

The Downside of the Dating Scene: Gender Differences in the Effect of Romantic
Climate on Academic Outcomes

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INTRODUCTION

School is a fundamental institution in the lives of American children and adolescents (Coleman, 1961). The high school in particular plays an important role in the transition to adulthood for adolescents. On one hand, the school structures educational opportunities for students. High school performance provides a crucial foundation for later life experiences, as the course taking and grades that comprise a student's academic record influence opportunities for years to come (AAUA, 1999). However, schools also serve as an important arena for social experiences. Interaction with peers is crucial in the developmental process, as adolescents begin to orient themselves more to their friends (Erikson, 1968). One potentially important phenomenon in this period is the rise of the importance of opposite sex interaction, and the introduction to the romance culture. Adolescents who date and form romantic relationships may face negative consequences in their educational performance and aspirations. However, the romance culture may not just have consequences for adolescents who date, but rather may influence all students regardless of participation.

Researchers have argued that the pervasive emphasis on heteronormative romantic relationships in adolescence and young adulthood has far-reaching consequences (Holland and Eisenhart, 1990; Ingraham, 1999). In part, this focus on romance may distract adolescents from their educational pursuits. However, it is also possible that this romantic focus has a less obvious influence on adolescents. The formation of romantic relationships in adolescence is associated with a heightened awareness and conformity to normative gender roles. Therefore, the increasing importance of romance in adolescence may encourage greater adherence to stereotypical

gender roles, and this may have differential consequences for the academic well-being of boys and girls. For girls, high levels of academic performance and aspirations may be less consistent with normative femininity, and therefore a strong focus on romance will have greater negative consequences.

This research addresses the role of adolescent romantic culture on academic outcomes of boys and girls. First, I explore how the emphasis on romance at the school level influences individual academic performance and college aspirations. Then, I address whether this romantic climate influences academic outcomes for all adolescents, or only those who form a relationship. Finally, I address whether the consequences of forming a romantic relationship vary depending on the level of the romantic climate in the school. This research builds on the literature on the role of the school context for educational outcomes, but specifically focuses on the school's romantic climate as an important element of the social world of adolescents that has far-reaching consequences for the academic well-being of boys and girls.

DATA AND METHODS

This study uses data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) and the linked Adolescent Health and Academic Achievement (AHAA) transcript component. Add Health is a large, nationally representative school-based survey of American adolescents that began in 1994. The study initiated with over 90,000 7th through 12th grade students in over 130 schools completing the in-school questionnaire in the 1994-1995 school year. From these schools, a sample of over 20,000 students completed the first in-home interview (Wave I) in 1995. In 1996, the Wave I participants who were in grades 7th through 11th were eligible to participate in the Wave

II in-home interviews. All Wave I participants were eligible for the Wave III follow-up conducted in 2001-2002. At Wave III, respondents were asked questions about the transition to adulthood, including education, family, and work experiences. In addition, respondents were asked to participate in the AHAA study by agreeing to release their high school transcripts, which contain detailed information on course taking and performance over the 9th through 12th grades. These data provide considerable information about the social and academic world of adolescents, and provides a unique opportunity to study the interaction of these spheres with a nationally representative sample. The sample used in analyses consists of all adolescents who participated in all three Waves of the Add Health survey and the AHAA study. I restricted the sample to those in grades 9-11 at the Wave I survey in order to assess changes in high school academic indicators between the Waves. This leaves an analytical sample of 5,738 adolescents (Udry, 2003).

This study addresses the effects of school romantic climate on two individual-level outcome variables: overall grade point average (GPA) and college aspirations at Wave II. The focal independent variable is school-level romantic climate, which is captured by two variables: the proportion of students in the school who have a romantic relationship at Wave I, and the school mean level of agreement on a 1-5 scale to a question about how much the respondent would like to form a romantic relationship in the next year. For all models, I include the following individual-level control variables: race/ethnicity, family structure, parent's education, age, PVT score, self-esteem, depression, school disengagement, school attachment, perceived intelligence, parental closeness, marital expectations, and virginity status. In addition, I include school-level

control variables of size, sector, region, urbanicity, and average cumulative GPA. Additional variables included in some models are: whether the individual formed a romantic relationship between the Waves, and individual Wave I levels of GPA and educational aspirations.

I run a set of four analyses for each academic outcome, all separately by gender. The first two models measure the effect of school level variables on GPA and educational aspirations at Wave II, while the final two models measure changes in these outcomes between the Waves by controlling for initial levels of each outcome. Model 1 for each outcome includes all school and individual-level controls to assess the overall effect of school romance on individual Wave II academic outcomes. In Model 2, I add individual romantic relationship formation to assess the effect of school level romantic climate independent of individual participation in dating. The remaining models measure the effect of romantic climate and individual relationship formation on changes in the academic outcomes between the Waves. In Models 3 and 4, I add a cross-level interaction term between individual level romantic relationship formation and each of the two romantic climate variables to address whether the effect of relationship formation varies depending on the school level romantic aspirations or the prevalence of dating at school. All models are run using a two-level modeling strategy in the HLM statistical package (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002) and include weights to adjust for the sampling design (Chantala and Tabor, 1999).

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Preliminary analyses reveal that the school's romantic climate is associated with individual academic outcomes, but that this operates very differently for boys and girls.

The first set of analyses measure the effect of school level romantic climate on overall grade point average and educational aspirations. For boys, romantic aspirations at the school level are positively associated with GPA, while there is a negative association for dating prevalence (although this effect is only marginally significant). Neither of the romantic climate variables is significantly associated with college aspirations for boys. For girls, the school level romantic aspirations are negatively associated with GPA, while dating prevalence is not significant. As with boys, the romantic climate variables are not significantly associated with college aspirations.

The second set of analyses address whether the school's romantic climate has an effect on academic outcomes independent of adolescents' individual dating activities. Therefore, I add the romantic relationship formation variables to each Model 1. Across all models, the findings are exactly the same. This suggests that in schools where students would like to form relationships, boys have higher overall grades and girls have lower overall grades compared to their same sex peers in schools with lower romantic aspirations. Furthermore, these differences are not explained by the individual's own dating participation. However, there does not appear to be an effect on adolescent's educational aspirations, nor does the actual frequency of relationship formation in the school influence either outcome.

The next set of models predict Wave II educational outcomes controlling for Wave I levels of each outcomes, but add a cross-level interaction term between relationship formation and each romantic climate variable to measure differences in the effect of relationship formation depending on the school context. For males, there were no significant effects for either the school level variables or individual level relationship

formation on changes in overall GPA or educational aspirations. For girls, the effect of forming a romantic relationship is associated with declining grades and educational aspirations across each model, however only in the GPA models does this effect vary by school climate. The negative effects of forming a romantic relationship for girls are magnified in schools where students express higher romantic aspirations. However, there is no significant cross-level interaction between romantic relationship formation and dating prevalence in the GPA model, nor between either romantic climate variable in the educational aspirations models.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Overall, these preliminary findings are suggestive that the romantic climate of the school influences academic performance regardless of whether adolescents actually engage in relationship formation. More importantly, these results highlight stark gender differences in the consequences of this romantic climate, with boys generally doing better in schools with a strong romantic focus and girls generally doing worse compared to their same sex peers at schools where forming a relationship is less desirable. For boys, actually dating does not have an effect on changes in academic performance or aspirations. However, girls who form relationship have a significant decline in their overall grades compared to girls who don't date, and this effect is even stronger in schools where relationships are desired. This suggests that dating is not merely a competing time demand for all adolescents, but rather that this social pressure to value relationships particularly distracts girls from academics, or even acts as a socializing agent to discourage girls from educational pursuits.

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