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The Effects of Romantic Involvement on Psychological Well-Being in Late Adolescence

Madeline Elizabeth McNeeley
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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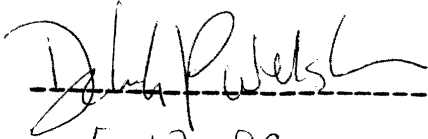
Name: Madeline E. McNeeley

College: Arts and Sciences Department: Psychology

Faculty Mentor: Deborah P. Welsh, Ph. D.

PROJECT TITLE: The Effects of Romantic Involvement on
Psychological Well-Being in Late Adolescence

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: , Faculty Mentor

Date: 5-12-99

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The Effects of Romantic Involvement on Psychological Well-Being in Late Adolescence

Madeline E. McNeeley

The University of Tennessee

Abstract

Social dating has long been considered a central part of the adolescent experience. Erikson (1968) and Sullivan (1953) theorized that early romantic relationships play an important role in healthy psychological development, while Dunphy (1963) proposed a stage theory in which normative development of interpersonal relationships culminates in late adolescence with involvement in intimate, dyadic romantic relationships. However, little empirical research has been conducted on these theories until very recently. This study extends the line of research in this area by analyzing the relationship between romantic involvement and well-being in late adolescence; well-being is defined as positive self-concept and absence of depression. Implications of the findings for these theories are discussed.

The Effects of Romantic Involvement on Psychological Well-Being in Late Adolescence

Social dating has long been considered a central part of the adolescent experience.

Sullivan's Interpersonal Theory (1953) holds that romantic involvement allows adolescents to develop senses of self that, in turn, will influence their perceptions of and relationships with others, affecting the course of all subsequent relationships. Moreover, the companionship and intimacy provided by these relationships play an important role in healthy adolescent psychological development, causing adolescent romantic relationships to play an important role throughout young adulthood (Buhrmester and Furman, 1987; Erikson, 1968; Sullivan, 1953).

Erikson (1968) and Sullivan (1953) both predict that long-term monogamous relationships will be associated with healthier functioning in late adolescence. Likewise, in describing the development of adolescent romantic relationships, Dunphy (1963) proposed a stage theory in which early adolescence is characterized by same-sex chumships, which progress in middle adolescence to single-gendered cliques interacting in mixed gender groups followed by group dating, and culminate in intimate dyadic relationships in late adolescence. Clearly, romantic involvement should be expected to have a great effect on adolescent psychological functioning. Despite the theoretical attention given to adolescent dating, however, little empirical research has been conducted on the subject until very recently.

Recognizing the need for empirical support of these theories, Feiring (1996) conducted a qualitative study that provided important information on the structure of middle adolescent dating relationships. Her findings that dating in this age group is primarily characterized by brief, monogamous relationships and occurs in the context of public, group settings essentially supports Dunphy's stage theory. Accordingly, progression to Dunphy's next stage should be associated with increased well-being. This has, in fact, been supported, as steady dating in mid-

to late adolescents has been linked to higher self-esteem (Samet and Kelly, 1987) and late adolescents involved in long-term romantic relationships have been shown to have greater psychological well-being than those with multiple dating partners (Niederjohn, Welsh and Kawaguchi, 1998). The next logical step in this line of research would be to explore the overall effect of monogamous dating more thoroughly. That is, we should consider whether involvement in intimate romantic relationships is healthier for late adolescents than not being romantically involved at all. This study examines the effect of late adolescent romantic involvement on psychological well-being, as indexed by self-esteem and depressive symptomatology.

Self-esteem has consistently been shown to have a negative relationship with depression (Orvaschel, Beeferman, and Kabacoff, 1997; Rice, Ashby, and Slaney, 1998; Taylor et al, 1997). However, nearly all study of this relationship has taken a unidimensional view of self-esteem, although it has been argued that the best image of adolescent self-concept, and therefore of self-esteem, is one that is multifaceted in nature. A strict focus on adolescents' overall feelings about themselves is considered to be inadequate, as young people tend to evaluate themselves along several different domains; this complexity means that an individual with a very positive self-image in scholastic ability, for example, might still feel inadequate in another area such as athletic ability (Cauce, 1987; Harter, 1990; Lau, 1990; Steinberg, 1996, p. 298). Therefore, exploration of the relationship of depression to the many facets of self-concept would be appropriate. One example of such a study is in the work of Patton and Noller (1994), whose treatment of self-image as a multifaceted trait led to their findings that specific areas of self-image are significantly correlated with depression.

By extending the theories of Sullivan, Erikson, and Dunphy we can infer that self-concept in the specific area of romantic appeal as well as general feelings of self-worth will be especially salient in the issue of adolescent romantic involvement. Furthermore, high perceived romantic appeal should be associated with low depression. Therefore, in order to gain a fuller understanding of adolescent functioning, this study analyzes the relationships between domains of self-esteem, particularly romantic appeal, and depression, in addition to taking a multidimensional approach to the examination of the effects of romantic involvement on self-esteem.

Three hypotheses were proposed for this study. First, late adolescents involved in monogamous relationships should display lower levels of depressive symptomatology than those who are not romantically involved. Second, high self-concept, especially in the domains of perceived romantic appeal and global self-worth, should be associated with involvement in monogamous relationships. Finally, self-perceived romantic appeal should be positively associated with absence of depressive symptoms.

Method

Participants

Approximately 300 undergraduate students volunteered to fill out a questionnaire in return for extra credit in a Psychology class. After the data were collected, any participants 23 years of age and older were excluded from the study. The resulting sample consisted of 284 students aged 17-22 years (mean age = 19.07 years), about two-thirds of whom were female (n=191). The sample was 87.3% Caucasian, 4.6% African American, 4.2% Asian, and 3.9% (combined) Hispanic, Native American, and other ethnic groups. Of the 256 participants who reported a religious affiliation, virtually all listed Catholicism or Protestantism (16.4% and 78.1%, respectively); the remainder of the participants identified themselves as Jewish, Muslim, or of some other religion (5.5% combined). Most of the participants in the study were earning quite good grades in their college courses; the students' grade point averages (GPAs) were negatively skewed with a mean of 3.1 on a 4.0 scale.

Materials

Subjects responded to a questionnaire that took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The questionnaire consisted of a demographic information sheet and three other sections:

Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (SPPA; Harter, 1988). The SPPA is a widely-used self-report measure that is designed to assess specific aspects of adolescents' perceived competence. The questionnaire comprises nine subscales. Eight of these cover specific domains of self-concept, including scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, job competence, romantic appeal, behavioral conduct, and close friendship; the ninth provides a measure of global self-worth. This scale has demonstrated high internal

consistency (Chronbach's alphas ranged from .74 to .93) and validity (Harter, 1988). In this study, Chronbach's alphas for the subscales were somewhat lower (see Table 1).

Unlike items on Likert-type scales, each item on the SPPA consists of two opposing ideas, such as, "Some teenagers find it hard to make friends BUT For other teenagers it's pretty easy" and "Some teenagers are very hard to like BUT Other teenagers are really easy to like." On either side of the item is a set of two boxes, one marked "Really true for me" and the other labeled "Sort of true for me." When the questionnaire is administered, participants are instructed first to decide whether they are more like teenagers on the right or left side of each item, then to decide how true that side is for them. This structure is intended to imply to the participants that half of all teenagers agree with the left side, while the other half agree with the right side, thus legitimizing either choice. This is advantageous in that it alleviates the tendency toward socially desirable responses (Harter, 1988).

Center for Epidemiology Scale of Depression (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). This widely-used self-report scale is designed to measure depression in non-clinical populations by assessing the absence of both internalizing and externalizing depressive symptoms. The CES-D consists of 20 items scored on a 4-point, Likert-type scale which gauges the number of days in the last week that the respondent experienced the described behaviors. Typical items include, "I thought my life had been a failure" and "I had crying spells." This scale has repeatedly demonstrated high validity and reliability; Chronbach's alpha for this study was .84.

Romantic Relationships Questionnaire. This form was created for the purposes of the study in order to gauge dating status (not dating, dating one person, or dating more than one person), length of current monogamous relationship, if applicable, and recent dating history (numbers of dating partners and monogamous partners in the past year). Also included were

items referring to the typical setting and activities of dates with the participants' current or most recent partners, such as how often per week the couple would attend school functions or go on a formal date (see Appendix for complete questionnaire).

Analyses

A series of regression analyses were performed to determine the relationship between dating status and depression. These analyses were conducted both with and without the use of self-concept as a mediating factor. In an attempt to further explain these relationships, regression analyses also were conducted to determine the various domains of self-concept that contribute to late adolescent depression and dating status. Because the distributions of most of the variables were quite skewed, robust and nonparametric methods were used for this study, including Spearman-Rank correlation coefficients, Kruskal-Wallis Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) on Ranks, and Tukey's biweight method of robust regression.

Results

The participants fell into three dating categories: not currently dating ($n=122$), dating more than one person ($n=31$), and dating only one person ($n=131$). Monogamous relationships tended to be long-term (longer than one year), with a mean of 20.75 months and a median of 16 months. The participants' responses were skewed toward positive self-concept and low depression. The medians for the self-concept subscales fluctuate around the value of 3.2, which is considerably above the scale's midpoint of 2.0 (see Table 1); these are also somewhat higher than the means reported by Harter (1988) for the original scale, which all were close to a value of 2.9. The median (13.0) and mean (14.8) of CES-D scores for this sample are higher than the means reported by Radloff (1977), which ranged from 7.94 to 9.25 for non-clinical samples, but are still below the cutoff of 16 that defines the general population.

Kruskal-Wallis ANOVAs showed no significant relationship between depression and membership in either the non-dating or monogamous relationship group [$\chi^2 = 0.619, p = 0.431$; the multiple-dating category was excluded because of its relatively small size]. Similar results were obtained from an ANOVA in which the two dating groups were combined ($n = 162$) and compared to the non-dating group [$\chi^2 = 0.867, p = 0.352$; see Table 1 for descriptions of each group].

After verifying that all of the competence measures were significantly correlated with depression (see Table 2), a stepwise robust regression was performed to determine the specific areas of self-concept (that is, excluding global self-worth) that are associated with depression in late adolescents. The analysis revealed that five of the domains – Scholastic Competence, Social Acceptance, Physical Appearance, Romantic Appeal, and Behavioral Conduct – are all significant predictors of depression [$F(5, 247) = 29.902, p < 0.00001$], although the significance

of Romantic Appeal is only marginal (see Table 3). If the stepwise regression is continued so that this domain is excluded from the model, the significance of each remaining variable improves to at least the $\alpha=.01$ level (see Table 3) and the overall significance of the model remains extremely high [$F(4, 248) = 35.836, p < 0.00001$]. Additionally, the removal of Romantic Appeal from the regression reduces the explanatory value of the model by only one percentage point ($R^2_{\text{full}} = 0.377, R^2_{\text{reduced}} = 0.366$); in either case, more than one-third of the variation in depression in the sample can be explained by these four or five self-concept domains. Each domain has a negative relationship with depression: that is, increased feelings of competence in each area are associated with decreased levels of depression.

Finally, a stepwise robust regression was performed in an attempt to relate dating status to self-concept (specific domains as well as global self-worth). Those participants dating more than one person were excluded from the sample due to the small size of that group. Five areas – Scholastic Competence, Athletic Competence, Romantic Appeal, Behavioral Conduct, and Global Self-Worth – were significant in explaining the differences in membership between the two dating groups. In this case, increased feelings of self-worth in the areas of Scholastic Competence and Romantic Appeal were associated with involvement in monogamous relationships, while increases in Athletic Competence, Behavioral Conduct, and Global Self-Worth were associated with remaining single (see Table 4). The overall model is highly significant [$F(5,207) = 21.659, p < 0.00001$] and explains over one-third of the variation in dating status ($R^2 = 0.3435$).

Discussion

Unexpectedly, none of the hypotheses were fully verified. The dating groups in this study showed no difference in depression, and perceived romantic appeal was only marginally associated with depressive symptoms. Additionally, while romantic appeal, as well as scholastic competence, were associated with monogamous dating, two other domains and, more importantly, global self-worth were associated with *not* dating. The possible reasons for these “negative” associations are intriguing. For example, high feelings of athletic competence naturally are associated with participation in sports [$F(1, 246) = 88.91, p < 0.0001$], so one might conclude that those with high perceived athletic competence might not have time to date seriously. The associations of behavioral conduct and global self-worth with dating status are not as simple to explain. One possibility is that college students with high self-concept in these areas – those who feel they are good people who usually do what is right – might feel “liberated” from the social pressure to be involved romantically.

This study has interesting implications for the popular theories posed several decades ago. The assumption through the years, of course, has been that theoreticians like Erikson and Sullivan were describing patterns that would always be applicable to all adolescents. It is quite likely, though, that their ideas were as much a function of the cultural atmosphere at the time as they were based on universal truths. Youths of the 1950s and early 1960s were growing up in a culture that would expect them to marry young, particularly during late adolescence. It follows that late adolescents of that era would feel better about themselves when involved in monogamous relationships than if they were not dating; exclusive romantic involvement, after all, is only a couple of short steps from marriage and the fulfillment of society’s mandates. In this context, the early developmental theories make perfect sense.

In today's society, however, there are different forces at work. Marriage tends to be delayed until after individuals have passed through adolescence, and there is somewhat more support in the public opinion for those who do not marry at all. Therefore, the importance of romantic involvement might be expected to be less salient than it was 40 years ago; for many people, dating is a lower priority now than it would have been then. For this reason, early theories such as those of Erikson, Dunphy, and Sullivan would not be as applicable to today's teenagers as they were to the previous generation.

Another factor to take into consideration, however, is that the sample for this study was of a fairly specific, homogenous background. All participants were college students, and therefore might reasonably be expected to delay marriage until after graduation. Also, their high grade point averages (at least half had GPAs above 3.2) indicate that most were fairly serious students who were committed to their studies, so schoolwork might take a higher priority for these students than would romantic involvement. Therefore, these findings might not generalize well to other adolescents. A study of the general population would be useful to determine whether this sample's demographics confounded the analyses.

Finally, reliability issues for this study should be addressed. Reliability scores for seven of the nine subscales of the SPPA were quite low, so the measures of self-concept used in these analyses might not be entirely accurate. This is most likely due to the fact that the SPPA was designed for use with students in the ninth through twelfth grades. Middle adolescents' ways of perceiving and describing themselves are likely to be different enough from those of late adolescents that the language and breakdown of the SPPA would be inadequate for assessing college students' self-concepts. This condition could be a major factor in explaining the lack of

significant findings in this study. It is recommended that future research in this area employ the similar Self Perception Profile for College Students (Neeman and Harter, 1986).

Further research in this area clearly is needed. It would be interesting for future work to address gender differences in the relationships described here. Also recommended are studies of these relationships as they apply to the other stages of adolescence, as well as a comparison of these relationships across all three stages. More in-depth analysis of the early developmental theories described here and possible revision of these theories from a sociocultural perspective are also warranted.

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Author Notes

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Table 1. *Averages and Reliability for the CES-D and SPPA*

Scale	median	x	SD	Chronbach's alpha
CES-D				
Overall	13.0	14.8	8.06	.84
Non-dating group only	13.0	15.0	8.03	
Monogamous group only	13.5	14.7	8.02	
Combined dating group	13.0	14.6	8.10	
SPPA subscales				
Scholastic Competence	3.2	3.13	.56	.66
Social Acceptance	3.4	3.25	.46	.62
Athletic Competence	3.0	2.73	.85	.88
Physical Appearance	2.8	2.72	.73	.83
Job Competence	3.4	3.27	.45	.49
Romantic Appeal	3.0	2.78	.61	.69
Behavioral Conduct	3.2	3.06	.56	.66
Close Friendship	3.4	3.18	.45	.63
Global Self-Worth	3.4	3.2	.54	.67

Note: The CES-D score is a sum across 20 items with a maximum total score of 60. Lower scores are associated with less depression. Each SPPA subscale is a mean of five items with a maximum possible mean of 4.0. Higher scores are associated with more positive self-concept.

Table 2. *Spearman-Rank Correlation Coefficients Relating Self-Concept to Depression*

Variable	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	Variable	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Scholastic Competence	-0.383	0.000001	Romantic Appeal	-0.345	0.000001
Social Acceptance	-0.288	0.000002	Behavioral Conduct	-0.247	0.000054
Athletic Competence	-0.145	0.023	Close Friendship	-0.128	0.038
Physical Appearance	-0.469	0.000001	Global Self-Worth	-0.467	0.000001
Job Competence	-0.147	0.017			

Table 3. *Summary of Hierarchical Regression for Predicting Depression with Specific Domains of Self-Perceived Competence*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>p</i>
Step 1: $\alpha > .05$ for removal			
Scholastic Competence	-2.116	0.595	0.00045
Social Acceptance	-1.712	0.789	0.031
Physical Appearance	-2.604	0.474	0.000001
Romantic Appeal	-1.202	0.597	0.045
Behavioral Conduct	-1.771	0.586	0.0028
Step 2: $\alpha > .01$ for removal			
Scholastic Competence	-2.216	0.594	0.00024
Social Acceptance	-1.966	0.764	0.01
Physical Appearance	-2.994	0.433	0.000001
Behavioral Conduct	-1.776	0.587	0.0028

Table 4. *Summary of Hierarchical Regression for Domains of Self-Concept Associated with Dating Status*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>p</i>
Scholastic	0.157	0.055	0.00001
Competence			
Athletic Competence	-0.135	0.034	0.0047
Romantic Appeal	0.478	0.051	0.00001
Behavioral Conduct	-0.153	0.057	0.008
Global Self-Worth	-0.201	0.063	0.002

Note: Dating status value of 1 represents “not currently dating;” value of 2 represents involvement in monogamous relationship.

Appendix

Romantic Relationships Questionnaire

1. Which of the following describes your current dating situation?

- a) not dating anyone
- b) dating one person exclusively*
- c) dating more than one person

*If you are dating only one person, how long have you been dating him/her? ___years ___months ___days

2. How many people have you "gone with" during the past year? ___

3. How many people have you gone on a date with during the past year? ___

4. When you are spending time with your current (or most recent) romantic partner, are you most likely to be

- a) by yourselves
- b) with a group of people
- c) with other couples

5. How often do (or did) you and your current (or most recent) romantic partner do the following activities together?

	usually <u>every day</u>	2-3 times <u>per week</u>	once <u>per week</u>	less than <u>once/week</u>	<u>never</u>
a) see each other during school hours	1	2	3	4	5
b) attend school functions outside of classes (e.g. sports, clubs, dances)	1	2	3	4	5
c) hang out at either partner's house	1	2	3	4	5
d) hang out at another friend's house	1	2	3	4	5
e) hang out at a public place (e.g. mall, park, tennis courts, pool)	1	2	3	4	5
f) go on a formal date (e.g. going out to dinner, movie, roller-skating, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
g) go to parties	1	2	3	4	5