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Romantic partner selection and socialization of young adolescents' substance use and behavior problems

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This study examined romantic partner selection and socialization of substance use (cigarettes, alcohol) and behavior problems among a sample of 78 young adolescents (6th–8th graders) over eleven months. Adolescent and romantic partner behaviors were assessed before and after relationships were initiated via school records and self-report. Most selection and socialization effects were apparent for the eighth grade adolescents (at Time 1). Prior to their relationship, eighth graders and romantic partners were alike on alcohol use. In contrast, romantic socialization effects emerged for eighth graders' cigarette use and behavior problems. The nature of the partner socialization effects depended on the combination of adolescents' and partners' pre-relationship behaviors. Eighth graders who dated partners with fewer problems showed the greatest instability in their behavior problems and partner behavior predicted greater decreased in problem behaviors among adolescents with more problems. The implications of these findings are discussed within the broader context of adolescent peer relationships.

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For many, adolescence is a time of behavioral experimentation. For example, the proportion of youth who initiate alcohol and cigarette use increases by approximately six fold between the ages of 12–16 years (SAMHSA, 2007). During this same period, more than one third of youth engage in various forms of minor delinquency, such as fighting, petty theft, or vandalism (SAMHSA, 2007). To some extent, these rising rates reflect adolescents' attempts to appear more mature and independent from parents (Moffitt, 1993; Shedler & Block, 1990). Nonetheless, the onset of these behaviors during early adolescence increases risk for later problem behaviors and psychiatric disorders (McGue & Iacono, 2005). Early alcohol use has been associated with later alcohol related problems and abuse as well as higher rates of depression, dating violence, and non-suicidal self-injury (Hasking, Momeni, Swannell, & Chia, 2008; Swahn, Bossarte, & Sullivent, 2008; Warner & White, 2003). Early cigarette use has been linked with lifetime alcohol and drug use disorders (Rohde, Lewinsohn, Brown, Gau, & Kahler, 2003). In a similar vein, early behavior problems are predictive of later illegal activities, difficulties with employment, and victimization of intimate partners and children (Moffitt, 1993).

Peer groups provide a central context for the initiation and persistence of adolescents' use of cigarettes and alcohol as well as other behavior problems (Oxford, Harachi, Catalano, & Abbott, 2001; Simons-Morton, 2002). Adolescents tend to select peers who are similar to themselves thereby shaping their exposure to alcohol, cigarettes, or problematic behavior (Arnett, 2003; Urberg, Degirmencioglu, & Tolson, 1998). Peers tend to shape and reinforce similarities over time such that affiliation

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with peers who smoke or drink or engage in problem behavior reinforces adolescents' values and provides behavioral opportunities that are not available to those who select peers who abstain from these behaviors (Allen & Antonishak, 2008; Arnett, 2003; Poulin, Dishion, & Burraston, 2001). As a result of these selection and socialization processes, adolescents and their friends tend to be similar in cigarette and alcohol use and behavior problems.

Less is known about whether these peer selection and socialization effects also operate in adolescents' romantic relationships. This is somewhat surprising given the significance of romantic relationships to adolescent development. As early as middle school, at least one third of students report having a romantic relationship in the past year (Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2006). Whether or not adolescents are involved in dating relationships, they are frequently at the center of adolescents' conversations, thoughts, and emotions (Richards, Crowe, Larson, & Swarr, 1998; Thompson, 1994). Their potential to shape identity and autonomy suggests that romantic partners may be influential in the ways adolescents make bids for independence from parents, including substance use and delinquency (Dowdy & Kliever, 1998; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Kobus, 2003).

Recent data suggests that both selection and socialization processes are evident in young adolescents' romantic relationships. Simon, Wargo Aikins, and Prinstein (2008) found that adolescents tend to select partners who are similar to themselves on developmentally salient domains that are also important to friendship selection (e.g., popularity). Moreover, the combination of adolescent and partner characteristics *prior* to the relationship predicted adolescents' subsequent psychosocial adjustment. The current study extends this work to examine the relevance of romantic partner selection and socialization processes for young adolescents' engagement in cigarette or alcohol use and minor delinquency at school. We hypothesize that in order to adequately *capture the peer context*, both peer and romantic partners must be considered as co-occurring socializing agents.

Romantic partner selection

The selection of partners who engage in similar behaviors or share similar attitudes is a particularly robust finding and points to the basic social-emotional satisfaction and interpersonal ease that emerges from relationship choices based on similarity (see review by McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Similarities in observed behavior may be particularly meaningful during the initial phases of relationship formation and may contribute to the similarities in substance use and problem behavior observed between friends (Urberg et al., 1998). There is also evidence of assortative mating for substance use and deviant behavior among adult romantic partners (Engels, Knibbe, & Drop, 1999; Kim & Capaldi, 2004; Quinton, Pickles, Maughan, & Rutter, 1993; Reynolds, Barlow, & Pederson, 2006). In one of the few prospective studies on substance use, Etcheverry and Agnew (2009) provide compelling evidence for selection effects among young adults on the basis of whether and how much each partner smokes. However, we know little about these types of selection effects during *adolescence*. In one of the few related studies, Dutch adolescents reported significant concordance in their own and their partners' alcohol use (van der Zwalau et al., 2009). However, in this as well as many other studies, reports of partner behavior were provided by participants *after* the relationship had begun, making it difficult to estimate pure selection effects.

In the current study, adolescents' and partners' reports of substance use (cigarette and alcohol) along with school reported behavior problems were obtained prior to relationship formation to estimate selection effects. We expected that adolescents would select romantic partners who were similar to themselves in substance use and behavior problems. To the extent that friend and romantic relationships share comparable features, we expected that similar criteria might be important to the selection of both types of relationship partners (Furman, Brown, & Feiring, 1999; Simon et al., 2008). In addition, early romantic partners are typically members of existing mixed-sex peer groups (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004) that are likely to already share common characteristics (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003). Within these groups, adolescents' friends may also encourage romantic partner similarity by discouraging the selection of partners whose behavior deviates from group norms (Brown, 1999). Hence, selection effects could be particularly strong for early adolescents, who are nearing peak susceptibility to peer conformity (Krosnick & Judd, 1982; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986).

Romantic partner socialization

Although adolescents may choose peers who are similar, changes in behavior over time may reflect socialization processes. Many studies have been criticized for overestimating the effects of peer socialization by using cross-sectional designs, participant-reported partner data, or failure to adequately control for selection effects. Longitudinal studies are not always exempt from problems but offer stronger evidence for peer socialization. Positive reinforcement of deviant behaviors within adolescent friend dyads contributes to escalations in deviancy two years later (Dishion, Capaldi, Spracklen, & Li, 1995; Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, & Patterson, 1996). Similarly, affiliation with friends who drink or smoke cigarettes increases adolescents' risk for substance use initiation (Engels et al., 1999; Mercken, Candel, Willems, & de Vries, 2007) and maintenance (Sieving, Perry, & Williams, 2000). These socialization effects do not necessarily reflect peer pressure or coercion *per se*; they may also reflect adolescents' curiosity in the face of opportunity, a desire for acceptance, or conformity to expected norms (Allen & Antonishak, 2008).

The current study utilized a longitudinal school-based sample to identify adolescent couples prior to relationship formation and track changes in adolescent behavior after the relationships were established. This design allowed us to estimate the socialization effects of romantic partners after accounting for selection effects. We expected that romantic

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