



Developmental trajectories of romantic stages and associations with problem behaviours during adolescence



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A B S T R A C T

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Normative romantic development is theorized to progress through a series of stages: affiliative activities, group-based dating, and romantic relationships. The objectives of this research were threefold: empirically examine this progression of romantic stages during adolescence, determine normative and atypical trajectories, and examine links with internalizing and externalizing symptoms. An eight-wave longitudinal study was conducted with 698 adolescents (53.6% female; $M_{age} = 11.8$ years at start of study). A group-based trajectory approach was employed to identify prototypical trajectories of romantic development and a model with three distinct romantic trajectories (i.e., On-time, Early Starters and Late Bloomers) was identified. Both timing and sequencing of romantic activity differed among trajectory groups. Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) identified associations between Early Starters and externalizing behaviours in early, middle and later adolescence. The findings support progression through theorized stages of romantic activity and highlight the problems that are linked to early-starting and non-sequenced romantic development.

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Romantic experiences are an important component of an adolescent's social maturation (Collins, 2003; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). Alongside positive developmental functions, navigating romantic experiences can evoke intense emotions (Brand, Luethi, von Planta, Hatzinger, & Holsboer-Trachsler, 2007), stress (Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999), and social-emotional difficulties (Joyner & Udry, 2000). The *normative trajectory model* links developmentally atypical romantic activity with a greater proclivity for adjustment problems and provides a framework for understanding this relationship (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Davila, 2008; Welsh, Grello, & Harper, 2003). Previous research has suggested that normative romantic development begins in early adolescence and progresses through stages encompassing several romantic activities. Initially, young people engage in mixed-gender activities and group dating (Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Feiring, 1999). These activities typically precede the emergence of casual dating and comprise a developmental progression through adolescence, culminating in mature romantic partnerships (Brown, 1999; Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999, 2004; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1994). Stage theories of romantic development are widely accepted (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Davies & Windle, 2000; Meier & Allen, 2009; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003), but to date, researchers have not empirically tested

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how romantic activity, in all of its developmentally-appropriate forms, progresses across longitudinal trajectories. The first purpose of the present research is to identify normative and non-normative trajectories of romantic stages across adolescence, examining both timing and sequencing within trajectories. Following this, the normative trajectory model will be examined to determine whether developmentally atypical romantic trajectories are linked to problematic outcomes.

Stage theories of romantic activity

According to life course theory, the changes that occur within individuals' lives can be conceptualized as a sequence of socially defined events or roles (Elder, 1994; Giele & Elder, 1998). Relating to romantic experiences, life course theory proposes that adolescents become intensely interested in matters of romance during the early adolescent years, and this initiates a course of age-differentiated experiences (Elder, 1994). Consistent with this view, theories of romantic development organize romantic activity within a sequence of stages through which young people progress towards dyadic adult-like romantic partnerships (Brown, 1999; Connolly et al., 2004; Furman & Wehner, 1994). Research supports three broad romantic stages associated with the three phases of adolescence: *Entry into romantic affiliations* during early adolescence when puberty triggers romantic interest and affiliation within mixed-gender peer groups (Connolly et al., 2004; Friedlander, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2007), *Exploring romantic relationships* during middle adolescence, when casual dating emerges, both in the form of group dating as well as short-lived dyads (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003), and *Consolidating dyadic romantic bonds* during later adolescence, when exclusive and stable romantic partnerships are established (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). While these theorists propose that these stages emerge sequentially across the phases of adolescence and support age-appropriate romantic growth, these hypotheses have yet to be examined empirically across the adolescent age range.

Trajectories of romantic stages

Developmental trajectories are an important framework to understand maturation within the romantic domain because they simultaneously capture two components of romantic development: timing, or the age at which specific milestones occur, and sequencing, or the order of the events in the sequence. A small number of studies, employing both cross-sectional and longitudinal data, have examined romantic development. Rather than considering the full range of ages and activities however, these studies have focused on dyadic dating or having a boy/girlfriend, comparing their frequencies at different phases of adolescence. Nonetheless these studies provide preliminary insights into the two components of longitudinal trajectories of romantic development: timing and sequencing of romantic activities.

Timing of dyadic dating

Most frequently, studies have focused on the age at which dyadic dating starts to occur. From a normative perspective the timing of dating involvement has most often been linked to the onset of puberty in early adolescence, with other factors, such as social expectations and cultural norms, also contributing to its emergence (Dornbusch et al, 1981; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). Carver, Joyner, and Udry (2003) noted that involvement in dating tends to become increasingly more normative during mid-adolescence, such that the number of adolescents reporting romantic relationships increases from 25% at age 12 to 50% by age 15. Similarly, other studies have noted that dating typically begins around 14–15 years of age (Connolly et al., 1999; Feiring, 1999).

Sequencing of romantic activities

With regard to sequencing, a small number of studies have supported the notion of a normative progression from less intensive to more intensive dating. For example, Davies and Windle (2000) examined romantic relationships among mid-adolescents aged 15–16 years, across a one year interval. It was found that casual relationships generally preceded more serious ones, either multiple relationships or a steady one. Similarly, an eight-year prospective study assessed the presence of a romantic partner at ages 13, 15, 17, and 21 (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). The study found support for a developmental sequence with respect to engagement in romantic relationships, such that the number of adolescents in romantic relationships increased with age. Finally, Meier and Allen (2009) examined the type of relationship adolescents were involved in over a six-year interval from ages 11 to 18. They found that younger adolescents had few romantic relationships, but with age, they came to establish dyadic, intimate romantic partnerships. In spite of the unique contributions of these studies, their findings with regard to understanding normative sequences are limited by the restricted range of romantic activities, which precludes examination of progression across the theorized stages.

By including a variety of romantic activities, Connolly et al. (2004) examined a stage conceptualization of romantic involvement and followed early adolescents for 9 months. They found that young people's romantic growth followed a progression from affiliative activities to group-based dating, and finally to romantic partnerships. Connolly et al. (2004) also found support for the notion that activities formed "soft" stages that allowed for overlapping activities and some movement among proximal stages. These findings provide initial support for a sequence of romantic stages whereby adolescents generally transition from same-gender friendships to mixed-gender affiliations, then to dating, and finally to dyadic

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