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**ADOLESCENT ROMANCE AND DELINQUENCY:  
A FURTHER EXPLORATION OF HIRSCHI'S "COLD AND BRITTLE"  
RELATIONSHIPS HYPOTHESIS**

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## ADOLESCENT ROMANCE AND DELINQUENCY: A FURTHER EXPLORATION OF HIRSCHI'S "COLD AND BRITTLE" RELATIONSHIPS HYPOTHESIS

### ABSTRACT

Early on Hirschi argued that delinquent youth form relatively "cold and brittle" relationships with peers, depicting these youths as deficient in their attachments to others, and calling into question the emphasis of social learning theories on the importance of the individual's network of affiliations. Recent interest in adolescent romantic ties and delinquency suggests the utility of exploring the character of these liaisons as an extension of prior research focused on same-gender friends. Drawing primarily on the first wave of the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study, we focus on 957 teens with dating experience, and examine several indices of closeness and influence, as well as more negative features such as conflict. Results suggest that delinquency is not related to several measures of intimacy, and is actually associated with higher frequency of interaction and greater perceptions of partner influence. However, more delinquent adolescents did report lower levels of identity support from the partner and higher levels of verbal conflict. Supplemental analyses explore the influence of gender on these associations, and longitudinal effects of several indices of love and intimacy on later delinquency.

## INTRODUCTION

Virtually all theories of delinquency accord importance to family factors, but the various perspectives, particularly social control and social learning theory diverge on the importance accorded to adolescent friendships and the ways in which these are characterized. Social learning theories have depicted strong ties within the gang or delinquent peer group, while Hirschi (1969) critiqued this view, suggesting that in reality the ties delinquents forge with their peers are relatively “cold and brittle.” Hirschi argued further that because these ties are not particularly intimate, it is unlikely that they are influential in the way that social learning theorists suggest. This line of theorizing is also consistent with a stable trait or deficit view of delinquents (as individuals who are incapable of strong attachments to others), and with psychological studies positing that peer-rejected youth are at higher risk for a variety of adjustment problems concurrently and later in life (Bukowski and Cillessen, 1998). Although varying in emphasis, these traditions coalesce around two interrelated assumptions, namely that a) attachment is inherently prosocial in its effects, and that b) delinquent youth are deficient in their levels of attachment to others.

Studies exploring the quality of delinquents’ ties to friends have not offered strong support for this deficit view (Cairns and Cairns, 1994; Giordano et al., 1986; Kandel, 1991; Pleydon and Schner, 2001), although research has documented that problem youth may have lower status or ranking within the larger peer group (Coie et al., 1990). The present study extends this line of inquiry by investigating the nature and quality of romantic ties of youths varying in their levels of involvement in delinquency. Most research on delinquency has ignored the role of romantic involvement and romantic partnerships, but the more general literature on development has recently highlighted the centrality of the heterosexual world for a

comprehensive understanding of the adolescent period. Recent research has begun to forge links to delinquency (Haynie et al., 2005; Lonardo et al., 2009; Rebellon and Manasse, 2004), but most studies have not examined the qualities of the ties youths form with romantic partners and how this is related to youths' delinquency status. An important exception is a recent study by McCarthy and Casey (2008), who examined links between love, sex, and delinquency, relying on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). These researchers found a positive effect of love, and a negative effect of sexual involvement on later offending. This finding seems generally consistent with the idea of attachment as a prosocial influence, and basic tenets of the cold and brittle hypothesis. However, a limitation of large scale surveys such as Add Health is that they do not contain many measures of the subjectively experienced aspects of romantic relationships, including more social psychological aspects of romantic love, or other indices of perceived intimacy. Thus, the current analyses draws on interview data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), a study that was designed at the outset to provide a more comprehensive view of romantic relationships, as well as the character of relationships with parents and peers.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Prior Theory and Research on the Nature of Delinquents' Friendship Ties**

Parents and the family have been incorporated into virtually all major explanations of delinquent behavior. For example, both social control and social learning theories offer explanations of how parenting affects the delinquency of one's children. However, the two theoretical frameworks provide competing views of the nature and impact of friendship ties.

Social learning theories and early work on the gang posit that strong friendship ties exist amongst members of the gang or delinquent peer group, while control theories, particularly social bonding, cast doubt on the importance of delinquents' friendships and characterize these relationships as relatively "cold and brittle" (Hirschi, 1969: 141). In discussing the characteristics of delinquents' relations with parents and peers, Hirschi notes that "...the idea that delinquents have comparatively warm, intimate social relations with each other (or with anyone) is a romantic myth" (p. 159). These ideas are followed up in Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) discussion of low self-control, as the researchers argue that those who are low on self-control have "difficulty making and keeping friends" (p. 158), while less delinquent youths have a greater capacity to form "close friendship ties within a peer group" (p. 158). Some psychological treatments of the peers-delinquency relationship offer generally compatible portraits. Research on "peer rejection" does show differences in the ways delinquent youths are perceived by the larger peer network, often being assigned lower statuses than more conforming network members (Coie et al., 1990). Bukowski and Cillessen (1998) also show that youth who are rejected by their peers are at higher risk for adjustment problems not only in adolescence but adulthood as well.

In contrast, solidarity and emotional closeness in the delinquent group were stressed by early subcultural and differential association theorists. In his study of over 1,300 gangs in Chicago, Thrasher ([1927]1963) described the bonds amongst gang members as if there was an "interpenetration of personalities" (p. 210). Shared identities as well as the intimacy developed allow potential influence to occur within the delinquent group. Thrasher notes that the gang member "really [feels] the pressure of public opinion in that part of his own social world which is most vital to him and in which he wishes to maintain status" (p. 204). Intimacy in the

delinquent group is associated with greater interaction and communication, thus increasing a group member's awareness of others' expectations and attitudes. In addition, the emotional closeness felt can be sufficiently rewarding that some young people may accede to influence attempts in order to maintain or improve status/regard of these valued others. Warr (2002), in a comprehensive review of influence mechanisms within peer groups, noted that adolescents may also fear ridicule from others in the delinquent group or gang, may act out of feelings of loyalty to the other group members, as well as to maintain or enhance their status. Thus, issues of intimacy and influence are deeply connected. As Hirschi argued, if delinquents have "little regard for one another" (p. 159), it is unlikely that they will emerge as the strong influence social learning theorists describe.

In general, empirical research has not offered strong support for the "cold and brittle" relationships hypothesis as applied to the peer arena. In a study comparing the friendships of a sample of youths varying significantly in their levels of delinquent involvement, Giordano, Cernkovich, and Pugh (1986) found that delinquents did not score lower than their less delinquent counterparts on levels of caring, trust or the intimacy of communication with one another. However, more delinquent youths did score higher on perceived peer pressure and reported more conflict/disagreements with their friends (see also Dishion et al., 1995). Further, in a longitudinal investigation of later adult outcomes, Giordano et al. (1998) found that the intimacy of friendships during adolescence was not associated with level of adult crime or intimate partner violence reported some thirteen years later.

Pleydon and Schner (2001) obtained generally compatible results in an investigation of multiple dimensions of female friendships. Delinquents and nondelinquents were just as likely to report perceptions of trust, intimacy, conflict, and closeness, but the delinquent girls in the

sample felt greater amounts of peer pressure and lower levels of communication. With respect to drug use, Krohn and Thornberry (1993) found differences between users and nonusers from the Rochester Youth Development Study, but adolescents involved in drug use on average reported higher levels of closeness to their friends (see also Kandel, 1978). In particular users confided more in each other and stated that they have greater trust with peers. However, Krohn and Thornberry also found that delinquents' relationships tended to be shorter in duration, suggesting a more complex portrait.

Prior research on the character of romantic ties and delinquency involvement

Adolescent romantic relationships have historically been neglected in the theorizing and empirical research on delinquency involvement, but this is changing as scholarly interest in adolescent romantic relationships has increased within the developmental literature (Brown et al., 1999). In contrast to stereotypical depictions of these relationships as fleeting and superficial, some research highlights that these relationships become increasingly important to the adolescents involved in them, and to the course of adolescent social and identity development (Collins, 2003; Florsheim, 2003; Giordano et al., 2006). This emerging literature provides a useful backdrop for extending our exploration of the "cold and brittle" hypothesis to cover the heterosexual realms of experience. A straightforward control (or indeed, low self-control) argument is that the self-centered qualities that make delinquents poor friends should also be implicated in the ways in which they conduct their romantic relationships. Thus, we might expect them to report fewer feelings of love and caring for the partner, little influence on one another, and higher levels of conflict. Based on the social learning perspective, we expect to find that delinquents do not differ significantly in the quality of their romantic ties.

A number of recent studies have explored the connections between romantic relationships and delinquency, but most have not examined the quality of ties formed, instead focusing on the delinquency of the partner (Haynie et al., 2005; Lonardo et al., 2009) or the role of delinquency in attracting partners (Rebellon and Manasse, 2004). However, as described briefly above, a recent article by McCarthy and Casey (2008) explored links between the character of romantic relationships and delinquency using data from Add Health. The authors developed a more nuanced argument relative to Hirschi's original stance about the relationship between attachment and delinquency, one that resonates with Sampson and Laub's (1993) revised theory of informal social control perspective. The latter focused on variations in the adult life course experiences of a sample of juvenile delinquents, and mechanisms underlying the "good marriage effect." Thus, McCarthy and Casey do not focus heavily on the idea that stable traits of some youth diminish their capacity to form significant bonds of attachment, but rather adopt a life course approach, suggesting that net of one's initial level of delinquency, those adolescents who are involved in a romantic relationship characterized by love will later on tend to evidence lower levels of delinquency involvement, compared with those reporting lower levels of attachment to their partners. Their longitudinal and cross-sectional findings indicating that love is inversely related to delinquency, however, are generally supportive of a control (i.e., attachment is prosocial) perspective. The authors also hypothesized, relying on a strain argument, that sexual involvement would be associated with greater delinquency involvement, and results provided general support for the idea of distinct mechanisms of influence for love and sexuality. As suggested above, however, a limitation of the Add Health data set is that the measures of love are largely behavioral, and for the most part do not tap the feelings and emotions associated with love and intimacy. In short, these items tap what adolescents have done and said within the



romantic context, but do not index levels of positive regard or affect actually experienced by the respondent. In addition, some of the items included in the love scale (e.g., whether the respondent had met the partner's parent) may index a particular type of formal dating relationship that is less common among delinquent youth, leaving relatively unexplored questions about levels of perceived love and caring and other qualities that characterize these relationships.

Some ethnographic accounts suggest that even if we accept the premise that delinquents' peer relations are not accurately described as "cold and brittle", that nevertheless heterosexual relationships may well be characterized in such a fashion. For example, Macleod (1987), in his study of two friendship groups in a low-income neighborhood, described the same-gender relationships of these relatively delinquent youth as close, quoting respondents who pointed out that some of the hardships they faced "makes your friendships bond tighter. Because you gotta rely on other people to help you through whatever it is you need..." (p. 254). In marked contrast, Macleod noted that while he did not delve into detail about the gender relations of the "Hallway Hangers," "it was quite obvious that they saw the woman's role in their relationships as purely instrumental. Women were stripped of all identity except for that bound up with their sexuality, and even that was severely restricted" (p. 280).

## **CURRENT INVESTIGATION**

The above depictions suggest the utility of examining in more systematic detail the romantic relationship experiences of youth who vary in their levels of delinquency involvement. Our measurement approach is multidimensional and designed to capture basic feelings of intimacy and closeness (intimate self-disclosure, caring), as well as subjective feelings that are

relatively unique to the romantic context (feelings of heightened emotionality or love). The portrait we develop also examines the adolescent's perceptions of the partner's influence as a reference other. Although frequency of interaction is relatively neutral as a relationship dimension, scholars have often suggested that contact provides numerous opportunities to develop feelings of intimacy and also increases the likelihood that influence will occur. Influence attempts and actual influence (as perceived by the partner) will also be assessed, however. Following the general logic of the "cold and brittle" hypothesis, we might expect to find that romantic partners are not particularly influential in the lives of more delinquent youth, and even the more general literature on peers typically depicts same-gender friends as the key source of reference and influence for delinquent youth. This notion is consistent with Macleod's (1987) depiction of girlfriends as occupying a relatively marginal position in the lives of the young people he studied. Our assessment also examines more negative relationship dynamics (verbal conflict, lack of identity support), which prior research on peers and the "cold and brittle" hypothesis would lead us to expect would be more prevalent for delinquent youth relative to their less delinquent counterparts.

Our objective is to determine whether level of self-reported delinquency involvement is significantly associated with variations in these relationship qualities and dynamics, both at the zero-order, and once traditional predictors (of delinquency, and of the character of social attachments) are taken into account. Given the key role of gender as a correlate of delinquency involvement, and as an influence on the character of romantic relationships, we include controls for gender and other sociodemographic characteristics in basic models, and also explore whether there are systematic variations in the nature of the association between delinquency and quality of the relationships as a function of respondent gender. Some prior research has focused on the

role of romantic partners as a particular influence on girls' delinquency ( see Cauffman et al., 2008; Haynie et al., 2005), and the developmental literature has also emphasized girls' strongly relational orientation (Gilligan, 1982). Thus, while we do not expect distinctive patterns of association between relationship qualities and delinquency in general, one provisional hypothesis is that more delinquent girls would score higher than their male counterparts on perceived influence of the romantic partner.

In building this descriptive portrait of the romantic relationship experiences of youths varying in their levels of delinquency involvement, we rely on the cross-sectional rather than longitudinal associations. A key reason is that unlike studies of marriage effects, by the time of the next wave of interviews occurs (one year later), many of the respondents are no longer dating the focal romantic partner they described at the initial wave. In addition, our focus here is not on the question of temporal shifts in levels of delinquency. However, as a supplement to the analyses described above, we also examined wave one reports of love and intimacy as predictors of wave two delinquency, controlling for wave one delinquency and other covariates. This provides a replication of McCarthy and Casey's (2008) approach to the love-delinquency relationship, using different indices of attachment or bonding within the romantic context.

## **METHODS**

### **DATA**

Now consisting of four waves, the TARS data were obtained from a stratified, random sample of 1,321 students registered for the 7th, 9th, and 11<sup>th</sup> grades in Lucas County, Ohio, an urban, metropolitan area largely consisting of the city of Toledo. Incorporating over-samples of Black and Hispanic youths, the initial sample was devised by the National Opinion Research

Center and was drawn from the enrollment records of 62 schools from seven school districts. Interview questionnaires were completed at home using laptop computers, and school attendance was not a requirement for inclusion in the sample. U.S. Census data indicate that our sample parallels the characteristics of the Toledo MSA, and the socio-demographic characteristics of the Toledo area are comparable to those of the nation in terms of education (80% in the Toledo MSA vs. 84% in the US are high school graduates), median family income (\$50,046 vs. \$50,287), marital status (73.5% vs. 75.9% married two-parent households), and race (13% vs. 12% Black). Of the full sample, our focus is on 971 adolescents at the first wave (2001-2002) who had reported dating at the time of the interview or in the year prior. Additionally, fourteen respondents reported being of a race/ethnicity other than White, Black, or Hispanic and were not included in the analysis. This results in an analytic sample of 957 dating adolescents. The supplemental longitudinal analysis relies on the respondents who completed waves one and two, or 836 respondents.

## MEASURES

### Dependent Variables.

Measures of *relationship qualities* were derived from prior studies of delinquents' peer relationships, with additional scales and items reflecting relationship dynamics that are relatively more unique to the romantic context. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and range) for all of the variables used in this study are presented in table 1.

**Table 1 about here**

*Intimate self-disclosure* is measured by a modified version of West and Zingle's (1969) scale. Each respondent was asked to report how often ("never" to "very often") he or she communicated the following to their partner: "something really great that happened;" "something really bad that happened;" "your home life and family;" "worried about your appearance;" and "your private thoughts and feelings" ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ).

*Caring* is determined by the respondents' answers to a single question, "X cares about me." Responses range from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

*Love* is a variable composed of four items adapted from Hatfield and Sprecher's (1986) passionate love scale. The survey questions ask for level of agreement ("strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") to these statements: "I would rather be with X than anyone else;" "the sight of X turns me on;" "I am very attracted by X;" and "X always seems to be on my mind" ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ).

*Frequency of interaction* is a measure based on items from prior research on peers (Giordano et al., 1986), and is constructed from the mean of two items gauging how often during the past week ("not at all" to "5 or more times") the adolescent went to his or her partner's home and met with the partner after school to hang out ( $\alpha = 0.63$ ).

*Influence attempts* is a scale of the average response to two items: "X sometimes wants to control what I do" and "X always tries to change me" (Giordano et al., 1986) ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ). The respondents were asked to indicate how strongly they agree or disagree with the statements.

*Actual influence* is derived from responses to three questions about the romantic partner's actual influence, as perceived by the respondent (Giordano et al., 1986). Each adolescent reported how strongly they agree with the statements "I sometimes do things because X is doing them," "I sometimes do things because I don't want to lose X's respect," and "X often influences what I do" ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ).

*Verbal conflict* is measured by a scale of three items drawn from the Conflict Tactics Scale (Strauss et al., 1980). Respondents were asked to respond with how often they “have disagreements or arguments” with their partner, “yell or shout at each other,” or “give each other the silent treatment” ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ). Responses range from “never” to “very often”.

*Lack of identity support* is a scale composed of two items (Giordano et al., 1986). The adolescent was asked to indicate how much they agree (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) with these statements: “X is often disappointed in me” and “X seemed to wish I were a different type of person” ( $\alpha = 0.64$ ).

#### Independent Variable

*Delinquency* was measured using a 10-item version of the 26-item delinquency scale developed by Elliot and Ageton (1980). The scale is composed of the mean values for each respondent to the following questions: “In the past 12 months, how often have you: drunk alcohol?;” “stolen (or tried to steal) things worth \$5 or less?;” “carried a hidden weapon other than a plain pocket knife?;” “damaged or destroyed property on purpose?;” “stolen (or tried to steal) something worth more than \$50?;” “attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting him/her?;” “sold drugs?;” “been drunk in a public place?;” “broken into a building or vehicle (or tried to break in) to steal something or just to look around?;” and “used drugs to get high (not because you were sick)?” ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ). The possible responses for these questions range from “never” to “more than once a day.”

#### Controls

*Gender* is coded so that male is the reference category. *Race/ethnicity* is composed of the groups white (reference), black, and Hispanic, and *age* is coded in years. Socioeconomic status is controlled for using *mother's education*, which consists of categories for less than a high school education, high school graduate (reference), and more than a high school education. A set of dummy variables is also included to represent *family structure* (single parent, step-parent, other, and married biological parents as the reference category). *Parental monitoring* is composed of a five-item scale gauging the extent to which the adolescents feel their parents make decisions for them concerning their social life, friends, and dating ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ). Academic achievement is measured by self-reported *grades* in school (ranging from “mostly A’s” to “mostly F’s”). *Self-esteem* is included as a six-item version of Rosenberg’s (1979) self-esteem scale ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ). Controls for relationship characteristics include a dummy for whether the respondent had *sexual intercourse with the partner* (reference category is no), a dummy for *relationship status* (current or most recent as the reference), and *duration* (in months).

### Analytic Strategy

We test Hirschi’s (1969) “cold and brittle” relationships hypothesis as applied to romantic relationships via a series of OLS regressions estimated to determine the zero-order association between self-reported delinquency and relationship quality. Then the models are estimated including the control variables discussed above. Using this method, we will determine whether any of the controls mediate observed relationship quality–delinquency associations. In addition, each continuous independent variable is centered on its mean before it is entered into the regression equations. We explore gender by delinquency interactions, in order to determine whether the relationship qualities–delinquency associations differ for males and females.

Supplemental models were estimated with corrections for possible selection bias using Heckman's sample selection procedure, based on the notion that the dating sample itself is likely to be somewhat more delinquent than the sample of non-daters.<sup>1</sup> A final set of models examined the influence of wave one relationship quality reports on time 2 delinquency, controlling for wave one self-reported delinquency and other covariates, an analysis that essentially focuses on changes in the respondent's behavior as influenced by levels of romantic partner intimacy reported at wave one.

## RESULTS

### Communication and Intimacy

Table 2 presents the results for models examining the nature of communication and intimacy within romantic relationships, as reported by youths varying significantly in their levels of delinquency involvement. Intimate self-disclosure has been conceptualized as a "barometer" of the state of relationships (West and Zingle, 1969), but both the zero-order and multivariate models indicate that delinquency is not significantly related to levels of intimate self-disclosure reported. The coefficient for delinquency in column 2 of Table 2 presents the results for the model testing the relationship between the index of partner caring and self-reported delinquency (as well as controls). Again we find that at the zero-order ( $b = 0.02$ ) and in the model including controls ( $b = -0.01$ ), delinquency is not significantly related to level of perceived caring. Results of models examining the association between love and delinquency are compatible with this portrait of communication and intimacy, but reference the respondent's own feelings of positive emotions associated with this romantic partner. The coefficient for delinquency at the zero-order and with controls does not indicate a significant relationship between reports of love and



delinquency involvement. In sum, while the “cold and brittle” hypothesis would lead us to predict that more delinquent youth would report lower levels of intimate self-disclosure, caring and love for their partner, the analyses do not support this depiction. These findings also diverge from McCarthy and Casey’s (2008) recent analysis of the Add Health data, where the authors documented an inverse cross-sectional association between their index of love and self-reported delinquency involvement, as well as a longitudinal influence on wave 2 delinquency reports. In supplemental analyses, we also estimated models that examined longitudinal effects of the above relationship quality variables on later delinquency, and do not find a significant longitudinal effect.<sup>2</sup>

### **Table 2 about here**

#### Frequency of Interaction and Perceptions of Partner Influence

The next set of models explores more basic contours of the relationship, including frequency of contact, partner influence attempts and actual influence of the romantic partner. Column 1 of Table 3 presents the results of the OLS regression of contact frequency on delinquency and controls. These models indicate that self-reported delinquency is positively related to the frequency of interaction at the zero-order ( $b = 0.21; p < 0.001$ ) and after including the control variables ( $b = 0.09; p < 0.01$ ). Examining the effect of the covariates on the frequency of interaction-delinquency relationship (from 0.21 to 0.09), we find that the association is partially accounted for by the inclusion of the control for sexual intercourse. Those who had sexual intercourse with their partner have an average rate of delinquency of 1.62, which is an increase of 0.41 over the rate for adolescents that have not had sex. A t-test indicates that the difference in means is significant at the 0.001 level. Although the relationship is thus

mediated in part by sexual experience, delinquency still exhibits a direct, positive association with frequency of contact.

### **Table 3 about here**

Column 2 reports the findings from our examination of attempted influence from the adolescents' romantic partners. Consistent with the "cold and brittle" notion and the idea of a marginal role for romantic partners, we would expect that influence attempts would have an inverse relationship with delinquency involvement. However, results reveal a positive association. These results indicate that net of other important factors, delinquent adolescents report that their partners attempt to influence them more than less delinquent adolescents. Similar to the results for frequency of interaction, the delinquency coefficient is partially mediated by the control for sexual intercourse.

Next we examine the association between perceptions of actual influence and delinquency involvement. In line with the "cold and brittle" hypothesis, we expected to find a lower level of actual influence from the romantic partner among more delinquent youth. However, the regression results indicate a positive association of delinquency with levels of actual influence at the zero-order ( $b = 0.09; p < 0.01$ ) and in the full model ( $b = 0.09; p < .05$ ). These findings add to the portrait of delinquents' lives, indicating not only frequent contact with peers, but frequent interactions with and perceived influence on the part of the romantic partner. In addition, supplemental analyses (not shown) indicate that durations of these relationships do not differ by the respondent's level of self-reported delinquency involvement, a finding that is also somewhat at odds with the idea of "brittle" relationships.

Verbal Conflict and Identity Support

The final set of models focus on the vicissitudes or more problematic aspects of these relationships, and links with delinquency involvement. First, it is expected that those who self-report involvement in delinquency will also exhibit more verbal conflict with their partners. Column 1 of table 4 reveals that this is indeed the case. At the zero-order, the coefficient for delinquency equals 0.13 ( $p < 0.001$ ). After adding controls, however, the delinquency coefficient decreases by about half, still maintaining significance at a conventional level ( $p < 0.05$ ). Again, having had sexual intercourse partially mediates the delinquency effect found at the zero-order. In general as delinquency increases, we find that verbal conflict also increases. This result may be viewed as providing some support for social control theory's view of adolescent relationship qualities, and is consistent with higher peer conflict noted in previous research (Dishion et al., 1995; Giordano et al., 1986). Column 2 lists the regression results for lack of identity support, and findings are consistent with the results for verbal conflict. Delinquency is associated with a greater perceived lack of identity support from the partner, and is significant at the zero order and with controls the coefficient is largely unchanged ( $b = 0.08$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 4 about here**

As a final step in the analysis, we estimated a series of models identical to those described above that included gender by delinquency interactions, in order to determine whether the observed relationship qualities-delinquency connections differed according to respondent gender. Whether the models focused on rewards, patterns of interaction and influence, or vicissitudes, the interactions were not significant, revealing a generally similar pattern of associations regardless of gender of the respondent.

## DISCUSSION

Research on delinquent youths' relationships has focused most heavily on family deficits and extensive socializing with peers; yet a comprehensive understanding of the lives of adolescents in general and delinquent youth in particular will necessarily also include attention to their dating and sexual experiences. Recent studies, generally consistent with a social learning perspective, have documented that the delinquency of adolescent romantic partners explains additional variance in youths' own self-reported involvement (Haynie et al., 2005; Lonardo et al., 2009). Yet this does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the qualities/dynamics of the romantic ties of youths who vary in their levels of participation in delinquent acts. Early on, Hirschi (1969) depicted the peer relationships of delinquent youth as "cold and brittle", suggesting that peers were unlikely to influence them in the ways stressed by cultural deviance and social learning theorists. Thus, by extension, we might expect such youths' romantic liaisons to be similarly lacking in warmth and intimacy. Generally consistent with this idea, McCarthy and Casey (2008) recently documented a negative association between involvement in romantic relationships characterized by love and later self-reported delinquency involvement, but a positive association between sexual intercourse and levels of participation in delinquent acts.

The current analysis provided a multidimensional portrait of the nature of adolescents' romantic relationships, suggesting a somewhat more complex portrait. Similar to McCarthy and Hagan's findings, we documented that delinquent youth are more likely than their less delinquent counterparts to report that they had sex with a current/most recent partner. However, across several different indices (level of intimate self-disclosure, perceived partner caring, love), we did not find an inverse relationship between feelings of love and intimacy and delinquency

involvement, whether we examined the association cross-sectionally or longitudinally. It is not clear why our findings differ from those based on analyses of the Add Health data. As suggested above, the Add Health index of love taps a range of behaviors associated with romantic involvement, rather than subjectively experienced feelings (e.g., Add Health asks respondents whether they have said “I love you,” whereas the TARS protocol includes items from Hatfield and Sprecher’s passionate love scale, such as “I would rather be with X than with anyone else.”). We note also that in straightforward cross-sectional comparisons, more delinquent Add Health respondents (defined based on above average scores on the self-reported delinquency index) do not differ significantly from their less delinquent counterparts on a number of the individual items comprising this love scale (analyses available upon request). For example, delinquents were as likely to report feeling like a couple, telling others they were a couple and saying I love you. Differences between the subgroups were observed on the “met parents” item, and more delinquent youth were (consistent with the sexual intercourse findings) more likely to report having kissed their romantic partner.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it appears that while McCarthy and Casey’s analyses exploring changes in delinquency suggest an inverse relationship to love, the basic descriptive data based on cross-sectional comparisons do not clearly evoke Hirschi’s (1969) cold and brittle depiction of the relationships of delinquent youth. Also inconsistent with the cold and brittle notion, analyses of the TARS data indicated that durations of romantic relationships did not differ across levels of delinquency, and more delinquent youth actually reported spending more time with romantic partners. Consistent with this, perceptions of partner’s influence attempts and actual influence were positively linked with delinquency involvement.

At the same time, more delinquent youth who participated in the TARS study reported higher levels of verbal conflict within their relationships, a finding that is generally consistent

with but adds to prior research showing similar patterns with their peers (Dishion et al., 1995; Giordano et al., 1986). In addition, delinquent youth perceived lower ‘identity support’ or levels of acceptance from their romantic partners, adding to the idea of more discord within these relationships. Across all of the dimensions of relationship quality studied, then, a portrait of romantic ties emerges of relationships of some significance to delinquent youth, but characterized by a greater number of problem areas. These results suggest that delinquent youth are not in fundamental ways incapable of forming attachments to others, as suggested by some versions of social control theory. Nevertheless, while average durations did not differ by level of delinquency, the conflict/identity support findings and additional research may well reveal more support for the “brittle” than the “cold” description Hirschi offered. Future research focusing on the adolescent period as well as the transition to adulthood is important to pursue, since studies of “desistance” from crime have accorded a central, if not entirely settled role for romantic partner effects (Giordano et al., 2007; Leverentz, 2006; Sampson et al., 2006).

The current study focused on the quality of ties formed, but a logical next step is to investigate links between the partner’s delinquency, the nature of these relationships, and respondents’ own trajectories of involvement in delinquency and crime. Even though prior research has documented a tendency toward homophily in partner selection, levels of behavioral concordance are not in most instances perfectly attuned. Thus, the higher scores on partner influence attempts and actual influence and even the lack of identity support findings may relate at least in part either to attempts to involve or restrict the romantic partner’s delinquency or related actions (e.g., drinking/drug use, socializing with peers). In addition, research on other dynamics, including sexual behavior (e.g., cheating behaviors), will not only provide a more comprehensive picture of the relationship experiences of delinquent youth, but may well uncover

factors that promote/limit the reach of the so-called 'good marriage effect' as respondents navigate the transition to adulthood.

## NOTES

1. We used Stata's Heckman procedure with robust standard errors and attempted to closely match McCarthy and Casey's (2008) selection model by including measures for gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, parental monitoring, grades, self-esteem, weight (respondent's perception of weight relative to others their age), belief that sex should wait until marriage, parent's discussions with respondent about waiting until marriage to have sex, perceived popularity with the opposite sex, and delinquency involvement.
2. Cross-sectional and longitudinal results were similar when we relied on the more serious items in our self-reported delinquency scale. We also estimated selection models incorporating variables identified as influences on delinquency involvement and the likelihood of having dating experience. While selection bias was identified in several models, this did not alter the substantive findings described above, or results described in subsequent sections.
3. While no differences were found in the percentages who reported giving the partner a gift, delinquents were less likely to indicate that they had received one from the partner. However, a majority in both subgroups answered affirmatively--75% of the less delinquent subgroup received a gift as compared with 72% of the delinquent youth.



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## TABLES

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Range</b>
<i>Dependent Variables</i>			
Intimate Self-Disclosure	3.28	.99	1–5
Caring	4.14	.85	1–5
Love	3.53	.89	1–5
Frequency of Interaction	2.52	.65	1–4
Influence Attempts	1.90	.86	1–5
Actual Influence	2.14	.82	1–5
Verbal Conflict	1.97	.87	1–5
Lack of Identity Support	1.84	.78	1–5
<i>Independent Variables</i>			
Delinquency	1.33	.67	1–9
Gender			
Male	.49	—	0–1
Female	.51	—	0–1
Race/Ethnicity			
White	.65	—	0–1
Black	.23	—	0–1
Hispanic	.12	—	0–1
Age	15.49	1.70	12–19
Mother's Education			
Less than H.S. graduation	.12	—	0–1
H.S. graduation	.36	—	0–1
More than H.S. graduation	.52	—	0–1

Family Type			
Married, biological parents	.49	—	0–1
Single parent	.26	—	0–1
Step parent	.18	—	0–1
Other	.07	—	0–1
Parental Monitoring	2.13	.89	1–5
Grades	6.17	2.00	1–9
Self-Esteem	3.96	.60	1.67–5
Sex with Partner			
No	.72	—	0–1
Yes	.28	—	0–1
Relationship Status			
Most recent	.40	—	0–1
Current	.60	—	0–1
Relationship Duration	4.79	2.07	1–8

Table 2. OLS Standardized Regression Coefficients: Communication and Intimacy

	Intimate Self-Disclosure		Caring		Love	
	Zero Order	Full Model	Zero Order	Full Model	Zero Order	Full Model
Delinquency <sup>a</sup>	.03	-.01	.02	-.01	.06	.02
Gender (reference = Male)						
Female	.17***	.11***	.11***	.07*	.06	.01
Race/Ethnicity (reference = White)						
Black	-.08*	-.14***	-.00	-.07*	-.02	-.05
Hispanic	.01	-.00	.04	.02	.02	.02
Age <sup>a</sup>	.26***	.09**	.18***	.00	.21***	.04
Mother's Education (reference = H.S. grad.)						
Less than H.S. graduation	.06	.03	.10**	.06	-.00	-.04
More than H.S. graduation	.07*	.06	.08*	.08*	-.01	-.01
Family Type (reference = Married, biological parents)						
Single parent	-.07*	-.05	-.04	-.06	-.06	-.06
Step parent	-.06	-.04	-.03	-.03	-.11**	-.10**
Other	-.03	-.05	-.03	-.06*	-.02	-.05
Parental Monitoring <sup>a</sup>	-.14***	-.06	-.13***	-.08**	-.15***	-.09**
Grades <sup>a</sup>	.09**	-.01	.03	-.05	.04	-.01
Self-Esteem <sup>a</sup>	.15***	.11***	.17***	.13***	.07*	.02

Sex with Partner (reference = No)							
Yes	.23***	.02	.20***	-.01	.20***	.01	
Relationship Status (reference = Most recent)							
Current	.35***	.26***	.29***	.21***	.31***	.25***	
Relationship Duration <sup>a</sup>	.42***	.33***	.44***	.39***	.35***	.29***	
Model F		27.60***		22.73***		16.46***	
R <sup>2</sup>		.32		.28		.22	

\* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

<sup>a</sup> Variable is centered around its mean



Table 3. OLS Standardized Regression Coefficients: Interaction and Influence

	Frequency of Interaction		Influence Attempts		Actual Influence	
	Zero Order	Full Model	Zero Order	Full Model	Zero Order	Full Model
Delinquency <sup>a</sup>	.21***	.09**	.16***	.11***	.09**	.09*
Gender (reference = Male)						
Female	-.04	-.06*	-.17***	-.15***	-.21***	-.23***
Race/Ethnicity (reference = White)						
Black	-.06	-.15***	.03	-.01	-.06	-.04
Hispanic	.03	-.03	.02	-.03	-.07*	-.08*
Age <sup>a</sup>	.35***	.14***	.02	-.04	-.00	-.03
Mother's Education (reference = H.S. grad.)						
Less than H.S. graduation	.04	-.01	.08*	.07*	.02	.05
More than H.S. graduation	-.04	-.03	.03	-.01	.04	.03
Family Type (reference = Married, biological parents)						
Single parent	.02	.02	.07*	.03	-.06	-.04
Step parent	.01	.02	-.04	-.06	-.07*	-.06
Other	.03	.03	.04	.04	-.02	.02
Parental Monitoring <sup>a</sup>	-.19***	-.06*	.04	.06	.01	.02
Grades <sup>a</sup>	-.04	-.02	-.12***	-.02	.00	.05
Self-Esteem <sup>a</sup>	.11***	.07*	-.16***	-.15***	-.15***	-.16***

Sex with Partner (reference = No)

Yes	.44***	.23***	.15***	.12***	.01	-.02
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Relationship Status (reference = Most recent)

Current	.20***	.10***	-.12***	-.13***	-.05	-.01
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Relationship Duration<sup>a</sup>

	.39***	.24***	.10**	.10**	.06*	.12***
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Model F

		26.85***		8.73***		6.61***
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R<sup>2</sup>

		.31		.13		.10
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\* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

<sup>a</sup> Variable is centered around its mean

Table 4. OLS Standardized Regression Coefficients: The Vicissitudes of Romance

	Verbal Conflict		Lack of Identity Support	
	Zero Order	Full Model	Zero Order	Full Model
Delinquency <sup>a</sup>	.13***	.06*	.10**	.08*
Gender (reference = Male)				
Female	.05	.05	-.18***	-.16***
Race/Ethnicity (reference = White)				
Black	.26***	.18***	.12***	.12**
Hispanic	.08*	.01	.02	-.00
Age <sup>a</sup>	.20***	.05	-.05	-.05
Mother's Education (reference = H.S. grad.)				
Less than H.S. graduation	.14***	.07*	.05	.04
More than H.S. graduation	-.07*	-.05	-.02	.00
Family Type (reference = Married, biological parents)				
Single parent	.16***	.02	.09**	.03
Step parent	.04	-.01	.04	.01
Other	.13***	.05	.09**	.08**
Parental Monitoring <sup>a</sup>	-.02	.02	.05	.02
Grades <sup>a</sup>	-.13***	-.04	-.13***	-.01
Self-Esteem <sup>a</sup>	-.00	-.04	-.20***	-.21***
Sex with Partner (reference = No)				
Yes	.31***	.15***	.04	.06
Relationship Status (reference = Most recent)				
Current	.06	-.07*	-.19***	-.18***
Relationship Duration <sup>a</sup>	.35***	.25***	-.02	.01
Model F		17.28***		9.80***
R <sup>2</sup>		.23		.14

\* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

<sup>a</sup> Variable is centered around its mean