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The Role of Romantic Relationships in Adolescent Development

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Most of us would characterize our adolescent romantic relationships as short-lived and superficial. In some respects, this description is correct. Most adolescent relationships only last a few weeks or months; it is unlikely that these relationships have the depth and complexity that characterize long-term committed relationships.

At the same time, the characterization of these relationships as short and superficial is incomplete. These relationships are central in adolescents' lives. They are a major topic of conversation among adolescents (Eder, 1993; Thompson, 1994). Real or fantasized relationships are the most common cause of strong positive and strong negative emotions—more so than friendships, relationships with parents, or school (Wilson-Shockley, 1995). Moreover, adolescents are not the only ones who see these relationships as significant. The formation of romantic relationships is often thought to be one of the important developmental tasks of adolescence (Sullivan, 1953), and these relationships have significant implications for health and adjustment (Bouchey & Furman, in press).

Not only are adolescent romantic relationships significant in their own right, but the thesis of this chapter is that they play an important role in shaping the general course of development during adolescence. In particular, adolescents face a series of tasks that include (a) the development of an identity, (b) the transformation of family relationships, (c) the development of close relationships with peers, (d) the development of sexuality, and (e) scholastic achievement and career planning. In the sections that follow, we describe how romantic relationships may play a role in each of these key developmental tasks.

Three caveats are warranted. First, the research primarily has been conducted with heterosexual adolescents in Western cultures, and we know little

about gay, lesbian, and bisexual relationships or romantic relationships in other cultures. Second, even the existing literature on Western heterosexual romantic relationships is limited. The question of what impact they have on development has received almost no attention. Thus, our comments are often speculative and will need to be tested empirically. Finally, the effects of romantic relationships vary from individual to individual. As will be seen repeatedly, the specific impact they have is likely to depend heavily on the nature of the particular experiences.

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

According to Erikson (1968), the key developmental task of adolescence is the development of identity. During early adolescence, there is a proliferation of self-representations that vary as a function of the social context (Harter, 1999). That is, early adolescents develop a sense of themselves with their mothers, fathers, friends, romantic partners, and others. Sometimes their different selves may contradict one another, but such contradictions are usually not acknowledged. In middle adolescence, they begin to recognize such seeming contradictions in their conceptions of themselves, and may be conflicted or confused. By late adolescence, many of them are able to integrate the seeming contradictions into a coherent picture.

Romantic experiences may play a role in the development of a sense of self or identity in two ways. First, adolescents develop distinct perceptions of themselves in the romantic arena. They do not simply have a concept of themselves with peers, but have different self-schemas of themselves with the general peer group, with close friends, and in romantic relationships (Connolly & Konarski, 1994; Gecas, 1972; Harter, 1988). Romantic self-concept is related to whether one has a romantic relationship and to the quality of that relationship (Connolly & Konarski, 1994; Kuttler, La Greca, & Prinstein, 1999), suggesting that romantic experiences may affect one's sense of self in the romantic domain. Thus, adolescents who have had positive experiences may think of themselves as attractive partners, whereas those who have had adverse romantic experiences may have little confidence in their ability to be appealing partners or have successful relationships.

Second, romantic experiences and romantic self-concept may also affect one's global self-esteem. This effect is poignantly expressed in one of our teen's reflections about her romantic experiences, including those with an abusive partner: "Hum, what have I gained? (6 sec. pause). I feel I haven't gained like a

lot, but I feel like I lost a lot. I lost my self-respect. I don't respect myself. It's like I feel like I have no self-esteem, no self-control, no nothing." Consistent with her comments, romantic self-concept has been empirically found to be substantially related to self-worth (e.g., r 's = .40 to .55; Harter, 1988, 1999). Romantic self-concept is also related to one's self-concept in other domains, particularly physical appearance and peer acceptance (Harter, 1988).

Although global self-esteem and perceived competence in various domains are fundamental aspects of self-representations, the concept of identity entails more than these. In the process of developing an identity, adolescents acquire moral and religious values, develop a political ideology, tentatively select and prepare for a career, and adopt a set of social roles, including gender roles (Waterman, 1985). Romantic relationships may facilitate the development of these facets of identity. For example, Erikson (1968) thought that adolescent love was an "attempt to arrive at a definition of one's identity by projecting one's diffused self-image on another and seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified" (p. 132). On the other hand, sometimes romantic relationships may hinder the identity development process. For example, parenthood—a potential consequence of romantic involvement—is thought to have a detrimental effect on adolescents' normative exploration of identity because of the constant demands and responsibilities it entails (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). Unfortunately, we can only speculate about how romantic relationships may facilitate or hinder identity development, as we have little empirical data about the role they may play. We know that peers and friends influence adolescents' attitudes and behaviors (Kandel, 1978), but as yet the specific influence of romantic relationships or romantic partners simply has not been examined.

One particularly promising domain to study is gender-role identity. According to the gender intensification hypothesis, early adolescence is a period in which gender-related expectations become increasingly differentiated (Hill & Lynch, 1983). Girls are expected to adhere to feminine stereotypes of behavior, whereas boys are expected to adhere to masculine stereotypes. It is commonly thought that the emergence of dating may be one of the most powerful factors contributing to the intensification of conventional gender roles. Romantic partners, as well as other peers, may reinforce or punish different gender-related behaviors or roles; certainly adolescents are likely to act in ways that they think might make them more attractive to members of the other sex. Of course, different romantic partners are likely to have different expectations regarding gender roles, and one's own experiences in romantic relationships would be expected to affect one's concepts of gender roles (Feiring, 2000).

THE TRANSFORMATION OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

During adolescence, relationships with parents and other family members undergo significant changes. From middle childhood through adolescence, rates of parental support and interaction decrease (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Larson & Richards, 1991; Laurson & Williams, 1997). Rates of conflict also decrease over the course of adolescence, although the intensity of the affect in the conflict appears to peak in middle adolescence (Laurson, Coy, & Collins, 1998).

These changes, however, do not usually reflect a detachment from parents, but instead a renegotiation and transformation of parent-child relationships. Most adolescents are able to become appropriately autonomous without severing the bonds with parents (Hill & Holmbeck, 1986). Similarly, most parents are gradually able to accept their children's individuality in the context of maintaining emotional ties (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Thus, the process of transforming the relationship is a mutual one.

This process is not always a smooth one, however. Parents and adolescents have different expectations for each other (Collins, 1990, 1995). Such discrepancies in expectations periodically lead to conflicts, which in turn can lead to a realignment of expectations and eventually changes in the nature of the relationship.

Romantic relationships may play a role in these transformations of family relationships in several ways. At the most basic level, adolescents spend less time with family members and more time with the other sex or in romantic relationships as they grow older (Blyth, Hill, & Thiel, 1982; Darling, Dowdy, Van Horn, & Caldwell, 1999; Laursen & Williams, 1997; Richards, Crowe, Larson, & Swarr, 1998; Zimmer-Gembeck, 1999). Those who have romantic relationships spend less time with family members than those who are not currently involved with someone (Laursen & Williams, 1997).

Romantic relationships are also a common source of conflict and tension in the family (Laursen, 1995; Smetana, 1989). Adolescents and parents may disagree about curfews, choices of peers, and whether one may go to a party or social activity. Dating and romantic relationships are topics in which parents and adolescents have different expectations, and both are invested in exercising jurisdiction. Parents may want jurisdiction because of the risks associated with dating and sexual behavior, whereas adolescents want control over such personal issues. Thus, these topics are likely to lead to perturbations in the relationship, trigger discussion and re-examination of expectations, and contribute to the normative transformation of the decision making in these rela-

tionships. In other instances, however, it is not the romantic experiences that lead to normative changes in family relationships, but instead, conflicts with family members may lead some adolescents to seek out romantic relationships to escape family problems.

Empirical research is consistent with the idea that family conflicts and romantic relationships are linked. Students who are dating report more frequent and intense conflicts than non-daters (Dowdy & Kliever, 1999). Those adolescents who are involved with a romantic partner at a young age also have higher rates of alcohol and drug use as well as lower levels of academic achievement (Aro & Taipale, 1987; Grinder, 1966). It appears that adolescents with interpersonal difficulties or familial problems may seek out romantic relationships earlier (Aro & Taipale, 1987; Pawlby, Mills, & Quinton, 1997), but it also seems possible that such early romantic relationships could lead to family discord or personal difficulties as well.

Even when dating is not a major source of conflict, parents may have ambivalent feelings about their children's romantic relationships (Bonini & Zani, cited in Zani, 1993). For example, mothers report being both joyful that their daughters are happy, and yet sometimes jealous and aware of the loss of an exclusive tie. Similarly, the satisfaction of seeing their sons mature can be counterbalanced by the realization that they are growing up and eventually leaving the household. Some fathers report being accepting of a romantic relationship, but concerned that their children may be torn between loyalty to a partner and to the family. A serious relationship can be seen as an intrusion or threat to the family. As yet, we do not know how such ambivalent feelings may impact family relationships, but it seems that they may very well lead to some rethinking or restructuring of the relationships between the parents and adolescents.

Although conflict and ambivalent feelings about romantic relationships may occur commonly, these should not be overstated. In popular stereotypes, adolescence is thought of as period of great strife between parents and peers, but in fact, peer and parental influences are typically synergistic (Hartup, 1983). We believe that the same synergism may be characteristic of romantic relationships and family relationships. For example, perceptions of parents' attitudes about "going steady" are associated with the likelihood of the adolescents actually having an exclusive relationship (Poffenberger, 1964). Although it is likely that this association stems partially from parents' control over their adolescents' dating behavior, it is also possible that adolescents' desires and romantic experiences will affect how their parents think about romantic relationships and what they will allow their offspring to do.

The links between supportive behavior in relationships with romantic partners and parents are complicated. As adolescents grow older, they are more

likely to turn to a boyfriend or girlfriend for support (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Moreover, they are less likely to seek support from their parents (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). The early phases of the transition from a parent as the primary attachment figure to a romantic partner may begin in adolescence, particularly in late adolescence (Furman & Wehner, 1994). Specifically, adolescents may begin to turn to their partners or peers for a safe haven, although their parents are likely to remain as their primary secure base (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994).

Interestingly, however, the amount of support in the two types of relationships at any particular age is positively correlated (Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Furman, 1999; Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchev, in press). Perhaps the ability to be supportive in one relationship carries over to the other relationship. Having a supportive romantic relationship (vs. just any romantic relationship) may also have a positive effect on one's general emotional state, which in turn may foster positive interactions in the home. Thus, although romantic relationships can be a source of strain on relationships with parents, they may have some positive effects on these relationships in other instances.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS

Concomitant with the changes in the family throughout adolescence are significant changes in peer relationships. On average, adolescents spend more than twice as much of their free time with peers than with their parents or other adults (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Over the course of adolescence, they increasingly turn to their peers for support as these relationships become more intimate in nature (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

The importance of being part of a popular clique peaks in early adolescence, and declines in middle adolescence, as groups become more permeable and teens become members of multiple cliques (Gavin & Furman, 1989). Throughout adolescence, however, teens are categorized as being part of a crowd (Brown, 1990). Members of the same crowd are seen as having similar attitudes and beliefs, even though they may or may not interact directly with everyone who is seen as part of that crowd.

Adolescent romantic relationships may contribute to adolescents' peer relations in several ways. As the brief description of developmental changes indicates, adolescents spend increasing amounts of time with their peers, and these changes in the sheer frequency of interaction primarily occur in interactions

with the other sex or in romantic relationships (Blyth et al., 1982; Laursen & Williams, 1997; Richards et al., 1998; Zimmer-Gembeck, 1999). One function such interactions serve is affiliation (Feiring, 1996; Furman, 1999; Roscoe, Diana, & Brooks, 1987; Skipper & Nass, 1966). These affiliative interactions are both stimulating and utilitarian in nature (Weiss, 1998). Such interchanges provide opportunities for reciprocal altruism, mutualism, and social play (Furman, 1999). Adolescents may develop their capacities to cooperate and co-construct a relationship. Moreover, the interactions are very rewarding in nature, as spending time with the other sex or having a romantic relationship is associated with positive emotionality (Neemann, Hubbard, & Masten, 1995; Richards et al., 1998).

The presence of such romantic relationships is also likely to influence the relationships one has with other peers. A boy/girlfriend becomes part of the adolescent's network and, in a significant minority of instances, remains part of the network even after the romantic element of the relationship has dissolved (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000). He or she may introduce the teen to other adolescents. If the relationship becomes more serious, the social networks of the two overlap more as mutual friendships develop (Milardo, 1982). In young adulthood, the networks usually become smaller as couples become more seriously involved and peripheral relations fade (see Surra, 1990). Even in adolescence, a romantic partner may vie with other peers for the person's attention (Laursen & Williams, 1997; Zimmer-Gembeck, 1999).

Just as the impact on family relationships varies, romantic relationships' effects on peer relations do also. For example, three different patterns of relations between the peer group and romantic relationships were identified by Ceroni et al. (cited in Zani, 1993) and by Zani, Altieri, and Signani (cited in Zani, 1993). In some cases the peer group became less salient as the romantic relationship was given priority. Sometimes, the choice between peers and romantic relationships was a source of conflict between the adolescent and the peers or partner. Finally, sometimes the peer group relations remained unchanged by the presence of the new relationship.

Romantic relationships can also affect one's standing in the peer group, as dating in Western cultures has traditionally served the functions of status grading and status achievement (Roscoe et al., 1987; Skipper & Nass, 1966). Dating a particularly attractive or popular person could improve one's popularity or reaffirm that one is popular. Consistent with this idea, high school students who received many positive nominations on a sociometric measure dated more frequently (Franzoi, Davis, & Vasquez-Suson, 1994).

Additionally, adolescents are likely to date those who share similar interests, attitudes, and values to theirs (Capaldi & Crosby, 1997). Their dating selections may reinforce the reputation they have or identify the crowd they are

seen as being part of. That is, their peers are likely to think they are similar to the individuals they are dating.

Finally, although double standards of sexual behavior are much less striking than they used to be, ethnographic work suggests that having sexual intercourse can still enhance boys' status in the peer group, whereas it may jeopardize the status of girls in at least some peer groups (Eyre, Hoffman, & Millstein, 1998). Similarly, having a serious romantic relationship can lead to ridicule and jeopardize one's status in some peer groups where members of the other sex are simply seen as objects for sexual conquest (Alexander, 1990).

Up to this point, we have emphasized how romantic relationships may affect adolescents' peer relations in general. They also can affect friendships in particular. In fact, romantic relationships share many features with friendships (Furman, 1999), and could be thought of as a special form of friendship. Often a romantic partner becomes the best friend, displacing the old friend (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1993).

Regardless of whether romantic relationships do or do not displace a friendship, it seems likely that the experiences in friendships and romantic relationships may influence each other. Both forms of relationships entail intimate disclosure, support seeking and giving, and mutuality. The skills that these require appear likely to carry over from one type of relationship to the other. Ratings of support and negative interactions in friendships and in romantic relationships have usually been found to be related to one another, but not always (Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Furman, 1999; Furman et al., in press). It seems possible that the *ability* or *desire* to be supportive toward romantic partners and friends may be related to one another, but the *actual amount* of support in the two relationships may be less clearly related as friends and romantic partners may vie for the adolescent's attention. In other words, a teen may learn ways of being supportive from interacting with a boyfriend, but if she spends most of her time with him, she will not have many opportunities to be supportive of her friends. Consistent with the idea that the desire to be supportive or unsupportive may be related, adolescents' cognitive representations of romantic relationships and friendships are related to one another (Furman, 1999; Furman et al., in press). That is, teens who value intimacy and closeness and expect their romantic partners to be available and responsive are likely to have similar expectations for their friendships.

SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

The development of sexuality is another key task in adolescence. As adolescents' bodies begin to mature in reproductive capacities, their sexual desires

increase. Most adolescents begin to experiment with sexual behavior, and gradually develop some comfort with their sexuality. In a 1995 national survey, 83% of males and 70% of females had had sexual intercourse by the age of 19 (Abma & Sonenstein, 2001).

It almost seems unnecessary to say that romantic relationships play a key role in the development of sexuality. Certainly, sexual behavior often occurs in brief encounters, as adolescents "hook-up" with each other for an evening. Additionally, sexual behaviors, particularly mild forms of sexual behavior, commonly occur with friends with whom adolescents are not romantically involved (Shaffer, 2001; Shaffer & Furman, 2001). Nevertheless, casual or committed romantic relationships are primary contexts for sexual behavior and learning about 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). Moreover, most teenagers are selective about with whom they have intercourse. Forty-nine percent of sexually active 19-year-old girls and 30% of sexually active boys have had intercourse with one or two partners. Less than 20% of sexually active girls and 35% of sexually active boys have had 6 or more partners (Abma & Sonenstein, 2001).

Aside from the idea that romantic relationships are a primary context for the development of sexuality, we know remarkably little about the specific role these relationships play. In fact, we know more about the influence of peers and parents than about romantic partners. Yet, it is difficult to believe that the partner and the nature of the relationship do not play critical roles in determining sexual behavior and in determining what is learned from the experiences.

Some descriptive information exists on the characteristics of sexual partners. For example, 75% of girls' most recent heterosexual partners are at least a year older; 22% are 4 or more years older; in contrast, only 27% of boys' heterosexual partners are older, and 46% are at least a year younger (Abma & Sonenstein, 2001). Adolescents are also more likely to have sexual intercourse for the first time with someone who is already sexually active than someone who is not (Rodgers, 1996). Finally, the modal reason given for first having intercourse is to have the partner love them more (Rodgers, 1996). These findings suggest that the characteristics of the partner and one's feelings about the partner are critical determinants of sexual behavior, but we still know little about the particulars.

In part, the absence of information about the role of romantic relationships may reflect the field's focus on sexual intercourse, contraception, and pregnancy and their demographic correlates. The field has emphasized these components because of the significance they have for health. Yet, an understanding of adolescent sexuality requires a broader perspective (Welsh, Rostosky, &

Kawaguchi, 1999). Bukowski, Sippola, and Brender (1993) proposed that the development of a healthy sense of sexuality includes: (a) learning about intimacy through interaction with peers, (b) developing an understanding of personal roles and relationships, (c) revising one's body schema to changes in size, shape, and capability, (d) adjusting to erotic feelings and experiences and integrating them into one's life, (e) learning about social standards and practices regarding sexual expression, and (f) developing an understanding and appreciation of reproductive processes. We believe that one's romantic relationships are likely to be one of the primary, if not the primary context, for learning about most of those facets of sexuality. Romantic relationships provide a testing ground not only for the *how* of sexual behavior but also for the *what* and *when*. They provide a context in which adolescents discover what is attractive and arousing. Adolescents learn what they like in their partners and what partners tend to like. They learn to reconcile their sexual desires, their moral values, and their partners' desires.

Finally, a critical facet of sexual development is the establishment or solidification of sexual orientation. Much of the existing research on adolescent sexuality and romantic relationships has focused on heterosexual adolescents, but current estimates indicate that approximately 10% of youth in the U.S. will consider themselves gay, lesbian, or bisexual at some point in their lives (D'Augelli, 1988). Many sexual minority youth become aware of their same-gender attractions in early to mid-adolescence. The average age for first awareness of these feelings is approximately 13 for gay males (Remafedi, 1987) and 16 for lesbians (D'Augelli, Collins, & Hart, 1987). Few sexual minority youth enter into romantic liaisons with same-sex peers during adolescence because of the limited opportunities to do so (Sears, 1991). The majority, however, date heterosexually (Savin-Williams, 1996). Adolescents who are questioning their sexual orientation often find that these relationships help them determine or confirm their sexual preferences (Diamond, Savin-Williams, & Dubé, 1999).

SCHOLASTIC ACHIEVEMENT AND CAREER PLANNING

Around the beginning of adolescence, students in the United States make a transition from elementary school to middle school or junior high. In middle adolescence, they move on to high school. Some continue on to colleges or vocational schools in late adolescence, whereas others complete their formal education when they graduate from high school, and still others drop out of middle school or high school. Similar educational transitions occur in other Western societies. What is common across Western cultures, at least, is that

the emphasis on academic learning increases with age, and students begin to take increasingly different paths.

Friendships and peer groups can have either positive or negative effects on adolescents' academic involvement and achievement (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Kindermann, McCollam, & Gibson, 1996). For example, those with supportive friends tend to become more involved in school, whereas those with more conflictual relationships become more disruptive (Berndt & Keefe, 1995). To date, however, we know less about the role that romantic relationships specifically may play.

As noted previously, early involvement in romantic relationships has been linked with poorer scholastic achievement (Grinder, 1966). In fact, romantic involvement and sexual behavior have been found to be negatively correlated with academic achievement throughout adolescence (Halpern, Joyner, Udry, & Suchindran, 2000; Neemann et al., 1995). Such associations could exist because those who are less academically oriented may be more likely to develop romantic relationships, or because romantic relationships may have an adverse effect on school achievement.

The time spent with a romantic partner could distract from schoolwork, but we suspect that any such effect may be highly dependent on the characteristics of the partner and the nature of the relationship, just as it is in the case of friendships (Berndt & Keefe, 1995). That is, some partners may detract from school, but others may promote achievement by studying together, helping with homework, encouraging achievement, or providing support. For example, an adolescent in one of our studies said, "It's really gotten me out of this big hole I used to be in. I used to go off and, I smoked weed a lot, drank a whole lot, I mean I used to love to party 24-7 and all that, and during this time, my grades just went down to like crap. . . . She's helped me actually get interested in school again, and be able to go off and just be actually be, I mean, she got me out of the rut. I mean I hardly drink. I don't smoke no more. I mean things like that. And just yesterday I mean, I won this award at our school." Once again, the nature of any such influence may be highly dependent on the particulars of the partner and the relationship.

Romantic partners may also influence career plans and aspirations. They can serve as comrades with whom to share ideas and dreams. They may encourage or discourage particular careers or educational plans. Developing a committed relationship, deciding to get married, or having a child is also likely to affect the plans for the future. For example, early parenthood has a strong negative effect on educational attainment (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). Adolescent parents may forego career dreams, because they no longer have time or financial resources to pursue the necessary training or education. Similarly, those who choose to commit to a romantic partner above all else may

narrow their options for career opportunities. Thus, as with other domains of adolescent development, romantic relationships may have either benefits or drawbacks for career plans, depending on the particular circumstances.

CLINICAL AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Our discussion of the role of romantic relationships in adolescent development has a number of implications for clinicians, educators, and parents. Perhaps the most obvious is how important romantic relationships can be in adolescents' lives. Not only are they central in the eyes of adolescents, but we have described the impact they may have on adolescent development.

Often, however, adults tend to downplay the significance of these relationships. Parents may tease their teens about a romantic relationship, or dismiss it as "only puppy love" and try to discourage them from getting too romantically involved as adolescents. In part, such reactions are understandable. Most adolescent relationships are not as serious or long-lasting as the ones that emerge in adulthood. Many adolescents may not really be prepared for making a long-term commitment to someone. Adolescent marriages are much more prone to divorce (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). Romantic experiences entail a number of risks, such as pregnancy, sexual victimization, and violence. As valid as these parental concerns may be, however, they miss the point to some degree. Even if the relationships are relatively superficial, they are phenomenologically quite important, and as we have suggested, may contribute to adolescent development. Thus, although parental monitoring of adolescent romantic experiences seems highly desirable, some sensitivity to the significance of the relationships for youth seems important as well. Disparaging or derogating a teen's relationship is not likely to be an effective parenting strategy.

The significance of these relationships for different aspects of development also means that parents and professionals may want to take them into account in understanding and treating adolescent problems. Problems in academic work or problems in family relationships could be linked to romantic experiences. For example, romantic break-ups are the most common trigger of the first episode of major depressive disorder, which would be likely to affect functioning in most domains of a teen's life (Monroe, Rhode, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999).

In general, those working with adolescents would want to consider the role romantic experiences play in different aspects of development. For example, sex education programs may want to consider the role relationships play in sexual behavior, and not just focus on anatomy and contraceptive practices.

Similarly, because the romantic domain is an important one in identity development, clinicians working with adolescents who are struggling with identity issues may want to consider how these issues are enacted in relationships. Clinicians and parents should also be sensitive to the role romantic experiences may play in the process of redefining relationships with family members or peers.

Romantic experiences may provide adolescents opportunities to rethink who they are and who they want to be. Sullivan (1953) suggested that chumships—intimate preadolescent same-sex friendships—may serve as corrective emotional experiences. Perhaps some long-term, supportive romantic relationships could serve similar functions. Interestingly, middle adolescents' working models of romantic relationships are more likely to be secure than their models of relationships with parents (Furman et al., in press). At the very least, romantic experiences may be helpful to adolescents who have observed that their parents have an unhappy marriage. Such experiences may help them realize that they do not necessarily need to have such a relationship themselves. Adult support and guidance can be helpful in enabling corrective romantic experiences for adolescents.

Throughout this chapter, we have emphasized the marked individual differences in adolescent romantic relationships. It is not enough for a clinician to know that an adolescent has or has had a boyfriend. One would want to know about the characteristics of their relationships, as well as when they occurred and how long they lasted. An assessment of these relationships may also serve as a venue for exploring topics such as sexuality, control, aggression, or victimization.

Finally, just as we scientists know relatively little about adolescent romantic relationships, educators, clinicians, parents, and adolescents themselves are also likely to know little and could benefit from learning more about the topic. Our impression is that most parents and many professionals use their own experiences as an adolescent as one of their primary sources of data. If not their own experiences, they may rely on descriptions in the mass media. Either of these sources of information could be quite misleading, when we consider the individual differences in adolescents' experiences, and the historical changes in sexual behavior and romantic relationships. Our anecdotal impression is that most parents have little sense of the prevalence of sexual activity and typically overestimate how common sexual activity is. Cultural differences may also contribute to conceptions or misconceptions. Imagine how difficult it would be for immigrant parents to have some sense of whether their child's experiences in a new culture are normative or not. Adolescents, too, would be prone to assuming that their experiences or their friends' experiences are normative. Such assumptions could not only be inaccurate, but dangerous. Controlling

behavior, coercive sexual behavior, or physical conflict may be more likely to be tolerated if a teen thought these occurred in most relationships.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although we have tried to make the case that romantic relationships may influence the course of adolescent development, our evidence is quite limited. Not only has relatively little research been conducted on these relationships in adolescence, but also the existing work has been guided primarily by models in which these relationships are treated as outcomes. For example, most research, including our own, seems to implicitly be guided by the idea that friendships or family relationships affect romantic relationships. The studies, however, are all correlational, and in most cases, the data are gathered at one time point. Thus, it is at least theoretically possible that the causal influences are in the other direction, or in both directions.

The limitations in our data bases cannot be corrected by simply recognizing that correlation does not imply causation. In designing our research, we need to consider deliberately how romantic relationships may impact other adolescent relationships or facets of development. This point is nicely illustrated in the literature on parental reactions to dating relationships. Some studies suggested that parental support is associated with increased or continued involvement in a dating relationship (Lewis, 1972), whereas other work suggested that romantic relationships could be enhanced by parental interference—the Romeo and Juliet effect (Driscoll, Davis, & Lipetz, 1972). The issue here is not that the findings are contradictory, however, but that the work had only considered the idea that parents may shape their offspring's romantic relationships. Little consideration was given to the idea that late adolescents may also be attempting to shape their parents' impressions of the relationship and thus, may modify their own interactions with their parents. Leslie, Huston, and Johnson (1986), however, found that the vast majority of late adolescents monitor the information they provide about their romantic relationships, and have made multiple efforts to influence their parents' opinions about the romantic relationships. The parents, too, had often communicated either approving or disapproving reactions. Thus, by considering the idea that the paths of influence may be bi-directional, the investigators provided a better understanding of the process than if they had simply tested a unidirectional model.

It is also important to remember that the effects of romantic experiences may not be salutary. We have focused mainly on how romantic relationships may contribute to the normative developmental tasks of adolescence, but there are risks as well. Approximately 20% to 25% of young women are victims of

dating violence or aggression (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001; Wolfe & Feiring, 2000). Adolescent romantic break-ups are one of the strongest predictors of depression, multiple-victim killings, and suicidal attempts or completions (Brent et al., 1993; Fessenden, 2000; Joyner & Udry, 2000; Monroe et al., 1999). Most incidents of sexual victimization are perpetrated by a romantic partner (Flanagan & Furman, 2000). The sexual activity that commonly co-occurs with romantic involvement places adolescents at risk for sexually transmitted diseases or becoming pregnant.

Perhaps the critical point is that the impact of romantic experiences is likely to vary from individual to individual. In the various sections of this chapter, we have tried to emphasize how not only the existence of a romantic relationship, but the quality of that relationship or the timing of the involvement may determine what the outcome of the experience will be (see also Bouchey & Furman, in press). Similarly, the intensity of the relationship is likely to play a critical role as well. For example, the links with relationships with parents vary as a function of duration of the romantic relationship (Connolly & Johnson, 1996). The experiences of those adolescents who are married or have children also seems qualitatively different from those who are dating more casually. Finally, the characteristics of the partner will also influence the nature of the romantic experience and its impact.

The emphasis on the variability of romantic experiences points out the need to identify the critical processes that are responsible for any impact that romantic experiences have. It may not be the simple presence of a relationship, but instead certain features or experiences that occur within the relationship that determine the outcome. For example, the experience of romantic break-ups, rather than the simple presence of a romantic relationship, may trigger depressive episodes (Grello, Dickson, Welsh, Harper, & Wintersteen, 2001).

Finally, in order to understand the impact of romantic relationships, we will need to understand the context in which they occur. The nature of these experiences vary as a function of the social and cultural context in which they occur (Bouchey & Furman, in press; Simon, Bouchey, & Furman, 2000). Conversely, we need to separate out the specific influence of romantic experiences from related experiences. In several places in this chapter we pointed out how it had been shown that peer relationships in general had an impact on development, but as yet, nobody had examined the specific impact of romantic relationships. Although romantic relationships certainly share many features with other forms of peer relations, they also have some distinct features that may lead them to have a different impact than other peer relationships.

In summary, we have tried to discuss how romantic relationships may contribute to various facets of adolescent development, including the development of an identity, the transformation of family relationships, the development of

close relationships with peers, the development of sexuality, and scholastic achievement and career planning. The evidence is consistent with the idea that romantic experiences may play a role in these various domains, but the evidence is still limited. It is clear that our work as scientists has just begun. It is hoped that this chapter contributes to the endeavor by delineating a series of questions that need to be addressed empirically.

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