

Infatuation and love of an adolescent girl: Dynamics of parent child relationship

N Janardhana, B Manjula

From Department of Psychiatric Social Work, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

Correspondence to: N Janardhana, Department of Psychiatric Social Work, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. E-mail: janardhannimhans@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: Increased interest in romantic relationship (RR) is central to adolescents' lives. RR has a significant influence on the emotional well-being of the adolescents and their future life. **Objective:** The present study aims at understanding the issues and concerns of adolescent girls in RR who come under care and protection issue. **Methods:** The study adopts a retrospective exploratory research design and analyzed the case reports maintained by psychiatric social workers. Reports elicit the information about the RR, marriage with the romantic partner, reason for run away with the marital partner, etc. **Results:** Majority of the adolescents run away with their romantic partner to get married and more than three-fourth of the adolescent girls believed that having sexual intercourse with their romantic partner would get their marriage approval and felt that marriage gave them sanction for the sexual relationship. Adolescents were worried about parent's rejection of their romantic partner and had guilt feeling that they were not able to meet the expectations of parents nor they were able to fulfill the dreams of their parents. Most of the adolescents were also aware that their romantic involvement has been one of the reasons for academic decline; some have to drop out from the schools. **Conclusion:** It is important to understand the issues of adolescent girls in RR so that it would help us in designing interventions to facilitate developmental needs and for the healthy transition to adulthood.

Key words: Adolescents, Child welfare committee, Psychosocial interventions, Romantic relationship

Romantic experiences of adolescents are believed to influence the course of a number of mentioned developmental tasks such as academic achievement, obtaining vocational training, and gaining knowledge. [1]. Increased interest in romantic relationships (RRs) is central to adolescents' lives and has long been considered defining the features of adolescence [2]. Initial interactions typically occur in mixed boy-girl groups and then group dating begins, with several pairs engaging in some activity together [3]. RRs have been defined as "mutually acknowledged on-going voluntary interactions; in comparison to the most other peer relationships, romantic ones typically have a distinctive intensity, which is usually marked by expressions of affection and current or anticipated sexual behavior, of course, some behaviors are simultaneously affectionate and sexual in nature" [4]. RRs are initially conceptualized as relatively unimportant compared to adults' relationships; adolescent RRs have been shown in research to be often long term and bear significant resemblance to the features of adult RRs [4,5].

Cultures vary widely in the norms, attitudes, and customs surrounding marriage. Marriage is a sacred institution in India [6], with long-established norms and customs and with strict cultural sanctions against those who do not follow such unwritten norms [7]. India, unlike West, does not have the concept of "dating." The concept of dating is not heard by many adolescents, any attraction or liking of opposite sex ends up in marriage.

Children are expected to be under the control and supervision of their parents until their marriage. Parents act as protector and also as provider for their children until they are married. A boy and a girl in RR would elope or runaway for getting married, mainly because of their parents' disapproval for their relationship and disagreement for their marriage. Caste, religion, socioeconomic status, character, etc., are important factors for marriage. In West, individuals select their own marital partner, whereas in India, parents and the extended family members select the marital partner and ensure that the partner is a good match within their caste and family network [8].

Janardhana *et al.*, [9] in their reports of proving psychosocial interventions for children in difficult circumstances under the care and protection of Child Welfare Committee (CWC) (annual and 6 monthly reports), mentioned about individual, family, and other factors associated with RR. Adolescent girls in RR face care and protection issues under the following circumstances - run away from home with their romantic partners, getting married below legal age, sexual abuse by romantic partners, teenage pregnancy, interpersonal issues with parents for being in romantic involvement, etc.

METHODS

The present study aimed at understanding the psychosocial issues of adolescent girls in RR under care and protection framework.

This study was carried out as part of a project providing psychosocial interventions for children in difficult circumstances under the care and protection of CWC, supported by Karnataka state's Integrated Child Protection Society, Government of Karnataka. The researchers are from the Department of Psychiatric Social Work, National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences, providing services for the children in difficult circumstances referred from CWC on a daily basis. Children, who were referred from the CWC for the temporary institutional care in the children home, constitute the study population. Children speaking Kannada, Telugu, and English constitute the sample for the study. Children reporting to be above the age of 18 years (with documentary proof) were excluded from the study as they would not be governed by the CWC.

Psychosocial care was provided to adolescent girls in RR, under care and protection issues. Case reports, with detailed notes of the therapist, were documented; the present study analyzes the case reports in understanding the issues of adolescents in RR issues and the process of interventions provided. Individual files have been maintained by a psychiatric social worker, eliciting information about the RR, marriage with the romantic partner, reason for run away with the marital partner, and to their decisions about their future life, career, and family life.

Cases collected for duration of 8 months were taken for the study. Ethical aspects were taken into consideration with regard to maintaining anonymity of the participants; the study findings do not affect the dignity of children and they all received psychosocial care services as part of the project. Initially, frequency analysis was done with regard to sociodemographic variables, themes were identified, and later, codes were made to understand the individual and family issues related to adolescents in RR. The data were analyzed using R Software, and frequency analysis was done.

RESULTS

A total of 50 girls who were in RR were selected for the study. The mean age was 16.34 years (standard deviation \pm 0.93), with a range of 14–18 years. Nearly 60% of girls were in high school and 32% of them were in pre-university college. One joined for BE (bachelor of engineering) and the remaining did not attend formal education. Almost 50% of the participants discontinued their studies and 20% of them completed the course. About 14% were currently pursuing the course and 10% had dropped from studies. Nearly 78% were from lower socioeconomic status, 18% from middle socioeconomic status, and 4% from higher socioeconomic status. Almost 80% belonged to Hindu religion, 12% belonged to Christian religion, and the remaining 8% belonged to Muslim religion. The mean age of menarche was 12.46 years. Nearly 56% of the participants were from nuclear family, 26% from single-parent families, and the remaining 18% were from joint family (Table 1).

Little more than 95% of the adolescent girls in RR ran away with their romantic partner. The remaining 6% of the participants

Table 1: Personal profile of the adolescents in romantic relationship

Variable	Frequency n=50 (%)
Age	
Mean \pm SD	16.34 \pm 0.939
Education	
High school	30 (60)
Pursuing PUC	16 (32)
Status of education	
Completed	10 (20)
Discontinued	25 (50)
Drop out	5 (10)
No formal education	3 (6)
Socioeconomic status	
High	2 (4)
Middle	9 (18)
Low	39 (78)
Religion	
Hindu	40 (80)
Muslim	4 (8)
Christian	6 (12)
Age at menarche	
Mean	12.46
Type of family	
Joint	9 (18)
Nuclear	28 (56)
Single parent	13 (26)

SD: Standard deviation, PUC: Pre-university college

did not run away from home; however, they came under care and protection mechanisms on the request of parents. The reason for run away with their romantic partner was to get married (62%) and another 38% of them had ambiguity regarding their marriage with the romantic partner. Little more than 70% of the adolescent girls believed that having sexual intercourse with their romantic partner would get their marriage approval. Most of the adolescents reported that marriage gave them sanction for the sexual relationship. Another 28% of them did not have sexual relationship. Nearly 76% were not aware about the safe sex practices, sexual health, reproductive health, and pregnancy (Table 2).

The case file analysis reveals that all adolescents were worried about their parents' rejection of their romantic partner and had a guilt feeling that they were not able to meet the expectations of parents. Most of the adolescents were also aware that their romantic involvement has been one of the reasons for academic decline which became the reason for school/college dropout. Adolescents felt that they have brought dishonor to the family, especially worried about the reactions of extended relatives and neighbors.

All adolescents in RR are under the conflict over prioritizing between their parents and their romantic partner. Often adolescents are confused about prioritizing between going back to their family and going back with their romantic partner. All

Table 2: Information about the psychosocial issues among adolescents and their families

Psychosocial issues among adolescents in RR issues	Frequency	Psychosocial issues among the parents of adolescents in RR issues	Frequency
Parental rejection	50	Disturbed family functioning	43
Guilt for not meeting the expectations of parents and romantic partner	50	Challenges in dealing with: Acceptance of daughter's decisions Behavioral issues of adolescents Parenting adolescents	50
Impact on academics	47	Social and legal issues	50
Conflict over prioritizing parents versus romantic partner	50	Social factors versus daughter's need in prioritizing	50
Worry about legal action against romantic partner	50		
Dilemmas of going back to family or waiting for the romantic partner	25		
Facing criticism from families and community	50		
Deciding about childbearing	3		

RR: Romantic relationship

adolescents in RR are worried about legal action against their romantic partner.

Disturbed family functioning is generally due to conflict over daughter's relationship, challenges in dealing with behavioral issues of adolescents in RR context, parenting issues such as balancing warmth and control, accepting adolescents' autonomy, and deviance behavior. Parents find it difficult to accept their daughter's decision because of caste and economic conditions as the reasons for rejection. Social issues such as family honor and answering to their relatives and neighbors are also the major social reasons for rejection. Parents find it difficult to accept issues such as first time entering the police station and attending judicial court procedures. Parents are also often confused in prioritizing between the importance of social factors and understanding their daughters' decision.

DISCUSSION

In this study, adolescent girls in RR were in the age group of 14–18 years, either studying in high school or started their college. Western studies also corroborate similar findings that adolescents in RR are in the age group of 14–19 years [10-13]. Adolescents typically say that they interact more frequently with their romantic partners than they do with their parents, siblings, or friends [14]. In the present study, majority of the participants hail from nuclear and single-parent families. Studies report that if there is instability in family structure such as single parent and step parent in both middle childhood and early adolescence, it increases the likelihood of RR [15].

Majority of the adolescents discontinued their study due to eloping with their romantic partner and some did not take examinations. A study on academic outcomes of RR shows that frequent dating behaviors and early sexual experiences showed significant negative impacts on academic outcomes [11,16]. Chung *et al.* [17] in their study found that frequent dating behaviors and early sexual experiences showed significant negative impacts on academic outcomes.

In general, parents are against and did not support RR. They adopt restrictive style of parenting and enforced restrictions. In Indian culture, there is no concept of dating before marriage. In Western context, most parents (64%) report prescribing dating rules, and rules vary by parents' gender. Mothers would like to take control over their daughters' dating activities [18]. In another study, parents also reported more restrictive involvement in daughters' than sons' RRs [19]. It is observed that the influence of sociocultural aspects made a significant impact on parenting style, often worried about family pride, honor, and societal response. Family stress and separation are risk factors for early romantic involvement [20] and it is associated with poor adjustment [21-24].

Majority of the adolescent girls had sexual relationship with their romantic partners. Norms about premarital sex remain traditional. Duration of relationship and marriage gave them sanction for engaging in physical intimacy [12,25,26]. Adolescents were also conditioned by the societal norm of "sexual relationship determining marriage for girls." Adolescents justify that their decision of sexual relationship is to get parental approval and recognition.

The adolescents also had a poor knowledge about sexuality and reproductive health. Similar finding was found in a study where 44.25% of adolescent girls were aware about the methods adopted for safer sex. As much as 12.5% of adolescent girls were having premarital RR [13]. Experiencing a RR within past 18 months is one of the most powerful predictors of sexual activity among adolescents [27]. Most adolescents experience sexual intercourse in the course of a RR [28], with romantic partner being an important source of support [29].

Adolescents get into RR for reasons such as peer pressure, family factors, and development need. An important developmental task in adolescence is to establish intimate friendships and simultaneously explore RRs [30], having impact not only on the development task but also on the future relationships [31]. RR sometimes involves emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse and become an increasing concern for helping professionals working

with adolescents in RR [32,33]. Due to the severity of negative outcomes, it is imperative for the counselors to understand the adolescents in RR, to facilitate early intervention [34].

Interventions for adolescents to deal with their RR should include rapport establishment, not taking sides of either adolescent or their parents. Interventions should be started with their understanding of personal safety, sexuality and reproductive health, and its importance. Discussions should be held on the legal framework governing children in India to help adolescents to look at their developmental tasks such as academic involvement or vocational training. Support should be extended to adolescents to set short- and long-term goals. Preventive and promotive mental health interventions for enhancing psychosocial competence should be provided. Supportive therapeutic interventions could assist adolescent girls to learn healthy ways of relating to others [35]. Helping professionals need to recognize, respond to RR issues among adolescents and problems of families [34]; develop interventions to deal with their RR and the relationship with their parents; interventions to strengthen adolescents and their families to deal with the community attitudes; building support networks in the community. Carlson [36] asserted that counselors working with youth must not only recognize violent actions, but also seek to understand the underlying issues causing such behavior.

Interventions for families

Therapists must built rapport with the parents and help them to ventilate their emotional concerns and insecurity. Discussions should be held with parents with regard to need for forgiving their child and to restart and rebuild their relationship with trust. Parenting skill building should also be provided in order to correct the default styles of parenting. Parents should be helped to realize their changing parental roles, as the child pass through childhood to adolescent and adulthood. Need for autonomy with responsibilities must be discussed.

There is no widely accepted intervention strategy to deal with young adolescents in RR. Counselors could develop a three-tier model of intervention programs such as universal prevention program for all students in the schools, peer education and guidance for adolescents at moderate risk, and supportive interventions responding the specific needs of adolescents in RR [37]. Rosen and Bezold [38] also have implemented a school-based didactic support group to help young women, which include identifying type and levels of abuse, empowering them that they are entitled to relationships without abuse, discussing the personal consequences of dating, enhancing interpersonal skills, and empowering themselves to make effective choices. The study has found that adolescents lack effective communication, problem-solving, decision-making, interpersonal relationship, safety, and conflict resolution skills, similar results have been found in various other studies [39,40].

This article provides important information about adolescent girls in RRs, the results must not be generalized to all adolescents in RR, the context need to be kept in mind. The sample includes those girls

who came in contact with the CWC, many such incidences would not come into the juvenile justice system, would be handled within the families and communities, and hence generalization may not be possible. Further work needs to be done in identifying the causes and consequences of romantic experiences and examining the diversity of romantic experiences. Research studies on impact at individual and family levels and especially on mental health of adolescents need to be carried out. This study only focused on the issues of adolescent girls and did not include their counter male partners, and hence the same needs to be explored. Further exploration is required in defining the concept of "RR" in the Indian context.

CONCLUSION

RR during adolescence has received developmental significance and has both positive and negative outcomes for adolescents. High-risk behaviors, unhealthy relationships, violation of legal norms, etc., led many adolescents to crisis situation. This affects their relationship with family, academics, and other opportunities, affecting their developmental process. Understanding adolescent issues from developmental perspective helps in designing programs for adolescents and their family members. This would facilitate healthy transition to adulthood and enables them to take part in societal development.

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