Exchange theory predicts that people who adopt favorable attitudes toward divorce invest fewer resources in their marriages, thus eroding marital quality. Cognitive dissonance theory predicts that people who experience declines in marital quality adopt more favorable attitudes toward divorce as they anticipate leaving the relationship. This study tests both hypotheses. National, longitudinal data and structural equation models are used to estimate reciprocal paths between changes in attitudes toward divorce and changes in marital quality. The data provide stronger support for the exchange theory hypothesis than the cognitive dissonance hypothesis. Adopting more favorable attitudes toward divorce appears to undermine marital quality in the long run.

Do Attitudes Toward Divorce Affect Marital Quality?

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STACY J. ROGERS
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It is well known that divorce rates in the United States increased dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s. Currently, about one half of all first marriages are expected to end in divorce (Cherlin, 1992). Observers have attributed the high rate of marital disruption to a number of factors, including the rise of no-fault divorce and the movement of wives into the paid-labor force (see White, 1991, for a review). In addition, people have become more accepting of marital dissolution and are less likely to endorse the notion that spouses should sacrifice their personal happiness to maintain an unsatisfying marriage (Glenn, 1996; Thornton, 1989). This trend suggests that a decline in commitment to the norm of life-long marriage also may be contributing to the high rate of marital dissolution (Cherlin, 1992; Glenn, 1996; Klagbrun, 1985; Popenoe, 1996). Consistent with this idea, Amato (1996) and Booth, Johnson, White, and Edwards (1985) found that people with more favorable attitudes toward divorce are more likely to dissolve their marriages than are people with less favorable attitudes.

The explanations just noted—changes in the law, women’s growing economic independence, and shifts in attitudes toward marital dissolu-
tion—assume that divorce has increased because the barriers to leaving unhappy marriages have weakened. It is also possible, however, that the increase in divorce is due partially to a decline in the quality of marriage itself. In support of this idea, Glenn (1991) found that the percentage of people in the General Social Survey reporting that their marriages are "very happy" declined gradually from 1973 to 1988. Similarly, Rogers and Amato (1997) found that a cohort of people married in the 1980s reported more marital conflict, more marital problems, and less marital interaction than a cohort married in the 1970s. (These findings are the opposite of what one would expect if increasing rates of divorce result in only the most successful marriages surviving.) Given that individuals' attitudes toward divorce appear to affect the stability of marital relationships, it is also possible that attitudes toward divorce are related to the quality of ongoing marital relationships. Indeed, the inverse association between these two trends—increasingly favorable attitudes toward divorce and declines in marital quality—raises the question of whether there is a causal relationship between them.

This question is relevant to recent debates about the role of cultural values in supporting or undermining marriage. Popenoe (1996) argued that the spread of excessive individualism in recent decades has weakened people's commitment to a variety of institutions, including marriage. According to this argument, a declining commitment to the ideal of marital permanence increases the odds of relationship failure (Glenn, 1996; Klagbrun, 1985). Although most Americans continue to value marriage, the belief that an unrewarding marriage should be jettisoned may lead some people to invest less time and energy in their marriages and make fewer attempts to resolve marital disagreements. In other words, a weak commitment to the general norm of life-long marriage may ultimately undermine people's commitments to particular relationships.

Prior studies have not dealt with this issue. However, a better understanding of the link between divorce attitudes and marital quality may help us to assess the consequences of society-wide changes in views of divorce for the future of marriage. In the present study, we use longitudinal data from a nationally representative sample of married persons to investigate the association between individuals' attitudes toward divorce and their marital quality. We use structural equation methods to determine whether the association between attitudes and marital quality is reciprocal or unidirectional.
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

We draw on two theoretical perspectives to analyze the link between divorce attitudes and marital quality.

*Exchange theory* provides one way of thinking about the link between divorce attitudes and marital quality. This theory assumes that individuals act to maximize their self-interest and that people enter and leave relationships based on their perceptions of the associated benefits and costs (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1950; Nye, 1982). More specifically, Levinger (1976) argued that the likelihood of marital dissolution is increased to the extent that people receive few rewards from the relationship, face few barriers to ending the relationship, and perceive good alternatives to the relationship. A tolerant attitude toward divorce weakens the barrier to leaving the relationship, in that people feel less guilt in initiating divorce and anticipate less disapproval and fewer negative sanctions from others following divorce. Consequently, given a particular level of marital unhappiness, people with tolerant attitudes toward divorce are more likely to dissolve their marriages than are people with a strong belief in marital permanence.

Although Levinger (1976) viewed rewards and barriers as separate factors that predict divorce, the link between these factors may be dynamic. We argue that people's attitudes toward marriage and divorce affect their motivation to invest resources in their relationships; these investments, in turn, can have long-term implications for the extent to which people experience their relationships as rewarding. Of course, most people enter marriage with a strong commitment to their partners. Nevertheless, compared with people who strongly support the norm of lifelong marriage, those with a weaker level of support may invest less emotion and time in their relationships and be less inclined to make costly personal sacrifices for their spouses. They may also make fewer efforts to reach mutually satisfying resolutions to disagreements, assuming that, after a certain point, it is easier to terminate unhappy marriages than to exert additional energy in reconciliation. The result of this individualistic orientation is likely to be a gradual erosion of relationship quality. In contrast, people with a strong belief in marital permanence are likely to invest considerable resources in resolving disagreements and problems, as they do not consider terminating the relationship to be an option. Therefore, factors that weaken or strengthen the barriers to leaving the relationship (such as attitudes toward divorce) also may affect, in the long run, the rewards and costs associated with maintaining the relationship. In support of this reasoning, a recent
study found that people’s reports of “prescriptive support” for their marriages (that is, a sense of social obligation to remain with one’s current spouse) were not only positively correlated with relationship commitment but also with relationship satisfaction (Cox, Wexler, Rusbult, & Gaines, 1997).

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957, 1964) provides another way of thinking about the association between divorce attitudes and marital quality. This theory assumes that people experience an unpleasant state of dissonance when their attitudes and behaviors are not congruent. To resolve dissonance, people often change their attitudes to make them congruent with their behavior. This is especially likely when people are called on to justify behaviors they have exhibited or plan to exhibit. For example, a person who decides to leave an old relationship and enter a new one may come to see the new relationship in an especially positive light and the old one in an especially negative light. In this example, accentuating the positive aspects of the new relationship and the negative aspects of the old relationship help to minimize any lingering doubts about whether the decision was correct. A large body of research supports the role of cognitive dissonance in changing individuals’ attitudes (Aronson, 1997; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976).

Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that the quality of the marital relationship can influence individuals’ attitudes toward divorce. In particular, people who experience increases in marital conflict and marital dissatisfaction may start thinking about leaving the marriage. This process may involve trying to anticipate the probable consequences of divorce, talking to others about divorce, making plans to separate, and perhaps initiating a trial separation. If people hold traditional attitudes about marital permanence, then these thoughts and actions are likely to generate a considerable degree of cognitive dissonance. People can resolve dissonance, however, by adopting attitudes more favorable toward divorce.

Two longitudinal studies by Amato and Booth (1991) and Thornton (1985) suggest that divorced individuals resolve cognitive dissonance by changing their attitudes toward divorce. Both studies found that individuals held more favorable attitudes toward marital dissolution following divorce than prior to divorce. Presumably, for some individuals, the realization that obtaining a divorce is incongruent with their views leads them to adjust their attitudes in a less traditional direction. It is probable, of course, that much of the change in attitudes occurs before the divorce is finalized or even before the couple separates. Furthermore, some people may adopt more positive views about divorce following a decline in marital quality, regardless of whether a divorce occurs.
HYPOTHESES

These theoretical considerations lead to two hypotheses. On the basis of exchange theory, we hypothesize that adopting favorable attitudes toward divorce leads to lower marital quality. On the basis of cognitive dissonance theory, we hypothesize that declines in marital quality lead people to adopt more favorable attitudes toward divorce. Note that the two theoretical perspectives (and their corresponding hypotheses) both assume that the association between changes in prodivorce attitudes and changes in marital quality is negative. The hypotheses differ, however, in their assumptions about causality. It is possible, of course, for both hypotheses to be correct if reciprocal causation operates between the two variables.

The present study provides an empirical test of the two hypotheses. With cross-sectional data, it is impossible to disentangle the two hypotheses, as a negative association between prodivorce attitudes and marital quality could result from causation in either direction. With longitudinal data, however, it is possible to use structural equation methods to test for reciprocal relations between changes in one variable and changes in the other. In the present study, we use longitudinal data and structural equation models to examine reciprocal changes between divorce attitudes and marital quality over two time periods: 1980-1983 and 1983-1988. Previous conceptual and empirical analyses have indicated that marital quality is multidimensional (Johnson, White, Edwards, & Booth, 1986). For this reason, we examine three distinct aspects of marital quality: marital happiness (how people feel about the relationship), marital interaction (how often spouses engage in activities together), and marital conflict (the frequency of quarrels and disagreements).

METHOD

SAMPLE

Our analysis is based on the Study of Marital Instability Over the Life Course (Booth, Johnson, White, & Edwards, 1991). This is a national sample of 2,033 married persons who participated in telephone interviews in 1980, 1983, and 1988. Interviewers used a clustered random-digit-dialing procedure to locate households, and only respondents 55 years or younger in 1980 were included in the study. Seventeen percent of individuals could not be reached after 10 or more calls. Of those individuals
contacted, 78% agreed to be interviewed—a rate that compares favorably with other studies that have used random digit dialing (Groves & Kahn, 1979). Comparisons with U.S. census data revealed that the 1980 sample was representative with respect to age, race, household size, presence of children, home ownership, and region. In 1983, 1,592 respondents (78% of the 1980 sample) were successfully reinterviewed—a result comparable to panel studies that use face-to-face interview procedures (Booth & Johnson, 1985). In 1988, 1,342 of the original sample (66%) were interviewed a third time. Due to sample attrition, the second and third waves were slightly unrepresentative with respect to African Americans, Hispanics, young respondents, renters, and those without a college education but no more so than studies using personal interviews (Booth & Johnson, 1985).

To simplify the interpretation of results, we limited our analyses to individuals in first marriages. We also eliminated individuals with missing data on any variable. To use the maximum number of cases, we carried out one analysis of change between 1980 and 1983 based on 1,291 individuals married to the same person in both years. We also carried out a second analysis of change between 1983 and 1988, although the sample size was reduced to 1,032, due to divorce, widowhood, and sample attrition.

VARIABLES

Marital quality. We assessed three dimensions of marital quality: happiness, interaction, and conflict. To measure marital happiness, respondents reported how happy they were with 10 aspects of their marriage, such as the amount of understanding received, the amount of love and affection received, the sexual relationship, and the spouse as someone who takes care of things around the home. High scores on this scale indicated greater happiness. Alpha reliability coefficients were .87 in 1980, .84 in 1983, and .88 in 1988. Marital interaction was based on respondents' reports of how often they engaged jointly in five activities with their spouses: eating the main meal of the day, shopping, visiting friends, working on projects around the house, and going out for leisure activities. High scores on this measure indicated more frequent interaction. Alpha coefficients were .63 in 1980, .63 in 1983, and .64 in 1988. The marital conflict scale included four items dealing with fights over the division of labor, the frequency of disagreements in general, the frequency of serious quarrels in the past 2 months, and whether spouses were so angry that they slapped, hit, punched, kicked, or threw things at one another at any time during the
Means and Standard Deviations for All Variables in the Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measured in 1980</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital happiness</td>
<td>28.63</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital interaction</td>
<td>15.77</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital conflict</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prodiveorce attitude</td>
<td>14.12</td>
<td>2.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>35.57</td>
<td>9.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years married</td>
<td>14.02</td>
<td>9.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife's hours of employment</td>
<td>22.14</td>
<td>20.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income</td>
<td>40,235.07</td>
<td>18,751.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measured in 1983</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital happiness</td>
<td>27.98</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital interaction</td>
<td>15.31</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital conflict</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prodiveorce attitude</td>
<td>14.11</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife's hours of employment</td>
<td>22.54</td>
<td>20.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income</td>
<td>40,268.70</td>
<td>16,832.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measured in 1988</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital happiness</td>
<td>27.86</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital interaction</td>
<td>14.79</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital conflict</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prodiveorce attitude</td>
<td>13.92</td>
<td>2.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife's hours of employment</td>
<td>24.44</td>
<td>21.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income</td>
<td>42,014.74</td>
<td>14,978.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Sample size is 1,291 for 1980 and 1983 and 1,032 for 1988. Family income is measured in constant 1988 dollars.

previous 3 years. High scores on this scale reflected greater conflict. Alpha coefficients were .54 in 1980, .52 in 1983, and .47 in 1988. (For more details on these scales, see Johnson et al., 1986.) Means and standard deviations for these and all other variables are available in Table 1.

Prodiveorce attitudes. We assessed attitudes toward divorce with the following items: (a) Couples are able to get divorced too easily today; (b) It is okay for people to get married, thinking that if it does not work out, they can always get a divorce; (c) The personal happiness of an individual is more important than putting up with a bad marriage; (d) If one spouse becomes mentally or physically disabled, the other person should stay in the marriage regardless of his or her own happiness; (e) Marriage is for
life, even if the couple is unhappy; and (f) In marriages where parents fight a lot, children are better off if their parents divorce or separate. People responded to each item on a 4-point scale (1 = disagree strongly, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = agree strongly). Items a, d, and e were reverse scored so that a high score always indicated a more accepting attitude toward divorce. Alpha reliability coefficients for this scale were .63 in 1980, .65 in 1983, and .67 in 1988.

Control variables. Some variables are likely to be correlated with marital quality as well as divorce attitudes. For example, there is some evidence that women, those with low education, and non-Whites may be less satisfied with marriage and more tolerant of divorce than men, those with high education, and Whites, respectively (Amato, 1996; White, 1991). For this reason, we used the following variables as controls: the respondent’s gender (0 = male, 1 = female), the respondent’s years of education, and the respondent’s race (0 = non-Hispanic White, 1 = other). We also controlled for the duration of marriage in years. All of these variables were measured in 1980. For the analysis of change between 1980 and 1983, we also included family income in 1980, family income in 1983, the number of children in the household in 1980, and the number of children in the household in 1983. For the analysis of change between 1983 and 1988, we used family income in 1983, family income in 1988, the number of children in the household in 1983, and the number of children in the household in 1988. The inclusion of income and the number of children at two time periods in the analysis is equivalent to controlling for changes in these variables. We included these variables because changes in family income or hours of wives’ employment may affect marital quality as well as attitudes toward divorce. For example, wives who increase their hours of employment may experience more work-family conflict (and hence, a decline in marital quality) as well as a greater sense of independence (and hence, a more positive attitude toward divorce).

MODEL

Figure 1 presents the general model. There are four latent variables: prodivorce attitudes at Time 1, prodivorce attitudes at Time 2, marital quality at Time 1, and marital quality at Time 2. The latent variable reflecting prodivorce attitudes is based on two halves (the even versus the odd items) of the attitude scale. Creating the latent variable in this fashion is similar to using a split-half reliability method to estimate measurement error (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1988, pp. 131-138) and allows us to correct for
measurement error in estimating the effects of the independent variables. Preliminary analyses suggested that a single latent variable based on all three marital quality measures did not fit the data well, so we carried out separate analyses for each dimension of marital quality. Consequently, the latent variable reflecting marital quality is based on the sum of the two halves (the odd versus the even items) of each marital quality scale (happiness, interaction, or conflict). This approach means that we tested the model in Figure 1 six times (three marital quality variables × two time periods).
The model indicates that prodivorce attitudes at Time 1 are a cause of prodivorce attitudes at Time 2 and marital quality at Time 1 is a cause of marital quality at Time 2. The key parts of this model, however, are the reciprocal paths between marital quality and prodivorce attitudes at Time 2. Because marital quality at Time 1 and prodivorce attitudes at Time 1 have been partialled from the Time 2 variables, these paths represent the extent to which changes in marital quality affect changes in attitudes and the extent to which changes in attitudes affect changes in marital quality. In addition, although not shown in the figure, we included the control variables described above in all models.

We allowed the errors in the observed indicators (the split halves of each scale) to correlate over time—a common procedure in two-wave models (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1988, pp. 168-182). We did not assume that the errors in the equations for attitudes and marital quality at Time 2 were correlated, although we left this open as an empirical question. Preliminary analyses revealed that the correlation between these errors terms was not significant in any model; consequently, we did not specify correlations between these error terms in the models presented below.

We used the AMOS (Analysis of Moment Structures) computer program (Arbuckle, 1995) to test our structural equation models. Because our hypotheses are directional, we used one-tailed tests to assess the statistical significance of paths between changes in marital quality and changes in attitudes. We used two-tailed tests to assess the significance of all other model parameters. To improve the fit of the models to the data, we freed additional paths, when appropriate, based on modification indices. In most models, it proved useful to include paths from some of the control variables to some of the observed indicators of the latent variables. For this reason, the degrees of freedom vary slightly from model to model. In no model, however, did the inclusion of paths from control variables to observed indicators change the magnitude or significance of any of the reciprocal paths between marital quality and prodivorce attitudes.

RESULTS

The structural equation analyses indicated that the latent variables reflecting prodivorce attitudes and marital quality were significantly correlated within the same time periods. For example, prodivorce attitudes in 1980 correlated at -.21 (p < .001) with marital happiness in 1980, -.10 (p < .01) with marital interaction in 1980, and .13 (p < .01) with marital conflict in 1980. Similar correlations appeared between the 1983 variables. These
correlations are all in the direction predicted by cognitive dissonance and exchange theory. However, because these correlations are cross-sectional, it is not possible to disentangle the direction of influence between variables. To cast further light on this issue, we turn to the longitudinal results.

Table 2 shows the main longitudinal findings based on three dimensions of marital quality and two time periods. Row 1 shows that the association between marital happiness in 1980 and 1983 was strong, as reflected in a standardized $\beta$ coefficient of .63. The association between marital happiness in 1983 and 1988 was also strong, with a standardized $\beta$ of .60. Row 2 shows that prodivorce attitudes also were strongly correlated over time, with a $\beta$ of .77 between 1980 and 1983 and a $\beta$ of .82 between 1983 and 1988. These results indicate that reports of marital quality and attitudes toward divorce were highly stable over the 8 years of the study.

Row 3 shows the estimated effect of changes in marital happiness on prodivorce attitudes. The $\beta$ coefficient of -.10 indicates that shifts in marital happiness between 1980 and 1983 were negatively associated with support for divorce. The results for 1983 and 1988 were similar ($\beta = -.06$). These findings are consistent with the hypothesis, based on cognitive dissonance theory, that declines in marital quality lead people to adopt more favorable attitudes toward divorce. Row 4 shows that increases in prodivorce attitudes were associated with declines in marital happiness between 1980 and 1983 ($\beta = -.05$) and between 1983 and 1988 ($\beta = -.08$). These results support the hypothesis, based on exchange theory, that people who adopt more favorable attitudes toward divorce experience declines in marital quality. However, although these associations are statistically significant, they appear to be quite weak—a point to which we return later.

Additional information on the structural equation models appears in row 5. The model for 1980-1983 fits the data well, as reflected in a nonsignificant $p$ value (.27) and high goodness-of-fit indexes (.99 and .98). The model for 1983-1988 yielded a significant $p$ value (.03); however, the goodness-of-fit indexes were high (.99 and .98), suggesting a good fit to the data overall.

Rows 6 through 10 in Table 2 present information on marital interaction. Similar to people's reports of marital happiness, reports of interaction were highly stable over time. In contrast to the findings for happiness, however, the path between interaction and prodivorce attitudes (row 8) was not significant in either 1980-1983 or 1983-1988. This suggests that changes in marital interaction had no effect on attitudes toward divorce.
### TABLE 2
Summary of Structural Equation Models Showing Associations (standardized coefficients) Between Changes in Prodiveorce Attitudes and Changes in Marital Happiness, Interaction, and Conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1980 to 1983</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>1983 to 1988</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>χ²</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>GFI</td>
<td>AGFI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital happiness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness 1 → Happiness 2</td>
<td>.63***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes 1 → Attitudes 2</td>
<td>.77***</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness 2 → Attitudes 2</td>
<td>-.10**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes 2 → Happiness 2</td>
<td>-.05*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40.66</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction 1 → Interaction 2</td>
<td>.88***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes 1 → Attitudes 2</td>
<td>.78***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction 2 → Attitudes 2</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes 2 → Interaction 2</td>
<td>-.08*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39.94</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict 1 → Conflict 2</td>
<td>.88***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes 1 → Attitudes 2</td>
<td>.78***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict 2 → Attitudes 2</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes 2 → Conflict 2</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>64.48</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The path between attitudes and interaction (row 9) was significant in 1980-1983 but not in 1983-1988. This result provides some support for the hypothesis that adoption of more favorable attitudes toward divorce lowers marital interaction. The goodness-of-fit indexes (row 10) show that both the 1980-1983 and the 1983-1988 models fit the data well.

Rows 11 through 15 in Table 2 present information on marital conflict. Similar to the other two dimensions of marital quality, reports of conflict were highly stable over the study. Changes in conflict did not appear to affect attitudes toward divorce, either in 1980-1983 or 1983-1988. The path between attitudes and conflict, although not significant in 1980-1983, was significant in 1983-1988. This provides some support for the hypothesis that changes in attitudes affect marital conflict. The goodness-of-fit indexes show that both the 1980-1983 and the 1983-1988 models fit the data reasonably well.

Overall, we find limited support for the hypothesis, based on cognitive dissonance theory, that changes in marital quality affect people's attitudes toward divorce. This appears to be true for marital happiness but not for marital interaction or marital conflict. We find somewhat stronger support for the hypothesis, based on exchange theory, that changes in people's attitudes toward divorce affect their marital quality. This appears to be true for marital happiness in both time periods and for interaction and conflict in at least one time period. Four out of six tests support Hypothesis 1 (based on exchange theory), whereas only two out of six tests support Hypothesis 2 (based on cognitive dissonance theory).

Although many of the results are statistically significant, the weak magnitude of the coefficients suggests that these associations may not be strong enough to be substantively important. However, the estimated effects are necessarily small for two reasons. First, it is probable that respondents who adopted strong prodissorce attitudes or who experienced a steep decline in marital quality were especially likely to divorce and drop out of the analysis. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that among individuals who experienced a strong decline in marital quality, those who did not divorce (and therefore remained in the analysis) held less positive attitudes toward divorce than those who did divorce (and therefore were omitted from the analysis). Correspondingly, it is reasonable to assume that among people who adopted positive views toward divorce, those who remained married had more satisfying marriages than those who ended their marriages. Consequently, selection out of the sample through divorce would have worked against the hypothesized trends, thus attenuating the associations between variables.
To provide a partial test of these assumptions, we found that positive attitudes toward divorce at Time 1 and low marital quality at Time 1 significantly predicted divorce between Time 1 and Time 2. (This was true for 1980-1983 and for 1983-1988.) When we included cases who divorced between Time 1 and Time 2 and recalculated the correlations between divorce attitudes and the three measures of marital quality at Time 1, the correlations were consistently larger than those reported earlier. The omission of divorced individuals is very likely to have had a similar effect on the associations between changes in attitudes and changes in marital quality between Time 1 and Time 2, although we cannot test this idea directly. These results suggest that the coefficients in Table 2 are underestimates of the true associations.

Second, as Table 2 indicates, marital quality and divorce attitudes were highly stable over time, with relatively few people changing. Because the coefficients in Table 2 are for the entire sample, they indicate weak effects, overall. But the effects may be substantial for the small number of people who changed a great deal. To explore this idea further, we focused on
those people who experienced moderate to large shifts in attitudes. We defined a moderate degree of change as a movement of at least one step on the response scale (for example, from disagree to agree or from agree to agree strongly) on three of the six attitude items (all in the same direction).

Figure 2 shows mean marital happiness, interaction, and conflict change scores for people in three groups: those who became less supportive of divorce, those who changed relatively little, and those who became more supportive of divorce. Between 1980 and 1983, 10% of respondents adopted more supportive attitudes and 10% adopted less supportive attitudes. Between 1983 and 1988, 7% adopted more favorable attitudes and 8% adopted less favorable attitudes. The marital quality means are based on scores at Time 2 minus scores at Time 1 and are expressed as z scores. These means are adjusted for all of the control variables described earlier. The figure shows only the results for variables and time periods that were significant in Table 2.

The upper left part of Figure 2 shows that marital happiness declined for all respondents between 1980 and 1983. Among individuals who adopted less supportive attitudes toward divorce, happiness declined by one tenth of a standard deviation (−.10). And among those who experienced little or no attitude change, happiness declined by about one fifth of a standard deviation (−.21). But among those who adopted more supportive attitudes toward divorce, happiness declined by more than one half of a standard deviation (−.54). The upper right part of the figure shows a similar pattern of change between 1983 and 1988, although the trend is less strong. The lower left part of Figure 2 shows that marital interaction declined between 1980 and 1983, regardless of attitudes. Nevertheless, those who adopted less supportive attitudes toward divorce experienced the smallest decline in interaction, whereas those who adopted more supportive attitudes toward divorce experienced the largest decline in interaction. Correspondingly, the lower right part of the figure shows that those who adopted less supportive attitudes toward divorce reported a decline in marital conflict between 1983 and 1988, whereas those who adopted more supportive attitudes toward divorce reported an increase in marital conflict.

Comparing those who became less supportive and more supportive of divorce is informative. The differences between these groups expressed in standard deviation units is .44 for marital happiness in 1980-1983, .31 for marital happiness in 1983-1988, .23 for marital interaction in 1980-1983, and .33 for marital conflict in 1983-1988. Glenn and Shelton (1983) argued that differences of one tenth of a standard deviation or more between groups should be considered substantively important when working with
survey data. By this criterion, these differences are moderately large. Of course, only part of the association between marital happiness and attitudes is due to changes in attitudes, as indicated in Table 1. But even if we attribute half of the difference to changes in attitudes, then our findings still meet Glenn and Shelton’s criterion. Furthermore, Table 2 indicates that the associations involving marital interaction and conflict run mainly from attitudes to marital quality, rather than vice versa. Overall, these results suggest that the estimated effects of prodivorce attitudes on marital quality are large enough to be substantively and not just statistically significant.

As an exploratory step, we searched for gender differences. We constructed separate structural equation models for husbands and wives and tested for the significance of differences between the key path coefficients running between prodivorce attitudes and marital quality. However, no evidence for consistent gender differences emerged from these analyses. Similarly, we split the sample between those married for less than 10 years and those married for 10 years or longer, but we found no consistent, significant differences in key path coefficients between those in short-term and long-term marriages.

**DISCUSSION**

Our study used national, longitudinal data to test two hypotheses about the link between attitudes toward divorce and marital quality. One hypothesis, based on cognitive dissonance theory, stated that declines in marital quality lead people to adopt more favorable attitudes toward divorce. Consistent with this hypothesis, structural equation models suggested that between 1980 and 1983, and between 1983 and 1988, changes in marital happiness had a significant impact on prodivorce attitudes. However, no significant estimated effects of marital interaction or conflict on attitudes appeared for either time period. Support for this hypothesis, therefore, is modest.

Another hypothesis, based on exchange theory, stated that the adoption of favorable attitudes toward divorce tends to undermine marital quality. Consistent with this hypothesis, structural equation models suggested that shifts in prodivorce attitudes had a significant impact on marital happiness in two time periods and a significant impact on marital interaction and conflict in at least one time period. Examination of adjusted means revealed that people who adopted more favorable attitudes toward divorce tended to experience declines in relationship quality, whereas those who
adopted less favorable attitudes toward divorce tended to experience improvements in relationship quality or at least a slowdown in the gradual decline in marital happiness and interaction that characterizes many marriages. This pattern held for women as well as for men and for people in longer marriages as well as for those in shorter marriages.

What are the implications of these findings? As noted earlier, some observers have suggested that cultural shifts in recent decades—shifts toward greater acceptance of divorce and a declining commitment to the ideal of marital permanence—may be increasing the chances of relationship failure (Glenn, 1996; Klagsbrun, 1985). Although most Americans continue to value marriage, the belief that an un rewarding marriage should be jettisoned may lead some people to invest less time in their marriages and make fewer attempts to resolve marital disagreements. The result may be a gradual decline in marital happiness. Ironically, by adopting attitudes that provide greater freedom to leave unsatisfying marriages, people may be increasing the likelihood that their marriages will become unsatisfying in the long run. Because our study is the first to provide empirical support for this idea, our findings are tentative, and replication with other data sets is necessary to reach a firm conclusion. But given the potential importance of this phenomenon, additional research is clearly warranted.

REFERENCES


