

## **Talking Together:**

### **Challenges and Solutions in Research with Couples**

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#### **Introduction**

The call for more fertility-related research among couples has been sounded among demographers for at least the last decade (e.g. Becker 1996 ). Couple research on family relationships, fertility, and contraception is both intuitively and theoretically appealing, given the strong influence both members of the couple presumably exert over these arenas<sup>1</sup>, and the direct effect these types of decisions clearly have on both individuals' lives. Most previous research on couples has come from developing countries and has typically focused on married couples specifically. In this paper, I address some of the specific issues which arise in doing couple research in a developed country like the US, drawing from my own fieldwork experience. I give a brief overview of previous couple research and review some the benefits of this method. Then I discuss some of the challenges I have encountered conducting my own research and believe that anyone conducting couple research—particularly in developed countries—would encounter, and finally offer some potential solutions to those challenges.

For my own recent fieldwork, I interviewed 32 male-female couples where the woman is age 18-30 on the east coast of the US. All of these couples had been in their current relationship for at least six months, and the interview schedule included questions on the couple's relationship, sexual, contraceptive, and fertility decisions; I also gathered

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<sup>1</sup> The degree of influence each member of the couple actually exerts over these decisions is an empirical question which couple research is extremely well-suited to answer.

similar information for each individual's previous partners as well. The goal of my dissertation was to learn more about the ways that couples make decisions about contraception; in particular, I was interested in the relationship factors that affect couple's contraceptive decisions as well as the processes leading up to and including the experience of unintended pregnancy. I initially attempted to recruit respondents through signs posted online and in strategic physical locations seeking women age 18-30 to participate in a research study on contraceptive use with their male partners interviewed separately. I did not pay respondents, and only four of my 32 couples were recruited using this technique. The vast majority of my sample was recruited through friends, but all of my interview subjects were previously unknown to me. The resulting sample was overwhelmingly White and well-educated, but suited my purposes well by representing every contraceptive method use except the diaphragm and sponge, and a diverse range of sexual relationship histories; my sample is certainly not representative of the population as a whole, however. Nevertheless, I believe that the methodological issues I have encountered would apply to some degree to all couple research, but particularly couple research in developed countries like the US using in-depth interviews.

## **Literature Review**

Demographers have historically focused on data exclusively from women, with the assumption that major demographic events regularly occur (such as miscarriages and abortions) about which men have no knowledge (Greene and Biddlecom 2000; Watkins 1993). Men's knowledge of these events has increasingly become an empirical question of great interest, as has their role in the fertility-related decisions around these events, both for policy purposes and as a source of major academic investigation. For example, a

major policy issue in developing countries is to what extent family planning programs should be directed towards men; in the US, a recent conflict has emerged over men's rights and responsibilities with regards to abortion and unintended pregnancy. The easiest way to discover men's actual role in these decisions, and to test their reliability as reporters of fertility-related events, is to compare and contrast their description about such events to their female partners' descriptions. Consequently, couple research has emerged as a major demographic method.

However, the field that has dominated couple research for decades is not demography, but rather couple therapy research. Given that the research goals of this discipline are so different from demography, it is not surprising that the methodological concerns were also different, with samples almost always pulled from a therapeutic context and not intended to provide any representation of the population at large. Whereas the issue of how to recruit couples for demographic research will loom large throughout this paper, the context of couple therapy simplifies recruitment concerns.

The discipline of family studies has also included some notable qualitative studies of American couples, particularly Rubin's (1976) book *Worlds of Pain*. Rubin was both a professional sociologist and a professional psychotherapist and was perhaps uniquely successful at recruiting a large sample of working- and middle-class couples with whom she discussed intimate details of their relationships, including their sex lives. She typically interviewed women and then later interviewed their male partners. Hochschild (1990) also successfully recruited couples for her intense ethnographic work for *The Second Shift*, but she provided fewer details about her recruitment technique. Finally, Vaughan (1990) recruited many dissolved couples for her book *Uncoupling* by first

interviewing one partner and then recruiting the ex- through the initial contact, although she included little couple analysis in her book. It should be noted that all of these analyses *only included couples that had been cohabiting*, and both Rubin and Hochschild strictly focused on married couples.

Interest in couple research in demography has grown considerably over the last decade, with a focus on developing countries. The driving force behind this interest has been an increasing concern with men and their role in shaping demographic processes and outcomes (Becker 1996; Blanc 2001). Throughout the 1990's and beyond, the Demographic and Health Surveys have provided survey data with married couples for a wide variety of developing countries from Armenia to Zimbabwe, with demographic analyses focusing on fertility and contraception decisions and practices (e.g. Bankole and Singh 1998; Doodoo 1998; Ezeh 1993; Lasee and Becker 1997). In addition, couple data sets have been collected in countries such as Nepal (Barber and Axinn 2004), Guatemala (Becker, Fonseca-Becker, and Schenck-Yglesias 2006), Zambia (Biddlecom and Fapohunda 1998), the Phillipines (Biddlecom, Casterline, and Perez 1997; Williams and Sobieszczyk 2003), Vietnam (Luke et al. 2007), Nigeria (Oyediran 2005), and India (Ranjan 2004). These data sets typically have the advantage of including both survey and interview data components, but their focus is also almost always on married couples.

Demographic data sets on couples in developed countries have been slower to emerge. The British Household Panel Study and the National Survey of Families and Households (US) both have included couple components for married and cohabiting respondents. The Fragile Families Survey in the US conducted a major survey of unmarried parents, and strategically used hospitals at the time of birth as the location and

time for recruiting unwed fathers (Reichman et al. 2001); women's participation in the survey was not contingent on men's. The most ambitious recent survey with couple data in the US were collected by the Batelle institute for the National Couples Survey, which includes over 1200 dating, cohabiting, and married couple respondents. Because my own work has taken place in the US context, and because couple work in developed countries is so much more scarce than work in developing countries, this paper will focus more on the methodological implications of conducting couple research in developed countries.

Several issues are more prominent in developed contexts that raise methodological concerns and questions for couple research. First, the constitution of a "couple" seems to be vaguer in these contexts, particularly among young people, who often engage in a constantly shifting variety of dating, cohabiting, and marriage arrangements; moreover, sex regularly takes place both in and out of these contexts. Thus if our interest is primarily in sex-related decisions (e.g. contraception), then our "couples" could theoretically include all sexual partners, but if our interest is more focused on long-range fertility plans, then our "couples" would probably only include cohabiting and married couples. Second, there is a strong cultural value placed on maintaining a "successful" relationship, which means that admitting to problems in a relationship—e.g. disagreements and domestic violence—is often tantamount to an admission of personal failure. This creates problems for researchers seeking to elicit this kind of information. Finally, research participation in general tends to be more limited in developed than developing contexts, in large part because of a more skeptical population. This means that as a whole, the people who agree to participate in research in developed countries tend to be a more select group than people who agree to participate in research

in developing contexts; the more sensitive the information sought, the more select the participating groups tend to become.

### **Benefits of Couple Research**

The most obvious benefit of couple research is that it allows us to see evidence of couple communication—or lack thereof, which is relevant for understanding relationship and fertility decisions. For example, consider the imaginary couple of Abby and Ben. If we interview both of them, we know what Abby thinks, we know what Ben thinks, we know what Abby thinks Ben thinks, and we know what Ben thinks Abby thinks. It is possible that these things are all the same, and it is possible that they are all different, but knowing them all gives us much greater insight into the couple's communication strategies. One of the most common issues that emerged in my own research was an “understanding” that the couple would use condoms when they first had sex, even though “it wasn't really talked about.” I heard these same statements from individuals many times, and doing couple research allowed me to see just how mutual that understanding really was by interviewing the partner with the supposed understanding. I refer to this type of communication as “intuitive,” because it is not necessarily non-verbal, but it is generally indirect. It is impossible to successfully demonstrate the presence of intuitive communication without couple data, since one person's intuition could easily be another's ignorance.

By far the most intriguing example of this kind of intuitive communication emerged in my own work from a couple I will call Hallie and Hernando. Hallie and Hernando had undergone an abortion together, but Hernando told me that he had never told anyone about the two other abortions he had gotten with previous girlfriends, and

that Hallie did not know about them. Hallie, however, made it clear to me that she *did* know about these other abortions because she could “see this sort of glimmer of agh” giving her a “feeling he’s been through that before” when they had made the decision to get their own abortion. This example of intuitive communication would be impossible to verify without couple data. Based only on Hallie’s report, we would not know if Hernando actually had experienced abortions before, while based only on Hernando’s report, we would not know that Hallie knew about them.

Another major benefit of couple research is that it presents an inherent reliability check—although unfortunately not a validity check<sup>2</sup>—for our data. In general, people seem more likely to report information which directly involves them. For example, women are more likely to mention the couple using female-controlled methods of contraception (e.g. the pill), while men are more likely to mention male-controlled methods of contraception (condoms and withdrawal). If we assume that both partners are correctly reporting their own contraceptive use, then my data strongly support the conclusion that considerable contraceptive under-reporting occurs depending on whether we talk only to women or men (and the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth data hint at the same pattern<sup>3</sup>). Similarly, one of my female respondents, Tasha, failed to mention that her partner Terrence had a child from a previous relationship, even though she had a long conversation with me about their mutual desire for a large family, and I only learned about Terrence’s son by interviewing him<sup>4</sup>. Terrence never acted furtive about his son,

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<sup>2</sup> Validity checks are less important when conducting qualitative research, but there is still a possibility that respondents might lie or omit significant information.

<sup>3</sup> The 2002 NSFG does not have couple data. However, it does have separate data for men and women’s contraceptive use, and men are much more likely to report condom use than women, who are much more likely to report pill use.

<sup>4</sup> This was an extreme case; in no other couple did one partner mention a child to me which the other one did not.

but Tasha gave absolutely no hint or indication of his son's existence. Neither partner told me directly that the child was a source of conflict in their relationship, but the enormity of the omission strongly suggested that he was, or that Terrence played such an insignificant role in his son's life that he did not even figure into Tasha's fertility calculations.

Not only are people less likely to report behavior that they have less control over, they are also less likely to report behavior that is socially undesirable; couple reports, however, can help overcome this obstacle. The couple I interviewed with the most conspicuously troubled relationship (they had been married, separated, and re-united), Shelly and Shawn, clearly illustrated this tendency to downplay their own socially undesirable actions. While he admitted that he had had some "anger problems," she talked about him throwing a bedpost at her. Although she mentioned their separation, she did not mention the havoc that her diagnosis with herpes had wreaked on their relationship. Together, the information from both informants provided a more complete picture of the relationship than was likely to be obtained from either individual because of their desire to protect their own dignity.

In addition to producing more information on concrete outcomes (contraceptive use, STI's, illegitimate step-children), couple data allow us to compare accounts of processes and decisions. People are unlikely to disagree about how many children they have, but subtle differences might exist, for instance, in their accounts of their decision to have a child. For example, Fred and Fran were a married couple who had recently had a baby. Fran reported that she had "tricked him a little bit" in order to get pregnant by not telling him until the last minute that she knew she was fertile when they had sex. Fred



reported that they “just knew” it was “the right time to have a baby,” and while he admitted that his son could have been “a little more planned,” presented himself as a more active participant in their decision to have a child than Fran did, and certainly did not describe himself as tricked. The differences in their accounts are subtle: both agree on the actual succession of events that occurred (she went off birth control pills and he knew that; they decided to have sex anyway because it was his birthday; in the middle of having sex, she told him she was fertile), but Fran’s account assigns Fred a much more passive and reluctant role than he grants himself. Their differing accounts culminate in a kind of miscommunication: both partners agree that Fran was hesitant to tell Fred that she was pregnant, but Fred was thrilled to learn that she was and upset that she hesitated to tell him. Having explanations from both partners about their sons’ conception allows us to better understand why the partners had different ideas about the intendedness the pregnancy.

The benefits of couple research in terms of seeing evidence of communication, different accounts of processes, and inherent reliability checks are considerable, especially for research analyses testing questions like, how do couples communicate about fertility and contraception? How do their accounts of these processes differ? How much do men know about these decisions compared to their female partners? These are extremely important questions to answer, but I suggest that the challenges in couple research should make us especially careful in ensuring that it is the appropriate methodology to answer our research questions.

## Challenges of Couple Research

By far the greatest problem for demographers doing couple research, in developed countries at least, is the selectivity bias that rapidly emerges in sampling. Researchers in developed countries have become accustomed to a certain level of selectivity bias in their samples, due to the suspicion and irritation with surveys that much of the population exhibits. This problem tends to make the people who are willing to participate in research studies more different from the rest of the population, and this problem is only exacerbated when sensitive topics are being studied (Wiederman 2004). This problem is in some respects doubled in couple research. Not only are we seeking the increasingly rare individual who is willing to participate in a research study, we are seeking *teams of linked individuals* willing to participate in a research study, potentially doubling our selectivity bias<sup>5</sup>. We should not be surprised then if our couple sample resembles our population of interest even less than a typical sample of individuals.

The most obvious manifestation of this selectivity bias is the relative ease in recruiting couples who live together (regardless of their formal marital status) compared to couples who are dating. I had hoped to recruit dating, cohabiting, and married couples in stratified proportions, but dating couples rarely volunteered and were much more difficult to schedule interviews with when they did volunteer<sup>6</sup>. The authors of the National Couples Survey also had much more difficulty recruiting dating couples compared to coresidential couples (Grady, personal communication). While this situation

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<sup>5</sup> Because of assortative mating, the problem is probably not as large as it theoretically could be. That is, couples tend to be more similar to one another than random individuals in the population, and one characteristic that they may sometimes be matched on is their willingness to participate in a research study (or, more generally, their willingness to trust strangers).

<sup>6</sup> In at least three cases, I had to drive across a state in order to interview dating partners who were in long-distance relationships.

poses a significant problem for researchers interested in issues specific to non-cohabiting couples, another apparent selectivity problem raises much greater concerns for all couple researchers: the apparently high relative relationship quality experienced by couples who participate in couple research. Relationship quality is difficult to measure objectively, but many couples showed visible signs of affection when I observed them together (such as physical touching, and saying “I love you” spontaneously). More concrete—although more subjective—were the respondents’ own reports, comparing their current relationship to their previous relationships. While people probably have an unconvincing tendency to portray their current relationship as their most satisfying ever, key factual evidence supported the conclusion that these relationships really often were: three female respondents volunteered the fact that their current partner was the first out of several partners to consistently help them reach orgasm<sup>7</sup>, and women’s sexual satisfaction is highly correlated with overall relationship satisfaction (Waite and Joyner 2001). Furthermore, men were much better able to discuss their current partner’s contraceptive habits<sup>8</sup> than those of their previous partners, often commenting that they had never engaged in a contraceptive negotiation with a previous partner—even other long-term partners—but had negotiated with their current partner. Finally, no one mentioned seriously abusive behaviors, and remarkably few respondents even mentioned arguing very much; only two of the couples in my sample had ever broken up with each other for

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<sup>7</sup> I did not specifically ask about sexual satisfaction, so there may have been others for whom this was true. Furthermore, 13 of my 60 respondents had never had sex with anyone other than their current partner, which was actually more common among older respondents than younger ones.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, their reports were universally accurate for their current partner’s contraceptive use.

any substantial period of time, and those two relationships overall were the most conspicuously troubled<sup>9</sup>.

While one might assume that the higher relationship quality of my respondents could be due in part to their extremely high levels of education, recent evidence suggests that increased education may actually be associated with decreased marital quality (Amato et al. 2003). The real problem, I believe, is not with my sample per se, but with the very nature of couple research. This problem was demonstrated on two separate occasions, when I scheduled interviews with couples who had to cancel their interviews at the last minute and were unable to immediately re-schedule; in both cases, when I returned less than a month later to try to schedule interviews with them again, their relationships had dissolved—one of those couples had even initiated divorce proceedings. These non-interviews strongly emphasized the difficulties in researching couples in less stable relationships, since presumably their relationship instability makes it difficult for them to do things together as a couple, like participating in a research study. Moreover, similar concerns emerged from the National Couples Survey, which attempted to create a nationally representative sample, but found relatively low rates of domestic violence reported by the couples they surveyed (Grady, personal communication). Taken altogether, these observations strongly suggest that couples who agree to participate in a research study together have higher average relationship quality than couples who do not volunteer or who are unable to participate.

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<sup>9</sup> While I did not do formal follow-up interviews, my snowball sample helped me to informally follow what happened to my respondents over time. One dating couple—not among the two I mention here as obviously troubled—that gave no indication of major relationship problems had broken up within a month; another couple that seemed to have more obvious problems was engaged within two months.

This selectivity bias is extremely disappointing since most of the demographic issues of greatest interest to couple researchers—relationship decisions and concordance, and fertility and contraceptive decisions and concordance—are most interesting in the context of relationships of average and below-average quality. For example, one of the issues I hoped to shed light on with my couple research was unintended pregnancy, which was certainly common in my sample. Eight of my respondents had experienced an abortion (four men and four women), and eleven had ever experienced an unintended pregnancy, *but only two couples had experienced an unintended pregnancy together*<sup>10</sup>. Previous work suggested, and my own work confirms, that unintended pregnancies seem to be more likely to occur in lower-quality relationships, and they also tend to precipitate subsequent relationship dissolution (Bouchard 2005). This fact combined with the difficulties of recruiting couples in lower-quality relationships makes unintended pregnancy extremely difficult to study with couple research.

In my opinion, the selectivity bias that emerges from couple research is the method's greatest disadvantage; however, there are other concerns about the data and its collection. First, couple research is clearly resource-intensive, especially in samples where diversity by characteristics such as race and class are important. Couples are more difficult to recruit than individuals, and they tend to be fairly similar in terms of their socioeconomic backgrounds; consequently, it is more difficult to recruit a socioeconomically diverse sample.

Second, couple research occasionally produces a dilemma when data from one partner seem to be of higher quality than data from the other partner. For example, one of my best interviews was with a woman whose fiancé was openly hostile towards me

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<sup>10</sup> Two other couples had experienced slightly mistimed pregnancies.

during his interview. If comparing couple data is the primary purpose of the research project, the issue emerges of what to do with the data from the partner with the higher-quality interview: should it be discarded completely, treated as representative for the pair, or treated separately? Presumably, something may be different and potentially of interest about these pairs compared to couples where both participated with equal enthusiasm (and for that matter, compared to couples who refused to participate altogether), lending support for their inclusion as much as possible in the final analysis. Either way, however, the potential loss of a single interview almost inevitably doubles in impact when dealing with couple research.

The last set of disadvantages in couple research come from ethical concerns, particularly pertaining to confidentiality. I personally believe that these ethical disadvantages are ultimately outweighed by the benefits of couple research, but I acknowledge that they are considerable. First, there is the potential for confidentiality violations from in-depth interview write-ups if couples actually read our research reports, since people are likely to recognize their own accounts, thus enabling them to recognize their partners' accounts as well. For instance, if either member of the couple mentioned earlier in the example of intuitive communication, Hallie and Hernando, were to read this paper, I am fairly confident that they would be able to identify themselves and their partner and learn something they did not previously know about each other and their relationship. While in standard interview write-ups we might be able to successfully describe people so that even their closest friends would not recognize them, it seems impossible to me to sufficiently disguise respondents—who know that their partners

participated in the same study—to the point that they could not *identify themselves* and thus identify their partners.

Second, there is also the potential for confidentiality violations within the interviews themselves if the same person conducts the interviews with both members of the couple. That is, interviewers might accidentally let slip details from their previous interview with the other partner. I personally conducted the interviews with both partners, but having carefully gone over my transcripts, I do not believe that I ever “slipped” and revealed something the other partner had said. However, the respondents themselves were clearly self-conscious about me conducting both interviews, and regularly commented that they really wished they knew what the other person had said. This problem is easy to resolve by having multiple interviewers, but I strongly believe that I achieved a better understanding of the couple as a relationship unit by interviewing both of them than I would have received if I had only personally interviewed one of them. Knowledge from one interview also sometimes helped me subtly direct questions with more recalcitrant or forgetful partners. For example, I conducted an interview with a husband who told me that his wife had at one point used the contraceptive ring; his wife (who was relatively distracted during her interview) told me that she had been on the pill consistently for years. I casually mentioned the ring in the course of our conversation, and she then remembered having used it.

The most difficult ethical issue that couple research raises is the legitimacy of individual consent. Couples are almost always initially recruited from a single individual within the pair who then obtains the consent of his or her partner. Because I used a snowball sampling methodology, my typical recruitment strategy involved a friend

“Sheryl” making a phone call to her friend “Kim”<sup>11</sup>. Sheryl would tell Kim about my dissertation research and ask if Kim and her husband would be interested in being interviewed by me. At this point, Kim would generally: (1) ask her husband, while on the phone, if he was interested in participating; (2) say she was pretty sure he would be willing to do it, and she would get back to us; (3) say she was not sure if he would be willing to do it, and she would get back to us; or (4) say she was sorry and could not help. Then I would talk to Kim myself and confirm that she and her husband were both willing to participate and schedule the interviews, which mostly took place in the couple’s place of residence (although more often in “public private” locations like coffee houses when the couple was not co-residential). Finally, when I arrived to actually conduct the interviews, each member of the couple signed a separate consent document before their own independent interviews.

I had hoped that this triple-checked<sup>12</sup> consent process would ensure that all of my participants were independently willing to participate. Unfortunately, I believe that I omitted a crucial component: I should have personally obtained consent from *both partners* merely to *schedule* the interviews. For instance, a communication error occurred, and I once arrived at a couple’s home where the wife had enthusiastically agreed to participate only to find that she had only told her shift-working husband about the interview five minutes before my arrival. Both husband and wife independently signed my consent form, and I reluctantly decided to conduct the interviews, even though I felt that the husband had been railroaded into participating. In retrospect, I should have

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<sup>11</sup> Many of my snowball respondents were actually recruited through the male partners; the name “Kim” is merely convenient.

<sup>12</sup> There were only double-checks when the respondents volunteered independently outside of my snowball sample, but I never experienced any ethical quandaries with these respondents.



conducted the wife's interview and come back for her husband's at another time. A far more awkward scenario occurred with another couple, Ellen and Elan. Elan had cheerfully agreed to participate, but Ellen seemed much more reluctant. Early in his interview, Elan left to go "make sure she was okay," and had an argument with her for some time in another room that I could not hear. Neither partner ever mentioned to me that Ellen did not want to participate, and I have no way to be sure what they were arguing about, but it seemed likely that he was cajoling her into participating. In both of these cases, I could have avoided awkward encounters if I had personally spoken to both members of the couple before I scheduled their interviews.

The stakes of refusing to participate in a research study become much higher for individuals when their participation has become not merely a personal issue, but a relationship issue. This situation is most problematic in relationships with major power inequities, where one partner can essentially bully the other into participating; regardless, their ability to refuse consent appears compromised. Whereas our standard consent forms only address the risks of *participation* in our research study, when one partner wants to participate and the other does not, there are risks associated with *not* participating, including potential fights and embarrassment.

### **Solvable and Unsolvable Problems**

While none of the problems I have discussed with couple research are soluble, many of them can be minimized. The selectivity biases I have mentioned are partly driven by recruitment challenges; it is relatively easy to find and recruit individuals, but where and how do we recruit couples (especially if we wish to include non-cohabiting couples)? The most straightforward method is to aim recruitment materials or

participation requests at individuals in relationships and persuade those individuals to persuade their partners to participate. This was the method that I used for my own study, but it raises a number of problems, including the necessity of partner negotiations, which are typically a variable of research interest in couple studies. It is easy to imagine why individuals in seriously troubled relationships would be reluctant to raise the issue of study participation with their partners, especially if their partners are abusive, because those individuals want to avoid relationship conflict as much as possible. Unfortunately, it was clear to me (as discussed above) that participation in my study was not always a conflict-free proposition for the couples who agreed to participate, so reluctance to recruit partners is often completely justified.

Another recruitment strategy is to recruit couples together by seeking them out in social situations which tend to attract couples (e.g. church, neighborhood family events, and parks). This strategy potentially removes the bias from partner-recruitment, but it raises another bias because couples who do things together tend to have higher relationship quality than couples who do not (Amato et al. 2003). Neither of these strategies successfully removes the relationship-quality bias.

In fact, no strategy I have devised really can completely circumvent this problem. I think that the only way to really negotiate this problem is to follow Rubin's (1976) strategy of recruiting individual men and women in relationships, interviewing them, and then requesting them to recruit their partners. In effect, the couple becomes a snowball sample of two, and the same kind of ethical guidelines for a standard snowball sample apply in terms of contacting potential respondents. The resulting total sample would include a more representative sample of individuals and a presumably more biased couple

subsample. However, it would allow us to have contemporary information from people in a more diverse array of relationships, and it would allow us to tentatively compare the kinds of relationships the couples have compared to the individuals. Furthermore, this strategy minimizes some of the ethical concerns mentioned earlier, since one person's participation is no longer dependent on the other's, and it ensures that both people must be contacted and interviewed separately.

This strategy raises irreconcilable concerns about data contamination since we are almost guaranteeing that the couple talks to one another about the interview after one member has already been interviewed. The only way to address this concern is to include questions about whether the couple discussed any of the material since the previous interview, and if so, what exactly they discussed; such questions do not erase the problem, but they do allow us to estimate how widespread its effect is. This recruitment strategy is also more resource-intensive, since it virtually guarantees that two trips to interview the couple will be required when one might have sufficed if both interviews were scheduled in advance; yet this problem may be more than made up for by the ease of recruiting individuals compared to recruiting couples and more interesting data. Since some of the most useful data should come from couples in less communicative and less trusting relationships, having a more diverse sample of couples should improve the overall quality of the data.

This strategy does not, unfortunately, entirely minimize concerns about differential data quality and ethical violations. The best we can do when couple interviews are of different quality is to take the quality differential itself as a point of analysis and look for patterns in it. For example, we might find that men are more likely

than women to yield lower quality interviews, and then we should also look to see if these different quality interviews were associated with some other aspect of their relationship; my own sample is not really large enough to attempt such an analysis, but it could be theoretically and methodologically informative with a larger sample. The ethical considerations described earlier can best be minimized by reducing the opportunity for couple negotiations about research participation and by having separate interviewers for each partner. It is probably unrealistic to envision any scenario in which both partners agree to participate without any contact with one another, but any strategies we can employ to minimize the opportunity for relationship conflict over study participation would be ethically beneficial as well as beneficial to our research. Most particularly, this means contacting partners separately and scheduling interviews with each partner separately. Typically, this means e-mailing or telephoning partners separately prior to the scheduled interview and obtaining their separate consent ahead of time, as well as with consent forms immediately prior to the scheduled interview. If neither partners' participation is contingent on the other partners' participation, then this vastly reduces the potential for relationship conflict over study participation.

### **Conclusion: Possible Applications to Survey Research**

Like many demographers, I have been a strong advocate of couple research as a technique for better understanding issues pertaining to fertility and family life for both qualitative and quantitative research analyses; I had hoped that the National Survey of Family Growth would convert largely to a couple format, for example. However, given my own experiences and the problems I encountered, I believe that converting our most important research projects to a couple format can only be accomplished well with couple

subsamples, like those found in the National Survey of Families and Households or the Demographic and Health Surveys. Although those surveys have only included coresidential partners, it should be possible, although difficult, to incorporate non-coresidential partners as well. Our research would generally be best informed by talking to couples in less communicative and less trusting relationships, but they are the couples we are least likely to reach. Nevertheless, the benefits of couple research make it appropriate and necessary to answer some of our most pressing demographic questions, requiring both survey and interview data. However, we should recognize that it is still a relatively new methodology and requires thoughtful execution to answer the questions we most want to answer with it.

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