Left Behind: An investigation of changing friendships for adolescents involved in dating relationships

Amy Elizabeth Claxton

University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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Left Behind: An investigation of changing friendships for adolescents involved in dating relationships

Amy Claxton
University of Tennessee

May 7, 2003
Abstract

This study examined the link between same-sex friendships and romantic relationships for middle and late adolescents. Data for this study was taken from the Study of Tennessee Adolescent Romantic Relationships (Welsh, 2000). Results indicated that adolescents perceive some change to their same-sex friendships after a friend begins dating, with no significant difference between males and females. However, if a female’s friend does not like her boyfriend, it is significantly likely that the friendship will change, she will experience more depression, and she will experience slightly less satisfaction in her dating relationship. If a male’s friend does not like his girlfriend, it is not likely to be associated with change in his friendship, nor is it likely to be associated with more depressive symptoms or less satisfaction in his dating relationship. When middle and late adolescents were examined separately, only one developmental difference was found. Older females (ages 18-21) experience more depression in association with their friend’s negative opinion of her boyfriend than younger females (ages 14-17).
skills and higher overall romantic relationship quality in later romantic relationships (Hennighausen, 2001). Both relationships are important for the adolescent’s development of intimacy and identity during a challenging developmental phase (Larson, Clore & Wood, 1999).

Adolescent dating has been approached more cautiously than adolescent friendships. Although romantic relationships can have both positive and negative consequences, committed relationships are generally viewed positively. Zimmer-Gimbeck, Siebenbruner, and Collins (2001) found that while overinvolvement with dating can create negative consequences in adolescents, overall emotional health improves for females who choose to date fewer partners. Individuals who date only a few stable partners also develop less hostility and better conflict-resolution skills in their intimate relationships (Madsen, 2001).

Clearly, both friendships and dating relationships can affect an adolescent in profound ways. The maintenance of strong and healthy relationships appears to have remarkable positive affects, both in the present and in the future. This is because as adolescents develop, friends become more and more important for support and as attachment figures. Dependence on a romantic partner occurs gradually throughout adolescence, peaking as the adolescent reaches adulthood (Furman, 2002). This is supported by Brendgen, Markiewicz, Doyle, and Bukowski’s (2001) study that found intimacy was experienced and valued more in friendships as adolescents grow older, with girls developing the need for intimacy sooner.

Although friendships are important during adolescence, they are not always constant. Roth and Parker (2001) found that the introduction of a dating partner into a
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Maintaining friendships and attaining romantic partners are developmental milestones during adolescence (Sullivan, 1954). During this time, friends and romantic partners become important to individuals as attachment figures. Both of these relationships are important for the healthy development of an individual (Ainsworth, 1989).

The quality of adolescents’ friendships is associated with healthy and unhealthy functioning. A friendship will often motivate adolescents to behave in positive or negative directions, and friends’ reinforcements can influence or alter prosocial behavior (McNamara, 2001). High levels of friend support are associated with lower levels of depression (Higgins 2000), while negative interactions with friends are associated with involvement in delinquency for both girls and boys (McNelles, 2000). Most studies support the idea that positive friendship interaction is associated with positive developmental outcomes, such as social competency, confidence, and high self-esteem (Hussong, 1997; Matsushima & Shiomi, 2002). Some adolescents even depend on their friends as their primary source of attachment (Freeman, 1997; Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchey, 2002).

Adolescent friendships also play an important role for future romantic relationships. Friendships are expected to contribute to the development of reciprocity and mutual intimacy that will become central to romantic relationships (Furman & Wehner, 1994). In fact, secure adolescent friendships predict better conflict resolution
friendship could create complex triangles of potential tension. Teens in this study reported feeling surprised, hurt, angry, and jealous when a friend who begins dating leaves them out, and nearly half of all adolescents report that this has occurred to them in the past. This occurs during an age when teenagers tend to view others as more rejecting and themselves as more opposing in general (Waldinger et al., 2002), which would aggravate the feelings of betrayal. When changes and terminations of friendships occur, they cause deep emotional distress in adolescents (George, 1999). However, previous studies did not factor in the friend’s opinion or perception of the dating partner and how it influences friendship change or overall mental health.

Some studies have noted gender differences in reactions to friendship changes. For example, girls are more likely to report a friendship change due to a third party involvement (George, 1999), and they will also report more feelings of jealously when they are left out (Roth & Parker, 2001). Girls also indicate more negative consequences to friendship changes (Degirmencioglu, 1995). Because of these findings, an examination of gender differences in the natures of friendship is needed.

It is clear that males and females experience friendships differently—regardless of whether one believes that biological factors or learned behavior is the culprit. Women are more intimate and emotional in their same-sex friendships, and they place more therapeutic value on them. They value events such as talking, sharing emotions, and discussing personal problems. Men, on the other hand, value events such as sharing activities and “doing things” with their friends, and they place less value on same-sex friendships. In contrast, they receive more support and therapeutic value from opposite-sex friendships than same-sex friendships (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Aukett, Ritchie &
Males are more critical with their close friends than females, and females show more positive affect and are more responsive (Brendgen, Markiewicz, Doyle, & Bukowski, 2001). However, males and females do not differ in time spent with close friends, length of friendships, or willingness to confront a friend (Roy, Benenson, & Lilly, 2000).

**Purpose**

This study proposes to investigate whether close friendships change when one member begins a serious dating relationship. Also, we hope to determine whether the frequency of change is different for males and females. We will examine what role the close friend’s opinion of the dating partner plays on the friendship, and what affect this opinion has on the participant’s well being and dating relationship satisfaction. Finally, we will examine differences in findings across the stages of middle and late adolescence.

**Hypotheses**

1) Because the nature of peer relationships in adolescence evolves from a tendency to form same-sex friends toward dyadic romantic relationships (Furman, 2002), we hypothesize that adolescents will report at least some friendship change when their friend begins a serious dating relationship.

2) Because of the emotional and intimacy-based trends of friendships for females (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Aukett, Ritchie, & Mill, 1988), we hypothesize that females will experience more change in friendship when their friend begins dating than males.

3) Due to the findings of George (1999) and Roth & Parker (2001) concerning emotional stress and strong negative reactions that result from changes in
friendships and findings by Furman (2002) concerning the importance of adolescent friendships, we hypothesize that adolescent males and females will experience less dating relationship satisfaction and more depressive symptoms if their close friends do not like their dating partner.

4) We hypothesize that middle adolescents will display more depressive symptoms and less relationship satisfaction due to a friend’s negative opinion of their dating partner than late adolescents. This is due to a developmental trend toward having romantic partners as a main attachment figure as adolescents get older (Furman, 2002), therefore making a change of friendships happen naturally.

Method

Participants

Participants were selected from a larger study of adolescents from 17 high schools in and surrounding a mid-sized southeastern city. The median household income for the area is $37,225, and the high schools were selected to represent rural, urban, and suburban communities and socioeconomic diversity. The sample for the current project contains 111 females (55 middle and 56 late adolescents) and their closest female friends and 77 males (28 middle and 49 late adolescents) and their closest male friends. Middle adolescents were between the ages of 14 and 17 years, and late adolescents were between the ages of 18 and 21 years. The mean age in this sample was 17.62 years. The sample was 88.9% Caucasian, 7.9% African American, 1.1% Asian, and 1.6% other races.

Procedure

Data was taken from the Study of Tennessee Adolescent Romantic Relationships (STARR; Welsh, 2000). Participants were randomly recruited from a larger study of 17
area high schools. Participants had to fit age requirements and be in a dating relationship for at least one month. If they met these requirements, they were invited to come with their dating partner to the University of Tennessee to complete self-report questionnaires and videotaped interactions. In addition, we contacted their closest same-sex friend, who completed a self-report questionnaire via mail. The couple members were paid $30 each for their participation, and the friends were sent $10 for completing the questionnaire. A higher percentage of female friends returned their questionnaires than male friends, which is why this study contains a disproportionate number of females.

**Measures**

*Change of friendship* was reported by the close friend. It was measured with a one-question item on a questionnaire developed for STARR:

- "*How much has your relationship with your friend changed since she began dating her current boyfriend?*"

The answers were provided on a five-point scale as "almost none," "very little," "some," "quite a bit," and "a great deal."

*Friend’s opinion of dating partner* was also reported by the close friend. It was measured by a one-question item on a questionnaire developed for STARR:

- "*How much do you like your friend’s boyfriend?*"

The answers were provided on a five-point scale as "almost none," "very little," "some," "quite a bit," and "a great deal."

*Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977).* The CES-D is a commonly used standardized instrument of depressive symptomatology. The scale consists of 20 items, (e.g. "I had crying spells" and "I enjoyed life"). Respondents
select the symptoms they experienced during the past week using a four-point scale (0 = less than 1 day, 1 = 1-2 days, 2 = 3-4 days, 3 = 5 or more days). Scores are summed and range from 0 to 60, with higher scores indicating more severe depressive symptomatology. Specifically, scores ranging from 0 to 15 reflect depressive levels found in the general population, scores ranging from 16-38 are considered “at risk” and scores above 39 resemble patients in a clinical population (Radloff, 1977). In the present sample, the scores had high internal consistency for males (α = .82) and for females (α = .85). Due to a small number of missing values, the group mean was imputed as a conservative estimate of the missing values.

**Romantic Satisfaction.** The Romantic Experience Scale (Levesque, 1993) was used to assess relationship satisfaction. The Romantic Experience questionnaire contains 12 components. We only use the Romantic Satisfaction subscale, a five-item measure that was created, normed, and validated for use with adolescents (age 14-18). The subscale was designed to measure specific aspects of adolescent romantic relationships that relate to and/or contribute to relationship satisfaction. Respondents were asked to rate their perceptions of their relationship on a six-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The romantic satisfaction scale contains statements to be ranked such as “In general, I am satisfied with our relationship,” and “I often wish I hadn’t gotten into this relationship.” Reliability of the scale's components in our sample is high for females (α = .88) and males (α = .86).

**Results**

To examine whether friendships of adolescents change when one member begins dating, we examined the means of the scores reported by the friends. When asked “How
much has your relationship with your friend changed since he/she began dating his/her current boyfriend/girlfriend?” the mean answer was “Some.” (See Graph 1) T-tests were performed to discover differences between genders. Males and females answers were not significantly different, nor were answers between the developmental groups.

**Graph 1: Reported means for friendship change**

“How much has your relationship with your friend changed since he (or she) started dating his (or her) current girlfriend (or boyfriend)?”

Using the friend’s opinion of the dating partner as the predictor, regression equations were performed to examine the relationship between the friend’s opinion and the friendship and the well-being of the participant. The file was split for gender. Regression results are indicated in table 1, and correlations are listed in table 2. Friend’s opinion of dating partner and friendship change were strongly correlated for females [F(1,107)=34.139, p<.000] but not for males [F(1,75)=2.530, n.s.]. Depressive symptoms were also strongly correlated for females [F(1,107)=7.186, p<.01] but not for males
Dating relationship satisfaction was slightly correlated for females [F(1,75)=1.530, n.s.] but again not for males [F(1,107)=4.671, p<.05] when the regressions were performed with the file split for age (middle and late adolescents), most findings were similar (see graph 2). The only significant difference found pertained to depressive symptoms in females. Late adolescent females were more likely to be depressed if their closest friend did not like their boyfriends than females in middle adolescence. No significant differences were found for middle and late adolescent males.

**Table 1**

| Regression equations with friend’s opinion of dating partner as predictor |
|-----------------------------|---|-----|----|
| Friendship Change          | F  | β  | F  | Sig. |
|                            | M  |    |    |     |
| Depressive Symptoms        | F  | β  | F  | Sig. |
|                            | M  |    |    |     |
| Dating Relationship        | F  | β  | F  | Sig. |
| Satisfaction              | M  |    |    |     |
## Table 2

### Correlations

#### Part I - Males

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>MALE</th>
<th>Friendship Change</th>
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<th>Depressive Symptoms</th>
<th>Dating Relationship Satisfaction</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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<td>.550</td>
<td>.219</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>77</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend's Opinion of Dating Partner</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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<td>77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Depressive Symptoms</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
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<td>77</td>
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<td>Dating Relationship Satisfaction</td>
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<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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#### Part II - Females

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<th>Depressive Symptoms</th>
<th>Dating Relationship Satisfaction</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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<td>Depressive Symptoms</td>
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<td>Dating Relationship Satisfaction</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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<td>110</td>
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</table>
Graph 2
Regression equations comparing differences between middle and late adolescents

Predictor: Close Friend’s opinion of Dating Partner

*P<.05, **P<.01
Discussion

Adolescents experience some friendship change when a friend begins dating (hypothesis 1 supported). This is inevitable given the developmental trend toward eventual dyadic partners (Furman, 2002). Literature suggests that jealousy toward the dating partner as a new influence and increased time spent apart could contribute to the change in friendship (George, 1999; Roth & Parker, 2001). This result supports George’s study (1999) that finds friendship change occurs frequently during adolescence, although the study did not address reasons why it occurs. Since friendship change has been associated with negative consequences in the past (George, 1999; Roth & Parker, 2001) and the present study found it to be a frequent occurrence, friendship change should be studied further to discover methods of prevention, coping mechanisms, and to document its possible harm.

Males and females reported roughly the same amount of friendship change (hypothesis 2 rejected). The gender divide that we expected did not occur. It is possible that males’ friendships change due to spending less time together and females’ friendships change results from a change in intimacy and sharing. In this way, the study suggests that males and females experience friendships similarly.

A friend’s negative opinion of a dating partner is associated with more negative consequences for females than for males (partially supporting hypothesis 3). When a female’s friend does not like her partner, the friendship is more likely to change, she is likely to be depressed, and she is likely to experience slightly less dating relationship satisfaction. When a male’s friend does not like his partner, his friendship is not likely to significantly change, his depression level is not likely to be significantly affected, and he
is not likely to experience change in his dating relationship satisfaction. The gender divide in this experiment is dramatic. This is additional evidence that the nature of same-sex friendships is different across genders. Females' close friendships are based on sharing emotions, discussing personal problems, and talking together (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Aukett, Ritchie, & Mill, 1988). If a close friend does not like her boyfriend, most of their shared activities are impeded. While sharing and talking, the boyfriend-issue would be difficult to avoid and would be a source of friction between friends. On the other hand, males' friendships are based on sharing activities and doing things together (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Aukett, Ritchie, & Mill, 1988). When a male does not like his friend's girlfriend, it would not impede their doing things and sharing activities together.

There was not significant developmental change across middle and late adolescence (hypothesis 4 was rejected). The idea that a developmental drift toward completely dyadic partnerships would take place during late adolescence was found incorrect. Our new idea is that this drift takes place during young adulthood, and that friendships remain important for support throughout adolescence. It supports Ruth's (2002) idea that intimacy in friendships increases during the span of adolescence. This would explain our finding that older adolescent females were likely to experience more negative affects when their friend dislikes their dating partner than younger adolescent females. Males were still not likely to experience negative affects. This finding also supports Roth and Parker's (2001) hypothesis that adolescents who have been rejected by a friend in the past will feel more hurt and angry the more often it occurs. We can hypothesize that the older adolescent females would have experienced more friendship
changes than the younger adolescent females, therefore causing more depression when it occurs again.

Findings from this study force us to examine comparisons between adolescent male and female same-sex friendships. Both genders are likely to experience at least some change in friendship when one friend begins dating. This implies similarities in the importance of maintaining friendships. Friendships are not likely to remain stable when one devotes less energy to it. A limitation exists in the study because we did not examine why each friendship changed. We know whether or not the close friend likes the dating partner, but we cannot ascertain whether this dislike causes the friendship to change or is a result of the friendship changing.
References


Appendix E - UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM
SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Amy Claxton

College: Arts & Sciences  Department: Psychology

Faculty Mentor: Deborah Welsh

PROJECT TITLE: Left behind: An investigation of changing friendships for adolescents involved in dating relationships.

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: [Signature] Deborah Welsh, Faculty Mentor

Date: 5-7-03

General Assessment - please provide a short paragraph that highlights the most significant features of the project.

Comments (Optional):