

Structured Choices: Dating Markets, Social Networks, and the Racial Characteristics of Intimate Partners among American Adolescents

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Abstract

Does race matter in adolescent intimate relations? To what extent are decisions about the racial/ethnic characteristics of intimate partners constrained by the composition of “dating markets” as opposed to being winnowed by racial preferences? This paper examines how opportunities and preferences affect adolescents’ choices of the racial/ethnic characteristics of their dating partners. Specifically, we examine the impact of opportunity in terms of school composition, which refers to variations in the local availability of potential sexual partners based on school-wide racial composition and grade-specific sex ratios. We also assess the importance of racial preferences by examining how homophily in school-based friendship networks affect choices about dating partners. Using Wave I of the public-use version of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, we test these competing explanations via generalized discrete choice models, or mixed logit models.

Introduction

Scholars have long studied trends and patterns in interracial marriage and residential segregation; they are now increasingly turning their attention to racial segregation in social networks, particularly among adolescents (Hallinan 1982; Hallinan and Williams 1989; Moody 2001; Joyner and Kao 2000; Quillian and Campbell 2003). Despite the increased attention to the importance of racial categories in the social networks of America's adolescents, relatively little is known about how race organizes their sexual networks.¹ In the two available national studies, Ford et al. (2001, 2003) reported that 22 percent of adolescents dated partners with racial characteristics different from themselves, a figure twice the national rate for non-cohabiting adults (Laumann et al. 1994). However, we still know little about the nature of these choices. Currently, there are no major studies examining adolescents' choices about the specific racial characteristics of their intimate partners. Moreover, we do not know if this higher rate reflects differences in demand-side factors, which would suggest the declining significance of racial preferences in this upcoming generation, or supply-side factors, such as greater opportunities to date individuals from different racial backgrounds.

To fill this gap in the literature, this research investigates factors associated with adolescents' choices about the racial characteristics of their intimate partners, romantic or non-romantic. In other words, we investigate adolescents' decision to "date" someone who is white, black, white Hispanic, black Hispanic, Asian, or other. We consider three types of determinants: (1) individual-level characteristics, (2) constraints on opportunity in terms of the composition of "dating markets," and (3) racial preferences, which are indexed by the racial heterogeneity of each adolescent's social network.

This extended abstract is organized as follows. We first briefly review the significance of race for adolescent intimate relationships. We then sketch two competing explanations: racial preferences vs. structural constraints on opportunities. To adequately examine these hypotheses, we employ a generalized discrete choice model, or mixed logit model, which combines features of the multinomial logit (i.e., individual-level covariates) with the conditional logit (i.e., alternative-specific covariates). For example, the mixed logit model will allow us to examine whether an alternative-specific characteristic, such as the number of students in each racial category in the school, affects the likelihood of choosing a specific category, while controlling for individual-level characteristics. We apply these models to intimate-partner dyad data collected during Wave I of the National Longitudinal Adolescent Health Study (Add Health). We conclude with a brief discussion of expected results.

Conceptual Framework

The intimate lives of adolescents and the choices they make about their dating partners constitute an important sociological topic for several reasons. First, at the level of partnership networks, systematic patterns in the selection of sexual partners along racial/ethnic lines have important epidemiological consequences for the rate of transmission of sexually transmitted infections through populations (Morris 1994; Laumann and Youm 1998; Bearman et al. 2004). Second, adolescence represents an important transition point in the life course. Research suggests that interracial friendships during this period increase the likelihood of having

¹ We use the term "race" as shorthand to refer to major racial and ethnic categories in the United States. These categories are non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic Black, Hispanic White, Asian, and Other.

interracial friendships in adulthood (Sigelman et al. 1996). Since adolescent dating is a central social institution through which females and males learn to negotiate “adult” social and sexual relationships (Gagnon 1972), one would expect interracial intimacies during adolescence to be quite important for decisions about the racial/ethnic characteristics of adult sex and marital partners. Finally, like interracial marriage, the extent of interracial dating among adolescents is an important social indicator of contemporary racial relations, which is currently undergoing rapid change as the United States shifts from a primarily black-white to a multiracial nation. Thus, the increasing prevalence of interracial intimacies among today’s adolescents raises an important research question. Does this increased prevalence reflect a declining significance of racial preferences in the choice of intimate partners, or is it a phenomenon induced by the increasingly multiracial composition of the “dating markets” (i.e., the schools)?

Currently, there are few existing studies investigating adolescents’ decisions about the racial characteristics of their dating partners. Ford, Sohn, and Lepkowski (2001, 2003) published two studies that utilized the Add Health data; they found that the decision to date someone of the same race as opposed to someone of another race was associated with age, gender, race of the respondent, and composition of the community and region. Unfortunately, because both studies utilized logistic regression, they did not distinguish among specific racial categories, so it is unclear how these covariates vary with choices about specific races. This paper extends this prior research by examining the discrete choice of a specific racial /ethnic category, i.e., non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, Asian, and a residual other category.

Since most intimate relationships, both adult and adolescent, involve two partners with shared racial characteristics, there are two basic completing explanations: demand-side and supply-side perspectives. The former highlights the importance of racial preferences in both intimate relationships (South 1991) and social networks (Joyner and Kao 2000). Thus, the first basic prediction is that students with a given racial characteristic will tend to choose an intimate partner with the same racial characteristic. Non-Hispanic whites will date non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic blacks will date non-Hispanic blacks, and so on.

Hypothesis 1, homophily bias: individuals will tend partner with individuals with shared racial characteristics, controlling for group size.

However, this basic perspective ignores the fact that the racial characteristics of intimate partnerships are nested within the culture of race relations. Some scholars argue that assimilation theory explains the incorporation of successive generations of Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans (for a review, see Lee and Bean 2004), but is not applicable for African Americans. Thus, Lee and Bean (2004) suggest an emerging black/non-black divide where the tendency to choose partners of the same race declines for both Asian and Hispanic Americans, and that these two groups will increasingly choose white partners. Other scholars suggest that Asians and Hispanics are still more likely to choose partners with shared racial characteristics, but not necessarily with shared ethnic backgrounds. Thus, these scholars argue for an emerging pan-ethnicity for Asians and Hispanic Americans (e.g., Rosenfeld 2001) and support Hypothesis 1. This leads us to our second and third predictions.

Hypothesis 2, assimilation: Asian and Hispanic Americans will be more likely to form interracial relationships with white partners, and this likelihood will increase with successive generations.

Hypothesis 3, black segregation: Black Americans will be the least likely to be chosen as intimate partners by white, Asian, and Hispanic Americans.

Supply-side explanations emphasize how the composition of “matching markets,” such as marriage markets or dating markets, act as constraints on opportunities to form particular partnerships (for a review, see Kalmijn 1998). Because group size is positively associated with the likelihood of dating someone with a shared racial characteristic, increased heterogeneity in a dating market should induce more interracial relationships. In addition, most adolescent relationships are organized by an “age rule”: adolescent males prefer to date females of equal grade or less, while adolescent females prefer to date males of equal grade or more. Thus, we also examine how grade-specific sex ratios affect choices about the racial characteristics of partners. This leads us to our fourth and fifth hypotheses.

Hypothesis 4, heterogeneity in the racial composition of schools: The size of a racial group in a school will be positively associated with the likelihood that a member of a specific racial group will be chosen as an intimate partner.

Hypothesis 5, imbalanced sex ratios: Imbalanced sex ratios will be positively associated with the formation of interracial relationships.

To summarize, this research makes two contributions to the literature. First, we examine the correlates of the selection of specific racial categories, which allows us to identify patterns and associations that are specific to a given racial group. For example, given the history of discrimination and prejudice in the United States, we expect that the decision to establish an interracial relationship with a black Adolescent will have a pattern of covariates distinct from other groups. Second, compared to previous research, we intend to use improved measures of opportunities and preferences. We employ school composition measures, as opposed to measures of community and regional composition, as indicators for dating markets. Likewise, we utilize measures of social network homophily to assess the extent that individuals prefer to associate themselves with specific racial categories over and above expected interactions if one assumed random friendship formation.

Data and Methods

The data were drawn Wave I of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative sample, conducted from 1994 to 1996, which surveyed adolescents and their families about their schooling, social networks, intimate relationships, behaviors, and well-being.² The public-use version of Wave I (N=6,504), available from Sociometrics Corp., contains approximately one-third of 18,924 respondents who were originally surveyed as part of the in-home interviews. The unit of analysis was the intimate dyad. Respondents were allowed to designate up to six intimate partnerships with an eighteen-month period.

² To conserve space here, please consult Bearman, Jones, and Udry (1997) for sampling and field techniques.

Measures. Our dependent measure was the racial category of the chosen intimate partner in each sexual dyad. To minimize the number of estimated covariates, we used the five largest racial categories – non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black, Hispanic white, Hispanic black, and Asian – and an “other” category. In terms of individual-level covariates, we included respondents’ race, gender, immigrant-generation number, parents’ education, GPA, and grade-level. To estimate preferences, we used the racial composition of respondents’ social networks to indicate racial preferences for associating with each racial group. Finally, to estimate opportunity, we use two measures of school composition. The first is the number of opposite-sex individuals for each racial category listed in the dependent variable. The second is the grade-specific sex ratio.

Models. We employed mixed logit models, which is a generalized discrete choice model that allows for the inclusion of individual-level and alternative-specific covariates. We treated the availability of potential partners, or the structure of opportunities, as an alternative-specific covariate. Likewise, measures for the racial composition of respondents’ social network were included as alternative-specific covariates. This procedure allowed us to use the racial composition of social networks as a proxy for respondents’ revealed racial preferences, controlling for school composition. Finally, all the other variables were treated as individual-level covariates.

Expected Findings

We believe that all five hypotheses will be confirmed. We also expect to observe that while school composition is an important factor for producing interracial relationships, racial preferences are still quite important. Finally, we expect to observe strong racial preferences against dating black Americans, suggesting the continuing significance of race in the upcoming generation.

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