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# **The Composition of Schools, Social Status, and Adolescent Relationship Formation**

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## **Abstract**

Previous research on adults shows that blacks marry later than whites, and research on adolescents suggests that blacks delay dating (but not sex) until later ages. We hypothesize that the social factors that delay black relationship formation in adulthood are evident in adolescence. This research uses data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health to investigate the relationship between the social context of schools and adolescent romantic and sexual relationships. Preliminary results show that black adolescents are much more likely to have had a nonromantic sexual relationship, and black girls are more likely to have relationships with someone outside their school. Analyses also show that adolescents who are less popular, have lower grades, and participate less in school activities are less likely to have a relationship, particularly a relationship with another adolescent who attends the same school.

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Previous research on adults shows that blacks marry later than whites (Raley 2000). The explanation for black-white differences in marriage that has received the most empirical support focuses on the lack of stable, well paying, employment opportunities for young black men (e.g. Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, and Landry 1992). Those with more resources are more attractive on the marriage market and more able to establish and maintain an independent household. Although empirical findings strongly support the idea that economic factors are partial explanations for the black-white gap in marriage, the results also suggest that these theories provide an incomplete account.

Demographic factors may also contribute to race differences in marriage and nonmarital fertility. Black-white differences in marriage rates are greater for women than men (Raley 2000; Mare and Winship 1991). Mortality rates among African American men are extraordinarily high, depressing the sex ratio (number of men per women) for blacks. Additionally, black men, especially those with higher levels of education, are more likely than black women to marry a white spouse (Crowder and Tolnay 2000). Combined, these factors contribute to a “marriage squeeze” for African American women. However, previous research has documented that only a small part of the race gap in marriage is due to lower sex ratios as well as a mismatch between the characteristics of African American men and women, given dominant patterns of assortative mating (Schoen and Kluegel 1988). One reason why empirical results provide only weak support of compositional arguments may be that the geographic units researchers use to define marriage markets (e.g. states or metropolitan areas) correspond poorly to the true markets women experience.

To investigate how demographic constraints impact relationship formation, our research focuses on the role of school composition and social interactions within schools on adolescent

dating. Research on adolescents suggests that blacks delay dating (but not sex) until later ages (Cooksey, Mott and Neubauer 2002). We hypothesize that the social factors that delay black relationship formation in adulthood are evident in adolescence. An advantage of focusing on adolescence is that the institutional influences on relationship formation are likely easier to identify in adolescence than in adulthood, in part because adolescents' lives are more tightly controlled by the family and school than parallel institutions control adult lives.

This research uses data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health to investigate the association between the social context of schools and adolescent relationships with the opposite sex. We focus on three aspects of the school environment, the social status of blacks relative to whites, the racial composition of schools, and racial differences in levels of involvement in school activities. Preliminary results in Figure 1 show that black adolescents are much more likely to have had a nonromantic sexual relationship, and black girls are more likely to have had relationships with someone outside their school. Analyses presented in Table 1 show that adolescents who are less popular, and those that participate less in school activities are less likely to have a relationship. The racial composition of schools has little impact on whether adolescents form relationships. However, this factor is associated with the quality of these relationships. Males in schools with many same race peers are less likely to be in sexual nonromantic relationships. Additionally, females in schools with more same race peers are more likely to form relationships in school, rather than outside of school. Multivariate analyses will investigate whether these demographic and social factors explain any of the race differences in relationship formation shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Black-White Differences in Adolescent Romantic and Sexual Involvement

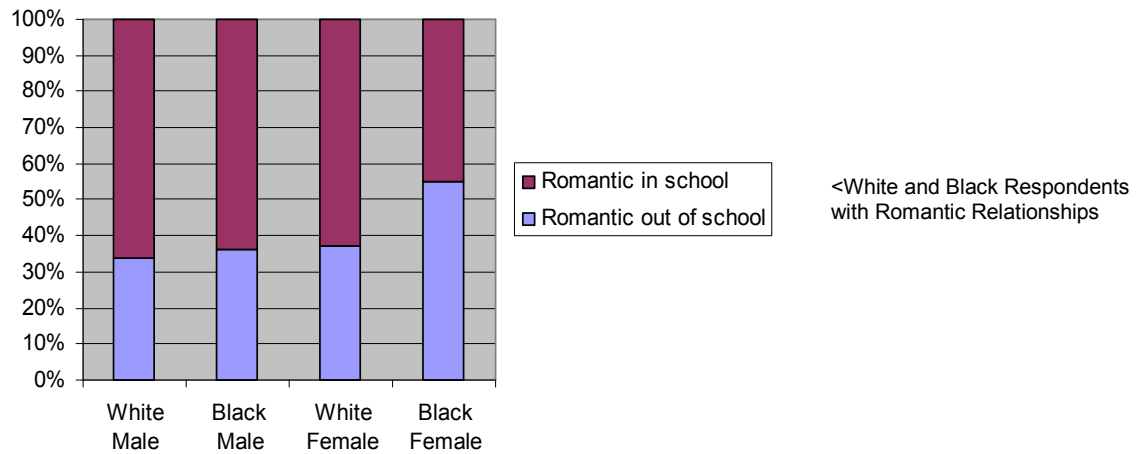
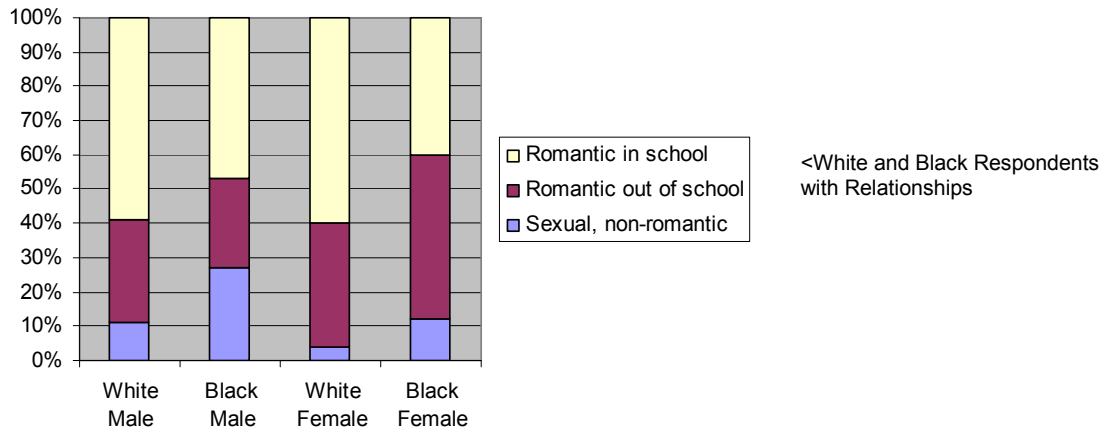
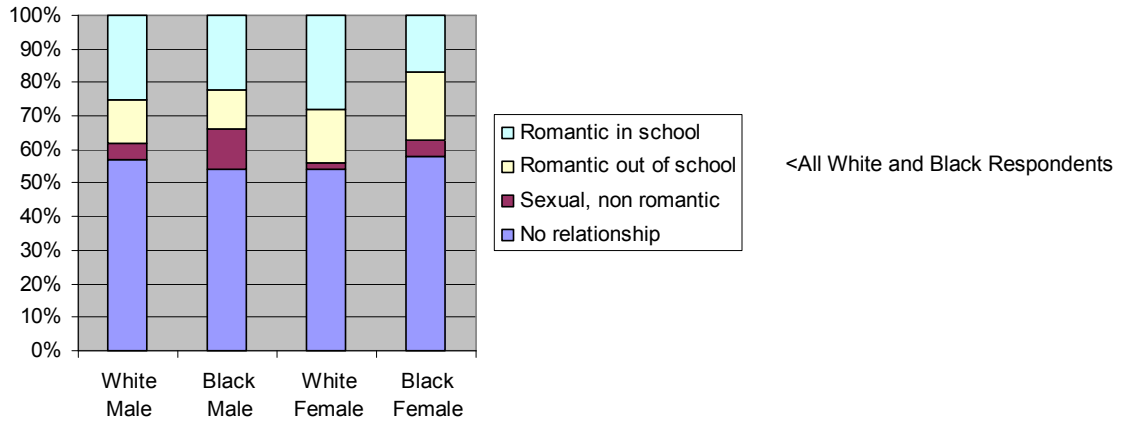


Table 1. Relationship between individuals academic/school characteristics and relationship type.

	% Had Relationship (N=10253)		Of those who had a relationship, % Romantic (N=4551)		Of those that had romantic relationship, % in school (N=3627)	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
<b>Popularity</b>						
Lowest quartile	38	40	82	93	59	51
2nd quartile	44	45	82	93	68	56
3rd quartile	48	47	88	93	69	61
Highest quartile	53	51	90	95	75	67
Missing	* 43	* 42	* 81	94	* 60	* 56
<b>Participation in School Activities</b>						
Lowest quartile	42	44	82	91	61	57
2nd quartile	44	43	87	95	66	58
3rd quartile	48	48	89	95	75	59
Highest quartile	47	48	86	95	68	65
Missing	* 43	* 42	* 81	* 94	* 60	53
<b>Racial Composition of School</b>						
Few same-race peers	44	43	76	91	59	42
Average same-race peers	45	45	87	95	65	56
Many same-race peers	44	45	* 86	94	67	* 64

\* Chi-Square test indicates that % with relationship of this type differs significantly across categories. (\* indicates  $p < .05$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ .)

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