

Estimates suggest that between 40% and 50% of all ever married individuals will experience divorce during their lifetime (Gibbs & Payne, 2010). Although individuals experiencing divorce may pass through several (but not necessarily all) 'stages' of 'relational breakdown' (Rollie & Duck, 2006), scholars have often assumed that marital deterioration tends to be gradual, characterized by slow but steady declines in the quality of the marriage. The implicit assumption behind research on relationship processes and quality prior to divorce is that most relationships follow a uniform pattern prior to legal marital dissolution (Duck & Wood, 2006).

However, recent work suggests that patterns of marital quality leading up to divorce may be more complex than previously thought. Although marital dissolution is often preceded by a period of unhappiness and dissatisfaction, many marriages that end in divorce do not appear highly distressed. Many spouses reported low levels of negative marital quality, such as conflict, and at least moderate levels of positive marital quality, such as happiness and interaction, in the years leading to divorce (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007) and some divorced couples showed stably high levels of relationship satisfaction in the first four years of marriage (Lavner & Bradbury, 2011), suggesting that not all couples who will eventually divorce experience similar patterns of marital quality in the years leading up to dissolution (Hetherington, 2003).

The aim of this paper is to empirically examine the pathways of marital change for individuals whose first marriages ended in divorce. Despite suggestive evidence that not everyone experiences changes in marital quality in similar ways, the divorce literature has yet to address the potential heterogeneity in the way that marital happiness, communication, and conflict change in the years leading to divorce. Further, research has

not yet employed models and methods that allow the documentation of the relative proportion of the population that follows each distinct trajectory. In other words, I ask whether there are multiple trajectories of marital happiness and communication patterns (e.g., with some people who experience stably high levels of happiness and communication that deteriorate rapidly immediately preceding marital dissolution and others who experience consistently low levels of happiness and communication prior to divorce). Similarly, does divorce usually follow already high levels of marital conflict or do some couples experience rapid increases in conflict before the legal end of their marital relationship? This paper, then, investigates the extent to which individuals follow distinct trajectories of marital quality, here indicated by marital happiness, communication, and conflict (each of which is examined separately), in the years leading to divorce.

To do this, I employ Latent Class Growth Analysis (LCGA), using data collected between 1979 and 2008 from women¹ in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979 cohort. In so doing, I document the shape and pattern of marital quality prior to divorce, a topic on which there is very little previous work, thereby illustrating for the first time the avenues individuals may traverse on their way to marital decline and dissolution. Along the way, I am able to examine the way that theories of marital decline combine and interact to influence contemporary patterns of marital change prior to dissolution.

Marital Quality Prior to Divorce

This paper aims to understand longitudinal patterns in changes in happiness, communication, and conflict in the years leading to divorce. The years leading to divorce

¹ Only female respondents were asked to report marital quality.

have often been characterized as turbulent, and for good reason. Divorce engenders complex emotions, including hurt, pain, anger, fear, and jealousy, with grief playing a prominent role. Prior to relationship dissolution, happiness often declines, communication becomes fraught with anxiety, and conflict escalates (Emery, 2012).

Because intimate relationships are among the most important factors for human development, the quality of a marriage can promote or undermine physical health, mental well-being, and social competence (Hetherington, 2003). To date, there is limited research on changes in marital quality among divorced individuals, although some work has examined how marriages that remain intact differ from marriages that end in divorce (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001; Kurdek, 2005).

Prior research has indicated that individuals whose marriages result in divorce often have lower marital quality compared to individuals in stable marriages (Gottman, 1994). Divorcing couples displayed more negative communication and emotion as newlyweds as well (Lavner & Bradbury, 2011). Compared to stably married couples, couples who divorced reported lower initial levels of marital quality (Huston, Niehuis, & Smith, 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In addition, these couples often experienced more rapid declines in the quality of the marriage (Lavner & Bradbury, 2010) because shifts in affective dimensions over the first two years of the marital relationship were frequently more dramatic for couples who divorced than those who remained married; the same is true of individuals who experienced increases in relational ambivalence (Huston, Niehuis, et al., 2001). As a result of these and other experiences, positive affect is often replaced by negative and perhaps neutral affect (Kayser & Rao, 2006) as divorcing partners begin to 'uncouple' (Vaughan, 1986).

Thus, prior research has established that couples who divorce tend to begin their marriages at lower levels than their continuously married counterparts, but that divorcing relationships also change in dramatic ways. However, no published studies to my knowledge have examined trajectories of marital quality among divorced couples themselves. One of the key contributions of this paper is that I examine longitudinal patterns of changes in marital quality prior to divorce *among the divorced*, rather than comparing them to stably married individuals. A second contribution lies in my investigation of variation in the way individuals experience marital change during the same period.

Despite the lack of research on the topic, prior research does provide some reason to expect variation in trajectories of marital quality prior to divorce. Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, and George (2001) 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 the marriage. This increase in ambiguity was accompanied by increased 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). These individuals experienced sharp declines in their marital quality but remained in the relationship longer than the ‘early exiters’, despite the absence of romance.

Variation in trajectories of marital quality prior to divorce may also be the result of differing levels of commitment. 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, thoughts of divorce, 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. They 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, further evidence for heterogeneity in the marital pathways traveled by individuals whose marriages are heading toward divorce.

Thus, prior research on marital quality trajectories prior to divorce suggests at least two groups of divorcés. One group is characterized by greater marital conflict and low initial levels of marital happiness that persist throughout the marriage and a second group characterized by higher initial levels of marital happiness and steep declines, accompanied by low levels of conflict.

The approach here, which employs latent class growth analysis, builds on and extends prior research in several ways. Research has often compared changes in marriage patterns among divorced versus continuously married individuals. Research to date has not examined differences in longitudinal trajectories of marital quality between divorced vs. non-divorced couples. Instead, research has often examined how a given variable may influence the probability of divorce or, more commonly, differences in levels of psychological distress or social support, for example, between divorced and non-divorced couples (Kurdek, 2005; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010). Although a useful endeavor, a focus on how marital quality patterns differ between divorced versus married individuals does not explicitly map out trajectories of marital quality *among the divorced* themselves, the approach taken here.

Furthermore, to my knowledge, no papers have employed methods that examine heterogeneity in longitudinal trajectories of marital quality among divorced individuals. Although Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) used cluster analysis, this produced a typology of marital quality groups prior to divorce. In contrast, I look for variation in trajectories of marital change across multiple dimensions of marital quality, including marital happiness, communication, and conflict. To put it simply, I am interested in the differential experiences of marital change among the divorced rather than in comparing how certain factors may differ between married and divorced couples. I then use indicators of socioeconomic status, past relationship history, family background, work history, and demographic characteristics to distinguish individuals whose pathways of marital quality prior to divorce are likely to follow each observed trajectory.

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