

**ADOLESCENT MARRIAGE AND COHABITATION EXPECTATIONS:
A FOCUS ON PARTICIPANTS IN RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recently, the federal government has attempted to support marriage by providing financial and political resources for marriage and relationship initiatives, particularly those that target poor and disadvantaged populations. This comes in response to a shift in marriage behavior during the last half of the 20th century in the United States wherein age at first marriage, nonmarital childbearing, cohabitation, and divorce rates increased (Cherlin 2004). Subsequently, almost half of all first marriages are expected to end in divorce or separation with an even greater percentage of second marriages failing (Schoen & Canudas-Romo 2006). Regardless of the tenuous nature of modern marriage, and the increased age at first marriage, most Americans expect to and will marry someday (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers 2007; Nock 2005). At the same time, cohabitation has become more common (Nock 2005), and has garnered acceptance as a pathway to marriage especially among young adults in the United States. These trends are particularly pronounced among low-income and disadvantaged populations and reflect a shift in ideological beliefs concerning normative life course events.

Given the aims of relationship education programs and policies it is important to consider the marriage and cohabitation expectations of adolescents. There are currently few relationship

education programs that target adolescents. Existing interventions tailored toward adolescents encourage relationship skills and seek to forestall premarital sex and childbearing. Research suggests that marriages among adolescents are particularly at risk for divorce compared to marriages later in life (Booth & Edwards 1985). For this reason, adolescent relationship education programs help youth develop the skills necessary to forge healthy relationships while emphasizing the importance of establishing a strong basis for marriage. Understanding adolescents' expectations to marry and cohabit, and how these expectations might differ in the context of various relationships, may provide information about their subsequent marriage behavior as adults. Better understanding of adolescents' marriage and cohabitation expectations can also inform relationship education policies and programs that target youth.

Adolescent romantic relationships unfold during a unique stage in the life course, one that is characterized by keen interest in relationships and sexuality, but with little preparation for navigating this new type of intimate contact. Early romantic relationships provide a framework for interaction with the opposite sex and influence the trajectory of adult relationships and family transitions. It is for this reason that the quality of adolescents' early romantic relationships is particularly important, and relationship programs that seek to improve these relationships are pivotal. New family trends suggest the importance of establishing current analyses of adolescents' beliefs and behaviors. This generation will be moving into a new world of decision-making that was and is not part of the life course landscape of their parents. As such, it is vital to fully understand the expectations that guide adolescents' relationship decisions. While nontraditional unions and family structures are becoming increasingly more common, the majority of adolescents still express negative attitudes toward divorce and view marriage as a lifelong commitment (Martin, Specter, Martin, & Martin 2003). These findings are complicated

by research that suggests over half of adolescents also hold positive attitudes toward cohabitation and believe that cohabitation is a means for increasing the likelihood of a successful marriage (Martin et al. 2003; Brown 2006).

The goal of this work is to evaluate the marriage and cohabitation expectations of adolescents in an effort to advance knowledge of the factors that influence adolescents' transition to healthy adult relationships and marriages, namely marriage beliefs, socioeconomic disadvantage associated with parents' marital status and social resources, relationship status and current relationship characteristics (e.g. quality and engagement), parenthood status, demographic characteristics (e.g. race and gender), and peer influence. The life course perspective serves as the conceptual framework for ensuing analyses by highlighting the occurrence of romantic relationships during a pivotal period of growth, and highlighting the ramifications of these relationships and transitions to more binding adult relationships. Participation in relationship education programs is expected to influence subsequent adult relationships to the extent that: 1) healthy communication skills are learned, 2) positive behavioral patterns are implemented, 3) adolescents make successful life course transitions as they pertain to childbearing and relationship behaviors, and 4) adolescents who are already parents implement more stable family structures that involve cooperative parenting and strong family bonds.

This work utilizes three data sets: 1) existing data from the relationship program *No Jerks* (including pre-/post-class assessments, a brief marriage attitudes survey, and demographic data) that highlights and advances knowledge of the views and experiences of disadvantaged adolescents who partake in relationship education programs; 2) new data from a pilot relationship education program *Relationship Smarts Plus* including pre-/post-class assessments,

demographic data, and in-depth interviews; and 3) wave one quantitative and qualitative findings from the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study with a particular emphasis on addressing factors that account for socioeconomic differences in marriage and cohabitation expectations including marriage beliefs, socioeconomic disadvantage associated with parents' marital status and social resources, relationship status and current relationship characteristics (e.g. quality and engagement), parenthood status, demographic characteristics (e.g. race and gender), and peer influence.

The current work will address the following principal research questions:

Question 1: What are the expectations concerning marriage and cohabitation among different samples of adolescents?

Question 2: Are there socioeconomic differentials in marriage and cohabitation expectations? Are these differences explained by marriage beliefs, socioeconomic status, relationship status, current relationship characteristics, demographic characteristics, parenthood status, and peer influence?

Question 3: How does participation in relationship education programs influence adolescents' expectations concerning marriage and cohabitation?