

CHASING A GREASED PIG:
HOW CAN WE GET A HANDLE ON ADOLESCENT DATING AND ROMANTIC
RELATIONSHIPS?

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Abstract

This study uses data from the first wave of the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) as well as the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth – 1997 (NLSY) to investigate the question of whether dating and romance are essentially the same. Our approach is to first compare the proportion who say they are dating (NLSY) to the proportion who say they are romantically involved in the (Add Health). Next, we will use the Add Health to examine the proportion of adolescents reporting romantic involvement who say that they went out alone or with a group. Finally, the analyses investigate the predictors of dating and romantic involvement to provide greater insight into the differing meanings of dating and romance. We find evidence to support the conclusion that dating and romance do not describe equivalent relationship types.

Brown, Feiring, and Furman (1999) note “studying adolescents’ romantic ventures is something like chasing a greased pig” (pg. 9). A lack of language to describe relationships contributes to their elusive nature. In popular accounts of teen romance we hear of adolescents “hooking up” with their “friends with benefits” (Denizet-Lewis 2004). It is likely that adolescents deliberately choose vague language so as not to appear too committed to a person who might reject the relationship, especially when talking to a journalist who might publish what she says.

Despite the lack of standard language, an emerging body of research investigates the social aspects of adolescent relationships using a variety of data sources and questioning approaches. This research shows that over 80 percent of reported adolescent heterosexual relationships take place within romantic relationships (Ford, Sohn, and Lepkowski, 2001) and being in a romantic relationship is a strong predictor of sexual activity (Bearman and Brükner 1999). The characteristics of the adolescent’s partner are also important predictors of contraceptive use. For example, if the sexual partner is also a romantic partner, the couple is more likely to use a condom, especially if the relationship is of longer duration (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2000; Ford et al. 2001). Adolescent romantic experiences also bear on the transition to adulthood. Involvement in a romantic relationship influences marriage expectations (Crissey 2005) and is associated with the choice of marriage or cohabitation in the early twenties (Raley et al. 2004).

Although this new line of research that investigates the social aspects of adolescent relationships is promising, this literature uses the terms “dating” and “romance” interchangeably. For example, Cooksey Mott, and Neubaur (2001) use data from the NLSY 1979 Cohort, which asks the adolescent children of the original respondents about their “dating” experiences, to

investigate race and ethnic differences in friendships, “relationships”, and the timing sexual initiation. Giordano et al. (forthcoming) use data from the Add Health, which asks adolescents about their “romantic relationships,” but sometimes refer to these as “dating” relationships. However, we do not know that “dating” and “romance” are synonymous and the potential differences in meaning are important for the interpretation of results.

This study uses data from the first wave of the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) as well as the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth – 1997 (NLSY) to investigate the question of whether dating and romance are essentially the same. Our approach is to first compare the proportion who say they are dating (NLSY) to the proportion who say they are romantically involved in the (Add Health). Next, we will use the Add Health to examine the proportion of adolescents reporting romantic involvement who say that they went out alone or with a group. If dating and romance are equivalent, we would expect that similar proportions will report dating as will report being in a romantic relationship and that the large majority of adolescents who are romantically involved will have “gone out” with their romantic partner. Finally, the analyses investigate the predictors of dating and romantic involvement to provide greater insight into the differing meanings of dating and romance.

RESULTS

The first and primary goal of this analysis is to compare estimates of dating and romantic involvement. To do so, we use data from the NLSY to measure dating the Add Health to measure romantic involvement. Figure 1 shows the results by age, sex, and race-ethnicity. Looking first at the results for Anglo boys, we see that dating increases much more rapidly than does romantic involvement. Whereas among those age 14, similar proportions date as are romantically involved, but by age 16 – when adolescent boys have increased freedom from

adults and many are driving – more are dating than are romantically involved. Although it takes the assumption that both surveys represent the same populations, it appears that some boys date without being romantically involved.

This is less true for African American boys. At age 16 equal proportions are romantically involved as are dating. This suggests that casual dating is less common among African Americans than Anglos and is consistent with Giorano et al.'s finding that African American romantic relationships are of average longer duration than are Anglos. That is, African American and Anglo boys have similar proportions who are romantically involved, but Anglo boys are more likely than African Americans to date. Finally, US Born Mexican boys are similar to African Americans in that by age 16 the proportion dating is similar to the proportion romantically involved

The pattern of race-ethnic variation for girls is somewhat different from the pattern for boys. Whereas similar proportions of African American and Anglo boys are romantically involved, a lower proportion of African American girls are romantically involved as compared to Anglo girls. However, just as we observed more dating among Anglo compared to African American boys, Anglo girls are more likely than African American girls to have dated in the last year.

There are three basic findings to take away from this part of the analysis. First, “dating” and “romantic involvement” are likely not to be equivalent. We get similar proportions reporting both, but the trajectories by age and the differentials by race vary by which measure we use. Second, for African American and Mexican men, dating appears to be more constrained, or less desired, than is the case for Anglo boys. However, romantic involvement is as common for African American boys as it is for Anglos. Third, similar to race differences in marriage,

African American girls are less likely than Anglo girls to form romantic relationships or to date, while Mexican girls fall somewhere between Anglos and blacks.

Additional analyses will use data from the Add Health to investigate the proportion of romantically involved couples that went out together in a group or along. A final set of analyses will investigate how the predictors of romantic involvement differ from the predictors of dating. Preliminary results are shown in Table 1. The results show that the predictors of dating are generally similar to the predictors of romance, but there are a couple of differences. First, paralleling the results from Figure 1, race-ethnic differences in dating are greater than differences in romantic involvement. Second, driving is a stronger predictor of dating than it is of romantic involvement. Additional analyses will explore other factors that might distinguish the two. These additional factors include popularity, the desire for a relationship, religious participation, as well as marriage expectations.

Table 1. Estimated predictors of romance and dating, Among 10-12 graders, Add Health

	Romantically Involved		Dating	
	Exp(B)	T	Exp(B)	T
Female	1.73	9.95	1.81	10.44
Race-ethnicity (Anglo)				
African American	1.24	2.61	1.06	0.67
Mexican	0.89	-0.96	0.87	-1.04
Other	0.78	-2.65	0.78	-2.44
Age	1.34	9.13	1.34	8.74
Parent's Education (College Graduate)				
Less than H.S.	0.79	-2.10	0.75	-2.49
H.S.	1.23	2.84	1.14	1.85
Some College	1.14	2.07	1.17	2.23
Drove in last week	1.50	6.27	1.60	6.60
Region (Northeast)				
Midwest	0.84	-1.85	0.90	-1.07
West	0.83	-1.72	0.84	-1.59
South	0.96	-0.54	0.93	-0.86

Figure 1. Percentage of adolescents reporting having dated in the last year (NLSY) and Percentage reporting a romantic relationship in the last 18 months (Add Health)

