

Influences of Romantic Relationships on Same-Sex Friendships in Adolescence: Conceptions of Friendship Features and Adjustment



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine whether adolescents' conceptions of the influences of romantic relationships on the features of same-sex friendships varied with age and sex, and to examine how adolescents' adjustment is related to their conceptions of friendships when one member of the friendship has a romantic relationship. Ninth graders ($n = 198$) and eleventh graders ($n = 152$) completed a questionnaire about their conceptions of friendship features both when one friend had a romantic relationship and when neither friend had a romantic relationship. Students also reported on their social, psychological, and academic adjustment. Ninth and eleventh graders viewed a friendship in which one friend had a romantic relationship as having less frequent interactions and less self-esteem support and intimacy, but more conflict and rivalry than a friendship in which neither friend had a romantic relationship. Moreover, the effect of a romantic relationship on frequency of interaction was greater in the eleventh than the ninth grade. Eleventh graders also viewed friends as engaging in less co-rumination when one friend had a romantic partner than when neither friend had a romantic partner, while ninth graders did not. Compared to boys, girls viewed friendships as lower in intimacy and co-rumination and higher in conflict and rivalry when one friend had a romantic relationship than when neither friend had a romantic relationship. In addition, adolescents who were better adjusted academically viewed friendships in which one friend had a romantic relationship as more supportive. Students who perceived themselves as more accepted by their peers had conceptions of such friendships as higher in intimacy.

BACKGROUND

How are friendships affected when one friend has a romantic relationship? Interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and the dyadic withdrawal hypothesis (Johnson & Leslie, 1982) suggest that spending time with a new relationship partner has a cost for existing relationships. The resources invested in a new relationship, such as the time partners spend together, leave fewer resources available for pre-existing relationships. However, romantic relationships in early adolescence tend to be unstable and superficial (Feiring, 1996). Therefore, while the presence of a romantic relationship may come at a cost to friendships throughout adolescence, this cost may be especially evident in late adolescence.

Others suggest that romantic relationships will not come at a cost to all features of friendship, but instead may result in friendships that are higher in features such as intimacy, at least in early adolescence (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). The first purpose of this study was to examine these alternative perspectives to determine whether adolescents' conceptions of the influences of romantic relationships on the features of friendships varied with age.

Conceptions of how the features of friendship are impacted by romantic relationships may also vary for boys and girls. Few theories of close relationships or the development of romantic relationships have considered sex as a variable, but previous research on girls' and boys' friendships and on their romantic relationships suggests that sex differences in conceptions may exist. For example, girls have closer friendships than do boys (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992) and girls are more susceptible to disruptions in their friendship by a third party than are boys (Rudolph, 2002). The second purpose of this study was to examine whether adolescents' conceptions of the influences of romantic relationships on the features of friendships varied with sex. The first hypothesis was that, compared to boys, girls will conceive of friendships as lower in positive features and higher in negative features when one friend has a romantic relationship than when neither friend has a romantic relationship.

Friendships are widely acknowledged as important for adolescents' emotional and psychological adjustment. Adolescents whose friendships are higher in positive features, such as self-esteem support and intimacy, score higher on measures of self-esteem (Keefe & Berndt, 1996), and report better social and academic adjustment (Berndt & Keefe, 1995). The final purpose of this study was to examine how adolescents' adjustment is related to their conceptions of friendships when one member of the friendship has a romantic relationship. The second hypothesis was that adolescents who are better adjusted will have conceptions of friendships when one friend has a romantic partner as higher in positive features and lower in negative features.

METHOD

•Participants were 198 ninth graders and 152 eleventh graders. The majority (59%) of the adolescents were female and nearly all (94%) were European American

•Students were asked to think about the frequency of interaction, self-esteem support, intimacy, co-rumination, conflict, and rivalry in hypothetical best friendships between people who were their own age and sex. They answered the same set of questions for two different pairs of friends (romantic condition; e.g., female version, "Think about two girls your own age, Mandy and Kim, who are best friends. Mandy has a boyfriend but Kim does not." Nonromantic condition; e.g., female version, "Now think about two other girls your own age, Judy and Ann, who are best friends. Neither of them has a boyfriend.").

•The friendship questions were adapted from Berndt and Keefe (1995; α 's ranged from .79-.92).

•Students also reported on their social, psychological, and academic adjustment by completing the social acceptance, scholastic competence, and global self-worth scales from Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985; α 's = .79-.87).

•Additional measures of academic adjustment were utilized. They included questions regarding positive involvement at school (e.g., "How often do you take part in class discussions or activities?") and disruptive behavior at school (e.g., "How often do you misbehave in class?"). The internal consistency of these measures was .80 and .87, respectively.

RESULTS

Conceptions of the Impact of Romantic Relationships on the Features of Friendships

Age. Ninth and eleventh graders viewed a friendship in which one friend had a romantic relationship as lower in frequency of interaction, self-esteem support, and intimacy, but as higher in conflict and rivalry, than a friendship in which neither friend had a romantic relationship. The negative effect of a romantic relationship on friends' frequency of interaction was greater in eleventh than ninth grade (see Figure 1). The difference increased because eleventh graders conceived of friends as spending more time together when neither had a romantic partner than did ninth graders. Eleventh graders also viewed friendships as involving less co-rumination when one friend had a romantic partner than when neither friend had a romantic partner, while ninth graders viewed friendships as having similar levels of co-rumination regardless of whether a friend had a romantic partner (see Figure 2).

Sex. Consistent with the hypothesis, compared to boys, girls viewed friendships as lower in intimacy and co-rumination and higher in conflict and rivalry when one friend had a romantic relationship than when neither friend had a romantic relationship (see Figure 3).

Relationship between Adjustment and Conceptions of Friendship

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine whether adolescents who were better adjusted had conceptions of friendship when one friend had a romantic partner as higher in positive features and lower in negative features. Each measure of adolescents' adjustment served as the criterion in a separate set of regression analyses. The predictor variables were adolescents' conceptions of the six friendship features when one friend has a romantic partner. Grade and sex were entered as control variables on the first step. Conceptions of friendship features were entered on the second step. Each friendship feature was entered individually into the model so that the individual features would not be in competition with each other for variance explained.

Adolescents who were better adjusted had more positive conceptions of friendship when one friend has a romantic partner (see Table 1). Students who had higher perceived social acceptance conceived of friendships as higher in intimacy. Students who had higher global self-worth and scholastic competence conceived of friendships as more supportive. Those who were more involved in school also conceived of friendships as more supportive. Adolescents who were more disruptive conceived of friendships as lower in support and as higher in co-rumination, conflict, and rivalry.

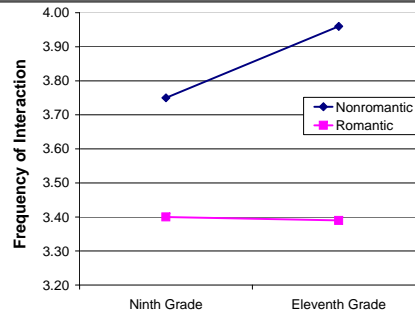


Figure 1. Conceptions of Frequency of Interaction in Friendships by Friendship Type and Grade

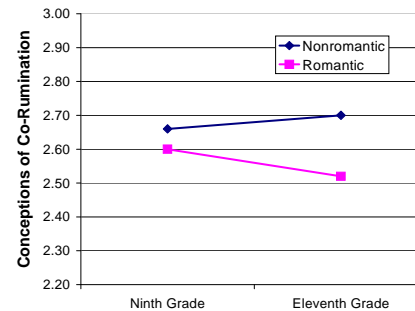


Figure 2. Conceptions of Co-Rumination in Friendships by Friendship Type and Grade

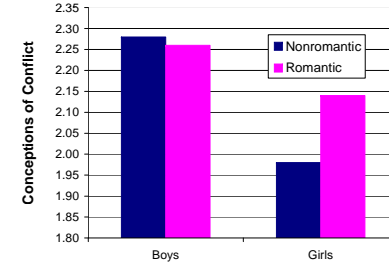


Figure 3. Conceptions of Conflict in Friendships by Friendship Type and Sex (Note: This pattern of results was similar for intimacy, co-rumination, and rivalry.)

Table 1 Standardized Regression Coefficients for Conceptions of Friendship Features in the Romantic Condition as Predictors of Students' Adjustment

	Social Acceptance	Global Self-Worth	Scholastic Competence	Involvement	Disruption
Step 1:					
Grade	.16**	.10	-.04	-.06	-.02
Sex	-.03	-.06	.03	.18***	-.42***
Step 2:					
Interaction	.09	-.01	-.01	.06	-.09
Self-Esteem Support	.07	.15*	.14*	.24****	-.13*
Intimacy	.27***	.08	-.01	.02	.03
Co-Rumination	.10	-.08	.04	-.02	.11*
Conflict	-.02	-.06	.08	-.06	.19***
Rivalry	.04	-.03	.06	-.09	.21***

Note: The value listed for each Step 2 measure of friendship features is the standardized regression coefficient when only that measure is entered on that step; $N_s = 343-347$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

Forming a romantic relationship may have a negative impact on friendships throughout adolescence. In both the ninth and eleventh grade, adolescents believe that romantic relationships will come at a cost to friendships in terms of the amount of time friends can spend together, the perceived availability of a friend for support, the amount of intimate self-disclosure between friends, and increased arguments and rivalry between friends. The findings also indicate that romantic relationships in early adolescence may be closer and more important for the fulfillment of social needs than previously believed. Consistent with this idea, fourteen-year-olds in one recent study did not differ from sixteen-year-olds in their perceptions of the advantages of having a romantic relationship for intimacy, caregiving, and attachment (Shulman & Scharf, 2000).

Eleventh graders viewed romantic relationships as having a more negative effect on the co-rumination within friendships than did ninth graders. Older adolescents may have or desire closer romantic relationships than do early adolescents. Co-rumination may be an especially sensitive measure of intimacy or closeness within a relationship because the more emotionally intense or potentially negative a conversation topic, the more intimate the disclosure is considered to be (Reis & Patrick, 1996). These results reflect the closer nature of late than early adolescents' romantic relationships.

Sex differences in adolescents' conceptions suggest that girls' friendships may be more adversely influenced by a friend having a romantic relationship than are boys' friendships. These findings may reflect girls greater sensitivity to the disruption of their friendships by a third party than boys. Girls may also desire closer romantic relationships than do boys, shifting their focus from maintaining close friendships to maintaining close romantic relationships before boys do. Theories of close relationships and their development will need to include sex as a variable of importance.

Adolescents who were better adjusted had more positive conceptions of friendships when one friend has a romantic partner. Those who reported greater self-esteem support in friendships where one friend has a romantic partner also reported higher self-esteem and academic adjustment. By definition, self-esteem support describes interactions between friends that promote an individual's sense of worth and value. Thus, students who are well adjusted academically and psychologically may also be able to maintain supportive friendships even when a friend has a romantic partner.

Students who perceived themselves as more socially accepted viewed friendships in which one friend has a romantic partner as higher in intimacy. Students who are more popular may be better able to maintain intimate friendships when they also have a romantic relationship. The process of intimate self-disclosure entails a range of skills, such as being sensitive to another person's needs that promote positive social relationships. Thus, adolescents' social adjustment is related to their view of friendships in which one friend has a romantic partner.