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All they need is love? Placing romantic stress in the context of other stressors: A 17-nation study

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Abstract

The present study focuses on romantic stress and coping styles in the context of identity and future-related stressors in 8,654 adolescents with a mean age of $M = 15.3$; $SD = 1.84$. The adolescents from 17 countries were grouped into seven regions, i.e., Mid-Europe, Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, South Africa, South America, and the Middle East. Future-related stressors were perceived as being more stressful than romantic stressors by all adolescents, irrespective of the region in which they lived. Identity-related stressors were of greater concern to adolescents from South Africa, South America, and the Middle East. Romantic stress was much higher in adolescents from Mid-Europe and Southern Europe compared to adolescents from other regions. Roughly 80% of all adolescents employed adaptive coping styles in that they negotiated with the romantic partner, sought support from friends and others, and shared an overall positive outlook. Adolescents from Mid-, Northern, and Eastern Europe were the most active in negotiating and support-seeking when dealing with romantic stressors.

Keywords

adolescence, coping, cross-culture, romantic stress

Although work on romantic relationships has substantially expanded in recent years (see Collins, 2003 and Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009 for reviews), little research has focused on how different contexts influence romantic development. It is unclear, for example, whether adolescents from other parts of the world assign the same significance to romantic relationships as those who have participated in North American and European studies (Carver, Joiner, & Udry, 2003; Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003), or whether the romantic relationship, besides being companionable and fun to be in, is perhaps also perceived as stressful for different reasons. Further, during recent years, future-related stressors (such as anxiety about becoming unemployed) have become more frequent among adolescents in different parts of the world (Gelhaar et al., 2007; Nurmi, 2005). Societal changes in most industrialized countries have spurred young people to attain high levels of education and obtain professional qualifications, although this does not necessarily guarantee job security (Arnett, 2000; Bynner, 2000). Thus, love is perhaps not ''all you need'' (Kloep, 1999), particularly for adolescents living in disadvantaged environments and countries with high youth unemployment. Further, although the impact of romantic involvement for self-worth and identity has been well established in North American studies (Harter, 1999), it is an open question as to whether this also holds for adolescents from other parts of the world, who have to cope with rapidly changing life conditions and new challenges to their identity (Saraswathi & Larson, 2002). Identity issues have long been regarded as crucial to adolescents' development (Erikson, 1968) and are nowadays of ''key importance in the psychology of globalization'' (Arnett, 2002, p. 774). Thus, for adolescents in some regions of the world, identity-related stressors may be of greater concern than romantic issues. This contribution therefore places romantic stress in the context of other stressors, such as future-related stress and identity-related stress, and explores the ways in which adolescents in different regions of the world cope with romantic stress.

Functions of romantic relations in different cultures

The stress perceived in romantic relationships is only partly related to the romantic affair as such, but lies in the diverse functions romantic relationships serve for adolescents; for example, the task

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of separation and individuation from the family (Gray & Steinberg, 1999), or as "training exercises" in a game of gaining social status in the peer group (Brown, 2006). Role experimentation, either with different types of romantic partners or with different ways of behaving in a relationship, were considered as normative during the early stages of romantic development, at least in North American and European samples. It is, however, an open question as to whether the focus on individuation from the family, on achieving social status, or being accepted by peers is as important for adolescents in other regions of the world.

That romantic relationships at earlier stages may be used to obtain autonomy from parents and to increase peer acceptance is a tenet underlying most studies on adolescent romance, based on a concept of individualism (Dion & Dion, 1996). In individualistic cultures, adolescents value the freedom to seek partners who gratify their own personal development without parental interference, and friends play a critical socialization role in this process. In contrast, in collectivistic cultures parents may be the prime socialization force for adolescent romance, and the transmission of cultural knowledge about romantic love may stress respect for the family of origin, the importance of responsibility, the function of having children (Dion & Dion, 1993), and perhaps a double standard in attitudes about sexual relationships for male and female adolescents (Milbrath, Ohlson, & Eyre, 2009). Such different cultural models in romance may impose different stressors in the romantic arena for adolescents from different regions of the world.

Cultural norms also affect the activities that are expected and approved within dating relationships and the amount of parental monitoring. There are some reports showing that Asian American adolescents are less involved in dating than African American adolescents (Carver et al., 2003) and that Latino girls are considerably less involved in dating than Latino boys (Milbrath et al., 2009) and are more closely supervised by their parents. Gendered behaviors and sex role stereotypes are stronger in some cultures than in others. Such variations are even noticeable within cultures of the same region. Gender differences in attitudes about sex are more strongly held in Southern than in Mid-Europe, for example (Giannotta, Ciairano, Spruijt, & Spruijt-Metz, 2009; Meschke & Silbereisen, 1997). Further, it is not clear whether romantic development beginning with casual, short-term encounters and leading to exclusive, long-term, and bonded relationships found in North American and European samples (Collins et al., 2009; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003) is characteristic of adolescents living in other cultural contexts.

Romantic relations and conflict management

Conflicts are an integral part of any relationship, and it is important to balance both negative—i.e. conflict-related—and positive relationship qualities in romantic partnerships. Research on conflict management strategies has demonstrated the increasing importance of negotiation between romantic partners for the transformation from more transient to more stable and enduring romantic relationships, characterized by passion and commitment (Rodrigues & Kitzmann, 2007; Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran, & Anbar, 2006); romantic stress decreases over time, while at the same time negotiation with the romantic partner increases. Concurrently, the quality of romantic relationships changes towards greater intimacy and affection (Nieder & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001).

Romantic stress may not only differ depending on phases of romantic development, but as detailed above it may also be influenced by the cultural context. In addition, the means of coping with romantic stress may follow cultural scripts, which prescribe the expected and culturally approved way of dealing with romantic quarrels; for example, with respect to negotiating and confrontation or withdrawal. In these stressful romantic encounters, the adolescent couple additionally has to deal with strong emotions. Ethnic differences in temperament have been reported (Rushton, 1999), and strategies of emotion regulation in dealing with relationship stressors vary strongly across cultures. As such, differences in more emotion-focused coping strategies are to be expected.

This contribution reports on a study which aimed to identify the amount of stress adolescents from 17 different nations experienced in romantic relationships and the ways they coped with romantic stress, depending on cultural background. Further, the amount of stress perceived in romantic relationships is placed in the context of future-related and self-related stressors. For a bigger picture, adolescents were grouped according to regions, e.g., according to geographical proximity (Mid-, Southern, Northern, and Eastern Europe, South Africa, South America, and the Middle East). The following research questions and hypotheses guided our research:

1. How stressful do adolescents from different regions perceive romantic stress to be, compared with other stressors? It was expected that for adolescents from most regions, due to increasing globalization and few job opportunities, future-related concerns would be perceived as more stressful than romantic concerns. Further, for adolescents from regions with rapidly changing living conditions like South Africa, South America, and the Middle East, identity concerns were expected to be perceived as more stressful than romantic concerns.
2. Regarding romantic stress, it was expected that due to the different functions of romantic relations, the amount of romantic stress would be higher in adolescents from cultures which focus on individuation and which accentuate free partner choice than in collectivist cultures. Given the important functions of romance for autonomy from parents and peer status, it was expected that stress in romantic relations would be the highest among adolescents from the various regions of Europe.
3. How do adolescents from different regions of the world cope with romantic stress? It was expected that adolescents from different regions of Europe would actively deal with romantic stress by negotiating with the romantic partner. It was further expected that adolescents from collectivistic cultures, or in cultures which value family relations highly (such as perhaps those living in South Africa, South America, and the Middle East) would be strongly inclined to regulate negative emotions stemming from the romantic encounter in order not to hurt or offend the partner.
4. Regarding the impact of age and gender, we expected strong age and gender effects, with younger participants naming higher rates of romantic stress and with females reporting higher stress rates than males. As adolescents from single-parent families may be more dependent on this newly established relationship, it was expected that adolescents from single-parent families would experience higher romantic stress than adolescents from two-parent families. Regarding coping, we expected higher levels of negotiation from older adolescents than from younger ones. Regarding gender and effects of regions, no specific hypotheses can be stated.

Method

Participants

Data were obtained from a sample of 8,654 12–18-year-old adolescents from 17 countries; these were, in a later step, grouped into regions in order to make comparisons easier. Participants included 1,138 adolescents from Germany and, listed in alphabetical order, adolescents from Croatia ($n = 229$), Czech Republic ($n = 559$), Egypt ($n = 220$), Estonia ($n = 357$), Finland ($n = 523$), Greece ($n = 184$), Italy ($n = 1081$), the Netherlands ($n = 411$), Pakistan ($n = 250$), Peru ($n = 886$), Poland ($n = 258$), Portugal ($n = 594$), Russia ($n = 384$), South Africa ($n = 275$), Switzerland ($n = 998$), and Turkey ($n = 307$). Mean age was $M = 15.3$; $SD = 1.84$. Gender distribution was well balanced in all countries and age groups; altogether, 47% male ($N = 4016$) and 53% female ($N = 4638$) adolescents participated in the study.

All adolescents were living in university cities, and most adolescents (63%) were from middle-class families. Eighty-two percent of the adolescents lived with two parents, and 18% lived in single-parent—mostly mother-headed families. There were, however, marked differences with respects to family structure and family size across countries. High percentages of two-parent families were found in Pakistan (99%), Egypt (97%), Greece (96%), and Turkey (95%); the rate of two-parent families was comparatively low in Finland (72%), Poland (81%), Russia (75%), Germany (73%), and Estonia (62%). The number of siblings per family differed across countries, with high mean numbers of children per family in Pakistan (4.1), Greece (2.1), and Egypt (1.8), and comparatively low mean numbers of children per family in Germany (1.2), Italy (1.1), Poland (1.1), Russia (0.8), and Estonia (0.7).

Instruments

Adolescent stress. Adolescent stress was measured by the Problem Questionnaire (PQ; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995), which assesses minor stressors in diverse domains. The instrument consists of 64 items that had been frequently named as typical and salient everyday stressors in earlier studies; for this study, the subscales of future-related stressors, self- and identity-related stressors, and stress in romantic relationships were selected. The adolescents were asked to indicate the stressfulness, ranging from 1 = *not stressful at all* to 5 = *highly stressful*. For this study, seven items pertaining to romantic stress were used (sample items: "I don't have a boyfriend/girlfriend"; "I feel insecure in dealing with the opposite sex"; "I am afraid that my jealousy could ruin my romantic relationship"; $\alpha = .82$ in the current sample). In addition, we used the 12 items of self-related problems (sample items: "I want to find out what I really want"; "I am different than my friends"; and "I find it difficult to talk about my feelings with others"; $\alpha = .85$ in the current sample) and the eight items of future-related stress (sample items: "I might not get into the training program or college/university of my choice"; "I am unsure which profession I am best suited for"; or "I might become unemployed"; $\alpha = .81$ in the current sample).

Coping with romantic stress. Coping style was measured with the Coping Across Situations Questionnaire (CASQ; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995), which assesses 20 coping strategies across eight possible problem domains; for this study, the domain of romantic relations was selected. A second-order factor analysis was performed incorporating the 20 coping strategies in the domain of romantic relations, based on the total sample. The principal component analysis and varimax rotation (with Kaiser normalization) revealed a 3-factor solution accounting for 52% of the variance. The criterion for factor extraction was an eigenvalue above 1.0. Factor 1 was termed Negotiating and Support Seeking and accounted for 22% of the variance explained; it consists of seven coping strategies such as "talking to the romantic partner", "trying to find a solution", or "solving the problem with the help of friends". Factor 2 was termed Positive Outlook and accounted for 19% of the variance; it contains six items pertaining to a positive view with a certain amount of ignorance or denial of the problem, such as "behaving as if everything is alright", "not to worry", and "not to think about problems". Factor 3 was termed Emotional Outlet (11% of the variance explained) and contained six items, such as "letting out anger and desperation", "letting out aggression", and "trying to forget the problem with alcohol and drugs". The Cronbach alphas for these dimensions were $\alpha = .89$, .87, and .83, respectively, in the overall sample.

Procedure

The PQ and CASQ, which have been originally published in English (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995), were translated by native speakers in each country and back-translated. In all countries, the assessments were conducted in university cities to limit variance caused by different levels of urbanization and civilization. All assessments were conducted in schools, grades 8 to 10, typically by assessing whole grades. Anonymity of the subjects was granted through the use of codes.

Plan of analyses. For all analyses, adolescents from the 17 countries were grouped into regions, with adolescents living in the same region of the world, based on geographical proximity, grouped together: Mid-Europe (Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland); Northern Europe (Finland); Eastern Europe (Poland, Estonia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Russia); Southern Europe (Italy, Greece, Portugal); South Africa; South America (Peru); and Middle East (Egypt, Pakistan, Turkey). Adolescents in one region mostly shared the same faith, for example Mid- and Northern European adolescents were mostly of Protestant faith, adolescents from Southern and Eastern Europe as well as adolescents from South America were mostly of Catholic faith. Adolescents from South Africa and the Middle East were mostly Muslim. Due to missing values in the PQ in South Africa, all analyses for stress measures were performed on six regions (with South Africa not included); due to missing values in the CASQ on romantic stress, all analyses for coping style were performed on six regions (with South America excluded). First, a repeated measures ANOVA tested the effect of different types of stressors (dependent variables: future, self, romance) in different regions. Then, ANOVAs explored the effect of region on romantic stress and coping styles. Further 2- and 3-factor ANOVAs tested the effects of age, gender, and family structure (with region as a fixed factor) on romantic stress and coping with romantic stress.

Results

The results will be reported in three steps. First, differences in perception of romantic stress as compared to self- and future-related stress, depending on regions where the adolescents were living, will

be reported. Then, findings on romantic stress will be reported in detail, e.g., the impact of region, the adolescent's age, gender, and his or her family situation will be reported. Finally, differences in coping style when dealing with romantic stress with a focus on the impact of region, the adolescent's age, gender, and family structure will be explored.

Placing romantic stress in the context of other stressors

The first research questions analyze the amount of romantic stress in adolescents from different regions relative to two other stressors: self- and future-related stress. A repeated-measures ANOVA tested the effect of type of stressor (romantic, self, future) as a dependent variable for adolescents from different regions and genders (as fixed factors).

A significant main effect of region emerged: $F(5, 8379) = 62.91$; $p < .001$; $\eta = .12$, with adolescents from Southern Europe, South America, and the Middle East reporting overall higher stress levels than adolescents from Mid-, Northern, and Eastern Europe. Further, a significant main effect of gender was found: $F(1, 8370) = 56.63$; $p < .001$; $\eta = .02$; this is, however, only significant with respect to self-related stressors: $F(1, 8370) = 32.46$; $p < .001$; $\eta = .01$, with females reporting higher stress levels than males, but not for romantic stress ($p = .25$) and future-related stress ($p = .38$). The interaction between region and gender is significant: $F(5, 8370) = 2.89$; $p < .01$; $\eta = .003$, but negligible.

Figure 1 illustrates that, overall, future-related stressors are perceived as most stressful by all adolescents, irrespective of region where they live. Bonferroni tests revealed (all ps < .05) that youth from Southern Europe scored highest, followed by youth from Mid-Europe, South America and the Middle East. Interestingly, romantic stress is significantly higher in adolescents from Mid-Europe and Southern Europe, compared to adolescents from other regions. In addition, adolescents from South America and the Middle East mention self-related stressors as more stressful than stress in romance, and their scores on identity stress are significantly higher than for youth from all other regions.

Stress in romance: Effects of age, gender, region, and family situation

Focusing more explicitly on romantic stress, single ANOVAs revealed significant effects of region: $F(5, 8379) = 194.43$; $p < .001$; $\eta = .11$, with adolescents from Southern Europe and Mid-Europe reporting significantly higher romantic stress than adolescents from all other regions. Significant effects were also shown by age group: $F(2, 8379) = 14.17$; $p < .001$; $\eta = .005$, with younger participants (aged 13–15) reporting higher stress levels than older ones (aged 16–17); and family structure: $F(1, 8379) = 26.83$; $p < .001$; $\eta = .02$. Adolescents who lived with both parents reported higher stress levels than those living in single-parent families.

Rather unexpectedly, no gender differences emerged. However, the interaction term of gender × regions is significant: $F(5, 8370) = 5.44$; < .001; $\eta = .005$; females from Southern Europe reported higher romantic stress than male peers of the same age. In contrast, males in the Middle East and South America reported higher romantic stress than females of the same age.

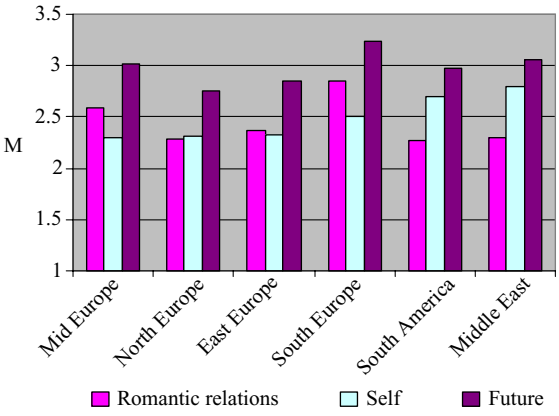

Figure 1. Stress with romantic partners, self- and future-related stress as seen in adolescents from six regions of the world ($N = 8,379$).

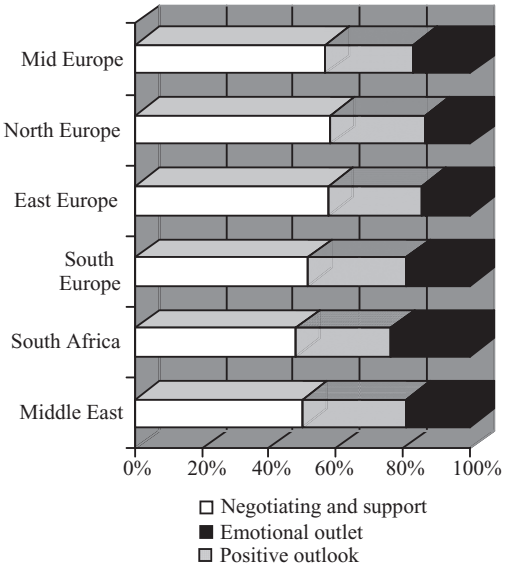

Figure 2. Adolescents' coping style in dealing with romantic stress in adolescents from six regions of the world ($N = 7,768$).

Coping with romantic stress, depending on region

Significant effects of region were found, with adolescents from Southern Europe scoring higher on all coping dimensions than adolescents from other regions—Positive Outlook: $F(5, 7768) = 72.32$; $p < .001$; $\eta = .04$; Negotiating: $F(5, 7768) = 102.80$; $p < .001$; $\eta = .06$; Emotional Outlet: $F(5, 7768)$ 44.91; $p < .001$; $\eta = .03$. Bonferroni tests further revealed (all ps < .05) that adolescents from Mid-Europe scored higher in Negotiating and Support-Seeking than adolescents from other regions, but not higher than Southern European youth, whereas adolescents from South Africa and the Middle East were the lowest in Negotiating.

Figure 2 illustrates that, overall, the coping style of adolescents from different regions is quite similar. Roughly 80% of all adolescents employ adaptive coping styles in that they negotiate with the romantic partner, seek support from friends and others, and have an overall positive outlook. Not many—roughly 20%—adolescents from all six regions showed Emotional Outlet, a coping style which entails emotionally loaded reactions as well as less adaptive strategies such as alcohol and drug use. This coping style is more evident

in adolescents from South Africa and from Southern Europe. Interestingly, from those who reported higher romantic stress, e.g., adolescents from Southern and Eastern Europe; only adolescents from Southern Europe reported quite high levels of Emotional Outlet. Overall, adolescents from Mid-, Northern, and Eastern Europe were the most active in negotiating and support-seeking when dealing with stressors in romantic encounters.

Coping with romantic stress, depending on age, gender, and family structure

Further ANOVAs revealed no gender effect, but significant age effects in all three coping styles, e.g., Negotiating: $F(2, 7768) = 101.79$; $p < .001$; $\eta = .03$; Positive Outlook: $F(2, 7768) = 7.73$; $p < .001$; $\eta = .002$; and Emotional Outlet: $F(10, 8297) = 29.26$; $p < .001$; $\eta = .007$. Older adolescents (16–17 years) scored higher than younger adolescents (13–15 years). Family structure had no effect on Positive Outlook as a coping style, but it had an effect on Negotiating: $F(1, 10252) = 23.56$; $p < .001$; $\eta = .05$; and on Emotional Outlet: $F(1, 10252) = 29.26$; $p < .001$; $\eta = 07$. Adolescents who lived with both parents reported higher Negotiating, less Emotional Outlet and higher stress levels than those living in single-parent families.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that we need to place romantic stress in the context of other stressful experiences during the adolescent period. Adolescents from all 17 countries, grouped into six regions, named future-related stressors as more stressful than identity stressors and romantic stressors. Thus, the fear of becoming unemployed or not getting into the desired training program is of great concern for adolescents from different parts of Europe, as well as for those from South Africa, South America, and the Middle East. This finding is in accordance with a number of studies highlighting the fearful future anticipation of youth in many countries across the world (Bynner, 2000; Nurmi, 2005; Seiffge-Krenke et al., in press). In our study, future-related stress was particularly high among adolescents from Southern Europe, where youth unemployment rates are considerably higher than in other parts of Europe (Eurostat, 2008).

Another noteworthy finding is that identity concerns are much stronger than romantic concerns in adolescents from South America and the Middle East, pointing to the rapidly changing developmental context in these regions of the world and its ramifications for adolescents' identity and relationship development (Saraswathi & Larson, 2002). Arnett (2002) argues that the influences of globalization on psychological functioning may lead to increased identity diffusion, especially in non-Western cultures, since global identity (led by the West and defined by free markets, consumerism, and individualism) often collides with traditional cultural values. Since adolescents are more open to new experiences (Dasen, 2000), they may be, via global media such as music, movies, television, and the internet, more affected by global development (Schlegel, 2001). Research comparing identity development over two decades has highlighted an increase in diffuse identity (Marcia, 1993), suggesting that the change in living circumstances, more options, and less clear markers for the transition to adulthood (Schulenberg, Sameroff, & Cicchetti, 2004) may be perceived as increasingly stressful among youth from different nations. Given that the need for identity exploration and the capacity to establish intimate relationships with the other sex are inherently linked (Erikson, 1968), sequencing of tasks may be a highly adaptive strategy when dealing with complex challenges (Bynner, 2000). It is thus understandable that youth from these regions of the world are primarily concerned about their future, next about their self and identity, and that romantic concerns are less of a problem for them. Additionally, romantic relations may not fulfil the same functions for them as for youth from more individualistic cultures, where autonomy from parents, free partner choice, and peer approval are more important.

The main focus of this study was on romantic stress and coping and the impact of region, age, gender, and family structure on perceived romantic stress and the coping styles employed. Interestingly, and in some accordance with our hypothesis of higher developmental significance for European youth, our findings demonstrated that romantic stress was highest among adolescents in Southern Europe, followed by those in Mid-Europe. Adolescents from the Middle East, South America, and Eastern Europe named considerably fewer romantic stressors. Having a romantic partner may be critically important in order to separate from the extended family, as suggested by Gray & Steinberg (1999). In fact, the importance of a romantic partner for leaving home and becoming independent has been established in studies on European youth (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006). Additionally, several studies in the past have highlighted that Southern European young people leave home later than Northern and Mid-European youth, and family bonding is high (Chiuri & Del Boca, 2007). Some support for our speculation that higher importance is accorded to romantic partners in order to signal emotional independence from parents in Southern European youth comes from an Italian study (Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007). Thus, one cause for their higher stress levels might be the greater importance the romantic partner has in these countries, due to his or her function as an avenue for independence—the high level of importance might make Southern European adolescents more sensitive to romantic stress.

Alternatively, the comparably lower romantic stress experienced by adolescents from South America and the Middle East may be, as mentioned, related to greater concern with other stressors (such as identity concerns), but may also be accounted for by the fact that family rules are still quite clear, and opportunities for free decisions in the romantic sphere are fewer. As suggested by Milbrath and colleagues (2009), romantic scripts might be quite strict and thus offer more guidance for them in the romantic arena. In contrast, adolescents from a more individualistic culture, such as those living in Europe, may experience more freedom to seek partners without parental interference (Dion & Dion, 1993). But "freedom and fun", as prevailing characteristics of the transition period to adulthood for Western industrialized countries (Barker & Galambos, 2005), may also have their costs, as evidenced in our study by increased stress levels in the romantic domain. Peer pressure for initiation of romantic relationships or sexual debuts has been reported, for example, in Northern American studies (Collins et al., 2009; Milbrath et al., 2009). As greater autonomy, too many options, and less clear boundaries may also compromise the health of young people in Western individualistic societies, future studies should explore the health consequences in youth from different regions of the world.

Interesting findings pertain to the dimensions of coping with romantic stress across cultures. Although negotiation and support-seeking as conflict coping tactics were prominent in youth from all countries, a further strong coping style of positive outlook emerged,

also encompassing, besides an overall positive perspective, harmonizing behavior and denial of tension and conflicts. This may suggest that adolescents were quite keen to protect their romance from any harm. However, without acknowledging and dealing with conflicts, adolescents may miss out on the opportunity to develop their relationship into a more stable, committed one (Nieder & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001).

We have to consider here, however, the early stage of romantic development for most of our participants. With a mean age of 15 years, most of our participants were probably at the beginning of their romantic development with romantic encounters of short duration, where conflicts may be considered as a threat to the still-unstable relationship. According to Collins et al. (2009), the ages of 15 to 16 are considered to be the crucial stage for transition from more casual romantic encounters to more ''serious'' relationships. This is further corroborated by the finding of our study that romantic stress was highest at earlier ages and lower in those beyond 16 years. Shulman et al. (2006) reported that couples who stayed together over a period of nine months showed more frequent negotiating strategies and were less confrontational. Our findings confirm higher negotiating, but also higher positive outlook and higher emotional outlet in older youth, which suggest increasing efforts in all coping styles. Possibly, these greater efforts result in a decrease in romantic stress, as was seen in our older youth: this speculation needs to be validated by future longitudinal studies.

A further remarkable finding was that age and gender differences were small, compared to the stronger effects of region, both in terms of romantic stress experienced and coping style employed. However, the impact of family structure was notable: in contrast to our expectations, adolescents from two-parent families showed higher concern for romantic stress and also were more active in solving problems than adolescents from single-parent families. This suggests that adolescents who have both parents present in their everyday life perhaps develop more sensitivity for relationship stressors and are also more active in solving problems when they occur.

Some limitations to our study warrant mention. First, we assessed only some basic variables (e.g., SES and family structure). The analysis of other interesting micro- and macro-level variables, such as cultural traditions, parenting styles, and monitoring, as well as romantic scripts (Milbrath et al., 2009), were not incorporated in our study. For example, in some countries and regions, adolescents' romantic liaisons are very carefully monitored, if not arranged (Brown, Larson, & Saraswathi, 2002). Also, we did not gather information about the frequency of romantic involvement and the duration of romance, hence we must consider our empirical findings as a first approximation in our understanding of region-related differences in this domain. Second, although we took care to ensure a representative selection of participants for our subsamples, various regional and sub-country differences may have been masked, so that results should be interpreted somewhat cautiously. Third, differences between questionnaire studies and observation and interview studies have been found, with romantic conflict being relatively low in most questionnaire studies, while high frequencies emerged in observational and interview studies (Furman & Shomaker, 2008). Since our findings were questionnaire-based, there is an obvious need to replicate our findings with different methods in samples of youths in other countries. Interview methods might also, for example, allow exploration of differences in emotion regulation (Rushton, 1999) in more detail than was possible in this study. Fourth, future studies should endeavor to increase the validity of our findings, which were based on self-reports, by including reports of others, preferably the romantic partner, and testing for the degree of correspondence between self-reported and observed coping behaviors. Analyzing adolescent couples would allow for an analysis of dyadic perspectives, and would thus make the research truly relational. Fifth, our study focused only on the periods of early and mid-adolescence. It would be interesting to examine whether the patterns we found in our samples persist into young adulthood.

Despite these limitations, our study demonstrates the highly similar development of complex skills and competencies in coping with romantic stress in adolescents from 17 countries. Further, adolescents' perspective on romantic stress varies, potentially as a function of different developmental contexts. The adolescents' concerns about their futures were realistic and corresponded to findings in other studies (Gelhaar et al., 2007; Malmberg, 2001; Nurmi, 2005), and identity problems were of concern for many youth, too. Placing adolescents' coping with romantic stress in a broader cultural context may inspire future studies on relationship development.

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