothers, siblings, friends and romantic partners were associated with self-esteem and emotionality, whereas the characteristics of relationships with mothers and teachers were linked to school adjustment (Furman, 1987). Adults' social networks contain equally diverse dyadic relationships, yet we know little about the relative roles of different relationships over the course of adult development.

Some types of relationships warrant more attention. For example, adult attachment researchers have emphasized the importance of parent-child relationships to romantic relationships, but we have shown that peer relationships, particularly close friendships, play an important and somewhat distinct role in the emergence of adolescent romantic relationships (Furman, 1998). As yet, the links between peer relationships and romantic relationships in adulthood have not been examined extensively. Similarly, sibling relationships play an important role in early development and adjustment, but we know relatively little about the role they may play in adulthood. The need to pay attention to the range of relationships applies

just as much to developmental researchers. For example, large literatures exist on marriages and romantic relationships in adulthood, but we know surprisingly little about romantic relationships in early or middle adolescence despite their seeming importance.

The diversity of relationships in social networks presents us with the challenge of identifying and taking into account the similarities and differences among relationships. The same underlying process may be manifested differently in various relationships. For example, feelings of affection are expressed differently toward parents, friends and romantic partners. Conversely, the same behavior may have different meanings in various relationships. For example, hugs and kisses from a parent are forms of affection, but these behaviors have a sexual connotation in romantic relationships. In our own research, we have been interested in assessing similar processes across different relationships. Accordingly, we have had to insure that our questionnaires and observational measures assess behaviors that reflect the same underlying processes in different relationships, and that they adequately represent the ways in which these processes may be manifested in the different relationships.

The similarities and differences among relationships have conceptual implications as well as methodological ones. Certain processes may not be relationship specific. For example, most of the research on the role of similarity has focused on friendships, but we found similarity of needs to be associated with harmony in mother–daughter pairs as well as in friendships (Gavin & Furman, 1998). One might have been tempted to propose that similarity of needs fosters harmony by promoting close egalitarian ties, but our findings suggest that similarity plays a role in both asymmetrical and egalitarian relationships. In general, relatively little conceptual or empirical work has considered how processes may be common to many close relationships or specific to particular ones.

Examination of seemingly similar features in different relationships can also lead to a reconceptualization of the phenomenon being examined. For example, a substantial amount of research has examined adults' representations of attachment relationships. George et al. (1985) developed the Berkeley Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) to assess working models of parent–child relationships, and other investigators have adapted that interview to assess working models of romantic relationships (e.g. Crowell & Owens, 1996; Silver & Cohen, 1992). We have developed similar interviews for assessing adolescents' friendships and romantic relationships, and have found that the AAI scales and categories can be used for assessing states of minds with regard to these relationships (Furman & Simon, 1998; Furman et al., 1997). Adolescent friendships and romantic relationships, however, are not usually conceptualized as attachments. Rather, they are more closely linked with other behavioral systems during adolescence. Affiliative processes are central in friendships, and sexual and affiliative processes are likely to be the most important behavioral systems in most adolescent romantic relationships. Romantic partners are not likely to be attachment figures or major recipients of caretaking until an

individual begins to develop long-term relationships. Yet the idea that similar approaches can be used for assessing working models of attachment relationships and non-attachment relationships suggests that we are not assessing working models of attachment per se, but are assessing working models of relationships or perhaps close relationships (Furman & Simon, 1998; Furman & Wehner, 1994). Similarly, measures of attachment styles may be assessing relational styles.

This reconceptualization of working models of attachment and attachment styles would suggest that one would not only find individual differences in attachment behavior, but also in caretaking, affiliation and sexuality. Investigators who examine adult romantic styles have found such differences. For example, men with secure romantic styles display more emotional support, reassurance and concern for their partner's well-being than men with avoidant styles (Simpson, 1990). Those with secure styles are higher in mutuality and couple orientation than those with avoidant or anxious-ambivalent styles (Feeney & Noller, 1991). Finally, individuals with secure styles are less likely to engage in uncommitted sexual relations than those with avoidant styles (Simpson & Gangstead, 1991). In our own work with adolescents, we designed our measures to assess caretaking affiliation and sexuality, as well as attachment. Consistent with this conceptualization, we have found relatively high relations among these perceptions of different behavioral systems (Furman & Wehner, 1994). Ongoing work in our laboratory with college students suggests that young adults' styles should also be conceptualized as relational styles, rather than attachment styles per se.

Our alternative conceptualization of cognitive representations of relationships may not have been evident if we had studied only one particular kind of relationship. Most of the time, however, we and other researchers, who study children's, adolescents', or adults' relationships, have focused on particular relationships. In fact, different theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches have been typically used to study different relationships. Our adolescents, however, have taught us that a broader network perspective may enrich our understanding of the various relationships we have.

Developmental transformations and trajectories

Another striking feature of adolescence is the developmental transformations in close relationships. One such type of developmental change is change in the *level* or frequency of a characteristic. For example, we compared fourth-, seventh- and tenth-grade students, and college students' perceptions of support in their relationships with significant others (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Age differences were observed in the mean scores for almost all relationships. Perceptions of support from mothers, fathers and siblings could be characterized in terms of quadratic functions, in which scores were greater in the fourth grade and college than in the seventh and tenth grade. Perceptions of grandparents were also higher in

the fourth grade than in the seventh and tenth grade, but showed no subsequent recovery in college. For same-sex friendships, significant grade differences were found in perceptions of support, but detailed analyses revealed that these differences principally reflected increases in perceptions of intimacy and affection from the fourth to the seventh and tenth grade, and not increases in other social provisions. Finally, romantic relationships were seen as increasingly supportive as adolescents grew older.

The net effect of all these changes is that the relative ranking of the relationships varied substantially with age. In the fourth grade, mothers and fathers were seen as the most frequent providers of support. Same-sex friends were perceived to be as supportive as parents in the seventh grade and were thought to be the most frequent providers of support in the tenth grade. Romantic partners increased in rank over the years, until college, at which time males rated them as the most supportive, and females saw mothers, friends, siblings and romantic partners as the most supportive.

The implication of these results is that the role of each relationship in children's and adolescents' social worlds changes with development. To fully appreciate those changes, we need to take into account the changing nature of a relationship, and the concurrent changes in other relationships. When a middle adolescent speaks about turning more to a romantic partner than before, the changes probably reflect both the increasing intimacy of the romantic relationship and the decreased reliance on parents. Thus, developmental changes are embedded in the context of the social network; conversely, comparisons of different relationships will be highly dependent on development.

To date, most of the work that examines developmental changes in the mean level of characteristics has focused on childhood and adolescence. Some important work has examined changes in adulthood (see Vanzetti & Duck, 1996), but we believe that the topic warrants greater consideration. Certainly, few of us would think that our personal relationships are the same as they were a decade or two ago! One may, in fact, want to be cautious about using samples with a wide range of ages as the individuals of different ages may be quite different.

Similarly, the point of examining changes within the context of the network is equally applicable. For example, adults interact less frequently with friends as romantic relationships develop and become more serious (Milardo et al., 1983). Becoming a parent often leads to changes in romantic relationships (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) and may affect relationships with one's own parents. Finally, transformations in parent-child relationships during adolescence affect parents as well as children, and the impact of these transformations on parents may be partially dependent upon features of parents' social network (Grotevant, 1998).

Changes in stability and centrality

Developmentalists not only commonly examine changes in the level of a relationship characteristic, but they also examine the continuity or stability

of relationship characteristics — a topic of much interest and debate currently. An issue that has received less attention is change in the stability of characteristics. That is, the amount of change may differ across different time-spans. For example, we examined adolescents' satisfaction with their social network in the summer before college and during the three academic quarters of their first year in college (Shaver et al., 1985). Satisfaction decreased from the summer to fall and then remained relatively stable. Thus, the degree of mean level in change was greater over the transition to college than over equally long periods within the first year of college. Additionally, satisfaction ratings in the summer were predictive of ratings in the fall, but were not as predictive as the fall ratings were of the winter, or as the winter of the spring. Thus, the stability of the ratings was less over the transition than later. These findings suggest that adolescents who are satisfied with their network before college are likely to develop satisfying networks in college; however, the nature of that emerging network may also play a role, as satisfaction is even more stable within the context of the college year.

The continuity of a variable can be thought of as a special kind of relation among variables — i.e. the relatedness of a variable with itself over time. More generally, one can examine the pattern of relatedness of variables or what we termed as the *centrality* of variables (Connell & Furman, 1984). Variables with stronger relations are said to be more central. Just as one can look at changes in stability, one can examine developmental changes or continuities in the centrality or relatedness of variables. For example, in the study described previously, we found that social skills were most related to network satisfaction in the fall, which suggests that such skills may be particularly critical in the early phases of a social transition. More recently, we examined the pattern of relations among corresponding measures of relational styles with romantic partners, friends and parents in high school and college students (Furman & Wehner, 1997). In high school, romantic styles were associated with friends, but romantic styles were not consistently related with styles with parents. In college, however, both styles with friends and with parents were related to romantic styles. We suggested that the change in the centrality of styles with parents may reflect the idea that caregiving and attachment components — critical features of relationships with parents — begin to become more important as individuals get older and develop longer-term relationships.

Changes in centrality have not been examined very extensively in any domain, but we suspect that they will prove to be quite pervasive, especially if we consider the development of particular relationships as well as the development of individuals. In fact, all of our comments about development seem equally applicable to relationship changes as age changes. Investigators have increasingly examined changes over the course of relationships (see Bedford & Blieszner, 1997), but we believe that a closer interface between those studying relationship development and those studying individual development would be to the benefit of all.

Structural changes

Up to this point, we have discussed *quantitative* developmental changes, but *qualitative changes* occur as well. Connell & Furman (1984) referred to these changes as *structural* ones. That is, underlying variables or processes may have different behavioral manifestations at different developmental points; conversely, a behavior's meaning may change over time. Changes in the number or composition of factors would be instances of structural changes.

Consider the changes that occur in romantic relationships (Furman & Wehner, 1997). Early romantic relationships could be characterized as clumsy experiments (Duck, 1988). In these beginning relationships, the focus is *not* on the nature of the relationship or the fulfillment of various needs, but on who the partner is, the partner's attractiveness, how they should interact in a romantic context and what their peers think of the relationship (Brown, 1998). Only after the adolescent has acquired some sense of comfort and competence in romantic relationships does the fulfillment of various needs become central to these relationships. In our behavioral systems conceptualization, we proposed that these relationships would begin to fulfill attachment, caregiving, affiliative and sexual needs after the earlier stage of experimentation (Furman & Wehner, 1994). We expected that romantic partners would first become important figures in the fulfillment of affiliative and sexual needs before attachment and caregiving needs. The attachment and caregiving systems are not expected to become significant until late adolescence and adulthood, during which time longer-term relationships develop, relationships with parents undergo transformations, and the search for a new primary attachment figure increases. Even in long-term, adult relationships, a romantic partner is usually expected to serve as a sexual figure and an affiliative figure before becoming an attachment figure or the regular recipient of caregiving. Thus, romantic relationships undergo qualitative or structural changes both over the course of adolescence and in the course of the development of particular relationships. Individuals' representations of these relationships are likely to be composed of qualitatively different features at different developmental points; conversely, behaviors, such as proximity-seeking or personal conversation, may have different meanings at different points. Such developmental transformations can be missed in simple descriptions of increases and decreases in the frequency of different characteristics, or in changes in the correlates of different characteristics.

When studying adolescents, one is acutely aware of the prospect of structural changes because of the saliency of developmental changes. The point seems applicable to studies of adult relationships, however, when one considers the changes over the course of long-term relationships or how relationships differ at different ages. The issue of structural differences, in fact, is applicable whenever comparisons are made. Our comments in a previous section about the complexities of identifying similarities and differences among different relationships essentially reflect a concern about structural differences. Efforts to identify structural similarities or

differences can lead to an enriched understanding of the phenomenon. For example, Reis et al. (1985) noted that many investigators have found that females have more intimate interactions than males, but few investigators have examined the basis of this difference. They observed that it is possible that men and women have different criteria for intimacy or that men are less willing to label interactions as intimate. In effect, these explanations would suggest that the difference was a spurious one, that reflected structural differences in what is defined or labeled as intimacy. Neither explanation was supported by their research, and instead it appeared that the difference was a meaningful one and reflected a sex difference in the kind of interaction that is preferred.

Individual development and timing

Our task is further complicated by the fact that development occurs at the level of the individual organism. Accordingly, descriptions of differences among age groups, even when they are sensitive to structural changes, can be misleading. For example, we found that sibling relationships are generally less 'intense' — i.e. less warm and less conflictual — in adolescence than in childhood (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990). We believe, however, that this mean difference between age groups masked important differences in the developmental course of particular individuals' relationships. Although many sibling relationships fade in intensity during adolescence, we suspect that some subgroups of individuals develop closer friendships with siblings during adolescence.

The idea that development occurs at the level of the individual organism also means that different individuals of the same age are at different stages of development, or on different timelines of social development. Differences among individuals could then reflect being on different developmental trajectories, or could reflect being at different points of the same general trajectory. For example, adolescents differ considerably in when they become interested in romantic relationships and when they began to date. An early or late start in the romantic arena may not necessarily be very predictive of the nature of the relationships that emerge (Furman & Wehner, 1994).

In our ongoing work on romantic relationships, we have examined adolescents' working models of their romantic relationships. Even though they may be of the same age, some individuals with a secure representation of romantic relationships have established a relatively long-term intimate relationship, whereas others with secure representations have only recently become interested in dating and may have only had relatively short-term relationships. We think these individuals are on similar trajectories but differ in when these trajectories began — i.e. their timelines. Of course, both of these kinds of individuals are expected to be on a different trajectory than a third kind, who have had a series of short-term relationships because they do not value intimacy or closeness.

This example points out a further complication. Not only is it unclear whether differences reflect fundamental differences in the trajectories

being taken, or simply differences in the timing of development, but it is also unclear whether or not seeming similarities in romantic relationships are indicative of genuine similarities in the developmental courses. Both our second and third kind of individuals are involved in short-term relationships, but the meaning of such relationships differs because the individuals are at different stages of development or timelines. Thus, we need to realize that similarities or differences in the overt characteristics of relationships at a particular time point may or may not be indicative of similarities in developmental trajectories, a point that harks back to the discussion of structural differences.

Whereas the distinction between trajectories and timelines is worth making, it is important to recognize that the two can be related. That is, the timing of events can influence one's trajectory. For example, the timing of puberty affects the nature of subsequent relationships (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996) and thus, individuals may take different trajectories as a function of when that trajectory is initiated. Our point is simply that timelines differ and such differences may not necessarily be predictive of differences in trajectories. Most interpretations of differences have assumed that the differences are long lasting and not simply a reflection of a difference in timing, but distinguishing these two possibilities requires longitudinal research. Although the task of distinguishing the possibilities is complex, the general point remains. Observed differences in individuals can reflect something other than differences in trait-like features. As the previous discussion has illustrated, such differences may reflect differences in social context, developmental history or timeline.

The variability in the developmental status of adolescents is particularly striking, but adults also differ in their stage of development or social timelines, even when they are of the same age. For example, most young adults may have been dating for some time, but they differ markedly in their readiness to marry or to have children. While such differences in readiness may in part reflect individual differences in trait-like features, they may also reflect differences in relationship histories, social context, or developmental trajectory. The problem of interpreting differences becomes increasingly more worrisome as samples get more diverse in age, social timelines, social context and experience. Unless we address the sources of heterogeneity in our samples, we may misrepresent both similarities and differences among individuals.

Conclusion

The adolescents in our research have taught us to appreciate the roles of social context and development. In many respects, these lessons are obvious ones; after all, who would dispute the importance of social context or development? At the same time, we believe that these lessons have rich, and sometimes not so obvious implications for studying relationships. Many investigators, who study adult as well as children and adolescent

relationships, have incorporated some of the specific implications of these lessons in their research, but other specific implications have not been incorporated as often. Under Steve Duck's editorship, the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* has promoted the value of interdisciplinary work and the importance of learning from different fields. We hope that our presentation of these lessons from youth contributes to that endeavor.

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