LIFE-COURSE EFFECTS ON MARITAL DISRUPTION* 

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ABSTRACT. Using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, between 1969 and 1978, the change in the percentage of marital disruption among 3372 families is decomposed into: (1) an increase of 1.7 percent due to the direct effects of age at first marriage; (2) a decrease of 1.1 percent from changes in the relative age at first birth; and (3) a 2.7 percent increase stemming from changes in the internal structure of the families. The maldaptation of concepts from the life-course perspective is demonstrated to have led to the expectation of somewhat different findings, and for the confusion regarding the roles of life-cycle and life-course events in precipitating marital instability. The results strongly suggest the use of greater discretion in the formulation and use of different classes of events within the life-course framework.

In any set of married persons, after a period of time a subset of them will have experienced marital disruption by either divorce, legal separation, or desertion. The probability, or likelihood, with which certain individual and family characteristics lead to marital dissolution has been a well considered subject (Udry, 1966; Morgan et al., 1974; Hannan et al., 1977; Cherlin, 1977, 1979; Glick and Carter, 1958; and Moore and Waite, 1981). While some agreement exists among these and other research, there is also considerable disagreement and confusion as to which factors are most likely to lead to separation and divorce.

Age at first marriage, age at first birth, total family income, wife’s income, wife’s work status, and number of children in the household, all have been found to correlate with frequency of marital disruption. Thornton (1977) and Christensen (1968) found a curvilinear relationship between number of children in the household and marital stability, while Cherlin (1977) found a linear relationship to exist if the ages of the children are taken into account. Looking at socio-economic status (SES), Hannan et al. (1977) report a positive linear relationship between marital dissolution and income (for some racial groups), but Moore and Waite (1981) found a negative one. Depending on whether the wife competes with or supplements her spouse’s status as the main wage earner, wife’s work status has been found sometimes to increase and at other times to decrease the probability of marital disruption (Cherlin,
1979). The findings of these research efforts conflict with each other, and their inconclusive nature is a cause for concern.

There is still another problem. Previously, the independent variables used in the investigation of marital dissolution attempted to determine which subsets among ever married persons (e.g., early vs. late marriers) had more of their members experience marital disruption. But this leaves a basic question unanswered. Which subgroups actually contribute most to the overall increase in marital instability? While specific subgroups (e.g., early marriers) may have higher divorce rates, because they are declining in their proportion in the total married population, it might be the case that these disruption-prone subsets act to lower the rate of marital dissolution in the total population. Thus, the focus of this research centers on the relative contribution of the attribute of married persons to the overall rate of marital disruption.

The confusion and the oversight precipitated by past research have much of their source in the theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches employed in those effects. Despite the appearance of a consensus in theoretical orientation, previous research has often employed differing conceptual orientations when defining the independent variables thought to affect marital dissolution. Further, the methodologies previously employed have restricted discussion to little more than finger-pointing (these have more divorces than those!). Because they were ill-equipped to do so, the data and methods used did not detail the process by which changes in the constituent characteristics of families over time affected the change in the number of marital unions experiencing dissolution. The next sections outline some of the shortcomings of previous conceptual and methodological approaches, state the research questions of interest here, and explain the more satisfactory techniques used in this paper. Then, findings are presented which result from: (1) analysis of differences in the level of marital disruption among and between two kinds of independent variables; and (2) decomposition of the effects of these variables on the overall rate of marital dissolution.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The inappropriate application of the life-course perspective is responsible for the appearance of a consensus in the analysis of marital disruption, which leads to confusion from conflicting research findings. Briefly, the life-course approach holds that human development occurs in a series of stages, and