



Gender Differences in Developing Romantic Relationships: Intimacy and Commitment

Ryan D. Steele, Jessica E. Salvatore, & W. Andrew Collins

Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota

Research Question

- Are there gender differences in the relation between adolescent romantic relationship intimacy and later romantic relationship functioning?

Introduction

- Intimacy is a key component of romantic relationships.
- Refers to a process in which both partners reveal themselves and in turn validate one another
- Intimacy plays a critical role in keeping a romantic relationship at a balanced, well-functioning level (Collins & Sroufe, 1999).
- Adolescent females focus more on self-disclosing and support in their romantic relationships, whereas males focus more on establishing their independence and dominance (Feiring, 1999).
- Males tend to be more focused on the level of physical attraction in a potential partner than are females (Feiring, 1996).

Hypothesis

- Predict gender x adolescent intimacy interaction for adult romantic relationship outcomes.
- **High** adolescent intimacy will relate to **high** commitment and **high** overall relationship quality for females, but to **low** commitment and **low** overall relationship quality for males.

Methods

Participants

- N= 46 (24 female) young adults who participated in interviews about a current romantic relationship at ages 16 and 23.
- Participants drawn from the Minnesota Parent-Child Project (Sroufe et al., 2005), a longitudinal study of adaptation in at-risk children and their families (70% White, 11% Black, and 19% other).

Measures

Age 16:

- **Intimacy Scale** (ICC = .80) Interview-derived rating of the degree of mutual love, caring, support and trust in the relationship. Ratings on a 7 point scale.

Age 23:

- **Overall Quality in the Romantic Relationship** (ICC = .94) Interview-derived rating of the goodness of the relationship. Ratings on a 5 point scale.
- **Commitment** (ICC = .93) Interview-derived rating of participant's resolve to maintain the relationship over time. Ratings on a 5 point scale.

Figure 1. Gender Differences in Age 16 Intimacy Predicting Age 23 Commitment in a Romantic Relationship

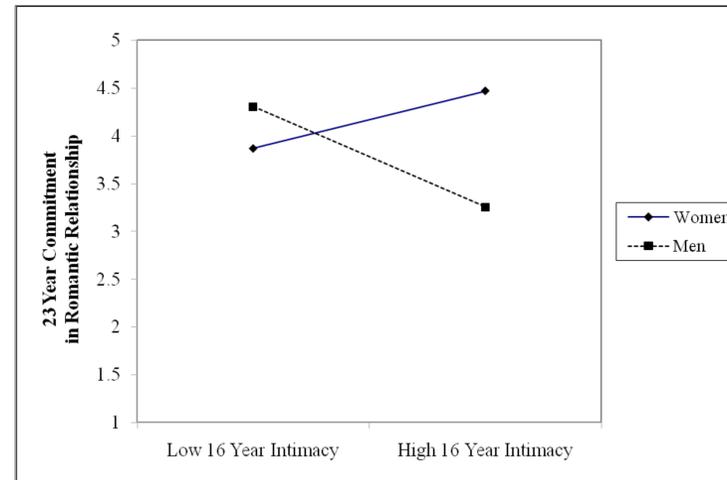
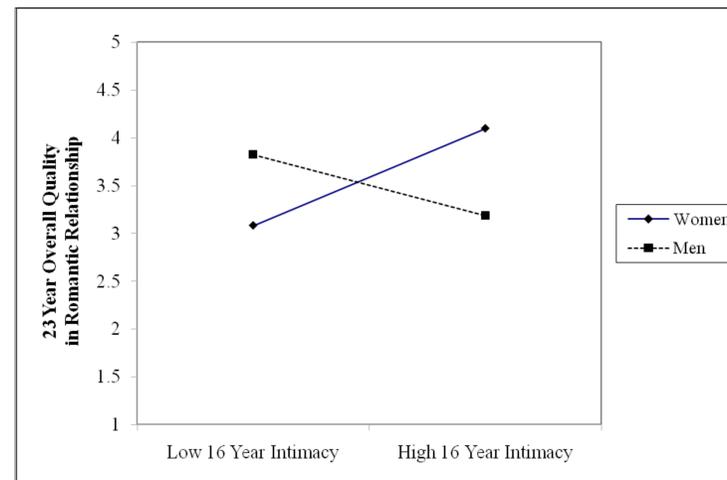


Figure 2. Gender Differences in Age 16 Intimacy Predicting Age 23 Overall Quality in a Romantic Relationship.



Results

- As predicted, a gender x adolescent intimacy interaction for adult romantic relationship outcomes was present.
- **Relationship Commitment** (figure 1):
Females: **Higher** age 16 Intimacy predicted **higher** age 23 Commitment
Males: **Higher** age 16 Intimacy predicted **lower** age 23 Commitment
- **Overall Relationship Quality** (figure 2):
Females: **Higher** age 16 Intimacy predicted **higher** age 23 Overall Relationship Quality
Males: **Higher** age 16 Intimacy predicted **lower** age 23 Overall Relationship Quality

Table 1. Gender and 16-Year Intimacy Predicting 23-year Commitment and Relationship Quality

Model 1: Commitment			
Variable	Beta	t-value	p-value
Gender	-.17	-1.15	.26
16-Year Intimacy	.22	1.07	.29
Gender x Intimacy	-.43	-2.07	.04*
Model 2: Relationship Quality			
Variable	Beta	t-value	p-value
Gender	-.03	-.24	.82
16-Year Intimacy	.36	1.80	.08
Gender x Intimacy	-.40	-2.01	.05*

* = p < .05

Discussion

- Females and males receive different experiences from their adolescent romantic relationships.
- Females: adolescent romantic relationships may act as a starting point in which to begin learning to be intimate with a romantic partner.
- Males: adolescent romantic relationships may function as a means of exploring themselves, viewing the relationship only in terms of status.
- Males and females may have differing motivations for attaining high intimacy.

