Reciprocal supportiveness and relationship stability in married, cohabiting, and visiting couples.

Bryndl E. Hohmann-Marriott

Arizona State University

Abstract

The emotional support provided by the partner provides a benefit for individuals in relationships, but it is not clear whether supportiveness impacts both married and unmarried relationships in similar ways. The stability of relationships may be influenced by supportiveness, especially when the support is reciprocal, or provided by both partners. Using the first two waves of the Fragile Families study, this research focuses on the impact of reciprocal emotional supportiveness on relationship stability, examining this as an area of potential difference in married, cohabiting, and visiting couples. This comparison of the effect of supportiveness on relationship stability across relationship type will advance our understanding of how marital and nonmarital relationships provide benefits to individuals, and will provide suggestions for where policy initiatives to support families should direct their focus.

Reciprocal supportiveness and relationship stability in married, cohabiting, and visiting couples.

Intimate relationships offer many advantages with potential to enhance social, economic, psychological and physical well-being. Yet it is not clear if relationship type is the key to deriving these benefits. Do only married individuals reap the benefits of being in a relationship? Some researchers contend that cohabiting or dating couples receive only minimal advantages over singles while married individuals are, on average, far better off (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). The question of relationship type versus relationship quality is a critical one as billion-dollar policy initiatives to promote marriage are proposed by the Bush administration (McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2001). If it is marriage per se that enhances well being then such initiatives may be money well spent. However, our understanding of the extent to which relationship quality varies by relationship type is limited. This study examines the interaction of relationship quality and relationship type when predicting relationship stability. If supportive couples, regardless of relationship type, are more stable than their unsupportive counterparts, we have reason to question whether our initiatives should focus on encouraging marriage over other types of relationships rather than providing couples with the tools to maintain their mutual support of one another.

Stability

One benefit of being in a relationship develops from the stability of that relationship. A longer-lasting relationship will give the individuals in that relationship more security and potentially less disruption than a relationship which breaks up. Marriages, on the whole, tend to last longer than nonmarital relationships (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). However, a substantial number of nonmarital relationships persevere, either continuing as they are or making the transition to marriage (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991) – and are therefore still presumably "stable." Also, many marriages end after only a brief existence; the risk of divorce is highest in the first few years of marriage. Thus, it is possible that marriage may not convey as much of an added benefit of stability once other factors are taken into consideration, since the benefits of being in a relationship and avoiding dissolution will be applicable to couples whether or not they are married.

The stability of married or unmarried relationships has an additional importance when the couple has children together, since multiple parental relationship transitions can be detrimental to children's wellbeing (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet 1995), and fathers' involvement is decreased when they are no longer in a relationship with the child's mother (White, Brinkerhoff, & Booth, 1985; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Furstenberg & Harris, 1992). While some presume that marriage is the most stable environment in which to raise children, others point out that serial marriages may be disruptive to children while stable living arrangements, regardless of the residential pattern of both parents, can be beneficial.

Supportiveness

Another benefit of relationships is the emotional support provided by the partners to each other.

> "Knowing there is someone willing to care for you, because they love and are committed to you, is in itself a great boost to one's psychological well-being. … Not every marriage partner is equally good at providing social support. But in marriages that last, partners are usually assured a certain basic level of emotional sustenance" (Waite and Gallagher, 2000, pp. 32-33).

Having a partner from whom one can receive emotional support may be advantageous, but the benefits of partner supportiveness are not necessarily limited only to marital relationships. Other types of relationships may also involve partners who care for one another and are supportive of one another, bringing benefits to those individuals, as well.

Emotional support, critical to relationship well-being, has often been overlooked (Erickson, 1993), and needs to be included in investigations of relationship quality (Stevens et al, 2001). Supportiveness is such a key aspect of relationships that a relationship without supportiveness can cause more psychological distress than having no relationship at all (Ross, 1995). When individuals in various types of relationships are compared, the emotional support provided by the partner contributes to lower levels of psychological distress for married and cohabiting individuals, but support does not provide these benefits to individuals who are in a relationship but who are not cohabiting (Ross, 1995). Thus, it would appear that supportiveness does have differential impacts on relationships depending on their type, but that married and cohabiting partners benefit equally from supportiveness.

Supportiveness and stability may be associated with one another. In a more stable relationship, the support will be present for a longer amount of time. In addition, the supportiveness of the couple will contribute to the stability of the relationship. The emotional quality of a marriage has been found to be an influential dynamic in the stability of that marriage (Booth et al. 1985; Sayer and Bianchi 2000; Sanchez and Gager 2000; Gottman 1994; Karney and Bradbury 1995). However, supportiveness is not only important in marriages; emotional support is also a very important predictor of the stability of nonmarital unions (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2003). Thus, partners receiving emotional support can have both a more stable relationship and a more beneficial relationship.

Reciprocal Supportiveness

The effects of supportiveness may be even stronger when both partners are taken into consideration. The dynamic between the partners contributes to the stability and quality of their relationship. For example, higher levels of couple agreement in marriage are associated with higher levels of relationship happiness and satisfaction (Bahr et al. 1983; Pasley et al. 1984), while low levels of agreement in marriage are associated with high levels of conflict (Sabourin et al. 1993; Chinitz & Brown 2001), and with relationship dissolution (Hill et al. 1981; Chinitz & Brown 2001).

Indeed, relationships appear to be most beneficial when the partners are supportive of each other. This reciprocal supportiveness, where each individual perceives their partner as providing emotional support, and where there is an approximately equal exchange of supportiveness, contributes to positive mood (Gleason et al, 2003), higher levels of marital happiness (Wright & Aquilino, 1998), and greater satisfaction with the relationship (Holm et al, 2001).

One further aspect is the gendered nature of emotional support, or emotion work, which tends to be more integral to the female role in relationships than to the male role (Erickson, 1993). It is possible that when emotional support is not reciprocal, then the impact on the relationship stability will be different if the woman is providing more support than if the man is providing more support. Therefore, the gendered nature of unequal support needs to be considered.

Reciprocal supportiveness appears to be a powerful factor in relationship processes, and it could also influence the stability of the relationship. There has been no research, however, on the impact of reciprocal supportiveness on relationship stability, or on the dynamics of reciprocal supportiveness in both marital and nonmarital relationships.

Research Focus

Relationship stability and partner supportiveness each provide benefits to the partners, and they are interconnected in that supportiveness may influence the stability of the relationship. The reciprocity of emotional support appears to be a critical aspect of its impact on relationships. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the relationship processes of couples in both married and unmarried relationships and to observe how these processes impact the stability of the relationship. This comparison of the effect of supportiveness on relationship stability across relationship type will advance our understanding of how marital and nonmarital relationships provide benefits to individuals. The current study will focus on the impact of reciprocal emotional supportiveness on relationship stability, examining this as an area of potential difference in married, cohabiting, and visiting couples.

It is important to note that there are clearly selection effects drawing individuals into each relationship type (see, for example, Lilliard, Brien, & Waite, 1995), and there may also be a joint selectivity process leading to relationship types and relationship quality; those who are more inclined to provide support to a partner may also be those drawn to formalizing their relationship through marriage. While this study does not directly address this selection process, the analyses are intended to shed light on the role of relationship quality on relationship stability across a variety of relationship types. If reciprocally supportive couples are more stable regardless of relationship type it would suggest that emphasis should be placed on increasing the reciprocal supportiveness of couples, rather than focusing entirely on the goal of marriage.

Data and Methods

Data are from the baseline and 1-year interviews of the Fragile Families Study. In the baseline interview, new mothers in 20 U.S. cities were interviewed in the hospital at the time of their baby's birth, and the fathers were interviewed at the same time or shortly thereafter. A follow-up interview was conducted a year later providing a longitudinal look at relationship stability. In addition, a major purpose of this research is to understand more about the relationships of unmarried parents, allowing for a comparison of married, cohabiting, and other unmarried couples. Data are weighted to be representative of nonmarital births in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000.

Data for this study are drawn from the 2,699 cases where both the mother and the father were included in the baseline survey and were in a romantic relationship at baseline. Three relationship categories were constructed from the couple's marital status, living situation, and romantic involvement, all using the mother's report at baseline. These include 826 married couples (weighted percent: 69), 1,391 cohabiting couples (in a romantic relationship and cohabiting; weighted percent: 22), and 749 visiting couples (in a romantic relationship but not cohabiting; weighted percent: 10).

This survey is unique in several aspects. The inclusion of both the male partner and the female partner allows for an exploration of interpersonal dynamics. Also, the study includes couples in committed relationships but not necessarily married or living together. Further, all couples are in a comparable juncture in the relationship life course since they have all had a child together quite recently, and are in the "magic moment," when their relationship is likely to be at a high peak. If partners are not supportive at this point in time, this may signal especially serious problems. These data strengths are accompanied by some weaknesses as well, especially the selection bias introduced due to the circumstance that fathers who did not agree to be surveyed may be the least committed.

All questions used in this analysis were asked of both fathers and mothers, with the following exceptions: Relationship status at baseline and Year 1 are based only on the mother's report, since the two partners were not always surveyed at the same time point, which could

lead to discrepancies in reporting due to actual changes in the relationship. In addition, the measure of poverty was only asked of the mothers.

At Year 1, the three types of relationships show a marked difference in stability. Married couples were coded as together if they remained married, and not together if they separated or divorced. Cohabiting couples were coded as together if they remained cohabiting or if they married, and not together if they separated. Finally, visiting couples were coded as together if they remained visiting, were cohabiting, or married, and as not together if they separated. Figure 1 shows that almost all couples who were married at baseline were still together at Year 1, while less than three-quarters of cohabiting couples and only half of visiting couples were still together at Year 1.

Emotional supportiveness was measured using four questions asked of all respondents; answers could include often, sometimes, or never. The questions ask each respondent: "Thinking about your relationship with [partner], how often would you say that: He/She was fair and willing to compromise when you had a disagreement; He/She encouraged or helped you to do things that were important to you; He/She expressed affection or love for you; He/She insulted or criticized you or your ideas." The last question is reverse-coded so that for all measures, higher values indicate higher amounts of supportiveness. The supportiveness of the woman represents the responses of the man when asked about his partner, and the supportiveness of the man represents the responses of the woman when asked about her partner. Therefore, supportiveness as it is measured in this survey is the perception of partner support, rather than self-report.

Couple support was constructed by comparing the two responses; couples where each partner reported that their partner was often supportive were coded as 'both,' or reciprocally supportive, couples where only the woman was reported to be often supportive were coded as 'woman more', couples where only the man was reported to be often supportive were coded as 'man more', and couples where neither partner was reported to be often supportive were coded as 'neither'. This coding is similar to other research comparing partner responses categorically (see, for example, Gager & Sanchez, 2003).

Sociodemographic and relationship variables include age, ethnicity and ethnic similarity, education and educational similarity, a measure of mother's poverty, and the length of the relationship. Ethnicity was recoded into five categories of White (non-Hispanic), Black (non-Hispanic), Latino (respondent indicated Hispanic or Latino origin or descent, regardless of race), Asian, and Native American. Ethnic similarity measures whether the partners are both White, both non-White, or mixed. Education was recoded into three categories of less than high school, high school diploma, and at least some college. Educational similarity measures whether the partners have the same level of education or are different. Mother's poverty is indicated by whether she paid for the child's birth with Medicaid. Length of the relationship is measured by averaging the number of years the mother and father reported that they knew each other before the mother became pregnant. These variables are shown for all three relationship types in Table 1.

Descriptive Results

The emotional supportiveness that was most often reported in all three couple types, for both men and women, was expressing affection, as can be seen in Table 2. The type of supportiveness least often reported was being fair and willing to compromise, with just over half of all partners in all relationship types described as often fair and willing to compromise. When there were differences between the three relationship types, the differences were often sharpest when comparing visiting couples, who showed less support, to married and cohabiting couples,

who showed greater support. There are few gender differences, with the exception that men were less likely to be perceived as insulting or criticizing than women.

Couples in all three relationship types were most often reciprocally supportive in expressing affection to one another, while the least amount of reciprocity is found in being fair and willing to compromise. There is some variation across relationship type. Reciprocal support is found in similar amounts in married and cohabiting couples, although when fairness is compared, fewer cohabiting couples are reciprocally supportive than married couples. For the most part, visiting couples show less reciprocal support than the other two relationship types.

Discussion and Further Analysis

These preliminary findings demonstrate that there are some areas of difference between the three relationship types; being fair and willing to compromise shows the greatest variation. Further, there are a considerable proportion of couples in each relationship type where support is not reported to be reciprocal across the partners, suggesting that these couples have a potential risk of dissolution.

The next stage of this research examines the question of how reciprocal support and unequal support impacts relationship stability. In addition, it examines whether unmarried couples who are not reciprocally supportive are at the same or different risk of dissolution than married couples who are not reciprocally supportive. To achieve this, logistic regression analyses will be conducted to measure the relative impact of couple type and supportiveness on relationship stability. An additional analysis will explore the interaction effects of couple type and supportiveness on stability.

References

Bahr, S.J., Chapell, C.B., et al. 1983. Age at marriage, role enactment, role consensus, and marital satisfaction. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 45,* 4, 795-803.

Booth, A., Johnson, D.R, White, L. & Edwards, J.N. 1985. Predicting divorce and permanent separation. *Journal of Family Issues, 6*, 331-346.

Bumpass, L.L., Raley, R.K. & Sweet, J.A. 1995. The changing character of stepfamilies: Implications of cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing. *Demography, 32,* 425-436.

Bumpass, L.L., Sweet, J.A., & Cherlin, A. 1991. The role of cohabitation in declining rates of marriage. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 53,* 913-927.

Carlson, M., McLanahan, S., & England, P. 2003. Union formation and dissolution in fragile families. *Center for Research on Child Wellbeing Working Paper #01-06-FF.*

Chinitz, J.G. & Brown, R.A. 2001. Religious homogamy, marital conflict, and stability in same-faith and interfaith Jewish marriages. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 40,* 4, 723-733.

Erickson, R.J. 1993. Reconceptualizing family work: The effect of emotion work on perceptions of marital quality. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 55,* 4, 888 -900.

Furstenberg, F.F.Jr. & Nord, C.W. 1985. Parenting apart: Patterns of childrearing after marital disruption. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 47,* 893-904.

Furstenberg, F.F.Jr., & Harris, K.M. 1992. The disappearing American father? Divorce and the waning significance of biological parenthood. In: South, S.J. & Tolnay, S.E. (Eds.). *The changing American family: Sociological and demographic perspectives,* pp. 197-223. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Gager, C.T., & Sanchez, L. 2003. Two as One? Couples' Perceptions of Time Spent Together, Marital Quality, and the Risk of Divorce. *Journal of Family Issues, 24,* 1, 21-50.

Gleason, M.E.J, Iida, M., Bolger, N., & Shrout, P.E. (2003). Daily supportive equity in close relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 29,* 8, 1036-1045.

Gottman, J.M. 1994. *What Predicts Divorce? The Relationship Between Marital Processes and Marital Outcomes*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hill, C.T., Peplau, L.A., et al. 1981. Differing perceptions in dating couples: Sex roles vs. alternative explanations. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 5,* 3, 418-434.

Holm, K.E., Werner-Wilson, R.J., Cook, A.S., & Berger, P.S. 2001. The association between emotion work balance and relationship satisfaction of couples seeking therapy. *American Journal of Family Therapy, 29,* 3, 193-205.

Karney, B.R., & Bradbury, T.N. 1995. The longitudinal course of marital quality and stability: A review of theory, method, and research." *Psychological Bulletin, 118*, 3-34.

Lilliard, L.L., Brien, M.J., & Waite, L.J. 1995. Premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital dissolution: A matter of self-selection? *Demography, 32,* 437-457.

McLanahan, S., Garfinkel, I, & Mincy, R. 2001. Fragile Families, Welfare Reform, and Marriage. *Policy Brief* No. 10. The Brookings Institution

Pasley, K., Ihinger-Tallman, M., & Coleman, C. 1984. Consensus styles among happy and unhappy remarried couples. *Family Relations, 33,* 3, 451-457.

Ross, C.E. 1995. Reconceptualizing marital status as a continuum of social attachment. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 57,* 1, 129-140.

Sabourin, T.C., Infante, D.E., et al. 1993. Verbal aggression in marriages: A comparison of violent, distressed but nonviolent, and nondistressed couples. *Human Communication Research, 20,* 2, 245-267.

Sanchez, L. & Gager, C. 2000. Hard living, perceived entitlement to a great marriage and marital dissolution. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62,*708-722.

Sayer, L.C. & Bianchi, S. M. 2000. Women's economic independence and the probability of divorce. *Journal of Family Issues, 21,* 906-943.

Stevens, D., Kiger, G., Riley, P.J. 2001. Working hard and hardly working: Domestic labor and marital satisfaction among dual-earner couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 63,* 2, 514-526.

Waite, L.J. & Gallagher, M. 2000. *The case for marriage: Why married people are happier, healthier, and better off financially*. Broadway Books:NY.

White, L.K., Brinkerhoff, D.B., & Booth, A. 1985. The effect of marital disruption on child's attachment to parents. *Journal of Family Issues, 6*, 5-22.

Wright, D., Aquilino, W.S. 1998. Influence of emotional support exchange in marriage on caregiving wives' burden and marital satisfaction. *Family Relations, 47,* 2, 195-204.

Table 1. Sociodemographic and Couple Characteristics of Married, Cohabiting, and Visiting Couples[1]

	Married	Cohabiting	Visiting
Age (mean)			
Woman	29	24	23
Man	32	27	25
Ethnicity (%)			
Woman			
White	60	33	12
Black	10	29	62
Latino	21	36	23
Asian	6	2	2
Native American	1	<1	1
Man			
White	58	27	10
Black	13	33	64
Latino	24	38	23
Asian	5	2	2
Native American	1	<1	3
Couple			
Both white	53	25	9
Both nonwhite	35	65	87
White/Nonwhite	12	10	5
Education (%)			
Woman			
Less than HS	13	35	37
HS diploma	17	34	34
Some college	69	31	30
Man			
Less than HS	14	38	41
HS diploma	22	36	34
Some college	64	26	24
Couple			
Both lt HS	8	21	23
Both HS	8	15	17
Both college	56	15	14
Different Education	29	50	47
Poverty (%)	20	67	74
Length (mean years)	8.11	3.88	3.41

[1] Data are from the Fragile Families study, where both partners were interviewed and in a romantic relationship or marriage. Participants include 826 (weighted percent = 69) married couples, 1391 (weighted percent = 22) cohabiting couples, and 749 (weighted percent = 10) visiting couples who are in a romantic relationship but not cohabiting. Results are weighted to be representative of unmarried births in U.S. cities larger than 200,000.

Table 2: Percent of Married, Cohabiting, and Visiting Partners and Couples with Reported Emotional Supportiveness[1]

	Married	Cohabiting	Visiting
Supportiveness of Woman[2]			
Often Fair[3]	61	54	52
Often Helps[4]	80	80	74
Often Expresses Affection[5]	86	88	80
Never insults[6]	60	66	65
Supportiveness of Man[7]			
Often Fair[3]	67	58	40
Often Helps[4]	79	82	76
Often Expresses Affection[5]	86	87	81
Never insults[6]	76	76	74
Couple Support[8]:			
Fair			
Both	44	32	23
Woman more	16	22	28
Man more	23	26	16
Neither	16	20	32
Help			
Both	65	68	58
Woman more	15	12	16
Man more	14	14	18
Neither	6	6	8
Affection			
Both	76	77	64
Woman more	10	10	16
Man more	10	9	17
Neither	4	3	3
Never Insults			
Both	49	53	52
Woman more	11	13	13
Man more	27	23	22
Neither	12	11	13

[1] Data are from the Fragile Families study, where both partners were interviewed and in a romantic relationship or marriage. Participants include 826 (weighted percent = 69) married couples, 1391 (weighted percent = 22) cohabiting couples, and 749 (weighted percent = 10) visiting couples who are in a romantic relationship but not cohabiting. Results are weighted to be representative of unmarried births in U.S. cities larger than 200,000.
[2] Supportiveness of woman as reported by her male partner.
[3] Fair = Fair and willing to compromise
[4] Help = Encourages or helps partner to do things that are important to partner
[5] Affection = Expresses affection or love
[6] Insult = Insults or criticizes partner or partner's ideas
[7] Supportiveness of man as reported by his female partner.
[8] The couple score represents couples where both partners are reported to provide support often, only one often, or neither often (for "insult," a response of 'never' is used instead of 'often').

Figure 1: Percent of couples who were married, cohabiting, or visiting at baseline who are still together at Year 1