Dating and Mate Selection

10

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Classic and contemporary studies of mate selection share a common goal: to describe and explain how individuals in romantic unions choose one another as partners. Upon first reading, this definition may seem to imply that mate selection is concerned only with choosing a partner for a committed relationship, but the study of mate selection is much more varied and dynamic in its focus. A full understanding of mate selection requires attention to the development and maintenance of romantic relationships, including their very beginnings and endings and the ups and downs in between. In this chapter, we review research aimed at these topics and suggest ways in which they are and are not being addressed. Because other chapters in this volume are devoted to cohabitation and to gay and lesbian relationships, we concentrate on mate selection in heterosexual relationships, and we discuss cohabitation only as it pertains to contemporary dating relationships and mate selection.

To guide our literature review, we used the following definitions (see Surra, Boettcher-Burke, Cottle, West, & Gray, 2007): Research on *dating and mate selection* concerns the processes by which individuals choose their romantic partners and the individual, relational, and contextual factors that predict whether relationships progress, maintain, dissolve, or change status over time. Throughout this chapter, we use the shorthand-term *developmental change* to refer to progress, maintenance, deterioration, dissolution, or status changes in relationships. The term *status* refers to the formal, socially agreed upon, and often legally determined state used to describe membership in romantic relationships (Surra et al., 2007). Statuses typically include dating, cohabitation, and marriage. Research on dating and mate selection also concerns the cognitive, affective, and behavioral properties of romantic relationships (e.g., commitment, conflict, or trust) and the factors that shape these properties, such as social network or cultural influences. More often than not the properties of relationships are thought to be universal; that is, they apply beyond dating relationships to marriages, friendships, and other close relationships.

A good understanding of dating and mate selection requires study of how properties of dating relationships, processes of mate choice, and developmental change in relationships are interrelated. Nevertheless, we probably know less now about dating and mate selection than we did 2 or 3 decades ago. One reason for the current lack of knowledge is because of trends in the way researchers are studying dating and mate selection.

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My colleagues and I studied the trends in the methods used to study dating and mate selection in articles published in psychology, sociology, and other fields between 1991 and 2001 (Surra et al., 2007; Surra, Gray, Boettcher, Cottle, & West, 2006). We found that the percentage of articles published on mate choice, out of the total published each year, declined over time from a high of 44% to a low of 16%, and the study of relationship properties increased over that same period. In addition, we found that researchers who study mate choice are more likely to distinguish one relationship status from another (e.g., cohabitation vs. marriage), but researchers who study relationship properties typically do not distinguish one status from another within their samples (e.g., daters from marrieds). Not too surprisingly, the study of mate choice is concentrated within sociology and the study of relationship properties is concentrated within social psychology and interpersonal communication. Thus, it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell how the properties of relationships might lead to developmental changes in status (e.g., cohabitation, marriage, or breakup). Studies of these topics are a compelling target for future research.

In this chapter, we concentrated on studies published since our previous reviews, from 2000 to 2009. Because the purpose of this handbook was to analyze "current research and theory about family relationships, family structural variations, and the role of families in society," (G. W. Peterson & K. R. Bush, personal communication, Jan 2, 2009), we focused on sociological approaches to the study of dating and mate selection more than social psychological approaches. We do, however, illustrate how integrating the two approaches would greatly enrich scholars' ability to explain racial, economic, and other variations in mate selection.

A Word on Nomenclature

Although many sociological studies contain information about dating and mate selection, the terms authors used to describe the unions they studied often do not convey the applicability of findings to dating relationships. To make sense of the literature, we used our own nomenclature to convey the applicability of findings to dating and mate selection. In some cases, the terms we use here differ from those the authors themselves used.

What Is a Union? What Is a Dating Union?

We use the term *dating* to describe the nonmarital romantic unions that precede a variety of different types of unions, including cohabitation, marriage, and nonmarital partnerships that involve childbearing. We use the term dating without implication as to depth or length of involvement because of the great variety on these dimensions in dating relationships. Generally speaking, we reserve the term dating for romantic nonmarital unions that do not involve living together, but we demonstrate below that cohabitation in many cases is a form of dating. When we want to make a distinction between daters who co-reside and those who do not, we use the phrases *dating cohabitors* and *dating noncohabitors*.

We use the term *union* to refer to any type of romantic involvement, and we precede it with an adjective that describes the type of union, such as dating unions, cohabiting unions, and marital unions. This usage is a departure from recent usage in the literature. In sociological studies of mate selection, the word union typically is used to describe cohabitation and marriage, implying that no dating or no developmental process—indeed no relationship—preceded the formation of the cohabitation or marriage. For example, researchers often study the duration of cohabiting unions and the transitions into and out of cohabiting unions (e.g., Binstock & Thornton, 2003; Brown, 2003, 2004) without attention to the union that preceded cohabitation, and the phrase "not in a union" really means not in a residential union (Schoen, Landale, & Daniels, 2007). Although authors sometimes acknowledge that cohabitors were not observed the entire length of their unions (Binstock & Thornton, 2003; Brown, 2000), the language used draws theoretical attention away

from the significance of the developmental process that leads couples toward cohabiting, marrying, or bearing children. The various usages of the term union also make it difficult to understand methods and compare across investigations.

Information about dating is also found in studies of courtship, premarital relationships, singlehood, and unmarried parents, even though the relevance of such studies to mate selection may not be immediately obvious because usage of the term dating has all but disappeared in literature on the sociology of the family. The words "single" or "singlehood," for example, have been variously used to label those who were unmarried (Lichter & Qian, 2008); were noncohabiting and pregnant (Manning, 1993); were not married or not cohabiting (Manning & Landale, 1996); those who had never been in a parental or nonparental residential union (Schoen et al., 2007); and daters who were and were not cohabiting (McGinnis, 2003). We found several other euphemisms for dating in the literature, including "noncohabiting partnered singles" or "noncohabiting singles" (McGinnis, 2003, p. 106). Another euphemism for dating is "visiting couples," a term found in some articles that employ data from the Fragile Families Study that refers to unmarried parents who were romantically involved, but who did not live together (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). Cohabitors who separated, but remained romantically involved, have been coded and labeled as separated (Osborne, 2005), even though results for such couples are informative about ongoing dating relationships. Although the terms "courtship" and "premarital" are used to describe the period of relationships that precedes marriage, these terms imply that marriage is the only outcome of dating, and fail to capture the idea that some dating relationships lead to deeper commitments or marriage, but others do not. Thus, we reserve the terms *premarital* and *courtship* to refer to relationships that result in marriage.

In summary, researchers are studying romantic relationships that precede or exist outside of cohabitation, childbearing, and marriage. However, no single term is used to describe these relationships and the term dating has fallen out of use, thereby implying that romantic relationships that occur outside of certain statuses are uninteresting in their own right or as precursors to cohabitation, child bearing, or marriage. In this chapter, we derive information about dating and mate selection from studies of individuals and couples who were romantically involved and unmarried, and we use the terms *daters* or *dating* to describe these unions.

Dating and Mate Selection

In the next section, we review demographic trends in dating and mate selection. This section serves to lay the groundwork for the review of empirical and theoretical literature on factors that affect dating and mate selection.

Demographic Trends in Dating, Mate Selection, and Marriage

Very few studies of nationally representative samples have examined characteristics and mate selection processes for daters. As a result, identifying recent trends in dating behaviors is difficult. As of 2008, there were 95.9 million unmarried individuals over the age of 18 (including those divorced and widowed), and 61% of them had never been married (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) is one of the only investigations to provide information about dating patterns in a nationally representative sample. One analysis of data from Add Health showed that 63% of adolescents and young adults had not had a romantic relationship in the preceding 18 months (Crissey, 2005). The remaining individuals all of whom were in relationships were classified according to whether they were in a serious relationship with sex, serious without sex, a group-oriented relationship, a physically oriented relationship, or a relationship of low involvement. The most common type of relationship reported was serious with sex (37%) and the least common type was low involvement (7%). The distribution of relationships varied by gender and race. White

men were significantly more likely than Black men to have had a serious-without-sex relationship (23% vs. 11%), and a higher proportion of Black men reported low-involvement relationships than White men (12% vs. 7%). Among women, Whites were significantly more likely to have had a serious relationship with sex compared to all other racial groups. Black women were nearly twice as likely to have had a physically oriented relationship as White women (26% vs. 14%). Black women (10%) and women of Mexican-origin (8%) were at least twice as likely to have had low-involvement relationships as White women (4%).

Most individuals do eventually wed, although individuals are entering marital unions at a later age than earlier generations. As of 2008, 51.9% of individuals, or 123.6 million opposite-sex couples, in the United States over the age of 15, were married (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Over the past several decades, the median age at first marriage has risen over 5 years for men and women. In 2008 the median age at first marriage was 27.6 for men and 25.9 for women. Comparable figures in 1960 were 22.8 for men and 20.3 for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Although individuals are entering marital unions at a later age than earlier generations, it is still largely normative for individuals to marry by their mid-30s. By 2003, over half (52%) of adults age 25–34 had married (Fields, 2004), and 15.6% of men and 25.4% of women married before age 23 (Uecker & Stokes, 2008). Of those age 30–34, 72% had married (Fields, 2004). Projections are, however, that expected marriage rates will decline by approximately 7%, although nearly 90% of individuals still are projected to wed at least once over the course of their lives (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001).

Rates of marriage differ by race, gender, age, and education. Numerous studies have shown that Blacks were less likely to marry than Whites (e.g., Carlson et al., 2004; Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006; Schoen & Cheng, 2006; Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2000; Uecker & Stokes, 2008), even after controlling for a multitude of explanatory variables. Black men were more likely to ever marry than Black women (Sassler & Schoen, 1999; Schoen & Cheng, 2006) whereas White women had higher likelihood of ever marrying than White men (Schoen & Cheng, 2006). A study of marriage likelihood in the Add Health data indicated that Mexican American women were the most likely to marry by age 24 (41%), followed by White women (36%), and then Black women (17%; Schoen et al., 2007). Similar findings hold for ever married women (Teachman et al., 2000). Marital timing differs by age, race, and gender as well. Results from one study showed that Hispanic women age 20–24 were more likely than White or Black women to ever marry (Teachman et al., 2000). By age 37, however, Whites were roughly 5% more likely than Latinas and roughly 20% more likely than Black women to have experienced a first marriage (Lloyd, 2006). Another study showed comparable patterns of marital timing for younger White and Hispanic women (Uecker & Stokes, 2008). Among those who married by age 23, White (29.4%) and Hispanic (27.5%) women were more likely to marry than Asian (16.4%) and Black (10.6%) women. Hispanic men had the highest percentage of marriage by age 23 (24.3%), compared to White men (16.1%), Asian men (12.3%), and Black men (9.3%).

Marital timing and the likelihood of cohabitation and marriage vary with educational attainment, and gender and race modify the effects of educational attainment. Goldstein and Kenney (2001) estimated entry into first marriage for women. Using data from the 1995 Current Population Survey, the researchers assessed the effects of cohort and age differences among women in three cohorts (1950–1954, 1955–1959, 1960–1964) for those with a college degree and those who either did not or were predicted not to receive a college degree. Women with college degrees married at later ages than those without a college degree, but they became progressively more likely to ever marry (94% for the youngest cohort). Women without college degrees became progressively less likely to ever marry (89% for the youngest cohort). College graduates in the oldest cohort had similar rates of ever marrying as those without a college degree (89.8% vs. 91.5%, respectively). Thus, the influence of a college education on marriage rates seems to be

increasing for more recent cohorts. The gap in lifetime marriage rates for women with and without a college degree held for both Blacks and Whites (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). Similarly, the likelihood of entering a marital vs. a cohabiting union was greater for White men with a college degree than for White men with a high school diploma (Oppenheimer, 2003), but for Black men, having a college degree increased the likelihood of entering either a marital or cohabiting union. White men without a high school diploma were more likely than those with a high school diploma to transition into marriage instead of cohabitation whereas the reverse was true for Black men. Findings obtained from marriage data in three states showed that Blacks with the lowest levels of education (i.e., less than a high school diploma) were more likely to never marry than to marry (Schoen & Cheng, 2006).

Economic Theories of Dating and Marriage

Theories and research to explain current trends in dating, cohabiting, and marital unions have concentrated on economic explanations. Three main theories dominate the literature: the theory of gender specialization, the theory of women's economic independence, and economic search theory. In addition, a fourth theory seems to be emerging that considers the effects of the pooling of coupled partners' economic resources on mate selection.

Theory of Gender Specialization

One theory of how economic characteristics affect mate selection is rooted in Becker's (1991) specialization theory or gains-to-marriage theory. The theory posits that men and women decide whom to marry on the basis of a complementary exchange of resources specialized on the basis of gender. Men's contribution to the exchange is economic resources. As a result, men's economic potential should affect their attractiveness as marriage partners, and more importantly, their likelihood of marriage. In exchange for economic benefits, women contribute child bearing, child care, and domestic help to the maintenance of the home. Hence, women's potential for contributing economically to marriage should be a less important factor on the marriage market and should produce negative effects on their likelihood of marriage (Carlson et al., 2004; Xie, Raymo, Goyette, & Thornton, 2003). Becker has argued that, even when married women are employed, their domestic and child care responsibilities mean that they earn less than men and invest less in market capital so that the traditional gender-based exchange will prevail.

The hypothesis that men's economic characteristics predict transitions into marriage has received strong support. Men's economic characteristics, assessed as characteristics of marriage markets or of individuals, explain marriage behavior for both Blacks and Whites and for the poor and nonpoor, although results are more inconsistent when measured at the individual level than the market level. Measures of male partners' economic characteristics at the level of local marriage markets predicted the proportion of women currently married for both Blacks and Whites (Lichter, LeClere, & McGlaughlin, 1991) and among poor women (McLaughlin & Lichter, 1997). In racially mixed neighborhoods and in White neighborhoods, mean male earnings increased the proportion married for both Blacks and Whites, and in racially mixed neighborhoods, male nonemployment decreased the proportion currently married for Blacks (Lichter et al., 1991). The pool of economically attractive men (e.g., ratio of unmarried men employed full time to unmarried women) explained some of the Black–White differences in marital timing, particularly among women who were younger or expecting to marry within 5 years (Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992). Yet the delay of marriage was substantial among Blacks even when market-level and individual-level variables were included in models. The availability of unmarried men with incomes above the poverty line increased the likelihood of marriage among poor women (McLaughlin & Lichter, 1997).

Results for individual-level economic characteristics have shown that employment and education increased the likelihood of marriage for

single men (Sassler & Schoen, 1999), earnings for single men predicted marriage vs. staying single (Stewart, Manning, & Smock, 2003), and earnings for cohabiting men predicted greater likelihood of marriage vs. continuing to cohabit (Brown; 2000, Sanchez, Manning, & Smock, 1998). If their male partners worked during the previous year, nonpoor cohabiting women were more likely to marry, but partners' employment had no effect on the transition out of cohabitation among poor women, suggesting that male wages may not be high enough to promote marriage among poor women (Lichter et al., 2006). If their male partners had a high school diploma or some college, poor women were more likely to marry, but nonpoor women were more likely to dissolve their unions. Manning and Smock (1995) found that Black men's education did not predict exits out of cohabitation. With respect to employment, cohabiting White men's employment increased the odds of marrying and decreased the odds of separating, but it did not predict for cohabiting White women or Black men and women.

Smock, Manning and Porter (2005) reviewed 21 studies, three of which used non-US samples, to examine whether and when economic characteristics predict marriage. The large majority of the studies found that men's economic characteristics positively predicted transitions to marriage out of cohabitation, and, even more consistently, transitions into marriage out of singlehood. (Note that in some cases, samples of singles included only noncohabitors whereas in other cases singles were all unmarrieds, whether cohabiting or not.)

Theory of Women's Economic Independence

The theory of women's economic independence is related to specialization theory, but draws more on changes in women's economic potential. According to this theory, major changes in women's labor force participation, educational attainment, and earnings have eroded the influence of the traditional marital exchange in mate selection decisions (e.g., Gaughan, 2002; Xie et al., 2003; for summaries and critiques of the theory also see Oppenheimer, 1997, 1988), and have altered the contributions men and women are able to make to the marital exchange posited by specialization theory. The reduction in manufacturing jobs has meant that men without a college degree have fewer options for earning wages that will support marriage and family, which, in turn, makes them less attractive on the marriage market (Cherlin, 2005). The increase in jobs in the service sector has had the opposite effect for women, providing them with viable sources of income. These trends have reduced the appeal of the gender-based marital exchange, and they have increased women's economic independence, their attractiveness on the marriage market, and by extension, their bargaining power in union formation. As a result, women have more degrees of freedom in their marriage decisions than previously. They may be motivated to eschew marriage altogether or to replace it permanently with cohabitation. Thus, the hypothesis derived from this theory is that women's economic independence will have negative effects on marriage.

Evidence in support of the hypothesis that women's economic independence reduces marriage behavior varies by level of analysis, and is stronger for variables measured at the marriage market-level than the individual level. When local labor market areas (multicounty units formed from commuting patterns) were the unit of analysis, the hypothesis that female economic independence would decrease the likelihood of marrying was supported, particularly for Black women (Lichter et al., 1991). For Blacks, the proportion of women employed and their mean earnings in the local marriage market were negatively related to the proportion currently married. In addition, receipt of public assistance significantly decreased the proportions of women currently married and ever married for both Blacks and Whites (Lichter et al., 1991). Among Latinas, market-level predictors (e.g., women's aggregate employment) decreased their likelihood of first marriage (Lloyd, 2006).

When indicators of women's economic independence are measured as individual characteristics, the evidence in support of the hypothesis is weaker, and often is opposite the hypothesis.

Consistent with the theory, Gaughan (2002) found that White women who were students and who had greater job prestige were less likely to marry. Likewise, women who received public assistance were less likely to marry (Fossett & Kiecolt, 1993; Lichter et al., 2006), but, contrary to the theory, so were those who were unemployed (Lichter et al., 2006). In addition, female employment and earnings increased the likelihood of marriage, perhaps because it increased their attractiveness as marriage partners (Lichter et al., 1992). Completing school and being employed part-time, as compared to being unemployed, increased the odds that women would form cohabiting and marital unions (Raley, 1996). Among poor women, employment increased the likelihood of marrying (McLaughlin & Lichter, 1997). For women in their late 20s, education and employment increased the odds of marrying (e.g., Sassler & Schoen, 1999). Among Latinas, some indicators, such as enrollment in school, showed, as the theory predicts, a negative relationship to transition to first marriage, but other indicators, such as educational attainment and number of weeks worked in the previous year, showed a positive relationship (Lloyd, 2006). After reviewing research on economic characteristics and marriage, Smock and colleagues (2005) concluded that the three studies that addressed only women's characteristics all showed positive effects on marriage.

Economic Search Theory

The third theory, called economic search theory, emphasizes the distinction between marriage foregone and marriage delayed by focusing on individuals' economic career development (Oppenheimer, 1988, 1997, 2000). The theory attempts to explain the demographic trend of the delay in marriage described previously. According to Oppenheimer, the decision to marry is the result of a process of discovering and evaluating the economic potential and career maturity of one's partner. Career maturity includes a clearly defined occupation, relatively stable employment, and income adequate to establish an independent household. The search process requires more time now than previously because developing economic potential and reaching career maturity require more time now than previously for both women and men.

The time during which the search occurs is fraught with uncertainty that stems from unknowns about how each partner's economic future will play out (Oppenheimer, 1988, 1997, 2000). Uncertainty derives from several sources. There is the problem of trying to project future economic characteristics from present information, which is often incomplete and changing as careers evolve. Then there is the problem of deciding whether to commit to marrying at an earlier age, with the hope that economic adaptations will be forthcoming after marriage. Predicting later economic characteristics at a younger age has its advantages, including a larger pool of potentially high quality matches and avoidance of the rewards foregone with long searches, but uncertainty about future prospects is greater for younger individuals.

The theory focuses more on the economic potential of men than women because women are in a relatively weaker labor market position and their economic contributions to the family often are secondary to men's. The nature of the search process depends, however, on the degree of differentiation in gendered roles. In situations in which roles are highly differentiated along traditional lines, women's economic well-being is greatly influenced by men's economic characteristics. In these situations, which have prevailed historically, men are likely to be motivated to delay marriage until they are ready to assume the economic burden of a home and family. Women are more likely to marry at a younger age than men because women are more uncertain about their own attributes than are men. Also, in this situation, women may be employed early in marriage to facilitate men's early career development. In the case where women have strong attachment to the labor force and economic independence, the search period is likely to be more uncertain and lengthier. This is because women are able to finance their own more exacting search; opportunities for career adjustments after marriage are

lessened for both spouses, putting more of a burden on the premarriage search; and partners must try to predict each other's economic prospects.

According to economic search theory, cohabitation is one option for dealing with the uncertainty posed by a lengthy search process. Cohabitation is a means by which partners may gather more information while taking advantage of the convenience and intimacies that cohabitation provides until uncertainties are resolved. In this way, cohabitation may extend courtship or engagement prior to marriage or it may serve as an alternative to singlehood.

Several tests of economic search theory have garnered support for its basic premises, and it has proved particularly useful for explaining racial difference in rates of forming cohabiting and marital unions. For both Black and White men, the likelihood of entering a cohabitation or marriage was very low if they earned less than $5,000 per year (Oppenheimer, 2003). Career immaturity, measured in terms of enrollment in school and whether the respondent was fully employed over a 2-year period, also predicted transitions into cohabitation or marriage. For Black and White men who were employed less than full time for 2 years, the odds of marrying were lower, and the deterioration of employment increased the likelihood of cohabitation. The effects of long-term employment prospects, as indexed by education, differed for Blacks and Whites. Whereas graduation from high school increased the odds of marriage for Whites, it decreased the odds of marriage for Blacks and increased the odds of cohabitation, a finding that may result from the poor economic prospects for Black men with high school degrees. Having a college degree increased the odds of marriage and reduced the odds of separation, but effects were stronger for Blacks. Women's educational attainment reduced the odds of cohabitation by about 21% for each additional year of education (Xie et al., 2003). The effects of 2-year work experience were strong for Whites, with less than full-time employment or a deterioration in employment associated with decreased odds of marriage (Oppenheimer, 2003). Estimated variables that assessed the earnings potential of unmarried White men and women, which were calculated from information about gender, education, and likely work experience, showed that men's predicted current earnings, earnings over the next 5 years, future earnings, past earnings, and lifetime earnings all significantly increased the odds of marriage, but women's estimated earnings were unrelated to the odds of marriage (Xie et al., 2003). Earnings did not matter for transitions into (Xie et al., 2003) or out of (Oppenheimer, 2003) cohabitation, perhaps because high earners were selected out of this status to begin with.

Transitions to career maturity are more difficult for Black than White men, which may help to explain why marriage rates differ between these two subpopulations. Oppenheimer (2000) has shown that men's transitions to career maturity, measured in terms of years out of school, earnings above the poverty line, education, and full-time employment for a 2-year period, have been more difficult to achieve for Black men than White men born between1979 and 1990. Findings for enrollment in school support the idea that marriage is delayed or foregone while individuals seek career maturity (Gaughan, 2002; Lloyd, 2006; Raley, 1996; Sweeney, 2002), but the results are stronger for Whites and Latinas than for Blacks (Oppenheimer, 2003; Sassler & Schoen, 1999). Studies often make no distinction between being a student and having an incomplete education, even though the two may have different effects. Schoen and Cheng (2006) used their measure of marriage propensities, which accounts for the numbers of unmarried men and women in the population, to investigate marriage rates in three states from 1970 to 1990. They found that the next to lowest marriage rate across gender and race categories was for those with an incomplete college education (13–15 years of education). They argued that this group may represent individuals who are selected out of the marriage market because of negative psychological or personal characteristics. Quitting college and working on a degree may capture different characteristics that need to be differentiated in studies of economic search theory.

The Effects of Coupled Partners' Pooled Economic Resources: A New Theory?

A new theory of the effects of economics on mate selection is emerging from some literature to address the complexities of contemporary mate selection for individuals at all income and educational levels. This emergent theory recognizes that increases in women's economic independence have made positive contributions to marriage. Indeed, a comparison of birth cohorts revealed that cohorts of women born between 1961 and 1965 have increased their earnings as well as their likelihood of marriage, compared to cohorts born between 1950 and 1954 (Sweeney, 2002). In addition, the emergent theory considers a more dyadic and interactive approach to mate selection. It focuses on the contribution of the set of coupled partners' economic characteristics to mate selection decisions, rather than individual characteristics. Becker (1991) argued that as women's employment continued to rise, the need for a specialized division of labor in the home would remain, although it would no longer be specialized by sex.

When sex is no longer the dividing line for who will contribute what to unions, two effects are apparent. First, the calculus that partners use to project economic potential becomes more complex and unpredictable. Male and female partners alike now need to weigh one another's potential economic and other contributions to the union. Moreover, each partner must consider the interactive mix of their combined economic characteristics. Such considerations not only weigh heavily with respect to career maturity and the standard of living the couple might enjoy by combining resources, but education and occupation also affect lifestyle considerations. Questions arise about division of household labor and child care, time together as a couple, transportation, and where to live to accommodate dual workers, to mention but a few. Thus, to say that as women's economic potential has increased so has their attractiveness as marriage partners greatly oversimplifies the implications of a dyadic approach to understanding economics of mate selection. Although several authors have recognized the need for such a theory (e.g., Lichter et al., 1992; Lloyd, 2006; Schoen & Cheng, 2006), it has yet to be formulated.

The second effect is that, when the division of labor becomes less specialized by sex, the qualities of the relationship itself should become more consequential for union formation. When sex is no longer the guide for a division of labor, the criteria on which a division of labor is based need to be fashioned by the coupled partners themselves. In order to fashion a workable division of labor, partners must be able to negotiate and mesh their mutual occupational planning and development. Their ability to communicate about difficult topics, resolve conflicts, trust in one another, and their caring and willingness to sacrifice for the other become paramount. These properties of the relationship should figure more prominently into the calculus for deciding about economic potential. Indeed, these properties will affect negotiation of a division of labor, and partners' faith in their abilities to negotiate a division of labor and navigate economic circumstances. Their belief in their ability as a couple to negotiate all of life's demands, including economic obstacles, is critical to their assessment of whether they will be able to survive and to survive happily as a couple. All of these factors put more of a burden on coupled partners to assess the synergy of their relationship.

Only a few studies shed light on the effects of the combined economic characteristics of coupled partners on the development and formation of unions. The scarcity of research stems primarily from the fact that nationally representative data sets on union formation rarely have longitudinal data obtained from both members of couples in dating, cohabiting, and marital unions. The Fragile Families Study of unmarried parents is a notable exception. Carlson and coauthors (2004) examined the economic and other predictors of union status 1 year after children were born in a sample of 3,285 couples. Union status after 1 year was compared to no romantic involvement, controlling for initial union status. The researchers found that, when both partners' economic characteristics were included in models, positive economic contributions from both partners increased the likelihood of unions. Mothers with a high

school degree or higher had an increased likelihood of cohabitation and of marriage and mothers with some college had an increased likelihood of dating and of marriage. The effects of fathers' education were weaker, with the exception that some college education significantly reduced the odds of cohabitation. Father's earnings of more than $25,000 increased the likelihood of marriage, and hourly wages increased the odds of dating and marriage for fathers and the odds of marriage for mothers. When men were earning between $10,000 and $24,999 the likelihood of remaining in a dating relationship was reduced, compared to no romantic involvement. Using essentially the same data, Osborne (2005) found that mother's education predicted marriage for cohabitors and mother's earnings predicted marriage for dating parents. The odds of marriage for dating parents were over ten times greater when mothers earned more than $25,000 per year compared to those with no earnings, but fathers' earnings had no effect. Other findings from the Fragile Families Study showed that as a couple's household-level economic circumstance (the ratio of household income relative to the poverty threshold for family size) improved, the likelihood of marriage among cohabitors increased. Couples' combined earnings increased the likelihood of marriage among all unmarried parents (Gibson-Davis, 2009).

The data from coupled parents sampled in the Fragile Families Study suggest that cohabiting and dating partners who are in the throes of making decisions about how deeply to commit may be weighing the adequacy of their economic circumstances as a couple. When they are less than adequate, cohabiting and visiting couples may hold deeper commitment at bay until they become more certain about whether incomplete or uncertain economic circumstances are likely to improve. Whether the findings from the Fragile Families Study of unmarried parents apply to dating nonparents remains to be determined, as a theory of coupled partners' pooled economic characteristics becomes more fully developed.

Some findings support the idea that properties of relationships are consequential in partners' assessments of how their economic situation affects their unions. A qualitative study of barriers to marriage among low income, romantically involved parents showed that financial concerns and relationship quality frequently were interconnected, as in cases where conflicts arose over finances (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Men's earnings of $25,000+ more than doubled the odds of marriage after 1 year (Carlson et al., 2004), but the size of this coefficient was reduced to nonsignificance once qualities of the relationship, such as supportiveness and frequency of conflict, were entered into the model. Likewise, the effects of income-to-needs ratio and poverty thresholds on marriage among cohabiting couples were reduced when partners said that their chance of marriage was good or certain (Gibson-Davis, 2009). Such findings demonstrate that properties of relationships mediate the impact of economics on marital decisions, particularly in studies where the economic contributions of both partners are tested. Thus, whether and how relationship properties are integrated into studies is critical to understanding mate selection, a point that we explore more deeply later in the chapter.

As we have demonstrated, adequate tests of a theory of pooled economic characteristics would require data from both members of couples and couples who represent wide variation in relational involvement (e.g., daters at different depths of involvement, cohabitors, transitions into marriage from dating and cohabitation). In addition, the theory implies two possibilities for hypothesis testing. The first is that coupled partners' individual-level characteristics will interact to effect changes in progress in relationships or union status. Tests of interactions would enable researchers to ferret out whether, for example, marriage is delayed or foregone among couples in which both partners have low educational levels, as compared to couples in which one partner is high and the other low or both are high. The second hypothesis that needs to be tested is whether effects of joint economic characteristics on relationship behavior are mediated by properties of relationships that indicate high levels of functioning. These qualities include such constructs as the ability to resolve conflicts and communication

about difficult topics, rather than avoidance of them, relationship-specific trust, and willingness to sacrifice for the other.

The studies just reviewed have sampled couples, measured each partner's individual economic characteristics, and entered them into models simultaneously. One problem with this approach is that models did not account for the intercorrelation or interdependence of coupled partners' characteristics (see Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). In studies where both members of couples are included in models, statistical analyses should take into account the nesting of individuals within couples and the variance that stems from the intercorrelation of partners' characteristics. Failure to do so can create biased estimates of effects and their significance. Models in which both partners' characteristics are examined hold promise for developing and testing a theory of mate selection that encompasses the interplay of both partners' economic potential and the nature of their relationship.

Marriage Markets and Mate Availability in Dating and Mate Selection

Theories about the availability of suitable mates in the population help to explain mate selection patterns, particularly the declining rates of marriage among Blacks. The theory is that the marriage rate among Black Americans is lower than that of Whites because of limited availability of desirable marriage partners in local populations. Availability is typically operationalized as the sex ratio, or the number of marriageable men divided by the number of marriageable women, where marriageability is defined in terms of economic characteristics, age, race, or other variables that are thought to influence individuals' assessments of the attractiveness of potential mates. Marriageable characteristics usually are measured within local metropolitan areas or labor markets, areas that are thought to define those traveled by potential partners in their everyday lives. Assessments of local characteristics obtained from census data often are combined with individual-level characteristics to investigate the independent effects of each. Under conditions in which the sex ratio is low, men are the scarcer sex, and should wield more power on the marriage market. Under conditions in which the sex ratio is high, and women are the scarcer sex, they will wield more power on the marriage market. Men and women wield different types of power, however. Women will have more dyadic bargaining power, giving them greater control over decisions to wed that have their basis in the quality of the relationship. Men's power is structural, deriving from control over political and economic resources. Marriage-market theories are believed to predict declining marriage rates among Blacks particularly well because such factors as incarceration and mortality reduce the availability of Black men on the marriage market (Fossett & Kiecolt, 1993).

The availability of marriageable partners appears to explain at least some of the lower marriage rates for Black than White Americans. After controlling for a number of individual characteristics, the racial discrepancy was partly explained by sex ratios, measured as the proportions of men who were employed full-time year round or who earn income above the poverty line (Lichter et al., 1992). The effect of available economically attractive mates was more powerful than the simple availability of unmarried partners. Likewise, Raley (1996) found that the ratio of employed men to all women increased both marriage and cohabitation over 5 years, and controlling for this ratio had the effect of reducing differences between Blacks and Whites in their likelihood of forming a union. The percentage of marriages among Blacks was higher where the sex ratio was higher (i.e., the ratio of Black men in the labor force to noninstitutionalized women aged 16 and above; Fossett & Kiecolt, 1993)

Sex ratios and other market-level indicators sometimes predict marriage for Hispanics and sometimes do not. Among Latinas, sex ratio indicators were associated with their likelihood of marrying for the first time within a given year (Lloyd, 2006). The larger the proportion of unmarried Black Latinos in the labor market area, the less likely Latinas were to marry for the first

time, but the greater was the proportion of men who were foreign born, who perhaps were more desirous of marriage, the more likely Latinas were to marry for the first time.

Marriage market conditions other than sex ratios also predict mate selection behavior. The educational concentration of mates in the marriage market, operationalized as the proportion of age-matched potential mates with at least as much education as the target individual, predicted the likelihood of marrying in any given year for men and for women (Lewis & Oppenheimer, 2000). These effects accumulated with age, demonstrating the effects of reduced pools of good mates as individuals age.

Homogamy in Dating and Mate Selection

Homogamy, or the degree of similarity between partners on their social backgrounds and personal characteristics, is thought to be one of the prime motivators for selecting a mate. According to theories of homogamy, having a partner who shares one's own characteristics increases the rewards derived from interaction by means of a number of mechanisms. It provides for the mutually rewarding exchange of behaviors, facilitates decisions about joint behavior, reduces conflict, and validates one's self-identity. In this section, we focus on homogamy on two of the most important background characteristics studied in the past decade, race and education, and on factors that predict deviations from homogamy in mate selection.

Demographic Trends in Homogamy on Race and Education

Current estimates indicate that 8.4% of all marriages and 15% of newly married couples are interracial or interethnic (Wang, 2012). Rates of interracial and interethnic marriage have increased greatly in the United States for the decades between 1970 and 1990 for all groups, measured in terms of endogamy (marrying within one's specific group) ratios by race, ethnicity, and national origin. White ethnics (e.g., Italian Americans, Polish Americans) have intermarried the most; Blacks, the least; and Hispanics and Asians, in between (Rosenfeld, 2002; also see Qian & Lichter, 2007). In a three-state study, Schoen and Cheng (2006) found that from 1980 to 1990 about 95% of Blacks and Whites married within-race. Several studies showed a propensity for Black men to intermarry with White women at rates consistently higher than intermarriages between Black women and White men (e.g., Batson, Qian, & Lichter, 2006; Crowder & Tolnay, 2000; Schoen & Cheng, 2006). The pace of immigration, in part, seems to explain some changes in intermarriage (Qian & Lichter, 2007). The pace of intermarriage for Hispanic and Asian American populations declined with increases in immigration of foreign-born Hispanics and Asians. This trend suggests that as the population of foreign-born Hispanics and Asians increased, native-born Hispanics and Asian Americans selected more often to marry within their ethnic groups as opposed to marrying native-born Whites or other minority groups.

Since mid-century, researchers also have found support for increased educational homogamy (e.g., Mare, 1991; Schwartz & Mare, 2005). Schwartz and Mare found that the odds of being in an educationally homogamous marriage were at its highest from 1990 to 2003 and higher than any other time since 1940. Married individuals showed stronger evidence of educational matching than nonmarried opposite-sex and same-sex couples, but all groups showed significant matching (Jepsen & Jepsen, 2002). Although the traditional pattern in which women marry up educationally was still common, the propensity for women to marry up declined greatly over time and the propensity to marry an educationally homogamous mate increased over time, especially among Blacks (Schoen & Cheng, 2006).

Most studies have found that cohabiting couples are less homogamous with respect to race than marrieds. From 1990 to 2000, interracial cohabitation increased more than interracial marriage (Qian & Lichter, 2007). Blacks were twice

as likely to cohabit interracially as they were to marry interracially. Interracial cohabitations were much more likely between Blacks and Whites than they were between members of different Black populations (e.g., Puerto Ricans, West Indians; Batson et al., 2006; also see Blackwell & Lichter, 2000).

Findings for homogamy among cohabitors are less clear for characteristics other than race. Compared to couples who did not cohabit premaritally, those who did cohabit premaritally were more homogamous on education, but less homogamous on age and religion (Forste & Tanfer, 1996). Comparisons between current cohabitors and the recently married showed the same results, suggesting that homogamy on ascribed characteristics like age may be more likely for marrieds, and homogamy on achieved characteristics like education may be more likely for cohabitors (Schoen & Weinick, 1993). Contrary to these findings for education, Blackwell and Lichter (2000) found that cohabitors were less homogamous educationally than marrieds, although these differences were small at high educational levels.

Theories of Educational and Racial Homogamy

A common theory used to explain mate selection in interracial relationships is status exchange theory, which focuses on the exchange of equally valuable resources for social gain. The theory of the exchange of racial, educational, and other economic characteristics has been supported in several studies that have tried to explain Black–White intermarriage. Data from the PUMS showed that interracially married White women were more likely to marry someone of higher education than were White women in intraracial marriages (Fu, 2001; Gullickson, 2006). Moreover, Blacks with lower educational levels were less likely to enter an interracial marriage than those with higher educational levels (Gullickson, 2006), and White wives married to Black husbands reported less education than White wives married to White husbands (Fu, 2001). Crowder and Tolnay (2000) found support for social exchange whereby Black men with higher income, education, and occupational prestige were more likely to be married to a White woman than Black men married to Black women. In a further demonstration of social exchange, Fu (2001) found that Black wives with lower levels of education had higher odds of being married to other Black men, compared to Black wives with higher levels of education who have higher odds of marrying a White husband. These findings suggest that race and education are exchanged on the marriage market by Black men and women. Fu found a similar pattern for Mexican Americans. Mexican American men with higher levels of education were more likely to marry White women with less schooling than were Mexican American men with lower levels of education. Overall, data suggest that being White is considered a higher social status that is exchanged for higher educational levels in a different race spouse.

Another theory that has been used to explain interracial relationships is structural assimilation theory. According to this theory, individuals will marry across racial lines if they share a structural characteristic, such as educational level. Education is thought to provide not only the resources that might be contributed by a potential marital partner, but also entrance into marriage markets of more privileged racial groups. Qian and Lichter (2007) argued that assimilation occurs in part due to increases in educational level, especially among minority groups, which helps minorities achieve access to other groups and increases the likelihood of interracial marriage. Consistent with the theory, for Asian Americans and Hispanics, intermarriage increased as couple members had higher levels of education. Among Blacks, however, race mattered more as a barrier to intermarriage than educational level. Another study showed no support for structural assimilation theory; there was no consistent link between Whites' education and intermarriage rates (Gullickson, 2006). Thus, structural assimilation theory has received mixed support, with findings dependent on the type of interracial pair.

The Role of Cohabitation in Dating and Mate Selection

In this section, we provide an overview of elements of cohabitation that are particularly relevant to dating and mate selection. Whereas much of the literature compares cohabitation to marriage and treats it as a marriage-like relationship, our goal is to review research suggesting that some forms of cohabitation are more dating-like.

Cohabitation as Dating

Several pieces of data point to the likelihood that cohabitation often is more dating-like than marriage-like. Cohabiting relationships, like many dating relationships, are short-lived and individuals often have multiple instances of them. About 50% of cohabitations last a year or less and only about 10% last 5 years or more (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Lichter & Qian, 2008). A panel study of the first union trajectories of young White adults age 15–31 from the Detroit metropolitan area showed that about 25% of cohabitors experienced a separation or a marriage within the first 6 months of the union; by the end of the second year of the union, 73% had ended in one of these two ways (Binstock & Thornton, 2003). The rate of dissolution of cohabitations formed by age 24 is 52% (Schoen et al., 2007). Individuals often have multiple cohabitations and estimates are that from 50 to 70% of second or higher-order cohabitations dissolve, depending on the duration of the cohabitation (Hohmann-Marriott, 2006; Lichter & Qian, 2008). Cohabitors were unlikely to reconcile after a separation due to discord (Binstock & Thornton, 2003). Within 6 months, 10% were cohabiting with someone new and within 4 years 41% were living with someone new.

Other findings suggest that cohabitations are becoming more tied to dating and less tied to marriage. Data on women age 19–44 from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) and from the National Survey of Family Growth have shown that the percentage of women who cohabited premaritally with their husbands and with other romantic partners increased from 5% for the 1980–1984 cohort to 12% for the 1990–1994 cohort, and the percentage cohabiting with previous romantic partners who were not their husbands increased from 2 to 4% respectively (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). When compared to previous cohorts, the percentage of marriages formed out of cohabiting unions up to age 24 has declined, suggesting that, at least for younger individuals in contemporary relationships, cohabitation less often precedes marriage and is more dating-like than marriage-like (see Schoen et al., 2007, for comparisons). There is evidence suggesting that cohabitation for Blacks may be more of an alternative to marriage than for Whites. Oppenheimer (2003) used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to examine the yearly change in never-married males' union status across cohorts born between 1957 and 1965. For Whites cohabitation was more tied to marriage, whereas for Blacks it was more often a moderate to long-term substitute for marriage. During the interview year immediately following the year during which cohabitations were formed, 32% of White and 13% of Black cohabitors had married. At the third year following cohabitation formation, more cohabitations of Black than Whites survived (23% vs. 12%), but fewer resulted in marriage (51% vs. 22%). Many other studies have shown that Black cohabitors were less likely to marry than Whites, even after controlling for a host of explanatory variables (e.g., Brown, 2000; Lichter & Qian, 2008; Manning & Smock, 1995; Schoen et al., 2007).

Cohabitation as Searching for a Partner

Some cohabitations appear to be more dating-like, in the sense that they are part of the process by which individuals enjoy one another's company while, at the same time, ascertain the quality of their relationships and the suitability of their match. Cohabitation in this sense serves the same purposes as dating, and occurs during the earlier stages of dating, while casually or seriously dating and marriage is an open or distant question. Cohabitation while dating, compared to dating without cohabiting, provides more opportunities to share intimacies and companionship across a diverse array of activities and settings. In this way, it provides opportunities to observe and interact with the partner, and enables partners to

develop beliefs about the nature of the relationship. This form of cohabitation may also be a means by which partners enjoy the benefits of coresidence as they garner information about compatibility and the socioeconomic potential of the partner, while, as Oppenheimer (2003, p. 131) put it, "life is still somewhat on hold."

The results from some studies support the idea that for some couples cohabitation is a tentative dating status and has become part of the process by which partners date and search for suitable mates. Of three relationship-specific reasons for cohabiting, desire for togetherness was rated the highest in importance and convenience the next highest (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). In a qualitative study, Sassler (2004) identified two groups of cohabitors that fit the profile of cohabiting as searching: (a) accelerated cohabitors, who experienced strong initial romantic attraction and moved in together within 6 months of the time they had begun dating for reasons that focused on convenience and finances; and (b) tentative cohabitors, who dated 7–12 months before moving in and were unsure whether cohabitation was right for them. Sassler concluded that quantitative studies have overestimated plans to marry among cohabitors, and argued that dating relationships continue to develop while cohabiting.

Other research has indicated that, rather than a test for marriage as some researchers have assumed, cohabitation may be a means by which partners maintain uncertain or troubled dating relationships while holding deeper commitments at bay. In these cases, cohabitations may provide a mechanism for maintaining relationships at lower levels of commitment while uncertainties about the quality of the relationship are resolved. Among low income individuals, cohabitation seems to provide an opportunity to test the relationship when financial and relationship uncertainties are pressing (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Casper and Bianchi (2002) identified two groups of cohabitors that resemble dating in uncertain relationships, which they called coresidential daters and trial marriages. These two groups had in common a moderate to high probability of dissolution and uncertainty about their compatibility with their partners. Although testing compatibility or the relationship for marriage were the least likely reasons for cohabiting (Rhoades et al., 2009; Sassler, 2004), other findings suggest that testing out the relationship may motivate a subset of cohabitors. Rhoades et al. (2009) found that individuals endorsed testing the relationship as a reason for cohabiting, the more depressed were their partners, the more negative were interactions with partners, and the less confidence they had in their relationships.

Cohabitation in Committed Dating Relationships or as a Prelude to Marriage

For some couples, the decision to wed has already been made prior to entering a nonmarital cohabiting union. Even though reversals in the decision to wed sometimes occur, the search process is, by and large, complete for these couples. Cohabitation as a precursor to marriage was characteristic of one group of cohabitors who had definite plans to marry and a low probability of relationship dissolution (Casper & Bianchi, 2002). If cohabitation occurs after daters have committed to wed, it may be a more deliberate decision. Sassler (2004) found that some cohabitors were more purposeful about making the decision, talked it over, and waited 1–4 years from the time they began to date before moving in together. Cohabitations formed more deliberately once commitments are in place may be better for the long-term health of relationships than those formed without forethought or mutual decision-making (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006).

The Role of Children in Dating, Cohabitation, and Mate Selection

One of the new developments in research on mate selection concerns the effects of children on transitions among singlehood, dating, cohabitation, and marriage (Goldscheider & Sassler, 2006). In this section, we review demographic trends and findings on this topic.

An increasing percentage of nonmarital births now occur to cohabiting women, about 40% of them (Cherlin, 2005). Among births to unmarried women from 1980 to 1994, births among those cohabiting increased from 29% to 39%; however, differences emerged by race whereby the increases were greater for Whites and Hispanics, but did not change for Blacks (Bumpass & Lu, 2000).

The Fragile Families Study is the first to provide information about nonmarried, coupled parents who were in dating and cohabiting unions and transitions in these unions. Cohabiting unions were the most stable of the nonmarital relationships; 60% of those who were cohabiting at the time of the child's birth were still doing so 1 year later and 15% had married (Carlson et al., 2004). Dating parents, operationalized as individuals who reported that they were romantically involved but living apart, had the most changeable relationship status, with almost half no longer romantically involved after 1 year. Among those who started the study as friends, 14% remained friends, 9% began to cohabit, and 1% married. Of those who had virtually no relationship at the start of the study, 65% still had no relationship after 1 year.

Nonmarital births appear to reduce the likelihood of forming cohabiting and marital unions, especially for Black women. Graefe and Lichter (2002) assessed martial transitions for Black, Hispanic, and White women between the ages of 15–44 who experienced a nonmarital childbirth compared to those who did not. Women in all ethnoracial groups were less likely to marry by the age of 40 if they had experienced a nonmarital childbirth. Black women were the most likely to have a nonmarital childbirth and the least likely to enter cohabitation or marriage after nonmarital childbirth. In another study, Black unmarried parents were less likely to marry than Whites and Hispanics 1 year after the birth of their child (Carlson et al., 2004). The effects of children also depend on whether a child was born into or conceived during cohabitation (e.g., Manning, 2004) and on the degree of men's involvement with their children (Stewart et al., 2003).

The residence and gender of children also are associated with union formation. Fathers with nonresident children were more likely to cohabit than to remain single, and less likely to marry than cohabit (Stewart et al., 2003). Men who were in coresidential relationships with children were almost five times more likely to marry a woman who had children than they were to remain single. Compared to remaining single, men who had non coresidential children were more likely to dissolve cohabitations. Cohabiting women who shared biological children with their partners had a lower likelihood of dissolving the cohabitation (Lichter et al., 2006). Mothers who had sons premaritally were more than 60% likely to marry the child's father than were mothers of girls, and the transition to marriage was faster for mothers of boys than mothers of girls (3.4 years vs. 4.6 years; Lundberg & Rose, 2003).

The Role of Relationship Properties in Dating, Cohabitation, and Mate Selection

As our review to this point has demonstrated, most sociological research on mate selection has focused on economic and marriage market characteristics as predictors of change in relationship status. Comparatively few studies have addressed how the properties of relationships themselves relate to relationship transitions, even though these properties are likely to be more proximal predictors of mate selection and change in relationship status than are the more distal predictors such as economic and market-level factors. By properties, we mean individuals' beliefs about and attitudes toward a specific partner and their relationship (e.g., relationship satisfaction, love for or trust in a partner), their estimates of its future course and commitment (e.g., plans to marry or chance of marriage), and the joint or separate behaviors that affect coupled partners (e.g., conflict). In this section, we examine the properties of relationships assessed in large surveys.

Relationship Properties and Transitions into and out of Dating and Cohabiting Unions

Many of the findings that pertain to relationship properties come from the Fragile Families Study or the National Survey of Family and Households. Indicators of relationship quality among parents strongly predicted transitions from dating to another union status or breakup over a 1-year period (Carlson et al., 2004; Waller & McLanahan, 2005). For unmarried parents who were dating, the likelihood of staying together or marrying declined as the frequency of arguments increased regardless of whether one or both partners reported frequent arguments (Waller & McLanahan, 2005). The likelihood of marrying increased if both partners reported sharing activities and the likelihood of continuing to date increased if only the female partner reported sharing activities. For both men and women, ratings of supportiveness were strongly associated with maintenance of or movement into both cohabitation and marriage, as compared to having no relationship (Carlson et al., 2004). For mothers, fathers' physical violence decreased the odds of mothers' staying in a dating relationship by 78% over breaking up. Fathers' reports of conflict reduced the odds of cohabitation after 1 year compared to having no relationship.

Estimates of the chance of marriage seem to be an especially powerful predictor of change in union status, perhaps more powerful than other relationship properties. A study of the effects of relationship quality on the transition to marriage among cohabiting parents showed that both mothers' and fathers' reports of the chance of marriage were associated with increased odds of marrying from Year 1 to Year 2, mothers' reports predicted marriage from Year 2 to Year 3, and the chance of marriage mediated the effects of father earnings on marriage likelihood (Gibson-Davis, 2009). Plans to marry apparently have less of an effect on marrying for Blacks than Whites (Brown, 2000). Among those where both partners agreed that they had plans to wed, 60% of Whites married compared to 20% of Blacks. Other studies have shown that including estimates of the chance of marriage in models reduces the impact of other relationship properties, suggesting that the chance of marriage may exert its effect on change in union status through properties of the relationship. For example, the rate of marriage was 2.6 times higher among cohabitors with plans to marry than those without, but once plans to marry and costs and benefits of marriage were controlled, cohabitation no longer predicted likelihood of marriage (McGinnis, 2003; also see Waller & McLanahan, 2005).

Individuals in cohabiting unions generally report that their relationships were of lower quality than those in marital unions, although chance of marriage and other indicators of quality strongly moderate this effect. Cohabitors were nearly twice as likely as marrieds to report that their relationships were in trouble during the past year (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). Brown (2003) used data from Wave 1 of the NSFH to examine predictors of relationship quality in cohabiting unions of 10 years or less in length. Compared to marrieds, cohabitors reported less time spent alone with the partner in the past month, less happiness with the relationship, and a greater chance of relationship dissolution. Although researchers using data from NSFH have found that cohabitors have lower quality or less happy relationships than marrieds, these differences disappeared once plans to marry or other relationship properties were included in models (Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995).

The connection between plans to marry and relationship quality differs by length of union. In cohabiting unions of shorter duration, individuals with plans to marry reported less relationship instability, but in cohabiting unions of longer duration, individuals with plans to marry reported greater relationship instability (Brown, 2003). Declines in relationship quality with increasing duration were similar for marrieds and cohabitors, except that perceived instability increased with time for cohabitors, but not marrieds. In cohabiting unions of longer duration, unfulfilled plans to marry may generate dissatisfaction with the relationship.

Plans to marry also seem to buffer some of the declines in relationship quality that are characteristic of cohabiting unions. Brown (2004) used data from Wave 1 and Wave 2 of the NSFH gathered 5–7 years apart to examine how plans to marry and changes in plans to marry might alter observed differences between cohabitors and marrieds on relationship quality. On a number of indicators (e.g., happiness, intensity of conflicts), individuals who continued to cohabit over the study period had lower relationship quality than those who were married. However, cohabitors who had plans to marry at Time 2, but not at Time 1, and those who had plans to marry at both points in time did not differ from those who had married on relationship quality at Time 2. Those whose plans to marry disappeared between Time 1 and Time 2 did show expected declines in relationship quality. Brown interpreted these findings to mean that marriages may not differ from long-term cohabitations when cohabitors have plans to wed. Another interpretation is that some cohabitations contribute to a search process that is rooted, in part, in assessments of the relationship. From this perspective, plans to marry are part of the assessment of relationship quality that emerges from and is informed by cohabitation.

Agreement between Coupled Partners on Relationship Properties

Closely related to studies of the properties of relationships are investigations of whether partners agree about its properties. Agreement is indicative of mutuality between partners in the way they assess their relationships, and agreement should make it easier to make decisions about whether to advance or regress involvement in the relationship. In cases where coupled partners disagree, decisions about changes in status are likely to be problematic, and may depend on the beliefs of one partner that define or limit the direction of the relationship.

Findings from research generally are consistent with this analysis and suggest whose beliefs prevail in making transitions when partners do disagree. Agreement on estimates of the chance of marriage to the partner predicted likelihood of marriage and separation after 12–18 months in a sample of coupled partners who were romantically involved but unmarried at the start of the study (Waller & McLanahan, 2005). If both partners reported a good or almost certain chance of marrying, couples were about seven times more likely to marry and two times more likely to continue their romance, compared to separating. For cohabiting couples, the odds of marrying were lower when neither partner reported plans to marry (Brown, 2000), and the likelihood of separating was greater at high levels of disagreement over beliefs about division of labor (Hohmann-Marriott, 2006). Among cohabitors, a pattern of disagreement in which the female partner held egalitarian beliefs, and the male, traditional beliefs, was associated with greater odds of separating over marrying or staying together (Sanchez et al., 1998). In another study of cohabitors, agreement within couples on six dimensions of relationships predicted separation more strongly than marriage and some evidence suggested that when partners disagreed, women's more negative evaluations predicted separation more strongly than men's more positive evaluations (Brown, 2000). Studies of the likelihood of marrying when cohabiting (Brown, 2000) or romantically involved (Waller & McLanahan, 2005), in contrast, indicate that decisions to wed are more responsive to the male partner's negative assessments of relationships.

Methodological Problems in the Study of Relationship Properties

Properties of dating relationships are likely to be one of the strongest predictors of whether relationships persist, become more or less involved, or change status. Although studies have demonstrated that economic and market-level variables predict relationship transitions, some research just reviewed has shown that relationship properties explain changes in unions status better than more distal variables and condition or mediate the connection between distal predictors and changes in status. Degree of commitment between

partners, for example, may help to ameliorate some of the impact of unemployment on the transition to marriage. Uncertainty about relationships (Cherlin, Cross-Barnet, Burton, & Garrett-Peters, 2008) and fears of divorce (Edin & Kefalas, 2005) figure into the relationship decisions of low-income women, and uncertainty and lack of trust may loom large in situations of serial cohabitation or multi-partner fertility. Yet national surveys typically have not incorporated measures of uncertainty or interpersonal trust. Instead, plans to marry, chance of marriage, supportiveness, and frequency or intensity of conflict are the constructs typically investigated, and other properties shown to be influential in studies from social psychology and communication typically are omitted from national surveys (see Campbell & Surra, 2012). As a result, researchers are constrained in their ability to answer questions about how trust, uncertainty, commitment, and other fundamental relationship properties operate in mate selection.

In addition, the measurement of those properties that have been assessed in national surveys sometimes is problematic. One problem is conceptual, and concerns validity of measurement, which stems from the mixing of levels of analysis when observing or constructing relationship variables. The literature on the theory and measurement of relationship properties makes a careful distinction between characteristics of individuals and characteristics of relationships (e.g., Kelley et al., 1983). Although properties of individuals and of relationships are likely to be correlated, they are not the same, and mixing variables from different levels of analysis muddies the theoretical interpretation of findings. In one example, substance abuse was conceptualized and entered into multivariate models as an indicator of relationship quality (Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007) when relationship theory would place it at the individual level. Substance abuse may be related to such relationship properties as conflict or trust, but it is an individual characteristic. Another example is the plans to marry question from the NSFH (e.g., Brown, 2000, 2003, 2004). A respondent reported whether (a) he/she thought they would never marry anyone; (b) he/she thought he/she would marry someone; (c) he/she would marry his/her steady dating partner; or (d) he/she currently had definite plans to marry his or her steady dating partner. Option C and Option D ask specifically about plans to marry the current partner whereas Option A and Option B ask about whether marriage to anyone is likely. From the viewpoint of cognitive theory about close relationships, the first two are generalized beliefs about marriage and the last two are relationship-specific beliefs. Although these two sets of items are likely to be correlated, they measure different levels of analysis. Responses typically are dummy coded to create comparisons, but it is impossible to tell what the resulting variable says about a target relationship.

Another measurement problem that sometimes surfaces in large surveys is low reliability of measures, which will reduce the predictive ability of relationship properties thereby yielding misleading conclusions. Although reliabilities usually are not reported in survey research, when they are reported reliability sometimes falls far below conventional levels. Not too surprisingly, assessments that have only one or two items have lower reliabilities than those that have several items (e.g., Cherlin et al., 2008; Harknett, 2008; Osborne, 2005). Researchers who use secondary data analysis have to rely on the quality of measurement achieved within surveys, and surveys often do not have the luxury to assess relationship properties by means of the full-blown scales with demonstrated validity and reliability that are generally available.

Another issue is that national surveys rarely permit investigators to examine the full range of union statuses involved in relationship development. Dating relationships are particularly overlooked, even though the relational properties that are the seeds of relationship discord and failure may be planted early in partners' associations with one another. The way that these seeds play out to affect union transitions cannot be studied well, if at all, from the nationally representative data sets currently available. Daters are infrequently studied and, if they are, the measurement that is applied to daters differs from that applied to cohabitors. Although cohabitations that

resulted in marriage were investigated in NSFH, the study did not track marriage to steady dating partners, and instead tracked marriage to any partner (McGinnis, 2003). Even the newer Fragile Families Study asked cohabitors about their chance of marriage, but did not ask daters (i.e., visiting parents who were romantically involved) about their chance of marriage (Waller & McLanahan, 2005). Thus, cohabitation can be studied only in relation to marriage, not dating, making it impossible to track the development of relationships with these data sets.

Nonresponse of daters and the less involved also interferes with researchers' ability to track relationships at all levels of involvement. The Fragile Families Study did track daters, but nonresponse was greater among male partners who were not cohabiting (Waller & McLanahan, 2005), and response rates of coupled partners also were lower when they were less committed or likely to marry (Brown, 2000; Bumpass et al., 1991; Waller & McLanahan, 2005). Nationally representative studies would have to be explicitly designed to track more fully the transitions from dating to cohabiting to marital unions.

Conclusions

The study of contemporary mate selection faces greater challenges now than in the previous half century. The patterns by which individuals select mates have diversified along the dividing lines of socioeconomic status and race and ethnicity, and neither theory nor research has been able to keep up with or explain that diversity. In this chapter, we have focused on sociological findings from national and qualitative data sets that have highlighted different mate selection patterns within and across subpopulations. These studies have moved scholars closer to capturing and characterizing diversified patterns of mate selection. Answers about relationships within subpopulations are incomplete, however. What is needed in the future is the melding of sociological approaches with the study of relationship properties from social psychology and interpersonal communication within nationally representative samples. Such investigations will further enrich understanding of the formation and maintenance of dating, cohabiting, and marital unions.

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