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Adolescents' Anxiety in Dating Situations:

The Role of Other-Sex Friends, Close Friends, and Romantic Partners

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Abstract

This study examined adolescents' interpersonal functioning, including the qualities of their closest friendships and romantic relationships, as predictors of dating/heterosocial anxiety. An ethnically diverse sample of 781 adolescents (57% girls; ages 15 – 19 years) completed measures that assessed the number and type of close friends, the presence of a romantic relationship, the qualities of their best same-sex friendship and their romantic relationship (using the *Network of Relationships Inventory-Revised*), and levels of dating or heterosocial anxiety (using the *Dating Anxiety Scale for Adolescents*). Most adolescents were romantically involved, and girls were more likely to have a romantic partner than boys. Adolescents with fewer other-sex friends and those with less positive and more negative interactions with their best friends reported high levels of dating anxiety. In addition, adolescents who reported never having a romantic relationship, who did not have a current romantic partner, and who had less positive and more negative interactions with their romantic partners reported higher levels of dating anxiety. Variations were noted for different aspects of dating anxiety. The findings indicate that multiple aspects of adolescents' social relations may be independently and uniquely related to feelings of distress in dating or heterosocial situations. Adolescents' social relationships have the potential to support or interfere with the development of successful romantic relationships.

Key words: Friendships; best friendships; romantic relationships; dating anxiety; adolescents.

Adolescents' Anxiety in Dating Situations:

The Role of Other-Sex Friends, Close Friends, and Romantic Partners

Dating and romantic relationships are normative in adolescence; by age 16, most adolescents report having had a romantic relationship (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Adolescent romantic relationships may have positive mental health benefits, including the provision of social support, the enhancement of self-esteem, preparation for adult relationships, and the development of intimacy (e.g., Collins, 2003; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Connolly & Konarski, 1994). However, romantic relationships also can represent a stressor that contributes to adolescents' psychosocial distress. The presence of a romantic relationship has been associated with feelings of depression, especially among adolescent girls (Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004). In fact, romantic relationships explain 25% - 34% of the strong emotions that high school students experience, and about 42% of these emotions are negative feelings, such as anxiety, anger, jealousy, and depression (Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999).

To understand some of the potential psychological ramifications of adolescent romantic relationships, there has been some attention to the role of anxiety in dating and heterosocial situations (i.e., social situations involving both sexes) (Glickman & La Greca, 2004). Anxiety in dating and heterosocial situations is common and differs from social anxiety experienced in other peer contexts. Using a conceptually- and empirically-derived measure of dating anxiety, the *Dating Anxiety Scale for Adolescents*, Glickman and La Greca (2004) identified three aspects of dating anxiety: fear of negative evaluation in dating and heterosocial situations, social avoidance and distress specific to interactions with a dating partner or a member of the other sex, and social avoidance and distress specific to heterosocial situations. Adolescents who were not dating reported more dating anxiety than those who were currently dating, and dating anxiety was associated with adolescents' internalized distress (Glickman & La Greca, 2004).

Within the growing area of adolescent romantic relationships, the purpose of the present study was to further elucidate some of the variables that are related to adolescents' feelings of anxiety in dating situations, in order to understand potential influences on dating anxiety. Using the same sample of adolescents reported in Glickman and La Greca (2004), we extended previous findings by evaluating the role of close friendships and current romantic relationships as predictors of adolescents' levels of dating anxiety. Below we discuss the potential contributions of close friendships and romantic relationships to the development of dating anxiety in adolescents.

Close Friendships

Close friendships represent an important aspect of adolescents' social functioning. During adolescence, close friends surpass parents as the primary source of social support, and contribute in important ways to adolescents' self-concept and well being (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Emerging research points to an important connection between adolescents' social functioning with peers and their romantic relationships (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000; Kuttler & La Greca, 2004; Linder & Collins, 2005). The present study examined two different aspects of adolescents' close friendships as predictors of dating anxiety: the number of close friends and the qualities of their closest (i.e., best) friendships.

With respect to the number of close friends, we expected that adolescents who reported having more close friends would report less dating and heterosocial anxiety. Having a number of close friends appears to be an indicator of social competence, which may help to set the stage for successful dating and romantic relationships (Kuttler & La Greca, 2004), and thereby minimize feelings of dating and heterosocial anxiety. Moreover, by mid-adolescence, it is common for adolescents to socialize in peer groups that are comprised of same- and other-sex peers (Connolly & Konarski, 1994). The presence of other-sex peer networks predicts the emergence of adolescents' romantic relationships (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000; Feiring, 1999). In

particular, having *close friends of the other sex* appears to facilitate the development of adolescent romantic relationships (Feiring, 1999). Experience with other-sex friends might contribute to adolescents' feelings of social ease around members of the other sex (Feiring, 1999) and thus be related to low levels of dating/heterosocial anxiety, although it is also possible that adolescents who are less anxious around members of the other sex might be more inclined to develop close other-sex friendships. Thus, we examined the associations between adolescents' close friends (number of friends, number of other-sex friends) and their reports of dating/heterosocial anxiety.

We also examined the *qualities* of adolescents' closest same-sex friendships. The *positive qualities* of adolescents' closest friendships (i.e., intimacy, support, affection) may have a protective mental health function, and have been associated with lower levels of peer-related social anxiety (La Greca & Lopez, 1998; Vernberg, Abwender, Ewell, & Beery, 1992). Close, supportive friendships also may help adolescents adjust to the new arena of dating and romantic relationships by providing a source of emotional support and by offering advice on how to handle new or confusing situations that might arise with a romantic partner (Brown, 1999). Close friends might also lessen dating anxiety by providing companionship during heterosocial situations. Thus, we expected that the positive qualities of adolescents' closest friendships would be related to lower levels of dating and heterosocial anxiety.

We also expected that the negative features of adolescents' best friendships would be linked with higher levels of dating anxiety. *Negative interactions* with close friends (e.g., pressure, criticism, exclusion) might heighten adolescents' feelings of discomfort or distress around others and contribute to concerns about negative evaluations in social situations, including dating or heterosocial situations. Negative interactions with close friends have been linked to problems with self-esteem (Berndt & Keefe, 1995) and to internalized distress (La Greca & Harrison, 2005).

Romantic Relationships

Dating relationships begin to develop around 14 to 15 years of age, and take on increasing importance during adolescence (Collins, 2003). Dating often begins as an extension of adolescents' involvement in heterosocial peer groups (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999; Connolly et al., 2000).

The present study examined the linkages between adolescents' romantic relationships and dating anxiety, expecting that adolescents who were not involved in a romantic relationship would report more dating/heterosocial anxiety than those who were romantically involved, and also that adolescents who *never had* a romantic partner would report more dating/heterosocial anxiety than those who've had a romantic relationship. We reasoned that teens that who were anxious about dating might avoid dating or heterosocial situations, thus making it difficult to develop a romantic relationship. Alternatively once an adolescent becomes romantically involved, fears and worries about dating and impressing the other sex may become less salient (i.e., low dating anxiety), although other concerns may arise, such as fear of rejection from or loss of the romantic partner.

In addition, among adolescents who report having a current romantic partner, it is likely that positive and negative interactions with the partner contribute to feelings of dating anxiety. Adolescent romantic relationships may provide substantial intimacy, support, and companionship (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Laursen, 1996). Adolescent romantic relationships may also intensify over time and take on increasing interpersonal importance. Positive interactions with a romantic partner might provide an important source of emotional support and thereby contribute to adolescents' mental health. In this manner, positive interactions with a romantic partner (i.e., support, companionship) might minimize feelings of anxiety in dating/heterosocial situations.

In contrast, negative interactions with a romantic partner, such as criticism, conflict, and pressure, could contribute to adolescents' feelings of internal distress, and possibly heighten their

feelings of dating anxiety. Recent work suggests that romantic partners contribute to adolescents' feeling of shyness and self-consciousness (Connolly, Ben-Knaz, Goldberg, & Craig, 1996), and that romantic relationships are associated with strong negative feelings (Larson et al., 1999). Negative interactions in romantic relationships might similarly contribute to feelings of dating anxiety.

An important feature of the current study was that we examined the linkages between the positive and negative aspects of adolescents' romantic relationships and their reports of dating anxiety, *after first controlling for the number and qualities of their close friendships*. This was important because adolescents' competence in their friendships and romantic relationships are interrelated (Connolly et al., 2000; Kuttler & La Greca, 2004; Linder & Collins, 2005); that is, more socially competent adolescents report more friends and higher quality friendships and romantic relationships than less socially competent teens. By controlling friendship variables, the *unique* contributions of romantic relationships to adolescents' dating anxiety could be evaluated.

The Current Study

This study examined how aspects of adolescents' friendships and romantic relationships are associated with anxiety and distress in dating and heterosocial situations. Using a multivariate approach, several predictors of adolescent dating anxiety were examined: the number of close friends and the number of other-sex close friends; positive and negative interactions with a same-sex best friend; having ever had a romantic relationship; the presence of a current romantic partner; and positive and negative interactions with a current romantic partner. A romantic partner was defined as "someone you are physically attracted to, have had intimate contact with (e.g., hand holding, kissing, etc.), you consider to be more than a friend, and go out on 'dates' with." The predictors were examined for overall dating anxiety and its specific aspects: fear of negative evaluation from a dating partner; and social avoidance and distress in dating situations and in mixed-sex group situations. Given the correlational study design, alternative causal paths are plausible and also require consideration.

In evaluating the study goals, adolescents' ethnicity, gender, and grade also were examined. Regarding ethnicity, previous research on this multiethnic sample did not reveal any ethnic differences in dating anxiety (Glickman & La Greca, 2004). Nor were gender differences apparent, with the exception that boys reported more social distress in heterosocial situations than girls. However, other studies have observed gender differences in friendships and romantic relationships, in that more girls than boys report having a romantic relationship (Carver et al., 2003); girls also report more positive and fewer negative interactions in their closest friendships than boys (Kuttler, La Greca, & Prinstein, 1999; Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1993). Finally, adolescents in the lower grades are less likely to be dating (Carver et al., 2003). Consequently, gender, grade, and ethnicity were evaluated and controlled in the models predicting dating anxiety.

Method

Participants

Participants were 781 adolescents (57% girls), in 10th – 12th grades, who ranged from 15 to 19 years of age ($M = 16.6$, $SD = 1.0$). The adolescents resided in a multicultural, urban area in the Southeastern US: 66% were Hispanic, 17% were non-Hispanic White, 8% were Black (African-American and Caribbean-American), and the remainder reported mixed or other ethnicity. The adolescents came from primarily middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds as reflected in the small number of free/reduced lunches provided at the participating high schools (22.9% to 29.2%).

Procedures

Adolescents were recruited as part of a larger study of adolescents' health and peer relations. Approval was obtained through the University Institutional Review Board and the local school board. Homeroom teachers explained the study and provided a letter describing the study, with an attached consent form in English and Spanish, for adolescents to take home to their parents. Active parental consent was obtained for students under 18 years of age; adolescent assent also was

obtained. Exact participation rates are unknown because teachers distributed the consent forms and it could not be determined how many parents received the forms. However, approximately 50% of the eligible students returned consent forms, and 98% of the forms indicated permission for child participation. Permission was obtained for 854 adolescents. Due to time constraints, 56 adolescents (6.6%) did not complete all the measures; 17 adolescents (2.0%) reported interest in same-sex dating and were excluded from the analyses. This resulted in a sample of 781 adolescents; these adolescents did not differ from those who were excluded in terms of their gender, grade, or ethnicity.

Adolescents completed the measures during group testing sessions; they were informed that participation was voluntary and that the questionnaires were to be completed anonymously. Trained research assistants answered questions and reviewed instructions. Adolescents completed the *Dating Anxiety Scale for Adolescents*, identified their closest friends and the presence of a romantic partner, and completed the *Network of Relationships Inventory-Revised* for their best friendship and romantic partner, if applicable.

Measures

Dating Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (DAS-A; Glickman & La Greca, 2004). The DAS-A assessed adolescents' anxiety in heterosocial and dating situations; it contains 21 items that are rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all characteristic of me* (1) to *extremely characteristic of me* (5), plus 5 filler items. Factor analysis (Glickman & La Greca, 2004) revealed three subscales. Fear of Negative Evaluation – Dating (FNE-Dating; 10 items) reflects concern or worry that a date or a member of the other sex would judge the adolescent in a negative manner (e.g., “I am usually worried about what kind of impression I make while on a date.”); Social Distress-Dating (SAD-Date; 7 items) reflects inhibition and distress while interacting with a member of the other sex on a date or socially (e.g., “I feel nervous in dating situations.”); and Social Distress-Group (SAD-Group; 4 items) reflects inhibition and distress during heterosocial

group situations (e.g., “I often feel nervous or tense in casual get-togethers in which both guys and girls are present.”). The DAS-A and the subscales have good internal consistency: .94 for Total DAS-A, .92 for FNE-Dating, .88 for SAD-Date, and .81 for SAD-Group; in addition, the subscales are intercorrelated, with r 's ranging from .59 to .73 (p 's < .001) (Glickman & La Greca, 2004). The Total DAS-A was used as the primary indicator of dating anxiety (possible range: 21 to 105). The DAS-A subscales were also used in secondary analyses.

Network of Relationship Inventory–Revised (NRI-R; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). The NRI-R was used to assess the number of close friends (total and other-sex) and the qualities of adolescents' best friendships and romantic relationships. Self-report measures are commonly used to assess adolescents' friendships and romantic relationships (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Connolly et al., 2000; Kuttler et al., 1999; La Greca & Lopez, 1998; Vernberg et al., 1992).

Adolescents listed their closest friends and indicated the sex of each friend. Adolescents also indicated whether or not they had a current romantic partner and whether they had ever had a romantic partner (a boyfriend or girlfriend). The information was used to compute the number of close friends, number of other-sex close friends (excluding romantic partners), presence of a current romantic partner (yes/no), and whether the adolescent ever had a romantic partner (yes/no).

The second part of the NRI-R contains 42 items that are rated on a 5-point scale where 1 = *little or none* and 5 = *the most*. Adolescents provided ratings separately for their best same-sex friendship and their romantic partner (if applicable). For each relationship, the NRI-R assessed nine positive qualities (companionship, affection, disclosure, nurturance, instrumental aid, approval, support, reliable alliance, and satisfaction) and five negative qualities (conflict, criticism, exclusion, dominance, and pressure). Items were averaged across the positive and negative subscales, separately for each relationship, yielding scores for: best friend-positive, best friend-negative, romantic partner-positive, and romantic partner-negative. Internal consistencies for

these four measures ranged from .83 to .95. Several investigators (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Kuttler & La Greca, 2004) have reported evidence for the reliability and validity of this measure.

Data Analytic Plan

First, descriptive information is provided for the study variables broken down by gender. Next, correlations among the key variables are presented. Finally, hierarchical regression analyses evaluated adolescents' close friendships and romantic relationships as predictors of dating anxiety, using the Total DAS-A as the primary outcome and the DAS-A subscales as secondary outcomes. In each analysis, the demographic variables of gender and grade (Step 1) and ethnicity (Step 2) were entered, to control for demographic differences in dating anxiety. Friendship variables were entered next; specifically, the number of close friends and other-sex close friends were entered (Step 3), followed by the positive and negative interactions with the best same-sex friendship (Step 4). Finally, the romantic relationship variables were entered; specifically, whether the adolescent ever had a romantic relationship (yes/no) (Step 5), and the presence of a current romantic relationship (yes/no) (Step 6). For adolescents who reported a current romantic relationship ($n = 433$ or 55%), the analyses were repeated through Step 4 and the positive and negative interactions with the romantic partner were entered on Step 5.¹

Results

Descriptive Statistics

ANOVAs and chi-squares were used to evaluate gender differences (Table 1). Girls reported more positive and fewer negative interactions in their same-sex best friendships than boys. More girls reported having a current romantic partner than did boys, and girls reported more positive interactions with their romantic partner than boys. No other gender differences were observed.

Friends and Romantic Relationships as Predictors of Dating Anxiety

Next, correlations among the study variables were examined (see Table 2). Adolescents

who reported having more close friends also reported more other-sex close friends ($r = .43$) and more positive ($r = .14$) and fewer negative interactions ($r = -.07$) with their best friends than did adolescents who reported fewer close friends. In contrast, having more *other-sex* close friends was not related to interactions with best (same-sex) friends, but was significantly related to having a romantic partner ($r = .12$) and having fewer negative interactions with a romantic partner ($r = -.10$). In addition, adolescents' positive interactions with best friends and romantic partners were related ($r = .15$), as were their negative interactions in these relationships ($r = .43$). All the study variables were related to total dating anxiety in the expected direction.

Predictors of Total Dating Anxiety. Regression analyses evaluated adolescents' friendships and romantic relationships as predictors of dating anxiety, controlling for demographic variables (see Table 3). With the exception of gender and grade, all the steps in the regression model were significant, accounting for 15.4% of the variance in dating anxiety ($p < .0001$). The effect for ethnicity was small (2% of variance) but significant, although none of the betas were uniquely significant. In terms of close friendships, adolescents who had fewer other-sex close friends, and who reported less positive and more negative interactions in their same-sex best friendships, reported significantly higher levels of dating anxiety; together the friendship variables accounted for 9% of the variance in dating anxiety (see Table 3, Steps 3 and 4). Even after accounting for friendship variables, adolescents who never had a romantic partner and those who did not have a current romantic partner reported significantly more dating anxiety than those who had been or were romantically involved (see Steps 5 and 6). When the analyses were restricted to adolescents with a current romantic partner,³ fewer positive and more negative interactions with their partner predicted significantly higher levels of dating anxiety (Table 3, bottom, second Step 5).

Exploratory Tests of Moderation for Total Dating Anxiety. Although adolescents' close friendships predicted total dating anxiety (see above), exploratory analyses evaluated whether

close friendships also moderated the association between having a romantic partner and feelings of dating anxiety. It is possible that the significance of having a romantic partner might differ depending on adolescents' level of general social competence. Thus, for the full sample, we evaluated whether any of the friendship measures (# of close friends, # of other-sex close friends, positive and negative interactions with best friend) moderated the association between having a current romantic partner and adolescents' reports of dating anxiety. We tested all four moderators as interaction terms, entering them in the regression analyses after the main effects (i.e., after Step 6 in Table 3). However, none of the interactions were significant, either uniquely (all p 's $\geq .36$) or in combination (F change = .714, $p = .582$).

Similarly, for adolescents with a romantic partner, we examined whether having more close friends or more other-sex close friends moderated the association between qualities of their romantic relationships and their reports of dating anxiety. Four moderation terms were examined: # of friends X positive-romantic partner; # of friends X negative-romantic partner, # of other-sex friends X positive-romantic partner, and # of other-sex friends X negative-romantic partner. After entering all main effects (i.e., after Step 5, bottom part of Table 3), none of the moderators were significant, either uniquely (all p 's $\geq .186$) or in combination (F change = .807, $p = .521$).

DAS-A Subscales. Adolescents' friendships and romantic relationships showed similar main effects for the DAS-A subscales, with some interesting variations. Using the same sequence of predictor variables for each DAS-A subscale (as described above), Table 4 presents the last step (Step 6) of the regression analysis for the full sample (with all variables controlled) and also includes the contribution of romantic partner interactions for adolescents who had a romantic partner (bottom of Table 4, Step 5). Adolescents who never had a romantic partner reported higher dating anxiety across the board compared to those who had had a romantic partner.

Adolescents who reported more negative interactions in their romantic relationships also tended to

report higher levels of dating anxiety across all subscales. Adolescents who did not have a current romantic partner and those who had fewer positive interactions with their romantic partner reported higher levels of concern about negative evaluations from dates or members of the other sex (FNE-Date) and greater inhibition and distress in dating situations (SAD-Date) than those who had a current romantic partner or who had more positive interactions with their partner.

In contrast, the friendship variables were most consistently related to social avoidance and distress in heterosocial situations (SAD-Group). Adolescents who had more friends, more other-sex friends, and more positive and less negative interactions with their best friend reported significantly SAD-Group than other teens. Interestingly, negative interactions with a best friend predicted all three DAS-A subscales (negative interactions were related to greater dating anxiety).

Although no gender differences in dating anxiety were initially observed (see Table 1), when all the variables were taken into account, gender was a significant predictor of SAD-Date ($\beta = .08, p < .05$). Specifically, girls reported higher levels of SAD-Date than did boys.

Discussion

Despite the importance of peer relationships during adolescence, the study of adolescents' romantic relationships has been largely ignored (Neeman, Hubbard, & Masten, 1995). This study examined how the *combined and unique* aspects of adolescents' close friendships and romantic relationships contribute to feelings of worry and distress in dating and heterosocial situations. Because romantic relationships are normative in late adolescence and set the stage for the development of intimate, adult, romantic partnerships (Collins, 2003), it is of considerable interest to understand factors that may impede the development of successful romantic relationships in adolescence. In this regard, the findings demonstrate that the number and quality of adolescents' close friendships, as well as the presence and quality of their romantic relationships, *independently and cumulatively* contribute to feelings of dating anxiety. These results are discussed below.

Close Friendships

Adolescents who have more close friends, and especially close friends of the other sex, reported less dating anxiety. Having more friends and more other-sex friends was also predictive of lower levels of avoidance and distress in social situations that included members of the other sex. Having close friends, and particularly close friends of the other sex, may help adolescents to feel more comfortable in heterosocial and dating situations (Feiring, 1999). In fact, socializing in mixed-sex groups appears to be an important step toward the development of dating and romantic relationships, as research indicates that having friends of the other-sex *precedes* and facilitates adolescents' involvement in romantic relationships (Connolly et al., 2000; Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Furman, 1998). Thus, lack of (or limited) friendship experiences with members of the other sex may be one factor contributing to adolescents' discomfort in dating and heterosocial situations. Alternatively, it may be the case that adolescents who feel comfortable in mixed-sex social groups are likely to develop and cultivate close friends who are members of the other sex.

Of all the friendship variables, the most striking findings were apparent for negative interactions with best friends. Adolescents who reported more negative interactions (e.g., conflict, exclusion) with their same-sex best friend reported greater dating anxiety, and this was the case for *all* its aspects (FNE-Date, SAD-Date, SAD-Group). This suggests that difficulties in close friendships may have a pervasive and adverse effect on adolescents' feelings of ease and comfort in many social situations, including heterosocial and dating situations. Feeling excluded and criticized by peers has been referred to as relational victimization (Prinstein, Boergers & Vernberg, 2001), which has been associated with adolescents' social anxiety (Vernberg et al., 1992) and internalized distress (Prinstein et al., 2001). Thus, adolescents who are criticized or excluded by their best friend might become anxious in social situations, including ones that involve members of the other sex. Alternatively, a high level of negative interactions with a best friend may be a

marker for low social competence, as socially competent adolescents tend to have few negative interactions with their best friends (Kuttler et al., 1999). Thus, less socially competent adolescents might both interact negatively with friends and also feel anxious in dating and heterosocial situations that “challenge” their social skills. Further study of the role of (low) social competence in the development of dating anxiety would be useful and important.

In contrast, positive interactions in adolescents’ same-sex best friendships (e.g., alliance, affection, companionship, disclosure) were associated with less dating anxiety, and primarily with less avoidance and distress in heterosocial situations. High-quality best friendships might provide adolescents with emotional support and companionship during heterosocial situations, thereby facilitating adolescents’ comfort in mixed-sex social groups. Interestingly, positive qualities in best friendships did not protect adolescents from concerns or worries about negative evaluations from dating partners or from avoidance and distress in dating situations.

In summary, the differential patterns of association between adolescents’ positive and negative interactions with same-sex best friends and their reports of dating and heterosocial anxiety warrant further study. Prospective studies are needed to evaluate the potential bidirectional nature of friendship interactions and adolescents’ anxiety in dating situations.

Romantic Relationships

An important study goal was to evaluate the unique contributions of adolescents’ romantic relationships to their feelings of dating/heterosocial anxiety, *above and beyond the effects of close friendships*. In fact, the presence and quality of adolescents’ romantic relationships appeared to contribute in meaningful and unique ways to their anxiety in dating and heterosocial situations.

First, adolescents who were not currently romantically involved, and those who had never had a romantic partner, reported significantly higher levels of dating anxiety than adolescents who were romantically involved. One possible explanation is that adolescents might avoid dating and

romantic relationships altogether if they feel anxious about dating or uncomfortable around members of the other sex. Alternatively, once adolescents have a romantic partner, they may become less concerned about what members of the other-sex think of them and less distressed about dating per se. The current findings do not allow us to evaluate the direction of the observed effects, or potential underlying mechanisms, which will be important avenues for future research. Nevertheless, if adolescents feel distress or discomfort in dating situations or around members of the other sex, they may avoid or reduce their opportunities for developing successful romantic relationships. Some of the negative ramifications of adolescents' avoiding age-appropriate romantic relationships include missed "opportunities to increase competencies in conflict resolution, establishing intimacy, and negotiating the boundaries between autonomy and connectedness in intimate relationships" (Downey, Bonica, & Rincon, 1999, p. 161). Future research might follow adolescents with high dating anxiety over time to evaluate whether such adolescents are slower to develop successful romantic partnerships and appropriate relationship skills than are those with less dating anxiety.

Second, the findings revealed that adolescents' interactions with their romantic partners *uniquely* contribute to feelings of dating anxiety, beyond the effects of close friendships. Adolescents who were romantically involved reported significantly less dating anxiety than those without such involvements. Moreover, among adolescents with romantic partners, those who reported *lower quality romantic relationships* (fewer positive and more negative interactions) also reported more dating anxiety, and especially concerns about negative evaluations from dating partners and members of the other sex. Such findings are intriguing and suggest that *difficulties* in romantic relationships contribute to, or possibly result from, feelings of dating anxiety.

The finding that negative interactions with a romantic partner were associated with feelings of dating anxiety is consistent with prior research showing that adolescents who experience stress in

their romantic relationships report more internalized distress than their peers (Davila et al., 2004; La Greca & Harrison, 2005). To the extent that negative interactions in a romantic relationship might be perceived as “rejection,” it is not surprising that such interactions were associated with dating anxiety and heightened concerns about negative evaluations. Downey et al. (1999) have noted that a critical aspect of romantic relationships is to make one feel accepted and loved, and that adolescents, in particular, have a heightened sensitivity to rejection from romantic partners. Thus, when conflict, exclusion, or other negative interactions emerge in a romantic relationship, they may lead to considerable anxiety and distress. It is also possible that adolescents who are already worried or anxious about dating situations may perceive their partner’s behavior in a negative manner.

The present findings extend previous research by revealing that *low levels of positive interactions* with a romantic partner also are a unique contributor to feelings of dating anxiety. It seems unlikely that problems with social competence could account for this pattern, because the analyses controlled for the number and quality of adolescents’ close friendships (which may be considered indicators of social competence; La Greca & Prinstein, 1999). Adolescents who feel anxious or uncomfortable in dating situations might be more inhibited and thus display less positive interactions (e.g., less affection or disclosure) with their partners, or perceive their partner to display fewer positive behaviors. These interpretations are consistent with longitudinal research on peer-related social anxiety, showing that socially anxious adolescents report decreases in intimacy and companionship in their close friendships over time. Alternatively, given the importance adolescents place on romantic involvement (Downey et al., 1999), low levels of affection, nurturance, and companionship (i.e., positive interactions) with a romantic partner might cause concern about the quality of the relationship and “how it is going,” and thus contribute to dating anxiety. Understanding the psychological impact of romantic relationships is important because troubled romantic relationships in adolescence may foreshadow future difficulties in adult

romantic relationships and psychological adjustment (Downey et al., 1999). Continued research on the interplay of romantic relationships and dating anxiety may be important and desirable.

Gender

In general, few findings pertaining to gender emerged in this study. Girls were more likely to be romantically involved than boys, and girls reported more positive interactions with best friends and romantic partners and fewer negative interactions with best friends than did boys, consistent with prior studies (Kuttler et al., 1999; Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1993). With respect to dating anxiety, however, gender differences were few and of small magnitude. Interestingly, girls reported more social avoidance and distress in dating situations than boys, once other aspects of their social functioning were considered. This suggests that girls may feel more tense and nervous on a date or with someone of the other sex than boys do. Adolescent girls are interested in the affiliative qualities of romantic relationships at an earlier point in development than are boys (Feiring, 1999), and perhaps the “relationship” orientation of a dating situation creates pressure or discomfort for girls who may be more concerned than boys about how the date is going.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations are important to consider. First, the study relied on adolescents’ self reports, primarily because adolescents are considered to be the best informants of internalized distress and of social functioning (Furman, 1998; Loeber, Green, & Lahey, 1990). Parents may be unaware of adolescents’ anxieties about dating or the specific qualities of their friendships and romantic relationships. Research on adolescent romantic relationships has relied on adolescents’ reports (e.g., Connolly et al., 1999; Feiring, 1999; Kuttler et al., 1999). Nevertheless, it would be useful to obtain input from significant others, such as peers and romantic partners. Also, it would be useful to obtain reciprocal friendship reports, as well as friends’ and partners’ input on their relationships, when possible. School-based studies of *preadolescents’*

friendship qualities have focused on reciprocated friendship reports (La Greca & Prinstein, 1999). However, for practical and conceptual reasons, this has not often been the case for studies of adolescents' friendships (e.g., Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Kuttler et al., 1999; Vernberg et al., 1992). Adolescents have multiple classes in school, and their closest friends and romantic partners may not be in the same grade or even the same school. As a result, school-based reciprocal reports would miss significant friendships and romantic relationships; at the same time, obtaining reports from friends and romantic partners *outside* the school setting presents a serious logistic challenge.

Second, because data were collected at one point in time, it is not possible to evaluate the potential bi-directional influences of friendships, dating experiences, and feelings of dating anxiety. Future research of a prospective nature is needed to better capture the transactional influences of peers, romantic partners, and feelings of anxiety and distress in dating situations.

Third, the findings can best be generalized to a predominantly urban, Latino population. The sample contained a high percentage of Latino adolescents, consistent with the demographics of the surrounding county. Very little attention has been directed to the dating behaviors and romantic relationships of Latino adolescents, aside from studies of parent-child communications about dating and sexuality (e.g., Romo, Lefkowitz, Sigman, & Au, 2002). No differences were apparent between Hispanic and non-Hispanic adolescents in terms of dating anxiety, although further evaluation of romantic relationships among adolescents from varied ethnic backgrounds would be of interest. Furthermore, the participation rate was somewhat low, though possibly an underestimate of the actual rate. In the absence of incentives for participation, obtaining active parental consent in a multicultural urban area is challenging, and may require special strategies for encouraging participation, such as directly consulting with adolescents regarding recruitment and retention strategies (e.g., Riesch, Tosi, & Thurston, 1999).

Fourth, although significant, adolescents' best friendships and romantic relationships had relatively small effect sizes, contributing 9% and 5% (respectively) to the prediction of dating anxiety. Future research might examine other variables that could be important predictors of dating anxiety. For example, details on adolescents' actual dating experiences (e.g., number of dating partners, presence or absence of victimization from dating partner) would be of interest to examine. Moreover, although it was not possible in the present study, future research might incorporate measures of social competence, depression, or general anxiety – variables that could mediate the linkage between peer/romantic relationships and dating anxiety and help to elucidate some of the potential mechanisms underlying the associations between adolescents' personal relationships and their feelings of dating anxiety.

Finally, the study focused on heterosexual adolescents and thus cannot be generalized to sexual minority youth. The romantic relationships of sexual minority youth are understudied, despite the fact that many gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth have romantic relationships during adolescence (e.g., Diamond, Savin-Williams, & Dube, 1999). In fact, the study of dating anxiety among sexual-minority youth may be an especially important avenue for research, given that many of these adolescents avoid dating same-sex individuals because of fear of harassment or pressures to date members of the other-sex (Savin-Williams, 2001).

These limitations notwithstanding, the findings are significant in that they extend our understanding of the importance of adolescents' best friendships and romantic relationships and their implications for adolescents' psychosocial adjustment. Future studies that consider the impact of both friendships and romantic relationships on adolescents' psychosocial adjustment, as well as reciprocal and transactional influences, should provide information needed to inform and develop effective interventions for adolescents who are experiencing interpersonal difficulties, and potentially prevent serious social impairments in adulthood.

Footnotes

¹Because all these adolescents had a current romantic partner, it did not make sense to include the variables that were entered in Step 5 (ever had a romantic partner) and Step 6 (presence of a current romantic partner) of the regression analysis for the full sample.

²In addition to this gender difference, adolescents who had a current romantic partner differed from adolescents who did not in their levels of dating anxiety and in the number and quality of their close friendships. Specifically, adolescents who had a current romantic partner reported having less dating anxiety (M 's = 45.66 versus 53.02, $F = 39.02$, $p < .001$), more other-sex close friends (M 's = 2.59 versus 2.14, $F = 12.76$, $p < .001$), and more positive (M 's = 4.09 versus 3.93, $F = 11.63$, $p < .001$) and fewer negative interactions (M 's = 1.75 versus 1.91, $F = 11.82$, $p < .001$) with their same-sex best friend. These differences remained significant when gender was controlled.

³The pattern of findings for the first four steps of the hierarchical regression analysis (predicting total dating anxiety) was nearly identical for the subset of adolescents who had a current romantic partner. Gender and grade did not predict dating anxiety ($R^2 = .00$, $p = .86$); ethnicity had a significant overall effect (R^2 change = .026, $p = .011$) although none of the beta weights for the ethnic groups were significant; and the number (R^2 change = .022, $p = .008$) and quality (R^2 change = .044, $p = .000$) of close friendships predicted dating anxiety, with fewer positive ($\beta = -.14$, $p = .006$) and more negative ($\beta = .14$, $p = .006$) interactions with best friends being related to higher dating anxiety.

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Table 1. Means (Standard Deviations) For Study Measures by Gender and Results of ANOVAs

Measure	Gender			<i>F</i>
	Mean (SD)			
	Girls (<i>n</i> = 447)	Boys (<i>n</i> = 334)	Total (<i>n</i> = 781)	
<i>Dating Anxiety Scale</i>				
Total Score	48.69 (16.5)	49.36 (17.2)	48.98 (16.8)	.31
FNE-Date (subscale mean)	2.51 (.9)	2.57 (.9)	2.54 (.9)	.79
SAD-Date (subscale mean)	2.55 (.9)	2.48 (1.0)	2.52 (.9)	.93
SAD-Group (subscale mean)	1.89 (.8)	2.00 (.9)	1.94 (.9)	3.13
<i>Close Friendships</i>				
# Close Friends	8.29 (2.2)	8.34 (2.3)	8.31 (2.2)	.09
# Other-sex Close Friends	2.43 (1.7)	2.34 (1.8)	2.39 (1.8)	.44
<i>Network of Relationships-Revised</i>				
Best Friend - Positive	4.20 (.6)	3.78 (.7)	4.02 (.7)	78.83***
Best Friend - Negative	1.73 (.6)	1.95 (.7)	1.82 (.6)	23.84***
Romantic Partner – Positive ^a	4.19 (.7)	4.03 (.7)	4.13 (.7)	5.02*
Romantic Partner – Negative ^a	1.99 (.7)	1.98 (.7)	1.99 (.7)	.03
<i>Ever Had a Romantic Partner (%)</i>	89%	90%	90%	.27
<i>Romantic Partner (%)</i>	62%	46%	55%	21.6***

^a Means are computed only for adolescents who reported having a romantic partner (*n* = 433)

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.