

Behind the “White Picket Fence”: Examining Relationship Stability Among Low Income Married Couples

The past 40 years have brought profound changes in family structure, including a decrease in marriage rates and an increase in nonmarital childbearing. Today, about one-third of all children and 40% of Hispanic and 70% of African American children are born to unmarried parents (Carlson, et al. 2004; Cohen 2003; Ventura et al. 1997; Waller 2001). The Fragile Families study has spawned a great deal of research on unmarried couples who have recently had a child. Early findings on the unmarried parents in the study have provided motivation for marriage-promotion initiatives and have informed the design of marriage-promotion curricula. Some of these marriage initiatives focus on strengthening married couple relationships. However, researchers have yet to take advantage of the married couples in the Fragile Families study as a source of information on how these couples confront everyday challenges and the impact of these challenges on relationship dynamics.

In my paper, I seek to add to the understanding of the experiences of low-income married couples by addressing the following research questions:

- (1) We know that married and unmarried couples differ sharply in their economic status. But, among couples with low-incomes, what economic, attitudinal, and demographic characteristics are most predictive of marital status at birth?
- (2) To what extent do differences in relationship quality distinguish low-income married and unmarried parents? Using longitudinal data from the study, I will also address the direction of causality. Marriage may increase relationship quality; on the other hand, couples with higher quality relationships may be more likely to select into marriage.
- (3) What characteristics distinguish married couples that stay together and those that separate or divorce after having a child together? Research has shown that children generally stabilize relationships, but they may also strain a fragile relationship. What role do new children play when marriages dissolve?
- (4) What role do attitudes about parenting and marriage play in influencing relationship quality, relationship stability and relationship dynamics for low-income married couples?

The results of my paper should be of interest to those who study family formation and policymakers interested in the uncovering those factors which promote relationship stability and improve child outcomes.

Data and Methodology

This paper will use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study survey data as well as data from the TLC3 qualitative subsample of the Fragile Families study. The Fragile Families survey follows a sample of about 5,000 births in 20 large US cities and is nationally representative for nonmarital births. The TLC3 data follows a sample of 75 births in three of the Fragile Families cities over four years. Because both fathers and mothers are followed over the course of the study, the Fragile Families and TLC3 data offer researchers a unique opportunity to examine attitudes towards marriage and also relationship dynamics.

In addition to a descriptive analysis of the characteristics of low-income mothers and fathers by marital status, I will use logistic regression to predict marital status at birth and to assess the relative influence of how economic factors influence relationship quality and marital status at the 30 month followup. I also intend to examine the impact of partner disagreement or inconsistencies in partner reports on relationship stability.

Analysis of data from the TLC-3 qualitative study will be used to uncover the processes which shape relationship trajectories for low-income married couples. Particular attention will be placed on exploring the heterogeneity in relationship quality within these families and the implications of these differences to relationship stability over time.

Expected Findings

Consistent with previous research, my preliminary findings suggest that among low-income couples, married parents are more likely to be older and have somewhat higher levels of educational attainment than unmarried parents. Although Edin and Kefalas (2005) did not find any differences by race in their qualitative sample, nonHispanic whites and Hispanic parents (and foreign born parents) are more likely to be married in the Fragile Families sample than nonHispanic blacks. Married couples in the Fragile Families sample are more likely to have known their partner longer, and have other biological children together with the father. Married couples in the Fragile Families sample were also more likely to have been living with both parents at 15. They were less likely to have had issues with drugs and alcohol and married fathers were less likely to be incarcerated, suggesting that they may be perceived as more “marriageable”. Fathers in married couples are more likely to be working at both baseline and at the one year follow-up. With reference to the baseline survey, low-income married couples appear more traditional in their attitudes concerning gender roles compared to unmarried couples. However, unmarried couples are less likely to agree that it is more important for a man to spend time with his family than to work a lot. Differences in relationship quality also appear salient as unmarried couples are more likely to disagree about the amount of time spent together, about the pregnancy and about partner fidelity.

While most low-income mothers believe that it is at least somewhat important for a husband to have a steady job for a successful marriage, unmarried moms are even more likely to think that their partner’s employment status is **very** important. Low income unmarried mothers are also more likely than married mothers to think that it is very important for the woman to have a steady job as well. Consistent with Edin and Kefalas’ (2005) findings, these results suggest that low-income unmarried mothers do have a high economic bar for marriage that includes achieving a measure of economic independence.

Consistent with these preliminary findings and prior research, I expect agreement between partners in their attitudes toward parenting and marriage to enhance relationship quality and relationship stability over time for low-income married couples. Moreover, consistent with a bargaining model, I expect that partner disagreements to be less relevant to relationship stability where only the father is employed but more significant where the mother is employed. Moreover, heterogeneity in the characteristics of and relationship quality among low-income married couples is likely to shape their relationship trajectories over the course of the Fragile Families study.

References

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