

# **THE FREQUENCY AND DETERMINANTS OF MARITAL DISAGREEMENTS IN A COMMUNITY SAMPLE**

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Although information about marital disagreements is included in most scales of marital quality, disagreements have generally not been studied as outcomes of importance in their own right. This is unfortunate in light of recent research documenting that marital disagreements have a powerful effect on mental health over and above the effects of marital quality. In this report, we describe a prospective analysis of the frequency and determinants of marital disagreements aimed at taking a first step toward treating disagreements as important in their own right. The analysis is based on a two-wave community survey of married couples that obtained basic descriptive information about both the frequency of marital disagreements and a variety of social and personal characteristics that might be their determinants. Results show that nearly all respondents report having marital disagreements at least some of the time, with the vast majority reporting average frequencies between one and two disagreements per month. Prospective analyses of daily diaries obtained from a random subsample of the survey respondents confirmed the accuracy of these retrospective frequency estimates. Multiple regression analyses revealed that personal and social support are the most powerful predictors of disagreement frequency. We close with a discussion of the implications of these results for future research on marital disagreements.

Despite the fact that marital disagreements are included in many

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general scales of marital quality (e.g. Spanier, 1976), very few previous studies have examined disagreements as outcomes of importance in their own right. This lack of attention can be traced, in large part, to the view that disagreements are merely one of many manifestations of marital distress and that a direct analysis of the latter is likely to be more productive than an analysis of any one of these manifestations (e.g. Birchler et al., 1975). Recent research, however, suggests that this view may be overly restrictive and that different dimensions should be studied separately. This evidence comes from the work of Johnson et al. (1986), who analyzed data from a large national survey on the component subscales of global marital quality scales (i.e. marital happiness, disagreement and interaction) and found that some important predictors of marital quality have differential effects across these component subscales. Based on these results, Johnson and his colleagues cautioned that aggregate analyses of marital quality are likely to overlook important etiologic information unless the correlates of each component subscale are studied separately.

Several studies suggest that frequency of marital disagreements is one of the components of marital quality that deserves this type of separate consideration. For example, Paykel et al. (1969) demonstrated that the most common life event preceding the onset of clinical depression among married women was an increase in marital arguments. More recently, Bolger et al. (1989a) reported that day-to-day marital disagreements are more important than any other commonly experienced daily stress in predicting day-to-day mood variation among married individuals. Finally, two studies suggest that marital disagreements affect mental health over and above marital quality. The first study (Hooley & Teasdale, 1989) documented that spousal criticism is a more powerful predictor of relapse among remitted depressives than a global measure of marital quality. The second study (McGonagle & Kessler, 1991) found that marital disagreement frequency predicted increases in depression and anxiety independent of global evaluations of marital quality in a prospective analysis based on a community sample of married couples.

Taken together, these results suggest that the frequency of marital disagreements is an important component of marital quality that warrants separate investigation. The present report describes an exploratory analysis of the frequency and correlates of marital disagreements aimed at taking a first step in that direction.

Although a computer search located abundant research on the determinants of globally defined marital quality, it failed to find a systematic literature on the determinants of marital disagreements. A handful of studies have examined disagreement frequency as a function of a single cause, such as adult children living at home (Suitor & Pillemer, 1987), spousal discrepancies in values and status (Jorgensen & Klein, 1979), wives' employment (Booth, 1977) and family division of labor (Benin & Agostinelli, 1988), but these findings have not been replicated or synthesized into a broader analysis. It is also important to note that there is a large body of research on marital interaction (see O'Leary & Smith, 1991 for a review) but such studies more generally focus on how couples handle their disagreements and not on how often disagreements arise.

Based on this review, and relying on the larger literature on the determinants of marital quality, we focused the analysis described below on seven sets of potentially important predictor variables which we now review: socioeconomic status, children, marital history, personality, social support, stress and mental health history.

*Socioeconomic status.* Krokoff et al. (1988) demonstrated that negative affect during marital problem solving is higher among white-collar men than blue-collar men and traced this difference to higher levels of job distress among the former group than the latter. These results are consistent with other research which has documented a positive association between family income and overall marital quality (e.g. Crohan & Veroff, 1989). Others have demonstrated a positive association between wives' employment and marital disagreements (Johnson et al., 1986) as well as a negative relationship between wife's income as a component of total family income and marital quality (Moore & Waite, 1981). However, these latter two associations have not been replicated in large-scale surveys (Booth, 1977). Two studies have looked at the association between education and outcomes that are related to our focus on disagreements. One study found that education is positively related to the use of conflict engagement to cope with marital strain (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). The other study found that education is positively related to verbal aggression between spouses (Suitor & Pillemer, 1987).

*Children.* Johnson et al. (1986) showed that couples who have children living at home disagree more frequently than couples

without children. Sutor & Pillemer (1987), in comparison, found that argument frequency is unrelated to the presence of adult children living at home, suggesting indirectly that the significant association found by Johnson et al. is due to young children.

*Marital history.* Johnson et al. (1986) found a negative relationship between length of marriage and disagreement frequency. There is some evidence to suggest that long-married couples cope with marital problems more effectively than those married more recently (Bowman, 1990), which may explain this relationship. However, there has been no longitudinal analysis to determine whether this is due to genuine growth within relationships over time, to historical or cohort effects, or to higher divorce rates among couples who disagree frequently. While there is evidence that remarriages are more likely than first marriages to end in divorce (Cherlin, 1981), there seems to be no difference in aggregate levels of marital happiness between first married and remarried people in national survey data (Veroff et al., 1981).

*The personality characteristics* of spouses have been linked to marital quality in several longitudinal studies. The most consistent personality predictor of marital distress is the neuroticism of one or both spouses (Bentler & Newcomb, 1978; Kelly & Conley, 1987). Several studies have also shown that low impulse control and high extroversion of the husband predict marital instability (Bentler & Newcomb, 1978; Kelly & Conley, 1987). We know of no research, however, that has related personality to marital disagreement frequency. It is noteworthy that important influences of spouse similarity in personality have been documented in other areas of research (e.g. Swan et al., 1986) suggesting that an examination of spouse personality consistency might also shed light on the determinants of marital disagreement frequency.

*Social support.* Although it has been suggested that marriages lacking in intimacy are inherently stressful (Hobfoll & Lerman, 1988), we know of only one study that explicitly examined the relationship between spouse support and marital disagreements. This study found a significant negative relationship between perceptions about spouse support and marital disagreement frequency (Schuster et al., 1990). We found only one study examining the effects of non-spouse support on marital quality, which documented a positive association between integration into support networks and marital satisfaction (Lee, 1988).

*Stress.* We know of no research that has directly examined the

relationship between major stress and marital disagreements. However, an association between minor daily stress and marital conflicts has been documented (Bolger et al., 1989b) and there is evidence that job distress provokes negative affect between spouses (Krokoff et al., 1988). Research which examines the content of marital grievances (e.g. Whyte, 1990) shows that common sources involve stresses like financial difficulties and child-raising problems. Thus, we would expect a positive association between exposure to life events and disagreement frequency.

*Mental health history.* Marital distress is known to be an enduring characteristic of couples in which one spouse has a history of psychiatric disorder (Merikangas, 1984). Thus, we would expect disagreements to be more frequent among couples where at least one spouse has such a history than among couples who are free from prior disorder.

## Method

*Respondents* come from two waves of a community survey administered to an equal-probability sample of non-black married men and women in the Detroit Metropolitan area. An explicit decision was made to exclude black couples from the survey because the number of eligible black couples in the sampling frame was too small to provide the basis for rigorous subgroup analysis and the cost of oversampling black couples would be prohibitive. The baseline survey included in-home interviews with 1755 respondents during the spring and summer of 1985. The screening response rate (which determined eligibility for the study) was 98 percent. Interviews were obtained from 78 percent of eligible respondents, for an overall baseline response rate of 76 percent. Mattlin et al. (1990) describe the sampling procedures in full.

A second interview was administered in 1988. Complete face-to-face interviews were obtained from 1455 of the original respondents (84 percent of those still living at the time of the second interview). Our analyses are based on data obtained from respondents whose spouses also provided complete information, yielding 778 intact couples at Time 1 and 586 intact couples at Time 2. Between 1985 and 1988, 3.5 percent of the couples divorced ( $n = 27$ ), which is lower than the rate of 5.5 percent obtained from current population survey data for the Detroit Metropolitan area during this period (National Center for Health Statistics, 1990), possibly because it is based on non-black couples, who have a lower divorce rate than black couples (Norton & Moorman, 1987).

Demographic characteristics of the sample closely reflect those of the target population. In the baseline sample of 778 couples, mean age was 42 years, mean education 13 years and mean household income (in 1984 dollars) \$47,000. The high average income, which accurately corresponds to the population data for non-black couples in the Detroit Metropolitan area, reflects the fact that the majority of men (79 percent) were employed full-time and a large proportion of women (51 percent) were employed at least 20 hours a week. An analysis of sociodemographic charac-

teristics of the 586 couples who completed the second interview indicates that they did not differ significantly from non-respondents in income, age, number of children, years married or wives' education. Non-responding husbands had significantly less education (1 year less) than responding husbands.

Given the exploratory nature of this investigation, a wide variety of predictor variables was included in the analyses. Descriptive statistics for the variables used in each of the seven predictor variable clusters are described in Table 1. All but one cluster are based on data obtained in the baseline interview. Mental health history data were obtained in the second interview.

The outcome variable is a single-item measure of *marital disagreement frequency* based on responses to the following question asked during both the Time 1 and Time 2 interviews: 'How often do you and your spouse (husband/wife) have an unpleasant disagreement?' Response options were on a 5-point scale, ranging from 'never' to 'once a week or more'. Given the importance of this outcome, we conducted a comparative analysis based on prospective diary data obtained from a random sample of 332 of the respondents who completed the Time 1 interview about the occurrence of marital disagreements on a *day-to-day* basis over a 6-week period (see Bolger et al., 1989a for a more complete description of the diary subsample and data collection procedures). The diary subsample generated 11,578 days of data completed by intact couples allowing us to examine whether the retrospective reports based on the single-item survey measure were accurately reflecting the number of disagreements that actually occurred on a day-to-day basis.

We began by inspecting the distributions of reports about marital disagreements. Husband and wife reports were then treated as separate dependent variables in a series of exploratory multiple regression analyses. All multiple regression analyses began with linear equations and were then expanded to include interaction terms. Rather than explore all possible non-linearities and interactions among the predictors, we replicated previously documented effects and explored a small number of substantively plausible effects not previously considered.

## Results

*The distribution of reported disagreement frequency* in the Time 1 and Time 2 survey measures are presented in columns 1a and 2a of Table 2 collapsed across sex. In columns 1b and 2b we present the total number of diary days completed by respondents at each level of the survey reports and the average number of days out of 30 on which a marital disagreement occurred.

There are several noteworthy results in Table 2. First, we see that more than 90 percent of respondents report having at least some marital disagreements in the survey. Only about 1 percent at Time 1 and 5 percent at Time 2 report 'never' disagreeing, as shown in columns 1a and 2a. Significantly more respondents endorsed 'never' at Time 2 — the *only* significant discrepancy between the two distributions ( $X^2(1) = 14.4, p < .0001$  for men and  $X^2(1) = 16.6, p < .0001$  for women).

Second, as shown in columns 1a and 2a, the vast majority of respondents fall between the two extremes of never disagreeing and disagreeing as often as once per week, with close to half reporting fewer than one disagreement per month and the other half reporting between one and three per month. Inspection of the diary reports among respondents who endorsed 'less often than once per month' ( $n =$

TABLE 1  
Description of the predictor variable measures<sup>a</sup>

Predictor variables	No. of items	Husband			Wife		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Alpha	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Alpha
<b>A. Socioeconomic status</b>							
Total income	1	48640	25757	—	—	—	—
Percentage wives' income	1	.17	.18	—	—	—	—
Years education	1	13.6	2.5	—	13.4	2.0	—
<b>B. Children</b>							
Number aged 0–12	1	.82	1.1	—	—	—	—
Number aged 13>	1	.65	1.0	—	—	—	—
Mean number living away from home	1	1.1	1.6	—	—	—	—
Spacing <sup>b</sup>	1	3.3	1.8	—	—	—	—
Density <sup>c</sup>	1	.24	.22	—	—	—	—
<b>C. Marital history</b>							
Years married	1	17.1	12.4	—	—	—	—
First vs remarriage <sup>d</sup>	1	.79	.41	—	—	—	—
<b>D. Personality<sup>e</sup></b>							
Neuroticism <sup>f</sup>	11	-.16	1.0	.78	.11	1.0	.77
Extroversion <sup>f</sup>	9	-.13	1.0	.80	.09	1.0	.81
Mastery <sup>g</sup>	4	.10	1.0	.60	-.03	1.0	.62
Self-esteem <sup>h</sup>	6	.14	1.0	.72	-.10	1.0	.76
Interpersonal dependency <sup>i</sup>	6	-.12	1.0	.61	.15	1.0	.65
Sex-role orientation <sup>j</sup>	3	-.02	1.0	.69	.13	1.0	.70
<b>E. Social support<sup>k</sup></b>							
Perceived spouse	5	.29	1.0	.79	-.09	1.0	.86
Perceived friend	2	-.25	1.0	.60	.24	1.0	.65
Perceived relative	2	-.12	1.0	.74	.13	1.0	.76
<b>F. Mental health history<sup>l</sup></b>							
	—	.48	.72	—	—	—	—
<b>G. Stress<sup>m</sup></b>							
Chronic difficulties	—	.46	.64	—	.52	.67	—
Acute life events	—	.34	.56	—	.37	.57	—

<sup>a</sup> Descriptive statistics are based on the respondents who completed both waves ( $n = 586$ ) and are presented under the husband column when the couple is the unit of analysis (i.e. income, children, marital history and mental health history).

<sup>b</sup> Spacing is calculated as the difference between the ages of the oldest and youngest children divided by 1 less the total number of children.

<sup>c</sup> Density is calculated as the total number of children divided by the number of years married.

<sup>d</sup> Coded as 0 = couples in which one or both spouses are remarried and 1 = couples in which both spouses are first married.

<sup>e</sup> Personality scales are standardized.

<sup>f</sup> From Eysenck & Eysenck (1976).

<sup>g</sup> From Pearlin & Schooler (1978).

<sup>h</sup> From Rosenberg (1965).

<sup>i</sup> From Hirschfeld et al. (1977).

<sup>j</sup> From Huber & Spitze (1983) and Mason et al. (1976); Coded as 0 = traditional, 1 = non-traditional.

<sup>k</sup> Social support scales are standardized and are from Schuster et al. (1990). Items for spouse support include perceptions of understanding, dependability, concern, trust, being able to open up. Items for friend and relative support include perceptions of care and interest.

<sup>l</sup> Based on a modified version of the Diagnostic Interview Schedule, from Robins et al. (1981). Cases were defined as respondents who met lifetime criteria for any of the following disorders: major depression, dysthymia, mania, anxiety, panic, phobia, alcohol/drug abuse or dependence and anti-social personality disorder. Coded as the number of disorders reported by both spouses.

<sup>m</sup> From McGonagle & Kessler (1990). Aggregated measures based on the sum of responses to a series of 87 questions about ongoing difficulties and major life events in a range of life domains. Items confounded with the outcome measure were removed (e.g. marital difficulties, separation).

**TABLE 2**  
**The distribution of marital disagreement frequency and the correspondence of the diary reports at Time 1 and Time 2**

Marital disagreement frequency	1a		1b		2a		2b	
	Time 1 %	(n)	Diary subsample $M^a$	(n) <sup>b</sup>	Time 2 %	(n)	Diary subsample $M^a$	(n) <sup>b</sup>
Never	1.2	(14)	.2	(161)	5.2	(61)	1.3	(749)
Less often than once per month	52.2	(612)	1.2	(6923)	45.5	(533)	1.3	(5649)
Once per month	26.6	(312)	2.0	(2716)	29.3	(344)	1.8	(3087)
2-3 times per month	14.4	(168)	3.2	(1330)	14.5	(170)	2.8	(1211)
Once per week or more	5.6	(66)	3.9	(448)	5.5	(64)	3.1	(413)
	100	1172		11,578	100	1172		11,109

<sup>a</sup> Average number of days out of 30 on which a marital disagreement occurred as reported by diary subsample respondents at the corresponding level of the survey measure.

<sup>b</sup> Total number of days on which a diary was completed by diary subsample respondents at the corresponding level of the survey measure.

6923 diary days at Time 1 and  $n = 5649$  days at Time 2) or 'once per month' ( $n = 2716$  diary days at Time 1 and  $n = 3087$  days at Time 2) shows that these survey categories slightly underestimate the actual number of disagreements that occurred. The former group actually had slightly more than one per month (1.2 at Time 1 and 1.3 at Time 2) while the latter group actually had closer to two disagreements per month than one (2.0 at Time 1 and 1.8 at Time 2). The diary data for those who reported two to three disagreements per month in the survey ( $n = 1330$  days at Time 1 and  $n = 1211$  days at Time 2) show that about this number actually occurred in a month's time (3.2 at Time 1 and 2.8 at Time 2).

Three results speak to the accuracy of our survey measure of disagreement frequency. First, nearly 90 percent of the respondents reported either no change in disagreement frequency over the 3-year interval (i.e. no increase or decrease; 48 percent of men, 50 percent of women) or a 1-unit change on our 5-level scale (41 percent of men, 38 percent of women), indicating that our measure of disagreement frequency is highly stable. No systematic sex differences were observed in the direction of change, with the percentages of men who reported increases and decreases over time (24 and 28 percent, respectively) similar to the corresponding percentages of women (25 and 25 percent).

Second, there is substantial spouse concordance in reports of disagreement frequency. The percentage of husbands and wives who report either the same level of frequency or within one level of each other is 85.7 percent at Time 1 and 83.9 percent at Time 2. Few spouses are discrepant by more than two levels at either Time 1 (3.5 percent) or Time 2 (2.9 percent). There is no systematic sex difference in reports of disagreements among discordant couples, with the percentage of husbands who report more disagreements than their wives (29.6 percent at Time 1 and 29.4 percent at Time 2) similar to the percentage of wives who report more than their husbands (24.5 percent at Time 1 and 25.7 percent at Time 2).

Finally, there is considerable concordance between spouses in the *stability* of their disagreement reports. Nearly 80 percent of husbands and wives are either perfectly concordant with each other in their reports of changes in frequency over time (i.e. increases or decreases; 226 couples) or are within one level (240 couples).



Exploratory analyses of the *determinants of marital disagreement frequency* at Time 1 and Time 2 were carried out by estimating multiple regression models separately for each of the seven predictor clusters. The Time 2 models controlled for the Time 1 measure of the outcome, converting the analysis into an investigation of the predictors of change in disagreement frequency. Table 3 reports  $R^2$  coefficients for the overall effects of the clusters considered together (total effects), the coefficients for the gross effects of each cluster considered separately ( $R^2$ ), and coefficients for the net effects of each cluster controlling for the others ( $\Delta R^2$ ). We see that as a group, the seven clusters explain approximately 25 percent of the variance in both husbands' and wives' reports of disagreement frequency at Time 1. The clusters account for less variance in changes in disagreement frequency,  $R^2 = .06$  for husbands and  $R^2 = .11$  for wives. Inspection of the separate  $R^2$  coefficients shows that five of the seven clusters have significant gross effects on at least one of the outcome measures. The exceptions are SES and stress.

TABLE 3  
The relationship between predictor clusters and marital disagreement frequency at Time 1 and at Time 2, controlling for Time 1

Predictor variable cluster	Marital disagreement frequency							
	Time 1				Time 2, controlling for Time 1			
	Husbands		Wives		Husbands		Wives	
	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$
Socioeconomic status	.007	.003	.007	.002	.006	.004	.011	.002
Children	.031*	.002	.019*	.005	.007	.006	.025*	.020
Marital history	.034*	.007*	.014*	.009*	.003	.000	.002	.006
Social support	.132*	.078*	.173*	.114*	.014	.014	.039*	.033*
Personality	.130*	.065*	.099*	.037*	.033*	.029*	.039*	.030*
Stress	.005	.006	.004	.003	.002	.001	.006	.006
Mental health history	.017*	.004	.022*	.003	.002	.000	.003	.001
Total	.251*		.247*		.060		.107*	

\*  $p < .05$ .

Social support and personality are the strongest predictors of Time 1 reports for both spouses and also significantly predict changes in wives' reports. Considered separately, personality is a significant predictor of changes in husbands' reports (i.e. gross effects) and when added to a model that controls for the other predictor clusters (i.e. net effects), leads to a significant increase in  $R^2$ . The other predictor clusters are much less powerful predictors. The gross effects of marital history are significant net of the other clusters for both spouses at Time 1, but not for changes over time. The gross effects of children are significant over time for both spouses, but disappear when we control for the other predictor clusters. Mental health history has a significant gross effect at both times for husbands and at Time 1 for wives, but these effects disappear in the net models.

*Disaggregated analyses of the significant predictor clusters* provide a more detailed examination of the determinants of marital disagreement frequency. Table 4 reports three indices of association between disagreement frequency and each predictor variable: the zero-order correlation coefficient ( $r$ ), standardized coefficients based on a multiple regression equation of all predictor variables *within* each separate cluster (gross coefficients) and coefficients based on a multiple re-

TABLE 4  
The relationship between disaggregated predictor clusters and marital disagreement frequency at Time 1 and at Time 2, controlling for Time 1

Predictor variables	Time 1			Time 2, controlling for Time 1			Time 2, controlling for Time 1			Time 2, controlling for Time 1		
	Husbands			Wives			Husbands			Wives		
	r	Gross $\beta$	Net $\beta$	r	Gross $\beta$	Net $\beta$	r	Gross $\beta$	Net $\beta$	r	Gross $\beta$	Net $\beta$
<b>A. Children</b>												
Number aged 0-12	.123*	.044	-.006	.091*	.044	-.005	.058	-.014	-.006	.066	.080**	.063
Number aged 13 >	-.055	-.034	-.023	-.094*	-.081*	-.058	-.057	-.056	-.076**	-.096*	-.033	-.032
Mean number away from home	-.130*	-.117*	-.055	-.038	-.020	.036	-.072	-.049	-.047	-.002	-.009	.013
Spacing	.002	.012	.020	.008	.014	.018	.024	.027	.014	.104*	.127*	.127*
Density	.092*	.089*	.018	.085*	.075	.029	.061	.036	.019	.009	.012	.004
<b>B. Marital history</b>												
Years married	-.168*	-.190*	-.143*	-.106*	-.122*	-.125*	-.104*	-.050	-.018	.007	-.016	-.024
First vs remarriage	.028	.080*	.063	.023	.056	.096*	-.047	-.012	-.007	-.006	.002	.029
<b>C. Personality</b>												
Wife neuroticism	.157*	.153*	.114*	.237*	.202*	.144*	.062	.089*	.063**	.159*	.158*	.135*
Extroversion	.050	.091	.074*	.044	.107*	.086*	.048	.046	.074**	-.053	-.010	.014
Mastery	-.094*	-.117*	-.096*	-.165*	-.130*	-.084**	.024	.007	-.002	-.066	-.090**	-.095**
Self-esteem	-.039	.092**	.088	-.118*	.047	.046	.037	.065	.063	.029	.131*	.132*
Dependency	.097*	.019	-.024	.176*	.067	.023	.098*	.043	.039	.088*	.016	.003
Sex-role orientation	.092*	.108*	.048	.019	.050	-.009	.038	.018	-.008	-.043	-.020	-.035
Husband neuroticism	.232*	.167*	.146*	.105*	.100*	.071	.095*	.109	.092*	-.022	.050	.036
Extroversion	.042	.094*	.078*	.036	.078*	.053	-.022	-.024	-.013	.077**	.085*	.092*
Mastery	-.199*	-.144*	-.132*	-.077*	-.083**	-.081	-.044	-.113*	-.115*	.032	.017	.032
Self-esteem	-.129*	.021	.011	-.031	.064	.071	.024	.128*	.124*	.026	-.008	-.012
Dependency	.186*	.065**	.020	.056	-.017	-.060	.021	-.037	-.027	-.048	-.053	-.041
Sex-role orientation	-.025	-.037	-.051	-.026	-.036	-.027	.003	-.040	-.046	-.029	-.030	-.016

TABLE 4 (continued)

Predictor variables	Time 1			Time 2, controlling for Time 1								
	Husbands			Wives			Husbands			Wives		
	r	Net β	Gross β	r	Net β	Gross β	r	Net β	Gross β	r	Net β	Gross β
<i>D. Social support</i>												
Wife spouse support	-.254*	-.143*	-.128*	-.376*	-.268*	-.300*	-.039	-.016	-.032	-.228*	-.180*	-.170*
Friend support	-.012	.016	.013	-.014	.037	.039	-.095*	-.103*	-.115*	-.118*	-.060	-.054
Relative support	-.062	-.010	.001	-.114*	-.036	-.056	.017	.032	.025	-.033	.047	.034
Husband spouse support	-.330*	-.254*	-.206*	-.302*	-.147*	-.169*	-.030	-.023	-.018	-.027	.005	.006
Friend support	-.138*	-.084*	-.060	-.077*	-.028	-.038	-.050	-.042	-.024	-.030	-.068**	-.075**
Relative support	-.047	-.000	-.001	.008	.029	.047	-.015	.024	.019	.030	.042	.049

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .10$ .

gression equation that controlled for all predictor variables *across* the full set of predictor clusters (net coefficients). We present results only for the children, marital history, personality and social support clusters because none of the other clusters contains variables with stable net effects.

*Children.* As shown in part A of Table 4, all five effects of children are present for at least one outcome. Four of the five are present in the zero-order analysis for at least one sex at Time 1, and the fifth is present over time but does not have a zero-order effect. Each effect is small and inconsistent, and all but the anomalous effect of spacing disappear in the net models.

The fact that the effects disappeared when we controlled for the other clusters makes it likely that children are linked to some other variable more proximally related to disagreements. We investigated this by conducting a decomposition analysis that traced out exactly which variables explained the effects of children. We discovered that an aspect of marital history — marriage length — was responsible for the spurious relationship between children and disagreement frequency. That is, the significant gross effects of children disappeared when years married was controlled. We discuss the implications of this finding below.

*Marital history.* As shown in part B, the effects of marital history on disagreement frequency are largely cross-sectional. Marriage length is negatively associated with disagreement frequency for both spouses and remains significant net of the other clusters. There is also a positive association between first marriage and disagreement frequency which is suppressed in the zero-order analysis. The suppression is due to a positive association between marriage length and first marriage (i.e. first married couples tend to have been married longer than remarried couples).

More extensive analyses were conducted to discriminate between the possibilities that the association between marriage length and disagreements is due to a process of (1) selection whereby conflictual marriages end in divorce or (2) a true decline of disagreement frequency over the length of marriage. While there is no definitive way to determine which of these processes is at work, an indirect test of the selection hypothesis is available. Since divorce is more common in the early years of marriage, a non-linearity should exist in the relationship between marriage length and disagreement frequency if selection was at work. We failed to document a consistent non-linearity of this type, thus indirectly ruling out selection as a totally adequate explanation.

*Personality.* Part C of Table 4 reveals four fairly consistent personality predictors of disagreement frequency: neuroticism, extroversion, mastery and self-esteem. In general, there are more effects of respondents' own personality than of spouses' personality. The most powerful predictors are husbands' neuroticism and mastery for husbands' reports and wives' neuroticism for wives' reports. However, it is interesting to note that wives' personality predicts husbands' reports nearly as often as it predicts wives' own reports. Each personality dimension of the wife is associated with husband's Time 1 reports and two of these effects are marginally associated with increases in husbands' reports over time in the net models: wives' neuroticism and extroversion. Wives' self-esteem and husbands' extroversion are also significant predictors of wives' disagreement reports in the longitudinal net analysis. Interaction analyses show that there are no multiplicative or consistency effects of particular combinations of husband and wife personality characteristics.

*Social support.* As shown in part D of Table 4, social support is generally

associated with decreased disagreements. Spouse support is the most powerful dimension of support associated with cross-sectional disagreement frequency. Over time, wives' perceptions of spouse support and, less powerfully, husbands' perceptions of friend support predict fewer disagreements for wives. Husbands' reports, in contrast, are solely predicted by wives' perceptions of friend support. We also examined the possibility that discrepancies in spouse supportiveness predicted disagreement frequency by adding a dummy predictor variable to the linear equation for couples where one spouse reported receiving much more support than the other spouse. There was no evidence that such discrepancies influence marital disagreement frequency.

## Discussion

Our study provides the first basic descriptive information on marital disagreements in a community sample. We find that nearly everyone reports at least an occasional marital disagreement, with the typical respondent reporting one to two disagreements per month. We also find that marital disagreement frequency is very stable. Over 3 years, nearly 90 percent of respondents who did not divorce reported either the same level of marital disagreements or within one level of their earlier report.

Two findings argue for the accuracy of our survey measure. One is the striking correspondence between the survey reports of marital disagreement frequency and daily diary reports. The second is the strong concordance between husbands and wives in reports of both frequency and stability of disagreements. These findings are important in suggesting that dynamic phenomena like marital disagreement frequency can be studied accurately using retrospective survey measures.

The second aim of the study was to carry out an explicitly exploratory analysis of the determinants of marital disagreements. We found several significant associations between children and disagreement frequency. However, these effects were inconsistent, weak and, with one exception, disappeared when we controlled for marriage length. These findings are also relevant to research which shows that children are a common *topic* of marital disagreements (Whyte, 1990). The fact that differences in the number of children were unrelated to marital disagreement frequency demonstrates that children are not a cause of disagreements, but represent instead an occasion for disagreement.

The finding that length of marriage and disagreement frequency are inversely related replicates prior research (Johnson et al.,

1986) and is consistent with recent research showing that long-married couples are more effective than those married a shorter time in coping with marital problems (Bowman, 1990). There is no definitive way to determine whether the effect is due to selection (i.e. those who cope poorly with marital problems get divorced) or to genuine growth within marriage. As noted earlier, we found no evidence to support the selection interpretation arguing indirectly for the growth interpretation, although long-term longitudinal data would provide a more convincing test.

We found that marital disagreements are less frequent among remarried couples. Other research has found both no differences in marital happiness between first-married couples and remarried couples (Veroff et al., 1981) and a greater likelihood of divorce for the remarried (Cherlin, 1981). These findings taken together are, at first glance, contradictory. However, we suggest that they reflect subtleties about remarriages not previously uncovered in gross analyses of marital quality. One possibility is that the impact of marital disagreements for the remarried is more severe than for the first married. This may occur, for example, if remarried individuals appraise their disagreements differently from the appraisals of those in their first marriages. A related possibility is that something else about remarriage — apart from marital disagreements — increases risk of distress that research has not yet captured. A test of these hypotheses requires going beyond conventional measures of marital satisfaction to an analysis of its component parts.

Prior research has linked neuroticism, social extroversion and mastery to marital distress. Our findings are consistent with these results and raise the possibility that increased disagreements may be one pathway that mediates the relationship between personality and marital distress. Wives' neuroticism seems to be a particularly important determinant as it predicts increases in disagreement reports for both spouses.

Personality was more consistently related to changes in disagreement frequency than the other predictor clusters, concordant with prior research which has found that personality has the most powerful influence on marital satisfaction (Kelly & Conley, 1987). Kelly & Conley suggested that communication deficits in distressed couples may stem from the personality traits of marital partners. An evaluation of this issue would require research linking personality to marital interaction data.

As noted earlier, few studies have examined the relationship between social support and marital quality. We find that the strongest predictor of cross-sectional marital disagreement frequency is the extent to which one's spouse is perceived as supportive. This is not surprising. What was not expected was that wives' perceptions of friend support predict decreases in husbands' reports of disagreement frequency over time. There is a comparable, although marginal, effect of husbands' friend support on wives' reports. To our knowledge, these effects have not previously been found, although they are consistent with evidence that network integration enhances marital satisfaction (Lee, 1988). It is not clear whether this is true because of some unmeasured variable related to social skill or to a benefit of support outside marriage in reducing marital disagreements.

Finally, some comment is in order to address the non-significant associations in our analysis. First, we found only limited evidence that mental health history is associated with disagreement frequency. This association was observed cross-sectionally, consistent with research based on clinical samples that has found a positive relationship between marital conflict and major depression (e.g. Hooley & Teasdale, 1989), but was attenuated in models that controlled for other predictor variables. A decomposition analysis revealed that its effects were largely (but not entirely) explained by neuroticism.

No association was obtained between SES and marital disagreement frequency, even though past research has found a positive association between family income and overall marital quality (e.g. Crohan & Veroff, 1989). Taken together, these findings suggest either that there are other aspects of low-SES marriages apart from marital disagreements that are negatively associated with marital quality or that the impact of marital disagreements is greater for low-SES individuals than for high-SES individuals. There is some evidence consistent with both possibilities (Krokoff et al., 1988).

Finally, no association was found between major stressors and disagreement frequency. This is consistent with our failure to document an effect of either children or SES — the other two predictor clusters most conceptually related to stress. These results stand in contrast to those of Bolger et al. (1989b), who found that daily stress predicts marital conflicts. This inconsistency may reflect the fact that major events pull families together in a way

that minor stresses do not (Kessler et al., 1987). If further research supports this hypothesis, it could help interpret evidence suggesting that daily hassles are more important predictors of psychological distress than are major stresses (DeLongis, 1982).

The present investigation has a number of limitations. External validity is compromised by the fact that non-response bias multiplies when intact couples comprise the sample (Krokoff, 1987). Even though a 76 percent response rate was obtained at the individual level, complete husband–wife information was obtained in only 58 percent ( $.76 \times .76$ ) of the couples initially approached to participate in the study.

Our analysis was strengthened by longitudinal data. However, even longitudinal data do not permit a completely unambiguous test of causal priority when the outcome variable is highly stable over time (Kessler & Greenberg, 1981). If longitudinal data are to play a useful part in sorting out the issue of causal priority, the baseline assessment should be made at an early point in the marriage, if not prior to the marriage, in order for developmental influences on disagreement frequency to be observed.

Finally, a potential limitation is that disagreements have been treated as homogeneous. Research based on diary data shows that marital conflicts which continue over multiple days are significantly more distressing than those that are immediately resolved (Bolger et al., 1989a). These findings raise the possibility that the results reported here differ as a function of disagreement duration. In addition, our analysis does not consider intensity, style or resolution — all components of marital disagreements known to be associated with marital distress (see O’Leary & Smith, 1991 for a review). Thus, an important task for future research is to examine the potentially different consequences of various types and styles of disagreements and the personal and social characteristics that may be their determinants.

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