



Determinants of marital quality in an arranged marriage society

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a uniquely large number of items on marital quality, this study explores the determinants of marital quality in Chitwan Valley, Nepal. Marital quality is measured with five dimensions identified through exploratory factor analysis, comprising satisfaction, communication, togetherness, problems, and disagreements. Gender, education, spouse choice, and marital duration emerge as the most important determinants of these dimensions of marital quality. Specifically, men, those with more schooling, those who participated in the choice of their spouse, and those who have been married longer have higher levels of marital quality. By contrast, caste, occupation, age at marriage, and number of children have little to no association with marital quality. However, while we identify key determinants of marital quality in this context, the majority of variation in marital quality remains unexplained.

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1. Introduction

Marital quality is an important aspect of family life that shapes well-being. Greater marital quality is associated with less depression (Williams, 2003), better self-rated health (Umberson et al., 2006), less physical illness (Wickrama et al., 1997), and other positive outcomes (Ross et al., 1990). Marital quality is also an important determinant of marital dissolution (Amato and Rogers, 1997). In turn, marital dissolution and the resulting changes in family structure shape economic inequality among households (Schwartz and Mare, 2012; Smock et al., 1999) and the well-being of children (Bronte-Tinkew and DeJong, 2004; Thomson et al., 1994). Given the importance of marital quality, there is also a large literature that explores the determinants of marital quality, including differences in the experience of marital quality by ethnicity and gender (Amato et al., 2003; Bulanda and Brown, 2007; Rogers and Amato, 2000).

Underlying this research on marital quality is the challenge of operationalizing and measuring marital quality. There is widespread agreement that marital quality is shorthand for the presence of “good” aspects of a marriage and the accompanying absence of “bad” aspects. However, there is less agreement on which aspects of a marriage are relevant exemplars of good and bad aspects. There is not a single, standardized measure of marital quality used across all studies (Bradbury et al., 2000). Instead, there are a handful of indices that are commonly used – including the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI) (Norton, 1983), Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) (Locke and Wallace, 1959), and Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976) – as well as a variety of other measures that are unique to particular surveys (Johnson et al., 1986).

The vast majority of this literature on marital quality focuses on Western contexts, especially the United States. In recent years, however, there is a growing interest in marital quality and its determinants and consequences for well-being in non-Western contexts. There are now studies that examine marital quality in Cameroon (Gwanfogbe et al., 1997), Turkey (Fisiloglu and Demir, 2000), Bolivia (Orgill and Heaton, 2005) and China (Pimentel, 2000), among others. This expansion

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of research on marital quality into non-Western contexts raises both new challenges and opportunities for research on marital quality.

First, this expansion into non-Western contexts further complicates the challenge of measuring marital quality. The concept of marital quality can vary across time and place with some aspects of marital quality applying to some places or groups, but not to others. For example, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale developed in reference to an American sample poses the frequency of kissing as an aspect of marital quality, but [Shek and Cheung \(2008\)](#) suggest that kissing is not a sign of marital satisfaction in China. Similarly, [Lee and Ono \(2008\)](#) suggest that a good marriage in Japan is commonly understood as one in which the husband works and the wife does not, while the husband's ability to support his wife is not as important in the conception of a good marriage in the United States. These contextual differences raise the challenge of developing measures of marital quality that are relevant to a particular context, while also allowing for comparison across contexts.

At the same time, the expansion into non-Western contexts provides new opportunities. First, it presents an opportunity to examine how aspects of social life that are not common in Western contexts influence marital quality. For example, a study from Cameroon examines how polygyny shapes marital satisfaction ([Gwanfogbe et al., 1997](#)). Similarly, studies from China examine how participation in the choice of one's spouse and parent's approval of spouses shapes the experience of marital quality ([Pimentel, 2000](#); [Xu and Whyte, 1990](#)). Second, the expansion into non-Western contexts provides the opportunity to examine how universal the determinants of marital quality are and how determinants of marital quality play out differently or similarly in other contexts.

This paper contributes to this expansion of research on marital quality into non-Western contexts by exploring the determinants of marital quality in Nepal. The Nepalese context provides two contributions to the literature. First, Nepal has a history of arranged marriages, which provides an opportunity to examine how marital quality is shaped by spouse choice. We examine whether those who participated in the choosing their spouse have greater marital quality. Thus, this paper contributes to understanding how an important social institution that is rare in Western contexts, but common in some non-Western contexts, shapes marital quality. It also speaks to research on the United States that addresses whether marrying based on love or institutional models results in greater marital quality ([Nock, 1995](#); [Wilcox and Dew, 2010](#)). Further, many Asian contexts are experiencing declines in arranged marriages and complementary rises in self-choice marriages ([Malhotra, 1991](#); [Pimentel, 2000](#)). Thus, this paper reflects on how the experience of marital quality may be changing in contexts where increasing proportions of the population have self-choice marriages. Second, Nepal presents a social context that is substantially different from the United States and other Western countries. We also examine whether well-known determinants of marital quality from Western contexts, such as education and gender, have similar effects on marital quality in this non-Western context. Thus, this paper contributes to broader theoretical questions about which factors are important determinants of marital quality and how context shapes these pathways.

This paper is not the first to examine the determinants of marital quality in Nepal. [Hoelter et al. \(2004\)](#) previously explored the effect of nonfamily experiences, as well as other factors, on marital quality in Nepal. This new study builds on the earlier work by employing a more rigorous measurement of marital quality. [Hoelter et al. \(2004\)](#) used six items on marital quality with an analysis of 3724 individuals surveyed in the 1996 Chitwan Valley Family Survey. Their six items were converted into four measures of marital quality, comprising expressions of love towards the spouse, frequency of criticism and disagreements, discussion of childbearing, and whether the respondent had ever been beaten by their spouse. This study draws on a much larger number of items and uses exploratory factor analysis to identify dimensions of marital quality.

2. Background and setting

Nepal is home to over a hundred religio-ethnic/caste groups, which vary in their marriage patterns, customs, rituals, values, norms, and behaviors ([Bista, 1972](#); [Macfarlane, 1976](#); [Subedi, 1998](#)). Historically, Hinduism has provided a unifying cultural force and Hindu values and norms provide prescriptions for family life for many Nepalese. Over the centuries, many members of ethnic groups that historically followed other religions have adopted Hinduism to varying degrees. Further, high caste Hindus have a history of power and privilege and even non-Hindu groups aspire to high caste status by imitating high caste Hindu family patterns, customs, rituals, and behaviors, a process known as Sanskritization ([Banerjee, 1984](#); [Berreman, 1972](#); [Dastider, 1995](#); [Guneratne, 2001](#); [Gurung, 1988](#); [Hofer, 1979](#); [Majupuria and Majupuria, 1978](#); [Maskey, 1996](#); [Sharma, 1977](#)).

According to Hinduism, marriage is obligatory and sacramental, more than just a simple bond between two individuals. Marriage is a bond between families and a promise of continuity in patriarchal family lines with deep religious, social, and institutional significance ([Banerjee, 1984](#); [Bennett, 1983](#); [Berreman, 1972](#); [Bista, 1972](#); [Mace and Mace, 1960](#); [Majupuria and Majupuria, 1978](#); [Pothen, 1989](#); [Stone, 1978](#)). Hindu doctrine prohibits youth participation in spouse selection and considers the virginity of a bride-to-be the most essential qualification for marriage, thus encouraging early marriages arranged by parents ([Banerjee, 1984](#); [Bennett, 1983](#); [Berreman, 1972](#); [Bista, 1972](#); [Mace and Mace, 1960](#); [Majupuria and Majupuria, 1978](#); [Pothen, 1989](#); [Stone, 1978](#)). Other aspects of Hinduism prohibit divorce, inter-caste marriage, and widow remarriage and condone polygyny ([Pothen, 1989](#)).

Hinduism shapes the ideal nature of marital relationships. Hindu doctrine emphasizes strong hierarchal relations based on gender (men's supremacy over women), and seniority (seniors over juniors) ([Banerjee, 1984](#); [Bennett, 1983](#); [Berreman, 1972](#); [Gray, 1991](#)). The Hindu doctrine of *pativrata* further asserts that once a woman marries a man she is

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