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## Romantic Relationships in Adolescence: Developmental Perspectives

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*Same-gender and cross-gender friendships are examined as potential contexts for the development of social preferences and skills that may influence the quality of adolescent dating relationships and adult marriages.*

## Gender Development and Heterosexual Romantic Relationships During Adolescence

*Campbell Leaper, Kristin J. Anderson*

One of the hallmarks of adolescence is the beginning of romantic relationships. Although many adolescents may either delay heterosexual dating until later years or indicate a preference for same-gender sexual partners, most will begin heterosexual relationships. The way in which adolescent girls and boys begin to relate with one another is apt to be influenced by their experiences in other types of relationships. As Furman and Wehner (1994, p. 182) recently argued, "adolescents are likely to be predisposed to respond to romantic partners as they have in other relationships." Moreover, how young women and men relate to one another in their first romantic relationships may lay the foundation for later sexual and nonsexual cross-gender relationships.<sup>1</sup> Despite the potentially important links between adolescents' romantic relationships and other relationships, surprisingly few comparisons have been made of these different types of relationships (Furman, 1993, p. 94). In an attempt to contribute to our thinking on this topic and possibly stimulate new research directions, this chapter explores ways in which same-and cross-gender friendships may influence the quality of adolescents' and young adults' heterosexual romantic relationships. We also consider how traditional gender development may undermine the emergence of qualities associated with high degrees of satisfaction in romantic relationships.

The chapter is divided into four sections. First, we consider some of the practical reasons why it is important to examine adolescent romantic relationships. Second, we consider how children's traditionally gender-segregated peer relationships contribute to miscommunications and power asymmetries in later heterosexual relationships, which in turn may lead to

relationship dissatisfaction. Third, we review some of the correlates of relationship satisfaction and dysfunction in heterosexual romantic relationships. Finally, we consider possible ways to foster in adolescents the social orientations and skills associated with satisfaction in romantic relationships. Given the absence of relevant research directly testing for the links between adolescent gender development and romantic relationships, our chapter typically relies on indirect evidence to support our ideas.

### Why Study Factors Related to Adolescent Romantic Relationships?

**Teenage Pregnancy, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, and Dating Violence in Adolescent Heterosexual Relationships.** Social scientists and laypersons alike are sounding alarms about the current state of adolescent heterosexual relationships in the United States. First, there is much concern about the widespread prevalence of teenage pregnancy (Hansen, Christopher, and Nangle, 1992; National Center for Health Statistics, 1993). Nearly two-fifths of adolescent girls become pregnant before the age of twenty. The babies born to these mothers account for nearly 13 percent of all U.S. births. The rates for teenage pregnancy and birth in the United States exceed those for any other developed country. These statistics are a serious cause for concern due to the great difficulties typically faced by teenage mothers and their babies. Infants born to teenage mothers are at significantly greater risk for a variety of health problems, including complications from premature birth. Most teenage mothers are single parents and one-third of them drop out of school. Lacking adequate job skills, child care, or support from the father, teenage mothers are likely to become financially dependent on either their families or welfare. In the United States, 60 percent of all women receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children are teen mothers. In addition to being poor, teenage mothers usually do not have the social supports or parenting skills to provide adequate child rearing for their children.

A second crisis associated with adolescent heterosexual relationships is the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Teenagers have the highest rate of STDs of any age group in the United States. Approximately one-fourth of adolescents contract an STD by the age of twenty-one (Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). Most important, however, is the fact that HIV infection is increasing at the fastest rate among adolescents; one-fourth of new infections in the United States occurs in teenagers.

Finally, the widespread incidence of dating violence is a serious cause for concern. Due to different definitions of what constitutes dating violence (ranging from assault to battery to rape), the rates of incidence vary somewhat across surveys. The estimates generally range between one-tenth to one-third of U.S. high school and college students have experienced physical violence in dating relationships (Bergman, 1992; Carlson, 1987; Levy, 1990). Moreover, some surveys targeting specific schools or geographic regions have reported inci-

dences of dating violence exceeding 50 percent (Jezl, 1996; O'Keeffe, Brockopp, and Chew, 1986).

For many teens and young adults, violence may be accepted as a normal and expected part of a dating relationship. Researchers have found, for example, that dating violence usually is not viewed by teenagers as a cause for terminating the relationship, that it is likely to recur during the course of the relationship, and that it usually may not even be recognized as violence by either partner (Bergman, 1992; Laner, 1990). Furthermore, the effects of these experiences may continue later in life. Those teenagers who experience dating violence are more likely to be victims or perpetrators of violence in their adult relationships (White and Humphrey, 1994). In addition to the impact of relationship violence on the individuals involved, the criminal costs of arresting, prosecuting, and incarcerating batterers further burdens society as a whole.

**Relationship Dissatisfaction and Violence in Adult Marriages.** The status of contemporary American heterosexual marriages provides additional reasons for looking back to adolescence to identify possible precursors and explore potential preventative interventions. Two issues are highlighted.

First, relationship dissatisfaction and divorce are common occurrences in most contemporary marriages in America. Approximately half of all marriages end in divorce. Although marriage is positively correlated with psychological adjustment in both women and men, the correlation is stronger for men than for women (Gove, Style, and Hughes, 1990; Wood, Rhodes, and Whelan, 1989). Also, women are twice as likely as men to initiate a divorce (National Center for Health Statistics, 1989). Therefore, women may be more likely than men not to be satisfied within the marriage, which leads to a greater likelihood to initiate divorce. After divorce, however, men are at a significantly greater risk for psychological adjustment problems (including depression and suicide) than women (McKenry and Price, 1990). Thus, the nature of marital dissatisfaction and dissolution appears somewhat different for women and men: women may be more likely to experience greater dissatisfaction inside a marriage, but men may be more apt to experience greater distress following divorce. Ultimately, both women and men suffer when marital relationships do not work.

One of the reasons for many American women's dissatisfaction in marriage and eventual divorce is domestic violence. Although men as well as women are victims of relationship violence, women are approximately ten times more likely than men to be victims of violence by an intimate partner (Bachman and Pillemer, 1992). In the United States, conservative estimates are that 10 percent of women in marriages experience physical battering, verbal abuse, or forced sex (Bagarozzi and Giddings, 1983; Bograd, 1986). Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury in the United States for women between fifteen and forty-four years of age (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1991).

The impact of domestic violence is far-reaching and extends to any children present in the family. Over three million children are exposed to parental

violence each year (Carlson, 1991), and child abuse is fifteen times more likely in families with domestic violence (Carter, Stacey, and Shupe, 1988). These experiences appear to have long-lasting effects on many of these children. Men who witnessed their parents' domestic violence when growing up are three times more likely than sons of nonviolent parents to abuse their own wives (Straus and Gelles, 1988). Conversely, women who witnessed domestic violence as children are at greater risk for entering abusive relationships (Follingstad, Rutledge, McNeill-Harkins, and Polek, 1992; Reuterman and Burcky, 1989; White and Humphrey, 1994). In these ways, the cycle of violence is repeated.

In summary, there is no shortage of sad statistics that underscore the crises occurring in women's and men's relationships: teenage pregnancy, life-threatening STDs, domestic violence, and generally unhappy lives. The risks are real for young women and men as well as for any children that result from their union. In the rest of the chapter we attempt to understand the nature of some of the problems underlying these crises. We explore some relevant factors in the development of heterosocial relationships, as well as consider some possible alternative pathways and means of intervention for improving these relationships. Some critics suggest that returning to more traditional gender roles is what is needed to solve these social problems (for example, Murray, 1995). We disagree. Instead, we argue that fostering greater gender equality can help to alleviate some of these current dilemmas.

In the next section we review possible origins of the emergence of traditional patterns in girls' and boys' social relationships that may contribute to later difficulties in heterosocial interactions and relationships. The maintenance of gender-segregated peer associations during childhood is targeted in particular. Afterwards, in the third part of the chapter, we consider factors related to satisfying romantic relationships. Finally, we explore how cross-gender intimacy may be fostered during development.

### The Legacies of Childhood Gender Segregation in Adolescence and Adulthood

Children typically begin demonstrating preferences for same-gender peers—known as gender segregation—around the age of three. These preferences are maintained throughout childhood until heterosocial and heterosexual relationships begin to emerge during adolescence (Maccoby, 1990). Gender-differentiated developmental pathways in peer play and relationships foster corresponding gender differences in social norms and social skills (see Leaper, 1994). For instance, girls' traditional play with dolls and kitchen sets provides them with relatively more opportunities than boys to practice the social-relational skills that are typically beneficial in the private world of intimate relationships. In contrast, boys' traditional play with construction toys or in team sports gives them relatively more opportunities to practice the instrumental-assertive skills that are advantageous in the public world of work. These divergent developmental pathways are maintained by parents (Fagot, 1995; Leaper,

Anderson, and Sanders, 1997), teachers (Leaper, 1995; Lockheed, 1985; Sadker and Sadker, 1994), and peers (Leaper, 1994; Leaper and Holliday, 1995; Maccoby, 1990, 1994). Thus, by the time they reach adolescence, boys traditionally have been prepared to approach relationships more in terms of greater independence and dominance, whereas girls traditionally have been socialized to approach relationships more in terms of nurturance and support (see Leaper, 1994). Consequently, men may demonstrate a more domineering and autonomous communication style, whereas women may demonstrate a more accommodating and engaging communication style. It is our thesis that differences in social norms and social-cognitive skills resulting from children's gender-segregated peer affiliations contribute in part to later communication difficulties and power asymmetries in heterosexual romantic relationships (see Gottman and Carrere, 1994; Leaper, 1994).

The traditional masculine gender-role pathway is of particular importance for understanding the unfortunate incidence of male violence in adolescent and adult romantic relationships. Toward this end, several authors have highlighted ways that the normative experiences and rewards associated with most boys' childhoods actually potentiates the likelihood of men's violence toward women. First, at early ages, boys learn to avoid anything considered "feminine"—which typically includes social sensitivity, nurturance, and emotional expressiveness (Levant, 1995). Also, boys receive more encouragement to confront others directly (and sometimes aggressively) with their anger (Levant, 1995). For example, fistfights on the playground or in the neighborhood are common occurrences during a boy's development but are relatively rare in a girl's experience. In contrast, researchers find that girls are more likely to express their anger and aggression in less overtly aggressive ways through, for example, creating coalitions with other children (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, and Kaukiainen, 1992; Crick and Grotpeter, 1995).

Gender differences in athletic participation are also tied to corresponding differences in aggression. Although their participation in sports such as baseball, basketball, track, and soccer has increased during recent years, girls rarely engage in highly aggressive contact sports such as football, hockey, and boxing. Journalists and social scientists have noted that these contact sports are sanctioned contexts in which it is acceptable for boys and men to act in physically aggressive ways (Messner and Sabo, 1994; Miedzian, 1991; Nelson, 1994). Moreover, the emphasis on physical aggression in these sports has been correlated with positive attitudes toward sexism and male dominance as well as higher incidences of violence toward women (see Messner and Sabo, 1994). For example, Koss and Dinero (1988) found that college athletes are responsible for approximately one-third of reported campus sexual assaults. Thus the culture of violence that predominates in many boys' world of sports may orient some men toward violence in close relationships (see Messner and Sabo, 1994; Nelson, 1994).

There is some evidence that tolerance for male aggression may have unfortunate consequences on later romantic relationships. Several researchers have

reported a greater likelihood of dating violence among adolescent boys and girls who were more accepting toward male dominance and aggression (Follingstad, Rutledge, McNeill-Harkins, and Polek, 1992; Hansen, Christopher, and Nangle, 1992; Lundberg-Love and Geffner, 1989; White and Humphrey, 1994; White and Koss, 1993). The findings are only correlational, however, and it is unclear to what extent tolerant attitudes regarding male aggression actually contribute to the likelihood that some boys will act violently or that some girls will enter into abusive relationships. Additional developmental research is needed to test the link between children's and adolescents' participation in aggressive sports, tolerance for aggression, and later functioning in romantic relationships.

We have reviewed some of the traditional ways in which many boys are engaged in social contexts that value dominance and overt aggression. Turning to girls, we can also note ways that they are usually involved in social situations stressing interpersonal sensitivity and closeness. Accordingly, we know from various studies that girls are generally more likely than boys to develop intimate friendships during adolescence. Whereas most adolescent girls appear to establish intimate friendships characterized by reciprocal disclosures and mutual support, adolescent boys are much more variable (Berndt, 1992; Buhrmester and Furman, 1987; Camarena, Sarigiani, and Petersen, 1990; Sharabany, Gershoni, and Hofman, 1981). For example, when Youniss and Smollar (1985) examined same-gender friendship qualities in adolescents, they found that two-thirds of adolescent girls had close friendships characterized by mutual openness and intimacy, but fewer than half of adolescent boys had similarly close same-gender friendships. Relatedly, when asked to indicate a problem in their friendships, adolescent boys were more likely than girls to mention a lack of reciprocation or help (approximately 25 percent versus 7 percent, respectively). Thus, given the emphasis on emotional control and competition associated with boys' childhood peer groups, establishing friendship intimacy may pose a greater challenge to boys than to girls. Furthermore, to the extent that they have viewed same-gender friendship intimacy differently, many adolescent boys and girls may also enter romantic relationships with different perspectives. For instance, when Feiring (1995) asked fifteen-year-old adolescents to evaluate various qualities in romantic relationships, more than half of the girls but only one-third of the boys mentioned intimacy as an advantage (54 percent versus 32 percent, respectively).

In sum, research strongly suggests that from an early age girls' and boys' gender-segregated and gender-normed peer relationships tend to provide different experiences and promote different skills, which may clash later when young women and men come together to form heterosexual romantic relationships. Now that we have considered some of the developmental processes that may possibly foster later difficulties and problems in heterosexual romantic relationships, we next examine some of the factors related to *satisfying* romantic relationships.

### What Accounts for Satisfying Romantic Relationships?

During recent decades there has been an increasing trend toward greater gender equality in sexual and work relationships in the United States and other western societies. Despite these changes, most heterosexual dating relationships still tend to follow traditional roles. For example, in a recent survey of 413 heterosexually dating undergraduates, Felmlee (1994) found that fewer than half perceived their relationships to be equal in the distribution of power. Imbalances in decision making, emotional involvement, and overall equity were most commonly reported. Men were twice as likely as women to be viewed as the one with more power. Conversely, women were seen as more emotionally engaged in the relationship. These differences reflect the traditional model of heterosexual relationships described by Parsons and Bales (1955) in which the husband takes on the role of "instrumental leader" while the wife assumes the role of "socioemotional leader."

Although change may be slow, there is evidence to support the trend toward equality in love relationships. Egalitarian relationships are generally associated with high degrees of satisfaction in studies of heterosexual romantic relationships (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Hecht, Marston, and Larkey, 1994; Kurdek and Schmitt, 1986; Winn, Crawford, and Fischer, 1991) and homosexual romantic relationships (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek and Schmitt, 1986), as well as same-gender friendships (Winn, Crawford, and Fischer, 1991).

If egalitarian relationships are not based on a complementarity of roles, as proposed in Parsons and Bales's model, then how is equality expressed in these relationships? To a large extent, both the woman and the man share the roles as socioemotional and instrumental leaders. Thus there is a combination of mutual decision making (instrumental function) and mutual expressiveness and support (socioemotional function). Relationship equality defined in this way is largely accomplished through communication. Accordingly, the research literature strongly indicates that friends as well as dating couples who have similar communication skills are more likely to have mutually satisfying, long-lasting relationships (see Burleson and Samter, 1994). However, as described earlier in the chapter, traditional gender development tends to foster different communication styles in girls and boys. Indeed, when surveyed about the kinds of dating problems they most often encounter, a sample of 334 college students often mentioned difficulties in communication (Knox and Wilson, 1983). For women, frequently cited problems included "unwanted pressure to engage in sexual behavior" (23 percent), "sexual misunderstandings" (9 percent), and "communication with date" (20 percent). For men, the most commonly mentioned problems included "communication with date" (35 percent) and "honesty/openness" (8 percent). Thus, both women and men often noted difficulties communicating and relating with one another. For the women, there were additional complaints about negotiating sexual boundaries. The

situation does not seem to change in marriage. Marriage counselors are regularly confronted with couples having difficulties communicating with each other (Gottman, 1994). The pervasiveness of communication difficulties in contemporary heterosexual relationships is also reflected by the seemingly endless appearance of best-selling books on love relationships and communication.

If many teenage girls and boys as well as adult women and men are having problems talking and relating with one another, what aspects of communication are tied to satisfying love relationships? Two sets of processes have been emphasized in the research literature: self-disclosure and listener support, and disagreement and conflict.

**Mutual Self-Disclosure.** Self-disclosure is an effective strategy for expressing and freeing one's feelings, revealing and sharing one's self with a partner, as well as allowing for the opportunity to get some validation and insight from the partner's feedback. Therefore, it should be no surprise that studies generally show a strong correlation between mutual self-disclosure and married couples' relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, 1981). The same appears true in adolescent romantic relationships as well. Hansen, Christopher, and Nangle (1992) reviewed various conversational skills correlated with successful heterosocial interactions and relationships, and self-disclosure and listener support were the most important predictors.

Traditional gender differences in expressiveness may contribute to frustrations in heterosexual relationships. There is a tendency toward less self-disclosure in boys' and men's friendships than in girls' and women's friendships (Dindia and Allen, 1992; Hill and Stull, 1987). However, studies suggest that the difference may be in preference rather than ability. Adolescent boys and young men appear willing to disclose to female friends but not to male friends (Reisman, 1990; Youniss and Smollar, 1985).

The influence of the partner's gender on boys' and men's willingness to self-disclose reflects the fact that gender differences in intimacy are partly a function of self-presentational concerns (Deaux and Major, 1987). Researchers have interpreted this situational variation as reflecting boys' and men's concern with appearing masculine with their male friends (see Leaper, 1994). However, to the extent that adolescent boys spend most of their time with male friends, these self-presentational concerns may limit the kinds of social skills they exercise and develop. If adolescent boys and young men avoid disclosing with one another, they will also be avoiding opportunities to refine the social skills associated with being a supportive listener. Thus, a difference in preference may develop into a difference in ability.

Besides sharing one's feelings, a reciprocal component of an intimate relationship is being a good listener. In their review of various conversational skills associated with satisfying heterosocial relationships, Hansen, Christopher, and Nangle (1992) indicated that acknowledging the other and showing support were related to successful interactions. Conversely, making negative statements and being nonresponsive to the other's statements were associated with het-

erosocial difficulties. Thus, in addition to sharing one's thoughts and feelings, it is necessary to know how to be a good listener. In many romantic relationships, however, it appears that the man may receive his romantic partner's support but not reciprocate that support in response to her disclosures (Tannen, 1990).

An example of how gender differences in listener support may tend to occur was suggested in a recent study looking at young adults' conversations with a friend. Leaper and colleagues (1995) studied eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds discussing their family relationships with either a same-gender or cross-gender friend. The listener's verbal responses following the friend's self-disclosure were analyzed in terms of levels of support and responsiveness. Some of the coded listening responses included active understanding (reflective, supportive statements), back channel listening statements (for example, "um-hmm"), and abstaining responses (no verbal response following a self-disclosure). Active understanding listener responses to friends' self-disclosures occurred proportionally more for women with female friends (27 percent) than for either women with male friends (13 percent), men with male friends (14 percent), or men with female friends (14 percent). The implication for heterosexual relationships is that many women may find themselves unsatisfied with the man's degree of listener support. The man, however, may be enjoying the rewards of the woman's responsiveness.

The interaction between individual and situational factors is emphasized in Deaux and Major's (1987) theoretical model of gender. Individual cognitive factors include the person's self-presentational concerns, attitudes, and social schemas, and situational factors include aspects of the interactive setting such as the activity and the gender of the participants. Correlational studies suggest a relationship between gender schemas and expressiveness in romantic relationships. For example, relationship quality and relationship satisfaction were higher among couples in which both partners have either "feminine" (socioemotional) or "androgynous" (combined instrumental and socioemotional) self-concepts (Kurdek and Schmitt, 1986). Also, individuals with "androgynous" self-concepts reported greater willingness to self-disclose than those with traditional gender self-concepts (Sollie and Fischer, 1985).

The previously cited evidence linking gender attitudes and schemas to relationship qualities is limited to correlational studies. Therefore, it is difficult to discern the extent to which people's attitudes direct versus reflect their behavior. Some experimental studies have highlighted how situational factors may be causally related to gender variations in individuals' behavior. For example, research was cited earlier indicating that men were more likely to self-disclose with women than with men friends. In addition to the friend's gender, the activity setting is another factor that may contribute to one's willingness to self-disclose. Several studies have shown that women and men tend to differ in their topic preferences during conversation (see Bischooping, 1993). Specifically, women were more apt to talk about other people, whereas men were more apt to talk about things they do (for example, sports, work). However,

when studies have assigned particular topics to discuss, an interesting finding emerges: the conversation topic rather than the speaker's (or the listener's) gender accounts for much of the variation in communication style. For example, in our own research (Anderson and Leaper, 1997), we asked young women and men to discuss different topics with one of their friends. In a self-disclosure situation, they were asked to discuss how their family relations have changed since entering college. In an unstructured situation, we allowed them to discuss whatever they wanted. When we analyzed the participants' conversational content for emotional expression, conversational topic was more predictive of emotion expression than was gender. In particular, we found relatively few references to negative emotions for either women or men in the unstructured setting compared to the self-disclosure topic. Furthermore, when negative emotions were discussed during the self-disclosure topic, speakers were more likely to refer to negative emotions using indirect phrases rather than explicit emotion terms. Thus, the assigned topic predicted the type of emotion discussed (positive or negative) as well as the linguistic form (direct or indirect) that was used to express emotions.

**Conflict and Disagreement.** Research indicates that another important predictor of relationship satisfaction and adjustment is the couple's capacity to engage in conversations about their disagreements (Gottman, 1993; Kurdek and Schmitt, 1986). Moreover, relationship satisfaction is strongly tied to the ability of one partner to bring up disagreements without the other partner either withdrawing or countercomplaining (Gottman, 1993). For example, withdrawal by husbands during discussions of issues initiated by the wife can reliably predict a decline in wives' relationship satisfaction (Heavey, Christensen, and Malamuth, 1995). Men's withdrawal during conflict with their partners may be a result of men's fear of relationship connectedness (Bergman, 1995). Also, there is some evidence suggesting that men tend to have more difficulty than women regulating negative affect during interpersonal conflicts. In support of this argument, Gottman and Levenson (1988) observed higher levels of autonomic arousal among husbands than wives during a marital conflict. One possible reaction is a "flight" response in the form of withdrawal and avoidance (Gottman, 1993; Heavey, Christensen, and Malamuth, 1995). However, an alternative reaction can be a "fight" response in the form of lashing out through physical abuse (Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, and Gottman, 1993). Additionally, as Noller (1993) postulates, men's silence during relationship conflicts may function to maintain their power over the situation. The person who withdraws leaves the other person powerless to resolve the conflict.

The correlations between men's withdrawal and emotional arousal during conflict does not establish the causal relationship (if any) between these factors. Some of the relevant research questions for developmental investigators to consider include the following: Are some men less communicative about their feelings during conflict resulting from their heightened levels of arousal? Or do these men experience heightened arousal during conflicts because they are not used to discussing their feelings? Or does avoiding emotion-laden

material become a vicious cycle in boys' and men's lives? We consider some possible answers.

Because boys and men attempt to control their emotions, they may become more aroused when confronted with interpersonal conflicts. When with their male friends, boys and men can intentionally avoid emotion-laden topics. Recall that studies indicate that men are less likely to discuss personal matters with their men friends (Bischoping, 1993). To the extent that people are more at ease in familiar than in unfamiliar situations, it may be that men who grew up learning to hide their feelings are at risk for relatively heightened autonomic arousal when their wives bring up emotional topics. For these men, verbal intimacy may be an unfamiliar context in which they perceive themselves having little control. This interpretation may also explain the common complaint among women that men respond to their self-disclosures with advice (for example, Tannen, 1990). Advising a solution is a way to restore a sense of control and get the issue out of the way. This gender difference seems to appear in gay and lesbian relationships as well. Kurdek and Schmitt (1986) found evidence that men in gay romantic relationships were more likely than women in lesbian relationships to report difficulties in communicating about inner thoughts and feelings (expectations for "mind reading").

According to some researchers (Bergman, 1995; Miller, Danaher, and Forbes, 1986; Tannen, 1990), girls (and women) differ from boys (and men) in how they view and respond to conflict. For the traditional man, disagreements may be interpreted as *competition* for viewpoints. In contrast, for the traditional woman, disagreements may be interpreted more as opportunities to *share* perspectives (Bergman, 1995). Paradoxically, each party may find the other's approach confrontive. The traditional woman may find the man's competition-for-viewpoints approach as domineering and insensitive, whereas the traditional man may find the woman's expectation for reciprocal disclosure as threatening to his sense of control. Consequently, miscommunication would occur between the partners. However, the outcome affects the woman and the man asymmetrically because it favors the man's control and dominance over the relationship (Henley, 1995). Also, to the extent that men are generally more satisfied with the marital situation, they may be less likely to complain to their partners and they have less to lose by withdrawing from conflict when the wives want to discuss their issues (Fitzpatrick and Mulac, 1995).

In addition to conflict handling being related to overall relationship satisfaction, another reason for considering how couples handle conflict is that recent research indicates that those couples who do not adequately deal with conflicts are at greater risk for relationship violence. Gryl (1991) examined the relationship between first-year college students' reports of dating violence and how they handled relationship conflicts. Participants in violent relationships were more likely than those in nonviolent relationships to report having relationship conflicts. Moreover, those in violent relationships used more indirect emotional appeals as negotiation strategies, and relied on confrontation and escape-avoidance as coping strategies. Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, and Gottman

(1993) similarly found a greater likelihood of the demand-withdraw pattern and husband's violence toward their wives. However, the violent marriages were specific to those relationships in which it was the husband's issue (demand) that was ignored by the wife (withdrawal) rather than the reverse.

All of the previous examples of studies examining the link between processes of conflict and relationship satisfaction have been carried out with adult dating or married couples. To our knowledge, there are no corresponding studies looking at the communication correlates of relationship quality among dating adolescents. We hypothesize that the same sorts of factors related to satisfaction in adult romantic relationships will be found in adolescents' dating relationships. Moreover, we expect that those adolescents whose romantic relationships share many of these features will be best prepared to enjoy happy love relationships later in life.

### Fostering Intimacy and Relationship Satisfaction in Adolescent Romantic Relationships

**Interventions Aimed at Improving Romantic Relationships.** A few experimental intervention programs have been designed to improve some of the factors related to relationship satisfaction. For example, experimental mixed-gender programs aimed at preventing dating violence have been successful in modifying the attitudes of both high school students (Jaffe, 1992; Lavoie, Vezina, Piche, and Boivin, 1995) and college students (Holcomb, Sarvela, Sondag, and Holcomb, 1993). In addition to endeavoring to change attitudes, intervention programs have also been aimed at improving social skills. Workshops can help adolescents develop their perspective-taking, negotiation, and listening skills (Christopher, Nangle, and Hansen, 1993; Hansen, Christopher, and Nangle, 1992; Heitland, 1986). For example, Heitland (1986) implemented an experimental training program in premarital communication with high school seniors and college undergraduates. After participating in the program, both young women and young men showed increased competence on measures of communication effectiveness, including listening, self-expression, and joint problem solving. Heitland's intervention program as well as those previously cited were pilot programs. Additional research is needed to identify more specifically the components of a successful program as well as their long-term impact on love relationships. The preliminary findings from the intervention studies suggest that we can teach young women and men how to communicate and relate better with one another.

In addition to implementing intervention programs during junior high school years, another potentially helpful strategy for fostering heterosocial skills is the encouragement of cross-gender cooperation and friendships earlier in life. This idea is explored next.

**Linking Cross-Gender Friendships and Romantic Relationships.** To the extent that girls and boys learn to form reciprocal, egalitarian friendships with one another in adolescence, they may be better prepared to develop rec-

iprocal, egalitarian love relationships in adulthood. In other words, we contend that love relationships are apt to be most satisfying when a person's romantic partner is also her or his best friend (see Hendrick and Hendrick, 1993). Our premise is consistent with the more general idea that adolescents' romantic relationships are influenced by their prior relationships (Connolly and Johnson, 1996; Furman and Wehner, 1994). Most adolescents' role models for close relationships likely come from their parents and same-gender friends (Connolly and Johnson, 1996). To the extent that parents provide traditionally imbalanced role models (Leaper, Anderson, and Sanders, 1997) and that same-gender friends provide gender-stereotyped patterns (Leaper, 1994), young women and men are apt to learn different ways of interpreting and acting in social relationships. In contrast, having close cross-gender friendships during childhood and adolescence may provide the basis for easier cross-gender romantic relationships during adolescence and adulthood. We can only pose this idea as a hypothesis, however, given the absence of relevant research on cross-gender friendship and its correlates during adolescence.

What we do know about cross-gender friendship is based primarily on work carried out with post-adolescent college students. Contrary to some earlier speculation that male dominance may be an obstacle in cross-gender friendships (McWilliams and Howard, 1993; O'Meara, 1989), subsequent research indicates that cross-gender friendships are typically egalitarian relationships (Monsour, Beard, Harris, and Kurzweil, 1994). Thus, to the extent that young women and men participate in nonsexual friendships together during adolescence, they may learn to integrate the social orientations that traditionally get bifurcated during childhood. Young men may learn to express their feelings more openly as well as develop supportive communication skills. Reciprocally, young women may learn to assert their wishes more directly and develop their instrumental interests. Through these experiences, both women and men may be better prepared to enter intimate, egalitarian romantic relationships with one another.

To date, no longitudinal or retrospective studies have tested our hypothesis that those adolescents who have close cross-gender friends are more likely to experience satisfying romantic relationships later in life. There is evidence, however, that suggests that sharing similar social norms and social orientations emphasizing closeness and equality in childhood and adolescence may benefit the quality of one's romantic relationships later in adulthood. This evidence comes from some recent work indicating that lesbian relationships are more likely than heterosexual or gay men's love relationships to share many of the features of friendship—most notably, equality and reciprocity (Bell and Weinberg, 1978; Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Clunis and Green, 1988; Peplau and Cochran, 1990; Peplau, Veniegas, and Campbell, 1995). We speculate that part of this difference may result from lesbians having shared similar gender-related social norms and social orientations emphasizing equality and intimacy during childhood and early adolescence. Indeed, women in general appear more concerned than men with pursuing egalitarian relationships. For



example, when asked to consider what they would do if they benefited in an inequitable manner in their relationship, women were more likely than men to indicate that they would make efforts to restore equity in the relationship; men were more likely than women to indicate that they would do nothing (Sprecher, 1992). The results are generally consistent with developmental studies of children and adolescents that found that girls are more likely than boys to emphasize symmetry and mutual collaboration in their same-gender friendships (see Leaper, 1994; Youniss and Smollar, 1985). Thus, we further speculate that similar outcomes would occur for *all* types of romantic relationships if boys as well as girls grew up learning to value closeness and mutuality in relationships. Also, we expect that asymmetries in power and status between women and men would be reduced if girls and boys grew up learning to share control over roles and activities in a cooperative manner. We hope these ideas will receive more attention in future research.

### Conclusions: Bringing Women and Men Together

If the premises and arguments in this chapter are accepted, then the reader may wonder how to implement them. Therefore, we close our chapter with two interrelated recommendations. First, family members and educators can make a more concerted effort to make cross-gender cooperation a regular part of children's and adolescents' daily experience. Although favoring same-gender peers may be an inevitable part of children's development, it is possible to increase cooperative cross-gender interactions that may lead to friendships. Studies show that children will interact cooperatively with the other gender when adults provide a structured context that encourages it (for example, Serbin, Tonick, and Sternglanz, 1977). Thus, situations can be arranged that allow children and adolescents to learn from the other gender (see Leaper, 1994). Second, schools and community organizations can institute training workshops to help prepare adolescents for intimate relationships. In light of contemporary concerns with teenage pregnancy and dating and marital violence, as well as with AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, we must seek ways to teach young women and men how to communicate and relate better with one another. As our review has highlighted, we are only beginning to investigate the kinds of factors related to adolescent romantic relationships.

### Note

1. Consistent with the policy of at least two research journals (*Sex Roles* and *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*), we use the word *gender* to refer broadly to one's assignment as a female or a male. In contrast, the word *sex* is viewed as referring more explicitly to hypothesized or known biological factors. This chapter does not address potential biological influences on adolescents' romantic relationships. Therefore, we use the term *gender* exclusively throughout. Additionally, rather than use the phrase *opposite gender* (which perpetuates the stereotype that women and men are "opposites"), we deliberately use the terms *cross gender* or *other gender*.

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