



# Four-Year Trajectories of Sexual Frequency among Committed Couples: An Exploratory Study

Jared R. Anderson

Matthew D. Johnson

Jiawen Chen

# Why Study Sexual Frequency?

- Sexuality is a fundamental component in intimate relationships
- Higher frequency is positively associated with relationship quality and sexual satisfaction
  - (McNulty & Fisher, 2008; McNulty et al., in press; Perlman & Abramson, 1982; Simms & Byers, 2009; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010)
- Higher frequency is positively associated with relationship stability in married and cohabiting unions
  - (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Yabiku & Gager, 2009)
- Sexuality is a powerful window into the relationship.
  - (Schnarch, 2009)

# Why Study Sexual Frequency Trajectories?

- Sexual frequency appears to decline with relationship duration
  - James, 1981; Jasso, 1985; Liu, 2003; McNulty, Wenner, & Fisher, in press; Rao & Demaris, 1995; Udry, 1980
- However, it remains unclear what variations from this general downward trend may exist
- Recent research has found multiple distinct trajectories of relationship satisfaction and relationship conflict
  - Anderson, Van Ryzin, & Doherty, 2010; Don & Mickelson, 2014; Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010

# Sexless Marriage: How To Deal With A Decrease In Sex

By Laura Seldon for GalTime  
(2013, September)



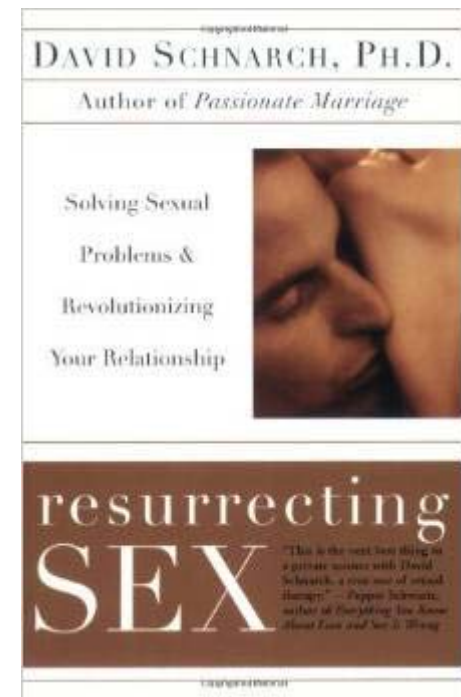
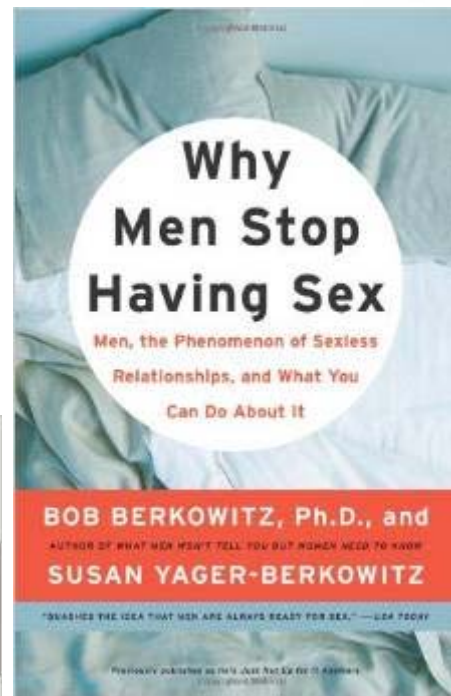
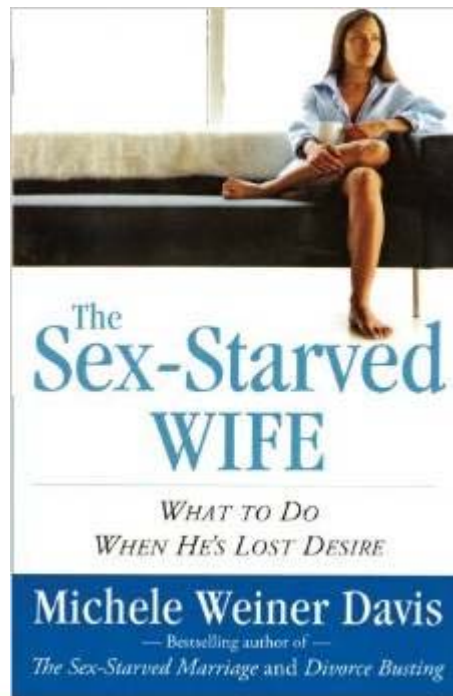
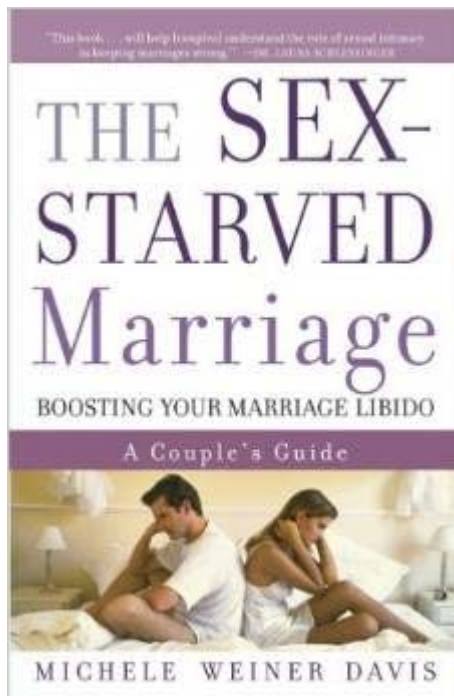
“Sex is one of those topics we’re all constantly thinking about, reading about, and even acting out... but not necessarily talking about. Sure, you’ll dish to your friends about the steamy sex session you had with your new man last night, but you won’t necessarily be so eager to share when your sex life goes from consistent to non-existent. And yet, **several studies have been revealing for the last decade that a dry spell in the bedroom is actually common among couples**”

NP

# Sexless marriages are a 'silent epidemic,' but it doesn't have to be that way, U.K. therapist argues



Marshall, A.G.,  
The Daily Telegraph  
National Post Wire Services  
(2013, December)



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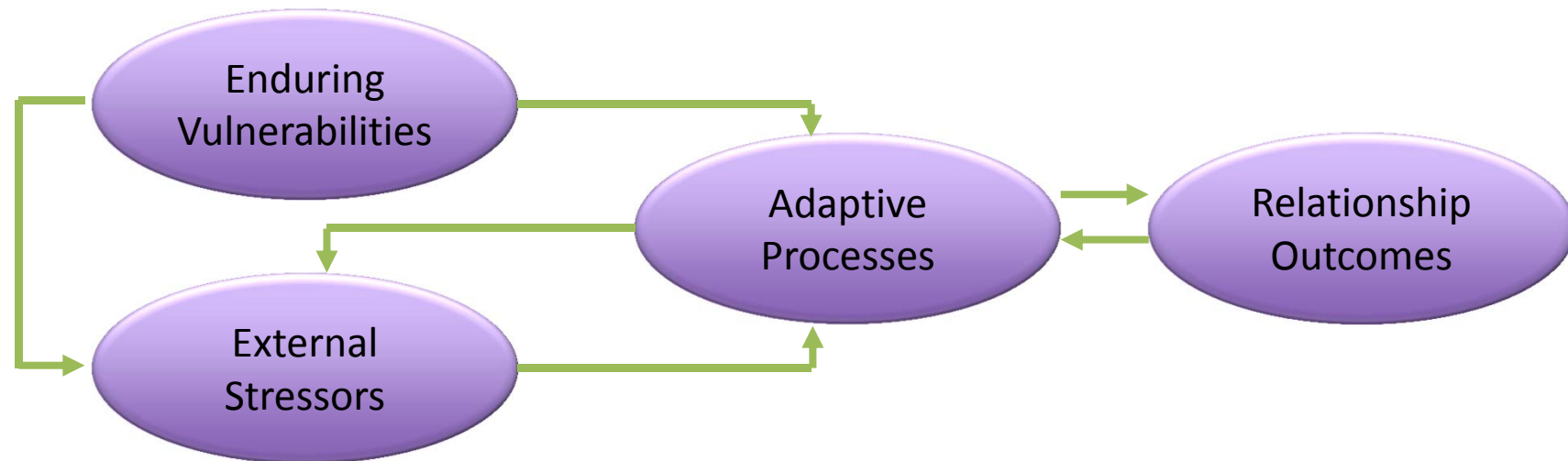
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# Research Questions

- Are there multiple, distinct trajectories of sexual frequency among committed couples over a four-year period?
- Can individuals in different trajectories be distinguished based on demographic characteristics, enduring vulnerabilities, external stressors, and romantic relationship processes and quality?

# Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model



Karney & Bradbury, 1995



# Procedures

- Waves 1-5
- Intimate partner pairs in *Pairfam* ( $n = 3,743$ )
- Filtered sample to include all couples who remained together through duration of the study
- Excluded adolescent age cohort
- Final sample: 1,231 couples (55.2% female anchor respondents)

# Measures

- **Sexual Frequency**
  - *How often have you had sexual intercourse on average during the past three months with your partner?*
    - 1 = *not in the past 3 months* to 7 = *daily*
    - Anchor's report (waves 2 – 4)
- **Demographics**
  - Both partners: Age, education, religious affiliation
  - Anchor: marital status, relationship length, number of children in the home (under 2, 3-5, 6-13), pregnancy, cohabitation prior to marriage, number of previous marriages

# Measures: Enduring Vulnerabilities

- **Self-Reported Health**

- *How would you describe your health status during the past 4 weeks, generally speaking?*
- 1 = Bad to 5 = Very good
- Each partner's report (wave 1)

- **Depression Symptoms**

- *How often did you feel down and melancholy in the past four weeks?*
- 1 = Never to 5 = Always
- Each partner's report (wave 1)

# Measures: External Stressors

- **Paid Work Hours**

- *What are, on average, your real weekly working hours, including overtime? For this calculation, please take into account all of your jobs.*
- Open-ended, continuous
- Each partner's report (wave 1)

- **Work Pressure**

- Examples: *I often have to work under heavy time pressure. I often have to deal with too heavy workloads.*
- 1 = Disagree completely to 5 = Agree completely
- Each partner's report (wave 1)

# Measures: Relationship Processes/Quality

- **Relationship Satisfaction**

- *Overall, how satisfied are you with your relationship?*
- *0 = very dissatisfied to 10 = very satisfied*
- Each partner's report (wave 1)

- **Sexual Satisfaction**

- *How satisfied are you with your sex life?*
- *0 = very dissatisfied to 10 = very satisfied*
- Each partner's report (wave 1)

# Measures: Relationship Processes/Quality

- **Relationship Stability**

- *Did you think that your partnership (or marriage) was in trouble during the past year?; Did you seriously consider separation or divorce during the past year?; Did you or your partner seriously propose a separation or divorce during the past year?*
- 1 = Yes and 2 = No
- Each partner's report (wave 1)

- **Conflict**

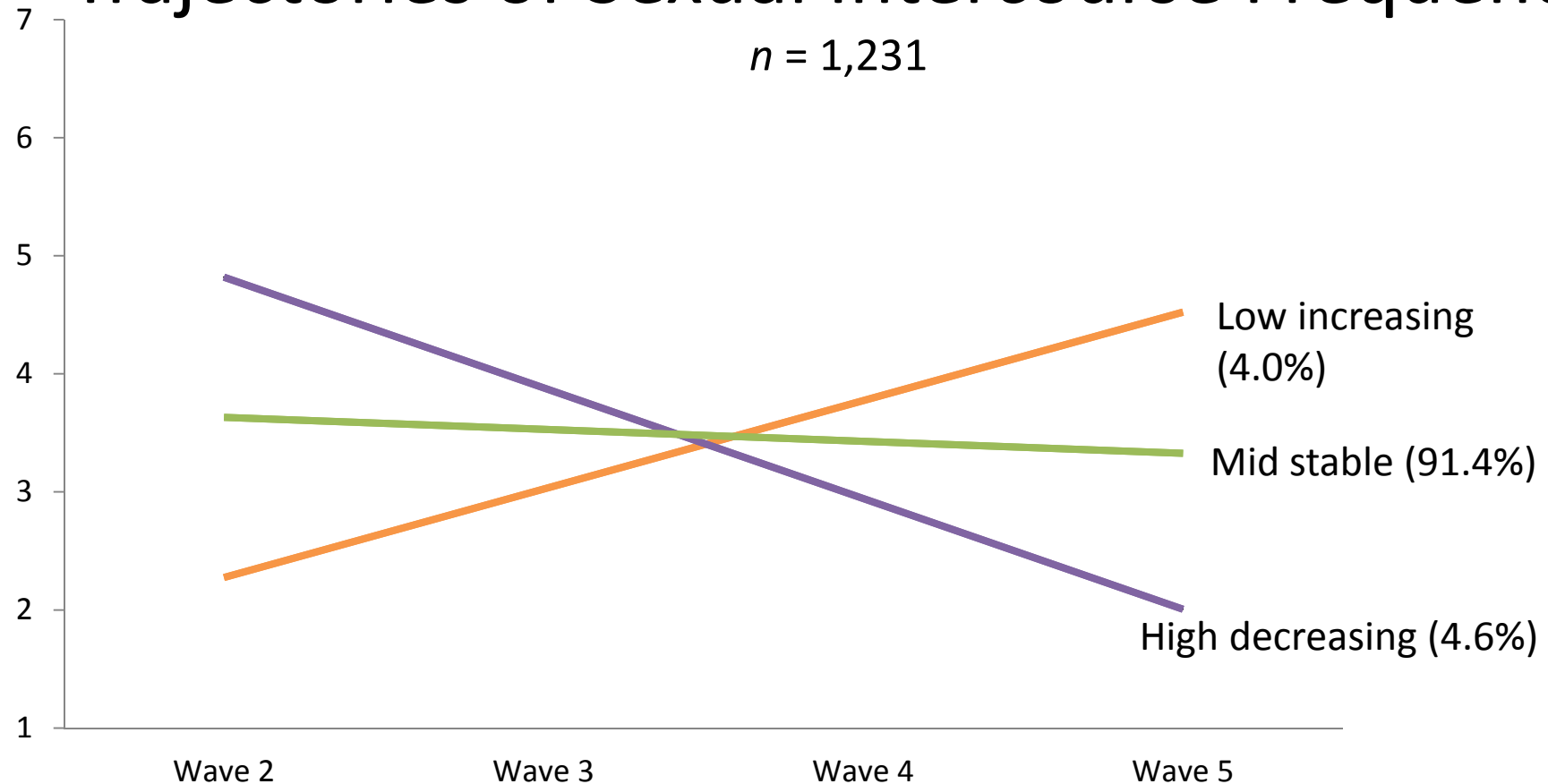
- *How often are you and partner annoyed or angry with each other? How often do you and partner disagree or quarrel with each other?*
- 1 = Never and 5 = Always
- Each partner's report (wave 1)

# Analytic Plan

- Growth Mixture Modeling (GMM)- Mplus 7.2
  - Included covariates to estimate the number of trajectories and proportion of trajectory group membership (Muthen & Muthen, 2010)
  - Relationship length, health, sexual satisfaction, birth cohort
- One-way ANOVA (SPSS)
  - Differences in characteristics among individuals of different trajectory groups

# Trajectories of Sexual Intercourse Frequency

$n = 1,231$



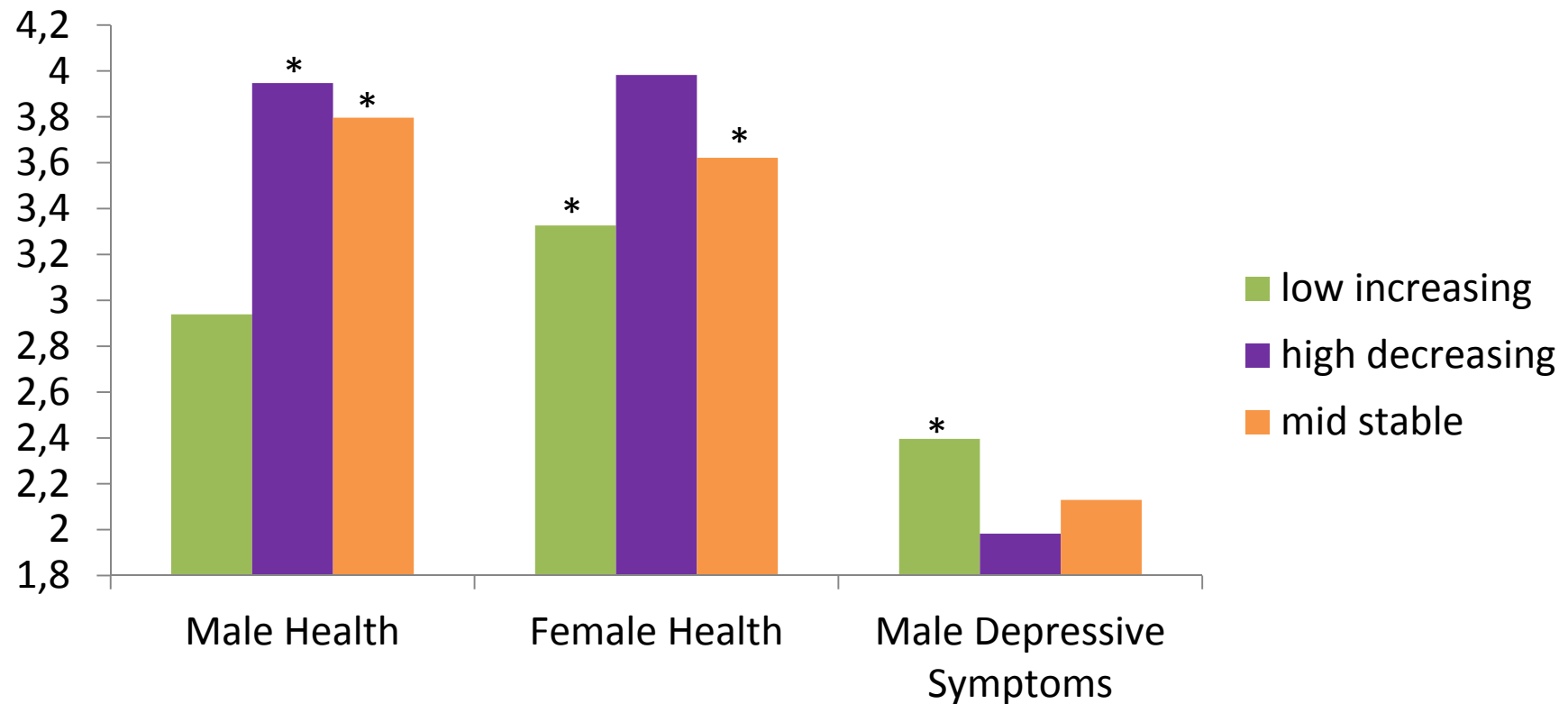
Model fit indices: AIC = 12827.37; BIC = 13016.65; Sample-Size Adjusted BIC = 12899.12; Entropy = .83; LMR  $P$ -value = .02; BLRT Approximate  $P$ -value = .04.



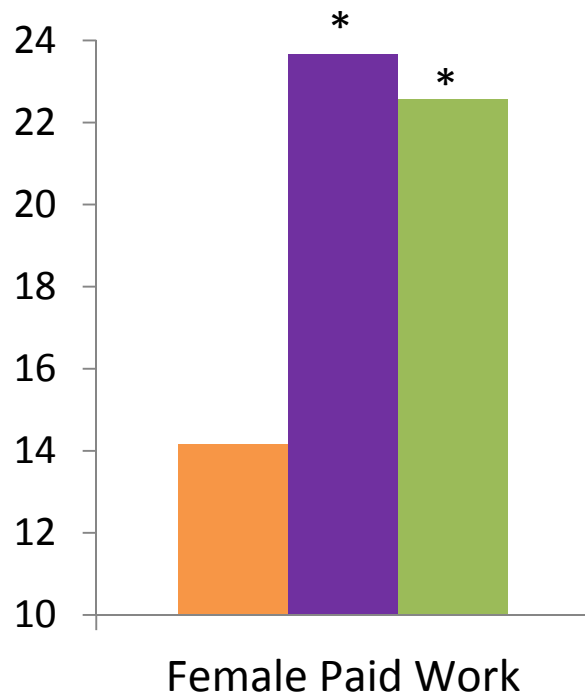
# Are there multiple trajectories of frequency of sexual intercourse?

- Three subgroups identified based on frequency of sexual intercourse:
  - Low increasing (4.0%): started with about once per month but increased over time;
  - High decreasing (4.6%): started with 2-3 times per week but decreased over time;
  - Mid stable (91.4%): remained stable (3-4 times per month) over time.

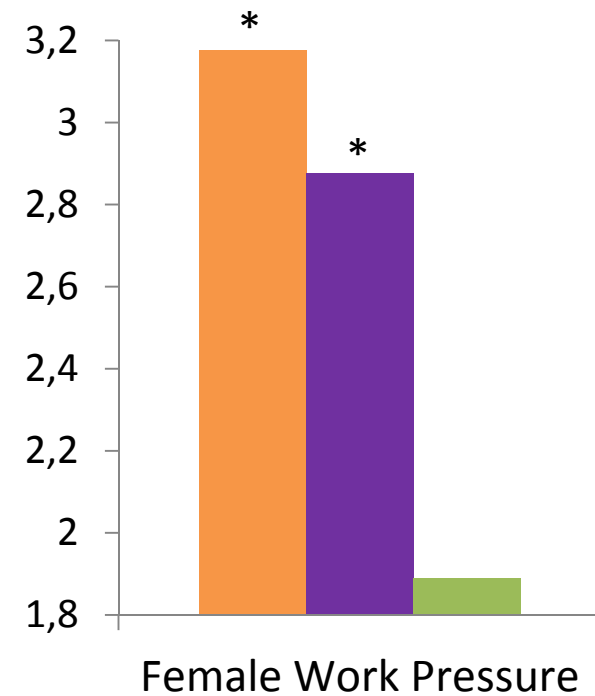
# Enduring Vulnerabilities (n = 1,231)



# Stressful Daily Events ( $n = 1,231$ )

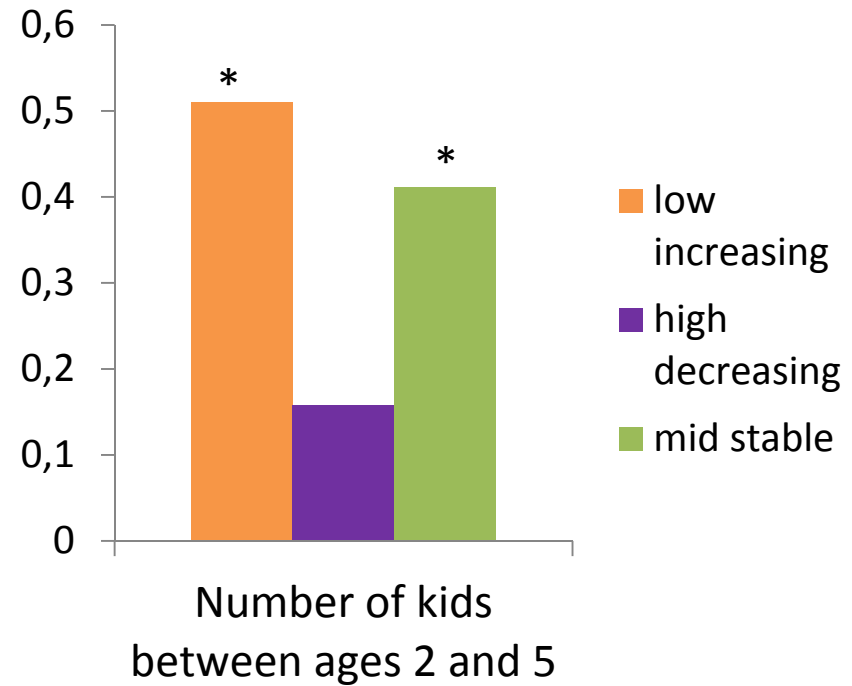
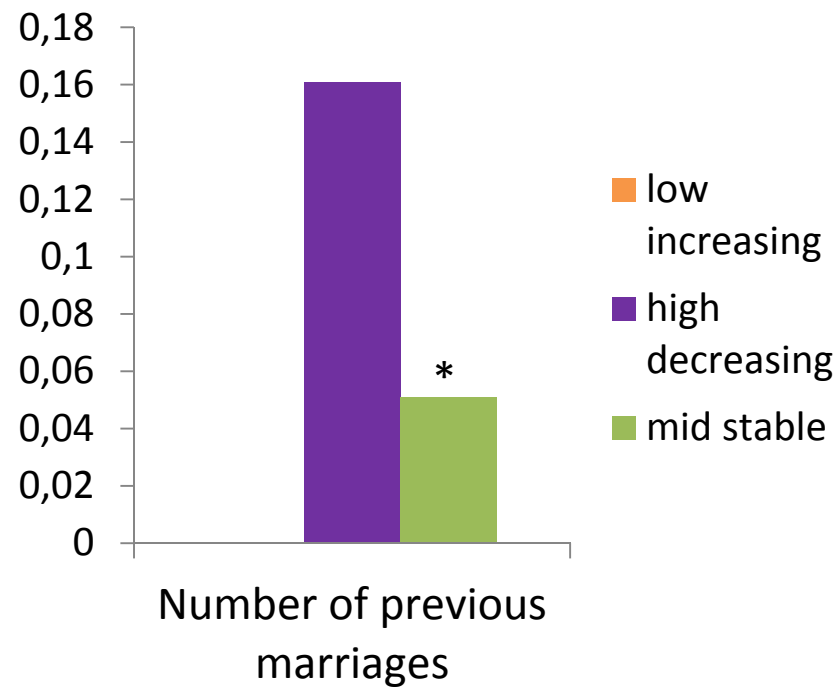


low increasing  
high decreasing  
mid stable

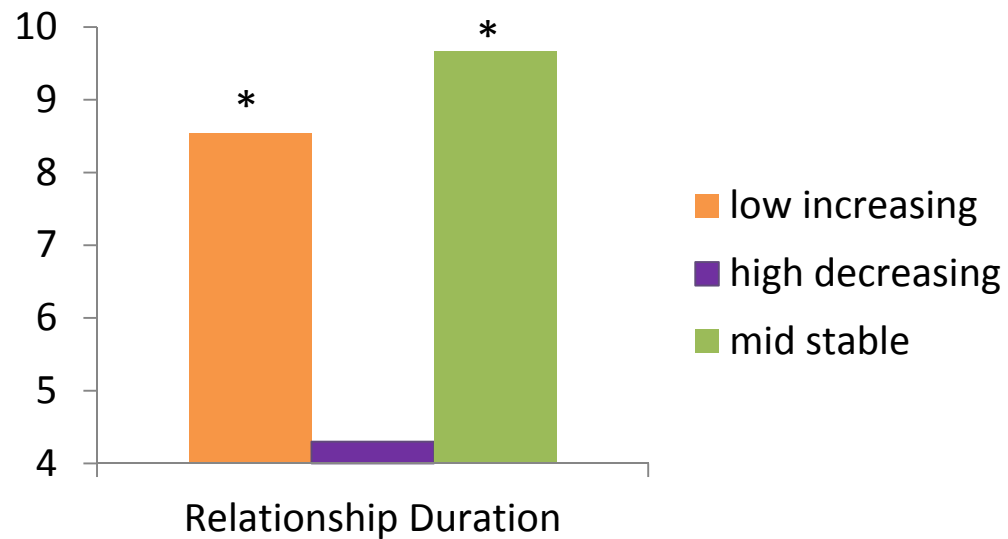


low increasing  
high decreasing  
mid stable

# Demographic Variables ( $n = 1,231$ )



# Demographic Variables ( $n = 1,231$ )



# Can trajectory group membership be distinguished?

- Membership characteristics at baseline:
  - Low increasing**: poorer health for both partners, higher levels of depressive symptoms for the male partner, and fewer working hours for the female partner;
  - High decreasing**: shorter relationship duration, more previous marriages, and fewer preschool kids;
  - Mid stable**: less work pressure for the female partner, and older average age (2 years older) for both partners.

# Discussion

- Further support for the sexual frequency decline hypothesis
- Why does sexual frequency decline over time in committed relationships?
  - Rational choice theory (habituation hypothesis):  
As sex increases, the level of satisfaction lowers, thus fewer resources are allocated to it.

“Nothing kills desire more than doing what works—relentlessly” (Kleinplatz, 2006, p. 345)



# Discussion

- Why does sexual frequency decline over time in committed relationships?
  - Natural phenomenon in all committed relationships (Schnarch)
    - Sex is always about left overs
    - An opportunity for growth

# Discussion

- Issues to consider
  - Sample
  - Limited time points
  - Cohort differences
  - Analysis limitations
- Next step
  - Variability around mean curve—look at predictors of sexual frequency over time

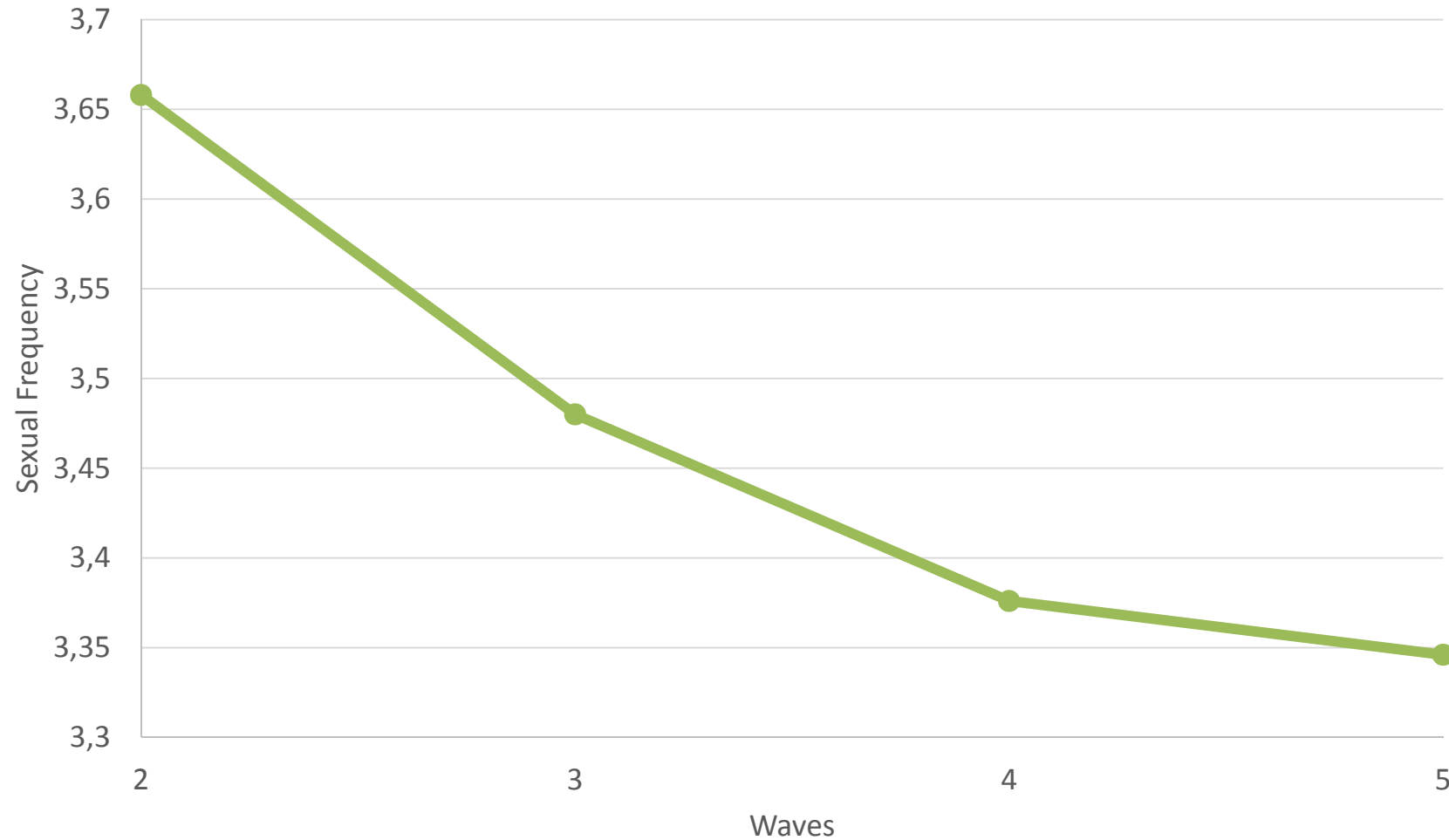


Questions?

Comments?

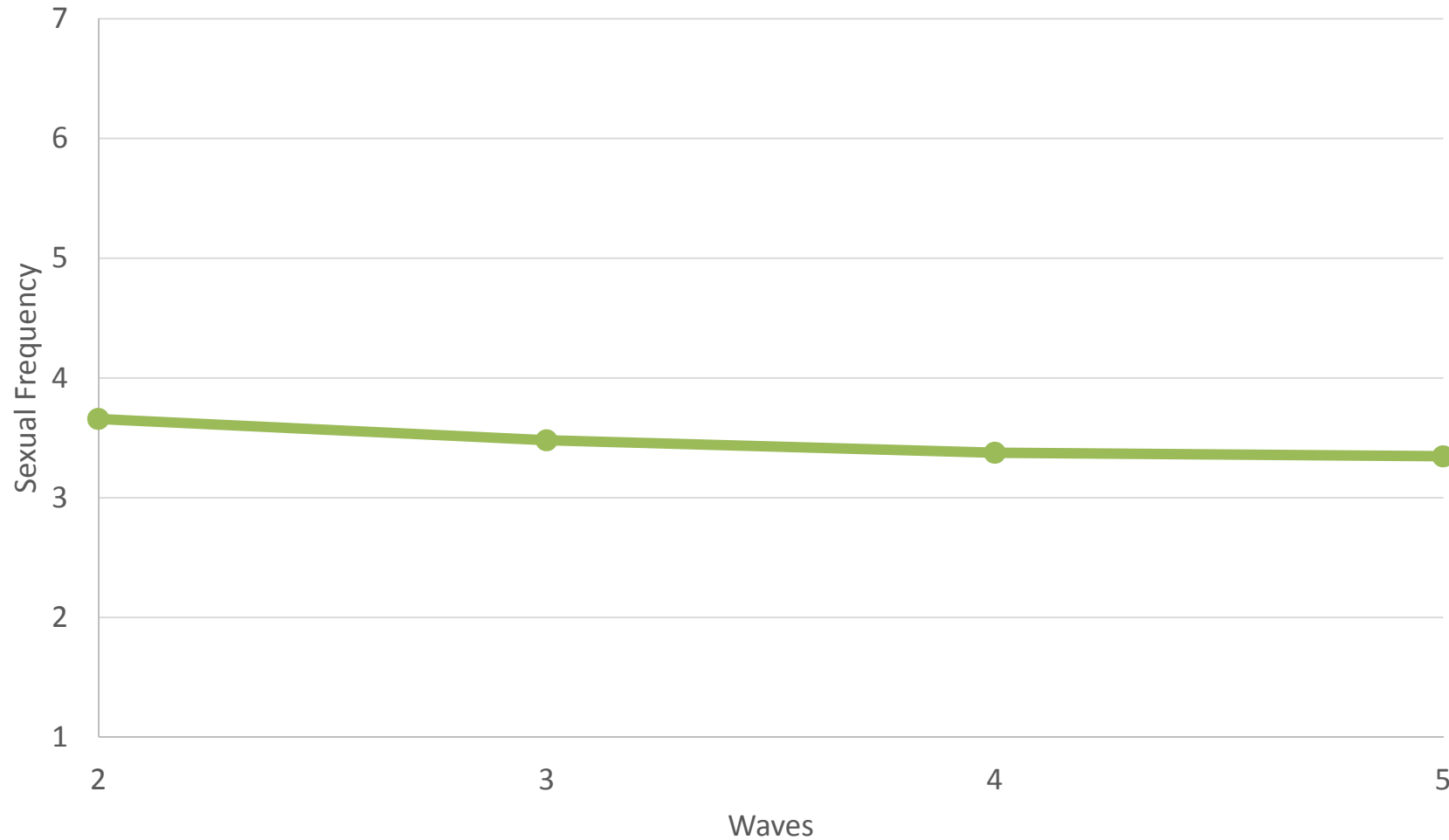
# Sexual Frequency

## Quadratic Growth Curve



# Sexual Frequency

## Quadratic Growth Curve



# Individual Sexual Frequency

