

Searching for the Roots of Family Instability:  
How do Institutions Influence Relationship Formation and Quality?

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Understanding how stable, high-quality unions are established is an important question for family scholars and others interested in family stability. Previous research shows that relationships, especially marriages, tend to form between individuals who share similar characteristics in terms of age, race/ethnicity, religion, education, and socioeconomic background, but little is known about how marriage markets actually work. The goal of this paper is to fill this gap by examining variation in how couples meet and how the quality of the match is associated with the meeting method.

Single individuals meet their partners as they go about their lives in schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, interacting with friends and family, and spending time in public places such as restaurants, bars, or the local neighborhood. Because workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and networks of friends are potentially sorted to contain similar types of people, the meeting mechanism may influence the quality of the match. Having things in common, whether a similar cultural background or similar hobbies, potentially makes for a smoother relationship. Couples who meet through an institution or network that is highly sorted might be more similar than other couples and therefore be more satisfied with their relationships.

Educational institutions are thought to be sorted most effectively for marriage market purposes, because they contain people of the same age and mixed genders. Colleges and universities are additionally sorted largely by socioeconomic status, academic achievement, and personal interests. Many workplaces are similarly sorted by socioeconomic status, but less sorted by age. Neighborhoods, on the other hand, tend to be sorted by inherited characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and often religion.

To examine how institutions influence union formation and quality, I use couple-level data from the Married and Cohabiting Couples 2010 survey (N=2,150) from the National Center for Marriage and Family Research. I begin with a descriptive analysis of how couples met. Schools appear to play a key matchmaking role among the highly educated, whereas

neighborhoods and public places play this role for the least educated. Almost a quarter of individuals with college degrees met their partners through an educational institution, compared with about one tenth or fewer among non-college graduates. By contrast, over 60% of non-high school graduates met their partners in a public place like a restaurant, bar, or local neighborhood, compared to just one third of college graduates. Compared to other groups, the youngest age cohort, 18-29 year olds, were most likely to have met through schools (28.4%) and also most likely to have met online (10.3%). Hispanic individuals were also more likely than those of other race/ethnic backgrounds to have met through schools, possibly due to union formation at younger ages when schooling is more relevant.

Moving to the multivariate analyses, I estimate five ordinary least squares regression models modeled separately by gender. The first model examines the bivariate relationship between self-reported relationship quality and how couples met. The second model controls for the individual's age and race. The third model accounts for differences in education and income. The fourth model adds in whether the couple is married or cohabiting and whether children are present in the household. The fifth model is the full model.

Results show that for both genders, meeting a partner through a mutual school, college, or university is associated with the highest level of relationship quality, with matches made through joint membership in organizations forming a close and not significantly different second. For men, meeting a partner through a mutual workplace is also associated with similar levels of relationship quality as meeting through schools. For women, workplace matches produce marginally lower quality unions than school matches; matches made without the assistance of any formal institution, such as those originating in public meeting places or through friends and family produce significantly lower quality matches. For men, unions that result from chance encounters in places like bars, parties, or the neighborhood are the only unions that produces significantly poorer quality unions than educational institutions, and for both genders this meeting method is associated with the lowest relationship quality. Whether the couple is married (versus cohabiting) appears to play the largest role in attenuating the association between how couples meet and relationship quality, perhaps because some of the lowest quality matches originating from meetings in neighborhoods and other public places do not transition to marriage.

The results imply that institutions play a key role in sorting which individuals interact with each other, and who will form relationships and marry. These differences are important as a potential root cause of family stability and instability. Individuals with access to institutions that create the conditions for high quality relationships to form gain an important advantage that may have long-term effects for the union and family stability.

<b>Table 1. How did couples meet? Distribution of independent variables by meeting status.</b>						
	School	Mutual workplace	Friends or family	Club, activity, or religious org.	Neighborhood, bar, party, etc.	Online
Observations	n=322 (15.0%)	n=308 (14.3%)	n=328 (15.3%)	n=194 (9.0%)	n=854 (39.7%)	n=144 (6.7%)
<b>Age group</b>						
18-29	28.4	10.6	12.8	10.9	27.0	10.3
30-39	18.0	13.4	15.7	7.9	38.8	6.2
40-49	10.1	17.5	15.7	7.4	44.0	5.6
50-59	9.9	15.6	16.2	9.4	42.0	6.9
60+	11.3	10.2	15.8	12.4	46.9	3.4
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>						
White	14.1	14.4	15.1	10.0	39.5	6.9
Black	13.1	17.8	16.8	4.7	42.1	5.6
Hispanic	21.0	11.4	15.0	6.6	40.7	5.4
Other	20.0	13.8	16.6	3.4	39.3	6.9
<b>Education</b>						
Less than HS	7.0	9.6	15.7	2.6	61.7	3.5
High school	9.8	13.2	20.4	7.0	43.8	5.8
Some college	10.9	15.7	15.5	9.0	40.1	8.8
College degree	23.9	14.4	11.5	11.4	33.2	5.6
<b>Rel. status</b>						
Married	15.4	14.9	15.6	10.4	39.6	4.1
Cohabiting	13.9	13.0	14.6	5.9	39.9	12.7
<b>Income</b>	\$73,171	\$79,409	\$66,513	\$68,503	\$63,288	\$61,652

<b>Table 2. Relationship quality (1-5 scale) by meeting method.</b>						
	School	Mutual workplace	Friends or family	Club, activity, or religious org.	Neighborhood, bar, party, etc.	Online
Observations	n=322 (15.0%)	n=308 (14.3%)	n=328 (15.3%)	n=194 (9.0%)	n=854 (39.7%)	n=144 (6.7%)
Women	4.33	4.19	4.09	4.30	4.12	4.14
Men	4.42	4.31	4.33	4.39	4.22	4.32
The relationship quality measure is normalized (mean=0, SD=1) in the multivariate regressions.						
Source: NCFMR Married and Cohabiting Couples 2010 Survey						

<b>Table 3. Women's and men's reported relationship quality based on where couples met. Results from OLS regressions.</b>										
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)		(5)	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
<b>How met</b>										
(School)										
Mutual workplace	-0.208+	-0.154	-0.186	-0.120	-0.173	-0.114	-0.167	-0.102	-0.159	-0.0992
Friends/family	-0.367**	-0.108	-0.352**	-0.0895	-0.286*	-0.0621	-0.317**	-0.0630	-0.265*	-0.0453
Club, activity, religious org.	-0.0388	-0.0236	-0.0340	-0.0254	0.00930	-0.0120	-0.0296	-0.0202	0.00635	-0.0112
Neigh., bar, party, etc.	-0.326**	-0.295**	-0.309**	-0.276**	-0.219*	-0.243**	-0.269**	-0.245**	-0.196+	-0.224**
Online	-0.292+	-0.133	-0.283+	-0.139	-0.206	-0.110	-0.198	-0.0572	-0.150	-0.0431
<b>Age group</b>										
(Age 18-29)										
Age 30-39			0.00377	-0.0615	-0.0948	-0.0977	-0.0629	-0.117	-0.128	-0.139
Age 40-49			-0.127	-0.199*	-0.205*	-0.249**	-0.211*	-0.276**	-0.254*	-0.306**
Age 50-59			-0.00406	-0.00278	-0.0784	-0.0480	-0.210+	-0.135	-0.234*	-0.158
Age 60-69			0.0546	-0.141	-0.0132	-0.195+	-0.221	-0.302*	-0.227	-0.330**
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>										
(White)										
Black			-0.202	-0.333**	-0.107	-0.303*	-0.0740	-0.242*	-0.0160	-0.227+
Hispanic			-0.00078	0.0505	0.0885	0.0601	0.0350	0.0621	0.108	0.0675
Other race			0.0449	-0.140	0.0430	-0.173	0.0517	-0.150	0.0553	-0.173
<b>Education and income</b>										
(Less than HS)										
High school					0.231	-0.0174			0.223	-0.0338
Some college					0.235	-0.0102			0.269	-0.0175
College					0.381*	0.0216			0.384*	-0.00012
Household income					0.0342**	0.0155*			0.0276**	0.0116
<b>Relationship and household</b>										
Married							0.358**	0.248**	0.296**	0.229**
(Cohabiting)										
Kids in household							-0.248**	-0.119+	-0.218**	-0.112+
Constant	0.139+		0.160		-0.349+		0.0909		-0.376+	
Observations	1073	1073	1073	1073	1073	1073	1073	1073	1073	1073
R-squared	0.016	0.017	0.020	0.033	0.048	0.039	0.044	0.048	0.064	0.051

\*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05, + p<0.1

Source: NCFMR Married and Cohabiting Couples 2010 Survey