The Ecology of Relationships:
The Effect of Meeting Patterns on Cohabiting Couples' Relationship Progression

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Abstract

While much research on union formation emphasizes the importance of marriage 'markets,' to date relatively little is known about whether some locales are more or less productive sites for meeting romantic partners. Yet where individuals meet romantic partners may have consequences for subsequent relationship development, shaping not only the likelihood of pursing the relationship, but also its composition, tempo, and the extent of familial/social support for the union. In this paper, we use in-depth qualitative interviews to examine where and how 62 cohabiting couples (124 individuals) report meeting their romantic partners, whether this differentiates relationship progression and respondents' perceptions of support for their relationship, and how this differs by social class (measured via educational attainment). Important distinctions are observed between tempo to shared living, sentiments regarding perceptions of the suitableness of the meeting sight, and the level of homogamy on important dimensions of relationship stability.

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Historically the purview of parents and community, over the 150 or so years young adults have increasingly taken on themselves the right to select romantic partners and arrange coresidential relationships (Coontz 2005; Fass 1977). As the power to initiate relationships devolved to men, who could use their expendable income to "purchase" a woman's companionship (Bailey 1988; Fass 1977; Rothman 1984), courtship increasingly moved out of the private sphere of the home and community, and into more anonymous, if public, spaces. While parents and relatives may continue to play important roles in selection of romantic partners, as of the early 21st century they no longer serve as the main gatekeepers. In fact, the locations where young adults can meet potential mates have multiplied dramatically, as more live independent of parents, pursue advanced education, and (for women) enter the paid labor force (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1989; Rosenfield, 2006; Sassler, forthcoming). New technologies have also provided young adults with new ways to meet prospective mates. Internet dating, for example, was unavailable just two decades ago; it is now a lucrative industry.[1]

The loosening of parental and communal control over the mate selection process may have important consequences for the development, quality, and stability of intimate relationships. Over the past four decades, levels of relationship stability have declined dramatically. Although divorce rates have declined somewhat in recent years, levels of marital disruption remain quite high (Department of Health and Human Services 2002), particularly for those with less than a college degree. Including the dissolution of other coresidential unions, such as cohabitation, highlights the amount of relationship flux

experienced by Americans (Schoen and Weinick 1993), leading some social commentators to label this as a uniquely American pattern (Cherlin 2009). In part this instability may be due to the increasing heterogamy of American's partnering practices. American relationships are now more likely to be racially and religiously heterogamous (Joyner and Kao 2005; Lehrer 1998), though educational homagamy has actually increased in recent decades (Schwartz and Mare, 2005). The weakening parental social control over mate selection may play a part in contemporary relationship instability. In other words, where partners meet may reflect, as well as contribute to, the likelihood that the union will be successful, or at least socially supported and sanctioned.

This paper explores where romantically involved couples report meeting their partners, and how they describe the development of their relationship. In particular, we examine the impact of where and how couples met, and see to determine how meeting locale sets the stage for subsequent relationship progression and development. Our sample consists of 62 cohabiting couples, with half of the sample consisting of couples where both partners generally have at least a college degree, and the other half made up of those who have some high school or have taken some college classes but have not completed their degree at the time of being interviewed. This enables us to focus on the role of social class in meeting locale and relationship progression. Our data are drawn from in-depth interviews with both members of the couple (n = 124 individuals), which have been transcribed verbatim and coded along key relationship dimensions (e.g., where met). The preliminary results reveal several main meeting sites where most couples meet, some of which are embedded in personal social networks, while others are more individualistic, anomic, or isolated, characterized by little familial oversight. Here, we

focus on the impact of different meeting locales, and whether they are embedded in personal social networks or not, expedites or delays the development of romantic relationships and their transitions into shared living.

To date relatively little is known about where people "shop for" and find prospective partners, which sites are more productive or result in better matches, or how they affect the tempo of relationship progression. What limited research exists on where people meet significant others has tended to focus on the impact of that location on assortative mating, or the likelihood that couples will be homogamous or heterogamous (Kalmijn and Flap 2001; Kalmijn 1991; Qian 1998). Those who study cohabitation, on the other hand, pay little attention to where couples meet, concentrating instead on whether such relationships progress into marriage or dissolve (Brown 2000; Manning and Smock 1995; Sassler and McNally 2003). To date, research on relationship progression prior to entering into coresidential relationships is scant, largely due to data limitations. Some recent qualitative work has attempted to rectify this omission, focusing on the pace of relationship development among cohabiting couples (Sassler 2004), or the difficulty in assessing when such living arrangements begin (Manning and Smock 2005). Nonetheless, the importance of place, particularly where or how couples meet, has received scant attention.

Although research on meeting places and subsequent relationship tempo is sparse, a substantial body of research focuses on how "marriage markets" operate to affect union formation (e.g., Kalmijn and Flap 2001; Lichter, LeClere, and McLaughlin 1991; Trent and South 2003). Opportunities to interact with eligible partners are not randomly distributed, as social contexts shape the networks from which people choose their mates

(Blau and Schwartz 1984; Kalmijn and Flap 2001; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels 1994). While preferences clearly matter, they are conditioned by restraints; individuals may desire that romantic partners be highly educated, with solid opportunities for career advancement, but the ability to realize that preference will be greatly enhanced by attending an institution of higher education. Even though young single men and women prefer partners who do not already have children (South 1993), their ability to find such a mate is highly constrained by the age of eligible prospectives and their prior relationships (Mincy 2002; Goldscheider and Sassler 2004). Individuals from higher social classes appear to have more partners to choose from due in part to their more diverse and cohesive social networks (Kadushin 2002). However, because they often meet their mates in school or at work, their parings are generally fairly homogamous (Kalmijn and Flap 2001). In contrast, the working class is more likely to meet through family, which Kalmijn and Flap (2001) find in their study of married and cohabiting couples in the Netherlands often results in less homogamous pairings.

Individuals' likelihood of pursuing relationships, and the pace with which they progress, may also be shaped by the type of network in which the initial meeting occurs. While research indicates that weak ties are most beneficial to those searching for employment (Granovetter 1973), strong ties between network actors may facilitate the development of more intimate and trusting bonds (Coleman 1988). Nonetheless, some research shows that weak ties may be important mechanisms moderating trust for strangers (Macy and Skvoretz 1998). Some meeting places, such as through friends or family, shared activities (such as worship groups), or work/school may be characterized by relatively stronger networks since they already assume at least some shared

relationships and characteristics. Relationships formed in such locations may be more homogamous, drawn from others with shared attributes – religion, or educational aspirations. Inhabiting similar social networks may also inhibit individuals from engaging in behavior that might be deemed by the social group as unacceptable, particularly if social networks can control membership (and expulsion). While shared networks may therefore raise levels of trust, they may affect the pace of relationship progression by either facilitating its development, or tempering its advancement.

Locations that are less constrained by accepted group or social norms, however, may encourage the formation of rather different types of relationships. For one thing, they are more likely to be frequented by individuals from more varied backgrounds, who may not be in pursuit of shared objectives. Furthermore, they are less constrained by concern with violating social norms, and may therefore enable (if not encourage) "bad behavior." Bars, for example, gather individuals in pursuit of alcoholic beverages, rather than shared values or aspirations; they are therefore likely to be characterized by relatively weaker social ties (the theme song from "Cheers" notwithstanding). Meeting on the internet also presents individuals with opportunities to engage in behaviors they might avoid if they were surrounded by others who knew them. Nonetheless, internet meetings have been referred to as paradoxical. Although meeting on the internet generally take place between individuals with weak or nonexistent prior social ties and involves relatively low social cost, the lack of a shared network to discuss leads to rapid, intense self-disclosure among those whose partners pass through a series of screening processes (Ben-Ze'eve 2004; Couch and Liamputtong 2008).

Few researchers have examined the ways that individuals meet their mates. Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994), for example, found that slightly over half of 319 cohabitors studied met through family or friends, 28% through school or work, 12% at a bar, and the rest in community settings. What research does examine the relationship between meeting place and subsequent research development finds that setting definitely impacts relationship pace, though the story is somewhat complicated. Sassler, Hartman, and Addo (2009), for example, find in a study of 487 low-income couples and 121 low-income individuals that those who met at work, school, or a house of worship moved fairly slowly relative to those who meet through family/friends or at a bar/club. Laumann et al. (1994), too, in their examination of couples' time to first sex find that those who met at bar or though family or friends are most likely to have sex within the first month of their relationships. Counter to the idea that the anonymity of the internet may foster greater intimacy (Ben-Ze'eve 2004), Sassler et al (2009) find that those couples who meet through singles groups or internet dating sites often delay sex longer than those who meet through family or friends. That couples who meet in locations traditionally thought of as mating markets (bars and the internet) pace their relationships in such different ways is interesting. Individuals often set off to meet others in specific social locations. For example, bars or clubs, particularly for men, are often thought of as good places to meet members of the opposite sex (DeLamater 1981; Gladue and Delaney 1990). Some speculate that internet daters are more direct and open with one another, which fosters quicker intimacy (Ben-Ze'eve 2004). Nonetheless, whether or how this intimacy extends beyond the virtual realm remains unclear.

In this paper, we explore the pace of relationship progression among working and middle class heterosexual cohabitors. In particular, we examine the impact of where and how couples meet on the pace of their developing relationships, focusing on the duration from meeting to first sex and from meeting to moving in to a shared residence (living together). The characteristics of these unions, such as whether they are racially or educationally heterogamous, are also assessed. We focus on five meeting settings: through family or friends; at work or school; in the community, often through shared activities (such as a sports league, theater group, or church); at a bar or party; or via the internet. We examine how cohabitors discuss the pace of the relationships, whether they indicate that where or how they met influenced their relationships in any meaningful ways, and variations in the speed of relationship progression across different meeting sites. Our analysis enables us to explore whether denser social networks facilitate more rapid relationship progression or if weak ties or greater anonymity speeds the advancement of romantic attachments.

Our preliminary results reveal that the largest number of cohabitors report meeting at school or work (n = 17), followed by those who were introduced via family or friends (n=16) or who met in the community (n=14). Though the number is small in absolute terms, the 7 cohabiting couples who met via the internet represent over 10 percent of the sample. The remaining 8 couples met in a more conventional location for meeting a mate--- in a bar.

Method

Qualitative methods are the best way to explore couples' lived experiences and the meaning they attribute to them (Altheide and Johnson 1998; Berg 1998; Charmaz

1983). These 62 couples (124 individuals) were interviewed as part of a larger project on young adults' occupational and educational goals, relationships, and future plans. For this project, data is utilized from 31 working class and 31 middle class couples residing in the Columbus metropolitan area.

The couples were recruited in different ways based upon their desired social class characteristics. Working class couples were recruited primarily from fliers posted at a local community college. Despite this, less than half of these individuals are attending school and, of them, very few are attending full time and all but one is also working. Middle class couples were recruited primarily through fliers posted in gourmet food stores, community coffee shops, and a posting on Craig's List, an online community bulletin board. Online recruitment results in a higher income, more educated sample (Hamilton and Bowers 2006), but in this instance (where middle class participants were the desired respondents) it was an effective way of reaching the target group. In order to be eligible for the interviews, couples had to be in the prime family formation years of 18-35. All couples lived together for at least three months prior to their interviews to ensure that the least stable group of cohabitors is not included in the sample (Bracher and Santow 1998).

Couples were purposefully selected for the study (Berg 1989) based upon their social class characteristics. Because income may not be the best measure for defining social class among a relatively young group of couples, education was used as the primary screening mechanism for the working and middle classes. Among the working class, while all couples earned at least $18,000 per year, the vast majority of couples were those in which each had less than a college degree. Four working class individuals did

have a bachelor's degree. However, they were placed among the working class because their partners did not and each was working in a job that did not require a degree (e.g., telemarketer). If both partners had bachelor's degrees, couples were placed in the middle class. Four additional couples were included in the middle class in which one partner had a degree while the other did not. In these cases, the non-degreed partners were working as successful small business owners, were about to complete their 4-year degrees, or had just left their (middle class) parents' home.

Sample descriptives are presented in Table 1. The mean couple-level income among the middle class sample is $67,672 and $38,036 for the working class. The modal level of education among working class couples was some college for each partner (n=21), and among middle class couples the mode is a bachelor's degree for each partner (n=14). Middle class couples were also slightly older than working class couples.

[Table 1 about Here]

Analytic Approach

Individual interviews lasted between one and three hours. In order to ensure complete confidentiality, each partner was interviewed at the same time but in separate rooms, and participants' names and identifying characteristics were changed in the transcripts. Coding schemes determined both from past research (deductively) and emerging from repeated readings of the transcripts (inductively). Following open coding to generate initial themes (such as "meeting location" or "feelings about tempo",) segments of narratives were classified into sub-categories (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The categories formed were constructed at the couple-level, based on both partners' responses; these were used to generate a qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon

2005; Sandelowski 2000). In the future, Atlas TI will be used to facilitate axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Results

Couples in this study met in a wide variety of locations. The majority of couples met at work or school (n = 17), through family or friends (n = 16) or in the community (n = 14), generally through participating in a shared group or activity. Sights generally thought of as "pick-up" locations, such as at a bar/club (n = 8) or on the internet (n = 7) were not utilized nearly as frequently by our participants. The vast majority of these couples formed their relationships through shared networks or interests. The largest social class differences were seen at those meeting locations that featured the weakest social ties: middle class couples were much more likely than other couples to meet at bars, and working class couples were much more likely to meet on the internet. Interestingly, cohabitors with some of the weakest ties (those who met on the internet) moved in together most rapidly---within an average of 7.43 months, though much of this might be attributed to the fact that individuals often lived in different states when they met, and moving to the same state, from a financial standpoint, was difficult without sharing living quarters. As might be expected, others who met through very loose ties (at bars) moved in together most slowly (an average of 16.06 months from dating to cohabitation), with those who had somewhat stronger ties moving in together more rapidly (an average of 13.6 months for those who met through work or school, 13.36 months who met through family or friends, and 12.38 months for those who met through shared community activities or clubs).

Next Steps

Subsequent work will examine the ways couples discuss their initial meetings, the timing of couples' progressions from dating to having sex and moving in together, how cohabitors from different categories describe the pace of their relationships, whether they would repeat such a process again if they had the choice.

Table 1: Characteristics of Working Class and Middle Class Couples

Variables	Measures	Working Class	Middle Class
Number		31	31
Age	Mean Age: Men (years)	26.3	28.3
	Mean Age: Women (years)	24.4	25.2
Relative Age	Man > 4 years older	6	11
	Woman > 4 years older	2	0
	Both within 4 years	23	19
Educational Attainment	Both high school or less	1	0
	One ≤ HS, one some college	5	0
	Both some college	21	0
	One HS, one BA	1	0
	One Some college, one BA	3	4
	Both BA	0	14
	One BA, One MA+	0	10
	Both MA+	0	3
Relative Schooling	Man has more education	7	6
	Woman has more education	8	8
	Equal levels of schooling	15	17
Race	Both White	14	24
	Both Hispanic	1	1
	Both Black	4	2
	Mixed-race couple	12	4
Couple-Level Income	Mean couple income	$38,036	$67,672
	Earnings Ratio: Female/Male	45%	70%
Relative Earnings	Man makes more	13	14
	Woman makes more	6	3
	Each partner earns within 40-60% of the income	12	14
Marital Status	Both never married	25	26
	One never married, one previously married	6	5

Variables	Measures	Working Class	Middle Class
Parental Status	Both no children	17	27
	Both share children	5	2
	Man has children (not woman)	6	2
	Woman has children (not man)	2	0
	Each has a child from a prior relationship	1	0
Duration to Cohabitation	0 – 6 months	15	7
	7 – 11 months	7	6
	12 – 23 months	6	11
	24 – 35 months	2	6
	3 years or more	1	1
Duration of Cohabitation	3 – 6 months	8	12
	7 – 11 months	2	1
	12 – 23 months	6	12
	24 – 35 months	7	4
	3 years or more	8	2
Plan to Marry Partner	Yes	17 (5 engaged)	19 (11 engaged)
	No	1	0
	Maybe	5	1
	Never Marry Anyone	4	2
	Disagree	4	9

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[1] In 2002, Rufus Griscom wrote in a *Wired* magazine article, "Serendipity is the hallmark of inefficient markets, and the marketplace of love, like it or not, is becoming more efficient." The nearly 1,400 dating sites available continue to grow, and are becoming increasingly specialized (Sullivan, 2008).While obtaining reliable statistics on the use of internet dating sites is challenging, Match.com reported 2002 revenues of $125.2 million dollars (Naraine 2003).