

THE ROLE OF GENDER, MOTIVATION,
AND SOCIAL STATUS IN PREDICTING PERCEIVED ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP
INTEREST IN PRE-ADOLESCENCE

By

JOHN ROSS BROWN

(Under the Direction of A. Michele Lease)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the behavioral and social characteristics of individuals in pre-adolescence who have begun to show interest in romantic relationships with the opposite gender. Four-hundred and fifty-five students in grades three through five from four public elementary schools in the rural southeastern United States were administered two self- and peer-report questionnaires that contained questions regarding their peer interactions, friendship groups, and peer/self-ratings of romantic behavior. The results indicated that self-reported interest in romantic relationships begins early and is consistently high; over 50% of students reported being interested in a romantic relationship irrespective of grade level. However, there were no differences in self-reported interest levels across age or gender. Multiple linear regression analyses suggested that the best predictors of perceived romantic relationship interest in pre-adolescence were gender, high motivation to engage in romantic behaviors, and perceptions as popular by peers.

INDEX WORDS: Romantic Relationships, Gender, Motivation, Social Status, Pre-adolescence

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DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to my best friend and wife,

KARA REBECCA BROWN

for her love, devotion, encouragement, and continuous support.

May our romantic relationship forever be a demonstration
to the world that complete and endless love exists.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On the social development of children, there has been extensive study of the developmental significance of peer relationships. Peer relationships are complex and multifaceted, taking place on a number of levels (i.e., dyadic and group) and are influenced by the larger social contexts (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). The peer context is instrumental in providing children opportunities to develop a diverse repertoire of interpersonal skills and gain knowledge of acceptable social behaviors (Fine, 1987; Rubin, Chen, Coplan, Buskirk, & Wajslawowicz, 2005). Indeed, peer activities allow children to cultivate abilities that enhance their social relationships (Zarbatany, Hartmann, & Rankin, 1990).

The study of friendships has enjoyed a great deal of attention in the last half-century. Friendships are a significant aspect of children's social development that provide opportunities for children to practice social exchanges in an emotionally supportive environment (Hartup, 1993; 1996). For example, while friendships are generally characterized as warm, intimate, and cooperative environments (Asher & Parker, 1989), they also contain higher levels of interpersonal conflict than do relationships with non-friends (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Rubin, et al., 2006). The interpersonal skills developed within friendship interactions are believed to serve as precursors necessary for relating in increasingly intimate relationships later in life, such as romantic relationships (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Dunphy, 1963; Hartup, 1992; Miller, 1990).

Despite the respectable amount of research conducted on friendship development and maintenance, however, the development of romantic relationships has largely been neglected (Collins, 2003; Furman, 2002). Whereas friendships and romantic relationships share many

common traits, such as being dyadic and fostering emotional intimacy (Hartup, 1996), romantic relationships are unique from friendships and can be distinguished by their heightened levels of affection, passion, and commitment (Rubin et al., 2006). Borrowed largely from Collins (2003), romantic relationships in this study are defined as “on-going voluntary interactions that are mutually acknowledged” and are marked by intense “expressions of affection (p. 2).”

Whereas adult romantic relationships have enjoyed increased research interest of late, few studies have investigated the development of pre-adult romantic relationships. Moreover, only a handful of studies address the romantic interests of individuals younger than high school age (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Yet, it is clear that there are individuals at younger ages that are interested in, and who even engage in, romantic relationships (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Most researchers report that approximately a third of middle schoolers report having a boyfriend or girlfriend (Carver et al., 2003; Darling, Dowdy, van Horn, & Caldwell, 1999), while others have estimated that up to half of students report having a boyfriend or girlfriend before entering high school (Carlson & Rose, 2007).

Research indicates that involvement in romantic relationships with the opposite sex is a significant event in most adolescents' lives and that interest in romantic relationships has begun even before the middle-school years (Crockett, Losoff, & Petersen, 1984; Halpern, Udry, Campbell, & Suchindran, 1999). Indeed, many researchers would argue that the development of romantic relationships in adolescence is a natural progression of social development (Brown, 1999; Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004; Furman & Wehner, 1997; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003; Sullivan, 1953; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2002). According to the theories of Sullivan (1953) and Brown (1990), individuals are continuously progressing toward developing more meaningful and intimate relationships. There is evidence to support these claims. During middle school,

peer groups tend to decrease in size and the formation of smaller, increasingly intimate and selective groups of peers sharing common interests typically emerge; these groups are commonly referred to as “cliques” (Brown, 1990; Cairns, Perrin, & Cairns, 1985; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998).

Given the potential social relevance of romantic interest and development during the middle-school years, it is puzzling that more research has not been conducted in the area of romantic relationships with pre-adolescent populations. What little research has been conducted regarding non-adult romantic relationships is heavily directed towards adolescents, which may suggest that researchers do not believe that pre-adolescent romantic relationships are worthy of closer examination. For example, Collins (2003) indicates that there are several looming “myths” about adolescent romantic relationships that may be influencing the scope or research in this area, the most pervasive being that adolescent romantic relationships are unimportant and maladaptive. As such, many of the studies on adolescent romantic relationships focus on a number of negative psychosocial outcomes likely associated with experiencing low quality relationships. For instance, studies suggest that adolescents engaged in romantic relationships are at increased risk for experiencing physical and psychological victimization (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001; Simon, Miller, Gorman-Smith, Orpinas, & Sullivan, 2010), depression (Davila, 2008; Joyner & Udry, 2000; Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999), lower academic achievement (Neemann, Hubbard, & Masten, 1995), and emotional distress (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010; Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2001).

Whereas romantic relationships at all ages place participants at increased risk of psychosocial vulnerability and negative outcomes (www.cdc.gov - Violence by Intimate Partners), positive outcomes are also observed in adolescence (Collins, 2003; Gonzaga, Keltner,

Londahl, & Smith, 2001). La Greca and Harrison (2005) found that being involved in a romantic relationship can actually *decrease* the likelihood of depression. Other researchers have linked romantic involvement with higher levels of self-esteem (Samet & Kelly, 1987).

The apparent contradiction between groups of studies may be resolved when considering the quality of the romantic relationship. For example, it is likely that when adolescents are engaged in poor quality romantic relationships (i.e., those that contain high levels of conflict, criticism, exclusion, peer pressure, instability, etc.) they are prone to experiencing elevated symptoms of depression and anxiety (Slotter et al., 2010; Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2004). Given these findings, it would appear that there are qualitative differences between those individuals who succeed in developing romantic relationships that produce healthy and positive outcomes from those that generate maladaptive outcomes. More research is clearly needed to determine the role that healthy romantic relationships play in pre-adolescents' and adolescents' social development to determine how to increase the chances of producing beneficial outcomes in romantic relationships (Ellis, Crooks, & Wolfe, 2008).

To date, most research available with school-aged participants is limited to high-school aged adolescents. This poses a potentially significant hurdle for those choosing to study pre-adolescent romantic relationships, as findings from adolescent research may not translate appropriately across the two developmental age groups. Key areas that require intensive study include understanding which factors predict the developmental timing of romantic relationships in pre-adolescence, which characteristics are associated with positive outcomes in romantic relationships, and how this unique form of peer relationship develops. This study begins to address the first of these questions by calculating self-reported romantic relationship interest in pre-adolescence, which is defined here as children from approximately ages nine through twelve,

or grades three through five. Furthermore, this study investigates the role between gender, motivation, and social status as these variables relate to perceived romantic interest.

For the purpose of this study, I make the argument that romantic relationship development is a natural progression in social development. Whereas numerous studies indicate that early romantic relationship involvement is associated with negative psychosocial outcomes, there is still a need for research in this specific area of the peer relationship literature. In fact, the high number of poor outcomes reported in the adolescent literature indicates that instead of dismissing the study of pre-adolescent romantic development, it is imperative to conduct more research in this area to better understand healthy romantic relationships that enhance participants' well-being, not detract from it.

Given the limited research in the development of pre-adolescent romantic relationships, it is difficult to know which factors predict romantic relationship interest prior to adolescences. Considering the complexities of peer relationships in general, a number of related factors are likely involved in predicting initial interest in romantic relationships. For purposes of parsimony, however, I speculate that gender, motivation, and social status are three factors that likely influence one's transition into pre-adolescent romantic relationships. Whereas these are not the only factors linked with romantic relationships, they are correlated with and subsume a larger set of skills and/or traits (i.e., prosocial skills, social dominance, etc.), which are likely to be considered useful in predicting romantic relationship interest.

Gender

Research suggests that gender homophily is strongly involved in friendship and peer group selection. The concept of homophily (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954), or the idea that individuals tend to gravitate towards others who are like themselves, is especially applicable in

understanding peer social interactions. From a young age, the most salient characteristics that children have in common with each other are their race and gender (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001; Shrum, Cheek, & Hunter, 1988). By age three, children are already beginning to demonstrate gender homophily by choosing to interact more frequently with same-sex peers than children of the opposite sex (Maccoby, 1998, 2002). This trend increases throughout childhood, with some estimates indicating that 95% of childhood friends are same-sex peers (Kovacs, Parker, & Hoffman, 1996). Given the homogeneity of children's peer groups, formal and recognized heterosexual romantic relationships are rare during early childhood. During pre-adolescence, however, some children begin to increase their number of opposite-gender interactions (Cairns, Leung, Buchanan, & Cairns, 1995; Connolly, Furman, Konarski, 2000; Shrum et al., 1988). Whereas the majority of social interactions in the adolescent period are still with same-sex peers, they do become more gender-diverse over time. Maccoby (1998) estimates that approximately one quarter of the social interactions that occur in later adolescence are with other-sex peers. Several researchers suggest that this gradual transition from predominantly same-sex interactions to forming increasing numbers of mixed-gender relationships is a natural progression of social and romantic development (Connolly et al., 2000, 2004; Dunphy, 1963; Feiring, 1999; Maccoby, 1998; Underwood, 2007).

Because males and females largely belong to different peer networks from the time they enter grade school, they likely develop different repertoires of social skills and have unique social experiences that influence their developmental trajectories (Underwood & Rosen, 2009). Whereas it is debatable whether boys and girls have differences in the overall size of their social networks (Cairns, Leung, Buchanan, & Cairns, 1995; Ladd, 1983), researchers are generally in agreement that there are qualitative differences in the content of each gender's interactions. For

example, boys tend to predominantly engage in multi-member activities that focus on competition and games, while girls tend to invest more time with dyadic peer interactions that focus on emotional intimacy (Adler & Adler, 1998; Connolly et al., 2000; Golombok & Hines, 2002; Lever, 1978; Maccoby, 1998, 2002; Zarbatany, McDougall, & Hymel, 2000).

As females tend to engage in more dyadic relationships that foster higher levels of emotional intimacy than do males in their group-based contexts, females are more likely to possess the prerequisite social skills and experience necessary to transition into mixed-sex relationships at an earlier age than males (Sippola, 1999). Evidence suggests that this is typically the case, with pre-adolescent females possessing more opposite-sex friendships than males of the same age by interacting with males in older grade levels (Feiring, 1999; Poulin & Pedersen, 2007). As a result of having more gender-heterogeneous friendship networks, and thus more interaction with the opposite gender, females are also more likely to form romantic relationships at an earlier age than males (Connolly et al., 2000; Feiring, 1999; Poulin & Pedersen, 2007). Thus, gender and the number of opposite-sex interactions an individual engages in may serve as predictors for the early entrance into romantic relationships (Connolly et al., 2000; Feiring, 1999; Kuttler & La Greca, 2004).

Motivation

Human behavior is complex and often times difficult to predict, and social behavior is certainly no exception. Hollander (1958) suggests that three broad dimensions govern social behavior – individual, group, and outcome expectancy factors. Considering one's motivation to engage in romantic relationships from this framework, a combination of these factors can be used to predict and understand early motivation to be romantically involved with the opposite sex. Specifically, people are intrinsically motivated to form intimate relationships with their

peers, avoid behaviors that lead to social rejection, and engage in behaviors which they find rewarding and feel efficacious in performing. Thus, the author speculates that individuals who are interested in, value, and are confident in their ability to navigate intimate contexts with the opposite-gender are more likely to pursue romantic relationships.

People are highly motivated to seek out relationships that make them feel like they belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; MacDonald, 1992; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). In fact, Maslow (1943) identified the desire to seek out social belongingness as a fundamental human need that is secondary only to the achievement of physiological (i.e., food) and safety (i.e., protection from harm) needs. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), the need to belong is closely tied with social approval and intimacy and requires relatively frequent, affective, and reciprocal interactions with peers. Whereas affective bonds are formed throughout one's life (i.e., parents and friends), increasing levels of emotional intimacy with peers is common during pre-adolescence (Adler & Adler, 1998; Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Rubin et al., 2006). Even though friendships afford partners with opportunities for companionship, support, and intimacy (Hartup, 1989), romantic relationships are characterized as having heightened levels of commitment and emotional intimacy (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004; Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

Despite the fact that many pre-adolescents are interested in romantic relationships (Connolly et al., 2000), and that romantic relationships become an increasingly important social experience in subsequent years (Furman, 2002), romantic relationship involvement is not often observed in pre-adolescence (Carver et al., 2003; Feiring, 1996; Kovacs et al., 1996). One possible reason for this is that pre-adolescents may simply not be developmentally ready for romantic relationships. Specifically, most individuals within this age group have not yet started

puberty. Therefore, the hormonal changes and development of secondary sex characteristics that emerge in individuals as they transition into adolescence (i.e., facial hair in males or breast development in females) are typically absent until the very end of the pre-adolescent period (Meschke, Zweig, Barber, & Eccles, 2000; Poulin & Pedersen, 2007; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2004).

Another potential explanation for this observation is that despite the fact that humans are naturally driven to seek out close relationships, they are motivated to avoid the emotional trauma associated with peer rejection (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Adolescent research indicates that opposite-sex interactions are initially stressful and anxiety-inducing experiences (Darling et al., 1999; Glickman & La Greca, 2004; Nieder & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001); therefore, pre-adolescents may likely be inclined to avoid them. This may be especially salient for males, who typically have less experience in intimate dyadic relationships and report feeling more anxious and awkward in mixed-gender situations than their female counterparts (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006). Furthermore, because romantic relationships involve higher levels of reciprocal dependency and emotional intimacy (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Connolly et al., 2000; Rubin et al., 2006), individuals are at an increased risk for depression and feelings of negative self-worth if the relationship dissolves (Furman, 2002; Monroe et al., 1999).

Along with personal insecurities and developmental timing, peers appear to exert considerable influence on behavior, sometimes employing equal or greater influence to that of parents (Sholte, van Lieshout, & van Aken, 2001). For example, in late childhood and pre-adolescence there are significant risks for violating gender boundaries (i.e., girls playing with boys and vice versa), such as peer rejection and teasing (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Gottman, 1986). As peer acceptance and inclusion are highly valued during adolescence (Merton, 1997;

Rubin et al., 2006), and romantic involvement is not the norm during pre-adolescence (Carver et al., 2003; Feiring, 1996; Kovacs et al., 1996), it is possible that some pre-adolescents refrain from romantic relationships to avoid peer criticism. As mentioned previously, however, it is equally plausible that individuals in the pre-adolescent age range are simply not developmentally ready for romantic relationships.

Given the potential risks associated with being rejected by a member of the opposite sex, it is likely that pre-adolescents who choose to engage in mixed-sex interactions possess higher levels of confidence, or self-efficacy, in their abilities than do their peers. According to Bandura's social-cognitive model of motivation (1977, 1994), self-efficacy is broadly defined as the confidence and belief in oneself to achieve a goal or perform a task/action. Associated concepts are self-confidence, self-competence and self-esteem, which are generally correlated terms. For example, individuals with high interpersonal self-efficacy typically have higher self-esteem and hold more positive views regarding their ability to successfully navigate social situations with the opposite sex and control their environment (Cameron, Stinson, Gaetz, & Balchen, 2010; Grover, Nangle, Serwik, & Zeff, 2007; Hawley, 1999). Not surprisingly, involvement in romantic behaviors is correlated with high self-esteem (Darling et al., 1999; Samet & Kelly, 1987). Thus, pre-adolescents with lower self-esteem may avoid social interactions where perceived rejection is likely (Cameron et al., 2010), whereas those with high levels of self-confidence may be buffered and protected from the negative side effects often associated with rejection (Mathes, Adams, & Davis, 1985). Similarly, self-efficacy is also related to how much individuals value an activity or behavior. As people tend to pursue activities that they feel competent performing, and individuals engage in activities they value, there is a reciprocal relationship between self-efficacy and value (Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles,

& Wigfield, 2002). Thus, it is likely that the desire to engage in romantic relationships and having the confidence to navigate intimate contexts with the opposite sex is linked with earlier involvement in romantic relationships.

Social Status and Popularity

Although pre-adolescent research is limited, a large amount of adolescent research supports the findings that individuals with higher levels of popularity and status are more likely to be involved in a romantic relationship (Brown, 1999; Bukowski, Sippola, & Hoza, 1999; Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000; Dunphy, 1963; Eder, 1985; LaFonta & Cillessen, 2009; Miller et al., 2009). Even from early elementary school, however, individuals are aware that their social networks are governed by and have a social hierarchy, with more popular peers having more social leverage and power (Adler & Adler, 1998; Corsaro, 1979; Gottman & Mettetal, 1986; Hartup, 1983; Krantz & Burton, 1985). As individuals transition into pre-adolescence, social stratification intensifies and achieving high levels of social status becomes a primary motivation (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Eder, 1985; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2009; Youniss, McLellan, & Strouse, 1994).

Many social scientists would agree that social status is actually a multi-dimensional construct (Lease, Musgrove, & Axelrod, 2002; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998). In fact, it is common to divide social status into two moderately related yet unique factors: sociometric popularity and perceived popularity (LaFontana & Cillessen, 1999; Lease, Musgrove, & Axelrod, 2002; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998; Rubin et al., 2005). Sociometric popularity is generally considered a measure of peer acceptance and likeability and is typically measured in terms of the number of nominations an individual receives in response to the peer-report questions “Who do you like to play with the most?” and “Who do you like to play with the least”

(Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982). On the other hand, perceived popularity is typically considered a measure of social dominance and influence and is measured in terms of the number of nominations an individual receives in response to the peer-report question, “Who is the most popular?” (Adler & Adler, 1998; Coie et al., 1982; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998; Rubin et al., 2006).

Interestingly, individuals nominated as possessing perceived popularity are not necessarily well-liked by their peers (Parkhurst & Asher, 1992; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998). Whereas sociometrically popular individuals tend to gain social status by being nice and demonstrating prosocial behaviors, perceived popular individuals tend to gain notoriety for being funny, trendy, mean, exclusionary, or socially aggressive (Adler & Adler, 1998; Coie et al., 1982; Eder, 1985; Lease, Kennedy, & Axelrod, 2002; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993). Thus, sociometrically popular and perceived popular individuals typically have different outcomes. Sociometrically popular individuals tend to have higher quality friendships and academic achievement (Newcomb et al., 1993; Parker & Asher, 1993), but perceived popular individuals tend to exhibit more externalizing problems, aggression, conduct problems, and as they enter into adolescence, generally engage in more risky behaviors (Dodge, 1983; Mayeux, Sandstrom, & Cillessen, 2008; Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006).

In older groups, perceived popular adolescents tend to have more social influence than their sociometrically popular peers, which allows them to establish behavioral norms within their peer groups (Adler & Adler, 1998; Lease et al., 2002b; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998). Because perceived popular individuals are typically the leaders of social activities and are emulated by peers (Adler & Adler, 1998), it is likely that they are less apprehensive about engaging in romantic relationship than their lower-status peers. Research supports this assumption, with

numerous studies indicating that high-status individuals tend to initiate entrance into romantic relationships (Brown, 1999; Connolly et al., 2000; Eder, 1985; Miller et al., 2009). In fact, there is evidence to suggest that being involved in romantic relationships can actually serve as a mechanism for increasing one's social status in pre-adolescence and throughout adolescence (Carlson & Rose, 2007; Miller et al., 2009; Roscoe, Diana, & Brooks, 1987). Because the majority of research pertaining to both popularity and romantic relationships is limited to adolescents, however, the association between the two variables may be less pronounced in younger populations.

Current Study

The current study seeks to further our understanding of pre-adolescent romantic relationships. Specifically, the study investigates what percentage of pre-adolescents in a sample of third, fourth, and fifth grade students self-report romantic relationship interest and how well social status and motivational factors might predict perceived romantic relationship interest. The results section of this study is divided into two sections. The first section is largely descriptive in nature and serves to determine the degree to which pre-adolescent individuals are reporting interest in romantic relationships. For the first section of analyses, three research questions were investigated:

1. How interested are pre-adolescents in romantic relationships?
2. Do individuals in older grades endorse more interest in romantic relationships when compared to their younger counterparts?
3. Do females endorse more interest in romantic relationships than males?

The descriptive analysis is followed by an analysis of how successfully gender, motivation, and social status factors predict perceived romantic interest within the sample. In this section, the following research questions were investigated:

4. Will individuals who are identified by their peers as possessing higher levels of perceived popularity, but not sociometric popularity, be perceived by peers as having more romantic relationship interest?
5. Will individuals who exhibit higher levels of romantic relationship motivation be perceived by peers as having more romantic relationship interest?

CHAPTER II

METHODS

Participants

Parental permission was solicited for all of the third, fourth, and fifth grade children at four rural elementary schools in the southeastern region of the United States. To be included in the current study, parental consent and child assent had to be obtained for at least 70% of students in the grade level. Rates of participation ranged from 75% to 86 % across grade level, with an overall consent rate of 81%. Students for whom consent was not obtained were neither allowed to nominate their peers nor be illegible as nominees for this study. The final sample consisted of 455 students ranging from 9 to 13 years of age. One-hundred and two students were included from the third grade (across six classrooms), 155 from the fourth grade (across nine classrooms), and 198 from the fifth grade (across eleven classrooms). Similar numbers of males (48%) and females (52%) were included in the study. Regarding the racial composition of the sample, 77% of the students identified themselves as Caucasian, 13% identified themselves as African American, 6% identified themselves as Hispanic, and the remaining 4% of students identified themselves as descending from another racial or ethnic background. On occasion, a few participants failed to complete all items within the questionnaires. As such, missing data points resulted in a decrease in the total sample size for some analyses.

Procedure

The data used were collected as part of a larger research project studying peer relations among pre-adolescents. Participants were asked to complete two hour-long questionnaires that contained multiple peer and self-report measures. Questionnaires were read aloud to students by one research team member while a second research team member provided support for any

participants who required additional assistance. Only those participants whose parents provided consent were included in the study. Upon completion, all participants received a small gift for their time.

Self-Ratings of Motivation to Engage in Romantic Relationships

One section of the survey asked participants to identify their motivation toward engaging in romantic relationships. Given that motivation is a multi-faceted construct that includes one's interest, valuation, and efficacy, four items were drawn from a larger scale assessing self-reported value and efficacy across six domains (academics, sports, trends, misbehavior, boyfriend/girlfriend interest, games) to produce two subscales which serve as indicators of motivation (Masland, 2011). For the *Value* subscale, which serves as an indicator of how important participants view engaging in romantic relationship behavior, participants were asked to respond to two questions (*"How much do you like or would you like having a boyfriend/girlfriend?"* and *"For me, being good at getting a girlfriend/boyfriend is..."*). For the former item, participants were prompted to indicate their interest by using a five-point scale with response options ranging from "Not at All" to "A Lot." For the latter item, participants were prompted to indicate their interest by using a five-point scale with response options ranging from "Not at All Important" to "Very Important." Though scale descriptors for each item were altered to appropriately match each item, they both contain five-point response options and are qualitatively comparable. Therefore, responses were summed and averaged for each participant and converted into a subscale (*Value*) which served as an indicator of the importance that each participant places on engaging in romantic relationship behavior (Cronbach's Alpha for this sample = 0.81).

For the *Efficacy* subscale, which served as an indicator of participants' reported self-efficacy in their ability to engage in romantic relationship behavior, participants were asked to respond to two questions (“*How good are you at getting a girlfriend/boyfriend?*” and “*If you were to try to get a girlfriend/boyfriend, how likely would it be that someone would want to go out with you?*”). For the former item, participants were prompted to indicate their interest by using a five-point scale with response options ranging from “Not Good at All” to “Very Good.” For the latter item, participants were prompted to indicate their interest by using a five-point scale with response options ranging from “Not Likely at All” to “Very Likely.” Though scale descriptors for each item were altered to appropriately match each item, they both contain five-point response options and are qualitatively comparable. Therefore, responses were summed and averaged for each participant and converted into a subscale (*Efficacy*) which served as an indicator of the confidence that each participant places on their abilities to successfully engage in romantic relationship behavior (Cronbach's Alpha for this sample = 0.87).

Whereas the *Value* and *Efficacy* subscales were included for regression purposes and considered two aspects of motivation, one primary purpose of this study was to generate base levels of romantic relationship interest within the pre-adolescent age range. While the *Value* subscale could serve as an indicator of romantic relationship importance, one of the items in that scale (“*How much do you like or would you like having a boyfriend/girlfriend?*”) seems to be a more representative indicator of interest. Therefore, descriptive analyses focus on this item alone to determine overall levels of self-reported interest in romantic relationship behavior.

Peer Nominations of Perceived Romantic Interest and Social Status

Peer nominations were used to determine which children were perceived by their classmates as engaging in a number of behaviors across six domains (academics, sports, trends,

misbehavior, boyfriend/girlfriend interest, games). All participants (students for whom consent was obtained) were provided with a list of other participating students within the same grade level from which they could select; students were not allowed to nominate peers from other grade levels. In addition, students for whom consent was not obtained were neither allowed to nominate their peers nor be nominees within this study. Participants were then allowed to nominate up to 10 peers from that list. For the current study, the following behaviors were of interest: perceived interest in romantic relationships and popularity. Specifically, perceived interest in romantic relationships served as the dependent variable for all analyses. One item was selected as a proxy for perceived interest in romantic relationships: *“This is a person who has a girlfriend or boyfriend or talks a lot about getting one.”* To account for differences in class sizes and uneven numbers of male and female participants, the number of nominations each participant received were summed and standardized by grade and gender to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.

In addition, participants were asked to identify the social status of their peers. Participants were asked to identify *“Which children are the most popular at school?”* (Lease et al., 2002a), and the number of nominations each participant received were summed and standardized within classroom and gender to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. This score served as a proxy for that person’s level of perceived popularity.

Two additional items were combined to produce an overall score for sociometric popularity. Participants were also asked to answer *“Who do you like to play with the most?”* and *“Who do you like to play with the least?”* (Coie et al., 1982). The number of like-most nominations and like-least nominations each participant received were summed and standardized within classroom and gender to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. To produce an

overall sociometric popularity score, like-least nominations were then subtracted from like-most nominations.

Data Analysis Plan

The aim of this study was to determine the extent of self-reported interest in romantic relationships and whether there are differences in interest based on age and gender. To achieve this end, descriptive statistics are presented regarding general late-childhood romantic relationship interest (Research Question 1). Next, separate Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney *U* tests were conducted to establish whether there were statistically significant differences in the number of participants that reported interest in romantic relationships across grade level (Research Question 2) and gender (Research Question 3), respectively. The second set of analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between age, gender, social status, motivation, and perceived interest in romantic relationships. A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine if these factors could predict a significant amount of variance in predicting perceived romantic relationship interest (Research Questions 4 and 5).

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Descriptive Analyses

Means and standard deviations (Table 1) and Pearson product-moment correlations (Table 2) for study variables are presented in Appendix A.

Self-reported interest in romantic relationships was high within the sample, with the majority of participants indicating that they strongly desired to have a boyfriend or girlfriend. In fact, the majority of participants endorsed the highest possible response option regarding their interest in romantic relationships, with 57% of participants indicating that they had “A Lot” of interest in obtaining a boyfriend or a girlfriend. Figure 1 provides a summary of the self-reported interest among the participants.

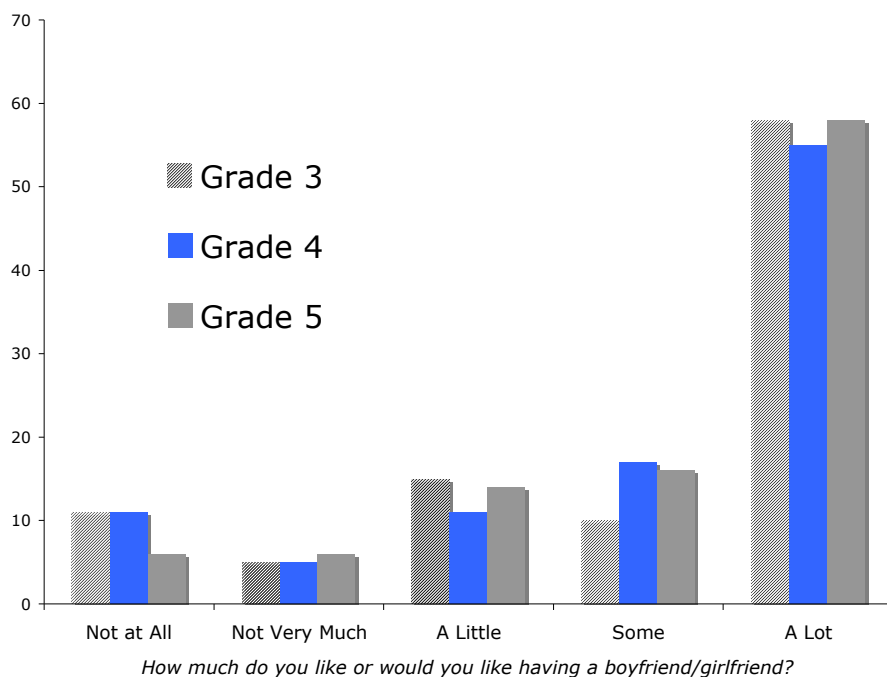


Figure 1. Percentage of participants who responded to the item: “How much do you like or would you like having a girlfriend/boyfriend?” per each grade level.

To determine whether there were significant differences in the amount of self-reported romantic relationship interest across grade level or gender, Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U tests were utilized. Due to the non-normal distribution of participant responses (Kolmogorov-Smirnov $Z = 6.962, p < 0.001$) to the self-reported romantic relationship interest item, a Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine if the distribution of response selections were unique across grade levels. The Kruskal-Wallis Test revealed no significant differences in response selection based on grade level [$\chi^2(2) = 0.732, p = 0.69$]. Similarly, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to determine if there were distribution differences in response selection based on the gender of the participant. Again, participant responses patterns were similar regardless of the participant's gender ($U = 23023.000, p = 0.49$). Table 3 (see Appendix) summarizes the percentage of participants that endorsed each response option separated by grade level and gender.

Multiple Regression Analyses

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between gender, motivation, social status, and perceived romantic relationship interest. Specifically, the number of interest nominations a participant received from peers served as the dependent variable (standardized by age and grade level), with gender (dummy coded as 0 = males, 1 = females), *Value* scores, *Efficacy* scores, sociometric popularity nominations, and perceived popularity nominations included as the independent variables. All independent variables were analyzed in a forced entry method multiple linear regression to determine whether each variable contributed to the model. Whereas it was predicted that sociometric popularity by itself would not be a significant predictor in the model, this variable was significantly (negatively) correlated with peer-reported interest in romantic relationships. Thus, all independent variables contributed

to explaining the variance in predicting perceived romantic relationship interest. Combined, these five variables explained approximately 49% of the variance in predicting perceived romantic relationship interest. Furthermore, all variables significantly contributed to the model at the significance level of $p < 0.05$. Table 4 (see Appendix A) displays the final model information.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Despite a noticeable increase in the number of studies pertaining to romantic relationship development over the last decade, there remains a scarcity of research on the early beginnings of romantic relationships (Collins et al., 2009). During the pre-adolescent period specifically, few studies have investigated how many and which individuals are interested in or engaging in romantic relationship behavior. This study extends the research base by providing evidence indicating a high level of interest in romantic relationships in the pre-adolescent age range and suggesting which individuals are most likely to seek earlier entry into these relationships before their peers.

The findings from this study indicate that over two-thirds of the pre-adolescents in our sample self-reported high interest in romantic relationships while in late elementary school. Whereas the few studies that have investigated romantic behavior during late childhood focus on romantic relationship involvement, and interest and involvement are not identical constructs, it is difficult to truly compare the results from previous research with the current study. With that consideration in mind, the findings from the current study suggest that there is significantly more self-reported interest in romantic relationships than actual dating behaviors within a comparable age group (Carver et al., 2003). Thus, whereas relationship engagement may be rare prior to adolescence, romantic relationship interest is typical for pre-adolescents.

Another aim of the study was to examine whether there would be differences in self-reported romantic relationship interest across gender and grade level. Contrary to predictions, males and females across all three grade levels self-reported similar amounts of interest in romantic relationships. As mentioned previously, one possible explanation for this finding is

that the research based used for developing the hypotheses focused on romantic relationship involvement, not interest. As the current study did not investigate rates of romantic relationship involvement within the sample population, which may vary across grade level and gender, the results from this study are not necessarily contradictory to previous research. In summary, self-reported romantic relationship interest was consistently high across all subgroups. This suggests that, from a young age, romantic relationship interest is present.

This study investigated the relationship between gender, motivation, social status, and peer-reported romantic relationship interest. Whereas no self-reported gender differences in romantic relationship interest were observed, gender differences in peer-nominated interest were found for romantic behavior. Specifically, females were identified more frequently than males as displaying romantic relationship behavior. Perhaps the inconsistency between the self-reported and peer-reported levels of interest can be contributed to a difference in the construct being measured by the two items of interest. For example, the self-report item is based on intrinsic romantic interest whereas peer nominations are more likely to be based on overt romantic gestures and behavior or on peers discussing who is attractive. Regardless, regression analyses support the hypothesis that gender is an important factor to consider when predicting romantic relationship interest in late childhood.

Parallel with adolescent-centered research (Carlson & Rose, 2007; Miller et al., 2009), per-adolescents who were perceived as popular were consistently linked with romantic relationship behavior. Alternatively, individuals who were identified by their peers as possessing higher levels of sociometric popularity were not viewed by their peers as engaging in romantic relationship behavior. Despite being a significant factor in the regression model, sociometric popularity was negatively related to perceived romantic relationship behavior. This would

suggest that peer-nominated romantic relationship interest is not associated with likeability, but instead on social dominance. Thus, the current findings support, to a large degree, the original hypothesis that perceived popular children would be associated with higher levels of peer-perceived romantic relationship behavior compared to sociometrically popular children. The current study did not, however, evaluate the possibility of an interaction between the two indicators of social status.

Similarly, individuals who identified themselves as having higher levels of motivation to engage in romantic behaviors (i.e., felt competent in their heterosexual interpersonal abilities and valued romantic relationships) were likely to be identified by their peers as also demonstrating more overt romantic behaviors than those with less motivation. This finding is significant considering that confidence is often linked with increased interaction with the opposite gender (Giordano et al., 2006). In summary, multiple linear regression analyses suggested that five factors (gender, value, efficacy, sociometric popularity, and perceived popularity) could account for approximately fifty percent of the variance in predicting which children were engaging in romantic behaviors.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged regarding this study. Primarily, the generalizability of these findings are limited by our sample characteristics. Although comparable numbers of males and females were included in the sample, there was an under-representation of minority students (77% of students were Caucasian). Similarly, all participants were from a similar geographic area in rural northeast Georgia. As such, the findings described in this study should be replicated with alternate samples that have different demographic characteristics. However, the author believes that this is unlikely considering the

consistency with the results of the current study and with previous research. Given the significant amount of interest displayed by individuals in the pre-adolescent period, it is likely that romantic relationship interest may begin at an even earlier age range than was included in the sample for this study.

Another significant limitation to this study is that the author's definition of romantic relationships does not apply to all populations. In fact, it excludes perhaps the most understudied area of dyadic relations: homosexual romantic relationships. Although this is an important area of research that needs to be addressed, the current study did not ask participants to identify their sexual orientation. Given that the homosexual population is particularly susceptible to experiencing negative psychosocial consequences for their romantic affiliations (Poteat & Espelage, 2007), it is immensely important that researchers increase the focus of their studies to include populations at increased risk for poor outcomes.

There are also methodological limitations with this study. Peer nominations and self-report ratings were used in all analyses. Both methods of data collection inherently include risk of over- or under-reporting. For example, peer nomination data require individuals to make judgments based on their personal perceptions; these perceptions may not accurately match overall sample perceptions. However, research suggests that children are typically accurate reports of peer behavior, especially when identifying markers of social status (Adler & Adler, 1988; Gest, Farmer, Cairns, & Xie, 2003; Gottman & Mettetal, 1986; Krantz & Burton, 1985). Similarly, there are limitations with self-report data. While not always the case, one concern regarding self-report ratings is that individuals tend to overestimate positive attributes about themselves, while minimizing negative associations. Students were also only allowed to

nominate peers within their grade level, which may exclude potential friends outside the child's grade.

Furthermore, a number of important related variables were not investigated in the current study. For example, this study focused largely on self- and peer-reported interest in romantic relationship behavior, but did not investigate self-reported engagement in romantic relationships. As such, there may be, and likely would be, a large divide between reported interest and actual engagement in romantic relationships.

Future studies should focus on increasing the knowledge base regarding the developmental significance of romantic relationships. It appears that even during pre-adolescence the majority of individuals self-report strong interest in romantic relationships. While it is likely that fewer individuals are displaying over romantic behaviors in pre-adolescence, the findings suggest that initial interest may begin even in childhood. Whereas the current study is helpful in identifying which children are likely to begin engaging in romantic behaviors during pre-adolescence, the study did not take into consideration the outcome of said individuals. Given the large research base indicating that individuals who engage in romantic behaviors are at increased risk of developing poor psychosocial outcomes, it is imperative that researchers focus on the development of healthy romantic relationship development and outcomes in pre-adolescence. Studies should also be conducted across various geographical regions and demographics to determine whether or not differences exist across settings. Additional information on the formation of romantic relationships, their progression across the lifespan, and the factors that predict healthy romantic relationships across ages is still needed.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Observed Variables

		Grade			Gender	
		3rd	4th	5th	Male	Female
	Interest	3.99 (0.14)	3.98 (0.11)	4.14 (0.09)	4.00 (0.09)	4.10 (0.09)
<i>Self</i>	Value	3.64 (1.42)	3.71 (1.31)	3.72 (1.18)	3.72 (1.30)	3.67 (1.26)
	Efficacy	3.31 (1.44)	3.38 (1.43)	3.44 (1.28)	3.40 (1.40)	3.38 (1.34)
	Interest	2.13 (2.85)	2.80 (3.82)	3.75 (4.51)	2.78 (4.00)	3.32 (3.99)
<i>Peer</i>	SocPop	3.13 (2.32)	3.52 (2.16)	4.24 (2.73)	3.58 (2.50)	3.89 (2.49)
	PercPop	2.35 (2.74)	4.00 (6.38)	4.85 (5.80)	3.37 (5.35)	4.58 (5.70)

Note: Standard deviations appear below means in parentheses. SocPop = Sociometric popularity; PercPop = Perceived popularity.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix of Observed Variables

	Self-Interest ¹	Value ¹	Efficacy ¹	PercInterest ²	SocPop ²	PercPop ²
Self-Interest ¹	-					
Value ¹	0.906*	-				
Efficacy ¹	0.498*	0.562*	-			
PercInterest ²	0.325*	0.382*	0.446*	-		
SocPop ²	-0.014	-0.043	0.082	0.063	-	
PercPop ²	0.204*	0.255*	0.441*	0.637*	0.369*	-

Note: * = Significant at $p < 0.001$. ¹ = Self-report; ² = Peer-report. Self-Interest = Self-Reported Interest; PercInterest = Perceived Interest; SocPop = Sociometric Popularity; PercPop = Perceived Popularity.

Table 3

Percentage of Participants Selecting Each Response Option for the Item: “How much do you like or would you like having a boyfriend / girlfriend?”

	Grade			Gender	
	3rd	4th	5th	Male	Female
Not at All	11	11	6	11	7
Not Very Much	5	5	6	5	6
A Little	15	11	14	12	14
Some	10	17	16	17	14
A Lot	58	55	58	55	59

Note: N = 437. Percentages do not always sum to 100% due to rounding.

Table 4

Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Perceived Romantic Relationship Interest

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>
Constant	-0.81	0.131		
Gender	0.191	0.07	0.095	0.007*
Value ¹	0.131	0.034	0.163	<0.001*
Efficacy ¹	0.072	0.034	0.097	0.034*
SocPop ²	-0.108	0.025	-0.161	<0.001*
PercPop ²	0.617	0.042	0.609	<0.001*

Note: Total Model $R^2 = 0.491$. * = Significant at $p < 0.05$. Gender is dummy coded with males = 0 and females = 1. ¹ = Self-report; ² = Peer-report. SocPop = Sociometric popularity; PercPop = Perceived popularity.