Marital Quality and Educational Differences in Divorce

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The risk of divorce is not shared equally across people with different levels of education (Cherlin 2010; Raley and Bumpass 2003). Over the past 30 years, the risk of divorce has increasingly diverged according to educational attainment. Only 36 percent of college educated women will experience a divorce in their lifetime, compared to 60 percent of women with only a high school degree (Raley and Bumpass 2003). The educational divergence in marital stability is typically tracked by educational attainment, although recent research supports the idea that the benefit of education stems more from the process of learning than just degree attainment (Raley, McClendon, and Steidl 2015). Clearly, higher education tends to be protective of marital stability, but why?

Previous research suggests several mechanisms for why education matters for marital stability. One mechanism that is commonly offered emphasizes the links between a college education and future employment opportunities in the labor market, and subsequently higher economic gains (Cherlin 2010; Ono 1999). This theory suggests that economic gains may act dually as a buffer from material strains and as a way to access a comfortable standard of living (Kim 2012). In turn, by being protected from additional material strains, these couples experience fewer major stressors on their marriage and become more likely to enjoy a higher degree of union stability. A second mechanism suggests that the process of obtaining higher education makes couples more adept at working through marital conflict (Harkonen and Dronkers 2006; Martin and Bumpass 1989; Ono 1998). Both the labor market and non-cognitive skills explanations implicitly suggest that marital quality explains educational differences in divorce. But while the mechanism of marital quality is theoretically plausible, it remains largely untested whether relationship quality mediates the link between education and divorce.

It is important to consider different aspects of marital quality that may be important for the persistence of marriages over time, like levels of conflict, intimacy, and care. Prior research has found that college attendance is related to higher levels of affection among married couples, and a reduced likelihood of reporting conflict (Hardie and Lucas 2010). Additionally, commitment to the norm of life-long marriage may be important to the stability of marriages over time. Commitment can influence one’s investment in a marriage and also shape how spouses respond to the quality of their marriage when they encounter marital difficulties (Amato and DeBoer 2001; Amato 1996, Tach and Halpern-Meekin 2012). Marriages do not automatically end when there is conflict, and spouses that divorce do not always report the highest level of marital distress (Amato and DeBoer 2001).

Research Questions

In this spirit, this project asks the following questions: 1) Does marriage quality mediate the link between educational attainment and risk of divorce? 2) Does commitment moderate any existing associations between closeness, care, and conflict and marital stability?

Dataset and Sample

We use the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 as well as Post-Secondary
Transcript Study data to answer these questions. The NLSY97 is a nationally representative sample of 8,984 women and men with an oversample of black and Hispanic people. Respondents were first interviewed in 1997 when they were ages 12-18, and then interviewed annually until 2012. The NLSY very recently released data from the 2014 16th round, when respondents were ages 28-34. (The analyses here include only data up to round 15). The Post-Secondary Transcript Study (PSTRAN), a project led by Chandra Muller at the University of Texas, provides detailed records of the educational experiences of the men and women of the NLSY97. This project collected transcript data from up to 8 postsecondary institutions that NLSY97 participants attended. We merge PSTRAN data with the NLSY97 to obtain precise measures of educational attainment. The analytic sample is restricted to respondents who entered their first marriage no later than the twelfth survey round, and had at least a high school degree at the time of marriage. Ten respondents got divorced before the first survey round and were dropped from the sample. Thirty-four respondents were missing data on all key mediating variables, and were dropped from analysis. The final sample population consists of 2,240 respondents, contributing a total of 14,023 person years.

Measures

Marital dissolution is the outcome of interest in this study. This binary variable indicates whether a respondent’s first marriage ended. We include both legal separations and formal divorces in marital dissolution since few couples that legally separate go on to permanently reconcile (Bumpass et al., 1991; Tumin et al., 2015). The majority of couples that enter legal separation go on to divorce, and most couples that initially reunite go on to subsequently separate (Binstock and Thornton 2003). Within our analytic sample, 511 first marriages ended.

The main independent variable is educational attainment. We used PSTRAN data to create a categorical variable that measures the highest amount of education respondents obtained by the June of the year they first married. The response categories include (1) High school degree, (2) Some college, (3) Associate’s degree, and (4) Bachelor’s degree or more.

The key mediating variables are ordinal measures of marital closeness, care, conflict, and commitment. Questions about closeness, care, and conflict were asked in rounds four through twelve, and the commitment question was asked in rounds eight through twelve. Each variable is measured on a scale of 0 to 10. A higher response indicates better marital quality for closeness, care, and commitment, while for the variable conflict, a low score is preferable. Closeness is measured by the question, “how close do you feel towards your spouse?” Care is measured through the question, “How much do you feel that your spouse cares about you?” Commitment taps “How committed would you say you are to your spouse, all things considered?” Conflict is measured through the question “Overall, what is your relationship with your partner? On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is no conflict and 10 is a lot of conflict, how would you rate your relationship with your partner?” Control variables include race/ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, Other), age at marriage, prior fertility to first marriage, parental education, family structure in early adolescence, and annual earnings.

Method

Analyses will proceed in three parts. First, we conduct lifetable estimates to establish descriptive estimates of dissolution experiences across education groups. This calculates the probability that a first marriage ends, given its survival to a specific duration. Marital duration is calculated by following first marriages from their start date to dissolution or censorship, when they are removed from observation in the survey. Second, we calculate mean differences in relationship quality by education, combining observations in the early years of marriage. While
a honeymoon effect in the early years of marriage is well established, this simple bivariate analysis will help establish whether there is an educational gradient in relationship quality. Third, we will use discrete-time event history analysis to study whether relationship quality explains the educational differences in divorce. This approach is uniquely suited to answering questions about the occurrence and timing of events, and can take advantage of the time-varying relationship quality variables that are in the NLSY97 data. This is a real strength of this study, as other projects investigating relationship quality have often had to rely on marriage quality as measured at one point in time.

**Preliminary Findings**

Table 1 displays lifetable estimates of marital dissolution by education levels. The marriages in this sample are relatively young. The longest duration we observe is 12 years of marriage, and the average duration to separation or censoring is six years. Even with a shorter window of observation, we still observe an educational gradient in marital dissolution. Twenty-six percent of high school degree-holders experience the dissolution of their first marriage within nine years, compared to 23 percent of respondents with some college. By contrast, only seven percent of college graduates have had their marriage end after nine years.

Table 2 shows mean differences in relationship quality by education level. The simple means support the idea of an educational gradient in relationship quality. College graduates report an average level of closeness of 9.58 in the first four years of marriage, while respondents with just a high school education have an average closeness level of 9.20. In fact college graduates consistently report higher levels of closeness, care, and commitment than respondents with less education. High school degree holders report the highest average level of marital conflict at 3.42, while college graduates report the lowest average conflict score of 2.71. We consistently find significant differences for all relationship quality and commitment measures between bachelor degree-holders and the high school educated and those with some college. However, bachelor’s and associate degree holders do not significantly differ in their mean conflict and commitment scores. These preliminary results provide initial evidence that marital quality is a candidate explanation for educational differences in divorce. This provides justification for further investigation of the relationship between marital quality, education, and marital dissolution, using event history analysis.

**Future Steps**

Next steps include handling missing data and estimating event history models using logistic regression. Because marital quality questions were asked in only certain rounds, some respondents were missing data for some of their person years in the sample. We will also estimate event history models predicting divorce with education, with and without time-varying measures of marital quality. Additionally, we will explore the distribution of responses on marital quality and consider different transformations to binary variables. This will facilitate analysis to answer the second research question, that is, whether commitment moderates the effect of closeness, care, or conflict on risk of divorce.

**References:**


**Tables**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Estimates of marital dissolution by education</th>
<th>% Marriages Dissolved</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>3 6 9 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS</td>
<td>3 15 26 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Coll</td>
<td>3 14 23 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assoc.</td>
<td>4 16 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>3 5 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3 13 23 31</td>
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<th>Table 2. Educational differences in Marital Quality in the first four years of marriage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Closeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some Coll</td>
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<td>Assoc.</td>
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<td>Bachelor's</td>
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<td>Person years</td>
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a=difference in means btwn HS and SC significantly different from 0 at p<.05  
b=difference in means btwn HS and AA significantly different from 0 at p<.05  
c=difference in means btwn HS and BA significantly different from 0 at p<.05  
d=difference in means btwn SC and AA significantly different from 0 at p<.05  
e=difference in means btwn SC and BA significantly different from 0 at p<.05  
f=difference in means btwn AA and BA significantly different from 0 at p<.05