

**EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF ADOLESCENT INTERRACIAL ROMANTIC  
RELATIONSHIPS ON SEXUAL BEHAVIOR**

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## **Introduction**

Sexual behavior among teens has drawn a lot of attention from scholars, as it has been linked to various negative social outcomes, such as the contraction of sexual transmitted disease (STD) and unintended teenage pregnancy (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Experts have argued that the way to prevent such negative outcomes is to delay the onset of early sexual intercourse and encourage the adoption of contraceptive use among sexually active adolescents. Several characteristics, including interracial dating status, may influence these sexual behaviors. As ethnic diversity in the U.S. continues to expand, the number of interracial romantic relationships among adolescents is on the rise. Nevertheless, few studies have systematically investigated the characteristics of interracial romantic relationships and how these characteristics influence sexual behavior among adolescents.

Sexual activity among interracially dating teens might be different from activity among intra-racially dating peers for two reasons. First, there are racial differences in the timing of sexual debut and the prevalence of contraceptive use. Interracial couples might hold different attitudes and values toward sexual practices, and reconciling those differences may be difficult. Second, the characteristics of interracially dating and non-interracially dating relationships may differ dramatically (Vequera and Kao 20). The intimacy level and degrees of communication regarding sex in interracial relationships may be lower. Given their similar social and cultural backgrounds, non-interracial couples may have a higher level of intimacy and more effective communication. Thus, it might be easier for these couples to discuss views regarding sex and contraceptive use. By contrast, communication regarding sensitive topics (such as sex and contraceptive use) between partners of different races may be particularly awkward, as adolescents may be struggling with adjusting to racial differences in other areas of the relationship. In short, inter-dating couples may face more obstacles than do the non-inter-dating couples.

To date, little is known about whether interracially dating teens engage in similar sex-related activities as their non-interracially dating peers or what accounts for any behavioral differences that do exist. Understanding these behavior patterns has important policy implications, as current sex programs and sex education curricula do little to address the importance of relationships, or take into consideration any barriers interracial couples face in terms of communication regarding contraceptive use.

## **Racial Differences in Sexual Behavior**

The overall tendency of teenage sex in the U.S. is that young people tend to experience sexual debut at earlier ages, and there are racial differences in the prevalence of sexual intercourse and the direction of sexual behavior trajectories (Fergus, Zimmerman and Caldwell 2007). At any given age in adolescence, blacks are twice as likely to have had sex as whites (Adamczyk and Felson 2005; Santelli et al. 2000). Asian-American adolescents have much lower rates of sexual experience than white, black and Hispanic adolescents (Hahm et al. 2006). Hispanics, in general, have lower rates of sexual activity, but more acculturated Hispanic adolescents report a higher risk of sex and increased levels of risky behavior than less acculturated teens (Aneshensel, Fielder & Becerra 1989; Upchurch et al. 2001).

In terms of contraceptive use, minority teens showed reduced contraceptive use and less consistency in use (Brindis et al. 2000; Ford et al. 2001; Ku et al. 1994; Manlove, Ryan and Franzetta 2007). Asian Americans have lower rates of contraceptive use and are at a higher risk of contracting STDs than whites. Black teens, however, showed more frequent contraceptive use than white or Hispanic teens (Ku et al. 1994; Hahm et al. 2006). Manning (2000) found that the younger teens are at the time of sexual initiation, the less likely they are to use contraceptives. However, the relationship is curvilinear, as older age is also negatively associated with condom use. In part, this is because older couples are more likely to be in committed relationships than younger couples (DiClemente et al. 1996; Ku et al. 1994; Manlove, Ryan and Franzetta 2007). These racial differences in norms and values may create challenges for inter-dating couples attempting to reach a consensus about the initiation of sexual intercourse within a romantic relationship and contraceptive use if the relationship involves sex.

### **Interracial Relationship Characteristics and Sexual Behavior**

Partner and relationship characteristics may have an impact on adolescent sexual behavior. A large body of research indicates that higher levels of intimacy between partners are associated with more sexual activity and a higher rate of contraceptive use, as sexual intercourse is more predictable in such relationships (Manlove et al. 2004 and 2007). However, other research suggests that rates of ever having used contraceptives and the consistent use of contraception are substantially lower in serious or committed relationships, as couples feel safe and are less likely to contract STDs or HIVs (Cooper and Orcutt 2000; Manlove, Rayn and Franzetta 2007; Noar, Zimmerman, and Atwood 2004). As different as these findings seem, it is clear that prior literature emphasizes the importance of intimacy level between partners for sexual behavior. Therefore, knowing whether there are differences in levels of intimacy between interracial and non-interracial relationships would improve scholars' understanding of adolescent sexual behavior.

In addition, communication between partners is an important predictor of contraceptive use. Prior research has shown that it is important for teens to communicate about issues related to sex and contraception with their partners (Manlove, Ryan and Franzetta 2007). Discussion of contraception before first having sex increases condom use as well as rates of ever using contraceptives and consistently using contraceptives (Kirby 2001; Manlove, Ryan and Franzetta 2007; Manlove et al. 2003, 2004; Noar, Carlyle and Cole 2006).

Inter-dating couples may experience lower levels of both intimacy and communication compared to non-interracial couples. Discussion of sex with partners may be very unlikely for inter-dating couples. Wang and Kao (2007) found that interracial dating couples reported similar levels of physical contact, such as kissing and touching (Vaquera and Kao 2005). However, the authors did not examine the level of communication about sex.

### **Research Questions**

Three research questions guide the third study: 1) Does participation in an interracial romantic relationship reduce the likelihood of having sexual intercourse among adolescents? 2) Is the association between interracial relationship status and sexual intercourse mediated by the level of intimacy and the level of communication in the relationship? Specifically, I examine the extent

to which interracial relationship status affects the level of intimacy and the level of communication in adolescent relationships, and eventually influences sexual behavior. 3) How does the level of contraceptive use among sexually active individuals change according to relationship type? Do levels of intimacy and communication mediate the relationship?

## **Data**

To evaluate these research questions, I use data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) Wave I, when adolescents were in grades 7-12 during the 1994-1995 school year. Each respondent reported up to three relationships, and detailed sexual behavior associated with each relationship is documented. If a respondent reported sexual practice changes based on the race of his or her partners, such a change may suggest that the race of the partner exerts a considerable impact on sexual behavior.

For this study, I restrict the analyses to adolescents who were included in both the in-school and in-home surveys in Wave 1, and who had reported at least one romantic relationship. Teens who did not report heterosexual relationships were eliminated from the sample. I create relationship-level files that include one observation for each romantic relationship reported in the survey, as each respondent is allowed to report up to three romantic relationships. I focus on non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic blacks, Hispanics and Asian Americans, and exclude respondents who identified as “bi-racial” or “other” as it is hard to identify a particular interracial relationship type for these respondents. American Indians were also excluded, as the distinction between American Indians and whites has diminished over the past several decades.

The final sample consists of 6,217 respondents, including 3,560 non-Hispanic whites, 1,322 non-Hispanic blacks, 1,021 Hispanics and 314 Asians. After reshaping the data based on the relationship(s) reported by each respondent, the total sample comprises 10,577 romantic relationships. Within this total, 9,176 relationships (86.75 percent) were non-interracial, and 1,401 (13.25 percent) were interracial. Of all the couples, 40.29 percent engaged in sexual intercourse, and among those, 79.52 percent reported ever having used contraceptives.

## **Variables**

*Dependent variables.* The dependent variable is sexual behavior. I employ two measures, derived from two survey questions, to capture adolescent sexual behavior. For each of their romantic relationships, respondents were asked whether they “have sexual intercourse” with their partner, and whether they or their partner “ever use any method of birth control.” Thus, I created two dichotomous dependent variables: sexual intercourse (0=No; 1=Yes) and ever used contraceptives (0=No; 1=Yes).

*Key independent variables.* I include two measures of relationship type, the first independent variable. The first measure is dichotomous; the variable is coded according to whether the race of the respondent is the same as that of the romantic partner (1=interracial; 0=non-interracial). The second measure is restricted to minority respondents, including black, Hispanic and Asian-American adolescents. For these groups, I further divided interracial relationships into inter-dating with whites and inter-dating with non-whites. I did so because intermarriage with whites and intermarriage with other non-whites suggest very different assimilation paths, the former

indicating upward mobility and the latter indicating downward mobility (Alba and Nee 2005; Portes and Zhou 1993). For this measure, relationship status is grouped into a three-category dummy variable (0=non-interracial dating; 1=interracial dating with whites; 2=interracial dating with other non-whites).

Two measures of relationship quality were used. *Level of intimacy* as a couple measures the degree to which respondents have an intimate relationship with their partner. I summed the scores of five dichotomous items: “I told others we are a couple,” “I met my partner's parents,” “we went out as a group,” “we saw less friends ”and“ we thought of ourselves as a couple.” The scores range from 0 to 5. I expect respondents with low scores to have a lower risk of being sexually active. *Communication* between partners measures whether respondents and their partners have communicated about sex-related issues (“We talked about contraception or sexually transmitted disease”), as prior studies have indicated that such communication usually improves the chance of having sex and having safe sex.

*Individual-level control variables.* Prior studies have indicated that being older, male, U.S. born, attractive, and more religious, as well as having better academic performance, having fewer behavior problems, having high family SES, and living with both biological parents are associated with lower rates of sex and/or higher rates of ever and consistently using contraceptives (Adamczyk and Felson 2005; Afxentiou and Hawley 1997; Fisher 2004; Kirby 2001; Manlove et al. 2007; Manlove et al. 2003; Miller 2002). Therefore, individual-level control variables include *age, gender, nativity, physical attractiveness, GPA, behavior index, religiosity, family SES and family structure.*

Based on parental education and parental occupation, *family SES* is coded as follows: low, medium and high. Family structure is associated with first sex, as teens from intact families are more likely to delay first sex than teens from other family structures (Lammers et al. 1999). In part, this is due to the fact that adolescents receive more supervision from two parent families, and thus have fewer opportunities to engage in sexual activities. *Family structure* is coded 1 for a two-parent (bio/step/adopt) family and 2 otherwise. As academic achievement is negatively associated with sexual activity, adolescents with higher GPAs are expected to be less likely to have romantic relationships. *GPA* is measured by the average of four self-reported grades (English, math, history and science).

## **Analytic Approach**

In accordance with my research questions, I stratify samples by race (non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, and Asian) to test my research questions separately. I will run two-level logistic regression models (relationship and individual), as the relationships are embedded in individuals.

I will first examine the influence of interracial dating relationship type (non-interracial, interracial with white; interracial with non-white) on adolescent sexual practice. Next, I will investigate the interactive effects of interracial relationship type and relationship characteristics on sexual practices among adolescents, while holding other social demographic covariates constant. The regression models will illustrate the impact of interracial relationship types on sexual behavior controlling for a variety of individual and school-level covariates. Last, I will

add interaction terms for interracial relationship type and relationship intimacy. These multilevel logistic models will help to determine the extent to which interracial relationship characteristics (intimacy and communication) independently and jointly affect adolescent sexual behavior.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Dependent variable and Independent Variables by Race

		<u>white</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>Hispanic</u>	<u>Asian</u>
	values	% or mean	% or mean	% or mean	% or mean
<b><i>Dependent Variables</i></b>					
Had sex with partner	0=no, 1=yes	36.53%	51.80%	39.61%	32.44%
Contraceptive Ever Use	0=no, 1=yes	82.76%	77.46%	75.18%	71.14 %
<b><i>Independent Variables</i></b>					
Relationship Type	intra-dating	91.44%	90.34%	69.97%	72.77%
	Inter-dating w/ white	-----	3.85 %	21.77%	14.26%
	inter-dating w/ minority	8.56%	5.81%	8.27%	12.98%
<b><i>Relationship-level variables</i></b>					
Engaging as a couple	Scale: 0-20	3.81(1.24)	3.45(1.33)	3.63 (1.32)	3.64 (1.30)
Communication	0=no; 1=yes	47.98%	63.64%	54.82%	45.64%
<b><i>Individual-level variables</i></b>					
Gender (female)	0=Male 1=Female	52.02 %	50.98%	47.24%	45.53%
Age (years)	Scale: 11-20	15.32(1.60)	15.34 (1.61)	15.69 (1.55)	16.04(1.38)
U.S born	0=No 1=Yes	98.5%	97.74%	74.53%	48.4%
Physical Attractiveness	Scale: 1-5	3.65(.864)	3.49 (.84)	3.64 (.89)	3.62 (.83)
GPA	Scale 1-4	2.82(.774)	2.57 (.67)	2.49 (.73)	2.91 (.79)
Off-track Behavior	Scale: 0-16	6.19(4.22)	6.98 (4.61)	6.84 (4.56)	6.98 (4.63)
Self esteem	Scale:6-30	24.47(3.41)	25.26 (3.18)	24.02 (3.56)	23.57 (3.32)
Church Attendance	Never	25.65%	15.35%	25.92%	18.38%
	Less than once a month	22.69%	11.62%	21.68%	16.88%
	Once a month	20.14%	24.09%	18.28%	18.80%
	Once a week	31.52%	48.94%	34.13%	45.94%
Family SES	Low SES	49.33 %	46.01%	67.10%	44.04%
	Medium SES	25.23%	27.73%	21.54%	31.06%
	High SES	25.45%	26.27%	11.36%	24.89%
Family structure	two-parent family	77.80%	52.81%	69.83%	79.04%
	One parent family	18.82%	41.53%	25.38%	15.07%
	No parent	3.38%	5.66%	4.78%	5.90%
<b><i>School- level variables</i></b>					
Percent white		62.93%	22.87%	20.41%	15.83%
Percent black		6.20%	36.75%	10.22%	14.25%
Percent Hispanic		7.56%	14.15%	46.09%	29.63%
Percent Asian		1.90%	4.13%	7.56%	19.68%
Urbanity	Suburban	56.43%	55.75%	39.88%	78.09%
	Urban	16.17%	29.28%	56.69%	18.72%
	Rural	27.40%	14.97%	3.43%	3.19%
School size	Small/medium (<1000)	54.66%	53.49%	17.89%	13.62%
	Large (>1001 students)	45.34%	46.51%	82.11%	86.38%
Number of Relationships		4930	1732	1389	400
Number of Respondents		3560	1322	1021	314

Table 2 Relationship Characteristics by Relationship Type and Race

	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>Hispanic</u>	<u>Asian</u>
	Mean or percent	Mean or percent	Mean or percent	Mean or percent
Presence as a couple				
Inter-dating w/ white	3.86	3.46	3.66	3.68
Inter-dating w/non-white	-----	3.37	3.63	3.6
Communication about sex (=yes)	3.57	3.38	3.5	3.5
Intra-dating				
Inter-dating w/whites	47.52%	64.63%	57.24%	46.91%
Inter-dating w/non-white		60.47%	48.14%	35.38%
	52.87%	50%	52.08%	50%



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