



Effects of relationship duration, cohabitation, and marriage on the frequency of intercourse in couples: Findings from German panel data



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ABSTRACT

Research into the changes in the frequency of sexual intercourse is (with few exceptions) limited to cross-sectional analyses of marital duration. We investigate the frequency of intercourse while taking into account relationship duration as well as the duration of cohabitation and marriage, effects of parenthood, and relationship quality. For the analysis we apply fixed effects regression models using data from the German Family Panel (pairfam), a nationwide randomly sampled German panel survey. Our findings imply that the drop in sex frequency occurs early in the relationship, whereas neither cohabitation nor marriage affects the frequency of intercourse to a significant extent. Sex frequency is reduced during pregnancy and as long as the couple has small children, but becomes revived later on. Relationship quality is found to play a role as well. These results are contrary to the honeymoon effect found in earlier research, but indicate that in times of postponed marriage an analogous effect may be at work in the initial period of the relationship.

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1. Introduction

Sexual interaction is an important component of intimate relationships (Edwards and Booth, 1994). Sexuality is related to wellbeing (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004; Rosen and Bachmann, 2008), relationship quality (Donnelly, 1993; Young et al., 1998), and union stability (Yabiku and Gager, 2009). Given the high prevalence of unhappy marriages and divorces (González and Viitanen, 2009), it seems imperative to study how sexuality develops in committed relationships. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that research on sexual interaction for couples, and, as one special aspect, the frequency of sexual intercourse, has a long tradition. Following the Kinsey reports (Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953), the frequency of intercourse in intimate relationships has been in the focus of research (see Christopher and Sprecher (2000) for a review). Confirmed by many studies is the fact that the frequency of intercourse decreases over time (Call et al., 1995; James, 1981; Westoff, 1974; Udry, 1980), but the reasons for this effect are not yet fully understood.

Research has been mainly limited to marital sexuality, without taking into account the premarital phases of a relationship. This limited focus might have been negligible in the past, but premarital sex and cohabitation are increasingly common phenomena (Cohen and Manning, 2010; Lichter et al., 2010; Yucel and Gassanov, 2010), and, what is more, differentiating

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between relationship duration and marital duration may shed some further light on the mechanisms causing the decline in the frequency of intercourse over time.

In this study we address the following question: at which point of the relationship does the decline in the frequency of intercourse takes place? Does it start right from the beginning of the relationship, even if the couple is not (yet) cohabiting, or does it start when the couple moves in together? Moreover, does marriage make a difference, or is McCarthy's (2003) statement true that "it is not marriage which kills sexual desire" (p. 2)? This question cannot be answered by simply comparing married and unmarried couples of the same relationship duration in a cross-sectional setting, as selection effects may be at work. Therefore, we use longitudinal data and employ fixed effects models, which have the advantage that the estimation is based on individual changes in the frequency of intercourse over time, and is therefore not biased by time-constant unobserved heterogeneity.

Our analysis is based on data from the German Family Panel (pairfam), a large, randomly sampled German panel survey with interviews conducted annually beginning in 2008, which focuses on the processes of relationship formation and development. We use a sample of 2855 heterosexual individuals from birth cohorts 1971–1973 and 1981–1983 who had the same partner for at least two waves. This dataset is well suited for our purposes, as all participants were questioned about the frequency of intercourse in each panel wave starting from the second wave, irrespective of their relationship status. The U.S. and Germany are rather similar with respect to the prevalence of premarital cohabitation (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Wilcox and Marquardt, 2011) and intercourse (Finer, 2007), although they differ in their societal norms toward premarital sex, as the U.S. tends toward more conservative values (Widmer et al., 1998). Hence, we expect to find patterns in our data similar to those reported in U.S. studies.

2. Contributions and limitations of past research

Over the past decades, a considerable number of empirical studies have investigated how the frequency of intercourse develops over the course of a relationship (for a review, see Christopher and Sprecher, 2000). Findings in the 1970s and 1980s were largely consistent insofar as, in cross-sectional analyses, older respondents and couples married for longer periods of time reported lower frequencies (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Edwards and Booth, 1994; Trussell and Westoff, 1980; Westoff, 1974). These effects were confirmed by early longitudinal research (Greenblat, 1983; James, 1981; Udry, 1980), but as these studies were based on small convenience samples, their generalizability is limited.¹ To give some examples, James (1981) reported diary data from 21 married couples, Greenblat (1983) findings from interviews with a sample of 80 persons, and Udry (1980) a non-representative panel of 500 couples.

More recent research has attempted to disentangle the effects of age and marital duration, mostly based on large-scale surveys. Relying on the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) with a national probability sample of 12,008 respondents, Call et al. (1995) found that couples engaged in sexual intercourse significantly more frequently in the first two years of marriage but after that, marital duration played no role when controlling for time-variant factors. Cheung et al. (2008) found an effect for ageing, but not for marital duration in a randomly sampled survey in Hong Kong. Drawing on cross-sectional data from the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) of 91,744 women in nineteen countries (in Asia, Africa, and America), Brewis and Meyer (2005) reported a decline in sex frequency with marital duration, but found varying effects of husband's and wife's age across countries.

We see three limitations of past research. First, as mentioned above, most of the existing research has been targeted toward married couples, without taking into account premarital relationships and their duration. In fact, all of the above cited studies relied on samples of married couples or individuals.² This may be at least partly due to changing norms, as only married couples were considered to be 'real' couples in the past, and cohabitation or even living apart together (LAT) were not as widespread and accepted living arrangements as they are today (Levin, 2004). As a consequence, data on sexual intercourse was often only available for married individuals or couples. Due to this focus, it remains unclear at which point in a relationship the decline in the frequency of intercourse begins: is it right from the beginning of the relationship, is it when the couple moves in together, or does marriage matter? Stafford et al. (2004) do not find changes in the frequency of sex associated with the transition from cohabitation to marriage, which implies that relationship duration or duration of cohabitation rather than marriage matters for the issue of sex frequency. It is remarkable, though, that even in the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) with more than 10,000 respondents surveyed in 1987 and 1988 (wave 1) and 1992–1994 (wave 2), only less than 115 individuals were cohabiting with the same partner in both waves, and 163 cohabited in wave 1 and were married in wave 2, whereas thousands of respondents were married without prior cohabitation (Stafford et al., 2004). Today, 25 years later, the situation is different (Finer, 2007; Wilcox and Marquardt, 2011), but investigations using current data have not yet been published.

Second, to our knowledge, no analysis of this nature exists using a large, randomly sampled longitudinal dataset. In their decade review, Christopher and Sprecher (2000) addressed the need for long-term longitudinal analyses to investigate the development of sexual activity over the life course. Nevertheless, panel analyses on couples' sexuality are still sparse.

¹ It has been shown that volunteer samples using college student participants are biased in areas such as sexual experience and sexual attitudes (Wiederman, 1999).

² Greenblat (1983) considered premarital cohabitation and intercourse, but only as control variables, without accounting for premarital relationship duration. Call et al. (1995) reported age effects for both married and cohabiting couples, but then limited their analysis to the effect of marital duration.

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