



Identity exploration in the dating domain: The role of attachment dimensions and parenting practices

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A B S T R A C T

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We examined relations among perceived parenting practices (support and psychological control), attachment dimensions for romantic relationships (anxiety and avoidance) and exploration of the dating identity among actively dating adolescents in two high school aged samples. In the all female sample of Study 1 ($n = 653$) and the gender balanced sample of Study 2 ($n = 1003$), parenting practices contributed to adolescent exploration of the dating identity. Parent psychological control, but not parental support, also contributed to elevated feeling of avoidance and anxiety in romantic relationships. Avoidance, in turn, was related to less exploration of the dating identity while anxiety seemed to increase it. Gender moderated the model, with parenting practices predicting exploration only for girls and with the links for avoidance and anxiety with exploration stronger for boys than girls. Indirect effects for parenting practices through attachment dimensions on exploration of the dating identity were also noted.

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Dating relationships in adolescence can be transient and superficial (Collins, 2003). However, Carver, Joyner, and Udry (2003) reported that 20% of early adolescents and 60% of late adolescents claim their current dating relationships have lasted 11 months or more, suggesting they may serve as practice for later adult relationships. Citing recent research, Smetana, Campione-Barr, and Metzger (2006) described romantic relationships during middle adolescence as both normative and relatively stable compared to similar relationships in early adolescence. Furthermore, adolescent romantic relationships resemble adult romantic relationships in terms of the associations between relationship satisfaction and such factors as commitment, communication, companionship, and passion (Levesque, 1993).

Although romantic relationships appear to be important to adolescent development (Furman & Shaffer, 2003), surprisingly few aspects of these relationships have been explored. In fact, Collins and van Dulmen (2006) noted that much research on this topic focuses on status aspects of dating, measuring trends in whether, when, and how regularly adolescents date. Insufficient attention has been given to the question of how adolescent romantic relationships affect adolescent development or later romantic relationships. Indeed, Giordano (2003) called this area a “last frontier” in adolescent research.

Given how common adolescent romantic relationships are and the Eriksonian claim (Erikson, 1980) that identity formation is the critical aspect of adolescent social development, this study aims to examine the role and relevance of the adolescent dating context in the process of identity exploration specific to dating relationships. For those anxious or uncomfortable about the dating context, the process of exploring the dating identity may be affected. Since adolescents are also loosening ties and renegotiating relationship with parents at this time (Hill, Bromell, Tyson, & Flint, 2007), we will examine parenting practices as potential contributors to adolescents’ comfort with close relationships as well as to their

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exploration of the dating relationship. We are interested in knowing whether more supportive parents contribute to comfort in dating relationships and in exploration of the dating identity, and how negative parenting practices that may stifle adolescent autonomy affect these processes.

Identity development

Identity has been defined as a “self-constructed dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and personal history into a coherent and autonomous self that guides the unfolding of one’s adult life course” (Montgomery, 2005, p.347). Erikson (1968) considered identity to be shaped by both personal and social factors. Ego identity he described as an awareness of the ego’s integration, as a sense of continuity over time and context, and as a sense of one’s individuality. He also defined ego identity as a sense of continuity in one’s meaning for significant others, which allows one to be recognized by others as the same person across different roles or even different times. Research on identity often organizes areas of self-awareness into domains, for example, the interpersonal domains of friendship and dating or the ideological domains of religious and political identity (Grotevant, Thornbecke, & Meyer, 1982). Hence, identity formation can be viewed as the process by which various roles, capacities, identifications, and needs across identity domains are developed and synthesized into a coherent self (Erikson, 1968).

Theorists and researchers since Erikson have conceptualized the process of identity formation in terms of two main underlying dimensions, exploration and commitment (e.g., Marcia, 1980). Activity pertaining to these dimensions explains the amount of identity formation achieved (e.g., Archer, 1989; Berman, Weems, Rodriguez, & Zamora, 2006; Kerpelman & White, 2006; Marcia, 1994; Thorbecke & Grotevant, 1982). Exploration is a process by which identity alternatives are examined as one seeks to find out about oneself in the context of an environment (Berman, Schwartz, Kurtines, & Berman, 2001). Commitment involves the selection of particular goals, values, and beliefs. It can result from exploration, but identity choices may be made without prior exploration (Marcia, 1994). Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, and Beyers (2006) elaborated the two dimensions of exploration and commitment by suggesting a two-phase process whereby initial exploration in breadth leads to initial, potentially tentative, commitments which tend to focus subsequent exploration at greater depth. This second exploratory process involves testing aspects of the initial commitment and may lead to an identification with that commitment or to a rejection of it along with a return to exploration in breadth. In this two-step process, identity achievement is associated with the second commitment rather than the initial commitment that is further explored. Although both exploration and commitment are essential for identity achievement, a focus on exploration is appropriate for an identity that is in-the-making, whether the exploration undertaken is broad or in depth. While exploration is a normative activity for adolescents, the uncertainty and potential for unsettling self-realizations can also make it feel threatening (e.g., Marcia, 1980, re: moratorium status).

The interpersonal identity domain, which includes and organizes self-views as a partner within the range of one’s interpersonal relationships, is explored among adolescents mainly through interactions in relationships with friends, family, and dating partners and involves constructing one or more sets of self-descriptions within those generally close relationships (Thorbecke & Grotevant, 1982). One might expect identity formation in this domain to be important for subsequent relationship outcomes whether in adolescence or adulthood (Grotevant et al., 1982), but only limited research has directly examined interpersonal identity formation (e.g., Bartle-Haring, 1997; Branch & Boothe, 2002; Forbes & Ashton, 1998; Markstrom-Adams & Adams, 1995) or identity formation specifically in the dating context (e.g., Allison & Schultz, 2001; Zimmer-Gembeck & Petherick, 2006). However, Archer (1992) contended that, because so much of identity formation involves exploration in interpersonal contexts, the interpersonal domain may be the most important domain for understanding identity formation processes. Therefore, this study focuses on the dating relationship context and addresses exploration of the dating partner identity.

Security and intimacy

According to Erikson (1968), one important outcome of healthy identity formation is the ability to form truly intimate relationships. However, Dyk and Adams (1987) argued a less consecutive and more concurrent developmental process in which intimacy during adolescence can promote identity exploration by offering an interpersonal context of connectedness. They distinguished identity development, which involves learning who one is within social contexts, from intimacy, which involves learning how one can be known by another person. They suggested that both processes emerge in the context of close relationships where adolescents experience both enhancement and compromise of inner resources. In a culture that seems to promote the interaction of the sexes in adolescence (Carver et al., 2003), it seems reasonable to assume that Erikson’s final developmental task of childhood, identity formation, and his first task of adulthood, intimacy, may emerge together (Montgomery, 2005; Seginer & Noyman, 2005).

Simultaneous engagement in the processes of identity formation and intimacy development necessarily involves adolescents in self-exploration within romantic-type relationships. The degree to which adolescents may be willing to engage in such relationships and explore their identity relevant experiences may be influenced by the attachment system (Bowlby, 1982; Pittman, Keiley, Kerpelman, & Vaughn, 2011). Attachment security is central to the development of intimacy (Allen & Land, 1999; Cassidy, 2001; Collins & Sroufe, 1999). Attachments develop in early relationships with parents, especially mothers. A model of self emerges reflecting representations of the self as worthy of care (or not) and a model of others

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