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Brief Report: Activities in Heterosexual Romantic Relationships: Grade Differences and Associations with Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

Whereas much research addresses relations of youths' heterosexual romantic relationships with sexual and/or delinquent activities, less attention has been paid to youths' more normative, day-to-day activities with romantic partners. This gap in the literature is problematic given that these activities define the substance of the relationships and likely are connected to relationship satisfaction. In the current study, 223 youths in fifth (28 boys; 32 girls), eighth (31 boys; 40 girls), and eleventh (36 boys; 56 girls) grades reporting current romantic relationships indicated their engagement in activities with romantic partners and relationship satisfaction. Findings revealed important grade differences in activity involvement, with eighth- and eleventh-graders reporting higher engagement than fifth-graders, especially in out-of-school activities. Additionally, engagement in out-of-school activities was most strongly associated with relationship satisfaction for all grades.

Keywords

Heterosexual romantic relationships; romantic activities; romantic relationship satisfaction

Although much is known about relations of youths' heterosexual romantic involvement with risky sexual and delinquent behavior (e.g., Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003; Wong, 2005), less emphasis has been placed on normative, day-to-day activities of romantic partners. This is unfortunate given that shared activities define the substance of youths' relationships. In fact, we identified only one study examining specific shared activities of romantic couples (Feiring, 1996). In this study, 15-year-olds identified their activities on dates, which were coded into five categories: movies, dinner, hanging out, parties, and home visits. To extend this work, the present research considered: (a) many more activities, (b) activities when youths are not on dates (e.g., in school), (c) differences in activities among fifth-, eighth-, and eleventh-graders, and (d) associations with relationship satisfaction.

Specifically, an activity checklist was developed based on past work concerning romantic relationships (e.g., Adams, Laursen, & Wilder, 2001; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989) and leisure activities (e.g., Larson & Richards, 1991, 1998). On the checklist, youths indicated whether they and their partner had engaged in activities which were grouped into five categories: (a) in-school activities (e.g., sitting together at lunch), (b) out-of-school activities (e.g., going to movies) in a group, (c) out-of-school activities (e.g., going to movies) as a couple, (d) other out-of-school activities (group vs. dyadic not specified; e.g.,

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going to the mall), and (e) communication activities (e.g., talking about personal things). Some activities not involving communication that were ambiguous regarding if they took place in school (e.g., working on homework) comprised an “other” category. Although not all possible activities were assessed, the study offers insight into the prevalence of a variety of activities in romantic relationships.

Grade differences in activity engagement also were examined. Despite evidence suggesting romantic involvement among preadolescents (e.g., Carlson & Rose, 2007), their relationships are understudied, perhaps due to a belief that they lack substance. Including fifth-graders therefore was important to advance knowledge of these youths’ activities with romantic partners. We hypothesized that older youths would engage in the most out-of-school activities. Parents may be unwilling to facilitate such interactions for younger youths, but older youths may have more resources (e.g., money, transportation) required for additional out-of-school activities. Grade differences may be strongest for out-of-school activities alone with a partner if younger youths feel more comfortable in groups (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). Communication activities also may be most common among older youths as intimacy increases with age (Furman & Burhmester, 1992). Fewer grade differences were expected for in-school activities.

Last, we tested relations between engagement in specific activities and relationship satisfaction. The data are concurrent and cannot speak to whether engaging in activities leads to satisfaction or satisfaction leads to engaging in activities. However, the study can identify activities that characterize satisfied partners.

Method

Participants

Permission slips were mailed to parents of the 735 fifth-, eighth-, and eleventh-graders in five middle-class Midwestern school districts (city populations 3000–11 000). Of those youths who returned permission slips to their teachers, 610 received parental consent and participated. Analyses focused on youths reporting current romantic relationships ($n = 261$): 68 of 176 fifth-graders (39%), 89 of 226 eighth-graders (39%), and 104 of 208 eleventh-graders (50%). These percents are similar to past research (Carlson & Rose, 2007; Collins, 2003). Of these youths, 38 were excluded because they did not complete the activities checklist (i.e., due to absence) and/or at least 2 of 3 satisfaction items. The final sample ($n = 223$) included 60 fifth-graders (28 boys; 32 girls), 71 eighth-graders (31 boys; 40 girls), and 92 eleventh-graders (36 boys; 56 girls).¹ This sample was 85.7% European American, 5.8% African American, and 4% each Native American, Hispanic American, Asian American, and “other” (e.g., biracial).

Procedure

During two classroom sessions, youths signed assent forms and completed questionnaires. Research assistants read all questions aloud.

¹Analyses were conducted to determine if the youths included in analyses ($n = 223$) differed from those excluded. First, the youths included in analyses were compared to youths who were excluded because they did not report a current romantic relationship ($n = 349$; they did not have data for activities with a romantic partner or romantic relationship satisfaction). We compared these youths in terms of gender and grade. The chi-square analysis indicated a nonsignificant effect for gender. The effect for grade, though, was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 8.03, p < .05$, with eleventh-graders being especially likely to report having a current romantic relationship. Second, the youths included in analyses were compared to youths who were excluded because they were missing data for activity engagement and/or romantic relationship satisfaction even though they reported a current romantic relationship ($n = 38$). Chi-square analyses indicated nonsignificant effects for gender and grade.

Measures

Romantic involvement—Heterosexual romantic involvement was assessed with the Romantic Relationship Nominations Questionnaire (Carlson & Rose, 2007).² Youths first indicated whether they had a boy/girlfriend. No definition was provided so youths could respond in terms of what having a boy/girlfriend meant to them. Youths with a boy/girlfriend indicated whether he/she was in the class/grade and circled the partner's name on a roster. This information was used to customize other measures.³ For fifth-graders, rosters included peers in the self-contained classrooms. For eighth- and eleventh-graders, rosters included grademates because youths changed classes during the day.

Activities—The checklist included 32 activities (Table 1). Four were in-school activities (e.g., sitting together at lunch). Two out-of-school activities that were expected to be common (going to movies; going out to eat) were assessed in group and dyadic contexts (e.g., one item assessed going to movies in a group; another assessed going to movies as a couple). This resulted in four items. For 14 other out-of-school activities (e.g., going to the mall), the context (group or dyadic) was not specified. Four items involved communication (i.e., talking about personal things, about non-personal things, on the telephone, and emailing/instant messaging). The final six were ambiguous regarding whether they took place at school and formed an “other” category (e.g., working on homework). If youths identified a partner, his/her name was inserted in the instructions (i.e., “Check all the things you do with [romantic partner's name].”). Otherwise, “My Boyfriend” or “My Girlfriend,” was inserted.⁴ By checking an item, youths indicated they had engaged in the activity (scored 1; unchecked activities scored 0).

Satisfaction—The relationship satisfaction items of the NRI (Furman & Burhmester, 1992) were customized as described above (with the partner's name or “My Boyfriend”/“My Girlfriend”). Youths rated three questions on a 5-point Likert scale: (a) “How satisfied are you with your relationship with [romantic partner's name]?” (b) “How good is your relationship with [romantic partner's name]?” (c) How happy are you with the way things are between you and [romantic partner's name]?” Scores were the mean of the items ($\alpha = .89$).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Percentages of youths engaging in each activity were computed (Table 1). Common activities (> 65%) were: talking in school, going to each others' houses, listening to music, talking on the telephone, talking about personal things, and talking about non-personal things. Uncommon activities (< 25%) were: going to concerts, going to plays, and going to museums.

²The current research focused on heterosexual romantic relationships given that they are the most common romantic relationships among youths of these ages. However, activities of sexual minority youths with romantic partners also are important and should be addressed in future research.

³This measure previously has been used to distinguish between romantic relationships that are mutually acknowledged by both partners (i.e., reciprocal romantic relationships) and those that are acknowledged only by one partner (i.e., non-reciprocal romantic relationships; Carlson & Rose, 2007). Although it would have been ideal to include reciprocity as a variable in the current study, reciprocity only could be evaluated for youths who nominated a romantic partner in their class or grade (e.g., reciprocity could not be evaluated for youths with a romantic partner from another school). In the current research, only 47 of the 223 youths who had a current romantic partner reported that the partner was in their class or grade and so reciprocity could only be determined for those 47 youths. Given the small sample of youths for whom reciprocity could be determined, reciprocity was not considered in analyses.

⁴Youths who did not have a current boy/girlfriend reported their activity involvement with a same-sex best friend so special attention would not be drawn to these youths. These data were not used for the current study.

Grade and Gender Differences in Activities

For each activity, a logistic regression tested grade and gender differences. Gender was included for descriptive purposes. The reference group was girls for gender and was fifth grade for grade. Each model included the fifth- versus eighth-grade comparison, the fifth- versus eleventh-grade comparison, gender, and the interactions of gender with each grade comparison.

Main effects emerged for grade (Table 2). Of the four in-school activities, one grade effect was significant. More fifth- than eleventh-graders passed notes. More grade differences emerged for out-of-school activities. For group activities, more eighth- than fifth-graders reported going to movies (no difference emerged between fifth- and eleventh-graders; rates were especially high for eighth-graders). More eighth- and eleventh-graders than fifth-graders reported going out to eat in groups. For dyadic activities, more eighth- and eleventh-graders than fifth-graders reported going to movies as a couple. Only eleventh-graders were more likely than fifth-graders to go out to eat as a couple. Of the remaining 14 out-of-school activities, eighth-graders were more likely than fifth-graders to report: listening to music, going to each others' houses, going to sporting events, going to dances, going to the mall, and going to concerts. The fifth-versus eleventh-grade comparisons were significant for five of the six activities that were more common among eighth-graders (all but going to concerts) and eleventh-graders also were more likely than fifth-graders to report: watching TV, taking a walk, playing video/computer games, and going for coffee/soda. For communication activities, eighth- and eleventh-graders were more likely than fifth-graders to talk on the telephone and email/instant message. However, only eleventh-graders were more likely than fifth-graders to report talking about non-personal and personal things. Last, grade differences emerged for one of six activities in the "other" category. Eighth- and eleventh-graders were more likely than fifth-graders to play music/sing.

Of 96 gender main effects and interactions, five were significant (5.2%). Because this would be expected by chance, gender was not considered to meaningfully influence the results.

Relations of Activities with Relationship Satisfaction

For each activity, a 2 (activity: yes/no) $\times$ 3 (grade) $\times$ 2 (gender) ANOVA was performed (Table 3; three-way interactions were not tested due to small cell sizes). Of interest were activity main effects and whether they were moderated by grade/gender. Of 32 activities, main effects emerged for 13, with youths engaging in the activity reporting more satisfaction. None of the in-school or out-of-school group activities was related to satisfaction. Both dyadic out-of-school activities were related to satisfaction. Of the 14 other out-of-school activities, eight were related to satisfaction. Of the four communication activities, activities (i.e., talking about non-personal and personal things) were related to satisfaction. One activity in the "other" category (playing music) was related to satisfaction. Interestingly, 11 of the 13 activities related to satisfaction were more common among older youths. Of 64 grade or gender interactions, only two (3.0%) were significant, suggesting that relations generally were consistent across grade and gender.⁶

Discussion

The present research increases our knowledge of youths' activities with romantic partners. Including fifth-graders was a major contribution as the results conflicted with the idea that preadolescent romances have little substance (e.g., Thorne, 1986). Fifth-graders were as

⁶Specific results from these analyses are available from the authors upon request.

likely as older youths to engage in in-school activities and about one-third or more reported out-of-school activities, like going to movies in groups.

Nevertheless, older youths reported more out-of-school and communication activities. About two-thirds or more of eleventh-graders reported going to movies, out to eat, to each others' houses, to the mall, to sporting events, and to dances as well as listening to music and watching TV, suggesting broad involvement in partners' lives outside of school. The effects for eighth-graders were similar in that they reported more out-of-school activities than fifth-graders, with a few notable differences. Although eighth- and eleventh-graders were more likely than fifth-graders to go to movies as a couple, only eighth-graders were more likely to go to movies in a group. Middle adolescents may see safety in numbers (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). Also, although eighth- and eleventh-graders reported communicating via telephone and computer more than fifth-graders, only eleventh-graders were more likely to talk about personal and non-personal topics. Interestingly, whereas 93% of eighth-graders reported talking to their partner via telephone, only 80% reported talking about non-personal topics (69% for personal topics). Perhaps middle adolescents' telephone conversations are so superficial that they do not even think of them as discussions of non-personal topics.

Associations with relationship satisfaction also emerged. No in-school activities were related to satisfaction. However, over half of the out-of-school activities, which require planning and may signal investment, were. Additionally, whereas communicating via telephone and computer were not related to satisfaction, talking about personal and non-personal topics were. Indeed, whether activities lead to satisfaction or satisfied youths engage in more activities is unknown. Finding that some activities were related to global perceptions of satisfaction, however, highlights the significance of studying activity engagement.

Other study limitations should be noted. For example, the data cannot explain the grade differences and future work incorporating parents might reveal that they are more supportive of the romantic activities of older youths compared to younger youths. Future studies also should test the generalizability of the results, especially in terms of same-sex couples.

Despite limitations, the study extends the literature. Past work focusing on the negative aspects of romantic involvement is crucial but should not overshadow basic research on the development of romantic relationships. The current study offers a glimpse into the day-to-day activities of young romantic partners that likely support the growth of social competencies in this important domain.

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Table 1

Percentages of Youths Reporting Engagement in Specific Activities and Summary of Results Regarding Grade Comparisons and Associations with Romantic Relationship Satisfaction

	% Reporting Engagement	Grade Comparison	Associated w/Satisfaction?
<u>In School Activities</u>			
Talk in school	66.4		N
Hang out at school when there is free time	59.2		N
Sit together at lunch	37.2		N
Pass notes in school	35.9	5>11	N
<u>Out-of-School Activities (Group)</u>			
Go to the movies in a group	47.1	5<8	N
Go out to eat in a group	42.2	5<8	N
<u>Out-of-School Activities (Alone)</u>			
Go to the movies, just the two of you	50.7	5<8, 5<11	Y
Go out to eat, just the two of you	42.2	5<11	Y
<u>Out-of-School Activities (Not specified group/alone)</u>			
Listen to music	68.2	5<8, 5<11	Y
Go to each others' houses after school/weekends	65.5	5<8, 5<11	N
Watch TV	62.8	5<11	N
Do an outdoor activity	59.6		Y
Go to a sporting event	57.9	5<8, 5<11	N
Go to dances	55.2	5<8, 5<11	Y
Take a walk	48.0	5<11	Y
Go shopping/hang out at the mall	43.1	5<8, 5<11	Y
Play video/computer games	33.2	5<11	N
Go to the park	32.7		Y
Go for coffee/soda	26.0	5<11	Y
Go to concerts	22.0	5<8	Y
Go to plays	15.7		N
Go to a museum	3.1		N
<u>Communication Activities</u>			
Talk on the telephone	87.9	5<8, 5<11	N
Talk about non-personal things	76.7	5<11	Y
Talk about personal things	69.5	5<11	Y
Write e-mails/instant messages	50.7	5<8, 5<11	N
<u>Other Activities</u>			
Play sports/exercise	39.0		N
Work on homework	33.2		N
Play music/sing	31.8	5<8, 5<11	Y
Read together	10.3		N
Do an art project	8.5		N
Go to the library	7.6		N

Table 2

Percentages by Grade of Youths Reporting Engagement in Activities with Romantic Partners and Odds Ratios for Grade Pairwise Comparisons

	5th grade	8th grade	11th grade	5th vs. 8th Odds Ratio	5th vs. 11th Odds Ratio
<u>In-School Activities</u>					
Pass notes in school	50.0%	42.3%	21.7%	.54	.22**
<u>Out-of-School Activities (Group)</u>					
Go to the movies in a group	30.0%	60.6%	47.8%	3.83**	2.06
Go out to eat in a group	20.0%	33.8%	63.0%	4.20*	12.60*****
<u>Out-of-School Activities (Alone)</u>					
Go to the movies, just the two of you	18.3%	54.9%	68.5%	4.79**	9.15*****
Go out to eat, just the two of you	10.0%	28.2%	73.9%	3.22	26.42*****
<u>Out-of-School Activities (Not specified group or alone)</u>					
Listen to music	43.3%	64.8%	87.0%	3.41*	19.00*****
Go to each others' houses after school and on weekends	30.0%	60.6%	92.4%	4.75**	33.22*****
Watch TV	38.3%	46.5%	91.3%	2.20	38.84*****
Go to a sporting event	40.0%	66.2%	63.0%	3.10*	3.00*
Go to dances	18.3%	69.0%	68.5%	10.11*****	8.44*****
Take a walk	36.7%	52.1%	52.2%	2.33	2.74*
Go shopping/hang out at the mall	15.0%	40.9%	63.0%	3.77*	14.78*****
Play video/computer games	28.3%	26.8%	41.3%	2.09	3.76*
Go for coffee/soda	20.0%	21.1%	33.7%	3.22	4.58*
Go to concerts	6.7%	29.6%	26.1%	11.76*	6.74
<u>Communication Activities</u>					
Talk on the telephone	78.3%	93.0%	90.2%	4.83*	3.26*
Write e-mails/instant messages	23.3%	73.2%	51.1%	7.91*****	2.79*
Talk about non-personal things	53.3%	80.3%	89.1%	1.80	7.80**
Talk about personal things	38.3%	69.0%	90.2%	2.35	20.00*****
<u>Other Activities</u>					
Play music/sing	20.0%	28.2%	42.4%	3.77*	6.07**

Note. Odds ratios less than 1 are interpreted backwards so the odds for engaging in the activity decrease for youths in the older grade.

Table 3
Relations Between Engagement in Specific Activities with Romantic Partners and Romantic Relationship Satisfaction

	<i>F</i> (1, 213) for Activity	Youths Who Reported Engaging in Activity <i>n</i>	<i>M</i> (SD)	Youths Who Reported Not Engaging in Activity <i>n</i>	<i>M</i> (SD)
<u>Out-of-School Activities (Alone)</u>					
Go to the movies, just the two of you	7.70**	110	4.34 (.92)	109	3.90 (1.19)
Go out to eat, just the two of you	10.23**	93	4.40 (.83)	126	3.91 (1.20)
<u>Out-of-School Activities (Not specified group or alone)</u>					
Listen to music	4.71*	150	4.21 (1.03)	69	3.91 (1.18)
Do an outdoor activity	10.90**	130	4.31 (.90)	89	3.85 (1.26)
Go to dances	4.83*	121	4.27 (.94)	98	3.94 (1.22)
Take a walk	5.34*	104	4.30 (.99)	115	3.95 (1.41)
Go shopping/hang out at the mall	5.51*	95	4.37 (.93)	124	3.93 (1.16)
Go to the park	12.72***	71	4.51 (.79)	148	3.93 (1.15)
Go for coffee/soda	5.41*	57	4.43 (.76)	162	4.01 (1.16)
Go to concerts	4.59*	49	4.57 (.68)	170	3.99 (1.15)
<u>Communication Activities</u>					
Talk about non-personal things	7.13**	168	4.23 (1.02)	51	3.76 (1.21)
Talk about personal things	11.97***	153	4.28 (1.00)	66	3.76 (1.19)
<u>Other Activities</u>					
Play music/sing	5.26*	69	4.42 (.96)	150	3.98 (1.11)

Notes. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.