

Romantic Relationship Trajectories:
Correlates and Consequences for Marital Quality among Low-Income Couples

Dissertation

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By

Margaret Anne Gassanov, M.A.

Graduate Program in Sociology

The Ohio State University

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Dissertation Committee:

Elizabeth Cooksey, Advisor

Kristi Williams

Claire Kamp Dush

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Abstract

Through the *Healthy Marriage Initiative*, the U.S. government promotes marital quality among low-income persons despite a lack of knowledge about marital quality and its predictors among the target population. Little is known about how couples' romantic relationship trajectories may impact marital quality, even with profound variation in ways couples form unions. To investigate this lacuna, I address four research aims using data from 399 low-income married couples in the *Marriage and Relationship Survey*.

My first two research aims offer new knowledge on low-income couples' romantic relationship trajectories and their predictors. First, I describe the *sequencing* of four events following the start of the dating relationship: sex, cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing. I differentiate couples into four mutually exclusive groups: (1) "traditional" couples, who neither cohabited nor had sex prior to marriage; (2) "traditional-plus-sex" couples, who did engage in premarital sex, but did not cohabit before marriage; (3) "modern" couples, who engaged in premarital sex and cohabited prior marrying; and (4) "unconventional" couples, who, besides premarital sex and cohabitation, also experienced premarital joint parenthood. I then describe couples' relationship *spacing*, i.e., the time separating: (1) dating and marriage; (2) dating and first sex; (3) dating and cohabitation; (4) cohabitation and marriage; and (5) marriage and the postmarital birth of the couples' first child. I find genuinely different romantic relationship trajectories, with

couples engaging in sex, cohabitation, and childbearing at varying rates and at various time points in the relationship. My second research aim is to explore sociodemographic factors associated with couples' relationship trajectories. Using multinomial logistic regression and Cox proportional hazards models, I find the calendar year the couple began dating, previous union history of the couple, and experiences in the family of origin to be significant correlates. The question remains: Are relationship trajectories related to marital quality among low-income couples?

The third aim of my study, therefore, examines whether associations exist between relationship trajectories and marital quality. Using ideas from the inertia and constraint commitment hypotheses and marital search theory, I hypothesize that couples who engaged in premarital sex, cohabitation, and childbearing will report poorer marital quality than those who delayed some or all of these events until marriage and that the time spent between most relationship events would be positively related to marital quality. I run a series of logistic regression models, comparing spouses reporting high marital satisfaction, high commitment, and low conflict to those who do not. I find that relationship trajectories are not strongly related to subsequent marital quality, at least for my sample. I point to deficiencies of the theories but am mindful that the absence of trajectory effects may be due to sample selection.

My final research aim is to examine other correlates of marital quality among low-income couples. I find the frequency of joint religious activity is positively associated with high marital quality, while severe economic hardship has the opposite effect. Other significant correlates of marital quality are employment, race, and

childhood experience of parental marriage. I conclude by discussing policy implications of my findings.

Dedicated to persons making marriages succeed—especially my husband.

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Vita

- 1996.....Smithville District Christian High School
- 2000.....B.A. Sociology, Religion & Theology,
Redeemer University College
- 2003.....M.A. Sociology, The Ohio State University
- 2006.....Graduate Interdisciplinary Certificate in
Survey Research, The Ohio State University

Publications

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgments.....	vi
Vita.....	vii
List of Tables.....	ix
List of Figures.....	xi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Theory and Literature Review.....	12
Chapter 3: Data, Measures, and Analytic Strategy.....	81
Chapter 4: Results.....	109
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions.....	188
References.....	219
Appendix A: Descriptive Statistics for Independent Variables that were Collapsed in Analyses.....	256

List of Tables

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for all Variables for Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 399).	114
Table 2. Odds Ratios (SE) from Multinomial Logistic Regression Model Predicting Relationship Sequence among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 387)	122
Table 3. Hazard Ratios (SE) from Cox Model for Hazard of Marriage after Dating Initiation among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 387).	127
Table 4. Odds Ratios (SE) from Multinomial Logistic Regression Model Predicting Spacing from Dating Initiation to Premarital Sex among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who had Premarital Sex (n = 312).	132
Table 5. Hazard Ratios (SE) from Cox Model for Hazard of Premarital Cohabitation after Dating Initiation among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 387).	136
Table 6. Hazard Ratios (SE) from Cox Model for Hazard of Marriage after Initiation of Premarital Cohabitation among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who Experienced Premarital Cohabitation (n = 200).	140
Table 7. Hazard Ratios (SE) from Cox Model for Hazard of First Shared Birth after Marriage among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who did not Experience a Shared Premarital Birth (n = 329).	144
Table 8. Summary of Multivariate Results for Spacing Variables.	149

Table 9. Odds Ratios (SE) from Bivariate and Multivariate Logistic Regression Models Predicting Marital Quality with Relationship Sequence among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 392).	156
Table 10. Odds Ratios (SE) from Bivariate and Multivariate Logistic Regression Models Predicting Marital Quality with Spacing from Dating Initiation to Marriage among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 392).	159
Table 11. Odds Ratios (SE) from Bivariate and Multivariate Logistic Regression Models Predicting Marital Quality with Spacing from Dating Initiation to First Sex among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 392).	164
Table 12. Odds Ratios (SE) from Bivariate and Multivariate Logistic Regression Models Predicting Marital Quality with Spacing from Dating Initiation to Premarital Cohabitation among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who Experienced Premarital Cohabitation (n = 203).	169
Table 13. Odds Ratios (SE) from Bivariate and Multivariate Logistic Regression Models Predicting Marital Quality with Spacing from Initiation of Premarital Cohabitation to Marriage among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who Experienced Premarital Cohabitation (n = 203).	174
Table 14. Odds Ratios (SE) from Bivariate and Multivariate Logistic Regression Models Predicting Marital Quality with Spacing from Marriage to First Shared Birth among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who had a First Shared Birth After Marriage (n = 291).	179
Table A1. Descriptive Statistics for Independent Variables that were Collapsed	256

List of Figures

Figure 1. Kaplan-Meier Failure Functions from Dating Initiation to Marriage among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS, by Sequence (n = 399).	125
Figure 2. Time from Dating Initiation to Premarital Sex among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who had Premarital Sex, by Sequence (n = 312).....	129
Figure 3. Kaplan-Meier Failure Functions from Dating Initiation to Premarital Cohabitation among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who Experienced Premarital Cohabitation, by Sequence (n = 209).....	134
Figure 4. Kaplan-Meier Failure Functions from Initiation of Premarital Cohabitation to Marriage among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who Experienced Premarital Cohabitation, by Sequence (n = 209).....	138
Figure 5. Kaplan-Meier Failure Functions from Marriage to First Birth among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who did not experience a Premarital Birth, by Sequence (n = 339).	142

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the past, romantic relationships progressed somewhat predictably: couples dated, they got married, and then they had children. Cohabitation was uncommon, and premarital sex, although widespread, was considered unacceptable by moral standards (Thornton et al. 1998). Premarital pregnancies were usually legitimated through marriage (Ellwood and Jencks 2004a).

Due to changing norms and attitudes regarding premarital sex, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation over the past few decades, significant variability now exists in the timing and order of romantic relationship events—if some events even occur at all (Glenn and Marquardt 2001). Sex is no longer reserved for marriage: with an average age of first sex at 17 years, men and women spend about ten years being sexually active before marrying (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2002). Cohabitation is also now commonplace: recent estimates suggest that over half of young adults have lived in a cohabiting union and that a similar proportion of all marriages are now preceded by cohabitation (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Raley 2000). Additionally, the proportion of births occurring outside of marital unions has increased: in 2004, 36 percent of all births occurred outside of marriage, and among racial/ethnic minorities the proportions were even higher (Martin et al. 2006). The proportion of children born to cohabiting parents today approximates 15 percent, more than double the proportion in the 1980s (Osborne, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn 2005). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2003:507) chronicle

relationship changes in the following manner:

... The model of a proper family used to include a clearly defined temporal sequence: “love—marriage—baby carriage”; first the meeting of hearts, then the union certified by the registry office and/or church, then, as the culmination of love, children. That was the norm, and most people more or less approximated to it—on pain of massive sanctions. This picture of a “correct sequence” still exists in the minds of many people, and wide sections of the population still live it out. Ever more openly and frequently, however, different models are appearing alongside it. For example, love does not necessarily have to lead to the registry office: an increasing number of couples live together without a certificate.... Parenthood is also increasingly separate from a marriage certificate.... In other words, the clearly prescribed order of old has given way to a variety of trajectories and models.

Despite the profound changes in romantic relationship trajectories, sociological literature on the topic is in its nascent stage. Little is known about the effects of various relationship pathways, including their effect on subsequent marital quality (Nock 2003b; Pinsof 2002; Surra et al. 2006). Longer courtships, for instance, may result in higher quality marriages because of the greater time to assess compatibility (Sassler and Kamp Dush 2008; Surra, Arizzi, and Asmussen 1988). Or, premarital cohabitation may be tied to lower marital quality because relationship inertia is the driving force behind marriage (Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman 2006a). These interpersonal decisions may have ramifications for society in general, as Nock (2003b: para. 4) wrote:

The way unions are formed influences their development and stability, which in turn influences society as much, if not more, than any other single force. A dramatic change in the ways intimate unions are formed will therefore have significant implications, not just for individuals, but also for the entire society. At the personal level, the way couples come together influences whether, when, and how many children they have. It influences decisions about participation in the labor force and affects the standard of living. It influences how long people remain together as well as their health and longevity. Collectively, the aggregate consequences of union formations are crucial for the economy and the social fabric.

The potential impact of relationship trajectories on marital quality is especially pertinent given the U.S. government's active promotion of healthy marriage. The *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996* heralded governmental marriage promotion efforts. Momentum was renewed in 2001 when the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF) launched the *Healthy Marriage Initiative*, to "strengthen and support" marriage, and again when the *Deficit Reduction Act of 2005* authorized spending \$150 million annually from 2006 to 2010 for healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood promotion. Through relationship skills-training programs, marriage mentoring programs, and related efforts, the government has hoped to increase the percentage of young adults and premarital couples, among others, that have the knowledge and skills needed to form healthy marriages (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2009).

At the heart of the government's marriage promotion policies is marital quality, or what the ACF calls "healthy marriages". Healthy marriages are those that are mutually satisfying, beneficial to both spouses and to children, and where husbands and wives are respectful of each other (ibid.). To be sure, the intention of the ACF is not to coerce persons to remain in unhealthy marriages or to stigmatize divorce. An unhealthy marriage reduces many of the benefits of marriage, which include emotional well-being (Aldous and Ganey 1999; Glenn 1990), physical health (Umberson et al. 2006; Wickrama et al. 1997), good parenting (Carlson and McLanahan 2006) and parenting satisfaction (Rogers and White 1998). Married persons have better mental and physical health and fare better economically than both single and cohabiting persons (Waite and Gallagher

2000). Children benefit from their parents' healthy marriage both directly and indirectly with better physical and emotional health, economic well-being, academic achievement, and more successful interpersonal relationships (Amato 2005; Amato and Booth 1997; Manning and Lichter 1996).

The rationale for marriage promotion is to reduce reliance on government benefits, including welfare, health care, and mental health-care services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2009). Consequently, healthy marriage initiatives are emphasized in programs serving low-income populations, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families services, Children's Bureau, and Community Services (Fein and Ooms 2006). Given the government's aim to promote healthy marriages, we need to know more about marital quality and its predictors, particularly among the low-income population (Fein 2004; Moore et al. 2007). Below, I review the literature on marital quality among low-income couples.

MARITAL QUALITY AMONG LOW-INCOME COUPLES

Economically disadvantaged Americans are less likely to enjoy the benefits that marriage provides to adults and their children. First, poor individuals are less likely to get married (McLaughlin and Lichter 1997; Schoen and Cheng 2006; Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005; Sweeney 2002). Recent data from the *National Survey of Family Growth* (NSFG) reveal that 64 percent of women with family incomes of less than \$25,000 marry by age 30, compared to 83 percent of women with family incomes of \$50,000 or more (Bramlett and Mosher 2002).

Poor couples who do marry then tend to experience stressors that differ from those of middle- and upper-income families, putting them at a higher risk for poor marital outcomes. Many low-income couples end up with complex family relationships, including nonmarital and multiple-partner births (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Ellwood and Jencks 2004a; Fein 2004; Karney, Garvan, and Thomas 2003; Martinez et al. 2006; Ooms 2002; Roy, Buckmiller, and McDowell 2008; Waite 2000), which lead to potential role ambiguities and other difficulties, thereby increasing couple tension and conflict (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004; Cherlin 1992; Dion 2005; Kurdek 1991; Moore et al. 2004) and causing an increased risk of marital disruption (Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Graefe and Lichter 2002; O'Connell and Rogers 1984). Poor married couples also tend to be young: 47 percent of poor married women are under age 35, compared with only 18 percent of those with incomes at least six times the poverty threshold (Fein 2004; Moore et al. 2007). Perhaps due to their fewer financial and emotional resources to undertake the responsibilities of marriage (Booth and Edwards 1985; Johnson et al 2002), couples marrying at a young age face a greater likelihood of marital disruption (Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Seiler 2002). Poor families also suffer higher rates of domestic abuse, depression, drug abuse, and incarceration (Karney et al. 2003; Ooms 2002; Schramm et al. 2003; Seccombe 2002). Arguably, the accumulated and chronic stresses faced by poor couples spill over into the home and limit their ability to manage conflict and negative events (Dyk 2004; Karney, Story, and Bradbury 2005; Ooms 2002).

In addition, poor couples are often unstably or under-employed, reside in poor and potentially dangerous neighborhoods, and have lower levels of educational attainment and higher rates of morbidity that make upward mobility challenging (Dyk 2004; Johnson et al. 2002; Ooms 2002; Schramm et al. 2003; Seccombe 2002). Income can buffer difficult circumstances (Waite et al. 2000), and a lack of resources is itself a stressor that often results in conflict between spouses (Waller 2008). According to the family stress model formulated by Conger and colleagues (1990, 1999), which depicts the mechanisms relating economic stress and low marital quality, objective economic hardship leads to perceived economic pressure, which in turn produces greater emotional distress and depression, resulting in less warmth and more hostility in interactions between spouses. These interactions then undermine marital quality. Similar mechanisms were found by Vinokur, Price, and Caplan (1996) in their analyses of the effect of recent unemployment on couples' relationship satisfaction.

These patterns help to explain why, on average, low-income persons have lower marital quality than their non-poor counterparts (Clark-Nicolas and Gray-Little 1991; Cutrona et al. 2003; Fein 2004; Rogers and Amato 1997; White and Rogers 2000). In a recent survey, the percentage of respondents reporting being "very happy" in their marriage rises from 56 percent in the bottom income group to 68 percent in the top income group, while the proportion reporting being "not too happy" in their marriage declines with income range (Fein 2004). Mean scores on indices for marital quality reveal less marital happiness and less frequent positive interaction among poor couples (ibid.). In recent state surveys, low-income persons scored lower than their non-poor

counterparts on multiple measures of marital satisfaction and commitment and higher on negative interaction (Johnson et al. 2002; Karney et al. 2003; Schramm et al. 2003).

Economic advantage is associated with more marital happiness and less divorce, while economic hardship is related to increased hostility in marital interactions, reduced supportive behaviors between spouses, lower marital quality, and increased thoughts of divorce (Conger et al. 1990; Cutrona et al. 2003; Johnson and Booth 1990; Vinokur et al. 1996; White and Rogers 2000).

Poor couples are consequently more likely than their non-poor counterparts to separate or divorce (Fein 2004; Moore et al. 2007; White and Rogers 2000). The fraction of first marriages lasting 10 years is 67 percent overall, but it is only 47 percent for persons from families with incomes of less than \$25,000 (Bramlett and Mosher 2002). Using education as a proxy for socioeconomic status, Raley and Bumpass (2003) find that the probability of divorce by 30 years of marriage is 36 percent for college graduates but is almost double that (60%) for high school dropouts. Additionally, the differential in disruption rates has increased over time. In sum, low-income couples face many challenges to forming and maintaining high-quality marriages, and they and their children are consequently less likely to benefit from healthy marriages.

RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH

Although healthy marriage programs target poor families, most research on marital quality has been based almost exclusively on middle-class, white, and college-educated samples (Karney et al. 2007; Ooms and Wilson 2004; Seefeldt and Smock 2004). The correlates of marital quality for these advantaged couples may not apply to

economically disadvantaged couples (Fein 2003). The studies reviewed above have used income to predict marital quality, but virtually none consider the predictors of marital quality for low-income couples (Fein 2003; Fein et al. 2003; Karney et al. 2007; Ooms and Wilson 2004).

Most literature on the economically disadvantaged population is based on samples of African Americans (e.g., Conger et al. 2002; McLloyd et al. 2000) or unwed parents (e.g., Carlson et al. 2004; Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005). Although certainly disadvantaged, these groups are poor proxies of low-income married couples (Fein 2003; Ooms 2002). It appears that only one study measures marital quality using a low-income sample that was not otherwise selected by race and/or marital status. Lichter and Carmalt (2009), using the same data as in this research, measured seven dimensions of marital quality among low-income couples and focused on the predictive role of religion. Almost all of their reported results were limited to effects of various religious variables, however.

My research addresses this important knowledge gap by exploring determinants of marital quality among low-income couples, specifically. Because effective interventions designed to lower the risks of marital breakdown should be based on an accurate understanding of the nature and cause of those risks within the target population (Coie et al. 1993; Ooms 2002), my research may provide knowledge for program designers and policy makers who make decisions about promoting healthy marriages among low-income couples. If relationship trajectories are significantly related to subsequent marital quality, this study can offer models of positive relationship

progression patterns. Furthermore, patterns of relationship development among the low-income population provide fertile ground for study, as rates of premarital cohabitation and nonmarital fertility, considered to be two of the most dramatic changes in recent family behavior (Schoen and Tufis 2003), are higher among low-income populations (Aassve 2003; Ellwood and Jencks 2004a; Seltzer 2000; Smock and Manning 2004).

My research proceeds with four primary goals. My first goal is to describe relationship trajectories among low-income couples by considering the sequencing and spacing patterns of four events that follow the start of the dating relationship: sex, cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing. *Sequencing* refers to the order in which the relationship events are experienced. Although all relationships begin with romantic initiation (i.e., dating), the next four events may occur in any sequence, and some may not occur at all. *Spacing* refers to the amount of time between any two events. Spacing is closely related to duration, or the length of time spent in any given state. My second goal is to ask which sociodemographic factors are associated with various relationship trajectories, focusing on a number of predictors, including age at the start of the dating relationship, the presence of children from previous unions, and previous marital experience, among others. My third goal is to examine how relationship trajectories affect subsequent marital satisfaction, commitment, and conflict. Finally, I consider other predictors of low-income wives and husbands' marital quality.

To address these research questions, I use data from the new *Marriage and Relationship Survey* (MARS), which includes information on union formation, marital quality, and their antecedents from 433 low-income married couples. The MARS sample

includes married couples who have incomes below the federal poverty guidelines and often depend on government aid, plus those who are “near-poor” (with incomes between 100% and 200% of the poverty line), who are often working and may receive some public assistance (Ooms and Wilson 2004).

RESEARCH OUTLINE

Using a sociodemographic perspective, I study low-income couples’ marital quality, with a focus on the predictive role of romantic relationship trajectories. In Chapter 2, I review the literature on relationship sequencing and spacing, using the life course perspective as a frame for understanding relationship trajectories. Next, I consider various predictors of relationship trajectories. Then, using marital search theory and the inertia and constraint commitment hypotheses, I explore how relationship trajectories might affect marital quality. I also consider other correlates of marital quality which may affect poor married couples. Chapter 3 provides information on data, measures, and analytic strategies. Chapter 4 presents the results of my analyses, and I address each research goal sequentially. First, I describe and examine predictors of relationship event trajectories. I find genuinely different romantic relationship trajectories among the MARS sample of low-income married couples, with couples engaging in premarital sex, cohabitation, and childbearing at varying rates and at various time points in the relationship. Then, I explore how relationship trajectories and other factors are associated with reports of marital satisfaction, commitment, and conflict. I find that, generally, couples’ relationship trajectories are not strongly related to wives’ and husbands’ subsequent marital quality. The dissertation concludes with Chapter 5, where I

discuss the contributions and policy implications of the findings for marriage promotion policies and programs. I highlight that romantic relationship trajectories are less important to marital quality than popular ideologies and theories may have us believe. I suggest that efforts to promote healthy marriage with relationship skills education appear promising. To improve the chances of healthy marriages, policy must also address the structural foundations of low marital quality among poor Americans.

Chapter 2: Theory and Literature Review

In this chapter, I review theory and literature on romantic relationship trajectories and marital quality. I start by explaining how the life course perspective can be used to understand relationship trajectories and point to individuation theory to explain the diversity in how couples form their unions. Next, I review the literature on the sequence of events that take place in romantic relationships, namely premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing. Third, I examine existing research on the spacing between select pairs of these relationship events. Then, I explore correlates of relationship trajectories. Finally, I consider how relationship trajectories might be associated with marital quality, using marital search theory and the inertia and constraint commitment hypotheses as guides. The chapter ends with a review of determinants of marital quality.

THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE AS A FRAME

FOR UNDERSTANDING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP TRAJECTORIES

The life course perspective is a useful frame to understand romantic relationship trajectories. In the same way that a person's life course proceeds from birth through maturation to eventual death, I conceptualize the trajectory of a romantic relationship as a series of events that extend from initial meeting, to intimate co-existence, to its ending in dissolution or death. A "trajectory" is a long-term life course dynamic that is marked by

sequences of “transitions,” or short-term changes in specific life events¹ (Elder 1985).

Trajectories can be traced by mapping transitions (e.g., birth, school completion, marriage, etc.) over successive time periods (ibid.). In my research, romantic relationship trajectories are defined by plotting out the month and year of four transitions in couples’ relationships after the initiation of the dating relationship: first sexual intercourse, start of premarital cohabitation, marriage, and birth of the first shared biological child. I conduct a “prospective” or “outflow” approach (ibid.), where at time 1, all couples are in the same state (i.e., dating initiation), but over time, the group becomes differentiated according to the events in their relationships.

The transitions that people experience over the life course usually follow expected patterns of behavior. For example, expectations are often linked to age, which may indicate psychological, developmental, biological, and economic maturity (ibid.). Cultural norms and values dictate these expectations, and some are reflected in formal laws and policies, such as the minimum age for marriage (Settersten 2004). In the United States, for example, perceived “age deadlines” for marriage are 26 and 28 for women and men, respectively (Settersten and Hagestad 1996), though the threshold may have moved up to age 30 more recently (Arnett 2004). To follow age-linked expectations, romantically involved youth may wait several years to marry to reach a more “appropriate” age (Glenn and Marquardt 2001). Conversely, a couple in their 30s may marry soon after the start of their relationship in an attempt to synchronize with the normative marital timetable.

¹ I use “transition” and “event” interchangeably, though Elder (1985) argues that events are more time-limited than transitions.

Closely linked to age expectations are ideas about the most desirable ordering of transitions within a trajectory. A typical sequence of transitions characterize the trajectory towards adulthood, namely completing school, getting a job, marrying, and then having children (Hogan 1978, 1980; Marini 1984). In a dating relationship, the most common ordering of transitions today is sex, cohabitation, marriage, and then childbearing (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2007; Teachman 2003a). Today's youth have endorsed this particular order of events as the normative or desirable sequence for a romantic relationship, as most have premarital sex (Finer 2007), expect to cohabit before marriage (Liefbroer et al. 1994; Manning et al. 2007), prefer childbearing after marriage (Pagnini and Rindfuss 1993; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), and report normative ages for relationship events which generally follow this sequence (Cohen and Shotland 1996; East 1998; Plotnick 2007; Smith and Zabin 1993).

Societies also uphold duration-linked expectations, or guidelines for the length of time between any two transitions. Duration, like age, may indicate developmental maturity. Communities convey ideals about how long, for instance, a couple should date before marrying, or about the most suitable inter-birth interval (Elder 1985). The expectations for proper ages, durations, and sequencing of transitions provide guidelines for people to follow as they travel along the various trajectories.

Timetables for life course events are influenced by social location and historical context (Giele and Elder 1998). Individual timelines vary based on cohorts because people experience different values and norms during their formative years and are subject to unique historical events and opportunities (Ryder 1965). From a cohort perspective,

the succession of generations brings about overall societal change: past values of older cohorts are succeeded by the new values of younger cohorts. Closely related are period effects, or variation caused by social changes that all cohorts contemporaneously experience such as economic fluctuation, war, or technological advances. These changes can alter the expectations of timing, sequencing, and spacing of life course transitions. For example, the Great Depression delayed marriage and childbearing among young adults until later ages than had been the case in previous generations (Elder 1974). Another example is the introduction of reliable contraception, which made premarital sex less risky and therefore more common (Akerlof, Yellen, and Katz 1996; Finer 2007). However, even within any given historical period, social location may differentially influence life course expectations. Normative timetables differ by cohort, gender, race, family structure, socioeconomic status, and so on (Feldman, Turner, and Araujo 1999; Settersten and Hagestad 1996; Settersten 2004). For example, socioeconomically disadvantaged respondents report earlier ideal timetables for life course transitions in the trajectory to adulthood (Furstenberg et al. 2003).

There is also the possibility that trajectories can be redirected by important events, called “turning points,” that an individual or couple experiences (Elder 1985).

Adaptation to a particular situation often has a domino effect: in reaction to the event, the timing and sequences of subsequent life course transitions may be altered (Giele and Elder 1998). In terms of a couples’ relationship, behaviors and choices at earlier stages in the relationship may have consequences that accumulate to shape and constrain options at subsequent stages of the relationship. An unexpected pregnancy, for example, may

trigger cohabitation or marriage (Brien, Lillard, and Waite 1995; Manning 1993, 2004; Raley 2001). Different reactions to the same event can result in dissimilar trajectories. For example, the resolution of a nonmarital pregnancy has important consequences for future life course trajectories (Marini 1984; McLaughlin et al. 1986; Nock 1998; O'Connell and Rogers 1984).

Life course theorists uphold the principle of *human agency*, meaning that normative expectations for behavior do not conclusively determine how individuals will actually behave (Giele and Elder 1998). Individuals and couples make decisions regarding their relationship trajectories that may deviate from culturally held expectations for sequencing and spacing, perhaps today more so than in the past. Individuation theory, reviewed next, helps to explain increasing diversity in romantic relationship trajectories. *Individuation Theory: Accounting For Diversity in Romantic Relationship Trajectories*

Couples today face a host of choices in directing the course of their relationships. The rising rates and growing acceptability of premarital sex, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing reveal the increasing diversity of options for romantic relationships. Indeed, the changes in relationship trajectories are part of broader family changes occurring in industrialized countries, including higher rates of singlehood and union disruption, and less and later instances of marriage and fertility (van de Kaa 1997). These changes collectively represent the “second demographic transition”, a term coined by Ron Lesthaeghe and Dirk van de Kaa.

Individuation theory attributes these family formation changes to an ideational shift valuing greater individual autonomy and devaluing institutional authority and

community influence (South 2001; Surkyn and Lesthaeghe 2004). In the 1950s, the companionate model of marriage replaced marriage as a social institution regulated by social and religious norms (Burgess and Locke 1945; Mintz and Kellogg 1988). More recently, marriage appears to have shifted once again, now to an individualistic marriage, where the emotional and psychological needs of the individual spouses are paramount (Cherlin 2004). The emphasis today is on individual self-fulfillment in romantic relationships (Lesthaeghe 1995; Lewis 2001; Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990; van de Kaa 1987). Persons are less deferential to family opinions, institutional regulation (e.g., religion), and societal norms, making for more autonomous decisions about personal life (Bumpass 1990; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988). Individuals are called to “live a life of their own” and break free from the control of parents and institutions (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2003; Shorter 1977). Self-initiated transitions are replacing institutionalized norms for trajectories (Heinz 2002), leaving a wider range of options for marriage and family life, including sexual freedom, nonmarital unions, and nonmarital parenthood (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988).

Individuation also encourages heterogeneity in the timing of life course events (Settersten 2004). Self-constructed and personal timetables prevail over general cultural timetables (Nydegger 1986). As evidence of this, we see that life course transitions take place at varying times in a person’s life. Indeed, family-related age deadlines are generally considered to be guidelines rather than hard-and-fast rules, and failing to adhere to these is perceived to be inconsequential (Settersten and Hagestad 1996).

LITERATURE ON ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP TRAJECTORIES

Most research considering romantic relationship events uses an individual-level and lifetime approach, considering, for example, the first time a person has sex in his or her lifetime, whether a person ever cohabits, or at what age marriage first occurs. There is little research that considers relationship events within the context of a couple's romantic relationship. The relationship-development or couple-level perspective approach examines how long a couple dates before they have sex, or how long a couple is married before they have their first child, and so on. This is the approach my research takes.

To my knowledge, no prior research has directly examined low-income couples' relationship trajectories from the start of the dating relationship through each subsequent event. Some research on relationship trajectories is available using the *National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health* (Add Health), a dataset on teens and youth (Joyner and Sassler 2008; O'Sullivan et al. 2007; Ryan et al. 2007; Sassler and Kamp Dush 2008). Although these studies provide a valuable starting point, the youthfulness of the sample ignores the increasing number of adults who are marrying in their late twenties and throughout their thirties, and the patterns, correlates, and consequences of relationship trajectories among this growing population merit attention. Moreover, these studies report on relationships that do not necessarily end in marriage, considering instead the most recent relationship, the first relationship, or the current relationship regardless of marital status. I mention this because relationships that do not end in marriage may be characterized by different trajectories (Laumann et al. 1994). Also

available are some studies on relationship trajectories using samples of unmarried parents. For example, a small qualitative study by Roy and colleagues (2008) explores unmarried fathers' accounts of the varying levels of commitment they have over time with their "babymamas". Similar qualitative studies using the *Time, Love, Cash, Care and Children Study* (TLC3) (e.g., England and Edin 2007; Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Reed 2006) provide rich descriptive analyses of how cohabiting parents view their unions, for example, but do not explore the sequencing or spacing of relationship events using measurable quantities. Quantitative research using *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study* (Fragile Families) data (i.e., Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004; Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002) offers suggestive evidence of relationship patterns for low-income couples, but describe nonmarital unions and, thus, the relevance of findings for unions ending in marriage is unknown. Moreover, studies using Fragile Families data cannot measure relationship event sequence and spacing as I do because of data limitations (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3). Only a few studies use a couple-level/relationship-development approach, and these are referenced in my literature review below (e.g., DeMaris 1984; Huston 1994; Macklin 1972; Peplau, Rubin, and Hill 1977; Sassler 2004; Whyte 1990)—but none of these studies consider relationship trajectories in as much detail as I do, considering instead only one or few aspects of sequencing and/or spacing of romantic relationship events. Moreover, none of these focus exclusively on low-income couples.

Because of the lack of literature directly relevant to my topic, this literature review covers research from a broad range of perspectives, including those not using a

couple's relationship trajectory perspective, and from a broad range of samples, including persons of all income brackets and relationship statuses. It remains to be seen how relevant the results of existing research are to the romantic relationship trajectories of low-income married couples.

Sequencing of Romantic Relationship Events

The sociological and demographic literature is replete with research on the events that occur in romantic relationships—namely, sex, cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing. Here, I review the literature on *relationship event sequencing*, or the order of the transitions. In my research, the first relationship status is identical for all couples (i.e., the initiation of the romantic relationship) and subsequent transitions to sex, cohabitation, marriage and childbearing may occur in any sequence. I address each of these four relationship events below.

Sex. Historically, normative (and legal) romantic relationship trajectories called for sexual abstinence until marriage. Primarily due to poorly controlled fertility, it was necessary to relegate sex to the realm of marriage where the legal rights and responsibilities of parents and children were institutionalized (Nock 2005). The introduction of hormonal birth control, especially the birth control pill in 1960, provided a major breakthrough in terms of uncoupling sex from fertility. Newfound control over fertility, available to both married and unmarried persons, transformed ideas about premarital sex (Lewis 2001). Since sexual intercourse no longer necessarily resulted in the very public consequence of illegitimate parenthood, sex could be undertaken more freely and privately. A series of important court battles in the 1960s and 1970s

established that choices regarding sexual relationships, regardless of marital status, belonged in the private realm and out of public scrutiny (Lewis 2001; Nock 2005). As Nock (2005:16) put it, “Once sex and procreation could be separated, so could sex and marriage.”

Since the 1960s, decreasing proportions of the population have upheld the abstinence-until-marriage ideal. In 1969, three-quarters of adult Americans thought that sex before marriage was wrong; this decreased to roughly half by 1972, and to about one-third by 1998 (Harding and Jencks 2003; Scott 1998; Smith 1990; Thornton and Young DeMarco 2001). In its place, adherence to the ethic of permissiveness with affection (i.e., sex is permissible in relationships of strong affection) has been mounting (Reiss 1967). A recent study of youth finds almost unanimous acceptance of sexual intercourse in serious relationships (Feldman et al. 1999). Today, despite a push by the U.S. federal government for abstinence-only sex education programs for youth (Title 42, Chapter 7, Subchapter V, Section 710b of the U.S. Code), the abstinence standard is no longer relevant for the majority of Americans. First sex occurring within the context of a marriage is relatively rare: data from the 2002 NSFG show that 15 percent of ever-married women aged 15 to 44 had sex for the first time in the same month as their first marriage (Chandra et al. 2005). These data also reveal that, by age 20, 75 percent of Americans have had premarital sex, and 95 percent have done so by age 44 (Finer 2007). Although the proportion of persons ever experiencing premarital sex has been high since the 1950s, the proportion experiencing premarital sex by any given age has been growing; to illustrate, three-quarters of the cohort turning 15 years old from 1994 to 2003

had premarital sex by age 20, up from almost half of those turning 15 from 1954 to 1963 (ibid.). Because youth are having sex earlier today than in the past and are delaying marriage longer, the number of years of unmarried sexual activity and the number of sex partners before marriage have both increased since the 1960s (Smith 2006).

Cohabitation. Traditionally, living together before marriage was uncommon and often considered immoral. Now, cohabitation has become the modal type of first union among Americans: the proportion of all first unions that began with cohabitation rose from 43 percent for unions formed in 1980 to 1984 to 54 percent for those formed in 1990 to 1994 (Bumpass and Lu 2000). More recent data show that 68 percent of all first unions formed from 1997 to 2001 began as cohabitation rather than marriage (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). Cohabitation has also become the modal path into marriage: the proportion of women's first marriages preceded by cohabitation increased from 41 percent among the 1980 to 1984 marriage cohort, to 56 percent for marriages occurring between 1990 and 1994, to 62 percent for women marrying from 1997 to 2002 (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). Similar patterns exist when making comparisons by birth cohort (Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006).

Cohabitation is often perceived as a testing ground for marriage (Casper and Bianchi 2002; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004), and about half (49%) of first cohabiting unions culminate in marriage by five years duration (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). An oft-cited reason for cohabitation is to ensure partners are compatible before marrying (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). The desire for relationship testing likely reflects the contemporary social milieu of greater marital

instability, delayed economic security, and changing meanings of marriage. Singles and cohabitators cite concerns about wanting to avoid divorce as a motivation for cohabitation (Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Waller 2002; Waller and Peters 2007); cohabitation moves the relationship forward without the formality of the marital commitment. Delayed economic security may also explain the mounting popularity of cohabitation: given the current focus on high educational attainment and delayed entry into full-time employment, cohabitation offers a setting where potential partners can evaluate each other's economic potential until "career maturity" has been developed (Oppenheimer 1988). Research among cohabitators reveals a high financial standard for marriage, one that is difficult for low-income couples to reach (Clarkberg 1999; Edin, Kefalas, and Reed 2004; Gibson-Davis et al. 2005). This may explain why nonmarital cohabitation is more prominent among poor Americans than among their non-poor counterparts (Karney et al. 2003). Finally, given shifting gender roles and opportunities, the benefits of the specialization-and-trade model of marriage are reduced, especially for women (Becker 1981); women may opt for cohabitation to avoid the traditional gender roles associated with marriage, including the "second shift" of domestic labor (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Hochschild 1989). Many of the same benefits that were once exclusive to marriage are now available in cohabitation, without some of the constraints.

Childbearing. The traditional trend, which continues to the present, is that childbearing follows marriage. Data from the 2002 NSFG reveal that only 5.5 percent of currently married women expect to remain childless (Chandra et al. 2005). In a recent survey of high school seniors, about ninety percent of youth expecting to parenthood

report that they expect to marry first (Plotnick 2007). Most married couples have children: 86.1 percent of ever-married women have had a child by their early 40s (Bachu 1999).

Though marital fertility is the norm, nonmarital childbearing is becoming more prevalent. In 2004, the birth rate per thousand unmarried women aged 15 to 44 stood at 46.1, a momentous increase from 7.1 in 1940. Likewise, the proportion of nonmarital births as a share of all births has risen dramatically, from 3.8 percent in 1940 to 35.8 percent in 2004 (Martin et al. 2006; Ventura and Bachrach 2000). Accordingly, in 2004, the United States witnessed almost 1.5 million nonmarital births. Although most of these births are to never-married women (Musick 2002), most of these mothers are not really alone as approximately 40 to 50 percent of nonmarital births are to mothers in cohabiting relationships, and an additional third are to mothers in visiting relationships (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Carlson et al. 2004; Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002).

Delayed marriage, declining marriage rates, and an increasing proportion of adults living in cohabiting unions mean that a greater percentage of reproductive years are spent in the unmarried state. The prevalence of sexual relations outside of marriage puts women at an increased risk of nonmarital pregnancy and/or birth. In fact, much of the growth in nonmarital childbearing in the 1980s and 1990s can be attributed to cohabiting two-parent families (Raley 2001). When faced with a nonmarital conception, young women are now less likely to legitimate the birth through marriage (Akerlof et al. 1996; Manning 1993; Parnell, Swicegood, and Stevens 1994; Smith 2006; Ventura and Bachrach 2000). Unmarried women—particularly young women—are also decreasingly

likely to end a nonmarital pregnancy in abortion. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and The Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI) reveal that 41 percent of nonmarital pregnancies ended in abortion in 1995, which is a substantial drop from 59 percent in 1980 (Ventura et al. 2000). As a result, the proportion of nonmarital pregnancies ending in live birth increased from 33 percent in 1980 to 47 percent in 1995 (ibid.).

Over the last few decades, in tandem with these behavioral changes, attitudes toward nonmarital births have become increasingly permissive in the United States (Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006; Pagnini and Rindfuss 1993). Today, childbearing and marriage are viewed as separable family-formation behaviors (Nock 2005), and nonmarital childbearing is considered an acceptable life course option (Pagnini and Rindfuss 1993; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). Indeed, data from the 1995 NSFG show that the proportion of planned nonmarital births are quite substantial, accounting for over half (54-56%) of births to cohabiting couples and 39 percent of births to single, non-cohabiting women (Manning 2001; Musick 2002). Also, *Current Population Survey* data reveal that higher-order nonmarital births are becoming more prevalent (Wu, Bumpass, and Musick 2001), suggesting that cohabitation and singlehood are becoming acceptable settings in which to bear and raise children (Raley 2001).

Within this changing context, nonmarital childbearing can be a viable option for family formation when the gains to marriage are reduced and when barriers to marriage are formidable (Musick 2007; Pagnini and Rindfuss 1993; Seltzer 2000; Willis 1999; Willis and Haaga 1996; Wilson 1987). Higher rates of nonmarital childbearing,

therefore, are found among the poor, less educated, Hispanics, blacks, poor whites, and previously married persons (Brien et al. 1999; Bumpass and Lu 2000; Driscoll et al. 1999; Ellwood and Jencks 2004b; Loomis and Landale 1994; Manning 1993; Manning 2001; Manning and Landale 1996; Martin et al. 2006; South and Lloyd 1992; Wildsmith and Raley 2006).

Marriage. Almost all Americans marry, although at later ages today than in the mid-twentieth century. In 2003, 96 percent of men and women age 65 and older had been married, and most (72%) were married by the time they were 30 to 34 years old (Fields 2004). The estimated median age at first marriage in 2008 was 25.9 years for women and 27.6 years for men, an increase of about 5 years from the 1960s (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). Predictions about the proportion of Americans marrying remain high, with estimates of marriage ranging close to 90 percent for today's youth (Kreider and Fields 2001).

Researchers have advanced various explanations for why people continue to marry despite the increasing acceptability and prevalence of premarital sex, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing. Some may choose marriage to uphold their own, their partner's, or their families' traditional or moral values. The belief that children are best raised in the context of a married family may be an impetus for marriage among cohabiting couples (Manning 2001). Complying with the social norm to marry may be beneficial for several reasons. First, though the instrumental value of marriage may have diminished, its symbolic value remains very high, including among low-income couples (Cherlin 2004; Edin and Reed 2005). Social support for married couples is higher than

for cohabiting couples (Aquilino 1997; Eggebeen 2005), and marriage connects people to social institutions, which are themselves sources of benefits. Unlike cohabitation, marriage is fully institutionalized; the norms of marriage are well understood and are supported by religious and legal institutions (Cherlin 2004; Nock 2005). Additionally, the long-term stability of marriage offers benefits not available in cohabitation. Its intended permanence encourages shared investments, such as pooling resources and jointly investing in children (Brines and Joyner 1999; Heimdal and Houseknecht 2003; Manning and Lichter 1996; Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990). The willingness to invest in the relationship may be especially true for women who may limit labor force participation while raising young children (Becker 1981).

Spacing Between Romantic Relationship Events

Although research on the prevalence of relationship events is vast, relatively little literature considers spacing, or the time that elapses between relationship events. There is a multitude of relationship spacing intervals one could study. I focus on the time between: (1) the start of the dating relationship and the couple's first sex; (2) the start of the dating relationship and premarital cohabitation; (3) the start of the dating relationship and marriage; (4) premarital cohabitation and marriage (i.e., the duration of premarital cohabitation); and (5) marriage and the couple's first postmarital birth (i.e., the first postmarital birth interval). I address each below.

Spacing between dating initiation and sexual initiation. Most research on sexual timetables has focused on the age of sexual debut in a person's lifetime, but not on the timing of the first sexual experience within couples' relationships. A relationship-

development perspective, which considers how long couples date before they have sex², is the focus of my study. Almost all research that uses a couple-level perspective to study sexual timetables uses samples of young people and college students. Although many relationships are formed during these years, most do not culminate in marriage. Research suggests that it is dubious to assume that the duration from the start of the dating relationship to first sex in nonmarital partnerships is similar to that in relationships ending in marriage. Kirkendall (1961) finds that the stronger the emotional involvement, the longer the relationship duration prior to sexual intercourse. Laumann and colleagues (1994) also find a substantial spacing difference, with slower progression to sex in relationships with future spouses than in cohabitations and other partnerships. Mindful of this limitation, I proceed with a review of extant studies on the subject matter.

Increasingly, young couples have sex early on in the relationship. Data collected from dating couples in the early 1970s show that 41 percent had sex within a month of the start of the dating relationship; another 41 percent had sex later (on average, six months after they started dating); and 18 percent had not yet had sexual intercourse (Peplau et al. 1977). Though data collected a decade later reveal generally similar patterns in spacing between dating and sex (Christopher and Cate 1985), research from the 1990s reveals that youth who had sex in a recent close romantic relationship

² Increasingly prevalent among recent cohorts of emerging adults and college students is “hooking up”, or sexual interaction without an ongoing romantic relationship (Bogle 2007; Glenn and Marquardt 2001). The MARS questionnaire assumes that dating precedes sex when it asked, “How long did you and your spouse date prior to having sex for the first time?” This assumption should not be a major limitation in the study because the traditional dating script was commonly held until recently. In a recent analysis of sexual timing among youth, Sessler and Kamp Dush (2007) found that only 6 percent of recent romantic relationships were hook-ups. Almost all (98-99%) MARS respondents answered the question with a valid response, indicating little trouble with the question wording.

experienced average relationship durations of 4.38 weeks and 12.28 weeks between the start of the dating relationship and sex for men and women, respectively (Cohen and Shotland 1996). Recently collected data from Add Health show that the pace of entry into sexual relationships is quite rapid among today's youth: nearly half (49.6%) had sex with their most recent romantic partner within one month of romantic initiation, one quarter delayed sexual involvement for one to three months, and the remaining quarter waited four months or longer before having sex. Only six percent of romantic relationships were not sexual (Sassler and Kamp Dush 2008).

I find only one couple-level study of sexual timetables not using data from youth or college students. In 1992, Laumann and colleagues' (1994) collected reports of the time between meeting (note: not dating) and first intercourse from adults ages 18 to 59. They find that ten percent of sexual relationships with future spouses involved sex within the first month of meeting, and almost half (47%) delayed sex for more than one year. The duration to sex in Laumann and colleagues (1994) study is substantially longer than those reported in the most recent studies. This is likely because of the wider age range of the sample, the different starting point (i.e., meeting, not dating), the historical time period, and perhaps the seriousness of the relationship (which is expected to delay sex; i.e., Kirkendall 1961). To the best of my knowledge, no current data exist on sexual timetables for married couples.

Spacing between dating initiation and cohabitation. The initiating date for cohabitating unions is rather difficult to obtain, chiefly because, unlike marriages, no official ceremony indicates the start of the coresidential union. The movement into

cohabitation is frequently described as a gradual process that occurs over weeks or even months, often without a deliberate decision (Macklin 1972; Manning and Smock 2005; Sassler 2004). Despite the fluid beginnings of cohabitation, after some consideration, most survey respondents can name the month cohabitation began (Manning and Smock 2005).

Studies on spacing between the start of dating and the commencement of cohabitation are rare. The two studies I find—both of which are qualitative and rely on small samples—suggest that couples transition into cohabitation rather quickly. Research by Macklin (1972), who studied cohabitation while it was still uncommon, reveals that half of female college cohabitators moved in with their boyfriends by the end of four months of dating. A similar pattern is found by Sassler (2004), where over half of the young adult cohabitators moved in with their partner within six months of the start of their relationship; 20 percent had dated 7 to 12 months prior to cohabiting, and the remaining 28 percent dated for more than one year prior to cohabiting.

Caution should be exercised in extrapolating spacing patterns from nonmarital relationships to those relationships that end in marriage. Just as spacing from dating to sex differs by relationship type, the spacing between the start of the dating relationship and cohabitation may also differ in relationships with future spouses than in other relationships.

Spacing between dating initiation and marriage. As in research on sexual timetables, most research on marital timetables uses an individual-level and lifetime perspective and measures the age at which a person first marries. In my research, I use a

relationship-development perspective and ask: how long do couples date before they marry? An extensive literature search on this topic produced few relevant studies. Data from a recent Florida survey of currently married persons find a mean courtship length of 24 months before first marriage, with slightly quicker pace to remarriage (Karney et al. 2003). A mean courtship length of 28 months before first marriage and a shorter duration to marriage among remarriages are also found in a dated study by Hollingshead (1952). Whyte's (1990) research also reveals an average length of two years between the start of the dating relationship and marriage. Surra (1985) finds a shorter courtship length, with a median of approximately 14 months. The variation in central tendency scores across these studies might be explained by a skewed distribution, with a small proportion of couples experiencing unusually long courtships. New and national data on the timing between dating and marriage is needed.

Duration of premarital cohabitation. There is a lot of evidence that cohabitating unions are usually of short duration: approximately half last one year or less, one-sixth last three years, and only one-tenth last five years or longer (Bumpass and Lu 2000). The short duration can be explained by the fact that many cohabitations end in dissolution or in marriage. The literature on the duration of premarital cohabitation with a future spouse reveals central tendency scores of about one year (DeMaris 1984; Manning 1995; Teachman and Polonko 1990; Thomson and Colella 1992), with a moderate amount of variation. For example, DeMaris (1984) finds that spouses cohabited, on average, for 11 months before marrying, with a range of less than 1 month to 11 years. Using the *National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth* (NLSY) 1979, Tach and Halpern-Meekin (2009)

find that the average duration of cohabitation before marriage is 1.6 years for cohabitators without a premarital birth and is 2.7 years for cohabitators with a premarital birth.

Some evidence suggests that poor cohabitators are less likely than their non-poor counterparts to transition to marriage and therefore cohabit for longer durations (Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Lichter, Graefe, and Brown 2003). To illustrate, Lichter, Qian, and Mellott (2006) find that 8 percent of poor cohabitators married by the end of the first year of the coresidential union versus 31 percent of non-poor cohabitators. Given the low-income status of the MARS sample, I expect to find an average duration of premarital cohabitation in excess of one year.

First postmarital birth interval. Most childbearing takes place after a couple marries (Martin et al. 2006; Ventura and Bachrach 2000). My research focuses on the birth of the couple's first biological child. I compare couples whose first birth was premarital to those whose first birth was postmarital. Among those whose first birth was postmarital, I measure the length of the first postmarital birth interval.³

Research shows that the first postmarital birth generally takes place within the first three years of marriage (Manning 1995; Wineberg 1988). Data from the 2002 NSFG reveal that, among ever married women aged 15 to 44 giving birth postmaritally, over half (59.87%) give birth 8 to 47 months after the first marriage. About one-in-six give birth within the first seven months of marriage, suggesting that, for a small proportion of

³ The small number of MARS couples experiencing a shared premarital birth prevents an in-depth consideration of premarital birth intervals. See Osborne (2005) for research on the determinants of marriage in the year following a child's birth.

couples, the marriage may serve to legitimate a nonmarital conception. The remaining quarter give birth four or more years after the wedding (Chandra et al. 2005).

The time women spend childfree in a marriage has been increasing since the marriage cohorts of the 1960s (Ellwood and Jencks 2004b). The median time from marriage to first postmarital birth was 15 to 18 months for white women in the marriage cohorts of 1950 to 1964. This interval increased to 23 months for women married in 1965 to 1969 and to 27 months for those married in the early 1970s (Teachman 1985; Teachman and Polonko 1985). By 1990, over half (52%) of women marrying for the first time bore their first child more than 36 months after marriage, if at all (Ellwood and Jencks 2004b). A similar cohort pattern for white women giving birth in remarriages has been documented (Griffith, Koo, and Suchindran 1985).

The pace of postmarital childbearing is slower among highly educated women than among their less-educated counterparts. When dividing women who were childless at the time of marriage by educational thirds, Ellwood and Jencks (2004a) find that over half (56.72%) of women in the lowest education category have a birth within three years of marriage, compared to 40.66 percent in the highest education category. Because education and socioeconomic status are highly correlated, my study of low-income couples may reveal a shorter-than-average postmarital birth interval. Indeed, among low-income persons, the ideal time for childbearing is reported as being in one's early twenties (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Gibson-Davis et al. 2005).

Below, after hypothesizing about the associations between relationship event sequencing and spacing, I review the literature on variables expected to influence low-income couples' romantic relationship trajectories.

Associations Between Romantic Relationship Event Sequencing and Spacing

Whether a couple engages in premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, and premarital childbearing is expected to be closely related to the spacing between romantic relationship events. For example, couples abstaining from premarital sex may transition to marriage relatively quickly; a short dating period may allow them to “hold-out” until the wedding night. To provide another example, the duration of premarital cohabitation is longer for couples who bear children together than for those who delay childbearing until after marriage (Tach and Halpern-Meekin 2009).

CORRELATES OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP TRAJECTORIES

The life course perspective informs us that union formation occurs within the context of other domains, and here I review sociodemographic factors that may influence low-income couples' romantic relationship trajectories. I examine the following factors: age at the start of the relationship, previous marital experience, previous cohabitation experience, the presence of children from previous unions, the year the couple began dating, homogamy, race/ethnicity, religious upbringing, childhood family structure, parental resources, and childhood experience of abuse and/or alcoholism. On the basis of theory and previous research, I speculate how each may affect couples' romantic relationship trajectories. Little prior research focuses on low-income couples

specifically; thus, I review the literature that exists for the general population, noting that these patterns are not expected to act differently for low-income couples.

Age at the Start of Dating

Partners' ages at the start of the dating relationship likely affect the couple's relationship trajectory for two reasons. First, according to the life course perspective, age often implies psychological, developmental, and economic maturity, and hence persons may make divergent relationship decisions based on their developmental stage in life. Second, the pressure to conform to age-related norms may influence couples' romantic relationship trajectories. Though both of these perspectives are theoretically and empirically suitable to study relationship development, each can produce arguments that may conflict with the other. I explore the hypothesized age effects of each perspective below.

With age, persons usually gain economic resources and greater developmental maturity. This may make older persons apprehensive about forming joint investments, such as property or children, until the security of marriage is first attained. Additionally, the likelihood of having "relationship baggage," such as children or failed past relationships, is greater with age, which may contribute toward adopting skeptical or tentative views on relationships. In comparison, younger people, who are less mature economically and developmentally, may feel they have little to lose in partaking in complex premarital relationship trajectories. For similar reasons, young people may also progress more quickly through the early stages of a romantic relationship. Indeed, some research supports these conjectures. Sessler (2004) finds that those who delay cohabiting

with their partners tend to be older and more cautious in their decision-making, considering, for example, how cohabitation might sidetrack them from fulfilling their personal goals. Additional research reveals lower rates of premarital childbearing among women who begin cohabiting at older ages (Manning 2001; Wu 1996). These studies suggest that, with age, couples' romantic relationships may proceed more slowly and formal commitments may be delayed.

Age norms for relationship events, especially for marriage and childbearing, likely affect the sequencing of and spacing between relationship events. A 2006 Gallup Poll found that the ideal age to marry according to American adults is age 25 for women and age 27 for men (Jones 2006), and a smaller study found age 30 as a cut-off (Arnett 2004). As stated earlier, low-income persons generally report earlier ideal ages for family events than members of the general population (Furstenberg et al. 2003). Individuals younger than the normative age for the event in question will likely experience less social and/or personal pressure to experience that event quickly. In contrast, when one's age is at or past the age norm for that event, the pressure or the desire to experience the event is arguably greater. Based on this line of reasoning, we might hypothesize that people young at the start of the relationship will experience longer spacing between events. On the other hand, older persons may progress more quickly through the events in a romantic relationship because of (perceived) diminishing opportunities for family formation. Hence, actual or perceived mate availability can affect romantic relationship trajectories (Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach 2000). Some research findings suggest that romantic relationships do indeed progress faster among

older persons. Other studies suggest that, with age, persons may be more inclined to make permanent family decisions. For example, Manning and Smock's (1995) analysis of *National Survey of Families and Households* (NSFH) data shows that cohabitators whose relationships began in their late twenties were more likely to proceed to marriage within five years than were cohabitators whose relationships began in their early twenties. Additionally, the odds of an intended (versus unintended) conception are higher among women who start cohabiting at older ages (Manning 2001). Finally, data from the Fragile Families study reveal a positive relationship between women's age and their optimism for marrying, measured at the time of the child's birth, suggesting the salience of age-related expectations for family formation among unmarried parents, many of whom are low-income (Waller and McLanahan 2005).

My hypotheses about the effects of age at the start of the dating relationship on relationship development are based on research and insight from both the developmental and age-norm perspectives. I expect to find the spacing between the start of the dating relationship and sex to be longer among couples whose relationships formed at very young ages, and shorter among couples who are older at the start of the dating relationship. Likewise, I expect the duration between dating and cohabitation to be longer for those at younger ages and shorter for those at older ages. Couples who are younger than the age norm for marriage will likely have longer spacing between dating and marriage and a longer duration of cohabitation than those who are at or past the normative age for marriage. Based on research by Manning (2001) and Wu (1996), I expect a negative association between age at the start of the dating relationship and the

likelihood of couples having a premarital birth. Finally, research by Marini (1981) leads me to expect no correlation between the age at the start of the dating relationship and the time between marriage and couples' first postmarital birth.

Previous Marital Experience

Low-income couples' romantic relationship trajectories may differ between those with never-married partners and those in which at least one partner has been previously married. Since the mid-1970s, divorce has replaced widowhood as the primary cause of marital termination (Faust and McKibben 1999), revealing that most formerly-married individuals have experienced marital strife. Low-income persons, in particular, are more likely to divorce than the general population (Fein 2004; White and Rogers 2000).

The negative experience of relationship breakdown may cause individuals to navigate cautiously and slowly through any new romantic relationship. Previously married individuals may be wary of marrying a new partner without living together first and for a considerable amount of time. Indeed, many women in low-income cohabiting couples assert that they cohabit without marrying because of gender mistrust (Edin 2000; Gibson-Davis et al. 2005). Cohabitation offers the opportunity to test a romantic relationship without the permanence or formality of marriage. Prior research finds that persons in second marriages are more likely to cohabit before marriage than those in their first marriage (Clayton and Voss 1977; DeMaris 1984) and that the duration of cohabitation is longer among previously-married cohabitators (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). Although the formerly married may delay the formal commitment of remarriage, they may not postpone the more informal events of sex or cohabiting with a new partner

(Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2002). Regarding couples' timing of childbearing, research does not provide a strong basis for expecting a difference based on previous marital experience (Cohen and Sweet 1974; Thornton 1978; Upchurch, Lillard, and Panis 2002). Thus, for my sample of low-income couples, I expect to find higher rates of premarital cohabitation, a longer duration between dating and marriage, and a longer duration of cohabitation among remarriage-couples compared to first-marriage couples.

Previous Cohabitation Experience

Experience of cohabitation with a previous partner may affect couples' progression of events in a new romantic relationship. Previous cohabitation is expected to have similar effects as previous marriage on relationship trajectories, and there is no reason to expect that previous cohabitation experience would have different effects for low-income couples than for the general population. Specifically, I expect to find higher rates of premarital sex and premarital cohabitation and greater time spent dating and cohabiting before marriage among couples with prior cohabiting experience. Sex and cohabitation may not be delayed and may occur more quickly among couples with cohabitation experience, perhaps out of a desire for companionship and sexual intimacy. Marriage, on the other hand, is likely to be postponed, possibly due to negative experiences of prior relationship dissolution or selection factors reducing the chance of marriage (e.g., poverty, low education) (Lichter and Qian 2008; Lichter et al. 2006).

Children from Previous Union(s)

Having had a child in a previous union is expected to influence the course of a new romantic union. The effects are particularly likely to be relevant to low-income

couples, who are substantially more likely than non-poor couples to have children from prior unions (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Fein 2004; Martinez et al. 2006; Ooms 2002). The weighty child care and emotional tasks and the high economic costs of parenthood may compel single parents to search for a partner to help raise the children, as Roy and Burton (2007) find among their sample of low-income mothers. Though low-income single parents may desire a quick progression to a coresidential union, they may be cautious about introducing a new parent figure into their child's life, particularly in the context of marriage. To test the new romantic partner as a potential spouse and stepparent, single parents may choose to cohabit first (Edin 2000; Edin, England, and Linnenberg 2003; Ganong and Coleman 1989).

Single parents, especially women, are at a disadvantage in the marriage market (Bennett, Bloom, and Miller 1995; Graefe and Lichter 2002) and may cohabit at the expense of marriage (Qian, Lichter, and Mellott 2005). Prospective partners may be unwilling to commit to a marriage when children are involved (South 1991). They may not want to invest in children with whom they share no biological ties. Further, they may hesitate to undertake the ambiguous and difficult stepparent role. A great deal of research supports the finding that having children reduces the likelihood of forming any coresidential union, but increases the likelihood of forming a cohabiting (rather than marital) union (Bennett et al. 1995; Clarkberg et al. 1995). One study suggests that single fathers may not face the same barriers to marriage as single mothers (Stewart, Manning, and Smock 2003), but another study disagrees (Nock 1998); both, however, find that

having children from a previous union increases the likelihood of men forming a cohabiting union.

Research using a sample of unmarried and mostly low-income parents reveals that women are wary of forming a committed union with men who are fathers. Many fear men's infidelity with former partners and are unhappy with the time spent away from the new relationship (Edin et al. 2003; Edin and Reed 2005). The sexual distrust and accompanying hesitation to cohabit has even been documented among those who bear children together: following the birth of a shared child, couples in which the father already had children with previous partners are less likely to marry or cohabit than couples with no stepchildren (Carlson et al. 2004; Edin et al. 2003) and report less optimism about the likelihood of marriage (Waller and McLanahan 2005).

Given these research findings, I expect to find relationship sequences with premarital cohabitation to be more popular among low-income couples where at least one partner has children from a previous union. To obtain material support, help with child care, and emotional support and guidance (Roy and Burton 2007), low-income couples with children from previous unions may experience a quicker tempo to premarital cohabitation than childless couples. Finally, I expect to find a longer spacing between the start of the dating relationship and marriage and a longer duration of cohabitation for low-income couples with children than for their counterparts with no children.

Couples where one or both partners already have children from previous unions may be less likely to bear children together before marriage (Musick 2007; Upchurch et al. 2002). The high demands of parenthood may make parents wary of additional

children, and the presence of a partner's children may contribute to couples' conflicts, thereby reducing their intention to bear additional children. Indeed, Stewart (2002) finds that couples with stepchildren are less likely than those with no stepchildren to bear children and that this effect is fully mediated by their lower intentions for bearing children. On the other hand, couples where one spouse already has a child may be more likely to have a joint premarital birth (Rindfuss and Parnell 1989). This may be because they are poorer contraceptors, have a higher level of fecundity, or have a desire for a larger family (Upchurch, Lillard, and Panis 2002), or, in the case of previous nonmarital fertility, because of selection: unmarried mothers are different from unmarried childless women in ways that increase their chances of having additional births outside of marriage (Musick 2007; Rindfuss and Parnell 1989). Never-married parents have born children out-of-wedlock before and are therefore more likely to do so again. Since cohabitation has replaced marriage as the most common type of second union, previously-married single parents may bear children during a cohabiting rather than a marital union (Brown 2000a). Among my sample of low-income couples, I expect that couples with children from previous unions will be more likely to have children before marriage than couples who enter the relationship childless.

Calendar Year the Dating Relationship Began

The shape that low-income couples' romantic relationship trajectories may take may differ by historical period, so I include the year that the couple began dating as a control variable. Changing trends in family formation include, among other things, increased rates of premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, and nonmarital births. Data

from the NSFG show decreasing levels of abstinence until marriage over time: approximately 20 percent of those first marrying before 1980 waited until marriage to have sex, compared to 13 percent of those first married between 1995 and 2002 (Chandra et al. 2005). Over the past few decades, the United States has witnessed increasing proportions of couples cohabiting before marriage and/or bearing children outside of marriage (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Manning 2001; Wu 1996), particularly among economically disadvantaged persons (Ellwood and Jencks 2004a; Raley 2000; Seltzer 2000; Smock and Manning 2004). Based on previous research, I expect to find higher rates of premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, and premarital childbearing for low-income couples whose relationships formed later in historical time than for those who started dating earlier. As cohabitation becomes more popular, dating couples may transition into cohabitation at increasingly shorter durations and delay marriage longer.

Homogamy in Age and Race/Ethnicity

The similarity or difference in partners' ages and racial/ethnic backgrounds may influence low-income couples' romantic relationship trajectories.⁴ Homogamous couples experience the social benefits of adhering to societal partnering norms. In contrast, nontraditional couples face negative stereotypes and generally receive less support from family and friends (Boyd and Li 2003; Vaquera and Kao 2005; Vera, Berardo, and Berardo 1985). Although marriage may therefore be viewed as an unproblematic transition for homogamous couples (Houts, Robins, and Huston 1996), heterogamous

⁴ Educational homogamy is not included as a correlate of relationship trajectories because the initiation of the dating relationship may have preceded the completion of schooling. It is, however, included in analyses of marital quality, as most MARS respondents have completed their formal education.

couples may confront criticism and choose to cohabit instead. Cohabitation may also be more common among heterogamous couples for reasons of selection; people who choose nontraditional partners are more likely to engage in other nontraditional behaviors, such as cohabitation. Research does indeed find more cohabitation among age- and/or race-discrepant couples (Blackwell and Lichter 2004; Boyd and Li 2003; Joyner and Kao 2005; Wu et al. 2000). In a study using Fragile Families data, Carlson and colleagues (2004) also found evidence of lower odds of marriage among couples with racial/ethnic differences.

Research by Joyner and Sassler (2008) and Sassler and Kamp Dush (2008) considers the role of race and/or age pairing in the tempo of relationship events. These studies find that age heterogamous couples move more quickly from the start of the dating relationship to first sex and that age and race heterogamous couples transition more quickly from first sex to cohabitation than do homogamous couples. Interracial couples move more slowly to marriage than same-race couples. The age difference between spouses appears to have no effect on the timing from cohabitation to marriage, however (Joyner and Sassler 2008; Sassler and Kamp Dush 2008).

Based on previous literature, I expect to find sequences with premarital sex, cohabitation, and premarital childbearing to be more frequent among heterogamous low-income couples than among their homogamous counterparts. I also believe that heterogamous couples will transition more quickly to sex and to cohabitation, but will delay marriage, and potentially, postmarital childbearing.

Race/Ethnicity

Patterns of union formation vary by race and ethnicity. Racial minorities have sex sooner in the life course and sooner in relationships than white couples (Browning, Leventhal, and Brooks-Gunn 2004; Sassler and Kamp Dush 2008; Upchurch et al. 1998). Race/ethnic patterns also appear in nonmarital childbearing, where blacks and Hispanics are more likely than whites to bear children outside of marriage (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Manning 2001). In 2004, 24.5 percent of non-Hispanic white births, 46.4 percent of Hispanic births, and 69.3 percent of non-Hispanic black births were to unmarried women (Martin et al. 2006). Although women's rates of ever having cohabited do not vary by race (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Chandra et al. 2005), some evidence suggests race/ethnic variation in the nature and meaning of cohabitation (Smock 2000). Cohabitation may be more acceptable as a setting for child rearing for Hispanic and black women, who are more likely than their white counterparts to remain cohabiting after a nonmarital pregnancy (Manning 2001; Manning and Smock 1995); in fact, rates of intended nonmarital childbearing are higher among Hispanics and blacks than whites (Musick 2002, 2007). Additionally, black and Hispanic cohabitators are significantly less likely to marry than are white cohabitators (Brown 2000b; Lichter et al. 2006; Manning and Smock 1995; Raley 2001), particularly among poor couples (Roy et al. 2008). Sassler and Kamp Dush (2008) find that racial minority couples move more slowly to cohabitation and to marriage than do white couples. I expect that these race/ethnic patterns will hold among my sample of low-income couples. Thus, I expect to find higher rates of nonmarital childbearing, a faster transition from dating to sex, a longer duration to marriage, and a

longer duration of cohabitation among my sample of low-income couples with at least one non-white partner.

Religious Upbringing

Religious upbringing is expected to influence low-income couples' romantic relationship trajectories. Religion influences the perceived costs or benefits of certain life course decisions, including marriage and fertility, which then influence the choices made regarding romantic relationships (Lehrer 2004a). As Lesthaeghe and Moors (2002:11) write: "Earlier value orientations are... predictive for choices with respect to alternative paths in household formation in contexts with plural models of life course structuring and high degrees of individual autonomy." I measure whether a person was religiously affiliated or not, and do not measure specific denominations as I do not have sufficient sample size to do so.⁵ Most contemporary religions practiced in the United States share similar views of ideal relationship trajectories, including resistance of premarital sex and cohabitation and promotion of marriage (Clarkberg et al. 1995; Xu, Hudspeth, and Bartowski 2005). Consequently, persons with no religious affiliation have the most permissive attitudes and behaviors on a host of sex, marriage, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing topics (Sweet and Bumpass 1990). Participation in religious institutions fosters behaviors aligned with more traditional relationship sequencing. Those without a religious affiliation have higher rates of premarital sex (Brewster 1994; Regnerus 2007), premarital cohabitation (Lehrer 2004b; Sweet and Bumpass 1990;

⁵ Measures of childhood religiosity, which may be related to relationship trajectories (Regnerus 2007; Thornton et al. 1992), are not available in the MARS.

Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992), and premarital childbearing (Wilcox 2008). Also, the religiously unaffiliated are less likely to transition from cohabitation to marriage within five years (Bramlett and Mosher 2002) and marry later than most religiously affiliated (Xu et al. 2005). Religious affiliation may also influence the timing of postmarital childbearing, given religion's adherence to traditional family norms and the lower fertility rates among the religiously unaffiliated (Althaus 1992; Mosher, Williams, and Johnson 1992). These relationships are expected to hold for low-income persons as well. Based on these research findings, couples raised without a religious affiliation are expected to be more likely to engage in sex, cohabitation, and childbearing in their premarital relationships. Moreover, I expect that they will marry later and have a longer cohabital duration and a longer first postmarital childbirth interval.

Growing Up without Married Parents

Parental marital status has a significant impact on how and when children form their own relationships and families. Though the studies reviewed below are not exclusive to low-income persons, there is no reason to expect that the effect of parents' marital status would differ by income. Arguably, family values and norms undergo some adjustment after the breakdown of parents' marriage, and children are likely to form their own unions with greater awareness of relationship fragility (Axinn and Thornton 1996; Trent and South 1992). Indeed, considerable research demonstrates a link between parents' divorce and adult children's likelihood of divorce (Amato and DeBoer 2001; Amato and Rogers 1997; Bumpass, Martin, and Sweet 1991a; Whyte 1990).

Evidence exists that parents' marital status in the family of origin influences the sequencing of children's romantic relationship events, including sex, cohabitation, and childbearing. Children of divorce espouse more accepting attitudes of premarital sex (Axinn and Thornton 1996) and are more likely to have premarital sex, more sexual partners, and more frequent sex (Newcomer and Udry 1987; Thornton and Camburn 1987). Likewise, positive attitudes about premarital cohabitation (Axinn and Thornton 1996; Glenn and Marquardt 2001) and actual cohabitation experience (Teachman 2004; Thornton 1991) are more popular among those who experienced parental divorce. Research using a couple-perspective finds that rates of cohabitation are especially high when both partners' parents had divorced and are somewhat less when only one partner experienced parental divorce (Amato 1996). Those who grew up in non-intact families also display higher rates of premarital childbearing (Bumpass and McLanahan 1989; Cherlin, Kiernan, and Chase-Landale 1995; McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; Teachman 2004). Given these findings, I expect to discover higher rates of premarital sex, cohabitation, and premarital childbearing among couples where at least one spouse was raised without married parents.

The spacing between relationship events may also be affected by parents' marital status. Most research on the topic, though based on the individual- and lifetime-approach, suggests a faster transition to sex and cohabitation and a delayed transition to marriage among those growing up without married parents. Persons from single-parent or step-family households have first sex at younger ages than those from two-parent biological families (Pearson, Muller, and Frisco 2006), and they form premarital

cohabiting unions earlier as well (Teachman 2003a; Thornton 1991; Wiik 2008).

Although parental divorce is associated with an increase in the chances of marrying during adolescence, it is also associated with delayed marriage among those who remain single past age 20 (Wolfinger 2003; also see research by Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Li and Wojtkiewicz 1994, McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; McLaughlin, Lichter, and Johnston 1993). Among unmarried—and mostly poor—parents in the Fragile Families sample, Waller and McLanahan (2005) find that expectations to marry are higher among those who grew up in intact families than among those who did not. Using a relationship-development perspective on the timing of relationship events, Sassler and Kamp Dush (2008) confirm these patterns: they find that sex and cohabitation take place earlier and marriage is delayed among couples who experienced parental divorce.

Given this research, I expect to find higher rates of premarital sex and a quicker transition to couples' first sex; higher rates of premarital cohabitation and more expedient transition to premarital cohabitation; longer spacing between the start of the dating relationship and marriage; and more premarital childbearing among low-income couples where at least one spouse was raised without married parents than among those where both spouses were raised in an intact family. These relationship patterns may result from the adult child's fear of marital breakdown, parental resources (and own status attainment goals), the parental home environment (including social control and parental attitudes), or earlier maturation (Axinn and Thornton 1992a; Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Pearson et al. 2006; Thornton 1991).

Parental Resources

Couples' romantic relationship trajectories may be influenced by parental resources, often proxied with socioeconomic status, occupational prestige, or, as in this research, educational attainment. Parents instill aspirations for education and career, and children's educational goals are reinforced by parental role models. Consequently, the educational attainment of parents and children is strongly related.

Parents' high educational attainment is associated with adult children's greater investment in the marketplace. High educational and vocational goals generally conflict with early childbearing and marriage and usually lead to a delayed investment in the household (Becker 1976; Oppenheimer 1988). Accordingly, youth with highly educated parents delay initiation of sexual activity (Miller and Moore 1990), cohabitation (Wiik 2008), and marriage (Axinn and Thornton 1992a; McLaughlin et al. 1993; South 1996, 2001; Waite and Spitze 1981), and have a lower risk of premarital childbearing (Chandra et al. 2005; South 1996) and premarital cohabitation (Sassler, Miller, and Addo 2008). Hence, I expect sequences of premarital sex, cohabitation, and premarital childbearing to be less frequent among low-income couples with highly educated parents.

Expectations regarding the timing of events in couples' relationships are less straightforward. Though individuals with highly educated parents may delay sex, cohabitation, and marriage in their lifetime, they may not delay these events within the course of a relationship. In fact, some reasoning suggests that the spacing between the start of the dating relationship and marriage may be shorter among children of highly-educated parents as couples who lack the economic well-being required for marriage may

cohabit for longer durations (Oppenheimer 1988; Smock et al. 2005). Furthermore, the tempo to sex and to cohabitation may not be strongly linked to parental education because these are now popular premarital behaviors for persons of all educational attainments (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Chandra et al. 2005) and are less tied to economic ability than is marriage (Sassler and Goldscheider 2004). Finally, the first postmarital birth interval is expected to be longer for those couples with highly educated parents, given that offspring of highly educated parents tend to espouse higher educational and vocational aspirations and demonstrate greater investment in these realms—and childbearing may interfere with these plans (Happel, Hill, and Low 1984; Heck et al. 1997; Plotnick 2007). Though this research is based on general population samples, I believe that these relationships will hold for low-income couples.

Dysfunctional Childhood Experience

Dysfunctional childhood experience, indicated by having lived with a problem drinker or having experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse during childhood, seems likely to play a role in couples' romantic relationship trajectories. Children living in these situations are more likely to encounter problems developing healthy emotions and attachments, which may then be associated with difficulties with intimacy, trust, and communication in future romantic relationships (Davis and Petretic-Jackson 2000; Harter 2000; Jackson et al. 1990; Kelley et al. 2005; Pistorello and Follette 1998). Indeed, adult survivors of childhood abuse are less likely than those without such experiences to be married or in stable cohabiting relationships. Instead, they are more likely to experience a series of fleeting and promiscuous unions (Browning and Laumann 1997; Cherlin et al.

2004; Davis and Petretic-Jackson 2000). In terms of the life course more generally, survivors of childhood abuse are more likely to have sex, become pregnant, parent, and cohabit during adolescence (Mullen et al. 1994; Noll, Trickett, and Putnam 2003; Small and Luster 1994). Children of alcoholics tend to date earlier (Larson et al. 2001) and to marry at younger ages (Dawson, Grant, and Harford, 1992; Hill et al. 1997). Given these past research findings, and expecting similar effects among low-income persons, I expect to find quicker progression to sex, cohabitation, and marriage, and an increased likelihood that the premarital relationship includes sex, cohabitation, and childbearing for couples in which at least one spouse had a dysfunctional childhood experience than for couples in which neither experienced a dysfunctional childhood.

ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP TRAJECTORIES AND MARITAL QUALITY

I expect my research to reveal an association between low-income couples' romantic relationship trajectories and wives' and husbands' subsequent marital quality. Marital search theory and the hypotheses of inertia and constraint commitment guide my expectations. Marital search theory, by incorporating insights from rational choice theory, Becker's (1981) New Home Economics, and Levinger's (1965) Exchange Theory, assumes that selecting a mate is approached rationally, with partners carefully selecting someone who is a good match. A high quality spouse is someone who can offer an equitable exchange. Marital search theorists assert that, much like the labor market, a range of potential mates exists for any given person, and a search process must be undertaken to find the best match (Oppenheimer 1988). The quality of the spouse relates

to the length of time spent searching: the longer the search, the higher quality of the spouse. The decision to marry marks the end of the search and theoretically precludes forming a different and possibly better match in the future.

The length of search for a spouse is often operationalized as age at marriage (e.g., South 1995). Marital search theorists suggest that persons who marry at young ages have spent insufficient time in the search process, resulting in the marriage of partners who are relatively poor matches on a number of traits (Becker, Landes, and Michael 1977; Oppenheimer 1988; South 1995). Over time, as spouses get to know each other better (and also become aware of spousal alternatives), the discordant traits become exposed, resulting in unsatisfactory marriages and a higher likelihood of divorce (Grover et al. 1985). Indeed, research supports this theoretical proposition: those who marry young have higher dissolution risks than those who delay marriage (Booth and Edwards 1985; Bumpass et al. 1991a; Teachman 1983; Seiler 2002). Though age at marriage may be a useful proxy for the length of search, the time actually spent in the relationship would be a more accurate indicator; that is, the length of time searching for the future mate is manifest in the time spent between various pairs of relationship events, including dating initiation, sex, cohabitation, childbearing, and marriage.

When individuals bear the responsibility for mate selection, they must rely on their own judgment and experience to determine whether they have made the right choice. People experiment, often through a series of romantic relationships, to ensure that the potential mate matches the characteristics of the ideal spouse. When, as is true in American culture, romantic love and self-fulfillment are the most important qualities,

relationships progress in ways to measure these characteristics among potential spouses. Individuals are encouraged to “shop around” before making commitments (Glenn and Marquardt 2001; South 1995; Whyte 1990). Romantically involved couples are usually encouraged to take time to develop their union, particularly regarding marriage and childbearing, because the length of dating prior to these events signals greater sophistication in choosing a compatible mate. Couples may even be encouraged to postpone more informal relationship events, like sex and cohabitation, because they could result in stronger commitments than expected (Christopher and Sprecher 2000; Haselton and Buss 2001; Regan and Dreyer 1999; Stanley et al. 2006a; Theiss and Solomon 2007).

Ideally, relationships develop into committed unions because of love and a desire for the relationship to continue. This reason for commitment is called “personal dedication” by Stanley and Markman (1992) and “relationship-driven commitment” by Surra and Hughes (1997). This interpersonal commitment reflects positive attributions of the relationship and mutual interdependence (e.g., wanting to spend one’s life with the person). Relationships can also progress to committed stages because of constraints or barriers to ending the relationship (e.g., financial obligations, social pressure) or through important events inside or outside of the relationship (e.g., premarital pregnancy). This type of derived commitment is called “constraint commitment” by Stanley and Markman (1992) and “event-driven commitment” by Surra and Hughes (1997). Couples may be driven to marry because of relationship inertia (Kline et al. 2004) or other circumstances, even when they may not have done so otherwise.

Marriages formed through constraints or events should be associated with poorer relationship quality (Surra and Hughes 1997). Certain relationship trajectories compromise or foreclose choices about life partners; more specifically, premarital sex, cohabitation, and premarital childbearing may result in commitment developing from constraints or events (Kline et al. 2004; Stanley et al. 2006a; Surra et al. 1987). Moreover, short spacing between relationship events is expected to be associated with poorer relationship quality, as these relationships may be more event-driven than relationship-driven.

Below, I review literature pertaining to how marital quality may be affected by the sequencing of sex, cohabitation, childbearing, and marriage. Then, I review how the spacing between these events may affect marital quality.

Romantic Relationship Event Sequencing and Marital Quality

I anticipate that the sequencing of romantic events in a couple's relationship will affect marital quality. The review of the following literature provides the basis for my analyses of how couples' romantic relationship trajectories generate satisfaction, commitment, and conflict in marriage among low-income couples.

Premarital sex. A couple may choose to have sex before marriage to test physical compatibility prior to committing to marriage. Incompatible couples could dissolve their relationships before marriage is reached. Through this "weeding-out" process, nonvirgins may have higher quality marriages than virgins. Nonvirgins would also have more realistic expectations about marital sexuality than would virgins. The experience in

intimate relationships could allow persons to make more informed decisions about marital partners (Whyte 1990).

Yet, premarital sex could result in poorer marital quality. If sexual compatibility is mistaken for emotional compatibility, then couples who engage in premarital sex may make worse marital choices (Kahn and London 1991). Another possibility is that premarital sex may make marriage “less special,” resulting in less respect for marriage as an institution (Burgess and Wallin 1953). Some research suggests that men find their partners less physically attractive and sexy after first-time sexual intercourse (Haselton and Buss 2001).

In a pioneering study, Burgess and Wallin (1953) find sexual restraint before marriage increases the chances of a successful marriage. Kelly and Conley (1987) also find that the extent of sexual activity with the premarital partner correlates significantly and negatively with marital satisfaction. Research on a sample of women married between 1925 and 1944 finds a negative correlation between premarital sex and marital quality; however, no parallel correlation appears for women married between 1944 and 1984 (Whyte 1990). Another recent study finds no relationship between whether dating partners had sexual intercourse and a number of future relationship outcomes, including marital satisfaction at 15-year follow-up (Hill and Peplau 1998). These findings suggest that the negative effects of premarital sex may have waned as sexual permissiveness became more popular. Instead, premarital sex with someone other than the future spouse may be related to marital outcomes. Indeed, Teachman (2003) finds a higher risk of marital dissolution among women who had premarital sex with the husband and someone

other than the future spouse, while women who had premarital sex with the husband only experience the same risk as those who abstained until marriage. Unfortunately, the MARS did not collect data on sexual partners, preventing me from exploring this possibility, though I do compare the marital quality among couples based on whether and when they had sex with their spouse.

Premarital cohabitation. Popular wisdom suggests that premarital cohabitation filters out incompatible couples (Larson and Holman 1994). Cohabitation can be used as a testing period, when partners can get to know each other as potential marriage partners and prepare for the realities of dyadic life (e.g., housekeeping issues) (DeMaris and Leslie 1984; Macklin 1972). However, research consistently finds that the marriages of cohabitators are less satisfactory and more unstable than those who did not cohabit: couples who cohabited together before marriage report less marital satisfaction, less commitment to their partner/marriage, and a greater frequency of disagreements than couples who did not cohabit prior to marriage (Booth and Johnson 1988; DeMaris and Leslie 1984; Hill and Evans 2006; Kamp Dush, Cohan, and Amato 2003; Stafford, Kline, and Rankin 2004; Stanley, Whitton, and Markman 2004; Stanley et al. 2006a; Thomson and Colella 1992).⁶ Other relational dimensions that suffer from premarital cohabitation include communication (Cohan and Kleinbaum 2002; DeMaris and Leslie 1984; Skinner et al. 2002), fidelity (Forste and Tanfer 1996), and marital violence (Stanley et al. 2004). Moreover, couples who cohabit prior to marriage have less perceived and actual marital stability than couples who do not (Bennett, Blanc, and Bloom 1988; Booth and Johnson

⁶ For an exception, see Hill and Peplau (1998).

1988; Schoen 1992; Teachman and Polonko 1990; Thomson and Colella 1992; Wu and Musick 2008).

Why cohabitation is associated with poorer marital outcomes is not clear. Theory and evidence point to two possibilities. One is that cohabitation is selective of persons who are nontraditional or bring other risk factors to the relationship (e.g., younger age, lower socioeconomic status, less religiosity, etc.). In other words, cohabitators are a select group of individuals possessing characteristics not conducive to stable relationships (Booth and Johnson 1988; Clarkberg et al. 1995; Lillard, Brien, and Waite 1995; Thomson and Colella 1992). It could also be that the experience of cohabitation has an independent effect on marital quality and stability, for example, by changing cohabitators' attitudes towards marriage and family life. To illustrate, the experience of cohabitation is associated with greater acceptance of divorce and a reduction in the number of children desired (Axinn and Barber 1997; Axinn and Thornton 1992b).

Couples enter cohabitation without a lot of forethought, often for reasons of convenience or finances (Sassler 2004). Often, there is a lack of clarity between partners about future plans for the relationship (Manning and Smock 2005). The deliberateness of the decision to cohabit before marriage may alter the effects of cohabitation on subsequent marriage. Having plans to marry or being engaged at the initiation of cohabitation may reduce any negative effects of cohabitation on marital outcomes. Kline and colleagues (2004) find that married couples who cohabited before engagement had poorer outcomes on all eight measures of marital quality (including commitment and marital adjustment) than married couples who cohabited only after engagement or who

did not cohabit at all. Only one significant difference emerges between those who cohabited after engagement and those who did not cohabit: the after-engagement group had fewer positive interactions than noncohabiters. In a study comparing cohabiters to marrieds, Brown and Booth (1996) find that relationship quality (including happiness and disagreements) is lower for cohabiters without marital intentions, though it differs little for cohabiters with plans to marry and married participants. The survey instrument used in my research, unfortunately, did not examine motives for cohabiting nor did it collect the date of engagement, making it impossible to distinguish between groups of premarital cohabiters. Nevertheless, the length of premarital cohabitation with future spouse may be a useful proxy for marriage plans: couples with short cohabital durations are more likely to have plans for marriage than are couples with longer cohabital durations (Bennett et al. 1988; Brown and Booth 1996; Kline et al. 2004).

Premarital cohabitation may have little or no effect on marital quality if cohabitation is limited to the future spouse. This notion has been established in research on marital stability (DeMaris and MacDonald 1993; Teachman 2003b; Teachman and Polonko 1990). Most studies on marital quality do not control for serial cohabitation, focusing only on premarital cohabitation with the spouse (e.g., Booth and Johnson 1988; DeMaris and Leslie 1984; Stafford et al. 2004; Stanley et al. 2004; Thomson and Colella 1992). I find only one study that makes this distinction, and results from this analysis reveal no effect of cohabitation with future spouse on marital happiness or disagreements, although cohabitation with someone else is associated with negative marital outcomes (Stets 1993). A study on marital stability by Lichter and Qian (2008) finds that serial

cohabitators have divorce rates double those of spouse-only cohabitators. In my analyses, I control for serial cohabitation. My research, therefore, offers another observation of the relationship between premarital cohabitation with future spouse and subsequent marital quality, independent of the effects of serial cohabitation. Despite its limitations, the bulk of extant research finds a negative relationship between premarital cohabitation with spouse and marital quality. I, therefore, expect to find less marital satisfaction, less commitment, and more conflict among couples that cohabited before marriage than among couples who did not cohabit.

Sequencing of marriage and childbearing. Children bring significant changes to couples' lives, including increased financial costs, restriction of free time, and negotiation of new parenting roles (Cowan and Cowan 1992, 1995). Although many studies show a negative impact of the presence of children on marital quality (see review by Twenge, Campbell, and Foster 2003), I consider the effects of the sequencing of marriage and the birth of the first shared biological child.⁷ Specifically, I expect that marital quality will be lower among couples that had a premarital birth. This pattern may also hold true for premarital pregnancies that are legitimated by marriage before birth.

As the inertia and constraint commitment hypotheses suggest, a premarital birth or pregnancy may stimulate greater commitment between partners, resulting in an unplanned cohabitation or marriage. Indeed, three-quarters of parent cohabitators in a recent TLC3 study began their cohabitation as a result of a pregnancy, the great majority

⁷ Although a major oversight in the literature comparing parents and childless adults in subsequent marital quality is the distinction between unions involving biological and non-biological parents (Fein et al. 2003), the studies herein reviewed compare couples that do and do not have a shared birth prior to marriage.

of which were either not intended, or accepted with ambivalence (Reed 2006; also see Raley 2001). Nonmarital pregnancies and births to cohabitators also accelerate transitions to marriage (Guzzo 2006; Manning 2001; Manning and Smock 1995; Upchurch et al. 2001). Indeed, a study of married couples finds that the length of coresidential living is shorter among couples facing a premarital pregnancy than among any other type of couple examined (Kurdek 1991).

Couples who marry because of a premarital birth or pregnancy may be ill-matched and have inadequate preparation for marriage. As a result, they may experience poor marital quality (Lewis and Spanier 1979; Surra and Hughes 1997). Kurdek (1991) finds that couples experiencing a premarital pregnancy report the lowest marital quality of six types of couples (including remarried and stepfather families) at marriage and one year later. Another study finds that couples who become pregnant before marriage (especially those becoming pregnant before engagement) report more conflict and more ambivalence at marriage than couples who delay childbearing until after marriage (Surra et al. 1987). Whyte's (1990) study also reveals more marital problems among couples with a premarital pregnancy.

Couples who bear children before marriage also face higher risks of marital instability (Manning, Smock, and Majumdar 2004; Timmer and Orbuch 2001; Whyte 1990; though perhaps not in remarriages, according to Teachman 2008). Wu and Musick (2008), using the NSFG, however, find no difference in marital stability between those who cohabit, marry, and then have a child and those who cohabit, have a child, and then marry; in other words, the particular sequencing of marriage and childbearing in this

recent study appears to have little impact on the subsequent stability of the marital union. Nevertheless, studies consistently find higher odds of union disruption among cohabiting parents who never married and among married parents who cohabited before marriage than among married parents who never cohabited (Manning et al. 2004; Wu and Musick 2008). Given this evidence, I expect to find that low-income couples who bear children together before they marry will report less marital satisfaction and commitment and more conflict than couples who delay childbearing until after marriage.

Romantic Relationship Event Spacing and Marital Quality

The spacing of romantic relationship events may also affect subsequent marital quality. With reference to the marital search theory, longer time spent searching before marriage is hypothesized to result in a better quality spousal match. With time, dating couples that are ill-matched can dissolve their unions before marriage occurs. A quick succession of events will result in levels of commitment that may be too high. Thus, I expect that the longer the spacing between the start of the dating relationship and each subsequent relationship event, the higher the subsequent marital quality will be.

Spacing between dating initiation and sex. Marital search theory suggests that the quality of the spousal match—and thus, marital quality—will increase with the time that a couple delays their first sexual experience. This is because the timing of sexual initiation in a relationship has implications for the subsequent trajectory of the romantic relationship. First coitus in a couple's relationship, which can be an expression of devotion to the relationship, results in the escalation of relationship intimacy and commitment (Haselton and Buss 2001; Huston 1994; Metts 2004; Theiss and Solomon

2007). Cohabitation and marriage may follow soon after. Recent research by Sassler and Kamp Dush (2008) finds couples who have sex within the first month of dating cohabit more quickly than those who delay sex, and, in his study of married couples, Huston (1994) finds that the more quickly the couple becomes sexually involved, the quicker they marry. In short, couples who have sex early in their relationship may experience faster unfolding relationship trajectories directed by events and/or constraints.

Relationships that progress quickly from dating to sex may later suffer from poorer marital quality, as implied by marital search theory. Metts (2004) and Peplau and colleagues (1977) find that dating couples who delay sex report significantly more love and feelings of closeness to the partner than couples who have sex within one month of dating, but no differences appear in overall relationship satisfaction. Dating couples that delay sex also report higher probabilities of marrying their partner (Peplau et al. 1977). Positive, though insignificant, correlations appear between time to first sex and marital satisfaction and feelings of love in a longitudinal study of married couples by Huston (1994).

The relationship between the tempo of the transition to first sex and commitment is unclear. Although Metts (2004) finds that rapid sexual involvement predicts greater commitment for men (suggesting that early first sex is the manifestation of passionate love), research by Kirkendall (1961) and Laumann et al. (1994) finds that the spacing from the start of the dating relationship to first sexual experience in the partnership is longer in relationships with future spouses than in other partnerships, suggesting that delayed sex is associated with a better quality match (i.e., spouse versus dating partner in

relationships not ending in marriage)—results which are in line with the tenets of marital search theory.

Given the lack of research on this topic, my expectations for the effects of spacing between dating and sex are tentative. Using marital search theory as a guide, I speculate that couples who have sex earlier in a relationship will have lower relationship quality than couples who delay sexual involvement; more specifically, the spacing between the start of the dating relationship and first sex may be positively related to marital satisfaction and commitment and negatively related to conflict.

Spacing between dating initiation and cohabitation. Couples cohabit for financial reasons, convenience, and the enjoyment of being together. Marriage, on the other hand, does not appear to be a prime motivator (Macklin 1972; Manning and Smock 2005; Sassler 2004). Although impending marriage may not have been the primary reason for cohabitation, many cohabiting couples may slide into marriage because of the barriers that exist to ending the union—as suggested by the inertial and constraint commitment hypotheses (Kline et al. 2004; Stanley et al. 2006a). Marital search theory proposes that couples who move in together quickly do not undertake a prolonged partner search and may be more poorly matched than couples who delay coresidential living. In a small qualitative study, Sassler (2004) finds that cohabitators with the shortest duration between romantic initiation and cohabitation are most likely to report reservations about having progressed too quickly. These relationships were whirlwinds of passion, where careful deliberation about cohabitation did not take place; instead, convenience and finance were most frequently discussed as motivation for cohabiting. Couples who wait more than one

year to live together, in contrast, are more deliberative about their relationships and most have discussed their future relationship goals prior to moving in with their partners.

Previous research suggests that cohabiting couples should be distinguished based on their plans for marriage (Brown and Booth 1996; Kline et al. 2004). Arguably, couples who cohabit soon after dating are less likely to have plans for marriage than couples who delay cohabitation. Based on this assumption, the literature comparing relationship quality among cohabitators with and without plans for marriage offers useful insight. Given this reasoning, previous research, and ideas gleaned from marital search theory and inertia/constraint commitment hypotheses, I expect to find lower levels of marital quality among couples who cohabit soon after dating than among couples who delay cohabitation.

Spacing between dating initiation and marriage. The tenets of marital search theory, namely that the time invested in the search for a marital partner will result in a better match, are supported when considering the spacing between dating and marriage. Indeed, the time the couple spends dating before marrying positively affects subsequent marital quality (Birtchnell and Kennard 1984; Grover et al. 1985). There also appears to be greater variability in marital satisfaction scores among couples who date for shorter periods, while couples who date for longer periods score consistently high on marital satisfaction (Grover et al. 1985). The length of the premarital relationship is also tied to subsequent marital stability: the likelihood of marital breakdown is greater for couples who knew each other for a shorter period of time before marriage (Kurdek 1991, 1993). These effects may decline over time, as longitudinal research by Clements, Stanley, and

Markman (2004) reveals no effect of length of dating relationship on whether couples are divorced, distressed, or happily married more than a decade after marriage. Based on empirical findings of prior research and arguments from marital search theory, I expect to find that a longer spacing between dating and marriage will be associated with more positive marital outcomes.

Spacing between cohabitation and marriage. The duration of premarital cohabitation is expected to affect couples' subsequent marital quality. From marital search theory, one can argue that couples who cohabit for a short period of time before marriage have less opportunity to know each other as coresidential mates and hence they reduce their chances of recognizing potential areas of conflict and working out their roles as a coresidential couple before marriage. With this theory, the duration of cohabitation would be expected to be positively related to marital quality (Lillard et al. 1995).

A contradictory hypothesis can be proposed: couples who cohabit for a long period of time may experience lower marital quality than couples who cohabit for shorter durations. A longer duration of cohabitation may signal uncertainty about the relationship or about the institution of marriage itself, whereas a shorter cohabitation may indicate a clear intention to marry the partner (Berrington and Diamond 1999; Brown and Booth 1996). Couples who marry after a long duration of cohabitation may be ill-matched, but marry regardless, due to inertia (Kline et al. 2004). A longer experience of cohabitation may also entrench feelings of independence and decrease the extent to which marriage is valued, potentially resulting in lower marital quality for long-term cohabitators (Axinn and Barber 1997; Hill and Evans 2006).

Most research supports this second hypothesis. Hill and Evans (2006) find that a longer duration of premarital cohabitation is associated with less marital satisfaction and more heated arguing. The duration of premarital cohabitation positively predicts perceived marital instability (ibid.; Thomson and Colella 1992) and actual marital instability (Bennett et al. 1988; Berrington and Diamond 1999; Teachman and Polonko 1990). Kline et al. (2004), however, did not find that cohabital duration was a significant covariate of any of their marital outcomes. This study controlled for engagement status at the time of cohabitation, which may account for their contrasting finding. Using most empirical research as a guide, I might expect to find longer cohabitations to be associated with less marital satisfaction, less commitment, and more conflict. Using marital search theory, however, leads me to make a converse hypothesis, namely that longer cohabital duration will be associated with more positive marital quality.

Spacing between marriage and postmarital childbearing. The final pair of relationship events considered here are marriage and childbearing. I expect to find that marital quality is enhanced by the postponement of childbearing following marriage. Marital search theory suggests that couples who postpone childbearing are more likely to benefit from achieving a positive dyadic relationship. This relationship maturity accompanies the greater developmental and economic maturity that comes with age.

Multiple studies find that the number of years married before parenthood is positively related to marital satisfaction and negatively related to conflict (Birtchnell and Kennard 1984; Bouchard, LaChance-Grzela, and Goguen 2008; Helms-Erikson 2001). Women who have children within the first five years of marriage report lower marital

satisfaction scores than women who plan to have children later in the marriage (Polonko, Scanzoni, and Teachman 1982). Although all couples experience a decline in marital happiness over time, this decline is more pronounced for couples who have made the transition to parenthood (Crohan 1996). Parents also report more frequent conflicts and higher marital tension than childless spouses (ibid.). A negative relationship describes the first postmarital birth interval and the probability of marital dissolution (Wineberg 1988). In sum, in line with the tenets of marital search theory, most studies find that marriage outcomes are more positive for couples who delay postmarital childbearing than for couples who give birth shortly after marriage.

OTHER CORRELATES OF MARITAL QUALITY

In addition to relationship trajectories, many other variables have been shown to influence marital quality: marital duration, age of the partners at start of marriage, marital history, previous cohabitation experience, having children from previous unions, spousal homogamy, race/ethnicity, employment status, joint religious activity, economic hardship, and parental marital history. Because most marital quality research is not based on low-income samples, the literature reviewed below is based on research using diverse samples.

*Marital Duration*⁸

Many studies find a U-shaped pattern of marital satisfaction with marital duration, where satisfaction is higher in the early and later years of marriage and lower in between

⁸ While most studies consider the duration of time since the wedding date, some studies measure duration since the start of cohabitation. By controlling for total time spent in the union, any independent effects of cohabitation can be isolated (e.g., Bennett et al. 1988; Berrington and Diamond 1999; DeMaris and Rao 1992; Teachman and Polonko 1990). I use marital duration to distinguish the independent effects of the duration of other premarital events (i.e., sex, cohabitation) on marital quality.

(e.g., Adelman, Chadwick, and Baerger 1996; Stanley et al. 2006b). The directional changes in satisfaction are typically attributed to the arrival and departure of children from the parental home (Glenn 1990). However, this curvilinear pattern may well be due to the fact that most studies use cross-sectional data. In contrast, research using longitudinal data has revealed declines in marital satisfaction for persons of all ages (Umberson et al. 2005) at all marital durations (Van Laningham, Johnson, and Amato 2001). Satisfaction with the relationship may decline over time as couples decrease their frequency of expressing affection, the time they spend talking together, and other activities that bring them pleasure, or because of diminished compatibility or boredom (Huston, McHale, and Crouter 1986; Huston et al 2001; VanLaningham et al. 2001). Because the MARS data I use in this research are cross-sectional, a curvilinear relationship may describe the association between relationship duration and marital satisfaction.

Time spent in a union fosters interdependence between partners and mounting barriers to exiting the relationship, such as finances, shared social networks, and children (Knoester and Booth 2000). These commitment constraints reinforce a sense of obligation to the marriage (Stanley and Markman 1992). If commitment is measured as the obligation to remain in the union, then one would expect a positive relationship between commitment and marital duration. However, when commitment is measured as dedication to the partner, excluding the notion of obligation, one might expect to find a negative association with marital duration. Indeed, a recent study finds that interpersonal dedication declines with marital duration (Stanley et al. 2006b). The commitment

variable available in the MARS dataset taps into interpersonal dedication. Drawing parallels to the arguments for marital satisfaction, I, therefore, expect to find a negative relationship between commitment and relationship duration.

With the passage of time, the frequency of disagreements between spouses is expected to decrease, largely due to increased familiarity. At the start of a relationship, couples learn how to mete out a dyadic existence, including articulating role expectations and coming to agreements on money, sex, and time (Schramm et al. 2005). Ideally, with time, spouses learn to compromise, negotiate, or avoid negative interactions. Indeed, research shows that couples experience fewer disagreements over time (Johnson et al. 1986; McGonagle, Kessler, and Schilling 1992; McGonagle, Kessler, and Gotlib 1993; Skinner et al. 2002).

Due to the effects of selection, all three measures of marital quality could demonstrate more positive outcomes over time, however, as the high divorce rate in the early years of marriage removes many of the lowest-quality marriages from the population of intact marriages.

Age at Marriage

Marital search theory scholars often use age at marriage to indicate the amount of time spent searching for a mate, with young age signifying a brief search. The life course perspective points out younger persons' greater immaturity. Both theories assert that young age at marriage will be related to poorer marital outcomes. Most research, in fact, bears this out: marriages contracted at early ages face higher risks of divorce (Booth and Edwards 1985; Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Bumpass et al. 1991a; Heaton 2002;

Teachman 1983) and worse marital quality (Amato and Rogers 1997; Lee 1977; Whyte 1990). In part, these negative outcomes may result from a lack of preparation for marital role performance (Booth and Edwards 1985; Lee 1977). Young couples may struggle to successfully perform expected spousal behaviors, including sexual fidelity, sensible alcohol and drug use, and supportive emotional interaction (e.g., communication and conflict resolution) (Amato and Rogers 1997; Booth and Edwards 1985). Moreover, persons who marry young may have less tolerance for unsatisfactory unions because alternatives to the current marriage are more abundant at younger ages (Booth and Edwards 1985; Lee 1977; South 1995). This monitoring of alternative partners indicates less interpersonal dedication (Stanley and Markman 1992). Furthermore, younger couples generally have fewer barriers to exiting unsatisfactory marriages (i.e., financial assets, social support), making constraint commitment a less powerful force (South 1995; Stanley and Markman 1992). Given this research and reasoning, I expect to find a positive association between age at marriage and marital satisfaction and marital commitment, and that age at marriage will be negatively associated with marital conflict.

Previous Marital Experience

Remarriage, though considered by Samuel Johnson to be “the triumph of hope over experience” (Boswell 1791), is associated with a higher risk of divorce than first marriage (Booth and Edwards 1992; Bramlett and Mosher 2001). Key stressors posing significant challenges to spouses in a remarriage include the structural complexity of the stepfamily (Downs 2003; Hobart and Brown 1988; Stewart 2005), especially if there are stepchildren (Falke and Larson 2007; White and Booth 1985), and financial obligations a

spouse may have to his/her first family (Ganong and Coleman 2003; Knox and Zussman 2001). An alternative hypothesis is that spouses experiencing divorce (especially serially) may be selective of qualities not conducive to marital success; for example, they may be more impulsive, less conforming, or have more poorly developed relationship skills compared to those in stable marriages (Booth and Edwards 1992; Brody, Neubaum, and Forehand 1988; Falke and Larson 2007).

For these reasons, among others, remarriages generally have poorer marital quality than first marriages. Couples who have remarried report less marital satisfaction (Booth and Edwards 1992; Skinner et al. 2002; Vemer et al. 1989) and more disagreements than couples in first marriages (Booth and Edwards 1992; Chen et al. 2006; Hobart 1991; White and Booth 1985; though see Brown and Booth 1996 and MacDonald and DeMaris 1995 for exceptions). Spouses in remarriages are expected to report less commitment to the current marriage because their previous experience of divorce signals a lack of commitment to maintain an unhappy marriage. Indeed, divorced individuals report that the primary contributor to their marital breakdown was a lack of commitment (Johnson et al. 2002; Schramm et al. 2003), and respondents in remarriages (regardless of their own marital history) are significantly more favorable towards divorce (White and Booth 1985). Yet, a recent study found no significant effect of remarriage on levels of interpersonal commitment (Stanley et al. 2006).

Previous Cohabitation Experience

As with remarriage, prior cohabitation with another partner is associated with lower marital quality. Whether due to experience or selection, previous cohabitation is

associated with poorer marital quality, including less interaction, less happiness, less satisfaction, poorer marital adjustment, more disagreements, and greater perceived instability (Brown 2003; Schramm et al. 2005; Stets 1993). Moreover, couples where at least one partner cohabited previously with another partner are more likely to experience marital dissolution than non-cohabitators or single-instance cohabitators (Berrington and Diamond 1999; DeMaris and MacDonald 1993; Lichter and Qian 2008; Teachman 2003b; Teachman and Polonko 1990). Brown (2003) finds that the adverse effects of earlier cohabiting unions persist throughout the duration of the current marriage.

Children from Previous Union(s)

Couples who enter a relationship with children from a previous union are expected to experience worse marital quality—regardless of the child’s age (Kurdek 1990).⁹ Financial and time commitments to children from previous relationships can be a source of marital conflict (Ganong and Coleman 2003). In addition, continued interaction with the previous partner can pose a challenge to building trust and fidelity for the new couple (Edin et al. 2003). The ambiguous role of stepparenting, coupled with myths that hold stepfamilies to unrealistic standards, increase the stress that stepfamilies face (Coleman, Ganong, and Fine 2000; Ganong and Coleman 2004). Additionally, research shows that the quality of the marital “match” is lower for unwed mothers than for their childless peers; they are more likely to marry men who are poor, unemployed, and poorly educated and are more likely to marry heterogamously (Lichter et al. 2003; Qian et al. 2005).

⁹ “Not all remarriages include children from prior relationships, nor do all stepfamilies incorporate a remarriage” (Coleman et al. 2000:1290). Therefore, remarriage and stepchildren are discussed separately.

As a result of challenges such as these, among others, marriages with children from previous unions are less stable (Graefe and Lichter 2002; Kurdek 1991; Lichter et al. 2003; Teachman 2008; White and Booth 1985). Marriages with stepchildren are characterized by lower marital quality than marriages without stepchildren, have lower levels of marital happiness, more disagreements, and more tensions (Brown and Booth 1996; Hobart 1991; White and Booth 1985). Although some research finds varying associations between the presence of stepchildren and marital quality (e.g., MacDonald and DeMaris 1995), the bulk of research demonstrates that stepchildren add strain to a marriage. Therefore, I expect to find poorer outcomes on my three indicators of marital quality among couples where at least one spouse has a child from a previous union.

Homogamy in Race/Ethnicity, Age, and Education

Marital search theory, along with related theories of mate selection (e.g., the winnowing hypothesis by Blackwell and Lichter 2004 and the filter theory by Kerckhoff and Davis 1962), assert that homogamy is a mechanism to identify potential mates. Individuals who are more alike—here measured in terms of race/ethnicity, age, and education—are considered to be better matched than those who are dissimilar. Differences in backgrounds can be a potential source of conflict and power imbalance, and mates are less likely to share values on basic life goals and expectations for marital roles (Bumpass and Sweet 1972). As a result, couples with dissimilar social characteristics are hypothesized to experience more tension, leading to higher rates of

marital dissolution (Lewis and Spanier 1979).¹⁰ Indeed, studies generally reveal that couples in heterogamous relationships report more conflict, less positive interaction, and less satisfaction than homogamous couples (Amato and Hohmann-Marriott 2007; Amato et al. 2003; Birtchnell and Kennard 1984; Houts et al. 1996), although Whyte (1990) finds no differences in reports of marital quality between women in heterogamous marriages and those in homogamous marriages. I also expect to find that spouses with dissimilar characteristics will report less marital satisfaction, less commitment, and more conflict than those whose characteristics are more homogamous.

Race/Ethnicity

Studies on marital quality have unearthed evidence of differentials between whites and blacks. Specifically, black married couples report less happiness, satisfaction, harmony, and interdependence, and higher levels of discord, negative behavior, and instability than white couples (Adelmann et al. 1996; Broman 1993; Broman 2005; Brown 2003; Trent and South 2003). Broman (1993) reports that marital satisfaction is lower for black women than white woman, but no similar race difference appears for men; this gender difference may be attributable to the constraints women, especially mothers, face when considering divorce. Like black Americans, Hispanics in the United States encounter a position of structural disadvantage. Despite this hardship, no gap in marital quality appears between whites and Mexican-Americans, perhaps due to Hispanic cultural factors such as familism and pronuptiality (Bulanda and Brown 2007).

¹⁰ Alternatively, heterogamous marriages may be selective of persons who are less committed to traditional values or of those who are less able to “compete within the prescribed market” (Bumpass and Sweet 1972); this selection of personal characteristics is not conducive to high marital quality.

Employment Status

Marital quality is also linked to spouses' employment status. Traditionally, husbands are expected to perform the instrumental role as the provider, while wives take primary responsibility for the expressive role, namely taking care of house and home. Studies using Fragile Families data find that when male partners are unemployed or underemployed—preventing the fulfillment of their breadwinner role—partner relationships tend to be strained (Edin 2000; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Fein et al. 2003). A husband's job insecurity/instability increases conflict, decreases marital satisfaction, and increases marital instability (Bumpass et al. 1991a; Fox and Chancey 1998)

Wives' paid employment is associated with both benefits and disadvantages regarding marital quality (Schoen, Rogers, and Amato 2006). On the one hand, marital quality may suffer because of increased work-family conflict resulting from women's workforce involvement (Hochschild 1989; Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, and Crouter 2000). Furthermore, employed women's greater financial independence may empower them to leave unsatisfactory marriages (Knoester and Booth 2000). On the other hand, marital quality may increase because family economic well-being may be improved by women's employment (Conger et al. 1990; White and Rogers 2000), especially for lower income couples (Lewis and Spanier 1979). In addition, the similarity in work roles for spouses can facilitate intimacy and mutual support between spouses (Coltrane 1996) and women's personal well-being may be enhanced through employment (Rogers and DeBoer 2001). These contrasting effects of women's employment may cancel each other out, leaving little net effect on marital quality. Given this reasoning and the results of

past research, I do not expect to find a wife's employment status will be linked to marital outcomes, but I do expect to find that a husband's unemployment will be related to less marital satisfaction, less commitment, and more conflict for both spouses.

Joint Religious Activities

Religions tend to encourage beliefs and practices, such as fidelity, commitment, and conflict management, which are conducive to high quality marriage (Curtis and Ellison 2002; Dion et al. 2003; Heaton and Pratt 1990; Lambert and Dollahite 2006). Moreover, social support and monitoring from fellow worshippers may encourage marital stability (Call and Heaton 1997). In general, religiosity appears to increase marital success, as it is associated with lower rates of divorce (Brown, Orbuch, and Bauermeister 2008; Bumpass 2002; Heaton and Pratt 1990) and positive marital quality (Amato et al. 2003; Heaton and Pratt 1990; Mahoney et al. 2001).

Relationship scholars have also established the important role of shared religious participation for marital quality among low-income couples. Lichter and Carmalt (2009) find positive associations between joint religious participation and each of seven dimensions of marital quality; more specifically, the more that couples pray together, jointly attend religious services, and so on, the greater their commitment, communication, marital satisfaction, intimacy, and positive conflict behaviors. Other studies find that spousal similarity in worship service attendance is associated with less conflict (Curtis and Ellison 2002), more marital happiness (Heaton and Pratt 1990), and greater marital stability (Call and Heaton 1997; Heaton and Pratt 1990). Taking advantage of the dyadic

data in the MARS, I measure the effects of joint religious participation on marital quality, expecting to find a positive relationship.

Economic Hardship

As described in greater detail earlier, families under economic stress report more individual distress and worse marital quality, including more marital conflict, more intimate violence, and less relationship satisfaction (Conger et al. 1990; Conger, Rueter, and Elder 1999; Fox et al. 2002; Fox and Chancey 1998; Vinokur et al. 1996; Voydanoff 1990). Lichter and Carmalt (2009), using a measure of material hardship from the MARS sample, find that severe hardship is negatively associated with marital quality even among a sample of low-income couples. Poor married couples also face greater perceived and actual marital instability than their non-poor counterparts (Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Johnson and Booth 1990). Indeed, the majority of low-income, divorced persons report that economic hardship contributed to their divorce (Johnson et al. 2002; Schramm et al. 2003). Even though all couples in the MARS are low-income, I expect that those facing greater economic hardship will report less marital satisfaction, less commitment and more marital conflict than those with better economic situations.

Growing up Without Married Parents

Relationship attitudes and behaviors are learned from parents and persist into adulthood. Children from divorced families have experienced poor models of dyadic behavior and may not learn the relationship skills that facilitate successful functioning within marital roles (Lewis and Spanier 1979; Sanders, Halford, and Behrens 1999). Indeed, when compared to adult children whose parents remained continuously married,

those whose parents divorced are more likely to have problems with anger, jealousy, communication, infidelity, and so on, which increase the risk of divorce (Amato 1996; Booth and Amato 2001). Furthermore, witnessing parental divorce demonstrates that marital commitments can be dissolved. As a result, offspring may have more accepting attitudes toward divorce and less commitment to the norm of lifelong marriage, thereby reducing the psychological barrier to leaving an unsatisfactory marriage (Amato and DeBoer 2001; Amato and Rogers 1999; Glenn and Kramer 1987; also see Axinn and Thornton 1996).

Not surprisingly, therefore, adult children of divorce are more likely to report less satisfaction in their own marriages (Booth and Amato 2001; Ross and Mirowsky 1999; Webster, Orbuch, and House 1995) and more marital problems and conflict (Amato 1996; McLeod 1991; Tallman et al. 1999).¹¹ Parental divorce is associated with a higher likelihood of perceived (Sassler, Cunningham, and Lichter 2009; Webster et al. 1995) and actual marital disruption (Amato and DeBoer 2001; Bumpass et al. 1991a; Glenn and Kramer 1987; McLanahan and Bumpass 1988).

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter laid the groundwork for my four research aims outlined in Chapter 1. I used the life course perspective to frame my understanding of couples' romantic relationship trajectories and individuation theory to explain the diversity of the

¹¹ Some studies have found little or no relationship between parental divorce and offspring marital quality (e.g., Amato and Booth 2001; Feng et al. 1999). This inconsistency might reflect the fact parental divorce is not a perfect indicator of parental marital quality; not all divorces are preceded by a high level of conflict, nor do all high-conflict marriages end in divorce. A better indicator of the intergenerational transmission of relationship processes would likely be parental marital quality, which, unfortunately, is not available in the MARS (Larson and Holman 1994; Lewis and Spanier 1979).

relationship pathways. I explored the literature on the sequence and spacing of sex, cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing following dating initiation. Though most extant research uses a life-time and individual-level perspective, I gleaned ideas from literature and theory to propose that marital quality may be better among couples who space their major relationship events, such as dating initiation to marriage, further apart (with the exception of the transition from premarital cohabitation to marriage). I ended this chapter by reviewing commonly understood determinants of marital quality; it is yet to be seen whether these are determinants for low-income couples. In the next chapter, I discuss the data and analyses used to address my four research aims.

Chapter 3: Data, Measures, and Analytic Strategy

DATA

Data for this research come from the MARS, a survey of 433 low-income married couples in the United States conducted in 2006. The MARS was constructed by my colleagues and me with the purpose of learning about relationship quality among poor and near-poor couples. The MARS sample originates from a probability-based, nationally representative panel administered by Knowledge Networks (KN). KN recruits its panel members through random digit-dialing telephone-survey methods, and persons in selected households are provided with free Internet access and a WebTV device if they are not already on the web. This telephone-based method of panel recruitment eliminates non-Internet coverage error and avoids the issue of self-selection common in online surveys.

The sampling frame for the MARS was married couples whose households had a total gross annual income of \$49,999 or less in the previous 12 months, one or more co-resident minor children, and where the wife was between the ages of 18 and 44. The maximum household income in the MARS sample parallels the 2006 real median household income (before taxes) of \$48,201 for all U.S. households (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith 2007). For married couple households in the United States, the 2006 median income was \$69,716, making the MARS sample comparatively low-income (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2007). An alternative measure of low-income is 200 percent of the

federal poverty threshold. Though this threshold varies by size of family, most families in the MARS would fall below this threshold, which was roughly \$41,000 for a family of four in 2006 (U.S. Census Bureau 2006).

KN panel members fitting the criteria were sent an e-mail inviting them to participate in the MARS, which was accessible for a three-week period in March 2006. Using unique login usernames and passwords, selected KN panel respondents completed the self-conducted survey. Information was collected independently from both spouses in the household. Given the sensitive nature of the interview, respondents were instructed to take the survey in a private setting. All married persons fitting the criteria were fielded (N = 1232), and 973 persons completed the survey, making for a 79 percent response rate. Of those who completed the survey, 866 were married partners (i.e., 433 married couples), resulting in a final response rate of 70 percent. All study procedures were approved by an institutional review board.

The MARS is the ideal dataset to address my research questions because it was specifically developed with policy issues on healthy marriage among low-income couples in mind. The MARS instrument measures a host of correlates of healthy marriages, including courtship patterns, family background, and marital histories. Existing secondary sources, such as the NSFH, the NLSY 79 and NLSY 97, and Fragile Families, offer limited data to study romantic relationship trajectories as they rarely include dates for couples' relationship events aside from dates of formal marriages. Although the Fragile Families study offers rich data on unmarried parents, who are primarily low-income, the history of the romantic relationship is not addressed; there is no information

on how long the couple has been together, for example, and no information on the biological status of the couple's children besides the focal child (Burstein et al. 2003). To my knowledge, Add Health is the only survey that asks respondents to report the date of initiation of the romantic relationship and the date of first sex. However, this survey focuses on one birth cohort only. Moreover, the young age of the sample (ages 18 to 26 in the most recent round of available data) means that few Add Health respondents are married, limiting the ability to estimate relationship progression to marriage or marital quality. The 2002 NSFG collected the date of first sex for respondents' recent opposite-sex sexual partners, but not the date of the start of the dating relationship. The NSFG also lacks measures of union quality, as do other large datasets including the CPS, the *National Survey of America's Families*, the *Panel Study of Income Dynamics*, and the *Survey of Income and Program Participation*. Another limitation is that the NSFG drew on independent samples of men and women rather than couples and gathered few characteristics of respondents' partners.

The MARS collected information from both members of the marital dyad, which has benefits over the typical procedure of relying on reports from only one partner. Marriage is an inherently mutual relationship, rendering the couple the preferred unit of analysis. A thorough analysis of the correlates and consequences of relationship trajectories requires the background characteristics and assessments of marital quality from both wives and husbands. Independent spousal reports allow for divergent assessments of the same marriage by each partner, and scholars can identify factors accounting for discrepant perspectives. Dyadic data also offer the possibility of

measuring how the characteristics of both partners affect the relationship's trajectory and quality. For example, Bumpass (2002) finds that, compared to couples where neither spouse has thought in the last year that their relationship was in trouble, the rate of separation is twice as high for couples in which one partner has thought so and is over three times as high if both partners have thought so. Also, Attridge, Berscheid, and Simpson (1995) find that assessments of relationship quality from both partners are more predictive of relationship stability than are assessments from one partner. I expect that relationship trajectories and reports of marital quality are affected by both the male and the female partner's characteristics and backgrounds. Ideally, I would operationalize the independent variables to simultaneously reflect both sociodemographic characteristics and social homogamy by measuring whether the attribute characterizes only the husband, only the wife, both spouses, or neither spouse (e.g., only the wife has been previously married, only the husband has been previously married, both spouses have been previously married, neither spouse has been previously married). However, my sample size dictates caution in using predictor variables with too many categories, so I collapse categories in ways that are consistent with predictions and maintain substantively important distinctions. I make the best use of the dyadic data, given the restrictions implied by sample size and statistical power.

MEASURES

Relationship Trajectories

The dates of relationship events were retrospectively collected from both wives and husbands. A commonly cited concern of retrospective reporting is the accuracy of

memory recollection. Fortunately, research shows that events of emotional weight and those signifying great turning points—including marriage and the birth of a child—are more salient (Auriat 1993). Pollard and Harris' (2007) study finds no indication of heaping on particular months when reporting cohabitation dates; any incorrect reports of dates are likely to be randomly distributed. Even if frequent erroneous reporting of dates occurred, it does not generally affect the logical sequence of events (Courgeau 1992). To improve accurate recall, the MARS' questions were presented in a logical chronological order, as suggested by Sudman and Bradburn (1987).

The start of the romantic relationship was measured by asking respondents, “When did you and your spouse start dating?”¹² Respondents reported the month and year from dropdown boxes. Premarital sex was measured with the question, “Did you and your spouse wait until you married before having sex?” Respondents who reported engaging in premarital sex were then asked, “How long did you and your spouse date prior to having sex for the first time?” Response categories were: *less than a week, more than a week but less than a month, 1 or 2 months, 3 to 6 months, more than 6 months but less than one year, and one year or more.*¹³ Cohabitation was measured by asking respondents, “Did you live with your spouse before you got married?” Those who answered affirmatively were then asked to report the month and year when they started living together. The month and year that the current marriage began was also obtained from each respondent. Finally, detailed data were collected from each respondent on all

¹² The questionnaire did not include definitions of “dating”, “sex”, or “live with”, so respondents were left to proceed with their own understanding of what the terms meant.

¹³ As discussed in footnote 7 (in Chapter 2), the MARS questionnaire assumes that dating precedes sex. I believe this assumption is not an important limitation because hooking up has been relatively rare until recently and because nearly all (98-99%) respondents were able to answer the question as posed.

persons residing in the household and biological children living elsewhere. By comparing spouses' reports, I determined the month and year the couple experienced the birth of their first, shared, biological child.¹⁴

Wives' reported dates of relationship events are used in all analyses, and husbands' dates are substituted for those that are missing¹⁵ or perceptibly erroneous.¹⁶ Likely because women have more vivid memories of relational events than do men (Ross and Holmberg 1992), they are more accurate in reporting dates of events (Auriat 1993; Courgeau 1992) and less likely to be uncertain about cohabitation start dates than men (Pollard and Harris 2007). In any case, the agreement between the independent reports of both dyad members was high. The correlations (before imputing with husbands' data) between wives' and husbands' reports are $r = .93$, $n = 414$, $p < .001$ for the start of the union, $r = .92$, $n = 320$, $p < .001$ for first sex (among couples who had sex), $r = .94$, $n = 209$, $p < .001$ for the start of cohabitation (among couples who cohabited), $r = .96$, $n = 424$, $p < .001$ for marriage, and $r = .99$, $n = 372$, $p < .001$ for the birth of the first biological child (among couples who bore a shared child)¹⁷. The high and positive correlations for each relationship event signal strong spousal consensus regarding the

¹⁴ The date of birth of non-biological children (i.e., adopted) may not match the date of when they joined the couple's household. Thus, I only use the date of birth of biological children.

¹⁵ $n=9$ for date of start of relationship; $n=3$ for date of start of marriage; $n=9$ for date of start of sexual relationship; $n=10$ for date of start of cohabitation; $n=6$ for the date of the first biological child's birth

¹⁶ $n=15$. Erroneous sequences include cases when, for example, the date of cohabitation was recorded as preceding the start of dating relationship, or the date of marriage preceded premarital cohabitation. Couples are also considered to have provided invalid dates if first sex and first shared biological childbirth were separated by less than five months.

¹⁷ I determined the date of birth of the eldest biological child by using paired husbands' and wives' household and non-household rosters and reports on whether the child was also the biological child of the current spouse. Spousal reports were compared and information from both sources was used to create the most accurate account of shared biological childbearing. Thus, unlike the paired correlations for other relationship event dates, the degree of correlation between dyad members' reports of the eldest child's birth date is somewhat inflated.

timing of each event. This is reassuring, given varying definitions for dating, sex, and cohabitation (Manning and Smock 2005).

Sequence. Based on the presence or absence of these relationship events, the MARS sample is divided into four sequence groups. Each couple has a single sequence that describes their relationship trajectory. Assignment is based on the events taking place in the current relationship only. I combine substantively similar sequences to produce sequences representing genuinely different premarital relationship trajectories.¹⁸ The first group, labeled *traditional*, is characterized by a dating period that does not include premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, or premarital childbearing; instead, these couples move from dating directly to marriage, and then, usually, to postmarital childbearing. The second group is labeled *traditional-plus-sex*, and differs from the first group only in that these couples have sex before marriage. *Modern* couples comprise the third category—these couples engage in premarital sex and premarital cohabitation, but do not bear children together before marriage. The final type of sequence group is labeled *unconventional*; before marriage, these couples have sex, cohabit, and bear at least one child together. In sum, the sequence groups and their definitions are as follows:

1. *Traditional*: Dating → marriage.
2. *Traditional-plus-sex*: Dating → sex → marriage.
3. *Modern*: Dating → sex / cohabitation → marriage.¹⁹
4. *Unconventional*: Dating → sex / cohabitation / childbearing → marriage.²⁰

¹⁸ The sequencing of premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, and premarital childbearing is variable for couples in the modern and unconventional groups. Details follow in footnotes 26 and 27.

¹⁹ While most reported the sequence of dating → sex → cohabitation → marriage, 7 couples reported the sequence of dating → cohabitation → sex → marriage.

Most couples in the first three groups end their sequence with the birth of the first shared child, although couples with no shared biological children are also included in these categories.

Spacing. The spacing between relationship events for (1) dating initiation to marriage; (2) dating initiation to cohabitation; (3) cohabitation to marriage; and (4) marriage to first joint postmarital birth is measured by subtracting the century month²¹ of one event from the other event of interest. For example, to measure the spacing between dating and marriage, the century month the dating relationship began is subtracted from the century month the wedding occurred. To measure the couples' tempo from (5) dating initiation to first sex, I use the following categories: *had premarital sex less than a month after dating initiation, one or two months after dating initiation, and three or more months after dating initiation.*

Marital Quality

Marital quality is a multifaceted concept (Johnson et al. 1986) whose operationalization varies widely. Many studies measure marital quality with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier 1976) or the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke and Wallace 1959), while others use uniquely created scales (e.g., Fowers and Olson 1993; Johnson et al. 1986). Although some measures of marital quality are based on global evaluative judgments of the relationship as a whole (i.e., the Marital Quality Index by Norton 1983

²⁰ Most reported a sequence of dating → sex → cohabitation → childbearing → marriage. This sequence group also includes 1 couple who reported the sequence of dating → cohabitation → sex → childbearing → marriage; and 4 couples that reported the sequence of dating → sex → childbearing → cohabitation → marriage.

²¹ A century month was calculated by multiplying the year of an event by 12 and then adding month the event took place, where 1 = January, 2 = February, and so on. For example, August 1997 would equal ((1997*12)+8), or 23972.

or the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale by Schumm et al. 1986), most measures employ a number of subscales to assess its multidimensional nature.

Recently, Child Trends Inc. developed a multidimensional construct of marital quality for low-income couples based on extensive prior research (Moore et al. 2004). Constructs of marital quality for poor couples include commitment to marriage, satisfaction, communication, emotional support, and so on. Child Trends' conceptualization of marital quality guided the creation of the MARS instrument. In addition to the Child Trends' constructs, the MARS also covered dimensions measured in other studies of marital quality, including frequency of disagreements, frequency of sex, and satisfaction with the partner's role performance (e.g., Clark-Nicolas and Gray-Little 1991; Stafford et al. 2004).

In this research on low-income couples' marital quality, I focus on three specific dimensions of marital quality: marital satisfaction, commitment, and the frequency of disagreements (which I interchangeably call "conflict"). "Lack of commitment" and "too much conflict and arguing" were reported as the top two contributors to divorce by low-income divorced persons (Johnson et al. 2002; Schramm et al. 2003). Accompanying these two dimensions is the most commonly measured aspect of marital quality, namely satisfaction with the relationship (Hawkins et al. 2007). Though moderately correlated, the three dimensions of marital quality are measured separately because they are distinct concepts and may yield different patterns of correlations with the independent variables. By including both objective and subjective measures of marital quality, as well as both

positive and negative dimensions (Bradbury et al. 2000; Johnson et al. 1986), I create a detailed depiction of marriage experienced by low-income couples.

Marital satisfaction. Satisfaction with the relationship is often considered the central variable reflecting marital quality (Fincham and Bradbury 1987; Karney and Bradbury 1995) and is variably called relationship happiness (Johnson et al. 1986). This dimension measures the individuals' attitudes about the benefits of the marriage (Hawkins et al. 2007; Johnson et al. 1986). Single item measures are frequently used to assess global marital satisfaction and highly correlate with more complicated multifaceted measures that gauge satisfaction with specific aspects of the marriage (Johnson 1995; Moore et al. 2007). In the MARS, marital satisfaction is measured with the following item: "Now think about your overall relationship with your spouse. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all satisfied and 10 is completely satisfied, taking all things together, how would you describe your relationship with your partner?"

Commitment. While individual satisfaction is important for a healthy marriage, the significance of commitment to the couple relationship is important as well (Cowan and Cowan 2003; Fowers 2003; Nock 2003a). Commitment seems to be a better predictor of divorce than other constructs of marital quality (Larson and Goltz 1989; Nock 2003a), yet it is relatively understudied (Amato et al. 2007; Fowers et al. 2003). Commitment is the expectation that the relationship is long-term (Moore et al. 2007) and exists when couples have a perception of "we-ness" (Moore et al. 2004; Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew 1998). Even when difficulties arise, commitment produces a stable relationship because couples intend to persist in the relationship. Commitment reflects

dedication, the desire to invest in the relationship, and seeking out what is best for the couple rather than the individual (Stanley 2007). While commitment can result from constraints and investments or from a lack of alternatives, it also stems from personal commitment to the partner (i.e., wanting to stay married to the spouse) (Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston 1999; Nock 2003a; Rusbult et al. 1998; Stanley and Markman 1992). The MARS measure of marital commitment reflects interpersonal dedication. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree* regarding the following statements: (a) “I view our relationship as lifelong”; (b) “I believe this relationship can stay strong even through the hard times”; and (c) “My spouse and I agree on long-term goals for our relationship”. I sum response scores for the three statements, and total scores range from 3 to 12, with higher scores reflecting greater commitment.²²

Conflict. The frequency of disagreements reflects interaction and interpersonal processes, rather than individual feelings (DeMaris 2000; McGonagle et al. 1992). Disagreements reflect a lack of consensus between the spouses about issues internal and external to the marriage (Johnson et al. 1986). Although all relationships involve some disagreement, maritally distressed couples tend to report higher frequencies of conflict; thus, low conflict is a dimension of high marital quality. Conflict predicts marital breakup (Bradbury et al. 2000); indeed, the frequency of disagreement is a more powerful predictor of marital disruption than either the style or the outcome of marital

²² Cronbach’s alpha for husbands (n = 408) was 0.83 and for wives (n = 413) was 0.86. Three men and two women gave responses to all but one item. For these cases, the mean of the two available items was substituted for the missing item, and then the three scores were summed. Cronbach’s alpha is calculated using only cases where all three items were available before mean imputation.

disagreement (McGonagle et al. 1993). The MARS participants were asked, “In the past year, how often have you and your spouse had arguments about...household chores? Sex? Spending time together? Managing money, bills, and debt? In-laws, other relatives, and friends? Drinking or drugs? Other women or men? Religion? Raising children?” Response options for each item ranged from 1 = *never* to 4 = *a few times a week or more*. I summed responses to these 9 items, and the scale ranges from 9 to 36, with higher scores indicating greater conflict.²³

Distribution of marital quality scores. The distributions of the marital quality scores were skewed, with the majority of respondents reporting high marital satisfaction (wives’ mean = 8.20, SD = 1.94; husbands’ mean = 8.54, SD = 1.63), high commitment (wives’ mean = 10.47, SD = 1.78; husbands’ mean = 10.64, SD = 1.58), and low conflict (wives’ mean = 14.72, SD = 4.30; husbands’ mean = 14.72, SD = 4.52). Many other studies on marital quality find that reports are very positive (e.g., 60 to 80 percent of respondents report being “very happy” with their marriage, according to Johnson 1993). In my research, the skewed distributions result in errors that are not normally distributed and an error variance that is not constant in ordinary least squares regression analyses. Thus, I transform the three continuous dependent variables into categorical ones (like Hawkins and Booth 2005, Heaton and Pratt 1990, Kelly and Conley 1987). Beach and colleagues (2005) found evidence of a discontinuity in marital satisfaction scores such that approximately 20 percent of couples experience marriage in a way that is

²³ Cronbach’s alpha was 0.82 (n=399) for husbands and 0.78 (n=403) for wives. Eleven men and ten women were missing a response on one of the nine items, three men were missing on two items, and one woman was missing on four items. The mean of available items was substituted for the missing items before summing. Cronbach’s alpha is calculated using only cases where all items were available before mean imputation.

qualitatively and not merely quantitatively different from their peers. I dichotomize each of the marital quality indicators, choosing cut points that approximate the 20th percentile.²⁴ My analyses, therefore, compare individuals with high and low marital satisfaction, high and low commitment, and high and low conflict. Individuals with high marital quality are coded as 1, and those with low marital quality are coded as 0. It is important to note that individuals placed in the low-quality marriage categories are not necessarily unsatisfied, uncommitted, or in frequent conflict with their spouse in an absolute sense. However, in a relative sense, these individuals experience lower-quality marriages. I believe that this classification scheme properly identifies individuals in low- and high-quality marriages.

Independent / Control Variables

All independent and control variables used in this research are described below. The first set of variables capture a number of union-related characteristics. The *year the relationship began* is the calendar year the couple began dating. *Marital duration* is the number of years from the date of the wedding until the date of the interview. Husband and wife's *age at the start of the dating relationship* is measured by subtracting the century month of their date of birth from the century month of dating initiation. I use the female partner's age at dating due to the positive and high correlation between dyad members' ages at the start of the dating relationship ($r = .76, n = 413, p < .001$). Because normative and/or typical ages vary for relationship events, particularly for marriage and

²⁴ For both men and women, the score closest to the 20th percentile is 7 for satisfaction, 9 for commitment, and 18 for the frequency of disagreements. I also analyzed several other classifications of low-quality marriages, including one standard deviation above/below the mean as cut-off points. Results are very similar across models for women's and men's marital satisfaction regardless of cut-off point because there is a great deal of overlap between the individuals classified as low quality in each scheme.

childbearing, I categorize this variable into three groups according to the female partner's age at the start of the dating relationship: was younger than age 20 (reference), 20 to 25 years, and 26 years or more. Respondents' *age at marriage* (in years) is measured by subtracting the century month of the date of birth from the century month of the wedding and then dividing by 12. I use wife's age at marriage because of the highly positive correlation between dyad members' age at marriage ($r = .75$, $n = 414$, $p < .001$).

Previous marital experience is obtained by asking respondents to report the number of times he/she has been married. A dichotomous variable is created, coded 1 for couples where at least one spouse has been married previously, and 0 for couples where both spouses are in their first marriage. *Previous cohabitation experience with other partner* was measured with respondents' answer to the question, "How many times have you ever lived in a nonmarital cohabiting relationship?" where cohabitation was defined as living with a romantic partner for at least one month. Respondents are recorded as having cohabited previously with someone other than their spouse if they reported (a) no cohabitation with future spouse but at least one cohabiting union or (b) two or more cohabiting unions.²⁵ Spousal data were combined to reflect whether at least one spouse had cohabited previously with another partner; the reference category is couples that begin the current union with no prior cohabitation experience. The variable *children*

²⁵ Findings regarding previous cohabitation experience should be cautiously interpreted as there appears to have been some confusion in answering this question: 33 men and 32 women who had cohabited with the current spouse reported the number of times living in a nonmarital cohabiting relationship as zero. My speculation is that the word "nonmarital" was the source of confusion in the question; respondents may have counted only partners whom they never married (Thomson and Colella 1992 reported a similar problem). For respondents who cohabited with the spouse prior to marriage, a response of zero or one in the number-of-times-cohabited variable was taken to indicate having no cohabitation experience with other partners.

from previous union(s) indicates whether either spouse entered the current union with children who were not biologically related to the current partner. Couples where at least one spouse has a child from a previous union are compared to the reference category of couples in which both spouses were childless at the start of the current union.²⁶

Homogamy is measured with two scales. The analyses predicting relationship trajectory uses a scale of couples' *homogamy in age and race/ethnicity*, obtained by comparing husbands' and wives' demographic profiles. Race/ethnic categories include *non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black, non-Hispanic other, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic 2+ races*. If spouses do not select the same category, the couple is considered to be racially/ethnically heterogamous, and is coded 1 on a dichotomous dummy variable. Following Wu and colleagues (2000), couples are considered age heterogamous when the husband is six or more years older than his wife or when the wife is two or more years older than her husband; age heterogamous couples are coded 1 on a dichotomous dummy variable. Because the hypothesized effects of race/ethnicity and age heterogamy on relationship trajectories are similar, the two dichotomous dummy variables are summed, with higher numbers indicating greater dissimilarity (like Amato et al. 2003). The summed scale ranges from 0 to 2, with 0 indicating similar race and age, 1 indicating either race or age heterogamy, and 2 indicating that spouses differ in both race and age.

²⁶ The correlation between previous marital experience and having children from a previous union is quite strong ($r = 0.60$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 413$ for men; $r = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 411$ for women). Among couples with no children from previous relationships, most (91.40%) are in a first marriage. In contrast, three-quarters (75.00%) of couples with at least one child from a previous union are in a remarriage for at least one spouse. Despite this substantial overlap, each variable is included separately in analyses because each has differential predicted effects for relationship trajectories; for instance, previous marriage may shorten the duration from dating to cohabitation, but having children from a previous union may do the opposite. Moreover, multicollinearity was not present in any model.

For analyses predicting marital quality, I operationalize a couple's heterogamy in the same way as for the first analysis, but I add a measure of heterogamy in education.²⁷ Respondents report their highest level of completed schooling (*less than high school diploma, high school diploma or equivalent, some college or associate's degree, and bachelor's degree or more*). Husbands' and wives' responses are cross-classified, and spouses in different categories are coded as heterogamous in educational attainment (like Blackwell and Lichter 2000). A summed score is created from differences in age, race/ethnicity, and education, with higher numbers representing greater spousal *heterogamy in race/ethnicity, age, and education*. Both heterogamy measures are interval-level measures. Spouses' race/ethnic profiles were cross-tabulated to create a couple-level measure of *race/ethnicity*. When both spouses are non-Hispanic white, they are coded as white (coded 0). All other combinations (i.e., one or both spouse reported being non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, other race, or two-or-more races) were combined into a non-white group (coded 1).²⁸

A second set of independent and control variables represent the spouses' current status. Husband's and wife's *employment status* indicates whether each is employed full-time (like Bumpass et al. 1991a). Full-time employment indicates greater commitment to the labor force and is likely to have more implications for the marriage with respect to gender roles, work-family conflict, and increased earnings (Schoen et al. 2006). Spousal

²⁷ As mentioned in Chapter 2, I do not include educational heterogamy as a correlate of relationship trajectory because respondents may not have completed their education when they began dating. However, most MARS respondents have completed their formal education by the time of the survey, making educational heterogamy a potential predictor of marital quality.

²⁸ Due to sample size considerations, it was not viable to separate out the non-whites into more specific race/ethnic groups.

data are combined to indicate whether only the wife works full-time, only the husband works full-time, both spouses work full-time, or neither spouse works full-time (the last group is the reference category). I maintain these separate categories because of the distinctive gender-related predictions made in Chapter 2.

The extent to which couples participate in *joint religious activities* is measured with five items. With a scale ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*, respondents indicated the frequency with which they (a) attend religious services together; (b) pray together; (c) talk about moral and spiritual issues together; (d) celebrate religious holidays or engage in religious rituals together; and (e) participate in religious social activities together (like Lichter and Carmalt 2009). I sum the responses to these items in a scale ranging from 5 to 25, with higher values reflecting greater frequency of joint participation.²⁹ Because this variable describes a couple-level phenomenon, and spouses' reports were highly correlated ($r = .89$, $n = 410$, $p < .001$), the measure used in analyses is the average of paired spouses' reports.³⁰

The truncated income distribution in the sample suggests *economic hardship* may better indicate socioeconomic disadvantage than income alone. I sum the *yes* responses to ten hardships, including getting behind in rent or mortgage, going without electricity or heat, and being unable to afford medical care.³¹ As expected, husbands' and wives'

²⁹ Cronbach's alpha was 0.93 for husbands ($n = 405$) and 0.91 for wives ($n = 410$). Five men and three women gave responses to all but one item. The mean of the four available items was substituted for the missing item before summing. Only cases where all items were available before mean imputation were used to calculate Cronbach's alpha.

³⁰ Except for cases where only one spouse's data was available ($n = 3$).

³¹ Cronbach's alpha was 0.78 for husbands ($n = 405$) and 0.78 for wives ($n = 407$). Eight men and six women gave responses to all but one of the ten items. The mean of the nine available items was substituted

reports are highly correlated ($r = .69$, $n = 413$, $p < .001$). Using the average of spouses' reports, I code couples reporting three or more hardships in the past year (i.e., 75th percentile) as "high hardship" (coded 1) and compare them to couples reporting fewer than three hardships (coded 0) (like Lichter and Carmalt 2009). The final variable reflecting current status is the age of the youngest household child: 0 to 1 year, 2 to 5 years, 6 to 12 years, and 13 to 17 years (the last category is the reference group).

The final set of independent and control variables capture dimensions of the respondents' family of origin and childhood experiences. Respondents were asked about their *religious upbringing*, by reporting their religious affiliation during childhood, if any. Couples are categorized according to whether at least one spouse was raised without a religious affiliation (1 = yes, 0 = no). I compare couples where at least one spouse was *raised without married parents* (coded 1) to couples where both spouses were raised by married parents (coded 0). Respondents are considered to have been raised without married parents if their parents separated or divorced when the respondent was age 14 or younger, were widowed at the respondent's birth, or were never married.

To measure parental resources, I use the *highest level of parental education*, reported as the highest grade completed by the mother/mother-figure or father/father-figure when the respondent was age 18. Like McLaughlin and colleagues (1993), I consider those whose parents had more than a high school diploma (i.e., completed at least some college/university or more), to have high educational attainment. Husbands' and wives' data are combined to form a dichotomous dummy variable indicating whether

for the missing item before summing. Cronbach's alpha is calculated using only cases where all items were available before mean imputation.

both spouses' parents are highly educated. The reference category is comprised of couples where one or both spouses' parents have low educational attainment.

Dysfunctional childhood experience is captured with reports of living with a problem drinker or being abused in childhood. Respondents were asked, "When you were growing up, did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic?" and "When you were growing up, were you ever physically, sexually, or emotionally abused?" Persons who answered affirmatively to either of these questions are coded as having had a dysfunctional childhood experience. Couples where at least one spouse experienced a dysfunctional childhood are compared to the reference category of couples where neither spouse experienced dysfunction during childhood.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

My research is partitioned into two parts. The first segment considers the predictors of relationship trajectories and the second portion considers the predictors of marital quality, with a special focus on the predictive role of couples' romantic relationship trajectories.

Part One: Predicting Relationship Trajectory

The first aim of my research is to describe relationship trajectories for low-income couples by considering the sequencing and spacing patterns of four events that follow dating initiation: sex, cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing. Descriptive statistics show the proportion of couples in each of the four sequence groups and the mean number of months (and standard deviations) separating the relationship events under consideration.

My second research aim is to explore how various factors are associated with romantic relationship trajectories. I explore predictors of relationship event *sequence* group using multinomial logistic regression, where the probability of membership in category *m* is compared to the probability of membership in the base category of the dependent variable. I use the independent variables to ascertain the probabilities of being in *traditional-plus-sex*, *modern*, and *unconventional* relationship trajectories versus following a *traditional* relationship trajectory. I alternate the omitted base category in the dependent variable to compare the probability of membership in various categories and indicate statistically significant comparisons with superscripts. I present results using odds ratios (OR) (exponentiated coefficients) for ease of understanding. An odds ratio of 1.00 means that X does not have a significant relationship with Y. For interval-level predictor variables, an odds ratio greater than 1.00 indicates that, for a one-unit increase in X, the odds of outcome *m*, relative to the base category, are expected to increase by its respective factor, given the other variables in the model are held constant. For example, an odds ratio of 1.88 indicates that the odds for category *m*, relative to the base category, increase by 88 percent for every one-unit increase in X. Odds ratios below 1.00 indicate a decrease in the odds for category *m*, relative to the base category. To illustrate, an odds ratio of 0.45 indicates that a one-unit increase in X is associated with a 55 percent decrease in the odds of being in category *m*, relative to the base category, given the other variables in the model are held constant. For nominal independent variables, odds ratios greater than 1.00 indicate that the group coded 1 experiences higher odds for category *m*, relative to the base category of the dependent variable, compared to the group coded 0.

For example, if males were coded 0 and females were coded 1, an odds ratio of 2.31 demonstrates that the odds of being in category m for females are 131 percent higher than the odds for males, relative to being in the base category of the dependent variable. Correspondingly, odds ratios less than 1.00 indicate lower odds for the group coded 1 than for the group coded 0 of being in category m , relative to being in the base category of the dependent variable and holding all other independent variables at fixed values.

I use event-history analyses to consider the predictors of *spacing* for the following pairs of relationship events: (1) dating initiation and marriage; (2) dating initiation and cohabitation; (3) cohabitation and marriage; and (4) marriage and the first joint postmarital birth. Couples are observed from the initial state specified until they experience the event in question. Because the time from (5) dating initiation to couples' first sex is recorded nominally in the MARS, I use methods appropriate to categorical data to analyze the tempo of that transition; this is discussed in greater detail below. Event history models are preferable when measuring duration because events which are not normally distributed violate the assumptions of traditional linear regression models. An additional benefit of event history models is that censored observations (i.e., those who did not experience an event during the time under study) can be included, making them full information models, unlike ordinary least squares regression models, which are only partial information models when censored data are present (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004).

In univariate analyses, I estimate failure functions with Kaplan-Meier estimators. I use the log-rank test to examine whether the shape of the curves for each sequence

group is approximately equal for model building purposes. If failure functions are parallel, I do not include sequence as a predictor of spacing in multivariate analyses; if they are not equal, sequence group is included in the multivariate model to see whether unequal failure rates are maintained when controlling for other factors (University of California Los Angeles 2009).

I use Cox proportional hazard regression methods to model survival time as a function of the set of independent variables. Cox models estimate regression parameters without specifying a functional form for the hazard function, avoiding the often questionable assumptions of parametric models and making it a preferred event-history modeling strategy (Cleves, Gould, and Gutierrez 2004).³² Results for the covariates are discussed in terms of hazard ratios (HR) (exponentiated coefficients) or the probability (risk) of the event occurring in time $t + 1$, given survival to time t . For interval-level predictor variables, hazard ratios above 1.00 indicate that, as the number of X increases by one unit, and all other variables are held constant, the rate of experiencing the event in question increases by a factor respective of the parameter estimate; for instance, a hazard ratio of 1.07 indicates an increase of 7 percent. The more above 1.00 the hazard ratio, the more the variable increases the odds of the event occurring, thereby diminishing predicted survival times. Hazard ratios below 1.00 indicate that a one-unit increase in x is associated with a decrease in the rate of experiencing the event in question; to illustrate, a hazard ratio of 0.70 indicates a decrease of 30 percent in the hazard rate. Stated in terms of survival times, the more the hazard ratio is below 1.00, the longer the

³² An assumption of the Cox model is proportionality of the hazards. I test the proportionality assumption by using the Schoenfeld residuals and find that my models meet the proportional hazards assumption.

predicted survival time. For nominal independent variables, hazard ratios above 1.00 indicate an increase in the rate of experiencing the event in question for the group coded 1 in comparison to the omitted reference category. Hazard ratios below 1.00 indicate a decreased rate of experiencing the event in question for the group coded 1 in contrast to the reference group, while holding all other variables constant. For example, a hazard ratio of 1.10 for females (coded 1) indicates that females have a rate of experiencing the event in question that is 10 percent higher than males (coded 0). In the same way, a hazard ratio of 0.97 indicates a 3 percent lower rate of experiencing the event, while holding all other independent variables constant.

The time between dating initiation and couples' first sex is, as previously discussed, measured nominally in the MARS. I use a stacked bar chart to describe how each sequence group that had premarital sex experiences different tempos in the transition to first coitus. Then, I proceed to multivariate analyses using multinomial logistic regression and present results using odds ratios. I use those who have sex within the first month of dating as the base category. To demonstrate the probability of being in various categories of the dependent variable, I rotate the base category and present comparative results with superscripts.

Part Two: Predicting Marital Quality

My third research aim is to examine how relationship trajectories affect subsequent marital quality. I use a series of logistic regression models to explore how relationship trajectories are associated with marital satisfaction, commitment, and conflict. Results are presented with odds ratios. Analyses are run separately for wives

and husbands to avoid the statistical issue of dyadic nonindependence, which is fundamental in couple-level data. Moreover, this modeling strategy recognizes that men and women experience relationships differently (Bernard 1972; Waller and McLanahan 2005), with men generally offering more positive assessments of their unions (Gager and Sanchez 2003), including fewer conflicts or problems (Amato and Rogers 1997; Chen et al. 2006; Rubin, Peplau, and Hill 1981; Vangelisti and Daly 1997), greater marital satisfaction (Huber and Spitz 1980; Lichter and Carmalt 2009), and more commitment (Lichter and Carmalt 2009). Generally, effects of independent variables are expected to act similarly for both husbands and wives, as found by Karney and Bradbury (1995).

I begin my analyses of the associations between romantic relationship trajectories and subsequent marital quality by focusing on the predictive ability of relationship event sequence. I compare the odds of individuals reporting high marital quality for individuals in traditional-plus-sex, modern, and unconventional couples versus the odds of reporting high marital quality for those in traditional couples.

Then, I focus on whether spacing is related to marital quality. I explore how the number of months separating the start of the dating relationship and marriage may affect wives and husbands' reports of marital quality. Then, I investigate how the timing of couples' first sex may affect the odds of reporting high marital quality. Next, I measure how the timing from the start of the dating relationship to cohabitation affects marital quality. I first model duration at the interval-level on the sample of couples who cohabited prior to marriage. Then, I include couples who did not cohabit, operationalize the variable categorically, and compare couples who dated 0 to 5 months before

cohabiting (reference) to those who dated 6 to 11 months before cohabiting, 12 or more months before cohabiting, and those who did not cohabit prior to marriage.³³

Subsequently, I examine how the spacing from the start of cohabitation to marriage is related to individuals' assessments of marital quality. I begin by exploring the effects of cohabitation duration among individuals in couples that cohabited, and then I include the full sample and compare those who cohabited with their spouse for 0 to 5 months before marriage (reference) to those who cohabited for 6 to 11 months, 12 to 23 months, 24 or more months, and not at all. The final set of models exploring how relationship trajectories are related to marital quality consider the timing of childbearing and marriage. First, among couples whose first shared birth was postmarital, I analyze how each additional month a birth is delayed after marriage is related to the odds of reporting high marital satisfaction, high commitment, and low conflict. Then, I operationalize the independent variable categorically and include couples with no shared children and those whose first shared birth was premarital. I compare individuals in couples whose first shared biological birth was premaritally born or conceived (reference category) to those whose first birth was 6 to 24 months after marriage, 25 or more months after marriage, and those with no shared biological children.

³³ The strategy of measuring the effects of an independent variable twice—once with a sample limited to those who engaged in the event (i.e., cohabitators) and once with a full sample including those who did not engage in the event (i.e., non-cohabitators)—was adapted from Bennett et al. (1988), Berrington and Diamond (1999) and Thomson and Colella (1992). I also use this two-model strategy when predicting how the duration of cohabitation and the duration of the first postmarital birth interval is related to reports of high marital quality because not all couples engaged in premarital cohabitation and in postmarital childbirth. Because the spacing from dating to first sex was measured categorically in the MARS, it would be repetitive to run analyses once with abstainers included and once with abstainers excluded; thus, the model measuring how premarital sex is associated with marital quality is conducted only once and includes abstainers. Because all couples married, the spacing from dating to marriage is measured only at the interval-level and analyses are based on the full sample.

The fourth and final aim of my research is to explore other predictors of wives' and husbands' marital quality. I report my findings for the correlates of marital quality in the regression models predicting wives' and husbands' reports of high marital satisfaction, high commitment, and low conflict.

Missing Data

Of the 433 MARS couples, 416 fit into one of the four sequence categories.³⁴ Seventeen couples were missing data on relationship event dates or marital quality indicators, reducing the sample with complete data on dependent variables to 399 couples. In Table 1 (presented in Chapter 4), I present the descriptive statistics for these 399 couples. Using listwise deletion of cases missing data on independent variables further reduces the sample size to 387 couples for analyses predicting relationship trajectory and to 392 couples for analyses predicting marital quality.³⁵

Limitations

Before I present my results, I acknowledge some important limitations of the study. One concerns sample selectivity. Presumably, couples who have reached longer marital durations have relatively high marital satisfaction, high commitment, and low conflict. With time, couples who may have been at a greater risk of poor marital quality may no longer report marital quality levels that are significantly different from those of

³⁴ Six couples (1.39% of the sample) are excluded because they report relationship sequences that do not fit into these four groups, including cohabiting prior to marriage without ever having premarital sex (n=3) and having premarital sex and premarital childbearing but not living together until marriage (n=3). Eleven couples (2.54%) are excluded because their relationship event dates are clearly erroneous and cannot be reconciled.

³⁵ In Table 1, I present the distributions including the number of couples with missing data. Because a sizeable number of respondents were missing data on parental education, I created a dummy variable indicating missing and kept these respondents in analyses if they were not missing on any other variable (n=37).

couples who were at a lower risk of poor marital quality. It is impossible to study marital satisfaction for couples who are not currently married; thus, all cross-sectional surveys studying marital quality will encounter some selectivity as a result of separation and divorce. Even longitudinal studies on marital quality would lose some respondents between waves through marital dissolution. Nonetheless, I attempt to minimize the impact of this selection factor by controlling for marital duration.³⁶

The cross-sectional nature of the survey offers only a snapshot of dynamic relationship processes and does not allow for the determination of causal processes. In the analyses predicting relationship trajectories, the independent variables likely temporally precede the relationship (e.g., childhood experience of dysfunction; previous marital status), buttressing a causal argument. The analyses predicting marital quality, however, are best interpreted as correlates. Although most independent variables temporally precede marital quality, some are measured simultaneously with marital quality, meaning that the relationship may be bi-directional. The relationship between romantic relationship trajectories and marital quality must be carefully interpreted. Though the premarital relationship trajectory does precede *marital* quality, relationship quality more generally does not precede the relationship trajectory (i.e., it is possible that the speed of relationship progression may indicate relationship compatibility and quality). I cannot control for the effect of premarital relationship quality on current marital quality, nor can I measure the change in union quality from dating through marriage. Statements about the causal relationship between romantic relationship trajectories and union quality

³⁶ Due to considerations of sample size and statistical power, I could not split the sample into those with short- and long-duration marriages.

must be limited only to *marital* quality, with the caveat that premarital union quality is unmeasured.

CONCLUSIONS

As described above, I will use various models to predict couples' romantic relationship trajectories and to examine the consequences of trajectories on marital quality for wives and husbands. In Chapter 4, I begin by exploring the descriptive statistics for all variables used the research. The remainder of the chapter is separated into two parts. In the first portion, I examine predictors of relationship event sequencing and spacing, and in the second portion, I explore how relationship trajectories and other factors are associated with individuals' reports of marital satisfaction, commitment, and conflict.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter has two main sections. In the first part, I present results on the romantic relationship trajectories followed by the low-income couples in the MARS, and in the second section of the chapter, I present results on their marital quality. First, however, I review the descriptive statistics for variables used in either or both analyses.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

In Table 1, I provide descriptive statistics for respondents' romantic relationship trajectories, marital quality, and all independent/control variables. The final two columns indicate whether the variables are used in analyses predicting relationship trajectories and/or in analyses predicting marital quality. In Table A1 in the Appendix, I present descriptive statistics for independent variables that were collapsed.

Relationship Event Sequence

My first research aim is to describe low-income married couples' relationship trajectories by considering the sequencing and spacing of four events that follow dating initiation: sex, cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing. I first examine the proportion of couples in each of the four sequence groups. Of the 399 couples that participated in the survey, 21.80 percent follow a traditional sequence of relationship events, which means they married directly after dating without engaging in premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, or premarital childbearing. One quarter (25.81%) of couples had sex while dating, but did not cohabit or bear children together prior to marrying; these are the

traditional-plus-sex couples. Modern couples comprise the modal sequence category: 37.34 percent of couples had sex and cohabited but did not bear children together prior to marrying. Unconventional couples make up the smallest sequence group, at 15.04 percent: these couples engaged in premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, and premarital childbearing.

Relationship Event Spacing

To further describe low-income married couples' relationship trajectories, I present the duration from (1) dating initiation to marriage; (2) dating initiation to premarital sex; (3) dating initiation to premarital cohabitation; (4) premarital cohabitation to marriage; and (5) marriage to first, shared, biological postmarital birth. Couples in the MARS dated for 29.28 months, on average, before marrying. Among couples that had premarital sex, 38.78 percent initiated sex within the first four weeks of dating. One quarter of couples (25.64%) had sex for the first time within one or two months of dating, and the remaining 35.58 percent of couples delayed sex until three or more months after the start of the relationship. About half of couples cohabited; on average, they dated for almost one year before moving in together and then cohabited for almost two years before marrying. Among couples who had a first shared biological birth after marriage, the average first postmarital birth interval was 29.01 months. Forty-three couples (10.78%) had no shared biological child by the time of the survey.³⁷

³⁷ In supplemental logistic regression analyses (not presented), I consider factors associated with having no joint, biological children. Couples that are more likely to have no shared children are those in which the wife was aged 26 or older at the start of dating (versus under age 20) (OR = 8.20, SE = 7.23, $p < 0.05$), have children from a previous union (versus have no prior children) (OR = 13.68, SE = 9.65, $p < 0.001$), and have started their relationships in more recent calendar years (OR = 1.15, SE = 0.07, $p < 0.01$). The odds of having no joint, biological children are lower for couples where at least one spouse was raised

Marital Quality

As discussed in Chapter 3, levels of marital quality are high for wives and husbands in the low-income MARS sample. The percentages of spouses reporting high and low marital satisfaction, high and low commitment, and high and low conflict reflect the dichotomizing scheme of using cut points that approximate the 20th percentile. Seventy-five percent of wives and 82.46 percent of husbands report high marital satisfaction, 71.68 percent of wives and 74.69 percent of husbands report high commitment, and 78.20 percent of wives and 76.19 percent of husbands report low conflict (i.e., few spousal disagreements).

Independent / Control Variables

At the time of the survey, MARS couples have been married for 10.49 years, on average. The year the relationship began ranges from 1978 to 2005. Regarding wife's age at the start of the dating relationship, 39.60 percent of couples began dating when the female partner was in her teen years, 35.09 percent when she was in her early 20s, and 25.31 percent when she was 26 years or older. Spouses married when the wife was 24.89 years old, on average. One or both partners in approximately one-third of couples have been formerly married (29.82%), have cohabited previously with another partner

without a religious affiliation than for couples where both were raised with a religious affiliation (OR = 0.25, SE = 0.14, $p < 0.01$). Keep in mind that this variable measures whether one was religiously affiliated during childhood—not the denomination nor the strength of religious sentiment—nor the couple's current religious status. Research by Glass and Jacobs (2005)—that compares marital and childbearing behavior by childhood religious affiliation—suggests that conflating both conservative and mainline childhood religious affiliations may gloss over important distinctions.

(35.59%), or have had a child in a prior union (32.58%).³⁸ The scores for both heterogamy scales indicate that most couples are homogamous in race/ethnicity and age and/or education, and 19.55 percent of couples include at least one spouse that is a racial/ethnic minority.

For 61.65 percent of MARS couples, only the husband works full-time, compared to 8.77 percent of couples where only the wife is employed full-time. Both spouses work full-time in 19.05 percent of couples, while, in 10.28 percent of couples, neither spouse works full-time. Compared to national figures, the MARS sample includes a greater proportion of families in which only the husband is employed full-time.³⁹ On average, couples engage in a fair amount of religious activities together; the mean score of 14.69 points on a scale of 5 to 25 indicates an average response of “sometimes” to the five indicators used. Reflecting the sampling frame criteria, 28.32 percent experience severe economic hardship. The youngest child in the household for most couples is 2 to 5 years (39.10%) or 6 to 12 years (35.34%). The youngest child is a teenager for 15.29 percent of couples, and 10.28 percent have an infant in the household.

Most spouses were raised with a religious affiliation: only one-quarter (24.31%) of couples include one or both spouses that were raised religiously unaffiliated. The

³⁸ While there is some overlap between these three variables (previous child, previous marriage $r = 0.68$, $p < 0.000$; previous child, previous cohabitation $r = 0.47$, $p < 0.000$; previous cohabitation, previous marriage $r = 0.44$, $p < 0.000$), multicollinearity is not present in any multivariate model.

³⁹ National data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2007) reveal that, in 2006, both parents were employed in most (62.0%) married-couple families with own children under 18 years of age. Father-only employment ranks second at 30.5 percent, and mother-only employment was relatively rare, at 4.8 percent. For 2.7 percent of married couple families with own children under 18 years, neither parent was employed. Note that these figures capture employment without distinguishing between full-time and part-time employment, as I do in my measure. Of married employed individuals with own children under 18 years, 72.77 percent of women and 96.81 percent of men were usually employed full-time (i.e., 35 hours or more per week) in 2006.

proportion of respondents raised in a married-parent household is quite low: almost half (46.37%) of couples include at least one spouse raised without two married parents. Both partners in one-in-five couples (21.30%) were raised by highly educated parents. Finally, having a dysfunctional childhood experience is common in this sample: two-thirds (65.66%) of couples report that at least one spouse experienced alcoholism or abuse during childhood. The proportions experiencing childhood dysfunction in the MARS exceed the ranges reported for Americans in general, again reflecting the selective nature of my sample.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ To be clear, the figure of 65.66 percent represents a cross-tabulation of wife and husband data. The following figures, provided for comparison, are at the individual-level. The percentage of adults in the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study reporting having lived with someone who abused drugs or alcohol is 26.9 percent, lower than the 31.30 percent of MARS respondents who reported having lived with someone who was a problem drinker. (No reference to drugs was made in the MARS.) In the ACE study, the percentage of respondents reporting childhood emotional abuse was 10.6 percent, physical abuse was 28.3 percent, and sexual abuse was 20.7 percent (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2009). These rates are collectively lower than the percent of adults reporting abuse in the MARS, at 29.69 percent. (Data for all types of abuse was collected in one measure in the MARS.)

		N	Mean or %	SD	Min	Max	Used in Trajectory Analyses	Used in Marital Quality Analyses
Relationship Trajectory Sequence								
	Traditional	87	21.80	-	0	1	X	X
	Traditional-plus-sex	103	25.81	-	0	1		
	Modern	149	37.34	-	0	1		
	Unconventional	60	15.04	-	0	1		
	Months between dating initiation and marriage	399	29.28	26.73	0	199	X	X
	Time between dating initiation and sex (n = 312, those who had premarital sex)						X	X
	Less than 1 month	121	38.78	-	0	1		
	1-2 months	80	25.64	-	0	1		
	3+ months	111	35.58	-	0	1		
	Months between dating initiation and cohabitation (n = 209, those who cohabited)	209	11.66	18.22	0	171	X	X
	Months between cohabitation and marriage (n = 209, those who cohabited)	209	22.76	26.51	0	189	X	X
	Months between marriage and postmarital baby (n = 296, those who had first joint biological birth after marriage)	296	29.01	25.05	0	161	X	X

Continued

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for all Variables for Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 399).

Table 1: Continued.

		N	Mean or %	SD	Min	Max	Used in Trajectory Analyses	Used in Marital Quality Analyses
<i>Marital quality</i>								
	High marital satisfaction							X
	Wife	301	75.44	-	0	1		
	Husband	329	82.46	-	0	1		
	High commitment							
	Wife	286	71.68	-	0	1		X
	Husband	298	74.69	-	0	1		
	Low conflict							
	Wife	312	78.20	-	0	1		X
	Husband	304	76.19	-	0	1		
<i>Independent/Control Variables</i>								
<i>Union characteristics</i>								
	Year dating began	399	1992.78	6.05	1978	2005	X	
	Marital duration (in years)	399	10.49	5.82	0.75	26.50		X
	Wife's age at start of dating							
	<20 years	158	39.60	-	0	1	X	
	20-25 years	140	35.09	-	0	1		
	26+ years	101	25.31	-	0	1		

Continued

Table 1: Continued.

116

	N	Mean or %	SD	Min	Max	Used in Trajectory Analyses	Used in Marital Quality Analyses
Wife's age at start of marriage	399	24.89	5.51	15.67	41.08		X
At least one spouse was married previously	119	29.82	-	0	1	X	X
At least one spouse cohabited previously	142	35.59	-	0	1	X	X
(missing)	1	0.25	-	0	1		
At least one spouse has child(ren) from previous union	130	32.58	-	0	1	X	X
Heterogamy (2-point scale - race and age)	399	0.42	0.59	0	2	X	
Heterogamy (3-point scale - race, age, and education)	399	0.96	0.79	0	3		X
At least one spouse is not white	78	19.55	-	0	1	X	X
<i>Current status variables</i>							
Employed full-time							X
Wife only	35	8.77	-	0	1		
Husband only	246	61.65	-	0	1		
Both	76	19.05	-	0	1		
Neither	41	10.28	-	0	1		
(missing)	1	0.25	-				

Continued

Table 1: Continued.

		N	Mean or %	SD	Min	Max	Used in Trajectory Analyses	Used in Marital Quality Analyses	
	Joint religious activities scale	399	14.59	6.19	5	25		X	
	Economic hardship	113	28.32	-	0	1		X	
	Age of youngest household child							X	
	0 to 1 years	41	10.28	-	0	1			
	2-5 years	156	39.10	-	0	1			
	6-12 years	141	35.34	-	0	1			
	13-17 years	61	15.29	-	0	1			
	<i>Family of origin/childhood variables</i>								
117	At least one spouse raised with no religious affiliation	97	24.31	-	0	1	X		
	(missing)	6	1.50	-	0	1			
	At least one spouse raised without married parents	185	46.37	-	0	1	X	X	
	(missing)	5	1.25	-	0	1			
	Both spouses' parents have high educational attainment	85	21.30	-	0	1	X		
	(missing)	37	9.27	-	0	1			
	At least one spouse experienced dysfunctional childhood	262	65.66	-	0	1	X		
	(missing)	1	0.25	-	0	1			

PART ONE: RELATIONSHIP TRAJECTORIES

In the following analyses, I address my second research aim, namely to examine how various factors predict couples' romantic relationship trajectories. First, I examine predictors of relationship event *sequence* group using multinomial logistic regression. Then, I explore various factors predicting relationship event *spacing*. I use event-history analyses to study the spacing from: (1) dating initiation to marriage; (2) dating initiation to cohabitation; (3) cohabitation to marriage; and (4) marriage to the birth of the first shared, biological child, and I use multinomial logistic regression to study the tempo from (5) dating initiation to couples' first sex.

Predicting Relationship Event Sequence

I explore predictors of relationship event sequence group using multinomial logistic regression, where the probabilities of following *traditional-plus-sex*, *modern*, and *unconventional* relationship trajectories are compared to the probability of following a *traditional* relationship trajectory. I present the odds ratios in Table 2. The superscript letters indicate statistically significant differences in the odds of pursuing diverse sequence groups when I alternate the omitted base category in the dependent variable.

Partners' ages at dating initiation affect the couple's relationship trajectory. The odds of following any of the non-traditional sequences are halved at best, relative to a traditional sequence, for couples that began dating when the female partner was 20 years old or older compared to couples who started dating when the wife was a teenager. The most highly statistically significant contrast is between the unconventional and traditional sequences. The odds ratio of 0.27 for couples in which the female partner was 20 to 25

years old at the start of the dating relationship indicates that the odds of following an unconventional sequence are 73 percent lower for these couples than the odds for couples where the female partner was under age 20 at the start of the dating relationship, relative to following a traditional sequence. When female partners were 26 years or older at the time the couple began dating, the odds of following an unconventional sequence, relative to a traditional sequence, drop by 91 percent compared to couples who began dating during the wife's teen years. The superscripts "b" and "c" indicate that the odds of pursuing an unconventional sequence for couples who begin dating when the female was age 26 or older are significantly lower than the odds for couples who begin dating when the female was under age 20, relative to pursuing both a traditional-plus-sex sequence and a modern sequence. With older age at the start of the dating relationship, couples are less likely to bear children out-of-wedlock.

I hypothesized that couples' romantic relationship trajectories would be associated with their experiences in previous relationships, and I expected to find higher rates of non-traditional sequences among those with previous marriage, cohabitation, or childbearing experiences. Certainly, the odds of following any of the less traditional sequences versus a traditional one are higher when one of the spouses has been previously married, but the contrasts are not statistically significant. A similar pattern is found for prior cohabitation, but here the contrasts do reach statistical significance. For example, the odds of following a modern sequence over a traditional sequence for couples where at least one member had cohabited previously are almost three times higher than for couples with no previous cohabitation experience. Similarly, having had

children in a previous union is strongly and positively related to the odds of following a modern or unconventional trajectory versus a traditional one; that is, if at least one spouse is already a parent, the new couple is more likely to cohabit and/or to bear a child together before marriage than to follow a traditional relationship trajectory that reserves sex and coresidential living for marriage. Additionally, the odds of following an unconventional sequence are significantly higher for step-parenting couples than for couples with no children at the start of the dating relationship, compared to following a traditional-plus-sex sequence.

Changing trends in family formation by historical period led me to expect higher rates of any non-traditional sequence for couples whose relationships formed later in historical time than for couples who started dating earlier. Indeed, I find that the year the couple began dating is significantly associated with the romantic relationship trajectory that they follow. The odds of pursuing a traditional-plus-sex sequence versus a modern sequence decline with each additional calendar year; in other words, the later in historical time the relationship begins, the more likely it is that couples will have sex and cohabit rather than just have sex. I hypothesized that couples with one or two racial/ethnic minority spouses would exhibit higher likelihoods of following an unconventional sequence; instead, I found lower odds of following a modern sequence, relative to a traditional-plus-sex sequence, among these couples than among couples with two white spouses.

Certain experiences in the family of origin were hypothesized to predict a couple's romantic relationship sequence: sequences including premarital sex,

cohabitation, and premarital childbearing were expected to be more common among couples where one or both spouses were raised religiously unaffiliated, without married parents, without highly educated parents, or experienced dysfunctional childhood circumstances. I find that having been raised with a religious affiliation reduces the odds of premarital childbearing, but not of premarital sex or cohabitation: couples where at least one spouse was raised without a religious affiliation are more than twice as likely as couples where both spouses were raised religiously affiliated to follow an unconventional relationship trajectory compared to a traditional or modern sequence. Similarly, the odds of following a modern or unconventional sequence are higher for couples where at least one spouse was raised without married parents than for couples where both spouses were raised with married parents, relative to pursuing traditional or traditional-plus-sex sequences. As expected, parental education exerts a protective effect against engaging in sex, cohabitation, and childbearing prior to marriage: when compared to couples where both spouses' parents did not attain a high level of education, couples where both spouses' parents have attained a high level of education are less likely to follow traditional-plus-sex, modern, or unconventional sequences relative to a traditional one. Finally, the odds of following a modern or unconventional sequence versus a traditional sequence are in the expected direction for couples in which at least one spouse experienced a dysfunctional childhood compared to those without dysfunctional experiences, but the contrasts do not attain statistical significance. The odds of pursuing a modern or unconventional sequence for couples with dysfunctional childhood

experiences are higher than the odds for couples in which neither spouse experienced dysfunction, relative to following a traditional-plus-sex sequence.

	Traditional- plus-sex		Modern		Unconven- tional	
Year dating began	0.96 (0.03)		1.01 (0.03)		0.95 (0.03)	a
Wife's age at start of dating						
<20 years (ref)						
20-25 years	0.49 (0.18)	+	0.52 (0.19)	+	0.27 (0.13)	**
26+ years	0.46 (0.24)		0.43 (0.22)		0.09 (0.06)	*** b c
At least one spouse was married previously	1.58 (0.94)		1.35 (0.78)		2.60 (1.79)	
At least one spouse cohabited previously	3.08 (1.44)	*	3.78 (1.67)	**	3.25 (1.75)	*
At least one spouse has child(ren) from previous union	2.18 (1.30)		5.04 (2.82)	**	9.31 (6.08)	*** b
Heterogamy scale	0.63 (0.24)		1.11 (0.40)		0.80 (0.36)	
At least one spouse is not white	2.12 (0.99)		0.71 (0.34)		1.23 (0.72)	a
At least one spouse raised with no religious affiliation	1.48 (0.58)		0.96 (0.38)		2.31 (1.07)	+ c

Continued

Note: Traditional is the omitted reference category for the dependent variable. + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. a = the factor change in the odds of being traditional-plus-sex versus modern is significant at $p < 0.05$. b = the factor change in the odds of being traditional-plus-sex versus unconventional is significant at $p < 0.05$. c = the factor change in the odds of being modern versus unconventional is significant at $p < 0.05$

Table 2. Odds Ratios (SE) from Multinomial Logistic Regression Model Predicting Relationship Sequence among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 387).

Table 2: Continued.

	Traditional- plus-sex		Modern		Unconven- tional	
At least one spouse raised without married parents	1.16 (0.43)		2.36 * (0.82)		2.94 * (1.31)	a b
Both spouses' parents have high educational attainment	0.35 ** (0.13)		0.47 * (0.17)		0.25 * (0.14)	
At least one spouse experienced dysfunctional childhood	0.62 (0.21)		1.47 (0.52)		1.99 (0.99)	a b
Pseudo r-square	0.17					
chi-square	173.09	***				
df	39					

Predicting Relationship Event Spacing

I now examine relationship event spacing, or the number of months separating pairs of relationship events. My goal here is to determine which factors predict the tempo of couples' transitions from one state to the next. I estimate Kaplan-Meier failure functions to examine the spacing from (1) dating initiation to marriage; (2) dating initiation to cohabitation; (3) cohabitation to marriage; and (4) marriage to first, shared, biological postmarital birth. The failure functions reveal the proportion of couples that experience the event in question on a monthly basis. For instance, the failure function from dating initiation to marriage shows the proportion of dating couples who marry over time. A couple's sequence of romantic relationship events is expected to be closely related to their spacing between these events; thus, I compare the failure functions by

sequence group. When log-rank test results indicate that failure functions are not parallel across sequence group, I include sequence as a predictor of spacing in multivariate analyses; when tests results indicate they are parallel, sequence group is excluded in the multivariate model. I estimate regression parameters in Cox proportional hazard regression models. Because the MARS question on couples' first sex was nominal, the time between (5) dating initiation and couples' first sex is described, by sequence, in a stacked bar chart. I use multinomial logistic regression to predict the tempo to couples' first coitus as a function of the independent variables.

Dating initiation to marriage. In Figure 1, I present the estimated Kaplan-Meier failure functions demonstrating the total time spent dating before marrying. Results are presented by sequence group to determine whether the four sequence groups differ in their timing to marriage. I find that traditional couples marry most expediently and unconventional couples delay marriage the longest. Approximately half of traditional couples are married 15 months after dating initiation, while it takes a little more than three years (38 months) before 50 percent of unconventional couples marry. About half of traditional-plus-sex and modern couples are married within two years of the start of the dating relationship, at 23 and 21 months, respectively. The failure functions from dating initiation to marriage differ significantly between the four groups (chi-square (3) = 51.27, $p < 0.000$); for this reason, sequence group is included as a control in multivariate analyses predicting the duration of dating before marriage.⁴¹

⁴¹ In a supplementary Cox model (not presented), I confirm that the effects of covariates are similar in a model excluding sequence as an independent variable.

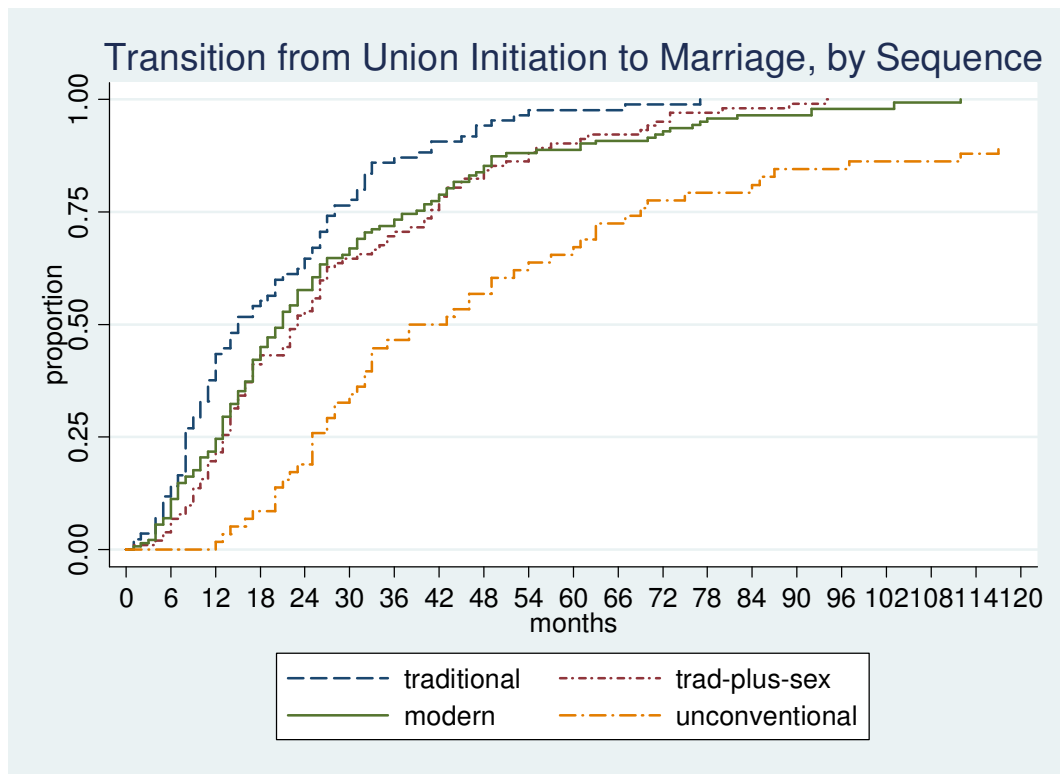


Figure 1. Kaplan-Meier Failure Functions from Dating Initiation to Marriage among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS, by Sequence (n = 399).

Table 3 presents hazard ratios from a Cox model predicting the hazard of marriage after dating initiation for all MARS couples. The dependent variable is the risk of marriage and is defined in monthly intervals from relationship initiation to the date of marriage. Each couple contributes one record for every month they were at risk of marrying, resulting in 11,822 couple-months of data. All couples in the sample eventually married, so none are censored. Hazard ratios greater than 1.00 reveal a faster transition to marriage (i.e., shorter duration of dating), and hazard ratios below 1.00 indicate a slower transition to marriage (i.e., a longer duration of dating).

As suggested by the Kaplan-Meier results, I find that, compared to traditional couples, all other sequence groups spend a longer time dating before marrying, net of controls. Not surprisingly, if couples have sex, cohabit, and/or have a shared premarital birth, marriage is delayed. In fact, the hazard ratio of marriage decreases with each additional premarital relationship event. Couples that have premarital sex but do not cohabit nor have a child prior to marriage have a hazard of marriage that is 0.65 that of traditional couples. Couples that have sex and cohabit have a hazard of marriage that is about half that of traditional couples (hazard ratio = 0.54). Unconventional couples, who engage in premarital sex, cohabitation, and birth, have the smallest hazard of marriage, at 0.25 that of traditional couples.

Of all the other background and control variables included in the model, only three reach a level of statistical significance of 0.10 or higher. The year the dating relationship began is a highly significant predictor: each additional calendar year is associated with a five percent increase in the hazard rate of marriage. Put another way, couples marry more quickly the later in historical time they begin dating.⁴² There are also weaker, but still statistically significant relationships, between the tempo of marrying and couples' parental status and race/ethnicity. In line with the hypothesis that having children from previous unions delays marriage, I find that when one or both partners enter the union with a child from another relationship, marriage is delayed: The hazard

⁴² Because the MARS sample includes only couples that were already married in 2006, couples who began dating more recently had to have married relatively quickly to be included in the sample. Stated statistically, the risk period from dating to marriage is not equal for all couples. To see whether the "year dating began" effect is being driven by couples who started dating more recently, I run a Cox model using a five year risk period, excluding 28 couples whose relationships began in 2001 or later (results not presented). Couples are censored at marriage or by 61 months, whichever occurs first. The hazard ratios in this model are virtually indistinguishable to those presented in Table 3. Most importantly, the hazard ratio for year dating began is almost identical (HR = 1.04, SE = 0.01 p < 0.001).

rate of marriage for couples with stepchildren is 24 percent lower than that of couples who enter the union without children. Race/ethnicity also matters. As expected, I find that couples with at least one minority partner date longer before marrying than do couples with two white partners.⁴³

Sequence			
	Traditional (ref)		
	Traditional plus sex	0.65	**
		(0.10)	
	Modern	0.54	***
		(0.09)	
	Unconventional	0.25	***
		(0.05)	
Year dating began		1.05	***
		(0.01)	
Wife's age at start of dating	<20 years (ref)		
	20-25 years	1.22	
		(0.16)	
	26+ years	1.26	
		(0.22)	
At least one spouse was married previously		0.97	
		(0.17)	
		Continued	

Note: + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Hazard Ratios (SE) from Cox Model for Hazard of Marriage after Dating Initiation among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 387).

⁴³ In supplemental Cox analyses (not presented), I investigate whether a premarital conception (defined as a birth within the first five months of marriage) or a premarital birth affects couples' hazard of marriage. Though couples with a premarital birth delay marriage longer than couples without a premarital birth (HR = 0.42, SE = 0.07, $p < 0.000$), couples with a premarital conception experience the same tempo to marriage as those without a premarital conception (HR = 0.92, SE = 0.19, $p = 0.67$). In another Cox model (not presented), I consider whether the number of months between dating and sex is significantly associated with duration of dating among couples that had premarital sex. Findings reveal no differences in the hazard rate of marriage for couples that had sex within the first month (reference) versus those who waited one or two months (HR = 0.87, SE = 0.14, $p = 0.37$) or three or more months (HR = 0.83, SE = 0.12, $p = 0.22$).

Table 3: Continued.

At least one spouse cohabited previously	1.18 (0.16)	
At least one spouse has child(ren) from previous union	0.76 (0.12)	+
Heterogamy scale	1.10 (0.12)	
At least one spouse is not White	0.72 (0.11)	*
At least one spouse raised with no religious affiliation	1.19 (0.15)	
At least one spouse raised without married parents	1.02 (0.12)	
Both spouses' parents have high educational attainment	0.85 (0.12)	
At least one spouse experienced dysfunctional childhood	1.05 (0.13)	
-2 log likelihood	105.71	***
df	16	
N subjects	387	
N failure	387	
Time at risk	11822	

Dating initiation to premarital sex. I now examine how long couples date prior to having sex for the first time and test the hypothesis that sequence groups differ in the tempo of their transition to first sex in the union. Figure 2 demonstrates that the time between dating initiation and premarital sex varies by sequence among the couples that had premarital sex. The modal category for modern (44.97%) and unconventional (50.00%) couples is to have sex within the first four weeks of dating, whereas traditional-plus-sex couples (52.43%) are most likely to wait three or more months after the start of

the dating relationship to have sex. Because chi-square test results indicate significant differences by sequence (chi-square (4) = 22.47, $p < 0.000$), I include sequence as a predictor in my multivariate model.⁴⁴

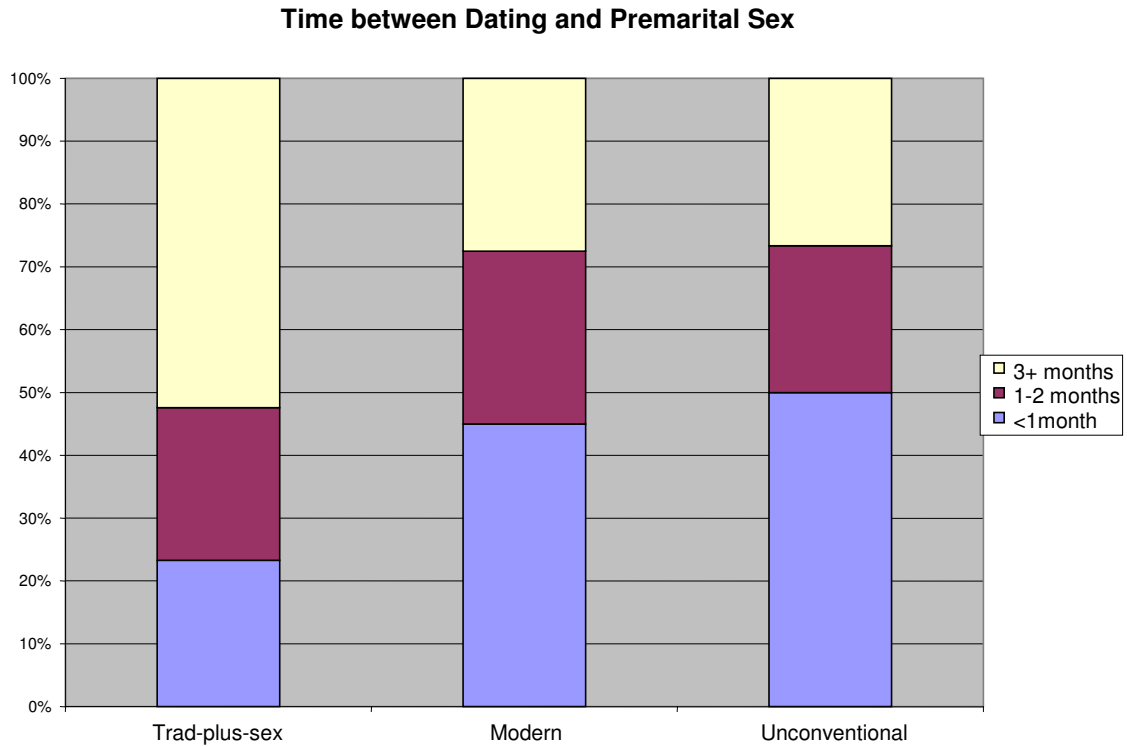


Figure 2. Time from Dating Initiation to Premarital Sex among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who had Premarital Sex, by Sequence (n = 312).

In Table 4, I present odds ratios from a multinomial logistic regression model predicting duration from dating to first sex among couples who engaged in premarital sex. I test whether the differences indicated in the Kaplan-Meier estimates hold up in

⁴⁴ Results of the other independent variables are practically identical in a model that does not control for sequence (not presented).

multivariate analyses and explore other predictors of the tempo to couples' first sex. The omitted reference category for the dependent variable is having had sex within the first four weeks of dating. Compared to traditional-plus-sex couples (reference), modern and unconventional couples have first sex sooner after dating initiation. Specifically, compared to traditional-plus-sex couples, the odds of modern couples waiting one to two months and of waiting three or more months are 48 and 68 percent lower, respectively, relative to having sex within the first month of dating. For unconventional couples, the odds of waiting one to two months are 56 percent lower and the odds of waiting three or more months are 78 percent lower than the odds for traditional-plus-sex couples, relative to initiating sex within the first month of dating. These findings reveal that couples who live together before marriage are also more likely to have sex earlier in a relationship, and those who also have a premarital shared birth have sex the earliest of the three groups.⁴⁵

Aligning with expectations, I find that couples have sex sooner after they begin dating if at least one of them had cohabited previously: the odds of waiting one to two months to have sex for the first time for couples with previous cohabitation experience are 63 percent lower than the odds for couples with no previous cohabitation experience, relative to having sex within the first month of dating. The odds ratio for delaying sex by three or more months is in the same direction, although it does not attain statistical significance. Similarly, couples with children from previous unions have sex sooner after they start dating than couples with no children: the odds of couples with previous-union

⁴⁵ Keep in mind that cohabitation almost always comes after the formation of a sexual union, and the birth of biological children always follows sex. Thus, a model controlling for sequence when predicting the duration between dating and first sex reverses the ordering of these events.

children delaying sex at least three months are 0.35 that of childless couples, relative to having sex within the first month of dating.

I had expected to find the spacing between dating initiation and sex to be longer among couples whose relationships formed during adolescence than couples whose relationships formed at older ages. Indeed, this is what I find: compared to couples beginning to date when the female partner is a teenager, couples that start dating when the female partner is ages 20 to 25 experience odds of delaying sex at least three months that are 47 percent lower, relative to initiating coitus within four weeks of dating. The superscript “a” also indicates significantly higher odds of initiating sex one to two months after dating, relative to delaying three or more months, for couples that start dating when the wife is in her early twenties compared her teen years.

Finally, in contrast to expectations based on previous research, I find that the more heterogamous the couple, the longer they delay sex: with a one-point increase on the age/race heterogamy scale, the odds of delaying sex by one or two months, relative to having sex within the first month of dating, increase by 87 percent. The odds of delaying the first coitus by three or more months are in the same direction for the heterogamy scale, but fail to reach statistical significance.

		1-2 months		3+ months	
Sequence	Traditional-plus-sex (ref)				
	Modern	0.52	+	0.32	**
		(0.20)		(0.12)	
	Unconventional	0.44	+	0.22	**
		(0.22)		(0.10)	
Year dating began		0.99		0.95	
		(0.03)		(0.03)	
Wife's age at start of dating	<20 years (ref)				
	20-25 years	1.82		0.53	+ a
		(0.73)		(0.20)	
	26+ years	1.18		1.21	
		(0.65)		(0.62)	
At least one spouse was married previously		1.32		0.83	
		(0.64)		(0.42)	
At least one spouse cohabited previously		0.37	**	0.63	
		(0.14)		(0.23)	
At least one spouse has child(ren) from previous union		0.79		0.35	*
		(0.33)		(0.15)	
Heterogamy scale		1.87	+	1.21	
		(0.62)		(0.39)	
At least one spouse is not white		0.84		1.10	
		(0.38)		(0.47)	
At least one spouse raised with no religious affiliation		1.01		0.68	
		(0.36)		(0.24)	

Continued

Notes: Premarital sex within the first month of dating is the omitted reference category for the DV. + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. a = the factor change in the odds of having sex in months 1-2 versus in months 3+ is significant at p < 0.05

Table 4. Odds Ratios (SE) from Multinomial Logistic Regression Model Predicting Spacing from Dating Initiation to Premarital Sex among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who had Premarital Sex (n = 312).

Table 4: Continued.

	1-2 months	3+ months
At least one spouse raised without married parents	0.87 (0.30)	1.42 (0.47)
Both spouses' parents have high educational attainment	1.59 (0.68)	1.36 (0.57)
At least one spouse experienced dysfunctional childhood	1.36 (0.53)	1.37 (0.49)
Pseudo r-square	0.12	
chi-square	77.55	***
df	30	

Dating initiation to premarital cohabitation. To develop my examination of couples' romantic relationship trajectories, I now turn to analyze the spacing from dating initiation to premarital cohabitation. Modern and unconventional couples are the two sequence groups who cohabited prior to marriage, and in Figure 3, I present Kaplan-Meier failure functions indicating the proportion of couples who start cohabiting by monthly intervals. Approximately half of modern and unconventional couples began cohabitating within seven months of dating. To test whether the two sequence groups differ in their tempo to premarital cohabitation, I use the log-rank test and find that the failure functions are equal between the two groups (chi-square (1) = 0.46, $p = 0.50$). Therefore, I do not control for sequence in multivariate models.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ In a supplementary Cox model (not presented), I confirm that there is no difference in the timing from dating to cohabitation between modern and unconventional couples, net of all controls (HR = 1.10, SE = 0.20, $p = 0.59$).

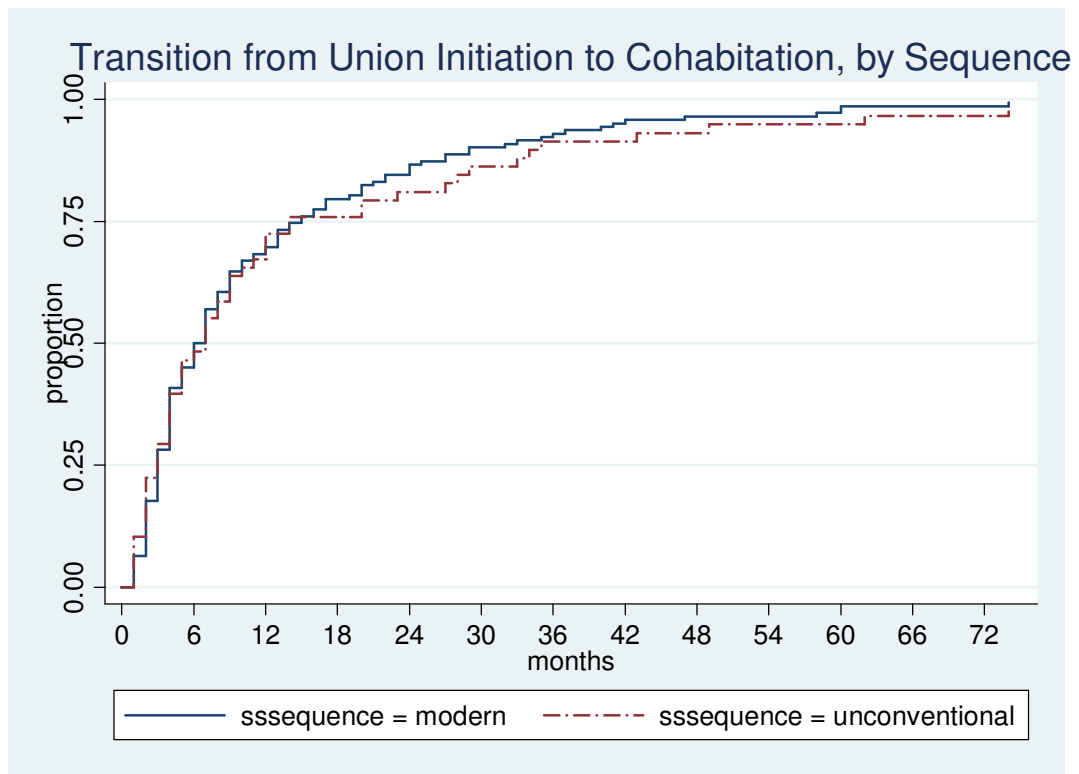


Figure 3. Kaplan-Meier Failure Functions from Dating Initiation to Premarital Cohabitation among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who Experienced Premarital Cohabitation, by Sequence (n = 209).

Table 5 displays hazard ratios from a Cox model predicting the hazard of cohabiting after dating initiation. Risk of premarital cohabitation, the dependent variable, is measured dichotomously as whether the couple cohabited with each other before marriage and is defined in monthly intervals from the start of the dating relationship through to the start of their cohabitation. Each couple contributes one record for each month they were at risk of cohabitating with each other for the first time. Couples who did not cohabit are censored at the month of marriage. There are 7,231 couple-months of data and 200 failures (i.e., 200 couples cohabited). Hazard ratios above 1.00 demonstrate

a more expedient transition to cohabitation, and hazard ratios below 1.00 demonstrate a delayed transition to cohabitation.

Factors that hasten the transition from dating to cohabitation are having been raised without married parents, having experienced dysfunction during childhood, calendar year in which the relationship began, having children from previous unions, and previous cohabitation experience. All of these covariates are associated with the risk of cohabitation as expected. Childhood experiences are highly significant in predicting the risk of cohabitation: if, as a child, at least one spouse experienced dysfunction or was raised without married parents, the hazard of cohabiting increases by 67 and 80 percent, respectively, versus couples without such experiences. As expected, my results reflect that cohabitation has become more a common experience over time: there is a four percent increase in couples' risk of cohabitation for every additional year in calendar time that the relationship began, controlling for other covariates in the model.⁴⁷ Prior cohabitation experience by at least one partner increases the hazard of spouses cohabiting before marriage by 36 percent, compared to couples with no prior cohabitation experience. The hazard of cohabiting is 88 percent higher for couples with children from previous unions than for couples formed by childless men and women. One factor shows a weak, but still statistically significant, association with delayed cohabitation. Couples where at least one of the partners is a racial/ethnic minority experience a lower hazard of

⁴⁷ Couples who began dating later in historical time must have married relatively quickly to be included in the MARS sample. I run a supplementary Cox model with a five year risk period, excluding 28 couples whose relationships began in 2001 or later because their relatively quick transition to marriage may be driving the “year dating began” effect (results not presented). Couples were censored at marriage or by 61 months, whichever occurred first. No new noteworthy results appear in this new model. Most importantly, the hazard ratio for “year dating began” is almost identical (1.05, SE = 0.02, $p < 0.01$) to the one presented in the original model, where the time at risk varies. I conclude that, indeed, the hazard of dating couples transitioning to cohabitation has increased over time.

cohabitation; in other words, they delay cohabitation longer than couples where both partners are white.⁴⁸

Year dating began	1.04 (0.02)	**
Wife's age at start of dating		
<20 years (ref)		
20-25 years	0.92 (0.18)	
26+ years	0.87 (0.21)	
At least one spouse was married previously	1.09 (0.26)	
At least one spouse cohabited previously	1.36 (0.24)	+
At least one spouse has child(ren) from previous union	1.88 (0.40)	**
Heterogamy scale	1.25 (0.19)	
At least one spouse is not white	0.69 (0.15)	+
At least one spouse raised with no religious affiliation	1.11 (0.19)	
At least one spouse raised without married parents	1.80 (0.29)	***

Continued

Notes: + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 5. Hazard Ratios (SE) from Cox Model for Hazard of Premarital Cohabitation after Dating Initiation among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 387).

⁴⁸ In supplementary Cox regression analysis for modern and unconventional couples (not presented), I consider how the couple's timing to first sex might affect their timing from dating to cohabitation. Findings reveal that couples who delay sex also delay cohabitation; more specifically, compared to couples who had sex within the first month of dating, the hazard ratio of cohabiting among those who delayed sex by one or two months is 0.66 (SE = 0.13, p < 0.05) and is 0.49 (SE = 0.09, p < 0.001) among couples who waited sex three or more months.

Table 5: Continued.

Both spouses' parents have high educational attainment	0.78 (0.16)	
At least one spouse experienced dysfunctional childhood	1.67 (0.33)	**
-2 log likelihood	128.05	***
df	13	
N subjects	387	
N failure	200	
Time at risk	7231	

Premarital cohabitation to marriage. Although modern and unconventional couples do not differ in number of months between dating and cohabitation, there are significant differences between the two groups in the time spent cohabiting before marriage. The estimated Kaplan-Meier failure functions, displayed in Figure 4, depict substantially different rates of marriage between the two groups. Half of modern couples marry within 11 months of cohabitation, whereas it takes almost two-and-a-half years after the start of cohabitation for half of unconventional couples to marry. Log-rank test results demonstrate that the two groups' failure rates are significantly different (chi-square (1) = 31.91, $p < 0.000$). For this reason, I compare modern and unconventional couples in multivariate analyses predicting the risk of marrying among cohabiting couples.

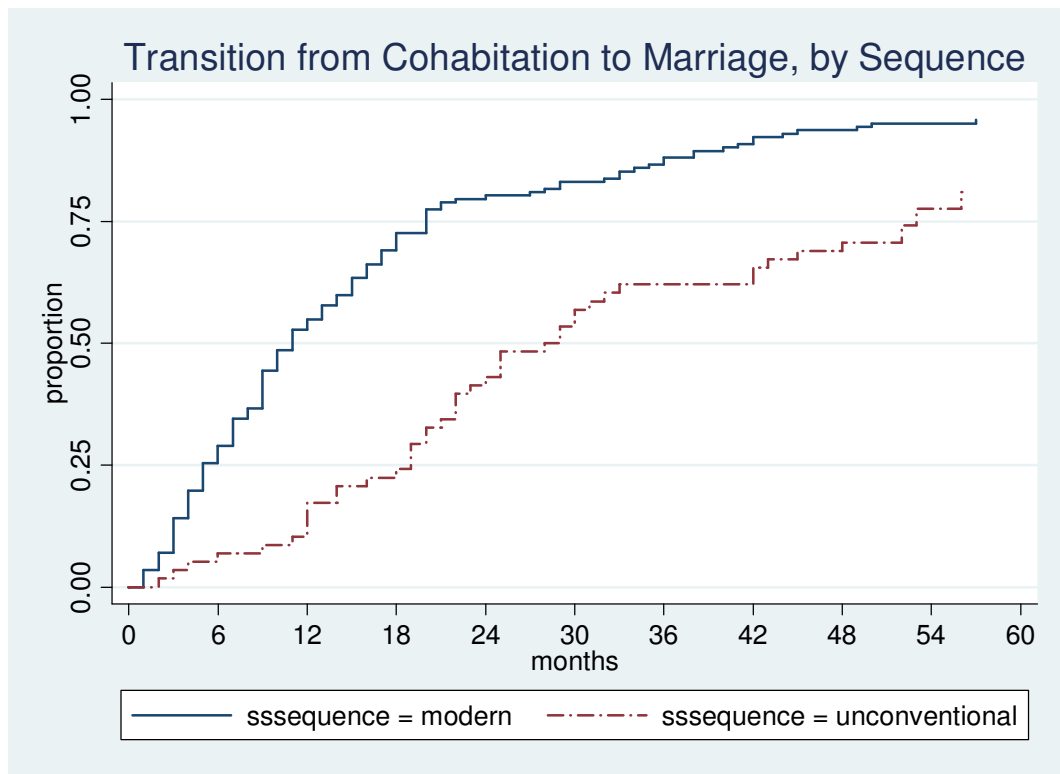


Figure 4. Kaplan-Meier Failure Functions from Initiation of Premarital Cohabitation to Marriage among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who Experienced Premarital Cohabitation, by Sequence (n = 209).

I present hazard ratios from this Cox proportional hazards model in Table 6. The monthly risk of marriage, the dependent variable, is measured dichotomously as whether the cohabiting couple married, and the number of months from the beginning of premarital cohabitation to marriage serves as the duration measure. Since all cohabitators in the sample married, no couples are censored. The 200 couples that cohabited before marriage contribute one record for each month they were at risk of marrying, leading to a total of 4,791 couple-months of cohabitation. Hazard ratios above 1.00 indicate a more expedient transition to marriage (i.e., shorter duration of cohabitation), and hazard ratios

below 1.00 reveal a delayed transition to marriage (i.e., a longer duration of cohabitation).

In the multivariate model, I test whether modern and unconventional couples exhibit similar tempos to marriage. Net of all covariates, the risk of marriage for modern and unconventional couples is significantly different: the hazard ratio of unconventional couples marrying is 0.42 that of modern couples. Stated otherwise, cohabiting couples who bear children together delay marriage longer than cohabiting couples who do not enter shared parenthood until after marriage has occurred.⁴⁹ A few other variables have statistically significant associations with cohabitators' hazard of marrying. Consistent with other studies, marriage is delayed among cohabiting couples with children from previous unions and among couples where at least one of the partners is a racial/ethnic minority. Finally, with each additional calendar year of dating initiation, the hazard of transitioning from cohabitation to marriage increases by three percent.^{50,51}

⁴⁹ In supplementary Cox analysis (not presented), I examine whether a premarital conception (i.e., a birth within the first five months of marriage) influences the hazard of marrying, and find that the estimate is not significant (HR = 0.89, SE = 0.24, p = 0.65).

⁵⁰ I examine whether the "year dating began" effect is being driven by couples whose cohabitations began most recently because these cohabiting couples had to have married relatively quickly to be included in the MARS sample of married couples. I run a Cox proportional hazards model using a five year risk period, excluding couples (n = 41) whose cohabitations began in 2001 or later (results not presented). Couples were censored at marriage or by 61 months, whichever occurred first. In this model, the hazard ratio for "year dating began" becomes insignificant (HR = 1.02, SE = 0.02, p = 0.25). The effect of calendar year the relationship began is, in fact, driven by couples whose relationships began recently. The result presented in Table 9 carries no great weight and will not be discussed further in this research. As expected, the effects of the other regression parameters are unaffected by the length of risk period and are almost identical to those presented in Table 9.

⁵¹ In two additional Cox models (not presented), I examine whether spacing from dating to sex and from dating to cohabitation affect the duration of cohabitation. Results reveal that couples who delay sex experience a shorter duration of premarital cohabitation: compared to couples who had sex within the first month of dating, those who waited three or more months to have sex have a hazard ratio of marriage of 1.45 (SE = 0.27, p < 0.05). Similarly, delaying the start of cohabitation has a weak, but accelerating, effect on cohabitators' transition: for every additional month spent dating before cohabiting, the hazard of marrying increases by one percent (SE = 0.01, p < 0.10).

Sequence			
	Modern (ref)		
	Unconventional	0.42	***
		(0.07)	
Year dating began		1.03	*
		(0.02)	
Wife's age at start of dating	<20 years (ref)		
	20-25 years	0.89	
		(0.18)	
	26+ years	1.01	
		(0.25)	
At least one spouse was married previously		0.91	
		(0.20)	
At least one spouse cohabited previously		1.13	
		(0.21)	
At least one spouse has child(ren) from previous union		0.69	*
		(0.13)	
Heterogamy scale		1.19	
		(0.19)	
At least one spouse is not white		0.59	*
		(0.13)	
At least one spouse raised with no religious affiliation		0.99	
		(0.17)	
At least one spouse raised without married parents		0.93	
		(0.15)	
Both spouses' parents have high educational attainment		1.07	
		(0.22)	

Continued

Notes: + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 6. Hazard Ratios (SE) from Cox Model for Hazard of Marriage after Initiation of Premarital Cohabitation among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who Experienced Premarital Cohabitation (n = 200).

Table 6: Continued.

At least one spouse experienced dysfunctional childhood	0.91 (0.17)	
-2 log likelihood	50.86	***
df	14	
N subjects	200	
N failure	200	
Time at risk	4791	

Marriage to first joint postmarital childbirth. In the final set of analyses examining the sequencing of major relationship events, I examine married couples' risk of giving birth to their first biological child. I present the Kaplan-Meier failure functions for the risk of the first shared biological postmarital birth in Figure 5, and these are presented by sequence group to see if the tempo to the first postmarital birth varies by relationship sequence.⁵² I find that about one-quarter of traditional, traditional-plus-sex, and modern couples have a first birth by 14 months of marriage, half have a child by 27 months, and another quarter wait 4 or more years to have their first child. Log-rank test results reveal no significant differences in the timing to first postmarital birth between the three groups (chi-square (2) = 1.30, $p = 0.52$); thus, I do not include sequence as an

⁵² All couples without a shared premarital birth are included in these analyses. As explained in footnote 8, an in-depth consideration of premarital birth intervals is impossible with the small number of couples whose first shared birth preceded marriage. Most couples in the United States (and in the MARS) delay childbearing until after marriage. In my research, I am concerned with the couple's first shared birth due to its weighty consequences for couples' dynamics, while second and later births are less life-altering (thus, I do not examine unconventional couples' first postmarital birth). Effectively, predictors of a premarital birth (i.e., unconventional couples) are available in Table 2.

independent variable in the multivariate Cox regression model predicting the hazard of the couples' first postmarital birth.⁵³

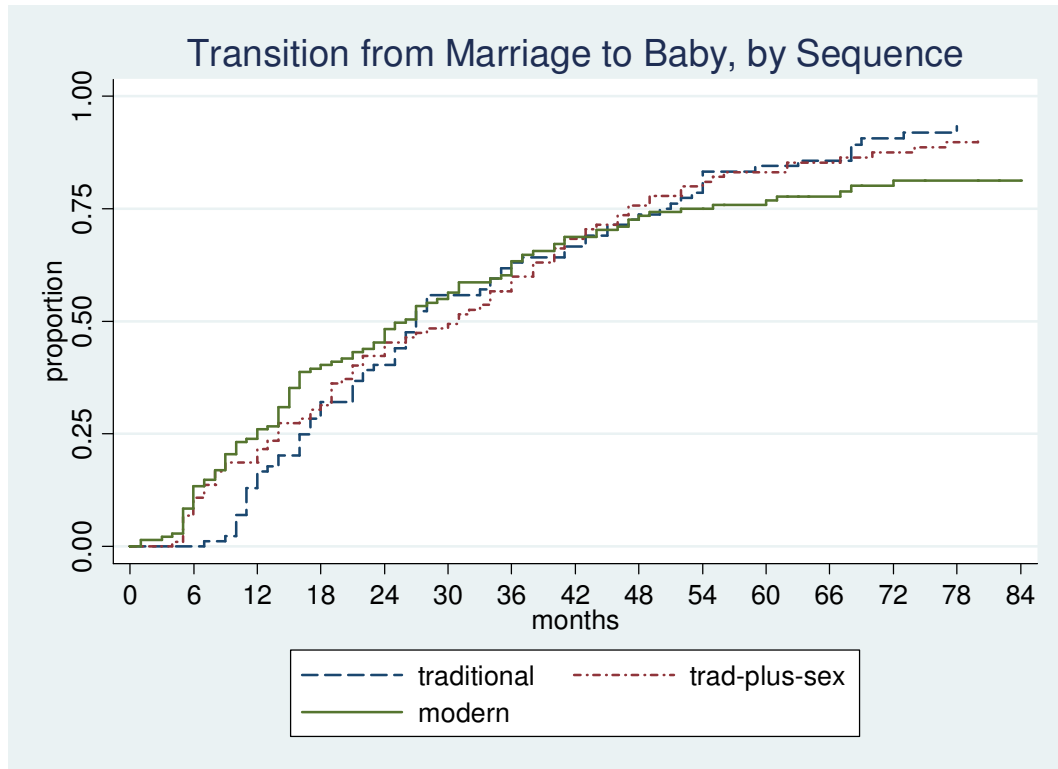


Figure 5. Kaplan-Meier Failure Functions from Marriage to First Birth among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who did not experience a Premarital Birth, by Sequence (n = 339).

Table 7 presents the hazard ratios from this model. There are 287 couples that had a postmarital birth, and their duration measure is the number of months between the wedding and the first birth. Forty-two couples had no shared birth, and they are censored by the survey date (i.e., their duration measure is the number of months between the

⁵³ In additional Cox analyses (not presented), I confirm there is no difference in the timing from marriage to first postmarital birth comparing traditional to traditional-plus-sex couples (HR = 1.08, SE = 0.17, p = 0.62) and to modern couples (HR = 1.25, SE = 0.21, p = 0.19), net of all controls.

wedding and the survey date). Together, the 329 couples contribute 11,699 couple-months of data. Hazard ratios above 1.00 indicate a higher risk of joint parenthood (i.e., a faster transition), and hazard ratios below 1.00 indicate a lower risk (i.e., a delayed transition).

Three independent variables reach statistical significance in this model. Although I had expected no association between age at dating and the first postmarital birth interval, I find that couples who begin dating at older ages have a lower chance of having a child in each monthly interval than couples who begin dating at younger ages. Specifically, couples that begin dating when the female partner is 26 years of age or older exhibit a 45 percent lower hazard of giving birth to a first child than couples whose relationships start during the female partner's teenage years. As hypothesized, I find that childbearing is delayed longer among couples with children from previous unions: The hazard of parenting couples having a shared postmarital birth is 0.45 that of childless couples. Finally, I find a positive association between the year the relationship began and the risk of joint postmarital parenthood: every additional calendar year is associated with a four percent increase in the hazard of first childbirth.⁵⁴ My findings suggest that low-

⁵⁴ To see whether this effect is driven by couples whose marriages began most recently, I run a Cox proportional hazards model using a five year risk period, excluding couples (n = 58) whose marriages began in 2001 or later. Couples are censored at the birth of their first child or by 61 months, whichever occurred first. I find that the hazard ratio for the year dating began is identical in this model and in the original model presented (HR = 1.05, SE = 0.01, p < 0.001). Thus, this period effect is robust to unequal risk periods. I also run a multinomial logistic regression on couples without a shared premarital birth, operationalizing the spacing to first birth categorically. Compared to having a child within the first 7 months of marriage (reference), the odds of having a birth 8 to 23, 24 to 27, and 48 or more months after marriage are negatively associated with calendar year.

income couples are increasingly likely to see marriage and childbearing as a joint phenomenon (Sassler and Cunningham 2008; Wu and Musick 2008).⁵⁵

Year dating began	1.05 (0.01)	***
Wife's age at start of dating		
<20 years (ref)		
20-25 years	0.92 (0.13)	
26+ years	0.55 (0.12)	**
At least one spouse was married previously	0.83 (0.19)	
At least one spouse cohabited previously	1.17 (0.19)	
At least one spouse has child(ren) from previous union	0.45 (0.10)	***
Heterogamy scale	1.15 (0.16)	
At least one spouse is not white	1.02 (0.20)	
At least one spouse raised with no religious affiliation	1.13 (0.16)	
At least one spouse raised without married parents	0.97 (0.13)	

Continued

Notes: + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 7. Hazard Ratios (SE) from Cox Model for Hazard of First Shared Birth after Marriage among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who did not Experience a Shared Premarital Birth (n = 329).

⁵⁵ In supplementary Cox regression analysis (not presented), I consider whether the time spent dating prior to marriage has a significant association with the first postmarital birth interval, but find no relationship (HR = 1.00, SE = 0.00, p = 0.39).

Table 7: Continued.

Both spouses' parents have high educational attainment	0.85 (0.12)		
At least one spouse experienced dysfunctional childhood	1.02 (0.15)		
	-2 log likelihood	68.37	***
	df	13	
	N subjects	329	
	N failure	287	
	Time at risk	11699	

Conclusions

Thus far, I have addressed the first two aims of my research, namely, to describe low-income couples' relationship trajectories and to explore various predictors of these trajectories. I found that the relationship trajectories pursued by the MARS couples were quite diverse: 21.80 percent followed a traditional sequence of relationship events, 25.81 percent pursued a traditional-plus-sex sequence, 37.34 percent followed a modern trajectory, and 15.04 percent engaged in an unconventional sequence of relationship events. On average, couples dated for almost two-and-a-half years before marrying, but the length of courtship varied widely by relationship sequence, with traditional couples marrying most expediently and unconventional couples delaying marriage the longest. Among couples having premarital sex, 38.78 percent initiated sex within the first month of dating, 25.64 percent waited one or two months, and the remaining 35.58 percent waited three or more months to have sex for the first time. Approximately half of MARS couples cohabited, dating for an average of one year before moving in together. The

number of months between the start of the dating relationship and cohabitation did not differ by relationship sequence, though I found that the duration of premarital cohabitation was significantly longer for unconventional couples than for modern couples. The trajectory to parenthood also varied among the couples. Though three-quarters of couples had their first shared birth after marriage, 15 percent had their first shared birth before marriage, while 11 percent had no joint biological children by the time of the survey. The average first postmarital birth interval was about two-and-a-half years, and did not differ between traditional, traditional-plus-sex, and modern couples.

I examined variables thought to be predictive of couples' romantic relationship trajectories. All were significantly related to the sequencing and/or spacing of relationship events, with the exception of previous marriage. I present summary findings for spacing in Table 8, and the results for sequence remain available in Table 2.

I found that relationship sequence was significantly related to the spacing between certain pairs of relationship events. All non-traditional couples delayed marriage longer than traditional couples. Couples deferred marriage by engaging in premarital sex, cohabitation, and childbearing; partaking in these events was linearly related to the hazard of marrying after the start of the dating relationship. In a similar manner, premarital births delayed the transition from cohabitation to marriage. Couples in the different sequence groups also reported varying tempos to first sex. Compared to traditional-plus-sex couples, modern couples initiated coitus sooner after the start of the dating relationship, and unconventional couples had first sex most expediently.

The wife's age at the start of the dating relationship helped to predict the trajectory of the romantic union. Couples with female partners older than age 20 exhibited lower odds of following an unconventional relationship sequence than couples with female partners less than 20 years old, relative to following a traditional sequence. The female partner's age at dating also affected the tempo between relationship events. Couples who began dating during the female partner's teenage years were more likely to delay sex for longer periods than were couples who began dating with female partner ages 20 to 25. I also found that the hazards of a postmarital birth were significantly lower for couples who began dating during the oldest ages measured here compared to couples who started dating during the youngest ages.

Previous relationship experiences were generally strong predictors of couples' romantic relationship trajectories. Previous cohabitation experience increased the odds of following any non-traditional relationship sequence and accelerated the transitions to sex and to cohabitation. Having had a child in a previous relationship increased the odds of following a modern or unconventional trajectory, hastened the transition to sex and to cohabitation, but delayed marriage (both from dating initiation and the start of cohabitation), and the postmarital birth of the couple's first child.

I also found significant associations between romantic relationship trajectories and their calendar year of formation. Each additional calendar year of the start of the dating relationship was associated with lower odds of following a traditional-plus-sex sequence versus a modern one. Over the time period studied, the hazards increased for

transitioning from dating to cohabitation, dating to marriage, and marriage to first postmarital birth.

For my sample of low-income couples, I found that partners' race was related to certain aspects of their relationship trajectories. Specifically, couples with at least one non-white partner delayed cohabitation and marriage (both from initiation of dating and cohabitation) longer than couples with two white partners. Partner heterogamy in age and/or race delayed sex somewhat, but had no significant associations with other aspects of the trajectory.

Finally, I found that childhood experiences influence couples' relationship trajectories, with stronger effects on relationship sequencing than on spacing. The odds of following some or all of the non-traditional relationship trajectories were greater for couples where one or both spouses were raised without married parents, without religious affiliation, without highly educated parents, and in homes with alcohol problems or abuse. The pace of transitioning from dating to cohabitation was also more expedient for couples in which at least one spouse was raised without married parents and for those couples in which at least one spouse experienced dysfunction during childhood.

I now turn my attention to my third research aim: to measure the effects of relationship trajectories on wives' and husbands' reports of marital quality.

		Dating Initiation to Marriage	Dating Initiation to Sex	Dating Initiation to Cohab	Cohab to Marriage	Marriage to Birth
Sequence	Traditional	(ref)	-	-	-	-
	Traditional-plus-sex	slower	(ref)	-	-	-
	Modern	slower	faster	-	(ref)	-
	Unconventional	slower	faster	-	slower	-
Year dating began		faster		faster		faster
Wife's age at start of dating	<20 years (ref)					
	20-25 years		faster			
	26+ years					slower
At least one spouse was married previously						
At least one spouse cohabited previously			faster	faster		
At least one spouse has child(ren) from previous union		slower	faster	faster	slower	slower
Heterogamy scale			slower			
At least one spouse is not white		slower		slower	slower	

Continued

Table 8. Summary of Multivariate Results for Spacing Variables.

Table 8: Continued.

	Dating Initiation to Marriage	Dating Initiation to Sex	Dating Initiation to Cohab	Cohab to Marriage	Marriage to Birth
At least one spouse raised with no religious affiliation					
At least one spouse raised without married parents			faster		
Both spouses' parents have high educational attainment					
At least one spouse experienced dysfunctional childhood			faster		

PART TWO: MARITAL QUALITY

To meet the goal of informing current policy requires explaining the role romantic relationship trajectories may play in developing healthy marriages. In this section of the chapter, I examine how couples' relationship trajectories are associated with wives' and husbands' reports of marital satisfaction, marital commitment, and frequency of disagreements. First, I consider how marital quality is affected by romantic relationship sequence and then I explore how it is affected by the spacing between pairs of relationship events. I use logistic regression models to predict the likelihood of reporting high marital satisfaction (versus low satisfaction = 0), high commitment (versus low commitment = 0), and low conflict (versus high conflict = 0), and I present my results in terms of odds ratios. The top portion of each table presents the bivariate relationships and, under the bolded line, I present the multivariate results. Although I display the results of all variables included in my analyses in each of my tables, I will discuss the results of the control variables at the end of the chapter where I tackle my fourth and final research aim—to explore other correlates of low-income wives' and husbands' marital quality.

Predicting Marital Quality with Relationship Event Sequence

To assess how romantic relationship sequence may be associated with subsequent marital quality, I compare the odds of reporting high marital quality for individuals in traditional-plus-sex, modern, and unconventional couples to those in traditional couples. Premarital sex has become so commonplace that is not expected to have a strong effect on marital quality, so I do not expect strong differences when comparing traditional and

traditional-plus-sex couples. I expect lower odds of reporting high marital quality among modern and unconventional couples, compared to traditional couples, because—despite popular wisdom that cohabitation will help to weed out incompatible couples (as per marital search theory)—most research finds negative associations between marital quality and premarital cohabitation and childbearing.

Results are presented in Table 9. In bivariate results, I find that wives and husbands in traditional couples consistently report higher satisfaction, higher commitment, and less conflict than wives and husbands in all other sequences, and the contrasts are overwhelmingly significant when couples in traditional sequences are compared with couples in modern or unconventional sequences. An exception is that husbands in traditional and unconventional couples do not differ in the likelihood of reporting high commitment. Men who enter joint parenthood first and subsequently marry may be a selective group of highly committed men.

In the next model, I present results of a multivariate model including all control variables except severe economic hardship and joint religiosity. I find that the significant associations between relationship sequence and husbands' reports of high marital quality are reduced to insignificance, with one exception: men in modern couples are less likely than those in traditional couples to report low marital conflict. The relationship event sequence variable does not attain statistical significance as a whole in this model (chi-square (3) = 3.73, $p = 0.29$), suggesting that sequence is not strongly related to men's reports of conflict. Relationship sequence remains significantly associated with wives' reports of marital quality. Specifically, relative to traditional wives, modern and/or

unconventional wives are less likely to report high marital satisfaction, high commitment, and low conflict. Sequence is not statistically significant as a whole, however, for wives' commitment (chi-square (3) = 3.95, $p = 0.27$) or for wives' conflict (chi-square (3) = 4.33, $p = 0.23$), indicating only partial support for my hypothesis that relationship event sequence affects these aspects of wives' marital quality. Sequence group as a whole is, however, significantly associated with wives' reports of marital satisfaction (chi-square (3) = 7.69, $p = 0.05$), meaning that sequence is a significant correlate of wives' reports of marital satisfaction, at least when joint religiosity and severe economic hardship are excluded as controls. Specifically, wives in modern and unconventional couples are 62 and 63 percent less likely, respectively, to report high marital satisfaction, relative to wives in traditional couples.

Once I introduce economic hardship and joint religiosity into the multivariate model, relationship sequence has no association with wives' or husbands' reports of high commitment, high satisfaction, or low conflict. This suggests that economic hardship and/or joint religiosity play a mediating role in the association between relationship event sequence and marital quality, especially for wives' marital satisfaction. In additional models (not presented), I examine the mediating roles of economic hardship and joint religiosity separately for all three dimensions of marital quality for both spouses. When severe economic hardship is the only variable excluded from the multivariate model, sequence is not significantly related to marital quality for either wives or husbands, suggesting that severe poverty does not act as a mediator. When joint religious activity is excluded only, sequence is significantly associated with wives' reports of high marital

satisfaction and husbands' reports of low conflict; in neither case, however, does the sequence group variable reach significance as a whole (husbands' conflict: chi-square (3) = 2.93, $p = 0.40$; wives' marital satisfaction: chi-square (3) = 5.85, $p = 0.12$). These analyses indicate two things: first, that my hypothesis that relationship event sequence is related to marital quality is only partially supported; and second, that couples' joint religious activity plays a mediating role in the association between sequence and wives' marital satisfaction.

In additional multivariate analyses with all control variables (not presented), I rotate the reference category of the independent variable three times—once for every sequence group—to see whether any significant differences in marital quality appear when omitting traditional-plus-sex, modern, and unconventional sequence groups as the reference group. In none of these analyses do significant relationships appear between relationship sequence and wives' or husbands' reports of marital quality. Thus, I conclude that, net of all controls, romantic relationship sequence is not a significant predictor of wives' or husbands' reports of marital quality, with one caveat: the association between romantic relationship event sequence and wives' marital satisfaction is mediated by the couples' shared religious activity.

Predicting Marital Quality with Relationship Event Spacing

Dating initiation to marriage. In Table 10, I examine how the number of months separating dating initiation and marriage is associated with wives' and husbands' reports of marital quality. Marital search theory suggests that dating for a longer time should be associated with better marital quality. Contrary to expectations, the number of months

between dating and marriage is not significantly associated with any marital quality measures for either wives or husbands in either the bivariate or the multivariate models. In other words, dating for a longer time does not predict better (or worse) marital quality.

	Wives						Husbands												
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict								
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE							
BIVARIATE																			
<i>Independent Variables</i>																			
Sequence																			
	Traditional (ref)																		
	Trad-plus-sex	0.62	0.24	0.57	0.20	0.50	0.22	0.62	0.28	0.51	+	0.19	0.59	0.24					
	Modern	0.36	**	0.13	0.50	*	0.17	0.31	**	0.13	0.44	*	0.18	0.47	*	0.16	0.33	**	0.12
	Unconventional	0.36	**	0.15	0.40	*	0.15	0.24	***	0.11	0.40	*	0.19	0.60		0.26	0.32	**	0.14
	Pseudo R ²	0.03		0.01		0.03		0.02		0.01		0.03							
	LR chi ² (3)	11.42	**	6.82	+	14.33	**	5.63		5.57		12.70	**						
MULTIVARIATE																			
<i>Model excluding high economic hardship and joint religiosity</i>																			
Sequence																			
	Traditional (ref)																		
	Trad-plus-sex	0.71	0.29	0.67	0.25	0.65	0.30	0.79	0.38	0.62	0.24	0.60	0.25						
	Modern	0.37	**	0.15	0.56	0.21	0.45	+	0.20	0.70	0.33	0.53	0.21	0.46	+	0.19			
	Unconventional	0.38	*	0.18	0.43	*	0.19	0.40	+	0.20	0.70	0.38	0.74	0.36	0.47	0.22			
	Pseudo R ²	0.06		0.06		0.07		0.13		0.09		0.07							
	LR chi ² (18)	28.29	+	26.20	+	30.48	*	46.88	***	40.84	**	30.66	*						

Continued

Notes: + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Although not presented, the first multivariate model includes all control variables except high economic hardship and joint religiosity.

Table 9. Odds Ratios (SE) from Bivariate and Multivariate Logistic Regression Models Predicting Marital Quality with Relationship Sequence among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 392).

Table 9: Continued.

	Wives						Husbands					
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
MULTIVARIATE												
<i>Model including high economic hardship and joint religiosity</i>												
Sequence												
Traditional (ref)												
Trad-plus-sex	0.96	0.42	1.38	0.57	0.93	0.45	1.21	0.62	1.04	0.44	0.72	0.32
Modern	0.55	0.24	1.45	0.62	0.79	0.38	1.26	0.66	1.10	0.49	0.59	0.27
Unconventional	0.64	0.33	1.31	0.66	0.81	0.45	1.35	0.82	1.79	0.98	0.63	0.33
Duration of marriage												
Years	0.91	0.08	1.00	0.09	1.09	0.10	1.12	0.11	1.01	0.09	1.05	0.10
Years sq	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.99	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
Wife's age at marriage (in years)	0.98	0.03	0.99	0.03	1.01	0.04	0.88 ***	0.03	0.91 **	0.03	0.95	0.03
At least one spouse previously married	1.08	0.43	0.65	0.25	1.25	0.55	1.13	0.53	0.96	0.40	1.15	0.45
At least one spouse previously cohabited	0.82	0.25	1.12	0.34	0.83	0.27	0.82	0.30	1.03	0.33	0.94	0.29
At least one spouse has child from previous union	1.03	0.41	1.50	0.59	1.28	0.54	0.91	0.42	1.08	0.45	0.80	0.31
Heterogamy scale	1.45 *	0.27	1.12	0.20	1.21	0.24	1.88 **	0.41	1.77 **	0.34	1.07	0.20
At least one spouse is not white	0.38 **	0.12	0.51 *	0.16	0.86	0.32	0.67	0.26	0.63	0.21	0.78	0.26

Continued

Table 9: Continued.

	Wives							Husbands							
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		OR	SE	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE			OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	
Full-time employment															
Only wife	0.59	0.34	0.93	0.51	0.80	0.46			0.40	0.24	0.40 +	0.22	0.68	0.42	
Only husband	0.84	0.39	1.39	0.61	1.60	0.74			2.09	1.08	1.66	0.77	0.51	0.25	
Both	0.93	0.49	0.81	0.39	0.74	0.38			1.10	0.62	0.61	0.31	0.78	0.44	
Neither (ref)															
Joint religiosity	1.05 +	0.03	1.14 ***	0.03	1.04	0.03			1.09 **	0.03	1.10 ***	0.03	1.03	0.02	
High economic hardship	0.61 +	0.18	0.64	0.18	0.26 ***	0.08			0.92	0.32	0.63	0.19	0.74	0.22	
At least one raised without married parents	0.87	0.24	1.68 +	0.46	0.68	0.20			0.96	0.31	1.49	0.42	0.60 +	0.16	
Age of youngest household child															
0-1 year	0.62	0.36	1.96	1.15	1.71	1.14			0.61	0.40	0.51	0.30	1.31	0.83	
2-5 years	1.03	0.48	1.64	0.73	0.95	0.47			0.64	0.33	0.50	0.23	0.80	0.38	
6-12 years	0.90	0.37	1.24	0.47	0.88	0.38			0.72	0.33	0.72	0.30	0.74	0.31	
13-17 years (ref)									1.00		1.00		1.00		
Pseudo R ²	0.08		0.12		0.13				0.15		0.13		0.08		
LR chi ² (20)	35.17 *		58.26 ***		53.16 ***				55.30 ***		58.18 ***		32.91 *		

158

	Wives						Husbands					
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
BIVARIATE												
<i>Independent Variables</i>												
Months between dating initiation and marriage	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.99	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
Pseudo R ²	0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00	
LR chi ² (1)	1.09		1.08		1.29		1.52		0.07		0.44	
MULTIVARIATE												
<i>Independent Variables</i>												
Months between dating initiation and marriage	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
<i>Control Variables</i>												
Duration of marriage												
Years	0.91	0.08	1.00	0.09	1.09	0.10	1.11	0.11	1.00	0.09	1.05	0.10
Years sq	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.99	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
Wife's age at marriage (in years)	0.99	0.03	0.99	0.03	1.02	0.04	0.88	*** 0.03	0.90	** 0.03	0.95	0.03

Continued

Notes: + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 10. Odds Ratios (SE) from Bivariate and Multivariate Logistic Regression Models Predicting Marital Quality with Spacing from Dating Initiation to Marriage among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 392).

Table 10: Continued.

	Wives								Husbands									
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict							
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE						
At least one spouse previously married	1.03	0.41	0.65	0.25	1.20	0.53	1.17	0.56	1.04	0.44	1.13	0.44						
At least one spouse previously cohabited	0.77	0.24	1.12	0.34	0.79	0.26	0.84	0.30	1.05	0.33	0.92	0.28						
At least one spouse has child from previous union	1.02	0.40	1.51	0.59	1.27	0.53	0.91	0.42	1.09	0.45	0.80	0.31						
Heterogamy scale	1.41	+	0.26	1.09	0.19	1.18	0.23	1.87	**	0.41	1.80	**	0.34	1.09	0.20			
At least one spouse is not white	0.42	**	0.13	0.53	*	0.17	0.90	0.33	0.67	0.26	0.60	0.20	0.77	0.26				
Full-time employment																		
Only wife	0.54		0.31	0.95	0.53	0.78	0.45	0.41	0.24	0.40	+	0.22	0.66	0.41				
Only husband	0.83		0.38	1.37	0.60	1.58	0.73	2.05	1.05	1.59		0.73	0.52	0.26				
Both	0.91		0.48	0.81	0.39	0.73	0.38	1.08	0.60	0.60		0.30	0.79	0.44				
Neither (ref)																		
Joint religiosity	1.06	**	0.02	1.13	***	0.03	1.04	+	0.03	1.08	**	0.03	1.10	***	0.03	1.04	+	0.02
High economic hardship	0.57	*	0.16	0.66		0.19	0.26	***	0.08	0.94	0.32	0.67	0.20	0.70	0.20			

Continued

Table 10: Continued.

	Wives						Husbands					
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
At least one raised without married parents	0.80	0.21	1.70 *	0.46	0.67	0.19	0.96	0.31	1.53	0.43	0.57 *	0.15
Age of youngest household child												
0-1 year	0.69	0.39	1.82	1.05	1.77	1.17	0.60	0.39	0.52	0.31	1.43	0.91
2-5 years	1.14	0.53	1.60	0.71	0.98	0.48	0.64	0.33	0.50	0.24	0.84	0.39
6-12 years	0.98	0.40	1.21	0.46	0.92	0.40	0.71	0.32	0.74	0.30	0.76	0.32
13-17 years (ref)												
Pseudo R ²	0.07		0.12		0.13		0.15		0.13		0.07	
LR chi ² (18)	32.29 *		57.74 ***		53.36 ***		55.10 ***		57.13 ***		31.62 *	

Dating initiation to sex. I now examine how the timing of couples' first sex may affect the odds of reporting high marital quality. Guided by ideas from marital search theory, I expect to find that couples who delay sex for longer periods report better marital quality than couples who have sex soon after the start of their relationship. I compare couples that *had premarital sex within the first month of dating* (reference) to those that *waited one or two months, three or more months*, and waited until marriage (i.e., *no premarital sex*). I present the results of my logistic regression models in Table 11. At the bivariate level, in all six models, I find that wives and husbands who abstained from premarital sex are approximately two to three times more likely to report high marital quality than couples who have sex within the first month of dating. Among premaritally sexually active couples, the tempo to first sex does not seem to matter much, with one exception: the odds of men reporting low conflict are 68 percent higher for those who delayed sex by three or more months compared to those who had sex within the first month of dating their wives.

When I include control variables, most of these differences are reduced to statistical insignificance. A weak effect for wives' commitment remains, where the odds of reporting high commitment are reduced approximately by half for wives in couples that had sex one or two months after relationship initiation. Research shows that a sense of commitment increases after sex has occurred for the first time in a relationship for both men and women, but especially among women (Haselton and Buss 2001). This association between commitment and sexual timing may also be bi-directional; namely, women who felt committed to their partner had sex early on in the relationship (like

Metts 2004 found in her study for men). However, the group of variables indicating time between dating initiation and first sex fails to reach statistical significance as a whole (chi-square (3) = 4.03, $p = 0.26$), making these conclusions tentative at best.

I rotate the reference category of the independent variable once for every sequence group to see whether other comparisons would result in significant differences, but I find no new results. In exploratory analyses (not presented), I discover that including the couples' frequency of joint religious activity largely explains the insignificance of the spacing to first sex variable in the multivariate model; I address the significance of the couple's joint religiosity for marital quality in greater detail at the end of the chapter. In sum, I conclude that there are no differences in marital quality for couples based on whether they had premarital sex or how long they delayed their first premarital sexual event, net of controls.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Regression analyses restricted to couples that engaged in premarital sex (not presented) show nearly identical results.

	Wives						Husbands											
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict							
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE						
BIVARIATE																		
<i>Independent Variables</i>																		
Spacing to First Sex																		
Less than 1 month (ref)																		
1-2 months after dating initiation	1.07	0.36	0.74	0.23	1.56	0.54	1.08	0.40	0.82	0.26	1.31	0.43						
3+ months after dating initiation	0.98	0.29	1.11	0.32	1.35	0.41	1.27	0.43	1.36	0.41	1.68	0.51						
No premarital sex	2.40	*	0.89	1.92	+	0.66	3.61	**	1.46	2.30	*	0.96	2.09	*	0.74	3.24	**	1.22
Pseudo R ²	0.02	*	0.02	+	0.03	**	0.01	0.02	+	0.03	**							
LR chi ² (3)	7.67		7.40		11.90		4.73	7.52		11.41								
MULTIVARIATE																		
<i>Independent Variables</i>																		
Spacing to First Sex																		
Less than 1 month (ref)																		
1-2 months after dating initiation	0.83	0.30	0.53	+	0.18	1.09	0.42	0.81	0.34	0.67	0.24	1.06	0.37					
3+ months after dating initiation	0.83	0.28	0.77	0.26	0.95	0.34	0.93	0.38	1.22	0.43	1.30	0.44						
No premarital sex	1.16	0.54	0.52	0.23	1.16	0.59	0.73	0.40	0.87	0.40	1.76	0.84						

Continued

Notes: + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 11. Odds Ratios (SE) from Bivariate and Multivariate Logistic Regression Models Predicting Marital Quality with Spacing from Dating Initiation to First Sex among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 392).

Table 11: Continued.

	Wives						Husbands						
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	
<i>Control Variables</i>													
Duration of marriage													
Years	0.91	0.08	1.01	0.09	1.10	0.10	1.12	0.11	1.00	0.09	1.05	0.10	
Years sq	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.99	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	
Wife's age at marriage (in years)	0.98	0.03	0.99	0.03	1.01	0.04	0.88 ***	0.03	0.91 **	0.03	0.95	0.03	
At least one spouse previously married	1.08	0.42	0.67	0.26	1.26	0.55	1.13	0.53	0.98	0.41	1.15	0.45	
At least one spouse previously cohabited	0.79	0.24	1.07	0.33	0.83	0.27	0.80	0.29	0.97	0.31	0.95	0.29	
At least one spouse has child from previous union	0.99	0.39	1.49	0.59	1.25	0.53	0.93	0.43	1.19	0.49	0.83	0.32	
Heterogamy scale	1.40 +	0.25	1.14	0.20	1.18	0.24	1.89 **	0.42	1.85 ***	0.36	1.08	0.20	
At least one spouse is not white	0.42 **	0.13	0.51 *	0.17	0.88	0.33	0.67	0.26	0.59	0.20	0.77	0.26	

165

Continued

Table 11: Continued.

	Wives								Husbands							
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		OR	SE	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict			
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE			OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE		
Full-time employment																
Only wife	0.56	0.32	1.02	0.57	0.78	0.45			0.41	0.25	0.42	0.24	0.65	0.40		
Only husband	0.83	0.38	1.46	0.64	1.58	0.72			2.08	1.07	1.62	0.76	0.50	0.25		
Both	0.93	0.49	0.87	0.42	0.73	0.38			1.11	0.62	0.63	0.32	0.78	0.44		
Neither (ref)																
Joint religiosity	1.05	* 0.03	1.15	*** 0.03	1.04	0.03			1.09	** 0.03	1.10	*** 0.03	1.02	0.03		
High economic hardship	0.58	* 0.16	0.59	+ 0.17	0.26	*** 0.08			0.91	0.32	0.64	0.20	0.75	0.22		
At least one raised without married parents	0.80	0.21	1.65	+ 0.45	0.67	0.19			0.96	0.31	1.51	0.42	0.58	* 0.16		
Age of youngest household child																
0-1 year	0.65	0.37	1.99	1.18	1.73	1.15			0.61	0.40	0.52	0.31	1.36	0.87		
2-5 years	1.13	0.52	1.68	0.75	0.97	0.48			0.64	0.33	0.50	0.23	0.83	0.39		
6-12 years	0.94	0.38	1.20	0.46	0.89	0.38			0.73	0.33	0.75	0.31	0.76	0.32		
13-17 years (ref)																
Pseudo R ²	0.08		0.13		0.13				0.15		0.13		0.08			
LR chi ² (20)	33.03	*	61.54	***	53.06	***			55.51	***	59.01	***	33.21	*		

Dating initiation to premarital cohabitation. I now turn my attention to how the timing from dating initiation to cohabitation might affect marital quality. Marital search theory proposes that couples who begin cohabiting soon after dating do not undertake a prolonged partner search and are unlikely to have plans for marriage when they move in together. The inertia hypothesis suggests that these couples, who may be poorly matched, may slide into marriage nonetheless. Thus, I expect to find a positive association between the odds of reporting high marital quality and the number of months that couples delay cohabitation after the start of dating.

Table 12 presents the odds ratios of bivariate and multivariate logistic regression models predicting how the tempo to premarital cohabitation is associated with marital quality among couples who cohabited. The number of months between dating and cohabitation does not reach significance in any of the six bivariate models nor in any of the six multivariate models. Thus, it appears that, among those who eventually cohabit, waiting to do so does not make for a better (or worse) marriage later on.

In additional multivariate logistic regression analyses (not presented), I expand the sample to include couples who married without cohabiting, and I operationalize the independent variable categorically: the couple *dated 0 to 5 months before entering premarital cohabitation*, *dated 6 to 11 months before cohabiting*, *dated 12 or more months before cohabiting*, and *did not cohabit before marrying*. I rotate the omitted reference group of the independent variable four times to explore each possible contrast, and find that the various categories of the spacing independent variable never reach

significance as a group.⁵⁷ Thus, I conclude that neither the occurrence of premarital cohabitation nor the amount of time spent dating before cohabiting is associated with wives' and husbands' reports of marital quality.

⁵⁷ I find a weak ($p = 0.10$) association for the odds of women reporting low conflict when comparing women who dated 6 to 11 months before cohabiting to those who dated 12 or more months before cohabiting, but this group of variables was not significant as a whole (chi-square (3) = 3.62, $p = 0.31$).

	Wives						Husbands					
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
BIVARIATE												
<i>Independent Variables</i>												
Months between dating initiation and cohabitation	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01
Pseudo R ²	0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00	
LR chi ² (1)	0.20		0.00		0.00		0.26		0.05		0.00	
MULTIVARIATE												
<i>Independent Variables</i>												
Months between dating initiation and cohabitation	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01
<i>Control Variables</i>												
Duration of marriage												
Years	0.89	0.11	0.93	0.11	1.04	0.14	1.10	0.15	0.96	0.12	1.10	0.14
Years sq	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	0.99	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01
Wife's age at marriage (in years)	0.93	0.04	0.97	0.04	1.02	0.05	0.88	* 0.05	0.93	0.04	0.97	0.04

Continued

Notes: + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 12. Odds Ratios (SE) from Bivariate and Multivariate Logistic Regression Models Predicting Marital Quality with Spacing from Dating Initiation to Premarital Cohabitation among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who Experienced Premarital Cohabitation (n = 203).

Table 12: Continued.

		Wives						Husbands					
		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict	
		OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
	At least one spouse previously married	1.46	0.69	1.14	0.54	1.16	0.60	1.04	0.58	1.30	0.66	1.55	0.73
	At least one spouse previously cohabited	0.94	0.36	1.07	0.41	1.60	0.67	0.89	0.42	0.79	0.32	1.37	0.52
	At least one spouse has child from previous union	0.99	0.47	1.38	0.64	1.75	0.90	0.86	0.50	1.11	0.56	1.03	0.46
	Heterogamy scale	1.34	0.33	1.16	0.28	1.23	0.34	1.85 *	0.56	1.63 +	0.44	1.02	0.25
170	At least one spouse is not white	0.36 *	0.17	0.48	0.22	0.70	0.37	0.32 *	0.18	0.39 +	0.20	1.09	0.51
	Full-time employment												
	Only wife	0.27 +	0.20	0.39	0.28	0.24 +	0.19	0.28	0.22	0.33	0.23	0.49	0.39
	Only husband	0.51	0.31	0.67	0.41	0.69	0.45	1.58	1.10	1.67	1.02	0.36	0.24
	Both	1.06	0.77	0.43	0.29	0.40	0.30	1.51	1.23	0.69	0.47	0.70	0.52
	Neither (ref)												
	Joint religiosity	1.02	0.03	1.08 *	0.04	1.02	0.04	1.10 *	0.05	1.06	0.04	0.99	0.03
	High economic hardship	0.74	0.27	0.44 *	0.16	0.19 ***	0.08	0.84	0.38	0.72	0.29	0.78	0.28

Continued

Table 12: Continued.

	Wives						Husbands					
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
At least one raised without married parents	0.68	0.25	1.32	0.47	0.66	0.26	1.26	0.56	1.80	0.68	0.74	0.26
Age of youngest household child												
0-1 year	0.37	0.28	1.59	1.25	2.28	2.00	0.50	0.47	0.38	0.31	3.01	2.62
2-5 years	1.20	0.69	1.66	0.94	1.49	0.93	0.50	0.34	0.40	0.24	1.49	0.87
6-12 years	1.33	0.66	1.86	0.90	1.48	0.81	0.80	0.46	0.88	0.47	0.89	0.46
13-17 years (ref)												
Pseudo R ²	0.09		0.08		0.15		0.17		0.11		0.06	
LR chi ² (18)	21.62		20.71		36.30	**	36.50	**	27.39	+	14.08	

171

Premarital cohabitation to marriage. Although the pace of transitioning to cohabitation is not related to marital quality, the duration of cohabitation may be. Marital search theory purports that a longer duration of premarital cohabitation will be associated with better marital quality: couples will have more time to learn how to live together before marrying, thereby ensuring a better marital match. I present the effects of cohabitation duration on marital quality in Table 13. Results show that the number of months separating premarital cohabitation and marriage is not significantly associated with wives' or husbands' marital satisfaction, commitment, or frequency of disagreements in any bivariate or multivariate model.^{58, 59}

Then again, a very long duration of cohabitation may entrench feelings of independence and decrease the extent to which marriage is valued, potentially resulting in lower marital quality for long-term cohabiters. In additional analyses (not presented), I include couples that did not cohabit and use dummy variables for the following durations of premarital cohabitation: *0 to 5 months, 6 to 11 months, 12 to 23 months, 24 or more*

⁵⁸ In additional analyses using the sample of cohabiting couples (not presented), I create an interaction variable between the number of months spent dating prior to cohabitation and the number of months spent cohabiting prior to marriage to explore whether cohabitation duration matters differently for those who transitioned quickly from dating to cohabitation versus those who transitioned more slowly from dating to cohabitation. A positive value for the effect of the interaction term would suggest that the longer the time spent dating before cohabiting, the greater the effect cohabitation duration would have on marital quality; similarly, the longer the duration of cohabitation, the greater the effect of delaying cohabitation on marital quality. A negative value for the effect of the interaction term would suggest the opposite. Essentially, the interaction term measures whether the effect of cohabitation duration varies by the length of time spent dating prior to cohabiting (and vice versa). In none of the six multivariate models is the interaction statistically significant, demonstrating that the effects of both spacing variables do not vary depending on the other.

⁵⁹ In another multivariate model (not presented), I examine whether the duration of cohabitation has the same effect on marital quality for modern couples as for unconventional couples by including an interaction term between modern (0/1) and the duration of cohabitation. The two main effects and the interaction term were not significant in any model. The (lack of) association between premarital cohabitation duration and marital quality operates similarly regardless of sequence type (i.e., with or without a shared premarital birth).

months, and *not at all*. In these models, duration of cohabitation, as a group, is never significantly associated with reports of marital quality.⁶⁰ Thus, I conclude that people are equally likely to report high marital satisfaction, high commitment, or low conflict regardless of whether or how long they cohabited with their spouse before marriage.⁶¹

⁶⁰ I find weak indications of difference in the likelihood of men reporting high satisfaction comparing those who cohabited for 0 to 5 months to those who cohabited for 24 months or longer, but as a whole, the group of dummy variables indicating the presence/length of cohabitation is not significant (chi-square (4) = 3.29, $p = 0.51$). Similarly, there are weak indications of difference in the likelihood of men reporting high commitment when comparing those who cohabited 0 to 5 months to men who cohabited 6 to 11 months and 24 or more months, but, again, the independent variable does not reach significance as a whole (chi-square (4) = 5.28, $p = 0.26$). Finally, comparing those who did not cohabit with their spouse to those who cohabited 12 to 23 months reveals associations with husbands' reports of conflict and wives' reports of satisfaction, but in neither case does the group of variables reach significance as a whole (husbands: chi-square (4) = 4.12, $p = 0.39$; wives: chi-square (4) = 3.85, $p = 0.43$).

⁶¹ In supplemental analyses (not presented), I measure the association between all six measures of marital quality with the duration of cohabitation coded as the number of months (plus one, to avoid overlap for those who cohabited for less than 1 month) for cohabitators and 0 for non-cohabitators (like Tach and Halpern 2009). The associations between this continuous variable and all six measures of marital quality are not significant.

	Wives						Husbands					
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
BIVARIATE												
<i>Independent Variables</i>												
Months between cohabitation and marriage	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01
Pseudo R ²	0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00	
LR chi ² (1)	0.70		0.51		0.80		0.67		0.02		0.19	
MULTIVARIATE												
<i>Independent Variables</i>												
Months between cohabitation and marriage	1.00	0.01	0.99	0.01	0.99	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01
<i>Control Variables</i>												
Duration of marriage												
Years	0.88	0.11	0.92	0.11	1.02	0.14	1.11	0.15	0.97	0.12	1.11	0.14
Years sq	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	0.99	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01
Wife's age at marriage (in years)	0.94	0.04	0.98	0.05	1.03	0.05	0.87 *	0.05	0.93	0.05	0.96	0.04

Continued

Notes: + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 13. Odds Ratios (SE) from Bivariate and Multivariate Logistic Regression Models Predicting Marital Quality with Spacing from Initiation of Premarital Cohabitation to Marriage among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who Experienced Premarital Cohabitation (n = 203).

Table 13: Continued.

175

	Wives							Husbands						
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict			
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE		
At least one spouse previously married	1.39	0.67	1.05	0.50	1.03	0.54	1.08	0.62	1.33	0.69	1.59	0.76		
At least one spouse previously cohabited	0.91	0.35	1.01	0.39	1.48	0.63	0.92	0.44	0.81	0.34	1.40	0.54		
At least one spouse has child from previous union	1.01	0.48	1.44	0.67	1.81	0.92	0.85	0.50	1.09	0.55	1.01	0.46		
Heterogamy scale	1.32	0.33	1.14	0.28	1.19	0.33	1.87 *	0.57	1.63 +	0.44	1.03	0.25		
At least one spouse is not white	0.38 *	0.18	0.50	0.24	0.76	0.40	0.31 *	0.18	0.38 +	0.19	1.06	0.51		
Full-time employment														
Only wife	0.26 +	0.19	0.36	0.26	0.23 +	0.18	0.29	0.22	0.35	0.24	0.53	0.41		
Only husband	0.49	0.30	0.64	0.40	0.64	0.43	1.61	1.12	1.71	1.05	0.38	0.25		
Both	1.03	0.75	0.41	0.29	0.37	0.29	1.53	1.25	0.70	0.48	0.72	0.54		
Neither (ref)														
Joint religiosity	1.02	0.03	1.08 *	0.04	1.02	0.04	1.09 *	0.05	1.06	0.04	0.99	0.03		
High economic hardship	0.74	0.27	0.43 *	0.16	0.18 ***	0.08	0.84	0.37	0.71	0.28	0.77	0.28		
At least one raised without married parents	0.69	0.25	1.37	0.49	0.69	0.27	1.24	0.55	1.76	0.67	0.72	0.26		

Continued

Table 13: Continued.

	Wives						Husbands					
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Age of youngest household child												
0-1 year	0.37	0.28	1.57	1.23	2.20	1.92	0.51	0.47	0.38	0.31	3.03	2.64
2-5 years	1.19	0.69	1.65	0.94	1.49	0.93	0.51	0.34	0.41	0.25	1.50	0.88
6-12 years	1.36	0.68	1.95	0.96	1.55	0.86	0.79	0.45	0.87	0.47	0.87	0.45
13-17 years (ref)												
Pseudo R ²	0.09		0.08		0.15		0.17		0.11		0.06	
LR chi ² (18)	21.84		21.51		37.46 **		36.55 **		27.41 +		14.23	

Marriage to first birth. Finally, I consider how reports of high marital quality may be related to the sixth aspect of relationship trajectories measured in this study: the timing of childbearing. I expect to find that couples will be more likely to report high marital quality the longer they postpone the birth of their first shared child after marriage. The odds of reporting high marital satisfaction, high commitment, and low conflict for wives and husbands in couples whose first shared birth was postmarital are presented in Table 14. I analyze how each additional month a birth is delayed after marriage relates to the odds of reporting high marital quality. In bivariate analyses, only one association attains weak statistical significance: for every month that a couple waits to have their first shared child, the odds of a husband reporting low conflict increase by one percent. When control variables are included, this bivariate association disappears. However, two new significant and positive relationships arise for men in multivariate analyses: net of controls, every month a couple delays childbearing after marriage is associated with a two percent increase in the odds of men reporting high satisfaction and high commitment. These are the only two multivariate models in which an aspect of a couple's relationship trajectory is significantly associated with reports of marital quality. However, when I operationalize the independent variable categorically and conduct analyses on the full sample—including those whose first shared birth was premarital and those with no shared children—these results do not hold. I compare those whose first child was *born or conceived premaritally*, was *born 6 to 24 months after marriage*, *born 25 or more months after marriage*, and those with *no shared biological children*, and I rotate categories of the independent variable four times to make all possible comparisons (not presented).⁶²

⁶² A premarital conception is defined as a birth taking place within the first five months of marriage.

No significant differences appear in the odds of reporting high marital satisfaction among husbands using this specification of the independent variable. Nor is the group of dummy variables, as a whole, significantly related to men's reports of commitment (chi-square (3) = 5.65, $p = 0.13$).⁶³ Because significant associations with men's satisfaction and men's commitment do not appear in these models, I cannot conclude with certainty that there are relationships between childbearing timing and men's reports of marital satisfaction and commitment. Using the nominal operationalization of the independent variable confirms the absence of significant relationships for childbearing timing and men's conflict and all three aspects of women's marital quality.⁶⁴

⁶³ I find weakly significant differences in the likelihood of men reporting high commitment when comparing those whose first birth was premarital/premaritally conceived to those whose first birth took place 6 to 24 months after marriage and when comparing those with no baby and those whose first baby was born 6 to 24 or 25 or more months after marriage—but these differences are not significant as a whole.

⁶⁴ I find some evidence that wives and husbands with no shared children are significantly more likely to report low conflict than some or all of the three other groups, but this group of variables as a whole does not attain statistical significance at conventional levels (wives: chi-square (3), $p = 0.31$; husbands: chi-square (3) = 6.07, $p = 0.11$).

	Wives						Husbands					
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
BIVARIATE												
<i>Independent Variables</i>												
Months between marriage and baby	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.01	0.01	1.01	0.01	1.01	0.01	1.01	+ 0.01
Pseudo R ²	0.00		0.00		0.01		0.01		0.01		0.01	
LR chi ² (1)	0.09		0.00		1.94		1.34		2.39		3.42 +	
MULTIVARIATE												
<i>Independent Variables</i>												
Months between marriage and baby	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.02	+ 0.01	1.02	* 0.01	1.01	0.01
<i>Control Variables</i>												
Duration of marriage												
Years	1.00	0.12	1.08	0.14	1.11	0.15	1.07	0.15	0.97	0.12	1.02	0.14
Years sq	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.99	0.01	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.01
Wife's age at marriage (in years)	1.02	0.04	1.00	0.04	1.03	0.05	0.87	** 0.04	0.88	** 0.04	0.94	0.04

Continued

Notes: + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 14. Odds Ratios (SE) from Bivariate and Multivariate Logistic Regression Models Predicting Marital Quality with Spacing from Marriage to First Shared Birth among Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS who had a First Shared Birth After Marriage (n = 291).

Table 14: Continued.

	Wives								Husbands								
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict						
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE					
At least one spouse previously married	0.58	0.31	0.45	0.23	0.79	0.48	1.29	0.86	0.90	0.50	0.80	0.42					
At least one spouse previously cohabited	1.02	0.40	1.54	0.60	0.73	0.30	0.63	0.27	1.18	0.45	1.12	0.43					
At least one spouse has child from previous union	1.52	0.83	1.40	0.74	1.54	0.90	0.92	0.60	1.00	0.54	0.68	0.36					
Heterogamy scale	1.51	+	0.34	1.06	0.23	1.13	0.27	2.14	**	0.60	1.91	**	0.45	1.06	0.24		
At least one spouse is not white	0.37	**	0.15	0.44	*	0.17	1.04	0.48	0.54	0.26	0.65	0.27	0.84	0.36			
Full-time employment																	
Only wife	0.91	0.67	3.45	+	2.58	1.16	0.83	0.75	0.56	0.31	+	0.22	1.04	0.79			
Only husband	1.04	0.57	1.85		0.93	2.62	+	1.39	3.00	+	1.79	1.17	0.65	0.80	0.44		
Both	0.77	0.49	1.06		0.61	0.83		0.50	1.15	0.75	0.44	0.27	1.29	0.88			
Neither (ref)																	
Joint religiosity	1.07	*	0.03	1.13	***	0.03	1.06	*	0.03	1.08	*	0.04	1.10	***	0.03	1.02	0.03
High economic hardship	0.34	**	0.12	0.56		0.20	0.21	***	0.08	0.91	0.40	0.94	0.35	0.55	+	0.20	

Continued

Table 14: Continued.

	Wives						Husbands					
	High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict		High Satisfaction		High Commitment		Low Conflict	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
At least one raised without married parents	0.69	0.22	1.60	0.53	0.71	0.25	0.80	0.32	1.70	0.58	0.46	* 0.15
Age of youngest household child												
0-1 year	0.43	0.35	1.76	1.46	1.07	0.95	0.24	0.23	0.80	0.64	0.52	0.48
2-5 years	0.77	0.56	1.55	1.09	1.02	0.78	0.34	0.30	0.75	0.52	0.41	0.32
6-12 years	0.69	0.43	0.97	0.56	0.86	0.55	0.34	0.24	1.12	0.66	0.36	0.25
13-17 years (ref)												
Pseudo R ²	0.10		0.15		0.15		0.15		0.16		0.09	
LR chi ² (18)	32.65	*	49.50	***	43.05	***	36.97	**	52.05	***	27.71	+

181

Conclusions

In sum, there is little—if any—association between couples' relationship trajectories and their reports of marital satisfaction, commitment, and conflict. In bivariate analyses, I found indications of worse marital quality for modern and unconventional couples when compared to traditional ones. Bivariately, I also found that couples who abstained from sex until marriage were more likely to report high marital quality than couples who had sex within the first month of dating. However, when control variables were added to the models, these associations became insignificant.

Only one aspect of a couple's relationship trajectory was significant when control variables were added to the model: when spacing between marriage and the child's first baby was operationalized at the interval level among couples whose first birth was postmarital, I found that a longer spacing interval was associated with greater odds of men reporting high marital satisfaction and commitment. However, these effects did not hold up when spacing was operationalized categorically. Thus, I conclude that, net of all controls, relationship event sequencing and spacing are not predictive of marital quality among my sample of low-income married couples.

This leads me to my fourth and final research aim: to explore which other variables are related to low-income wives' and husbands' marital quality.

Predicting Marital Quality with Control Variables

In multivariate models, I predict marital quality using a variety of factors associated with marital quality in other research. I now highlight the findings of these control variables presented in Tables 9 to 14. Contrary to expectations, the following

variables are not significantly related to marital quality in any model: marital duration, previous marriage, previous cohabitation, having children from previous unions, and age of the youngest household child. Many of the MARS couples have already reached a relatively long duration of marriage; couples that were least satisfied, least committed, and arguing most frequently likely have already ended their unions, excluding them from the sampling frame. This may account for the insignificance of marital duration in the MARS. Moreover, in cross-sectional surveys, the U-shaped curve often found to describe marital satisfaction is typically attributed to the arrival and departure of children from the parental home (Glenn 1990)—but all couples had to have children under age 18 in the household to qualify for inclusion in the MARS sample. This may also explain why the age of the youngest child variable did not reach statistical significance. My study is not the only one to find similarity in marital quality for first and second marriages (Brown 2003; Hobart 1991; MacDonald and DeMaris 1995; Skinner et al. 2002); it is possible that remarried couples have recalibrated expectations for marriage or made a better match. The absence of significant effects for previous cohabitation might suggest that marital quality is related to the experience of former sexual unions—and not necessarily cohabital ones, *per se* (Teachman 2003b). Finally, I find no difference in marital quality when comparing couples in which at least one spouse has a child from a previous union to those couples entering the union without children. This may be explained by the fact that almost all MARS couples had shared biological children, and previous research shows that marital quality for couples with both stepchildren and biological children does not differ from marital quality for couples with biological

children only; instead, worse marital quality is experienced among couples that have stepchildren exclusively (MacDonald and DeMaris 1995).

I now turn to the variables attaining statistical significance in the multivariate models predicting wives' and husbands' marital satisfaction, commitment, and conflict. Across all models, the frequency of couples' joint religious activity consistently appears as a significant predictor of marital quality for both spouses. Couples' shared religious activity has a positive and significant association with the likelihood of reporting high satisfaction (mean OR = 1.06 for wives and 1.09 for husbands) and high commitment (mean OR = 1.12 for wives and 1.10 for husbands). Although appearing less often, joint religious participation is also positively associated with the likelihood of reporting low conflict for both wives and husbands.

The couples in the MARS sample reporting severe destitution experience poorer marital quality than couples not experiencing that. Wives with severe economic hardship are less satisfied with their marriages (mean OR = 0.53), less committed to their spouses (mean OR = 0.49), and argue more frequently with their husbands (mean OR = 0.23) than wives in relatively more advantaged households. I find that severe economic hardship is less consistently related to husbands' reports of marital quality in this sample: it reaches significance in only one model, where it acts as expected, reducing men's odds of reporting low conflict.

Race is significantly associated with marital quality, especially for wives. For couples in which one or both partners is a racial/ethnic minority, wives are, on average, 61 percent less likely to report high marital satisfaction and 50 percent less likely to

report high commitment than wives in couples with two white spouses. Husbands in racial/ethnic minority couples also exhibit lower odds of reporting high marital satisfaction (mean OR = 0.32) and high commitment (mean OR = 0.39) than husbands in white couples.

Contrary to expectations, spousal heterogamy in age, race, and/or education is positively associated with reports of high satisfaction by wives (mean OR = 1.44) and husbands (mean OR = 1.92) and with reports of high commitment by husbands (mean OR = 1.77). These findings may result from selection: if heterogamy poses a challenge to marital quality, many heterogamous couples may have already ended their unions, leaving heterogamous couples that are particularly satisfied or committed to remain married.

Older age at marriage is associated with lower marital satisfaction and commitment for husbands: every additional year of wife's age at marriage decreases the odds of men reporting high satisfaction and high commitment by 12 percent and 10 percent, respectively. (Remember that dyad members' ages at marriage are highly correlated, so men's age at marriage is also negatively associated with their marital satisfaction and commitment.) This may also result from sample selection: couples who married at young ages—and who have remained married—may indicate very satisfied and very committed men.

I also find significant associations between marital quality and couples' employment status. I expected that conforming to gender-related expectations—especially the instrumental role for males—would be positively linked to both spouses'

marital quality. In my analyses, my omitted reference category was couples where neither spouse was employed full-time. I find, as expected, that husbands are much less likely to report high commitment (mean OR = 0.37) and wives are much less likely to report high satisfaction (mean OR = 0.27) and low conflict (mean OR = 0.24) when the wife is the only one working full-time. I also find that marital quality is much higher for couples in which only the husband works full-time: wives are more likely to report low levels of conflict (OR = 2.62) and husbands are more likely to report high marital satisfaction (OR = 3.00) than their counterparts in couples where neither spouse is employed full-time.⁶⁵

The final variable reaching significance in models predicting marital quality among low-income couples is the respondents' parents' marital status during childhood. I find that experiencing a non-intact family during childhood negatively affects husbands' marital quality during adulthood. When the husband, wife, or both were raised without married parents, men are less likely to report low conflict (mean OR = 0.55) than when both spouses were raised with married parents. On the other hand, experiencing a non-intact family increases the odds of women reporting high commitment by 68 percent, on average. In other words, I find that, according to the husband, couples growing up without two married parents argue more frequently, but the wives report more commitment than wives in couples where both spouses grew up with two married parents.

⁶⁵ In Table 14, I find that the odds of predicting high commitment are significantly greater for wives in couples where only she works full-time compared to couples where neither spouse is employed full-time. This finding is not conclusive for two reasons: first, in this model, it is marginally significant at $p = 0.10$; second, this variable is not significant when I operationalize the spacing variable categorically and include all couples in the sample.

Conclusions

I have now addressed all four aims of my research. Although I found no strong indication that couples' relationship trajectories affect their marital quality, my analyses revealed that the frequency of joint religious activity, employment status, race, economic hardship, and childhood experience of parents' marital breakdown do have significant effects on wives' and husbands' marital quality. I conclude the dissertation with Chapter 5, where I discuss the contributions and policy implications of the findings for marriage promotion policies and programs.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

The context for this study of romantic relationship trajectories is the U.S. government's active promotion of healthy marriage, particularly among low-income persons. Effective interventions to reduce marital breakdown and increase the likelihood of healthy marriage among poor couples should be based on accurate understanding of the nature of marital quality among the target population. Yet, not much is known about marital quality and its predictors among poor couples. Despite profound variation in the ways couples form unions (Nock 2003b; Pinosof 2002; Surra et al., 2006), little is known about the sequencing and timing of events that unfold to create relationship trajectories, and how these various relationship trajectories may impact marital quality. To address this knowledge gap, my dissertation has focused on four research objectives. Analyses are based on 399 married pairs of wives and husbands from the MARS, a survey that was specifically designed to examine relationship quality among low-income married couples in the United States.

To address my first research aim, I described relationship trajectories for low-income married couples. Few studies use a relationship-development perspective and, instead, rely on an individual-level and/or lifetime perspective. For instance, studies tend to investigate the age at which a person first marries in his or her lifetime rather than considering how long a couple dates before they marry. My study offers a look at relationship trajectories using a relationship-development (i.e., couple-level) perspective.

The very few studies that examine relationship trajectories with this perspective tend to rely on samples of young people and nonmarital partnerships—in other words, people who may follow trajectories quite distinct from those that culminate in marriage. Using the MARS sample of married couples, my research provides up-to-date information on the rarely-studied topic of romantic relationship trajectories among couples that did marry. If trajectories prove to be associated with subsequent marital quality, healthy marriage program and policy designers could develop models of positive relationship trajectories to give individuals and couples the knowledge necessary to form strong unions.

I described relationship trajectories by exploring the sequencing and spacing patterns of four relationship events that follow dating initiation: sex, cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing. I found that relationship event sequences could be differentiated into four mutually exclusive groups. The first group I termed “traditional” couples, and these couples neither cohabited nor engaged in sex prior to marriage. “Traditional-plus-sex” couples did engage in premarital sex, but did not cohabit before they married. The third group was comprised of “modern” couples who engaged in premarital sex and cohabited prior to getting married. The fourth group I termed “unconventional”, as, in addition to engaging in premarital sex and premarital cohabitation, they also experienced premarital joint parenthood. The 399 low-income couples in the MARS are distributed across all four relationship event sequence groups: 21.80 percent followed a traditional sequence of relationship events, 25.81 percent participated in a traditional-plus-sex trajectory, 37.34 percent followed a modern

trajectory, and 15.04 percent engaged in an unconventional sequence of relationship events. Clearly, the pathways to marriage among low income couples are quite diverse, and this may have important implications for the quality of their unions. If I ascertain that marital quality varies by relationship sequence, my research can provide the government with sought-after information regarding which of the sequence trajectories should be promoted as being more likely to lead to a healthy marriage.

Relationship trajectories may be characterized not only by the order in which relationship events occur but also by the length of time between pairs of relationship events. It is likely that this, too, has important consequences for marital quality. Therefore, I also considered the length of time (or spacing) that occurred between: (1) dating initiation and marriage; (2) dating initiation and sex; (3) dating initiation and cohabitation; (4) cohabitation and marriage; and (5) marriage and first postmarital shared birth.

My sample of low-income couples dated for an average of just under 2.5 years before marrying, which is not far from the average courtship length of 24 months found in other studies (Karney et al. 2003; Whyte 1990). As one would predict, however, the length of courtship varied widely by relationship sequence. Traditional couples proceeded more quickly to marriage than any of the other sequence groups, and half married within 15 months of the start of the dating relationship. Traditional couples may be motivated to marry quickly to start a sexually intimate union. Akin to the desire to become sexually active, desires to co-reside and to bear children may spur couples to marry. This explains why traditional-plus-sex and modern couples filled the middle

positions in terms of courtship length: half of traditional-plus-sex couples were married within 23 months of dating, and half of modern couples were married by 21 months. Understandably, unconventional couples delayed marriage the longest, probably because they already enjoyed co-residence and joint parenthood. It took 38 months before half of unconventional couples married. These differences by relationship sequence group were statistically significant in an event history multivariate model, showing that engaging in premarital sex, cohabitation, and childbearing additively delays marriage, net of all controls.

To the best of my knowledge, this study uses the most current data on sexual timetables for couples that later marry. In the MARS, 78.20 percent of couples had premarital sex, which corresponds with findings from the 2002 NSFG (Chandra et al., 2005). Of the MARS couples that had premarital sex, 38.78 percent first had sex within the same month they started dating, and 25.64 percent waited one or two months. The remaining 35.58 percent of couples waited three or more months before initiating sex. The pace of entry into sexual relationships in this sample falls within the boundaries of expected timelines garnered from other studies (Cohen and Shotland 1996; Sassler and Kamp Dush 2008). Among couples that had premarital sex, I found statistically significant differences in the tempo to first sex by relationship sequence group. Unconventional couples transition most quickly to first coitus, followed by modern couples, and then traditional-plus-sex couples, net of all controls.

About half of couples in the sample cohabited, paralleling results in other studies (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass 2007). On average, couples dated for

just less than one year before moving in together: half of cohabitators moved in together within six months of dating, approximately 20 percent dated between six months and a year, and the remainder dated for more than one year prior to cohabiting, proportions similar to the small sample in Sassler's (2004) qualitative study. The risk of cohabiting after dating initiation did not differ between modern and unconventional couples, but the duration of cohabitation did. The duration of premarital cohabitation for couples that bore children together before marriage was significantly longer than for couples without a shared premarital birth, echoing findings from the NLSY 79 (Tach and Halpern-Meehin 2009). In the MARS, half of modern couples married within 11 months of cohabiting, whereas it took 28 months of cohabitation for the same proportion of unconventional couples to marry. These differences were statistically significant in a multivariate model, so I conclude that, net of controls, a shared premarital birth reduces the hazard of marriage among cohabiting couples. This is an important finding because, once again, it shows that premarital childbearing hinders couples' transitions to marriage. For all cohabitators in the MARS sample, the mean duration of premarital cohabitation with their spouse was 22.76 months, which is longer than the median of about 12 months in other studies (DeMaris 1984; Manning 1995; Teachman and Polonko 1990; Thomson and Colella 1992). Even MARS couples' median cohabitation duration (14 months) is lengthier, reflecting the longer cohabital durations for poor versus non-poor cohabitators (Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Lichter, et al., 2003; Lichter, et al., 2006). This finding is important because it suggests that, for financial reasons, cohabiting couples may be

unwilling or unable to marry. Government policy to promote higher rates of marriage, thus, must also focus on economic assistance to poor couples.

The trajectory to joint parenthood also varies among the couples sampled in the MARS. Eleven percent of couples reported no joint biological children. Among those who did, however, 74.19 percent of couples had a first shared birth after marriage, and 15.04 percent had a first shared birth before marriage. These numbers correspond to proportions reported in other data (Bachu 1999; Tach and Halpern 2009). As expected, the average first postmarital birth interval for the MARS sample is slightly shorter than average, at 29.01 months, or about 2.5 years. This birth interval does not differ among traditional, traditional-plus-sex, and modern couples. This is important because it suggests that the spacing norm for postmarital childbearing may be ubiquitous, regardless of whether premarital sex or premarital cohabitation occurred first.

Taken as a whole, these findings contribute new knowledge to the literature on how couples' relationships progress. My research on how and when couples make transitional steps in their relationships addresses a lack of basic descriptive information on relationship trajectories, which is especially surprising given the profound changes in dating and mating patterns. Family service providers will find this information to be useful in devising relationship skills-training programs if relationship trajectories are associated with marital quality.

If romantic relationship trajectories are related to marital quality, then program designers and policy makers who make decisions about promoting healthy marriages among low-income couples should know the kinds of factors that are associated with

these various relationship trajectories. Thus, my second research aim was to discover which sociodemographic factors might be associated with romantic relationship trajectories. Policies that aim to strengthen marriage should be based on a sound understanding of patterns of union formation, including the causes of these patterns (Ooms 2002). To address this research aim, I went beyond simply describing romantic relationship trajectories and explored various factors that might impact the sequencing and spacing of romantic relationship events, including: age at the start of the relationship, previous marital experience, previous cohabitation experience, children from previous unions, calendar year the dating relationship began, homogamy in race/ethnicity and age, race/ethnicity, growing up with married parents, religious upbringing, parental resources, and childhood experience of abuse and/or alcoholism. With the exception of previous marriage, I found all of these variables to be statistically significant predictors of relationship event sequencing and/or spacing. Here, I present the most important findings.

I discovered that previous relationship experiences shape couples' trajectories in new unions. For example, the odds of engaging in non-traditional relationship sequences are higher for couples in which at least one spouse cohabited previously or had a child with another partner. Couples with children from previous unions also delay marriage longer (both from dating initiation and from cohabitation start) and postpone the postmarital birth of the first biological child. These findings fall in line with research and theory suggesting that individuals with previous relationship experience approach new unions more cautiously, delaying marriage and parenthood with the new partner and

typically cohabiting beforehand (Ganong and Coleman 1989; Stewart 2002). My research offers new information to the literature on relationship trajectories that has been heretofore unknown with the following findings: low-income couples in which at least one spouse previously cohabited or had a child with another partner transition more quickly from dating initiation to sex and to cohabitation. This means that poor couples with previous cohabitation and childbearing experiences do not necessarily want to postpone sexual intimacy and co-residence simply because they defer marriage; in fact, these couples proceed to sex and cohabitation more quickly in new unions. They may crave companionship, sexual intimacy, a partner to help raise children, or an additional economic provider. Thus, if marriage and family service providers want to effect change in couples' relationship trajectories, they must be aware of each partner's previous union experience and discover the reasons for their quicker transition to sex and cohabitation.

In another essential set of findings, I demonstrate the predictive ability of childhood experiences for low-income couples' relationship trajectories. I find statistically significant effects of childhood religious affiliation, parents' marital status, parental education, and alcoholism/abuse issues on couples' relationship sequencing. Some of the key findings were that the odds of engaging in an unconventional relationship trajectory, relative to a traditional one, were higher for couples in which one or both spouses were raised without religious affiliation, without married parents, without highly educated parents, and in dysfunctional home environments (i.e., homes with alcohol problems or abuse). The odds of engaging in a modern sequence, relative to a traditional one, were also higher for couples raised without married parents or without

highly educated parents. These results replicate previous research that uses an individual-level and lifetime approach (Amato 1996; Chandra et al., 2005; Cherlin et al., 2004; McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; Newcomer and Udry 1987; Noll, et al., 2003; Sassler, Miller, and Addo 2008; South 1996; Teachman 2004; Thornton and Camburn 1987; Wilcox 2008). An important contribution of my research is that I can confirm that these patterns also hold when studying relationship events using a couple-level perspective. Moreover, my findings demonstrate that these childhood predictors hold for low-income couples. Furthermore, my findings on the importance of childhood experiences for the pace of relationship transitions contributes knowledge on trajectories that, to my understanding, is not yet in published literature.⁶⁶ Specifically, I found a relationship between childhood experiences and the tempo of transitioning from dating to premarital cohabitation. Cohabitation was entered more quickly for couples in which at least one spouse was raised without married parents compared to couples in which both spouses were raised by married parents. Also, having experienced abuse and/or alcoholism during childhood was associated with a quicker transition from dating initiation to cohabitation. Though testing for mechanisms is not possible in this study, perhaps these experiences led to advanced emotional maturation and a desire to leave home earlier, thereby increasing couples' hazards of cohabiting after they begin dating. These findings suggest the importance of learning how and why childhood experiences affect couples' union trajectories. Armed with this knowledge, family professionals could provide interventions to individuals and couples that get at the root causes of early

⁶⁶ Research underway by Sassler and Kamp Dush (2008) demonstrates a similar effect of parents' marital status on the timing to cohabitation from first sex (i.e., they do not measure start of the dating relationship).

cohabitation. This would be especially important if a quick transition to cohabitation is related to poor marital outcomes.

My third and final set of important results centers on how the year the couple began dating affects their romantic relationship trajectory. Couples in the MARS had started dating over a spread of years between 1978 and 2005. I found that, for each later calendar year in which a relationship begins, the odds of following a modern sequence rather than a traditional-plus-sex sequence increase. Relationships formed more recently also transition more quickly from dating initiation to cohabitation. Both of these findings are attributable to and evidential of the greater acceptance of cohabiting unions in recent history, where cohabitation is increasingly understood to be a stage in the dating process. Research on the tempo of the transition to cohabitation is characterized by qualitative and mostly outdated data; thus, my new and quantitative finding on faster transitions from dating to cohabitation over time offers something fresh. I also found that the year of dating initiation was positively associated with the risk of marrying; in other words, the more recently the relationship began, the quicker the couple progressed to marriage. Initially, this finding may sound surprising because it is well known that, increasingly, individuals delay marriage longer in their lifetime. Using a relationship-development perspective, however, illuminates my finding: delaying marriage in one's lifetime is different than delaying marriage once a person has begun dating their future spouse. Increasingly, couples delay the age at which they began dating their spouse⁶⁷, but couples do not date for longer durations before they marry. Thus, this period effect is not so

⁶⁷ The correlation between the wife's age at the start of dating and the year dating began is $r = 0.47$, $p < 0.000$, $n = 399$).

surprising after all and, in fact, sheds some new light on an aspect of “common knowledge”. The final result of year of dating initiation deserving mention here is that, among couples who delayed childbearing to after marriage, each additional year was associated with a higher hazard of transitioning from marriage to parenthood. This indicates that low-income couples are increasingly likely to see marriage and childbearing as a joint relationship decision (Sassler and Cunningham 2008; Wu and Musick 2008). This is an important finding because it may be of practical help to marriage and family professionals who work with low-income couples. The transition to parenthood presents new challenges and, especially for newly formed marriages, may prove harmful to marital success. If my results show that the spacing between marriage and childbearing is predictive of marital quality for low-income wives and husbands, marriage and family service providers may want to encourage couples to consider marriage and childbearing as two separate events.

Some of the less weighty results in these analyses center on how age and race/ethnicity are predictive of couples’ relationship trajectories. Couples who began dating when the female partner was age 26 or older were less likely than couples who started dating when the wife was a teen to follow an unconventional relationship sequence, relative to traditional, traditional-plus-sex, and modern sequences. The risk of the first postmarital birth was also significantly lower among these older couples than compared to the very young couples. Both of these findings can be understood using the life course perspective: couples make divergent relationship decisions based on their developmental stage in life. With age, people gain greater psychological, developmental,

and economic maturity, and, as a result, may be better contraceptors, have more developed career paths, or higher educational attainment—factors that delay childbearing. Despite the age norms for childbearing, older couples appear to want the stability of a marriage before childbearing begins. (Of course, these patterns may be attributable to lower fecundity as well.) Another age-related finding was that couples who began dating when the wife was a teenager delayed sex longer than couples who began dating in their early twenties; this finding reflects the age norms for sexual activity, with sex being considered more appropriate for young adults than for teens. Though these findings are not new, they are important because I can confirm that couples' relationship trajectories are based on life stages and societal age norms.

Finally, I found that couples with at least one race/ethnic minority delay cohabitation and marriage longer after dating initiation, and they cohabit for longer durations than couples in which both partners are white. My findings mirror other research showing that, compared to white cohabitators, black and Hispanic cohabitators are significantly less likely to marry (Brown 2000b; Lichter, et al., 2006; Manning and Smock 1995; Raley 2001). My findings also replicate those of Sassler and Kamp Dush (2008), who find that racial minority couples delay transitions to both cohabitation and marriage longer than white couples do. Contrary to expectations, couples with race/ethnic minority partners did not demonstrate higher odds of having a premarital birth (i.e., following an unconventional sequence), though they did exhibit higher odds of following a traditional-plus-sex trajectory relative to a modern one. Most studies finding higher rates of nonmarital fertility among racial minorities attribute the difference to

race/ethnicity. My results suggest that these findings may actually be capturing a socioeconomic effect because—when the sample is limited to low-income couples—race is not a significant predictor of following an unconventional sequence (relative to a traditional one). Conversely, these findings may also be attributable to the fact that my sample includes only low-income married couples: Black and Hispanic families are less likely to be married than are white families, so my sample of poor black married couples may be selective of blacks and Hispanics with more traditional values or experiences.⁶⁸

I have addressed my first two research goals using newly collected survey data from low-income married couples and measuring couples' relationship trajectories using a relationship-development perspective. Overall, my findings on relationship sequence fall in line with expectations based on theory and literature. I offer new knowledge on the understudied topics of the tempo of relationship trajectories and their predictors. My research identifies questions for future research and also suggests avenues for practical application for government policy and for marriage and family service providers. The question remains: Are relationship trajectories related to marital quality among low-income couples? If so, the information provided on the factors that are associated with these various relationship trajectories would be especially useful to program designers and policy makers who make decisions about promoting healthy marriages among this population.

The third aim of my study was, therefore, to examine marital quality among the low-income sample of married couples and, in particular, to see if any associations

⁶⁸ Black families are the least likely to be married-couple families. In March 2006, nearly half of black families were married couples, compared with about 80 percent of both white and Asian families, and nearly 70 percent of Hispanic or Latino families (Cromartie 2007)

existed between marital quality and relationship event sequencing and spacing. I found levels of marital quality were high for wives and husbands: the majority of individuals report high marital satisfaction, high commitment, and low conflict. This high level of marital quality is not altogether unexpected, given that persons in low quality marriages are able, and often willing, to divorce. If low quality marriages tend to end quickly, the average quality of intact marriages will be high, as my data seemed to suggest. This issue of sample selectivity is one to which I return below. However, this finding may also indicate that low-income couples have protective mechanisms helping them adapt to the stresses associated with disadvantaged living. At least up to a point, the low-income couples in the MARS appear to be able to maintain high quality marriages despite their challenging circumstances.

I hypothesized that romantic relationship trajectories would influence couples' marital quality. Using ideas from marital search theory, I expected that a greater amount of time spent between relationship events would result in better marital quality. Analogous to the search for a job or a marketplace product, marital search theory proposes that individuals undertake a rational search, compare alternative options, and then select the best one available. Applied to the search for a mate, I expected that a longer duration between relationship events would indicate a better marital match (i.e., spousal compatibility), which should result in greater marital quality. I also used ideas from the inertia and constraint commitment hypotheses when forming expectations about the effects of relationship trajectories on marital quality. I expected couples who experienced premarital sex, cohabitation, and childbearing to exhibit worse marital

quality than those who delayed some or all of these events until marriage. A couple's involvement in these premarital events might inadvertently result in commitment developing because of relationship inertia or barriers to leaving. Rather than relationship-driven reasons, such as love, relationships driven by events or constraints (i.e., a joint household and/or a shared child) may be more difficult to end, and marriage may result between people who may not have otherwise remained together. In addition, an event-driven union might be characterized by short spacing between relationship events (more so than a relationship-driven one), and was expected to be associated with poorer relationship quality.

In bivariate analyses, I found some support for both the marital search and inertia/constraint commitment hypotheses. In the bivariate model analyzing the effect of relationship sequence on marital quality, I found that, compared to traditional couples, modern and unconventional couples almost always reported lower levels of marital quality. This suggests that couples who engage in premarital relationship events—especially cohabitation and premarital childbearing—may remain together due to relationship inertia or because they have formed too many constraints to leave. I also found some support for marital search theory in the bivariate models predicting how timing to first sex and timing to first baby were related to marital quality. For both wives and husbands, the odds of reporting high marital satisfaction, high commitment, and low conflict were greater for those who delayed sex until marriage than for those who had sex within the first month of dating. Among men, I also found that the odds of reporting low conflict were greater for those who delayed sex to the third or later month than for those

having sex within the first month of the relationship. Among couples whose first shared birth was postmarital, I found that a longer delay of childbirth was associated with less conflict for husbands, providing support for marital search theory.

When all control variables were added to the model, however, relationship trajectories had no notable associations with marital quality for wives and husbands. Relationship sequence was not related to marital satisfaction, commitment, or conflict when all control variables were included in the models. In a model excluding couples' joint religious activity, I found a significant association between sequence and wives' reports of marital satisfaction. Including couples' religiosity into this model reduced the association to insignificance, indicating the mediating role of religiosity. The cross-sectional nature of the MARS means that couples' religiosity was measured contemporaneously with the retrospective accounts of relationship trajectories and reports of marital quality, precluding me from making strong assertions about causal directions. Yet, this finding highlights the important role of shared religious activity in predicting couples' marital quality—a point to which I return below. The spacing between relationship events also has little to no association with marital quality. I found one indication of a weak association between wives' commitment and the number of months from dating initiation to couples' first sex, but the group of variables representing spacing was not significant as a whole, rendering this result inconsequential. Similarly suggestive but unconvincing findings were revealed for the associations between childbearing timing and husbands' reports of marital quality. In my multivariate models among couples whose first birth was postmarital, husbands' odds of reporting high satisfaction and high

commitment increased each additional month childbearing was delayed after marriage. However, when the sample was expanded to include those with no shared birth and those whose first birth was premarital, I found no associations between childbearing spacing and men's reports of marital satisfaction and commitment.

I found that these theories do not provide a particularly insightful perspective when understanding the results of my study. It seems that relationship trajectories are, by and large, irrelevant to subsequent marital success, at least among my sample of low-income married couples. This finding is important because the absence of effects may reflect the diminishing importance of premarital sex, cohabitation, and childbearing for subsequent marital quality as an increasing share of the population follows relationship trajectories including these events, making them normative experiences (Smock 2000). The inertia and constraint commitment hypotheses—although theoretically appealing—may be, therefore, increasingly irrelevant. The more that people engage in these premarital events, the less likely these events are to result in the inadvertent development of commitment leading to marriage. Any potential negative effects of premarital sex, cohabitation, and childbearing that might have existed in the past may have waned as the events that make up these premarital relationship trajectories have become more prevalent in the population in recent decades, at least among low-income couples who eventually marry.

I also suggest that marital search theory may be of limited utility for three reasons. First, it is based on a rational choice framework although, in reality, matters of the heart are not always rational. Second, marital search theory implicitly relies on a

static notion of compatibility. Partners that may have been well-matched in values, aspirations, habits, and so on at one point may end up being poorly matched at a later date and, thereby, experience strife in their marriages. Third, searching for a mate is not perfectly comparable to searching for a job or another marketplace item: the marketplace analogy assumes that all options are known to the searcher, that the choice is one-way, and that all options will be available for an unlimited time—but these assumptions do not bear out when referring to the search for a mate (Whyte 1990). The ability to compare the current romantic partner to others is limited. Usually, persons date only one partner at a time at a level of intimacy that would provide information on whether he/she offers a suitable match. Comparisons to previous partners are limited by memory distortions, and comparisons to future partners are in the realm of speculation. The level of intimacy required to really judge a person constrains against considering alternative options. Furthermore, the choice of a marriage partner is a two-way street; a person cannot unilaterally choose the partner he or she desires. The search for a marriage partner is also time-dependent: a sought-after partner may be currently with someone else, or the time available for making a selection may be perceived as diminishing, and so alternative selections—perhaps not the preferred choice—may be made. The final choice of a mate may, then, actually be a compromise. In sum, the analogy suffers some drawbacks in its applicability to the search for a spouse.

To conclude, I found almost no associations between relationship trajectories and wives' and husbands' reports of marital satisfaction, commitment, or conflict when all control variables were included in the models. I am mindful that the absence of strong

relationship trajectory effects in this research may be due to the selective nature of the sample—an issue which I address at great length below. Nonetheless, I proceed to the final aim in my research.

My final objective was to examine other correlates of marital quality among low-income married couples. Despite the U.S. government's policy of healthy marriage promotion, surprisingly little is known about marital quality and its predictors among the low-income population (Fein 2004; Moore et al. 2007). Most healthy marriage programming has been based on research using general population samples, but family and relationship matters may differ for people in dissimilar economic circumstances. For example, research often reports that the transition to first-time parenthood is quite challenging for newlyweds, but this transition may be less salient for low-income couples, many of whom enter marriage already with children from previous unions. Healthy marriage initiatives geared towards poor couples may wish, instead, to address issues surrounding multiple partner fertility (Fein 2004). The applicability of prior research on marital quality for *low-income* couples has not been studied (Fein et al. 2003; Karney et al. 2007; Ooms and Wilson 2004). To be effective, healthy marriage initiatives should be based on research using the target population. Thus, my research offers insight to designers of healthy marriage initiatives for low-income couples.

Consistently, I found a significant effect of couples' joint religiosity in predicting marital quality for both wives and husbands, echoing findings by Lichter and Carmalt (2009). The more couples engage in religious activities together, the greater their marital satisfaction and commitment, and the less frequent their arguments. I also found that

couples' religiosity mediates the association between relationship event sequence and wives' marital satisfaction. The significant role that couples' religiosity plays in predicting marital quality contributes knowledge regarding a relatively uncommon aspect of religious activity—the couple-level or joint aspect of religious activity rather than individual beliefs or activities. While these findings may be interpreted to indicate a religiosity effect, they may also indicate the positive effect of couples' joint activity, which happens to fall within the religious context. If it is the latter, then future research could explore other, non-religious measures of couples' joint activities to see whether they have a similar positive effect on marital quality. If it is a religious effect, then my findings suggest that religious institutions may have a role to play in promoting healthy marriages and that policy makers may want to target religious institutions in their healthy marriage initiatives. Though the government may not wish to wade into controversy and engage in promoting religiosity as a means of improving couples' marital quality, it might consider providing greater resources to religious institutions that provide relationship services.

Another significant predictor of marital quality was severe economic hardship. Wives in very poor couples reported less satisfaction with their marriages, less commitment to their spouses, and more frequent spousal arguments. This finding is important because it appeared despite the truncated income distribution in the MARS sample. My research provides public policy administrators with a vital means of raising marital quality: providing greater economic support. The fact that I find a difference in marital quality by economic status even among a sample that is limited to low-income

couples implies that government must, at a minimum, ensure that couples do not experience severe destitution.

I found that spouses generally report better marital quality if their employment patterns conform to traditionally gendered expectations. Wives and husbands in couples where only the wife works full-time are unlikely to report high marital quality. These findings correspond to qualitative research by Edin and colleagues (Edin 2000; Edin and Kefalas 2005), who find greater relationship tension among low-income couples where male partners do not fulfill the traditional expectation of being an economic provider. As Nock (2001:772) wrote, “Normative marriage requires that men be the principal earners. This means that a husband’s labor-force involvement is mandatory. The husband who cannot work may be pitied, but the husband who will not work is scorned. He is not only a bad husband, he is not fully a man.” Marital happiness is higher among wives whose husbands take the lead in breadwinning (Wilcox and Nock 2007). Although this is not a new finding, it does reinforce that interventions to promote healthy marriage need to address employment issues as well.

Another important result that appeared when predicting low-income couples’ marital quality concerns race/ethnicity: couples where at least one spouse is a racial/ethnic minority were less likely to report high marital satisfaction and high commitment than couples where both spouses were white. My findings lend support to those of previous research, which demonstrates lower marital quality and greater instability among black couples than among white married couples (Adelmann et al. 1996; Broman 2005; Brown 2003; Trent and South 2003), particularly for wives (Broman

1993).⁶⁹ These racial patterns in marital quality appear even among a sample of poor couples, who all face unsafe neighborhoods, high rates of unemployment, and other economic stressors that place enormous strain on marital unions. My finding is important because it demonstrates that differences in marital quality by race persist after controlling for economic circumstances. This suggests that experiences of racism and discrimination may be a significant source of stress within some minority couples, which could, in turn, result in poor marital quality (Murry, Smith, and Hill 2001). Programs and policies aimed at strengthening marriage among low-income couples should, therefore, also address issues that are particular to racial/ethnic minority couples.

The final important correlate of marital quality for low-income couples that I found was respondents' parents' marital status during childhood. Couples where one or both partners grew up without married parents argue more frequently than couples where both spouses were raised with married parents, according to husbands. Yet, wives reported greater commitment if they or their spouse experienced a non-intact family of origin. Perhaps having witnessed marital breakdown hampered the development of positive conflict negotiation skills in couples and increased problematic interpersonal behavior, leading to more frequent spousal arguments (Amato 1996). Indeed, other research has found that adults with divorced parents report more marital problems, problems with anger and communication, and conflict than adults with married parents (Booth and Amato 2001; McLeod 1991; Tallman et al. 1999). Despite frequent conflict, wives may cling to the relationship, with the hope of protecting themselves and their children from divorce—the costs of which are typically greater for women than for men.

⁶⁹ These studies compare black couples to white couples—not white couples to all others, as I do.

This finding is important because it demonstrates that adult children of divorce may experience contrasting effects of parental marital discord.⁷⁰ Most research shows that parental non-marriage leads to worse marital quality, as I do with my finding of more frequent spousal disagreements. However, my study also suggests that having experienced family breakdown may provide incentives for maintaining unions, even unhappy ones. This heightened sense of commitment (at least among wives) may provide a basis of intervention for marriage and family professionals to explore further.

Finally, two more correlates of marital quality appeared in my models, but these were less convincing. I found that the more spouses differ from each other in race/ethnicity, age, and education, the more likely they are to report high satisfaction (both wives and husbands) and high commitment (husbands only). This finding may result from sample selection: heterogamous couples in long-term intact marriages may be particularly satisfied with or committed to their spouse. I also found that men who married young wives (and were young themselves when they married—due to the high correlation between spouses' ages) were more likely to report high marital satisfaction and commitment than were men who married wives at older ages. It is important to remember that these men reporting high marital quality are in couples who married young and, most importantly, have remained married. With divorce being a popular option, men who remain in intact couples may represent a select group who are highly satisfied and highly committed (Johnson et al. 2002). It is also possible that older age

⁷⁰ It is worth mentioning that the presence of conflict and the level of marital commitment are not on opposite sides of the same spectrum. Couples who are disengaged from each other, for example, may have both low commitment and low conflict.

leads to a more limited selection of potential spouses to choose from, reducing the chances of making a good match (Norval 2005).

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

My research makes several contributions to our understanding of relationship trajectories and marital quality among low-income couples. Despite the limitations discussed below, this study fills an important gap: few studies exist on relationship trajectories in general or on marital quality among poor couples in particular, and none consider the intersection of the two. Prior research reveals a greater chance of relationship dissolution for low-income married couples than for non-poor couples (Fein 2004), so studying this segment of the population is valuable in its own right. Moreover, that these couples have children in the household makes this study of marital quality doubly important because parental divorce has implications for children for many years (Amato 2001; Cherlin et al. 1991). (To be clear, I do not generalize my results to all couples, regardless of socioeconomic status.) I use data from a survey specifically developed to focus on poor couples and their marital quality. I measure multiple dimensions of marital quality: marital satisfaction, which is the most common measure of marital quality, as well as commitment and conflict, which are cited as the top two contributors to divorce by low-income divorced persons (Johnson et al. 2002; Schramm et al. 2003). I also offer a glimpse at marriage through the eyes of husbands as well as of wives, which is unlike much of previous research. By examining the characteristics and experiences of both spouses, my research enriches our understanding of marriage and improves the ability to predict outcomes of inherently dyadic unions. Finally, my sample

included couples of all races and from all regions of the United States, increasing the representativeness of my findings for low-income married couples.

My study has also identified several limitations that need to be overcome in future research. First, the MARS sample is comprised solely of intact married couples, leaving the strong likelihood of sample selection bias. My findings are based on data gathered from couples who married each other—yet, premarital romantic relationship trajectories may be related to the likelihood of marriage. The probability of transition into marriage is not equal across all groups or relationship trajectories (Carlson et al. 2004; Sassler and Kamp Dush 2008; Tach and Halpern-Meekin 2009); for example, couples that cohabited soon after the start of the dating relationship may be more likely to break up before marriage. Another selection bias is that, over time, married couples with the lowest marital quality dissolve their unions. This means that marital quality indicators will be increasingly indistinguishable among couples that remain married. Couples with the least marital commitment, for example, are most likely to have ended their marriages early on, leaving intact couples to be increasingly comprised of those reporting high marital commitment. This may account for the largely insignificant associations of relationship trajectory with marital quality. The selection of couples with the highest marital quality is always an issue in cross-sectional surveys of married couples. Some other studies using cross-sectional data attempt to minimize this impact by limiting their sample to couples married for the fewest years, but the size of the MARS sample precluded this option (i.e., the number of couples married for 5 years or less was under 100). Because the MARS sample is one of intact marital unions, an exploration of whether relationships

that end in disruption (before or after marriage) experience different relationship trajectories is not possible.

Second, although my sample is larger than most used to study married dyads, its size limits certain analyses that I would have otherwise undertaken. I would have preferred not to collapse categories in the couple-level independent variables (i.e., wife only, husband only, both spouses, and neither spouse) to determine whether actor and partner effects are equivalent. For example, marital quality may be differentially affected by a wife's experience of parental divorce, compared to a husband's experience, and marital quality may be especially poor if both spouses' parents had divorced. Previous research suggests that having data from both spouses provides for a richer understanding of the various ways that his, her, and their characteristics affect the union (i.e., Amato 1996, Amato and Rogers 1997; Bumpass et al. 1991a; DeMaris 1984; Thomson, McDonald, and Bumpass 1990; Waller and McLanahan 2005). With a larger sample size, I would have also examined couples' relationship trajectories and marital quality with more precise measurements of race, including comparisons by interracial differences (like Joyner and Sassler 2008). Any racial/ethnic patterns in relationship trajectories or marital quality could have implications for marriage programs (e.g., employment services for husbands may be especially helpful to black couples).

Third, because the MARS research design is cross-sectional, it is difficult to determine causal processes. Associations between relationship quality and relationship trajectories may operate bi-directionally. In other words, relationship trajectories may serve as an indicator of relationship quality (e.g., couples may engage in premarital sex

more quickly because their relationship is of high quality). Premarital relationship quality may affect the sequence and spacing of romantic relationship events and is also likely to be highly predictive of subsequent marital quality (Carlson et al. 2004; Huston 1994). The cross-sectional nature of the MARS offers only a snapshot of dynamic relationship processes. To determine how relationship trajectories are causally related to relationship success, it would be ideal to follow a panel of couples over time from dating initiation to marriage and for many years afterwards. Besides addressing causality, longitudinal studies would address sample selection issues (avoiding issues of having intact unions only in cross-sectional studies on marital quality) and would also yield data on the trajectory of change in relationship quality over time (for examples, see Clements et al. 2004; Karney and Bradbury 1997).

My study raises several more opportunities for future research. Future data collections may wish to ask survey participants about hooking up, premarital sex histories with persons other than the spouse, and other related topics which were unavailable in the MARS. The number of premarital sexual partners may be related to marital quality, but I was unable to measure this. It would also be advantageous for future research to measure how emotions or behavioral interactions shape couples' relationship trajectories and union quality. My research focused on sociodemographic correlates, but the most useful data for healthy marriage promotion initiatives would include multiple factors related to couples' marital quality, including premarital relationship quality, values/attitudes to relationships, patience with partner, and so on. Finally, to increase our knowledge of how marriage outcomes vary across different levels of economic disadvantage, future

research studies should conduct comparative analyses between poor and non-poor groups. This technique would be the ideal approach for identifying determinants whose effects may (or may not) be unique to one socioeconomic group.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND INTERVENTION

In the face of stressful events, poor married couples are more likely than non-poor couples to end their unions (Fein 2004). This suggests that the availability and timing of relationship supports could prove critical for poor couples' marital success. My research shows that relationship trajectories have little, if any, effect on marital quality for this population. Until future studies are embarked upon, in ways that I have suggested above, we will not know whether prescriptions of a specific trajectory can be made with any degree of certainty. Moreover, the complexities of individuals, dyadic dynamics, and marriage markets preclude simplistic policy prescriptions. Proposals that can be made, based on findings from my research and other literature, suggest that efforts to promote healthy marriage among low-income couples should focus elsewhere.

I suggest that marital and premarital educational programs that equip individuals and couples with the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain healthy marriages should be maintained. Studies show that couples who participate in premarital education are significantly more likely to report high marital satisfaction, high commitment, low conflict, and lower divorce proneness (Norval 2005; Schramm et al. 2003; Stanley et al. 2006b). Marriage education would not be a very difficult initiative to sustain because there is already a great deal of interest in it: the vast majority of adults in three state surveys report that they would consider using workshops or classes to

strengthen their marriage relationship (Johnson et al. 2002; Karney et al. 2003; Schramm et al. 2003). Notably, low-income respondents report higher levels of interest in relationship education than the general population (Johnson et al. 2002; Karney et al. 2003; Schramm et al. 2003). Given the interest and established positive association between premarital education and marital quality, policy makers may wish to improve and expand such opportunities for premarital and marital couples. To promote healthy marriage services among the low-income population, policymakers could incorporate marriage education courses into the benefit packages available to adults who qualify for public assistance.

Given the strong associations between couples' religious activities and marital quality, I suggest that policy makers consider ways that religious institutions could be used to promote the goals of healthy marriage initiatives. Many couples already rely on these institutions for social support, and many relationship education programs are already established in religious institutions (Johnson et al. 2002; Karney et al. 2003; Schramm et al. 2003). My study found that couples engaged in religious activities together report higher marital quality. The government may wish to provide additional resources and training to religious institutions that already provide relationship skills education. Moreover, religious institutions may be better able to develop programs that address the needs of the local community, promising to be more effective than those geared to the general population.

In addition to relationship skills education, healthy marriage initiatives must take into account the circumstances of people's lives. Romantic relationships do not develop

in a vacuum. All couples face obstacles that prevent them from forming or maintaining healthy marriages. Government resources must be effectively devoted to helping individuals and couples overcome relevant obstacles, including those that are especially likely to challenge low-income Americans such as mental health issues, substance abuse, domestic violence, and incarceration (Karney et al. 2003; Ooms 2002; Schramm et al. 2003; Seccombe 2002; Seefeldt and Smock 2004). More broadly, policymakers should consider the structural correlates of low marital quality among poor Americans. Many of the ultimate sources of these “personal” challenges are linked to social inequalities. Poor persons are less likely to be gainfully employed, more likely to live in unsafe neighborhoods, experience poorer health, and complete less education (Dyk 2004; Johnson et al. 2002; Ooms 2002; Schramm et al. 2003; Seccombe 2002). Instituting programs and services to improve educational and employment opportunities, for example, will likely indirectly benefit low-income Americans’ interpersonal relationships. Indeed, my research found that marital quality was higher when the husband was employed full-time and among couples not facing severe economic hardship. The likelihood of forming and maintaining a healthy marriage will be higher when the general socioeconomic environment is better. General work and family supports – including income supplements, increased access to education, job training, and child care subsidies – will go a long way in improving marital quality.

To be effective, future programs and policies to strengthen marriages among low-income couples must rest on a solid foundation of knowledge using data from poor couples. Federal initiatives aimed at supporting marriage have increased the need for up-

to-date data on low-income married couples. As Fein (2004) points out, these needs begin with basic descriptive statistics, and simple facts can be very useful in stimulating plans for making effective interventions. My research offers these basic descriptors and much more. I ascertain how various characteristics of low-income couples are associated with their romantic relationship trajectories. If future research is able to demonstrate that relationship trajectories matter for marital quality, then my study provides detailed information on low-income couples' trajectories, using couple-level predictors. I also determine various factors associated with poor wives' and husbands' marital satisfaction, commitment, and conflict. With my findings, I suggest the kinds of services and policy interventions that may be most helpful for efforts to support healthy marriage among low-income couples. This study offers an important step in the right direction for learning more about marital quality and its predictors among the low-income population.

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Appendix: Descriptive Statistics for Independent Variables that were Collapsed.

		N	Mean or %	Min	Max
Married previously					
	Wife only	32	8.02	0	1
	Husband only	47	11.78	0	1
	Both	40	10.03	0	1
	Neither	280	70.18	0	1
Cohabited with other partner					
	Wife only	40	10.03	0	1
	Husband only	57	14.29	0	1
	Both	42	10.53	0	1
	Neither	256	64.16	0	1
	(missing)	4	1.00	0	1
Child(ren) from previous union					
	Wife only	58	14.54	0	1
	Husband only	37	9.27	0	1
	Both	35	8.77	0	1
	Neither	269	67.42	0	1
Raised with religious affiliation					
	Wife only	48	12.03	0	1
	Husband only	33	8.27	0	1
	Both	296	74.19	0	1
	Neither	15	3.76	0	1
	(missing)	7	1.75	0	1
Race/ethnicity is not White					
	Wife only	20	5.01	0	1
	Husband only	27	6.77	0	1
	Both	31	7.77	0	1
	Neither	321	80.45	0	1

Continued

Table A1. Descriptive statistics for Independent Variables that were Collapsed in Analyses for Low-Income Married Couples in the MARS (n = 399).

Table A1: Continued.

Raised by married parents				
Wife only	65	16.29	0	1
Husband only	78	19.55	0	1
Both	209	52.38	0	1
Neither	39	9.77	0	1
(missing)	8	2.01	0	1
Parents with high educational attainment				
Wife only	81	20.30	0	1
Husband only	56	14.04	0	1
Both	85	21.30	0	1
Neither	140	35.09	0	1
(missing)	37	9.27	0	1
Experienced dysfunctional childhood				
Wife only	96	24.06	0	1
Husband only	66	16.54	0	1
Both	100	25.06	0	1
Neither	136	34.09	0	1
(missing)	1	0.25	0	1
