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Directly observed interaction within adolescent romantic relationships: What have we learned?

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Abstract

Review and conceptual analysis of the papers in this special issue calls attention to several important methodological and conceptual issues surrounding the direct observation of adolescent romantic couples. It also provides an important new foundation of knowledge about the nature of adolescents' romantic relationships. Connections with previous family relationships, new understandings of the distinctive nature of adolescent romantic relationships, and gender issues are clarified by this body of papers. Together, these papers move the scholarly field forward and generate new lines of questions for future investigators.

Although adolescent romantic relationships have long captured the attention of popular discourse in literature, movies, and music, the scholarly investigation of the developmental significance of adolescent romantic relationships has only blossomed in the past decade (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, in press). Over the past decade, many different research laboratories across the world in North America, South America, Europe, Australia, and the Middle East have begun to explore the nature and processes of adolescent romantic relationships. The scholarship of these laboratories has been published in several edited volumes (e.g., Crouter & Booth, 2006; Florsheim, 2003; Furman et al., 1999), and hundreds of journal articles. Despite the impressive recent burgeoning of empirical research on adolescent romantic relationships, the majority of data has been gathered through self report questionnaire methods provided by individuals. It is possible when data is sought only from individual adolescents that some individuals report on relationships in which they wish to be involved, but in reality are not reciprocated (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). In addition, even when relationships are reciprocated, one partner may perceive the relationship as romantic while the other may consider it as merely a friendship (Leaper & Anderson, 1997).

Researchers from numerous other fields of study have long recognized the value of directly observing the interactions of their participants (Margolin et al., 1998; Noller & Feeney, 2002). Direct observation provides clear and specific information about the temporal sequences and nuanced patterns of interactional processes between people in an interpersonal context that cannot be obtained from global self-report measures alone. Observational methodologies also allow researchers to obtain multiple perspectives of adolescents' interactions, including the perspectives of outside trained experts, as well as the perspectives of adolescents themselves and of their romantic partners. People behave in ways that are discrepant from their self

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perceptions and direct observations can capture their behavior independent from their self perceptions (Kerig, 2001; Stoneman & Brody, 1990). The information obtained through observation can add unique and independent information from that provided by adolescents' individual global self reports of their romantic relationships. In addition, the Reese-Weber paper in this special issue illustrates that participants' observation of standardized recordings of adolescent romantic couples' interactions can also shed important light on participants' attitudes towards specific relational processes such as violence.

Adolescent romantic relationships can be studied within the framework of relational systems. In line with this understanding, studying interactions provides access to the relationships among individuals rather than focusing exclusively on individuals' characteristics (Kerig, 2001). The unit of analysis becomes the system. A systems level analysis allows investigators to capture more complex aspects of the romantic relationship. In addition, within a systemic perspective, interactional interdependency, namely that the extent to which the behavior of one partner affects the behavior of the other, can also be observed (Lindhal, 2001).

For many of these reasons, scholars interested in understanding adolescents' romantic relationships more intensively have begun to incorporate observational methodologies into their investigations of adolescent development. We believe that the inclusion of data obtained through directly observing adolescent romantic couples' interactions can provide new understandings of adolescent romantic relationships and their developmental course. The purpose of this special issue is to examine the contributions of research using directly observed interaction methodologies on our understanding of adolescent romantic relationships. The papers in this special issue make important conceptual and methodological contributions to the scholarly literature on the developmental significance of adolescent romantic relationships.

Each paper in this special issue examines specific relationship processes that occur in adolescent romantic relationships and most link these specific processes to the quality of adolescents' romantic relationships. The studies presented in this special issue employ a variety of different methods for assessing direct observations to address and examine their specific questions.

In this concluding and integrative paper, three major topics are highlighted. The first topic pertains to *the content of the observation*: what are the characteristics of the observation task? The second topic deals with the *interpretation or assessment of the observed interaction*: what coding system or procedures are selected to interpret the interaction and what is the conceptual or theoretical foundation for that decision? The third topic highlights new understandings of adolescent romantic relationships that can be formulated based on the papers in this special issue. Finally, conceptual issues in the study of adolescent romance are reviewed, and future directions in this field of study are discussed.

Direct observation of adolescent romantic couples: The observation task

In his review of the observation of couples' conflicts, Heyman (2001) suggests that observation involves, at the very least, an implicit model of what relationships constitute and what are the more important and relevant aspects under inquiry. Without such an implicit model, researchers or clinicians may end up observing a behavior that lacks conceptualization and is idiosyncratic. The papers in this issue adapted observational techniques originally utilized in the family and marital processes literatures to the study of adolescent romantic relationships. In this vein, the majority of the papers in this special issue conceptualize adolescent romantic relationships within the context of family relationships and apply the rich corpus of observational methodologies used in the study of family and couple relationships (Gottman, 1999; Noller & Feeny, 2002).

A striking similarity of all nine of the papers in this special issue is that they all used observational tasks that focused on conflict resolution in the couples' conversations. The majority of these projects (seven of the nine) employed an issues checklist of typical domains of conflict in adolescent romantic relationships and asked each partner to select an issue of conflict in his or her romantic relationship. Couples were then directed to discuss these conflictual issues and to try to come to some resolution on the issue. Most of these projects included separate discussions of an issue selected by each partner. The paper by Laurent, Kim, and Capaldi indicates the importance of examining both partners' issues and of analyzing the data from the two issues separately. The quality of couples' interactions differed depending upon which couple member selected the topic of discussion. Although Shulman, Mayes, Cohen, Swain and Leckman did not ask couples to discuss topics of conflict in their relationship select by couple members as did most of the projects, they, nonetheless, also emphasized conflict in their observational task. Shulman and his colleagues measured each partner's assessment of the couple's disagreement in ten domains on a scale of 1-100. Using a revealed differences paradigm, the interviewer then selected the issue with the largest *discrepancy* between the two partners in their assessment of their disagreement for the observation task. Furman and Shoemaker also had a somewhat different task. Although Furman and Shoemaker included a conversation about a problem *inside* the couples' relationship that was similar to the observation task utilized by the other projects in this issue, they also included, and averaged the ratings across, three other conversations that did not necessarily emphasize conflict resolution. These three other conversations included two discussions about a problem *outside* the relationship that each partner selected and a conversation about personal goals that the target adolescent was working towards.

The overwhelming selection of observational tasks that pull for conflict and conflict resolution processes fits with the developmental task in adolescence of negotiating autonomy and connectedness (Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994). In addition, there is ample evidence suggesting that "bad" or conflictual information and emotions are processed more thoroughly and are more useful in a predictive sense than are "good" feelings and interactions (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). In previous pilot testing of an observational paradigm with adolescent romantic couples, Welsh tried using an observation task that pulled for connection rather than conflict. Data from this pilot project revealed a much smaller range in the types of interactions observed than is obtained from data from conflict tasks. Thus, as Baumeister and his colleagues suggest, "bad is stronger than good" and all of the papers in this special issue utilized conflict oriented observation tasks.

The majority of the projects eased romantic partners into the conflict task with an enjoyable or at least neutral warm-up task that was not coded. In almost all cases, this warm-up task involved the romantic couple planning the details of a party together. Some of the researchers also considered it important to complete the discussion portion of their studies within a positive atmosphere where couples were asked to discuss areas of agreement in their relationship following the conflict conversations.

The coded portions of the observation tasks ranged from 7 to 20 minutes of interaction. Those with only one task were on the low end of this range and those with multiple tasks, for example, those that had separate discussions of an issue selected by each partner, were at the upper end of this range. Adolescent couples were asked to discuss between five and ten minutes for any individual conversation topic. The time frame selected must balance participants' fatigue against the need for a large enough sample of interaction to meaningfully gain a picture of the couples' interactional processes.

Taken together, through the adaptation and employment of observation methods developed within the field of family research, the studies appearing in the special issue provide an

overview of the range of observational tasks currently being used by scientists interested in understanding adolescent romantic relationships. In general, the studies indicate a large degree of similarity in that all emphasize conflict resolution. More variability existed in how long researchers observed couples' interactions.

Coding of adolescents' romantic interactional data

Observation of interactions provides rich and complex data. Observational researchers must determine how to make sense of such rich and complex information. Decisions about how to interpret adolescent couples' interactions must be guided by the specific research questions and the theoretical foundations upon which the questions are based. Three decisions are particularly important. First, researchers need to determine the level of analysis (micro or macro), and to decide whether to assess the behavior and/or feelings of the dyad as a whole or of the individual partners. Second, researchers must select the dimensions of interest to code. Finally, researchers must decide whose understandings of the interaction are desired in order to determine who should code the couples' interaction.

Observational data captures patterns of interaction, affective expressions, and nonverbal behavior, and provides a plethora of information that needs to undergo data reduction procedures to address the research questions. A critical decision that observational scholars must make involves how much to reduce data. This decision is driven by the research questions being addressed.

In her review of coding systems in family observational research, Lindhal (2001) described two major levels of analysis: micro-analytic and macro-analytic. In the micro-analytic system, small, specific behaviors over small units of time are coded. The advantage of microanalytic coding systems is that they provide specific information about the temporal relationship between couple members' behavioral and affective processes. Three of the papers in this special issue utilized micro-analytic coding of adolescents' conversations with their romantic partners (Galliher, Enno & Wright; Haugen, Welsh & McNulty; Laurent, Kim & Capaldi). Laurent and her colleagues coded their interactions in real time and indicated codes that assessed each partner's content and affect. Each code was assigned for as long as that code captured the content and affect of each partner and changed whenever a change in content and/or affect occurred. In contrast, both the Galliher and the Haugen teams coded the affect and behavior displayed for each discrete 20-second segment in the conversation. Codes for both teams were not mutually exclusive. That is, partners could simultaneously demonstrate multiple behaviors and affects within each segment.

Macro-analytic or global coding systems require coders to synthesize the interaction and apply global ratings based on the overall quality of the entire interaction. Macro-analytic coding systems tend to assess interactive processes, and often the relational concepts are assessed at the systemic level (Lindhal, 2001). Five of the papers in this special issue employed global or macro-analytic coding systems (Darling, Cohan, Burns & Thompson; Furman & Shoemaker; Madsen & Collins; McIssaac, Connolly, McKenney, Pepler & Craig; Shulman, Mayes, Cohen, Swain & Leckman).

The Florsheim and Moore project did not fit into either of these levels of analysis. They used a composite coding system in between micro-analytic and macro-analytic levels of analysis. Florsheim and Moore examined the frequency of specific behaviors and feelings that occurred within 2 minute intervals in the observed conversations. The two minute interval allowed them to get more specific information at a somewhat specific and micro-analytic level, while at the same time, the interval was long enough to allow for more complex relational constructs to be coded.

The distinction between the micro and macro levels of analysis cannot be disconnected from the conceptual understanding of a dyadic interaction. On the one hand, individual behavior during joint interaction is recorded and rated. However, being embedded within the study of couples and families, the focus and coding of an interaction cannot ignore the dyadic level. Theoretically, the balance between self and relatedness (Blatt, 2008; Minuchin, 1974) is a central axis that operates family systems. In the Allen and colleagues (1994) coding system that served as the foundation for a number of studies in this issue, assessing the balance of autonomy and relatedness is central. A number of papers included systemic codes in their coding system in addition to individual codes. For example, Madsen and Collins assessed the “balance”, namely how effectively interaction partners were able to balance the needs of the individual and the relationship. Similarly, Shulman and colleagues and Galliher and her colleagues focused on the quality of a negotiation and assessed the ability of partners to clarify a disagreement, understand the other's point of view, and jointly negotiate a solution that considered both partners' perspectives.

Second, researchers need to select the dimensions of interest to code. Many different coding systems have been developed to understand family and adult couples' interactions (Kerig & Baucom, 2004; Kerig & Lindahl, 2001). Most of the projects in this special issue drew directly or indirectly from the vast adolescent-parent or adult marital literatures in selecting coding systems that enabled researchers to make sense of adolescent romantic couples' interactions. Just over half of the papers used slightly modified versions of well-established pre-existing coding systems while the remaining projects used coding systems that were specifically developed to meet the needs of their own particular, larger projects.

The five projects that used existing or modified existing coding systems selected systems originally developed for purposes other than evaluating the interactions of adolescent romantic couples. Since the diverse coding systems included a variety of content codes, they were flexible enough to capture aspects of behavior relevant for the study of adolescent romantic relationships as indicated in each of the five papers. The projects drew from coding systems originally developed for understanding the interactions of adolescents and their parents (Laurent, Kim & Capaldi) adult marital couples (Darling, Cohan, Burns & Thompson; Furman & Shoemaker;) or overarching models of human social interaction (Florsheim & Moore) or narrative analysis (Galliher, Enno and Wright). Several of these five research teams made slight modifications in the coding systems to accommodate the unique aspects of adolescent romantic couples' interaction or of their specific research questions.

Laurent, Kim and Capaldi employed the Family and Peer Process Code (FPPC, Stubbs, Crosby, Forgatch, & Capaldi, 1998) developed initially to investigate the family interactions of adolescents and their parents and with adolescents and their friends. The FPPC is an elaborate coding system that captures 24 content codes and 6 affective codes based on verbal and nonverbal cues. Laurent and her colleagues clustered the individual content and affect codes into larger patterns of positive engagement, psychological aggression, and withdrawal to address the specific questions of their study reported in this special issue.

The Darling and Furman projects selected established coding systems originally designed to investigate adult couples' interactions and made minor modifications to fit the systems to the needs of their adolescent couples participants and to their specific questions. Darling and her colleagues coded their adolescent couples' interactions using the System for Coding Interactions in Dyads (SCID: Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Lindahl & Malik, 2001) which examines withdrawal, verbal aggression, negativity, physical aggression, and problem solving in each partner and also evaluates the cohesiveness of the couple. Furman and Shomaker employed the Interactional Dimensions Coding System (IDCS; Julien, Markman, & Lindhal, 1989) that evaluates each partner's affect and behavior on 10 scales using a 5-point likert scale.

The codes were factor analyzed and four composite individual codes (off task, conflict, communication skills, and affective responsiveness) and one composite dyadic code (positivity) were created.

Florsheim and Moore and Galliher and colleagues also coded their data using well established coding systems designed to capture a wide variety of human social behavior. Florsheim and Moore used the Structural Analysis of Social Behavior (SASB; Benjamin, 1996), which is based on a circumplex model of interpersonal and intrapsychic processes. It is an elaborate system that provides many codes and like the other systems it is highly flexible in its application, both in regards to the ways in which coded data may be summarized and analyzed. An advantage of using the SASB with adolescent couples was that the two main dimensions, interdependence and affiliation, are particularly salient developmental issues associated with adolescence. The SASB is unusual in that it is both a research and clinical tool and that it is relatively easy to derive applied clinical implications from the research findings. Not only does the SASB describe participants' interactions, but it also provides a means for modifying problematic interpersonal patterns. Galliher, Enno and Wright adapted the Narrative Consortium coding system (Fiese & Sameroff, 1999) to code the problem solving conversations of their adolescent couples on dimensions of narrative quality. In recent years, employment of narrative approaches to the study of family relationships has gained momentum. Narratives afford the opportunity to examine implicit beliefs that families have about their relationships. Narratives reflect how the family makes sense of its world and the trustworthiness of their relationships (Fiese & Spagnola, 2005).

Five research teams created their own coding systems (Galliher, Enno & Wright; Haugen, Welsh & McNulty; Madsen and Collins; McIssac, Connolly, McKenney, Pepler & Craig; Shulman, Mayes, Cohen, Swain & Leckman). Each of these coding systems drew primarily from the developmental and family systems literatures that conceptually emphasized the developmental significance of negotiating the balance between autonomy and relatedness in relationships (Allen, Hauser, Bell, Boykin and Tate, 1994). Relatedness provides a sense of warmth and acceptance while autonomy and individuation facilitates independent behavior in terms of instrumental functioning, decision making, conflict negotiation and emotional self-reliance. The coding systems incorporated codes conceptually and/or practically linked with those described by researchers who conduct observational work with adolescents (e.g., Allen et al., 1994; Powers, Welsh, & Wright, 1994).

More than 300 studies conducted on families and couples have demonstrated the external validity of observational assessment to reveal detectable differences in affect, behavior, physiology, and interactional patterns and processes (Gottman, 1999; Heyman, 2001). Employment or adaptation of existing coding systems (micro-analytic and macro-analytic) that were developed for the study of family interaction and have demonstrated psychometric properties and validity is thus an advantage for the study of adolescent romantic relationships. However, it is reasonable to question whether coding systems developed for the study of families and adult couples, despite their flexibility, are sensitive enough to capture distinctive aspects in the study of adolescent romantic relationships.

Despite the similarities to other family and couple relationships, Tabares and Gottman (2003) stated that the unique nature of adolescent romantic relationships should not be overlooked. A few observational concepts are clearly distinctive to adolescent romantic partners' interactions and are not typically included in parent-adolescent or marital coding systems. Adolescent romantic relationships differ in several critical ways from parent-adolescent relationships. Adolescents' romantic relationships are more egalitarian (Galliher et al., 1999) while parent-adolescent relationships are more asymmetrical, with parents having more power and authority. In acknowledgement of the change in power structures associated

with adolescents' romantic relationships, Welsh's coding system (used by the Haugen and Galliher teams in this issue) includes codes assessing power dimensions (giving in and trying to persuade) (Welsh & Dickson, 2005). Additionally, unlike the obligatory nature of relationships with parents, romantic relationships are voluntary and can be easily terminated by either person (Larson, 1983). As a consequence of these characteristics, adolescents' romantic partners tend to amplify each other's behavior leading to excessive humor or laughter (Furman & Shoemaker); the task itself may get forgotten in such interchanges and become less important than the positivity of the interaction. To address this distinction, Furman and Shoemaker added a scale of task avoidance to their coding system, to assess avoidance of the assigned discussion topic or task. Similarly, adolescents' discussions of conflict with romantic partners are much more concrete, brief, and superficial than conflict discussions among young adult romantic partners (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). In line with this finding unique to romantic relationships during the adolescent period, Shulman and his colleagues included a scale of downplaying disagreements in their coding system in order to capture partners' inclination to keep the positive façade of a romantic relationship.

Most researchers are interested in assessing the “objective” meaning of adolescent romantic couples' interactions and, thus, train experts outside of the adolescent couple to rate the couples' interactions. Video-recall procedures reported by Galliher, Enno and Wright and by Haugen, Welsh and McNulty involve recording participants' interactions and subsequently asking them to review their recorded interactions to provide feedback about their meanings and/or emotional experiences during the original conversations (Welsh & Dickson, 2005). This procedure provides information about the meanings that each partner in the couple ascribed to their own interactions and those of their partner. Video-recall procedures allow researchers and clinicians to obtain a more comprehensive assessment of outside coders' more “objective” ratings of participants' behaviors, as well as partners' own – insider - subjective understanding of those observed behaviors.

To summarize, observational researchers must make several important decisions when determining how to code or interpret adolescent romantic interaction. These decisions should be based on the conceptual framework and specific research questions being investigated. Most coding systems of observational romantic partners' interactions are conceptually and pragmatically rooted in parent-adolescent or marital coding systems. Adolescent romantic relationship coding systems must also incorporate elements uniquely important to adolescent romantic relationships such as the evaluation of power, downplaying disagreements, and conflict avoidance.

What do observed interactions teach us about adolescent romantic relationships?

The studies published in this special issue which focused on directly observed interaction provide new understanding of adolescents' romantic relationships. In this final section, we integrate the findings and discuss their implications for our developing knowledge of adolescents' romantic relationships. We organized findings into three sections: 1) continuity and discontinuities with family relationships, 2) descriptive findings about the nature of adolescent romantic relationships, and 3) gender differences in adolescent romantic couples.

Continuity and discontinuity between adolescents' family relationships and romantic relationships

Attachment theory, family systems theory, and social learning theory all posit continuities between relationships with parents and subsequent adolescent romantic relationships. Findings from four of the observational studies presented in this special issue support these theorized

links (Darling, Cohan, Burns, & Thompson; Furman & Shoemaker; Madsen & Collins; Scharf & Mayseless). Furman and Shoemaker's findings indicate that adolescents' interactions with their romantic partners are unique. For example, adolescents perceived more support and fewer negative interactions with romantic partners than with mothers. Nonetheless, adolescents' interactions with their romantic partners were significantly associated with their interactions with their mothers.

Madsen and Collins found evidence for specific developmentally predicted pathways linking adolescents' interactions with parents in early adolescence to their later interactions with romantic partners. Specifically, they found that adolescents' collaborative, dyadic problem solving processes in early adolescence with their parents predicted interaction qualities with romantic partners in late adolescence/early adulthood. In contrast, eruptions of conflict and negative affect (or expressive processes) with parents were not related to later interactions with romantic partners. These findings support predictions based on attachment theory that collaboratively based constructs are posited to be related to later relational functioning, while individual expressive tendencies are not.

Darling, Cohan, Burns and Thompson examined the link between parent-adolescent interactions and adolescent-romantic partner interactions as well as the link between parent marital interactions and adolescent-romantic partner interactions. Their results revealed that parental marital conflict, especially fathers' verbal aggression with mothers, was associated with adolescents' conflict in their own romantic relationships. Significantly, although links were identified between parent-adolescent interactions and adolescent-romantic partner interactions, Darling and her colleagues found stronger evidence of cross-generational continuity in conflict behavior in parental marital interactions and adolescents' interactions with romantic partners than in the link between parent-adolescent interaction and adolescent-romantic partner interaction. This finding also supports assertions by social learning and family systems theories.

Scharf and Mayseless also identified longitudinal specificity in the developmental pathways linking parent-adolescent relationships with later romantic relationships. They found that relationships with fathers and mothers were associated with different aspects of adolescents' romantic interactions. Interestingly, this association was found only with regard to observational data and not self report data. Associations between observational data and the quality of late adolescent daughters' romantic relationships suggested distinctive developmental paths from mothers and fathers to daughters' romantic relationships. Maternal behavior during observed interactions explained the timing and initiation of daughters' romantic involvement. In contrast, paternal behavior explained the quality of daughters' romantic relationships two years later.

Taken together, significant links were found between relational patterns in the family and concurrent and subsequent interactions with romantic partners. These links occur for a variety of theoretical reasons such as skill acquisition, imitation, or emotion regulation (Elicker, Eglund, & Sroufe, 1992) or the penchant for coherence across relational systems in which an individual is involved (Shulman & Collins, 1995). In their seminal discussion on the construction of relationship and their carry over into future relationships, Sroufe and Fleeson (1986) contend that carrying forward all specific behaviors and response chains from previous interactions would be an overwhelming task. It is rather a limited set of expectations that are constructed and these generate and adapt behavior in a variety of situations. It was interesting to notice the distinctive patterns of carry over reported the in the Darling and colleagues and the Scharf and Mayesless papers. For example, conflict behavior in parental marital interactions were more associated with adolescents' interactions with romantic partners than was conflict with parents (Darling and colleagues) or that patterns of interaction with fathers but not with

mothers explained quality of later romantic relationships of adolescent girls (Scharf and Mayesless).

Findings about the distinctive nature of adolescent romantic relationships

The studies in this special issue as a group provide a substantial amount of new information about the nature of adolescents' romantic relationships. Most adolescent interactions with their romantic partners are perceived harmoniously by outside coders and by adolescents themselves (Galliher, Enno & Wright). Adolescent couples as a group tend to use facilitative styles of negotiation more than restrictive styles (McIsaac, Connolly, McKenney, Pepler & Craig). The tendency of adolescent romantic partners to keep a positive façade of their romantic relationship was also described in studies by Furman and Shomaker and by Shulman, Mayes, Cohen, Swain & Leckman. Furman and Shomaker reported on increased level of off task behavior among adolescent romantic partners, which they attributed to adolescent romantic partners' tendency to amplify each other's behavior leading to excessive humor or laughter. The task itself may have been forgotten and became less important than keeping the positivity of the interaction. Similarly, Shulman and colleagues found that couples were invested in circumventing, minimizing, and even disowning or rejecting the differences between them. Consequently, their discussions were concise, and they did not seek to understand the reasons for the disagreements or their partner's point of view.

Conceptually, it might be argued that adolescents may be directed by the principle of equity. In keeping with equity theory, partners are likely to avoid potential costs such as conflict and inequity in order to prevent the dissolution of the relationship (Laursen & Jensen-Campbell, 1999). Evolutionary perspectives (Fisher, 1998, 2006), posit that romantic encounters during adolescence are primarily aimed at gaining experience in forming romantic relationships and have the quality of "play." Adolescents are also less comfortable than adults in the new domain of romantic relationships. Their discomfort and insecurity with romantic relationships and their wish to keep the relationship intact may result in a tendency to protect or maintain their relationships by using strategies aimed at minimizing conflict (e.g., self silencing; Harper & Welsh, 2007).

Just a few years later, young adult romantic partners approach their romantic relationships differently, and more similarly to those of married couples. Young adult romantic partners demonstrate a capacity for using differences between them for authentic examination of their relationships. They are more likely to perceive their differences as incentives for deepening and improving their relationships (Tuval Mashlach & Shulman, 2006). Findings from the study conducted by Shulman and his colleagues' in this special issue revealed important changes in romantic relationships over the course of the early stages of romantic relationships. Partners showed an increasing capability to recognize, face, and better negotiate their disagreements over the course of their relationship (Shulman, Mayes, Cohen, Swain, & Leckman).

Taken together, comparison between self reports and observed interaction point to the distinctive nature of adolescent romantic relationships. Adolescents are inclined to describe their romantic partners and their relationships mainly in positive terms, and to see their romantic relationship as special or unique (Shulman & Kipnis, 2001). This has been documented by phenomenological studies that used terms such as uniqueness, absoluteness, and idealism to characterize adolescent romance (Fischer & Alapack, 1987; Hatfield & Rapson, 1987). However, as a number of studies in this special issue indicate, this phenomenon is more complex. Adolescent partners are probably aware of their differences, but they employ a variety of methods to keep a positive façade.

Adolescent romantic relationships - the gender perspective

Several of the studies published in this special issue shed light on the ways in which interactions within adolescents' romantic relationships are gender related. Although few gender differences were noted in the overall interactions of males and females in most papers in this special issue, gender differences emerged when investigating the link between adolescents' romantic interactions and relational outcomes. In general, girlfriends' behaviors in their romantic interactions appear to be more important than boyfriends' behavior in predicting the adjustment of the couple.

Findings from the Reese-Weber study shed light on the distinctive gender attitudes about violence in adolescent romantic relationships. Male initiated violence in adolescent romantic relationships was viewed as less acceptable than female initiated violence. Females were also less accepting of violence than were males. Violence is quite prevalent in adolescent romantic relationships, especially for adolescent females as aggressors or initiators of aggression (Capaldi, Kim, & Shortt, 2007; Jouriles et al. 2005). The higher rates of female initiated aggression may result, in part, from adolescents' attitudes about the unacceptability of male aggression and the relatively less negative attitudes toward female aggression.

The central role of the female partner in securing a relationship is further demonstrated in two of the papers in this special issue. McIsaac, Connolly, McKenney, Pepler, & Craig's study indicated that females play a more powerful role in their romantic relationships than males in terms of impacting their partners. Female's autonomy development was uniquely affected by her own behavior; whereas, male's autonomy development reflected joint contributions from himself and his partner. Similarly, Haugen, Welsh and McNulty found that the more a female was accurate about persuasion during the interaction the more likely that she was satisfied with the relationship. It is possible, as speculated by McIsaac and her colleagues that these gender differences are related to girls' greater experience in relational domains.

Relatedly, Laurent, Kim & Capaldi found that females' positive engagement benefited couples and this benefit extended to both partners. The female's positive engagement predicted higher satisfaction and commitment for the couple. Laurent and her colleagues suggested that young women may bear a greater portion of the burden for upholding more mature forms of relationship negotiations. A similar pattern was found in relation to females' psychological aggression during a joint discussion. The more psychologically aggressive females were, the less satisfied were both partners. Interestingly, the unique importance of males' behavior was found in the form of withdrawal, a less mature conflict negotiation strategy. Males' withdrawal during joint discussions predicted increased satisfaction. Withdrawal, though less mature, may help preserve relationships when negotiation skills and relationship security are less developed.

These findings suggest that females' and males' behavior during joint discussions with their romantic partners are influenced by the interdependent, gendered, and emergent nature of the heterosexual romantic context. Quite consistently, they function differently in the relationship and interdependent influences are also gender-related. Males and females have distinct and consistent roles within the conjoint emergent romantic relationship. More specifically, females function more often as the bearers of partner influence, and males function more often as the receivers.

These gender differences are consistent with previous studies and theory suggesting that socialization practices may render females more likely to attend to the needs and behaviors of relationship partners, relative to males (Gilligan, 1982) as well as models of gendered communication (Gottman & Levenson, 1986). Within these "cultural scripts" females may feel more accountable for resolving relationship issues and males may rely more on their partners to provide support and to regulate their conflict-related arousal.

Laurent and her colleagues suggest that females show more pragmatism necessary for the bonding process and to ensure the continuing health of the relationship. Moreover, findings of the Galliher and colleagues study demonstrate that this pragmatism is reality based. Females' ratings were more likely to be significantly correlated with observers' ratings of male partners' narrative coherence than were males' own ratings. Thus, female romantic partners demonstrate a more accurate perception of the relationships they are involved in and their perception and behavior play a crucial role in the quality of a relationship.

Former studies indicate that female and male romantic partners act in concert with stereotyped gendered lines. Adolescent females emphasized more attachment and care in their romantic relationships whereas males described their romance more in terms of playfulness (Shulman & Scharf, 2000). Findings in this special issue based on observed interactions emphasize the power of these gendered patterns of interaction and point to their relevance for relational outcomes.

Future directions

The studies in this special issue clearly document the methodological and conceptual progress of the developmental field of adolescent romantic relationships. Taken as a whole, they also point to new directions for future research investigations.

Although our special issue was originally conceptualized to focus on adolescent romantic relationships, in reality, due to the longitudinal nature of a number of the reported studies, emerging adult couples were also included. The studies did not draw major conceptual differences between late adolescent and early adult romantic relationships. However, findings reported by Laurent and her colleagues show significant slopes of commitment and satisfaction. Couples tended to increase their level of commitment across time. In addition, a significant decrease in satisfaction over time was found for males but not for females. These findings corroborate Brown's (1999) and Connolly and Goldberg's (1999) conceptual models suggesting that with age romantic partners become more committed. The decline in satisfaction may also demonstrate a more realistic perception of the relationship and feeling safe enough not to keep a façade. On the other hand, Haugen and his colleagues showed that empathic accuracy was not associated significantly with age and relationship duration. Older romantic partners were not more empathically accurate than younger partners, and partners in more established relationships were not more empathically accurate than those in newer relationships. It will be interesting and important for future investigations to examine the role of specific role of age, developmental level, and experience in adolescent romantic interactions in a more nuanced manner.

Age differences are also found within couples. The male-female age gap becomes common during late adolescence. All of the papers treated romantic couples as if the female and the male were in the same developmental stage. However, it is possible that there may have been significant age differences with females tending to be younger, and potentially in different developmental stages, than their male partners. It will be important to examine whether these age gaps might affect the nature of partners' negotiation of disagreements. Thus, as this example of age and experience demonstrates, it is important for future observational studies to examine differences between and within couples more fully.

The most obvious and glaring hole in the papers submitted for this special issue pertains to the lack of observational studies of sexual minority adolescents' romantic relationships. It is embarrassing that all studies presented in this special issue reported findings from studies of male-female couples. Although a number of researchers have been investigating the romantic relationships of sexual minority adolescents, their research has primarily used interview and

questionnaire methodologies. It is important that the relationships of sexual minority youth be included in observational investigations.

In summary, this special issue highlights important methodological and conceptual issues surrounding the direct observation of adolescent romantic couples. It also provides an important new foundation of knowledge about the nature of adolescents' romantic relationships. Connections with previous family relationships, new understandings of the distinctive nature of adolescent romantic relationships, and gender issues are clarified by this body of papers. Together, these papers move the scholarly field forward and generate new lines of questions for future investigators.

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