A high level of marital disruption remains a major factor of American family experience. This analysis takes advantage of the broad coverage of family-related issues by the National Survey of Families and Households (1987-1988) to explore both methodological and substantive issues concerning marital dissolution in the United States. The analysis finds that marital disruptions are seriously underreported by males, making the analysis of male marital histories problematic. Also, the potential impact of reconciliations on the estimates of recent marital disruption based on separation is explored; no upward bias is likely to result from the inclusion of separations that may subsequently reconcile. The impact of a wide variety of factors on the risk of marital disruption is examined using proportional hazard techniques. Among them are included parental background factors, respondent's characteristics at the time of marriage, differences in spouses' characteristics, and joint activity statuses of marital partners in the first year of marriage. The risk of marital disruption is highest among women with young age at marriage, low education, a cohabitation history, and those whose spouse has been married previously. Parental family disruption affects marital stability primarily through age at marriage and cohabitation. Religious and educational heterogeneity and male unemployment reduce marital stability.

The Impact of Family Background and Early Marital Factors on Marital Disruption

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Although the United States divorce rate has plateaued over the last decade, the level of disruption is very high and remains a major factor in American family experience. Well over half, and perhaps two thirds, of recent marriages are likely to end in separation or divorce (Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989). The exact level of marital instability is less important than the simple fact that it is a majority experience among both children and adults. Marriage has become a most uncertain lifetime guarantee for either parental stability for children or economic security for women and children. It seems most likely that a general awareness of this insecurity

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is feeding back on the institution itself, both in terms of an increased tentativeness toward marriage and, perhaps, a reduced willingness to make long-term investments in marriage relationships.

The present analysis takes advantage of the marital histories and several unique aspects of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to explore both methodological and substantive issues concerning marital dissolution in the United States. We first explore two methodological issues: the relative quality of marital history data from males, and the implications of marital reconciliation for the usual practice of measuring the timing of disruption by the date of separation. We then examine in sequence the effects on marital disruption of parental background factors, respondent's characteristics at first marriage, differences in couple characteristics, and the joint activity statuses of both spouses in the first year of marriage. The broad coverage of family issues by the NSFH allows us to integrate in one analysis a wide array of factors, replicate previous findings, and explore additional correlates of separation, providing further insights into the process of marital dissolution.

THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS

The NSFH, conducted during 1987 and 1988, is a national sample survey that covers a wide variety of issues on American family life. It involved interviews with 13,017 respondents, including a main cross-section sample of 9,643 persons aged 19 and over plus an oversample of minorities and households containing single-parent families, stepfamilies, recently married couples, and cohabiting couples. In each household, a randomly selected adult was interviewed. In addition, a shorter, self-administered questionnaire was administered to the spouse or cohabiting partner of the primary respondent. Interviews averaged about 100 minutes, although interview length varied considerably with the complexity of the respondent's family history. Topics covered included detailed household composition, family background, adult family transitions, couple interactions, parent-child interactions, education and work, economic and psychological well-being, and family attitudes (detailed description provided in Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988).

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

RELATIVE QUALITY OF MARITAL HISTORIES FROM MALE RESPONDENTS

Most work on marital stability has been based on marital histories provided by females. In some cases, data have been collected only from females (as in analyses based on fertility surveys; Bumpass & Sweet, 1972), and in others the data for men have been found to be of lower quality (Cherlin & McCarthy, 1984). The lower quality of male marital histories in the Current Population Survey (CPS) has been attributed to the fact that the level of proxy reporting is much higher for males than for females.

We can evaluate this issue without the CPS complication of proxy reports because the NSFH interviewed both males and females. Nonetheless, we come to the regrettable conclusion that, in our data as well, marital histories from males are not of sufficient quality to merit their use in analyses of marital stability. We have explored a good deal of detailed modeling, but the case is made clearly enough with two examples. The first concerns the level of marital disruption reported for marriage cohorts.

Table 1 presents life-table estimates of the proportion of marriages disrupted by 5 years for first marriages, 1975 to 1979 and 1980 to 1984.¹ First marriages to males and females in a given period need not have identical disruption levels because some first marriages are to remarried spouses. Consequently, Table 1 is limited to marriages in which neither partner had been married before. This defines a universe for which male and female experience should be identical.

The results are most easily discussed separately by race. Looking at the second panel of this table, for non-Hispanic Whites, we find very similar proportions of males and females disrupted by 5 years for the first cohort, but markedly different proportions for marriages 1980-84. In the more recent cohort, the proportion disrupted by 5 years is more than a third lower in the male than in the female histories. One likely explanation of this difference may be the difficulty in interviewing currently separated or divorced males. Although it is seldom noted, the response rate is consistently lower among males than among females in sample surveys. Previously married males may be harder to find because of life-style patterns, and they may be less willing to participate because of unmet child-support obligations. Further, it is possible that previously married males who are interviewed are more likely than are females to not report

TABLE 1
Life Table Estimates of Disruption Within 5 Years of First Marriage, by Sex: First Marriages for Both Spouses 1975-84, Respondents Whose Spouse Also Responded, 1987-88 NSFH

<i>Marriage Cohort</i>	<i>Separated or Divorced by 5 Years</i>		<i>N</i>	
	<i>Males (%)</i>	<i>Females (%)</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>
Total				
1975-79	21	24	390	527
1980-84	16	26	461	539
1975-84	19	25	851	1066
Non-Hispanic Whites				
1975-79	22	25	285	400
1980-84	16	25	367	414
1975-84	19	25	652	814
Blacks				
1975-79	16	24	47	69
1980-84	24	46	56	77
1975-84	21	35	103	146

their first marriage (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987), in part because, unlike women, they seldom have children from the previous marriage living with them. The selective nonresponse hypothesis seems more likely, given that the male data seem much better for the earlier cohort, more of whom have had time to remarry.

The data for Black males appear much worse than those for Black females irrespective of duration since marriage: The reported level of disruption is only half as high in the marriage histories of Black male respondents compared to the data from Black females. Clearly, we are missing a great deal of the marital disruption experienced by first marriage cohorts in the reports from Black males. The well-known problem of locating and interviewing unattached Black males in their 20s and 30s would be consistent with our interpretation of the sex difference in terms of response rates.²

Comparison of the non-Hispanic White and Black female estimates by cohort suggests that disruptions of earlier Black marriages may be substantially underreported even among Black females. Although the proportion disrupted by 5 years is much higher among Black women for the 1980 to 1984 marriage cohort, there is little racial difference for the 1975 to

1979 cohort. This observation is based on a relatively small number of cases, but it gains some support when we reexamine the data from the CPS reported earlier (Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989). In those data, there is a large racial differential for the 1975 to 1979 cohort, but much less of a difference for the 1970 to 1974 cohort. Hence it is possible that in the CPS as well there is a deterioration with time since marriage in the quality of the marital disruption data for Black women. This would mean that some of what we interpreted as a greater increase among Blacks since 1970 may simply reflect better data quality for events closer to interview date, and it hence raises a warning concerning such within-data estimation of differences in trends.

Clearly, male histories cannot be used to examine trends or levels of marital disruption. Nonetheless, if the missing information were relatively random with respect to independent variables, one might be able to proceed with multivariate analysis. Our explorations suggest that this is not the case. For example, the effect of first husband's education is large and highly significant based on marriage histories from females, whereas it has only a weak and nonsignificant effect in analyses using male marriage histories. Hence it appears that marital disruptions are most underrepresented among the least educated males. Consequently, we focus the remainder of this analysis on the data from female respondents.³

RECONCILIATION FOLLOWING SEPARATION

It is generally accepted that the date of separation is a better marker of marital disruption than is the date of divorce. It is clear that analyses based only on divorce can seriously misrepresent subgroup differences in marital disruption, because of differentials in the pace, and even in the probability, of divorce after separation (e.g., McCarthy, 1978; Sweet & Bumpass, 1974). On the other hand, the use of separation may upwardly bias the estimates of marital disruption to the extent that persons who are separated at the time of interview will subsequently reconcile. It is generally assumed that this bias should be small, but until now we have not had the data necessary to evaluate the extent of such reconciliations.

The NSFH included a sequence of questions about whether a separation because of marital discord had ever been followed by reconciliation. In cases where there was a reconciliation, we obtained the beginning date for the first such separation and how long it lasted. By combining this information with our other data on separations, both those followed by

divorce and those still separated, we can calculate both the extent and timing of reconciliation.

We find that spells of separation followed by reconciliation are extremely common, but that they are generally of very short duration. Because they are so short, it is not clear that more detailed examination is in order; but in any event, such analysis is beyond our current objectives. We note only the following:

1. Of persons who first separated 1970-1984, 40% reconciled at least once; 18% twice or more.
2. Almost all of these separations were of very short duration. Of those who separated and then reconciled, 45% did so within a month and 95% within a year.
3. Of those who separated and reconciled, about two fifths were still together at interview.

Hence we can be quite confident that if the year preceding the survey is excluded from the estimates of recent marital disruption levels, no bias is likely to result from ignoring the small proportion of current separations that will subsequently reconcile.

BACKGROUND FACTORS AND MARITAL DISRUPTION

Next we will examine the effects of a variety of sociodemographic factors whose association with marital disruption has been established by previous studies. Although it cannot be claimed that these correlates represent the entire causal chain underlying the process of marital dissolution, through them we can identify relevant characteristics that determine the variation in marital stability within the population.

The discussion will be organized into four major blocks of variables that depict different spheres potentially influential on marital stability:

1. Family background
 - race
 - mother's education
 - whether family received welfare
 - whether Catholic
 - whether family intact to age 16
2. Respondent characteristics at marriage
 - marriage cohort
 - age at marriage

TABLE 2
Effects on Marital Disruption of
Characteristics of Parental Family: First Marriages
1975-84, Female Non-Hispanic White Respondents, 1987-88 NSFH

	<i>Gross</i>		<i>Net^a</i>		<i>Percentage</i>
	<i>Effect</i>	<i>(β/se)</i>	<i>Effect</i>	<i>(β/se)</i>	
Mother's education (under 12 years)					
12 years	-20	(-1.6)	-8	(-0.6)	45.1
College	-31	(-2.1)	4	(0.2)	27.3
Family received welfare	31	(1.4)	-14	(-0.7)	8.6
Catholic	11	(0.8)	17	(1.1)	30.8
Parental family (intact to age 16)					
Mother never married	59	(1.6)	21	(0.6)	4.0
Separated/divorced	70	(3.4)	29	(1.6)	12.4
Widowed	-65	(-2.3)	-66	(-2.4)	5.5
<i>N</i> = 824					

a. Includes respondent characteristics reported in Table 3.

- education at marriage
- whether cohabited before marriage
- whether had premarital birth or pregnancy
- enrollment in school and employment in first year of marriage
- 3. Homogamy and heterogamy
 - age differences
 - education differences
 - religion differences
 - differences in whether parental family intact
 - whether husband previously married
- 4. Joint activity status during the first year of marriage
 - joint school enrollment
 - joint employment behavior
 - whether husband in armed forces

We use proportional hazard techniques to take into account both the truncation of experience by interview and the need for multivariate controls (Cox, 1972). Proportional hazard models combine the basics of life tables and regression analysis techniques and have become a standard method for analyzing marital disruption histories (e.g., Menken, Trussel, Stempel, & Babakol, 1981; Teachman, 1982). The effect parameters reported in Table 2 and following are the percentage change in risk associated with a given category compared to the omitted category; that is,

$(\exp[\text{Beta}] - 1) \times 100$. Two sets of effects are presented: those with the variable considered by itself, and those from a model including all of the other variables.

RACE/ETHNICITY

One of the largest differentials in marital disruption in the United States is determined by the higher rate of separation among Blacks (Cherlin, 1981). Indeed, the effects of factors affecting disruption differ sufficiently by race that it is preferable to run separate analyses for Blacks and Whites (Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989). Unfortunately, even with the double sample of minorities, there are only 208 Black females and 148 Hispanic females in the NSFH who married in the decade under consideration. This small number of minority cases precludes the performance of separate analyses.

However, when we ignore the interactions by race and include race/ethnicity in a model for the full sample, we find a net rate of marital disruption that is 58% higher among Blacks than among non-Hispanic Whites. This is almost identical to the 56% higher rate we obtained in a similar exercise with the June 1985 CPS. As in the CPS, we find no difference between Hispanic and non-Hispanic Whites, but again the small sample size precludes conclusive comparison tests. We have restricted the following analyses to non-Hispanic White women.

PARENTAL FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

Table 2 considers four characteristics of the respondent's parental family: her mother's education, whether the family received welfare while she was growing up, whether she was raised as Catholic, and whether she was in an intact family to age 16. Two sets of estimates are provided: (a) the effects of each variable without control for any other variables ("gross" effects) and (b) those for each variable after the other family characteristics and characteristics at marriage have been controlled to assess the independent contribution of each of these dimensions "net" of the others.

Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to experience marital disruption. The gross effects indicate approximately one-third lower rates among the daughters of college-educated mothers than among daughters of high school dropouts, and about one-third higher rates among women whose families received welfare while they were

growing up compared to those who did not. These effects are indirect, however, operating through the subsequent variables in the model, particularly age at marriage and educational attainment. After these variables are controlled, the net effects are small and insignificant.

Somewhat surprisingly, despite the strong position of the Catholic church on divorce, the risk of disruption is not lower among women who were raised as Catholics. Indeed, when other variables are controlled, the disruption risk is 17% higher among those who grew up as Catholics. We will see how this positive effect comes about when we examine the effects of religious intermarriage.

We are exploring the effects of parental family structure in greater detail in ongoing work, but our current results differ from earlier analyses (e.g., Glenn & Kramer, 1987; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988) in two respects. The first is that we have distinguished between women who never lived with their fathers and those who experienced a parental separation before the age of 16. The former were primarily births to unmarried mothers, although the latter obviously include out-of-wedlock births whose mothers later married the babies' fathers. This distinction turns out to make little difference for the risk of marital disruption when multivariate controls are applied, and this is informative to "stress" theories that would attribute the causal mechanism involved in the intergenerational transmission linkage of marital disruption to the experience of parent loss. Although the first group had no father role model, they did not experience the stress of severing emotional ties with their father.

The strong negative effect of parent loss through death is also informative. Both parent absence and the experience of parent loss are involved, and yet women who had a parent die while they were growing up are *less* likely to experience a marital disruption in adulthood.

Most of the effect of parental family disruption is mediated through the other variables in the full model, particularly the respondent's age at marriage, education, and, to a lesser extent, cohabitation experience.⁴ This suggests that the intergeneration linkage in family disruption is less associated with attitudes directly affecting either marital behavior or the acceptability of divorce as a solution than it is with demographic behaviors that in turn may affect these outcomes.

CHARACTERISTICS AT MARRIAGE

In Table 3 we consider a number of variables related to early marital circumstances. All these factors have been shown in the literature to play

TABLE 3
Effects on Marital Disruption of
Respondent's Characteristics: First Marriages 1975-84,
Female Non-Hispanic White Respondents, 1987-88 NSFH

	<i>Gross</i>		<i>Net^a</i>		<i>Percentage</i>
	<i>Effect</i>	<i>(β/se)</i>	<i>Effect</i>	<i>(β/se)</i>	
Married (1975-79)					
1980-84	-6	(-0.5)	-15	(-1.2)	45.0
Age at marriage (under 20)					
20-22	-33	(-2.8)	-15	(-1.0)	31.6
23-25	-45	(-3.4)	-27	(-1.6)	18.3
26-29	-69	(-4.0)	-49	(-2.1)	11.3
30+	-71	(-2.9)	-57	(-2.0)	5.4
Education at marriage (under 12 years)					
12 years	-37	(-2.7)	-62	(-3.6)	40.6
College 1-3	-61	(-4.5)	-62	(-3.6)	27.1
College 4+	-82	(-6.2)	-81	(-4.8)	23.3
Cohabited (did not)					
With spouse	33	(2.2)	50	(2.9)	33.0
With other/s	61	(2.2)	102	(3.2)	5.4
Premarital fertility (none)					
Premarital birth	86	(3.2)	14	(0.6)	6.4
Premarital conception	64	(3.1)	11	(0.6)	12.2
First year of marriage					
Enrolled in school	-8	(-0.5)	21	(1.2)	20.4
Worked					
Full-time	-24	(-2.0)	19	(1.2)	63.8
Part-time	11	(0.7)	36	(2.0)	23.6
Unemployed	12	(0.7)	16	(0.9)	13.4

N = 824

a. Includes parental family characteristics reported in Table 2.

a substantial role conditioning marital survival: (a) year of marriage (Morgan & Rindfuss, 1985; Preston & McDonald, 1979; Thornton & Rodgers, 1987), (b) age at marriage (Booth & Edwards, 1985; Teachman, 1983), (c) education (South & Spitze, 1986), (d) whether marriage was preceded by cohabitation (Booth & Johnson, 1988; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989), (e) whether there was a premarital birth or pregnancy (Furstenberg, 1976; Teachman, 1983), and (f) enrollment in school and employment in the first year of marriage (Cherlin, 1979).

Despite the decline in the crude divorce rate, our analyses of the June 1985 CPS found no decline in the rate of marital disruption when measures were more specific with regard to risk status. Similarly, with the NSFH data, the early 1980s are best described as a plateau rather than a decline in comparison to the late 1970s.

The strong positive relationship between age at marriage and marital stability is well established, and because our results are consistent with prior work, there is little need for further comment. Disruption rates are two thirds lower among women who married after the age of 25 than they are among those marrying as teenagers. Age at marriage has been a major intervening variable in the effects of many background variables, so it is worth noting that this intervening effect is likely to decline as teenage marriages become less common.⁵

With regard to education at marriage, we find a very strong effect that remains practically unaltered when other variables, including age at marriage, are controlled. Disruption rates are one third lower among women who had completed high school and four fifths lower among those who had completed college, compared with women with less than high school education at the time of marriage. In our earlier analysis of the June 1985 CPS, we used a measure of completed education, which allows for some causal ambiguity because of postmarital education (Bumpass & Call, 1989). These results corroborate that the level of educational attainment is a strong predictor of marital disruption, and suggest that this effect is larger when education is measured prior to marriage.

The higher rate of disruption for marriages preceded by cohabitation was documented in an earlier article (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989), based on bivariate results. We see in Table 3 that this effect of cohabitation is, if anything, increased by multivariate controls. Women who cohabited with their spouses before marriage have disruption rates that are 50% higher than those who did not.⁶

For women who had a cohabiting relationship with someone other than their first spouse, a category that involves less than 6% of the respondents, the risk of having their marriage disrupted is twice as high. Further work with the attitude variables and the planned follow-up survey may help elucidate this relationship, but the most compelling explanation seems to be one of selection (Booth & Johnson, 1988). That is, it seems far more likely that cohabitation signals preexisting differences in values and relational styles than that the experience of cohabitation itself reduces the likelihood of marital stability.

Although women with premarital births and pregnancies are much more likely to experience marital disruption than those without, there is no significant direct effect, net of variables such as education, age at marriage and cohabitation experience. We observed this finding with respect to premarital pregnancy in analyses done almost 20 years ago; now it seems to be the case also with respect to premarital births. The stigma associated with nonmarital childbearing has been greatly reduced, and additional strains introduced by child care early in marriage appear to be offset by the stabilizing influence that the presence of such children may have. Further, couples who choose to marry, given pregnancy or the presence of a child, may be selective of those more committed to their relationships. And this selection may well have increased over time, as a result of the weakened social pressure to marry that pregnant women and mothers are likely to experience.

The final panel in Table 3 reports four dichotomous measures of activities in the first year of marriage. Given the priority our society still gives to males as economic providers, one might expect a different effect for these variables among women than we would expect for the same variables for their husbands. We will turn to measures for both spouses soon, but include these here in part because we are able to do so with a larger sample size than we have for the couple data.

A woman's being enrolled in school at the time of marriage does not seem to have any significant effect on her marital stability. And although the gross effect of full-time employment seems to be a reduction in the risk of disruption, this effect disappears when other variables, and in particular education, are controlled. There is a curious positive effect for part-time employment in the first year of marriage. Women who worked part time have disruption rates over a third higher than those who did not. We do not have any ready explanation for this finding and are inclined to ignore it as random variation until it is replicated in other data. Unemployment of the wife is not associated with a higher rate of disruption, although, of course, in the present model we have no measures of the husband's labor force status.

HOMOGAMY AND HETEROGAMY

We collected information on first spouses' characteristics in two different ways, depending on whether or not the first marriage was still intact at the time of interview. Respondents whose first marriage had ended were asked a separate set of questions about their first spouses, including age,

education, prior marriage and fertility, religion, parental family intactness, and activities in the first year of marriage. This information was obtained for intact first marriages through the self-administered questionnaire given to spouses. Although this procedure saved interview time and avoided proxy reporting on spouses' characteristics whenever possible, it also means that our sample for the analysis of couple characteristics is limited to those cases in which the spouse questionnaire was completed (78% of the husbands of respondents completed this questionnaire). The proportion disrupted in 5 years is identical in this reduced sample to the level in the total cohort for female respondents, so we do not think the selection based on husband's response rates introduces any significant bias.

Heterogamy has been depicted in numerous studies as a potential source of conflict, value dissonance, and power imbalance between spouses that can induce marital instability (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977; Bumpass & Sweet, 1972; Heaton, 1984). To explore this issue, the variables in Table 4 have been constructed to focus attention on spouses' differences with respect to age, education, religion, parental family background, and marriage order.

We would expect the persistence of patriarchal values to make marital adjustment more difficult when either the wife is older or has more education than her husband. The gross effects reveal the surprising finding that rates of marital disruption are 42% lower for couples in which the wife is older than her husband by 2 or more years. This effect disappears in the full model, however, because it is a consequence of the fact that marriages in which the wife is older are disproportionately drawn from older ages at marriage (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987).

Educational heterogamy, on the other hand, has the expected effects on marital instability. Although this pattern was evident almost 20 years ago (Bumpass & Sweet, 1972), the results are surprising because of the strength of the relationship.⁷ Compared to couples in the same educational category and net of other factors in our model, marital disruption rates are 35% lower if the husband is in a higher educational category and 29% higher if the wife has more education than her husband.

Hence among couples with unequal levels of education, the risk of disruption is about twice as high if the wife is the most educated one. This large effect of educational differences is likely to reflect several related factors. The first is a variation of the "independence" effect widely noted in the literature on women's employment and marital stability (Hannan,

TABLE 4
Effects on Marital Disruption of Differences in
Couple Characteristics: First Marriages 1975-84,
Female Non-Hispanic Whites, 1987-88 NSFH

	<i>Gross</i>		<i>Net^a</i>		<i>Percentage</i>
	<i>Effect</i>	<i>(β/se)</i>	<i>Effect</i>	<i>(β/se)</i>	
Age difference (within 1 year)					
Husband older 5+	12	(0.7)	-11	(-0.6)	24.1
Husband older 2-4	24	(1.4)	1	(0.1)	27.3
Wife older 2+	-42	(-1.7)	-2	(-0.1)	7.6
Education difference at marriage (same category)					
Husband higher	1	(0.1)	-35	(2.4)	20.8
Wife higher	41	(2.4)	29	(1.6)	29.8
Catholic (neither)					
One	34	(2.1)	40	(2.3)	24.2
Both	-18	(-1.0)	14	(0.6)	15.3
Parental family intact to age 16 (both intact)					
Husband not	68	(3.1)	51	(2.4)	12.9
Wife not	45	(2.3)	19	(1.1)	17.8
Both not	49	(1.5)	7	(0.2)	4.6
Husband previously married (no)					
Yes, no child	53	(2.0)	106	(3.0)	6.6
Yes, child	13	(0.6)	24	(0.9)	9.3

N = 729

a. Includes parental family characteristics and respondent characteristics in Tables 2 and 3.

Tuma, & Groeneveld, 1978). Because educational level is already in the model, in this case the argument is cast in relative terms: Relative to the economic standards of their current marriage, women who are more highly educated than their husbands have better prospects of getting by on their own outside of the marriage than do women who are less educated than their husbands. Thus better educated women may be more likely to leave a marriage at a given level of unhappiness. A related, but somewhat different, factor is that such wives may feel that they can do better in the marriage market than their current match to a less educated spouse. Finally, the persistence of patriarchal values may affect both husbands'

and wives' assessments of role performance and power distribution when the husband is less educated than his wife.

Similarly, this analysis from the 1987-1988 NSFH replicates our results on religious heterogamy that were based on the 1970 National Fertility Survey (Bumpass & Sweet, 1972). Despite the strong position of the Catholic church on divorce, there is no difference in marital stability between couples in which both partners are Catholics and those in which both are protestant. On the other hand, net disruption rates are 40% higher when one partner is Catholic and the other is not.

Next we turn to some initially puzzling results based on the parental family background of both spouses. We would expect the effect of parental family disruption to be additive, with the highest disruption rates observed for couples where both experienced a family breakup in childhood. The gross effects in the first column of Table 4 show that the largest effect occurs when only the husband had a nonintact parental family, although disruption rates are similarly higher for all combinations of at least one partner with a family disruption compared to cases where both grew up in intact families.

When all other variables are controlled, the only category with significantly higher disruption rates are those cases where the husband, but not the wife, experienced a childhood family disruption.⁸ Until this greater direct effect for husband's parental background is replicated elsewhere, we think substantive interpretation should focus on the gross differences revealing that parental disruption for either partner matters.

The final panel in Table 4 expands our earlier findings that disruption rates are higher for first marriages of women to remarried husbands, although this appears to be true only when the husband has not had a child in a previous marriage. Net of other factors, marriages to childless, previously married husbands are over twice as likely to disrupt as marriages to a never-married male. However, the effect is much smaller, and not significant, for marriages to a previously married husband with children. Because the child is not present in the household in most of the latter cases, this finding suggests that selection with respect to family-related attitudes is likely to be involved.

ACTIVITY STATUSES OF SPOUSES IN THE FIRST YEAR OF MARRIAGE

Finally we examine the consequences of couples' enrollment, employment, and unemployment and of husband's armed forces participation in the first year of marriage (Table 5).

TABLE 5
Effects on Marital Disruption During
the First 3 Years of Marriage of Employment and
Enrollment in School in First Year of Marriage: First
Marriages 1975-84, Female Non-Hispanic Whites, 1987-88 NSFH

	<i>Gross</i>		<i>Net^a</i>		<i>Percentage</i>
	<i>Effect</i>	<i>(β/se)</i>	<i>Effect</i>	<i>(β/se)</i>	
Enrollment in school (neither)					
Husband	-17	(-0.7)	-18	(-0.7)	10.9
Wife	-4	(-0.2)	2	(0.1)	15.6
Both	-19	(-0.6)	-22	(-0.7)	6.0
Full-time employment (husband)					
Wife	1	(0.1)	17	(0.6)	13.0
Both	-21	(-1.2)	-3	(-0.6)	51.2
Neither	68	(2.3)	20	(0.7)	11.5
Unemployment (neither)					
Husband	108	(3.7)	107	(3.5)	11.3
Wife	16	(0.6)	5	(0.2)	11.2
Both	261	(4.5)	166	(3.1)	2.4
Husband in armed forces	105	(3.1)	63	(1.8)	6.7
<i>N</i> = 729					

a. Includes parental family characteristics and respondent characteristics in Tables 2 and 3.

Although, ideally, the impact of an activity on marital disruption should be analyzed as a time-varying effect, we do not have information on activity status over time for both spouses, as it is required to perform such analysis. For this reason, we are constrained to analyze the impact of the activity status held by both partners at the time they entered marriage, and specify it as a fixed covariate. However, because activity status is likely to change over time and we cannot assume that the effect of activity at the earliest stages of marriage remains constant at later marital durations, we will examine only its short-term impact, by limiting the analysis to the first 3 years of marriage.

Reinforcing our earlier observation based only on wives' activities, there is no indication that being enrolled in school early in marriage has a deleterious effect on marital chances.

In contrast to the most traditional arrangement where only the husband is employed full time, net disruption rates are not higher if only the wife

is employed full time or if neither is employed full time. A model that contrasts all cases other than those in which only the husband is employed full time also does not show any significant difference in terms of marital stability.

We do find very strong effects on marital disruption of unemployment experience early in marriage. It does not seem to matter if the husband remains employed and the wife is unemployed, but if the husband was unemployed at any time during the first year of marriage the risk of disruption is twice as high than if neither spouse was unemployed. Further, if the husband and the wife were both unemployed during the first year, the disruption rate is more than 1.5 times greater than if neither were unemployed. Thus this is clear evidence for the strains of economic insecurity on the prospects of new marriages.

When the husband is in the armed forces in the first year of marriage the disruption rate is twice as high as among other couples. This effect is reduced somewhat after control for education and the other variables, but a 63% higher net rate persists. It will be worth exploring the role of separate living arrangements brought about by military service in this effect.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

High rates of marital disruption have made the uncertainty of marital unions and the diversity of family arrangements intrinsic features of modern family life. In this study, we have taken advantage of the broad coverage of family-related issues provided by the NSFH to assess the variation in marital stability by a wide array of factors. Many of our findings replicate prior research increasing our confidence in this set of sociodemographic predictors of separation. Other findings provide new insights into the determinants of the process of marital disruption.

We began by exploring two methodological issues. First, we examined the quality of male reports of marital histories and found a serious underreporting of recent marital disruptions. Although the NSFH has the advantage over other data sources of using both female and male informants, the discrepancy between their reports of marital histories suggests that the analysis of marital disruption derived from male reports would be subject to substantial biases.

Second, we analyzed the potential impact of reconciliations on the estimates of marital disruption when using separation dates as the marker for marital disruption. We found that reconciliations are quite common, but virtually all of them occur within 1 year since separation. Consequently, if the year preceding the survey is excluded from the analysis, the risk of upwardly biased estimates of marital disruption is negligible.

The influence that a wide variety of background and early marital factors exert on the risk of marital dissolution was analyzed using proportional hazard techniques. Consistent with previous studies, we found that the rates of disruption are highest among women with young age at marriage, those with lower education, those who cohabited before marriage, and those whose spouse had been previously married. We also replicated a much earlier finding that there is no independent effect of premarital fertility beyond its effects through variables such as age at marriage and education.

Our findings differ from previous research with respect to the effect of several variables. For example, we found that the effect of parental family disruption was entirely mediated by age at marriage, education, and cohabitational experience.

The NSFH data provide a unique opportunity to examine the effects of differences between spouses, and two findings in particular stand out in this regard. Intermarriages between Catholics and non-Catholics have much higher disruption rates than do religiously homogamous marriages. This may reflect the consequences of value differences between spouses, particularly in the family domain.

The second major finding on intermarriage also replicates an early result, but it is particularly noteworthy for its persistence. It might be thought that the rapid changes in attitudes with respect to gender roles would make marriages in which the wife's status exceeds the husband's no less stable than the reverse. On the contrary, the higher disruption rate of marriages in which the wife is more educated than her husband suggests the strong persistence of patriarchal values with respect to the traditional statuses and roles assigned to men and women.

Finally, with regard to the impact of the activity status of both spouses during the first year of marriage, we found a very strong association between unemployment experience early in marriage and dissolution risks. This effect applies when it is the husband or both spouses who are out of the labor force, but not when it is the wife who is unemployed, another manifestation of the persistence of traditional role values.

NOTES

1. Marriages since 1984 are not included because the NSFH sample design of interviewing adults over the age of 19 (younger only if currently married) means that disrupted marriages to persons under the age of 19 at the date of interview are not represented in the sample.

2. In the comparison of reported levels of disruption between male and female Black respondents, the magnitude of the differentials should be taken only as indicative, given the small sample size of both groups.

3. The data for females match the quality of other data sources; for example, levels of disruption for first marriages in the NSFH are identical to those estimated from the June 1985 CPS for marriage cohorts of 1974 to 1979 and 1980 to 1985. The extent to which the underreporting of disruption in all surveys (compared to vital statistics, see Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989) may affect measured differentials is unknown. It is likely that variables such as education have an even larger effect than we are able to measure because of differential data quality (e.g., if the more educated are more likely to report previous marriages accurately).

4. The specified variables were identified as the main intervening variables through the comparison of a set of hierarchical models.

5. The proportion of women who married as teenagers declined by 40% between 1970 and 1985 (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1989).

6. We have included in the "with spouse" category those who also had other cohabiting relationships besides the one with spouse, although such multiple cohabitations are relatively rare.

7. For this comparison we have classified education into levels that make major distinctions rather than treating differences in single years of schooling. Educational heterogamy would seem more important in cases where one spouse has completed college and the other dropped out after 3 years than in cases where they have 13 and 15 years of schooling, respectively, even though the difference in years of schooling is greater in the latter instance. Hence we coded each spouse into whether they had not completed high school, completed high school, attended but did not complete college, or completed college at the time of marriage; then we compared the educational category of husbands and wives.

8. This difference is not a consequence of having controlled for the wife's characteristics. The results remain the same in models in which only husband's education, age at marriage, and premarital cohabitation have been included.

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