Adolescent Romantic Behaviors and Perceptions: Age- and Gender-Related Differences, and Links With Family and Peer Relationships

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This study examined the role of age, gender, and dating experience in adolescent romantic behaviors and perceptions. In addition, the linkage between the quality of relationships with parents and peers, and affective intensity with a romantic partner was investigated. Interviews were held with 168 Israeli adolescents, who also completed questionnaires assessing romantic behaviors, romantic perceptions, and quality of relationships with their romantic partner, parents, and a same-gender close friend. Older adolescents were more likely than younger adolescents to have a romantic partner. Romantic perceptions pertaining to companionship and excitement were less frequent among older adolescents. However, aspects such as intimacy and level of emotional involvement were similar across adolescence. Girls emphasized more attachment and care in their romantic relationships than boys. In addition, adolescents who were currently dating perceived romantic relationships more in terms of emotional involvement than adolescents who were not dating. The affective intensity with same-gender close friend but not with parents was linked to the affective intensity with the romantic partner.

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Although adolescent romantic experiences are believed to play an important role in the development of later significant romantic relationships, little is known about their nature. The literature on adolescent romantic relationships focuses on patterns of dating and sexual behavior. Early relationships with romantic partners are casual, less intense, and short-lived (Feiring, 1996). Young adolescents focus more on who they are, how attractive they are, how they should interact with the other gender, and how this interaction will be accepted by their peers (Brown, 1997). Gradually, interest and interaction with the other gender increases, and at 15 years of age the majority of adolescents have had some dating experience (Blyth, Hill, & Thiel, 1982). Sexual activity takes place in dating, and adolescents perceive having some sexual experience by the age of 15 as normative (Feldman, Turner, & Araujo, 1999). Conceptually, relationships with the other gender were more understood within the framework of friendship or companionship (Blyth & Foster-Clark, 1987; Feiring & Lewis, 1991). The classic work of Dunphy (1963) described a gradual change in the nature of cross-gender interactions. This starts with a preference to be in places where other gender peers are likely to be present, then advances to participation in mixed-gender group activities, group dating in which couples meet in the context of the “crowd,” and individual dyads going out on their own.

Other studies investigated adolescent romantic relationships within the framework of the network of relationships with significant others such as parents, same-gender friends, and siblings (Blyth et al., 1982; Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1993). In these studies, adolescents were asked to rate the support that they received in a particular relationship, and its functional importance, or to indicate the range of activities that they engaged in with the various figures (Laursen & Williams, 1997). Results consistently showed that with age the importance of romantic relationships as providers of support and targets of intimacy increases, although friends and family members remain important figures in the life of teenagers throughout adolescence.

Studies that focus on the romantic experience and its qualitative nature have been conducted mainly among college students or adults. Sternberg’s (1986) approach focused on the functions of romantic relations, and outlined three major components—intimacy, passion, and commitment. Hazan and Shaver (1987) conceptualized love relationships in terms of attachment. According to this view, a romantic partner is thought to become an attachment figure, replacing the parental attachment figures as uppermost in the attachment hierarchy. Hazan and Shaver described romantic love as an adaptive biological process, which facilitates attachment between sexual partners. The attachment between romantic partners differs
to some extent from the parent–child bond as it involves the integration of attachment, caregiving, and sexual behavior between two adults.

This study was designed to address age-related differences in adolescent romantic experience and perceptions, especially identifying the qualitative differences in the nature of adolescent romance during the different stages of adolescence. Furman and Wehner's (1994) theory on adolescent romantic relationships is a pioneering attempt to explain how cross-gender encounters initiated in a group context develop and change into attachments. Based on their integration of the theoretical works of Bowlby and Sullivan, Furman and Wehner suggested that younger adolescent romantic partners serve more as companions and friends, thus providing experiences of cooperation and reciprocity. In addition, these relationships are also based on self-disclosure and consensual validation of self-worth. At a later stage, a partner is sought out in times of distress, and is expected to provide support, comfort, and caregiving. In conjunction with the emergent sexual interest the individual turns to the romantic partner for sexual fulfillment as well. By fulfilling the different needs, the romantic partner becomes part of the hierarchy of important figures and its importance for the adolescent in comparison with other important figures moves up with age (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992).

In a more recent article, Furman and Wehner (1997) elaborated on the evolution of a romantic partner into an attachment figure, placing extra emphasis on the importance of the interaction experience for the quality of a romantic relationship: “As individuals grow older and acquire more experience in various romantic relationships, they may be more likely to turn to a partner to fulfill these functions than when they were younger and less experienced” (p. 23). Studies in social exchange theory suggest that mutually beneficial exchanges promote future cooperation as participants learn to rely on one another for rewards (Kelly et al., 1983). Thus, gaining more experience with romantic relationships, in addition to chronological age, may also contribute to changes in romantic behaviors and in how romantic love is understood.

In line with these conceptualizations, clear changes with age can be expected. Affiliative behaviors and motives can be found among romantic partners during the earlier stages of adolescence, reflecting the companionship quality of the interaction with members of the other gender. The caregiving and attachment components are expected to become more significant in romantic relationships in later stages of adolescence and in young adulthood, when the need for a new attachment figure increases. In addition, experience and acquisition of some competencies in interacting with the other gender may also facilitate the coordination of affiliative, at-
tachment, and sexual needs, and their becoming central to the relationship (Furman & Wehner, 1997).

Evidence to date suggests that there are gender differences in friendship intimacy. Adolescent female friends are reportedly closer, and more inclined to self-disclosure, than are boys (Camerena, Sargiani, & Petersen, 1990; Jones & Dembo, 1989; Sharabany, Gershoni, & Hofman, 1981; Shulman, Laursen, Kalman, & Karpovsky, 1997). However, in adolescent and young adult cross-gender friendships (Reisman, 1990), adolescent romantic partnerships (Shulman, Levy-Shiff, Kedem, & Alon, 1997), and married couples (Merves-Okin, Amidon, & Berndt, 1991) no significant differences were found between boys and girls on self-disclosure and expression of emotions. Intimacy, measured in terms of commitment and communication, also showed no significant differences within couples (White, Speisman, Jackson, Bartis, & Costos, 1986).

Nevertheless, girls spend more time with and thinking about boys (Richards, Crowe, Larson, & Swarr, 1998), and more perceive their romantic relationships as supportive (Connolly & Johnson, 1996). Male adolescents reported a lower level of respect for their romantic partner than did female adolescents (Shulman et al., 1997), and men are more likely than women to interrupt their partners (Leaper & Anderson, 1997). Girls are thus more attentive to their partners and more perceive relationships as supportive. This is in line with Gilligan's (1982) contention that women are more at ease being close in their relationships and their life is organized around being able to maintain affiliations. In addition, women were traditionally expected to stay connected in meaningful ways and care about their partners and families (Papp, 1989). Previous research shows that women report more frequent and positive caregiving behaviors than men, probably reflecting societal expectations that reward female nurturant behavior (Kunce & Shaver, 1994). Overall, we may expect that female adolescents will emphasize more commitment and care in their romantic relationships than male adolescents.

The growing interest and investment in a romantic partner cannot be detached from the two other central relationships in an adolescent’s life, namely family and close friends. It is well documented that throughout adolescence frequency of interactions and diversity of activities shift from parents to peers (Laursen & Williams, 1997). Nevertheless, one cannot overlook the fact that parents remain a major source of support for their adolescent children even as the salience of peers increases (Youniss & Smollar, 1985), and often maintain this status throughout the college years as well (Furman & Wehner, 1997). Moreover, understanding romantic relationships from a developmental perspective and within an attachment framework (Furman & Wehner, 1994) may suggest that the quality of the
romantic relationship is related not only to the experiences with the romantic partner, but also to the quality of relationship with parents and peers. Thus, relational patterns such as the sense of closeness experienced in the relationship with parents and peers are linked to the sense of closeness experienced with a romantic partner. This assumption is in line with attachment theory. Models of self and others, and relationships that develop from experiences in close relationships, influence the nature of interaction with the environment, expectations concerning availability, responsiveness, and attitudes of others, as well as expectations about the self in future relationships (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986).

In sum, three major questions are addressed in this study:

1. Do romantic behaviors and perceptions differ across adolescence? We hypothesized that older adolescents will be more likely to report having a romantic partner, will report on romantic relationships that last longer, will meet frequently with, and will be more likely to be sexually intimate with their romantic partner than younger adolescents. In addition, it was hypothesized that younger adolescents will be more likely to perceive romantic relationships in terms of friendships, whereas older adolescents will be more likely to perceive romantic relationships in terms of care and attachment. It was also expected that more experience in romantic relationships will be related to higher competence in interacting with the other gender and will be reflected in higher levels of involvement with and care for the romantic partner.

2. Do romantic behaviors and perceptions differ across gender? We expected that girls will be more likely to perceive romantic relationships in terms of caregiving and support, whereas boys will be more likely to perceive romantic relationships in terms of companionship.

3. To what extent do relationships with parents and close same-gender friends relate to the quality of the romantic relationship during adolescence? We explored the extent to which the positive dimension of relationships with parents and peers, namely the level of experienced closeness in these relationships, is related to the sense of closeness experienced in an adolescent’s romantic relationship.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

A total of 168 adolescents (91 boys and 77 girls) participated in the investigation. Participants were drawn from four high schools in medium-sized towns in the center and south of Israel, and represented a lower-middle
class to an upper-middle class spectrum. Participants were included after they gave consent. Ninth-grade participants were included in the study only after parental consent was given as well, whereas 11th and 13th graders were included in the study after they consented. When our study was conducted, personal consent for participating in psychological study was approved for 11th graders. The 168 adolescents represented a participation rate of 87%. All the participants lived with their families. The sample consisted of 54 ninth graders, 30 girls and 24 boys (mean age = 14.11 years, $SD = 0.37$); 53 eleventh graders, 30 girls and 23 boys (mean age = 16.26 years, $SD = 0.52$); and 61 thirteenth graders, 31 girls and 30 boys (mean age = 19.18 years, $SD = 0.59$). The 13th graders attended two senior high schools where studies continue for 4 years, instead of the more common 3 years. These schools are not academically or socially different from schools that offer 3 years of senior high school besides offering an additional year of schooling that mainly focuses on science education. The decision for an additional year of schooling is made by students themselves and not dictated by the school system. No academic, socioeconomic, or family background differences between those who continue to study an extra year and those who graduate from school after the 12th grade were reported by the schools’ principals. These 13th graders form a unique comparison group as they represented a group of older adolescents who are not away from home and who study in a high school setting and not a college.

Measures and Procedure

Participants were interviewed, and were asked to complete questionnaires assessing the nature of their romantic behaviors, their romantic perceptions, and their relationships with a romantic partner, parents, and a same-gender close friend. Participants were individually interviewed and completed questionnaires in groups of 20 students at their schools. Participants randomly were interviewed first or completed questionnaires first.

Romantic Behaviors

Participants were asked to indicate in open-ended responses the following information:

1. Occurrence of dating (currently dating, have dated, have never dated).
2. Length of current or most recent significant romantic relationship, in weeks.
3. Interaction frequency, in minutes, of contact with the romantic partner during a morning, an afternoon, and an evening in the preceding
week. The total time of contacts represented the interaction frequency with the romantic partner on an ordinary day in the preceding week.

4. Participants were asked to rate on a scale ranging from 1 (never touched each other) to 9 (had sexual intercourse) how sexually intimate they were with their current romantic partner or with their previous partner.

These open-ended questions were patterned according to Berscheid, Snyder, and Omoto's (1989) revised version of the Relationship Closeness Inventory. Berscheid and her colleagues found reports of frequency of interaction to possess acceptable test–retest reliability over a period of 3 to 5 weeks (.81).

In addition, to measure the extent of perceived closeness with the romantic partner, participants were asked to rate the affective intensity with their current or most recent romantic partner. The Index of Affective Relationships (Takahashi & Nagima, 1994) was used to measure intensity of affective relationships. In its original form this is a self-report instrument consisting of 18 statements describing affective desires to rely on or to be with a significant figure in the life of the adolescent. In this study, an adapted and shortened version of the instrument was used, comprising 13 items. For each item respondents were required to rate on a scale ranging from 1 (never correct) to 5 (always correct) the extent to which a statement characterized their relationship with a certain figure. Examples of statements are "When I receive bad news I want to be with X," "I want to share pleasant feelings with X." In this study, respondents were asked to complete the instrument with regard to their romantic partner as well as with regard to their mother, father, and same-gender close friend. Mean score for affective intensity with each figure was computed. Mean scores ranged from 1 to 5. Cronbach alphas for the four figures in this shortened version were satisfactory and ranged from .88 to .95.

Romantic Perceptions

1. Romantic relationship experiences were measured by Hendrick and Hendrick's (1986) measure of love styles. The 36-item measure indexes six love styles. A respondent is asked to indicate the extent to which a certain statement characterizes the relationship with the romantic partner on a scale ranging from 1 (does not characterize the relationship at all) to 5 (very much characterizes the relationship). The six love styles, and examples of items, are listed next.
Eros (physical love): “We were attracted to each other immediately when we first met.”
Ludus (game-playing love): “I try to keep her uncertain about my commitment to her.”
Storge (friendship, companionate love): “The best kind of love grows out of a long friendship.”
Pragma (practical, objective love): “An important factor in choosing a boyfriend is how he will be as a father.”
Mania (preoccupation with the romantic relationship): “When I am in love, I have trouble concentrating on anything else.”
Agape (caregiving, self-sacrificing love): “I try to always help her through difficult times.”

For each love style a mean score was computed, hence scores ranged from 1 to .5. Cronbach alphas for the six styles in this study were as follows: Eros, \( \alpha = .76 \); Ludus, \( \alpha = .71 \); Storge, \( \alpha = .73 \);Pragma, \( \alpha = .65 \); Mania, \( \alpha = .74 \); Agape, \( \alpha = .76 \). Removal of one item from the Pragma scale resulted in an alpha of .69. The mean for the Pragma love style was thus computed based on five items. Intercorrelations among love styles revealed the Eros, Mania, and Agape love styles to be interrelated (correlations ranged from .43 to .67). Therefore these three styles were collapsed into one love style reflecting attraction, involvement, and care, and was termed Emotional Involvement love style.

2. Perceived advantages of having a romantic partner were examined by Feiring’s (1996) semistructured interview about dating in which adolescents are requested to talk about the advantages of having a boyfriend or girlfriend. Content analysis was conducted on adolescents’ transcribed comments to determine categories that are most frequent and best describe the data. The following advantage categories were derived:

Companionship: “You have somebody to go out with, to study together with before exams.”
Intimacy: “To share my personal matters with someone.”
Attachment: “I feel that somebody, who is not a family member, really loves me, and I can count on him.”
Care: “Somebody who spoils you and you spoil her.”
Status: “In my class, it makes me a MAN.”
Sex: “You can kiss him and do things you do not do with a friend.”
Excitement: “It is just great to think that you are involved and to wait for the next time you meet.”

Each participant’s answers were coded according to whether they mentioned or did not mention a given category. Categories are not mutually
exclusive, and a participant could mention a number of advantages. To establish interrater reliability on these categories, transcripts were coded independently by two raters. Cohen’s Kappas were in the range of .87 to .91. The interview data used in this study are thus highly reliable and provide adolescents’ perceptions of their romantic relationships. The categories derived in this study are quite similar to those derived by Feiring. In sum, responses fell into one of two possibilities: A respondent has mentioned or has not mentioned a category.

RESULTS

Plan of Analysis

In this section, we first describe age, gender, and dating experience differences in romantic behaviors and perceptions. Then we examine the linkages between affective intensity with parents and peers, and affective intensity with a romantic partner during adolescence.

Age, Gender, and Dating Status Differences in Romantic Behaviors

Frequencies and percentages of three categories of dating status (currently dating, have dated, have never dated) were tabulated across three age groups and are presented in Table 1. Sixteen and 19-year-olds reported a higher frequency of dating currently than 14-year-olds. In addition, 19-year-olds reported the highest frequency of having never dated. However, 14-year-olds reported the highest frequency of having dated in the past, whereas 16-year-olds in comparison with them reported less that they had dated in the past, $\chi^2(4, N = 168) = 28.70, p < .0001$.

To assess age, gender, and dating status differences in romantic behaviors the following analyses were conducted on the cohort of adolescents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Currently Dating</th>
<th>Have Dated</th>
<th>Never Dated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 13</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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who reported currently dating and those who had dated in the recent past. A 3 (age) x 2 (gender) x 2 (dating status: currently dating and have dated in the past) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the mean duration of romantic relationships across three age groups and gender among those who were currently dating and those who had dated in the recent past. Results revealed two significant main effects: for age, $F(2, 114) = 7.05, p < .001$; and for gender, $F(1, 114) = 3.54, p < .05$. A Scheffé follow-up contrast ($p < .05$) revealed that 14-year-olds compared with 16- and 19-year-olds were engaged in relationships that last longer, $M = 52.29$ weeks ($SD = 40.48$) versus $M = 26.88$ weeks ($SD = 42.35$) and $M = 20.81$ weeks ($SD = 24.02$), respectively. Girls in comparison with boys reported engaging in relationships that lasted longer, $M = 38.57$ weeks ($SD = 39.62$) versus $M = 28$ weeks and $M = 27.90$ weeks ($SD = 37.32$), respectively.

A 3 (age) x 2 (gender) x 2 (dating status) ANOVA was conducted to assess the mean length of time, in minutes, during which adolescents were engaged with their romantic partners in the preceding week (or were engaged in their most recent romantic relationship). Results revealed one significant main effect for dating status, $F(1, 114) = 5.74, p < .02$. Those who were currently dating reported spending more time with their romantic partners than adolescents reporting on time spent in the past with a romantic partner in a relationship that had terminated, $M = 152.57$ min ($SD = 109.95$) versus $M = 86.92$ min ($SD = 173.61$), respectively.

An additional 3 (age) x 2 (gender) x 2 (dating status) ANOVA was conducted to assess the level of sexual intimacy with the romantic partner. Results revealed one significant main effect for dating status, $F(1, 114) = 10.09, p < .01$. Those who were currently dating reported being more sexually intimate with their partner than those who reported on the sexual intimacy in a relationship that had ended, $M = 7.44$ ($SD = 2.08$) versus $M = 5.69$ ($SD = 2.27$), respectively.

Finally, a 3 (age) x 2 (gender) x 2 (dating status) ANOVA was conducted to assess the mean level of affective intensity with the romantic partner across three age groups and gender among those who were currently dating and those who had dated in the recent past. Results revealed two significant main effects: for gender, $F(1, 114) = 5.28, p < .05$; and for dating status, $F(1, 114) = 4.78, p < .05$. Girls reported a higher level of affective intensity in their romantic relationships than boys, $M = 4.42$ ($SD = 0.46$) and $M = 4.10$ ($SD = 0.74$), respectively. Adolescents who were currently dating reported higher affective intensity with their partner than adolescents reporting on a relationship that had ended, $M = 4.46$ ($SD = 0.53$) and $M = 4.10$ ($SD = 0.66$), respectively.

To summarize, among older adolescents there was a higher chance that they were currently engaged in a romantic relationship; however,
14-year-olds reported more than 16-year-olds that they had dated in the past. Romantic relationships of 19-year-olds lasted longer than those of younger adolescents. Girls across all age groups were engaged in relationships of longer duration and reported a higher level of affective intensity with their romantic partner. Finally, currently dating adolescents reported a higher frequency of interaction and higher levels of sexual intimacy and affective intensity in their relationships than adolescents reporting on relationships that had ended.

**Age, Gender, and Dating Status Differences in Romantic Perceptions**

The following analyses were conducted on the whole sample. The three dating status categories, currently dating, have dated, and have never dated, represent the independent variable of dating experience.

**Love styles.** A 3 (age) × 2 (gender) × 3 (dating status: currently dating, have dated, and have never dated) multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to assess the mean level of the love styles across age, gender, and dating status. Three main effects emerged: for age, $F(2, 159) = 2.79, p < .01$; for gender, $F(1, 159) = 3.59, p < .001$; and for dating status, $F(2, 159) = 3.00, p < .001$. No significant interactions among age, gender, or dating status were found. Follow-up ANOVAs and Scheffé contrasts ($p < .05$) specified age, gender, and dating status differences on each love style.

Univariate ANOVAs revealed a significant age difference for the Storge love style, $F(2, 159) = 4.81, p < .001$. A Scheffé follow-up contrast showed that perception of romantic love as friendship was higher among 14- and 16-year-olds, $M = 3.74 (SD = 0.55)$ and $M = 3.65 (SD = 0.75)$, than among 19-year-olds, $M = 3.41 (SD = 0.68)$. An additional set of univariate ANOVAs revealed a significant gender difference on the Ludus (game-playing love) style, $F(1, 159) = 11.03, p < .001$. Boys across the three age groups described a higher level of Ludus-style love than did girls, $M = 2.86 (SD = 0.71)$ and $M = 2.39 (SD = 0.62)$, respectively.

A third set of univariate ANOVAs revealed a significant difference in the Emotional Involvement love style, $F(2, 159) = 9.13, p < .001$. A Scheffé follow-up contrast showed that adolescents who were currently dating reported a higher level of the Emotional Involvement love style than adolescents who had dated, $M = 3.85 (SD = 0.63)$, and $M = 3.36 (SD = 0.67)$, respectively. Adolescents who had never dated reported an in-
termediate level of the Emotional Involvement love style, $M = 3.59$ ($SD = 0.43$).

**Advantages of having a romantic partner.** A series of $3$ (age) $\times 2$ (gender) $\times 3$ (dating status: currently dating, have dated, and have never dated) $\times 2$ (advantage category: was mentioned or was not mentioned) log-linear analyses were conducted. Results revealed several significant two-way interactions between independent variables and advantage categories. Two log-linear analyses revealed interactions between age and the companionship advantage category, $\chi^2(2, N = 168) = 6.65, p < .05$, as well as between age and the excitement advantage category, $\chi^2(2, N = 168) = 10.26, p < .01$. As can be seen in Table 2, 14- and 16-year-olds mentioned more companionship as an advantage of romantic relationship than 19-year-olds. In addition, 19-year-olds mentioned excitement as an advantage of romantic relationships less than did younger adolescents.

In addition, two log-linear analyses revealed interactions between gender and the attachment advantage category, $\chi^2(1, N = 168) = 30.36, p < .0001$, as well as between gender and the care advantage category, $\chi^2(1, N = 168) = 6.65, p < .05$.

![Table 2](image)

**Perceived Advantages of Having a Romantic Partner by Age, Gender, and Dating Status**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantage Category</th>
<th>Category Mentioned</th>
<th>Category Not Mentioned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companionship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-year-old</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>68.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-year-old</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-year-old</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-year-old</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>42.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-year-old</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-year-old</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>64.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Care</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Currently dating</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never dated</td>
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168) = 33.84, p < .0001. Attachment and care were more perceived by girls across all age groups and dating statuses as an advantage of having a romantic partner than by boys (See Table 2). An additional log–linear analysis revealed a significant interaction between dating status and sex as an advantage category, $\chi^2(2, N = 168) = 7.88, p < .01$. Adolescents who were currently dating or had dated in the past were more likely to mention sex as an advantage of romantic relationships than were adolescents who have never dated (see Table 2).

To summarize, older adolescents (19-year-olds) perceived romantic relationships less in terms of friendship, and considered companionship less to be an advantage of having a romantic partner, than did younger adolescents (14- and 16-year-olds). In addition, 19-year-olds mentioned excitement as an advantage less than did younger adolescents. No age differences were found in perceptions of romantic relationships in terms of intimacy, caregiving, or attachment. Attachment and care were more perceived by girls across all age groups as an advantage of having a romantic partner than by boys. In contrast, the perception of romantic relationships in terms of game-playing love was more emphasized by boys than by girls. Adolescents who were currently dating perceived romantic relationships more in terms of emotional involvement than did adolescents who currently did not have a romantic partner. In addition, sex was more frequently mentioned as an advantage for dating among adolescents who were currently involved in a romantic relationship or had dated in the past than it was among adolescents who had never dated.

**Intensity of the Affective Relationship With a Romantic Partner Versus the Role of the Quality of Relationships With Parents and Peers**

A multiple regression was conducted to determine the linkages between the quality of relationships with parents and peers and the intensity of the affective relationship with a romantic partner. (This analysis was conducted with 120 adolescents who reported currently having a romantic partner and who had a partner in the past.) Results of the multiple regression are presented in Table 3. As can be seen, the affective intensity with parents did not explain affective intensity with a romantic partner, whereas closeness to a same-gender friend explained 43% of affective intensity with a romantic partner.

To control the possible contribution of other variables to the affective intensity with the romantic partner, a hierarchical regression was performed.
TABLE 3
Summary of the Multiple-Regression Analysis for Variables Explaining Affective Intensity With Romantic Partner

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Simple R</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affective intensity—mother</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective intensity—father</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Affective intensity—friend</td>
<td>.63*</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 120.
*p < .0001. **p < .00001.

in which demographic variables (gender and age) as well as variables related to the romantic experience and perceptions (the status of dating, the frequency of contact with the romantic partner, the sexual intimacy with the romantic partner, and romantic perceptions in terms of love styles) were inserted prior to the insertion of the indexes of affective intensity with mother, father, and close same-gender friend. Results showed that even after controlling those variables, affective intensity with a same-gender close friend explained 27% of the sense of closeness with the romantic partner, whereas affective intensity with either of the parents did not explain affective intensity with a romantic partner.

DISCUSSION

Results of this study show that almost one half of the 16- and 19-year-olds reported being currently engaged in a romantic relationship. Among 14-year-olds, only 15% reported being currently involved in a romantic relationship. These findings extend results from previous studies reporting that the proportion of individuals who state that they have a boyfriend or a girlfriend increases with age (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992), and that by the age of 15 most teenagers have had some experience of dating (Blyth et al., 1982; Feiring, 1996). Report of previous dating, however, showed a different age-related trend. The majority of 14-year-olds (65%) reported having had some previous experience with dating, whereas only 22% of 16-year-olds reported this. This unexpected trend may indicate a previously unnoticed aspect in the study of adolescent romance.

In the majority of studies, adolescents are asked to indicate whether they are currently dating, have dated in the past, or have never dated. However, to the best of our knowledge, no criteria were ever formulated to define the terms boyfriend or girlfriend. Previous studies showed that adolescent romantic relationships are part of the adolescent social context and
experience (Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Dunphy, 1963). Our results showed that conceptions of companionship and friendship are an integral part of adolescents' understanding of romance. It is reasonable to question whether adolescents, especially younger adolescents, differentiate between a romantic relationship and a cross-gender friendship. We know that children and adolescents are involved in cross-gender interactions or friendships (Leaper & Anderson, 1997), but we do not know when and how a friendship turns into a romantic relationship or is considered as such. In a recent article, LaVoie, Johnson, Mahoney, Ramet, and Anderson (1998) described a continuum of dating status, starting from "close friends" via "casual dating" to "exclusive dating." We speculate that 14-year-olds may regard a close cross-gender friendship or casual dating as an exclusive romantic relationship. Going out in mixed-gender groups at this age might be considered dating and this might be the reason why many 14-year-olds compared to 16-year-olds tend to report they have experience in dating. Sixteen-year-olds probably have a stricter idea of what it means to have a boyfriend or a girlfriend or to be in love. A recently published study gives rise to this possibility. Montgomery and Sorrel (1998) reported a trend suggesting a decrease in the number of adolescents reporting on having been in love among 11th graders.

This possible changing dialectic of friendship and romance is further evinced in the age-related differences in romantic perceptions found in this study. Some perceptions of romantic relationships are similar across adolescence, although others differ. Experience of romance as a caregiving relationship, as well as the value placed on intimacy and attachment is predominant across the various stages of adolescence. In these aspects adolescent romantic relationships, even among younger adolescents, resemble those of adults (Levesque, 1993). Yet despite these consistencies, there are aspects that differ with age. In this study, younger adolescents emphasized aspects of friendship or companionship in their romantic relationships, whereas this tendency was lower only among the 19-year-olds. In addition, there was a decrease in the perception of excitement related to the romantic relationship. The age differences in perception of a romantic partner as a companion are in line with Furman and Wehner's (1994) theory that at an earlier age romantic partners serve more as companions and friends, providing experiences of cooperation and reciprocity. At a later stage when a partner is more expected to provide support, comfort, and caregiving, and turning into more of an attachment figure, the aspects of companionship and friendship in the romantic relationship are less pronounced.

The age-related decrease in excitement points to an additional aspect of romance in adolescence. Phenomenological studies, as well as lay intuition, have described components such as uniqueness, absolutes, and ide-
alism as characterizing adolescent romance (Fischer & Alapack, 1987). Fascination has been used to differentiate romantic from friendship relations (Hatfield & Rapson, 1987). However, as Feiring (1996) suggested, fascination "captures the brief but intense nature of adolescent romance. Given the amount of attention focused on the dating partner, short-term fascination might best describe the initial stage of romance in adolescence" (p. 192).

Whereas age is related to a decrease in characterization of romantic relationships in terms of companionship and fascination, current experience of dating was found to be related to an increase in aspects characterizing closeness and mutual commitment. This can be understood because the romantic relationship provides rich opportunities for cooperation, mutualism, and reciprocal altruism (Laursen & Williams, 1997). As relationships develop, individuals may become more confident in partners’ availability and support, and this further affects romantic perceptions. Furman and Wehner (1997) found that college women in exclusive relationships were more secure and less preoccupied in their romantic styles than those dating more casually. Kirkpatrick and Hazan (1994) found that some individuals with insecure avoidant styles switched to a secure style when they become involved in a new relationship. However, some caution is warranted. It is possible that adolescents reporting on a relationship that had ended describe a less successful relationship, or tend to reconstruct a previous relationship in a less favorable manner.

Despite the importance of romantic experience, age differences in romantic behaviors and perceptions were found independent of dating experience. It is possible that age and dating experience are related to different aspects of adolescent romantic relationships. Experience is probably more related to the quality of the relationship whereas age-related trends are possibly bound to the meaning of love and its functions during the different stages of adolescence. However, this finding must be interpreted in light of the following limitation. Some cells, like 19-year-olds who had never dated or 14-year-olds who were currently dating, contained few participants, and in fact may raise questions whether interaction effects between age and experience exist but were not detected in this study. This must be tested in future studies.

Consistent gender differences across the three age groups emerged with regard to romantic behaviors and perceptions. Girls reported a higher level of affective intensity with their romantic partners. In addition, girls more than boys reported valuing attachment and care in their relationships. Boys, by contrast, perceived romantic relationships more as game-playing love. These findings recall the well-documented gender differences in adolescent close relationships. Adolescent female friends
are reportedly closer, and more inclined to self-disclosure, than are boys (Camerena et al., 1990; Jones & Dembo, 1989; Shulman, Levy-Shiff, Kedem, & Alon, 1997). Boys tend to express themselves through separateness, characterizing friendship in terms of shared activities, whereas girls perceive relatedness, emphasizing mutual closeness and reciprocity in friendship (Smoller & Youniss, 1982). Similarly, this finding recalls the higher tendency of women to report higher level of commitment, caregiving, and security than men (Gilligan, 1982; Kunce & Shaver, 1994; Pines, 1998).

The affective intensity with the romantic partner was related to the quality of the relationship with a same-gender close friend, whereas the relationship with parents was not related to affective intensity with a romantic partner. Our results consistently demonstrate that although adolescent romantic relationships contain components found in adult love experiences, components of friendship and companionship are also dominant in romantic relationships during earlier stages of adolescence. The friendship quality of adolescent romantic relationships can also be attributed to the fact that many of the interactions with the romantic partner take place within the peer arena. Adolescents meet in mixed-gender group activities, and date in a group context (Blyth & Padgham, 1987; Dunphy, 1963). Furman and Wehner (1993) also found that romantic relational styles of high school girls were related to relational styles with friends but not with parents. Among college women, however, romantic relational styles were related to those with friends as well as to relational styles with parents. Future studies on late adolescent and young adult romantic relationships could illuminate to what extent friendships moderate relationships with romantic partners, and if and when the role of relationships with parents becomes more prominent in explaining late adolescent and early adult romantic relationships (as found by Owens et al., 1995).

Some additional limitations of this study should be addressed. Our results demonstrated differences as a function of age, yet the study was cross-sectional in nature. A longitudinal study is needed to rule out alternative explanations. In addition, this study dealt with the reported behaviors and perceptions of adolescents with regard to romantic relationship in which they are or were involved. A relationship consists of two partners. As we have shown (Shulman et al., 1997), more can be learned about a relationship when both partners are examined rather than one partner alone.

In closing, our results show that adolescent romantic relationships consist of components found in adult romantic relationships, such as the mutual caregiving quality, but they are also an arena for joint activities and companionship, as is friendship. However, the nature and quality of adolescent romance was found to be different in early and late adolescence. In
line with Furman and Wehner's (1997) suggestions, future longitudinal studies of the development of adolescent romantic relationships could help us better understand the transformations in affiliative, attachment, caregiving, and sexual features.

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