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Discrepancies within Global Perceptions of Adolescent Romantic Relationships

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Introduction

In the past decade there has been a substantial focus of research on adolescent romantic relationships (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). One line within this broad focus of research has begun to examine discrepancies between romantic partners; in that romantic partners may have very different perceptions of what is occurring within their relationship (Welsh, Galliher, Kawaguchi, & Rostosky, 1999; Galliher, Enno, & Wright, 2008; Haugen, Welsh, & McNulty, 2008). These divergent perceptions about experiences and beliefs concerning adolescents' own romantic relationships question whether adolescents in these early relationships experience mutuality (Welsh et al., 1999). Instead, adolescent romantic partners may focus more on their partner's actions, and their behavior may be indicative of how they perceive their partner is acting. The unique lack of communication and mutuality may stem from the newness of the experience of a romantic relationship and the level of development of social cognition that has been achieved when engaging in romantic relationships (Gurucharri & Selman, 1982). Therefore, among adolescent romantic relationships, partners may each act in accordance with how they perceive their partner.

There are several factors that may influence the degree of perspective taking and understanding between adolescents. Individuals with low self esteem feel less capable in their ability to engage in a romantic relationship (Bouchey, 2007), and anxious partners crave support, closeness, and reassurance from their romantic partners more often (Collins and Read, 1990). In contrast, partners who perceive equality tend to feel better about themselves, report more acceptance, and feel less anxious (Bouchey, 2007), and romantically involved individuals

report being closer to their ideal self than single individuals (Campbell, Sedikides, & Boson, 1994). Weiss (1980) found that in married couples, partners' perceptions of their spouses may be characteristic of their ideal of the relationship rather than specific behaviors, so that the perceived quality of the relationship is projected onto the spouse and supersedes the spouse's actual behavior. This may in part hold true for adolescent romantic relationships as well. Additionally, Furman and Wehner (1994) reported that individuals develop certain views of romantic relationships (representations of romantic relationships, representations of oneself in romantic relationships, and representations of one's partner in romantic relationships) again indicating that partners in romantic relationships may interpret the relationship from different perspectives.

Additionally, high anxiety levels in a partner are predictive of that individual attributing more negative assessments to his or her partner (Collins, 1996), perceiving more conflict on a daily basis (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, and Kashy, 2005), and projecting onto one's partner (Mikulineer & Horesh, 1999). When one partner of a couple is highly anxious, both partners are likely to view conflict as more detrimental to their romantic relationship even though the highly anxious individual feels more hurt by the conflict (Campbell et al., 2005). In relationships where partners perceive more support, couple members are more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction, perceive more partner satisfaction, feel more optimistic about the relationship future, and perceive that one's partner is more optimistic about the relationship future (Campbell et al., 2005).

These perceptions of one's own behaviors, thoughts, and feelings may be correlated to how one perceives his or her partner to be behaving. Perceptions that adolescent romantic partners gather from daily events influence how partners view each others' underlying motives within their relationship (Fincham, 2001). However, the development of acute perception skills may not take place until the context of such adolescent relationships (Furman & Simon, 1999). Haugen et al. (2008) found that the ability to read one another's cognitive and affective states (defined as empathic accuracy) may depend on experience within relationships more than age, gender, or length of a relationship. Therefore, adolescents may vary in their abilities of empathic accuracy leaving some adolescent romantic partners with little ability to correctly interpret the actions, core motivations, and affective states of their romantic partners. With such variation within adolescents, skewed perceptions could be a prevalent facet of some adolescent romantic relationships.

Though differences in perceptions can be attributed to individual differences, age may be significant as well. Research has found that older adolescents differ from younger adolescents within their romantic relationships. Older adolescents (18 – 20 years) have longer romantic relationship duration and value commitment-relevant aspects more than younger couples (Bouchev, 2007). Older adolescents also have fewer nonreciprocal relationships than middle school youth (Carlson & Rose, 2007). These differences may be indicative of a discrepancy in development of skills such as perspective taking and conflict negotiation which are both integral in successful romantic relationships.

Perspective taking development may in some instances directly influence the perceived existence of a romantic relationship which may explain the following statistics of self-reportedly single individuals: 41.6% of 3rd graders, 50.3% of 5th graders, 63% of 7th graders, and 60% of 9th graders (Carlson & Rose, 2007). This odd pattern could be due to a less basic cognition of perceptions interfering with the ability to rule whether an actual relationship exists. Younger adolescents may not be at the same social, developmental level as older adolescents. Also, in early adolescence, the purpose of a romantic relationship is more self-fulfilling in nature (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006), and the necessary maturity for a romantic relationship is typically not achieved until late adolescence (Allen & Land, 1999). Conflict resolution tactics also tend to increase with age through young adulthood (Laursen, Finkelstein, & Betts, 2001) which is an important skill for the durability of romantic relationships. Such conflict resolution tactics are also indicative of an increase in the ability of perspective-taking which is often utilized in conflict resolution.

Much of the research on examining discrepancies in adolescents' perceptions about their romantic relationships thus far has been focused on the perceptions of observed interactions between partners (Welsh & Shulman, 2008). The trend is reversed for married couples, where there is more self-reporting data and less observational data regarding marital relationships (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987); however, there is more observational data for adolescent romantic relationships and far less self report data available (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). This study evaluates adolescent romantic couple members' perceptions of the global qualities of their romantic relationship. Global perceptions about their relationship quality indicate each partner's more general beliefs and feelings about the relationship and one

another as opposed to evaluating one specific conflicted moment. In contrast to rating the quality of an observed interaction, the rating of global relationship quality looks to evaluate a relationship through self report which is thought to be indicative of the overall quality of the romantic relationship. Observed interactions evaluate a relationship based on specific instances instead of an assessment of the whole relationship (McNulty & Karney, 2001).

In summary, there is evidence to support that perceptions within adolescent romantic relationships may differ between partners and that they may further differ as a function of age. Adolescent romantic partners can experience different relationships due to variation in perception. These diverse perceptions are not isolated to specific partner interactions, but also in reference to relationship quality. Adolescent romantic partners may experience their relationship divergently from one another based on differences in perceptions about their relationship (Bentley, Galliher, & Ferguson, 2007). These differences in perceptions shape how each partner interprets the other's motives and actions. Thusly, if one makes perceptions about his partner, and if those perceptions are divergent from reality, then the conclusions reached about a partner's motives and actions may be incorrect. Partners may also regulate their behaviors based on their perceptions of their partner. Whatever a partner senses he or she is getting from her partner, he or she will give back. Additionally, younger adolescents may not have achieved an appropriate level of social cognition for a romantic relationship (Gurucharri & Selman, 1982), which enhances the difference in projected perceptions and reality.

This study analyzes the differences in perceptions of relationship quality between adolescent romantic partners. It is hypothesized that adolescent romantic partners will give to

their partners what they perceive that they are getting from their partners across five global relationship qualities: togetherness, commitment, communication, emotional support, and passion. These perceptions are also hypothesized to vary across age with increasing accuracy as adolescents grow older. Thus, adolescent romantic partners are expected to become better at understanding their partner as they grow older.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The data for this investigation came from the Study of Tennessee Adolescent Romantic Relationships (STARR). Couples were recruited to reflect two age groups: middle and late adolescence, with each partner falling within those age ranges. The final sample included 92 adolescent romantic couples with ages ranging from 14 – 21. All couples were heterosexual and were recruited from a previous study on adolescent dating behaviors of over 2,200 students attending 17 high schools in eastern Tennessee. These schools were chosen to represent all communities (rural, suburban, and urban) and to reflect the socioeconomic diversity in the area. Individuals from the high school study who indicated potential interest in participating in future research (86% of the participants from the high school sample) were contacted by telephone and provided information regarding the purpose and procedures of the upcoming adolescent romantic couple study. Target adolescents were either 15 or 16 and dating a partner between 14 and 17 or 18 or 19 and dating a partner between 17 and 21. Adolescents who met the age criteria and reported dating their current partner for at least 4 weeks were mailed consent forms describing the procedure and contacted 1 week later regarding their willingness

to participate. Similar-aged partners were recruited for this study so that questions about couples at different developmental stages could be examined.

Of the target adolescents, the mean age was 17.37. The majority of the sample identified as Caucasian (90.8%), with the remainder of the sample identifying as African American (5.4%), Hispanic (1.1%), Native American (1.1%), Asian (0.5%), and Other (1.1%). Approximately half of the sample identified their neighborhoods as suburban (47.8%), followed by rural (32.1%) and urban (19.6%). Parental education level (the highest level of education completed by either parent) was used as an indicator for socioeconomic status. About two-thirds of adolescents reported that either their father or mother did not have a college degree. Additionally, 45.3% of participants reported having fathers with a high school degree or less, and 42.4% of participants reported that their mothers had a high school degree or less.

Couples came to our project facility for a total of 3 hours of data collection. Data collection was scheduled at the couple's convenience and was completed in one session. Our facility was comprised of three separate rooms within a suite, which allowed each couple member sufficient privacy from our staff and from each other. Snacks and beverages were available during the administration to facilitate alertness and cooperation. Couple members were paid \$30 each (\$60/couple) for their participation.

Measures

Demographics: A demographic questionnaire was used to obtain information about participants' residence, age, race, and parental education level.

Relationship satisfaction: Levesque's (1993) Relationship Satisfaction Scale was used to assess relationship satisfaction in the context of adolescents' romantic relationships. It was developed by modifying Spanier's (1976) widely used Dyadic Adjustment Scale and is similar to Hendrick and Hendrick's (1988) measure of relationship satisfaction. Thirty items were used to examine measures of togetherness, emotional support, communication, commitment, and passion. There were 6 items for each relationship quality (3 relevant to giving, and 3 relevant to getting). Example items include, *I am happiest when we are together*, and *I never have to lie to her*. Participants responded to the items using a 6-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

Results

Is the giving of relationship qualities correlated with getting relationship qualities?

The first aim of this study was to determine if there was a relationship between adolescent romantic partners' giving of relationship qualities and getting relationship qualities. Correlations between getting and giving relationship qualities are reported in Table 1. Results are divided by gender, but not indicative of analysis which evaluated gender differences. All correlations are significant ($p < .01$) for both males and females indicating that what an adolescent romantic partner perceives to be getting from his or her partner is highly related to what he or she reports giving to his or her partner. For males, the highest correlation between getting and giving was commitment ($r = .80, p < .01$), and the lowest correlation was with regards to emotional support ($r = .65, p < .01$). For females, emotional support yielded the greatest correlation between giving and getting ($r = .75, p < .01$). Communication was the

lowest ($r = .54, p < .01$). However, overall for both males and females, what individual reported getting from their partner was significantly correlated to what they gave to their partner.

Regression analyses were performed to further analyze the relationship between getting and giving five global relationship qualities. There were 3 significant findings. With respect to togetherness, males who gave more togetherness were significantly less likely to report getting togetherness [$t(88) = -1.80, p < .08$]. Additionally, giving passion was significantly negatively correlated with getting passion for males, $t(88) = -.14, p < .07$, so that males who gave more passion felt that they received less passion. For females, giving emotional support was positively correlated with getting emotional support, $t(87) = 2.11, p < .04$, such that females who gave emotional support reported getting emotional support. Other results of the regression analyses were not significant.

Does age influence the giving of relationship qualities?

As a function of age, getting and giving relationship qualities were mostly non-significant ($p > .05$). With respect to getting relationship qualities, only commitment ($r = .21, p < .05$) was significantly related to age for females, where older females reported getting more commitment than younger females. For males, none of the 5 variables were significantly related to age. As for giving relationship qualities, none of the five variables were significant for females. For males, only togetherness ($r = -.21, p < .05$) was significantly related to age, such that older males reported giving less togetherness. Communication ($r = -.18, p < .10$) and passion ($r = .18, p < .10$) were marginally related indicating that older males were less communicative and gave less passion than females.

To further test whether these effects differed by age, variables were centered and appropriate interaction terms were added to the regression model. Three significant age interactions emerged. First, togetherness interacted with age [$t(88) = -1.80, p < .05$], such that at lower levels of togetherness younger boys gave more togetherness than older boys, however at higher levels of togetherness age had no effect (See *Figure 1*). Second, emotional support interacted with age, $t(86) = 2.53, p < .01$, such that at lower levels of receiving emotional support, younger males gave more emotional support to their partners than did older males. However, there was not a significant interaction with age for males who reported receiving high emotional support (See *Figure 2*). Third, there was an interaction between age and receiving passion for males [$t(87) = 2.76, p < .01$], such that at lower levels of reported passion, younger males gave more passion to their partners than older males (See *Figure 3*). Similar to togetherness and emotional support, there was no significant interaction for high levels of passion. Interestingly, all 3 significant interactions shared the same pattern where younger males who reported receiving less, gave more in return. In sum, these results demonstrated that giving and getting global relationship qualities (togetherness, emotional support, communication, commitment, and passion) are significantly correlated in adolescent romantic relationships. However, age is not an overwhelmingly significant factor affecting these relationships qualities, except in minimal instances.

Discussion

The present study explored adolescent romantic partners' perceptions of getting and giving 5 global relationship qualities (togetherness, emotional support, communication,

commitment, and passion). Specifically, Hypothesis 1 proposed that individual reports of giving and getting relationship qualities would be positively correlated, such that partners gave to their partners what they perceived to be receiving from them. Correlations were moderately to highly significant across all five relationship qualities which supports Hypothesis 1. Though the strength of the correlation varied by relationship quality and gender examined, all were significant. Further research could investigate the possibility of romantic partners projecting what they give to their partners as what they receive from their partners.

Three additionally significant relationships were revealed; however, only 1 supported Hypothesis 1. Males who gave togetherness to their partner reported receiving less togetherness in return. Males also reported giving more passion and receiving less from their partners. For males, they reported feeling that if they were investing into the relationship in regards to being a couple member (togetherness) and being passionate, then they felt that there was less reciprocity. These findings were not supportive of Hypothesis 1. Though this study cannot scientifically comment on gender differences due to the statistical analyses performed, speculation can predict that males' view of togetherness and passion is possibly confounded in that male couple members who feel invested as a couple member also view passion (as expressed physically) as pertinent to being an invested couple member. Thusly, in order to perceive togetherness, one must also perceive passion. For females who reported giving more emotional support, they also reported getting emotional support. Positive female correlations of emotional support supported Hypothesis 1 in that the giving of emotional support was positively correlated to the reports of receiving emotional support.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that perceptions of relationship qualities would vary as a function of age, and specifically, adolescents would report more reciprocity as they became older. This was hypothesized to reflect a social developmental perspective of adolescence. Overall, analysis did not support perceptions of relationship qualities varying as a function of age. With respect to getting relationship qualities, only commitment was significantly related to female age ($r = .21, p < .05$). Older females reported getting more commitment than younger females, but this could be indicative of a developmental change in their partners where men become more committed as they grow older. With regards to giving relationship qualities, for males, only togetherness was significant by communication and passion were marginal. Overall, this indicates that older males give less than younger males which is additionally supported by subsequent analysis. All three interactions were such that young males received less of a relationship quality (togetherness, passion, and emotional support); however, they gave more of the relationship quality in return than did older males receiving less. This did not hold for males who received high levels of a specific relationship quality. Implications of this finding are that younger males involved in a romantic relationship with a less invested female partner may give more in order to entice the less devoted partner. However, as males grow older, they tend to give less overall. This provides mild support of a developmental perspective for males in adolescent romantic relationships. Interestingly, there were not significant developmental findings with regards to females. Overall, the present study found support for Hypothesis 1. There is a correlation between what a partner perceives to be receiving from a partner and what he or she gives back. However, this proposition of reciprocity is not a function of age in most cases as Hypothesis 2 proposed, except a mild finding relating to male development.

Limitations

Though this study may provide additional insight into adolescent romantic relationships, it is limited in several ways. First, the sample was quite homogenous, comprised of participants who were predominately Caucasian and involved in heterosexual relationships. Additionally, all participants lived near a midsize southeastern U.S. city. This limits the capacity to which results can be generalized across racial and sexual minority adolescents. Secondly, participants identified themselves as being engaged in a romantic relationship for at least four weeks which may differ from less committed, casual relationships in many ways. Third, this study was cross-sectional, so there may be more benefits from a longitudinal study from a developmental perspective. Lastly, only five qualities were examined, so this cannot be generalized over all global relationship qualities.

Future Directions

Further research in this area is clearly needed. Specifically, it would be interesting for future studies to further investigate the high correlations between giving and getting relationship qualities to examine if projection onto romantic partners could explain such a correlation. Additionally, the examination of supplementary relationship qualities could provide a more complete understanding of global relationship qualities. Also recommended are studies focusing on adolescent romantic relationships examining age as a continuous variable instead of a dichotomous one which would allow for a more thorough developmental perspective. Lastly, future research should inspect global relationship qualities as a function of gender where direct comparisons can be conclusive of any gender differences.

Table 1: Correlations between Getting and Giving Relationship Qualities

Getting	Giving (Male)	Giving (Female)
Togetherness	.71**	.74**
Commitment	.80**	.70**
Communication	.68**	.54**
Emotional Support	.65**	.75**
Passion	.70**	.66**

**Correlation is significant at $p < .01$

Figure 1: Interactions of Age and Receiving Togetherness on Giving Togetherness

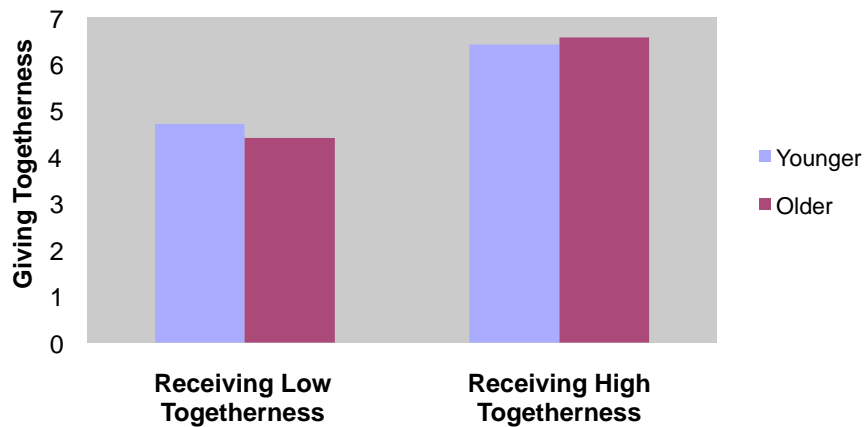


Figure 2: Interactions of Age and Receiving Emotional Support on Giving Emotional Support

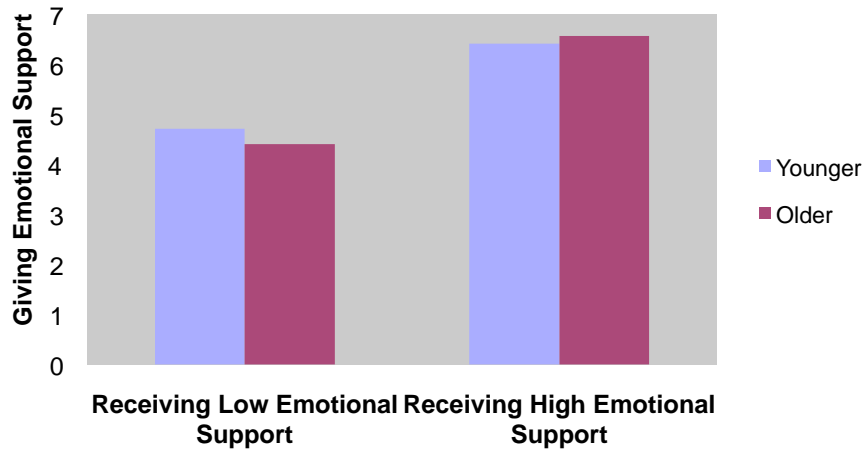
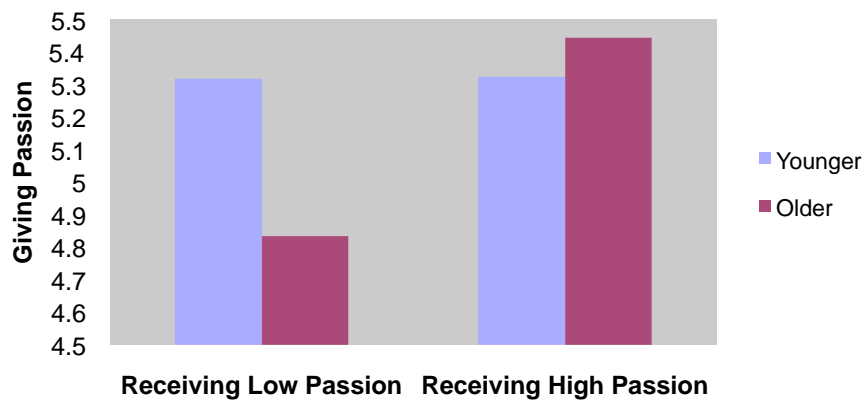


Figure 3: Interaction of Age and Receiving Passion on Giving Passion



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