



# Brief report: How adolescent personality moderates the effect of love history on the young adulthood romantic relationship quality?



Rongqin Yu<sup>a,\*</sup>, Susan Branje<sup>a</sup>, Loes Keijsers<sup>a</sup>, Wim Meeus<sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Research Centre Adolescent Development, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Department of Developmental Psychology, Tilburg University, The Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of previous romantic relationship involvement on later romantic relationship quality and tested whether adolescents' personality type (i.e., overcontrollers, undercontrollers, resilients) moderated this link. We answered our research questions in a sample of 320 Dutch participants (213 girls) who had a romantic relationship when they were 21 years old. At 12 years of age, their personality types were identified. At 21 years of age, participants reported their current romantic relationship quality (i.e., commitment, exploration, and reconsideration) and indicated the number of romantic relationships they had before. No main effects of the number of romantic relationships on current romantic relationship quality were found. There were significant interaction effects between personality types and the number of romantic relationships on romantic relationship quality. With more romantic relationship experiences, undercontrollers committed less to and explored less in their current romantic relationship. No such link was found for resilients and overcontrollers.

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Although romantic relationship involvement is common during adolescence, it has been linked to both negative and positive developmental outcomes (e.g., depression, delinquency, self-confidence; [Furman & Collins, 2009](#); [Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2001](#)). However, it is unknown for which adolescents romantic relationship involvement has negative or positive consequences. In this study, we examined the overall hypothesis that the developmental significance of involvement in romantic relationships might depend on individual personality characteristics ([Furman & Collins, 2009](#)).

More specifically, we focused on the quality of later romantic relationships as an outcome. A recent study showed that adolescents who dated fewer romantic partners during mid-adolescence had better romantic relationship quality in young adulthood ([Madsen & Collins, 2011](#)), suggesting that romantic relationship involvement in adolescence may have adverse effects on later relationship satisfaction. However, a risk group was studied and replicability of the results needs to be tested in other populations. More importantly, individuals' personality types (i.e., overcontrollers, undercontrollers, resilients; [Block & Block, 1980](#)) might moderate the effect of romantic relationship involvement on future romantic relationship quality. In particular, resilients are more capable to develop high-quality relationships than individuals with less resilient personalities

\* Corresponding author. Research Centre Adolescent Development, Department of Youth and Family, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Utrecht University, P.O. Box 80.140, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 30 2534617.

E-mail address: [r.yu@uu.nl](mailto:r.yu@uu.nl) (R. Yu).

such as undercontrollers and overcontrollers (Asendorpf, Borkenau, Ostendorf, & Van Aken, 2001). Moreover, dissolutions of relationships might have more negative effects for individuals who are less able to have a good relationship. Thus, individuals with a less resilient personality type might be more negatively influenced by their romantic relationship dissolutions. The current study tested the replicability of the negative link between romantic relationship involvement and later romantic relationship quality in a normal population and whether adolescent personality moderates the link.

## Method

### Participants and procedure

Participants were 320 Dutch participants (213 girls) who had a romantic relationship when they were on average 21.35 years old ( $SD = 0.54$ ). This sample was part of the younger cohort of an ongoing longitudinal study Conflict and Management of Relationships (Meeus, Van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010). The present study used data gathered when participants were at age 12 and 21.

### Measures

**Age 12 personality types.** Adolescents rated their personality on the Quick Big Five questionnaire (Goldberg, 1992; Vermulst & Gerris, 2005). Five personality dimensions: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional stability, and Openness to new experience, were assessed with 6 items each, scored on 7-point Likert scales (from 1 = *very untrue* to 7 = *very true*). Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s ranged from .75 to .86. An earlier study has revealed that three personality types can be constructed directly from the Big Five dimensions with a latent class analysis which is an advanced person-centered analytic strategy grouping individuals into classes (Meeus, Van der Schoot, Klimstra, & Branje, 2011; Nylund, Asparouhov, & Muthén, 2007). We adopted this classification from the larger study including our sample. In our sample, there were 151 overcontrollers, 29 undercontrollers, and 140 resilients. See Meeus, Van de Schoot, Klimstra, & Branje (2011) for mean scores on the Big Five dimensions for each personality type.

**Age 21 Relationship history and quality.** Number of relationships was obtained by counting the frequency of starting a relationship as reported by participants in a Life History Calendar (LHC; Caspi et al., 1996). LHC is a data-collection method for obtaining reliable retrospective event-history data, which has shown good test-retest reliability and has been considered as an accurate measure of romantic relationship history (Caspi et al., 1996; Asendorpf, & Van Aken, 1999).

**Quality of intimate relationship** was assessed with the Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (U-MICS; Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008). Participants rated their current romantic relationship commitment (e.g., My partner gives me certainly in life; 5 items,  $\alpha = .91$ ), in-depth exploration (e.g., I tried a lot to learn about my partner; 5 items,  $\alpha = .78$ ), and reconsideration (e.g., I often think another partner would make my life more interesting; 3 items,  $\alpha = .94$ ). Likert-scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*totally disagree*) was used and scores were reversely coded.

## Results

### Overview of participants' romantic experiences

On average the participants had 0.95 ( $SD = 1.17$ ) romantic relationships before the current one. In particular, 146 (45.6%) reported having no prior relationship, 90 (28.1%) reported having had one, 57 (17.8%) reported having had two, and 27 (8.4%) reported having had three or more relationships. The frequency of prior romantic relationship was not different for boys or girls ( $t[320] = 0.64, p = .52$ ), nor for youths with different personality types ( $F[2, 319] = 0.71, p = .49$ ). In addition, there was no significant difference in the distribution of number of relationships by personality types ( $\chi^2[N = 320, 8] = 8.57, p = .74$ ). To answer our research questions, we conducted linear regression analyses in *Mplus* (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012) and used robust maximum likelihood (MLR; Satorra & Bentler, 2001) to take the non-normal distribution of the data into account. Two dummy variables were used to compare personality types, with resilients as the reference group (see Table 1 for descriptive

**Table 1**

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among number of previous romantic relationships and young adults' romantic relationship quality by personality types.

Measure	Overcontrollers ( $n = 151$ )					Undercontrollers ( $n = 29$ )					Resilients ( $n = 140$ )				
	$M (SD)$	1	2	3	4	$M (SD)$	1	2	3	4	$M (SD)$	1	2	3	4
1. No. of Relations before	0.94 (1.14)	–	–.01	.11	–.10	0.72 (1.07)	–	–.49**	–.49**	.34	1.01 (1.21)	–	.00	.18*	–.06
2. Commitment	4.16 (0.62)		–	.21**	–.38**	4.38 (0.73)		–	.74***	–.21	4.12 (0.65)		–	.44**	–.49***
3. Exploration	3.93 (0.58)			–	–.10	4.14 (0.84)			–	–.15	3.97 (0.58)			–	–.19*
4. Reconsideration	1.50 (0.82)				–	1.49 (0.99)				–	1.38 (0.62)				–

Note.  $M (SD)$  = mean (standard deviation); \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

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