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Journal of Adolescence

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/adolescence](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/adolescence)

## Review article

## Romantic relationships and sexuality in diverse adolescent populations: Introduction to the special issue



## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Adolescence  
 Romantic relationships  
 Sexuality  
 Sexual behavior  
 Diversity  
 Culture

## ABSTRACT

Although scientific research on adolescent romantic and sexual development has proliferated in recent years, currently, too little is known about how development in these areas can be understood across diverse populations (e.g., different socio-cultural groups within countries) and contexts (e.g., countries or different proximal social environments). The goal of the current virtual special issue in the *Journal of Adolescence* was to highlight relevant and timely empirical findings from studies utilizing innovative and diverse research methods in the areas of adolescent romantic and sexual development from around the globe, with an emphasis on data collected outside of the Western world. It combines an interesting set of nine empirical papers, which describe datasets from 5 countries (Canada, India, Indonesia, Mexico, and the United States). In this editorial, we provide an introduction to this special issue, and illustrate how these studies expand our understanding of adolescent romantic and sexual development by examining: 1) romantic and sexual relationship constructs that are relevant for understudied and diverse populations; 2) how culture-specific factors may shape adolescents' romantic and sexual relationships; 3) how romantic and sexual relationship constructs are linked to psychosocial adjustment outcomes in understudied cultural contexts; 4) the role of different proximal social environments (e.g., parents, siblings, peers) in romantic and sexual development in diverse populations.

## 1. Introduction

Romantic relationships and sexuality are conceptualized in contemporary adolescent research as a normative and healthy part of adolescent development (Collins, 2003; Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009; Halpern, 2010). Several studies have also linked romantic and sexual experiences to adolescent psychosocial adjustment (Grello, Welsh, Harper, & Dickson, 2003). Guided by ecological system models (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), researchers have widely examined how contextual factors such as parents, siblings, and peers shape adolescents' romantic relationships (Collins et al., 2009; Van de Bongardt, Yu, Deković, & Meeus, 2015) and sexual behaviors (Kincaid, Jones, Sterrett, & McKee, 2012; White & Warner, 2015). Although increasingly expanding, little empirical research has examined how these contextual factors explain romantic and sexual relationship development among diverse populations (Boislard, Van de Bongardt, & Blais, 2016; Espinosa-Hernández, Bissell-Havran, Van Duzor, & Halgunseth, 2017) or how romantic relationships and sexuality are linked to adolescent psychosocial adjustment in these populations (Espinosa-Hernández & Vasilenko, 2015). Diversity, here, is broadly defined to include sexual orientation, culture (e.g., ethnicity, nationality), and atypical development such as developmental disabilities (Patel, Tabb, & Sue, 2017). Moreover, most of the research on adolescents' romantic relationships and sexuality relies on cross-sectional and self-report methods. Incorporating longitudinal designs and multimethod approaches can aid in the understanding of how romantic relationships and sexuality - and associations with individual, family, and peer factors - develop over time and influence each other (Furman, Collibee, Lantagne, & Golden, 2019; Van de Bongardt et al., 2015). Expanding adolescent romantic and sexuality research among minority groups around the world would help better understand universal *and* culture-specific romantic and sexual developmental issues, as well as their correlates and outcomes. The goal of the current virtual special issue in the *Journal of Adolescence* was to highlight relevant and timely empirical findings yielded by innovative and diverse research methods in the areas of adolescent romantic and sexual development from around the globe, especially data collected outside of the Western world. Together, the studies in this special issue expand our understanding

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2020.07.002>

Received 22 June 2020; Accepted 1 July 2020

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of adolescent romantic relationships and sexuality by examining: 1) romantic and sexual relationship constructs that are relevant for understudied and diverse populations; 2) how culture-specific factors may shape adolescents' romantic and sexual relationships; 3) how romantic and sexual relationship constructs are linked to psychosocial adjustment outcomes in understudied cultural contexts; 4) the role of different proximal social environments (e.g., parents, siblings, peers) in romantic and sexual development in diverse populations.

## 2. Culturally and developmentally relevant romantic relationship and sexuality constructs

In societies with traditional gender role ideologies and high levels of religiosity (e.g., India, Indonesia), dating for recreational purposes among adolescents may be discouraged by adults (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016; Shen et al., *this issue*). Romantic relationships and sexual behaviors, therefore, may be postponed or delayed during adolescence. For instance, Shen and colleagues (*this issue*), when examining romantic involvement in Indonesian Muslim adolescents, found that romantic experiences increased with age. Rates of serious romantic relationships, however, were overall lower (Shen et al., *this issue*), compared to U.S. adolescent relationships (Furman, Low, & Ho, 2009). Thus, despite relatively lower rates of serious romantic relationships, it may still be developmentally and culturally relevant to examine romantic relationship experiences in non-Western cultural contexts. Bowker and colleagues (*this issue*) examined crush status or being viewed as a crush by opposite-sex peers among adolescents in urban India ( $M = 13.77$  years). In this cultural context, crush status was linked to similar correlates found in previous U.S. studies (e.g., physical attractiveness). The authors also found some unique associations with crush status (e.g., shyness). Both the Shen et al. and Bowker et al. studies underscore the importance of understanding the universality of romantic constructs and how relevant they are in non-Western cultural contexts, emphasizing the importance of examining generalizability across countries. Moreover, Bowker and colleagues begin to explore correlates of crush status that may be culture-specific.

In the majority of the scientific literature, romantic relationship constructs are mostly examined in typically developing youth (Boislard et al., 2016; Collins et al., 2009). Constructs utilized to understand romantic development in majority populations, however, might not fully capture developmentally-relevant issues among diverse populations. Researchers need to select constructs that are ideal for understanding atypical developing populations. For instance, Heifetz and colleagues (*this issue*) examined romantic conceptualizations (i.e., defining features of a romantic partner) and romantic awareness (i.e., knowledge regarding sexual behavior and how to initiate a romantic relationship) among 16 to 19-year-old adolescents with intellectual and developmental disabilities; underscoring romantic relationship's importance among this population. Results also indicate adolescents with disabilities differ in their understanding of romantic relationships, and how to initiate them. This study also highlights the importance of identifying constructs pertinent to adolescents who may not experience typical romantic relationship development.

Similarly, researchers examining sexual minorities' romantic relationships need to be culturally sensitive and select constructs that are ideal for understanding romantic development among sexual minorities who most likely are developing in heteronormative environments. For instance, Stewart and colleagues' (*this issue*) longitudinal study focused on constructs that are particularly relevant to sexual minority youth. They examined how self-labelled sexual identities and romantic attractions changed over time among adolescents from low-income high schools in the rural Southeastern U.S. Examining sexual minority youth's development in diverse regional contexts may help us better understand sexual orientation milestones in different cultural contexts. In conjunction, these studies highlight the importance of examining constructs that are developmentally and culturally-relevant among diverse populations.

## 3. Culture-specific factors and adolescents' romantic relationships

Increasingly, researchers are moving beyond examining ethnic or cross-cultural differences in adolescents' romantic relationships and sexual behaviors (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003) to focus on culture-specific factors, such as cultural values. Assessing cultural variables that are salient for specific populations (e.g., religion among Muslim adolescents) may allow for a deeper understanding of how and why romantic relationship development may differ across adolescent groups. Several studies in the present special issue have examined norms and values linked to traditional masculinity and religion, as well as the role of these constructs in romantic relationships among diverse groups of adolescents. First, Reid and colleagues (*this issue*) found that stronger endorsement of *caballerismo* values (i.e., emphasizing chivalry and respect towards women) was associated with higher romantic relationship satisfaction among 12 to 19-year-old adolescents in romantic relationships living in Mexico. Second, Shen and colleagues (*this issue*) examined religion among Muslim adolescents in Indonesia and found that more religious girls were less likely to become romantically involved than less religious girls. These associations were not significant for boys. Third, Rogers and colleagues (*this issue*) examined norms of traditional masculinity (i.e., a bravado focused on interpersonal dominance) in an observational study among an ethnically diverse (43% white and 41% Latinx) U.S. sample consisting of heterosexual couples between the ages of 14–18 years. They found that conformity to traditional masculinity was associated with lower reports of conflict negotiation strategies and a higher frequency of coercion use during an observed discussion task between romantic partners. However, it was the male partners' traditional masculinity level, but not that of the female partners, that was associated with lower negotiation use for both dyad members. Together, these three studies underscore the importance of examining culture-specific values (i.e., religion, gender norms constructs) to understand better romantic relationship prevalence among youth, the perceived quality of young people's heterosexual romantic relationships, and interaction dynamics within young romantic couples in culturally diverse populations. Moreover, they underscore the importance of understanding gender among heterosexual adolescents around the world.

#### 4. Romantic relationships and psychosocial adjustment in understudied adolescent populations

Several of these studies also expand our understanding of how romantic relationship constructs are linked to adolescents' psychosocial adjustment in understudied cultural contexts. For example, [Bowker and colleagues' \(this issue\)](#) longitudinal study among Indian adolescents examined behavioral and psychological correlates of crush status, indicating that high crush status (i.e., being viewed by many peers as a crush) was associated with a decrease of social anxiety. [Goodcase and colleagues' \(this issue\)](#) longitudinal study examined a sample of adolescents (most of them were girls and of Latinx ethnicity) who were currently pregnant or were already parents and involved in a romantic relationship. Findings indicated that the use of more positive conflict resolution strategies was associated with lower prevalence of verbally and physically abusive behaviors with their romantic partners. [Shen and colleagues \(this issue\)](#), however, found that romantic involvement was linked to increases in problem behavior (e.g., shoplifting, alcohol use) among Indonesian Muslim adolescents attending high school. These studies examined how romantic relationship constructs are associated with psychosocial adjustment in diverse populations that are seldom studied. They highlight the importance of understanding what aspects of romantic relationships are linked to both healthy adjustment outcomes and risk behaviors around the world, expanding our knowledge of how generalizable these associations are.

#### 5. The role of parents, siblings, and peers in adolescent romantic relationships around the globe

In the current issue, researchers studying adolescents living in collectivistic and family-oriented societies (e.g., Mexico), and atypical developing youth also highlighted the role that parents play in adolescent romantic relationship development. For instance, in a qualitative study, [Heifetz and colleagues \(this issue\)](#) found that parents were the primary source of information about romantic relationships for U.S. adolescents with intellectual and developmental disabilities. [Reid and colleagues \(this issue\)](#) also explored the role of parents in Mexican adolescent romantic relationships. They found that stronger *caballerismo* was associated with higher romantic relationship satisfaction, but that this link was strongest among girls who reported relatively low maternal psychological control and boys who reported relatively high maternal psychological control. These studies highlight the essential role that parents play in romantic relationship development among adolescents who experience both typical and atypical development, and indicate that parents may play different roles for boys and girls across countries.

Other studies in this issue examined the role of siblings and school peers in adolescents' romantic relationships using longitudinal designs that span several years. For instance, in a six-year longitudinal study, [Schacter and colleagues \(this issue\)](#) found that U.S. adolescents (an ethnically diverse sample) whose school peers increasingly rejected them were more likely to be aggressive towards their romantic partners in high school. [Sun and colleagues \(this issue\)](#) assessed U.S. first and second-born sibling dyads (mostly European American working and middle-class families) in another longitudinal study (lasting almost ten years). They found that lower levels of intimacy and higher levels of control within sibling-relationships during adolescence (13–16 years) were associated with more avoidant attachment orientation in couple relationships during young adulthood (23–26 years). Control toward and by a sibling was furthermore linked to more anxious romantic attachment later in life. Together, these studies underscore the importance of understanding the role of parents, peers, and siblings in adolescent romantic relationship development around the world. Moreover, these longitudinal studies help explain how romantic relationships and associations with family and peer factors develop over time and influence each other.

#### 6. Conclusion and future directions

This special issue expands our current understanding of adolescents' romantic relationships in understudied and diverse populations around the world. Together, the nine studies assessed romantic relationship constructs relevant for these populations, examined how culture-specific constructs shape romantic relationships, and assessed the role of individual, family, and peer contextual factors.

In future studies, it is important to continue identifying relevant relationship constructs that are universal or population-specific for youth across cultural contexts, sexual orientations, and both typical and atypical development. These studies expand our understanding of universal and normative romantic relationship and sexuality development during adolescence, and how specific cultural contexts may encourage or delay this development. Moreover, cultural constructs such as gender norm constructs, and religion may help better understand how culture shapes romantic experiences and sexuality. Examining these constructs may be especially important among sexual minority adolescents who live in cultural contexts where traditional gender norms are endorsed, and where religious institutions openly discourage same-sex romantic or sexual experiences. Researchers examining associations between romantic relationships, sexuality, and psychosocial adjustment should examine adjustment indicators beyond negative outcomes (e.g., depression, risk behaviors) among adolescents. Assessing positive aspects of physical, mental, and social well-being (e.g., health, happiness, life satisfaction, positive attachment and social relations) among diverse populations may allow for a better understanding of the role of romance and sexuality in adolescent psychosocial adjustment from a more holistic perspective.

Finally, many studies in this special issue utilized carefully designed longitudinal studies ([Goodcase et al., this issue](#); [Schacter et al., this issue](#); [Shen et al., this issue](#); [Stewart et al., this issue](#); [Sun et al., this issue](#)), culturally and developmentally sensitive measures ([Bowker et al., this issue](#); [Heifetz and colleagues, this issue](#); [Reid et al., this issue](#); [Rogers et al., this issue](#); [Shen et al., this issue](#)), and advanced statistical methods that appropriately address research questions driven by theory and empirical evidence. These intricate research designs and longitudinal studies, however, require extensive funding. Researchers assessing diverse populations may lack financial support. To better understand romantic relationship development among diverse adolescent populations

around the world, especially in developing and low-income nations, funding agencies should continue supporting researchers who study these topics in diverse populations.

## Acknowledgements

We want to thank the following reviewers who provided invaluable feedback: Charlene Belu, Beverly Black, Marie-Aude Boislard, Julie Bowker, Kirsten L. Buist, Marianne Cense, Jennifer Connolly, Thao Ha, Kristyn Kamke, Maria Luisa Marván, Alexander Reid, Ellen Reitz, Hannah Schacter, Encarnación Soriano, David Szwedo, Elizabeth Trejo-Castillo, Sarah Trinh, Sara Vasilenko, Rose Wesche, and Rongqin Yu. We could not have done this without you!

We are also grateful to Nancy Darling for giving us the opportunity to be part of this special issue. Graciela, Sophie and Daphne would also like to thank Manfred Van Dulmen for making every step an enriching experience. Your patience, support, and guidance have been vital during this process.

Dr. D. van de Bongardt is funded by a Veni Grant (451-17-016), part of the Innovational Research Incentives Scheme of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

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