

## COMMENTARY

### A Story of Adolescence: The Emergence of Other-Sex Relationships

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#### INTRODUCTION

The articles in this special issue tell a story of adolescence—a remarkably consistent and coherent story. It is a story of the emergence of other-sex relationships, of the change from the predominantly same-sex peer networks of preadolescents to the networks of adolescents containing several new forms of other-sex relationships. These papers highlight the richness of these relationships and the individual, dyadic, and contextual factors that influence and are influenced by the emergence of these relationships in the adolescent social arena. It is a story that is only now being told by social scientists, and one to which these papers contribute substantially. In our commentary, we summarize our rendition of this story, highlight the key themes in these papers, and point out the chapters that remain to be written in this story of adolescent other-sex relationships.

#### A STORY OF DEVELOPMENT THE TRANSFORMATION

Prior to adolescence, relatively little social interaction occurs between boys and girls. Researchers have shown that voluntary gender segregation pervades the social worlds of children (Leaper, 1994; Maccoby, 1990) and renders other-sex friendships relatively uncommon (Gottman, 1986; Maccoby, 1990). Additionally,

Preparation of this manuscript was supported by Grant 50106 from the National Institute of Mental Health.

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the segregation leads to markedly different peer experiences for girls and boys (Maccoby, 1990).

Some time around early adolescence, the degree of other-sex contact increases substantially (Dunphy, 1963; Furman, 1989). For example, Feiring (this issue) reports that nine-year-olds have slightly less than one other-sex friend, whereas thirteen-year-olds average over five. Similarly, Darling *et al.* (this issue) report substantial increases from the sixth to the eighth grade in the number of other-sex friends, the proportion who have dated, and the number of dates. Although same-sex friendships continue to hold a strong position in adolescents' social networks (Bukowski *et al.*, 1993; Furman and Buhrmester, 1992; Lempers and Clark-Lempers, 1993), other-sex relationships gain importance as adolescence proceeds (LaVoie *et al.*, 1996; Sharabany *et al.*, 1981; Sterling *et al.*, 1995). It seems fair to say that the transformations in other-sex relationships are at least as substantial as the transformations adolescents undergo in their relationships with parents.

Of course, even the layperson on the street knows of the emergence of other-sex relationships in adolescence. These papers contribute to our knowledge by articulating the specifics. The transformation in the adolescent peer network does not occur over night, and it is multi-faceted in nature. For instance, Bukowski *et al.* (this issue) show that early adolescents are more likely to be involved in same-sex friendships than other-sex friendships regardless of how much they prefer the same sex to the other sex. Thus, adolescents' actual participation in other-sex friendships may not coincide with their interest in having other-sex friendships. Similarly, Darling *et al.* (this issue) show that boys' interest in dating is positively correlated with self-esteem, but the actual amount of dating is negatively related. Substantively, the findings of these two papers are quite interesting, but they also make the general point that we need to differentiate between interests and actual behavior. Other potentially important differences may include the context (i.e., group vs. dyadic) or setting (i.e., school vs. neighborhood) in which the interactions occur.

Perhaps the most important distinction is between other-sex friendships and heterosexual romantic relationships. In the past, investigators commonly failed to differentiate between these two types of other-sex relationships or simply focused on romantic relationships. Although the explanations of why other-sex relationships increase in adolescence have often focused on the emerging interest in sexuality and ultimately pair bonding, it is important to note that many of these relationships are not romantic in nature, especially in early adolescence. To further our understanding of the other-sex relationships of adolescence, we need to examine non-romantic, as well as romantic, relationships.

Connolly *et al.* (this issue) show that early adolescents themselves discriminate between other-sex friendships and romantic relationships. The participants in their study describe their other-sex friendships in terms of affiliation, whereas the romantic relationships are characterized by affiliation, intimacy, and passion. In a related paper, Connolly, Goldberg *et al.* (1998) show that mixed-sex interactions

are normative in early adolescence and seem to precede dating or romantic relationships, which occur less frequently. In effect, other-sex friendships and heterosexual romantic relationships have different developmental courses and seem to serve somewhat different functions.

The two types of relationships are, however, linked to each other. Specifically, adolescents with a larger number of other-sex friends and peers in their social networks are more likely to develop romantic relationships (Connolly, Furman *et al.*, 1999); thus, other-sex friendships can serve as a conduit for heterosexual romantic relationships and, in fact, may develop into romantic relationships in some cases. Yet, they are also important in their own right as a form of friendship. Not only can they fulfill the typical functions of friendship, but because they are with members of the other sex, they can also provide the adolescent with experiences and perspectives that he or she had not encountered prior to adolescence. When we have asked adolescents about the advantages of these relationships, they commonly have mentioned that through them they learn more about the other sex and get to hear the other sex's perspectives on issues (Shaffer, 1999a).

### FUZZY DEFINITIONS

Although we have described other-sex friendships and heterosexual romantic relationships as two different types of relationships, the differentiation between them can be challenging for adolescents and researchers alike. The task is complicated by the vagary of language, unclear boundaries, and sexuality. For starters, the language we use influences the answers we obtain. For example, when Bukowski *et al.* (this issue) asked adolescents to name their "other-sex friends," they found that adolescents often included romantic, as well as nonromantic, relationships. One may want to include both types of relationships when assessing peer status or friendliness, but in most instances, the two should be distinguished. Unfortunately, a number of studies in the past have reported developmental changes in other-sex relationships, but one cannot determine if the changes reflect changes in heterosexual romantic relationships, other-sex friendships, or both. The problem is compounded by the likelihood that some proportion of adolescents may consider their romantic partner to be a friend, and others may not. In our own research, a little over half (57%) of the adolescents included romantic partners in their counts when asked to report the number of their other-sex friends, whereas the other 43% included only nonromantic relationships. Perhaps the relationships with those named as friends differ from those not named as friends, but it seems just as likely that adolescents may differ in whether they conceptualize romantic relationships as a type of friendship. Hence, if we are not clear about what kinds of relationships we are interested in, we are likely to obtain findings that are difficult to interpret.

Even when the language we use is clear, the relationship boundaries may not be. O'Meara (1989) suggests that the task of defining the relationship is one of the

greatest challenges facing other-sex friends. Friendships may become confusing or jealousy-ridden as individuals try to establish boundaries around romantic and sexual issues (Shaffer, 1999b). Sexual feelings exist in many other-sex friendships (Kaplan and Keys, 1997; Monsour *et al.*, 1994; Sapadin, 1988). These feelings may produce a spark of excitement in nonromantic other-sex relationships, lending a thrilling aspect to the relationships (Camerer, 1994; Kaplan and Keys, 1997; Rubin, 1985). However, they may also present the friends with the problem of negotiating any romantic or sexual interest present in supposedly nonromantic other-sex relationships; if no resolution is reached, such feelings have negative effects on the relationship (Shaffer, 1999b). Moreover, the distinction between a friendship and a romantic relationship is not necessarily whether sexual activity occurs because some nonromantic friends in our research reported periodically engaging in some form of sexual activity. In fact, 14% have engaged in heavy petting, intercourse, or oral sex with their friends (Shaffer, 1999b). Additionally, some adolescents report having "sex friends," individuals with whom they primarily engage in sexual activity. It is not clear if such relationships should be categorized as a form of romantic relationship or a distinct type of relationship. Whereas the answers to these definitional problems are not easy, they are critical issues to address in order to understand other-sex relationships.

Such definitional dilemmas are common in the social sciences, but may be particularly worrisome in this domain where the relationships are just developing and taking form. Darling *et al.* (this issue) suggest the same language may be used by adolescents to describe different behaviors or relationships at different points in development. From their interviews, for example, they concluded that what it means to say one has a boyfriend or girlfriend is different for sixth and eighth graders. Darling *et al.* (this issue) propose that norms may not be well established during this transitional period, making it difficult to pin labels to behaviors and thus hard to measure adolescent relationships and activities without extensive observation.

## RELATIONSHIPS IN CONTEXT

These papers not only illustrate the multiple facets and types of other-sex relationships, but also emphasize the importance of understanding the social context in which they develop. These relationships do not emerge in isolation, and the present papers point out numerous links among same-sex friendships, other-sex friendships, and heterosexual romantic relationships.

A number of years ago, Dunphy (1963) proposed a developmental model of the emergence of mixed-sex cliques, crowds, and dating; but empirical support is emerging only now. As noted previously, mixed-sex interactions usually emerge before dating and romantic relationships (Connolly, Goldberg *et al.*, 1998), and the number of other-sex friendships is predictive of developing a romantic relationship (Connolly, Furman *et al.*, 1999). Feiring (this issue) showed that those with

more frequent contact with other-sex friends were likely to have longer romantic relationships subsequently; moreover, they described their romantic relationships in terms of self-disclosure and support, whereas those with less contact described them in terms of social status. These findings suggest that the other-sex interactions may not only foster romantic relationships but also influence the nature of those relationships. Finally, Feiring (this issue) finds few links with same-sex friends, but Bukowski *et al.* (this issue) report that those who are either very popular or unpopular with same-sex peers are more likely to have other-sex friends than those who are average in popularity.

Although one cannot infer causality with certainty, these papers provide some suggestions that romantic relationships may also influence other relationships in networks. For example, the increased time and energy allotted to romantic relationships seem to take a toll on friendships, as Zimmer-Gembeck (this issue) found a small trade-off between the time spent with romantic partners and that spent with friends. In our work, we have obtained similar results, showing that adolescents involved in longer, more exclusive romantic relationships have smaller friend networks (Shaffer and Ognibene, 1998). Finally, Darling *et al.* (this issue) suggest that the expansion of the peer network not only leads to a reorganization of relationships but to a reorganization of the self system to include perceptions of self in the role of other-sex friend and romantic partner.

In summary, these papers help us articulate the story of the emergence of other-sex relationships in adolescence. They make us aware of the complexities of the relationships in their many forms, and how they influence and are influenced by the general social network.

## THE STORY'S MEANING

These papers also provide insights into the meaning of adolescent other-sex peer relationships—that is, the processes underlying the emergence of these relationships, and how they may impact development and adjustment.

### Behavioral Systems

Although we admit to some bias in theoretical orientation, we believe that these papers are quite consistent with our behavioral system conceptualization (Furman and Wehner, 1994). In particular, we proposed that in long-term romantic relationships of adults, four behavioral systems play key roles—attachment, care-taking, sexuality, and affiliation. In adolescence, the affiliative and sexual systems are expected to be important in romantic relationships, whereas in friendships—both same-sex and other-sex—the affiliative system would be central (Furman and Simon, in press; Simon *et al.*, in press). Support-seeking and providing also occur,

but the attachment and caretaking systems usually are not expected to be as salient as in subsequent relationships in adulthood.

Feiring (this issue) and Connolly *et al.* (this issue) both emphasize the role of affiliation in adolescent other-sex peer relationships. Connolly *et al.* show that affiliation is a key descriptor for both other-sex friendships and romantic relationships, suggesting that expectations for these relationships are a function of experiences with other-sex peers in general and not one particular type of relationship. Similarly, Feiring demonstrates that other-sex friend networks provide opportunities for adolescents to develop affiliative skills with other-sex peers. These skills are expected to facilitate intimacy and support in romantic relationships. Thus, these papers provide empirical support for the ideas that affiliative processes are central in these relationships and that experiences in peer relationships, as well as parent-child relationships, may shape the course of romantic relationships (Furman, in press).

Of course, the affiliative system is not the only one in the forefront of adolescent relationships with other-sex peers. For heterosexual youth, the sexual system also plays a central role in these relationships. It is no coincidence that an interest in the other sex increases around puberty. Young adolescents find themselves faced with the challenges of coping with sexual feelings and learning to enact these feelings appropriately. Gay and lesbian youth are presented with the additional challenge of deciding that they are not attracted to other-sex peers.

Ironically, the present papers say very little about the emergence of sexuality. This may be a healthy antidote to the almost exclusive emphasis on sexuality in past work on other-sex relationships, but eventually we will need to integrate these fields to obtain a comprehensive understanding of these relationships. Most of these papers also focused on early romantic relationships, in which attachment and caretaking processes do not play an important role. We will, however, need to eventually link this literature to the research on later romantic relationships, in which attachment and caretaking are central.

### **Developmental Lessons and Adjustment**

Other-sex relationships are venues for learning about the other-sex and may lay the groundwork for adult other-sex interactions. These papers discuss some of the lessons that are learned and the links with psycho-social adjustment. Bukowski *et al.* (this issue) show that having an other-sex friend generally seems associated with positive self-perceptions, although some complex exceptions to this assertion may exist. Darling *et al.* (this issue) also report links with self-perceptions of competence, but again the specific links vary by gender and measure. Interestingly, they suggest that better functioning boys may express an age-normative interest in having a girlfriend in early adolescence, but the actual experience of dating may lead to declines in confidence and esteem while they struggle with the new social role. Other research has found early sexual involvement to be associated

with deviancy and poor adjustment (e.g., Neeman *et al.*, 1995). Taken together, these findings suggest that early romantic experiences may prove to be a mixed blessing, with both worrisome and health-promoting correlates.

As most of the present and past studies have only had one wave of data, however, it is not yet possible to draw causal inferences about these links. Some of the correlations may reflect selection factors; for example, some work suggests that early sexual intercourse is associated with deviant behavior, but does not foster further deviancy (Bingham and Crockett, 1996). Alternatively, some of the associations may reflect the transitional process. For example, Darling *et al.* consider the alternative hypotheses that mixed-sex contexts could be stressful or they could be energizing. In either case, we might expect that these feelings and their effects to change over the course of time; that is, the contexts may become less stressful or energizing as the adolescents become more experienced. Moreover, if the correlates reflect these transitional effects, one might expect adolescents who undergo these experiences later to have similar responses at that time. Alternatively, it is possible that early romantic experiences may have some enduring effects that lead adolescents to follow different trajectories than those who start later.

Regardless of what the answers may prove to be, the complexities of disentangling causality illustrate several points. The most obvious is the need for longitudinal work. Feiring's paper (this issue) is one of the first demonstrations that mixed-sex interactions in early adolescence may influence the characteristics of subsequent romantic relationships (see also Connolly, Furman *et al.*, 1999). These exceptions notwithstanding, we know little about the long-term impact of these relationships and the transformations they undergo. When we consider the dynamic nature of these relationships and the concomitant developmental changes individuals are undergoing, it seems highly likely that transformations will occur in other-sex relationships throughout adolescence and early adulthood. Whether the experiences in other-sex relationships in early or middle adolescence affect subsequent relationships is less obvious. In many respects, the agenda for these relationships changes (Furman and Wehner, 1997); on the other hand, adolescents may be learning patterns of interactions that carry forward. Clearly, it is important to determine the links between these relationships and later ones with romantic partners, friends, and coworkers.

Our observations about the complexity of disentangling causality also underscore the importance of distinguishing between the timing and trajectory of experiences (Furman and Simon, 1998). Some adolescents enter the world of other-sex relationships at an earlier age or at a more rapid pace. Any differences we find among adolescents at a particular age could be a function of the differences in the timing of their romantic development as well as differences in the trajectories they may be pursuing. As we noted previously, the differences in self-perceptions reported by Darling *et al.* (this issue) may reflect the process of transition into dating or may reflect more enduring differences. Many of our theoretical explanations focus on the stable, trait-like features of the organism developing, but we need to

remind ourselves that some observed differences may reflect differences in social time line, especially when the timing varies so much.

### MANY STORIES TO BE TOLD

Although we have described the emergence of other-sex relationships as a story, it is really many stories. The frequency, nature, and timing of other-sex relationships are all likely to differ. Such diversity is evident in the variability of the experiences reported by the adolescents in these papers, and in the authors' documentation of the correlates of such differences. For example, self-esteem (Darling *et al.*, this issue), peer status (Bukowski *et al.*, this issue), and gender (Feiring, this issue) are all associated with the kinds of other-sex relationships adolescents experience.

Several of the authors examine the multiple pathways related to other-sex peer relationships. For instance, Bukowski *et al.* (this issue) suggest that other-sex friends may serve as either a parallel or a backup system to same-sex friends. That is, some adolescents may come to be involved in other-sex relationships because they are generally socially skilled and popular with same- and other-sex peers. Alternatively, adolescents who are unpopular with their same-sex peers may turn to other-sex peers to fill the social voids left by being rejected by their same-sex peers. Similarly, Zimmer-Gembeck (this issue) delineates a series of three different trajectories that adolescents follow in their romantic relationships during high school. Such emphases on the different pathways adolescents take should provide us with a richer understanding of the developmental courses of other-sex relationships.

### UNWRITTEN STORIES

Our discussion of the many trajectories that adolescents may follow in their relationships with other-sex peers leads quite naturally to a discussion of the topics that have not been addressed—the stories that have not been told. Quite naturally, we social scientists have focused on identifying some of the common paths of development and the factors that influence them, but the other paths often shed light onto the nature of other-sex relationships. We have discussed some of these unwritten stories in prior sections, but several other issues warrant attention.

Although we have emphasized the emergence of other-sex relationships in adolescence, some of these relationships also occur earlier, particularly outside of the school context. The significance of such early other-sex relationships remains unclear. Some work suggests that the presence of such relationships may be indicative of difficulties in adjustment (Sroufe *et al.*, 1993), but their meaning may depend on whether children have same-sex friends as well (Kovacs *et al.*, 1996).

In a related vein, our anecdotal impression is that other-sex friendships are more common in adolescence today than they were in the past, but we have seen

no scientific documentation of such. Moreover, the effect such a historical change may have on the social world of adolescents needs examination.

The samples in these studies seem to be comprised of primarily middle-class, Caucasian, heterosexual youth. We know almost nothing about the nature of other-sex relationships in different cultural, regional, or socioeconomic contexts. Particularly needed is work on sexual minority youth. A significant proportion of gay and lesbian youth date other-sex peers, at least for some period of time (Diamond *et al.*, in press). It would be interesting to know more about the nature of these relationships, both for those sexual minority youth who date the other sex and those who do not.

Most of these papers also focused on early adolescence, a time when these relationships show marked increases in frequency and intensity. It will be important to track the course of these relationships throughout adolescence and into adulthood. Particularly interesting will be the course and nature of other-sex friendships as romantic relationships become more salient.

Clearly, many stories remain to be told before we obtain a comprehensive picture of adolescent other-sex peer relationships. The existence of this special issue is an important development, however. This topic has received surprisingly little attention in the literature, and it is encouraging to see the increased interests. At last, the stories are beginning to be told.

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