

5-2014

The Effects of Dating on Developmental Adjustment for Adolescents

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THE EFFECTS OF DATING ON DEVELOPMENTAL ADJUSTMENT FOR
ADOLESCENTS

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Curriculum & Instruction
Of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Science, with University Honors
and Honors in Secondary Education

by

Taylor L. Smith

May 2014

The Effects of Dating on Developmental Adjustment

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The Effects of Dating on Developmental Adjustment

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I owe my deepest gratitude to Dr. Cynthia Ybos. Without her expertise, enthusiasm, and generosity in lending me research materials out of her own collection, this thesis would have never come together.

I would also like to thank my second readers, Ms. Penelope Rector Speaker and Mr. Abram Himmelstein, for taking the time to review and suggest changes to this project.

To my advisors at the Honors office, Dr. Abu Kabir Mostafa Sarwar and Dr. Noriko Ito Krenn: You have inspired me to do my best work and enriched my experience over my last four years at UNO. Thank you for your support.

And finally, thanks to Austin McCown for his unwavering mental health support during all those long nights of revising and rewriting.

The Effects of Dating on Developmental Adjustment

Abstract

This research study examined the course and effects of romantic relationships on the psychology and development of adolescents between the age of 15 and 18. Because existing literature demonstrates a high level of developmental significance to the relationships between adolescents and platonic peers, the introduction of the romantic element to teens' social lives carries additional importance to their maturation process. There are also certain individuals and relationships that have greater likelihood of resulting in negative outcomes such as dating abuse and depression. Of eight participants, four were male and four were female, and all participants were currently 18-19 years of age and asked to reflect on relationship experiences they had between the ages of 15 and 18. The results did support the hypothesis of certain traits indicating higher likelihood of negative outcomes. Though the study lacked the empirical data to draw definitive conclusions, the trends found may provide insight into capability for greater understanding of the developmental significance of adolescent dating, thereby potentially leading to the development of more effective interventions by educators for individuals who need them.

Keywords: Adolescents, Relationships, Dating, Dating Abuse, Adolescent Development

Introduction

Education is not a one-sided field of study. While it may seem straightforward on the surface – tell students what they need to know, give them work to do, test them, grade them, wash, rinse, repeat – it is, in reality, not so clear-cut. In order for students, particularly adolescents, to find success in school, it is important for the adults in their lives to understand the intricacies of their development. As teens make the precarious leap between childhood and adulthood, few things are more important to them than their relationships with other people. This usually manifests as a desire to impress one's friends and belong to a peer group; however, there is a different type of relationship often overlooked by parents, teachers, and researchers alike – the first adolescent forays into romance and relationships. While these early romances are usually remembered fondly, there are unfortunately some who will find themselves in relationships that are toxic or that carry negative consequences for their development. Therefore, which adolescents – and what types of life circumstances or personality traits – are most likely to be vulnerable to unhealthy behavior in dating relationships?

Literature Review

Adolescence as we currently understand it is generally split up into three distinct stages: early, middle, and late. Spano (2004) has delineated these stages and some of their characteristics, particularly in the realm of identity development and sexuality. Early adolescence begins around age ten and lasts until age 14 – four years in which adolescents experience some of the most dramatic physical, mental, and emotional changes of their lives. Individuals in this early stage begin to separate themselves from parents and search for other attachment figures. While this usually manifests as increased importance placed on close friendships and standing

within the peer group, it can also turn young adolescents toward an interest in dating. However, as quoted in Furman and Wehner (1994, p. 184-185), Dunphy (1963) has found that, at this early stage, adolescents usually lack the basic skills for interacting with potential partners; therefore, many develop a sense of comfort around potential partners by first experimenting with casual interaction in large peer groups. As their bodies mature, early adolescents may also worry about “normalcy” or become fixated on their physical changes; however, Advocates for Youth statistics (Conklin, 2012) indicate that fewer than twenty percent of adolescents in the United States enter into sexual relationships this early in life, although data for sexual behavior in this age group is limited.

Spano’s (2004) conception of middle adolescence is short, lasting only from age 15 to age 16. In this middling phase, the psychological break between the adolescent and parents becomes more marked, as many teens come to see their parents as obstacles to their growing sense of independence. As a result, Furman and Wehner (1997) have found that “the press to find a new primary attachment figure increases” (p. 24). This search for new sources of emotional support often leads to increased interest in dating exclusively, although teens of this age typically change partners frequently. However, despite the briefness and seeming superficiality of romantic partnerships in middle adolescence, they are often “central in our social lives and emotional experiences as adolescents” (Furman and Wehner, 1994, p. 168).

Finally, Spano (2004) describes late adolescence as beginning at 17 and segueing into early adulthood at age 21. Adolescents become much more adult-like in this stage, gaining a firmer sense of their own identities and, in most cases, developing long-term goals and interests. This comes in handy, as late adolescence is normally when a young person moves on from the structured environment of high school and must plan his or her own future – figuring out higher

education, a career, where one will live, etc. Older teens and young adults are also much more likely than their early- and middle-adolescent counterparts to seek out committed, loving relationships. In short, late adolescence is the stage in which teens begin to look and behave like adults, in dating as well as in other facets of their lives (Spano, 2004).

So, how does having a romantic relationship fit into the lives of early and middle adolescents? In the middle school years/young adolescence, romantic relationships are little more than an extension of the peer relationships that are so important to individuals at this stage. “Having romantic relationships...exalts boys’ and girls’ status among their peers, as long as they choose correctly” (Perlstein, 2003, p. 42). The peer group has the ultimate say in whether, and with whom, a young adolescent pursues a dating relationship. Even if a young couple agrees to become exclusive, very little actually changes. Perlstein (2003), speaking of a seventh grader – “Jackie” – and her new boyfriend, “Anton”, explains that, for kids this age, dating is little more than...

Talking to someone more at school and on the phone. “It’s just like saying, ‘She likes him, he likes her.’ They’re just better friends.” It’s not like romantic status really changes anything...Jackie and Anton don’t go anywhere together. They don’t talk much, on the phone or at school. Mainly their relationship means Jackie checks herself in the bathroom every day after lunch and runs around Anton on the playground... (p. 84).

However, somewhere in middle adolescence, romantic relationships become a more pressing issue. “Much of teens’ time is spent attempting to date, talking about dating, actually dating, and recovering from dating relationships” (Drysdale & Rye, 2009, p. 277). Often between the ages of 15 and 18, a teenager first experiences feelings of love and passion, making these romantic

relationships much more closely resemble those of adults. Their bodies, according to Spano (2004) are also becoming more adult-like, with the emergence of secondary sex characteristics such as breast development in females, growth of the penis and testicles in males, and weight gain and growth of body hair in both sexes. These new adult bodies and new adult feelings of attraction come in sharp contrast to the teenage brain, which still has a lot of work to do before reaching adulthood. According to Knox (2010), teenage brains are in the process of neural insulation, or the coating of myelin – “white matter” – on the nerve cells in the brain. This white matter allows the different parts of the brain to communicate efficiently with one another, and the process is not finished until an individual is in his or her mid-20s. This is why adolescents are often guilty of self-centeredness and lack of insight: their frontal lobes, the parts of the brain responsible for using judgment and understanding consequences, are not yet fully insulated. It is not that a teenager is completely incapable of using judgment; rather, his or her accessing the ability to think critically is a slower process than it is in a fully developed brain. This can lead to the rash, selfish behavior that makes teens vulnerable to risk behaviors (Knox, 2010).

The disconnect between adult appearance and behavior in teenagers and the unfinished adolescent brain has caused concern among some researchers. For example, Grello, Harper, and Welsh (2003) argue that incompletely developed adolescent brains may be more susceptible to depression when confronted with dilemmas such as unrequited love, sexual decision-making, infidelity, and breaking up (as cited in Drysdale & Rye, 2009, p. 279-288). Furman and Shaffer (2003) however, contend that healthy romantic relationships in adolescence carry important developmental benefits, such as identity development, greater autonomy from family, and development of sexual identity (as cited in Drysdale & Rye, 2009, p. 289-298).

Most research on adolescent development has focused primarily on relationships with peers and parents. The limited research that has been done on romantic relationships tends to either focus on these relationships as an end result – i.e. the effect of relationships with friends and family on romantic relationships – or overlook the relationship element entirely in order to focus on teen sex and the public health problems it can pose.

This begs the question: How do educators of adolescents, those whose job it is to advocate for teens' well-being and proper development, know when young love should be allowed to progress, and when intervention may be in the student's best interest? Furthermore, why should educators even care about an issue such as teen dating that does not directly affect classroom instruction? The answer lies in when, where, and how the line is crossed between a normal, loving relationship and an unhealthy one. A good educator knows the various social and emotional pitfalls of adolescence, and understands that his or her students do not leave their personal lives at the classroom door.

Research suggests that “fifty to eighty percent of teens report knowing someone involved in a violent relationship” (O’Keefe & Trester, 1998). Numbers this high suggest teens may be unaware of the complications a toxic relationship can bring and need guidance from the adults in their lives as to what a healthy, affirming relationship does and does not look like. To that end, Drysdale and Rye (2009) explain:

Clinicians, educators, and researchers need to develop better explicated theories of the normal progression of adolescent romantic relationships. Simply knowing that an adolescent is involved in a romantic relationship tells us little about needed intervention (e.g. to help prevent negative outcomes such as depression or relationship violence). Being able to predict which types of teens and which types

of romantic relationships have negative consequences for the adolescent seems imperative for efforts to help these youth have positive growth experiences rather than experience detrimental outcomes. This is an area of adolescence that is in dire need of further research. (p. 299-300)

The stakes get even higher when one considers the sort of negative outcomes for which teens in unhealthy relationships are at risk. According to Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, and Rothman (2012), teens who suffer emotional or physical abuse from romantic partners in adolescence are more vulnerable to succumbing to self-destructive behavior in adulthood (e.g. depression, alcohol and drug abuse, suicidal ideation, etc.) Most disturbingly, individuals who experience abusive behavior from a partner in adolescence are also two to three times more likely to be in unhealthy relationships in adulthood, in which case, they may become one of the 1.3 million women or 835,000 men who face physical violence from a domestic partner each year in the United States. Though these very adult issues may not have a direct impact on classroom instruction, guiding students to academic success is not the only role of an education professional. Educators, particularly the teachers who interact with students each day and get to know them well, are generally seen as “safe” adults that adolescents are encouraged to talk to if they are experiencing problems, especially if the nature of said problems makes them prefer speaking to an adult outside the family (Lyness 2012). Therefore, those who work with adolescents should make it their business to familiarize themselves with these issues, in order to better provide guidance, and intervention if needed, for any student who may come to them for help.

Further knowledge of teenage relationship patterns is also beneficial to other areas of study in adolescent well-being. The aforementioned focus of many researchers on teen sex and

its accompanying issues is lacking without considering the romantic relationships that are frequently the context for adolescents' sexual encounters. For example, understanding teenage dating politics is crucial to preventing sexually transmitted disease (STD) outbreaks among high school students. In a 2004 study, researchers Bearman, Moody and Stovel actually mapped the sexual network of an entire high school in an effort to compare teens' dating and sexual patterns to those of adults. What researchers found was that, unlike adults, who tend to date and have relations within close social networks, teens tend to adhere to dating politics within the high school environment that frown on dating an individual with social or romantic ties to one's friends or ex-partners. Such behavior is seen as, to use the popular term, taking "sloppy seconds". This creates a phenomenon in which adolescents form a chain of sorts – "student A had relations with student B, who had relations with student C and so on" (Bearman et. al., 2004). This essentially means that a number of individuals, sometimes hundreds depending on the size of the population pool, are all indirectly sexually connected with every other individual on the chain. Therefore, unlike in adult populations – where outbreaks of STDs tend to stay contained within the relatively small social networks that make up the average adult's dating pool – STDs in teenage populations can spread farther due to this "chaining" of sexual partnerships. In cases like these, understanding the relationship dynamics of adolescents sheds light on a public health issue, and gives education and health professionals the information they need to design interventions to address that issue.

Design of the Study

The Target Population

For this research project, individuals ages 18-19 who had been part of exclusive dating relationships between the ages of 15 and 18 were sought to participate. To my knowledge, no

one else has researched this topic using slightly older participants, and I believe that the element of hindsight in this case is beneficial because it provides a more mature perspective on the relationships but are still within the realm of recent experience. Younger adolescents are less likely to be able to articulate what they are experiencing because of a still-developing sense of personal knowledge of themselves (Spano, 2004). Furthermore, working with younger adolescents presented problems due to the status of minors as a protected group of research subjects. The legal requirement for parent involvement and restricted access to communication with subjects as a result of these legal protections made the choice of minors as research participants a highly impractical one.

Recruitment of participants for this project proved to be more challenging than originally anticipated. Initial attempts to recruit participants through face to face meetings were not successful. Recruitment via Internet yielded many potential participants but most failed to complete the information in any meaningful way. Of the over 100 potential participants, eight were selected.

No participant was excluded based on factors such as sexual orientation or duration of relationships, as long as he or she met the core criteria of being presently 18-19 years of age and having been in one or more exclusive dating relationships between the ages of 15 and 18. This study was not intended to provide definitive answers to all of the questions educators may have about adolescents and dating; rather, it was designed to create an overview of trends in adolescent relationships based on selected participant responses. This is the reason the sample size for this study was relatively small.

Besides the sample size being small, there are other limitations of this study for this particular group. The use of the Internet to solicit information means that the individuals are

more likely to be articulate and to have strong opinions. There is also the fact that using the Internet to connect with respondents may have invited self-selection bias, as only an individual with something to say about a past relationship would bother to participate at all. Also, due to the lack of face-to-face interaction with participants, elements of conversation that may have aided in interpretation of participants' responses (e.g. facial expressions, body language, and other forms of nonverbal communication) were moot (Onwuegbuzi, Leech & Collins, 2010; Eysenbach and Wyatt, 2002).

Despite these limitations, the benefits of drawing responses from this group outweighed the drawbacks. Because this was only an introductory, exploratory study of the subject matter, the respondents were more likely to participate, and their responses can, if desired, be used later on as a starting point for a more rigorous study of adolescents and dating (Onwuegbuzi, 2010; Eysenbach & Wyatt, 2002).

All names used in the study are randomly assigned pseudonyms, and any unique information that may reveal a participant's identity has not been included.

Recruiting Participants

Participants were recruited from introductory college freshman courses and through friend recommendations using social media. This method of recruiting participants is a relatively new approach, but it does have advantages. Social media is the preferred platform of communication for adolescents and young adults; therefore, participation in the study was more accessible to potential respondents this way. Potential disadvantages include the lack of nonverbal communication mentioned previously, which potentially limited the accuracy of interpreting participants' responses (Eysenbach and Wyatt, 2002).

Description of Participants

Out of those who responded to the questionnaire, eight were selected for further analysis based on the completeness and relevance of their responses. While a balance of gender was not a specific goal for selection of participants, the final selections did have four males and four females. The participants whose responses were used in the study are as follows:

- Valerie: Describes self as manipulative and admits to having carried on three relationships at once, with her different partners having no idea of the others' existence. Concern over a partner's mental health caused her to perform poorly on the SAT.
- Louis: Attributes conflicts in his relationship with his girlfriend to both partners' mutual mistrust of one another. Also succumbed to girlfriend's demands that he buy more expensive clothing, though he asserts that the relationship also motivated him to do better in school.
- Eric: When faced with conflict with a partner over sexual activity (she wanted to have intercourse but he did not feel ready), he resorted to "forgetting" to bring condoms to get out of the situation rather than talk about his feelings. When pressed, he gave in to his girlfriend's pressure for sex.
- Evelyn: Blames lasting body-image issues on her boyfriend, who would call her fat in public and talk about how attractive other girls were to make her feel insecure. She now claims she has learned from the experience to have more self-respect.
- Ivy: Dealt with an emotionally distant boyfriend who made her feel uncomfortable with his drug use. The same boyfriend would accuse her of also doing drugs and of being hypocritical about drug use; accusations she would not fight back against out of a desire to prevent conflict in the relationship.

- Robert: Still wrestling with feelings for an old girlfriend who habitually blew small issues out of proportion, causing strain on the relationship. He also attributes their break-up to religious differences.
- Nadia: The perfect control – a respondent who, like the others, had a romantic relationship as a teen, but reports no unhealthy or abusive behavior. Describes an affirming relationship, supportive family and friends, and positive pressure on academic performance.
- Ralph: Repressed sexual identity as a gay male and tried to force himself to have a relationship with a girl. Despite lack of support from family and community, he describes being in a healthier relationship now that he is open about his sexuality

Data Collection

Participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire regarding their adolescent dating experiences. This questionnaire can be found in Appendix II. Once the questionnaire was received it was randomly assigned code name, which was attached to each individual participant's file.

I elected to communicate with participants strictly online because, despite the fact responses obtained online are less easily verifiable than responses obtained through traditional avenues, this method is more efficient than alternatives such as in-person interviews (Onwuegbuzi, 2010; Eysenbach & Wyatt, 2002). Interactions between me and the participants were text-based and thus did not need recording or transcribing. Also, I believe answering personal questions in the form of an anonymous survey made participants feel safer and was more convenient for participants. Sparing them in-person interviews lessened the awkwardness of divulging relationship details to a stranger, and the simple fact that the survey was posted on a

popular social media site made participation more attractive to potential 18-19 year-old respondents, for whom the Internet is the preferred means of communication.

The questionnaire was designed to elicit responses that would reveal certain traits about each individual respondent, such as the types and severity of conflicts he or she got into with a partner, how he or she typically handled such conflicts, and other supports he or she had in place from family or peers.

Analyzing the Data

The results of the questionnaire were analyzed using methods similar to an inventory from LoveIsRespect.org, a website created by anti-dating violence organization Break the Cycle and the National Dating Abuse Helpline as a resource to “engage, educate, and empower youth and young adults to prevent and end abusive relationships”. These organizations, two of the nation’s most prominent in advocating for healthy relationships at any stage of life, published the inventory to help teens and young adults identify “red flag” behaviors from a partner as well as evaluate whether or not one’s relationship is healthy. It is free to use on the LoveIsRespect.org website. I determined it would make a useful tool to compare and rank the instances of abusive or otherwise unhealthy behaviors I came across when analyzing respondent data. The inventory uses a scoring system that assigns points based on unhealthy or abusive behaviors, and subtracts points for healthy behaviors. Therefore, a score that is close to zero or even in the negatives is indicative of a healthy relationship. Some behaviors are worth more points than others (for example, physical violence racks up more points than unfounded accusations of infidelity), and the number of points tacked on or taken away is also adjusted based on the *frequency* of the behaviors. A score between 11 and 50 signifies that unhealthy behaviors and/or warning signs of abuse are present in the relationship, while a score higher than 50 indicates an abusive situation.

After data collection was completed, the negative experiences reported by each individual were assigned a numerical value.

While analyzing my data, I classified phrases recounting aggressive or domineering conduct from a partner as negative or unhealthy behaviors and then arranged them from most negative to least negative. I then assigned a numeric value to the phrases. This results in a score. I repeated the process for healthy behaviors and assigned what I considered to be appropriate scores. The scores for healthy behaviors were subtracted from the scores for unhealthy behaviors, creating the final scores to use for comparison of healthy and unhealthy behaviors experienced by each participant.

It is important to note here that this method is not scientifically sound. Therefore, my results are not meant to be considered as a representative sample of all adolescents who choose to take part in romantic relationships. Getting truly representative results would require further study and use of processes to establish validity and reliability. However, because this was meant to be an exploratory study and my results were never intended to be definitive, I chose to proceed with this method.

Due to the method of gathering data and the sensitive nature of the information I was asking participants to provide, I did not get contact information from them. Therefore, I did not contact any participant for further clarification as to his or her responses.

Results

A look at participants' responses shows an array of experiences for such a relatively small sample. In order to get a workable set of data, responses were distilled to three factors which were assigned numerical values: 1) negative experiences, referring to unhealthy or abusive

behavior perpetrated on the respondent by his or her partner; 2) outside support, referring to emotional connections the respondent had outside of his or her relationship, namely those with peers and family members; and 3) academic performance, referring to the reported effect the respondent's relationship had on his or her performance in school and involvement in extracurricular activities. A graphic representation of this data can be found in Figure I. I chose these three traits in particular because they provide as close a picture of the whole adolescent as possible with the data I had available. Because school and relationships with peers and family are generally very big parts of adolescents' lives, I chose to see how a competing element for the teen's attention (i.e. a romantic partner) would affect these other areas.

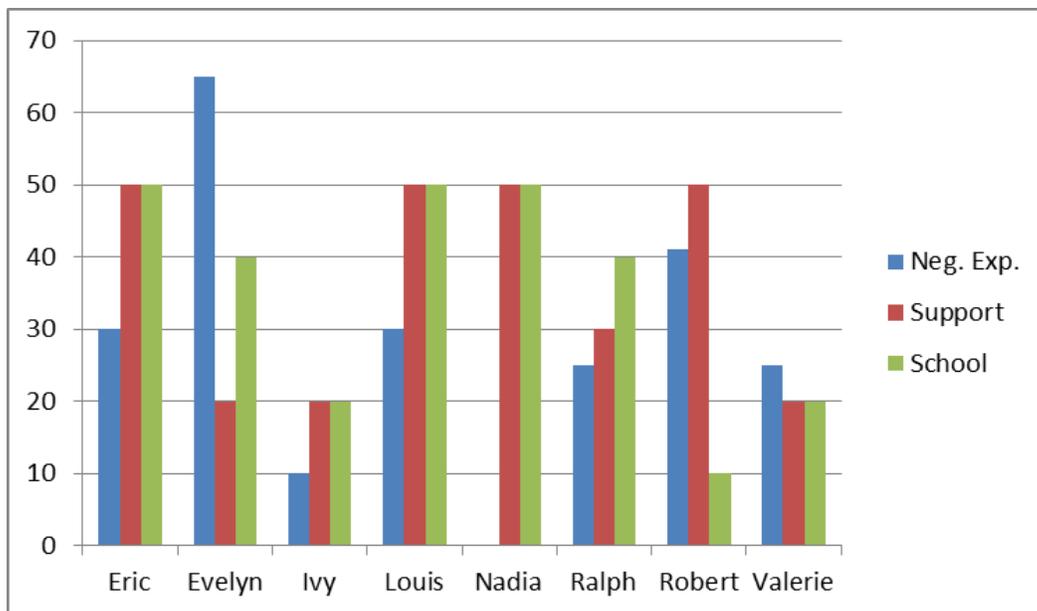


Figure I: Graph of Respondent Data

The first factor, negative experiences, is abbreviated as “Neg. Exp.” in Fig. I and is represented by the blue column. I used the scores from the LoveIsRespect.org inventory discussed previously when assigning a negative experiences value to each participant.

Aggressive or bullying behaviors such as jealousy or possessiveness, attempts to control a partner's behavior, or more violent acts such as sexual manipulation all added to participants' scores in this column, while positive behavior such as supportiveness and willingness to compromise subtracted from it.

The average score for all participants was 28.25; broken down between the sexes, the average score for males was 31.5, and females, 25. There is room for error in interpreting these statistics – for example, there is the possibility that males tend to exaggerate bad behavior from a partner while females could be more likely to play it down. While this possibility is explored further in the Discussion section, that is all it is: a possibility, rather than a solid theory. There is also the fact that the participants' responses give one-sided accounts of what is by necessity a two-sided situation – one cannot get a truly accurate representation of a relationship's dynamics if only one partner is the source of information. For these reasons, I do not consider these numbers highly significant differences.

The other two values, outside support and academic performance, were abbreviated in Fig. I as “Support” and “School” and represented by the red and green columns, respectively. These values were both rated from one to five based on the questionnaire responses, with one being the lowest possible score (indicating a total lack of emotional support outside the relationship or a profoundly harmful effect of the relationship on academic achievement) and five being the highest possible score (indicating a supportive network of friends and family independent of the relationship or a positive influence of the relationship on performance in school). These scores out of five were then converted to scores out of 50 (a score of 1/5 becoming a score of 10/50, 2/5 becoming 20/50, etc.); therefore, the highest score possible for both of these factors is 50. This was done to put the range of scores for these two elements in the

same range as the scores for negative behavior, making a graphic representation of the data easier to interpret.

The average score for all participants in the area of outside support was 36.25 (average for males 45 vs. average for females 27.5), and the average score for all participants in the area of academic performance was 35 (average for males 37.5 vs. average for females 32.5). The trend seen here of males scoring markedly higher than their female counterparts warrants further discussion, although it is hard to say exactly why this disparity exists.

There are also other interpersonal traits among respondents to consider. Respondents who indicated greater likelihood of passivity in their interactions with partners – namely, exhibiting submissive behavior during a conflict or changing themselves in order to please a partner – also reported more unhealthy behavior from their partners. Three of the four participants who scored highest in negative experiences also reported giving in to a partner to end or prevent a fight. The same pattern was found in respondents who indicated willingness to change due to a partner's demands. This demonstrates two facets of unassertive behavior, both of which the respondents who had experienced more unhealthy behavior from partners were more likely to report demonstrating themselves. This backs up the idea that a passive personality and negative outcomes in a romantic relationship are connected (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode & Rothman, 2012).

Discussion

Going into this study, I anticipated seeing more instances of domineering or aggressive behavior perpetrated by males against female partners, simply because of existing statistics/stereotypes of dating violence among heterosexual couples. Also, when it came to

individual personality traits, I projected that those who indicate more passive temperaments would encounter more unhealthy behavior from partners, as those individuals would be more likely to be drawn to personalities that are prone to bullying or controlling a romantic partner.

One of the unexpected trends my participants' experiences showed was in the gender breakdown of individuals reporting negative experiences from a partner. It was somewhat unexpected to see that male respondents actually reported more unhealthy or abusive behavior from female partners than vice-versa. Is this an insight into a misleadingly common problem, underreported because of the social stigma placed on males seen as weak or, to use another popular term, "whipped" by their female partners? Or, could males possibly tend to exaggerate unhealthy behavior from partners while females are more prone to playing such behavior down? Statistics on teen dating violence provide some insight. According to the National Center for Victims of Crime, both males and females are at risk for dating violence, although the *types* of abuse tend to differ between the sexes: females are more likely to perpetrate verbal abuse, manipulate a partner through self-harm, or commit less severe acts of physical abuse such as slapping or scratching, while females are more likely to be injured by a male partner (2012). The abusive behavior typically exhibited by females is also more likely to be given a pass than are abusive behaviors exhibited by men: others will frequently cite hormones or past emotional trauma as excuses for an abusive female's behavior (Ramos, 2014). These statistics complement my data, as most of my male respondents who indicated negative experiences from female partners described behavior of the screaming and manipulation variety. For example, "Robert" describes an incident in which he and his girlfriend were responsible for completing a project together in geometry class. When his girlfriend failed to complete her part of the project the night before it was due, Robert attempted to pick up the slack during another class – only to have

the project confiscated by the teacher. Upon arriving to geometry class empty-handed and explaining what had happened, Robert had to contend with his girlfriend's angry meltdown:

She completely lost all composure right there. She shrieked for at least ten minutes, crying and wailing as loud as she could. She blamed me for everything, so the geometry teacher, not knowing the whole story, took her side. Our relationship was never the same after that project, and we broke up soon after.

While some might suspect a secret epidemic of dating violence against adolescent males, or that the accounts of unhealthy behavior suffered by young men are exaggerated, prior research does not support this. Instead, the existing literature indicates that the problem itself crossed gender lines and that the abuse suffered by males and females differs in type, frequency and severity (National Center for Victims of Crime, 2012). Therefore, the data does not support the idea that there is a secret epidemic of dating violence against adolescent males; nor does it mean that the accounts of unhealthy behavior suffered by young men from their female partners are exaggerated. The responses simply support what existing literature there is on the topic of teens and dating abuse – the problem itself cuts across gender lines, but the abuse suffered by males and females differs in type, frequency, and severity (National Center for Victims of Crime, 2012).

Warranting further exploration is the possibility of young women playing down any unhealthy or abusive behavior they may face in order to protect a partner or preserve a relationship. It has been shown in a number of studies that girls are socialized to be “nice”. For example, Bailey (1992) has found that young girls are more often praised for traits such as quietness, calmness, and playing nicely with others than they are for critical thinking or independence. Over time, an unconscious, systematic conditioning takes place that, by

adolescence, encourages most girls to value being well-liked over being self-sufficient (as cited in Chapman, n.d.) Could this unconscious discouragement of assertive behavior in young girls make them less likely to make waves by holding a partner responsible for inappropriate behavior in a relationship? Reay (2001) examines the issue from another angle:

At very early ages, girls begin defining their femininities in relation to boys. One study of a third grade classroom examined four self-sorted groups of girls within the classroom: the nice girls, the girlies, the spice girls, and the tomboys. Through interviews...Reay found that 'nice girls' was considered a derogatory term indicating '...an absence of toughness and attitude'...Furthermore, the girlies were a group of girls who focused their time on flirting with and writing love letters to boys, the tomboys were girls who played sports with the boys, and the spice girls espoused girl-power and played 'rate-the-boy' on the playground. Reay's research shows that each of the groups of girls defined their own femininities in relation to boys (as cited in Chapman, n.d.)

If this effect of defining oneself and one's femininity only as those things relate to boys is so defined when girls are in third grade – presumably much too young for any of them to be interested in boys in a romantic sense – then how much stronger is it by adolescence, and how does that affect young women who are navigating the unfamiliar territory of dating relationships? When a girl starts to notice boys in a romantic or sexual sense, it is easy to imagine how, unsure of how to make a boy notice her or like her, she might resort to dumbing herself down or making herself appear helpless in an unconscious attempt to be more traditionally feminine and attractive to the opposite sex (Borchard, 2011). While these responses alone cannot prove for certain that this effect is at play on a large scale – nor can they account for

how gender socialization affects the relationships of young women who do not identify as heterosexual – it could explain why some adolescent girls choose to ignore or downplay unhealthy behavior from a partner: subconsciously pressured to maintain their femininity and their reputation as a suitable partner, they may be reluctant to hold an abusive partner responsible for fear of loneliness or stigma. What is most intriguing, though, is the way this effect may tie into the trend seen in the participants' accounts in which girls who are involved in a romantic relationship report lower levels of familial and/or peer support and higher levels of harm to academic performance than their male counterparts. Are young women more likely than young men to sacrifice other aspects of their lives – family, friends, schoolwork, etc. – because of the pressure of female socialization to prioritize relationships with others, particularly when it comes to romantic partners? The correlation is compelling, but does not necessarily imply causation. It is also possible that young women who are already lacking in other aspects of their lives are more likely to seek out a romantic partner in order to fill a gap left by emotionally distant family or by difficulty with school or friends, making the relationship a result rather than a cause of these other problems. It is a question that cannot be answered definitively through this type of study and needs more empirical data; however, the connection between young women in exclusive relationships, lower levels of familial/peer support, and lower academic achievement is an intriguing one for educators.

Finally, the responses I collected from participants demonstrated that passive personalities, correlating with predictions, seem to be more likely to experience negative or abusive behavior from a partner. For example, “Evelyn”, whose response scored highest on the dating abuse inventory, reported conflicts in the relationship as usually beginning with her bringing up a concern, but then seeing angry pushback from her partner. These conflicts would

end with *her* apologizing for troubling her partner in the first place, and dismissing her own concerns:

[Conflict] was handled by me confronting the boy with my overdramatic feelings that would spark conflict. The typical response was anger and guilt for expressing my feelings, which usually ended with me crying and apologizing for bringing up any issue I thought I saw.

Other respondents who scored in the upper ranges on the dating abuse inventory also indicated a proclivity toward taking the path of least resistance when it came to conflict with a romantic partner. For example: “Louis”, who bought expensive new clothes after being pressured by a partner to dress nicer (“I told her no because I don’t have any money...[she] always pointed out to me how attractive she thought celebrities looked because of the way they dressed until eventually I cracked...”); “Ivy”, who put up with unfounded accusations of drug use from a partner without defending herself (“He got pissed off and said that he doesn’t want to hear about me ‘popping pills.’ I thought that was the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard, but I just went along with it because I didn’t want to fight.”); and “Eric”, who went along with a partner’s demand for intercourse rather than tell her he did not feel ready for it (“Since I felt uncomfortable saying that I did not want to have sex (which I realize now was a terrible mistake), I allowed my partner to dictate all of our sexual activity, even when I did not really want to do anything.”). This is classic passivity – the noun form of “passive”, which is defined as “unresisting and receptive to external forces; submissive” (Passivity, n.d.). By itself, passivity is not inherently a bad trait; however, reluctance to stand up for oneself or one’s desires in an intimate relationship can pave the way for one partner taking advantage of the other. More

importantly, passivity can make it more likely that a person will find themselves with someone who might dominate or bully them. Supporting this idea, Podesta (2012) writes:

People with passive personalities love to tell themselves that their input does not matter. They even make excuses when someone is treating them badly...It's easy to see why aggressives love to work with, be friends with, and marry passive people. Because passives do whatever the aggressive wants without even a whimper of dissent or honest discussion. Aggressives' favorite thing is to push others to the limit...Passives often fail to set any limits at all...And when someone takes advantage of them, they let it go...

While Podesta, a motivational speaker, might be reasonably expected to speak in a biased manner against passive personality types, her description of passive versus aggressive personality types in the context of personal relationships makes sense: of course an aggressive would prefer to interact with passives over other aggressives, because passives will not challenge the aggressive's dominance and control. Furthermore, it is supported by participant data – those respondents who indicated passive responses to conflict also reported higher incidents of negative behavior from romantic partners. I do not consider these results definitive – as I have stated before, proving a causation relationship would require more empirical data and a larger sample size than I have provided here – however, the connection is an extremely compelling one.

Conclusion

My thesis was as follows: Certain traits are predictive of negative developmental outcomes for adolescents in romantic relationships. The data found here certainly supports this idea. Teens who exhibit passive personality traits, namely those who submitted responses indicating that they would give in to a partner's demands or change something about themselves just to avoid conflict within the relationship, reported more frequent incidents of unhealthy behavior from partners. Furthermore, there was little difference in frequency of negative behaviors reported from male respondents versus female; however, the type and severity of the behavior varied between the sexes. Moreover, the young women I studied reported greater harm to academic performance and less emotional support from non-romantic individuals in their lives, adding another dimension to the study of dating abuse when it is divided across gender lines.

As this was an exploratory study, I proceeded with a relatively small sample size (eight individuals) and an unorthodox method of gathering data (gathering responses online, then assigning them a numerical value based on the LoveIsRespect.org inventory). Therefore, I do not consider my results to be airtight scientific proof of what personality type, gender identification, or other traits are more or less predictive of an individual experiencing dating abuse from a partner. If I were to perform this type of research again, I would aim to reach a wider pool of respondents and work with more results. I would attempt to do this in a way that results in more sound data – for example, asking respondents to numerically rate their experiences themselves rather than asking open-ended questions, which are much harder and less reliable to try to quantify. There are also other facets that were not considered in this study which, if explored, might deepen our knowledge of the issue of dating abuse in adolescents and illuminate other

predictive factors – for example, the socioeconomic statuses of respondents, the number of experiences a respondent has had, and at what age(s) the respondent had these experiences. Cultural backgrounds of the respondents were also largely overlooked in this study, but could also provide valuable information if studied in more depth.

In short, this study alone has not provided the community of education professionals with the kind of solid, research-based information they might actually apply to adolescents or use to design interventions. However, using research like this as a springboard, we could eventually gain that sort of insight into how adolescent romantic relationships impact the developmental progress and academic performance of the teens who participate in them.

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Appendix I: Human Subjects Approval

**University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research
University of New Orleans**

Campus Correspondence

Principal Investigator: Cynthia Ybos

Co-Investigator: Taylor Smith

Date: July 26, 2013

Protocol Title: "The effects of dating on developmental adjustment for adolescents"

IRB#: 01Aug13

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures are compliant with the University of New Orleans and federal guidelines. The above referenced human subjects protocol has been reviewed and approved using expedited procedures (under 45 CFR 46.116(a) category (7)).

Approval is only valid for one year from the approval date. Any changes to the procedures or protocols must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. Use the IRB number listed on this letter in all future correspondence regarding this proposal.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best wishes on your project!

Sincerely,



Robert D. Laird, Ph.D., Chair
UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

Appendix II: Questionnaire

1. Describe the course of your romantic relationships in high school, beginning with how you would typically meet someone, who initiated the relationship, how long you would know someone before you thought you were in a serious relationship, how the relationship changed over time, and ending with how you ended the relationship. What do you think were the most important events during these relationships? What do you think you learned about yourself from these relationships?
2. Describe a time when you were in high school and engaged in conflict with a partner, including the nature of the conflict, who started it, the extent to which the conflict affected you, and what happened during and as a result of this conflict. How do you feel about this event now and how would you handle such a situation if it happened to you today?
3. Describe a time when you were in high school and think you felt pressured to change your actions or appearance to please a partner and how you handled the situation. How do you feel about this action now? Would you make the same decision if the situation happened today?
4. Describe what kind of emotional support you feel you had from friends or family when you were in high school. How do you think this influenced your romantic relationships with others?
5. Describe how you think your romantic relationships affected other areas of your life at that time, such as academic performance, participation in extracurricular activities, or relationships with other friends or your family.
6. When you were in high school, did you ever experience a relationship that you felt was unhealthy? If so, describe what happened and how you currently feel about that relationship. If you personally have not experienced such a relationship, have you known anyone who was involved in such a relationship? Describe your perceptions of that relationship.

Appendix III: Abusive Behavior Inventory

The Person I'm With: (Often, Sometimes or Never)

1. Is very supportive of things that I do and encourages me to try new things.
2. Likes to listen when I have something on my mind.
3. Talks to me when they're unhappy with something in the relationship.
4. Is willing to compromise.
5. Understands that we have separate interests and can spend time apart.
6. Is mean or rude to my friends.
7. Criticizes or distracts me when I'm doing things that don't involve them.
8. Gets extremely jealous or possessive.
9. Accuses me of flirting or cheating when I'm not.
10. Constantly checks up on me or makes me check in.
11. Breaks or throws things when we fight.
12. Threatens to destroy my things.
13. Tries to control what I do, who I see, what I wear, how I look or who I talk to.
14. Makes me feel nervous or like I'm "walking on eggshells."
15. Blames me for problems, puts me down, calls me names or criticizes me.
16. Makes me feel like no one else would want me.
17. Threatens to hurt themselves, me, my friends, pets or family.
18. Grabs, pushes, shoves, chokes, punches, slaps, holds me down, throws things or hurts me in some way.
19. Yells, screams or humiliates me in front of other people.
20. Pressures, guilt or forces me into having sex or going farther than I want to.

Scoring

Questions 1-5: Often: -5, Sometimes: -3, Never: 5

Questions 6-10: Often: 5, Sometimes: 1, Never: 0

Questions 11-15: Often: 10, Sometimes: 5, Never: 0

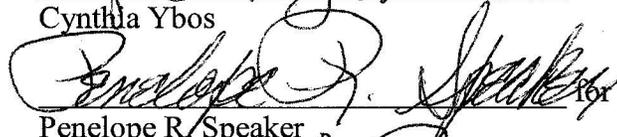
Questions 16-20: Often: 50, Sometimes: 25, Never: 0

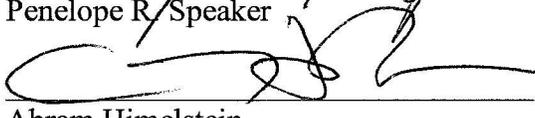
APPROVAL SHEET

This is to certify that Taylor Lastene Smith has successfully completed her Senior Honors Thesis, entitled:

The Effects of Dating on Developmental Adjustment for Adolescents


Cynthia Ybos Director of Thesis


Penelope R. Speaker for the Department


Abram Himmelstein for the Department


Abu Kabir Mostofa Sarwar for the University Honors Program

April 29, 2014
Date