

**Relationship Progression: Consequences for Relationship Quality**

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In the past, relationships progressed somewhat predictably: people dated, they got married, and then they had children. Cohabitation was uncommon and nonmarital fertility relatively rare. Today, due to changing norms regarding premarital sex, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation, and because of the instability of cohabiting unions, there is significant variability in the timing and order these relationship events occur – if some of them even occur at all. Despite such changes, sociological literature on couples' relationship progression is underdeveloped (see Sassler 2004 for a qualitative study). I hope to address this gap by considering the sequencing and spacing of relationship events among a sample of about 400 married couples. The five major relationship events under consideration are dating, sex, cohabitation, marriage, and children's births.

The project has two goals. First, I focus on describing sequencing and spacing patterns in relationship progression. *Sequencing* refers to the order in which these events are experienced. All relationships begin with romantic initiation, but the next four events may occur in any sequence, while some may not occur at all. Sex is the subsequent relationship event for most couples (Teachman 2003), but some may marry first without having had sex. Many couples cohabit before marriage, and some may bear children prior to a co-residential union, while others may delay childbearing until being in a cohabiting or marital union. *Spacing* refers to the amount of time (measured here in months) between any two relationship events. It is closely related to duration, or the length of time spent in any given state.

Second, I examine how relationship progression patterns affect subsequent marital quality. The *sequencing* of relationship events may affect marital quality. There is a multitude of evidence showing that cohabiting prior to marriage reduces marital stability (Bennett, Blanc, and Bloom 1988; Teachman and Polonko 1990) and marital quality (Booth and Johnson 1988;

Thomson and Colella 1992). The question of the effects of premarital sex and childbearing has not yet been adequately addressed, however. Teachman (2003) finds that premarital sex may affect subsequent marital stability, but he does not address union quality. A number of studies have considered whether nonmarital childbearing reduces marital stability, but even these do not share consistent findings (e.g., Bramlet and Mosher 2002; Heaton 2002; Timmer and Orbuch 2001; Wu and Musick 2006). Brown and Booth (1996) studied the link between nonmarital childbearing and union quality, finding that the presence of children from previous unions negatively affects relationship quality. The *spacing* of relationship events may also affect subsequent marital quality. Research demonstrates that the duration of premarital cohabitation has a negative effect on marital stability and quality (Brown 2003; DeMaris and MacDonald 1993; Hill and Evans 2006; Thomson and Colella 1992). The spacing between marriage and childbearing may affect marital quality. Marriages that are hastily contracted due to an unexpected pregnancy are more likely to end in dissolution (Heaton 2002; Timmer and Orbuch 2001). Research by Helms-Erikson (2001) demonstrates that couples who have their first birth relatively early rate their marriages more poorly than couples who delay childbearing.

The importance of the topic lies in its promise of providing useful knowledge for public policy purposes. Although the current U.S. administration lacks basic information on the progression from dating to sexual involvement, it supports efforts to delay the onset of sexual initiation. The Healthy Marriage Initiative is also underway, attempting to promote healthy marriages among low-income couples. Both programs are carried out without fundamental knowledge regarding how romantic relationships progress. The government's recent efforts would be better formulated were they based on research regarding relationship development. Furthermore, if the sequencing and spacing of romantic relationship events is significantly

related to subsequent marital quality, this study can offer models of positive relationship progression patterns. The topic of relationship progression merits further investigation and consideration by policymakers.

### Data

The Marriage and Relationship Survey (MARS) is a nationally representative survey of 433 married couples, where the female partner was aged 18 to 44. The survey was limited to married couples with household incomes of less than \$50,000 and with at least one child in the household. Other than the Fragile Families project, there has been little attention to influences on relationship quality among economically disadvantaged groups. MARS focuses particularly on the quality of adult intimate relationships.

The data were collected in March 2006 using Knowledge Networks (KN), a web-enabled panel with a nationally representative probability sample of U.S. households. Members of the panel are randomly recruited through list-assisted random digit dialing and provided with access to the Internet. The MARS survey was a computer-assisted self-interview, and husbands and wives completed the survey at their residence during the same week. Couples were instructed to complete the survey on their own in a private setting. The questionnaires for males and females were identical. 1232 married persons were fielded, and responses were received from 973 persons, 866 of whom were members of a responding dyad. This makes for a response rate of 70%.

Many surveys do not collect data on relationship events prior to cohabitation. However, the MARS collected retrospective data on couples' relationship progression from the date of romantic initiation. Couple-level data is relatively rarely used in studies on union formation and dissolution (Seltzer et al. 2005).

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