Adolescent Romantic Relationships and
Young Adult Union Formation*

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Abstract

  Life course sociologists and developmental psychologists assert that adolescent romantic relationships aid in the developmental goal of providing "practice" for romantic relationships in adulthood. Yet, too much practice or practice in poor quality adolescent relationships may negatively impact young adult relationships. This paper examines the role of adolescents' romantic relationship profiles and the quality of their romantic experience on young adult romantic unions and the quality of these unions. Using three waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, we identify adolescent romantic relationship profiles as single (no relationships over a three year period), solo (one short-term relationship), steady (one long-term relationship), serial (several relationships not overlapping in time), or concurrent (several relationships overlapping in time). Adolescent romantic relationship quality is defined by emotional commitment, social embeddedness, conflict and sexual intimacy. We investigate how relationship profile and quality measured at times 1 and 2, when respondents are 12 to 20 years old, impact young adult romantic union type and quality measured at time 3 when respondents are 18 to 25 years old. Results indicate that both adolescent relationship type and quality are formative for young adult relationship type and quality.

Introduction

The timing and ordering of key markers in the transition to adulthood have shifted dramatically over the past half century. In particular, family formation now occurs at a later age and in a more disorderly progression than in previous generations. The age at first marriage is older for most people, childbearing is delayed for many, but is also increasingly detached from marriage, and the prevalence of cohabitation has increased (Raley 2000). Demographers have spent considerable effort measuring, describing and analyzing the order and timing of family formation. These changes have also captured the attention of the general public and policy-makers. Non-profit groups, states and the federal government have created a set of initiatives, sometimes characterized as the "marriage movement" (e.g., the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative), aimed at strengthening marriage and preventing divorce. Thus, the past several decades have seen dramatic shifts in how young adults structure their interpersonal relationships and a keen interest among policy makers in the quality of these relationships.

Guided by normative and structural constraints, young adults are now making more diverse choices about how their relationships will be structured and when they will start and end. Though researchers have documented increasing diversity in the paths to family formation (Waite, Bachrach, Hindin, Thomson & Thornton 2000; Goldscheider & Goldscheider 1999), determinants of these decisions remain unclear. While current social-structural and interpersonal conditions probably have a large influence on family formation decisions, past relationship experience likely influences when and under what conditions young adults form family relationships. These earlier experiences can serve as templates for young adult relationships in the same way that secondary schooling experiences can influence eventual educational attainment. Early experience in relationships may set individuals on a trajectory toward a set of

particular family formation decisions. This paper examines the influence of adolescent romantic relationship experience (in structure and quality) on young adult relationship formation and the quality of these unions. This paper offers a rare look at the developmental significance of adolescent romance during the transition to adulthood in a nationally representative sample.

Background

Several theories suggest that adolescent romantic relationships are important influences in young adult family formation. First, Dunphry's (1963) theory of stages of group development in adolescence posit that as adolescents age from pre-teens to late teens, they progress through five stages of peer association. The first stage is the pre-crowd stage, where individuals belong to same-sex cliques. The second stage is the beginning of the crowd, when same-sex cliques begin to interact with one another. The third stage is the crowd in structural transition, when upper status members in same-sex cliques begin to form a heterosexual clique. In stage four, mixed-sex cliques interact with one another to form a crowd. Finally, in the fifth stage, the crowd begins to disintegrate into dyads, or romantic relationships. Dunphry argues that a main purpose of mixed-sex crowd formation is to afford a market of eligible partners for young men and women. These partners then become potential marital partners. In the 1960's when Dunphry was writing, late adolescent couples were probably more likely to form marital bonds than they are today. Still, as Dunphry suggests, late teen and young adult relationships are an important part of social relationship development during the transition to adulthood.

Attachment theory is a second framework for understanding how romantic relationships may influence young adult unions. Attachment theory posits that earlier relationships provide representations of how social relationships function, and these "working models" help young people build relationship skills. While attachment theory has traditionally focused on the infant-

parent attachment bond as the foundational "working model" for how relationships should operate, recent theoretical work indicates that attachment processes shape adolescent relationships as well. Allen and Land (1999) suggest that adolescent relationships are based on both an internal model of relationships formed from their own parent-child relationship *and* experience in current relationships with other attachment figures such as peers and romantic partners (see empirical evidence in Carlson et al 2004). This suggests that each relationship affects one's next relationship, and all prior relationships affect one's current relationship. In this way, individuals accumulate relationship experience.

Peer and romantic relationships are often described as both harmful and helpful to healthy adolescent development. Attachment theorists note that attachment shifts from parents to peers during adolescence. In addition, peer relationships are the first relationships youth have with others of their same status. Like peer relationships, romantic relationships serve several developmental purposes. First, romantic relationships are important because they advance the goal of separation from parents (Gray and Steinberg 1999). After shifting attachment from parents to peers, adolescents further redirect intense interpersonal energy to romantic partners. Second, romantic relationships allow teens to gain unique emotional and sometimes physical intimacy experience that is different from that experienced with parents or peers (Furman and Wehner 1994; Furman, Brown and Feiring 1999; Collins 2003).

Though adolescent romantic involvement can be described as a healthy event for development, it is often implicated as a risk factor for harmful outcomes as well. Historically the study of adolescent romantic relationships has assumed that romantic involvement forecasts maladaptation in teens rather than serving positive developmental purposes (see Collins 2003 for a brief review). Indeed, teens who maintain more than one romantic relationship concurrently are

at a higher risk for STDs (Ford et al. 2002). In her study on pubertal development and delinquency involvement, Haynie (2003) finds that romantic involvement is one of the largest confounders of the positive relationship between early development and deviance. She finds that romantic involvement increases some forms of deviance (party deviance) by 35 percent and other forms (minor and serious delinquency) by somewhat less.

Using a sample of 700 10th and 11th graders over a one year period, Davies and Windle (2000) examine the relationship between dating types and adolescent drinking, sexual involvement and interpersonal relationship quality with close friends. They find that heavy daters (multiple casual partners) are at the highest risk for heavy drinking while light daters (never dated or one casual partner) are at the lowest risk. Those who had one steady partner fall between the heavy and light daters. This indicates that it is not dating per se, but the *kind of dating experience* one has that may negative impact adolescent well-being.

Using a community sample of 205, Neeman, Hubbard and Masten (1995) examine how the influence of romantic relationships changes from early (8-12 years old) to late (17-23 years old) adolescence. They test the effect of romantic involvement on conduct problems, job outcomes and academic achievement. The authors find that romantic involvement in early and middle adolescence is related to decreases in academic achievement and increases in conduct problems. In late adolescence, romantic involvement is no longer related to conduct problems or decreases in academic achievement. The authors suggest that early adolescent romantic relationships can be problematic whereas later adolescent romantic involvement becomes a normal developmental task. This indicates that the *timing of romantic relationships* in adolescence conditions its pro-social or problematic effects.

The few empirical studies that directly test the effect of romantic relationship involvement on adolescent or young adult union formation offer mixed evidence. Madsen (2001) tests the effects of dating behavior in adolescence (ages 15-17 ½) on the quality of young adult romantic relationships (ages 20-21) using a community sample of 180 adolescents. Madsen finds that moderate or low dating frequency predicts higher quality young adult relationships whereas heavy dating frequency predicts poorer quality young adult relationships. She also finds that respondents report better relationship quality in young adulthood if they had at least one adolescent dating relationship of more than two weeks duration by age 16. In addition, Madsen finds that the effects of adolescent romantic relationships persist even after relationships with parents and peers are considered concurrently. These findings indicate several things: 1) some dating is advantageous for adult relationship quality; 2) too much dating is maladaptive for later relationships; and 3) romantic experience is distinct from relationship experience with peers and parents.

Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth and Tellegen (2004) find evidence that contradicts Madsen's findings. They test the predictive links between friendship, academic, conduct, work, and romantic tasks at age 20 to young adult adaptation at age 30 in a community sample of about 180 respondents. They find that when friendship, academic, and conduct tasks are controlled, there is no effect of romantic experience at age 20 on romantic experience at age 30. The authors claim that there is no evidence that adolescent romantic relationships are building blocks for adult relationships. These contrasting findings – Madsen (2001) and Roisman et al (2004) – suggest that further evidence is needed.

Empirical research by Connolly and Johnson (1996) using a sample of approximately 1000 adolescents and a review article by Collins (1997) suggest remarkable continuity in

relationships across time and with different partners. These scholars suggest that, in general, if an individual has problematic relationships in one relationship domain (with parents, peers, or romantic partners), they are more likely to have problems with their relationships in other domains. If relationship experience crosses domains, it should certainly transfer between relationships in the same domain; thus, adolescent romantic experience should influence young adult romantic partnerships. Specifically, romantic relationships have the unique qualities of: 1) being close in time to young adulthood; 2) unfolding during a life stage in which individuals are particularly open to creating representations of how the world works (Mead 1934); and 3) being in the same relationship domain (romantic) as young adult partnerships. This should make romantic relationships in this period especially influential. Finally, romantic relationships should have a direct influence on young adult partnerships because some adolescent romantic relationships actually transition into young adult relationships of cohabitation or marriage. Of course, the majority of adolescent romantic relationships do not become young adult unions, but they are likely to hold developmental significance nonetheless.

As Collins (2003) notes, we know little about the range in quality, intensity, interaction, support, control, and caring of the romantic relationships of teens. More nuanced and multifaceted treatment of romantic involvement would attend to features that promote both positive and negative development in early adulthood (Collins 2003). Some romantic relationships involvement may be good practice. Too much practice, however, with overlapping or poor quality relationships may portend unstable relationships in adulthood.

Ultimately, we know little about adolescent romantic relationships, and our current understanding comes from small, select samples of adolescents from one school or one city (Furman, Brown and Feiring 1999). A primary disadvantage of such samples is their

homogeneity compared to the experience of adolescents nationwide. Similar adolescents are often clustered in geographically limited units—such as schools or towns—which make it difficult to generalize findings.

Grounded in theory and empirical evidence, the present study investigates the influence of adolescent romantic experience on young adult relationship formation and quality. The study uses three waves of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) described below.   This analysis has the advantage of a large, nationally representative sample collected over three critical time points during adolescence and the transition to adulthood. This allows for more generalizable and robust estimates of the effects of adolescent romantic experience on young adult partnerships than can be afforded by small, regional, and cross-sectional studies that serve as the basis for many of the prior research on this topic.

Data and Methods

Data

Add Health is a nationally representative survey of U.S. adolescents who were in grades 7-12 in 1994-95. In 1995, more than 90,000 adolescents in 80 schools completed a self-administered, in-school questionnaire and more than 20,000 students and one of their parents completed an intensive, in-home interview about health behaviors and social relationships including family, peers and romantic partners. Approximately 14,700 students completed a second in-home interview in 1996 and about 15,000 of the original respondents completed in-home interviews in 2001-02.

The sample used here includes adolescents who completed wave 1, 2, and 3 interviews, those who were not married by wave 2, and those who had valid sample weights.[1] This results in

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[1] There are several reasons for missing sample weights. First, if the case was not in the original sampling frame, but was added in the field, it does not have a weight. Second, if the case was selected as part of a pair (twins, half-

a potential sample of 10,734 for multivariate analyses. Adolescent romantic relationship profile is defined from wave 1 and 2 measures while union formation is measured at wave 3. Thus, all adolescent romantic relationship experience is measured prior to cohabitation or marriage. This makes causal inference regarding the effect of adolescent relationship experience on young adult relationships more plausible.

Measures

Adolescent romantic profile and quality are the key independent variables of interest in this study. To measure profile, I construct five different romantic relationship categories from relationship histories covering three years during adolescence.[2] These five categories include: 1) *singles* – those who reported no romantic relationships over the three year period; 2) *solos* – those who reported having only one romantic relationship for a short duration (less than 3 months); 3) *steadies* – those who reported only one relationship but of a longer duration (3 months or more); 4) *serials* – those who report multiple romantic relationships in the course of the past three years, but the relationships *did not* overlap in time and; 4) *concurrent daters* – those who reported multiple relationships, and the relationships *did* overlap in time. There is also a residual category of those who report at least one relationship, but it cannot be determined whether they are solos, steadies, serials or concurrent daters because of missing data on month and/or year of relationship start and/or stop dates. Those in the *undetermined* category are included in some of the analyses where appropriate. Table 1 below shows average relationship duration and average number of relationships by profile.

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siblings) and both were not interviewed, it does not have a weight. Finally, if the case did not have a sample flag, it does not have a weight (Joyce Tabor, Add Health Data Manager, personal communication, January 17, 2003).
[2] Eighteen month retrospective relationship histories were collected from respondents at waves 1 and 2. As noted, the first interview wave took part in 1995, with a small number of interviews at the end of 1994. Dating back 18 months from this first interview means that relationships ending as early as 1993 are recorded. The second interview was conducted in 1996, so approximately three years of romantic relationship history are captured in these two interviews.

Table 1: Unweighted Means of Relationship Characteristics by
Romantic Relationship Profile

Relationship Profile	Average Relationship Duration (months)	Average # of Relationships
Single	0	0
Short-term Solo	0.94	1
Long-term Steady	16.39	1
Serial	6.99	2.23
Concurrent	9.43	3.52

N=9087 with known relationship profile

For confidentiality and compliance reasons, identifiers for adolescent romantic partners
are not included in the Add Health data. Because the 18-month window prior to the second
interview may overlap with the relationship period covered in the first interview, great caution
was employed to correctly account for overlap in relationship reporting. For example, it is
possible that a romantic relationship that is reported in wave 2 with a start date at or about the
time of the wave 1 interview is the same relationship or a different relationship than one reported
that was still ongoing at the time of the wave 1 interview.

Where we could be sure of the pattern of a series of reported relationships based on start
and stop dates, we have categorized respondents into the five profiles. There are several ways in
which to categorize relationship profiles. Prior work on relationship characteristics indicates that
length and exclusivity of relationships as well as number of partners are important features
(Davies and Windle 2000; Madsen 2001). The solo (short term) and steady (long-term)
relationships are separately defined to distinguish very short (fling) versus longer-term
commitments even though both indicate having only one romantic partner over the course of
three years. The concurrent relationship category indicates those who have a history of not being

exclusive with their romantic partner and of having multiple partners. The serial relationship category indicates having multiple partners, but not at the same time. Perhaps past findings that multiple romantic relationships lead to negative health and social outcomes are driven largely by the subset of those whose relationship overlap in time (Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner & Collins 2001). In fact, from a developmental perspective, multiple relationships could be a routine part of adolescent development. Thus, distinguishing between serial and concurrent multiple partner profiles allows for examination of this nuance.

While three years is a substantial duration during adolescence (which is conventionally defined as ages 12-18), it does not cover *all* of adolescence. Because respondents range in age from 12 to 18 at wave 1 and 18-month retrospective dating histories are used, for some the window of adolescent relationship observation is from ages 10-12 while for others it is from ages 16 to 18 (or any other three consecutive years in between). Romantic relationship profiles based on experiences at ages 10, 11, and 12 probably have a very different meaning than profiles based on experiences at ages 16, 17, and 18. Several descriptive figures presented later in the paper indicate relationship profile differences by age, and multivariate analyses control for age. Future analyses will test other ways to more fully incorporate age into the relationship story.

Adolescent relationship quality is measured by four indicators: conflict, sexual intimacy, emotional commitment, and social embeddedness. Each measure is a composite of several questions. Relationship conflict is measured by questions about whether your partner ever treats you disrespectfully, swears at you in front of others, threatens you with violence, pushes or shoves you, or throws things at you that could hurt you (alpha = 0.69). The measure is then categorized into no conflict, low conflict, or high conflict.

The sexual intimacy measure is comprised of three indicators: whether or not you and your partner have touched each other under your clothes, touched each others' genitals, or had sexual intercourse (alpha = 0.87). The measure is categorized as no sexual contact, some contact, or intercourse. The variables that comprise the conflict and sexual intimacy summary measures were subjected to a principle components factor analysis. These two indicators emerged from factor loadings.

The emotional commitment measure is comprised of five indicators: if the respondent saw less of friends to spend more time exclusively with partner, went out with partner alone, gave gifts to partner, told partner that he/she loved him/her, and thought of themselves as a couple (alpha = 0.76). The measure is categorized as no commitment, very little commitment, some commitment, very committed, extremely committed (see too Bearman and Bruckner 2001).

Finally, social embeddedness is a measure indicating how connected your romantic relationships are to other social relationships with parents and peers (Bearman and Bruckner 2001). The indicators forming this measure are: whether you went out with partner in a group of peers, your partner met your parents, and you told other people you were a couple (alpha = 0.66). The measure is then categorized into low, medium, and high social embeddedness. Each of the questions comprising all four of the quality measures were asked with reference to each relationship on which the respondent reported. Therefore, we use the average of all relationships to represent the average quality experienced in all adolescent relationships.[3]

With regard to young adult unions, current relationship status is measured. Respondents indicate whether they are not in a romantic union, in a non-exclusive dating relationship, an exclusive dating relationship, a cohabitating relationship, or a marriage. While adolescent

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[3] The relationships quality measures discussed in this paper were only recently added to the analyses. We are working on other ways of using these measures in the future. Suggestions are welcomed.

relationship measures represent a three year history of romantic relationships, the adult

relationship measures constructed here represent current relationship status. We could look at

young adult relationship *history*, however some respondents are just 18 years old at wave 3, and

thus have less opportunity than older respondents to gain relationship experience in adulthood.

If data are again collected from respondents in a fourth wave, the youngest respondents will be at

least 23 years old. With these additional years, there would be at least five years of young adult

relationship history to analyze. At this time, current relationship status is the best indicator of

union formation for a sample of 18-25 year olds. We recognize that the probability of various

types of union formation is likely to vary based on age.

With regard to quality, relationship satisfaction and conflict are measured for current

unions in young adulthood. The satisfaction measure is comprised of five indicators: how

committed are you to your partner, how likely it is that your relationship will be permanent, how

satisfied are you with the relationship, how much you love your partner, and how much you

think your partner loves you (alpha=0.85). Responses on the indicators are summed for a range

of 1-11. Young adult relationship conflict is measured by three indicators: whether your partner

has 1) threatened you; 2) slapped, hit or kicked you; and 3) whether you've had an injury

because of this (alpha=0.85). The measure is coded to represent high, medium, and low levels of

conflict. These questions are asked both with reference to the partner initiating conflict and the

respondent initiating conflict.

Age is measured at wave 2 when adolescent dating profile is the outcome (Figures 2a-b)

and at wave 3 when union formation is the outcome (Figures 4a-b).[4] Other socio-demographic

variables are measured at wave 1. Race/ethnicity is indicated by five categories: non-Hispanic

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[4] Wave 3 age ranges from 18 to 28, but there are very few cases above age 25. Thus, we have top-coded age at 25 so that this category includes all respondents ages 25 or older.

white, non-Hispanic black, non-Hispanic Asian-American, Hispanic, and those of other races.

The family of origin structure measures include: intact family (biological or adoptive married parents), step-family, single-parent family and other family structure. Multivariate analyses also include controls for parents' education measured categorically as highest level attained from less than high school to undergraduate degree or more, and family income coded as the log odds of annual household income.

Analytic Methods

Descriptive analyses indicate the number of cases and weighted percentages for each category on key variables of interest.[5] Then, a series of multinomial logistic regression models are estimated to determine 1) the relative risk of having various adolescent relationship profiles based on age and gender; and 2) the relative risk of having adolescent relationships of varying qualities. Finally, a series of multinomial logistic regression models estimate 1) the effect of adolescent relationship *profile* on young adult union formation *type*; 2) the effect of adolescent relationship *quality* on adult relationship *type*; and 3) the effect of adolescent relationship *quality* on adult relationship *quality*. All multivariate analyses adjust for the complex sampling design of the Add Health study using STATA 7.0.

Results

For ease of interpretation figures are used to depict results from descriptive analyses and multivariate analyses. Figure 1 shows the distribution of adolescent romantic relationship profiles for all sample respondents included in these analyses (N=9087). The most common profile is that of a single adolescent – one who has no romantic relationship experiences by wave 2. However, 75 percent of all adolescents have some relationship experience. Twenty-three percent of sample adolescents have a steady profile, 17% have a serial profile, and 13% are

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[5] Several figures hint at the developmental nature of romantic relationships.

concurrent daters. Solo (those with one, short-term relationship) is the least common profile (6%). Approximately 16 percent of all respondents had at least one romantic relationship, but because of missing information on start and stop dates of that relationship across the two waves of data collection, it is not possible to determine whether these individuals have a solo, steady, serial or concurrent profile.

Figure 1: Adolescent Romantic Relationship Profiles
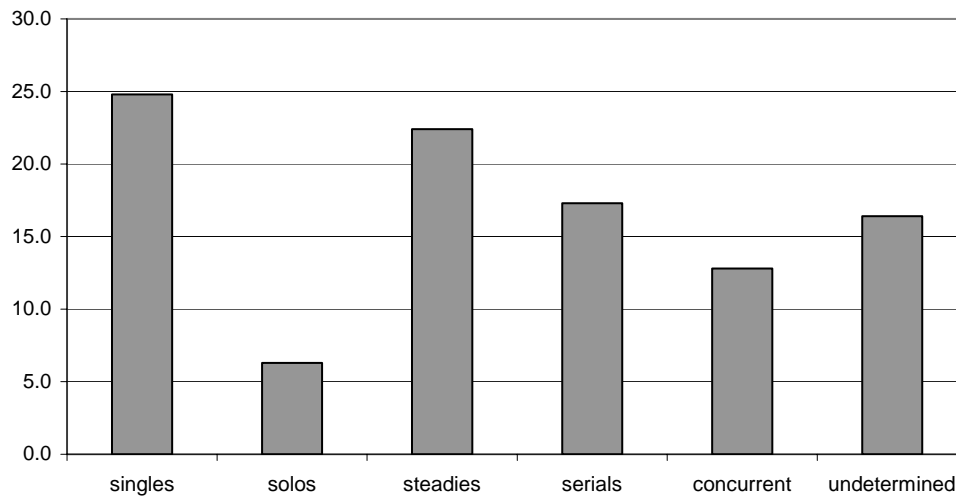
Figures 2a and 2b display adolescent relationship profile distributions by gender and age. These figures hint at the developmental nature of relationship experience. These figures show the proportion of adolescents in each age group that report the various relationship profiles. A few points should be noted. First, with age adolescents are less likely to have little (solo) or no (single) relationship experience, and they are more likely to have a steady, serial or concurrent profile. The trends are similar for males and females. This indicates that adolescents gain relationship experience as they age into late adolescence and early adulthood.

Figure 2a: Adolescent Relationships: Females

Figure 2b: Adolescent Relationships: Males
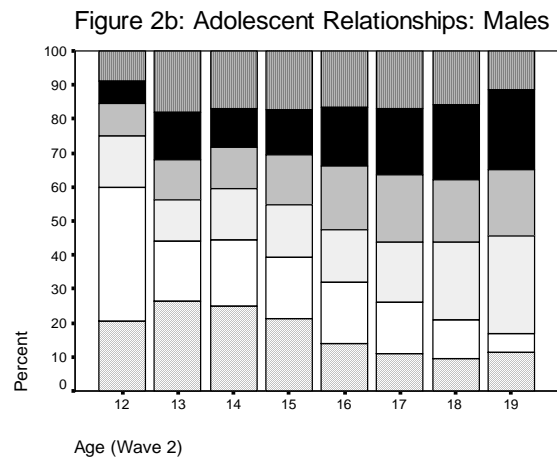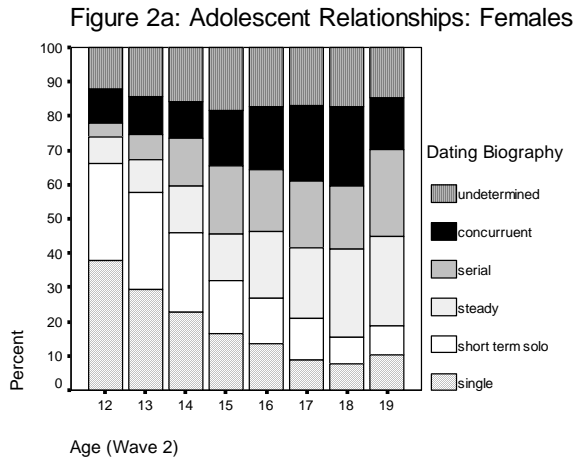
Figures 3a-d graphically display average adolescent relationship quality indicators by gender for those who reported at least one romantic relationship in adolescence. Gender differences are minimal, so we do not discuss them here. Figure 3a depicts average commitment in adolescent relationships. Most adolescents report very or extremely committed adolescent relationships. Figure 3b shows that most adolescent relationships are highly embedded in other social relationships (e.g. with family or friends). Figure 3c shows that sexual activity in adolescent relationships varies a good deal. Slightly more than one-third of adolescents report having intercourse in their relationship, and just under one-third report some (petting) or no sexual contact, respectively. Figure 3d displays the distribution for average relationship conflict levels in adolescence. Overwhelmingly, adolescents report no relationship conflict. Recall that the conflict measure records verbal (swearing) and physical (hitting) conflict, so it does not capture less intense forms of relationship conflict such as disagreements.

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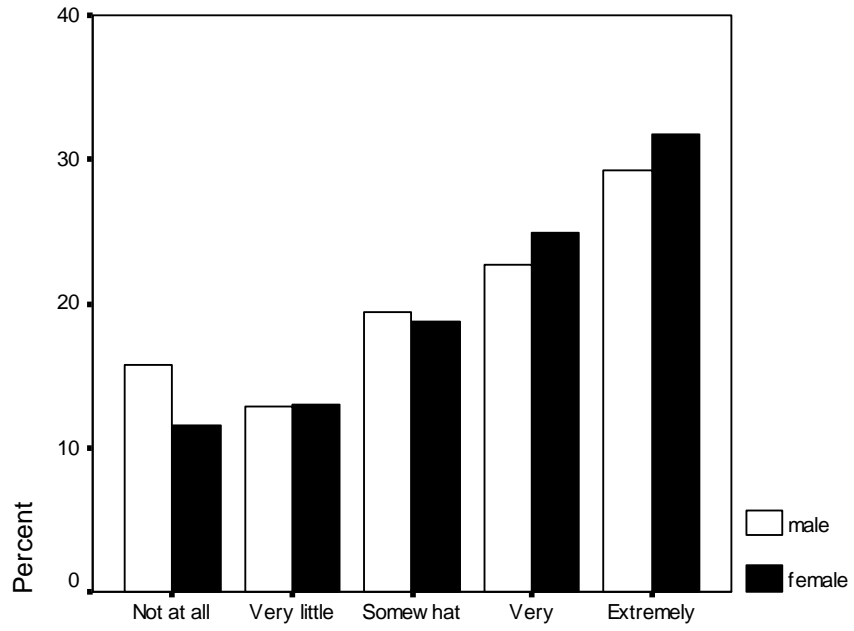## Figure 3a: Ave Adolescent Rel Committment

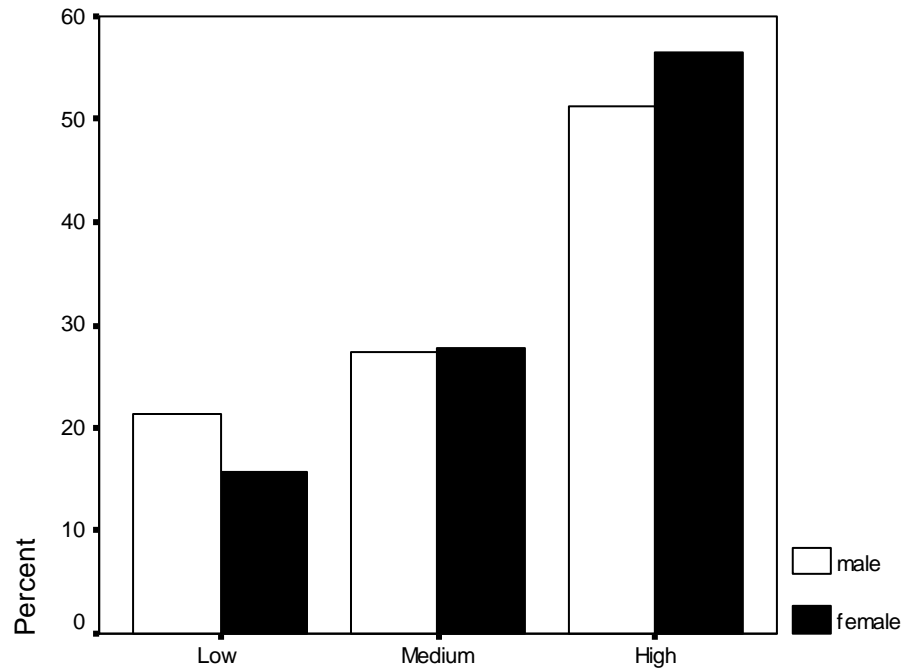## Figure 3b: Ave Adolescent Rel Embeddedness

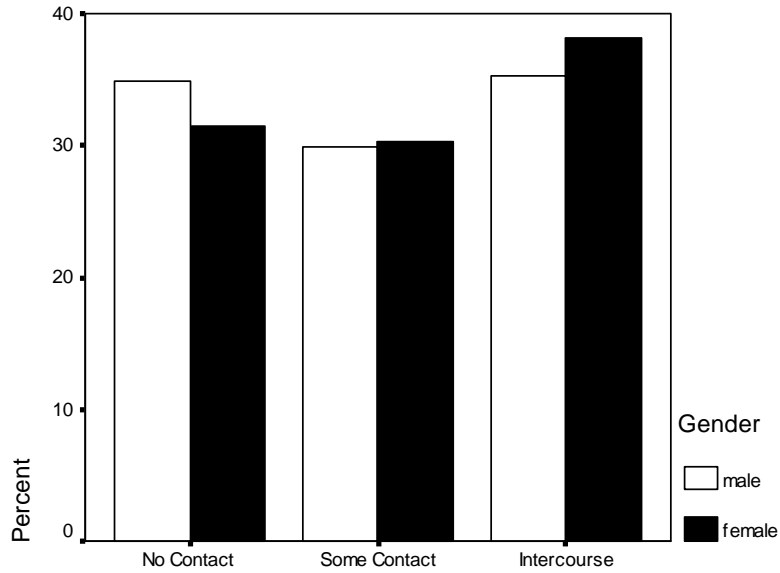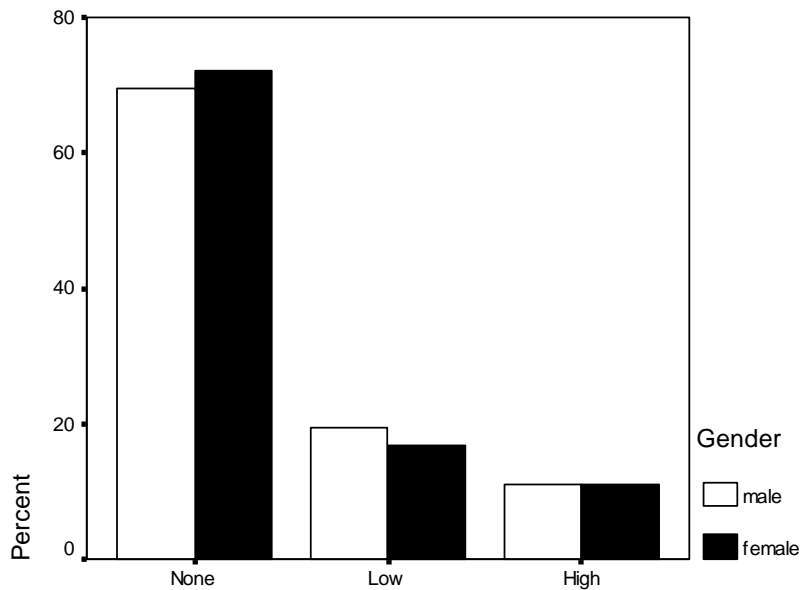## Figure 3c: Average Adolescent Sexual Activity

Figure 3d: Average Adolescent Rel Conflict

Figures 4a and 4b depict adult relationship status by age and gender. Again, because some of the sample is just entering young adult years at wave 3 and others are in their mid-twenties, it is important to recognize union formation differences by age. Here we see that with age and within each gender group, respondents are increasingly likely to be married and less

likely to be dating non-exclusively. The top three bars in each age group make up an

increasingly larger portion of the entire bar as age increases. This signals a trend toward "settling

into" relationships.
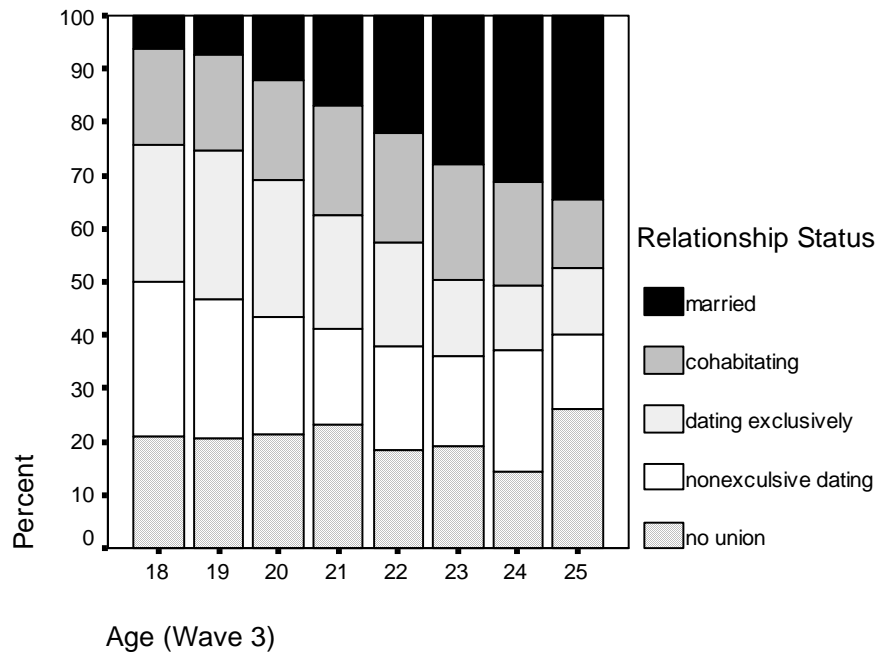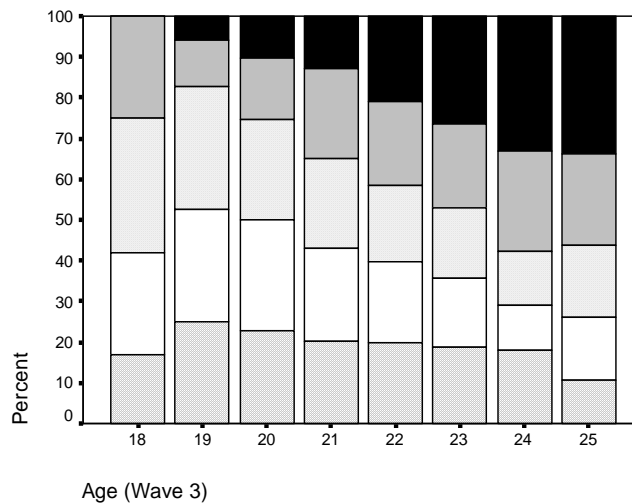
Figure 4a: Adult Union Formation: Females

Age (Wave 3)

Figure 4b: Adult Union Formation: Males

Age (Wave 3)

The final descriptive analysis displays the two adult relationship quality measures among

those in adult relationships (Figures 5a and 5b). Much like adolescent relationships, most adults

report no conflict in their current unions. In concert with this, young adult respondents are

overwhelmingly satisfied with their current relationships. This seems intuitive because, if they

were not satisfied, they may opt out of that young adult relationship, leaving that relationship

uncaptured by our analyses.[6]
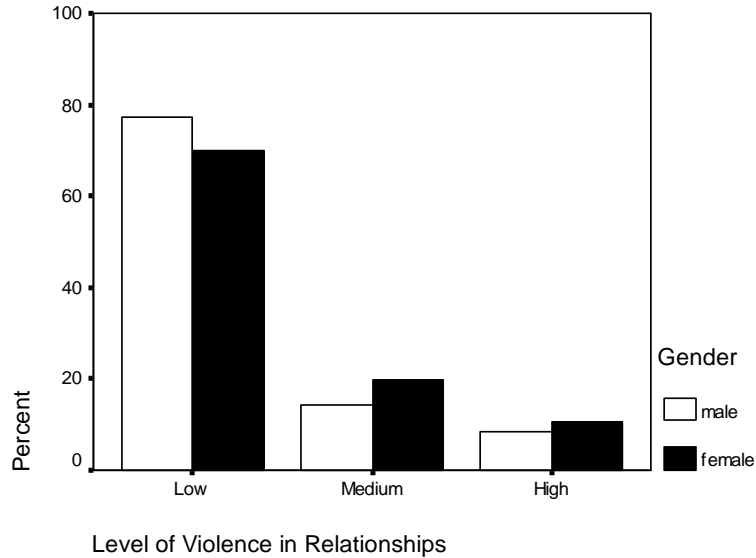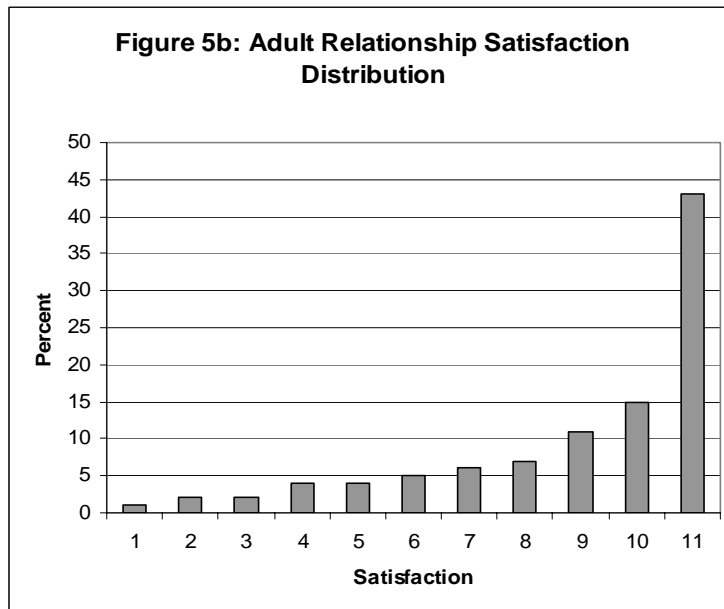
Figure 5a: Adult Violence in Relationships

Percent

Level of Violence in Relationships

Figure 5b: Adult Relationship Satisfaction Distribution

Percent

Satisfaction

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[6] Relationship satisfaction measures are typically highly skewed toward positive response. We are exploring other young adult relationship quality measures. For a sub-sample of Add Health respondents at wave 3, current partners were also interviewed. We are working to include insights from this subsample which has much richer data on relationship quality, although the number of respondents drops considerably.

Turning now to multivariate models, Figure 6 displays the predicted probabilities

(generated from the multinomial logistic regression model) of adolescent relationship profile

based on varying levels of conflict. All multinomial logistic models control for age, gender,

race/ethnicity, family structure, parent's education, and family income. Asterisks indicate

statistically significant differences in conflict by relationship profile using an adjusted Wald test.

Those with a steady profile are more likely than others to have high conflict relationships.

However, they may also have more time in romantic relationships for conflict to develop.

Concurrent daters are most likely to have some or high conflict. Recall that these adolescents

report romantic relationships that overlap in time – these relationships may be more vulnerable to

conflict over relationship fidelity.

Figure 6: Predicted Probability of Adolescent Relationship Conflict by Profile
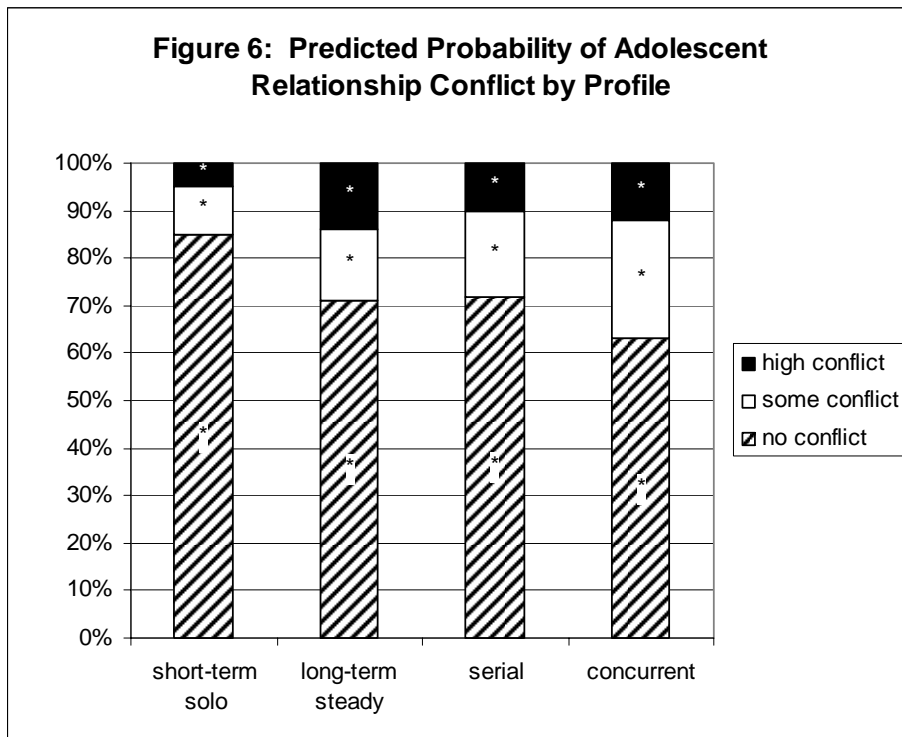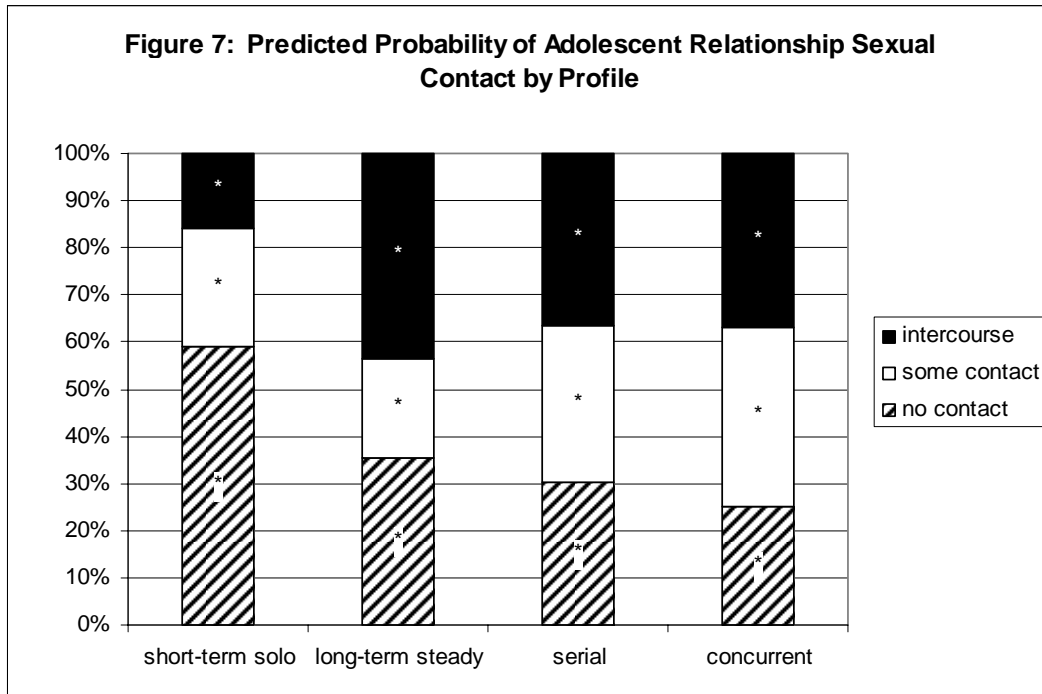
Figure 7 shows the predicted probabilities of adolescent relationship profile based on

varying levels of sexual contact. Not surprisingly, those with a steady relationship profile are

more likely to have sexual contact with their partners. This may be due to the duration and

development of a long-term steady relationship that allows consistent exposure to the opportunity for sexual contact and perhaps more emotional preparedness. When you consider both "some contact" and "intercourse," those with concurrent relationship profiles are more likely than others to have sexual contact. The lowest level of sexual contact is for those with short-term solo relationships.

Figure 7: Predicted Probability of Adolescent Relationship Sexual Contact by Profile

	short-term solo	long-term steady	serial	concurrent
intercourse				
some contact				
no contact				

Next, Figure 8 shows predicted probabilities of adolescent relationship profile for varying levels of emotional commitment. Those with a steady profile report higher levels of commitment to their relationships followed by those with a serial profile. Concurrent daters are least likely to have no commitment. Consistent with their profile of relationship multi-tasking, they are most likely to be somewhat committed on average to each relationship, but they are among the least likely to be very committed.

Figure 8: Predicted Probability of Adolescent Relationship Emotional Commitment by Profile

Legend: very, lots, some, little, none

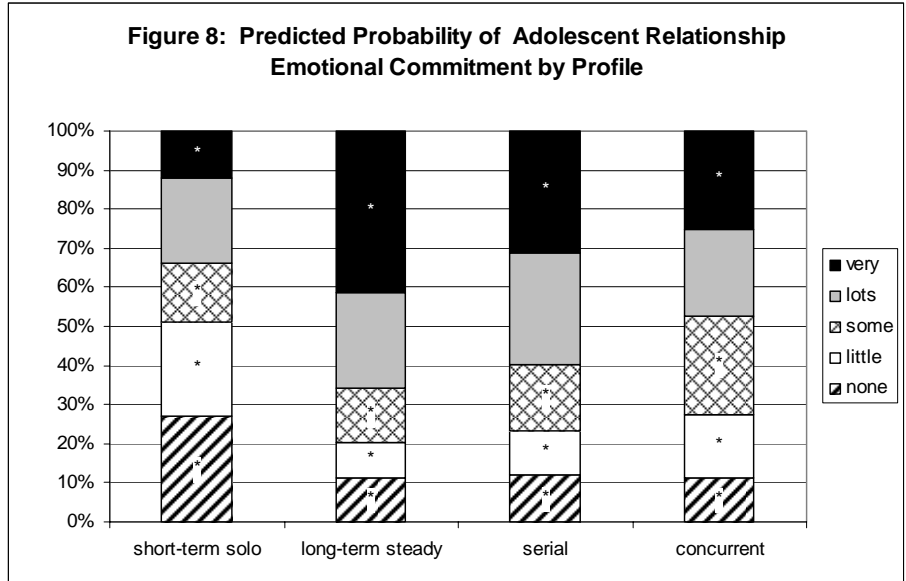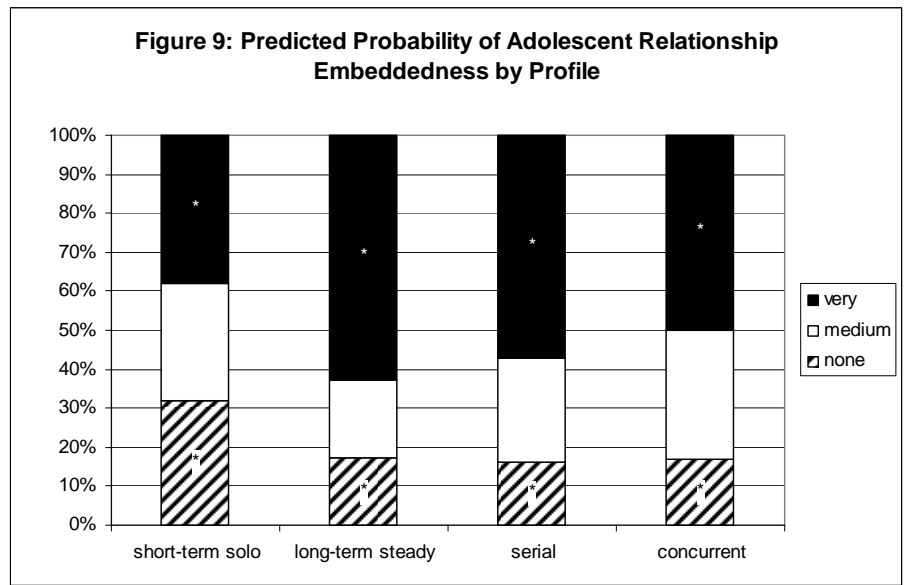X-axis: short-term solo, long-term steady, serial, concurrent

Figure 9 shows predicted probabilities of adolescent relationship profiles by varying levels of social embeddedness. Those with a steady profile have relationships that are more socially embedded than those of other profiles. Short-term solo daters have the least embedded profiles. Again, the duration of a steady relationship allows for more exposure of partners to each others' social network.

Figure 9: Predicted Probability of Adolescent Relationship Embeddedness by Profile

Legend: very, medium, none

X-axis: short-term solo, long-term steady, serial, concurrent

Next, we turn to the question of whether adolescent relationship structure predicts young adult union formation and type. Again, predicted probabilities were generated from the multinomial logistic model, and significance is established by the adjusted Wald test. Figure 10 shows that, if in adolescence respondents had a single profile, they were more likely to be single at wave 3 (the bottom portion of the bar). A similar proportion of those with an adolescent solo profile were single at wave 3. If respondents had a steady or serial profile as an adolescent, they were more likely than others to be married in young adulthood. If adolescents had a concurrent profile, they were more likely than those of other profiles to be cohabiting or in non-exclusive relationships. These results suggest a continuing pattern of low-levels of exclusivity in relationships and indicate some cumulative continuity in relationships during the transition to adulthood.

Figure 10: Predicted Probability of Adult Formation Type by Adolescent Profile
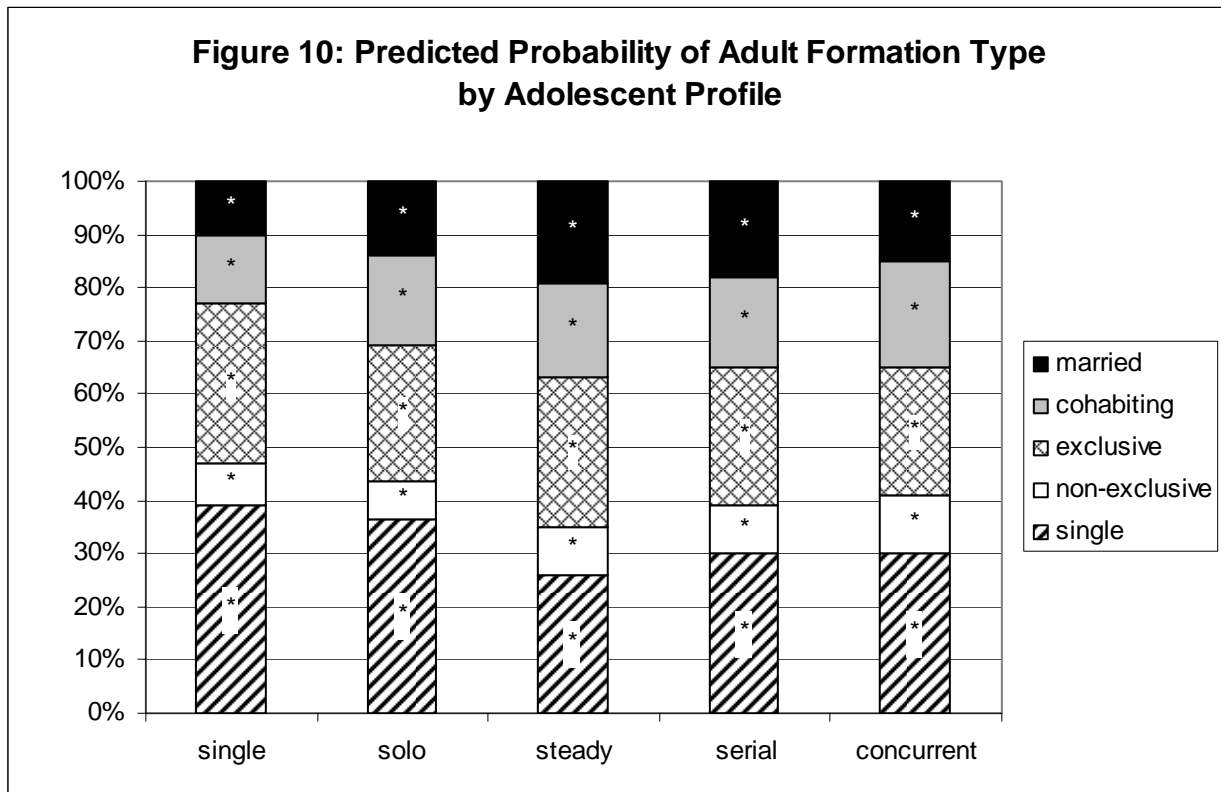
Does adolescent relationship quality affect young adult union type or quality? Models testing the relationship between adolescent quality and young adult relationship type did not generate significant effects for adolescent quality measures net of adolescent relationship profiles. However, Figure 11 shows the significant estimates of adolescent relationship quality in predicting adult union quality. If respondents' adolescent relationship conflict was high, the predicted probability of adult relationship conflict was significantly greater than for those with low levels of adolescent relationship conflict. However, recall that most adolescent and young adult respondents reported low or no conflict in their relationships. Still, this model indicates some continuity in relationship quality from adolescence into young adulthood.

Figure 11: Predicted Probability of Adult Relationship Conflict by Adolescent Relationship Conflict
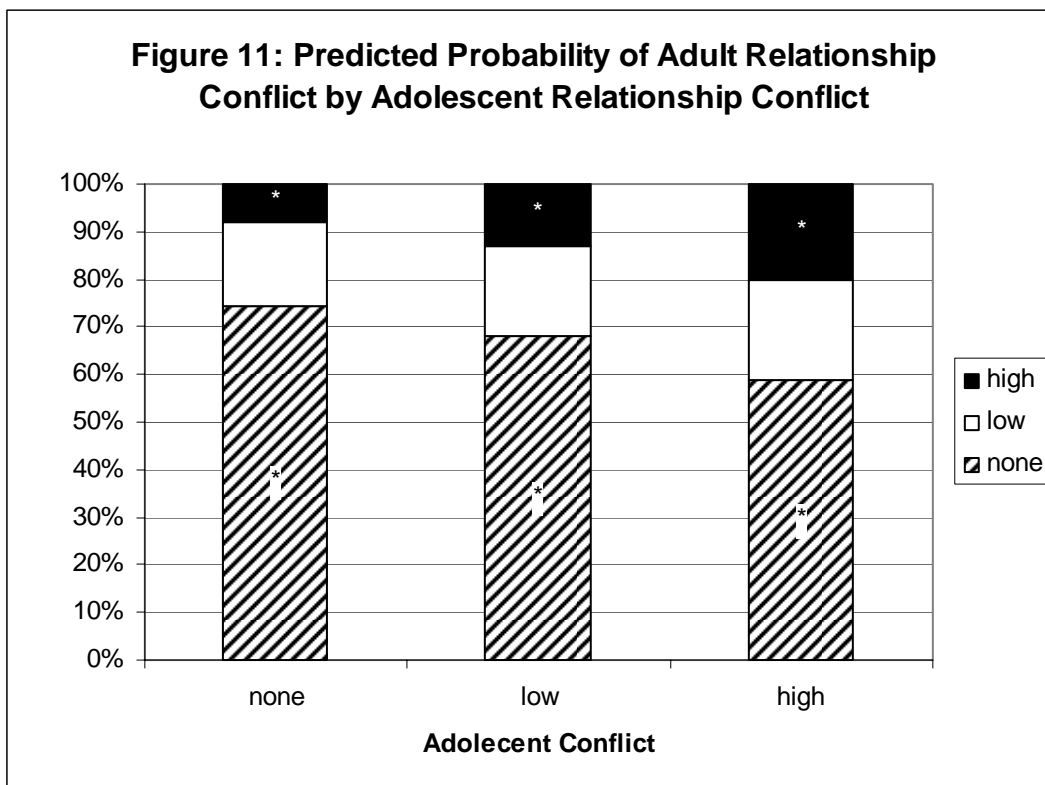
Conclusion

Together these results indicate that young adult union formation is influenced by adolescent romantic relationship experience. Compared to those with other adolescent romantic

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relationship profiles, steadies and serials are more likely to be married at wave 3. Those with

adolescent concurrent profiles are more likely than others to be cohabiting or in non-exclusive

dating relationships. Adolescent singles and solos are more likely than others to be single in

young adulthood. With regard to quality, there is some carry over from adolescence into young

adulthood as well. Adolescents with high average conflict in relationships are more likely to

form high conflict unions in young adulthood. It appears that adolescent romantic relationship

are at least partly developmentally important for later relationships. Thus, if we are concerned

concerned with adult union formation and quality, we may be well-served by focusing attention

on adolescents' early forays into romantic relationships. When adolescent romantic relationships

have been considered in past studies, oftentimes a simple indicator for dating or not dating is

entered into multivariate models. This study suggests that romantic relationship profiles

developed over the course of adolescence signal young adult union formation outcomes.

This study set out to understand adolescent romantic relationship experience (in profile

and quality), and to assess the degree to which these experiences signal particular young adult

union formation types and qualities. On the first objective, the results indicate relationship

profiles differ by age and less-so by gender. The findings with regard to age lend credibility to

the idea that romantic relationships in adolescence are woven into the relationship life course.

As adolescents age, they gain more experience with romantic relationships moving first into

relationships with one other person, but eventually gaining experience with multiple romantic

partners (sometimes concurrently).

But, do serial and concurrent profiles signal too much of a good thing? This study

suggests that those with serial and concurrent relationship profiles are at an increased risk for

cohabitation and decreased risk of marriage (especially concurrents), net of age and other socio-

demographic factors. Because all respondents are under 26 years of age, it is unwise to determine that a decreased risk for marriage is a particularly negative outcome. Delayed marriage in one's 20's is often associated with post-secondary school attendance and career development, which could be considered positive life pursuits. The value of marriage at this young age is not easily determined as positive or negative. Also, the value of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage or to test the potential of a partner for marriage is also not easily categorized as positive or negative. Some research indicates that marriages preceded by cohabitation are more likely to end in divorce. In the samples used for these analyses, half of all of those who were married had cohabitation experience prior to marriage. Of those who had not yet married, over a third had cohabitation experience. As cohabitation becomes more common, its association with negative outcomes like divorce may lessen.

The role of romantic relationships has been relatively neglected by the research community in the past (Brown 1999; Furman 2002). While this study lays the groundwork for understanding the role of romantic relationship profiles and characteristics in young adult relationship formation and quality, there is much more work to be done. Where data is available, future research should aim to test the relevance of both the existence and characteristics of romantic relationships over time.

Limitations

While this analysis moves us forward in our understanding of the role of romantic relationships, several caveats should be noted. First, the definition of being in a romantic relationship is a social one, and therefore the respondent has a good deal of authority in determining whether or not a relationship is simply a friendship or if it is a romantic relationship. The Add Health study attempts to put some boundaries on the definition of a romantic

relationship. Respondents are asked: "In the past 18 months—since {MONTH, YEAR}—have you had a special romantic relationship with anyone?" If a respondent replies "yes" he/she is defined as having a romantic relationship. If a respondent replies "no" he/she is routed to a second series of questions that ask about three behaviors – holding hands, kissing and telling someone you liked/loved him/her. If the respondent replies "yes" to all three of these questions, and they have done these things with the same person, they are determined to have had a romantic relationship and they are asked questions on romantic relationship involvement. Still, as Risman and Swartz (2002) note, the actual romantic lives of adolescents are not as simple as the definitions employed in surveys might suggest.

A second caveat is with regard to sexual orientation. This analysis uses only adolescents with heterosexual romantic and sexual relationships. While the Add Health data has several questions that allow insight into same-sex romantic attraction, very few of the reported romantic relationships were with a same sex partner (less than 1 percent). This is too small of a group for which to estimate separate effects.

The research community recognizes the importance of adolescent experiences in education and work on later achievements in these domains, yet adolescent experiences in romance have been neglected when examining family formation decisions. This study indicates that some romantic relationship profiles are associated with young adult union formation. The findings confirm that individuals with a history of multiple romantic partners, particularly concurrent romantic partners, are at an increased risk for cohabitation and a decreased risk for marriage. This study highlights the importance of understanding the role of adolescent relationship experience as an early template for adult union formation and maintenance.

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