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*Working Paper Series 2009-02*

**ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND ACADEMIC/CAREER TRAJECTORIES  
IN EARLY ADULTHOOD**

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\*This research was supported by a grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, HD36223, and by the Center for Family and Demographic Research, Bowling Green State University, which has core funding from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R24HD050959-01).

## **ABSTRACT**

A defining feature of emerging adulthood is independence from parents and the desire to obtain financial and personal independence. During this time period young adults move away from parents and friends and toward romantic partners as a source of reference, support and influence. This chapter draws on quantitative and qualitative data from young adults in the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS) to examine the extent to which individuals value achievement and ambition in their romantic partners and explore the mechanisms through which romantic partners influence educational and career trajectories.

## INTRODUCTION

A defining feature of early adulthood is gaining independence from parents, both financially and psychologically. Education and work experience are key to establishing the groundwork for successful transitions to adulthood for both men and women. Most critical transitions in education and work life occur in early adulthood, a time when romantic partnerships are also taken more seriously; marital prospects, especially, are evaluated for their economic potential. Unlike prior generations, *both* men and women today are valued in the ‘marriage market’ for their current and potential positive economic circumstances (e.g., Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004; Goldstein and Kenney 2001; Sweeney and Cancian 2004; White and Rogers 2000). Early adulthood is a time period when interactions and the influence of parents and peers wanes and are to some extent supplanted by the support and influence of romantic partnerships (Giordano, Phelps, et al. 2008). Thus, in early adulthood romantic partners are expected to play a large role that may have long-term, consequential implications on work and education prospects.

This chapter focuses on the importance of achievement and economic stability in early adulthood and how romantic relationships influence education and career trajectories. A multi-method approach is applied drawing on survey data from 428 currently dating young adults and narrative data soliciting the perspectives of 155 young adults. The interviews are used to examine the role of the romantic partner on attitudes, behaviors and future goals, as understood by respondents themselves.

### *Romantic Partnership Influence in Adolescence.*

Researchers have focused on implications of adolescents’ dating relationships including emotional well-being, delinquency, and teen parenthood. The emotional bonds that characterize

dating relationships may leave some adolescents who date open to great emotional pleasure or pain. Dating relationships are reported by teens to be the single greatest source of stress (Larson et al. 1999). The negative aspects of dating, break-up or conflict, have implications for depressive symptoms (Monroe et al. 1999; Meier 2007). Global self-esteem and other aspects of well-being may be affected by positive or negative romantic experiences (Furman and Shaffer 2003; Harter 1988). Positive romantic experiences affect adolescents' sense of self in a positive way and adverse experiences may negatively affect confidence in the ability to have a strong romantic relationship (Connolly and Konarski 1994). In addition, greater numbers of dating relationships are positively related to externalizing behavior problems (Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2001), and teens who have multiple casual partners are at increased risk of problem behaviors (Davies and Windle 2000). Haynie et al. (2005) document that dating partner's delinquency is significantly associated with the reports of delinquent involvement provided by the respondent, even after levels of peer delinquency and traditional predictors of delinquency had been taken into account. Further, dating partner's delinquency matters once accounting for parental and peer indicators of delinquency (Lonardo et al. 2009). Finally, a number of studies find that teens who are dating are more likely to become teen parents than those not dating (Porter 2005; Bearman and Brückner 1999; Hanson, Myers, and Ginsberg 1987). Daters may be at greater risk of parenthood because dating is associated with increased sexual activity and in some cases reduced contraceptive use (Manlove et al. 2007).

Recent work has assessed how romantic relationships influence educational performance. Crissey (2006) finds that adolescent girls who report having romantic relationships also report declining grades and educational aspirations, but this association between dating and educational performance and goals is not found among boys. Giordano, Phelps, et al. (2008) demonstrate

that the academic orientation of the romantic partner is a significant predictor of the adolescent's own performance, once the well-documented effects of parents and peers have been taken into account. Thus, there is evidence that an important achievement outcome --- academic performance --- is significantly related to the performance level of the romantic partner. Adolescents may select into relationships with certain types of partners based on their academic achievement.

In summary, the research on adolescent dating has explored effects of early romantic involvement on a range of developmental outcomes, but much of the emphasis is negative, stressing detriments to emotional well-being, risky sexual involvement, delinquency, and a negative impact on grades. Recent studies of behavioral concordance between respondents and their romantic partners hint that influence may be positive or negative, depending upon the academic or other behavioral characteristics of the partners with whom the individual affiliates. In prior analyses, we hypothesized that these levels of concordance reflect selection, but also more active influence processes, and longitudinal analyses controlling for respondent characteristics on initial interview provide some support for the latter point of view. Nevertheless, more research is needed that elucidates the specific mechanisms through which romantic partners exert either positive or negative influences. In addition, little work has moved beyond the adolescent period to consider how partners influence adult educational performance and the adult parallel to school, work.

### *Emerging Adulthood*

Emerging adulthood is a life course stage ranging from about ages 18-25 (Arnett 1998, 2000, 2004; Hagan and Foster 2003; Schwartz, Côté and Arnett 2005) and has been characterized as a 'winding path' into adulthood. Shifts in the nature of education opportunities,

leaving the parental home, career development, early parenthood, and delayed marriage have resulted in less rigid transitions to adulthood. This period is a mix of adolescent and adult commitments and responsibilities that are infused with experimentation (Arnett 2000; Erikson 1968). Core questions that emerging adults may ask themselves are: “who am I” and “where do I want to go” along with “who do I want to go there with?”

Young adults have an increasingly wide variety of employment and education experiences (Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck, and Park 2005; Osgood et al. 2005). Among 15-24-year-olds high school graduates only 30 percent were enrolled in a 4-year higher education institution (U.S. Census 2006) and one-third of high school students do not continue on to college the year after they graduate (Davis and Bauman 2008). Arnett (2000) discusses how emerging adults experiment with educational choices to help form career paths. Shifts in occupational interests are characteristic of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000, 2004). For example, most high school students are employed part-time in low-skilled jobs simply to pay for leisure activities and personal items. These employment experiences change as emerging adults focus more so on skilled jobs that may lead into careers and adult roles. Prior research has documented that top criteria for adulthood status are *Accepting responsibility for oneself*, *making independent decision*, and *financial independence* (see Arnett 1997, 1998, 2000; Greene et al. 1992). Thus education and career trajectories are key to understanding transitions to adulthood. However, little is known about the role and influence of romantic partners as an influence and outcome of these developmental shifts.

Developmental changes occurring during late adolescence and emerging adulthood include the onset and escalation of romantic behaviors (Arnett 2000). Dating differs between adolescence and emerging adulthood. On average, adolescents begin recreational dating around

ages 12-14 and these relationships tend to be rather short-lived (Carver, Joyner, and Udry 2003; Feiring 1996). During emerging adulthood, however, dating relationships last longer and are typically more physically and emotionally intimate (Collins 2003). Dating partners start to supplant parents and peers as emotionally significant sources of influence in emerging adulthood. Giordano, Longmore, et al. (2008) show that the time spent with friends decreases as teenagers move into adulthood. At the same time dating partners' interactions and influence increase sharply as teenagers make the transition into adulthood (Giordano, Longmore, et al. 2008). These findings highlight that romantic partners may potentially supersede friend and parent influence during emerging adulthood.

### *Current Study*

The conceptual framework we draw on emphasizes that: a) each form of social relationship, including romantic relationships, contributes in unique ways to development and behavior, and b) the relative salience of different relationships shifts across the life course, as respondents mature, and the challenges of each phase of life change along with and serve as catalysts for these maturational processes. Thus, it is important to document these general shifts in the character of network alignments, and to discover the role of specific relationships as influences on consequential developmental outcomes. Our prior research showed that, even during the adolescent period, the romantic partner has been underappreciated as a source of reference and influence. Recent analyses also document that the perceived influence of the romantic partner increases significantly as young people begin the process of making the transition to adulthood (Giordano, Longmore, et al. 2008). Older respondents reported spending more time with partners relative to the time devoted to friends, and are significantly more likely than at younger ages to consider the partner an important reference other.

Recognizing these general changes, we examined the role of romantic partners as either a positive or negative influence on drinking, drugs, and other antisocial behavior, and results do indicate a pattern of influence on these behaviors, and an increasing influence among older respondents (Giordano, Longmore, et al. 2008). Thus, by extension, we expect that young adult partners may also begin to influence long-term educational and occupational aspirations, pursuits, and success within these domains.

Based on our conceptual framework and results of prior studies, we expect that the effect of the romantic partner on education and work begins with an active selection process. Homophily or concordance in long-term aspirations or educational attainment is not a given, but often derives from maturational changes in the emerging adult's view of what constitutes an appealing or worthy partner. Accordingly, we examine the percentage of respondents who indicate that financial and career aspirations are important criteria when making dating choices. We also expect, based on our prior research on behaviors such as drug and alcohol use, that the romantic partner can have both positive and negative influences on behavior. This idea is more consistent with a social learning approach, rather than with attachment or control perspectives, which have more often conceptualized strong attachments as a uniformly positive feature of development. In addition, while there is a trend toward homophily in attitudes and perspectives within couples, differences do occur. In this regard, we expect that where one partner represents a strong contrast, the possibility of effects is itself likely to be stronger. Finally, our analyses benefit from and extend Hocevar's (2008) recent insight that it is important to consider the fluid and shifting nature of romantic relationships, particularly during this phase of life. Thus, some individuals may end relationships that fail to support their long term goals and aspirations, and others may completely "opt out" of the dating market to avoid dealing with the potentially



derailing influences of partners. Such cases are difficult to observe when focusing only on a current dating relationship (as in traditional quantitative assessments of romantic partner effects), but often emerge as part the more complete relationship history narrative approach we relied upon in this investigation.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

We draw on quantitative and qualitative data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS). TARS data were collected in 2001, 2002, 2004, and 2006 with in-depth interviews at waves one, three, and four as well as a parent questionnaire at wave one. The initial sample was drawn from 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grade enrollment records of all youths in Lucas County, Ohio in 2000. Through stratified random sampling, a total of 1,321 youths were interviewed. Respondents did not have to be enrolled in school to participate in any wave, thus yielding a sample with slightly more high-risk youth than other data samples only including enrolled students.

Data from the structured survey at wave four focuses on the defining features of adulthood and adult relationships. Most of the TARS respondents have dated, 87% of respondents who are not cohabiting or married at wave 4 had dated and about 60% were dating at the time of the interview. This analysis includes 428 respondents who were 18 or older and were dating at the time of interview and identified as heterosexual. Respondents were asked if they were dating: “Is there someone you are currently dating--that is, a girl/guy you like and who likes you back?” If the respondent responded ‘yes’ then they are coded as dating.

Respondents in our analytic sample are 18 to 24 years old with an average age of 20.3. The sample is nearly evenly divided by gender (females = 54%) and the distribution of

race/ethnicity is as follows: 60.5% non-Hispanic white, 24.3% non-Hispanic African American, 10.5% Hispanic, and 4.7% were some other race or ethnicity.

One hundred fifty-five respondents were over age 18 and chosen to participate in the in-depth interviews at wave three or wave four. Some were randomly selected and others were selected based on their previous high risk sexual behaviors putting them at risk for unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections as observed at waves three or four. The remainder of the sample included in the in-depth interviews were selected because they lived in environments that were associated with greater risk (i.e., poverty), even though they had not previously indicated involvement in high risk sexual behaviors. Though not a random sample, this strategy provides a good mix of prosocial youth as well as those with high risk exposure to delinquency and other problem outcomes. The qualitative sample is almost equally divided by gender and the vast majority had dating experience.

The semi-structured interview questions outline various features of relationships including dating, break-ups, hook-ups, romantic relationship importance and friendships. Interviews took place at the respondents' home and were approximately one to two hours long. Respondents speak candidly about dating experiences and the links between current goals and romantic partners. These interviews are helpful for exploring the mechanisms of partner influence and the variability in dating pathways during emerging adulthood. One of the key interview questions is: "How important is/was the relationship to you?" In response, many focus on influence factors and how they have personally changed because of the dating experience. Additional questions focused on comparison and contrast across partners. The open-ended nature of the interviews allows for general reflection in which respondents are encouraged to speak about their own perspectives without judgment. Short two-page summaries

were developed from each interview and specifically utilized direct quotes from the respondent. An open coding scheme is used to develop an understanding of the connections between romantic relationships and life goals and behaviors.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Defining Adulthood***

Although much has been written about the lack of tangible markers associated with arriving at the status of adulthood, most respondents (84%) in our sample of current daters reported that they felt like an adult. The open-ended responses indicate that the primary reasons that they answered affirmatively to this question are that they are living on their own and making their own decisions. The respondents who did not feel like adults at the time of interview offered several views on what it would take for them to feel adult-like: living on their own, paying their bills, and having a better job. Thus, independence and specifically financial independence is an indicator of adulthood. While economic prospects seem to define adulthood, respondents are somewhat concerned about their own economic prospects. Nearly two-fifths (38%) are concerned about not having enough money, 30% are concerned about debt and not achieving a desired standard of living, and one-quarter (26%) are concerned about having a 'dead-end job.' To put these findings in context, 21% are concerned about divorce, only 14% are concerned about finding a soul-mate, and 17% express concern about being like their parents. These results are consistent with other studies that highlight financial and residential independence as being key markers of adulthood. Notably, a substantial minority express strong concerns about their financial futures.

### *Homophily in Work and Education*

Dating partners often share similar work and education patterns, but as stated at the outset, this involves what might be considered passive selection processes (for example, traveling in the same social circles due to similar levels of social and cultural capital), but also in part due to more active selection processes as well as in response to efforts to sustain and move their relationships forward. In our sample the majority share similar levels of educational attainment, crudely measured as high school as a contrast to post-high school. Two-fifths of our sample both had some post-high school education and one-third of our sample shared lower levels of education (high school graduates or less). In terms of being enrolled in school, we find that one-quarter were both enrolled in school and one-third were both not enrolled. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that about two-fifths of respondents were in relationships with someone who did not share their school enrollment status.

Work experiences were even more varied. In our sample 13% of young adults were not working and in relationships with someone else who was not working (at least 10 hours per week). At this life course stage only 17% of respondents were themselves working full-time and dating someone else who worked full-time.

Given the education and work roles that are unfolding, we combined full-time work and enrollment in school and coded it as being 'active.' We find that half of the sample was active and had an active boyfriend or girlfriend. About twelve percent were both inactive, neither was in school or working full-time. Yet one-third of young adults were working full-time or in school and dating someone who was not engaged in either activity. Although similarly positioned partners may exert significant reciprocal influences on educational and occupational

circumstances, our view is that the contrast presented by differently positioned partners may heighten the potential for influence (or alternatively for destabilizing the relationship).

### ***Valued Partner Attributes***

While respondents may be seeking independence as a route to adulthood, little is known about what they are seeking in romantic partners. Young adults generally value financial security in a relationship. The vast majority (72%) thought their boyfriend/girlfriend had a bright financial future. About 65% think it is pretty or very important to be in a financially secure relationship. Respondents were asked about specific perspectives on the long-term economic prospects of their current boyfriends and girlfriends. Even though the young adults were only dating, not cohabiting or married, their partners' economic future was deemed important. Most young adults (61%) felt their boyfriends/girlfriends know what they want in terms of their job/future and do not wish he/she had a better job. However, one-fifth did wish their boy/girlfriend had a better job. About half (55%) reported they cared about their boy/girlfriend's financial future and only 14% said they did not care. About half of young adults liked how their boy/girlfriend handled money. These findings indicate that the economic potential of boyfriends and girlfriends are important.

### ***Partner Influence***

About half (56%) of dating young adults indicated that it was important for them to gain the approval of their boyfriend or girlfriend, indicating that there is a strong potential for some influence, for good or ill. Yet relatively few actually report changing their behavior for their boyfriend or girlfriend. About one-fifth (18%) indicated that they had changed their behavior to please their boyfriend or girlfriend and a similar proportion feel their boyfriend or girlfriend tries to control them. Relatively few respondents (6%) agree that their boyfriend or girlfriend always

wants to change them. Giordano, Longmore, et al. (2008) report there is a developmental arc with the levels of partner influence increasing substantially from adolescence into adulthood, recognizing that respondents are in general reluctant to suggest that they are not themselves the primary architects/ managers of their current values, attitudes, and behaviors.

The in-depth relationship history narratives adds to this portrait, as this approach allows more nuanced discussions of whether and how partners have influenced them. This approach also provides an opportunity for respondents to describe prior relationships, future goals in making partner choices, and fluidity in the nature of influence within the context of a single relationship.

#### *Positive Influence of the Romantic Partner*

Respondents more commonly indicate that the partner helps rather than hurts their career goals and objectives. And, as a contrast to the findings about general influence or change cited above, many emerging adults attribute at least some aspects of their own successes to the presence of their romantic partner. Twenty-two-year-olds Cameron and Julie have been together for over three years. When asked about how their relationship has affected him, Cameron says: “She kept me straight. I mean I have a really good, steady job.” This quote expresses the idea that having a steady job is a positive aspect of his life and credits that to the partner.

Brandon age 22 has been dating Julie and recently earned his GED. He knew he did not measure up to Julie in terms of education when they started dating. He did not tell Julie about his education during the first two months of their relationship “because the subject never really came up, so it wasn’t something, you know, you just blurt out to someone.” He states that Julie was a reason he wanted to work hard and get his GED.

She’s another reason that made me wanna get my GED because she’s real...you know, I felt kinda stupid bein’ with this super intelligent girl and I don’t even have a GED.

This couple shows how even in educationally discordant couples romantic partners can be a powerful motivating influence. Similarly, 21 year old James likes the fact that his girlfriend, Shelby, is trying to get him to aspire and achieve more in his life. James states that “she’s got goals” and he admits she wants more for him. When asked why he appreciates her efforts to change him, he replies

Because there's more out there than just smoking weed, like getting a better job, getting an education. Like I don't want to go back to school or nothing like that... She's always on my neck about that, like get a trade. Like barber school, I like cutting hair and stuff and she's like you should go do that, go do that. Like I just don't want to go through the classes and stuff for it. That's the only thing that is stopping me.

Shelby does not support his current lifestyle and their relationship is on shaky ground. Even though Shelby is pestering James (‘on my neck’) about improving his circumstances, he recognizes that she is a positive source of influence.

Some couples’ behavior is mutually reinforcing and encourages one another to achieve.

Marsha age 23 refrains from going out at night because her 25 year old boyfriend Tim does not. She acknowledges that she would go out more, if he wanted to.

R: To go out to the bar every night, isn’t, I mean, we both have to work, we both have school, so it’s kinda difficult.

I: Are you at all influenced on the fact that, or by the fact that he doesn’t party as much?

R: Yeah, yeah. If he partied as much, I’d go out just as much. ‘Cus he stays home I’ll stay home with him.

Twenty-three year old Claire and 26 year old Steve are both high achieving students in medical school. Claire works hard to keep up with Steve and credits Steve with the fact she receives honors.

R: He usually gets better grades by like I don’t know, two or three percentage points. But that’s alright.

I: You guys are a little competitive?

R: A little bit. A little. But it's good cause I mean he will always get you know, get the honors and so if I have to be competitive and it makes me take a step above in trying to you know, get better than him and I end up with honors too, that's not a bad thing.

Another way for a partner to influence grades is very directly by making good academic performance a criteria for the relationship. Ashley, 18 years old, said she learned responsibility from her last relationship. In fact, her boyfriend wants her to get her unsatisfactory grades up, and until then, they are broken up.

These quotes represent multiple ways in which partners can be a source of influence. This can be modeling behavior of a good student or worker, provide support for career and educational goals, and make a strong academic performance a criteria for the relationship.

#### *Negative Effects of Romantic Partners*

Although most respondents mention prosocial partner influences on education and finances, there are still respondents who describe how dating partners negatively influence their career or education goals. The most typical way is by drawing attention away from work and/or school. When asked about how her relationship has affected her, twenty-one-year-old Liz says:

I'm happy. I mean, I'm not typically a happy person, but now I'm like, I'm always happy. I mean, it has affected me. I've taken away from schoolwork a little bit to hang out with him, but I mean, at the same time, I am very happy.

This statement suggests that, for some emerging adults, current happiness is possibly more important than traditional educational endeavors. The social learning perspective is an important consideration here, because if Liz' boyfriend were more intent upon his own educational and occupational endeavors, he would likely not be content to spend so much time simply "hanging out" with her. Though Liz is broadly speaking about "taking away from schoolwork," her comment is followed by the word "but" suggesting that she acknowledges that the relationship is



not entirely positive. Twenty-year-old Eric acknowledges how he negatively influenced his girlfriend Jennifer by taking time away from college to be with him:

Um, she doesn't attend college anymore. She actually kind of gave it up for me...I did not ask her for this, but she had to give up something because of time.

Now that the two are engaged, Eric and Jennifer plan on going back to school, but in the mean time, they both work at a local pet store. This example highlights that it is often an oversimplification to conceptualize particular romantic partners as either a positive or negative influence. The perspectives of each partner are not static, communication continually takes place that may move the couple forward, and outside influences/events may also play a role.

As described in prior work focused on drug and alcohol use, (Giordano, Longmore, et al. 2008) respondents are agentic with respect to whether they wish to be in a relationship, actively selecting particular partners, and are not just passive recipients of their partner's influence. Some respondents broke up with a significant other or do not date because of real or potential negative influences on their education and work goals. These young adults may be opting out of dating. The most common reason provided for not dating in the survey data was wanting to avoid drama (56%) which was followed by claiming they were too involved in work/school (48%). These findings are supported by the qualitative data. An 18 year old female respondent recently quit dating her boyfriend to catch up with school work in hopes of attending a local community college. "Ahh, it [the relationship] stopped because I don't want a boyfriend now that I'm studying. I want a clear mind [laughs]." When asked why he is not currently dating, 18-year-old Jamal replies "I'm worried about school." Brandy has dated two boys in the past and suggests that she currently is not dating because she has aspirations to be a nurse and wants "to be into school more than [into] boys." Certainly, incompatible goals can be a reason for breaking up or avoiding relationships and relationships can be viewed as interfering with their future goals.

Some respondents even recognize the importance of being ambitious in order to find a girl/boyfriend. Twenty-two year old Doug realizes that he has to move away from a partying lifestyle to find a serious girlfriend.

And as far as the relationship goes, I mean nobody wants to hang out with, you know, the partying dude, you know, the dude that, you know, goes out 24/7, and you know, can't commit to a relationship, so...That's had an effect on me. I've never had a girlfriend say, you know, I need to stop partying so much. Nothin' like that, but I know that's a necessary step I have to take if I want to find somebody serious, so...it was something to take into consideration.

### *Relationship Histories and Partner Influence*

The relationship history narratives make clear that respondents may have been involved with partners who negatively influenced them at one point but then shift to more positive relationships later. The social learning perspective thus also encompasses the notion that these young adults learn not only from a current partner, but from their prior relationships.

Accordingly, over time they may modify their goals and/or seek partners who are more compatible with their life goals. Twenty-two year old Mark was attending a four year college and had a series of girlfriends who were quite casual and sometimes stressful. He claimed his new girlfriend, Marcy, was different from all the rest and she had a positive influence on his studies.

Marcy is nice and she brought up some of the things that I needed to change in my life... I never was really adamant about attending class that much and this semester I definitely missed less than fifteen classes. She helped me realize that I need to be more responsible about some of my behavior...I'm driving her to class and I am already awake so I might as well go - because she has early classes. It's more just like helping me realize I had some growing up to do before moving into the real world.

Marcy not only had the direct influence of making sure he got to class but changed his view of his college education and future.

Twenty-two-year-old Alexis says a previous two year relationship ended because her boyfriend Dave was not motivated in school. Additionally, he was “not supportive about my job” and “pessimistic.” Dave, four years her senior, did not have the motivation and educational goals that she wanted in a partner. Despite dating her current boyfriend for only three months, Alexis says that the relationship is serious because they “both have the same life long goals.” In her near future she sees “marriage and family... I hope I see myself with William [current boyfriend] still and happy. Three to five years we might be living in Georgia [and] getting my degree.” She describes her boyfriend as “goal oriented, motivated, and optimistic.” In fact he is receiving his master’s degree in a few months. Alexis learned from her prior relationships and found someone who meets her prosocial attributes with positive lifelong goals.

## **DISCUSSION**

Developmental changes occurring during late adolescence and emerging adulthood include the escalation of romantic behaviors and shifts in romantic partner influence (Arnett 2000; Giordano, Longmore, et al. 2008). The adult relationship that has received much attention is marriage, with an emphasis on how marriage promotes adult health and well-being (e.g., Duncan, Wilkerson, and England 2006; Sampson and Laub 1993; Waite and Gallagher 2000; Warr 1998; Williams, Sassler, and Nicholson 2008; Williams and Umberson 2004). Yet, researchers have overlooked the influence of romantic partners in adulthood, the relationships that precede marriage. Our prior work has focused on how early adulthood romantic partners influence problematic behaviors, such as drinking and drug use. This chapter extends that work by providing new insight into how partners impact achievement in early adulthood. We highlight what is valued in romantic partners, the potential influence of partners, and the mechanisms of partner influence by utilizing multi-method data.

We confirm other studies that indicate a key component of defining oneself as an adult is being independent and financially secure. Our work shows that in early adulthood, romantic partners are valued in part for their economic potential value. Young adults are aware of the importance of positive economic prospects and realize the necessity of investing in education and career goals to find a good partner.

Given the multiple and varying work and education roles, it is not surprising that romantic partners do not always share the same education or work status, i.e., enrolled in school or working full time. Even when partners are both in school or working one partner can encourage and support the other in their specified role. For example, even when both romantic partners are full-time college students one partner can help out by encouraging class attendance or pushing them to work harder in school. At the same time, romantic partners appear to be a great source of influence when there are some differences in their achievements or goals. Similar to our findings focusing on substance use, in these cases romantic partners are sources of both positive and negative influences. An example of a negative influence is that romantic partners have the capacity to draw young adults away from education or career objectives. In some cases, this can then be part of a decision to end a relationship or avoid relationships altogether. There appears to be a view that relationships can get in the way of education and work achievements. At the same time a romantic partner can encourage their partner who is not in school or working full-time to achieve more by setting a high standard or encouraging behaviors that lead to further education or career development.

The relationship between romantic partners and academic and work achievement is important for understanding other early adult behavior as well. We find one way that young adults desist from crime as well as substance abuse is by having a partner who encourages more

prosocial investments in school and work (Giordano, Longmore, et al. 2008). Second, educational attainment is positively related to union formation for both adult men and women. Men and women often believe a prerequisite for marriage is being financially stable or economically set (Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005) and economic security has a greater influence on marriage than cohabitation (e.g., Brines and Joyner 1999; Oppenheimer 2003). Thus, as dating experiences influence educational/work performance goals, there are implications for a future trajectory for the timing and type of unions formed during early adulthood. Third, parents must provide for their children and take seriously their investments in their children's future through work/education. Thus, especially among parents work and education goals can compete with relationships. For example, twenty-two-year-old Laura says that she is not currently dating because of priorities: her son and work. She even broke up a relationship last year because both she and her partner decided they were both too busy with other priorities. Thus, the associations between romantic partnerships and education and work trajectories are complex and linked to other activities and roles.

These findings provide a lens into the lives of emerging adults. While structural factors certainly have a strong influence on education and work roles in early adulthood, we argue there has been inadequate attention to how the social context (partners, family and friends) in emerging adulthood shapes behaviors. This study showcases the potentially important role of romantic partners on trajectories through adulthood. A key next step is to study the significant role of partners, parents and peers on adult life trajectories.

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