Extended Abstract

**Trends Across Adolescence and Sociodemographic Correlates
of the Age Gap Between Romantic Partners[1]**

**Christine Flanigan
Department of Sociology, Bowling Green State University**

Past research has identified relationships between older males and younger females as a marker for risky sexual activity. For example, studies have generally found that that sex more likely to occur in a relationship as the age gap between male and female partners increases, and this is particularly true for younger teens. Some studies, particularly those who use a relatively large age gap to define the male partner as "older," also find that those in older male-younger female relationships are less likely to use condoms/contraception (Abma, Driscoll & Moore, 1998; Darroch, Landry, & Oslak, 1999; DiClemente, et al., 2002; Ford, Sohn & Lepkowski, 2001; Ku, Sonenstein, & Pleck, 1993; Manlove, Ryan, & Franzetta, 2003; Manlove, Terry-Humen, and Ikramullah, 2006; Sturdevant, et al., 2001; Weisman, et al., 1991). Age gaps between partners are also associated with other negative sexual health outcomes. Having an older partner is associated with an increased risk of diagnosis with a sexually transmitted disease for females (Boyer, et al., 1999; Crosby et al., 2002a; Ford & Lepkowski, 2004; Sturdevant, et al., 2001), although age gaps between partners are not associated with re-infection (Kissinger, et al., 2002). As the age gap between teen girls and their first sex partners increases, they are more likely to rate their first sexual experience as relatively unwanted (Moore, Driscoll, & Lindberg, 1998).

Given these findings, it is not surprising that preventing adolescent females from dating older males is seen as a potential prevention strategy by teen pregnancy and STI prevention advocates. As such, it is important to study predictors of choosing an older male/younger female relationship, both to identify groups most in need of intervention on this subject, and to address the issue of a potential spurious association between the older partner relationship and negative reproductive health outcomes. However, very few studies have actually looked at predictors of having an older partner. Abma and Sonenstein's (2001) analysis of NSFG and NSAM data found few differences at the bivariate level between those with an older partner and those with same-aged partner using typical demographic factors such as family structure, mother's education, urbanicity, or region of the country. Racial/ethnic differences in age gaps between partners found in the literature tend to be inconsistent and weak. Abma and Sonenstein did find that age was found to be a significant predictor of age gaps between partners: for both genders, younger age at first sex was associated with having older partners, which is consistent with findings from two multivariate analyses (Kaestle, et al., 2002; Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2000), although inconsistent with a third that found no age difference (Ford, Sohn, & Lepkowski, 2003). For males, having a younger partner at most recent sex was more likely among older teens, and was more likely at most recent sex than at first sex.

This paper attempts to add to the literature on correlates of older partner choice. A specific focus of this analysis is on changes over relationships in the age gap between partners, an issue that has largely been ignored by research to date, which typically analyzes the age gap in a single relationship. One could imagine that perhaps there is no real change over time, with those choosing older, or same-age, partners at one point in time continuing to do so at a later time period. On the other hand, there does seem to be some evidence from the cross-sectional studies discussed above that the likelihood of there being large age differences between partners does vary over time, although the direction of the effect is unclear.

Data and Methods

This study uses the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), waves 1 through 3. Add Health is a nationally representative sample of youth in the United States who were in grades 7-12 during the 1994-95 school year. Most respondents in the in-home sample were interviewed three times, in 1995, 1996, and 2001-2. The current sample consists of 7,057 respondents, male and female, who reported a romantic relationship at either wave 1 or 2 (the sample size will increase when I incorporate the wave 3 data; I also plan on using multiple imputation to account for relationships missing partner's age and/or start dates). These respondents contribute (so far) 12,333 relationships.

Dependent Variables: The age gap between partners is calculated by subtracting the female partner's age from the male's, using both partners' ages when the relationship began, as reported by the respondent. Thus, positive values indicate an older male partner. The summary measure of age gap patterns across adolescence consists (so far) of three categories: never in older male/younger female relationships, always in older male/younger female relationships, and variation across relationships. Here, and older male partner is defined as being at least 3 years older.

Independent Variables: I plan on including as independent variables the respondent's gender, race/ethnicity, urbanicity, family structure at wave 1, and mother's education. For the growth curve model, age is incorporated as the unit of growth, but it will be included as an independent variable for the analysis of relationship patterns.

Analytic Strategy: For the 3-category analysis of relationship patterns, I will use multinomial logistic regression to predict never or sometimes being in an older male/younger female relationship, as opposed to never being in such as relationship during adolescence. In addition, I will use a multilevel, mixed-effect model to show change in the average age gap between partners across adolescence. Such growth curve models allow for the independent variables to be associated with differences both in the

average age gap and the magnitude of the change over time (i.e., the intercept and slope of the growth curve).

Preliminary Results

Preliminary growth curve analyses indicate that in the average dating relationship, the male is older than the female by about 11 months. Furthermore, the gap grows by about 5 weeks for every year the respondent ages. In a model that includes independent variables, all other racial/ethnic groups have smaller age gaps than do non-Hispanic White adolescents in early adolescence, but also experience greater increases over the adolescent period. The same pattern (smaller gaps in early adolescence with greater increases over time) is seen among other family forms as compared to two biological parent families, among urban and rural teens as compared to suburban teens, and in particular among female teens as compared to male teens – the average age gap increases per year for females approximately 6 months more than it increases for males. (I will test for nonlinearities in the change over time once my coding is complete, and I may also test interactions between gender and the other independent variables.)

In terms of the summary measure of age gap patterns across adolescence, the majority of adolescents (76%) are never involved in an older male/younger female relationships, while about 1 in 8 teens are always in older male/younger female relationships (12%), and another 1 in 8 teens experience variation across relationships (12%). Initial analyses indicate that females have higher odds than males to consistently be in age gap relationships, as do Hispanics and non-Hispanic Blacks compared to non-Hispanic Whites Likewise, those from single mother and "other" family structures have higher odds of always being in older male/younger female relationships as compared to teens from two biological parent families. Both urban and rural youth have higher odds than do suburban youth of consistently being in relationships where there is an age gap.