

The Influence and Significance of Adolescent Romantic Relationships on Adolescent Psychological Development

Shuyue Ge*

Nanjing Foreign Language School Huai'an Campus, Huai'an, 223001, Jiangsu, China

* Corresponding Author Email: esme18@ldy.edu.rs

Abstract. The impact and significance of adolescent romantic relationships on adolescent psychological development has attracted a great deal of attention from researchers since the beginning of the 21st century. This paper briefly reviews the research on how adolescent RRs affect adolescent psychological development from the following three aspects. (1) Theoretical changes in the influence of adolescent romantic relationships on adolescents - from "absolute influence" to "relative influence"; (2) An exploration on the mechanisms of adolescent romantic relationships affect adolescents' mental health: Numerous studies have confirmed that the greater factor influencing adolescents is the quality of the relationship. Adolescent romantic relationships do not directly lead to negative outcomes in adolescent psychological development. In addition to this, secure attachment with romantic partners can bring many desirable outcomes for adolescents, but there are also three factors that influence adolescent attachment security: age, parental, and expression of physical intimacy. (3) Revelations from previous research on how parents and schools should properly guide adolescents. Since there is a significant correlation between adolescent-partner relationships and parenting styles during adolescence, this paper draws insights into how parents can properly guide adolescents in their interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Adolescent romantic relationships, relationship quality, attachment security.

1. Introduction

The possibility of starting a romantic relationship (RR) at the stage of adolescence is higher than commonly believed. The stages of adolescence are divided into early puberty (usually 10-13 years old); middle puberty (14-17 years old); and late puberty (18 to early 20s). However, the incidence of RRs varies across the three recognized sub-stages of adolescence. For instance, according to the findings of one study, 36 out of every 100 teenagers who are thirteen and 51 out of every 100 teenagers around the age of 15 stated that they were in a relationship within the previous year. Among 17-year-olds, the rate of relationship involvement was substantially greater, with roughly 70 out of every 100 indicating that they had been in a recent relationship [1]. This study indicates that majority of individuals are in RRs during the mid-adolescent period. Therefore, psychologists and sociologists are now paying close attention to how RRs affect the mental health of teenagers.

Before 1999, most of the literature on the effects of RRs on young people contained only descriptive information and no empirical research. Relevant research on the effect on personal development has largely focused on the link between maladaptation and negative behaviours, such as negative effects on academic performance, behaviour and mood. Scholars at this stage supported the "Absolute Impact Theory" which argued that all adolescents involved in RRs tend to have negative outcomes. Until the beginning of the 21st century, more scholars delved into the topic, and these researchers supported the "relative influence theory". They focused more on the process of the relationship and argued that there is often more than one factor that influences the psychological development of adolescents in RRs. As a result, they focused more on the specific features of adolescent RRs. They concluded that the impact of RRs on adolescents depended on the specific characteristics of the relationship, such as the quality of the relationship and whether it was a secure attachment relationship.

2. Adolescent Relationships Affecting Youth: Theoretical Changes

RRs are consensual contacts, which usually last for a period of time and are recognised by both parties [2]. Four stages have been identified in adolescent relationships [2]: in the first stage, an adolescent's primary objective is to expand their conception of themselves and gain confidence through the development of relationships. Teenagers are hence primarily focused on their own thoughts, activities, and worries about how their peers will see them. Most relationships in the second stage emphasize companionship. The third stage signifies the presence of an intimate RR. In this type of relationship, the interaction between the partners exhibits the qualities of a dualistic relationship (one person is able to realize that the other is a separate being like himself or herself, is able to empathize with the feelings of the other person, and is able to genuinely respect the will of the other person). Finally, the fourth stage occurs in late adolescence, when partners may have established committed relationships. These relationships last a long time, and there is a strong commitment.

Theoretical changes in adolescent RRs have mainly gone through a change from 'absolute influence' to 'relative influence'. According to the absolute influence theory, all RRs between adolescents have negative outcomes. In contrast, the relative influence theory places more emphasis on the relationship's processes and contends that there are multiple factors affecting the psychological development of adolescents in RRs. Thus, academics who subscribe to this theory concentrate more on particular traits of RRs.

2.1. Absolute Influence Theory

2.1.1 Early major views and research evidence

Before 1999, most of the literature on the impact of RRs on young people contained only descriptive information and no empirical research. Relevant research on the effect on personal development has largely focused on the link between maladaptation and negative behaviours, such as negative effects on academic performance, behaviour and mood.

In 1999, Brown argued that adolescent RRs are generally transient and superficial. To begin a relationship, teenagers need to acquire some skills [3]. This description is accurate in some aspects. Most adolescent relationships are short-lived, which means that they are difficult to last for a year or more and are unlikely to have a sincere commitment. Thus, he argues that in the initial stages of adolescent romantic activity, adolescents are not concerned with the quality or characteristics of RRs. However, because their emphasis is on self-image rather than relationships, scientists either choose to investigate adults or completely ignore adolescent RR research.

2.1.2 Effects on academic performance and behavior

Most early studies found that RRs were detrimental to academic performance. Some studies revealed that during adolescence, RRs and sexual behaviour are inversely related to performance in school [3]. Additionally, it has also been suggested that there is a correlation between falling in love in high school and having lower expectations for attending college. Furthermore, only teenagers with low levels of their own expectations and a deficient self-concept will desire to fall in love early. In contrast, adolescents with satisfactory senses of themselves or expect to have education and employment in the future will not fall in love [4]. These scholars have offered conjectures about the possible reasons for this negative association. On one hand, adolescents who are less focused on their studies would be more inclined to date. On the other hand, RRs might have a negative impact on their school performance. These concepts illustrate the potential reciprocal influence of academic performance and adolescent RRs.

In addition to perceptions of the impact on academic performance, some scholars have argued that RRs in early adolescence are more closely associated with externalizing behavioral problems (e.g. aggression, resentment, temperament, etc.). According to Laursen's research, in contrast to other teenagers, adolescents in RRs reported experiencing more conflict [5].

2.1.3 The emotional impact

On the other hand, several studies asserted in the 1990s that adolescent mood swings may be exacerbated by RRs. Mood swing issues are a common feature of teenage emotional lives and are particularly severe for individuals in love relationships [3]. Joyner and Udry (2000) reported that in comparison, those involved in a RR over a period of time had more pronounced depression than those who did not [3].

In 2000, Joyner used nationally representative data to investigate the impact of RRs on adolescent depression. According to the study, males and females who had RRs between interviews reported higher rates of depression than those who were single. It is worth mentioning that adolescent RRs caused higher increases in depression levels in females than in males (as shown in Figure 1). This study seems to be able to determine that being in a relationship during adolescence increases the incidence of developing depression.

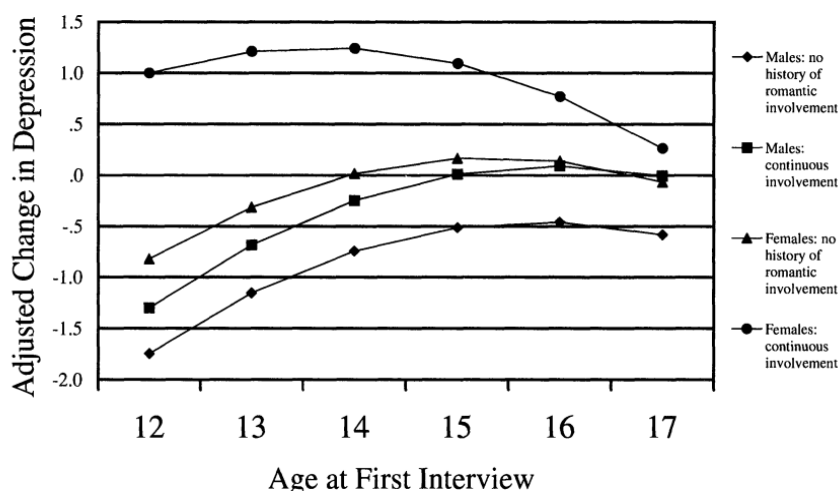


Fig. 1 Adjusted Changed in Depression Between Interview by Age at First Interview [3]

Additionally, RRs can be stressful because they change one's existing relationships parents, because adolescents might quarrel with their parents about their partner choice or how much time they spend away from home [6]. Joyner contended that the much greater risk of depression among adolescent females than boys was partially due to the fact that they experience more deteriorating changes in their relationship with their parents [4].

2.2. Relative Influence Theory

2.2.1 Main points and research evidence

Prior research on RRs in adolescence has generally concluded that they predict maladjustment. However, subsequent research indicates that emphasizing only negative consequences may skew perceptions of romantic interactions as a normal part of adolescence. Thus, the improved relative influence theory focuses on specific features of the adolescent relationship process.

In the early 21st century, scholars began to conduct further research on adolescent RRs. Several aspects of teenage personal development have been found to be statistically reliably correlated with the experiences of developing RRs. For instance, Furmans & Shaffer (2003) proposed that adolescents involved in RRs can have better self-awareness and expression of their emotions; adolescents can confide in their partners about their negative emotions; simultaneously, a good partner can promote adolescents' desire to go to school [7]. Relationship quality is correlated with social skills, self-confidence, and self-esteem [8]. High-quality relationships that are intimate and supportive are linked to social competence (e.g., the ability to solve problems, coordinate and analyze tasks, and communicate with others) [8]. In contrast, those who have anxiety related to sustaining connections tend to self-silencing. They may suppress their thoughts and opinions for fear of losing their intimate partners and relationships. Therefore, if adolescents can feel positively supported in a

relationship and it is a healthy relationship with no negative consequences, then adolescents can reap the benefits of multiple aspects of development in the process.

2.2.2 Influence mechanisms and individual differences in RRs

In the 20th century, scholars considered adolescent RRs as determinants of adolescent mental health. However, their correlation studies did not take into account the influence of individual differences on adolescents at this stage and the mechanism of influence.

And later, at the beginning of the 21st century, several researchers started looking at how other aspects of teenage RRs affected adolescents' moods. For instance, mood swings arising from breakups can explain the significant increase in the symptoms of depression mentioned in Figure 1. It can be concluded that romantic connections between teenagers do not directly cause depression. Depressive reactions to relationship events may be exacerbated by personality traits and relationship histories of one or both partners [9].

2.2.3 Effects on academic performance and behavior:

Regarding the idea that RRs may have an adverse effect on academic performance, Furman Shaffer contended that spending time with a romantic partner can be a distraction from studying, but he also believed that this effect might vary greatly depending on the nature of the relationship and the partner's traits [7]. Throughout a relationship, some individuals may undermine academic success, while others may foster it by studying together, offering encouragement, assisting with assignments, or praising achievements.

In response to reports that adolescents in RRs will face more conflict and have more externalising behaviours, as articulated by previous research. Collins argues that current research that only focuses on negative outcomes may skew the perception of RRs as a developmental feature of adolescence [10]. Data from a 2001 study by Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins revealed a relationship between the number of different people who had dated in the previous year and changes in externalizing behaviors between the ages of 12 and 16. (see Figure 2). A possible explanation for this result is that teenagers who actively pursue and sustain numerous dates are occupied with meeting, phoning, conversing, and engaging with both possible and real dates. They might also go through a lot of tension, disagreements, and breakups, all of which are bad for their mental health [11].

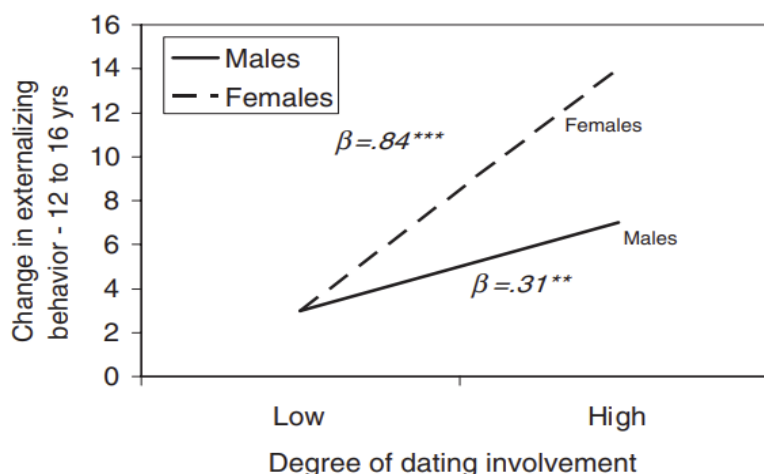


Fig. 2 Change in externalizing behavior (age 12-16) as a function of dating involvement [10].

In summary, the specific characteristics of the adolescent relationship determine whether RRs lead to a series of negative behaviors.

2.2.4 Effects on emotions

With regard to the emotional changes and intensity caused by RRs during adolescence, Jessica Kansky and Joseph P. Allen indicated that teenagers might substantially benefit from learning coping methods and communication skills that help to handle such mood swings [12]. Since supportive and conflictual traits are essential for the development of constructive conflict resolution techniques, those

who have supportive partners or are less hostile and conflictual in their relationships may have fewer or less severe mood swings. [12] Additionally, in order to develop a positive and healthy RR, it is necessary for adolescents to have the ability of resolve conflicts, listen to each other's thoughts, and communicate effectively.

In 2003, Collins proposed five main characteristics as determinants of adolescents: relationship participants, object identity, relationship content, relationship quality, and cognitive and affective processes in relationships [13]. With further research on adolescent mental health, researchers have focused on the correlation between RR quality, partner characteristics and adolescent mental health. It is also an indispensable step from adolescence to adulthood.

3. The importance of RR quality and attachment security

3.1. Quality of RRs

The level of closeness, caring, and nurturing that couples demonstrate is referred to as relationship quality. Irritation, confrontation, and what appears to be excessive amounts of conflict or controlling behavior are characteristics of low-quality relationships [14]. Romantic Relationship Quality (RRQ) is defined as “the degree to which a relationship provides an overall rewarding experience it could represent the subjective measure of a person's level of satisfaction in a RR [13]. Different findings have resulted from studies looking at the connection between RRQ and outcomes related to mental health in early and late adolescent groups.

On the one hand, it makes sense that some stressful traits or events in RRs might be linked to suicidal thoughts or actions as well as depression [7]. For example, the finding adolescence, especially girls, are prone to experience an increased risk of depression may be associated with unequal commitment to relationships, lower levels of intimacy, and lower emotional support [13]. Since relationships do not directly contribute to depressive outcomes, research should focus on individual differences or unique characteristics of relationships. Existing research has shown that greater unfavorable features being linked to a variety of poor outcomes [13].

On the other hand, some researchers made a particularly important discovery in 2017: Compared to relationship breakdown, there is a stronger correlation between relationship quality and mental health outcomes [15]. There are multiple reasons why the results could be so different. First, Romantic Relationship Breakup (RRB) is common in this population. It's possible that this will lessen the effect on mental health outcomes. Likewise, the ephemeral and fragile character of these connections makes it challenging to ascertain the connection between young adults' and adolescents' mental health. Furthermore, RRB can represent a more sudden and significant change in the psychosocial context, which increases the likelihood of inciting actions related to seeking assistance, thereby enhancing its outcomes that affect mental health. Based on current research, it appears that RRB and low-quality relationships are stresses that lead to the emergence of depression symptoms.

3.2. Attachment Security

3.2.1 Attachment

Humans have an innate need to attach to others, and this instinct may have its roots in an infant's need for an adult caretaker to provide their fundamental demands for existence [16]. Many beneficial consequences, including better communication, increased ability for personal accomplishment, and a higher threshold for suffering, are associated with attachment security [16]. On the contrary, the target individual usually experiences anxiety or avoidance when their attachment figure is inaccessible, unresponsive, and uncommitted [16].

3.2.2 Age Factors

Late adolescence (ages 17–20) is when attachment romances are most likely to happen since people are more mature and relationships tend to last longer. The cognitive reasoning abilities of teenagers begin to match their emotional levels as they approach maturity, thus those who are

approaching the end of adolescence may be less vulnerable to social pressures and more capable of self-control than those who are younger [17]. Younger adolescents would experience more challenges than older adolescents in building attachment security, in combination with cognitive growth trajectories [18]. Younger adolescents may experience more challenges than older adolescents in building attachment security, in combination with cognitive growth trajectories [18]. The establishment of romantic partnerships requires interpersonal faculty abilities in addition to cognitive development in individuals [19]. Effective listening, proper emotional expression, and assertiveness help partners reveal their innermost feelings and realise what their partner's real needs are [19]. Consequently, individuals in their late teens are more likely to have more mature competencies in the area of sustaining RRs, such as more effective communication capabilities, empathy, and more sincere commitments [18].

3.2.3 Parental factors

Scholars have proposed that during adolescence, attachment function moves from parents to peers, even if RRs in youth may not be as attachment-oriented as they are in adulthood [20]. More specifically, late adolescence and early adulthood RRs are highly predicted by the quality of teenagers' relationships with their parents. Parents' animosity toward one another may have a greater impact on females [21]. Relative to other girls, those who grow up with hostile parents are more prone to feel nervous and preoccupied with their romantic feelings than other females. Adolescents who grow up in hostile family environments have difficulty forming attachment security with their partners. Consequently, even if they are unconscious, attachments formed by childhood caregivers have a significant impact on the formation of attachments between adolescents and their partners [18].

The level of parental control over teenage romantic interactions is another possible factor [18]. The development of intimate relationships between teenagers and their partners is heavily dependent on romantic autonomy, even though they may require some direction in this new domain [22]. The formation of romantic attachment may be hampered by parental regulations regarding acceptable physical contact or hours of meeting per day. For example, Teens whose parents forbid them from having any kind of physical touch, were unable to feel content in their romantic connection. The parents of another adolescent might have very strict control over the length of their child's dates with their partner, which limits the teen's ability to be emotionally intimate with their partner, to respond immediately and to meet their partner's needs. At the same time, it also limits their ability to talk about personal matters and express physical affection. These hypothetical instances illustrate the possibility of parental control [18].

3.2.4 Intimate physical expression

It is important to express and give love in a tangible way that teenagers can easily perceive and experience. Adolescent partners may strengthen their attachment security by demonstrating good physical affection [18]. Securely attached partners also expect intimate physical contact with their partner, as it is vital to maintain physical and emotional closeness [20]. Despite the fact that parents could have expectations regarding physical intimacy, romantic physical contact may be particularly meaningful during adolescence. Consensual and polite physical contact frequently represents the intangible and difficult to observe concepts of trust, security, and emotional closeness [23]. Moreover, the security of a partnership may suffer from a lack of intimate physical expression [23].

4. Insights from past research (how parents and schools should guide adolescents)

4.1. School

Students should be guided to deal with interpersonal relationships correctly, rather than being totally negative or permissive. To help teenagers acquire skills in problem solving, negotiation, conflict resolution, and anger control, schools could organize lectures or presentations aimed at influencing students' views toward impulsive or violent behavior in relationships. In addition, students should also be guided to plan for the future in order to motivate them to study without devoting all their time and energy to RRs. A smooth transition from late adolescence to adulthood should be accomplished by developing relationships without compromising academic performance. At last, attention should be paid to psychological support for partners after a breakup, as mood swings after a breakup can easily lead to mental health impacts among adolescents, such as an elevated risk of depression.

4.2. Family

The warmth, support, and lack of animosity toward romantic partners in adolescent relationships are correlated with adolescents' relationships with their parents and methods of parenting. The level of respect for privacy in the family was positively associated with intimacy in late adolescent RRs, particularly strong female bonding. Furthermore, it was found that resolving conflicts with romantic partners later on was linked to parental conflict resolution with teenagers [24]. Conversely, the more negative emotions adolescents experience with their parents appear to be associated with lower quality interactions with their partners during late adolescence. Incompetent parenting and aversive family communication were linked to later aggression toward romantic partners [24]. As a result, parents ought to instill in their teenagers a clear knowledge of the characteristics of a healthy relationship, enabling them to recognize unhealthy relationships when they encounter them and know when to leave them or make adjustments to them.

5. Conclusion

Based on an in-depth analysis of existing research, it can be found that adolescent RRs are not the decisive factor influencing adolescents' psychological development, in which what is more critical is the quality of adolescent RRs and whether or not they form attachment security. High-quality relationships are likely to have fewer intense mood swings, from which adolescents can acquire skills in managing emotions and conflict resolution. In contrast, low-quality relationships and relationship breakdown may be a stressor that leads to the onset of depressive symptoms. Therefore, on the one hand, it is more important to properly guide adolescents in dealing with relationships and help them develop skills in conflict management, negotiation, problem solving, and controlling angry emotions. For adolescents who are already in low-quality relationships, their attitudes toward conflict and violence in relationships should be changed, and more attention should be paid to psychological support for this group of adolescents after a breakup. On the other hand, due to the fact that during adolescence, there is a significant correlation between adolescent-partner relationships and parenting styles. Therefore, more attention should be paid to conflict resolution and rational communication with adolescents in parenting styles, and parents of adolescents should teach adolescents the characteristics of healthy relationships. Future research could delve deeper into the correlations between adolescent-parent relationships and parenting styles with adolescent RRs.

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