POWER AND INFLUENCE DYNAMICS IN ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: AN ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVES

Deanna Trella

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2005

Committee:

Peggy C. Giordano, Advisor

Monica A. Longmore

Wendy D. Manning
ABSTRACT

Peggy Giordano, Advisor

Scholarly research reflects a growing interest in adolescent romantic relationships; yet our knowledge of their characteristics and the dynamic processes within them are as yet not well understood. Currently, one of the most frequently studied relationship dynamics is intimate partner violence. However, it is important to explore the full range of communication and influence dynamics within adolescent romantic relationships. In this thesis, I will investigate adolescents’ ‘relationship history’ narratives from a developmental symbolic interactionist approach. Key objectives are to: 1) explore the meanings of power and influence issues and dynamics, whether or not these understandings derive from traditional gender scripts often associated with violence; 2) uncover ways in which issues of power and influence relate to other relationship dynamics; and 3) observe where power and influence ‘fit’ within the broader context of these early romantic relationships. Thus, I will also consider the key sources of difference and conflict in adolescent romantic relationships that serve to foreground issues of power and influence. An important assumption, however, is that if there were a complete agreement of perspectives within such relationships, assertion of power would not be necessary. Finally, I analyze adolescents’ perceptions of the consequences of power assertions within relationships, as influences on the course of particular and subsequent relationships, as well as on the adolescent’s self-image and sense of well-being. Data are drawn from in-depth interviews with adolescents from the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study- a comprehensive assessment of the relationship experiences of a large heterogeneous sample (N=1316) of adolescents. TARS investigates the nature and meaning of adolescent heterosexual romantic relationships, and how differences in
these experiences are a function of friend, peer, and familial influence. This paper analyzes interviews from a subset of 94 male and female adolescents who provided in-depth personal interviews detailing their romantic relationship histories. Life history narratives suggest that four areas of disagreement between adolescent romantic partners are particularly common: 1) amount of time devoted to romantic attachments, 2) defining and establishing commitment, 3) communication, and 4) partners’ beliefs, behavior, and appearance. The narratives indicate that both male and female adolescents utilize a range of strategies for eliciting change from partners including use of mild suggestions, threats, inducing guilt, interrogation, sexual manipulation, and physical violence. However, the narratives also reveal that influence attempts can benefit the partner, as when one partner encourages academic achievement and encourages relationship skill building that can be carried forward into subsequent relationships.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to those who helped me through this process. First, I would like to thank Peggy Giordano for her wisdom, guidance, and continued reassurance and encouragement. I would also like to thank Wendy Manning and Monica Longmore for their expertise and insight both of which improved the final product.

To my parents, I would like to express my love and appreciation for your continued support of my endeavors and encouragement during times of self-doubt. To my sisters, who provide the levity and perspective that balance my crazier moments, I thank you both. To Scotty, my sunshine, your love and patience strengthens and calms me, I thank you.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow students in the Sociology department at Bowling Green State University. Your humor, talent, and experiences make me a better person for being in your presence. In particular, I would like to thank Mim Northcutt—your friendship and shared neuroses make me feel a little saner in an insane place.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Approach to Adolescent Romantic Relationships: A Focus on Control Attempts</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Theory and Adolescent Romantic Relationships</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Influences and Adolescent Romantic Relationships</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptualizing Intimate Power and Influence</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power and Influence</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Conceptions of Power and Influence</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Processes</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power and Influence in Adolescence</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATA AND METHODS</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Analysis</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESULTS</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of Time Devoted to Romantic Attachments</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining and Establishing Commitment</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling Communication</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Partners’ Appearance, Beliefs, and Behavior</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies for Change and Influence</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inducing Guilt</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrogation</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Manipulation</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Violence</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyadic Identities</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable Dyadic Identities</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory Dyadic Identities</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescents’ Reflections on Power and Influence</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Adolescent romantic relationships have only recently emerged as a significant domain of sociological inquiry. Consequently, we are only beginning to understand the nature of romance in the daily lives of adolescents (Furman, Brown, & Feiring, 1999). Research to date has focused on how these romantic encounters differ from adult relationships, friendships, peer interactions and familial relations. It is important to avoid the tendency to consider these relationships as marriage-like because these liaisons unfold during a unique stage in the life course, one that is characterized by keen interest in relationships and sexuality, but with little preparation for navigating this new type of intimate contact. Given the novelty of dating during adolescence, and cross-gender relations more generally, it is highly likely that adolescents will turn to significant others and reference societal norms as they attempt to understand their roles as romantic partners. Peers are the most salient reference group during early adolescence, prior to romantic dating (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2001). As this influence increases, peers take on the responsibility of co-managing or, in some instances, completely taking over the management of adult-like behaviors (Bogenschneider, Wu, Raffaelli & Tsay, 1998; Hartup, French, Laursen, Johnston, & Ogawa, 1993). Advice adolescents receive about romance and relationships from peers is likely to be incomplete and, at best, speculative. Adolescents who pursue the domain of romantic relationships do so misinformed and sometimes ill-prepared to deal with the heightened emotions that often surround adolescent relationships. Culturally-convinced of their need to be in love (Simon, Eder & Evans, 1992), young people may be more susceptible to manipulation, influence and control attempts by their equally ill-prepared dating and romantic partners.
It is important to explore the full range of communication and influence dynamics within adolescent romantic relationships. Power and influence are critically important aspects of the contours of these relationships. Giordano et al. (2001) recently suggested that while cooperative co-construction (Youniss & Smollar, 1985) of experiences is found within adolescent romantic relationships, the adolescent must bridge considerable differences when crossing gender boundaries. This sometimes may, but not always, follow traditional gender scripts, as both male and female adolescents may not be entirely satisfied with partners’ communications, actions, and levels of interest in relationships. Maccoby (1990) suggests that during childhood boys and girls establish different relationship styles (i.e., boys tend to play in larger groups with a focus on dominance and competition, while girls forge intimate dyadic friendships characterized by supportive styles of communication), and subsequently experience difficulty adapting to heterosexual romantic relationships. In addition, the partner may be a reflection on the self in a way that is less true of friendships; thus, this basic dynamic may increase pressure to try to change the partner to fit an existing romantic ideal.

Adolescents desire the personal and social benefits of romantic relationships, yet may be emotionally ill-prepared to handle relationship issues. For these reasons, issues of power and influence are very important to an understanding of adolescent conduct within these early relationships. Traditional gender scripts are only one conceptual template for understanding power and influence processes as asymmetries and other dynamics that develop within the couple context need not necessarily privilege the male adolescent.

This thesis, drawing on in-depth interviews with 94 male and female adolescents, explores the ways in which power and influence mechanisms emerge as important dynamics within heterosexual adolescent romantic relationships. It is important to identify the range of
mechanisms that adolescents use in their attempts to control or change their partners and to connect these to normative beliefs. Some dyadic processes of influence and power are, however generic; it is also important to examine the degree to which these processes are affected by developmental phase. I approach the study of adolescent romantic interactions using a developmental symbolic interactionist approach, a strategy that reflects the unique concerns and contingencies intimately connected with each stage of life, and highlights the situated nature of power relations. This approach is developmental to the extent that it focuses on adolescence as a unique period in life, and it is consistent with symbolic interactionism because it emphasizes the emergence of meaning and the process of negotiating power and influence in dyadic relations.

Below I review prior literature that addresses 1) control attempts within adolescent romantic relationships, 2) the influence of attachment theory, 3) cultural influences on adolescent romantic relationships, 4) generalized conceptualizations of intimate power and influence, and 5) the unique nature of power and influence dynamics during the adolescent period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An Approach to Adolescent Romantic Relationships: A Focus on Control Attempts

Scholarly research reflects a growing interest in adolescent romantic relationships; yet our knowledge of their characteristics and the dynamic processes within them are as yet not well understood. It is important to explore the full range of communication and influence dynamics within adolescent romantic relationships. Currently, one of the most frequently studied relationship dynamics is intimate partner violence. Recent reports of the incidence of violence in adolescent dating relationships range from 8.8% to 40% (Kann et al., 2000; Sousa, 1999; Bergman, 1992); apart from violence, literature on romantic partners’ attempts to control,
manipulate or change partners is relatively scarce. Previous research has been limited to investigations of relationships among college-age students, in part, for availability reasons, but also because of their relative closeness to an age of ‘appropriate’ sexual interest and activity. Adolescent notions of romance have long been dismissed as trivial and immature, but it is unlikely that youth would invest a great deal of time and thought in experiences they believe are meaningless or ‘empty’ (Giordano et al., 2001). Research has shown that adolescent dating and romance are meaningful domains for both cognitive and social development (Furman & Simon, 1998; Furman & Wehner, 1993). During this period of time, adolescents interact with the opposite sex, mimic adult roles, and learn new methods of communication and problem-solving skills with a romantic partner (Suarez, 1994; Feiring, 1996).

For the vast majority of adolescents, the emergence of dating reflects a logical progression toward an increased frequency of interaction between other-sex peers. Romantic partners emerge as a major focus of adolescents’ thoughts and time. Most studies of adolescent dating characterize this period as a shift in focus from friends and family to the pool of potential romantic partners (Bouchey & Furman, 2003). Dunphy (1963) describes this process of shifting attention in a five-stage developmental model of adolescent peer group interaction. Each successive stage is characterized by an increased focus on other-sex peers as potential romantic partners, to the exclusion of same-sex friendships and family. This multistage approach is beneficial for the present purposes because it provides a picture of adolescence as a time of increasing reliance on one’s romantic partner that will eventually replace strong ties with family and friends. The nature of this “tunnel vision” may contribute to the proliferation of control mechanisms between partners as adolescents come to value the social benefits of having a romantic partner, regardless of the psychological and possibly physical ramifications (Larson,
The notion that one “should always be in love” can, in certain circumstances, contribute to the willful accommodation to control mechanisms in the context of romantic relationships (Simon et al., 1992).

**Attachment Theory and Adolescent Romantic Relationships**

Adolescents typically do not enter the realm of dating completely naïve of romantic relations. The parents’ marital relationship is typically the first and most salient model of romantic involvement that adolescents experience, and from which they draw conclusions about the nature of gender roles and interaction in the context of romantic relationships (Bouchey & Furman, 2003). Attachment theory emphasizes that individuals have learned forms of attachment from early relationships with family (Collins, Cooper, Albino, & Allard, 2002). The quality of attachment with family typically characterizes one’s future relationships with friends and romantic partners. According to attachment theorists, close parental relationships foster a willingness to date and ‘try out’ other relationships. Secure adolescents who are successful in family relationships have also likely experienced better friendships, as they have developed more social competence and thus are better able to work out conflict and negotiation. Allen, Moore, Kupermine, and Bell (1998) note that a secure attachment in adolescence and adulthood is characterized by coherence in talking about experiences and affect related to attachment. They suggest that experiences and affect will be “processed more accurately” (1998, p. 1407) in peer relationships when there is a secure attachment between parent and adolescent. Conversely, it is believed that insecure attachment may characterize persistent difficulties in the parental relationship that preclude adolescents from having successful peer relationships (Gavin & Furman, 1996). Poor parental and peer attachment may predispose adolescents to similarly poor romantic attachments (Gavin & Furman, 1996). Attachment theories have been criticized,
however because they fail to take into account the unique cultural influences that can structure many aspects of an adolescent’s relationship experience (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2004, CFDR working papers series).

**Cultural Influences and Adolescent Romantic Relationships**

Adolescent relationships are also influenced by broader societal and cultural norms that dictate the expression of gender roles, dating rituals and appropriate age-specific romantic involvement. Simon and Gagnon (2003) note that “the sexual encounter remains a profoundly social act in its enactment and even more so in its antecedents and consequences. Implicit audiences and explicit audiences are present in every sexual encounter and the judgments and views of these audiences are considered, even if only in their denial” (p. 492). Adolescents are bombarded by media portrayals of acceptable maleness and femaleness that often do not strongly depart from traditional enactments of gender.

Research at the cultural level posits that traditional gender scripts contribute to greater male power and influence in adolescent relationships. The theme of traditional male power is, perhaps, most clearly encapsulated in research on male peer groups (Eder, Evans, & Parker, 1995). This research examines how peer- and self-policing occurs among adolescent males and females in an effort to clarify appropriate gender identity. Adolescent males learn to control their “wimpy” emotions, avoid signs of weakness, and emphasize competitiveness (Eder et al., 1995). Conversely, girls are taught to idealize physicality, and emphasize the cult of romance (Eder et al., 1995). Eder et al. (1995) note that this divergence in approach often results in girls being dominated and controlled by their boyfriends. However, Eder et al.’s (1995) assessment is not complete because it fails to account for the transitional impediments that boys may face.
shifting from same-sex friendships to the romantic domain (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2004, CFDR working papers series).

Youth who engage in peer bullying may continue to use intimidating patterns of interaction in romantic relationships. Bullying refers to the use of power against another during a series of repeated aggressive behaviors (Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000). Connolly et al. (2000) suggest that “the use of power and aggression in peer relationships will generalize to romantic relationships for those children who bully…because romantic relationships develop in the context of peer groups and are linked to the quality of friendships” (p. 300). They find that adolescents who bully in their peer relationships are at a greater risk for continued difficulties during the transition to romantic relationships (2000). The “bullies” in their study reportedly view partners as less emotionally supportive and less equitable, and indicate more experiences of physical aggression with partners than non-bullying youth (Connolly et al., 2000). This study provides a unique perspective on dating violence because it highlights characteristics of perpetrators, and emphasizes the importance of the transitional period from same-sex friendships to romantic relationships. Interestingly, Connolly et al. (2000) find that adolescents who report having perpetrated aggressive behaviors are also likely to have been victimized in romantic relationships.

Adolescents must accomplish the tasks of learning about themselves while discovering how to successfully navigate romantic relationships. It is not surprising, given the novelty and significance of these tasks, that adolescents will rely on significant and generalized others for guidance (Furman & Simon, 1998). Peers thus are widely regarded as significant socializing agents during the adolescent period, and previous research has documented that importance of peer relationships during adolescence (Merten, 1997; Eder et al., 1995; Hartup et al., 1993;
Kinney, 1993; Eder & Enke, 1991; Berndt, 1982; Siman, 1977). In their research on friendships and heterosexual relationships among middle school students, Eder et al. (1995) note that peer friendships serve as a bastion of traditional discourse wherein boys are applauded for competitive toughness and chastised for "wimpy" feelings. This peer monitoring is blatantly expressed in ridicule, teasing, and ostracism, and more subtly in taken-for-granted assumptions about maleness. Adolescents learn, through interaction with peers, how to survive and thrive not only in their peer culture, but also in romantic relationships; however, lessons learned in peer interaction are often ill-suited to the romantic domain. The implications of mirroring others’ behavior in the context of personal romantic relationships may be detrimental to the extent that adolescents rely on stereotypes and the equally immature romantic logic of peers. Giordano et al. (2004) suggest that romantic relationships may be a potentially significant arena of socialization wherein new perspectives may coexist with, contradict, and even negate peer influence. They note that meanings may “emerge on-site” in dyadic interactions rather than being carried-over from family, friends, prior behavior, and the larger social environment.

Although the influence of culture agents is important, the romantic relationship itself also emerges as an arena of socialization, communication and emotional engagement, and this perspective provides a conceptual underpinning of the present investigation. Although scholars such as Youniss and Smollar (1985) have examined adolescents’ relationships, their research primarily focuses on adolescent relationships with parents and friends, and does not explore the developmental significance of adolescent romantic relationships. Their research focuses on shared activities between parents and adolescents, quality and topics of communication, and conflicts and conflict resolution tactics within each of these domains (Youniss & Smollar 1985). The general lack of information pertaining to the character of adolescent interactions in the
romantic domain warrants further research. Of interest in this thesis are the dynamic processes of power and influence.

**Conceptualizing Intimate Power and Influence**

In his groundbreaking work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) claims that “regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind and his motive for having this objective, it will be to his interest to control the conduct of others...” (p. 3). Sprey (1991) asserts that the instinct to control others is a response to the uncertainty of one’s environment. Romantic relationships are indeed fraught with uncertainty for adolescents. For some, dealing with this uncertainty involves controlling aspects of the relationship or one’s partner. Felson and Messner (2000) suggest that attempts to control can be present- or future-oriented. Present-oriented control refers to the use of threatening measures to gain immediate rewards (Felson & Messner, 2000). Future-oriented control refers to the use of threats as a preventative measure to control a future outcome (Felson & Messner, 2000).

**Power and Influence**

The ability to control facets of a relationship hinges on one partner having more power and influence than the other. Theorists have questioned the necessity and causal outcome of distinguishing conceptions of power and influence, however, Willer, Lovaglia, and Markovsky (1997) address conceptions of power and influence as distinct sociological categories while noting theoretical arguments that suggest the interrelatedness of these aspects of interpersonal relationships. The researchers define power as “the structurally determined potential for obtaining favored payoffs in relations where interests are opposed” (p. 573). For example, in an intimate relationship this may involve structurally-defined powerful partners determining with whom the couple will interact when there is a difference of opinion. The structurally-determined
nature of this power suggests that it is not a concrete personal attribute, but something that is continually negotiated between partners. Willer et al. (1997) define influence as “the socially induced modification of a belief, attitude, or expectation effected without recourse to sanctions” (p. 573). In an intimate relationship, for example, this may entail suggesting a change in a partner’s physical appearance or taste in music. Though these researchers adopt a theoretical basis for distinguishing power and influence, Willer et al. (1997) acknowledge that the relationship between power and influence is complex. Citing the reward expectations branch of status characteristics theory (Berger & Zelditch Jr., 1995), Willer et al. (1997) note that power may lead to influence and influence can produce power. Powerful partners may influence others to change their beliefs and behaviors to match their own. Likewise, the ability to influence a partner may result in developing greater power in the relationship.

*Traditional Conceptions of Power and Influence*

Traditional conceptions of power and influence privilege male partners and perpetuate the notion that power is a patriarchal construct (Connell 1987; White, 1980). Research suggests that males subsequently import this sense of patriarchal entitlement in intimate relationships (Johnson, 1995; Lenton 1995; Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Umberson, Anderson, Williams, & Chen, 2003). Men are perceived to have a sense of power and autonomy over women; thus, they are often portrayed as having less interest in romantic intimacy and more interest in sexual gratification (Winter 1973; McClelland 1975). Winter (1973) notes that males who repeatedly seduce and abandon women will purposely increase intimacy with partners to the point of sexual seduction and then abandon relationships. He suggests that power and sexual motives are intertwined, and produce a pattern of “approach-avoidance” in intimate relationships (Winter, 1973).
Giordano et al. (2004) suggest that traditional conceptions of power and intimacy are built on a set of assumptions that may not be appropriate for adolescent relationships. They note that prior studies on power and influence underestimate male involvement in relationships, and mischaracterize females as victims of emotional vulnerability. As in most relationships, we expect there will be power and influence dynamics, but the full range of tactics used by both partners is not elucidated in traditional research. Much prior research on power and influence tends to focus on endpoint conflicts and emphasizes conflict tactics (e.g., physical abuse) (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Johnson, 1995). Blood and Wolfe’s (1960) study, for example, approaches power dynamics by focusing on observable, behavioral outcomes of power such as decision-making authority. Power is conceptualized as the potential ability of partners to influence behavior in a desired manner, and is manifested, in the familial domain, as the ability to make decisions affecting the lives of family members. They suggest that power is determined by contribution of desirable resources to the relationship, thus partners who make contributions are granted legitimacy to engage in the decision-making process; especially relevant here are financial contributions to the relationship. Though insightful, this research fails to acknowledge underlying power processes, and does not examine the full range of power and influence mechanisms, that may include mild suggestions, threats, inducing guilt, interrogation, sexual manipulation, and physical violence.

Power Processes

Sprey (1991) defines a process as “all that happened, is happening, and may happen in [intimate relationships]…a chain of probabilities, events that may or may not happen along the way” (p. 668). As a dynamic process, power is more complex and enduring than merely a static experience. Szinovacz (1987) notes that “for a descriptive analysis of power, a static model of
control may suffice, but an explanation of power relations must reflect the complexity and
dynamics of ongoing ‘powering’ processes” (p. 659).

Komter’s (1989) study, “Hidden Power in Marriage” focuses on power processes, rather
than outcomes. She attempts to uncover power processes that determine subjective preferences
by examining hidden ideological forces that constitute women’s and men’s desires concerning
certain aspects of marriage. Komter (1989) is most interested in the quality of power whereas
previous studies have largely focused on how power is divided between partners. This study is
important for the present purposes because it highlights the process of power, the strategies that
men and women employ in effecting or preventing change, and the dynamic of shifting intimate
power (Komter, 1989).

Summarizing, the preceding research fails to account for the unique qualities of
adolescence that may affect why adolescents choose to control partners or assert power decisions
may not be as consequential or tied to economic issues, as in the case of marital decisions. This
research also fails to address the range of power and influence mechanisms that may be unique to
or predominate during adolescence.

**Power and Influence in Adolescence**

Research concerning the existence and perpetration of power and influence dynamics in
adolescent romantic relationships is relatively scarce. Existing literature suggests that, though
rare, physical aggression does characterize some adolescent relationships (Henton, Cate, Koval,
Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983). Henton et al. (1983) examine the frequency and timing of physical
aggression in adolescence, types of violent behaviors, meaning of violence, reactions to violence,
and attitudes toward physical aggression in romantic relationships. Their data reveal that 12.1%
of adolescents surveyed reported having been involved in a violent dating relationship as a
victim or perpetrator (1983). Pushing, grabbing, shoving, slapping, kicking, biting, or hitting with the fist were the most frequent aggressive behaviors exhibited by both victims and perpetrators of dating violence (Henton et al., 1983). Data reveal that physical violence in dating relationships is associated with feelings of confusion, anger, fear, regret, and sadness by both partners (Henton et al., 1983). Though this research provides an insightful examination of physical violence tactics between romantic partners, it fails to address the full range of power and influence tactics utilized by adolescents.

Stets (1995) suggests that control is likely to operate in relationships in which a partner feels his/her environment has been challenged. In such instances, partners circuitously utilize control to compensate for a perceived lack of control (Stets, 1995). This dynamic may characterize some adolescent relationships given the tendency for self-doubt and self-consciousness during this time period. Ronfeldt, Kimerling, and Arias (1998), examining dating violence, find that dissatisfaction with relationship power predicts psychological and physical abuse. They find that some men become physically abusive in response to dissatisfaction with relationship power while others progress from psychologically to physically abusive behaviors (Ronfeldt et al., 1998). Those male adolescents who were exposed to father-initiated marital abuse are most likely to exhibit escalatory abuse in their own relationships (Ronfeldt et al., 1998). Kaura and Allen (2004) also find that parental violence is associated with the use of violence in dating relationships. Findings from their sample of undergraduate college students indicate that male perpetration of violence is associated with mother’s violence and female perpetration of dating violence is related to father’s violence (2004).

Feiring, Deblinger, Hoch-Espada, and Haworth (2002) address the extent to which there are gender and grade differences concerning acceptance of physical aggression between romantic
partners and having been victimized or having perpetrated aggression in romantic relationships. They find boys are more likely to endorse dysfunctional sexual attitudes and aggression in romantic relationships (2002). Boys were also found to express lower levels of guilt and shame in relation to the justification of sexual aggression, and were more likely to blame others in relation to using physical aggression against partners (Feiring et al., 2002). Feiring et al. (2002) find that girls are more likely to admit being the perpetrator of physical aggression in romantic relationships. Girls with less secure friendships and low levels of shame and guilt were also more likely to use aggression against partners and express unhealthy attitudes about romantic relationships (Feiring et al., 2002). However, Feiring et al. (2002) suggest that aggressive behaviors and attitudes are generally uncommon among adolescents in romantic relationships.

In their comprehensive examination of adolescent boys’ experience within romantic relationships, Giordano et al. (2004) find intriguing gender differences concerning the utilization of power and influence. Their data reveal that males score higher on partner influence attempts, yet they also report higher levels of influence from romantic partners (2004). Additionally, males more often expressed the belief that their partners have more power (2004). Data reveal consistent patterns of gender differences within each of the race/ethnic subgroups; as well, age by gender interactions were found to be non-significant (Giordano et al., 2004). Giordano et al.’s (2004) research highlights the importance of reconsidering traditional “one-dimensional” characterizations of adolescent males. Their research emphasizes the less obvious components of the range of behaviors exhibited by both boys and girls. Though their research focuses on adolescent males, they note that girls also exhibit a range of power and influence behavior including, for example, more traditional expressions of excessive dependence on the partner as well as non-traditional expressions of power and influence (2004). This research is important for
the present purposes because it highlights the range of power and influence behavior within and between genders. Range of gendered behavior will be an important focus in the analysis of life history narratives in this thesis.

Issues concerning sexual initiation, consent, compliance, and resistance in romantic relationships constitute a major empirical focus of scholarly research on adolescence (Scott & Sprecher, 2000; Feltrey, K.M., Ainslie, J.J., & Geib, A., 1991). Greer and Buss’ (1994) research concerning gender differences in sexual initiation tactics reveals that there is considerable overlap in the tactics commonly employed by men and women, including implying commitment, increasing attention, and displaying status cues. Compliance with sexual advances is another domain of active scholarly research where issues of power and influence are obviously important. Previous research has focused on single individuals who consent to unwanted sexual acts in the absence of sexual coercion or aggression (Scott & Sprecher, 2000). Women have been found to unwillingly comply with partners’ sexual advances in an attempt to maintain or ‘save’ a relationship and avoid disappointing partners (O’Sullivan & Gaines, 1998; Shotland & Hunter, 1995). Though less common, some research suggests that men also resist their partners’ sexual initiation, particularly in committed dating relationships (O’Sullivan & Byers, 1993). In instances of male refusal, men are more likely than women to note the inappropriateness of the relationship, rather than timing or place, as the reason for their reluctance (O’Sullivan & Byers, 1993).

Sexual coercion and aggression also emerged as a productive area of scholarly research during the 1990s. For arguably the first time, research during this period depicted adolescents as potential and actual victims and perpetrators of sexual coercion and aggression (Erickson & Rapkin, 1991; Jordan, Price, Telljohann, & Chesney, 1998). A picture emerged of sexually
coerced adolescents as being older, more sexually active, experiencing less parental monitoring and more parental sexual abuse, having poorer peer relationships, being more likely to conform to peers, and having more same-sex friends who were also sexually active, than those not having experienced sexual coercion or aggression (Vicary, Klingaman, & Harkness, 1995).

Feltey et al. (1991) suggest that gender socialization of both males and females “results in the denial of the validity of women’s feelings about sexuality, resulting in pro-rape attitudes by men. Women… deny their own feelings and perceptions about intimate encounters, feeling that they have relinquished their right to withdraw consent when the encounter advances beyond a preliminary stage” (p. 245). Sexually coercive men, as compared to non-sexually coercive men, are found to be non-committal, manipulative, more frequent daters, sexually active at an early age, to have high numbers of sexual partners, and to be prone to ‘game playing’ (i.e., testing the boundaries of one’s commitment through psychological and physical manipulation) (Byers & Eno, 1991; Christopher, Owens, & Stecker, 1993a; Christopher, Owens, & Stecker, 1993b; Kalichman, Sarwer, Johnson, Ali, Early, & Tuten, 1993; Sarwer, Kalichman, Johnson, Early, & Ali, 1993; Malamuth, Lintz, Heavey, Barnes, & Acker, 1995; Lalumiere, Chalmers, Quinsey, & Seto, 1996). It has also been suggested that sexually coercive men may lack the communication skills necessary for successfully navigating romantic relationships; thus, misinterpreting women’s intentions and failing to adequately express their own intentions (Malamuth & Brown, 1994).

Fewer studies have examined the role of young women as initiators of sexual activity; however, available research suggests that sexually ‘coercive’ women view themselves as more open, have higher self-esteem, experience more relationship satisfaction, feel hostile toward men, possess a brooding anger, have a history of being sexually coercive, and experience
relationship conflict with and ambivalence about their coerced partners (Christopher et al., 1993b; Christopher, Madura, & Weaver, 1998). When women are sexually coercive, however, they tend to use fewer physical tactics than men (Christopher et al., 1998). When men are coerced, the experience typically does not extend beyond kissing and fondling, whereas, sexual coercion of women typically results in intercourse (Waldner-Haugrud & Magruder, 1995). A study of college-age adolescents suggests that male victims of female initiated sexual coercion experience less and shorter term emotional upset relative to males who do not experience female initiated sexual coercion; however, these men were more likely to be angry and experience depression than men who had not been sexually coerced (O’Sullivan, Byers, & Finkelman, 1998).

Previous research on sexual initiation, influence, and resistance sheds light on the complexity of the processes involved in romantic dyadic interactions. Miscommunication and conflicting expectations are a hazard of adolescent dating in particular given the novelty of the experience, and the necessity that one learn to navigate the nonverbal cues that are often involved in sexual initiation and compliance. The complexity of these interactions warrants further exploration of how power and influence function more generally in adolescent romantic interactions.

In summary, previous research on adolescent romantic relationships fails to address how power and influence develops between partners. Though we know a great deal about why power and influence may emerge, we do not know how it operates between partners to contribute to or facilitate the demise of a relationship; nor do we know how power and influence may benefit a relationship. Previous research does not give precedence to the dyadic dynamics of adolescent relationships, relying instead on external influence to explain why power and influence occurs
between adolescents (Kaura & Allen, 2004). This body of literature suggests that the novelty of dating and conflicting social messages may foster a domain of uncertainty that leaves adolescents searching for some semblance of control and order in their lives. Given the salience of romantic partnerships during adolescence, the likelihood that this control will manifest itself within the romantic domain increases. Adolescents may be more forgiving of manipulation and assertions of power from romantic partners simply because they are intensely invested in having and maintaining romantic relationships; however, the degree to which adolescents passively assent to attempts at control and change within romantic relationships and come to view partners as a source of influence remains to be explored (Giordano et al., 2001). Although these studies have thus documented important correlates of dating violence, the symbolic interactionist perspective focuses attention on emerging meaning and the negotiation of power.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Heterosexual romantic relationships are, by nature, based on some elements of difference and contrast. The varying perspectives and expectations that adolescents bring to romantic relationships increase the likelihood for disagreement and conflict (Giordano et al., 2001). Implicit in this conflict is a struggle for power wherein one partner attempts to persuade and influence the other. The partner attempting to influence often demonstrates a desire to be ‘right’ in relational conflict, which is commonly complemented by the more receptive partner’s desire to be in a relationship at any cost. Power is typically conceptualized detrimentally as the forceful imposition of one person’s beliefs or self on another; however, this is not an entirely accurate or complete depiction of how power and influence emerge and operate within adolescent romantic relationships. For example, influence and power may be conceptualized as beneficial to the
extent that one is encouraged to achieve academically, or to resist succumbing to drugs and alcohol (Giordano et al., 2004).

Recognizing the presence of strongly gendered (cultural) scripts, it is nevertheless important to understand how girls and boys resist traditional power arrangements, how individuals who exert power or influence understand their actions, and how young people on the receiving end of power assertions experience and thus control influence attempts. From a relationship standpoint, it is important to explore how the relationship changes or is renegotiated as power and influence dynamics unfold, and what the larger consequences are for those who remain in or choose to end relationships at least in part due to issues of power and influence. Romantic relationships involve dynamic interactions wherein events are shaped, renegotiated, and in some instances never truly reconciled between partners. Prior research on power dynamics documents that even the most asymmetrical relationships of power are constantly negotiated; thus, it is important to understand how adolescents try to influence, control or manipulate their partners to change in small and larger ways (Giordano et al., 2001).

In short, the unique dynamic nature of adolescent romantic relationships warrants focusing on how power and influence operates between partners within the context of the intimate interactions. As heterosexual romantic relationships involve both males and females, it is important to examine gender dynamics as they pertain to power and influence processes. I will address the range of control and influence behaviors exhibited by both males and females in the life history narratives.

Life history narratives will be examined for instances in which partners indicate a reason for necessitating change within their relationship. I will address how power and influence emerge in intimate relationships in reference to attempts to change one’s partner. Specifically, I
will focus on attempts to change: 1) the amount of time devoted to romantic attachments, 2) defining and establishing commitment, 3) controlling communication, and 4) partners’ appearance, beliefs, and behavior.

I will explore the in-depth relationship narratives to examine various control or change strategies. Adolescents utilize a number of strategies to exert control and influence ranging from relatively friendly suggestions to the use of ‘silent treatments’ (i.e., refusing to speak with one’s partner until the necessary change has been made), and finally to the less common use of physical abuse. The use of mild suggestions, though important to the understanding of power and influence dynamics in romantic relationships, is difficult to glean from the life-history narratives. Mildly suggestive statements (e.g., “you look nice in the color green) are often overshadowed by more memorable statements, events, and “scenes” (McAdams, 1989) that occurred over the course of a relationship, and while positive statements or dynamics may be memorable, negative experiences may be even more likely to figure into narrations, particularly of relationships that are no longer viable. I will address how power and coercive influence operate in intimate relationships by focusing on the use of: 1) threats, 2) inducing guilt, 3) interrogation, 4) sexual manipulation, and 5) physical abuse.

I will also explore adolescents’ understanding of these attempts as both initiator and receiver of influence. I will address the power outcome in the interaction in reference to dyadic identities (i.e., the identity one assumes while part of a unique romantic couple). Dyadic identities will be examined as stable or exploratory depending on the extent to which adolescents alter their beliefs and behavior during the course of a romantic relationship as a dyadic partner. In this section, I will also examine how changes in dyadic identity may cause a relationship to flourish or fail.
Finally, I will examine adolescents’ reflections on power and influence in romantic relationships. Adolescents often justify the existence of control and manipulation in their romantic relationships because of a strong desire to establish and maintain bonds regardless of the implications. In this section, I will thus explore adolescents’ own understandings of the meaning of power and influence, and how they frame effects on subsequent well-being and relationship stability.

DATA AND METHODS

This study utilizes data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), which focuses on adolescent relationships with parents, peers, and romantic partners. Data are collected from Toledo-area adolescents from grades 7, 9, and 11 in Lucas County, Ohio, encompassing 62 schools across 7 school districts. The stratified, random sample was devised by the National Opinion Research Center, and includes oversamples of African American and Hispanic adolescents. The sampling frame, including a final total of N=1316, was legally obtained under the Ohio open records act. TARS investigates the nature and meaning of adolescent heterosexual romantic relationships, and how differences in these experiences are a function of friend, peer, and familial influence. Of the 1316 adolescents involved in the TARS project, this thesis will analyze a subgroup of 94 adolescents who provided in-depth personal interviews detailing their romantic relationship histories. There are forty-six female adolescents ranging in age from 16-18-years-old. Of the female adolescents, sixteen are White, sixteen are African American, thirteen are Hispanic, and one is listed as “Other.” There are forty-eight male adolescents ranging in age from 16-18-years-old. Of the male adolescents, twenty-one are White, sixteen are African American, and eleven are Hispanic. Adolescents indicate a range of
dating experience and number of romantic relationships. Adolescents were chosen for this analysis if they indicated at least some experience with romantic relationships.

**Narrative Analysis**

The narrative is a reconstruction of past events and, of relevance here, provides a window on how power unfolds in a dynamic setting, and how it influences the subsequent relationship ‘career’. The open-ended nature of the interviews allows for a free-flowing thought process in which adolescents are encouraged to recall and reflect on previous and current romantic relationships. Narrative theorists such as Gergen and Gergen (1988) suggest that social events “become laden with a storied sense. Events will acquire the reality of ‘a beginning,’ ‘a climax,’ ‘a low point,’ ‘an ending,’ and so on. People will live out the events in such a way that they and other will index them in just this way” (p. 18). This narrative approach is especially useful for exploring the realm of power and influence processes in the romantic context because it allows subjects to step back from their experience and provide a retrospective consideration of their role in the dynamic processes that occurred. In other words, narratives tie together the past, present, and future into a coherent story (Powers, 2004).

Narratives are inherently socially-embedded thus, in keeping with the developmental symbolic interactionist focus of this thesis, they are particularly useful for illuminating the nature of intimate dyadic experiences. McAdams (1989) suggests that the process of narrative development takes on particular significance during late adolescence and young adulthood. According to McAdams (1989), it is during adolescence and young adulthood that individuals must address ideological concerns and develop an ideological framework for their life history narratives. McAdams (1989) notes that “the ideological setting situates the action of a person’s evolving life story within a particular locus of belief and value- a locus shaped by society’s
conventions regarding the good and the true and the individuals’ struggles to find meaning within or outside of conventions” (p. 165). Narratives include specific “scenes” from the individual’s past that are emphasized as symbolic while others are left out of the narrative (McAdams, 1989).

Narratives provide information about behavioral processes as they constitute an individual’s subjective perspective on his or her own self and experiences, and provide insight into motivations to “reconcile events with their desired self-concepts” (Baumeister et al., 1990). The life-history narratives in this thesis provide insight into adolescents’ dyadic experiences while also highlighting the developmental significance of adolescence as a unique life period. Adolescents’ reflections on romantic relationships sometimes support McAdams’ (1989) claim that the main characters in one’s life story are “idealized and personified images of self” (p. 169). Nevertheless, the narrative analyses illuminate intimate dyadic experiences that are often more difficult to elucidate using quantitative methods.

**Coding**

The in-depth narrative histories were based on simple probing questions that initially elicited information about the relationships of friends or others at school, and ultimately, adolescents’ discussion about their own experiences. Questions focused on the ‘dating scene’, adolescents’ ‘relationship careers’, comparison to friendships, nature of the most recent romantic relationship, sexuality, and non-relationship liaisons.

Shorter 2-3 page narratives were developed from each adolescent’s in-depth history, and contain a summary of the respondent’s experiences, including direct quotes from the longer narrative to briefly characterize each case. Utilizing these shorter narratives, in tandem with the longer in-depth histories, I approach this study with a developmental symbolic interactionist
framework and an open coding scheme. A developmental symbolic interactionist approach reflects the unique concerns and contingencies intimately connected with each stage of life, and highlights the situated nature of power relations. This approach is developmental to the extent that it focuses on adolescence as a unique period in life, and it is consistent with symbolic interactionism because it emphasizes the emergence of meaning and the process of negotiating power and influence in dyadic relations. Narratives are initially analyzed with a more global focus on information pertaining to societal and cultural influences that traditionally contribute to greater male power and control in adolescent relationships (Eder et al., 1995; White, 1980). Specifically, I address the ways adolescents’ speak about their perceived role as a male or female partner in a romantic dyad. Secondly, narratives are assessed for relational information pertaining to the routine ways in which adolescents negotiate, problem solve, influence, and control one another within the romantic context. Of interest are the ways in which the relationship changes or is renegotiated as power and influence dynamics unfold, and the strategies adolescents use to elicit these changes. Finally, narratives are assessed for information pertaining to the unique experiences of adolescents as both individuals and partners in romantic dyads. Specifically, I evaluate how individuals who exert power or influence understand their actions, and how adolescents on the receiving end of power assertions experience control attempts.

RESULTS

Adolescents engaged in romantic relationships attempt to change their partners in subtle and more obvious ways. Attempting to change a partner suggests disapproval of aspects of that partner, but also reveals the ways in which one partner reflects on the other. One’s romantic
partner, perhaps more so than friends, reflects directly on the adolescent’s own beliefs, actions, relationship goals, and identity. Romantic partners are chosen from an abundant population of, generally, similar-minded youth, and represent desired traits that are highly valued by adolescents. Feiring (1996) suggests that partners are initially selected on the basis of stimulus characteristics such as desirable personalities and physical attractiveness; however, common interests, values, and interpersonal compatibility become important as the relationship progresses. Analysis of the narratives suggests that adolescents often focus their efforts on changing the amount of time that is devoted to these romantic relationships, the definition and establishment of commitment, control of communication, and partners’ appearance, beliefs, and behavior.

Amount of Time Devoted to Romantic Attachments

Research suggests that adolescence is a period of shifting focus from family and friends to romantic partners (Dunphy, 1963; Bouchey & Furman, 2003). Adolescence involves an intersection of demands from family, friends, academics, and new romantic partners. Youth must learn to balance existing friendships with a burgeoning interest in the romantic domain. Life-history narratives reveal that both males and females may vary in whether they desire more or less time devoted to romantic relationships. One male adolescent explains a relatively subtle distinction between friends and romantic partners that propels this shift in focus:

I would say friends you don’t have to be so involved with. You get to hang out with them, you could joke with them, you could tell them secrets, but with a girlfriend you got certain responsibilities with them...you got to be there for them, you gotta [sic] um care for them a lot more than you do with a friend. I mean, you care about friends a lot but you make your priority with your girlfriend. You make her priority.

The respondent’s comments support the notion that some males prioritize and actively engage in intimate relationships (Giordano et al., 2004). Recognizing the importance of romantic partners
often means diminishing time spent with friends and family. One female adolescent explains that this generally is not an easy, effortless transition:

…we have the same friends but he wants to be with me everyday, all day. I mean you do need a break every once in awhile and be with other people…I would rather be with my friends. Whenever I’m with him he’s hovering over me. I mean it’s good sometimes but I’m basically my whole life I was independent. You know had no guy with me. And I’m a very independent person. So I like to move freely and do what I want to do.

Thus, time spent with friends and romantic partners emerges as a point of contention for many adolescents. Problems negotiating the demands of friendships and romances arise when these two facets of an adolescent’s social world fail to mesh perfectly. Often times youth will compel romantically-involved friends to address a lack of focus on the friendship while romantic partners tend to express jealousy over pre-existing friendship bonds. An adolescent female explains her experience:

…his friends could talk him into doing things…he would listen to his friends instead of me…‘cause [sic] his friends didn’t have girls…so his friends really…couldn’t understand a relationship…they would tell him to do whatever they wanted…I don’t want to break up their friendship…I told him if I’m his girlfriend he would sure listen to…what I have to say…

The respondent notes the difficulty her boyfriend experiences managing time with childhood friends and his romantic commitment, but believes that, as his girlfriend, she should play a more influential role in determining how he spends his time. With schedules further devoted to academics, recreational sports and after-school jobs, adolescents often experience difficulty balancing time spent with friends and partners.

Adolescents enter relationships expecting a certain level of commitment and time from partners, but problems arise when partners disagree on their expectations:

…she had friends…and she would always go places and do things with them and I couldn’t accept that by me being her boyfriend. I’m like, ‘well, if you can find time to spend time with your friends, you can find time to spend time with me!’…I felt like if anything, you should spend more time with her companion than your friends…yeah, I felt
like I was being neglected…like, you gotta [sic] show me respect, you can’t be running the streets with your friends when you know you could be spending time with me.

The respondent’s comments highlight a desire for greater intimacy and engagement. When expectations for commitment and time contrast, adolescents may choose to end the relationship, or may attempt to elicit more time from partners. Jealousy sometimes emerges when adolescents intuit that they do not receive a disproportionate amount of partners’ time. Adolescents who express feelings of jealousy often reflect insecurity as they sense their importance is challenged by a partners’ engagement with family and friends. White (1980) suggests that jealousy is a mediating construct that is produced by anticipated relationship loss. Thus, the expression of jealousy in adolescent relationships highlights the importance of these relationships for adolescents. Adolescents value romantic relationships yet many lack finesse in communicating their desires. Adolescents sometimes counteract insecurity by attempting to dictate who a partner may spend time with, and by questioning a partner’s whereabouts:

…like he doesn’t like when I have guys around…[he’s] very jealous. Even with my best friend he doesn’t like me hanging out without him…he’s insecure…very insecure. He thinks I’m going to leave him…like this weekend I didn’t come over Saturday night and he was so mad and he started crying ‘cause [sic] he said ‘I thought you were dead.’

Adolescents whose partners are attempting to dictate how time is spent may downplay the importance of complaints, make accommodations, or end the relationship. Adolescents who are interrogated by partners may downplay control by describing it as “caring” or “protective.” As one respondent notes,

he was just nice and everything…but it was like sometimes he would get overprotective… one day I came out of basketball practice and I was like ‘man, I’m going to talk to my friends’ and all…and one of them was a boy, and he caught attitude like ‘well, what was he doing talking to you?’…so it was like he was cool, but he was a little more overprotective…he knew they’re just my friends but he’d still be trying to go off. I mean, he was nice and all, I mean if I needed anything he would get it for me, I would never had [sic] to ask him for anything….but it’s just he was overprotective too much.
Some adolescents choose to disengage from romantic relationships when partners begin questioning their fidelity and demanding more attention than they are willing or able to give. Control sometimes escalates until partners feel they have reached a point of undesirable disequilibrium with other relationships and feel little or no control over their own actions.

These issues of time and control do not always reflect boys’ position of greater dominance and control. One male respondent describes an experience with his girlfriend:

we’re friends but she like totally screwed me over…she really started getting too controlling. She like [sic], ‘okay we’re going out now and I mean…I tried making plans with my friends like going out on weekends and stuff. Amy’s like, ‘no, we’re going out here and we’re doing this and we’re going’…I mean we…she never said anything about it but when it came around to it she like [sic] ‘okay…I told you this and we’re going out tonight’…so I got sick of it. Every night we’d do that. I’m like okay that’s enough…I told her because I just got sick of it. I just I wasn’t going to live with that anymore…I don’t get to see any of my friends anymore.

Adolescence involves balancing demands of family, friends, and an emerging interest in romantic relationships. The novelty and fragility during this phase of the life course can foster multiple uncertainties, and given the salience of romantic partnerships, the likelihood that control issues will emerge within the romantic domain increases.

Defining and Establishing Commitment

Adolescents strongly invested in having and maintaining romantic relationships will resort to various means to affect commitment from partners. Analysis of the relationship narratives reveals that both males and females are hesitant to even begin relationships based on the belief that partners will cheat, reject them, or cause irreparable heartache. As one female adolescent explains “I’m afraid of the heartbreak I guess…I’m afraid of the rejection.” Another female respondent explains, “…that is a big fear of mine…to be in a commitment, committing to one person…you never know what is going to happen from day to day. You don’t want to put
all your eggs in one basket!” Often times these feelings of trepidation extend to both partners as is evidenced by an adolescent female’s recollection that both she and her boyfriend were concerned about being ‘played’ (i.e., when a partner dates multiple people while simultaneously citing commitment to one person): “…we was talking [sic]…he was like ‘uh…you think we should go together for real?’ and I was like ‘I don’t know because you might, uh, play me’ and he was like, ‘no, you might play me!’ and I was like ‘I don’t play people!’ and he was like ‘I don’t either!’”

Once adolescents are engaged in romantic relationships, defining parameters of romantic commitment often involves negotiating the onset of sexual contact. From the perspective of one who attempts to initiate sexual contact, difficulty sometimes lies in convincing a partner that he/she is invested in more than just sex. Although this has been associated with girls’ stresses, analyses reveal that boys are not immune from these mismatches concerning the timing of intimate contact. One adolescent male who felt pressured into sex notes:

…I guess she was more mature than I was and I guess I wasn’t on her level you know because she wanted to do it more than I did…I was too young, I was scared…I wasn’t ready for it…she was my girlfriend and that’s what she wanted…It was like she would want it like every time we would see each other and that’s all we had in common…she started pulling away from me first like she stopped calling me and everything…I wasn’t going to do nothing I wasn’t ready for and she couldn’t accept it.

The respondent’s girlfriend attempts to initiate sexual contact, and subsequently establish a more committed relationship regardless of his resistance. The respondent’s comments suggest that at least some males are not merely interested in sexual encounters; the narratives reveal that many male adolescents value emotional intimacy in romantic relationships.

Once adolescents have engaged in sexual relations this aspect of the relationship is sometimes used to cement the partners’ commitment. In some cases, the fear of losing one’s partner to another may prompt individuals to increase the intensity of a sexual relationship.
After the initiation of a sexual relationship, partners often experience a heightened sense of commitment and connection (see Giordano et al., 2004). Problems arise when one partner ascribes greater importance to the sexual relationship than the other and uses this as leverage to extract and secure commitment. This dynamic is comparable to Cromwell and Olson’s (1975) notion of referent power as it involves one partner being more invested in having and maintaining a sexual relationship than the other.

Although some adolescents attempt to ascertain *more* commitment from partners, others seek to limit the seriousness of relationships through avoidance and limited contact with partners. As one respondent notes,

I felt if I really didn’t push Tommy away so much we would still be together because when he would try to hug me, show affection in public, I would just kind of pull away and when he wanted to meet my parents, I didn’t want him to. I didn’t know what he wanted in a relationship and I would try to ask him and he would be like ‘I want a long term relationship’ but I didn’t want to believe him because I was like ‘guys lie, guys cheat’ so I don’t want to believe him.

The respondent notes that reluctance to indulge her boyfriend’s desire for greater commitment, in addition to being an ongoing concern, ultimately ends the relationship. Another female respondent notes a similar experience with a boyfriend who was more invested in the relationship:

… he would always come around and I think I seen [sic] him too much. Part of liking someone is missing them so like go away…because its irritating you know a guy constantly on you to go out with you and then if you start going out with him then he’d be like ‘yes I finally got her’ and on you even more…he was like too aggressive which I don’t like. He would always call me and I felt like he was stalking me sometimes…I told him he called a little bit too much and he would be like ‘oh, I’m sorry’ then he would stop for a couple of days then it was back.

This respondent *does* indicate a desire for greater commitment. As adolescents navigate romantic relationships for the first time they often experience difficulty establishing a level of commitment that is acceptable to both partners. As the previous example illustrates, problems
arise when partners fail to clarify their intentions and expectations concerning commitment, or when the two simply disagree about a desirable or appropriate level.

*Controlling Communication*

Adolescents, relatively new to romantic relationships and, more generally, dealing with the opposite sex, often express frustration and confusion concerning their communications with partners. Some adolescent females express difficulty communicating with boyfriends that they deem “stubborn” and “noncommittal”. Likewise, some male adolescents indicate feeling “pushed aside” by partners who fail to communicate their needs. Concerning her partner, one respondent notes “…he was very mean to me at first…I think this is the way that he showed that he liked me…he was very like scared to open up to me. He was very scared to let me know when he was upset or anything…it was like silent treatment.” This respondent excuses her boyfriend’s behavior because it was supposedly just “the way he acts” and, perhaps even how he demonstrates his admiration. Another female respondent is less accepting of her partner’s reluctance to communicate:

he wouldn’t want to call me and I would beg him to call me. I would look like a fool begging him…I was like ‘will you call me?’ and he was like ‘yeah…it if I have time’…and I just felt really stupid but I was telling everybody…I was really happy because I thought he was going to call me, but he never called me and I cried…I was so sad.

The phenomenon of the “brooding male” is certainly found within the narratives, but offers a limited characterization of the range of experiences of male adolescents within the romantic context. Evidence suggests that some female adolescents *also* may hesitate to communicate with partners about their emotions. As one male respondent notes,

every time we try to talk about it she just yells at me. I was like, ‘okay this ain’t [sic] working’…she’s like the person that started the arguments. But she didn’t want to continue. I was like, ‘okay. Well just talk then. Why argue?’…and she’d get frustrated and run away…she was always the person that didn’t want to…talk but how could I
know what she was thinking if we didn’t talk?...I tried to tell her what I’m thinking and she would always like, I don’t know, freak out and leave.

Previous research suggests that women disclose more information than men during intimate encounters (Dindia & Allen, 1992; Maccoby, 2002). Jourard (1961) suggests that the socially-contrived ‘male role’ does not allow men to acknowledge or to disclose their thoughts and emotions. Maccoby (2002) finds a notable difference between interactions in all-male compared to all-female groups noting that men tend to talk about sports, cars, sex, and sometimes politics, whereas women are more likely to talk intimately about relationships. The narratives suggest that, at least for adolescent males, this image of male behavior is not complete. However, it is important to underscore that each adolescent has the opportunity to frame his/her own understanding of these common processes. Thus, it is quite likely that some boys believe that they are communicating in intimate ways, but that the corresponding partner would narrate these dynamics in a different way.

*Changing Partners’ Appearance, Beliefs, and Behavior*

Adolescents not only attempt to influence features of the relationship such as common processes and time spent together, but also to affect changes in the partners’ appearance, beliefs, and behavior. Adolescence is a developmental phase characterized by anxiety and self-consciousness. Anxiety over appearance may be transferred to one’s partner in an effort to avoid negative reflection on one’s self. Adolescent respondents’ change efforts frequently revolve around a desire for partners to fit gender idealizations, to boost partners’ self-esteem, and to influence the physical appearance of partners. Life-history narratives reveal that both males and females attempt to change their partners in subtle and more obvious ways.

Adolescents approach romantic relationships with an idealized notion of how men and woman *should* behave, think, and dress. In their privileged positions as romantic confidantes,
adolescents wield influential power to persuade partners to act in ways that befit their idealized notions. As one respondent explains,

he wants me to play this wife role or he wants…to be the dominate [sic] in the relationship and…I disagree with that totally. You know as far as what the girl does…everything she’s supposed to. Take care of the baby you know, wash the clothes, and stuff like that. You know I I [sic] don’t get, I don’t like that stuff. So me and him argue about that because I’m not that type of person…I try to play the dominate [sic] role also and…he feels that he’s a man and he should be playing that part…I’m independent so I should play that part and that’s when we argue.

These comments reflect the situated nature of power processes in adolescent romantic relationships, in that the respondent indicates that both she and her boyfriend struggle to establish dominance in the relationship. He maintains idealized notions of appropriate feminine behavior that include staying home to care for children and maintaining the household. Conversely, as an “independent” woman, these activities do not appeal to the respondent and she feels they should not be forced upon her by virtue of gender. As is indicated by this respondent’s experience, and as elicited by Elias (1998), power is a dynamic balancing act that is continually negotiated between partners.

Some respondents indicate a preference for partners based on what they feel is an appropriate sexual identity and behavior. Often this preference involves partners’ sexual experience. As one adolescent male explains,

I don’t want to be with you if a whole lot of other people have been with you…that’s just a man thing! I can’t explain it. I guess, men feel they have to, I don’t know, they just, they have to be above, women…I look for somebody that’s either equal with me, or below me…I don’t want to be like with somebody that’s more experienced than me…I learn on my own! I don’t want no [sic] girl teaching me! It takes the pleasure out of it…I guess cause they know more….and then, they be in control or something. I feel like I have to be in control! It just doesn’t make it right! I want to be in charge!

This respondent’s explanation of “male pride” concerning the experience of his partner is not uncommon among adolescent males. Adolescent males often fear being upstaged by female
partners in the bedroom. The respondent’s comments also reveal that sexual prowess can be a source of power in romantic relationships. His trepidation suggests that the assumption of male power is not certain, at least in situations where the female partner has more sexual experience.

Changing partners to conform to idealizations of the opposite sex may involve attempting to change the physical appearance of partners. One male adolescent explains how his girlfriend attempts to change him in numerous ways:

she’s tried, see I don’t…want to change her. I never did but there was something about her she always wanted to change me. She wanted me to do this and wear this and do that. I was like, ‘okay. Whatever.’” I’d do it but I don’t know. It’s like not the person that see, she’s like changing. If you’re going to change it, yeah that’s okay to do it on yourself but when other people try to change me…to suit their needs, I don’t know, I just don’t see it right.

The respondent expresses hesitation at changing his clothing and behavior to suit his girlfriend’s desires. He admits that making changes on his own would be fine, but when they are prompted by his girlfriend he questions her acceptance of him. Romantic partners, perhaps more so than friends, directly reflect upon one another, since partners make a concerted choice to be with one another. It is assumed that each partner finds qualities in the other that reflect positively on them. When partners present themselves in a way that reflects poorly on the other, this significant other is apt to initiate a desired change.

Not all adolescent influence is negative or coercive; however, interestingly, within the life history narratives male adolescents more often expressed a desire to make partners feel good about themselves. As one male notes,

…she’s insecure…she’s like not comfortable with herself sometimes…like with her body and stuff cause she’s self-conscious…like the more we’re together the more like comfortable and closer she feels…I just tell her how pretty she is you know cause she gets down on herself…I’m just trying to help her out and make her feel a lot better…
The respondent recognizes his girlfriend’s insecurity and attempts to convince her of his loyalty and acceptance. Another male respondent notes a similar experience with his girlfriend,

        I don’t think that she really did love me, she always kind of hated herself, you can’t really love anybody until you love yourself…I kept trying to make her like write down the good points about her and stuff like that and she would think it was stupid and not do it. And then I would always write down stuff that I liked about her and I would write her like gay poems…they were stupid…like one was like ‘this is the reason why I like to see you everyday’…

While the respondent offers the disclaimer that his attempts to boost his girlfriend’s self-esteem are “stupid”, this is an important dynamic that has received relatively little attention in previous research on gender dynamics. For example, Holland and Eisenhart (1990) emphasize the extent to which romantic partners of the college females studied denigrate the partners’ appearance, career goals and the like.

*Strategies for Change and Influence*

Adolescents attempt to influence, change, and even control their romantic partners utilizing a number of psychological and sometimes physical means. Adolescents’ assumed beliefs about the use of control in romantic relationships are manifest in blatant attempts to coerce, manipulate and influence partners’ appearance, beliefs, and behavior; they are also apparent to the extent that partners willingly accede to these attempts. The use of mild suggestions, though important to the understanding of power and influence dynamics in romantic relationships, is difficult to glean from the life-history narratives. Analysis of the life history narratives documents that threats, inducing guilt, interrogation, sexual manipulation, and physical violence characterize the range of mechanisms employed by both males and females to affect change in some aspect of the partner or the relationship, recognizing that more subtle mechanisms may be employed routinely but do not loom as large within a narrative framework.
**Threats**

Adolescents attempting to elicit change in partners and relationships may resort to threats. As noted by Felson and Messner (2000), the use of threatening measures is a common control mechanism that can be either present- or future-oriented. Threats tend to involve withholding communication (i.e., ‘silent treatments’), withholding affection, and in relationships involving children, withholding visitation rights. Youth often resort to the ‘silent treatment’ as a show of power and influence. A female respondent explains how she used the ‘silent treatment’ to elicit a behavioral change in her partner:

I was like ‘Eric you’re making me mad’…he’s like ‘that’s what I’m trying to do’ and I was like ‘I don’t like it’ and still he tried to irritate me and I’m like ‘you know what’s going to happen is that you’re really going to make me mad and I’m not going to talk to you for a couple of weeks’ and he said something and we hung up and I didn’t call him for a couple of weeks so he finally called me and he’s like ‘man, you weren’t kidding and you didn’t call me for a couple of weeks’ and I was like ‘I told you.’

By withholding communication, this respondent successfully changes the dynamic of her relationship, and may have elicited respect from her partner. Her tactics suggest a common theme among adolescents that desire change in relationships, but lack communicative skills to elicit change in a more subtle, supportive manner.

Sometimes withholding communication does not have the desired effect of eliciting change in a partner. A female respondent recalls how her boyfriend expressed resentment toward her and threatened not to speak with her when he was unsuccessful in getting her to change:

well usually he gets mad over stupid stupid [sic] stuff…like last night he was like ‘can I come over tonight?’ and I was like, ‘no. I’m very tired and I have homework to do.’ And he got mad over that. He’s like, ‘if I’m not coming over then don’t talk to me again for a long long [sic] time.’ But usually…he doesn’t stay mad at me for a long time because he says he can’t be mad at me for more than 10 minutes because he loves me so much…I just say, ‘yeah right. You’ll be talking to me in like five minutes.’ And then if that’s crazy he says, ‘I know. I can’t help it.’
The respondent’s comments highlight the “powering process” (Szinovacz, 1987) in romantic relationships. She notes that her boyfriend’s attempt at changing the dynamic of the relationship to spend more time with her fails when he concedes defeat too quickly. Unlike the previous respondent who is able to follow-through with her threats, this respondent gives in too quickly and fails to elicit more time with his partner because she may no longer take his threats seriously. As Sprey (1991) suggests, the ‘non-dominant’ partner often has difficulty eliciting change. The problem is circuitous to the extent that ‘non-dominant’ partners are not likely to successfully control and influence partners, and to be a more ‘dominant’ partner suggests that one is able to successfully control and influence partners. Narratives reveal that power is indeed dynamic, rather than a static entity or condition of the relationship. Routinely, the unique composition of each dyad influences exercise of power and influence.

Adolescents sometimes threaten to withhold physical affection as a means of eliciting a desired response from partners. As one male respondent explains,

…she didn’t have power, I used to let her know it, because she would say that she was going to put me on a drought…so when she tried putting me on these long little waits, tell me I can’t right now for her little various reasons I would let her know that if you don’t then I’ll go get it from someone else. I would let her know but I guess she took it like a joke.

The respondent’s comments are particularly interesting considering that both he and his partner are threatening to withhold physical affection to bring about a desired outcome. When his girlfriend attempts to withhold sex to her advantage, the respondent responds in kind by threatening not only to withhold sex from her, but to find physical affection from someone else if she persists in putting him on “little droughts.” The respondent’s claim that he will seek intimacy elsewhere is an example of a future-oriented threat (Felson & Messner, 2000); the threat serves to warn his partner that failing to meet his needs may prompt him to cheat on her in
the future. His comments also highlight the situated nature of power in intimate relationships.

As he attempted to stake a traditional stance with his partner (“she didn’t have power…if you don’t then I’ll go get it from someone else”) the respondent faced resistance within the relationship when his partner “took it like a joke.”

Couples who use threatening measures to change or influence partners sometimes rely on potentially damaging tactics when relationships involve children. As one male respondent explains:

…if we got into it, there would be times where I would say ‘I don’t want to be with you’ she would be ‘you can’t see your son no more’ she would throw that in my face at that point in time…if I didn’t I wouldn’t see my son for a long while until we had to go to court or I could go back to her right then and there and be able to see my son. And deal with all the mess the headaches…

The respondent explains that his child’s mother threatens to withhold access to their child if he tries to leave her. She uses their child as a means to bring about a desired change in the respondent. The respondent’s girlfriend’s threats are suggestive of the youthful methods adolescents sometimes use to elicit change from their partners, but they also reveal a desire for intimacy by any means. This respondent ultimately concedes to his girlfriend’s demands because he values the relationship with his child; this is, however, not always the case as is evidenced by the following respondent’s comments:

I don’t come around that often. ‘Cause I’m not, I gotta [sic] put up with her attitude…yeah, I come around still every once in awhile but not, it wasn’t like everyday or every other day like it used to be. She demands stuff she want [sic] to be done and she never [sic] satisfied. Just, she think [sic] the baby, maybe cause, if I buy the baby some diapers, well, well ‘he need this, he need that’, she I don’t know. She just [sic] a problem. I don’t like the girl. She threatened me with child support. I don’t care less [sic] about child support.

This respondent admits that he is not threatened by losing access to his child because he is not interested in playing a participatory role in his life. Key to the use of threats when attempting to
elicit change is choosing something that is important to partners. In this instance, the respondent admits that he is not interested in paying child support; therefore, using his child to elicit change is not successful. However, his reaction may be interpreted as more of a defense mechanism against his partner than an assessment of his parental involvement.

**Inducing Guilt**

Inducing guilt is another behavior modification tactic frequently used by both male and female adolescents in their romantic relationships. Adolescents attempt to ‘guilt’ partners into changing, oftentimes to suit personal needs. Given the importance of romantic partners in the lives of adolescents, guilt tends to be a successful tactic for eliciting change. When a partner cheats or behaves inappropriately, capitalizing on the cheating partner’s guilt (i.e., black mail) allows an adolescent to elicit subsequent behavioral changes:

> she hadn’t completely forgiven me and she didn’t completely have trust in me. She was going to give me another chance, but she wasn’t gonna [sic] have...I was, I was dying for another chance ‘cause [sic] I knew I did something wrong and I, you know, it was like on my behalf that I messed up...no, she held it against me like a knife to my throat. Like if I did something wrong and like if we got into a fight she’d throw it in my face...oh, I uh...I’d get mad, but then I’d have to face the fact that I did it and it was, it was my fault and I have to roll with the punches.

The respondent notes that his girlfriend’s guilt-inducing tactics work to the extent that he will “roll with the punches” and feels obliged to change his behavior to amend previous indiscretions. The respondent’s comments reveal a strong desire for intimacy and commitment (“I was dying for another chance”) and underscore the extent to which some males wish to actively engage in relationship processes. As with the use of threats, tactics involving guilt will only work if partners value the relationship and are willing to accede to the others’ demands.
Adolescents tend to express insecurity in their romantic relationships. Thus, common strategies include questioning the whereabouts of partners, with whom partners spend their time, and generally doubting and mistrusting partners. As one female adolescent explains:

…he was just really jealous and he would just be like ‘oh, I don’t like your friends’…he wouldn’t want me to go out with them or I don’t know…Like, ‘where you goin’ [sic]? meet some guys?’ Like he had to know where I as at all the time…he would call my house and then if I wasn’t there as soon as I got back he’d call like ‘where were you at?’ if I didn’t say where I was…he’d just be like, ‘oh, were you out lookin’ [sic] at guys…?’ I didn’t really give him a reason…I trusted him more than he trusted me….he was all about like ‘where have you been?’ and ‘who were you with?, how long were you gone?’ and all that.

The respondent’s boyfriend not only questions her whereabouts and demands a timeframe of her activities, he also accuses her of cheating. His “over-protective” behavior eventually becomes bothersome and intrusive, and eventually results in the demise of their relationship. Though the respondent’s partner’s actions may be interpreted as overbearing, they reveal the extent to which some adolescent males value commitment, and fear rejection from females. Often times, girls can be equally, if not more, insecure than their male counterparts. One male adolescent notes that his girlfriend:

started getting into a little too close or something, where she thought she could start saying anything, and doing anything to me, I’m like…like as far as calling me…she is my girlfriend and I understand that, but she was doing [imitating girlfriend] ‘call me everyday…who you on the phone with?...where you been at?’ This and that…just all down my neck and I wouldn’t on it [sic], I wouldn’t try to hear all that everyday…I’m like ‘my mama ain’t [sic] even do that to me!

The fragility of relationships and adolescents’ general sense of insecurity and inexperience is undoubtedly related to self-doubt and lack of trust in partners. However, it is also important to underscore that, based on the relatively short duration of most adolescent romantic relationships, these respondents are not completely misguided in their concerns about where a particular
relationship may be headed. In addition, school and other social activities provide a fertile backdrop for engaging other heterosexual partners, further heightening the adolescent’s sense of relationship vulnerability.

**Sexual Manipulation**

For many adolescents, romantic relationships serve as the major gateway into physical intimacy and sexual contact. Jealousy, self-doubt, and insecurity may escalate in adolescent relationships when they involve sexual and physical intimacy. Establishing a physical relationship requires a degree of vulnerability between partners. When this vulnerability is capitalized upon partners may cheat, manipulate, and use sex as a bargaining tool for personal benefit. As one adolescent male explains,

…and so I had this girl, she was like, she wanted to date me, she wanted to be my girl real bad. And I mean I’d be in her bedroom, she was like ‘alright. Let’s have sex.’ So I [sic] ‘okay lets.’ It’s like I’d be to the point to where I mean we’re about to two seconds we’re going to have sex and she’s like ‘well, wait a minute. We’re not going out. Why don’t we go out?’ I was like ‘I don’t want a girlfriend right now’ you know. And she was like ‘well, well what do you mean?...I mean we’re about to have sex.’…I’m like ‘I’m just trying to get off here and so are you, let’s just do this.’

When his friend realizes that the respondent values a sexual relationship, she uses this to her advantage to negotiate a commitment; if the respondent wants sex, he presumably would have to agree to a greater commitment. The respondent attempts to clarify an apparent misunderstanding with his friend by noting that both of them are merely interested in a physical encounter and not a committed relationship. Though the respondent’s actions are consistent with traditional conceptions of intimate male behavior (see Winter, 1973), his partner’s mere attempt to garner commitment prior to sexual intimacy suggests that some females do indeed have a degree of bargaining power in relationships.
The promise of physical intimacy can also serve to cement commitment from a partner in an established relationship. A male respondent explains how his girlfriend uses sex to procure a stronger commitment:

like there was girls [sic] I was finding out girls like, you know how in high school, you’ll find out if another girl likes you somehow…Heather would find out all these other girls were liking me and she’d be like ‘you’d better not’…I think she was sleeping with me to try to keep me…And I said no. I don’t want to do that, even if it is sex...she wanted me and I didn’t want her…like we were dating too long, ‘you’re too protective, you don’t trust me, you don’t care what I think’, you know it all just tallied up. So I guess, you know, she was mad, sad…

The respondent admits that other girls were interested in dating him and his girlfriend offered sex to keep him interested in their relationship. Although he expresses an interest in having sex, the respondent admits that his relationship was not healthy and that his girlfriend was overly protective. The respondent’s comments underscore the notion that males are not solely interested in a sexual relationship (“...I don’t want to do that, even if it is sex”). The narratives suggest that some adolescents confuse emotional intimacy with physical intimacy, and may attempt to compensate for a lack in emotional intimacy with a sexual relationship.

**Physical Violence**

As stated previously, physical abuse occurs less frequently than other forms of power and influence in adolescent romantic relationships (Kann et al., 2000; Sousa, 1999; Bergman, 1992). However, a complete assessment of power and influence in adolescent romantic relationships should examine the *full* range of change strategies. Previous research finds evidence of physical violence in adolescent romantic relationships, as do the life-history narratives (Henton et al., 1983). Romantic relationships often culminate in physical violence after preceding patterns of less serious forms of power and influence (e.g., mild suggestion) (Campbell & Humphreys, 1993). The life history narratives reveal that adolescent victims of physical abuse recall a history
of escalated power and influence that eventually turned violent. One female adolescent notes how jealousy and mistrust preceded physical assaults:

…we started drifting apart a lot…There were some really bad times like real bad like he would start beating me…over lies and he didn’t believe me he believed his friend…his friend told him that I had put a hickey on his neck and I was like ‘I didn’t even see him’…I don’t remember exactly why he hit me at first…He slapped me in the face…He seemed nice and stuff…It was just some days he would just get mad at me over something…I didn’t hit him back the first time but I did hit him back once…He said I deserved it…I was yelling and I had slapped him. He started pacing back and forth…He then hit me with this tool and he hit me on the wrist when I blocked it so he hit me on the arm. It was like a wrench…I still felt at times that I loved him…I cared about him so much; it shouldn’t end it just because of the fights and the hitting. I just start thinking that maybe I did deserve it…Thinking I did something wrong.

Some adolescents express surprise and confusion when more insidious, less serious forms of power and influence turn violent. For some, this physical violence becomes a normative element in romantic relationships, and may serve a communicative function for those lacking the skills to elucidate problems with partners.

Life-history narratives indicate that some male adolescents are also victims of physical violence within romantic relationships. Interestingly, this finding suggests that at least some boys are willing to discuss being physically violated by female partners. Feiring et al.’s (2002) finding that girls are more likely to admit being the perpetrator of physical aggression in romantic relationships may indicate an acceptance or justification of female violence against male partners. However, female-perpetrated physical violence is not always retaliatory. One adolescent recalls physical abuse at the hands of his girlfriend: “she’s hit me a couple times…she slammed me through her bedroom door once…it hurt…it was another one of those arguments…she pushed me through her bedroom door and I fell down a flight of stairs…she hit me with a boat oar once…she was getting pissed at me and she just whacked me.” Further in the narrative, this adolescent expresses his disdain for the use of violent measures between romantic
partners. Though he believes one should “never hit a girl”, he accepts being abused by his girlfriend because she supposedly lacks the ability to communicate in a more constructive manner.

Another male adolescent admits to utilizing violence after a particularly big fight with his girlfriend even though he was taught not to hit girls:

I couldn’t be as open and tell her, and talk to her like I used to like asking questions and telling things about me or…like that type of stuff. And um…yeah, it, it really pushed me away from her a little bit. Um…then the last time we broke up we had a really big fight. Um…and this was the first time I ever punched at a girl ‘cause [sic] I find that very disrespectful. That’s how my father has always taught me. And I called her out of her name and a really big fight.

Though this adolescent notes that he was taught not to hit girls, his violence may be a result of his inability to communicate with her. He claims that he could no longer “talk to her like I used to.” The adolescent’s communicative difficulties in no way justify the use of physical violence, but they emphasize findings by Ronfeldt et al. (1998) that some men become physically abusive in response to dissatisfaction with relationship power while others progress from psychologically to physically abusive behaviors. However, these results are not consistent with findings by Feiring et al. (2003) that boys express lower levels of guilt and shame in relation to the justification of sexual aggression, and were more likely to blame others in relation to using physical aggression against partners. This adolescent appears to take responsibility for his actions and does express some regret.

Some male adolescents will retaliate against female partners who utilize physical violence to avoid being stigmatized by others as “whipped” (i.e., controlled by a female partner). One adolescent male explains this dynamic:

She always liked to hit…like slap in the face hit…I didn’t say anything retarded or anything, she would just hull off and slap me in the face. One day…I lost it, she smacked me really hard like the hardest anyone has ever smacked me…she slapped me right in
front of the guys...She would hit me in front of anybody. I was like ‘Oh God, don’t do that Cassie’ and she hit me again and it was like equally hard...she hit me on this side of my face on the left and my right ear starts ringing...I gave her two warnings and she hit me a third time and I smacked her as hard as I could and she fell. I felt horrible...I was trying to make it okay...I would be like ‘well I warned her two times you know’, she just pushed me too far and then I would be like ‘that’s my girlfriend and I just clocked her in front of my friends but then she shouldn’t have slapped me that hard in front of my friends.’

This adolescent appears to grapple with his beliefs about not hitting women and still maintaining a respectable reputation with his friends. His struggle highlights the equation of victimization with femininity. This adolescent appears to fear being victimized by his partner in front of friends more so than actually being hit because it may testify to his supposed lack of masculinity. He rationalizes that warning her not to hit him again justifies his retaliatory strike. The mutual use of physical violence, though rare, does characterize some adolescent romantic relationships.

Another male adolescent expresses the belief that “she was the dude and I was the female” after being repeatedly assaulted by his girlfriend:

…one time we were broke up and I was over at this girl’s house and she came over to this girl’s house and she cut me with a box cutter…She came there for the purpose of cutting me...she came directly after me...I didn’t do nothing, I didn’t know she had a box cutter in her hand and when she swung I just jumped back but if I didn’t jump back she probably would have cut my whole face or something...she tries to fight me all the time. Like one day I was going to a basketball game up at Woodworth and she threw her pager at me because I didn’t want to sit by her at the game. I just wanted to sit by myself...We weren’t together, I think she was a little jealous...There has been times when she poured a whole pop on me, trying to fight me at school, follows me to all my classes...Fist fight...Physical, like she was the dude and I was the female...

This adolescent’s comments reveal that some physical abuse may even occur after the demise of a relationship. He notes that his girlfriend’s jealousy supposedly fueled many of her physical assaults, and claims that her attacks were sometimes pre-meditated (“she came there for the purpose of cutting me”). This suggests that physical violence may not only occur in “the heat of the moment”, but also may be the result of a conscious decision to inflict harm on one’s partner.
Dyadic Identities

Adolescence is a period of exploration and learning that allows youth freedom to try different social personas in a relatively consequence-free environment; this same notion is true in romantic relationships. Each dyad has unique qualities that may prove relatively beneficial or destructive depending on the combination of individuals. The age-graded social world of adolescents provides a ready population of generally similar-minded youth with whom to learn more about the world of romantic attachments and to develop a more complex understanding of a longer term partner’s desired qualities. Each relationship, regardless of the length and seriousness, serves to teach youth about wants and needs from a romantic partner. Although attachment theories underscore that individuals do not begin to forge these relationships as a blank slate, (Youniss & Smollar, 1985) the life history narratives reveal that romantic relationships are themselves a source of further learning and socialization.

Stable Dyadic Identities

Though adolescent romantic relationships are undoubtedly influential and, in some cases, behavior- and belief-altering they may also serve to bolster, rather than deconstruct, pre-existing beliefs and associated identities. Adolescents exhibit stable dyadic identities when they maintain beliefs and behavior that pre-date a particular dyad. As one adolescent female explains,

…I need to stop this relationship ‘cause [sic] he wants something different than I want…I, I wouldn’t even kiss him when we first started dating and then we started kissing and he wanted to start rubbing and like that…I’m like ‘no, I’m not that way.’ So, I stopped him and he tried it again…I knew it had to go…they all knew I had boundaries and nobody could step over my boundaries…if you step over it you’re gone…I should be able to set boundaries for myself…

Like the respondent, adolescents often establish dating “rules” that dictate behavior and beliefs regardless of the person they date. Mores help guide adolescents through the oftentimes
confusing experience of interacting with the opposite sex. One adolescent female explains her “rule” about name-calling in a relationship:

…the reason why me and him broke up is because he was talking to me and he got mad at me and he called me a bitch…like I had established at the beginning of the relationship, like if you was to ever call me that, I would just, probably wouldn’t even talk to you anymore like you’d probably be my friend but I would definitely not go with you no more.

This adolescent female maintains her dyadic identity as one who will not tolerate name-calling regardless of who she dates; this rule allows her to “weed-out” unsuitable partners. Both narratives suggest that females are not solely consumed with having and maintaining romantic relationships. Each respondent indicates that there are expectations concerning what is ‘acceptable’ behavior in intimate relationships, and failure to meet these expectations results in the demise of the relationship.

*Exploratory Dyadic Identities*

Adolescents who are beginning to date often try-out different personas in an attempt to better communicate with the opposite sex. A young woman may dress more provocatively if she feels it will garner attention from boys. Likewise, a young man may feign interest in shopping if it allows him to spend more time with a potential partner. Adolescents exhibit exploratory dyadic identities to the extent that they alter their beliefs and behavior during the course of a particular romantic relationship. One adolescent male explains the process of choosing what he believes to be a socially-desirable persona:

I tried that! It actually did work!...You’re keeping [sic] acting like you’re a bad ass, stuff like that…and then you let ‘em [sic] see how you really are, a little at a time…I’m more the quiet type…I felt like a heel and like a…and I didn’t want to feel like a heel, actually…and then I just felt bad…oh geez, um [imitating friends] ‘why don’t you dating [sic] a couple of girls?’ and I’m like ‘no…I only want to date one girl at a time. Uh. I don’t feel like playing them like that’…it felt really really bad!
This adolescent explains that, for a time, he pretended to be a “bad ass” when dealing with women but eventually found it did not work for him because he felt bad “playing them like that.” At the insistence of friends, this adolescent attempted to date more than one girl at a time only to find his conscience prevented him from following through with the “tough guy” persona. The respondent’s comments indicate the influential role of friends, but also highlight the significance of experiences in intimate relationships. The respondent is unable to follow-through with a ‘Don Juan’ persona (see Winter, 1973) because he values his partners’ feelings. After a particularly bad break-up one adolescent male explains how he erects a protective emotional “moat” to avoid being hurt again:

…that’s why I said I’m a player now. I go pick the hos [sic] you, you can ask my mom. I’ve said that and I was like ‘nope.’ I’m not dating anymore girls.” I’m going to turn girls into sluts. That’s what I’m going to do. And I’m tired of this stuff and I mean…I’ve got a, I’ve got a- what do you call it?- a moat around me. And like…yeah, you better think, be able to think, swim, fly to get to me because if you can’t do all of them you’re not in…

After a disheartening experience this adolescent questions his prospects in a monogamous relationship. He intends to “turn girls into sluts”- the implication being that he will date and discard women rather than connect with them emotionally. Often times, partners who lack control in a relationship will resort to drastic measures in an attempt to quell the influential and controlling dynamic in an asymmetrical relationship.

As the adolescents are able to talk about their complete dating careers, some youths compare and contrast relationships in a way that highlights a gradual and, in many instances, positive relationship building process:

I mean he knew how I felt about him but I would never be able to tell him exactly how I was feeling… I had been looking for a serious relationship again but I was scared. And that’s one big thing that shows with me and him is that, like, I get scared so easily and I start pulling away from him. But, I think we both kinda [sic] always realize what’s happening and we stop it…he makes me talk about everything that I’m feeling and it’s
This adolescent realizes that she is able to communicate better in her current romantic relationship because this particular partner forces her to be open about feelings; though she admits this is difficult, she appears to have gradually recognized the benefits of openly expressing herself to a partner. Interestingly, it is the respondent’s partner who desires greater communication and intimacy in the relationship. This narrative suggests that some male adolescents value the intimacy forged in romantic relationships.

Adolescents often play a positive role in the growth of romantic partners because of their position of influence; this influence is often most clearly evident in the academic realm. As one adolescent male explains, “she makes me want to do better in school and stuff…I want to do well because of her…I really enjoy being with her all the time…she is really smart…I don’t think she would want me to be dumb…I don’t want to look stupid…I just don’t want to get grades too low.” Young men also have a positive influence on their girlfriends:

we have a lot of classes together, actually. So we see each other a lot during the day…I think he’s the reason that I do well in school, sometimes…he’s probably better at math than I am so he’s very good at helping me with that…yeah, I always try and beat him in math ‘cause [sic] I know he’s good at math. But it’s no big deal. And he does help me now, if I don’t understand stuff.

Adolescent relationships serve as a forum for reaffirming or dispelling pre-existing gender beliefs. As one adolescent female notes, “…he really wants a relationship and he like talks with me forever. I mean he’s really good at the relationship so…That makes me more like trusting guys [sic] and thinking guys are changing but still I know they’re out there and they just want one thing…” A good experience with her current boyfriend tentatively allows this
respondent to reexamine her existing misconceptions about male adolescents. A male adolescent explains how his current girlfriend has a positive impact on his life by requiring more of him:

…she didn’t let me run over her like other girls. I don’t know, I just don’t like to be with a girl I can run over easy. I don’t know, we just talking for awhile [sic] and then, I don’t know, I just started liking her more. That’s when I started dropping other girls…she was pretty, smart, and she wouldn’t let me run over her. I just liked the way she act [sic].

The respondent notes that this specific girlfriend was unique to the extent that she demanded more from him and “wouldn’t let me run over her.” The narrative highlights the unique dyadic power processes that result from a particular combination of individuals. Contrary to prior experiences, the respondent notes that this particular partner was able to influence him not to date other people.

Adolescents’ Reflections on Power and Influence

Adolescents often justify the existence of control and manipulation in their romantic relationships because of a strong desire to establish and maintain bonds regardless of the implications. Adolescents who are being controlled or manipulated by romantic partners often convince themselves that a power privilege does not exist. This pattern of excusing control, psychological and physical abuse as indices of intimacy and commonalities of romantic relationships is characteristic of victims in adult abusive relationships (Makepeace, 1986), and may characterize adolescent romantic partners. Adolescents often note that partners’ controlling behavior is “just how they are”, and many believe that they deserve this treatment. The notion that “he was just being protective” is a common refrain among adolescent females. As one female respondent explains, “if I wear a certain type of shirt that like show my back out…kind of revealing clothes, he’ll tell me…’you don’t really need to go out lookin’ [sic] like that because…guys think of sex only and…you don’t want to put that in their minds’…he teaches me…stuff about how men think.” The respondent is instructed that it is her appearance and
behavior that must be regulated, and she justifies this control by defining it as beneficial “brotherly” advice.

Though adolescent males attempt to control more often than girls, they are also more susceptible to control within the context of romantic relationships (Giordano, 2003). One adolescent male justifies his girlfriend’s increasingly suspicious and controlling behavior: “…like you can’t do the things you’re doing like if you’re in a regular relationship, just saying you’re going with somebody like talking to other people on the phone. I mean, they’ll have to say it’s okay with them ‘cause [sic] they might get mad, think you’re trying to go with somebody else.” The respondent rationalizes that suspicious behavior is not an atypical response for a girlfriend. He internalizes the belief that he must ascertain his girlfriend’s permission to talk with other girls and go places without her. The fact that adolescents justify their decisions to remain in harmful relationships is concerning given that psychological control and manipulation can be a precursor of more violent physical abuse (Campbell & Humphreys, 1993).

Adolescents who are controlled or manipulated by partners may not justify or accept the behavior; nonetheless, they explain its presence and function in relationships. One adolescent male claims that his girlfriend,

…really started getting too controlling. She like [sic], ‘okay we’re going out now’ and I tried…making plans with my friends [but] Amy’s like, ‘no we’re going out here and we’re doing this.’ I just…wasn’t going to live with that anymore…there was something about her she always wanted to change me. She wanted me to do this and wear this and do that. I was like ‘okay. Whatever.’ I’d do it but…I don’t see it [as] right.

Youth who manipulate and control their partners often justify the behavior by blaming “out-of-control” and “disrespectful” partners. They may also blame partners for inciting anger by behaving inappropriately. As one male adolescent explains,

I mean I would let a girl know, ‘don’t hit me’, I’d give her three test, if she hit me I’ll let her get away with it the first time, but I’d let her know ‘get away from me, don’t hit me
no more’ and when she do it [sic] the second time, I’ll let her know again and push her away from me so she knows I’m not playing and if she hit me a third time, then I’m hitting her back…yeah, I’ve hit a girl before…not too long ago I got into it with a girl…she kept putting her hands on me, so I let her have one.

The respondent justifies his use of physical force by noting that his girlfriend hit him first. He notes that three warnings are given before he will strike back at a girl.

Controlling and manipulative youth may not justify or excuse their behavior, but will note its presence and utility in relationships. Many adolescents blame their behavior on inexperiencen and naiveté in romantic relationships. One adolescent female admits to being a controlling and manipulative person; though rationalizes that she was “young and stupid”:

everybody wanted to be my friend and just go out with me so I just used my power against people and I was just mean to a lot of people and I really regret what I did though to everybody…I don’t know I just wanted to be mean I guess…like I mean I know I could so people would like me…Like I knew I had a power trip over people and I knew I could do it and it was okay and nobody would say anything…I would just like make fun of them right in front of their friends and they wouldn’t say anything to me…I don’t know, I just thought that I was better than everybody, but I wasn’t, I was equal and I realize that now…I just used it at my disposal…”

The respondent explains that her behavior was due to youthfulness and an over-active ego. She regrets her behavior but notes that at the time, her ability to manipulate others without repercussion fueled her actions.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I examine power and influence as critically important aspects of adolescent romantic relationships. Using life history narratives from a sample of adolescents with a range of dating experience, I rely on a developmental symbolic interactionist perspective to explore the range of mechanisms that adolescents use in their attempts to control or change partners. Increased dating experience may be beneficial to the extent that adolescents learn to effectively
communicate with the opposite sex, but it may also provide adolescents with subtle or heavy-handed methods of exerting power and influence. The life-history narratives reveal that a range in dating experience and change mechanisms was found not only between genders, but also within each gender. Some male adolescents exhibit stereotypic masculine behavior (e.g., non-communication and preference for short-term sexual relationships) while other males indicate a preference for meaningful, long-term relationships characterized by open-communication. Likewise, some female adolescents exhibit atypical feminine behavior (e.g., physical abuse of male partners and desire for short-term sexual relationships) while other female adolescents indicate a desire for increased communication and commitment.

The current analysis reveals that the range of power and influence in adolescent relationships may serve a beneficial function. Many adolescents note that their partners urged them to become better communicators, better students, and more accepting individuals. The life history narratives also suggest that adolescent romantic relationships are a beneficial domain for development and socialization. Contrary to traditional beliefs, the narratives suggest that many female adolescents express a strong desire to maintain independent identities; romantic relationships do not always hold precedence over school, friends, and future goals. Although many adolescent males express a desire for multiple, relatively short-term relationships, the life history narratives suggest that similar numbers do express a desire for monogamous relationships and open communication with partners. This thesis suggests that current conceptions of male and female adolescents may be caricatures of gendered attitudes that do not apply to all youths or to the changes adolescents experience as they garner more relationship experience. Further research that explores the meanings ascribed to intimate relationships by both males and females, and the patterns of interaction that characterize unique dyads, will provide additional insight into
how and why particular relationships succeed while others fail, and under which effects on
development are positive or problematic.

The current study also examined the function of power and influence as romantic
relationships develop or fade. Adolescents’ life history narratives indicate that power and
influence in romantic relationships can range in intensity from threats to more aggressive sexual
manipulation and physical violence. The findings suggest the need to further explore the full
range of these dynamics and how they may be affected by developmental phase. The life-history
narratives were not able to capture more mild suggestive change tactics that are likely to be
invoked quite frequently. These everyday, suggestive statements may provide insight into more
subtle forms of power and influence in adolescent romantic relationships. Analyses of diaries,
romantic partner interactions, and letters exchanged between partners may provide a better
source for these subtle change strategies.

As suggested at the outset, it is important not to approach the examination of adolescent
romantic relationships from the perspective of research on adult marital or other interdependent
relationships. Though adolescent relationships may share similar characteristics of these more
adult-like relationships, their positioning in the life course necessitates a unique approach.
Further research linking adolescent romantic relationship outcomes with subsequent intimate
relationships will further clarify the significance of this developmental stage. In addition,
preventative strategies and programs aimed at improving communication between romantic
partners may benefit from studies that highlight the significance of romantic relationships during
adolescence and any ramifications they may have on subsequent relationships.

Though they provide a wealth of information concerning the quality and dynamic
processes involved in romantic relationships, the life history narratives are based on a regional
sample of adolescents. Thus, the sample may not accurately and entirely portray the experiences of youth from other areas. Additional research utilizing a more comprehensive sample of youth will benefit our understanding of a range of experiences. Secondly, life history narratives are retrospective reports of specific “scenes” (McAdams, 1989) from an adolescent’s romantic career. Recollections may be clouded by the passage of time and by whether a relationship is ongoing or has ended. The quality of an adolescent’s relationship with an ex-partner also may influence how they perceive past events. Problems of recall, however, should not detract from the significance of adolescents’ experiences in the life history narratives. Lastly, the life history narratives present information from only one partner. Future research will benefit from exploring the use of influence and the dynamics of power privilege within romantic relationships from the perspective of both partners. This dual insight will underscore the dynamic quality of “powering processes” (Szinovacz, 1987) in romantic dyads. Future research should also examine the communication and interpretation of control mechanisms as a function of the power dynamic established between romantic partners. How adolescents establish and communicate their dominance to one another is of particular interest as it provides a greater understanding of the intent behind the use of control mechanisms.
REFERENCES


Connell, Noreen. (1987). Feminism has been pro-family from the start. *Utne Reader, 21*, 90-96.


Finn, J. (1986). The relationships between sex role attitudes and attitudes supporting marital violence. *Sex Roles, 14*, 235-244.


