

# The Development of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence

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## 12 "You're Going Out with Who?"

### *Peer Group Influences on Adolescent Romantic Relationships*

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One of the hallmarks of American adolescence is the broadening and intensification of peer relationships (Brown, 1990; Hartup, 1993). During this life stage young people typically expand the time spent with peers, rely more on peers for advice and support, and work out their identities and aspirations within the context of peer relationships. The peer system itself expands, most notably with a new form of dyadic association: romantic relationships. To a limited extent, researchers have explored various facets of this new form of relationship: its connection to family structure and processes, its impact on the emotional and sexual lives of young people, its associations with participants' personal characteristics such as sex role orientation or attachment style, and its role in the social mandate of mate selection and marriage. Rarely, however, have researchers given concurrent attention to two other critical components of adolescent romantic relationships: the social context in which they are primarily embedded, that is, the social world of peers and the changes or metamorphosis that they manifest across adolescence. Both of these components are addressed in several other contributions to this volume, but they are the focal interests of this chapter.

My mission is to urge investigators to approach adolescent romantic relationships from a *developmental-contextual* perspective. I suggest that these relationships change dramatically in form, substance, and function over the course of this stage of life, and that they both shape and are shaped by the broader peer context in which they are rooted. More specifically, after sketching out the major features of the developmental-contextual perspective, I present a heuristic model of a prototype, four-phase sequence through which adolescents pass in their development of romantic interests, skills, and relationship experiences. In each phase I discuss the character of romantic activity and key features of the peer context. Finally, I suggest

some applications of this model to future research on the role of peers in adolescent romantic relationships.

One of the most daunting tasks in studying adolescent romantic relationships is simply defining them — especially if one takes the position that they change substantively over this period of life. In this chapter I regard relationships as romantic if they are dyadic peer associations that are perceived by the participants or their close peer associates to include strong feelings of liking and caring and at least the potential for sexual activity. The strong feelings may be genuine or feigned for the sake of impression management. One individual may have romantic interests in another (feelings of liking and caring, combined with some sense of sexual attraction), but these must be shared by the couple — again, in reality or at least in appearance to peers — for the association to be considered a romantic relationship.

#### A Developmental-Contextual Perspective

Our "romanticized" image of a romantic couple is one of isolation: two individuals walking alone across a wind-swept shore, cuddling by themselves in front of a roaring fire, or so embraced by each other that they lose all sense of the masses of humanity surrounding them. Although such precocious (and precarious) moments of isolation exist in any relationship, the truth is that romantic ties are generally negotiated in a series of social contexts — especially during the preadult years. Parents and other relatives, characters in mass media, and other adults in the community model romantic relationships and attempt to instill culturally prescribed values and orientations that will help youngsters engage successfully in this type of relationship. Religious organizations and juvenile justice authorities place restrictions on both the private and public conduct of romantically involved couples. Peers provide opportunities to meet and interact with romantic partners, to initiate and recover from such relationships, and to learn from one's romantic experiences. For all their emphasis on privacy and exclusivity, romantic relations are really a social affair.

There is also much to be learned, much to be accepted before a young person can be judged proficient at romantic relationships. The nature of one's initial forays into the romantic world are typically quite different from the romantic ties that characterize the later stages of adolescence or early adulthood. In short, one's romantic inclinations and abilities develop over time, and they do so in several social contexts.

For adolescents, peers serve as something between a guiding or inspiring and a controlling social context for romantic relationships. However, both

the nature and degree of peer influence can be expected to change over the course of adolescence. As young people's romantic interests and orientations change across adolescence, the support they require from peers, and the interference they are willing to tolerate, shift substantially.

#### Some Initial Caveats

Before presenting an overview of the four phases, some general comments are in order. First, I am not the only scholar to propose a developmental sequence in adolescents' romantic experiences. The most widely cited phase model is that of Feinstein and Ardon (1973), who proposed a four-stage progression from sexual awakening through practicing and acceptance of the sexual role to permanent object choice. As is apparent from the stage titles, their model is based on object relations theory (Mahler, 1972) and focuses on intrapsychic issues related to adolescents' negotiation of pubertal libidinal drives. Because of its Freudian roots, this model pays little attention to context or to the social nature of ties with romantic partners. It does suggest, however, that adolescents do not simply "jump right in" to romantic relationships, but rather that they struggle with issues of identity and proficiency in coping with the demands of the romantic role. Connolly and Goldberg (this volume) also articulate four stages of romantic relationships, but with more of an emphasis on individuals' conscious orientations to the relationship rather than their unconscious libidinal drives. Their stages are labeled *infatuation*, *affiliative*, *intimate*, and *committed*.

Others have noted a progression in dating activities or features of romantic relationships without specifying a stage or developmental sequence. For example, McCabe (1984) noted that dating activity commonly begins with a period of casual, short-term relationships before individuals negotiate more serious, longer-term "steady" relationships with just one partner. Still others point to multiple functions that dating can serve without suggesting any developmental sequence to these functions. Skipper and Naas (1966), for example, specified four major functions served by dating relationships: socialization (regarding what members of the other sex are like and how to interact effectively with them), status grading or achievement, recreation, and mate selection. These functions closely reflect the dominant features of the four stages that I will articulate. There are also clear connections between my four phases and those of Feinstein and Ardon, as well as those of Connolly and Goldberg.

Thus, several authors have espoused the notion that orientations and competencies related to romantic relations evolve during adolescence.

Others emphasize the multiple functions that romantic activity can serve but stop short of putting these into a developmental framework. The developmental sequence that I present later clearly builds on these ideas.

In addition to developmental changes, adolescent romantic relationships are subject to historical changes, which can alter the nature of one or more stages or the initiation and sequencing of stages. Spreadbury (1982) noted a steady increase over the first half of the 20th century in the percentage of adolescents — particularly early adolescents — reporting casual dating activity. This implies that the age of initiation into romantic relationships declined significantly between 1910 and 1950. Bell and Chaskes (1970) reported a historical trend toward greater serial monogamy in adolescent relationships and toward going steady at earlier ages than previous generations, suggesting that age of entry into more advanced stages of romantic relationships has also dropped historically. On the other hand, Gordon and Miller (1984) found that by the early 1980s, long-term monogamous relationships were giving way to more casual dating patterns, which evolved into the group dating pattern (mixed-sex groups engaging in social activities without splitting into clearly discernible romantic pairs) that was common among middle-class youth in the 1990s. Such historical changes affect when the sequence of romantic stages begins, how quickly adolescents move among stages, and the features that characterize each stage. As a result, it is best to construe developmental models as malleable, capable of adjusting to the shifting norms or demands of a particular context or historical epoch.

Of course, these broad historical trends must be considered within the context of persistent individual variability in the age at initiation and duration of time within each developmental stage or phase. I do not wish to suggest that all adolescents move through the developmental sequence in lock-step fashion. In some cases, young people may skip a phase altogether; in other cases — such as the transition to a new school or a move to a new community or a residential college environment — young people may “recycle” through the phases. There is even cultural variability in the importance adolescents assign to romantic relationships (Griffin, 1985). Reasons for and implications of individual and subgroup variability in initiation and sequencing of romantic stages become important questions to pursue in future studies. Most American adolescents, however, can be expected to cycle through the phases sequentially at about the same time as most members of their peer group. Later, I suggest some of the dilemmas faced by adolescents who are normatively “off time” in their negotiation of the developmental stages.

I also want to emphasize that sexuality plays an important role in each phase of romantic relationships (see Miller and Benson, this volume, for a fuller exposition of this topic), although, as Feinstein and Ardon’s (1973) model implies, it is manifest in very different ways across phases. Sexual feelings and interests are an important trigger for the developmental sequence, even though opportunities for sexual activities with a partner may be quite limited in the initial phase of my model. Thornton (1990) reported that the probability that teenagers would report having had heterosexual intercourse was significantly correlated with the age at which they began dating, and there was a noticeable spike in rates of sexual intercourse 1 year after respondents reported their first steady relationship. By the college years, males are likely to measure the level of intimacy in a romantic relationship by its degree of sexual involvement (Roscoe, Kennedy, & Pope, 1987); college students rate sexual activity with someone besides one’s partner as the second strongest indicator (behind the more nebulous notion of “spending time with someone else”) of infidelity in a relationship (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988).

Nevertheless, sexual activity is not the primary defining feature, or necessarily even the strongest impetus, to the developmental sequence that I will discuss. Indeed, there is some evidence that sexual maturation is not as strong a predictor of initiation of romantic activity as social factors (Dornbusch et al., 1981). Sexual activity — especially frequency of heterosexual intercourse — is not as common among adolescents as one might think: In Thornton’s (1990) sample of white 18-year-olds, two-thirds reported no incidence of sexual intercourse in the past month, and only 20% reported having sex more than twice. Still, the connection between sexual expression and romantic relationships varies considerably across cultures, as Coates illustrates in her chapter in this volume.

Finally, I employ the term *phases* rather than *stages* intentionally to emphasize the more informal nature of this developmental sequence than standard developmental stage theories. The developmental sequence is neither fixed nor inevitable nor unrepeatable. Some adolescents steadfastly remain in one phase, and others skip that phase altogether. The phases are quite distinctive for some teens but tend to overlap or blend together for others. It is possible to renegotiate the sequence. Moving into a new social context (especially the transition to a residential college setting) can prompt individuals comfortably settled in the third phase of the sequence to slip back into the earliest phase and work their way back up the sequence. These are not so much regressions as renegotiations within a new and often developmentally more sophisticated environment. However, to the extent

that the social context supports the developmental sequence and prescribes a general timetable for negotiating the phases, adolescents will probably pay some social or emotional price for stepping off the normative developmental track in pursuing romantic interests and relationships. For this reason, adolescents may devote considerable energy to locating a social context in which developmental norms match their individual interests or abilities in the pursuit of romantic relationships.

### *The Developmental Sequence*

With these caveats in mind, I now offer an overview of the four phases. Please bear in mind that they are intended to describe not the progression through a specific relationship, but rather developmental shifts in individuals' basic orientation toward romantic relationships.

1. *Initiation Phase.* A defining feature of the transition to adolescence is pubertal development, which includes a surge in sexual drives (Katchadourian, 1990). This spurs an interest in sexual expression and relationships, which, for the preponderance of youths, who are heterosexually oriented, inspires a new dimension to interactions with the other sex. Ironically, young people who have followed the normative trend in peer relationships over the course of childhood have systematically withdrawn from other-sex interaction. Scholars point out that the tendency to socialize in same-sex groups reaches its peak just prior to adolescence (Maccoby, 1988). Thus, these youths need to become reoriented toward and reacquainted with the other sex — but with a markedly different objective: as potential romantic and sexual partners rather than just as friends and playmates. Those who do not face biological urges because of delayed physical development may be swept up in the normative push toward other-sex and romantic relationships anyway by powerful forces in the peer group and the media. Gay and lesbian youths do not need to reorient toward other-sex relationships, but they are prompted by biological urges to add a new dimension to same-sex relationships (see Diamond, Savin-Williams, & Dube, this volume) — usually in the face of strong peer and broader societal pressures against homosexual expressions.

As a result, this initial phase of adolescent romantic activity tends not to focus on the quality or features of romantic relationships, but rather on characteristics within the self. The basic objectives of the initiation phase are to broaden one's self-concept to include "effective romantic partner" and to gain confidence in one's capacity to relate to potential partners in romantic ways. In other words, the focus is on the *self* (self-image and per-

sonal competencies), not on relationships. Typically, adolescents in this phase must also achieve some skill in initiating romantic relationships. Actual relationships with romantic partners, however, can be superficial or short-lived and still be quite satisfying. Indeed, a succession of short-term, superficial romantic relationships is probably more adaptive in this phase than deep, lasting affiliations.

2. *Status Phase.* As adolescents gain confidence in their ability to interact effectively with potential romantic partners and to negotiate short-term romantic relationships, the focus turns from the self to the self's *connections* to others — but not as much toward the prospective partner or relationship as to the broader peer culture in which such relationships will be enacted. Young people confront the pressures of having the "right kinds" of romantic relationships with the "right people," and of beginning and ending these relationships in socially sanctioned ways. Typically, in early and middle adolescence, individuals are preoccupied with fitting in, finding a crowd, being popular, achieving status, or at least being accepted by a group of peers (Coleman, 1961; Eder, 1985; Newman & Newman, 1976). Romantic relationships become vehicles (or possibly obstacles) to achieving these objectives. Thus, in pursuing romantic partners, adolescents must consider the consequences of a particular relationship for their image or status among peers. Romantic relationships are an important means of establishing, improving, or maintaining peer group status. Dating the "wrong" person or conducting romantic relationships in the "wrong" way can seriously damage one's standing in the group. These concerns can easily overshadow one's interest in the relationship itself. This makes it difficult to sustain relationships that are too heavily focused inward, on the quality of the interaction or needs of the couple.

3. *Affection Phase.* At some point, however, there is a shift away from the context in which the relationship exists toward the relationship itself. Through the modest array of romantic activities and relationships that occur in the first two phases, adolescents typically gain sufficient confidence in their orientations and abilities to risk a deeper, more sustained level of romantic relationship. At the same time, the power of the peer group seems to wane as young people become satisfied with (or resigned to) their status and reputation in the peer culture and sufficiently confident in their emerging self-concept to be less dependent on the judgment of others. The more intensive romantic relationships that characterize this phase are themselves more rewarding, both emotionally and sexually. Thus, the relationships often become a source of passion and preoccupation. Indeed, I would argue that it is not until this point that true and meaningful attach-

ments to romantic partners can occur (see Furman & Simon, this volume, for a description of the central features of attachment in romantic relationships). Much of the popular music and literature about adolescent romance is focused on capturing the essence of relationships in this phase — often in an idealized or stylized way.

Of course, individuals do not divorce themselves from the peer group or other social contexts in the phase of these more affectional romantic ties. Yet, I would expect that, in this phase, the relative salience of romantic relationships increases, somewhat at the expense of other social bonds. Peers serve important functions in this phase, but they cannot exercise the same level of control over romantic relationships that they did in earlier phases.

4. *Bonding Phase.* To achieve truly mature relationships, individuals must supplement the passion of the affection stage with more pragmatic and personal concerns about the possibility of long-term commitment to one's romantic partner. There is a fourth shift that should occur in late adolescence or young adulthood, which adds an important new perspective to romantic relationships. The issue is whether or not one can and should form an extended, lifelong bond to one's partner. In American society, this bond is intended to be exclusive; there is no longer any question about the feasibility of pursuing more than one romantic partner at a time. Prototypically, the objective of the bonding phase is to get married "for better or worse." However, it is possible to enter into a committed or bonded relationship outside the institution of marriage (which currently remains a limited option for gay and lesbian couples). In any case, practical as well as emotional factors enter into one's evaluation of romantic affiliations in this final phase. Because the median age at first marriage in the United States is the mid-20s, it could be argued that this phase does not occur until after individuals have moved beyond adolescence. Indeed, one's capacity to approach romantic relationships from this perspective may be a signpost of the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Nevertheless, I later explore it briefly as a phase that adolescents must come to grips with in their later romantic relationships, and one that links adolescent and adult worlds within the domain of romantic relationships.

#### *Development in Context*

As I have already indicated, my objective is not simply to point out the evolving nature of adolescent romantic relationships, but also to emphasize the ways in which that evolution is influenced by (and, in turn, influences)

one's social context. The assertion that romantic affiliations are shaped by social contexts will raise few eyebrows, but many may be more skeptical about my focus on the peer group rather than other social contexts — the family, school, community, or broader American society — which could easily be regarded as more salient than peers. I maintain that the importance of peers, relative to these other social contexts, has been seriously underestimated by previous studies. To date, evidence of the preeminence of the peer context is indirect but intriguing.

Many would assume that the family plays a particularly central role in adolescents' pursuit of romantic activities. Indeed it does (see Gray and Steinberg, this volume), but probably to a lesser extent than one might expect. In a study of Arab and Jewish youth in Israel, Mikulincer, Weller, and Florian (1993) found that fewer adolescents reported family rules about dating than about any other domain. Nguyen and Williams (1989) reported that, regardless of amount of time spent in the United States, Vietnamese refugee parents strongly endorsed traditional family values, which emphasize absolute obedience to parental authority. Yet, these parents tended to approve of adolescent freedom of choice in dating and marriage partners. The extent to which parents in other ethnic groups shy away from regulating or setting boundaries on adolescent romantic interactions is simply not known, but these studies suggest that one cannot assume that all parents are heavily involved in direct management of their children's romantic ventures.

By contrast, the peer group has been portrayed as extensively involved in the romantic lives of its members. From interviews with a diverse sample of 400 American teenage girls, Thompson (1994, p. 233) ascertained that "[b]roken-hearted narrators portrayed friends as dividers, regulators, and warners. . . . They stigmatized girls who did not follow the rules. They warned each other to be careful not to give it up to just anyone, not to get hurt. Their first job was to keep each other from making a variety of mistakes — from going too far to picking the wrong guy to wearing the wrong style. Their second job was to commiserate when, after all, things went wrong: to build a friend's courage, resolve, and sense of self back up again." Dickinson (1975) provided a clever illustration of the power of influence that peers have in this domain in a comparison of dating behaviors among southern Black adolescents at two time points 10 years apart, before and after their high school was merged (because of desegregation efforts) with an all-White high school in town. Between the two time points, the average age at which dating began, the typical activities on dates, and the frequency of "parking" (typically, sexual activity) all

changed dramatically for Blacks in the direction of conformity to White norms. Whereas the two racial groups had been distinctive on almost all measures in the initial survey, by 1974 their behavior was indistinguishable on all but two or three variables, even though the two groups seemed to remain socially segregated in daily interactions. Dornbusch et al. (1981) found chronological age to be stronger than pubertal development as a predictor of initiation into dating. The most sensible explanation of this finding is that age-graded, normative changes in peer group activities constitute a more compelling influence on romantic involvement than the heightened sexual urges that accompany biological changes in adolescence. Teenagers can be swept up in peer group expectations to date even if their bodies haven't yet sent out signals of interest in the sexual component of this activity, or they may delay acting on physiological impulses until the peer group provides the normative structure for romantic ventures.

Of course, the peer group does not operate in a monolithic fashion on American adolescents (Brown, 1990). Gargiulo, Altie, Brooks-Gunn, and Warren (1987) found that dating began later and was less extensive for a group of adolescent girls who were pursuing a professional career in dance than among a comparison group of nondancers. Further, menarchal status (pubertal development) was related to dating activities for the dancers but not the nondancers. Peer expectations for the age of initiation into romantic relationships also differ significantly among adolescents in different peer crowds (Brown, 1998). It is reasonable to assume marked individual variability in adolescents' attentiveness to peer group norms about dating, their reliance on friends for guidance in romantic ventures, and their willingness to allow romantic relationships to supplant other forms of peer association.

In the following sections, I flesh out this developmental-contextual model by presenting the data that support the organization of phases outlined earlier and by considering the roles that peers play in each phase of adolescent romantic relationships. Much of what is presented, particularly about peers, is conjecture and inference because of the paucity of scientific studies in this area. My interest is not in affirming and summarizing previous research but in providing a conceptual framework for subsequent work in this area. Because friends and peer groups appear to be much more active and instrumental in the early phases of dating, my comments concentrate on the first two phases of the model. These are the phases in which, relatively speaking, little research has been conducted on adolescent romantic relationships.

### The Initiation Phase

According to many people, adolescents always have sex and romance on their minds. In truth, however, romantic interests emerge slowly during early adolescence and must be heavily nurtured by the social context. Connolly, Ben-Knaz, and Goldberg (1996) noted that only 30% of their middle school sample expressed an interest in romantic relationships. Mitman and Packer (1982) asked a group of middle school youths to rate their level of concern, at the beginning of their seventh-grade year, about each of 32 items covering academic, social, and personal issues; romantic relationships ranked 20th on their list. When the investigators measured their sample's concerns again several months into the (seventh-grade) school year, the "romantic relationships" item had climbed to number 10 and was the second highest social concern (behind fears that older students would bully or beat them up). Yet, romantic relationships did not load on any of the five major factors to emerge in a factor analysis that Mitman and Packer performed on their 32 items; apparently, at this age, romantic relationships were not yet well integrated into the broader context of these youngsters' lives.

In part, this may be because individuals typically enter adolescence with remarkably limited understanding of dating and romance. Jackson (1975) queried a sample of White, lower-class 11- and 12-year-olds about what the word *dating* meant. The most common answer for both sexes was "When you go out with the other sex," but among boys the second most common answer was "It's dumb!" — a generic put-down that could easily mask their difficulty in defining the term clearly. In fact, when asked what one usually does on a date, three-quarters of the boys and nearly half of the girls in this sample confessed that they simply didn't know. The proliferation of television shows about teenagers in recent years and the modest historical trend toward earlier initiation into dating may have improved young people's knowledge about dating activities, but I suspect that the majority of American youth still enter adolescence quite naive about romantic relationships.

It is difficult for adults to appreciate the awesome task that is set before youngsters (in the United States) in early adolescence: Heterosexual youths must suddenly "reverse course" in other-sex interactions, seeking intimate, affectionate relationships with peers who have been routinely ignored or derided prior to this time. Gay and lesbian youths must come to grips with their sexual orientation, then add a new dimension to their same-sex relationships, and do so in the face of pressures from their immediate peer

group or the broader society against harboring romantic affections for same-sex peers. Such changes simply do not occur immediately and easily. Heightened interest at this stage in sexual expression advances the salience of romantic relationships, but they must be approached in terms of the more compelling needs of early adolescence: to fit in, to be accepted, to establish a reputation among peers, to achieve a clear and stable sense of identity (Brown, 1990; Erikson, 1963; Newman & Newman, 1976). Thus, romance first emerges in adolescence as an *identity* issue, not a relational issue. To understand the role of the peer group in facilitating adolescent romantic relationships, it is helpful to appeal to principles in theories of identity formation, as well as those of socialization theories.

Erikson (1963) portrayed early adolescence as a period of disruption, when puberty and its libidinal drives sever the sense of psychological and interpersonal continuity that individuals had achieved in middle and later childhood. The resulting effort in adolescence to construct an integrated sense of identity is meant to restore the lost sense of continuity and sameness, not only between one's past, present, and future selves, but also between one's self-image and the image others appear to have of oneself. A healthy sense of identity requires a commitment to some work or occupational role (locating an *occupational niche*), acceptance of whatever it means to be a man or woman in one's society (achieving an appropriate *sex-role identity*), and adoption of a set of values or guiding principles (*ideology*) that make sense of one's vocational and sex role orientations. To be viable, these efforts not only have to be sensible to the individual but also acceptable to the culture or society in which that person lives.

Some disciples of Erikson regarded this as an overwhelming task that was best accomplished in two phases. Adolescents, they argued, first have to work on *fitting in* before they can concentrate on *standing out*. Their initial task is to achieve a sense of *group identity* or acceptance, an affiliation with peers who can guide their subsequent efforts to derive an autonomous, individuated sense of identity (Newman & Newman, 1976). Applied to romantic relationships, this framework implies that adolescents must first prove to their peer group that they are (among other things) viable candidates for a romantic relationship, particularly in terms of their (configured) sex role identity. Only then can they focus on defining the particulars of their romantic interests, as distinctive from normative group standards and practices.

Of course, the peer group, for its part, has to be there to set standards, guide and judge potential members, and accept certain individuals into the fold. The group is expected to encourage and direct adolescents' efforts to

begin the pursuit of romantic relationships, to provide a supportive environment in which group members can explore their romantic interests and sharpen their romantic self-image.

#### *The Character of Romantic Activity*

Most individuals do not immerse themselves in romantic relations at the outset of adolescence. The average age at which individuals begin dating—engaging in social activities as an identifiable romantic (or at least potentially romantic) couple—varies between 14 and 16 years of age (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Gordon & Miller, 1984; Thornton, 1990), but relatively few early adolescents report steady dating relationships prior to age 14 (Thornton, 1990). Few 10- to 14-year-olds indicate that they date more than rarely, and the average duration of romantic relationships in this age group is less than 3 months; many relationships last for a matter of days (Connolly et al., 1996; Eder, 1993; Feiring, 1996). Furthermore, initial romantic relationships appear to be superficial in comparison to other types of peer associations—particularly friendships. There is no empirical support for the assumption that when adolescents begin to date, the intimacy of their friendships declines (Blos, 1979; Broderick & Weaver, 1968; Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1993; Weebe, 1987). As I indicate later, however, this is not necessarily the case in later phases that feature more intense and long-term romantic alliances.

One reason for the superficial nature of early forays into romantic relationships is the awkwardness and uncertainty that adolescents feel in these ventures. In a small interview study of White, middle-class girls, Place (1975, p. 167) discovered that "all the girls agree that their very first dates were full of apprehension and often painfully awkward. The first date presents a dilemma concerning proper behavior and often the dilemma is repeated when dating a new partner: The girls are not sure how they learned dating behavior but were in agreement that the right words and right actions come with dating experience." This is confirmed in retrospections about initial dating experiences among college youths studied by Spreadbury (1982). More males than females recalled feeling happy on their first date but also awkward; females were more likely to recall feeling scared. Although statistically significant, the sex differences in emotional responses were not that dramatic. Essentially, early adolescents are too focused on how they are doing and how the date is going to invest much in the relationship itself. As Larson, Clore, and Wood note in their chapter in this volume, learning to recognize and regulate new feelings that are



aroused by romantic interest is often an extraordinarily difficult task for youngsters at this age.

Because romantic *relationships* are rare, ephemeral, and not highly salient to youths in the initiation phase, it is easy to overlook the extensive romantic *activity* that characterizes this phase and the extent to which romantic interests affect peer interactions. Eder (1993) conducted an intensive ethnographic study of middle school girls, focusing particularly on their behavior in informal settings such as the lunchroom. Much of the lunchroom conversation among these girls focused on boys and employed teasing as a conversational device. Several girls teased another about liking a certain boy or being liked by a boy; or the group as a whole made jokes about a particular boy or group of boys. If a boy joined them at the table, one or more girls teased him as a means of expressing their attraction to him. It was not unusual for an entire group to fix their affections on a particular boy and to share with each other their romantic interest in him. Because the boy was likely to pay all of them equal attention — or no attention at all — it was unusual for jealousies to arise over their shared interest in this one person.

The romantic partnerships that *did* emerge from these interactions, according to Eder, were superficial and ephemeral. Moreover, they tended to be confined to interaction at school, that is, in a public arena with peers as an attentive audience. One might question whether they constituted a relationship or a performance, and whether the target of the young person's words and actions was the alleged romantic partner or the peers who were observing.

Least one suspect that the behavior Eder (1993) observed applies only to teenage girls. I recently had occasion to witness their male equivalent while driving my sixth-grade son and his male friends to a weekend campout. To while away time in the car, the boys began a game of "truth or dare." But since a moving car (with a stern chauffeur) afforded few opportunities for dares, the game quickly evolved into demands for honest answers to pointed questions. The favorite query was "Who do you like?" One after the other, the boys were commanded to offer up the name of the object of their romantic affections, then treated to the group's evaluation of this person, then regaled with the group's fantasies about the happy couple in various romantic activities. Laughter and teasing whittled away the miles, growing most raucous with playful accusations that perhaps it was another boy who one of the group *really* liked.

Though many would dismiss all of this as frivolous early adolescent banter, I regard it as the very serious business of initial romantic activity.

Through these interactions within same- and mixed-gender groups, early adolescents learn how to negotiate the initial steps in a romantic relationship: how to talk about a romantic interest, how to approach that person and let her or him know of one's interest, how to acquire an evaluation of the person from one's friends, how to fend off the meddling interest of peers, how to compete with others for the attention and affection of a potential romantic partner, how to restrain new and awkward emotions when talking with an attractive peer, how to prove one's romantic inclinations to a peer group that demands this of its members. This is the essence of peer socialization into the romantic role (Skipper & Naas, 1966). It is also the emergence of peer collaboration in declining romantic interest and nurturing competencies in initiating romantic relationships.

#### *The Peer Context*

Early adolescents juggle a complex developmental agenda that includes coping with new romantic impulses; struggling to maintain self-esteem and build self-confidence in the face of major physical, cognitive, and social changes; and finding acceptance within a new and more complex peer group system (Brown, 1990). Peer relationships serve to assist in all components of this agenda. In seeking acceptance into a peer group, early adolescents often must display (or feign) interest in romantic relationships; in working out their questions and interests regarding sex and romance with friends, they forge collaborative ties that solidify their position within a peer group; through positive feedback from peers about their interactions with potential romantic partners, they gain confidence in their ability to engage in romantic relationships and they elaborate their configured sex role identity (see Feiring, this volume).

Some argue that sex role identity and romantic or sexual interests are so central to this stage of life that they prompt a major restructuring of peer group relations. In a classic observational study of Australian youth, Dumphy (1969) traced a metamorphosis in peer groups across early and middle adolescence. The changes seemed to be designed expressly to foster young people's transition into the heterosocial organization of adult society. Dumphy noted five stages of peer group structure, beginning at the outset of adolescence with *isolated, monosexual cliques*. Clique leaders tended to be youths who were most advanced in their interest in the other sex. As these leaders began to interact with each other in formative romantic relations, they drew their respective cliques into the second stage of peer group structure, in which leaders modeled appropriate modes of interaction with



the other sex while other clique members watched or attempted to follow suit. The leaders' relationship brought the two sexes in close proximity, thus giving clique members a target group of other-sex members on whom to concentrate their romantic initiatives. The leaders could even urge reluctant members into action by subtle or more overt matchmaking. Ultimately, two or more opposite-sex cliques would effectively merge for socializing purposes, driving the members into the third stage of group structure.

This peer group structure is perfectly suited to the general outline of the first phase of romantic relations that others have observed. The initial emphasis is on conversations within one's same-sex clique about romantic relations — the sort of banter that both Eder (1993) and I observed among girls and boys, respectively. Then, modest forays into romantic alliances are attempted, but, as Eder observed, in the public, group context. The most heterosocially advanced boys and girls lead the way, but their relationship (with a romantic partner) is not as important as their performance (their public behavior with the partner). It is the performance that sparks discussion among the same-sex peer group, and the discussion serves as appraisal of and guidance about one's romantic self; it restores the continuity between self-image and one's image among others. The group discussion also provides articulation and reinforcement of group norms regarding romantic relationships. Norm violators are "prosecuted" in this setting through teasing, gossip, remonstrations, or ostracism if necessary to ensure that group boundaries of acceptable behavior are maintained (Simon, Eder, & Evans, 1992). Members may still challenge these boundaries and remain in the group, but only if the group is willing to tolerate their deviant self-image.

Although this peer group metamorphosis may work well for most young people in the late elementary and early middle school years, there are two groups for which it does not seem very adaptive. The first is those who are "off time" in terms of their sexual and romantic interests. Early developers, who are ready for more involved relationships, should find the teasing and public dissection of their romantic alliances menacing. In turn, their more sophisticated approach to romantic alliances can be intimidating to their clique-mates. One solution is to abandon their age peers in favor of older adolescents who are more involved in romantic relationships. Typically, however, this leads them into more deviantly oriented peer groups who encourage delinquent activity and health-compromising behaviors (Caspi, Lyhann, Moffitt, & Silva, 1993; Staltn & Magnusson, 1990). This helps explain the negative correlations many have observed between the age at which dating begins and several undesirable behaviors (e.g., Pawlby, Mills,

& Quinton, 1997; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Late developers, on the other hand, may be perplexed and threatened by the efforts of their clique leaders to draw closer to an other-sex group of peers. Their reluctance to engage in the "romance games" that preoccupy their clique-mates can undermine their efforts to secure a place in a peer group and forge a positive self-concept. Peer groups can be remarkably cruel in early adolescence, particularly toward those who do not toe the line in terms of peer group standards. This situation is captured poignantly in such films as *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, in which an unattractive late maturer is nicknamed "Weiner dog" and confronted in the lunchroom by the entire cheerleading squad, who just want to know, "Is it true that you're a lesbian?"

The second group for which the peer group metamorphosis is ill suited is gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths. As depicted by Dunphy (1969), the early adolescent peer group is exclusively heterosocially oriented. Samet and Kelly (1987) found that Israeli students expected peers who had a romantic relationship to conform more closely (than those without such a relationship) to the gender-appropriate sex role. One of five cardinal norms regarding romantic relationships that Simon et al. (1992) discerned in their ethnographic study of White, middle-class, early adolescent girls was that romantic partners must be male. A group's emphasis on heterosexual orientation and its derision of same-sex attractions clearly would undermine healthy self-concept development among those who harbor such attractions. Studies are underway to examine how gay and lesbian youths cope with these forces in their social system (see Diamond et al., this volume).

Dunphy (1969) observed but chose to ignore a critical feature of early adolescent peer groups, namely, that each has a distinctive reputation based on the values and activities that typify its members. Peer crowds serve a broader purpose than simply nurturing heterosocial interests and competencies (Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994). They sketch out prototypic lifestyles (*provisional identities*) and establish the social hierarchy within a particular peer system. The provisional identities give early adolescents a preformulated self-image that they can adopt temporarily, with confidence that other group members will support it and accept them, while they develop the confidence to search for a more personal sense of identity (Newman & Newman, 1976). Part of this provisional identity is a configured sex role identity — a set of prescriptions for sex role-appropriate behavior, including acceptable goals and behaviors in romantic interactions. To the extent that crowds differ in their provisional identities, adolescents should find it easier to fit into a group that matches their own romantic interests, abilities, and interactional style.

Some studies have demonstrated marked differences in friendship patterns among youths in different crowds (Eckert, 1989; Kinney, 1993). Although there is scant evidence to affirm it, I suspect that this dynamic applies to the romantic sphere as well: Different crowds emphasize different patterns of romantic interactions and different attitudes toward romantic relationships. Some peer groups foster an image of romance as conquest rather than mutual care; some groups identify romantic partners by sexual as opposed to social activity; some regard romance as inherently heterosexual, whereas others consider sexual orientation irrelevant. Crowds should also differ in their timetable for moving from one phase of romantic relationships to the next, and they should vary in their willingness to retain members who are faster or slower than most group members in proceeding through the phases.

This variability among crowds is adaptive in several ways. It allows adolescents to locate a crowd that is compatible with their own emerging sex role identity and with their interest in moving quickly or slowly toward more intense and mature romantic relationships. It also should make it easier for sexual minority youths to locate a peer group that can nurture their orientations and identity issues. On the other hand, the variability increases the chance that some crowds will encourage sexist attitudes, condone behaviors such as date rape, or endorse other worrisome norms regarding romantic behaviors and self-images.

#### Status Phase

In the initiation phase, early adolescents quickly discover that romance is a *public* behavior that provides feedback from friends and age-mates on one's image among peers. Romantic activity, then, can become a tool in impression management, a means by which a young person can manipulate her or his reputation among peers in order to achieve or maintain membership in a particular peer group. Romantic behavior is also a *qualifier*, something that can mark an adolescent as a good or bad candidate for membership in a particular peer group. Dating itself is a source of peer status for adolescents. A sociometric study of high school youths in one small Midwestern community revealed that adolescents whose sociometric ratings placed them in the popular category reported more frequent dating than any other group except the controversial adolescents — those high in both "like most" and "like least" nominations from peers (Franzoni, Davis, & Vasquez-Suson, 1994). The most active daters were both admired (for their romantic prowess) and disliked, perhaps because they stole away dat-

ing partners from others or because their romantic activity limited the time available to interact with other peers.

Adolescents move out of the initiation phase when they begin to realize that the peer group is concerned not simply with *whether or not* one has romantic skills and interests, but also with the type of person to whom one directs romantic attention. Some may question how this is distinctive from the initiation phase. Isn't learning who to like and dating the right people a central part of learning how to be a romantic partner? A distinction that some have noted is that the initial learning is a *corporate* affair, but applying what has been learned to actual relationships is a *competitive* activity (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Simon et al., 1992). It is acceptable for all members of a group to fix their attention on the same romantic partner in the initiation phase because no one is really going to have a relationship with that person; they are simply learning together how to play the part. But once proficiency has been achieved, several group members could begin vying for the affections of the same prospective partner. New, stronger norms emerge at this juncture (Simon et al., 1992), and relationships with friends or group members become more complex and ambivalent (Douvan & Adelson, 1966).

The most compelling and controversial evidence of the status factor in adolescent romantic relationships comes from studies of what Willard Waller (1937) referred to as the *rating/dating complex*. In his investigation of undergraduates at Pennsylvania State University over half a century ago, Waller noted that students no longer approached dating as a means of courtship and mate selection; instead, the emphasis was on thrill seeking and exploitation. Rather than long-term, monogamous relationships, undergraduates seemed to prefer to date around and to select as dating partners those who had "high marks" on a set of gender-specific criteria. These partners served to enhance the student's own peer status. A spirited debate ensued for several decades over the accuracy of Waller's observations (see Herold, 1974, for an insightful review), but it remained focused on late adolescents and considered status and courtship as competing models of dating orientation. Few recognized the possibility of a developmental sequence in these orientations. Although we might expect most college youth to be moving on toward more serious intentions in their dating activities, early and middle adolescents have good reason to be preoccupied with issues of status and prestige.

An early component of identity development is to feel accepted by one's peers, to fit in with a crowd (Erikson, 1963; Newman & Newman, 1976). But the American social system demands more than that. Self-esteem is

contingent on being highly regarded and accepted by a high-status crowd. Romantic relationships quickly become associated with this identity objective. Gordon (1981) refers to early-20th-century novels, such as Willa Cather's (1918) *My Antonia* or Fannie Kilbourne's (1918) *Berry Bell*, which sketch key features of the status phase. The heroines illustrate the prestige that comes from being asked out or, particularly, becoming the steady dating partner of a high-status boy. The novels also feature the finer points of gaining status through romantic activity, as when one heroine hopes she has been widely noticed being walked home by a member of the football team. More recent ethnographies verify that the same dynamics (but, again, not just among women) are alive and well in the contemporary American secondary school (Eckert, 1989; Eder, 1985). Romantic activity continues to be part of establishing one's reputation among peers, one's place in a particular peer group.

Franzoni et al. (1994, p. 471) confess that "the role of dating in the acquisition and maintenance of social status is an almost completely unexamined area." Nevertheless, young adolescents are aware that prestige or status plays an important part in romantic relationships. Roscoe, Diana, and Brooks (1987) cataloged the reasons for dating that were given by a sample of 6th graders, 11th graders, and college students. Status was the third most common reason among the two younger age groups, but it wasn't among the top five reasons given by college students. The percentage listing status faded across the three age groups. When asked to list desirable characteristics of a dating partner, early adolescents tended to emphasize personal and prestige factors, whereas the oldest group focused on partners who shared their interests or who had goals for the future. When asked what the advantages were of having a dating partner, Feiring's (1996) 15-year-old respondents were most likely to list companionship and intimacy — characteristics more compatible with the affection phase of romantic relationships (as one might expect at that age). Yet, status was still listed by 20% of the girls and about 10% of the boys.

In their attention to the status component of romantic activities, adolescents in this phase often craft relationships that remain superficial, short-lived, and public — though less so than in the initiation phase. In an interview study of White, middle-class suburban teens, Feiring (1996) discovered that nearly 90% claimed to have had a romantic relationship at some point in the past year, but only 20% were currently dating someone. Relationships tended to be casual, intense, and brief. Although partners might spend an hour a day on the phone with each other, most still preferred group social activities to couple-alone events. Moreover, girls in par-

ticular often expressed concern that the relationship was demanding "too much commitment."

The critical feature of the status phase is that adolescents pursue dating relationships or make decisions about romantic partners with a cautious eye on the expectations or reactions of their friends and their peer group. "Is this dating partner acceptable to my friends?" "Will this relationship help me to gain entry to the group?" "What will it do to my reputation to be seen with this person?" Hollywood captures the angst of these questions in poignant fashion. In *Lucas*, the new girl in town is swept into the popular crowd when she is courted by the football hero — and the geekish late maturer who loves her is left to concoct a scheme to raise his own social status in order to win back her affections. In *Firting and Zebrahead*, couples struggle to establish a romantic alliance that violates peer group norms against cross-racial relationships. In *Can't Buy Me Love*, a boy pays a popular girl to date him for a month so that he can secure a spot in the popular crowd. In *Beethoven*, a girl is ecstatic that a popular jock actually knows her name. In *Weird Science*, two geeks manage to create (via computer) a beautiful genie of sorts who vaults them into stardom among the school's status elite and into romantic relationships they could only dream about beforehand.

The degree to which adolescents use romantic relationships to achieve, enhance, or maintain their popularity or prestige among peers probably varies among peer crowds. Groups at or near the top of the status hierarchy — populars, preppies, jocks, and so on — are likely to be much more attentive to the status consequences of romantic as well as friendship relationships than groups further down the hierarchy (Eder, 1985). Yet, even adolescents in groups that lack this status consciousness must be attentive to their standing within their own group and to the ways a particular romantic partner might affect that standing (e.g., Eckert, 1989; MacLeod, 1995).

Some individuals go so far as to feign romantic interest in someone simply to foster their own position in the peer group; they may maintain a relationship with this person if it serves their own status interests. In most cases, however, romantic feelings are governed by the heart (or, perhaps more accurately, by hormones) as well as the head. Some teenagers thus find themselves in the predicament of harboring affection for a peer who is either so far above them in status as to be unreachable or so undesirable among one's peers as to jeopardize their standing in the group. Such potential conflicts make the short-term, superficial nature of romantic relationships in this phase particularly adaptive.

These strict guidelines and limitations on romantic partners strike many as unhealthy and constraining. Both Husbands (1970) and Douvan and Adelson (1966) argued that by following a prescribed role or script in dating, American adolescents fail to take the risk of being themselves for fear that their partner will misunderstand or disapprove and break off the relationship. Dating becomes a game of impression management rather than a mode of identity revelation or self-exploration; American adolescents are too busy playing the romantic role to learn much about themselves *within* the role. These scholars' misgivings seem persuasive, but they lack developmental vision. Adolescents must first feel accepted before they can risk self-exploration, and they must then gain security in their self-concept before risking self-expansion in a relationship. Restoring that sense of continuity and sameness is a cautious, step-by-step process. Peer group prescriptions for dating partners and dating activities allow teenagers to ease into the romantic role before they need to work on fitting the role to their more autonomous sense of identity. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that adolescents are not entirely genuine in their romantic relationships at this age. Behavior in the relationship is guarded. Adolescents worry too much about being rejected by their peer group or their partner to feel free to express their true selves within a relationship. To the extent that they feel their self-image compromised in these relationships, rather than explored or expanded, they are likely to suffer emotionally (Harter, Marold, Whitesell, & Cobbs, 1996).

#### *The Peer Context*

In the status phase, peers move well beyond their earlier role of discussing romance and encouraging interactions with potential romantic partners. Indeed, the collaborative spirit of the initiation phase is more difficult to maintain amid the competitive atmosphere of the status phase. Eder (1993) commented that, whereas liking the same boy seemed to bring sixth-grade girls together, it was a source of tension and jealousy among eighth-grade girls. The difference, she emphasizes, was that the sixth graders rarely actually interacted with boys, so there was little reason for rivalry.

Nevertheless, there are a number of ways in which the peer group typically facilitates individual development during this phase. Perhaps the most obvious way is by creating a social status hierarchy among peer crowds or by articulating the criteria for status and acceptance within one's own friendship clique (see Simon et al., 1992, for a depiction of how norms

regarding romantic relations emerge in the peer group). Knowledge of the group hierarchy and of membership criteria for various groups gives adolescents a clear sense of which peers are desirable romantic partners, which are prime candidates for romantic relationships (by virtue of being very similar to self in status), and which are to be scrupulously avoided — if one wishes to maintain a good reputation with friends. The travails of falling in love with someone too distant from oneself in peer prestige form one of the most hackneyed plots in films about American teenagers (e.g., *Breaking Away*, *Grazie*, *Pretty in Pink*, *Say Anything*, *Stand by Me*).

Typically, in this phase, peers are also major brokers of relationships. They take on the role of matchmaking. One of the more fascinating mechanisms for assuming this function is their role as a messenger service. The most straightforward way of initiating a romantic liaison, asking someone out, is rarely done. Instead, an elaborate communications system is invoked prior to this event to ensure that when someone is asked out, the answer will be "yes." For example, if Rene is interested in Luis, she first asks her friends what they think of him. If Luis passes this test, Rene may ask one of her friends to ask one of his friends to ask Luis if he is interested in Rene (is everyone still with me here?). The response works its way back through the message service to Rene. If the answer is "Forget it!" Rene may deny the entire episode as rumor and innuendo; if the answer is more encouraging, she can confidently approach Luis to initiate a dating relationship. Of course, this communication system also allows an adolescent to discover a peer's interest and respond to it without the potential awkwardness of a direct confrontation. It is much easier for Luis to ask his friends to convey the message that he is not interested in Rene than to say so directly to her face.

The messenger service is particularly useful in helping adolescents avoid direct rejection, which, as Downy, Bonita, and Rincon (this volume) note, can be especially traumatic for adolescents just beginning to venture into romantic relationships. The messenger service is also especially useful for gay and lesbian teens who are interested in establishing romantic connections with a peer context that discourages or derides same-sex relationships. In this case, adolescents must develop a messenger service that is more discreet, and more adept at ascertaining not only whether a particular person is interested in their friend but also whether or not this person is receptive to same-sex relationships.

Peers can be instrumental in subsequent steps in the romantic relationships as well. They can suggest appropriate social activities, ways to respond to conflict in the relationship, interpretations of a partner's trouble-

some behavior, and even methods for ending the relationship without threatening one's standing in the group. Yet, there is a down side to the close scrutiny that peers give to romantic relationships in this phase. A faulty messenger system can bungle the inquiry about a potential partner and cause an adolescent considerable embarrassment. Well-meaning friends may try to "torpedo" a relationship that they believe is detrimental to the adolescent's standing in the group (see, e.g., John Hughes's film *Pretty in Pink*). Most noteworthy is that as adolescents gain confidence in their romantic skills and as they come to grips with their position in the peer group, they can come to resent peers' efforts to meddle in their romantic affairs. These attitudes are usually a sign that adolescents have matured in their appreciation of romantic relationships; they are making the transition to the third phase.

#### Affection Phase

From Erikson's (1963) perspective, identity development is a social process. A successful resolution of the identity crisis, however, requires individuals to adopt an identity that is personal and unique. Adolescents cannot continue to rely on group norms and provisional identities to define their self-concept and determine their behavior. They must move on to define the particulars of their own unique position within the group and the broader society. In a similar fashion, romance cannot remain a strictly public activity, directed by the peer group and motivated simply by the objectives of group acceptance or peer prestige. As adolescents become comfortable with (or resigned to) their position within the peer system, and confident that they can engage in romantic relationships successfully, they tend to be drawn more deeply into the relationship. At this point they are prepared to let the relationship itself be the focal point of their romantic activity, diminishing their attentiveness to group norms and friends' expectations. In the affection phase, romance — like identity — becomes a *personal* and relational affair.

#### The Character of Romantic Activity

Gordon and Miller (1984) found that over half of their sample of seniors from several Connecticut high schools rated going steady as the primary objective of high school social life. The importance of steady relationships did vary appreciably among schools and probably varies historically as well. Yet, these older students' focus on steady dating is revealing of their

#### "You're Going Out with Who?"

interest in more stable and long-term romantic relationships. So is their characterization of a good steady relationship: an exclusive relationship (mentioned more often by girls) that provides affection, friendship, and security; is preceded by dating; and fosters personal understanding. Smaller percentages noted that it involves having a good time and sexual activity. In this sample, such relationships were infrequent — on average, the students reported having had two or three steady partners — but more durable than romantic alliances in early phases. They lasted between 2 and 10 months, rather than a matter of days or weeks, as in earlier phases (Elder, 1993; Feiring, 1996).

The more serious relationships of the affection phase seem to alter the pattern of social interaction. In Gordon and Miller's (1984) study, those who were currently involved with a romantic partner reported that a typical weekend night was spent either with that partner or with a group of same-sex peers. Those without a current partner were more likely to socialize in a mixed-sex group. Time allocation is also significantly different. My own data on high school youths indicated that adolescents in romantic relationships reported spending less time (on weekends) with friends but, ironically, more time with a larger group of peers (the crowd) than those who were currently without a boyfriend or girlfriend or who had never had such a relationship. Among German youth, Silbertsen, Noack, and von Eye (1992) found a contrasting shift in preferred leisure contexts related to experience in romantic relationships. As youths expressed interest in finding their first romantic partner, they tended to change from preferring private to public contexts for leisure activities because of the greater opportunities to meet potential dating partners. Those more experienced in romantic relations, however, made the opposite shift in preferred leisure contexts, perhaps to avoid the social scrutiny so central to earlier phases, so that they could concentrate on nurturing their romantic alliance.

A key factor differentiating relationships in this phase from earlier romantic encounters is *depth*. Partners in an affection-oriented relationship probe deeper into each other's personalities, generate deeper feelings of commitment for the relationship, express deeper levels of caring for each other, and typically engage in more extensive sexual activity as well. All of these things generate strong emotional responses, so that even though emotions were substantial in earlier phases, they can become especially intense and overwhelming at this stage. Moreover, the intimacy achieved in these relationships allows participants to express to each other strong feelings about issues in their lives beyond the relationship. In many ways, then,

these are emotionally charged relationships. Managing these emotions becomes a critical and challenging task for partners, both as individuals and as a relational unit (see Larson et al.'s chapter in this volume for a lengthier discussion of these challenges). Hollywood portrayals of teenage romance most commonly try to capture the essence of the emotionally charged relationships of this phase rather than the relationships typical of earlier phases (see, e.g., *Boys in the Hood*, *Endless Love*, *Say Anything*).

Because few investigators have traced the relational histories of adolescents, it is not clear whether individuals who have experienced a relationship that is characteristic of the affection phase will stick exclusively to this type of relationship, or will cycle between more serious relationships and the more casual dating or romantic alliances that were typical of earlier phases. I suspect that the latter pattern is more common, but it would be interesting to study the factors that differentiate adolescents who follow each pattern.

There is much to be learned in the affection phase. Adolescents must expand their relationship skills to be able to manage longer-term, more intimate relationships. Patience, empathy, trust, and a sense of mutuality become salient traits. Partners must diminish their efforts at impression management in favor of more honest self-disclosure. Conflict management skills are also important, as is the capacity for *relationship monitoring*: being able to sense how the relationship is going, what the partner is feeling or needing, when it is appropriate to strive for a more intimate or serious level of association, and when one should temporarily suspend efforts to deepen the relationship. At this point, the processes of exchange that Lausen and Jensen-Campbell (this volume) discuss become particularly meaningful; and, as I have already mentioned, the need for emotional regulation is heightened. The affection phase also presents the first clear opportunity for genuine attachments to form (see Furman and Simon, this volume) in the context of romantic relationships. Many of these factors are reflected in the three most important dating goals that Miller, Betencourt, DeBro, and Hoffman (1993) discovered in their sample of college students: avoiding conflict in a relationship, maintaining emotional closeness with one's partner, and achieving narcissistic goals (sexual intimacy, making a positive impression).

All of these features are important components of identity development, especially for women. Because of their stronger orientation toward relationships compared to men (Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Gilligan, 1992), women may regard their success or failure in romantic relationships in this phase as a reflection of their *general* self-worth — not just as an indicator of

their adeptness at dating or attracting romantic partners (see Feiring's chapter in this volume for a fuller discussion of this issue). For this reason, women may demand more support from friends in their romantic experiences, and may take more time to recover from a bad experience or an undesirable ending to a serious romantic liaison. Of course, not all males and females conform to this gender difference; boys, too, can be profoundly affected in identity development by their success or failure in romantic relationships.

It is common for changes in sexual activity to accompany shifts in the quality of romantic relationships. McCabe and Collins (1983) compared the actual and desired sexual activity among a sample of 16- to 25-year-old Australian youths at three levels of romantic activity: first date, casual relationship (several dates), and going steady. Sexual activity was more extensive at each level of relationship. Miller, McCoy, and Olson (1986), on the other hand, found higher rates of sexual intercourse and more liberal attitudes toward sexuality among adolescents who were dating several individuals concurrently than among those who focused on just one partner (although sexual activity was highest among those who were going steadily or engaged to be married). Thus, there appeared to be two patterns of sexuality: one for those who dated and slept around and another for those who waited for a serious relationship. Others have depicted an even broader array of sexual styles (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996), whose association with styles or features of romantic relationships is not well established (see Graber, Britto, & Brooks-Gunn, this volume, for more discussion of this issue). Of course, these patterns or styles are likely to vary by both history and context: Phinney, Jensen, Olsen, and Cundick (1990) discovered that the correlation between age of initial dating and initial heterosexual intercourse was significant for White youths but not for Blacks; in fact, Blacks in her sample reported a lower median age for first sexual intercourse than for first date.

#### *The Peer Context*

As an adolescent's romantic relationships grow more serious and sustained, the rest of his or her peer social network (not to mention family, school, and other social contexts) must adjust to the new features and depth of these relationships. Most notably, the locus of primary influence is likely to tip more noticeably away from the larger peer group or crowd toward the smaller circle of close friends. This shift is reflected in the final

two stages of Dunphy's (1969) model of peer group structure. In early adolescence, peer groups are transformed from isolated, monosexual cliques to loosely associated mixed-sex groups. By middle adolescence (Stage 4), cliques have become more fully integrated in terms of gender and have formed into a coalition of cliques (a *crowd*, in Dunphy's terms) for the purposes of major social activities. At this stage, which I suspect begins before but overlaps with the affection phase of romantic relationships, deciding who is in the crowd and who is not — who gets included in or excluded from crowd social events — is a major preoccupation of crowd leaders. Toward the end of adolescence, however, the alliances between cliques that form a crowd begin to break down, and cliques tend to operate more independently, as they did in Stage 1 or Stage 2 of Dunphy's model. The difference, however, is that late adolescent cliques are cross-gender rather than single-sex groups. Their smaller size is conducive to more stable membership and is quite comparable to the "small circle of friends" that characterizes social patterns among American adults. Within the clique individuals can nurture stable and intense friendships, as well as intense romantic relationships, love triangles, and so forth. The dynamics of these cliques are well captured (though perhaps overdramatized) in the film *Str. Elnor's Fire*. As is illustrated in this film, when a couple who are both clique members breaks up, the entire clique can be plunged into emotional and interpersonal turmoil until all of the issues related to the dissolution of the relationship have been worked through. In other words, the intense feelings that are characteristic of romantic relationships in this phase are not confined to the couple; they spill over into the peer group and its pattern of interactions as well.

In this phase, individual friends and the friendship group take on a set of significant roles. They continue as matchmakers and cheerleaders, encouraging an adolescent's ventures into more serious romantic liaisons. But they also become *private eyes*, keeping tabs on a romantic partner's actions to ensure that she or he is faithful to the relationship. To be sure, individuals and groups vary in the degree of fraternizing, flirting, and fooling around (with persons other than the romantic partner) they will tolerate. But if a teenager oversteps the norms of the group, repercussions can be expected — beginning, of course, with a message to the group member that his or her romantic partner has been unfaithful. If for this or other reasons the couple gets into a fight, peer group members may assume a second role: *arbitrator*. A new version of the messenger service (from the status phase) may be enacted to convey partners' reactions and feelings back and forth to each other. These may replace or supplement direct com-

munication between the couple. In some cases, the couple's conflict may be the primary focus of group discussion until the issue is resolved (or the relationship abandoned).

Peers expand their vital role as a *support system* in this phase. Especially for teenagers who cannot turn to parents, older siblings, or other relatives for advice, friends become the sympathetic ear or the wellspring of ideas on how to respond to new or confusing situations in a relationship. When the romance ends, peers offer advice on how to end the affair and consolation during the recovery period. Over the long term, the intimacy between close friends does not appear to be affected by the intense feelings adolescents develop for romantic partners (Feiring, 1996), so that friends can pick up where they left off after the romance is over.

As supportive as peers can be for group members or close friends, they can also be fiercely indignant toward individuals (especially nonfriends or nongroup members) who are perceived to have acted unethically or inappropriately in a romantic relationship. In instances of severe or persistent violation of group norms regarding romantic relationships, the peer group can serve as *judge and jury*, determining which party is guilty and how that person should be punished. It makes sense that a peer group will favor one of its own members over an outsider, but how typical this pattern is I honestly do not know. To the offended party the group extends sympathy and encouragement. To the offender it can mete out appropriate punishment: remonstrations, lectures, shunning, ostracism, or whatever. In this regard, things can be especially awkward for an adolescent who has not moved with the group from the status to the affection phase of romantic relationships. Someone who is still feigning interest in a romantic partner or pursuing superficial relationships to improve his or her standing in the group can easily run afoul of the peer group if the target of the person's romantic overtures is looking for a deeper, more personal relationship.

Although close friendships appear to be maintained across affection-oriented romantic relationships, they may be more heavily tested than in previous phases. The intensity of romantic experiences can steal both time and affect from close friendships. The advantage in intimacy, trust, and companionship that friends have maintained over romantic partners in early phases of romantic relationships disappears by the end of high school, when this phase is more common (Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1993). Particularly if an adolescent does not also have a romantic partner, he or she may feel abandoned when a close friend becomes more intimately involved with a boyfriend or girlfriend. It is difficult to get teenagers to confess jealousy or resentment over a friend's romantic partner because



such feelings violate the norms of friendship. Indeed, such feelings among male friends could easily be interpreted by peers as indicators of one boy's homosexual inclinations, so in most instances they will be carefully suppressed. Yet, I have witnessed these friendship dynamics time and again among groups of teens I work with in the community. With maturity, particularly as both members of a friendship pair gain experience with more serious romantic relationships, adolescents learn to compensate for time or affect lost when a friend pursues a romantic interest, typically by broadening their friendship network or finding a boyfriend or girlfriend of their own.

In sum, the peer group continues to be restructured in this phase, assuming an organization that is not only conducive to the more serious and sustained romantic relationships that are typical at this time, but also one that prepares adolescents for normative patterns of social interaction in adult society. The functions that friends serve again seem to change to accommodate the needs of romantic development. However, because peer groups are growing smaller, more stable, and couple oriented at this stage, they are more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of members' romantic relationships. Trauma in one member's romantic activities can reverberate throughout the group. Of course, these group dynamics are likely to differ from one crowd to the next, according to crowd norms about romantic relationships, as well as among individuals, according to their commitment to the group and their reliance on its members for support. Moreover, this portrait of the peer context remains remarkably speculative in the absence of close scrutiny by social scientists.

### Bonding Phase

A healthy restoration of continuity and sameness demands the reconnection of past, present, and future selves. At some point in late adolescence, individuals should feel the need to look beyond the present and make realistic plans for the future. "How will my emerging sense of identity launch me into specific, concrete roles in adult society?" "How can I enter into sustaining relationships that will define my position in the adult community?" American society expects late adolescents to become preoccupied with these questions as they "polish off" their quest for identity and prepare for entry into adulthood. This long-term, pragmatic view should be extended to romantic relationships as well, especially because they are the crux of the next "crisis" in Erikson's (1963) lifelong sequence of developmental stages: intimacy versus isolation.

### The Character of Romantic Relations

In this phase, individuals are expected to maintain the depth of relationships typical of the affection phase but to replace some of the emotionality of those romantic alliances with a more pragmatic perspective. The key issues for relational partners are whether or not they can commit to a lifelong partnership with each other, how confident they are about the prospect of building a life together, how willing they are to put up with each other's shortcomings as well as strengths, and how open they are to accommodating unforeseeable changes that are bound to occur to the partner. These are sobering concerns. They highlight the transformation in relational orientation that must take place between the affection and bonding phases: In the former, the focus in romantic relationships was on self-exploration and self-discovery (within a relational context). The objective was to probe deeply into the self in order to discover and accept one's personal, unique sense of identity. With the transition from Stage 5 to Stage 6 in Erikson's theory, individuals must take that carefully crafted sense of identity and risk losing it in an attempt at *identity fusion* with their partner. A truly mature relationship, from Erikson's perspective, requires partners to become so close that the boundaries of their identities are blurred. They remain distinctive personalities but inseparable as a couple — like two clearly discernible human forms in a sculpture who seem to emerge from and merge into each other.

These developmental mandates compel romantic partners to look at each other (and their relationship) in pragmatic and objective terms. All emotions and passions aside, do I like this person as a friend? Can I put up with his irritating habits? Do I feel comfortable with her values and lifestyle? Would we make an effective team in raising children, working out problems, or serving the community? To be sure, not all late adolescent or adult couples who make a lifelong commitment to each other have reached the level of romantic relationship featured in the bonding phase. Not all individuals, I would argue, graduate to this phase. The literature on courtship and mating stipulates other scripts for entering into lifelong relationships than the one specified by Erikson. It would be helpful in future research to identify factors that prompt some individuals to transcend the emotional fervor of affection-oriented relationships and achieve this more mature orientation. Related issues are whether or not both members of a committed couple must operate from the bonding perspective for the relationship to be successful or, indeed, whether a bonding perspective is truly more adaptive for couples over the long term than the more adolescent emphasis on status or emotional attachment.

Evidence for this final phase of romantic relations, and for the more general sequencing of phases, is admittedly thin. However, some corroboration emerges from the rationales that different age groups give for dating or their characterizations of a desirable romantic partner. Roscoe, Diana, and Brooks (1987) compared the reasons for dating given by early, middle, and late adolescents (6th graders, 11th graders, and college students). Early and middle adolescents tended to emphasize recreation and status, whereas late adolescents were more likely to list companionship, sexual activity, or mate selection. In describing features of a desirable dating partner, the younger respondents focused on personal and prestige factors, whereas the oldest group emphasized "shares my interests" and "has goals for the future." "Early adolescents tended to weight more heavily superficial features (e.g., dresses fashionably) and their approval by others (e.g., approved of by parents, well liked by many people) than did late adolescents," the investigators concluded (p. 66). "It appears that with maturity and/or experience, late adolescents become more independent in their ratings and more future oriented in their views of dating."

#### *The Peer Context*

By the time most individuals are ready to enter the bonding phase, the peer context has already been transformed, according to Dunphy (1969) into a structure compatible with normative adult forms of social interaction. Thus, no major restructuring of the peer context appears to be necessary at this point. Nevertheless, it would seem adaptive for peers to withdraw somewhat from their heavy involvement in group members' romantic lives, but at the same time remain supportive of members and brutally candid about romantic relationships. The decision to fuse one's identity with someone else is an intensely personal one with far-reaching, lifelong consequences. It is certainly not the business of peers, even close and long-standing friends, to make this decision for someone else. Yet, friends can be very effective sounding boards as individuals think through their commitment to romantic partners. Friends also may be able to judge a person's partner, or the quality of the couple's relationship, more objectively because they lack the deep emotional feelings or sexual passion that the person brings to the relationship.

In this phase, peer influences seem to lack both the collaborative and the competitive spirit that characterized their role in earlier phases. The intensity of peer influence and the compulsion to attend to peers' advice or admonitions is likely to fade as well. Still, peers can be the purveyors of

cultural norms. The importance of loyalty, equality, respect, long-term commitment, and ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic homogeneity in a romantic relationship will be encoded in the group's norms, just as they are in the norms of the larger subculture, culture, or society in which individuals live. A key issue is whether or not there is convergence in these norms among the major social contexts in which late adolescents or young adults are situated. Particularly in the case of immigrant youths, the peer group continues to be a major voice in defining and interpreting cultural values. How do norms and practices within the former culture fit within the current social context? Often adolescents will look to peers rather than parents to address this issue (Brown, Hamm, & Myerson, 1996; Nguyen & Williams, 1989).

#### **Conclusion**

From giggle-ridden conversations about who the cutest person is at the next lunchroom table to schemes to win the affection of the most popular peer at school to sobering contemplation about sustaining a loving relationship with a particular person over the next five decades, romantic interests and relationships in American society undergo dramatic changes over the adolescent and young adult years. Accompanying these changes are major transformations in the structure and content of peer relations, which seem either to stem from or significantly affect adolescents' experiences in romance. In this chapter I have outlined a four-phase sequence to describe the developmental course of romantic interests and expressions. I have appealed to Erikson's theory of identity development, as well as to several research studies, to provide both the rationale for and some supportive evidence of these developmental changes. The portrait of peer group processes and influences in each phase of the model has been much more speculative for lack of solid research evidence. Yet, it is strongly suggestive of an intimate connection between development and context in this domain of adolescents' lives. It also implies a strong connection between romantic activities and peer relationships more generally, a connection that has been underrepresented and, I would argue, underrated in previous research.

From this brief exploration of the connections between the peer context and romantic activities, I would like to emphasize five concluding points. First, *romantic interests and activities constitute a complex developmental phenomenon in American adolescents*. By restricting research to romantic relationships that manifest features of long-term, committed, adult relation-

ships, investigators have missed most of the activity that individuals engage in during adolescence; even studies of dating ignore much of the preliminary development of romantic orientations, skills, and self-concepts so central to the serious relationships individuals encounter in later adolescence. A proper understanding of adolescents' romantic relationships must proceed from the broader perspective of the full developmental range of romantic orientations and experiences. Even when investigators focus on a particular type of relationship or phase of romantic development, it is helpful for them to have the big picture in mind. For researchers to do so effectively, much more attention must be devoted to the earlier phases of the developmental sequence. The current heavy concentration of research on relationships in the affection and bonding stages must be redirected toward the experiences of younger adolescents.

Second, the developmental-contextual perspective adopted here demands that *researchers be careful not to separate romantic couples from the social context in which their relationship is situated*. I have emphasized the peer context in this chapter because I believe it is heavily influential during the adolescent years, yet seriously underrepresented or inadequately measured in many research studies. Other contexts, however, are also vitally important. Gray and Steinberg (this volume) illustrate the critical role that the family plays in adolescents' romantic experiences. Feingold (this volume) points to the influence of community or cultural expectations for sex roles and configured gender identities. Coates (this volume) explores the powerful influences of ethnic and neighborhood context, and emphasizes the reciprocal nature of influences between romantic relationships and social contexts. More careful study of each social context is sorely needed. Yet, researchers also must move to a higher level of analysis, considering how these various major social contexts interact — whether they serve to reinforce each other or, as I have pointed out in the case of some immigrant youths (Nguyen & Williams, 1989), present young people with contradictory expectations about romantic relationships.

An extension of this second point is to be mindful of broader sociohistorical forces at work on adolescent romantic relationships: historical changes and national or cultural differences. I have been careful to emphasize that this chapter focuses on the experiences and developmental trajectories of adolescents in the United States because my ideas are based on studies and observations of U.S. samples. Researchers who have studied teenage romance in other countries have presented a markedly different picture. Husbands (1970), for example, contrasted the superficiality of the American dating system with the tendency among European adolescents

to date fewer individuals for longer periods of time, with stronger consideration in each relationship of the potential for lifelong commitment (mate selection). In some nations, patterns of gender segregation or an intensive focus on school and studying undermines opportunities to locate or interact with romantic partners. Such factors can affect the developmental course of romantic relationships and the roles that peers play in this process. In a similar fashion, historical changes affect romantic relations. Changes in health care and nutritional habits have lowered the age of puberty during the past century, thus increasing the possibility of teenage pregnancy, which alters a significant component of peer relations: sexual activity (see Graber et al., this volume). In the United States, the historical shift from formal dating to more informal interaction in small, mixed-sex groups allows teenagers to get to know each other on a casual, friendly basis before declaring any romantic intentions. All of these factors can affect the sequencing of phases or the character of relationships within each phase.

A third point is that *researchers must be attentive to variability in norms governing romantic relationships within a particular peer system*. Such a pattern may be influenced not only by societal norms regarding mate selection or marriage but also by the organization of adolescents' relationships with peers. Eckert (1989), for example, implies that different peer crowds will emphasize different values and orientations toward romantic activity. Crowds are likely to feature different timetables for moving from one phase to the next. Within a given population of American adolescents, one may find groups that are still making awkward approaches to potential romantic partners, under the watchful eye of a clique of same-sex companions, at the same time that other age-mates are embroiled in long-term dating relationships within the context of a larger, heterosexual peer crowd. The level of diversity and flexibility within a given peer system may be a significant predictor of adolescents' successful progression through phases of romantic activity.

Fourth, *just as there is normative variability within the larger peer system, there is also individual variability*. Adolescents do not all move in lock-step fashion through any developmental sequence. The variability apparent in pubertal and sexual maturation is also likely to be observed in maturation of romantic interests and experiences (see Silbereisen et al., 1992). At issue is whether youths who are off time in romantic development manifest the same departures from healthy developmental outcomes that have often been observed among youths who are off time in physical maturation. I have suggested some reasons why this may be the case at var-

ious points in the romantic developmental process; Douvan and Adelson (1966) also provide both empirical and theoretical arguments about the dangers of precocious dating. This issue demands much more careful research attention.

Finally, multiple research methods must be brought to bear on the study of developmental changes in and peer influences on adolescent romantic relationships. I have cited work that relies upon self-report data as well as participant observation, individual or focus group interviews, and even diary material. No single methodology is superlative, particularly in capturing the dynamics — such as status seeking or jealousy over a friend's success in romance — that are difficult for adolescents to acknowledge. Authors must continue to explore creative methodologies for collecting information on these intriguing subjects.

Romantic interests launch adolescents on an exciting, precarious journey of self-discovery and, hopefully, interpersonal fulfillment. It is important not to lose sight of this fact in our careful, scientific scrutiny of adolescents' romantic relationships. If our science drains this dimension of adolescent development of its wonder and rapture, we can be sure that we have missed the mark. "You're going with who?" Such remonstrations from one adolescent to another should never puzzle nor dismay us.

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