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Having and being an other-sex crush during early adolescence

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ABSTRACT

This study examined other-sex crush experiences (both having and being perceived as an other-sex crush) among 544 young adolescents (mean age = 12.74 years). Results indicated that 56% had at least one current other-sex crush, with little overlap between crushes, friends, and boyfriends/girlfriends. Significant associations between other-sex crush scores (scores reflecting the number of crush nominations received) and physical attractiveness, relational aggression, physical aggression, and popularity, as reported by same-sex and other-sex peers, were found. In addition, crush scores were (a) associated with same-sex likeability for boys (but not girls) and (b) uniquely related to peer nominations of popularity and physical attractiveness, as reported by other-sex peers. Neither having nor being perceived as an other-sex crush was uniquely related to loneliness. Taken together, the findings suggest that other-sex crushes are normative experiences during early adolescence that warrant further research attention.

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Introduction

The popular wisdom expressed in movies, songs, and romance novels would have us believe that other-sex crushes are nearly universal during adolescence. But very few studies have examined this phenomenon; to our knowledge, other-sex crushes have been investigated only (a) via retrospective accounts or (b) in studies that did not distinguish between crushes and other types of close relationships. In the current study, we addressed the poorly understood romantic experience of crushes by considering the following three questions. First, are other-sex crushes distinct from other-sex friendships and romantic relationships? Second, how common are other-sex crushes? Third, what are the characteristics of young adolescents who become other-sex crushes (e.g., are they popular?)? In addition, we considered, with an exploratory approach, whether having other-sex crushes and being

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viewed as crushes were associated with loneliness. We focused on other-sex crushes during early adolescence, the developmental period when crushes are most likely to occur and are most relevant to psychosocial adjustment (Hurlock & Klein, 1934; Siegel & Shaughnessy, 1995).

Distinctiveness and prevalence of having other-sex crushes

The use of the term “crush” as we know it may have originated in the 19th-century practice of referring to a crowded social gathering or dance as a “crush” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). At a crush, attendees had the opportunity to see, bump into, and perhaps meet individuals they found attractive. Today, the term refers to a target-specific liking for another person, characterized by unilateral physical or romantic attraction or sexual feelings and fantasies (Hurlock & Klein, 1934; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002).

Although few studies of crushes exist, there is some evidence to suggest that crushes are distinct from other-sex friendships and romantic relationships. For instance, it was found in one study that most young adults (75%) report developing crushes for same-age other-sex peers who are casual acquaintances with whom they occasionally interact; fewer (17%) developed crushes for close other-sex friends (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002). In addition, the majority of adolescents (~63%) in the Hurlock and Klein (1934) study reported the *absence* of sexual relations with and intimate disclosure to their crushes, suggesting that many crushes differ from romantic relationships during early adolescence (Furman & Collins, 2009). Thus, based on the evidence, we expected that adolescents' nominations of crushes, other-sex friends, and romantic partners in our study would rarely overlap.

The extant literature led us to anticipate not only that crushes are distinct from other peer relationships during early adolescence but also that they are very common peer experiences. Support for this expectation was provided by findings indicating that the vast majority of adolescents and young adults report having had at least one other-sex crush in the past (Hearn, O'Sullivan, & Dudley, 2003; Hurlock & Klein, 1934; Kornreich, Hearn, Rodriguez, & O'Sullivan, 2003). For example, in one study, 94% of young adolescent girls (12–14 years) reported having had crushes on at least one other-sex peer in the past (Hearn, O'Sullivan, & Dudley, 2003). The use of the term “crush” increases throughout the elementary school years (Thorne & Luria, 1986), and most individuals report their first crushes as occurring during early adolescence and prior to experiences with first dates, boyfriends/girlfriends, and “loves” (Hearn, O'Sullivan, & Dudley, 2003; Hurlock & Klein, 1934; Janssen, 2008; Siegel & Shaughnessy, 1995). These findings on the prevalence and developmental timing of crushes are consistent with theory and research indicating that young adolescents spend considerable time thinking about other-sex peers and romantic issues before actually interacting with other-sex peers or becoming involved in mutual romantic relationships (Blyth, Hill, & Thiel, 1982; Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004; Dunphy, 1963; Richards, Crowe, Larson, & Swarr, 1998).

Finally, drawing from theory and past research (e.g., Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Hurlock & Klein, 1934), it was further hypothesized that most adolescents in our study would report having crushes for other-sex peers and that few crushes would be mutual (or reciprocated). However, it is important to note that the strongest evidence to date that the large majority of adolescent boys and girls (72% of boys and 87% of girls) have had at least one crush in the past, with most reporting other-sex crushes, comes from a study published nearly 80 years ago (Hurlock & Klein, 1934). Due to significant historical and cultural changes during the past century, it is not clear whether these findings are generalizable to today's adolescents. In addition, past investigators did not specifically test the mutuality (or lack thereof) of crush nominations even though it is theorized that most crushes are unilateral affective preferences (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Hurlock & Klein, 1934), likely because only a small group of individuals are crushed on and, thus, it is not possible for many crushes to be reciprocated. Because individuals only occasionally interact with their crushes (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002), it is also plausible that some young adolescents are not aware of who has crushes on them and, thus, are not able to reciprocate the affection.

It should also be noted that a major limitation of the available literature on the distinctiveness and prevalence of crushes is that most previous studies relied on retrospective accounts by adolescents and adults (Hearn, O'Sullivan, & Dudley, 2003; Hurlock & Klein, 1934; Kornreich, Hearn, Rodriguez, & O'Sullivan, 2003), which may be subject to recall error and bias (Loftus & Pickrell, 1995). In addition,

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