

Measuring Couple Relationships, 2003-2007

Overview

The Measuring Couple Relationships agreement transferred funds from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to support activities of the NICHD Family and Child Well-Being Network, through the Network's grant at Child Trends (HD30930/Moore), to review the state of the art in measuring couple relationships.

Marriage and couple relationships constitute an area of intense interest for researchers as well as policy makers. Attempts to measure aspects of the quality of marital relationships began more than 50 years ago, and measures continue to be developed and refined. A number of conceptual issues surround the measurement of relationship quality, such as the definition of "quality," whether to use subjective measures based on satisfaction with the relationship or more objective measures based on observed behaviors of the couple, and what sorts of outcomes measures should be able to predict.

In reviewing measures to assess the quality of couple relationships, this project gave particular attention to measures that (1) are applicable to large samples, low-income individuals and couples, and ethnic and linguistic minorities, (2) can be used across some or all of the broad range of categories defining couple relationships, and (3) may be sensitive to interventions designed to strengthen relationships through providing the skills and knowledge to support healthy marriages.

The project reviewed the state of the art in measuring couple relationships across a broad range of categories, covering psychological, sociological, economic, and other relevant literatures. It examined existing tools, and determined the need for refinement of current measures or development of new measures to address gaps. The project examined measures of:

- The nature of couple relationships—for example, how do existing instruments address the complex variety of family structures, such as (1) dating, (2) "visiting" relationship (romantically involved, but living apart), (3) roommates (cohabiting, but not romantic), (4) cohabiting and intimate, (5) single mother (never married, but the father is supporting the child), (6) single mother (without father support), (7) engaged, (8) married parents, (9) married step-parents, (10) separated or divorced co-parents, and (11) extended family household—in particular grandparents;
- The quality of couple relationships, including the nature of couples' interactions and each partner's satisfaction or other attitudes about the relationship; and
- Aspects of the nature and quality of couple relationships that are related to children, such as the nature of couples' interactions specifically related to parenting roles and behaviors, how parental roles contribute to the definition of the couple relationship (as in examples 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10 above), or aspects of couple relationships that have been shown (or are likely) to affect children's well-being.

Specific tasks included:

- preparing a compendium of existing measures;
- commissioning short memos that described the critical conceptual issues in conceptualizing and measuring relationship quality, with concrete recommendations for constructs and measures;
- conducting literature reviews to inform the measures work;
- identifying critical constructs that are relevant for the population groups of interest; and

- developing measures.