

**Emotional Supportiveness and
the Marriage Decisions of Unmarried Couples**

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Abstract

Policies such as the Healthy Marriage Initiative aim to help couples create and maintain healthy marriages. However, research is still unclear as to whether healthy marriages are the result of marital status per se or of the interpersonal processes within couples. Emotional supportiveness between partners is one aspect of a healthy relationship which may precede marriage. This research confirms that when unmarried partners are more supportive of one another, they are more likely to marry. This is an indication that the health of their relationship preceded their decision to marry, and has implications for policies and programs wishing to promote healthy marriages. These programs should place their focus on the emotional supportiveness and health of premarital and nonmarital relationships. In this way, both relationships which eventually lead to marriage and those which do not would be strengthened.

Emotional Supportiveness and the Marriage Decisions of Unmarried Couples

The Healthy Marriage Initiative, a program developed as a part of TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families), is a multimillion-dollar enterprise aimed at encouraging strong and stable marriages. The initiative is clear in its goal of promoting not just any marriages, but healthy marriages. Wade F. Horn, the Assistant Secretary of the Administration for Children and Families, states that “Our emphasis is on *healthy marriages* – not marriage for the sake of marriage, not marriage at any cost, but healthy marriages that provide a strong and stable environment for raising children” (Horn, 2004; italics in original). While a healthy relationship is indisputably better than a relationship where there is abuse, poor communication, or a lack of conflict resolution skills, it is unclear whether couples who choose marriage have healthier relationships than couples who do not do so. Despite claims that marriage itself is beneficial (Waite & Gallagher, 2000), little is known about the health of premarital relationships of couples who choose to marry in comparison with that of couples who choose not to marry.

This research explores how the relationship health of unmarried couples predicts those who eventually marry. Specifically, it examines the emotional support provided by the partners to one another. If couples who are more supportive are more likely to marry, this is an indication that it may be the health of the couple’s relationship premaritally, rather than the state of marriage, which provides benefits to couples, children and society. There are important implications for policies such as the Healthy Marriage Initiative. If the premarital relationship of couples who marry is more supportive, then programs should focus on the health and supportiveness of all unmarried couples, rather than directing their attention to marriage. In this way, couples who eventually choose to marry could have a healthier beginning to their marriage, and couples who do not go on to marry could also reap the benefits of a healthier relationship.

Marriage

Marriages tend to be longer lasting than nonmarital relationships (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). However, a substantial number of nonmarital relationships persevere, either continuing as they are or making the transition to marriage (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). Also, many marriages end, with the risk of divorce greatest in the first few years of marriage (Kreider & Fields, 2002). Thus, it is probable that factors other than marital status may contribute to the difference in longevity between marital and nonmarital relationships.

One of these factors may be the interactional processes between the partners in the relationship. Research suggests that couples who begin their marriage with shared beliefs and good communication are more likely to have a stable marriage (Larson & Holman, 1994). Terling-Watt (2001) finds that spouses who report disagreements about money and who spend little time together are more likely to divorce. Among cohabiting couples, future plans are an important factor, with couples who intend to marry just as satisfied with their relationship as married couples (Brown & Booth, 1996). However, there remains very little research exploring couple interactional processes in unmarried couples, and even less examining how the relationship processes of unmarried couples may precede their eventual marriage.

Researchers examining the differences between married and unmarried couples find that there are clear selection effects drawing individuals into or away from marriage (see, for example, Lilliard, O’Brien, & Waite, 1995). In addition, Carlson, McLanahan, and England (2004) find that unmarried couples with higher-quality relationships are more likely to increase the commitment level in their relationships, either by moving to a romantic relationship, by cohabiting, or by marrying. Therefore, there is a strong indication that there is a joint selectivity process leading to both

relationship processes and marital status; those couples who have more positive relationship processes may also be those drawn to formalizing their relationship through marriage.

Emotionally Supportive Relationships

The emotional supportiveness in a relationship is a key indicator of the health of that relationship, although research often overlooks it (Erickson, 1993; Stevens et al, 2001). Emotional support can include both expressions as well as actions of caring for the partner and commitment to the relationship. As such, supportiveness itself is beneficial to the partners in the relationship, and it also brings with it other benefits to the couple. Both married and cohabiting individuals who do not feel supportiveness in their relationship report higher levels of psychological distress than individuals who feel emotionally supported by their partners (Ross, 1995).

In a healthy relationship, both individuals should feel supported by their partner, since a relationship where one partner provides emotional support but the other does not can hardly be said to be healthy. Indeed, research has found profound effects on the quality of the relationship when both partners are supportive of one another. Couple supportiveness has been found to positively impact relationships by contributing to higher levels of marital happiness (Wright & Aquilino, 1998), greater satisfaction with the relationship (Holm et al, 2001), and positive mood (Gleason et al, 2003). Thus, couple emotional supportiveness contributes to a healthier relationship.

Emotional support may also enhance the health of a relationship by contributing to its stability. The emotional quality of a marriage has been found to be an influential dynamic in the stability of that marriage (Booth et al. 1985; Sayer and Bianchi 2000; Sanchez and Gager 2000; Gottman 1994; Karney and Bradbury 1995), and supportiveness is also a very important predictor of the stability of nonmarital unions (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004).

When both partners provide emotional support to one another, they will have a healthier relationship. If a supportive unmarried couple eventually marries, they will begin their marriage with a better chance at a longer-lasting marriage. Even if a supportive unmarried couple does not marry, they could reap the benefits of being in a healthier relationship.

Research Focus

This research builds on the Carlson, McLanahan, and England (2004) study by exploring the dynamics of couple supportiveness, rather than the reports of support by only one partner, and by focusing specifically on the marriage behavior of the unmarried couples. In this way, it will be able to assess how couple relationship processes contribute to the decisions of unmarried couples to marry. It will also contribute to our understanding of the differential selection processes drawing couples into or away from marriage.

Methods

Data

This couple-level analysis uses data from the first two interviews of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey. Fragile Families is unique because it provides extensive information on both married and unmarried relationships, as well as data on both female and male partners. Interviews for the Fragile Families study were conducted in 20 U.S. cities which were drawn from a random sample stratified by labor market conditions and welfare policies. The first interview was conducted at the birth of the couple's child, and the second interview took place about one year later. The weighted sample is representative of unmarried births in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. For a complete report of the study design and sample, see Reichman et al. (2001).

The sample used in the analysis includes couples who in a romantic relationship, either cohabiting or not, at the first interview, where both the female and the male partner participated in the first interview and the female partner participated in the second interview. Of the 4898 cases in the total sample, 2050 were thus eligible for the current study. An additional requirement to being included in the final sample was to have provided responses to the questions used in the analysis; there were 27 cases (1% of eligible couples) missing the couple characteristics variables and 213 cases (10% of eligible couples) missing the supportiveness variables. These restrictions provided a final sample of 1810 couples.

This analysis is conducted with the couple as the unit of analysis. All variables are based on the couple's shared characteristics and experiences. In the analyses, couples are entered into the model as a single unit rather than as two individuals, thus eliminating the problem of nonindependence. The necessity for couple-level analysis and the specifics of conducting these analyses are detailed by Thompson & Walker (1982).

Marriage Decisions and Type of Relationship

In the overall sample of unmarried couples, 67% of the couples were cohabiting at the first interview (they reported being in a romantic relationship and living together), and 33% of couples were dating at the first interview (they reported being in a romantic relationship but were not living together). By the second interview, 36% of the unmarried couples had ended their relationship, 50% were still together but were not married, and 15% were married. More dating couples than cohabiting couples ended their relationship. When dating couples stayed together, most moved into a cohabiting arrangement. Interestingly, of cohabiting and dating couples who did not end their relationship, almost the same proportion of each got married.

Emotional Supportiveness

The independent variable of interest is the emotional support provided by partners to each other. This variable is based on three questions at the first interview asking both partners whether their partner "was fair and willing to compromise when you had a disagreement," "encouraged or helped you to do things that were important to you," or expressed affection or love for you." Responses could include often, sometimes, or never. These variables are termed "fair," "help," and "love," respectively.

A measure of couple support was constructed separately for each of these three areas by comparing whether the two partners responded that their partner 'often' provided support. Couples could thus be in one of three categories: both partners provided support, one partner provided support, or neither partner provided support. Figure 1 gives these couple measures for each area of supportiveness. This coding is similar to other research comparing partner responses categorically (see, for example, Gager & Sanchez, 2003).

In addition, a measure of total support was created which assessed the number of areas in which both couples reported support 'often.' This measure of total support could range from 0, meaning that the partners were supportive of one another in none of the areas, to 3, meaning that the partners were supportive of one another in all three areas. The overall mean number of areas partner were supportive was 1.8 ($SD = 0.98$), with cohabiting couples at 1.8 ($SD = 0.96$) and dating couples at 1.6 ($SD = 1.01$).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Expressing love to one another was the area of supportiveness which had the highest percentage of couples who were both supportive, while the lowest percentage was for being fair and willing to compromise, as shown in Figure 1. Being fair also had the highest percentage of couples where neither partner was supportive. When cohabiting and dating couples are examined separately, they have the same number where both are fair, but there are fewer cohabiting couples where neither is fair than dating couples. Cohabiting and dating couples are basically alike in their provision of help and love, however.

Couple Characteristics

In addition to the type of relationship the couple was in at the first interview and their emotional supportiveness, a number of other characteristics were included in the analysis. For each of these characteristics, a couple measure was created from the two individual responses. The individual responses are not given here, but are available upon request. The complete description of each of these couple characteristics is detailed in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Age was measured using a continuous variable of the mean ages of the two partners. In addition, dichotomous variables measured whether either partner was under age 18 and whether the couple had an age difference of greater than 5 years. The average age of the couples ranged from 16 to 51, with a mean of 25, and cohabiting couples were older than dating couples. More couples with partners under 18 were in dating relationships, and one-third of all couples were in age-discrepant partnerships.

The length of the relationship is measured by a question asking the number of years the partners knew each other before the pregnancy; because it is skewed, the log is used in the analysis. Couples reported knowing each other for between 1 month and 30 years before the pregnancy, with an average of 4 years. Cohabiting and dating couples reported similar lengths of time.

The children the couple had together was measured by questions asking the woman how many children she and her current partner had together, and how many children she had with other partners. The analysis thus compares couples who had only one child with couples who had more than one child, couples where the woman had at least one child with another partner, and couples who had both more than one child together and where the woman had at least one child with another partner. This measure did not include whether the man had children with other partners, since the questions asked of the male partner only gave an incomplete estimate. Most couples only have one child together, and more cohabiting couples than dating couples have more than one child together.

The ethnicity of the couple was assessed by comparing couples where both partners are White with couples where both partners are Black, both are Hispanic, both are Asian or Native American, and where the two partners have different ethnic backgrounds. While the largest group of cohabiting couples is Hispanic (35%), the largest group of dating couples is Black (61%).

Education was a couple variable assessing both level of education and whether the partners had similar educational levels. Couples who shared educational levels had either both partners having more than a high school education, both a high school diploma, or both less than a high school education. Couples with different educational levels had either one partner with a high school education and one with less, one partner with more than a high school education and the

other with less, or one partner with more than a high school education and the other with a high school diploma. The educational levels of the sample were quite low. The largest groups of couples were evenly divided between both partners with less than a high school education and one with less and the other with a high school diploma.

Supportiveness and Marriage

For couples who were unmarried at the first interview, more supportive couples should be more likely to get married as opposed to either staying together without marrying or ending their relationship by the second interview. Multinomial logit regression models were used to predict whether couples were together but unmarried versus married, and no longer together versus married, with these models detailed in Table 2. Model 1 only includes couple characteristics, while Model 2 adds the measure of total support and Model 3 adds all three supportiveness areas. This preliminary analysis takes a first look at the impact of couple supportiveness on the decision to marry. Further analysis will continue to explore this in more depth.

Model 1 shows that the couples' age and education influenced their decision to marry as opposed to either staying together unmarried or ending the relationship. Younger couples were less likely to marry than older couples, and couples with less than a high school education were less likely to marry than couples with more than a high school education. Different factors, however, predicted whether couples ended their relationship or stayed together without marrying. The longer a couple knew each other, the less likely they were to marry as opposed to stay together without marrying. Also, couples where one partner had more than a high school education while the other had only a high school education were less likely to marry as opposed to staying together unmarried. Black couples, while no less likely to marry than to stay together unmarried, were nevertheless much more likely to end their relationship than to marry. It is particularly interesting to note that, while dating couples are more likely to end their relationship than cohabiting couples, there is no difference between the two types of couples in whether they marry or stay together unmarried.

The analysis in Model 2 confirms that supportiveness is a key factor in the decision to marry. When unmarried couples are more supportive of one another, they are more likely to marry. This holds for both marriage versus staying together unmarried, as well as for marriage versus ending the relationship. The more extensive the partners' support for one another, as evidenced by the number of areas where they both are supportive, the more likely they are to marry. The chance of remaining unmarried, as opposed to marrying, decreased by 17% for each additional area of support ($e^{-0.19} = 0.826$). This means that a couple who is not supportive in any way will be half as likely to marry as a couple who is supportive across all three areas.

When specific areas of support were examined in Model 3, fairness appeared as the most important indicator of whether the couple would marry. Couples where both partners were fair were significantly more likely than couples where neither partner was fair to marry, as opposed to staying together unmarried. Couples where both partners were fair were half as likely to remain unmarried as couples where neither partner was fair, with their chances of remaining unmarried decreased by 48% ($e^{-0.65} = 0.522$). When looking at couples who stayed together versus couples who married, it is clear that only when both partners were fair were they more likely to marry; there was no difference between couples where only one partner was fair and couples where neither partner was fair. In addition, only being fair and willing to compromise affected marriage decisions, since the other areas of support did not affect whether or not couples married.

It is important to note that it is specifically when the partners are supportive of one another that they are more likely to marry as opposed to staying together without marrying. Emotional support provided by only one partner did not have any effect on whether or not the couple married

or simply stayed together. Previous research which only examines the reports of one partner thus may not be accurately assessing the impact of supportiveness on the couple's decisions to marry. The supportiveness of both partners also has a cumulative effect: When the two partners were supportive of one another in more ways, they were more encouraged to marry. Likewise, when the partners both were fair and willing to compromise, they were more likely to choose to marry. It is only in the interactional process of both partners being supportive that marriage is more likely.

Discussion

When couples have a mutually supportive relationship, they are more likely to marry. This clearly confirms research finding that there is a selection process distinguishing couples who marry from those who do not. It also corroborates the Carlson, McLanahan, and England (2004) study by finding that unmarried couples in higher-quality relationships, specifically those with emotional supportiveness, are not only more likely to increase their commitment to one another, they are also more likely to marry.

The impact of supportiveness on marriage decisions can help to explain why marriages may be longer lasting and confer more benefits than nonmarital relationships. If couples who have healthier relationships even before marriage are also more likely to marry, then the benefits of marriage may stem more from the quality of the premarital relationship than from the state of being married.

Supportiveness is a precursor to a strong and healthy marriage, indicating that policies such as the Healthy Marriage Initiative aimed at encouraging this type of relationship may need to refocus their priorities. Rather than directing their resources to the goal of marriage, they should consider concentrating on the current relationships of unmarried couples. By encouraging unmarried partners to be more supportive of one another, they would not only reach their goal of promoting the eventual healthy marriages of those couples who choose to marry, but they would also be helping to strengthen and increase the health of relationships of couples who may not eventually marry. All of these couples, their children, and society, will benefit from a stronger and healthier relationship, whether or not they eventually marry.

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Table 1: Couple Characteristics of Unmarried Couples¹

	All Unmarried Couples	Cohabiting Couples	Dating Couples
Age			
Couple average			
Mean Years (SD)	25 (5.7)	26 (5.7)	24 (5.6)
Under 18 (%)	5	3	10
Difference of 5 years or more (%)	31	32	28
Relationship Length			
Mean Years (SD)	4 (3.86)	4 (3.9)	4 (3.8)
Children (%)			
One together	40	39	43
More than one together	19	23	11
Separately only	30	27	37
Separately and together	11	12	9
Ethnicity (%)			
Both White	14	19	5
Both Black	38	27	61
Both Hispanic	30	35	20
Both Asian / Both Native American	1	1	>1
Different Ethnicities	17	18	14
Education (%)			
Both less than HS	22	22	23
Both High School	18	19	18
Both more than HS	10	10	8
One HS, one less	24	23	24
One more, one less	10	9	11
One more, one HS	16	17	15
N (% of total)	1810	1153 (67)	657 (33)

¹ Data are from the Fragile Families study, where partners were unmarried and in a romantic relationship at the first interview. Percentages are weighted to be representative of unmarried births in U.S. cities larger than 200,000. Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

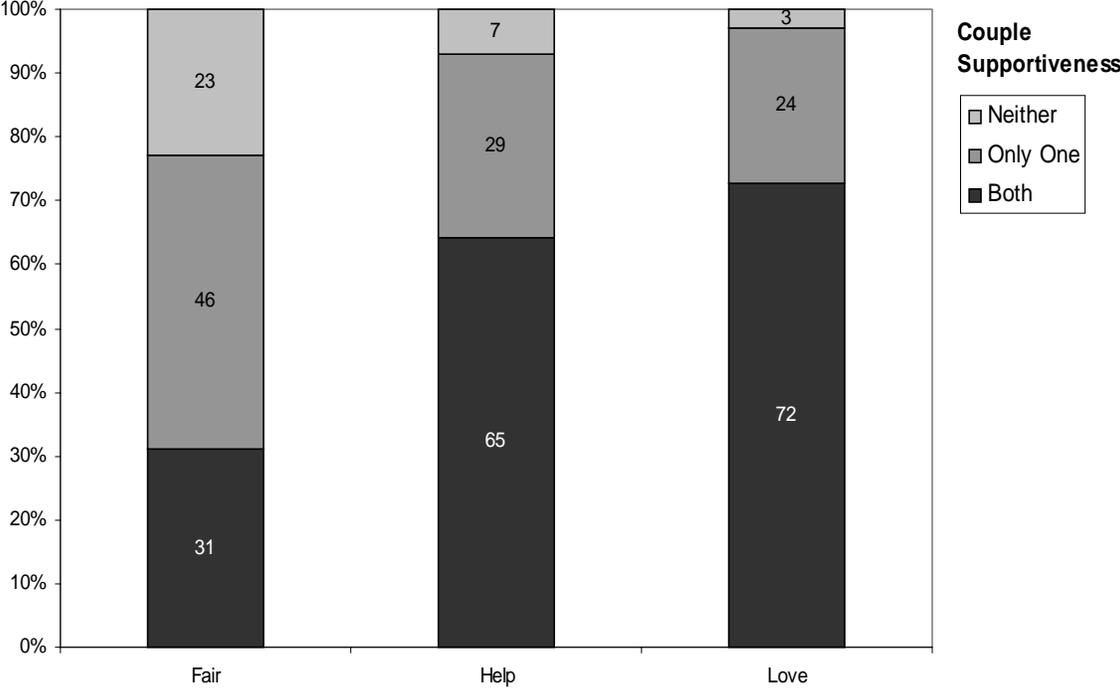
Table 2: Supportiveness as a Predictor of Marriage for Unmarried Couples¹

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Unmarried vs. Married	Not Together vs. Married	Unmarried vs. Married	Not Together vs. Married	Unmarried vs. Married	Not Together vs. Married
Age						
Couple average	-0.04 *	-0.03 *	-0.04 *	-0.03 *	-0.04 *	-0.03 *
Under 18	-0.49	0.01	-0.50	0.01	-0.04	-0.01
Difference of 5+ years	0.32	0.19	0.30	0.17	0.31	0.18
Length of relationship	0.21 **	0.13	0.21 **	0.12	0.21 **	0.13
Children (vs. One child)						
Together	-0.25	-0.25	-0.32	-0.42	-0.33	-0.44
Separately	0.17	0.24	0.16	0.20	0.14	0.19
Separately and Together	0.22	0.20	0.19	0.10	0.17	0.08
Ethnicity (vs. Both White)						
Both Black	0.37	0.89 ***	0.36	0.87 ***	0.29	0.83 **
Both Hispanic	-0.08	-0.27	-0.78	-0.27	-0.29	-0.29
Different	0.07	0.36	0.09	0.40	0.04	0.37
Education (vs. Both more)						
Both less than HS	0.53 *	0.63 *	0.49	0.55	0.53 *	0.59 *
Both HS	0.32	0.32	0.29	0.28	0.33	0.32
One more, one HS	0.54 *	0.54	0.51	0.47	0.53 *	0.49
One more, one less	0.37	0.17	0.34	0.11	0.12	0.14
One HS, one less	0.22	0.14	0.21	0.09	0.24	0.13
Relationship Type						
Dating (vs. Cohabiting)	0.20	1.06 ***	0.15	0.94 ***	0.15	0.94 ***
Supportiveness						
Total Support			-0.19 *	-0.49 ***		
Fair (vs. Neither Fair)						
Both					-0.65 **	-0.99 ***
Only One					-0.43	-0.51 *
Help (vs. Neither Help)						
Both					0.61	-0.09
Only One					0.63	0.27
Love (vs. Neither Love)						
Both					-0.36	-0.79
Only One					-0.03	-0.36
Intercept	1.66 ***	0.64	2.09 ***	1.66 **	1.86 *	2.01 **
Likelihood Ratio χ^2	3272	3272	3242	3242	3236	3236

¹ Data are from the Fragile Families study, and include 1810 couples where partners were unmarried and in a romantic relationship at the first interview.

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Figure 1: Couple Supportiveness of Unmarried Couples¹



¹ Data are from the Fragile Families study, and include 1810 couples where partners were unmarried and in a romantic relationship at the first interview. Percentages are weighted to be representative of unmarried births in U.S. cities larger than 200,000. Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.