Attachment Relationships and Adolescent Psychological Health: The Influence of Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

Research demonstrates that attachment relationships play important roles in adolescent psychological health. The influence of romantic relationships on adjustment is less clear. Using a cross-sectional sample of 515 adolescents, the current study examines whether romantic relationships replace the influence of other attachment relationships on adolescent psychological health. Regression analyses revealed that romantic relationships did not significantly impact on the influence of other attachment relationships when predicting depression but did significantly decrease the influence of peer attachment for self-esteem. It is concluded that romantic relationships during adolescence do not have major direct effects on adjustment and have only a minor influence on existing attachment relationships in predicting psychological health. Findings are discussed in the light of the continuity model of interpersonal relationships.

Although a topic of considerable interest in popular culture, the study of adolescent romantic relationships from a psychological perspective has been relatively neglected. While the relative importance of parental attachment, peer attachment and close friendship in the prediction of adolescent psychological health have been the subject of debate (Wilkinson, 2004a), relatively few researchers have investigated adolescent romantic relationships in the context of existing attachment relationships. It has been argued that adolescent romantic relationships represent one of the most important developmental tasks of adolescence (Furman & Wehner, 1997). However, it is not clearly understood what influence adolescent romantic relationships have on other attachment relationships or on psychological health.

During late adolescence close dyadic relationships such as intimate friendships and romantic relationships develop. Research has suggested that these close intimate bonds share many features with attachment relationships. Ainsworth (1989) argued that under certain circumstances these intimate relationships may be classified as attachments. In one of the few studies in the area, Buhrmester (1990) found that the intimacy of friendships was consistently related to adjustment and interpersonal competence during adolescence and that adolescents who characterised their intimate friendships as compassionate, disclosing, and satisfying reported less depression and higher levels of self-esteem.

Researchers have argued that romantic relationships are a key developmental task and the failure to establish a romantic relationship during adolescence is thought to have adverse consequences for the individual (Collins, 2003). These relationships are unlike adult romantic relationships, however, in that they tend to be short-term and do not involve the same level of commitment, exclusivity, attachment and care-giving (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999). While the adult romantic relationship literature has found that long-term romantic relationships are associated with stability, security and relationship satisfaction (Feeney, 1999), it is unclear whether long-term romantic relationships in adolescents are associated with such positive outcomes (Overbeek, Vollebergh, Engels, & Meeus, 2001).
In contrast to the asserted developmental importance of romantic relationships in adolescence, studies that consider their impact on psychological health are limited and contradictory. Some research has demonstrated that romantic relationships are associated with increased social competence and self-esteem and are an important source of emotional support and commitment for adolescents (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999). However, other studies report that romantic involvement during adolescence is related to more depressive symptoms (Davilla, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004) and behavioural and academic problems (Neeman, Hubbard, & Masten, 1995). Moreover, a higher number of romantic partners during adolescence has been linked to higher levels of externalising behaviours, and poor emotional health and academic performance (Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2001).

Research investigating the links between romantic involvement and peer attachment in psychological health has been limited. Brendgen, Vitaro, Doyle, Markieqicz, and Bukowski (2002) found that being involved in a romantic relationship was related to poorer emotional and behavioural adjustment, but only for those adolescents with inadequate peer relationships. For adolescents who had adequate peer relationships, romantic involvement was not related to emotional and behavioural adjustment. They suggested that adolescents who are unable to establish stable and successful peer relationships lack the social skills necessary for positive social interaction in romantic relationships. Thus, while romantic relationships may be an indicator for normative and adaptive development, the effects of romantic relationships on adjustment may depend on whether or not adolescents have established successful peer relationships. However, a further explanation for the interaction between romantic relationships and peer relationships may be that the functions of attachment are transferring from peers to romantic partners in the prediction of adolescent adjustment (Wilkinson & Sarandrea, 2005).

Research investigating the links between adolescent romantic involvement and parental attachment in the prediction of psychological health has also been limited. Overbeek, and colleagues (2003) found that parental attachment was differentially associated with emotional disturbance in groups of adolescents with and without romantic relationships. Specifically, the links between parental attachment and emotional disturbance were less strong for adolescents in a romantic relationship than adolescents not in a romantic relationship. The authors argue that the influence of parental attachment diminishes in late adolescence due to romantic relationships becoming the basic source of support and intimacy.

The present study

The aim of this study is to investigate whether being involved in a romantic relationship during adolescence decreases the influence of parental attachment, peer attachment and intimate friendship in the prediction of psychological health. It is well established in the attachment literature that the quality of parental and peer attachment is important in adolescent psychological health. This research has demonstrated considerable support for the 'continuity/cognitive' model of interpersonal relationships, such that parental attachment, peer attachment and intimate friendships play complimentary and cumulative roles in adolescent adjustment. However, recent research from Overbeek and colleagues (2003) and Brendgen et al. (2002) suggest that the influence of parental and peer attachment in the prediction of adolescent psychological health is moderated by the existence of a romantic relationship. These findings provide support for the 'competition' model of interpersonal relationships by suggesting that romantic relationships may supplant existing attachment relationships in the prediction of adolescent psychological health.

Based on these findings, it is hypothesised that involvement in a romantic relationship will decrease the influence of mother, father, and peer attachment in the prediction of adolescent psychological health. Further, previous research has failed to examine whether involvement in a romantic relationship decreases the influence of close friendships in the prediction of
adolescent psychological health. Intimate friendships are considered to be important for adolescent psychological health (Buhrmester, 1990) and are thought to operate in a similar way to attachment relationships with parents and peers. Thus, it is hypothesised that involvement in a romantic relationship will also decrease the influence of intimate friendships in the prediction of adolescent psychological health.

**Method**

**Participants**

A cross-sectional sample of 515 volunteer high school students from the Australian Capital Territory aged between 15 and 19 years (Mean = 17.2, SD = 7.34) participated in the study. Of this sample, 398 were female (77.3%) and 117 (22.7%) were male. The sample included 192 (37.3%) participants who were currently involved in a romantic relationship and 323 (62.7%) who were not. Based on parental occupation, the majority of participants (74.8%) were from families classified as middle socio-economic status.

**Procedure and Measures**

Parental and individual consent was obtained for all participants before they took part in the research. In a classroom setting participants completed a self-report questionnaire booklet containing several measures. A debriefing was conducted for participants after the questionnaire was administered.

The thirteen item Secure subscale of the Adolescent Friendship Attachment Scale (AFAS-S: Wilkinson, 2004b) was used to measure the quality of friendship attachment. Participants were asked to consider the friend they are closest to and indicate on a 5-point scale the extent to which they agree or disagree with several statements. Examples include “when I have a bad day my friend cheers me up” and “I like the closeness I share with my friend”. Internal consistency for the AFAS-S was high (α = 0.91).

Quality of attachment to mothers, fathers, and peers was measured using a modified 45-item version of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA: Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Fifteen items separately assessed father, mother and peer attachment quality. Respondents rated each item using a 5-point scale ranging from “almost never or never” (1) to “always or almost always” (5) to indicate the degree to which the items were true. Internal consistency of the 15-item measures was similar to Armsden and Greenberg (1987) (Mother Attachment α = 0.94; Father Attachment α = 0.94; Peer Attachment α = 0.89).

Psychological health was assessed with separate depression and self-esteem scales. For the ten item Depression Scale (Wilkinson, 2004a) participants were asked to rate, on a 3-point scale, how often they had experienced each item in the last month for a range of typical symptoms. Examples include “I’ve felt hopeless about the future” and “I’ve felt unhappy or sad”. The scale has good internal consistency (α = 0.83). Self-esteem was measured using the eight item Taforodie and Swann (2001) Self-Liking Scale Revised (SL-R). Participants were asked to rate on a 5-point scale how they feel about themselves while reading several statements. Examples include “I tend to under-rate myself” and “I have a negative attitude towards myself”. Internal consistency for this scale was adequate (α = .80).

The status of romantic relationship was assessed using a single item: “do you currently have a boyfriend or girlfriend?”.

**Results**

Prior to analysis, variables were screened for accuracy of data entry, missing values and assumptions of multivariate analysis. Eight univariate outliers were changed to one score above or below the next non-outlying score in the corresponding distribution. No multivariate outliers were identified. The sample included 192 participants (37.3%) involved in a romantic
relationship and 323 participants (62.7%) who were not. Those currently in a relationship were significantly older ($M = 17.30, SD = 0.63$ versus $M = 17.15, SD = 0.60$), $t(513) = 2.71, p < .01$, and had higher friendship attachment ($M = 61.99, SD = 7.28$ versus $M = 59.25, SD = 7.52$), $t(513) = 4.14, p < .001$, than those not in a relationship. There were no significant differences between the groups on any of the other variables of interest.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Depression</th>
<th>Self-Liking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Main Effects</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
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<td>-0.122*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Attachment</td>
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<td>Mother Attachment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Father Attachment</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Mother X Relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Father X Relationship</td>
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<td>-0.199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend X Relationship</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>-0.069</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Depression - Main Effects Model $R^2 = .22$, Interaction Model $R^2 = .22$; Self-Liking - Main Effects Model $R^2 = .27$, Interaction Model $R^2 = .28$; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Multiple regression analyses with interaction effects were performed to investigate whether romantic relationship status decreased the influence of attachment relationships in the prediction of depression and self-esteem. Data were divided into two groups: those in a romantic relationship and those not in a romantic relationship (Relationship Status). The statistical models were composed of main effect predictor variables (Peer, Mother, Father, and Friend Attachment, and Relationship Status) and the multiplicative interaction terms (Peer Attachment X Relationship Status, Mother Attachment X Relationship Status, Father Attachment X Relationship Status, and Friend Attachment X Relationship Status). The procedure recommended by Jaccard, Turrisi, and Wan (1990) for assessing interactions in regression was employed and variables were centred to improve any impact of multicollinearity. Initial main effects models were examined prior to the final model which included both main effects and interaction terms. Sex and Age were also entered as controls.

The results of the main effects analysis for Depression are presented in Table 1 and indicate that Depression was significantly predicted by Sex, $t(474) = -2.84, p < .01$, Peer Attachment $t(474) = -6.91, p < .001$, Mother Attachment, $t(474) = -3.45, p < .01$, and Father Attachment, $t(474) = -4.26, p < .001$. Overall, this model accounted for 22% of the variance. Table 1 also presents the results of the interaction analysis. Examination of final $\beta$ weights indicates no significant interactions between any of the variables of interest when predicting Depression.
The results of the main effects analysis for Self-Esteem are presented in Table 1 and show that it was significantly predicted by Sex, $t(474) = 6.16, p < .001$, Peer Attachment $t(474) = 6.97, p < .001$, Mother Attachment $t(474) = 5.09, p < .001$, and Father Attachment $t(474) = 3.51, p < .001$. Overall, this model accounted for 27% of the variation in Self-Esteem. The results for the interaction analysis are also presented in Table 1. There was a significant interaction between Peer Attachment and Relationship Status, $t(481) = -2.25, p < .05$. This suggests that the influence of peer attachment changes as a function of romantic relationship status. There were no statistically significant interactions for any of the other variables of interest. Overall, the set of variables accounted for 28% of the variance.

In order to assist in the interpretation of the interaction between Peer Attachment and Relationship Status in the prediction of Self-Esteem an examination of the separate $\beta$ weights across Relationship Status was undertaken. Although the $\beta$ weight for Peer Attachment is significant in both models, it is significantly higher in the model for adolescents with no romantic relationship ($\beta = .399$) than in the model for those who were in a romantic relationship ($\beta = 0.229$), Fisher $Z = 1.99, p < .05$.

**Discussion**

Overall, the hypothesis that involvement in a romantic relationship decreases either the quality of attachment relationships or their role in adolescent psychological health was not supported, with the exception of one finding. The involvement in a romantic relationship did decrease the influence of peer attachment in the prediction of self-esteem. However, it did not decrease the influence of either parental attachment or intimate friendship. Moreover, involvement in a romantic relationship did not decrease the influence of parental attachment, peer attachment, or intimate friendship in the prediction of depression.

A preliminary aim of this study was to explore whether attachment relationships and psychological health outcomes vary across romantic relationship status. Attachment relationships with parents and peers remained stable. This finding is inconsistent with recent research suggesting that adolescent involvement in a romantic relationship places strain on existing relationships and leads to a decline in the quality of peer attachment (Brown et al., 1999). The current study suggests that romantic relationships in adolescence do not occur at the expense of existing relationships with parents or peers. With regard to secure intimate friendships, adolescents who were involved in a romantic relationship did maintain greater security than those not in such a relationship. This finding may reflect the fact that adolescents who have already established romantic relationships have the necessary intimacy skills required to maintain both a romantic relationship and close friendships (Brenggen et al., 2002). In contrast, adolescents not involved in romantic relationships may be at a different developmental stage and lack the skills necessary to establish a romantic relationship and maintain quality intimate friendships.

The present study confirms a number of previous findings regarding the direct role of attachment relationships in adolescent psychological health. Lower levels of mother, father and peer attachment were associated with increased depression and decreased self-esteem and this is consistent with previous research (Wilkinson & Walford, 2001; Wilkinson, 2004a). These findings highlight the continuing importance of both parental and peer relationships in adolescent psychological health and support the continuity model of interpersonal relationships in that both parental and peer relationships operate in cumulative and complementary ways and are associated with lower levels of psychological distress and increased self-confidence.

Secure intimate friendship was not significantly associated with either depression or self-esteem. This is contrary to previous research implicating the role of quality of intimate friendships in adolescent depression (Buhrmester, 1990). This finding is also in contrast to the direct effects of peer and parental attachment and suggests that secure intimate friendships
may have a different function separate from other relationships. Secure intimate friendships typically provide a context for greater self-disclosure and intimacy about emotional and social problems. While adolescents with secure intimate friendships may utilise these relationships for such self-disclosure, adolescents with less secure intimate friendships may be utilising peers or parents as providers of close emotional support.

Similar to the case for close friendships, romantic relationships had no impact on either depression or self-esteem in the context of the other relationship variables. While a number of recent studies have demonstrated that involvement in a romantic relationship is associated with greater depressive symptoms (Davilla et al., 2004), this study suggests that adolescent involvement in a romantic relationship has neither malign nor beneficial effects on psychological health. Importantly, and contrary to predictions, there was little evidence to support the interactive effect of romantic relationship status on the role of attachment relationships in psychological health. Whether predicting depression or self-esteem, parental attachment and peer attachment had similar effects regardless of whether the adolescent was in a romantic relationship. This would suggest that the establishment of new relationships during adolescence, such as close intimate friendships or romantic relationships, do not occur at the expense of existing relationships with parents and peers. To this end, the concern of many parents that their own relationship and their child’s peer relationships may suffer as a result of a romantic relationship, may be alleviated with the knowledge that romantic relationships develop, not to the detriment of other existing relationships with parents or peers, but in a network of existing complimentary relationships.

A key finding was the interaction between peer attachment and romantic relationship status in the prediction of self-esteem. It may be concluded that self-esteem is more dependent on peer relationships when an adolescent is not in a romantic relationship than when in such a relationship. This finding is consistent with Brendgen and colleagues (2002) and suggests that perhaps there is some form of transfer of attachment occurring from peer relationships to romantic relationships, particularly with regard to the adolescents self-concept. Nevertheless, the overall results are consistent with literature suggesting that adolescent romantic relationships are transitory and lack the social and emotional depth to be considered significant relationships (Brown et al., 1999). Perhaps, as argued by some researchers, adolescent romantic relationships are simply a context for learning about different facets of sexuality and increasing one’s status in the peer group (Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

There are a number of suggestions for future research and limitations of this study that need to be addressed. Firstly, a relatively small number of participants were involved in a romantic relationship and this lead to the decision to dichotomise the Relationship Status variable. Future research should look at increasing the sample size of this group so that it becomes viable to look at the length of romantic relationship on the outcome variables. There is some evidence to suggest that there is an 'optimal' length of romantic relationships in adolescence and that longer term romantic relationships may be problematic in this developmental period. The imbalance of female and male participant numbers in this study is also not ideal and a more balanced distribution would enable an examination of sex differences. Future research would also benefit from longitudinal studies which would enable researchers to investigate how individual attachment relationships change and interact with romantic relationships overtime.

Conclusions

The current study investigated whether involvement in a romantic relationship decreased the influence of attachment relationships in the prediction of adolescent psychological health. Involvement in a romantic relationship did not play a significant role in directly predicting psychological health outcomes or as a moderator in decreasing the influence of attachment relationships in predicting psychological health outcomes. The findings provide support for the continuity model of interpersonal relationships by highlighting the importance of
attachment relationships with parents and peers and the complementary, cumulative ways in which these relationships influence adolescent psychological health. While popular culture’s interest in adolescent romance has heightened the focus on such relationships, this study suggests that relationships with parents and peers are more important to adolescent psychological health than adolescent romantic relationships.

References


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