

Children and families

Three panelists presented new research on issues related to children and families. Lloyd Grieger discussed preliminary findings from work done jointly with Yasamin Kusunoki and David Harding, on adolescent romantic relationships, concluding that such relationships are common, and that most occur outside the boundaries of neighborhoods, schools, and peer groups. Steve Haider presented new work done with Todd Elder and John Goddeeris, providing a framework for evaluating racial and ethnic infant mortality gaps, and suggesting that the role of socioeconomic status in explaining such gaps is larger than previously thought. Alexandra Killewald discussed work done with Ian Lundberg and Cassandra Robertson, providing new evidence for assessing the pathways through which economic circumstances may affect couples' risk of divorce. This set of articles summarizes their presentations.

The social contexts of adolescent romantic relationships

Lloyd Grieger, Yasamin Kusunoki, and David J. Harding

Lloyd Grieger is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Yale University. Yasamin Kusunoki is Assistant Research Scientist at the Population Studies Center and Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. David J. Harding is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley.

Adolescence is a crucial developmental period when individuals increasingly exert their independence from their family, form close relationships with non-family peers, and often enter into their first romantic relationships.¹ Early intimate relationships influence a number of interpersonal processes that are integral to psychological and social development, such as autonomy, individuation, relatedness, identity formation, and the capacity for intimacy.² These early romantic relationships are the primary context for developing sexual identity and learning to express sexuality.³ The relationships also have a lasting effect throughout adulthood, setting the stage for future relationships and family formation behaviors.⁴ The behaviors adolescents engage in within these intimate relationships are of great concern to social scientists, particularly behaviors associated with negative outcomes like sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies. Engagement in these risky behaviors is associated with a constellation of contributing factors and among them are the partners' own normative beliefs about sexual behaviors.⁵ Among the many influences on an adolescent's views about sexual behaviors are peer groups, which are important for the development and policing of behavioral norms. In addition, the greater social environment, such as neighborhoods and schools, are also thought to facilitate the development and policing of adolescents' attitudes towards sex and engagement in risky behaviors.

In theory, norms are spread through social interactions, implying that the social networks of young people play a very central role in propagating beliefs about sexual behaviors.⁶

Because adolescents are free to choose partners from outside the spatial and social boundaries of neighborhoods, schools, and peer groups, we believe that romantic relationship formation, like friendship formation, can be viewed as a vehicle for transporting norms outside of these typical boundaries. To deepen the understanding of romantic adolescent social interaction, we produce a descriptive analysis of the *embeddedness* of adolescent relationships, that is, whether or not partners live in the same neighborhood, attend the same school, or share common friends. We also investigate whether concentrated disadvantage in the school or neighborhood is associated with relationship embeddedness.

Prevalence of romantic relationships within neighborhoods, schools, or peer groups

For the purposes of this study, the adolescents are individuals between the ages of 14 and 17. The data for the analyses come from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a nationally representative school-based study of students enrolled in grades 7 through 12 during the 1994–1995 school year.⁷ We look separately at whether partners know each other from the same social context (neighborhood or school), and whether they know each other by being in the same peer group (that is, the partner was either already a friend, or the friend of a friend, at the time the relationship began).

Preliminary findings

Though still in the early stages, this research has already revealed some important facts about adolescent relationships. First, we find that romantic relationship experience is the norm among adolescents; over 80 percent of our sample of 14- to 17-year-olds have been in a romantic relationship. We also find that adolescents with relationship experience do not necessarily come from disadvantaged backgrounds; adolescents from all backgrounds are likely to have romantic relationships.

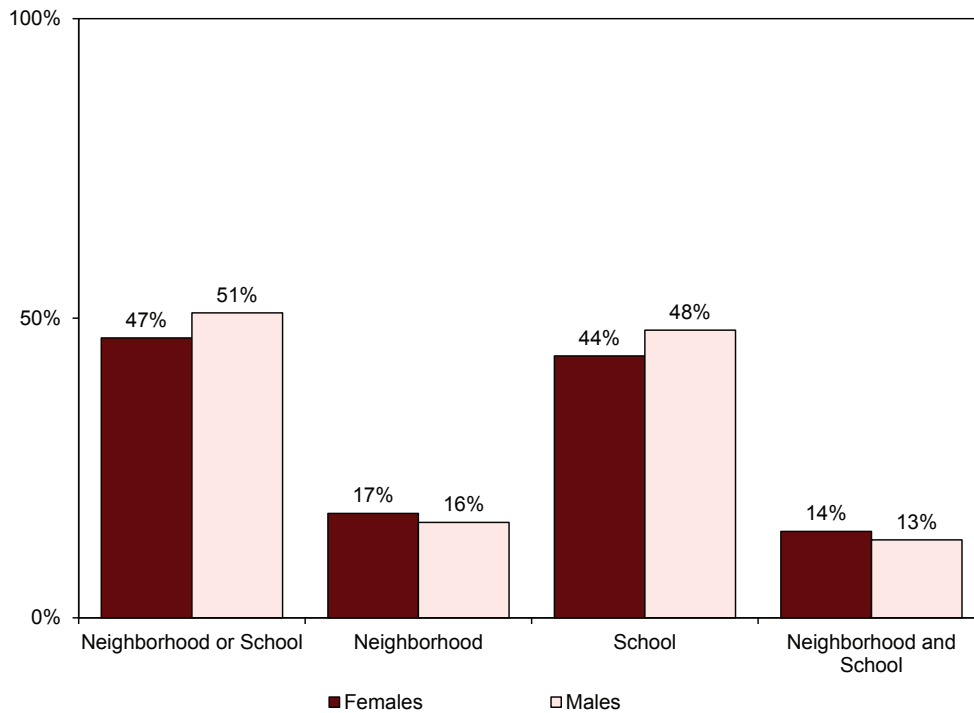


Figure 1. Proportion of adolescent romantic relationships with person from same neighborhood, school, or both.

Second, as shown in Figure 1, we find that about half of the adolescent relationships are formed with someone who neither lives in the same neighborhood nor attends the same school. Since a significant amount of research has been conducted on the effects of neighborhood and school environments on risky sexual behaviors, it is important to know that over half of these relationships are formed across these boundaries.

As Figure 2 shows, adolescent romantic relationships are even less likely to be formed from within a peer group than within a neighborhood or school; over 80 percent of relationships are formed with someone who was neither a friend, nor the friend of a friend, at the time the relationship began. We know from other research that adolescents learn about sexual identity and sexual cues from their peers.⁸ Our finding that most relationships are formed outside one's social circle may be an indication of how these views are transported beyond peer group boundaries.

In future analyses, we plan to examine the association between relationship embeddedness and neighborhood and school disadvantage, using multivariate multilevel statistical approaches. Our preliminary findings suggest that the influence of school and neighborhood disadvantage on relationship embeddedness varies depending on gender: for girls, school disadvantage seems to be associated with choosing partners from their own schools, neighborhoods, and peer groups. For boys, however, school disadvantage seems to have the opposite association; boys from disadvantaged schools are more likely to choose their relationship partners from outside their schools, neighborhoods, and peer groups.

Implications

Romantic relationships among adolescents are important to study because they are common, and adolescents of all backgrounds engage in them. Because the majority of adolescent romantic relationships occur outside a school, neighborhood, or peer group context, relationship formation is likely to be a viable pathway for the spread of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors across spatial and social boundaries.

In the future it would be interesting to know whether embedded relationships are more or less risky depending on individual or contextual characteristics, as this knowledge could be useful for identifying potential pathways for transmission or reinforcement of disadvantage within a neighborhood or school. For example, if the girls who formed embedded relationships are more likely to participate in risky sexual behaviors, then this could be one way through which neighborhood or school disadvantage reinforces itself. Additionally, if boys who formed non-embedded relationships are riskier in terms of their sexual behaviors, then this could be one way by which neighborhood or school disadvantage propagates across spatial and social boundaries. Our future work on this topic will attempt to answer some of these questions. ■

¹D. Buhrmester and W. Furman, "The Changing Functions of Friends in Childhood: A Neo-Sullivanian Perspective," in *Friendship and Social Interaction*, eds. V. J. Derlega and B. A. Winstead (New York: Springer, 1986); H. S. Sullivan, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* (New York: Norton, 1953).

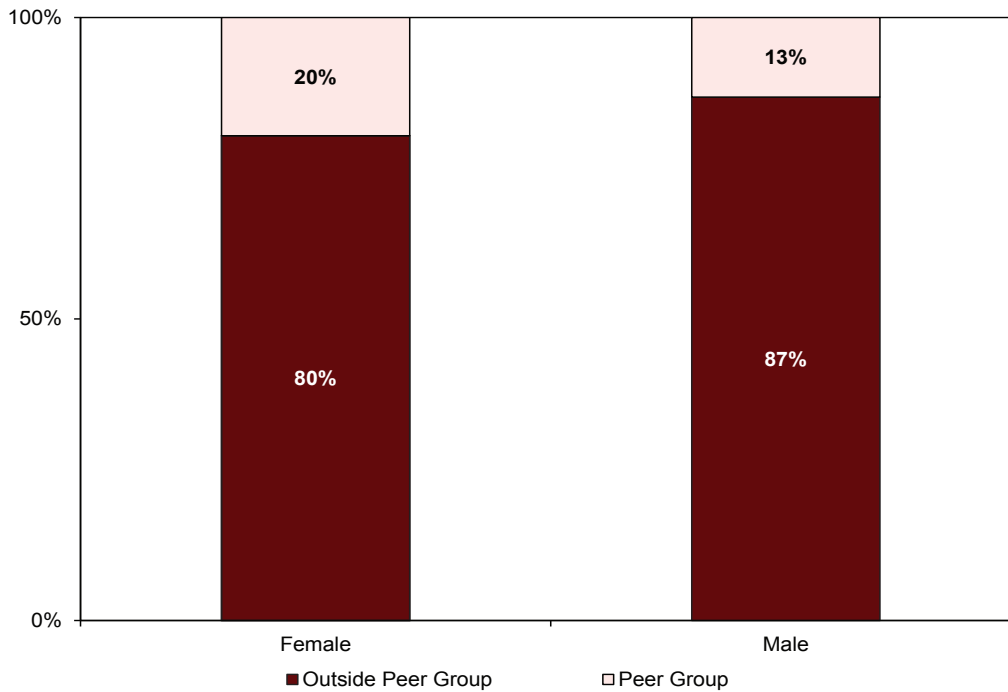


Figure 2. Proportion of adolescent romantic relationships with person from within or outside peer group.

²D. L. Coates, “The Cultured and Culturing Aspects of Romantic Experiences in Adolescence,” in *The Development of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence*, eds. B. Furman, B. B. Brown, and C. Feiring (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³See, for example, W. A. Collins, “More than Myth: The Developmental Significance of Romantic Relationships During Adolescence,” *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 13, No. 1 (2003): 1–24.

⁴See, for example, R. K. Raley, S. Crissey, and C. Muller, “Of Sex and Romance: Late Adolescent Relationships and Young Adult Union Formation,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69, No. 5 (2007): 1210–1226.

⁵S. A. Vasilenko, D. A. Kreager, and E. S. Lefkowitz, “Gender, Contraceptive Attitudes, and Condom Use in Adolescent Romantic Relationships: A Dyadic Approach,” *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (2013). doi: 10.1111/jora.12091

⁶See, for example, M. S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, No. 6 (1973): 1360–1380.

⁷For more information about the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth), see <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth>.

⁸P. Busse, M. Fishbein, A. Bleakley, and M. Hennessy, “The Role of Communication with Friends in Sexual Initiation,” *Communication Research* 37, No. 2 (2010): 239–255.