SOCIAL DISTANCE AND RELATIONSHIP PROGRESSION

Sharon Sassler and Kara Joyner
Department of Policy Analysis and Management
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14850

Over the past few decades, the nature and process of courting has changed in important ways (Bailey 1988; Coontz 2005; Fass 1977). The median age at first marriage has increased dramatically over the past three decades, rising to 25.3 years for women and 27.1 years for men in 2000 (Fields 2003). For the majority of contemporary young adults, sexual intimacy is no longer reserved for marriage. By the time they have reached their late teen years at least three-fourths of men and women have had intercourse, and more than two-thirds of all sexually experienced teens have had two or more partners (AGI 2005). Masked in these figures are class and race differences in both age at entrance into sexual unions and the timing and likelihood of marriage and parenting (Ellwood and Jencks 2004; Martin 2004). Other factors reshaping contemporary relationship development include increasing acceptance of interracial unions (Joyner and Kao 2005; Schuman et al. 1997); the growing prevalence of living together in sexually intimate relationships without marriage across all class levels (Bumpass and Lu 2000); and the rise in non-marital parenting (Martin et al. 2003).

Despite the many factors reshaping the American family, relatively little is known about the determinants associated with the initial formation and progression of intimate relationships. Groups such as "Love Can Wait" advocate that teenagers defer sexual involvement until marriage, and the current administration supports abstinence only educational programs in secondary schools as well as programs designed to slow

relationship progression among members of the military (Santelli 2006; Jelinek 2006). Yet few nationally representative studies have documented the early tempo of romantic relationship progression. While data from the National Health and Social Life Survey does provide some information on the rapidity with which sexual relationships advanced, and researchers have assessed variation in the progression to sexual involvement among daters, cohabitors, and married couples (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels 1994), to date we know relatively little about how various relationship stages are linked. For starters, we know relatively little about the pace of young adults' relationships, or how long they know each other before becoming romantically or sexually involved, or which factors expedite or delay the progression from romantic to sexual involvement, or from sexual involvement to union formation.

The absence of such research is surprising, given the societal and theoretical importance of such information. The duration between romantic and sexual involvement, as well as sexual involvement and coresidence, have significant meaning on their own, serving as indicators of relationship compatibility, bargaining power, social distance, as well as exposure to the risk of childbearing or sexually transmitted diseases. The speed of relationship progression may also reflect prevailing structural factors influencing life-cycle developments, such as class, or schooling and employment opportunities (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Geronimus and Korenman 1992; Luker 1996). The absence of such basic descriptive information no doubt weakens programmatic efforts to delay the onset of sexual involvement (Bearman and Bruckner 2001; Santelli et al. 2006).

A better understanding of the processes underlying relationship progression and how they are related to social distance, support for or challenges to status hierarchy

(examined in theories of social exchange and social distance), or selection is clearly warranted. Current theories of relationship progression do not adequately address these linkages, as they are focused predominantly on marriage (e.g., Becker 1981; Oppenheimer 1988). Yet there are tantalizing hints in the union formation literature that particular couple-level attributes may hinder progression into more formalized (e.g., state sanctioned) types of unions such as marriage. For example, the results from cross-sectional studies of dating, cohabiting, and married couples suggests that the progression of interracial relationships continues to differ from racially homogamous unions (Blackwell and Lichter 2000, 2004; Joyner and Kao 2005; Qian and Lichter 2001; Sassler and McNally 2003). Class differences in entrance into non-marital parenting, cohabitation, and marriage are also evident (Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006; Martin 2004; McLanahan 2004). Such developments suggest the persistence of status hierarchies impeding the formalization of romantic relationships that cross racial or class barriers, notwithstanding American expressions of racial tolerance and support of democratic principles (Myrdal 1944; Schuman et al. 1997). These outcomes in turn further growing levels of family inequality (McLanahan 2004).

In this paper we examine patterns of relationship progression, elaborating on the sequencing of sexual and romantic relationships from their inception. In particular, we focus on the duration between romantic involvement and sexual activity, as well as the transition from sexually intimate dating relationships to cohabitation. To our knowledge, no published study has examined whether the tempo of relationship progression varies for racially homogamous versus heterogamous unions in these initial stages. We situate our study in research on exchange, social distance, and union formation. The results provide

evidence of considerable differences in the tempo of movement into sexual involvement between mixed-race and racially homogamous relationships, though this momentum does not consistently emerge for individuals entering cohabiting unions. We discuss results in light of contemporary theorizing regarding the growing prevalence of intermarriage and family change in the United States.

The Impact of Racial Heterogamy on Relationship Progression

In 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the legality of prohibiting interracial marriages (*Loving vs. the State of Virginia*), ruling that the anti-miscegenation laws adhered to by 16 states at that time were unconstitutional. Since that decision the number of romantic relationships that cross racial lines has increased dramatically. Census data indicate that from 1970 to 2000 the number of marriages between African Americans and whites increased nearly six time, going from 65,000 to 363,000; marriages between whites and representatives of other racial groups also grew from 233,000 to 1 million (Lichter and Qian 2004). Not reflected in these numbers are cohabiting and dating individuals involved in interracial relationships. As of 2000, 10 percent of couples reporting in the 2000 census that they were cohabiting were in interracial relationships (Lichter and Qian 2004). And the proportions of dating couples who are interracial appear to be even higher, though obtaining data on such couples is difficult. Results from Add Health indicate that of young adults interviewed in 2001-2002, 18.8 percent of 18 to 21 year olds were currently involved in an interracial dating relationship, while 23.5 percent of respondents in that age group were involved in interracial cohabiting unions (Joyner and Kao 2005).

Scholars have long viewed marriage across ethnic or racial lines as an indicator that social distance between groups is weakening, as is the salience of race and ethnicity as factors determining mate selection (Blau and Schwartz 1984; Gordon 1961, 1964; Lieberson and Waters 1988). The growth of interracial marriages suggests that race has become just one more attribute for exchange in the marriage market (Becker 1981; Parsons 1955), much like social class or physical attractiveness. While many continue to assert the persistence of a racial hierarchy in the United States, with Blacks concentrated at the bottom and Asians and Latinos in an interim position (Bonilla-Silva 2004; Omi and Winant 1994), exchange theory suggests that this caste-like ranking of race can be offset for those with other desirable attributes. Empirical research in general finds support for such caste for class transfers (Schoen and Wooldredge 1989). Whites in interracial relationships come from lower economic and educational classes, on average, than do those who do not date interracially, and this relationship is reversed for racial minorities (Crowder and Tolnay 2000; Qian 1997; Kalmijn 1993; though see Yancey 2002 for opposing findings). Most mixed marriages between blacks and whites are between black men and white women (Kalmijn 1993; Qian and Lichter 2001), and outmarriage is more prevalent among highly educated black males and lower status white females (Schoen and Wooldredge 1989; Kalmijn 1993). In fact, black men who are married to white wives have much higher educational levels than do the black husbands of black women (Lichter and Qian 2004). Axes of exchange vary by gender, as well as race. Asian women are more likely to outmarry than are their male counterparts (Qian and Lichter 2001; Qian 1997); barriers to interracial marriage are also low among Latina women (Blackwell and Lichter 2000; Zian 1997).

These studies, and much of the literature on exchange relationships, focus on marriage. Yet interracial relationships are even more prevalent among young adults who are dating or cohabiting (Blackwell and Lichter 2004; Joyner and Kao 2005). Our understanding of the nature of relationship advancement through these stages is weak, and longitudinal data on individuals' relationships progression across these stages has until recently been lacking. What evidence exists, however, suggests the presence of continued barriers to romances that cross racial lines. Interracial romances are less likely to result in coresidential unions than are racially homogamous partnerships (Joyner and Kao 2005). Similarly, interracial cohabiting couples are significantly less likely to marry than are racially homogamous white couples, though they are no more likely to break up (Sassler and McNally 2003). Blackwell and Lichter's (2001, 2004) cross-sectional data also finds that married couples are more racially homogamous than are cohabitors.

Attempts to understand such trends utilize filter theory to explain the selective nature of married couples. According to this perspective, as individuals contemplate relationships of greater seriousness their selection criteria becomes increasingly refined. Important filters include ascribed traits such as race and age, as well as shared achieved traits like educational attainment (Kalmijn 1993). Partners that are less well matched in important characteristics are either not selected in the first place, or such relationships are terminated prior to progressing into more serious attachments. This progression, often termed the *winnowing process*, should result in the greater persistence of homogamous relationships inevitably proceeding towards marriage, while more heterogamous unions dissolve (or remain in less formalized states, such as dating or cohabiting (Sassler and McNally 2003)). Individuals who are dating may place less emphasis on couple-level

similarities than young adults who are pursuing more serious, committed, or longer-term relationships. In fact, the data supports this suggestion; dating couples are far more likely to be interracial than either cohabiting couples, who are more likely to cross racial lines than married couples (Blackwell & Lichter, 2000, 2004; Joyner & Kao 2005; Sassler & McNally 2003).

Nonetheless, support for the *winnowing* theory with regards to relationship progression into more committed relationships is mixed, at best. Among black couples, racial homogamy is highest for married couples, followed by cohabiting couples and then those who are dating. For whites, on the other hand, racial homogamy is highest among cohabitors, followed by marrieds, and trailed by daters (Blackwell and Lichter 2004). Blackwell and Lichter (2004) conclude that the winnowing theory does not adequately explain whites' relationships. Instead, they posit that for whites, living together represents something other than just a way of selecting out marriage partners (see also Schoen and Weinick 1993). Rather, cohabitation is a weaker bond than marriage, and those deciding to move in with a partner are not in search of the same attributes as those pursuing marital partners.

Individuals who enter into cohabiting unions are selectively different from those choosing to marry directly; they are of lower economic status, with less education and more unstable marital histories (Blackwell and Lichter 2000; Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991; Sassler and McNally, 2003). These same attributes may also shape factors relating to relationship progression or partner choice. Schoen and Weinick (1993) suggest that men with poorer economic prospects may prefer cohabiting over marriage, as there are lower expectations for them to be economic providers; alternatively, men

with better economic attributes are more likely to enter into marriage (Sassler and Goldscheider 2004). These factors may also hinder them from transitioning from cohabitation to marriage.

How these varying perspectives might be applied to study relationship progression is inadequately theorized. As winnowing theory suggests, less serious relationships may be more exploratory than more serious or committed unions like cohabiting or marital unions. While existing data does not enable us to hypothesize how rapidly romantic relationships will progress, the literature does provide some suggestions regarding possible tempo differences for various kinds of relationships. We might therefore expect the pace of relationship progression, from relationship to sex, and from sex to coresidence, to **slow** as couples become more serious. Such a development could signify the winnowing out of more poorly matched relationships, or the progression of more successful (i.e. more compatible) relationships. Alternatively, a slowing of the pace of relationship progression might signify the continued existence of racial barriers deterring interracial relationships from advancing.

Factors shaping the progression of the relationship would then include the race of one's partner, as well as other individual and family characteristics, such as sex, age, and family social class. The existing literature on interracial relationships finds significant gender differences in the likelihood of dating across racial or ethnic lines, with men substantially more likely to do so than women (Clark-Ibanez and Felmlee 2004; Tucker and Mitchel-Kiernan 1995; Yancey 2002). Not surprisingly, women are more likely than men to mention pressures from family members or societal pressure as reason for avoiding interethnic dating (Clark-Ibanez and Felmlee 2004). White men are far more

likely to partner with Asian or Latino women than black women. Men are also significantly more likely than women to mention physical attraction as a facilitator of interethnic dating (Clark-Ibanez and Felmlee 2004). Some have suggested that men's advantaged gender position makes them more willing to experiment with their dating habits, by dating across racial lines (Yancey 2000). White men's racial advantage in mixed-race unions may also result in a more rapid relationship progression than might occur for white men in racially homogamous relationships. On the other hand, white women involved in interracial romances may seek to capture a minority male with desirable attributes, and should therefore also engage in more rapid relationship progression in mixed-race unions than in racially homogamous ones.

As the winnowing theory suggests, less serious relationships may be more exploratory than increasingly committed relationships like cohabitation or marriage. We would therefore expect the pace of relationship progression, particularly the transition from sex to cohabitation, to slow as couples become more serious. Lengthening duration into more serious unions could signify the winnowing out of more poorly matched relationships, or the progression of more successful (i.e., compatible) relationships. We might also expect interracial relationships to progress more slowly into cohabiting unions than into dating ones. Evidence of winnowing would be provided if interracial relationships progress more slowly into cohabiting unions than racially homogamous couples. Alternatively, if interracial unions progress more rapidly from sexual involvement to cohabitation than do same-race couples, that would provide support for the idea that cohabitors are in search of a different type of relationship than are those in

search of marriage – generally, one that is less homogamous, with less time to get to know one another.

Analysis Plan

We examine relationship progression from dating to sexual activity. In particular, we examine if interracial romances progress at a different pace than do racially homogamous relationships, and if patterns for men and women differ. Next, we explore the duration from sexual involvement to the entrance into cohabiting unions. The pace of relationship progression among interracial unions is again contrasted to union transitions among individuals in racially homogamous relationships. We compare the pace of relationships before and after taking into account pre-existing characteristics of individuals, such as age at first sex. These characteristics may make individuals more prone to having interracial relationships and may influence the tempo of relationships, creating a spurious relationship.

Data and Samples

Data for our analyses of young adults come from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (or Add Health) and the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). Add Health is a school-based study of adolescents in grades seven through twelve (Harris et al. 2003). Based on school rosters, Add Health selected a nationally representative sample of 12,105 students in these schools to participate in an in-home interview in 1994 and 1995. In 2001 and 2002, Add Health re-interviewed 9,130 of the wave one in-home respondents. The 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, in contrast, is a nationally representative cross-sectional sample of women and men ages 15 t0 45. The NSFG, collected by the National Center for Health Statistics, is designed to

provide estimates of factors affecting the U.S. birth rate, family formation, and reproductive health among males and females (Abma 2002).

Both Add Health and the NSFG are some of the first nationally representative surveys to collect information on respondent's recent sexual partners, including their demographic characteristics and the date respondents first had sex with them. These surveys additionally ask whether these relationships eventuated in cohabitation and marriage, and if so, the dates of these events. Most important for our purposes, these surveys provide detailed information on the race of partner. Utilizing both data sets allows us to corroborate our findings, as these outcomes have not been examined before. Also the sample frame of Add Health is more limited than that of the NSFG; its excludes high school dropouts from the first wave. But Add Health is ideal in that is has more detailed information on relationships and has larger sample sizes.

We limit our samples to respondents with recent partners of the opposite sex. Since most of the Add Health respondents were between the ages 18 to 25 at the time of the recent interview, we limit the samples from both surveys to respondents from these age groups. We also limit our NSFG sample to men since the file structure for women is different. Finally, we limit our sample to white men and women because in Add Health minorities were disproportionately more likely to skip out of the section in which they were to enumerate sexual partners.

Models and Variables:

For respondents from Add Health who report having a romantic relationship, we first estimate Cox proportional hazards models of the timing from the onset of the relationship to first sex with that partner. Respondents are censored if they dissolve their

relationship or reach the interview date before having sex. For respondents in both data sets who have a sexual relationship, we next estimate Cox models of the timing to cohabitation, with respondents being censored when they marry, dissolve the relationship, or reach the interview date

We first estimate models for the timing to sex and cohabitation that include an indicator variable for having a white partner (versus minority partner). Next, we add control variables for age, maternal education, nativity, adolescent family structure, church attendance, virginity status, age at first sex, and cohabitation history. As mentioned earlier, these variables are intended to take into account factors that have effects on both the likelihood of forming an interracial relationship and the timing to sex and cohabitation in a relationship. Descriptive statistics for these variables are shown in Table 1 (Add Health men and women in romantic relationships) and 2 (Add Health and NSFG men in sexual relationships).

[TABLES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE]

Results

Table 3 displays the relative hazards of having sex for Add Health men and women with white partners versus minority partners, before and after including control variables. Relative hazards less than one indicate that the timing is slower for white respondents with white partners, while hazards greater than one indicate faster timing for white respondents with white partners. Our results reveal that the tempo is significantly faster for white men and women who have minority partners than for their counterparts with white partners. Specifically, the hazard of having sex is over 20% greater for whites

with minority partners. However, the differences in tempo for white women falls out of significance with the inclusion of control variables.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Table 4 displays the relative hazards of cohabiting for white men from the NSFG and Add Health who have white partners versus minority partners. (Women are not in this figure because the difference is not significant.) Here we see that the difference for white men from Add Health is not significant in either model; however, the difference for white men from NSFG is significant even after control variables are added. This difference between Add Health and NSFG could reflect the school-based sampling. NSFG is a more class diverse sample, in that it includes high school dropouts. Such respondents may be more likely to come in contact with minority partners, via neighborhoods or occupations.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Conclusion

Our results provide partial support for all three perspectives. With respect to exchange, we find that white men develop their relationships faster with minority partners than with white partners. Because white men are advantaged in terms of gender and race, they can extract sex in return. Offering support for the winnowing perspective, white men's relatively faster pace with minority women slackens somewhat as they approach cohabitation. Finally, supporting selection arguments, white women's faster sexual tempo in relationships with minority partners is explained by background characteristics.

Additional Analyses Planned for the PAA Draft

Over the next few months we will incorporate NSFG females into our analyses. To take into account selection into sample of most recent relationships, we intend to estimate fixed effects models that compare the timing to sex and cohabitation across individuals within relationships. Finally, we will compare differences in partner characteristics (e.g., education, religion, and presence of child from previous relationship) for white-white and white-minority couples using the Add Health Couples Sample.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Progression from Romance to Sex Samples: White Men and Women Ages 18-24 from Add Health

Survey	Men	Women
White partner	.904	.893
	(.295)	(.309)
Age at beginning of romantic relationship	19.048	18.542
	(2.267)	(2.349)
Mother has less than high school degree	.072	.097
	(.258)	(.296)
Mother has only high school degree	.520	.536
	(.500)	(.499)
Mother has bachelor's degree	.319	.294
	(.466)	(.455)
Missing on maternal education	.087	.072
	(.282)	(.259)
Foreign born	.011	.012
	(.107)	(.108)
With biological parents in adolescence	.610	.590
	(.488)	(.492)
Living with a step and biological parent	.184	.166
	(.388)	(.372)
Living with a single mother	.183	.206
	(.386)	(.405)
Living in other arrangement	.021	.037
	(.143)	(.189)
Infrequent church in adolescence	.123	.098
	(.328)	(.298)
Whether virgin at beginning of relationship	.308	.287
	(.462)	(.452)
Age at first intercourse (if nonvirgin)	17.017	16.602
	(2.158)	(2.103)
Ever cohabited before relationship	.140	.170
	(.347)	(.376)
N of cases	2,263	2,902

Notes: Estimates are unweighted. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Progression from Sex to Cohabitation Samples: White Men Ages 18-24 from Add Health and NSFG

Survey	Add Health Men	NSFG Men
White partner	.901	.874
	(.299)	(.332)
Age at beginning of sexual relationship	19.400	19.273
	(2.210)	(2.182)
Mother has less than high school degree	.078	.064
	(.268)	(.245)
Mother has only high school degree	.535	.615
	(.499)	(.487)
Mother has bachelor's degree	.290	.313
	(.454)	(.464)
Missing on maternal education	.096	---
	(.294)	
Foreign born	.011	.046
	(.106)	(.210)
With biological parents in adolescence	.578	.700
	(.494)	(.459)
Living with a step and biological parent	.191	.112
	(.393)	(.316)
Living with a single parent (mother in NSFG	.204	.187
	(.403)	(.391)
Living in other arrangement	.026	---
	(.160)	
Infrequent church in adolescence	.130	.229
	(.336)	(.421)
Age at first intercourse	16.707	16.421
	(2.149)	(2.005)
Ever cohabited before relationship	.154	.112
	(.361)	(.316)
N of cases	2,131	454

Notes : Estimates are unweighted. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Table 3. Proportional Hazards Models of Timing from Romance to Sex
White Men and Women Ages 18-24 from Add Health

	Men (N = 2,263)		Women (N = 2,902)	
Survey	Estimate	Estimate	Estimate	Estimate
White partner	-.258 **	-.235 **	-.165	-.093
	(.078)		(.064)	(.064)
Age at beginning of romantic relationshi	---	.131 ***	---	.128 ***
		(.011)		(.009)
Mother has less than high school degree	---	.052	---	.222 **
		(.090)		(.068)
Mother has only high school degree	---	---	---	---
Mother has bachelor's degree	---	-.098	---	-.119 *
		(.054)		(.049)
Foreign born	---	-.244	---	-.024
		(.238)		(.194)
With biological parents in adolescence	---	---	---	---
Living with a step and biological parent	---	.088	---	.197 ***
		(.062)		(.056)
Living with a single mother	---	.026	---	.124 *
		(.067)		(.054)
Living in other arrangement	---	.184	---	.315
		(.160)		(.114)
Infrequent church in adolescence	---	.046	---	.058
		(.071)		(.067)
Whether virgin at beginning of relationsh	---	-.364 ***	---	-.547 ***
		(.057)		(.053)
Age at first intercourse (if nonvirgin)	---	-.057 ***	---	-.092 ***
		(.012)		(.011)
Ever cohabited before relationship	---	-.062	---	-.115 *
		(.070)		(.057)
Negative 2 log likelihood	25552.3	25254.2	35427.7	34863.4

Notes : Standard errors are in parentheses.

# p < .10 * p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001 (two-tailed tests)

Table 4. Proportional Hazards Models of Timing from Sex to Cohabitation White Men Ages 18-24 from Add Health and NSFG

	Add Health Men (N = 2,131)			NSFG Men (N =454)		
Survey	Estimate		Estimate	Estimate		Estimate
White partner	-.208	#	-.166	-.565	*	-.561 *
	(.110)		(.111)	(.249)		(.252)
Age at beginning of romantic relationshi	---		.205 ***	---		.131 **
			(.017)			(.047)
Mother has less than high school degree	---		.287 *	---		.426
			(.113)			(.342)
Mother has only high school degree	---		---	---		---
Mother has bachelor's degree	---		-.210 *	---		.178
			(.087)			(.227)
Foreign born	---		-.395	---		-.339
			(.411)			(.523)
With biological parents in adolescence	---		---	---		---
Living with a step and biological parent	---		.362 ***	---		-.009
			(.087)			(.322)
Living with a single mother	---		.252 **	---		.524 *
			(.091)			(.230)
Living in other arrangement	---		.299	---		---
			(.205)			
Infrequent church in adolescence	---		.137	---		.391 #
			(.094)			(.215)
Age at first intercourse	---		-.042 *	---		-.157 **
			(.018)			(.057)
Ever cohabited before relationship	---		.304 **	---		.383
			(.092)			(.275)
Negative 2 log likelihood	11588		11372	1091		1054

Notes : Standard errors are in parentheses.

# p < .10 * p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001 (two-tailed tests)