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Unhappily Ever After: Effects of Long-Term Low-Quality Marriages on Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

The present study shows that long-term low-quality marriages have significant negative effects on overall well-being. We utilize a nationally representative longitudinal study with a multi-item marital quality scale that allows us to track unhappy marriages over a twelve-year period and to assess marital happiness along many dimensions. Remaining unhappily married is associated with significantly lower levels of overall happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and overall health, along with elevated levels of psychological distress, compared to remaining otherwise continuously married. There is also some evidence that staying unhappily married is more detrimental than divorcing, as people in low-quality marriages are less happy than individuals who divorce and remarry and have lower levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and overall health than individuals who divorce and remain unmarried. Unhappily married people may have greater odds of improving their well-being by dissolving their low-quality unions, as there is no evidence that they are better off on any aspects of overall well-being than those who divorce.

Although marital happiness is a strong predictor of marital stability (White & Booth 1991) and divorce is readily available, long-term low-quality marriages still exist in American society (Heaton & Albrecht 1991). The positive effects of marriage have been well-documented in recent studies (e.g., Waite 1995; Waite & Gallagher 2000), but these benefits may not be secured by individuals who are unhappily married. The negative effects of divorce have been covered in depth in the extant literature (Amato 2000), but it is not clear whether some individuals are better off staying married or divorcing, as the costs of remaining unhappily married may be even greater than those of marital dissolution. Overall, given that remaining in a long-term low-quality marriage may be a significant social and health problem, it is surprising that it has received relatively little attention. Utilizing a longitudinal, nationally representative study of married people, this study compares unhappily married individuals to other continuously married people and to those that divorce over the course of the study in order to assess the relationship between remaining in a long-term low-quality marriage and five aspects of well-being.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

<u>The Benefits of Marriage</u>

Social scientists consistently find that married people have higher levels of psychological and physical well-being than individuals who are single, separated, or divorced (Horowitz, McLaughlin & White 1997; Lillard & Waite 1995; Waite 1995; Waite & Gallagher 2000). There are a number of mechanisms through which marriage may have direct effects on well-being. Marriage may protect mental health by giving people a greater sense of meaning in their lives and allowing them to fill multiple social roles (Burton 1998). Remaining married may also buffer psychological problems because marriage provides a spouse who can be a consistent source of

social and emotional support (Waite & Gallagher 2000). Longitudinal research demonstrates that individuals' emotional well-being improves substantially when they marry (Marks & Lambert 1998). Although happier people may be selected into marriage (Mastekaasa 1992), it is clear that marrying has at least some additional effect on improving psychological well-being. In regard to physical health, the structured and organized lifestyle associated with marriage, including direct monitoring by one's spouse, work to promote healthy behaviors and discourage harmful acts (Umberson 1987; Waite 1995; Waite & Gallagher 2000). Additionally, married individuals can often afford better medical care and homes in safer neighborhoods (Ross, Mirowsky & Goldsteen 1990; Waite & Gallagher 2000). As with the selection effect associated with happiness, healthier people may be more likely to marry, but recent research has shown that about half of the health benefits derive from marriage itself (Daniel 1995).

We propose that an interaction effect exists between the state of being married and the quality of the marriage. When marriages are of low-quality, individuals may not receive the same type of benefits to their psychological and physical well-being as other continuously married people. Unhappily married individuals likely do not find as much meaning in their spousal role or receive as much support from their partners as other continuously married people. In other words, we expect that in long-term low-quality marriages, the negative impact of marital unhappiness will trump any potential benefits that marriage would otherwise confer. Past research has demonstrated that individuals who are unhappy with their marriages tend to also have low ratings of global happiness (Glenn 1998; Glenn & Weaver 1981). Dissatisfaction with the marriage may spill over into other family relationships, thus affecting life satisfaction (e.g., Booth & Amato 1997). Self-esteem may suffer due to the failure to negotiate a successful union. Living in an unhappy marriage likely elevates and maintains high stress levels, thus leading to

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increased psychological distress. Health may even suffer when unhappily married individuals do not feel compelled by their spousal role to engage in healthy behaviors and avoid risk-taking. These considerations lead us to our first hypothesis.

> *Hypothesis 1: Unhappily married individuals will show substantially lower levels of happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and overall health, and higher levels of psychological distress, than otherwise continuously married individuals.*

The Costs of Divorce

A great deal of recent research shows that divorced individuals show lower levels of well-being than married individuals, including lower levels of happiness and self-esteem and greater psychological distress (Kitson 1992; Marks 1996; Simon & Marcussen 1999). The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective suggests that these negative outcomes are mainly caused by stressors associated with the process of divorce, such as feelings of estrangement, the loss of emotional support, a decline in financial well-being, and continuing conflict with the former spouse (Amato 2000). Support for this perspective comes from longitudinal studies demonstrating that divorce is associated with subsequent increased symptoms of psychological distress and depression and reduced levels of happiness and self-esteem (Amato & Booth 1991; Aseltine & Kessler 1993; Johnson & Wu 2002; Marks & Lambert 1998).

While the research literature clearly demonstrates substantial costs associated with divorce, it is still not clear how serious those declines are in comparison to remaining in a long-term low-quality marriage. In some recent studies, divorced individuals have reported increases in happiness, life satisfaction, and self-esteem following the dissolution of their marriages (Acock and Demo 1992; Kitson 1992; Riesmann 1990). Removing oneself from an unsatisfying or debilitating marriage through the process of divorce may be a way that chronically unhappily

married people could also experience these gains in well-being, as divorce is often considered a second chance at happiness (Ahrons 1994; Stacey 1996). By directly comparing individuals in low-quality marriages to those that divorce, we can assess in this study whether unhappily married individuals may have a better chance at increased well-being by divorcing.

There may be substantial differences in well-being between individuals who divorce and remarry versus those who divorce and remain unmarried, as many divorced individuals only fully adjust to a past divorce once they remarry (Amato 2000; Johnson & Wu 2002). Therefore, it is important in this study to compare unhappily married people separately to both categories of divorced people. Remarriage often significantly improves psychological well-being. (Johnson & Wu 2002). In addition, success in finding a new spouse can increase self-confidence and self-worth (Elliot 1996). In general, we should expect divorced individuals who remarry to have higher levels of well-being than unhappily married people, in part due to leaving a low-quality marriage and in part due to the potential psychological and physical health benefits that a new marriage may confer upon them. However, many people who remarry are no happier in their second marriages than their first (Johnson & Booth 1998), so the benefits received from the new marriage may only be modest.

> *Hypothesis 2: Unhappily married individuals will have slightly lower levels of happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and overall health, and slightly higher levels of psychological distress, than divorced/remarried individuals.*

Divorced individuals who remain unmarried may still not be significantly better off than unhappily married people even though their marital unhappiness is no longer a drain on their overall well-being. On one hand, a divorce may result in a loss of social relationships, emotional support, self-esteem, a structured lifestyle, and economic benefits that are not replaced by a new

marriage. On the other hand, the ability to leave a debilitating relationship and enter a more benign social environment may have positive effects on happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological distress. In addition, if an unhappy marriage is harming an individual's sense of self-worth, leaving the marriage could result in a self-esteem increase, especially for those individuals who are not looking for a new spouse. Overall health may be the only aspect of well-being that is significantly harmed by leaving a marriage, however unhappy.

> *Hypothesis 3a: Unhappily married individuals will not have significantly different levels of happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, or psychological distress than divorced/unmarried individuals.*

> *Hypothesis 3b: Unhappily married individuals will have slightly better overall health than divorced/unmarried individuals.*

A Recent Study of Unhappily Married Individuals

Utilizing two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households, Waite et al. (2002) found that among a group of unhappily married individuals, those who divorced did not experience significant increases in happiness and self-esteem or decreases in symptoms of depression compared to those who remained married. Additionally, they note that two-thirds of unhappily married people who remained married reported happy marriages five years later. Waite and colleagues take this evidence as an indication that most people would benefit from remaining in unhappy marriages, as divorce will not improve their well-being and a good chance exists that their marital quality will improve substantially. Our focus in this study is slightly different, as we concentrate explicitly on the most chronically unhappy group of married people. Utilizing four waves of data that cover a twelve-year period and a comprehensive, multi-item marital quality scale (as opposed to the one-item measure used by Waite and colleagues), we are

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better able to categorize long-term low-quality marriages. While we acknowledge that fluctuations in marital quality are common and that divorce may not benefit all unhappily married people, we argue that there is a subpopulation of at-risk individuals whose marriages never seem to improve who may benefit by dissolving their marriages, and this group is the focus of the present study.

METHODS

Analytic Strategy

The analyses compare unhappily married people to all other continuously married individuals, people who divorced and remarried, and individuals who divorced and remained unmarried using ordinary least squares regression. The outcome variables (overall happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, psychological distress, and overall health) are all measured in 1992 to assess the effect that a minimum of twelve years of being unhappily married has on well-being. We utilize a conditional panel model with a lagged dependent variable rather than an unconditional change-score model. The conditional panel model involves estimating the relationship between the main predictors and the dependent variable when the dependent variable from a previous time also included in the regression as a control variable. There are two reasons we use this method rather than calculating a change-score for the dependent variable. First, the conditional model is preferred when prior scores on a variable may affect current assessments of that variable, as often occurs with measures of psychological attitudes (Finkel 1995). For this study, there is substantive reason to believe that past levels of happiness, satisfaction, self-esteem, psychological distress, and overall health have a causal influence on respondents' assessments of those variables in 1992. Second, we do not have measures of life satisfaction and self-esteem before 1988, so it is not possible to create a change score for those outcomes.

Instead, overall happiness in 1980 must serve as a proxy for prior scores on life satisfaction and self-esteem. As a result, overall happiness in 1980 is controlled in the first three models to address the possibility that the selection of unhappy, unsatisfied, and low self-esteem individuals into unhappy marriages is the cause of poor outcomes. Psychological distress was first assessed in 1983, so this measure is included as a control in the model in which psychological distress in 1992 is the outcome. Overall health in 1980 is included as a control variable in the overall health model to better assess the possibility that a decline in health is a consequence rather than cause of being unhappily married.

Several control variables are included that past research indicates are the most relevant predictors of marital quality and stability and may also be related to measures of well-being. Age, gender, and race are included as basic demographic controls. The risk of divorce declines with age (Booth, Johnson, White, and Edwards 1986), despite a concurrent decrease in marital happiness (Van Langinham, Johnson & Amato 2001). Women are less likely to remarry following divorce (Cherlin 1992), while whites are less likely to dissolve their marriages than members of many minority groups (McLoyd et al. 2000). Two measures of socioeconomic status, years of education and family income, are utilized as individuals with higher socioeconomic status experience both lower levels of marital disruption and higher levels of marital quality and overall well-being (Cherlin 1992; Nakonezny, Shull & Rodgers 1995; South & Spitze 1986). The number of children in the household is controlled because children tend to be associated with reduced marital happiness (White, Booth & Edwards 1986) but increased stability (Waite & Lillard 1991). Whether at least one of the children is a stepchild is included because stepchildren in particular increase martial instability (Booth & Edwards 1992). Religiosity is controlled, as individuals with strong religious beliefs tend to support the norm of

lifelong marriage, have lower divorce rates, and more satisfying marriages (Heaton & Pratt 1990). Finally, two marital history variables (remarriage and prior cohabitation) are included, as individuals who remarry or cohabited before marriage experience a higher risk of divorce (Cherlin 1992; Heaton 2002).[1]

<u>Sample</u>

This study utilizes the first four waves of the Marital Instability Over the Life Course Study (Booth et al. 1993). Telephone interviews were conducted in 1980 with 2,033 married individuals under the age of 55 who were living with their spouses. Sample households were selected using a clustered random digit dialing procedure, and the husband or wife of the couple was chosen using an additional random procedure. The response rate of 65% in the 1980 survey compares favorably to other studies that utilized a random digit dialing method (Groves & Kahn 1979). The respondents were representative of the United States population with regard to age, race, number of children, household size, and region, according to comparisons with census data from 1980 (Booth et al. 1993). In 1983, 1,592 of the respondents from the original sample were successfully re-interviewed. The re-interview rate of 78% compares favorably with other panel studies that have used personal interview procedures (Booth & Johnson 1985). In 1988, 1,341 (66%) of the respondents were re-interviewed for the third wave. The fourth wave was conducted in 1992, with 1,183 (58%) of the respondents from the original sample being successfully re-interviewed. The analyses presented here use a subset of the total sample, as all individuals who were continuously married (n = 972) for four waves or divorced over the course of the study (n = 178), were included in the sample, yielding 1150 total cases.

Although attrition between waves has been relatively modest, Heckman's (1979) method was used to correct for sample selection bias. Logistic regression analysis revealed that attrition

from the panel is greater among males, non-whites, and less educated respondents. Lambda, the probability of remaining in the sample, was calculated based on these variables. Lambda was included as an independent variable in each regression, but did not attain significance nor affect other predictors. Since attrition bias does not substantially alter the models, lambda is not included in the regression results reported here. In addition, the sample is weighted to the national population averages to account for attrition from the original nationally representative sample.

Outcome Variables

Five outcome variables were created to assess the life quality of the study respondents, and are all measured in the fourth wave. *Overall happiness* is measured by a question that asks, "Taking all things together, how happy are you these days?" and has ordinal answer categories of 1 = not too happy, 2 = pretty happy, and 3 = very happy. *Life satisfaction* is a six-item summed scale that assesses how satisfied respondents are with their neighborhoods, jobs, homes, friends, leisure time, and families. Respondents were asked, "How much satisfaction do you get from (each specific aspect)?" and could answer from 1 = none to 5 = a great deal. *Self-esteem* is measured as a six-item, Likert-type scale that assesses global self-esteem as opposed to specific self-esteem (Rosenberg et al. 1995). It addresses aspects such as whether respondents feel that they have good qualities, feel useless at times, are satisfied with themselves, and feel that they are failures. Individuals could respond from 1 = strongly agree to 4 = strongly disagree. Items were summed and recoded so that higher scores indicate greater self-esteem. *Psychological distress* is assessed with eight items from Langner's (1962) scale of psychiatric symptoms indicating impairment. The items were summed with higher scores indicating greater distress. The measure of health included in this study is the respondents' ratings of their own *overall*

health as 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, or 4 = excellent. Past research indicates that individuals assess their health as reliably as their physicians (Ferraro & Farmer 1999).

Predictor Variables

A set of dummy variables allows unhappily married individuals to be compared to all other continuously married people, as well as those that divorced over the course of the study. An eleven-item, Likert-type scale was used to assess respondents' level of marital happiness (Johnson et al. 1986). Seven of the items ask about happiness with specific aspects of marriage, such as understanding, agreement, and faithfulness. The remaining four items are concerned with the global satisfaction of the marriage, such as overall happiness and whether the marriage is getting better or worse. Higher scores on the scale indicate greater marital satisfaction, and the scale has a coefficient alpha for reliability of .87.

In order to be classified as *unhappily married*, individuals needed to be continuously married and score below the mean marital happiness at all four waves.[2] It is important to note that individuals placed into this low-quality marriage category are not unhappy in an absolute sense. Their average score over the four waves for each marital happiness item is 2.15, which corresponds to "pretty happy" with each aspect of marriage. However, across several national studies, 60 to 80 percent of respondents select the "very happy" category, while less than 3% select the "not too happy" response (Johnson 1993). In a relative sense, these individuals consistently score below the average marital happiness of the sample. Due to the social desirability of providing high martial happiness scores, and the possible cognitive dissonance that could result from rating a long-term marriage poorly, we believe that this classification scheme does identify a potentially at-risk group of individuals in low-quality marriages.

Any respondent who did not meet the criteria for being unhappily married, but was married to the same spouse for all four waves, is categorized as being *continuously married*. The divorced category of individuals is divided in this analysis into those who did and those who did not remarry subsequent to their divorce during the study period. Individuals who divorced in the second or third waves and then remarried in the third or fourth waves were placed into the *divorced/remarried* category. Individuals who divorced in the second, third, or fourth waves and remained single were coded into the *divorced/unmarried* group.

Control Variables

Age, gender, and race are measured in 1980. *Gender* is coded female = 1 and male = 0. *Race* is measured as a dichotomous variable due to the small numbers of minorities in the sample, with white = 1 and other = 0. Years of education, family income, religiosity, number of children, and presence of a stepchild are measured in 1992. *Education* is a continuous variable assessing years of schooling. *Family income* is measured in thousands of dollars, computed by combining all incomes of $65,000 and above into one category to minimize skewness. *Number of children* is the average number of children living in the respondent's household over the course of the 4 waves. If any of the children are *stepchildren* of the respondent, the stepchild variable is coded 1. *Religiosity* is a measure of the influence of religion on the respondent's life, ranging from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much. Two marital history variables (*remarriage* and *cohabitation*) are measured in 1980 as they relate only to the original study marriage of the respondent. If individuals had been married before the first study marriage they are coded 1. The cohabitation variable is coded as 1 if respondents lived with their spouses before marriage. When past *overall happiness*, *psychological distress*, and *overall health* are used as controls, the question wording and response items are identical to those used to assess these measures in the

1992. Table 1 displays the correlations and descriptive statistics for all study variables, including alpha coefficients for reliability where appropriate.

[Table 1 about here]

RESULTS

<u>Overall Happiness</u>

Table 2 displays the results of the regression of being unhappily married on overall happiness in 1992. In the bivariate relationship (Model 1), individuals who remain continuously married and individuals who divorce and remarry have greater overall happiness in 1992 than unhappily married individuals. Divorced individuals who remain unmarried do not show a significant difference in overall happiness compared to unhappily married individuals. These relationships hold true when controlling for past overall happiness in Model 2, although the strength of the marital status variables are somewhat attenuated. The additional control variables in Model 3 change the magnitude and significance of the major predictors very little. As predicted, continuously married and divorced/remarried individuals are significantly happier than unhappily married people. Martial status has a strong effect on overall happiness, as the continuously married variable is as strong a predictor as overall happiness measured at a previous wave. Continuously married people score over half a standard deviation and divorced remarried people score over one-third a standard deviation above unhappily married people on overall happiness. Also, as hypothesized, divorced people who remain unmarried are not significantly happier than individuals in low-quality marriages.

[Table 2 about here]

<u>Life Satisfaction</u>

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The results of the regression model for the effect of remaining unhappily married on life satisfaction are displayed in Table 3. In Model 1, continuously married and divorced/unmarried individuals have significantly higher degrees of life satisfaction than unhappily married individuals, while divorced/remarried people do not show a significant difference. When overall happiness is added to the regression (Model 2), both significant marital status variables are attenuated, and the divorced/unmarried coefficient loses significance. With the addition of all other controls in Model 3, the divorced/unmarried coefficient regains significance, while the continuously married predictor is slightly attenuated. Unhappily married respondents, as predicted, report significantly less satisfaction with life than continuously married individuals. Again, being continuously married compared to unhappily married is almost as strong a predictor as any in the model, only slightly smaller than overall happiness and religiosity. Contrary to expectations, individuals who divorce and remain unmarried, but not those that remarry, report significantly higher levels of life satisfaction than unhappily married individuals.

[Table 3 about here]

Self-Esteem

Table 4 displays the regression results for the effect of remaining unhappily married on self-esteem. In the bivariate analysis (Model 1), continuously married and divorced/unmarried individuals show significantly higher self-esteem than unhappily married people. When overall happiness is added in Model 2, both significant marital status variables are slightly attenuated, but remain significant. The addition of the remaining control variables in Model 3 changes the magnitude and significance of the main predictors very little, although the divorce/unmarried coefficient actually increases slightly. As predicted, remaining in a low-quality marriage has negative effects on self-esteem compared to remaining in other continuous marriages.

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Unexpectedly, among those who divorce, the unmarried group shows greater self-esteem than unhappily married individuals, but the remarried group does not. In this model, only years of education has a stronger relationship to self-esteem than the two significant marital status variables. Continuously married individuals score about one-third a standard deviation and divorced/unmarried people score nearly half a standard deviation above unhappily married individuals on self-esteem.

[Table 4 about here]

Psychological Distress

The effects of remaining unhappily married on symptoms of psychological distress are displayed in Table 5. As seen in Model 1, only continuously married individuals score significantly lower on psychological distress than unhappily married people. When past measures of psychological distress are controlled (Model 2), the magnitude of the continuously married coefficient is reduced by about one-half. Adding additional controls in Model 3 only slightly affects the main predictors. As hypothesized, continuously married people show lower levels of psychological distress than those in low-quality marriages. Other than past psychological distress, the continuously married predictor is the strongest in the model. Contrary to expectations, individuals who divorced and remarried are not significantly lower on levels of psychological distress than unhappily married people. Divorced/unmarried people also do not have significantly different scores on psychological distress, supporting our hypothesis.

[Table 5 about here]

Overall Health

The coefficients for the regression of remaining unhappily married on respondent's overall health in 1992 are shown in Table 6. In Model 1, individuals from all marital status

categories have better overall health than unhappily married people. The strength of these relationships is attenuated by about one-third when controlling for respondents' past health, but the coefficients do remain significant (Model 2). The addition of further control variables in Model 3 causes the divorced/remarried coefficient to become non-significant. The continuously married predictor remains largely unchanged, and the divorced/unmarried coefficient actually increases in magnitude. As predicted, continuously married people report significantly better health than unhappily married individuals, but surprisingly, divorced/unmarried individuals do as well. While past health and age are the strongest predictors in the model, the two significant marital status variables, compared to unhappily married people, are equal in strength to education and income. Contrary to expectations, divorced/remarried individuals do not show better health in 1992 than unhappily married individuals.

[Table 6 about here]

DISCUSSION

The present study focuses on the relationship between remaining unhappily married and psychological and physical well-being. The longitudinal nature of the data has allowed for multiple assessments of marital happiness at four different time points. It has also made possible a determination of marital stability based on whether marriages dissolved or remained intact over a twelve-year period and suggests a causal ordering with predictors measured at a time previous to outcomes. Remaining unhappily married appears to lower happiness, life satisfaction, and self-esteem and is associated with poorer health compared to being otherwise continuously married. Unhappily married individuals also appear to have higher levels of psychological distress than continuously married people. The comparison to individuals who divorce reveals some findings contrary to recent research that indicates that unhappily married adults who

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divorced were no happier on average than unhappily married adults who stayed married (Waite et al. 2002). Divorced people sometimes experience greater well-being than unhappily married people, although this can be conditional on whether or not they remarry. Our results show that divorced individuals who remarry have greater happiness than unhappily married people, and divorced people who remain unmarried report more satisfaction with life, greater self-esteem, and better overall health. Remaining unhappily married rather than divorcing is never beneficial on average to the psychological well-being or overall health of the individuals in this study.

Do Unhappily Married Individuals Benefit from Marriage?

The social and emotional support that individuals receive from marriage is apparently not being obtained by unhappily married people. Even when taking into account levels of overall happiness in 1980 when respondents entered the study, remaining unhappily married is associated with a further reduction in people's happiness and life satisfaction. It is not surprising that remaining in such an unsatisfying relationship would be detrimental to happiness, given how important marital happiness is to global happiness (Glenn 1998; Glenn and Weaver 1981). Life satisfaction is also reduced, as being unhappily married likely harms relationships with family and friends, as well as causes problems with career satisfaction. Unhappily married individuals' self-esteem also continues to decrease over the course of their marriage, probably at least in part due to their failure to negotiate a happy union. Part of the effect of self-esteem may be due to a selection effect, as overall happiness in 1980 is controlled for instead of self-esteem, which was not measured in the first wave. Unhappily married individuals may not evaluate themselves very well on the marriage market, so they may in part be trapped in their marriages due to low self-esteem. However, overall happiness, which is controlled for in the analysis, is highly related to self-esteem (Elliot 1996), so remaining unhappily married is probably at least partially

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contributing to a reduction in self-esteem. Remaining in a low-quality marriage appears to increase psychological distress and even reduce overall health. The lack of happiness and self-esteem in unhappily married people's lives likely increases their distress symptoms. And while unhappily married people should still receive many of the economic benefits to health that marriage confers, it is likely that their lives are less structured than those of happily married people, thus encouraging unhealthy and risky behavior. In addition, they may not be as satisfied with their spousal roles, giving them less incentive to engage in healthy behaviors, and as a result, poorer overall health. Remaining unhappily married for an extended period of time is also likely to increase stress, which can in turn lead to higher levels of psychological distress and poorer health.

<u>Do the Costs of Low-Quality Marriages Outweigh the Costs of Divorce?</u>

Despite the negative consequences of divorce that lower people's psychological well-being (Amato 2000), unhappily married people still seem to be moderately worse off than divorced people. People who divorce but subsequently remarry are happier overall than unhappily married people, probably due to the contribution of marital happiness to global happiness. Divorced individuals who do not remarry have greater life satisfaction than unhappily married people, probably due to being freed from an unhappy marriage. However, it is not clear why divorced/remarried individuals do not show the same increase in life satisfaction over unhappily married people. Remarried people do tend to carry certain personality traits with them into their remarriage that negatively affect marital quality (Johnson and Booth 1998), and these traits may also harm their outlook on certain aspects of life. Divorced/unmarried people also have higher levels of self-esteem than unhappily married individuals. Again, leaving a bad marriage may contribute to increased levels of self-esteem in divorced individuals, although part

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of this effect could be due to a selection factor, as divorced individuals who do not remarry may be more independent and self-confident people. It is not clear why divorced/unmarried people also have better overall health than unhappily married individuals. Dissolving a low-quality marriage may eliminate a significant source of stress, although this too could be in part a selection effect in that healthy individuals are more capable of leaving their marriages.

Divorce may actually be a second chance at happiness for unhappily married people, as remaining married will likely only further harm their well-being. In addition, remarrying could significantly increase their happiness, while simply leaving an unsatisfying marriage can increase their life satisfaction, self-esteem, and possibly even overall health. Given the small sample size of divorced individuals and the consistent direction of the coefficients, it seems that being unhappily married is the worst possible marital situation, although the magnitude of the differences between the groups are often modest. Even though divorce often has negative consequences, people who remarried during this study are happier overall in their remarriages than their first marriages ($t = 2.87$, df $= 62$, $p<.01$). At any rate, divorcing would not likely put unhappily married people in a more detrimental situation than they are already in. Clearly there are situations in which spouses find the resilience to turn an unhappy marriage into a happy one, as Waite et al. (2002) find that two-thirds of unhappily married individuals who stay together end up happily married 5 years later. However, our focus in this study is on unhappily married individuals who have been continuously dissatisfied at four separate time points and for at least twelve years. It is evident that for this subpopulation of married individuals, which constitutes over 16% of the continuously married sample in this study, remaining in their marriage is not helping and likely will not help their overall well-being.

How Unhappy Must a Marriage Be to Harm Well-Being?

There is an additional note of concern related to the findings of this study. Waite and Gallagher (2000) suggest that there should be little alarm about the harmful effects of bad marriages on psychological and physical health, since most people categorize their marriages as "very happy." It is true that marriages of the lowest quality are rare, as only 2% of men and 4% of women in recent General Social Surveys characterize their marriages at the lowest level of "not too happy" (Waite and Gallagher 2000). However, we suggest that individuals may not need to be in the doldrums of marital quality in order to experience some harm to their overall well-being. The individuals classified as being in low-quality marriages in this study generally do not characterize their marriages at the lowest levels of satisfaction. Unhappily married individuals score an average of 2.15 across the broad range marital quality scale items, which correspond to a ranking of "pretty happy" with these eleven aspects of their marriages. However, the relative unhappiness of this group makes them a meaningful category, especially in light of their consistently below-average happiness and the reluctance of most married individuals to report their marriages as "not too happy." The unhappily married individuals studied here are clearly suffering at least moderate harm from their marital situation and may be an at-risk population from the standpoint of general health and well-being, especially if they are trapped in their marriages due to personal or structural forces that they cannot overcome.

Future Directions

The limitations and results of this study suggest several directions for future research. First, with a three to five year interval between waves, it is possible that many of the individuals who were continuously unhappily married had more fluctuation in their marital quality than could be detected. Shorter intervals between waves would allow for an improved assessment of marital happiness. Second, a larger data set could have substantially increased the statistical

power of the analyses, allowing for the possible detection of other differences between unhappily married, continuously married, and divorced individuals. Third, tracking individuals from the time they were married, or even before they married, until they divorced would allow for the determination of whether unhappily married people tend to begin their relationships with low levels of quality. It would also be beneficial to compare the well-being of unhappily married people to the well-being of those who never marry. Fourth, future studies are needed that focus on changing marital patterns over time to determine the reasons some individuals remain happily married, others unhappily married, and still others fluctuate in their marital happiness. For example, unhappily married individuals may remain in their marriages due to personality issues, such as low self-esteem, or social-structural characteristics, such as a lack of personal income or education needed to live alone. Finally, the consequences for children within long-term unhappy marriages should be examined. Prior research shows that the detrimental effects of divorce on children vary depending on their parents' levels of marital conflict before the marriage ends (Amato and Booth 1997), but it is not clear whether children of couples in low-quality marriages would be better off if their parents divorced or remained married.

Conclusion

This study compares the well-being of unhappily married individuals with those in other continuous marriages, those who divorce and remarry, and those who divorce and remain unmarried. We draw on longitudinal data from a national sample of married individuals and a multi-dimensional scale of marital happiness. Compared to otherwise continuously married people, the unhappily married group suffers from lower levels of overall happiness, life satisfaction, and self-esteem, more symptoms of psychological distress, and poorer health. Divorced individuals who remarry have greater overall happiness, and those who divorce and

remain unmarried have greater levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and overall health, than unhappily married people. While the differences between the marital status groups are not often great in magnitude, the uniformly low levels of well-being suggest that individuals in long-term, low-quality marriages may be at greater risk of morbidity and mortality. We suggest that unhappily married people who dissolve low-quality marriages likely have greater odds of improving their well-being than those remaining in such unions.

ENDNOTES

1. Years of marriage is another important predictor of marital happiness (Van Laningham, Johnson & Amato 2001) and likelihood of divorce (White & Booth 1991), but was removed from the regression analyses due to high levels of collinearity with age (r = .86).

2. Several other classifications of unhappily married individuals were utilized in preliminary examinations of the data. For example, we utilized one standard deviation below the mean and one-half a standard deviation below the mean marital happiness for all waves as cut-off points, as well as a scheme that required unhappily married individuals to score one-half a standard deviation below the mean in at least two waves and below the mean in the remaining waves. We also performed a sensitivity analysis which placed more emphasis on marital happiness in the last two waves of measurement. None of the alternative schemes substantially changed our regression results, as there was a great deal of overlap between the individuals classified as unhappily married in each scheme (average r = .78). We settled on the current classification scheme for parsimony and to maximize the sample size of unhappily married individuals.

TABLES

Table 1. Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Overall Happiness 1992	–										
2. Life Satisfaction 1992	.39***	–									
3. Self-Esteem 1992	.30***	.22***	–								
4. Psychological Distress 1992	-.41***	-.29***	-.30***	–							
5. Overall Health 1992	.22***	.17***	.21***	-.33***	–						
6. Unhappily Married	-.21***	-.18***	-.14***	.16***	-.11***	–					
7. Continuously Married	.26***	.20***	.10**	-.20***	.05	-.64***	–				
8. Divorced/Remarried	-.02	-.05	-.02	.07*	.04	-.09**	-.36***	–			
9. Divorced/Unmarried	-.12***	-.05	.03	.06	.03	-.13***	-.52***	-.08*	–		
10. Age	.11**	.18***	-.06*	-.11***	-.15***	-.03	.15***	-.13***	-.10**	–	
11. Female	.00	.02	.00	.11***	.00	.03	-.07*	.02	.07*	-.12***	–
12. White	-.02	.04	.02	-.09**	.05	-.10**	.09**	.04	-.05	-.01	.02
13. Years of Education	.04	-.01	.27***	-.11***	.19***	-.05	.02	-.01	.03	-.09**	-.07*
14. Family Income	.03	.05	.17***	-.13***	.18***	-.01	.16***	.04	-.27***	-.08*	-.08**
15. Number of Children	-.06*	-.17***	.00	.03	.12***	.05	.00	.06*	-.10**	-.57***	.03
16. Stepchild	-.07*	-.07*	-.04	.05	.04	-.09**	-.35***	.36***	.38***	-.18***	.10**
17. Religiosity	.16***	.23***	-.08*	.00	.00	-.08*	.14***	-.04	-.09**	.14***	.18***
18. Remarried	-.06	.00	-.03	.03	-.05	-.04	-.07*	.05	.12***	.11**	.06
19. Cohabited	-.08**	-.11**	.04	.04	-.01	.03	-.12***	.07*	.09**	-.20***	-.03
20. Overall Happiness 1980	.28***	.26***	.14***	-.20***	.15***	-.25***	.29***	-.04	-.11***	.05	.05
21. Psychological Distress 1983	-.22***	-.19***	-.22***	.50***	-.20***	.19***	-.24***	.04	.12***	-.09**	.14***
22. Overall Health 1980	.13***	.13***	.14***	-.23***	.37***	-.13***	.08*	.04	.01	-.10**	-.08**
Mean	2.41	23.84	19.31	12.68	3.22	.14	.71	.05	.10	35.46	.62
SD	.57	3.57	2.15	2.18	.74	.35	.46	.23	.30	8.94	.48
Range	1-3	6-30	6-24	8-24	1-4	0-1	0-1	0-1	0-1	19-54	0-1
α		.62	.77	.60							
N	1147	1150	1150	1147	1147	1150	1150	1150	1150	1150	1150

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

Table 1. Continued

Variable	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
12. White	–										
13. Years of Education	.08*	–									
14. Family Income	.10**	.38***	–								
15. Number of Children	.01	.05	.06	–							
16. Stepchild	.02	-.03	-.11***	.24***	–						
17. Religiosity	-.06	-.04	-.16***	.01	-.08**	–					
18. Remarried	-.10**	-.11***	-.04	-.08**	.15***	-.05	–				
19. Cohabited	-.06	.05	.03	.10**	.08**	-.19***	.24***	–			
20. Overall Happiness 1980	.10**	.00	.08*	-.02	-.08*	.15***	.01	-.06	–		
21. Psychological Distress 1983	-.07*	-.13***	-.18***	.06*	.09**	.01	.05	.08*	-.25***	–	
22. Overall Health 1980	.16***	.20***	.21***	.08*	.01	-.06*	-.08*	.02	.23***	-.18***	–
Mean	.92	14.18	45.48	.68	.08	3.74	.12	.14	2.43	12.60	3.45
SD	.27	2.71	17.10	.56	.27	1.23	.33	.35	.56	2.45	.71
Range	0-1	0-28	0-1	0-3	0-1	0-5	0-1	0-1	1-3	8-24	1-4
α										.65	
N	1150	1150	1149	1150	1150	1149	1150	1148	1149	1090	1148

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

Table 2. Regression Coefficients for the Effect of Remaining Unhappily Married on Overall Happiness in 1992[a]

Predictors	Model					
	1		2		3	
Marital Status[b]						
Continuously Married	.39***	(.31)	.30***	(.24)	.29***	(.23)
Divorced/Remarried	.24**	(.09)	.19*	(.07)	.20*	(.08)
Divorced/Unmarried	.09	(.05)	.05	(.03)	.05	(.03)
Overall Happiness 1980			.22***	(.21)	.21***	(.21)
Age					.00	(.02)
Female					.00	(.00)
White					-.14*	(-.07)
Years of Education					.01	(.05)
Family Income					.00	(.00)
Number of Children					-.03	(-.03)
Stepchild					.07	(.03)
Religiosity					.04**	(.09)
Remarried					-.10	(-.06)
Cohabited					-.03	(-.02)
Constant	2.11***		1.65***		1.42***	
R^2	.07		.12		.14	
F for R^2 Change	28.00***		49.79***		3.15**	

[a] Standardized coefficients in parentheses
[b] Reference category = Unhappily Married
N = 1142
* $p<.05$ ** $p<.01$ *** $p<.001$

Table 3. Regression Coefficients for the Effect of Remaining Unhappily Married on Life Satisfaction in 1992[a]

Predictors	Model					
	1		2		3	
Marital Status[b]						
Continuously Married	2.11***	(.26)	1.47***	(.18)	1.21***	(.15)
Divorced/Remarried	.85	(.05)	.49	(.03)	.53	(.03)
Divorced/Unmarried	1.06*	(.09)	.84	(.07)	1.07*	(.09)
Overall Happiness 1980			1.42***	(.22)	1.22***	(.19)
Age					.03*	(.09)
Female					-.04	(-.01)
White					.19	(.02)
Years of Education					-.03	(-.03)
Family Income					.02*	(.09)
Number of Children					-.57*	(-.09)
Stepchild					.23	(.02)
Religiosity					.54***	(.19)
Remarried					.02	(.00)
Cohabited					-.31	(-.03)
Constant	22.15***		19.20***		16.51***	
R^2	.05		.09		.15	
F for R^2 change	17.07***		50.97***		7.56***	

[a] Standardized coefficients in parentheses
[b] Reference category = Unhappily Married
N = 1145
* p<.05   ** p<.01   *** p<.001

Table 4. Regression Coefficients for the Effect of Remaining Unhappily Married on Self-Esteem in 1992[a]

Predictors	Model					
	1		2		3	
Marital Status[b]						
Continuously Married	.89***	(.19)	.71***	(.15)	.62**	(.13)
Divorced/Remarried	.56	(.06)	.45	(.05)	.40	(.04)
Divorced/Unmarried	.93**	(.13)	.86**	(.12)	.97**	(.13)
Overall Happiness 1980			.41**	(.11)	.37**	(.10)
Age					-.02*	(-.08)
Female					.00	(.00)
White					-.13	(-.02)
Years of Education					.17***	(.22)
Family Income					.01**	(.11)
Number of Children					-.22	(-.06)
Stepchild					-.25	(-.03)
Religiosity					.17**	(.10)
Remarried					-.03	(-.00)
Cohabited					.24	(.04)
Constant	18.48***		17.61***		15.17***	
R^2	.02		.03		.12	
F for R^2 change	7.78***		11.48**		10.62***	

[a] Standardized coefficients in parentheses
[b] Reference category = Unhappily Married
N = 1145
* $p<.05$ ** $p<.01$ *** $p<.001$

Table 5. Regression Coefficients for the Effect of Remaining Unhappily Married on Psychological Distress in 1992[a]

Predictors	Model					
	1		2		3	
Marital Status[b]						
Continuously Married	-1.15***	(-.23)	-.54***	(-.14)	-.50**	(-.10)
Divorced/Remarried	.10	(.01)	.32	(.02)	.22	(.02)
Divorced/Unmarried	-.34	(-.04)	-.31	(-.04)	-.47	(-.06)
Psychological Distress 1983			.41***	(.48)	.40***	(.46)
Age					-.02*	(-.09)
Female					.12	(.03)
White					-.38*	(-.05)
Years of Education					-.03	(-.04)
Family Income					-.00	(-.03)
Number of Children					-.15	(-.04)
Stepchild					.16	(.02)
Religiosity					.01	(.00)
Remarried					-.03	(-.01)
Cohabited					-.15	(-.03)
Constant	13.53***		7.87***		9.73***	
R^2	.05		.26		.26	
F for R^2 change	16.14***		286.89***		1.63*	

[a] Standardized coefficients in parentheses
[b] Reference category = Unhappily Married
N = 1085
* p<.05   ** p<.01   *** p<.001

Table 6. Regression Coefficients for the Effect of Remaining Unhappily Married on Overall Health in 1992[a]

Predictors	Model					
	1		2		3	
Marital Status[b]						
Continuously Married	.32***	(.18)	.18**	(.11)	.18*	(.10)
Divorced/Remarried	.33**	(.10)	.20*	(.06)	.15	(.05)
Divorced/Unmarried	.25**	(.10)	.17*	(.07)	.22*	(.09)
Overall Health 1980			.38***	(.36)	.34***	(.33)
Age					-.02**	(-.18)
Female					.01	(.01)
White					-.04	(-.01)
Years of Education					.03**	(.10)
Family Income					.01**	(.11)
Number of Children					.02	(.03)
Stepchild					.03	(.04)
Religiosity					.06	(.02)
Remarried					.09	(.04)
Cohabited					.33	(-.03)
Constant	2.97***		1.75***		1.50***	
R^2	.02		.14		.17	
F for R^2 change	4.93**		161.52***		4.52***	

[a] Standardized coefficients in parentheses
[b] Reference category = Unhappily Married
N = 1141
* $p<.05$ ** $p<.01$ *** $p<.001$

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