

Emerging Adult Relationship Transitions as Opportune Times for Tailored Interventions

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Abstract

The goal of this research was to identify predictors of college students' relationship dissolution and how a relationship education (RE) curriculum integrated into a college course (*Relationship U [RU]*) influenced students' breakup (BU) and relationship formation decisions. Study 1 ($n = 854$) showed the strongest predictors of BU by the end of the semester were low relationship efficacy, dedication, satisfaction, and relationship length and greater emotional safety, distance, and extradyadic behavior. Study 2 ($n = 7,957$) examined the perceived influence of RU on students' decisions to end and begin relationships through thematic analysis of open-ended questions asking participants to identify what (if any) aspect of the curriculum influenced their decisions. Participant responses highlighted specific RE components differentially salient to their decisions to end and begin romantic relationships. Implications for creating tailored and adaptive RE curricula with emerging adults are discussed.

Keywords

relationship education, emerging adulthood, romantic relationship transitions, dating, decision-making

Models of romantic relationship development suggest that during emerging adulthood, individuals enter a period characterized by more committed and intense emotional relationships (e.g., Connolly, Craig, Goldberg & Pepler, 2004) that have numerous effects on concurrent and later mental health and relational outcomes (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Overbeek, Stattin, Vermulst, Ha, & Engles, 2007). The increasing diversity in pathways to family formation (e.g., Hayford, Guzzo, & Smock, 2014) necessitates intervening early in relationship development (i.e., prior to cohabitation, childbirth, and marriage), while risk factors for later distress are still malleable (Rhoades & Stanley, 2009). Accordingly, Fincham, Stanley, and Rhodes (2011) argue for application of relationship education (RE) during emerging adulthood, as individuals begin to focus on the potential for long-term committed relationships (Arnett, 2006; Brown, 1999) and begin displaying many of the risk factors for later distress (Fincham, Stanley, & Rhodes, 2011). The goals of RE are to provide individuals or couples with the education, skills, and principles to increase their chances of having healthy and stable relationships (Markman & Rhoades, 2012). This includes helping emerging adults choose a good match; set realistic relationship expectations; and thoroughly evaluate risk, compatibility, and commitment before moving through transitions that will encourage the continuation of the relationship (i.e., having sex, moving in together, shared debt) and make breaking up more challenging (Rhoades & Stanley, 2009).

Relationship transitions (e.g., marriage, birth of the first child, divorce, and remarriage) have been conceptualized in the RE literature as opportune times for intervention where decisions have large consequences and partners are primed for change. Ending any romantic relationship can result in psychological distress and decreased life satisfaction (Rhoades, Atkins, Kamp Dush, Stanley, & Markman, 2011), but ending a destructive or abusive relationship is particularly critical due to the concurrent and future negative impacts of maintaining that relationship (e.g., Amanor-Boadu, Stith, Miller, Cook, Allen, & Gorzek, 2011). Thus, understanding what predicts the ending of emerging adult relationships not only provides important information on relationship development this period also allows relationship educators to screen for emerging adults who may be at risk for distress and more efficiently and

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effectively tailor interventions for this population (e.g., Collins et al., 2004). Tailoring interventions to capitalize on emerging adult relationship transitions requires an understanding of which RE components emerging adults find the most influential as they decide to transition into or out of their relationships. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to explore what factors predict the dissolution of emerging adult relationships in a college context and what RE components were most influential to their decisions to end or begin a romantic relationship.

Study 1: Predicting the End of Emerging Adult Romantic Relationships

Levinger (1979) suggests that individuals end relationships when the attractiveness of the relationship is low (i.e., negative aspects of the relationship outweigh positive aspects), the barriers to leaving it are low, and/or when alternatives to the relationship are high. Stanley and colleagues (e.g., Stanley & Rhoades 2009) note that partners' assessment of the relationship includes each person's individual characteristics as well as features of the relationship itself. Many individual and relationship characteristics may influence emerging adults' evaluation of relationship attractiveness in a college context: College students report relatively high rates of drinking, physical assault (Hingson, Heeren, Zakocs, Kopstein, & Weschler, 2002), psychological disorders (see Storrie, Ahern, & Tuckett, 2010), casual sex (e.g., Glenn & Marquardt, 2001), and relationship violence (e.g., Straus, 2004). Additionally, within a typical college context, alternatives to the relationship abound and barriers to leaving the relationship are low (e.g., lack of financial interdependence, home ownership, and children). Below we outline individual and relational characteristics that may impact relationship quality, potential barriers to ending a relationship, and attractive alternatives to the relationship that may predict relationship dissolution for emerging adult college students.

Individual Characteristics

Researchers have found that a history of parental divorce (Larson & Reedy, 2004) and a lack of self-perceived interpersonal competence (Fischer, Fitzpatrick, & Cleveland, 2007; we will refer to this construct as relationship efficacy) negatively impact emerging adult relationship quality. Excessive drinking (Fischer et al., 2007) and depressive symptoms (Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012) are also negatively associated with young adult romantic relationship quality. Further, in line with Brown's (1999) model of relationship development, we expect that as emerging adults move from freshman to senior year, their relationship skills and long-term focus will increase, as demonstrated by a decrease in the rate of breakup (BU). Altogether, we expect that emerging adults who report nonmarried parents, low relationship efficacy, heavy drinking, greater depressive symptoms, and being a freshman will have increased odds of experiencing the ending of their relationship.

Relationship Characteristics

Dedication and relationship satisfaction are conceptualized as key predictors of relationship stability (see Fincham & Rogge, 2010; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010). In emerging adult relationships, conflict resolution may be critical for sustaining relationship quality (e.g., Cui, Fincham, & Pasley, 2008; Fischer et al., 2007) as around one third of those in dating relationships have experienced physical violence (Hettrich & O'Leary, 2007). Aggression in any form is likely to reduce partners' perceptions of safety in the relationship (Servino, Smith, Porter, & Brown, 2011), potentially increasing the chances for relationship dissolution (see Fincham, Cui, Braithwaite, & Pasley, 2008). Thus, we predict that lower levels of dedication, satisfaction, constructive communication, and emotional safety along with higher levels of psychological and physical aggression in a relationship will increase the odds of BU.

Barriers to Leaving

Constraints relevant to a college context include structural ones (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009), such as proximity and cohabitation, as well as those denoting an investment, such as relationship length and relationship status. Although proximity (i.e., living on the same campus or in the same dorm) may make ending a college relationship more challenging, distance (i.e., going home on break or to an internship) may encourage it (Knox, Zusman, Daniels, & Brantley, 2002). Taking proximity to an extreme, cohabiting may further bind partners through financial obligations and shared property (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Additionally, as the length of romantic relationships increase, so does the investment size (the amount of resources put into the relationship; Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012), discouraging dissolution. Similarly, as partners move from nonexclusive to exclusive and engaged relationships, they are choosing to give up alternatives and become more invested in their current relationship. Thus, we expect that students who dissolve their relationships will be more likely to report living a greater distance from their partners, not cohabiting, shorter relationships, and be in nonexclusive relationships.

Attractive Alternatives

On college campuses, students have contact with many potential alternative partners. Although most emerging adults disapprove of extradyadic behavior (Knox, Zusman, Kaluzny, & Sturdivant, 2000), 69% of undergraduates report committing some form of infidelity while dating within the past 2 years, commonly resulting in the dissolution of the relationship (Allen & Baucom, 2006; Knox et al., 2000). Thus, we posit that perceptions of infidelity behaviors will increase the odds of relationship termination.

Method

Procedure

As part of a larger study, data were collected from undergraduate students in an introductory family development course at a

large southeastern university. This class meets a liberal studies requirement, so students represent all colleges and majors on campus (Fincham et al., 2008). Students were given several options for class credit, including participation in a study. Those who choose the study were e-mailed a link to a secure online system at the beginning (T1), middle (T2), and end (T3) of the 14-week semester.

Participants

Participants for this analysis were drawn from data obtained over four consecutive semesters. Those who indicated they were currently in a romantic relationship but were not married at T1 ($n = 1,078$ or 44% of the total available sample) were included. From these, 24 were excluded because they were beyond the emerging adult age range (>25 years old). Of the remaining 1,054, 42% reported they ended this relationship by T2 or T3. From this subsample, 31 were excluded due to missing responses on entire scales. The final BU sample included 427 participants (358 females and 69 males).

We then used random sample selection in SPSS (Version 22) to select 427 participants (358 females and 69 males) whose relationships had not ended by the end of the semester. The two groups were statistically similar in age, race, sexual orientation, and relationship status at T1. The mean age of both groups was about 19 years (BU = 19.27, nonbreakup [NBU] = 19.47) and the majority identified as Caucasian (BU = 66%, NBU = 68%), followed by African American (BU = 15%, NBU = 13%), Latino (BU = 11%, NBU = 13%), Asian (BU = 3%, NBU = 1%), and "Other" races (BU = 6%, NBU = 5%). The majority were in heterosexual relationships (BU = 97.7%, NBU = 99.5%).

Individual Characteristics at T1

Participants indicated whether their parents were married and living together, separated or divorced, never married, a parent had died, or other. This variable was recoded into *parents together* (0) and *parents not together* (1). Relationship efficacy was measured by 7 items (Fincham, Harold & Gano-Phillips, 2000) concerning perceived ability to resolve conflict with the partner (e.g., "I am able to do the things needed to settle our conflicts."). Responses ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7), with higher scores reflecting greater relationship efficacy; α coefficients were .85 for BU and .84 for NBU groups. To assess heavy drinking, we asked how frequently the respondent had more than five drinks on one occasion in the last 30 days (ranging from *it never happened* [1] to *more than 10 times* [9]). Depressive symptoms were measured using the 10-item version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977). Respondents rated the frequency of symptoms experienced over the past week (e.g., "I felt sad") ranging from *rarely or none of the time* (1) to *most or all of the time* (5); higher scores indicated more symptoms. Coefficient α s were .79 for the BU and .75 for NBU groups. Finally, participants also indicated their year in college.

Relationship Characteristics at T1

Respondents answered 4 items from the commitment inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992), such as "My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life," on a 5-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7), with higher scores reflecting greater dedication ($\alpha = .81$ and $.82$ for the BU and NBU groups, respectively). Participants reported their relationship satisfaction over the past week (termed recent relationship satisfaction in this article) using 7 items on a scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very* (7). Sample items included "how well has your partner met your needs?" and "how good your relationship was compared to most other relationships?" Higher scores indicated greater relationship satisfaction. Exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring with oblique rotation indicated one factor ($\alpha = .90$ and $.90$ for BU and NBU groups, respectively).

Seven items from the Constructive Communication subscale of the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984) assessed partners' use of mutual discussion, expression of feelings, and compromise to resolve conflict. Participants rated the likelihood of these behaviors from *very unlikely* (1) to *very likely* (9); higher scores reflect greater constructive communication ($\alpha = .80$ and $.81$ for BU and NBU groups, respectively). Two subscales from the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) assessed Psychological Aggression (16 items) and Physical Assault (we used the 10 nonsevere items such as "I pushed or shoved my partner"). Participants rated the frequency of their own and their partner's behavior over the previous 8 weeks; responses ranged from *once* (1) to *more than 20 times* (6); *not in the past 8 weeks, but it did happen* (7); or *it never happened* (8). Higher scores reflect more frequent Psychological Aggression and Physical Assault ($\alpha = .85$ for both BU and NBU groups on Psychological Aggression; $\alpha = .77$ for both BU and NBU groups on Physical Assault). Items were also created for this survey to assess how safe participants felt: "telling their partner about their goals and dreams," "sharing their innermost beliefs," "asking for things they want from their partner," and "letting them know exactly how they feel." Responses ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring with oblique rotation revealed one factor (coefficient α for BU and NBU groups was $.84$ and $.92$, respectively).

Barriers to Leaving at T1

Proximity to partner was dummy coded into living ≤ 50 miles apart (0) and > 51 miles apart (1) because of the parabolic distribution of the ordered categorical response options. Participants also indicated whether they were *living separately* (0) or *living together* (1) and how long they had been in a relationship with their current partner: < 6 months (referent category), 6–12 months, 1–2 years, 2–3 years, and ≥ 4 years. Relationship status options at T1 were *dating non-exclusively* (referent category), *dating exclusively*, *engaged*,

Table 1. Analysis of Variance for the Breakup Versus Nonbreakup Groups.

Variables	Breakup (n = 429)		Nonbreakup (n = 426)		F	p	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD			
Heavy alcohol use	2.57	2.16	2.33	2.00	2.68 ^a	.102	.004
Relationship efficacy	36.20	8.21	39.28	7.11	34.27 ^a	.000	.041
Depression	18.32	4.98	17.14	4.39	13.51 ^a	.000	.016
Constructive communication	50.26	9.79	52.43	9.01	11.28	.001	.014
Emotional safety	17.56	2.97	18.04	3.05	5.49	.019	.007
Psychological aggression	1.38	2.05	0.98	1.63	9.92 ^a	.002	.012
Physical assault	0.42	1.23	0.34	1.13	0.89	.347	.001
Dedication	13.98	3.44	15.94	3.10	76.22	.000	.085
Recent relationship satisfaction	35.45	10.23	41.70	7.66	101.47 ^a	.000	.109
Infidelity behavior	1.68	1.77	0.80	1.41	63.41 ^a	.000	.072

Note. Based on Cohen (1988), η^2 values of .01 are small, .06 are medium, and .14 are large.

^aWelch's *F*-statistic used when variances between groups were not homogenous.

or *other* (qualitative responses of *other* were recoded into one of the other options).

Attractive Alternatives at T1

Participants checked *yes* (1) or *no* (0) on 6 items asking participants whether they or their partner did anything they or their partner considered physically or emotionally unfaithful in the past 2 months. Responses were summed, so that higher scores reflected greater perceived infidelity.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

In order to test the most parsimonious logistic regression, we used analyses of variance (ANOVAs; Table 1) and cross-tabulations (Table 2) to examine differences between the BU and NBU groups. On average, the participants in the BU group were more likely to be freshmen and report lower relationship efficacy; more depressive symptoms and psychological aggression; and less dedication, relationship satisfaction, constructive communication, and emotional safety. Participants who ended their relationships were also more likely to be living over 50 miles apart, dating for less than 6 months, in a nonexclusive relationship, and not living together compared with those in the NBU group. Additionally, participants in the BU group reported a greater number of perceived infidelity behaviors than did those in the NBU group. The majority of these effects (as measured by the calculation of η^2 for ANOVAs and ϕ for the cross-tabulations) were small, except for relationship efficacy, dedication, infidelity behavior, and recent relationship satisfaction, which were medium to moderate (effect size categorizations based on Cohen's, 1988, guidelines). There were no significant differences between participants who broke up and those that did not on family structure, heavy alcohol use, or physical assault.

Table 2. Cross-Tabulations for Breakup Versus Nonbreakup Groups.

Variables	Breakup		Nonbreakup		χ^2	df	p	ϕ
	N	%	N	%				
Family of origin structure					1.13	1	.320	.040
Parents not together	259	60.7	269	64.2				
Parents together	168	39.3	150	35.8				
Year in college					8.92	3	.030	.106
Freshman	157	36.8	123	29.3				
Sophomore	147	34.4	145	34.5				
Junior	97	22.7	109	26.0				
Senior	26	6.1	43	10.2				
Cohabitation					16.12	1	.000	.157
Cohabiting	16	3.8	46	11.0				
Not cohabiting	410	96.2	374	89.0				
Distance					6.61	1	.010	.097
<50 miles apart	223	46.6	256	61.2				
>50 miles apart	202	47.5	162	38.8				
Relationship length					30.81	4	.000	.192
<6 months	167	39.1	97	23.1				
6–12 months	50	11.7	72	17.1				
1–2 years	90	21.1	95	22.6				
2–3 years	59	13.8	59	14.0				
>3 years	61	14.3	97	23.1				
Relationship status					31.99	2	.000	.199
Noncommitted	95	22.2	35	8.3				
Committed	319	74.7	366	87.1				
Engaged	13	3.0	19	4.5				

Note. Based on Cohen (1988), ϕ values of .1 are small, .3 are medium, and .5 are large.

Logistic Regression

Next, a binary logistic regression was conducted using only the variables that significantly differed between the groups in the preliminary analyses (see Table 3). In order to examine the differential impact of relationship quality, barriers to ending the relationship, and attractive alternatives on likelihood of emerging adult relationship dissolution in a college context, these

Table 3. Summary of the Final Logistic Regression Model Coefficients.

Predictor	B	SEB	e ^B	χ ²	df	p
Block 1						
Efficacy	-.03	.01	0.97	4.14	1	.04
Depression	-.00	.02	1.0	0.05	1	.82
Year in college (freshman)				7.67	3	.05
Year in college (sophomore)	-.29	.19	0.75	2.29	1	.13
Year in college (junior)	-.32	.21	0.73	2.21	1	.14
Year in college (senior)	-.84	.32	0.43	6.89	1	<.01
Constructive communication	.02	.01	1.02	1.96	1	.16
Emotional safety	.09	.03	1.09	7.17	1	.01
Psychological aggression	.09	.06	1.09	2.58	1	.11
Dedication	-.09	.03	0.92	8.27	1	<.01
Recent relationship satisfaction	-.06	.01	0.95	21.05	1	<.001
Block 2						
Cohabitation	-.64	.35	0.53	3.28	1	<.01
Relationship length (<6 months)				19.17	4	<.01
6–12 months	-.95	.26	0.39	13.77	1	<.001
1–2 years	-.57	.23	0.56	6.35	1	.01
2–3 years	-.43	.26	0.65	2.64	1	.10
>3 years	-.90	.26	0.41	12.23	1	<.001
Relationship distance	.39	.17	1.48	5.48	1	.02
Relationship status (noncommitted)				1.80	2	.41
Committed	-.25	.25	0.78	1.03	1	.31
Engaged	.15	.50	1.16	0.09	1	.76
Block 3						
Infidelity	.21	.05	1.24	15.89	1	<.001
Constant	2.58					
Model χ ²				190.78	19	<.001

Note. For categorical variables, the first category is the referent. Cohabitation and relationship distance are dichotomous variables where 0 = *not cohabiting or living under 50 miles apart* and 1 = *living together or living over 50 miles apart*. e^B = exponentiated B; dependent variable = breakup (1); SEB = Standard Error of the Beta.

three components of Levinger’s theory were entered in blocks. Entering the individual and relational characteristics influencing the attractiveness of the relationship (Block 1) significantly improved the model fit over the baseline model, $\chi^2(10, n = 842) = 138.67, p < .001$, and accounted for just over 20% of the variance in BU. The classification table showed that 67.5% of those in the BU group and 68.2% of those in the NBU were correctly classified (18% more than by chance alone). In Block 2, adding barriers to leaving the relationship significantly improved model fit, $\chi^2(8, n = 842) = 35.71, p < .001$. The Nagelkerke *R*² indicated almost a 5% increase in the variance explained, and just over 70% of cases were correctly classified into BU and NBU groups. Finally, the addition of attractive alternatives (perceptions of extradyadic behavior) in Block 3 significantly improved model fit, $\chi^2(1, n = 842) = 16.40, p < .001$: 2% more of the variance was explained, and 72.4% of the BU group and 70.6% in the NBU group were now correctly classified.

With all predictors in the model, two individual and three relationship characteristics hypothesized to influence

attractiveness of the relationship predicted BU: relationship efficacy, year in college, dedication, recent relationship satisfaction, and emotional safety. The odds of BU decreased by 3% for every one-unit increase in relationship efficacy, by 8% for every one-unit increase in dedication, and by just over 5% for every one-unit increase in recent relationship satisfaction. Compared to freshman, the odds of BU decreased by 25% for sophomores, 27% for juniors, and 57% for seniors. Contrary to our hypothesis, the odds of breaking up increased (rather than decreased) by 9% for every one-unit increase in emotional safety.

Two barriers to dissolution (distance and length of the relationship) and attractive alternatives (i.e., perceived infidelity) all had large impacts on the odds of breaking up. Living over 50 miles away from a partner versus less than 50 miles away increased the odds of breaking up by 48%. Compared to those who had been dating less than 6 months at T1, the odds of break up decreased by 61% for those together for 6–12 months, 44% for those together for 1–2 years, and 59% for those who had been dating more than 3 years. Lastly, the odds of breaking up increased by 24% for every additional perceived extradyadic behavior.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to provide a preliminary evaluation of factors that predict the dissolution of nonmarital emerging adult romantic relationships in a college context. We found support for all three components of Levinger’s (1979) model of relationship dissolution: attractiveness of the relationship, potential barriers to leaving, and available alternative partners. Although the BU and NBU groups significantly differed on the majority of our hypothesized predictors of BU, when all were included in the model, several salient predictors emerged: relationship efficacy, emotional safety, dedication, satisfaction, relationship length, distance, and infidelity.

The ability to predict the ending of young adult relationships with relatively few factors has implications for screening, intervention, and student retention. Although relationship variables (e.g., satisfaction and commitment) have been found in previous studies to be stronger predictors of dissolution than individual variables (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010), year in college is an easy identifier of students at risk for distress. In addition to their increase risk for relationship dissolution, freshman experience more loneliness, higher frequency of life changes, and often question their relationships—all factors shown to affect academic progress and retention (see Lee, Olson, Locke, Michelson, & Odes, 2009). Including RE in the orientation of new students may aid them in coping with relationship dissolution and other relationship transition issues that could pose a threat to their academic performance.

Although the majority of relationship characteristics were predictive of BU in the expected direction, greater emotional safety *increased* the odds of BU. Lack of emotional safety may be a sign of distress, although it may be that some level of safety in discussing what one wants and how one feels in a

relationship is needed to facilitate the dissolution of relationships. Accordingly, too little emotional safety in a relationship could serve as a barrier to dissolution if one is afraid of a partner's response. Although previous studies found that constructive communication, relationship violence, and psychological aggression are related to BU (e.g., DeMaris, 2000), we did not. It may be that regardless of the level of conflict, partners' perception of their ability to manage conflict and safely leave emotionally or physically abusive relationships (relationship efficacy) may have a greater impact on their decision to BU than the presence of general conflict or violence alone. This is supported by other researchers who found that conflictual couples were no more likely to BU than stay together (Ogolsky, Surra, & Monk, 2016), reinforcing the importance of including content in RE that increases emerging adults' efficacy in recognizing warning signs of an unsafe relationship, accessing resources, and managing conflict.

A number of other expected predictors of BU did not align with expectations and may be operating through other variables in the study. For example, the impact of parental marital instability on emerging adult relationships may be through internalized constructs such as efficacy and dedication (Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008), which were both predictive of BU in our sample. Further, it may be that the number of structural transitions in their family (e.g., multiple divorces or partnerships) and family-of-origin dynamics are more predictive of offspring outcomes than family structure per se (Amato, 2000). Additionally, although participants in the BU group reported significantly more depression in the preliminary analysis, depression was no longer associated with BU once other variables were added to the model. It may be that depression is a symptom of variations in relationship satisfaction (Whitton & Whisman, 2010), thus making relationship satisfaction a more salient predictor of eventual relationship termination.

Limitations

Although our data were longitudinal, allowing us to examine temporal ordering of constructs, our findings need to be interpreted in the light of several limitations. First, it is important to consider that our sample was overrepresentative of female and heterosexual emerging adults; gender may moderate which factors predict dissolution (Le et al., 2010), and factors impacting relationship dissolution (e.g., social support for the relationship, availability of alternative partners) are likely to differ in same-sex versus different-sex relationships. Additionally, several of our measures were single items or not previously validated. For example, our indicator of heavy alcohol use was a single item which did not assess the frequency of drinking in general or drinking together as a couple, both might affect relationship outcomes. Additionally, several of our predictors were highly skewed; both physical violence and cohabitation were endorsed by a scant minority, limiting our power to detect the effects of these relationship components. Further, although predicting the dissolution of the dyad was the goal of the current study, information about who initiated the BU would provide

more nuanced insight into the associations presented here. More research is needed on factors impacting relationship dissolution among emerging adults not in a college context using dyadic data and more robust measures.

Study 2: RE Components That Impacted Emerging Adults' Decisions to Begin and End Relationships

Since about 70% of emerging adults enroll in college immediately after high school (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014), and the vast majority will enter a romantic relationship at some point during college or after (e.g., Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010), integrating RE into college curricula has the potential to promote adaptive relationship processes and prevent maladaptive patterns from continuing into the future for a large portion of emerging adults. Specifically designed to address malleable risk factors for later relationship distress in emerging adult relationships, the *Relationship U (RU)* curriculum places a strong emphasis on helping students evaluate their relationship expectations, compatibility with a potential or current partner, the development of commitment, the risks inherent in sliding through relationship transitions without careful evaluation, as well as information on what to look for when choosing a partner, how to detect the warning signs of an unhealthy relationship, communicate effectively, and end relationships safely. RU was adapted from *Within My Reach* (Pearson, Stanley, & Rhoades, 2008) to a college context and strives to help (a) individuals seeking a relationship to choose their partner deliberately, (b) those in healthy relationships further protect their relationship stability, and (c) emerging adults in destructive relationships leave safely before they accrue large barriers to leaving.

Although many researchers have attempted to understand the important question "does RE work" (e.g., Hawkins, Blanchard, Bladwin, & Fawcett, 2008), it is also important to understand what specifically works for whom in which circumstances (see Rogge, Cobb, Lawrence, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2013). Additionally, since those who most need RE are the least likely to access it (see Johnson, 2012), obtaining participants' views on what they found useful is pivotal to drawing and maintaining engagement (Duncan & Goddard, 2011). Understanding what components are most influential to emerging adults' decision to end or begin a relationship allows for tailoring of RE curriculum to more effectively meet the needs of this population and reduce subsequent risk factors for distress. Using qualitative methodology, the goal of Study 2 was to examine which specific components of RU were reported by students to be influential in their decisions to end undesirable relationships and begin new ones.

Method

Procedure

RU was delivered for eight semesters as part of a three-credit introductory family development course at a large university

in the southeast United States that contained students from all majors on campus. Students attended two large lectures on general family development topics each week along with one small RU breakout session. Homework tasks asked students to apply the concepts and skills learned in the breakouts.

Participants

Students were given several options for class credit, including participation in the survey used for this study. Those who chose to participate were sent a link to a secure online survey at the T1, T2, and the T3 of the semester. Over 4 years, 7,957 students participated in the surveys (74.76% female; mean age = 19.40, *SD* = 1.95 years). The majority of participants indicated their race as White (69.66%), followed by African American (12.79%), Latino (10.43%), mixed race or Other (4.87%), and Asian (2.21%). At T2 and T3, the roughly 20% of participants who had ended (*n* = 1,611) or began (*n* = 1,621) a romantic relationship during the semester were asked if anything learned in the course directly influenced their decision. Over 34% (*n* = 552) of those students who broke up and 37% (*n* = 600) of those who began relationships indicated that RU content influenced their decision to end or begin a relationship.

Results

Analysis Strategy

Participants’ open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis (see Braun & Clark, 2006). Expanding on previous RE efficacy research, we sought to understand “*what specifically was influential for participants?*” by using the participants’ own words to capture their unique experiences and perspectives (Creswell, 1998). Similar to the methodology used in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), thematic analysis involves coding responses to uncover related themes in participant reports (Braun & Clark, 2006). These personal responses are fundamental in assessing the needs of a target population in order to develop and implement effective programs (Duncan & Goddard, 2011).

In the present study, meaning units were analyzed, so one participant’s response could encompass several different components of RU they found influential. The meaning units were grouped into themes that were further organized into categories congruent with components of the RU curriculum. Two independent coders examined and cross-examined the responses, coding the meaning units independently then discussing discrepancies until a consensus was established between coders (interrater reliability was above 85%; the authors agreed on the coding of over 85% of the meaning units).

From our analysis, 21 themes representing concepts covered in RU emerged and were sorted into four categories (see Table 4). In order of prevalence, 36% of meaning units were categorized under Core Relationship Concepts and Skills, followed by Smart Love (SL; 32%), Overall RU (20%), and Red Flags (11%). An additional “Coder Unsure” category accounted for the 2% of meaning units that did not group with

Table 4. Coding Framework for the Influence of Relationship U on Relationship Transitions.

Categories and Themes	Type of Relationship Transition		
	Dissolution (<i>n</i> = 552)	Initiation (<i>n</i> = 600)	Grand Total
Core Relationship Concepts and Skills	192 (28%)	325 (42%)	517 (36%)
Reviewing relationship expectations	60 (9%)	108 (14%)	168 (12%)
Sliding versus deciding	84 (12%)	77 (10%)	161 (11%)
Communication skills	28 (4%)	84 (11%)	112 (8%)
Going slow/importance of friendship	10 (1%)	43 (6%)	53 (4%)
Commitment development	10 (1%)	13 (2%)	23 (2%)
Smart Love (SL)	239 (35%)	221 (29%)	460 (32%)
SL have a bottom line	92 (14%)	28 (4%)	120 (8%)
SL seek a good match	20 (3%)	70 (9%)	90 (6%)
SL expect good communication	42 (6%)	40 (5%)	82 (6%)
SL don’t choose a makeover project	34 (5%)	17 (2%)	51 (4%)
SL general	23 (3%)	26 (3%)	49 (3%)
SL pay attention to values	12 (2%)	28 (4%)	40 (3%)
SL don’t change yourself	8 (1%)	7 (.9%)	15 (1%)
SL no games	8 (1%)	5 (.6%)	13 (.9%)
Overall Relationship U	131 (19%)	159 (21%)	290 (20%)
General helpfulness	61 (9%)	111 (14%)	172 (12%)
Text book or lecture	55 (8%)	42 (5%)	97 (7%)
Reaffirmed what already knew	12 (2%)	6 (.7%)	18 (1%)
Gave them hope	3 (.4%)	0	3 (.2%)
Red Flags	102 (15%)	51 (7%)	153 (11%)
Healthy versus unhealthy relations	70 (10%)	26 (3%)	96 (7%)
Danger signs	22 (3%)	14 (2%)	36 (2%)
Baggage and hidden issues	2 (.3%)	10 (1%)	12 (.8%)
Safety	8 (1%)	1 (.1%)	9 (.6%)
Coder Unsure	14 (2%)	15 (2%)	29 (2%)

Note. *N* = 1,152.

any others. These categories were differentially reported as influential by students deciding to end or begin relationships. The theme of “having a bottom line” within the category of SL was most frequently mentioned as influential to students who ended their relationship, whereas the theme “reviewing relationship expectations” within the category of Core Relationship Concepts and Skills was the more frequently mentioned by students beginning relationships. The results are reported from the most frequent to least frequent overall categories and themes for students who ended and initiated relationships.

Core Relationship Concepts and Skills (36% of Total Meaning Units)

This category accounted for 28% of the meaning units mentioned as influential by emerging adults who ended relationships and 42% of those who began relationships. This category encompassed “reviewing relationship expectations” (12% of all meaning units), “sliding versus deciding” (11%),

“communication skills” (8%), “going slow and the importance of friendship” (2%), and “commitment development” (1%). Not surprisingly, “reviewing relationship expectations” was overall the RE component most frequently mentioned (representing 14% of meaning units for relationship initiators) as influential by emerging adults who began a relationship. For example, one student said, “we have only started ‘dating’ (barely) within the last month or so; I’ve been taking things slowly to see if we have the same expectations and stuff like that.” Surprisingly, partners who ended relationships also reported that “reviewing relationship expectations” (9% of meaning units for this group) was influential as they examined the future viability of their relationship. As one student said, “I thought about my expectations and whether they were being met, or were going to be met, in the future.”

The theme of sliding versus deciding refers to the concept articulated by Stanley et al. (2006) regarding the risks associated with a lack of thoughtful decision-making around relationship transitions. Sliding versus deciding was the most frequently mentioned theme in this category for emerging adults who ended relationships (12% of meaning units for this group) and was also commonly noted as influential by those who began relationships (10% of meaning units for this group). For those who ended their relationship, open-ended responses indicated that students who had been sliding in their relationships realized this was a risky course of action, and RU prompted them to end a relationship they did not want to be in but had not taken the steps to end. For example, one student realized she was “sliding instead of deciding because it was easier to stay with him than to face the facts.”

Although communication skills were noted as influential more often by students who began a relationship (11% of meaning units) than those who ended relationships (4% of meaning units), both groups found the communication skills training helpful in evaluating the long-term viability of a relationship (e.g., “The communication skills we learned in the class and in our breakout sessions helped influence who I decided to be with”) as well as increasing their ability to effectively communicate. For example, one student said, “I realized that the communication between me and the person I’ve been going back and forth with for a year now is poor. The techniques I learned in class gave me a better strategy for effective communication.”

“Going slow/the importance of friendship” also appeared to have a higher relevance for students who began relationships (6% of meaning units within the relationship initiation group) than those who ended them (1% of meaning units within the BU group), although both groups used this concept of going slow/the importance of friendship similarly. For example, one student said, “I’m actually taking it EXTREMELY slow with this next guy . . . we are just talking . . . we didn’t kiss ‘til after a month had passed (I know. how? I don’t know. LOL [laugh out loud].) and now we’re taking it really slow . . .” Another student learned “not to date someone based on their looks. Try to get to know them on a personal level before you start to get intimate.”

Discussion around the role of commitment development in relationships was reported as influential at a similarly low rate by students ending and beginning relationships (1% and 2%, respectively). One student mentioned, “I am scared of commitment and I learned to talk to my partner about that and how to move on from that behavior.”

SL

The next most frequently mentioned category overall was the SL portion of the RU curriculum (representing 35% of meaning units for students who ended relationships and 29% of meaning units for those who initiated relationships). The names of the SL guidelines explored in depth in the curriculum are straightforward and participants predominantly mentioned them by name without much explanation. Of note, students who dissolved their relationships more frequently mentioned the SL guideline of “have a bottom line” as influential over any other RE component (14% of meaning units for this group). The majority of students referred to this bottom line as a standard they set for their relationship and crossing it became a “deal breaker.” For example, one student said, “I had a bottom line, he crossed it, and I completely cut all ties.” Another student mentioned, “I decided to stop going for guys that don’t treat me right.”

Predictably, the SL guideline of “seek a good match” was more frequently mentioned as influential by students who initiated relationships (9% of meaning units within group) than by those who ended one (3% of meaning units within group). Application of this guideline by students largely involved evaluating the compatibility of potential and current partners. For example, one student said, “I realized it was best to date people you have [things] in common with.” Interestingly, the SL guideline of “don’t choose a makeover project” was more often noted as influential by participants who ended rather than began relationships and determined that their partner “was too much of a work in progress.”

The remaining SL guidelines (“expect good communication,” “pay attention to values,” “don’t change yourself,” and “no games”) were cited relatively equally across the two groups and were often reported as important for personal growth. For example, one student said, “I learned that I [can be] manipulative and that’s not fair to my partner.” A second student stated, “I’m starting to be just myself and not conform to whoever I’m with at the time, and am happier all around for that. I have found someone who likes who I really am, and I am fortunate.”

Overall RU

Both students who ended or began relationships mentioned the overall influence of RU at similar rates (19% and 21% of meaning units for students who ended and began relationships, respectively). For example, one participant stated, “What I have learned in class just makes me more aware, and more mature when I decide to start dating.” Another student said, “I learned a lot of things about standards, and what is not worth

sacrificing. I learned the right way to choose a mate, and to an extent, how to keep one. I suggest that this class be made mandatory.” RU also seemed to help students better understand their relationship experiences. For example, one student said, “this class help[ed] me realize a couple things about relationships I did not see before.” Another student mentioned that “[The class] made me more comfortable with the decision to break up and taught me that I didn’t do anything wrong, and it is good that the relationship ended.”

Red Flags

Content captured by this category included healthy relationship characteristics and how to avoid a destructive relationship. This category accounted for 15% of the meaning units mentioned by students who ended relationships and 7% of meaning units cited by those who began relationships. The most prominent theme under this category, “healthy versus unhealthy relations,” accounted for 10% of the meaning units for students who ended relationships and 3% of students who began relationships. For example, one student said, “I learned what a healthy relationship should look and feel like. This class gave me the confidence and reassurance that I made the right decision and not to go running back to him.” Another student said, “she started showing signs of an unhealthy relationship such as blaming her wrongful behavior on alcohol, yet she won’t stop drinking.” Similarly, a student reported the information on warning signs of an unhealthy relationship “caused me to end my last relationship and [find] someone with more compatible qualities.” Most importantly, the information in RU on the warning signs of a dangerous relationship and how to break up safely helped several students leave dangerous relationships. One student who ended their relationship revealed, “I was physically abused. He slapped me and tried to manipulate me . . .” Another realized, “my boyfriend was very, very controlling. Very jealous, very untrusting. [He] pushed me around.” Similarly, another student “learned that . . . I shouldn’t be manipulated. Also, I shouldn’t be abused, mentally or physically.”

Quantitative Follow-Up

An important question is what distinguished those participants for which RU influenced their transition versus those who it did not. In order to reduce variance in the results due to the evolution of the program across semesters, data were selected from the semester with the most variables related to participants’ individual-level characteristics. In this semester, of those who received the intervention ($N = 874$), 30.2% ended or began a relationship over the course of the semester. Of these, 42% indicated that RU influenced their decision. Group comparisons revealed that those who did *not* indicate that RU influenced their relationship transition decision were more likely to be male, 69.4% of males vs. 52.8% of females; $\chi^2(1, n = 257) = 5.24, p = .015$; report more frequent heavy alcohol use, $F(1, 249) = 3.94, p = .048$; report more symptoms of depression, Welch’s $F(1, 249) = 2.64, p = .092$; and be less

satisfied with their life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin 1985), $F(1, 249) = 3.25, p = .073$. Participants’ race/ethnicity, age, parents’ marital status, and estimated grade in the class did not distinguish between those who indicated that RU influenced their transition decision versus those who did not.

Discussion

Because one of the key goals of RE is to sustain relationships and reduce the burden of separation (see Halford, 2011), critics argue that initiatives like RU encourage people to stay in unhealthy or unsafe relationships (see Sparks, 2008; for other criticisms, see Johnson, 2012). Our results indicate that the RU curriculum may help emerging adult participants learn not only the “warning signs” of unhealthy relationships but better strategies for leaving unhealthy/unsafe relationships, which is congruent with previous quantitative research on the outcomes of RU (Vennum & Fincham, 2011). Additional research using randomized control groups is needed to explore BU as a positive outcome of RE with emerging adults.

Understanding which specific RE components are particularly relevant to emerging adults considering ending or beginning a relationship can inform how educators frame the material they are delivering. For example, it may be helpful to discuss expectations not only in light of choosing a partner but as an ongoing process of evaluation to engage in throughout the relationship. These findings lay the groundwork for quantitative evaluation of the impact of specific program components and indicate strategies for harnessing emerging adult relationship transitions as windows of opportunities to reduce distress and risk factors for future distress.

When embedded in popular undergraduate courses taken by students representing diverse majors, RE has the potential to positively impact college students who may not otherwise have exposure to or seek out RE. Although increased access to RE is a benefit of this delivery method, students who may not currently have the personal resources to work through the somewhat sensitive topics of the course, who are not interested in RE at this time, or for whom RE is not effective are a part of the intervention. Although we did not have the data to analyze why some students reported a lack of influence of RU on their relationship transition decisions, those who drank alcohol heavily, reported more depressive symptoms, were less satisfied with life, and were male were less likely to report RU influenced their transition decisions compared to their female counterparts and those who drank less, were more satisfied with life, and reported fewer depressive symptoms. Further research is needed on methods for improving effectiveness of RE with these populations. For example, screening students for depression and binge drinking may be important for adjusting the appropriateness of the timing of the intervention for students who may need other resources first. In addition, because college students report a high prevalence of drinking in general (Hingson et al., 2002) and most drinking occurs on weekends (Tremblay, Graham, Wells, Harris, Pulford, & Roberts, 2010), shifting breakout sessions to mid-week (rather

than on Fridays) may improve attention during class, attendance, and homework completion. Additionally, seeking focus group feedback from males and females on the relevance of the material, how societal messages about gender roles impact how they engage with the material, and delivery methods for improving engagement may help relationship educators equalize gender differences in program impact.

Limitations

The open-ended responses were conducted through an online survey, making probing and follow-up questions impossible. For example, participants who did not report that RU influenced their decision to begin or end their relationship were not asked why the curriculum was not influential. We also did not ask what components of the RU were influential in helping those participants who stayed together over the semester maintain or improve their relationship. Further research is needed with emerging adults on what RE components are particularly influential for participants attempting to repair or maintain a relationship. Another notable limitation is the lack of diversity in those who reported transitions and the overall sample in general. Only 25% of the sample was male and about 66% indicated that they were White. Future research is needed on what information and skills would be beneficial to underrepresented groups and emerging adults not in college. Additionally, though a qualitative assessment of impactful RE components is a good first step, quantitative research is needed to understand the specific effect of specific RE components on emerging adult relationship and mental health outcomes.

General Conclusions

We are proposing that emerging adult relationship transitions provide a window of opportunity for reducing risk and enhancing protective factors for relational and mental health outcomes. Taking advantage of emerging adult relationship transitions requires the ability to identify (1) which emerging adults are likely to proximally experience these transitions and (2) the particular RE curriculum components that emerging adults find the most helpful during these transitions. Using this knowledge to adapt RE interventions for emerging adults has the potential to greatly increase effectiveness. In adaptive interventions, components that are thought to be universally effective may be provided to everyone, but in cases where the effects of a fixed intervention are expected to vary significantly for individuals who differ on certain characteristics or circumstances, adaptive components may greatly increase effectiveness (Collins et al., 2004).

The results of Study 1 point to several salient screening variables (i.e., a history of infidelity, low satisfaction, low commitment, or low relationship efficacy) for identifying emerging adults at risk for BU. Although we did not attempt to predict relationship formation, we believe this could be easily done

by simply asking emerging adults whether they are in the process of beginning a relationship or are considering beginning a romantic relationship. The results of Study 2 identify RE topics most salient overall for emerging adults experiencing relationship transitions as well as which topics were differentially impactful for partners who ended relationships versus those who began relationships.

Screening for the strengths and risks of the individual or couple prior to attending the first session would allow RE program developers to create particular orderings of content shown to be most effective for the particular risk or resiliency factors participants bring to RE. Based on the results of Study 2, emerging adults whose relationships are at risk for BU may find interventions that help them clarify their expectations, avoid sliding, identify their bottom line, and help them distinguish between healthy versus unhealthy relationship behaviors particularly helpful in deciding whether their current relationship is one they wish to continue. This content could be followed by RE components particularly suited to helping them breakup safely or mitigate the risk factors necessary for improving their current relationship. For single emerging adults looking to begin a romantic relationship, interventions that help them evaluate their expectations, decide rather than slide into the relationship, seek a good match, and communicate their expectations effectively may be particularly relevant to increasing their chances of establishing a healthy relationship.

Once implemented, these adaptive program components would require evaluation designs that can assess which combinations of components (e.g., expanded factorial designs) as well as which sequences and intensities of components (e.g., Sequential Multiple Assignment Randomized Trial [SMART] designs; see Nahum-Shani et al., 2012, for an overview) are most effective given specific situations. Tailoring RE to the needs of the participants and identifying research on the specific change mechanisms of manualized RE programs for diverse groups facing diverse risk factors for relationship distress have the potential to increase the effectiveness of RE. Taken together, the results of these two studies provide initial ingredients for adaptive RE interventions that aim to help emerging adults leave or begin romantic relationships with intention in order to reduce risk for future relationship distress.

Author Contribution

A. Vennum contributed to conception and design, analysis, and interpretation; drafted the manuscript; critically revised the manuscript; gave final approval; and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. J. K. Monk contributed to analysis and interpretation, drafted the manuscript, critically revised the manuscript, gave final approval, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. B. K. Pasley contributed to conception and design, critically revised the manuscript, gave final approval, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. F. D. Fincham contributed to design, critically revised the manuscript, gave final approval, and

agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy.

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