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Who influences whom in adolescent romantic relationship?

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Who influences whom in adolescent romantic relationships? This is an important question not only because of the abundance of influence in adolescence in general, but also because of the possible detrimental effects that can arise. Knowledge of the workings of influence between adolescent romantic partners can lead to better ways to handle the influential nature of these relationships, especially when it comes to harmful effects, as they can possibly be avoided. The current study addresses this problem using data from a longitudinal study in Denver Colorado. Our analyses are composed of a sample of 87 stable adolescent couples who were in this relationship for two consecutive time points. Each member of the romantic couple filled out several questionnaires, including those that asked about jealousy and support-seeking in the relationship. Using an actor-partner interdependence model, which is a statistical technique that takes into account the interdependence of the data, we found that males influence their girlfriends on jealousy, and females influence their boyfriends on support-seeking. This study extends prior research by using an APIM to show partner effects and gender differences regarding influence in romantic partner dyads. It also illustrates the finding that the dyad member with higher levels of a particular relationship attribute, for instance jealousy, does not necessarily predict influence in the relationship.

Who Influences Whom? Jealousy and Support-Seeking in Romantic Partners

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Introduction

Partners in a romantic relationship can influence each other in many ways. This raises an important question: who influences whom? Some work in the marital literature has addressed the direction of influence among husbands and wives. For instance, Gottman and Levenson (1999) found that husband negativity predicted wife disgust, contempt, and decreased positivity four years later, but the reverse was not found. In adolescent and young adult romantic relationships, however, less is known.

The present study will examine the influence of romantic partners' jealousy and support-seeking, as they have been associated with relationship quality (Theiss & Solomon, 2006; Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010; Seiffge-Krenke & Lang, 2002). Influence will be analyzed using a longitudinal actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005), which determines the relative influence that each partner has on the other, taking into account non-independence.

In keeping with research on married couples, it was hypothesized that cross-lagged paths would differ in terms of partner influence. Specifically, girlfriends were hypothesized to influence boyfriends in support-seeking because support is related to relationship satisfaction for wives more than husbands (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994). Conversely, boyfriends were hypothesized to influence girlfriends in jealousy because it is related to marital satisfaction for males more than females (Hansen, 1983).

Method

Participants included 84 stable, heterosexual romantic partners from a longitudinal study of adolescent and young adult development in Colorado. Participants were considered to be in stable relationships if they reported the same romantic partners at two consecutive time points, which were an average of ten months apart. For all couples, Time 1 represents the first year of the relationship. Subjects ranged in age from 14 to 21 at Time 1 ($M = 18.90$ years). Romantic partners ranged in age from 14 to 33 ($M = 19.47$). Participants and their romantic partners completed the same measures at both time points. This study focuses on:

Support-seeking: Adolescent Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (AICQ; Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988). Assessed how good one is with seeking out a person to talk to.

Jealousy: Multidimensional Jealousy Scale (MJS; Pfeiffer & Wong, 1987). Assessed how often a person thinks and does jealous things in his/her current relationship, and what he/she would do in jealous situations.

Results

Figure 1. Girlfriend support-seeking at Time 1 influences boyfriend support-seeking at Time 2. Reported estimates are standardized.

$N = 84$ dyads

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

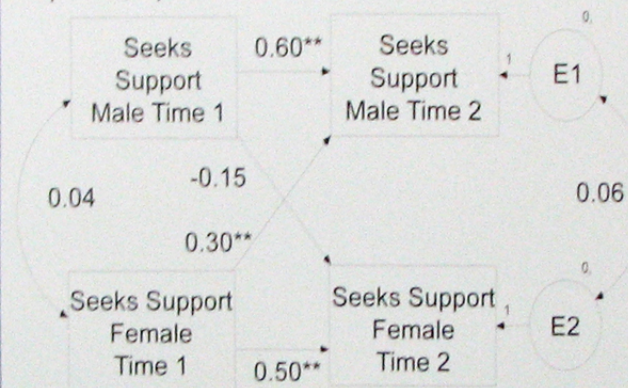
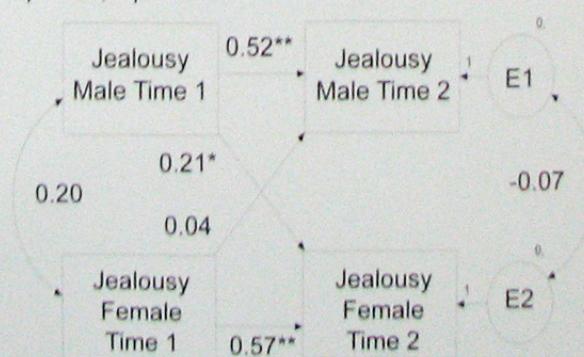


Figure 2. Boyfriend jealousy at Time 1 influences girlfriend jealousy at Time 2. Reported estimates are standardized.

$N = 84$ dyads

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.



An APIM for distinguishable dyads examined influence on support-seeking (Male, $M = 3.18$ to 3.25 ; Female, $M = 3.56$ to 3.66) and jealousy (Male, $M = 2.41$ to 2.43 ; Female, $M = 2.52$ to 2.54).

The results are depicted in Figures 1 and 2. The paths from Male Time 1 to Male Time 2 and the paths from Female Time 1 to Female Time 2 represent actor effects. The cross-lagged paths represent partner effects. The significant actor effects present in both models indicate stability over time. Partner effects indicate influence and were present in both models as well, but the models differed in who influenced whom:

- *Support-seeking APIM:* Girlfriend support-seeking at Time 1 significantly predicted boyfriend support-seeking at Time 2. However, boyfriend support-seeking did not influence later girlfriend support-seeking.
- *Jealousy APIM:* Boyfriend jealousy at Time 1 significantly predicted girlfriend jealousy at Time 2. However, girlfriend jealousy did not influence later boyfriend jealousy.

Discussion

This study extends prior research on influence in romantic relationships by examining differential influence within the adolescent and adult romantic dyad. Using a distinguishable dyads APIM to examine partner effects, gender differences regarding influence in romantic partner dyads were found: Girlfriend support-seeking predicted subsequent boyfriend support-seeking, and boyfriend jealousy predicted subsequent girlfriend jealousy.

This study shows that there are differential effects that boyfriends and girlfriends have on one another and on the relationship as a whole. Because support-seeking and moderate jealousy are both found in healthy romantic relationships, and because similarity leads to relationship satisfaction (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001; Burleson & Denton, 1992), each partner provides different means to achieve a healthy (or unhealthy) romantic relationship.