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Marital Quality from a Rural Indian Context in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

This paper describes the conception of marital quality held by respondents living in one Indian village, as identified through an analysis of semi-structured interviews (n=46). Their conception of marital quality is summed up in the overarching ideal of the life partner and characterized by the dimensions of love, peace, understanding, communication, trust, and balance. This conception is then compared to the conception of marital quality found in the literature, which was developed in reference to Western contexts. The comparison suggests that the villagers' conception of marital quality intersects in many ways with that found in the literature, but there are also important differences. These results point to the importance of greater examination of marital quality in non-Western contexts without unthinkingly applying Western measures.

INTRODUCTION

There is a large literature that examines marital quality, its determinants, and its consequences in Western settings. Underlying this research is the belief that marital quality is an important aspect of social life, which is worthy of study in its own right, as well as having significant consequences for well-being. The presence of children, marital duration, availability of alternative spouses, and a host of other factors influence marital quality (Bradbury et al., 2000; Glenn, 1990). Marital quality further affects self-rated health, physical health, and subjective well-being and happiness (Dush & Amato, 2005; Umberson et al., 2006; Wickrama et al., 1997).

By comparison, marital quality in non-Western contexts has received much less attention. Recently, however, a growing number of studies have begun to examine marital quality in non-Western countries. The determinants of marital quality have been explored in Ghana (Miller and Kanae, 1999), Cameroon (Gwanfogbe et al., 1997), Bolivia (Orgill and Heaton, 2005), Taiwan (Xu and Lai, 2004), China (Pimentel, 2000), Malaysia (Ng et al., 2008), Nepal (Hoelter et al., 2004), and India (Kumar and Trivedi, 1990; Sandhya, 2009; Shukla and Kapoor, 1990; Singh et al., 2006). The effect of marital quality on other outcomes has also been examined for postpartum depression in Turkey (Alkar and Gencoz, 2005) and children's behavior in Brazil (Stutzman et al., 2009).

Many of these studies on marital quality in non-Western contexts use measures of marital quality developed in the previous research on Western countries. Moreover, these Western

measures are often employed without an evaluation of their relevance to the particular context. This practice implicitly assumes that conceptions of what constitutes a good marriage in Western settings apply equally well to non-Western contexts. Such an assumption is unlikely to hold, however, since marital quality is an inherently subjective concept. At its base, marital quality is the degree to which a marriage is judged to be good or bad. The characteristics of a marriage that are considered good are subjective and can vary across time and place. Thus, it is likely that conceptions of marital quality derived from Western studies are not equally applicable in all non-Western settings. Some aspects of marital quality may apply to some contexts, but not to others. Thus, applying Western conceptions in other contexts may inappropriately include dimensions of marital quality that are not relevant to the setting or miss other dimensions that are. It is also important not to reify differences solely along Western versus non-Western lines. Given the large variations within non-Western societies there must be differences in the concept of marital quality within non-Western contexts. Similarly, it is also likely that there is variation in the conception of marital quality within Western contexts. Indeed, variation in the conception of marital quality within Western contexts may be one reason why measures of marital quality vary across studies. Certainly, the value of marriage itself varies within Western contexts, as seen in the greater premium placed on marriage in the United States compared to Britain and France (Cherlin 2009).

This practice of applying Western concepts and measures of marital quality, without examining their salience in a particular context, leads to two main problems. First, it bypasses an important and interesting area of inquiry. If marital quality is assumed to take a universal shape, then researchers miss the opportunity to examine how and why conceptions of marital quality vary by context. Second, this practice may lead to misleading or even incorrect findings. For example, Miller and Kanae (1999) express surprise that they find that patriarchal attitudes are associated with poor marital quality among men in Ghana. This result may be due to their choice of measures however. They include items on how much time men spent shopping, cooking, and performing other household chores with their wives in their measure of marital quality. It seems logical that men with patriarchal attitudes do not engage in housework alongside their wives, but this may not necessarily mean that they have poor quality marriages according to either their own evaluations or the conception of marital quality held in Ghana. If the study had employed only the global measure of how satisfied men were with their marriage or measures of marital quality attuned to Ghana, perhaps they would have found a different result.

To study marital quality in non-Western contexts we must understand what marital quality is in a particular setting and how it differs from the existing conception of marital quality in the literature, which was developed in reference to Western countries. Two studies that employ confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate the appropriateness of the Western measures to other settings take a first step in this endeavor (Fisiloglu and Demir, 2000; Shek and Cheung, 2008). These analyses reveal some of the differences by context. For example, in their evaluation of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale to a Chinese sample, Shek and Cheung (2008) find that the frequency of kissing one's spouse loads only weakly on to the cohesion factor. They suggest that this is because kissing is not an important sign of marital satisfaction in China. Confirmatory factor analyses of Western measures on non-Western samples are not

sufficient however. First, they do not reveal important aspects of marital quality that are missing from the Western measures. Second, such analyses cannot directly reveal the nuances and ideals of marital quality as held and expressed by people in that context. As Pimentel (2000) demonstrates, we can more comprehensively understand the conception of marital quality in a particular place and time by directly asking people what characterizes good and bad aspects of marriages.

This paper aims to contribute to such an endeavor by examining the conception of marital quality held in one rural Indian context and comparing it to the conception that is found in the literature on marital quality in Western countries. The conception of marital quality held in the Indian village is drawn from an analysis of semi-structured interviews in which respondents were directly asked about the characteristics of a good marriage. The conception of marital quality in the literature is drawn from a review of studies on marital quality in Western countries. The comparison of the conception of marital quality held in one Indian village to the conception found in the Western literature is not intended as a value judgment of conceptions of marital quality. I do not suggest that either Indian or Western conceptions of marital quality are superior to the other. I compare the concept of marital quality found in one Indian context to that found in the literature on Western countries, not because a Western view is superior or correct, but because it dominates research on marital quality. As described above, such comparisons have important implications for our understanding of marital quality and future research on marital quality in non-Western contexts.

Before proceeding to a description of the conceptions of marital quality, two other aspects of this analysis should be emphasized. First, this examination of the conception of marital quality is based only on one Indian village. Pariwarbasti is not representative of rural India, nor India as a whole. Thus, this analysis compares the conception found in the literature to the conception of marital quality found in only one, non-Western setting. Second, for the sake of linguistic simplicity, I referred above to the conception of marital quality found in the literature. However, the use of conception in its singular form may not be the most accurate choice. There is not yet a single conception of marital quality, nor standard measure of marital quality, that is agreed upon and used in all studies (Bradbury et al., 2000). There is broad agreement that marital quality is a multidimensional concept. There are also several dimensions of marital quality that are repeatedly used across studies. So, it is possible to identify aspects of marital quality that are widely agreed upon. Based on a review of the literature, I identified aspects of marital quality that are widely used. It is these commonly used dimensions in the literature on marital quality that I compare to the dimensions of marital quality found in Pariwarbasti. Specifically, I examine how the dimensions of marital quality intersect and vary between Pariwarbasti and the Western literature.

MARITAL QUALITY IN THE WESTERN LITERATURE

I identified seven commonly used dimensions of marital quality by reviewing several studies of marital quality in Western countries, primarily the United States. The dimensions appear both explicitly in conceptual discussions of marital quality and implicitly in the items used to measure marital quality. In this review, I included standard measures that are used by a

variety of studies, including the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) (Locke and Wallace, 1959), Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976), and Quality of Marriage Index (QMI) (Norton, 1983), as well as non-standard measures used in recent studies.

Three of these dimensions can be characterized as focusing on the internal, emotional core of a marriage. These three, more internal dimensions, include happiness, love, and understanding. The first dimension of happiness refers to an individual's happiness and satisfaction with their marriage or particular aspects of their marriage (Amato and Booth, 1995; Bryant et al., 2001; Johnson et al. 1986; Kaufmann and Taniguchi, 2006; Norton, 1983; Skinner et al. 2002; Umberson et al. 2005). The second dimension refers to the love and affection that an individual feels and expresses for their spouse and vice versa (Amato and Booth, 1995; Hassebrauck and Fehr, 2002; Johnson et al., 1986; Locke and Wallace, 1959; Spanier, 1976; Umberson et al., 2005). The third internal dimension of understanding between spouses is a more multi-faceted dimension. Some measures explicitly invoke understanding by asking how satisfied an individual is with the amount of understanding received or experienced in their marriage (Amato and Booth, 1995; Hassebrauck and Fehr, 2002; Skinner et al., 2002). Understanding is also invoked as underlying compatibility and similarity of spouses through measures of whether spouses are similar in general, hold similar goals, beliefs, and attitudes about life and family, and have similar personalities (Hassebrauck and Fehr, 2002; Norton, 1983). Both the widely used Marital Adjustment Test (Locke and Wallace, 1959) and Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) include items that invoke understanding as agreement between spouses on family finances, philosophy, religious matters, and a raft of other items.

Three other dimensions focus more on the external quality of interactions between spouses. These interactional dimensions include communication, conflict, and jointly engaging in activities together. The communication dimension is seen in several measures of marital quality that include items on how much couples listen and talk to each other, as well as confide in each other (Hassebrauck and Fehr, 2002; Locke and Wallace, 1959; Skinner et al., 2002; Spanier, 1976). The conflict dimension is demonstrated in items on the frequency of disagreements and arguments between spouses on various matters, as well as violent behaviors, like slapping and hitting (Amato and Booth, 1995; Johnson et al., 1986; Skinner et al., 2002; Spanier 1976;). The dimension of jointly doing things together refers to a collection of items on spouses engaging in leisure activities together, household chores, and other activities. This dimension is seen in general items on how frequently spouses do things together and take time for each other (Amato and Booth, 1995; Hassebrauck and Fehr, 2002; Norton, 1983; Spanier, 1976). Several items of this type refer to specific activities, like whether couples do household work together, shop together, and work on projects around the house (Amato and Booth, 1995; Hassebrauck and Fehr, 2002; Johnson et al., 1986). This focus on household tasks implicitly assumes that husbands and wives should share household tasks. Thus, this dimension is sometimes framed as fairness between spouses. Skinner et al. (2002), for example, include items on the extent of fairness in the relationship in household chores, working for pay, and spending money.

Finally, the last dimension of marital quality is stability, which refers to the longevity of a marriage. This dimension is seen in measures on whether spouses think about divorce,

whether they have talked to others about problems in the marriage, how stable the relationship is, and if they believe they will still be together in the future (Amato and Booth, 1995; Hassebrauck and Fehr, 2002; Johnson et al., 1986; Norton, 1983).

MARITAL QUALITY IN INDIA

There is comparatively little explicit attention to marital quality in India and the rest of South Asia. Ethnographic work on the family in South Asia, however, does reflect on the ideal nature of the marital bond. Much of this discussion is rooted in the features of the joint family system. Family structure varies within India by region, urban residence, class, and caste (Dasgupta et al. 1999; Niranjana et al. 2005). Moreover, processes of social and economic change may be changing the relative frequency of different family types and, in particular, what constitutes a joint family (D'Cruz and Bharat 2001; Niranjana et al. 2005; Seymour 1999). Given these changes and the complexity of family forms, it should be noted that the shape of joint and nuclear family are not always the same across time and place. Despite these variations, however, the archetypal description of the joint family system is still influential both as an ideal and in practice in India. Under the archetypal joint family system, a marriage does not signal the creation of a new family, as it does in nuclear family contexts. Instead, a man is a member of his own natal family for his entire life, while a woman becomes a member of her husband's family at the time of marriage. In keeping with this family membership, a young couple customarily begins married life in a joint family with the husband's parents, brothers, brother's wives, and unmarried sisters. As the older generation ages and dies or the family partitions, couples live in a nuclear family at later ages. Finally, when the couple is older they will again live in a joint family as their sons marry and bring daughters-in-law into the family. The standard account of the joint family system is, thus, that the primary family bond is the patrilineal, blood bond among men and their natal family members (Bennett, 1983; Das Gupta, 1999; Derne, 1995). A man's primary loyalty should be directed to his parents and brothers, rather than his wife. The marital bond is not only secondary, but dangerous, because love for a wife might spur a man to break from his family and form a nuclear household. The dominant ethnographic account of the ideal nature of the marital relationship is, thus, one of respect and avoidance where spouses are expected to maintain a distance from each other so as not to endanger patrilineal bonds.

Some ethnographic accounts suggest that an ideal of strong, loving marital bonds do exist side by side with this emphasis on respect and avoidance between the marital couple. For example, in an analysis of memoirs from nineteenth century Bengal, Raychaudhuri (2000) notes that several of the memoirs described great happiness and love among married couples. More recently, most of the upper caste men that Derne (1995) interviewed in Varanasi in 1986 said they believed in husband-wife avoidance, yet a third of them also said that they themselves had become close to their wives and rejected the ideal of limited couple interaction in their own marriages. Perhaps most compellingly, in Tamil Nadu, Trawick (1990) found that the importance of hiding marital love was widely held. At the same time though, when respondents were asked between what pair of family members love should be the strongest, the husband and wife pair was the stock response.

There also indications that views about what constitutes an ideal marital bond are changing to include a growing emphasis on loving, strong marriages. Fuller and Narasimhan (2008) find that a companionate marriage with emotional satisfaction between spouses at the core has emerged as the newfound ideal among middle class members of a Brahman subcaste in Tamil Nadu. They further suggest that this type of marriage is now the norm for the middle class across urban India. Similarly in rural areas, several anthropologists note that young people increasingly express aspirations for companionate marriages and that young people's preferences are increasingly taken into account by parents in marriage arrangements (Ahearn, 2001; Seymour, 1999; Wadley, 1994). Wadley (1994) further notes that young couples are being given greater privacy and space within joint families to develop marital bonds.

Several authors suggest that the growing importance of love and the marital bond in India is due in part to a growing Western influence on India. Netting (2009) contends that the aspirations for loving, intimate marriages she found among unmarried, middle class youth in urban Gujarat is due to an ideoscape of individualism imported from the West. Similarly, based on a comparison of interviews with men in Varanasi collected in 1985 to those collected in 2001, Derne (2008) suggests that globalization is changing men's beliefs about the importance of marital love and their acceptance of love as the basis of marriage. Puri (1997) further suggests that the widespread proliferation of Mills and Boon romances across India – known as Harlequin novels in the United States – promote Western ideals of marital love that run counter to traditional Indian culture.

A review of the literature from India, thus, suggests two alternative hypotheses. Many ethnographies – drawing on the primacy of the patrilineal bond in the joint family system and the danger of a strong marital bond – suggest that a good Indian marriage is characterized by respect, distance, and avoidance. Based on this, I hypothesize that the conception of marital quality held in this rural Indian setting will differ substantially from conception of marital quality found in the literature on Western countries described above. By contrast, the other studies that describe the importance of a strong, loving marital bond, present an alternative hypothesis. Based on this work, I hypothesize that the conception of marital quality held in this rural Indian setting will be similar to that found in the Western literature.

METHOD

This study is part of a larger project that addressed family relationship quality and its connections to women's agency and maternal and child health (Author 2009). Fieldwork was completed by the author in Pariwarbasti, Darjeeling District, West Bengal from September 2007 through May 2008. (Pariwarbasti, as well as the names of respondents used here, are pseudonyms.) Pariwarbasti is a village perched amidst the Himalayan foothills. The primary economic activity in the village is agriculture, with rice, millet, corn, and gladiolas comprising the main crops. Many villagers work as daily laborers in agriculture and construction. It is also common for village men to work in other parts of India, either temporarily migrating to cities in search of jobs or working as soldiers in the Indian army. Ethnically, the village includes high caste, Chetri-Bahun, several Tibeto-Burman groups,

including Rai, Limbu, Lepcha, Tamang, Gurung, and Sherpa, and some Scheduled Castes. The village is primarily Hindu, but also includes large numbers of Buddhists and Christians. Customarily, many Tibeto-Burman groups practiced their own indigenous religions, including Kiranti among the Rai, Yuma among the Limbu, and Mun among the Lepcha. Over time, however, through close contact with other ethnic groups and the process of Hinduization in the region, many Tibeto-Burman people now identify as Hindu or Buddhist, while others have converted to Christianity. Missionaries have been active in the region since the late 19th century. In Pariwarbasti, Rai and Limbu, which are the most numerous Tibeto-Burman groups, identify as Hindu, while Tamang, Lepcha, Gurung, and Sherpas identify as Buddhist. However, some also still practice their own religious rituals and draw on their own religious figures while maintaining Buddhist or Hindu practices as well. For example, Lepchas in the village regularly participate in activities at the local Buddhist Ghumba run by Tamang lamas, but for special occasions some also call on Lepcha lamas and shamans that live elsewhere.

Most of the results presented here are drawn from semi-structured interviews with 46 members of a sample of 22 village households. Sample selection began by visiting every household in the study area ($n=232$) and identifying all available target households ($n=31$). Due to the focus on maternal and child health, target households comprised all households that had a birth in the past year. The women who had the births are referred to as focus women. From the list of 31 target households, the sample households were selected based on household structure and other characteristics. First, all non-joint households – in which focus women lived either in nuclear households or with their own natal family – were selected. Second, from the remaining joint households, the rest of the households were chosen to provide a mix of basic characteristics. I stratified the sample by family structure and included a number of non-traditional family forms to increase the chances of sampling a wide range of family relationship quality. Sampling by family structure provided a window into relationship quality because relationship quality plays a role in determining family structure. One of the commonly given reasons for joint families partitioning into nuclear families is family members, particularly women, being unable to get along. Similarly, marital breakdowns can result in women returning to their natal family homes.

After the sample households were chosen, a further six months was spent living in the village. During that period, I spent a large amount of time visiting families' homes, observing and interacting with them at community events and other locations, and carrying on countless casual conversations. I also collected a series of formal semi-structured interviews in Nepali, the local language. Focus women ($n=22$) were interviewed formally three times. Their co-resident husbands ($n=14$) and co-resident mothers or mothers-in-law ($n=10$) were formally interviewed once if they were available. Some husbands were absent because they worked and lived elsewhere or, in the case of one family, because the couple was no longer married. The basic characteristics of the 46 respondents are presented in Table 1.

My goal was to understand the conception of marital quality held in the village. In other words, I wanted to find out what they believed were good and bad aspects of a marriage. Therefore, I began with open ended questions that did not make any assumptions about what

marital quality includes. I asked, for example, what a good marriage is like and how a married couple should feel towards each other. After basic elements of marital quality emerged through these more open question, I later asked follow up questions about the elements that emerged from those initial questions. For example, after respondents said love was important, I asked how couples express love for each other and whether a man should love his wife or parents more and why. I also asked questions about the quality of their own marriages, including how do you feel about your spouse, how do you think they feel about you, who do you confide in and why, are there tensions in your marriage and home and why, and do you feel there is understanding between you and your spouse and why.

All interviews were transcribed in Nepali and translated into English by native Nepali speakers. I analyzed the resulting transcripts and fieldnotes to identify dimensions of marital quality. Analysis consisted of descriptive coding that was intended to inductively identify common aspects or dimensions of what characterizes a good (and bad) marriage according to the respondents' own words (Lofland and Lofland, 1995; Miles and Huberman, 1994). I began by reading over the transcripts and creating codes for each new aspect that I encountered. The codes were simply brief descriptions of the aspect of marital quality, such as love or scolding, that were assigned to relevant text. After a few interviews had been coded in this manner, I then reduced the list of codes by merging some codes that appeared to tap into the same dimensions of marital quality and limiting it to those that appeared across multiple respondents. With this refined list of codes, I then coded the rest of the transcripts. These dimensions of marital quality were seen as inter-related by the respondents. Thus, when appropriate, I simultaneously coded parts of the transcripts with more than one code. This allowed for an examination of the connections between these dimensions. The final list of major codes comprised the dimensions of marital quality that are described below.

RESULTS

Love

There is a widespread belief among respondents that love is the foundation of a good marriage. Every respondent said that a husband and wife should love each other. The importance of love was put most simply by Premila. When I asked her what the best kind of marriage is like she answered simply "love, affection" and then stopped as if there was nothing more to add. Similarly, Shakunt explicitly spoke of the foundational aspect of love, "the husband and wife first must love each other. They have to live in love and affection."

This ideal of marital love is closely tied into the overarching ideal of a spouse as a life partner. There is a popular logic that a spouse is one's life partner, one loves their life partner and, therefore, you love your spouse. The simplicity of this logic can be seen in the strikingly parallel words of an older widow, Maya and a young married man, Laxman. In Maya's words, "[men] would obviously love their wives because their wives are their life partners." Similarly, Laxman said, "[a] wife is your life partner. You love your wife."

Along with the ideal of the life partner comes the ideal that a marriage and marital love should last the whole of one's life. As Smita said, "once you are married the husband should

also love you and you should also love your husband. Well, in life the husband has to love his wife and look after her till the time she dies.” Paired with this ideal of life-long love is the ideal that such love should persist even when tested by adversity. As Unnati stated, “So no matter how bitter your married life may be there is always love between the husband and wife.”

This ideal of love conceives of an internal emotion that is also manifested in visible ways. Taking care of each other is one main way that spouses show their love and also gain love from their spouse. Often ideals about how husbands and wives should take care of each other fell along gendered lines of what a husband and wife should do. Umesh describes these gendered roles: “The husband goes out and brings money and gives it to his family at home. The wife must be able to take care of the things the husband brings home and be able to run the house well.”

Husbands can show their love by giving food, money, and providing for their wives and families. Manisha, for example, spoke of how providing for a wife is a sign of a good marriage: “Well [my marriage] is good. My husband has kept me well. I’ve been getting good clothes to wear and he looks after my every need. That’s why I am happy.” Wives can demonstrate their love for their husbands, and also gain their love, by taking care of the home, watching children, and serving food. For example, Ranjita describes how such work will gain a husband’s love:

According to me, to get love from your husband you must do everything perfectly and keep things on your mind. You must pay attention to your home. If you have a child, then taking care of the child. Serving meals to your in-laws at the right time.

On the other hand, not performing these tasks is seen as a lack of love. Drinking alcohol is a widespread habit in the village, as it is in many places in India. Drinking is common, although people deplore it because men waste precious household funds on alcohol, rather than using it to support their families. Indu resignedly suggested her own husband’s drinking habit showed he did not love her: “He is good, but at times he drinks. I get angry because he squanders the money... What can I say? How can he love me?” Similarly, women can express their displeasure by not carrying out their household tasks, or doing so with less care. As Manavi describes:

Only if they, the husband and wife, get along well and live together do you cook and feed the husband. But if you’re fighting then you only cook, but you don’t care whether he eats or not, or if he goes to bed without food - that’s how it is.

Understanding

In the Oxford English Dictionary, understanding is defined as comprehension, amicable or friendly relations, mutual agreement, and sympathetic tolerance. The American Webster’s Dictionary concurs with these and also adds an agreement of feelings or opinion. These elements of understanding are all present in ideals of the marital relationship. Two-thirds of respondents said that an element of understanding is part of a good marriage. Often the different aspects of understanding were combined in overlapping and complementary ways.

These different elements of understanding can also be seen linguistically in the words people used. People used the verb *bujnu* conjugated in different ways, which is a verb that means to understand in the sense of comprehension. They also used *mel milaap* to refer to people getting along, the amicable relations side of understanding. Schmidt (1993) defines *mel milaap* as “compatibility, understanding, reconciliation.” The phrase *man milnu* or simply *milnu* by itself was also used, which literally means to be joined, in agreement, or to match and, specifically for the heart/mind to match in the case of *man milnu*. Thus, this phrase too indicates compatibility or agreement of feelings or opinion. People also used the English word “understanding” in their speech. People spoke of having understanding and gaining or losing understanding. For example, when explaining why her daughter’s marriage had ended, a woman said that the couple had lost understanding.

Some spoke of understanding in a way that combined understanding as comprehension with understanding as amicable relations and compatibility. There is an ideal that spouses should inherently get along – that there must be something fundamental about them that allows them to identify and sympathize with the other. Sahaj spoke evocatively of this understanding as the ability of spouses to get along and work together:

If there is no understanding in a house and family... then they will get divorced. If the house doesn’t stay well, then there is no use to just stay there. There is no use just to get married and stay there. Some things have to be understood by the wife and the husband. The house will run well only if they get along well. It will not work with only one of them. While ploughing the field with buffaloes two of them have to be there. It cannot be done with only one of them. So a husband and wife also have to be like that. They have to be happy with each other.

There is a feeling that there should be some internal or innate compatibility between spouses that provides understanding, but there is also a feeling that spouses must engage in active understanding or comprehension to achieve this state of amicable relations. These ideals can be seen in the words of Ranajay:

[I like it when a man] does not think badly about his wife [and] the wife will also not think anything bad about her husband. There is a good understanding between each other, good feelings, which is not distributed among others. It has to be from both sides. Like I have some feelings in my mind, I have to understand the reply she gives. I must not get angry with her. I have to understand what she is saying. I have to understand what type of ideas she is giving. She also has to understand.

Sometimes when people invoke understanding they emphasize the forgiving or sympathetic tolerance aspect of understanding. They emphasize active understanding or comprehension, suggesting that a spouse should not only give the other the benefit of the doubt, but forgive them when they have done wrong. Mayuri, for example, invokes understanding explicitly as forgiveness between spouses as well as mutual agreement and comprehension of each other:

There should be an understanding between a husband and a wife. A husband should forgive his wife if she makes some mistake and we should also understand the husband’s wishes. If we make some mistake we should immediately ask for forgiveness.

The ideals of understanding are also closely tied to the ideals about marital love discussed above. Understanding is viewed both as an outcome of love and a cause of love. That is if a couple loves each other they will understand each other and if they understand each they will love each other. As Monal states, “there is love between a husband and wife if they have mutual understanding.”

Peace

Living in peace with one’s spouse is another ideal for the marital relationship. Nearly every respondent spoke of the need to live in peace and harmony without fighting. As Parvati said, “I wish to live in peace and not have fights.” The ideal of living in peace is closely linked to the ideals of love and understanding. For many, living in peace is a sign of love, a way to show love. As Dipesh said, “To show their love they [husbands and wives] have to live in harmony. They should not fight. That is it.” Peace is also closely related to the aspect of understanding that gets at people’s ability to get along with each other. In speaking about her own marriage, Vandita describes how her marriage is good because they are living, for the most part, in peace. It is an ability to understand and agree with each other that allows a couple to live in peace:

Our relationship is good. We must live in peace. We must agree with each other and get along. He has to listen to what I say and I too must obey him. Our relationship is good, we do not fight. Sometimes only we quarrel, sometimes when we are in a bad mood. He says something and that hurts me, only then. Otherwise we have a good relationship.

Living in peace without fighting is the ideal, but there is also the belief that some amount of fighting is inevitable. As Lalima notes, “Of course, we husband and wife like to live in peace. We wish to live in peace and not fight, but we have fights no matter how much we want to avoid them. Since we are a family, we have fights no matter what.” People accept that some amount of fighting will occur, but they still maintain the ideal of peace by believing that if fights occur they should be peaceful fights – one should not fight physically and engage in violence. As Sahaj describes, “I have married someone else’s daughter. I should not hit her. There will be fights, but I should be able to keep them peacefully. It cannot be done by hitting her and telling her to do things.” Despite this ideal of peace, violence does, of course, occur between spouses.

Trust and Fidelity

Trust and fidelity appear to be another dimension of the marital relationship. The ideal of life-long faithfulness falls well within the love and life partner ideals discussed above. Marital affairs or flirtations or the potential of such extra-marital relations are viewed as relatively common though. The desirable ideal of fidelity was not spoken of directly, but people did note the lack of fidelity as a problem. It is believed that affairs are a main source of fighting and violence among married couples in their community. For example, as Umesh states, “In some cases the man lies and has an affair with another woman. This is the reason for fights.” Women too have affairs, which causes marital turmoil. As Megna notes, “some wives go with other men and that’s why they [a husband and wife] don’t get along.”

While people do have extra marital affairs, it is often the fear or suspicion that a spouse may have an affair that is a source of trouble, rather than an actual affair. For the most part, it appears that it is mainly men who fear that their wives will have an affair, rather than the other way around. Women spoke of husbands being suspicious of their behavior around other men. While women noted that there are some women who do have affairs, for the most part, they felt that husbands are often suspicious of their wives without good reason. Thus, trust emerged as a related aspect of fidelity. For example, Unma spoke about her own frustration with her late husband's inability to trust her:

Well some husbands if they see their wives talking to some other man, or enjoying another man's company, will have a fight about it. Some women who are honest assume their husbands are like them, but some are different. I know that because my husband was like that before. If he found me talking with another man at the house he used to get drunk and start a fight with me. He used to falsely accuse me and say things like, 'Have you been living with another husband?'

Communication

When it comes to daily interactions, many of the ideals discussed above are expressed through communication between spouses. People demonstrated love and understanding and maintained peace through good communication. Thus, while communication can be described as a dimension of relationship quality, it may also be described as a demonstration of the more emotional, value-based dimensions discussed above. Good communication for spouses consisted largely of talking and sharing together, listening, and speaking nicely.

Speaking freely and sharing their feelings and thoughts is viewed as a sign of a good relationship – that the couples gets along and have love for each other. Unnati, for example, notes that, "[With my husband] it is good up to this point. He tells me everything and consults me." Thus, for Unnati it is her husband's sharing of "everything" with her that she both values and believes is a demonstration that they get along well. Similarly, Smita spoke happily of how her best times are when she shares with her husband: "In the evening, we talk while I cook and also over dinner. In bed we talk about our joys and sorrows and then we fall asleep like that."

Tightly intertwined with the ideal of a married couple sharing their thoughts, is the ideal of listening. In a good marital relationship while one spouse speaks, the other listens. Mayuri, for example, describes how she confides in her husband because he is close to her: "If my feelings are hurt, I tell my husband. Who else will listen to me? He is the closest to me." By contrast, Sahila, who said she did not have a particularly loving relationship with her husband, confides in a friend instead: "[I confide in my friend] because we get along. She also tells me things that are there in her heart and I tell her. ... It makes no sense to tell my husband. He does not care about such things."

In addition to the ideal of simply talking and sharing, is the ideal that spouses when speaking, should speak nicely to each other. As Mohini states, "[Couples] should speak sweetly with each other. That is love." Speaking nicely also includes refraining from shouting and scolding. As Kamala note, "[My husband] does not shout at me. He does not

scold me, but loves me. Other people's husbands scold them.” This ideal of speaking nicely is closely tied to the ideal of understanding as forgiveness as discussed above – at all times, and even when a spouse makes a mistake, they want to be forgiven and spoken to nicely.

Balance

Another dimension of marital quality that emerged cut across family dyads. Given the dynamics of joint families, in which multiple generations of the family reside together, there are often many people residing together in one household or very near each other in different households. In these living arrangements, balancing relationships with different family members emerged as a central ideal of both marital quality and family relationship quality more broadly. The marital bond should be properly balanced vis-à-vis other family relationships. Women are seen as members of their husband's family after marriage and are expected to reside with their husbands and in-laws. So, women's primary love and loyalty is supposed to be directed towards their husbands, children, and in-laws, rather than their natal family. By contrast, men are expected to live their whole lives within their natal families and, unlike women, are never expected to sever or lessen ties with their natal families. Thus, a man should equally balance his love for his wife versus that for his parents, particularly his mother.

Just over half of respondents expressed this ideal of balance by explicitly saying that a man must love his wife and parents exactly equally, not favoring one over the other. As Unnati notes, “He should love [a wife and parents] equally. His parents gave birth to him and worked hard to raise him. On the other hand, a wife is a life partner of a husband. So he should also love her. So the love should be equal.” The other half of respondents suggested that parents or wives should have a slight edge over the other, but still expressed the ideal of balance. For example, Salokh, a young husband, declares that the wife gains greater importance than a mother with time, but still emphasizes his love for his mother:

I love them both. A mother is a mother and a wife is a wife. I love them both, but [pause]. While one is single a mother is everything, but after marriage things change and you tend to love your wife more. I guess that's because you have to share everything with your wife.

This ideal for balance is also seen in the ambivalence of some respondents in choosing one or the other as more important. For example, Laxman starts out declaring that a mother is loved more, but then changes his mind and says the love for a wife and mother must be equal:

Wife is your life partner. You love your wife. There is love for the mother. You love both of them, but you love your mother a little more than your wife because the mother gave you birth. [Pause.] Half, half – sharing the love with both. Now, you must love both. It is not appropriate to love one more than the other.

Whether they said the love should be exactly equal or one should have a slight edge, the reasoning was remarkably uniform. A man should love his mother because she gave birth to him and he must love his wife because she is his life partner.

Love of a wife and parents should be balanced so that harmony is maintained within the marriage, but more importantly within the family as a whole. If one or the other is favored it will cause problems and fights in the family, undermining their ability to achieve the ideal of living in peace. As Laxman states, “The day you love one more than the other it is upsetting. The day you love the other more, the other person gets upset. That happens, therefore, it is better to give equal love and in that all are happy.”

DISCUSSION

The conception of marital quality held in Pariwarbasti intersects with conception found in the literature on marital quality in Western countries in some ways, but also diverges in other ways. Thus, overall, the results provides support for both hypotheses – the dimensions of marital quality found in Pariwarbasti both intersect and diverge from the dimensions widely used in the literature on marital quality. In terms of intersections, many of the dimensions of marital quality found in Pariwarbasti are also found in the literature described above. Love, understanding, peace (or lack of conflict), and good communication are elements of marital quality in both the Western literature and Pariwarbasti.

Other aspects of marital quality were framed slightly differently, but reflect the same underlying ideals. I did not explicitly specify stability as a dimension in Pariwarbasti, but this element is found within the ideals of a life partner and life-long love described in the section on love. Similarly, trust and fidelity, which I did identify as a dimension in Pariwarbasti, are also linked to the longevity or stability of a marriage. Further, while trust and fidelity do not commonly appear as a dimension in Western studies, one study did use direct items on trust and fidelity in their marriage of marital quality (Skinner et al. 2002). Aspects of trust and fidelity, as well as communication, also emerge as important aspects of marriages in the Western literature on domestic violence (e.g. Allison et al. 2008).

These intersections between the conception of marital quality found in Pariwarbasti and the Western literature may be due in part to Western influences. Since I have data from only one point in time, I cannot address the extent to which ideals of marital quality have changed in recent years and whether such changes are due to Western influences. Villagers did often remark on how family life is changing in Pariwarbasti. For example, in keeping with changes in spouse selection in the region, the majority of the focus women I interviewed chose their own husbands, while the majority of the mothers and mothers-in-law married men chosen by their parents. Thus, it is certainly possible that these intersections are due, at least in part, to changes in recent years. It should be stressed that marital love is not just a Western import though. Ideals of love have a long and varied history in India (Orsini, 2007).

There are also points of divergence between the dimensions of marital quality held in Pariwarbasti and those commonly used in the Western literature however. This variation demonstrates how context shapes conceptions of marital quality. One key difference points to the influence of family structure. Properly balancing the marital relationship with parental relationships is an important dimension of marital quality in Pariwarbasti, but not in the Western literature. Respondents believe that a husband should equally balance his relationships with his wife and parents. A wife, on the other hand, is primarily a member of

her husband's family and, as such, she should place her husband and her in-laws above her own parents. This element of balance points to the influential role of the joint family system in shaping villagers' conceptions of marital quality. The need for an equal balance, however, does not match with some of the previous work on the joint family, which suggests that the marital bond is secondary to the parental bond. In Parwarbasti today, villagers do not believe that a wife should be secondary to parents, but they do strongly value the parental bond and believe it should be equally strong for men. This importance of balance also reflects how marital quality is understood within a larger web of family relationships in Pariwarbasti. The extent to which spouses properly balance the marital relationship with other family relationships is an aspect of the quality of the marriage itself, the quality of other family relationships, and, most importantly, the quality of family relations as a whole.

By contrast, the conception of marital quality in the Western literature is firmly rooted in the nuclear family form. The nuclear family context leads to a focus on the marital couple in isolation. Marital quality is seen as located in the interactions and emotions between the couple only. In fact, among the measures of marital quality used across studies there is only one that brings in parents and in-laws to my knowledge. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale includes an item on the extent of agreement on ways of dealing with parents/in-laws (Spanier, 1976). Interestingly, however, in a rare example of attention to relations beyond the nuclear family, Bryant et al. (2001) find that marital quality is affected by the quality of in-law relationships among a sample of white, American families living in a rural area in the United States.

One element of marital quality found in the Western literature is also missing from Pariwarbasti. The ideal of spouses engaging in activities together was not expressed in Pariwarbasti. This divergence may reflect both the influence of gender norms and economic context. First, as described above, part of this dimension focuses on spouses jointly engaging in the same household tasks together, such as cooking. This focus integrates gender norms into the conception of marital quality. This sharing of the same household tasks found in the Western literature, can be characterized as an integration of norms of gender equality into the concept of marital quality. In Pariwarbasti, however, villagers believe that husbands and wives have different roles. As discussed in the section on love, husbands show their love by earning income, buying household goods, and supporting their wives and the rest of the family. Wives show their love by cooking, having children, and doing other work around the home. Thus, the conception of marital quality in Pariwarbasti reflects norms of gender complementarity.

It should be noted that norms of gender complementarity are found in Western countries as well. A specialization or exchange model of marriage, in which the husband is the breadwinner and the wife is a homemaker, is viewed as the traditional Western marriage (Becker 1981; Oppenheimer 1997). This model does not appear to be commonly integrated into conceptions of marital quality though. Interestingly, in an exception to this pattern, Johnson et al. (1986) do initially include an item on how happy respondents are with their spouse as a breadwinner as a measure of marital happiness, but they later drop it from their analysis because it did not correlate well with other items.

Second, the dimension of jointly engaging in activities together that is found in the Western literature incorporates a theme of leisure that may not be equally salient across all economic contexts. This leisure theme includes items on how much time is spent together in general, whether spouses' preferences for how to spend leisure time are compatible, and whether spouses engage in many outside interests together (Amato and Booth, 1995; Bulanda and Brown, 2007; Norton, 1983; Spanier 1976). This element of marital quality did not explicitly emerge in respondents' descriptions of what constitutes a good marriage in Pariwarbasti. I suspect though, that they would not object to the idea that a husband and wife should spend time together in a good marriage. This omission may be due to the influence of economic context. The focus on leisure and time spent together may be rooted in a Western economic context, in which most of the population works outside of agriculture in an office or other workplace setting and there are clear distinctions between time spent at work, time spent at home with the family, and leisure time, which may or may not include the family. In such contexts, time spent at work is often viewed as competing with time spent with the family, including time spent with a spouse. In Pariwarbasti, as in many rural, low income settings in non-Western contexts, the economic context is substantially different. Many people work in agriculture on their own land or rented land near their homes. In such cases, their time spent working in the fields may well be shared with spouses who are also working in the fields or nearby. Thus, time spent at work versus that with the family is not clearly separated. In turn, making time for the family or a spouse may not be as salient in Parwarbasti as it is in Western contexts. This lack of salience may account for why spending time together was not directly mentioned as a characteristic of a good marriage in Pariwarbasti.

This difference further suggests that some of the Western measures may be biased when applied to a rural, low income setting in some non-Western contexts. It is likely that people's responses to these items on time spent together in general or leisure time specifically may be strongly determined by their occupation and wealth, rather than by the strength of their marriage. As noted above, families engaged in agriculture often work together and, thus, spend a large amount of time together. Given the lack of jobs in rural areas, many of the men who do not work in agriculture migrate to nearby towns or distant cities to take up other types of employment, leaving their wives and other family members in the village. Thus, these couples in which the man works in other occupations away from the village spend very little time together. Thus, items on the amount of time spent together may suggest that couples engaged in agriculture have greater marital quality than those with other occupations. This would categorize those engaged in agriculture as having greater marital quality on the basis of their occupation, rather than on the strength of their marriage. Further, couples' economic status may also strongly influence the amount of leisure time they have in general, which in turn influences how much leisure time they spend together. Poor families can literally spend all day long in subsistence activities, while wealthy families employ servants and can have substantial amounts of leisure time. This pattern could be seen in my fieldwork. Members of wealthier families were often sitting in the family courtyard and chatting with neighbors when I visited their homes, while those from poor families were often away in the fields, collecting firewood, or engaged in other subsistence activities. Thus, measures that tap into the amount of leisure time that couples spend together may be

biased towards wealthier couples who simply have more leisure time because of their economic status.

CONCLUSION

This paper describes the dimensions of marital quality held in one Indian village and compares it to the dimensions of marital quality widely used in the literature on marital quality, which was developed in reference to Western countries. Villagers' conception of marital quality is summed up in the overarching ideal of the life partner and characterized by the dimensions of love, peace, understanding, communication, trust, and balance. The comparison of this Indian conception to that found in studies on Western contexts suggests that the dimensions intersect in many ways, but also diverge in important ways. Many aspects of marital quality, including emphases on love, communication, understanding, trust, and peace, are found in both Pariwarbasti and the Western literature.

The variation between dimensions further suggests that Pariwarbasti villagers' conception of marital quality is also shaped by their context in unique ways. The dimensions of marital quality in the Western literature reflect norms of gender equality in allocation of household tasks and a nuclear family context. By contrast, Pariwarbasti villagers' conception is shaped by norms of gender complementarity and the joint family system. Further, some measures of the Western conceptions may be rooted in the particularities of Western economies, which may lack validity when applied to rural, low income settings in some non-Western countries.

The dimensions of marital quality described here cannot provide a thoroughly comprehensive account of all aspects of marital quality held in Parwarbasti. Nor can the conception of marital quality found in one Indian village reflect the conception of marital quality found in India as a whole, let alone for non-Western contexts in general. In fact, exploring how and why conceptions of marital quality vary within India itself is an important area for further research. However, the comparison of the dimensions of marital quality commonly used in Western research with those from this single context from India can point the way to two broader implications that should be examined with future research.

First, these results reinforce the point made in the introduction that measures of marital quality developed for Western contexts should not be unthinkingly applied to non-Western contexts. Western measures may include some aspects of marital quality that are *not* relevant to the context at hand and miss other aspects of marital quality that *are* relevant to the context. Applying Western measures to Pariwarbasti might incorrectly put an emphasis on gender equality in allocation of household tasks and miss the importance of balancing relationships. Further, using Western measures of the extent to which couples spend time together in rural, low income contexts may be more determined by occupation and wealth, than the strength of a marriage. These results further suggest that global measures that ask how happy or satisfied people are with their marriages may be usefully employed for comparing the experience of marital quality across contexts, but they may well measure somewhat different conceptions of marital quality.

Second, these findings reinforce that marital quality and the emotional aspects of the marital bond are relevant to family life in India. Love and loyalty between generations, particularly between sons and their parents, are certainly important and are even incorporated into conceptions of marital quality. At the same time though, ideals of a strong, loving marital bond can be upheld as well. The relevance of love and other positive aspects of marital quality in this context further suggest that current research on marital quality in the region is too narrowly focused. There is a burgeoning area of research on domestic violence in India and other non-Western contexts, which characterizes marriages as varying in quality from violent to non-violent. This focus on domestic violence, while important, touches only a part of the complex and nuanced picture of the marital bond. Future research on marital quality in India and other non-Western contexts should take a holistic view that examines both positive and negative aspects of the marital bond, its place within the broader family, and its links to well-being.

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Table 1

Basic characteristics of respondents (N=46).

	Number
Gender	
Women	32
Men	14
Age	
<25	18
25–34	15
35+	13
Education	
None	9
Primary	24
Secondary	13
Caste/Ethnic Group	
Chettri or Bahun	4
Tibeto-Burman	38
Scheduled Caste	4
Religion	
Hindu	23
Buddhist	14
Christian	9
Household Type	
Joint with husband's family	29
Nuclear	10
Living with wife's family	7