The Power of the “Magic Moment”: The Long-term Effects of Marital Expectations on Child Health and Relational Outcomes

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Introduction

Maternal childbearing has become increasingly common among couples in the United States. Recent research has found that those with married parents and their children are more likely to experience positive personal and familial outcomes compared to those in which the parents are non-marital. These negative outcomes include lower levels of financial stability, inconsistent parental involvement, more behavioral problems in children, relationship instability, lower amounts of positive parenting practices, and lower levels of overall family functioning (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; McLanahan & Gottdiener, 2000; Olszynko, Meringer, & Smiest, 2017; Olszynko & McLanahan, 2020).

However, there is not much data on what these children need as their future parents begin to shape their future development and behavior. In this study, we find that 92% of unmarried parents indicate a better than a 40% chance of marrying the child’s other parent in the future (Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinic, 2021). The present study examines the effects of marital expectations and relationship quality on child health outcomes. We predict that marital expectations and relationship quality will be associated with child health outcomes.

Present Study

The central hypothesis of this study is that expectations to marry a partner will impact relationship quality with the partner and parenting behaviors and thereby the child. Those behaviors are related to child health outcomes. If parents expect to marry and then to stay together, we may reason that it is more likely that they are stable and reliable parents, which would influence their children’s behavior.

Participants

The sample for the study included 6,332 parents from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Participants were asked at the birth of the first child. The sample includes more black than white participants. The sample was black, white, other, Asian Indian and Latino. Parents for the study were recruited from local hospitals in 28 cities across the United States. Interviews were conducted with both parents when the child was one and three years old (waves 2 and 3). The sample was black, white, other, American Indian and Latino.

Results

Table 1 displays the results of mixed regression models predicting child health outcomes when children were one and three years old. The presence of multiple possible confounding variables. The use of preexistent data limiting the researcher’s ability to measure relationship quality. In regards to relationship quality the link persisted after controlling for common demographic controls. In the case of child health outcomes the link was maintained after controlling for parenting stress and common demographic controls. In the case of relationship quality the link even continued after controlling for parenting stress and common demographic controls. In the case of child health outcomes the link even continued after controlling for parenting stress and common demographic controls.

Table 2. Results of mixed regression models predicting marital expectations and relationship quality.

Discussion

In this study, marital expectations were associated with child health outcomes. The presence of multiple possible confounding variables. The use of preexistent data limiting the researcher’s ability to measure relationship quality. In regards to relationship quality the link persisted after controlling for common demographic controls. In the case of child health outcomes the link even continued after controlling for parenting stress and common demographic controls. In the case of relationship quality the link even continued after controlling for parenting stress and common demographic controls.

Limitations and Future Directions

Some limitations of this study include:

• The use of preexistent data limiting the researcher’s ability to measure relationship quality.

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