

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

ABSTRACT

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Recently, the federal government has attempted to support marriage by providing financial and political resources for marriage and relationship initiatives, particularly those that target poor and disadvantaged populations. This comes in response to a shift in marriage behavior during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States wherein age at first marriage, nonmarital childbearing, cohabitation, and divorce rates increased (Cherlin 2004). There are few marriage and relationship programs that target adolescents. Adolescent romantic relationships unfold during a unique stage in the life course, one that is characterized by keen interest in relationships and sexuality, but with little preparation for navigating this new type of intimate contact. Early romantic relationships provide a framework for interaction with the opposite sex and influence the trajectory of adult relationships and family transitions. It is for this reason that the quality of adolescents' early romantic relationships is particularly important, and relationship programs that seek to improve these relationships are pivotal.

The goal of this dissertation is to evaluate the marriage and cohabitation expectations of adolescents in an effort to advance knowledge of the factors that influence adolescents' transition to healthy adult relationships and marriages, namely marriage beliefs, socioeconomic disadvantage associated with parents' marital status and social resources, relationship status and current relationship characteristics (e.g. quality and engagement), parenthood status, demographic characteristics (e.g. race and gender), and peer influence. The life course perspective serves as the conceptual framework for ensuing analyses by highlighting the occurrence of romantic relationships during a pivotal period of growth, and highlighting the ramifications of these relationships and transitions to more binding adult relationships.

This dissertation utilizes three data sets: 1) existing data from the Grand Rapids Healthy Marriages Healthy Relationships program *No Jerks* (including pre-/post-class assessments, a brief marriage attitudes survey, and demographic data) that highlights and advances knowledge of the views and experiences of disadvantaged adolescents who partake in relationship education programs; 2) new data from a pilot relationship education program *Relationship Smarts Plus* including pre-/post-class assessments, demographic data, and in-depth interviews; and 3) wave one findings from the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study with a particular emphasis on addressing factors that account for socioeconomic differences in marriage and cohabitation expectations. These factors include marriage beliefs, socioeconomic disadvantage associated with parents' marital status and social resources, relationship status and current relationship characteristics (e.g. quality and engagement), parenthood status, demographic characteristics (e.g. race and gender), and peer influence.