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978-0-521-19530-0 - Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood

Edited by Frank D. Fincham and Ming Cui

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ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Emerging adulthood – the period between the late teens and mid-twenties – is a unique and important developmental period during which people gain relationship experience before settling on someone to partner with. *Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood* presents a synthesis of cutting-edge research and theory on this topic. Leading scholars from demography, sociology, family studies, and psychology provide original data and theoretical analyses that address the formation, nature, and significance of romantic relationships in emerging adults. Until recently, it was assumed that romantic relationships in emerging adults were not particularly important or formative. The material presented here allows this assumption to be thoroughly evaluated.

This volume is intended to be a resource for anyone interested in understanding romantic relationships in emerging adulthood. It is especially appropriate for classroom use in upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses in the fields of family sociology, human development and family studies, clinical and developmental psychology, and social work.

Frank D. Fincham obtained a doctoral degree in social psychology as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University. He then completed postdoctoral training in clinical psychology at Stony Brook University before assuming a position as assistant professor at the University of Illinois, where he ultimately became a professor and the Director of Clinical Training. He was a SUNY Distinguished Professor at the University at Buffalo before assuming his current position as Eminent Scholar at The Florida State University. He is the author of more than 200 publications, and his research has been widely recognized by numerous awards, including the Berscheid-Hatfield Award for “sustained, substantial, and distinguished contributions to the field of personal relationships” from the International Network on Personal Relationships and the President’s Award for “distinguished contributions to psychological knowledge” from the British Psychological Society. A Fellow of five different professional societies, Fincham has been listed among the top 25 psychologists in the world in terms of impact (defined as number of citations per paper).

Ming Cui graduated from Iowa State University with a PhD in sociology and a master’s degree in statistics. She has been employed at the University of California, Davis, and the Institute for Social and Behavioral Research at Iowa State University. In 2006, she joined the Family and Child Sciences Department at The Florida State University. Cui’s research interests include youth development, parenting, interpersonal relationships, and methods and statistics. She has published articles in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *Developmental Psychology*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *Psychological Assessment*, and *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. In 2002, she received a New Contribution Award from the International Association for Relationship Research. Cui has served as a member of the Reuben Hill Award Committee. Currently, she is an editorial board member for the *Journal of Marriage and Family* and a reviewer for many journals.

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Although scholars from a variety of disciplines have written and conversed about the importance of personal relationships for decades, the emergence of personal relationships as a field of study is relatively recent. *Advances in Personal Relationships* represents the culmination of years of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary work on personal relationships. Sponsored by the International Association for Relationship Research, the series offers readers cutting-edge research and theory in the field. Contributing authors are internationally known scholars from a variety of disciplines, including social psychology, clinical psychology, communication, history, sociology, gerontology, and family studies. Volumes include integrative reviews, conceptual pieces, summaries of research programs, and major theoretical works. *Advances in Personal Relationships* presents first-rate scholarship that is both provocative and theoretically grounded. The theoretical and empirical work described by authors will stimulate readers and advance the field by offering new ideas and retooling old ones. The series will be of interest to upper-division undergraduate students, graduate students, researchers, and practitioners.

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FOREWORD

JEFFREY JENSEN ARNETT

In one sense, romantic love among the young has been around for a long time. “How beautiful and how delightful you are, my love, with all your charms!” The latest hit pop song lyric? No, the young lover in the Song of Solomon, a book of the Hebrew Bible written more than 2,000 years ago, extolling his loved one. At another point she says of him, “On my bed night after night I sought him whom my soul loves.” So the contemporary ideal of the “soul mate” is not our invention after all.

Yet in another sense, everything has changed with respect to youthful romantic love, and there has never been another era like this one. Until recently it was never considered an adequate – much less ideal – basis for marriage. In most cultures in most times, marriages have been determined by families, in arrangements made by the parents, not on the basis of youthful infatuations. Even when marriage became based more on individual choice in the West, a few centuries ago, it was often a decision that had more practical than romantic elements. She needed someone to provide for her economically and to protect her from men and beasts. He needed someone to bear and care for children and to prepare food and run the household. If they were fond of each other, all the better, but there were few expectations of emotional intimacy in marriage. Only in the 20th century did the “companionate marriage” become prevalent in the United States and other western countries, with its high intimacy expectations and its encouragement of frequent sex as a way of fostering the marital bond (Cherlin, 2009).

The 20th century is also the period when it first became acceptable to have a variety of romantic partners before marriage (Brumberg, 1998). Before that time, there was no such thing as “dating.” Instead, there was “calling,” in which a young man would visit a young woman at her home, chat with her parents, and perhaps have a little time alone with her in the parlor. Calling was not simply recreational; it was also a signal of serious marriage intentions. Then dating arose, in the 1920s, and serial romantic (and sexual) liaisons between

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young people became gradually accepted (if not exactly celebrated, at least by their elders).

Profound as the changes in youthful romantic relations were in the early 20th century, the changes in recent decades have been nothing short of astonishing. In the 1960s and 1970s ideas about gender roles and gender divisions were challenged and began to change. The feminist revolution that followed shattered the traditional expectation that the only suitable adult roles for women were wife and mother, and young women began to enter higher education and high-status occupations in unprecedented numbers. They no longer needed a man to provide them with economic support and a legitimate social role, so they felt less pressure to find a husband by their late teens or very early twenties.

Along with the feminist revolution came the sexual revolution. Throughout millennia of western cultural history, sexual relations before marriage had been strictly forbidden. For women especially, to violate this taboo was to risk disgrace and ruin, so few did. Then suddenly in the 1960s, in the space of just a decade, all those centuries of tradition were turned on their heads. The invention of the birth control pill in 1964 seemed to offer the promise of sex without the risk of an unintended pregnancy. Part of the feminist revolution was an assertion of women's sexual needs as an important part of their identities. By the end of the 1970s, sexual relations before marriage had become the norm in North America and northern Europe.

As women felt less pressure to find a husband by around age 20, and as premarital sex and cohabitation became widely tolerated, the age of entering marriage began to rise inexorably. By the first decade of the 21st century, the average age was older than 26 in the United States and even older in every other western country (Douglass, 2007). The age of entering parenthood rose, too (although not quite parallel to the age of marriage, as single motherhood became increasingly accepted and widespread in North America and northern Europe).

Rising ages of entering marriage and parenthood, longer and more widespread participation in postsecondary education and training, plus a host of other related changes – put them all together and by the early 21st century the age period from 18–25 had changed utterly from what it had been a century before. I proposed the theory of emerging adulthood to reflect this new social and cultural reality (Arnett, 2004). Instead of being a time of entering and settling into stable adult roles, for most people in industrialized countries these are now years of enormous flux, instability, uncertainty, and change. In effect, a new life stage has developed. Rather than entering young adulthood by around age 20, most young people now go from adolescence to emerging adulthood around age 18 and then make the transition from emerging to young adulthood in their late twenties.

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This concept of emerging adulthood has generated an enormous amount of attention and research since I proposed it in a 2000 article in *American Psychologist* (Arnett, 2000). I think this shows that the concept tapped into an intuitive conclusion that many other investigators (and people in the general public) had reached: that there was a need for a new term and a new understanding for the years from the late teens through the twenties. Emerging adulthood provided many people with a way of making sense of the changes they were witnessing in the world around them. For social scientists, it provided a paradigm that they could use as a framework for new research.

Paradigms matter. They draw our research attention and energies toward some areas (with a compelling paradigm) and away from others (without a paradigm). As many of the authors in this book observe, there is far more research on romantic relationships in adolescence than in emerging adulthood. Now that there is a coherent, widely accepted paradigm for studying the emerging adult years, more researchers will be drawn to investigate this and other topics.

Although the theory of emerging adulthood provides a useful conception of the new life stage, the diversity within the emerging adult years should never be forgotten. From the beginning, I have called attention to this diversity, emphasizing that in many ways emerging adulthood is the most heterogeneous period of the lifespan (Arnett, 2000). Other periods of the lifespan are relatively easy to classify in terms of whether most of their members are in school or not, are working or not, are in a romantic relationship or not, or are parents or not. Not so in emerging adulthood. On the contrary, through their twenties emerging adults follow a nearly infinite variety of paths in love, education, work, friendships, and family relations.

Does this diversity make it impossible to call them “emerging adults” and classify emerging adulthood as a life stage? Not at all. The old stage models – for example, the 20th-century stage theories by Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg – gave stages a bad name by making it seem as if they had to be ontogenetic, uniform, and universal. For this reason, many social scientists still resist any references to stages, because they fear that the diversity within stages will become obscured (Elder & Shanahan, 2006). Yet there is no need for the assumptions of the old stage models to dominate the present. Stages can be useful heuristics, as long as the diversity within each stage is kept in mind (Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2010). There is not one emerging adulthood but many emerging adulthoods, just as there are multiple infancies, adolescences, and middle adulthoods (Arnett, 2010; Larson, Wilson, & Rickman, 2010; Shweder, 1998; Small, 1998). Diversity is more pronounced during emerging adulthood than in other life stages, but there are common themes as well.

What are the themes and variations with regard to romantic love in emerging adulthood? Apparently, the soul mate ideal is a strong theme, at least in the United States, given that 94% of Americans aged 18–29 agree with the

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statement, “When you marry you want to marry your soul mate, first and foremost,” according to the National Marriage Project (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2001). With regard to variations, a key one is the timing of entry into marriage and (especially) parenthood. Those who enter parenthood in their early 20s, earlier than their peers, have their emerging adulthood truncated, and those who enter it without a partner, as single mothers, have an especially tough road ahead.

This book contains a wealth of information about themes and variations of romantic relationships in emerging adulthood. It is an important step forward in expanding our knowledge of development during this new, complex, and fascinating life stage. Enjoy!

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