

Romance and Sex in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: Risks and Opportunities

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A FEW "COURSE CORRECTIONS" TO COLLINS AND VAN DULMEN'S "THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE"

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Five years ago I began a chapter in which I assessed the state of our knowledge about adolescent romantic relationships by chiding social scientists for paying too little attention to this important aspect of young people's relationships with peers (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999). In the interim, scholars have made remarkable progress in unraveling the mysteries of teenage romance (at least in North America). Scientific journals and academic conferences now routinely offer new evidence derived from richer theoretical perspectives and a more diverse array of respondents. We have moved beyond the inclination to regard adolescents' romantic forays as frivolous behavior, or to simply disregard them in favor of the more troublesome topic of teenage sexuality. The contributors to this book display the impressive progress that investigators have made in understanding adolescent romance. My comments will concentrate on Collins and van Dulmen (this volume), which is largely concerned with how aspects of adolescents' relationships with friends and parents predict features of their romantic experiences.

It is important at the outset to underscore the advances to research on adolescent romantic relationships that are inherent in the work of Collins and his associates. Several features set this program of research apart from most studies of romantic interests and liaisons during this period of life. First and foremost, it has strong and sensible theoretical roots that provide an insightful conceptual framework for analyses and interpretation of findings. As investigators move beyond the "bean counting" stage of research (in which they document how frequently a phenomenon occurs, at what ages, within what demographic groups, and so on), they need a firm theoretical foundation for guiding the selection of issues, samples, measures, and methods of gathering and interpreting information. Collins and colleagues draw judiciously from several theories, including attachment theory, socialization theory, and Sullivan's neo-psychoanalytic model of interpersonal development, to guide their thinking.

A second advance is that they obtain information from multiple methods and sources. Their data include ratings not only from the target youth but also from parents, teachers, and peers. This information is supplemented with observational data and intensive interviews that provide a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures. Third, the study extends from well before adolescent romantic relationships are initiated to well after they are an established part of most

respondents' lives. By following youth over such a long period of time and managing to retain a high proportion of the initial sample, Collins and colleagues have amassed an unusually rich data set with extensive, systematically gathered information about key constructs. Finally, the data are broad in theoretical scope, addressing a variety of constructs that are appropriately located within a developmental framework. That is, the specific variables examined change from one measurement point to the next, in accordance with our understanding of how interpersonal resources and relationships develop over time.

Riding the "Developmental Wave"

In gathering data prospectively over a long time period, Collins and van Dulmen allow us to appreciate the complex and slowly evolving connections between parent and peer relations, on the one hand, and romantic experiences, on the other. Seemingly contradictory findings suddenly make sense from this long-range perspective. Consider two curious findings that the investigators report in their chapter (from their own or from others' data). The first finding is that the quality of teenagers' romantic relationships is significantly predicted by the quality of parent-child relationships in childhood but is not associated strongly with features of parent-child relationships in adolescence. The second finding is that the individuals most likely to develop healthy romantic relationships with other-sex peers in adolescence are those who seemed to scrupulously avoid other-sex peers prior to this stage of life.

In more circumscribed data sets these findings might remain mysterious, but from the long-range perspective of the Minnesota Longitudinal Study, they are clearly consistent with expectations arising from Sullivan's (1953) or other developmental theories. They illustrate how individuals "ride the developmental wave" on their way to healthy and effective romantic liaisons. Youth develop what Collins and van Dulmen refer to as "foundational relationships" with parents that will establish a pattern for later close relationships; then, they move on to the childhood world of same-sex "chums." These peer associations set the stage more directly for intense romantic involvements in adolescence with, typically, other-sex peers. Close romantic relationships in adolescence (and, by extension, adulthood) are the result of a carefully scripted sequence of "foundational experiences" with family and peers in earlier life stages. Different types of close relationships come to prominence, then recede in their influence, as young people move with the developmental wave, but a given relationship's influence is still visible, even if distal. A big question, of course, is precisely what skills or motivations or aspects of self are individuals mastering through each of their close relationships as they ride the developmental wave? Through various theoretical frameworks (Bowlby, 1982; Sullivan, 1953), Collins and van Dulmen begin to answer this question.

What happens to individuals who ride *against* the wave, who chart a non-normative course in close relationships from infancy to adolescence? I would suggest two specific features. First, those who pursue non-normative peer relationships may have a limited choice of healthy partners. If a 10-year old wants to pursue a close friendship with a peer of the other sex, who can the child induce to join in such a relationship? Those most receptive are likely to be those least effective in establishing close friendships with same-sex age mates—probably because of deficiencies in their own interpersonal skills. The relationship is certainly likely to catch the attention of peers who, through teasing, direct confrontation, or other methods of normative regulation, will try to bring the errant couple back in line with the developmental wave. Wary parents, teachers, or other significant adults will add their own pressures against the relationship. This hardly seems like a promising script for mastering the interests and abilities that will prepare a young person for entry into the arena of romantic liaisons on adolescence.

A second example acknowledges that some youth may not ride against the developmental wave by choice, but by virtue of deficiencies in their interpersonal network. Unhealthy attachment relationships are often the result of parents' inadequacies. According to Collins and van Dulmen, this sets the stage for problems in adolescent romantic relationships. Future studies can look at how specific deficiencies in early parent-child relationships predict problems with particular aspects of adolescent romantic interactions. Attachment theory provides the basis for making specific predictions.

Stages of Romantic Relationships

Sullivan (1953) deftly sketched normative developmental shifts in interpersonal attention: from close relationships with parents in early childhood to a focus on same-sex peers in later childhood to romantic relationships in adolescence. He was less successful in charting developmental changes in the organization of adolescent peer groups that may explain some other findings that Collins and van Dulmen report. Consider, for example, how peer competence and friendship quality predict features of romantic activity at various life stages. Peer competence is associated with involvement in romantic relationships in middle adolescence, but by young adulthood it is the quality of child and adolescent friendships that is associated with the quality of couple interaction. Several scholars have proposed that romantic experiences evolve through stages across adolescence (Brown, 1999b; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Feinstein & Ardon, 1973). These theories consistently portray early adolescent romantic forays as public affairs played out in the arena of the peer group. The short duration of these relationships underscores their function as "training exercises" and pawns in a game of social status, rather than as deep and meaningful emotional connections between two individuals (Roscoe, Diana, & Brooks, 1987). Giordano, Manning, and Longmore (this volume) detail these dynamics in their depictions of the transition into romantic interactions.

It would be surprising if the quality of dyadic relationships (with friends or parents) was as predictive of adolescents' success in the early stages of romantic encounters as later on, when relationships evolve to a more enduring and personal level. Likewise, it would be surprising if general peer competence was as important as success in dyadic relationships in the more advanced stages of romantic development characteristic of young adult relations. Thus, to understand the shifting predictive value of peer competence and friendship quality (or shifts across age in the predictive utility of aspects of early childhood bonds to parents), investigators must pay closer attention to developmental changes in the nature of romantic alliances. Long ago, scholars abandoned the notion that children are merely miniature adults. It is time for investigators to dismiss the notion that early adolescent romances are simply miniature versions of young adult romantic relationships. Collins and van Dulmen's findings and their challenges to researchers to explain these findings should provide the incentive to take this important step forward in research on romantic relationships.

Influence of the Peer Context

For most American adolescents, romantic relationships are situated within a complex, dynamic system of peer interactions. This system features an interweaving of distinctive types of relationships and levels of interaction (Brown, 1999a). Especially in early and middle adolescence, young people do not pursue romantic relationships independent of their other peer affiliations (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000). Collins and van Dulmen emphasize associations between romantic relationships and close friendships, but both of these types of relationships are situated within friendship groups and, in many cases, reputation-oriented crowds that can influence their characteristics. These higher-level groups set normative standards for dyadic relationships of members, standards that are not equivalent across groups. Eckert (1989) contrasted the wary, competitive orientation toward friendships in the jock crowd to the more cooperative, interdependent style of burnouts. Eder (1985) explained how the exclusive status consciousness inherent in friendship interactions among the popular clique in one midwestern middle school served to maintain the group's prestige in the peer system. Macleod (1995) compared the solidarity of a group of urban African American males to the diffuse, unreliable affiliations characteristic of a neighboring group of European American youth. I suspect that similar variability occurs in romantic relationships among different peer contexts. Indeed, I believe that the gender dynamics documented by Giordano and colleagues (this volume) also vary across peer groups. Thus, one must be cautious about over-generalizing the connections between friendships and romantic affiliations that Collins and van Dulmen discover in their data.

Effects of Romantic Relationships on Adolescents' Other Close Relationships

In pursuing a thorough understanding of the connections between peer or family relations and romantic experiences, investigators ought to pay closer attention to the meaning that romantic relationships have for other close affiliations. As individuals move beyond superficial, "entry-level" romantic encounters to more stable relationships, their romantic experiences are likely to become signal events for both friends and parents. The time that adolescents devote to their romantic partners, particularly as couples become more exclusive in their interactions, translates into less time spent with family and close friends. Increases in the intimacy of romantic relationships diminish the adolescent's need for emotional support and advice seeking from friends and parents. This can be a difficult adjustment for close friends, especially if they are not involved in a romantic relationship themselves. Expressing concern to a friend about the loss of time together or loss of a sense of intimacy and support is generally taboo—particularly among males, as pointed out by Giordano et al. (this volume). It crosses normative boundaries of friendship and, among same-sex friends, can be interpreted as an indication of homosexual affection. In this stage, adolescents may quietly harbor resentment toward their close friend's romantic partner rather than risk confronting the issue directly with friends. As the social world evolves in later adolescence or young adulthood toward "couple coordinate friendships" (both friends having intimate romantic partners), these emotional dynamics among friends are likely to subside.

Parents also may bemoan the loss of time with their child as romantic relationships intensify. In addition, however, romantic partners are a source of concern to parents about risky sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, or premature long-term commitment to a peer whom parents are not eager to welcome into the family. Sensing such reservations from parents, adolescents may respond by censoring the information they share about romantic alliances. Our own pilot investigations indicate that adolescents generally assert that parents do not have the right to know details of their associations with peers (especially romantic partners) beyond the basics of where they are going, what they are doing, and who will share in the activity (Krein, 2004). In other words, romantic partners can inspire a sense of loss and concern among parents in middle adolescence that prompts adolescents to distance themselves from parents, at least in terms of sharing information about peer relationships. These dynamics need to be factored into considerations of how friend and parent-child relationships interact with romantic relationships.

To put it more bluntly, patterns of influence between parent-child or friendship relationships and romantic relationships are reciprocal rather than unidirectional. This assertion by no means discredits the insights that Collins and van Dulmen

provide about family and peer influences on romance. They are concerned primarily with how relationships *prior* to adolescence influence adolescent-based romantic behaviors. I simply wish to encourage the addition of another dimension: how adolescent romantic experiences influence (concurrently and prospectively) other close relationships. This should be especially instructive for those studying romantic relationships in late adolescence or adulthood.

Interdependence of Parent and Peer Influences

To this point, I have portrayed friendship or peer group experiences and family (especially parent-child) relations as independent sources of influence on adolescent romantic relationships. This perspective is prominent in the studies cited by Collins and van Dulmen, but other possibilities merit consideration. One that is consistent with Collins and van Dulmen's interpretation of findings is that influences are sequential. Different types of close relationships form a set of building blocks that ultimately lead to the capacity for mature, sustained romantic partnerships. As young people master the skills or experiences offered by one "foundational relationship," they become more receptive to lessons to be learned in the next such relationship. Youniss and Smollar (1985), for example, illustrated how cognitive and social advances allow young people to move from adult-child "relationships of constraint" to the more egalitarian peer relationships typical of pre-adolescence and adolescence. This perspective would explain why parent-child, peer group, and close friendship relationships, respectively, achieve their strongest predictive validity toward aspects of adolescent romantic relationships at different points in the life course. However, it does not account effectively for concurrent predictive utility in several different types of relationships—a pattern that also can be discerned in some studies.

Another possibility is that influences are synergistic, such that nurturing experiences in one type of relationship are most apparent among youth who also have nurturing experiences in another type of relationship. The interpersonally rich get richer while the interpersonally poor get poorer. Still another possibility is a compensatory pattern of association among relationship types. For example, the quality of adolescent friendships may be most influential among youth who lack close and caring relationships with parents. Different theoretical frameworks seem to emphasize different possibilities here, so it may not be easy to engage in comparative analyses of these possibilities that are theoretically sensible as well as empirically viable. In earlier work on the distinctiveness and interdependence of various types of social relationships, Collins (2003; Collins & Laursen, 2000) provided some hints on how to proceed with this task. Perhaps the way in which various foundational experiences influence romantic relationships varies across different facets of adolescent romantic relationships.

Additional Considerations: Culture and Sexual Orientation

Two features of the scope of Collins and van Dulmen's investigation deserve closer consideration. One involves the generalizability of findings across cultures. In earlier work, Collins (2003) acknowledged the ways in which cultural forces shape adolescents' romantic experiences. Ethnic groups within the United States differ substantially in the age at which dating becomes normative, the speed with which sexual activity is incorporated into romantic relationships, the level of supervision that parents exercise over romantic partners, the types of peers who are deemed acceptable as dating partners, and so on (Coates, 1999; O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlberg, 2003). If the assessment is extended beyond North America, the cultural contrasts become even sharper. In some cases, adolescent romantic liaisons are very carefully monitored—if not arranged—by adults, or simply proscribed until youth reach young adulthood (Brown, Larson, & Saraswathi, 2002). Likewise, the degree of adolescents' social interaction with peers varies dramatically across cultures, affecting their capacity to play a meaningful role in romantic relationships. One cannot fully appreciate such cultural influences without a sample that is larger and more diverse than the Minnesota Longitudinal Study. Thus, examination of these influences lies beyond the scope of most studies highlighted by Collins and van Dulmen. Nevertheless, as Collins himself stated, "Examining contextual variations that impinge on features of romantic relationships is an essential first step toward better understanding how context influences the impact of these relationships" (Collins, 2003, p. 14).

Another feature to consider is sexual orientation. Collins and van Dulmen are careful to define romantic relationships in a way that does not exclude youth who pursue same-sex partners. This is an important advance over most researchers who routinely and often thoughtlessly confine their investigations to same-sex couples or heterosexual orientations and experiences. Yet, consideration of homosexual relationships must extend beyond definitions. The social climate for these relationships can have a profound effect on their development and expression, making it more difficult to judge parent and peer influences upon them. Derogation of homosexual inclinations and activity remains common among American youth (Diamond & Lucas, in press), especially in early adolescence. Gay and lesbian youth often find that they must pursue romantic relationships furtively, perhaps even masquerading as heterosexuals in order to satisfy suspicious peers (Savin-Williams, 1999). This alters the roles that the friendship network plays in adolescents' development of romantic interests and experiences. It also seems to affect the organization of the network itself. Diamond and Lucas (2004) reported that gay and lesbian youth harbored more anxiety about losing friends and finding acceptable romantic partners than their heterosexual peers; these concerns affected the size and organization of peer networks. Curiously, at least among older

adolescents, sexual minority youth claimed a larger number of close friendships, with some such relationships reaching a level of emotional intensity or "passion" that rivaled romantic or sexual relationships (Diamond, Savin-Williams, & Dube, 1999).

The need that many sexual minority youth feel to hide their romantic relationships from parents also could affect the associations that Collins and van Dulmen trace between parent and romantic relationships. Although early attachments may emerge as the basis for longer-term romantic liaisons achieved in young adulthood, the connection may not be so visible within the restrictive romantic involvements of sexual minority adolescents. The inability to seek out parents as sources of support through the trials and tribulations of early romantic experiences also could strain the connection. In effect, gay and lesbian adolescents are not "riding the developmental wave," not responding to the mandate to shift attention from same- to other-sex relationships. To the degree that parents and peers cannot accept this, they can easily become estranged from sexual minority adolescents' efforts at mastering the romantic role. Thus, more careful attention to these young people's experiences is needed before incorporating them into the dynamics described by Collins and van Dulmen.

Defining Romantic Relationships: The Case for Reciprocal Nomination

I end with a concern about the way in which romantic relationships have been ascertained and operationalized in many studies of adolescents. Collins and van Dulmen assert that mutual acknowledgment should be a prerequisite for these relationships (both parties should agree that they are romantic partners). A similar prerequisite is now widely accepted in studies of friendship. More often than not, however, investigators take a respondent's word for whether or not s/he is now or recently has been involved with a romantic partner. We know from sociometric studies that many friendship nominations are not reciprocated, even when one is asking about close or best friends. It is very likely that romantic relationships function the same way, especially during early and middle adolescence. Figures from national surveys such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health), or even large-scale studies such as the Minnesota Longitudinal Study, may overstate the frequency of romantic liaisons by not requiring reciprocal nomination. Likewise, these studies can distort the nature of these relationships by including, in data analyses, ostensible romantic pairs who do not mutually agree that they are romantically connected.

An important mission for future research is to compare the characterization of romantic relationships when the criterion of mutual acknowledgment is and is not imposed. How reasonable is it to compare findings from studies of reciprocated pairs to those in which reciprocity is uncertain? How many current conclusions

about adolescent romantic relationships would be retained if studies were restricted to reciprocated nominations? Investigators also need to carefully consider, from a theoretical standpoint, what to make of romantic partner nominations that are not reciprocated. Are adolescents who claim such relationships bragging, dreaming, or seriously unaware that their partner does not perceive the relationship as romantic? What personal or situational factors are associated with the inclination to claim a romantic partner who does not return one's affections?

Operationalizing romantic relationships more consistently also would allow researchers to differentiate three constructs more clearly: romantic competencies, interactions, and relationships. The first of these deals with the social skills that allow individuals to engage in romantic interactions and relationships successfully. Romantic interactions refer to interpersonal behaviors with others that have a romantic focus; they may or may not occur within romantic relationships. For example, flirting with a peer, conversing with someone older on whom one has a crush, practicing with a friend how to ask someone out, are all important romantic behaviors that occur outside of a genuine romantic relationship. These different facets of romantic activity are time-related: Romantic competencies develop across childhood and adolescence; romantic interactions (short of relationships) are most common in pre- and early adolescence, whereas romantic relationships occur from adolescence onward. Distinguishing these constructs will help investigators to compare findings across studies more intelligently.

In sum, the Minnesota Longitudinal Study does what any groundbreaking research effort should do: raises as many questions as it provides answers. Collins and van Dulmen point investigators in new directions that may lead to a more sophisticated understanding of the interplay of relationship experiences that precede and then flow from romantic encounters in adolescence. Placing adolescent romantic relationships in this broader temporal and interpersonal context should inspire studies that unlock the mysteries of this crucial feature of adolescence in North American cultures.

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