

# Review of early adult romantic relationships



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This essay critically reviews the topic of “ early adult romantic relationships”, with a particular focus on “ Personality, Family History and Competence in Early Adult Romantic Relationships”, by Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger (2005), as an example of the type of methodology used in this field, outlining the research and its contribution to the topic. The following essay will provide a brief background and context information pertaining to the topic area (Romantic Love). I will explore/discuss the relevant theories of romantic love, and the belief that childhood experiences (more specifically, parent-child interaction) largely determine competence and attachment style in early adult romantic relationships. I argue that romantic love can exist in long-term relationships; to justify this argument I will demonstrate that results from the current study, and other relevant literature provides evidence to support this idea. Limitations of the topic area will then be discussed, in order to provide a critical review of the topic.

The definition of “ romantic love” varies; however, it is generally best defined as “ a basis to marry” (Dion & Dion, 1991, as cited in Acevedo & Aron, 2009, p. 59). Romantic love involves a combination of sexual and emotional desire for another person; however, psychologist Lisa Diamond argues/believes that emotional and sexual desires are separate. For example, sex may be physically satisfying, but not emotionally (and vice-versa).

Robert Sternberg proposed a “ Triangular Theory of Love”, which suggests that love consists of three components; Intimacy, Passion, and Decision/Commitment, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love (From " Psychology Applied to Modern Life: Adjustment in the 21st Century" (p. 254), by Weiten, Lloyd, Dunn, & Hammer, 2009, Copyright © 2009 by Cengage Learning)

Sternberg describes the intimacy component as the emotional component, the passion component as " the drives that lead to romance" (Sternberg, 1986, p. 119), and the decision/commitment component as the decision to love someone and the commitment to maintain that love. Sternberg's theory describes romantic love as short-term, with passion largely mediating the relationship, followed by the intimacy component, and with little-to-no commitment.

Contrary to the belief that romantic love cannot exist in a long-term relationship (as suggested by Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love), recent evidence suggests that romantic love partnerships can exist in long-term relationships (e. g., Sprecher, 1999; Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005). In saying this, how long is long-term? Of course there is no right or wrong answer, however, in terms of this investigation (romantic relationships), long-term can be considered as two years or more. Another interesting question that should be asked is " How does one pinpoint exactly when a romantic relationship begins, especially if it begins as a friendship?" (Carver, Joyner & Udry (2003), as cited in Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005, p. 565).

John Bowlby proposed that attachment bonds formed during childhood largely mediate competence and behaviour in adult relationships, known as Bowlby's ethological theory of attachment. The basis upon which the theory

is built, is three attachment styles; Secure, Avoidant, and Resistant. Hazan & Shaver (1987, p. 523) propose that “ The attachment theory approach to romantic love is a biological, as well as a social process”. Hazan & Shaver (1987) explore the idea that romantic love is an attachment process; using two questionnaires, they investigated the differences among the three groups (Secure, avoidant, and anxious).

A specific focus of this study which is important to the topic area is the testing of observed marital interactions and relationship quality with parents. Participants were asked to describe how they were treated by parents during childhood (using 37 adjectives), and observed marital interactions (12 adjectives). Results show that that best predictors of adult attachment type were, indeed, observed marital interactions and relationship quality.

In line with the attachment theory of romantic love, results from Hazan & Shaver (1987) suggest that the best predictors of adult attachment type in romantic relationships are observed marital interactions and relationship quality with parents. Consistent with these findings, other studies suggest that parent-childhood relationship quality largely determine attachment type in adult romantic relationships, that is, interactions with parents and observed marital interactions (e. g., Bartholomew, 1990; Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Dinero et al., 2008; Feeney, 2004; Fraley & Davis, 1997; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This seems to implicate that the aspect of childhood interactions and experiences has an impact on the development of romantic relationships in early adulthood.

The current study, Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger (2005) attempted to study the effect of personality, family history, and competence in early adult romantic relationships. The authors attempted to answer “ Why are some individuals involved in satisfying romantic relationships, whereas other relationships are involved in less satisfying and more distressed relationships?” (p. 562). In an attempt to answer this question, they studied the effects of individual personality and developmental-contextual variables (such as observed marital interactions and parenting practices), using Tellegen’s Multi-dimensional personality Questionnaire (MPQ).

Tellegen’s MPQ is a personality instrument, which lasts for approximately thirty minutes and consists of 276 mostly true-false items. The purpose of using the MPQ was to test how well family characteristics and personality traits measure in late adolescence predict aspects of romantic relationships in early adult romantic relationships. Along with this methodology, the basic model used in this study can be seen in Figure 2. Figure 2 shows personality, young adult interactions and relationship quality from 1994 to 2001.

Figure 2. Basic Model (From “ Personality, Family History, and Competence in Early Adult Romantic Relationships”, by Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, p. 564)

Participants were drawn from the Family Transitions Project (FTP), a longitudinal study of the transition from adolescence to early adulthood. Participants were from Iowa, who had previously participated in similar studies; the average age of participants was 18.35 years old,  $SD = 3.87$ . Conducting a longitudinal study can help answer research questions in the

study of human development because it provides researchers with the same participants over a long period of time. Therefore, any individual changes (in this case, behaviour) in participants can be observed easily and more accurately.

In 1994 students were interviewed for two 2 hour sessions; the first session focused on characteristics, interactions and economic circumstances, and the second session (which was video-recorded) focused on family interaction[1]. In 1999 researchers performed a follow up study, which featured a 25 minute video-taped discussion regarding the relationship. Results show that the majority (85%) of 1999 participants were still with the same romantic partner in 2001. Of these " 85% were married, 11% were co-habiting, 4% were in a committed relationship, and <1% were missing data" (p. 565).

The measures observed were developmental-contextual (observed marital negativity, and nurturant-involved parenting), late-adolescent personality, and early adult relationship variables (observed negative relationship interactions, and relationship quality). These measures were observed to assess factors affecting competence in early adult romantic relationships. Trained observers rated participants on a 9 point scale (1 being not characteristic of the individual, and 9 being the opposite), to prevent contrived testing environments, or any demand effect that might occur.

Results show that observed marital negativity was not a significant predictor of relationship quality, but observed parenting is a significant predictor of competence, and predicts relationship quality, i. e. a strong, positive

relationship with parents predicts a higher competence, then a negative relationship does. The suggestion by Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger (2005, p. 572) that “ individual differences help explain behavior in romantic relationships” is consistent with other findings (e. g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1988; Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000)

There is no sufficient evidence to suggest that romantic relationships cannot last long-term. Consistent with this statement, the current study shows that 85% of participants were with the same romantic partner after two years (1999 to 2001), thus, suggesting that romantic relationships may well be able to exist in the long-term. Furthermore, Acevedo & Aron, (2009, p. 59) argue that “ romantic love, with intensity, engagement and sexual interaction can last”.

The most surprising result from the current study is that observed negative marital interactions were not a significant predictor of relationship quality. In contrast, Amato & Booth (2001, p. 627) suggest that “ adults who report that their parents were unhappily married tend to report a relatively high number of problems in their own marriages”. This seems to implicate that observed marital interactions and observed behaviour are factors that can affect future relationship quality, i. e. negative emotionality stemming from observing parents’ negative interactions towards each other increases the likelihood of having a similar relationship with your future partner, and vice-versa.

Limitations from the current study include the ethnicity group of the participants, that is, they were all European Americans from Iowa (Midwest region) of the United States. It should be noted that participants of this ethnicity were not chosen specifically; rather the group is reflective of “ the underlying demographics of rural Iowa” (Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005, p. 565).

Other limitations related to the topic area are sexual orientation, situational factors, varying definition(s), and varying theories. Firstly, results for lesbian, homosexual, and bisexual couples may differ to heterosexual couples. As the majority of research consists of heterosexual couples, to the best of my knowledge, there have not been comparisons with couples of different sexual orientation. Studying the different groups may provide researchers with a better understanding to romantic love, i. e. whether there is more or less commitment among lesbian, homosexual, or bisexual couples.

In regards to situational factors, couples who have a positive/mutually satisfying romantic relationship at the time of investigation are more likely to perceive they are happy, and act accordingly. The way in which participants are acting at the time of investigation isn't necessarily reflective of the entire relationship; however, using a longitudinal study (as the current study did) can provide a scope of behavioural changes over time. The varying definition(s) of romantic love may affect the methodology used, and what is being tested.

The current study provided an account of relationships success/competency based on observed marital interactions, parenting practices, emotionality,



and personality traits. Along with this contribution, the authors provided a basic model of personality, relationship quality and interactions over time; 1994 to 2001 (Figure 2).

In conclusion, individuals who are provided with better parenting, observe positive marital interactions, and have a better relationship quality as a child are more likely to have greater competence in early adult romantic relationships. I have demonstrated the possibility that romantic relationships can last long-term. I have also shown that developmental-contextual variables and individual differences help determine both attachment style and competence in relationships, however, as Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger (2005, p. 572) state “ Although relationships are certain to have emergent properties, qualities of the relationship are nonetheless shaped by what each partner brings to the union”.

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