

Marital Quality in Second Marriages across the Life Course

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Abstract

Although there is a plethora of research that examines marital quality across the life course (see VanLaningham, Johnson & Amato, 2001 for a review) many of these studies are limited in their abilities to examine how the broader context of marriage changes with age. Because first marriages tend to occur predominantly in the earlier stage of adult life it is difficult to distinguish sources of life course variability in marriage from marital duration or selective attrition from the population of married couples. Since remarriage occurs throughout adulthood, it has the potential to offer unique leverage on life course variation in marital quality. This study will utilize data from three waves of data of the NSFH to examine how perceived marital quality across a variety of domains differs for individuals in recently-formed second marriages formed in mid to later life (40+) versus earlier in life (<40). Potential variation in the quality of second marriages by gender, prior cohabitation experiences, the presence of children, and dissolution status of first marriage (divorce versus widowhood) will be examined.

Background

Remarriage is a generally neglected area of research and there are particularly few studies of remarriage in later life (Cooney & Dunne, 2004; Sweeney, 2010). This omission is surprising given that nearly half of recently formed marriages involve a remarriage for at least one spouse (Bumpass & Raley, 2007). The study of remarriage can also offer strategic opportunities to study key issues of concern to family scholars, such as marital quality. Early research on variation in marital quality across the life course generally identified a U-shaped curve, suggesting that marital quality declines in the early years to middle years of marriage (often during peak childrearing years) and rises again in the later years of marriage (see VanLaningham et al., 2001

for a review). Much of this work was limited by a focus on non-probability samples, cross-sectional designs, and duration bias issues. Individuals who are dissatisfied in their marriages are more likely to separate, thus leaving the sample of prevailing marriages in later life more representative of happier unions. More recent research examining life course variability in marital quality often uses longitudinal data and more carefully considers selection of unsatisfied couples out of the sample of prevailing marriages. These studies still tend to find declines in marital quality earlier in life, but marital quality in later years of marriage either declines consistently at a slower rate or flattens out somewhat over time rather than increasing (Glenn, 1998; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Umberson et al., 2005; VanLaningham et al., 2001; Vaillant & Vaillant, 1993).

Many of these studies examine marital quality for samples of all currently married individuals, which tend to be driven by the characteristics of first marriages, and sometimes studies exclude higher order marriage from the analysis. Thus, it is difficult to disentangle the effects of age from duration on marital quality, since first marriages tend to occur predominately in the early stage of the adult life course. However, remarriages tend to occur more broadly throughout the life course than first marriages (Kreider, 2005). An advantage of studying second marriages is that they offer a unique methodological insight into how the broader context of marriage may vary across the life course. One can limit the analysis to individuals who entered into remarriages relatively recently to assess how marital quality varies broadly across age, while adjusting for the effects of marital duration.

Prior research suggests that remarried couples are more likely to perceive instability in their relationship and remarriages are also more likely to end in dissolution than first marriages (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Martin & Bumpass, 1989; McCarthy,

1978). However, remarriages have similar levels of marital quality relative to first marriages (Amato, 2007; Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Skinner et al., 2002). Prior work also suggests that older age of second marriage is associated with lower rates of disruption (Teachman, 2008). Moreover, couples in which both the husband and wife are remarried report more intrinsic reasons for marriage (i.e. “We are close and intimate”) and fewer external reasons for marriage (i.e. “He/she knows what I want”) than do other married couples (Kurdex, 1989).

In addition to suggestive prior research, there are a number of important theoretical reasons to investigate life course variability in marital quality within remarried relationships. First and foremost, the broader context of marriage itself may tend to vary over the life course. Older remarried individuals may be at a point in their lives when they can focus more time on their relationship rather than other demands of family and work life. Adult children may have left home, individuals may be phasing into retirement and also may be more financially stable. Indeed, fewer role demands, for example retiring from a stressful job, are associated with increases in marital quality at least for men (Myers & Booth, 1996). Thus older couples may be at a point in their lives when they can focus more time and energy on each other and shared life experiences potentially aiding their marriage (Glenn, 1991; Kemp & Kemp, 2002).

Younger couples, on the other hand, may have to focus on the day-to-day demands of childrearing, perhaps balancing peak career demands as well (Kemp & Kemp, 2002; Twenge, et al., 2003). These demands may place stress on a remarriage and younger remarried couples may have to deal with the additional challenges that stepfamilies with children from prior relationships bring (see Sweeney, 2010 for a review). Sociologist Andrew Cherlin (1978) famously argued that remarriage is “incompletely institutionalized,” such that stepfamilies have fewer norms to guide raising stepchildren, which may increase conflict within the marital

relationship. Support for this idea is mixed, as some research finds that stepchildren are related to higher divorce rates, lower marital satisfaction and increased marital strain in remarriages (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Teachman, 2008; White & Booth, 1985), but other work indicates that stepchildren are not related to higher levels of marital conflict or divorce (MacDonald & DeMaris, 1995; Martin & Bumpass, 1989). Regardless of the mixed support for the idea of remarriage as an incomplete institution, however, it is likely that a lack of norms to guide stepparents may be less problematic for remarried individuals in later life. Although they may have prior children, the demands and lack of norms for blending a household and raising stepchildren may be less of a concern for older non-coresident children. Taken together, these arguments suggest that remarriages formed in mid to later life may be associated with relatively better marital quality than remarriages formed earlier in life. However, at much older ages marital quality may be lower from declines in health and women in particular may perceive burdens to the relationship from providing care to her husband (e.g. Wright & Aquilino, 1998).

The approval of third parties may also be important to consider when theorizing how marital quality varies across the life course for remarried individuals. Decisions to form partnerships in later life often relate to concerns over social security benefits and inheritance (Brien et al., 2004). Indeed, individuals in later life may decide to cohabit rather than remarry due to these concerns (Gierveld & Peeters, 2003; Hatch, 1995; Kemp & Kemp, 2002). Individuals in later life who do remarry may face disapproval from adult children due to concerns about receiving inheritance (Chevan, 1996; Hatch, 1995).¹ In addition, researchers argue that widowed individuals face norms about the acceptable time frame that one must mourn before entering a new relationship and that this may be longer for women than men (Davidson,

¹ For individuals who have experienced a marital disruption since the prior wave the NSFH asks whether their children approved of them dating and remarrying. I plan to explore these items and how they relate to marital quality in second marriage across the life course in a supplementary set of analyses.

2001). Individuals may face scrutiny from friends and family if they entered into a new marriage “too early.” Lack of approval from adult children and close friends for one’s marriage may strain the relationship. Indeed, social support from family and friends is related to better marital quality (Kurdex, 1989). These arguments would suggest that remarriage in later life may be associated with lower levels of marital quality relative to second marriages formed earlier in life.

It may also be important to consider one’s prior union experiences when examining marital quality in second marriages. Prior research points to cohabitation in particular as important to consider. Remarried individuals who cohabited with both the first and second spouse prior to marriage have lower marital stability and individuals that cohabited with their spouse prior to remarriage have lower levels of perceived marital happiness and fairness in the remarriage (Teachman, 2008; Skinner et al., 2002). Older remarried individuals may have experienced a greater number of cohabitation spells prior to getting married for the second time and overall may have experienced more complex life histories such as children from prior relationships (Teachman, 2008). The accumulation of past union experiences may have negative implications for the quality of subsequent relationships (King & Scott, 2005). This argument suggests that the marital quality of second marriages formed in later life may be worse than second marriages formed earlier in life.

Finally, demographic processes such as marriage markets may be important to consider when theorizing how marital quality in second marriages may vary across age. Researchers have suggested that for women, but not men, there may be fewer suitable partners available in later life relative to earlier in life as sex-ratios become more unbalanced (Bhrolchain & Sigle-Rushton, 2005). Because women tend to live longer than men and because of spouse age preferences, men’s supply of potential marriage partners tends to increase with age while women’s supply of

potential partners tends to shrink. At least for women, this may reduce the likelihood of ending up with a compatible partner in later life which may be negatively related to marital quality (Gelissen, 2004; Kurdex, 1989; Vemer et al., 1989). This argument would point to a gendered hypothesis that marital quality in second marriages may be worse for women in later life relative to earlier in life, but one would not expect the same patterns for men.² In sum, prior research and theory point to complex and often competing predictions of how marital quality in second marriages may vary over the life course.

Selectivity in Characteristics of Early Versus Late Remarriages

Finally, a key potential issue for research examining remarriage in order to gain leverage on life-course variation in marital quality is the possibility that individuals who remarry relatively earlier in life may have different background characteristics relative to those who remarry relatively later in life. Although little work has directly addressed this issue, I would expect that those who remarry relatively younger versus older may differ in terms of duration of their first marriage, age at first marriage, how the first marriage ended (divorce versus widowhood), time between first and second marriages, and attitudes towards marriage and family. Analysis of life course variability in the determinants of remarriage quality needs to address these potentially confounding factors.

The Current Research

Using three waves of data from the NSFH, this study will examine marital quality of second marriages formed in later versus earlier life. Many prior studies of marital quality are

² Another potential direction for work on this project could investigate patterns of assortative mating in quality of one's match in remarriages formed in later life versus earlier life.

limited in their abilities to examine life course variation in marital quality because first marriages tend to occur predominately in early adulthood. This makes it difficult to distinguish effects of age or life course variability from effects of marital duration and selective attrition. The advantage of examining marital quality among second marriages is that remarriage occurs more broadly throughout the life course, thus offering a unique glimpse into life course variation in marital quality. The analysis will examine how perceived marital quality across a variety of domains differs for individuals in second marriages formed in later life (40+) verses earlier in life (<40).³ In order to control for potential bias resulting from selective attrition out of remarriage in the lowest quality couples, the sample will be limited to second marriages of five years duration or less.

Methods

Data

The data for this chapter will utilize all three waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The NSFH includes a main sample of 9,643 households with an oversampling of Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, single-parent families, families and with stepchildren, cohabiting couples, and recently married people. Interviews were conducted on a total of 13,017 randomly-selected primary respondents age 19 or older in 1987-1988 (Wave 1), with 10,007 of these respondents completing follow-up interviews in 1992-1994 (Wave 2). Finally, the sample was interviewed again in 2001-2002 (Wave 3), although this time interviews were only conducted on individuals who had an eligible focal child at Wave 2 or who were age

³ I focus on a simple dichotomous specification of age to maximize sample sizes in each category. As there may be important variation across the life course for individuals much younger or older than 40, as sample sizes permit I will explore more refined measures of age categories across the life course.

45 or older as of January, 2000.⁴ The NSFH is particularly well-suited for this study because it contains a large population of older married individuals, important background variables, and rich marital quality measures relative to other datasets with large sample sizes of later-life marriages such as the HRS.

The marital quality questions are asked of individuals currently married at each wave. In order to examine a larger number of individuals in second marriages, especially in older age groups, the analytical sample will pool individuals in recently-formed second marriages at each of the three waves. The sample will be restricted to 949 cases (411 males and 538 females) who have been in their second marriages for five years or less in order to limit potential duration bias of dissatisfied individuals who are more likely to exit a marriage.⁵ In addition to assessing a wide variety of aspects of marital quality at each wave, the data include detailed information on a variety of other potentially important independent or control variables such as gender, prior cohabitation experiences, dissolution status, prior children, race, education and socioeconomic resources and duration of the second marriage.⁶ The final analytical sample will be restricted to individuals with valid data on the various domains of the dependent variables, independent variables, and only Black, White and Hispanic individuals due to small sample sizes for other

⁴ The analysis will test the sensitivity of the results to limiting the sample such that everyone is eligible to be interviewed in Wave 3. In other words, limit to the sample to those who were at least age 45 as of January 1st, 2000 in order to maintain the representativeness of the analytical sample.

⁵ I also plan to test the sensitivity of the results to other limits on marital duration, such as three years or ten years. If results do not differ across other limits on marital duration, increasing duration would increase sample sizes, especially at older age groups. For example, the sample size would increase to 1,324 individuals in second marriages of duration 10 years or less. In addition, if the sample criterion of 5 years duration is used, there will not be any overlap for individuals who fit the criteria to be included as “newlyweds” in multiple waves as each wave is separated by at least 5 years. However, if the duration criterion is changed to 10 years, there is likely to be some overlap for individuals that could be included in the sample at multiple waves. For these cases, information from the first wave that they fit the duration criteria will be used.

⁶ I will also explore other start dates of duration of the second marriage such as when the couple began cohabiting to see whether marital quality of second marriages varies depending on whether you model duration starting at the beginning of marriage or beginning of the coresidential relationship.

groups.⁷ Differing patterns of missing data on the dependent variables allow for about 900 respondents across the various domains of marital quality.

Variables and Methods

Marital happiness: The dependent variables will be based on domains of marital quality that are assessed in all three waves of the NSFH.⁸ As prior research suggests advantages to measuring perceived global marital happiness, and points to both positive and negative dimensions of marital quality that are distinct and should be measured separately, global marital happiness and both positive and negative domains of marital quality will be assessed (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Global marital happiness is based on responses to a single question that asks respondents, “Taking all things together, how would you describe your marriage?” Responses range on a seven point scale from “very unhappy” to “very happy.” I will explore the sensitivity of the results to how this variable is constructed such as leaving it as a seven point scale and constructing it as a dichotomous variable (“very happy” versus the other responses).

Perceived fairness: The next domain assesses perceived fairness in the marital relationship across several domains - household chores, working for pay, spending money, and childcare. Responses include: “very/somewhat unfair to respondent,” “fair to both,” “somewhat/very unfair to respondent’s spouse.” I will examine these items both averaged across the four fairness domains and also separately. It may be possible that some of these items will be more or less relevant across the life course in predicting marital quality (e.g. childcare may be more relevant for younger remarried couples). In addition, prior research notes that it is quite

⁷ I will examine sensitivity to other approaches to handling missing data on the independent variables such as multiple imputation.

⁸ I will explore differing constructions of the dependent variables.

rare for wives and husbands to note that the division of household labor is unfair to the husband (Gager & Sanchez, 2003). Thus, I may construct this variable in terms of the husband and wife's perception of the division of household labor as unfair/fair to the wife.

Marital conflict: A third domain will assess marital conflict based on questions asking respondents how much they disagree about household tasks, money, spending time together, in-laws, and the children. Responses range from "less than once a month," to "almost every day."

Marital instability: The final marital quality measure will assess perceived instability, based on reports of whether respondents felt that their marriage was in trouble in that last year.

The analysis will include several independent variables that have been shown to relate to marital quality in remarriages such as gender, cohabitation experiences (with the spouse or other), prior children (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Skinner et al., 2002; Teachman, 2008; White & Booth, 1995) and children born within the remarriage. The analysis will also include several control variables that have important theoretical implications or have been shown to be important predictors of marital quality in prior research such as race/ethnicity, education, income, wealth, respondent's health, spouse's health, and caregiving responsibilities. However, it should be noted that while these variables are highly predictive of marital quality in first marriages (i.e. race and education), research suggests they are less predictive of marital stability in second marriages (Teachman, 2008). Finally, it is important to note that there may be differences in the background characteristics of those who enter into remarriage later in life versus earlier in life and this may have consequences for the quality of those relationships. Thus, it may be important to control for several variables that may tap into some of these selection differences. Although little work has directly addressed this issue, I would expect that those who remarry relatively younger versus older may differ in terms of duration of their first marriage, age at first marriage,

how the first marriage ended (divorce versus widowhood), time between first and second marriages, and attitudes towards marriage and family.

This chapter will utilize conventional linear and logistic regression techniques appropriate to the construction of each dependent variable and also explore ordered logit models for the measures with likert scaling to examine how marital quality in second marriages varies across the life course. The analysis will begin with bivariate models regressing each of the marital quality domains on age. Model 2 will add the other independent variables to the models to test whether an association between age and marital quality remains once adding in the other covariates. Finally, Model 3 will test whether prior cohabitation, children and possibly dissolution status moderate the association between age and marital quality by adding interaction terms to the model. As prior research suggests that the determinants of perceived marital quality differs by sex (Bradbury et al, 2000) and to compare findings across sex, models will be presented separately by sex.

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