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Romantic relationships and sexuality in adolescence and young adulthood: The role of parents, peers, and partners

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The formation of romantic relationships and the engagement in sexual behaviours are considered normative and salient developmental tasks for adolescents and young adults. These developmental tasks are increasingly viewed from an ecological perspective, thus not only as individual processes, but also as strongly embedded in different social contexts, including the proximal social domains of parents, peers, and partners. This special issue brings together seven recent empirical studies on adolescents' and young adults' romantic relationships and sexuality in the context of relationships and interactions with parents, peers, and partners. In this editorial introduction, we describe two important recent changes in the theoretical perspectives on emerging romantic relationships and sexual activity: from risky behaviours to normative tasks, and from individual to contextualized processes. We then discuss recent advances in empirical research on romantic relationships and sexuality of adolescents and young adults. After that, we review the seven studies in this special issue, and discuss the contributions of these studies to the existing literature. Finally, we discuss directions for future research regarding how the interrelational perspective can be further incorporated into empirical research, and how the gap between the research fields on romantic relationships and sexuality may be bridged.

Keywords: Romantic relationships; Sexuality; Adolescence; Young adulthood; Social contexts; Parents, peers, partners.

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The development of the knowledge, skills, and experience that are needed for the formation of healthy and positive romantic relationships and sexuality is a life-long process. Romantic feelings and sexual experimentation early in life form the building blocks for personal preferences and boundaries pertaining to emotional and physical intimacy, which are reflected back in more mature romantic relationships and sexual behaviours later in life (De Graaf & Rademakers, 2006; Joyner & Campa, 2006). Adolescence and young adulthood are particularly salient developmental periods for the exploration of romantic relationships and sexual behaviours (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). According to the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), which has become a dominant paradigm in the field of developmental psychology, romantic relationships and sexual experiences do not exist in a social vacuum. Rather, social contexts and interpersonal relationships with significant others (e.g., parents, peers, partners) contribute significantly to the processes through which adolescents and young adults shape their romantic relationships and their sexuality (Kotchick, Shaffer, Miller, & Forehand, 2001; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). The aim of the current special issue is to advance the existing knowledge on how romantic relationships and sexuality develop during adolescence and young adulthood in the context of the proximal ecological social domains of parents, peers, and partners.

In this editorial introduction, we describe two important recent changes in the theoretical perspectives on emerging romantic relationships and sexual activities: from risky behaviours to normative tasks, and from individual to contextualized processes. We then discuss recent advances in empirical research on romantic relationships and sexuality of adolescents and young adults. After that, we review the seven studies in this special issue, and discuss the contributions of these studies to the existing literature. Finally, we discuss directions for future research regarding how the interrelational perspective can be further incorporated into empirical research, and how the gap between the research fields on romantic relationships and sexuality may be bridged.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES I: FROM RISKY BEHAVIOURS TO NORMATIVE TASKS

Romantic relationships and sexual activities of youth have long been equated with risk. Early romantic involvements, especially those during the first part of adolescence, have been linked to various negative outcomes, including depression, anxiety, substance use, and delinquent behaviours (for a review, see Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). A particularly persistent finding has been that teenage romantic affairs that result in early marriage are generally associated with a higher risk for marital dissatisfaction and divorce (Whisman, Johnson, Li, & Robustelli, 2014). With regard to sexuality, adolescent (or premarital) sexual activity has traditionally been investigated as potentially dangerous and harmful for individual as well as

public health (Fergus, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2007). This line of research, focusing on the risks involved in early relationships and sexual behaviours, has been of critical importance in light of the high prevalence rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unwanted teenage pregnancies (Finer, 2010; Forhan et al., 2009), and has yielded important knowledge about how to optimize prevention and intervention strategies that aim to promote youth's relational and sexual health (Connolly et al., 2014; Salazar et al., 2005). However, it tends to overlook the fact that early romantic relationships and adolescent sexual activity are not inherently risky.

Since last decade, the engagement in romantic relationships and emerging sexual activity are increasingly considered normative aspects of adolescent development and the transition to young adulthood (Collins et al., 2009; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). That is, romantic relationships and sexuality pertain to the expected behaviour patterns of adolescents and young adults, as evidenced by prevalence statistics from many Western countries. Concerning romantic relationship involvement, studies from Germany (Seiffge-Krenke, 2000), the Netherlands (De Graaf, Kruijer, Van Acker, & Meijer, 2012), Australia (Zimmer-Gembeck, 1999), and the USA (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003) indicate that most teenagers in those countries have been engaged in one or more romantic relationships. Regarding sexual activity, in the USA (Martinez, Copen, & Abma, 2011), the UK (Mercer et al., 2013), and the Netherlands (De Graaf et al., 2012), more than half of the teenagers report having experience with sexual intercourse by the time they turn 18.

The "new" perspective on young people's engagement in romantic relationships and sexual behaviours, where these are considered as normative developmental phenomena during adolescence and young adulthood, has been increasingly utilized to guide a significant body of empirical work (for reviews, see Collins et al., 2009; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). In this growing line of research, scholars do not merely focus on potentially risky aspects of adolescent romantic relationships and sexuality, often followed by implications for how such behaviours can be prevented, but aim to better understand how the majority of adolescents' develop their romantic relationships and sexuality in a normative way. The resulting literature has accumulated important knowledge on how early romantic relationships and sexuality develop, and how to design effective comprehensive education programmes to promote healthy and positive relational and sexual development in youth (Kirby, 2008; Madsen, 2008). This change in perspectives on romantic relationships and sexual behaviours in adolescence and young adulthood from risky behaviours to normative tasks has guided empirical research to shift from an exclusive focus on identifying factors that may prevent youths from becoming involved in romantic or sexual relationships towards assessing factors that aid a more fundamental understanding of when, how, and why young people engage in romantic relationships and sexual behaviours. Also, it enabled the disentanglement of truly risky versus normative developmental

trajectories, thus clarifying young people's different types of educational and health care needs.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES II: FROM INDIVIDUAL TO CONTEXTUALIZED PROCESSES

According to the ecological perspective, which has become a dominant theoretical paradigm in developmental psychology over the past decades, changes in adolescents' behaviours, cognitions, and social relationships are the outcomes of continuous interactions between individual characteristics and socio-contextual factors, such as relations with parents and peers (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Consistent with this ecological approach, scholars have increasingly acknowledged that romantic and sexual developments during adolescence and young adulthood do not take place in a social vacuum (Smetana et al., 2006). As a result, attention for social contexts and interpersonal relations has become more prominent in the scientific study of romantic relationships and sexuality (for reviews see: Collins et al., 2009; Kotchick et al., 2001). Through this, valuable knowledge has been yielded about how developing romance and sexuality are linked to social contexts and interpersonal relations including parenting processes (De Goede, Branje, Van Duin, Van der Valk, & Meeus, 2012; De Graaf, Vanwesenbeeck, Woertman, & Meeus, 2011), peer norms (Van de Bongardt, Reitz, Sandfort, & Deković, 2015), and partner interactions (Aalsma, Carpentier, Azzouz, & Fortenberry, 2012).

The resulting body of literature has shown that parents, peers, and partners play important roles in shaping adolescent and young adult romantic relationships. In regard to the role of parents, according to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), adolescents construct working models of attachment, or mental representations of the self, and relationships, based on their relationship with their parents (Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchey, 2002). Adolescents subsequently use these working models to construct their later relationships with romantic partners (Furman et al., 2002). Empirical research provides support for these views (De Goede et al., 2012; Furman, Stephenson, & Rhoades, 2014; Seiffge-Krenke, 2006), showing, for instance, long-term positive associations between a secure attachment to parents and a secure attachment to romantic partners. Friendships also offer an important training ground for developing the capacities and expectations for later romantic relationships (Collins et al., 2009), as friendships and romantic relationships share various commonalities in that they are generally both voluntarily chosen, egalitarian, and based on reciprocity (Furman & Wehner, 1994). Consistent with social learning theory, longitudinal studies have shown positive linkages between the quality of adolescents' friendships (reflected in the levels of support, negative interaction, and power balance) and the quality of later romantic relationships (Yu, Branje, Keijsers, & Meeus, 2014). Furthermore, characteristics of romantic partners

themselves, such as personality traits and self-esteem, also contribute to the quality of adolescents' romantic relationships (Collins et al., 2009).

In sexuality research, a consistent finding pertaining to the role of parents in healthy adolescent sexual development concerns the protective function of a high-quality relationship with parents. Adolescents who have a good relationship with their parents—characterized by high levels of warmth, closeness, and support—generally initiate sexual behaviour at a later age and engage in safer sexual behaviour (De Graaf et al., 2011; Kotchick et al., 2001). Concerning the peer context, a recent meta-analysis has shown differential relations between adolescents' own sexual (risk) behaviour and different types of sexual norms among peers (i.e., descriptive norms, injunctive norms, peer pressure, and risk norms), where adolescents' perceptions of descriptive sexual norms (peers' sexual behaviours) were most strongly related to their own sexual activity (Van de Bongardt et al., 2015). Regarding partners, it has been found that teenagers with more intimate relationships and who communicate more about contraception with their partner are more consistent in their contraceptive use (Manlove, Ryan, & Franzetta, 2007). However, the role of romantic partners in adolescents' sexual behaviours is still largely understudied, and deserves more attention.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE CURRENT SPECIAL ISSUE

The purpose of the current special issue is to expand the existing knowledge about how romantic relationships and sexuality develop during adolescence and young adulthood in the ecological context of interpersonal relations and interactive processes with parents, peers, and partners—three highly important proximal social domains (Collins et al., 2009; Smetana et al., 2006). To pursue a discussion on this topic, the current special issue presents seven empirical studies by scholars from six Western countries (Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and the USA), who have examined adolescents' and young adults' developing romantic relationships and sexuality in relation to various aspects of relations with parents, peers, and partners. Three studies examined the formation of young people's romantic relationships (Connolly, Baird, Bravo, Løvald, Pepler, & Craig, 2015; Seiffge-Krenke, Persike, & Shulman, 2015; Walper & Wendt, 2015), whereas the other four studies focused on youth's developing sexuality (Beyers, Verlyser, & Verlee, 2015; DeLuca, Claxton, Baker, & Van Dulmen, 2015; Reitz et al., 2015; Mastro & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2015).

CONTRIBUTIONS EXAMINING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

In the first contribution, Walper and Wendt (2015) used a behaviour systems perspective and attachment theory to examine longitudinal links between various characteristics (i.e., relatedness, negative conflict, emotional insecurity, and dominance) of relationships with parents and romantic partners among German

late adolescents. The authors found that various features of relationships with parents were predictive of romantic relationship features one year later. Relationships with mothers were more influential than relationships with fathers, with emotional insecurity with mothers being most broadly linked to all features of adolescents' romantic relationships later on.

In the second contribution from Germany, Seiffge-Krenke and colleagues (2015) analysed data from an 11-year longitudinal study to assess the impact of parental support and negativity and that of body image during adolescence on romantic attachment in young adulthood. They found that, for women, body image mediated the associations between parental support and fathers' negativity during adolescence, on the one hand, and attachment to romantic partners during young adulthood, on the other hand. For men, no such mediating processes occurred and only body image, but not parenting, was related to their romantic attachment. These results are discussed in the light of suggested gendered socialization processes.

In the third contribution, Connolly and colleagues (2015) investigated Canadian adolescents' use of affiliative and aggressive strategies during conflicts with best friends and romantic partners. Through observations of dyadic interactions, the authors found that female best friends were more affiliative than male best friends and heterosexual romantic partners. They furthermore observed gender differences in the interaction patterns within same-sex friendships versus romantic relationships. That is, within romantic couples, girlfriends displayed more mock aggressive behaviours, whereas boyfriends exhibited more affiliative behaviours.

CONTRIBUTIONS EXAMINING SEXUALITY

The fourth study of DeLuca and colleagues (2015) assessed over-time relations between various peer factors (peer sexual behaviour, peer approval, and peer communication) and American young adults' satisfaction with casual sexual relationships and experiences (CSREs) during Halloween, characterized as a high alcohol-consumption event in the USA. The authors found that more peer approval of CSREs was related to more satisfaction with the experience, both immediately afterward and at follow-up one month later. Yet, young adults who were more satisfied with CSREs immediately afterward were less likely to have told their friends about the experiences after one month. Furthermore, the link between the intention to discuss CSREs with peers and follow-up satisfaction with CSREs was stronger for young adults who engaged in non-penetrative sexual behaviours versus penetrative behaviours during their casual sexual encounters.

In the fifth contribution from Australia, Mastro and Zimmer-Gembeck (2015) examined cross-sectional relations between young adults' reports on communication about sex (frequency and quality) with mothers, fathers, and best friends, their sexual subjectivity (sexual body esteem and sexual pleasure self-efficacy),

and their' sexual well-being, including sexual assertiveness, safe-sex behaviour competence, and affective responses to sex. The results showed that more frequent communication with mothers in high school and higher quality current communication with mothers and friends were related to higher safe-sex behaviour competence. Higher quality communication with fathers was related to more positive affect about sex. Sexual subjectivity, particularly pleasure self-efficacy, mediated various relations between communication and sexual well-being.

In the sixth contribution, Beyers and colleagues (2015) examined parent by peer interactions in cross-sectional data from a sample of Belgian adolescents. Specifically, they investigated whether parenting aspects (responsiveness, behavioural control, psychological control, and autonomy support) functioned as buffers for the relations between sexual norms among peers (descriptive and injunctive norms) and adolescents' own sexual behaviours. The authors' parents-as-a-buffer hypothesis was not supported by their findings. In contrast, positive parenting was found to strengthen the associations between sexual peer norms and adolescents' sexual behaviours; this was particularly true for late adolescents.

In the last study, Reitz and colleagues (2015) employed a multi-domain approach to investigate how individual, parenting, peer, and Internet factors were longitudinally related to Dutch adolescents' sexual behaviours. Specifically, they examined the effects of adolescents' levels of impulsivity, relationship quality with parents, and involvement with peers, and the time they spent on social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), and interactions between these multi-domain factors. They found no significant interaction effects between the four domains, but significant main effects of all four domains while controlling for the others. The findings indicated that higher levels of impulsivity, involvement with peers, and time spent on social networking sites were related to more sexual experience over time, whereas a higher quality relationship with parents was related to less sexual experience.

STRENGTHS OF THE STUDIES PRESENTED IN THE CURRENT SPECIAL ISSUE

Each of the studies that are presented in this special issue has individual theoretical and methodological merits. We would like to highlight four aspects of this series of studies as a whole that we consider to be particularly valuable for the contribution they make to the literature on romantic and sexual developments during adolescence and young adulthood within the social contexts of relations with parents, peers, and partners.

ADVANCING A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Developmental perspectives suggest that romantic relationships and sexual behaviours typically undergo significant changes over the course of adolescence

and young adulthood (Connolly et al., 2014; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). The studies in the present special issue advances this developmental perspective on romantic relationships and sexual behaviours of young people in two ways.

First, the samples covered major developmental stages of romantic and sexual development, ranging from early (Beyers et al., 2015; Reitz et al., 2015), middle (Connolly et al., 2015), and late (Walper & Wendt, 2015) adolescents to young adults (DeLuca et al., 2015; Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2015), thus covering major developmental stages of romantic and sexual development. Furthermore, several studies specifically examined the effects of age on the roles that socio-contextual factors play in developing relationships and sexuality. DeLuca and colleagues (2015) found that peer approval of casual sexual relationships and experiences (CSREs) increased young adults' own satisfaction with CSREs only for the younger college subsample (± 20 years), and not for the older non-college subsample (± 26 years), indicating that the importance of peer approval for the evaluation of young people's own sexual experiences decreases with age. This result adds to the findings of a recent meta-analysis, which found that, across studies, the relation between peer approval of having sex and adolescents' own sexual activity was stronger in middle and late adolescence than in early adolescence (Van de Bongardt et al., 2015). Thus, whereas the importance of peer approval of sexual behaviours seems to increase towards the end of adolescence, the finding of DeLuca and colleagues (2015) suggests that this decreases again towards the end of young adulthood. This would be consistent with identity development theories, which propose that conformity to peer norms serves the need to identify and affiliate with peers for a sense of identity and well-being during adolescence (Newman & Newman, 2001). In young adulthood, however, this need tends to decrease after having developed a more autonomous sense of self (Berndt, 1979). Related to this, the moderating effects of age on the parent by peer interactions found by Beyers and colleagues (this issue) are also notable. They found that parental responsiveness and parental control affected the association between sexual peer norms and adolescents' own sexual behaviour only for older adolescents, and not for younger adolescents. Together, these findings illustrate that the developmental period from middle adolescence to middle young adulthood may be a particularly salient time for parents and educators to consider peer influences on young people's sexuality.

Second, four studies in this special issue used longitudinal data to address their research questions (DeLuca et al., 2015; Reitz et al., 2015; Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2015; Walper & Wendt, 2015), which permits the investigation of actual developmental processes over time. Over the past decades, scholars have increasingly employed longitudinal research designs to explore how ecological factors (e.g., individual characteristics, parenting processes, peer interactions) are associated with adolescent romantic and sexual development over time (for reviews, see: Collins et al., 2009; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). The

studies in this issue relied on data collected over relatively short (five days; DeLuca et al., 2015) to quite long (11 years; Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2015) time periods, with time intervals between assessments varying from one day to four years. As such, these contributions provide insight into how socio-contextual factors predict characteristics of young people's romantic relationships and sexual behaviours over short time cycles as well as longer developmental periods.

ADVANCING THE ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE BY INTEGRATING MULTI-RELATIONAL CONTEXTS

Although the empirical evidence shows that parents, peers, and partners all play a significant role in developmental processes of young people's romantic relationship formation and sexuality, still, relatively little is known about how these social contexts operate simultaneously. The ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) not only distinguishes various contextual systems at the micro-level, but also considers that these systems interact with each other at the meso-level. The contributions to the current special issue advance an ecological perspective on romantic relationships and sexual behaviours of young people by investigating various social contexts simultaneously and comparing them as well as examining interactions between them.

The study of Mastro and Zimmer-Gembeck (2015) revealed that young adults who retrospectively reported more frequent communication with their mothers and best friends in high school reported greater safe-sex competence, whereas those who reported more frequent communication with their fathers reported more positive emotional responses to sex. In addition, Seiffge-Krenke and colleagues (2015) and Walper and Wendt (2015) both found differential effects of mothers and fathers on youth's romantic relationship quality. In the study of Walper and Wendt (2015), emotional insecurity with mothers was broadly linked to all features of adolescents' romantic relationship, whereas emotional insecurity with fathers was related to fewer characteristics of young adults' romantic relationship. Seiffge-Krenke and colleagues (2015) found that adolescents' body image mediated the association between paternal negativity (punishment and conflict), but not maternal negativity, and later avoidant romantic attachment. Together, these studies suggest that although mothers, fathers, and friends are all important social referents in shaping young people's romantic relationships, they may serve distinctive functions.

The current issue also includes two studies that examined interactions between social microsystems at the meso-level in relation to adolescent sexuality (Beyers et al., 2015; Reitz et al., 2015). First, Beyers and colleagues (2015) assessed how parenting practices interacted with (i.e., functioned as a buffer for) adolescents' perceived sexual peer norms in connection with their sexual behaviours. The observed parent by peer interactions add to those found in previous studies (e.g.,

Fasula & Miller, 2006), and emphasize the importance of considering how aspects of adolescents' relationships with parents and peers may create combined effects on how adolescents develop their sexuality. Second, Reitz and colleagues (2015) examined interactions between not only the parenting and peer domain, but also the increasingly important Internet domain in relation to adolescents' sexual behaviours. Although the authors found no significant interactions between these domains, such multi-domain models, which take into account these various social contexts of adolescents' lives and interactions between them simultaneously, likely tap into a more realistic representation of which factors are particularly important in comparison to one another.

STATE-OF-THE-ART RESEARCH METHODS

In addition to the longitudinal character of some of the studies' research designs, which are in and of themselves highly labour-intensive for both researchers and participants, the studies in this special issue used a wide variety of state-of-the-art research methods to collect their data, including online questionnaires (e.g., Reitz et al., 2015), computer-assisted interviews (CAPI and CASI; Walper & Wendt, 2015), daily diary assessments (DeLuca et al., 2015), and observations of dyadic interactions (Connolly et al., 2015). As such, these studies reflect that researchers increasingly use innovative research methods to collect data on the personal, private, and sensitive topics of romantic relationships and sexuality. It is to be expected that this trend will expand further, and that future research in these fields will continue to adopt e-based data collection techniques (through online or smartphone application surveys) and observational methods, both in experimental and in ecologically valid settings (e.g., dyadic interactions, social network sites such as Facebook, speed-dating events). Moreover, due to the transitory feature of adolescent romantic and sexual relations, studies using time-sensitive methods such as daily diary applications or intensive life relationship history recordings will help to gain more insight into the developmental courses of young people's romantic relationships and sexual behaviours.

A BROAD CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SEXUALITY

Another notable shift in the literature is reflected in the broad conceptualization of sexuality used in the contributions in this special issue. In all three studies that examined young people's sexual behaviour (Beyers et al., 2015; DeLuca et al., 2015; Reitz et al., 2015), a broad range of various sexual behaviours were measured, including kissing, touching, manual sex, oral sex, and vaginal and anal intercourse. Traditionally, in many studies, adolescent sexual behaviour has been conceptualized rather narrowly as heterosexual intercourse (e.g., L'Engle & Jackson, 2008; Meschke, Zweig, Barber, & Eccles, 2000). Although such an intercourse-focus fits with the risk-oriented approach of adolescent sexual

activity—as intercourse can be seen as carrying the most potential risks for sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy—there are several disadvantages to this approach. Measuring adolescents' sexual behaviours as their experience with intercourse provides a limited reflection of adolescents' emerging sexual activity, as most adolescents follow a progressive sexual trajectory, and engage in non-coital sexual behaviours before they engage in intercourse (De Graaf, Vanwesenbeeck, Meijer, Woertman, & Meeus, 2009). Thus, this narrow approach excludes sexually active adolescents who have not yet engaged in intercourse, but who may have engaged in other (non-coital) sexual behaviours.

Furthermore, sexuality encompasses more than behaviours. Yet, in the literature, relatively little attention is paid to the investigation of cognitive or emotional aspects of young people's sexuality (Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). As a result, the reasons why adolescents and young adults engage in sexual behaviours or relationships (e.g., their own intentions and expectations) or how they experience and evaluate these relationships and behaviours remain less well understood. Increasingly, research is starting to move away from the behaviour-only focus by paying more attention to other aspects of sexuality such as emotions and satisfaction (Van de Bongardt, Reitz, & Deković, *in press*). This is also reflected in the contribution to the present special issue of Mastro and Zimmer-Gembeck (2015), who examined not only behavioural aspects (sexual assertiveness and safe-sex behaviour competence), but also cognitive traits (sexual body esteem and sexual pleasure self-efficacy) and emotional facets (positive and negative affective responses to sex) of young adults' sexuality. Together, these studies emphasize the relevance and significance of further investigating multiple dimensions (behaviours, skills, attitudes, emotions) of young people's sexual lives.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The seven studies presented in this special issue contribute significantly to the existing literature on romantic and sexual developments during adolescence and young adulthood, and the knowledge about the role of social contexts therein. Building on their qualities, but also on some of their limitations, we observe four important directions for future research in these fields.

MOVING FURTHER: FROM RISKY TO NORMATIVE TO POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY

Moving beyond the increased recognition of romantic relationships and sexual behaviours as normative aspects of adolescence and young adulthood, instead of inherently risky, some researchers have begun to pay attention to positive outcomes of young people's romantic relationships and sexuality (Barber &

Eccles, 2003; Vasilenko, Ram, & Lefkowitz, 2011). For instance, being involved in a high-quality romantic relationship has been found to contribute to adolescents' feelings of happiness (Demir, 2008), self-worth (Connolly & Konarski, 1994), social competence and perceived popularity among peers (Furman, Low, & Ho, 2009; O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003), and provides an important new source of support in light of the weakening bonds with parents towards the end of adolescence (Demir, 2008). Whereas research on romantic relationships has a longer tradition of focusing on these positive outcomes, in sexuality research, recently, scholars have also begun to explore the positive aspects of young people's sexual behaviours. For instance, first intercourse experiences have been found to improve male adolescents' satisfaction with their physical appearance (Vasilenko et al., 2011).

Anchored in a growing acknowledgement of romantic and sexual experiences as having also positive qualities, such as social and emotional support and sexual pleasure, empirical evidence of how socio-contextual factors contribute to these positive outcomes is currently expanding. For instance, a recent study has found that a high-quality relationship with parents was related to higher global self-esteem of adolescents, which in turn was related to adolescents' experiences of more positive emotions after having sex (Van de Bongardt et al., *in press*). The contribution of Mastro and Zimmer-Gembeck (2015) in this special issue showed that communication with parents and peers about sex was related to young adults' positive affective responses to sex, partly through increased pleasure self-efficacy. Seiffge-Krenke and colleagues (2015, this issue) showed that parental support was associated with less avoidant romantic attachment in young adults. Building on these important findings, many positive aspects and outcomes of young people's romantic relationships and sexuality, and the role of social contexts therein, remain yet to be further investigated.

MORE ATTENTION FOR BIDIRECTIONALITY BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS AND CONTEXTS

Although scholars are increasingly employing longitudinal research designs to explore how socio-contextual factors are associated with romantic and sexual development over time (Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008), most studies, including those in the present special issue, focus primarily on unidirectional socialization processes. That is, they generally focus on how social contexts affect adolescent romantic and sexual development. According to transactional theories, however, young people are not only influenced by social contexts, but they themselves, in turn, also select and affect their social environment (Smetana et al., 2006). In light of this transactional perspective, the theoretical and empirical emphasis on unidirectional socialization processes in the literature is problematic, as this underestimates the complexity of the dynamic relations between developments in young people's romantic relationships and sexuality, on the

one hand, and developments in their social relations (e.g., with parents and peers), on the other hand. Several empirical studies have evidenced bidirectional relations between adolescents' sexual behaviours and parenting behaviours (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005), perceptions of sexual peer norms (Van de Bongardt et al., 2015), and the use of sexualized media content (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2008). Hence, further advancing our theoretical understanding of bidirectional relations between social contexts and romantic and sexual development over-time, through the use of longitudinal research, is paramount.

MORE CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARISON STUDIES

This special issue encompasses seven studies conducted in European countries, North-America, and Australia, which largely reflects the general literature on young people's romantic relationships and sexuality, with the majority of the published studies focusing on Western developed countries. As a result, the existing empirical knowledge does not include the lived experiences of the 90% of the world's adolescents who are growing up in the "majority world", which includes Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean (Raffaelli, Lazarevic, Koller, Nsamenang, & Sharma, 2013). This is problematic, as the norms and values related to adolescents' and young adults' romantic relationships and sexuality tend to vary across diverse cultural contexts (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003; Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2010). At a socio-cultural level (across countries), adolescents living in more collectivist and conservative countries are generally more oriented towards their social context, more inclined to conform to existing social norms, and more sensitive to friendship-rules than adolescents in more individualistic cultures (Bond & Smith, 1996; Verkuyten & Masson, 1996). As such, romantic relationships and sexual behaviours of adolescents in more collectivist countries tend to be more strongly affected by parents and peers. A cross-national comparison (Li, Connolly, Jiang, Pepler, & Craig, 2010) between Canada and China revealed that a high-quality parent-adolescent relationship (characterized by trust, intimacy, and companionship) was negatively associated with adolescents' romantic relationship status and their romantic intention in China, but not in Canadian. Furthermore, Dhariwal and Connolly (2013) have suggested that adolescents in different cultural contexts may perceive different levels of autonomy from their parents regarding partner choice. The meta-analysis of Van de Bongardt and colleagues (2015) showed that, across studies, peer pressure was more strongly related with adolescents' own sexual activity in more collectivist countries than in more individualist countries. These findings highlight the importance of considering socio-cultural differences in how young people's romantic relationships and sexual behaviours develop in the context of relations with parents, peers, and partners. Specifically, more research on these topics in the "majority world" is paramount. Also, more cross-ethnic and cross-country research is needed to compare how various

aspects of romantic relationships and sexual behaviours develop within parental and peer contexts, and how this differs across different socio-cultural contexts.

CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN RESEARCH ON ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY

To date, scholars in developmental psychology and related disciplines tend to focus their research either on romantic relationships or on sexual behaviours, and the literature in these two fields has proceeded relatively independently. This is striking as romantic relationships are typically the context in which the majority of adolescents' sexual behaviours occur (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2000). Although several scholars have called for the investigation of young people's sexuality within romantic couples (e.g., Bouchey & Furman, 2003), strikingly, it is the research on sexual behaviours outside of committed romantic relationships ("hooking-up") that is expanding more rapidly (for a review, see Heldman & Wade, 2010). The contribution of DeLuca and colleagues (2015) to the present special issue, which focused on casual sexual relationships and experiences (CSREs), is clearly embedded within this line of research. Yet, up to now, much remains unknown about how characteristics of romantic relationships or romantic partners are associated with adolescents' and young adults' sexual behaviours and their evaluations thereof. Some researchers have started to fill in this gap, by examining sexual behaviours within romantic relationships (Maas & Lefkowitz, 2015; McElwain, Kerpelman, & Pittman, 2015; Welsh, Haugen, Widman, Darling, & Grello, 2005). Closing the gap between the literature on romantic relationships and sexuality will certainly advance both fields of research. Further investigating romantic relationships as a salient context within which many adolescents' and young adults' sexual experiences occur is therefore a highly relevant direction for future research. Closing the gap between the literature on young people's romantic relationships and sexuality will certainly advance both fields of research.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Together, the seven studies in this special issue make a valuable contribution to the advancement of the empirical knowledge and theoretical understanding of how romantic relationships and sexuality develop during adolescence and young adulthood in the social contexts of parents, peers, and partners. Their findings, and the ecological perspective more generally, are also important for prevention and intervention strategies in education and health care that are aimed at promoting young people's relational and sexual health. By incorporating these insights into the salience of social norms, high-quality interpersonal relationships, dyadic interactions, and communication content and processes

into such strategies, parents, peers, and partners may be valuable potential allies in the stimulation of responsible, healthy, and positive relational and sexual decision-making of adolescents and young adults.

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