

Investigation of Starting Romantic Intimacy in Emerging Adulthood in terms of Self-Esteem, Gender and Gender Roles

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Abstract

This study aims, firstly, to examine whether gender plays a decisive role in starting romantic intimacy during the emerging adulthood period; secondly, to compare emerging adults who are assigned different gender roles, in terms of starting romantic intimacy; and thirdly, to analyze the level at which self-esteem and gender roles predict the ability to start romantic intimacy. This study examines the relationship between, gender, gender roles, self-esteem and initiating romantic intimacy at emerging adulthood. A total of 256 individuals (148 female and 108 male) completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Bem Gender Roles Inventory (BGRİ) and Markers of Starting Romantic Intimacy Scale. In this study, t-test was used to determine whether gender plays a significant role in initiating a romantic intimate relationship, and also variance analysis method was used to determine whether gender roles plays a significant role in initiating a romantic intimate relationship. Besides basic regression analysis was employed to uncover the interaction between initiating a romantic intimate relationship and gender, self-esteem, and gender roles. It was found out that there was gender difference on starting romantic intimacy. Regression analysis shows that self-esteem, gender, and also gender roles were the most important factors for starting romantic intimacy. The findings of the study suggest that there is a statistically significant relationship between starting romantic intimacy, gender, gender roles, and also self-esteem. The results of the research were found parallel with the literature, and also they are discussed with respect to emerging adulthood, gender, self-esteem and cultural factors.

Key Words

Romantic Relationship, Gender, Self-Esteem, Gender Roles.

In recent years, the development psychology literature has offered some explanations suggesting that individuals do not mature directly from adolescence to adulthood; rather, they experience a preparation period before transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000). For instance, socio-economic changes recorded in the last 5 decades have been found to have some reflections on individuals' transition from adolescence into adulthood. In this process, it has been revealed that individuals postpone developmental duties such as getting married, becoming a parent, completing their education, and living in a separate house until the end of their 20s (Arnett,

2001; Casper & Bianchi, 2002). Arnett (2000; 2004) labels the period that individuals experience after adolescence and before adulthood as "emerging adulthood". Studies conducted in Turkey showed that the emerging adulthood period is experienced in the age range 19-26 years (Atak, 2005; Atak & Çök, 2010).

According to Arnett (2000), one of the most important duties of emerging adults is identity exploration. The process of identity development includes many attempts and decisions made in various areas of life. Attempts and decision-making processes undertaken particularly in the fields of love, business and worldview start during adolescence; however, they develop during emerging adulthood (Sternberg, 1999). Starting romantic intimacy is addressed as the most important variable for sustaining romantic intimacy and explor-

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ing identity. Analysis of the literature shows that romantic relations are regarded as a process, and offers some information on the factors that sustain and end this process. Within this scope, starting romantic intimacy is deemed an important element of this process. Studies have only begun to address this topic recently: Eryılmaz and Atak (2009) identified five important determinants of “starting of romantic intimacy” among emerging adults: (i) self-perception, (ii) self-knowledge, (iii) behavioral intimacy, (iv) emotional and cognitive intimacy, and (v) romantic verbalization. Emotional and cognitive intimacy includes asking others’ point of view, thinking about others and expressing one’s emotions. Behavioral intimacy includes behavioral elements such as spending time together and taking the phone number of a person. Self perception includes personal evaluations by the individual about her/his personal sufficiencies such as congeniality, attractiveness, and intelligence. Romantic verbalization includes variables such as writing poems and using appropriate words. Finally, self-knowledge includes elements such as honesty in relations and respecting others’ opinions and feelings (Eryılmaz & Atak, 2009).

The related literature offers some theoretical explanations about factors relevant to starting romantic intimacy among emerging adults. It has been shown that gender is one of the factors effective on starting romantic intimacy. Studying gender-based differences in romantic intimacy, which is an important element of identity exploration, can also make reference to identity development.

One of the concepts seemingly related to romantic intimacy is gender. Gender is defined in the literature as “socially-defined personal characteristics, roles, and responsibilities of males and females”. In modern terms, gender roles are addressed in four main groups: femininity, masculinity, androgyny and undifferentiated gender (Dökmen, 2004). The literature provides no information on the effects of gender roles on starting romantic intimacy. Revealing the role played by gender, which informs each dimension of life, in starting romantic intimacy may contribute to the related literature. Self-esteem is also underlined to be important in sustaining romantic intimacy (Sternberg, 1999). However, there is no previous study on the effects of self-esteem on starting romantic intimacy. There are previous studies on the effects of self-esteem on sustaining and ending relations. Indeed, starting romantic intimacy is a part of the relationship process. For this reason, addressing the role played by self-esteem in

starting relationship may contribute to the related literature.

This study aims, firstly, to examine whether gender plays a decisive role in starting romantic intimacy during the emerging adulthood period; secondly, to compare emerging adults who are assigned different gender roles, in terms of starting romantic intimacy; and thirdly, to analyze the level at which self-esteem and gender roles predict the ability to start romantic intimacy.

Method

Model

This is a descriptive study that examines the current situation. The study used the relational survey method as the basis to examine the relationship between starting romantic intimacy, on one hand, and self-esteem, gender and gender roles on the other. The study data were collected from individuals at different ages and a cross-sectional study pattern was used.

Study Group

The study used purposive sampling as a sampling method (Büyüköztürk, Kılıç-Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2008; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993; Sencer, 1989). The study included 300 university students aged between 19–25 years. Participant responses to the data collection tools were revised before data analysis. At the end of the revision process, 44 respondents were excluded from the data set, since either they did not fully complete the scale (at least 5 % of the whole scale remained incomplete) or they shifted to center. As a result, the study analyzed the responses of 256 participants: 148 female and 108 male. The mean age of the emerging adolescents who participated in the study was 22.59 years (standard deviation 1.74 years). Of 256 study participants, 116 attended physical sciences (45.3%) and 140 attended social sciences (54.7%) departments.

Data Collection Tools

In this study, the personal information form, Markers of Starting Romantic Intimacy Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and Bem Gender Roles Inventory were used.

Personal Information Form: Demographic information of the participants such as age, gender and

educational background were collected via a personal information form.

Markers of Starting Romantic Intimacy Scale: This is a 5 dimensional scale developed by Eryılmaz and Atak (2009), which measures individuals' perceptions of starting romantic intimacy. A high score means that the individual has the required determiners and is able to start romantic intimacy.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale: This is a 63-itemed scale developed by Rosenberg (1965) and composed of 12 multiple-choice categories. The present study used a 10-itemed Self-Esteem subcategory of the RSS. This subcategory is based on a 4-point Likert type scale and composed of 5 positive and 5 negative statements (Rosenberg, 1965). The scale was adapted into Turkish culture by Çuhadaroğlu (1985).

Bem Gender Roles Inventory: Bem Gender Roles Inventory, developed by Bem (1974), was used in the present study to detect the gender role tendencies of the study participants. This version of the scale was adapted into Turkish by Kavuncu and subsequently subjected to validity and reliability analysis by Kavuncu and Dökmen (Dökmen, 1999; Kavuncu, 1987). In the validity and reliability analysis conducted by Dökmen (1999), the scale is composed of 40 items, 20 related to femininity and 20 to masculinity. Separate scores are obtained from the Femininity and Masculinity subscales. The median score of these two separate scores determines whether the individual has androgynous, masculine, feminine, or undifferentiated gender roles.

Data Analysis

The SPSS software (version 14.00) was used in statistical analysis of the study data. Frequency and percentage distributions were used in the analysis of the demographic data. The t-test was used for the independent groups in order to determine whether the identifiers of starting romantic intimacy differed significantly according to gender. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine whether starting romantic intimacy differed according to gender roles. Multiple regression was used to understand whether the variables of self-esteem, femininity and masculinity could significantly explain starting romantic intimacy. Statistical significance was set at .05 for the data analysis.

Process

The study data were collected from students attending universities located in Ankara province

of Turkey from April-August 2010. The scale implementation took 40-45 minutes. The study data were collected in the form of individual and group implementations. The data were collected during tuition hours with the consent and assistance of the course lecturers. The data were collected on a voluntary basis: participants were given a brief explanation about the aim of the study; the scale was administered on volunteer participants. Moreover, additional information was given to the demanding participants. Participants were not asked any identity information.

Results

The study findings were grouped in three main themes. T-test results, one-way ANOVA results and simple regression analysis results were assessed, respectively.

Starting Romantic Intimacy in terms of Gender

T-test analysis was used for the independent groups to determine whether the determiners for starting romantic intimacy varied significantly in terms of gender. The mean score for "starting romantic intimacy" ($\bar{X}=54.19$) among the male emerging adults was found to be higher than that of female ($\bar{X}=49.88$) emerging adults. The results suggest that the males ($t=4.49$; $p < .01$) are able to start romantic intimacy more easily than the females. At the same time, males scored significantly higher than females in terms of self-perception, behavioral intimacy, emotional and cognitive intimacy, and romantic verbalization. However, there was no statistically significant difference between females and males in terms of self-knowledge.

Starting Romantic Intimacy according to Gender Roles

One-way ANOVA was used to determine whether starting romantic intimacy differed in terms of gender roles. Mean scores for "starting romantic intimacy" among emerging adults with masculine and androgynous gender roles were found to be higher than individuals with feminine and undifferentiated gender roles. One-way ANOVA was used to determine whether this difference was statistically significant. Gender roles were observed to result in differences in starting romantic intimacy [$F(3-252) = 16.09$, $p < .01$]. The Scheffe multi-comparison test was used to reveal the groups with different mean scores. The results showed that individuals with

androgynous gender roles (\bar{X} = 54.97) had significantly higher mean scores than both individuals with feminine (\bar{X} = 48.45; $p<.01$) and undifferentiated gender roles (\bar{X} = 48.45; $p<.01$). The Scheffe multi-comparison test also showed that individuals with masculine gender roles (\bar{X} = 54.07) had significantly higher mean scores than individuals with feminine (\bar{X} = 48.45.38; $p<.01$) and undifferentiated gender roles (\bar{X} = 48.45.01; $p<.01$).

The Role of Self-Esteem, Femininity and Masculinity on Starting Romantic Intimacy

Multiple regression analysis was used to determine whether the variables of self-esteem, femininity and masculinity had statistically significant effects on starting romantic intimacy ($R=.66$, $R^2=.43$, $F=63.28$, $p<.01$). It was found that these three variables were significant determinants of starting romantic intimacy. Evaluation of each variable's independent effects on starting romantic intimacy showed that masculinity ($\beta=.48$; $p<.01$), had the most significant positive relationship in starting romantic intimacy, followed by self-esteem ($\beta=.31$; $p<.01$). Moreover, femininity was found to have a statistically non-significant effect on starting romantic intimacy. According to these results, these three variables explain 43% of the total variance related to starting romantic intimacy.

Discussion

The present study addressed the issue of starting romantic intimacy during emerging adulthood in terms of individuals' gender, gender roles and self-esteem. This section discusses the study findings related to these three main titles and within the scope of the related literature.

Gender-Based Evaluation of Starting Romantic Intimacy

The study results showed that gender had a statistically significant effect on starting romantic intimacy, that is to say, males started romantic intimacy more easily than females. The study findings may be interpreted within a cultural context, in general. Previous studies also suggested that males started romantic intimacy more easily than females (Eryılmaz & Atak, 2007, 2009; Eryılmaz & Ercan, 2010a, 2010b; 2011; in press; Furjman & Schaffer, 2003; Güneri, Sümer, & Yıldırım, 1999; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2000; Meador & Rogers, 1979; Suh,

Moskowitz, Fournier, & Zuroff, 2004). It has been concluded that males have higher perceived control than females (Eryılmaz, 2004, 2006; Vogel, Wester, Heesacker, & Madon, 2003). General evaluation of the effects of gender on starting romantic intimacy shows that the findings of the present study comply with those of previous studies in the literature.

Gender Roles- Based Evaluation of Starting Romantic Intimacy

It was found out that masculine and androgynous gender roles had important effects on starting romantic intimacy. These results differ from those of previous studies on romantic intimacy. For instance, in a study carried out by Sakallı-Uğurlu (2003), male dominance was found to have significant effects on retention of the relationship. These results show that different dynamics are effective on starting and sustaining a relationship, supporting the theoretical explanations offered by Sternberg (1999), suggesting that romantic relationships should be addressed in the scope of starting, sustaining and ending such relationships. On the other hand, being a male and masculinity are important in terms of starting a relationship but unimportant in terms of sustaining a relationship, which can be explained on the basis of reciprocity and cultural structures. Moss and Schwebel (1993) explained romantic relationships in the light of five factors, including reciprocity. According to Moss and Schwebel (1993), a relationship cannot be sustained through the support, efforts or behaviors of only one side. Therefore, the finding of the present study that "*being male and masculinity are important variables in starting a romantic relationship*" can be explained on the grounds of cultural effects.

Self-Esteem Based Evaluation of Starting Romantic Intimacy

According to the findings of the present study, there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between level of self-esteem and starting of romantic intimacy among emerging adults.

The literature suggests that romantic intimacy should be addressed in an integral context (Sternberg, 1999). Starting, sustaining and ending a relationship are three important pieces of this integrated context. The emotions and options of an individual about her/himself differ with regard

to the relationship process. For instance, ending a relationship may cause a high level of stress and may start a traumatic process. In the process of ending a relationship, individuals may suffer from depression and loneliness. Self-esteem levels of individuals may decrease due to a relationship break up (Cain, 1988; Gray & Steinberg, 1999; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1986). Unlike the ending process, individuals should have some resources to use in the process of starting a relationship; self-esteem is a kind of resource. For instance, some studies suggest that people involved in a romantic relationship have higher levels of self-esteem than single individuals (Çuhadaroğlu, 1985; Pettijohn, Naples, & McDermott, 2010). Both the present study and previous studies confirm that a romantic relationship is an important source of self-esteem. Individuals need a high level of self-esteem to both sustain their relationship and experience love and relief during their relationship (Connely & Goldberg, 1999; Hally & Pollack, 1993; Myers, 1996; Sprecher, 1994). In conclusion, the process of starting a relationship may require individuals to develop high levels of self-esteem. From another perspective, acceptance is important for romantic affairs. The literature suggests that self-esteem is an important indicator of acceptance experienced during intimate relationships. The first prerequisite of the acceptance of an individual by others is self-love and self-acceptance (Cramer, 2009). The relationship between self-esteem and starting romantic intimacy, as revealed in this study, may result from the bidirectional function of self-esteem (Cramer, 1993; Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999).

It is possible to make some suggestions on the basis of the results obtained from the present study: firstly, identity exploration is an important development duty for emerging adults. In order to contribute to the literature on this theme, future studies should also include an examination of identity. Secondly, self-esteem has a positive effect on starting romantic intimacy. From the perspective of those professions rendering clinical assistance, both preventive and interventionist programs should be started on romantic relationships and self-esteem for those who have difficulty in starting romantic intimacy. In the psychological consultancy process, on the other hand, self-esteem should be addressed in order to ensure self-knowledge and self-understanding.

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