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**VARIATIONS IN ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: A
PATTERN-CENTERED APPROACH**

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Abstract

The current study examines the variability in adolescents' subjective experience of romantic relationships in a large, diverse sample of currently dating youth. Relying on cluster analysis, five types of relationships are identified: passionate (17.1%), conventional (28.3%), insecure (24.6%), casual (19.2%), and conflictual (10.6%). A series of one-way ANOVAs, regressions, and excerpts from face-to-face interviews are included to describe each of the relationship profiles from the perspective of the dating adolescent and to verify the classification strategy. Analyses document some sociodemographic differences (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity) associated with variations in the qualities and dynamics within these relationships, and indicate that these relationship patterns are associated with differences in grades, depressive symptoms, and delinquency. Implications for research on adolescent dating experiences are discussed.

Keywords: Romantic relationships; Adolescents; Cluster analysis; Adjustment

Variations in Adolescent Romantic Relationships: A Pattern-Centered Approach

Research on the adolescent period has increasingly focused on romantic relationships, but the resulting depictions of their characteristics and meaning(s) are often contradictory. For example, Merten, (1996) in an examination of middle school relationships, characterized the majority as shallow and superficial, while Giordano, Longmore, & Manning (2006) suggested that many adolescent dating relationships hold great meaning and significance for the adolescents involved in them. Aside from age trends or other sources of variation in the aggregate picture (see e.g., Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2005); one way of reconciling these distinctive portraits is to consider directly the variability in the nature and significance of relationships that exists within a given adolescent sample (Furman & Hand, 2006). Only a few studies to date have utilized pattern-centered or person-centered techniques such as cluster analysis to examine romantic relationships among adolescents, and these have focused on variations in parenting practices with regard adolescent dating and sexual behavior (e.g., Kan, McHale, & Crouter, 2008; Rosenthal, Senserrick, & Feldman, 2001). A primary benefit of pattern-centered approaches, such as cluster analysis, is that subgroups obscured by variable-centered approaches may be revealed (Bogat, Levendosky, & von Eye, 2005). This is a logical next step in research on the impact of dating and romance, since it is generally accepted that such relationships may prove to be a positive benefit or a challenge to development, depending on the specific dynamics that unfold within these relationships (Joyner & Udry, 2000).

Although early work was confined to simple dichotomies, such as whether the adolescent has begun to date (e.g., Joyner & Udry, 2000), other research has focused more attention on specific relationship factors such as heightened affect, asymmetries, communication awkwardness, and issues related to exclusivity and commitment that are especially salient for

understanding romantic involvements (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1998; Furman & Hand, 2006; Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2006; Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Building on the idea that relationships may exhibit distinctive qualities, in this study, we: (1) document patterns of variation in the ways in which a large, diverse sample of adolescents describe their relationships; (2) examine links between respondent characteristics (especially age, gender, and race/ethnicity) and observed ‘styles’ of romantic involvement; and (3) forge a link to developmental outcomes, including associations between specific relationship styles and grades, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and delinquency. The latter assessments are included as a way to illustrate the general utility of a pattern-centered approach for stimulating more comprehensive investigations of links between dating experiences and these and other important developmental outcomes.

This analysis relies on structured and qualitative data drawn from the first wave of the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS). The stratified random sample of teens includes structured interviews with 579 currently dating teens about the nature and quality of their current romantic ties. In-depth relationship history narratives were also elicited from a subset of 100 respondents, and these qualitative data are used to examine teens own understandings of the qualities/dynamics that characterize their relationships.

Background

Sources of Variation in the Characteristics/Qualities of Romantic Relationships

Love and identity support. Adolescents often distinguish ‘best friends’ from more casual acquaintances, and the feelings of heightened emotionality that are associated with romantic involvement are arguably even more variable and potentially intense. Adolescents may be madly in love with a given partner, or more measured in their feelings of emotional connection (Brown,

Feiring, & Furman, 1999; Collins, 2003). Thus the strength of feelings of *love* for the partner is a key basis for distinguishing the character and intensity of these early liaisons. Merten (1996) noted that many early romantic relationships are limited in intimacy because teens often put up a false front when they are with romantic partners, believing that the latter are unlikely to care for them if they were to display their ‘true selves.’ McCall and Simmons (1966), in a more general treatment of close relationships noted that feelings of affirmation and acceptance are a key reward of intimacy. Thus one source of variation in the character of the relationship is the level of *identity support* the adolescent receives within the context of the relationship (Longmore & DeMaris, 1994).

Communication and conflict. Communication processes are considered central to an understanding of close relationships, although much of the research in this area has been carried out with reference to the quality of marital or parent-child relationships (e.g., Lefkowitz & Fingerman, 2003). Yet recent research suggests that youths vary in feelings of *communication awkwardness* when in the company of a romantic interest, or alternatively focus heavily on the rewards of being able to express themselves freely with their romantic partner (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1998; Brown & Furman, 1999; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2001). Researchers interested in both adolescent and adult close relationships have noted that *conflict* is prevalent in virtually all close relationships, but have suggested that the ways in which conflict is handled are especially important to an understanding of variations in the quality of interpersonal ties (Gelles & Strauss, 1988). Problem management of conflict or “conflict tactics” among teens such as ridiculing the partner and even physical violence has been documented in previous studies (e.g., Cleveland, Herrera, & Stuewig, 2003; Johnson, Frattaroli, Campbell, Wright, Pearson-Fields, & Cheng, 2005). As prior research by Cleveland et al. (2003)

indicates, the opportunity for conflict may increase when emotions intensify as romantic relationships become more serious. One study found that urban adolescents and young adults report violence in a relationship as an indicator of commitment, and subsequently, perceive violence as one conflict tactic that would ultimately benefit the relationship (Johnson et al., 2005). Despite this prior research focus on violence in relationships, future research is needed to examine normative levels of conflict in romantic relationships among youth (Vézina & Hébert, 2007). We consider more systematically variations in the experience of levels of conflict (physical and verbal) and relationship dynamics. Given the few studies available focused on features of romantic relationships among youth, we examine the ways in which conflict tactics ‘fit’ with other more basic features/qualities of the relationship.

Assessing the significance of the relationship. Love and identity support, communication, and conflict, are fundamental qualities and dynamics of romantic relationships, but relationships can also be distinguished by adolescents’ overall assessments of the significance of such relationships in their lives. For some adolescents, a dating partner may play a relatively limited role as a companion for various social activities, but other adolescents may come to see the romantic partner as an important source of *influence*. Indeed, research has shown that while peers are critically important to youths during this phase of life, romantic partners are a somewhat understudied source of reference and support (Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2006; Haynie, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2005; Giordano, Phelps, Manning, & Longmore, 2008). Prior work, for example, has shown that romantic partners’ delinquency helps to explain adolescents’ own self-reported delinquency involvement, even after taking into account peer and family factors (e.g., Haynie, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2005). Giordano et al. (2008) showed that romantic partner grades were a significant predictor of respondents’ grades. The current

analysis, however, moves beyond prior work by considering variations in perceived influence of the partner, and how this is connected to other features of the relationship, including passionate love, identity support, communication awkwardness, and conflict.

A second way of assessing the significance of the relationship focuses on the perceived uniqueness or special qualities of the romantic partner. Some adolescents may believe that while they enjoy being with their current partner, there are *alternative partners* with whom they could also be content. This provides a different vantage point on the meaning and importance of this romantic tie. Individuals who do not believe the partner is replaceable may have a greater stake in the relationship, and asymmetries of power may develop from this dynamic. For example, Udry (1981), while focused primarily on marital unions, argued that the belief in the replaceability of the partner was a useful way of assessing power dynamics within a relationship.

A third way in which to assess meaning and significance is the adolescent's view of how long the relationship is likely to last. The *projected duration* of the relationship provides an index not only of a depth of feeling, but of commitment to a future that includes this romantic attachment.

Aims of the Current Study

Prior research has explored some specific qualities of adolescents' romantic relationships, but these have most often been considered as stand-alone dynamics (e.g., in studies of love, or the use of problem conflict tactics). In this analysis, we consider how the dynamics outlined above coalesce in the dating experiences of individuals, and describe 'styles' of relationships observed in a large, diverse sample of adolescents aged 12 to 19 years. We expect that some relationships will be characterized by high levels of affect and perceived significance, while others will be described in ways that reflect lower levels of intensity. Since prior research has

often treated problem conflict tactics as a dependent variable rather than a feature of the relationship, it is not clear how this dynamic will connect to other relationship qualities, and this is, thus, one important objective of this pattern-centered approach.

Although a range of predictors potentially influence the likelihood that adolescents will become involved in different types of relationships, in this initial investigation we consider basic sociodemographic correlates of styles that we encounter in this adolescent sample. Some research suggests that romantic relationships become more intimate and important with age; thus, we will examine the relationship of grade in school and relationship styles. Prior research has also emphasized gendered meanings of romantic attachments (most research suggests that young women are more heavily invested in their relationships—but see Giordano et al., 2006); consequently male and female reports will be a second basis for comparison. Finally, a limited number of studies have suggested some effects of race/ethnicity on the character of romantic attachments during the period (e.g., Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2005); therefore, we also assess similarities and differences by race/ethnicity on the styles of dating adolescents report.

A third objective of the analyses is to link variations in dating styles to important outcomes – here we focus on grades, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and delinquency. While prior research has shown that, for example, dating is associated with depression (Davila, 2008; Joyner & Udry, 2000), it is intuitive to expect that some dating experiences are more strongly linked than others to negative affective states or alternatively to an enhanced sense of self (self-esteem). Similarly, while research has documented that non-daters tend to have higher grades (e.g., Holland & Eisenhart, 1990) and lower probability of delinquency or problem behavior (e.g., Haynie et al., 2005; Jessor & Jessor, 1977) relative to those who date. The social phenomenon of dating is sufficiently ubiquitous in American teen culture that an important and

natural next step is to examine associations between various styles of dating and measures of achievement, as well as involvement in problem behavior.

Method

Data Sources

The data used in this study were derived from structured interviews conducted in connection with the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (n = 1,321). 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 and preloaded laptops were used to administer the interview. Current 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." At the time of the first interview, 579 adolescents reported a current romantic partner. We note that our definition differs from that used in The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), which asks about "a special romantic relationship," but that our definition accurately measures dating status (see Furman & Hand (2006) for a discussion of issues related to the definition and measurement of dating status).

Measures

Seven variables are used as the component variables, reflecting romantic relationships qualities. These are described in turn.

Passionate love is measured using four items from a scale developed by Hatfield and

Sprecher (1986). Respondents rated items from 1 to 5 (“Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”), including “I am very attracted to X.” Summated scores range from 4 to 20 ($M = 14.99$, $SD = 3.29$) (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .85$).

Identity support is measured by two items used in the Maryland Youth Survey: “X is disappointed with me” and “X seems to wish I was a different kind of person.” Respondents rated items 1 to 5 (“Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”). Summed scores are reverse-coded so that higher scores indicated greater support from dating partner, ranging from 2 to 8 ($M = 8.55$, $SD = 1.52$) (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .63$).

Communication awkwardness or feelings of apprehension was measured by four items: “Sometimes I don’t know quite what to say with X,” “I would be uncomfortable having intimate conversations with X” “Sometimes I find it hard to talk about my feelings with X,” and “Sometimes I need to watch what I say to X” (Powers & Hutchinson, 1979). Respondents rated items from 1 to 5 (“Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”). Summated scores range from 4 to 20 ($M = 9.10$, $SD = 3.20$) (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .71$).

Conflict was measured by a seven item version of the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus & Gelles, 1990) (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .88$). Respondents were asked to rate how often their dating partner had “Ridiculed or criticized your values or beliefs,” “Put down your physical appearance,” and “Pushed, shoved, or grabbed you.” Responses ranged from 1 to 5 (“Never” to “Very often”). Summated scores range from 7 to 33 ($M = 8.93$, $SD = 3.35$) (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$).

Influence is measured by three items from a scale developed by Strauss & Gelles (1990), including “X often influences what I do,” “I sometimes do things because X is doing them,” and “I sometimes do things because I don’t want to lose X’s respect.” Respondents rated items from 1 to 5 (“Disagree strongly” to “Agree strongly”). Summated scores ranged from 3 to 15 ($M =$

6.29, $SD = 2.49$) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$).

Partner alternatives is measured by a modified version of Udry's (1983, 1981) asymmetry scale. Items included "I could find another girl/guy as good as X is" and "It's likely that there are other girls/guys I could be happy with." Respondents rated items from 1 to 5 ("Disagree strongly" to "Agree strongly"). Summated scores range from 2 to 10 ($M = 6.29$, $SD = 2.20$) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$).

Projected duration is measured by the single item, "How long do you think this relationship will last?" Responses range from 1 ("a few weeks") to 9 ("two or more years").

Four variables are assessed to reflect adolescent functioning. These include academic grades, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and delinquency.

Grades are assessed with the question: "What grades did you get in school this year?" The item is scored on a scale ranging from 1 to 9 ("Mostly F's" to "Mostly A's") and reverse-coded. ($M = 6.13$, mixed B's and C's, $SD = 2.06$).

Self-esteem is measured by a six item version of Rosenberg's (1979) self-esteem scale. Responses range from 10 to 30 ($M = 23.94$, $SD = 3.65$) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .68$).

Depressive symptoms are measured by a seven item version of the CES-D (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). The items are scored from 1 to 8 ("Never" to "Everyday"). Summated scores range from 0 to 45 ($M = 9.62$, $SD = 8.36$) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$).

Delinquency is assessed with a ten item scale (Elliot & Ageton, 1980). Respondents were asked how often in the past 12 months they had: been drunk in public; stolen something worth more than 50 dollars; attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting him/her?" (etc.). Responses range from 0 to 8, ("Never" to "Almost daily"). A scale is created by summing the responses, range 0 to 80 ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 6.74$) (Cronbach $\alpha = .84$).

We also collected information regarding age, gender, and race/ethnicity. *Grade* in school is calculated from the respondent's year in school (dummy variables for 7th and 11th grade). *Gender* is dummy-coded (0=females, 1=males). *Race/ethnicity* is coded into four mutually exclusive categories (dummy variables for African American, Hispanic, and Other).

Analytic Strategy

Descriptive profiles of self-reported relationship qualities are constructed via a two-step cluster analysis (SPSS 15.0). Two-step cluster analysis relies on a seminal algorithm and since all variables in the current study are continuous, Euclidean distance is used, with cases categorized under the cluster which is associated with the smallest Euclidean distance (Zhang, Ramakrishnon, & Livny, 1996). In the first step, scores are standardized and cases are categorized into subclusters with the goal of reducing the size of the matrix that contains distances between all possible pairs of cases. In the second step, an agglomerative hierarchical clustering technique is used to combine those subclusters that are most similar until all subclusters are assigned to one cluster according to the distance measure (Norušis, 2004). Next, a range of cluster solutions from two to five are considered. The two-cluster solution distinguishes adolescents who scored high and low on five of the seven component variables (passionate love, identity support, communication awkwardness, partner alternatives, projected duration) but does not distinguish between adolescents who differed on conflict or influence. Similar to the two-cluster solution, the three-cluster solution fails to distinguish the subgroup of adolescents who report higher or average levels of passionate love, yet also report higher levels of conflict. Finally, the four and five-cluster solutions are inspected, as both solutions were considered theoretically meaningful. The four-cluster solution classifies the subgroup of youths who scored high on passionate love and higher on conflict. The five-cluster solution, as compared to the

four-cluster solution, provides the smallest Schwartz's Bayesian Information Criteria (BIC). The five-cluster solution reveals a group of daters ($n=142$) high on awkwardness, but low on conflict, important from a theoretical perspective since these two constructs tap unique aspects of intimate communication. Thus, the five-cluster solution was selected as optimal. The final five-cluster solution included 99.65% of the total sample. Two cases were missing data on *projected duration* and thus were not classified. Clusters are inspected with regard to between-cluster distinctions on component variables, cluster size, and the magnitude of associated F tests (Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984). Mean scores for the component variables across the five clusters are described using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Table 1 presents the five clusters and the Pillai-Bartlett multivariate test statistic indicates an overall pattern of significant group differences across the seven component variables used in the cluster analysis ($V = 1.981, F = 79.494, 28/2268 df, p < .001$). Post-hoc univariate F tests on the component variables confirm a pattern of significant between-cluster differences.

To further validate the final cluster solution, we also include excerpts from in-depth interviews conducted with a subset ($n = 94$) of the respondents who participated in the wave one structured interviews. The interviews were generally scheduled separately from the structured interview and lasted an average of 60 minutes. We present accounts from seven respondents to clearly express the voices of dating youth from each relationship profile.

We present associations between cluster membership and respondent characteristics, as well as conceptually relevant developmental outcomes. Chi-square analyses are included to examine differences according to age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Mean scores for the adjustment variables (e.g., grades, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and delinquency) across the five clusters are described using ANOVA and ordinary least squares regression models are estimated

predicting the adjustment variables. As a final step, multivariate regression models are estimated. The goal of these analyses is to determine whether links between cluster membership and developmental outcomes vary when key sociodemographic factors are included.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Results

Descriptions of the Five Relationship Styles

The first relationship profile, the 'passionate' profile, describes 17 percent of the sample. Adolescents in the passionate group are characterized by the highest scores on passionate love and projected duration, and the lowest scores on partner alternatives relative to all other groups, thereby indicating heightened emotionality associated with passionate love. Speaking of his girlfriend of 9 months, a 17-year-old male succinctly declares, "It's like, this is like, this is like one of the best things that has ever happened. She is like the most incredible girl. So, and I love her and I have a great time with her." [Daniel, 17] Daniel chooses language (e.g., 'incredible' 'best thing') that describes a highly emotional connection. Adolescents in this profile scored the highest on identity support and the lowest on communication awkwardness. However, heightened emotionality is the key distinguishing feature of this profile. As the quote below illustrates, Alexis communicates the significance of the relationship by describing how devastated she would be if they broke-up,

I think about our relationship all the time. It's not just like if we just broke up today I'll decide oh well and just forget about it and move on... I would like to see it go a whole lot further than you know just boyfriend and girlfriend like later on in the future when we finish college and stuff. [Alexis]

As Alexis' relationship aspirations indicate, the teens who report a passionate relationship pattern

also typically expect their relationships to endure over time.

The 'conventional' profile (cluster 2) categorized the largest percentage (28%) in the sample. The youth with a conventional pattern report above average levels of identity support and below average levels of communication awkwardness and conflict, at levels statistically similar to youth reporting a passionate profile. While good communication with their dating partner is part of this second relationship pattern, an important contrast with youth in the passionate profile is that teens in this second cluster report statistically lower levels of passionate love, influence, and projected duration. Furthermore, youth in the conventional profile, as compared to youth who report a passionate profile, report a significantly higher number of relationship alternatives, suggesting a moderate level of dedication to their relationship partner. As one female reflects about the progression of her dating relationship,

Okay. Um, well I guess we met as friends, like we had mutual friends and we met through that. And we always used to have, like, a flirty fun kind of relationship and then I don't even know what happened. One night he just came over and he kissed me and I was like okay. And then he asked me out after that and we've been together ever since.

[Natalie, 17]

Natalie's description portrays a seemingly smooth transition from friendship to romance, relatively free of worry or concern. Also absent from Natalie's description are the linguistic superlatives characteristic of the more passionate respondents. Although youths such as Natalie are likely to report generally stable relationships, some conflict is part of a conventional relationship profile. Still, a significant aspect of the conventional style is the resolution of differences between partners,

I mean, we do have our little arguments but we don't get so mad that we both . . . like one

of us takes off, you know? It's not like that. We bicker but then . . . you know, we start explaining . . . we explain ourselves why we feel the way . . . why I feel the way I do and why he does. And we always apologize. [Tasha, 17]

The 'insecure' profile (cluster 3) constitutes the second largest percentage of the sample (25%).¹ Participants categorized as insecure indicated the highest mean levels of communication awkwardness, suggesting that feelings of apprehension pervade their dating relationship, relative to scores of those reporting either a passionate or conventional styles. One respondent reflects on how hard it is for him to approach a girl,

...I just kind of shy, like I guess it's the rejection... I don't want to go up and tell them "hey I like you", and the rejection of "well I don't like you like that." And then there would always be that feeling and it would always say ruin the friendship you know what I'm saying? [Michael, 17]

In sharp contrast to Natalie's matter-of-fact account of her relationship history, Michael alludes to a fear that romantic involvement with ruin existing friendships. Consistent with this, Michael reiterates a degree of uncertainty with his current girlfriend;

I'm still afraid to say, not afraid to say I love you, but just want to make sure I love her you know before I say that....because I realized that those three words are probably the most powerful words in the world....I love you to some people is like they love me but they'll do whatever they can to keep you...that's the only thing that I can see...

As the preceding quote indicates, Michael reports wanting to make sure that he has chosen the right partner to say 'I love you'- a sentiment echoed by many youth, and one that may be especially likely to occur for those individuals fearing rejection. While his words, "do whatever they can to keep you" may indicate hesitancy regarding commitment in general, his discomfort

with his partner may diminish over time or with another partner.

The 'casual' profile (cluster 4) describes 19% of the sample. Youth described as involved in a casual dating relationship also reported a significantly higher number of partner alternatives than all other youth, suggesting youth in this group are involved in a relationship of much less significance than a majority of teens in the total sample. Teens in this profile also scored significantly lower than all other groups on passionate love and projected duration. As one 17-year-old male explains his hesitation about entering or staying in a “serious” relationship when questioned by the interviewer, “. . . my cousin, my dad . . . we don’t get into serious relationships when you’re young. We’re explorers.” [Jorge, 17]. The youth’s choice of the word “explorer” captures the spirit of adolescent experimentation and identity-seeking. Also revealing is Jorge’s reference to his family’s expectations indicating that a casual orientation towards dating is encouraged by his male role models.

The 'conflictual' profile (cluster 5) characterizes the smallest percentage (11%) of the sample. Adolescents in this group reported significantly higher feelings of conflict with their dating partner as compared to the four other clusters. Consistent with a relationship characterized by high frequency of put downs or even slapping and hitting, youth in this profile also reported the least amount of identity support. An 18-year-old male explains that in between his two interview sessions, he has since broken-up with his girlfriend because she,

...cheated on me before, we always argue and fight, she get mad because I have a close relationship with my mother, or she’s jealous because I have a close relationship with my mother and her mother and her father and her don’t have a close relationship at all.

[Tony]

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Relationship Profiles

The distribution of Table 2 shows the number of participants for each of the five relationship profiles (passionate, conventional, insecure, casual, conflictual) according to grade in school, gender, and racial/ethnic group.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Results indicate significant differences according to grade among the five profiles ($\chi^2=36.89, p < .001$). The distribution of ninth and eleventh-graders suggests a developmental trending toward committed and significant relationships, consistent with an individual's movement toward autonomy and emerging adulthood. The largest percentage of teens found in any one cluster (35%), occurs among eleventh-graders categorized as having a conventional relationship style. Younger and older teens, however, are distributed across the five relationship profiles. Thus younger age is not inevitably associated with insecurity and relationships among older adolescents are not all stable and committed.

Significant differences between males and females are indicated ($\chi^2=34.92, p < .001$), yet results in Table 2 are in contrast to traditional gender stereotypes of adolescent romantic relationships. Nearly identical percentages of males and females are found in the passionate group, suggesting that both males and females define their relationships as highly affectionate. A higher percentage of females than males are found in the conventional and casual profiles, while more males are found in the insecure and conflictual profiles, evidence suggesting gender differences. Overall, the presence of males and females in each of the five relationship profiles suggests a nuanced interpretation of gender differences is appropriate.

The percentages of youths according to race/ethnicity (see Table 2) vary across the five clusters, yet differences among the clusters are not as robust in significance level as those differences according to grade in school and gender ($\chi^2=.18, p < .01$). Nearly one-third of all

Anglo, African American, and Hispanic youths are categorized in the conventional profile.

While differences according to race/ethnicity are suggested by the percentages of youths of a specific ethnicity found in the conflictual profile, this profile is the least common of the five profiles. Also, it is unclear why the smallest percentage of African American youth reported a passionate style. Still, youths of each of the four race/ethnicity categories are distributed across the five profiles, suggesting areas of similarity across race/ethnicity.²

Variations in Adjustment by Relationship Style

Figure 1 presents the standardized means of grades, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and delinquency by relationship style. As Figure 1 illustrates, youth who described a conventional relationship style also reported the highest average grades (mostly A's and B's) and the highest scores on self-esteem, while youth who described a conflictual style reported the lowest grades, lowest scores on self-esteem, and highest delinquency scores. A series of one-way analysis of variance tests were conducted to evaluate more systematically the relationship between relationship style and grades, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and delinquency. There are significant between-cluster differences on three of the four dependent variables: grades [$F(4, 576) = 10.36, p < .001$], self-esteem [$F(4, 576) = 7.41, p < .001$], and delinquency [$F(4, 576) = 4.18, p < .05$] (results available from authors). Despite variability on levels of depressive symptoms, all groups are similar statistically.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Between-cluster differences in mean scores of grades, self-esteem, and delinquency are examined further in *post-hoc* comparisons using the Tukey HSD test. Youths in the passionate, conventional, and insecure groups are above the mean (and similar to each other) while youths in the casual and conflictual groups are below the mean (and similar to each other) on grades,

suggesting the three groups with scores above the mean on *projected duration* reported higher grades. Two groups (passionate, conventional) reported scores above the mean (and similar to each other) on self-esteem, while three groups (insecure, casual, conflictual) reported scores below the mean (and similar to each other), suggesting that the three groups who reported below average scores on self-esteem also described their relationship as high on *communication awkwardness* and low on *identity support*. Only one group, the conflictual style, reported above average scores on delinquency, indicating that this group is significantly different from all other groups.

Next, a series of multiple regression analyses are conducted to evaluate whether the association between relationship style and adjustment outcomes (grades, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, delinquency) remain statistically significant net of the effects of age, gender, and race/ethnicity. The cluster membership variable is dummy-coded, as is the gender and race/ethnicity variables, and conventional relationship style, females, and whites were the reference groups. Results are consistent with the results of the univariate *F* tests stated above, with the exception of findings regarding depressive symptoms (see Table 3). Specifically, regression results suggest that being classified in the conventional group predicts significantly lower depressive symptoms scores than all other groups, even after adjusting for the effects of age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Thus generally the relationship clusters have similar association with the outcome indices when we account for age, gender, and race/ethnicity.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Discussion

Romantic experiences are an important part of adolescent development (Collins, 2003; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Sullivan, 1953). The goal of the current study was to extend our

understanding of adolescent romantic relationships by relying on youth's reports of their dating experiences. Consistent with our results and prior research, currently dating adolescents describe remarkably diverse and complex romantic relationships (Furman & Hand, 2006). Prior work has documented the importance of dating and specific relationship factors such as heightened affect, asymmetries, communication awkwardness, and issues related to exclusivity and commitment (Adler & Adler, 1998; Furman & Hand, 2006; Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2006; Joyner & Udry, 2000; Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Our work shows that the combinations of multiple factors are important for accurate assessment of adolescent dating relationships. We focused on seven factors that have been found to be especially salient for understanding romantic involvements, and in doing so, generated five distinct relationship styles among currently dating youth: passionate, conventional, insecure, casual, and conflictual.

The validity of these clusters was assessed by between-cluster comparisons of mean scores for both component and conceptually relevant variables (i.e., grades, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and delinquency). Our findings suggest that factors related to love and support, communication and conflict, and significance of the dating relationships are particularly useful for understanding adolescent daters. Differences according to age, gender, and race/ethnicity were found, but overall, results lend support for a nuanced view of relationship type and sociodemographic characteristics. In addition, important links between relationship qualities and developmental outcomes, particularly delinquency, were identified. Finally, in contrast to prior research on adolescent romantic relationships, this study took an important first step in assessing a combination of relationship quality factors among youth.

Our use of a pattern-centered perspective builds upon prior work and suggests that romantic relationships provide a significant developmental context. For example, of the seventh-

graders who indicated in the sample, a majority indicated an insecure or casual “explorer” relationship style. These results suggest that young adolescents express concerns about their relationship and predict their particular dating relationship as likely to end. Our data suggest that it is mostly *older* adolescents who report satisfying dating relationships, free of awkward communication or conflict. It is possible that many young adolescents report involvement in superficial and fleeting romantic relationships, as Merten (1996) notes. Approximately 25 percent of seventh-graders, however, indicated a conventional or passionate relationship style and it is also noteworthy that young adolescents did not outnumber older youth among those who described a conflictual style. These results are consistent with prior work suggesting that even among young adolescents, a substantial proportion of younger adolescents describe affectionate relationships predicted to last (Giordano et al., 2006). While age is likely to predict the quality of adolescent romantic relationships to a certain extent, it is important for future researchers to consider youth’s diverse relationships styles across age groups.

Our findings with regard to the set of conceptually relevant outcomes (grades, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, delinquency) have important implications for future research among adolescents involved in romantic relationships. Prior work has documented that adolescent girls are vulnerable to depression over time after entering into romantic relationships (Joyner & Udry, 2000; Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004). Recent work has also indicated that the detrimental effect of depressive symptoms on adolescents’ self-esteem may take time to manifest (Repetto, Caldwell, & Zimmerman, 2004). Interestingly, our univariate findings indicate significant differences by relationship pattern on levels of self-esteem but not on levels of depressive symptoms. The regression results, however, do indicate groups vary on depressive symptoms such that involvement in what we describe as a

conventional relationship style may buffer the effects of depression. Although our analyses are cross-sectional in nature, these findings do seem to provide preliminary evidence that a range of relationship qualities influence health-related trajectories, such as depression. Future work is needed to investigate links between adolescent romantic relationship patterns and health-related trajectories given that factors and influences during adolescent development are understood to be working as a functioning whole (Bergman, 2001). Furthermore, person-centered and pattern-centered approaches are critical for understanding diversity in adolescent processes and outcomes (e.g., Lerner, Lerner, De Stefanis, & Apfel, 2001).

Our study has a few limitations that should be noted. Although our study was guided by theory, the validity of cluster analysis as an analytic technique relies on the researcher (Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984). We included a set of conceptually relevant adjustment outcomes to validate our cluster solution, but acknowledge that had another cluster technique been used, another solution may have been determined as optimal. The complexity of accurately depicting adolescent relationship presents a challenge for many analytic strategies, and thus replication of our work needed before relationship profiles are included in more comprehensive modeling strategies, for instance. Second, future research should determine empirically whether our relationship patterns are generalizable to a larger geographic area and/or among emerging adults. The current sample was limited to romantic relationships as described by high school students and future researchers may uncover unique patterns among older age groups, such as high-school students transitioning to college or full-time employment. Third, our data is self-report and based on descriptions of a single dating partner, and thus our relationship profiles may be subjected to bias associated with relying data elicited from one partner. Future work is needed to address the disparity between respondent and dating partner reports, in conjunction with

pattern-based research.

To conclude, few studies to date have utilized pattern-centered techniques such as cluster analysis to examine romantic relationships among adolescents (e.g., Kan, McHale, & Crouter, 2008; Rosenthal, Senserrick, & Feldman, 2001). Our findings, however, suggest that variation in relationships styles among adolescents is important in furthering our understanding of romantic involvements of youth. Moving away from a dating versus non-dating conceptualization to a holistic framework of adolescent romantic experiences has important implications for future research. We suggest that future investigators replicate these adolescent romantic relationship profiles over time. It will be important to discern relationship profiles across partners, as many adolescents will undoubtedly forge new relationships. While it is likely that some teens who describe awkward or conflictual relationships will do so from partner to partner, it is also likely that many more youth will develop the skills necessary to negotiate conflict with a romantic partner successfully. By documenting early relationship patterns among adolescents, researchers will gain information regarding the variation of romantic relationships vital for the understanding of relationships formed during emerging adulthood, and later life.

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Notes

1. We use the adjective “insecure” to convey a sense that the youth classified in this group described a general lack confidence with regards to important features of their romantic involvement. Our use of this label is not meant to connote a specific attachment style.
2. With the exception of youths reporting ‘other’ as their race/ethnicity. We suggest this finding is a result of the small number of youths identifying their race/ethnicity as ‘other’.

Table 1
 Standardized Means for Relationship Quality Factors for Optimal Five-cluster Solution among Current Daters (N = 577)

	Cluster 1 <i>n</i> = 99 (17.16%)	Cluster 2 <i>n</i> = 164 (28.42%)	Cluster 3 <i>n</i> = 142 (24.61%)	Cluster 4 <i>n</i> = 111 (19.24%)	Cluster 5 <i>n</i> = 61 (10.57%)	HSD Cluster Comparison
<i>Relationship Quality</i>	Passionate	Conventional	Insecure	Casual	Conflictual	
<i>Love and Support</i>						
Passionate love	1.10	0.37	0.41	-0.82	0.12	1 > (3,2,5) > 4
Identity support	0.48	0.67	-0.54	-0.14	-0.97	(2,1) > 4 > 3 > 5
<i>Communication and Conflict</i>						
Communication awkwardness	-0.68	-0.68	0.68	0.44	0.47	(3,5,4) > (1,2)
Conflict	-0.29	-0.39	-0.12	-0.31	2.20	5 > (3,1,4,2)
<i>Significance of Relationship</i>						
Influence	-0.09	-0.59	0.72	-0.43	0.36	(3,5) > 1 > (4,2)
Partner alternatives	-1.58	0.11	-0.02	0.57	-0.04	4 > (2,3,5) > 1
Projected duration	0.83	0.31	0.12	-1.24	-0.20	1 > (2,3) > (3,5) > 4

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study

Note: Clusters outside parentheses are significantly different on relationships quality, $p < .001$ and clusters inside parentheses are statistically similar.

Table 2
Sociodemographic Characteristics of Current Daters across the Five Relationship Profiles

	Total % (n)	<i>Passionate</i> n = 99	<i>Conventional</i> n = 164	<i>Insecure</i> n = 142	<i>Casual</i> n = 111	<i>Conflictual</i> n = 61
<i>Grade</i>						
7th	26.9 (144)	11.6 (16)	16.2 (23)	30.9 (44)	29.0 (43)	12.3 (18)
9th	34.8 (178)	15.0 (28)	28.7 (52)	23.9 (41)	20.2 (35)	12.3 (22)
11th	38.3 (255)	21.0 (55)	34.7 (89)	22.9 (57)	13.2 (33)	8.3 (21)
<i>Gender</i>						
Male	44.1 (243)	16.8 (42)	19.7 (47)	29.6 (71)	16.8 (41)	17.1 (42)
Female	55.9 (334)	16.0 (57)	33.9 (117)	22.0 (71)	22.2 (70)	5.9 (19)
<i>Ethnicity</i>						
White	63.9 (346)	19.4 (68)	29.6 (105)	25.9 (88)	17.7 (59)	7.5 (26)
African American	27.5 (154)	8.2 (13)	23.5 (38)	26.8 (40)	23.7 (36)	17.8 (27)
Hispanic	7.5 (70)	23.1 (18)	28.5 (20)	12.9 (11)	22.9 (14)	12.5 (7)
Other	1.1 (7)	0.0	16.9 (1)	40.8 (3)	28.2 (2)	14.1 (1)

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study

Note: Percentages are weighted.

Table 3
 Selected Results From Linear Regression Models Predicting Adjustment Outcomes

	<i>Grades</i>		<i>Self-esteem</i>		<i>Depressive Symptoms</i>		<i>Delinquency</i>	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Relationship Profile								
Passionate	-.13	.24	-.27	.45	.44**	.15	-1.67 ⁺	.85
(Conventional) ^a	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Insecure	-.01	.22	-1.67***	.42	.42**	.14	-.03	.78
Casual	-.45	.24	-1.03*	.45	.33*	.15	.14	.84
Conflictual	-.99**	.30	-2.52***	.55	.50**	.18	3.10**	1.04
Intercept	6.92***	.21	23.95***	.38	1.31***	.13	3.11***	.73

Note: All models control for gender, grade in school, and race/ethnicity.

^a Reference category for set of cluster dummy variables.

⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Adjustment outcomes across the five relationship styles.

