The Salience of Adolescent Romantic Experiences for Romantic Relationship Qualities in Young Adulthood

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Conceptual links between aspects of adolescents’ dating experiences (i.e., involvement and quality; ages 15–17.5) and qualities of their romantic relationships in young adulthood (ages 20–21) were examined in a prospective longitudinal design. Even after accounting for earlier relationship experiences with parents and peers, aspects of adolescent dating experiences predicted romantic relationship qualities in young adulthood. Adolescents who dated fewer partners in mid-adolescence and who experienced a better quality dating relationship at age 16 demonstrated romantic partner interactions characterized by smoother relationship process in young adulthood (e.g., negotiating conflict to mutual satisfaction, effective and timely caregiving/seeking); adolescents who dated more partners in mid-adolescence displayed greater negative affect in romantic partner interactions in young adulthood.

Relationship scholars have long regarded adolescents’ experiences with parents and peers as important precursors of romantic relationship qualities in young adulthood, and a substantial body of research now documents these associations (Collins, 2003; Collins & Van Dulmen, 2006; Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000; Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). Comparatively less research has examined the likelihood that adolescent romantic experiences contribute to features of later romantic relationships, despite the fact that several conceptual perspectives posit these associations (Collins, 2003; Havighurst, 1948; Seiffge-Krenke, Shulman, & Klessinger, 2001; Sullivan, 1953).

This seemingly obvious link between adolescent and young adult romantic relationships has received little empirical attention to date. Most existing studies have used retrospective designs and self-reports from single informants, and have focused primarily on whether a young person is or has recently been involved in dating and, occasionally, on the timing of those experiences (Joyner & Campa, 2006; Raley, Crissey, & Muller, 2007; Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003; Shulman & Kipnis, 2001). In a recent exception, Meier and Allen (2009) use evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to demonstrate links between adolescent dating patterns and qualities and young adult relationship outcomes; however, the authors acknowledge that this study is limited by somewhat superficial measures of relationship quality in adolescence and the absence of relationship quality measures in young adulthood. Researchers predominantly have presumed that adolescent romantic experiences are helpful in ensuring later relationship success despite the fact adolescents do not experience all aspects of romance positively, underscoring the need to consider quality of romantic experiences in addition to dating involvement (Barber, Crouter, & Booth, 2006; Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001; Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999; Welsh, Grello, Harper, & Florsheim, 2003).

The present research is grounded in conceptual views specific to dating (Brown, 1999; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1994; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003) and uses a prospective longitudinal design to test hypothesized links between aspects of adolescent dating experiences and qualities of romantic relationships in young adulthood. Drawing from a sample born into poverty allows us to examine a population at greater risk for poor relationship outcomes (e.g., relationship violence, divorce; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). This approach draws upon two of the features specified in Collins’ (2003) five-feature framework of adolescent romantic relationships: involvement (i.e., the number of dating partners across mid-adolescence) and quality (i.e., disclosure, enjoyment, con-
conflict resolution, intimacy, and security in an ongoing dating relationship). As Collins (2003) notes, the constructs of involvement and quality are expected to operate independently in influencing romantic relationship quality in young adulthood. Measures of simple involvement capture little of the quality of the partnership and involvement is heavily influenced by opportunities that occur because of peer group affiliations (Collins & Van Dulmen, 2006). Moreover, these features of involvement and quality are expected to build upon earlier relationship experiences with parents and peers in uniquely predicting romantic relationship qualities in young adulthood. In particular, we expect adolescent dating experiences to relate to established desirable qualities of young adult romantic relationships including smooth conflict resolution (Peterson, 2002), low anger and hostility (Gottman, 1994), shared positive affect (Levesque, 1993), and the ability to balance the needs of the relationship with the needs of each individual when discussing conflict-laden topics (Roisman, Collins, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2005; Sheldon & Niemiec, 2006).

**ADOLESCENT DATING EXPERIENCE**

Adolescent romantic relationships increasingly have been recognized as an important developmental context that both stems from earlier relationships and provides a foundation for future ones (Collins, 2003). Moreover, these relationships have been associated with both positive and negative outcomes. The outcomes appear to be differentially associated with particular features of the relationships adolescents have experienced, as Collins (2003) predicted.

**Involvement**

By age 16, the majority of adolescents (55% of boys; 64% of girls) report having had a romantic relationship in the past 18 months (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Thirty-five percent of 15–16-year-olds report that their relationships have continued 11 months or longer. Less information is available regarding the number of dating partners that adolescents typically acquire; indeed, adolescents themselves are sometimes uncertain as to whether a particular relationship is “romantic” or not (Carver et al., 2003). Mid-adolescent youth from one high-risk sample reported an average of 2–3 romantic partners a year, with a range of 0–45 partners at age 16 and 0–60 partners at age 18 (Seffrin, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2009). Involvement appears to vary by race and class, and researchers have documented that overinvolvement in dating, or dating a high number of partners in a short span of time during middle adolescence is associated with poorer psychosocial functioning in childhood and adolescence (Davies & Windle, 2000; Neemann, Hubbard, & Masten, 1995; Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2001). Thus, understanding variability in involvement may help to illuminate the developmental course of later relationship functioning.

Recent conceptualizations of adolescent romantic experiences propose that young people progress through a series of “soft” phases of romantic involvement. Theorists’ frameworks vary in terms of focusing on these stages as guided by the adolescent’s changing frame of reference for the relationship (i.e., self, peers, or the relationship itself; Brown, 1999) or adolescents’ motivations for relationships within the context of the peer group (i.e., passion, affiliation, emotional intimacy, commitment; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). In these frameworks, adolescents begin by dabbling in feelings associated with dating, progress to group settings where they may date several partners, then focus on a specific dyadic relationship, and finally establish committed relationships with partners who serve as attachment figures. Available research has confirmed that these phases roughly correspond to early adolescence, middle adolescence, late adolescence, and early adulthood (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003) and that youth tend to progress through this general pattern (and seldom regress; Meier & Allen, 2009). In later phases, adolescents are expected to both date fewer partners and experience adult-like, committed relationships. Adolescents who continue to acquire many dating partners across mid-adolescence may lack the ability to move on to the next phase and toward more exclusive relationships with more adult-like features and, thus, may show poorer adaptation in their young adult romantic relationships. Adolescents who acquire little dating experience, however, may have few opportunities to practice relationship skills (e.g., balancing intimacy and autonomy needs) that form the basis of good quality young adult romantic relationships. Thus, moderate levels of dating involvement may be ideal in terms of promoting higher quality young adult romantic relationships.

**Quality**

Assessments of optimal qualities of adolescent romantic relationships have focused on features such as intimacy (Collins & Sroufe, 1999), enjoyment (Levesque, 1993), the ability to resolve conflict
smoothly (Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran, & Anbar, 2006), and security (Van Dulmen, Goncy, Haydon, & Collins, 2008). The present study includes a measure of adolescent dating quality based on these established criteria. Several theoretical perspectives suggest that the nature of these initial romantic relationships ought to inform the quality of later ones. For example, taking a social learning perspective, Shulman (2003) proposes that adolescent romantic relationships are a useful context for developing skills for communicating with romantic partners and managing emotions in passionate situations. Drawing upon attachment theory, Furman and Wehner (1994) state that dating experiences offer adolescents the opportunity to shape their romantic views, thus influencing expectations for future romantic relationships. Despite these compelling theoretical perspectives, few empirical studies explicitly examine the connection between quality of romantic relationships in adolescence and young adulthood. In the present study, better quality adolescent romantic relationships are expected to be associated with markers of better quality young adult romantic relationships such as smoother relationship processes and less negative affect.

**LINKS BETWEEN PEER AND PARENT RELATIONSHIPS AND YOUNG ADULT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS**

Romantic relationship scholars traditionally have looked first to relationships with peers and parents as predictors of later romantic relationships. Collins and Sroufe (1999) contend that early relationships with caregivers provide a foundation for later relationships by influencing children’s expectancies about others, nurturing the ability to relate empathically to others, and by creating a context for practicing reciprocity. Longitudinal research supports this connection between early experience with parents and later romantic relationships (Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007; Van Dulmen et al., 2008). In addition, parent–adolescent relationships also are associated with qualities of romantic partnerships. For example, longitudinal findings demonstrate that supportive relationships with parents during adolescence are associated with the level of closeness and sexual attraction in early adult romantic relationships (Seiffge-Krenke, Overbeek, & Vermulst, 2010; see Collins & Van Dulmen, 2006, for a review of other research documenting links between parent–child and romantic relationships).

Peer relationships also have been theorized to contribute to later romantic relationship outcomes. Perhaps the best known theorist to raise this issue was Sullivan (1953), who viewed “chumships” established in middle childhood as foundational for later romantic relationships. Researchers have since documented that friendships in middle childhood are predictive of both romantic relationship involvement in adolescence and relationship quality in young adulthood (Neemann et al., 1995). Sroufe et al. (1999, 2005) highlight investment in the peer world in middle childhood as a salient developmental task that forms the basis for the later integration of self and peer relationships in adolescence. Moreover, experiences of rejection by peers in middle childhood are key influences in the development of rejection sensitivity, and resultant expectations of rejection have been strongly correlated with dissatisfaction in romantic relationships (Downey, Bonica, & Rincón, 1999).

A handful of studies consider parent and peer relationships together as predictors of later romantic relationships (e.g., see Furman & Wehner, 1997; Roisman, Booth-LaForce, Cauffman, & Spieker, 2009; Simpson et al., 2007); however, we know of no studies that have considered relationship experiences with parents, peers, and adolescent dating partners as predictors of young adult romantic relationship quality. Based on evidence that experiences with parents in both early childhood and adolescence are predictive of later romantic relationship quality, we have included measures at each time point in our design. In addition, to examine further the link between peer competence and skills, emotions, and cognitions needed to be successful in later romantic relationships, we have included a measure of peer competence as well. This novel approach goes beyond earlier studies that have examined relationship experiences solely in adolescence, instead examining them at varying junctures from infancy through adolescence. Including these constructs allows us to test the unique contribution of adolescent romantic experiences to the quality of young adult romantic relationships.

**THE PRESENT STUDY**

This study tests the long-term implication of adolescents’ romantic experiences for the quality of young adult romantic relationships using data from the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children. Although related questions have been studied in previously published work with this project, the question being addressed here is distinct.
and novel, and the expected outcomes are different. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that adolescent romantic experiences distinctively influence later romantic relationships, even after accounting for relationship experiences developed in earlier interactions with parents and peers.

To test this hypothesis we drew upon composite predictors that were theoretically chosen measures of relationship functioning in earlier age periods: observed early supportive care in infancy (12–42 months), teachers’ ratings of peer competence in middle childhood (grades 1–3), and observed parent–child process in early adolescence (age 13). We then tested whether participants’ reports of number of dating partners in mid-adolescence (i.e., ages 15–17.5) and ratings of adolescent dating quality (age 16) accounted for additional variance in predicting observations of young adults’ romantic relationship qualities (i.e., composites of romantic relationship process and negative affect), positing direct effects and controlling for sex. As proposed in conceptualizations of normative developmental pathways to dating (Brown, 1999; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999), we predicted that having fewer dating partners in mid-adolescence would be associated with better qualities of romantic relationships in young adulthood, testing both linear and curvilinear relationships and controlling for earlier parent and peer relationship qualities and sex. Based on conceptualizations emphasizing the developmental value of adolescents’ romantic experiences (Collins, 2003; Furman & Wehner, 1994), we also hypothesized that experiencing a better quality dating relationship at age 16 would predict smoother relationship process and less negative affect in young adult romantic relationships over and above qualities of earlier relationships with parents and peers. Use of an at-risk sample of young people followed from birth through young adulthood provided a strong assessment of broader theoretical and conceptual links by using a prospective longitudinal design that spans more than 20 years, and a multimethod, multiinformant approach.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants were drawn from a sample of young adults who have participated in the ongoing Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children since birth (see Egeland & Brunquell, 1979). Participants’ mothers were recruited between 1975 and 1977 from Minneapolis public health clinics where they received prenatal care; therefore, participants may be considered developmentally at-risk as they were born into poverty (Egeland & Brunquell, 1979). Of the original 267 participants, nearly 70% (180) remain active in the study 35 years later; 20% of the sample had left the study by the time the participants were 24 months and much of the initial attrition of this sample included participants who were at greatest risk for poor developmental outcomes (for greater detail on patterns of attrition for this study, see Sroufe et al., 2005).

The current study considers the subsample (N = 73; 36 men and 37 women) of those participants who completed a romantic relationships assessment with their partners of 4 months or longer at age 20–21. Of these participants, 69% percent were European American, 16% had mixed racial backgrounds (European American, African American, Latino, and/or Native American), 10% were African American, 1% were Native American or Latino, and 4% were unclassifiable due to missing data on their fathers’ race. This subsample was comparable to the current follow-up longitudinal sample in terms of race, sex, child’s IQ, mother’s educational level at birth, and child’s high school graduation rates (85%). Six participants (6%) in the subsample were married (M = 7.67 months, standard deviation [SD] = 4.89, range = 1–14 months), a rate comparable to the full sample; none of the participants in the subsample were separated, compared with .05% of those in the full sample.

**Measures and Procedures**

**Supportive care in early childhood.** In early childhood, participants completed a series of observed tasks with a primary caregiver. These tasks included the Strange Situation (i.e., a laboratory separation and reunion procedure designed to test the quality of attachment; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) at 12 and 18 months, a problem-solving task with the mother at 24 months, and a teaching task at 42 months (see Sroufe, Egeland, & Kreutzer, 1990, for a detailed description of these tasks). The outcomes of these tasks (e.g., attachment security, child’s experience in problem solving, and caregiver’s supportive presence, respectively) are conceptually linked in that they measure the child’s experience of supportive care in early childhood, and thus the mean of the z scores of each variable was taken to form a composite variable of early supportive care. Possible scores in the full sample ranged from −1.85 to +1.80, with higher
scores on this composite indicating care that showed greater sensitivity, responsiveness, and support on the part of the mother (see Appendix A for brief descriptions of scales used to form all composites in this study).

**Peer competence in middle childhood.** At the end of first, second, and third grades teachers provided rankings of individual participant’s peer competence relative to their classmates. The teachers considered the child’s relative sociability, popularity, friendships, social skills and leadership qualities, and ability to understand other children’s perspectives and desires (see Sroufe et al., 1990, for a complete description of definitions provided to the teachers). Rankings were translated into percentiles (e.g., a child who was ranked fifth out of 20 students would get a ranking of 75%), such that possible scores ranged from 0 to 100. The average of the three rankings was taken to form a single composite of peer competence, with higher scores indicating better peer competence. Rankings were fairly consistent, \( r_s(168) = .49 - .52, ps < .001 \), and creating a composite allowed us to maximize the number of participants included in analyses, while remaining confident that the child’s peer competence was captured across a range of years in middle childhood.

**Parent–child process in early adolescence.** When participants were 13 years old they were invited to participate in a set of videotaped activities with their caregivers. Tasks included directing a blindfolded parent on how to complete a puzzle, planning an antismoking campaign and a family vacation together, and collaborating on an Ideal Person Q-Sort. These videotaped sessions lasted approximately 45 min and were rated by observers on several 7-point scales to assess various dimensions of the relationship (Sroufe, 1991). These scales included Anger, Conflict, Conflict Resolution, Confrontive Attacking, Emotional Engagement, Hostility, Negative Affect, Positive Affect, and three “Balance” scales that focused on the degree to which relationships (1) were responsive to individual feelings and ideas, (2) were scaffolds of personal development, and (3) helped individuals to meet task demands (Aguilar, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 2000; for previous research using these scales, see Linder & Collins, 2005; Roisman, Madsen, Hennighausen, Sroufe, & Collins, 2001). Repeated viewings of the tapes allowed observers to refine the scales until reliability and satisfactory descriptors of the scale points were established. Videotapes were then coded by at least two trained graduate student observers to determine reliability. Intraclass correlations (\( \rho_s \)) for these rating scales ranged from .60 to .70 (\( ps < .001 \)).

Parent–child relationship quality has been operationalized previously in this research project using a composite measure of “parent–child process” derived from a principal components analysis of the ratings mentioned above (Roisman et al., 2001). This quality composite is an average of the Balance I, Balance II, Emotional Engagement, and Positive Affect scales (\( \alpha = .83 \); see Appendix A for brief descriptions of these scales). Higher scores on this composite indicate smoother parent–child relationship process, or quality.

**Adolescent dating involvement.** At age 16, participants were interviewed individually about their dating experiences (for a full description of the dating interview, see Egeland, Lehn, Ostoja, Williams, & Kalkoske, 1994). Using the popular terminology at the time and for that age (participants turned 16 between 1991 and 1993), all participants were asked if they went out with anyone and how many people they had dated in the past year; participants were not given further guidance in defining these terms. Participants were asked these same questions again at age 17.5. By summing the responses from the two time points, a variable capturing the number of dating partners from ages 15 to 17.5 was created (\( M = 7.95 \), \( SD = 6.44 \), range: 0–26.5).

**Adolescent dating quality.** At age 16, participants who were involved in current or recent past regular romantic relationships lasting at least 2 weeks were asked additional questions concerning their experience in the relationship (e.g., “When something good happens to you, do you share it with your boy/girlfriend?”). Five trained graduate student researchers rated audiotaped interviews on the following 7-point scales: Conflict Resolution, Disclosure, Enjoyment, Intimacy, and Security; higher scores indicated a greater degree of the quality being rated. Training was completed through extended discussions of scales and interviews. A minimum criteria of 2 months duration was used for coding Disclosure and Intimacy and a minimum criteria of at least 2 weeks duration was used for coding all other scales; however, most relationships coded had lasted far longer than these cut-off points. A subset of interviews was coded for reliability purposes and Cronbach’s zs for these rating scales ranged from .63 to .89. A principal components analysis (Varimax rotation) was run on the entire sample of participants...
available in this assessment \(N = 90\) to reduce the number of variables for analysis. A single component of “adolescent dating quality” including all five rating scales emerged \((\alpha = .89)\); these scales were composited via averaging. Higher scores on this composite indicate a better quality adolescent dating relationship.

**Romantic relationship qualities in young adulthood.** At ages 20–21, participants and their romantic partners of 4 months or longer completed a videotaped observational protocol including two tasks: the Markman–Cox Observational Procedure and the Ideal-Couple Q-Sort. No participant identified him or herself as gay or lesbian.

The *Markman–Cox Observational Procedure* was designed to elicit conflict between relationship partners (Cox, 1991). Individually, each partner completed a Relationship Problem Inventory requiring him or her to rate relationship problem areas (e.g., communication, in-laws, jealousy) on a 10-point scale. The couple was brought together and presented with the completed inventories. The couple was asked to compare inventories and to agree upon the problem area that was the greatest source of conflict in their relationship. After describing the problem area to the graduate research assistant to ensure that it was substantial enough to garner more than a few minutes of discussion, the couple was asked to talk about the problem and to try to reach a conclusion that was satisfactory to both members. Each couple was given a full 10 min for discussion. Upon completion, the couples were presented with their inventories once again and asked to discuss the areas that they agreed upon the most (or argued about the least) in their relationship. Couples were given 4 min for this task, essentially providing a “cool-down” period for those couples whose earlier discussions were particularly heated.

Next, couples completed a collaborative *Ideal-Couple Q-Sort*. This task was designed to demonstrate the couple’s ability to work together. Couples were given a set of 45 cards containing statements adapted from the Dyadic Relationship Q-sort (Bengston & Grotevant, 1999). Each card’s statement described a quality of a romantic couple (e.g., “have the same friends,” “tell each other everything,” “spend some time apart”). Couples were instructed to read each card aloud and to decide together the quality’s best fit in one of three baskets labeled “Most like an ideal couple,” “Middle/Unsure,” or “Least like an ideal couple.” Couples were asked to keep approximately the same number of cards in each basket and to remember to discuss the “ideal” relationship rather than their own. After completing this portion of the task, couples selected the seven cards from the “least ideal” basket that they thought least described an ideal relationship and seven cards from the “most ideal” basket that they thought best described an ideal relationship.

Graduate research assistants coded videotapes of the couple interactions using 10 rating scales of behavior and affect: Anger, Conflict Resolution, Dyadic Negative Affect, Hostility, Overall Quality, Secure Base, Shared Positive Affect, and three “Balance” scales that captured the couple’s ability to balance individual needs with those of the couple (Aguilar et al., 1997). Coders were blind to the identity of the original participants within the couples. Twenty-five percent of the tapes were double-coded for reliability. Interrater reliabilities were high, with intraclass correlations \(r\) ranging from .81 to .95 \((p < .001)\) for these 5- and 7-point scales. Previous studies from this research project have operationalized romantic relationship quality using two composite measures derived from a principal components analysis of the 10 rating scales (Roisman et al., 2001; Roisman, Padron, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2002). These components include “Romantic Relationship Process” (Balance I, Balance II, Conflict Resolution, Overall Quality, Secure Base, and Shared Positive Affect; \(\alpha = .95\)) and “Romantic Relationship Negative Affect” (Anger, Dyadic Negative Affect, and Hostility; \(\alpha = .91\)). Higher scores indicate smoother relationship processes and greater shared negative affect, respectively.

**RESULTS**

**Overview of Participants’ Dating Experiences in Mid-Adolescence**

Of the 73 target participants, 92% had experienced at least one dating relationship of at least 2 weeks’ duration by age 16. Most relationships at age 16 were of substantial length, averaging approximately 6 months and ranging from 2 weeks (the minimum cut-off in this study) to 1 year in duration \((M = 25.20\) weeks, \(SD = 18.77)\). Girls were involved in relationships that had lasted longer \((M = 29.90\) weeks, \(SD = 18.57\)) than boys’ relationships \((M = 19.77, SD = 17.84)\), \(t(54) = 2.07, p < .05\). On average, girls dated partners who were older than themselves \((M = 17.29\) years, \(SD = 1.70)\), while boys dated slightly younger partners \((M = 15.37\) years, \(SD = 1.01)\), \(t(56) = 5.14, p < .001\).
Adolescent Dating Experiences Predicting Young Adult Romantic Relationship Quality

**Analytic plan.** Maximum likelihood estimation (MLR) was used to allow analysis of the target sample of 73 participants with outcome data at age 20–21 using MPlus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2010). MLR generates “parameter estimates with standard errors and a chi-square test statistic that are robust to non-normality and non-independence of observations” (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2010, p. 533). Missing data for predictor variables was low to low/moderate, ranging from 0% to 23.3% (dating involvement) with a mean of 5.9% over all variables.

Linear regressions models were run in MPlus, 6.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2010) to test whether adolescents’ dating involvement (operationalized as number of dating partners in mid-adolescence) and dating relationship quality predicted qualities of romantic relationships in young adulthood, even after accounting for sex and earlier experiences with parents and peers. Means, SDs, and inter-correlations of predictor and outcome variables are shown in Table 1. Linear regression models were run in a series to examine the impact of each family and peer predictor composite in chronological order, controlling for sex: (a) the first step included only the early supportive care composite (12–42 months), (b) the second step added the peer competence composite (grades 1–3), (c) the third step added the parent–child process composite (age 13), and (d) dating involvement and quality were then entered simultaneously together with previous predictor variables in the final step. A summary of the hierarchical linear regressions is presented in Table 2. Follow-up linear regressions were conducted to test for a curvilinear relationship between dating involvement and young adult romantic relationship quality composites by entering the squared term of centered values of dating involvement in the final step of the hierarchical regressions. The sample size (N = 73) exceeded that needed to detect the $R^2$ 80% of the time it occurs, given an $z$ level of .05, six predictors, an anticipated large effect size ($f^2 = .35$), and a desired statistical power level of .80 (Soper, 2010).

**Predicting romantic relationship process in young adulthood.** As hypothesized, adolescent dating experiences (i.e., dating involvement and dating quality) predicted additional variance in young adult romantic relationship processes controlling for sex and earlier experiences with parents and peers (see Step 4 of Table 2). The overall model was significant ($\chi^2/df = 26.71/6 = 4.45, N = 73, p = .0002$), showing that participants who experienced positive parent–child relationship processes in adolescence, fewer dating partners, and better quality dating relationships demonstrated better quality romantic relationship process in young adulthood. Adolescent dating involvement and quality accounted for an additional 19% of the variance beyond earlier predictors, as indicated by the change in the adjusted $R^2$. The entire group of predictors had an adjusted $R^2$ value of .30, $p < .001$, indicative of a large effect size ($f^2 = .43$) by the standards set by Cohen (1988). The effect size attributable to adolescent dating experiences was medium-to-large ($f^2 = .23$), again using conventions set by Cohen (1988). A follow-up linear regression was conducted to test whether there was a curvilinear relationship between dating involvement and young adult romantic relationship process by entering the squared term of centered values of dating involvement in the final

### Table 1

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<th>Measure</th>
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<th>Maximum</th>
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<th>SD</th>
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*Note. Early supportive care measures were collected at 12–42 months, teacher ratings of peer competence were gathered in grades 1–3, parent–child observation was conducted at age 13, dating involvement spans ages 15–17.5, adolescent dating quality was rated at age 16, and young adult romantic relationship observation occurred at age 20–21.  

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.*
Predicting romantic relationship negative affect in young adulthood. When predicting negative affect in young adult romantic relationships, the overall model was once again significant ($\chi^2/df = 24.52/6 = 4.09$, $N = 73$, $p = .0004$). Participants who dated a greater number of partners during adolescence demonstrated greater negative affect in their young adult romantic relationships. Adolescent dating involvement and quality again accounted for an additional 19% of the variance beyond earlier predictors, as indicated by the change in the adjusted $R^2$. The entire group of predictors had an adjusted $R^2$ value of .34, $p < .05$, indicative of a large effect size ($f^2 = .52$) by the standards set by Cohen (1988).

The effect size attributable to adolescent dating experiences was medium-to-large ($f^2 = .23$), again using conventions set by Cohen (1988). A follow-up linear regression was conducted to test whether a curvilinear relationship was a better fit for the construct of dating involvement by adding the square of centered values of dating involvement to the final step of the hierarchical regression; however, the curvilinear relationship was not significant.

**DISCUSSION**

These findings provide one of the first known prospective tests of the significance of multiple aspects of romantic experiences in adolescence for qualities of young adult romantic relationships in a high-risk sample (and do not replicate previously published findings from this project). Both adolescent dating involvement (i.e., the number of partners dated across mid-adolescence) and romantic relationship quality predicted qualities of young adult romantic relationships, over and above earlier experiences with parents and peers, controlling for sex. Although the importance of experiences with parents and peers is not in doubt, the present study supports theoretical speculations that adolescents’ experiences with romantic relationships make unique contributions to romantic relationship quality in young adulthood (Collins, 2003). Focusing on a high-risk sample allows the consideration of those youth who may be at greatest risk for poor relationship outcomes; however, it is important to note that these findings may be unique to high-risk populations.

**Family and Peer Links to Young Adult Romantic Relationships Qualities**

Early experiences with parents predicted young adults’ romantic relationship quality when entered alone, but did not remain a significant predictor in the final model. In contrast, parent–child processes in adolescence contributed to young adult romantic relationship process even after adolescent dating experiences were accounted for. Consistent with an attachment framework, caregiver relationships provide the groundwork for one’s later romantic relationships, helping to establish expectations about the self and others in relationships (Ainsworth, 1989). Participation in dating relationships provides

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**TABLE 2**

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Summary for Family, Peer, and Dating Variables, Predicting Young Adult Romantic Relationship Qualities (Age 20–21; $N = 73$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Young Adult Romantic Relationship Process (Ages 20–21)</th>
<th>Young Adult Romantic Relationship Negative Affect (Ages 20–21)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early supportive care (12–42 months)</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer competence (grades 1–3)</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent–child process (age 13)</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent dating involvement (age 15–17.5)</td>
<td>– .07</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent dating quality (age 16)</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $B =$ unstandardized regression coefficient; $\beta =$ standardized regression coefficient; Adjusted $R^2$s are shown. $^*p < .10; ^{*}\cdot p < .05; ^{**}p < .01$. 

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fine-tuned training in skills specific to romantic relationships, which differ from parent–child relationships in that romantic relationships have a horizontal power structure, are voluntary (and thus easily dissolved), and are infused with passion. For example, earlier family relationships may lead individuals to approach conflict with romantic partners in a hostile, open, or inhibited manner; but experience in dating relationships during adolescence provides a critical arena for modifying these skills to fit the context of romantic relationships (Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2006).

Peer competence in middle childhood was not a strong predictor of young adults’ romantic relationship quality in this study. Perhaps competence with peers enables one to initiate young adult romantic relationships confidently or reflects other characteristics such as low heterosocial anxiety (La Greca & Mackey, 2007), but does not provide skills needed to support enduring, good quality relationships (Collins & Van Dulmen, 2006). Observations of close friendship quality may provide a closer link to romantic relationship quality compared with peer competence (Collins, Haydon, & Van Dulmen, 2005; Collins & Van Dulmen, 2006).

Adolescent Dating Experience Links to Young Adult Romantic Relationships

Dating involvement. Consistent with past research demonstrating the risks of overinvolvement in dating during mid-adolescence, adolescents who dated many partners experienced young adult relationships with poorer relationship processes and increased negative affect. We did not find support for a curvilinear link between number of dating partners in adolescence and later romantic relationship quality. Although it seems plausible to assume that adolescents who date many partners across adolescence were experiencing many poorer quality relationships, data presented here support Collins’ (2003) supposition that the constructs of involvement and quality are not related. It is possible that overinvolvement is indicative of a host of other problems (e.g., earlier dating onset, a propensity for risk-taking) that hamper optimal development. Adolescents tend to spend time with relationship partners who are similar to them in terms of antisocial behavior (Piehler & Dishion, 2007); perhaps it is exposure to these partners, and not the relationships themselves, that is problematic, particularly for this high-risk sample. Information about partner selection, in addition to involvement and relationship quality, would help to determine the likelihood of this scenario. Another possibility is that adolescents who date many partners are not progressing as smoothly along the phases of romantic involvement outlined by Brown (1999) and Connolly and Goldberg (1999) compared with those who date fewer partners, thus foregoing opportunities to experience more mature types of relationships during adolescence. Examining alternate developmental pathways through these established phases, and identifying risky developmental pathways in particular, could be a useful next step in this area of research.

Dating quality. Consistent with Furman and Wehner’s (1994) romantic views theory and the social learning perspective, better adolescent dating quality was predictive of smoother relationship process and less negative affect in young adult romantic relationships. Moreover, adolescent dating quality did not simply replicate experiences gained in earlier relationships. Theorists have proposed numerous mediating processes to explain the links between adolescents and young adults’ romantic experiences, ranging from the acquisition of relationship skills to improved knowledge about the self and others to modifications of relationship cognitions, but these await empirical investigation. Research on mediating processes will be important for revealing mechanisms through which earlier experiences influence later ones.

Distinguishing “Dating” Experience from “Romantic Relationship” Experience

Considering multiple aspects of romantic experience (i.e., involvement and quality) highlights the need to differentiate dating from romantic relationships. Dating refers to individual adolescents’ experiences meeting with others for joint activities within a romantic context, but with no long-term expectations of commitment (Shulman, Collins, & Knafo, 1997). In contrast, romantic relationships refer to on going romantic partnerships characterized by passionate feelings and focused on the experiences of the couple rather than the individual (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999). Adolescents who date many partners may gather useful experience, but this experience may not transfer well to future romantic relationships. Instead, it is possible that skills associated with successful dating (e.g., initiating dates, recovering from rejection) are associated with some other aspects of future social functioning (e.g., interviewing successfully in a work setting) or individual
characteristics (e.g., hetero-social competence; Grover, Nangle, Serwik, & Zeff, 2007; La Greca & Mackey, 2007). Focusing on fewer relationships may afford the opportunity to focus on those elements of adolescent romantic relationships that are most relevant to later adult romantic relationships (e.g., conflict resolution, intimacy), while still experiencing those functions of romantic relationships thought to be unique to adolescence (e.g., identity development, separating from family). Definitions of dating and romance in adolescence are slippery; adolescents themselves are not always able to define the type of relationship in which they are involved. Still, careful attention to this issue is critical in understanding diverse aspects of the adolescent romantic experience.

Limitations

This study contributes distinctive evidence regarding the role of adolescent romantic experiences in development. The design of the study was strong, including multiple measures of relationships from different observers over the course of 20 years, providing particularly rich data. At the same time, replications of these findings with larger samples from different backgrounds are needed to increase confidence in generalizing these results beyond high-risk populations. Participants in this sample were born into poverty and thus may have forged unique developmental pathways that do not apply equally to all adolescents. The high-risk nature of the sample may have increased the frequency of dating. Other researchers have shown that dating larger numbers of partners in mid-adolescence coexists with other risky factors (i.e., deviant friendship networks, self-identifying as a “troublemaker,” and delinquency; e.g., Seffrin et al., 2009). It is possible that factors such as these—and not dating involvement alone—are problematic in building relationship skills. This study used descriptions of dating that were current at the time data were gathered, but it is possible that when reporting on number of dating partners participants were describing a diverse set of experiences (e.g., hook-ups, group dating contexts). Further, we did not seek to exclude same-sex couples, but our study is limited in that none were included in our sample. Finally, although our study helps to establish the relevance of adolescent romantic experiences to romantic relationship quality in young adulthood, it remains to be seen whether this impact will extend beyond this transitional period into later adulthood (see Roisman et al., 2004).

CONCLUSION

Clearly adolescents’ romantic experiences cannot accurately be characterized, as Brown et al. (1999) note that it was once supposed, as “an unimportant digression from meaningful socialization into adult roles” (p. 9). Rather, these unique experiences foretell the quality of some of life’s most important relationships and, therefore, warrant research attention. Findings from this study can inform programs aimed at promoting adolescents’ healthy relationships (Barber & Eccles, 2003) and provide encouragement that such programs have the potential for long-term impact on adult romantic relationships.

APPENDIX A: BRIEF DESCRIPTIONS OF RATING SCALES THAT COMPOSE EACH COMPOSITE

A. Early supportive care (12–42 months)

I. Attachment security: Secure versus insecure attachment classification in the Strange Situation Procedure at 12 and 18 months.

II. Supportive presence: Mother’s positive regard/emotional support at 24 and 42 months.

III. Mothers’ responsivity: Mother’s consistent/timely responsiveness at 30 months.

B. Peer competence, grades 1, 2, and 3; r_s(168) = .49 – .52, teachers’ ranking of child’s relative sociability, popularity, friendships, social skills, leadership, and perspective taking abilities.

C. Parent–child process (age 13; α = .83).

I. Balance I: Degree of willingness to express individual ideas freely.

II. Balance III: Ability of the parent–child dyad to meet task demands.

III. Emotional Engagement: Level of emotional connectedness.

IV. Positive Affect: Amount of reciprocal personal regard and pleasure.

D. Adolescent dating quality (age 16; α = .89).

I. Conflict Resolution: Ability to resolve conflicts with effective and fair approaches to resolution.

II. Disclosure: Amount of disclosure (i.e., sharing events, thoughts, feelings, dreams) and pervasiveness of disclosure across topics and situations.
III. **Enjoyment**: Degree to which participant views dating relationship and partner as a source of happiness, pleasure, and good feelings.

IV. **Intimacy** (rated only for relationships lasting > 2 months): Level of mutual love, caring, support, trust, and commitment evident in the relationship.

V. **Security** (rated only for relationships lasting > 2 months): Degree to which the participant acknowledges his/her feelings, vulnerabilities and conflict to the partner, with the expectation of being heard and respected and with evidence that problems are worked out openly and through compromise.

E. Young adult romantic relationship process (ages 20–21; \( \alpha = .95 \)).

I. **Balance I**: Degree of willingness to express individual ideas freely.

II. **Balance II**: Degree to which the relationship serves individual development.

III. **Conflict Resolution**: Ability to resolve conflict in a way that leads to mutual satisfaction.

IV. **Overall Quality**: Global rating of mutual caring, emotional investment, and trust.

V. **Secure Base**: Ability to seek or provide care in a timely, contingent manner.

VI. **Shared Positive Affect**: Amount of reciprocal personal regard and pleasure.

F. Young adult romantic relationship negative affect (ages 20–21; \( \alpha = .91 \)).

I. **Anger**: Degree and pervasiveness of direct anger, irritation, and fighting.

II. **Dyadic Negative Affect**: Amount of reciprocal tension and irritability.

III. **Hostility**: Degree and pervasiveness of coldness, rejection, and hurtfulness.

**REFERENCES**


and behavior in their current romantic relationship: Prospective tests of the prototype hypothesis. *Attachment & Human Development, 7*, 105–121.


