Trends in Dating Patterns and Adolescent Development

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A developmental scheme has been proposed which recognizes clusters of variables of adolescent behavior in the area of heterosexual object relationship development. These periods—(I) stage of sexual awakening (13-15), (II) stage of practicing (14-17), (III) stage of acceptance (16-19), (IV) stage of permanent object choice (18-25)—reflect the developing capacity of object relationship and are a recapitulation on a higher level of functioning of the separation-individuation operations of the infant. The dating patterns at these levels of development provide a sensitive indication of growth, and unworked-through development is reflected in immature patterns. The current trends in dating described are considered to be a function of the prolongation of adolescence and not pathological.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence represents an important time for growth and development of the individual. A stage of life previously ignored, adolescence has recently become an area of increasing interest. This interest springs from several sources. As a clinical challenge, adolescence demands the utilization of specialized techniques, and as a period of life, adolescence may be of great importance in the general understanding of development and psychopathology.

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The longitudinal, observational approach has confirmed the etiological importance of infancy on normal emotional development. The oedipal period, during which the identificatory processes receive their greatest stimulation, continues to affect developmental growth. However, adolescence as a developmental stage may achieve the same degree of significance as an etiological precursor of later development as has been assigned to the infantile period (Feinstein et al., 1971). This importance is manifested by the actions that result from the unique disruptive aspects of adolescence which are related to both successful and unsuccessful efforts to effect a reorientation that attempts both to rework the distorted directions of previous developmental errors and to progressively achieve future characterological stability.

One of the critical tasks of adolescence is the assumption of a sexual role with intrapsychic, interpersonal, and societal manifestations. One of the techniques used in finally resolving this developmental demand is a social technique now shown as dating.

Dating, the independent arrangement by a boy and girl to meet alone or in a group at a specific place at a scheduled time, is a phenomenon of the twentieth century. Dating practices as well as premodern courting behavior have historically reflected some of the prevalent basic attitudes toward the sexual roles played by developing individuals on their way toward the assumption of the constant, dyadic role expected in a marital relationship. However, even though the folkways of the dating rituals have changed, the essential goal has remained the same; through practice and experimentation in heterosexual relationships, the final constant adult relationship model is formed.

While current dating practices are causing concern in many quarters because of their seeming lack of direction toward a heterosexual bond, the loss of sexual identification through unisexual clothes and attitudes, the decrease in single dating in favor of peer group activities, and the "living together" as a substitute for dating and engagement, some writers about the "sexual revolution" believe that these changes are evolutionary rather than revolutionary and represent the process of growth and development (Masterson, 1973).

HISTORICAL ASPECT OF DATING AND ATTITUDES TOWARD LOVE

Prior to the development of the dating ritual in this century, dating as a practice was not even conceptualized as a technique. Before the Middle Ages, no time was allotted for experimentation in heterosexual relations, since, as Keniston (1971) points out, there were no recognized stages of childhood and adolescence. The young person at an early age had to assume the responsibilities of the adult, including an early marriage. Before any contact was allowed between the courting couples, a marriage commitment was arranged by the parents which dealt with agreements involving property, social rank, and military