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ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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Abstract

Parent and peer influences on academic achievement are well documented, but little research has examined links to romantic involvement during the adolescent period. The current study draws on interviews with 572 currently dating teens and results indicate that the romantic partner's grades are significantly related to adolescent respondents' self-reported grades, even after their own orientation toward school and traditional family, peer, and demographic controls have been taken into account. We hypothesize, following results on peer influence processes, that this concordance reveals a tendency to select partners relatively similar to oneself, but may involve social influence processes as well. We draw on the content of in-depth interviews elicited from a subset of the respondents to illustrate both types of mechanisms (selection vs. influence). Quantitative analyses also explore the role of age, gender and race/ethnicity as affecting the nature of this relationship. While age and race do not appear to uniquely influence the association, analyses indicate a gender effect—results reveal a stronger influence of partners' grades on boys' own self-reported grades relative to the association documented among girls. These results underscore the importance of continuing to explore the role of romantic partners in connection with a broad range of prosocial as well as problem adolescent outcomes.

Introduction

Research on academic achievement has focused on the importance of family characteristics and processes for cognitive and social development, teacher expectations, academic aspirations/attainment, and dropping out behaviors (DeGraaf, DeGraaf, and Kraaykamp, 2000; Farkas, 1996; Jeynes, 2005; Rumberger, 1990; Steinberg, 1990). While somewhat less voluminous, research has also linked peer relations and characteristics of friends to academic motivation, school disruption, aspirations, and achievement (Berndt, Laychak, and Park, 1990; Crosnoe and Elder, 2003; Epstein, 1983; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Urdan, 1997). Thus, family and peer relations are critical to an understanding of adolescents' social and academic lives.

During adolescence, teens also become interested and involved in dating, and it is clear that over the period, heterosexual relationships gain in importance (see e.g., Furman, Brown, and Feiring, 1999). Yet despite the ubiquity and general importance of dating, the role of romantic partners on academic achievement has not been systematically investigated. Brown, Feiring, and Furman (1999) note that the tendency to overlook dating partners as a source of social influence may trace back to the idea that such relationships are likely to be relatively superficial and transitory (see e.g., Merten, 1996), particularly when compared to family and friendship bonds. However, recent studies focused directly on the character, meaning and importance of romantic relationships to adolescents themselves develop a portrait that contrasts with these earlier depictions (Furman and Hand, 2006; Furman and Shaffer, 2003; Giordano, Longmore, and Manning, 2006). Studies of other adolescent behaviors such as delinquency also suggest that research on partner effects may be important to pursue (Haynie, Giordano, Manning, and Longmore, 2005). Thus, the objective of the current study is to determine whether the dating partner's academic performance is related to adolescents' academic achievement levels, once the well-documented influence of parents and peers has been taken into account.

We rely on data from the first wave of the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), a longitudinal investigation of romantic, peer and family relationships during adolescence, in order to assess whether the dating partner's level of academic performance (measured by grades) is significantly

related to the adolescent's own performance, controlling for the respondent's demographic characteristics, personal orientation toward academics, friends' attitudes, variations in family resources (e.g., parents' education), as well as family structure and dynamics (e.g., monitoring, involvement in school-related activities). As the seriousness of dating involvement has been associated with the adolescent's age (Carver, Joyner, and Udry, 2003), we also explore whether any observed connections between romantic partners and academic achievement vary by the developmental stage of the adolescent. Similarly, research has pointed to gender differences in the salience and character of romantic relationships, and, in the aggregate, girls outperform boys during the high school years; thus interactions between gender and romantic partners' grades as influences on the respondent's grades are also examined. Finally, prior research has documented some variations in minority youths' experiences within the world of romance (Coates, 1999), and research has also shown that race/ethnicity is related to levels of school performance (Roscigno, 1998). Thus our sampling strategy was designed to elicit interviews from a diverse sample of teens. In addition to controls for race/ethnicity within multivariate models, we also estimate models that include race/ethnicity by romantic partner's grades interactions.

Background

Family Influence

It is well accepted that the family plays a crucial role in the academic orientation and performance of students. Prior research has shown that socioeconomic status, family structure and parental involvement are related to a range of achievement outcomes for children and adolescents (Astone and McLanahan, 1991; Battle, 1998; Downey, 1995). A most consistent predictor is the parents' own level of academic attainment. As Coleman (1988) highlighted, the parents' educational level influences the financial, social and cultural resources and relationship alliances of the parents, including involvement in 'high' cultural activities that have been found to influence children's cognitive and communication skills, and enhance material that is taught in the classroom (DeGraaf et al., 2000; Farkas, 1996; Lareau, 1987; Parcel and Dufur, 2001). Accordingly, it is not surprising that research consistently shows that in less advantaged

families, children perform at a lower level than those who come from families characterized by greater income and parental education (Orr, 2003).

The type of family household in which the adolescent resides has been found to contribute to performance; however, results are mixed. Studies have generally shown that students who live in two-parent homes tend to do better academically than students who live in one-parent homes (e.g., Guo, 1998, Jeynes, 2005; Jordan and Nettles, 1999). Two-parent homes, it has been argued, are better equipped to monitor the activities of the child, may be more involved in the student's academic life, and may be more advantaged in terms of resources (Milne, Myers, Rosenthal, and Ginsburg, 1986). Nevertheless, some studies fail to find any significant negative effect of single-parent homes on achievement or any differences between single parent and two-parent homes (e.g., McNeal, 1999).

A number of studies have moved beyond these basic family characteristics to study parenting processes such as involvement directly. Parental involvement includes the more general notion of parental monitoring and supervision, but also encompasses more direct, instrumental involvement in the academic affairs of the child (Crosnoe, 2001; Muller, 1998). For example, parents may engage in conversations about academics with the adolescent, assist with course selection and homework and provide advice concerning school and career goals (Bogenschneider, 1997). Conversely, having parents who are less involved in their student's high school career (e.g., not attending parental school activities and their children's school activities), has been linked to dropping out of school (Rumberger, 1990).

Friends

Friendship processes in adolescence are also strongly related to social and academic development (Crosnoe, 2000; Guay, Bolvin, and Hodges, 1999; Newcomb and Bagwell, 1996). Research has shown that friends influence academically related outcomes such as school attachment/engagement (Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder, 2001), cheating behaviors (Finn and Frone, 2004), and achievement (Johnson, 2000). Although some research suggests that negative interactions with peers are related to poor school

adjustment (see e.g., Berndt and Keefe, 1995), the quality or warmth of relationships formed does not provide a comprehensive assessment of peer effects.

Knowledge of the academic orientation or achievement of a focal adolescent's friends provides an additional vantage point for gauging how friends influence achievement outcomes (Hartup, 1996). Friends' attitudes toward achievement have the potential to influence the adolescent's own attitudes and performance because of the large amount of time spent with friends during adolescence (Brown, 2004), and increased autonomy from parents that also characterizes the period. In addition, a tendency to select friends on the basis of similar characteristics sets into motion identification processes, that along with frequent contact, maximize the likelihood that influence will occur (Epstein and Karweit, 1983; Kandel, 1978; Noller, 1994; Youniss and Smoller, 1985).

Researchers find that friends' orientation toward education does appear to influence academic performance. Epstein (1983) explored the relationship between close friends' attitudes toward achievement and academic performance on the student's achievement over the duration of a year, and found that the student's achievement declined or improved over the year depending on their friends' achievement and academic attitudes. Initially low-scoring students were positively influenced by high scoring friends across all grade levels (9-11) on achievement tests. Urdan (1997) found that adolescent high achievers were more likely to have friends who also encouraged and valued academic achievement. Similarly, Crosnoe and Elder (2003) observed that having academically oriented friends is associated with a decrease in problems at school.

Romantic Relationships

Dating partners as an influence during adolescence have been examined less often than friendship and peer relations and the family. The limited literature has directed most of the attention towards the negative outcomes of adolescent romantic relationship involvement. Research on adolescent sexuality, for example, frequently derives from a problem behavior perspective, focusing on issues such as early age of onset (Graber, Brooks-Gunn, and Galen, 1998; Hirschi, 1969), teen pregnancy (Hofferth and Hayes,

1987), and more recently risk for sexually transmitted infections (DiClemente and Crosby, 2003; Joyner and Udry, 2000; Laursen, 1995). Research on relationship violence extends the problem behavior focus. While this research has directed attention to a critical social problem, most estimates indicate that a majority of adolescents have not experienced physical violence within the context of their dating relationships (Wekerle and Avgoustis, 2003). Thus, additional research on the ways in which adolescent dating influences identity formation, social development and a range of behavior outcomes should serve as an important supplement to the problem behavior tradition (see also Furman and Shaffer, 2003).

The lack of prior research on the effects of romantic relationships may be due at least in part to the belief that, in comparison to parents and even peers, such relationships are very short-lived and transitory—thus lessening any potential impact. However, recent research suggests that these early relationships vary considerably in length and levels of engagement (Carver et al., 2003). Some ethnographic studies also concentrate on very young teens, a strategy that has also likely influenced the portrait of these relationships that has developed. For example, Merten (1996) contended that many going steady relationships were relatively shallow and superficial, but focused solely on relationships among seventh and eighth grade youths.

Adolescence researchers have also pointed to significant differences in the way boys and girls perceive and experience these early romantic relationships. Eder, Evans, and Parker (1995), in an important study of the social life within a Midwestern middle school, pointed out ways in which differing male and female peer group emphases lead to gendered perspectives on heterosexual relationships. Boys are socialized by peers to relate to one another in terms of dominance and competition, and often learn to think of the heterosexual arena as another way of gaining status in the eyes of male peers (see also Kimmel, 1994). These dynamics also reinforce interest in the sexual rather than relationship aspects of heterosexual liaisons. This research tradition thus conveys the idea that influence from same-gender peers remains the most important social dynamic for adolescent boys, and leads to the prediction that peers, rather than romantic partners will (along with parental attitudes and practices) likely influence variations in developmental outcomes such as boys' level of academic performance or achievement.

Researchers have often emphasized that girls have a stronger relational orientation (Gilligan, 1982) and learn to center much time and energy on their romantic endeavors. A plausible hypothesis, then, is that girls are likely to be more influenced by romantic partners. Most studies have not explored effects of dating on academic achievement specifically, but researchers have generally posited negative effects on girls, suggesting that young women's excessive focus on dating/capturing male attention often limits or derails academic pursuits. For example, Holland and Eisenhart (1990), in a study of female college students, found that peer group concerns, centered on boys and dating, did little to enhance academic success. In addition, this study pointed out that boyfriends themselves often belittled or minimized girls' aspirations, and in this way also negatively affected academic achievement and long-term career goals.

In summary, the sheer volume of prior research on parents and peers and the nature of theorizing about romantic partners leads to the hypothesis that romantic partners are unlikely to affect academic performance, or, in the case of girls, are likely to influence achievement in a negative way. One study examined the relative importance of parents, friends and romantic partners on achievement among first-year college students. Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, and Russell (1994) found that parent's support predicted college achievement during the first and second years, but failed to find significance for friends' and romantic partners' support. However, this portrait might not generalize to the adolescent period, and in this study the academic orientation of partners was not taken into account. As suggested above, current research on peer effects has increasingly recognized the need to take into account the attitude and behavioral profiles of friends, and not just the quality of the relationships formed (see e.g., Crosnoe, 2000; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Pugh, 1986; Hartup, 1996).

In our view, this observation can readily be extended to cover the domain of romantic relationships. Thus, an understanding of the degree of support provided by parents, peers and romantic partners provides only a partial understanding of how intimate others may influence a range of behavioral outcomes, including academic achievement. Further, simply gauging whether or not youths have begun dating does not provide a comprehensive picture, as romantic involvement becomes ubiquitous as a social phenomenon during the period (Carver et al., 2003). Thus, as a first step in exploring the connections

between romantic partners' and adolescents' own academic performance, we examine whether, among those adolescents who had begun dating, the partner's grades are significantly associated with the adolescent's own grades, once the respondent's own orientation toward school (perceived importance of grades) and effects of parent and peer processes have been taken into account. Below we outline a symbolic interactionist perspective on adolescent romantic relationships that provides a general basis for expecting significant romantic partner effects, and a somewhat different view of how gender may influence these processes.

A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective on Adolescent Romantic Relationships

Family and peer relations involve frequent contact and high levels of identification. Within the literature on social influence processes, it is generally assumed that others similar to oneself will be most pivotal as sources of reference and influence. However, as we have suggested previously, following emphases within the symbolic interactionist theoretical tradition (Giordano, 1995), relationships based in elements of difference or contrast also occasion much interest, and can be seen as providing more in the way of a developmental "challenge" (see e.g., Cooley, 1902[1970]; Mead, 1934; Simmel, 1950) (for a more detailed elaboration of this theoretical perspective, see Giordano et al., 2006). As adolescents begin to develop this new form of intimacy with the opposite gender, relationships involve many of the same but also unique dynamics not found within friendship relations. Romantic relationships, like friendships, are characterized by frequent interaction and communication. Based simply on the amount of time adolescent romantic partners often spend together, then, it is reasonable to expect that partners could become a source of influence with regard to school matters and a host of other issues. However, these relationships also involve distinctive dynamics not found within friendship—feelings of heightened emotionality common within heterosexual relationships provide a distinctive contrast with the comfort and relative stability of same-gender friendships. Researchers within the sociology of emotions tradition have recently highlighted that emotions can be theorized as providing additional 'energy' or motivation for various lines of action (Collins, 2004; Engdahl, 2004). Thus, relationships that involve an emotional

dimension, along with more generic dynamics associated with close relations (frequent interaction and communication, feelings of loyalty and caring), can usefully be theorized as having potential as a source of influence.

One significant complicating factor is that while there are theoretical reasons to expect that romantic partners may influence one another, it has also been well documented that individuals tend to select romantic partners (as well as friends) on the basis of an initial similarity—a high achieving girl likely will have a tendency to select for a romantic partner a similarly academically oriented boy. Nevertheless, we expect that this is an imperfect relationship—academic performance may not be as central to the selection of romantic partners, particularly during adolescence, as, for example, physical attractiveness, which prior research has shown is highly “concordant” at the couple level (Brown and Hendrix, 1981; Peretti and Abplanalp, 2004). Further, prior research shows that in the case of friendship effects, both selection and socialization contribute to the levels of homophily typically observed within friendship dyads (Kandel, 1978) or groups (Cairns and Cairns, 1994). That is, individuals make friendship choices on the basis of some degree of similarity, but tend to become more similar to their friends over time. Our working hypothesis is that if a romantic partner’s academic performance contributes to an understanding of variations in the adolescent’s own grades (even after other individual and social factors have been taken into account), this likely derives from elements of selection as well as influence. However, we recognize that the current examination of these associations is far from definitive, as the cross-sectional strategy does not allow us to establish the relative impact of these dynamic processes.

Differential Effects?

A further complication is that the role of romantic partners as an influence on academic performance may vary for different types of adolescents. In this analysis, we consider the role of gender, race/ethnicity and age as potential influences on the nature of this relationship. Our expectation with respect to age is relatively straightforward: since romantic relationships are generally described as becoming relatively more important and intimate during the period, it is intuitive to expect that the association between the

partner's grades and respondents' own grades should be stronger for older as contrasted with younger respondents (see Gallotti, Kozberg, and Appleman (1990) for a useful discussion of developmental shifts in the character of romantic relationships as respondents mature).

As described briefly above, it has been suggested that girls are more heavily invested in romantic relationships, while male adolescents place more emphasis on achieving status in the eyes of their peers (Anderson, 1989; Eder et al., 1995; Wight, 1994). This line of theorizing leads to the expectation that girls would be more influenced by romantic partners, boys by same-gender peers. However, a number of studies have documented that on average, girls outperform boys in school, are more likely to complete homework assignments and generally evidence higher levels of attachment to school (Downey and Yuan, 2005; Van Houtte, 2004). Thus, it is possible that boys would be more likely to be influenced by their female romantic partners, rather than the reverse. The symbolic interactionist perspective also provides specific basis for theorizing that boys may be more heavily influenced in certain respects by romantic partners.

As we have argued previously, because boys' peer interactions are often characterized by low levels of intimate self-disclosure and an emphasis on competitive discourse and activities (see e.g., Crosnoe, 2000), boys are likely to experience an especially strong contrast between their peer and romantic interactions. Thus, we have argued that boys may come to value the unique dynamics that unfold within the romantic context, and in some respects can be considered more dependent on these relationships than girls, who have a range of other relationships available for such intimate talk and social support. Even though boys have frequently received messages from peers discouraging the development of caring feelings for partners (see e.g., Anderson, 1989), a symbolic interactionist framework highlights that current behavior is never fully determined by past affiliations and interactions (Simon and Gagnon, 1986). Instead, reality is necessarily 'situated' within the requirements of the new interactive situation. Involvement in romantic relationships is also a choice behavior—thus the affiliation has meaning and value as an extension of the adolescent's own emerging identity (see e.g., Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994).

A recent analysis of the influence of gender on romantic relationship experiences provides initial support for this symbolic interactionist perspective (Giordano et al., 2006). Results indicate that in the aggregate, boys did not differ from adolescent girls in levels of perceived “heightened emotionality” in connection with their romantic relationships (as gauged by scores on a love scale). In addition, boys, compared with their female counterparts, reported significantly more influence from the romantic partner, as indexed by a scale measuring the partner’s influence attempts and ‘actual’ (as perceived by the respondent) influence. However, a limitation of this analysis was that the scales measuring partner influence were rather general, and did not tap influence on particular domains or areas of the adolescent’s life.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of adolescent Health (Add Health), we recently completed one such domain-specific analysis, documenting that the romantic partner’s delinquency was a significant predictor of the respondent’s delinquency, net of peer and family effects (Haynie et al., 2005). In addition, where the focus was upon acts of minor delinquency, we found stronger effects of male romantic partners on female respondents’ self-reports of delinquency (a finding opposite to our prediction here). It is also important to note, however, that the partner’s delinquency was a significant predictor for both male and female respondents, and that gender interactions were not significant in analyses focused on serious delinquency. In the current study we wish to extend this line of inquiry to consider the influence of romantic partners on a prosocial outcome, the adolescent’s level of academic performance.

In addition to assessing the role of age and gender as potential influences on the nature of this relationship, we also consider whether the adolescent’s race/ethnicity conditions this association. Although we do not have a specific hypothesis in this regard, prior research has documented some significant differences in African American and White adolescents’ descriptions of their romantic relationships. For example, in a previous analysis, again relying on Add Health data, we observed that African American youth reported a somewhat less intense relationship style, as reflected in a lower frequency of interaction with the romantic partner, and lower levels of intimate self-disclosure (Giordano, Manning, and Longmore, 2005). Prior research has also shown that African American compared with

White teens report somewhat lower levels of intimacy and perceived pressure from friends, while scoring higher on family attachment and time spent with family members (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Demaris, 1993; Larson, Richards, Sims, and Dworkin, 2001). Thus, it is possible that the relative impact of these reference groups on particular behavior patterns itself varies significantly according to the respondent's race or ethnic identification. The research base on Hispanic adolescent social networks does not provide a basis for developing a specific hypothesis about romantic partner effects on grades, but the TARS' oversample of Hispanic youth will allow us to explore whether similar or distinct patterns of association emerge for Hispanic as well as African American and White respondents.

Analytic Strategy

Our analyses rely on wave one interview data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study. Although a longitudinal approach might appear to be ideal, we are reluctant to link romantic partner information from wave one with wave two grades. Prior research using Add Health indicates that in well over half the cases, respondents were no longer dating the original partner at the time of the second wave (Carver et al., 2003), and similar changes in romantic partnerships occur in the TARS data set. Thus, a cross-sectional strategy provides an initial assessment of the nature and extent of any association between romantic partners' academic characteristics and that of focal respondents, where we can be more confident that answers about a focal partner accurately reflect the respondent's current dating status. Nevertheless, we recognize the need to follow up with longitudinal analyses (perhaps with a shorter time interval between measurement of relationships and various developmental outcomes), in order to more adequately disentangle selection and influence as causes of any observed concordance. The qualitative data are a useful adjunct to the statistical analysis, however, as they illustrate both types of processes, albeit from adolescents' own points of view. These qualitative data themselves are subject to certain limitations due to the subjective nature of these interview data. For example, we know that marriage partners frequently share a similar social status, but respondents may be reluctant to admit or may not have a keen awareness that they are using this as a criterion for mate selection (see e.g., Gardyn, 2002).

We first assess whether romantic partners' grades are significantly associated with the respondent's own grades by examining the zero order relationship. We subsequently include measures of the individual's own and friends' academic orientation (as measured by the perceived importance of getting good grades) as well as an index of the parents' levels of involvement in their child's academic lives. This will permit an assessment of the relative impact of the individual's own attitudes and those of partners, peers and parents. Next we estimate complete models that include sociodemographic characteristics, parents' education, family structure and a more general index of parental monitoring. These analyses allow us to determine whether knowledge of the romantic partner's grades contributes to an understanding of the adolescent's level of performance, once these traditional predictors have been taken into account. We also estimated models in which romantic partners' grades are introduced last in the sequence, and calculate a nested F test to determine whether knowledge of the partner's grades adds significantly to the explained variance in grades reported. Finally, we introduce a series of interactions, in order to determine whether the pattern of observed effects is similar for adolescents of different ages, and across gender and race/ethnicity.

Methods

Data

We rely on data derived from structured interviews conducted in connection with the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (n=1316). The sample was drawn from the 2000 enrollment records for all youths in the 7th, 9th, and 11th grades residing in Lucas County, Ohio. This included 62 schools across 7 school districts. The sampling design includes oversamples of African American and Hispanic adolescents, and school attendance was not required for inclusion in the sample. Most interviews took place in the respondent's home or in a few cases in a public setting such as the library. At the same time, parents (generally mothers) completed a questionnaire that included information about their parenting practices, including academic-specific parenting of the focal adolescent. We also draw on in-depth 'relationship history narratives' collected from a subset of the respondents (n=100) to illustrate some of

the social mechanisms that may underlie significant associations documented through the quantitative analysis.

Results indicate that at wave one, 971 adolescents reported about either a current or most recent romantic partner, while 231 teens (17.55% of the sample) were considered non-daters. Dating status was determined from a question that began with a simple definition of dating: “Now we are interested in your own experiences with dating and the opposite sex. When we ask about ‘dating’ we mean when you like a guy [girl], and he/she likes you back. This does not have to mean going on a formal date.” We note that this definition differs from that used in Add Health which asks about “a special romantic relationship.” Accordingly, our percentages of daters are slightly higher, but are similar by age to levels reported by Furman and Hand in another longitudinal investigation of romantic relationships (see Furman and Hand, 2006 for a more detailed discussion of issues of definition and measurement of dating status). Of the subgroup of daters, 59.6% reported being currently involved in a romantic relationship. We restrict this analysis to current daters (n=572). As a preliminary step in our analyses, however, we also examined the self-reported grades of non-daters compared with those reported by young people who had entered the dating world. These analyses indicate a modest negative relationship (-.11) at the zero order (non-daters report slightly higher grades), but this relationship is not significant in a model that includes traditional controls (age, race, gender, family structure, family SES, parental involvement, monitoring). This suggests the need to move beyond a simple assessment of dating/not dating, as we estimate models that consider the specific academic orientation of the romantic partner.

Within the dating sample, 27% are African American, 12% Hispanic and 72% White. Slightly over fifty percent of the sample is female (51.5%), while males comprise 48.5% of the sample. The age range is 12 years old to 19 years old, with the average 15.72 years. The average length of romantic relationships is 5.08 (2 to 5 months) on a scale of 1 (less than a week) to 8 (a year or more). The average duration is lowest among respondents in lower grades (12 year olds report a mean of 2.5 (1 to 3 weeks), whereas average durations are higher among the older respondents (6.21 or in the 6 to 8 months range for 18 year olds). The average age of partners is 16.31, and their average grades are in the B range (3.27). A

total of 57.51 percent report attending the same school as the respondent. Girls were more likely to report dating a partner at least one year older (56.9 vs. 22%), and corresponding to this, boys were more likely to indicate they dated someone at least one year younger (33.1% vs. 12.9%). Only a small percentage of youths reported dating someone who no longer attended school (23 or 3.97% of the sample), and these individuals were deleted from the analysis.

Measures

Academic Achievement. We measured academic achievement with the question, “What grades did you get in school this year?” The item was scored on a scale ranging from 1 (mostly F’s) to 9 (mostly A’s).

Dating Partner’s Grades. We measured partner’s grades with a similar question: “What grades does ____ usually get in school?” As laptops were used for the bulk of the interview, all questions use the partner’s first name or nickname, as provided initially by the respondent.

Respondent’s Academic Orientation. Respondents noted level of agreement or disagreement that “good grades are important to me.” This item is scored on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Friends’ Academic Orientation. We assess friends’ attitudes toward academic achievement with a similar item, “My friends think good grades are important.” Scores range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Parents’ School Involvement. The parent’s level of involvement in the child’s academic life is measured with seven items drawn from the parents’ own questionnaire responses, and includes the following behaviors: (1) checking on child’s homework; (2) helping child with homework; (3) talking with child about school activities; (4) talking with child about things she/he has learned in school; (5) involvement in child’s academics (6) attendance at school events and (7) attendance at school meetings. Each variable is measured on a five point scale ranging from 1(never) to 5 (very often). Responses to these seven items were summed to create an index of parental school involvement. Scores are ranging

from 6 to 40; a higher score indicates greater involvement in the respondent's academic life. ($\alpha = .71$)

Race, Gender, and Age. Race and gender are self-reported; race categories include White, African American, and Hispanic. White and male are the contrast categories. Age is calculated from the respondent's reported birth date.

Family Structure. Family structure is measured from the respondent's report of the question asked, "During the past 12 months, who were you living with most of the time?" The response categories are single parents, biological parents, stepparent and other parent households. For multivariate analyses, we create three dummy variables with both biological parents as the contrast category.

Parental Education. Parental education is reported by the parent. For multivariate analyses, parent's education is measured with three dummy variables with 12 years of education as the contrast category. This strategy allows for the assessment of non-linear effects.

Parental Monitoring. We also include a general measure of parental monitoring, which includes the following items completed by the parents: I call to check if my child is where he/she is supposed to be; when my child is away from home he/she is supposed to let me know where he/she is; I ask who my child is going out with. The responses for each item ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Responses to these three items are summed to create an index of parental monitoring. The scores range from 3 to 15; a higher score indicates greater parental monitoring ($\alpha = .88$).

Distribution of Variables

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, ranges, and frequencies for the sample. A correlation matrix is shown in Appendix Table A1. The average grades reported by the respondent are 6.12, which reflects a mix of B's and C's. When grades are examined by gender, the TARS female respondents, consistent with other analyses, report higher grades. The average grades of the dating partner reported by the respondent is 6.75, which reflects a combination of B's and C's. Examining the dating partner's grades by gender, boys indicate that their dating partners make higher grades than girls' reports of their

dating partners' grades. Among the three racial categories, Whites report that their dating partner makes higher grades compared to African American and Hispanic dating partners. Also, older adolescents report that their partners make higher grades compared to younger adolescents. These results for partners thus correspond well with the self-reports of youths about their own grades. The mean level of respondent agreement about the importance of getting good grades is 4.3, while the mean of friends' orientation toward grades is 3.98. The parents of the respondents, on average, report a moderate level of involvement in the child's academic affairs (19.08 in a range of 6 and 40). Race and age are associated with grades reported: White youth report higher grades than African American and Hispanic youths and older adolescents also report higher grades. Respondents reported, on average, high parental monitoring, (12.04) on a scale ranging from 3 to 15.

Next we consider multivariate results for the regression of the partner's grades and other covariates on adolescents' self-reports of youths' own current levels of academic performance. These analyses are restricted to current daters.

Results

Results shown in Model 1 of Table 2 indicate that the romantic partner's grades are significantly associated with the adolescent's own levels of academic performance, as predicted. Teens who have romantic partners with higher grades are themselves more likely to earn higher grades. Next we estimated a model including the measure of the individual's own view of the importance of good grades, the friends' attitude measure and parents' levels of involvement in the child's academic life. The respondents' own attitudes toward getting good grades are significantly related to grades reported, and partner's grades remains significant as a predictor. However, the measure of parents' levels of involvement in the child's academic affairs is not significantly related to variations in grades reported. It is possible that the type of direct involvement captured by items within this scale is more important at earlier ages, or that such parental engagement may be more necessary when students are having difficulties in school. The friends' attitudes variable is significant in a model with all variables included

except the respondent's own attitude toward getting good grades, but is not significant in the complete model. Given that some selection is undoubtedly involved in the choice of friends as well as romantic partners, it is interesting that the partner grades variable remains significant once the individual's own attitudes are taken into account, but the friends' variable does not.

Model 3 adds all covariates and includes partner's grades, respondents' own and friends' academic orientation, parental school involvement, and demographic controls (race, gender, age), in addition to indices of family structure, parental education, and the general parental monitoring scale. Partner grades and the adolescent's own attitudes remain significant predictors, but as in Model 2 friends' academic orientation is not significant. Even without the introduction of the individual's own orientation toward grades, the friends' grades variable is not significant once parental education is introduced. While the parental school involvement index, as in model 2, is not significant, other traditional family variables such as family structure and mother's education are significantly related in the expected direction.

Specifically, adolescents living in two-parent (biological) homes report higher achievement than those living in single parent, stepparent, and other family types. Teens who have parents with less than 12 years of education report lower grades than children of high school graduates. Conversely, youths of parents who have more than twelve years of education have higher achievement than the latter. African American youths report lower grades than Whites, while Hispanics and Whites do not differ significantly. Girls self-report higher grades than boys. At the bivariate level, age and the general measure of parental monitoring are significantly related to grades, but these variables are not significant in the multivariate model. We also conducted a nested F test to determine whether the addition of partner grades contributes significantly to an understanding of variations in respondents' academic achievement. The results indicate that partner grades is a significant addition to the model.

Table 3 presents results of analyses that explored whether the influence of the dating partner's grades differs according to race, gender, or age of the respondent. Examination of race/ethnicity by partner's grades interactions (African American and Hispanic as compared with White youths) indicates similar patterns of association regardless of race/ethnicity (Model 1). However, results as shown in Model 2

indicate a significant gender by partner's grades interaction, suggesting a stronger association between male adolescents' reports of partners' grades and their own academic performance. In separate gender models, the association between partner and respondent grades is only marginally significant for females ($B=$, $p \leq .06$) in the full model, while the association is clearly significant for male respondents ($B=$, $p \leq .01$). Finally, Model 3 shows that while it is reasonable to expect a stronger association for older adolescents, the age by romantic partner's grades interaction was not significant—indicating similar effects among youth who varied in age.

Selection and Influence: Illustrations from Adolescents' Relationship History Narratives

The findings reported above provide some support for our more general view that romantic relationships 'matter' to adolescents in multiple respects, but as stated at the outset, the observed link between respondents' and partners' grades could be influenced by the tendency to select similar partners, as well as derive from a more active influence process. Indeed, while respondents were not asked specifically about the importance of academic performance to their choice of romantic partners, sometimes their comments in the in-depth interview did suggest the importance of taking this selection process into account. For example, Jason, aged 17, was asked about what was important to him in a relationship:

Honestly, the most important thing would be intelligence. Because I cannot stand talkin' to people that are not like, even close to being- I mean, I wouldn't say can't stand, but, I mean it's – just one of the things that's my pet peeve -I guess I could say that [I like girls that] are on, like the same wave length as me. Cause, then usually they go hand-in-hand. If the person doesn't have the, just the mere intelligence to carry on a conversation, then there goes the humor and everything else.

Brian, another 17 year old student who participated in the in-depth interview developed a similar idea, as he discussed what distinguished his first serious girlfriend Janice from other girls he had known:

Like she was, the only one who that was as intelligent as me at that point in my life. The only one who wasn't thinking about Barbies and thinking actually about other things.

It is not common for individuals to indicate that they prefer a girlfriend/boyfriend with low intelligence or wish to associate with someone who does poorly in school; however the narratives of adolescents who are not academically inclined may stress other qualities or characteristics of a girlfriend that reflect a different salience hierarchy (Stryker, 1980). For example, Donny was not currently dating anyone at the time of the in-depth interview. However, he indicated that he had quite a reputation as a “partier” and was actually interested in finding a girlfriend who also liked to party:

I think I’m also looking for a partier because... I want a partier girlfriend because Carrie wasn’t a party girlfriend. The others was, kind of not. I want a girl that will like what I do, and not yell when I come home. I don’t want to have to come home to that. I want her to be with me when I party.

This quote conveys that Donny’s partier identity not only influences his current behavior, but his choice of a romantic partner as well. However, this narrative also accords well with Emirbayer and Goodwin’s (1994) critique of some of the passive assumptions of many social network analyses. These authors stressed that individuals have a significant role (i.e., agency) in choosing the very network members that will nevertheless subsequently have a significant influence upon them. Aside from these agentic moves, it is also likely that structured opportunities to meet particular kinds of dating partners will tend to operate so as to produce a certain level of correspondence in academic orientations. Thus, for example, the boy in advanced placement courses is simply more likely to come into contact with a similarly high achieving girl; conversely, teens in “occupational-work experience” classes may have recurring opportunities to socialize as well as shared attitudes (e.g., lack of attachment to school) that heighten the sense of identification. However, our view is that even in instances in which individuals begin a relationship based on relatively similar attitudes toward school/levels of achievement, the close affiliation that develops could further reinforce these initial tendencies. This assertion is consistent with much prior sociological theorizing about the connections between intimacy, communication, and the likelihood of interpersonal influence (McCall and Simmons, 1966). Joe, for example, had apparently been a good student prior to meeting Angela, but nevertheless described a mutual influence process that occurred during the course of their relationship:

For like um...the past two years, you know, that I've been with her it has been, you know, about school. We both are carrying 3.8 averages and stuff. So, it's, it is basically, you know, helping each other and getting through school and deciding what we're going to do...She is 3 higher than me and actually we, we do kind of compete, but it's, you know, fun. Like last quarter it was, "ah, ha I got a better GPA than you." And this quarter I'm higher than her. So...She, math is a major thing 'cause I have always been a straight A student in math. So, I help her in math and 'cause her...she is on, she has alg...or geometry and I have Algebra 2 and um...so, I help her with math on occasion and uh...to write reports. She helps me with um...book reports and stuff like that. I'm not a big reader at all. I'm always the first one to go to the library and pick up Cliff Notes, but I, 'cause I never, I was never interested in reading books, but she helps me with um...with reading books and certain, certain things along that line. But um...I, I guess you could say we do homework together. Um...she wants to be on Broadway and her um...uh...she wants to write and I want to go into architecture. And, you know, we're both kind of, you know, kind of pushing each other along like, "you know, should really go do this." So, academically we help each other like a lot.

Of perhaps even greater substantive interest are youths' narratives that describe a relationship in which one partner represents more of a contrast along the dimension of academic performance. Doug discussed the close relationship he had developed with his girlfriend Julie:

[Julie] makes me want to do better in school and stuff. I want to do well because of her because she is really smart and she's got a real good grade point average. Mine isn't as high as hers so I try to be up there and I don't want to look stupid. I don't think she would want me to be dumb.¹

This narrative excerpt hints that Julie is not just one more individual added to Doug's mix of friends, and supports our assertion that the special qualities of the romantic relationship (especially the strong emotional component) may provide additional motivation to make significant changes or adjustments—here an increased willingness to work hard to improve his grade point average. And, while we did not interview Julie herself, a reasonable argument is that romantic partners, even more than friends, may come to be viewed as a reflection of one's own identity. This increases the likelihood that Julie will make influence attempts (e.g., encouraging Doug to finish his homework assignments) as well as the likelihood that Doug will be receptive to them.

Conclusion

¹ This provides a contrast with Frost's (2001) description of boys' singular concern with what peers think of them, citing Kimmel (1994:128-9): "...this kind of policing of identity construction, reflects a profound need to be accepted and approved by men: 'There is no strong concern for women's approval as they are in too low a place on the social ladder.'"

The findings described above contribute to the developing literature on adolescent romantic relationships by demonstrating concordance in students' grades and that of their current romantic partners. This association is significant even when traditional predictors such as parents' education have been taken into account. We also found that the degree of concordance appears to be stronger for male than female adolescents. This analysis provides an interesting follow-up to a previous examination of adolescent levels of involvement in delinquency, where romantic partner effects were documented, and where, for minor delinquency, a stronger association for girls was observed. The contribution to the literature on academic attainment is modest, but does fit well with a growing interest in the non-formal side of schooling. For example, researchers have recently shown that involvement in extracurricular activities contributes to achievement, as such involvement undoubtedly create desirable social contacts and feelings of attachment to school, as well as providing opportunities for skill-building and mastery (Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, and Lord, 2005).

The study of romantic relationships poses special challenges for researchers, because these relationships vary greatly in length during the adolescent period. Thus, in order to examine associations of interest from a longitudinal standpoint, it would be necessary to restrict samples to the smaller subset of youths who stayed with a particular partner over a relatively long period of time; the resulting analysis would not, however, provide an accurate portrait of the full range of more 'typical' dynamics within adolescent romantic relationships. Thus, our cross-sectional strategy draws in a broader spectrum of adolescent relationships, but limits our ability to make inferences about what portion of partner effects is due to initial selection, and what portion reflects a more active influence process. Researchers may benefit from shorter intervals between interviews, in order to document more definitively effects of romantic partners on a range of outcomes such as depression, adolescent drinking as well as academic achievement. The study does reveal the utility of considering partner characteristics rather than simply whether or not the adolescent has entered the dating world (recall that with control variables introduced, dating/non-dating status was not significantly related to grades reported). Variations in the quality of relationships formed may also contribute to an understanding of these influence processes. For example,

some youth form short term heterosexual affiliations characterized by little affection or few qualities of interpersonal intimacy; obviously for such youths, romantic partnerships may be unlikely to exert a significant influence on academic or other behavioral outcomes.

The finding of a stronger effect of partner's grades for boys deserves more scrutiny, and could be examined from the point of view of other theoretical frameworks, for example "routine activities theory" (Cohen and Felson, 1979). It may be that developing a stable romantic partner for boys reflects a kind of 'settling down,' not unlike the "good marriage effect" documented in the literature on adult development (Laub and Sampson, 2003; Warr, 1998). However, it is important to highlight that the current analysis does not capture the percentage of youths who experience positive or negative changes. Future research should examine how youths characterized by different initial levels of academic achievement are influenced by partners who represent similar or distinct academic orientations. In addition, more refined analyses could specify the conditions under which girls are influenced academically by specific aspects or types of romantic relationships. For example, girls involved in high conflict relationships may exert much time and emotional energy in managing and repairing the relationship, which could have a negative effect. However, our data suggest that it is important to move beyond global generalizations about the role of gender, such as the notion that involvement with male partners necessarily lowers career aspirations or limits girls' academic pursuits (Holland and Eisenhart, 1990). The generally higher grades of girls in high school as well as college and the results of the current study provide a caution to this line of theorizing.

This study has provided a snapshot of current daters, many of whom will go on to break up with the focal romantic partner. This underscores that over the long haul, family members, who are less replaceable, undoubtedly continue to influence academic trajectories in multiple ways. Indeed, the results indicate significant effects of parents' education and family structure differences, although in this investigation, variations in academic – specific parenting involvement were not a source of systematic variation in reported grades. Friendship alliances also shift during the period (Brown, 2004), but changes in friendship typically do not have the dramatic and abrupt quality of romantic "breakups." Thus, future

research needs to capture in a more holistic way adolescents' more complete romantic 'careers' and peer relationship histories and how family factors connect to these experiences. This will allow us to better gauge the long term effects and relative impact of parents, peers and romantic partners. Longitudinal efforts that follow youths through the transition to adulthood are well positioned to assess points in the life course when particular reference others appear to gain in importance; for example when partners more routinely influence academic success or other outcomes (e.g., drinking, drug use) while peer relationships begin to recede in their importance.

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Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Frequencies and the Range for Currently Dating Respondents (N=572)

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
<i>Dependent Variable</i>				
Respondent's Grades	6.12	2.05	1	9
<i>Independent Variables</i>				
Partner's Grades	6.75	1.62	1	9
Respondent's Academic Orientation	4.34	.71	1	5
Friends' Academic Orientation	3.98	.88	1	5
Parental School Involvement	19.08	3.90	6	40
<i>Controls</i>				
Race				
White	72.00%			
Black	27.00%			
Hispanic	12.00%			
Age	15.72	1.66	12	19
Gender				
Male	48.50%			
Female	51.50%			
Family Structure				
Two biological	43.71%			
Single	26.57%			
Step	16.26%			
Other	13.46%			
Parental Education				
Less Than 12 Years	15.38%			
12 Years	30.07%			
More Than 12 Years	54.55%			
Parental Monitoring	12.05	3.34	3	15

Table 2. Unstandardized OLS Coefficients for the Regression of Student Grades on Controls and Romantic Partner Grades. (N=572)

Regressors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Partner's Grades	.18**	.16**	.17**
Respondent's Academic Orientation		.89***	.77***
Friends' Academic Orientation		.07	.04
Parents' School Involvement		-.01	.01
<i>Controls</i>			
Race			
(White)			
African American			-.79***
Hispanic			-.33
Age			.09*
Gender			
(Male)			
Female			.88**
Family Structure			
(Two biological)			
Single			-.49*
Step			-.70**
Other			-.65**
Parental Education			
Less than 12 years			-.43
(12 years)			
More than 12 years			.36*
Parental Monitoring			.01
Intercept	4.89	1.01	-.11
F	12.23	20.17	15.80
R ²	.02	.12	.28

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Note: Contrast categories are in parentheses.

Table 3. Unstandardized OLS Coefficients for the Regression of Student Grades on Controls and Romantic Partner Grades with Interactions. (N=572)

Regressors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Partner's Grades	.20**	.33***	.87
Respondent's Academic Orientation	.77***	.77***	.78***
Friends' Academic Orientation	.03	.04	.03
Parents' School Involvement	.01	-.01	.01
<i>Controls</i>			
Race			
(White)			
African American	-.14	-.80***	-.79***
Hispanic	-.22	-.26	-.32
Age	.09*	.08	.38*
Gender			
(Male)			
Female	.87***	2.54**	.87***
Family Structure			
(Two biological)			
Single	-.49*	-.51**	-.49**
Step	-.69**	-.71**	-.70**
Other	-.63*	-.71**	-.61**
Parental Education			
Less than 12 years	-.42	-.43	-.44
(12 years)			
More than 12 years	.35*	.36*	.37*
Parental Monitoring	-.03	-.01	-.01
<i>Interaction Terms</i>			
African American by partner's grades	-.09		
Hispanic by partner's grades	-.01		
Gender by partner's grades		-.23*	
Age by partner's grades			-.04
<i>Intercept</i>	-.25	-1.06	-4.71
F	13.84	15.27	14.94
R ²	28.3%	27%	28.5%

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Appendix Table A1. Correlation Matrix for Grades, Partner's Grades, Friends' Attitudes, and Parent Variables. (N=572)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Grades														
2. Partner's Grades	.14													
3. Friend's Attitudes	.10	-.007												
4. Parental Involvement	-.01	-.03	.07											
5. Resp. Academic Orientation	.32	.02	.24	.06										
6. African American	-.20	-.01	.13	.18	.05									
7. Hispanic	-.10	-.11	-.08	-.04	-.04	-.22								
8. Age	.11	.01	-.003	-.14	.01	-.02	.04							
9. Female	.23	-.27	.15	.05	.15	-.04	-.04	.00						
10. Single Parent	-.10	-.06	-.04	.04	-.02	.18	-.005	-.06	.005					
11. Stepparent	-.10	-.01	.007	.09	.02	.09	.06	-.009	-.06	-.26				
12. Other Parent	-.11	-.10	.10	.00	-.03	.08	.11	-.09	.05	-.23	-.17			
13. Less than 12 years	-.22	-.12	-.16	.05	-.10	.09	.22	-.04	-.04	.09	-.007	.13		
14. More than 12 years	-.20	-.13	.02	-.02	.06	-.02	-.17	.08	.03	-.05	-.02	-.08	-.46	
15. Parental Monitoring	-.07	-.09	.06	.09	.04	.06	.08	-.15	.05	.01	.07	.05	.08	-.04