

Conceptualizing and Measuring “Healthy Marriage” For Empirical Research and Evaluation Studies:

A Review of the Literature and Annotated Bibliography (Task Three)

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Marriage and couple relationships constitute an area of intense interest for researchers as well as policy makers. One of the goals of the Healthy Marriages study is to inform current discussions regarding the *measurement* of aspects of the quality of marital relationships. A series of government-sponsored evaluations are underway to examine educational, counseling, and other approaches to strengthen the quality and duration of marriages, particularly for low-income couples. Months or even years later, researchers will assess their effectiveness. Thus, increasing the prevalence of healthy marriage is a critical goal for the interventions, and by attaining that goal, policymakers and others expect to see improvements in outcomes for adults, children, and families.

This literature review and annotated bibliography represent several products of Child Trends' project to review the state of the art in measuring couple relationships. The literature review and bibliography included here provide information on the psychometric properties of existing measures/tools used in current research on couple relationships across a broad range of sub-populations. These populations include: cohabiting couples, stepfamilies and remarried families, families who are co-parenting after the couple relationship has ended, families with children, families in which one or more partners in a couple is in the military, and families in which one or more partners in a couple is incarcerated. We also provide information on the psychometric properties of general measures that have been widely used in the literature, as well as measures that have been used to capture societal norms, values, and attitudes.

The review contains psychometric information on measures of marriage from published papers and studies, most of which were conducted during the past decade. The review is not exhaustive, but rather a broad representation of the type and quality of measures that have been previously used. The review of the psychometric properties of existing measures is intended to be a useful tool for the development of measures of healthy marriage for future research and evaluation.

How This Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography Were Compiled

We selected and located the articles reviewed using a standardized process. First, we used several databases containing marriage research articles to identify relevant articles for the populations of interest. The data bases used included among others PsycINFO, Sociofile, EBSCO, and Web of Science. This literature search allowed us to identify well-known journals and books that contained articles on marriage and marital relationships for the sub-populations of interest. The journals used in this search included, but are not limited to, the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *Demography*, *Journal of Family Issues*, *Social Forces*, *the American Journal of Sociology*, *the American Sociological Review*, *Military Medicine*, *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, and *Family Relations*.

Second, we developed a standard set of search terms to allow for consistent searching between databases. We used these terms to locate all journal articles, reports and books that pertained to marriage. The standard set of search terms for the articles included: relationship quality; relationship satisfaction; conflict resolution; relationship conflict; relationship commitment; marital satisfaction; marital relationship; marital quality; marital communication; marital attitudes; marital happiness; cohabitation; stepfamilies; and marital dissolution.

Once we identified and obtained the research materials (either the journal article, report or the paper), we read them for topic relevance. If these materials contained information pertinent to our sub-populations of interest, they were included. If these materials also contained information about other pertinent studies that were not identified in the primary search, we also obtained these secondary source studies for review. We chose the most current and relevant studies/reports identified by each of our search terms. The number of

studies reviewed for each sub-population ranges from seven (7) to twenty-five (25), resulting in over one hundred reviews.

What This Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography Contain

The reviews of the literature and annotated bibliography are provided for the following groups:

- Cohabiting and Visiting Couples
- Stepfamilies and Remarried Families
- Families Co-parenting Post Relationship
- Families with Children
- Military Families
- Incarcerated Families

We also provide information on the psychometric properties of:

- General Measures of Marriage; and
- Measures of Societal Norms, Values, and Attitudes.

For each article reviewed in the annotated bibliography, we provide the following information: the title, author, publication citation, purpose, focus of the research, source of data, research design/sampling frame, method of data collation, study population, measure used, psychometric information (reliability and validity) of the measure, and an additional comment on the findings of the study.

Like many measures in the behavioral and social sciences, some of the measures included here may have stronger reliability and validity, than others. For many measures, very little psychometric information is provided. Psychometric statistics refer to the measurement properties of a construct. For example, reliability refers to the extent to which a measure produces consistent or identical results. An alpha coefficient of 0.69 or more is often considered the benchmark for determining whether a measure is reliable. Alpha coefficients of less than 0.69 are often considered unsatisfactory. Validity refers to the extent to which a scale measures what it is intended to measure. For a measure to be considered valid it must have a statistically significant association with at least two related measures at the $p < .05$ level (Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991). The lack of psychometric information for many of the measures included in this review does not imply that these measures are not important, just that more information is needed on their psychometric properties. We also provide a Summary/ Synthesis of all of the articles reviewed for each of the sub-populations of interest.

What Did the Reviews Tell Us About the Status of the Measurement of Marital Relationships among Various Sub-Populations?

Key findings based on our review of the literature for various population groups are summarized below.

Cohabiting and Visiting Couples

Cohabiting couples represent an increasingly common family form, and the research community has begun to devote much attention to cohabiting couples in recent years. Cohabiting couples are distinguished from “visiting” couples, a term made popular by the Fragile Families study. Visiting couples are those who are romantically involved and have a child together, but who do not share a common residence. To date, only a handful of studies have focused on visiting couples, but research on this group is expected to increase given the recent availability of the Fragile Families data. Although cohabiting and visiting couples face challenges that differ from those of married couples, studies generally use the same measures used with married couples. Moreover, studies do not generally conduct separate psychometric analyses for cohabiting, visiting, and married couples. Our review suggests that the measurement of relationship quality for cohabiting and visiting couples could benefit from the following:

- Testing the psychometric properties of well-established measures specifically for populations of cohabitators and visitors, rather than for cohabitators or visitors combined with married couples, as this is typically done;
- Developing measures that more accurately reflect the unique circumstances that cohabiting and visiting couples face, and that can capture the under-studied dimensions of relationships most salient to these family forms, such as frequency and nature of contact;
- Encouraging more quantitative research on the quality and stability of visiting parent relationships, as well as the frequency and nature of visiting parents' contact with their non-resident children;
- Developing qualitative studies that examine how visiting couples' relationships and parenting differ from cohabiting parents;
- Collecting longitudinal data that will allow researchers to measure and track changes in cohabitators' and visitors' relationship quality over time; and
- Examining subgroup differences in relationship quality, to see if overall quality and the importance of specific dimensions of quality vary by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, presence of children, gender, and age.

Step and Remarried Families

The defining feature of stepfamilies is the presence of children from a previous union. As found for cohabiting and visiting couples, for the most part, remarriages in which neither partner brings children into the marriage are conceptualized and measured similarly to first marriages. Nevertheless, a key distinguishing feature of studies of stepfamilies in comparison to intact biological families is the role of step-parenting. Also, the role of the ex-spouse or ex-partner can be critical to the current relationship. While the theoretical and substantive understanding of what stepfamilies are like and how they function has increased in recent decades, measures still lag behind in terms of both theory and research findings. With few exceptions, researchers working in this area have not applied the progress of the last two decades to the development of measures that capture issues unique to stepfamilies or that go beyond the stepchild-stepparent relationship. Our review of the literature suggests that the measurement of marital relationships for stepfamilies and remarried families could be further aided by:

- Careful and thorough psychometric analyses of existing measures on nationally representative samples of stepfamilies. It is still unclear whether measures developed for couples in first unions are appropriate for couples in stepfamilies;
- The study of cohabiting stepfamilies, as well as father-stepmother households.
- Inclusion of a life-course perspective, to study couples over time as their relationship evolves.

Couples Co-Parenting After Relationship Dissolution

Co-parenting is a feature of the couple relationship that can occur when both parents are together, and also when they are apart. The nature of the co-parenting relationship has the potential to change over time, as new unions are established and additional children may be born to either partner. Research suggests that those who have positive co-parenting relationships prior to divorce are more likely to be satisfied with their shared physical custody (Hetherington & Stanley-Heyen, 1994); and low conflict prior to divorce is also related to co-operative coparenting. Most prior research on couples who are co-parenting after relationship dissolution has focused on divorce and its effects on children. Few studies have specifically addressed the issue of the couple relationship after relationship dissolution. Our review of the literature suggests that the measurement of relationship quality for couples' co-parenting after relationship dissolution could benefit from the following:

- Testing of validated and comprehensive measures, such as the Ahrons' Quality of Co-parental Communication Scale, on populations typically subjected to welfare policy;
- Testing of measures that have been validated for divorced couples on couples who have dissolved their *non-marital* union;

- Expansion of theoretical models to consider the pathways by which co-parenting in diverse contexts would influence child well-being (e.g., the dissolution of cohabiting and visiting relationships, or co-parenting when one partner begins a new cohabiting relationship);
- Encouraging qualitative research on whether marital status makes a difference in how ‘co-parenting’ should be measured for separated couples; and
- Taking into account the age of the child and time since relationship disruption or divorce when considering appropriate co-parenting measures (Kitzmann et al., 2003).

Families with Children

Research on the marital quality of couples with children typically has two purposes: to examine the influence of marital quality on children’s well-being or to study the associations between family processes – such as becoming a parent -- and marital quality. Studies of the former category typically focus on the effects of parental conflict on offspring well-being in either childhood or young adulthood, often with the goal of understanding the divorce process. The relationship between parental conflict and child well-being is well-documented; however, the links between other aspects of marital quality and child well-being are not.

Research on measures of relationship quality among couples with children would benefit from:

- Development and validation of constructs such as ‘commitment,’ ‘intimacy’ and communication patterns among couples with children, and in particular, testing whether these constructs are linked to child well-being;
- Development of measures that can be used for unmarried as well as married couples;
- Testing the applicability of measures for race and ethnic subgroups; and
- Testing the applicability of measures for low-income and low-education sub-populations.

Military Families

A large and growing body of research currently exists on marital relationships in military populations, as researchers have examined the issues associated with deployment and family reintegration following prolonged involuntary separation. The most common separation in military populations that is likely to influence marital relationships involves an active duty member leaving a spouse as part of their military duty. Other separations can involve two active duty members of the same family. Recent examples of family separations due to deployment include peacekeeping missions, humanitarian aid missions, and wartime deployments (e.g., the Persian Gulf War). To these families, separation presents stresses to marital relationships in three stages-- preparation, during service, and reunion. Each stage has its own emotions and problems.

There are several strengths associated with the measurement of marriages among military populations. For the most part, available measures of marital relationships in military populations have used readily available measures from available literature on marriage and family relationships. However, in some cases, particular items have been adapted for use with military populations. Many studies have also made efforts to use shortened versions of longer measures in attempts to obtain information from respondents. In addition, some studies have attempted longitudinal analyses to ascertain changes in marital relationships from one time point to another, and in the various stages of preparation, wartime, and reunion.

However, on the other hand, existing measures are not designed to collect marital data on active duty military personnel. In some studies, it is also difficult to determine the validity and reliability of the measure for the military sample because no psychometric data are provided, and in some cases, when these data are provided, the reliability and validity estimates cited are often from a previous test of the measure. Thus, one has to extrapolate to determine how the measure works for the military sample. Based on our review, we suggest that future research on marital relationships in military populations could benefit from the following:

- The development, testing, refinement and use of measures that are specifically tailored for use in military populations and that capture specifically how deployment influences marital relationships;

- Research needs to consider how to modify general purpose measures so they work for military couples;
- The collection of data from more representative samples of military populations as opposed to small select samples from whom generalizations cannot be made. This may be achieved by the use of random sampling of military installations or rosters;
- Additional longitudinal research that enables researchers to determine how marital relationships in this population change over time; and
- Research on how the quality of marital relationships in military families influences child well-being.

Incarcerated Families

The prison population accounts for 1.3 million people at mid-year in 2001 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2002), and incarceration remains one of the leading causes of marital non-cohabitation. To date, research on the marital relations of those incarcerated is limited and inconclusive. The field has been hampered by limited data, and the existing data from which we must glean information on marital and family relationships are fragmented, of unknown reliability, and generally derived from small select samples of inmates in select prison populations. It seems clear that incarceration can have negative consequences for marriages and families. Findings suggest that future research on marital relationships in prison populations could benefit from the following:

- The collection of data from the spouses or “significant others” of prisoners;
- The collection of data and the use of measures that capture offenders’ perceptions of how imprisonment influences marital relationships and specifically about the role of separation, proximity, dwindling social support networks, limited contact, and lack of companionship and interaction;
- The collection of data from varied incarcerated populations that are more representative, as opposed to small select samples of offenders from whom generalizations cannot be made. Useful strategies that would yield more representative prison samples for marital research include recruitment through the use of court or institutional records;
- Testing and refinement of measures of marital relationships that are specifically tailored or augmented for use in prison populations and examination of ways to extend or augment general purpose measures so they reflect the concerns and circumstances of incarcerated persons;
- Longitudinal research that enables researchers to determine how marital relationships in this population change over time;
- In-depth data collection on marital relationships in all of the phases of the criminal justice process, including pre-release, and in the post-release phase; and
- Research on how the quality of marital relationships in prison families influences parent-child relationships and child well-being;

What Did the Reviews Tell Us About the Status of the Measurement of Marriage in General?

As described above, many studies have not distinguished among critical sub-populations, particularly when providing psychometric information. Accordingly, most existing measures and databases have already been described. In this section, we round out our review with a number of general and miscellaneous articles that address additional sub-populations, such as race/ethnicity sub-populations, and that examine constructs that are not typically explored except in studies of married couples, such as commitment and divorce proneness. Most measures continue to be individual report measures completed by a respondent or reported to an interviewer.

Surprisingly, only a small number of studies have been conducted that explicitly examine and compare the psychometrics of marriage measures in varied racial, ethnic and cultural subgroups. Those that exist do not provide evidence that the marriage measures that are being used are inappropriate or useless. However, a

broader range of constructs needs to be examined. Moreover, we have found few studies that examine psychometric issues among lower-income or low-education married couples as a separate subgroup.

Another gap in the literature on marriage is the limited work done on the construct of commitment. Important work by Scott Stanley and Howard Markman (1992) and Blaine Fowers (2003) calls attention to this construct, and studies by these researchers provide promising measures; but, as they recognize, there is a need to examine the utility of their measures in more diverse samples.

Accordingly, despite the plethora of research on marriage shared in the sub-population reviews and in this section, several fundamental gaps exist. There is a need for:

- Examination of measures within race, ethnicity and cultural subgroups;
- Testing the applicability of measures for low-income and low-education populations; and
- Qualitative and quantitative work to further develop and examine measures of commitment that can be used in varied populations.

What Did the Reviews Tell Us About Existing Research on the Measurement of Marital Norms, Attitudes and Values for the General Population?

Measures of marital attitudes and values are infrequently used by social scientists conducting marriage research. In a recent review, Fowers (2003) found that other measures, such as marital conflict, are covered widely in the literature, while measures of marital attitudes and values seem to be underrepresented (2003). Our review of the literature suggests the following:

- Recent ethnographic and statistical analytic research by those using Fragile Families data on low-income, urban samples (Edin, 2000; Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2003) suggests that attitudes are quite important for low-income populations--both in terms of predicting their likelihood to enter into marriages as well as to maintain their marriages. For instance, positive attitudes about marriage and marital expectations (or plans) have also been found to associated with higher relationship stability among cohabiting couples (Axinn & Thornton, 1993; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; McGinnis, 2003). Such concepts that predict marital outcomes and should not be missing from studies exploring marriage.
- The collection of social normative beliefs about marriage is important as these beliefs are indicators of how society views the health of marriage as an institution. Furthermore, these social norms may eventually have some effect on social behaviors regarding marriage and divorce in the future.
- Data on the attitudes and values of children regarding marriage are a neglected topic. The perspectives of children and youth may provide important information about patterns and trends that are likely to unfold.

Concluding Comments

The articles reviewed in this phase of our work have nearly all been published in peer-reviewed journals. Accordingly, the measures that are used generally have predictive power and have adequate psychometric properties. Nevertheless, the psychometric information that is provided is quite limited. Authors who report any psychometric information tend to report on the reliability of scales, generally the alpha for the scale. Other criteria are almost never discussed, e.g., the distribution of scores on an item, scale or index, the construct validity of a measure, or particularly the prospective validity of a measure. Implicitly, authors seem to be relying on face validity. Importantly, however, very few articles examine the psychometric properties of the measures that they use for critical subgroups, other than gender and occasionally the major family structure groups, e.g., married versus divorced couples. Thus, there is considerable uncertainty about whether the measures used in these articles are appropriate for other family structure groups, such as visiting couples

or cohabiting couples, and whether the measures are appropriate for varied race, ethnicity, and cultural groups or for low-income couples. Face validity among researchers is not a sufficient standard for ensuring that measures are conceptually appropriate and that they are effective across a diverse population.

This review was intentionally organized to identify important population sub-groups because the greatest challenge is developing measures for non-traditional family forms. Hence, it is essential to identify whatever studies exist on cohabiting couples, visiting couples, couples with an incarcerated partner or a partner in the military, and couples dealing with co-parenting issues. Such studies would be expected to suggest appropriate measures or items. Unfortunately, we did not find any one measure that has been used successfully across all sub-populations. The Conflict Tactics Scale is widely used when violence is studied, and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale and the Marital Adjustment Test are used in several studies, as are a handful of additional measures; but there is no evidence that the field has “voted with its feet” by selecting a single measure or a small group of measures.

Nevertheless, for some constructs many of the measures used in these studies are quite similar. For example, varied satisfaction items focus on satisfaction across similar aspects of marriage, such as communication. Thus, the items in current use represent an excellent pool of potential items for new scales and indices.

Several additional limitations of the available research warrant mention. For example, a number of studies describe scales when the construct seems more appropriately conceptualized as an index. Items on a scale are correlated with each other and describe an underlying construct. On the other hand, items on an index are not necessarily correlated. Thus, it is not necessarily the case that conflict over in-laws is expected to predict conflict over children or sex or religion. Accordingly, creating an index might be more appropriate. Also, little explicit attention is given in these studies to examining short versions of scales or to comparing multiple approaches to assessing a given construct. Most measures are survey items that are administered by interviewers or completed by the respondent himself or herself.

Despite the limitations, the information derived from this review of published studies will be helpful in the next phase of the project. As noted, a compendium of measures used in existing studies and in the major national surveys was compiled in the initial phase of our work. In addition, in the second phase of our work, researchers working in the area were asked to prepare recommendation memos highlighting the critical conceptual and measurement issues that need to be addressed in our work to define and measure healthy marriage. This literature review provides additional important information on the psychometric properties of available measures and their utility in multivariate, explanatory empirical studies. Based on this work so far, we have prepared a book chapter (Moore et al., in press) that provides a perspective on the components of a healthy marriage and on related constructs that are not part of the definition of a healthy marriage (Moore et al., 2003).

Next steps will draw on the information accumulated in the first three tasks to flesh out these components of a healthy marriage. As proposed, the constructs include:

- Marital satisfaction
- Communication
- Marital status
- Conflict / conflict resolution
- Violence
- Fidelity
- Interaction / time together
- Intimacy / emotional support
- Couple commitment

- Commitment to children, and
- Duration

The next task is to prepare potential measures for each of these constructs and explore how these constructs can be aggregated into a summary measure of healthy marriage that works across varied populations. Potential measures have been identified for all of these constructs; however, except for marital satisfaction and communication, psychometric evidence for the measures is generally quite limited. Also, as noted, psychometric information is rarely available for critical subgroups or lower income couples, and information on prospective validity is particularly lacking. Accordingly, while the measures that will be prepared will build on available measures and the experience and advice of those working in the field, they will benefit from being tested further prior to being fielded in critical research or evaluation studies.

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