PROMOTING HEALTHY ADOLESCENT FRIENDSHIP AND LOVE RELATIONSHIPS

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   ABSTRACT: *This paper reviews three theoretical approaches to under-standing adolescent friendship and romantic relationships: attachment the-ory, Sullivan and neo-Sullivanian theory, and Imago theory. Each of these approaches was discussed, and research with implications for understand-ing adolescents' relationships was summarised. This theory and research were used to guide the development of experiential exercises about friend-ship and love. These are described, so that some of these exercises may be used in developing a workshop focussing on improving adolescents' close relationships.*

> "And down through the ages, it cannot be denied,
>   That everyone needs someone by their side."
>   John Wayne and Frank Schuster, Comedy Skit

   This paper will describe three major theoretical frameworks and relat-ed research results about close interpersonal relationships, and offer some suggestions for specific exercises which may be used with adolescents in order to facilitate the development of healthy friendships and romantic partnerships. The three theoretical approaches are: 1) attachment theory, 2) Sullivan and neo-Sullivanian theory, and 3) Hendrix's Imago theory. First, each one of the major theoretical and empirical research areas will be summarized. Next, the specific related exercises which contribute to adolescents' understanding and improvement of these relationships, will be described. Throughout, I will highlight key implications for interven-tions aimed at helping adolescents mature in ways that contribute to success in these crucial intimate involvements.

ATTACHMENT THEORY

Research
   A major theoretical approach with implications for intimate relation-ships is attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Bowlby defines attachment as an affectional bond whose function is to provide safety and security to the child. He describes four features of attachment bonds. First, the child (and caregiver) tries to maintain close proximity, particu-larly when the child feels threatened. Second, the child associates the mother with safety, and uses her as a safe haven to seek out when

stressed. Third, when the child is separated from the caregiver, he feels separation anxiety. Fourth, the child uses the caregiver as a secure base from which to explore the environment.

The quality of the parent-child relationship is emphasized as the most important determinant of the child's development of a secure attachment bond. The mothers (or principal mother-figures) who offer sensitive and responsive caregiving to their children promote the development of secure attachments in these children. Parents differ in their ability to stay "in tune" with and available to their children. Thus, children develop different internal mental representations (called "working models") about the extent to which the world is a safe place, and the self is lovable. Research has shown that children form different attachment styles which correspond to the parenting style they experienced (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

Bartholomew (1990) proposed a conceptualization of four basic types or styles of attachment. (See Figure 1.) These correspond to the four possible combinations of positive versus negative views of the self and of the positive versus negative views of others (i.e., caregivers.). Accordingly, a secure person has a "working model" of others as dependable and caring, and of the self as worthy of love. This style is expected to emerge when mothers are sensitive and consistently responsive to the child's needs. When parenting goes wrong, insecure attachment is expected. The three remaining (insecure) styles include the following: Preoccupied, Dismissing, and Fearful.

		Model Of Self	
		Positive	Negative
Model	Positive	SECURE	PREOCCUPIED
OF			
Other	Negative	DISMISSING	FEARFUL

Figure 1: The four attachment styles conceptualized as Model of Self and of Other, (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Preoccupied insecurely attached people have an unfavorable view of themselves and a favorable view of others. This style is expected to emerge when caregivers are inconsistent, sometimes warm and sensitive and at other times unresponsive. The child is unable to predict the caregiver's reactions, and becomes anxious and clingy, demanding attention

and becoming fearful of abandonment. Dismissing is a style associated with those who hold a favorable view of themselves, but an unfavorable view of others. This type is associated with distant, unresponsive parenting. The child learns to avoid seeking the support of the parent when stressed or threatened, since the reaction is consistently rejecting. The parents may not be rejecting, however, when the child is calm and content. This leads to a kind of "compulsive self-reliance," as a defense, including a general inability to access emotions. This child seems to be self-sufficient and not to need others. However, the style limits the ability of the person to access emotions and to relate to others in order to meet underlying intimacy needs. On the other hand, the child may come to feel competent and thus have a favorable sense of self. The last style, fearful, is one in which the person has an unfavorable view of both the self and others. The parenting style associated with this type of insecurity is generally rejecting, hostile, unresponsive and unpredictable. In extreme cases, this parent may be physically and/or psychologically abusive.

Current research and theory emphasizes the importance of the quality of early attachment relationships (e.g., with parents) as a determinant of the quality of other later close personal relationships including friendships (e.g., Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986) and romantic relationships (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Research demonstrates that the current attachment quality with mothers significantly correlates with the quality of adolescents' relationships with peers (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Kerns & Stevens, 1996; Markiewicz, Doyle, & Brendgen, 2001) and with romantic partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The pattern indicates that those who are securely attached to mothers seem to be more satisfied and successful in their friendships and romantic relationships. Importantly, however, the correlations tend to be moderate only, suggesting that early attachment styles are likely to change across the lifespan. In fact, people are likely to experience different quality relationships with different significant others. Thus, one developmental challenge is to recognize the variation in availability, helpfulness, and the like, of those who become important in one's life. In other words, those who are able to differentiate between people who are more dependable versus less so, will hold more realistic expectations, and be less disappointed.

Several studies have indicated that close friends and romantic partners may begin to function as attachment figures for adolescents and young adults. Buhrmester (1992) found that adolescents with long-term friends and romantic partners seemed to have strong emotional ties, and exhibited age-appropriate proximity-seeking, secure base, separation protest, and safe haven patterns of behavior analogous to patterns described for young children. Fraley and Davis (1997) also found evidence that supports the view that adolescents and young adults eventually transfer some attachment-related functions to best friends and romantic partners.

Attachment theory and related research suggests that since people have very different styles of relating in close interpersonal relationships, they are likely to experience some predictable difficulties that vary according to their style. Becoming more aware of one's style may help in anticipating and learning better strategies for coping when the defenses are evoked.

Attachment theory exercises:

One instrument used for the self-diagnosis of attachment style is the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ, Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). This measure consists of four paragraphs, each describing one of the four prototypes: secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful. (See Figure 2.) Adolescents are asked to choose the one paragraph that best describes their relationship with their mother or mother-figure. The same instrument can be used again in order to describe the paragraph that best fits the relationship with father. It can be used again for best friends and for romantic partners as well. This measure has been used in research with adolescents from grades 7 and older. They generally seem to be able to select a paragraph that seems to fit their experience.

However, in possible interventions for promoting healthy relating, the purpose of using this measure is not simply to accurately classify the adolescent into an attachment style. Rather, it serves as a mechanism for encouraging the individuals to think about their ways of relating to others who are important to them. The potential for increasing self-awareness is the more important value of the exercise. Many adolescents have indicated that this theoretical framework and measure helped them to begin to understand some of their "automatic" reactions, such as why they became extremely and overly upset by certain behaviors of friends or romantic partners. For example, one older adolescent recalled how often her mother would become insulting and critical when as a child she sought reassurance when frightened. She was able to recognize how with her current boyfriend, if he was not entirely supportive, she would become depressed and withdraw. The boyfriend, in turn, would be puzzled or irritated by the reaction, and a vicious cycle would ensue. Since people may have different styles with different people, another purpose of the exercise is to help the teens recognize that they have a variety of styles in their total behavioral repertoire, and can learn to access these appropriately. Thus, the exercise may also generate opportunities for role-playing alternative ways of responding to typical interpersonal situations.

> Instructions: Think about your relationship with your mother. Now read each paragraph below and indicate which one best describes your relationship with your mother. *(Note that the category label of which style corresponds with which paragraph was not included in the instrument, but is included here for the reader.)*
>
> **Secure:**
>   1. It is easy for me to become emotionally close to my mother. I am comfortable depending on my mother and having my mother depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having my mother not accept me.   .
>
> **Dismissing:**
>   2. I am comfortable not having a close emotional relationship with my mother. It is very important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient, and I prefer not to depend on my mother or have my mother depend on me.
>
> **Preoccupied:**
>   3. I want to be completely emotionally close with my mother, but I often find that my mother is reluctant to get as close as I would like. I am uncomfortable not having a close relationship with my mother, but I sometimes worry the she doesn't value me as much as I value her.
>
> **Fearful:**
>   4. I am uncomfortable getting close to my mother. I want to be emotionally close to my mother, but I find it difficult to trust her completely, or to depend on her. I worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to my mother.
>
> Figure 2: The descriptive paragraphs of attachment styles based on the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

SULLIVAN, NEO-SULLIVANIAN THEORY

Research
     Another theoretical approach which complements attachment theory proposes that individuals have "key" relationships which are most salient at different developmental stages (Sullivan, Buhrmester & Furman, 1986; 1953). These authors suggest that each key relationship provides essential experiences for the acquisition of particular competencies and for the satisfaction of specific needs. They also suggest that in order to succeed in the new type of relationship, the person must develop the competencies necessary in the earlier relationship categories.
     From this perspective, the early parent-child relationship may be viewed as a context for the development of skills while trying to meet needs for care and connection. That is, it is an opportunity for the child to learn to identify his needs and to signal these needs to others. Kobak and Sceery (1988) suggest that secure attachment promotes the child's ability

to regulate negative emotions constructively, and thus to relate more effectively to others. The most important need emphasized by attachment theory is for a basic sense of felt security. Feeling secure certainly helps to attenuate the intensity of negative feelings, and in turn increases the child's receptiveness to learning effective responses.

During middle childhood, important skills of cooperation, competition, and compromise may be acquired mainly in the context of groups of same-sex peers. This is a period when children's peer network may offer them a sense of belonging and of self worth, or alternatively of rejection and unworthiness. In preadolescence, "chumships" are formed and close, dyadic mainly same-sex friendships emerge. These close relationships provide the friends an opportunity to develop their ability to empathize with others, to take others' perspectives into account, and to behave in altruistic ways. The friends are able to satisfy each other's needs for intimacy and affirmation. During early adolescence, children's friendships become more intimate, with more self-disclosure and mutual affirmation (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). The theoretical framework presented here suggests that relationships after the parent-child one have the potential to contribute to the development of mature, adaptive interpersonal expectations and skills. One type of close relationship which has received considerable attention, therefore, is the best or close friendship.

A friendship exercise

Close friendships provide companionship, help, and affirmation. One theory of friendship (Wright, 1985) suggests that the strength of a friendship is determined by the extent to which the friends judge each other to be unique, and the extent to which the friends go out of their way to spend time together. As part of adolescents' reflections about their current or past close friendships, they may complete two ten-item subscales from a longer instrument measuring friendship quality, the Acquaintance Description Form (Wright, 1985). One subscale, Person-Qua-Person, measures the extent to which the friend is judged to be unique and irreplaceable. Some example items include: "Being with this person feels special. If this person moved away, I would really miss her/him." The second subscale, Voluntary Interdependence, measures the extent to which people try to spend time together when possible. Some example items include: "When I have free time, I try to get together with this person to do things. I keep in touch with this person at least every couple of days."

One of the most frequently emphasized features of satisfying friendships adolescents report is their sense that the friend values them and views them as special. While many of the other aspects of the friendships (e.g., shared activities, help when needed) are acknowledged, the sense of being seen as special has an emotional intensity, which surpasses the other features. For example, one adolescent described how her best friend's messages about her specialness gave her a huge boost in energy and confidence, so that she was able to accomplish her goals in other aspects of her life. In addition, when friendships ended, often the loss of this sense of having been special and irreplaceable was especially painful.

In the case just described, loss of this feeling led to deflation and apathy. Parents often convey to their children that they are special to them. However, the sense of being special in a friendship has a different meaning, since these are reciprocal and voluntary choices. They also, by definition, may not be permanent. The evaluation of the friend may acquire a symbolic importance for the individual, concerning their role in the peer network as well. Helping adolescents deal with the sometimes devastating experience of friendship losses, examining their consequences, and reducing the tendency to interpret the loss as evidence of their no longer being valuable, or special may be essential to their continued openness to new peer relationships, including romantic ones.

The development of romantic relationships
Best friendships and peer networks continue to be mainly same-sex for adolescents, but opposite sex peers and romantic relationships become increasingly valued. The romantic relationships, like close friendships, offer an opportunity for the further development of perspective-taking and caregiving within the close dyadic relationship. In addition, the adolescent has an arena for testing the expression of sexual interest and behaviors. Thus, romantic relationships may satisfy not only needs for companionship and intimacy, but also for sexual expression and experiences. In addition, having a romantic partner may contribute to an adolescent's status in the peer group and sense of belonging and self worth.

On the other hand, because the adolescent may be overwhelmed by emerging sexual feelings and may feel particularly vulnerable and insecure with respect to this new role, early romantic relationships may not actually provide the mutual affirmation and caring each partner seeks. In addition, adolescents tend to hold extremely idealistic beliefs about romantic relationships (Roscoe, Diana, & Brooks, 1987), and these are likely to lead to unrealistic expectations and disappointment in actual involvements. It is important to note that adults also often hold unrealistic, idealistic beliefs about the potential of romance and of partners to provide happiness. Dealing with this phenomenon is one of the challenges in later adult relationships as well as in those of adolescents.

Some research has suggested that involvement in romantic relationships at an early age may be harmful to the adolescent's psychological adjustment (e.g., Darling, Dowdy, Van Horn, & Caldwell, 1999; Neeman, Hubbard, & Masten, 1995). However, other research suggests that if the adolescents have good same-sex peer relationships, probably indicative of good social skills, having a boyfriend/girlfriend did not seem to be associated with emotional or behavioral adjustment. That is, it did not seem to be either detrimental or advantageous (Brendgen, Vitaro, Doyle, Markiewicz, & Bukowski, 2002). These results are consistent with the idea that good friendships may provide a good foundation for later romantic relationships, as suggested by Sullivan. If adolescents have not been able to develop skills that contribute to good quality friendships (e.g., support, appropriate self-disclosure, etc.), the addition of intense new sexual needs may interfere with learning those skills in a romantic relationship. Thus,

one approach to helping adolescents prepare for romantic involvements is to encourage the cultivation of non-sexual friendships first.

Some of the research on qualitative differences in same-sex friendships of boys versus girls has implications for cross-sex friendships and romances. Consistent with other research, Brendgen, Markiewicz, Doyle, and Bukowski (2001) found that adolescent girls report higher levels of positive friendship qualities and lower levels of conflict compared with boys. In addition, they found that observed behavior with friends also differed in corresponding ways. Girls were more responsive, self-disclosed more, showed more positive feelings, and less negative feelings, criticized less, and engaged in less conflict with their friends compared with boys and their friends. Interestingly, boys who rated their friend as a best or very good friend (versus less close), self-disclosed more with those closer friends, but also criticized more. The authors concluded that boys and girls seem to differ in general style, with girls engaging in a more "harmonious" and boys in a more "confrontational" style with their same-sex friends.

An exercise on different communication styles

These research findings suggest that when cross-gender relationships are developed, the gender-related styles may contribute to misunderstanding and disappointment, particularly for the girls. Thus, understanding possible gender differences in communication styles becomes important to emphasize. The popular work of John Gray (1992), *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus,* provides a basis for exploring this issue in a humorous way. Specifically, humorous stereotypes of the Martian versus Venutian roles were created, and role plays formed the basis for discussions about different communication styles and their meanings. While Gray suggests that Martians tend to be men, and Venutians to be women, we did not make that assumption, but instead treated them as style difference. For example, in one role play, the "Martian" is instructed to respond to a hypothetical stress situation by withdrawing, not talking, and by giving abbreviated answers to questions, like "I'm okay." In this role play, the "Venutian" is instructed to pursue relentlessly when sensing that the other has a problem, asking the other to talk about what s/he is feeling, ignoring signs that s/he does not want to talk. These role played situations evoked laughter, and set the stage for discussions of what it may feel like in each role. Most adolescents are able to identify different roles with significant people in their lives. In addition, some of the skills which Gray (and others) suggest contribute to more effective communication with others, such as appropriate timing for requests, conveying a non-demanding attitude and tone of voice, being brief, and being patient in waiting for a response to requests, may also be practiced.

HENDRIX'S IMAGO THEORY

Finally, a theoretical framework based on Hendrix's (1988, 1992) "Imago" theory of couple relationships offers a method for examining the

qualitative elements in the choice of love partner, the likely evolution of romantic relationships, and suggestions for managing more satisfying partnerships. This framework and related exercises may be useful for older adolescents who have begun dating and are "going steady" with a romantic partner.

Hendrix suggests that in searching for a romantic partner, we are unconsciously (although sometimes partly aware) "...looking for someone who has the predominant character traits of the people who raised us." (1992, p.14). This process involves comparing the potential target with an image, the Imago, described as an unconscious image composed of the positive and negative traits of important caretakers from childhood. This composite picture is hazy, and contains vivid impressions from early experiences.

Hendrix also suggests that since caregivers encouraged only some aspects of the child's self expressions, those aspects of the self that were discouraged become buried, and are also located in this imago. The search for a romantic partner, therefore, is an unconscious Imago-matching process in which important and often negative traits of early caregivers and repressed parts of the self are sought out in the partner.

This leads to some likely problems. First, the partner is likely to "wound" the other in similar ways as important caregivers had done, in effect reinjuring the other in ways to which they are already vulnerable. Second, picking someone who is good at expressing parts of oneself does not help develop those parts, and thus the unfulfilled person continues to feel "deadened" in those areas. Finally, since the process is unconscious, unrealistic expectations of the other to make one feel "whole" and validated in ways the person has not received from earlier caregivers, are probably doomed to disappointment. Hendrix suggests that this leads to relationships which begin with great hope that the partner will be the idealized match, and subsequent disappointment and a "power struggle." These stages he calls the unconscious relationship, since both the idealization and angry struggle are guided by unconscious and unrealistic expectations. He suggests that the relationship can only move to a mutually satisfying one if the partners become more aware of their unconscious desires and defenses, and begin to see their partners more realistically and to set mutually acceptable conscious goals.

If we apply this theory to adolescents, it seems to be consistent with the findings of adolescents' tendency to form extreme and idealized views of romantic partnerships (Roscoe et al, 1987). Helping adolescents to identify and make more conscious those traits within their Imago may contribute to more effective choices, and less angry reactions to the often unintentional hurt caused by the partners. That is, two aspects of the potential learning are: First, to recognize that we may be attracted to others who remind us of the disappointing parts of our earlier relationships which we hope to resolve with the new partner. Second, that it is likely that we will be particularly upset by the hurt caused by the partner if it is similar to the way we were hurt in the past.

The Imago exercise

An exercise adapted from Hendrix may help older adolescents describe elements of their Imagos. They are asked to think back to their childhood, and try to recall the important people in their lives. They are then asked to take a piece of paper and to draw a horizontal line across the middle of it. Then they list all the favorable qualities of all the important people on the top half of the sheet, in no particular order. They list all the unfavorable qualities on the lower half of the sheet. Finally, they circle the most important of the favorable qualities and of the unfavorable ones. This is a description of the traits in their Imagos. This exercise complements the attachment exercise, which stresses the person's own general pattern of responding to close others (i.e., with avoidance, clinginess, etc.). That is, the Imago exercise highlights the traits of the other which may be unconsciously sought out.

Older adolescents using this exercise found it enlightening, and were surprised by the match with romantic partner choices, particularly by the match of the negative qualities. In their analyses of an important romantic relationship, almost all of them were able to use the concept of the Imago at least to some extent. However, because I have not used this exercise with younger adolescents, I think that it should be tested with a few youth in order to determine its appropriateness for this age group.

The "Universal language of lovers" exercise

Romantic love is the earliest phase of a new relationship, and is generally accompanied by good feelings, high energy, and a bright outlook. Hendrix (1988) points out that is partly due to the biochemical changes produced by the brain (e.g., dopamine and norepinephrine) in response to the feelings of excitement and sexual attraction. This results in an enhanced feeling of well-being and security. He also points out that a psychological reason for the good feelings has to do with the unconscious belief that the partner will fulfill needs for nurturance and wholeness.

Hendrix (1988, p. 50-51) describes four basic phenomena or themes which occur in poetry, plays, songs, etc. about love, and which he refers to as the "universal language of lovers":

1) Recognition ("I know we just met, but I feel that I already know you").
2) Timelessness ("I can't remember when I didn't know you.").

These two phenomena are based on the Imago match. We recognize the familiar qualities of our parents, and since we have always known our parents, we feel as if we also have always known the new partner.

3) Reunification ("When I'm with you, I no longer feel alone; I feel whole, complete.").

This phenomenon is based on the choice of a partner who has qualities we have not developed in ourselves (e.g., cautious where we are wild, etc.).

4) Necessity ("I love you so much, I can't live without you.").

This is based on the phenomenon that lovers unconsciously transfer their needs for protection from their parents to their partners.

Adolescents may be asked to bring a poem or song which they think represents their feelings in a romantic relationship. Then the four themes may be described, and they may discuss in small groups the extent to which they think the songs/poems contain comparable themes. The exercise may facilitate discussion about the ideals and hopes evident in the romantic stage of relationships. The goal of this exercise is to "normalize" some of the intense feelings associated with the phenomenon of romance and to gain an understanding of its source.

The "intentional dialogue" exercise
Finally, adolescents may be taught a technique for improving their ability to maintain emotional connection and understanding with their partners, particularly when they feel hurt or angry. This involves an "intentional dialogue" in which active listening, paraphrasing, and understanding without judging is practiced, particularly when one or both members of the relationship are upset. Adolescents may practice with each other choosing topics involving an emotionally troubling situation. The steps in the interaction include the listener's mirroring, validating and empathizing with the speaker. The goal of the exercise is to learn to stay focussed on understanding the other, and continuing to allow the other to complete their account until they indicate that they have expressed what they wish (all they can think of) and have been understood. This mirroring exercise provides the experience of a "safe haven" when couples are stressed. This is an exercise that requires extensive practice in order to be useful in actual relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have presented three theoretical perspectives and related research findings focussing on adolescents' close interpersonal relationships. I have tried to emphasize aspects which would contribute to an increased understanding of adolescents' experiences in these important relationships. I have also selected some related exercises about friendship and love, which may be used with adolescents. Presenting the theory and managing the experiential learning process should help ado-

lescents gain insight into their own experiences, have an opportunity to discuss these experiences in a safe context with others, and to practice some skills which may promote their future effectiveness in these relationships. Some of these theories and / or exercises may be used with individual adolescents. In addition, a workshop incorporating some of the material presented here has the potential to contribute to the development of mature, satisfying, and healthy adolescent love relationships.

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