

CONJUGAL TRAJECTORIES

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CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES IN
FAMILY RESEARCH VOLUME 22

**CONJUGAL TRAJECTORIES:
RELATIONSHIP BEGINNINGS,
CHANGE, AND DISSOLUTIONS**

EDITED BY

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Carballo, Natalia (2018). “Mejor alfabetizadas, en mejores trabajos, solteras y en sus cuarentas: Mujeres jefas de hogar en Costa Rica”. En: *Construyendo identidades y analizando desigualdades: Familias y trayectorias de vida como objeto de análisis en Europa y América. Siglos XVI-XXI*. Coordinadores: Francisco Chacón, Albert Esteve y Ricardo Cicerchia. España, Centre d’Estudis Demografics.

Carballo, Natalia (2020). “Viudez y soltería en la costa pacífica de Costa Rica, siglos XX-XXI”. En: *Vivir en soledad: viudedad, soltería y abandono en el mundo rural (España y América Latina, siglos XVI-XXI)*. Francisco García González (ed.). Madrid: Iberoamericana Editorial Vervuert.

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FOREWORD

Conjugal life is a process, rather than a steady state, which couples achieve once they establish a relationship. The trajectories they develop throughout the life cycle are closely linked to political, economic, cultural, and demographic processes that shape their decisions, arrangements, and the roles couples and families serve in society. By studying marriage and cohabitation decision-making, the process of mate acquaintance, the criteria for mate selection, the age difference between the mates and the changing family structures among some other topics, we are able to understand how society and culture shape individual decisions as well as how individuals challenge the norms and make space for cultural change.

Over recent decades, the study of how couples form and what happens after they establish has received increasing attention from social and human disciplines. As with most fields of study the approaches vary and emphasize aspects considered relevant for the discipline in question. The interest in conjugal life from different perspectives and fields of study has frequently connected this discussion to marriage and its social forms, problems, status, rights and role. Much of this interest has been paid to analyze the quality of the conjugal bond, the conflicts and harmony in marital life, the conjugality and capital, the changes in the calendar of marriage and cohabitation, long-distance conjugality, conjugal rights, and the connections of conjugality to love, consanguinity, fertility, sexuality, paternity, polygamy, monogamy, children's behaviour, and so on. These wide range of discussions come from both qualitative and quantitative approaches and allow us to see the dynamism of the conjugal trajectories.

Conjugal trajectories can be understood as the sexual-affective and domestic stories that married and cohabitant couples produce in order to stay together. The trajectory demands the acceptance of explicit and implicit agreements that are the reflection of wider social rules and norms that impact on their sexuality, displays of affection, rights and duties, and economy.

Conjugal trajectories are composed by four elements (Cuevas, 2019): the presence of at least one partner throughout the life cycle; the existence of a legal, symbolic or consensual relationship through which the marriage or union was formalized; the coexistence as a couple under the same or separate roofs and the recognition of these arrangements by the immediate family and social circles; and the presence or absence of children born out of that relationships or from previous marriages or unions.

Research on the formation of couples has changed and increased over the last several decades, improving and deepening our knowledge on the topic. Research literature from around the globe reflects that an increasing number of couples choose cohabitation over marriage, delaying marriage and getting divorced or separating in greater numbers than ever before. The changes have both a structural

and cultural origin and show that given the extent of the phenomena that marital life is undergoing, people everyday feel more vulnerable and exposed to the pressures of having their private life under scrutiny in social networks, failing to achieve a balanced and happy relationship.

The chapters in this book present a coherent approach to the understanding of conjugal trajectories from different contemporary social problems. They represent the work of authors from different countries, disciplines and methodological perspectives who have approached it from both novel and classical objects of study to provide empirical research that contributes important results to the understanding of this knowledge. In this respect, the book contributes to the understanding of the evolving nature of marriage and cohabitation and does so from a contemporary perspective. The different chapters approach us to a variety of discussions of great relevance that shed light on complex arenas of marital life from the individual, group and intergenerational perspective of different cultures and social groups that, to a greater or lesser extent, show the impact of modernity on the intimacy of these individuals. A common finding made by several authors of the book is the increasing relevance of the partners' qualities and communication skills as crucial factors for the conjugal life; a valuation that played a key role for the election of partner for Africans, North Americans, Europeans and Latin Americans alike. This is a reflection of the deep and unequal impact modernity has had across the world, mainly among educated and highly schooled populations. Another important contribution to the knowledge of conjugal life is the discussion of the stability and length of the conjugal bond amidst the growth in life expectancy at birth, the creation and application of divorce laws, the access to education of women, and the rise of cohabitation in all socioeconomic and age groups. The evidence found by several authors in different countries point out that conjugal relationships are more intense and unstable than ever before and that individuals face both the possibility of having several partners throughout their life but also the opportunity to live with the same couple for many decades.

The discussion on conjugal trajectories this book offers can be organized in three main discussions. The first of them groups the works that consider that intimacy, subjectivity, and happiness play a crucial role in marital satisfaction and quality. In *An Exploratory Study of the Influence of Marital Attitudes and Skin Tone Perception on the Romantic Relationship Quality Among African American and Latinx Young Adults*, Sarah N. Mitchell, Antoinette M. Landor and Katharine H. Zeiders discuss, from a quantitative approach, the ways in which attitudes about marriage (i.e., desire, importance, and expectation) relate to young adults' current relationship quality (i.e., satisfaction, intimacy, and commitment). They used the Marital Horizon Theory as a lens to understand young adults' marital attitudes and relationship quality. Their research showed that for young adults, marital attitudes are associated with relationship quality. They aimed to shed light on how this association plays out for young adults of color, a research topic understudied. Additionally, they found that the influence of skin tone perception plays an important role in the relationship between marital attitudes and relationship quality. They studied these associations through a group of African American and Latinx young adults attending college. Their results indicated that

marital expectations were positively associated with relationship quality in that young adults who expected to marry one day, reported greater relationship satisfaction, commitment, and intimacy in their current relationships. Additionally, skin tone perception moderated the association between marital attitudes and relationship quality in two ways (i.e., between expectations and satisfaction and between importance and intimacy). Collectively, their findings suggest that differing levels of marital attitudes and skin tone perception contribute to young adults' perceptions of relationship quality.

In *Breaking Up Is Hard to Do: Investigating Breakup Distress and Sexual Regret in Undergraduates' Casual and Committed Sexual Relationships*, Siri Wilder, Christina L. Scott and Micaela A. Chavarin explore how the rupture with the partner amongst teenagers was perceived and felt. They did so from a survey that considered a variety of demographic characteristics and several questions of their sexual history and divided the analysis in two groups, namely the distress caused by the breakup and the sexual regrets. In both groups, they explored the sex differences, the relationship differences, and the interaction when having casual sex and being in a romantic relationship. Their results show that there were statistically significant effects found for breakup distress as a function of sex and type of relationship and that women and men, as expected, behaved according to sex and gender roles and were deeply affected by their ideas on romantic love in the breakup. Whether casual or committed, teenagers had a wide range of emotional reactions to the end of their sexual relationships. However, the authors found that still remains to be seen whether these responses are significantly different across both types of relationships. They also found that there were statistically significant main effects found for breakup distress as a function of sex and the type of relationship.

In *Romantic, Confessional and Post-Romantic: The Timeline of Conjuality at a Distance Between Mexico and the United States*, Javiera Cienfuegos-Illanes discusses the construction of transnational marital bonds over time through a dual approach and a qualitative perspective. The author first, based on multi-site fieldwork carried out in 2011 and 2012 in two regions of Mexico and one of the United States, analyzes how transnational heterosexual couples with young children deal with being separated and construct their conjuality. This discussion considers two dimensions: intimacy and domestic organization. The second part of the chapter discusses the same results of the study after a decade, based on contact with the same participants and an exploration of their trajectories of intimacy and family organization. The author uses the notion of life cycle and family trajectory arriving at paths in the definition of intimacy that discuss the romantic component initially identified and add the confessional and post-romantic components as part of the experience of geographical distance for prolonged periods of migration, in addition to aging processes.

In *Age-Homogamy and Age-Heterogamy in Three Generations of Heterosexual Women and Men in Mexico*, Ana Josefina Cuevas Hernández uses the data gathered in 81 semi-structured interviews carried on with heterosexual men and women from two Mexican cities. The author divides the discussion in three sections, namely the age-gap and age-discrepancy in the three generations of study;

the role of schooling and social class in the significance of the age-gap and age-discrepancy relationships; and the gender inequality in couple relationships. Her work aims to contribute from a qualitative and sociological standpoint to this field of knowledge that has been understudied. The discussion focused on the meaning interviewers gave to the age difference from their subjectivity and intimacy to see how their ideas on the age difference were perceived. Her findings show a vigorous and strong trend of marriages and unions between older men and younger women where great gender inequalities persisted. This took place amidst signs of cultural change in the younger generations and highly educated men and women from middle classes who perceived the age difference negatively. This, rather than being a contradiction, reveals how schooling and social origin affect the resignification of the age difference, and moreover, suggests that the power relations in the couple were more equitable.

In *Predictors of Marital Quality: What Makes a Happy Marriage in Croatia?*, Josip Obradović and Mira Čudina explore the marital quality in Croatian marriage using the Socio-ecological model. The authors aim to contribute to this field of knowledge that has also been understudied in most non-western societies, where specific historical and cultural issues model conjugal life. Their work explores, from a quantitative perspective, the subjective and qualitative aspects of the couple's perceptions on their marital life. By doing so, they aim to contribute to the explanation of the quality of the marital relationship. Their results show great similarity to the studies carried out in other social contexts and point out that marital harmony and distress in Croatia were very important predictors of the marital quality and pretty similar to the results observed in the United States and some Western countries. Thus, it seems that the values of satisfaction, individuality, companionship and mutual help – all a reflection of intimacy and late modernity – are predictors of the quality of conjugal life irrespective of socio-cultural context. However, traditionalism, marital partners' personalities, and engagement in child care are elements of great value in the socio-cultural context in Croatia.

A second group of works analyze the conjugal trajectories through marriage formation. In *Marriage Formation in Vietnam: Characteristics and Changes*, Nguyen Huu Minh and Bui Thu Huong use data from the Vietnam Family Survey and Vietnam Marriage Survey to examine the changing patterns of marriage formation in Vietnam. Due to many of the changing socio-economic and legal factors, they find that traditional expectations concerning marriage have given way to a more individualist form, such that those seeking to get marriage focus primarily upon their desire for individual happiness. Although concerns about family obligations still remain, the various decision-making processes concerning mate selection and marriage are no longer controlled predominantly by parents. Instead, the independent preferences of contemporary young adults are slowly, but steadily, serving to change the patterns of marriage in Vietnam.

The distinctions between traditional forms of marriage, which often are controlled by parents, and more progressive forms, wherein individuals have greater choice in the selection of a partner, are also examined by Shichao Du in *Education, Marriage Cohorts, and Different Pathways to Marriage in East Asian Societies*. Using data from the East Asian Social Survey, this chapter examines the role of

education and change over time in the marriage trajectories of young adults in China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Educational attainment (more years of schooling) is associated with fewer arranged marriages, and more self-initiated marriages. Over time, arranged marriages are shown to be on the decline, while individual choice is revealed as the evolving form in the selection of a partner. These patterns are discussed within the framework of developmentalism.

Natalia Carballo Murillo explores the nature of reproductive strategies across family generations in *Life Trajectories and Reproductive Strategies of Costa Rican Households: An Intergenerational Perspective*. Using qualitative interviews across multiple generations, she finds that both conjugal trajectories and reproductive strategies steadily changed. Contextual factors from the larger society, such as economic stress, are shown to bring about change in familial attitudes, gender roles, and fertility strategies. Older generations are shown to be more traditional and conservative in these regards, while younger generations are shown to feel compelled to adjust and adapt more readily. Given the complexity of Costa Rican families, such changes are not necessarily easy to accomplish, as the influence of familial ties across generations can be quite substantial.

In *What Difference Does Marriage Make? Life Course Trajectories and the Transition to Marriage for Gay Men and Lesbians*, Aaron Hoy examines the varied paths to marriage among gay and lesbian individuals. Using a series of semi-structured interviews, he finds that the various routes taken en route to marriage had lasting and meaningful impacts upon the transition into marriage. A distinction is found between the “short and direct” route to marriage, and the “long and winding” trajectory, with the former route often involving large and elaborate wedding ceremonies, while the latter commonly involved relatively small, and even unplanned, ceremonies. The emotional meanings and experiences of these two trajectories were quite different, and reveal much about the complex and nuanced nature of marriage transitions for gays and lesbians.

The third group of chapters explores the conjugal trajectories through marriage stability and family structures. In *Identifying Predictors of First Versus Subsequent Divorce Among Divorcing Parents*, Joshua J. Turner, Olena Kopystynska, Kay Bradford, Brian J. Higginbotham and David G. Schramm examine the various factors that promote vulnerabilities among remarried couples. Using data from a large sample of divorcing parents who participated in a state-mandated, online divorce education course, the authors found that individuals going through their first divorce were more likely to identify growing apart and infidelity as reasons for seeking a divorce. Among those going through a subsequent divorce, though, problems such as alcohol and drug abuse, disagreements concerning childrearing, financial problems, and a combination of emotional, verbal, and physical abuse, as the primary factors which prompted their decision to seek a divorce. Their research not only contributes to our conceptual and theoretical understanding of divorce, but also yielded implications for practitioners.

Using data from the National Survey of Family Growth, J. Bart Stykes and Karen Benjamin Guzzo examine the linkages between unintended childbearing and union dissolution. In *Unintended Higher-Order Births and Union Stability: Variation by Union Characteristics*, the authors find that unintended childbearing,

cohabitation, and stepfamily status are all linked with a greater risk of dissolution. The impact of unintended childbearing is much more complicated, though, as it is associated with a higher risk of dissolution for married couples, as compared to cohabiting couples. Their findings strongly suggest that it is selection, rather than causation, which explains the association between unintended childbearing and union instability among higher-order births.

In *Dynamism and Changes in the Abia Family Structure and Conjugal Relationship: The Influence of the Nigerian Civil War*, Chigozirim Ogubuike, Mofeyisara Oluwatoyin Omobowale, and Olukemi K. Amodu focus on intergenerational variations in conjugality in different types of Abia families, comparing their changes and conjugal relations from traditional times to contemporary times. Specifically, they cast a glance at the dynamism and changes in the family structure and conjugal relationships at different eras of the family life cycle through a qualitative approach aiming to know how Nigerian Civil War affected their family structures and conjugal relationships. Their findings reveal a great dynamism and changes in family structures, with a prevalence of polygyny prior to the civil war, the emergence of step-parent and single-parent families during the civil war, and monogamy being most prevalent, with increasing single-parent and step-parent families contemporaneously. The conjugal relationship shifted from having concubines (acceptable and practiced covertly) to having side chicks (practiced covertly). The Nigerian civil war had an impact on the dynamics and the family structures of Nigerian families during the civil war and the immediate post-civil war. The authors also found out that other factors such as religion, education, civilization, and migration, among others, also influenced the contemporary Abia family structure. In short, their findings provide a better understanding on family structure dynamics and the possible use of this information in solving issues regarding family and conjugal trajectories.

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