The Significance of Distal Influences on Adolescent Romantic Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

Research supports the assumption that the attitudes of persons and groups external to an adolescent couple play a role in the dyad’s dating experience. Distal influences may come from several sources including parents, religion, society in general, and the dyad’s cohort. These influences can impact the couple in many ways, especially on perceived relationship satisfaction.

In the present study, we distributed a questionnaire consisting of a published measure of satisfaction and a new measure of distal influences to 97 first year college students at a small rural Christian college. Participants chose and reflected upon a dating relationship from their adolescence that lasted at least four months. Several enlightening trends emerged regarding the relationship between external influences and relationship satisfaction. A bivariate correlation analysis found that the influences from Society, $r(95) = -.35, p < .001$, and Cohort, $r(95) = -.31, p = .002$, have negative correlations with Satisfaction whereas Parents, $r(95) = .24, p = .017$, and Religion, $r(95) = .34, p = .001$, are positively correlated with Satisfaction. An analysis of linear regression showed that when controlling for other predictors, influences from the dyad’s Cohort were the best predictor of low Satisfaction, $\beta = -.21, t(90) = -2.04, p = .04$; influences from Religion were found to be the best predictor of elevated Satisfaction, $\beta = .21, t(90) = 1.98, p = .05$. These conclusions have distinct implications for how parents, administrators, researchers and professionals view the role of social influences on romantic relationships for adolescents.
The Significance of Distal Influences on Adolescent Romantic Relationship Satisfaction

The nature of dyad formation in adolescence has changed drastically since the mid-nineteenth century. Whereas several decades ago couples were free to go on dates without commitment and even date several people at once, presently many high school couples declare commitment to each other before the initiation of interaction outside of the primary social context which is most often school (Carver, Joyner & Udry, 2003). ‘Dating’ no longer has a casual connotation for adolescents; to be dating indicates a committed relationship. In addition, many adults may be surprised to learn that one study of 5,188 relationships in adolescence found that the median duration of first romantic relationships is now 13.6 months (Carver, Joyner & Udry, 2003).

Yet research regarding romantic relationships in adolescence has not kept up with these changes and has been curiously neglected in modern academia (Arnett, 2007). Scholarship seems to focus more on aspects of marriage, failing to recognize the importance of the fertile training ground that adolescent dating has become. In addition, much of the existing research on teen dating focuses on one individual’s experience in the relationship instead on the relationship itself (Furman, 2002).

The correlations between teen dating and depression, delinquency, and sexuality are all popular topics; other heavily researched areas include gender roles, sexuality, and dating violence. However, these studies have produced little insight into relational factors and have been descriptive rather than theoretical. Leading contributors to this field have called for a more holistic treatment of the topic at hand, advocating for research focusing on the many aspects of the relationship itself, rather than on the various effects the relationship has on the individual (Furman, Feiring, & Brown, 1999).
Scholarship has demonstrated that environmental factors influence adolescent romantic relationships; the family (especially parents), peers (especially friends), society, culture, and various faiths have all been shown to influence teens in dating relationships (Laursen & Jensen-Campbell, 1999).

The values and expectations of peers and parents are important to teens who are dating (Billy & Udry, 1985; Inazu & Fox, 1980). Parents attempt to regulate who their children date and how time together is spent. Parents also seek to instill values regarding dating and parents often have a voice in the decision making of the couple. In addition, patterns of communication, emotional regulation, and problem solving may be transmitted to the malleable adolescent.

However, teens may receive different messages from their peers. The acquisition of status within a peer group is an important way peers influence the adolescent relationship (Paul & White, 1990): adolescents may seek relationships to increase their status amongst their peers. For example, both Latina and female African American early adolescents described their desire for having a boyfriend in terms of demonstrating their popularity to their friends. Boyfriends who were attractive, somewhat older, popular, and able to bring gifts were the most sought after (O’Sullivan & Meyer-Balhburg, 2003).

Peers also shape the informal rules for relationship initiation, partner selection, expectations for relationship maintenance, and other dating norms. Peer approval and stereotypes can influence which relationships endure and which crumble. Friendships may play an especially significant role in the shaping of adolescent relationships. Friends model relationships, demonstrating accepted relationship scripts (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler,
The influences from parents, peers, and friends have all been shown to play a role in the unfolding of the adolescent dyad.

In addition, adolescent romantic relationships are surrounded by social sanctions. Laws forbid certain sexual interactions, curfews restrict opportunities for time together, schools attempt to prohibit public displays of affection, taboos exist as to which behaviors are appropriate where and when. Media depictions further surround teens with attitudes regarding what is appropriate and what is not (Laursen & Jensen-Campbell, 1999).

In addition to possible influences from friends, peers, parents, and society, it is also important to investigate influences from religion. One study (Lomax, Karff, & McKenny, 2002) found that approximately 90% of Americans believe in God or some higher power. In addition, influences from religion seem to have important effects on individuals. Religiosity has been positively correlated with individuals who are better able to deal with stress, depression, anxiety, and physical illness (Koenig et al., 1992). Religion is also said to enhance one’s marital satisfaction, to assist and guide one through crisis and chronic illness, to provide an outlet of support when facing psychological stress, and to create happiness (Weaver et al., 2002). It is important to recognize, however, that these effects mostly relate to the experience of individuals (not couples), and that they are dependant on one’s religious participation and not on amount of influence from religious sources as is the focus of the present study.

It is clear that religious influences and their role in adolescent romantic relationships should also be studied. Religious institutions provide another opportunity for romantic interaction, but under a very different set of expectations. In addition, religious organizations attempt to define the morals to which teens should abide while dating. Teens may experience conflict in meeting the expectations conveyed by these multiple sources of distal influence.
The Role of Relationship Satisfaction in Romantic Relationships

Although relationship satisfaction is one of the major established areas of marital relationship assessment (Hendrick, 1988), less attention has been paid to satisfaction in adolescent romantic relationships. Because of this, measures of marital satisfaction have been used successfully with dating couples (Vaughn & Matyastik-Baier, 1999).

Research in marital relationships has produced information about many determinants of satisfaction in marriage. Patrick, Sells, Giordano, and Tollerud (2007) found intimacy and personality variables to be predictors of marital satisfaction. In addition, Parsons, Nalbone, Killmer, and Wetchler (2007) found that identity formation and differentiation predicted marital satisfaction. These authors found no relationship between religiosity and marital satisfaction. Another set of authors, however, have found a connection between sociocultural context and marital satisfaction (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000).

In the current study, we used these findings from marital literature to assist in our study of satisfaction in adolescent romantic relationships. Similarly to some of the above studies, we wanted to investigate possible determinants of satisfaction. Instead of examining proximal determinants, we wanted to determine if external factors play a role in adolescent relationship satisfaction.

Methods

Qualifying participants were asked to choose and report on one romantic relationship that occurred during their teenage years. A survey comprised of a demographics section, and measure of Satisfaction, and a measure of Distal Influences was made available to participants. Responses were collected via an online survey tool. Reliability analyses were run on the scales
and subscales, and a bivariate correlation and a linear regression were performed on the data after it was groomed.

**Participants**

First year-students at Messiah College (Grantham, Pennsylvania) who met three criteria were invited to take an online survey. Participants were required to verify their current age (at least 18 years), that they graduated high school in the previous school year, and that they had at least one romantic relationship lasting at least four months during their adolescence. The requirement that the relationship be at least four months in duration was based on information provided by Carver, Joyner, and Udry (2003; reporting on 1995 data) who found that 82 percent of adolescents age 16 or older had experienced a romantic relationship lasting four months or longer. First-year students were used to achieve more accurate responses than would have been acquired using older participants who are further removed from their adolescence. Ideally, high school students would be asked to report on the current status of their relationship, however the means to accomplish this were outside the scope of this study due to the need for parental consent and because of the difficulty gaining approval from local school boards.

The participants were recruited via a mass email to all 783 first year students. The selection criteria were outlined in the email as well as the option to be considered for one of 33 ten dollar gift cards which were distributed to every third participant of the first 100 (funding was acquired via a grant from the Messiah College Honors College). Of the 122 participants completing surveys, 25 reported on relationships that occurred primarily in emerging adulthood as opposed to adolescence as instructed. These 25 responses were excluded based on the construct difference in population and in light of significant (p < .05) differences existing
between the group whose relationships primarily occurred prior to the age of 18 versus those primarily occurring after the age of 18 on the dependant variable (Satisfaction).

The number of completed surveys representing relationships that occurred primarily in adolescence was 97. Participants included 29 males and 68 females; 97% of participants were either 18 or 19 at the time of participation. All but nine participants self-selected ‘European-American/White’ and their ethnicity. All but three participants self-selected Christianity as their religion at the time of the relationship on which they chose to report. All participants reported being heterosexual at the time of the relationship. T-tests revealed significant differences on the dependant variable between the two genders and between Christians and non-Christians. The median length reported was 11 months. The median start age was 16 years 2 months. The median age at the middle of the relationship was 16 years 10 months.

**Apparatus**

**Assessing Satisfaction.**

In selecting a measure of Satisfaction, we sought a published scale that was brief, psychometrically sound, and applicable to adolescent dyads. The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS, Hendrick, 1998) was selected because it met the first two criteria in addition to being a widely used measure in marital research. It is a seven item (two reverse-scored items) measure requiring participants to answer on a five point Likert type scale. The published Chronbach’s Alpha is .86 (Hendrick, 1998). Although it had not previously been used with adolescent romantic relationships (according to personal correspondence with its author), the scale was easily modified to fit the purposes of the present study. The verb tense of items was changed from present tense to past tense to require participants to reflect on the chosen relationship from high school as opposed to reflecting on a current relationship. In thinking about the previous
relationship, respondents were asked to think about the middle of the relationship, simply
defined as, “after the beginning stages, but before things started to go sour.” This helped to
negate the intense emotions felt at the onset and termination of relationships. The Chronbach’s
alpha for the modified RAS in the present study was found to be .90.

**Assessing Significance of Distal Influences.**

At the present time, no instrument exists that has investigated the significance of outside
factors on adolescent romantic relationships in the manner proposed. Therefore, in order to
produce a survey that accomplished the specified goals, questions were created after consultation
with several tests related to the specific sources of distal influence (Bardis, 1962; Bienvenu,

Each item was scored by the respondent on a 5-point Likert scale (Definitely False,
Somewhat False, Undecided, Somewhat True, Definitely True). This scale was used to assess
potential influences from peers, friends, parents, religion, and society as a whole. The scale
consists of 30 items: six items for each of the five aforementioned sources (one item from each
of the five subscales is reverse scored). Participants were asked to think about the middle of
their relationships when responding to these items. Following are one example from each of the
subscales: At the middle of our relationship, my partner and I…

- …felt pressure to act a certain way in public. (Society)
- …received helpful advice about our relationship from our parents. (Parents)
- …acted differently in front of our peers than we did when we were alone. (Peers)
- …made decisions about our relationship based on religious principles. (Religion)
- …made judgments about our relationship based on what our friends thought. (Friends)
A reliability analysis of this overall Distal Influences scale (29 items due to the one deletion from the Parents subscale) yielded a Chronbach’s alpha of .66. The alpha for the Parents subscale (with one item deletion) was found to be .52. The alpha for the Society subscale was .58; for the Religion subscale alpha equaled .77. The alpha for the Peers subscale was found to be .466; alpha for the Friends subscale equaled .231. The unusually low subscale scores for the Peers and Friends subscales are believed to be caused by the indiscriminance on behalf of the participants regarding the two subgroups (peers and friends). The difference between these two constructs may have been simply semantic for participants. When the Peer and Friend subscales were combined to form a new (12 item) subscale, Cohort, the Chronbach’s alpha was determined to be .56. This partially confirms the hypothesis that participants were unable to properly differentiate between the two groups when responding to the questionnaire.

**Design and Procedure**

The survey was designed in and hosted by Messiah College’s Qualtrics electronic survey tool. The survey remained open for two weeks. After the survey was closed and incomplete responses and responses from unqualified participants were removed, responses were groomed to ensure no participant responded twice. Data was imported from the electronic survey tool into SPSS for data analysis. Items requiring reverse coding were reverse coded. Following descriptive analyses on the demographic data, a reliability analysis was run on the scales and subscales. A bivariate correlation was then run as well as a linear regression.

**Results**

Significant correlations were found between all four subscales (Parents, Society, Religion, Cohort) and Satisfaction. A two-tail bivariate correlation revealed a positive correlation between amount of influence from Religion and Satisfaction, \( r(95) = .34, p = .001 \).
Influences from Parents were also positively correlated with Satisfaction, $r(95) = .24, p = .017$. However, the stronger the influences from the dyad’s Cohort, the less Satisfaction was reported, $r(95) = -.31, p = .002$. Influences from Society were also negatively correlated with Satisfaction, $r(95) = -.35, p < .001$. (See Table 1 for scale cross-correlations.) These correlations demonstrate an almost perfect inverse relationship between the positively correlated and negatively correlated factors.

An analysis of linear regression showed that when controlling for other predictors, influences from the dyad’s Cohort were the best predictor of low Satisfaction, $\beta = -.21, t(90) = -2.04, p = .04$; influences from Religion were found to be the best predictor of elevated Satisfaction, $\beta = .21, t(90) = 1.98, p = .05$. This means that the relative importance of Religion is the most significant in anticipating greater Satisfaction; the Cohort is the distal influence most significantly indicating lower Satisfaction. (See Table 2 for full regression results.)

Further analysis has revealed that the significance of Gender in predicting Satisfaction is partially mediated by the influence of Religion. Males tended to report more religious influence, and religious influence is positively correlated with Satisfaction; therefore the influence of Gender is going through the influence of religion to predict Satisfaction. The analysis of a linear regression using Religion as the constant shows this statistical significance at the $p < .05$ level.

**Discussion**

These results greatly enhance our understanding of the role of socializing factors for adolescents in romantic relationships. As the importance of dating experiences during the teenage years continues to increase so too does our need to understand them. Given that satisfaction plays the greatest role in determining length of the relationship, the importance of understanding the factors that contribute to satisfaction cannot be understated.
The possible explanations for these results are many. We believe that the results are best explained in terms of the influence’s ability to promote accurate relationship expectations. Because expectations can serve as the comparison for present reality, the less realistic the expectations the more disappointed and dissatisfied the couple will be. Parents are experienced in relationships and assumedly know their children best and can thus give helpful and accurate advice that helps produce expectations that are more valid for their teenagers. Society is infamous for providing inaccurate models for comparison. The media, implicit cultural norms, and traditions can put unnecessary constraints and pressure on young couples to conform to specific unrealistic expectations. When couples fail to meet these standards the result is dissatisfaction.

Explanations for the effects of Religion and Cohort are a bit less obvious (interestingly enough these two influences were the most important according to the regression). It is likely that peers express similar unrealistic expectations as championed by society. In addition, members of the dyad's cohort are concurrently experimenting with their own ideas about relationships. The influence if Religion is most likely positive because the participants report being religious. If the participants were non-religious, influences from Religion may prove to be more negative than positive in predicting Satisfaction.

The potential weaknesses and sources of error in this study are many. One of the most important weaknesses is the retroflective nature of this research. Requiring participants to report on a relationship that potentially occurred several years prior surely created many errors in reporting. Some of these errors may have been reflected in the relatively low reliabilities of the Distal Influences subscales. The conclusions drawn from the correlations and regressions are
weakened by the slightly reduced reliability of the subscales. In addition, the sample was almost entirely Christian and White. These two characteristics limit the robustness of this research.

Despite its sources of error, this research has many important implications especially for helping teens. Much of the strife faced by teens relates in some way to relationship turmoil. Relationship dissolution can be an especially negative experience, potentially leading to depression, anxiety, decreased feelings of self worth and the like (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004). For this reason, and the fact that satisfaction is linked to dissolution one can see the importance of understanding reasons for satisfaction or lack there of.

The major contribution of this study is in its contribution to the realization that satisfaction is linked to external influences which likely shape the value set of the couple. Therefore, when counseling teens who are experiencing dissatisfaction, we must understand the source of the teen’s values because the source is significantly related to the presence or absence of satisfaction. An understanding of how religious, societal, cohort, and parental influences relate to romantic relationship satisfaction, possibly via the role of values and expectations, allows caregivers, friends, clinicians, pastors and the like to more accurately conceptualize and more beneficially assist teenagers in their expression of love.
References


### Table 1

*Scale Correlations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Distal Influences</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Society</th>
<th>Religion</th>
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<td>-.31**</td>
<td>-.35**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
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<td>-.34**</td>
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<td>.53**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>-.24*</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Pearson, 2-tailed, N=97.

* * p < .05, ** p < .01.

### Table 2

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Predictors of Satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
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<th>SE B</th>
<th>β</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>.78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort</td>
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<td>-.21*</td>
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<td>Society</td>
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<td>.17</td>
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<td>Religion</td>
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<td>.11</td>
<td>.21*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.21*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 97, $R^2 = .33$, $F = 7.24^{***}$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. 