Influences of Romantic Relationships on Same-Sex Friendships in Adolescence: Conceptions of Friendship Features and Adjustment

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The purpose of this study was to examine whether adolescents’ conceptions of the influences of romantic relationships on the features of same-sex friendships varied with age and sex, and to examine how adolescents’ adjustment is related to their conceptions of friendships when one member of the friendship has a romantic relationship. Ninth graders (n = 198) and eleventh graders (n = 152) completed a questionnaire about their conceptions of friendship features both when one friend had a romantic relationship and when neither friend had a romantic relationship. Students also reported on their social, psychological and academic adjustment. Ninth and eleventh graders viewed a friendship in which one friend had a romantic relationship as having less frequent interactions and less self-esteem support and intimacy, but as higher in conflict and rivalry, than a friendship in which neither friend had a romantic relationship. The difference increased because eleventh graders conceived of friends as spending more time together when neither had a romantic partner than did ninth graders. Eleventh graders also viewed friendships as involving less co-rumination whether one friend had a romantic partner or not. Ninth graders viewed friendships as having similar levels of co-rumination regardless of whether a friend had a romantic partner (see Figure 2).

Sex. Consistent with the hypothesis, compared to boys, girls viewed friendships as lower in intimacy and co-rumination and higher in conflict and rivalry when one friend had a romantic relationship than when neither friend had a romantic relationship (see Figure 3).

RESULTS

Conceptions of the Impact of Romantic Relationships on the Features of Friendships

Age. Ninth and eleventh graders viewed a friendship in which one friend had a romantic relationship as lower in frequency of interaction, self-esteem support, and intimacy, but as higher in conflict and rivalry, than a friendship in which neither friend had a romantic relationship. The negative effect of a romantic relationship on friends’ frequency of interaction was greater in eleventh than ninth graders (see Figure 1). The difference increased because eleventh graders conceived of friends as spending more time together when neither had a romantic partner than did ninth graders.

CONCLUSIONS

Forming a romantic relationship may have a negative impact on friendships throughout adolescence. In both the ninth and eleventh grade, adolescents believe that romantic relationships will come at a cost to friendships in many of the amount of time friends can spend together, the perceived availability of a friend for support, the amount of intimate self-disclosure between friends, and increased arguments and rivalry between friends. The findings also indicate that romantic relationships in early adolescence may be closer and more important for the fulfillment of social needs than previously believed. Consistent with this idea, fourteen-year-olds in one recent study did not differ from sixteen-year-olds in their perceptions of the advantages of having a romantic relationship for intimacy, caring, and attachment (Shulman & Schaaf, 2000).

Eleventh graders viewed romantic relationships as having a more negative effect on the co-relationship within friendships than did ninth graders. Older adolescents may have or desire closer romantic relationships than do early adolescents. Co-relationship may be an especially sensitive measure of intimacy or closeness within a relationship because the more emotionally intense or potentially negative a conversation topic, the more intimate the disclosure is considered to be (Reis & Patrick, 1996). These results reflect the closer nature of late than early adolescents’ romantic relationships.

Sex differences in adolescents’ conceptions suggest that girls’ friendships may be more adversely influenced by a friend having a romantic relationship than are boys’ friendships. These findings may reflect girls greater sensitivity to the effects on their friendships by a third party than boys. Girls may also desire closer romantic relationships than do boys, shifting their focus from maintaining close friendships to maintaining close romantic relationships before boys do. Theories of close relationships and their development will need to include sex as a variable of importance.

Adolescents who were better adjusted had more positive conceptions of friendship when one friend had a romantic partner (see Table 1). Students who had higher perceived social acceptance conceived of friendships as higher in intimacy. Students who had higher global self-worth and scholastic competence conceived of friendships as more supportive. Those who were more involved in school also conceived of friendships as more supportive. Adolescents who were more disruptive conceived of friendships as lower in support and as higher in co-rumination, conflict, and rivalry.

Participating in school also predicted higher social adjustment when one friend had a romantic partner as well as better academic adjustment when one friend had a romantic relationship. The final purpose of this study was to examine these alternative perspectives on whether adolescent’s conceptions of the influence of romantic relationships on the features of friendships varied with age.

METHOD

Participants were 198 ninth graders and 152 eleventh graders. The majority (59%) of the adolescents were female and nearly all (94%) were European American.

Students were asked to think about the frequency of interaction, self-esteem support, intimacy, co-rumination, and rivalry in hypothetical best friendships between people who were their same age and sex. They answered the same set of questions for two different pairs of friends (romantic condition: e.g., female version: “Think about two girls your own age, Malia and Kim, who are best friends. Manny has a boyfriend but Kim does not.” Nonromantic condition: e.g., female version, “Now think about two other girls your own age, Judy and Ann, who are best friends. Neither of them has a boyfriend.”). The friendship questions were adapted from Berndt and Keefe (1995; α’s ranged from .79-82).

Students also reported on their social, psychological, and academic adjustment by completing the social acceptance, scholastic competence, and global self-worth scales from Hartley’s Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1988; α’s = .79-87).

Additional measures of academic adjustment were utilized. They included questions regarding positive involvement at school (e.g., “How often do you participate in class discussions or activities?”) and disruptive behavior at school (e.g., “How often do you misbehave in class?”). The internal consistency of these measures was .80 and .87, respectively.


discussion

The value listed for each Step 2 measure of friendship features is the standardized regression coefficient (Step 1 measure of friendship features is the standardized regression coefficient). The value listed for each Step 2 measure of friendship features is the standardized regression coefficient (Step 1 measure of friendship features is the standardized regression coefficient).