Healthy Adolescent Romantic Relationships

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Romantic relationships - current ones, past ones, desired ones, other people’s relationships - are on the minds and in the conversations of many adolescents. Interest in romantic relationships increases in adolescence because of pressures from sexually maturing bodies, expectations of peers to find romantic partners, and messages from diverse media sources that present romance and sex as enticing and desirable. Peers, in particular, through in-person and online communication, make the focus of romantic relationships both daily and central in the lives of adolescents.

Many adults may view adolescents’ romantic relationships as shallow or fleeting; however, these relationships should not be ignored. In fact, research supports the developmental significance of romantic relationships in adolescents’ lives (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Giordano et al., 2006). On the positive side, experiences with romantic partners offer adolescents opportunities to explore their identities, consider their future goals, develop communication and conflict management skills, learn about intimacy and sexuality, and experience feelings of closeness and support. However, adolescents’ romantic relationships also bring challenges. In particular, getting involved in romantic relationships increases the potential for adolescents to become sexually active, which in turn increases their risks of unintended pregnancy; contraction of sexually transmitted diseases; and negative emotional consequences such as anxiety, jealousy, depression, and suicidal ideation. There also is a risk of dating violence within adolescents’ romantic partnerships.

Role of Adult Mentor Figures

Although adolescents do turn to their friends for support and advice, they still rely on parents and adult mentors for guidance. Having high-quality parent-adolescent relationships with open communication can be a protective factor. But even when parents have good quality relationships with their adolescents, addressing emerging sexuality and the choices adolescents make can be challenging. Parents also may need to address dating aggression with their adolescents, which includes both physical aggression (e.g., slapping, shoving, or hitting a partner) and psychological aggression (e.g., belittling, insulting, or threatening a partner). Parents and other adults, when they have healthy relationships, can serve as positive role models to help adolescents observe healthy ways of engaging in effective conflict management with their relationship partners.

It is important that the adults in adolescents’ lives are well informed about healthy relationships and can assist adolescents in finding the information they seek about dating and related topics. Parents and mentors can benefit from being aware of reputable online sources of information about adolescent romantic relationships. If adolescents are unable to obtain information from reputable sources they may believe faulty information about romantic relationships.
messages about relationships can come from family members and peers, on websites, and from other sources. Developmentally, it is normal for adolescents to make decisions based on immediate needs and wants, using the limited information they have and often giving little thought to future implications or consequences. This especially is true when adolescents find themselves strongly attracted to another person, have limited experience negotiating within relationships, and are being pressured to engage in behaviors with a romantic partner.

**The Value of Relationship Education**

Relationship education helps adolescents consider how their current decisions affect immediate and long-term outcomes. It also provides alternatives for addressing relationship challenges, including ways to avoid or get help for an unhealthy romantic relationship. Furthermore, adolescents learn reasons why sexual activity should not be disconnected from relationships and that it matters when, how, and with whom sexual activity occurs. To be most effective, relationship education needs to reach adolescents in multiple contexts, through varying venues, and at different times across adolescence. This means reaching adolescents in school contexts, community contexts, through parents and other adult mentors, and online.

Effective youth-focused relationship education uses a developmentally appropriate approach and typically covers areas such as self-development; values; decision making in relationships; recognizing healthy, unhealthy, and abusive relationships; and building skills necessary for good communication and managing conflict within relationships (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007). When youth are educated about healthy relationships, they are better able to engage skills and make choices that benefit their well-being. In fact, Kerpelman and colleagues (2010) showed that relationship education was beneficial across adolescent participants, but most beneficial for adolescents who faced multiple obstacles to observing and receiving information about healthy relationships. Thus, it is important to consider what adolescents bring to the relationship education context, such as their family and cultural backgrounds, past and current dating experiences, and their beliefs about romantic relationships, so that the learning experiences are sensitive to the needs of the adolescents being served. For all youth, relationship education offers a means to counter the faulty messages they may receive and can help them learn and practice skills to communicate effectively; manage disagreements productively; and engage in activities that help to build respect, intimacy, and trust within a romantic relationship.

During the past decade, evaluation studies of relationship education lessons delivered in school settings have shown promising results. Research has documented that educating adolescents about healthy relationships increases their understanding of how relationships function and helps them build skills and behaviors associated with maintaining healthy romantic relationships . . .

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Also is important that the curriculum content include engaging activities and clear examples that represent the real experiences of youth. An effective relationship education curriculum should tap into issues or concerns that are current for today’s youth, and adolescents should feel that they can apply what they have learned to their everyday experiences. The materials also should be tailored to meet the needs of the specific group of youth being served. For example, younger youth need different information emphasized and different examples than older youth do. Regional and cultural differences also affect the fit between the materials and the adolescent audience, as does the literacy level of the youth in the class or group.

**Prepared and effective facilitators.** The deliverer of the relationship education lessons plays a critically important role. Facilitators should be individuals who are able to build good rapport with youth, are comfortable with relationship education topics (especially sensitive topics), and understand the importance of teaching the relationship education concepts with fidelity. Facilitators also should have a good understanding of adolescent development and use an enthusiastic and dynamic teaching approach, while...
Relationship Initiation and Early Dating

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Asking someone for a date, getting fixed up by mutual friends, and using Internet dating services are among the many first steps people take to initiate a potential long-term romantic relationship. Relationship-development researchers are interested in each stage of progression, from initial attraction, to dating and spending time together, to commitment, including couples who choose not to continue beyond a certain point. More advanced stages of relationship development studied by scholars include cohabitation; marriage; and, increasingly, alternative progressions for committed couples who do not get married, either by choice or because of legal barriers (see Ogolsky et al., 2013).

Beginning in the 1960s, two main approaches to studying romance and relationships emerged (generally only in regard to heterosexual pairings). One involved bringing strangers together (or sometimes just showing a participant photographs of potential mates) and seeing whether characteristics such as personality traits and physical appearance seemed to predict initial liking. A study by Elaine (Hatfield) Walster and colleagues (1966) in which first-year college students were randomly assigned a date at a large researcher-organized dance is one prominent example. The second approach entailed surveying members of established couples to learn about the development of their relationships. Zick Rubin’s dissertation research, in which he recruited couples to complete surveys by Blanketing the University of Michigan with “Only Dating Couples Can Do It” signs, exemplifies this research strategy of gathering data on relationship development from existing couples. Now, nearly 50 years later, the verdict appears to be that investigations of established couples have dominated over studies of relationship-initiation processes (see Perlman, 2008). Garth Fletcher and colleagues (2000) asserted that studying very early relationship development is “uncharted territory,” and this assertion is still valid. How individuals meet, interact initially, and possibly hit it off have been neglected. We agree that more work is needed to help explain the jump from initial attraction to the beginnings of commitment. It is likely these very earliest stages have implications for subsequent relationship progression, quality, infidelity, and dissolution.

Early models of relationship development (e.g., Murstein’s stimulus-value-role model; Kerckhoff and Davis’s filter model, Altman and Taylor’s social penetration model) have proposed a series of stages dating partners go through, from relationship initiation and development to stability or dissolution. All these theories emphasize the importance of seeking out information about partners in order to assess compatibility early in the relationship.

For instance, Mark Knapp, in his 1978 book Social Intercourse: From Greeting to Goodbye, proposed a 10-stage model for relationship progression that still is commonly used today. Knapp argued that couples first initiate conversation (first step) and then proceed to experimentation (second step), when individuals try to discover basic information about one another. Through experimenting, individuals discover whether they want a relationship to progress to a deeper level (third step), in which partners begin to cultivate trust and commitment. Knapp explicitly acknowledged that most partners will never reach this third step and that the vast majority of interactions will never go beyond the experimentation stage. Yet this reality is very rarely acknowledged by relationship researchers or explored empirically and theoretically. Fletcher and associates (2000) reported that 46% of participants they studied had ended their relationship within three months of initiation. This highlights the fact that much happens to make or break a couple within the earliest stages of romantic development and that budding relationships hold much insight into future relationship outcomes.

One valuable theoretical lens through which to study early relationship development was an ecological model. Niehuis et al. (2006) suggested that to best understand individuals’ transitions from courtship to marriage, it is necessary to assess couples’ relationship development over time and how individual, couple, and contextual factors will continuously influence the relationship. Specifically, it is crucial to explore the dynamic and interactive nature of personal relationships, including attributes both partners bring to the relationship (preferences, needs, attitudes, values, self-esteem, etc.), dyadic partner compatibility, social network support, and cultural contexts. In conjunction, these components help explain how commitment develops and relationships progress. This ecological approach is also appropriate to broadly guide how we should explore relationship initiation and early progression to commitment.

Individuals’ differences in attraction should be considered in a theory of early relationship development. Researchers typically ask “To which qualities are individuals attracted?” and “Are they willing to interact with this potential partner?” Eastwick and Finkel’s (2008) finding that individuals’ self-reported partner preferences are not consistent with their real-life dating preferences has received great attention. These investigators asked participants to evaluate dating profiles and rate the degree to which they desired potential dating partners based on physical attractiveness, earning prospects, and personality. Participants later attended a speed-dating event and were told to evaluate each of 12 potential mates on those three dimensions, as well as their interest in dating each person with whom they interacted. Participants were then briefly surveyed ten times over the next month to assess whether relationship initiation continued on page F4...
they were romantically involved and still attracted to the potential partner. The results indicated that what individuals said they valued in romantic partners did not necessarily translate into who they selected in real life. Some individuals were willing to date others who did not match their ideal. But how likely are such individuals to be happy with their partner and to remain in their relationship?

To answer such a question, Fletcher et al. (2000) surveyed 158 college students currently in heterosexual relationships in laboratories of four weeks or less. Participants reported on perceptions of their ideal and actual partners, as well as a measure of relationship quality. Participants completed follow-up assessments, potentially as much as 12 months after the initial data collection. Fletcher and associates found that when romantic partners closely matched stated ideals, participants evaluated partners more favorably and indicated greater relationship quality. Lower rates of relationship dissolution were also found when partners better matched reported ideals, apparently as a result of enhanced relationship quality. Thus, feeling that one’s actual partner matches one’s ideal may have longer term beneficial implications for romantic relationships. Although Eastwick and Finkel’s participants were willing to date people who did not adhere to their ideals, it does not necessarily mean that these couplings would last, even in the short term.

A theory of early relationship development should inform us how initial decisions and partner selection relate to whether and how relationships develop and progress. For example, Eastwick and Finkel proposed that one reason for their results may be that participants were limited in their available choices (i.e. participants could choose partners only from the available pool at the speed-dating event). In reality, individuals face a variety of potential partners and alternatives, which may greatly influence the decision to enter into and maintain a relationship (see Arriaga and colleagues, 2008, in the Handbook of Relationship Initiation, for further discussion). Some individuals may believe themselves (correctly or not) to be a highly attractive partner with many alternative options and are willing to hold out for an optimal partner. Others may hold themselves and/or their options in lower regard, leading them to accept less than ideal romantic partners. In a recent work, Stephanie Spielmann and associates (2013) coined the term fear of being single, which the authors defined as “concern, anxiety, or distress regarding the current or prospective experience of being without a romantic partner” (p. 2). These authors found that individuals with this fear are more likely to report interest in less desirable romantic partners and exhibit greater willingness to persist in unsatisfying relationships. The literature strongly suggests that the reasons someone initiates, dates, and forms bonds varies tremendously, because of individual, dyadic, and contextual factors, and may result in distinct relationship trajectories. Catherine Surra and colleagues have extensively explored relationship trajectories and helped capture the continuous, dynamic progression of committed romantic relationships. According to Surra and Hughes (1997), relationship-driven commitments progress because of increased interdependence, as well as positive views of the relationship, the partner, and couple members’ compatibility. In contrast, event-driven increases in commitment are due to external circumstances, such as needing a place to live, or social network interactions. Studying couples who were predominantly “seriously dating” or “committed to marriage,” Surra and Hughes found that relationship-driven commitment was associated with higher levels of satisfaction over time. In line with our focus on early relationship development, both relationship and event factors may explain a couple’s trajectory into the relationship and how relationships progress in their earliest stages. An important next step would be to explore how these commitment processes unfold prospectively over time given that the majority of this research has been conducted retrospectively with individuals in long-term dating, cohabiting, or marital relationships.

The existing literature suggests that even the earliest seeds of relationship development may influence the longevity and stability of romantic relationships. We would expect distinct trajectories for relationships that are initiated because an individual believes that this is the best partner he or she can attract compared to relationships that are launched because of a mutual deep romantic attraction. We suggest that an ecological model of early relationship development provides a number of interesting and novel hypotheses to test (e.g., one could hypothesize that when two people meet, each with clear ideas about who they are and what they are looking for in a partner, decisions about relationship continuation or breakup would occur more quickly, compared to partners who do not know what they are looking for in a mate or who approach dating as entertainment rather than a search for a lifetime partner). Most important, exploring early dating will allow scientists and practitioners to make recommendations about how individuals should consider entering into and pursuing relationships. For example, it is possible that “settling” for a relationship partner out of fear of being single may be linked to poorer relationship outcomes in the long run. Therefore, we need to understand how even the most rudimentary commitments begin to develop, what separates relationships that never progress to courtship from those that become deep commitments, and how these commitment origins relate to long-term outcomes.

Selected References
Together Again: The Emerging Trend of On-Again/Off-Again Relationships

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These days it seems like any time you turn on the radio there is someone singing about considering getting back together with an ex-partner. Although there may be many labels for this relationship phenomenon (i.e., on-again/off-again, cycling, churning, boomerang dating), they all refer to the same process of breaking up and reconciling with the same partner. In the past, researchers hypothesized that if you broke up with a partner, but rekindled the old flame, you would be more satisfied because you and your partner had reevaluated the relationship and chosen to renew it. Research does not support this hypothesis, as the factors involved with reconciling with an ex-lover are substantially more complex. Unfortunately, relationship quality actually declines with each breakup and reconciliation, and having cycled just once during courtship may represent a risk for later marital distress (Venum et al., 2014).

How Common Is It?
Researchers estimate that about 30% to 50% of emerging adults have experienced a breakup and reconciliation with their current partner, with over 60% having experienced a cyclical relationship at least once (Dailey et al., 2009). This is not solely a characteristic of the early stages of romance: 22% of cohabiting couples in a nationally representative sample had experienced a breakup and renewal while living together. This instability makes it less likely that these couples will transition to marriage, although 23% of spouses reported experiencing a breakup and renewal during courtship. Interestingly, cycling is not just a premarital phenomenon, with about one-third of married couples reporting at least one separation and reconciliation during marriage. Unfortunately, about half of those couples who renew after a trial separation separate again within three years.

Relationship cycling is not unique to U.S. samples and may be related to trends toward increasing diversity and ambiguity of the paths toward family formation. Emerging research on the rise of dating relationships in urban India and China suggests the characteristics of cyclical relationships may carry some cross-cultural similarities as well.

What Makes Partners “Come Crawling Back?”
There are a variety of unique reasons an individual may return to a failed relationship. It can be emotionally difficult to permanently end a relationship with someone with whom you have a rich history, and it can be uncomfortable to continue routines that were previously done with your partner. Those who return to a relationship often report doing so because of “lingering feelings,” or a perceived improvement in the partner or the relationship, which act as attraction forces (Dailey et al., 2011). In addition to these forces that pull partners toward the relationship, there may also be barriers that keep partners from permanently leaving. Accordingly, cyclical partners are more likely than noncyclical partners to report constraints or obligations that push them back to the relationship. For example, cyclical cohabiting couples in a nationally representative sample were more likely to indicate that help with child care was a major reason for cohabiting compared to noncyclical cohabiters. In addition to material constraints, such as finances or a shared residence, lack of alternative partners and high intimate self-disclosure in the relationship have also been noted as more common for cyclical couples, potentially encouraging these relationships to renew when they might otherwise have permanently ended.

What’s the Problem?
Although it is not always a bad omen to get back with an ex, those with a history of instability are often prone to more problematic outcomes, including future relationship instability. On average, partners who have renewed their relationship report poorer communication, fewer positive relationship maintenance behaviors, lower levels of dedication and satisfaction, and greater uncertainty in their relationship, as well as higher levels of verbal abuse and physical violence, than partners who have remained stably together (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013). Further, cycling once increases your chances of cycling again as cohabiters who broke up and renewed while dating were more likely to experience a subsequent breakup and renewal while living together than cohabiters who had not previously cycled (Venum et al., 2014).

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We would hope that cyclical partners who decide to wed have been able to overcome these vulnerabilities, but recent research suggests that is not the case. Compared to non-cyclical newlyweds, spouses with a history of cycling enter marriage with more conflict, lower levels of satisfaction, fewer feelings of closeness, and less confidence that getting married was the right thing to do. Similar to cyclical cohabitators, spouses who experienced a breakup and renewal during courtship were more likely to experience a trial separation during the early years of marriage than newlyweds who had stable courtships.

**What Accounts for the Poor Outcomes?**

Relationship cycling is likely a symptom of relationships that are struggling prior to the initial breakup. Theoretically, the lower dedication and greater uncertainty experienced by cyclical dating partners may be due, in part, to less explicit decision making during the initial development of the relationship. Stanley et al. (2006) referred to the lack of thoughtful and clear relationship decision making as “sliding versus deciding.” The risk for later distress and instability accrues as partners slide through relationship transitions without assessing the viability of the relationship (e.g., warning signs of a destructive relationship, compatibility, and commitment level) and without communicating about their dedication to making the relationship work.

As transitions are made, constraints develop (e.g., having signed a lease together) that limit partners’ options going forward, thereby increasing the chances that a distressed relationship will continue when it might have otherwise ended had partners evaluated the relationship before the constraints built up. It may also be that the act of ending and renewing a relationship increases further risk by decreasing partners’ confidence that the relationship will last. Partners who renew have already experienced the end of the relationship, potentially increasing their uncertainty in the state of the relationship now and in the future. Unfortunately, this increased anxiety about the future of the relationship, in combination with poorer communication found in cycling couples, may make thoughtful relationship decision making and communicating about the state of the relationship all the more challenging, thus encouraging more sliding. Dailey and colleagues (2008) found that relational uncertainty influenced dedication through cyclical partners’ lack of openness about their needs and the quality of the relationship. Accordingly, the more renewals partners have experienced, the greater sliding and uncertainty they report and, consequently, the steeper the decline in their dedication over time.

**What Can Practitioners Do to Help?**

Relationship education scholars suggest intervening during emerging adulthood, because this is the time that youth begin to contemplate long-term committed relationships. Intervening before more investments and constraints have had time to develop may prevent lower quality and lower committed relationships from transition-

... partners who have renewed their relationship report poorer communication, fewer positive relationship maintenance behaviors, lower levels of dedication and satisfaction, and greater uncertainty in their relationship.

Thus, it is critical that practitioners assess for cycling and patterns and behaviors that are common in on-again/off-again couples as well as to facilitate discussion clarifying each partner’s concerns and dedication to making the next stage of the relationship work to prevent future instability. It also would be important to help couples learn to cope with anxiety in constructive ways (rather than avoidance and sliding) and to help partners take action to improve or terminate the relationship in a healthy way. An engaged couple with a history of cycling, for example, can benefit from having a conversation about their reasons for deciding to marry and potential risks to their future marital relationship within a safe, open environment like premarital education. Increasing couples’ confidence in their ability to effectively manage issues in their relationships, evaluate next relationship steps, and prepare themselves for future risks can play a major role in improving stability, especially if intervention occurs early at the first signs of distress.

**References**


Mental and Physical Health Correlates of Nonmarital Relationship Dissolution

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Our romantic connections provide incredible joy and fulfillment. When these connections break, this happiness can quickly turn to devastating sorrow. Losing a romantic partner hurts more than just emotionally; breaking up has a powerful influence on mental and physical functioning. Although our focus here is primarily on nonmarital relationship dissolution, the paucity of research on this topic necessitates that we extrapolate from relevant research on the link between divorce and health.

Mental Health and Cognitive Outcomes

Experiencing a romantic breakup is associated with the development of psychological distress - most notably, depression. Meerns (1991) found that over 50% of college students experienced either clinical depression or moderate to severe depressive symptoms following the dissolution of a dating relationship. These outcomes are not trivial; nonmarital relationship dissolution can heighten one’s risk for experiencing major depressive disorder (Monroe et al., 1999).

The most commonly reported depression-related symptoms are those associated with bereavement, including sleep disturbances and chronically intrusive thoughts - both of which can also result in insomnia (Hardison et al., 2005). LeBlanc and colleagues (2007) found that insomnia undermines individuals’ health-related quality of life. Further, individuals who suffer from insomnia use medications more often, consume greater quantities of alcohol, and consult health care professionals more frequently relative to good sleepers (Daley et al., 2008; Swanson et al., 2011).

In light of these negative outcomes, researchers have attempted to identify possible individual differences that may exacerbate the etiology of depression within the breakup context. Negative mood regulation expectancies (Catanzaro & Meerns, 1987, 1990), or the perceived ability to control one’s negative mood when faced with stress, moderate the link between romantic breakup and the onset of depression. Individuals with low expectancies for regulating their negative moods become more depressed following a breakup than individuals with high expectancies. Helgeson (1994) noted that relationship beliefs also are associated with adjustment to breakup; for example, individuals who are particularly optimistic about the future of their relationships experience greater distress following a breakup.

According to Campbell and colleagues (1996), breaking up also disrupts self-concept clarity - or how much one has a stable sense of who one is as a person. As relationships progress over time, individuals incorporate attributes of their romantic partners into their own self-concepts. When relationships end, former partners’ self-concept clarity is weakened, forcing them to redefine who they are. Importantly, reductions in self-concept clarity are associated with emotional distress (Slotter et al., 2010) and poorer psychological well-being (Bigler et al., 2001). For example, Lee-Flynn and colleagues (2011) found that individuals with decreased self-concept clarity are at increased risk for depressive symptoms two years later. In other words, breakups threaten individuals’ identities, significantly affect their self-beliefs, and may ultimately promote the onset of depression.

Characteristics of a relationship before it ends may also forecast negative outcomes after a breakup. Relationship duration can exacerbate distress when it ends, especially if an individual was more invested in the relationship. For example, the longer the pre-breakup relationship was, and the more satisfied and committed one was with a former partner, the greater the post-breakup distress will be (Fraley et al., 1997; Sprecher et al., 1998). Locker and colleagues (2010) stated that individuals in long-term relationships rely on their partners to fulfill emotional and goal-based needs. Disruption of these needs results in greater emotional distress for those in longer relationships (Berscheid et al., 1989; Dibble et al., 2012).

Health-Relevant Physiological Processes and Physical Health Outcomes

The psychological distress of breaking up is associated with biological effects that have adverse health consequences. Kiecolt-Glaser and colleagues (1987) discovered that divorced adults who continue to struggle emotionally with their separations have significantly higher antibody titers to the Epstein-Barr virus and a lower percentage of natural killer cell activity - both indicators of impaired immune function. These in vivo markers of immuno-incompetence forecast objective negative health outcomes, including increased susceptibility to diseases. Thus, the stress from breakups can have downstream effects for immune regulation and disrupt biological processes important to health and well-being.

Simply reflecting on a recent separation influences health-relevant physiological processes. According to Sbarra and colleagues (2009), separated and divorced individuals with greater emotional intrusion (e.g., dreaming and/or experiencing sudden emotion about the separation) have significantly...
higher resting blood pressure. Similarly, anxiously attached individuals (those who worry about rejection and abandonment in relationships) who speak in a manner that demonstrates high salience of the separation exhibit significantly higher blood pressure relative to less anxious individuals who speak with less immediacy (Lee et al., 2011). Merely reflecting on the loss of a significant relationship evokes physiological responses designed to prepare the body to cope with stress. Physiological stress that persists over time often characterizes the period following relationship dissolution, contributing to cumulative wear and tear on bodily systems. The loss of a romantic partner causes a number of acute upper respiratory symptoms. For instance, Lepore and Greenberg (2002) found that relationship dissolution predicts increases in sore throat, sneezing, and fatigue. Breakups also may increase the risk of developing more serious health complications, including symptoms similar to those observed in cardiac patients. For example, after a breakup, individuals report symptoms similar to those of bereaved persons; this is often referred to as heartbreak syndrome and has been described by Field (2011) and Wittstein and colleagues (2005) as the physical pain in the chest that often follows the death of a loved one.

**Conclusion and Future Directions**

All the available evidence supports the conclusion that nonmarital relationship dissolution undermines mental and physical health. Although we have highlighted the most central health consequences of relationship dissolution across relationship types, more research will determine whether findings regarding divorce and health can be extrapolated to nonmarital dissolution. Three other key future directions would contribute to understanding breakups and relationship theories more generally.

First, relationship dissolution is not always heartbreaking and harmful; breaking up is beneficial for some individuals (e.g., experiencing personal growth post-dissolution; Lewandowski & Bizzocco, 2007). Identifying the characteristics of individuals and their relationships that culminate in negative consequences is an important future avenue. We need to focus on the mechanisms that influence resiliency and recovery from relationship dissolution. Understanding how individuals are able to bounce back after a breakup will provide greater insight into how to effectively reduce distress. It is possible that certain characteristics associated with recovery and resiliency (e.g., personality traits, self-compassion) may help ameliorate psychological turmoil following relationship dissolution. Further research on individuals who struggle with breakups would allow helping professionals to develop techniques that recognize and build on resilient qualities while minimizing negative outcomes associated with dissolution.

Second, because individuals likely experience more unsuccessful relationships than successful relationships across the life span, it is necessary to study how age and relationship type moderate negative experiences following breakups. The period of transition from adolescence to young adulthood is marked with significant changes in identity and personality (Klimstra et al., 2013). It is possible that adolescents may be more prone to greater distress following breakups because they have not formed a secure sense of self. Carstensen and colleagues (2003) further pointed out that, compared to young adults, older adults tend to ignore negative stimuli and focus more on positive emotional experiences. Younger individuals may struggle and have more negative emotional experiences when dealing with breakups compared to older individuals. Given that adolescents who have gone through a breakup are at high risk for the onset of depression, it is critical to target these individuals to identify and prevent the development of depression.

In regard to relationship type, simply being married versus unmarried promotes better health (e.g., lower mortality risk; Lillard & Panis, 1996; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Marital relationships and nonmarital relationships (e.g., cohabiting relationships) are more similar than they are different with respect to their influences on psychological well-being (Musick & Bumpass, 2006), suggesting that nonmarital relationships are important to study in their own right. The number of relationships and breakups individuals experience prior to marriage are bound to affect general relationship beliefs and individuals’ future relationships. In general, studying the connection between nonmarital relationship dissolution and health adds more to our understanding about the link between relationship dissolution and health than does a sole focus on marriage.

Finally, by adapting more integrative methods (i.e., simultaneously measuring cognitive, affective, and physiological health responses post-breakup), researchers can attain a more holistic understanding of the health-relevant outcomes associated with relationship dissolution. For example, it is possible that relationship beliefs may interact with emotional health prior to breakup to elicit more positive physiological reactions for certain individuals. Examining breakups using an integrated approach would facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of all the effects breakups can have and provide insight into how to avoid negative health outcomes.

There is sufficient empirical evidence to suggest that breakups are hard on our minds and bodies. It is possible that by studying only the health consequences of marriage and divorce we miss something important. Studying nonmarital relationships and breakups will broaden our scope of knowledge on...
Dating and Mate Selection Among Adult Children of Immigrants

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More than 17 million children in the U.S. are living in immigrant families (defined as having at least one foreign-born parent), which accounts for 25% of all children nationwide (Nwosu et al., 2014). In some states, the share of children in immigrant families is even higher: 50% in California, 39% in Nevada, 36% in New York, 36% in New Jersey, and 34% in Texas. As the members of this second generation mature and begin exploring interpersonal relationships, their mate selection can be complicated by the need to balance the expectations of immigrant parents and influences from the larger society. Ethnic identity, heritage language retention, acculturation, and cultural background play important roles in dating and mate selection experiences of the second generation.

In this article I share the results of a study of 45 young women and men (18-30 years old) raised by immigrant parents from the following diverse cultures and countries: Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, China, Colombia, Croatia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Greece, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Macau, Macedonia, Nigeria, Palestine, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Romania, Russia, Spain, Syria, Turkey, and Uzbekistan. The majority of the participants were born in the U.S.; some immigrated here at a young age, but they all were educated and socialized in the U.S.

In-depth personal interviews with the participants were conducted as part of the larger study into the familial and social experiences of grown children of immigrants. On the basis of the analysis of the transcripts, the following themes related to dating and mate selection were developed: (1) parental expectations of their children’s mate selection; (2) dating and the influence of the original culture, gender, birth order, and assimilation; and (3) the second generation’s preferences for marriage partners.

Parental Expectations of Their Children’s Mate Selection

Although diverse participants of the study expressed varied opinions, preferences, and experiences with respect to mate selection their stories point to many commonalities, attributed to their shared experience of being second-generation immigrants and being raised with two cultures. Overall, immigrant parents hold largely endogamous attitudes and prefer their children to marry within their culture, ethnicity, and religion. If unable to find partners of their specific country of origin, participants’ parents advised them to seek partners within a larger cultural or ethnic group (e.g., Latino/Hispanic, Arab, Asian, Eastern European, etc.). By doing so, the second generation would be more likely to preserve a sense of shared ethnicity, language, and culture in a family. An exception to these views came from several female participants whose mothers advised them not to marry within their culture because of its traditional gender roles and inequality. With their assimilation to the U.S. mainstream values and the realities of dual-earner marriages, these first-generation immigrant women wished for their daughters to have greater equality in the division of housework in the family.

In terms of other preferences, parents with strong religious views preferred their children to marry a partner with the same religious background, even if the person was not necessarily of the same country of origin (this was especially the case for the Muslim participants). Similarly, nonreligious parents advised their children not to seek partners with strong religious views in order to avoid conflicts.

When discussing cultures or ethnicities they deemed unacceptable to marry, participants...

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relationships across the life span and provide more information regarding how the mental and physical pain caused by the end of a relationship can be attenuated.

Selected References


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revealed their parents’ preference for not marrying historic group enemies (e.g., Turks and Armenians, Palestinians and Jews, Greeks and Turks). Participants also reluctantly admitted that their immigrant parents considered African Americans as the least preferred dating and marriage partners for their children, and they explained such attitude as stemming from their parents’ lack of knowledge of successful Black people, racial stereotyping, and perceived cultural differences. Overall, many participants described their immigrant parents as somewhat prejudiced toward ethnicities and cultures that were unfamiliar to them or were perceived as very different. In contrast, second-generation young adults, who were socialized in the U.S., reported being more open-minded and challenging of their parents’ stereotypes, which sometimes led to intergenerational conflicts.

**Dating and the Influence of the Original Culture, Gender, Birth Order, and Assimilation**

The majority of study participants were allowed to date because their original cultures accepted dating (e.g., Bulgarian, Romanian, Russian), their immigrant parents were not religious, and they had been assimilated into American culture. A minority of women reported that they were prohibited from dating or associating with men because of their parents’ traditional views, culture, and religious beliefs (these participants were from Armenia, El Salvador, India, Jordan, Palestine, and Turkey). Young women prohibited from dating because of their parents’ cultural views disclosed that they felt resentful and even resorted to hiding their relationships with their parents, a strategy also found in other studies (Manohar, 2008). Those young women whose religion prohibited dating tended to agree that dating was unacceptable and were content with the view of dating as courtship that takes place after the official engagement with one’s future spouse.

Consistent with existing literature (Foner & Kasinitz, 2007; Manohar, 2008), participants’ stories pointed to a gender double standard prevalent in families from a variety of immigrant backgrounds, where parents gave more dating freedom to their sons as compared to their daughters. Many female participants lamented that their brothers did not face the same restrictions of freedom as they did. Such gender discrimination was acknowledged by the men in the study, who commented on similar situations in their families.

In addition, immigrant parents reportedly treated their children differently depending on their birth order, with first-born children having less freedom in dating than the second-born children. Older siblings were more closely monitored and were expected to provide an example for their younger siblings, whereas younger, more Americanized siblings enjoyed more freedom and fewer responsibilities. Perhaps with longer residence in the U.S., increased acculturation, and parenting experience, immigrant parents become more relaxed with their later-born children, allowing them more flexibility not only in dating but also in marrying outside of their ethnic group. Participants reported that having an older sibling marry outside of their ethnic group “opened the doors” for them to do the same and that dating was certainly a less restricted experience for them as compared to their older siblings.

**Second Generation’s Preferences for Marriage Partners**

Among the culturally diverse participants, the majority reported (similar to their parents) that their ideal partner would share their cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds in order to ensure compatibility and pass on their culture to future children. Participants admitted that such criteria have not always been important to them; growing up, many rejected their culture and ethnicity in an attempt to blend in with their peers. However, after maturing into adulthood and developing a stronger sense of ethnic identity, participants began to appreciate their cultural, ethnic, and immigrant backgrounds, and reported seeking similar partners, a finding consistent with previous research (Netting, 2006).

Second-generation young adults believe that they have a lot in common with other children of immigrants, who share their experience of growing up in an immigrant home with an emphasis on family values, education, hard work, and respect for elders. At the same time, they acknowledge their “American” side and seek to find an acculturated partner who would support a respectful, egalitarian relationship with the spouse. Women, in particular, expressed a strong preference for Americanized partners to prevent relapsing into traditional gender roles prevalent in the original culture. Thus, an ideal partner would be bicultural, with an experience of balancing an American and a heritage culture.

In spite of the reported importance of marrying within one’s culture or national origin, six of the participants in the study who were married were not married to co-ethnics (e.g., Portuguese with Chilean, Polish with American, Romanian with Portuguese), and many unmarried participants admitted to dating outside of their ethnic or cultural group. Therefore, participants’ reported preferences for co-ethnic partners diverged from their actions (for those who were married), indicating possible support for increasing ethnic intermarriage and marital assimilation in the second generation.

Participants’ actions and narratives showed a belief in romantic love and individual choice to marry for love, regardless of the person’s ethnic background. Several participants (mostly from less traditional and nonreligious backgrounds) shared that their parents would accept the person they chose to marry, and this contributed to their children’s happiness, even if the partner was not co-ethnic.

**Conclusion and Future Research**

The major limitation of the present exploratory study is its small and diverse sample, which consisted of second-generation young adults with various heritage countries/cultures. However, the general themes gleaned from these interviews can supplement existing studies on ethnic intermarriage that rely on survey data, and they provide us with a valuable insight into the familial and cultural factors that influence mate selection in the second generation (Nesteruk & Gramescu, 2012).
Moving Forward or Moving On? Predicting Progression and Dissolution in Dating Couples

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Understanding what makes relationships progress and remain stable is at the center of close relationship research. At the core of this question is commitment, which is pivotal to understanding how couples progress, regress, or maintain their relationships. In studying relationship commitment, the initial period of relationship development is important, as many researchers have found that early relationship processes are predictive of later relationship outcomes, making dating the ideal time for preventing future relationship problems. In addition, dating couples do not have as many moral, legal, or social constraints keeping them in relationships as married couples, so transitions can be made more easily at earlier stages of relationship development. Because dating is an important stepping stone to marriage or other relationship alternatives, we highlight in this article the work on how commitment dissolves or progresses in dating unions.

Global Commitment and Commitment to Wed
Although commitment is intuitively understood, it is considered a complex, multidimensional concept. In research, the term commitment has been used to describe the likelihood that a relationship will continue, with definitions often including a long-term orientation and an intention to continue the relationship. Although commitment has been measured in many ways, Surra et al. (1999) argued that commitment is best studied through partners’ predictions about future involvement in relationships. In fact, researchers have used the concept of commitment to wed, or the likelihood that a relationship will progress to marriage, to assess predictions of commitment. Commitment to wed has traditionally been studied by having couples graph changes in the chance of marriage over time, and researchers have found that there are varying pathways toward or away from deeper levels of commitment. Such a rich assessment is important today given that estimates indicate that 85%-90% of Americans will marry at least once during their lifetimes.

Pathways of Commitment to Wed
Early work focusing on commitment to wed, beginning with Huston and colleagues’ study in the early 1980s, examined the ways in which married couples recalled their movement toward marriage. They found four different trajectories whereby accelerated courtships could be graphed to illustrate smooth, quick movement toward marriage at one end of the continuum, whereas prolonged courtships displayed slow movement toward marriage on the other end. The remaining two trajectories fell between, with intermediate courtships displaying a moderate progression toward marriage and accelerated-arrested courtships showing a quick progression, similar to the accelerated type but losing momentum over time.

Research in this area moved forward when Surra and her colleagues investigated the reasons given for changes in the likelihood of marriage, which provided further explanation of the commitment processes among couples who had never married. Individuals mentioned changes due to spending time together, having a fight, buying a house together, pressure from family, or changing views of a partner. These reasons provided additional information to explain the data generated by graphing changes in the chance of marriage. In one of the most cited studies on commitment to wed, Surra and Hughes (1997) discussed two distinct types of commitment processes that were based on changes in romantic partners’ perceptions of the likelihood of marriage. These types were labeled relationship-driven commitments, characterized by primarily positive upturns and stable changes in commitment, and event-driven commitments, which developed from quick decisions based on circumstances that resulted in more downturns and steeper rates of change. Individuals in relationship-driven commitments reported more satisfaction and trust, as well as less ambivalence and conflict, than those in event-driven commitments. Surprisingly, a paradox emerged in two separate studies whereby these commitment types did not differ in rates of breakup. Thus, event-driven relationships remained intact over a 9-month period despite appearing more dissatisfying and problematic. Although these typologies are informative, a lingering question remains as to why individuals in event-driven commitments do not dissolve their relationships at higher rates than those in relationship-driven commitments.

A Refined Classification
To investigate why some daters progress toward stages associated with greater commitment, whereas others break up, we tested a refined classification that revealed a more expected pattern of dissolution (Ogolsky et al., 2014). To test the classification, we first established groupings by replicating previous methods of having dating partners graph their commitment to wed and providing reasons for any changes in this commitment. A cluster analysis revealed four distinct groups. The event-driven classification broke into two subgroups that we called the dramatic and conflict-ridden clusters. The relationship-driven classification also broke into two subtypes that we named the socially involved and partner-focused clusters. The dramatic cluster was distinguished by...
large and frequent changes in commitment that were often downturns. In addition, this group reported reasons for the changes in commitment that focused on negative views about their partners and time spent with their social networks separate from their partners more than the other groups. The conflict-ridden cluster was characterized by downturns in commitment and a high proportion of reasons for these changes that focused on relational conflict, though there were fewer downturns than in the dramatic group. Those in this cluster were less likely to report reasons that focused on positive views about the relationship or positive views endorsed by their friends and families about their partners.

In contrast to the event-driven subtypes, the socially involved cluster was differentiated by a high proportion of reasons that mentioned positivity and time spent together with mutual friends and family. These individuals also had a low proportion of downturns. Likewise, the partner-focused group also appeared to be positive and stable, with a low proportion of downturns in commitment, as well as a high proportion of reasons that focused on time spent alone with their partners.

After the clusters were established, we tested theoretical models to predict group membership. We found higher levels of ambivalence about the relationship, and worries about marriage increased the likelihood of being in both event-driven subtypes compared to the relationship-driven subtypes. Higher levels of passionate love predicted membership in the conflict-ridden group, whereas higher levels of friendship-based love were predictive of membership in the socially involved group. Higher levels of conscientiousness and engagement in leisure activities predicted increased likelihood of being in a relationship-driven subtype over an event-driven subtype. Also, higher levels of relationship satisfaction increased the likelihood of being in the partner-focused group.

Following tests of the predictive models, we returned to the breakup paradox. In models predicting breakup and change in stage of involvement (e.g., progressing from casual to serious dating), couples in the dramatic subtype were twice as likely to break up and had a greater likelihood of regressing in stage of involvement (e.g., moving from seriously dating to causally dating) than any of the other commitment subtypes. If those in dramatic commitments were more likely to dissolve their relationships, why is it that event-driven individuals as a whole were not more likely to end their relationships? The conflict-ridden group sheds more light on this paradox because they were likely to maintain, rather than progress or regress, their commitments and were no more likely to break up than any of the other groups.

This maintenance of a conflictual relationship is supported by Kamp Dush and Taylor (2012), who argue that volatile couples, who have a higher proportion of conflict, are not necessarily more likely to break up. Even though concerns about marriage may keep people in the conflict-ridden cluster from advancing in stage, the high levels of passionate love that are reported by individuals in this cluster seem to keep them together. Conversely, those in the socially involved cluster appear more stable than the dramatic or conflict-ridden clusters because of a higher degree of reported friendship-based love and satisfaction. Similarly, the partner-focused group was the most likely to advance in stage of involvement during the study, perhaps because of their high degree of compatibility.

**Implications for Practitioners**

In establishing a refined classification, we provide an explanation of the paradox from past work by showing that there is a distinct group of couples who demonstrate dramatic swings in the chance of marriage resulting in an increased likelihood of breakup and regression in stage of involvement. This refined classification has implications for applied work because the typology can provide a framework for conceptualizing relationship struggles. Therapists and relationship educators can help couples understand different commitment pathways in order to make more informed decisions about the future of their relationships. Practitioners can also address the importance of making informed decisions based on assessments about the relationship (e.g., liking to spend time together) instead of on the trivial factors that can be misleading.
“TEXT ME”: Impact of Technology on Today’s Romantic Relationships

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Technology has changed the way individuals initiate, escalate, and end their relationships. Those who want a date tonight can open their Tinder App, scroll through 20 photos, tap those that “look good,” ask if they want to hang out and wait a few minutes for a response. As relationships escalate, partners text each other throughout the day and move their relationship forward with words of endearment/affirmation. Some partners end their relationship with “Sorry, this isn’t working out.”

Extent of Technology Used in Communication

It comes as no surprise that the extent of using cell phones to send text messages is extensive. A Bank of America Trends in Mobility Survey (2012) revealed typical cell phone use per day: 51% reported using their phone once or more every hour, 26% a few times a day, 13% hardly ever, 8% morning and evening and 2% didn’t know. Both women and men are involved in texting, with some research revealing that women text more than men. A Nielsen State of the Media Survey (2010) reported that women spent 818 minutes texting 640 messages, and men spent 716 minutes texting 555 messages. Technology use in communication is also worldwide. According to a Time Mobility survey (2012) of 4,700 respondents in the U.S. and seven other countries (China, the United Kingdom, India, South Korea, South Africa, Indonesia, and Brazil), 9 in 10 carry a cell phone (1 in 4 check it every 30 minutes; 1 in 5 check it every 10 minutes).

Technology as a Conduit for Delivering “Good” and “Bad” News

Technology affects how good news, and bad news, is delivered to a romantic partner. In a study presented at the Southern Sociological Association in New Orleans, graduate student Faircloth and her colleagues (2012) analyzed data from 354 undergraduates who revealed the degree to which the use of technology-mediated communication (TMC) or electronic delivery (texting/email vs. face-to-face communication) was used to deliver good (“I love you,” “Let’s get married,” “Date night?”) and bad (“I think we should break up,” “I cheated,” “I have an STI,” “I got into graduate school and will be moving”) news to a romantic partner. More details about their findings included the following:

Frequency. Slightly over half (51%) reported that their romantic partner communicated good news such as “I love you” for the first time via electronic methods such as a text or an e-mail. In addition, approximately 50% of the respondents noted that their partners had used text or e-mail to broach the subject of sexual involvement. Thirty-five percent reported informing partners of good news about a job promotion, and 6% reported receiving a marriage proposal by text or e-mail.

Nearly half of the respondents had received bad news via an electronic method - 46% had been broken up with via text, e-mail, or another electronic method, and 44% had been told that their partner had been unfaithful whereas 39% reported that they had ended a relationship, and 25% communicated infidelity.

Gender. In regard to disclosing infidelity, 15% more males than females used TMC.

A similar percentage of males and females responded that they had electronically ended a relationship (35% and 39%, respectively).

Media Preferences and Emotional Reaction. Although technology was used to convey both negative and positive content, it was not identified as preferable to face-to-face delivery. Almost 90% (88%) of the respondents listed face-to-face as their preferred method of receiving bad news, and 71% listed face-to-face as their preferred method of delivering bad news. Similarly, over 90% of the respondents preferred face-to-face as the method for delivering and receiving good news.

Positive and Negative Aspects of Technology in Relationships

Technology influences relationships in both positive and negative ways. On the positive side, technology allows individuals to text me continued on page F14

dating couples continued from page F13

of circumstantial events (e.g., family events, pregnancy) to improve relationship quality. The information about diverse pathways to commitment can be validating for couples as they recognize that there is not one way to “do” relationships, and it may help therapists identify and conceptualize relationship problems when serving couples.

References


Family Focus on...

 Dating and Mate Selection

**text me** continued from page F13

have an instant and continuous connection throughout the day so that they are, in effect, “together all the time.” Texting is particularly valuable for couples in long-distance relationships in that it provides a way for the partners to maintain their connection, although it can discourage phone and face-to-face communication. The scene of two people sitting at a table, both texting and neither talking to the other, is familiar. Family members living in the same house can text rather than talk to each other. Some undergraduates have reached their limit and want more human interaction. Rappleyea and colleagues (2014) analyzed data from 1,003 young adults concerning technology and relationship formation and found that respondents believed that “talking,” “hanging out,” and “sharing intimate details” were more important than using communication technologies to establish a relationship.” An extreme example of technology going too far is *nomophobia*, whereby the individual is dependent on virtual environments to the point of having a social phobia and personal interaction is difficult or even irrelevant. Huang and Leung (2010) studied instant messaging and identified four characteristics of “addiction” in teenagers: (1) preoccupation with instant messaging (IM), (2) loss of relationships due to overuse, (3) loss of control, and (4) escape. Their results showed that shyness and alienation from family, peers, and school were significantly and positively associated with levels of IM addiction. As expected, both the level of IM use and level of IM addiction were linked to poorer academic performance. Schade and colleagues (2013) studied relationship satisfaction and technology in romantic relationships. They analyzed data from 276 adults (ages 18-25) in committed relationships and found that male texting frequency was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction and stability scores for both partners, whereas female texting frequency was positively associated with their own relationship stability scores. Whereas females thrived on texting, and it had a positive relationship effect, males tolerated it, perceiving it negatively. One male said “I’m afraid to date a woman three times since she will start this drama of ‘Why didn’t you text me when you first woke up this morning’?”

**Impact of Social Networking Sites on Relationships**

Social networking sites can become a problem in some relationships. Facebook, with over one billion users and 140 billion friendship connections, has been used to find previous partners and to connect and interact with them without the current partner’s knowledge. These Facebook encounters may result in rekindling a relationship with regular text messaging and e-mails, resulting in an emotional affair. Researchers Norton and Baptist (2012) emphasized how 205 married individuals reduced the negative impact of technology on their relationship. One strategy included openness whereby each spouse provided the passwords to each other’s cell phone and e-mail accounts and made the partner aware of any new online friends. A second strategy involved a discussion about fidelity whereby flirting and offline relationships were mutually off limits. Finally, the couple had an understanding of who “appropriate” people were for the partners to be interacting with online. Former partners were specifically excluded.

** Sexting**

Another way in which technology influences romantic relationships is sexting (sending erotic text and photo images via a cell phone). Recent research by Burke-Winkelman et al. (2014) reported that 65% of 1,652 undergraduates reported sending sexually suggestive texts or photos to a current or potential partner (69% reported receiving these messages). Almost one-third (31%) reported sending the text messages to a third party. In regard to sending nude photos, less than half were positive, and females were more likely to feel pressure to send nude photos.

**Implications for Couples, Families, and Policymakers**

Today’s exploding technology has several implications on relationships. Individuals, couples, parents, and children might use technology constructively to stay connected, to keep each other safe (“Text me when you get there”) and to protect children. According to Survey.com, “technological advances” were identified as the top issue that concerned 2,000 participating parents. Although technology can be used to enhance the bond between parents and children, some parents express concerns. Predators might contact children/teenagers without the parents’ awareness, and some teens report having sent sexually suggestive text messages and photos or videos of themselves. Policymakers might encourage the development of technology such as the Short Message Service Tracker for Android, which permits parents to effectively take over their child’s cell phone. A parent can see all incoming and outgoing calls, text messages, and photos. Another protective device is My-MobileWatchdog, which monitors a child’s cell phone use and instantly alerts the parents online if their son or daughter receives unapproved e-mails, text messages, or phone calls. Finally, SecuraFone can reveal how fast the car in which the cell phone of the user is moving and can alert parents. If a teen is speeding, the parents will know. One version shuts the texting capability down if the phone is going faster than five miles an hour.

Technology is a double-edged sword, influencing relationships in both positive and negative ways. Ideally, technology should be used with good judgment, and in appropriate contexts, so that it supports communication and thus relationships in a constructive manner.

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Romantic relationships and dating commonly emerge during adolescence and have important implications for developmental and relational trajectories of individuals. In one of the classic works on adolescence, Deborah Coates argued in the early 1990s that dating is both a cultural and a cultural activity. Cultural norms influence dating attitudes and behaviors, and they in turn reshape cultural beliefs and practices.

**Purpose and Prevalence of Dating**
Typically, the purpose of dating is to explore and test the relationship before making a serious commitment. It is important to note that “dating” is not a universal concept. Many places around the world do not embrace the idea or its practices, although this is slowly changing with the spread of popular culture through the globalization of the media and the Internet.

Comparative statistics on dating across cultures are sparse. One study, conducted by Li and colleagues (2010), found that approximately 34% of adolescents in China, and 84% of youth in Canada, reported that they are currently in a romantic relationship. It is often cited (Li et al., 2010) that dating occurs less frequently and at a later age for youth from collectivistic cultures, such as parts of Asia, compared to those from more individualistic societies, for example, North America. Existing data support these cultural differences. In their longitudinal study, Connolly and colleagues (2013) found that early starting adolescents from Canada began dating at around 11.6 years of age. On the other hand, Sherer and Sherer (2008) found that Jewish and Arab youth in Israel, a collectivist country, reported dating slightly later, at age 12.5 to 14.5 years.

Cultural beliefs play a role in determining dating age norms, and emerging research points to additional geographical influences. New evidence shows that maturation generally occurs sooner for individuals in the northern hemispheres than those living near the Equator (Villamor et al., 2011). Researchers linked this to the level of sun exposure and Vitamin D deficiency, which contribute to the earlier onset of puberty. The associations between these geographical factors and dating have not been explored, but romantic interests are commonly triggered during puberty (Connolly et al., 2013).

**Dating Process: Formality, Choice, and Family Involvement**
The process of dating varies across cultures, particularly in the degree of formality, personal choice, and family involvement. Historically, and in some contemporary societies, mate selection is orchestrated by the parents or by professional matchmakers. For instance, many modern young adults who are Muslim or Hindu and reside in India and Egypt do not initiate dating to find a romantic partner. Courtship is a formal process with specific rituals ingrained in the cultural traditions. Once individuals reach marriageable age, their parents will search through their social networks or consult marriage advertisements for a compatible mate. Selection may be based on caste or social standing and religious compatibility.

Betrothals, or marriage contracts, are quite common in many patriarchal and agricultural societies, such as modern Ghana and Kenya, where the family’s economic survival and social ties are critical. Because of limited resources and harsh living conditions, children in these societies are viewed as valuable assets because they can help with farm work and household chores. Marital engagements are considered as marriages between two families rather than two individuals. Often, right after birth, girls are promised for marriage to a particular family with the goal of strengthening economic resources and solidifying social alliances. Bride prices, or dowries, may be negotiated and exchanged to secure the relationship. These gifts compensate the bride’s family for the loss of their resources when girls leave their natal home to join the groom’s family. Because of strict gender roles, women are discouraged from expressing their romantic interests. However, this is changing as women gain more independence through education and labor force participation (Hamon & Ingoldsby, 2003).

In these traditionalistic cultures, dating is either nonexistent or kept very minimal because it is not an essential component of family formation. Before marriage, partners may have brief, chaperoned encounters in the presence of their families and these encounters are monitored. Premarital sexual contacts are prohibited. From this cultural perspective, arranged marriages are seen as important mechanisms to ensure the stability and longevity of the couple’s relationship.

Conversely, dating and courtship are less formal and less regulated in nontraditionalistic societies, such as the Netherlands and North America, where industrialization and urbanization have changed the family structure and gender roles. Less emphasis is placed on the kinship network, and more on the nuclear family. Greater autonomy allows forming romantic relationships based on personal preferences. Gender roles are more fluid, allowing both men and women to initiate and pursue their romantic interests (Hamon & Ingoldsby, 2003). At the time of marriage, there is no need to compensate the family, because young adults often do not reside with their parents. Couples may seek their parents’ approval, but the family has less power and involvement in the relationship.

In 2012, Nesteruk and Gramescu studied dating in U.S. immigrant families to assess the continued support of these traditional cultural patterns. In-depth interviews with families from 30 different countries represented the basis of their data. They found that dating is allowed by parents who do...
not hold strong religious views, and who are from cultures that accept dating (e.g., Russia), and who somewhat acculturated to American society. On the contrary, dating is prohibited by parents who came from traditional cultures, such as Greece and Palestine. These families also have strong religious views and are less assimilated within American culture. The youth in these families encounter more stringent rules concerning dating, such as needing parental approval in order to have friends of the opposite sex. Dating is allowed only as a precursor to a marriage. Compared to their male counterparts, women from these traditional families are more likely to be prevented from dating.

The Intersection Between Culture and Religion

Although culture exerts a strong influence on dating, religious beliefs, social class, and historical changes also affect relationship processes (Hamon & Ingoldsby, 2003). These factors and their effects on dating have not been well researched, with the exception of religion. A study conducted by Shaleve and colleagues in 2012 offers a deeper understanding of how religion affects the mate selection process of Modern Orthodox Jewish couples in Israel. The couples explained that dating is solely for the purpose of marriage. They mentioned three general steps in the mate selection process. First, they search for a suitable partner through modern means, such as Internet forums or speed dating events on college campuses. These strategies are seen as an acceptable part of life in the modern world. The next phrase is accelerated dating, when the couples have the chance to talk on the telephone or meet in person. Dating is kept relatively short, because of the Modern Orthodox norm forbidding sexual contact before marriage. There are strong expectations from the religious community that all dating activities lead to the final union of the two people. Marriage discussions typically occur by the third date, when couples must talk about whether they want to move forward with the engagement. Among Israeli couples love is not an important consideration for marriage, but religious compatibility and moral character are emphasized. The young adults in the study indicated that dating was very stressful because they were given little time to make choices about their future, but consulting with their rabbinical authority helped ease the stress and indecision. This study sheds light on how Israeli couples integrate modern practices of dating into the traditionalist and religious contexts of their lives.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Cultures around the world share similar goals concerning romantic relationships, but the means vary from one context to another. Some cultures believe that stable relationships can be created by using well-established strategies that have worked over many generations, whereas others believe in personal autonomy and exploration to find a compatible match. No specific pathway is better than another. They all work within the culture in which they are embedded. The cultural terrain of dating is vast, and many areas remain to be explored. One major challenge is that both culture and dating are often poorly conceptualized and difficult to operationalize due to their fluid and shifting dynamics. What constitutes “dating” differs from one context to another and from one era to the next. It may involve brief, casual hookups or long-term cohabitation. Simply asking participants if they have ever dated can produce ambiguous results.

Culture adds another layer of complexity to dating research. Most studies compare differences between countries, without explicitly looking into the cultural orientation of the participants. Those that do look at cultural orientation tend to focus on the individualistic and collectivistic dimensions, even though culture is multifaceted. Dion and Dion stated in their frequently cited 1996 paper that cross-cultural work on romantic love should take into consideration both the societal cultural dimensions as well as individual cultural beliefs. Not everyone from a collectivistic society will have a strong collectivistic orientation, and vice versa.

Finally, the interactions between culture and other demographic variables, such as ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation, still need to be examined. For instance, the dating experiences of homosexual couples across different cultures are absent from the existing literature. Longitudinal or cohort studies are needed to understand how culture and dating practices change across sociohistorical time.

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Black Men and Marriage: Is the Glass Half-Empty or Half-Full?

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To date, a number of scholars have focused on understanding Black men’s retreat from marriage, rather than focusing on those who have succeeded in marriage. According to recent estimates, one-third of Black men in the U.S. are married; this proportion is fewer than Hispanics (44%), Whites (53%), and Asians (58%), as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2014. Cultivating strong marital relationships is important because marriages affect physical, psychological, emotional, and financial well-being as well as children’s developmental outcomes. Thus, disparities in marital formation and stability could negatively influence individual, child, and family well-being (Bryant & Wickrama, 2005).

The research on which this article is based focuses on the marriages of the one-third of Black men who do marry and their views of marriage. Identifying the strengths of these men’s marriages, rather than focusing on reasons Black men do not marry, could reveal strategies that they use to prepare for and sustain their unions. Such an approach, if communicated to other Black males, could encourage marriage among them and teach younger generations positive values of marriage. Because the voices of Black men are largely absent from the marital literature, scholars and practitioners are urged to increase their efforts to include Black men in research and programming designed to strengthen marriages, couple relationships, and families (Marks et al., 2010).

The Benefits of Marriage to Black Men

In 2008, Steven Nock noted that marriage is a significant transition in adulthood for men. Because men are likely to be affected by marriage differently than women, it is important to study the two genders separately. According to a comprehensive literature review conducted by Blackman and colleagues in 2005, marriage provides Black men with enhanced outcomes relative to physical, psychological, and financial well-being. These positive effects for psychological and individual well-being are underscored by my own research. Using a sample of 52 married Black men, husbands credited their marriages with providing them secure emotional support, lifelong commitment, enhanced life success, and secure attachment (Hurt, 2013).

Influences on Marriage Among Black Men

Black men’s marital aspirations often begin with gaining a deep respect for marriage from their families. Although marriage has declined in the Black community over time, adults continue to value it. Valuing marriage begins in childhood. Developmental perspectives underscore the importance of training, securing a well-paying job, and establishing a household. Because incarceration has been found to be negatively associated with marriage, avoiding crime is also important for those aspiring to marry. Unfortunately, Black men are disproportionately affected by inequalities in education, employment, and incarceration. These disparities, in addition to the deep-rooted consequences of slavery that influenced Black family patterns, and ongoing contemporary incidents of racism and discrimination, often challenge the likelihood of Black marriages, couple communication, and relationship quality, as well as the tenor of gender relations between Black men and Black women. In light of these considerations, Black men must proactively engage in relationship strategies to promote their likelihood of not only getting married but also staying married.

So, Why Do Black Men Get Married?

Some of the reasons Black men decide to marry have been researched (Hurt, 2014). Drawing on in-depth qualitative data of married Black men as to why they made this decision, I sought to understand factors that encouraged and discouraged their entering marriage. The goal was to describe elements of their marital experiences that might be unique and highlight factors that had been previously overlooked in other studies. These men reflected on their wives’ characteristics as a key reason for choosing to marry them. For example, one 47 year-old husband, shared.

“Just her, the qualities that she possesses, her character, very strong, independent. And I mean, she didn’t need me. She just wanted my attention, but she didn’t need me. She just wanted me for any financial gain. She just wanted...”

Black men are likely to marry after they achieve developmental milestones such as finishing postsecondary education or training, securing a well-paying job, and establishing a household.
Intimacy Across the Lifespan

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My dad claimed he almost accidentally drove the car off the road when his father shouted from the backseat, “I’m getting married!” My jolly-faced grandpa was 88 years old at the time of this monumental life-changing announcement. My family knew that my grandpa had a new “lady friend,” and the timing of her entry into his life coincided with a renewed spring in his step. His face no longer displayed the forlornness of widowhood; instead, a smile projected revitalization. My family had never anticipated that he would choose to remarry.

Once the shock of my grandpa’s announcement wore off, the questions set in. As an academic, I was searching for answers in research journals and textbooks. As I dug into the literature on intimacy, I found that most of the research was based on studies of “young” adults. Amanda Barusch’s 2008 book Love Stories of Later Life: A Narrative Approach to Understanding Romance revealed that marriage had been scientifically examined in relation to the “young” three times more frequently than in the “elderly,” but definitions of “young” and “elderly” varied widely. A personal review of the later life intimacy literature indicated that age ranges of the samples varied significantly. Categories encompassed the entire adult lifespan or focused on early, middle, or late adulthood. To complicate matters, the cutoff points were very flexible. Such a wide range makes the term older relatively arbitrary and complicates the ability to generalize findings across populations.

In 1980, Paula Dressel noted in her article Assortative Mating in Later Life that findings about mate selection, courtship, and marriage from studies of younger populations could not be accurately generalized to explain the distinct experiences of older adults. There does appear, however, to be an exception with respect to intimacy. Intimacy has been defined at all ages as an essential component to a happy and healthy life. “To love and be loved is arguably one of the most powerful and fundamental driving forces for sustaining self-esteem and self-identity throughout the life course” (Davidson & Fennel, 2002, p. 3). Although the need for intimacy does not appear to age, researchers have been discovering some noteworthy differences between young and old dating patterns and repartnering choices. Social science researchers are increasingly addressing later life intimacy, including the topics of dating, cohabitation, living apart together (LAT), and remarriage.

**Flexible repartnering strategies are particularly attractive to older adults.**

Dating Dating options and choices are influenced by age, gender, education, wealth, health, past relationship experiences, social environment, and religious affiliation. Options for repartnering decrease over time. Because women tend to live longer than men, the pool of eligible male partners of similar age may be appreciably reduced at older ages. Women’s tendency to date older men, and the social acceptability of men dating younger women, creates logistical obstacles. Older single women may struggle to find a new partner, but older men may find that they are a hot commodity. This appears to be particularly true for men who are educated, have sufficient financial means, and are still fertile. The odds are in favor of older men, who are six times more likely to repartner (de Jong Gierveld, 2004).

Considering past relationships, divorced individuals are more likely to seek a new partner than the widowed (de Jong Gierveld, 2004). Persons who rated a previous relationship as “poor” were less likely to repartner (Davidson & Fennell, 2002). In general, older singles with social connections have more opportunities to date, but even those with strong social networks may, because of religious convictions, choose not to repartner (de Jong Gierveld, 2004).

For those who do want to repartner, many older singles have embraced technology to expand their social connections. Several online dating sites focus on an older population. Anne Roiphe’s candid book Epilogue (2008) chronicled her experiences with online dating in her seventies. She shared vivid and sometimes embarrassing accounts while simultaneously exploring her struggle with loneliness and a need for intimacy in widowhood. For the elderly past relationship experiences, such as a previous marriage, contribute to traditional views emphasizing commitment and exclusivity.

**Cohabitation**

Although cohabitation may be viewed by younger adults as a transitioning phase toward marriage, older couples may perceive cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. Although cohabitation rates have been increasing, particularly among the baby boomer cohort (Stevens, 2002), numerous barriers to cohabitation exist. Individuals who cohabit run a higher risk of losing contact with adult children (de Jong Gierveld, 2004) and face more uncertainty about financial and familial rights. Some cite religious beliefs as a reason to avoid cohabitation (de Jong Gierveld, 2002). Couples who consider remarriage face similar barriers, such as objections by adult children, a desire to protect economic resources, and fear of caring for an ailing partner. Such deterrents may encourage a less formal repartnered option, such as LAT.

LAT Nonresidential partnerships are on the rise. Fair amounts of data have come from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. LAT relationships have been characterized as deeply intimate and focused on interdependently expressed emotional support. Couples display attitudes and behaviors that are consistent with a committed relationship while maintaining separate residences.
that companionship. And so, without those strings being attached to the relationship, I think it made [her] more attractive to me.”  

Other men commented on the importance of spirituality, the desire to be together, readiness to marry, and encouragement from others to do so. The men recalled overcoming personal reservations, a perceived loss of freedom, disapproval from others, prior relationship challenges, and financial issues in deciding to marry. Almost 70% were either happy that they had married when they did or would have preferred to have entered marriage even earlier in life. In retrospect, nearly one-third would have chosen to marry later, only three men would have preferred not to have married at all. Men reflected on the importance of securing jobs and housing, completing education or training, and developing as adults. This study advanced the literature by using married Black men’s voices to highlight subtle variations in their decisions to marry and understand key factors that were important to them in marrying their wives.

**Implications**

Findings from research on married Black men will help refine marriage-strengthening programs and approaches and foster marital formation and stability among Blacks. Men’s personal testimonies as to the value and benefits of marriage could inspire other Black men regarding the viability of marriage and provide insight not only into the benefits of marriage but also on the steps that they took to prepare themselves to be husbands. The experiences of married Black men, if personally shared in community-based marriage preparation or enrichment programs, could convey meaning to Black men who are starting their marital relationship journeys or are experiencing marital distress. Developing partnerships among married Black men and encouraging their involvement in marriage and relationship enrichment programs could help ensure cultural sensitivity in intervention approaches. Developing partnerships with groups that commonly include predominantly Black male membership or involvement (e.g., churches, fraternities and Masonic chapters, barber shops, etc.) would be consistent with a community-based participatory approach to marriage enrichment. Such partnerships would create opportunities for lay leaders and residents to engage with scholars and practitioners in initiatives focused on strengthening families and, in turn, Black communities. Community members could play a critical role in ensuring that marriage professionals are aware of the subtleties of local norms and values relative to marriage.

Last, because Black men are likely to marry after attaining key milestones in adulthood (e.g., attaining a job, education, housing), continuing to address disparities in these areas is critical, in order to enable these men to marry and succeed in their marriages. Researchers should continue to collaborate with policymakers to address inequities in employment, education, housing, and incarceration of Black men as a means to address the marriage rate among Blacks. Sustained attention to ways to mitigate these barriers will be key to supporting existing marriages and encouraging new unions.

**Selected References**


Note. The author publishes scholarly work using her maiden name, Tera R. Hurt.

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The majority of couples spend almost daily time with their partner. For some, LAT may represent the best of both worlds, providing an option for a meaningful intimate relationship without the need to discard a certain level of independence and freedom (Karslon & Borell, 2002). Flexible repartnering strategies are particularly attractive to older adults who are entrenched in their patterns of life (de Jong Gierveld, 2002) and who wish to keep their finances separate (Karslon & Borell, 2002). For those who want a more formalized commitment, remarriage may be an option.

**Remarriage**

Several researchers have asserted that an increase in the rate of marriage among older adults is an inevitable consequence of longer lives and accessible divorce. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (2009), 7.4% of the men and 5.1% of the women marrying during the year of that census were age 55+. The benefits of marriage, such as improved health, financial security, and well-being, also apply to couples who remarried in later life. In *Family Life Now* (2nd ed., 2009), Kelly Welch cited research that couples who remarried in later life (60-75) had higher levels of marital satisfaction and more effective communication skills than couples who remarried in mid-life (30-40). As many individuals enjoy continued good health, remarriage may be a valued option.

**Conclusions and Implications**

To date, the majority of research related to mate selection and repartnering has focused on a younger demographic. Where intimacy has been studied in older adults, the definition of older has varied widely. In an older group, the ability to generalize becomes more challenging as numerous researchers have documented that heterogeneity increases with age. Replication of studies that clearly operationalized the term older into categories such as “young-old,” “middle-old,” and “oldest-old” could contribute to more consistency in age ranges of future sampled populations and ultimately lead to a clearer understanding of the role of age in repartnering.

In 2009, CNN reported a surprising story about a 107 year-old Malaysian woman seeking to get married for the 23rd time.

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also being good listeners and helping youth articulate their ideas. In addition to having qualities that make a facilitator effective in educating youth, it is important that the facilitator receive adequate training for delivering relationship education lessons and learn effective ways to moderate youth discussions about a wide range of relationship topics.

Continuing the dialogue. Parents, teachers, and other adult mentors who interact with youth in different contexts on a regular basis are important for reinforcing information about healthy relationships and offering opportunities for ongoing dialogue with youth about relationships. Thus, it is important to ensure that the adults in adolescents’ lives have the information and strategies they need to model and discuss healthy relationships with youth effectively. Some ways to help adults provide supportive contexts for healthy adolescent relationships include having the adults consider how they are handling their own close relationships, and supporting adults’ efforts to practice opening up communication with adolescents, especially about areas that may be sensitive or difficult to discuss. It addition, it is important to ensure that adults are aware of resources they can use for up-to-date information about relationships, and to enhance their capacities to share this information, as well as listen to adolescents’ perspectives about relationships.

Summary
Adolescent romantic relationships matter for adolescent development. Research shows that romantic relationships have implications for adolescent growth and well-being, as well as risk taking and health. Parents and other adult mentors are important sources of information and support for adolescents to consult when they have questions or concerns about romantic relationships. Educating youth about healthy romantic relationships needs to occur across the adolescent years and across contexts. Relationship education delivered in school and community settings can offer adolescents the knowledge and skills they need to recognize and create healthy relationships in their own lives. Aspects to emphasize in relationship education include the quality of the educational materials; the selection and preparation of facilitators; and the capacity of parents, teachers, and other adult mentors to reinforce and extend adolescents’ knowledge about healthy relationships.

References


Resources for Parents, Teachers, and Mentors


Additional resources can be found online at www.ncfr.org/ncfr-report

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because she was lonely! Stories like this serve as a reminder that forming and maintaining intimate connections is essential to well-being across the lifespan. The roles of gender and age have been the most widely explored thus far, although factors such as ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, past relationships, social environment, technology, health, and family dynamics require further examination. Quantitative data could be used by (1) demographers, to chart trends and projections; (2) gerontologists, to examine connections to aging theory; and (3) educators of future professionals concerning later life intimacy. Qualitative data could shed further light on the human experience of intimacy across the lifespan and be of particular use to family life educators, counselors, and marriage and family therapists. Family science professionals stand to benefit from an increased understanding of later life intimacy as they work to dispel myths and support individuals and families through various life transitions.

Selected References


