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The Relationship Timeline: A Method for the Study of Shared Lived Experiences in Relational Contexts

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Abstract

Lifeline methods—graphic illustrations of the pathways of lived experience traveled by individuals from birth to anticipated death—have been useful in the study of lived experience. Existing lifeline methods and research focus on the individual experience; absent from this literature are the collective experiences of those in intimate relationships. In this paper, based on our research with 120 same-sex couples, we present a method to allow for the joint creation of relationship timelines, which serve as the basis for eliciting dyadic data in multiple forms: graphic representations of relationship development through couples' creation of a timeline of key events and periods; qualitative narratives of couples' shared experiences; and quantitative ratings of significant events and periods in their lives together. Lessons learned from the application of this Relationship Timeline Method are discussed, as are implications for future study of the shared lived experience.

Keywords

timelines; shared experiences; dyadic data; life course

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Introduction

The lifeline approach, a technique for visually depicting the events and transitions of individual life histories (Gramling & Carr, 2004) was borne out of the parallel literatures of life course and life events research. Elder (1998) and others have noted the prominence of life events in the examination of the life course as they draw attention to key incidents and circumstances associated with life changes over time. Life course research establishes the importance of examining lives in time and place, adopting historical and biographical perspectives (Settersten 1999). A life course perspective advances that experiences at every stage of life inform experiences at subsequent stages as part of an overall trajectory, demonstrating the evolution of life experience over time. Moreover, it addresses the interdependence of lives in relational contexts, facilitating understandings of the ways in which individuals share life experiences through their close ties to one another, i.e., “linked lives” (Elder, 1998).

Many life events and their resulting life changes are viewed as inherently stressful (Dohrenwend, 2006). Early measures assessing stressful life events and their experienced effects include the well-known foundational efforts of Holmes and Rahe (1967). In their Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS), individuals indicate the occasion of normative life events (e.g., marriage, births, deaths) having occurred over some period of time giving rise to life-change unit scores interpreted as an index of social stress. More recent research has returned to the life course context within which life events are experienced, suggesting that the consequences of life events may be strongly influenced by their timing, perceived relevance, and subjective experience (XX XXXXX, Blando, Southard & Bubeck, 2001; Jang & Haley, 2002). Associated with this is a move away from event recognition and their scalar assessments to more narrative descriptions of events in the context of an individual’s life (XX XXXXX, Suedfeld, Krell, Blando & Southard, 2005; XX XXXXX, & Watt, 1996)—an integration of an event-based perspective with the personal life course narrative (XX XXXXX, 2013) providing an “insider’s” perspective on the individual life course.

This individually-based use of lifelines is briefly reviewed below, along with recent applications to the understanding of relationships. Building upon these efforts, we introduce a Relationship Timeline Method, which provides an innovative means for examining the relational (i.e., couple) nature of lived experience. Couples construct the Relationship Timeline with an interviewer, anchoring it in the date the couple met with space on the line through the present to an anticipated future. The interviewers then facilitated a process wherein the participating couples added to it by labeling and dating significant events and periods from their shared past and anticipated future that they felt were (or would be) definitive of their relationship. The couples then rated all of the events and periods of time illustrated on their timelines regarding the degree to which they felt each was stressful for them as a couple. We demonstrate how the Relationship Timeline Method yields a variety of data types—visual representations, narrative accounts, and numeric ratings—which can be brought to bear in mixed methods research on critical concerns in a variety of relational contexts. We illustrate the utility of the Relationship Timeline Method using data from an ongoing research study on stress in same-sex couples.

The Lifeline: Method and Content

The central tool used for the derivation of lifelines (sometimes referenced as timelines) is a linear graphic illustration of life: a line anchored at one end by “BIRTH” and at the other by “DEATH” (Rappaport, Enrich, & Wilson, 1985). Individuals are asked to indicate and label on the line those life events that are, have been, or are anticipated to be of significance and the age at which these events occurred/will occur. These events are subsequently rated on a series of dimensions chronicling stress and event appraisals such as expectedness, adjustment and responsibility (XX XXXXX, Walker & Blando, 1995; XX XXXXX, et al. 2005).

A somewhat comparable process for capturing the sequencing of life events can found in life history calendars (LHC; Axinn, Pearce, & Ghimire, 1999), wherein respondents are first asked to recollect memorable, general, or extended events such as birthdays, holidays, or changes in school/work, which may be considered landmark or anchor events and then place these events on a chart that resembles a typical calendar format (see Roberts & Horney, 2010, for a discussion of different calendar formats). The dates of these general events are used to orient and improve accuracy when recalling more specific events (Morris & Slocum, 2010). In both the LHC and lifeline exercises interviewees are asked to elaborate on the events they have listed on their unique lifelines, adding narrative context and qualitative detail to the event listings. Research has employed this method with women and men of various ages typically focusing on the type and number of life events generated in this individualized, narrative life course context. It has not been concerned with using the lifeline or timeline as a means of generating qualitative narratives surrounding critical events or periods of times in peoples’ lives, as individuals or couples.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the type of events identified in lifeline studies largely mirror those addressed in the SRRS (XX XXXXX, & Watt, 1996; Schroots & Assink, 2005). The categories revealed by these analyses cover the expected domains: education, career, moves, personal health, relationships and family, births and deaths, and personal growth. Past events predominate for all groups—roughly three-quarters of identified events; it is the minority of events yet to occur. Future events are rarely studied, yet provide evocative projections of lives and relationships (XX XXXXX, 2013). Normative events, the largest proportion of identified events, may favor older adults in as they reflect on their lives and younger adults as they anticipate years to come. Gender differences have also been noted; XX XXXXX, et al. (1995), for example, reported that women identified an overall greater number of events than did men (with respective means of 21 and 17). The relational context of women’s lives (e.g., Miller, 1976) has been named in the interpretation of this finding: women are more likely to identify the events of others are “their” events than are men.

This focus is infrequently found in the lifeline literature, even as many of the events introduced above are relational—at least in a broad sense (e.g., marriages, births and deaths, romances, relationship beginnings and endings, friendships). A more particular coding of the listed events (XX XXXXX, 2002) of women and men across the adult life course found that 43% concerned other persons explicitly, many of which (just under 10 percent of all events)

were specific to friends and friendship. No data are available regarding the proportion of events inherently linked to romantic relationships.

The Study of Shared Relationship Narratives

The narratives individuals tell themselves and others about their interpersonal and romantic relationships may well serve to provide them with a sense of connection and meaning (Fiese & Grotevant, 2001; Fiese & Spagnola, 2005; Fiese, Marjinsky, & Cowan, 1999; XXXXX, 2011). The narrative study of lives has embraced the investigation of how relationships of all sorts can be better understood through the use of narrative approaches (Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2007; Singer, 2004). Relationship narratives contain both behavioral (i.e., what happened in the relationship story) and perceptual components (i.e., the narrative retelling reveals what is important and meaningful to the relationship partners and their interpretations of their own and their partners' behavior). Narrative accounts of relationships are often central in guiding individuals' overarching life narratives (e.g., Josselson, 1996; 2007; 2009).

Individuals make meaning through the construction of relationship stories by choosing, from the vast "menu" of culture, experience, values, goals, etc., to include the most meaningful and important aspects of shared experiences into their life stories (Conville, 1997; McAdams & Pals, 2006). Such narratives are constantly evolving units of analysis to which researchers can look holistically to understand and study interpersonal relationships (XXXXX, 2011 XXXXX, 2013; Josselson, 2007; Singer, 2004), similar to the insider's (i.e., subjective) life course perspective of the individual life line. Researchers interested in interpersonal relationships have increasingly begun to make use of narrative frameworks and methodological tools in their work. This shift towards a focus on narrative reflects the "importance of being able to study meaning-making in relationships" (Fiese & Grotevant, 2001, p. 581).

In order to take the relational nature of relationship stories more seriously, the unit of analysis may need to be expanded to include couples' jointly constructed narratives which can be taken to represent collective meaning making strategies at the couple level rather than at the individual level. Indeed, research on couples' communication and conversation has alternatively focused on jointly told stories of couples and families. This research has shown how qualities of co-constructed stories are associated with relationship quality (e.g., Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Doohan, Carrère, & Riggs, 2010; Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha, & Ortega, 1993). Couples' and families' jointly told stories of events in their relationships (e.g., relational histories, courtship stories, stories of stressful experiences) are predictive of relationship quality and mental health (Buhelman et al., 1992; Kellas, 2005; Kellas, Trees, Schrod, LeClair-Underberg, & Willer, 2010). For example, behavioral representations of intimacy and positive affect in couples' relational histories—measured as marital bond—is associated with heightened relationship satisfaction and lower levels of depression (Doohan et al., 2010). Although these studies have demonstrated the ways in which aspects of jointly constructed narratives can provide insight into indicators of relational well-being, they have yet to be integrated into lifeline methods that seek to investigate the meaning of significant life events in developmental context.

We report below on an ongoing study wherein we explore the relationship timelines and accompanying narratives of same-sex couples. Research that explicitly focuses on the lives of same-sex couples is both timely and novel. It is timely in light of the growing awareness of population health disparities based on sexual orientation (Institute of Medicine, 2011). In addition, the recent Supreme Court's recent rulings that have legalized same-sex marriage across the United States has focused unprecedented attention on the reality that same-sex couples have long faced opposition to achieving their basic relational pursuits, and that they will continue to do so.

It is novel in that previous research has largely examined relational experiences from the perspectives of *individuals* in relationships, ignoring the potential of data that inherently reflect shared experiences through the collection of dyadic data. Data elicited through dyadic methods are likely to reveal findings distinct from those drawn from methods focusing on individuals, and such data stand to teach us a great deal. The study on which this paper is based is devoted, for example, to improving current understandings of how the stigmatization of some relationship types (e.g., same-sex relationships, mixed racial/ethnic relationships) is distinct from the stigmatization of some identities (e.g., sexual orientation, race/ethnicity), and how *stressors at the relationship level* contribute to stress processes that influence couple well-being and individual partner health (XXXXXXXX, XXXXXX, & Wight 2015). In sum, research and innovative research methods focused on dyadic life experience are critically needed.

Data Types and Utility within Mixed Methods Research

The Relationship Timeline Method yields three primary forms of data. The first is the *graphic* depiction of shared lived experience in the form of the jointly constructed relationship timeline itself. Interpretation of the graphic data can focus on the clustering or grouping of particular events in relation to others or the anchors on the timeline (e.g., today, death). The second type of data the Relationship Timeline Method produces is the *quantitative* data related to the number of events placed on the timeline and the ratings of such events on dimensions of important to the aims of the research (e.g., importance, stressfulness). The third type of data is *qualitative*, stemming from the nature of the events placed on the line (e.g., birth of a child, purchase of a house) and participants' narrative accounts of the lived experience of the event (i.e., who was involved in the event, what happened, how they reacted to it, what it meant to them).

Collectively, the data obtained from the Relationship Timeline Method provide researchers with *constructivist units of analysis* (e.g., Little, 2000) in that these data emerge naturally from the participants' own lived experience within their particular relational contexts. Each relationship timeline is therefore unique in its construction. The events that make up the relationship timeline reflect those events that have been perceived as relevant to the participants. Constructivist units of analysis thus stand in stark contrast to typical life event inventories, which require recipients to endorse whether or not they experienced a standard set of events predetermined as relevant by researchers. Even though standardized rating metrics and deductive coding schemes can be applied to the data generated from the Relationship Timeline Method, the actual data themselves are emergent from lived

experience rather than imposed by the research team. Thus, the kinds of constructivist units of analysis yielded by the use of the Relationship Timeline Method are potentially more accurate representations of participants' lived experience in relational contexts than traditional life event inventories and existing scales designed to measure relational constructs.

An Example Relationship Timeline Study

Our study, described below, builds upon and contributes to the foregoing literatures, with a focus on stressful events and periods of time in the lives of same-sex couples, framed in the narrative and contextualized course of their relationships. The focus of our study was the experience of minority stress among same-sex couples, elaborating upon existing research (and methods) with their exclusive focus on the individual. Rather than imposing the existing model onto the experiences of couples, we sought to understand the types of events, periods or episodes that couples identify in the context of their relationship and the role of minority stress in these experiences. In so doing, we hoped to theorize minority stress at this couple-level, rooted in the shared experiences identified and described. Creating the Relationship Timeline Method provided a couple-specific method and forum for the understanding and interpretation of these events and experiences uncovered (XXXXXXX, XXXXX, & Wight 2015).

In the text that follows, we describe our work so far, sharing lessons learned from the application of this relationship timeline method. We provide examples of real relationship timelines to demonstrate how this method offers a rare perspective on the shared experiences of individuals within romantic relationships.

Sample

As part of a study of minority stress and mental health among same-sex couples, relationship timeline interviews were conducted with 120 couples, evenly dispersed across two study sites (Greater Atlanta and San Francisco Bay areas), gender, and relationship duration (6 months < 3 years; 3 years < 7 years; and 7 years or more (e.g., new versus mid- and long-term partnerships)). Eligibility criteria for participation in this study were that: (1) both partners were at least 21 years of age; (2) both individuals perceived of one another as their partner, of themselves as a "couple;" and (3) at some point in their shared history, they had been engaged in a sexual relationship.

In order to ensure couples met these eligibility criteria, each partner within a couple was directed to complete an online screener containing questions about their own age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, location of residence, and relationship characteristics (e.g., length, cohabitation status). Partners' responses to the screener were compared to one another to confirm the integrity of their responses and eligibility for the study. A member of the project team monitored screener responses daily and invited couples to participate directly via email and/or telephone.

Quota-based sampling was used to enroll equal numbers of male and female couples, as well as equal numbers of couples representing the three categories of relationship duration,

within each study site. Moreover, couples were selectively recruited so that in at least 40% of participating couples within each of the 12 “recruitment cells,” at least one partner is from a racial/ethnic minority background. Therefore, the total sample of 120 couples is, by design, evenly dispersed by study site, gender, and relationship duration. For the total sample – and within each study site – just less than half of both the male and female subsamples were couples in which both partners are non-Hispanic White.

Design

We adapted the traditional lifeline methodology, described above, to create the Relationship Timeline Method, in which couples began by jointly creating a timeline that was anchored with the “DATE WE MET.” Trained interviewers instructed the couples to write their ages at the time they met on their line, and then to label “TODAY” somewhere to the right of the date they met, on the line, where they felt it should be in relation to the “DATE THEY MET.” In addition, participants were asked to leave room to the right of “TODAY” for the “ANTICIPATED FUTURE” they envisioned for themselves as a couple.

Once this basic relationship timeline was created, the interviewers then facilitated a process wherein the participating couples added to it by labeling and dating, typically with the month and year or simply the year, significant events and periods from their shared past that they felt defined their relationships to date. Similarly, they labeled and dated significant events and periods of time that they jointly anticipated for their futures together. In addition, the couples then rated all of the events and periods of time illustrated on their timelines regarding the degree to which they felt each was stressful for them as a couple on a scale of 0 to 4, with 0 indicating not at all stressful and 4 indicating very stressful. In this regard, the stressfulness ratings represent a quantitative dimensional rating of a common quality of the events placed on the line (i.e., stressfulness). Then the interviewers asked a series of narrative prompts concerning each of four events/periods, to elicit more detailed accounts regarding stressful experience. The four events/periods chosen for discussion were selected as follows (1) the highest rated stress experience closest to the “DATE THEY MET;” (2) the highest rated stress experience closest to “TODAY;” (3) the highest rated anticipated stress experience in their futures; and (4) one stress experience (from the past or in the anticipated future) of their choosing.

Narrative prompts for these event or period elaborations included brief descriptions (i.e., “Please describe this event or period of time; please tell me about what happened”) followed by more subjective appraisals such as: “Can you describe how you were thinking and feeling when this happened/at that time?” and “How do you think this event or period of time has affected you as a couple?” and “Did this event or period of time have a lasting impact on your day-to-day lives?” These probes were asked generally and then for each partner, as needed and/or appropriate. Prompts regarding minority stress events/experiences additionally inquired whether “this event or period of time involve[d] stigma, prejudice, discrimination and/or negative feeling related to your being in a same-sex couple?”

Lastly, given the research was focused on the particular experience of minority stressors, couples were then instructed to place a star – using self-adhesive stars provided by the

interviewers – to identify those events or periods of time that involved the experience of stress related the stigmatization or marginalization of their relationship.

Implementation

In Tables 1 and 2, respectively, we present demographic descriptive data regarding this sample and descriptive statistics concerning the relationship timelines created by the 120 participating couples. Table 1 presents, as per our sampling goal for racial/ethnic diversity, at least 40% of the couples in each recruitment cell are couples where at least one partner is a person of color (combine the second and third rows of Table 1 for each column). For the total sample – and within each study site – half or less than half of both the male and female sub-samples were couples in which both partners are non-Hispanic White. In short, this sample of same-sex couples is racially/ethnically diverse. As shown in the bottom row of Table 2, the average number of events/periods per timeline was 27, with more past events/periods (19.8) than anticipated future events/periods (7.2). There were no differences in the total number of events/periods, the number of past events/periods, or the number of anticipated future events/periods based on couples' gender, race/ethnicity, living arrangements, or study site. However, long-term couples (7 years or more) created timelines with more past events/periods than those in the other two relationship duration categories (i.e., 6 months to < 3 years, and 3 years to < 7 years), and fewer anticipated future events than couples who had been together for 6 months to < 3 years). With regard to the designation of events/periods as minority stressors on the timeline, these data suggest that about six of the 27 total events/periods involved the experience of minority stress, and more of these concerned experiences from the past (3.8) than those anticipated in the future (2.1).

Examples of Relationship Timelines

Figures 1 – 3 provide examples of three relationship timelines created by participating couples. Pseudonyms are used, and some details regarding specific events or periods of time are changed, to maintain confidentiality. Figure 1 describes the relationship timeline of Heather and Maggie (ages 32 and 28), two non-Hispanic White women who met in their twenties and had been together for almost three years at the time of their participation in the study. They identified 13 past events/periods, 10 anticipated future events/periods, and starred eleven events/periods as involving minority stress. Recall that four events were particularly queried. The most stressful event closest to the date of the interview was “qualifying exams” for Heather who was seeking a graduate degree and experienced panic attacks fearing failure and being expelled from her program; the most stressful event closest to the date they met was “Thanksgiving 2010.” Maggie was traveling to see her parents for the holiday and she had promised Heather she would tell her parents about their relationship during the visit. This would also represent the first meeting of Maggie and Heather’s parents when she returned home. The most stressful event anticipated for the future was buying a “house.” This source of stress in this event was both financial and, relatedly, concern over the decision-making process of deciding on a particular house. The stressful event chosen by this couple for discussion was their upcoming “wedding.” Their excitement about this future event was tempered by their worry about preparations, an inequality in preparation efforts,

and a concern that their marriage would count for less than the marriage of a heterosexual couple.

As an illustration of the qualitative data deriving from this approach, the following exchange was part of the discussion about the “Thanksgiving event,” during which the couple addressed the stress of coming out to family and how they thought it had affected their day-to-day lives as a couple:

Heather I think for me at least coming back to that trust thing, I think that was one of those things where she was like, “Okay. I’m going to tell them,” and she told them. So it was like an early on kind of proof that when she says she’s going to do something and when she knows something is important to me, she’ll follow through with it. So, I think like that on a day-to-day basis I have a lot more trust in her probably than I would have had that, like, and had she not done it or like had dragged it out for months and months and that sort of thing. That’s my perspective.

Maggie Yeah. Um, I don’t know. I think along the same lines. We’re definitely - I think I felt - leading up to that point I felt a daily pressure that I put on myself. She was great. She didn’t, she didn’t do a lot of badgering like, “Tell them. Tell them. Tell them. Tell them.” But I think once I did tell them, it did change. I think I was much more comfortable with it, and I think I was able to be much more open after that. But I don’t know. I didn’t really - I mean it was like an instant relief and everything after that felt a little easier. So, maybe that’s how it changed it.

Figure 2 presents the relationship timeline of Peter and Matt, an inter-racial couple who had been together for four years when they participated in the study. Peter was 45 and Matt was 42. They identified 25 past events/periods, 10 anticipated future events/periods, and starred seven events/periods as involving minority stress. The most stressful event closest to the date of the interview was “dogs killed cat in house.” The stress of this event derived from the couple having rescued and fed animals and Peter’s fear of the relationship ending due to this stress. The most stressful event closest to the date they met was “changing jobs:” Peter was laid off, having difficulty finding another job and feared that Matt would leave him. The most stressful anticipated event was “pet death” and the couple became emotional discussing this, describing their pets as their children. “P moved in with M” was the stressful event of their choosing to discuss; they described this process as gradual and natural, requiring a building of trust that the other person would not steal or damage their personal things.

The following exchange, again illustrating the qualitative data generated by way of this approach, was generated as Matt and Peter were constructing their Relationship Timeline (and prior to the interview focusing on the four events), envisioning their future, poignantly contemplating nursing care for same-sex partners and related caregiving issues.

Peter But I mean I’m, I’m talking like when we’re in our 80s and 90s. You know, there’s a whole issue now. Where, where do same-sex couples go - or gay and lesbian people go when you’re in your 80s and 90s? What nursing home is going to be friendly? Where, where do we go?

Matt Well, my side of the family doesn't live past 80, so – it'll be you. [laughs]

Peter I know, but, but I'm talking about - I mean we're going to have to pay for assisted living. I mean we're going to get old and die. So, I mean we need to - we need to have a game plan -

Matt Well, yeah, but that's ... How can you point that on there?

Peter It's a major thing in life.

....

Peter So, I'm, I'm thinking like 40 years out, when I'm 85. Think about it. We don't have kids, Matt. Who's going to take care of us?

Matt My nephews and nieces.

Peter Your - well, we'll see what happens with that, but - I think other things we have to do too, we have to worry about caring for our own elderly parents. That - that's going to be a big deal ... because how old is your mom right now?

Matt Um, she's 65 –

Peter So, you've got to think that, you know, once she's in her 70s and 80s, she may not be able to - you know what I'm saying? You're mom's got a lot of health problems: the knees, her back. You know, my problems with my parents. Who's going to care for them, you know? I mean there's always that surprise that someone might have to move in with us. [chuckles]

Matt No. Oh.

Peter And that's going to put a huge stress on [laughs] our relationship.

Figure 3 illustrates the relationship of Mindy and Bambi, non-Hispanic white who had been together for 12 years at the time of the interview; Mindy was 44 and Bambi was 57. Their relationship timeline includes 20 past events/periods, five anticipated events; seven events/periods were starred—one multiple times. The most stressful event closest to the date of the interview was identified as “back pains.” The stress of this event derives from the relationship strains attributable to Bambi's chronic difficulties with her back, including a stressful trip to the emergency room, Bambi's temporary paralysis, and the concomitant effects on their sex life. The most stressful event closest to the date the couple met was “mom visits for the first time,” made stressful by the perceived homophobic attitude of Mindy's mother. Mindy's mother, who has health problems requiring some assistance and care, was similarly the focus of the most stressful anticipated event as the couple dreaded caring for this “horrible patient” again—as they had in the past. The couple spoke of the “big wedding” as the event identified by them for further discussion—a validating and stressful experience.

Part of what made the wedding stressful for this couple was the reaction of Mindy's mother to their union and their decision to ask her not to come to the wedding (and all that such a decision represented), as discussed in the quote below:

Bambi Well we were doing – we did couple sessions like premarital or you know that kind of thing. And, uh so it was kinda – I felt like it was good to come to that – once we came to that decision and how to do it, it was great. And it was freeing and, um – And also another piece of this I think I felt like you didn't – she stopped talking to you but you also were like “And I'm not gonna bend over backwards to get her to talk to me.” And not that necessarily you did your whole life but there was –

Mindy No, I did.

Bambi It was a little bit twofold there that Mindy would still send her a card on her birthday and somethin' and you know. So it was really, um like I felt you were really holding onto your own and I would have felt like whatever you did was okay I mean I hope I supported you in that.

Mindy And I felt really supported because we had decided that we wanted to do this premarital counseling to talk about stuff like were we gonna have kids and where were we gonna live and just what our life plan was. And when this issue about my mom came up I had this structure that was really supportive to me because I – like on my own I'm not sure exactly how I would have handled it with my mom but because we talked about it in counseling and – and you said what you said and the therapist said, “Now you know you've gotta actually give her a date by which to respond”

The honesty and openness reflected in the quotes above extended to events and circumstances that were clearly emotionally challenging and threatening to the relationship. Consider the narratives of Josh and Roger (ages 44 and 45), for example: two non-Hispanic White men who met in their thirties and had been together for eighteen years at the time of their participation in the study. They identified 42 past events/periods, eight anticipated future events/periods, and starred 13 events/periods as involving minority stress. The most stressful event closest to the date of the interview was “Meeting Josh's parents” where Roger felt apprehensive and nervous due to Josh's parents conservative, religious values; the most stressful event closest to the date they met was “Josh's unprotected sex outside of relationship” when Josh admitted to Roger that he had engaged in unprotected anal sex with another man, which caused both men to question their relationship. The most stressful event anticipated for the future was “Co-teaching a workshop,” something they plan on doing as their full-time jobs. The stressful event chosen by this couple for discussion was when “Josh's father died.” This event was stressful because Josh attended the funeral alone, per his family's wishes, and was even asked by his mother to remove his wedding band.

As an illustration of the qualitative data deriving from this approach, the following exchange was part of the discussion about dealing with Josh's infidelity, during which the couple addressed the effects this had on their relationship and their day-to-day lives:

Roger Uh, we were at a hot springs together, I felt really connected and bonded. And then [clear throat] uh, in bed in the morning, Josh finally shares this, “By the way, I’ve had, you know, um, sex with somebody.” Which, you know, in and of itself is like, “That sucks, what, you know-” But when uh, he shared what was actually unprotected um, anal sex. And he and I had unprotected anal sex several times that weekend up at the hot springs. Uh. It was a huge um- uh- blow to my- my trust uh, in us. Um- uh- felt like, um- um, that he didn’t have my back, that he wasn’t, you know- that he could have passed on, you know, something to me. And um- it wa- it just- it shook the ground underneath my feeling about what the relationship was about. And my expecta- or- I realized later that it was- it pulled the rug out from under my expectations of who Josh was for me.

Josh So, I- I um, remember being really surprised, just shocked, at my um, lack of consideration. Like, the fact that I- you know, because we had always- we’ve always had a guideline around safe sex. Um, if we were going to be having sex outside the relationship. And um, with everything that I had been through, having him tell me about his sexual acting- uh, addiction and acting out. Realizing that I- I was now turning the tables, I- I had now turned the tables on him. And um, something that I had found so scary, um, and risky on- of his actions, I was now, you know, doing that to him. And- and also that I know Roger has even more fear of AIDS than I do. I don’t have that much of a fear, but he- like, it’s a really deep fear for you. And so, I remember just being so shocked that I had um, been so disconnected from um, the- the consequences of my behavior on him. And it really disturbed me.

Similarly, Marianne and Roxanne (ages 43 and 52), two non-Hispanic White women who had been together for 21 years at the time of their participation in the study, spoke of the stresses in their relationship centered on their daughter. They identified 14 past events/periods, six anticipated future events/periods, and starred two events/periods as involving minority stress. Recall that four events were particularly queried. The most stressful event closest to the date of the interview was “Dealing with Barbara,” the couples’ teenage daughter who was struggling with and continues to struggle with mental health issues; the most stressful event closest to the date they met was “Miscarriage,” when Marianne became pregnant using the last vial of sperm from the same donor used to conceive Barbara and then miscarried. The most stressful event anticipated for the future was “Barbara driving,” which they related to their past and current struggles with Barbara. The stressful event chosen by this couple for discussion was their “Move to California.” This event was a source of stress both financial and, relatedly, however they ultimately described this event as a positive experience as they were able to bond as a family despite the stress of not having a stable work or home environment for quite some time.

As an illustration of the qualitative data deriving from this approach, the following exchange was part of the discussion about “dealing with Barbara,” and her borderline personality diagnosis, during which the couple addressed the effects this has had on their relationship and their day-to-day lives, including dealing with discrimination from a therapist who cited their relationship as the cause of Barbara’s condition:

Marianne Yeah, that's been more of a – a – um, (sighs) I mean there have been times that it brought us together cuz we do deal with it together but we, um, it's – it's been more of dividing I would say too. I know a lot of times, um, you know Barbara and – and me, sometimes we'll often blame Roxanne for the situation where things are. So that's um, you know I think some of the ways you know we've gone through periods where I've said – felt that the way Roxanne's dealt with things has – has made – made it worse with her and I know she's thought the same of me. And so that would be a yeah, not a – not a highlight of how to make a better relationship how we dealt with that. You okay?

Roxanne No, I mean – I – I think at this point Barbara has, well for what, I don't know what point but she really doesn't like me so it's you know that's – that's a tough –

Marianne One of the diagnoses that – diagnosis that the psychiatrist thought he said if I had to give her a diagnosis I would say borderline personality disorder. And I don't know if you're familiar with that but, um, you know its – splitting is a big part of it so—I'm sure that she's contributed to us putting each other against each other – Yeah so that's been a – a real challenge for our – for our relationship. Challenging with her, but definitely it challenged our relationship.

Roxanne Uh, (hesitates) um, well Barbara would say, you know “I don't know why you guys are together. I – I you know I don't like her” and blah, blah, blah and all this stuff. And then Marianne will say “oh you know, I kind of agree with her” and “you get angry” then –

Marianne Well I think Barbara has some valid complaints you know there are things about Roxanne that are hard to live with and, um, you know they affect Barbara. And I don't know how to answer those – respond to that when you know Barbara's, “Well she's this, this and this” and I'm like, “Yeah, yeah you're right.” (chuckles) You know so I – I don't want to take sides but I – you know it's really you know— I do – I do blame, um, part of the situation on – on Roxanne and, um, I do. Yeah. I think that's some of her, you know, she has a very short temper, um, she can be very condescending and those kinds of things that I think she's – she's – has contributed to – to Barbara's mental state or haven't helped anyway. And so when Barbara gets really upset then I – I'm, um, you know less happy about my relationship.

It should be noted that the data presented above are to illustrate the variety and types of data that can be obtained using the relationship timeline method. These example timelines illustrate the richness of the data deriving from this approach. The qualitative data from our study of minority stressors affecting same-sex couples - presented above - especially bring to life the kinds of stressors that people in same-sex relationships face, including not only stressors common to couples of all types, but also those unique to couples whose relationships are stigmatized or marginalized by the larger society. For example, the timelines and associated narratives created by these couples concerned past, ongoing, and anticipated challenges dealing with family members regarding holiday events (Heather and Maggie), wedding planning (Mindy and Bambi), and funerals (Josh and Roger). Moreover, Marianne and Roxanne describe their struggle with a mental health care provider who attributed their daughter's problems to their same-sex relationship and Peter and Matt voiced

worries about how they will find long-term care that is accepting and affirming of them as older gay men, an older gay couple. Of course these are only select examples of how the application of the relationship timeline method resulted in data that leads to deeper understandings of couple-level minority stress. However, the method is intended to be adaptable to suit the aims and research questions of any given investigation. As such, we do not offer recommendations regarding how the data should be analyzed, as that decision would be determined within a given study. The flexibility would allow multiple analytic approaches to be employed, such as: a content analysis of the event types placed on the line, a narrative analysis of the meaning making processes operating in the retelling of significant events on the line, a discursive analysis of power negotiations in deciding on joint ratings, and the use of dimensional ratings as predictor variables in combination with outcomes measured by including additional scale items (e.g., relationship satisfaction, depressive symptoms).

Evaluation and Future Directions

The couple-based data obtained using the relationship timeline method are informative, encouraging of further research and consistent with those found from studies with individual lifelines. A significant strength of this approach is the joint completion of the timeline, providing an infrequent glimpse into the constructed relationship narratives of (same-sex) couples. Our study provides a focus on how couples identify and navigate stressors in their relationships—and offers a methodology for such investigations. As such, this approach contributes to the literature largely characterized by individual analyses and interpretations.

Indeed, as shown in the previous section, the relationship timeline methodology offers more than a typical individual in-depth semi-structured interview in addressing the lived experiences of couples. This occurs primarily in that the timeline creation exercise requires couples to *jointly* represent a shared account of their time together and the events that collectively shape the meaning and course of their relational development. Individual interviews elicit only one partner's account and therefore fall short of yielding data that can truly speak to the relational meanings of interest to most relationship researchers. Additionally, the relationship timeline methodology yields not only qualitative data in the form of voiced responses to questions posed by an interview, but also a visual representation of a couple's shared lived experiences and quantitative dimensional ratings of selected aspects of this lived experience. In allowing couples to chart the course of the interview via their construction of the line, researchers avoid imposing a pre-existing set of expectations of what types of events will be meaningful in couples' lives and instead allow couples to determine the types of events that they deem meaningful. Such events are then the focus of further dimensional ratings and narrative exploration. In this regard, the relationship timeline methodology can be considered constructivist in nature, more so than the typical in-depth semi-structured interview protocol.

Our experiences with this approach lead us to recommend its further use. We found, for example, that participating couples generally worked collaboratively in completing their relationship timelines. In some instances, one partner tended to be the more dominant voice

in the creation of the relationship timeline. This issue, one that is reflected in the dynamics between many couples, was difficult to address at times. In response we did attempt to reinforce the “joint exercise” instructions and our interest in the “shared story,” but this was not always successful. Once we moved into the discussion of focal event/periods (e.g., the questions posed above), we were able to introduce prompts that helped us engage the less forthcoming partner. Additionally, a small number of couples struggled to create “joint stress ratings;” instances where they could not come up with joint ratings, we simply put separate ratings for each partner for those events/periods (averaging their ratings) and encouraged them to continue the process. In general, however, the couples readily and comfortably took to the exercise, frequently commenting on their positive experience in the process. Nonetheless, regardless of our efforts to encourage participation from both partners, relationship dynamics – such as those where one partner is more dominant or passive over the course of the timeline interview – are evident in both the timeline that was created and in the accompanying narratives generated by both partners. We view this as a strength of methods in which two individuals simultaneously participate given it is difficult to observe relationship dynamics first-hand when participants are interviewed individually. Indeed, future studies that are especially focused on building deeper understandings of relationship dynamics may consider ways to frame the timeline interview specifically to elicit data for the purpose of revealing those more vividly. For instance, some additional ‘rules’ could be instituted to ensure that each partner’s contribution to the lifeline construction is more readily visible (e.g., assigning different colored pens to distinguish their respective labeling of the line and rating of the events or periods of time). In the study at hand, which was focused specifically on the ways in which same-sex couples uniquely experience minority stress due to the stigmatized nature of their relationships, relationship dynamics were not the primary focus.

We see many opportunities for subsequent research employing this methodology. The data generated from the Relationship Timeline Method can be analyzed in a variety of mixed methods designs and analytical approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Morse, 2003). For example, in answering a research question like “What types of events are most meaningful in the formative stages of romantic relationships?”: (a) a graphic analysis could be conducted to isolate the events clustering closest to a “date we met” anchor on the relationship timeline; (b) a content analysis could be conducted on the qualitative descriptions of the types of events, which could be compared to (c) couples’ quantitative ratings of the events as expressed, on a meaningfulness dimension or some other such rating scale (e.g., participants may be asked, after constructing their timeline, to rate each event on a scale where 0 = not at all meaningful to 4 = very meaningful).

The data obtained from the Relationship Timeline Method can also be combined with other sources of data in sequential mixed methods analyses (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Sutton, 2006). For example, the qualitative types of events and their qualitative ratings can be thought of as potential predictors of outcomes in inferential statistical analyses (e.g., Do couple with more stressful life events in their anticipated futures on their timelines score higher on scale measures of anticipatory stress and uncertainty about the future?) and in the development of other measures.

There is clearly a wide variety of research questions that may be addressed through the use of this method. For example, XXXXXXXX, XXXXXX, and Wight (2015) have recently theorized a framework and mechanisms of stress proliferation (including minority stress) for couples; both individual and couple-level minority stressors can be examined using relationship timelines. A wide array of additional relationship constructs can be examined by way of this method. Such relationship constructs include conflict, sexual dysfunction, relationship satisfaction, intimacy, trust, and commitment. Several of these constructs are apparent in the qualitative examples provided above. These are, of course, highly sensitive and often personally and relationally-threatening issues and the frequency with which such issues are raised remains to be seen.

Similarly, transitions of many types in relationships of many forms may be explored with this methodology. These may include, for example, romantic relationship transitions such as the decisions and issues related to marrying or separating or becoming parents. Parent-child issues may be considered including negotiating roles over changing family circumstances (e.g., age of child and independence or need for care of parent and inter/dependence). Issues beyond families are similarly open to exploration with this method; as friendships evolve (e.g., the relocation of a friend) or work relationships change (e.g., promotions and new relationship parameters between co-workers), engagement of the Relationship Timeline Method may facilitate a clearer understanding—for all involved.

Relatedly, the relationship timelines may enhance clinical interventions with couple clients. Comments by our participants reflect some of this potential. For example, a member of one of the lesbian couples in our study, after reflecting on the relationship timeline that they had just created, said:

This is our life and this is how we both see it...these are the important events that we both see, we both understand. When I look at it, I can see myself walking down our hallway, you know, and like our pictures on the walls. And, like I think about these events often and because they shaped us and because I'm always, like semi-conscious of all these things.

Another couple—two gay men—described the timeline and the accompanying process as being able to “guide you as a couple into some other areas of conversation or benefit...the whole exercise format allowed to us maybe talk more and interact more...”

These comments suggest the potential of this methodology as an adjunct to therapy—as a means of generating ideas or conversations, as an exercise in preparation, as a way of structuring thoughts, events and periods. The timelines and their nodal points may serve as foci for discussion and provide context for actions, decisions, and feelings. The manner in which decisions are made or framed may serve as guides to discussions involving conflict and mediation.

Conclusion

We introduce the Relationship Timeline Method, a creative adaptation of an existing, productive methodology providing opportunities and a framework for the examination of

relationship evolution and narratives. The 120 same-sex couples in our research readily embraced this approach, often reporting on the insights they gained in their engagement with this technique. Our preliminary analysis of these data revealed an evocatively clear pattern in the way in which these timelines were completed: couples identify more than two-dozen events or periods, on average, strongly favoring the past over the future. This pattern was noted without significant variation across couple gender, race/ethnicity, living arrangements, or region of the country in which this preliminary study was conducted; the only differences in these timeline characteristics were noted attributable to relationship longevity. The qualitative data reveal the depth to which these interviews may be mined, both in the examination of key concepts as well as in their derivation. This approach holds promise for further research into the shared/joint narratives of couples, with implications for clinical intervention as well.

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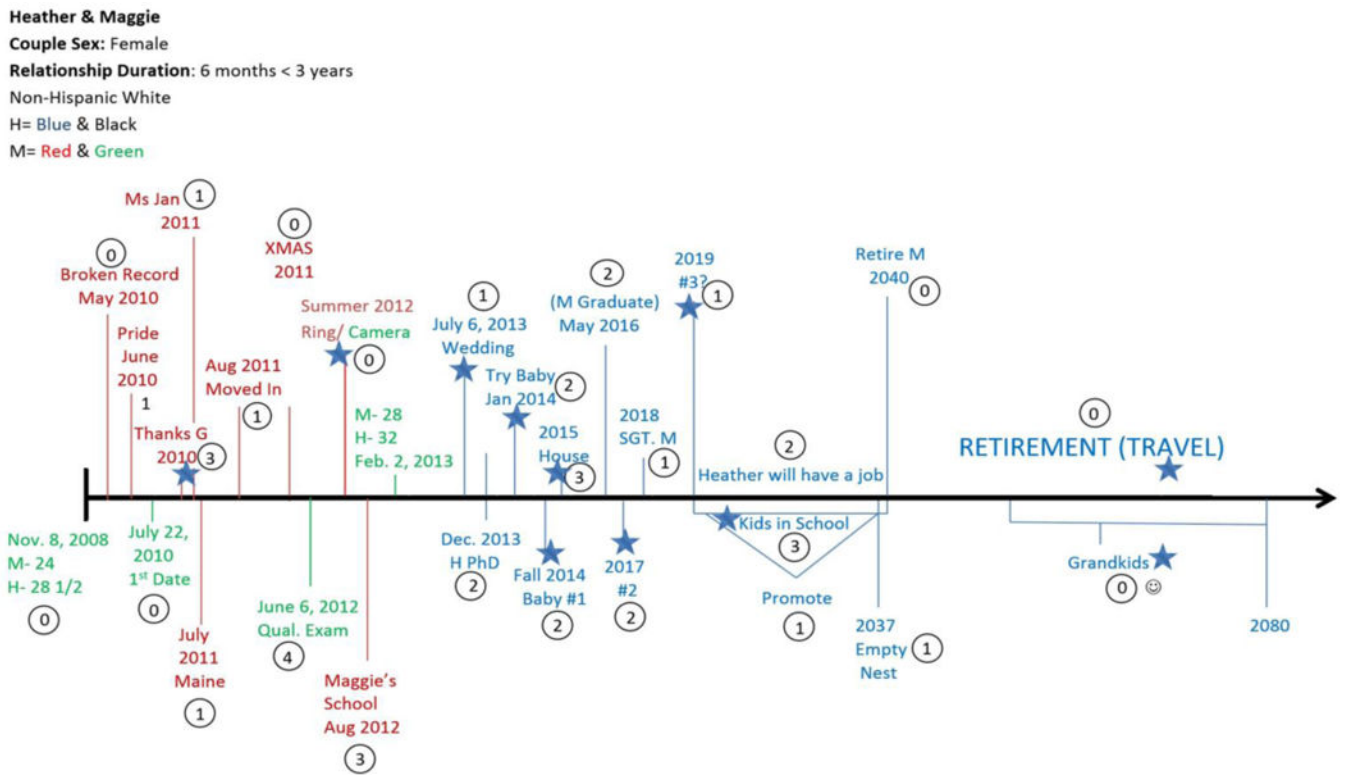


Figure 1.
 The Relationship Timeline of Heather and Maggie

Peter & Matt
Couple Sex: Male
Relationship duration: 3 years < 7 years
 Non-Hispanic White/ Person of Color

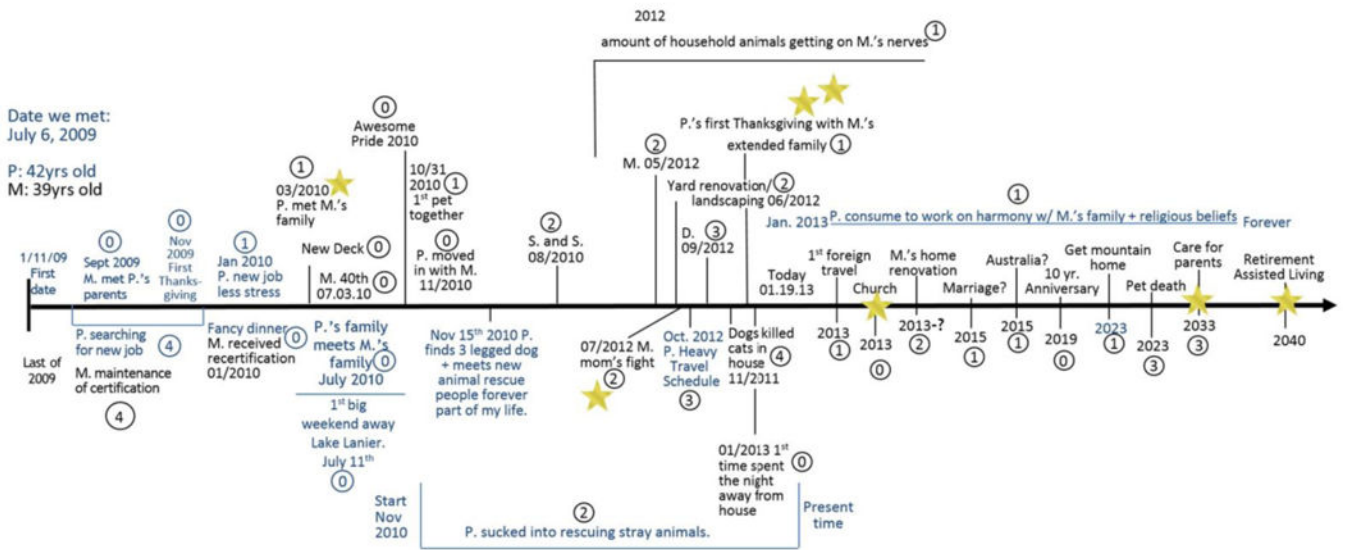


Figure 2.
 The Relationship Timeline of Peter and Matt

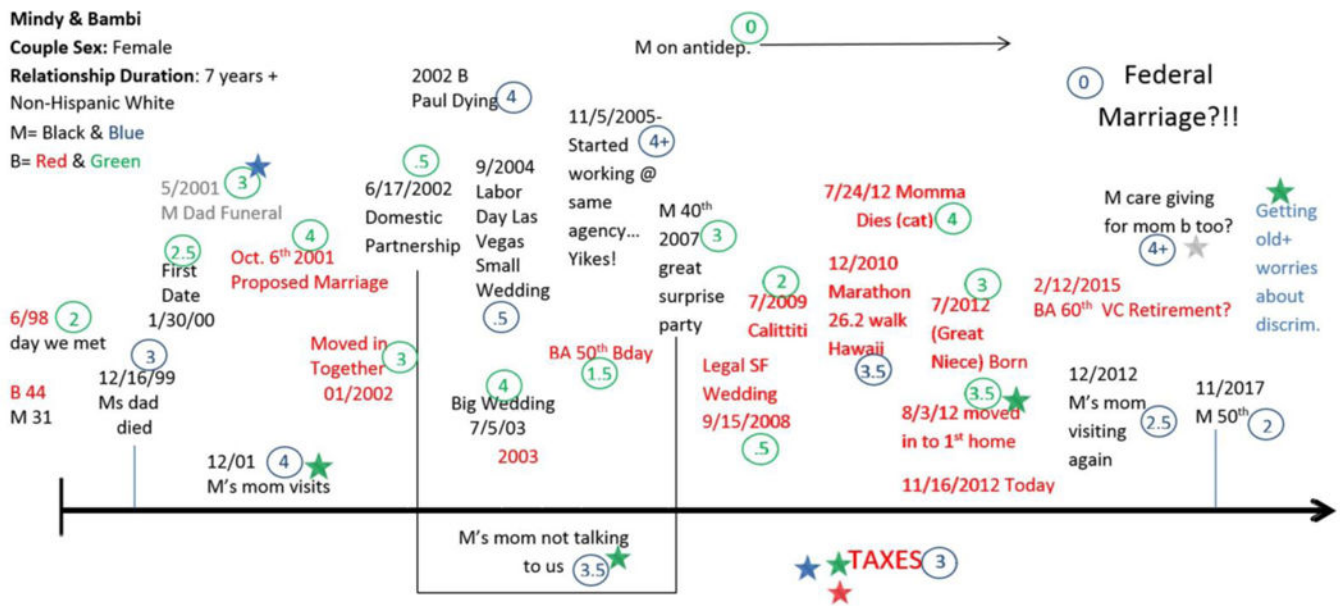


Figure 3.
 The Relationship Timeline of Mindy and Bambi

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Table 1

Qualitative Research Sample: Race/Ethnicity

RACE/ETHNICITY	SF BAY AREA SUB-SAMPLE			GREATER ATLANTA SUB-SAMPLE			TOTAL SAMPLE		
	Female Couples (n=30)	Male Couples (n=30)	Site Total (n=60)	Female Couples (n=30)	Male Couples (n=30)	Site Total (n=60)	Female Couples (n=60)	Male Couples (n=60)	Total Sample (n=120)
Both non-Hispanic White	12 (40%)	14 (47%)	26 (44%)	17 (57%)	13 (43%)	30 (50%)	29 (48%)	27 (45%)	56 (47%)
Non-Hispanic White/Person of Color	9 (30%)	14 (47%)	23 (38%)	3 (10%)	9 (30%)	12 (20%)	12 (20%)	23 (38%)	35 (29%)
Both Persons of Color	9 (30%)	2 (6%)	11 (18%)	10 (33%)	8 (27%)	18 (30%)	19 (32%)	10 (17%)	29 (24%)

Table 2

Relationship Timelines among Same-Sex Couples ($N= 120$) by Sociodemographic Characteristics and Study Site

	# of PAST Events/Periods	# of FUTURE Events/Periods	TOTAL # of Events/Periods
GENDER			
Female Couples	19.7	7.3	27.0
Male Couples	19.8	7.0	26.9
<i>t</i>	.07	-.45	-.08
RACE/ETHNICITY			
Both non-Hispanic White	21.3	7.3	28.7
Non-Hispanic White/Person of Color	18.1	7.0	25.1
Both Persons of Color	18.8	7.0	25.8
<i>F</i>	1.70	.15	1.62
RELATIONSHIP DURATION			
6 Months < 3 Years	18.6 ^a	7.8 ^a	26.4
3 Years < 7 Years	17.4 ^a	7.5	24.9
7 Years or More	23.4 ^b	6.2 ^b	29.6
<i>F</i>	5.41**	2.84[†]	2.24
LIVING ARRANGEMENTS			
Live Together	20.2	7.3	27.5
Live Apart	17.1	6.6	23.7
<i>t</i>	-1.4	-.79	-1.50
STUDY SITE			
Greater ATL Metro	20.7	7.1	27.9
Greater SF Bay Area	18.8	7.2	26.0
<i>t</i>	.24	.91	.32
PROJECT TOTALS	19.8	7.2	27.0

Note: different superscripts indicate significant differences between means.

* $p < .05$

[†] $< .10$.