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“American Couples: How Couples Meet, and Whether They Stay Together”

Concept Sheet, Background, and Proposed Questions

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Introduction and Motivation:

Scholars who study the American family have discovered that the transition to adulthood has changed.¹ Young adults are marrying later, traveling more, and spending more time away from home before settling down. In my research I refer to this new life stage as the independent life stage.²

At the same time that the demography of young adulthood has changed, the basic structure of American families has diversified. Scholars note the rise of divorce, the increasing postponement (or complete avoidance) of first marriage, the rise of extramarital cohabitation, the rise of interracial marriage, and the rise of same-sex unions.³ These are but several of the changes that have replaced a unitary system of same race heterosexual marriage with a more plural system of romantic unions.

The temporal concurrence of the rise of the independent life stage with the rise of nontraditional families in the U.S. raises some interesting questions. Is the new diversity

¹ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Early Twenties* (Oxford, 2004), Frances K. Goldscheider and Calvin Goldscheider, *The Changing Transition to Adulthood: Leaving and Returning Home* (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1999), John Modell, *Into One's Own: From Youth to Adulthood in the United States, 1920-1975* (Berkeley, 1989), Richard A. Setterstein, Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut (eds.), *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy* (Chicago, 2005).

² Michael J. Rosenfeld, *The Age of Independence: Interracial Unions, Same-Sex Unions, and the Changing American Family* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), Michael J. Rosenfeld and Byung-Soo Kim, 'The Independence of Young Adults and the Rise of Interracial and Same-Sex Unions', *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 4 (2005): 541-562.

³ Andrew J. Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), John D'Emilio, 'Capitalism and Gay Identity', in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York, 1993), Michael J. Rosenfeld, 'Measures of Assimilation in the Marriage Market: Mexican Americans 1970-1990', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 64 (2002): 152-162, Tom W. Smith, 'The Emerging 21st Century American Family,' in *General Social Survey Social Change Reports* (1999).

of American families a product of the independent life stage? Do the younger generations meet their spouses and romantic partners in the same ways and in the same places that previous generations met their partners, or has the structure of the mating game fundamentally shifted?

Other available datasets such as the CPS, NSFH, NSFG, NHLS, and Add Health⁴ provide a wealth of information about marriage, cohabitation, and divorce in the general case, but the existing data provide poor coverage of less traditional family types, such as interracial couples and same-sex unions. Because the less-traditional family types generally constitute a small percentage of all families, most surveys which do not oversample the less traditional couples have insufficient samples of less traditional couples. This proposed project will oversample the less traditional couples in order to study how Americans meet their partners and the longevity of couples while also taking the real diversity of American families into account.

I have recently published a book (*The Age of Independence*, Harvard University Press) and several papers (“The Independence of Young Adults and the Rise of Interracial and Same-sex Unions,” and “Young Adulthood as a Factor in Social Change”). The book manuscript and the papers collectively argue that the independent life stage has fostered a new diversity in the kind of romantic unions young people form. I demonstrate that interracial couples and same-sex couples are much more likely than traditional same race married couples to move away from their communities of origin, to have a college degree, and to live in a large city. Although my work has established new connections between the independent life stage and family life and social life in the U.S., some key questions remain unanswered because of limitations in the existing data.

My work on the independent life stage and nontraditional families has relied mainly on data from the U.S. census. Census data has the advantages of unparalleled sample size and historical comparability (for some questions) that reaches back into the 19th century. Unfortunately, the census asks only the basic demographic questions. It is not possible to reconstruct the details or the time lines of family formation from the census. In order to learn about how Americans find their spouses and partners, and whether the mate selection process has changed over time, a new kind of data is needed.

Currently available data provide insufficient information about the dissolution rates of same-sex couples, interracial couples, and interreligious couples.⁵ My proposed study will include brief follow-ups at 1 year, 2 years, and 5 years in order to ascertain which respondents are still in the relationship with the spouse or main romantic partner named in the original survey. The national representativity of the survey sample, combined with the oversamples of nontraditional couples, will provide the first full picture of couple dissolution rates across all couple types including different types of less traditional unions.

⁴ In order, Current Population Survey, National Survey of Families and Households, National Survey of Family Growth, National Health and Social Life Survey, and National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

⁵ For a non-representative but very interesting study of couplehood and couple dissolution rates, including for same-sex couples, see Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, *American Couples: Money, Work, Sex* (New York, 1983). For a review of divorce rates for interracial couples from the limited existing data, see Rose Marie Kreider, 'Interracial Marriage and Marital Instability,' in *Unpublished Dissertation* (University of Maryland: 1999).

Literature on Mate Selection and Union Formation:

One of the central research interests of sociologists who studied marriage and the family in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s was the way that mate selection in American cities was shaped and constrained by residential propinquity. Study after study in the leading sociology journals showed that the chance of marriage between people declined sharply with the distance between their addresses.⁶ The typical finding was that 30 percent of marriage licenses were granted to couples who lived within roughly 5 blocks of each other, despite the low frequency of premarital cohabitation. As Bossard wrote in 1932, "Cupid may have wings, but apparently they are not adapted for long flights."⁷

The literature on mate selection and residential propinquity dates back to a time in American life before the independent life stage, that is before young adults were attending college, traveling and postponing marriage.⁸ The literature on mate selection and propinquity made the simple assumption (which was appropriate at the time but is no longer appropriate) that the transition from young adulthood to marriage was simple and straightforward. Young adults in the post-1960 period are exposed before they marry to not one but several different communities: the community of origin (with its embedded secondary school), the college community, the corporate work environment, the disparate communities they experience while traveling abroad, and the urban neighborhood to which they relocate for college or for work. In order to determine how the new life stage of young adulthood affects mate selection, we need to know not only their residential propinquity before union formation, and the age at which they first met, but also which of the various communities brought the couple together.

The new life stage of young adulthood, in other words, requires new kinds of questions about how and when couples meet and form romantic unions. Although recent studies on how couples meet have been done in France and Holland,⁹ somewhat less is known about the process of how couples meet in the US. The third wave of the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health¹⁰ provides detailed age at meeting for the

⁶ James H. S. Bossard, 'Residential Propinquity as a Factor in Marriage Selection', *American Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 2 (1932): 219-224, Alfred C. Clarke, 'An Examination of the Operation of Residential Propinquity as a Factor in Mate Selection', *American Sociological Review* 17 (1952): 17-22, Maurice R. Davie and Ruby Jo Reeves, 'Propinquity of Residence Before Marriage', *American Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 4 (1939): 510-517, Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy, 'Premarital Residential Propinquity and Ethnic Endogamy', *American Journal of Sociology* 48, no. 5 (1943): 580-584, Joseph R. Marches and Gus Turbeville, 'The Effect of Residential Propinquity on Marriage Selection', *American Journal of Sociology* 58, no. 6 (1953): 592-595.. Several later papers revisited these findings, including Barrie S. Morgan, 'A Contribution to the Debate on Homogamy, Propinquity, and Segregation', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 43, no. 4 (1981): 909-921, Natalie Rogoff Ramsøy, 'Assortative Mating and the Structure of Cities', *American Sociological Review* 31, no. 6 (1966): 773-786..

⁷ Bossard, 'Residential Propinquity as a Factor in Marriage Selection' p. 222.

⁸ Bossard, 'Residential Propinquity as a Factor in Marriage Selection', Clarke, 'An Examination of the Operation of Residential Propinquity as a Factor in Mate Selection', Kennedy, 'Premarital Residential Propinquity and Ethnic Endogamy'.

⁹ Michel Bozon and Francois Heran, 'Finding a Spouse: A Survey of How French Couples Meet', *Population* 44, no. 1 (1989): 91-212, Matthijs Kalmijn and Henk Flap, 'Assortative Meeting and Mating: Unintended Consequences of Organized Settings for Partner Choices', *Social Forces* 79, no. 4 (2001): 1289-1312.

¹⁰ J.R. Udry, 'The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), Waves I & II 1994-1996; Wave III 2001-2002,' (Chapel Hill, NC: Carolina Population Center, 2003).

young adults in the US and their romantic partners, but respondents were in their early 20s at the time of the survey, so most of the marriages and long term romantic unions those young adults will eventually experience were not yet recorded at the time of the survey.

Racial intermarriage is on the rise in the U.S.¹¹ Heterosexual cohabitation and same-sex unions are also on the rise.¹² My research has suggested that the new life stage of young adulthood shapes the kinds of families young adults form.¹³ Most of the work on racial intermarriage has been done with data from the U.S. census. Limitations of census data prevent these data from providing much insight into how or when in the life stage romantic unions are formed.

Knowledge Networks:

Since this is a study of American couples which compares traditional to nontraditional couples, it is crucial to have a large enough sample of nontraditional couples in the survey to allow for statistically powerful tests. The large sample size (approximately 42,000) of the Knowledge Networks (KN) panel is the key advantage of KN for studying nontraditional families. The approximately 1,000 gay, lesbian or bisexual respondents in KN panel, who are already identified, is an order of magnitude larger than the number of gays, lesbians, or bisexuals available in any of the other major national surveys of family dynamics.

The KN survey is an internet survey, which means that respondents answer the questions at their leisure. KN panel participants are initially contacted through a nationally representative random digit dialing telephone survey, so the sample is nationally representative. The response rate to individual survey modules, from subjects in the KN panel, is greater than 70%. The structure of the KN survey, which already includes long term participation by subjects, is ideal for large scale longitudinal survey at modest cost.

The fact that KN survey respondents participate in surveys regularly means that the basic demography of these respondents (including age, gender, education, income, living with children, urban residence, sexual identity, marital status, state of residence, employment status, religion, and occupation) is already known.

¹¹ Matthijs Kalmijn, 'Trends in Black/White Intermarriage', *Social Forces* 72, no. 1 (1993): 119-146, Matthijs Kalmijn, 'Intermarriage and Homogamy: Causes, Patterns, Trends', *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 395-421, Stanley Lieberson and Mary C. Waters, *From Many Strands: Ethnic and Racial Groups in Contemporary America* (New York, 1988), Zhenchao Qian, 'Breaking the Racial Barriers: Variations in Interracial Marriage between 1980 and 1990', *Demography* 34 (1997): 263-276, Rosenfeld, 'Measures of Assimilation in the Marriage Market: Mexican Americans 1970-1990', Rosenfeld and Kim, 'The Independence of Young Adults and the Rise of Interracial and Same-Sex Unions'.

¹² D'Emilio, 'Capitalism and Gay Identity', Michael J. Rosenfeld, 'Young Adulthood as a Factor in Social Change in the United States', *Population and Development Review* 32, no. 1 (2006), Rosenfeld and Kim, 'The Independence of Young Adults and the Rise of Interracial and Same-Sex Unions'.

¹³ Rosenfeld, 'Young Adulthood as a Factor in Social Change in the United States', Rosenfeld and Kim, 'The Independence of Young Adults and the Rise of Interracial and Same-Sex Unions'.

Project Stages:

- 1) Pilot Survey, already completed, N=533, including 268 married heterosexuals plus an oversample of 265 self-identified gay, lesbian, and bisexual respondents. Two questions were included: where and how did you meet your spouse or current partner, and how old were you when you first met your spouse or partner?
- 2) Ongoing in-depth ethnographic interviews with N=5-10 subjects per year. Survey respondents tend to provide only 1 or 2 sentence answers to questions such as “how did you meet your partner.” The in-depth interviews will supplement the surveys by providing richer details and stories.
- 3) Main Survey, N=6,000, including 5,000 adult respondents plus an oversample of 1,000 self-identified gay, lesbian, and bisexual respondents. The main survey will include roughly thirty questions including how and where respondents met their partners, what kinds of social ties preceded the union, how their relationship has been accepted by their families, along with questions about race, religion, education, gender, sexual identity, and social class background of respondents and partners to identify less traditional unions.
- 4) Brief follow up surveys, in years 1, 2, and 5 after the main survey, with all respondents who reported a marriage or main romantic relationship in the main survey, to determine if the marriage or main romantic relationship is still intact.

The Pilot Survey:

The pilot survey has already been conducted by KN, and it included two questions posed to a roughly equal number of married heterosexuals and GLB (gay, lesbian, and bisexual) respondents.

An open ended response question,

Q1) Describe how and where you first met your spouse, or if you are not married, how and where you first met your current main romantic partner (i.e. boyfriend or girlfriend)

And a Numeric Response Question

Q2) How old were you when you first met your spouse?

The pilot survey data allow for some initial observations about how couples meet, and also raise issues that will be pursued in the main survey and in the ethnographic interviews.

Fifteen percent of married heterosexuals mention family when they describe how they met their spouse, but only five percent of GLB respondents met their partners through a family connection. Because gays and lesbians are more geographically mobile away from their families of origin, and because families of GLB respondents may be disapproving and unsupportive, family connections don't help GLB respondents as much.

Coworkers were also more likely to have played a role in introducing heterosexual married couples. Sixteen percent of heterosexual married couples had worked together, compared with nine percent of GLB respondents.

The internet, on the other hand, plays a much more vital role in dating for GLB respondents. Fifteen percent of GLB respondents met on the internet, compared to only two percent of heterosexual married respondents.

Heterosexual married men and women should presumably tell the same stories about how they met, but there are some interesting differences. Married women tend to emphasize the social connection a bit more such as the friend, the coworker, or the family member. Married women emphasize the "how." Married men, on the other hand, are more likely to describe the "where" such as a bar, a restaurant, or the park. Men are also more likely to retell the story of the first conversation.

Some of the simple responses to the question "how and where did you meet your spouse or partner" reveal aspects of the mate selection process that have never been studied. For instance, among the 25 individuals who reported meeting their spouse or partner in college, four met their spouse or partner *on the first day of college*. The first day of college is a fairly unique social situation in which strangers with some presumed commonalities are pressed together without a known social network to rely on.

The pilot data demonstrate the feasibility of the study and the potential usefulness of the KN survey for this project.

Sample of Proposed Questions for the Main survey:

The following questions are preliminary, and will be revised as the pilot data are analyzed. The proposed questions are based, in part, on the French survey by Bozon and Heran.¹⁴

[If Married, Skip to Q5]

[If unmarried male]

Q1 Do you have a main romantic partner, i.e. boyfriend or girlfriend?

Boyfriend, we are a same-sex couple 1

Girlfriend 2

No main romantic partner 3

[If unmarried female]

Q2 Do you have a main romantic partner, i.e. boyfriend or girlfriend?

Boyfriend 1

Girlfriend, we are a same-sex couple 2

No main romantic partner 3

Q3 Do you and this partner currently live together?

Yes, live together 1

No, do not live together 2

Q4 What is your partner's first name?

[This information will be stored by KN for the follow-up surveys, but not reported to the researchers]

[SKIP TO Q8]

[For married men]

Q5 What gender is your spouse

Female 1

Male, we are a same-sex couple 2

[For married women]

Q6 What gender is your spouse?

Male 1

Female, we are a same-sex couple 2

Q7 What is your spouse's first name?

[This information will be stored by KN for the follow-up surveys, but not reported to the researchers]

¹⁴ Bozon and Heran, 'Finding a Spouse'.

Q8, Q9, Q10 How old were you when you FIRST MET this (spouse) boyfriend (girlfriend), and How old were you when you first became a couple?

AGE WHEN FIRST MET [Q8]	AGE WHEN FIRST BECAME A COUPLE [Q9]	[IF Married] AGE WHEN MARRIED [Q10]	CURRENT AGE
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Q11 What is your (spouse's) boyfriend's (girlfriend's) race?

- White, Non-Hispanic 1
- Black, Non-Hispanic 2
- Other, Non-Hispanic 3
- Hispanic 4

Q12 What religion was your (spouse) boyfriend (girlfriend) raised in?

[Note, will be edited to conform to information on respondent's religion]

- Protestant 1
- Catholic 2
- Jewish 3
- Muslim 4
- No religion 5

Q13 Think about where you FIRST met your (spouse) boyfriend (girlfriend). Choose all that apply. Did you first meet them in

- your neighborhood 1
- your high school 2
- your college 3
- a church or house of worship 4
- at work 5
- through a mutual friend 6
- a dating service 7
- on the internet 8
- through a family connection 9
- None of the above 10

Q14 Please describe in detail how and where you FIRST meet your (spouse) boyfriend (girlfriend)

Q15 Did you and your (spouse) boyfriend (girlfriend) attend the same high school?

Same High School 1
Different High Schools 2

[If respondent has some college education]

Q16 Did you and your (spouse) or partner attend the same university?

Attended Same University 1
Did Not Attend Same University 2

Q17 Did you and your spouse or partner grow up in the same city or town?

Yes 1
No 2

Q18 Did your parents know your spouse's (or partner's) parents before you met your spouse (or partner)?

Yes 1
No 2

Q19 What is (or was) your father's profession

Q20 What is (or was) your spouse's (or if unmarried, your partner's) father's profession?

Q21 How would you describe the person your parents think would be the ideal mate for you?

Q22 How do your parents feel about your spouse (or if unmarried, your current partner)?

My parents have always been supportive 1
My parents are neutral 2
My parents have never met my spouse (partner) 3
My parents never liked my spouse (partner) 4

[If parents have not always been supportive]

Q23 Why do you think your parents are not more supportive of your choice of spouse (partner)?

Q24 Do you currently live with either your father or your mother?

[If do not live with parents]

Q25 How many miles away from your home is the home of your nearest parent?

Q26 How many miles apart is your current home from the home where you spent the most years growing up?

[If age at least 26]

Q27 Think about the year after your 25th birthday. How many months of that year did you spend living with your parents?

Q28 How many of your relatives do you see or visit at least once a month?

Q29 In general, how satisfied are you in your relationship with _____?

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Very Satisfied | 1 |
| Somewhat Satisfied | 2 |
| Neither Satisfied nor dissatisfied | 3 |
| Somewhat dissatisfied | 4 |
| Very Dissatisfied | 5 |

Q30 In your own words, explain why you feel satisfied or dissatisfied in your relationship with _____

The Follow-Up Surveys:

The follow-up surveys will be used to measure relationship dissolution at years 1, 2, and 5 for all couples identified in the main survey. Based on the pilot survey, we estimate that 75% of adult respondents to the main survey will have a current spouse or partner. Follow-up surveys assume 10% loss to follow-up per year¹⁵, along with relationship dissolution rate of 5% per year. The year 2 follow-up will target all couples who were still intact from the year 1 follow-up, and the year 5 follow-up will target all couples still intact from the year 2 follow-up survey.

1 Year follow-up, $N=4,050 (=6,000(.75)(.90))$

2 Year follow-up, $N=3,463 (=6,000(.75)(.90^2)(.95))$

5 Year follow-up, $N=2,398 (=6,000(.75)(.90^5)(.95^2))$

Two Questions:

Q1: Are you still married to (still dating) _____?

[If they were married]

Q2 Why are you no longer married to _____?

Divorce 1

_____ passed away 2

[If they were unmarried]

Q3 Why are you no longer dating _____?

We broke up 1

_____ passed away 2

¹⁵ The loss to follow up in the KN sample is 25% per year, but they have found that this can be reduced to 10% by providing incentives and follow-up calls to the targeted respondents. In addition, because my proposed follow-up survey is so short, the survey can be implemented over the phone to subjects who have left the panel but who can still be traced.

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