Correlates of False Self in Adolescent Romantic Relationships

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The goal of this study was to examine the association between interpersonal competencies in the peer domain and feelings of false self in romantic relationships. Participants included 238 White, middle-class boys and girls (Grades 10 and 11). Students completed self-report measures of false self in romantic relationships and interpersonal competency in same-sex and other-sex peer relationships. Results indicate that boys experience higher levels of false self in romantic relationships when compared to girls. Conflict management in the context of other-sex peer relationships was negatively associated with feelings of false self in romantic relationships for both boys and girls. For girls, competency in the domain of emotional support in same-sex peer relationships was associated with lower levels of false self in romantic relationships. For boys, competency in the domains of self-disclosure and asserting influence with same-sex peers was associated with lower levels of false self in romantic relationships.

The emotional lability frequently observed in the context of adolescent romantic relationships may be partially attributed to adolescents’ developing sense of self (Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999). Self attributes become increasingly differentiated during adolescence as a function of the diverse and sometimes conflicting expectations of significant others such as parents, friends, and romantic partners (Erikson, 1959). This differentiation may contribute to feelings of “false self,” which reflect the subjective sense that the self presented in public is separate from the true, inner self known only to the adolescent (Broughton, 1981). Recently, researchers have begun to examine the relational contexts in which false self is experienced (Harter & Monsour, 1992). The goal of the study presented here was to expand on this research by examining the association between interpersonal competencies in the peer domain and adolescents’ feelings of false self in romantic relationships.

Previous research has indicated that adolescents report the highest levels of false-self in heterosexual romantic relationships (Harter & Monsour, 1992). This finding is consistent with the view that early romantic relationships in adolescence may provide a context for identity development and not simply for the development of relational skills (Brown, 1999; Paul & White, 1990). Brown suggested that early romantic relationships focus attention on the self as adolescents attempt to integrate an understanding of what it means to relate to others in a romantic context into their overall self-concept. Thus, feelings of false self that emerge in early romantic relationships may reflect adolescents’ uncertainty about their ability to engage in an emotionally intense, intimate relationship while maintaining an intact sense of self.

Healthy romantic relationships are characterized by a sense that the self is understood and validated by a significant other (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Consequently, it could be argued that resolving feelings of false self in the context of these relationships reflects a dimension of romantic competency. This perspective receives some support from previous research on false self and romantic relationships in adulthood. Neff and Harter (2002b) observed that higher levels of false self were associated with lower levels of self-assertiveness in romantic relationships. In another study, subordinating one’s own needs to resolve conflicts with a romantic partner was more frequently associated with feelings of false self in adult women when compared to men (Neff & Harter, 2002a). These feelings about conflict resolution were associated in turn with perceived negative outcomes for both the self and the relationship. In view of these observations, it is important to understand the factors that may be associated with lower levels of false self in the context of early romantic relationships. We suggest that the interpersonal skills...
acquired in the context of peer relationships may be linked to feelings of false self in heterosexual romantic relationships.1

Research on the role of peers in the development of romantic relationships has indicated that (a) adolescents who are embedded in large and mixed-sex peer networks are more likely to participate in a heterosexual romantic relationship (Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Feiring, 1999) and (b) qualitative features of adolescents’ peer relationships are associated with qualitative features of heterosexual romantic relationships (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000; Connolly & Johnson, 1996). However, previous research has not examined the association between peer relationships and self-understanding in the context of romantic relationships.

Adolescents who have developed interpersonal skills are more likely to have supportive peer networks, which may provide an important context for the resolution of feelings of false self in romantic relationships. Indeed, observational research indicates that romantic relationships are a common topic of discussion among peers (Simon, Eder, & Evans, 1992). Consequently, an individual who feels capable of engaging in self-disclosure may be more likely to explore his or her romantic interests with peers which may diminish feelings of false self in their romantic relationships. Similarly, the capacity to provide emotional support to peers is likely to contribute to the development of intimate, mutually supportive relationships with peers that may enhance the development of an understanding of self in romantic relationships (Furman, 1999).

Adolescence is also an important time in life for the development of a sense of independence of self from others (Hill & Holmbeck, 1986). Thus, developing the ability to assert one’s own views/opinions/desires in relationships with peers may be important for the development of self-understanding in the context of romantic relationships. Similarly, managing conflict in peer relationships provides adolescents with an opportunity to gain insights into the needs of self and other (Laursen & Hartup, 1996). Thus, conflict management skills developed in the context of peer relationships may help adolescents feel more confident asserting their own needs when these conflict with the needs of a romantic partner, thereby reducing feelings of false self in romantic relationships (Neff & Harter, 2002a).

It is important to note that interactions with other-sex peers increase during early adolescence (Buhmester & Furman, 1987). Although many of the basic interpersonal skills needed to resolve feelings of false self in the context of romantic relationships may initially evolve in the context of same-sex peer relationships, other sex relationships may provide an opportunity to expand on these skills. Thus, interpersonal skills in other-sex relationships may make a unique contribution to feelings of false self in the context of romantic relationships.

In the study presented here, we expected to observe an association between interpersonal skills with peers and feelings of false self in romantic relationships. Specifically, we examined the unique contributions of interpersonal skills in the context of same-sex and other-sex relationships. In addition, we explored the moderating effects of sex on the association between interpersonal skills with peers and feelings of false-self in romantic relationships.

Method

Participants

Participants were predominantly White, middle-class students from Grades 10 and 11 (ages 15–16) attending one of three participating urban schools located in the Canadian midwest.2 We were not allowed to collect demographic information about the sample. Administrators at the school provided us with an overall description, which is used to describe this group. Observation suggests that less that 5% of the sample was Asian Canadian.

Participants were predominantly White, middle-class students from Grades 10 and 11 (ages 15–16) attending one of three participating urban schools located in the Canadian midwest.2 Informed, written parent consent and student assent were obtained. A total of 1,071 students were recruited. Of the students who received parental consent to participate in the study (501; 47%), 361 students participated.3 Only boys and girls who reported having had recent dating experience (i.e., within the last year) completed the measure assessing false self in romantic relationships. Consequently, the final sample (N = 238) of students who contributed the data for this study included 88 boys and 150 girls.

1Although we recognize the importance of understanding development in gay and lesbian youth, in our project we were not able to assess sexual orientation of participating students. Consequently, this study is limited to heterosexual youth.

2On the day of data collection, several classes were unable to participate because of unexpected conflicts in schedules. Some students refused to participate even though they had received parental permission. Unfortunately, because of limited personnel on the day of data collection, we did not monitor the numbers of students who were absent, were unable to participate because of scheduling conflicts, or refused to participate. From our observations, no differences in age/socioeconomic status were observed between those students who participated and those who we recruited but did not participate.
Measures

**False self.** We adapted items from the Silencing the Self Scale that was initially developed by Jack and Dill (1992) to assess women’s schemas regarding how to initiate and maintain intimate relationships, particularly with romantic partners. Items from one of the subscales (i.e., the Divided-self [DSS]) were designed to assess the phenomenological experience of alienation or disconnection of the true self from that which is presented in relationships with others. The original measure demonstrated adequate internal consistency and construct validity (Jack & Dill, 1992). The items used in our study are very similar to the descriptions of false self that have emerged from research on self concept with adolescent boys and girls (e.g., Harter & Bresnick, 1996; Harter & Monsour, 1992).

We conducted three pilot studies of the DSS with adolescents with similar characteristics (e.g., grade and socioeconomic status) as the current sample. Two of the original items (see Table 1, Items 3 and 5) consistently created problems with internal consistency estimates. Consequently, these items were dropped and new items (3 and 5 under Revised Version in Table 1) were created.

In our study, participants were first asked to tell us whether they were currently dating or had dated in the past year. Only those students who had dating experience completed the DSS for romantic relationships. These students were asked to think about the way they feel when they are with a boyfriend or girlfriend (i.e., someone they are dating or have dated in the past). They were asked to indicate how much they agreed with each item by using a Likert rating scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Mean scores were derived for each version of the subscale. Internal consistency coefficients were computed separately for boys ($\alpha = .83$) and girls ($\alpha = .87$).

The Interpersonal Competency Questionnaire (ICQ) is a valid and reliable measure that was used to assess adolescents’ perceptions of interpersonal skills competency with same- and other-sex peers (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reiss, 1988). Two versions of the ICQ were administered. One version assessed adolescents’ perceptions of interpersonal competency with same-sex friends and the other version assessed perceptions with other-sex friends. Students were told that other-sex friends did not include individuals with whom they had had or with whom they are currently having a dating relationship. The ICQ used in our study consisted of 20 items, 5 each to assess four competency domains. The Conflict Resolution subscale measured perceived ability to manage conflict positively (e.g., “How good are you at dealing with disagreements in ways that make both people happy in the long run?”). The Self-Disclosure subscale assessed perceived ability to disclose personal information in a relationship (e.g., “I feel free to talk with my (female/male) friend about almost everything.”). Participants’ perceptions of their ability to provide emotional support to friends were assessed using items such as “How good are you at being able to make your (female/male) friend feel like his/her problems are understood?” Finally, the Asserting Influence subscale measured participants’ perceptions of their

<table>
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<th>Table 1. The False Self Scale</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Original Items (Jack &amp; Dill, 1992)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. I find it is harder to be myself when I am in a close relationship than when I am on my own.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I feel I have to act in a certain way to please my partner.</td>
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<td>3. Often, I look happy enough on the outside, but inwardly I feel angry and rebellious.</td>
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<td>4. In order for my partner to love me, I cannot reveal certain things about myself to him/her.</td>
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<td>5. When I am in a close relationship I lose my sense of whom I am.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. My partner loves and appreciates me for whom I am.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. I feel that my partner does not know my real self.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Revised Items Used in This Study</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. It is harder to be myself when I am with the girls at school than when I am on my own.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I feel I have to act a certain way to please the girls at school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. I feel like I am a different person when I am with the girls at school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. In order for the girls at school to like me, I cannot reveal certain things about myself to them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. I don’t really act like my true self when I am with the girls at my school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. The girls at my school appreciate me for who I am. (reverse scored)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. The girls at school don’t know the “true” me.</td>
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Note: For our study, two versions of the false self measure were administered. On one version, same-sex peers were presented as the reference group (e.g., girls for girls, boys for boys). On the second version, other-sex peers were presented as the reference group (e.g., Girls were presented with items such as “It is harder to be myself when I am with the boys at school than when I am on my own.”).
ability to assert themselves in their relationships (e.g., “How good are you at getting your female/male friend to go along with what you want?”). Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (poor at this) to 5 (extremely good at this). A mean score was computed for the ratings within each subscale (i.e., mean range 1–5, with higher scores reflecting greater perceived competency). We computed the internal consistency coefficients for the subscales in same- and other-sex relationships separately for boys and girls. The alpha values ranged from .73 to .91.

Procedures

The data used for this study were part of a larger survey designed to examine adolescents’ experiences of other-sex relationships. The survey package was administered to groups of students during a regularly scheduled class period with a research assistant and the classroom teacher present.

Results

Hierarchical regression was used to examine the association between feelings of false self in romantic relationships and interpersonal competency in relationships with same- and other-sex peers. Data were screened to assess for multicollinearity and singularity using the procedures described by Tabachnik and Fidell (1996). All indexes suggest that multicollinearity and singularity were not a problem, so the hierarchical regression was conducted as planned. In this analysis, sex was entered in the first step. The second step included the z scores of the four domains of interpersonal competency assessed in both same- and other-sex relationships (i.e., emotional support, self disclosure, conflict management, and asserting influence). The interaction terms between sex and the eight scores for interpersonal competency were entered on the last step. Table 2 presents the significant results from this analysis.

Results of the regression analysis indicate that feelings of competency with other-sex peers were not uniquely associated with feelings of false self in romantic relationships. The only exception to this general pattern of findings was in the domain of conflict management. In this sample, feelings of competency in managing conflict in other-sex peer relationships was negatively associated with feelings of false self in romantic relationships for both boys and girls. In other words, feeling more competent in managing conflict with other-sex peers was associated with lower levels of false self in romantic relationships.

However, a number of interactions between sex and competency domain with same-sex peers were observed in the third step of the regression analyses. These interactions were interpreted using the procedure described by Aiken and West (1991).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>ΔR²</th>
<th>ΔF</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-.41***</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>23.84***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Conflict Other-Sex</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>5.47***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sex × Esss</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>4.31***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sex × SDss</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sex × Alss</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td></td>
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Note: ESss = emotional support in same-sex relationships; SDss = self-disclosure with same-sex; Alss = asserting influence with same-sex.

**p<.01. ***p<.001.

Table 2. Regression Results: Interpersonal Competency Predicting False Self in Romantic Relationships (Significant Effects Only)

Emotional support in same-sex friendships and feelings of false self. Figure 1 illustrates the interaction between sex and emotional support in same-sex friendships. The slope of the regression line was significant for girls (β = -.26, p < .01) but not for boys (β = .13, p > .05). Thus, higher levels of competency in the provision of emotional support in same-sex friendships were associated with lower levels of false self in romantic relationships but only for girls.

Self disclosure in same-sex friendships and feelings of false self. Figure 2 illustrates the interaction between sex and self-disclosure in same-sex friendships. In contrast to the results obtained for emotional support, the slope of the regression line was significant for boys (β = -.26, p < .01) but not for girls (β = .10, p > .05). Thus, boys who report higher levels of competency in self-disclosure in same-sex friendships reported lower levels of false self in romantic relationships.

Asserting influence in same-sex friendships and feelings of false self. Figure 3 illustrates the interaction between sex and asserting influence in same-sex friendships. Although the interaction term in the initial regression equation was significant, the slope of the regression line was only marginally significant for boys (β = -.14, p = .071) and was not significant for girls (β = .10, p > .05). Thus, although a significant interaction was observed, the effects of asserting influence are only marginally significant for boys when...
compared to girls. Boys who felt more confident in asserting themselves in same-sex friendships experienced lower levels of feelings of false self in their romantic relationships.

Discussion

The goal of the study presented here was to examine correlates of false self in adolescent romantic relationships. The results of our study provided partial support for our hypotheses regarding the correlates of false self in adolescent romantic relationships. We expected to observe different patterns of association among the interpersonal variables assessed in the context of same- and other-sex peer relationships and feelings of false self in romantic relationships. Contrary to our expectation, the other-sex peer variables generally contributed little to our understanding of false self in romantic relationships. These results initially seem consistent with results obtained from other studies which generally suggest that relationships with same-sex peers are most critical to adolescents’ development in the romantic domain (Brendgen, Vitaro, Doyle, Markiewicz, & Bukowski, 2002; Feiring, 1999). However, one area in which experiences with other-sex peers may be particularly important is in the area of conflict management. For both boys and girls, competency in managing conflict with other-sex peers was associated with lower levels of false self in romantic relationships. Thus, for both boys and girls, developing a sense of competency in conflict management in the context of platonic relationships with other-sex peers may make an important

Figure 1. Emotional support in same-sex friendships and false self in romantic relationships.

Figure 2. Self disclosure in same-sex friendships and false self in romantic relationships.
contribution to their ability to remain true to the self in the face of conflict in early romantic relationships. In general, little research has examined the developmental implications of relationships with other-sex peers (Sippola, 1999). These findings suggest that further research is needed to understand how they contribute to the development of healthy romantic relationships in adolescence.

Although the results of the study suggest an important contribution of experiences with same-sex peers for adolescents' sense of self in romantic relationships, this contribution is modified by the sex of the participant. Girls who felt more capable of providing emotional support in the context of their relationships with other girls report lower levels of false self in romantic relationships. No other domains of competence in same- or other-sex peer relationships were associated with girls' reports of false self in romantic relationships. In contrast, boys' feelings of competence in the domains of self-disclosure and asserting influence in their relationships with other boys were both negatively associated with feelings of false self. These findings may reflect the importance of status among same-sex peers for boys' romantic self concept. That is, boys who are capable of asserting influence and who engage in self-disclosure with their male peers may have higher status when compared to boys who do not have these skills (Savin-Williams, 1979). For these boys, same-sex peer relationships likely provide important opportunities to integrate diverse aspects of the self concept including the self in romantic relationships.

Although this study provides some insight into the correlates of false self in romantic relationships in adolescence, a number of limitations can be identified. First, information about interpersonal competency was obtained via adolescents' self-reports. It is possible that adolescents' self-perceptions of interpersonal competency do not accurately reflect actual levels of skills in relationships and future research should include peer/romantic partner reports. Second, the study presented here does not shed light on the developmental trajectory of interpersonal skills and false self in romantic relationships. It is unclear from our study whether the self concept in romantic relationships benefits from prior existing interpersonal competencies or vice versa. Longitudinal research is needed to address this issue. The study
is also limited by the low numbers of students who actually participated. It is possible that the results obtained might reflect self-selection bias. Finally, our study does not directly assess competency in the romantic domain. Previous research has linked feelings of false self with the skills required to maintain healthy romantic relationships (Neff & Harter, 2002b). However, further research is needed to specifically examine the link between the self concept in the romantic domain and the development of romantic competency per se.

In spite of the limitations just described, our study provides insight into the unique contributions of relationships with same- and other-sex peers to adolescents’ feelings of well-being in the context of romantic relationships. Understanding how adolescents negotiate the normal developmental task of integrating the romantic self into one’s overall sense of self is necessary to better understand those individuals who may be at risk for developing unhealthy relationships.

**References**


Received January 1, 2005

Accepted November 13, 2006