



Adolescent academic achievement and romantic relationships [☆]

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Abstract

Parent and peer influences on academic achievement are well documented, but little research has examined links to romantic involvement during the adolescent period. This study draws on interviews with 572 currently dating teens and results indicate that the romantic partner's grades are significantly related to adolescent respondents' self-reported grades, even after their own orientation toward school and traditional family, peer, and demographic controls have been taken into account. We hypothesize, following results on peer influence processes, that this concordance reveals a tendency to select similar partners, but may involve social influence processes as well. A longitudinal analysis in which partners' grades predict respondents' grades reported at the second interview (controlling for wave one grades and the other covariates) lends support to this view. We also explore the role of age, gender and race/ethnicity as affecting the nature of these relationships. Finally, we draw on the content of in-depth interviews elicited from a subset of the respondents to illustrate both types of mechanisms (selection vs. influence). These results underscore the importance of continuing to explore the role of romantic partners in connection with a broad range of prosocial as well as problem adolescent outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Research on academic achievement has focused on the importance of family characteristics and processes for cognitive and social development, teacher expectations, academic aspirations/attainment, and dropping out behaviors (De Graaf et al., 2000; Farkas, 1996; Jeynes, 2005; Rumberger, 1990; Steinberg, 1990). While somewhat less voluminous, research has also linked peer relations and characteristics of friends to academic motivation, school disruption, aspirations, and achievement (Berndt et al., 1990; Crosnoe and Elder, 2003;

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Epstein, 1983; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Ryan, 2001; Urdan, 1997). Thus, family and peer relations are critical to an understanding of adolescents' social and academic lives.

During adolescence, teens also become interested and involved in dating, and it is clear that over the period, heterosexual relationships gain in importance (see e.g., Furman et al., 1999). Yet despite the ubiquity and general importance of dating, the role of romantic partners on academic achievement has not been systematically investigated. Brown et al. (1999) note that the tendency to overlook dating partners as a source of social influence may trace back to the idea that such relationships are likely to be relatively superficial and transitory (see e.g., Merten, 1996), particularly when compared to family and friendship bonds. However, recent studies focused directly on the character, meaning and importance of romantic relationships to adolescents themselves develop a portrait that contrasts with these earlier depictions (Furman and Hand, 2006; Furman and Shaffer, 2003; Giordano et al., 2006). Studies of other adolescent behaviors such as delinquency also suggest that research on partner effects may be important to pursue (Haynie et al., 2005). Thus, the objective of the current study is to determine whether the dating partner's academic performance is related to adolescents' academic achievement levels, once the well-documented influence of parents and peers has been taken into account.

We rely on data from the first and second waves of interviews conducted in connection with the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), a longitudinal investigation of romantic, peer and family relationships during adolescence, in order to assess whether the dating partner's level of academic performance (measured by grades) is significantly related to the adolescent's own performance, controlling for the respondent's demographic characteristics, personal orientation toward academics, friends' attitudes, variations in family resources (e.g., parents' education), as well as family structure and dynamics (e.g., monitoring, involvement in school-related activities).¹ We estimate cross-sectional and longitudinal models, the latter controlling for wave one grades reported by the respondent. As the seriousness of dating involvement has been associated with the adolescent's age (Carver et al., 2003), we also explore whether any observed connections between romantic partners and academic achievement vary by the developmental stage of the adolescent. Similarly, research has pointed to gender differences in the salience and character of romantic relationships, and, in the aggregate, girls outperform boys during the high school years; thus interactions between gender and romantic partners' grades as influences on the respondent's grades are also examined. Finally, prior research has documented some variations in minority youths' experiences within the world of romance (Coates, 1999), and research has also shown that race/ethnicity is related to levels of school performance (Roscigno, 1998). Thus our sampling strategy was designed to elicit interviews from a diverse sample of teens. In addition to controls for race/ethnicity within multivariate models, we estimate models that include race/ethnicity by romantic partner's grades interactions. Detailed "relationship history narratives" were also elicited from a subset of these respondents ($n = 100$), and these qualitative data are used to illustrate mechanisms that may underlie the observed statistical associations.

2. Background

2.1. Family influence

It is well accepted that the family plays a crucial role in the academic orientation and performance of students. Prior research has shown that socioeconomic status, family structure and parental involvement are related to a range of achievement outcomes for children and adolescents (Astone and McLanahan, 1991; Battle, 1998; Downey, 1995). A most consistent predictor is the parents' own level of academic attainment. As Coleman (1988) highlighted, the parents' educational level influences the financial, social and cultural resources and relationship alliances of the parents, including involvement in 'high' cultural activities that have been found to influence children's cognitive and communication skills, and enhance material that is taught in the classroom (De Graaf et al., 2000; Farkas, 1996; Lareau, 1987; Parcel and Dufur, 2001). Accordingly, it is not surprising that research consistently shows that in less advantaged families, children perform at a lower

¹ We note also that the number of youths who indicated a gay or lesbian identity at the time of the first and second wave interviews is too small to allow for a separate analysis. However, we are currently analyzing the social network and dating experiences of bisexual and homosexual teens, relying on data from all four waves of TARS interviews.

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