

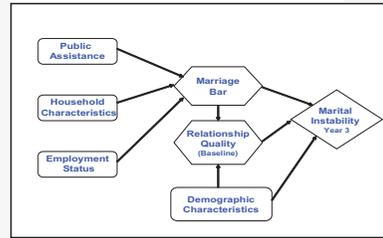
Behind the White Picket Fence: The “Marriage Bar” and Marriage Instability in Fragile Families

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The “Marriage Bar”

- Economically disadvantaged couples hold themselves to a high economic standard for marriage – refer to this standard as the “marriage bar” (Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Smock et al, 2005)
- The “marriage bar” is characterized by:
 - Independent household/homeownership
 - Employed/Husband Employed
 - No public assistance
- But some couples may marry even if they do not meet the marriage bar

Conceptual Framework



Research Questions

- What characteristics distinguish married couples that meet the “marriage bar” from those who do not?
- Are couples who meet the “marriage bar” more stable?
- Does relationship quality influence marital instability for couples who do not meet the “marriage bar”?

Data and Methods

Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey

- Baseline Survey: Characteristics and measures of relationship quality
- Year 1 Survey: Marital status at year 1
- Year 3 Survey: Marital status at year 3

Sample: Of 1,186 mothers married at baseline 1,000 mothers (84%) reported marital status at all three survey waves

I ran logistic regression models to assess the influence of the marriage bar and relationship quality on marital instability

Dependent Variable: Marital Instability

A couple was coded as unstable if:

- Married at baseline but not at year 3
- Married at baseline, Not in relationship at year 1, Remarried at year 3

880 couples were coded as stable (88%)

120 couples were coded as unstable (12%)

Constructing the “Marriage Bar”

Couples meet the “marriage bar” if:

- Both report that they had worked in the past year
- Respondents owned their home or lived in a household with no more than 2 adults
- The mother reported that she did not receive public assistance

66.2% of couples met the marriage bar

Other Variables

RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

- Companionship (Summed scale)
- Support (Averaged scale)
- Conflict: Money, Time, Sex, Drug Use and Fidelity

OTHER CONTROLS:

Age, Race, Education, Nativity, Length of Relationship, Multi-partner Fertility

Results

	MODEL 1 Maternal and Paternal Characteristics	MODEL 2 Maternal and Paternal Characteristics and Length of Relationship	MODEL 3A Maternal and Paternal Characteristics and Length of Relationship
Met Marriage Bar	0.47 (0.13)**	0.52 (0.15)*	0.55 (0.18)
COMPANIONSHIP (Sum)			
Mother's report			1.00 (0.17)
Father's report			1.12 (0.20)
SUPPORT (average)			
Mother's report			0.11 (0.08)**
Father's report			0.82 (0.53)
CONFLICT			
Conflict over money (Mother's report)			2.89 (1.11)**
Conflict over time (Mother's report)			1.19 (0.37)
Conflict over sex (Mother's report)			0.39 (0.13)**
Conflict over drugs (Mother's report)			1.95 (0.95)
Conflict over infidelity (Mother's report)			2.97 (1.40)*
Conflict over money (Father's report)			1.05 (0.36)
Conflict over time (Father's report)			0.46 (0.16)*
Conflict over sex (Father's report)			1.64 (0.56)
Conflict over drugs (Father's report)			1.23 (0.57)
Conflict over infidelity (Father's report)			1.03 (0.50)

	MODEL 1 Maternal and Paternal Characteristics	MODEL 2 Maternal and Paternal Characteristics and Length of Relationship	MODEL 3B Maternal and Paternal Characteristics and Length of Relationship
Met Marriage Bar	0.47 (0.13)**	0.52 (0.15)*	0.52 (0.17)*
COMPANIONSHIP (Sum)			
Mother's report			0.95 (0.17)
Father's report			1.13 (0.20)
SUPPORT (average)			
Mother's report			0.10 (0.07)**
Father's report			0.87 (0.58)
MONEY			
Mother reports conflict			2.18 (1.14)
Father reports conflict			0.69 (0.49)
Both mother and father report conflict			3.03 (1.32)*
TIME			
Mother reports conflict			2.01 (0.81)
Father reports conflict			0.76 (0.34)
Both mother and father report conflict			0.52 (0.22)
SEX			
Mother reports conflict			0.23 (0.12)**
Father reports conflict			1.35 (0.59)
Both mother and father report conflict			0.86 (0.36)
DRUGS			
Mother reports conflict			0.78 (0.56)
Father reports conflict			0.86 (0.50)
Both mother and father report conflict			3.76 (2.16)*
INFIDELITY			
Mother reports conflict			3.99 (2.27)*
Father reports conflict			1.20 (0.70)
Both mother and father report conflict			2.01 (1.42)

Limitations

- “Marriage Bar” based on baseline data, not on couple's situation prior to marriage
- Marital and gender attitudes might also influence relationship quality and marital instability, particularly if partners' attitudes are not shared
- Changes in employment status or economic status over time are likely to strain families and influence marital stability

Conclusions

- A couple's ability to meet a “marriage bar” – essentially a measure of economic stability – is associated with marital stability
- High levels of conflict are associated with marital instability for Fragile Families
- Economic pressures are a significant source of conflict and instability for married couples in the Fragile Families sample

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