Identifying a Typology of Emerging Adult Romantic Relationships: Implications for Relationship Education

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Abstract

Objective: Our objective was to use multiple dimensions of romantic relationships to identify a typology of emerging adult romantic relationships.

Background: Emerging adult romantic relationships vary in terms of their relational dynamics, emotional and physical intimacy, and commitment. Understanding the diversity in emerging adult romantic relationships is crucial for developing effective relationship education that assists emerging adults as they make decisions about their romantic partnerships.

Method: Using data from 396 romantically involved, but unmarried emerging adults, we employed cluster analysis to identify a typology of romantic relationships based on relational dynamics (i.e., warmth and support and negative interactions), relationship duration, consolidation (i.e., number of nights and percentage of free time spent together), and commitment (i.e., likelihood of marrying partner).

Results: The results indicated five types of relationships: 1. happily consolidated (30.8%), 2. happily independent (18.9%), 3. exploratory (17.9%), 4. stuck (23.0%), and 5. high intensity (9.3%). Demographic characteristics, depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, current cohabitation, and cycling within the current relationship varied between the relationship types.

Conclusions: There appear to be meaningful and important variations among the types of romantic relationships that emerging adults pursue. The associations between relationship type and well-being depends on the interplay between relational dynamics, consolidation, and commitment.

Implications: Individuals in different types of relationships may require targeted interventions to help them move out of problematic relationships or to help them build skills for developing/maintaining relationship quality. Suggestions for each type of relationship are provided.

Keywords: Romantic relationships, relationship typology, emerging adulthood, romantic development
Identifying a Typology of Emerging Adult Romantic Relationships: Implications for Relationship Education

Emerging adulthood marks a normative shift in romantic involvement from shorter, less intimate relationships to more stable, committed, and intimate romantic partnerships (Giordano, Manning, Longmore, & Flanigan, 2012; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Yet, emerging adult romantic relationships can vary widely in terms of their interpersonal dynamics, commitment, and emotional and sexual intimacy (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013; Collibee & Furman, 2015; Roberson, Norona, Fish, Olmstead, & Fincham, 2017). Romantic relationships also may convey different meanings and serve different purposes depending on emerging adults’ progress on other important developmental tasks, such as identity and career development (Kefalas, Furstenberg, Carr, & Napolitano, 2011; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Such variations in emerging adult romantic relationships may have important implications for how they influence emerging adult well-being (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010).

In order to understand the variability in emerging adult romantic relationships, researchers have advocated for identifying relationship typologies (Manlove, Welti, Wildsmith, & Barry, 2014; Roberson et al., 2017). Identifying and describing different types of romantic relationships is particularly important for ensuring that relationship education programs address the diversity of emerging adults’ romantic experiences. In the present study, we identified a typology of romantic relationships among unmarried 18 to 29-year-old individuals. To explore how the typology reflected conceptualizations of romantic development during emerging adulthood, we compared participant demographic characteristics, relationship experiences (i.e., relationship status, cohabitation, and cycling), and emerging adult well-being (i.e., depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, and heavy alcohol use) between the emerging adults in each relationship type.

Emerging Adulthood and Romantic Development

Emerging adulthood is expected to be a time of romantic exploration (Arnett, 2015; Giordano et al., 2012), and most emerging adults have several committed partnerships over the course of their twenties (Rauer, Pettit, Lansford, Bates, & Dodge, 2013). Exploration can be seen also in emerging adults testing compatibility and commitment with their partners through stayovers (Jamison & Ganong, 2011) and cohabitation (Eikmeyer & Manning, 2018). Because emerging adults also vary in their desire to be in romantic relationships (Beckmeyer & Cromwell, 2018; Watkins & Beckmeyer, 2020), some emerging adults may pursue casual romantic and sexual experiences such as hookups and friends with benefits (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). Despite the expectation for romantic exploration during emerging adulthood, some emerging adults do make binding romantic commitments during their early twenties (Kefalas et al., 2011). For example, some emerging adults consider marriage as central to their adult identities (Willoughby & James, 2017) or the natural life course step following high school (Kefalas et al., 2011). Such emerging adults may eschew relational exploration and instead make more stable commitments via cohabitation and engagement.

Emerging adulthood is also a time of meaningful transitions across multiple individual and interpersonal domains (Arnett, 2015). As emerging adults experience those transitions, they can feel caught in-between their romantic commitments and their more individually-oriented life goals (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006). Thus, Shulman and Connolly (2013) proposed that successful romantic development during emerging adulthood requires the integration of romantic involvement and the pursuit of other salient tasks such as pursuing educational and occupational opportunities and maintaining on-going relationships with friends and family. The consequence
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of this tension is that sometimes emerging adults may need to end relationships in order to
pursue non-romantic goals (Norona, Olmstead, & Welsh, 2017). Others may be able to
successfully balance their own and their partners’ goals and needs, facilitating stable, high
quality unions. Taken together, prior research supports our assertion that emerging adults’
romantic relationships will vary in stability, characteristics, intimacy, and relational dynamics
(see Manlove et al., 2014; Roberson et al., 2017). The purpose of the present study is to explore
the range of relationships that may represent that variability.

Dimensions of Romantic Relationships

The present study was based on Fincham’s and Rogge’s (2010) conceptualization of
relationships as multi-dimensional including healthy and promotive aspects, as well as negative
characteristics. Among the most widely studied relational outcomes is relationship quality, yet
Fincham and Rogge (2010) have posited that conceptual ambiguity about relationship adjustment
has led to a dearth of theory development in this area of study. They suggested that an important
base for any theory building effort is considering both the positive and negative aspects of
relationships, rather than focusing solely on the presence or absence of negative aspects in the
relationship. In this study, we extended this view by conceptualizing relationship quality as
involving both structural aspects of relationships (e.g., duration, time spent together, number of
stayovers each week) and subjective assessments of multiple relationship dynamics (i.e., warmth,
support, negative interactions, commitment, and satisfaction). In doing so, we were able to move
beyond the binary view of relationship quality as positive or negative by describing the interplay
between different relational components.

The relationship dimensions that we included in this study were informed broadly by this
multi-dimensional view of relationships and more specifically by empirical research. Based on
Fincham and Rogge (2010), we first addressed the parts of a relationship that are associated with
relational adjustment. For example, relational dynamics reflect the positive, e.g., providing
emotional and instrumental support, showing warmth and affection, and intimate self-disclosure,
and negative, e.g., coercion, criticism, antagonism, and controlling behavior, ways romantic
partners interact with each other (Collibee & Furman, 2015). Positive and negative relational
dynamics play important roles in building relationship intimacy and satisfaction (Gottman,
1993), and they influence how relationship participation affects emerging adults’ well-being
(Collibee & Furman, 2015). Thus, how couples interact with each other is an important
component of relationship quality.

Relationship dynamics should be considered within the context of the relationship’s other
characteristics. For example, relationship duration, i.e., the length of time in a specific
relationship, may shape emerging adults’ relationship behaviors and expectations about the union
(Clark & Beck, 2011), as well as shaping how emerging adults see that they should integrate a
relationship into other aspects of their lives (Kefalas et al., 2011; Shulman & Connolly, 2013).
Although relationship duration is an important foundation, it operates somewhat independently
from the integration of partners into each other’s lives. Pollard and Harris (2013) defined
relationship consolidation as the degree to which romantic partners have integrated their
resources together, e.g., money, time. For the purpose of this study, we focused on the
consolidation of time in the form of stayovers, i.e., spending the night together, and shared free
time. It may seem intuitive that longer relationships would involve more consolidation.
However, some emerging adults may begin stayovers and spending most of their free time with
partners early in a relationship, e.g., Jamison and Ganong (2011). Conversely, relationships that
are long distance or that include individuals who are focused on their individual development
may exhibit less consolidation even after a considerable length of time. Finally, researchers have conceptualized relationship commitment as having an anticipated future with a partner, including but not limited to the expectation for marriage. Although emerging adults are choosing to marry at older ages (Anderson, 2016) and the path to marriage has changed (Guzzo, 2014), most emerging adults intend to marry during adulthood (Willoughby & James, 2017). However, emerging adults do not perceive all romantic relationships as potential marriages (Kefalas et al., 2011). The degree to which emerging adults foresee marrying their partners provides important context to the other relationship variables included in this study.

**Emerging Adult Romantic Relationship Typologies**

Relationship typologies capture distinct types of emerging romantic relationships based on unique combinations of relationship dynamics, duration, consolidation, and commitment. Those combinations may have implications for whether an individual is experiencing positive relationship development or not. For example, the meaning and appropriateness of relationship commitment may both depend on and influence other relationship aspects. A high degree of commitment in a relationship that has endured for several years and features positive dynamics may contribute to positive outcomes for the individual. However, high commitment very early in a relationship and/or in the context of negative dynamics may be problematic (Knopp, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2015). Identifying relationship typologies allows researchers to provide insights into how young people structure their romantic relationships.

Two prior studies have identified typologies of unmarried romantic relationships among emerging adults. Using data from college students, Roberson et al. (2017) identified a typology with four relationship types: committers (38% of their sample), casual daters (23% of their sample), settlers (30% of their sample), and volatile daters (8% of their sample). Their typology was based on six variables: tolerance for relationship ambiguity, future orientation, conflict management competency, satisfaction, relationship sanctification, and alcohol use. Committers’ relationships were marked by high relationship satisfaction, positive conflict management, and low tolerance for relational ambiguity. Casual daters’ relationships were more moderate in their satisfaction and conflict management with greater tolerance for relational ambiguity. Settlers’ relationships had low tolerance for relational ambiguity, poor conflict management, and moderate satisfaction. Finally, volatile daters had a high tolerance for relational ambiguity, and their relationships featured poor conflict management and low satisfaction.

Using data from the young adult waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), Manlove et al. (2014) also identified a relationship typology with four relationship types (short-term/casual, short-term/rosy outlook, long-term/cloudy outlook, and long-term/serious). Their typology was based on four variables: relationship duration, intimacy, commitment, and conflict. Short-term/casual relationships (15.1% of their sample) were low in commitment and intimacy with low to moderate conflict. Generally, emerging adults in those relationships did not expect them to last past the next six months. Short-term/rosy outlook relationships (21.8% of their sample) were shorter in duration but featured higher commitment and intimacy along with low conflict and an expectation that the relationship would last for at least the next six months. Long-term/cloudy outlook relationships (26.7% of their sample) were longer lasting relationships, but featured lower intimacy, higher conflict, and moderate expectation of lasting for the next six months. Finally, long-term/serious relationships (36.4% of their sample) had lasted longer than one year, about 95% believed they would be together in six months, and they were high in intimacy but low in conflict.
Based on Manlove et al. (2014) and Roberson et al. (2017) it appears that most emerging adult romantic relationships are healthy, committed partnerships, i.e., committers and long-term/serious, or reflect normative relationship exploration, i.e., casual daters and short-term/casual and short-term/rosy outlook. However, there also appears to be a sizable proportion of emerging adults in less optimal partnerships. For example, emerging adults may become stuck in ambivalent unions, i.e., settlers and long-term/cloudy outlook, or potentially harmful relationships, i.e., volatile daters. This is important because creating and implementing successful relationship education programs requires that educators distinguish between healthy couples and those that may need guidance about leaving the relationship or improving it.

These studies provide important insights into the variability among emerging adults’ romantic relationships, yet both studies had limitations that may have obscured the full spectrum of relationship types. For example, of the six variables used by Roberson et al. (2017) three focused primarily on individual behaviors or characteristics, i.e., alcohol consumption; tolerance for relationship ambiguity, conflict management competency. Roberson et al. also used a younger sample, including college students who were mostly 18 or 19 years old (M age = 19.3 years). Manlove et al. (2014) conducted a secondary data analysis, so they were limited to the variables available in the NLSY97, i.e., relationship duration, intimacy, commitment, and conflict. They were not able to account for important aspects of romantic relationships such as positive or negative relationship dynamics. Manlove et al. also omitted cohabiting couples, which limits the ability to identify nuanced, within-group differences for committed partnerships.

In the present study we were able to address several of these limitations. First, we used seven relationship aspects to identify the relationship typology. Including positive and negative relationship dynamics, consolidation, and commitment is particularly beneficial given our goal of identifying relationship types that did not emerge in previous studies. Second, our sample included a broader group of emerging adults with ages ranging from 18-29 years. Previous research suggests that individuals in their early twenties remain committed to the idea of marriage, but they generally want to wait until their late twenties or early thirties to make binding commitments (Willoughby & James, 2017). Consequently, unmarried individuals in their late twenties might be oriented differently toward their relationships than younger individuals, as they are closer to their ideal age for marriage. Finally, we retained cohabitors and engaged couples in the study to better understand how those forms of commitment may have combined with other relationship characteristics to form distinct groups. Cohabitation is an interesting construct because research has shown that couples move in together for practical reasons, e.g., lease ending, finances, and interpersonal reasons, e.g., to spend more time together, (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). Thus, cohabitors can include a broad range of couples with varying levels of positive and negative dynamics and commitment levels.

**Romantic Involvement and Emerging Adult Well-Being**

Participation in romantic relationships is expected to enhance emerging adult well-being (Furman & Collibee, 2014) by providing companionship and encouraging health promoting behaviors while reducing the opportunity for risk-taking (Beckmeyer & Cromwell, 2018; Braithwaite et al., 2010; Furman & Collibee, 2014). However, variability in the quality and characteristics of emerging adult romantic relationships may mean that romantic involvement in some instances (e.g., relationships where partners are warm and supportive of each other) is a promotive factor for emerging adult well-being but in others (e.g., relationships with conflict and ambiguity) it can undermine emerging adult well-being. Well-being can be conceptualized in multiple ways. In the present study we drew on a hedonic perspective (Lent, 2004) that
emphasizes the importance of life satisfaction as well as the absence of mental (e.g., depressive symptoms) and behavioral (e.g., heavy alcohol use) health challenges. We anticipated that differences in well-being would help us better understand the developmental appropriateness of different types of emerging adult romantic relationships.

**Present Study**

The present study had two aims. The first was to identify a typology of unmarried emerging adult romantic relationships. To do so we performed a cluster analysis on seven relationship variables that represented four domains of emerging adults’ current romantic relationships. The domains were relationship dynamics, i.e., warmth and support, negative interactions, and relationship satisfaction, duration, i.e., length of the relationship, consolidation, i.e., number of stayovers per week and percentage of free time spent with partner, and commitment, i.e., the likelihood of marrying their current partner. Because we included relationship aspects absent in prior studies, the present study will expand on previous efforts in ways that have the potential to reveal a more nuanced typology. Our second study aim was to describe differences in participant characteristics (i.e., age, race/ethnicity), relationship experiences (i.e., relationship status, cohabitation, and cycling), and well-being (i.e., depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, and heavy drinking) between the relationship types. To address these aims, we sought to answer two research questions:

**RQ1:** Are there distinctive types of relationships that can be defined based on relationship dynamics, duration, consolidation, and commitment?

**RQ2:** What are the characteristics of the individuals within each type of relationship and how are relationship types related to individual outcomes (i.e., depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, and heavy alcohol use)?

**Methods**

**Procedures**

Emerging adults were recruited to participate in a study of romantic experiences and health outcomes using Qualtrics Panel Services, which facilitates researchers’ access to existing online panels of research participants. Our participants were recruited from a double opt-in panel. Emerging adults first opted-in to the overall panel after receiving an invitation through social media sites. Once enrolled in the panel, participants could opt into research and survey opportunities when they meet the eligibility criteria. The eligibility criteria for the present study included being between 18 and 29 years old and reading/writing English.

Study data were collected via an online survey in 2016. In order to increase data validity we included three attention filters in the survey (i.e., items directing participants to select a specific response). Participants that answered an attention filter incorrectly were skipped out of the remainder of the survey and were not considered a valid study participant. Additionally, the survey had to be completed in at least 1/3 of the overall median completion time to ensure that participants read the questions and provided meaningful responses. The initial sample with all participants with valid survey responses included 1,050 young adults. During data cleaning (i.e., removing participants with extensive missing data, illogical responses, and/or straight-lining the survey) we removed 67 participants for a final overall sample of 983 emerging adults. In terms of romantic relationship involvement, 338 were single, 223 were married, 420 were in unmarried relationships, and two skipped the romantic relationship status item.

**Participants**

For the present study we first limited the sample to participants who were unmarried but in a romantic relationship (n = 420). In order to retain participants with missing data internal to
multi-item scales (i.e., they skipped some items on multi-item scales), we used individual mean replacement. We did so conservatively; participants could have skipped only one item on scales containing four or five items or have completed at least 80% of scales containing six or more items. Mean replacement was not used for two- or three-item scales. Overall, we used mean replacement for 41 of the 420 participants with a non-marital romantic union and for only four participants did we replace values on two scales. Following the individual mean replacement we limited the sample of unmarried but romantically involved participants to only those with complete data on all variables used in this study. The final sample included 396 emerging adults, evenly split by gender (51.4% female). Most participants were white non-Hispanic (67.0%), approximately 24 years-old (M = 24.38, SD = 3.17), and identified as heterosexual (81.8%). Approximately, 18.9% had a high school diploma or less, 37.2% were current students (i.e., they were completing a 2-year, 4-year, or graduate/professional degree), and 43.9% had completed at least some college (see Table 1).

(Table 1 here)

**Measures**

**Relationship dynamics.** We measured three types of relationship dynamics: warmth and support, negative interactions, and relationship satisfaction. *Warmth and support* (4-items; α = .83) and *negative interactions* (5-items; α = .87) were assessed with items adapted from the Network of Relationships Inventory-Relationship Quality Version (Buhremester & Furman, 2008). Sample warmth and support items included: “We play around and have fun together” and “I turn to my partner for support with personal problems.” Sample negative interactions items included: “We get mad or get in fights with each other,” and “My partner points out my faults or puts me down in a hurtful way.” Warmth and support and negative interaction items were rated on 5-point scale (1 = never to 5 = all of the time) and scores for each quality were computed by averaging across the specific scale items. Higher scores reflect perceiving more warmth and support or more negative interactions within one’s relationships. *Relationship satisfaction* was measured with the Couples Satisfaction Index (4-items; Funk & Rogge, 2007; α = .93). Items were rated on a 4-point scale (1 = not true to 4 = very true) and scores were computed by averaging across the items. Higher scores reflect greater relationship satisfaction.

**Relationship duration.** Participants reported the length of their relationship in years and months. We converted relationship duration to years by computing relationship length in months and then dividing by 12.

**Couple consolidation.** We assessed how much free time participants spend together and the number of nights per week they stay over at one partner’s home. *Percentage of free time together* was measured with the item: “About what percentage of your free time do you spend with your partner?” Participants responded by reporting a percentage between 0% and 100%. *Number of nights per week* was determined with two items. Participants were first asked if they were currently living with their romantic partner. If yes, they were assigned a score of 7-nights per week. Participants who reported they were not cohabiting were asked how many nights per week they typically spent the night with their partner. Responses ranged from 0 to 7.

**Relationship commitment.** *Likelihood of marriage* was measured with the item: “How likely is it that you will marry your partner?” There were four response options: extremely unlikely, unlikely, likely, and very likely.

**Relationship experiences.** Participants reported if they were currently cohabiting with their romantic partner, if they had experienced relationship cycling in their current relationship (i.e., breaking up and getting back together), and the status of their relationship. *Cohabitation*
was measured with the item: “Do you and your partner currently live together?” There were two response options: yes or no. *Relationship cycling* was measured with the item: “How many times have you broken up and gotten back together with your current romantic partner?” Participants were instructed to respond with 0 if they had never broken up and gotten back together with their current romantic partner. Participants who had experienced cycling in their current relationships provided the number of times they had done so. We coded those responses as 0 = never cycled or 1 = has cycled at least once. *Relationship status* was measured by asking participants: “How would you describe your current romantic relationship status?” Response options included casually dating, exclusive relationship, or engaged.

**Depressive symptoms.** Depressive symptoms were measured with the 10-item short form of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (Andresen, Malmgren, Carter, & Patrick, 1994; $\alpha = .82$). Items were rated using a 4-point scale (1 = rarely or never, less than 1 day to 4 = all of the time, 5-7 days). Scores were computed by averaging across the items. Higher scores reflect more depressive thoughts and feelings over the past week.

**Life satisfaction.** Life satisfaction was measured with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; 5-items; $\alpha = .83$). Items were rated using a 4-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). Scores were computed by averaging across the items. Higher scores reflect greater satisfaction with current life circumstances.

**Heavy drinking.** Heavy drinking was computed as a composite of past 30-day drinking frequency, drinking amount, and drunkenness (Beckmeyer, 2017; $\alpha = .83$). *Drinking frequency* was measured with the item: “In the past 30 days how often did you have at least one drink of alcohol?” There were six categories (0 = 0 days to 5 = 20-30 days). *Drinking amount* was measured with the item: “In the past 30 days, when you did drink, how many drinks did you usually have?” There were six categories (0 = no alcohol in past 30 days to 5 = 9 or more). *Drunkenness* was measured with the item: “In the past 30 days, how often did you get drunk, by drunk we mean unsteady, dizzy, light headed, and/or sick to your stomach?” There were six categories (0 = not at all to 5 = 20 or more). Heavy drinking was computed by averaging together participants’ drinking frequency, amount, and drunkenness. Higher scores reflect heavier drinking during the past 30 days.

**Control variables.** Based on prior literature and frameworks on emerging adult romantic development (e.g., Bryant & Conger, 2003; Furman & Collibee, 2014; Shulman & Connolly, 2013), we included six control variables in the present study. Analyses controlled for sex, age, race/ethnicity (white non-Hispanic or other race/ethnicity), sexual identity (heterosexual or lesbian, gay, bisexual), level of education, and sensation seeking with the Brief Sensation Seeking Scale (4-items; Stephenson, Hoyle, Palmgreen, Slater, 2003; $\alpha = .59$).

**Analysis Plan**

To answer the first research question, we performed an agglomerative hierarchical cluster analysis on the romantic relationship variables. In agglomerative hierarchal cluster analysis, each participant is initially considered an individual cluster, at successive steps in the analysis similar clusters are combined (Henry, Tolan, & German-Smith, 2005). We used the Ward’s method to assign clusters and the squared Euclidean distance procedure to determine the difference between clusters. We standardized the romantic relationship characteristic variables as $z$-scores so each contributed equally in the analysis (Norušis, 2009). After identifying the romantic relationship clusters, we used chi-square and ANOVA tests to determine demographic differences between the relationship types. Finally, we used MANCOVA to test if well-being differed between
emerging adults in the different types of relationships. The MANCOVA controlled for gender, age, race/ethnicity, sexual identity, level of education, and sensation seeking.

**Results**

The agglomeration schedule, generated by the agglomerative hierarchical cluster analysis, suggested a five-cluster solution. The appropriateness of a five-cluster solution was also supported by the meaningful differences in the relationship dimensions across the clusters and that the patterns within each cluster could be interpreted within the context of emerging adulthood. We generated cluster labels by comparing the relative differences in the relationship dimensions (see Table 2), labeling the clusters as: happily independent (18.9%), happily consolidated (30.8%), exploratory (17.9%), stuck (23.0%), and high intensity (9.3%). We used ANOVA and chi-square tests to determine which participant demographics and relationship experiences differed between the clusters (see Table 1). There were significant group differences for age ($F(4, 391) = 2.87, p = .023$), sex ($\chi^2(4) = 12.75, p = .013$), romantic relationship status ($\chi^2(8) = 129.75, p < .001$), education ($\chi^2(8) = 24.22, p = .002$), relationship cycling ($\chi^2(4) = 25.55, p < .001$), and current cohabitation ($\chi^2(4) = 246.78, p < .001$). Below, we describe the characteristics of each relationship type, along with key demographic characteristics and differences in relationship experiences.

**(Table 2 Here)**

**Happily Independent Relationships**

Happily independent relationships (18.9%) were characterized by a pattern of positive relational dynamics (i.e., high in satisfaction, warmth, and support but low in negative interactions), moderate duration ($M = 1.72$ years), and a strong perceived likelihood for marriage. However, these relationships featured less consolidation than other groups - spending the second fewest nights and second lowest percentage of free time with their partners (see Table 2). Most of the participants in this cluster identified as being in an exclusive relationship (82.7%), yet none were cohabiting with their partners. They also reported the least relationship cycling. Participants in this cluster were on-average the youngest emerging adults ($M = 23.73$). In terms of education, they had the smallest proportion of participants with a high school education or less and the second largest proportion of current students (48.0%).

**Happily Consolidated Relationships**

Happily consolidated relationships (30.8%) had a pattern of relational dynamics and commitment that did not differ from the happily independent cluster. However, these relationships were highly consolidated (i.e., highest average number of stayovers and second highest percentage of free time spent with partner) and longer in duration ($M = 3.41$ years; see Table 2). Characteristic of their high consolidation, this cluster featured the largest proportions of engaged (28.9%) and cohabiting (91.0%) emerging adults and the smallest proportion of casually dating couples (1.6%; see Table 1). Compared to the happily independent cluster, fewer of these participants were current students (28.7%).

**Exploratory Relationships**

Exploratory relationships (17.9%) had a pattern of relational dynamics, consolidation, duration, and commitment consistent with a stage of early relationship formation. Specifically, the relational dynamics were more moderate in quality compared to the happily independent and happily consolidated clusters (i.e., lower satisfaction, warmth, and support and greater negative interactions; see Table 2). Additionally, exploratory relationships were the shortest in duration and featured the least consolidation (i.e., the fewest stayovers and least free time spent with partners) and commitment (i.e., least likelihood of marriage) of all the relationship types.
Consistent with the concept of exploration, most participants reported they were casually dating (62.0%) and none were cohabiting. Approximately half of the emerging adults in this cluster were current students (50.7%; see Table 1).

**Stuck Relationships**

Stuck relationships (23.0%) reflected a pattern of moderate quality relational dynamics and high consolidation (see Table 2). Relationship satisfaction, warmth, and support were lower than other clusters, but negative interactions were higher than the happily independent and happily consolidated clusters. However, unlike the exploratory relationship cluster, these relationships had the longest average duration ($M = 3.53$ years) and a high degree of consolidation (i.e., participants stayed over an average of 5.8 nights and spent 61.22% of free time with their partners). Despite high consolidation, individuals in this cluster reported that they were unlikely to marry their partners. Over half (58.2%) identified the relationship as exclusive and 18.7% were engaged. This cluster also featured the second highest proportion of cohabiters (70.3%) and more than half (54.9%) had experienced relationship cycling. Participants in this cluster were older on average than other groups ($M = 25.22$). About one-third (28.6%) of them were current students, with 50.5% having completed at least some college and 20.9% having completed a high school degree or less (see Table 1).

**High Intensity**

High intensity relationships (9.3%) had a contradictory pattern of relational dynamics. The relationships were relatively long ($M = 2.14$ years) and had high levels of warmth, support, and relationship satisfaction. However, they also had the highest level of negative interactions. These relationships were quite consolidated (i.e., 5.84 stayovers per week and 69.59% of free time spent with partners) and committed (i.e., high marriage intentions). Individuals in this cluster also reported the highest rate of relationship cycling (56.8%). Most of these relationships were exclusive (64.9%) or engagements (8.1%) and 64.9% were currently cohabiting. This cluster had the lowest proportion of women (29.7%) and the highest proportion of current students (56.8%; see Table 1).

**Differences in Well-Being**

Based on a MANCOVA model (controlling for sex, age, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and sensation seeking), there was a significant multivariate effect for romantic relationship typology on emerging adult well-being (Wilks’ $\lambda = .86, F(12, 982) = 4.89, p < .001$, partial-$\eta^2 = .050$). There were significant group differences for depressive symptoms ($F(4, 373) = 5.97, p < .001$, partial-$\eta^2 = .060$) and life satisfaction ($F(4, 373) = 6.11, p < .001$, partial-$\eta^2 = .062$) but not heavy drinking ($F(4, 373) = 2.30, p = .058$).

**Depressive symptoms.** Emerging adults in the stuck and high intensity clusters reported more depressive symptoms than those in the happily independent, happily consolidated, and exploratory clusters (see Table 2). There were no other significant group differences for emerging adults’ depressive symptoms.

**Life satisfaction.** Emerging adults in the happily consolidated cluster reported greater life satisfaction than those in the exploratory or stuck clusters. Emerging adults in the high intensity cluster reported greater life satisfaction than those in the happily independent, exploratory, or stuck clusters (see Table 2). There were no other significant group differences for emerging adults’ life satisfaction.

**Discussion**

In this study we identified five distinct types of romantic relationships that reveal an interesting interplay between the duration, consolidation, commitment, and interpersonal
dynamics of romantic unions. When viewed through the lens of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015), our results highlight the complexity of relationship involvement at this stage of life. Specifically, emerging adults must learn to balance their romantic explorations and commitments with individual goals, such as advancing their education and careers (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Arnett (2000) articulated five themes related to emerging adulthood: identity exploration, feeling in-between, instability, age of opportunity, and self-focus. These characteristics are reflected in the different ways emerging adults construct their romantic relationships.

Happily independent and happily consolidated relationships are primarily distinguished from each other by their degree of consolidation. Perhaps emerging adults in happily independent relationships are eager to remain open to the possibilities that come with developing other parts of their lives outside of their romantic unions (e.g., maintaining close friendships and pursuing academic and occupational opportunities; Jamison & Ganong, 2011). Doing so may also reflect a level of self-focus that is less central when couples choose to cohabit or spend more of their free time together, as is the case with happily consolidated couples. From a structural standpoint, it may also be that happily independent couples are in a period of their lives (e.g., 48.0% current students) that makes consolidation difficult or undesirable. As emerging adults in both types of relationships reported similar well-being, differences in relationship consolidation may indicate that they are successfully balancing their romantic involvement and individual life tasks (see Shulman & Connolly, 2013). We speculate that over time, happily independent relationships may transition into happily consolidated unions.

The emerging adult characteristics of exploration and instability might be best exemplified by emerging adults in exploratory relationships. These relationships have little consolidation or commitment, suggesting that emerging adults may be determining if their partnerships have the potential for long-term commitment. For some emerging adults, exploring their identities also means exploring different types of partners and partnerships (Kefalas et al., 2011). As this relationship type does not appear to compromise individual wellbeing, we might assume that those in exploratory relationships are taking advantage of the freedom this stage of life can provide. An important next step for researchers is determining the trajectories of exploratory relationships, including what facilitates their transitions to other relationship types (e.g., happily consolidated versus stuck) or dissolution.

Exploration during emerging adulthood sometimes comes at the cost of feeling settled into adulthood and feeling stable in work and love. It may be that individuals who are in stuck relationships (i.e., high consolidation but more moderate commitment and quality) are either caught in a pattern of relationship ambiguity (see Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, 2011), unsure where their relationship is heading, or seeking a sense of stability through their romantic union that is lacking in other areas of their lives. The high level of relationship cycling in this group (54.9%) hints that perhaps some of these emerging adults are involved in a protracted pathway to relationship dissolution (Baxter, 1984), though we are unable to determine if this the case based on available data. Regardless of what creates stability in these unions, they appear costly for emerging adults’ well-being in terms of depression and life satisfaction.

The high intensity relationships may also be a response to common emerging adulthood experiences of feeling in-between roles and instability. As couples navigate the stressors of balancing work, education, and romantic goals, they may exhibit some negative relationship dynamics, e.g., higher conflict. Yet, this group has a high level of commitment and some positive relationship dynamics. Thus, these emerging adults may be hopeful about the future of their relationships or they may be accepting the mix of highs and lows as the normal pattern of their
Relationships. Gottman (1993) found that couples with volatile conflict styles could have positive and stable relationships as long as the negative interactions were balanced by warmth and support. A similar process may be at work with these couples; however, the positive aspects of these relationships did not appear to be compensating for the negatives. These participants reported the most depressive symptoms of any group as well as the highest life satisfaction. Relationship researchers commonly rely on relationship status, e.g., single, casually dating, exclusively dating, married, and duration when describing emerging adults’ current romantic involvement. This strategy has the benefits of simplicity, consistency across studies, and parsimony, but it lacks sufficient detail to describe the nature of an individual’s engagement with a romantic partner (Fincham & Rogge, 2010). The stuck and high intensity groups are particularly revealing in this regard because most individuals in these groups identified as either casually or exclusively dating, yet their interactions with each other were starkly different. Even accounting for relationship duration, we might have expected both groups to be reasonably satisfied and, perhaps, moving toward marriage. However, layering on consolidation, relationship dynamics, and marriage intentions created a much more nuanced picture of how individuals were relating to their partners. It is not always possible to ask a series of detailed questions about romantic engagement, but this study suggests that doing so is critical if a central aim of the study is understanding the true nature of romantic involvement and its impact on individual or couple well-being.

Implications for Relationship Education

The commonalities across the results of our study and those of Manlove et al., (2014) and Roberson et al. (2017) are important because they suggest that relationship educators are likely to encounter a few common types of romantic relationships as they carry out their work. It appears that relationship educators will encounter romantic unions marked by positive relational dynamics and high commitment, i.e., happily consolidated, committers, or long-term/serious, as well as a relatively stable relationships with less optimal relational dynamics, i.e., stuck relationships, settlers’, and long-term/cloudy outlook. Relationship educators should also be prepared for shorter-term relationships with positive relational dynamics, i.e., happily independent and short-term/rosy outlook, as well as more casual relationships, i.e., exploratory, casual daters, and short-term/casual. Finally, relationship educators may encounter relationships that combine positive and negative qualities, i.e., high intensity and volatile daters.

Emerging adults in different types of romantic relationships may require different programs and resources as they make decisions about their relationships. Emerging adults in happily independent and happily consolidated relationships appear well-suited for common couples-based relationship education (see Fincham, Stanely, & Rhoades, 2011; Rogge, Cobb, Lawrence, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2013). These programs typically focus on enhancing relationships through building and maintaining intimacy, learning to effectively discuss and resolve conflicts, and planning for important relationship steps in the future (e.g., cohabitation and/or marriage). Providing emerging adults in positive, committed relationships with relationship education resources can support the investments and commitments they have already made in their romantic relationships.

Emerging adults in exploratory relationships may need relationship education resources that help them evaluate the long-term potential of their relationships and make deliberate decisions about whether or not they want to make greater investments in commitment and consolidation, particularly in terms of cohabitation. Specifically, emphasizing the importance of
collecting information before accruing barriers to breakup (e.g., cohabitation, shared child) could prevent relational “sliding” and promote more deliberate decision-making (Stanley et al., 2006).

Emerging adults who see their exploratory relationships as potential long-term unions may benefit from resources and programs that help them communicate relational goals and expectations to their partners. Those who do not see long-term potential for their relationships may benefit from RE resources focused on determining when and how to end their relationships when it no longer meeting their needs (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2019). Emerging adults in stuck or high intensity relationships may need therapy in addition to relationship education. These relationships appear to have embedded relational patterns that may require intervention that is more intensive and individualized than what is typically offered in relationship education.

Limitations

The results of this study must be considered within the context of its limitations. First, our study relies on cross-sectional data that was collected from one member of the relationship. Romantic relationships are dynamic; they change over time as individuals shift in their expectations and behaviors. We are unable to determine if these relationships transition into other relationship types overtime. Consequently, our findings are constrained to the snapshot in time of where an individual was at the time of data collection. Similarly, having the perceptions of only one member of couple prevents us from making conclusions about the status of the relationship more broadly. Our study, as well as those by Manlove et al. (2014) and Roberson et al. (2017) are investigations of individual perceptions of relationships. We do not think this detracts from the overall contribution of the study, but it does require some consideration for how the findings are interpreted and used. In particular, our results should be interpreted as reflecting individuals’ perceptions of their romantic experiences. Our cross-sectional data also precludes us from determining whether being in a specific type of relationship leads to changes in emerging adult well-being. Although we included seven relationship variables, they are not inclusive of all relationship dynamics, characteristics, or types of commitment. Further, using different person-centered approaches, e.g., latent profile analysis, could also yield a different typology. Future research, should compare typologies identified with different approaches and those using single-reporter and dyadic data. Finally, although our sample is diverse, it is not representative of emerging adults in the United States. Therefore, our typology needs to be replicated in order to determine its generalizability.

Conclusion

This study contributes to a growing consensus about the ways in which emerging adults engage in romantic relationships. Consistent with the instability, identity development, and occupational explorations that characterize emerging adulthood, there is considerable diversity in the ways that emerging adults structure their romantic relationships. Our findings suggest that the impact of different relationships on wellbeing depends on the interplay between relationship dynamics, consolidation, and future relationship goals, e.g., marriage intentions. Specifically, relationships that are committed and stable are not always beneficial for emerging adult development and those that are casual or exploratory are not always risky or problematic. These different relationship forms reflect the complex task of coordinating romantic relationship formation in the context of identity exploration, building a career, and becoming independent. Thus, relationship education that accounts for diverse relationship forms is likely to have the greatest impact on emerging adults.
References


relationships in emerging adulthood (pp. 293-316). New York; Cambridge University Press.


Table 1.
Demographic and Descriptive Statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Full sample (N = 396)</th>
<th>Happily independent (n = 75)</th>
<th>Happily consolidated (n = 122)</th>
<th>Exploratory (n = 71)</th>
<th>Stuck (n = 91)</th>
<th>High intensity (n = 37)</th>
<th>χ²(df) or F(df)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female</strong></td>
<td>52.5%</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
<td>50.5%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>12.75(4)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>24.38 (3.17)</td>
<td>23.73 (3.04)</td>
<td>24.44 (2.94)</td>
<td>24.18 (3.71)</td>
<td>25.22 (3.03)</td>
<td>23.76 (3.07)</td>
<td>2.87(4, 391)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White NH</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
<td>74.6%</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
<td>25.34(16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black NH</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other NH</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>78.5%</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
<td>77.9%</td>
<td>76.1%</td>
<td>74.7%</td>
<td>86.5%</td>
<td>3.22(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24.22(8)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or less</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently a student</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>50.7%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>56.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college or more</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
<td>41.3%</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>50.5%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sensation seeking</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casually dating</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive</td>
<td>63.1%</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
<td>70.5%</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship cycling</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>54.9%</td>
<td>56.8%</td>
<td>26.55(4)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently cohabiting</td>
<td>50.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>91.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>70.3%</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td>246.28(4)***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes.** *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
Table 2. Differences in Relationship Variables for the Emerging Adult Romantic Relationship Typology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship variable</th>
<th>Happily independent (n = 75)</th>
<th>Happily consolidated (n = 122)</th>
<th>Exploratory (n = 71)</th>
<th>Stuck (n = 91)</th>
<th>High intensity (n = 37)</th>
<th>F(4, 391)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship satisfaction</td>
<td>3.89 (0.26)</td>
<td>3.86 (0.29)</td>
<td>2.55 (0.78)</td>
<td>2.81 (0.65)</td>
<td>3.48 (0.40)</td>
<td>119.73***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warmth &amp; support</td>
<td>4.44 (0.36)</td>
<td>4.49 (0.46)</td>
<td>3.36 (0.65)</td>
<td>3.42 (0.81)</td>
<td>4.14 (0.51)</td>
<td>76.11***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative interactions</td>
<td>1.70 (0.57)</td>
<td>1.76 (0.49)</td>
<td>2.02 (0.68)</td>
<td>2.59 (.70)</td>
<td>3.88 (0.53)</td>
<td>113.97***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of nights per week</td>
<td>1.47 (1.24)</td>
<td>6.78 (1.00)</td>
<td>0.97 (1.13)</td>
<td>5.80 (2.09)</td>
<td>5.84 (1.88)</td>
<td>280.53***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship length</td>
<td>1.72 (1.18)</td>
<td>3.41 (2.71)</td>
<td>0.89 (0.95)</td>
<td>3.53 (2.39)</td>
<td>2.14 (1.32)</td>
<td>25.67***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of marriage</td>
<td>3.61 (0.54)</td>
<td>3.79 (0.40)</td>
<td>2.34 (0.75)</td>
<td>2.59 (0.97)</td>
<td>3.54 (0.61)</td>
<td>80.16***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% free time together</td>
<td>44.84 (21.96)</td>
<td>68.93 (18.01)</td>
<td>33.18 (23.51)</td>
<td>61.22 (21.87)</td>
<td>69.59 (15.13)</td>
<td>45.05***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressive symptoms</td>
<td>1.95 (0.60)</td>
<td>1.92 (0.61)</td>
<td>2.12 (0.53)</td>
<td>2.27 (0.53)</td>
<td>2.37 (0.56)</td>
<td>5.97***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life satisfaction</td>
<td>2.62 (0.64)</td>
<td>2.74 (0.69)</td>
<td>2.45 (0.60)</td>
<td>2.42 (0.53)</td>
<td>3.04 (0.61)</td>
<td>6.11***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy drinking</td>
<td>1.14 (1.00)</td>
<td>1.26 (1.04)</td>
<td>1.26 (1.17)</td>
<td>1.33 (1.03)</td>
<td>1.96 (1.40)</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Means in same row with different superscripts are significantly different at p < .01. ***p < .001