

**Social Contexts of Romantic and Family Relationships: A Multi-
Disciplinary, Multi-Site Study of Universities, The Military, and Poor
Communities**

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Social Contexts of Romantic and Family Relationships:
A Multi-Disciplinary, Multi-Site Study of Universities, The Military, and Poor Communities

Proposal to the Provost's Common Fund

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Abstract: This proposal employs a multi-method, multi-disciplinary approach to analyze the development of romantic and family relationships of adolescents and young adults. Recognizing that these relationships are shaped directly by the context in which they occur, we propose to compare and contrast relationship formation for those in college, in the military, or in low-income neighborhoods. As members of a multidisciplinary team (representing sociology, economics, psychology, history, biology and public policy), we will employ multiple methods to study both the relevant micro processes (e.g., developmental processes including identity formation within contexts) as well as the macro structures (e.g., the features of social institutions including their historical origins and contemporary supports) that inform these relationships. Financial resources from the Provost Common Fund will allow us to integrate preliminary findings and to carry out needed pilot work to support a competitive P01 Proposal to the National Institutes of Health (NICHD) for summer of 2008.

I. Introduction. Romantic relationships, marriage, and child-bearing patterns among adolescents and young adults have changed dramatically over the past fifty years. Given the earlier onset of puberty and an increase in the age at first marriage, cultural norms that permit and/or encourage out-of-wedlock sexual activity, and technologies such as the internet that facilitate social networking today's adolescents and young adults face an array of options as they negotiate their personal lives. Collectively, their behaviors profoundly impact American society, affecting everything from views on children and family life to resource allocation decisions for education and health care. But the structure, causes, and consequences of relationship behavior among young adults are not well understood. It is unclear how such behaviors emerge, what informs and constrains them, or what implications they might have.

We address these issues by proposing to investigate how adolescent and young adult relationships are formed and maintained in three very different social contexts: the university, the military, and low-income neighborhoods. Enrollment in college, enlistment in military service, and participation in the neighborhood and work world represent the most common settings for post-secondary young adults. Each context by itself is interesting, but their integrated study allows for broader conceptualization and explanation, and will expose aspects of social process and structure that promote or inhibit different behaviors. Our multi-disciplinary study will also interrogate the divergent meanings and interpretations often applied to romantic relationships across context. (Consider, for example, how identical behaviors may be understood depending on the context: university students may be "experimenting" sexually while young, adults in poor communities are engaging in "immoral and self-destructive" behavior.).

We adopt a theoretical framework that views relationship behavior as a function of one's *individual schemas* about relationships and *available resources* that allow for the enactment of particular schema. One's individual schemas, in turn, grow out of cultural-wide schemas and individual developmental histories. Relevant resources for enacting schemas are distributed unequally across social and physical space. The simultaneous study of social process and social structure requires the multi-disciplinary expertise of group. Thus, through a multi-disciplinary, multi-method comparative analysis of young adults in these three contexts, we will develop a more comprehensive understanding of relationships and how those relationships are informed and constrained by personal, social, and economic resources.

Three orienting questions that address the structure, antecedents, and consequences of romantic relationships shape our approach. First, are descriptive questions that focus on the definition and measurement of adolescent and young adult relationship behavior and schemas. We are interested, here, in describing what constitutes a "romantic relationship" or a "hook-up", and the frequency and intensity of these relationships. The second group of questions focus on understanding the antecedents of these phenomena. Here, we are particularly interested in the historical and institutional contexts in which union and family formation occur and the developmental antecedents of these relationships. The third set of questions focus on the effects of these behaviors and how these effects vary across individuals and social contexts. Here, we focus on how relationships directly inform future family formation decisions, and the consequences of these relationships for ego and identity development.

II. Specific Aims. We seek Provost Common Fund (PCF) support to complete the necessary prior studies and ground work required to submit a competitive P01 Proposal¹ on social context and romantic/family relationships to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. We aim for a submission date in the summer of 2008. Our preliminary estimates of the direct costs for the P01 exceed two million dollars over a four-year period.

Because of the complexity of relationship phenomena, we believe it is necessary to include three levels of analysis in our P01, with evidence from ethnographic, survey, and administrative data for each of the three contexts. Some of this evidence already exists, but we propose to use PCF support to carry out the necessary pilot studies to ensure that we have sufficient preliminary data at each of these levels.

For our proposal to be competitive we will need to complete the following specific tasks:

¹ "A Program Project Grant (P01) is an assistance award for the support of a broadly based multidisciplinary research program that has a well-defined central research focus or objective."

<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/dert/programs/p01.htm>

1. Develop an integrative theory to guide each component of the project.
2. Identify the key hypotheses of the integrative theory, and design the research project so that these hypotheses can be tested.
3. Carry out preliminary studies that will complement existing ethnographic, survey, and administrative data.

III. Background and Progress to Date. The applicants are 2006-2007 SSRI Faculty Fellows. We come from a variety of disciplines and departments, including biology, psychology, sociology, public policy, history, and economics. This proposal reflects our work to date, and provides evidence that our diverse team can meet our goals. Indeed, we have already developed—through our weekly, three-hour SSRI meetings—some common understandings as well as a common language that allow us communicate, collaborate and integrate the unique perspectives of our disciplines. Below, we describe a meta-theory that will provide a common theoretical frame for our work.

While we have divided ourselves into sub-groups for project development, most of us will be co-investigators on more than segment of the overall project. Further, we all see exciting opportunities at the intersections of these projects. That is, while each of the subprojects has intrinsic merit it is the ability to compare adolescent romantic relationships across contexts that makes this project truly unique.

IV. Our Overarching Theoretical Perspective. We adopt a meta-theory emerging from an ongoing NICHD Contract, “New Models of Family Change and Variation” (PI, S. Philip Morgan but including over 75 investigators and consultants). The Contract goal is to produce a model that is consistent with the key insights about human behavior across the biological and social sciences. Our group adopts this perspective not as a “finished product” but as a “work in progress” to which we can contribute.

Very briefly, the *Theory of Conjunctural Action* (TCA) has six key assumptions:

1. All stimuli and experience are filtered by an individual’s mental “maps,” “frames,” or “schema” (hereafter schema).
2. Schemas are shared among group members. The sum of shared schemas comprise “virtual structure” (similar to “nonmaterial culture”) that allows for effective interaction and joint action.
3. This virtual structure is embedded in material structure, e.g., artifacts, tools, social institutions. Virtual structure and its material form are mutually reinforcing, one suggesting behavior, the other enabling it.
4. Individuals have schemas about who they are and how persons should behave. Thus, identity is crucial to the TCA theory. Identity brings order to the individual life course by providing internal clues regarding the appropriate schema for this person at this moment. Identity also signals to others how a person will behave and reason. Identity is formed and altered by developmental and life course processes.
5. Factors motivating behavior are predominately aspects of the contemporary context,—that is a *conjuncture*. Conjunctures are the settings for behavior. Persons “read” situations by asking, “What is this an example of?” and then they adopt appropriate schemas to guide their behavior. The heart of this approach is the process of *construal*, the ways in which we process the range of stimuli present at any conjuncture to arrive at a schema that enables behavior.
6. Events are critical in both maintaining and altering patterned behavior (social structure). Actions consistent with existing schemas, and normative uses of material structure, reify and sediment structure. New or innovative behavior, if reproduced by others, changes patterned behavior. Thus, humans change their social contexts by “living in them.”

These six claims allow us to understand social structure, which we can also describe as patterned human behavior. But our goal is to understand not just structure, but structural change. How does this occur? Change can originate through the agency of individuals. When confronted with ambiguous situations, individuals routinely invoke novel schemas to guide or justify behavior. Their behavior, in turn, can be modeled by others. This process allows micro-behaviors to alter macro structures (i.e., virtual or material

structure). Change can also be initiated by the diffusion of schemas from new contacts or through the media, or the transposition of a schema from one domain to another. These new ways of thinking and perceiving can spread rapidly in a population.

New material resources or social institutions can also foster change by making certain schemas plausible guides to behavior. For example, one may “know” the schema that links family limitation to greater wealth/security. But if one lacks the means to control fertility, this schema is not invoked. Finally, change can occur because the social environment changes in such a way that stimuli that tend to invoke a particular schema become more/less common. That is, the relative frequency of different conjunctures can change. For example, advertising seeks to make certain clues/stimuli ubiquitous in order to motivate particular behaviors. (For greater detail on TCA see: Johnson-Hanks et.al. 2006; For applications, see: Morgan and Welsh 2006.)

Again, we employ the theory of conjunctural action to understand changing patterns of romantic and family relationships among adolescents and young adults in three distinct contexts: the university, the military, low income neighborhoods. We hope to understand the dynamics of the relationship formation both within and across these different contexts.

V. The Specific Projects.

i) Universities (*Investigators: Arcidiacono & Shanahan*). This sub-project explores the cultural logic of romantic relationships on college campuses. We seek to understand what college men and women are doing, thinking, and feeling about sex, dating, courtship, marriage and family. Of particular interest are ‘hookup’ culture and the schemas shaping uncommitted sexual encounters on college campuses.

Since the late 1990s the popular press has been increasingly intrigued with the adolescent ‘hookups’—one time encounters that include anything from kissing to intercourse with no expectation of further relationship. While casual sex has always been a feature of the college experience for some, casual sex is increasingly described as the normative form of romantic relationship on campuses (Paul, McManus and Hayes 2000). According to a report produced for the Independent Women’s Forum in 2001, 91% of college women surveyed on campuses across the country described their own campus as having a salient “hook-up” culture. Other surveys find that 70% of college students engaged in intercourse with a casual sex partner during the previous year (Grello et.al. 2006). Rates are even higher when oral sex and petting below the waist are part of the operational definition of hooking up (Paul and Hayes 2002).

And while there are an increasing number of single site studies of casual sex and a smattering of new work looking at the psychological affects of hooking up on individuals, there has been very little work exploring its underlying cultural logic. We aim to fill this gap. Three broad themes guide our inquiry. First, we will uncover the competing schemas that college students employ to understand both the phenomenon at large and their particular participation or non-participation. Second, we explore how participation in the hook up culture affects expectations about career, marriage and family. Put differently, how does participation affect an individual’s other schema? Third, is an interest in how the material environment (resources) affects the salience of different schemas that guide romantic relationships across various campuses.

More specifically, these themes are explored through three sets of research questions. First, is the issue of prevalence (and prevalence of what). We begin by asking what constitutes ‘hooking up’ and then turn to the issue of how often. What are the characteristics of students who are more likely to participate and what are the characteristics of campuses that have higher rates of overall participation?

Second, is the question of underlying motivations for and understanding of hooking-up itself. One focus is on male/female preferences. We ask: do the underlying objectives of the encounter vary by gender? Most work on casual sex highlights variations in male and female behaviors. But very little work explores the gendered rationales prior and interpretations after the encounter. How do men and women differentially interpret the hookup ritual? Or do men and women deploy different schemas?

Third is the question of effects. While there is significant research on the relationship between early sexual experience and self esteem or sexual experience and aspirations there is far less work on how participation in hook up culture affects ideas about marriage and family in both the short and long term.

Furthermore there is really no work to date that examines the effect of hook up culture on the career and family aspirations for both participants and non-participants in the hook-up culture. This is our focus.

Toward this end, over the next 18 months, we will launch a multi-method pilot study at Duke and North Carolina Central Universities. The first component will be a survey of student behavior and attitudes toward romantic relationships and sexuality. We hope to survey 500 students in each setting. The second will be a series of in depth interviews with participants in a daily diary study of romantic and sexual encounters. We hope to include 25 students from each school in this part of the study.

ii) The Military (*Investigators: Hill, Kornbluh & Morgan*). How different is romantic behavior, union formation and fertility among soldiers and veterans of the U.S. military? We will focus on the experiences of both women and men as soldiers and veterans, and as the partners of soldiers. As we consider those in the military context, we will assess the impact of the military as a social institution (providing resources) and as a source of schemas. We will focus on the role of the “military welfare state,” the broad array of benefits available to soldiers and veterans (but not workers in other contexts).

We have special interest in the relationship and family schema of women soldiers and veterans. The U.S. military was dominated for two centuries by the ideal of the male citizen-soldier. The obligation for men to take up arms on behalf of the state, and the exclusion of women from this obligation, were central aspects of the differential citizenship men and women through at least the late twentieth century. Supplementing rather than replacing the citizen-soldier ideal has been the “family-soldier”, whose military service became the basis for economic security and social membership for himself, his wife, and his dependent children. This second model took hold powerfully after World War Two, when the G.I. Bill enabled thousands of male veterans to pursue postsecondary education, and to own homes.

Both ideals, that of the citizen-soldier and that of the family-soldier, have been transformed since the rise of the volunteer armed forces in the 1970s. First, soldiering is now a voluntary, rather than mandatory, activity for male citizens. Thus the citizen-soldier is no longer the everyman fulfilling his civic obligation, but an exceptional citizen, who earns benefits by taking special risks on behalf of the state. The rise of the all-volunteer military force produced a greater emphasis on the recruitment of soldiers. One strategy for recruitment was to increase the array of family benefits offered to soldiers. Another was to open the doors of military service more broadly to women. A third was to focus recruitment efforts on working-class communities, African Americans, and Latinos/as.

As in the study of the university context, we address three sets of questions: What are the patterns we can observe in relationship and child-bearing behavior among U.S. soldiers and their partners? For example, is the “hook-up” culture prevalent among active-duty military personnel?

Second are questions related to the motivations underlying romantic behavior and child-bearing in the military context. Do the social welfare policies of the military promote earlier marriage and more stable unions (compared to non-military contexts)? Do the schemas employed in the military context differ from those used by young adults in other settings? Can these differences be attributed to “selection into the military” or to the experience of contemporary soldiering? Again we have interest in male/female differences: How do the underlying objectives of romantic encounters vary by sex?

Third are questions about effects: How do romantic experiences affect subsequent life-course development for soldiers and their partners? Are the patterns in the military context different than those observed in other contexts?

To address these questions, we will review existing national data sources that include military samples (e.g., the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the Ad Health data). This work will take up much of our time in the next academic year; several existing data sets contain military sub-samples, and scholars have barely begun to explore them (see for instance, Lundquist and Smith 2005). At the same time, we will explore the historical and institutional framework within which late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century soldiers have made their decisions about romance, family, and children. We will do this by reviewing published government reports and archival sources on the creation and expansion of the military’s services for families, and by gathering historical data on women’s changing role in the U.S. armed forces. Following these initial forays, we will pilot both survey and small-group qualitative research with current, active-duty military personnel headquartered at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, North

Carolina and at West Point or another postsecondary institution linked to the U.S. military. We will pursue national funding to continue our investigations with larger groups of soldiers at more diverse sites.

iii) Poor Communities (*Investigators: Burton, Gibson-Davis, & Dodge*). The overall goal of our third sub-project is to examine the ways in which adolescents growing up in poor communities learn and develop schemas about romantic relationships, marriage, sexual intercourse, and child-bearing. To inform the development of conceptual and methodological strategies for a later and larger project that will include longitudinal analysis of relationship formation, we propose to conduct a pilot ethnography study of 12 African-American tenth graders. All of the participants will be low-income (as evidenced by their participation in the free and reduced-price lunch program) and will be drawn from various Durham neighborhoods. The ethnography will determine feasibility and potential value of the larger project, which aims to: (1) identify features of their relationship schemas; (2) explore the extent to which their schemas are influenced by peer and family contexts; and (3) assess how those schemas differ for boys and girls growing up in households with and without histories of domestic violence, sexual abuse, or child abuse and neglect. We will follow the sample for 6 to 8 months, interviewing participants about their perceptions of romantic relationships and observing them with their peers and families in discussions about relationships. We will use these pilot data, along with secondary analyses of other ethnographic and survey data sets, to develop the best approaches for establishing baseline data on relationship schemas for early adolescents, and for exploring how these early schemas change over time and influence future life choices about family formation and marriage.

Our need to conduct a pilot ethnography in preparation for writing the larger proposal is based on our assessment of the current literature on the topic. At a time when adolescents may be experiencing a wider range of options for romantic relationships, more than at any other time in history, the existing empirical literature provides little insight on how teens think about romantic relationships and act upon their perceptions (Crouter & Booth, 2006). Knowledge concerning romantic schemas among low-income and ethnic/racial minorities is particularly limited. To a large degree, the prevailing empirical literature, as well as popular media portrayals, support gender and racial stereotypes about low-income teens, profiling urban adolescent boys as hyper-masculine “men” who repress tender feelings and emotions and see a romantic relationship with a girl as an opportunity to “score” (Anderson, 1990; Giordano, Manning, and Longmore, 2006; Stevenson, 2003). Girls, in contrast, are presented as dreamers, gamers, and prey who build “man-catching” skills early in life. In situations where a history of household violence is indicated, profound consequences are noted in the intimate relationships and sexual behaviors of teens as they move to adulthood (Loeb et al., 2002). Consequences for men and women include being perpetrators and victims in relationship violence, risky sexual behavior with multiple partners, and the inability to form close intimate relationships.

Through our pilot ethnographic study, we aim to gather more insight about the prevalence, nature, and source of relationship schemas of young low-income adolescents with an eye toward which factors shape them over time. Do low-income boys and girls in early adolescence have romantic relationship schemas? Do relationship schemas among poor adolescents fit the stereotypes showcased in the popular media and empirical literature? What role do peers, and family, and violence play in shaping these schemas? In addition we hope to garner evidence about effects—that is, how might these schemas influence the future romantic relationships for these teens?

VI. Conclusion. The pilot studies conducted by each subgroup will yield new insights into how schemas about romantic relationships, marriage, sex, and child-bearing emerge and change. Considered individually, each project represents an important contribution to the extant literature, be it on gender relations on university campuses, women in the military or poor families. Taken together and linked through the development of a single theoretical framework about social change, this multi-disciplinary, multi-method comparative approach will provide a new, comprehensive understanding of the romantic relationships among adolescents and young adults and of their broader social implications.

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