



Romantic relationships and delinquent behaviour in adolescence: The moderating role of delinquency propensity

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A B S T R A C T

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There is some evidence that adolescent romantic involvement is associated with delinquent behaviour. One aim of this longitudinal study was to determine whether this holds for romantic relationships deemed important by the participants. A second aim was to test whether this association was stronger for adolescents with pre-existing delinquent behaviour and personality traits of impulsivity and thrill seeking (delinquency propensity). Sex differences also were examined. Participants were 686 7th and 8th grade students who completed three assessments over three years. The results showed that delinquency was associated with earlier romantic relationships among those who were higher in delinquency propensity one year earlier. This association was stronger among girls than boys. Thus, romantic relationships amplified girls' and boys' existing delinquency propensity, but this was strongest among girls.

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Peer relationships are assumed to be one of the most important social influences on adolescents' behaviour. As adolescents mature and strive for autonomy, they tend to shift attention away from their parents, and peers become more and more important (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986; Zimmer-Gembeck, & Collins, 2003). Indeed, it has been shown that having deviant friends is associated with adolescent delinquency (Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, & Patterson, 1996; Fergusson, Vitaro, Wanner, & Brendgen, 2007; Haynie, 2002; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2000; Vitaro, Tremblay, Kerr, Pagani, & Bukowski, 1997) and that peers influence other behaviours in adolescence, such as smoking and alcohol and drug use (Mounts & Steinberg, 1995; Wills & Cleary, 1999). Thus, a large literature points to the importance of peer influences on adolescent problem behaviour.

Even though many studies have stressed the significance of peer influences on adolescent behaviour, the majority of these studies have focused only on the influence of friends. By doing so, research has largely overlooked the possibility that other important persons in adolescents' lives, such as romantic partners, might also influence their behaviour. In one of the few studies done in this area, adolescents seemed to be influenced by their romantic partners, even after the influence of friends was taken into account (Haynie, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2005). This suggests that romantic partners make unique contributions to influencing youth behaviour that cannot be explained by the influence of friends.

There are additional reasons to believe that romantic partners play an important role in adolescent socialisation. First, at the same time as adolescents spend increasing time with their peers, they begin spending more time in mixed-gender peer groups, start dating and become romantically involved (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004; Kuttler & La Greca, 2004). In fact, it has been shown that about half of early-to-middle adolescents have experienced a romantic relationship (Carver,

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Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Thus, the emergence of romantic relationships is a main feature of adolescence that affects many adolescents. Second, a considerable number of adolescents report relatively long-lasting relationships (Carver et al., 2003), and even though most romantic relationships in early-to-middle adolescence are of short duration (review by Zimmer-Gembeck, 2002), this does not necessarily imply that these relationships are trivial (Collins, 2003). Third, the time adolescents spend with their romantic partners (Adams, Laursen, & Wilder, 2001; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2002) and the number of activities they share (Laursen & Williams, 1997) also suggest that romantic partners might influence adolescent behaviour. Consequently, romantic relationships should be further examined as an additional source of influence on adolescent behaviour.

One limitation of the available research on romantic involvement and problem behaviour in adolescence is that most studies have focused only on non-normative or problematic aspects of romantic involvement. More specifically, multiple, casual relationships, early initiation of dating, and early or risky sexual behaviours have been linked to delinquency and alcohol use (Cooper, Wood, Orcutt, & Albino, 2003; Davies & Windle, 2000; Dishion, 2000; Donovan & Jessor, 1985; Tubman, Windle, & Windle, 1996a, 1996b; Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2001). It has been suggested that these aspects of romantic involvement are part of a continuous pattern of maladjustment (Donovan & Jessor, 1985; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2001). However, since romantic involvement is part of normal development in adolescence, it is also important to investigate the role of more normative romantic relationships, or romantic partners that adolescents consider important in their lives (Collins, 2003).

There are, in fact, some studies showing links between romantic relationships that youth consider important and problem behaviour. For example, it has been shown that having a steady or an intimate partner, or a special romantic relationship with someone is associated with delinquency and alcohol use (Engels & Knibbe, 2000; Joyner & Udry, 2000; Meeus, Branje, & Overbeek, 2004). These findings support the notion that even important romantic relationships are linked to adolescent problem behaviour.

There are several possible explanations why adolescents who are involved in a romantic relationship generally are more delinquent and drink more than other adolescents do. One of these explanations deals with selection. Previous studies have demonstrated selection effects whereby adolescents with delinquent behaviour and alcohol use more frequently become romantically involved (Engels & Knibbe, 2000; Rebellon & Manasse, 2004). Because adolescents with problem behaviour are more likely to enter a romantic relationship, it is possible that selection effects partly explain the association between romantic involvement and problem behaviour.

However, it is possible that individual characteristics, such as personality traits that are associated with problem behaviour, can also make some adolescents more likely to become romantically involved. Thus, a further limitation of the research linking romantic involvement and problem behaviour is that it has not examined whether this association can be explained by personality traits. Indeed, it has been shown that impulsive, sensation seeking girls were more involved in romantic relationships (Persson, Kerr, & Stattin, 2004). These personality characteristics have also consistently been found to contribute to delinquent behaviour (Caspi et al., 1997; Caspi et al., 1994; Krueger et al., 1994). Thus, it is possible that impulsive, sensation-seeking adolescents are more likely to develop delinquent behaviour and to become romantically involved. Consequently, impulsive, sensation-seeking personality traits might play a role in the association between adolescents' romantic involvement and delinquent behaviour.

Another explanation of the link between romantic involvement and problem behaviour is that romantic partners actually influence adolescent behaviour. Romantic partners might influence youth behaviour indirectly by providing norms of behaviour or directly by reinforcing certain behaviours. Youths entering a romantic relationship have shown greater increases in delinquency compared with other youths (Joyner & Udry, 2000), providing some evidence for the social influence explanation. It has been suggested that even well adjusted youths might be drawn into delinquency by their romantic partners (Stattin & Magnusson, 1990). However, earlier research has not clarified whether this is actually the case, and it is reasonable to assume that youths with different personalities are differently influenced by their romantic partners. An additional limitation of the research on romantic involvement and problem behaviour is, therefore, that it has not examined whether romantic partners influence adolescents' delinquency independently of adolescents' propensity towards delinquent behaviour. Perhaps it is only youths who are already prone to delinquent behaviour who can be socialized into more delinquency by romantic partners. In fact, there is some evidence that social influences on delinquency vary by individuals' propensities towards delinquent behaviour. For instance, it has previously been reported that delinquent peers promote delinquency primarily among individuals with low self-control (Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 2001). Similarly, it has been shown that having an antisocial partner in early adulthood promoted crime most strongly for females who were already prone to crime (Moffitt, 2001; Simons, Stewart, Gordon, Conger, & Elder, 2002). Thus, the romantic relationships appeared to amplify an already existing propensity to criminal behaviour. However, these studies focused on romantic relationships in young adulthood and research examining the link between romantic relationships and problem behaviour in early adolescence is needed (see Rhule-Louie & McMahon, 2007). Hence, the question remains whether the influence of romantic relationships on adolescent delinquency varies by delinquency propensity.

With respect to sex differences, it has been hypothesised that girls, especially, might be drawn into delinquency by their boyfriends (Stattin & Magnusson, 1990). In similar findings on friends' influence on delinquency, having a boy as a best friend predicted antisocial behaviour for both girls and boys (Arndorfer & Stormshak, 2008). In other words, associating with boys was related to antisocial behaviour for girls, but associating with girls was not related to antisocial behaviour for boys. In other research, however, romantic partners' deviant behaviour predicted minor deviancy and more serious delinquency for both boys and girls, but the influence of romantic partners' deviancy was stronger for girls than for boys when it came to minor

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