

Navigating In and Out of Romantic Relationships From Adolescence to Emerging Adulthood: Distinct Patterns and Their Correlates at Age 25

Emerging Adulthood
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Abstract

This study examines how romantic relationship patterns (i.e., based on the number of different partners and the number of years in a relationship) from adolescence to emerging adulthood (1) are associated with independence at age 25 and (2) are related to the characteristics of one's romantic relationship and parental status at age 25. A sample of 274 youth (61.3% girls) identified their romantic partners each year between the ages of 16 and 24 and completed a series of questionnaires at age 25 concerning their level of independence and the characteristics of their current romantic relationship and parental status. Results show that patterns were associated with the pace at which youth accomplished tasks associated with emerging adulthood, in particular, gaining independence and becoming parents themselves. However, characteristics of the youth's romantic relationships at age 25 did not vary as a function of these patterns.

Keywords

longitudinal study, quantitative methods, romantic relationships, transition to adulthood, social competence

The modernization of the industrialized world has delayed the taking on of adult roles for today's youth (Settersten Jr. & Ray, 2010). This means that youth now have the opportunity to explore more diverse academic, occupational, and romantic pathways before entering into adulthood. Arnett (2000) proposed the term "emerging adulthood" to refer to the developmental period between the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood (approximately 18–29 years of age). The opportunity to explore romantic relationships during this period notably leads to diverse romantic relationship patterns (Furman, 2002). Relationship patterns refer to the series of romantic events experienced by youth during this period (e.g., entering into, maintaining, and ending one or more relationships). Recent studies have identified a number of romantic relationship patterns based on the number of different romantic partners and the number of years in a relationship in adolescence and emerging adulthood (e.g., Boisvert & Poulin, 2016; Rauer, Pettit, Lansford, Bates, & Dodge, 2013). The identification of these patterns has raised new questions. Are they associated with the gaining of independence, an important task in emerging adulthood? What quality of couple relationship do they lead to when youth progress through emerging adulthood? This study, part of a broader longitudinal study, examined these questions using data collected annually, when participants were between the ages of 16 and 25.

Romantic Relationship Patterns

Examining romantic relationship patterns involves observing the evolution of individuals' love lives over a given period, with regard to two dimensions. The first dimension is their level of involvement in romantic relationships. For example, over a given period of time, some individuals will not be involved in any romantic relationships at all, others will be involved in romantic relationships intermittently, and still others will be continuously involved in one or more romantic relationships. The second dimension refers to the stability (length) of these romantic relationships. For example, among those involved in relationships, some will keep the same partner over a long period of time, while others will change partners frequently. Two recent longitudinal studies examined these two dimensions simultaneously. Rauer, Pettit, Lansford, Bates, and Dodge (2013) asked young American adults to indicate, each

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year from age 18 to age 25, whether they were currently involved in a romantic relationship and, if so, to write down the name of their romantic partner. The two following variables were then compiled: (1) the number of waves the participant reported being in a romantic relationship and (2) the number of different romantic partners named from ages 18 to 25. A cluster analysis brought out five romantic relationship patterns that differed from one another with regard to a set of developmental antecedents. Boisvert and Poulin (2016) conducted a similar study among Canadian youth interviewed every year from ages 16 to 24. The participants were asked to name all the romantic partners they had in the previous year. Two similar variables to those compiled by Rauer et al. were then submitted to a latent class analysis. Five romantic relationship patterns emerged which also differed from one another with regard to several family and peer antecedents.

These two studies show that while each individual participant had their own personal romantic experiences from adolescence to emerging adulthood, some common patterns could be seen. For example, some youth had a history of romantic relationships marked by more frequent partner changes (e.g., *frequent* or *intense involvement patterns*), others had few partners but maintained their relationships for several years (e.g., *long-term* or *steady involvement patterns*), while still others were simply less involved in romantic relationships (e.g., *sporadic involvement pattern*), or became involved at a later age (e.g., *later involvement pattern*). Significant similarities in the results of these two studies lend support to the validity of these patterns, especially given that they were found in different cultural contexts.

Emerging Adulthood

Several authors have sought to define what characterizes emerging adulthood as compared to other developmental periods. Erikson (1968) suggested that young adults (aged 18–34) experience an identity crisis, referred to as the “intimacy versus isolation” crisis. This crisis is thought to be resolved by attaining intimacy in close relationships, such as friendships or romantic relationships. According to Arnett (2004), emerging adults must accomplish a set of developmental tasks such as finding stable and satisfying work, gaining financial independence, and forming a relationship with a romantic partner with the aim of starting a family. Thus, emerging adults are generally expected to become independent and enter into a fairly stable romantic relationship that could lead to the establishment of a family of their own. Shulman and Connolly (2013) maintain that commitment to a stable romantic relationship appears to be closely associated with a degree of stability in one’s work life. For example, young people who have no career aspirations or whose career aspirations have been met appear more likely to engage in the tasks associated with adulthood (e.g., getting married, having a family). Moreover, having met these career aspirations before establishing a stable romantic relationship seems to be even more important for boys (Shulman, Scharf, Livne, & Barr, 2013). According to Shulman

and Connolly, young people are tasked with coordinating different aspects of their lives during emerging adulthood.

Based on these theoretical propositions, it appears relevant to examine how romantic relationship patterns fit into the broader life context during emerging adulthood, particularly with regard to gaining independence. Moreover, these patterns could be related to particular outcomes in terms of the characteristics of one’s romantic relationship and one’s parental status when youth progress through emerging adulthood. These two questions are addressed in greater detail in the paragraphs below.

Independence. How are romantic relationship patterns associated with independence? Two aspects are considered here: the degree of stability in one’s work life and one’s level of financial independence. An orientation toward stable and satisfying work in emerging adulthood could be associated with stability in romantic relationships (Arnett, 2004; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). However, some factors could delay the process of finding stable work, such as the pursuit of higher education or high career aspirations. One study reported that 24-year-olds who were married, had children, and were engaged in long-term careers were less likely to have pursued university studies (Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, & Barber, 2005). Moreover, young people who pursue university studies tend to come from a social background that favors identity exploration (Morgan, 2012). Thus, youth who do not pursue higher education (or who have finished their studies) may be more inclined to seek stability earlier than their peers in their work and love lives.

Financial independence is seen as one of the main criteria for attaining adulthood (e.g., Manning, Giordano, Longmore, & Hocevar, 2011). A good indicator of financial independence for young people is having left the parental home (Whittington & Peters, 1996). An emerging adult might choose to delay getting involved in a serious romantic relationship after gaining a degree of financial independence for fear of jeopardizing the personal security provided by this independence if the relationship did not work out (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2001). On the other hand, youth who have not yet gained a degree of financial independence might also be less inclined to get involved in a stable romantic relationship.

Characteristics of romantic relationships and parental status in emerging adulthood. As one navigates through emerging adulthood, their involvement in romantic relationships often crystallizes and leads to the establishment of a family of one’s own (Arnett, 2004). Numerous indicators are used to assess whether a person’s romantic involvement is committed and oriented toward the future: whether or not one is involved in a romantic relationship, whether or not one lives with one’s partner, the length of the relationship, as well as whether one feels committed to the current romantic relationship or feels that the quality of this relationship is high.

Beyond simply being involved in a couple relationship, commitment to such a relationship can be indicated by living with one’s partner, a practice that appears to be more popular

among emerging adults than getting married (Settersen Jr. & Ray, 2010). This seems especially true for youth of Quebec, where the study took place (Institut de la statistique du Québec [ISQ], 2015). It is interesting to note that the likelihood of living with one's romantic partner at age 29 is lower for young people who initiate sexual relations at a later age (Harden, 2012). The same phenomenon could apply to those who start dating at a later age. Moreover, the length of the relationship must also be taken into account. This factor appears to be positively associated with attachment security, which, in turn, appears to predict relationship stability (Duemmler & Kobak, 2001). Thus, young people with a history of romantic relationships marked by frequent partner changes may be more likely to be involved in shorter term relationships in emerging adulthood. Furthermore, both perceived commitment and the quality of romantic relationships are positively associated with the length of romantic relationships (Rodrigues, Hall, & Fincham, 2006). Perceived commitment to a romantic relationship appears to fulfill the basic need for attachment, which could also foster longer lasting relationships (Maner & Miller, 2011). Moreover, the quality of romantic relationships tends to be maintained from one partner to another (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Madsen & Collins, 2011). Thus, young people who have experienced a romantic pathway characterized by longer term relationships might be more inclined to feel committed to their current romantic relationship and to perceive this relationship to be of higher quality.

The birth of a first child is closely associated with involvement in a romantic relationship (Manlove, Ryan, & Franzetta, 2007) and marks the beginning of family life. Becoming a parent in early emerging adulthood appears to lead to early entry into adulthood (Arnett, 2011). On the other hand, young people who pursue high academic or career goals tend to start their families later (Hockaday, Crase, Shelley, & Stockdale, 2000). Starting a family could also be associated with the romantic relationship pattern one has exhibited, where youth who committed to a long-term relationship in emerging adulthood are more likely than their peers to have children at 25 (Rauer et al., 2013).

The Current Study

Previous studies have documented distinct romantic relationship patterns from adolescence to emerging adulthood and their developmental antecedents (Boisvert & Poulin, 2016; Rauer et al., 2013). The current study pursued two research goals related to these patterns. The first goal was to determine whether romantic relationship patterns are associated with different levels of independence in the middle of emerging adulthood (age 25). For example, young people who have exhibited a romantic relationship pattern characterized by greater involvement in stable romantic relationships could be ahead of their peers when it comes to work-related life goals. That is, they may have finished their studies, be integrated into the work force (have a job, work more hours), and be financially independent (have left home) by 25. The second goal was to

determine whether the characteristics of youth's love and family lives while navigating through emerging adulthood (i.e., whether or not they are in a couple relationship, living with their partner, the quality of and the length and perceived commitment to their relationship, and their parental status) are related to their romantic relationship pattern.

Method

Participants

A sample of 390 Grade 6 students (mean age = 12.38 years; 58% girls) was initially recruited from 12 schools in Quebec (Canada). The sample was ethnically homogenous. Most of the youth were White and French-speaking (around 3% Black, 1% Asian, 3% Latino, and 3% Arabic). Most of the participants were Canadian-born (90%), lived with both biological parents (72%), and came from middle-class families (mean family income = \$CAD45,000 to \$CAD55,000). Mothers and fathers had the same average number of years of schooling (13.10 and 13.20 years, respectively). These participants were assessed annually up to age 25, and the rates of retention varied between 77% and 82% of the initial sample. The sample retained for the current study met the two following criteria: (1) participation in at least seven of nine yearly waves of data collection between the ages of 16 and 24 (the period during which the youth's romantic relationship patterns were identified; $n = 281$), and (2) participation in the data collection at age 25, when all independent variables were measured ($n = 274$; 61% girls). Compared to the nonretained participants ($n = 116$), the retained participants ($n = 274$) were more likely to have come from intact families ($p < .001$) but were not different in terms of gender or ethnicity.

Procedures

In high school (ages 16–17), the questionnaires were completed by the students in the classroom under the supervision of research assistants. In some cases, assessments had to be conducted at the participant's home (approximately 10 per year), or the questionnaires had to be sent out by mail (approximately 5 per year). After high school (ages 18–22 and age 25), the assessments were conducted at the participant's home (approximately five were sent by mail). At ages 23 and 24, the data were collected through a structured telephone interview conducted by trained and supervised research assistants. Parents provided written consent for their child's participation at ages 16 and 17. From ages 18 to 25, written consent was provided by the participants. From age 16 onward, the youth received a gift certificate (to a movie theater, music store, or sports store) or monetary compensation for their participation. The study was approved by the internal review board for ethics in research with humans at the authors' university.

Measures

Romantic relationship patterns from ages 16 to 24. Each year from ages 16 to 24, the participants were asked to report the first and

last names of all the romantic partners (maximum five), they had over the previous 12 months. They were then asked to specify, for each of the partners named, how long the relationship had lasted. Only romantic relationships lasting at least 1 month were retained in the current study. Two variables were then calculated based on this information. First, the number of different romantic partners named between the ages of 16 and 24 was compiled (ranging from 0 to X). Second, the number of years in a romantic relationship was calculated by adding up the number of years, in which the participant reported having had at least one romantic partner in the previous year. The value of this variable ranged from 0 to 9, with a value of 9 indicating that the participant reported being in a couple relationship (i.e., named at least one romantic partner) every year between the ages of 16 and 24.

In a previous study based on the same data set (blind reference), these two variables were submitted to a latent class analysis to identify romantic relationship patterns. The results indicated that a five-class model was the best-fitting model. The participants in the *later involvement pattern* (11.7%) were characterized by a low number of romantic partners (average of 1.30 partners between 16 and 24), a small number of years in a romantic relationship (average of 1.88 years in a relationships between 16 and 24), and late entry into romantic relationships (average age of 20). The participants in the *sporadic involvement pattern* (21%) were characterized by a moderate number of romantic partners (2.90 partners) and a moderate number of years in a romantic relationship (5.31 years). Their relationships were spread out over time. The participants in the *long-term involvement pattern* (48.4%) were characterized by a moderate number of romantic partners (3.21 partners), a high number of years in a romantic relationship (8.17 years), and longer lasting romantic relationships. The participants in the *frequent involvement pattern* (14.6%) were characterized by a high number of romantic partners (7.08 partners) and a high number of years in a romantic relationship (8.29 years). The participants in the *intense involvement pattern* (4.3%) presented a very high number of different romantic partners (11.58 partners) and a high number of years in a romantic relationship (8.42 years). The romantic relationship pattern variable, broken down into these five categories, was used in the current analyses.

Variables Measured at Age 25

Independence. Participants were asked to answer questions regarding work, school, and their level of financial independence: “Are you currently going to school? (yes/no)” and “Do you currently have a paid job? (yes/no).” If participants did have a job, they were asked one additional question: “How many hours do you work from Monday to Sunday?” As for financial independence, the participants were asked, “Have you left your parents’ home? (yes/no).”

Characteristics of the current romantic relationship. Participants were asked to indicate whether they currently had a romantic

partner (yes/no). Those who answered yes were then asked to answer a set of questions related to this partner. Whether or not they were *living together* was assessed by the item: “Do you live with this person?” The *length* of the relationship was assessed by the item: “In all, how long have you been together (in months)?” *Commitment* to the romantic relationship was assessed using the Commitment Subscale from the Modified Investment Model Scale (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006). Four items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *do not agree at all* to *agree completely* (sample item: “I’m committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner”). A mean score was calculated for the 4 items ($\alpha = .89$). The *quality* of the romantic relationship was assessed using a shorter version of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Sabourin, Valois, & Lussier, 2005; Spanier, 1976). Participants rated 7 items on a 6- to 7-point scale (sample item: “Do you confide in your romantic partner?”). A score for the quality of participants’ current romantic relationship was obtained by adding up these 7 items ($\alpha = .80$).

Parental status. Parental status was assessed by asking the participants: “Do you have any children to whom you are the biological parent? (yes/no)” and “Are you (or your partner) currently pregnant (yes/no).” If the participants answered yes to at least one of these two questions, they were considered to be parents.

Data Analysis Plan

Statistical analyses consisted of comparing the five different romantic relationship patterns with regard to two sets of variables corresponding to the research questions (independence, characteristics of current romantic relationship, and parental status). The dichotomous variables were analyzed using χ^2 and Bonferroni’s post hoc tests, while the continuous variables were analyzed using analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with Tukey’s post hoc. When a variable was corrected for variance homogeneity with Welch’s test (length of the romantic relationship and commitment in the romantic relationship), Games-Howell’s post hoc was used.

Results

Comparing Romantic Relationship Patterns With Regard to Independence

Descriptive statistics for the independent variables at age 25 as a function of romantic relationship patterns are presented in Table 1. A significant effect was found for having left the parental home, $\chi^2(4, 269) = 11.91, p < .05$. The post hoc analyses revealed that participants in the later involvement pattern were the least likely to have left home at age 25, while those in the long-term involvement pattern were the most likely. Another significant effect was found for being in school at age 25, $\chi^2(4, 269) = 16.64, p < .01$. The post hoc analyses revealed that participants in the later involvement pattern were the most likely to still be in school at age 25, while those in the

Table 1. Independence at Age 25 as a Function of Romantic Relationship Patterns.

Variables	Romantic relationship patterns				
	Later (<i>n</i> = 33)	Sporadic (<i>n</i> = 57)	Long Term (<i>n</i> = 133)	Frequent (<i>n</i> = 39)	Intense (<i>n</i> = 12)
Left home (% yes)	36.36 _a	64.91 _{a, b}	68.42 _b	64.10 _{a, b}	58.33 _{a, b}
Currently studying (% yes)	54.55 _a	38.60 _{a, b}	24.06 _b	25.64 _{a, b}	8.33 _{a, b}
Currently employed (% yes)	90.91	82.46	92.48	97.44	83.33
Subsample having a job . . .	<i>n</i> = 30	<i>n</i> = 47	<i>n</i> = 123	<i>n</i> = 38	<i>n</i> = 10
Number of hours worked per week (<i>M</i> and <i>SD</i>)	28.26 (13.25) _a	36.04 (10.18) _{a, b}	35.82 (11.32) _{a, b}	38.13 (17.71) _{a, b}	41.29 (10.23) _b

Note. Percentages or means with different subscripts within a row are significantly different from one another ($p < .05$).

Table 2. Descriptive Information for Characteristics of Current Romantic Relationship and Parental Status at Age 25 as a Function of Romantic Relationship Patterns.

Variables	Romantic relationship patterns				
	Late	Sporadic	Long Term	Frequent	Intense
Being a parent (% yes)	0 _a	5.26 _{a, b}	16.54 _{a, b}	23.08 _{b, c}	50.00 _c
Currently in a relationship (% yes)	42.42 _a	57.90 _a	80.45 _b	66.67 _{a, b}	83.33 _{a, b}
Subsample with a romantic partner . . .	<i>n</i> = 14	<i>n</i> = 33	<i>n</i> = 107	<i>n</i> = 26	<i>n</i> = 10
Living with partner (% yes)	35.71	66.67	70.09	65.38	60.00
Length of the relationship (in months; <i>M</i> and <i>SD</i>)	23.50 (18.17) _{a, c}	34.24 (22.27) _a	54.48 (35.72) _b	34.08 (29.00) _{a, c}	(11.82) _{a, c}
Commitment (<i>M</i> and <i>SD</i>)	4.27 (1.14)	4.47 (0.64)	4.67 (0.56)	4.50 (0.61)	4.59 (0.64)
Quality (<i>M</i> and <i>SD</i>)	24.64 (4.52)	25.12 (3.89)	25.90 (3.03)	25.39 (4.09)	25.80 (3.99)

Note. Percentages or means with different subscripts within a row are significantly different from one another ($p < .05$).

long-term involvement pattern were the least likely. However, no significant effect was found regarding the likelihood of having a job at age 25, $\chi^2(4, 269) = 7.810, p = .099$. Among those who did have a job ($n = 248$; breakdown by romantic relationship patterns is reported in Table 1), a significant effect was found for the number of hours worked per week, $F(4, 243) = 2.859, p < .05$. The post hoc analyses revealed that the participants in the later involvement pattern worked the least number of hours, while those in the intense involvement pattern worked the greatest number of hours.

Comparing Romantic Relationship Patterns With Regard to Characteristics of the Current Romantic Relationship and Parental Status at Age 25

Descriptive statistics for the characteristics of the current romantic relationship and parental status variables are presented in Table 2. A first significant effect was found for being a parent, $\chi^2(4, 269) = 24.34, p < .001$. The post hoc analyses revealed that participants in the later involvement pattern were the least likely to be a parent at age 25, while those in the intense involvement pattern were the most likely to be a parent. A second significant effect was found for being in a relationship at age 25, $\chi^2(4, 269) = 23.72, p < .001$. The post hoc analyses indicated that the participants in the later and sporadic involvement patterns were the least likely to be in a romantic relationship at age 25, while those in the long-term involvement pattern were the most likely.

The next series of analyses were conducted only among participants who reported having a romantic partner at age 25 ($n = 190$; breakdown by romantic relationship patterns reported in Table 2). No differences between the romantic relationship patterns were found for living with one's partner, $\chi^2(4, 185) = 6.67, p = .154$. ANOVAs were used to examine length, commitment to and quality of the current romantic relationship as a function of romantic relationship patterns. A significant effect was observed for the length of the relationship, $F(4, 269) = 13.80, p < .001$. The post hoc analyses for this variable revealed that, compared to the participants in all other patterns, those in the later, frequent and intense involvement patterns reported the shortest romantic relationships, while those in the long-term involvement pattern reported the longest romantic relationships. No significant effect was found for commitment to, $F(4, 269) = 1.96, p = .12$, or quality of the relationship, $F(4, 269) = .64, p = .64$.

Discussion

Recent studies have brought out diverse romantic relationship patterns from adolescence to emerging adulthood (e.g., Boisvert & Poulin, 2016; Orpinas, Horne, Song, Reeves, & Hsieh, 2013; Rauer et al., 2013). However, these studies do not shed light on how they might be associated with youth's level of independence or the characteristics of their romantic relationships and parental status when youth are navigating through emerging adulthood. The results of the current study provide

some answers to these questions. More specifically, by comparing the romantic relationship patterns, we found that they were closely associated with the accomplishment of the tasks associated with entry into adulthood (i.e., having a job, being financially independent, being in a relationship, and aiming to start a family; Arnett, 2004). However, the characteristics of the youth's romantic relationships (i.e., commitment and quality) at 25 did not vary as a function of these patterns. We describe the study findings in greater detail below and discuss their significance.

Independence

Arnett (2004) maintains that finding stable work and gaining financial independence are tasks to be accomplished during emerging adulthood. Our results show that the participants in the long-term, frequent, and intense involvement patterns were further ahead in this regard. This could be explained by the fact that the participants in these three patterns were no longer studying at age 25. Indeed, not pursuing higher education increases the likelihood of bypassing the stage of exploration associated with emerging adulthood and entering into adulthood earlier (Carr & Kefalas, 2011). On the other hand, the participants in the later involvement pattern (i.e., later entry into romantic relationships and lower level of involvement) were more likely to still be studying at age 25, to be financially dependent, and to work fewer hours than their peers. Thus, these individuals gained independence later than the other participants, which might prolong their period of emerging adulthood. Nevertheless, further studies are needed to determine whether individuals in the later involvement pattern do as well as their peers (or perhaps even better) in psychological terms once they cross the threshold into adulthood.

Characteristics of Romantic Relationships and Parental Status in Emerging Adulthood

The rare longitudinal studies on the development of romantic relationships from adolescence to emerging adulthood show a degree of continuity (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006; Seiffge-Krenke, Shulman, & Kiessinger, 2001). Thus, it is plausible that individuals who have exhibited different romantic relationship patterns will report different characteristics in their romantic relationships at age 25. Our results lend partial support to this hypothesis. More specifically, the participants in a romantic relationship pattern marked by longer lasting relationships between the ages of 16 and 24 (long-term involvement pattern) were the most likely to be in a couple relationship at age 25 and to have been with the same partner for a longer period. On the other hand, the participants who reported a low level of involvement in romantic relationships (later involvement pattern) or whose involvement was marked by frequent partner changes (frequent or intense involvement patterns) were more likely to be in a relationship that began more recently at age 25. These results suggest that entry into a stable romantic relationship might appear later for some youth. However, among the participants in a couple relationship at age 25, no significant

differences were found between the romantic relationship patterns with regard to the characteristics (commitment and quality) of their romantic relationship or the likelihood that they lived with their romantic partner. At first sight, this finding is surprising. Participants who had experienced stable relationships would have been expected to report higher levels of commitment and quality in their relationships compared to those who had experienced relationship instability (e.g., Rodrigues et al., 2006). It is possible that the way individuals perceive their romantic relationships is related more to contemporaneous factors than to their romantic history.

With regard to parental status, our results reveal that the participants in the romantic relationship patterns characterized by a high number of partner changes were the most likely to be parents at age 25. Our hypothesis was, conversely, that stable romantic relationships would lead to parenthood. Having multiple sexual partners increases the risk of pregnancy (Ashenurst, Wilhite, Hard, & Fromme, 2016), and it is likely that the same phenomenon applies to having multiple romantic partners. Nevertheless, these participants' entry into parenthood appears to be quite early, when the population statistics are taken into account. On average, women in Quebec (where the current study took place) have their first child at the age of 28.9 (ISQ, 2015), that is, at the end of emerging adulthood. The responsibilities associated with parenthood could precipitate entry into adulthood for young people in these romantic relationship patterns.

To sum up, the results of this study bring out significant differences between the various romantic relationship patterns. The participants who reported stable and longer lasting relationships from adolescence to emerging adulthood (long-term involvement pattern) were ahead of their peers in terms of their level of independence and their involvement in a stable romantic relationship at age 25. Participants who had experienced more partner changes and higher levels of instability in their romantic relationships (frequent and intense involvement patterns) were also ahead of their peers in terms of having a job and being a parent. This lead in terms of having a job was most likely brought about by their being parents. Moreover, the participants who had become involved in romantic relationships at a later age (later involvement pattern) appeared to be set up to experience a longer period of emerging adulthood. Lastly, the sporadic involvement pattern did not stand out in terms of a faster or slower pace when it came to accomplishing the tasks associated with emerging adulthood, which suggests that this pattern pertains to a healthy developmental pathway.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

The strengths of this study include the use of a longitudinal study design involving yearly data collection over a 10-year period (ages 16–25), a person-centered approach that brought out distinct romantic relationship patterns, and the examination of variables associated with these patterns at age 25. Some limitations should nevertheless be noted. All the constructs were measured using self-report questionnaires. This may have

resulted in some shared method bias, especially given that romantic relationships were also self-reported. The measurement of the parental status variable included only biological children and future studies should also include stepchildren. The limited sample size meant that some patterns included a very small number of individuals (e.g., intense involvement pattern), which reduced the statistical power of the analyses. Lastly, this study used a fairly homogeneous sample of youth from a single geographical area and should be replicated with more ethnically and economically diverse samples.

At least three avenues of future research in romantic relationship patterns should be pursued. First, we identified romantic relationship patterns based only on the presence or absence of involvement in relationships and the stability of these relationships. Changes in the more qualitative aspects of the romantic relationships experienced by the individuals in the various patterns across this period should also be examined. Second, in addition to the differences that were documented in the current study, it would be important to determine whether the individuals in these various patterns differ from one another with regard to their psychological well-being in emerging adulthood. Third, since some significant life events for couples generally occur after the period covered by this study (i.e., in Quebec, only 3% of young people get married before age 25 and the mean age for women at the birth of their first child is 28.9; ISQ, 2012, 2015), analyses of the possible consequences associated with these romantic relationship patterns should include data collection waves that adequately cover the entry into adulthood, therefore assessing youth until the end of their 20s.

Conclusion

The development of romantic relationships from adolescence to emerging adulthood is heterogeneous, and distinct patterns have been documented. This study contributed to the advancement of knowledge on this question by showing that romantic relationship patterns are linked with the accomplishment of tasks associated with emerging adulthood as well as with the characteristics of the participants' current romantic relationship and parental status at age 25.

Authors' Note

This study have been approved by the appropriate institutional research ethics committee. APA human subjects' guidelines were followed in the collection of data. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Authors' Contribution

This research was conducted as part of SB's doctoral dissertation. SB participated in the coordination of the study, performed the statistical analysis, interpreted the data, and drafted the manuscript. FP conceived of the study, its design, its coordination; participated in the interpretation of the data; and helped to draft the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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