

**Marital Dissolution in South Asia: Empirical Tests of  
New Theoretical Frameworks**

**By**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines causes of marital dissolution in a South Asian setting. Marital dissolution has historically been uncommon in South Asia, but there is evidence that it is increasing in prevalence. However, empirical investigations of marital dissolution in South Asian settings have been limited. We have acquired a great deal of knowledge about the causes of marital dissolution in Western settings, but differences in family life in South Asia compared to the West suggest that the causes of marital dissolution may also be dissimilar in the two settings. This dissertation addresses the gap in knowledge of the causes of marital dissolution outside of Western settings by investigating the phenomenon in the rural, agrarian setting of Nepal.

Results from the following three papers offer new insights into the process of marital dissolution. First, the predictors of marital dissolution in Nepal are similar to the United States. Namely, age at marriage, wives' work experience, and marital fertility are found to have strong influences on couples' odds of dissolution. Second, both spouses' perceptions of discord increase their odds of dissolution, even in this setting where women face many disadvantages relative to men. In fact, wives' perceptions of discord have an influence that is independent of their husbands' perceptions. Third, marital fertility has important and unique influences on dissolution in this setting. Having at least one child, having additional children (up to three), and having younger children suppress the odds of dissolution. On the other hand, a daughter can exert a negative influence on their parents' odds of dissolution, but only when they do not have siblings.

This dissertation expands understanding of the process of marital dissolution, developing a new theoretical framework for studying the process across settings that are



socially, culturally, and religiously different. Future directions for this line of research point toward the incorporation of theories that account for setting-specific gender and marital dynamics. Furthermore, the collection of more comprehensive longitudinal data and the collection of time use data from couples—especially those with children—is necessary for expanding our understanding of the mechanisms behind marital dissolution.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

This dissertation investigates the causes of marital dissolution in rural Nepal—a setting where marriages do not commonly dissolve before the death of a spouse. There has been little empirical investigation of the process of marital dissolution in South Asian settings. Yet, marital dissolution may be expected to rise across the globe, with the potential to alter the nature and function of families (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994; Goode 1993; Sweeney 2010). The first paper of this dissertation (Chapter 2) investigates the factors that are commonly associated with marital dissolution in the United States, uncovering whether they operate similarly in South Asia. The second paper (Chapter 3) focuses on spousal dynamics in this setting where wives are typically expected to be subordinate to their husbands (Bennett 1983). Specifically, I investigate whether marital discord is predictive of dissolution, and whether wives' and their husbands' perceptions of discord can independently predict their odds of marital dissolution. In the third paper (Chapter 4), I investigate how marital fertility influences couples' odds of dissolution, focusing on the presence of children, family size, children's age distribution, and children's sex distribution.

These papers concentrate on a population in rural Nepal, near the Indian border. As a rural agrarian society, Nepal's economic conditions are similar to the majority of the world's population, living in impoverished and developing regions. For, example, life in Nepal is similar to life in other rural South Asian settings, such as in India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Because South Asia houses 34% of the world's total population

(Population Reference Bureau 2012) and is rapidly growing, understanding marital dissolution in Nepal has relevance for a large proportion of the world's population.

Nepal, like much of South Asia, is a country in which people have not historically had a great deal of freedom to make personal choices. Due to a long history of rule by high caste Hindus, Hinduism guides people's behaviors both through legal codes and cultural norms (Guneratne 2002; Levine 1987). Under Hindu decree, marriage is indissoluble (Holden 2008). In Nepal, marriage is universal, which means that almost every person is exposed to the risk of marital dissolution at some time in their life. Although marital dissolution due to marital breakdown has historically been rare, the number of dissolution events has been rising in recent years. For example, prior to 1985, divorce was practically nonexistent in the rural district of Chitwan, Nepal. But the number of filed divorces has quickly climbed, to a high of nearly 250 divorces in the year 2010 (see Figure 2.1). Still, with the low prevalence of separation or divorce, those who experience these events are an interesting minority: they have dissolved their marriages in spite of lacking freedom of individual choice and despite Hindu doctrines that frown upon divorce.

- Figure 2.1 About Here -

Studying marital dissolution in Nepal is not only relevant for populations across South Asia, but also advances our understanding of marital dissolution in settings like the United States. In expanding the investigation of the causes of marital dissolution in settings outside the United States we are better able to grasp the correlates of divorce, and whether there are unobserved factors, unique to the United States, which may be influencing the high rate of divorce. Without studying other settings, like Nepal, for

comparison we cannot uncover whether predictors of divorce in the United States are due to unobservable local characteristics of life and family relationships. For example, we know that education and women's labor force participation can influence couples' likelihood of dissolution in the United States (Booth, Johnson, White, and Edwards 1984; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985; Ruggles 1997; South 2001; South and Spitze 1986; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, and Markman 2006; Teachman 2002). But, this could be due to the educational system or curriculum, or the nature of female labor force participation in the United States. We also know that marital discord can increase a couples' likelihood of dissolution in the United States (Amato and Rogers 1997; Sanchez and Gager 2000), but perhaps this is because of the nature of setting-specific couple dynamics. Similarly, having sons can reduce the likelihood of couples' dissolution in the United States (Morgan, Condran, Lye 1988), but this may be due to the particular nature of parent-child relationships. Studying these factors in settings that are different from the United States in many ways (such as Nepal) can advance our understanding of the role of these unobserved influences across settings. This, in turn, can advance our ability to infer causal relationships in research on marital dissolution.

More concretely, research on marital dissolution in Nepal can advance our understanding of the mechanisms behind marital dissolution in settings like the United States. As described in the following pages, there are important differences between family life and marriage in the United States and Nepal. Because of these differences, there are reasons to expect that the process of marital dissolution is different in these different settings. For example, consider the mechanisms behind age at marriage: one of the most consistent predictors of dissolution in the United States (Becker, Landes, and

Michael 1977; South and Spitze 1986; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985). In the United States, people who marry at older ages have lower odds of marital dissolution, and this is attributed to greater maturity and opportunity for seeking an appropriate spouse (Becker et al. 1977; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985). In Nepal, on the other hand, people do not typically date and those who marry young often do so because of parental pressure and marital arrangement (Bennett 1983; Jennings, Axinn, Ghimire 2012). This leads to different expectations for the influence of age at marriage on marital dissolution in settings like Nepal. If, however, we find similarity between the association in Nepal and the United States, this will signify a need to reconceptualize the mechanisms at play in settings like the United States. In other words, by varying the setting, we can test the universality of the mechanisms and established theories regarding the processes that contribute to marital dissolution.

Furthermore, increasing our understanding of the causes of marital dissolution both improves our understanding of marital stability and provides a basis for understanding the consequences of dissolution. The same factors that predict marital dissolution can be inferred to also predict marital stability, albeit in the opposite direction (Goode 1993). Additionally, understanding the causes of marital dissolution is a prerequisite to understanding its consequences. In Nepal, people's lives are centered on their family, and family is the source of caste, religious identity, economic support, and social support (Bennett 1983; Gilbert 1992; Ghimire, Axinn, Yabiku, and Thornton 2006). The rising prevalence of marital dissolution may indicate a gradual shift in family relationships and family life in Nepal and throughout similar regions. Marital dissolution can also greatly impact women's well-being. Women in Nepal and similar settings are often dependent on

marriage for their livelihoods, as they lack access to inheritance, land ownership, and—especially in rural settings—employment (Pandey 2010; Gilbert 1992). The significance of the marital relationship for individuals in Nepal increases the importance of understanding predictors of its dissolution.

This dissertation employs data from Nepal with extensive information on people's lives before and during marriage—data that are rare in South Asia—to investigate the predictors of marital dissolution. The Chitwan Valley Family Study (CVFS) includes data from life history calendars, which collect retrospective information about respondents' entire lives. This offers the ability to predict couples' odds of experiencing marital dissolution from individuals' experiences during their entire life trajectory. The CVFS also offers data from interviews with both spouses, followed by monthly follow-up interviews, which allows for couple-level investigations into the prospective odds of marital dissolution. With these unique data, I embark on one of the first empirical investigations into the predictors of marital dissolution in South Asia (Dommaraju and Jones 2011).

In the first paper (Chapter 2), I apply existing knowledge about the predictors of marital dissolution in Western settings to this rural Nepalese population. I use event history analyses with retrospective life history data to investigate the influence of these potential predictors on the odds that first marriages end in separation or divorce. Given the stark social, religious, and cultural differences between the two settings, there are limited reasons to expect that the causes of divorce in the United States will operate similarly in Nepal. Yet, results reveal that common influences on marital dissolution in the United States also have important influences in this South Asian setting, motivating

future work in such under-studied settings to grow out of our knowledge from Western settings.

In the second paper (Chapter 3), I examine the influence of marital discord on separation and divorce. Using a sample of 682 Nepalese couples, I investigate the impact of marital discord on couples' odds of marital dissolution during the subsequent 13 years, and the extent to which wives' and husbands' perceptions of discord influence dissolution. Results reveal that (a) spouses' perceptions of marital discord do increase the odds of marital dissolution, (b) both husbands' and wives' perceptions of discord have an important influence on these odds, and (c) the influence of wives' perceptions of discord is independent of their husbands' perceptions. These findings suggest that both spouses' perceptions of discord are important for marital outcomes, and these influences are strong even in settings where the costs of marital dissolution are relatively high.

In my third paper (Chapter 4), I explore the influences of childlessness, family size, and family composition on the odds marital dissolution. The presence, number, and particular characteristics of children can have important influences on couples' likelihood of marital dissolution across settings. In South Asia, children have value that is not only psychological, but also explicitly economic. Parents rely on their children, and particularly on sons, for support in old age, continuation of the family line, and performance of religious rituals. I examine fertility influences in Nepal using retrospective data that spans back to the beginning of couples' marriages, allowing me to capture the period of marriage before they had children, the births of each child, and the dissolutions of their marriages. Results reveal that childless couples have higher odds of dissolution, and that each additional child after the first—but only up to parity three—and

younger children reduces couples' odds of dissolution. Children's age and sex composition also have important influences, but these influences are limited to relatively lower parities. Together, these three papers advance research on marital processes in understudied populations.



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## CHAPTER 2

### **Predictors of Marital Dissolution in a South Asian Setting**

Divorce in Western countries has been extensively studied, providing a rich understanding of the causes and consequences of this phenomenon (Becker, Landes, and Michael 1977; Cherlin 2009; Coontz 2007; Hannan, Tuma, and Groeneveld 1977; Martin 2006). Similar studies in non-Western countries, however, are more limited. In many of these non-Western settings, the social and family context is so dissimilar from Western contexts that the predictors of marital dissolution are likely to be entirely different. In South Asia, people tend to value collectivism over individualism and family values remain strong in the present day (DaVanzo and Chan 1994; Jayakody, Thornton, and Axinn 2008). Related to these values, marital dissolution has historically been uncommon among the population (Dommaraju and Jones 2011), and the causes of the dissolutions that do occur may be distinct from the causes of dissolution in more individualistic Western settings.

This paper extends the knowledge that scholars have gathered on marital dissolution in the United States to an investigation of its causes in rural Nepal. In both the Nepalese and U.S. settings, marriage is highly valued (Cherlin 2009; Jennings, Axinn, and Ghimire 2012; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), but the rituals and norms around marriage and family life are very different. This paper begins to investigate the causes of marital dissolution in Nepal, offering a revised framework that considers the distinctive social and family practices in this setting.

With recent social changes in Nepal (Ghimire, Axinn, Yabiku, and Thornton 2006), the setting presents a unique opportunity to study marital dissolution at the cusp of

a possible transition to greater prevalence of divorce (see Figure 1). However, detailed and quality data on marriage and marital dissolution are rare in South Asia. The Chitwan Valley Family Study (CVFS) provides comprehensive data on the lives and marriages of thousands of individuals. I use these data to investigate the impact of women's individual and couples' marital experiences on the likelihood that their first marriages will dissolve. In the following paragraphs, I describe social and family life in this Nepalese setting, and then I provide a theoretical backdrop for studying the predictors of marital dissolution in such a setting.

### **Marriage and Marital Dissolution in Rural Nepal**

The study area for the CVFS is in the Southern region of Chitwan, Nepal, near the Indian border. Like most of the country, the population of Chitwan is highly dependent on subsistence agriculture, and the area consists mainly of farmland (Axinn and Ghimire 2011; Shrestha and Bhandari 2007). The study area is mainly rural, with a city on the edge of the CVFS area, called Narayanghat. Travel to the city can be time consuming due to unpaved, poorly maintained roads. Although the farthest neighborhood in the study area from Narayanghat is only about 18 miles, it took approximately three hours for a person living in that neighborhood to reach the city by bus as of the year 2003.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of Nepalese people identify as Hindu (84 percent of the CVFS sample as of 2008), and people's behaviors are largely guided by Hindu religious doctrines (Bennett 1983; Thapa 2010). Marriage and religion are intertwined. Under strict Hindu decree, once a wedding ceremony is held, the marriage is bound for life and

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<sup>1</sup> Car ownership is extremely rare. Motorcycle ownership is more common, but, still, only about 11% of households owned a motorcycle in 2006. Most people must depend on public transportation to get to the city.

indissoluble (Holden 2008). However, this decree applies more stringently to upper caste groups than lower caste groups; lower caste groups face lower expectations to be “good Hindus”, and so they have more freedom to grant divorce and the right of women to remarry (Holden 2008). Furthermore, informal marital dissolutions have been known to occur, even under this strict decree (ibid). Yet the stringency of this decree is indicative of the great value placed on the sanctity of marriage.

The early age and universality of marriage further illustrate the value of this institution among Nepalese people. The average age at marriage for those marrying between 2000 and 2005 was 19.9 for women and 23.9 for men. This is an increase from a decade earlier: for those marrying between 1990 and 1995, the average age was 17.5 for women and 22.4 for men (Yabiku 2005). Still, the large majority of people get married by their early thirties: 96% of women and 95% of men between ages 30-34 in 2008 had married. The expectation and desire to bear children to continue the family lineage is an important reason for such high marriage rates, as childbearing occurs almost exclusively within marriage (Bennett 1983; Jennings et al. 2012).

The arranged marriage system in Nepal helps to maintain the early and universal nature of marriage. Most marriages have historically been arranged, at least in part, by parents or relatives of the bride and/or groom (Ghimire et al. 2006). However, this practice has been loosening recently, and it is now more common than in the past for young people to participate in choosing their marriage partner (Ghimire et al. 2006; Niraula 1995). As of 1996, 84 percent of married women and 69 percent of married men had marriages that were at least partially arranged by their relatives. These percentages dropped to 75 percent and 59 percent, respectively, by 2008. The arranged marriage

system helps to preserve family status and prestige, allowing senior kin to ensure that the younger generations marry into a family with equal or greater socioeconomic status and with their family's same ethnicity or caste (Bennett 1983).

Ethnicity plays an important role in marriage practices, and in gendered expectations for marriage. Ethnicity in Nepal is complex, multi-faceted, and related to both caste and religion. (For detailed descriptions of the different ethnic groups, see Bennett 1983; Cameron 1998; Fricke 1986; and Guneratne 2002.) Although Nepal is an ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse country, it has historically been governed by high caste Hindus (Guneratne 2002; Levine 1987). As a result, customs and cultural practices throughout the country tend to be driven by Hindu ideas. Among those who practice Hinduism, families of higher standing hold their daughters to stricter expectations. These groups – the Brahmins and Chhettris – are motivated to protect their prestige, and therefore ensure that their daughters follow customs closely. For example, these families tend to arrange marriages for their daughters much earlier than other families in order to ensure that their daughters are virgins upon marriage (Bennett 1983; Niraula and Morgan 1996). In fact, it was historically common for these groups to have their daughters marry before their first menstruation to make certain that pregnancy would occur within marriage (Radl, Rajwar, and Aro 2012), but this practice has faded (Yabiku 2005).

Once married, women, and especially women of higher status Hindu groups, are expected to be subservient and show deference to their husbands (Bennett 1983). This expectation is largely maintained by older generations, and often by women's parents-in-law. Many Nepalese practice patrilocality, in which women move out of their natal home

and into or nearby the home of their husband's family, making it easier for in-laws to monitor the couple and ensure their sons' authority within the marriage. Women of the upper caste Hindu groups have historically been expected to be faithful to their husbands under any circumstances, including widowhood. If their husband should die, no matter the age of the woman, they were expected to remain widowed and not remarry (Bennett 1983; Holden 2008).

On the other hand, families of the lower social standing or of non-Hindu identity are not as strict about these marriage practices and rituals. For example, among Hill Indigenous groups, there is less stigma attached to premarital sex and nonmarital childbearing (Fricke 1986). Terai Indigenous people, too, are not held to the same customs as Hindu groups (Guneratne 2002).

*Marital Dissolution.* Not surprisingly, given the high value and strict customs around marriage, marital dissolution is not common in Nepal. For example, only 10% of marriages occurring in the Chitwan Valley in the 1980s had dissolved through either separation or divorce by 2008.<sup>2</sup> Those who do dissolve their marriages face being stigmatized in their community. In ethnographic work that I conducted in Fall 2010, one 32 year old woman expressed this as a concern, pointing out that the entire family can lose prestige based on one member's divorce: "People in the society don't take the incident as good. The blame goes to whole family."<sup>3</sup> Other people tend to stress that

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<sup>2</sup> This information was obtained from the 2008 CVFS Life History Calendar data.

<sup>3</sup> In Fall 2010, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 men and women on the topics of marital dissolution, remarriage, and childbearing. These 30 interviews were conducted with local residents of Chitwan. The author developed and pretested a semi-structured interview questionnaire, with help from local Nepali staff at the Institute for Social and Environmental Research (ISER). The questionnaire was fielded among 18-45 year-olds (20 women and 10 men). The final sample represents people from different ethnic groups who were residing in neighborhoods of varying distances from the nearest city.



divorce is not a good option, but is justifiable as a last resort. For example, one 19 year old woman, in discussing the possibility that spousal conflict might lead to divorce, said “Having divorce is a very last decision, it’s not good.”

Women, in particular, face stigma in dissolving a marriage. As alluded to above, Nepalese women’s sexuality tends to be guarded (Bennett 1983) and, much like a widow, a divorced woman is typically considered to be “impure” for any man besides her first husband. Similar sexual double standards, which hold women’s sexuality to more conservative standards than men’s sexuality, are also prevalent in the United States (Crawford and Popp 2003; Elliot and Umberson 2008; Melvin and Miller 1986). One 36 year old local Nepali man conveyed this idea when he said “it becomes difficult for women to get a second marriage. Women are not seen as good when they have already been married. No fresh boy is ready to marry with a woman who has already been married.” Due to this stigma, a woman is likely to face backlash from her natal family, as a daughter’s divorce can impact a family’s social standing (Bennett 1983). Men, on the other hand, do not face as much stigma if they divorce. In fact, it is not uncommon for men to take a second wife without dissolving their first marriage (Deuba and Rana 2001).<sup>4</sup>

Women may also be reluctant to divorce because, unless they are able to quickly remarry, divorce often leaves them with no alternative but to return to their natal home, where they may not be welcome. It may only be under certain circumstances that a woman’s parents will accept her back, such as circumstances in which she is being

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<sup>4</sup> Although polygamy has been outlawed in Nepal it is still practiced, especially in rural areas (Deuba and Rana 2001).

abused or mistreated in her marital home. The natal family may also be accepting if the woman's husband opts for a divorce because she is not bearing children—historically a common reason for marital dissolution (Cain 1986). Whether or not she is welcome back into her natal home, she typically will have little alternative, as women have little access to economic independence.

There have been other barriers to divorce for women. In the past, women (especially of high castes) had a difficult time in filing for divorce (Gilbert 1992). Since divorce was legalized under the Civil Code of 1963 (Manzione 2001), however, the legal requirements for women who file for divorce have become more lenient (Gilbert 1992). An amendment in 1975 granted women legal custody of their children and access to alimony for five years after divorce (Manzione 2001). More recently, in 2006, men lost the right to file for divorce due to infertility (Dubey 2006)—a legal change that protects wives. Today, many even argue that women have an easier time in seeking divorce than men (Bhusal 2012). In fact, records from the District Court of Chitwan indicate that, among couples who formally divorce, it is most often the wife who files for the divorce.<sup>5</sup> Yet, even with these legal advances, divorce is difficult to obtain and the stigma associated with divorce makes it an undesirable option. Moreover, people living in more rural areas may be unaware of legal changes that make divorce more accessible (Deuba and Rana 2001).

Women have few opportunities for salaried employment and limited access to property ownership that could allow them to support their own livelihood. Although the legal code now allows women to inherit and own land (Acharya et al. 2007; Gilbert 1992;

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<sup>5</sup> Of the 529 divorces that were filed in the Chitwan District Court between 1990 and 2004, 96% of were filed by wives. (See Table A.2 in Appendix).

Allendorf 2007), this is not a common practice. Instead, families typically leave their land to their sons (Pandey 2010), so women are largely dependent on their husbands for access to land. Because of these economic barriers to being independent, in conjunction with the possibility that her family will not allow her back into the natal home and that she will be unable to remarry, a woman may be more likely to endure a bad marriage than to file for divorce. These social, economic, and legal barriers to marital dissolution provide a backdrop to studying the specific influences on marital dissolution among the Nepalese population.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Given the social, religious, and cultural backdrop of Nepal, there is little reason to expect that predictors of divorce in the United States will operate similarly. But, with recent social changes (Axinn and Yabiku 2001), it is possible that people in this Nepalese setting have adapted practices that lead to greater comparability with the West (Allendorf 2013; Axinn, Ghimire, and Barber 2008; Thornton, Ghimire, and Mitchell 2012).

Of course, there are many characteristics that are unique to Nepal and not present in the United States that I do not discuss here and are beyond the scope of the current investigation. For example, Hindu religion, strict legal codes, and the different nature of family living (e.g., the tendency for wives to live with their in-laws and the expectations for husband-wife relations [Bennett 1983]) in Nepal are likely to exert unique influences on marital dissolution as compared to the United States. Although it is important to acknowledge these factors, they are not the focus of this paper.

### *Age at Marriage and Marital Duration*

Two highly reliable and relatively universal predictors of marital success, across societies, are age at marriage and duration of marriage (Becker et al. 1977; Bose and South 2003; Bumpass and Sweet 1972; Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985; South 2001; Thornton and Rodgers 1987; Trent and South 1989). Literature in the United States suggests that people who marry later are presumably more mature and more prepared for the commitment of marriage (Morgan and Rindfuss 1985). Furthermore, people who marry later have had more time to devote to courtship and to getting to know their partner prior to marrying. This acquired maturity and knowledge can allow for more successful marriages (Becker et al. 1977; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985). Similarly, marriages that have survived a longer duration are less likely to dissolve because there is a lower chance that the partners will acquire new information about each other that could lead to dissolution (Becker et al. 1977; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985). In general, couples that have been married for longer durations tend to be more committed to marriage and, thus, have lower odds of experiencing dissolution (Morgan and Rindfuss 1985).

In the Nepalese setting, where there has been a history of practicing child marriage, it is common for people to marry young (Cain 1986; Yabiku 2005). Girls often marry as teenagers. In this rural region, especially, it has historically been uncommon for young people to date prior to marriage (Regmi, van Teijlingen, Simkhada, and Acharya 2010), and so waiting longer to marry does not necessarily increase the likelihood of finding a better spousal match. In fact, those who do marry younger are more likely to have had family involvement in their marriage and, in turn, may face more social pressure to maintain their marriages. These people may also hold relatively more respect

for traditional family values than those who marry later. For example, people who marry younger may be more committed to beginning their own family. In Nepal, marriage is considered to be the first step in beginning a new family, and childbearing is expected to follow soon thereafter (Jennings et al. 2012). During my ethnographic work, one 40 year old Nepali woman stated that she “think[s] marriage is nothing more than having children.” Because marriage and childbearing are viewed as inseparable, those who marry at younger ages may be especially motivated to begin childbearing and a family of their own. According to this logic, those who marry at older ages may be expected to be more likely to dissolve their marriages.

Marital duration, on the other hand, is likely to operate similarly in the Nepalese setting as in the United States. Couples who endure the early years of marriage are likely to continue to stay together, and couples who decide to split are more likely to do so early on.<sup>6</sup> Spouses gain more new information about each other early in a marriage, compared to later in the marriage (Becker et al. 1977; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985). Thus, the risk that spouses will learn new information that could cause them to weigh the benefits of marital dissolution more heavily than the benefits of staying in the marriage is greater in the early stages of marriage. For these reasons, I expect that the longer a couple is married the less likely they are to dissolve their marriage.

### *Wives' Education and Work*

There is also extensive literature from Western contexts that explores the influences of women's experiences outside the home on couples' likelihood of dissolving

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<sup>6</sup> Note that, in the analytic sample described below, the hazard of marital dissolution is in fact shaped this way (as revealed by including a quadratic term for marital duration; see Figure 2.2).

(Martin and Bumpass 1989; Kalmijn, De Graaf, and Poortman 2004; Ruggles 1997; South 2001; Spitze and South 1985; Teachman 2002). Some literature reveals wives' education to have a positive effect on marital dissolution (Heaton 1990; Teachman 2002), but other literature reveals a negative effect (Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003; Martin and Bumpass 1989; Mott and Moore 1979; Moore and Waite 1981; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, and Markman 2006) or a negative effect only at shorter marital durations (Morgan and Rindfuss 1985; South and Spitze 1986; South 2001). Explanations for a negative influence include that these wives are more prepared for marital commitment, and their education may enhance marital quality (Mizell and Steelman 2000; South and Spitze 1986). A positive influence has been attributed to the human capital that education provides to wives, and their ability to use their education to seek employment (Ono 1998; South and Spitze 1986), thus eliminating some disincentive to divorce.

In Nepal, wives with more education may be more aware of their alternatives to an unhappy marriage, and may have or perceive more prospects outside of marriage than wives with less education. These perceptions may come from having had more exposure to ideas from outside of the home due to school attendance, and/or they may come from the idea that education provides greater access to employment. Furthermore, educational attainment has been known to increase attitudes in favor of more modern family life in this setting (Barber 2004). If these mechanisms are at play, then an increase in wives' education would be expected to increase the likelihood of marital dissolution in the Nepalese setting.

However, in the Nepalese setting, women tend to attain lower levels of education, on average, than women in the United States (Williams 2009). Thus, wives' education might have a unique influence on marital dissolution (Greenstein and Davis 2006). With low levels of education, and with limited access to employment in this rural setting, we might not expect women's education to increase their employment prospects or access to human capital. However, Nepalese women who do have greater education may have more similar educational attainment to their husbands', and this may increase the egalitarianism within their marriage. This greater egalitarianism, in turn, might enhance marital quality and lead to greater marital success. In fact, a 27 year old Nepali woman expressed the idea that spousal heterogamy in education may create conflict in marriage, saying that "sometimes [the] wife is not educated and the husband is educated, so they don't understand each other and quarrel begins in their family and lastly leads to a divorce." Consistent with this mechanism, there is evidence of a negative association between wives' education and divorce in Southeast Asia (Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003). Because greater education of wives has the potential to create more mutual understanding between spouses, I expect marriages in which wives are more educated to be less likely to dissolve in this Nepalese setting.

In the United States, the relationship between women's employment and marital dissolution is typically found to be positive (Booth, Johnson, White, and Edwards 1984; Ruggles 1997; South 2001; South and Spitze 1986). In fact, a study using an experimental design that was conducted in the 1970s, in which families were randomly assigned to income maintenance treatments, found that women with greater income are more likely to experience dissolution (Hannan et al. 1977). Women's employment is

theorized to influence divorce through mechanisms of increasing women's autonomy, decreasing spousal interdependence, and lowering the cost of divorce for women (Oppenheimer 1994; Popenoe 1993; Thornton 1985). Wives' employment may also disrupt the traditional breadwinner model of marriage, thereby potentially causing marital tension and dissolution (Booth et al. 1984; Rogers 1999).

In Nepal, it is less common for women to be steadily employed than in the United States. Although salaried employment is rare, many women have worked for pay at some point. For example, it is typical for women in landless households to work on the farm of landowning households for compensation (Cameron 1998). However, because this kind of work is performed for the benefit of the marital home and women do not typically retain the compensation for their own savings, the influence on marital dissolution may not be very strong. Yet, the ability to earn money may increase wives' perception that they can support themselves outside of marriage, independent of whether they have accumulated funds for themselves, which may decrease their perceived cost of dissolution. I expect that couples in which wives have worked for wages will be more likely to dissolve.

### *Marital Fertility*

Marital fertility is widely found to decrease the likelihood of marital dissolution (Becker et al. 1977; Cherlin 1977; Morgan, Lye and Condran 1988; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985; Waite and Lillard 1991; Wu 1995). In the United States, children raise the emotional costs of divorce, and people's attitudes generally are especially disfavoring of divorce when children are involved (Waite and Lillard 1991; Thornton and Young-Demarco 2001). Parents may maintain their marriages, even if they are not happily



married, in order to avoid the potentially negative effects of divorce on their children. They might also be motivated to remain married in order to avoid either of them having to singly take on the burden of childrearing.

In Nepal, the presence of children is expected to have an especially important influence on couples' odds of marital dissolution. Childbearing is inextricably linked to marriage, and marriage is considered to be an avenue to parenthood (Jennings et al. 2012). Not only do children have a great deal of value in this setting, but couples who do not have children can face stigma from their community (Riessman 2000; Stone 1978). This stigma might add tension to childless couples' marriage, thus putting them at a greater risk of dissolution.

Like in the United States, Nepalese attitudes are more disapproving of marital dissolution when couples have children. A 36 year old Nepali woman conveys this attitude about divorce, saying that "...if they [a couple] already have children, then there are problems [in the case of divorce]. The situation of the children can be very bad." In fact, children may present an even greater cost for divorce in Nepal, where joint custody is less common and where children have a direct economic value for the many households that rely on subsistence agriculture (Cain 1977; Karki 1988). Moreover, parents depend on their children for support in old age (Jennings et al. 2012; Niraula and Morgan 1995), and may be motivated to keep a marriage intact so that they are assured to reap this benefit later on. With each additional child, the value of the marriage and the barriers to dissolution increases. Therefore, the presence of a greater number of children is expected to suppress the likelihood of dissolution.

### *Arranged Marriage*

Nepalese people also have some practices that are distinct from the United States, requiring additional considerations in the investigation of marital dissolution. Most American couples meet on their own accord, date for some period of time, and decide to marry (Thornton, Axinn, and Xie 2007). They may seek parental approval before marrying, but they most often are left to find a partner on their own. In Nepal, marriages are most often arranged by parents or relatives of the bride and/or groom. This distinct practice can have an important and unique influence on marital dissolution. In a setting where arranged marriage has historically been the norm, a person who exercises more independent choice in their marriage may place lower value on the traditional family. Furthermore, such a person has already exerted independence in entering marriage and, therefore, is relatively more likely to exert independence, again, by ending their marriage. If these mechanisms are operating, then participation in spouse choice would be expected to increase the likelihood that a marriage will dissolve.

There are other mechanisms likely to be at play. Parental pressure associated with marital arrangement can lead to two types of disputes that have the potential to cause the dissolution of marriage. First, couples may be unhappy in marriages that were arranged by their parents. In my ethnographic work, I heard stories about people being pressured to marry a partner that they were not interested in marrying, rather than being supported in marrying a partner that they desired. One 35 year old Nepali man states that this kind of marriage “can be broken easily.” If partners face parental pressure to marry, but one partner is unhappy with the match, the couple may be more likely to split. Second, parents may encourage the dissolution of marriages that they did not arrange, in favor of their child marrying a more desirable spouse. This encouragement may eventually lead to

dissolution. One 27 year old Nepali woman conveys this possibility, saying that “If [parents] encourage their son to marry another woman, then he will absolutely do it because he can’t go against the will of his parents. So there’ll be the possibility of getting divorced.”

Even if parents do not adamantly oppose a self-chosen marriage, these couples may have a more difficult time surviving marriage merely because of the reduced social support they are likely to receive from their families. In the Nepalese setting, in particular, kin and intergenerational relationships are highly valued and important in everyday life (Jennings et al. 2012; Niraula 1995). Given the indication of spouses’ independence and the likely lack of their family’s support, I expect that marriages in which the spouses participated in spouse choice will be more likely to dissolve.

These mechanisms connecting marital arrangement and marital dissolution may also explain some of the influence of marital duration. Couples who survive the early difficulties of marriages that were either arranged or self-chosen are less likely to dissolve their marriage later on. If parents disapprove of a marriage, the couple is likely to either succumb to that disapproval early on, or the parents may lessen their pressure on the couple as time passes.

### *Ethnicity*

People of different races and ethnicities can exhibit different marital dissolution rates in the United States. For example, black Americans have consistently experienced higher rates of marital dissolution than non-Hispanic whites or Hispanics (Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Martin and Bumpass 1989; Raley and Bumpass 2003).

Ethnicity in Nepal is also likely to play an important role in marital dissolution. In general, the role of ethnicity in all aspects of social life cannot be overstated in this setting. As discussed above, upper caste Hindus (i.e., Brahmin and Chettri) tend to be most strict about following Hindu marriage customs (Bennett 1983; Stash and Hannum 2001). Thus, couples of these high caste groups may endure especially intense pressure for their marriages to succeed and may also be more likely to internalize those family values, leading them to lower odds of experiencing dissolution than other groups. Other ethnic groups have less strict marital customs to adhere to (Fricke 1986; Cameron 1998) and, thus, face fewer barriers to dissolving their marriages.

### **Data and Sample**

I use data from the Chitwan Valley Family Study (CVFS), conducted in 2008. The CVFS is conducted in rural, southern Nepal. Respondents were drawn from a cluster sampling scheme, in which 151 neighborhoods were randomly sampled and each member of those neighborhoods between the ages of 15 and 59 were interviewed. Structured interviews were conducted to gather information on a range of family-related attitudes and experiences. Less structured interviews were also conducted, with life history calendars (Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin, and Young De-Marco 1988), to collect information on events that the respondents had experienced throughout their lives, such as attending school, working, having children, marrying, separating, and divorcing.

I use a combination of the 2008 structured interview data and the semi-structured retrospective life history calendar data to perform a statistical investigation of the influence of women's experiences on the odds of marital dissolution. I limit my sample to couples in which the wives are in their first marriages and are ages 50 and under (N=

2818). I use this age restriction because the occurrence of marital dissolution becomes extremely rare after age 50. The higher rate of marital dissolution for this sample maximizes the opportunity to examine the causes of marital dissolution. The retrospective nature of the data allows me to investigate the likelihood of marital dissolution from the very beginning of wives' first marriages, thus eliminating any potential issue with left-censoring.

## **Measures**

### *Dependent*

I operationalize the concept of marital dissolution by combining the events of marital separation and divorce, a common approach, as there often is a temporal lag in the time from separation to divorce (Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985; Morgan et al. 1988; Martin and Bumpass 1989; Schoen 1992; South 2001). Combining separation and divorce into a single event allows me to pinpoint the time at which the marriage was first disrupted. This is especially important in a setting where separation can often occur without a divorce to follow (Dommaraju and Jones 2011). On the other hand, separation is not a prerequisite for divorce in this setting, and many dissolutions are the result of immediate divorce. Of those couples in the analytic sample who experienced marital dissolution, only about a third initially experienced separation (some with divorce to follow, some without divorce during the observation period). The measure of marital dissolution indicates marital breakdown, and separation due to temporary migration is not considered to be dissolution for the purpose of this investigation.

Following previous research on divorce (e.g., Bose and South 2003; Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003; Morgan, Lye, and Condran 1988; Waite and Lillard 1991), I focus on dissolution of first marriages (from the wives' perspective). In Nepal, nearly everyone experiences first marriage (Yabiku 2002), but remarriage is very rare, especially for women. Only about 7% of ever-married women ages 40 and older in the CVFS sample had been married more than once as of 2008. The percentage is greater for men (24% had been married more than once), likely due to the practice of polygamy. Later marriages lack institutional support, established norms and social roles to guide them, compared to first marriages. This has been true in Western settings (Cherlin 1978; Holden 2008) and, given the infrequency of remarriage in Nepal, is likely to be even more true in this setting (Parry 2001). Additionally, Western literature demonstrates that remarriages tend to have significantly different causes and are prone to a greater likelihood of dissolution than first marriages (Becker et al. 1977; Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Cherlin 1978; Martin and Bumpass 1989). Thus, I limit my investigation to first marriages.

I use the life history calendar data to operationalize the yearly hazard of marital dissolution in discrete time. The discrete time approach yields results similar to a continuous approach because the incidence of marital dissolution in any one year is quite low, but the discrete time approach allows the avoidance of making any parametric assumptions regarding the distribution of the underlying baseline hazard (Yamaguchi 1991). The measure of marital dissolution is coded as 0 for every year the woman is married and 1 for the first year in which the woman is separated (for at least six months) or divorced, after which the couple ceases to contribute to couple-years of exposure to

risk of marital dissolution. Widowhood is treated as a competing risk, so that women whose husbands die cease to contribute couple-years to the hazard.<sup>7</sup>

### *Independent*

I investigate the influence of wives' individual experiences, as well as experiences shared by couples, on marital dissolution. Due to the nature of the retrospective data, I do not have the capability to match information from women with information from their ex-husbands. This limits me to the investigation of these individual and couples experiences from wives' perspectives.

I investigate the influence of marital experiences using measures for wife's age at marriage, participation in spouse choice, and marital duration. Wife's participation in spouse choice is coded from a survey item phrased: "People marry in different ways. Sometimes our parents or relatives decide whom we should marry, and sometimes we decide ourselves. In your case, who selected your (first) spouse? Your parents/relatives, yourself, or both?" The dummy measure is coded 1 if the wife had any participation in choosing her spouse, and 0 if she had no participation in choosing her spouse. Marital duration is coded in years, indicating the number of years that have lapsed since the couple was married. I include marital duration in the logistic regression model as a linear term because of the logged shape of the curve (see Figure 2.2).

- Figure 2.2 About Here -

Next, I examine the influences of wife's experiences in activities outside the home—or nonfamily experiences—based on their reports during the life history

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<sup>7</sup> Couples in which a wife dies are excluded from this sample, by necessity, because the data were collected from the wives in 2008.

interviews. The measure for wife's education is coded as categorical to indicate her accumulated years of school enrollment. A code of 0 indicates that the wife never attended school, 1 indicates that she attended 1 to 4 years of school, 2 indicates that she attended 5 to 9 years of school, 3 indicates that she attended 10 to 14 years of school, and 5 indicates that she attended 15 or more years of school. A wife is considered to have attended a year of school if she was enrolled for at least part of the year. I use this measure, rather than a measure for years of educational attainment, because female school attendance is low in this setting and older women are especially unlikely to have attended school at all. I also account for whether the wife was enrolled in school during any year of the hazard, with a dummy measure coded 1 during the years in which the wife was enrolled for at least a partial year. Given the theoretical expectation for spousal heterogamy to increase marital dissolution, it would be valuable to be able to test its influence. However, due to the nature of the data, I am unable to account for husband's education level, and only able to test the influence of wife's education. Given the relatively low level of female education in this setting, historically, a greater amount of wife's education can be presumed to most often decrease spousal heterogamy in education. I also code a time-varying measure indicating whether the wife ever worked for wages. This measure is coded as 1 if the wife ever worked and 0 if she never worked.

Next, I consider the influence of couples' fertility experiences. This measure also comes from the life history calendar interview, and is coded as the time-varying number of children that the woman and her husband have. Because few women have more than 5 children (15 percent of women, total, have at least 6 children), I top code the variable so that it ranges from 0 to 5, with 5 indicating that the wife had 5 or more children.



Finally, I account for wife’s ethnicity. The measures of ethnicity are coded from an item in the structured questionnaire, which asks “What is your father’s caste?” Father’s caste is an accurate indicator of a person’s caste identity in such a patrilineal setting (Niraula and Morgan 1996). Wife’s ethnicity is coded as four dummy variables: Brahmin/Chettri (or upper caste Hindus), Dalit (or lower caste Hindus), Hill Indigenous, and Terai Indigenous. Brahmin/Chettri is the excluded category in the analyses.

I control for wife’s birth cohort. A woman’s year of birth influences the factors to which she is exposed, which can, in turn, influence her likelihood of marital dissolution. Birth cohort is coded as three dummy variables, indicating that the respondent was born between 1968 and 1982; between 1953 and 1967; and between 1938 and 1952. The oldest cohort—those born between 1938 and 1952—is excluded as the reference category in the analyses.

### **Analytic Method**

I use discrete-time event history analysis and logistic regression to model the risk of marital dissolution, with couples-years of exposure as the unit of analysis. The models are estimated with multilevel modeling to account for the clustered nature of the CVFS sampling design at the neighborhood level. The analysis is based on monthly measurement indicating whether the respondent experienced marital dissolution. I use the following logistic regression equation:

$$\ln\left(\frac{p}{1-p}\right) = a + \sum (B_{in})(X_{in})$$

Where  $p$  is the probability of marital dissolution,  $\frac{p}{(1-p)}$  is the odds of marital dissolution,  $a$  is a constant term,  $\beta$  is the effect of independent variables within neighborhoods ( $n$ ), and  $X$  is the value of these independent variables. Couples ( $i$ ) who are exposed to the risk of marital dissolution are defined as those in which wives are ages 50 and under and in their first marriage. I discuss the results as odds ratios, which is the anti-log of the coefficient. These odds ratios can be interpreted as the amount by which the odds are multiplied for each unit change in the respective independent variable. If the odds ratio is greater than 1, the effect is positive, meaning that the odds of marital dissolution are increased; if it is less than 1, the effect is negative, meaning that the odds of marital dissolution are decreased. These ratios can be easily transformed into percent change in the odds associated with each unit change in the respective independent variable by subtracting 1 from the odds ratio and multiplying by 100 (Thornton et al. 2007, pp. 352-353). Because so few marital dissolutions occur in each yearly interval, the yearly odds of marital dissolution are comparable to the rate of marital dissolution. For this reason, I discuss the rate of marital dissolution as interchangeable with the odds of marital dissolution.

As Table 2.1 reveals, only about 7% of the sample experience marital dissolution during the period of observation. Although this is a small proportion, it presents a large enough incidence of marital dissolution to allow for the use of logistic regression with event history analysis (Chen 2007; King and Zeng 2001). The main danger is that such a low rate of events might be expected to produce nonsignificant results in the associations

between the independent measures and marital dissolution. Thus, any significant results would suggest powerful influences.

## **Results**

Table 2.1 displays the mean values of the measures used in the analyses, reflecting the last observations for couples that contribute to the couple-years of observation (i.e., the time at dissolution, the time at widowhood, or the time of the 2008 interview—whichever comes first). The table reveals that wives in the sample married at relatively young ages, with their mean age at marriage between 16 and 17 years old. Spouse choice is not common among these women: only 34% had some choice in their spouse, with the other 66% having fully arranged marriages. Their marriages lasted 20.11 years, on average, as of their last observation in the hazard file.<sup>8</sup> On the education scale ranging from 0 to 4, the average is 1.37, which indicates a typical educational level of 1 to 4 years of accumulated school enrollment for wives in this sample. Although the mean of the last observation suggests that only 1% were enrolled in school, 20% of wives enrolled in school for at least a year over the entire period of observation. About half (47%) of wives had worked by the last observation. Furthermore, their fertility is high, relative to Western countries (Population Reference Bureau 2012), at a mean of 2.85 (or 3.14, with a maximum of 13 children, when this measure is not top-coded). This mean level of fertility is also high by today's Nepalese standards, with more recent TFR of 2.6 in 2012 (Population Reference Bureau 2012). The higher mean for this analytic sample is not surprising, given the retrospective nature of the data. The majority of the sample

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<sup>8</sup> Among this analytic sample, marriages that ended in dissolution lasted an average of 9.21 years.

identifies with the high caste ethnic group of Brahmin/Chettri (51%), and a minority identify as Dalit (11%), Hill Indigenous (18%), or Terai Indigenous (20%).

- Table 2.1 about here -

Table 2.2 displays the odds ratio coefficients from logistic regression. These odds ratios indicate the multiplicative effects of the independent measures on the odds of marital dissolution. Model 1 reveals the influences of marital characteristics, holding couples' demographics and wife's birth cohort constant. Although the level of significance is marginal, wife's age at marriage is negatively associated with a couple's odds of dissolution. The odds ratio of 0.94 indicates that, with each additional year of wife's age at marriage, a couple has 6% lower odds of dissolving. Because the odds ratio has a multiplicative effect on marital dissolution, the odds ratio of 0.94 translates into a 17% lower rate of dissolution for a couple who married when the wife was age 20, compared to a couple who married when the wife was age 17. This negative association provides evidence that age at marriage has a similar influence in Nepal as in the United States (Becker et al. 1977; South and Spitze 1986; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985). This does not support the hypothesis that people marrying at younger ages in Nepal are more committed to family and marriage. Instead, there may be similar mechanisms occurring in this setting as in the West. The mechanism could be related to increased maturity and preparedness for commitment with age, or there could be another common thread between the United States and Nepal that leads to these similar findings in the two settings.

Model 1 reveals no evidence that wife's participation in spouse choice has a significant influence on marital dissolution. Thus, there is no support for the setting-

specific expectation that the practice of arranged marriage has had an influence on marital dissolution in this rural South Asian setting. However, marital duration does have a significant influence that is comparable to the influence of wife's age at marriage. An odds ratio of 0.92 indicates that marriages of longer duration experience an 8 percent reduced rate of dissolution with each additional year of marriage. This result is consistent with setting-specific expectations, and is also consistent with U.S literature (Becker et al. 1977; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985). Even with a relatively lengthy average marital duration at time of dissolution among this sample (9.21 years), compared to the United States (with a median of 7 years to separation as of 2009; Kreider and Ellis 2011), couples that successfully surpass the early years of marriage are more likely to continue to maintain their marital ties.

Also as expected, relative to Brahmins and Chettris, other ethnic groups exhibit greater odds of marital dissolution, with the strongest positive influence occurring among Dalits. This is likely due to the different marital practices across the groups, with Brahmins and Chettris placing more emphasis on the purity of wives and the indissolubility of marriage than other groups. Cohort influences are not in the expected direction, considering the trend toward greater numbers of divorce over the years (see Figure 1): the younger cohorts have lower odds of marital dissolution, relative to the oldest cohort of women. However, cohort influences are not significant until accounting for nonfamily experiences in Model 2, at which point only the very youngest cohort experiences a significantly lower odds of dissolution, relative to the oldest.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I also tested models in which a measure indicating the year of the couple's marriage was included, instead of measures for birth cohort. The influence of year of marriage is slightly negative and significant. Due to

- Table 2.2 about here -

Model 2 investigates the influence of wives' education. The influence does not reach statistical significance, thus failing to support the hypothesis that greater education of wives will create more mutual understanding between spouses and reduce odds of dissolution.<sup>10</sup> Many of the women in this sample grew up in a time when it was rare for females to attend school (Axinn and Yabiku 2001), and even today female educational attainment in Nepal is low relative to the United States (Williams 2009). Thus, the lack of observed association may be due to the skewed distribution of this measure toward fewer, or zero, years in school.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, including this measure in the model does not alter the influences of wife's age at marriage or couples' marital duration.

Model 3 investigates the influence of wife's experience of ever having worked for wages. I investigate this measure separately from education because theories based around human capital and women's autonomy predict that these measures will operate in similar ways, via similar mechanisms. Wife's work experience has a large and significant influence on couples' odds of dissolution: couples in which the wife ever worked for wages have a 1.91 greater odds of dissolution than couples in which the wife never worked for wages. Despite the nature of women's wage work being much different in

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the high correlations between cohort and year of marriage, it is inappropriate to include the measures together in the model.

<sup>10</sup> Models were also tested in which the influence of education was estimated (a) without wife's marital characteristics and (b) without wife's marital characteristics or demographics. Similar to results in Models 2 through 5, the measures of education did not exert a significant influence on marital dissolution in these unadjusted models. Although we know enrollment in school and educational attainment affect marriage in Nepal in many of the same ways they affect marriage in the United States (Yabiku 2005), this potential mechanism does not explain the failure to find significant effects of education on marital dissolution in Nepal.

<sup>11</sup> Models were also tested, in which education was coded into a dummy measure, indicating wives ever attended school. This coding scheme also revealed no significant influence of wives' education.

rural Nepal compared to the United States, the effect of wife's work is similar in these two settings (South and Spitze 1986; South 2001). Although wage work may be sporadic and low in prestige for women in this setting, it is powerfully associated with marital dissolution. Including this measure in the model does not reduce the influence of wife's age at marriage, marital duration, or ethnicity.

Model 4 accounts for measures of wives' school enrollment and work experience, simultaneously. Holding educational indicators constant, couples have 1.96 greater odds of marital dissolution if the wife has ever worked. Thus, independent of any human capital that wives may accumulate via school attendance, wives' work experience increases couples' odds of dissolution. Independent of work experience, educational indicators still do not exert a statistically significant influence on marital dissolution.

Finally, in Model 5, I account for couples' fertility. As expected, couples with more children experience reduced odds of marital dissolution. With each additional child, a couple's odds of dissolution decrease by a factor of 0.57. This means that a couple with three children has about a 68 percent lower odds of dissolving than a couple with only one child.<sup>12</sup> This negative influence is akin to the influence of marital fertility in the United States (Becker et al. 1977; Morgan et al. 1988; Waite and Lillard 1991). In this Nepalese setting, fertility has such an important influence on marital dissolution that it reduces the significance and magnitude of other important marital experiences: wife's age at marriage and couple's marital duration. Fertility is particularly intertwined with marital duration, with couples having increasingly more children as their marriage

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<sup>12</sup> Dummy measures for number of children were also tested, in reference to couples with no children. These results (not shown) confirmed that the odds of dissolution decrease with each unit increase in number of children born (relative to having no children).

endures. Because these two correlated influences are operating in a similar direction to suppress marital dissolution, the influence of marital duration is diluted when considered simultaneously with fertility. Wife's work experience, however, maintains a strong and significant influence on the odds of marital dissolution, net of couples' fertility.

Additional sensitivity models were tested to further investigate the influence of children on marital dissolution (not shown). First, in order to assess whether the number of children born is an appropriate measure, I tested a model with dummy measures to indicate that the couple had one child, two children, three children, four children, or five or more children (with no children as the reference category). Results confirm that the coding of the measure is appropriate: a couples' rate of marital dissolution becomes subsequently lower with each additional child, although the gains to marital success introduced by additional children after parity 3 are small. Next, I tested a model, similar to Model 5 except that I limited the sample to couples with at least one child (n=2661 at last observation). The influence of number of children and other measures in the model were relatively unchanged. Then, I tested a similar model to Model 5, but accounting for number of sons instead of number of total children. Number of sons exerts an influence on marital dissolution similar to the influence of number of children. Furthermore, the odds ratios of other covariates are relatively unchanged when replacing number of children for number of sons. Finally, including both number of children and number of sons in the model reveals number of sons to have an insignificant influence on marital dissolution, independent of total number of children.

## **Conclusion**



This paper has investigated the factors that are known to influence marital dissolution in the United States, focusing on how these factors operate in the South Asian setting of rural Nepal. To date, the bulk of our knowledge about the forces leading married couples to dissolve are based on data from Western populations, and largely from the United States. But social and family life can take a range of forms across different settings. In this Nepalese setting, marriage itself is practiced differently, as partially exemplified in the universality of marriage, young age at marriage, and the practice of arranged marriage. Marital dissolution has historically been uncommon in this setting, offering an interesting contrast to the United States, which has the highest divorce rate of any country in the world (Cherlin 2009). This paper has revealed that, despite these vivid differences between the two settings, many of the factors that influence marital dissolution in the United States operate similarly in this South Asian setting.

Wife's age at marriage, marital duration, wife's education, wife's work experience, marital fertility, and ethnicity are some of the most common predictors of divorce in the United States (Becker et al. 1977; Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Martin and Bumpass 1989; South 2001; Morgan et al. 1988; Waite and Lillard 1991), and these factors appear to operate similarly in Nepal, as well. Net of the other theoretically and empirically important factors I am able to account for, wife's education, wife's work experience, fertility, and ethnicity have strong influences on marital dissolution.

The important and independent influences of wife's work experience, combined with records from the Chitwan District Court—which indicate that an overwhelming majority of divorces were filed by wives, not husbands (see Table A.2 in Appendix)—suggest that wage work may provide women with the ability to seek individual

satisfaction outside of marriage. Wives who have ever worked for wages may perceive that they have autonomy and the ability to provide for themselves, thus offering them an alternative to an unhappy or unsatisfying marriage. In fact, women who leave their homes to work are also at a heightened risk of meeting alternative romantic partners, which can further contribute to their increased odds of marital dissolution (South and Lloyd 1995).

Couples with children, on the other hand, have suppressed odds of marital dissolution. Children can raise the cost of marital dissolution in this Nepalese setting, as they do in the U.S. setting (Becker et al. 1977). In fact, children may raise the benefits of marriage to a greater extent in this setting, where they are depended on for old age security (Niraula and Morgan 1995). For this reason, and because joint custody is rare, each parent may perceive an especially high cost of dissolution.

These findings suggest that marital dissolution may have similar roots across settings, encouraging further investigation in South Asia and elsewhere. It is likely that marital dissolution will increase around the world as new communications and values spread internationally, exposing people to new ideas about family life (Barber 2001; Barber and Axinn 2004; Casterline 2001; Goode 1993; Hornik and McAnany 2001). Thus, even where marital dissolution is currently uncommon, investigating the causes of dissolution can prove valuable for understanding future trends. The investigations in this paper have been limited to the basic and most robust predictors of divorce in Western settings, but the results point toward the possibility that many other factors that predict divorce in the United States could apply to the Nepalese and other settings. Researchers may be able to apply the plethora of knowledge we have acquired about divorce in the United States to other, culturally dissimilar settings. For example, marital happiness,

characteristics of couples' children, and availability of alternative partners may have important influences across settings (Amato and Rogers 1997; South and Lloyd 1995; Waite and Lillard 1991; White and Booth 1991). These can be fruitful avenues for international family research.

There are some limitations in this investigation that are important to mention. First, the retrospective nature of the data does not necessarily represent the current causes of marital dissolution in contemporary Nepal, as the Nepalese family is rapidly changing (Axinn and Yabiku 2001). Second, because the average marital duration at dissolution is nearly 10 years, it is among a relatively older marital cohort that we are able to observe marital dissolution. Third, the relatively small proportion of couples experiencing marital dissolution in the present sample suggests that these results should be generalized with caution, and replicated in similar settings. Finally, the analyses in this investigation have not directly considered the influence of religion, legal codes, and family life that are unique to this Nepalese settings and likely to impose influences on marital dissolution that are different from the United States. Nonetheless, these results do offer strong evidence that long-standing influences on divorce in the United States also apply in this setting.

Understanding the underlying causes of marital dissolution can have important implications, as dissolution can be tremendously consequential for families. Marital dissolution has even been cited as a contributor to family decline (Popenoe 1993). The consequences for women who divorce can be especially great, even in the United States (Duncan and Hoffman 1985; Holden and Smock 1991; Smock, Manning, and Gupta 1999; Lavelle and Smock 2012), where they have entered the labor force in large

numbers and, thus, have more means to be economically independent. In a setting like rural Nepal, where women have little means to support themselves, the consequences are likely to be greater. This paper has revealed findings from one of the first empirical investigations of the predictors of marital dissolution in a South Asian setting. In the future, it would be valuable to collect quality data at the country level, in order to discern national trends as well as differences between rural and urban areas. Different predictors may be operating in Kathmandu, for example, than in rural areas like Chitwan or in the more remote mountainous regions of Nepal. Future research establishing the trajectories of people after marital dissolution—and especially women—would also be valuable to begin understand the consequences of dissolution in this kind of setting.

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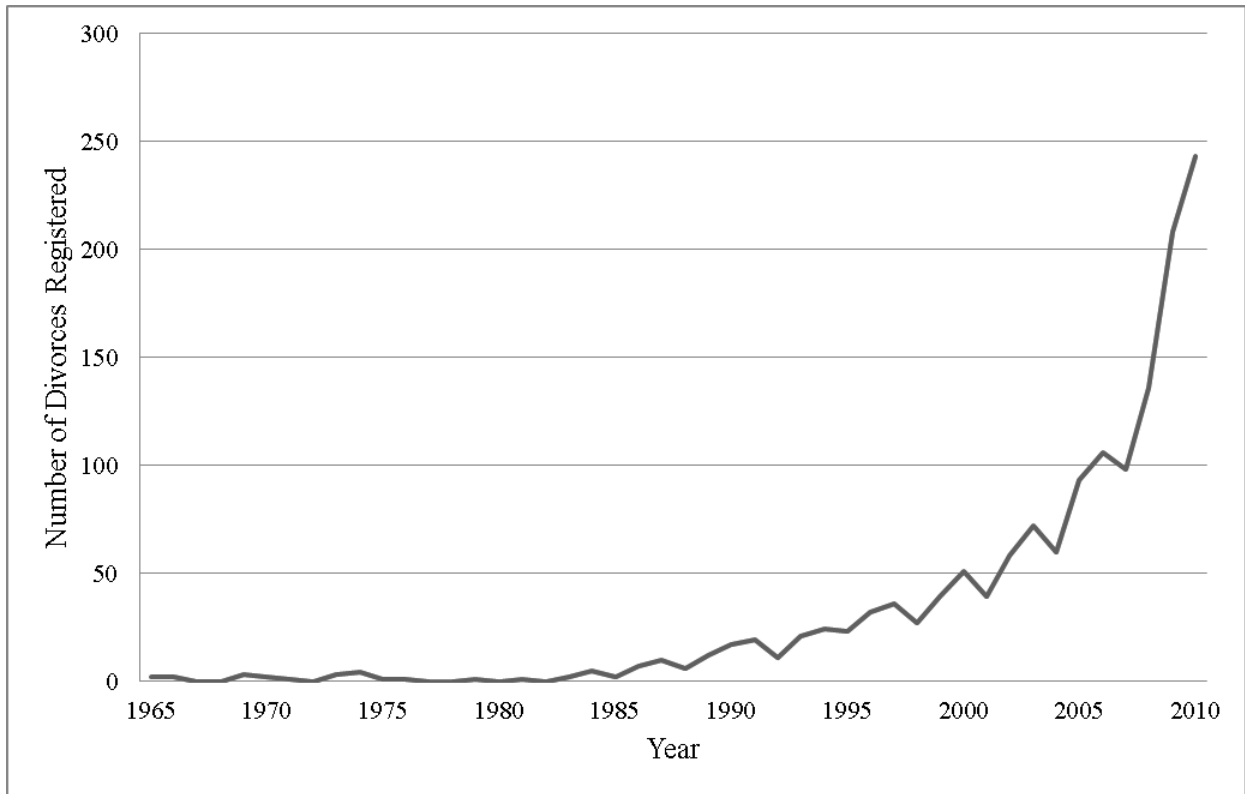
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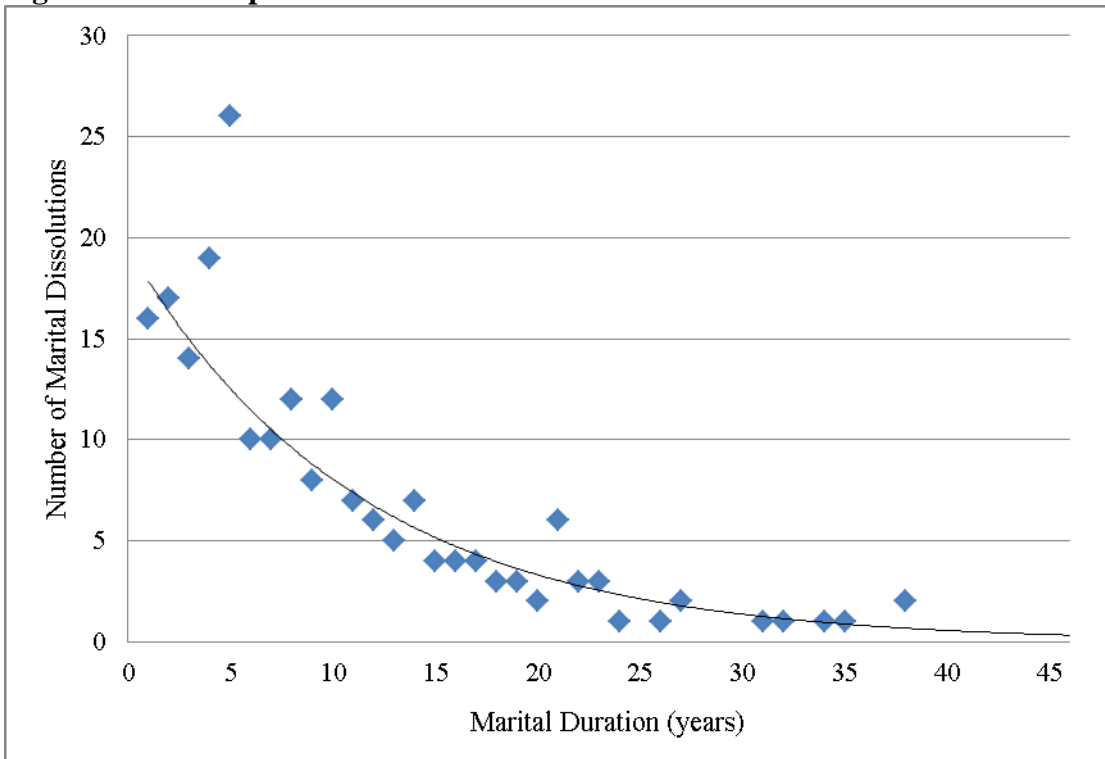
**Figure 2.1 Number of Divorce Cases Registered in District Court of Chitwan, 1965-2010**



*Source: Chitwan District Court, Nepal*



**Figure 2.2 Scatterplot: The Functional Form of Marital Duration**



*Source: Chitwan Valley Family Study, 2008 Life History Calendar*

**Table 2.1: Descriptive Statistics**

<b>Measure</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>
Marital dissolution (proportion)	0.07	0.26	0.00	1.00
<i>Wife's Marital Characteristics</i>				
Age at marriage	17.37	3.85	5.00	40.00
Had some spouse choice	0.34	0.47	0.00	1.00
Marital duration (last observation)	20.09	10.69	1.00	46.00
<i>Wife's Nonfamily Experiences</i>				
Accumulated school enrollment at marriage	1.37	1.44	0.00	4.00
Enrolled in school, yearly (last observation)	0.01	0.11	0.00	1.00
Ever worked for wages (last observation)	0.48	0.50	0.00	1.00
<i>Fertility Experiences</i>				
Number of children (last observation)	2.85	1.47	0.00	5.00
<i>Wife's Demographics</i>				
Brahmin/Chettri	0.51	0.50	0.00	1.00
Dalit	0.11	0.31	0.00	1.00
Hill Indigenous	0.18	0.39	0.00	1.00
Terai Indigenous	0.19	0.40	0.00	1.00
<i>Controls</i>				
Year of marriage (Nepali calendar)	2042.19	13.32	2001.00	2065.00
Cohort born 1968-1982	0.59	0.49	0.00	1.00
Cohort ages 1953-1967	0.28	0.45	0.00	1.00
Cohort born 1938-1952	0.13	0.34	0.00	1.00
Total couples in sample	2818			
Total experiencing marital dissolution	211			

Note: These numbers represent the last year of observation in the hazard file.

**Table 2.2 Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression: Investigating Influences on Marital Dissolution**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<b><i>Wife's Marital Characteristics</i></b>					
Age at marriage	0.94* (-2.45)	0.93* (-2.47)	0.93* (-2.50)	0.92** (-2.64)	0.95+ (1.76)
Had some spouse choice	0.72 (-1.53)	0.72 (-1.57)	0.71 (-1.45)	0.71 (-1.50)	0.68 (-1.63)
Marital Duration	0.92*** (-7.18)	0.92*** (-7.13)	0.92*** (-7.01)	0.92*** (-6.96)	1.00 (-0.08)
<b><i>Wife's Nonfamily Experiences</i></b>					
Accumulated school enrollment at marriage †		1.03 (0.35)		1.09 (0.78)	1.07 (0.67)
Enrolled in school, yearly		1.25 (0.40)		1.23 (0.34)	0.99 (-0.01)
Ever worked for wages			1.90** (3.30)	1.94*** (3.40)	2.09*** (3.75)
<b><i>Fertility Experiences</i></b>					
Number of children					0.57*** (-6.42)
<b><i>Wife's Demographics</i></b>					
Ethnicity (Ref: Brahmin/Chettri)					
Dalit	2.47*** (3.79)	2.54*** (3.78)	1.99** (2.68)	2.10** (2.82)	2.24** (3.05)
Hill Indigenous	1.74* (2.21)	1.77* (2.24)	1.78* (2.20)	1.87* (2.35)	1.89* (2.38)
Terai Indigenous	1.54+ (1.85)	1.59+ (1.89)	1.33 (1.19)	1.44 (1.41)	1.63+ (1.89)
<b><i>Controls</i></b>					
Cohort (Ref: born 1938-1952)					
Cohort born 1968-1982	0.70 (-1.57)	0.67 (-1.59)	0.59* (-2.11)	0.53* (-2.25)	0.57+ (-1.90)
Cohort born 1953-1967	0.81 (-1.01)	0.81 (-1.04)	0.75 (-1.27)	0.74 (-1.35)	0.76 (-1.23)
Total couple-years	56618	56618	56618	56618	56618
Total couples	2818	2818	2818	2818	2818
Total couples experiencing marital dissolution	211	211	211	211	211

Results presented as odds ratios. T-ratios are indicated in parentheses.

Two-tailed tests were performed. +p<.10 \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001

† Models were also tested in which the influence of accumulated school enrollment was estimated without adjusting for wife's marital characteristics or demographics. Accumulated school enrollment did not exert a significant influence on marital dissolution in these unadjusted models.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Marital Discord and Subsequent Marital Dissolution:**

#### **Perceptions of Wives and their Husbands**

Over the last several decades, much of the world has experienced significant family change, including a shift in the meaning of marriage (Goode 1970, 1993; Jayakody, Thornton, and Axinn 2008; Rindfuss and Morgan 1983; Thornton and Lin 1994). Populations outside of industrialized, Western settings have begun to adopt a new model of marriage that emphasizes personal fulfillment and happiness (Dion and Dion 1993; Goode 1970; Thornton 2001). Accompanying this marital shift, many of these countries have seen a rising prevalence of divorce (Goode 1993). Yet, although we have developed an understanding of the process of marital breakdown in individualistic settings, we have a limited understanding of this process among collectivist populations. This study investigates the process of marital dissolution in rural South Asia: a setting where individuals have relatively low personal freedom (Jayakody et al. 2008; Sastry and Ross 1998). Ample research demonstrates that marital quality is associated with marital dissolution among Western populations (Amato and Rogers 1997; DeMaris 2000; Gottman 1994), but it is unclear whether marital quality will have an impact on marital outcomes in settings where people may not perceive that they have the power to exercise independent choice. It is even less clear whether a wife's perception of marital quality will have as much influence as her husband's perceived quality.

This paper focuses on the role of marital discord in predicting marital outcomes among an agrarian population in Nepal. Divorce remains uncommon throughout South Asia (Dommaraju and Jones 2011), but is likely to be on the rise as families and their

social surroundings are changing (Axinn and Yabiku 2001; Jayakody et al. 2008). In fact, the number of divorces registered in the Chitwan District Court of Nepal has been increasing rapidly since the mid-1980s, from less than 10 per year to over 200 in the year 2010. Furthermore, in this population, nearly every young person marries, which automatically exposes them to the possibility of experiencing marital dissolution. This offers the unique opportunity to study the association between marital discord and marital dissolution in a setting where the population may be undergoing a transition to high divorce prevalence. Beyond the general role of marital discord, this paper also investigates the potentially different influences that wives' and husbands' perceptions of marital discord may have on marital dissolution. In a setting as male-dominated as Nepal (Bennett 1983), wives' perceptions of discord may not have an important impact on couples' marital outcomes.

Detailed, couple-level measures of marital discord and individuals' marital experiences are unusual in South Asian settings. This study uses data from the Chitwan Valley Family Study (CVFS), which combines such measures with extensive panel data on marital dissolution. The CVFS offers unique, within-couple measures of marital discord at a single point in time and monthly information on marital dissolution events, for more than a decade thereafter. These data allow the investigation of whether perceptions of marital discord, as held by wives' and their husbands', influence couples' rate of separating or divorcing over the subsequent thirteen years.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Background*

In any given setting, the likelihood of marital dissolution is related to the meaning and value of marriage among the local population. In rural Nepal, the high value placed on marriage is indicated in its universality and early occurrence (Yabiku 2005). Marriages have long been arranged by family members, although young people today are exercising more participation in their spouse choice (Ghimire, Axinn, Yabiku, and Thornton 2006). Marriage is especially important for the gendered division of labor within households, as women are responsible for certain tasks both in the field and in the home (Allendorf 2007). Women typically do not hold jobs outside of the home, although it is not uncommon for women to perform temporary work for wages. As of 2008, almost half of all women ages 18 and older in the Chitwan Valley had ever worked for wages, and only about 13% had ever held a salaried job. Temporary wage work is somewhat deprecated for women, as it is typically performed because of a household's poverty and necessity to send women to work on the land of wealthier, higher status families (Acharya 1994; Bennett 1983; Cameron 1998; Stash and Hannum 2001). These lower status women are also under less strict expectations, compared to higher status women, to show obedience to their husbands and in-laws (Bennett 1983). Although wives in higher status families face greater power disadvantage in their marital households, wives of all groups face power constraints (Allendorf 2007; Allendorf 2013; Jayaweera 1997).

It is not surprising, in a setting where marriage is nearly universal and encompasses well-defined norms and customs, that marital dissolution is uncommon (Parry 2001). Just as with other aspects of social life in Nepal, the practices around marital dissolution are based on Hindu customs. Hindu code historically has not recognized marital dissolution, although some Hindus dissolved their marriages

nonetheless (Goode 1970; Holden 2008; Parry 2001). Marital dissolution was more common among lower status (or lower caste), marginalized groups than among higher status groups (Holden 2008). As is the case with marriage, marital dissolution (either divorce or separation) often does not involve the legal system, and sometimes involves a separation without subsequent divorce (Parry 2001).

In-depth interviews were conducted during fieldwork in Fall 2010, with 30 men and women of Chitwan, regarding the prevalence and understanding of divorce. These interviews revealed that local people tend to be aware that divorce occurs around them, but also view it as negative or perceive that others view it as negative. For example, one 25-year-old Chettri (upper caste) woman said:

When one once gets married with a person he or she should create a suitable environment in [the] family and should live without breaking their relation[ship]. Otherwise society also looks with negative eyes.

As a result of this stigma, people can have a hard time finding a second spouse after the dissolution of their first marriage. This can present a particularly salient obstacle for women in rural areas, as they have few opportunities to support themselves outside of marriage. For this reason, separation may be a more desirable option for wives than divorce, so that they are able to continue to be supported by their husband. During interviews, people told stories of how a husband and wife would split, and the wife would move to a separate household, or to another room in the same house. In addition to the economic benefits, this can also ensure that the wife maintains contact with her children, rather than risking losing custody in a divorce.

In Nepal, women may also be reluctant to divorce because this often leaves them with no alternative but to return to their natal home, where they may not be welcome. It may only be under certain circumstances that a woman's parents will accept her back, such as circumstances in which she is being abused or mistreated in her marital home. The natal family may also be accepting if the woman's husband opts for a divorce because she is not bearing children—historically a common reason for marital dissolution (Cain 1986).

Despite the undesirability of divorce, relative to separation, the majority of marriages that dissolve in rural Nepal appear to be the result of divorce (without first separating): 63% of dissolutions that occurred among ever married respondents of the 2008 CVFS were the result of divorce, not separation. Although dissolutions that occur via initial separation (i.e., the other 37%) sometimes lead to divorce later on, many separations last for long periods, or indefinitely. Local people recognize that separation is different from divorce in that it can allow the wife to maintain economic support and leaves a possibility of reuniting, but there is also a clear sentiment that separation is a form of dissolution, albeit less formal than divorce. For example, a 27-year-old woman of Hill Indigenous ethnicity said:

When they [a husband and wife] live separately they don't have written document, they perform it orally due to quarrelling on a small matter. But divorce is a written document and states that they don't have any relationship between each other since they signed the document.

Nonetheless, marital dissolution is experienced by few members of the population. Of women in Chitwan, Nepal who first married in the 1980s, only 10% had



experienced the dissolution of that marriage by 2008. This is much lower than a setting like the United States, where current projections suggest that half of marriages will end in divorce (Bianchi, Raley, and Casper 2012; Cherlin 2010).

### *Marital Discord and Spousal Disagreements*

Predictors of marital dissolution are more established in Western literature than in South Asian literature, as divorce has long been a commonly experienced event in Western countries (Cherlin 2009; Goldstein 1999; Ruggles 1997). Couple dynamics can play an important role in marital stability, and partners' reports of both marital happiness and marital discord have been linked to marital dissolution (Amato and Rogers 1997; Sanchez and Gager 2000), although few studies are able to capture the perceptions of both spouses. Furthermore, these studies focus on couples in Western settings, where there is more individual independence and where divorce is a more acceptable option to an unsatisfying marriage. In regions where people have less access to divorce, marital discord may be inconsequential for marital dissolution. On the other hand, there are reasons to expect that marital discord may be associated with the likelihood of dissolution.

Marital discord is a strong predictor of marital dissolution in Western settings, as both observational and survey methods of data collection have revealed (Amato and Rogers 1997; DeMaris 2000; Gottman 1994; Matthews, Wickrama, and Conger 1996). Theories based on a cost-benefit approach would predict that a marriage will dissolve once the benefits of leaving that marriage outweigh the costs (Becker, Landes, and Michael 1977). This threshold may be higher in Nepal as compared to settings where divorce is more common and the social costs of divorce are lower. For example, in

settings where divorce is more common, marriages can dissolve due to a general lack of emotional fulfillment (Amato and Hohmann-Marriot 2007; Riessman 1990). But where divorce is less common and the costs of divorce higher, frequent discord may be necessary for a couple to decide to break up.

Researchers often operationalize the concept of marital discord as problems and conflict between spouses, or as the absence of marital satisfaction (Amato and Sobolewski 2001; Gottman 1979). Here the term *discord* refers to disagreements between spouses that may or may not be manifested verbally. Spousal disagreements may be expressed in different ways across couples. One couple facing a disagreement may be prone to verbal arguments, and may address disagreements by raising their voices at one another. Another couple might discuss disagreements more calmly. Meanwhile, a third couple might be aware of disagreements, but may not verbally address them. In fact, there are particular reasons to expect that couples in the study setting might avoid verbal discord. Neighbors tend to be aware of the goings-on around them (Barber 2004), and couples may expect any loud arguments to become local gossip, and might even cause them to be ostracized in their community. Hence, marital discord may be quiet and concealed, or loud and overt, or anywhere in between.

Whether verbal or not, more frequent disagreements can decrease the benefits of marriage via decreased satisfaction. Growing dissatisfaction can cause the husband or wife to consider alternatives to remaining married. For example, a person who endures frequent marital discord may grow dissatisfied and begin to consider their prospects for economic independence. If they feel that those prospects are preferable to remaining in the marriage, they may leave their spouse. Similarly, a person who grows dissatisfied

with their marriage due to frequent discord may seek alternative romantic relationships. Evidence from the United States demonstrates that people are more likely to leave their marriage if they have or perceive alternatives to their current spouse (South and Lloyd 1995). Through these mechanisms, marital discord may lead to dissolution.

*Hypothesis 1:* Marriages in which spouses report more frequent disagreements will have higher rates of dissolution.

*Wives' and Husbands' Experiences and Perceptions of Disagreements*

Spouses' perceptions of how often they endure discord are likely to be even more important than some actual frequency of discord (even if we were able to measure it objectively). The individual spouses in any marital union have their own perceptions of the experiences they share as a couple. These perceptions about the nature and meaning of discord might be congruent, or they might be dissimilar. Past research provides evidence that wives and husbands hold different perceptions of shared experiences, such as how their marriage was formed (Bernard 1982), the amount that each spouse contributes to the housework (Hochschild and Machung 1989; Kluwer, Heesink, and Van de Vliert 1996; Smith, Gager, and Morgan 1998; Wilkie, Ferree, and Ratcliff 1998), the intensity of discord (Amato and Rogers 1997; Benin and Agostinelli 1988; Gottman 1994; Matthews et al. 1996), and—in the case of marital dissolution—what caused their marriage to fail (Stewart, Copeland, Chester, Malley, and Barenbaum 1997). By extension, we might expect wives and husbands to hold different perceptions of the level of discord in their marriage, and for these perceptions to have important influences on the outcome of their marriage.

There is evidence that husbands may be more sensitive to discord than wives, and this may lead spouses to hold different perceptions of discord. For example, a wife may perceive a discussion as a minor disagreement, but her husband may be more likely to perceive that same discussion as a significant point of conflict (Gottman 1994; Sanchez and Gager 2000). If this spousal, gender-based difference is present, then discord may become too “costly” for husbands at a lower threshold of perceived discord than for wives. Husbands, then, might be motivated to seek marital dissolution at a lower level of perceived discord than wives.

In the United States, there is also evidence that wives respond to discord differently than husbands: wives may be more likely to address marital problems, whereas husbands may be more likely to avoid problems (Gottman 1994). In Nepal, however, a wife may have particular motivation to keep disagreements quiet. Many Nepali wives live with their in-laws, and so they may be interested in remaining on good terms with their husbands in order to avoid the wrath of other household members (Bennett 1983; Niraula and Morgan 1996). In such cases, a wife may perceive disagreements with her husband, but may keep them concealed to avoid conflict, leading her husband to be unaware of those disagreements. Of course, husbands may also prefer to avoid confrontation (Gottman 1994), and may perceive disagreements of which their wives are unaware. For these reasons, wives’ and husbands’ perceptions of the discord may be discrepant, leading them to take different actions regarding their marital trajectory.

Even if spouses’ perceptions of discord are similar, and even if these perceptions lead both of them to desire to end the marriage, they may have different abilities or

incentives to achieve that desire. Women tend to have few social or economic options outside of marriage in the rural Nepalese setting, and so wives may be more willing to endure discord than their husbands (Strube and Barbour 1983; Sanchez and Gager 2000). On the other hand, wives may be especially interested in seeking relief from discord through dissolution, motivating them to overcome these barriers. In the former case, we wouldn't expect marriages to be more likely to dissolve when wives perceive frequent discord. In the latter case, we would expect marital outcomes to be responsive to wives' perceptions of discord.

Research on couples in the United States has shown that husbands' perceptions of unfairness and disagreements in marriage are more predictive of dissolution than wives' perceptions (Sanchez and Gager 2000). Husbands who perceive discord may be more motivated to end a marriage than wives who perceive discord. In Nepal, there are reasons to expect that the influence of husbands' perceptions will be even stronger. Husbands in Nepal tend to hold a great deal of power relative to their wives (Bennett 1983; Chapagain 2006). Men have liberties that women do not, such as the means to own land and to more readily remarry. Women face impaired post-divorce economic prospects and greater stigma in remarriage, compared to men (Holden 2008). Given that men face relatively lower costs in marital dissolution, they likely have a lower threshold in deciding to end their marriage. This leads to the second hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 2:* Marriages in which husbands perceive more frequent disagreements will have higher rates of dissolution, whereas wives' perceptions will not significantly influence marital dissolution.

Other factors at play may lead wives to have incentives for seeking separation from discord-ridden marriages. The stigma and difficulty that women face in remarrying may motivate a wife with no alternative prospective partner to avoid dissolution, but if she acquires an alternative partner while married then her motivation to dissolve her marriage is increased. Although a husband may be just as motivated to seek an alternative partner as a wife, he may face lower motivation to dissolve a current marriage if he successfully finds an alternative partner. Polygamy has been illegal in Nepal since 1963, but it is still practiced to some extent (Deuba and Rana 2001). As a result, a husband is able to bring a second spouse into the home as an alternative to ending a discord-ridden marriage—an alternative unavailable to women in this part of Nepal. A husband who perceives frequent discord with his wife, then, has the option of bringing a new wife into the home in the hopes of having a more satisfying relationship. A wife must first dissolve her current marriage before marrying another man, potentially increasing the benefits of dissolution for her if she perceived frequent discord.

Furthermore, recent social changes in Nepal offer reason to expect that wives who perceive discord have fewer disincentives to seek dissolution than in the past. For example, Nepal has seen recent legal advances in women's rights. Divorce became legal in 1963, under the Civil Code, and an amendment in 1975 granted women legal custody of their children and access to alimony for five years after divorce (Manziona 2001). Since 1963, the legal requirements for women who file for divorce have become more lenient (Gilbert 1992), and many even argue that women have an easier time in seeking divorce than men (Bhusal 2012). Women have also seen some improvement in their ability to be financially independent post-divorce. For instance, although it is not yet a

common practice, women have gained the right to inherit or own land (Acharya et al. 2007; Gilbert 1992; Allendorf 2007). Additionally, recent social changes have allowed women more access to education and paid work (Gubhaju 2009). These advances may be further diminishing the costs for women to dissolve their marriages in the case of frequent discord. This further suggests that wives' perceptions of marital discord may have an important influence on marital dissolution. Thus, as an alternative to the second hypothesis, wives' and husbands' perceptions are expected to have important, independent influences on dissolution.

*Hypothesis 3: Marriages in which either wives or husbands perceive more frequent disagreements will have higher rates of dissolution.*

#### *Exogenous Influences on Dissolution*

There is reason to expect that marital discord will have an important influence on marital dissolution in this setting, but there are many other exogenous factors that have the potential to influence both discord and dissolution. These factors include nonfamily experiences, such as education and work experiences (Hannan, Tuma, and Groeneveld 1977; Heuveline and Poch 2006; Kalmijn, Graaf and Poortman 2004; Oppenheimer 1994; Teachman 2002; Thornton 1985); marital experiences, such as age at marriage, marital duration, marital cohabitation, and—in this setting—participation in spouse choice (Bumpass and Sweet 1972; Becker et al. 1977; Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985; South 2001; Teachman 2011); and marital fertility (Bose and South 2003; Morgan, Lye and Condran 1988; Todesco 2011; Waite and Lillard 1991).

The particular family arrangements of this setting lead to the importance of considering some other, setting-specific factors that have the potential to influence

marital discord and marital dissolution. First, household-level farmland ownership is an indicator of wealth, and a woman may be motivated to stay in a household that has greater wealth. Furthermore, women in landless households tend to work outside their home for compensation (Cameron 1998), potentially eliminating some of their perceived economic disincentive to divorce. Second, place of marital residence may have an influence, in such a patrilocal setting. Women who move a greater distance from their own natal home upon marriage may have less access to the support of their family and friends in seeking dissolution (Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003). In fact, contact with natal home has been found to influence demographic events and family relationships in the marital home (Dyson and Moore 1983; Fricke, Axinn, and Thornton 1993; Fricke and Teachman 1993). Likewise, couples who live with the husbands' parents may either be influenced by his parents to break up, or they may feel greater pressure to maintain their marriage. It is important to account for these potentially endogenous factors in examining the influence of discord on marital dissolution.

### **Data and Sample**

The Chitwan Valley Family Study (CVFS), conducted in rural Nepal, provides rare couple-level data on spouses' experiences and their perceptions of marital discord. The data collection began in 1996 with the fielding of 72-minute, face-to-face baseline interviews. These interviews were conducted with all household members, aged 15–59 and their spouses (even if outside this age range or living elsewhere), of every household in 151 sampled neighborhoods. Special care was taken to interview spouses simultaneously in two different locations to enhance the independence of their responses.



Following the 1996 baseline interview, monthly interviews were conducted with the original respondents, as part of a household registry that began in 1997. These monthly interviews collected information on family and life events such as separation and divorce. Information about marital status was collected from interviews with one member of the household who reported on the experiences of all household members. This household registry offers benefits over court-based data on registered divorces, which exclude the many marital dissolutions that are not formally reported or legally registered (Dommaraju and Jones 2011). Reports of marital discord from the 1996 baseline interview are used to predict marital dissolution (either separation or divorce) with 13 years of data from the household registry.

The analytic sample includes all couples who were married in the first month of the household registry (total base sample of  $n=1956$ ) in which wives were aged 14 to 31 in 1996 (reducing sample by 40%, to  $n=1167$ ), who were in their first marriage (reducing sample by 2%, to  $n=1145$ ), and whose husband was also interviewed in 1996 (reducing sample by 38%, to  $n=707$ )<sup>13</sup>. Excluding missing values, the analytic sample includes a total of 682 couples. The analysis follows the couples' monthly hazard of marital dissolution for 162 months. The sample is limited to couples in which wives were ages 31 and younger because the experience of marital dissolution was very rare and infrequent for women above this age range in the 162 months of observation. Some couples in which wives were ages 31 or younger in 1996 may have dissolved prior to 1996, creating some left censoring. Yet, the higher rate of marital dissolution for this sample maximizes the opportunity to examine the consequences of marital discord for dissolution. Even in

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<sup>13</sup> One of the husbands in the sample had two wives who met these sample restrictions. In this polygamous case, I follow that husband's marriage to his first wife, only, and not his marriage to the second.

restricting the sample to couples experiencing the highest rate of dissolution, however, the rate is low: only 5% of the 682 couples experienced marital dissolution during the 162 months. This proportion of couples experiencing dissolution is sufficient for the use of logistic regression with event history analysis (Chen 2007; King and Zeng 2001). Such a low rate of events might be expected to produce nonsignificant results in the associations between the independent measures and marital dissolution.

## **Measures**

### *Dependent*

The concept of marital dissolution is operationalized by combining the events of separation and divorce: a common approach (Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985; Morgan et al. 1988; Martin and Bumpass 1989; Schoen 1992; South 2001). Combining separation and divorce into a single event allows pinpointing of the time at which the marriage was first disrupted. This is especially important in a setting where separation can often occur without a divorce to follow (Dommaraju and Jones 2011). On the other hand, separation is not a prerequisite for divorce in this setting, and many dissolutions are the result of immediate divorce. Of those couples in the analytic sample who experienced marital dissolution, only 31% (n=11) initially experienced separation compared to the 69% (n=24) who experienced immediate divorce. The measure of marital dissolution indicates marital breakdown, and not separation due to temporary migration.

Following previous research on divorce in Asia (Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003), this study focuses on dissolution of first marriages. In Nepal nearly everyone experiences first marriage (Yabiku 2002), but remarriage is rare. Only

about 7% of ever-married women ages 40 and older in the CVFS sample had been married more than once as of 2008. The percentage is greater for men (24% had been married more than once), likely due to the practice of polygamy. Later marriages tend to be less institutionalized than first marriages in Western settings (Cherlin 1978; Holden 2008) and, given their rarity, are likely to be even less institutionalized in this setting (Parry 2001). Additionally, literature on Western contexts demonstrates that remarriages tend to have substantially different causes and are prone to a greater likelihood of dissolution than first marriages (Becker et al. 1977; Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Cherlin 1978), indicating that remarriage may be more selective on individual characteristics than first marriages. Restricting the focus to first marriages avoids potential biases that later marriages might introduce.

This dependent measure uses 162 months of data from the household registry to operationalize the monthly hazard of marital dissolution in discrete time. The discrete time approach yields results similar to a continuous approach because the incidence of marital dissolution in any one month is quite low, but the discrete time approach allows the avoidance of making any parametric assumptions regarding the distribution of the underlying baseline hazard (Yamaguchi 1991). The measure of marital dissolution is coded as 0 for every month the couple is married and 1 for the first month in which the couple becomes separated or divorced, after which the couple ceases to contribute to couple-months of exposure to risk of marital dissolution. Widowhood is treated as a competing risk, so that couples in which a spouse dies cease to contribute couple-months to the hazard.

-Table 3.1 about here-

### *Independent*

Marital discord is operationalized with a measure of spouses' perceptions of disagreements. This measure comes from a survey item asking spouses how frequently they disagree with one another: "How often do you have disagreements with your (husband/wife)? Frequently, sometimes, seldom, or never?" This measure is coded from 1 to 4, with 1 indicating *never* and 4 indicating *frequently*.

Although this measure is based on spouses' individual reports of shared experiences, the correlation between husbands' and wives' perceptions of disagreements is not high, at  $r=0.23$ . This low correlation implies that, in fact, husbands and wives have unique perceptions of discord within the same marriage.

### *Controls*

The models also account for other factors that may influence marital dissolution in this setting. First, nonfamily experiences of both the wife and the husband are included in the models. Wives' and husbands' educational attainment are coded as the number of years of education that each spouse completed as of 1996. Because few people in the sample received levels of education beyond eleven years, these measures are top-coded at 11 years of education. Wives' work is also included as an indicator of nonfamily experiences, coded as a dummy variable to indicate whether the wife ever worked for pay as of 1996. Next, the models account for husbands' work experience. Men more commonly are involved in work, and so husbands' work experience is included as a measure of salaried labor, coded as a dummy variable to indicate whether the husband ever held a salaried job.

The models also control for marital experiences that may influence a couples' odds of splitting up. Wife's age at first marriage and husband's age at first marriage are coded in years. Additionally, the models include measures to indicate whether each spouse participated in selecting their husband/wife. These measures are coded into dummies: 1 indicates that they had some participation in choosing their spouse, 0 indicates that they had no participation in choosing their spouse. Because spouses within the same marriage may have experienced different participation in spouse choice, the models account for separate measures, reported by both the wife and the husband. A measure accounting for marital duration is coded as months lapsed since the first month of marriage. Next, the models also include a measure of marital cohabitation. It has become common for men in Chitwan to leave their families temporarily to earn money in a separate location (Williams, Ghimire, Axinn, Jennings, and Pradhan 2012), and this time spent apart may lead marriages to deteriorate. Marital cohabitation is coded 1 in the months that the husband and wife live together and 0 in the months they do not live together. These monthly time-varying measures are each lagged by one month. The models also include a dummy measure indicating whether the husband had been married more than once in 1996. Couple's fertility experience is operationalized as their number of children, coded as a time-varying covariate to indicate the total number of children that the couple had in each month, and lagged by one month. Sensitivity analyses were also performed that excluded couples in which husbands had been married more than once, as well as separate analyses that controlled for number of sons instead of number of children. Both sets of sensitivity analyses revealed similar results to those presented below.

Characteristics of the marital home include a series of measures, from the 1996 baseline interview data. Farmland ownership is coded as a dummy variable, with a value of 1 indicating the household owns farmland. Distance of the marital home from the wives' natal home is coded on a scale of 1 to 4, where a value of 1 indicates that the couple lives with the wife's parents; 2 indicates that she lives in the same village as her parents; 3 indicates that she can reach her parents' house in one day; and 4 indicates that it takes her longer than one day to reach her parents' house. A measure for whether the couple lives with husband's parents is coded as 1 if the husband reported living with his parents in 1996 and 0 if he reported not living with his parents.

I also include measures of ethnicity and birth cohort—key demographic characteristics in this setting. Ethnicity, which is associated with both caste and religion in Nepal, is extremely important in all aspects of social life (for detailed descriptions of the different ethnic groups, see Bennett 1983; Cameron 1998; Fricke 1986; and Guneratne 2002). Upper Caste Hindus tend to be most strict about following Hindu customs (Bennett 1983; Stash and Hannum 2001). Thus, couples of these high caste groups may endure especially intense pressure for their marriages to succeed. Other ethnic groups have less strict marital customs to adhere to (Cameron 1998; Fricke 1986; Niraula and Morgan 1996) and thus may face fewer obstacles to dissolving their marriages. To indicate ethnicity, models include four dummy variables: Dalit (or lower caste Hindus), Hill Indigenous, and Terai Indigenous, with Brahmin/Chettri (or upper caste Hindus) as the reference category.

Spouses' birth cohort is important because younger individuals have had broader experience with the rapid and recent social changes, and have greater exposure to

Western perspectives about marriage and divorce (Axinn and Yabiku 2001; Barber and Axinn 2004). Younger cohorts, therefore, may be more likely to consider divorce in the case of an unhappy marriage. Wives' and husbands birth cohorts are coded into dummy measures, coded 1 if born before the year 1983 and 0 if born in or after 1983.

### **Analysis**

I use discrete-time event history analysis and logistic regression to model the risk of marital dissolution, with couple-months of exposure as the unit of analysis (Peterson 1993). The models are estimated with two-level modeling to account for the clustering of couples within neighborhoods, due to the nature of the CVFS sampling design at the neighborhood level. The analysis is based on monthly measurement indicating whether the respondent experienced marital dissolution. The following logistic regression equation is used:

$$\ln\left(\frac{p}{1-p}\right) = a + \sum (B_{in})(X_{in})$$

Where  $p$  is the probability of marital dissolution,  $\frac{p}{(1-p)}$  is the odds of marital dissolution,  $a$  is a constant term,  $\beta$  is the effect of independent variables within neighborhoods ( $n$ ), and  $X$  is the value of these independent variables. Couples ( $i$ ) who are exposed to the risk of marital dissolution are defined as wives in their first marriage. As shown in Table 3.1, the couples included in this sample had been married for an average of about 8 years (93.09 months) at the beginning of the observation period.

I discuss the results as odds ratios, which is the anti-log of the coefficient. These odds ratios can be interpreted as the amount by which the odds are multiplied for each unit change in the respective independent variable. If the odds ratio is greater than 1, the effect is positive, meaning that marital dissolution is more likely (occurs sooner); if it is

less than 1, the effect is negative, meaning that marital dissolution is less likely (occurs later). Based on unidirectional theories regarding the expected influence of marital discord, these measures are tested with one-tailed tests of significance. Control measures are tested with two-tailed tests of significance.

## **Results**

Table 3.2 displays the results of the event history analyses. First, Model 1 begins to test the first two hypotheses: that marriages with more frequent disagreements will have higher rates of dissolution, and that marriage in which husbands perceive more frequent disagreements will have higher rates of dissolution (whereas wives' perceptions will not have a significant influence). Because these are hazard models, with a time-varying dependent measure, the coefficients indicate both the rate (i.e., the odds and the speed) of marital dissolution. Model 1 reveals the influence of husbands' perceptions, net of the effects of the control measures. Although the overall rate of marital dissolution is low among this sample, the influence of this marital discord measure is large and significant. This offers confirmation of the first hypothesis.

The model also reveals evidence to support the second hypothesis: couples in which husbands perceive more frequent disagreements dissolve more quickly than couples in which husbands perceive less frequent disagreements. For each unit increase in husbands' perception, the rate of marital dissolution increases by 60%. Because this measure of perceived disagreements is coded on a four-point scale, this coefficient indicates that couples in which the husband perceives that he "frequently" has disagreements with his wife dissolve at a rate 4.10 times faster than couples in which husbands say they "never" have disagreements with their wife.



Model 2 continues to test the second hypothesis, analyzing whether wives' perceptions of discord influence marital dissolution. Despite expectations, wives' perceptions of disagreements have a strong, positive influence on couples' hazard of marital dissolution. The magnitude of this influence resembles the magnitude of that for husbands (Model 2): the speed of a couple's dissolution increases by 58% with each unit increase in wives' perceptions of disagreements. Like husbands' perceptions, wives' perceptions of discord have a large and significant influence on couples' odds of dissolving.

-Table 3.2 about here-

Model 3 tests the third hypothesis: that marriages in which either husbands or wives perceive more frequent disagreements will have higher rates of dissolution. This model tests for whether wives' and husbands' perceptions have independent influences on their odds of dissolving. Both wives' and husbands' perceptions maintain strong independent influences in Model 4. Net of their husbands' perceptions, wives' perceptions of disagreements increases the rate of couples' marital dissolution by 50%; and husbands' perceptions increase the rate by 43%, net of their wives' perceptions. This indicates that couples in which the wife perceives frequently disagreeing dissolve 3.38 times faster than couples in which wives perceive never disagreeing. Couples in which husbands perceive frequent disagreements dissolve 2.92 times faster than couples in which husbands perceive never disagreeing. Because the distribution of perceived frequency of disagreements is skewed, models were also tested (not shown) using a dichotomous measure of disagreements (never versus ever disagree). Those results

revealed similar influences, though weaker in magnitude across the range, as the range is reduced with the dichotomous measure.<sup>14,15</sup>

Models were also tested based on the 682 couple observations, with marital dissolution treated as time-invariant. In these models, the value of each of the independent and control measures in 1996 were used to predict marital dissolution by the end of the 13-year observation period. These models reveal similar results to those obtained using hazard models and couple-months of observation. Namely, wives' and husbands' perceptions of more frequent disagreements are associated with a greater likelihood of having dissolved their marriages 13 years later.

Many of the control measures are relevant in predicting marital dissolution, as well. First, in Model 2, husbands' educational attainment is revealed to be negatively associated with marital dissolution. It is worth noting that wives' educational attainment exerts a similar significant and negative influence when included in a model that does not account for husbands' education (not shown). A negative influence of education has also been found in other studies, based in the United States and Indonesia (Cammack and Heaton 2011; Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003; Martin and Bumpass 1989). Marital experiences are associated with the rate of dissolution in the expected direction. In Models 2 and 3, husbands' age at marriage and participation in spouse choice are positively associated with marital dissolution. The rate of marital dissolution is greatly reduced when spouses are living together (marital cohabitation), but the rate increases for

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<sup>14</sup> Models including a measure to indicate how happy the wife reports her relationship with her mother-in-law to be were also tested. These models revealed similar results to those shown in Table 3.2. However, I do not include this measure in the main results because doing so would result in missing data (due to deceased mothers-in-law) and a reduced sample size of 611 couples with 31 events.

<sup>15</sup> Models predicting divorce and separation, separately, were also tested. Although the number of events is reduced, thus reducing the predictive power, results revealed that discord predicts divorce and separation similarly.

couples in which husbands have been married more than once. Fertility also has an important impact: couples with more children experience a lower rate of dissolution, similar to findings from extensive research on this association (Becker et al. 1977; Morgan et al. 1988; Todesco 2011; Waite and Lillard 1991). Finally, relative to Brahmin and Chettris, Terai Indigenous couples are less likely to experience marital dissolution—an unexpected result that may indicate changing norms of marriage among Brahmin/Chettri groups.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has investigated the influence of marital discord on marital dissolution in a rural, agrarian setting of South Asia, where marital dissolution is still an uncommon phenomenon, but likely to be on the rise. The results reveal that marital discord increases couples' rate of marital dissolution, independent of the influences of other relevant experiences and individual characteristics. Although marital dissolution is relatively uncommon and stigmatized in this setting, the influence of marital discord is similar to Western settings, where divorce has been common for decades (Amato and Rogers 1997; Cherlin 2009; DeMaris 2000; Goldstein 1999; Gottman 1994; Matthews et al. 1996). Moreover, both husbands' and wives' perceptions of discord have important influences on the odds of couples' dissolution.

Though the finding that spouses' perceptions have distinct influences on a variety of outcomes, including divorce, is not new (Allendorf 2007; Amato and Rogers 1997; Glass and Fujimoto 1994; Gottman 1994; Wilkie et al. 1998), this finding is particularly significant in this context. It is noteworthy that even though women in Nepal generally have relatively little power in households and little means to support themselves

economically, Nepalese wives' perceptions of discord have an important influence on marital outcomes, and marriages are more likely to end if wives perceive more frequent discord.

In fact, wives' perceptions of discord have an important influence on marital dissolution that is independent of their own husbands' perceptions. This key finding points toward the importance of considering both spouses' perceptions of marital dynamics in studies of marital events. Although spouses within a marriage share similar experiences, their unique perceptions of those experiences can have important consequences for their marital trajectory. Future studies on marital events would benefit from data collections that capture information from both spouses, at the couple level.

Due to the limited liberties available to Nepalese women—as compared to men—it is somewhat unexpected that the significance of wives' perceptions is not reduced when accounting for their husbands' perceptions in this setting. Women in discord-ridden marriages are in particularly precarious situations because they can face financial hardship in dissolving their marriage (Cain 1986; Holden and Smock 1991; Smock, Manning, and Gupta 1999), but remaining married can have its own negative consequences for their emotional and, sometimes, physical well-being (Naved, Azim, Bhuiya, and Persson 2006; Finchman, Beach, Gordon and Osborne 1997). Yet, the findings in this paper reveal that wives who perceive more frequent discord in their marriages are, in fact, more likely to experience marital dissolution than wives who perceive less frequent discord. Wives perceiving a great deal of discord may find ways to lower the costs of dissolving their marriages, possibly by finding alternative romantic

partners, returning to their natal home, or seeking continued support from their husbands via separation instead of divorce.

The strong influence of marital discord on marital dissolution may also be evidence of an ideational shift that has reached this rural South Asian setting, and this shift may be changing the nature of marital relationships. As Western ideas about family life spread, people around the world—even in remote areas like this one—may become more accepting of behaviors that promote individualistic values (Dion and Dion 1993; Jayakody et al. 2008; Thornton 2001). Furthermore, there is evidence that Nepalese people have raised their expectation for marriages to provide an emotional bond and companionship (Dion and Dion 2005; Hoelter, Axinn, and Ghimire 2004; Link 2011; Rindfuss and Morgan 1983). With these ideational and marital changes, both husbands and wives may be less willing to endure frequent marital discord, and may perceive greater benefits to dissolving such marriages.

This paper has revealed an important association between marital discord and marital dissolution in rural Nepal. Nevertheless, there are also some limitations to this investigation. First, the data do not reveal which spouse initiated the observed marital dissolutions. For example, it may be the case that a wife perceives frequent disagreement, but her husband may ultimately choose to end the marriage (or vice versa). However, there is evidence, based on data from the District Court of Chitwan (see Table A.2 in Appendix), that wives file the majority of requests for divorce. Second, modeling the influence of discord with a measure of disagreements is not comprehensive, as other types of discord are also likely to be relevant (Amato and Rogers 1997; DeMaris 2000; Gottman 1994; Porter and O’Leary 1980). In fact, access to measures from observational

methods might provide greater insight into couple dynamics and would likely reveal even stronger effects of discord on dissolution (Gottman 1994). Third, the measures of marital discord are from a single time point, and do not capture the changing dynamics of spousal disagreements. Repeated measures of perceived disagreements would likely reveal stronger influences on marital dissolution. Nonetheless, the single time point measure of discord has the power to predict marital dissolution over the subsequent 13 years. Fifth, the small number of marital dissolution events that occur during the period of observation limit the power with which this investigation can be performed. However, the significant results that we find with this small number of events suggest an important relationship between discord and dissolution.

If married life in South Asia continues to develop on a trajectory toward greater emphasis on emotional bonds and companionship, this may open the door for greater opportunity for spouses to disagree on various matters. As marital changes progress, then, we might expect to see divorce rising even more rapidly. In turn, the rising prevalence of divorce in this Nepalese and similar agrarian settings can have important implications for the well-being of women and families. As careful research using longitudinal data has demonstrated, the economic consequences of divorce can be detrimental, and these negative consequences may affect women in particular (Andreß, Borgloh, Bröckel, Giesselmann, and Hummelsheim 2006; Duncan and Hoffman 1985; Holden and Smock 1991; Peterson 1996; Smock et al. 1999; Lavelle and Smock 2012). These consequences are likely to be even more detrimental for women in settings where opportunities for their economic independence are few (Cain 1986). Thus, it is important to continue to expand our knowledge of the process of marital dissolution, increasing our

understanding of its causes in such settings. Only then can we efficiently study the consequences for women and families.

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**Table 3.1: Descriptive Statistics**

<b>Measure</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>
Marital dissolution (proportion)	.05	.22	0.00	1.00
<b>Perceptions of Disagreements</b>				
Wives' report	1.80	0.70	1.00	4.00
Husbands' report	1.80	0.73	1.00	4.00
<b>Nonfamily Experiences</b>				
Wife's educational attainment	3.81	4.00	0.00	11.00
Wife ever worked for wages	.43	.50	0.00	1.00
Husband's educational attainment	6.24	4.05	0.00	11.00
Husband ever had a salaried job	.68	.47	0.00	1.00
<b>Marital Experiences</b>				
Wife's age at marriage	16.85	2.47	9.00	28.00
Husband's age at marriage	21.08	3.78	9.00	45.00
Wife had some spouse choice	0.35	0.48	0.00	1.00
Husband had some spouse choice	0.63	0.48	0.00	1.00
Marital duration, in months (first month of hazard)	93.09	55.55	1.00	253.00
Marital cohabitation (first month of hazard)	.71	.45	0.00	1.00
Husband married more than once	.13	.34	0.00	1.00
<b>Fertility Experiences</b>				
Number of children born (first month of hazard)	2.08	1.44	0.00	7.00
<b>Characteristics of Marital Home</b>				
Household owns farmland	.80	.40	0.00	1.00
Distance from wife's natal home (greater distance)	2.82	0.58	1.00	4.00
Living with husband's parents	0.64	.48	0.00	1.00
<b>Demographics</b>				
Brahmin/Chettri (upper caste)	.48	.50	0.00	1.00
Dalit (low caste)	.12	.32	0.00	1.00
Hill Indigenous	.16	.36	0.00	1.00
Terai Indigenous	.24	.43	0.00	1.00
<i>Wife's cohort</i>				
Cohort born before 1983	.38	.49	0.00	1.00
Cohort born 1983 or later	.62	.49	0.00	1.00
Husband's cohort:				
Cohort born before 1983	.70	.46	0.00	1.00
Cohort born 1983 or later	.30	.46	0.00	1.00
Total couples in sample	682			
Total experiencing marital dissolution	35			

**Table 3.2: Hazard Estimates of Marital Dissolution: Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression of Spouses' Perceptions of Disagreements**

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>T-ratio</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>T-ratio</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>T-ratio</i>
<b>Disagreements</b>						
Husbands' perception of frequency	1.60*	1.77			1.43*	1.82
Wives' perception of frequency			1.58**	2.39	1.50*	-2.07
<b>Controls</b>						
<b>Nonfamily Experiences</b>						
Wife's educational attainment	0.91	-1.20	0.91	1.43	0.91	-1.48
Husband's educational attainment	0.90	-1.33	0.89*	-2.15	0.90	-1.87
Wife ever worked for wages	0.89	-0.25	1.00	0.01	0.93	-0.19
Husband ever had a salaried job	0.98	-0.04	0.87	-0.39	0.87	-0.37
<b>Marital Experiences</b>						
Wife's age at marriage	0.90	-1.05	0.96	-0.64	0.93	-0.98
Husband's age at marriage	1.09	1.18	1.13*	2.21	1.12*	2.05
Wife had some spouse choice	1.11	0.22	1.23	0.61	1.27	0.69
Husband had some spouse choice	1.88	1.22	2.01*	1.84	2.04*	1.83
Marital duration	0.99	-1.47	1.00	-1.04	1.00	-1.34
Marital cohabitation	0.14***	-3.87	0.14***	-6.06	0.14***	-5.74
Husband married more than once	4.97***	2.66	8.81***	4.69	7.77***	4.39
<b>Fertility Experiences</b>						
Number of children born	0.58**	-2.39	0.57***	-3.63	0.57***	-3.48
<b>Characteristics of Marital Home</b>						
Household owns farmland	0.54	-1.28	0.50*	-1.73	0.50*	-1.77
Distance from wife's natal home (greater distance)	0.77	-0.95	0.75	-1.50	0.76	-1.36
Living with husband's parents	0.57	-1.15	0.76	-0.74	0.69	-1.01
<b>Demographics</b>						
Ethnicity: Brahmin/Chettri (reference)						
Dalit	1.57	0.73	1.00	0.00	1.14	0.25
Hill Indigenous	1.50	0.71	1.18	0.39	1.31	0.61
Terai Indigenous	0.13*	-1.97	0.09***	-3.10	0.11**	-2.83
Wife's cohort: Cohort born before 1983 (reference)						
Cohort born 1983 or later	0.61	-0.71	1.06	0.12	0.88	-0.25
Husband's cohort: Cohort born before 1983 (reference)						
Cohort born 1983 or later	1.20	0.27	2.40*	1.81	1.86	1.24
N (couple-months)	98995		98995		98995	
N (couples experiencing marital dissolution)	35		35		35	

One-tailed tests used for disagreement measures, two-tailed tests used for controls.

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001

## CHAPTER 4

### **Influences of Childlessness, Family Size, and Child Characteristics on Marital**

#### **Dissolution: Evidence from South Asia**

Marital fertility is one of the most consistent predictors of marital dissolution. Couples who have children tend to be less likely to experience marital dissolution. Beyond just their presence, the characteristics of children can exert particularly important influences on their parents' marital outcomes: a greater number of children, younger children, and sons (compared to daughters) have been found to suppress marital dissolution in Western settings (Cherlin 1977; Harris and Morgan 1991; Morgan, Lye, and Condran 1988; Thornton 1977; Waite and Lillard 1991). However, the existing research focuses mainly on settings in which wealth flows from parents to children, and children have limited economic value for their parents (Becker, Landes, and Michael 1977; Waite and Lillard 1991). This research largely ignores the variance in the value of children across settings. Children may exert an especially strong, and possibly even unique, influence on marital dissolution in settings where they maintain a direct economic value for their parents, as well as a unique socio-cultural and psycho-emotional value (Arnold, Kim, and Roy 1998; Cain 1977; Das Gupta, Zhenghua, Bohua, Zhenming, and Chung, Hwa-Ok 2003).

Although the direction of intergenerational wealth flow in many non-Western settings has reversed in recent decades, with wealth beginning to flow in the direction of parents to their children, parents still rely on their children for support (Biddlecom, Chayovan and Ofstedal 2003; Caldwell 1982; Kpessa 2010). In South Asia, married couples are expected to have children (Riessman 2000). Furthermore, although the spread of education has reduced the amount of time that children spend working on their

families' farms, children have continued to have significant economic value for their parents (Axinn and Barber 2001). Under these circumstances parents may be particularly concerned with maintaining an intact marriage so that they can prevent confusion about which parent the child(ren) should care for as adults. The motivation to maintain marriages may be particularly strong while children are young—when parents are establishing bonds with their children. The bearing of sons, as compared to daughters, may also have important influences on marital outcomes for their parents: sons offer economic security and are crucial for ensuring their parents' entrance into heaven (Bose and South 2003; Fricke 1986; Jennings, Axinn, and Ghimire 2012; Karki 1988; Niraula and Morgan 1995).

This paper explores the influences of children and their characteristics on couples' odds of marital dissolution in a rural, South Asian setting of southern Nepal. I use data from the Chitwan Valley Family Study (CVFS) to estimate the hazard of marital dissolution, using event history models. These extensive, retrospective data span from the beginning of couples' marriages, capturing the period of marriage before they had their first child, the births of each child, and the dissolution (or not) of their marriage. This allows for the unique investigation of the influences that particular attributes of marital fertility can have on marital dissolution in a South Asian setting. Specifically, I investigate the influences of parity, age of children, and sex composition of children on the odds of marital dissolution among couples in this setting.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Economic theories suggest that children reduce the odds of marital dissolution because they introduce marriage-specific capital, thus increasing the costs of divorce (Becker et

al. 1977; Weiss and Willis 1985). But, the costs are not uniform for all parents. In the paragraphs that follow, I describe how the characteristics of children—their presence, number (or parity), age, and sex—are connected to couples' odds of experiencing marital dissolution in the Nepalese context.

### *Marital Fertility and Parity*

Childbearing in Nepal is inextricably linked to marriage (Bose and South 2003; Jennings et al. 2012). Historically, and still today, many Nepalese people consider childbearing to be a main purpose of the marital union. Moreover, marital unions are considered to be the only acceptable unions in which to have children, solidifying this important link between marriage and fertility (Fricke and Teachman 1993; Jennings et al. 2012). During my fieldwork in Chitwan, one forty year old Nepali woman expressed her thoughts about this link: “I think marriage is nothing more than having children. It’s continuity in the world... There is a hope that they [children] would take care [of their parents] in the old age...”<sup>16</sup> This notion that married couples are supposed to have children is prevalent among the population. In fact, of the respondents of the 2008 CVFS (N=5170), only 25% agreed with the statement “It is okay for a person to decide not to have any children.” There are strong social taboos related to childlessness, and those couples who remain childless for a lengthy period of time face stigma from their community (Riessman 2000; Stone 1978).

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<sup>16</sup> In Fall 2010, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 men and women on the topics of marital dissolution, remarriage, and childbearing. These 30 interviews were conducted with local residents of Chitwan. The author developed and pretested a semi-structured interview questionnaire, with help from a local Nepali staff at the Institute for Social and Environmental Research (ISER). The questionnaire was fielded among 18-45 year-olds (20 women and 10 men). The final sample represents people from different ethnic groups and who were residing in neighborhoods of varying distances from the nearest city.

In addition to evading the stigma associated with childlessness, the bearing of children introduces significant value to marriages. In this setting, where there are no state-sponsored pension programs, and where families often depend on subsistence agriculture, children have a direct economic value. Children are valued for their ability to contribute to both the present household economy and to their parents' long-term well-being (Cain 1977; Jennings et al. 2012; Niraula 1995). Children are also valued for their religious role in securing their parents' well-being even in the afterlife (Bose and South 2003; Fricke 1986).

The negative value placed on childlessness and the positive value placed on childbearing can each affect couples' likelihood of marital dissolution. The social pressure that childless couples face can increase their likelihood of dissolution. Childless couples may endure pressure from their family and community members to have children (Jennings and Barber 2013; Link 2010). This pressure can translate into tensions between the spouses, potentially leading the couple to eventually surrender by dissolving their marriage. In fact, infertility was grounds for husbands to file for divorce in the recent past, but this a ruling in 2006 eliminated husbands' right to file for divorce due to infertility (Dubey 2006). In Nepal, there is a tendency for infertility to be blamed on wives (Rao 1997; Riessman 2000), and it is not uncommon for husbands to seek another wife in order to fulfill their need to procreate (Cain 1986; Parvez 2011). With contemporary laws, this can take the form of a husband seeking a second wife without dissolving his first marriage.<sup>17</sup> But, the first wife may then become unhappy and seek

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<sup>17</sup> Although polygamy, too, is now illegal in Nepal, it is still practiced among some people in rural areas, like Chitwan (Deuba and Rana 2001).



dissolution. A twenty-two year old Nepali woman described this kind of scenario to me during my fieldwork: “If there is no child from a couple then the husband wants to bring another wife to get children to extend his generation... When he gets the second marriage then he gives divorce to his first wife”.<sup>18</sup> For these reasons, childlessness is expected to increase the likelihood of marital dissolution. Of course, given that premarital sex is rare in Nepal (Retherford and Thapa 1998), almost all married couples spend some period of time childless.

Once a couple has children, they experience increased barriers, or costs, to dissolution. Parents may be motivated to avoid dissolution, as they face concern for their children’s well-being. They may be wary of the negative consequences that marital dissolution can have for their children. Some of this concern may be internalized, and some may come from social pressure to do what is best for their children. During my fieldwork, many people expressed the idea that divorce is very bad for children. For example, one thirty-nine year old man told me “...if they [a couple] have children and if they decide to get divorced after getting children then they are doing a great mistake. They are committing a sin in their life; they damage the life of their children”. Because of concerns for their children and fear of social repercussions, parents may perceive high costs to marital dissolution, as compared to childless couples. Each additional child can increase these concerns, thus decreasing the odds of dissolution further.

Parents might also be expected to face reduced odds of marital dissolution, compared to childless couples, because of perceptions that children present impediments

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<sup>18</sup> Although illegal since 1963 (Deuba and Rana 2001), polygamy is still practiced in rural Nepal. This means that husbands do not necessarily have to dissolve their first marriage in order to marry a different woman. However, as expressed in this quote, first wives of such scenarios often seek dissolution.

to remarriage (Becker et al. 1977; Teachman and Heckert 1985; Thornton 1977). Women in Nepal are especially dependent on marriage: they have few prospects for economic independence and typically must rely on male relatives for their livelihood. Thus, Nepalese women have strong incentive to remarry quickly if they experience a marital dissolution. But, a woman with children may anticipate a more difficult time in finding a second spouse after dissolution than women without children. Indeed, during my fieldwork in Nepal, people expressed this idea—one forty-three year old man told me “If she has children from the first marriage then it can be almost impossible for her to get remarried.” This barrier that children can present to remarriage might motivate wives with children to remain in their first marriages.

#### *Age of children*

I expect that having children, and a greater number of children, will suppress the odds of marital dissolution, but children are not likely to have a uniform influence across ages. Couples with younger children have been known to have a lower likelihood of marital dissolution, compared to couples with older children (Heaton 1990; Waite and Lillard 1991). Couples may be especially motivated to keep their marriage intact when they have young children because the costs of dissolution can be greater during this period.

With the high value placed on children, parents may be particularly concerned with maintaining strong relationships with their children—a concern that is especially salient when children are young. In Nepal, marital dissolution would likely lead to the sole custody of one parent and higher costs of dissolution. Young children require a greater amount of care, which likely leads parents to develop an especially strong bond with their children. These bonds increase the emotional costs of dissolution for

noncustodial parents. Noncustodial parents face economic costs, as well: the loss of contact with their children can cause them to lose the opportunity to maintain and develop bonds that are important in securing old age care. If these bonds are lost when children are young, the children may not develop a feeling of obligation to care for the noncustodial parent in old age. Custodial parents also face costs: younger children require more supervision and childcare, making it more difficult for a single parent to take on parenting responsibility during this phase (Heaton 1990; Waite and Lillard 1991). Thus, parents are motivated to maintain intact marriages while children are young, to avoid this risk of custody arrangements that can have negative consequences.

Parental concerns for their children's well-being may also be heightened when children are young. Parents may believe that young children are more vulnerable to the negative effects of dissolution, further motivating them to avoid marital dissolution during this stage. There is evidence from Western settings that this motivation is strong: couples with young children are less happy than couples with older children (Twenge, Campbell, and Foster 2003; White, Booth, and Edwards 1986), but these couples have the lowest rate of marital dissolution in Western settings (Waite and Lillard 1991; Heaton 1990). Thus, concern for young children's well-being may be so strong that it motivates couples to endure the least happy years of their marriage.

As children get older, they become more independent and less vulnerable, and parents gradually spend less time in childrearing. With these changes, the emotional bonds between parents and children may loosen and the concern for children's vulnerability may decrease, thus decreasing the costs of marital dissolution. But, children may continue to have a suppressing effect on parents' marital dissolution into their school

ages. Children who are in school are dependent on their parents to finance their school supplies, clothing, and any school fees (Caldwell 1982). Some parents may perceive that the consequences of dissolution are especially detrimental for school-aged children, who may face stigma from their peers at school. One nineteen year old woman told me, in reflecting on these concerns, “When they become old enough to go to school, they need their father’s, mother’s name. And friends in school also may ask them who their father is and mother. At that time it becomes difficult for the children and it may affect negatively on their mind... It may hamper in the study of the children.” With these kinds of concerns, children may continue to prevent marital dissolution into their school ages.

#### *Sex of children*

Children’s sex composition may have distinct influences in South Asia, compared to Western settings. Even in Western settings, where son preference is not explicit, sons have been found to decrease couples’ odds of marital dissolution, (Morgan et al. 1988; Heaton and Albrecht 1991; Katzev, Warner, and Acock 1994). In these settings, there is evidence that husbands become more involved in childrearing when sons are present, and this father involvement can increase both the emotional costs of dissolution for fathers and marital satisfaction for mothers (Harris and Morgan 1991; Katzev et al. 1994; Morgan et al. 1988).

In South Asia, sons are particularly valued. Sons have an important role in death rites, and, in this patrilineal setting, they allow for continuation of the family line and ensure consistency in family inheritance practices through male kin (Bennett1983; Bose and South 2003; Fricke 1986; Karki 1988; Niraula and Morgan 1995). Daughters, on the other hand, join their husbands’ family upon marriage, leaving their own parents and

natal home (Bennett 1983; Jennings and Barber 2013). Parents have higher expectations for sons to care for them in old age, compared to daughters, who are expected to help care for their parents-in-law (Goldstein, Schuler, and Ross 1983; Jennings et al. 2012; Niraula and Morgan 1995). Regardless of whether they have a daughter, then, when a couple bears a son they may be put at ease in knowing that their son will fulfill these responsibilities. This relief may translate into greater marital satisfaction, thus suppressing couples' odds of marital dissolution.

Although there is reason to expect especially strong influences of sons on marital dissolution, couples also tend to desire children of both sexes. This is true across settings (Andersson, Hank, Røsen, and Vikat 2006; Pebley, Delgado, and Brineman 1980; Pollard and Morgan 2002). In Nepal, couples typically desire at least one daughter, in addition to their son(s) (Karki 1988; Niraula and Morgan 1995; Stash 1996). In fact, when asked what gender composition they would prefer if they could have exactly three children, 57% of respondents say they prefer two sons and one daughter, and another 34% say they prefer two daughters and one son, with only the remaining 9% preferring a same-sex composition.<sup>19</sup> If achieving the desired sex composition of children increases marital satisfaction, then having at least one son *and* at least one daughter should have a suppressing influence on marital dissolution relative to having only children of one sex.

## **Data**

I use data from the 2008 fielding of the Chitwan Valley Family Study (CVFS). The CVFS is conducted in rural Nepal. Respondents were drawn from a cluster sampling scheme, in which 151 neighborhoods were randomly sampled and each member of those

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<sup>19</sup> These percentages were calculated from the unrestricted 2008 CVFS sample of 5190 men and women.

neighborhoods between the ages of 15 and 59 were interviewed. Structured interviews were conducted to gather information on a range of family-related attitudes and experiences. Less structured interviews were also conducted, with life history calendars (Axinn, Pearce, and Ghimire 1999; Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin, and Young De-Marco 1988), to collect information on events that the respondents had experienced throughout their lives, such as school, work, birth, marriage, separation, and divorce.

I use a combination of the 2008 structured interview data and the retrospective life history calendar data to perform a statistical investigation of the influence of children on their parents' odds of marital dissolution. I limit my sample to couples in which the wives are in their first marriage, are age 50 and under (in any year during the retrospective observations) (N= 2818).<sup>20</sup> I use this age restriction because the occurrence of marital dissolution becomes extremely rare after age 50. Restricting the sample to these couples with a higher rate of marital dissolution maximizes the opportunity to investigate the influence of children on marital dissolution. I also investigate the effect of children's age with the additional sample restriction of couples with at least one child (N=2661). The retrospective nature of the data allows me to investigate the likelihood of marital dissolution from the very beginning of couples' marriages, thus eliminating any issue with left-censoring.

## **Measures**

### *Dependent*

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<sup>20</sup> Sensitivity analyses were also performed for a sample including couples who married after 1998, in order to more directly eliminate some of the biases introduced by right censoring, and the results were similar to those presented below.

I operationalize the concept of marital dissolution by combining the events of marital separation and divorce, a common approach, as there can be a temporal lag in the time from separation to divorce (Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985; Morgan et al. 1988; Martin and Bumpass 1989; Schoen 1992; South 2001). The measure of marital dissolution indicates marital breakdown; separation due to temporary migration is not considered to be dissolution for the purpose of this investigation. Combining separation and divorce into a single event allows me to pinpoint the time at which the marriage was first disrupted. This is especially important in a setting where separation can often occur without a divorce to follow (Dommaraju and Jones 2011). On the other hand, separation is not a prerequisite for divorce in this setting, and many dissolutions are the result of immediate divorce. Of those couples in the full analytic sample who experienced marital dissolution, only about 35% initially experienced separation (some with divorce to follow, some without divorce during the observation period).

Following previous research on divorce in Asia (Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003), I focus on dissolution of first marriages (from the wife's perspective). In Nepal, nearly everyone experiences first marriage (Yabiku 2002), but remarriage is very rare. As of 2008, only about 11% of ever-married women and 10% of ever-married men ages 40 and older in the CVFS sample had been married more than once. Later marriages tend to be less institutionalized than first marriages in Western settings (Cherlin 1978). In other words, later marriages tend to have fewer established norms and guidelines than first marriages, as remarriage is a less common and more recent phenomenon. Given the more pronounced infrequency of later marriages in this

setting, these marriages are likely to be even less institutionalized than in the West (Holden 2008; Parry 2001). Additionally, Western literature demonstrates that remarriages tend to have significantly different causes and are prone to a greater likelihood of dissolution than first marriages (Becker et al. 1977; Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Cherlin 1978; Martin and Bumpass 1989). Thus, I limit my investigation to first marriages.

I use the life history calendar data to operationalize the yearly hazard of marital dissolution in discrete time. The discrete time approach yields results similar to a continuous approach because the incidence of marital dissolution in any one year is quite low, but the discrete time approach allows the avoidance of parametric assumptions regarding the distribution of the underlying baseline hazard (Yamaguchi 1991). The measure of marital dissolution is coded as 0 for every year the couple is married and 1 for the first year in which the couple is separated (for at least six months) or divorced, after which they cease to contribute to couple-years of exposure to risk of marital dissolution. Widowhood is treated as a competing risk, couples in which a spouse dies cease to contribute couple-years to the hazard.

### *Independent*

In order to investigate the overall influence of having children, I code time-varying dummy measures of fertility, from the life history calendar data. The measures indicate (1) whether the couple is childless, (2) whether the couple has one child, (3) whether the couple has two children, (4) whether the couple has three children, (5) whether the couple has four children, and (6) whether the couple has five or more children. Each measure is coded 1 if the couple falls into the category and 0 otherwise. I



combine couples with five or more children (ranging as high as 13) because so few have more than five children by the last observation of the hazard (13% of the sample).

Next, to investigate the influence of children's age on their parents' rate of marital dissolution I code two time-varying measures to indicate the age characteristics of the youngest child. First, I code a continuous measure of the age of the youngest (or last born) child. Next, I code a dummy measure to indicate whether the youngest child is under the age of three.

Finally, I investigate the influence of children's sex. I code a series of dummy measures to indicate whether couples at parity one have a boy or a girl; whether couples at parity two have two boys, two girls, or one of each sex; and whether couples at parity three or higher have at least three sons, only one or two sons, or no sons.<sup>21</sup>

### *Controls*

I also include a number of controls in the models, to account for other factors that may influence both fertility and marital dissolution in this setting. Due to the nature of the retrospective data, I do not have the capability to match up information from women with information from their ex-husbands. This limits me to controlling for measures of individual and couple experiences as obtained from the wives.

I account for wife's age at the time that she was first married. Wife's level of spouse choice comes from the 2008 structured interview, and is coded into a dummy measure: 0 indicates that the wife had no participation in choosing her spouse, and 1 indicates that the wife had any participation in choosing her spouse. Length of marriage

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<sup>21</sup> I code the dummy measure to indicate that the couple has at least three sons instead of indicating that the couple has only sons because the later would create very small cell sizes.

is a time-varying measure, coded in years, indicating the number of years that have lapsed since the couple was married.

Wife's education is coded as categorical, ranging from 0 to 4 and indicating the total amount of wife's accumulated school attendance at marriage: 0 = never attended school; 1 = attended school for 1 to 4 years; 2 = attended school for 5 to 9 years; 3 = attended school for 10 to 14 years; and 4 = attended school for 15 years or more.<sup>22</sup> A time-varying measure indicating whether the wife ever worked for wages is coded 1 if the wife ever worked and 0 if she never worked for wages.

Ethnicity is coded as four dummy variables: Brahmin/Chettri (or upper caste Hindus), Dalit (or lower caste Hindus), Hill Indigenous, and Terai Indigenous. Brahmin/Chettri is the reference category in the analyses.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, birth cohort is coded as three dummy variables, indicating that the respondent was born between 1968 and 1982; between 1953 and 1967; or between 1938 and 1952.<sup>24</sup>

## **Analytic Method**

I use discrete-time event history analysis and logistic regression to model the risk of marital dissolution, with person-years of exposure as the units of analysis. The models are estimated with multilevel modeling to account for the clustered nature of the CVFS

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<sup>22</sup> A wife is considered to have attended a year of school if she was enrolled for at least a part of the year.

<sup>23</sup> Because the number of couples in the Newari ethnic group that fit the sample restrictions for the full sample is very small (N=167), and very few experience dissolution (N=12), I do not include those of Newar ethnicity in the sample.

<sup>24</sup> Measures for length of marriage, age at marriage, cohort, and parity are correlated. At the last person-year of observation, length of marriage is correlated with age at marriage at  $r = -0.38$ , with cohort at  $r = 0.63$ , and with parity at  $r = 0.65$ . Cohort and parity are correlated at 0.39; cohort and age at marriage are correlated at -0.25; and age at marriage and parity are correlated at -0.21.

sampling design at the neighborhood level. The analysis is based on yearly measurement indicating whether the respondent experienced marital dissolution. I use the following logistic regression equation:

$$\ln\left(\frac{p}{1-p}\right) = a + \sum (B_{in})(X_{in})$$

Where  $p$  is the probability of marital dissolution,  $\frac{p}{(1-p)}$  is the odds of marital

dissolution,  $a$  is a constant term,  $\beta$  is the effect of independent variables within neighborhoods ( $n$ ), and  $x$  is the value of these independent variables. Individuals ( $i$ ) who are exposed to the risk of marital dissolution are defined as wives, ages 50 and under, and in their first marriage. I discuss the results as odds ratios, which is the anti-log of the coefficient. These odds ratios can be interpreted as the amount by which the odds are multiplied for each unit change in the respective independent variable. If the odds ratio is greater than 1, the effect is positive, meaning that marital dissolution occurs at a higher (faster) rate; if it is less than 1, the effect is negative, meaning that marital dissolution occurs at a lower (slower) rate. Moreover, these ratios can be easily transformed into percent change in the odds associated with each unit change in the respective independent variable by subtracting 1 from the odds ratio and multiplying by 100 (Thornton, Axinn, Xie 2007). Because so few marital dissolutions occur in each yearly interval, the yearly odds of marital dissolution are comparable to the rate of marital dissolution. For this reason, I sometimes discuss the rate of marital dissolution as interchangeable with the odds of marital dissolution.

As Table 4.1 reveals, only about 7% of the full sample experience marital dissolution during the period of observation. Although this is a small proportion, it

presents a large enough incidence of marital dissolution to allow for the use of logistic regression with event history analysis (Chen 2007; King and Zeng 2001). The main statistical concern is that such a low rate of events might be expected to produce nonsignificant results in the associations between the independent measures and marital dissolution. Furthermore, the low incidence of marital dissolutions draws attention to the question of what these events tell us, and whether we can generalize the results obtained from these 211 couples.

## **Results**

Table 4.1 displays means for the full sample of couples, couples who have children, and (to facilitate interpretability of Tables 4.2 and 4.3) couples at each parity. Because the units of observation in my analyses are person-years, I include statistics at both the beginning and the end of the observation period for time-varying covariates. Focusing on the full sample, very few of the couples have children at first observation—not surprising, given that the hazard begins at marriage. By the last observation, only 6% of couples have no children, and most (83%) have at least two children. Among couples at first parity (11% of the sample), a little over half have a daughter. At parity two (30% of sample), most couples have a son and a daughter, and only a minority have two sons. At parities three and higher (53% of the sample), most couples again have a mixed sex composition, and a minority have no sons.

- Table 4.1 about here -

Wives in the full sample were married at about age 17, on average, and a minority (34%) participated in choosing their spouse. By the end of the observation, couples had been married for an average of about 20 years. (Among marriages that dissolved, this

average was about 9.21 years.) Upon marriage, 29% of wives had work experience, and this percentage rose to 48% by the last observation. About half of the sample (51%) identifies as Brahmin/Chettri, 20% is of the Terai Indigenous ethnicity, 18% is Hill Indigenous, and 11% is Dalit. Over half of the wives (59%) fall into the youngest cohort—born between 1968 and 1982—and a minority (13%) fall into the oldest cohort—born between 1938 and 1952.

Table 4.2 displays results from event history analyses. In Model 1, I investigate the influence of childlessness on couples' odds of marital dissolution. The odds ratio of 2.42 indicates that couples with no children had 2.42 greater odds of marital dissolution than couples who had at least one child. This coefficient is statistically significant and independent of marital characteristics, wife's nonfamily experiences, and demographics. In Model 2, I examine the influence of parity on the odds of marital dissolution with a series of dummy measures. Couples with no children are treated as the reference group, so that the influence of each other measure in this model is relative to childless couples. Couples with one child do not experience a significantly different rate of marital dissolution compared to childless couples. I discuss possible reasons for this in the conclusion.

Couples with two children, however, experienced lower odds of dissolution than childless couples: an odds ratio of 0.28 translates to 72% lower odds. Couples with three children have even lower odds of dissolution (89% lower) than childless couples. Couples at parity four and couples at parity five experience 91% lower odds than childless couples. In summary, Table 4.2 demonstrates strong evidence that having more than one child suppresses couples' rate of marital dissolution, and that the rate of

dissolution decreases with each additional child, up to three. Additional children beyond the third do not create additional gains in marital longevity for couples who have already had three children.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in the subsequent models, I employ measures of fertility that combine couples above parity two into a single category.

- Table 4.2 about here -

Table 4.3 expands the investigation to examine the influence of children's age composition on their parents' odds of dissolution. In this table, the sample is limited to couples who have at least one child. In Model 1, I investigate the influence of the age of the youngest child, treated as a continuous measure. The youngest child's age exerts a significant, positive influence on the odds of marital dissolution. The odds ratio of 1.12 suggests that the odds of marital dissolution increases by 12% with each additional year of age.

In Model 2 of Table 4.3, I investigate the influence of a dichotomous measure of the youngest child's age, to indicate that the child is under age three. I use this cut off at age three because, in a model investigating the influence of a series of dummy measures for the youngest child's age (not shown), no significant effects of children under age three relative to children under age one were revealed and the influence of child's age was similarly positive for all ages above age two (relative to under age one). Thus, hypotheses suggesting that school-aged children continue to have a suppressing influence on marital dissolution do not hold. In Model 2, the odds ratio of 0.39 indicates that having a child under age three suppresses the odds of marital dissolution, complementing

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<sup>25</sup>Tests of statistical difference were performed in models, not shown, in which couples at parity three were treated as the reference category. Odds of dissolution for couples at parities four and greater than four were revealed to be statistically no different than couples at parity three.

the results of Model 1. Specifically, couples whose youngest child is under the age of three have 61% lower odds of experiencing marital dissolution than couples whose youngest child is age three or older.<sup>26</sup>

Model 3 accounts for parents' parity, with couples who have one child treated as the reference category. In this model, the influence of the youngest child's age remains significant, even as the influence of parity exerts strong influences. An odds ratio of 0.48 indicates that couples with a youngest child under the age of three have 51% lower odds of marital dissolution than couples with all children ages three or older. These results are similar to results from Western settings, which also find that children's age is an independent predictor of parents' marital dissolution, holding total family size constant (Wu 1995; Lillard and Waite 1993). In this Nepalese setting, too, child's age appears to have a strong and independent influence on couples' odds of marital dissolution.

Of course, child's age and parity are correlated. Because of this correlation, I investigate interactions in Model 4. Couples who have one child age three or older are treated as the reference category. The model reveals significant interaction effects between age and parity. Specifically, compared to couples with one child age three or older, couples with one child under age three have 73% reduced odds of marital dissolution. Couples who have two children or at least three children have 75% and 91% reduced odds of marital dissolution, respectively, when their youngest child is age three or older (compared to couples with only one child who is age three or older). Within-parity differences were tested in models not shown, revealing that couples with two children and a youngest child age three or older have significantly greater odds of

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<sup>26</sup> Investigations for effects of the oldest child's age were also conducted. The oldest child's age is not a strong predictor of parents' marital dissolution, contrary to findings from the United States (Heaton 1990).

dissolution than their counterparts with a youngest child under age three. Couples with three or more children do not face significantly different odds of marital dissolution if their child is under age three relative to if their youngest child is age three or older. Overall, then, Table 4.3 reiterates the important influence of both parity and child's age, and illustrates that these two characteristics of child composition interact to influence marital dissolution. The differential effects of child's age, however, are no longer significant for couples at higher parities (i.e., three or more children).

- Table 4.3 about here -

Next, I turn to possible influences of the sex composition of children. Note that the retrospective data capture every birth event until the couples' last observation, since the hazard begins in the year of first marriage for everyone. Therefore, couples who reach parity two or higher spent some time at parity one, and couples who reach parity three or higher spent some time at parity two (with the exception of multiple births). Figure 4.1 displays predicted probabilities of marital dissolution based on couples' parity and sex, for the full sample, with length of marriage held at its mean (20.11 years). (See Table A.1 in the Appendix for the odds ratio results). The height of the bars refers to the expected probability of marital dissolution in each year, given that they did not dissolve in the previous year. The asterisk refers to significant differences in the probability of experiencing marital dissolution for couples with different sex compositions, within parity.

- Figure 4.1 about here -

Figure 4.1 illustrates the similarity—which was statistically confirmed in Table 4.2—in the probably of marital dissolution for couples at first parity and childless



couples. Moreover, the figure visually reveals a drastic difference in the probability of marital dissolution for those at first parity compared to those at higher parity. Among the 2641 couples at first parity, 60 experience marital dissolution. It is only these couples who exhibit a statistically different probability of marital dissolution depending on child sex composition. Specifically, the probability of marital dissolution among couples at parity one is lower for couples with a daughter, compared to couples with a son. Within second parity, couples with one son and one daughter have a higher probability of marital dissolution than couples with only sons or only daughters, but these differences are not significant. Couples at third or higher parities also do not experience a significantly different probability of marital dissolution across sex compositions. Together, results from Figure 4.1 suggest that only couples at first parity experience a significantly different probability of marital dissolution depending on the sex composition of their children; at higher parities, the sex composition of children does not exert important influences on marital dissolution.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the influences of marital fertility on marital dissolution in a setting where marital dissolution has historically been very rare, and where children are greatly valued by their parents. I find that, not unlike settings where divorce is more common and young children provide less economic benefit to parents, having children, having more children (higher parity), and having younger children all suppress the risk of marital dissolution. Parity has an especially strong influence, which is apparent even in accounting for age or sex composition. Moreover, seemingly unique to this setting, results revealed that having a daughter reduces the odds of marital dissolution, but only

for couples with one child. Thus, although the overall effect of children seems to be consistent in this South Asian setting with effects in Western settings, particular characteristics of children may provide unique motivations for parents to seek the dissolution of their marriages.

Childless couples face greater odds of marital dissolution compared to couples with children. However, having only one child was not found to be protective against dissolution, relative to childless marriages. It could be that having only one child does not significantly increase couples' perception of the value of their marriage compared to having no children. In the present day, the majority of people state that two children is the ideal family size (Jennings and Barber 2013), and the ideal family size was greater in the past (during the time that many of the women in the sample were bearing children).<sup>27</sup> With the prevalence of this two-child ideal family size, it may be that couples place value on children only after they have reached this ideal number. Consistent with this explanation, upon reaching parity one the odds of marital dissolution decreases with subsequent births.

Though the finding that additional children can suppress marital dissolution is not unique to this setting, children may have a particularly important influence on marital outcomes in South Asia, where they are relied on heavily for economic support in both young ages and in their adulthood (Cain 1977; Niraula 1995; Watt et al. 2013). In addition to the value of children for farm labor and for old age support, the perceived detrimental effects of divorce on children may prevent parents from seeking dissolution as readily as childless couples. However, after couples have reached parity three, there

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<sup>27</sup> Comparing responses to the 2008 CVFS survey and the 1996 CVFS survey, respondents' average preferred family size dropped from 2.86 to 2.32 children.

appears to be little gain for marital longevity with additional children. Evidence suggests that marital stability may only increase up to third parity in the United States, as well, despite the lower fertility rates (Santelli and Melnikas 2010) and different value placed on children (Heaton 1990).

Also similar to findings in the United States, I found evidence that younger children suppress dissolution relative to older children in Nepal and children's age influences marital dissolution independent of parity (Waite and Lillard 1991). Furthermore, the age of couples' youngest child interacts with parity to influence couples' rate of marital dissolution. However, the within-parity differences in age effects only hold for couples with one or two children. At parities three and higher, couples no longer experience more strongly suppressed odds of marital dissolution when the youngest child is younger, compared to older.

Perhaps the most compelling finding pertains to children's sex composition. More than two decades ago, Morgan, Condran, and Lye (1988) published an important paper revealing that sons can have a suppressing influence on parents' marital dissolution compared to daughters. Since then, further research has confirmed this finding in other countries—both Western and Asian (Bose and South 2003; Heaton and Albrecht 1991; Katzev, Warner, and Acock 1994). Results from this Nepalese setting, however, reveal the somewhat conflicting result that having a daughter can reduce parents' odds of marital dissolution at first parity. In other words, when couples have one child, they have decreased odds of dissolution if that child is a daughter, rather than a son.

Morgan et al. (1988) suggest that sons may have a greater suppressing effect on marital dissolution than daughters because fathers are more invested in childrearing when

they have sons. In Nepal, daughters have less value for their parents than sons because a son is needed for the proper performance of death rituals and for continuation of the family line (Bose and South 2003; Niraula and Morgan 1995). We might then expect that marriages involving daughters would be more likely to dissolve than marriages involving sons. But, instead, the negative influence of having a daughter at parity one may be related to the relative economic disadvantage faced by females in this setting.

In Nepal, where women have historically been restricted from owning land or inheriting from their parents, and where female employment opportunities are limited, women are dependent on their male relatives for economic security. In early life, they depend primarily on their fathers. Once they marry, their dependence becomes refocused on their husband (Gilbert 1992). A son can offer women further economic security, but a daughter does not offer the same benefit for their mothers. A mother might perceive that her son can offer economic security, independent of the security she receives from her husband. Thus, relative to couples with a son, couples with a daughter may be less likely to dissolve because the wife perceives worse prospects for economic security outside of marriage.<sup>28</sup> More investigation into this daughter influence would be useful and may lead to the construction of new theories about the importance of children's sex composition for marital processes in non-Western settings.

Similar to the interacting effect of age, the negative influence of daughters disappears at higher parities. This may be because parents perceive the costs of

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<sup>28</sup> Records from the Chitwan District Court reveal that wives have filed the overwhelming majority of divorce requests since these data began to be collected in 1965. This is likely due to both (1) the protection that laws provide for wives, making it relatively more difficult for husbands to file for divorce than for wives to do so (Manziona 2001) and (2) the option that husbands have of polygamy as an alternative to divorce.

dissolution to be too high at higher parities, regardless of their children's age or sex composition. The concern for the well-being of each child may accumulate, so that the costs of dissolution for a marriage involving multiple children begin to outweigh any influence of their age and sex characteristics.

Although this study offers important insight into the relationship between fertility and marital dissolution, limitations exist. For example, it is possible that happier couples, who are more prone to have successful marriages, are selected into parenthood (Lawrence, Cobb, Rothman, Rothman, and Bradbury 2008; Lillard and Waite 1993). If we were able to account for marital happiness prior to first birth, this might explain some of the suppressing influence of children. Additionally, the retrospective nature of the data used in these analyses do not necessarily represent the current causes of marital dissolution in contemporary Nepal, as the Nepalese family is rapidly changing (Axinn and Yabiku 2001). Furthermore, because the average marital duration at dissolution is nearly 10 years, it requires a relatively older marital cohort to allow for observation of marital dissolution events. Replications of these analyses with more contemporary data and younger cohorts of respondents would be useful. Also important, the uncommon occurrence of marital dissolution among this analytic sample brings into question the ability to generalize these results. The 211 couples who experience dissolution may be unique in some unobserved way, and so these results should be generalized even to similar settings with caution.

Overall, these results point toward important implications for future marital trends. Fertility rates have drastically fallen in Nepal over the last several decades and are likely to continue to fall (Thornton et al. 2012). As family sizes decrease, more couples

will face lower barriers to marital dissolution and the prevalence of marital dissolution may grow. Yet, with fewer children to rely on for emotional and economic security after dissolution, the well-being of men and women who experience dissolution may be at greater risk. As fertility falls and divorce and separation become more common, institutional support for families facing the repercussions of dissolution will become even more important. Women, especially, may benefit from increased opportunities for economic security that reduce their dependence on male relatives. While fertility trends and marital dissolution trends are independently important for policy change, the two trends combined raise the priority for policies that protect individuals from the potential detriments of family change.

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**Table 4.1: Descriptive Statistics**

	Full Sample (N=2818)		Sample with Children (N=2661)		Sample: Couples at Parity 1 (N=2641)		Sample: Couples at Parity 2 (N=2341)		Sample: Couples at Parity 3 (N=1503)	
	First Obs.	Last Obs.	First Obs.	Last Obs.	First Obs.	Last Obs.	First Obs.	Last Obs.	First Obs.	Last Obs.
Marital Dissolution (proportion)		0.074		0.050		0.023		0.014		0.026
<b>Fertility Experiences</b>										
Couple has no children	0.97	0.06								
Has one child	0.02	0.11								
Has two children	0.0004	0.30								
Has three children	0.00	0.20								
Has four children	0.00	0.13								
Has at least five children	0.00	0.20								
Age of youngest (continuous)			0.00	10.39						
Youngest under age 10			1.00	0.51						
<b>Parity 1</b>										
Son	0.02	0.05								
Daughter	0.01	0.06								
<b>Parity 2</b>										
Two sons	0.00	0.04								
One son, one daughter	0.00	0.17								
Two daughters	0.0004	0.09								
<b>Parity 3 or higher</b>										
Three or more sons	0.00	0.20								
Mixed sex	0.00	0.30								
No sons	0.00	0.03								
Has at least one son					0.50		0.75		0.89	
<b>Characteristics of the marriage</b>										
Wife's age at marriage	17.37		17.32		17.32		16.92		16.15	
Wife had some spouse choice	0.34		0.34		0.34		0.32		0.26	
Marital duration	1.00	20.09 <sup>a</sup>	3.74	20.75 <sup>b</sup>	3.73	6.08 <sup>c</sup>	6.53	10.89 <sup>d</sup>	9.58	26.22 <sup>e</sup>
<b>Wife's nonfamily experiences</b>										
Accumulated school enrollment at marriage	1.37 <sup>f</sup>		1.38 <sup>g</sup>		1.38 <sup>h</sup>		1.24 <sup>i</sup>		0.77 <sup>j</sup>	
Ever worked for wages	0.29	0.48	0.36	0.48	0.36	0.38	0.37	0.41	0.40	0.51
<b>Demographics</b>										
Brahmin/Chettri	0.51		0.52		0.52		0.52		0.50	
Not of Brahmin/Chettri ethnicity	0.49		0.48		0.48		0.48		0.50	
Dalit	0.11		0.11							
Hill Janajati	0.18		0.18							
Terai Janajati	0.20		0.19							
Cohort born 1938-1952	0.13		0.13		0.13		0.14		0.20	
Cohort born 1953-1967	0.28		0.28		0.28		0.30		0.40	
Cohort born 1968-1982	0.59		0.59		0.59		0.56		0.40	

<sup>a</sup> Standard deviation=10.69; minimum value=1, maximum value=46

<sup>b</sup> Standard deviation=10.39; minimum value=2, maximum value=46

<sup>c</sup> Standard deviation=3.93; minimum value=1, maximum value=37

<sup>d</sup> Standard deviation=5.91; minimum value=2, maximum value=40

<sup>e</sup> Standard deviation=9.02; minimum value=4, maximum value=46

<sup>f, g, h</sup> Standard deviation=1.44; minimum value=0, maximum value=4

<sup>i</sup> Standard deviation=1.38; minimum value=0, maximum value=4

<sup>j</sup> Standard deviation=1.13; minimum value=0, maximum value=4

**Table 4.2: Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression for Childlessness and Parity Influencing Marital Dissolution**

	Model 1	Model 2
<b><i>Fertility Experiences</i></b>		
Couple has no children	2.42*** (4.28)	
Ref: Has no children		
Has one child		0.70 (-1.55)
Has two children		0.28*** (-4.28)
Has three children		0.11*** (-5.08)
Has four children		0.09*** (-4.65)
Has at least five children		0.09*** (-5.08)
<b><i>Characteristics of the marriage</i></b>		
Wife's age at marriage	0.94* (-2.25)	0.95+ (-1.81)
Wife had some spouse choice	0.69+ (-1.75)	0.68+ (-1.68)
Length of marriage	0.95*** (-4.36)	1.00 (0.01)
<b><i>Wife's nonfamily experiences</i></b>		
Accumulated school enrollment at marriage	1.11 (1.09)	1.06 (0.59)
Ever worked for wages	2.03*** (4.02)	2.08*** (3.79)
<b><i>Demographics</i></b>		
Ethnicity (Ref: Brahmin/Chettri)		
Dalit	2.08** (2.94)	2.16** (2.96)
Hill Indigenous	1.75* (2.24)	1.86* (2.35)
Terai Indigenous	1.48 (1.60)	1.59+ (1.79)
Birth cohort (ref: born 1938-1952)		
Cohort born 1982-1968	0.60* (-1.95)	0.62 (-1.62)
Cohort born 1953-1967	0.78 (-1.22)	0.81 (-0.96)
Total person-years	56618	56618
Total persons	2818	2818
Total persons experiencing marital dissolution	211	211

Two-tailed +p<.10 \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001

Results presented as odds ratios. T-ratios are indicated in parentheses.



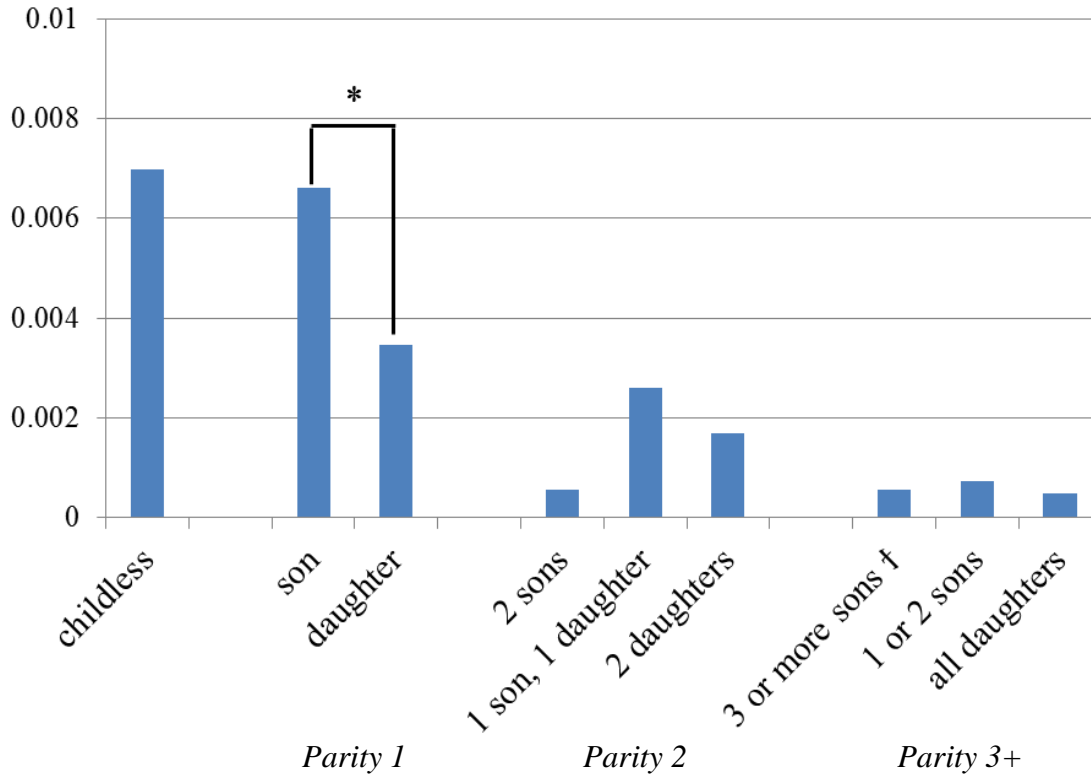
**Table 4.3: Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression for Age Characteristics of Youngest Child Influencing Marital Dissolution, Sample of Couples with at Least One Child**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Fertility Characteristics</i>				
Youngest Child's Age (continuous)	1.12** (2.66)			
Youngest Child is Under Age 3		0.39** (-2.95)	0.48* (-2.26)	
Ref: Has One Child				
Has Two Children			0.44** (-2.57)	
Has Three or More Children			0.20*** (-4.08)	
Ref: Has One Child Age 3 or older				
Has One Child with Youngest Under Age 3				0.27*** (-4.01)
Has Two Children with Youngest Age 3 or older				0.25*** (-3.79)
Has Two Children with Youngest Under Age 3				0.66 (-0.96)
Has Three Children with Youngest Age 3 or older				0.09*** (-5.64)
Has Three Children with Youngest Under Age 3				1.06 (0.15)
<i>Characteristics of the marriage</i>				
Wife's age at marriage	0.92+ (-1.86)	0.92+ (1.83)	0.93+ (-1.68)	0.94+ (-1.87)
Wife had some spouse choice	0.84 (-0.55)	0.86 (-0.51)	0.83 (-0.64)	0.78 (-1.02)
Length of marriage	0.87*** (-4.51)	0.89*** (-5.13)	0.95* (-2.00)	0.96+ (-2.07)
<i>Wife's nonfamily experiences</i>				
Accumulated school enrollment at marriage	1.17 (1.10)	1.17 (1.08)	1.12 (0.83)	1.11 (0.87)
Ever worked for wages	2.72*** (3.56)	2.69*** (3.57)	2.73*** (3.72)	2.77*** (4.58)
<i>Demographics</i>				
Ethnicity (Ref: Brahmin/Chettri)				
Not of Brahmin/Chettri ethnicity	1.56 (1.52)	1.54 (1.50)	1.56 (1.60)	1.48 (1.60)
Birth cohort (ref born 1938-1952)				
Cohort born 1982-1968	0.32** (-2.68)	0.31** (-2.74)	0.38* (-2.31)	0.43* (-2.43)
Cohort born 1953-1967	0.64 (-1.34)	0.67 (-1.21)	0.77 (-0.81)	0.85 (-0.62)
Total person-years	47926	47926	47926	47926
Total persons	2661	2661	2661	2661
Total persons experiencing marital dissolution	132	132	132	132

Two-tailed +p<.10 \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001

Results presented as odds ratios. T-ratios are indicated in parentheses.

**Figure 4.1: Predicted Probabilities of Couples' Marital Dissolution for Different Sex Compositions**



\* Indicates statistically significant difference between sex composition categories within parity at  $p < .10$ .

† At parity 3 and higher there are few couples who have only sons. Because of the small cell size for couples with only sons, I use this measure of 3 or more sons for couples with 3 or more children, total.

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusion

In these three papers I have addressed three different themes, each of which expands frameworks for studying marital dissolution. The first theme focuses on applying our knowledge about the causes of marital dissolution in settings where divorce is prevalent to a setting in which divorce is not yet common, and where marital and family life have some different characteristics. The second theme focuses on the role of marital discord, and how discord—and particularly each spouse’s perceptions of discord—operate to influence marital outcomes. The third and final theme focuses on the value of children, and how their presence and particular characteristics can influence couples’ experience with marital dissolution.

These papers are some of the first empirical investigations into the predictors of marital dissolution in South Asia (Dommaraju and Jones 2011). Although marital dissolution in this setting has only recently begun to increase, there is great value in understanding the process of dissolution. In fact, Goode (1993) has suggested that “divorce processes are worth analyzing even if divorce is uncommon” (p. 319), as the analyses will reveal not only the contributors to marital breakdown, but also the contributors to marital stability. Furthermore, the absence of marital dissolution among a population is not necessarily indicative of happier marriages. Instead, there may be economic, social, and legal obstacles that prevent marital dissolution from being a viable option for many individuals who are in unhappy marriages. Thus, it is important to understand both the predictors and the factors that do not predict marital dissolution in settings like Nepal.

I have approached this investigation from a theoretical standpoint that considers sociological, economic, and social psychological frameworks. From a sociological angle, the theoretical framework and empirical investigation—to the extent possible—takes into account the structural forces that may allow (or disallow) for couples to opt to dissolve their marriages. I take consider marital and individual experiences that are shaped by structural forces, as well. Furthermore, I use an economic framework in considering the costs and benefits of staying in a marriage versus dissolving the marriage. Additionally, the consideration of couple interactions and how those interactions can lead to marital dissolution events offers a social psychological perspective of marital dissolution. Applying these different frameworks advances understanding about the wide range of factors that can influence marital dissolution, and the mechanisms through which they can influence marital dissolution.

The application of these theoretical frameworks in the three preceding chapters reveal the importance of taking setting-specific factors into account. Though these three papers have revealed that marital dissolution can have many common causes across settings, there are also some unique predictors of dissolution that require a setting-specific framework to uncover and understand. Future research on marriage and its dissolution across settings and cultures will benefit from the consideration of such setting-specific frameworks.

These findings regarding marital dissolution in Nepal have significance for research on marital dissolution in settings like the United States. The two types of settings exhibit drastic differences in family and marital life. Yet I find that the predictors of marital dissolution are similar in the two settings. This suggests that many of the

mechanisms that have been theorized to be at play in settings like the United States are so important and influential that they operate to influence marital dissolution in a certain way, no matter the setting. In some cases, this may indicate a need to reconceptualize the mechanisms at play. Returning to the example of age at marriage, I find that those who marry at older ages have reduced odds of marital dissolution in Nepal, just as in the United States. Theories that are based on Western settings suggest that people who marry later have had more time to date and narrow down the appropriate spouse for a successful marriage (Becker et al. 1977). But these mechanisms are unlikely to be operating in rural Nepal, where couples do not typically date prior to marriage. Instead, there appears to be a common thread between the United States and Nepal that has been unaccounted for in research in Western settings. In other cases, the common influences across settings may indicate the universality of mechanisms at play. For example, I find that wives' experience of ever having worked for pay has a similarly positive influence on the odds of marital dissolution in Nepal as in the United States (Ruggles 1997; South 2001; South and Spitze 1986). This suggests that it may be the ability for a woman to be compensated for her labor that decreases the barriers to marital dissolution, regardless of the nature of the work being done. Understanding whether these kinds of mechanisms are universal advances our understanding of marital dissolution in the United States.

The investigations in these three papers uncover some important pieces of the process that leads to marital dissolution in Nepal. In the first paper (Chapter 2), I find that the common predictors of marital dissolution in Western contexts—such as age at marriage, marital duration, wives' experience in paid work, and marital fertility—are significant forces influencing marital dissolution in rural Nepal, as well. In fact, despite

the younger age at marriage among the Nepalese population and the distinct nature of women's work, these forces operate in a similar way as in the United States. This suggests that the common predictors of marital dissolution in Western settings may be relevant across settings, and the influences of these predictors in the United States are not simply due to unobserved characteristics that are unique to the local setting.

The second paper (Chapter 3) reveals strong influences of marital discord on marital dissolution. This is especially significant in a setting where wives have historically been in a position of subordination to their husbands. My results reveal that each spouse's perception of marital discord is a strong predictor of dissolution, and that wives' perceptions of discord have an influence on marital dissolution that is independent of the influence of their husbands' perceptions. These findings suggest that the importance of spousal dynamics in marital outcomes is prevalent across settings. The results also point toward the importance of considering both spouses' experiences and perceptions in studies of these marital and family outcomes.

Finally, the third paper (Chapter 4) reveals that the presence of children suppresses marital dissolution, additional children can increase protection against dissolution, and younger children are more protective than older children. The paper also reveals a finding that is new to this area of research: daughters can reduce their parents' odds of dissolution. But this differential effect of having a daughter compared to having a son is limited to parents at parity one, before bearing additional children who can alter the costs and benefits of marital dissolution. I offer a cautious interpretation of this finding: perhaps couples, and especially wives, avoid marital dissolution to a greater extent when

they have a daughter than when they have a son, as daughters cannot provide them with economic security outside of marriage.

Moreover, the effects revealed in each of the three papers are largely independent. In Chapter 2, age at marriage, marital duration, wife's work experience, and fertility were revealed to have important influences on dissolution. We learned that number of children a couple has explains such a significant amount of their odds of marital dissolution that accounting for fertility renders the influences of age at marriage and marital duration no longer significant. Later, in Chapter 4, we learned that particular characteristics of couples' fertility (i.e., parity and sex composition) have independently significant influences on marital dissolution, again holding these other important characteristics constant. Thus, marital characteristics and wife's work experience have robust influences on marital dissolution, with fertility and work have particularly robust and important influences.

In Chapter 3, I account for these robust predictors of marital dissolution in the prospective analysis of the influence of marital discord on marital dissolution. The nature of the data changes—the analysis relies on a younger sample of wives, and the prospective registry data allow me to account for husbands' characteristics in addition to wives'—and the influences of those robust (in the retrospective analyses) predictors change. Wife's age at marriage does not exert a significant influence on couples' odds of marital dissolution among this sample, but in some of the models (in Chapter 3) husband's age at marriage exerts a *positive* influence. Comparing this with the negative influence of wife's age at marriage that was found in Chapter 2, this suggests a need to consider gender-specific mechanisms. Furthermore, husband's education exerts a

negative influence on the odds of marital dissolution for this prospective sample, while the influence of neither spouse's work experience nor couples' marital duration is significant. Marital fertility, however, remains a robust suppressor of marital dissolution. In addition to the existence of gender-specific mechanisms, these different influences identified in Chapter 3 suggest that the processes leading to marital dissolution may be changing, so that the influences on the odds of marital dissolution are different for this younger cohort than they were in the past, among earlier-born cohorts.

Also important, Chapter 3 reveals that the influence of marital discord is independent of the potentially exogenous influences of those marital characteristics and spousal experiences. Regardless of either spouse's age at marriage, work experience, education, or their marital duration, spouses' perceptions of discord is an important force in their odds of marital dissolution. Hence, marital discord is an important force influencing marital outcomes in the Nepalese setting.

Overall, the findings in these three papers have some implications for policy. First, the empowerment of women in settings like Nepal, and especially in rural areas, remains important for promoting their well-being. Of course, recognition of the need for initiatives that promote women's empowerment is not new (e.g., United Nations 1994). This goal of female empowerment remains a priority in allowing women the means to support their own livelihoods in the face of rising divorce prevalence. As women become more empowered through greater access to land ownership, inheritance, and salaried employment, they will be less dependent on husbands and more able to choose their own life path. In combination with these routes to empowerment, it will be important to make headway in reducing the stigma attached to divorce and marital dissolution, more



broadly. Policies geared toward reducing these barriers to marital dissolution may allow spouses more freedom to leave poor quality marriages and live happier lives.

The important findings from these three papers point to some future directions in data collection, both in settings like Nepal and in settings like the United States. The importance of longitudinal data cannot be overstated. Observing couples from the very start of their marriage (or, in the United States, their cohabitation) can provide useful and necessary information for studying the causes and consequences of dissolution. The first and third papers of this dissertation employed data that followed couples during their entire period of exposure to the risk of dissolution, but these data were collected retrospectively. Following couples prospectively, starting from the time at which they marry, is ideal as this type of data collection can eliminate possible recall bias and biases introduced by left censoring, and can also provide useful information about the marital relationship and the marital home prior to dissolution. Similarly, in future studies of spousal dynamics, it will be important to collect measures at multiple points during the period of observation. Given the strong influence, revealed in Chapter 3, of marital discord as collected at one point in time on marital dissolution events over the subsequent 13 years, this type of data collection is likely to be fruitful.

The results of the third paper leave some questions about the nature of parent-child relationships in South Asia, and how those relationships are affected by children's sex. Collecting time use data from parents in such settings would likely reveal some interesting answers to these questions. In particular, measures of mother and father involvement with their sons and daughters, and how that time with children is spent, would be useful. These kinds of data are severely lacking in such settings, leaving us with

little knowledge about whether fathers participate in childcare, to what extent, and how their care might differ depending on the sex of the child. Given that fathers are evidenced to increase their involvement when they have sons in the United States (Harris and Morgan 1991; Morgan et al. 1988), these kinds of data in South Asia are likely to provide useful insights into whether father involvement plays a role in the influence of child sex on marital dissolution.

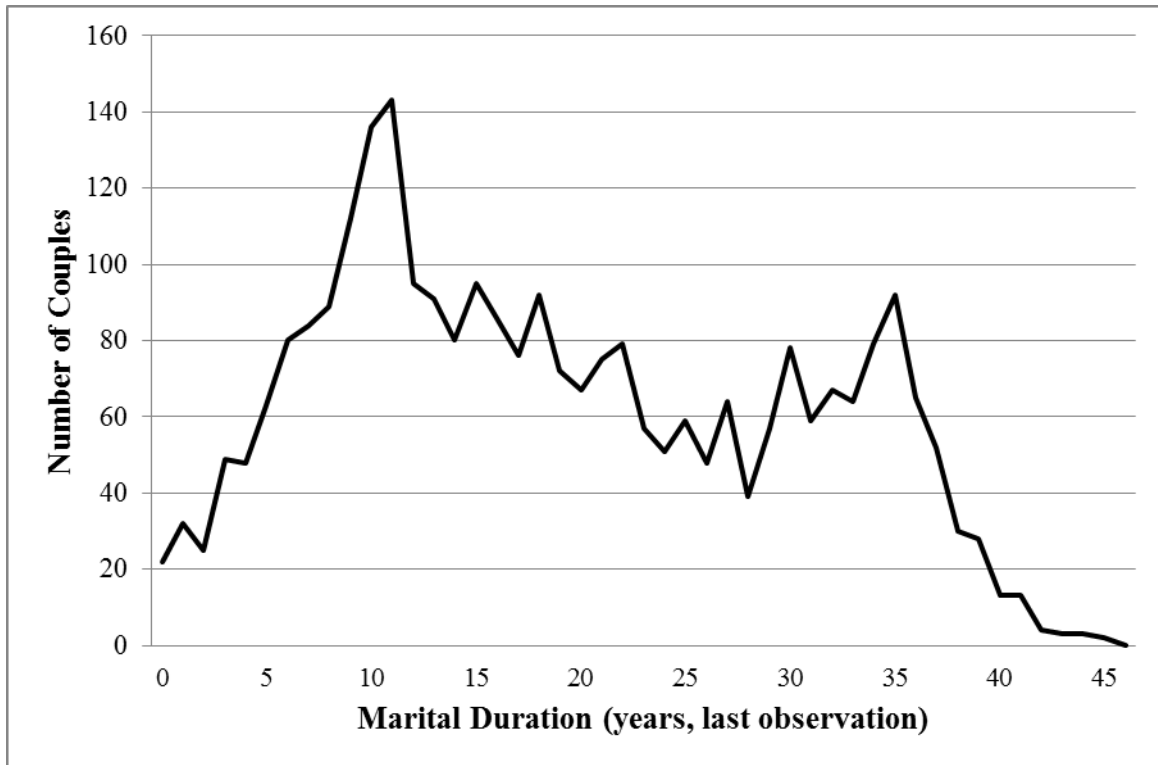
Equally as important in moving this line of research forward is the advancement of our understanding about the consequences of marital dissolution for families in South Asia and in other understudied settings. Women and children may face particularly dire circumstances after marital dissolution, given the limited access that women in this kind of setting have to be economically independent. First, it will be important to learn about what happens to women and their children after separation or divorce from their first husband. As we work to increase women's well-being, it will be important to uncover the barriers to remarriage and the circumstances, or quality, of remarriages. In order to best study these consequences of dissolution, the collection of prospective data that provides information before, during, and after marriage (for marriages that dissolve) is a high priority. Only with these kinds of data will researchers be able to begin to infer causal links between dissolution and its consequences.

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## APPENDIX

**Figure A.1: Frequency Distribution of Marital Duration, Last Observation**



*Data includes all couples from samples in Chapters 2 and 4, N=2818*

**Table A.1: Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression for Gender and Parity Composition Influencing Marital Dissolution**

	Model 1
<b>Reference: No children</b>	
<i>Parity 1</i>	
Son	0.95 (-0.21)
Daughter	0.49* (-2.27)
<i>Parity 2</i>	
Two sons	0.08* (-2.51)
One son, one daughter	0.37** (-3.02)
Two daughters	0.24*** (-3.12)
<i>Parity 3 or higher</i>	
Three or more sons	0.08*** (-5.31)
Mixed sex	0.11*** (-5.90)
No sons	0.07** (-2.59)
<b>Characteristics of the marriage</b>	
Wife's age at marriage	0.95+ (-1.88)
Wife had some spouse choice	0.67+ (-1.72)
Length of marriage	1.00 (0.14)
<b>Wife's nonfamily experiences</b>	
Accumulated school enrollment at marriage	1.08 (0.73)
Ever worked for wages	2.15*** (4.03)
<b>Demographics</b>	
Ethnicity (Ref: Brahmin/Chettri)	
Not of Brahmin/Chettri ethnicity	1.84** (3.03)
Birth cohort (ref born 1938-1952)	
Cohort born 1982-1968	0.60+ (-1.78)
Cohort born 1953-1967	0.79 (-1.05)
Total person-years	56618
Total persons	2818
Total persons experiencing marital dissolution	211

Two-tailed +p<.10 \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001

Results presented as odds ratios. T-ratios are indicated in parentheses.

**Table A.2: Divorces Cases Registered in the District Court of Chitwan, 1965-2004**

Year	Cases Registered by		Total Cases	Percent Wife-Initiated
	Husband	Wife		
1965	1	1	2	50.00
1966	2	0	2	0.00
1967	0	0	0	
1968	0	0	0	
1969	1	2	3	66.67
1970	0	2	2	100.00
1971	0	1	1	100.00
1972	0	0	0	
1973	2	1	3	33.33
1974	0	4	4	100.00
1975	0	1	1	100.00
1976	1	0	1	0.00
1977	0	0	0	
1978	0	0	0	
1979	0	1	1	100.00
1980	0	0	0	
1981	0	1	1	100.00
1982	0	0	0	
1983	0	2	2	100.00
1984	3	2	5	40.00
1985	0	2	2	100.00
1986	2	5	7	71.43
1987	3	7	10	70.00
1988	0	6	6	100.00
1989	0	12	12	100.00
1990	1	16	17	94.12
1991	3	16	19	84.21
1992	2	9	11	81.82
1993	4	17	21	80.95
1994	2	22	24	91.67
1995	2	21	23	91.30
1996	2	30	32	93.75
1997	2	34	36	94.44
1998	0	27	27	100.00
1999	1	38	39	97.44
2000	2	49	51	96.08
2001	0	39	39	100.00
2002	0	58	58	100.00
2003	1	71	72	98.61
2004	0	60	60	100.00
	<b>37</b>	<b>557</b>	<b>594</b>	<b>93.77</b>