



Conflict resolution patterns and longevity of adolescent romantic couples: A 2-year follow-up study

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Abstract

This study examined the predictors of longevity among 40 late adolescent romantic couples (mean age males = 17.71 years; mean age females = 17.18 years). Subjects were given a revealed differences task where they were asked to solve their disagreements. The joint task was recorded, transcribed and analysed by two raters. At 3, 6, 9, 12, 18, and 24 months after this procedure, partners were contacted by telephone and asked whether their relationship was still intact. A cluster analysis was performed on couples' interaction indices and yielded three distinctive conflict resolution patterns. The *Downplaying* pattern was characterized by a high tendency to minimize the conflict. The relationships of the adolescents displaying this pattern stayed intact for a period of 9 months. Half of them were still together after 24 months. The *adolescents displaying the Integrative* pattern, which shows a good ability to negotiate differences tended to stay together over a period of 24 months. Those showing the *Conflictive* pattern, characterized by a confrontative interaction, were separated by the 3 months follow-up. Results are discussed within the context of developmental perspectives of conflict resolution tendencies and adolescent romance.

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Introduction

Romantic relationships are normative and salient during adolescence. By the age of 18, more than 70% of adolescents report having had a romantic relationship in the past 18 months (Carver,

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Joyner, & Udry, 2003). While early romantic relationships are more of a transitional nature and may barely develop into relationships, (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999) as adolescents grow older their relationships become more long-standing and intimate, and start to serve as an important source of affection and support (Brown, 1999; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Laursen & Williams, 1997).

Recent empirical studies have demonstrated that the mean duration of relationships among 17 and 18 year olds may be 12 months or more (Carver et al., 2003; Shulman & Scharf, 2000) suggesting that at this age a substantial number of adolescents have attained the capability of becoming involved in steady relationships. The purpose of this study was to examine the predictors of steady and transient romantic relationships in late adolescence, namely of relationships which partners are capable of maintaining for a significant period of time and relationships that dissolve earlier. For this purpose adolescent couples were followed for a period of 2 years in order to assess the predictors of stability in adolescent romantic relationships.

Empirical findings, though sparse, suggest that the degree and nature of romantic involvement during adolescence is related to indices of individual adaptation and functioning (Neemann, Hubbard, & Masten, 1995). In a 1-year study of middle adolescents, problem behaviours increased with increasing levels of casual dating, whereas problem behaviours and emotional distress declined as dating resolved toward steady relationships (Davies & Windle, 2000). Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, and Collins (2001) found that over-involvement with dating at age 16, as evinced by dating a larger number of people in the previous year, is associated with more psychosocial and behavioural problems in early adolescence and with significant declines in functioning between early and middle adolescence. Thus, adolescents with psychosocial and behavioral problems are more likely to be involved in less stable romantic relationships. This study, emerging from a systemic perspective, is set to examine the relationship properties that are related to, and can predict the involvement in steady and less steady romantic relationships during the latter stages of adolescence.

Stability of relationships has previously been studied in friendships, dating, courtships, and marriages but not in adolescent romantic relationships. Consistently, findings have shown that relationships described as positive, providing a sense of closeness, help, and security (Bradbury, Cohan, & Karney, 1998; Bukowski, Hoza, & Bovin, 1994; Cate & Lloyd, 1992; Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Schneider, Fonzi, Tani, & Tomada, 1997) last for longer periods of time. Relationships characterized by conflict, mistrust, and jealousy are more likely to dissolve overtime (Youniss, 1980).

However, conflicts are not necessarily bad. Commonly, friends display mutual empathy, affection, and security (Sullivan, 1953) and share important feelings and information. Yet conflicts are found even in relationships that might have been perceived as close (Shantz, 1987). Few friends are able to avoid disagreements, since disputes are an inevitable part of all close relationships; in one account, adolescents report an average of one or two disagreements with close friends every day (Laursen, 1993). The mere presence of conflict, therefore, reveals less about the quality of a relationship than does the way in which the conflict is handled (Perry, Perry, & Kennedy, 1992). Moreover, though conflict may provoke relationship perturbation or even disintegration, it may also provide an opportunity to define roles, improve communication, and strengthen interconnections (Hartup, 1992). Therefore, conflict management is a particularly important barometer of relational functioning, because friends are both invested in the rewards of affiliation and free to discontinue relationships perceived to be disadvantageous.

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