

END NOTE

Glee's *McKinley High*: Following Middle America's sexual taboos

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Writers for popular media frequently draw on insights known about social networks in developing their plotlines and character biographies (whether in books, television, movies, etc.). Perhaps most known to network analysts in this respect, Freeman (2000) presents a collection of network concepts represented in comic strips. These depictions often are consistent with the patterns network analysts observe in real-world empirical examples. For example, the long-running sitcom *Friends* exhibited strong homophily (McPherson et al., 2001) or assortative mixing on race and socioeconomic status among the main characters. Other times the violation of these typical patterns can serve to generate dramatic tension or a source of comedy. For example transitivity—or the tendency of one's friends to also become friends (Holland & Leinhardt, 1972)—is absent in the movie *Hush* where Jessica Lange's character plots to kill the daughter-in-law she does not like. P-O-X social balance (Heider, 1948) describes the tendency for friends to share common interests, which was violated to comedic effect in the *Seinfeld* episode where Jerry's character simply cannot accept his date's refusal to try a taste of the pie he finds delicious, bothering him for days and ultimately leading to his ending the relationship.

Perhaps one of the most prominent empirical findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health data on romantic and sexual partnerships is adolescents' tendency not to date their former partners' current partners' ex partners—what the authors term an avoidance of “four cycles” (Bearman et al., 2004). Bearman et al. additionally note that while this taboo is virtually universally followed (only two 4-cycles appear in the entire school), it is done so with almost no teens likely able to verbalize that behavioral norm.

Figure 1 plots the (on screen or discussed) romantic and “hook-up” relationships among characters through the first two seasons of Fox's internationally renowned sitcom/musical *Glee*.¹ In this relatively small subsample of the school's student population, it can be seen that four cycles are much more common than in Add Health, both in count (10 4-cycles) and as a percentage of the observed romantic relationships ($15/36 = 42\%$ of observed relationships in the *Glee* network were part

¹ I limited the observed window for the *Glee* network to only two seasons to approximate the 18-month reporting window for romantic relationships in the Add Health study.

Table 1. *ERG Model of Glee & Jefferson High Romantic Relationships/Hookups.*

	<u>Glee's "McKinley High"</u>	<u>Add Health's "Jefferson High"</u>
Edges	1.45 (1.77)	-1.05 (0.92)
Same Gender	-2.90*** (0.70)	-4.53*** (0.49)
Degree = 1	3.33* (1.57)	3.56*** (0.57)
2-Star	0.65 (1.00)	1.35*** (0.28)
3-Path	-0.03 (0.19)	-0.02 (0.03)
GWNSP	-0.40* (0.19)	-0.53*** (0.15)

Note: Presented are coefficients and (*standard errors*). *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Quinn–Finn–Rachel–Puckerman cycle. Once properly modeling these 4-cycles while also accounting for other structural features of the network, 4-cycles are also treated as taboo in this setting, just as they were in Add Health. What is less clear is whether this pattern arises because this norm is so implicitly followed in real life that even the writers unknowingly fit it into their plot development. Alternatively, adolescents may be more aware of it than Bearman et al. claim, and rare violations of this norm was an accessible strategy to build plot tension. Or maybe *Glee's* show-runner Ryan Murphy is just an avid reader of the *American Journal of Sociology*.

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