

STUDYING MARITAL INTERACTION AND COMMITMENT WITH SURVEY DATA

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Studies based on existing survey data sets have provided a good understanding of the demographic factors that predict marital dissolution. For example, parental divorce, early age at marriage, low socioeconomic status, and various forms of marital heterogamy are consistent predictors of divorce (Bumpass, Martin, and Sweet 1991; Bramlett and Mosher 2001).

Attitudinal variables also are related to marital disruption. For example, religious individuals and people who voice strong support for the norm of lifelong marriage tend to have relatively low rates of divorce (Amato 1996; Heaton and Pratt 1990). Despite these advances, existing data sets have been *less* useful in describing the internal dynamics of marital relationships and people's subjective views of their marriages.

Figure 1 shows the current state of knowledge. Although we know about the distal, demographic and attitudinal factors that provide a context for marital relationships, we know relatively little about the proximal processes that lead some marriages to remain together and other marriages to end in dissolution. Indeed, interpersonal processes within marriage largely represent a "black box" to demographers. In general, survey researchers have been content to let

family and clinical psychologists study these processes, assuming that once we know the demographic predictors of divorce, our work is finished. Indeed, some observers may argue that studying these processes is tautological. That is, once we know that people who marry at young ages are prone to divorce, it is redundant to demonstrate that these relationships are troubled.

(Figure 1 about here)

There are several problems with this line of reasoning. First, not all troubled marriages end in divorce, and many marriages appear to function reasonably well prior to marital disruption (Booth and Amato 2001). Moreover, the various demographic and attitudinal factors that predict divorce may do so for different reasons. For example, people who marry at young ages may be especially likely to engage in infidelity (Booth and Edwards 1985), parental divorce may lead children to reach adulthood with poor interpersonal skills (Amato and Booth 2001), and holding traditional attitudes toward marriage and divorce may inhibit people from leaving troubled relationships (Heaton and Albrecht 1991). To understand why demographic and attitudinal variables predict divorce, we need to know more about the interpersonal mechanisms that mediate these associations.

Although sociologists and demographers have not, in general, focused on the internal workings of marriage, many data sets contain information on marital happiness. For example, items dealing with marital happiness (or satisfaction) appear in the National Survey of Families and Households, Add Health (wave III), and the annual General Social Survey. This variable is important for two reasons. First, longitudinal studies show that marital happiness is a good predictor of divorce (Booth, Johnson, White, and Edwards 1985). Second, marital unhappiness is linked to a variety of problematic outcomes, including inept parenting (Hetherington, 2002),

psychological distress (Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach 2000), and poor physical health--especially among wives (Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton 2001). Nevertheless, items on marital happiness provide only a partial understanding of how people subjectively evaluate their marriages. Moreover, knowing that people are happy or unhappy with their marriages tells us little about the patterns of interaction that serve as precursors to these subjective evaluations.

In this paper, I make two major points. First, I argue that sociologists and demographers should build on the research conducted by family psychologists during the last two decades. Family psychologists--using largely observational methods with small samples--have produced a rich set of constructs related to marital functioning, and many of these constructs are good predictors of divorce. The development of survey-based measures of these constructs would substantially enrich our understanding of marriage. Second, I argue that the construct of marital commitment is underdeveloped, both theoretically and empirically. Moreover, the study of marital commitment may prove to be as central to our understanding of marital quality and stability as the study of marital happiness has been. Although I frame my comments in terms of married couples, the same considerations apply to cohabiting (and perhaps dating) couples.

MARITAL INTERACTION

Most studies of marital interaction are based on observations of married couples discussing a problem in their marriage. Researchers typically videotape these interactions, and teams of independent coders later rate spouses' behaviors using objective coding schemes. These schemes often include categories for communication content (disagreement, showing support), tone of voice, and facial expressions. Some labs also include physiological measures, such as heart rate. The ability to study sequences of behavior makes it possible to identify recurring

patterns of interaction that distinguish happily married couples from unhappily married couples. Moreover, these studies demonstrate that observations of interaction early in marriage can predict subsequent divorce with a reasonably high level of accuracy.

A number of longitudinal studies have shown that the interactions of couples headed for divorce tend to involve more expressions of negative affect than do the interactions of stable couples (Gottman and Notarius, 2000). In fact, during interactions, happily married couples tend to exhibit about five positive behaviors for every negative behavior. Unhappily married couples, in contrast, exhibit about as many negative behaviors as positive behaviors. These results suggest that it takes five positive comments to make up for the damage inflicted by one negative comment. Moreover, distressed couples tend to engage in long chains of reciprocated negativity (for example, responding to anger with anger). Gottman (2002) pointed out that all couples--even happily married couples--engage in cycles of reciprocated negativity. Nondistressed couples, however, frequently use repair attempts to de-escalate negative exchanges. Repair mechanisms include using humor, exchanging information, sharing information about feelings, finding areas of common ground, and appealing to larger expectations about the marriage. De-escalation attempts are most likely to succeed early in a disagreement, when negativity is still at a relatively low level.

For distressed couples reciprocated negativity tends to be an absorbing state--a state that is difficult to exit once entered. Spouses in distressed marriages appear to become so focused on negative affect that they are unresponsive to other possibilities, even when their spouses try to use repair strategies. Moreover, distressed couples (unlike nondistressed couples) tend to escalate (rather than de-escalate) negative affect during conflict episodes. This escalation often reflects a

rejection of influence on the part of one (or both) partners. For example, when one spouse engages in criticism, the second partner may angrily reject the point or engage in counter-criticism. In many distressed marriages, the escalation of negativity during conflict can be viewed as a power struggle between spouses.

Longitudinal research by John Gottman (1994) has identified four negative behaviors that are particularly good predictors of marital disruption. One corrosive behavior involves expressing contempt (e.g., insults, mockery, sarcasm, and hostile humor). Contempt can be communicated through facial expressions and tone of voice, as well as through verbal content. The second behavior is criticism, especially criticism that is harsh in tone. The third behavior is defensiveness, which involves an attempt to ward off or protect one's self from perceived criticism. Defensiveness can take the form of denying responsibility for a problem, engaging in counter-attacks, or "whining." The latter category involves statements like, "Why are you always picking on me? I didn't do anything wrong." The final behavior is "stonewalling" that is, avoiding disagreements by emotionally or physically withdrawing from one's spouse.

Spouses in troubled marriages often exhibit a "demand-withdrawal" or "pursuer-distancer" pattern (Gottman 1994; Hetherington and Kelly 2002). In these marriages, one spouse (generally the wife) is habitually critical of the other spouse's behavior. In response, the other spouse (generally the husband) denies the existence of the problem and physically or emotionally withdraws from the interaction. Withdrawal leads wives to intensify their criticism, resulting in even more withdrawal on the part of husbands. Eventually, many wives grow tired of this routine and become contemptuous of their husbands. Gottman notes that this pattern can be viewed as one in which wives engage in "negative start-up," and husbands refuse to accept influence from

their wives (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson, 1998).

Most observational studies have focused on negative interactions, based on the assumption that these behaviors are better predictors of divorce than are positive interactions. Nevertheless, some observational studies have shown that the provision of social support within marriage (showing affection, expressing agreement, and providing practical assistance) predicts subsequent marital outcomes, even after controlling for negative behaviors (Pasch and Bradbury 1998). Indeed, some researchers believe that existing research has underestimated the importance of positive interactional processes in predicting the long-term success of marriages (Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach 2000).

Although the results of observational studies are intriguing, these data are difficult, time-consuming, and expensive to collect. For example, it may take 6 to 12 months to train a team of coders to rate behaviors with an acceptable level of inter-coder reliability. Furthermore, once trained, it requires about one hour to code about 10 minutes of interaction (Rogge and Bradbury 1999). Although observational methods are ideal for identifying the interpersonal dynamics that predict later marital outcomes, applying these methods on a large scale is not practical.

Given these constraints, some family psychologists have attempted to measure marital behaviors using questionnaire methods, mainly focusing on styles of communication and methods of problem solving. A few longitudinal studies indicate that questionnaire measures of interaction predict subsequent marital outcomes about as well as do observational measures (Hill and Peplau 1998; Larson and Olson 1989). Rogge and Bradbury (1999) directly compared the predictive utility of observational and self-report measures of marital interaction. They found that self-report measures and observational measures were equally successful in predicting

marital happiness and stability over a 4-year period.

In summary, prior research suggests the utility of adapting or developing survey questions to measure constructs such as contempt, criticism, defensiveness, withdrawal, cycles of escalating negative reciprocity, and the pursuer-distancer pattern. Measure of social support and positivity within marriage also may be useful. Few large data sets contain items that measure these constructs. The NSFH contains a short series of items dealing with disagreements and the manner in which couples respond to conflict. The Marital Instability Over the Life Course (Booth, Johnson, White, and Edwards, 1981) contains a series of items on the frequency of conflict, as well as the existence of problems in the marriage. These data sets, however, do not contain items that directly measure the constructs that have emerged from observational studies.

In an attempt to measure some of these interactional dimensions within the context of a social survey, Johnson et al. (2001) included the following items in a telephone survey of 3,344 individuals in Oklahoma and three adjoining states.

1. My spouse criticizes or belittles my opinions, feelings, or desires. (*criticism*)
2. When we argue, one of us withdraws, that is, does not want to talk about it anymore or leaves the scene. (*withdrawal*)
3. Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name calling, or bringing up past hurts. (*escalation of negative reciprocity*)

For these items, response options were *never or almost never* (1), *sometimes* (2), and *frequently* (3). Correlations between these items ranged from .38 to .55.

Table 1 shows the associations between several demographic variables and each of the three measures of negative marital interaction. Note that education was negatively related to criticism but not to escalating negativity or withdrawal. Blacks (compared with Whites) reported more escalating negativity and withdrawal in their marriages but not more criticism. Latinos reported more escalating negativity than did Whites. Age at marriage was associated with less escalating negativity and withdrawal but was not associated with criticism. Duration of marriage was associated only with escalating negativity. These associations indicate that particular demographic variables are linked with certain problematic marital behaviors but not others. In contrast, cohabitation prior to marriage, use of public assistance, and religiosity were associated with all three forms of negative behavior in the expected direction.

(Table 1 about here)

To show the links between these behaviors and marital outcomes, I created a scale of marital quality based on two items, one referring to marital happiness and the other to marital satisfaction ($\alpha = .73$). I created a second scale of perceived marital instability, based on five items that assessed whether people thought their marriage was in trouble, were thinking about divorce, had discussed divorce with their spouses, had discussed divorce with a friend or relative, or had consulted an attorney ($\alpha = .85$).

Table 2 shows the associations between demographic variables and these two marital outcomes, with and without the three negative behaviors included in the equations. Comparing model 1 with model 2 reveals that the negative marital behaviors reduced many of the associations between demographic variables and the marital outcomes. With respect to marital happiness, adding the negative marital behaviors to the model reduced the coefficient for Blacks

by about one-half, and the coefficient for Latinos declined by about one-fourth. The behavioral items completely accounted for the association between prior cohabitation and marital happiness, as well as the association between use of public assistance and marital happiness. The coefficient for religiosity also was reduced substantially. These results indicate that the three negative behavior items accounted for many of the associations between demographic variables and marital happiness.

(Table 2 about here)

The results were comparable for perceived marital instability. The behavioral items accounted for most of the estimated effects of being Black, cohabitation prior to marriage, and using public assistance on marital instability. The coefficients for age at marriage and religiosity also were reduced substantially. Once again, these results suggest that negative marital behaviors help to explain why demographic variables are related to indices of marital quality and stability. It is not possible to interpret each of the individual findings in this paper, and the results in Tables 1 and 2 are suggestive rather than definitive. Nevertheless, these results suggest that the inclusion of a broader range of marital behaviors in statistical models may explain why certain demographic characteristics put people at risk of having unhappy marriages or seeing their marriages end in divorce. More detailed research ultimately may delineate the specific behavioral mechanisms (proximal factors) that link broad demographic factors to problematic (or successful) marital outcomes.

MARITAL COMMITMENT

Marital commitment can be defined as the extent to which people hold long-term perspectives on their marriages, make sacrifices for their relationships, take steps to maintain and

strengthen the cohesiveness of their unions, and stay with their spouses even when their marriages are not rewarding. Commitment implies an obligation to others--an obligation that can be abandoned only under extreme circumstances. Implicit in the notion of marital obligation is the sense that marriage has value that extends beyond the happiness of the individual spouses.

Many researchers define marital quality primarily in terms of marital happiness or satisfaction (Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach 2000; Glenn, 1990). According to this view, marital happiness is the *sine quo non* of a high-quality marriage. Other dimensions of marriage, such as the spending time together, the level of conflict, or perceptions of relationship problems, are *causes* of marital quality rather than *forms* of marital quality. A good argument can be made, however, that commitment is as central to what we mean by marital quality as is happiness. Consider a marriage in which both spouses are reasonably happy, but one spouse decides to leave the marriage because he (or she) has found an even more attractive partner. Most observers would not consider this to be a successful marriage. Now consider a marriage in which both spouses are unhappy with the marriage but want their marriage to work, reject the option of divorce, and decide to attend counseling with the goal of improving the relationship. Most observers probably would consider the second marriage to be in better shape than the first one, despite the fact that spouses in the second marriage are unhappy. It is likely that the current focus among family scholars on marital happiness as the central defining characteristic of a high-quality marriage reflects the culture of expressive individualism and self-growth that has become pervasive in American society since the 1960s (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, 1985). Seen in this light, a focus on commitment as a central feature of marital quality represents a necessary corrective to the individualistic and hedonistic slant of much contemporary research

on marriage.

Exchange theory recognizes that stability and happiness are different relationship dimensions (Levinger, 1965, 1976). According to this perspective, a stable relationship might come about because spouses enjoy one another's company. In this case, the rewards of the relationship facilitate marital cohesion. In contrast, other relationships remain together despite the fact that both partners are unhappy. In these cases, spouses may remain in the marriage because of barriers (e.g., not wanting to give up one's home or standard of living, concerns about one's children, or religious beliefs) or because no viable alternatives are apparent. Some exchange theorists view barriers and the absence of alternatives as factors that promote relationship commitment (Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston 1999). One can question, however, whether it makes sense to say that people are "committed" to relationships only because they feel constrained to remain in them. According to this view, actions that reflect commitment are engaged in willingly and reflect more than the existence of internal or external constraints on leaving the relationship.

Commitment to a relationship requires what psychologist Caryl Rusbult calls *accommodative behavior* (Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, and Cox 1998). Accommodative behavior are actions in which partners sacrifice their short-term well-being for the long-term stability of their relationships. Accommodation can take a variety of forms, such as watching television programs that bore you but entertain your spouse, dealing with unpleasant in-laws, accepting faults in your partner, forgiving your partner for a transgression, or inhibiting an urge to retaliate when your partner criticizes you. People engage in accommodative behavior because they are committed to their relationships--not because they are acting on the basis of short-term

self-interest.

The measurement of commitment is not well developed. Researchers have developed several commitment scales that include items such as, “How likely is it that your relationship will be permanent?” (Lund, 1985) and “To what degree do you feel committed to maintaining your marriage?” (Rusbult et al 1998). These scales are generally highly correlated with measures of relationship happiness, however, and factor analytic studies show that questionnaire items assessing happiness and commitment tend to load on the same factor. These studies demonstrate that commitment is difficult to disentangle from happiness when people’s relationships are progressing smoothly. Under these circumstances, people will say that they are “committed” to their partners because their relationships are rewarding.

It is only when relationships are troubled, and spouses are unhappy with their marriages, that commitment comes into sharp focus. When confronted with unhappiness or tension in a relationship, people can respond in four ways. One possibility is to leave the relationship--a response that reflects the absence of commitment. A second strategy--one that reflects a minimal level of commitment--is to remain in the marriage but to disengage from one’s partner or deny the existence of problems. A third strategy (which reflects a stronger level of commitment) is to stand by one’s partner and optimistically wait, trusting that the relationship eventually will improve. The final strategy, and one that reflects the highest level of commitment, is for couples to work actively on their disagreements with the goal of making their marriages satisfying again. In other words, commitment is reflected primarily in how couples react to stress in their marriages. (See Rusbult et al 1998 for a discussion.)

Some large survey data sets contain items on perceived instability or divorce proneness.

For example, the NSFH includes a series of items on thinking that one's marriage might be in trouble, discussing separation or divorce with one's spouse, and the perceived chances of splitting up. The 20-year panel study designed by Alan Booth and colleagues (Booth, Johnson, White, and Edwards 1981) contains the best measure of its kind: a 13-item scale that assesses cognition (thinking about divorce) and behavior (talking with one's spouse about separation, consulting an attorney, or having a trial separation). This scale is an excellent predictor of divorce: spouses who score in the top 10% of the distribution are eight times more likely to divorce within the next three years than are those in the bottom 50% of the distribution (Booth, Johnson, White, and Edwards 1985). Nevertheless, perceived instability (or divorce proneness) is similar to, but not the same as, marital commitment.

Consider the data in Table 3, which come from the first wave of the study of Marital Instability Over the Life Course in 1980. Marital happiness is based on an 11-item scale and includes items that tap specific aspects of the relationship (happiness with the spouse as a companion, happiness with the sexual relationship) as well as overall evaluations of the relationship. For presentation, I divided this scale into quartiles. The row variable refers to whether respondents have raised the issue of divorce with their spouses during the previous year. Note that when marital happiness is high (in the top half of the distribution) no one reported talking about divorce. (After all, why should they?) In contrast, among those in the bottom quartile, 10% had talked with their spouse recently about divorce. The key question is why the figure is as low as 10%. (The results are nearly identical when I selected thinking about divorce rather than talking about divorce.). Some people may not have wanted to admit that they had discussed divorce. Other individuals felt constrained to stay in their marriages, either because of

barriers or the lack of good alternatives. But other people were not considering divorce because they were committed to their marriages.

(Table 3 about here)

What happened to these relatively unhappy individuals three years later (in 1983)? Some of these people--mainly those who were thinking about divorce--ended their marriages in dissolution. Among those who stayed together, two thirds were still unhappy with their marriages. But one-third were happier at the next interview, and 10% were substantially happier, shifting from the bottom quartile of the happiness distribution to the top 50%. One hypothesis is that unhappily married individuals who remained unhappily married were stuck in their marriages because of perceived barriers or the lack of good alternatives. Correspondingly, those who experienced improvements in happiness may have engaged in accommodative behaviors associated with high levels of commitment. They expressed loyalty and stayed with their partners, waiting for the bad times to pass, or they actively sought solutions to their problems. It is not possible to test these ideas with the existing data. But the hypothesis that commitment can provide an engine, not only to maintain marital stability, but also to recover from periods of unhappiness, is one that could be explored in the future.

Future surveys can measure marital commitment in two ways. First, it should be possible to develop a short sequences of questions that tap people's *feelings* of commitment. Previously developed scales could represent useful starting points, although it will be necessary to distinguish commitment to one's spouse from the existence of barriers to leaving the marriage or the lack of good alternatives. Second, survey items could assess the extent to which spouses engage in accommodative behaviors when dealing with marital disagreements. As noted earlier,

these behaviors (e.g., working to find solutions as opposed to ignoring problems or disengaging from one's partner) can be viewed as indicators of underlying commitment. Because commitment and relationship satisfaction are positively correlated, it would make sense to control for marital happiness in analyses to provide purer estimates of commitment effects.

CONCLUSION

The next generation of survey research on marriage (and cohabitation) would benefit from developing and incorporating measures of relationship interaction and commitment. Observational studies have revealed patterns of interaction that are good predictors of subsequent marital unhappiness and divorce. And the construct of relationship commitment has been underdeveloped, both theoretically and empirically. Incorporating valid and reliable measures of these variables into future data sets should make it possible to describe the behavioral mechanisms that link particular demographic variables to specific marital outcomes. Taking these steps would not only promote a closer dialogue between family demographers and family psychologists, but also provide a stronger basis for interventions to strengthen marriage--an important concern in an era in which promoting marital quality and stability has become an explicit goal of social policy.

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Table 1. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients Showing Associations Between Demographic Variables and Three Negative Forms of Marital Interaction

	<u>Escalating Negativity</u>	<u>Criticism</u>	<u>Withdrawal</u>
Female	-.046	-.050	-.008
Education	-.008	-.027**	-.002
Black	.232***	.089	.283***
Latino	.129*	-.006	.070
Age at marriage	-.006**	.000	-.011***
Duration of marriage	-.006*	.001	-.003
Cohabitation	.124***	.104**	.085*
Government assistance	.247***	.200***	.226**
Religiosity	-.054***	-.072***	-.081***
constant	1.812	1.620	2.224
R squared	.071***	.045***	.051***

$N = 1,920$. Source: Oklahoma Survey of Marriage and Divorce (Johnson et al., 2001).

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

Table 2. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients Showing Associations Between Demographic Variables, Negative Marital Behaviors, and Marital Outcomes

	<u>Marital happiness</u>		<u>Marital Instability</u>	
	<u>Model 1</u>	<u>Model 2</u>	<u>Model 1</u>	<u>Model 2</u>
<i>Demographic variables</i>				
Female	-.126**	-.167***	.053	.094
Education	.015	-.003	-.023	-.008
Black	-.435***	-.216*	.336**	.138
Latino	-.375***	-.298**	-.036	-.120
Age at marriage	-.006	-.011**	-.017***	-.012**
Duration of marriage	-.020***	-.021***	.004	.006
Duration squared	.001***	.001***	-.001**	-.001***
Cohabitation	-.117*	.017	.225***	.109*
Government assistance	-.292***	-.023	.363***	.115
Religiosity	.207***	.130***	-.185***	-.117***
<i>Negative marital behaviors</i>				
Escalating negativity	---	-.383***	---	.445***
Criticism	---	-.506***	---	.385***
Withdrawal	---	-.290***	---	.218***
constant	-.113	1.998	1.033	-.874
R squared	.065***	.348***	.051***	.344***

$N = 1,920$. Source: Oklahoma Survey of Marriage and Divorce (Johnson et al., 2001).

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

Table 3. Percentage of Respondents Who Discussed Divorce with Their Spouses During the Previous Year By Level of Marital Happiness

		<u>Marital Happiness</u>			
		<u>Low</u>	<u>Below Average</u>	<u>Above Average</u>	<u>High</u>
Discussed Divorce	No	90	98	99	100
	Yes	10	2	1	0
	Total	100	100	100	100

N = 2,034. Each marital happiness category contains about one-fourth of the sample. Source: Marital Instability Over the Life Course study (Booth, Johnson, White, and Edwards, 1981).

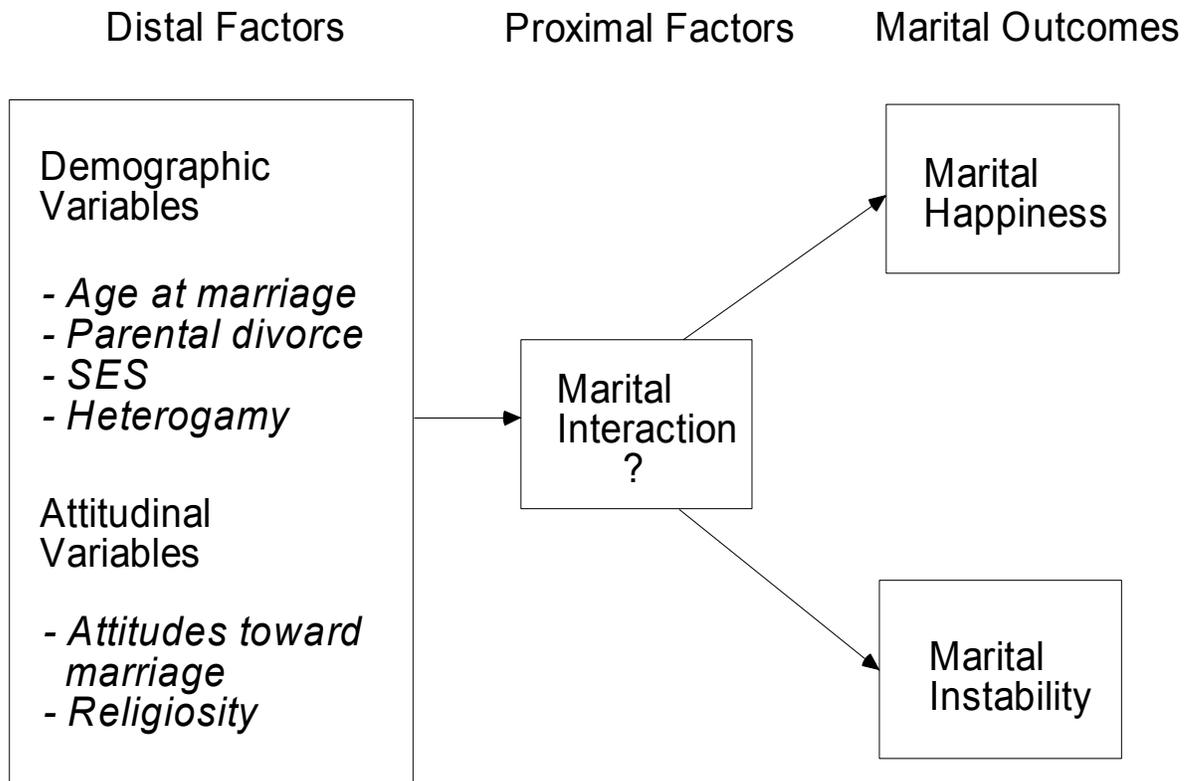


Figure 1. Distal Factors, Proximal Factors, and Marital Outcomes