Variation in trajectories of women's marital quality

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ABSTRACT

I examine variation in trajectories of women's marital quality across the life course. The analysis improves upon earlier research in three ways: (1) the analysis uses a sequential cohort design and data from the first 35 years of marriage; (2) I analyze rich data from a national sample; (3) I examine multiple dimensions of marital quality. Latent class growth analyses estimated on data from women in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979 ($N = 2604$) suggest multiple trajectories for each of three dimensions of marital quality, including two trajectories of marital happiness, two trajectories of marital communication, and three trajectories of marital conflict. Socioeconomic and demographic covariates are then used to illustrate how factors such as income, cohabitation, and race-ethnicity set individuals at risk of poor marital quality throughout the life course by differentiating between high and low trajectories of marital quality. Women on low marital quality trajectories are, as expected, at much greater risk of divorce. Taken together, these findings show how fundamental socioeconomic and demographic characteristics contribute to subsequent marital outcomes via their influence on trajectories of marital quality as well as providing a better picture of the complexity in contemporary patterns of marital quality.

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1. Introduction

Despite societal notions that marriage and family are historically static institutions, research shows that the American family has undergone a tremendous amount of change. In fact, in the past 60 years, we have witnessed dramatic shifts in cohabitation, nonmarital fertility, and relationship dissolution (Cherlin, 2009). Individuals are delaying marriage and child-bearing; women, particularly married women, have entered the labor force; and more people are raising children without a romantic, stable partner.

One result of the increasing diversity of family experiences in the contemporary United States is greater attention to the implications of marriage for personal well-being, as well as a desire for greater clarification regarding both the causes and consequences of high quality marriages (Cherlin, 2009). A significant amount of research has examined how marital quality changes as marriages mature (Amato et al., 2007) as researchers have examined the ebbs and flows of long-term, romantic relationships.

However, researchers often assume that most people experience a single, average trajectory of marital quality and this assumption has led to two theories of how marital quality changes over time—the U-shaped curve and continual decline perspectives (Glenn, 1998). As a result, virtually everything we know about how marital quality changes over time is based on the notion that most marriages change in similar ways (Anderson et al., 2010). Therefore, this paper focuses on whether this notion of similarity is true or whether some people follow markedly different trajectories of marital quality. If there are

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multiple trajectories of marital quality, we may need to rethink our conceptualization of marital quality across the life course, as this would constitute a misunderstanding of marriage, a fundamental social institution.

This is not to say that the possibility of multiple trajectories of marital quality has not been examined before. It has (Anderson et al., 2010; Birditt et al., 2012; Kamp Dush and Taylor, 2012; Kamp Dush et al., 2008; Lavner and Bradbury, 2010). But the number of studies is small and limited by important methodological and theoretical shortcomings detailed in Section 4. This article enhances our understanding of variation in trajectories of marital quality by overcoming these methodological and theoretical shortcomings as no article to date has been able to address the shortcomings in the same paper (i.e., track a national sample of marriages from the beginning of the marriage for 35 years to examine multiple dimensions of marital quality), making this the most extensive examination to date of variation in trajectories of marital quality.

This paper has several goals. The first is to examine whether a single trajectory representing the average relationship between marital quality and marital duration adequately captures people's marital experiences or whether it obscures distinct subgroups (i.e., variation) following qualitatively different trajectories. The second goal is to demonstrate the key role socioeconomic and demographic characteristics (e.g., income, premarital cohabitation, and race-ethnicity) play in sorting people into these varying trajectories, with individuals from traditionally disadvantaged groups faring poorly. The third goal is to examine whether membership in a specific marital quality trajectory influences the likelihood of subsequent divorce. To achieve these goals, I used latent class growth analyses to establish trajectories of marital happiness, communication, and conflict and then examine if socioeconomic and demographic characteristics served as risk factors for poor marital quality trajectories over the life course. Finally, I examined the link between being in a given marital quality trajectory and the likelihood of divorce.

2. Variation in longitudinal trends of marital quality

Previous researchers have attempted empirical tests between the U-shaped curve (marital quality begins high, declines, and then increases again at later marital durations) and continual decline hypotheses (marital quality begins high, then declines continually through the marriage; see Amato et al., 2007 for an overview of both perspectives). Papers have often been conceptually structured as attempts to adjudicate between the two perspectives (Glenn, 1998; Vaillant and Vaillant, 1993; VanLaningham et al., 2001). Another way of conceptualizing marital quality across the life course is to investigate the possibility of variation in trajectories of marital quality rather than assuming all marriages follow the same general trajectory over time. In this paper, I ask whether it is possible for each theoretical perspective (U-shape vs. continual decline) to represent the pattern of marital change for some subgroup of the population. Thus, this paper attempts to get at questions surrounding variability in experiences of marital change (i.e., whether marital quality trajectories are better explained by the U-shaped curve or the continual decline perspective).

Recent work, aided by advances in statistical techniques such as latent class analysis and group-based modeling (Nagin, 2005), has raised the possibility that married couples follow one of several trajectories of marital happiness/satisfaction (Anderson et al., 2010; Kamp Dush et al., 2008; Lavner and Bradbury, 2010) and marital conflict (Kamp Dush and Taylor, 2012)—while marital quality tends to decline with time, the decline is much sharper for some than others. The pattern appears somewhat different for marital conflict. Kamp Dush and Taylor (2012) found three subgroups (high, medium, and low) of marital conflict trajectories and that shifts in marital conflict over time were less dramatic than for marital happiness.

Despite this recent work, it is difficult to draw firm inferences from the results because of methodological and conceptual problems. These limitations, which deal with issues such as the time metric used, the measurement of the dependent variable, marital quality, and sampling, are detailed in Section 4, so I forgo additional discussion of them here.

This recent work, however, speaks to the debate between the U-shape curve and the continual decline perspectives. Although many scholars believe there is little credible evidence for the U-shaped curve (Glenn, 1998; VanLaningham et al., 2001), the most recent work. (Anderson et al., 2010; Kamp Dush et al., 2008) suggests marital quality, whether measured as marital happiness or marital conflict, follows a U-shaped curve for at least some individuals. Thus, questions about the U-shaped curve or continual decline perspectives may need to consider whether it is possible for both the U-shaped curve *and* the continual decline perspective to contribute meaningfully to our understanding of marital change—they may represent different trajectories *within the same married population*. Thus, it may be premature to declare the debate between the U-shaped curve and continual decline perspectives over.

This paper moves the literature forward in several ways. First, I press for a more nuanced view of the two perspectives by suggesting both perspectives are necessary for understanding how marital quality changes as marriages mature. Second, I examine the correlates of trajectories of marital quality, linking socioeconomic and demographic predictors to each trajectory. Finally, I link these trajectories of marital quality to the probability of subsequent divorce, a question previously unexamined.

3. Theoretical perspectives on marital quality trajectories

3.1. Why marital quality changes

Two theories, marital life course and enduring dynamics, provide guidance regarding *why* marital quality changes with marital duration. These are distinguished from the U-shaped curve and continual decline perspectives, which tell us *how*