

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

Societal shifts in nonmarital childbearing, divorce, and cohabitation over the last half of the 20th century coupled with dramatic increases in single motherhood and women's labor force participation have reshaped the face of the American family and the place of marriage within it (Casper & Bianchi, 2000; Coontz, 2005). In particular, these changes have highlighted the increasing family diversity, leading many to question the previously favored role of marriage in shaping American society (Cherlin, 2004). While scholars have explored family diversity in many settings, an often-unacknowledged assumption regarding family diversity is that marriage is a homogenous (and perhaps homogenizing) institution against which all other family forms can be meaningfully compared. However, it is possible that there is diversity *within* marriage itself, resulting in a wide range of marital experiences. In this paper, I focus on one understudied part of the diversity of family experiences—differing trajectories of marital change based on divorce status, premarital cohabitation experience, and race-ethnicity.

A significant amount of research to date has attempted to answer questions regarding how marital quality changes as a marriage matures. Indeed, the ebbs and flows of marital happiness, marital communication, and marital conflict have been the subject of much conversation in the scholarly literature, with marital happiness occupying a particularly prominent position. These research efforts have resulted in a vast literature examining marital change (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), and some of this research has attempted to elucidate differences in marital experiences depending on whether the couple cohabited prior to marriage (Brown, 2003; Brown & Booth, 1996), whether the

marriage ended in divorce (Caughlin & Huston, 2006; Gottman, 1994; Huston, Niehuis, & Smith, 2001), or by race-ethnicity (Bryant et al., 2010). In general, the literature has suggested that cohabitators, individuals headed for divorce, and racial minorities report lower marital quality than non-cohabitators, continuously married individuals, and Whites. Most of this research, has, however, examined the overall *level* of marital quality, rather than differences in the way marriages *change* over time for these groups. In this paper, I begin to fill this gap in the literature by using growth curve analysis to examine trajectories of marital happiness, communication, and conflict, respectively and compare these trajectories by divorce status, premarital cohabitation experience, and race-ethnicity using multigroup latent growth curve models. The analyses employ data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979 cohort.