



## FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

May 2004 • Number 23

# "His" and "Her" Marriage Expectations: Determinants and Consequences

## Background

The Bush administration is proposing to spend 1.5 billion dollars during the next five years on programs to encourage marriage among unmarried parents. In order for these programs to be successful, policy makers and practitioners need to understand the individual factors associated with both marriage and breaking up in this group. Specifically, whether or not an unmarried couple marries, stays together without marrying, or separates is likely to be determined by both parents' views of their relationship - each partner brings "his" and "her" own set of expectations, beliefs, and characteristics to the relationship.

Since it takes two people to make a marriage work, knowing whether partners share expectations about marriage is very important in assessing the likelihood of establishing a stable marriage. If partners have the same expectations regarding marriage, they may be better able to achieve their common goal. Partners who have different expectations may never have formed an identity as a couple or may have begun to separate from each other. Thus, it is not merely the "his" and "hers" of the couple relationship that are important, but also the "theirs." This brief focuses on unmarried parents' expectations about marriage and the association between their expectations and subsequent marriage or separation.

## Data and Methods

The data are taken from the baseline and one-year follow-up interviews with mother and fathers in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (see box on back). The Fragile Families survey asks new unmarried parents about their chances of marriage - whether they have "no chance, a little chance, a 50-50

chance, a pretty good chance, or an almost certain chance" of marrying the other parent in the future. Parents' responses are classified as: (a) mother reports a high chance of marriage (good or almost certain) and father reports a low chance (50-50 or lower); (b) father reports a high chance of marriage and mother reports a low chance; (c) both parents report a high chance of marriage; or (d) neither parent reports a high chance. The sample is limited to parents for whom we have interviews with both partners.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Unmarried Parents in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study**

Dependent Variables	Means and proportions (%)
Mother optimistic, father pessimistic	9.2
Father optimistic, mother pessimistic	16.0
Both optimistic	60.9
Neither optimistic (comparison group)	13.9
Married at follow-up	11.7
Romantic relationship at follow-up	59.5
No romantic relationship at follow-up (comparison group)	28.8

## Results

In about 61 percent of the couples, both parents rate their chances of marriage as high (see Table 1). In another 14 percent of cases, both parents rate their chances as low (50-50 or lower). When partners disagree (25 percent of all cases), fathers are more likely than mothers to be optimistic about marriage. Specifically, in 16 percent of cases, fathers are optimistic and mothers are not, and in nine percent of the cases mothers are optimistic and fathers are not.

**Table 2. Unmarried Parents' Union Transitions 12 - 18 Months After Their Child's Birth**

Expectations	Married (vs. Separated)	Romantic (vs. Separated)
Both Optimistic	7.24***	2.16***
Mother Optimistic, Father not	2.19+	1.46+
Father Optimistic, Mother not	2.52*	1.65**
+ $p \leq 0.1$ * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$		

Note: Coefficients are Relative Risk Ratios from Multinomial Regression Models. Models also include controls for Background Characteristics such as race/ethnicity, age, children with other partners, education, and employment.

Despite the high expectations of marriage that unmarried parents report at birth, 12 to 18 months later, only 12 percent have married while 29 percent have separated. The other 60 percent of parents are still in a romantic relationship. The proportion of couples that marry may seem low given their initial expectations. However, the question asked parents to assess their chances of marrying in the future rather than in the next year. Although marriage rates are likely highest in the first year after a non-marital birth, more couples will likely marry in the future. Still, the percentage of break-ups indicates some disparity between initial expectations and outcomes, with more than twice the number of couples separating as marrying.

## Do marriage expectations predict behavior?

Table 2 shows the associations (in the form of relative risk ratios) between marriage expectations at birth and whether parents marry or stay together (versus breaking up) in the 12-18 months following their child's birth. Having at least one optimistic partner increases the odds of marriage relative to breaking up. Mothers' optimism doubles the odds of marriage, whereas father's optimism increases the odds by two and a half times relative to neither parent being optimistic of marriage. If both partners are optimistic, the odds are seven times higher than if neither partner is optimistic. The same pattern holds for staying together (remaining romantically involved but not marrying) relative to breaking up. Having at least one optimistic partner increases the odds of staying together and having two optimistic partners increases the odds even more. Therefore, there is a direct relationship between expectations and outcomes. Notice that for both outcomes, fathers' optimism is a stronger predictor of staying together than mothers' optimism.

## What factors predict optimism about marriage?

A number of factors are associated with both partners being optimistic about the future of "their" relationship. Table 3 highlights those factors that have the greatest impact on expectations to marry. These include distrust of the opposite sex (gender distrust), holding traditional views about marriage, couple conflict, and shared activities. To measure feelings of gender distrust, we ask mothers whether they believe men can be trusted to be faithful and whether men are

**Table 3. Unmarried Parents' Marriage Expectations at the Time of Their Child's Birth**

Independent Variables	Couple Optimistic
<i>Gender Beliefs</i>	
Mother only reports gender distrust	0.47***
Father only reports gender distrust	0.58**
Both report distrust	0.32***
Mother only has traditional gender beliefs	2.01*
Father only has traditional gender beliefs	0.93
Both gave traditional gender beliefs	1.56
<i>Relationship Characteristics</i>	
Mother only reports high conflict	0.48***
Father only reports high conflict	0.44***
Both report high conflict	0.21***
Mother only reports shared activities	1.48+
Father only reports shared activities	2.27***
Both report shared activities	3.04***
+ $p \leq 0.1$ * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$	
Note: Coefficients are Relative Risk from Multinomial Regression Models Relative to Neither Optimistic. Models also include controls for Background Characteristics such as race/ethnicity, age, children with other partners, education, and employment.	

"out to take advantage" of women; fathers were asked identical questions about women. Distrust of the opposite gender by either partner reduces the likelihood that both parents will be optimistic about marriage. And when both partners are distrustful, the effect is even stronger. The effect of mothers' distrust is slightly larger than the effect of fathers' distrust.

A different pattern appears for traditional gender beliefs which are measured with a question asking parents whether "the important decisions in the family should be made by the man in the house." Here mothers' beliefs about traditional gender role are more important than fathers' beliefs. The odds of both parents being optimistic are lower when either partner reports high conflict, and they are lower still when both partners report high conflict. Conflict in the relationship is captured by an index which sums parents' responses to six questions asking how often they argue about money, spending time together, sex, the pregnancy, drinking or drug use, and being faithful. The odds of both parents being optimistic are higher when either partner reports shared activities together. Finally, parents are coded as sharing positive activities if they have visited

friends and helped each other solve a problem in the last month. Fathers' reports of shared activities appear to be especially important in predicting joint optimism.

## Conclusion and Policy Implications

Couples are most likely to realize their expectations and maintain their relationships when "his" and "her" positive expectations for the relationship converge. We find that couple's expectations about "their" future together are the strongest predictors of whether they will marry soon after their child's birth. Our findings indicate that promoting the value of marriage may be less essential than understanding and addressing the factors that encourage and discourage couples' from thinking about themselves as a couple. Programs that focus on relationship skills training should recognize that gender distrust, women's attitudes about gender roles, high levels of conflict, and the absence of shared activities may present particular barriers to couples' relationships, making them less optimistic about marriage and, therefore, less likely to marry.

## Recent Working Papers

The following comprises a list of the most recent Working Papers authored by the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) faculty and research associates. A complete list of Working Papers is also available for viewing and downloading on the CRCW web site: [crrw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies](http://crrw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies)

2004-06-FF Cynthia Osborne May 2004 "The Relationship Between Family Structure and Mothering Behavior within Racial and Ethnic Groups"

2004-05-FF Jean Knab Apr 2004 "Who's In and for How Much? The Impact of Definitional Changes on the Prevalence and Outcomes of cohabitation"

2004-04-FF I-Fen Lin, Sara McLanahan Apr 2004 "Gender Differences in Perceptions of Paternal Responsibility"

2004-03-FF Lauren Rich, Irwin Garfinkel, Qin Gao Apr 2004 "Child Support Enforcement Policy and Unmarried Fathers' Employment in the Underground and Regular Economies"

2004-02-FF Anna Aizer, Sara McLanahan Apr 2004 "The Impact of Child Support on

Fertility, Parental Investments and Child Well-being"

2002-13-FF W. Bradford Wilcox, Nicholas Wolfinger Apr 2004 "Then Comes Marriage?: Religion, Race, and Marriage in Urban America"

2004-01-FF Rachel Kimbro, Scott Lynch, Sara McLanahan Feb 2004 "The Hispanic Paradox and Breastfeeding: Does Acculturation Matter? Evidence from the Fragile Families Study"

2003-22-FF Julien Teitler, Nancy Reichman, Lenna Nepomnyaschy Dec 2003 "The Effects of State Policies on TANF Participation"

2003-21-FF Nancy Reichman, Hope Corman, Kelly Noonan Dec 2003 "Effects of Child Health on Parents' Relationship Status"

2003-20-FF Hope Corman, Nancy Reichman, Kelly Noonan Dec 2003 "Mothers' Labor Supply in Fragile Families: The Role of Child Health"

2003-19-FF Kelly Noonan, Nancy Reichman, Hope Corman Dec 2003 "New Fathers' Labor Supply: Does Child Health Matter"

2003-17-FF Nancy Reichman, Julien Teitler, Marah Curtis Dec 2003 "Hardships Among Sanctioned Leavers, Non-Sanctioned Leavers, and TANF Stayers"

2003-16-FF Sara McLanahan May 2004 "Fragile Families and the Marriage Agenda"

2003-15 Angela Fertig Nov 2003 "Healthy Baby, Healthy Marriage? The Effect of Children's Health on Divorce"

2003-14-FF Marcia Carlson, Frank Furstenberg, Jr. Oct 2003 "Complex Families: Documenting the Prevalence and Correlates of Multi-Partnered Fertility in the United States"

2003-13-FF Nancy Cohen Oct 2003 "Unmarried African American Fathers' Involvement with Their Infants: The Role of Couple Relationships"

2003-12-FF Ariel Kalil Oct 2003 "Fathers' Perceptions of Paternal Roles: Variations by Marital Status and Living Arrangement"

2003-11-FF Catherine Kenney Sept 2003 "Hardship in Marriage and Cohabiting Parent Households: Do Cohabiting Parents Underinvest in Household Public Goods?" \ 2003-10 Anne Case, Angela Fertig,

# FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

*Center for Research on Child Wellbeing*

Wallace Hall, 2nd Fl. • Princeton University • Princeton, NJ 08544

Presorted  
First-Class Mail  
U.S. Postage  
Paid  
Princeton, NJ  
Permit No. 299

---

## Inside...

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine unmarried parents' expectations about marriage and the association between their expectations and subsequent marriage or separation.

---

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is following a birth cohort of nearly 5,000 children, including 3,712 children born to unmarried parents and 1,186 children born to married parents. The data are nationally representative of births in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. For more information about the study, visit the Web site of The Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies> or email the CRCW at [crcw@opr.princeton.edu](mailto:crcw@opr.princeton.edu)

This research brief was adapted from “His' and 'Her' Marriage Expectations: Determinants and Consequences” by Maureen Waller and Sara McLanahan To download a copy of the paper on which this brief was based, visit <http://crcw.princeton.edu>, go to the *Fragile Families* link, click on *Publications*, then click on *Working Papers Series*.

The Fragile Families Research Brief is funded in part by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We also thank the Joint Center for Poverty Research for helping to disseminate this brief.