

Commentary and Rejoinder on Sinclair, Hood, and Wright (2014)

Romeo and Juliet Through a Narrow Window

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The original Romeo and Juliet Effect findings suggest that the intensification of romantic love occurs within a narrow window, between the time that parents first object and the youngsters unite and stand together, and somewhat later when the youngsters are worn out by the continuing turmoil and have had enough of it. Parental opposition is also associated with lower trust and more frequent criticism between the couples, creating a confusing mixture of positive and negative feelings. This paradoxical nature of parental opposition challenges popular methodologies.

The Romeo and Juliet Effect is indeed an odd beast, in that it refers not to a continuing principle for satisfactory relationships but to a significant bend in the general progression of increasing intimacy. Our initial research (Driscoll, Davis, & Lipetz, 1972) suggests that the intensification of romantic feelings occurs over a relatively brief span of time and then fades. Unfortunately, although not surprisingly, the brief window factor has been widely overlooked amid the more intriguing aspects of the research. The heightened feelings of love may last several weeks or even several months, but do not continue over longer spans of time and are not a promising basis for a sound marriage. In the original Romeo and Juliet play, the intense feelings lasted a mere five days, and would hardly have been the basis for a happy ever after continuation. Imagine Romeo and Juliet outside the walls of Verona, had they lived, now without their familiar privileges, changing diapers, and taking menial jobs to scrape by. Would they not grow tired of each other, and begin to resent their earlier romantic choices?

Love among beginning relationship may be only mildly associated with trust, acceptance, and other positive relationship qualities, but love becomes more strongly aligned with these positive features as relationships mature. The longer you are together, the more your track record counts for you or against you. In our Time 1 sample, parental opposition was associated with not just a surge of romantic emotion but also with mistrust and frequent criti-

cism in the relationship. As a relationship matures and the early romantic aspects fade, the amount of trust and acceptance must become more important and these features obviously undermine feelings of love.

The Sinclair, Hood and Wright research (2014) appears to be a thoughtful, carefully conducted replication. The scales match our earlier scales, and the subject pool is more than adequate. And the findings are similar in several important respects. Parental opposition is consistently linked to lower trust, higher criticism, and poorer treatment, as it was in our original study. So why the failure to replicate the romantic surge that is at the heart of R & J?

Note that we are looking for a brief surge in reported love in the midst of various relationship problems. Couples experiencing the surge of love along with the mistrust and criticism must find it confusing at the least and may feel like it is tearing them apart. These are a small minority who could be easily overlooked but would be more apt to volunteer for a study that offers to help them make sense of their contradictory feelings.

So here we have what is perhaps a key difference in the original study as opposed to its various replications. The original study offered to help couples learn more about their relationships, included lengthy questionnaires for all and marital counseling sessions for some, and further, required couples to initiate the contact to sign up. It is quite possible that our sample included a more than average share of couples joining to learn about confusing emotions they were experiencing. In contrast, most replications actively initiate contact with subject pools, and so require a minimum of initiative from prospective subjects.

Romeo and Juliet is one of Shakespeare's most popular plays, and it is fair to say that it touches something deep inside of us. Many of us have clashed with parents over love interests, and may remember that feeling of standing up for the relationship perhaps without even knowing our partner that well. A series of in depth interviews might reveal more about the sequences of feelings and attitudes

in such situations, and may be a more promising research methodology here.

For better or for worse, the Romeo and Juliet effect remains “ever popular,” not because of multiple replications but because it touches something in our souls. I hope that our personal experiences and the research findings can be somehow reconciled.

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In Search of Romeo and Juliet

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The “Romeo and Juliet effect” was coined by Driscoll, Davis, and Lipetz (1972) when they discovered that dating couples who reported an increase in negative parental interference in their romantic relationship also evidenced an increase in love over the same 6-month period. Like other researchers, we were not able to fully replicate Driscoll and colleagues findings. However, we expect that the lore of the Romeo and Juliet effect will continue to persist. In this commentary, we suggest that researchers may need to revisit the way we think about this effect as parental disapproval may only be one piece of the puzzle. We take a closer look at the Romeo and Juliet effect, explore the evidence surrounding the types of individuals who may experience this effect, and suggest implications for research on social network influences on romantic relationships.

In Search of Romeo and Juliet

First, we would like to thank Dr. Driscoll for his positive comments about our replication of the original “Romeo and Juliet” study and for taking the time to provide his thoughts on why we did not find support for parental disapproval increasing feelings of love or commitment, despite finding support for the other findings.

Although we did not replicate the most “popular” finding from the original Driscoll and colleagues’ (1972) study, we want to recognize that their study was the first of its kind to investigate the role of parental interference on

romantic relationship outcomes (and among the first to examine the influence social networks more generally). Numerous studies have since been inspired by Driscoll et al.’s study, creating a fascinating area of relationship research. As a result of these studies, we now know that social networks can have a profound influence on all stages of romantic relationship development from initiation to deterioration (Sinclair & Wright, 2009).

As Driscoll notes, the enduring popularity of the Romeo and Juliet effect may have a lot to do with individuals being able to think of examples wherein they have experienced what they believe to be the intensification of affection in the face of social disapproval. Certainly, there is the possibility that the effect as originally conceived could exist in the narrow window of time that Driscoll suggests, particularly among those involved in a quest for relationship information. A daily diary study of such a sample would be a worthwhile endeavor. However, through our ongoing search for Romeo and Juliet we believe our understanding of their story may just need to be seen in a different light.

One reason we have continued our search for the Romeo and Juliet effect is because it seems consistent with a number of theoretical perspectives within social psychology and relationship science. For example, it is consistent with the ideas that we want more than what we think we cannot have (e.g., the scarcity effect), that which we think we are being denied (e.g., reactance theory), or that which we worked harder to obtain (e.g., effort justification). Further, Brehm’s (1999) Emotional Intensity Theory suggests that moderate obstacles intensify both positive and negative

affect which motivates an individual to surmount the obstacle (whereas minor obstacles are ignored and large obstacles seem insurmountable). Thus, individuals or couples may recognize “moderate” disapproval and intensify their affect – both positive (love) and negative (distrust) – as a response to this obstacle to their relationship.

Upon examining this last possibility, however, we found that the presence of the moderate disapproval does not intensify positive affect to the extent that the couple is now more in love than they would have been *if there was social facilitation of the relationship*. For this reason, it may be more appropriate to view modern-day Romeos and Juliets as those whose relationships *endure* despite disapproval as opposed to *because* of it. This idea is in-line with the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), such that social disapproval represents a stressor on the relationship, and certain factors (individual, dyadic, and environmental) can either help the couple survive the stressor or succumb to it.

We recently took a different approach to trying to find the Romeo and Juliet effect and went into our past samples of over 1,000 survey respondents collected over three years and identified those individuals who exhibited high degrees of parental disapproval but still expressed high degrees of passionate love for their partner (Blaney & Sinclair, 2013). We then compared them with individuals exhibiting the social network effect (high degrees of parental approval and high love) on a number of variables. Those we considered to be the Romeos and Juliets scored higher than the socially approved sample on a number of variables, including friend support, individualism, independent self-construal, and cultivation orientations (i.e., per Knee's, 1998 Implicit Theories of Relationships). They were not different on a number of other variables (e.g., commitment, intimacy, length of relationship).

Thus, those who stick together despite social disapproval are individuals seeking their independence, who believe that obstacles are opportunities for relationship growth, and who have the support from friends to facilitate those beliefs. If we think about it, this is not too different from the story of Romeo and Juliet. They were emerging adults (Arnett, 2000) seeking independence from their families, who turned to sources of social support (the friar, the nanny, Romeo's cousin) to help their relationship endure despite the interference of their families (Sinclair & Ellithorpe, in press). Thus, our take on Romeo and Juliet is less of a rewrite than it is a revision of how the couple is able to weather the storm of social disapproval.

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