

**The Sequencing of Coupling Events:
Ideal and Actual Intimate Experiences of American Adolescents**

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How do adolescents negotiate and sequentially order *coupling events*, such as going out in a group, telling a partner 'I love you', exchanging gifts, and engaging in sexual activities (i.e., kissing, petting, and intercourse)? And how does the social context impact the ordering of these events? Using Wave I data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, we examine adolescents' preferred and actual sequencing of coupling events, using a rarely exploited statistical model in sociology, the rank-ordered logit (Allison and Christakis 1994). We also investigate the correlates of adolescents' assessments of ideal sequences of coupling events and compare these results with the correlates of actual, negotiated coupling events in their intimate relationships.

Introduction

How do adolescents negotiate and sequentially order *coupling events*, such as going out in a group, telling a partner ‘I love you’, exchanging gifts, and engaging in sexual activities (i.e., kissing, petting, and intercourse)? And how does the social context impact the ordering of these events? The unfolding of any intimate relationship necessarily involves a set of ordered events involved in the joint social construction of an intimate coupling. Adolescents deploy these activities to construct “romantic” relationships as well as “non-romantic” relationships. With the much of the research in this area focusing on the timing of sexual debut (e.g., Furstenberg 1987; Bearman and Bruckner 2001), there are no systematic studies of the patterning of these coupling events. However, information about this topic could be quite useful in determining the status of romance and dating in contemporary adolescent culture.

In this research, we develop a systematic approach to this topic. Using a rarely exploited statistical model in sociology, the rank-ordered logit (Allison and Christakis 1994), we examine adolescents’ preferred and actual sequencing of coupling events. Specifically, using the public-use version of Wave I data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, we investigate the correlates of adolescents’ assessments of ideal sequences of coupling events and compare these results with the correlates of actual, negotiated coupling events in their intimate relationships.

Conceptual Framework

Dating in adolescence is considered to be a major social institution. It is arguably the primary medium through which adolescents first learn to negotiate gender roles and sexuality (Gagnon 1972). Sexual experiences embedded in adolescent intimate relationships could also have profound implications for problems that may arise in later adult relationships, such as communication problems and conflicts in marriage and other romantic relationships (Giordano 2003). Yet despite the importance of adolescent dating, it has received limited attention in sociology. The last two decades have seen a burgeoning literature on adolescent sexuality; however, the emphasis has usually focused on public health issues, such as the timing of sexual debut or teen pregnancy (Furstenberg et al. 1987; South and Baumer 2000; Bearman and Bruckner 2001). Since romantic dating is primary context in which sexual debut occurs, scholarship on the changing nature of adolescent coupling is needed.

Scripting theory suggests that adolescents learn social norms for what is considered appropriate behaviour at different stages of their intimate relationships. However, because there are several conflicting scripts available through different spheres of influence, adolescent pairs must negotiate the unfolding of specific events in their dating relationships (Simon and Gagnon 1973). Other researchers have suggested that the social context of relationships influences the sequence of non-coital and coital events within intimate relationships (Miller et al. 1986; Mahay and Laumann 2004). Yet, with few exceptions (Smith and Udry 1985; McCabe and Collins 1984; Merten 1996; Pedersen 2003), little is known about the sequence of coupling events in adolescents’ intimate relationships. Smith and Udry (1985) found that there are significant racial differences in the sequence of events leading up to coitus. However, there appear to be no existing, systematic studies of the sequencing of coupling events.

Our goal in this paper is to examine the correlates of the sequencing of coupling events. Specifically, we investigate how adolescents' preferred and actual sequencing of coupling events are associated with demographic factors, including race/ethnicity, age, parents' education, and religion, delinquency, and school performance. Given observed racial differences in the timing of sexual debut (Furstenberg et al. 1987; Bearman and Bruckner 2001), we expect to observe racial differences in the sequencing of coupling events.

We also intend to investigate the significance of social networks. Individuals whose social networks are comprised by only same-gender persons are more likely to hold traditional gender roles (Bott 1971), which during adolescence involves males being focused on sexual conquest and girls oriented towards romance and emotional intimacy (Thorne and Luria 1986; Thompson 1994). Thus, we expect that males with all-male social networks will prefer and actually have relationships where sexual activity occurs relatively early in the sequencing of coupling events. Conversely, we expect that females with all-female social networks will prefer and actually have relationships where the sequencing of coupling events is close to the romantic ideal.

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.¹ 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.

Measures. We constructed two dependent measures. The first measures tapped respondents' assessments of the preferred sequence of seventeen coupling events. These included, for example, going out in a group, meeting the parents, telling other people that they were a couple, spending less time with friends, going out alone, giving presents, holding hands, kissing, touching each other sexually, having intercourse, and getting pregnant. Respondents' rank ordered these items by which event they preferred first, second, and so on. Respondents' also rank ordered the actual sequence of these events, if they occurred, in their actual relationships. Independent measures included demographic characteristics, school performance, family background, delinquency, and social network indicators.

Models. We used the rank-ordered logit model (Allison and Christakis 1994). This model is specifically designed to handle rank-ordered data and has a sequential interpretation, so it well suited for investigating ordered preferences as well as sequences if events occur only once. The model can also handle ties, which do not apply in our case, but also missing events. Missing events refer to situations where an item is not rank-ordered, such as when an event does not occur.

¹ To conserve space here, please consult Bearman, Jones, and Udry (1997) for sampling and field techniques.

Expected Findings

Figure 1 presents the distributions of the sequencing of coupling events for the first listed partner in Wave I. Preliminary analyses suggest that a large proportion of adolescent relationships are embedded in pair groups and networks, and these socially embedded relationships are more likely to adhere to normative scripts for the progression of events leading up to intercourse. Hence, we expect that relationships that are formed outside of the social network – including parental control – are more likely to forego the non-coital activities, in favour of sexual intercourse. We also suspect that there will be significant race and gender differences in the unfolding of events.

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