Methodologies of Assessing Marital Success (2010)

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Basic Concepts & Definitions

There has been considerable debate among family scholars concerning how to best measure marital success. Given the significant scholarship related to measuring marital and relationship success, this entry focuses on how marital outcomes can be best accessed—rather than on how marital success can be best predicted. There are numerous ways of accessing marital success, including survey research, observational techniques, qualitative approaches, and unobtrusive measures. Moreover, there are numerous ways of defining the term “marital success” itself.

Because conceptualization is a critical step in measurement, in this section, I briefly summarize definitions of some of the key concepts that are explored in this entry. Note, however, that these concepts are oftentimes used interchangeably in popular discourse, as well as in the research literature. In the sections that follow, I detail some of the problems with this practice. (Sabatelli, 1988). For instance, a study of marital satisfaction is not the same as a study of marital adjustment (although the concepts may be closely related). Furthermore, what constitutes a successful marriage can vary by culture, and for this reason, not all measures of marital success can be considered universally applicable. For example, western romantic ideals consider love (especially early in a relationship) to be a key component of marital success, an ideal that is much less valued in Indian society.

Marital success is defined, for the purposes of this entry, as an umbrella term referring to the various concepts used by scholars to measure marital outcomes. It should be noted that marital success includes outcomes, such as divorce rates, that are typically excluded when researchers refer to measures of marital quality (another umbrella term). Marital quality, in contrast, is defined as “the subjective evaluation of a married couple’s relationship on a number of dimensions and evaluations” (Spanier & Lewis, 1980, p. 826). The authors note that this term includes the range of variables that have been used by scholars to examine marital outcomes, such as marital happiness and marital adjustment. Marital adjustment is defined as the “accommodation of a husband and wife to each other at a given time” (Locke & Wallace, 1959, p. 251). Lastly, marital satisfaction is defined as “. . . a global evaluation of the state of one’s marriage” (Brockwood, 2007).
Importance of Topic to Work and Family Studies

Work-family scholarship generally proceeds from the assumption that paid work and family life are characterized by fluid boundaries (Kanter, 1977). As we examine the fluid boundaries between these domains, we are often interested in how paid work influences a variety of personal outcomes, including those associated with marriage. The linkages between marital outcomes and other variables, such as physical health, mental health, and individual well-being, are central reasons for work-family scholars’ interest in examining such outcomes (for a review, see Kalmijn & Monden, 2006). Other scholars have suggested that strong marriages are essential to the stability and well-being of society at large (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). For these reasons, how the navigation of paid work and family terrain shapes marital outcomes has been the focus of a number of studies (e.g., Hill, 2005; Voydanoff, 2005, 2007). As evidenced in the work of Amato, Johnson, Booth, and Rogers (2003), changes in work-family situations, such as women’s increased paid labor force participation, often have consequences for the marital quality of both men and women. Given our interest in marital outcomes as an area of investigation, it is crucial that we use the best methods available for assessing such outcomes.

State of the Body of Knowledge

There are a wide variety of methods available for assessing marital outcomes (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Johnson, White, Edwards, & Booth, 1986; Sabatelli, 1988). In general, those methods utilized by scholars can be broken into four main types: survey instruments, observational techniques, qualitative approaches, and unobtrusive measures (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 2000). Survey instruments have been dominant in family scholarship addressing marital outcomes; however, observational techniques, qualitative approaches, and unobtrusive measures have also been used. Each of these approaches to assessing marital outcomes will be addressed.

Survey Research

Scholars who utilize survey techniques have considered a wide variety of outcomes when investigating marriage, including marital adjustment, marital satisfaction, marital happiness, and marital interaction (Heyman, Sayers, & Bellack, 1994; Johnson, White, Edwards, and Booth, 1986; Lively, 1969). At the heart of most of these concepts is the idea of marital quality, which has been defined as the subjective evaluations that marital partners have concerning their marriage (Johnson et al., 1986; Spanier & Lewis, 1980). In other words, the concept focuses on people’s own feelings about their marriages rather than marital stability or the absence of divorce/separation. Marital quality has been noted as being one of the most frequently explored topics in family studies (Bradbury et al., 2000; Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Norton,
Despite the prevalence of research addressing marital quality, the concept itself continues to be subject to considerable scrutiny and criticism (Bradbury et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 1986; Sabatelli, 1988). Adding to the concerns about the conceptualization of marital quality is the fact that scholars have tended to discuss marital quality and marital stability as if they are interchangeable (Sabatelli, 1988). While there is certainly some overlap between the two variables, they do not always occur together, as has been demonstrated by numerous longitudinal studies (Huston, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Further, even when research has clearly identified marital quality as the object of investigation, the fact that scholars have used a wide variety of marital quality measures has led to difficulty in integrating results from different studies (Bradbury et al., 2000; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Glenn, 1990; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Lively, 1969). Table 1 provides a brief overview of the most widely used measures of marital quality, which are discussed in this section of the entry.

Historically, among the most widely used measures of marital quality are those that focus on measuring marital adjustment (Sabatelli, 1988). Sabatelli (1988) states that scholars interested in marital adjustment are concerned with "processes that are presumed to be necessary to achieve a harmonious and functional marital relationship" (p. 894). Because marital adjustment focuses on what is necessary to achieve a good relationship, some scholars have argued that the dyad is the most appropriate level of measurement for this variable (Sabatelli, 1988). Problems have arisen because most measures of marital adjustment contain items that measure aspects of the relationship along with individual feelings and attitudes toward the relationship (Johnson et al., 1986; Sabatelli, 1988). For example, a measure of marital adjustment might contain an item measuring how often the couple disagrees with one another and also an item assessing how satisfied each partner is with the relationship. Before further potential criticisms of adjustment scales are detailed, it is useful to introduce some of the most common measures. Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale and Locke and Wallace's Marital Adjustment Test are among the most popular—and heavily criticized—measures of marital adjustment (Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Sabatelli, 1988). Despite consistent criticism over the years, they both remain in regular use by researchers (Amato et al., 2007; Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Sabatelli, 1988). It should be noted that these scales were developed during a historical period characterized by rather rigid gender expectations; accordingly, traditional gender beliefs may influence the items that were selected for the scales (Sabatelli, 1988). For example, in the Locke and Wallace (1959) measure discussed below, couples are given higher scores if they both prefer to stay at home for leisure. Further, in the Locke and Wallace (1959) measure, "the highest adjustment score is assigned to those individuals who engage in all outside interests together" (Sabatelli, 1988, p. 896). Clearly, such expectations developed in a particular historical context and may not be applicable to contemporary marriages.

The primary goal of Locke and Wallace (1959) was to create a measure that was shorter than many that were in use at the time (some of which contained more than 200 items), while also ensuring adequate
reliability and validity of the new scale. They defined marital adjustment as the “... accommodation of a husband and wife to each other at a given time” (Locke & Wallace, 1959, p. 251). To create the scale, the authors identified items that had been used in previous measures and then selected the items they deemed most fundamental to marital adjustment. They further trimmed the number of items by eliminating duplicate items and selecting those that successfully discriminated between couples in the previous studies. The resulting scale of marital adjustment consisted of 15 items, with several items focused on how often the couple disagrees about various issues such as financial matters or relations with in-laws. Items concerning how happy the respondent is in his or her marriage, how disagreements are settled, leisure activities, and how often the respondent confides in his or her partner were also included. The authors tested the new scale on 118 husbands and 118 wives (not married to each other) from Los Angeles who were either in adjusted or maladjusted marriages. Details about the sampling procedure were not provided by the authors (Locke & Wallace, 1959; Sabatelli, 1988). The sample was characterized by the authors as being “a predominantly young, native-white, educated, Protestant, white-collar and professional, urban group” (p. 254). The marital adjustment scale was found to have high reliability (.90 using the split-half technique with a Spearman-Brown correction) and to adequately distinguish between people who were either in adjusted or maladjusted marriages, which was viewed as an indicator of the scale’s validity (Locke & Wallace, 1959).

Regarding the Locke and Wallace Marital Adjustment Test, Sabatelli stated: “because of the scale’s widespread use since 1959, it is commonly thought of today as being the most validated instrument employed to evaluate marital quality” (1988, p. 895). Nonetheless, the scale has been subject to numerous criticisms over the years. A common critique is that the scale combines items that are conceptually distinct from one another, which may lead to both conceptual ambiguity and measurement issues (Bradbury et al., 2000; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Johnson et al., 1986; Sabatelli, 1988). Scholars also have commented that scales such as the Locke and Wallace Marital Adjustment Test combine items that measure the respondent’s assessment of his or her marital quality (often referred to as subjective items) with items about specific behaviors within the couple (often referred to as objective items), which leads to difficulties in the interpretation of results demonstrating the relationship between marital quality and other behavioral variables (Bradbury et al., 2000; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Sabatelli, 1988). It has also been suggested that the original estimation of reliability by Locke and Wallace (1959) may have artificially inflated the ability of the scale to discriminate among couples because their sample contained only well-adjusted and poorly-adjusted couples (Sabatelli, 1988).

Another measure of marital adjustment that has enjoyed widespread use over the years is Spanier’s Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Amato et al., 2007; Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Glenn, 1990; Graham & Liu, 2006). The Dyadic Adjustment Scale was designed by Graham Spanier and consists of 32 items that can
be used to measure the adjustment of either married or cohabiting couples (Spanier, 1976). Spanier conceptualized adjustment as a process occurring over time in couples, but he asserted that adjustment could be measured at any given point in time. He defines adjustment as “... a process, the outcome of which is determined by the degree of: (1) troublesome dyadic differences; (2) interpersonal tensions and personal anxiety; (3) dyadic satisfaction; (4) dyadic cohesion; and (5) consensus on matters of importance to dyadic functioning” (p. 17). To create the scale, Spanier identified all items that had been used in previous measures of marital adjustment and then eliminated any duplicate items. Three judges then determined the content validity of the remaining items, and items deemed unacceptable were eliminated. The remaining 200 items, along with a few newly created items, were included in a questionnaire administered by Spanier. After administering the questionnaire, Spanier eliminated items with high skewness and low variance. He then performed a series of t tests on the remaining items, and those that did not produce a highly significant difference between the means of divorced and married couples were eliminated. A factor analysis led to the elimination of further items with low factor loadings. The 32 items that comprise Spanier’s final dyadic adjustment scale can be grouped into four components—dyadic satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, dyadic consensus, and affectional expression. The scale was initially tested on a nonprobability purposive sample of married and divorced individuals (N = 218 married individuals and 94 divorced individuals) from Pennsylvania. Spanier characterized the married individuals as all being white, but no details were provided concerning the race/ethnicity of the divorced individuals. Further details concerning the initial sample can be found in the original article (Spanier, 1976). The introduction of the scale presented evidence of content validity, criterion-related validity, and construct validity (Spanier, 1976). Evidence of reliability was provided in the form of Cronbach’s coefficient alphas for both the overall scale (.96) and each of the subscales (ranging from .73 to .94). A meta-analysis of 91 published studies that had used the scale indicated a mean Cronbach’s coefficient alpha of .915 (Graham, Liu, & Jeziorski, 2006). One of the primary advantages of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale is its relative shortness, especially compared to other measures that were in wide use at the time the scale was created (Spanier, 1976). If needed, the various subscales can be used alone. Given the widespread use of the scale, it has the potential to make integration of findings from different studies easier than has been the case in the past.

Spanier’s scale has come under routine criticism over the years. For instance, scholars have expressed concern that the scale does not incorporate a longitudinal component of change across time in how people feel about their marriages, which is problematic given that marital adjustment was defined as a process (Huston, 2000; Lively, 1969; Trost, 1985). Scholars have also pointed out issues in Spanier’s conceptualization of adjustment. Some scholars have argued that the conceptualization is tautological because adjustment is described as both a process and an outcome of a process, while others have suggested that the conceptualization is simply unclear and not fully defined (Heyman et al., 1994; Trost, 1985). The scale has also been criticized for the combining of dissimilar items. For instance, scholars
have expressed concern about the mixing of evaluative items, items about specific behaviors, and items dealing with interaction patterns (Bradbury et al., 2000; Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Johnson et al., 1986; Norton, 1983; Sabatelli, 1988). It is thought that the combination of such items can inflate associations between marital adjustment and other variables that researchers are interested in examining (Bradbury et al., 2000; Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Norton, 1983; Johnson et al., 1986). Others have noted that it is problematic to combine items aimed at describing the individual with those aimed at describing the relationship (Johnson et al., 1986). Norton also disagreed with Spanier’s decision to weight all items on the scale equally (Norton, 1983). Others have expressed concern that the process of developing the scale focused too heavily on the psychometric properties of the scale and not enough on building a firm conceptual foundation (Heyman et al., 1994; Norton, 1983). In particular, scholars questioned the elimination of items for skewness and the requirement that all items be normally distributed (Heyman et al., 1994; Norton, 1983). These decisions were viewed as problematic because marital adjustment is likely not normally distributed in the population.

To address some of the criticisms leveled against marital adjustment scales such as those advocated by Spanier (1976) and Locke and Wallace (1959), some scholars have advocated the use of global measures of marital satisfaction (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Norton, 1983; Schumm et al., 1986). Glenn (1990) noted that global measures of marital quality became increasingly widespread in the 1980s. These measures are referred to as global because they focus on overall assessments that respondents have about their marriages. The scales omit items that measure patterns of communication and other important behaviors in marriage, as these items are viewed as predictors rather than indicators of marital quality (Amato et al., 2007). As detailed by Fincham and Bradbury (1987), two of the most widely used global measures of marital satisfaction are the Quality of Marriage Index (Norton, 1983) and the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm et al., 1986).

The Quality of Marriage Index comprises six items that ask the respondent to evaluate his or her marriage. Examples of items include “we have a good marriage” and “our marriage is strong” (Norton, 1983). Respondents then indicate the extent of their agreement with these statements on a scale from 1 to 7. The scale was initially tested on a sample of individuals (many of whom were from couples; N = 430 individuals) from Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, and Kentucky (Norton, 1983). Details about sampling procedures were not given by the author. The author did not specifically discuss evidence of reliability or validity; however, he did analyze the relationship between the scale and other variables such as similarity of attitudes.

The Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale consists of three items asking respondents their level of satisfaction with their partner, their marriage, and their relationship with their partner (Sabatelli, 1988; Schumm et al., 1986). This scale was also tested on a sample of respondents. The sampling frame
consisted of a list of “urban families in Kansas in which the wife was between 35 and 55 years of age, and where the wife had had at least one child” (Schumm et al., 1986, p. 382) from Manhattan, Kansas. Every seventh name was selected, and a total of 63 wives were surveyed (a response rate of approximately 65%). Evidence of reliability was provided in the form of a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .93 for the scale (Schumm et al., 1986), and evidence of discriminant validity was also provided.

The main advantage of global evaluations of marital quality is that they are straightforward. The concept the scales are meant to measure is clearly articulated, and all items included on the scale are directly relevant to the concept of global marital satisfaction (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Sabatelli, 1988). Because the scales focus on overall assessments of marriage, they are ideal to use for research on the predictors of marital quality, especially if the researcher wishes to examine the role of specific behaviors (such as communication or affection) that were often included in past measures of marital quality (Sabatelli, 1988). Further, global measures of marital satisfaction are thought to connect easily to past research that used measures of marital adjustment that heavily weighted items pertaining to overall satisfaction (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). The Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale, in particular, has accrued considerable evidence of its validity and reliability (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; Sabatelli, 1988; Schumm et al., 1986). However, global evaluations of marital satisfaction are not without criticisms. Fincham and Linfield (1997), for instance, are concerned that such measures do not allow researchers to measure fluctuations in the feelings that people experience about their marriages.

Other scholars have argued for the creation of scales that separately measure positive and negative perceptions of marriage (Bradbury et al., 2000; Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Mattson, Paldino, & Johnson, 2007). For instance, Fincham and Linfield (1997) argued “… an overall index of the spouse’s sentiment toward the marriage may not capture the reality of everyday life. Clinical observation suggests that a spouse’s marital behavior is not always driven by a single undifferentiated view of his or her marriage” (p. 490). Because people hold complicated views of their marriages, it is argued that it makes sense to separately measure positive and negative attitudes toward the marriage. Fincham and Linfield (1997) created measures of positive and negative marital quality and found that they did account for unique variance in reported behaviors beyond that accounted for by measures like the Locke and Wallace Marital Adjustment Test. Further, their confirmatory factor analysis supported the idea of positive and negative dimensions of marital quality (Fincham & Linfield, 1997). Other scholars have also conducted analyses that support the contention that there are two dimensions of marital quality and that measuring two separate dimensions provides greater information on couples’ relationship quality (Mattson et al., 2007).

Many work-family scholars are interested in examining data from publicly available nationally representative datasets, many of which contain measures of marital quality. Here, the measures from a few such surveys are presented. The National Survey of Families and Households is a longitudinal study
of U.S. households that has thus far had three waves of data collection. Wave 1 took place in 1987-1988 and included a one-item global measure of marital quality: “Taking things all together, how would you describe your marriage?” (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988). The answer categories ranged from 1 = very unhappy to 7 = very happy. Data collection for Wave 2 occurred in 1992-1994 and contained the same one-item global measure of marital quality. An eight-item scale of marital happiness was also included. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their happiness with various aspects of their marriage, including the understanding received from spouse, love and affection, amount of time spent with spouse, demands spouse places on them, their sexual relationship, the way their spouse spends money, and the work the spouse does around the house (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996). The answer categories ranged from 1 = very unhappy to 7 = very happy. Wave 3 took place in 2001-2002 and contained virtually the same measures used in Wave 2 (Sweet & Bumpass, 2002).

The General Social Survey is a study of U.S. households conducted on a nearly yearly basis by the National Opinion Research Center (Davis & Smith, 1992). A one-item measure of marital happiness is part of the permanent set of questions that is asked each time the survey is done. Married respondents are asked the following question: “Taking things all together, how would you describe your marriage? Would you say that your marriage is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?” (National Opinion Research Center, 2009).

The National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW), sponsored by the Families and Work Institute, is a telephone survey of U.S. workers that was conducted in 1992, 1997, and 2002 (MacDermid, Galinsky, & Bond, 2005). The 2002 NSCW asked the following question to measure marital satisfaction: “All in all, how satisfied would you say you are with your marriage/relationship with your partner.” (National Study of the Changing Workforce, p. 90). The available responses range from 1 = extremely satisfied to 4 = not too satisfied. The description of the 2002 questionnaire detailed that the wording of this item was updated for the 2002 survey, but that it remains comparable to the question that was asked in 1992 and 1997 (National Study of the Changing Workforce).

It is important to note that the national studies mentioned here tend not to contain measures that have been rigorously tested for validity and reliability by previous researchers. The single-item measures are probably closest in type to the global evaluations of marriage reviewed earlier, and hence are likely characterized by the same strengths and weaknesses. Given that the work-family area of scholarship uses such data regularly, we should be mindful of the limitations of said data, especially in terms of the use of single-item measures. It is unlikely that single-item measures accurately gauge a concept as complicated as marital quality. However, the nationally representative samples offered by such surveys should potentially offset some of the limitations of measurement.
### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Number of Items</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Locke and Wallace 1959</td>
<td>Marital adjustment</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanier (1976)</td>
<td>Dyadic adjustment</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norton (1983)</td>
<td>Marital quality</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale</td>
<td>Marital satisfaction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fincham &amp; Linfield (1997)</td>
<td>Positive and negative marital quality</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 1 and 2 of National Survey of Families and Households</td>
<td>Marital quality</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2 and 3 of National Surveys of Families and Households</td>
<td>Marital happiness</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Social Survey</td>
<td>Marital happiness</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Study of the Changing Workforce</td>
<td>Marital satisfaction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Laboratory Observational Techniques

Another approach used to study marital success is to focus on the interactional dynamics of couples, which can be predictive of the strength and durability of relationships (Bradbury et al., 2000; Gottman & Notarius, 2002). Here I outline a small but promising set of approaches. Each shares in common a process of bringing couples together for a brief observational period and measuring the way in which they handle challenges or disagreements. Those couples that are able to navigate these encounters in a manner that predicts long-term relational strength are considered more successful than those whose encounters decay into intense hostility or interpersonally hurtful exchanges. Observational approaches became more prominent in the 1950s with the increased focus on interaction in marriages, and by the 1970s, they were in more widespread use by researchers (Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Spanier & Lewis, 1980). Observational techniques tend to be used most frequently by family psychologists (Amato et al., 2007). Among the most vocal advocates of an observational approach is John Gottman, who has used observational methods over the years to study marital interaction (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). Indeed, a review of observational research on marriage by Gottman and Notarius (2002) presents an almost evolutionary view of marital research moving from weaker self-report measures to stronger observational methods. Observational methods are considered to be especially promising for gathering data about interaction between marital partners (Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Schumm, 1990).

A variety of observational techniques have been used to study couples, including videotaping couples’ conversations, having couples play structured games, or asking couples to make decisions and/or perform various tasks (Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Schumm, 1990). Sophisticated physiological measures, made possible through time-synchronization of data, are sometimes used, along with the more traditional observational techniques (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). Physiological data may include variables such as heart rate and respiration (Amato et al., 2007). The observational study of interaction also led researchers to recognize the importance of affect to marital outcomes (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). Research in this area was buoyed by a variety of developments, including methodologies that allow for the coding of facial and vocal expressions (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). Indeed, both verbal and nonverbal behaviors are often used as data in observational approaches (Schumm, 1990).

Observational studies are generally seen as methodologically strong, but perhaps prohibitively expensive. A particular strength of observational approaches lies in their ability to detect and study nonverbal cues, which have important implications for marital quality (L’Abate & Bagarozzi, 1993). The main criticisms that have been leveled against lab studies concern the artificiality often inherent in lab situations and the lack of replication across lab studies (Bradbury et al., 2000; Gottman & Notarius, 2002). Others have suggested that the nature of being observed may change the behavior of those under study, thereby potentially introducing bias into lab studies (Schumm, 1990). Lastly, concerns about the coding of such complicated data have also been raised (L’Abate & Bagarozzi, 1993; Schumm, 1990). Scholars have
suggested that the coding of emotional responses and nonverbal cues is often not straightforward and that observers sometimes incorrectly interpret the meaning of such behaviors (L'Abate & Bagarozzi, 1993).

**Qualitative Approaches**

Qualitative approaches tend to be used the least often in assessing marital outcomes, although a few highly influential studies of marriages have utilized such techniques (e.g., Hochschild, 1989, 1997; LeMasters, 1975; Rubin, 1983). Qualitative techniques include but are not limited to interviews, open-ended questionnaires, ethnographies, participant observation, and archival research (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995; LaRossa & Wolf, 1985). Several scholars have commented on the under-representation of qualitative methods in family studies, especially in the most prestigious family journals (LaRossa & Wolf, 1985). Indeed, at least one review of marital quality literature admonished quantitative researchers to pay greater attention to insights from qualitative work on marriages (Glenn, 1990). The under-representation has been partly attributed to the fact that married life transpires at least partly in private contexts. The private context of marriage makes it difficult for researchers to study it qualitatively, especially when compared to behaviors taking place in public urban areas, which tend to be among the more common venues for qualitative research (Matthews, 2005). Further, qualitative research in family life is often exploratory or descriptive in nature, whereas the study of marital outcomes over the past several decades has been dominated by explanatory studies that seek to find correlates of marital quality (Bradbury et al., 2000; LaRossa & Wolf, 1985).

Qualitative approaches were not always so underutilized in family studies. Indeed, LaRossa and Wolf (1985) detailed how qualitative research was prominent in family studies during the 1920s and 1930s when scholars were increasingly concerned with the social and psychological aspects of families. During this period, researchers would often integrate both qualitative and quantitative methods into the same study (LaRossa & Wolf, 1985). The decades of the 1940s onward brought greater attention to quantitative methods, and qualitative research within family studies became increasingly marginalized (LaRossa & Wolf, 1985). For example, LaRossa and Wolf performed a content analysis of the Journal of Marriage and Family (one of the most prestigious interdisciplinary family journals) using a sample of issues from 1965 to 1983 and found that only 9% of the articles primarily used qualitative methods. Another study (Ambert et al., 1995) noted that only 1.9% of articles published in the Journal of Marriage and Family during the previous 6-year period were qualitative in nature. One can imagine that of those articles, only a small fraction focused on the assessment of marital outcomes.

Qualitative methods of studying marriage focus on analyzing verbal data or words rather than numerical data. Scholars using such methods tend to be concerned with issues of symbolic meanings, how families attribute meaning to their own experiences, or why people behave or think like they do (Ambert et al.,
Researchers often proceed by looking for coherent themes that emerge from the data (Amato et al., 2007). The goal of qualitative research is gaining in-depth and intimate knowledge about a social group and how that group is shaped by its context (Ambert et al., 1995). By and large, qualitative researchers often aim to understand the world as seen from the perspective of their informants (Matthews, 2005).

Despite the under-representation of qualitative research in family studies, the fact remains that it can address questions that cannot be fully addressed by other methods of inquiry (Ambert et al., 1995; Matthews, 2005). For example, Hochschild’s (1997) study revealed that people’s attitudes toward paid work and family life were much more complicated than can be readily assessed by a questionnaire, and Hochschild’s (1989) study detailed the subtle intricacies that often characterize conflicts couples have about the division of household labor.

**Unobtrusive Measures**

Unobtrusive measures are defined as “measures that do not require the cooperation of a respondent and that do not themselves contaminate the response” (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 2000, p. 2). Scholars use unobtrusive measures such as marriage records, marriage rates, and divorce rates to study marital success. Scholars have shown a special interest in studying divorce rates. Divorce rates can be calculated in various ways, but the most commonly used measure is the crude divorce rate, which is calculated by determining the number of divorces per 1,000 persons in the population (Eshleman & Bulcroft, 2010). Divorce rates have the advantage of being both publicly available and unaffected by issues of social desirability that plague self-report measures. Divorce rates also allow for geographical and cross-cultural comparisons. Studies of divorce rates, however, are not without limitations. For instance, crude divorce rates clearly do not take into account marriage rates; hence, a country like the United States has a high crude divorce rate partially because of its high rate of marriage (Eshleman & Bulcroft, 2010). Crude divorce rates are also affected by social forces operating at a much higher level than any particular marriage, such as the liberalization of divorce laws and the age distribution of the population (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 2002; Eshleman & Bulcroft, 2010).

Finally, it is important to consider that even if statistics such as divorce rates are reliably created, they do not always offer a valid means of assessing marital success. For example, divorce rates in Middle Eastern societies are extremely low. But given the levels of abuse that women experience in these societies (oftentimes by the hands of other family members), it would be problematic to conclude that marriages are more successful in these societies than in others.

**Implications for Research and Practice**

Future researchers interested in examining the impact of the work-family interface on marital outcomes
Academics should carefully consider the methodological approach they embrace. Each approach has its own strengths and weaknesses that must be considered. Scholars undertaking survey research should be mindful of the considerable disagreement concerning how to best assess the quality of marriage with survey instruments and should weigh the benefits and drawbacks of the available measures of marital quality. The approach introduced by Fincham and Linfield (1997) of separately assessing positive and negative marital quality appears especially promising. Such an approach is an important step in the direction of survey measures that more fully capture the complex feelings people hold about their marriages. Couples also experience fluctuations across time in their feelings about marriage, and such changes are best studied through the use of longitudinal survey data (Bradbury, 2002; Bradbury et al., 2000; Huston, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Without longitudinal data, we are unable to fully grasp the processes that shape marriages across time.

The observational approach to studying marriages is promising, especially for scholars interested in improving the marriages of particular couples. Scholars such as John Gottman have enjoyed considerable success in predicting marital outcomes and helping couples improve their marriages (Gottman, 1994). Such approaches have the advantage of being rigorously scientific; however, they also may be simply too expensive for many researchers to pursue. Qualitative research can help us to determine the most pressing issues facing contemporary couples. Indeed, the insights gained from past qualitative research into marital dynamics (Hochschild, 1989, 1997; LeMasters, 1975; Rubin, 1983) suggest that embracing qualitative methods may help to move the field of work-family studies forward. The contested nature of paid work and family life coupled with gendered expectations built into the work and family domains mean that constructing survey questions that adequately gauge the meanings and lived experiences of people is increasingly difficult. Qualitative research is beneficial on its own for the insights generated and also in combination with other methods in helping to determine the questions that most need to be asked.

Whatever approach is taken, the study of marital outcomes will benefit from more fully considering both the micro contexts that couples operate in and the large macro social forces that shape marriages (Huston, 2000). Such considerations are especially critical for those interested in studying the fluid boundaries between paid work and family life. Huston (2000) argued that undertaking a telephone diary procedure would be a step in the direction of more fully attending to the micro and macro factors that shape marriages. The telephone diary procedure, as utilized by Huston, provides details about how couples spend their time along with daily reports of marital satisfaction. Huston also recommended that the time diary procedure be supplemented with direct observation of spouses, which would yield further data concerning spousal interactions. The combining of methodological approaches, as advocated by Huston, results in complex and nuanced pictures of married life. Clearly, other such creative approaches for studying marriages need to be proposed by future scholars of marital outcomes.
The information contained in this entry is also useful for practitioners, especially marital therapists. First, much research on marital quality is undertaken with the intended consequence that it will be put to use by practitioners. For example, research by John Gottman seems especially relevant to practitioners dealing with couples considering marriage or experiencing marital difficulties. For couples considering marriage, Gottman provides information that might be useful in counseling couples to avoid marriages that are likely to end in dissolution (Gottman, 1994). For couples undergoing marital difficulties, Gottman’s methods have uncovered a wealth of variables, such as interaction patterns, that marital therapists can work with their clients on to improve marital processes (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). Second, as marital therapists review studies relevant to their practice, they should be mindful of how marital quality is measured. All measures are characterized by strengths and weaknesses, and the results of studies should be interpreted in light of such limitations.

References


Mattson, R. E., Paldino, D., & Johnson, M. D. (2007). The increased construct validity and clinical utility of
assessing relationship quality using separate positive and negative dimensions. Psychological Assessment, 19(1), 146-151.


**Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies**

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. *(More about the Matrix ...)*.

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry’s topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.
<table>
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<th>Domain A: Antecedent Descriptives</th>
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Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains
About the Matrix

Sloan Work and Family Research Network
Resources for Teaching: Mapping the Work-Family Area of Studies

Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.
Process

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. **Key Informants:** The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants.

Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. **Literature review:** Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. **Peer review:** On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes at pittcats@bc.edu

Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:
1. Our use of the word "family" refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term "work-family" to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves. Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term "work-family" (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word "family" continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word "family" to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, care giver care taker relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal. Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, "Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study," on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.

Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:

1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

**Work-Family Experiences:** The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family need & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities’ problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

**Antecedents:** Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
- Workplace Antecedents
- Community Antecedents
- Societal Antecedents

**Covariates:** The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see Column C in Table 1).
- Individual Covariates
- Family Covariates
- Workplace Covariates
- Community Covariates
- Societal Covariates

**Decisions and Responses:** The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

- Individual Decision and Responses
- Family Decisions and Responses
- Workplace Decisions and Responses
- Community Decisions and Responses
- Public Sector Decisions and Responses

**Outcomes & Impacts:** The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

- Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
- Outcomes & Impacts on Families
- Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
- Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
- Outcomes & Impacts on Society

**Theoretical Foundations:** The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

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