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Till Death Do Us Part: Contexts and Implications of Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage Across Adulthood

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Abstract

The marital tie is one of the most influential relationships in adulthood, with vast implications for well-being. This special issue uses diverse samples, examines individuals in different marital situations (engaged, married, divorced, and remarried), and considers marital situations with regard to several contexts (e.g., in-law relationships, marital happiness, support, caregiving, well-being) across the life span. This issue includes four articles examining several marital situations among different age groups. Articles examine formation of marital ties in early adulthood and implications for in-law relationships, the development of marital happiness over 16 years, the implications of marital quality for the divorce experience, and the caregiving experience among remarried caregivers. Overall, these studies highlight the complexity and the diversity of experiences in marriage, divorce, and remarriage which is especially critical given the increasingly complicated family structures individuals experience across the life span.

The marital tie represents one of the most influential and prevalent relationships in adulthood, with enormous implications for well-being. Better quality marriages (e.g., higher marital happiness) are associated with fewer psychological and physical health problems (Choi & Marks, 2008; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Whisman, 2007). The life course of marriage and the context in which it occurs, as well as variations such as divorce and remarriage, require systematic study. Cross sectional studies have revealed that marital happiness follows a *U*-shaped curve (Glenn, 1990; Spanier & Lewis, 1980) in which happiness starts out high, declines in the middle years, and increases in later life. Surprisingly, we have little long-term data with longitudinal studies often only examining the early years of marriage (years 1 to 4). We know little about the transition from engaged to married or how marital quality changes longitudinally over time from young adulthood to old age. In addition, we know little about what happens after marriages dissolve in terms of the contexts of divorce and remarriage. Further, much of the work on marriage has focused predominately on White middle-class couples. Finally, little work has considered the complicated relationships of in-laws and stepfamilies. This special issue uses diverse samples, examines individuals in different marital situations (engaged, married, divorced, and remarried), and considers marital situations with regard to several contexts (e.g., in-law relationships, marital happiness, support, caregiving, well-being) across the life span.

This issue includes four articles examining several marital situations among different age groups. Fingerman, Gilligan, VanderDrift, and Pitzer focus on the formation of marital ties in early adulthood. Engaged couples and their mothers-in-law completed interviews before and after the wedding, providing information about the in-law ties that may influence the marriage. Couples who had more positive in-law relationships and greater one-on-one contact with in-laws prior to marriage had better ties after marriage. Birditt, Hope, Brown, and Orbuch examined trajectories of marital happiness from the first year of marriage to the 16th year. They found distinct trajectories of marital happiness, and those trajectories were associated with divorce and varied by sociodemographic characteristics. Brown, Birditt, Huff, and Edwards examined links between divorce and depressive symptoms in midlife and whether those links varied by race and relationship quality in the first year of marriage. Most importantly they found that relationship quality moderated the effects of marital status on depressive symptoms differently for Black and White women. Sherman assessed marriage later in life among middle-age and older women who had remarried and were caregiving for a spouse with dementia. Qualitative findings revealed variations in support and nonsupport by family, stepfamily, and others that contribute to caregivers' experiences of burden and well-being. Overall, these studies highlight the complexity and the diversity of experiences in marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

These articles used a variety of approaches including qualitative and quantitative methods, cross sectional and longitudinal designs, and included participants ranging in age from young to older adulthood. These articles contribute to the literature in several important ways. We know little about the early years of marriage and the transformation of in-law relationships. We also know little about the developmental course of marriage beyond the early years or what marital characteristics predict better or worse divorce outcomes. Finally, this special issue seeks to provide insight about the remarried relationship, especially with regard to the stress of spousal caregiving. All of these issues are critical for many people who are experiencing increasingly complicated family structures due to increased longevity, divorce, and remarriage. In addition, there is great diversity in the marriage experience by gender, family context, socioeconomic status, and race, which is progressively more essential to consider as the U.S. population becomes increasingly diverse.

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