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ADOLESCENT PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT in BRNO

An ELSPAC Study 2005–2011

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2.

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1. Romantic Behaviour and Perceptions of the Meaning of the Term „Dating Somebody“

There are not many issues that hold such a prestigious position in fiction or lyrics as being in love and love in all its forms. This can be also viewed as a proof of how significant this experience is in human life. Romantic relationships in adulthood represent a deeply embedded and fairly frequent topic in counselling and clinical practice, as well as in empirical research in psychology of intimate relationships. As opposed to that, adolescent romantic relationships represent a relatively new topic in research (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999); the development of its examination follows the developmental line of interest in adolescent intimate relationships in the direction away from relationships with parents, over peer relationships in a group, to the phenomenon of friendship and first platonic relationships. It is these relationships in particular that appear as crucially important in the adolescence period, they are in the centre of attention and tend to be accompanied by deep and intensive emotional experiencing. However, the surrounding world of adults tends to underestimate their importance and perceive their character as superficial and transient. Nevertheless, the fact itself that a teen in middle adolescence spends up to 8 hours a week thinking about an existing or potential partner (Richards, Crowe, Larson & Swarr, 1998) and that the frequency of real interactions with a romantic partner exceeds the number of interactions with parents, siblings and friends (Laursen & Williams, as cited in Bouchey & Furman, 2003) illustrates the irreplaceable role of this type of relationship in the development of an individual. Early romantic relationships are significant also for the consequent formation of long-term and mature relationships in adulthood (Sorensen, 2007).

The term of romantic relationships is used to refer to a wide range of adolescent behaviour and experiencing including both mere imagined images of an ideal partner and also intimate interactions with a real partner spreading over a shorter or longer period of time. These relationships may but need not necessarily be declared as a „relationship“ within the peer group, family or even the dyad itself (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999). The variability of the perceptions of adolescent romantic relationships is documented e.g. by C. Leaper and K. J. Anderson (1997) claiming that often even adolescents themselves express their insecurity over whether their relationship is only a close heterosexual friendship or already a romantic relationship. Thus, romantic relationships between adolescents can take on various forms – adolescents enter relationships resembling by its character more likely an intense friendship or they establish such romantic relationships in which, besides mutual physical attraction and appeal leading to the fulfilment of their sexual needs, there is also a reciprocal provision of emotional support, and partners can already mutually fulfil the role of a primary attachment figure. Some young people enter relationships including the start of sexual life very early; others, on the contrary, have this experience involuntarily much later. There is also a group of adolescents who refuse this experience despite the real possibilities that are available for them and avoid a romantic relationship up until late adolescence or early adulthood. Moreover, also the experiencing of this relationship varies. Some adolescents experience their relationship very intensively and there is also an open declaration of commitment to the public; other adolescents (as well as young adults) more likely search and experiment within these relationships and do not want to commit themselves to a partner yet. There is also a group of adolescents who in this developmental period prefer more likely school or their hobbies to their love life. Also the contents of evaluating the contribution of romantic relationship are relatively rich and varied – some adolescents describe warmth and support provided by their partner; as opposed to that, others speak of relationships accompanied by disappointment, misunderstandings and conflicts.

The high variability of the form of romantic relationships in adolescence is regarded as one of the major causes of the relatively low frequency of this issue in empirical research in the recent past (e.g.

Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999; Collins, 2003). In recent years, nevertheless, there has been a growth in studies focused in this way (Weichold & Barber, 2008). The aim of these studies is the description itself of the examined phenomenon (Feiring, 1996); furthermore, depiction of developmental dynamics (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003), observing considerable influences that can affect the form of early romantic relationships (in this field prevails examining the quality of parent-child relationships and peer relationships in the role of predictors of the form of romantic relationships, e.g. Collins & Van Dulmen, 2006). Moreover, also possible consequences and correlations of this phenomenon in other areas of psychological development are studied, such as adolescent self-esteem and self-perception, psychopathologic phenomena, risk behaviour, academic aspirations (Joyner & Udry, 2000; Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998; Quatman, Sampson, Robinson, & Watson, 2001).

The meaning of „dating somebody” in our study: ages 13, 15 and 17

Because adolescents describe their romantic relationships and experience with them in many different ways, it is useful and relevant to adopt a descriptive approach (Feiring, 1996), aimed to examine what adolescents themselves (especially in early and middle adolescence) view as a romantic/intimate relationship and what they conceive of this notion or what value it represents for them. In our longitudinal survey of adolescents, the representation of what „dating somebody” means for adolescents was examined already in the early adolescence period (at age 13) and then repeatedly in other waves of examinations (ages 15 and 17). Cross-sectional analyses and pilot studies introducing the form of romantic relationships in the individual periods as well as the description of the trajectories of this representation were presented step by step in partial publications (age 13 – Lacinová & Michalčáková, 2006; age 15 – Lacinová & Michalčáková, 2008; Lacinová, Michalčáková, & Masopustová, 2008; a pilot study on the development of the representation of the notion at ages 13, 15 and 17 – Lacinová & Michalčáková, 2010).

To categorize adolescents’ responses about what „they think dating somebody means”¹, we adopted a concept by W. Furman and E. A. Wehner (1997), characterizing romantic relationship in adolescence by the presence of four behavioural systems: attachment, affiliation, caretaking and sex/reproduction. Their key idea is that during the development of the romantic relationship partners can become mutual attachment figures on whom these behavioural systems are focused when activated (it means that adolescent partners can offer each other company, friendship, help and care, closeness, sharing and sexual satisfaction). The choice of this theoretical concept for the analysis of our data stemmed especially from the fact that it was formulated by Furman and Wehner (1997) in connection with the attachment theory to explain the developmental dynamics of romantic relationships particularly in the adolescence period and that its hypotheses can be used not only to examine the developmental aspects of the form of romantic relationships, but also as a criterion of the categorization of responses describing the romantic relationship and to examine the individual developmental trajectories of this representation.

The individual categories of the representation of romantic relationship were thus based on an analysis of respondents’ answers² according to the character of the behavioural systems: *attachment* (e.g. safe place, confiding, trust, support, and help with problem-solving); *affiliation* (e.g. time spent together, having fun, humour, and mutual interests); *physical contact* (e.g. kissing, holding hands, and hugging). Another category under consideration was *commitment* (common future, fidelity, declared willingness to make sacrifice for one another, restricting oneself to the benefit of the relationship or the partner), appearing as a significant developmental aspect for the development of adolescent romantic relationships in other major conceptions of the development of adolescent romantic relationships by B. B. Brown (1999) and J. Connolly and A. Goldberg (1999). A number of adolescents used very general formulations in the interview to describe the „dating somebody” phenomenon. These answers, including e.g. only a mere expression of mutual affection at a most general level (e.g. like each other), were not included into

¹ Questions about the representation of the romantic relationship were asked within a semi-structured interview and the responses were analyzed as a whole, i.e. we examined the occurrence of individual answers belonging to prepared categories within answers to all the following questions: 1) What do you think dating somebody means? 2) In what do you think it can be nice? 3) In what do you think it may not be nice? 4) Which qualities should your life partner have, what is most important for you? 5) Which qualities should he/she not have? 6) Are you dating somebody? 7) Which qualities do you like about your boyfriend/girlfriend? 8) Which qualities do you not like about him/her?

² Responses of a sub-sample composed of 96 respondents were analyzed (54% boys; 46% girls), with whom a semi-structured interview was conducted in three waves of data collection.

the consequent analyses. Besides the representation of romantic relationship, adolescents' personal experience with this type of relationship was examined in all the periods as well. As a part of the examination respondents were also presented several statements³, with which they either agreed or disagreed. At age 13, 18.4% respondents⁴ reported to have had experience with a romantic relationship, 73.2% respondents at age 15 and 84.4% respondents at age 17. Statistically significant growth was confirmed among all the ages under our examination (Cochran's $Q = 184.06$; $p < .001$).

Table 2.1. Frequency of the individual categories in the examined issues (in %)

	13 years	15 years	17 years
Attachment	12.5	66.7	66.7
Affiliation	61.5	68.8	75.0
Physical contact	17.7	22.9	24.0
Commitment	1.0	47.9	55.2

Table 2.1 presents relative frequencies of the individual categories at ages 13, 15 and 17. A significant change was found in the examined period (i.e. in the sense of growth) in the categories of attachment (Cochran's $Q = 74.08$; $p < .001$) and commitment (Cochran's $Q = 69.25$; $p < .001$). No significant change was detected in the period under our examination in the occurrence of the affiliation category, which is also the most frequently used characteristic for the form of „dating” as such (Cochran's $Q = 4.62$; $p = .099$), similarly to the category of physical contact (Cochran's $Q = 1.51$; $p = .469$).

The development of „dating somebody” in the ELSPAC study at ages 13, 15 and 17

As was mentioned above, Furman and Wehner (1997) represent in their conception not only the individual components characterizing the form of romantic relationships in adolescence, but also how they gradually emerge in the course of adolescence and slowly integrate into the form of a full-fledged romantic relationship at the threshold of adult-hood. It is from this developmental perspective that the authors claim that romantic relationships of early adolescents can be first characterized mainly by their behaviour, which manifests the activation of two behavioural systems: affiliation and sexual/reproduction system (at the beginning of adulthood, feelings of mutual attraction start to occur and there are first attempts and explorations on the field of sexuality). The presence of behaviour related to the activation of the attachment system and the caregiving system complementing it are more typical of late adolescence and early adulthood. Their functioning is enabled by the gradually increasing length of intimate relationships (Furman, 2002). During adolescence, the hierarchy of attachment figures changes, the partner becomes the main and most frequently sought source of support in a stressful situation (Furman & Wehner, 1997).

In their conception of the development of romantic relationships, B. B. Brown (1999) and J. Connolly and A. Goldberg (1999) accentuate the significance of peer context and describe four developmental stages of these relationships:

1. *initiation phase*: c. 11-13 years of age; according to Brown, it is marked by re-orienting social needs on peers of the opposite sex; adolescents gradually expand their self-image by the role of self as a potential romantic partner; Connolly and Goldberg refer to the first stage as the initial infatuation stage. The signs of this stage are physical attraction and passion; however, they need not be accompanied by particular targeted interaction.

2. *status phase*: c. 14-16 years of age; according to Brown, it is associated with a growing social pressure from the peer group to have a partner that is positively assessed and accepted by this group. On the contrary, an inappropriate partner can lower adolescent's social status. Connolly and Goldberg speak of this period as a stage of affiliative romantic relationships when partner dyads have not been established

³ There were the following statements: 1. I am dating somebody at present. 2. No, I am not dating anybody at present, but I used to. 3. I have never dated anybody so far.

⁴ Responses of a sub-sample composed of 179 respondents were analyzed (55% boys; 45% girls), whom a PC methods were administered in three waves of data collection.

yet; nevertheless, they gradually acquire a „romantic touch” and meeting potential partners takes place in larger, mixed-gender groups.

3. *affectionate phase*: ages 17 to 20; in this phase, Brown points out the transition of relationships from the public space of a peer group into an intimate – dyadic space; the relationship is viewed more as a personal matter, whilst the peer-group influence diminishes. Partners in so defined relationships experience deeper feelings of commitment; the repertoire of intimate behaviour is enriched by the so-called caregiving behaviour and there is a rise in dyadic sexual activity. The peer social network is reduced to a smaller circle of friends of both sexes, which provides adolescents with a space to share their experience with meeting, mutual intimate behaviour and support in case of a breakup. Connolly and Goldberg call this period a stage of intimate romantic relationships when the romantic relationship is formed and consequently declared and the role of the peer group steps aside.

4. *bonding phase*: c. age 21; according to Brown, the relationship depth typical of the previous stage is preserved and extended by a pragmatic perspective. The central topic is the question of whether the given partner meets the requirements subjectively imposed on a life-long partner. According to Connolly and Goldberg, at this stage, which they call committed romantic relationship, combines attraction, intimacy, mutual caregiving and many times it leads to a marriage.

Table 2.2 Frequency of the *developmental trends* of the representation of the notion of „dating somebody” (in %)

Trend n=96	Attachment	Affiliation	Physical contact	Commitment
Growing	54.2	28.1	15.6	54.2
Declining	0.0	14.6	9.4	0.0
Mixed	21.9	14.6	17.7	17.7
Constant (0)	14.6	5.2	52.1	28.1
Constant (1)	9.4	37.5	5.2	0.0

Table 2.2, presents the frequency of *developmental trends* for the individual categories of the representation of romantic relationship, as it was reported by the respondents of the ELSPAC study. Most adolescents whose answers included the categories of *attachment and commitment* showed a growing trend. The most numerous in the category of *physical contact* is the constant (0) trend – over a half of the respondents did not report any statement belonging to this category in any of the examined periods; on the contrary, the most frequent trend in the *affiliation* category is constant (1), where more than a third of the respondents always stated for the representation of „dating” a characteristic related to the affiliative aspects of the relationship. On the basis of these findings we can conclude that in the period between 13 and 17 years of age, adolescent ideas of a romantic relationship are characterized by a growing importance of the partner as a source of support and security (growing trend of *attachment*) as well as an intensified awareness of *commitment*. It is worth noting that *commitment* was defined negatively to a large degree by the respondents as a certain restriction stemming from the exclusiveness of the relationship with the partner (e.g. lack of time for friends and hobbies). Simultaneously, in these two characteristics no occurrence of a falling trend was detected in the period under our examination. *Affiliation* in the sense of friendship, spending leisure time and also very often in the sense of characterizing the romantic relationship as a „deeper or little different friendship” represents a stable part of relationship for a majority of adolescents. Over a third of the respondents reported an affiliative characteristic in all three examined periods and a growing trend appeared in this characteristic in nearly a third of the respondents. Over a half of the respondents did not report the characteristic of „dating somebody” in the intentions of *physical contact* when face to face with an adult examiner conducting the semi-structured interview in any of the three periods. Even though mutual attraction and the presence of physical contact is exactly the aspect differentiating romantic relationship from deep heterosexual friendship and which appears already at the very beginning of development of this type of relationship, the adolescents do not really mention it during the interview. It may be caused by the embarrassing experience, lack of willingness to discuss such intimate manifestations with an adult and social desirability to give answers in the context of a long-time participation in a longitudinal study, during which respondents’ parents were involved relatively intensively. The differences between answering in a direct contact with an examiner and via self-report,

e.g. administration by PC, are hence caused by the fact that the self-reporting option provides respondents with a greater degree of intimacy and privacy. Nevertheless, the form and direction of the response style (i.e. overestimating or concealing experience of intimate or even sexual character) cannot be described as consistent. Similar „inconsistencies” in reporting experience with dating in the adolescence period is mentioned in the context of the current or retrospective perspective also by Shulman and Sharf (2000). While 64.8% fourteen-year-old adolescents claim in their study to have had experience with „dating”, this experience is reported only by 22% adolescents older by two years. This unexpected trend can be explained both by a changed representation of what older adolescents regard as real „dating somebody” as opposed to younger adolescents, but also by a growing share of experienced intimacy in these relationships and hence also the lack of willingness to discuss it with a researcher or even admit its existence.

The development of the representation of romantic relationships in the period between early and late adolescence stemming from the description of individual trends in the occurrence of categories that adolescents use to delineate it is in accordance with the above-mentioned theoretical conceptions by Furman and Wehner (1997), Brown (1999), Connolly and Goldberg (1999), but for instance also with empirical results of the studies by Feiring (1996) or Shulman and Sharf (2000).

2. Sexuality in adolescence⁵

Romantic relationships in adolescence are significant as it is in this period that adolescents have their first sexual experiences (Bearman & Bruekner, 2001; Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999). It is well known from developmental studies that during the period of adolescence young people extricate themselves from parental control and start spending more time with their peers, who convey their first erotic experiences to them. Simultaneously, there are rapid physiological changes, especially at the beginning of adolescence. These can be a catalyst for adolescents’ interest in sexuality (Weinstein & Rosen, 1991). This interest in sexuality becomes stronger with age (Furman & Werner, 1997) to the degree that sexual behaviour becomes an integral part of adolescent life (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004).

Similarly, it is evident from the previously described findings of our study that 15-year old adolescents have already had sexual experiences, with variation in the frequency of the different types of sexual activity experienced. Table 2.3 shows adolescents had the most experience with kissing, and the least with coitus. A similar pattern of sexual behaviours also occurred at age 17. However, it is notable that there were no significant differences between fifteen-year-old boys and girls, while at age 17, girls demonstrated greater experience with petting than boys (Ševčíková & Konečný, 2011). Despite this difference, which may have been caused by differing perceptions of the importance of individual sexual activities, the results show a gradual broadening of sexual experience, moving towards more intimate forms of sexual behaviour. Therefore, due to its prevalence, sexual intercourse seems to represent a base for the examined sexual activities in adolescence. Further, the widespread occurrence of oral sex compared to sexual intercourse is interesting, especially at age 15. Likewise, an American study showed that adolescents between 15 and 19 had more experience with oral sex than with sexual intercourse, even though this activity is much more common in those who have already experienced vaginal intercourse (Duberstein Lindberg, Jones, & Santelli, 2008). If the other advantages of oral sex are ignored, such as a the reduced risk of pregnancy, then the legal minimum age for having sex, 15 in the Czech Republic, likely plays a role in its widespread occurrence.

⁵ The authors acknowledge the support of the the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MSM0021622406) and the Czech Science Foundation (GAP407/11/0585).

Table 2.3 Frequency of sexual behaviours at age 15 (N= 539) and 17 (N=446)

Sexual experience in real life	age 15		age 17	
	Yes	%	Yes	%
Kissing	390	72.4	402	90.1
Petting, embracing or caressing someone's intimate parts	166	30.9	350	78.8
Oral sex	62	32.5	214	61.3
Sexual intercourse	37	19.4	189	40.9

Adolescents, sexuality and the Internet

Sexuality generally represents an area of life that tends to be concealed from others. Even though there are tendencies to discuss it openly, asking intimate questions remains a taboo. Therefore, it can be more acceptable for adolescents to express their sexual experiences in the anonymous Internet environment, where they need not censor their own psycho-sexual experiences and where they can, get acquainted with sexual content without being ashamed.

From previous studies it is already well known that adolescents use the Internet in a broad context, e.g. to search for sexually relevant information (Graya, Klein, Noyce, Sesselberg, & Cantrill, 2005; Suzuki & Calzo, 2004), establish romantic relationships, experiment with online sexual representations (Subrahmanyam, Šmahel, & Greenfield, 2006; Šmahel & Subrahmanyam, 2007), email erotic pictures (Lenhart, 2009), cybersex (Vybíral, Šmahel, & Divínová, 2004) and watch pornographic material (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2005).

There are many questions to be asked regarding the relationship of the media to sexual development. One of the most frequently addressed research problems is the topic of the media's influence on sexual attitudes and behaviour, i.e. how being exposed to sexual material can affect adolescent sexual behaviour (see the critical overview of this research by Subrahmanyam and Šmahel, 2011). However, within our longitudinal study we focused on a related issue of the relationship between the real world and the Internet. Due to the fact that today's adolescents grow up side by side with the Internet, which is a much more interactive environment than television, we asked what the relationship is between using the Internet for sexual purposes and offline sexual behaviours. The aim was to find out whether a lack of offline sexual experience may be related to the use of the Internet for sexual purposes. This assumption stems from a Czech qualitative study carried out by Šmahel (2003), in which adolescent participants engaged in cybersex without having had any experience with offline sex. However, in contrast to the theory of using the Internet to compensate, there is a competing hypothesis which says using the Internet for sexual purposes will be more likely in a group of adolescents who are already sexually active in the physical world. This hypothesis goes hand in hand with the fact that adolescents use the Internet to keep in touch with offline peer groups (Gross, 2004), as well as to maintain offline romantic relationships (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011), i.e. not only to make new intimate contacts (Subrahmanyam et al., 2006).

A cross sectional analysis conducted on the 17-year-old adolescents in the ELSPAC study clearly showed that adolescents who had experienced only one of the following activities – kissing, petting, oral sex or sexual intercourse used the Internet for sexual purposes more often⁶ (Ševčíková & Konečný, 2011). Nevertheless, it was revealed that individuals who had reported experience both with kissing and petting did not differ in using the Internet for sexual purposes. Comparing the other two groups, the same relationship was found also in the experience with oral sex and sexual intercourse. The only significant difference was identified between adolescents who had already experienced kissing or petting, and those who had had oral sex or sexual intercourse; the group with greater sexual experience used the Internet for sexual purposes much more in comparison with the less experienced group.

A possible explanation of why the compensation mechanisms of using the Internet for sexual purposes were not confirmed could be the period itself, the beginning of late adolescence. At age 17 differences in physiological development inciting the interest in sexuality are more likely negligible within peer groups. However, these differences are more prominent in early adolescence, which may result in the casting out of individuals who are more physically developed, and thus also making it more difficult for

⁶ The dimension of using the Internet for sexual purposes included activities such as obtaining sexually relevant information, talking about sex, discussing sexual experience, exchanging their own photos with a sexual subtext and cybersex.

them to find erotic and sexual stimuli among their peers. This may then lead the more mature individuals to a greater interest in the Internet, particularly in sexually-oriented exploration.

Moreover, together with the idea of negligible physiological differences at age 17, there is also another explanation for the close relationship between offline sexual behaviours and engaging in online sexual activities in seventeen-year-old adolescents. The research was conducted on an age group which is at the threshold of late adolescence, when it is legitimate to establish romantic relationships which are the primary context for sexual activities (Bearman & Bruekner, 2001; Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999). Nevertheless, there are apparent differences from the published research in the degree of Internet use for sexual purposes based on the level of adolescents' offline sexual experience. We can assume that adolescents attribute varying degrees of intimacy to individual offline sexual activities. For example, one study focused on non-coital sexual activities implies that oral sex is very close to vaginal intercourse (Duberstein Lindberg et al., 2008); oral sex occurred in adolescent sexual activities 6 months after starting sexual intercourse. If we take into the account the assumption that offline sexual activities can, to a certain degree, affect using the Internet for sexual purposes, then the development of intimacy in the form of obtaining sexual experience can be reflected in the degree of interest in online sexual activities. As it is a cross-sectional study, it is necessary to take this interpretation with some caution, as some studies confirm that sexual content mediated by the Internet incites adolescents to practice oral or vaginal sex (Brown & L'Engle, 2008).

Conclusion

This chapter introduced romantic relationships in the adolescence period from two various perspectives facilitating a complex view of the development of this type of close relationships in the adolescence period. The representations of the relationship and sexual behaviours in adolescence were examined in our research by various interviewing methods with regard to the character of the examined issue. While the views of the form of a romantic relationship were a part of the interview, capturing the heterogeneity and variability of this phenomenon by means of open and more specifying questions, sexual behaviours were examined in a more confidential environment, which was provided to the respondent by computer administration. By combining these methodological approaches, we were more likely to draw a more realistic picture of this phenomenon, which is one of the building stones of romantic relationship in adulthood.

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