



Discordance in couples' reporting of courtship stages: Implications for measurement and marital quality

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ABSTRACT

The symbolism of rituals creates a shared understanding of events among group members. In the context of romantic relationships, a shared understanding of relationship status transitions may be associated with greater commitment and higher quality relationships. We argue that couples with differing retrospective accounts of their premarital courtship may not have had clear discussions or rituals marking relationship turning points. We test the association between discordance in couples' reports of premarital courtship stages and marital quality using data from married couples in a national online survey ($n = 1504$). We find that couple discordance is common, particularly among former premarital cohabitators and for the less institutionalized relationship stages of dating and stayovers, and is associated with lower marital quality. Implications for relationship measurement and the meaning of couple discordance are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Sociology has long recognized the symbolic power of rituals for communicating shared meaning in social interactions (for a review, see Gusfield and Michalowicz, 1984) even as they are a way of sharing of true emotion (Grimes, 2000; Hochschild, 1998; Schweingruber et al., 2004). In the romantic relationship context specifically, relationship rituals such as engagement may play a protective role in relationship development because of the clarity, mutuality, and publicness of the information carried about commitment (Stanley et al., 2010b). Couples who “slide” into more serious union stages, rather than “deciding” to do so, may be at greater risk for poor relationship outcomes because of how such courtship patterns affect the development of commitment (Rhoades et al., 2009; Stanley et al., 2010a, 2006; Vennum and Fincham, 2011).

If clear decisions and signals about commitment provide some protection as relationships progress toward marriage, discordance in partners' retrospective reports of the progression of their relationship may be a potential indicator that a couple “slid” into a more serious relationship rather than having “decided” to do so. Turning points in the relationship that were more clearly demarcated should be more salient, and therefore more memorable. Differing reports of a relationship's history may be a consequence of couples progressing without clear signals in the relationship, such as particular conversations about what was happening in the relationship and what it meant; this may have implications for the quality of their relationship. We examine whether discordance in couples' retrospective reports of whether and when various relationship stages took place is associated with current marital quality.

The present study builds on previous research by (1) investigating the frequency of discordance in couples' retrospective reporting of premarital relationship stages, (2) examining premarital relationship stages beyond pre-engagement

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cohabitation as potentially meaningful areas of discordance, and (3) considering whether such intra-couple discordance is a meaningful risk factor for poorer marital quality. Given that those who cohabit before marriage have experienced an additional relationship stage, compared to those who enter marriage directly, and given indications in the existing literature that premarital cohabitators are more likely than those who enter marriage directly to have slid into a more serious relationship without proactively deciding to do so (as one can more easily slide into cohabitation than marriage), we pay particular attention to potential differences between premarital cohabitators and noncohabitators. We use original survey data collected in a special topics module of the Knowledge Networks online research panel. Our data are representative of currently married couples and include responses from both members of the couple about the timing of their premarital courtship stages.

2. Background

2.1. “Sliding” versus “Deciding” and relationship quality

Spouses who cohabited without being engaged report lower dedication and marital satisfaction as well as a greater likelihood of divorce than those who entered marriage directly or who only cohabited after engagement (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades et al., 2009). In a similar vein, the quality of cohabiting relationships differs based on whether or not there is a commitment to marry (Brown and Booth, 1996). This follows from the idea that the symbolism of rituals fosters a shared understanding of events and adjustment to new social roles (Young, 1965); specifically, the ritual of engagement prior to cohabitation strengthens relationship quality and reduces marital dissolution by increasing the likelihood that the couple agreed about the meaning and direction of the relationship.

Stanley et al. (2006) argued that part of the risk of pre-engagement cohabitation was that couples may have “slid” into an increasingly serious relationship without consciously making the decision to do so. The authors suggested that some cohabiting couples may end up following a path into marriage that is not based primarily on the quality of their relationships, but rather on the inertia that develops when they already share a home, possessions, and sometimes children. Getting engaged or explicitly deciding on future marriage plans prior to cohabitation, therefore, can be a marker that “deciding” rather than “sliding” led a couple down the aisle. Further, such clear and public markers should decrease the likelihood that partners misperceive one another’s commitment levels (Stanley et al., 2010b); that is, engaging in the ritual of engagement – the proposal, the ring, the engagement party – ensures the couple has a shared understanding of one another’s intentions for the relationship. This is supported empirically, with couples who cohabit prior to engagement more likely to show asymmetrical levels of dedication in the relationship; these differences do not abate after the transition into marriage (Rhoades et al., 2006).

Other relationship transitions—beyond engagement—may be more or less ritualized for couples; for example, starting to spend the night together on a regular basis may have a different meaning if having “the talk” accompanies partners’ exchanging house keys or leaving a toothbrush in the bathroom. If a girlfriend gives her boyfriend a house key, saying it is easier than coordinating their schedules, the meaning and salience of this step in their relationship is far different than if she explains she is giving him the house key because she trusts him and imagines they will live together some day. In the first instance, the event of starting to spend the night together on a regular basis is not marked in any particular way that would make the couple likely to remember it; in the second instance, the expressed symbolism of the event raises its salience, more likely demarcating it as a memorable event (and therefore one on which they could give similar retrospective reports).

We argue that discordance in couples’ retrospective reporting of relationship stages could be a potential marker for “sliding.” Couples’ discordance about the progression and timing of their relationship stages may signal the lack of an explicit decision-making process or weaker commitment (Manning and Smock, 2005; Rhoades et al., 2006, 2009). A range of behaviors, including both more institutionalized rituals (like engagement) and less institutionalized rituals (like having “the talk” or changing your Facebook status), may create a more conscious decision to advance the relationship and increase the memorability of the event for both partners. Therefore, as a potential indicator of sliding, couple discordance about the occurrence and start date of various relationship stages may be associated with lower relationship quality.

2.2. Couple discordance on relationship stages

Previous research has examined the quality of current versus retrospective reports of marriage and cohabitation start dates, and the level of agreement between partners in their reporting of these dates (Hayford and Morgan, 2008; Lillard and Waite, 1989; Peters, 1988; Teitler and Reichman, 2001; Thomson and Colella, 1992). Researchers examining the quality of reports of marriage start dates generally find high levels of concordance between partners and for the same partner across multiple survey waves. For example, Lillard and Waite (1989) found that 83% of husbands and wives reported the same marriage year in the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), and Peters (1988) found that only 4% of women in the 1968 National Longitudinal Survey (NLS) reported marriage dates that differed by more than a year across survey waves. Discordance over the occurrence and date of marital disruption was more common. Discordance also increased as the length of time between the event and the survey increased, and couples with simpler relationship histories (such as having only one marriage versus multiple marriages) were also more likely to agree (Lillard and Waite, 1989; Peters, 1988).

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