School Racial Composition and Adolescent Racial Homophily

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School Racial Composition and Adolescent Racial Homophobia*

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Objective. Even though schools are characterized by an unprecedented amount of racial diversity, it is unclear whether a racially diverse student body necessarily translates into friendships between adolescents from different racial groups. We examine how schools structure adolescent racial homophily, that is, adolescents’ tendency to form friendships with students who are similar with respect to race. Methods. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, we examine how the racial composition of schools influences the chances of having an interracial friendship for U.S. adolescents in grades seven through twelve. Results. Our results demonstrate that white, black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American adolescents differ greatly in their chances of having an interracial friendship. They additionally demonstrate that adolescents’ chances of having an interracial friendship increase dramatically as the proportion of same-race students in their schools decreases. Finally, they suggest that school racial composition accounts for a large part of the variation in interracial friendship by race, but not for all of it. Conclusions. We conclude that racial differences in interracial friendship reflect opportunities and preferences for interracial contact.

A number of studies suggest that the racial composition of schools has important consequences for students, and some of these consequences persist into adulthood. Students who attend racially integrated schools have more positive feelings about other racial groups than do students who attend segregated schools. Students in integrated schools also have more extensive interaction with other racial groups than their counterparts in segregated schools (for a review of this literature, see Schofield and Sagar, 1983). Not only does attending a racially integrated school influence racial attitudes and behavior in childhood and adolescence, it also appears to influence patterns of close interracial friendship in adulthood (Ellison and Powers, 1994; Sigelmann et al., 1996).

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SOCIAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY, Volume 81, Number 3, September 2000
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Undoubtedly, some of the effect of school racial composition on interracial friendship in adulthood is explained by the experience of an interracial friendship during childhood or adolescence. In spite of the evidence that integrated schools promote friendship between students of different races, previous studies have not used nationally representative data to demonstrate this. Typically, studies that do address the issue of interracial friendship focus on students from schools within a particular region of the country, or even more narrowly, they focus on students within a particular school.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a nationally representative survey of about 90,000 adolescents in grades seven through twelve, we examine patterns of interracial friendship. Our results suggest that white, black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American adolescents differ greatly in their likelihood of having an interracial friendship, be it a same-sex friendship or an opposite-sex one. Although the relative size of different racial groups explains a large share of these racial differences, it does not fully account for them. We argue that racial differences in interracial friendship reflect opportunities for contact with members of a different race, as well as preferences for interracial contact.

Background

Racial Group Size and Interracial Relationships. A number of studies explain contact between different groups in terms of opportunities to satisfy preferences for contact with members of the same group. Blau (e.g., 1977, 1994) offers the most widely cited formulation of this perspective. He argues that individuals prefer to associate with members of their own group; however, the size of their group relative to other groups influences

Sandra Hofferth and J. Richard Udry for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper that was presented at the 1998 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, California. This research is based on data from the Add Health project, a program project designed by J. Richard Udry (PI) and Peter Bearman, and funded by grant P01-HD31921 from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to the Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with cooperative funding participation by the National Cancer Institute; the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism; the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders; the National Institute on Drug Abuse; the National Institute of General Medical Sciences; the National Institute of Mental Health; the National Institute of Nursing Research; the Office of AIDS Research, NIH; the Office of Behavior and Social Science Research, NIH; the Office of the Director, NIH; the Office of Research on Women's Health, NIH; the Office of Population Affairs, DHHS; the National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, DHHS; the Office of Minority Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, DHHS; the Office of Minority Health, Office of Public Health and Science, DHHS; the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, DHHS; and the National Science Foundation. Persons interested in obtaining data files from The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health should contact Francesca Florey, Carolina Population Center, 123 West Franklin Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516-3997 (e-mail: fflorey@email.unc.edu).
their ability to satisfy this preference. More specifically, individuals' likelihood of coming into contact with members of their own group decreases as its relative size decreases. Individuals from smaller groups, then, have less opportunity to satisfy their preferences for same-group contact than do individuals from larger groups.

In contemporary society, individuals characteristically belong to several groups (Fischer, 1984). Membership in one group does not necessarily coincide with membership in other groups. This means that individuals are less likely to come into contact with individuals who share several group memberships than with individuals who share only one group membership. Given this constraint, individuals are thought to satisfy more-salient group preferences at the expense of less-salient ones (Blau, 1977, 1994). Previous studies suggest that membership in a racial group is far more critical to patterns of association than membership in age, educational, or religious groups (e.g., Laumann et al., 1994).

The majority of studies on interracial contact focus on marriage between individuals of a different race, as opposed to acquaintance, friendship, or romance between them. Many of these studies directly examine how the relative size of different racial groups in a state or metropolitan area influences rates of interracial marriage within it. These studies reveal that individuals have higher rates of outmarriage the smaller the size of their own racial group in comparison to other racial groups (e.g., Blau, Blum, and Schwartz, 1982).

A recent study by Sigelman and colleagues (1996) reveals that relative group size has a significant impact on both casual contact (i.e., conversations) and close friendship between blacks and whites. As the percentage of blacks in a neighborhood increases, so does the percentage of whites having a close interracial friendship. The percentage of whites with casual interracial contact also increases as the percentage of blacks in a neighborhood increases; however, this type of contact increases at a more rapid rate where blacks are the minority. Sigelman and colleagues explain the nonlinear effect of neighborhood racial composition on interracial contact in terms of emergent properties of relative group size. As the percentage of blacks in a population approaches 50%, whites feel more threatened by blacks.

**Racial Preferences and Interracial Relationships.** As suggested above, previous studies demonstrate that the relative size of different racial groups structures opportunities for interracial contact. This finding, by itself, tells us nothing about preferences for contact with members of the same racial group. How can we determine whether individuals prefer same-race contact against the backdrop of structured opportunities? Furthermore, how can we determine whether preferences for same-race contact differ between racial groups?

To address both of these questions, studies use a measure termed homophily bias. Basically, this measure captures the probability that indi-
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Individuals will select members of the same group above and beyond their likelihood of doing so only on the basis of group size (e.g., Fararo and Sunshine, 1964; Laumann et al., 1994). Laumann and colleagues calculate their measure of homophily as follows:

$$h_i = \frac{p_i - (N_i/N)}{1 - (N_i/N)}$$

where $p_i$ is the observed probability of within-group (intraracial) choices by group $i$, $N_i$ is the size of group $i$, and $N$ is the total number of individuals in the population. Hence $N_i/N$ is the expected probability of having an intraracial relationship. The denominator, which is equivalent to the maximum possible value of the numerator, serves to normalize the values between 1 and −1. A value of 0 indicates no bias; a value of −1 indicates extreme bias in favor of members of a different group; and a value of 1 indicates extreme bias in favor of members of the same group.

Consider the example of black and white male students most characteristic of this study’s sample. On average, black males attend schools that are 44% black. In contrast, white males attend school that are 73% white. Assume that race does not factor into students’ friendship choices. Under these circumstances, black males have a 44% chance of selecting a black student as a friend, and white males have a 73% chance of selecting a white student as a friend.

In our sample, about 79% of black males and 88% of white males are “best” friends with a student of the same race. These statistics alone suggest that black males are less homophilous than white males. According to the above formula, however, the homophily bias is .62 for black males and .55 for white males. These values suggest that black males are more inclined than white males to associate with members of their own racial group. Nevertheless, black and white males are both more inclined to associate with members of their own racial group than with members of other racial groups.

Researchers typically attribute residual differences between racial groups in the likelihood of intermarriage (i.e., differences that remain once opportunity is taken into account) to individual preferences and to social control on the part of family and friends (Surra, 1990). Scholars have long used the term “social distance” to depict individual and group preferences for different types of contact with different racial groups (e.g., Park, 1924; Bogardus, 1967). Individuals’ preferences influence their desire to interact with members of other racial groups. The preferences of friends and family influence individuals’ abilities to act on their preferences for interracial contact. Finally, their ability to establish and maintain interracial contact is dependent on the preferences of members of other racial groups.

Controlling for the relative size of different racial groups, studies based on nationally representative data reveal that individuals are much more
likely to marry members of their own racial group than members of other racial groups (e.g., Qian, 1997). In a recent study, Qian reveals that the tendency to marry within one's racial group is most pronounced among blacks, followed by Asians, Hispanics, and whites. Studies that consider racial homogamy in other types of relationships (e.g., friendship and co-habitation) use dichotomous measures of race (e.g., blacks versus nonblacks), so we lack an understanding of whether these specific patterns are limited to marriage.

**Interracial Friendship in Adolescence.** Little is known about patterns of friendship between adolescents of different races. Focusing on high school students, Hallinan and Williams (1989) conduct one of the few studies to examine these patterns using nationally representative data. They find that students are much more likely to become friends with members of the same race than with members of a different race. They do not highlight how the relative size of different racial groups within schools affects the likelihood of having an interracial friendship.

Previous research suggests that factors at several levels (i.e., region, community, school, classroom, and individual) influence adolescents’ likelihood of having an interracial relationship. At what level of analysis is racial composition most important? Addressing this issue, Blau (1993) compares the impact of different levels of racial heterogeneity on the friendship choices of elementary school children. He finds that heterogeneity measured at the classroom level is most influential to the friendship choices of elementary school children, followed by heterogeneity at the grade, school, and district levels.

**Theoretical Framework.** Based on the above studies, we expect that adolescents’ likelihood of having an interracial friendship will increase as the proportion of same-race students in their schools decreases. We also expect that differences between groups in the likelihood of having an interracial relationship will remain once we control for relative group size, due to social distance between groups. To the extent that adolescents adopt their parents’ preferences for interracial contact, we believe that patterns of interracial friendship among adolescents will mirror patterns of interracial marriage.

At the same time, we would not be surprised if adolescents deviate from adults in their patterns of interracial contact. After all, we are examining friendships, not marriages. Marriages are based on sex and romance, among other things. Our guess is that some of the opposite-sex friendships are similar to marriages in this respect, but only a very small fraction of same-sex friendships include sex or romance. Besides, marriage requires commitment on the part of two individuals. To the extent that friendships require less in the way of validation from a partner, they may be impinged upon less by norms of social distance.
Schools are surely the most important context where adolescents come into contact with potential friends, basically because they spend so much time there (Coleman, 1961). Hence, we assume that schools better approximate the opportunity structure for interracial friendship than do neighborhoods or broader geographic areas. Since elementary school children usually remain in one class all day, it makes sense that the racial composition of their classrooms rather than of their schools is more pertinent to their friendship choices. Beyond elementary school, however, youth typically change classes several times during the day. Given their mobility, it seems reasonable to take into account the racial composition of their schools.

Sample

Initiated during the 1994–95 school year, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (hereafter, Add Health) is a school-based study of adolescents in grades seven through twelve in 134 public, private, and parochial schools (Bearman, Jones, and Udry, 1997). Add Health collected “in-school” questionnaires from more than 90,000 students who were present on the day of its administration. For each participating school, Add Health obtained a roster of its students and assigned identification numbers to them. These rosters enabled students to identify their friends in the course of filling out the in-school questionnaire. At the end of the class period, these rosters were collected and destroyed to ensure their confidentiality.

Using these identification numbers, we are able to determine the race of respondents' friends directly by examining their own reports. Since we have no other way of identifying those friends who did not complete a questionnaire, our analyses of interracial friendship are restricted to adolescents who have same-sex or opposite-sex best friends in our sample. Eighty-two percent of our sample identified a friend of the same sex, while 70% identified a friend of the opposite sex. Fifty-six percent of the same-sex friends (i.e., 35,541) and 45% of the opposite-sex friends (i.e., 24,532) are in our sample.

Measures

Race of Respondent. To determine the race of respondents, we examine their answers to two questions. The first question asks: “Are you of Hispanic or Spanish origin?” The second one asks: “What is your race?” Respondents may choose from five responses, including white, black/African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Native American, or other. We divide respondents into five mutually exclusive racial groups: white, black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American. To
maintain consistency with other studies of interracial contact, we consider respondents who mark Hispanic to be Hispanic, regardless of their race (e.g., Laumann et al., 1994). We exclude from our analysis non-Hispanic respondents who mark more than one race. It is important to note that our basic pattern of results is the same regardless of whether we include or exclude this group.

**Interracial Friendships.** Add Health asked respondents to identify their five closest male and female friends, listing their “best” male and female friends first. Respondents were informed that they could include friends who were also romantic partners. They were also informed that they could include friends who attended a different school, as well as friends who did not attend school.

As adolescents’ number of friends increases, their chances of having an interracial friendship increase as well (results not shown). While more than 75% of our male sample nominated at least one same-sex friend, only about 50% of our male sample nominated five friends. Similarly, while about 85% of female respondents named at least one same-sex friend, only about 60% named five same-sex friends. Because adolescents vary greatly in their number of friends nominated, we focus on the first-listed friends. We consider friendships to be interracial if the respondent and the first-listed friend report a different race.

Keep in mind that estimates of interracial friendship differ according to the measures used. The General Social Survey asks respondents to name all of the people with whom they discussed important matters within the past six months, and then it asks them the race of the first five people listed. High School and Beyond asks students to name three friends; researchers then determine the race of friends who are in the sample using their ID numbers. Other studies, such as the Detroit Area Survey, ask respondents how many good friends they have of another race. Studies based on actual friendship nominations probably offer a more realistic picture of interracial contact than studies which simply ask respondents if they have friends of a different race. Importantly, studies based on nominations place boundaries on individuals’ friendship networks (Marsden, 1993).

**School Racial Composition.** For each school sampled, we use information from the in-school questionnaires to determine the proportion of each race in each school. Then, we determine the proportion of each respondent’s school comprised of students who are the same race. We use both a squared and linear measure of this variable. Our use of both measures is motivated by the finding that among whites, the percentage of blacks in a neighborhood has a nonlinear effect on the likelihood of casual interracial contact within it (Sigelman et al., 1996).

**Control Variables.** In addition to the above variables, we include a number of control variables. Some of these variables are thought to influence
inter racial contact, and some of them are thought to be associated with school racial composition. For each respondent, we include a continuous measure of age. For each school sampled, we use information from the school administrator questionnaires to construct additional measures of social context, including school size, urbanicity, and region of the country.

Analysis Plan

We first present descriptive statistics for interracial friendship among white, black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American students. These statistics give us an idea of the visibility of interracial friendships in the adolescent population. Then, we estimate logistic regression models of the likelihood of having an interracial friendship. These models include dummy variables for each racial group, with whites being the omitted group. Finally, we add variables for school racial composition and other aspects of social context.

Our multivariate models enable us to directly examine the influence of school racial composition on the likelihood of having an interracial friendship. They also allow us to see how black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American adolescents compare with white adolescents in their likelihood of having an interracial friendship once social context is taken into account. These statistics tell us, for instance, whether Asians are more likely than whites to have an interracial friendship once we control for the fact that they attend schools with fewer students of the same race.

We compute the above statistics separately for males and females. Chow tests reveal that the overall processes influencing interracial friendships, especially opposite-sex ones, differ significantly for males and females. Therefore, we stratify our models of friendship by the sex of respondent.

Descriptive Statistics

Focusing on adolescent males, Table 1 presents sample statistics for different measures of friendship. These statistics suggest that the majority of adolescent males have a friend of the same sex; 84% of whites, 67% of blacks, 68% of Hispanics, 77% of Asians, and 73% of Native Americans nominate one. The majority of adolescent males also nominate a friend of the opposite sex; however, they are less likely to nominate an opposite-sex friend than a same-sex one. For example, 69% of whites, 56% of blacks, 55% of Hispanics, 56% of Asians, and 61% of Native Americans nominate an opposite-sex friend.

The racial patterns for opposite-sex and same-sex friendships are similar, with the exception of Asian males. Although Asian males appear average in terms of having a same-sex friendship, they are among the racial groups least likely to have an opposite-sex friendship. We believe this reflects the
fact that Asian males are significantly less likely than males in other racial groups to have a romantic relationship (statistics not shown).

Regardless of their race, about 50% of the males with either type of friend nominate one from the sample (i.e., a friend in their school who filled out a questionnaire). Of the males who report a same-sex friend, about 12% of whites, 21% of blacks, 42% of Hispanics, 41% of Asians, and 89% of Native Americans nominate one of a different race. Comparable estimates for opposite-sex friends are almost identical. Roughly 9% of whites, 22% of blacks, 43% of Hispanics, 45% Asians and 92% of Native Americans nominate an opposite-sex friend of a different race.

These large racial differences in interracial friendship parallel large racial differences in school racial composition. For males, the average percentage of students at school who are the same race is 73% for whites, 44% for blacks, 40% for Hispanics, 21% for Asians, and 3% for Native Americans. Because these statistics are computed for the entire sample of males, they do not address the extent to which differences in interracial friendship correspond to differences in school racial composition.

Table 2 presents these same types of statistics for females. The patterns observed for females depart in two ways from the patterns observed for males. Regardless of their race, females are more likely than males to report either type of friendship. Furthermore, females are noticeably less likely than males to have an opposite-sex friend in the sample. Surely this is a reflection of their romantic behavior; females are significantly less
TABLE 2
Variable Descriptions and Sample Means: Females (N = 38,933)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Native American</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex friendship (SSF)</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposite-sex friendship (OSF)</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex friend in sample (if SSF)</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposite-sex friend in sample (if OSF)</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSF of a different race (if SSF in sample)</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSF of a different race (if OSF in sample)</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School racial composition Proportion of school same race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>22,426</td>
<td>7,079</td>
<td>7,097</td>
<td>1,990</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

likely than males to select romantic partners from their own schools (statistics not shown).

In spite of these differences, we find the same overall pattern for females that we find for males. Most important, racial differences in the likelihood of having an interracial friendship appear to be inversely related to relative group size. White females have the greatest opportunity to meet members of the same race, and correspondingly, they are the least likely to have an interracial relationship. At the other end of the spectrum, Native American females have barely any opportunity to meet members of the same race, and the vast majority of them have an interracial relationship. Using multivariate models, we examine the extent to which these patterns are a function of group size.

Multivariate Models

Table 3 presents the results for logistic regression models that predict the likelihood of having an interracial friendship for males who report a same-sex or opposite-sex friend. Because logistic regression coefficients are difficult to interpret, we display their respective exponentiated coefficients or odds ratios. In interpreting these odds ratios, note that values greater than one represent greater odds of having an interracial friendship, while values less than one signify lesser odds. Also, these values represent the change in odds per unit change in a given independent variable. Distances below one are not equivalent to distances above one. In our discussion of
TABLE 3

Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression Models of Having an Interracial Friendship: Males with a Same-Sex and/or Opposite-Sex Friendship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>SSF (N = 16,285)</th>
<th>OSF (N = 12,927)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1a</td>
<td>Model 2ab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race of respondent:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2.00***</td>
<td>.71***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>5.48***</td>
<td>1.63***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5.41***</td>
<td>.76***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>58.70***</td>
<td>3.51***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School racial composition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>same race</td>
<td>.00***</td>
<td>.00***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>same race squared</td>
<td>71.42***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model chi-square:</td>
<td>1784.2</td>
<td>3501.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(df)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aIncludes age.
bIncludes school size, urbanicity, and region of the country.
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

The odds ratios, we take the reciprocal of odds below one to make them comparable to odds above one.

The model in the first column, which does not take into account school racial composition, suggests that the odds of having a same-sex interracial friendship for black males is twice that for white males (the comparison group). Similarly, the odds of having an interracial friendship for Hispanic males are 5.5 times greater than the odds for white males, while the odds of having such a friendship for Asian males are 5.4 times greater. The odds of having an interracial friendship for Native American males are about 59 times the odds for white males. As will be revealed, this last estimate is inflated due to the relatively small group size of Native Americans in our sample.

After we take into account school racial composition and other measures of social context, a very different story of racial sorting emerges. As revealed by the model in the second column, the odds of having an interracial friendship relative to whites are greatly diminished for all of the minority groups. In fact, the odds of having an interracial friend for white males are 1.4 times (1.71) greater than the odds for black males. Similarly, the odds of white males are 1.3 times (1.76) greater than the odds for Asian males. The proportion of adolescents' schools comprised of same-race students indeed has an important impact on the students' relative odds of having an interracial friendship; both the linear and squared measures of this factor are highly significant. Note that the direction and size of these effects are similar in models for opposite-sex friends, shown in columns three and four.
### Table 4

Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression Models of Having an Interracial Friendship: Females with a Same-Sex and/or Opposite-Sex Friendship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>SSF (N = 19,256)</th>
<th>OSF (N = 11,605)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Model 2&lt;sup&gt;ab&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race of respondent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1.74***</td>
<td>.69***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>6.23***</td>
<td>2.12***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>6.17***</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>80.61***</td>
<td>6.07***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School racial composition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of school same race</td>
<td>.00***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of school same race squared</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model chi-square (df)</td>
<td>2013 (5)</td>
<td>3735.6 (14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Includes age.

<sup>b</sup>Includes school size, urbanicity, and region of the country.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Table 4 presents identical models for females. The racial and ethnic patterns are similar to those found for males. Before controlling for social context, the odds of having a same-sex friendship that is interracial are 1.7 times greater for black females than they are for white females. The odds of having an interracial relationship are about 6 times greater for both Hispanic and Asian females. Finally, the odds are 80.6 times greater for Native American females than they are for white females.

Again, we find school racial composition to be highly significant in influencing the odds of having an interracial friendship, be it a same-sex friendship or opposite-sex one. Once we take into account school racial composition and other measures of social context, we find that black females are less likely to report an interracial friendship than their white counterparts. As evidence of this, the odds of having an interracial friendship are 1.6 times (1/0.69) greater for white females than they are for black females. We find no significant difference between Asian females and white females in the likelihood of nominating an interracial friend.

Although the relative odds of having an interracial friendship for Hispanic and Native American females are greatly reduced, we still find these groups to have a significantly greater likelihood of having an interracial friendship than their white counterparts. As is the case for males, the general patterns for opposite-sex interracial friendships are similar. It is important to note that these patterns differ from those observed for interracial marriage. Excluding Native Americans from his analysis of intermarriage, Qian (1997) finds that whites are the least endogamous. In
contrast, our results suggest that Hispanics and Native Americans are the least endogamous.

Figure 1 presents the predicted probability of having an interracial friendship, and of having a same-sex or opposite-sex relationship, for both males and females. The x-axis shows the proportion of males’ schools comprised
of students of the same race, while the y-axis presents the predicted probability of nominating a friend of a different race. These probabilities are based on the logistic regression models presented earlier. From these probabilities it is clear that the effect of school racial composition is virtually identical for males and females, and for same-sex and opposite-sex friendships. As we expected, adolescents who attend schools that are comprised predominantly of students like themselves racially have little opportunity to interact with students of a different race.

What is striking is that students who attend schools that are comprised of 70% of their same-race counterparts are not dramatically more likely to have an interracial friendship than students whose schools are completely racially homogeneous (i.e., comprised of 100% of their same-race counterparts). As suggested earlier, Sigelman and his colleagues (1996) find a similar pattern for whites in their consideration of interracial contact. These probabilities further suggest that adolescents’ actual likelihood of having an interracial friendship falls considerably below their expected likelihood (i.e., 1−Ny/N).

It seems plausible that school racial composition also influences adolescents’ inclinations to make friends at school in the first place. For example, students may deal with the fact that there are hardly any individuals of the same race at their school by foregoing friendship altogether, or by selecting a friend from another school. To explore these possibilities, we estimated logistic regression models to examine the impact of school racial composition on the likelihood of nominating a friend, and its impact on the likelihood of nominating a friend who attends the same school. The relative odds of these two outcomes are practically constant, suggesting that the likelihood of becoming friends with fellow students does not depend on the racial composition of schools (results not shown).

We have also estimated logistic regression models of having any interracial friends for respondents who have at least one friend in the sample (results not shown). Generally speaking, the pattern of results from these models is similar to the pattern of results from models we presented earlier. For the sake of simplicity, we have focused on first-listed friends.

Discussion

Studies have long explained racial homophily in terms of opportunities to meet members of different racial groups. However, previous studies have not directly examined the effect of school racial composition on interracial friendship among adolescents using nationally representative data. Our results suggest that schools structure opportunities for adolescents to become friends with students of different races. More specifically, adolescents’ likelihood of having an interracial friendship increases as the proportion of same-race students in their schools decreases.
About 10% of white students, 20% of blacks, 40% of Hispanics and Asians, and the vast majority of Native American youth report an interracial friendship. The relatively high percentages of interracial contact for minority adolescents are somewhat misleading since they have more opportunity to meet students of their same racial background, given their smaller group size. Given the same opportunity structure, Hispanics and Native Americans are still more likely than whites to have an interracial friendship. In contrast, blacks and Asians are less likely than whites to have such a relationship. Regardless of their race, however, adolescents' actual likelihood of having an interracial friendship falls considerably below their expected likelihood. Like adults, adolescents are more likely to associate with members of their own race than with members of a different race.

These results suggest that norms of social distance also structure adolescents' chances to engage in meaningful contact with individuals of a different race. These norms appear to offset the effects of school racial composition. As suggested earlier, these norms represent preferences on the part of adolescents' own racial groups or other racial groups. Using Add Health data, we plan to untangle the effects of preference and opportunity by examining whether students are less likely to reciprocate friendships with members of some racial groups than of others.

Studies also attribute residual differences between racial groups in interracial marriage to cultural and status differences between groups (Anderson and Saenz, 1994; Hwang, Saenz, and Aguirre, 1997). For instance, studies of interracial friendship among youth suggest that tracking influences the opportunity structure for interracial friendships as well (Kubitschek and Hallinan, 1998). Hallinan and Williams (1989) find that high school students are more likely to become friends with individuals from their own academic track than with individuals from a different one, basically because students within their tracks have equal academic status. Because students are much more likely to encounter members of their own race within their tracks, they are more likely to have same-race friends. This suggests that adolescents' likelihood of interracial contact depends on opportunities for equal-status contact with members of a different race. We plan to explore this issue as well.

REFERENCES


School Racial Composition and Adolescent Racial Homophily


