



## Marital happiness and marital stability: Consequences for psychological well-being<sup>☆</sup>

Linda J. Waite<sup>a</sup>, Ye Luo<sup>b</sup>, Alisa C. Lewin<sup>c,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, Chicago IL 60637, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634, USA

<sup>c</sup> Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Haifa, Mount Carmel, Haifa 31905, Israel

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the consequences for psychological well-being of marital stability and change over the five-year period between the two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households. We develop and test the following hypotheses: (1) those who divorce or separate experience declines in psychological well-being compared to those who remain married; (2) among those unhappy with their marriage, those who divorce or separate see improvements in psychological well-being, especially if they remarry, compared to those who remain married to the same person; (3) psychological well-being declines in the first year or two following the end of the marriage and then improves to previous levels; (4) women experience greater improvements in psychological well-being from leaving an unhappy marriage than do men. We find strong and consistent support only for the first of these.

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### 1. Marital happiness and marital stability consequences for psychological well-being

Divorce has detrimental effects on people's emotional well-being. But these detrimental effects of divorce may differ by marital happiness (Marks and Lambert, 1998; Simon, 2002). Studies have asked whether people in unhappy marriages improve their emotional situation upon divorce (Amato and Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Aseltine and Kessler, 1993; Kalmijn and Monden, 2006; Prigerson et al., 1999; Wheaton, 1990; Williams, 2003), and the findings have been mixed. One explanation for the mixed findings may be that most of these studies do not distinguish between the immediate short-term crisis effect, and the chronic, or long-term effects of divorce (Wheaton, 1990 is the exception). In this study we argue that it is important to distinguish between the long-term and short-term effects because the process of divorce itself is stressful and conflict-ridden, even when desired (Hopper, 2001). Thus, even if people's emotional well-being improves in the long-term, we would expect to observe a short-term emotional crisis for everyone. We expect that the emotional effects of divorce will be related to marital happiness. People who were happily married may be more devastated by the breakup of their union than people who were unhappily married, for whom the dissolution may provide some emotional relief. In this study we compare changes in emotional well-being in the first few years following the end of the marriage, and over the longer-term, and we compare the emotional well-being of adults who remain married to those who separate, divorce, or remarry.

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\* Corresponding author. Fax: +972 4 8240819.

E-mail address: [alewin@soc.haifa.ac.il](mailto:alewin@soc.haifa.ac.il) (A.C. Lewin).

## 2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

### 2.1. Emotional well-being and divorce

The dissolution of a marriage may increase psychological distress and reduce emotional well-being through a number of mechanisms. First, marital disruption is generally an acrimonious process (Hopper, 1993), marked by high levels of inter-personal conflict (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989; Masheter, 1991, 1997; Tschann et al., 1989). These negative experiences and emotions cause distress and lead to a decline in positive emotions and evaluations (Kitson and Morgan, 1990). Second, marital disruption tends to reduce the economic well-being of former spouses (Peterson, 1996; Smock et al., 1999). The economic problems that often follow divorce may have negative effects on emotional well-being (Aseltine and Kessler, 1993). Third, the disruption and acrimony around the divorce may lead to emotional and behavioral problems for children (Cherlin et al., 1998; Wallerstein et al., 2000), increasing distress for parents. Finally, the end of a marriage signals the failure of an intimate relationship, which may reduce emotional well-being, at least until and unless the person enters a new relationship. Since marriage is a central source of social support (Ross, 1995; Tschann et al., 1989), divorce may destroy or weaken support networks, disrupt ability to deal with stress during a stressful period, and thus increase emotional distress. We hypothesize that those who divorce or separate experience immediate declines in psychological well-being compared to those who remain married.

### 2.2. Temporary crisis vs. state of chronic strain

Our study attempts to shed light on the question whether divorce represents a temporary crisis or whether divorce is a state of persistent chronic strain. Marital disruption is a stressful life event, even when the marriage was unhappy and divorce was desired. The uncertainty, acrimony, negotiations, residential changes, and financial reversals are often extremely stressful during the course of the divorce or separation. According to the *Crisis* model the effects of divorce are temporary and emotional well-being falls during the divorce process, but later returns to pre-divorce levels. Booth and Amato (1991) find such a pattern, whereby levels of stress increase in the period prior to divorce, then decline to levels comparable to those reported by the married. Their results suggest that the “crisis” period is about two years, after which divorced and married people do not differ in reported levels of stress. Hetherington and Kelly (2002) also find a crisis period of about two years, during which most couples showed some type of emotional problem. However, in their study of divorced couples over 30 years they also found long-term emotional problems in almost a third (30%) of the couples (Hetherington and Kelly, 2002).

Another approach focuses on the *State* of being divorced or separated as a chronic strain. This perspective points to the declines in financial well-being that accompany divorce (Peterson, 1996; Simon, 2002), the strains of single parenthood (McLanahan, 1983), and social isolation. Studies show that divorced people tend to have more chronic stressors in their lives, and they also tend to have less social support with which to cope with these stressors (Johnson and Wu, 2002). According to this perspective, *getting* divorced is stressful, and *being* divorced is stressful, so that divorced people may show relatively persistent deficits in emotional well-being compared to their previous state or to married people. Mastekaasa (1995) finds, in a Norwegian sample, that people who divorced or separated showed a significant increase in psychological distress over both the short-term (up to four years following the divorce) and long-term (from four to eight years following the divorce). Kiecolt-Glaser and colleagues find that the immune function of women who had divorced recently showed deficits compared to otherwise similar married women, but so did the immune function of women who had been divorced for some time (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1987). Both these findings provide support for the *State* model.

In our study we test both the *Crisis* and *State* models by comparing changes in emotional well-being in the year or two following the disruption with those disruptions more than two years in the past. We hypothesize that, based on the *Crisis* model, sizeable negative effects on emotional well-being only occur in the period shortly after the marriage ended. The *State* model leads to an alternative hypothesis predicting that diminished emotional well-being would also appear in later years among those who did not remarry.

We acknowledge that there may be a process of selection whereby some people have personal characteristics that predispose them to both divorce and to depression (Amato, 2000). We expect that by accounting for marital happiness prior to marital breakup we can account for at least part of this selection effect.

### 2.3. Marital happiness and divorce

Studies have asked whether marital disruption has different consequences for emotional well-being among spouses who are happy with their marriage and those who are unhappy with their marriage. Marital unhappiness signals a failure of the marriage to meet the emotional and other needs of the individual (Glenn, 1996), and any loss as a result of the divorce is likely to be smaller than in the case of a happily married person. But unhappy spouses may still see the end of the marriage as a failure and experience distress and disappointment as a result. And declines in economic well-being tend to follow the disruption of *all* marriages, as do declines in social support. This reasoning implies that both those who rated their marriage as happy prior to the disruption and those who rated their marriage as unhappy will show declines in emotional well-being following divorce, but we expect that the negative consequences of marital disruption will be smaller and perhaps more short-term among those who were unhappy with their marriage than among those who were happy with their marriage.

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