

**Adolescent Dating Relationships:
Implications for Understanding Adult Unions**

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INTRODUCTION

Increased interest in romantic relationships has long been considered a defining feature of adolescence (Waller 1937; Sullivan 1953). Indeed, by age 18 over 80% of American adolescents have some dating experience (Carver, Joyner, and Udry 2003). Even relatively young adolescents report having boyfriends and girlfriends, and youth who do not date, nevertheless, express a strong interest in dating (Giordano, Longmore, and Manning 2001). In recent years, developmental psychologists, in particular, have continued to specify the ways in which dating is an important part of adolescent development in contemporary American society (e.g., Collins 2003). Given the broad cultural and societal interest in adolescent dating, and increased research interest in romantic relationships during this period (e.g., Brown, Feiring, and Furman, 1999), it is surprising that little academic research has considered the implications of adolescent dating for understanding the character of adult development associated with life course experiences. Only a handful of studies have examined how adolescent romance and dating influences adult relationship formation and maintenance.

In this chapter we argue that a sociological lens adds to perspectives on adolescent relationships emphasized by developmental psychologists (notably, attachment theories), providing a more fully social view of long term effects of these adolescent relationship experiences. A structurally informed symbolic interactionist approach recognizes that conduct within these relationships is more than an individual achievement, and specifically: (1) foregrounds the ways in which sociodemographic characteristics and broad historical/cultural forces pattern the contours of adolescent

dating relationships (and in turn how these connect to later life course experiences), and (2) recognizes that, while early attachment relationships influence later relationships, each form of relationship (parents, peers, romantic partners) has its own unique properties, dynamics, and implications for adolescent development (Giordano, Longmore, and Manning 2006). Thus, there are limits to the idea that one's conduct within adult relationships, and indeed, the meaning of these relationships is transported wholesale from earlier relationship experiences. However, consistent with the attachment notion, symbolic interactionist theories (e.g., Mead 1934) and basic tenets of the life course perspective (e.g., Shanahan 2000), nor does the individual navigate each new phase of the life course and the relationships that define them as a blank slate. This suggests the general logic underlying our contention that what occurs within the confines of adolescent dating influences (directly or indirectly) what happens later on in the world of adult union formation. This is particularly intuitive since the form of relationship is similar; that is, dating relationships, like adult unions, are intimate dyadic liaisons (unlike the links between parent-child or friendship relations, which inevitably involve a shift in type of relationship).

The symbolic interactionist approach is also useful as it highlights the important role of self and identity processes as a lens for decision-making and as a core dynamic of human development. A sociological approach to identity recognizes that social interaction is crucial to the formation of malleable but increasingly stable self-views (Mead 1934). Over time, these conceptions of self affect short and long term goals, partner choices, and conduct within relationships. Similarly, those same relationships

and partner choices influence the development of identity as well as other components of the self-concept. Thus, relationship experiences and associated identity development during adolescence may influence later union formation experiences (e.g., as an individual develops the view of self as/as not the 'marrying kind.')

For example, recent research (e.g., Manning et al. 2006) demonstrates that as early as the adolescent period, youth have already begun forming their expectations on whether or not they plan to cohabit, cohabit before marriage, and to marry without cohabiting first.

In the remainder of the chapter, we use our structural symbolic interactionist perspective to draw together and to integrate key approaches and empirical studies to understand the implications of adolescent dating relationships for adult unions. While our focus is primarily on heterosexual relationships, we consider adolescents' romantic relationships to be useful for understanding gay and lesbian adult unions as well, but space limitations preclude us from a comprehensive assessment of this important literature. We review attachment approaches, which primarily emphasize the significance of parent-child attachment for later relationships, as well as socio-historical influences on adolescent dating and adult unions. Aspects of both of these approaches are compatible with, and help to inform our structural symbolic interactionist approach, which emphasizes the significance of demographic patterns, social networks, and self-conceptions as both causes and consequences of social relationships. We then review the unique features of adolescent romantic relationships, which distinguish this socializing agent from both parents and peers. We outline both indirect and direct

ways in which adolescents' dating and romantic relationships influence the character of adult union formation experiences.

The Attachment Approach to Intimate Relationships

As suggested briefly above, most of the literature on adolescent dating and romance is based on the work of developmental psychologists. The attachment perspective highlights that all types of prior relational experiences influence current romantic experiences. This work, however, focuses most on the key role of attachment processes in early childhood including support and interactions with parents and later with peers (Hazan and Shaver 1987). Hartup (1986) states that childhood and adolescent relationships "serve as important templates or models that can be used in the construction of future relationships... (thus) consequences of earlier relationships can frequently be detected in later ones" (p. 2). While research has demonstrated support for the notion that secure early attachment is related to later success within the realm of peer and romantic relationships, most studies of attachment processes have considered adolescent romantic relationships as an end-point of research, rather than constituting a set of experiences that uniquely influence and structure subsequent life course trajectories.

Socio-Historical Influences

Consistent with structural symbolic interactionism, the social and historical context always provides the landscape for individuals' social relationships. For example, in recent years in contemporary American society, the road to adulthood has become longer and more winding with prolonged and more indirect education,

employment, parenthood, and marital transitions (Arnett 2004; Furstenberg, Rumbaut, and Settersten 2005; Rindfuss 1991). Consequently, the age at marriage for men and women continues to be the highest in the history of the United States, 26 for women and 27 for men (US Census Bureau 2006). This increase in the length of time between life course transitions (i.e., completion of formal schooling and settling down with an intimate partner) has left more life course space for a series of premarital relationships including adult sexual relationships, adult romantic experiences, adult dating, and cohabitation. In part because the transition into adulthood has become more complex, some scholars have argued that there is a blurring of the lines between singlehood and marriage (Rindfuss 1991). As a consequence adolescent relationships may increasingly become more important as launching points for the wide variety of adults' premarital relationships.

Sociological investigations have also documented shifts in contemporary meanings, arguing that economic incentives have to some extent been replaced by a view of marriage as the highest form of interpersonal intimacy (Cherlin 2004). Thus, dating experiences provide early introduction to the idea that one must always be in love (Eder 1985), or that intimate self-disclosure is key to having a successful relationship (Bulcroft et al. 2000). These preoccupations, and the emphasis on interpersonal qualities as influences on one's ideal mate have their origins in culturally and historically specific processes associated with adolescent dating, as well as deriving from individual variations (i.e., differences in attachment style) which are also manifested in adolescent dating.

Socio/historical influences on gender socialization significantly affect relationship processes, and as a result may also transcend the effect of individual attachment histories. To a great extent, children are socialized in same-sex groups. During the adolescent period, however, there are many more opportunities for cross-sex friendships, and for youth to be socialized in mixed-sex groups. Girls, during childhood as well as adolescence, in particular are heavily socialized to value relationships (Gilligan 1982), and to value and desire popularity (e.g., Eder 1985). Consequently, when girls begin the process of developing romantic ties they have already experienced intimacy within the context of their earlier same-sex friendship relations. Boys, in contrast, have typically interacted within larger groups, and have less often focused on intimate dyadic interaction. Because of these early experiences, we suggest that boys experience romantic relationships as an especially strong contrast to prior interactions (Giordano et al. 2006). In turn, this increases feelings of awkwardness and lack of confidence within the romantic context, while also creating much interest. Relying on interviews with a large sample of adolescent girls and boys, we document that boys scored higher on communication awkwardness, and lower on feelings of confidence navigating their romantic relationships, while reporting similar levels of emotional engagement. Further, while it is conventional to argue that boys have more power within the romantic context, our results indicate that where relationships were not perceived to be characterized by equal power, respondents more often indicated that girls in these early relationships had more “say” within the

relationship. These findings hint that boys may face a steeper relationship learning curve early on in the dating-union formation sequence.

Prior research has also shown that the experiences associated with race/ethnicity may influence conduct within relationships, a reality that also complicates the individual-differences approach. For example, relying on an analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) we documented that African American youth report having a somewhat less intense or intimate relationship style—as reflected in lower frequencies of interaction with the romantic partner, and lower odds of intimate self-disclosure (Giordano et al. 2005). We argue that these interpersonal dynamics may be influenced by broader forces, such as a cultural emphasis on socializing within the family of origin, and/or greater family responsibilities (e.g., Larsen’s time use studies indicate that African American youth spend more time with family members and less time, relative to white youths, interacting with friends). These Add Health findings appear consistent, but again suggest that the way individuals ‘do’ romance is likely influenced by these social and historical realities as well as by early attachment experiences.

Unique Features of Adolescent Romance: A Theory of Contrasts

Dating relationships have long been considered an important part of adolescent life (Waller 1937), but social transformations such as those outlined above foster climates within which (at least in the contemporary Western context) cross-gender socializing and romance have arguably become even more central. Thus, our own research on adolescent romantic relationships documents that both male and female adolescents

consider these relationships very important in their lives—for many the dating partner becomes a source of reference and influence—as well as a romantic or love interest. The significant amount of time partners often spend in one another’s company creates numerous possibilities for influence, and the ‘heightened emotions’ that early romance often carries with it also may increase the individual’s receptivity to influence attempts. In a general way, this suggests that not only parents and peers, but also romantic partners can play a significant role in development (Giordano et al. 2006).

As we have previously suggested, adolescent dating relationships encompass relational dynamics that are relatively unique to the romantic context—strong feelings and emotions, the kind of intimacy associated with dyadic interactions, and uncertainties about how relationships will progress. In contrast with the comfort and mutuality that characterizes adolescent friendships, adolescent romantic relationships may encompass asymmetries of interest (where one partner is more invested in the relationship than the other), power plays, jealousy, as well as highly pleasurable interactions. The differences or contrasts between one’s friends or family interactions and what occurs within the world of romance itself becomes a source of much interest and engagement. Most research documents that parents and peers continue to be important in the lives of adolescents, but our findings suggest the need to add dating partners to this roster of potentially important social network ‘others.’

Relationship Careers

Prior research on dating has shown that as individuals move through adolescence into adulthood the types and qualities of their relationships shift highlighting the

developmental significance of age. These changes in the character/meaning of dating over the adolescent period have been described by different researchers in compatible ways, as passing through various stages that culminate in a more committed or bonded relationship. The affiliative and often sexual processes are central to adolescent romantic relationships, while attachment and caregiving are believed to become more prominent in adult romantic relationships (Furman and Simon 1999). Connelly and Goldberg (1999) describe stages that move from infatuation, to affiliative, to intimate, to committed. Brown (1999) presents phases of relationships that encompass initiation, status, affection, and bonding. Laursen and Jensen-Campbell (1999) argue that as teens become older their relationships include commitment and interdependence, and their relationships more closely mirror adult relationships. Furman and Wehner (1997) report increases in support from romantic relationships as youth age and some replacement of support from partners relative to support from friends and parents.

Although these researchers thus clearly recognize that relationships change in character over time (and with increasing age), little research/theorizing specifically focuses on how early relationships influence subsequent stages, including what could be considered the final stage--adult union formation. Roisman and colleagues (2004) state "Despite some provocative theoretical speculation (Collins 2003; Furman 2002), to our knowledge no published study has show adolescent romantic experiences to be a key building block on which future adult relationships rest" (p.124).

Implications of Adolescent Dating: Why Are There so Few Studies?

There are several reasons why adolescent dating has not been extensively studied (Brown et al. 1999; Collins 2003) and more importantly for this chapter why it has not been considered in research on adult union formation. One reason for the lack of attention to the influence of adolescent dating on adult relationships is that until recently most researchers have regarded adolescent relationships as fleeting, short-term relationships. Relative to adult marriages, these relationships are short in duration. Yet not all dating relationships are, in fact, fleeting. Although there is wide variation in the duration of dating experiences, Carver et al. (2003) report that one-third of 15-16 year olds and over half of 17-18 year olds were in relationships that lasted at least 11 months.

A second and related reason that researchers ignore adolescent dating experiences when analyzing adult union formation is that teen dating relationships are sometimes viewed as a series of minor or meaningless relationships. Yet as suggested above, these relationships loom large in the minds and lives of teenagers themselves (Brown 1999; Eder 1993; Giordano et al. 2006). Even though these relationships can be relatively short in duration, our view is that they can nevertheless have profound direct and indirect influences on union formation processes which we describe in more detail below.

Another reason that researchers have neglected adolescent relationships is that they are difficult to measure. As the structure of families has shifted, so have the rules surrounding adolescent dating (Modell 1989), and some argue that dating is a fading remnant of the 1950s. However, researchers have documented that teens do refer to

dating and that while the contours and ways adolescent date may have changed, teenagers still have boyfriends and girlfriends. Furthermore, the definitions of dating relationships also change across the adolescent period (Brown 1999), and the measurement of dating varies widely according to data sources. For example, Raley (2006) illustrates the significance of measurement issues by comparing the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth respondents which asks whether respondents “date or had gone out with someone of the opposite sex in an unsupervised social outing” and the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health respondents which asks whether respondents were involved in a “special romantic relationship.” She finds dating and romantic relationship are not equivalent; teens who have romantic relationships do not always date and not all daters report having romantic relationships (Raley 2006). These terms do not appear interchangeable and have different meanings to adolescents and these meanings probably differ by age, gender, race, and social class. This demonstrates just some of the complications in measuring adolescent dating or romantic relationships.

A final explanation for the limited research on adolescent dating is related to disciplinary boundaries. Developmental psychologists tend to emphasize how early childhood experiences influence adolescent dating, but typically have not addressed how adolescent experiences carry over into adulthood. Their work seems to end at the point of adulthood, although to be sure some scholarship emphasizes emerging adulthood as a new life stage (e.g., Arnett 2004). In contrast, sociologists’ analyses of adult union formation tends not to focus on how adolescent experiences shape union

decision-making or behavior. Rather, the focus of sociologists usually is on the implications of sociodemographic factors, such as age, race/ethnicity, family structure and family socioeconomic status. An integration of sociology and psychology provides an opportunity to pull together these separate but related fields of study.

New Perspectives

Although dating relationships vary in duration and meaning for adolescents, and measurement issues present significant problems, we nevertheless believe that dating experiences may have indirect effects on union formation through their influences on emotional well-being, educational progress, delinquency, and fertility as well as having direct effects on adult union formation expectations and behavior. These varied experiences are also the sources of the adolescent's emerging self-views, which are integrated into an increasingly more coherent, stable set of identities. These social identities also act as a guide or filter for relationship decision-making, thus also influencing the character of union formation experiences. Below we explore more systematically these indirect and direct connections.

INDIRECT PATHWAYS:

FROM ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS TO ADULT UNION FORMATION

Dating partners as a social influence during adolescence have been examined less often than friendship and peer relations and familial influences. Yet, decisions about romantic partners may have implications for adolescent well-being that carry over into adulthood. With regard to empirical studies, some of this research simply documents that teens who are dating fare better or worse than teens who are not dating, while

other work focuses on the characteristics of romantic partners or features of the romantic partnership.

Taken together, research demonstrates that adolescent dating relationships can influence adult union formation indirectly via their influence on education, delinquency, emotional well-being, and fertility. Boyfriends and girlfriends during adolescence can influence behaviors that impact later life trajectories. For example, adults who have few economic prospects, who are involved in criminal activities, who are emotionally unhealthy, or have children outside of marriage typically are not the most desirable adult relationship partners. Adolescent dating involvement that hinders or encourages emotional well-being, early criminal activity, educational performance and goals, and early parenthood may have consequences for adult union formation. We further describe the indirect effects of adolescent dating on adult unions via these four outcomes in the next section.

Emotional well-being

Dating relationships are reported by teens to be the single greatest source of stress (Larson, Clore, and Wood 1999). The emotional bonds that characterize dating relationships leave adolescents who date open to great emotional pleasure or pain. Using the Add Health Joyner and Udry (2000) find that teens who began dating in the year prior to the first interview reported more depressive symptoms than teens who were not dating. Yet, the negative effects of romantic relationships can be partially explained by having two or more romantic relationships, experiencing a break-up in the past month, and declines in school performance. Further evidence indicates that the

negative aspects of dating, break-up or conflict, have implications for depressive symptoms. A recent break-up increases the likelihood that adolescents experience the initial onset of major depressive disorders (Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, and Lewinsohn, 1999).

Since adolescence is the period in which depressive symptoms or disorders often make an initial appearance, traumatic or upsetting relationship experiences may be one of the social factors that set in motion longer term patterns of depressive symptomatology. In addition to considering the effect of particular experiences or specific relationships, researchers have also focused on the notion of relationship styles, suggesting that a preoccupied relational style is also associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms (Davila et al. 2004). Studies of adult depression indicate reciprocal relationships between marital quality and mental health, particularly for women (Williams 2003); thus adolescent romantic relationships should be taken into account as they influence well-being, relationship experiences and the way these connect over the life course.

Delinquency

Numerous studies have documented a positive relationship between the delinquency of one's peers/friends and an adolescent's own delinquency involvement (Haynie 2003; Matsueda and Anderson 1998; Warr 2002). Fewer studies have examined whether dating partners influence delinquency, however researchers have shown that the number of dating relationships is positively related to externalizing behavior problems (Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, and Collins, 2001), and that teens who have multiple

casual partners are at increased risk of problem behaviors (Davies and Windle 2000).

In a recent analysis using the Add Health data, Haynie et al. (2005) document that the dating partner's delinquency was significantly associated with the reports of delinquent involvement provided by the respondent, even after levels of peer delinquency and traditional predictors of delinquency had been taken into account. Haynie (2003) also finds that dating older males is associated with increased involvement in problem behaviors. These findings indicate that dating experiences may influence delinquency involvement, which in turn is associated with adult criminality.

Relatedly, involvement with the legal system as an adult is associated with poor economic prospects, and decreased likelihood and stability of marriage (Farrington 2003; Sampson and Laub 1993). Thus, adolescent romantic partners can potentially be important as one of the gateways to problem behaviors, but also under some circumstances—even during the adolescent period—could be associated with a more favorable outcome (as might occur when a young man with a history of delinquency involvement develops a strong relationship with a prosocial girlfriend).

Educational Performance and Goals

Recent work using the first two waves of the Add Health indicates that adolescent girls who report having romantic relationships also report declining grades and educational aspirations (Crissey 2006). However, Crissey (2006) reports that this association between dating and educational performance and goals is not found among boys.

Using the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study data, Giordano et al. (2006) find that teens who are dating report only slightly lower grades than teens who were not dating,

and this difference is explained with the inclusion of social and demographic control variables. In addition, it is important to take into account the academic orientation of partners. Giordano et al.'s (2006) analysis demonstrates that the academic orientation of the partner is a significant predictor of the adolescent's own performance, once the well-documented effects of parents and peers have been taken into account. Thus, there is evidence that an important achievement outcome, academic performance, is significantly related to the performance level of the romantic partner with whom the adolescent reports a current relationship.

As with the study of delinquency, it will be important to explore how various types of partners influence academic trajectories—for example where both partners share high aspirations, this could have a synergistic and positive effect on academic achievement. Where both partners have negative attitudes toward school, this could have an especially deleterious effect. It is also possible that a partner with a contrasting orientation toward school could significantly influence academic decision-making and level of involvement in school-related matters (homework, extra-curricular activities). This follows from our basic premise that romantic involvement may occasion numerous opportunities for interaction about these and other issues, and, particularly in the case of longer-term liaisons, the partner may emerge as a highly significant reference other. This could entail interpersonal dynamics that are not as characteristic of peer interactions (e.g., desire to live up to the romantic partner's expectations).

Contraceptive and Fertility

Teens who are in more committed relationships are less rigorous in their contraceptive use (e.g., Manlove, Franzetta, Ryan and Moore 2006). This may be particularly true as the relationship progresses and the partners are not viewed as presenting a risk of sexually transmitted infections (Manning, Giordano, and Longmore 2005). The combination of access to a regular sexual partner and reduced contraceptive use suggests that teens in dating relationships may be at greater risk of pregnancy than teens who are having sex outside of dating relationships. In fact, Porter (2005) reports that girls in the Add Health who reported dating at the time of the first interview, were more likely to become teen mothers by the second interview one year later. Several other studies confirm this finding (e.g., Bearman and Power 1999; Hanson, Myers, and Ginsberg 1987). Thus, it is possible that adolescent dating may result in teens' increased risk of early parenthood. This has implications for union formation because unmarried parenthood reduces the likelihood of transition to marriage and in some cases also reduces the transition into cohabitation (Bennett et al. 1995; Goldscheider and Sassler 2006; Stewart et al. 2003).

Summarizing, there are several outcomes of adolescent dating that have implications for adult union formation. But equally important, is there a more direct correspondence between adolescent dating relationships and their adult unions?

DIRECT PATHWAYS:

FROM ADOLESCENT DATING RELATIONSHIPS TO ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

The empirical work on the effects of adolescent dating relationships on adult relationship formation is quite sparse, although romantic involvement in early childhood is positively related to romantic involvement in late adolescence and early adulthood (Neemann et al. 1995). New analyses using the Add Health have documented that adolescents who have romantic partners are more likely to transition into cohabitation or marriage by age 22 (Raley, Crissey and Muller 2004). These findings are confirmed by Meier et al. (2005) who find that the effect appears stronger among girls than boys. Thus, there seems to be a logical association and progression from adolescent dating to cohabitation or marriage. This early union formation need not be conceptualized in uniformly positive ways, however. For example, marriage at an early age is associated with higher divorce rates (Teachman 2002). Given that almost all teens date during adolescence, further theoretical and empirical work is needed on the specific character of adolescent dating experiences that are associated with the timing as well as the success (e.g., higher marital quality) of union formation experiences.

Although the number of empirical studies is quite limited, conceptually, there are at least four reasons why adolescent dating should matter for adult unions. First, prior relationship attachment affects subsequent attachment. Second, relationship skills developed in adolescent relationships are more or less useful for subsequent relationships. Third, conceptions of self which develop in earlier intimate relationships have direct implications for later relationships. Lastly, adolescents' expectations to

marry and/or cohabit are often formed during the adolescent period. Below we review each of these points in turn. We note that consistent with our symbolic interactionist perspective, while acknowledging the importance of attachment approaches, we especially highlight the importance of demographic patterns associated with adolescents' union formation expectations, the significance of social networks for skill building, and the role of the self-concept, especially identities, as an essential lens for understanding and interpreting the significance of current, past, and future relationships.

Attachment and Carry Over Effects From Prior Relationships

Furman and Wehner (1994) propose a developmental theory of adolescent romantic relationships that argues prior relationship experiences and accumulation of interactions are the basis of "romantic views." Romantic views are conscious and unconscious styles and working models that are integrated and shape the course of relationships through the life course. This approach builds on attachment theory as well as Erikson's (1968) psychosocial and Sullivan's (1953) social needs approaches that also emphasize that prior relationship experiences influence the nature and progression of future relationships. Furman and Wehner (1994) propose three 'views' of romantic relationships: secure, dismissing or preoccupied. Teens draw on early experiences and their interpretations of these relationships to form their emotional and cognitive views towards relationships (Collins 2003; Furman and Simon 1999). Downey et al. (1999) take a slightly different approach and refer to working models or relational schema. Their work focuses on acceptance and rejection in relationships. Rejection sensitivity is

developed through experiences in prior relationships and is part of a cognitive-affective processing system that determines the initiation and progress of relationships. The essence of each of these approaches is that each individual possesses beliefs and expectations based on earlier experiences with attachment, which influence interactions with dating partners. Relationships are not perfectly replayed in the future, but they have the potential to influence adult union formation and the quality of such unions as individuals adopt and modify their behavior based on prior experiences.

Relationship Skill Building

Adolescence is an exploratory stage where important skills and experience are obtained while dating which help teens to navigate later life relationships. Beginning and ending romantic relationships during adolescence is developmentally appropriate. Thus, dating performs an important social learning function in teaching youth how to enter, manage, and end relationships with the romantic partners. In fact, analysis of undergraduates indicates two-fifths report that “expertise in relationships” is a perceived benefit of a romantic relationship (Sedikide, Oliver, and Campbell 1994).

To date, there is not a large body of empirical evidence but there is some theoretical attention to the notion that adolescent dating teaches teens how to do romance. “Brief romantic encounters provide adolescents with opportunities to practice exchange rules and refine personal resources prior to initiating relationships that entail commitment and reproduction” (Laursen and Jensen-Campbell 1999:64). Adolescent competence in the relationship domain may lead to more intense dating or more positive experiences in adulthood because teens have worked out their relationship

style. For example, one of the experiences of dating is breaking up. Breaking up allows teens to learn how to end romantic relationships and provide knowledge that they can emotionally survive the experience. Giordano et al. (2006) interviewed a young man who let a relationship drag on, even after he wished to break up. Eventually, he started dating someone else before he had ended the prior relationship (“I just couldn’t do it.”). As the young man observed the way this made his first girlfriend feel, he began to recognize that, “If I’m feeling a certain way I should just tell them and not just sit there and wait and wait and not tell her.” Dating relationships thus provide numerous opportunities to learn about positive relationship dynamics such as intimate self-disclosure and caring as well as difficulties that romantic partners frequently encounter—differences of perspective, break-ups, conflict, and jealousy.

And while the researchers have suggested that adolescents move through different stages in terms of the salience of various dimensions of romantic involvement, it is likely that there is overlap. Thus, for example, Shulman (1997) and others suggest that social support becomes more important later in the sequence of these stages, but it is likely that even early romantic interactions contain some socially supportive interactions. These experiences and exposure to particular types of partners can serve as guides for future partner choices and eventually the emergence of more mature relationship behaviors. This is compatible with the attachment approach, but highlights to a greater extent the role of the adolescent romantic context, itself, as a site for learning and additional socialization.

A particularly underdeveloped line of investigation/conceptualization is the notion that particular dating experiences can serve to *redirect* future actions within the romantic realm. Since moving in the direction of particular types of partners does involve the element of choice, the individual's agency/cognitive capacities to redraw romantic "goals" based on prior experiences is especially relevant (e.g., the young woman who dates a series of "bad boys," but ultimately recognizes that it is preferable to develop ties with a more prosocial partner). These adjustments/changes are more of a challenge to study/observe than the dynamics of "continuity," (i.e., the notion of "styles" of attachment), but are important to understand and document nevertheless.

Self-Concept

Adolescent dating provides a context through which teens work out self concept issues (e.g., Coates 1999; Connolly and Goldberg 1999; Downey et al. 1999; Feiring 1999; Gray and Steinberg 1999). Virtually all aspects of the self-concept, we contend, are affected by adolescents' dating relationships including (1) evaluative components (e.g., self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy) which refer to how the adolescent assesses or evaluates him/herself; (2) identities, which refer to who the adolescent believes he/she is and which have a behavioral correspondence with roles; and (3) a sense of authenticity which refers to questions of being genuine or true to oneself. For example, dating shows teens how to handle emotions in relationships and this life skill is important for establishing a secure identity (Larson et al. 1999) and positive self-assessments especially with regard to competence (Gecas and Seff 1990). Conversely,

psychologically harmful dating experiences likely impinge negatively on the self-concept, and much of the literature on adolescent well-being demonstrates this point.

Of special direct relevance for adult union formation, adhering to varying degrees to cultural norms and expectations, adolescents enact their conceptions of gender, as well as their expectations of what the opposite sex should be like. Scholars, especially from the tradition of psychology emphasize how adolescent gender influences adult self-conceptions (e.g., Erickson 1968; Collins and Sroufe 1999; Connolly and Goldberg 1999; Feiring 1999; Larson et al. 1999; Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner and Collins 2001). Adolescent dating is one way that teens explore and then develop their identities as romantic partners (Furman and Simon 1999). Some literature suggests that these romantic identities and ideals, established in part from earlier relationships, are associated with relationship quality and associated with commitment (e.g., Sprecher and Metts 2004). Moreover, dating, typically marks teens' movement toward sexual transitions including first sexual experiences, and for some youth continued sexual activity, pregnancy as well as pregnancy resolution (e.g., Thornton 1990). As a result issues of sexual identity and attractions are typically explored in the context of dating relationships (Diamond, Savin-Williams, and Dube 1999). Finally, the maturing adolescent moves toward a higher level of coherence of these self views, as one's romantic and sexual identities are inevitably integrated with other salient roles (e.g. occupation).

Union Formation Expectations

An important predictor of behavior is the expectation to perform that behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). This suggests that teens' attitudes toward marriage will be an important predictor of marriage. Adolescents' often express positive future orientations toward their boyfriends and girlfriends and many young people report desires to get married to their dating partners (Crissey 2005; Manning et al. 2006). Manning et al. (2006) report that teens who never dated had lower expectations to marry than their counterparts with dating experience and teens' dating at the time of the survey interview were more likely to expect to cohabit in the future than teens who were not dating when interviewed. Teens in relationships may be more relationship oriented and able to see themselves in adult relationships. It is, however, more important to consider the type of relationship rather than simply whether teens dated or not. For example, teens in more serious (committed) relationships have higher odds of expecting to marry by age 25 than teens who were not dating (Crissey 2005). At the same time, these sentiments toward marriage and cohabitation may be another way of expressing emotional intimacy and commitment during ongoing relationships. It appears that dating and type of dating relationship influence teens' expectations to marry and cohabit and adolescents' feelings about marriage (and cohabitation) may influence subsequent decisions about timing and type of first coresidential unions.

Empirical Studies Examining Adolescent Dating and Adult Union Formation

Although there are only a few empirical examinations of the influence of adolescent dating and adult union formation, nevertheless, several studies have drawn

attention to a) relationship qualities and b) relationship styles. We review these studies in turn.

Relationship Qualities. Simply gauging whether or not youths have begun dating is not especially useful, as romantic involvement becomes ubiquitous as a social phenomenon during this period (Carver et al. 2003). Research has attempted to determine whether something about the types of adolescent relationships influence their later union formation. These analyses have largely been limited to a few key papers using the Add Health data. Researchers have examined the following different relationship qualities: sexuality, involvement, and emotionality. While the Add Health data provide a unique opportunity to assess how different types of adolescent relationships influence later relationship formation at the national level, the indicators of relationship types are based largely on behavioral measures. These studies and others set the foundation for further work on how different types of adolescent relationships influence relationship formation in adulthood (Meier and Allen 2006; Raley 2004; Seiffge-Krenke and Guttenberg 2003; Shulman and Kipnis 2001). Further theoretical and empirical work will help move our understanding forward.

The quality of early romantic relationships at age 17 is highly predictive of relationship quality at age 21 (Seiffge-Krenke and Guttenberg 2003). This is based on a longitudinal study of 103 German youth. The elements of quality in this study are numerous and include happiness, friendship, trust, fear of closeness, acceptance, emotional extremes, jealousy, obsessive preoccupation, sexual attraction, desire for a union, desire for reciprocation, and love at first sight. Moreover, simply dating or not

does not influence romantic love at age 21 but social support from the partner at age 15 and 17 is positively associated with experiencing romantic love at age 21. Thus, the quality of earlier relationships influences the quality at older ages.

Research based on the Add Health addresses specific elements of relationship quality. For example, Raley et al. (2004) consider whether sexual behavior in dating relationships influences adult transitions. Their life table estimates indicate that teens who had sexual romantic relationships more often transitioned to unions by age 22 than teens who had a non-sexual romantic relationships. This distinction is largely driven by differences in cohabitation and not marriage. For example, half (53%) of girls who had been in a sexual romantic relationship cohabited by age 22 in contrast to 38% of who had been in a non-sexual romantic relationship (Raley et al. 2004). Meier and Allen (2006) report that teens who had more intense sexual experiences in their dating relationships (6 point scale ranging from no contact to sexual intercourse) were more likely to be engaged, cohabiting and married six years later.

An alternative measure of relationship qualities is the level or intensity of involvement. Using the Add Health data, Raley et al. (2004) measure involvement by summing whether or not respondents engaged in the following six behaviors: met the parents, said they were a couple, exchanged presents, thought of themselves as couple, said they loved their partner or saw less of their friends. The level of involvement did not influence boys union formation (cohabitation or marriage) by age 22 and did not influence girls odds of cohabiting by age 22. However, girls who score higher in the involvement scale with their dating partner reported significantly higher odds of

marriage by age 22. Also using the Add Health, Meier and Allen (2006) pursue a slightly different strategy and focused on the emotional elements of this particular scale. They operationalized emotional intimacy in terms of whether or not they exchanged gifts, said they loved one another, thought of themselves as a couple, and told others they were a couple. They did not take into account the timing of relationships but did find that emotional intimacy is not related to the relationship status at the third interview, number of relationships, or whether respondents ever married or cohabited (Meier and Allen 2006).

Relationship Styles. Another strategy is to classify dating experience according to relationship styles or patterns. This strategy is also consistent with a developmental approach. Teens may adopt relationship styles that carry over into adulthood. For example, teenagers may consistently engage in highly conflicted relationships, unhealthy abusive relationships or a series of short term sexually based relationships. To date, few researchers have specifically empirically addressed this topic.

In terms of conceptualization, research has examined how individuals move from progressively more stable relationships or regress to more numerous and fleeting relationships (McCabe 1984). Meier and Allen's (2006) study includes the number and duration of relationships and measure relationship progression or regression as movement along a continuum toward stable and steady relationships (more than 3 months in duration). They find that teens in stable relationships at wave 1 and 2 of the Add Health were more likely to ever have been married six years later. The effect of being in stable and steady relationships at waves 1 and 2 of the Add Health was

initially related to whether teens had cohabited but this was explained by level of sexual involvement. This is not surprising because two-thirds (65%) of the respondents in stable relationships had sexual intercourse. Similarly, in a smaller study, adolescents who are continually involved with one partner or a sequence report increased romantic relationship quality over time (Seiffge-Krenke and Gutenber 2003). Taken together, these findings support notion of a sequence of romantic development from early adolescence to early adulthood.

Although the above studies have a behavioral emphasis, Shulman and Kipnis (2001) focused on how adults perceive their teenage romantic relationships influenced their current romantic life. A total of 40 Israeli romantic couples were interviewed about their romantic experiences when they were 15-16, and findings show clear differences in the experiences of adult and adolescent romantic experiences. Moreover, there is a gender difference with a closer link between the quality of adolescent and adult relationships among males than females (Shulman and Kipnis 2001).

In sum, adolescent experiences should have the most close relationship to adult relationships but these relationships are not perfectly replayed in adulthood. They do not have to be replicated to influence adult union formation. There may be some continuation of prior behavior or decisions to react against and seek out other types of partners. This issue of continuity and discontinuity in relationship styles should be further pursued.

NEXT STEPS FOR RESEARCH ON UNION FORMATION

We argue that adults do not enter their co-residential unions (marriage or cohabitation) as blank slates with little prior experience with intimate relationships. That is, “Mature patterns of romantic social interaction do not germinate and blossom during adulthood, but rather emerge gradually with experience and maturation acquired during adolescence” (Laursen and Jensen-Campbell 1999:70). Typically young adults have had many years of experience in dating and romantic spheres that influence their decisions in adulthood. This experience may have both important indirect and direct influences on union formation and quality in adulthood. Yet most researchers interested in adult union formation and quality ignore relationship experiences prior to adulthood. At the same time researchers focusing on adolescents do not consider how adolescent relationships influence transitions into adulthood. These boundaries appear to be artifacts of narrow theories, data issues, and disciplinary divides. Our approach calls for modifications of theoretical orientations, attention to measurement, collection of new types of data, and new substantive questions.

Our understanding of adolescent experiences on adult relationships may lead to modifications of some theoretical approaches often used to understand adult relationships (e.g., attachment, feminist, social exchange, symbolic interaction, life course). It seems that adolescent relationships are ignored in part because they do not fit neatly into theoretical paradigms (Brown et al. 1999). For example, mate selection theories are based on an interest in longer term relationships and economic based decisions. Yet, most adolescents do not marry their high school sweethearts and economic factors are arguably not central to their adolescent romances. Similarly,

duration in marriage and cohabitation is a signal of commitment. During adolescence, relationships are often relatively short in duration, suggesting that duration may not serve as the most effective proxy for commitment during adolescence. Thus, our understanding of adult relationships cannot simply be trickled down to adolescence and adult theories appear to be poor fits for framing adolescent romance (Brown et al. 1999). For these same reasons theories used to understand adolescent relationships cannot be simply extended into adulthood. Moreover, the transition into adulthood involves new roles and identities (e.g., academic, work, social conduct, friendship) that potentially make their dating and romantic relationships more complex. Research needs to explore how these roles are integrated and intertwined rather than examining them as separate activities.

The developmental approach emphasizes continuity of prior relationship experiences. An emphasis on continuity is relatively more simple to understand theoretically and examine empirically. However the reality of these social processes can be complex because just some elements of relationship experience may be carried over into adulthood. At the same time, there is discontinuity in relationship qualities and style from adolescence into adulthood. This is relatively more difficult to study and conceptualize, but it is important (and consistent with a life course perspective) to do so. Qualitative approaches may help understand how adolescents navigate the transition into adulthood. In-depth interviews that allow respondents to describe continuities as well as changes in their romantic and sexual careers should be especially useful.

We argue that the characteristics and qualities of adult married and cohabiting relationships most likely have origins that begin in adolescence and earlier. Marriage and cohabitation patterns and qualities are obviously influenced by experiences associated with gender and race-ethnicity. These relationship differentials during adulthood emerge in part from earlier experiences with the opposite sex. If adult relationships connect in direct and indirect ways to adolescent relationships, then some of the same patterns that we observe in adult relationships may begin to develop in adolescent relationships. Thus, to understand racial and gender differences in marital patterns and relationships it may be important to see whether these same patterns originate earlier in the life course. Another area that deserves greater attention is social class. This may be particularly important during emerging adulthood when decisions about work and education are being made. Adolescent dating may be influencing trajectories that differ according to social class, and social class may contribute to the meaning and course of dating relationships.

Theories and research emphasize that adolescent romantic involvement is developmentally appropriate. However, the timing of involvement deserves greater research scrutiny (Neemann et al. 1995). There is some evidence that early involvement in adolescent relationships is tied to less competence in later adolescence in terms of rule/law breaking, employment and academic success, and social competence (Neemann et al. 1995). It appears that early involvement may draw teens' time away from prosocial activities that may in turn influence later adult union formation and the quality of these relationships.

Not only should researchers include adolescent dating relationships in their studies of union formation, adult dating relationships also warrant more attention. Adolescent dating relationships most likely have the strongest impact on adult dating relationships which, then, influence cohabitation and marriage timing and quality. Prior empirical studies move from adolescent relationships to adult coresidential unions. Perhaps further work needs to explore how adolescent relationships influence the wide array of ways that adults experience romance. Explorations of love in emerging adulthood focus on the following question: “Given the kind of person I am, what kind of person do I wish to have as a partner through life?” (Arnett 2002). In contrast in adolescence, the questions are ‘who would I enjoy being with here and now?’ Research on adult dating relationships has focused on college samples who are sometimes treated as late teenagers or early adults (Brown et al. 1999). It will be important to broaden our samples beyond college and consider how the full range of adult relationships influence union formation and maintenance.

Sexual minority adults may be especially influenced by their adolescent relationships in part because their relationship options are often constrained. Both same sex dating and other-sex dating may be particularly salient to sexual minority youth identity (Diamond et al. 1999). Sexual minority youth may not have had the same socialization experiences in a dating context that will aid them in their adult relationships. Researchers need to consider how the romantic and sexual experiences of sexual minority youth carry over into adulthood in order to better understand variation

in adult same sex relationships and factors associated with more successful transitions into adulthood.

We also note that broad social change has led to shifts in the terrain of romance. The structures that supported more formal, regulated patterns of love and romance have weakened, making the world of love more uncertain and potentially risky (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Bulcroft et al. 2000). Thus, the importance of personal history and experience may be more important in understanding union formation and maintenance patterns than in the past.

While we expect that adolescent relationships in terms of experience, style, and quality will influence adult union formation and quality, we cannot claim that adolescent relationships are the only factors to consider in future work. Research should also examine how family and peer relationships influence and operate in tandem with adolescent romantic relationships. Further, our discussion has not fully differentiated the timing of union formation, stability of unions, union choice, and union quality. It is likely that the influence of adolescent relationships will vary according to the outcomes of interest. Challenges remain in how to measure and characterize dating relationships as well as how to theorize the influence of adolescent relationships.

We provide an overview to help to move our understanding of adult union formation forward. Our view is that multi-method data collection efforts and longitudinal design will help us to link early adolescent relationships and consequences to later union formation experiences. Greater integration of conceptual frameworks is

needed in order to effectively model continuities and discontinuities as well as direct and indirect mechanisms of adolescent dating influence. This approach is consistent with the basic premises of the Explaining Family Change framework outlined by Seltzer et al. (2005).

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