

RELATIONSHIPS IN ADOLESCENCE

Peggy C. Giordano

Department of Sociology, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio 43403;

email: pgiorda@bgnet.bgsu.edu

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■ **Abstract** In this chapter I review recent research on the nature, meaning, and impact of extrafamilial relationships during adolescence. I use findings of quantitative and qualitative studies to develop the idea that close friendships, wider networks of peers, and romantic relationships have distinct meanings and significance for the developing adolescent. Sociologists' work inevitably focuses attention on the ways in which the adolescent's social addresses and locations (gender, race, social class) influence many aspects of these early relationships. The review also highlights some limitations of the dominant perspective on adolescent relationships, attachment theory, and provides suggestions for future research (particularly in the area of romantic relationships, where the literature is growing but still relatively undeveloped).

INTRODUCTION

It is well recognized that relationships outside the family become increasingly important during adolescence. Although several very important studies of basic social processes have been conducted by sociologists (Coleman 1961, Waller 1937), historically much of the research and theorizing about adolescent relationships has been carried out by developmental psychologists. Sociologists have a strong interest in the adolescent period, but much work has focused on specific outcomes such as delinquency, sexual behavior, or academic achievement. Traditionally, relationship variables most often enter the picture as potential predictors of these dependent variables, rather than being the primary objects of inquiry. In the past decade, however, sociologists have increasingly focused on relationship processes, and the availability of large data sets such as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) has greatly facilitated this research. Innovative ethnographic studies, multilevel analyses, and other longitudinal data collection efforts have also added to our knowledge about the nature, meaning, and impact of adolescent relationships.

In this review I examine recent research that has centered primarily on relationship processes or that, while concentrating on specific outcomes such as delinquency or sexual behavior, provides more general insights about these early relationships. Although scholars from a variety of disciplines frequently address similar topics, a sociological perspective affords a particularly strong vantage point

for highlighting (a) ways in which structuring variables (Cullen 1983) such as gender and race influence key aspects of these relations, (b) the impact of broader network processes in general and as they influence dyadic relationships, (c) the content of what is communicated within the adolescent's social networks (and the cultural worlds that are created through these interactions), and (d) the situated, malleable nature of social relationships and in turn the role played by human agency in network processes. These conceptual assets suggest some limitations of the dominant perspective on adolescent relationships, attachment theory, and fruitful avenues for additional research.

BEYOND THE PARENTS-AND-PEERS DICHOTOMY

The family continues to maintain its position as the most researched social domain within the study of adolescent relationships. Nevertheless, the literature is also characterized by a dramatic increase in attention to peer relationships. Early work tended to pit these two arenas against one another, with the objective of discerning which reference group tends to be most influential during the adolescent period (the so-called parent-peer cross-pressures literature—e.g., Brittain 1963, Floyd & South 1972). Aside from a few well-publicized popular treatments of this topic (e.g., Harris 1998), there is now rather wide consensus that parents continue to be critically important sources of support, control, and socialization, even as autonomy is negotiated and peers take on a heightened salience.

Within the general domain of peer-related studies, there has been increased recognition for the need to distinguish and give individual research attention to different types of peer relations (Savin-Williams & Berndt 1990). Both theoretically and empirically, scholars have placed the most emphasis on close friendships, and a significant body of research has also developed around the social world beyond the dyad. Studies such as Add Health have enabled researchers to link respondents' friendship nominations to the data and to the friendship nominations of others, thus facilitating analyses of the nature and impact of even wider networks of affiliation. This adds to a developing literature on adolescent crowds, a research tradition that has conventionally focused on issues of reputation as well as interaction and affiliation (i.e., individuals similarly labeled as jocks or nerds may or may not actively associate with one another). Finally, a particularly exciting development in the study of adolescent relationships has been recent theoretical and research attention focused on romantic relationships. In many ways, romantic and sexual partnerships can be considered the "last frontier" in the study of adolescent relationships.

Below I organize this review of existing research around these different types of relationships. However, whatever the specific referent—whether close friends, the wider network, or romantic partners—much of the literature focuses in varying measure on one or a combination of the following key concepts: (a) salience, (b) intimacy, (c) status, and/or (d) influence. The salience of a particular relationship refers to its overall prominence or importance to the individual as compared with other relations (e.g., the salience of friends versus romantic partners) or activities and interests (e.g., the adolescent's level of interest in romantic relations as

contrasted with concern for academic achievement). The level of intimacy is distinct from salience in that intimacy references a pattern of conduct within relationships and/or includes subjective assessments of attachment. Literature focusing on status considerations highlights that many associations in adolescence are characterized by hierarchical or prestige components, and the need to distinguish popularity (being well liked by many) from friendship (intimacy with another). Finally, many studies, particularly within sociology, have focused on influence processes. Influence can extend to the effects of one's associations on self-attitudes and feelings (e.g., self-esteem, self-concept, sense of well-being), to a wide array of behavioral outcomes (e.g., delinquency, involvement in high-risk sexual behavior, smoking), or to the nature of one's conduct within other relations (e.g., effects of friendship experiences on romantic involvements).

ATTACHMENT THEORY AS AN ORGANIZING FRAMEWORK

As suggested above, many scholars interested in adolescent relationships rely on concepts and insights derived from attachment theories as a framework for their research; indeed, this is arguably the most prominent theoretical position within the existing relationships literature. Attachment theories emphasize the important role of very early experiences in the family, particularly the infant-mother relationship (Collins & Sroufe 1999, Hazan & Shaver 1987). Individuals who develop secure early attachment(s) are believed to be more successful in forging later relationships, including close friendships and romantic relations. The logic underlying this approach includes the notion that the security and stability this early relationship provides frees the developing youth to comfortably explore subsequent relationships (Bowlby 1973). In addition, these early experiences engage cognitive processes—what Furman and colleagues (Furman & Simon 1999, Furman & Wehner 1994) call cognitive representations or “views” of relationships. These generalized attitudes and beliefs also play a significant role in the individual's ongoing relationship experiences and choices. For example, individuals who do not experience secure attachment may develop a sensitivity to rejection in later relationships (Downey et al. 1999). Finally, attachment models include the notion of skill building. Individuals who have positive early attachment experiences have not only constructed particular views of relationships, but have also had numerous opportunities to practice relationship skills that they can carry over into the next relationship (Collins & Sroufe 1999).

Although these ideas are intuitively appealing and have garnered empirical support, for several reasons attachment models are not entirely comprehensive as a framework for understanding adolescent relationships. First, by emphasizing carry-over or consistency across the various relationships, this perspective fails to adequately highlight the unique developmental roles, subjective meanings, and relationship dynamics connected to each relationship form. Certainly, researchers theorizing about adolescent relationships increasingly describe several distinct functions or qualities (see, e.g., Furman & Wehner 1994). In particular,

researchers who draw on the work of theorists such as Sullivan (1953) have emphasized several unique features of each form of relationship as well as variations in the salience of particular relationships at different stages of development. Nevertheless, many empirical studies continue to be organized around carry-over notions (Furman et al. 2002).

A second contestable assumption associated with this perspective is the notion that attachment is a priori a developmental "good" or, stated somewhat differently, that attachment processes reflect and encourage that which is prosocial (Youniss & Smollar 1985). This emphasis sustains two important, interrelated themes: (a) adolescents who capably forge intimate relationships are unlikely to engage in deviant or problem behavior and (b) young people who are in fact deviant or antisocial are deficient in social skills and are characterized by their lack of interest in and inability to sustain close interpersonal ties. As we indicate below, however, these ideas have not received strong empirical support. Thus attachment models are somewhat limited as a conceptual bridge to the types of problem outcomes in which sociologists have a particularly strong interest. In contrast, perspectives such as differential association theory (Sutherland 1939) remain more neutral about the effects of relationships on adjustment, emphasizing that such attachments can have either positive or negative effects, depending on reference other(s)' normative orientations and the wider context in which these relationships develop. Although sociological work is more likely to proceed from the latter set of assumptions, Hirschi's (1969) control theory, for example, conceptualizes the peers-delinquency relationship in a manner that is compatible with the basic logic of (psychological) attachment theories, and a number of psychologists [notably Cairns and colleagues (Cairns & Cairns 1994, Xie et al. 1999)] have consistently positioned themselves against these same assumptions.

A third concern about attachment approaches is that they tend to be relatively individualistic—the emphasis on the young person's early experiences as a model for later relations does not readily lead to explorations of broader social influences on a relationships' form or content. However, experiences associated with gender, race, social class, school, or neighborhood context(s) all significantly influence the shape of adolescent relationships. While highlighting distinct themes and emphases (e.g., feminist perspectives, symbolic interaction), sociological theories in general provide a particularly useful background for exploring these interrelationships. Below, then, we not only highlight the findings of specific studies, but also demonstrate the distinct theoretical contribution sociological perspectives make to the study of adolescent relationships.

CLOSE FRIENDS

Intimacy Processes

The perspective developed by Youniss & Smollar (1985) is in some respects consistent with attachment models (e.g., as reflected in their declaration that friendships

are “inherently prosocial”). Nevertheless, their basic contrast of close friends and parental relationships [inspired in part by Sullivan’s (1953) work] is quite useful as it foregrounds the unique features of these relationships during the adolescent period. In contrast to the hierarchical nature of the parent-child bond, friendships at their base are egalitarian—within friendships, reality is “cooperatively co-constructed.” This general idea fits well with more sociologically oriented interpretive theories of childhood and adolescence that emphasize how young people, through recurrent peer interactions, draw on elements within the existing adult/parent culture in a unique and selective manner. This distinctive selection process produces novel and, in some respects, independent cultural worlds (Corsaro & Eder 1990, Eder et al. 1995). Youniss & Smollar (1985) also emphasize that close friends are more accepting than parents, who are necessarily more oriented toward the future and concerned with the potentially negative consequences of the child’s behavior. This greater level of acceptance within the friendship context and tendency to focus on the present helps explain the high levels of self-disclosure and mutual trust that often develop as basic characteristics of close friendship ties. The notion that adolescents can be themselves with friends (in contrast with more selective communications and frequently more guarded relationships with parents) is often considered a defining feature of such relations.

This portrait is generally consistent with the findings by Call & Mortimer (2001) in a recent study of several types of adolescent relationships, a project centered on Simmons and colleagues’ (Simmons & Blyth 1987) concept of “arenas of comfort.” Simmons et al. (1979) found that youths who experienced a kind of piling up of changes during the early adolescent period (e.g., early maturation, changes in schools, and starting to date) scored lower on self-esteem when compared with youth who had not experienced as many overlapping transitions. Some relationships are particularly important as they provide a kind of safety zone—an arena of comfort—that enhances the adolescent’s ability to cope with these changes as well as a base from which to venture forth and experiment “with new roles and identities” (Call & Mortimer 2001, p. 2). In their study of a variety of adolescent social contexts, including family, peers, school, and work, Call & Mortimer (2001) also found that a high percentage of adolescents surveyed experienced significant comfort (perceived support and understanding) within the friendship context.

Although close friendships are thus typically depicted as richly rewarding, relatively intimate, and highly useful adolescent social relations, recent research adds complexity by considering that conflict, disagreement, and change are an integral part of friendship dynamics (Degirmencioglu et al. 1998, Laursen 1996). Studies have also considered systematic variations in friendship experiences that do not derive solely from early parenting or from individual differences such as the adolescent’s level of social skill. Because many early studies of the adolescent period focused on white middle-class youth, age and gender effects on friendship experiences have been more heavily researched than other structuring variables such as social class or race/ethnicity.

Research generally reveals a linear increase with age in levels of friendship intimacy, and girls' relationships are almost invariably found to be "closer" than those of boys (see Collins & Laursen 1999). Researchers have emphasized the distinct early play styles of girls compared to boys (e.g., girls' preferences for dyadic interaction and boys' socialization in the direction of team sports and other games that require a larger number of players) as at least a partial explanation for these differences in intimacy (Maccoby 1990). However, Youniss & Smollar (1985) documented across several sample groups that a relatively stable subset of approximately 30% of boys produce the lower average scores of boys on traditional indices of intimacy. A related consideration is that, within the study of friendship, measures typically employed to assess levels of attachment can be considered more resonant with girls' styles of intimacy—the study of friendship is one area of research where males tend to be compared against a female-centered standard. This suggests the need for multidimensional assessments of friendship qualities and behaviors—such relationships may be regarded as highly salient and important to male adolescents, even though the sharing of intimacies may not be as frequent or pervasive (see, e.g., Nikkah 2000).

Compared with the volume of research on ways in which age and gender influence friendship, the literature on race/ethnicity and social class is less extensive and contradictory in several basic respects. Although sociologists have a long-standing interest in these variables, much of the literature on race and friendship focuses on cross-race interactions and relationships (Epstein 1985, Hallinan & Williams 1987). This line of research is important, and no doubt derives from concerns over school desegregation and more generally the state of American race relations. However, most adolescent friendships are intraracial (Moody 2001), and surprisingly little research has focused on the everyday friendship patterns of minority youth. Early on, a kind of compensation hypothesis developed, focusing on the idea that female-headed households are related to a heightened influence from peers (Silverstein & Kratochwill 1975). Other researchers have suggested that the difficulties minority youth face in achieving success along traditional lines increase the salience of peer group interactions (Anderson 1989, Coates 1999, Savin-Williams & Berndt 1990).

Although empirical examinations are not plentiful, findings from survey data do not tend to provide direct support for these hypotheses. Giordano et al. (1993) found that African-American youth rated "having a group of friends to hang around with" as less important than did their white counterparts and reported lower levels of intimacy with friends. In contrast, African-American respondents reported higher levels of family intimacy. In a study where adolescents kept daily logs of their activities and interactions, African-American adolescents reported spending more time with family and conversely less time interacting with friends (Larson et al. 2001). Such findings seem to contradict the traditional hypotheses described above, but they fit well with the larger body of research that has emphasized the strengths and importance of the African-American family (Stack 1974).

The contradictory themes that characterize the race/ethnicity literature are echoed in discussions of the effects of social status on the nature of adolescent

friendship ties. Eckert's (1989) ethnography of an American high school highlighted ways in which socioeconomic status (SES) differences are reproduced within adolescent social hierarchies (middle-class jocks generally have higher status than lower-SES youth, who are more likely to be considered "burnouts"). Eckert posited that the nature of friendship relations within these groups differed as well. She argued that middle-class youths were relatively more instrumental in their orientations and more willing/likely to shift alliances as they became involved in new activities or eventually accomplished specific transitions (notably, leaving home for college). Lacking this involvement in school activities and access to traditional avenues of success, burnouts' relationships with one another, according to Eckert, tended to last longer and assume a greater importance.

Although this notion of stronger ties among lower-SES youth is certainly plausible, observations from the broader stratification literature might lead to the development of alternative hypotheses. For example, changes in family status are linked with low SES, which in turn is associated with more frequent short-term residential moves). As McLanahan & Booth (1989) point out, such moves may disrupt network ties and directly impact the child, who will often be "starting a new school and making new friends" (McLanahan & Booth 1989, p. 560). Youths who are frequently absent from school and lack any strong connection to it may have less favorable social space in which to carry out friendship-building and -sustaining processes. Living in unsafe neighborhoods has also been associated with the development of a general wariness, defensiveness, and lack of trust—a personal stance that may be effective as a general survival strategy but that may also inhibit the development of highly intimate friendships (Carr 2002, Sanchez-Jankowski 1991). These different currents within the literature suggest the need for more research on ways in which social class or minority status influences friendship qualities and dynamics. It would also be useful for researchers to consider (and research designs to accommodate) the possibility that members of the adolescent's extended family may constitute important reference groups in addition to the more heavily researched same-age friends the literature typically emphasizes. For example, Miller (1986) found that cousins, young aunts/uncles, siblings, and other relatives frequently acted as critical reference others/socializing agents as the young minority women she studied made the transition to adulthood.

Influence Processes

The similarity of friends along a number of dimensions is well established, but researchers differ in their assessments of the degree to which this reflects an attraction—"birds of a feather flock together"—or influence process (Hirschi 1969, Warr 2002). A level of association between intimacy and influence is reasonable to expect because (a) frequent interaction and communication creates numerous opportunities for influence, (b) actors tend to identify most readily with individuals perceived as similar to themselves, thus enhancing receptivity to influence attempts, and (c) the more that individuals value particular affiliations, the more

willing they may be to accede to any influence attempts to maintain or enhance their relationship(s).

A large number of studies have documented substantial correlations between adolescents' behavioral repertoires and those of close friends. However, most of the research in this area initially relied on cross-sectional data; thus these studies did little to resolve the selection versus socialization controversy. A number of longitudinal studies have now demonstrated significant effects of peer attitudes and behaviors, even when prior behavior and other substantively important predictors have been taken into account (Elliot et al. 1985, Jessor & Jessor 1977, Patterson & Dishion 1985, Thornberry et al. 1994). Nevertheless, studies have typically obtained assessments of peer characteristics from the focal respondent, a strategy that could potentially inflate the magnitude of peer effects. In a design that included data provided by a focal respondent as well as a friend, Kandel (1978) found evidence of not only selection (individuals who had similar behavioral profiles were more likely to become friends), but also socialization (friends tended to become more similar over time).

More recently, studies such as Add Health allow respondents to nominate a potentially larger roster of their friends. As a result, researchers can link the focal respondents' data to the interview responses of all their friends (provided they attended schools that were included in the study). Using the linked friendship data, Haynie (2001), found that delinquency of friends remained a significant predictor of a respondent's own involvement even after prior behavior and other relevant controls had been taken into account. Those with rosters comprised entirely of delinquent friends were most likely to be delinquent, suggesting a kind of encapsulation effect. However, a particularly interesting finding is that a majority of adolescents (approximately 61%) actually nominated a mix of delinquent and nondelinquent associations. This observed heterogeneity underscores that the friendship group is not a monolithic entity—a conception that may have been fostered in large part by researchers' reliance on a focal actor's characterizations of friends rather than on direct measures. In addition, the relatively high prevalence of this mix of associations suggests that adolescents as they mature or change goals or orientations have some degrees of freedom to actively shift alliances within the network (Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994, Giordano et al. 2003). Finally, findings indicate that the influence of friends is not constant, even within the period of adolescence. Research generally finds a curvilinear age trend, whether exploring general susceptibility (Kinney 1984) or effects on specific outcomes like delinquency (Warr 1993, 2002).

The relationship between gender and susceptibility to peer influence appears somewhat more complex. Much has been written about girls' greater sensitivity to the opinions of others (Gilligan 1982, Maccoby 1990). Furthermore, research does generally show that peer behaviors are significant predictors of female as well as male outcomes, whether the referent is sexual activity, delinquency, or smoking (Thornberry & Krohn 1997). Nevertheless, females at every age, when compared to similarly situated males, are much less likely to become involved in delinquent activity or to engage in high-risk sexual behavior. Given the known

gender distributions of delinquency and other problem outcomes, girls are simply much less likely to have friends with delinquent behavioral repertoires. The large disparity in rates undoubtedly also connects to more pervasive gender-socialization mechanisms, of which peer interactions are but a part (Heimer & Decoster 1999, Hagan et al. 1987).

Although most girls do not become involved in risky behaviors, a small subset do. Research on female gangs and studies of adjudicated offenders (Gaarder & Belknap 2002, Miller 2001) suggest that peers play a significant role in the etiology of female as well as male delinquency. Yet more research is needed to sort out similarities and differences in how peer influence operates. (For example, are male friends or boyfriends an important part of the social context in which female delinquency occurs? How do peer-related risk factors link to gendered causal processes such as sexual victimization?) It is possible but more difficult to study these issues by using school, neighborhood, or cohort designs, wherein a majority of girls do not exhibit the outcomes of interest.

Research on how race and ethnicity affect adolescent susceptibility to peer influence is rather limited. However, some research suggests that African-American youth relative to white adolescents may be somewhat less susceptible to direct influence from peers and are more tolerant of heterogeneity within their friendships. For example, Billy & Udry (1985) found that white compared to African-American youth were more likely to select friends with similar levels of sexual experience, and white females in particular were likely to deselect friends when their behaviors were out of alignment with their own. Black youth were also less likely than their white counterparts to capitulate to peer judgements within an experimental setting; this study also documented an earlier peak age of conformity for black youth (Iscoe et al. 1964). Giordano et al. (1993) found that African-American respondents also scored lower on a scale indexing the adolescent's perceived susceptibility to peer pressure/influence. These findings, like those relating to intimacy levels, do not fit easily with hypotheses emphasizing minority youths' higher levels of concern with peer judgements and opinions. Possible explanations for these results include the greater salience of family as a reference group as well as direct parental socialization that emphasizes the need to retain a level of independence from peers (Rosier & Corsaro 1993). In addition, youths' desires to be well regarded/respected by peers [as emphasized by scholars such as Anderson (1989)] may involve somewhat distinct processes from those that work to produce a high degree of homophily within a particular friendship group.

Linking Intimacy and Influence

Although individual differences undoubtedly play an important role, the findings reviewed above indicate that adolescents' social addresses and locations affect levels of intimacy and influence. Research has also explored attachment theory's more basic (and controversial) premise that more favorable adjustment, and indeed prosocial behavioral repertoires, tend to flow from strong attachments. Conversely,

the theory also asserts the notion that youth who exhibit problem behaviors lack close interpersonal relationships, or those that are formed tend to be relatively superficial, i.e., "cold and brittle" (Hirschi 1969).

Many studies have examined peer relations during the grade-school years and concluded that peer-rejected youth are at higher risk for a variety of adjustment problems concurrently and later in life (Bukowski & Cillessen 1998). The most widely used method to measure respondents' peer relations involves student ratings of those who are "most liked" and "least liked" within the classroom setting. Research findings indicate that, compared with well-liked youths, so-called rejected youths are more likely to exhibit aggression as well as other conduct and emotional problems. However, a limitation of this method is that it appears to capture youths' overall standing or popularity within the classroom, rather than the nature of their friendship ties. Researchers focusing on similarly aged populations used different methods and found that aggressive youths frequently have good friends, albeit aggressive ones, and in some contexts gain status from their aggressive acts (Cairns & Cairns 1994).

Focusing on the adolescent period, DeMuth (1997) recently isolated the group of respondents within the National Youth Survey who indicated that they had no friends and found that these "loners" were significantly less delinquent than their counterparts who had at least one friend. Researchers have found that respondents who vary significantly in their levels of delinquency involvement report quite similar levels of friendship intimacy and interactions (Giordano et al. 1986, Kandel 1991, Pleydon & Schner 2001, Dishion et al. 1995, Wilkinson 2001).

In a different treatment of the attachment-influence process, Haynie & Osgood (D. Haynie & W.R. Osgood, unpublished data) recently used Add Health data and tested the possibility of a more conditional, amplifying effect of attachment levels on the impact of friends' delinquent repertoires. Although it revealed a significant peer effect, Haynie & Osgood's analysis (unpublished data) did not indicate that levels of attachment conditioned the nature of this effect. Additional research could examine this intimacy-influence process in more detail because the Add Health protocol included only a general measure of attachment to peers. Thus, it is possible (and consistent with the tenets of differential association theory) that particular friends with whom one has forged an especially strong bond will be the most influential as reference others.

Research does tend to indicate a significant relationship between the qualities of one's friendship ties and individual well-being (Hartup 1996, Collins & Laursen 1999). Bearman & Moody (2003) recently documented, using Add Health data, that respondents who lacked attachment to peers were more likely than others to have thought of (ideation) or actually attempted suicide. Some evidence of social learning effects was also apparent in the finding that having friends who had thought of or had committed suicide was also a significant predictor of suicide ideation. Also suggesting the utility of exploring different research trajectories, Moody (J. Moody, unpublished data) again using Add Health data, recently examined predictors of carrying weapons to school, and found that having friends who were

school oriented was negatively related to this outcome but a lack of friends in school was also a significant predictor. This finding suggests the importance of continuing to explore different pathways and possibly even distinct motivations for a similar behavior pattern.

THE WIDER NETWORK

Themes stressed in the literature on close friends and the sheer volume of such studies might lead to the conclusion that most of the developmental action takes place in these intimate circles. However, small friendship groups are necessarily connected to wider networks of peers. In addition, by virtue of direct and indirect communication processes (adulation, approval, gossip, teasing, ridicule), adolescents learn a great deal about themselves, their social worth, and the broader cultural world they inhabit through experiences beyond the confines of close friendship. Although interactions across the wider network are almost by definition less frequent and intimate, relations based in elements of distance, contrast, and difference can also be consequential from a developmental standpoint (Simmel 1950, Cooley 1902).

In his influential study, Coleman (1961) documented the presence of well-defined crowds that differed in prestige and reputation but stressed how the values of the most popular youth influence young people inhabiting all the other rungs on the high-school status ladder. More recent research in this area adds significantly to this basic observation, by emphasizing how communication processes serve to create, sustain, and even change particular cultural emphases and associated status hierarchies. Eder (1985) focused on gossip routines that can at once help to define who is popular but then serve to derail the adolescent's social position. She found that popular middle-school girls felt pressure to sustain their reputations as friendly, while avoiding interacting too frequently with unpopular individuals. This tension created further possibilities for these girls to be labeled by those in the wider network as "stuck up" and in effect to lose some of their prestige (creating a kind of "cycle of popularity").

Brown et al. (1994) also examined links between reputation-based crowds and social relationship processes. They argue that crowds serve an important channeling role, structuring opportunities for interaction with friends and/or the opposite sex and indicating approval or disapproval of particular choices. However, these authors also suggested that crowd boundaries are actually more permeable and changeable than has frequently been assumed, leaving room for the development of relationships outside one's immediate circle (see also Brown 1999). McFarland's (2001) creative multilevel analysis of student behavior within 36 classrooms also highlights the situated nature of prestige processes. McFarland found that students who had higher social standing (received a larger number of friendship nominations) within a given classroom were more likely to engage in various forms of classroom rebellion, such as interrupting the teacher, but that global popularity was not related to students' acts of defiance.

Research has focused attention on popular youth because their definitions of the situation influence not only others in their group, but also less popular individuals. Almost by definition, however, the majority of youth in a given school are not popular. Stone & Brown (1999) found significant age variations in concern with popularity—ninth grade was typically the grade where levels of concern were highest (see also Strouse 1999). Kinney's (1993, 1999) work is unique in that it tracked how the social identities and status concerns of particular individuals changed over time. Across multiple interviews beginning in middle school, Kinney observed that nonpopular youth (e.g., nerds, hippies) generally expressed higher levels of satisfaction with their identities and feelings of greater social acceptance/comfort as their school careers progressed. Students adapted in different ways—some continued to accept the legitimacy of traditional high-school values/concerns but believed that they had carved out more acceptable or "normal" social identities. Others more actively rejected traditional values and the social hierarchies that sustained them. In both instances, however, these changes showcase the active role of individuals in shaping their own identities and social niches.

More quantitatively oriented researchers have used social network methods and concepts that incorporate but are not limited to considerations of prestige. Haynie (2001) showed that network centrality in addition to the behavioral profiles of friends significantly influenced the adolescent's level of delinquency involvement. A number of researchers have also examined the effects of school characteristics on conduct within intimate relations. Examining different configurations of race/ethnic groups within schools, for example, Moody (2001) found that, up to a point, more heterogeneity was actually associated with an increased likelihood of segregation at the friendship level. However, he also documented that extracurricular activities that promoted cross-race socializing modified these patterns, which again suggests areas of malleability in the effects of these broader network processes.

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Although increased interest in the opposite gender is considered a defining feature of the adolescent period (Sullivan 1953), until quite recently research on romantic relationships could be described as "primitive" (Brown 1994, p. 1) and surprisingly sparse. (Brown et al. 1999). A partner is obviously a requirement for sexual intercourse to occur, yet we know more about the individual, family, peer, and even community effects on sexual behavior than about the relationship context(s) within which these behaviors unfold. For example, Kotchick et al. (2001) recently reviewed research on adolescent sexual risk-taking, and although they noted the importance of taking extrafamilial systems into account, their discussion was limited to peer effects and ignored the romantic context of these behaviors entirely. Little is known about the basic contours of these early relationships, the ways in which relationship processes influence sexual behaviors, or the nature of effects on other transition outcomes such as delinquency involvement. This situation is

changing rapidly, however, as quantitative and qualitatively oriented researchers increasingly give attention to dating and sexual partnerships.

A number of sociologists have explored the more general terrain of gender relations, although several of the key studies focus on preadolescence and early adolescence (Adler & Adler 1998, Eder et al. 1995, Merten 1996, Simon et al. 1992, Thorne & Luria 1986). Their work is important in highlighting the degree to which features of these early relations, and even intense personal feelings such as being in love, are socially constructed. Simon et al. (1992) suggest that adolescents' conceptions about and conduct within these relationships are heavily influenced by interaction and communication with other girls. Specific rules emerge (e.g., one should always be in love, it is wrong to date more than one person, heterosexuality is the only acceptable romantic option), and gossip and other social sanctions serve as important sources of informal social control around these prescriptions.

The ethnography of a middle school by Eder and colleagues' (1995), which included observations in the lunch room and other informal settings, also showed how the separate emphases within male and female peer groups contribute to gender inequalities. They stressed the excessive concern with competitive athletics within male subcultures, an emphasis on toughness that leads young males to deny their "softer" emotions. This has a spillover effect as boys learn to objectify young women and may come to see the heterosexual world as another arena in which they can "score" (see also Thorne & Luria 1986, Adler & Adler 1998).

Merten's (1996) research moves into the early adolescent period when youths are old enough to say they are going steady and is useful in actually characterizing the nature of these relationships. Merton describes these liaisons as highly superficial and based on unrealistic idealized expectations and notes that the desire of adolescents to put on a good "front" inhibits the development of intimacy. Merton concludes that going steady is a limited and limiting adolescent social ritual.

Taken together, this research effectively foreshadows many of the more problematic aspects of later male-female relations (e.g., communication problems, conflict, divorce, physical violence) and adds complexity to attachment theorists' emphasis on the beneficial aspects of these relationships. However, adolescent romantic relationships undoubtedly involve some positive experiences/benefits/effects as well as negative ones. Scholars who have focused on heterosexual relationships later in the adolescent period in particular conclude that such relations clearly matter to adolescents and deserve greater research scrutiny (Furman et al. 1999).

In attempting to develop a portrait of the character of adolescent romance, a useful first step is to compare these relations with more heavily studied close-friend relationships. Whereas friendship is based in similarity and shared perspectives, heterosexual relations by their nature encompass difference. Thus the principles of contrast described in connection with the wider network of peers are in full operation when the referent is romantic partnerships. This notion of boundary crossing is in general very compatible with the research on early adolescence reviewed above. However, it may be useful, at least initially, to adapt a more neutral stance in theorizing about the meaning and effects of these contrasts.

One important feature of these relationships is the heightened emotionality connected to all phases of a romantic relationship's career (Larson et al. 1999). In contrast, and in line with our earlier discussion, close friendships are generally considered a more settled and comfortable social arena. These feelings of heightened emotionality undoubtedly derive not only from the sexual potential within them, but also from the newness of these relationship experiences. Adolescents do change friends over this period of development, but as young people make new friends they can draw on a backlog of experiences with other friendships. Movement into dating represents a shift to an entirely different form of relationship, one that encompasses new emotional territory. For example, items that have been used to measure passionate love [e.g., "X always seems to be on my mind," "I have a powerful attraction for X" (Hatfield & Sprecher 1986)] index feelings that do not have a parallel in the adolescent's friendship ties. Negative feelings (e.g., jealousy) also seem, if not distinct in character, then to reflect more intense or volatile levels of emotion. Larson & Asmussen (1991) studied matters that bothered adolescents, relying on pagers to contact youth at different points during their day. A high percentage of the concerns youths described related to friendship, but on closer scrutiny, the researchers found that a majority of these issues actually referenced their cross-gender relationships.

Another distinctive and perhaps related feature is the greater possibility for asymmetries inherent in the romantic dyad. A defining quality of friendship, according to Youniss & Smollar (1985), is "symmetrical reciprocity," but the greater instability and short duration of romantic relations during adolescence, as well as the high levels of emotionality involved, create many possibilities for a mismatch of interests. For example, Carver & Udry (1997) examined the reciprocity in choices of romantic partners within Add Health (If a focal actor X nominates Y as a romantic partner, does Y similarly name X?) and found that approximately 38% of cases involved a nonreciprocated choice.

Issues of exclusivity and commitment are conceptually distinct but interrelated matters that appear more fundamental to an understanding of romantic compared with friendship relations. One can have many friends, but in general, norms discourage simultaneous involvement with more than one partner (Adler & Adler 1998). Research conducted by Eyre and colleagues (1998) documents that norms of fidelity are frequently violated, but these researchers also concluded that the frequent focus on "fidelity management" within peer and partner communications underscores that exclusivity and commitment are highly salient personal and moral issues for the adolescents involved.

Gender and the Meaning(s) of Romantic Relationships

Considerations of the basic contours of adolescent romance lead inevitably to discussions of the gendered nature of these involvements. From global statements about different interests (e.g., boys want sex, girls want love), to assessments of girls' greater levels of investment in general and romantic relationships in

particular, there is ample basis for positing differences in salience and meaning(s) (Thompson 1994, 1995). The more general body of feminist research, although focused mostly on adult relations, emphasizes multiple ways in which access to economic and social power directly influences relationship processes (especially power dynamics) within the domestic arena (Kompter 1989). It is reasonable to expect that these later differences have important parallels in relationships forged earlier in life.

Maccoby (1990) argued that as boys and girls begin the process of relating to one another the transition is much easier for adolescent males, who essentially transport their dominant interaction styles (derived from peer interactions) into this new relationship form. Maccoby references experimental research on communication processes observed in same- and mixed-gender groups to support this idea. Although behavior observed in cross-gender task groups is relevant, intimate dyadic relationships and task groups are not equivalent social contexts. Thus, an alternative hypothesis is that boys, who have less practice than their female counterparts relating intimately (by virtue of their peer group experiences), must make what amounts to a larger developmental leap as they move into the heterosexual arena. For example, examining the messages students write one another in high-school yearbooks (Giordano et al. 2001), we observed marked differences between boys' discourse directed toward friends (e.g., "you're a lousy wrestler. . .") and that directed toward romantic partners (e.g., "you are very beautiful in so many ways it would take me a lifetime to express them in words. . ."). In contrast, the language young girls use in messages to close friends and boyfriends is more similar in form and content. To the degree that the romantic context provides their only opportunity to express themselves and, more broadly, to relate in this intimate fashion, in some respects young males can be considered more dependent on these relations than female adolescents, who have close friends for intimate talk and social support. Of course this quality of uniqueness may figure into the etiology of more negative and sometimes gendered relational dynamics that also emerge in connection with romantic involvements [stalking, intrusive control efforts, violence and the like (see Hagan & Foster 2001)].

The above discussion suggests the need to move beyond broad portraits to explore the full range of romantic experiences—including rewarding as well as negative ones. Ideally these could be examined within the same design framework to better understand how specific relational qualities are connected to one another. As suggested at the outset of this review, research and theory should increasingly distinguish salience from conduct within the relationship (e.g., males may depend on or highly value their romantic relations in certain respects and yet exert more power within a given relationship).

Research on how minority status impacts the nature of romantic experiences also illustrates the need to distinguish relationship behaviors from their overall salience or importance to the individual. Coates (1999), following the logic described in the above discussion of friendship, emphasized that "romance may have a higher level of salience "for disadvantaged minority youth owing to their "undervalued

status in the larger society.” She theorized that such youth may “engage in more intense romances in an attempt to compensate for identity and status needs that are not met through other sources of social validation” (Coates 1999, pp. 350–51). However, in an analysis of Add Health data, Giordano et al. (2002) found that African-American adolescents reported lower frequency of interaction and intimate self-disclosure with current partners than white youths and scored lower on a scale measuring romantic intimacies. Most Add Health items are behavioral, however, thus leaving open larger questions of salience or meaning. For example, one can assess whether the respondent went to a current romantic partner’s home or said “I love you,” but not whether they consider themselves to be “in love” or are highly invested in a particular relationship.

Influence Processes

Joyner & Udry (2000) recently relied on Add Health data to examine the effects of dating on adolescents’ reports of well-being and found evidence consistent with the point of view held by researchers who have emphasized the downside of these relationships. They found that movement into dating relationships was associated with higher levels of self-reported depression for both males and females (but consistent with a gendered portrait, effects were stronger for female adolescents). Earlier research by Simmons and colleagues (1979) had also documented some negative effects (e.g., lower self-esteem) of movement into the dating world, particularly among early maturing girls. More research is needed to understand the specific mechanisms involved in these connections (e.g., whether higher levels of distress connect to a piling on of changes, specific relationship problems/difficulties, conflicts with parents over independence issues, or some combination of these factors).

Research focused on links between romantic relationship experiences and sexual behavior is not voluminous but has been given increased attention in a number of recent studies. This line of research is critical because the social context of sexual decision making is distinct from choices relating to other life domains (including other high-risk problem behaviors). Sexual behavior occurs outside the purview of parents and peers and is inherently dyadic in nature.

Early work in this area established that dating is associated with earlier exposure to sexual experiences (Thornton 1990). Recently researchers have examined even earlier forms of cross-sex socializing and found that having friendships of the opposite gender is associated with earlier dating and, for boys, earlier sexual initiation (Cooksey et al. 2002). Some research has moved beyond the basic dating/nondating distinction to consider levels of closeness with a partner and how these influence sexual decision making. Because of the serious consequences that flow from some sexual decisions (e.g., pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections), a number of research studies have focused on how relationship variables influence the use of a condom or other methods of contraception. However, relationship

qualities are often assessed in a rather schematic fashion (i.e., close versus casual), and the literature contains some contradictory results. For example, some work indicates that couples in closer relationships are more likely to use contraception than their counterparts in more casual relationships (Ford et al. 2001, Landry & Camelo 1994, Santelli 1996). Other research contradicts this portrait, finding either no connection or a negative relationship (Ku et al. 1994, Manning et al. 2000, Pleck et al. 1991, Weisman et al. 1991).

Another complication is that dichotomies such as close versus casual relationships do not effectively capture all the types of heterosexual relationships in which young people may be involved. For example, preliminary analyses of results from interviews with 1320 adolescents indicates that of the sexually active respondents, one third had sex with someone they considered a friend rather than a dating partner, and one third had sex with a previous girlfriend or boyfriend (Giordano et al. 2003). These relationships warrant greater research scrutiny because they may be defined as safe, even though involvement may be highly episodic and in some ways more risky than with a truly casual partner (who might be more likely to cue vigilant condom use).

Researchers are also beginning to examine partner characteristics as another important feature of relationship context. Age heterogamy has been associated with a greater level of risk taking, especially a lower likelihood of using condoms (Darroch et al. 1999, Marin et al. 2000, Morris & Kretzschmar 1995). Analysis by Ford et al. (2001) of Add Health data indicated that a greater number of differences (in school attended, neighborhood, age, and race) was significantly related to lower condom use. Additional research that addresses the relationship dynamics underlying these patterns is needed (for example, power differences are assumed, but this has not been studied directly). It may also prove useful to explore other types of asymmetries, in addition to those deriving from demographic differences [for example, where one partner is more invested in the relationship than the other (a relational asymmetry) or one is more popular/attractive (a status asymmetry)]. Other relationship processes should also be investigated—e.g., involvement in a highly volatile relationship, or one characterized by extreme jealousy, might also be associated with less-consistent use of contraception.

Researchers are beginning to explore patterns of relationships over time. Because of the short average duration of a given romantic relationship during adolescence, such assessments are generally important; however, interest in patterns is also undoubtedly fueled by concerns about the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Kann & Warren (1996) report that almost 20% of sexually active adolescents have had four or more sexual partners (see also Terry & Manlove 2000). Males are more likely to report multiple partners and concurrent partners (Santelli et al. 1998), and research suggests that African-American male respondents are more likely to report overlapping sexual partners (Ku et al. 1998, see also Ford et al. 2002). As Ickovics et al. (2001) and others have pointed out, young women are, nevertheless, disproportionately affected, given their higher risk for sexually transmitted infections through heterosexual contacts.

Future research on the social psychological processes that relate to these high-risk behaviors is needed. For example, Greiling & Buss (1998), in an examination of motivations for cheating, found that women were more likely than men to consider these actions as a mate-search activity (i.e., they were considering making a permanent switch in their main partner). However, this study relied on respondents' reactions to hypothetical cheating scenarios to document gender differences. Thus it would also be important to study these relationship dynamics as they evolve in the context of real-world adolescent relationships.

Research is also needed on longer-term patterns of stability and change in the nature of individuals' relationship and sexual involvements. Studies associated with attachment approaches have examined areas of continuity across relationships, but the application of a broader life-course perspective could also prove very useful (Crosnoe 2000). This would enable researchers to identify different relationship or sexual trajectories as individuals mature. It would be particularly important to focus attention on the subgroups who make significant changes or essentially desist from high-risk patterns, and then to identify factors associated with making such life-course changes. Theoretical perspectives and methods developed in connection with examinations of other behavioral trajectories (notably criminal involvement) could be useful in this regard (Laub et al. 1998, Nagin 1999). Currently, most work on change processes in this area concentrates on short-term effects of specific prevention and intervention programs relating to AIDS or pregnancy outcomes.

Research on how romantic relationships affect outcomes other than sexual behavior (e.g., delinquency involvement) is not particularly well developed, but the literature contains some studies of male-partner influence on female adolescents. Much of this work focuses on the early maturing girl and the negative effects of socializing with an older crowd, especially an older partner. Stattin & Magnusson (1990) found that the greater delinquency levels and school difficulties associated with being an early maturing girl were primarily the result of involvement with an older male. Caspi et al. (1993) also found an effect of early maturation but documented that such girls were more likely to be delinquent only if they attended mixed-sex schools—a finding that also suggests a negative effect of socializing with males. More recently, Haynie (2003) examined the effect of early puberty using the Add Health survey and found that higher levels of delinquency were the result of romantic-partner involvement and not simply having opposite-sex friends.

Not much parallel research examines the effects of girlfriends on male delinquency. However, given their overall levels of involvement, girlfriends are expected to serve, on average, as a prosocial influence. Certainly, studies focused on later stages of life do provide evidence of this process—the so-called good-marriage effect (Laub et al. 1998). However, it would be important to determine whether heterosexual involvement makes a difference during the adolescent period [and, as has already been documented for adults, to distinguish a true good-girlfriend effect from changes in adolescents' own motivations or desire to distance themselves from delinquent peers (Giordano et al. 2003)].

CONCLUSION

Close friendships have been more heavily studied than other extrafamilial relationships, but the wider network of one's peers and romantic relationships are also important parts of the adolescent's social world. The latter types of relationships are more apt to encompass elements of distance and difference, in effect constituting a "tougher audience" for the developing adolescent. These social others frequently weigh in on the adolescent's apparent social worth/identity and engender feelings of awkwardness and insecurity. Nevertheless, they warrant additional scrutiny—movement into such relations of contrast requires a developmental "stretch" that is not as pronounced in the more comfortable world of close friendship. Attention to this full roster of relationship experiences does, however, allow us to gain a better appreciation of the pull of close friendship ties (the arenas of comfort notion) and their critical role as reference others.

More research is needed on linkages between these social domains in general and for subgroups of adolescents in particular. For example, as researchers increasingly focus on the social relations of Hispanic and other minority youths, attention to multiple arenas within the same study design (including the family) will allow researchers to build a more holistic portrait. This will also facilitate examinations of carry-over processes (in line with attachment approaches) or the idea that positive experiences in one arena may compensate for deficits in another (Call & Mortimer 2001). Once broad portraits have been developed, it will be useful to focus in-depth on young people who are outliers to these aggregate trends or tendencies [for example, boys involved in committed relationships (see e.g., Bearman & Brueckner 2001), girls who forge a series of short-term sexual liaisons, or young people whose identities and behaviors challenge the strongly heterosexual norms that characterize the period].

Sociologists have made substantial contributions to this literature by focusing on the norms and values that are communicated and refined within these interpersonal contexts—from those reinforced within small friendship groups to those that contribute to a school's social climate. Examinations of the effects of particular levels of attachment/closeness within relationships will undoubtedly be limited unless simultaneous consideration is given to the normative orientations of these reference others. Future research on heterosexual relationships and their effects in particular could benefit from considering not only the formal characteristics of these relationships (e.g., age differences) or level of closeness, but also the values and behavioral repertoires of the partners to whom one becomes attached. There is also a need to develop more creative ways of measuring these normative orientations. Currently, most studies use either a direct or an indirect report of (for example) friends' behaviors. These studies provide basic evidence in support of social learning processes, but there is a need to be much more specific about the complement of concerns, emphases, and specific mechanisms that operate to produce these high levels of behavioral homophily (see, e.g., Lashbrook 2000).

Sociologists are also well placed (by virtue of theoretical tradition) to focus more attention on subjective processes, including the meaning and salience of the various relationships from the actor's own point of view. Symbolic interaction and related theoretical approaches may prove useful in the design of smaller-scale quantitative and qualitative studies that can supplement the behavioral emphasis of important surveys such as Add Health.

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