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THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTS' MARITAL QUALITY ON ADULT CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES TOWARD MARRIAGE AND ITS ALTERNATIVES: MAIN AND MODERATING EFFECTS*

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Abstract

Drawing on a panel study of parents and children, we investigate linkages between parents' marital quality and adult children's attitudes toward a range of family issues, including premarital sex, cohabitation, lifelong singlehood, and divorce. We hypothesize that parents' marital quality will be negatively related to children's support for these behaviors in adulthood and that parents' marital quality will condition the intergenerational transmission of attitudes toward these issues. We find some evidence that parents' marital quality influences children's support for divorce and premarital sex. More important, our analyses show that parents' marital quality facilitates the intergenerational transmission of attitudes. Parents' attitudes toward premarital sex, cohabitation, and being single are more strongly linked to those same attitudes among their young adult children when parents' marital quality is high than when it is low.

Historically, marriage in the United States constituted a unified set of ideas about appropriate adult behavior. Marriage conferred adult status and set the boundaries for sexual activity, childbearing, and living arrangements with a sexual partner. Marriage defined the kinds of work performed by husbands and wives and was viewed as a lifelong endeavor. In recent decades, however, marriage has been largely deinstitutionalized; its meaning is no longer broadly shared, and the package of behaviors that were associated with marriage in the past have become much less closely linked (Cherlin 2004). Behaviors such as premarital sex, cohabitation, childbearing outside of marriage, extended singlehood, and divorce have become much more common in recent years, and they have also become more widely accepted (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). The goal of this article is to investigate the ways in which parents' marriages shape children's attitudes about behaviors that conflict with historical definitions of marriage. Understanding the factors influencing attitudes about marriage and family life is important in part because these attitudes have been linked with behaviors such as premarital sex, cohabitation, and divorce (Axinn and Thornton 1992, 1993; Bumpass 2002). We expect that the quality of marital relationships observed by the children of married parents will shape children's attitudes toward the behaviors that have historically been associated with marriage. We also hypothesize that parents' marital quality will condition the intergenerational transmission of attitudes about marriage and its alternatives.

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Research has demonstrated wide-ranging consequences of marital quality for physical and mental health (Waite 1995; Wickrama et al. 1997). In this study, we extend the research on the consequences of marital quality by investigating its implications for family attitudes as well as patterns of intergenerational continuity in family attitudes. Researchers have documented declines in the quality of marital relationships in the United States over the past several decades (Rogers and Amato 1997; Umberson et al. 2005). It seems likely that declining marital quality may have implications for children's attitudes toward marriage and related behaviors. If children observe increasingly unhappy marriages among their parents, declining marital quality over time may contribute to higher levels of support for marriage alternatives. In addition, when parents' marital quality is high, parent-child attitude similarity may be enhanced. This could occur if the quality of parents' marriages is an indicator of the likelihood that children wish to emulate their parents. We hypothesize that children will be more likely to adopt attitudes that are similar to those of their parents when their parents' marriages are of relatively high quality. To the extent that parents' marital quality has been declining over time, this segment of our investigation implies that changes in the quality of marital relationships may also contribute to attenuation in parent-child attitude correspondence.

To carry out our analysis, we rely on data from a 31-year panel study of parents and children. We examine the influences of parents' marital quality on adult children's attitudes toward premarital sex, cohabitation, divorce, and being single compared with being married. Several aspects of our data make the analyses particularly powerful. Not only are we able to draw on data gathered independently from parents and children, we are also able to examine the relationship between parents' marital quality and a range of marriage-related attitudes among the parents' young adult children. Further, we analyze reports of parents' marital quality provided separately by both mothers and children, allowing us to gauge the extent to which the association between parents' marital quality and children's family attitudes differs depending on whether it is based on the parent's or the child's assessment of the parents' marital quality.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Family historians have documented that for hundreds and perhaps thousands of years, marriage constituted the primary marker of adult status and was the central institution structuring family life (Gillis 1985; Laslett 1984/1965; Macfarlane 1986). In the northwestern European societies that shaped many of the laws and practices characterizing marriage in the contemporary United States, marriage organized production and reproduction (Hanawalt 1986; Thornton, Axinn, and Xie forthcoming). Prior to marriage, young unmarried adults usually lived either with their parents or in other family households, and entry into marriage offered the only acceptable route to the formation of an independent household (Gillis 1985). Marriage was extremely difficult to dissolve and served as the only legitimating context for sexual relationships and childbearing.

Historically, marriage consisted of a relatively unified set of ideas about appropriate living arrangements, sexual relationships, and the privileged status of married people relative to those who were not married. In recent times, however, marriage has been largely deinstitutionalized and no longer carries the widely shared set of meanings that it did in the past (Axinn and Thornton 2000; Cherlin 2004). Many behaviors that were part of the marriage package in the past have been decoupled from contemporary marriage, such that marriage no longer serves as the legitimizing context for adult status, sexual or residential relationships, or childbearing. Further, many people no longer view marriage as lifelong.

Our research investigates the relationship between the quality of parents' marriages and young adult children's attitudes toward this set of ideas that have been associated with marriage historically. Although we do not analyze attitudes toward every facet of marriage in this study, we examine a substantial number of the elements that represent contemporary departures from historical ideas about marriage. These elements include attitudes about sex before marriage, the benefits of marriage compared with being single, living with a partner outside of marriage, and divorce.

Intergenerational Influences of Marital Quality on Marriage Attitudes

The causes and consequences of marital quality have been extensively studied by social scientific researchers interested in family dynamics (Amato and Booth 1991a, 1991b, 1995; Amato and Rogers 1997; Rogers and Amato 1997, 2000; VanLaningham, Johnson, and Amato 2001; Waite and Gallagher 2000). Relatively little research, however, has addressed the intergenerational influences of marital quality on marriage-related attitudes.

Whether married or not, individuals are likely to observe the marriages of others, consciously or unconsciously assessing the meaning and desirability of marriage. Although marriages might be observed among peers and siblings or in media representations, children and adolescents are likely to spend large amounts of time observing their parents' marriages. Because of the proximity and intensity of children's observations of their parents' marriages while growing up, it seems particularly likely that children's attitudes about marriage and its alternatives will be shaped by these early impressions. As a result, children's marriage-related attitudes are expected to be influenced by the extent to which parents' relationships provide primarily positive or negative images of marriage. Our first hypothesis, then, is that parents' marital quality will be negatively associated with children's support for premarital sex, cohabitation, being single, and divorce.

We recognize that children's family-related attitudes might exert reciprocal influences on parents' marital quality, but we make the assumption that the primary direction of influence runs from parents' marital quality to children's attitudes. We base this assumption on the premise that parents' marriages are likely to be shaped by a range of personal, interactional, and contextual characteristics over long periods and that the causal influence of children's attitudes toward family issues is likely to play a relatively small role in the parents' overall relationship quality. The most direct evidence for our first hypothesis comes from a study by Amato and Booth (1991a). Although their findings were based on retrospective reporting of parents' marital quality, they found that individuals who recalled their parents' marriages as having been unhappy were more supportive of divorce (Amato and Booth 1991a).

Our second hypothesis shifts the focus from direct influences of parents' marital quality on children's marriage-related attitudes to the idea that parents' marital quality may be a factor that affects the extent to which parents' attitudes are shared by their young adult children. Our analysis of the influence of parents' marital quality in affecting the transmission of attitudes across generations begins with the observation that there is a substantial amount of research linking parents' and children's family-related attitudes (Axinn and Thornton 1996; Kapinus 2004; Moen, Erickson, and Dempster-McClain 1995). Children may adopt attitudes similar to their parents as a result of passive internalization (Campbell 1969), or parents may take a more active role by using support or control to encourage their children's adoption of similar attitudes (Gecas and Seff 1990; Peterson and Rollins 1987). It is also possible that parents and children hold similar attitudes as a result of shared social position (Glass, Bengtson, and Dunham 1986). We argue that this intergenerational attitude similarity is likely to be conditioned by parents' marital quality.

We hypothesize specifically that parents' attitudes will be most strongly linked with children's attitudes when the quality of the parents' marriage is high. We are not aware of any existing research that has investigated the influence of interactions between parents' marital quality and parents' attitudes in affecting children's attitudes. Previous research on attitudes toward premarital sex, however, has suggested that parent-child attitude similarity is greatest when parents and children have high-quality relationships (Moore, Peterson, and Furstenberg 1986; Weinstein and Thornton 1989). Weinstein and Thornton (1989:574) argued that "maternal attitudes are the fundamental determinant of children's attitudes and behavior, with mother-child relations playing a secondary, facilitative role." We hypothesize that mother-father relations may play a similar "facilitative" role in the transmission of attitudes, leading children to be more likely to emulate parents' marriage-related attitudes when the marriages the children have observed appear satisfying to those who are involved in them. Indeed, it seems possible that parent-child attitude similarity in domains other than marriage would be conditioned by parents' marital quality as well, but our hypothesis seems most plausible in the case of marriage-related attitudes.

Each of the hypotheses presented to this point assumes that parents' marital quality can be reliably measured regardless of whether a parent or a child is evaluating the quality of the parents' relationship. In the case of troubled marriages that are highly adversarial, such an assumption may be warranted. However, the assessment of personal relationships is likely to be subjective and possibly variable according to the perspective of the relationship evaluator. For our purposes, parents and children may not share similar perceptions of the quality of the parents' marital relationship. For this reason, we assess each of our hypotheses by using reports of the parents' marital quality from roughly the same point in time, but provided separately by parents and children. We speculate that children's reports of parents' marital quality will be more strongly related to children's attitudes than will parents' reports of parents' marital quality, primarily because they are likely to be more salient to the child.

In summary, these analyses will facilitate several important contributions to our understanding of the forces shaping attitudes toward marriage and its alternatives. First, we suggest that the quality of parents' marital relationships will exert main effects on children's attitudes toward premarital sex, cohabitation, lifelong singlehood, and divorce. Second, we hypothesize that parents' marital quality will moderate the transmission of these attitudes from parents to children. Finally, we investigate the influences of parents' and children's assessments of parents' marital quality, in an effort to ascertain whether the hypothesized relationships between parents' marital quality and children's attitudes differ depending on who is rating parents' marital quality.

DATA

Data for this study are drawn from the Intergenerational Panel Study of Parents and Children (IPSPC), a study of mothers and children spanning the 31 years between 1962 and 1993. The focal children in the study were born in July 1961 and are the offspring of a group of mothers selected from a probability sample of birth records for first-, second-, and fourth-born white children in the Detroit metropolitan area. The children from this initial sample were interviewed at age 18 (in 1980). Response rates for the initial interview of mothers were extremely high (92%), and 87% of the original families participated in the study in 1980. Information about the parents was obtained in six interviews with the mothers between 1962, just after the children were born, and 1980, when the children were 18 years old.

The sample is racially homogeneous, and it is possible that the processes we are investigating operate differently for nonwhites. The original sample was also regionally

based in the Detroit metropolitan area. However, a substantial fraction of respondents moved outside of the Detroit area and the state of Michigan. Despite these limitations, the comprehensive information gathered about marriage-related attitudes and marital quality from both parents and children makes the IPSPC uniquely suited to address our research questions.

The analysis includes the 755 mother-child pairs among whom the mother was married in 1980. Only those children whose biological parents were living together in 1980 answered questions about their parents' marriages, so the children of mothers who divorced and remarried between 1962 and 1980 did not assess the quality of the marriages between their mothers and the mothers' new husbands. These children, however, did answer questions about their attitudes toward marriage and marriage alternatives. As a result, our sample is marginally smaller ($n = 679$) for the analyses in which children's reports of parents' marital quality are an independent variable.

Measures

Our measures of attitudes tap views about premarital sex, cohabitation, divorce, and the benefits of marriage compared with remaining single (see Appendix A for text). They are measured among both the mothers and children in 1980. The children were 18 years old at that time, and the ages of the mothers varied. Indices capturing attitudes toward cohabitation, premarital sex, and singlehood are each composed of two items. Only one item is used to capture attitudes toward divorce. For each family dimension we create an averaged index after coding each of the items so that a high score represents greater support for cohabitation, premarital sex, divorce, or singlehood compared with marriage. The items that use multiple indicators have acceptable measurement properties. Among the mothers, Cronbach's alpha coefficients are .82 for cohabitation, .83 for premarital sex, and .56 for the benefits of being single compared with being married. Among the children, Cronbach's alpha coefficients are .82 for the cohabitation measures, .81 for the premarital sex measures, and .60 for the items comparing singlehood with marriage. Because of the lower reliability of the measures comparing singlehood with marriage, we also analyze each of the index's constituent items separately.

Mothers' reports of marital quality are measured with a set of five survey questions administered in 1980 (see Appendix B for text). The items are averaged into an index in which a high score indicates better marital quality. Cronbach's alpha for this measure is .83. Children's reports of parents' marital quality are assessed with two items (see Appendix B for text) and averaged into an index. Cronbach's alpha for this measure is .72.

We control for a range of parental characteristics that might be associated with parents' marital quality and mother's and children's attitudes. These items include an average of the mother's and father's education in years, the mother's religious affiliation (with dummy variables for Catholics, Fundamentalist Protestants, and those with some other religious affiliation), the mother's frequency of attendance at religious services in 1980, the mother's age at marriage assessed in 1962, whether the mother was pregnant prior to her marriage to her spouse in 1962, whether the mother divorced and remarried between 1962 and 1980, and the gender of the focal child.

PLAN OF ANALYSIS

Our multivariate analysis begins with an examination of the influence of parents' marital quality on children's attitudes. We identify main effects of parents' marital quality on each of the four indicators of the children's attitudes at age 18 by using reports of parents' marital quality assessed independently by mothers and children in 1980. As stated previously,

although we recognize the possibility that children's attitudes exert causal influences on parents' relationship quality, we argue that the primary causal pathway operates from parents' marital quality to children's attitudes. All analyses include controls for parental education, maternal religious affiliation and attendance, mother's age at marriage, premarital pregnancy, and the gender of the child. The models based on the mother's report of her marital quality also include a control for whether she divorced and remarried between the child's birth and 1980. We do not present or discuss parameter estimates for the control variables, although those results are available on request. Finally, each model controls for the mother's attitude toward the issue in question in 1980. We analyze the data by using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression because all of the outcomes, with the exception of divorce attitudes, have at least 10 possible response categories. We also conduct several supplementary analyses using ordinal logistic regression (OLR), and those results are discussed below.

After examining the main effects of parents' marital quality on adult children's marriage-related attitudes at age 18, we consider the extent to which parents' marital quality moderates the relationship between mothers' and children's attitudes. To accomplish this part of the analysis, we create two sets of cross-product terms. The first multiplies scores on each of the mother's attitudes (measured in 1980) by the mother's report of her marital quality, and the second multiplies the mother's attitude score by the child's report of the parents' marital quality. We then add these interaction terms to the equations predicting the four attitudinal outcomes. The equation for each outcome is estimated twice, once with an interaction term based on the mother's report of her marital quality and once with an interaction term based on the child's report of the parents' marital quality. Measures of marital quality and attitudes are standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 in all models in order to reduce collinearity among the interaction terms (Aiken and West 1991).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1 in their unstandardized form. Note that these statistics are provided based on the largest sample size for which they are analyzed.

We begin with an examination of the relationship between parents' marital quality and adult children's attitudes. Our first hypothesis postulates that parents' marital quality will be negatively associated with children's support for singlehood compared with marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and premarital sex. Table 2 presents results from a set of equations in which children's attitudes at age 18 are regressed on measures of parents' marital quality. The columns labeled "1" assess the influence of mothers' reports of parents' marital quality on children's attitudes, and the columns labeled "2" provide similar estimates based on the children's reports of the parents' marital quality. The models control for the variables outlined in the previous section. The correlation between mothers' and children's reports of parents' marital quality in 1980 is .52 and is highly significant (not shown). Despite this relatively high correlation, however, the influences of parents' marital quality on children's attitudes differ across the two sets of equations.

Table 2 shows that when mothers' reports of marital quality are used to predict children's marriage-related attitudes, the first hypothesis is not supported. The results from the "1" columns in Table 2 demonstrate that mothers' reports of the quality of their marriages are not related to children's attitudes at age 18. There is some support for our first hypothesis, however, when children's reports of parents' marital quality are used to predict children's

attitudes. The columns labeled “2” in Table 2 show that children who perceive that their parents have high-quality marriages are less supportive of divorce and premarital sex.

Several methodological issues and substantive insights are raised by the results in Table 2. In terms of methodological questions, we note that the differences in the findings for mothers' and children's reports of marital quality are not due to sample differences—the null findings for the influence of mothers' reports are the same when the sample is restricted to those included in the sample when children's reports are used (not shown). We also conducted analyses of the divorce item and the component items of the index comparing lifelong singlehood with marriage using ordinal logistic regression (not shown). The substantive conclusions were identical with OLS and OLR in all cases. The influence of parents' marital quality on children's attitudes toward being single was not statistically significant using either regression technique. When the influence of children's reports of parents' marital quality was analyzed, the estimated coefficients for the items when the two items were analyzed separately using OLR were very similar to those generated when the items were analyzed jointly using OLS.

There are several substantive implications of the findings in Table 2. First, although mothers' and children's reports of parents' marital quality are highly associated, they are far from perfectly correlated. The results suggest that observed differences in the perception of parents' relationship quality are not trivial. In terms of its influence on children's attitudes, marital quality lies “in the eye of the beholder.” Although mothers' assessments of the quality of their relationships with their husbands are not strongly related to children's attitudes, children's assessments of those relationships are significantly associated with children's attitudes toward divorce and premarital sex, and all coefficients but one are in the expected direction. Second, readers may wonder whether potential influences of parents' marital quality on children's attitudes are transmitted by the mothers' attitudes, a hypothesis that would suggest the total effects of parents' marital quality on children's attitudes are greater than those presented in Table 2. Supplementary analyses, however, show that effects of parents' marital quality are similar even when measures of the mothers' attitudes are excluded from the equations (not shown). This suggests that parents' attitudes do not mediate the influence of parents' marital quality on children's marriage-related attitudes. Third, although not presented in the table, the results from the column “1” equations suggest that the children of parents who divorced and remarried between the child's birth and age 18 are significantly more supportive of divorce, cohabitation, and premarital sex. This provides additional indirect evidence that children who experience their parents' low-quality marriages are likely to be more supportive of marriage alternatives. Having considered the main effects of parents' marital quality in Table 2, we now turn to an analysis of the moderating influences of parents' marital quality. The models in Table 3 are designed to test our second hypothesis, which posits that parents' relationship quality will condition the association between mothers' attitudes and children's attitudes. The equations in Table 3 add a term capturing the interaction of parents' marital quality and the mother's attitude to the equations in Table 2. As in Table 2, the columns in Table 3 labeled “1” designate equations based on variables tapping the mothers' reports of marital quality, and the columns labeled “2” designate models based on children's reports of parents' marital quality.

Like Table 2, Table 3 shows that there are strong positive associations between mothers' and children's attitudes across all domains. More important, when mothers' reports of marital quality are considered, we find evidence supporting our hypothesis about the moderating influence of parents' marital quality in transmitting marriage-related attitudes from parents to children. In the “1” columns of Table 3, all the coefficients for the interaction term are in the expected positive direction. The coefficients for marriage compared with being single, cohabitation, and premarital sex are statistically significant. These findings imply that

parents' marital quality facilitates the intergenerational transmission of family-related attitudes. The key interaction terms in Table 3 demonstrate that the influence of mothers' attitudes on children's attitudes is greatest when parents' marital quality is high and is smaller when parents' marital quality is low. We find somewhat less support for this pattern when children's reports of parents' marital quality are used. In the "2" columns of Table 3, interaction terms are statistically significant only for attitudes toward singlehood and premarital sex.

We also examine models using OLR for the divorce item and the components of the index comparing being single with marriage. As in Table 2, the results for divorce are identical for OLS and OLR. The results from OLR equations examining attitudes toward lifelong singlehood are similar to the findings presented in Table 3, with two exceptions. First, when mothers' reports of parents' marital quality are used, the interaction between marital quality and mothers' attitudes attains statistical significance only in the equation for the item asserting that it is better to marry than to remain single. Second, when children's reports of parents' marital quality are analyzed, the interaction terms in each of the equations falls just shy of statistical significance when the two items are analyzed separately (not shown). Overall the observed inconsistencies are minor and do not suggest serious qualification of the results presented in Table 3.

To illustrate the facilitative role of parents' marital quality in transmitting parents' marriage-related attitudes to children, we present in Table 4 estimates of the predicted magnitude of the relationship between mothers' attitudes and children's attitudes for each outcome for two levels of parents' marital quality. We define low marital quality in Table 4 as being one standard deviation below the mean marital quality score, and high marital quality as being one standard deviation above the mean marital quality score. Because our measures of marital quality are standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1, we can calculate the predicted regression slope between mothers' and children's attitudes by a straightforward transformation of the coefficients in Table 3. Specifically, to calculate the slope coefficient for a low-quality marriage, we begin with the coefficient estimating the relationship between mothers' and children's attitudes and then subtract the value for the interaction between mothers' attitudes and parents' marital quality. For instance, if we consider the relationship between mothers' and children's views comparing singlehood with marriage, we start with a value of .13. We can estimate the value of this coefficient for low-quality marriages by subtracting .08 from .13 to give us the value of .05 in the first row and first column of Table 4. Similarly, if we add .08 to .13, we estimate that the predicted influence of mothers' attitudes on children's attitudes in high-quality marriages (based on mothers' reports) is .21.

The results in Table 4 demonstrate how parents' marital quality amplifies intergenerational similarity in marriage-related attitudes. Table 4 shows, first, that even among low-quality marriages, the relationship between mothers' and children's attitudes is positive for all variables. Second, the results highlight the fact that mother-child attitude similarity is greater in higher-quality marital conditions than it is in lower-quality marital conditions. The children of parents who are satisfied with their marriages are more likely to emulate their parents' attitudes than are the children of unhappily married parents. In this sense, high marriage quality among parents appears to amplify the congruence between the attitudes of mothers and their 18-year-old children. Based on mothers' reports of parents' marital quality, the relationship between mothers' attitudes toward premarital sex and cohabitation and children's attitudes toward those same issues is twice as large among families with high-quality marriages as it is among families with lower-quality marriages. In the case of attitudes comparing singlehood with marriage, the relationship between mothers' attitudes

and children's attitudes among families with high-quality marriages is four times as large as it is among families with low-quality marriages.

In combination, the results from our analyses suggest that the primary influence of marital quality as reported by mothers occurs by conditioning the intergenerational transmission of attitudes (for all cases but divorce). In contrast, children's reports of parents' marital quality operate both as a main and facilitative factor, depending on the outcome. When children's reports of parents' marital quality are used, there are statistically significant main and interactive effects on children's attitudes toward premarital sex. Only the main effect is significant for divorce attitudes, however, and only the interactive effect is significant for attitudes comparing marriage with being single.

CONCLUSIONS

The analyses we have presented offer several contributions to the understanding of the way that marital dynamics are related to attitudes toward an array of behaviors that challenge historical definitions of marriage. Data gathered from two generations enabled us to address several underexplored questions about the relationship between parents' marital quality and children's attitudes toward divorce, cohabitation, premarital sex, and lifelong singlehood. Our results suggest only moderate support for the hypothesis that parents' marital quality is related to adult children's attitudes toward marriage-related issues. We found greater evidence, however, that parents' marital quality facilitates the intergenerational transmission of attitudes. Parent-child attitude similarity is highest among families in which the parents have a relatively positive relationship.

In the past, marriage was arguably the central organizing relationship in people's lives and constituted the most important marker of adulthood. Marriage served as the legitimizing context for sex, childbearing, and coresidence with a sexual partner and was expected to last until death. Even though contemporary marriage is much less loosely associated with these behaviors, our research suggests that children's experiences of their parents' marriages shape their ideas about the package of behaviors that have historically defined marriage. Our findings show that children who reported that their parents were happily married were less likely to endorse sex before marriage or divorce as acceptable decisions than were the children of less happily married parents. Although these results were present only when the children's reports of parents' marital quality were used as the independent variable, they suggest that children were more likely to accept the historical parameters of marriage if they perceived their parents' marriage to be generally positive.

Our main interest in these analyses was in the primary socialization that occurs as children observe their parents' marriages while residing in the parental home. For this reason, we restricted the analysis to the 18-year-old children. In supplementary analyses, however, we examined the extent to which parents' marital quality when the children were 18 years old was related to changes in the children's marriage-related attitudes over the ensuing 13 years. We found very little evidence that parents' marital quality influences change in children's attitudes after age 18 (not shown). Further, restricting our analyses to 18-year-old children implies that our findings rely on data measured more than two decades ago, in 1980. Although it is likely that both the quality of marriages and attitudes toward family issues have changed since 1980, we see little reason to expect that the relationship between these two sets of factors has been substantially altered over the ensuing decades. Our primary arguments are based on the nature of relationship dynamics within families, and we are not aware of existing evidence that suggests fundamental changes in the intergenerational processes at work.

The most important contribution of our analysis is the identification of the facilitative role that parents' marital quality plays in the intergenerational transmission of attitudes. We found that the magnitude of the relationship between mothers' and children's attitudes toward cohabitation, premarital sex, and lifelong singlehood was greater when parents' marital quality was high and smaller when parents' marital quality was low. Our results suggest that parents' who are satisfied with their marriages are more attractive models for children and that children are more likely to emulate the family-related ideas of happily married parents than of less happily married parents. Future research might explore the extent to which intergenerational attitude congruency in other substantive domains is moderated by parents' marital quality.

Our findings regarding both main and interactive effects of parents' marital quality on children's attitudes varied according to whether the source of reporting on parents' marital quality was the mother or the child. This variation suggests that the study of children's reports of parents' marital quality might provide an interesting contribution to the research on trends in marital quality over time. Specifically, the analysis of data with multiple waves of children's reports of their parents' marital quality might be able to assess whether children's accounts verify or contradict observed declines in marital quality across cohorts or across the life course. Such an analysis could provide insight into the extent to which marital quality is declining because of increases in married adults' expectations about marriage or as a result of decreases in the tangible benefits of marriage and the actual quality of marital relationships.

Our research into the intergenerational consequences of parents' marital quality also has implications for future changes in attitudes toward marriage and marriage alternatives. The decline in marital quality across cohorts may contribute to increasing support among children for alternatives to marriage, such as cohabitation and lifelong singlehood. Our study shows how support for behaviors such as cohabitation and lifelong singlehood may increase over time, even among children whose parents are continuously married. Combined with increasing rates of cohabitation and delays in marriage, few forces appear likely to slow the acceptance of marriage alternatives. Finally, our findings suggest that declines in marital quality over time may also reduce intergenerational similarity in attitudes in the future. Trends in parent-child attitudinal continuity have not been extensively studied, and additional research is needed to investigate the extent and consequences of declining attitude similarity across generations.

Appendix

Appendix A

Text of Marriage-Related Attitude Measures, IPSPC, 1962–1980^a

Being Single Versus Married

Married people are usually happier than those who go through life without getting married.[‡]

It's better for a person to get married than to go through life being single.[‡]

Divorce

When there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don't get along.[‡]

Cohabitation

It's alright for a couple to live together without planning to get married.

A young couple should not live together unless they are married.[‡]

Premarital Sex

Premarital sex is alright for a young couple planning to get married.

Young people should not have sex before marriage.[‡]

Notes: Indices are created by taking the average score of the items for each time point. Items are coded so that a high score indicates greater support for the behavior.

^aPossible responses are “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “don’t know,” “agree,” and “strongly agree.”

[‡]Indicates reverse-coded items.

Appendix B

Text of Parents' Marital Quality Measures, IPSPC, 1962–1980

Mother's Report

How well do you think your husband understands you—your feelings, your likes and dislikes, and any problems you may have?^{a‡}

And how well do you think you understand your husband?^{a‡}

Generally speaking, would you say that the time you spend together with your husband is extremely enjoyable, very enjoyable, enjoyable, or not too enjoyable?[‡]

Taking things all together, how would you describe your marriage?^{b‡}

Even happily married couples sometimes have problems getting along with each other. Would you say that this happens with you often, sometimes, hardly ever, or never?

Child's Report

Taking things all together, how would you describe your parent's marriage?^{b‡}

Even happily married couples sometimes have problems getting along with each other. How often does this happen with your parents?^c

Notes: The indices are created by taking the average score of the items for each time point. Items are coded so that a high score indicates higher marital quality.

^aPossible responses are “very well,” “fairly well,” “not very well,” and “not well at all.”

^bPossible responses are “very happy,” “a little happier than average,” “just about average,” and “not too happy.”

^cPossible responses are “often,” “sometimes,” “hardly ever,” and “never.”

[‡]Indicates reverse-coded items.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for All Variables, IPSPC, 1962–1980

| Variable | Age of Child When Measured | Mean | SD | Proportion |
|---|----------------------------|-------|------|------------|
| Child Characteristics | | | | |
| Singlehood versus marriage attitude index | 18 | 3.07 | 0.98 | — |
| Divorce attitude | 18 | 3.79 | 0.96 | — |
| Cohabitation attitude index | 18 | 3.11 | 1.20 | — |
| Premarital sex attitude index | 18 | 3.46 | 1.09 | — |
| Parents' marital quality index ^a | 18 | 2.69 | 0.75 | — |
| Female | 18 | — | — | .50 |
| Parent Characteristics | | | | |
| Singlehood versus marriage attitude index | 18 | 3.02 | 0.89 | — |
| Divorce attitude | 18 | 3.79 | 0.96 | — |
| Cohabitation attitude index | 18 | 2.22 | 0.96 | — |
| Premarital sex attitude index | 18 | 2.52 | 1.00 | — |
| Mother's marital quality index | 18 | 2.98 | 0.58 | — |
| Average education of spouses (years) | 1 | 12.34 | 1.89 | — |
| Catholic | 1 | — | — | .54 |
| Fundamentalist Protestant | 1 | — | — | .11 |
| Jewish/Other or no religious affiliation | 1 | — | — | .03 |
| Mother's age at marriage | 1 | 20.63 | 3.14 | — |
| Mother pregnant before marriage | 1 | — | — | .19 |
| Attendance at religious services | 18 | 3.82 | 1.54 | — |
| Mother divorced and remarried | 1–18 | — | — | .09 |

Note: $n = 755$.

^a $n = 681$.

Table 2

Unstandardized Coefficients From Regression of Children's Family Attitudes at Age 18 on Mothers' and Children's Reports of Parents' Marital Quality and Mothers' Attitudes, IPSPC, 1962–1980

| Independent Variable | Being Single Versus Married | | Divorce | | Cohabitation | | Premarital Sex | |
|--|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|---------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Marital Quality | | | | | | | | |
| Mother's report of marital quality | .05 (.04) | | .01 (.04) | | .01 (.03) | | .01 (.04) | |
| Child's report of parents' marital quality | | .04 (.04) | | -.10** (.04) | | -.04 (.04) | | -.10*** (.04) |
| Mother's Attitude | | | | | | | | |
| Mother's attitude (toward outcome) | .13*** (.04) | .13*** (.04) | .17*** (.04) | .17*** (.04) | .22*** (.04) | .25*** (.04) | .18*** (.04) | .18*** (.04) |
| Adjusted R^2 | .03 | .03 | .13 | .11 | .18 | .16 | .14 | .15 |
| n | 755 | 681 | 755 | 681 | 755 | 681 | 755 | 681 |

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. Columns labeled "1" assess the influence of mothers' reports of parents' marital quality; columns labeled "2" assess the influence of children's reports. All models control for parents' average education, mother's religious affiliation (Catholic, Fundamentalist Protestant, and other religious affiliation), mother's attendance at religious services, mother's age at marriage, mother's premarital pregnancy, and child's gender. Models in the column "1" equations also control for mother's divorce and remarriage between 1962 and 1980.

**
 $p < .01$;

 $p < .001$ (one-tailed tests)

Table 3

Unstandardized Coefficients From Regression of Children's Family Attitudes at Age 18 on Mothers' and Children's Reports of Parents' Marital Quality and Interaction of Mothers' Family Attitudes and Marital Quality, IPSPC, 1962–1980

| Independent Variable | Being Single Versus Married | | Divorce | | Cohabitation | | Premarital Sex | |
|--|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|---------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Marital Quality | | | | | | | | |
| Mother's report of marital quality | .04 (.04) | | .01 (.04) | | .01 (.03) | | [.004] (.04) | |
| Child's report of parents' marital quality | | .04 (.04) | | -.09** (.04) | | -.03 (.04) | | -.10*** (.04) |
| Mother's Attitude | | | | | | | | |
| Mother's attitude (toward outcome) | .13*** (.04) | .13*** (.04) | .17*** (.04) | .17*** (.04) | .23*** (.04) | .25*** (.04) | .18*** (.04) | .19*** (.04) |
| Interaction of Marital Quality and Mother's Attitude | | | | | | | | |
| Mother's report of marital quality × mother's attitude | .08** (.04) | | .03 (.03) | | .07** (.03) | | .06* (.03) | |
| Child's report of parents' marital quality × mother's attitude | | .07* (.04) | | .02 (.03) | | .02 (.04) | | .07* (.04) |
| Adjusted R^2 | .04 | .04 | .13 | .11 | .18 | .16 | .14 | .15 |
| n | 755 | 681 | 755 | 681 | 755 | 681 | 755 | 681 |

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. Columns labeled "1" assess the influence of mothers' reports of parents' marital quality; columns labeled "2" assess the influence of children's reports. All models control for parents' average education, mother's religious affiliation (Catholic, Fundamentalist Protestant, and other religious affiliation), mother's attendance at religious services, mother's age at marriage, mother's premarital pregnancy, and child's gender. Models in the column "1" equations also control for mother's divorce and remarriage between 1962 and 1980.

* $p < .05$;

** $p < .01$;

*** $p < .001$ (one-tailed tests)

Table 4

Predicted Magnitude of Influence of Mothers' Attitudes on Children's Attitudes in 1980 for Low-Quality and High-Quality Marriages, Based on Coefficients From Table 3, IPSPC, 1962–1980

| Independent Variable | Being Single Versus Married | Divorce | Cohabitation | Premarital Sex |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------|------------------|------------------|
| Mother's Report | | | | |
| Low marital quality ^a | .05 | .14 | .16 | .12 |
| High marital quality ^b | .21 ^c | .20 | .30 ^c | .24 ^c |
| Child's Report | | | | |
| Low marital quality ^a | .06 | .15 | .23 | .12 |
| High marital quality ^b | .20 ^c | .19 | .27 | .26 ^c |

^aOne standard deviation below mean.

^bOne standard deviation above mean.

^cStatistically significant difference across levels of marital quality.