Reciprocal Associations between Marital Timing Expectations and Changing Economic and Relationship Circumstances in Cohabiting Individuals

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Although marriage has maintained or even gained in symbolic status in America over recent years, fewer people are marrying in the United States and those who do marry are delaying taking their vows (Cherlin, 2004; 2010). And whereas many individuals believe, or at least hope, they will marry one day, not all will (Lichter, Batson, & Brown, 2004; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Willoughby, Hall, & Luczak, 2015). Prior to—or instead of—marriage, many individuals form cohabiting unions in which they carry out many of the tasks reserved for marriage in past generations, such as bearing children or managing a shared household. Some cohabiting couples transition their union to marriage; others exist for many years as informal unions (Willets, 2006), and still others break up, often within only a few years of formation (particularly when children are present; Heuveline, Timberlake, & Furstenberg, 2003).

However, a large portion of cohabitators believe that they will marry their partner one day (Cohen & Manning, 2010); for many, there are identifiable barriers that they say are preventing them from tying the knot, such as a lack of economic security, unsatisfactory characteristics of the relationship with the partner, or simply not enough money to pay for the desired style and grandeur of a modern-day wedding ceremony (Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005; Aarskaug Wiik, Bernhardt, & Noack, 2010). These issues have been identified and studied mostly in disadvantaged populations and mothers (see Edin & Reed, 2005 for a review). Conventional thinking might lead one to believe that if these issues were resolved, cohabiting individuals might be more certain and confident in marriage, and may actually then go on to formalize their union (Smock, Manning, & Porter).

Conversely, it is possible that those who expect or hope to marry sooner will in turn change their behavior to more closely match the married-person role, or will work to set themselves up for marriage by obtaining further education or steady employment or by finding a partner with certain desirable characteristics. However, changes in marital expectations over time according to situational characteristics have not been explored in a more general sample. This study examined how changes in marital expectations might both predict and be predicted by changes in circumstances—such as educational attainment, relationship satisfaction, and a partner’s characteristics—in a sample of men and women from across the socioeconomic spectrum. Our research question was thus: what are the reciprocal associations between marital expectations held by cohabiting individuals and changing economic and relational circumstances? We aimed to test both possible directions of prediction simultaneously by using auto-regressive cross-lagged structural equation models.

Competing Theories

Symbolic Interaction Theory (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993) emphasizes that it is not simply the presence or absence of a behavior, trait, or resource that determines how an individual will react to a situation. The reaction also depends significantly on the interpretation that an individual makes of the context and resources available to them. Some people may believe that they have sufficient financial resources for a wedding to take place, while others may interpret the same amount of money as hardly adequate for their desired ceremony and delay their marriage accordingly. Therefore, it might be expected that as circumstances improve—as more education is obtained, or finances improve, or the relationship becomes more satisfying or less
conflictual (or the individual enters into a new relationship with a new, “better” partner)—expectations for marriage should become more proximal.

On the other hand, Marital Horizon Theory (Carroll et al., 2007) expects that individuals change their behavior to match their desires and make it more likely that they will experience their desired event, particularly in the case of impending, or at least hoped-for, nuptials. According to this view, then, a change in employment or financial standing should not drive a change in marital expectations so much as a desire for marriage in the near future should necessitate gaining more education, or making a change in employment to something more stable or with better pay than previously provided. Rather than waiting for the circumstances to change and then allowing marital expectations to follow, this view would hold that strongly-held expectations will instead incite the change one hopes to see in their life before entering matrimony.

**Data and Methods**

We examined these competing theories using data collected between the years 2000 to 2012 in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth Child and Young Adult cohort (NSLY-CYA). We utilized data collected in the Young Adult surveys, which were fielded to those respondents 15 years and older by the end of the survey year and repeated in biennial waves. This dataset was uniquely suited to this research question because of the broad swath of individuals included and because marital expectations were asked of the same individuals at multiple times. We isolated those individuals who were currently cohabiting with a partner and examined how their expectations for the timing of possible marriage changed over the waves, both predicted by, and predicting, changes in circumstances.

**Marital expectations.** Marital expectations were quantified by how soon individuals in these unions saw themselves marrying—or conversely, how far away they believed marriage was. In the survey, respondents were first asked if they planned to marry their partner. If they said yes, they were asked to state the age at which they planned to marry. If they said no, they were asked if they believed they would eventually marry that partner. If they said yes, they were asked at what age they would like to marry. Responses to both questions about future age at marriage were combined and an indicator variable was created to denote plans for marriage versus liking to eventually marry. We then subtracted the respondent’s current age from the age they had stated for their possible marriage, with the difference thus denoting how soon one could see themselves marrying the person with whom they were currently living.

**Economic variables.** In preliminary analyses, we focused on respondents’ educational attainment and partners’ employment situation, measured as the number of weeks worked in the past year. We also included partners’ educational attainment and homeownership status as control variables. To further elucidate the association between socioeconomic status and marital expectations in future analyses, we will also include measures of respondents’ employment situation, respondents’ and partners’ rate of pay or salary, and additional assets and debts of the respondents and the partners.

**Relational variables.** We generated a mean score for the frequency of arguments between the respondent and partner about 10 topics on a 4-point scale (chores, children, money, affection, religion, leisure, drinking, affairs with other people, relatives of the respondent, and relatives of the partner; alphas range from .68 - .84 over years measured) to produce a measure of arguments between partners, which was included as control variable in preliminary analyses, as was a measure of the age difference between partners. In further analyses, we will include the frequency of occasions that the respondent and their partner have positive interactions, the
happiness of the respondent with their current relationship, and the similarity of respondents’ religious preferences to their partners’.

**Other variables.** Additionally, in preliminary analyses we controlled for respondent race (Black, Hispanic, or other), the racial makeup of the couple (same vs. different-race), respondent gender, respondent’s body mass index (BMI), respondent’s self-esteem, respondent’s age, and urban or rural residence. In further analyses we will control for respondents’ drug and alcohol use and the presence and characteristics of children in the household (respondents’ children, partners’ children, and children of both).

**Preliminary Analysis and Results**

While some of the 2,114 respondents with marital expectations data provided up to 7 observations of expectations, about 60% of the subsample provided marital expectations only once, leaving 859 respondents for longitudinal analysis. In preliminary analysis, we chose to model reciprocal associations between marital expectations and various circumstance variables between the first and second time that each respondent was asked to state their marital expectations. Those who were missing data on marital timing because they answered “Don’t know” to the age at marriage question at both of their first two waves were removed from the analysis, for a model \( n \) of 843. Missing data on other variables in the model were estimated using the Maximum Likelihood with Missing Values option of the `sem` command in Stata12.

Figure 1 shows the results of the model testing reciprocal associations between marital expectations and educational attainment. This model suggested support for the Symbolic Interactionist perspective, that is, that the desires or expectations to marry sooner appeared to be predicted by increased educational attainment. The opposite path, from marital expectations to education, was not significant.

However, as shown in Figure 2, we did find marginally-significant evidence \( (p < 0.10) \) supporting Marital Horizon Theory, suggesting that those with more proximal expectations of marriage were more likely to have partners with better employment the next time they stated their desires, possibly because they sought out more employable, more stable partners in the hopes of entering marriage sooner.

**Significance and Further Analyses**

These preliminary results lend credence to both theoretical explanations, though they only weakly support the Marital Horizons perspective. Recently, Garrett-Peters and Burton (2015) have suggested that, in explaining the disconnect between the number of cohabiters who say they want to marry and who actually go on to wed, it is not enough to believe that low-income mothers will simply marry when their circumstances appear to be conducive to the transition, or to expect that marital expectations are only a function of their circumstances. To this end, we aim to broaden understanding of marital attitudes and intentions by examining marital expectations in reciprocal associations, in a more normative population, in both men and women, and through multiple theoretical lenses.

Continued analysis of this question before the conference will included different measures of circumstance, both economic and relational (described above) and will continue to allow for the consideration of both directions of associations. Differences by gender, age, socioeconomic status, and other possible moderating variables will be explored to further elucidate the associations presented here and contribute to the literature on marital expectations and aspirations. Additionally, within-individual change will be isolated through the use of fixed-effects and hybrid-effects models to further understand how individuals conceptualize their marital expectations as the circumstances around them develop.
Figure 1: Reciprocal associations between marital expectations and educational attainment.

Model fit statistics: $\chi^2 (58) = 62.509, p = 0.319$. CFI = 0.992, RMSEA = 0.010.

Model controls for partner education, frequency of arguments, plans to marry, age, age difference between partners, race, racial similarity between partners, BMI, self-esteem, homeownership, length of relationship, partner employment, urban/rural context, gender, and year of response.

Figure 2: Reciprocal associations between marital expectations and partner employment, measured in weeks worked in previous year.

Model fit statistics: $\chi^2 (61) = 60.919, p = 0.479$. CFI = 1.000, RMSEA = 0.000.

Model controls for education, partner education, frequency of arguments, plans to marry, age, age difference between partners, race, racial similarity between partners, BMI, self-esteem, homeownership, length of relationship, urban/rural context, gender, and year of response.
References


