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Early Adolescent Romantic Partner Status, Peer Standing, and Problem Behaviors

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Abstract

This study examined associations among early adolescent romantic relationships, peer standing, problem behaviors, and gender as a moderator of these associations, in a sample of 320 seventh-grade students. Popular and controversial status youth were more likely to have a romantic partner, whereas neglected status youth were less likely to have a romantic partner. Similarly, youth perceived as conventional and unconventional leaders were also more likely to have a romantic partner than were non-leaders. Youth who had a romantic partner drank more alcohol and were more aggressive than were youth who did not have a romantic partner. Among those youth who had romantic partners, those who reported having more deviance-prone partners were themselves more likely to use alcohol and to be more aggressive, and those who engaged in deviant behavior with their partners used more alcohol. However, these associations varied somewhat by gender. These findings underscore the salience of early romantic partner relationships in the adjustment of early adolescents.

Keywords

romantic relationships; dating; peer relations; problem behaviors; early adolescence

The importance of peer affiliations for adolescents' adjustment has been well established (Kupersmidt & Dodge, 2004). Peers provide a context in which adolescents can explore new roles, experiment with different identities, and learn about intimate relationships outside of the family (Sharp, Coatsworth, Darling, Cumsille, & Ranieri, 2007). Although peers may serve many positive functions, several studies have shown that affiliation with problem-prone friends is a strong predictor of a youth's own involvement in problem behaviors (Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Warr, 2002). Furthermore, susceptibility to the influences of peers is particularly high during early adolescence (Urberg, Luo, Pilgrim, & Degirmencioglu, 2003).

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During adolescence, affiliations with romantic partners emerge as new, salient relationship contexts. Recent studies suggest that not only are adolescents' romantic relationships more common and less transitory than previously believed but that these relationships relate to many aspects of adolescents' development (Florsheim, 2003; Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Furthermore, early adolescent romantic interests appear to unfold from existing peer affiliations (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004). However, there has been only limited study of links between peer affiliations and romantic relationships, particularly in early adolescence when such mixed-gender affiliations are emerging. Furthermore, although there is evidence for associations between peer deviance and problem behaviors in the broader peer group, less is understood about how romantic relationships during early adolescence may be related to engagement in problem behaviors. This study brings together these peer and romantic relationship literatures and examines associations among early adolescent romantic relationships, peer standing, and problem behaviors of aggression and alcohol use.

Our understanding of the associations among early adolescent romantic relationships, peer standing, and problem behaviors can be guided by a behavioral systems conceptualization of key relationships during early adolescence (Buhrmester & Furman, 1986; Furman & Wehner, 1994). A central tenet of this theory is the interplay between important relationships and developmental shifts over time in these connections. During early adolescence, the interdependence of peer standing and involvement in early romantic relationships is especially heightened as young teens are concerned with approval and how their relationships are viewed by friends (Collins, 2003). In this way, early adolescent peer relationships serve as a springboard for involvement in emerging romantic relationships, and issues of status and perceived leadership and standing may be especially relevant to dating relations. In addition, just as affiliations with deviant peer groups promote problem behavior in individual adolescents (Warr, 1996), emerging romantic relationships with deviant partners may serve as an additional social context that promotes problem behaviors, particularly during early adolescence when youth are most susceptible to peer influences. Furthermore, not only the relationships themselves but characteristics of these relationships, such as the problem proneness of partners and their age, may be especially salient to engagement in risk-taking activity (Capaldi, Kim, & Shortt, 2004; Connolly et al., 2004).

Peer Standing During Adolescence: Links With Romantic Relationships

There is an extensive literature describing how peer relationships are an important contributor to overall adjustment (e.g., Dodge et al., 2003; Parker & Asher, 1987). During childhood, peer affiliations are highly sex-segregated (Golombok & Fivush, 1994; Maccoby, 1998). However, in early adolescence, these segregated boundaries begin to break down as many boys and girls develop heterosexual interests and affiliate in larger, mixed-gender groups (Brown, 1999). To illustrate, Connolly, Furman, and Konarski (2000) followed a group of 180 students from grade 9 to grade 11 and found that romantic relationships emerge from the broader peer group; over time, an adolescent's number of same-sex friends predicted his or her number of cross-sex friends as well as involvement in a romantic relationship.

One important aspect of peer affiliations is status or standing. Peer status is typically assessed by asking youth to identify those whom they like most and like least, resulting in the assignment of youth to one of five mutually exclusive categories of peer status (popular, controversial, rejected, neglected, and average status groups). Several studies suggest that high status in the peer group may be a precursor to the establishment of early romantic relationships (Brown, 1999; Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000). For example, Adler and Adler's (1998) ethnographic work suggests that during early adolescence, popular youth are more likely to have cross-sex interactions that may be the first step toward establishing romantic relationships.

Another way to conceive of peer standing is the degree to which an adolescent is considered a "leader." Recent studies have begun to identify different types of adolescent peer leaders. Miller-Johnson and colleagues (2003) found two types—"conventional leaders" (adolescents in traditional positions of authority) and "unconventional leaders" (adolescents who set trends in behavioral norms but are more deviant and promote independence from adult regulation). Furthermore, controversial status youth (as well as popular status youth) were mostly likely to be perceived as being unconventional leaders. Similar subtypes of leaders have been identified in other studies as well (Luthar & McMahon, 1996; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000).

There has been some limited study of how peer standing relates to romantic relationships. Franzoni, Davis, and Vasquez-Suson (1994) found that controversial status high school students were most likely to be dating, followed by popular adolescents. Clique leaders also tend to be more advanced in terms of starting to date earlier than other teens (Dunphy, 1963). Capaldi and Crosby (1997) found, also among a sample of older teens, that dating a popular person improved an adolescent's popularity. Although these studies suggest links between peer standing and romantic relationships, they have focused on older adolescents. The current study adds to the existing literature by examining links between peer standing and dating status in early adolescence when romantic affiliations are beginning to emerge.

Adolescent Romantic Relationships and Problem Behaviors

Although peer affiliations during adolescence can be positive (e.g., studying together) or benign (e.g., sharing clothing), what is of most concern is when peers engage in behaviors that are not sanctioned by adults. An adolescent is much more likely to engage in deviant behavior with peers than alone (Warr, 1996). Peer affiliations reflect both similarities in the choice of friends as well as active influence of friends on each other's behavior. Peers choose friends who are like them, including similarities in levels of problem behaviors (Elliott & Menard, 1996; Thornberry & Krohn, 1997). Peers may also actively reinforce each other to engage in risky activity through a series of social interactions known as deviancy training, for example, through laughter, smiling, or positive comments about deviant behaviors (Dishion & Andrews, 1995). Thus, although deviant peer relationships may be a marker for other attributes that are in turn related to problem behaviors, peers may actively reinforce and escalate involvement in problem behaviors.

In the same way, romantic relationships may promote involvement in problem behaviors. Early adolescent romantic relationships are characterized by idealization and passion (Montgomery, 2005), and young teens may be caught up in the infatuation of such affiliations and perhaps more likely to engage in behaviors that they might not otherwise. However, there has been only limited study of links between adolescent romantic relationships and problem behaviors. Davies and Windle (2000) found that 10th- and 11th-graders who were involved in steady or multiple dating relationships reported higher levels of minor delinquency, sexual activity, and alcohol use. Another study that compared early and late daters found that those who had their first romantic relationships at younger ages used alcohol more frequently at age 16 (Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2004). Similarly, Neemann, Hubbard, and Masten (1995) found that romantic relationships in late childhood (ages 8 to 12 years) were related to more concurrent conduct problems as well as to increases in conduct problems by middle adolescence. Overall, this body of research suggests that early involvement in romantic relationships may predict problem behaviors.

These previous studies lead to the question of whether merely *having* a romantic partner is associated with higher levels of problem behaviors or whether it is having a *deviant* or problem-prone partner that is associated with higher levels of problem behaviors. Woodward,

Fergusson, and Horwood (2002) found that men and women with a deviant romantic partner showed the highest rates of offending at age 21, followed by those who had no romantic partner; the lowest rates were found for men and women with a nondeviant partner. Youth who are prone to problem behaviors may also be attracted to one another, reflecting assortative mating processes that result in antisocial youth becoming romantically involved with similarly deviant partners (Capaldi et al., 2004). These findings suggest that dating per se may not be related to problem behaviors. Rather, dating a deviant partner or engaging in deviant behavior with a partner may be the important factors that would predict whether dating would be related to problem behaviors.

Another characteristic of the romantic relationship that may be related to poor outcomes is the partner's age (Connolly et al., 2004). Limited work on adolescents has shown that girls with older boyfriends are more likely to engage in sexual activity (Gowen, Feldman, Diaz, & Yisrael, 2004; Kaestle, Morisky, & Wiley, 2002). An older partner may pose particular risk because he or she would be more likely to have already engaged in problem behaviors and may initiate and scaffold a younger partner into these experiences. Taken together, these findings suggest the need to take into account the partner's age, the partner's deviance, and shared deviance between the romantic partners when considering links between romantic relationships and problem behaviors.

Gender and Romantic Relationships

There has been some suggestion that romantic partners may play a role in problem behaviors, particularly among girls. Girls' problem behaviors are more likely to occur in mixed-gender settings, whereas boys' problem behaviors are more likely to occur with other boys (Warr, 2002). Studies have also found that girls are more likely to be introduced to substance use by a male friend or boyfriend than by other girls (Eaves, 2004; Moon, Hecht, Jackson, & Spellers, 1999). Girls are more likely than boys to use substances to improve their self-image, enhance their confidence, and obtain social approval, all of which may make them more susceptible to their romantic partners' influence (Amaro, Blake, Schwartz, & Flinchbaugh, 2001).

Giordano, Longmore, and Manning (2001) describe other gender differences in the context of romantic relationships. They contend that power dynamics and the desire to control and change the partner are more pronounced in romantic relationships than in same-sex friendships. However, boys' behavior remains linked primarily to same-sex friends, whereas girls' behavior comes to resemble their romantic partners' behavior. Indeed, Haynie, Giordano, Manning, and Longmore (2005) found that romantic partners' deviance was more strongly related to girls' than to boys' involvement in minor deviance. Thus, gender may affect associations between characteristics of romantic relationships and adolescents' problem behaviors.

This Study

This study addresses three questions related to links among peer standing, early adolescent romantic relationships, and problem behaviors. First, do peer status and leadership predict early adolescents' involvement in romantic relationships? We hypothesize that adolescents who are relatively popular and who are leaders will be more likely to have a romantic partner. Second, does being involved in a romantic relationship in early adolescence predict problem behaviors? We hypothesize that youth who have a romantic partner will engage in relatively higher rates of problem behaviors. Third, for adolescents who are involved in a romantic relationship, do characteristics of the partner and the relationship relate to problem behaviors? We hypothesize that having an older partner and elevated levels of partner and shared deviance will be positively related to early adolescents' own problem behaviors. We also investigate whether these associations are moderated by gender. We hypothesize that older partner age and shared and

partner deviance will be more strongly related to problem behaviors for girls than for boys. Finally, although not a direct focus of the study, we controlled for pubertal status because it has been shown to be related to aggression and substance use (Kaltiala-Heino, Marttunen, Rantanen, & Rimpela, 2003; Lanza & Collins, 2002).[1]

Method

Participants

The participants were part of a larger study of peer social influences on substance use and other problem behaviors. The study took place in a magnet school (grades 6–12) specializing in the arts in a midsize Southeastern city. In this magnet school, attendance was determined via a lottery, with any student in the county eligible to enter the lottery (as opposed to a specified attendance zone). The school was chosen as a result of a study investigator (who had worked previously with school staff) being contacted by school personnel who were interested in learning more about the impact of peers on substance use among their students. Seventh-graders were chosen for the study in order to have more stable peer networks (as compared to the sixth grade when students merge from multiple schools) and to identify substance use patterns in their early stages. All seventh-grade students were invited to participate; data were collected across two cohorts assessed separately in spring of 2004 and fall of 2004. The participation rate was 73% for Cohort 1 and 83% for Cohort 2, for a total of 320 students (45% male; 45% European American, 45% African American, 3% Latino, 5% multiethnic, and 2% other). The mean age of the students was 12.5 years (SD = 0.64).

Procedure and Measures

Project staff administered a survey to consenting students during a 100-minute class period. Students received five dollars for completing the survey.

Peer nominations—Peer social status, aggression, and conventional and unconventional leadership—Students were provided with a roster of all current seventh-grade students and asked to make unlimited nominations of peers who fit various behavioral and social influence descriptors. To assess *peer social status*, students were instructed to name students that they "liked the most" and "liked the least." Based on scoring from Coie and Dodge (1983), students were assigned to one of five mutually exclusive peer status groups: (a) average (n = 172; 41% of boys, 59% of girls), (b) popular (n = 40; 10% of boys, 15% of girls), (c) controversial (n = 19; 4% of boys, 8% of girls), (d) neglected (n = 41; 6% of boys, 12% of girls), and (e) rejected (n = 36; 18% of boys, 6% of girls). *Aggression* was based on nominations for the descriptor "fights a lot, hits others, or says mean things to them." *Unconventional leadership* was derived from nominations for the item "are good at getting other kids to break the rules." *Conventional leadership* was based on nominations for the item "are leaders and good to have in charge." The aggression and the two leadership variables are continuous.

Pubertal development—Pubertal status was assessed with the seven-item Recent Growth measure (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group [CPPRG], 2001a). The measure was adapted from the Pubertal Development Scale (Petersen, Crockett, Richards, & Boxer, 1988), a commonly used measure of physical development. Three items (growth spurts, body hair, skin changes) were common to both genders; two items (voice changes, facial hair) were specific to boys; two items (breast development, onset of menstruation) were specific to girls. The items were rated on a 4-point scale (1 = *not yet started*; 2 = *just started*; 3 = *definitely*

[1]Although in the text of this article we presume a heterosexual orientation for most of the adolescents described, the questions asked in our study did not specify the gender of the romantic partner; thus, they were equally applicable to all adolescents, regardless of their sexual orientation.

started; 4 = *completed*). The internal consistency of the scale was acceptable (boys, α = .67; girls, α = .76).

Alcohol use—Alcohol use was assessed with the item "On how many days in the last month did you have an alcoholic drink?" The item was rated on a 6-point scale (0 = *none*; 1 = *1 to 2*; 2 = *3 to 5*; 3 = *6 to 9*; 4 = *10 to 19*; 5 = *20 to 31*). Recent studies suggest that self-reports of substance use among adolescents are a reliable, if imperfect, indicator of use (O'Malley, Johnston, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2000; Wallace & Bachman, 1997), and single-item measures have demonstrated reliability and predictive power similar to other more complex measures such as timeline follow-back and frequency-quantity indexes (LaBrie, Pedersen, & Earleywine, 2005).

Romantic partner status—Romantic partner status was assessed with the item "Please select the one statement that best describes your current status: 1 = *I have a boy/girlfriend right now*; 2 = *I have more than one boy/girl-friend right now*; 3 = *I do not have a boy/girlfriend right now, but have had one in the last two or three months*; 4 = *I do not have a boy/girlfriend right now, but had one more than two or three months ago*; 5 = *I have never had a boy/girlfriend*."[2] This item was adapted from the Dating Questionnaire used in a longitudinal study of adolescent dating (our version allowed for multiple partners; Connolly et al., 2004).

Deviance—Romantic relationship—We assessed perceptions of shared deviance with one's boy/girlfriend and the deviant behavior of the partner. *Shared deviance* was assessed with seven dichotomous items adapted from the Self-Report of Close Friends (0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*; CPPRG, 2001b). Students rated whether they had engaged in problem behaviors with their current or recent romantic partner (e.g., stolen something together; done things together that might have gotten them into trouble with the police). The items were averaged to create a scale (α = .80). To assess *partner deviance*, students completed six items adapted from the Self-Report of Close Friends (CPPRG, 2001b) that assessed boy/girlfriends' involvement in a variety of problem behaviors (e.g., "Has this person done things that get him/her into serious trouble with teachers?" "Has this person ever stolen?"). Items were rated on a 4-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 2 = *a little*; 3 = *somewhat*; 4 = *very much*) and averaged to create a scale (α = .74).

Finally, students reported the *partner's age* with the item "How old is this person?" Integer response categories were provided on the survey (e.g., 10, 11, 12).

Results

We first provide descriptive data, including the prevalence of having a romantic partner in the sample and the correlations, means, and standard deviations for the study variables. We then report on our three research questions. First, we determined whether having a romantic partner varied as a function of peer status and conventional and unconventional leadership. The next question examined links between having a romantic partner and problem behaviors of aggression and alcohol use. Last, among those students with a current or recent romantic partner, we examined whether partner and shared deviance and partner age were associated with aggression and alcohol use. For each question, we also examined whether gender was a moderator of these associations.[3]

[2]The timeframe for having a recent partner was 2 months for the first cohort and 3 months for the second cohort.
[3]For all research questions, we also tested whether cohort moderated predictive patterns, and all results were nonsignificant.

Descriptives

Of the total sample, 89 students (29%) reported that they had a current romantic partner, and 8 students (3%) reported having more than one current romantic partner. An additional 61 students (20%) reported that they did not have a current romantic partner, but that they had one in the past 2 or 3 months. Ninety-one students (30%) reported that they did not have a romantic partner in the past 2 or 3 months, but that they had one in the past year. Finally, 59 students (19%) reported that they never had a romantic partner (of the 320 consented students, 308 completed the item on whether they had a romantic partner). The proportion of students across the dating status categories did not vary by gender, χ^2 (4, N = 308) = 3.80, *ns*. Table 1 provides correlations, means, and standard deviations for the variables separately by gender. Alcohol use did not differ significantly by gender, $t(299) = 0.60$, *ns*. Peers reported that boys were more aggressive than girls, $t(306) = 3.99$, $p < .001$. For all subsequent analyses, we controlled for pubertal status, cohort (0 or 1), gender (0 = *girls*; 1 = *boys*), and two dummy coded variables for ethnicity (0 = *African American*; 1 = *European American*).

Peer Standing and Romantic Relationships

For our first research question, we conducted a logistic regression to examine whether having a romantic partner varied as a function of peer standing (see Table 2). As noted previously, peer standing is defined as both peer status (Model 1: accepted, rejected, popular, neglected, or controversial status) and peer leadership (Model 2: conventional and unconventional leadership styles). Romantic partner status was defined dichotomously as whether or not the student reported a current or recent (in the past 2–3 months) boy/girlfriend. Peer status was coded as four variables, with "average" status as the reference group for the remaining categories. For the peer status model, we initially attempted to determine whether gender moderated these associations; however, the cell sizes became very small (including one cell with no participants). Therefore, tests for gender interactions were not conducted for this model. Both of these models were tested among all of the students in the grade.

For Model 1, we conducted a multiple degree of freedom test to determine whether having a romantic partner varied as a function of peer status overall, and the test was significant, Wald χ^2 (4, 289) = 17.67, $p < .01$. As shown in Table 2, tests comparing average status with controversial, neglected, and popular status were all significant. The results indicate that controversial status students were more likely, 7.8 times the odds, and popular students were more likely, 2.6 times the odds, to have a romantic partner than were average status students. By comparison, neglected status students were less likely, 0.45 times the odds, to have a romantic partner than were average-status students.

Dating status also varied as a function of leadership style. As shown in Table 2, peer nominations of both conventional and unconventional leadership were positively related to having a romantic partner. Gender did not moderate the associations of either leadership style with having a romantic partner.

Romantic Relationships and Problem Behaviors

The next research question examined associations between romantic relationships and problem behaviors of aggression and substance use, and whether gender moderated these associations. We used simultaneous multiple regression analyses (i.e., adding all of the variables into the model at the same time), with the dichotomous romantic relationship status variable and the interaction of this variable with gender as predictors of continuous ratings of problem behaviors; separate models were conducted for the aggression and alcohol use outcomes.

As shown in Table 3, having a romantic relationship was significantly associated with alcohol use; those students who reported having a current or recent boy/girlfriend were also more likely

to report alcohol use. However, this association was qualified by a marginal interaction of gender with having a romantic partner. The multiple regressions were then conducted separately by gender. The results indicated that having a romantic partner was unrelated to alcohol use for girls, $t(1, 153) = 0.69$, *ns*. However, boys who reported having a recent or current girlfriend were more likely to use alcohol than boys who did not have a recent or current girlfriend, $t(1, 130) = 3.02$, $p < .01$.

Students who reported having a recent or current boy/girlfriend were also viewed by their peers as being more aggressive. Again, this association was qualified by a marginal interaction of gender with having a romantic relationship. Results from analyses run separately by gender indicated that the association between having a romantic relationship and aggression, while significant for both genders, was particularly strong for girls; girls: $t(1, 159) = 3.88$, $p < .001$; boys: $t(1, 130) = 2.72$, $p < .01$.

Relationship and Partner Characteristics and Problem Behaviors

Analyses reported thus far show a consistent pattern of associations between having a romantic partner and problem behaviors. For our last research question, we were interested in looking at the subset of youth reporting a current or recent partner to determine whether relationship and partner characteristics (partner deviance, shared deviance, partner age) were associated with problem behaviors and whether these associations were moderated by gender. Owing to the high correlations among the predictor variables and concerns about multicollinearity, we conducted three sets of multiple regression analyses (one for each of the three predictor variables); within each set, we looked at problem behavior outcomes of aggression and alcohol use.

As shown in Table 4, the main effect for partner deviance was significant for both outcome variables. Students who had boy/girlfriends with high levels of deviant behaviors were themselves more likely to use alcohol and to be viewed by their peers as being more physically aggressive. The effect for partner deviance on aggression, however, was qualified by a significant interaction with gender. Analyses run separately by gender showed that boys with deviance-prone girlfriends were marginally more likely to be physically aggressive, $t(1, 67) = 1.79$, $p < .10$. By comparison, there was no association between having a problem-prone boyfriend and physically aggressive behaviors among girls, $t(1, 74) = 0.31$, *ns*.

Youth who reported engaging in problem behaviors with their boy/girlfriend were also more likely to report greater use of alcohol. However, this effect was qualified by a marginal interaction with gender. Regression analyses run separately by gender revealed that the association between shared deviance and alcohol use was significant for boys, $t(1, 67) = 2.69$, $p < .01$, but not for girls, $t(1, 71) = 0.19$, *ns*. There was a marginal effect of partner age on alcohol use, such that youth who reported having an older boy/girlfriend were marginally more likely to report greater use of alcohol. All other effects for partner age were nonsignificant.[4]

Discussion

This study brings together the peer and romantic relationship literatures and examines associations among early adolescent romantic relationships, peer standing, and problem behaviors of aggression and alcohol use. The findings extend previous work on links between

[4]The analyses were repeated to test for moderation by ethnicity. For Questions 1 and 3, the interaction of ethnicity with predictor variables was not significant (controversial peer status could not be included in analyses owing to insufficient cell size by ethnicity). For Question 2, ethnicity moderated the association between dating status and aggression. The analyses were then run separately by ethnicity. The results indicated that the association was significant (and in the same direction) for both African American and European American youth; however, the association was relatively stronger for African American youth.

peer and dating affiliations to show how standing and influence among peers may unfold in the emergence of early adolescent romantic interests. The results also enhance our understanding of specific relationship and partner characteristics that are related to problem behaviors. Previous work has generally focused on older teens, and these findings extend downward to early adolescence when romantic affiliations are first emerging. Taken together, the findings suggest that early in adolescence, having a romantic partner is related to high status and leadership in the peer group as well as to problem behaviors, particularly if the romantic partner engages in deviant behavior.

Youth who were in a position of influence and who were regarded most positively in the peer culture (popular and controversial status youth, in comparison with average-status youth) were most likely to report having a current or recent romantic partner. These findings extend work by Connolly and colleagues (2004) by elucidating how standing and influence within peer groups relate to dating status. These results suggest that as peer affiliations shift from same-gender to mixed-gender groupings, a young adolescent's status may enhance his or her appeal as a potential romantic partner. During early adolescence, romantic relationships are closely tied to the peer group, and susceptibility to peer influence is at its peak (Dishion, Dodge, & Lansford, 2006). Young teens in particular are concerned with how attractive they are, how they interact with cross-gender peers, and how mixed-gender forays will be perceived by their peers. In this way, young adolescents may consider how a romantic relationship will affect their image and status and strive to be in a relationship with someone who will be acceptable to their friends; indeed, peers often function as matchmakers (Brown, 1999). Popular and controversial status youth are also highly visible in the peer context and possess many positive and effective social qualities (Parkhurst & Asher, 1992). Such savoir faire may increase their ability to attract a member of the opposite sex. Early adolescents may also be interested in dating a high status peer who could enhance their own status in the peer group.

The results also highlighted how the early adolescent dating context is linked with alcohol use and aggressive behavior. During early adolescence in particular, youth are particularly fascinated with the allure of romantic relationships. More so than older adolescents, early adolescents may value the thrill-seeking aspect of these new, intriguing relationships (Shulman & Scharf, 2000). Young teens may strive to put on a good front as they attempt to impress a partner (Merton, 1996). Potential partners may be selected because they are different or represent an opportunity for involvement in unfamiliar, yet enticing risky behaviors (Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2005). In this way, youth may take on a "false self" in efforts to attract members of the opposite sex and maintain a relationship. Because this study relied on cross-sectional data, we cannot conclude that romantic partner involvement influenced problem behaviors. Such affiliations may serve as a marker for other attributes that in turn are related to problem behaviors. Longitudinal research is needed to examine the temporal ordering and the extent to which these early romantic affiliations affect problem behaviors or reflect overall antisocial tendencies.

These findings also extend previous work by highlighting specific relationship and partner characteristics that are related to problem behaviors. Among youth with a romantic partner, having a deviance-prone boy/girlfriend and engaging together in deviant behaviors was linked to higher levels of alcohol use and aggressive behavior. These findings underscore how a romantic relationship may be an important socialization context for involvement in problem behaviors. During early adolescence, youth may experiment with different roles and behaviors (Giordano et al., 2001), and engaging in problem behaviors with a boy/girlfriend may be one assertion of this newfound independence. In the same way, one function of a romantic relationship may be to prove maturity and provide a venue for such autonomy-seeking, risk-taking endeavors. We speculate that deviancy training processes that take place within adolescent peer groups (e.g., Dishion & Andrews, 1995) may also be operating within early

adolescent romantic relationships. For example, boyfriends and girlfriends may brag or joke about problem behaviors as a way to enhance their status. Within mixed-gender groups, such boastful banter may have an even greater reinforcing impact than in same-gender peer groups as youth attempt to impress members of the opposite sex. Furthermore, problem-prone youth may be attracted to each other, and early dating may be a developmentally relevant expression of a general antisocial tendency (Capaldi et al., 2004). Future research is needed to explore potential deviancy training processes and selection effects within mixed-gender contexts.

Links between romantic relationships and problem behaviors were qualified by both marginal and significant interactions with gender. Contrary to our hypotheses, however, the general pattern of within-gender analyses showed significant associations for boys but not for girls. Although purely speculative, associations may be higher among boys owing to their role as gatekeepers or instigators of girls' involvement in problem behaviors. Studies with both clinical and nonclinical samples have found that girls are much more likely to be introduced to substances by a male friend or boyfriend (Eaves, 2004; Moon et al., 1999). In this way, within a romantic relationship, boys may use more alcohol as they serve as the point of access for their girlfriends. Similarly, findings based on data from the National Youth Study indicate that males are generally most likely to instigate girls' engagement in problem behaviors (Warr, 1996). These findings suggest the need for further study of gendered dynamics within early adolescent romantic affiliations among both boys and girls.

For the most part, results were generally consistent with studies of older adolescents. Popular and controversial status older adolescents have been found to be most likely to date (Franzoni et al., 1994). Similarly, other studies of high school students found dating status to be linked with both involvement in problem behaviors, such as minor delinquency, sexual activity, and alcohol use (Davies & Windle, 2000; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2003). Associations between partner and relationship characteristics and problem behaviors were less consistent with studies based on older adolescents. As in other studies (Capaldi et al., 2004; Woodward et al., 2002), having a problem-prone partner related to involvement in substance use and aggression. However, young teens' reports of the age of their partner was only marginally related to alcohol use and not related to aggressive behavior. Given that young teens' dating affiliations emerge from existing peer affiliations, early adolescents may be more likely to date known individuals. In contrast, as dating becomes more established, older adolescents may begin dating both familiar and unfamiliar people who span a wider age range.

Our findings underscore the need to expand current views of adolescent peer affiliations to take into account the dating context and the ways in which peer affiliations are linked with early romantic relationships. With some exceptions (e.g., Connolly et al., 2004; Dunphy, 1963; Franzoni et al., 1994; Neemann et al. 1995), however, research probing peer and romantic affiliations has functioned in isolation despite the apparent overlap of these interpersonal contexts. The results also suggest links between the romantic relationship context and engagement in problem behaviors. In part, problem behaviors within romantic relationships may be a developmentally relevant expression of a general antisocial tendency and may represent another interpersonal context in which these behaviors are expressed (Capaldi et al., 2004).

This study does have a number of limitations. The current study is based on cross-sectional data, which precludes any causal or causal-like inferences. Accordingly, the study is limited in the extent to which the results can go beyond offering suggestions worthy of further longitudinal inquiry. Nevertheless, the results do emphasize the need for further study, particularly longitudinal inquiry, of romantic relationships during adolescence when these early cross-gender affiliations are beginning to emerge. The study relied on a one-item self-report rating of romantic relationship status. Observational and qualitative data would be

particularly useful to gain a more textured understanding of the nature and meaning of these early cross-gender affiliations. Our sample size was relatively small, particularly for examining gender interactions within the sample of youth who had a romantic partner. Given the school's magnet status, the school may have drawn students with certain characteristics that may affect the generalizability of the results, and the proportion of students on free or reduced-price lunch was lower (22.5%) than the average proportion for the school district's other middle schools (43%). Finally, we did not have data from other sources, such as partners, teachers, and parents, which would have provided a more comprehensive perspective.

Despite these limitations, the investigation also has a number of strengths, including its focus on an ethnically diverse sample of young adolescents, the inclusion of pubertal status as a control variable, and the availability of peer sociometric ratings. On the whole, our findings underscore the need to expand current views of peer affiliations to take into account associations between romantic relationships and problem behaviors. The findings highlight the salience of adolescent romantic relationships for early adolescent adjustment and suggest processes that may underlie links among peer relations, relationship characteristics, and problem behaviors. The results also suggest sex-specific patterns in links between romantic relationships and problem behaviors in early adolescence.

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Biographies

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Girls								
X̄	18.04	1.67	0.05	13.06	0.31	−0.17	0.33	−0.15
SD	7.66	0.91	0.15	1.21	1.12	0.64	0.82	0.71
1. Puberty	–	0.22	0.19	0.42***	−0.06	0.19*	0.16*	0.23**
2. Partner deviance	−0.00	–	0.38***	0.15	−0.16	0.15	0.37***	0.14
3. Shared deviance	0.21	0.54***	–	0.30**	−0.14	0.06	0.17	0.07
4. Partner age	0.26*	0.40***	0.46***	–	−0.10	0.29**	0.26*	0.24*
5. Conventional leadership	0.05	−0.01	−0.05	0.02	–	0.03	0.12	0.00
6. Unconventional leadership	0.24**	0.29**	0.03	0.35**	0.22**	–	0.07	0.89***
7. Alcohol	0.15	0.12	0.37***	0.23	0.25**	0.27**	–	0.07
8. Aggression	0.25**	0.31**	0.03	0.32**	0.12	0.95***	0.23**	–
Boys								
X̄	12.03	1.41	0.04	12.99	−0.33	0.19	0.39	0.20
SD	4.54	0.61	0.12	1.35	0.73	1.28	1.04	1.23

Note: Correlations for girls are on the top half of the table; correlations for boys are on the bottom half of the table. The number of participants providing data for each correlation ranges from 68 to 171, depending on whether or not they had a current or recent romantic partner.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 2

Models 1 and 2 in Total Sample: Peer Status and Peer Standing as Predictors of Dating Status

Predictor	Variables in Model	Wald χ^2	Odds Ratio	Confidence Interval (5th, 95th)
Model 1: Peer Status	Cohort	0.01	0.97	0.59, 1.62
	Race	Wald χ^2 (2, 289) = 4.18, *ns*		
	Puberty	4.54*	1.05	1.00, 1.10
	Gender	8.34**	2.33	1.31, 4.14
	Neglected	3.93*	045	0.20, 0.99
	Popular	5.53*	2.61	1.12, 5.80
	Controversial	6.83**	7.78	1.67, 36.27
	Rejected	0.29	1.25	0.56, 2.78
Model 2: Peer Standing	Cohort	0.24	0.88	0.52, 1.48
	Race	Wald χ^2 (2, 289) = 0.91, *ns*		
	Puberty	4.39*	1.05	1.00, 1.10
	Gender	3.21	1.95	1.21, 2.69
	Conventional leadership	6.75**	1.51	1.20, 1.82
	Unconventional leadership	8.57**	4.34	3.36, 5.32
	Conventional Leadership × Gender	1.12	–	–
	Unconventional Leadership × Gender	0.05	–	–

Note: Odds ratios and confidence intervals do not apply for the interaction terms. Gender is coded 0 (*female*) or 1 (*male*).

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Dating Status as a Predictor of Alcohol Use and Physical Aggression

	Alcohol			Physical Aggression		
	t	**β**	***SE***	***t***	**β**	***SE***
Cohort	−2.14*	−0.13	0.11	−1.18	−0.06	0.09
Puberty	2.12*	0.14	0.01	2.04*	0.12	0.01
Race		*F*(2, 275) = 1.29, *ns*			*F*(2, 281) = 17.85, *p* < .001	
Gender	1.25	0.08	0.13	4.14**	0.24	0.10
Dating status	2.71**	0.16	0.12	4.46**	0.24	0.10
Gender × Dating Status	1.97†	0.11	0.23	1.79†	0.09	0.19

Note: *SE* = standard error; we conducted a multiple degree of freedom *F* test for the race variable, which had two dummy coded categories.

† *p* < .10.

* *p* < .05.

** *p* < .01.

Table 4

Shared Deviance, Partner Deviance, and Partner Age as Predictors of Alcohol Use and Aggression

	Alcohol			Aggression		
	t	**β**	***SE***	***t***	**β**	***SE***
Partner deviance						
Cohort	−1.13	−0.10	0.21	−0.22	−0.02	0.18
Puberty	1.75†	0.17	0.02	1.50	0.13	0.01
Race		$F(2, 130) = 0.97$, *ns*			$F(2, 133) = 6.75$, $p < .01$	
Gender	2.37*	0.22	0.22	3.94**	0.34	0.19
Partner deviance	2.20*	0.22	0.15	2.06*	0.18	0.12
Gender × Partner Deviance	0.04	0.00	0.28	2.20*	0.18	0.25
Shared deviance						
Cohort	−1.33	−0.11	0.20	−0.54	−0.04	0.18
Puberty	1.77†	0.17	0.02	1.38	0.12	0.01
Race		$F(2, 130) = 0.25$, *ns*			$F(2, 133) = 8.98$, $p < .0001$	
Gender	1.99*	0.18	0.22	3.34**	0.29	0.19
Shared deviance	2.26*	0.20	0.72	0.21	0.02	0.64
Gender × Shared Deviance	1.92†	0.16	1.39	−0.29	−0.02	1.25
Partner age						
Cohort	−1.42	−0.12	0.21	−0.27	−0.02	0.18
Puberty	1.38	0.14	0.02	1.02	0.10	0.01
Race		$F(2, 130) = 0.46$, *ns*			$F(2, 133) = 9.21$, $p < .0001$	
Gender	1.82†	0.17	0.22	3.36**	0.29	0.19
Partner age	1.74†	0.17	0.10	1.61	0.14	0.08
Gender × Partner Age	0.28	0.02	0.18	1.52	0.12	0.15

Note: *SE* = standard error; we conducted a multiple degree of freedom *F* test for the race variable, which had two dummy coded categories.

† $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.