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Variation in Marital Quality in a National Sample of Divorced Women

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Previous work has compared marital quality between stably married and divorced individuals. Less work has examined the possibility of variation among divorcés in trajectories of marital quality as divorce approaches. This study addressed that hole by first examining whether distinct trajectories of marital quality can be discerned among women whose marriages ended in divorce and, second, the profile of women who experienced each trajectory. Latent class growth analyses with longitudinal data from a nationally representative sample were used to “look backward” from the time of divorce. Although demographic and socioeconomic variables from this national sample did not predict the trajectories well, nearly 66% of divorced women reported relatively high levels of both happiness and communication and either low or moderate levels of conflict. Future research including personality or interactional patterns may lead to theoretical insights about patterns of marital quality in the years leading to divorce.

Keywords: divorce, marital quality, latent class growth analysis

Recent estimates from the United States suggest that approximately half of ever-married individuals will experience divorce (Gibbs & Payne, 2010). A large literature has explored why couples divorce or remain married (Amato, 2010). In many instances, divorce is the result of poor communication skills and interactional processes on the one hand and socioeconomic and demographic disadvantage on the other (Amato, 2010; Gottman, 1994). My goal is to understand longitudinal trajectories of happiness, communication, and conflict in the years leading to divorce. This question is important because the months and years leading to divorce may be among the most turbulent times a family experiences (Fine & Harvey, 2006).

Divorce engenders complex emotions, including hurt, pain, anger, fear, jealousy, and grief. Often, happiness declines and conflict escalates (Emery, 2012). Because marriage is often the most important of personal relationships (Hetherington, 2003), marital quality and stability can promote or undermine physical health, mental well-being, and social competence (Waite, 1995). Frequently, partners withdraw emotionally, fights and disagreements escalate, and eventually one of the partners, often the woman, seeks a divorce (Emery, 2012). Throughout the process, individuals may pass through several “stages” of relational breakdown (Rollie & Duck, 2006).

Yet patterns of marital quality before divorce are complex. Although unhappiness and dissatisfaction often precede marital dissolution (Fine & Harvey, 2006), not all divorces were highly distressed marriages. In fact, many spouses reported low levels

of negative marital quality and at least moderate levels of positive marital quality in the years leading to divorce (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). Some divorced couples reported high relationship satisfaction over the first 4 years of marriage (Lavner & Bradbury, 2012). Thus, some happy couples divorce and some unhappy couples remain married (Hawkins & Booth, 2005; Hetherington, 2003). Research has not fully explored the question of *variation* in marital quality prior to divorce. Although we know something about marital quality prior to divorce, no studies to my knowledge have identified trajectories of marital quality among those whose marriage ended in divorce.

This article provides a unique perspective for looking at trajectories of marital quality prior to divorce by examining variation in trajectories of marital quality solely among those whose marriages ended in divorce. A unique contribution of the study is, rather than starting at the beginning of the marriage and “looking forward” in time, this study begins at the time of divorce and “looks backward” at trajectories of marital quality prior to divorce.¹ The size of each group is then estimated and covariates are used to predict trajectory membership.

To do this, I employed latent growth curve and latent class growth analyses to examine marital quality data collected between 1992 and 2008 from female participants in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—1979 (only women were asked about marital quality; Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor, 1979–2008). I documented the variation in the shape and pattern of marital quality prior to divorce. I also examined how patterns predicted by theories of marital decline combine to inform contemporary patterns of marital change prior to dissolution.

¹ Throughout the study, I use *trajectory*, *pathway*, *avenue*, and *group* interchangeably; all refer to differing experiences of marital change in happiness, communication, and conflict, across the life course.

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Theoretical Perspectives on Marital Change Prior to Divorce

To date, theories of longitudinal marital change have focused on how marital quality changes from the beginning of marriage. Less attention has been paid to how marital quality changes prior to divorce. Much can be learned by taking more general theories about longitudinal patterns of marital quality and applying them specifically to divorcing women. Two perspectives in particular have been discussed about how marital quality changes as marriages mature. The first suggests that marital quality begins high but drops because of stressors and developmental processes. The second perspective suggests that preexisting characteristics and interactional patterns keep marital quality steady across the life course.

Importantly, recent work on marital quality trajectories across the life course has established the presence of multiple trajectories of marital quality throughout the life course (Anderson, Van Ryzin, & Doherty, 2010; Birditt, Hope, Brown, & Orbuch, 2012; James, 2015; Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012; Kamp Dush, Taylor, & Kroeger, 2008; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010). Despite differences in the number of possible trajectories, there is consensus that some marriages start at high initial happiness trajectories and remain stable, whereas others begin with moderate or low happiness that declines over time. This suggests that trajectories of marital quality prior to divorce may show similar patterns. Indeed, for some women, marital quality may follow the path predicted by one theoretical perspective, whereas other women follow a different trajectory.

The first view, which may be called the *life course perspective* and draws on the disillusionment and emergent distress models (Huston & Houts, 1998), suggests that marital quality starts out high (the “honeymoon” years). Rising economic well-being, accumulating assets, community integration, and reduced childcare responsibilities may improve marital functioning (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007), but research shows a clear downward trend in the marital quality of maturing marriages (Glenn, 1998). Following initial optimism about the relationship (the “honeymoon” period), couples discover problematic aspects of their partner’s personalities and behavior as developmental changes, drug/alcohol use, employment, health, and financial issues strain the relationship. Stressors of married life accumulate, leading to declining happiness. Eventually one partner seeks an end to the relationship.

This life course view can be contrasted with an *enduring dynamics* model that suggests that divorced couples may have continuously low marital quality from the outset because couples establish the quality of the relationship early on, perhaps even prior to marriage (Holman, 2001; Huston, Niehuis, & Smith, 2001). This may be particularly true for marital conflict (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012). From this perspective, enduring vulnerabilities, present from the outset because personality traits, attitudes and values, social skills, and attachment styles endure from dating to marriage, cause problems, as Karney and Bradbury (1995) have suggested in their vulnerability–stress–adaptation model. Many relationships headed for divorce are distressed from the beginning of the marriage—perhaps even prior to it. Premarital factors such as dating/engaged interactional patterns, communication styles, cohabitation, education level, and parental divorce set the couple on a

course for distressed marriages, leading many to relationship dissolution.

These two views suggest at least two patterns of marital quality prior to divorce, with some people showing declines in marital quality throughout their marriages. In other cases, people may have low marital quality from the beginning. Such a possibility suggests at least two trajectories of marital quality, a declining group and a low stable group. In addition, the enduring dynamics and emergent distress perspectives suggest other possibilities: Some couples may begin with troubled marriages and remain consistently troubled until divorce, whereas other couples might start off troubled but decline even further as divorce approaches.

Marital Quality Prior to Divorce

Despite marital quality’s key role in the well-being of adults and children, marital quality dynamics in the years prior to divorce are not well understood. Some work has indicated, compared with intact couples, individuals whose marriages result in divorce often have lower initial marital happiness, satisfaction, and social support, and have greater psychological distress (Gottman, 1994; Kurdek, 2005). Divorced couples, compared with stably married couples, also exhibit more harmful communication and negative emotion as newlyweds (Lavner, Bradbury, & Karney, 2012), and marital communication patterns have been shown as predictors of divorce in many studies (Amato & James, 2010), although there is some contrary evidence (Kayser & Rao, 2006). Divorced couples may also experience more rapid declines in marital quality, likely due to at least three factors: declines in overt displays of affection (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001), dramatic fluctuations in affect (Lavner & Bradbury, 2010), and increases in relational ambivalence (Huston, Caughlin, et al., 2001). By the time the divorce is final, negative affect dominates the relationship, in part due to unresolved conflict (Emery, 2012).

Prior research provides some reason to expect variation in trajectories of marital quality prior to divorce. Huston, Niehuis, et al. (2001), using a sample of rural Pennsylvanians, produced a typology of divorce and found that not all divorced individuals experienced similar marital changes prior to dissolution. “Early exiters,” who divorced after 2–6 years of marriage, reported ambiguity about the relationship and their partner soon after marriage. This increase in ambiguity was accompanied by more negativity, resulting in quick divorces. In contrast, “delayed-action” divorces were characterized by the highest levels of initial affection, love, and happiness (even higher than couples who were happily married more than a decade later). Such individuals experienced declines in marital quality but remained in the relationship longer than the early exiters despite the absence of romance, perhaps in hopes of regaining previous marital success.

But comparing divorced couples with married ones tells us little about varying experiences of marital quality prior to divorce. Importantly, comparisons between divorced versus married couples inherently assume that the pattern of marital deterioration is similar for all divorced couples given that the models provide a single coefficient for each group. In this study, I looked for variation in trajectories of marital quality prior to divorce instead of comparing divorced and nondivorced couples. The reason for this is simple: It is possible, even likely, that not everyone experiences similar changes in marital quality prior to divorce, and

these differences may explain why not everyone experiences the same outcomes after divorce.

Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) used a cluster analysis of divorced couples and found two groups. Couples in the first group reported frequent arguments, physical aggression, and thoughts of divorce with little marital happiness and minimal interaction, whereas couples in the second cluster reported fewer arguments, little physical aggression, fewer thoughts of divorce, and moderate levels of marital happiness and interaction. However, both groups shared many characteristics, such as parental divorce. The study concluded that the accumulation of risk factors shared by both groups may lead to divorce via high levels of conflict and unhappiness or low levels of commitment, giving further evidence for heterogeneity in marital pathways of individuals heading toward divorce.

Research has not yet fully examined differences in longitudinal trajectories of marital quality among the divorced. Instead, research has often examined how a given variable may influence the probability of divorce or how levels of psychological distress or social support differ for divorced and nondivorced couples (Kurdek, 2005; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010). Thus, this study furthers our understanding of theoretical perspectives about marital quality prior to divorce by using latent class growth analyses in a novel way that enables us to “look backward” in time from divorce.

Furthermore, few studies have employed methods that examine heterogeneity in longitudinal trajectories of marital quality among divorced individuals. Although Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) used cluster analysis, both they and Huston, Niehuis, & Smith (2001) produced a typology of marriages. In other words, Amato and Hohmann-Marriott placed five marital quality variables from a single wave of data in a cluster analysis. Together, these variables placed marriages into either a high- or low-distress cluster. The clusters did not provide information on how these marriages changed through time, whereas longitudinal change is the focus here. I used measures of marital happiness, communication, and conflict from nine waves of data to construct separate trajectories for each of these three dimensions of marital quality to look for variation in trajectories of marital change in the years prior to divorce. My focus was on the differential experiences of marital change among the divorced rather than in comparing how certain factors may differ between couples. This placed the emphasis on *trajectories* of marital quality, whereas previous research has often been better equipped to examine *levels*. Commonly studied correlates of marital quality, such as socioeconomic status, past relationship history, family background, and demographic characteristics, were then used to predict trajectory membership. These were included because prior research has identified that these are primary predictors of marital quality (Amato et al., 2007).

Contributions of the Current Study

This study's goal was to use data from a national sample of divorced women to examine variation in trajectories of marital quality prior to divorce. In doing so, it advances previous research in several ways. Perhaps the most novel innovation of this study is found in its unique conceptual and analytical framework. Most studies begin at marriage and look forward in time. In contrast, this study examined marital quality from the opposite perspective by examining marital quality prior to divorce. Rather than “looking

forward,” this study begins at the time of divorce and “looks backward” in time. This unique perspective provides another theoretically rich angle from which to examine marital quality. It places the emphasis squarely on divorce, not marriage, as the key transition in the analysis. This focuses attention on how marital quality changes as divorce occurs, similar to the way that marital quality has been studied around other major transitions, such as the transition to parenthood (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003).

Second, I focused on divorced women and their predivorce patterns of marital quality, providing a more nuanced and complex look at marital quality in this important demographic. A handful of studies have examined variation in trajectories of marital quality (Anderson et al., 2010; Birditt et al., 2012; Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012; Kamp Dush et al., 2008; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010), but the focus has been on the married population. Some work has examined whether different patterns of marital quality lead to divorce (Birditt et al., 2012), and others have controlled for it in their models (Kamp Dush et al., 2008). Third, the majority of prior studies have often found different results depending on whether a cross-sectional or longitudinal sample was used (Birditt et al., 2012). The advantage of using National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—1979 data is the ability to assess change over a long period of time in a national, longitudinal sample.

Fourth, our knowledge of marital change past the initial 4 years of marriage is incomplete (Birditt et al., 2012). Several studies found that couples showed a linear decline from Year 1 through Year 4 (Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Kurdek, 1998); this decline tends to be sustained (VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001), although there is evidence of stability in marital quality over time (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012; Kamp Dush et al., 2008; Lavner & Bradbury, 2012). Thus, the advantage of this study is that it extends the frame well beyond 4 years to include people who have been married up to 15 years prior to divorce. Finally, many studies on trajectories of marital quality have examined a single dimension of marital quality, usually marital happiness or satisfaction (see Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012, for an exception).

Method

Sample

I used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—1979 cohort (NLSY79). Interviews spanned 1979–2008, with 12,685 people (aged 14–22 years at Wave 1) born between 1957 and 1964. Interviews were conducted annually between 1979 and 1994, and biennially thereafter. The NLSY79 focuses on labor market behavior, education, family background, government program participation, union formation history, and financial well-being.

Data assessing women's marital quality (men were not asked marital quality questions) were first collected in 1992 and biennially through 2008. Due to their potentially confounding role, higher order (i.e., not first) marriages were excluded. Women who married and divorced prior to 1992 were excluded because of a lack of information on marital quality, meaning the results are unable to speak to short-term marriages that began relatively early in the life course. To be eligible, women had to report that their first marriage ended in divorce and they had to have valid marital quality data for at least half the time their marriage lasted. Sensi-

tivity analyses (available on request) suggest that the results were robust to alternative specifications on the percentage of missing data.

Variables

Marital quality. Following prior research (Amato et al., 2007; James & Beattie, 2012), I conceptualized marital quality as a multidimensional construct with behavioral and attitudinal elements. For reasons described by Johnson, White, Edwards, and Booth (1986), I analyzed each dimension separately. The NLSY79 contains three marital quality measures: happiness, communication, and conflict. 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 ($\alpha = .79$; averaged across all waves) of how often (1 = *less than once a month* to 4 = *almost every day*) respondents laughed together, calmly discussed something with their spouse, or talked about their day. Marital conflict was a summative index ($\alpha = .78$; averaged across all waves) assessing how often (1 = *often* to 4 = *never*) respondents argued with their spouse over chores and responsibilities, children, money, showing affection, religion, leisure, drinking, other women, his relatives, and her relatives. Responses to questions were coded in the direction of higher levels of happiness, communication, and conflict.

Independent variables. These variables, used to predict trajectory membership, were grouped into three categories: socioeconomic status, family background and relationship features, and demographic characteristics. A large body of literature has suggested that socioeconomic status (Amato et al., 2007; Clark-Nicolas & Gray-Little, 1991), family background (Busby, Gardner, & Taniguchi, 2005), and demographic characteristics (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Bulanda & Brown, 2007; James & Beattie, 2012; Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2012) greatly influence marital dynamics. Because the outcome (trajectory membership) was time-invariant, all covariates predicting trajectory membership were time-invariant as well. The small sample size in some subgroups is another reason for excluding time-varying covariates in the analysis.

Socioeconomic status variables included logged respondent's income (average 1979–2008 income capture life course changes), education level (highest grade completed; 1 = *1 year* to 20 = *doctorate/professional degree*), if the respondent fell below the federal poverty line (1 = *yes*), and average number of hours worked between 1979 and 2008 (in 100-hr increments).

Four variables assessed family background and relationship features. Dummy variables included whether the respondent lived with both biological parents at age 14 years (1 = *yes*), cohabited prior to marriage (1 = *yes*), and whether the respondent had experienced the death of a child (1 = *yes*). I also included a continuous variable for the number of children, top coded at 4.

Finally, respondents' demographic characteristics included race/ethnicity (dummies for African American and Hispanic; reference was non-African American, non-Hispanic), the age at which the respondent's first marriage took place and age at first interview in 1979, and a control variable for marital duration prior to 1992, when marital quality was first collected.

Time Metric

The time metric, crucial to the model's substantive interpretability (Nagin, 2005), was reconstructed from survey year to marital duration prior to divorce so that each respondent's reports of marital happiness, communication, and conflict aligned with the number of years prior to marital dissolution. This was done by subtracting the survey year from the divorce year, and then aligning the marital quality measures accordingly.

Thus, if a woman divorced in 1993, marital quality measures from 1992 would be placed in the first year prior to divorce. Following prior research (Anderson et al., 2010), I combined observations into 2-year "buckets," meaning observations for Years 0 and 1 prior to divorce were placed into the same time period bucket in the analysis, Years 2 and 3 were in the same bucket, and so forth, which ensured that no respondent had multiple marital quality observations in the same time period and maximized the number of observations in each bucket.

Missing Data

Although missing data never exceeded 10% for any variable, full-information maximum likelihood techniques, under the missing-at-random assumption, were used to account for missing data. These procedures use all available observations to estimate the model and allow individuals to contribute unequal assessments. I used all valid cases on a given variable to estimate the coefficients and standard errors for the coefficients. However, this implies that each coefficient in the model could be based on a different sample size, giving each coefficient a different reliability estimate. To account for this, I adjusted the standard errors by the different reliabilities, correcting for potential bias introduced by full-information maximum likelihood. See Jung and Wickrama (2008) for more information.

Heckman's two-step method assessed attrition bias. I first estimated a probit regression to model respondent attrition, then calculated lambda—the probability of dropping out of the panel. 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.

Analytic Strategy

I employed latent class growth analysis, a type of semiparametric group-based mixture modeling (Nagin, 2005), to look for variation in trajectories of marital quality prior to divorce. In contrast to hierarchical and growth-curve modeling, however, this approach does not summarize the patterns using a single coefficient for the intercept and slope. Instead, these group-based methods assume that the population consists of an unknown number of groups with distinct trajectories of marital quality and corresponding intercepts and linear/quadratic slopes. Thus, the analytic strategy involved the identification of the optimal number of trajectories (group), the shape of each trajectory, and the proportion of the sample belonging to each group (weighted for generalizability).

Decisions about the number of groups were informed by several factors, particularly the substantive interpretability of the model, in light of prior theory and research. Additional factors included entropy (the extent to which cases can be unambiguously separated

into a given number of groups), ranging from 0 to 1, with higher numbers indicating less ambiguity; the Bayesian information criterion (BIC), where smaller numbers indicate better fit; and two likelihood ratio tests (LRTs), the Vuong–Lo–Mendell–Rubin (VLMR) LRT and the Lo–Mendell–Rubin (LMR) adjusted LRT, both of which compare a model with k classes (e.g., three classes) with $k - 1$ classes (e.g., two classes). Although the BIC often occupies a privileged place during the model selection process, I used all available selection criteria to ensure that the best model was selected, as BIC does not always select the correct number of groups (Nylund, Asparouhov, & Muthén, 2007).

Because I examined marital quality prior to divorce, I set the initial time score at 0 and subsequent waves' time scores at negative values, indicating the number of years (in 2-year buckets) prior to divorce, enabling me to begin at divorce and look backward in time to examine variation in the trajectories of marital quality prior to divorce, placing the intercept at the end of the trajectory instead of the beginning. Note that this approach is similar conceptually to demographic mortality studies that begin with the time of death and look back in time at factors that precede it. This approach has also been used to examine declines in cognitive aging (Hofer & Alwin, 2008).

Trajectories of marital quality up to 15 years prior to marital dissolution were then estimated. Originally, I assigned time scores as the years prior to divorce. These models failed to converge adequately. To achieve convergence, I divided the time periods by 10. Binary (happiness and communication) and multinomial (conflict) logistic regression equations were then specified to predict class membership (i.e., the class with the highest posterior probability). To incorporate uncertainty about class assignment (e.g., probability of class membership often ranged from 0.6 to 1.0), I weighted the estimates by the probability of class membership.

Results

Table 1 presents sample statistics for the data used in this study,

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges for All Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Range
Marital happiness	2.42	0.66	1–3
Marital communication	10.68	2.05	3–12
Marital conflict	20.37	5.24	10–36
Income (\$)	40,502.38	41,401.41	3,108–245,343
Education (years)	13.75	2.97	6–20
Poverty	0.66	0.59	0–1
Hours worked	13.32	6.06	0–28
Lived with biological parent at age 14 years	0.72	0.52	0–1
Premarital cohabitation	0.44	0.60	0–1
Number of children	1.88	1.45	0–4
Experienced child death	0.02	0.15	0–1
Black	0.12	0.26	0–1
Hispanic	0.07	0.17	0–1
Age at marriage (years)	23.64	6.18	14–43
Age (years)	17.15	2.83	14–22
Prior marital duration (years)	7.74	5.54	0–19

Note. Estimates are weighted and based on 594 married women from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—1979 cohort.

which focused exclusively on divorced individuals. The descriptive statistics suggest that the modal individual in the sample had a household income of approximately \$40,000 and some college education, and most had lived below the federal poverty line at least once in their lives. Nineteen percent of the sample was Black or Hispanic and 44% lived with their spouse prior to marriage. The average respondent in this study worked about 1,300 hr in a given year and married in their mid-20s. On average, these women had been married almost 8 years in 1992.

Marital Happiness

The top panels of Table 2 and Figure 1 depict the trajectories for all divorces and the subgroups of marital happiness prior to divorce. The table presents the intercept, linear slope, and quadratic slope terms. Note the “All Divorces” (representing the average) trajectory was estimated using latent growth curve analysis; the subgroup categories come from latent class growth analysis. Results suggest, on average (see the “All Divorces” column in Table 2), that marital happiness was low at the time of divorce (intercept = 2.13, $p < .001$), whereas 10 years prior women reported relatively high happiness. However, these relatively high levels of marital happiness declined over the ensuing years (slope = -0.87 , $p < .001$), with an accelerated decline as divorce became imminent (quadratic = -0.36 , $p < .001$).

Trajectories of marital happiness. The next question asked whether all women experienced a similar trajectory of marital happiness prior to divorce or whether distinct subgroup trajectories could be discerned from the data. The latent class growth analyses are found in the top panel of Table 2, columns “Class 1” and “Class 2.” The top panel of Figure 1 illustrates the predicted trajectory of marital happiness from the top panel of Table 2. Model fit measures (see Table 3) suggest that a two-class model best fit the data based on the BIC and the VLMR and LMR p values.

Class 1, 24% of the sample, reported much lower marital happiness prior to divorce than the average represented by the growth curve. This relatively low start/steep decline group reported poor marital quality before divorce (intercept = 1.43, $p < .001$), with a significantly steeper decline (slope = -1.21 , $p < .001$) and quadratic decrease (quadratic = -0.46 , $p < .05$) than the overall trend for all divorces. Thus, beyond having lower overall levels of marital happiness prior to divorce, the relatively low start/steep decline group also experienced sharper declines, particularly in the years immediately before the divorce, than the average trend.

The majority of divorced respondents reported a different trajectory, closer to that observed for the average. These individuals, about three quarters of the sample, reported relatively high marital happiness until the final years of the relationship. Like the relatively low start/steep decline group, the relatively high start/modest decline group experienced declines in marital happiness throughout the observation period (slope = -0.75 , $p < .001$), with an accelerated decline as the divorce grew near (quadratic = -0.30 , $p < .05$). However, Wald tests revealed that the slope was not as steep and the accelerated decline was less sharp than the trend for all divorces.

Comparisons can be drawn between the intercepts and slopes. Although the linear slopes were similar, Class 1’s intercept was lower, indicating more unhappiness in the marriage at the time of

Table 2
Variation in Trajectories of Marital Quality Prior to Divorce

Variable	All divorced (average)	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3
Happiness				
Intercept	2.13***	1.43***	2.41***	
Slope	-0.87***	-1.21***	-0.75***	
Quadratic	-0.36***	-0.46*	-0.30*	
Communication				
Intercept	9.88***	4.91***	10.64*	
Slope	-2.08***	-6.84**	-1.62***	
Quadratic	-0.82**	-2.97	-0.66*	
Conflict				
Intercept	20.47***	21.25***	15.48***	27.66***
Slope	1.33	1.04	1.01	2.67
Quadratic	1.51	0.98	1.74	2.74

Note. Results come from three separate analyses using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—1979 ($N = 594$).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

divorce, whereas Class 2 experienced a slower acceleration in the decreasing happiness prior to divorce. Thus, women in Class 1 reported lower overall levels of marital happiness and a more accelerated decline as divorce approached than women in Class 2.

Predicting trajectories of marital happiness. Given these two qualitatively distinct trajectories of marital happiness prior to divorce, the next question was whether one could distinguish membership trajectory. Drawing from the two theoretical perspectives described above, I examined whether socioeconomic status, family background and relationship features, and demographic characteristics could distinguish between trajectories. The first column of Table 4 shows the results of the binary logistic regression predicting membership in the relatively high start/modest decline (vs. relatively low start/steep decline) group.

Of the 12 variables in the model, only two significantly differentiated between the relatively high start/modest decline group and the relatively low start/steep decline group, with one third trending (the model itself was statistically significant; $p < .05$). On average, each additional child in the family was associated with a reduction of about 22% ($e^{-.25} = 0.78$) in the log-odds of membership in the relatively high start/modest decline group. Holding all other variables at their respective means, the predicted probability for the relatively high start/modest decline group was .86 for those with no children and .75 for those with three children. Income fell just beyond significance ($p = .06$). Individuals with incomes of \$20,000 annually had a lower probability for the relatively high start/modest decline trajectory (.74) compared with their wealthier counterparts (\$80,000 annually, probability = .84). Individuals who were younger in 1979 were more likely to report membership in the relatively high start/modest decline group than older respondents, suggesting possible age effects in marital quality, a topic beyond the scope of this study. Factors often associated with marital happiness, such as race, education, poverty, and premarital cohabitation, did not differentiate between trajectory memberships.

Marital Communication

The middle panels of Table 2 and Figure 1 present the results of the latent growth curve for marital communication; the middle

panel of Figure 1 (solid black line) depicts the predicted patterns of change in marital communication prior to divorce. Similar to marital happiness, women's marital communication levels 10 years before the divorce were high. These levels, however, declined in ensuing years (slope = -2.08 , $p < .001$), and the decline accelerated in the years immediately preceding divorce (quadratic = -0.82 , $p < .001$). At the time of divorce, marital communication was estimated to be 9.88 ($p < .001$) on a scale ranging from 3 to 12, indicating moderately high levels of communication.

Trajectories of marital communication. Measures of model fit (see Table 2), including the entropy, BIC, and VLMR and LMR p values, again suggest that a two-class model best fit the data. The second and third columns in the middle panel of Table 2 and the top and bottom lines in the middle panel of Figure 1 demonstrate that a large majority of women in the NLSY79 (87%) followed a pattern of generally high levels of marital communication that declined as divorce approached. This pattern closely mirrored the one observed for the average trajectory. However, latent class growth analysis results show an important subgroup (13%) that displayed a markedly different pattern from the relatively high start/modest decline group. Fourteen years prior to divorce, individuals in this group reported low marital communication levels and this level declined sharply (slope = -6.84 , $p < .01$) in the years before divorce (the quadratic slope was not significant). At the time of divorce, the relatively low start/steep decline group reported remarkably low marital communication. This group differed significantly from the relatively high start/modest decline group in its intercept, slope, and quadratic terms, suggesting that this group is distinct. Thus, the relatively low start/steep decline group showed a small but theoretically interesting group whose experiences of change in marital communication prior to divorce differed dramatically from the general population.

Predicting trajectories of marital communication. The second column of Table 4 provides some indication of factors that differentiate individuals whose marriages follow a relatively high start/modest decline versus relatively low start/steep decline trajectory. As with marital happiness, only a few variables distinguished individuals on the high versus low trajectory (the model itself was statistically significant; $p < .001$). African Americans had a lower probability (.85) in the relatively high start/modest decline group than Whites (.93), and women with no children had a higher probability (.96) than women with four children (.84). Older ages were again found to be predictive of membership on the relatively low start/steep decline trajectory, and not living with one's biological parents at age 14 was trending toward significance. Thus, for marital communication, traditional demographic predictors such as parity and race appear to be the best predictors of variation in trajectories of marital communication, with African American women and women with multiple children reporting membership on a trajectory characterized by poor marital communication.

Marital Conflict

The results for marital conflict, the third and final dimension of marital quality studied here, can be found in the bottom panel of Table 2 and the bottom panel of Figure 1. The latent growth curve

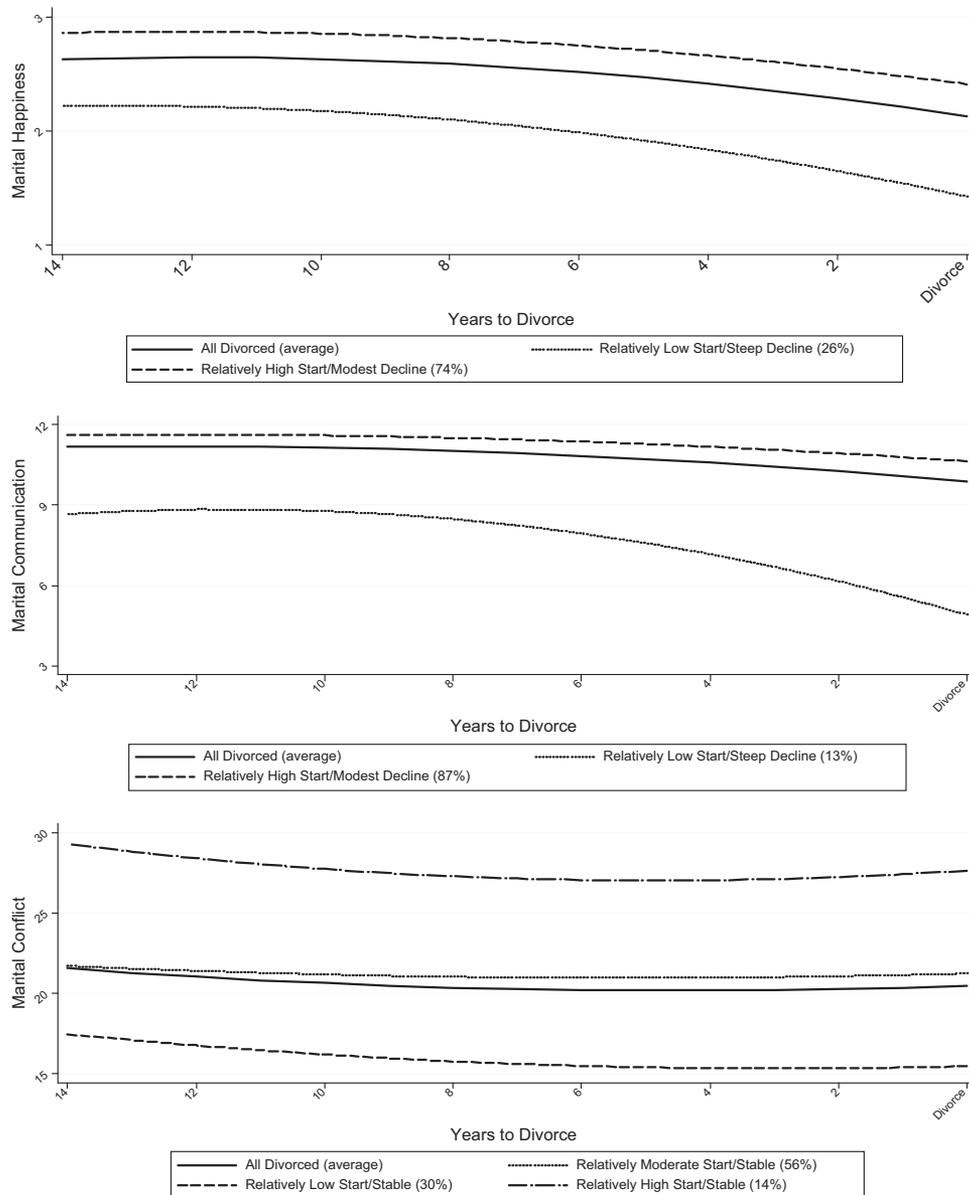


Figure 1. Overall and subgroup trajectories of marital happiness (top panel), communication (middle panel), and conflict (bottom panel) prior to divorce, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—1979 ($N = 594$).

revealed, on average, that women reported conflict levels of 20.47 (out of 36) at the time of divorce. In contrast to happiness and communication, however, there was no evidence that conflict changed over time prior to divorce. In fact, conflict appears to be remarkably stable, as neither the slope nor the quadratic term showed significant change.

Trajectories of marital conflict. This stability is also found in the results from the latent class growth analysis presented in the final three columns of the bottom panel of Table 2 and the bottom panel of Figure 1. Measures of model fit (see Table 3) suggest a three-class model for conflict, based on the BIC and the VLMR and LMR p values. The three classes were characterized by wide variability in overall levels of conflict prior to

divorce but similar stability over time, suggesting that conflict may be established early on and persist over time.

Individuals in the relatively high start/stable group (14%) reported higher levels of conflict throughout the marriage (intercept = 27.66, $p < .001$) than women in either the relatively moderate start/stable or relatively low start/stable groups. Wald tests for intergroup differences suggest that the intercepts in the three groups differed significantly from each other but not the linear or quadratic slopes, suggesting that, once established, these differences remained stable as divorce approached.

Predicting trajectories of marital conflict. The final three columns of Table 4 display the contrasting results of the multinomial logistic regression. Women's income and number of

Table 3
Measures of Model Fit for Latent Class Growth Analyses

Variable	Classes (n)	BIC	Free parameters (n)	VLMR <i>p</i>	LMR <i>p</i>	Entropy
Happiness	1 (LGC)	5862.69				1.00
	2	5876.10	15	.03	.032	0.68
	3	5820.34	19	.52	.53	0.59
	4	5803.62	23	.37	.37	0.62
	5	5057.93	27	.97	.97	0.66
Communication	1 (LGC)	6116.67	13			1.00
	2	6029.26	15	.010	.010	0.93
	3	5843.55	19	.36	.37	0.89
	4	5744.34	23	.73	.73	0.82
	5	5708.65	27	.77	.77	0.83
Conflict	1 (LGC)	4990.311				1.00
	2	5205.73	15	.00	.00	0.60
	3	5051.76	19	.06	.07	0.69
	4	5029.55	23	1.00	1.00	0.61
	5	5025.98	27	.00	.00	0.57

Note. Bold type indicates selected model. BIC = Bayesian information criterion; VLMR = Vuong–Lo–Mendell–Rubin likelihood ratio test for $k - 1$ (Ho) versus k classes; LMR = Lo–Mendell–Rubin adjusted likelihood ratio test; LGC = latent growth curve. Entropy assesses extent to which cases can be unambiguously separated into a given number of groups.

children distinguished group membership (the model itself was statistically significant; $p < .001$). The probability of membership in the relatively high start/stable trajectory was .73 for an individual making \$20,000, compared with .35 for someone making \$80,000 (the comparable numbers for the moderate category were .16 and .73, respectively). Similarly, people with three or more children had a probability of .37 for the relatively high start/stable trajectory compared with .10 for those without children. The number of children also distinguished between the relatively high start/stable and relatively moderate start/stable groups. Individuals who cohabited prior to marriage had 67% ($e^{.51} = 1.67$) higher odds of membership in the moderate versus low trajectory. Finally, African Americans had a higher probability (.66) than non-Blacks (.55) of membership in the

relatively moderate start/stable trajectory than the relatively low start/stable one.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to empirically examine the varying pathways of marital change before divorce. Prior research has found that there are multiple trajectories of marital quality, with some marriages being stably high and others following a pattern of decline, among other patterns (Anderson et al., 2010; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010). One gap in this literature is that comparisons have usually been drawn between married versus divorced couples. This approach assumes that all divorced couples experience similar trajectories of marital quality because all divorced couples

Table 4
Predictors of Class Membership in Trajectories of Marital Happiness, Communication, and Conflict

Variable	Happiness	Communication	Conflict		
	High vs. low	High vs. low	Moderate vs. low	High vs. low	High vs. moderate
Income (log)	0.44 (0.23) ⁺	0.42 (0.33)	0.50 (0.21)*	-0.23 (0.31)	-0.73 (0.34)*
Education	-0.02 (0.05)	0.10 (0.08)	0.03 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.07 (0.07)
Poverty	0.27 (0.26)	0.37 (0.36)	0.20 (0.25)	-0.08 (0.36)	-0.29 (0.39)
Hours worked	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.05 (0.03)	0.00 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.04)
Lived with biological parent at age 14 years	0.04 (0.23)	-0.57 (0.33) ⁺	-0.04 (0.22)	0.69 (0.33)*	0.73 (0.35)*
Premarital cohabitation	0.12 (0.21)	0.02 (0.27)	-0.51 (0.21)*	-0.23 (0.27)	0.28 (0.30)
Number of children	-0.25 (0.09)**	-0.40 (0.12)***	-0.15 (0.10)	0.40 (0.13)**	0.55 (0.14)***
Experienced child death	-0.23 (0.57)	0.50 (0.70)	-0.46 (0.69)	-0.90 (0.89)	-0.44 (1.00)
Black	-0.17 (0.26)	-0.92 (0.35)***	0.48 (0.27) ⁺	0.81 (0.33)*	0.32 (0.37)
Hispanic	0.21 (0.27)	0.15 (0.39)	0.17 (0.26)	0.04 (0.35)	-0.14 (0.39)
Age at marriage (years)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.04)	0.07 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.08 (0.05)
Age (years)	-0.13 (0.06)*	-0.14 (0.07)*	-0.14 (0.06)*	-0.05 (0.07)	0.09 (0.08)
Intercept	0.73 (2.31)	2.05 (3.17)	5.76 (2.37)*	6.68 (3.56)	0.92 (3.21) ⁺

Note. Results from three separate analyses using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—1979 ($N = 594$). All models control for marital duration before marital quality data were first collected (1992). Statistics are log-odds from binary logistic (happiness and communication) and multinomial logistic (conflict) regressions. Numbers in parentheses refer to standard errors.

⁺ $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

are lumped into a single “divorced” group. This study recognized and demonstrated the variation in patterns of women’s marital quality prior.

Varying Experiences of Marital Quality Prior to Divorce

Although nearly all distressed marriages exhibited declining happiness and communication and stable conflict, the severity of the decline in the years preceding divorce varied by subgroup: Some divorced women reported consistently lower levels of happiness and steeper declines prior to divorce. Similar patterns were observed for communication. These findings are in line with those of *Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007)*, who found that many dissolved marriages reported moderate positive marital quality and low negative marital quality. In many instances, reasonably happy couples divorced, whereas in other instances the divorce ended a prolonged period of marital dissatisfaction. These findings are also in line with previous work on marital quality trajectories that found two trajectories of marital happiness (*Birditt et al., 2012*).

For conflict, three classes emerged. Despite some evidence that conflict increases dramatically just before divorce (*Emery, 2012*), I found little evidence of this, although this was likely influenced by the large time intervals observed here. The greatest source of variation was not in how conflict changes over time but rather in the overall level of conflict throughout the marriage, in support of prior research examining how marital conflict changes in marriages (not limited to those ending in divorce; *Huston, Caughlin, et al., 2001*; *Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012*). The three conflict trajectories demonstrated remarkable stability. Differences that emerged years, sometimes decades, before the divorce and often very early in the marriage remained stable throughout the marriage, even up to divorce. The results for conflict also provide support for *Hetherington’s (2003)* contention that conflictual marriages include about 15–20% of all divorces.

The multiple trajectories of marital happiness, communication, and conflict prior to divorce also have implications for statistical modeling. Traditional methods such as random/fixed effects models and latent growth curves may obscure information that facilitates understanding of the complex patterns of marital change in the years prior to divorce. Because traditional methods assume that a single trajectory of marital change represents marital experiences, such methods may obscure significant variation in patterns of marital change.

Predictors of Trajectory Membership

This study also used commonly studied correlates of marital happiness, communication, and conflict to differentiate membership in the trajectories. Socioeconomic status, past relationship history, family background, and demographic characteristics were used to predict membership in the trajectories observed for each dimension of marital quality because these variables are consistent correlates of marital quality when studied cross-sectionally. Interestingly, these demographic variables, consistent correlates of marital quality when studied cross-sectionally, did not do a good job of predicting marital quality longitudinally. Despite well-documented racial and socioeconomic differences in divorce (*Amato, 2010*), the results here found only modest evidence that

such processes were at play when distinguishing between trajectory memberships. Income and race/ethnicity predicted trajectory membership in some instances, but this relationship was not consistent. The same was true for cohabitation and family structure. However, in line with prior research (*Twenge et al., 2003*), a greater number of children was consistently associated with membership in trajectories of lower marital quality prior to divorce. The inability of frequently studied correlates of marital quality to predict membership in these trajectories may suggest the need to examine a broader range of individual and relationships characteristics.

Theories of Marital Change

The findings of this study also inform our understanding of prominent theories of marital change. One view, which draws on the disillusionment and emergent distress model (*Huston & Houts, 1998*), sees marital quality as dynamic in nature and proposes that a major life transition such as divorce is often preceded by declines in the quality of a marriage. The dynamism of marital quality was apparent in the significant decline and accelerating drop in marital happiness and communication prior to divorce, and these shifts were more pronounced for groups usually characterized by lower overall levels of happiness and communication. This may also suggest the presence of developmental change over time for these outcomes.

The current study also informs our knowledge of the enduring dynamics perspective, which holds that marital quality is a relatively stable phenomenon over time because of early relationship, even premarital, characteristics. The results showed a consistent difference in intercepts: In no case did the trajectories cross, suggesting that early relationship characteristics shaped the marital quality trajectory. The results for conflict further underscore this point, where observed differences in conflict remained stable throughout the observation period, in some cases up to 15 years prior to divorce. Thus, the combination of relative intergroup stability suggests the importance of dynamics that establish the quality of the relationship early on.

These results provide support for both perspectives and suggest that insights from each can be fused into a more general model, one that accommodates and incorporates multiple theoretical perspectives. This general model acknowledges that relationship problems often emerge early in marriage, perhaps even from the very beginning of the relationship. These initial differences likely have a durable influence that can be felt for long periods of time, perhaps as far out as 15 years prior to the divorce. The general, emergent model would also recognize that marriages undergo sequences of change prior to divorce, most likely due to the influence of changing life circumstances such as children’s entrance, development, and exit from the family home, changes in economic well-being, the accumulation of assets, and shifting friendship networks and community integration. As such, if arguments develop over any of these or many other issues, the influence of a stressor could augment earlier problems in the marriage, thereby accelerating the decline in marital quality and perhaps ultimately leading to divorce. These changes could become accelerated as divorce becomes imminent, taking the marriage from bad to worse.

This study also demonstrates the utility of examining multiple dimensions of marital quality. Many previous studies, perhaps because of the importance placed on self-fulfillment and personal expression, have examined a single dimension of marital quality, often happiness or satisfaction. This leaves an incomplete picture about how other relationship dimensions change over time in longitudinal, nationally representative samples. This study examined happiness, communication, and conflict, and found multiple trajectories of each. Although the results suggest that patterns of change in communication and happiness may be similar, the groups only partially overlapped. Furthermore, patterns of marital conflict were quite different from those observed for happiness and communication, suggesting the need to examine multiple dimensions separately. Thus, one way to advance research would be to examine the implications of similarities and differences in group membership for various measures of relationship quality.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the study was not able to account well for why people fall into the various trajectory groups, beyond respondents' age and number of children. This inability to differentiate between groups may serve as a useful guide for future researchers to incorporate measures of personality and interactional patterns. For example, demographic characteristics may better predict marital quality trajectories of short-lived marriages.² Second, the extent to which the findings are generalizable to men is unknown. Although research has found gender differences in overall marital quality (Skinner, Bahr, Crane, & Call, 2002), evidence for gender differences in changes in marital quality is less pronounced (Amato et al., 2007). Nonetheless, results for men may be quite different. Third, the 2 years between measurements means that I was unable to assess the final months of marriage, which are often the most turbulent, sometimes characterized by a separation period followed by reunification. Also, couples who divorced less than 2 years into marriage were not represented here and may look different from what we see here. Finally, the study was unable to incorporate time-varying covariates. Despite repeated attempts, models with time-varying covariates proved inestimable.

Despite these limitations, the current study furthers knowledge of both marital quality and divorce in several ways. First, this study demonstrates variation in marital quality prior to divorce, a topic research has yet to explore fully. Instead, prior literature has often lumped divorcés together. The results here suggest that there is variability in divorced women's reported marital quality prior to divorce. Second, this study employed a novel analytical and conceptual technique to "look backward" from the time of divorce. This viewpoint provides insight into theoretical processes thought to underpin divorce and suggests that several perspectives can be combined into an emergent model of marital change prior to divorce. Third, this study drew on a national sample of married women collected over 16 years, providing a longitudinal and relatively recent view of marriage in the years leading to divorce.

Conclusion

The results provided empirical evidence of women's markedly different experiences in terms of marital happiness, communication, and conflict prior to divorce; these trajectories support pre-

vious theoretical work but also extend it. Membership in these trajectories was not predicted well by the demographic variables available, suggesting the need to employ personality and interactional measures in future research. With increasing family diversity, understanding the heterogeneous pathways that individuals travel toward relationship dissolution may become increasingly important.

² My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

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