

# 9

## **Transformations in Heterosexual Romantic Relationships Across the Transition Into Adulthood**

**“Meet Me at the  
Bleachers . . . I Mean the Bar”**

*Wyndol Furman*

*Jessica K. Winkles*

**O**ne of the most striking differences between adolescence and early adulthood is the change in romantic relationships. In most Western cultures, romantic relationships first appear in adolescence, but they become increasingly interdependent and committed in

---

This research was supported by Grant 50106 from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) (W. Furman, principal investigator [PI]) and Grant HD049080 from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) (W. Furman, PI).

early adulthood. In the present chapter, we review the theories and existing empirical literature on changes in heterosexual romantic relationships and experiences from adolescence to early adulthood, and outline directions for subsequent research.

For the sake of brevity, we use the term *romantic relationships*, but we are primarily referring to heterosexual romantic relationships. Most of the existing literature is based on samples of predominantly or exclusively heterosexual relationships. Some findings on heterosexual relationships may apply to same-sex relationships, and some findings on same-sex relationships may apply to heterosexual relationships, but as yet, little direct information exists on the similarities and differences of heterosexual and same-sex relationships. Russell, Watson, and Muraco (2011 [also Chapter 10 of this volume]), however, provide a review of the existing literature on same-sex relationships.

We are also primarily referring to heterosexual romantic relationships in Western cultures in the late 20th or 21st century. The majority of the research has been done in the United States with some other work done in Canada, Europe, Israel, and Australia, yet striking cultural differences can be expected (see Brown, Larson, & Saraswathi, 2000; Schneider, Lee, & Alvarez-Valdivia, 2011 [also Chapter 6 of this volume]). In fact, it is likely that differences exist among the Western cultures that have been studied, but we have little firm bases for knowing exactly what these differences are.

The review focuses on transitions and changes from adolescence to early adulthood. As the research has primarily been conducted with samples drawn from schools in Western cultures, we examine differences between the relationships of adolescents in high school (approximately 15 to 18 years old) and the relationships of young adults who have completed high school (18 to 25 years old). Although we show that romantic relationships in adolescence and early adulthood tend to differ in certain ways, such differences do not apply to all romantic relationships, even within a particular culture. Marked diversity exists. The relationships of young adults are typically more interdependent than adolescents, but some adolescent romantic relationships entail high levels of interdependence and commitment; conversely, many young adults' relationships are brief and superficial in nature. Thus, the changes from adolescence to early adulthood are noteworthy, but we are reluctant to characterize them as normative or to suggest that most youth are on the same pathway of romantic development.

In the sections that follow, we first describe relevant theories of the changes in romantic relationships. We then review the existing empirical literature. Finally, we delineate a series of directions for future research.

## THEORIES OF DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

---

Many of the classic theorists in psychology focused on developmental changes from infancy to adolescence, but some theorists have also incorporated changes later in the life span. One of the earliest of such formulations was Erikson's (1950) theory of eight psychosocial stages of development. In each stage, a "crisis" or developmental task needs to be resolved. In adolescence, the task is the development of an identity, and peer relationships play a key role in the resolution of this task. In early adulthood, the task is the development of intimacy, and romantic relationships play a key role. Thus, romantic relationships move to the forefront and become more intimate. Erikson did not provide detailed descriptions of the expected changes in romantic experience as his emphasis was on the individual's personality development. Nevertheless, his conceptualization of such stages was built on the changing nature of relationships over the course of development.

Attachment theorists also describe changes in romantic relationships. Bowlby (1979) proposed that a long-term romantic partner eventually replaces a parent as the primary attachment figure. The shift from parent to partner is hypothesized to begin in adolescence because of the hormonal changes that occur with puberty (Ainsworth, 1989). Such changes lead adolescents to search for a peer with whom to establish a relationship. Most adolescent romantic relationships, however, do not meet all the criteria for an attachment bond—that is, a persistent affectional bond that entails proximity seeking, distress over inexplicable separation, pleasure at reunion, grief at loss, and importantly, the use of the partner as a safe haven (a source of comfort and safety) and secure base (a source of support for exploration; Ainsworth, 1989). Instead, such romantic relationships began to gradually acquire such characteristics, both over the course of a particular relationship and with age. Accordingly, Hazan and Zeifman (1994) proposed that attachments are transferred from parent to peer function by function. In particular, proximity

seeking first occurs, then safe haven behavior, and finally separation protest and secure base behavior.

In an effort to integrate the insights of attachment and Sullivanian theorists, Furman and Wehner (1994, 1997) proposed a behavioral systems theory in which romantic partners are hypothesized to become major figures in the functioning of the attachment, caregiving, affiliative, and sexual/reproductive behavioral systems. Affiliation and sexuality are expected to be the central systems in romantic relationships initially, but eventually the attachment and caregiving systems become salient as well. The emergence of these systems is reflected in four developmental stages in the nature of their romantic relationships. Initially, their interactions could be characterized as *simple interchanges* as they develop a sense of comfort interacting with potential sexual or romantic partners. As they become comfortable, they may move to *casual dating* in which affiliative behavior and sexual experimentation occur in a number of short-term relationships. Romantic partners are not expected to emerge as attachment figures or recipients of caretaking until they begin to develop *stable relationships*—exclusive, longer-term relationships. In fact, these systems may not fully emerge in romantic relationships until the appearance of *committed relationships*—that is, relationships that may become a marriage or lifetime partnership; such relationships typically do not appear until early adulthood or later.

Individuals also develop representations, or *views*, of romantic relationships (Furman & Wehner, 1994, 1997). Such views are cognitive expectations regarding romantic relationships, the self in romantic relationships and the romantic partner. Views are expected to guide a person's behavior and serve as a basis for predicting and interpreting the partner's behavior. They are hypothesized to affect and be affected by romantic experiences. With regard to developmental changes in representations, Furman and Wehner did not think that views followed any one particular developmental trajectory. Instead, they become more secure, less secure, or remain relatively consistent depending on the nature of the romantic experiences a person has.

Several other theorists have described developmental changes in romantic relationships in adolescence and adulthood. Connolly and Goldberg (1999) described four phases of romantic relationships: (1) an initial infatuation stage in which passion and physical attraction are most salient; (2) an affiliative stage in which romantic relationships emerge in the context of the peer group; (3) an intimate stage in which emotional intimacy emerges; and (4) a committed romantic relationship stage in which

commitment joins passion, affiliation, and intimacy as motivating and defining features of romantic relationships.

Similarly, Brown (1999) proposed a four-stage sequence: (1) an initiation phase in early adolescence during which heterosexual youths' interest in the other sex increases and short-term relationships are established, (2) a status phase in early and middle adolescence in which the focus is on establishing relationships that are approved of by one's peers, (3) an affection phase in which the emphasis is placed on the relationship itself, and (4) a bonding phase in which the possibility of a long-term commitment is considered. Brown thought this phase typically emerged in late adolescence and early adulthood in the United States. An important implication of the emergence of this phase is that pragmatic and personal concerns about whether to make a long-term commitment to a particular person become salient, as well as the feelings of intimacy and affection that emerge in the prior stage. In effect, Brown and Connolly and Goldberg's theories identify commitment and the pragmatic concerns that accompany it as the key difference between relationships in adolescence and adulthood.

Finally, social exchange theory and evolutionary theory have been frequently used in the study of adult romantic relationships but have received little attention in the adolescent literature. In a noteworthy exception, Laursen and Jensen-Campbell (1999) proposed that a shift occurs over the course of adolescence and early adulthood in the resources associated with romantic relationships. In early adolescence, status and physical attractiveness are highly salient, but kindness and reciprocity increase in saliency with age. Consequently, the social exchanges in early adolescence are predominately selfish in nature, with personal gain and reproductive success being maximized. In late adolescence and early adulthood, the exchanges provide mutual gains, such that relationship stability and interdependence are promoted.

As can be seen in this review, the different theories all describe some fundamental changes in romantic relationships from adolescence to early adulthood. Although the terminology and details may differ, the central description of the transformation is similar in the different conceptualizations. This shared description is encouraging, but our theories of such romantic relationships and their changes remain underdeveloped. Many theories are primarily descriptions, rather than explanations of change. Formulations of underlying mechanisms and processes have been brief and rarely have guided empirical studies. Additional theoretical development is required for further progress in the field.

**■■■ RECENT EMPIRICAL ADVANCES**

---

In the sections that follow, we first review the literature on developmental changes in the involvement of youth in romantic relationships. We then discuss changes in the qualities of the romantic relationships that occur.

**Romantic Involvement**

Being involved in a romantic relationship is quite common in adolescence and early adulthood. In a retrospective study from age 17 to 27, participants reported having 1 to 10 partners, with an average of 2.6 partners. They had a steady partner about two thirds of time, with the average relationship lasting 37 months (Chen et al., 2006). However, developmental changes in both romantic status and relationship duration also occur during the transition from adolescence to early adulthood.

***Status***

Findings from multiple studies demonstrate increases in the proportion of dating individuals during the transition to young adulthood. During an 18-month period, in a study of American youth, approximately 25% of 12-year-olds, 50% of 15-year-olds, and 69% of 18-year-olds are in "special" romantic relationships (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). In a longitudinal study of German youth, 40% of participants were in a romantic relationship at age 13, 43% were in a relationship at age 15, 47% had a relationship at age 17, and 65% were in a romantic relationship at age 21 (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003).

Changes in the frequency of cohabitation and marriage occur as well. In 2002, 5.6% of 15- to 19-year-old American women cohabited with their partners, whereas 15.7% of 20- to 24-year-old women were cohabiting. Similarly, 1.9% of adolescent men and 13.4% of young adult men lived with their partners (Goodwin, Mosher, & Chandra, 2010). Only 1.5% of 15- to 17-year-old adolescents are married. Among 18- and 19-year-olds, 2.2% are married, whereas 14.9% of 20- to 24-year-olds are married. The estimated median age at marriage in 2009 in the United States was 28.1 for men and 25.9 for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), and these ages have been increasing in recent years.

Involvement in early adulthood is also predicted by involvement in adolescence. Romantic involvement in 11th and 12th grade is associated with increased rates of both cohabitation and marriage in early adulthood (ages 23–25) (Raley, Crissy, & Muller, 2007).

### *Duration*

Relationship duration tends to increase throughout adolescence and into adulthood. Among adolescents 16 or older, 55% report having “special” romantic relationships of more than 11 months, whereas only 35% of 14- and 15-year-olds report having relationships of such a long duration (Carver et al., 2003). Although the duration of such “special” romantic relationships is longer than romantic relationships in general (Furman & Hand, 2006), the trend of increasing duration appears to apply to romantic relationships in general and, in fact, continues into early adulthood. In a German sample, mean romantic relationship duration is 5.1 months at age 15, 11.8 months at age 17, and 21.3 months at age 21 (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). In a longitudinal study of Ohio youth, the average relationship duration among adolescents ages 12 to 17 is 4.8 months, whereas the average for young adults ages 18 to 23 is 10.5 months (Giordano, Flannigan, Manning, & Longmore, 2009). The average relationship length for young adults living with their partners is 15.8 months, three times as long as adolescents’.

## Relationship Qualities

### *Support*

Support increases in romantic relationships from adolescence to early adulthood (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Giordano et al., 2009; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). These changes are also evident in young adults’ characterizations of their current relationships and the relationships they had in adolescence (Shulman & Kipnis, 2001). Young adult relationships were primarily described as trusting and supportive, whereas adolescent romantic relationships were mainly portrayed in terms of companionship. When asked to describe differences in their current and adolescent relationships, they characterized their adolescent relationships in terms of social activities, whereas current relationships were often portrayed as mature and emotionally close.

The developmental changes not only occur in terms of the rates of support, but also in terms of the rates of support relative to that provided by other individuals. For example, the romantic partner's place in the hierarchy of perceived support figures goes from fourth in the 7th grade, to third in the 10th grade, and then to the most supportive in college for men and tied for first for women (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Similarly, from high school to college, romantic partners move up in the hierarchy of attachment figures and are increasingly preferred in both support-seeking and affiliative contexts (Rosenthal & Kobak, 2010). Hazan and Zeifman's (1994) theory of the sequence of the transfer of attachment functions also has received support. Middle adolescents seek proximity to romantic partners more than other important individuals, whereas others are turned to more often for a safe haven or secure base (Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggart, 2006). Early adults also seek proximity to romantic partners most often, but they also turn to romantic partners and friends most often for a secure base. Mothers, however, remain the most commonly sought secure base.

### *Love*

The likelihood of *currently* being in love remains stable (at about 50%) from early adolescence to young adulthood. Differences arise, however, when individuals are asked about the *number of times* they have been in love. Early adolescent males report having been in love more times than young adult males and more times than females at all ages. Females report having been in love a similar number of times across ages (Montgomery, 2005).

Although the likelihood of currently being in love is generally stable during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, the intensity of passionate love (intense longing to be with another) increases. Passionate love scores are also higher for young adults living with their partners than young adults who are just dating (Giordano et al., 2009). Conversely, feelings of infatuation are more common in adolescent relationships (Shulman & Kipnis, 2001).

In addition to the frequency and intensity of feelings of love, perceptions regarding the nature of love change over time. Fourteen- and 16-year-olds are more likely to perceive romantic love as friendship (Storge love style) than 19-year-olds are (Shulman & Scharf, 2000).



### *Sexual Behavior*

The proportion of individuals who have engaged in different sexual behaviors increases through adolescence and early adulthood. In the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, 26% of 15-year-old women, 70% of 18-year-olds, and 92% of 22- to 24-year-olds have had vaginal intercourse with a male. Frequencies for males were similar: 24.9% of 15-year-olds, 62.3% of 18-year-olds, and 89% of 22- to 24-year-olds have had vaginal intercourse with a female (Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005). The number of partners per year also increases from late adolescence to early adulthood (Lansford et al., 2010). Finally, the frequency of sexual intercourse is negatively associated with relationship satisfaction in adolescence, but it tends to be positively related to relationship commitment in early adulthood (Welsh, Haugen, Widman, Darling, & Grello, 2005). Thus, the meaning or significance of sexual intercourse changes developmentally.

### *Other Positive Features*

Young adults describe their current relationships as more enjoyable and closer than their recollections of their adolescent romantic relationships (Shulman & Kipnis, 2001). Similarly, relationship satisfaction increases from adolescence to early adulthood (Young, Furman, & Laursen, 2011).

### *Conflict*

Several investigators have examined changes from adolescence to adulthood in the frequency and intensity of conflict in romantic relationships, but the results across studies are not consistent. Two studies reported decreases between 15 and 20 years of age (Chen et al., 2006; Vujeva & Furman, 2011), but another study found increases (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Similarly, decreases from 21 to 25 are found in one study (Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2006), and increases are found in another (Chen et al., 2006). The mean level of conflict is also higher for married and cohabiting couples compared to others (Chen et al., 2006), which would suggest that increases may occur as more individuals cohabit and marry.

The developmental picture is clearer regarding changes in conflict resolution. Compromise is used in conflict resolution more often by older high school students than by younger ones (Feldman & Gowen, 1998),

and skills such as problem solving tend to increase from age 15 to 20 (Vujeva & Furman, 2011). In adolescence, resolution most often includes negotiation, followed by coercion and then disengagement, but compromise is relatively superficial (Laursen, Finkelstein, & Betts, 2001). Late adolescent couples (17–18 years old) tend to avoid or minimize their differences by seeking a quick and easy compromise or rescinding previous statements of disagreement (Tuval-Maschiach & Shulman, 2006). When asked to discuss a disagreement, conversations among adolescent couples are concise; couples do not solicit the partner's perspective and rarely refer to the relationship itself. Even adolescents in longer relationships tend to minimize and downplay disagreements. In early adulthood, negotiation becomes more common as young adult couples are able to examine their relationships in the context of differences (Laursen et al., 2001). Their conversations are characterized by humor and emotional expression, even if such expressions lead to painful realizations (Tuval-Maschiach & Shulman, 2006).

### ***Other Negative Features***

Although conflict has received the most attention, some research indicates that romantic stress decreases from adolescence to adulthood (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006). Young adults also recollect their adolescent romantic relationships as having more frequent relationship problems than their current relationships (Shulman & Kipnis, 2001). On the other hand, intimate partner violence victimization (sexual or physical) increases from adolescence to early adulthood (Halpern, Spriggs, Martin, & Kupper, 2009).

### **Cognitive Representations of Relationships**

Developmental changes also occur in the security of representations of romantic relationships. Representations are commonly conceptualized along anxious and avoidant dimensions. Anxious individuals worry about having their needs met in romantic relationships, whereas avoidant individuals tend to dismiss the value of close romantic relationships (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). In an early cross-sectional comparison (Furman & Wehner, 1997), college students had less avoidant and anxious romantic styles than high school students. In two longitudinal studies of community samples, similar decreases in avoidant representations

occurred from adolescence to early adulthood on both a self-report measure of styles (Collins, Cooper, Albino, & Allard, 2002; Furman & Stephenson, 2010) and an interview measure of working models (Furman & Stephenson, 2010). Changes in anxious representations are less clear, as increases, decreases, and no changes have been reported (Collins et al., 2002; Furman & Stephenson, 2010).

Developmental changes also occur in other cognitions about romantic relationships. Perceptions of romantic competence and confidence increase, whereas feelings of awkwardness in communication decrease (Giordano et al., 2009; Young et al., 2011).

### **Dating Goals and Partner Characteristics**

What individuals seek in romantic relationships changes during the transition from adolescence to early adulthood. College students are more likely to report companionship, sexual activity, and mate selection as reasons for dating, whereas adolescents are more likely to report recreation and status as reasons (Roscoe, Diana, & Brooks, 1987). College students report that shared interests is an important characteristic of a partner, whereas adolescents are concerned about the relative age of the partner. Young adult males also place importance on their partner being sexually active, and young adult females valued partners that would some day have a good job and have set goals for the future. Roscoe and colleagues suggested that these differences reflect a change from an emphasis on immediate gratification and social activity to an emphasis on personal fulfillment. Consistent with this idea, looks and appearance become less important reasons for establishing a romantic commitment over the course of adolescence and into early adulthood, whereas mutual feelings and compatibility become more important reasons (Galotti, Kozberg, & Appleman, 1990).

### **Other Developmental Changes**

Up to this point, we have reviewed research that has examined changes in the mean level of a characteristic of a romantic relationship. For example, we have reported evidence that the average level of support increases. Conceptually, other types of change are possible, including changes in stability and centrality (see Connell & Furman, 1984).

Changes in stability refer to changes in consistency over time. The literature showing developmental increases in the average length of romantic relationships (e.g., Giordano et al., 2009; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003) indicates that romantic relationships themselves become more stable. A change in stability would also be indicated if the correlation between scores at Time 1 and 2 differed from that between Time 2 and 3. Using this criterion, relationship satisfaction has been shown to become more stable (Young et al., 2011). It seems possible that other romantic relationship qualities would also become more stable with development as individuals acquire romantic experience and develop patterns of interaction.

Changes in centrality refer to changes in the pattern of relations of variables. For example, Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, and Tellegen (2004) proposed that romantic relationships are an emerging developmental task in adolescence and early adulthood and become a salient developmental task later in adulthood. As an emerging developmental task, romantic relationships would not be expected to have long-term stability and predictiveness, but they would as a salient developmental task. This developmental change in centrality has not been fully tested yet, but romantic relationship quality appears more related to adjustment in early adulthood than adolescence. For example, the associations between depression and conflict frequency and resolution seem to increase from adolescence to early adulthood (Vujeva & Furman, 2011). Similarly, commitment to a romantic partner is associated with fewer emotional problems in early adulthood, but not in adolescence (Meeus, Branje, van der Valk, & de Wied, 2007). As yet, however, we know relatively little about other changes in centrality.

### **Accounting for the Changes**

Although the empirical literature is not very extensive, it provides a relatively consistent picture of changes from adolescence to early adulthood. Consistent with the theoretical formulations reviewed previously, relationships become more serious, committed, and interdependent. For example, changes occur in relationship duration, support, feelings of love, sexual activity, and centrality of romantic relationships. Similarly, interdependence, daily social interaction, and weekly activity diversity increase (Adams, Laursen, & Wilder, 2001). Why such changes occur has received less attention.

In their research on age changes described in the prior sections, Giordano et al. (2009) included relationship duration, having had sexual intercourse in the relationship, and cohabiting, as well as age as predictors of growth from adolescence to early adulthood. Each of the four variables was a significant predictor for most of the characteristics. Thus, part of the reason for the observed age changes could be because relationships become longer, are more likely to include sexual intercourse, or include a higher proportion of cohabiting couples. Alternatively, duration, sexual intercourse, or cohabitation could themselves be reflections of some other processes. For example, the greater likelihood of intercourse could reflect societal norms, developmental changes in biological processes, or increases in emotional intimacy. Importantly, age remained a significant predictor of growth in almost all instances, even when these other variables were included in the equation. It is possible that the addition of still other variables could eliminate the predictive power of age. For example, cohabitation is not the only noteworthy indicator of a change in the nature of a romantic relationship. Being in love or decisions to get married could also account for some of the seeming age changes. Alternatively, the changes could reflect processes more closely linked to age. For example, as they grow older, individuals acquire more experience, become more skilled, and develop socially and cognitively. Their ability to select a compatible partner may also improve.

Thus, multiple factors could account for the observed changes. For example, consider the changes in conflict resolution that occur during the transition to adulthood. First, they gain more experience in resolving conflicts and as a consequence may become more skillful in doing so. Second, adolescents have idealistic views of romantic relationships and feelings of infatuation and acting “crazy” when in love (Shulman & Kipnis, 2001). Worries about losing the excitement in a relationship may motivate adolescents to focus on agreement rather than acknowledging problems and discussing them honestly. Third, young adults are more cognitively developed than adolescents. Effective negotiation may become more frequent as individuals develop cognitive capacities for viewing the perspectives of others and integrating multiple wants and needs. Fourth, they may also be more likely to initiate or maintain relationships with partners with whom they can effectively resolve conflicts. Finally, factors like increased relationship duration or the increased intimacy and interdependence that comes with sexual intercourse or cohabitation could partially account for some of the changes. As relationships become longer,

one may learn how to effectively resolve conflicts with that particular partner. Increases in intimacy and interdependence may motivate individuals to work through problems, whereas feelings of intimacy allow them to talk openly and express their own needs. Unfortunately, we still know relatively little about what factors could be responsible for the age changes that have been observed.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

---

Although it is rather hackneyed to say that additional research is needed, such a statement is particularly true for this topic. Unfortunately, the literatures on adolescent romantic relationships and early adult romantic relationships have been quite separate. Most studies of developmental changes and transitions in romantic relationships have examined changes *within* the adolescent years (i.e., the middle school and high school years), rather than changes from adolescence into early adulthood. Moreover, the majority of studies of romantic relationships in early adulthood consist of cross-sectional studies of college students, which are often retrospective in nature. In some cases, investigators compare cross-sectional samples of high school students and college students, but such comparisons confound selection and developmental effects. Longitudinal studies with representative samples are essential to understand the developmental changes, and unfortunately, many of the well-known longitudinal studies in the developmental field did not examine romantic relationships extensively until the participants were adults. Until recently, social scientists failed to appreciate the significance of adolescent romantic relationships (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999; Collins, 2003).

As we can see from the present review, some facets of romantic experiences have received surprisingly little attention. For example, little work exists on changes in power and influence, and the work that does exist is inconsistent (cf. Adams, Laursen, & Wilder, 2001; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Giordano et al., 2009). Similarly, the subtitle of this chapter ("Meet Me at the Bleachers . . . I Mean the Bar") refers to expected changes in the nature of the activities in romantic interactions, but as yet, such changes have not been documented. Even the topics that have received more attention, such as support and conflict, have been examined in only a handful of studies. Clearly, more work is needed.

## Variations in Transitions

Up to this point, we have focused on the changes from adolescence to early adulthood in the typical characteristics of romantic experiences. Equally noteworthy is the variability in romantic experiences. Not only do individuals of a particular age vary in their romantic experiences, but differences also exist in the developmental course of romantic experiences in adolescence and early adulthood—both across and within cultures.

One important kind of difference across cultures is in the timing of particular romantic experiences or events. For example, the average age of first marriage for women is 17.6 in the Republic of Niger but 32.9 in Spain (“Age at First Marriage,” n.d.). Within cultures, variation in timing has been studied more extensively. For instance, investigators have examined the predictors and consequences of the age of marriage in the United States (Glenn, Uecker, & Love, 2010; Lehrer, 2008; Ryan, Franzetta, Schelar, & Manlove, 2009; Uecker & Stokes, 2008). Relatedly, those young adults who desire to get married in their early 20s differ in substance use, sexual permissiveness, and family formation values from those who desire to get married in their mid-20s or later (Carroll et al., 2007).

Work also exists on the consequences of romantic involvement at an early age (see Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). Less is known about the timing of experiences later in adolescence or in early adulthood. We hypothesized that variation in timing and degree of romantic involvement would be strongly influenced by biological maturity, cultural and local norms, and peer prestige variables (Furman & Wehner, 1994). Consistent with these ideas, casual and serious romantic involvement in late adolescence are related to physical appearance and friends’ normative romantic involvement in late adolescence (Furman & Winkles, 2010). Serious involvement also predicted decreases in avoidant representations and increases in anxious representations and in satisfaction (Winkles & Furman, 2010). Casual dating involvement predicted increases in romantic appeal. Otherwise, little is known about romantic involvement in late adolescence or early adulthood.

The variation in the timing of marriage or other transitions in romantic experiences not only illustrates the variability in the developmental course but also means that the significance or effect of such a transition may vary as a function of timing as well. For example, getting married at an early age has different consequences than getting married at a later age (Glenn et al., 2010; Lehrer, 2008). Moreover, the difference between those who are married at an early age and those who are not may be unlike the

difference between those who have married by a later age and those who have not. In other words, the meaning or significance of getting married changes developmentally. Much of the literature has focused on the former comparisons (predictors/effects of timing), but the latter comparisons (developmental changes in the effects of romantic status) warrant attention as well (see Meeus et al., 2007).

Individuals not only vary in the timing of their romantic experiences but in the experiences they have. Not everyone is on the path to marriage or wants to be. Not everyone will have the same amount or kind of romantic experience. Research on the predictors and consequences of such variation is being conducted (see Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Furman & Collins, 2008). Studying such variation can shed light on the nature of the developmental changes that occur. For example, if we can determine what is characteristic of individuals who do and do not have certain romantic experiences, we may get some clues about what is required or underlying such experiences or developmental changes.

### The Nature of Change

In the present review, we have focused on changes that occur in the transition from adolescence to early adulthood. In some cases, the changes may be specific or more marked during the transitional period, but often these developmental changes have begun earlier in adolescence or continue further into adulthood. For example, support increases throughout adolescence (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992) and seems likely to continue to increase through early adulthood as relationships become more interdependent and committed. Reviews of the developmental changes during adolescence or during early adulthood are beyond the scope of this paper (see Collins & van Dulmen, 2006; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Furman & Collins, 2008). Identifying the developmental patterns over a wide age span remains challenging, as most of the research to date has simply compared scores at two or perhaps three different ages, which are usually relatively close together. Thus, inferences about the developmental changes from the onset of adolescence into adulthood would require piecing together different studies, which are likely to have used somewhat different samples and measures. Clearly, more long-term developmental research is needed.

It is also important to realize that change can take different forms (Young et al., 2011). *Stochastic* processes of change are those in which there is a variable or even random element of change over time. Stochastic



change arises when a variable is influenced by proximal factors that are themselves in the midst of change. For example, relationship satisfaction may fluctuate as a function of changes in a relationship. In contrast, *deterministic* processes of change are those in which change is a steady unfolding continuous process; the processes unfold in a consistent, developmentally driven model. For example, the development of romantic competence may follow a continuous trajectory.

Importantly, the hypothesized nature of change should be considered in selecting an analytic tool. Autoregressive cross-lagged models are appropriate when changes are stochastic in nature, whereas growth curve models are appropriate for deterministic processes. Both of these approaches assume that there is one form of change; if multiple types of trajectories exist, growth mixture modeling may be appropriate. As yet, we know little about how to characterize the type of change that different aspects of romantic relationships undergo. And if we analyze the type of change using the wrong model, we may not capture it.

It is also important to consider whether changes occur as a function of a series of ongoing experiences or if highly salient events may lead to marked, discontinuous changes in romantic experiences. For example, decreases in security of representations may occur as a consequence of a series of unsupportive experiences. On the other hand, a particularly marked experience may lead to a quick change in security. For example, after experiencing sexual coercion, adolescents display a marked increase in anxious representations of romantic relationships; they also engage in sexual intercourse with more casual sex partners, and this behavior continues to increase at a faster rate over time (Young, Furman, & Jones, in press). Whether such discontinuous changes occur after other events, such as declaring love, engaging in intercourse, or cohabiting, remains to be determined.

Additionally, the degree to which individuals are affected by events is also important in its own right. Those partners whose commitment is substantially affected by particular events experience more negative events and are less compatible with their partner than those in which commitment increases more smoothly (Surra & Hughes, 1997).

## The Broader Context

Transitions in romantic experiences, such as the establishment of a committed relationship, are not the only developmental milestones that commonly occur in early adulthood. Completing one's education, beginning

to work full-time, establishing independent residence, and having a child are all significant milestones that commonly occur in early adulthood as well. These different milestones are not independent of one another; thus, if we are to understand the impact of romantic milestones, such as the establishment of a committed relationship, we need to consider how these other milestones may be related or even responsible for any seeming effect.

Moreover, no single normative sequence of these events exists in contemporary Western society. For example, Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, & Barber (2005) identified six different patterns that characterized individuals in their mid-20s: (1) fast starters (married and employed full-time with less education and half with children); (2) parents without careers (married/cohabiting with children, less education, and only a short-term job or no job); (3) educated partners (married/cohabiting, high levels of education, and no children); (4) educated singles (high levels of education but not married/cohabiting); (5) working singles (employed full-time and often living with parents); and (6) slow starters (living at home, limited education and employment). The pattern of milestones a person has experienced or not experienced may play a role, as well as the particular ones (but see Mouw, 2005).

Investigators have considered how demographic variables and cultural context affect the changes that occur in the romantic milestones, such as cohabitation and marriage. For example, African Americans are less likely to marry by early adulthood, even when income status is controlled for (Meier & Allen, 2009). Not only are such demographic characteristics predictive of different experiences but in some cases the romantic experiences in adolescence interact with such demographic characteristics in predicting experiences in early adulthood. For example, overall African Americans are less likely to cohabit in early adulthood; however, if they were involved in a steady relationship in adolescence, they are more likely to cohabit (Meier & Allen, 2009). Thus, our developmental models are not only going to need to consider contextual factors, but also take into account the experiences a person has had during various developmental periods.

## SUMMARY

---

Although only a limited amount of research has examined the transition in heterosexual romantic relationships from adolescence to early adulthood, a relatively coherent picture is emerging—both theoretically and

empirically. Relationships become more serious, committed, and interdependent. Such change reflects both transformations in the kind of romantic relationships that emerge and changes in other age or experience-related processes. Further work is needed, however, both to describe the changes and identify the underlying processes. Attention to the variability in the nature and timing of the changes and the larger context in which romantic relationships occur should provide us further understanding of the nature of these transitions.

### SUGGESTED READINGS

---

- Collins, W. A., & van Dulmen, M. (2006). "The course of true love(s) . . .": Origins and pathways in the development of romantic relationships. In A. Booth & A. Crouter (Eds.), *Romance and sex in adolescence and emerging adulthood: Risks and opportunities* (pp. 63–86). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Furman, W., & Buhrmester, D. (1992). Age and sex differences in perceptions of networks of personal relationships. *Child Development*, 63, 103–115.
- Furman, W., & Collins, W. A. (2008). Adolescent romantic relationships and experiences. In K. H. Rubin, W. Bukowski, & B. Laursen (Eds.), *Peer interactions, relationships, and groups* (pp. 341–360). New York: Guilford Press.
- Seiffge-Krenke, I. (2003). Testing theories of romantic development from adolescence to young adulthood: Evidence of a developmental sequence. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 27, 519–531.
- Shulman, S., & Kipnis, O. (2001). Adolescent romantic relationships: A look from the future. *Journal of Adolescence*, 24, 337–351.

### REFERENCES

---

- Adams, R., Laursen, B., & Wilder, D. (2001). Characteristics of closeness in adolescent romantic relationships. *Journal of Adolescence*, 24, 353–363.
- Age at First Marriage. (n.d.). *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age\\_at\\_first\\_marriage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_at_first_marriage).
- Ainsworth, M. S. (1989). Attachments beyond infancy. *American Psychologist*, 44, 709–716.
- Bowlby, J. (1979). *Attachment and Loss: Vol 1. Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.
- Brennan, K. A., Clark, C. L., & Shaver, P. R. (1998). Self-report measurement of adult romantic attachment: An integrative overview. In J. A. Simpson & W. S. Rholes (Eds.), *Attachment theory and close relationships* (pp. 46–76). New York: Guilford Press.
- Brown, B. (1999). "You're going out with who?": Peer group influences on adolescent romantic relationships. In B. B. Brown, C. Feiring, & W. Furman (Eds.), *The development of romantic relationships in adolescence* (pp. 1–16). New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Brown, B. B., Feiring, C., & Furman, W. (1999). Missing the love boat: Why researchers have shied away from adolescent romance. In W. Furman, B. B. Brown, & C. Feiring (Eds.), *The development of romantic relationships in adolescence* (pp. 1–16). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, B. B., Larson, R. W., & Saraswathi, T. S. (Eds.). (2000). *The world's youth: Adolescence in eight regions of the globe*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Carroll, J., Willoughby, B., Badger, S., Nelson, L., Barry, C., & Madsen, S. (2007). So close, yet so far away: The impact of varying marital horizons on emerging adulthood. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 22, 219–247.
- Carver, K., Joyner, K., & Udry, J. R. (2003). National estimates of adolescent romantic relationships. In P. Florsheim (Ed.), *Adolescent romantic relationships and sexual behavior: Theory, research, and practical implications* (pp. 291–329). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, H., Cohen, P., Kasen, S., Johnson, J. G., Ehrensaft, M., & Gordon, K. (2006). Predicting conflict with romantic relationships during the transition to adulthood. *Personal Relationships*, 13, 411–427.
- Collins, N., Cooper, M., Albino, A., & Allard, L. (2002). Psychosocial vulnerability from adolescence to adulthood: A prospective study of attachment style differences in relationship functioning and partner choice. *Journal of Personality*, 70, 965–1008.
- Collins, W. A. (2003). More than myth: The developmental significance of romantic relationships during adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 13, 1–25.
- Collins, W. A., & van Dulmen, M. (2006). "The course of true love(s) . . .": Origins and pathways in the development of romantic relationships. In A. Booth & A. Crouter (Eds.), *Romance and sex in adolescence and emerging adulthood: Risks and opportunities* (pp. 63–86). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Connell, J. C., & Furman, W. (1984). Conceptual and methodological issues in the study of transitions. In R. Harmon & R. Emde (Eds.), *Continuity and discontinuity in development* (pp. 153–173). New York: Plenum.
- Connolly, J. A., & Goldberg, A. (1999). Romantic relationships in adolescence: The role of friends and peers in their emergence and development. In W. Furman, B. B. Brown, & C. Feiring (Eds.), *The development of romantic relationships in adolescence* (pp. 266–290). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Connolly, J., & McIsaac, C. (2009). Romantic relationships in adolescence. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology, Vol. 2: Contextual influences on adolescent development* (3rd ed., pp. 104–151). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.
- Feldman, S. S., & Gowen, L. K. (1998). Conflict negotiation tactics in romantic relationships in high school students. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 27, 691–717.
- Furman, W., & Buhrmester, D. (1992). Age and sex differences in perceptions of networks of personal relationships. *Child Development*, 63, 103–115.
- Furman, W., & Collins, W. A. (2008). Adolescent romantic relationships and experiences. In K. H. Rubin, W. Bukowski, & B. Laursen (Eds.), *Peer interactions, relationships, and groups* (pp. 341–360). New York: Guilford Press.
- Furman, W., & Hand, L. S. (2006). The slippery nature of romantic relationships: Issues in definition and differentiation. In A. Booth & A. C. Crouter (Eds.), *Romance and sex in adolescence and emerging adulthood: Risks and opportunities* (pp. 171–178). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Furman, W., & Stephenson, C. (2010). *Changes in representations and interactions in romantic relationships*. Manuscript in preparation.
- Furman, W., & Wehner, E. A. (1994). Romantic views: Toward a theory of adolescent romantic relationships. In R. Montemayor, G. R. Adams, & G. P. Gullota (Eds.), *Advances in adolescent development: Vol. 6, Relationships during adolescence* (pp. 168–175). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Furman, W., & Wehner, E. A. (1997). Adolescent romantic relationships: A developmental perspective. In S. Shulman & W. A. Collins (Eds.), *New directions for child development (No. 78). Romantic relationships in adolescence: Developmental perspectives* (pp. 21–36). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Furman, W., & Winkles, J. K. (2010). Predicting romantic involvement, relationship cognitions, and relationship qualities from physical appearance, perceived norms, and relational styles regarding friends and parents. *Journal of Adolescence*, 33, 827–836.
- Galotti, K. M., Kozberg, S. P., & Appleman, D. (1990). Younger and older adolescents' thinking about commitments. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 50, 324–339.
- Giordano, P. C., Flannigan, C. M., Manning, W. D., & Longmore, M. A. (2009). Developmental shifts in the character of romantic relationships from adolescence to early adulthood. *National Center for Family & Marriage Research Working Paper Series*.
- Glenn, N. D., Uecker, J. E., & Love, R. W. B., Jr. (2010). Later first marriage and marital success. *Social Science Research*, 39, 787–800.
- Goodwin, P. Y., Mosher, W. D., & Chandra, A. (2010). Marriage and cohabitation in the United States: A statistical portrait based on Cycle 6 (2002) of the National Survey of Family Growth. *National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Health Statistics*, 23, 1–55.
- Halpern, C. T., Spriggs, A. L., Martin, S. L., & Kupper, L. L. (2009). Patterns of intimate partner violence victimization from adolescence to young adulthood in a nationally representative sample. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 45, 508–516.
- Hazan, C., & Zeifman, D. (1994). Sex and the psychological tether. In K. Bartholomew & D. Perlman (Eds.), *Advances in personal relationships: Vol. 1. Attachment processes in adulthood* (pp. 151–180). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Lansford, J. E., Yu, T., Erath, S. A., Pettit, G. S., Bates, J. E. & Dodge, K. A. (2010). Developmental precursors of number of sexual partners from ages 16 to 22. *Journal of Research in Adolescence*, 20, 678–705.
- Laursen, B., Finkelstein, B. D., & Betts, N. T. (2001). A developmental meta-analysis of peer conflict resolution. *Developmental Review*, 21, 423–449.
- Laursen, B., & Jensen-Campbell, L. A. (1999). The nature and functions of social exchange in adolescent romantic relationships. In W. Furman, B. B. Brown, & C. Feiring (Eds.), *The development of romantic relationships in adolescence* (pp. 50–74). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lehrer, E. L. (2008). Age at marriage and marital instability: Revisiting the Becker–Landes–Michael hypothesis. *Journal of Population Economics*, 31, 463–484.
- Markiewicz, D., Lawford, H., Doyle, A., & Haggart, N. (2006). Developmental differences in adolescents' and young adults' use of mothers, fathers, best friends, and romantic partners to fulfill attachment needs. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 35, 127–140.
- Meeus, W., Branje, S., van der Valk, I., & de Wied, M. (2007). Relationships with intimate partner, best friend, and parents in adolescence and early adulthood: A study of the saliency of the intimate partnership. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 31, 569–580.

- Meier, A., & Allen, G. (2009). Romantic relationships from adolescence to young adulthood: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. *The Sociological Quarterly, 50*, 308–335.
- Montgomery, M. J. (2005). Psychosocial intimacy and identity: From early adolescence to emerging adulthood. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 20*, 346–374.
- Mosher, W. D., Chandra, A., & Jones, J. (2005). Sexual behavior and selected health measures: Men and women 15–44 years of age, United States, 2002. *Advance Data from Vital Health and Statistics (No. 132)*. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.
- Mouw, T. (2005). Sequences of early adult transitions: A look at variability and consequences. In R. A. Settersten, F. F. Furstenberg, & R. G. Rumbaut (Eds.), *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 256–291). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Osgood, D., Ruth, G., Eccles, J., Jacobs, J., & Barber, B. (2005). Six paths to adulthood: Fast starters, parents without careers, educated partners, educated singles, working singles, and slow starters. In R. A. Settersten, F. F. Furstenberg, & R. G. Rumbaut (Eds.), *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 320–355). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Raley, R. K., Crissy, S., & Muller, C. (2007). Of sex and romance: Late adolescent relationships and young adult union formation. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 69*, 1210–1226.
- Robins, R. W., Caspi, A., & Moffitt, T. E. (2006). It's not just who you're with, it's who you are: Personality and relationship experiences across multiple relationships. *Journal of Personality, 70*, 925–963.
- Roisman, G., Masten, A., Coatsworth, J., & Tellegen, A. (2004). Salient and emerging developmental tasks in the transition to adulthood. *Child Development, 75*, 123–133.
- Roscoe, B., Diana, M. S., & Brooks, R. H. (1987). Early, middle, and late adolescents' views on dating and factors influencing partner selection. *Adolescence, 22*, 59–68.
- Rosenthal, N. L. & Kobak, R. (2010). Assessing adolescents' attachment hierarchies: Differences across developmental periods and associations with individual adaptation. *Journal of Research in Adolescence, 20*, 678–706.
- Russell, S. T., Watson, R., & Muraco, J. A. (2011). The development of same-sex intimate relationships during adolescence. In B. Laursen & W. A. Collins (Eds.), *Relationship pathways: From adolescence to young adulthood*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ryan, S., Franzetta, K., Schelar, E., & Manlove, J. (2009). Family structure history: Links to relationship formation behaviors in young adulthood. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 71*, 935–953.
- Schneider, B. H., Lee, M. D., & Alvarez-Valdivia, I. (2011). Adult friendship bonds in cultures of connectedness. In B. Laursen & W. A. Collins (Eds.), *Relationship pathways: From adolescence to young adulthood*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Seiffge-Krenke, I. (2003). Testing theories of romantic development from adolescence to young adulthood: Evidence of a developmental sequence. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 27*, 519–531.
- Seiffge-Krenke, I. (2006). Coping with relationship stressors: The impact of different working models of attachment and links to adaptation. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 35*, 25–39.
- Shulman, S., & Kipnis, O. (2001). Adolescent romantic relationships: A look from the future. *Journal of Adolescence, 24*, 337–351.

- Shulman, S., & Scharf, M. (2000). Adolescent romantic behaviors and perceptions: Age- and gender-related differences, and links with family and peer relationships. *Journal of Research in Adolescence, 10*, 91–118.
- Surra, C. A., & Hughes, D. K. (1997). Commitment processes in accounts of the development of premarital relationships. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 59*, 5–21.
- Tuval-Maschiach, R., & Shulman, S. (2006). Resolution of disagreements between romantic partners, among adolescents, and young adults: Qualitative analysis of interaction discourses. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 16*, 561–588.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2009). Table MS-2: Estimated median age at first marriage, by sex: 1980 to the present. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/ms2.csv>
- Uecker, J., & Stokes, C. (2008). Early marriage in the United States. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 70*(4), 835–846.
- Vujeva, H. M., & Furman, W. (2011). Depressive symptoms and romantic relationship qualities from adolescence through emerging adulthood: A longitudinal examination influences. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology, 40*(11), 123–135.
- Welsh, D. P., Haugen, P. T., Widman, L., Darling, N., & Grello, C. M. (2005). Kissing is good: A developmental investigation of sexuality in adolescent romantic couples. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy, 2*, 32–41.
- Winkles, J. K., & Furman, W. (2010). *Adolescent serious and casual dating involvement predict changes in romantic cognitions and emotions*. Manuscript under review.
- Young, B. J., Furman, W., & Jones, M. C. (in press). Changes in adolescents' risk factors following peer sexual coercion: Evidence for a feedback loop. *Development and Psychopathology*.
- Young, B. J., Furman, W., & Laursen, B. (2011). Models of change and continuity in romantic experiences. In F. D. Fincham (Ed.), *Romantic relationships in emerging adulthood*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.