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Longitudinal Patterns of Women's Marital Quality: The Case of Divorce, Cohabitation, and Race-Ethnicity

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Abstract

Previous work on marital quality has compared average levels of marital quality by demographic characteristics, such as cohabitation, divorce, or race-ethnicity. Less work has examined whether such differences persist over time. To begin to answer this question, this paper uses multigroup latent growth curves to examine changes in marital quality over time in addition to measuring differences in levels of reported marital quality among cohabitators vs. non-cohabitators, divorced vs. stably married women, and members of different racial-ethnic groups. Although many of the differences are small and statistically insignificant, the results show that non-normative and traditionally disadvantaged groups experience not only lower levels of marital quality but that these differences also persist throughout the life course. I also show that using marital instead of relationship duration for cohabitators has substantive implications when interpreting the results.

Keywords

cohabitation; divorce; ethnicity; marriage; stability of relationships

Introduction

Societal shifts in nonmarital childbearing, divorce, and cohabitation over the last half of the 20th century coupled with dramatic increases in single motherhood and women's labor force participation have reshaped the face of the American family and the place of marriage within it (Casper & Bianchi, 2000; Coontz, 2005). In particular, these changes have highlighted the increasing family diversity, leading many to question the previously favored role of marriage in shaping American society (Cherlin, 2004). While scholars have explored family diversity in many settings, diversity *within* marriage itself remains a relevant topic in the field because marriage, frequently seen as a homogenous (and perhaps homogenizing) institution, is often viewed as the family form against which other family forms can be measured. This paper provides evidence of heterogeneous experiences within marriage by examining long-term trajectories of marital quality across several axes of social and familial stratification. This paper contributes to the literature in a straightforward manner by focusing on one understudied part of the diversity of family experiences—differing trajectories of marital change based on divorce status, premarital cohabitation experience, and race-

ethnicity. A better understanding of this diversity can help shed additional light on our theoretical understanding of changes in contemporary family patterns (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007).

A Life Course Perspective on Marital Quality

Like individual development, marital relationships often follow predictable patterns of change over time (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, & Campbell, 2005). Previous research has shown the importance of considering the shifts in marital quality as marriages mature (Bradbury, 1998; Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012) because the quality of a marriage is dynamic and based on historical context, the timing and sequencing of events and transitions, and changing spousal roles over time (Elder, 1998).

For the purposes of this paper, the life course perspective suggests the importance of examining *trajectories* of marital quality over time rather than comparing differences in the overall *levels* of marital quality among those whose marriages ended in divorce (Caughlin & Huston, 2006; Gottman, 1994; Huston, Niehuis, & Smith, 2001), were preceded by cohabitation (Brown & Booth, 1996; Brown, 2003; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003), or by race-ethnicity (Bryant et al., 2010; Bulanda & Brown, 2007), as previous work has often done. Although such work shows that disadvantaged groups (Blacks and Hispanics) and those following non-traditional relationship behaviors (cohabitation, divorce) report lower levels of marital quality than their more advantaged peers, the limited time frame examined, often a single time point, means we know relatively little about whether and how such changes emerge, persist, or dissipate over time. This ‘snapshot’ approach provides, in statistical terms, a sense of the intercepts but not the slopes.

Yet it is precisely the difference in how marital quality changes over time that is of most interest theoretically, especially because of the ways that social inequality plays out across the life course. For example, when social conditions such as race and ethnicity can be shown to be fundamental causes of health disparities in the United States (Link & Phelan, 1995), the sociodemographic factors that place people at ‘risk of risks’ likely lead to poor marital outcomes as well. If differences in marital quality are the result of a social sorting process, certain characteristics and behaviors, such as skin color, ethnic heritage, or choosing to cohabit prior to marriage, may influence the allocation of resources, opportunities, and social support in family, social, and economic settings.

These social sorting processes are unlikely to be captured by work focusing solely on differences at a given time point, or even a limited number of time points because social stratification is the result of a complex interplay between neighborhoods, schools, personal choices about which relationships and family types to pursue, and peer and social networks, etc that unfolds over time. (Western, Bloome, Sosnaud, & Tach, 2012). In turn, these longitudinal processes influence how people experience and view their marriages, including marital happiness, marital communication, and marital conflict.

To capture these processes, one needs longitudinal data collected over a long period of time to begin to see the differences that are the result of this sorting process. Although this paper is descriptive, it does provide empirical evidence for longitudinal differences in marital

quality by race-ethnicity, cohabitation, and divorce status using multi-group latent growth curve models to examine long-term differences in the trajectories of marital happiness, communication, and conflict. The results from this paper shed additional light on major axes of familial and social stratification by showing how intergroup differences persist throughout the life course.

Variation in Marital Quality by Cohabitation, Divorce, and Race-ethnicity

Despite considerable research done on marital quality, our understanding is still incomplete about how marital quality changes across time for different groups of people, such as cohabitators, divorcés, and racial and ethnic minorities (Amato et al., 2007). This constraint is at least partly because much previous work has looked for differences in marital quality during a limited period of time, frequently using cross-sectional data. Because of this, whether the marital quality differences observed in previous work persist throughout the life course is an open question.

Previous research on marital quality differences between cohabitators and non-cohabitators generally supports the proposition that cohabitators tend to report poorer marital quality and experience greater marital instability than those who move directly into marriage (Jose, O'Leary, & Moyer, 2010), both because of selection into and the experience of cohabitation. Those who cohabit tend to be less religious (Glezer, 1997; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004; Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992), advocate greater gender equality (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004), report lower levels of education (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; McGinnis, 2003) and are more apt to have experienced a parental divorce (Glezer, 1997; Kamp Dush et al., 2003). Because cohabiting relationships tend to be relatively short-lived, individuals with experience in cohabiting unions may be more likely to view romantic relationships as temporary. Awareness of relationship impermanency may reduce investment in a relationship, potentially resulting in a poorer quality marriage as well as a lower threshold for leaving it (Brown & Booth, 1996; Qian, Lichter, & Mellott, 2005). These differences may stem largely from the lack of institutionalization regarding cohabitation (Nock, 1995). In spite of cohabitation's widespread diffusion, it is not yet governed by strong consensual social norms and formal laws. Consequently, cohabitators may not benefit from the same level of social support that married women do. Relationship 'inertia' may lead some to make relationship transitions by "sliding into" cohabitation, rather than making an explicit decision to cohabit (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006), resulting in sub-optimal matches, perhaps due in part to relationship-specific capital (children, possessions, pets, etc.) accumulated during cohabitation.

Importantly, this large body of literature examines the influence of premarital cohabitation on subsequent marital quality and stability (Seltzer, 2000), but most of this research examines differences in levels of marital quality at a given time point between those who did and did not cohabit (Smock, 2000). This 'snapshot' approach of comparing marital quality between cohabitators and non-cohabitators, while yielding valuable information on differences in the average level of marital quality between cohabitators and non-cohabitators, is less than ideal from a life course perspective because it tells us little about how cohabitators differ from non-cohabitators in their overall level of marital quality or if marriages preceded by

cohabitation decline more rapidly than relationships that did not. Tach and Halpern-Meekin's (2009) study is informative on this point. Although women who cohabited reported lower overall levels of marital quality, the rate of decline was similar for cohabitators and non-cohabitators. These results suggest the importance of examining trajectories of marital quality for cohabitators and non-cohabitators, given the disparity between initial differences in marital quality and changes in the relationship over time.

Some work has also examined how marriages that remain intact differ from marriages that end in divorce (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001; Kurdek, 2005). Prior research has indicated that individuals whose marriages result in divorce often have lower marital quality compared to individuals in stable marriages (Gottman, 1994). Divorcing individuals displayed more negative communication and emotion as newlyweds as well (Lavner & Bradbury, 2012). Compared to those who were stably married, those who divorced reported lower initial levels of marital quality (Huston, Niehuis, et al., 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In addition, they often experienced more rapid declines in the quality of their marriage (Lavner & Bradbury, 2010) because shifts in affective dimensions over the first two years of the marital relationship were frequently more dramatic for those who divorced than those who remained married; the same is true of individuals who experienced increases in relational ambivalence (Huston, Niehuis, et al., 2001). As a result of these and other experiences, positive affect is often replaced by negative and perhaps neutral affect (Kayser & Rao, 2006) as divorcing partners begin to 'uncouple' (Vaughan, 1986).

Thus, prior research has established that those who divorce tend to begin their marriages at lower levels than their continuously married counterparts do, but that divorcing relationships also change in dramatic ways. However, many of these studies suffer from the same limitations described above. Namely, many studies comparing marital quality levels between divorced and continuously married individuals use small, often unrepresentative samples often consisting of White, middle-class individuals. The extent to which these results generalize to the broader American population remains unknown. Thus, this paper builds on prior research by employing data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth-1979 to examine trajectories of marital happiness, communication, and conflict.

Finally, I examine differences in marital quality by race-ethnicity. Although researchers have been aware of race-ethnic differences in marital stability for some time (Raley & Bumpass, 2003), racial differences in marital quality have received less attention (Bryant et al., 2010). When researchers have examined differences in race, they have tended to focus primarily on Black-White differences, with only sparse mention of other ethnic groups, such as Hispanics.

On average, Blacks tend to report the lowest levels of marital quality and have the highest risk of divorce (Broman, 2005), although a recent study found that the comparatively high risk of divorce among Blacks can be explained by their lower marital quality (Bulanda & Brown, 2007). Despite widespread economic hardships, Mexican Americans, by far the largest Hispanic subgroup, have similar levels of marital quality to Whites but better communication (Bulanda & Brown, 2007). This suggests that aspects of culture, such as

collectivism and familism, may mitigate the effect of economic hardship on marital quality among Mexican Americans (Oropesa, 1996). In contrast, economic factors may figure more prominently in the quality of Black marriages. Declining economic prospects among many Black men, low returns to education, and disproportionately high rates of incarceration have all contributed to both the 'retreat from marriage' and marital instability among African Americans (Oppenheimer, 1988; Western & Wildeman, 2009; Wilson, 1987). Research has shown that black women especially emphasize the economic prospects of potential partners (Edin & Kefalas, 2005) and black men are more likely to hold jobs requiring shift work, which has been linked to poor marital quality (Clark-Nicolas & Gray-Little, 1991). Similarly, some scholars have argued that the lower marital quality in African American marriages is a combination of the lingering effects of slavery, class and culture effects, and marriage market influences (Amato, 2011).

To sum, previous work has often examined differences in the level of marital quality at a given time point, which is less than ideal from a life course perspective. A life course perspective emphasizes the importance of examining intra- and inter-individual change in marital quality (Amato et al., 2007). This paper takes a life course perspective by examining trajectories of marital quality for cohabitators versus those who marry directly and divorcing versus stably married women. I also examine trajectories of marital quality for Black, Hispanic, and White individuals. Doing so makes it possible to examine *changes* in marital quality over time instead of measuring differences in *levels* of reported marital quality at one or two points in time, as previous research has often done.

Limitations of Prior Work on Longitudinal Trends in Marital Quality

Shortcomings in extant literature make it difficult to draw firm inferences regarding the relationship between marital duration and marital quality. These issues largely fall into two broad categories—study design and sampling concerns and measurement.

First, many study designs make it difficult to assess the relationship between marital duration and marital quality. Many studies on the topic have employed either cross-sectional designs or use two waves of data to examine how transitions such as childbearing and employment impact marital quality (Bradbury, 1998). Such designs provide only limited information about how marital quality changes as a marriage matures because cross-sectional studies necessarily confound cohort and period effects and two-wave studies are unable to detect non-linear patterns of marital quality. Further, cross-sectional studies have no way of dealing with the selective attrition of poor-quality relationships out of the population of marriages, meaning that cross-sectional studies are likely biased toward selecting high-quality marriages into their samples because such marriages are at risk of inclusion for a greater period of time.

The second issue involves sampling. The samples of many previous studies consist largely of White, middle-class individuals from specific geographic regions (see, for example, Kurdek, 1999; Leonard & Roberts, 1998). Furthermore, although family psychologists have produced many high-quality empirical and theoretical studies of the earlier, honeymoon, periods of marriage (Noller & Feeney, 1998; Veroff, Douvan, Orbach, & Acitelli, 1998) and others have focused on the later stages of life (Carr et al., 2000; Umberson & Williams,

2005), we know considerably less about the middle stages of the marital life course. In particular, only a few studies have followed married women for more than 10 years (Hill & Peplau, 1998; Huston, Niehuis, et al., 2001; Lindahl, Clements, & Markman, 1998). Given differences in the population of married individuals in the United States, such as heterogeneity across cohabitation history, age, marital duration, race, education, and geographic region, studies using data collected from a nationally representative sample of married individuals, such as this one, are desirable to shed light on the extent to which patterns and trends observed in varying geographic areas and within certain sub-groups are generalizable to the broader American population.

Data and Method

Data

To assess the relationship between dimensions of marital quality and marital duration, I employed the nationally representative, longitudinal data available in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979 (NLSY79). The original sample included 12,685 people, born between 1957 and 1964 and aged 14–22 when first interviewed in 1979, who were interviewed annually between 1979 and 1994, and biennially thereafter with the last available data wave coming from 2008. Funded by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the NLSY79 focuses on a variety of issues, including labor market behavior, educational experiences, family background, government program participation, union formation history, and financial well-being.

Unfortunately, the NLSY79 did not begin asking questions about marital quality until 1992, 13 years after the first interview was conducted. These questions, described below, were then repeated every two years until the latest wave, collected in 2008. Because only women's marital quality was ascertained at all available time points, I restrict my analyses to women who report at least one valid value of each dimension of marital quality (see below), starting in 1992. Due to the potentially confounding role of higher-order marriages, I simplified my analyses by further restricting the sample to women in first marriages. Women who married and divorced prior to 1992 are excluded due to the lack of marital quality information. All growth curve and mixture models analyses are weighted. The final analytic sample size was 2,640 women. Note as well that these limitations mean that my findings are likely only representative of women who did not marry early in the life course and who were born in the late 1950s and early 1960s. To the extent that findings here accord with results from other studies, these findings may be informative about general trends.

Time Metric

The selection of the time metric is a crucial aspect of any investigation involving longitudinal data because it holds important implications for the substantive interpretability of the model (Nagin, 2005). Because of the data structure, the inherent time metric in the NLSY79 is survey year. Thus, I reconstructed the dataset so that each respondent's reports of marital happiness, communication, and conflict are aligned according to when the marriage began through the first 30 years of marriage¹. This was complicated by the fact that marital quality was not collected for the first time until 1992, a point at which many

respondents were already married. For instance, someone who married in 1980 would have been in her 12th year of marriage when the NLSY79 began collecting information on the quality of the relationship. The person in this instance would therefore receive missing data until the 12th year of marriage. The initial measurement of person's marital quality, taken in 1992, would therefore be placed in the 12th year of marriage, with each subsequent measurement of marital quality falling in the 14th, 16th, 18th, 20th, 22nd, 24th, 26th, and 28th years of marriage². This procedure was followed for all individuals who married prior to 1992. The same procedure was followed for individuals whose marriages began in 1992 and afterward by placing the measurement taken from the first year the respondent reported a first marriage and placing it in year 1 and aligning the data accordingly in each subsequent year up to year 16 of the marriage.

Following prior research (Anderson, Van Ryzin, & Doherty, 2010), I combined observations into 2 year 'buckets' to deal with data sparseness. Thus, all observations covering years 0 and 1 were placed into the same bucket, years 2 and 3, 4 and 5, etc. Two-year buckets were selected to maximize the number of observations in each bucket while ensuring that no respondent had multiple marital quality observations in the same bucket.

There were multiple reasons for data to be missing in the dataset. First, missing data could be structurally missing because it was left censored. This occurred because the respondent married prior to the commencement of marital quality data in 1992. Similarly, data could be structurally missing due to right censoring, meaning the respondent was still married in 2008 when the observation window closed. For example, an individual who married for the first time in 2008 would only contribute information for the first year of marriage, with missing data for the rest of the years of marriage. Third, data could be missing due to divorce. Finally, attrition created missing data as well. Full information maximum likelihood (see below) was used to deal with missing data. Sensitivity analyses (available upon request) provided no reason to believe that patterns of missing data influenced the substantive conclusions drawn from the analyses.

Variables

Marital Quality—Following Amato, and colleagues (Amato et al., 2007), this paper conceptualizes marital quality as a multidimensional construct with both behavioral and altitudinal elements. The NLSY79 contains three measures of marital quality, happiness, communication, and conflict, analyzed separately. Marital happiness was measured by asking respondents how happy their marriage was (3 = *very happy*, 2 = *fairly happy*, 1 = *not too happy*). Marital communication was a summative index ($\alpha = .79$) of how often (1 = *almost every day* to 4 = *less than once a month*) respondents laughed together, calmly discussed something with their spouse, or talked about their day, respectively. Marital conflict was also a summative index ($\alpha = .79$) that assessed how often (1 = *often* to 4 = *never*) respondents reported arguing with their spouse over chores and responsibilities,

¹For cohabitators, marital quality is coded from the beginning of the relationship. For instance, if a respondent began cohabiting with their spouse two years prior to marriage, the first year of reported marital quality would be considered as marital quality in year three. I only employ reports of marital, not relationship, quality in this paper.

²I have information on up to 16 years of marital quality data, so respondents could contribute at most 9 observations of marital quality (even years between 1992 and 2008).

children, money, showing affection, religion, leisure, drinking, other women, his relatives, and her relatives. Responses to all questions were coded in the direction of higher levels of happiness, communication, and conflict. Each dependent variable was standardized to facilitate comparisons of the magnitude of change across happiness, communication, and conflict. Unstandardized results are available upon request.

Respondents' marital histories were used to determine if the first marriage ended in divorce, which occurred for 22% of the sample. Respondents were also asked whether they cohabited with their spouse prior to marriage, with about 33% reporting they did so. Race-ethnicity was reported by the respondent. Ten percent of the sample reported Black race-ethnicity, 6% Hispanic, and 84% reported non-Black, non-Hispanic. Although the variable is termed 'non-Black, non-Hispanic', this category consists overwhelmingly of non-Hispanic Whites³; I refer to this category as white hereafter.

Analytic Strategy

Latent growth curve analysis was used to assess trajectories of marital happiness, communication, and conflict for cohabitators and non-cohabitators, divorced and continuously married respondents, and by race-ethnicity (Duncan, Duncan, Strycker, Li, & Alpert, 1999; Preacher, Wichman, MacCallum, & Briggs, 2008). Three random effects were estimated: an intercept, a linear slope, and a quadratic slope. All models were estimated in *Mplus* with maximum likelihood estimation (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). *Mplus* uses full-information maximum likelihood techniques to deal with missing data, which uses all available observations of marital happiness, communication, and conflict to estimate the model. The procedure does not require that all respondents contribute an equal number of marital quality assessments and is particularly useful when the assessment periods are not identical across respondents (Lavner & Bradbury, 2010). I originally fixed the intercept, slope, and quadratic terms to zero for the years 0 and 1 of the marriage (the first 'bucket'), 2 for years 2 and 3 (the second bucket), etc., with the final bucket fixed at 30 for years 30 and 31. These models failed to converge. To achieve convergence, I followed the recommendation of Muthén & Muthén (2010) and divided the time periods by 10, resulting in values of 0, .2, .4, .6, .8, 1.0...2.0...3.0. Using these new weights, the models converged and the results are reported below. The results reflect the reduced weights, although the results were transformed back to years to construct the figures. I used Heckman's (1979) two-step method to correct for attrition bias by first estimating a probit regression equation to model the attrition of respondents from the panel, then calculating lambda--the probability of dropping out of the panel--for each case. Lambda served as an additional covariate in preliminary analyses. Adjusting for attrition bias, however, had no substantive implications for the findings, so I omit further discussion.

Results

Table 1 presents the weighted means and standard deviations for the three dimensions of marital quality by divorce status, premarital cohabitation experience, and race-ethnicity.

³According to the 1980 Census, only 2.5% of the non-Black, non-Hispanic population was not White.

Individuals whose marriages ended in divorce reported, on average, less happiness, poorer communication, and more conflict than individuals who remained continually married throughout the observation period did. Similarly, women who reported cohabiting with their husbands prior to marriage reported, on average, slightly less marital happiness and poorer communication and more conflict, although mean differences between cohabitators and non-cohabitators are smaller than between divorced and continuously married individuals.

The results for race-ethnicity are perhaps the most interesting. Little work has examined Hispanic patterns of marital quality relative to Blacks and Whites. Hispanics experience similar levels of economic disadvantage as Blacks but prior work has suggested that Hispanics exhibit family patterns more similar to Whites than Blacks (Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Oropesa, 1996). A cursory examination of the means displayed here support this assertion. Blacks report notably lower levels of happiness and communication than either Whites or Hispanics, while differences in the mean level of happiness and communication between Hispanics and Whites appear minimal. In contrast, mean levels of conflict for Blacks and Hispanics appear similarly higher when compared to non-Hispanic Whites.

To test the extent to which these differences in average level of marital happiness, communication, and conflict hold up to empirical scrutiny, I estimated multigroup latent growth curve models. Initially, I estimated single-group latent growth curve models to assess overall trends in marital change over time prior to examining potential trends by divorce status, cohabitation experience, and race-ethnicity. The numerical results are displayed in Table 2. With respect to marital happiness, the intercept (0.41) was positive and significant, which indicates that the mean level of marital happiness was .4 standard deviations above average at the beginning of the marriage. The linear slope ($-.36$) was negative and significant, which indicates a tendency for marital happiness to decline after the early years of marriage. The positive and significant quadratic term (0.03) indicates a slight flattening of the downward trend in happiness later in marriage. The trajectory of marital happiness (and other dimensions of marital quality) is shown in Figure 1. The figure reveals that happiness decreased nearly linearly for the first decade of marriage, falling nearly one-half of a standard deviation and then declining at a slightly less sharp rate through the remainder of the marriage.

The model for communication suggested that the initial level of communication in the marriage was above average (0.26) but declined (slope= -0.26) after the early years of marriage. The positive and significant quadratic term (0.04) indicates a slight flattening of the downward trend in communication in later marriage, similar to the pattern observed for marital happiness. The middle panel of Figure 1 shows the trajectory for marital communication. High initial levels of communication were followed by a sharp decline in communication through the first decade of marriage. These declines flattened out during the later years of marriage.

The intercept for marital conflict was not significant, which indicates that the mean for initial levels of conflict was close to the grand mean. A positive linear trend (0.23) and negative quadratic trend (-0.12) emerged. The bottom panel of Figure 3 shows a modest

increase in conflict during the first decade of marriage, followed by a steep decline in subsequent years, resulting in a hill-shaped curve for marital conflict.

The bottom panel in Table 2 shows three fit indices: the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Acceptable values for the CFI and the TLI are .90 and above, and acceptable values for the RMSEA are .08 or less (Kline, 2011). By these criteria, the growth curve models for all five outcomes fit the data well. The same measures of model fit are shown for all the multigroup models below as well. With the exception of marital happiness and marital communication for race-ethnicity, which are very close to levels of acceptable fit for the CFI and TLI (Table 5), all multigroup models fit the data at acceptable levels.

The next step in the analysis compared trajectories of marital quality for two groups of spouses: those who remained continuously married and those who divorced. The results, shown in Table 3 and Figure 2, were obtained from multigroup latent growth curve models (Kline, 2011). The top panel of Table 3 shows the equations for respondents who remained married. Because the majority of respondents did not divorce, the parameter estimates for this group are similar to the estimates for the full sample (shown in Table 2). The positive and significant intercept for this group (0.44) indicates that marital happiness was about one-half standard deviations above the mean at the beginning of the marriage, followed by declines as the marriage matured (slope = $-.25$). The second panel shows coefficients for respondents who divorced. Figure 2 shows the growth curves for the two groups. (I did not extend the curve beyond the 25th year of marriage due to the small number of divorces beyond that marital duration.) Among divorced women, the intercept for marital happiness was positive and significant (0.31). This result indicates that women whose marriage ended in divorce scored about one-third of a standard deviation above the mean. On average, divorcing individuals began their marriages less happy with their marriages than their continuously married counterparts did, though this difference was not significant. In contrast, the gap between divorcing and stably married respondents increased significantly over time, evidenced by the significant difference between the slopes (-0.25 vs. -0.73)⁴. The intercept for marital communication in the second panel of Table 3 indicated that marital communication was above average at the beginning of the marriage and declined thereafter (see middle figure of Figure 2).

The analysis for marital conflict indicated that continuously married spouses reported below average initial levels of conflict (-0.11). However, conflict increased over the next decade before falling during the later years of marriage. The significant and positive intercept for marital conflict for the divorcing group indicated that conflict was .25 standard deviations above average at the beginning of the marriage, significantly higher than were those in intact marriages. The increase and subsequent decline in conflict among those headed for divorce are similar to those observed in the non-divorced group.

⁴The model for marital happiness proved inestimable with the inclusion of a quadratic term for the divorced group. This parameter was fixed at 0, as were the variance and covariances for the divorced group. The same issue arose and the same approach taken with the quadratic term for cohabitators' (Table 4) and Hispanics' (Table 5) marital communication.

Table 4 presents the results for the multigroup LGC models for cohabitators and those who married directly. The corresponding graphical depictions of these trajectories can be found in Figure 3. The top panel in the top half of Table 4 shows the equations for respondents who did not cohabit. The second panel shows coefficients for respondent who chose to live with their spouse prior to marriage. The intercept for marital happiness among those who married directly was 0.42 and 0.33 among cohabitators, indicating that both groups reported above average marital happiness at the beginning of the marital relationship. Both groups experienced declines in happiness over time, with a slight flattening of the trend for non-cohabitators. However, cohabitators and non-cohabitators had similar intercepts, slopes, and quadratic terms, suggesting that individuals who cohabit have similar trajectories of marital happiness over time as those who do not cohabit. The story is much the same for communication and conflict. Cohabitators' trajectories of marital quality do not appear to differ appreciably from those who married directly.

This result—cohabitators experience similar trajectories of marital quality as non-cohabitators—is the subject of debate. If marital quality declines as relationships mature (Glenn, 1998; Kurdek, 1999), however, using the length of marriage as the time metric, as previous research has often done, essentially starts the clock sooner for cohabitators than for marrieds. I provide empirical evidence of this possibility in Table 4 by comparing the trajectories of marital quality for cohabitators and non-cohabitators using both the length of the relationship (top half of Table 4), as this paper does, and the length of marriage (bottom half of Table 4). Notably, the intercept for marital happiness among cohabitators is lower when using marital duration. When marital happiness is measured from the beginning of the relationship, the intercept is 0.33. If happiness is measured from the beginning of the marriage, the intercept for cohabitators drops to 0.28. Additionally, the difference in the intercepts for cohabitators and those who marry directly is now significant.

Finally, I explore the evidence for variation in trajectories of marital quality by race-ethnicity. Table 5 presents the numerical results. Racial differences in trajectories of marital quality can be seen in Figure 4. Whites report the highest initial levels of marital happiness and communication and the lowest levels of conflict, followed by Hispanics, and then Blacks. This initial pattern, with Whites reporting the highest marital quality, Blacks the lowest, and Hispanics in the middle, generally holds throughout the marital life course. For marital happiness, the intercept for Whites is significantly higher than the intercept for Hispanics or Blacks, although I observe no differences in the slopes by race-ethnicity. Interestingly, although Blacks report the lowest initial marital happiness, the positive and significant quadratic term (0.11) indicates that Whites report higher levels of communication than Blacks or Hispanics at the beginning of the marriage. As the marriage matures, however, Blacks and Whites experience the most rapid declines in communication, with Hispanics experiencing a more gentle decrease in communication over time. The predicted level of communication for Whites remains higher than that of Hispanics throughout the first 30 years of marriage, with Blacks below the other two groups, although Blacks make up some, but not all, of the ground lost with a modest uptick during the third decade of marriage.

In terms of conflict, the patterns is reasonably clear—Whites begin marriage with lower levels of conflict than Blacks and Hispanics, and this difference persists in the ensuing years.

Figure 4 shows a modest increase in conflict during the early years of marriage for all groups, followed by a decline. Whites experience the greatest increase in conflict during the early years, although the difference is significant only relative to Blacks. All groups decline in later years at similar rates. The trajectories for all three race-ethnicities form hill-shaped curves.

Discussion

The goal of this paper, based on data from the NLSY79, was to examine the evidence for variation in the ways married individuals experience marital change. To do this, I examined three axes of familial and social stratification—divorce status, cohabitation experience, and race-ethnicity (Cherlin, 2010). Multigroup latent growth curves were used to examine not just differences in the overall *level* of marital quality between these groups but also to examine potential variation in how marital quality *changes*.

The results provided a nuanced picture that moved beyond traditional representations of divorcees, cohabitators, and racial and ethnic minorities experiencing lower levels of marital quality than their continuously married, non-cohabiting, and White counterparts (Adelmann, Chadwick, & Baerger, 1996; Broman, 2005). To be sure, the findings demonstrate the salience of the more general trend regarding the marital quality disadvantage experienced by individuals who are members of minority groups or who choose to explore non-traditional family forms. Divorcees, cohabitators, and racial and ethnic minorities do tend to report lower happiness, poorer communication, and more conflict.

Importantly, though, the gaps between the groups are often small and statistically insignificant. This matters because much has been made of differences in marital quality by race-ethnicity, divorce, and cohabitation status. The current work provides for examining such differences from a longitudinal perspective of several decades, for it shows that differences, although real and potentially impactful, may not be as large as previously believed. For example, much has been made of differences in marital quality between individuals whose family formation choices are marked by premarital cohabitation. On average, previous research has found that cohabitation is negatively associated with subsequent marital quality (Kamp Dush et al., 2003). However, as the results demonstrate, although women who marry directly report higher levels of happiness and communication and lower levels of conflict throughout marriage, in no case does this difference achieve statistical significance. Thus, when trajectories, rather than overall levels, of marital quality over time are studied, the gap between cohabitators and non-cohabitators narrows considerably, providing further support for Tach and Halpern-Meekin's (2009) finding that marital quality declines at the same rate for all women regardless of cohabitation status.

I provide empirical evidence for one explanation of the discrepancy in previous research examining whether cohabitators score higher, lower, or the same on measures of marital

quality. Some studies have reported a positive effect, some a negative one, and still others found no relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital quality (James & Beattie, 2012). Previous work has often used the beginning of the marriage as the time metric. If marital quality declines as a romantic relationship matures, one would expect cohabitators to report lower marital quality because using the length of marriage as the time metric starts the clock sooner for cohabitators than for marrieds. When estimates using the two approaches to the time metric, relationship duration and marriage duration, are directly compared, as seen in Table 4, the intercept for marital happiness among cohabitators was lower when using marital duration and the difference in the intercepts for cohabitators and direct marrieds became significant. In other words, using the length of marriage rather than the length of the relationship can lead to the erroneous conclusion that cohabitators begin their marriages at lower levels of marital happiness than those who marry directly, a point made salient because marital happiness is one of the most commonly studied dimensions of marital quality (Amato et al., 2007; Glenn, 1998).

However, the results also provide evidence of group differences in the experience of marital change across divorce status and race-ethnicity. The results suggested that divorced individuals experienced a more rapid decline in their marital happiness, in line with previous research (Anderson et al., 2010; Huston, Niehuis, et al., 2001). Similarly, although divorced and continuously married respondents experienced declines in communication over the marital life course, this decline appears to stabilize at later marital durations for individuals who remain married, resulting in comparatively higher marital communication for this group. Additionally, I found support for Gottman's (1994) assertion that those who eventually divorce experience higher levels of conflict in the early years of matrimony and that these differences persist throughout the marriage.

With respect to race-ethnicity, the results demonstrated the complexity of the intersection between family patterns and racial and ethnic relations in the United States. Although Whites entered marriage with more happiness, better communication, and less conflict than Hispanics or Blacks (Adelmann et al., 1996; Bulanda & Brown, 2007), this advantage did not always persist throughout the marital life course. For example, the uptick in marital happiness at later marital durations was greater for Blacks than Whites⁵, allowing Blacks who remained continuously married for over two decades to regain some, but not all, of the ground previously lost. For Hispanics, the decline in communication was less dramatic than for Whites and Blacks, again narrowing the racial gap as individuals traverse the marital life course. In addition, the initially low levels of conflict for Whites appeared to dissipate over time. Whites reported greater increases in conflict over the first decade of marriage than Blacks or Hispanics, indicating that the gap in marital conflict narrowed considerably as marriages entered their second decade.

The results stressed the importance of focusing on variation in trajectories of marital quality. The results clearly illustrate that levels of and changes in marital quality are not uniform

⁵This uptick could also be due to selective attrition out of marriage among Blacks with poor-quality marriages, although this would not change the fact that, in the absence of racial differences in the mechanisms selecting low marital quality individuals out of marriage, the Black-White marriage gap narrows substantially at later durations.

across the married population. Notably, I found no evidence of differences in trajectories of marital quality between women who married directly and those who cohabited. However, the findings illustrate that individuals whose marriages ended in divorce began their marriages with more conflict and experienced a greater decline in happiness than continuously married women. Additionally, Black and Hispanics, when compared to Whites, displayed different starting points and change patterns in marital quality over time.

These findings point to an interesting possibility—the marital quality gap by divorce experience, cohabitation status, and race-ethnicity may attenuate at later marital durations. It is difficult to say definitively whether this narrowing is substantively important because the increased similarity could be a sign of increasing homogeneity in the married population as poor-quality marriages drop out, essentially resulting in what one could term a ‘survivor’ effect. Nevertheless, future work should explore the issue to examine whether early differences in marital quality weaken as marriages enter their second, third, or even fourth decade. Are the narrowing differences due to the selective attrition described above? Is there evidence of a floor effect, wherein developmental change (Johnson, Amoloza, & Booth, 1992) results in long-term marriages eventually settling at a low but stable level, regardless of race-ethnicity, divorce status, or cohabitation? Or are the results due to substantively meaningful intergroup shifts in marital quality? The answers to these questions may also provide insights into why some individuals remain in long-term, low-quality marriages, a topic about which we know very little (Hawkins & Booth, 2005).

The current study also casts light on theories of marital quality. Consistent with the enduring dynamics and social exchange models, the results showed that women who divorced (compared with women in stable relationships) had more troubled relationships throughout their marriages. Specifically, these women reported higher levels of conflict and more rapid declines in happiness. But consistent with a marital life course and life course/ accommodation model, I also observed changes, sometimes even rapid changes, in the three dimensions of marital quality over the life course, suggesting the importance of focusing attention to broad trends that go beyond individual developmental processes, as well as the salience of conceptualizing marital quality as a multidimensional construct of empirically correlated but conceptually distinct indicators. The results showed that women experienced substantial changes in relationship quality over 20 years of marriage. Among those who remained together, marital quality tended to decline during the first decade of marriage and flatten out during the second decade. Among women who eventually divorced, in contrast, all dimensions of marital quality showed a more rapid decline. Additionally, the results also suggested that the U-shaped Curve of marital happiness may be more salient for Blacks than either Whites or Hispanics and that the U-shaped Curve was consistently supported for marital conflict, where trajectories produced hill-shaped curves. In summary, the results suggested that insights from several theoretical perspectives are necessary to understand marital change and that no particular perspective was universally supported.

This paper is not without limitations. First, because the NLSY79 asked questions regarding marital quality only to women, the extent to which the findings are generalizable to men is unknown. However, it is important to note that despite evidence that women tend to report lower *levels* of marital quality than men (Skinner, Bahr, Crane, & Call, 2002), evidence of

differences in how marital quality *changes* over time is much weaker. Amato, Booth, Johnson, and Rogers (2007) found that women tend to report lower levels of marital happiness but that changes in marital quality were similar for men and women, suggesting that patterns of change in marriage may not be gendered to the same extent as the overall level of marital quality. The fact that women tend to report lower levels of marital quality may render the estimates here presented conservative, since marital quality would almost certainly be higher if men were included in the sample. Another limitation deals with the absence of early marriages from the sample because young marriages occurred in the early years of the NLSY79, before marital quality data were available. Because we know that marriages contracted at early ages tend to be less stable (Glenn, Uecker, & Love, 2010), their absence from this sample likely serves to bias the estimates upward. I also have limited dimensions of marital quality, and future work should examine whether the patterns I observe here for happiness, communication, and conflict are similar to patterns observed for other dimensions of marital quality. A final limitation involves the relatively aged sample. Because the NLSY79 tracks women born in the 1950s and 1960s, the demographic characteristics of this sample are different from those today. However, the NLSY79 remains the best source for studying trajectories of marital quality in a national sample. Cultural changes over the years observed here, such as widespread use of the internet, social media, and cell phones, could also account for some of these trends, especially if disadvantaged groups were less likely to participate in them. Despite the rapid growth of the Hispanic population, (Passel & Cohn, 2011), research suggests that shifts in the racial-ethnic composition of the U.S population between 1980 and 2000 were generally not associated with shifts in marital quality over the same period (Amato et al., 2007), lending some credence to the findings offered here.

Despite these limitations, these results build on and advance our understanding of marital processes by more accurately capturing the heterogeneity in the ways individuals experience marital quality over the life course. The assumption, so prevalent in prior research, that marriage itself is sufficiently homogenous to serve as a meaningful comparison to other family forms may need to be reconsidered, given the complex and nuanced patterns of variation in individuals' experiences of marital change.

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Figure 1.

Trajectories of three dimensions of marital quality, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979

Figure 2.

Trajectories of three dimensions of marital quality for divorcing and continuously married individuals, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979

Figure 3.

Trajectories of three dimensions of marital quality by cohabitation status, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979

Figure 4.

Trajectories of three dimensions of marital quality by race-ethnicity, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of Marital Happiness, Communication, and Conflict by Divorce Status, Premarital Cohabitation Experience, and Race-Ethnicity

Marital Quality	Grand Marital Happiness		Grand Marital Communication		Grand Marital Conflict	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Divorced	2.41	0.65	10.65	2.06	20.32	5.18
Continuously Married	2.72	0.41	11.35	1.10	18.30	4.09
Cohabited	2.61	0.52	11.16	1.51	19.07	4.55
Married Directly	2.67	0.48	11.21	1.34	18.62	4.43
Black	2.49	0.53	10.64	1.97	19.52	4.94
Hispanic	2.61	0.45	11.09	1.29	19.54	4.51
White	2.67	0.43	11.27	1.18	18.62	3.87

Note: Estimates are weighted and based on 2,640 married women from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979 cohort.

Table 2

Latent Growth Curve Analysis of Three Dimensions of Standardized Marital Quality, N=2640, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979

	Marital Happiness	Marital Communication	Marital Conflict
Intercept	0.41***	0.26***	0.008
Slope	-0.36***	-0.26***	0.23***
Quadratic	0.03*	0.04*	-.12***
Model Fit Indices			
CFI	0.92	0.92	0.96
TLI	0.93	0.92	0.97
RMSEA	0.04	0.04	0.03

Note: Sample includes 2,640 women. CFI = confirmatory fit index, TLI = Tucker Lewis fit index, RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.

*
p < .05,

**
p < .01,

p < .001 (two-tailed)

Table 3

Results from multigroup latent growth curves of three dimensions of marital quality for divorced and continuously married individuals, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979

	Marital Happiness	Marital Communication	Marital Conflict
Continuously Married (n=2033, weighted=78%)			
Intercept	0.44 ^{***a}	0.25 ^{***a}	-0.11 ^{**a}
Slope	-0.25 ^{***a}	-0.14 ^{***a}	0.30 ^{***a}
Quadratic	0.02	0.02 ^a	-0.14 ^{***a}
Divorced (n=607, weighted=22%)			
Intercept	0.31 ^{***a}	0.18 ^a	0.25 ^{*b}
Slope	-0.73 ^{***b}	-0.32 ^a	0.34 ^a
Quadratic	0.00	-0.19 ^b	-0.19 ^{*a}
Model Fit Indices			
CFI	0.92	0.93	0.95
TLI	0.92	0.93	0.96
RMSEA	0.05	0.04	0.04

Note: Sample includes 2,640 women.

*
 $p < .05$,

**
 $p < .01$,

 $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

All analyses are weighted. Superscripts denote the level of significance within row between the intercepts, slopes, and quadratic terms, respectively, between the groups. Coefficients with the same superscripts are not significantly different from each other. Those with different superscripts are significantly different from each other at the $p < 0.05$ level. Coefficients represented as '0.00' were fixed in the model due to a linear association with time.

Table 4

Results from multigroup latent growth curves of three dimensions of marital quality by cohabitation status and two measures of duration, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979.

	Marital Happiness	Marital Communication	Marital Conflict
<i>Duration of Relationship (used for analysis)</i>			
Married Directly (n=1759, weighted=67%)			
Intercept	0.42*** _a	0.26*** _a	0.004 ^a
Slope	-0.35*** _a	-0.27*** _a	0.21*** _a
Quadratic	0.04** _a	0.05***	-0.11*** _a
Cohabited (n=881, weighted=33%)			
Intercept	0.33*** _a	0.27*** _a	0.02 ^a
Slope	-0.36*** _a	-0.25*** _a	0.27*** _a
Quadratic	0.02 ^a	0.00	-0.13*** _a
Model Fit Indices			
CFI	0.92	0.89	0.95
TLI	0.93	0.90	0.96
RMSEA	0.04	0.05	0.04
<i>Duration of Marriage</i>			
Using Duration of Relationship as Time Metric			
Intercept	0.42*** _a	0.18*** _a	0.004 ^a
Slope	-0.35*** _a	-0.26*** _a	0.21*** _a
Quadratic	0.04** _a	0.06*** _a	-0.11*** _a
Using Duration of Marriage as Time Metric			
Intercept	0.28*** _b	0.14* _a	0.08 ^a
Slope	-0.39*** _a	-0.33*** _a	0.19* _a
Quadratic	0.034 ^a	0.07 ^a	-0.12*** _a
Model Fit Indices			
CFI	0.92	0.91	0.96
TLI	0.93	0.91	0.96
RMSEA	0.04	0.05	0.04

Note: Sample includes 2,640 women.

*
 $p < .05$,

**
 $p < .01$,

 $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

All analyses are weighted. Superscripts denote the level of significance within row between the intercepts, slopes, and quadratic terms, respectively, between the groups. Coefficients with the same superscripts are not significantly different from each other. Those with different superscripts are significantly different from each other at the $p < 0.05$ level. Coefficients represented as '0.00' were fixed in the model due to a linear association with time.

Table 5

Results from multigroup latent growth curves of three dimensions of marital quality by race-ethnicity, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979.

	Marital Happiness	Marital Communication	Marital Conflict
Hispanic (n=610, weighted=10%)			
Intercept	0.25 ^{***a}	0.10 ^a	0.22 ^{**a}
Slope	-0.34 ^{***a}	-0.12 ^{***a}	0.09 ^{a,b}
Quadratic	0.06 ^{*a,b}	0.00	-0.06 ^{*a}
Black (n=530, weighted=6%)			
Intercept	0.12 ^a	0.23 ^a	0.28 ^{***a}
Slope	-0.5 ^{***a}	-0.52 ^{***b}	0.04 ^a
Quadratic	0.11 ^{*a}	0.12 ^{*a}	-0.07 ^a
White (n=1500, weighted=84%)			
Intercept	0.46 ^{***b}	0.30 ^{***b}	-0.05 ^b
Slope	-0.36 ^{***a}	-0.26 ^{***b}	0.27 ^{***b}
Quadratic	0.03 ^b	0.04 ^{*a}	-0.13 ^{***a}
Model Fit Indices			
CFI	0.88	0.88	0.94
TLI	0.89	0.89	0.95
RMSEA	0.05	0.05	0.04

Note: Sample includes 2,640 women.

*
 $p < .05$,

**
 $p < .01$,

 $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

All analyses are weighted. Superscripts denote the level of significance within row between the intercepts, slopes, and quadratic terms, respectively, between the groups. Coefficients with the same superscripts are not significantly different from each other. Those with different superscripts are significantly different from each other at the $p < 0.05$ level.