Misconceptions About The U-Shaped Curve Of Marital Satisfaction Over The Life Course

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ABSTRACT

There are three misconceptions about the empirical generalization that there is a curvilinear relationship between marital satisfaction and the family life cycle. These misconceptions are that the generalization is based primarily on cross-sectional data, the slope of the U-shaped curve is steep and dramatic, and change in marital satisfaction over the life course is primarily a function of changes in parenting. These misconceptions are reexamined using longitudinal research. Implications for family life educators and researchers are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

There has been considerable interest over the past three decades in changes that occur in marital satisfaction over the life course of marriage. Since 1970, a considerable amount of evidence has accumulated to indicate that there is a curvilinear, or U-shaped, pattern for marital satisfaction over the family life cycle (Anderson, Russell, & Schumm, 1983; Burr, 1970; Gilford and Bengston, 1979; Olson, McCubbin, Barnes, Larsen, Muxen, & Wilson, 1983; Rollins and Cannon, 1974; Rollins and Feldman, 1970). In other words, there is a significant decrease in marital satisfaction in the early stages of the marriage. Marital satisfaction seems to be lowest during the time that most families have adolescents in the home, and then there is an increase in satisfaction after the children leave the home. When this pattern is illustrated on a line graph, with marital satisfaction on the Y-axis and stage of the family life cycle on the X-axis, the curvilinear line is U-shaped.

Based upon this accumulation of research, family scholars have generally concluded that this empirically derived finding represents reality for the majority of marriages. In his 1990 decade review of the marital research, Glenn concluded "that there is, or recently has been, a curvilinear relationship between family stage and some aspects of marital quality is about as close to being certain as anything ever is in the social sciences" (1990, p. 823).

Despite this empirical evidence, the pattern of marital satisfaction over the life cycle is not always followed by family life educators and researchers. This criticism generated by Mattessich and Hill (1987), has been extended by other scholars, who argue that the model is characterized by gradual change and adjustment over time. The timing and nature of family life cycle changes vary across different cultures and family structures. For example, some scholars argue that the timing of family life cycle stages is influenced by factors such as individual life-span development, social norms, and cultural values.

Another criticism is that the stage of the family life cycle to another is not a discrete event, but a process characterized by gradual change and adjustment over time. Despite these criticisms of the developmental perspective, family life educators have continued to use the family life cycle as a framework for understanding marital satisfaction over the life course. No matter what the family life cycle theory, it seems that the interaction from a developmental perspective remains.

Although the U-shaped pattern of marital satisfaction over the life course is substantial, there is much of the information that family life educators lack confidence in college students about the course of marital satisfaction. Specifically, there are three misconceptions about the U-shaped curve of marital satisfaction that family life educators lack confidence in. It is believed that it is based on cross-sectional data, the slope of the U-shaped curve is steep and dramatic, and change in marital satisfaction over the life course is primarily a function of changes in parenting.

Key words: marital satisfaction, longitudinal research

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Despite this empirical evidence, the theoretical notion of examining the pattern of marital satisfaction over the family life cycle has been criticized by family scholars for many years. This criticism generally falls on the family development perspective, which is the basis of the concept of the family life cycle. As summarized by Mattessich and Hill (1987), many of these criticisms concern the applicability of a single modal life cycle to a complex society that has a variety of pathways of family development. For example, single-parent families and childless couples represent family structures that do not fit the stages of the family life cycle (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). The timing and sequencing of family transitions also do not follow the traditional family life cycle. Sometimes childbirth precedes marriage or a couple may delay childbirth until middle age. Thus, with the variations in family structure and transitions, the argument is that it is impractical, as well as unwise, to conceptualize a normative pattern in the family life cycle.

Another criticism is that the stages are based primarily on parental status and childrearing responsibilities, while ignoring other developmental aspects of family members (Mattessich & Hill, 1987). With a preoccupation on parenting, other issues, such as individual life-span development and occupational careers, get ignored as possible influences on family development. In a sense, there is confusion regarding the different levels of analysis in the developmental perspective, with developmental change in the family influenced by developmental issues at several levels of the family and its members (Aldous, 1990; Rodgers & White, 1993). Also, some scholars argue that the transition from one stage of the family life cycle to another is not a discrete event, but rather a process characterized by gradual change and adjustment (Klein & White, 1996).

Despite these criticisms of the developmental perspective, the idea of tracking change in marital satisfaction over the family life cycle remains popular. Virtually every family studies, family science, and family sociology textbook discusses change of marital satisfaction over the life course. Most textbooks contain graphs from one of the prominent studies demonstrating the U-shaped pattern. Moreover, almost all family textbooks are organized by chapter according to the family life cycle. No matter what theoretical orientation is used in the textbook to examine the family system, it seems that the idea of examining family interaction from a developmental perspective remains a prominent tradition.

Although the U-shaped pattern of marital satisfaction remains popular, there is substantial misunderstanding about this empirical generalization. Indeed, much of the information that family life educators teach their high school and college students about the course of marital satisfaction over the family life cycle is misleading. Specifically, there are three misconceptions that seem to dominate discussions about the U-shaped curve of marital satisfaction. First, some scholars and family life educators lack confidence in the U-shaped pattern because they believe that it is based on cross-sectional data. Second, the slope of the U-shaped curve is perceived to be steep and dramatic. Finally, changes in marital satisfaction over the life course are believed to be primarily a function of changes in parenting responsibilities.
A close examination of empirical research suggests that each of these perceptions lack validity. By carefully analyzing available research, a more accurate view of marital satisfaction over the life course becomes possible.

MISCONCEPTION #1: THE MISCONCEPTION OF CROSS-SECTIONAL DATA

The first misconception is that the curvilinear relationship between marital satisfaction and stages in the family life cycle cannot fully be trusted because the evidence is based on cross-sectional data. In 1975, Spanier, Lewis, and Cole first warned family scholars that this empirical generalization had been based largely on cross-sectional research; therefore, the ability to imply change in marriage over the family life cycle was severely limited. This was especially true when studying the later stages of marriage. Specifically, they mentioned that cohort effects were a problem with cross-sectional research, suggesting the possibility that because older couples were socialized differently, they may be prone to rate their marriages higher than later cohorts of couples. They also discussed the possibility that there may be age-related response bias, where the aging process leads people to rate their marriages higher, independent of actual changes in the marriage. Finally, Spanier et al. (1975) suggested that higher scores among older couples might be a function of cognitive dissonance, where couples that have been married longer report higher levels of marital satisfaction as a means to justify their long-term commitment to the relationship.

Although these concerns were certainly valid at one time, they are now outdated. The reality is that researchers have responded to the call for longitudinal research (Schram, 1979) and have conducted a number of longitudinal studies that have examined change in marital satisfaction over the family life cycle. There are at least seven longitudinal studies that have investigated changes in marital satisfaction during the early stages of the marriage. Four of these study small samples (Beach & O'Leary, 1993; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Kurdek, 1993, 1999; Lindahl, Clements, & Markman, 1998). Another small longitudinal study compares the course of the relationship of gay and lesbian couples with married couples (Kurdek, 1998).

There are two longitudinal studies that utilize large samples. In an early study, a group of 1000 engaged couples were first studied in 1937 and 1938. They were re-contacted after three to five years of marriage, with about 600 couples participating in the second wave of the study. They were contacted a third time in the middle 1950s, when the couples had been married between 16 and 20 years. A little over 400 couples participated in the final wave (Pineo, 1961). More recently, a national probability 8-year longitudinal study of marital relationships interviewed over 1000 married individuals in 1980, 1983, and 1988 (Johnson, Amoloza, & Booth, 1992).

There are two longitudinal studies that have examined marital quality after the last child leaves home. One study interviewed Chicago married adults in 1972 and 1976 (Menaghan, 1983). The other, (White & Edwards, 1990), analyzed 1983 and 1988 data from the before-mentioned longitudinal national probability sample to examine changes in marital satisfaction after launching their last child.

Thus, there are a number of longitudinal studies providing evidence against a U-shaped pattern of marital satisfaction over the life course.
sample to examine change in marital satisfaction among those couples that launched their last child.

Thus, there are a number of longitudinal studies to test the validity of the U-shaped pattern of marital satisfaction over the life course.

MISCONCEPTION #2: THE U-SHAPED CURVE IS STEEP

The longitudinal studies provide empirical support that there is a curvilinear relationship between marital satisfaction and the family life cycle. The studies have consistently found that marital satisfaction decreases during the early years of marriage. For example, the Karney and Bradbury (1997) study used four different measures of marital satisfaction to analyze change in marital satisfaction during the first four years of marriage. They found that there was a linear decline in satisfaction over the course of the four years. Likewise, Kurdek (1999) studied 93 couples over the first ten years of marriage and found that there was a significant decrease in marital satisfaction. Kurdek (1998) found that gay and lesbian couples experienced a decline in marital satisfaction that was similar to heterosexual couples.

The larger studies also found a decrease in satisfaction during the early years of marriage. Pineo (1961) reported that there was a significant decrease in marital satisfaction over the first 16 to 20 years of marriage, and Johnson, Amoloza, and Booth (1992) found that there was a significant decrease in marital happiness in the early years of marriage.

Although there are only two studies, there is also longitudinal evidence for the hypothesized “upturn” of the U-shaped pattern of marital satisfaction. White and Edwards' (1990) analysis of the national probability data indicated that launching the last child had a statistically significant positive effect on marital happiness. This effect was strongest immediately after the last child left home. Menaghan’s (1983) study provides partial support for the hypothesis. She differentiated marital quality into two dimensions: perceived equity between husbands and wives and affection-fulfillment. She found that the departure of the youngest child was associated with an increase in equity, but it wasn't related to change in affection-fulfillment.

There is one long-term longitudinal study that has been cited as evidence against a U-shaped pattern. Because of the conclusions that the authors of the study make, it is important to examine the study carefully. The study, one of Harvard male students, began in 1943, and biennial questionnaires were sent to these men through 1989. They completed a marital adjustment scale in 1954, 1967, 1972, 1983, and 1989 (Vaillant and Vaillant, 1993). Their wives responded to similar questions in 1967, 1975, and 1987. Data are available from 51 couples that responded to all relevant questionnaires and were still married. They had been married an average of 42 years when they were last interviewed. Marital satisfaction was measured by the Grant Study Marital Adjustment Scale, which included four items dealing with disagreements, marital stability, sexual adjustment, and consideration of divorce.
Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) found that there was little change in marital satisfaction over the 35 years of the study. There was no change for the men, while the women experienced an "extremely modest" decrease in satisfaction during the later stages of their marriages. (1993, p. 238). It is unclear from their report whether or not the decrease was statistically significant. At the end of their article, Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) concluded that their findings "failed to support the importance of the family life cycle to marital satisfaction", and that "the U-curve of marital satisfaction may be an artifact of retrospective and cross-sectional study" (1993, p. 238).

It is important to note, though, that this study is not a valid test of the impact of family life cycle stage on marital satisfaction. The study began a decade after most of the men married, and the wives didn't participate until 24 years after the men were first studied in college, suggesting that most of them had probably been married at least 20 years. Hence, the significant decline in marital satisfaction would have already occurred in the marriages before the couples began participating in the longitudinal studies. In a sense, the study is really an examination of mid and later-life marriages, but there is insufficient information about the couples to pinpoint where they are in their marital careers at any point in the study.

The results of these longitudinal studies, with the noted exception of the Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) study, are consistent with the U-shaped pattern of marital satisfaction over the life course; however, a closer examination of the results of these studies indicate that the changes that these marriages experience over time are very modest. For example, Kurdek's (1993) analysis of the first four years of his study of newly married couples indicated that the average decrease in marital satisfaction among wives was 1.80, on a scale ranging from 0 to 50. The husbands had an average decrease of 1.75 during the same time interval. In another study, White and Edwards' (1990) analysis of the impact of launching the last child on marital satisfaction found that, although the effect was statistically significant, it was only a 1.10 point increase on the marital happiness scale. With the scale ranging from 11 to 33, an increase of 1.10 would have to be considered very modest. Although it is true that scores on marital satisfaction scales are skewed to the higher end, thus limiting the scales' variability, it is still noteworthy that the differences in scores across time are small.

Karney and Bradbury also found that the decline in marital quality, using four different measures, was modest during the first four years of marriage. They reported that husbands' and wives' mean scores declined "between 3% and 4% of the total range of each measure each year (1997, p. 1083).

This lack of dramatic change can also be empirically explored by examining the degree of stability in marital satisfaction scores over time. Change in marital relationships over the life course is generally determined by comparing statistical means between different points of data collection. However, Johnson and his colleagues (1992) differentiate between developmental change in marital satisfaction and stability of satisfaction scores over time. The former refers to changes in mean levels of marital satisfaction, while the latter refers to the correlation between satisfaction scores at one point of time for couples and at another point of time. Analyzing the stability (1992) found that the adjusted, or corrected, level of marital happiness over an 8 year period ranged from stability and consistency of marital happiness remained high, regardless of the length of marriage.

Wallace and Gotlib (1990) also examined the impact of family life cycle stage on marital satisfaction among couples that were newly married at the time of their marriage. They reported that husbands' and wives' mean scores declined "between 3% and 4% of the total range of each measure each year (1997, p. 1083)."

Indeed, a high level of continuity characterizes marital relationships. Unhappy marriages are long period of time. In some cases these relationships end, but the relationship remains chronically unhappy or satisfying relationships generally continue for a long period of time. Although there are adjustments necessary in the face of stresses, these marriages are able to accommodate these adjustments and maintaining a satisfying relationship.

From a theoretical perspective, systems theory would suggest that relationships are characterized by relative stability and continuity. During the establishment of a new system, the basic patterns of interaction and evaluation of the relationship are organized, the system develops a sense of stability. Thereafter, even when stresses and new situations occur, the basic patterns of interaction and evaluation remain relatively stable. This pattern of stability of marital satisfaction is consistent with systems theory's focus on transitions and change. Indeed, the pattern of stability and continuity in marital relationships over the life course stands in contrast to the perspective's focus on transitions and change.
correlation between satisfaction scores at different points in time. A high
correlation would indicate there was high stability, meaning that a score of marital
satisfaction at one point of time for couples was a good predictor of satisfaction at a
later point of time. Analyzing the stability of satisfaction scores, Johnson et al.
(1992) found that the adjusted, or corrected, correlation coefficients for marital
happiness over an 8 year period ranged from .94 to .89, indicating a high level of
stability and consistency of marital happiness. Moreover, the levels of stability
remained high, regardless of the length of marriage among the couples.

Wallace and Gotlib (1990) also found substantial continuity in marital
satisfaction among couples that were new parents. They found that the best
predictor of marital satisfaction six months after the birth of the first child was the
level of marital satisfaction before the child was born. Prebirth marital satisfaction
accounted for 43% of the variance for the husbands and 42% for the wives.

This pattern of stability of marital satisfaction over time seems to
continue throughout the course of the marriage. Cole (1984) reported that the
strongest predictor of marital satisfaction in later life is the couple’s level of
satisfaction in the early years of the marriage. Moreover, after finding few
differences between marital relations at mid- and later-life, Ade-Ridder (1985, p.
233) concluded “patterns established during the middle years are likely to persist in
the later years.”

Indeed, a high level of continuity in marital satisfaction generally
characterizes marital relationships. Unhappy marriages tend to be unhappy over a
long period of time. In some cases these relationships end up in divorce; in others,
the relationship remains chronically unhappy over several decades. Likewise,
satisfying relationships generally continue happy over the course of the marriage.
Although there are adjustments necessary when encountering transitions and
stresses, these marriages are able to accommodate to these situations while
maintaining a satisfying relationship.

From a theoretical perspective, the concept of homeostasis from family
systems theory would suggest that relationships are characterized by considerable
continuity. During the establishment of a new family system, patterns of interaction
and subjective evaluations of the relationship are developed. Once these patterns
are organized, the system develops a sense of equilibrium, or homeostasis. Thereafter,
even when stresses and new situations are introduced into the system,
the basic patterns of interaction and evaluation remain remarkably unyielding to
substantial change. The introduction of significant transitions, such as the birth of a
child, the launching of a child, or retirement, may create some fluctuation in the
system, but after a period of adjustment, the system will generally return back to its
homeostatic patterns. Consequently, it is reasonable to understand why there is
relative stability and continuity in marital relationships over the family life cycle.

The theoretical emphasis of homeostasis on continuity in marital
satisfaction over the life course stands in contrast to the family development
perspective’s focus on transitions and change. However, the results of the
longitudinal studies suggest that both perspectives offer insight into the course of
marital satisfaction over time. Indeed, the processes of change and stability are not
mutually exclusive in family systems. Rather, marital relationships over time are
characterized by the dual dynamics of morphogenesis, or change, and homeostasis (Olson, et al., 1983). In complementary ways, the family development perspective helps us understand many of the changes that occur in marital satisfaction over the family life cycle, while the systems concept of homeostasis helps us understand why these changes are generally modest, with marriages characterized by substantial continuity.

Despite research that suggests only modest change in marital satisfaction throughout the family life cycle, graphical presentations of the data in many of the studies on marital satisfaction over the life course generally depict a dramatic decrease in marital satisfaction followed by an equally striking increase after the children leave home. For example, Olson and his colleagues' (1983) national cross-sectional study of families is one of the most widely cited cross-sectional studies that give empirical support for the U-shaped pattern, and the graph that was created to illustrate the finding has been reproduced in several textbooks. It suggests a substantial decline early in marriage and a dramatic improvement later in the life course; the slopes are quite steep. However, a closer examination of the graph reveals that it is scaled in such a way to emphasize the slopes; the range of the graph is only from 49 to 54. If the graph used the entire range of the marital satisfaction scale, the U-shaped pattern would be much more realistic. This is especially important considering that Olson et al. (1983) found that stage in the family life cycle explained only one percent of the variance change in marital satisfaction. Even though the authors stress in the text that the explained variance is minimal, the graph depicts a more dramatic impact.

There are other studies whose graphs have also exaggerated the slope of the U-shaped curve (Gilford & Bengtson, 1979; Vaillant & Vaillant, 1993). The point is that using graphs that "zoom" into the data to better illustrate the statistically significant changes in scores take the findings out of context. The result is that readers are left with the impression that marital satisfaction changes dramatically over the life course, rather than understanding that the results of the study point towards only modest change and relative continuity in satisfaction over time.

MISCONCEPTION #3: CHANGE IN MARITAL SATISFACTION IS A FUNCTION OF CHANGES IN CHILDRearing

Even though longitudinal research indicates that changes in marital satisfaction over the life course are modest, those changes that have been found have generally been attributed by family scientists to change in parenting responsibility (Aldous, 1990). Because the U-shaped pattern of marital satisfaction is linked with family development theory, it has generally been assumed by family scientists that changes in marital satisfaction over time is due to transitions from one stage of the family life cycle to another. Moreover, the transitions in family development are usually marked by changes in childrearing responsibilities. Hence, the theoretical explanations for the U-shaped curve over the life course have been based primarily on parenting issues.

However, longitudinal studies suggest that marital satisfaction during the early years of the marriage is linked with negative marital satisfaction (Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983; Levy-Shiff, 1994), and those couples that are becoming parents. The control groups.

Longitudinal studies that include only couples without children have found no differences between couples transitioning from childless to parenthood. An analysis of the 8-year national longitudinal study of married individuals who became parents during the marriage (Olson, et al., 1983), with those who remained childless. There was a significant decline in marital quality in both groups, but the change in marital quality between the two groups. This suggests that couples with children have a negative effect on marital quality.

Other longitudinal studies have found contradictory results. For example, Olson and his colleagues (1983) found that there were no differences in marital quality between the two groups of married individuals who became parents during the marriage. In addition, Kurdek (1993) reported that women who become parents had a greater decline in marital quality than their nonparent counterparts. Moreover, these studies reported greater declines in marital satisfaction than childless couples. Indeed, these studies reported greater declines in marital satisfaction than childless couples. Moreover, these couples reported slightly
However, longitudinal studies suggest that the decline in marital satisfaction during the early years of the marriage is not a function of becoming a parent. A number of longitudinal studies have found that becoming a parent is linked with negative marital satisfaction (Belsky, Lang, & Rovine, 1985; Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983; Levy-Shtff, 1994); however, these studies only follow those couples that are becoming parents. The studies do not include childless control groups.

Longitudinal studies that include control groups have generally found no differences between couples transitioning to parenthood and comparable childless couples. An analysis of the 8-year national probability sample compared married individuals who became parents during a three year period, (1980 to 1983), with those who remained childless. White and Booth (1985) found no differences in marital quality between the two groups. That is, the transition to parenthood did not have an independent negative effect on marital satisfaction.

Other longitudinal studies have found similar results. A longitudinal study of newlyweds during the first year of marriage found similar decreases in marital quality between new parents and childless couples (McHale and Huston, 1985). An expansion of the McHale and Huston (1985) study also found no differences in marital quality between the two groups (MacDermid, Huston, & McHale, 1990). In addition, Kurdek (1993) reported no differences in the decline in marital quality over a four-year period between those couples who became parents and those who did not. Menaghan's (1983) longitudinal study also found that there were no differences in marital quality between the two groups over a four-year time interval. Lindahl, Clements, and Markman (1998) reported that parents and nonparent couples had similar declines in marital satisfaction over the first nine years of marriage. Finally, Karney and Bradbury's (1997) four-year longitudinal study of newlywed couples did not find any differences in the trajectory of marital satisfaction between the two groups. One study, however, found that new parents had a greater decline in marital quality than childless couples (Cowan, Cowan, Herning, Garrett, Coyish, Curtis-Boles, and Boles, 1985). In another study, Ryder (1973) found that wives that became mothers experienced more decline in marital satisfaction than childless wives. However, there were no differences between the two groups of husbands.

These findings, although not unequivocal, suggest that the decline in marital satisfaction early in marriage is not due primarily to parenthood. Overall, there were seven longitudinal studies, including one with a national probability sample, which found no differences between new parents and childless couples. On the other hand, there was only one study that found that both new parents experienced more decline in marital satisfaction, and one study that found only new mothers to report greater declines in marital satisfaction.

These findings do not suggest that there were no differences in the marriages of the new parents and the childless couples (Belsky & Pensky, 1988). Indeed, these studies reported greater decline in joint activities among the new parents, as well as less cohesion among these marriages (Kurdek, 1993). Moreover, these couples reported slightly more problems and disagreements.
In addition, new parents generally assumed a more traditional division of labor (MacDermid, et al., 1990). However, the bulk of the evidence suggests that there were no differences in marital satisfaction, per se, between parents and childless couples, indicating that becoming a parent does not lead to decreases in marital satisfaction.

These findings that all relationships experience a decline in satisfaction during the first few years of marriage, regardless of parental status, suggests that there is a "duration effect". That is, there is a natural decline in marital satisfaction after the "honeymoon period". Developmentally, it is impossible to maintain the affective intensity of the early stages of the relationship; consequently, there is a natural decline in satisfaction. Moreover, greater familiarity with spouse, which comes with extended interaction, leads to a more realistic appraisal of a partner's positive and negative behaviors and characteristics. Hence, there is typically a decline in their evaluation of the relationship during the early years of marriage, regardless of the parenting status.

It is also commonly assumed that the low part of the U-shaped curve is due to the parental stresses of rearing adolescent children. Indeed, the bottom of the curve coincides with the stage of the family life cycle when there are adolescent children in the home. However, there is some evidence from longitudinal research that suggests that other factors, in addition to the presence of adolescents in the home, are accountable for decreases in marital satisfaction during this time. Using data from 129 couples who were interviewed twice over a 12 month period, Steinberg and Silverberg, (1987) found that, as predicted, distance in the relationship between parents and same-sex adolescent children at Time-1 was a significant predictor of lower marital satisfaction at Time-2. However, wives' concerns about personal midlife identity issues also predicted subsequent lower levels of marital satisfaction. These findings suggest that parents' individual developmental issues are also important influences of changes in marital quality over the life course. Although other longitudinal studies that examine change in marital satisfaction during children's adolescence are not available, cross-sectional research (Aldous, 1996; Orbuch, House, Mero, Webster, 1996) suggests that couples' employment and economic conditions also have an influence on marital satisfaction during this period of the family life cycle.

The two studies which examine the "upturn" of the U-shaped curve (Menaghan, 1983; White & Edwards, 1999) demonstrate the impact of a parenting transition on marital satisfaction. However, there is no longitudinal research that addresses other individual and relational sources of change in mid-life marriages. Consequently, although research indicates that launching children has a positive effect on marital satisfaction, we still have little understanding about its relative effect on change in marital satisfaction.

SUMMARY

A careful examination of the longitudinal research on marital satisfaction over the life course indicates that there is a U-shaped pattern. There are consistent results among a number of studies indicating that marital satisfaction declines during the early years of marriage, but increases after children leave home.

However, this generalization must be balanced by the fact that the slope of the U-shape curve is fairly flat, indicating that the interpretation of the results from these longitudinal studies is not always supported by research.

Rather than focuses exclusively on the decline in marital satisfaction during the early years of marriage, we must understand it as a form of "homeostasis", and not simply the result of becoming a parent. Instead, marital relationships are characterized by continuity, in addition to change, also have development over the life course.

It is important that family life educators and researchers examine the U-shaped pattern of marital satisfaction over the life course and provide more accurate information to their students. The information contained in family textbooks is likely to perpetuate these misconceptions. Also, family life educators must address these misconceptions during their classroom lessons.

The implications of teaching these stereotypical ideas are significant. High school, college, or community education programs must address the decline in marital satisfaction as a normal part of the life cycle. However, it is important to recognize that the decline in marital satisfaction is primarily a function of the demands and stresses of parenting, and not simply the result of becoming a parent. Therefore, it is necessary to address couples' attitudes about having children and the impact of these attitudes on their decision to have children or not.

The findings suggesting marital satisfaction by continuity, in addition to change, also have implications for educators. The concept of homeostasis suggests that relationships are crucial in developing a stable state.
are consistent results among a number of longitudinal studies that marital satisfaction declines during the early years of marriage. Consistent with the U-shaped pattern, there is also evidence that marital satisfaction improves after children leave home.

However, this generalization must be tempered by substantial evidence that the slope of the U-shape curve is fairly small. Hence, the most accurate interpretation of the results from these longitudinal studies is that marital satisfaction over the life course is best characterized by a shallow U-shaped curve. Any suggestion of dramatic changes in marital satisfaction over the life course is not supported by research.

Rather than focuses exclusively on change, marital relationships over the life course are best understood as demonstrating processes of change, or morphogenesis, and homeostasis. Marital relationships tend to adapt to changes in life circumstances, yet they are constrained by an underlying tendency towards continuity. Hence, the modest nature of the U-shaped curve could be interpreted as demonstrating the homeostatic nature of marital relationships.

Finally, declines in marital satisfaction during the early years of marriage should not be readily attributed to the presence of children. New parents and couples who remain childless generally experience similar changes in marital satisfaction during the early years of marriage. Moreover, limited evidence suggests that the adolescent stage of children is not the only significant reason for lower marital satisfaction during that stage of the life course.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY LIFE EDUCATORS

It is important that family life educators fully understand the realities of the U-shaped pattern of marital satisfaction over the life course so that they can provide more accurate information to their students. Unfortunately, the information contained in family textbooks is likely to perpetuate some of the misconceptions of this empirical generalization. Also, family life educators have often perpetuated these misconceptions during their classroom lectures.

The implications of teaching these misconceptions to students, whether they be high school, college, or community-based, are significant. The misconception that the decline in marital satisfaction in the early years of marriage is primarily a function of becoming a parent can potentially have a negative influence on couples' attitudes about having children. For example, I once had a student who, after reading about this subject in a family textbook, asked me, "Why would a couple want to have children when kids mess up a marriage so badly?"

Likewise, it would be unfortunate for students to learn that the cause of marital struggles during the middle years is fundamentally the presence of adolescent children in the home. Such a conclusion scapegoats the children while ignoring the many issues that face mid-life adults and mid-life marriages.

The findings suggesting marital relationships are generally characterized by continuity, in addition to change, also have important implications for family life educators. The concept of homeostasis suggests that the early months and years of a relationship are crucial in developing a satisfying relationship, with these early
patterns of interaction and sentiments becoming relatively stable elements of the marital system throughout the life course. Although it is also important to teach students about the developmental stresses and challenges that are necessary in the adjustment to marital transitions, these adjustments need to be placed in the context of a homeostatic relationship. Consequently, students need to be taught the importance of establishing fulfilling patterns of interaction during the beginning stages of their relationships.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS**

What new challenges lie ahead for marital researchers? One fruitful direction would be to go beyond the concept of marital satisfaction to explore how some of the complex processes of the marital relationship change over time. For example, how does time, as well as specific role transitions, affect the balance of power in the relationship? How does the meaning and expression of love change in a relationship over time? How do patterns of communication and conflict resolution change as the couple ages? In a sense, the research question changes from "How does marital satisfaction change over time?" to "How does the marital relationship change over the course of life?" Although over 100 longitudinal studies have examined marital relationships (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), virtually all of them used marital satisfaction or divorce as the dependent variable. Few studies have addressed longitudinal changes in other aspects of marital relationships. The exception is the research that examines the effect of the transition to parenthood on the marital relationship (Belsky and Pensky, 1988), which has investigated other dependent variables, such as joint activities, division of labor, and conflict. Research on other transitions should follow this trend.

Second, rather than trying to summarize the marital experience for all couples, researchers would do well to explore variations in change and stability of marital relationships over the life course. Recently, Karney and Bradbury (1995; 1997) have introduced the use of growth curve analysis to examine individual trajectories of marital satisfaction over the life course. This technique uses multivariate data to estimate parameters of change of individuals before addressing variability in change between individuals. The determination of individual trajectories will provide a much better understanding of change than simply comparing overall group means.

Third, although a substantial amount of longitudinal research has examined the early years of marriage, little longitudinal research has addressed marriage in mid and latter life. Specific to the U-shaped pattern of marital satisfaction, only two studies have looked at the "upturn" portion of the U-shaped curve. Longitudinal research is needed to study marriage during the time that children are adolescents, and more research is needed to replicate the earlier longitudinal studies that have examined the effect of launching children on the marital relationship.

There are now a number of longitudinal changes in marital satisfaction observed in life over time. Researchers need to be taught the importance of establishing fulfilling patterns of interaction during the beginning stages of their relationships.
Finally, virtually all of the longitudinal research has studied middle-class white samples. Very little is known about the developmental course of marriages among minority populations. Longitudinal research is needed among these groups.

CONCLUSION

There are now a number of longitudinal studies that have examined changes in marital satisfaction over the life course. These studies provide empirical support for a shallow U-shaped curve. Indeed, the longitudinal research suggests that marital satisfaction is characterized by substantial continuity over the life course, with only modest changes. Changes that do occur in marital satisfaction are not primarily a function of parenting responsibilities, especially during the early years of marriage. Hopefully, the clarification of these research findings will help family life educators provide more accurate information to students and the public.

REFERENCES


