



Conflict negotiation and autonomy processes in adolescent romantic relationships: An observational study of interdependency in boyfriend and girlfriend effects

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Abstract

This study examined the association between conflict negotiation and the expression of autonomy in adolescent romantic partners. Thirty-seven couples participated in a globally coded conflict interaction task. Actor-partner interdependence models (APIM) were used to quantify the extent to which boys' and girls' autonomy was linked solely to their own negotiation of the conflict or whether it was linked conjointly to their own and their partners' negotiation style. Combining agentic autonomy theories and peer socialization models, it was expected that boys' and girls' autonomy would be associated only with their own conflict behaviors when they employed conflict styles reflective of their same gender repertoire, and associated conjointly with self and partner behaviors when they employed gender-atypical conflict styles. Instead of an equal, albeit distinct, positioning in the autonomy dynamic, the results suggested that girls' autonomy is associated solely with their own conflict behaviors, whereas boys' autonomy is jointly associated with their own and their partners' conflict behaviors. We discuss the relative power of boys and girls in emergent dyadic contexts, emphasizing how romantic dynamics shape salient abilities.

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The negotiation of autonomy, defined as the process of differentiating oneself in cognition, behavior, and affect from others, is a task that is central to the social development of adolescents (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Beyers, Gossens, Vansant, & Moors, 2003; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986). Although autonomy is typically viewed as an intrapersonal process, most conceptualizations also highlight the importance of the relationship context as this provides the backdrop upon which adolescents may project a separate sense of self (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). Despite the longstanding notion that relationships provide the substrate for autonomy expression, researchers have typically focused on one member of the relationship or the other, without considering the influences that might exist between the partners (Laursen, 2005). The extent to which these self and partner influences shape autonomy may be particularly important to quantify in the emergent romantic relationships of adolescence. From an individual perspective, these nascent attachments provide a context for youths to behave in ways that promote their innate and stage-salient need to initiate and regulate self-expression (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan, Kuhl, & Deci, 1997). Yet from a dyadic perspective, these relationships also offer an introduction to interdependent exchanges with a romantic peer, wherein the behavior of one partner may influence the behavior of the other (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). The present observational study seeks to understand how boyfriends and girlfriends may shape their own and their partners' autonomous functioning, employing conflict negotiation as the studied behavior.

Autonomy and conflict negotiation in adolescence

Conflict among adolescent boyfriends and girlfriends has been conceptually linked to romantic autonomy because the negotiation of a disagreement provides a forced stimulus that requires each member of the couple to articulate a position apart from the other, while at the same time, balance other's needs and protect the relationship (Collins, Laursen, Mortensen, Luebker, & Moors, 1997; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Laursen, Finkelstein, & Betts, 2001; Shulman, 2003). The centrality of the negotiation process is reflected in Noom, Dekovic, and Meeus' (2001) conceptualization of autonomy as the ability to express one's views in a considerate manner, tolerate the opposing views of one's partner, and integrate these two views in a way that balances the individuality of both adolescents while simultaneously maintaining their connectedness. Though there are presently few studies that consider the correlates of autonomy expression among adolescent romantic partners, extant research has demonstrated that the negotiation of conflict fosters the expression of autonomy in adolescent–parent relationships (Allen et al., 1994; Hauser, Powers, Noam, Jacobson, Weiss, & Follansbee, 1984; Phinney, Kim-Jo, Osorio, & Vilhjalmssdottir, 2005). That these links are apparent in such vertical and obligatory relationships underscores the need for their investigation in adolescent couples wherein the potential for relationship dissolution theoretically translates into a greater need to attend to issues of mutuality and balance (Collins et al., 1997).

The notion of balance also extends to conceptualizations of conflict response styles. In general, conflict styles that promote equilibrium between the partners have been labelled as enabling or facilitative, whereas styles that advance the needs of one partner at the expense of the other have been labelled as constraining or restrictive (Hauser et al., 1984; Jensen-Campbell, Graziano, & Hair, 2003; Laursen & Collins, 1994; Laursen et al., 2001; Maccoby, 1990; Shulman & Knafo, 1997).

Facilitative styles are typified by a willingness to engage in the disagreement, take turns, and compromise. Restrictive styles, in contrast, are characterized by avoiding the conflict, dominating the discussion, and being inflexible. Shulman (2003) has recently suggested that facilitative conflict processes generate a balanced environment because adolescents feel free to express themselves and tolerate partner difference. In contrast, Shulman (2003) has argued that restrictive conflict processes generate imbalanced environments as adolescents may either be inhibited about self-expression for the sake of relationship maintenance, or controlling and unconcerned about respecting their partner as they move towards unilateral outcomes. The current study will focus on how these facilitating and restrictive styles may relate to autonomous functioning within adolescent romantic dyads. Building on previous research, we examine the influence of the self, the influence of the partner, and the conjoint influences of self and partner on the autonomy processes of boyfriends and girlfriends.

Effects of self and partner conflict negotiation on autonomy

In mapping the complex dynamics of autonomy expression among romantic partners, we first consider how adolescents' own conflict style may shape their own autonomy processes. The self-determination theories of Ryan and Deci (2000) propose that individuals will behave in ways that support their own innate need to feel autonomous. Knee, Lonsbary, Patrick, and Canevello (2005) recently utilized this theoretical perspective in their study of young adult couples. Using a combination of self-report and observational methodology, they found links between an individual's openness to exploring different aspects of the conflict with his or her romantic partner and the individual's own perception of autonomy in the relationship. Knee et al. (2005) also found that defensive or avoidant approaches to conflict were linked to lower self-perceptions of autonomy. These effects were consistent for both genders. Additional evidence for the presence of self, or "actor", effects comes from a family interaction study conducted by Hauser et al. (1984). They reported that adolescents who engaged in facilitative forms of conflict negotiation with their parents exhibited greater autonomy than adolescents who employed restrictive styles. Extending these findings to the present study, it is expected that boys' and girls' facilitative and restrictive conflict strategies will either promote or hinder their own autonomy, respectively.

There has been relatively scant research on the relational dynamics of autonomy expression among adolescent romantic couples, and, as such, our investigation into the potential interdependencies between boyfriends and girlfriends draws on studies of the parent–adolescent relationship. In Hauser et al.'s (1984) family interaction study, strong associations emerged between parents' facilitating approaches to conflict with their son or daughter and their child's ability to express his or her own views in a complex, mutual, and tolerant manner. Parental utilization of a restrictive conflict style, however, was associated with more concreteness, self-focus, and demandingness on the part of their adolescent. The presence of strong "partner effects" in the parent–adolescent relationship is consistent with the form and history of these vertical interactions—the direction of influence proceeds from the more powerful parent to the inexperienced child (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). In contrast, strong partner effects may not be present in the relationships that adolescents form with their romantic peers, given that these

associations are emergent and horizontal in nature. A recent investigation into the interdependent links between adolescents' romantic views and the quality of their dating relationships found only a limited number of small partner effects (Furman & Simon, 2006). These effects, when present, also paralleled those that the adolescent had on his or her own behavior, raising the possibility that it is the "conjoint" action of one's romantic partner and oneself that produces individual behavioral outcomes. In the present study, we will consider how the nascent interdependency of adolescent couples unfolds during their conflict negotiations by exploring conjoint actor-partner effects, as well as those of self and partner.

Our desire to accurately model conjoint influences on autonomy necessitates a consideration of whether boys and girls will show different patterns of partner influence. Gender issues are particularly important to consider from a developmental perspective, given that when boys and girls come together in the context of adolescent romance, they do so carrying forward the distinct interactional styles that have been consolidated in their same-gender friendships (Maccoby, 1990, 2000). Although boys and girls report using both facilitative and restrictive behaviors during their conflicts with their same-sex friends, observational studies reveal consistent gender differences in their predominant approach. Girls are relatively more compromising, communicative, and supportive with their same-sex friends, whereas boys are more insistent, forceful, and antagonistic (Black, 2000; Chung & Asher, 1996; Miller, Danaher, & Forbes, 1986; Rose & Asher, 1999). It is an open question whether these gendered patterns will also be apparent in observational studies of romantic conflict management. Yet several theorists have remarked about the strong potential for continuity in these gendered styles of relating, suggesting that the "overlearning" of patterns in pre-adolescent same-sex friendships produces distinct sets of behavioral expertise for each gender in the context of their romantic relationships (Leaper & Anderson, 1997; Maccoby, 1990, 2000; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). That is, boys and girls are thought to be more adept at using gendered styles of interaction and thus will be more likely to influence their romantic partners' behavior when they do so. Stated in the context of our present focus on observed conflict negotiation and autonomy, girls' facilitative behaviors will be associated with their boyfriends' autonomy, whereas boys' restrictive behaviors will be associated with their girlfriends' autonomy. This argument also implies that adolescents will be less able to influence their partner when they utilize conflict styles that are gender atypical and with which they have little experience. Thus, boys' facilitative behaviors will not influence their girlfriends' autonomy and girls' restrictive behaviors will not influence their boyfriends' autonomy.

Actor-partner interdependence models

The actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) is a recently developed statistical method that has made it possible to examine how adolescents' behaviors may be shaped by unique and interdependent processes that unfold simultaneously between partners in close, ongoing relationships. In particular, these techniques enable researchers to isolate three potential patterns of influence. First, one may estimate the association between an individual's own behavior and his or her self outcomes. In APIM language, this is termed the "actor effect" (lines A_b and A_g in Fig. 1). Second, one may estimate the association between the partner's behavior and the outcomes of the self.

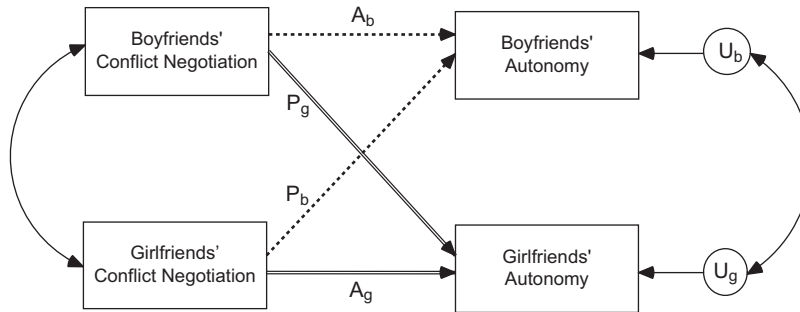


Fig. 1. Actor-partner interdependence model of conflict negotiation and autonomy. *Note.* A_b = Boyfriends' actor effect, A_g = Girlfriends' actor effect, P_b = Boyfriends' partner effect, and P_g = Girlfriends' partner effect. Together, A_g and P_g represent the conjoint effect on girlfriends' autonomy (double lines) and A_b and P_b represent the conjoint effect on boyfriend' autonomy (dotted lines). U_b = Unexplained variance in boyfriends' autonomy and U_g = Unexplained variance in girlfriends' autonomy.

In APIM language, the reaction of the self to the partner's behavior is termed the “partner effect” (lines P_b and P_g in Fig. 1). Third, and most novel to the APIM approach, one may derive an estimate of the association between the synergy of self and partner behaviors on self outcomes. In APIM language this is termed the “conjoint effect” (lines $A_g + P_g$ for girls and lines $A_b + P_b$ for boys in Fig. 1). The present study will capitalize on APIM capabilities to quantify the extent to which conflict negotiation has actor, partner, and conjoint influences on boyfriends' and girlfriends' autonomy.

The present study

We utilize a combination of observational methods and APIM techniques to delineate a comprehensive view of the gender-specific links between conflict negotiation and autonomy processes among adolescent couples. From an individual perspective, we expect boys' and girls' conflict negotiation to be uniquely related to their own autonomy when they engage in conflict styles that are characteristic of longstanding gender patterns. In particular, we expect to find unique “actor effects” between facilitation and autonomy in girls, and restriction and autonomy in boys. Conversely, given the emergent nature of the adolescent romantic context, we do *not* expect to find unique effects of the “partner” on the self. Rather, from a development-interdependence perspective, we *do* expect to uncover “conjoint” patterns of self and partner influence of conflict behaviors on autonomy for boys and girls. We expect that boyfriends' and girlfriends' autonomy will be shaped by a self-partner synergism when they themselves are engaged in conflict styles that are more typical of the gender of their opposite-sex romantic partner. That is, we expect a boy's autonomy to be conjointly associated with his own and his girlfriend's facilitative style, and we expect a girl's autonomy to be conjointly associated her own and her boyfriend's restrictive style. Lastly, we do not expect boys or girls to influence their partner, even conjointly, when they are engaged in gender-atypical styles of negotiation.

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from a longitudinal, multi-method study of adolescents' relationships that took place in three high schools that were located in a large Canadian city. The observational portion of the research took place when the youth were in grade 11. Adolescents were eligible to participate in the observational component if they had a current romantic partner and had participated in earlier waves of the study. One hundred seventy-four adolescents, taken from the larger sample of 846 grade 11 students, met these eligibility criteria. Of the non-eligible students, 14% did not have longitudinal data and 86% did not have a current romantic partner. The eligible students were contacted by members of the research team and were invited to participate in the study. Thirty-seven of these youths (14 boys, 23 girls) consented to participate and they comprise the current sample. Of note, eligible students who declined participation mostly did so because of their academic workload, scheduling difficulties, or a reluctance to inform their parents about their involvement with a romantic partner.

Participants in the observational study ranged in age from 15 to 18 years ($M = 16.35$, $SD = .68$). The majority identified themselves as European–Canadian (79%). The remainder were ethnically diverse: 5% Asian–Canadian, 3% African/Caribbean–Canadian, and 13% “other” or “mixed”. The participants' families were well-educated, as 57% of mothers and 70% of fathers had obtained at least a university degree. Approximately 63% lived with both parents, 27% lived with their mother only, and 10% lived in other configurations. Adolescents had been dating their romantic partners for an average of 68.19 weeks ($SD = 58.35$, mode: 13, range: 4–286).

The demographic information gathered from the participants was compared to the information gathered from the 672 adolescents in the larger sample who were ineligible to participate. The current sample did not differ from the larger sample on any of the demographic measures. Comparisons were also made between the participants and the 137 adolescents who were eligible for participation but declined. These students were equivalent on all demographic measures except for the duration of their current romantic relationship. Participants had been dating their current romantic partner for a longer period of time than non-participants ($M = 30.97$ weeks, $SD = 41.00$, mode: 8, range: .51–310).

Adolescents took part in the observational study with their current romantic partner. All of the couples were heterosexual and 89% were of the same ethnicity. Because 57% of the romantic partners were enrolled in schools that were not involved in the larger longitudinal study, detailed demographic information was available for only 43% of partners (7 boys, 9 girls). The demographic information of this partner sub-sample was generally consistent with that of the participant group, the exception being that the partners were, on average, 1 year older ($M = 17.44$, $SD = 1.15$).

Procedure

Informed and active parental consent, as well as personal assent, was obtained for both the participants and their romantic partners prior to their involvement in the observational component of the larger study. The observation itself was conducted and videotaped in the

participants' homes, or if preferred, in a private location at their school. Just prior to the interaction, each member of the couple independently rated, using a 4-point Likert-type scale, the extent to which eight commonly reported sources of conflict, including neglect, jealousy, trust, competition, disliking each others' friends, peer pressure, not standing up for one another, and harassing others, created problems in their relationship. Researchers then selected the most highly rated issue for the couple to discuss during the conflict interaction task. A counter-balanced approach was used to ensure that equal numbers of dyads would discuss the problem that was rated most highly by the girlfriends and the boyfriends. Even so, follow-up analyses suggested that the romantic partners held very similar views about the nature of the problems that they encountered in their relationship. Eighty-seven percent of the couples gave the highest rating to the same issue and the mean difference between all of couples' ratings was close to zero (conflict concordance = boyfriend's rating – girlfriend's rating; $M = .30$, $SD = 1.02$). Prior to discussing the identified source of conflict, participants engaged in a five minute warm-up activity (i.e., plan a party together) to acclimatize them to the videotape recorder. They were then instructed to discuss the relationship issue for seven minutes. The adolescent targets were paid \$30.00 for their participation.

Observational coding

Observed interactions were coded using a global coding system designed to tap dimensions of autonomy and conflict negotiation. The coding scheme was developed for the current research and was closely modeled after the global codes utilized by Allen et al. (1994, 2002) in their observational study of autonomy in the adolescent–parent relationship. In particular, each code simultaneously reflected both the frequency and intensity of the autonomy and conflict behaviors that were present in the interaction. According to Allen et al. (1994), global coding systems such as these are intended to capture information about the importance of specific behaviors to the overall tone of the interaction, rather than generating a simple sum of their occurrences. Also similar to the coding scheme of Allen et al. (2002), which includes separate rating scales for positive and negative relationship behaviors, we created distinct scales for facilitative and restrictive negotiation of the conflict. The use of separate conflict style scales allowed for the possibility that boyfriends and girlfriends would utilize both facilitative and restrictive strategies within the same observed interaction. The conflict and autonomy behaviors were coded on a 5-point scale and were rated separately for each member of the couple.

Three indicators of autonomy were coded for each partner, including self-expression (i.e., stating one's perspective), respectful expression (i.e., articulating one's views and opinions in a considerate manner), and acceptance of difference (i.e., tolerating self-partner differences around opinions, activities, and interests). Facilitative and restrictive conflict negotiation styles were each measured by two items corresponding to the style of presenting concerns and the style of managing the conflict. Examples of a facilitative style of presenting concerns include clarifying the task and asking open-ended questions. Examples of a facilitative style of managing the conflict include turn-taking and compromising towards a shared resolution. In contrast, a restrictive presentation of the conflict is indicated by such behaviors as avoiding the topic and stating disinterest. Restrictive styles of management are those that lead to conclusions that favour one partner at the expense of the other and include dominating the discussion and being inflexible.

The two facilitative items and the two restrictive items were combined to create separate conflict negotiation scales for boys and girls. The internal reliabilities for the conflict negotiation scales were sufficient (range: .89–.91). A global item of dyadic closeness (e.g., supportive statements, interactive body posture, and positive touch) was also rated.

The first and third author coded all of the taped interactions. In order to establish initial reference criteria, three of the tapes were double coded. These scores were subsequently discussed among a larger group of adolescent researchers and consensus codes were assigned. Of the remaining 34 interactions, 22 were coded independently (each of the two coders rated 11), 2 were coded jointly (at the mid-point of coding to maintain consistency), and 10 were coded twice (to assess inter-rater reliability). Following procedures outlined by McGraw and Wong (1996), a consistency-type intra-class correlation (ICC) was calculated (using a two-way random effects model) to assess inter-rater reliability in the autonomy, conflict, and closeness ratings for boys and girls. All of the single measurement correlations were significantly different from 0 at $\alpha = .01$ and were sufficiently close to 1 (self-expression: $ICC_{\text{boys}} = .71$, $ICC_{\text{girls}} = .94$; respectful expression: $ICC_{\text{boys}} = .84$, $ICC_{\text{girls}} = .88$; acceptance of difference: $ICC_{\text{boys}} = .66$, $ICC_{\text{girls}} = .68$; facilitative presentation: $ICC_{\text{boys}} = .90$, $ICC_{\text{girls}} = .78$; restrictive presentation: $ICC_{\text{boys}} = .94$, $ICC_{\text{girls}} = .79$; facilitative management: $ICC_{\text{boys}} = .92$, $ICC_{\text{girls}} = .79$ restrictive management: $ICC_{\text{boys}} = .72$, $ICC_{\text{girls}} = .69$; dyadic closeness: $ICC = .84$). These values indicated that the variation in scores was attributable to actual participant differences, not to differences in how the participants were rated.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The mean values for the observed variables are presented in Table 1. To compare boyfriends and girlfriends on autonomy and conflict negotiation, five multivariate analyses of variance, with couple member as the repeated factor, were conducted. These analyses demonstrated that within each couple, there were no differences between the levels of autonomy and conflict negotiation.

Table 1

Means and standard deviations for autonomy processes and conflict negotiation styles in heterosexual romantic partners

Observed variable	Boyfriends		Girlfriends	
	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>M</i>	SD
Autonomy processes				
Self-expression	4.00	1.33	4.00	1.00
Respectful expression	3.92	1.01	3.73	1.15
Acceptance of difference	3.81	1.24	3.76	.98
Conflict negotiation style				
Facilitative	3.41	1.20	3.24	1.05
Restrictive	1.86	1.15	2.00	1.11

Multivariate analyses were also conducted for each gender to determine whether facilitative and restrictive styles of conflict negotiation differed. There was a significant difference in that facilitative styles were more prevalent than restrictive styles for both boys, $F(1, 36) = 18.63$, $\lambda = .66$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .34$, and girls, $F(1, 36) = 14.02$, $\lambda = .72$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .28$. Similar analyses were conducted to assess differences in observed self-expression, respectful expression, and acceptance of difference. Within each gender, these aspects of autonomy were equally exhibited.

Variable intercorrelations

Table 2 contains the within-gender and within-dyad correlations for autonomy processes and conflict negotiation styles. As expected, boys' and girls' autonomy was positively related to facilitative conflict management and negatively related to restrictive conflict management. The only exception to this pattern was the lack of a significant relationship between girls' self-expression and their restrictive conflict style. The three autonomy variables were also correlated with each other for both boys and girls. The exception to this pattern of intercorrelation was between girls' self-expression and girls' respectful expression. The two conflict negotiation variables also had a strong negative correlation in both genders. Turning to the within-dyad correlations, the overall pattern of significance illustrated a moderate positive correspondence between boyfriends and girlfriends in their displays of autonomy and conflict negotiation.

Actor-partner interdependence models

The links between conflict negotiation and autonomy processes were examined using APIM techniques (Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny et al., 2006). As pictured in Fig. 1, the fully saturated model includes actor, partner, and conjoint effects. The model also contains a correlation between the predictor variables (conflict), and a correlation between the outcome (autonomy) residuals. The correlation between predictors controls for the effect of one predictor on the outcome while the effect of the other is estimated (and vice versa). The correlation between residuals allows for the possibility that the relationship between the outcome variables may be due to dyadic factors other than those that were included in the model.

Table 2
Within-dyad and within-gender correlations among autonomy processes and conflict negotiation styles

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Self-expression	.52***	.29	.34*	.57**	-.21
2. Respectful expression	.50**	.51***	.63***	.76***	-.83***
3. Acceptance of differences	.47**	.65***	.44**	.45**	-.52***
4. Facilitative negotiation	.71***	.63***	.36*	.50**	-.75***
5. Restrictive negotiation	-.53***	-.84***	-.53***	-.71***	.60***

Note. Above the diagonal are correlations among girls, below are correlations among boys. Along the diagonal, in bold, are within-dyad correlations.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

The APIM was estimated using procedures outlined by Kenny et al. (2000, 2005, 2006) for the analysis of distinguishable members (i.e., boy vs. girl member of the romantic couple) with structural equation modeling (AMOS 7.0; Arbuckle, 2006). As all of the variables in the model were multivariate normal, maximum likelihood estimation was employed (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2000).

Characteristics of the conflict predictors and the autonomy outcome variables were examined to ensure that the assumptions of APIM were met. APIM requires the outcome variables to be non-independent, as indicated by a significant within-dyad correlation, and the predictor variables to be mixed (i.e., have both within- and between-dyad variability), as indicated by a significant intra-class correlation (ICC) that is between, but not equal to, -1 or 1 . The necessary properties were found for both sets of variables. Table 2 shows the significant within-dyad correlation for autonomy and the ICCs calculated for facilitative and restrictive styles were $.50$, $p < .05$, and $.61$, $p < .05$, respectively. Power was estimated using procedures outlined by Kenny et al. (2006, p. 179) for APIMs where the predictor variables have an ICC of $.50$ or greater. Based on previous research (Knee et al., 2005), a value of $r = .40$ was selected as the starting effect size for the power analysis. This value was adjusted upward to reflect the interdependence in the autonomy outcome variables (Kenny et al., 2006), resulting in $r = .46$ for self-expression, $r = .46$ for respectful expression, and $r = .47$ for acceptance of difference. Using these values, 80% power would be attained in samples of 28–46 dyads (Cohen & Cohen, 1983, Table G.2, p. 530).

The APIMs were used to evaluate our gender-specific predictions about the conflict styles that would be associated uniquely with actor effects versus the conflict styles that would be associated with the conjoint effects of the self and the partner for boys and girls. Our predictions were tested by comparing the relative fit of the fully saturated model to one in which the actor and partner paths were constrained to be equal. This comparison is conducted by examining the chi-square statistic of the constrained model alone. When this chi-square is non-significant, the actor and partner effects are equivalent, meaning that the autonomy outcomes are conjointly influenced by the conflict style of the self and the partner—not the unique effect of one relationship member in isolation of the other. In this case, the pooled regression coefficient (i.e., the regression coefficient that is averaged across actor and partner effects in the constrained model) should be interpreted to quantify the conjoint effect (Cook & Kenny, 2005). When the chi-square statistic of the constrained model is significant, actor and partner paths are significantly different from each other, meaning that the expression of autonomy is uniquely influenced by the actions of one relationship member, either actor or partner. We have predicted that these unique effects will reflect only actor, and not partner, pathways, as the latter would suggest full dependency in the dyad (i.e., an individual's autonomy is affected solely by the actions of his or her partner and not his or her own actions).

Following the above logic, a chi-square statistic was estimated for the constrained models of interest. A separate test was conducted for each gender to ensure that the chi-square difference test was evaluated appropriately on only one degree of freedom. More specifically, a separate test for boys, setting $A_b = P_b$, and another for girls, setting $A_g = P_g$, was conducted for each combination of negotiation and autonomy variables. This procedure resulted in a total of six constrained models for each gender. These models were then compared against the fully saturated models that corresponded to the six different combinations of conflict predictors and autonomy outcomes.

The estimates pertaining to the associations between facilitative negotiation and autonomy are presented in Table 3. Our hypothesis that a girlfriend's facilitation uniquely influences her own autonomy processes was supported by the significant chi-square values for girlfriends' self-expression, respectful expression, and acceptance of difference. Recall that these significant chi-square statistics indicate that either the actor or the partner effect is influencing autonomy and there is no significant synergistic or conjoint effect. In our data, it is the actor effect that is significant for girls. Stated more conceptually, girls' autonomy was positively and uniquely related to their own facilitative behaviors and was not responsive to the conflict styles of their male partners or to any conjoint effect. Turning to the boys, there was support for our hypothesis that, in facilitative contexts, their autonomy would be influenced by the conjoint effect of their own and their girlfriends' behaviors. This synergistic effect was evidenced by the non-significant chi-square values for boys' autonomy, demonstrating the equivalence of the actor and partner paths, and implying that only the significant pooled coefficient or conjoint effect should be interpreted. Overall, boys' autonomy processes were positively related to the conjoint influence of the synergy between their own and their girlfriends' facilitative negotiation.

The actor and partner effects of restrictive negotiation on autonomy are presented in Table 4. Our prediction that a boy's autonomy would be uniquely associated with his own restrictive negotiation was only partially supported. A significant chi-square value was associated with boys' respectful expression alone. For this aspect of autonomy, the coefficient for the actor effect was both significant and statistically different from the partner coefficient. This pattern demonstrated that a boy's restriction was independently related to discussing a conflictual issue with his girlfriend in a less respectful manner. Contrary to our expectation, boys' self-expression and acceptance of difference were not uniquely associated with their own restrictive management of the conflict. Rather, the non-significant chi-squares pointed to the equivalence of boys' and girls'

Table 3
Actor, partner, and conjoint effects of facilitative negotiation on autonomy

Dyad member	Autonomy process	Actor	Partner	$X^2(1)$	Joint
Boyfriends	Self-expression	N/A	N/A	1.61	.25***
	Respectful expression	N/A	N/A	1.19	.17**
	Acceptance of differences	N/A	N/A	.64	.15***
Girlfriends	Self-expression	.29***	-.03	6.08*	N/A
	Respectful expression	.37***	.07	7.06**	N/A
	Acceptance of differences	.25**	-.07	5.59*	N/A

Note. The actor and partner effects are unstandardized regression coefficients from the fully saturated model. The joint effects are unstandardized pooled regression coefficients from the model wherein the actor and partner effects are constrained to be equal. The X^2 statistic tests the difference between the fully saturated model and the constrained model. When the X^2 statistic is non-significant, the actor and partner effects are equivalent and the joint effect should be interpreted. When the X^2 statistic is significant, the actor and partner effects should be interpreted separately. The interpretable effects for each autonomy process are bolded.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4
Actor, partner, and conjoint effects of restrictive negotiation on autonomy

Dyad member	Autonomy process	Actor	Partner	$X^2(1)$	Joint
Boyfriends	Self-expression	N/A	N/A	.29	-.17***
	Respectful expression	-.38***	.02	16.01***	N/A
	Acceptance of differences	N/A	N/A	1.69	-.15***
Girlfriends	Self-expression	-.07	-.04	.03	-.06
	Respectful expression	-.39***	-.06	8.89**	N/A
	Acceptance of differences	-.28***	-.07	5.92*	N/A

Note. The actor and partner effects are unstandardized regression coefficients from the fully saturated model. The joint effects are unstandardized pooled regression coefficients from the model wherein the actor and partner effects are constrained to be equal. The X^2 statistic tests the difference between the fully saturated model and the constrained model. When the X^2 statistic is non-significant, the actor and partner effects are equivalent and the joint effect should be interpreted. When the X^2 statistic is significant, the actor and partner effects should be interpreted separately. The interpretable effects for each autonomy process are bolded.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

influence in these domains. The corresponding pooled coefficients showed that when boyfriends and girlfriends conjointly approached the conflict in restrictive ways, the boyfriends were less able to articulate their own position and to tolerate differences between their own views and those of their girlfriends'. An unexpected pattern of effects was also uncovered for the girls' autonomous behaviors. We found that, for restrictive styles, a girl's autonomy was negatively related to her own management of the conflict and not to the conjoint effect of her own and her partner's behavior as predicted. This finding was evidenced by the significant chi-squares and actor pathways for girls' respectful expression and acceptance of difference. Also unexpected was the absence of linkages, including both actor and partner paths, between self-expression and restrictive negotiation for girls.

Association with dyadic variables: Closeness, duration, and conflict concordance

Dyadic closeness and romantic relationship duration have been linked to both autonomy processes and conflict negotiation (Taradash, Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Costa, 2001). The extent to which members of a couple conjointly view an issue as being problematic and important may also influence the way they work together towards its management (Shulman, 2003). As such, zero-order correlations were calculated for closeness, relationship duration, and concordance in problem ratings with the conflict and autonomy measures to determine if any of these variables biased the APIM results. Neither conflict concordance nor relationship duration was significantly correlated with the expression of autonomy or the negotiation of the conflict. Observed closeness of the dyad ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.12$) did show significant correlations (self-expression: $r_b = .73$, $p < .001$, $r_g = .47$, $p < .01$; respectful expression: $r_b = .46$, $p < .01$, $r_g = .62$, $p < .001$; acceptance of difference: $r_b = .38$, $p < .05$, $r_g = .26$, *ns*; facilitation: $r_b = .65$, $p < .001$, $r_g = .71$, $p < .001$; restriction: $r_b = -.59$, $p < .001$, $r_g = .63$, $p < .001$). Given this relationship, the APIMs were

re-estimated by adding dyadic closeness to the fully saturated model, along with intercorrelations between closeness and boyfriends' and girlfriends' conflict processes, and paths between closeness and boyfriends' and girlfriends' autonomy. Only 1 of the 12 re-estimated models produced a different pattern of effects. Specifically, when controlling for dyadic closeness, a boyfriend's self-expression was associated solely with his own facilitative negotiation of the conflict and not to the conjoint effect of his own and his girlfriend's facilitative style.

Discussion

The present research affirms the importance of adolescents' romantic relationships in the acquisition and practice of developmentally salient autonomy skills. In so doing, our study expands current notions of the relational contexts within which adolescents manifest their autonomy, demonstrating that independence is not only asserted in their vertical relationships with parents, but also in their horizontal attachments with romantic peers. Our findings also speak to the dynamic nature of the romantic context as we show that adolescents' expressions of autonomy are conjointly associated with the behavior of the self and the behavior of the partner. Overall our data suggest that boyfriends and girlfriends work together in distinct, yet complementary, ways to bring about interdependent autonomy processes.

Our results are consistent with agentic theories of autonomy development (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 1997) in that adolescents' own actions are associated with their own autonomy outcomes. The persistent effect of self, whether expressed uniquely or conjointly with the effect of a romantic partner, is apparent across all of the conflict-autonomy links, regardless of the facilitative or restrictive nature of the conflict response. That being said, adolescent boyfriends and girlfriends far more often engage in facilitative styles of negotiation in their conflicts with each other, an approach, which, in turn, is associated with greater expressions of personal autonomy for both genders. Not only is this connection consistent with agentic theories of autonomy, which posit that adolescents will most typically engage in behaviors that support their own innate need to convey a separate sense of self (LaGuardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000), the link between facilitation and autonomy supports the interdependence perspective that we have used to frame this research. Similar to the dialectic between autonomy and relatedness (Allen et al., 1994), our observational data suggest that in order for young people to truly maximize their sense of individuality, they must learn to negotiate conflicts in ways that attend to the needs of their relationship partners as well as themselves.

The way in which the dialectic between autonomy and conflict negotiation unfolds between adolescent boyfriends and girlfriends is also related to the gendered and emergent nature of the heterosexual romantic context. Consistent with our predictions, we find that boys and girls do function quite differently in the relationship. Yet the ways in which they differ depart somewhat from our expectations. In particular, we see that for both facilitative and restrictive conflict responses, a girl's autonomy is uniquely associated with her own behavior, whereas a boy's autonomy tends to reflect joint contributions from himself and his girlfriend. In contrast to our hypothesis that experience with gendered styles of relating would produce differential associations for boys' restriction and girls' facilitation, our findings instead suggest that boys and girls have distinct and consistent roles within the conjoint dynamic of adolescent romantic autonomy,

regardless of the conflict style employed. More specifically, girls typically function as the bearers of partner influence, and boys typically function as the receivers.

Girls' unexpectedly powerful position in the autonomy dynamic may be a consequence of the dyadic nature of the romantic interactions under study. Two-person social contexts favour the experiential base of girls. Research consistently demonstrates that girls predominantly participate in dyadic friendships whereas boys affiliate in larger friendship groups (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). The peer literature also contains evidence of girls utilizing dyadic friendship contexts more so than boys to support the development of their own relationship skills and needs (Camarena, Sarigiani, & Petersen, 1990; Sharabany, Gershoni, & Hoffman, 1981). Adolescent girls also appear to use the dyadic context to scaffold the interpersonal functioning of their opposite-sex friends. For instance, in their dyadic friendships with girls, adolescent boys express more sensitivity, trust, and affection than they do in their dyadic friendships with other boys (Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Sharabany et al., 1981). Applying these notions to the current research, adolescent girls may be drawing on previously acquired skills for dyadic interaction in general, rather than more specific conflict negotiation abilities, to promote their own autonomy and enhance the autonomy of their boyfriends. The analogous developmental argument implies that boys might conjointly shape their girlfriends' autonomy when they interact as part of a larger group. In support of this view, Caspi, Lynam, Moffit, and Silva (1993) report that boys' presence in the larger social network accounts for girls' greater involvement in delinquent behaviors in mixed-sex school environments. Although we cannot presently speak to the idea that dyads and groups provide distinct forums for each of the genders to influence their partners, this notion should be tested in future studies because of its potential to enrich our understanding of how boys and girls support each others' development in the emergent context of romantic relationships.

Some limitations of the current study should be noted. The cross-sectional nature of the data may limit the conclusions that can be drawn from the results, particularly around the causal associations between autonomy and conflict negotiation. Our conclusions are also limited by the small sample size and further studies with larger numbers of romantic partners would be helpful. Additional sampling should also target a broader age range of adolescents as this would allow for the modeling of how age-related gains in autonomy (Beyers et al., 2003) and conflict resolution skills (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006) affect the relational dynamic of these processes. We suspect that with age and increasing dating experience, boys and girls will assimilate more to each other's behavioral preferences and styles, thus reducing gender polarity in the autonomy dynamic and contribute to a more universal pattern of self and conjoint influence. Our conclusions would also benefit from an examination of experimental settings that play to the strengths of boys. The communication demands of the present task, as well as the dyadic focus of the present conflict topics, likely favour girls' skills (Camarena et al., 1990; McNelles & Connolly, 1999). Activity-based tasks and externally-focused topics (i.e., disagreements with parents or other peers) would perhaps showcase boys' abilities and allow for an increasingly comprehensive picture of self and conjoint effects to emerge.

In conclusion, our study provides an initial window on the dynamics of autonomy in adolescent couples. We highlight the role that individual boys and girls have in supporting their own autonomy, yet we also show that the effects of the individual do not occur in isolation of the effects shared among romantic partners. We are also able to discuss the differential positioning of boys and girls within this dynamic. These nuanced gender differences are apparent only because

of our utilization of APIM methods, as a more traditional focus on our means and intercorrelations would erroneously suggest that conflict and autonomy processes unfold in a similar manner for boys and girls. The presence of this gendered and shared dynamic is the perhaps the most meaningful aspect of our study as it speaks to the importance of the romantic context in supporting the positive development of adolescents.

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