

**Marital Dissolution in Rural Nepal:
Do Western Influences on Marital Dissolution Apply
across Contexts?**

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Abstract

While studies on divorce in Western contexts are extensive and well-established, there has been limited investigation of the causes and consequences of divorce in non-Western, agrarian contexts like South Asia. In this study, I apply what we know about marital dissolution in the West to a rural Nepalese context. Given the large differences between the societies, we would not necessarily expect that the factors predicting divorce in the US to operate similarly in rural Nepal. I use event history analysis with retrospective data to investigate women's likelihood of experience marital dissolution from their first marriages. Results reveal that common predictors of divorce in the US context—such as wives' age at marriage, marital duration, work experience, and marital fertility—have very similar influences in this Nepalese context. Even in this very different religious and social setting, women's experiences influence marital dissolution in a similar capacity as in the US.

Background and Significance

Family demographers know a great deal about the causes and consequences of divorce in Western settings, where divorce has a long history and data are extensive. However, little is known about marital dissolution in other parts of the world. I examine this phenomenon in the South Asian setting of rural Nepal, where it is uncommon. In a setting like rural Nepal, where financial independence is relatively difficult for women to achieve (Allendorf 2007; Holden 2008), the consequences of divorce are likely to be very detrimental for women. However, before we can investigate the consequences of marital dissolution, we must first understand its causes. This study takes an essential step toward uncovering the factors that influence divorce in the South Asian setting of rural Nepal, comparing these factors to the well-studied influences in the US context.

In rural Nepal, family life, as well as social life more broadly, takes a much different form than family and social life in the United States. While marriage is highly valued in both contexts (Cherlin 2009; Jennings, Axinn and Ghimire forthcoming), the process upon which people enter marriage in Nepal is very different than in the US context. Arranged marriage is prevalent, and the sanctity of marriage is important to the large majority of the population that practice Hinduism. In a setting that is so socially and religiously different from the US, we might expect to find that the factors predicting divorce in the US context do not operate in the same way in this Nepalese context. This paper investigates the common factors that influence marital dissolution in the US, applying the theories behind these influences to the Nepalese context and analyzing their empirical influences. With recent social changes that Nepal has been undergoing (Ghimire et al. 2006), we are presented with the unique opportunity to study marital dissolution at the cusp of a potential transition to increasing rates of dissolution.

This paper uses event history analysis to explore the factors influencing marital dissolution in the Chitwan Valley of rural Nepal. The Chitwan Valley Family Study (CVFS) provides detailed measures on individual and marital experiences with a retrospective data collection, which collected data on respondents' lives from 2008 backward. The data allow one of the first looks into the influences on marital dissolution in a South Asian context. I employ the CVFS data to

study the impact of women's individual and marital experiences on the likelihood that their first marriages will dissolve.

Context

In any given setting, the likelihood of marital dissolution is related to the meaning and value of marriage among that population. In rural Nepal, the high value placed on marriage is indicated in its universality and early occurrence. The age at first marriage between 1990 and 1996 was 17.6 for women and 21.9 for men, with over 98% of men and women married by their early 30s (Yabiku 2005). 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). Less than a third of Nepali women in the CVFS had work experience outside of the home before marriage (29% as of 2008), although more women work for wages during marriage (44% of women who were married for at least 5 years in 2008).¹ Because it is intertwined with religious and cultural practices, wage work is somewhat deprecated for women. For example, it is more common for wives of lower caste groups to work outside the home, out of necessity, than wives of upper caste groups (Acharya 1994; Bennett 1983; Cameron 1998; Stash and Hannum 2001). As their position demands stricter adherence to the rules of obedience to their husbands and in-laws (Bennett 1983), upper caste women are at a larger power disadvantage in their households than are lower caste women, although wives of all groups face similar constraints (Allendorf 2007; Allendorf forthcoming; 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 very rare (Parry 2001). Still, other factors more directly related to marital dissolution itself also contribute to its infrequency. Just as with other aspects of social life in Nepal, the practice of marital dissolution is based on Hindu customs. Hindu code historically has not recognized marital dissolution, but many groups of Hindus have practiced dissolution nonetheless (Holden 2008; Parry 2001). This practice has been more common among lower caste, marginalized groups than among the upper castes (Holden 2008). As is the case with marriage, marital dissolution often does not involve the legal system, and often occurs as a separation without subsequent divorce (Parry 2001).

Theoretical Framework

In this South Asian context, little is known about the causes of marital dissolution. However, literature on divorce in the US is well-established and reveals a number of factors that typically influence marital dissolution. In this section, I discuss the common influences on marital dissolution in Western contexts, considering their potential roles in this South Asian context. I then discuss reasons for expecting changes over time in the factors causing marital dissolution.

Marital and Experiential Influences on Marital Dissolution

¹ These numbers represent women's first marriages among those ever married as of 2008; 3654 women had ever been married in 2008, and 3344 had been married for at least 5 years.

Two highly reliable and relatively universal predictors of marital success are age at marriage and duration of marriage (Bumpass and Sweet 1972; Becker, Landes, and Michael 1977; Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985; South 2001; Thornton and Rodgers 1987). People who marry at later ages 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 investing in getting to know their partner prior to marrying. This acquired maturity and knowledge allows 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 parents will acquire new information about each other that could lead to dissolution (Becker et al. 1977; Morgan and Rindfuss 1985). Age at marriage and length of marriage are likely to operate in a similar way to influence marital dissolution in this context of rural Nepal.

There is also extensive literature from Western contexts that explores the influences of women's nonfamily experiences on marital dissolution (Martin and Bumpass 1989; Kalmijn, De Graaf, and Poortman 2004; Ruggles 1997; South 2001; Spitze and South 1985; Teachman 2002). Findings regarding education and women's employment are not always consistent or straightforward. Some literature reveals education to have a positive effect on marital dissolution (Teachman 2002; Thornton and Lin 1994), while other literature reveals a negative effect (Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003; Martin and Bumpass 1989) or a negative effect only at shorter marital durations (Morgan and Rindfuss 1985; South and Spitze 1986). In this Nepalese setting, wives with greater education may be more equal with their husbands in this domain, and this may increase the egalitarianism within their marriage, possibly leading to greater marital success. On the other hand, 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.

Like education, the relationship between women's employment and marital dissolution is typically found to be positive (Ruggles 1997; South 2001), but it is not completely clear that the association is always positive (Trent and South 1992). Women's employment is theorized to influence divorce through mechanisms of increasing women's autonomy and lowering the cost of divorce for women (Oppenheimer 1994; Thornton 1985). Wives' work experience is expected to operate similarly in this Nepalese context.

Marital fertility is widely found to decrease the likelihood of marital dissolution. This influence is partly dependent on the children's age and gender: younger children and male children tend to have a greater suppressing influence on divorce in the US than older children (Cherlin 1977; Morgan, Lye and Condran 1988; Waite, Haggstrom and Kanouse 1985; Waite and Lillard 1991). In the US and Nepal, alike, children raise the cost 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). In fact, children may present an even greater cost for divorce in Nepal, where joint custody is much less common and where children have a direct economic value for the many households that rely on subsistence agriculture (Cain 1977; Karki 1988). With each additional child, the value of the marriage increases, likely decreasing the odds of dissolution.

The unique marital practices in this context require the consideration of additional factors that may influence marital dissolution beyond the common factors at play in Western contexts. Most important of these practices is arranged marriage. In Nepal, it is typical for parents and other senior relatives to arrange the marriages of youth. However, this practice has been loosening recently, and it is now more common than in the past for young people to choose their own marriage partner (Ghimire et al. 2006; Niraula 1994). Those who practice independent choice in their marriage may place lower value on the traditional family and its norms. Furthermore, these people have already exerted independence in entering marriage and, therefore, may be at a heightened likelihood of exerting independence by ending their marriage. Hence, greater spouse choice on the part of either the wife or husband is likely to increase the likelihood of a couples' dissolution.

Characteristics of couples' marital home may also have an important impact on their likelihood of marital dissolution. A very relevant practice is that of patrilocal residence. Once a woman marries she typically leaves her own natal home to move into her husband's natal home, although some couples set up their own, separate household. Still others, much less commonly, live with the wives' parents. Women who live a greater distance from their natal home have less access to the support that their family and long-time friends might offer. Without proximity to their natal home and the social and economic support it can bring, women may be less likely to consider divorce as an option (Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003).

Married couples living in households that own farmland may also be less likely to experience dissolution, for at least three reasons. First, in households that do not own farmland, it is common for women to work outside the home, on the land of wealthier families, for compensation (Cameron 1998). This income earned is expected to be given to her household rather than to be kept for herself. But, the ability to and experience of selling her labor can eliminate some of the financial disincentives to divorce. Second, women are responsible for many tasks in the field (Allendorf 2007), making their presence valuable to landowning households. Thus, husbands in these households are likely motivated to avoid marital dissolution. Third, land ownership is an indicator of the household's socioeconomic status, and a woman may be less inclined to leave a household that has more wealth. Wives living in wealthier households may perceive few alternatives that would be more desirable than remaining in that marriage.

Ethnicity 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 context. Ethnicity 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.) Upper Caste Hindus (i.e., Brahmin and Chettri), conceptualized in this paper as one ethnic group, tend to be most strict about following Hindu customs (Bennett 1983; Stash and Hannum 2001). In relation to marriage and marital dissolution, this means that marriage is especially valued as a sacred institution. For example, upper caste Hindu girls are married at particularly young ages in order to ensure their purity for their husband (Bennett 1983; Niraula and Morgan 1996). Thus, couples of these high caste groups may endure especially intense pressure for their marriages to succeed and may perceive great difficulty in remarrying, leading them to be less likely to

divorce. Other ethnic groups have less strict marital customs to adhere to (Fricke 1986; Cameron 1998) and, thus, face fewer obstacles in dissolving their marriages.

Data and Sample

I use data from the 2008 fielding of the CVFS. Interviews were conducted with all people ages 15 to 59, who were living in 151 sampled neighborhoods. At the same time, a life history calendar was conducted with each of these respondents, collecting information on events they had experienced in their lives, such as attending school, working, having children, marrying, separating, and divorcing. I use these retrospective data from the life history calendar to investigate the influence of women's life and marital experiences on the odds of marital dissolution. The sample is limited to women in their first marriages, ages 50 and under (during the yearly observations), who were married by the year 1998 (N= 2434 women).

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 that marriages were first disrupted, instead of the time point at which the legal process was completed. This is especially important in a setting where couples often do not bother with the legal system, and where separation often occurs without divorce.

Following previous research on divorce in Asia (Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003), I focus on dissolution of first marriages. In Nepal nearly everyone experiences first marriage (Yabiku 2002), while remarriage is very rare, even as of recently: as of 2008, only about 11% of ever-married women 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; Holden 2008) and, given their rarity, are likely to be even less institutionalized 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), indicating that remarriage may be more selective on individual characteristics than first marriages.

I use the life history calendar data to operationalize the yearly hazard of marital dissolution, from the beginning of the women's married lives, 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 they cease to contribute to person-years of exposure to risk of marital dissolution. Widowhood is

treated as a competing risk, so that women whose husbands die cease to contribute person-years to the hazard.

Independent

I investigate the influence of marital characteristics using measures for wives' age at marriage and level of spouse choice, and the length of the marriage. Wives' age is coded in years, and is time-varying. Wives' level of spouse choice is coded on a scale from 1 to 5, from having no choice of their spouse (1) to having complete choice (5) (Ghimire et al. 2006). Length of marriage is coded as the length of time, in years, since the couple was married.

I also examine the influences of wives' nonfamily experiences, employing time-varying measures to indicate education and work experience. The measure for wife's education reflects whether she has ever attended school, coded 1 if she has and 0 if she has not. This measure, rather than a measure for educational attainment, is used because female school attendance is low for women of older ages. A measure indicating whether the wife ever worked for wages is coded in a similar manner.

I also consider the influence of couples' fertility experiences. This measure is coded as the number of children that the woman and her husband have and is time-varying, by year.

Finally, I account for wives' ethnicity. Wives' 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 our analyses.²

Controls

I control for additional factors that may influence the likelihood of marital dissolution. I control for a measure indicating the year that the couple was married. The historical time at which a couple married can influence their exposure to the risk of dissolution. Certain historic events, such as the armed conflict that took place during the last decade, may influence family behaviors (Williams et al. forthcoming). I also control for age cohort. Similar to year of marriage, a woman's year of birth influences the factors to which she is exposed, which can, in turn, influence her likelihood of marital dissolution. Age cohort is coded as three dummy variables: ages 26-40, ages 41-55, and ages 56-70 in 2008. Ages 56-70 in 2008 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 person-years of exposure as the units of analysis (Peterson 1993). 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

² Because the number of women in the Newari ethnic group that fit the sample restrictions is very small (N=167), and very few experience dissolution (N=16), I do not include those of Newar ethnicity in the sample.

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, β 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 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 is more likely (occurs sooner); if it is less than 1, the effect is negative, meaning that marital dissolution is less likely (occurs later). I employ two-tailed tests of significance.

Preliminary Results and Next Steps

First, it is important to make note of the descriptive statistics, shown in Table 1. Marital dissolution is rare among this rural Nepalese sample: only 8% of the sample experienced dissolution of their first marriages by 2008. Age at marriage for these women is young, at about 17 years old. These women also had low levels of spouse choice, at a mean of 1.97 on a scale from 1 to 5. Their marriages lasted 22.39 years, on average, as of their last observation in the hazard file. About half of the women (0.48) ever went to school or worked for wages (by the end of the hazard). Their mean fertility is between 3 and 4 children. The largest percentage of the sample identifies as Brahmin/Chettri (50%), while a minority identify as Dalit (11%), Hill Indigenous (18%), or Terai Indigenous (19%).

Table 2 displays the odds ratio coefficients from logistic regression. The first model accounts for basic characteristics of the marriage, as well as ethnicity and control measures for year of marriage and cohort. Age at marriage is revealed to have a negative influence on dissolution, as expected, so that women who first married at later ages are less likely to experience dissolution. Each unit increase in age at marriage reduces a woman's odds of experiencing dissolution by a factor of 0.94. A similar influence is revealed for length of marriage: marriages of longer duration are at a reduced likelihood of dissolving, by a factor 0.93 with each year. Also as expected, each ethnic group is at greater risk of marital dissolution than Brahmins and Chettris.

Model 2 of Table 2 reveals similar results, with the addition of the measure indicating whether the respondent ever worked for wages. Work experience has the expected positive influence on dissolution, with women who ever worked for wages being 1.85 times as likely to experience dissolution as women who never worked for wages. Model 3 then replaces work experience with a measure indicating whether the respondent ever attended school. I look at these two measures separately because they are expected to have an influence on dissolution for similar reasons. However, Model 3 reveals no significant influence of school attendance. Model 4 reveals a similarly strong influence of work experience when school attendance is held constant. Finally,

in Model 5, I account for fertility. The number of children that couples have exerts a strong negative influence on marital dissolution, net of the other influential measures discussed so far. With each additional child, a couple's likelihood of dissolving decreases by a factor of 0.65. For example, a woman with 3 children is 0.42 times as likely to experience dissolution as a woman with 1 child. In fact, fertility has such an important influence on marital dissolution that it removes the significant influences of two important marital characteristics: age at marriage and length of marriage.

These preliminary results reveal that the causes of marital dissolution in the US hold up in this Nepalese context, despite the strong social, cultural, and religious differences across the two contexts. In the coming weeks, I will expand the interpretation of these results. I will also investigate whether similar influences hold in a prospective analysis, among the same population. This will involve using measures from the 1996 CVFS baseline survey to estimate the odds of marital dissolution in the subsequent 13 years (using monthly panel data from 1997 onward). Preliminary analyses reveal similar influences of the factors analyzed here. This finding would offer confirmation that marital dissolution not only has similar causes among this very different population, compared to the US, but that these similar causes hold when looking at marital dissolution in different ways within the population.

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Tables

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Measure	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Marital dissolution (proportion)	0.08	0.27	0.00	1.00
<i>Wife's Marital Characteristics</i>				
Age at marriage	16.55	3.33	5.00	40.00
Level of spouse choice	1.97	1.63	1.00	5.00
Length of marriage (years)	22.39	9.89	1.00	46.00
<i>Wife's Nonfamily Experiences</i>				
Ever worked for wages (time-varying)	0.48	0.50	0.00	1.00
Ever attended school (time-varying)	0.48	0.50	0.00	1.00
<i>Fertility Experiences</i>				
Number of children (time-varying)	3.44	2.07	0.00	13.00
<i>Wife's Demographics</i>				
Brahmin/Chettri	0.50	0.50	0.00	1.00
Dalit	0.11	0.32	0.00	1.00
Hill Indigenous	0.18	0.39	0.00	0.00
Terai Indigenous	0.19	0.40	0.00	1.00
<i>Controls</i>				
Year of marriage (calendar)	2039.40	12.32	2001.00	2055.00
Cohort ages 26-40 in 2008	0.15	0.36	0.00	1.00
Cohort ages 41-55 in 2008	0.33	0.47	0.00	1.00
Cohort ages 56-70 in 2008	0.15	0.36	0.00	1.00
Total couples in sample	2434			
Total experiencing marital dissolution	194			

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

Table 2: Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression: Investigating Influences on Marital Dissolution

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<i>Characteristics of the marriage</i>					
Age at marriage	0.94+ (-1.84)	0.94+ (-1.86)	0.94+ (-1.84)	0.94+ (-1.86)	0.96 (1.02)
Level of wife's spouse choice	0.94 (-1.01)	0.94 (-1.06)	0.94 (-1.00)	0.94 (-1.05)	0.94 (-0.86)
Length of marriage	0.93*** (-6.46)	0.93*** (-6.80)	0.93*** (-6.45)	0.93*** (-6.79)	1.00 (-0.23)
<i>Nonfamily experiences</i>					
Ever worked for wages (time-varying)		1.85*** (3.39)		1.88*** (3.42)	2.02** (3.15)
Ever attended school (time-varying)			1.06 (0.29)	1.14 (0.64)	1.16 (0.60)
<i>Fertility Experiences</i>					
Number of children					0.65*** (-4.87)
<i>Demographics</i>					
Dalit	2.32*** (3.38)	1.85* (2.38)	2.35*** (3.39)	1.89* (2.43)	2.11* (2.50)
Hill Indigenous	1.62+ (1.85)	1.57+ (1.73)	1.63+ (1.87)	1.59* (1.78)	1.74+ (1.83)
Terai Indigenous	1.58+ (1.88)	1.37 (1.26)	1.63+ (1.89)	1.42 (1.37)	1.63+ (1.69)
<i>Controls</i>					
Year of marriage (calendar)	1.01 (0.53)	1.01 (0.29)	1.01 (0.46)	1.00 (0.14)	1.00 (0.09)
Cohort ages 26-40 in 2008	2.24 (1.35)	2.29 (1.37)	2.23 (1.34)	2.27 (1.35)	2.29 (1.12)
Cohort ages 41-55 in 2008	1.48 (1.18)	1.52 (1.24)	1.49 (1.19)	1.53 (1.26)	1.50 (0.99)
Total person-years	54464	54464	54464	54464	54464
Total persons	2434	2434	2434	2434	2434
Total persons experiencing marital dissolution	194	194	194	194	194

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

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

Reference category for ethnicity is Upper-caste Hindu (Brahmin/Chettri).

Reference category for cohort is ages 26 to 70 (in 2008).