You can't always get what you want: Network determinants of relationship inactualization in adolescence

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Despite widespread interest in the link between social and sexual networks, little research has focused on how social networks influence the progression of intimate relationships (e.g., from holding hands to sexual intercourse). I argue that social networks not only affect individuals' opportunities to meet romantic partners, but also shape the ideal and actual progressions of intimate acts within their relationships. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), I conduct an optimal matching analysis of adolescents' purported ideal versus actual relationship sequences, which are comprised of romantic and sexual events. Low discrepancy scores indicate that intimate acts in one's recent relationship were sequenced much as one had desired. Results demonstrate that how students are situated within their schools' broader friendship networks affects their experiences with intimacy: high rank prestige individuals are better able to achieve their ideal relationships, as are individuals with densely knit friendship networks. Additionally, increased gender salience among boys within the socio-centric friendship network is associated with increased discord between desired and actual relationship progressions, but this relationship is mediated by the rareness of the individual's ideal relationship trajectory.

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1. Introduction

Although much research has investigated the effects of romantic and sexual relationships on individual-level health and behavioral outcomes (Eklund et al., 2010; Giordano, 2003; Harding, 2007; Haynie et al., 2005; Jones and Furman, 2010; Markey et al., 2007) little is known the about the progression of intimate events in relationships themselves. Romantic relationships involve a variety of acts that signal different degrees and types of intimacy, including physical acts (e.g., kissing), emotional acts (e.g., expressing love), and social acts (e.g., introducing one's partner to family and friends). The order in which these intimate acts occur informs relationship development and trajectory. To this end, the effects of sexual intercourse on emotional well-being (Meier, 2007) and delinquent behavior (Armour and Haynie, 2007) may be contingent on the timing of intercourse relative to when the individual would have preferred it to occur within the relationship.

Although few relationships unfold exactly as desired, there is considerable variation in the degree to which individuals compromise their ideals by engaging in certain behaviors out of their preferred sequences (Harding, 2007). Conceptually, one can consider the degree to which a desired relationship is actualized as the level of congruence between two sequences: the actual relationship sequence and the ideal relationship sequence. Recent research suggests that low levels of relationship

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actualization have strong implications for mental health, especially among adolescent women (Soller, 2014), and that this discord between ideal and actual romantic relationship progressions—*relationship inactualization*– is associated with poor romantic relationship quality (Frye and Trinitapoli, 2015). However, despite the ramifications of relationship inactualization on emotional wellbeing, less is known about the social predictors of such ideal disjuncture (see Harding, 2007; Frye and Trinitapoli, 2015; Soller, 2015) and, importantly, who compromises their romantic ideals most.

In this paper, I argue that the extent to which individuals are able to achieve their desired relationships is influenced by the social networks in which they are embedded. Prior sociological work has emphasized the role of friendship networks in the process of partner matching, explaining that actors' egocentric networks facilitate access to romantic partners and the flow of information about them (Laumann et al., 1994, 2004). Among adolescents, friends play an integral role in romantic relationship initiation and trajectory. Mixed gender peer groups not only serve as sites for romantic partner introductions (Connolly et al., 2000; Connolly et al., 2004), but friends also shape the types of relationships adolescents desire (Cavanagh, 2007; Miranda-Diaz and Corcoran, 2012) and the sexual behaviors in which they engage (Buhi and Goodson, 2007). Further, school-level trends in the dating norms and relationship scripts that students privilege can influence both adolescents' romantic partner choices (Bearman et al., 2004), as well as the types of relationships that ensue (Bearman and Bruckner, 2001). It is therefore necessary to consider how the structure of broader friendship networks and individuals' positions within them may similarly influence relationship development and inactualization. Individuals' network positions may shape the range and quality of information they receive about romantic partners, as well as the degree of influence they are able to exert within their romantic relationships. Additionally, trends in gender homophily, i.e., the tendency for students to nominate friends of the same gender, may influence how adolescents form and discuss their romantic ideals, as well as shape opportunities to meet and socialize with opposite sex partners.

To investigate how social networks influence relationship inactualization, I utilize data from National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), which supplies detailed network data of high school students at both the individual and school levels. As a result, it is possible to adjust for both the egocentric context and school-wide environment (or market) to which the individual is exposed. The completeness of this network data is especially salient given that "a friend of a friend is, often, a sex partner," (Moody, 2007, 346). I investigate the role of social networks in relationship inactualization, as they may impact individuals' information about romantic partners, social influence within romantic relationships, and individuals' willingness to compromise their romantic ideals in their actual relationships that unfold. My results underscore the importance of network embeddedness in understanding who is best able to achieve their ideal relationship trajectory.

1.1. Sequential approaches to romantic relationships

Romantic and sexual relationships are intricately scripted by a host of norms and rituals that dictate which partner initiates specific activities at certain points in the relationship (England et al., 2008; Harding, 2007; Laumann et al., 1994; Serewicz et al., 2008; Seal and Ehrhardt, 2003; Simon and Gagnon, 1984). When illustrated as sequences, relationships become a progression of events woven together, each influenced by the order of the last. In this way, a sequential approach to romantic relationships examines romantic events as they are embedded within the relationship's trajectory. The additional context a sequential approach provides is important for understanding how romantic relationships impact mental health. Prior research that analyzes romantic and sexual events as situated within broader relationship sequences finds that the effect of relationship milestones, such as sexual intercourse, on mental health is contingent on this context (Meier, 2007).

A budding area of research that focuses on intrapsychic romantic sequence deviations finds that romantic relationships that fail to proceed "in order" or "according to plan" relative to individuals' own desired romantic scripts are similarly associated with poor relationship and mental health outcomes. Intrapersonal scripts are increasingly important as postmodern enactments of love and intimacy rely less and less on constraining gendered scripts (Giddens, 1992). Thus, it is difficult to define what constitutes a meaningful variation from a cultural script given the myriad, dynamic scripts adolescents have to choose from (e.g., virginity pledges, hook up culture, "friends with benefits"). In their study of young adults in Malawi, Frye and Trinitapoli (2015) find that discord between individuals' desired and actual romantic relationships is a strong predictor of relationship wellbeing. In contrast to prior milestone analyses, they find that this divergence between ideal and actual relationship trajectories is more strongly related to relationship health than the timing of sexual intercourse. Similarly, Soller (2014) finds that the disjuncture between adolescent girls' ideal and actual relationships is a strong predictor of severe depression, suicide ideation, and suicide attempt. This work underscores how the order and timing of more quotidian romantic relationship events, such as meeting a partner's parents and exchanging gifts, are additionally important in understanding romantic relationships' influence on adolescents' personal wellbeing and relationship quality.

Drawing on previous studies of the discord between ideal and actual relationship experiences (Frye and Trinitapoli, 2015; Harding, 2007; Soller, 2014, 2015), I define one's level of relationship inactualization as the degree of discrepancy between one's ideal and actual romantic relationship sequences. This concept captures the extent to which the progression of one's experienced relationship mirrors that of one's ideal relationship, with high discrepancy between these relationships indicating a high degree of inactualization. Given the previously demonstrated importance of relationship inactualization for mental health, I shift focus from the consequences to the predictors of relationship inactualization.