The interpersonal context of romantic autonomy in adolescence

Ali Taradash, Jennifer Connolly, Debra Pepler, Wendy Craig and Monique Costa

This study explored the interpersonal context of romantic autonomy in mid adolescence by examining within-relationship links with romantic intimacy and affiliation, links across relationships with mothers and friends, and individual differences due to age and gender. Two hundred and thirty adolescents in grades 9, 10 and 11 with a current romantic partner, completed self-report questionnaires assessing their relationships. The results indicated that romantic autonomy was positively linked to romantic intimacy and affiliation, although this link differed according to the duration of the romantic relationship. The results also indicated that romantic autonomy was higher among girls than boys. Finally, romantic autonomy was uniquely linked to intimacy and autonomy in both maternal and friend relationships. Overall, this study highlights the interconnection of intimacy and autonomy in romantic relationships and the interconnections across relationships.

Introduction

Romantic relationships begin to emerge during adolescence and are of central concern to young people at this time (Connolly and Goldberg, 1999). Although adolescents’ romantic relationships are often short in duration, they are, nonetheless, characterized as very intimate and intense (Feiring, 1996). In adolescents’ other relationships, autonomy is thought to emerge as a collateral feature of intimacy (Selman, 1989; Allen et al., 1994). Since intimacy is a central feature of adolescents’ romantic relationships (Connolly and Goldberg, 1999), it is likely that autonomy is also an important feature. Much is known about the parameters of autonomy in the intimate relationships of adults and of its co-occurrence with intimacy (Rankin et al., 1997). Little, however, is known about autonomy within adolescents’ romantic relationships. The purpose of the present study is to explore romantic autonomy and its relational context in mid-adolescence. We examine its links with romantic intimacy and affiliation, links to relationships with mothers and friends, and differences due to age and gender.

The interpersonal context of romantic autonomy

Links to intimacy

For many years, autonomy and intimacy were conceptualized as independent relational processes. Autonomy has been defined as behavioral and emotional independence, feeling comfort with differences from others, feeling secure with the self, and being self-reliant (Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986; Ryan and Lynch, 1989; Montgomery et al., 1995; Hodgins et al., 1996).
Intimacy, on the other hand, has been conceptualized as support, trust, closeness, and connectedness with others (Sullivan, 1953; Sharabany et al., 1981). Recently, there has been considerable interest in the interplay between intimacy and autonomy (Baxter, 1988; Guisinger and Blatt, 1995; Baxter and Erbert, 1999), and it has been suggested that they are co-developing processes such that intimacy creates a relational context within which autonomy can develop (Allen et al., 1994).

Focusing on parent–adolescent relationships, theorists initially emphasized the necessity of emotional detachment from parents in order for adolescents to gain autonomy and independence (Blos, 1967; Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986). More recently, the value of detachment has been questioned, and instead it has been suggested that it is important for adolescents to maintain close connections to their parents while autonomy develops (Hill and Holmbeck, 1986; Ryan and Lynch, 1989; Allen et al., 1994; Collins and Repinski, 1994; Allen and Ladd, 1999). Allen et al. (1994) stressed the importance of maintaining a balance between autonomy and relatedness within the parental relationship for healthy adolescent development. Within the peer relationship as well, similar co-developing processes are suggested for intimacy and autonomy (Selman and Schultz, 1990; Hodgins et al., 1996; Shulman and Knafo, 1997). As adolescent friends come to share moments of intimacy, there is also a need to establish autonomy in order for the relationship to flourish (Selman, 1989).

Among adults, there is evidence that romantic autonomy and relatedness are positively linked (Rankin et al., 1997). Moreover, individuals who balance autonomy with connectedness in their marital relationship reported the highest levels of self-validation within their marriage (Harter et al., 1997). The capacity to express personal autonomy within the context of a close relationship is thus important for adult romantic relationships.

Although the link between intimacy and autonomy has been uncovered in adolescents’ parent and peer relationships as well as in adults’ romantic relationships, links between autonomy and intimacy in adolescents’ romantic relationships are unexplored. Similar to intimacy and autonomy in adolescents’ other close relationships, we expected that romantic autonomy would be linked to romantic intimacy, such that higher levels of intimacy would be accompanied by higher levels of autonomy. This link, however, may be affected by the duration of the romantic relationship. In comparison with other relationships, adolescents’ romantic relationships are often shorter in duration and consequently are characterized by high levels of affiliation rather than by emotional intimacy (Feiring, 1996; Connolly and Goldberg, 1999). As adolescents’ romantic relationships endure, however, emotional closeness emerges and there is a shift from a focus on affiliation to a focus on intimacy (Connolly and Johnson, 1996; Connolly and Goldberg, 1999). Hence, a link between intimacy and autonomy might be most evident in romantic relationships of longer duration. In romantic relationships of shorter duration, in which adolescents typically report a primacy of shared activities and companionship, autonomy may be more clearly linked to affiliation rather than intimacy.

Age and gender differences in romantic autonomy
Age-related changes in autonomy have been observed within the context of peer and parent–adolescent relationships. Berndt (1979) reported that peer conformity peaks during grade 9 and declines by grade 11. This finding implies that the capacity for autonomy within the peer relationship increases with age. At the same time, conformity to parents was reported to decline with age (Berndt, 1979). As well, increased emotional autonomy from parents has
been observed across early adolescence (Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986). Taken together, these findings indicate that autonomy increases during adolescence within the context of both peer and parent relationships. Little is known, however, about age-related change in autonomy in adolescents’ romantic relationships. We expected that romantic autonomy would show a similar age-related increase and would be more advanced in older adolescents than in younger adolescents.

Gender differences in relationship autonomy have often been reported. Girls show more resistance to peer conformity than do boys (Berndt, 1979; Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986). Girls also report more emotional autonomy in their relationships with their parents than do boys (Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986). Given that girls are more autonomous than boys in their relationships with their parents and peers, it is likely that girls are more autonomous than boys in their relationships with their romantic partners.

Links to parents and friends
Theorists generally agree that the quality of relationships with parents and friends contributes to the development of romantic relationships in adolescence (Sullivan, 1953; Furman and Wehner, 1994; Hazan and Shaver, 1994; Feiring, 1996; Brown, 1999; Furman, 1999; Connolly et al., 2000). For example, supportive relationships with parents and friends were both related to perceptions of support in adolescents’ romantic relationships (Connolly and Johnson, 1996). From a behavioral systems perspective (Furman and Wehner, 1994), interpersonal qualities that characterize prior parent and peer relationships may carry over into the romantic relationship. With regard to autonomy then, adolescents who develop confidence in the expression of personal autonomy with their mothers and friends may transfer this confidence to their romantic relationships. From a social learning perspective (Bandura, 1977), adolescents’ interactions with their parents and friends may also serve as models for their interactions with their romantic partners. Adolescents who develop skills in expressing autonomy with their mothers and friends may apply these learned skills to their romantic relationships.

Maternal and friend intimacy may also be associated with romantic autonomy. Reciprocal influences between intimacy and autonomy exist within relationships (Allen et al., 1994). Moreover, links between intimacy and other relationship attributes have been reported across relationships. For example, Barber and Olsen (1997) found that in 8th grade adolescents, strong connections to parents were positively related to positive social experiences with peers. It is possible then, that close, supportive relationships with mothers and friends facilitate adolescents’ willingness to express their personal needs and beliefs in a romantic context.

Although there may be links between mother, friend, and romantic autonomy, this is not to suggest that these processes necessarily operate in a comparable fashion in all three relationships. For many relationship attributes, such as support and companionship, adolescents’ reported levels differ across relationships. In particular, mid adolescents report more support in their friendships than in their romantic or parent-adolescent relationships (Furman and Buhrmester, 1992). We expect autonomy to show similar differences across relationships and to be more advanced in friendships and maternal relationships than in romantic relationships.

In summary, this study examines romantic autonomy in mid adolescence, focusing in particular on its relational context. We first examined links between romantic autonomy, affiliation, and intimacy in both short- and longer-term romantic relationships. We expected
romantic autonomy to be positively correlated with both intimacy and affiliation, with affiliation more dominant in short-term relationships and intimacy more dominant in longer-term relationships. We then examined differences in romantic autonomy due to age and gender. We expected romantic autonomy to be higher in older adolescents and in girls, compared to younger adolescents and boys. Third, we examined differences in the mean level of autonomy in mother, friend, and romantic relationships. We expected autonomy to be more advanced in relationships with friends and mothers than in relationships with romantic partners. Finally, we examined whether autonomy and intimacy in relationships with mothers and friends would independently contribute to romantic autonomy. We expected that autonomy and intimacy with both mothers and friends would uniquely account for adolescents’ romantic autonomy.

Method

Participants
Participants in this study were selected from a sample of 905 (403 boys; 502 girls) high school students on the basis of their current romantic relationship status. The participants were enrolled in four high schools in a large city in Ontario, Canada and were in grades 9 through 11. Students ranged in age from 13 to 18 years with a mean age of 15·28 (s.d. = 0·98). The ethnic composition of the sample was 70 per cent European-Canadian, 13 per cent Asian-Canadian, 7 per cent African/Caribbean-Canadian, 5 per cent South-Asian Canadian, 2 per cent Latin-American/Hispanic, and 3 per cent of other backgrounds. Seventy-three per cent of the participants were living in intact families, 5·5 per cent were living in step-families, 14 per cent were living in single parent families, 5 per cent were living in joint custody arrangements, and 2·5 per cent were of other family configurations (e.g. living with legal guardians). The parents of the participants were well educated: 80 per cent of the adolescents’ parents had completed high school, with 68 per cent of mothers and 73 per cent of fathers having also completed some post-secondary education. As some of our participants were from divorced or single parent families and often lived with their mothers, our questionnaires assessed relations with mothers and not both parents or fathers.

Of the 905 participants, 230 (106 boys; 124 girls) reported currently having a romantic partner, 170 (83 boys; 87 girls) reported having had a romantic partner in the last six months, 213 (90 boys; 123 girls) reported having had a romantic partner more than six months ago, and 260 (102 boys; 158 girls) reported never having had a romantic partner. Thirty-two of the participants did not report on dating status.

A comparison of those who reported currently having a romantic partner with those who reported having had a romantic partner in the last six months revealed that the “current” sample perceived their romantic relationship as more intimate ($M = 4·16; S.D. = 0·64$) than did the “recent” sample ($M = 3·84; S.D. = 0·69$), $F(1, 336) = 18·39; p < 0·001$. The “current” sample also differed from the “recent” sample on perceived intimacy, $F(1, 377) = 7·36; p < 0·01$, and perceived autonomy, $F(1, 374) = 4·00; p < 0·05$, in the mother-adolescent relationship. The “recent” sample perceived more intimacy ($M = 4·05; S.D. = 0·63$) than the “current” sample ($M = 3·86; S.D. = 0·74$) and more autonomy ($M = 4·10; S.D. = 0·66$) than the “current” sample ($M = 3·96; S.D. = 0·70$) in their relationships with their mothers. As a result of these differences, subsequent data analyses focused on the current dating sample only.
Procedure
Participants completed self-report questionnaires during regularly scheduled class periods. Trained research assistants administered the questionnaires to the participants. Written informed consent was obtained from both parents and adolescents prior to completing the questionnaires.

Measures

Identification of romantic relationships. The Dating Questionnaire (Connolly et al., 1999) was administered to identify adolescents with a romantic partner. To identify adolescents’ dating status, adolescents were asked, “Do you have a romantic partner right now?” Four possible responses were: 1. “Yes, I have one right now.” 2. “No, but I had a romantic partner within the last six months.” 3. “No, but I had one in the past, more than six months ago.” 4. “No, I’ve never had a romantic partner.”

The Dating Questionnaire (Connolly et al., 1999) was also used to assess the duration of the current romantic relationship. Participants were asked to indicate the length of their current relationship in weeks. Scores on the duration of current romantic relationship ranged from 0–30 weeks to 260 weeks. The median score was 10 weeks.

Autonomy in relationships. To assess autonomy in mother, close friend, and romantic relationships, the Autonomy in Close Relationships Scale (ACR; Montgomery et al., 1995) was used. This measure assesses “healthy” autonomy, conceptualized as comfort with differences from others and resilience of the self-concept in relationships with others (Montgomery et al., 1995). Participants were given a modified version of the original scale, in which the six items with the highest factor loadings on two autonomy factors (comfort with differences and resilience of the self concept), were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The ratings ranged from 1 “almost never or never true” to 5 “almost always or always true”. A factor analysis of the six items used in the current study revealed that one item had low similarity with the other items. As a result, the autonomy scale was constructed with five items. Autonomy was scored for each relationship by computing the sum of the five items and creating a mean score. The standardized item alpha coefficients for each relationship were: mother, $\alpha(n=869)=0.71$, friend, $\alpha(n=857)=0.76$, and romantic partner, $\alpha(n=343)=0.76$.

Intimacy in relationships. To assess intimacy in mother, close friend, and romantic relationships, the trust, communication, and alienation subscales from the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden and Greenberg, 1987) were employed. Trust contains nine items (e.g., “I trust my mother”), Communication contains five items (e.g. “I tell my mother everything”), and Alienation contains four items (e.g. “It’s hard for me to talk to my mother”). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with a score of 1 representing “almost never or never true” and a score of 5 representing “almost always or always true”. After reverse coding Alienation, the subscales were averaged to create an overall measure of intimacy for each relationship. The standardized item alphas for each relationship were: mother, $\alpha(n=862)=0.94$ for mother, $\alpha(n=807)=0.93$ for friend, and $\alpha(n=340)=0.94$ for the romantic partner.

Affiliation in romantic relationships. To assess affiliation in romantic relationships, participants were asked to rate the amount of time they spent with their current romantic partner outside of school and on weekends. This question was assessed on a 5-point Likert
Scale ranging from 1 for “less than two hours per week” to 5 for “more than twelve hours per week”.

**Results**

*Links between autonomy, intimacy, and affiliation within romantic relationships*

To examine the association between romantic autonomy, intimacy, and affiliation, correlations were computed. Overall, romantic autonomy was significantly positively correlated with romantic intimacy, $r (n=197)=0.28, p<0.001$. Additionally, romantic autonomy was positively correlated with affiliation, $r (n=206)=0.17, p<0.05$.

Next, the sample was dichotomized based on a median split of duration of the romantic relationship (median=10 weeks). Relationships lasting between 0 and 10 weeks were classified as short-term ($n=111$), whereas relationships lasting more than 11 weeks were classified as longer-term ($n=107$) in duration. Associations between romantic autonomy, affiliation, and intimacy were examined for shorter and longer duration relationships. As shown in Table 1, the results indicated that in short-term romantic relationships, romantic autonomy was significantly positively correlated with affiliation, yet it was not significantly correlated with intimacy. In longer-term relationships, romantic autonomy was significantly positively correlated with intimacy, yet it was not significantly correlated with affiliation.

*Grade, gender, and relationship type differences in autonomy*

To examine mean differences in romantic autonomy across grade and gender as well as mean differences in autonomy across relationship type, a multivariate repeated measures analysis of variance (MANOVA) was computed. Gender and grade were included as between-subjects factors, and relationship type (romantic, mother, and friend) was a within-subjects factor. Multivariate tests revealed a between-subjects main effect of gender, $F(1, 192)=13.28, p<0.001$. Univariate analyses were conducted to further explore the main effect of gender. As indicated by the means in Table 2, girls perceived more autonomy than did boys in their romantic relationships. Girls also perceived more autonomy than did boys in their relationships with their mothers and friends. The main effect of grade and its interaction with gender were non-significant.

Multivariate tests also revealed a significant main effect of relationship, Wilks’ $\lambda$ $F(2, 191)=3.82, p<0.05$. Post-hoc paired sample $t$-tests were conducted to further examine the mean differences across relationships. As shown in Table 2, the results indicated that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 Correlations between autonomy, intimacy and affiliation in short- and longer-term romantic relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Romantic Autonomy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic intimacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: n values range from 94 to 100.

*p<0.001.*
perceived autonomy with friends was significantly higher than perceived autonomy with romantic partners, $t(208) = -2.51, p < 0.05$. Perceived autonomy with mothers did not differ from perceived autonomy with romantic partners or with friends.

**Links across romantic, mother, and friend relationships**

**Autonomy in romantic and other relationships.** To examine the links between autonomy in mother, friend, and romantic relationships, correlation analyses were first computed. The results indicated that romantic autonomy was positively correlated with autonomy in the mother-adolescent relationship, $r(n=204) = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$, and with autonomy in the friend relationship, $r(n=209) = 0.81$, $p < 0.001$.

**Romantic autonomy and intimacy in other relationships.** To examine the links between romantic autonomy and intimacy in relationships with mothers and friends, correlations were again computed. The results revealed that romantic autonomy was moderately correlated with intimacy in the mother-adolescent relationship, $r(n=201) = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$, and with intimacy in the friend relationship, $r(n=199) = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$.

**Romantic autonomy and relationships with mothers and friends.** To examine the concurrent contributions of mother and friend relationships to romantic autonomy, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. Since romantic intimacy is correlated with autonomy, it was included in the analysis as a control variable. In view of the observed gender differences in romantic autonomy, gender was also included as a factor in the equation. In the regression analysis of romantic relationships, romantic intimacy was entered in step 1; gender was entered in step 2; mother autonomy and intimacy and friend autonomy and intimacy were entered simultaneously in step 3; and all possible 2-way, 3-way and 4-way interactions were entered in step 4. The results indicated that all interaction terms were non-significant and so the model was computed again without the interaction terms. Additionally, as the predictor variables were moderately to highly correlated, collinearity statistics were computed. The variance inflation factors were less than 2.5 for all predictors in the model, indicating that multicollinearity did not bias the results.

Overall, the final model accounted for 69 per cent of the variance in romantic autonomy. As shown in Table 3, an analysis of the $R^2$ change revealed that romantic intimacy was

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**Table 2 Differences in autonomy in romantic, mother, and friend relationships for boys and girls**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship type</th>
<th>Boys $^a$</th>
<th>Girls $^a$</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic $^b$</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>(0.73)</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>(0.77)</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend $^b$</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>(0.77)</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>(0.76)</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Scores range from 1 to 5. $n=198$.

$^a$Main effect of gender.

$^b$Friend autonomy is significantly greater than romantic autonomy.
significantly associated with romantic autonomy and that gender also added to the model, although it only accounted for 2 per cent of the change in $R^2$. The $R^2$ change in the third step revealed that after controlling for romantic intimacy and gender, mother autonomy, friend autonomy and friend intimacy taken together significantly accounted for the greatest change in the model and were each significantly associated with romantic autonomy. Intimacy in the mother-adolescent relationship was not significantly associated with romantic autonomy when controlling for these other variables.

**Discussion**

The results of this study indicate that autonomy is a feature of mid adolescents’ romantic relationships. Our findings suggest that romantic autonomy and intimacy are co-developing processes, especially as these relationships become increasingly enduring. Consistent with our expectations, girls showed greater maturity of autonomy across all relationships than boys. For both boys and girls, romantic autonomy was associated with a capacity for autonomy in other significant relationships, providing support for a systems perspective on romantic relationships.

**Links to romantic intimacy**

One of the major goals of our study was to examine the association between intimacy and autonomy in adolescents’ romantic relationships. In our study we found that overall, romantic autonomy was positively linked to romantic intimacy. The more adolescents perceived their romantic relationships as close, supportive, trusting, and communicative, the more comfortable they were to set boundaries and express their differences in their romantic relationships. These findings suggest that intimacy and autonomy are co-developing processes in mid adolescents’ romantic relationships. Our results are consistent with the results of other studies that have reported links between intimacy and autonomy in

**Table 3** Hierarchical regression analysis of friend autonomy and intimacy and mother autonomy and intimacy with romantic autonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables entered at each step</th>
<th>$R$</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$R^2\Delta$</th>
<th>Beta (Final)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic Intimacy</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09***</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother autonomy</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.58***</td>
<td>0.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend autonomy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.68***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother intimacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend intimacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.16**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $n=172$.  
* $p<0.05$.  
** $p<0.01$.  
*** $p<0.001$.  

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parent-adolescent relationships and peer relationships (Selman and Schultz, 1990; Allen et al., 1994; Hodgins et al., 1996; Shulman and Knafo, 1997). For example, Selman (1989) suggested that both intimacy and autonomy progress through developmental stages and at each stage the interplay between intimacy and autonomy can be observed. Moreover, Shulman and Knafo (1997) suggested that most mid adolescents are involved in interdependent relationships with their friends, such that they are able to balance intimacy and autonomy in their friendships. Our findings are also consistent with the adult marital literature which highlights the importance of maintaining both autonomy and relatedness within the marital relationship for increased marital adjustment (Rankin et al., 1997; Baxter and Erbert, 1999). Our study adds to these findings by identifying the links between intimacy and autonomy in mid adolescents’ romantic relationships.

We also found that affiliation was positively linked to romantic autonomy. Importantly, however, the links between romantic autonomy, affiliation, and intimacy differed according to the duration of the romantic relationship. In short-term relationships, romantic autonomy was positively associated with affiliation but not intimacy. In longer-term relationships, romantic autonomy was positively associated with intimacy and not affiliation. These findings may reflect the change in focal qualities that occurs with the development of romantic relationships (Connolly and Goldberg, 1999). In romantic relationships of short duration, affiliation rather than intimacy characterizes the relationship. When adolescents first begin to spend time with their romantic partners, they may begin to express their opinions and needs about the sharing of activities. As the romantic relationship endures and the opportunity for emotional intimacy arises, romantic autonomy is more likely to be linked to intimacy. At this point in the relationship, adolescents may express their opinions and differences around issues of personal needs and closeness. In longer-term relationships then, feeling close to one’s romantic partner is more important than spending time or sharing activities with one’s romantic partner for the expression of autonomy. Therefore, although overall romantic autonomy is associated with both romantic intimacy and affiliation, its association with these two qualities changes with the longevity of the romantic relationship.

**Gender and age differences**

Our second goal was to examine gender and age differences in romantic autonomy. In our study we found that girls reported greater comfort in expressing their personal views and opinions in their relationships with their romantic partners than did boys. Indeed, girls perceived greater autonomy in their relationships with their mothers and their friends than did boys. These findings are consistent with the results of other studies that have shown gender differences in the expression of autonomy with parents and peers (Berndt, 1979; Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986). Taken together, these findings suggest that girls may be more advanced in their acquisition of autonomy skills than are boys across a variety of relationships. It has been suggested that there is a power imbalance in adults’ intimate relationships so that women are reluctant to express their own ideas and opinions in relationships with men. The results of our study do not provide any evidence of this during the middle adolescent years. Perhaps there is a change in the power balance of romantic relationships which emerges only later in adolescence. As romantic relationships increase in intimacy and attachment, women may choose to conform to more traditional gender stereotypes, such as allowing their partners to be dominant and powerful in their romantic relationships.
Contrary to our predictions, the results of our study did not indicate any increase in perceived personal autonomy in romantic relationships across the mid adolescent period. In contrast to studies of the development of autonomy in parent and peer relationships (Berndt, 1979; Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986), the adolescents in our study reported similar perceptions of autonomy in their romantic relationships across grades 9, 10 and 11. This finding may be a result of a number of factors. First, grades 9 through 11 together encompass a narrower age range than some of the previous studies. As a result, there may be less variation in adolescents’ expression of autonomy across this two-year time period. Greater change might have been observed if we had studied the period of early to late adolescence. Second, the stable age trends may be related to the measures used to assess autonomy. Studies in which developmental trends have been observed have examined adolescents’ susceptibility or resistance to pressures for conformity (Berndt, 1979). In our study, we assess “healthy” autonomy by examining comfort with differences and resilience of the self-concept in relationships with others. This aspect of autonomy may develop more slowly than other forms of autonomy during the mid-adolescent period.

**Links with parents and friends**

Our final goal was to examine the broader relational context of maternal and friend relationships within which romantic autonomy develops. The results of our study indicate that adolescents’ experiences of autonomy with their mothers and with their friends were both linked to romantic autonomy. Adolescents who feel comfortable with their differences in their relationships with their mothers and with their friends are most likely also to feel comfortable with their differences in their relationships with their romantic partners. The findings from this study give further support to the notion that romantic relationships develop in the relational context of parent and friend relationships and that these close relationships share important common features (Furman and Wehner, 1994; Connolly and Johnson, 1996). Consistent with a behavioral systems perspective (Furman and Wehner, 1994, 1997), adolescents’ confidence in expressing autonomy in their relationships with parents and friends likely carries over into their romantic relationships. It is also likely that adolescents learn important skills from their struggles to express autonomy in close relationships and are then able to apply these skills to their romantic relationships. Since the expression of autonomy was most advanced in the context of adolescents’ friendships, perhaps it is in this relationship that they most readily learn autonomy skills that can be applied to romantic relationships.

The results of our study indicating that intimacy in friendships is associated with romantic autonomy further highlight the particular importance of this relationship. This finding suggests that adolescents who have more supportive friendships are most comfortable with their differences in their romantic relationships. Adolescents may feel comfortable taking a risk and expressing their differences in their romantic relationship knowing that they have friends who will support them and whom they can rely on in times of need. Intimate and supportive friendships may thus provide an emotional context for romantic autonomy to develop. Taken together, these findings highlight the strong connection between friends and romantic partners, a finding consistent with previous research that has examined this link (Furman and Wehner, 1997; Furman, 1999; Seiffge-Krenke, 2000; Shulman and Scharf, 2000).

Complimenting the importance of friendships, the results of our study also reveal ways in which the mother-adolescent relationship is important to the romantic relationship.
Relationships with mothers appear to be an important forum to develop, explore and express autonomy, serving as a model for the expression of autonomy in the romantic relationship. These results stand in contrast to that of previous researchers who have not consistently demonstrated the importance of parental relationships in early or mid-adolescence. It is important to note that much of this previous research has been focused on intimacy (e.g. Shulman and Scharf, 2000) and similar to us, found that closeness in the parental relationship was not relevant to romantic relationships. In our study, our examination of the process of autonomy brings into focus a process that is of particular importance to the parent–adolescent relationship during this time period. From a developmental perspective, adolescents’ strong interest on achieving some measure of autonomy with their mothers may be an important reason that it is linked to autonomy in mid adolescents’ romantic relationships.

Three limitations of our study should be noted. First, our study explored the relational context of romantic autonomy with a cross-sectional design and was based on adolescents’ self-reported data. Future researchers should use a longitudinal approach and include parent and peer reports to extend the current findings. Second, we explored adolescents’ relationships with their mothers but not with their fathers. Important differences may be observed when exploring the links between autonomy in the father–adolescent relationship and romantic autonomy and therefore, the conclusions drawn regarding the parental links to romantic autonomy should only be generalized to the mother–adolescent relationship. Third, the importance of expressing autonomy in close relationships has been conceptualized differently in other cultures. The conclusions drawn from this study are thus most relevant to adolescents from European–Canadian families and should not be generalized cross-culturally.

In summary, this study highlights the interconnections between intimacy and autonomy within romantic relationships and the interconnections between autonomy across relationships. This study has shown that to best understand autonomy in adolescents’ romantic relationships, we must examine its connection to the broader relational context within which it develops. Romantic autonomy does not develop in a vacuum. It is embedded in a context of other romantic relationship qualities and in the context of adolescents’ broader social world. By examining romantic autonomy in its social relational context, we can begin to map the development of this process in adolescents’ romantic relationships.

References


