

**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 also 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 importantly, 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 adult children when parents' marital quality is high than when it is low.

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

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, child bearing, 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 de-institutionalized; its meaning is no longer broadly shared, and individuals' decisions about union formation and dissolution are much less closely linked with entry into marriage (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 the current paper is to investigate the ways in which children's experiences of their 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 such 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 package of ideas 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.

Research demonstrates 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 both family attitudes and patterns of intergenerational continuity. 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 are observing increasingly unhappy marriages among their parents, declining marital quality over time may be contributing to higher levels of support for marriage alternatives. In addition, parents' marital quality may also influence attitude change in other ways. Specifically, parent-child attitude similarity may be enhanced when parents' marital quality is high. 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 be contributing to attenuation in parent-child attitude correspondence.

To carry out our analysis, we rely on data from a thirty-one 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 to 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 influence of parents' marital quality on a range of marriage-related attitudes. Further, we analyze reports of parents' marital quality provided separately by both mothers and children, allowing us to gauge the extent to which the influence of parents' marital quality differs according to the

person by whom it is assessed.

We begin our investigation by outlining hypotheses about inter-generational influences of marital quality on the four attitudinal measures that serve as our primary outcome variables. Next, we present hypotheses about the moderating role of parents' marital quality in transmitting attitudes about family issues from parents to children. After introducing the data with which we test our central hypotheses, we carry out a set of multivariate regression models designed to address our research questions. We conclude with several observations about the nature of linkages between parents' marital quality and children's perceptions of behaviors that challenge historical definitions of marriage.

## **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 it also 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 de-

institutionalized, and it 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 de-coupled 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 how the quality of parents' marital relationships influences offsprings' attitudes toward this package of ideas that has 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 to 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 inter-generational 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 its meaning and desirability. Although marriages might be observed among peers, 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. The most direct evidence for this hypothesis comes from a study by Amato and Booth (1991). 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 1991).

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 transmitted to their 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; Cunningham 2001; Kapinus 2004). 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 support 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 specifically hypothesize that parents' attitudes will be most strongly linked with children's attitudes when the quality of the parents' marriage is high. No research of which we are aware has investigated interactions between parents' marital quality and parents' attitudes in

affecting children's attitudes. Previous research on attitudes toward premarital sex, however, suggests 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) argue that "maternal attitudes are the fundamental determinant of children's attitudes and behavior, with mother-child relations playing a secondary, facilitative role" (574). 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 would be conditioned by parents' marital quality in domains other than marriage, but we find this hypothesis most plausible in the case of marriage-related attitudes.

Each of the hypotheses presented to this point has assumed that parents' marital quality can be reliably measured regardless of whether a parent or 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, 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 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 parents' reports of parents' marital quality simply because they are likely to be more meaningful to the child.

In summary, our analyses facilitate several important contributions to our understanding



of the forces shaping attitudes toward marriage and its alternatives. First, we have suggested 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 effects of parents' marital quality on 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. All of the children from this initial sample were interviewed at age 18 (in 1980). Response rates for the initial interview 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 age 18.

The sample is racially homogeneous and it is possible that the processes we are investigating operate differently for non-whites. 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 among both parents' and children's makes the IPSPC uniquely suited to address our research questions.

Our sample includes the 755 mother-child pairs among whom the mother was married in 1980. Only those children whose biological parents were living together 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. 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 to remaining single. They are measured among both the mothers and children in 1980. The children were 18 years old at that time, although the ages of the mothers varied. Indices capturing attitudes toward cohabitation, premarital sex, and singlehood are each composed of two items. One item is used to capture attitudes toward divorce (see Appendix A for text). For each family dimension we create an averaged index after coding each of the items so that a high score represents greater support for the behavior in question. 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 singlehood. Among the children, Cronbach's alpha coefficients are .82 for the cohabitation measures, .81 for the premarital sex measures, and .60 for the benefits of being single compared to being married. Because of the lower reliability of the benefits of being single index, 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 were 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 were assessed with two items, and summed into an index. The text of these measures is included in Appendix B, and 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 mothers' marital quality on children's attitudes. We identify main effects of parents' marital quality, measured for both mothers and children in 1980, on each of the four indicators of the children's attitudes. We examine the influences of the mother's and the child's report of the parents' marriage on the child's attitudes in 1980 independently. Parents' marital quality (both mother reports and child reports) and children's attitudes were assessed when the children were 18 years of age. For reasons outlined above, we hypothesize that parents' marital quality influences children's attitudes. All analyses include controls for parental education, maternal religious affiliation and attendance, mother's age at marriage and 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 from the first

author. Finally, each model controls for the mother's attitude toward the issue in question in 1980. We analyze the data using Ordinary Least Squares regression because all of the outcomes with the exception of divorce attitudes have at least ten 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 then consider the extent to which parents' marital quality moderates the relationships between mothers' and children's attitudes. To accomplish this part of the analysis we created two sets of cross-product terms. The first multiplies values on each of the mother's attitudes (measured in 1980) by the mother's report of the parents' 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 zero and a standard deviation of one 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.

[Table 1 about here]

We begin with an examination of the influence of parents' marital quality on adult children's attitudes. Table 2 is designed to test our first hypothesis, which postulates that parents'

marital quality will be negatively associated with children's support for marriage compared to singlehood, 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 with a "I" assess the influence of mothers' reports of marital quality on children's attitudes, and the columns labeled with a "II" 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 marital quality differ across the two columns.

[Table 2 about here]

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 Table 2 in the "I" columns demonstrate that mothers' reports of the quality of their marriages are not related to children's age-18 attitudes. 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 with a "II" 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 measuring attitudes 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 were very similar when the two items were analyzed separately using OLR as when they were when 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 have little influence on children's attitudes, children's assessments of those relationships do have a measurable impact on attitudes toward divorce and premarital sex, and all coefficients but one are in the expected direction. Second, readers may wonder whether potential influences of parent's 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, showed 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 I 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 posited that parents' relationship quality would condition the influence of mothers' attitudes on 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 with a "I" designate equations based on variables tapping the mothers' reports of marital quality and the columns labeled with a "II" designate models based on children's reports of parents' marital quality.

[Table 3 about here]

Like Table 2, Table 3 shows that there are strong positive associations between mothers' and children's attitudes across all domains. More importantly, 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 columns of Table 3 labeled with a "I," all of the coefficients for the interaction term are in the expected positive direction. The coefficients for marriage compared to 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 interactions 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 columns labeled with a "II," statistically significant interaction terms are present only for attitudes toward singlehood and premarital sex.

We also examined 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 were identical. The results from OLR equations examining attitudes toward lifelong singlehood were similar to the findings presented in Table 3 with two exceptions. First, when mothers' reports of parents' marital quality were used, the interaction between marital quality and mothers' attitudes only attains statistical significance 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 were analyzed, the interaction terms in each of the equations fell just shy of statistical significance when the two items were analyzed separately (not shown). Overall the observed inconsistencies are minor and do not suggest serious qualification of the results presented in Table 3.

It is interesting to note that divorce is the single issue in which parents' marital quality does not play a facilitative role regardless of whether the parent's or child's report of marital quality is used to assess parents' marital quality. Mothers' and children's attitudes toward divorce are highly related, and the main effect of parents' marital quality on children's divorce attitudes is substantial (when children's reports of parents' marital quality are used). However, children of happily-married parents are no more likely to hold attitudes toward divorce that are similar to their parents than are the children of parents with lower quality marriages. Stated differently, children from low- and high-quality marriages are equally likely to adopt the divorce attitudes of their parents. It is possible that the "facilitative" effect of parents' marital quality that operates by enhancing the desirability of emulating parents is offset in this case by the perception of children whose parents are less happily married that their parents believe it is important to stay



together regardless of the quality of the marital relationship. This interpretation is consistent with research by Amato and DeBoer (2001), who argue that the children of parents who remain married despite high levels of conflict develop a stronger commitment to marriage than the children of parents who divorce.

In order to illustrate the facilitative role of mothers' marital quality in transmitting parents' marriage-related attitudes to children, Table 4 presents estimates of the predicted magnitude of the influence of mothers' attitudes on 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 standard deviation of one, 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, 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 about the benefits of marriage compared to being single, 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 can estimate that the predicted influence of mothers' attitudes on children's attitudes in high-quality marriages (based on mothers' reports) is .21.

[Table 4 about here]

The results in Table 4 demonstrate the facilitative role that parents' marital quality plays

in the intergenerational transmission of 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 transmission of attitudes between mothers and their 18-year-old children. Based on mothers' reports of parents' marital quality, the influence of mothers' attitudes toward premarital sex and cohabitation on children's attitudes toward those same issues is twice as large among the high marital quality parents as it is among parents with lower marital quality. For attitudes about the advantages of marriage compared to being single, the influence of mothers' attitudes for high marital quality families is four times as large as it is for low marital quality families.

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. In contrast, marital quality as reported by the children appears to operate both as a main and facilitative factor, depending on the outcome. For children's reports of parents' marital quality, attitudes toward premarital sex are the only outcome for which both main and interactive effects are statistically significant. 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 a number of contributions to our understanding of the way

that marital dynamics influence attitudes toward an array of behaviors that may compete with or challenge historical definitions of marriage. The availability of information gathered from two generations enabled us to address several under-explored questions about the influences of marital quality on attitudes toward remaining single throughout adulthood, divorce, cohabitation, and premarital sex. Our results suggest only moderate support for the hypothesis that parents' marital quality influences adult children's attitudes toward marriage-related issues. More significantly, we demonstrated 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. As such, it was a privileged position compared with being single. Marriage served as the legitimizing context for sex, childbearing, and co-residence 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 a set of issues that have historically been linked by their shared role in defining various components of marriage. Our findings showed that parents' marital quality was negatively linked with children's attitudes about premarital sex and divorce. 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 primary socialization that occurs as children observe their parents' marriages while residing in the parental home. For this reasons, we restricted the analysis to the 18-year-old children. It is also possible, however, that parents' marital quality influences subsequent change in children's marriage-related attitudes as they age further into adulthood. In supplementary analyses we examined the influence of parents' marital quality when the children were 18 years old on changes in the children's marriage-related attitudes over the ensuing thirteen years. We found very little evidence that parents' marital quality influences change in children's attitudes after age 18 (not shown).

The most important contribution of our analysis was the identification of the facilitative role that parents' marital quality plays in the intergenerational transmission of attitudes. We hypothesized that mother-child attitude similarity would be relatively large when parents' marital quality was high and relatively small when parents' marital quality was low. We found support for this hypothesis in the case of attitudes toward lifelong singlehood, cohabitation, and premarital sex. These findings complement earlier research by Weinstein and Thornton (1989) demonstrating that parents and children are more likely to hold similar attitudes toward premarital sex when the parent and child have a positive relationship. 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 the moderating influence of parents' marital quality extends to the intergenerational transmission of attitudes in other substantive domains.

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 in effects raises several issues that deserve elaboration. First, our research confirms the common-sense observation that marital quality is probably a less reliable indicator of parents' marital behavior than reporting on a discrete event such as a divorce or a second marriage. Second, the gap in perceptions of marital quality may be an interesting topic of study in its own right, and future research might fruitfully explore factors that are associated with relatively higher or lower consistency between reporting sources. Third, and perhaps most interestingly, 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. Although age-related developmental issues among children would make the analysis complex, such research could provide insight into the extent to which marital quality is declining because of increases in 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. Researchers have previously established that parental divorce increases children's support for premarital sex, cohabitation, and divorce. Our study shows how support for these behaviors may increase even among those 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, declines in marital quality over time may also reduce intergenerational similarity in attitudes in the future, since low marital quality decreases the association between parents' and children's attitudes. 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.

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**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for All Variables, Intergenerational Panel Study of Parents and Children, 1962-1993**

Variable	Age of Child when Measured	Mean	Standard Deviation	Proportion
<u>Child Characteristics</u>				
Single vs. married 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 <sup>a</sup>	18	2.69	0.75	--
Female	18	--	--	.50
<u>Parent Characteristics</u>				
Single vs. married 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/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 <sup>a</sup>	1-18	--	--	.09

*Note:* n = 755

<sup>a</sup> n = 681

**Table 2. Unstandardized Coefficients from Regression of Children's Family Attitudes at Age 18 on Mother's and Children's Reports of Marital Quality and Mothers' Attitudes, IPSPC, 1962 – 1993**

Model	Being Single vs. Married		Divorce		Cohabitation		Premarital Sex	
	I	II	I	II	I	II	I	II
<u>Marital Quality</u>								
Mother's report of marital quality	.05 (.04)		.01 (.04)		.01 (.03)		.01 (.04)	
Child's report of marital quality		.04 (.04)		-.10** (.04)		-.04 (.04)		-.10*** (.04)
<u>Mother's Attitude</u>								
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 in parentheses. 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 gender. Models in the Column I 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 Child's Family Attitudes at Age 18 on Mother's and Child's Reports of Parents' Marital Quality and Interaction of Mother's Family Attitudes and Marital Quality, IPSPC, 1962 – 1993**

Independent Variable	Being Single vs. Married		Divorce		Cohabitation		Premarital Sex	
	I	II	I	II	I	II	I	II
<u>Marital Quality</u>								
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)
<u>Mother's Attitude</u>								
Mother's attitude (toward outcome)	.13*** (.04)	.13*** (.04)	.17*** (.04)	.17*** (.04)	.23*** (.04)	.25*** (.04)	.18*** (.04)	.19*** (.04)
<u>Interaction of Marital Quality and Mother's Attitude</u>								
Mother's report of marital quality * mother's attitude	.08** (.04)		.03 (.03)		.07** (.03)		.06* (.03)	
Child report of parents' marital quality * mother's attitude		.07* (.04)		.02 (.03)		.02 (.04)		.07* (.04)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.04	.04	.13	.11	.18	.16	.14	.15
n	755	681	755	681	755	681	755	681

*Note:* 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 gender. Models in the Column I 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 and High Marital Quality Groups Based on Coefficients from Table 3, IPSPC, 1962 - 1993**

Independent Variable	Being Single vs. Married	Divorce	Cohabitation	Premarital Sex
<u>Mother's Report</u>				
Low marital quality <sup>a</sup>	.05	.14	.16	.12
High marital quality <sup>b</sup>	.21 <sup>c</sup>	.20	.30 <sup>c</sup>	.24 <sup>c</sup>
<u>Child's Report</u>				
Low marital quality <sup>a</sup>	.06	.15	.23	.12
High marital quality <sup>b</sup>	.20 <sup>c</sup>	.19	.27	.26 <sup>c</sup>

*Note:* Estimates are based on coefficients in Table 3.

<sup>a</sup> One standard deviation below mean.

<sup>b</sup> One standard deviation above mean.

<sup>c</sup> Statistically significant difference across levels of marital quality.

## **Appendix A. Text of Marriage-Related Attitude Measures, IPSPC, 1962-1993<sup>a</sup>**

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### Singlehood

Married people are usually happier than those who go through life without getting married.<sup>‡</sup>

It's better for a person to get married than to go through life being single.<sup>‡</sup>

### Divorce

When there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don't get along.<sup>‡</sup>

### Cohabitation

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

A young couple should not live together unless they are married.<sup>‡</sup>

### Premarital Sex

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

Young people should not have sex before marriage.<sup>‡</sup>

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*Note:* 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.

<sup>a</sup> Possible responses include "strongly disagree," "disagree," "don't know," "agree," and "strongly agree."

## **Appendix B. Text of Parents' Marital Quality Measures, IPSPC, 1962-1993**

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### Mother's Report

How well do you think your husband understands you—your feelings, your likes and dislikes, and any problems you may have?<sup>a‡</sup>

And how well do you think you understand your husband?<sup>a‡</sup>

Generally speaking, would you say that the time you spend together with your husband is extremely enjoyable, very enjoyable, enjoyable, or not too enjoyable?<sup>‡</sup>

Taking things all together, how would you describe your marriage?<sup>b‡</sup>

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?<sup>b‡</sup>

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

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*Note:* 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.

<sup>a</sup> Possible responses include “very well,” “fairly well,” “not very well,” and “not well at all.”

<sup>b</sup> Possible responses include “very happy,” “a little happier than average,” “just about average,” or “not too happy.”

<sup>c</sup> Possible responses include “often,” “sometimes,” “hardly ever,” or “never.”

<sup>‡</sup> Indicates reverse-coded items.