

2005

# Constructing resilient marital relationships: a panel study of marriages under pressure

Amy Manning

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, amannin@lsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_dissertations](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations)



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Manning, Amy, "Constructing resilient marital relationships: a panel study of marriages under pressure" (2005). *LSU Doctoral Dissertations*. 2098.

[https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_dissertations/2098](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/2098)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [gradetd@lsu.edu](mailto:gradetd@lsu.edu).

CONSTRUCTING RESILIENT MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS:  
A PANEL STUDY OF MARRIAGES UNDER PRESSURE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

In

The Department of Sociology

By  
Amy Manning  
B.S., Texas A&M University, 1995  
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1998  
May 2005

**NOTICE:**

This document has been redacted for certain information subject to the rules of HIPPA, FERPA, Human Subjects/IRB rules and other such acts. The redaction does not alter the research nor its findings.



LSU Graduate School  
May 2, 2006

Title:                    **Constructing Resilient Marital Relationships: A Panel Study of Marriages Under Pressure**

Author:                 **Amy Manning**

Date of  
Original Submission:   **January 26, 2006**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation has come together because of the efforts of a number of important individuals.

I thank Drs. Garand, Kamo, Sutor, and Stem for their service on my committee and their valuable input in the final dissertation draft.

I also extend a special thanks to my committee chairman, Dr. Scott Feld, who pushed me and encouraged, and made me realize that life is a constant work in progress.

Finally, I thank my family. I thank my son William for his constant smiles. I thank my husband Brett Kirk who was instrumentally, and most of all emotionally supportive of me in my efforts. And, I thank my parents, Nancy and Leon Manning, who have listened to my frustrations, encouraged me in my triumphs, and remained constantly by my side in the graduate school process.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	ii
ABSTRACT .....	v
PART I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER	
1. FACTORS LEADING TO MARITAL STABILITY AND QUALITY .....	7
MARITAL QUALITY AND MARITAL DISRUPTION AND INSTABILITY IN JOB LOSS.....	7
2. COMMITMENT, MARITAL DISRUPTION AND INSTABILITY, AND MARITAL QUALITY.....	13
DEFINING COMMITMENT.....	13
COMMITMENT AND CONDITIONS OF MARRIAGE.....	15
3. METHODS.....	18
THE BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY .....	18
THE SAMPLE SELECTION.....	19
Sample Size.....	20
Non-representativeness, Self-Selection Bias, and Sample Characteristics.....	22
QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN AND MEASUREMENT .....	24
Measurement of Concepts.....	25
DATA COLLECTION.....	30
DATA ANALYSIS.....	32
Step One – Describing Couples.....	32
Step Two – Variables and Thematic Summaries.....	34
CONFIDENTIALITY .....	35
PART II. RETROSPECTIVE AND TIME 1 FINDINGS.....	36
4. COMMITMENT RETROSPECTIVELY AND AT TIME 1.....	37
COMMITMENT.....	37
Subjective Notions of Commitment.....	38
Moral Commitment.....	41
COMMITMENT AND MARITAL QUALITY.....	42

5.	UNEMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES AND RESPONSES TO JOB LOSS.....	44
	COUPLES' ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES AT TIME 1.....	44
	REACTIONS TO JOB LOSS AND SATISFACTION WITH LIFE....	46
	Husbands' Former Jobs and Their Self-worth.....	46
	The Challenges of Unemployment and Job Interviewing.....	47
	Wives' Emotional Support.....	49
	Stockpiles of Savings and Positive Affect.....	51
	UNEMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES, RESPONSES TO JOB LOSS, AND MARITAL QUALITY.....	51
6.	CONDITIONS OF MARRIAGE AT TIME 1.....	53
	COMMUNICATION SKILLS.....	53
	MARITAL COUNSELING.....	57
	QUALITY TIME TOGETHER.....	58
	ATTRACTIVE ALTERNATIVES.....	60
	PRESSURES TO STAY MARRIED.....	62
	COMMITMENT, WORK, AND CONDITIONS OF MARRIAGE.....	64
7.	MARITAL QUALITY RETROSPECTIVELY AND AT TIME 1.....	66
	MARITAL QUALITY.....	66
	Marital Interaction and Functioning.....	66
	Marital Happiness.....	68
	COMMITMENT, CONDITIONS OF MARRIAGE, EXTERNAL STRESSES, AND MARITAL QUALITY.....	70
	PART III. JOB SITUATIONS AND HOSTILITY AT TIME 2.....	72
8.	JOB SITUATIONS AT TIME 2.....	73
9.	HOSTILITY AT TIME 2.....	76
	MARITAL QUALITY OVER TIME.....	76
	Marital Interaction and Functioning.....	76
	Marital Happiness.....	77
	Disagreements.....	78
	LACK OF COMMITMENT AND WORK AS A SOURCE OF INCREASED HOSTILITY.....	80
	SPECULATIONS ON CAUSES OF HOSTILITY.....	81
10.	CONCLUSIONS.....	83
	REFERENCES.....	86
	APPENDIX: REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION IN STUDY.....	91
	VITA.....	92

## ABSTRACT

In the past, much of the literature on marital quality and stability has suggested that effective communication, positive affect, and spouses' emotional support are important to marital quality (Gottman and Levenson, 2000; Gottman and Notarius, 2000; Popenoe, 2004; Sanchez and Ganger, 2000; Whitehead and Popenoe, 2001). Other works have also suggested that "commitment," that is feelings regarding the permanency of marriage, encourages marital quality. However, to date, few studies have empirically investigated the relationship between commitment and marital quality (Surra and Gray, 2000).

This dissertation investigates the relationships between commitment, marital disruption and instability, and marital quality, utilizing the context of job loss. The study examines the loss of husbands' jobs at a corporation in the South around the year 2000. The job loss context is utilized, because past studies indicate that couples who have experienced job loss are more prone to marital instability and marital disruption than those who have not experienced job loss. For the purposes of research, it was important to find variation in commitment, marital stability, and marital quality.

I suggest that commitment, through work at positive conditions of marriage, encourages marital quality.

Findings indicate that most marriages in my sample remained successful in job loss, and all marriages remained stable. Most couples were highly committed, and small variations in commitment were not central to less success or marital disruption. Effective communication, quality time together, and positive affect seemed more important to marital quality over time than commitment; and lower commitment may be a result of

decreased marital quality. Thus, commitment's influence upon marital quality seems minimal, in comparison to effective communication, quality time together, and positive affect.

## **PART I. INTRODUCTION**

In the past half century, much consideration has been given to the determinants of marital stability and quality.

To date, the literature suggests that the most critical determinants of stable, quality marriages are affection (Popenoe, 2004), effective communication between spouses (Paul, 2002; Sanchez and Ganger, 2000; Whitehead and Popenoe, 2001), and spouses' emotional support (Gottman and Levenson, 2000; Gottman and Notarius, 2000). Many other observers suggest that "commitment," that is feelings regarding the permanency of one's marriage, encourages marital stability and quality (Doherty, 2001; Popenoe, 2004; Waite, Browning, Doherty, Gallagher, Luo, and Stanley, 2002), but to date, there has been little systematic study of the effects of commitment on marital stability and quality (Johnson, 1999; Popenoe, 2004; Stanley and Markman, 1992; Surra and Gray, 2000; Waite, Browning, Doherty, Gallagher, Luo, and Stanley, 2002).

While there is much consensus that commitment affects marital quality and stability, scholars often do not directly define commitment, or they define it in a variety of ways (Surra and Gray, 2000; Waite, Browning, Doherty, Gallagher, Luo, and Stanley, 2002). Also, there is a widespread belief that marital relationships are better and longer lasting when spouses work hard and determinedly to make marriages work (Doherty, 2001; Johnson, 1999; Popenoe, 2004; Stanley, 1998; Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1995). Consequently, *ceteris paribus*, couples who are more committed to their relationships are more likely to work harder and have higher quality, lasting relationships than those who are less committed (Doherty, 2001; Popenoe, 2004; Stanley, 1998).

These assumptions seem so obvious that they are rarely subject to question, and even more rarely are they the subject of empirical research (Surra and Gray, 2000; Waite, Browning, Doherty, Gallagher, Luo, and Stanley, 2002). However, there are reasons to question this simplistic interpretation.

First, it would seem that working harder and more determinedly can only help make relationships better and longer lasting. However, hard work may not influence marital quality and stability if marriages are “overdetermined” by factors external to marriages, such as a husband’s job loss (Elder, 1999). Also, hard work is not always constructively directed, or many times occurs after couples are seriously contemplating divorce (Striof and Striof, 2004). In addition, some couples have better relationships without hard work (Popenoe, 2004), and others may have difficulty despite their hard work (Striof and Striof, 2004). Therefore, hard work should generally be positively related to marital quality and survivability. However, the relationships between hard work and marital quality and stability may not be as strong as initially imagined. Thus, contrary to often-stated beliefs, having a good marriage does not necessarily indicate hard work, and having a poor marriage does not necessarily indicate negligence (Popenoe, 2004; Striof and Striof, 2004).

Second, it seems logical to say that spouses who are more committed to a relationship will work harder to make their marriages work (Popenoe, 2004; Striof and Striof, 2004). However, commitment does not always entail work (Nock, 1995), even when couples are subjected to challenges and stress. Couples who are seemingly less committed may nonetheless rise to challenges in their relationships (Striof and Striof,

2004). Thus, subjective views of commitment may determine how effectively couples deal with challenges.

Third, even if commitment is not always acted upon, it does seem reasonable to expect that couples who are highly committed are more likely to work at relationships than couples who are less committed. However, it may be that most couples are fairly committed to their relationships initially, with little variation. Thus, while committed couples do better than hardly committed couples, it may also be true that the small amounts of variation in commitment have hardly detectable effects in actions.

Understanding rather than assuming the effects of commitment can be important for improving the quality and duration of marriages, because there may be other factors that are more important determinants of marital quality and stability over time. For example, it may be much more important that couples develop effective ways to communicate when marital problems arise (Gottman, 1994).

This dissertation investigates the relationships between commitment, marital disruption and instability, and marital quality. I define commitment as the assumption that spouses will be together forever. I define marital disruption as changes in marriages that can negatively affect the stability of one's marriage. For example, increased hostility is said to be a strong predictor of marital instability (Elder, 1999; Gottman, 1994). Marital instability is divorce or separation. Marital quality is marital happiness, marital interaction and functioning (as seen in Spanier's marital quality scale, 1976), and spouses' subjective evaluations of their marriages.

The study examines variation in commitment among couples who have experienced the loss of a husband's job at a corporation in the South around the year

2000. This sample is utilized because past studies indicate that couples who have experienced job loss are more prone to marital instability and marital difficulties than those who have not experienced job loss (Elder, 1999; Newman, 1988). It was important to find more variation in commitment, marital quality, and marital stability than among those who had not experienced job loss.

I first define commitment and examine other scholarly definitions of commitment. I also examine spouses' subjective notions of commitment.

Second, I examine the job loss experiences of participants, and the extent to which these experiences became challenging, both financially and in terms of how effectively spouses responded to job loss.

Third, I examine whether variation in strength or notions of commitment is empirically related to the ways spouses respond to adversity, the work that they put into relationships, and the effectiveness of the work they put into relationships.

Related to work in marriage, I also specifically examine other factors that have been demonstrated to be related to marital quality and stability (Gottman, 1994; Levinger, 1965; Lewis and Spanier, 1979; Stanley and Markman, 1992), and that are said to be indicative of work in marriage (Doherty, 2001; Popenoe, 2004), and that are under couples' control (Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston, 1999; Stanley and Markman, 1992). These factors include communication skills, quality time together, alternative attractions, and pressures to stay married. Collectively, I call these factors "conditions of marriage." Communication skills have to do with how effectively spouses communicate when they disagree. Quality time together is a couples' one-on-one interaction that develops solidarity and positive affect between spouses. Both communication skills and quality

time together have to do with couples' interactions. Alternative attractions are spouses' perceived alternative partners, and pressures to stay married include spouses' perceived emotional, financial, and legal barriers to divorce. I also examine specifically whether the utilization of any of these conditions of marriage is related to commitment levels or subjective notions of commitment.

Finally, I determine whether variation in commitment is related to variation in marital quality and stability.

I should be upfront in explaining my own perspective in approaching this study. I began with the same beliefs as those described above. That is, commitment must be a crucial element to marital success, and oftentimes, it is coupled with hard work that makes marriages successful. When I realized that despite the widespread sharing of this belief, there was little direct empirical evidence, I set out to provide that evidence. However, in my efforts to demonstrate the importance of commitment, I found that small variations in amounts of commitment did not lead to any detectable differences in work at marriage or marital quality.

As will be seen in my discussion, I found couples who had different beliefs and actions; and these couples had differing notions of commitment. Yet, it was difficult to characterize some as "more" committed than others, and the differences that did exist did not have clearly predictable consequences. Some spouses who seemed less committed in a variety of traditional ways nevertheless worked hard and did well, and other spouses who expressed great commitment did not necessarily work harder than other spouses who seemed less committed. So, I came away from the investigation with increasing

questions of whether commitment should be the focus of improving marriages, when so many other seemingly more crucial factors are involved.

The first section of this dissertation is composed of Chapters 1, 2, and 3. Chapters 1 and 2 explore the relevant literature regarding factors leading to marital stability and quality and the relevant commitment literature. Chapter 3 is a discussion of the methods I employ for this study.

## **CHAPTER 1. FACTORS LEADING TO MARITAL STABILITY AND QUALITY**

The subjects of marital stability and quality have been of great interest to sociologists in the past 50 years, and there is a vast amount of literature on these topics (Gottman and Notarius, 2000; Lewis and Spanier, 1979). While this literature warns against assuming that all stable marriages are quality marriages, it is also true that marital quality is a strong predictor of marital stability (Lewis and Spanier, 1979).

Much of this literature has been devoted to understanding spousal interaction as a source of marital quality and stability (Gottman and Notarius, 2000; Lewis and Spanier, 1979). Specific to spousal interaction, positive affect, communication skills, role fit, and quality time together are said to be important predictors of marital quality and stability (Lewis and Spanier, 1979). External to couples' interactions, and heavily influenced by job loss, financial resources and satisfaction with life are said to influence marital quality and stability as well (Elder, 1999; Lewis and Spanier, 1979); and attractive alternatives and pressures to stay married also influence marital stability (Lewis and Spanier, 1979; Thibaut and Kelly, 1959). Figure 1.1 illustrates Lewis and Spanier's (1979) classic model of marital quality and stability, which takes into account all the above-mentioned factors leading to marital quality and stability.

### **MARITAL QUALITY AND MARITAL DISRUPTION AND INSTABILITY IN JOB LOSS**

Figure 1.2 is my model of marital quality, and marital disruption and instability in job loss. As Figure 1.2 indicates, I incorporate several elements of Lewis and Spanier's model. Specifically, my model shows external factors as well as characteristics of a couple that affect their marital quality. Then, marital quality is an important

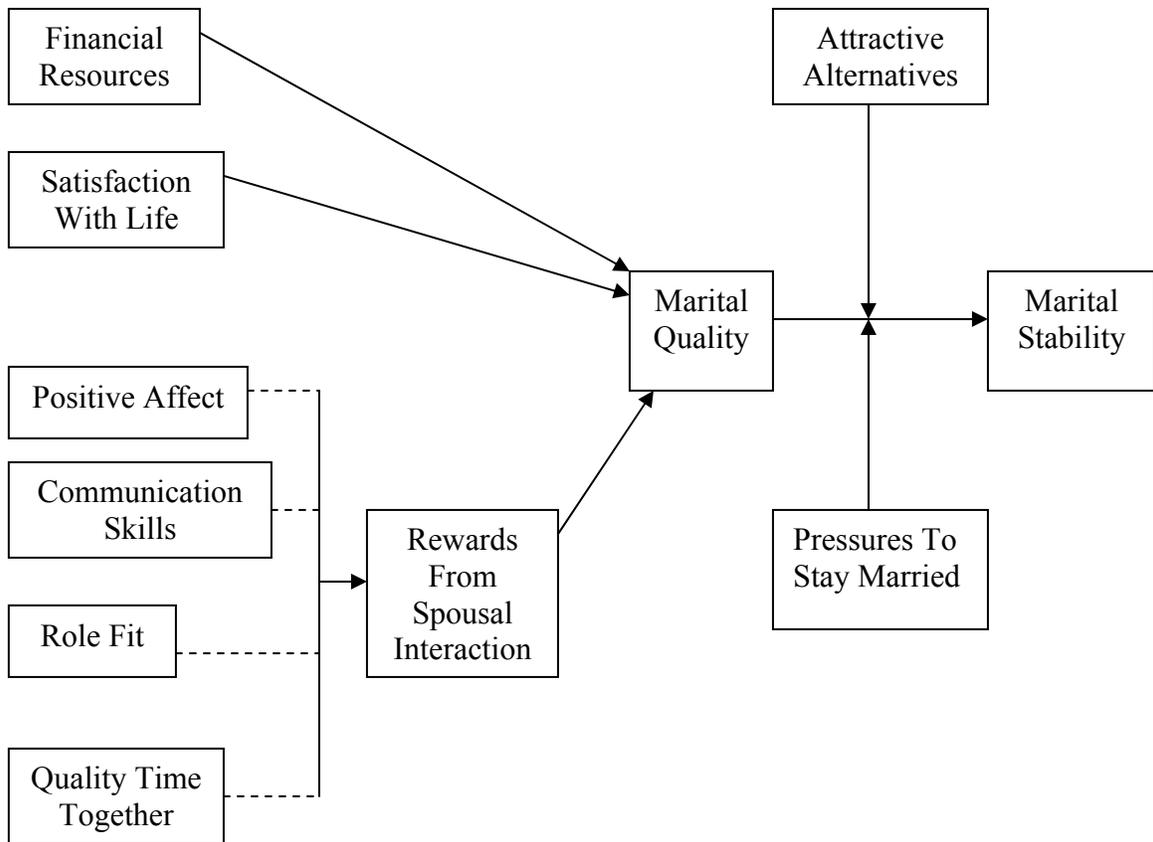


FIGURE 1.1: LEWIS AND SPANIER'S MODEL FOR MARITAL QUALITY AND STABILITY  
(Lewis and Spanier, 1979)

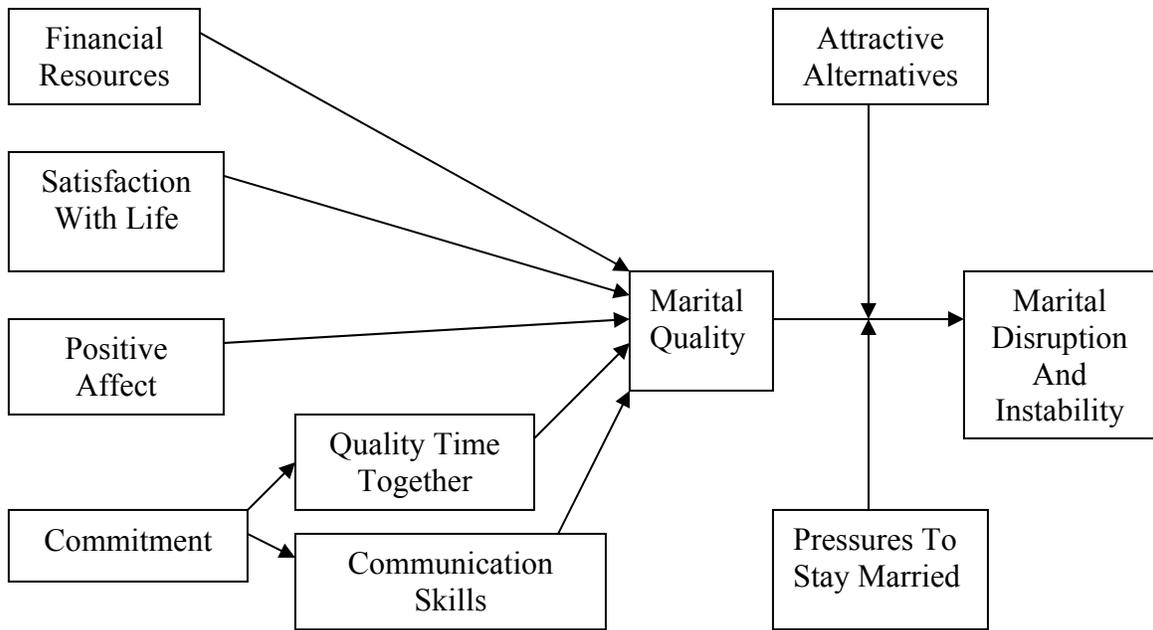


FIGURE 1.2: MARITAL QUALITY AND MARITAL DISRUPTION AND INSTABILITY IN JOB LOSS

determinant of marital stability, but tempered by some factors that hold couples together and others that drive them apart. However, there are a number of important ways in which my model is different.

A primary difference between my model and the Lewis and Spanier model is that I have included “marital disruption” as well as marital instability as the dependent variable under consideration. The only variation in marital stability arises from separation or divorce, which occur relatively infrequently over a short period of time. By including consideration of “disruption” in the form of hostility and conflict, the present study focuses on more common characteristics that are both important in themselves and might lead to separation and divorce over a longer term. Some specific elements of the Lewis and Spanier model were omitted in my model, to focus on those elements that are most relevant to the context studied here.

I am particularly interested in understanding how relationships change when confronted with job loss, and understanding the effects of commitment in this context. As a result, I have also added commitment as a factor leading to marital quality.

A central idea of the dissertation is that commitment affects conditions of marriage through work. Scholars have suggested that marriages are successful because of the work couples put into their marriages (Doherty, 2001; Gottman, 1994; Popenoe, 2004; Waite, Browning, Doherty, Gallagher, Luo, and Stanley, 2002), and that committed couples are successful because their marriages are characterized by work (Doherty, 2001; Waite, Browning, Gallagher, Luo, and Stanley, 2002). However, there is very little empirical evidence to link commitment and work at marriage (Johnson, 1999; Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston, 1999; Stanley and Markman, 1992; Waite, Browning, Doherty,

Gallagher, Luo, and Stanley, 2002). A goal of this dissertation is to better understand if commitment affects conditions of marriage through work.

While conditions of marriage may be affected by work in marriage, the mere *presence* of these conditions does not necessarily indicate that couples have worked hard to develop these conditions (Gottman, 1994; Levinger, 1965). For example, couples who are affectionate communicate well, with few conscious efforts to develop effective communication. Satisfied couples may pay less attention to alternatives without conscious effort to do so (Thibaut and Kelly, 1959). And work can be negatively associated with good conditions if couples who consciously work hard to improve their conditions of marriage are those who have had less success in marriages, prior to their work (Gottman, 1994).

As a part of analysis, I determine the presence of conditions of marriage in all marriages in my sample. I also specifically examine the extent to which spouses consciously work to affect these conditions.

Also, central to marital quality and marital disruption and instability in job loss are financial resources and satisfaction with life, and these factors leading to marital quality are included in my model as well. For the purposes of research, financial resources are considered any monetary supplies that alleviate the tension of job loss (Elder, 1999; Lewis and Spanier, 1979). I consider “satisfaction with life” as any expression regarding spouses’ frustration or contentment with their job loss experience.

The literature specific to marital quality and job loss suggests that financial resources and satisfaction with life are heavily influenced by job loss (Elder, 1999; Newman, 1988). However, financial resources or difficulties and satisfaction with life

have less influence on marital quality in job loss than on-going effective communication and historic positive affect (Elder, 1999). Still, having financial resources, such as considerable savings accounts, can ease the tension of job loss (Elder, 1999); and with lengthy unemployment experiences, financial resources and satisfaction with life become more critical to marital quality and the viability of marriages (Elder, 1999). I too suggest that financial resources and satisfaction with life can influence marital quality in job loss. However, their influence may only become important in lengthy unemployment experiences.

To summarize, my model is specific to the context of job loss, and thus, I choose to examine marital disruption and instability. Also, a focus of my model is commitment as a source of marital quality, and in particular, a source of work that can affect conditions of marriage.

Because commitment is central to the dissertation, Chapter 2 is devoted to a discussion of commitment and its potential to influence work that can affect conditions of marriage.

## **CHAPTER 2. COMMITMENT, MARITAL DISRUPTION AND INSTABILITY, AND MARITAL QUALITY**

While the outcomes of interest in this dissertation are marital quality and marital disruption and instability, a primary motivation for this research was to better understand commitment as an independent variable. Thus, in this chapter, I focus upon what is known about commitment as a source of success in marriage.

### **DEFINING COMMITMENT**

Social psychologists have typically defined commitment in terms of prior constraints or attractions and rewards (Surra and Gray, 2000). Commitment is said to be relevant to feelings of *needing* or *having* to be in a relationship (Becker, 1960) or to feelings of *wanting* to be in a relationship (Dean and Spainer, 1974). Constraining commitment, relevant to needing or having to be in a relationship, is often said to be structural or moral commitment (Johnson, 1999). And commitment having to do with wanting to be in a relationship is most commonly called personal commitment (Johnson, 1999). Empirical evidence indicates that when couples think of their commitment, they most commonly think of it in terms of attraction (Stanley and Markman, 1992).

However, many have suggested that the only commitment relevant to long-term marital stability and quality is that which implies moral constraints (Doherty, 2001; Stanley, 1998; Waite, Browning, Doherty, Gallagher, Luo, and Stanley, 2002).

In addition, some have said that commitment and adversity are intimately linked, and that commitment is not fully realized until adversity occurs (Brickman, 1987; Lyndon and Zanna, 1990). This literature suggests that adversity is especially relevant to commitment when it is subjectively perceived as a means of affirming commitment (Lyndon and Zanna, 1990), prior to adversity. Empirical evidence does suggest that

adversity shapes commitment, when values regarding commitment entail adversity before adversity occurs (Lyndon and Zanna, 1990). However, thus far, these empirical tests have been limited to the use of students in the context of commitment to projects (Lyndon and Zanna, 1990).

Still others have discussed commitment in terms of marriage-preserving behavior, in which a *guarantee* of marriage-preserving behavior is implied (Leik and Leik, 1977). This commitment is said to be a result of attraction and constraints (Johnson and Rusbult, 1989). However, it is most noteworthy because of its pragmatic value in making marriages stable and successful. Implications of this commitment are similar to the implications of marriage vows, in which spouses *promise* to unconditionally love and honor each other. Subsequently, this commitment is thought to be not easily changed. Understanding commitment in this way means committed spouses will clearly and consistently act in ways that indicate they will continue in the marriage union (Nock, 1995). For example, it has been suggested that committed spouses do not contemplate alternative partners (Leik and Leik, 1977).

I borrow most from this final viewpoint of commitment. I suggest that while commitment can be conceptualized in terms of attractions or constraints, it is best understood as an attitude in which guaranteed behaviors are implied. I define commitment as *feeling that one will always be married to their spouse*. Therefore, commitment becomes an assumption in marriage.

Also, because guaranteed behavior is implied commitment, I suggest that it is steadfast and not easily changed. And because it is tenacious and unmovable, it seems logical that this commitment can potentially foster relatively stable conditions of

marriage that are relevant to marital stability and quality. However, because it becomes an assumption that is sometimes unconscious, its relation to hard work in marriage may not be strong.

In addition, while this commitment is resilient, I suggest that it is not born out of adversity. I suggest that adversity and commitment are separate, and commitment exists prior to and regardless of adversity. However, over time, adversity might shape commitment. Whether or not commitment is affected by adversity largely depends upon spouses' commitment levels prior to adversity. I also suggest that it is dependant upon the extreme circumstances couples experience as a part of adversity.

Finally, I also suggest that there are measurable components of this commitment. In particular, I choose to examine a moral component of commitment, that I call moral commitment. I define moral commitment as *feeling that individuals ought to stay married because of moral convictions about marriage*.

As a part of my analysis, I examine levels of commitment and subjective notions of commitment at three times. I also measure levels of moral commitment at these times.

### **COMMITMENT AND CONDITIONS OF MARRIAGE**

A central theme of the commitment literature is that commitment is centrally tied to communication skills, quality time together, alternative attractions, and pressures to stay married, that also influence marital stability and quality (Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston, 1999; Johnson and Rusbult, 1989; Stanley and Markman, 1992). However, there is disagreement about the nature of this relationship. Some argue that commitment is a product of effective communication skills, quality time together, and pressures to stay married, and limited attractive alternatives (Nock, 1995).

Others suggest commitment and conditions of marriage are in a reciprocal relationship. Empirical findings from this literature indicate that as communication skills, quality time together, and pressures to stay married increase and attractive alternatives decrease, individuals' commitment levels also intensify. Subsequent high commitment produces further devaluation of attractive alternatives and further investments in relationships over time (Johnson and Rusbult, 1989; Thibaut and Kelly, 1959).

Still, other works propose that commitment encourages the creation and maintenance of positive conditions in marriage (Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston, 1999; Stanley and Markman, 1992), that affect marital stability and quality. This literature suggests that because commitment implies consistency, individuals high in commitment will make their attitudes, behaviors, and environment consistent (Stanley and Markman, 1992). However, this literature currently yields few empirical findings related to this hypothesis. Findings do indicate that committed spouses say that pressures to stay married are necessary and positive forces for stabilizing their marriages and making them successful (Stanley and Markman, 1992).

In addition, the literature suggests that moral commitment in particular encourages development and maintenance of positive conditions of marriage (Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston, 1999), and some have suggested that this commitment is most relevant to the long-term stability and success of marriages (Doherty, 2001; Stanley, 1998). However, others suggest that while moral commitment preserves marital stability, marriages that are only characterized by moral commitment may be unsatisfying

(Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston, 1999). To date, there is no empirical evidence to support either of these hypotheses (Surra and Gray, 2000).

While it seems logical that committed couples will affect conditions of marriage in ways that positively affect marital stability and quality, it is also possible that commitment may not be as important to marital stability and quality as initially assumed. In addition, it is possible that commitment's influence of conditions of marriage can vary among couples, depending upon their subjective views of commitment or their marital quality prior to hard work at affecting conditions of marriage. Ultimately, commitment's importance to marital stability and quality may not be universal; and in-fact, commitment's relevance to marital stability and quality may be more important to marriages that are in need of work.

As a part of my analysis, I empirically examine the link between commitment and conditions of marriage. Specifically, I examine whether or not levels of commitment or subjective notions of commitment influence how couples *affect* conditions of marriage. Through this analysis, I can better understand the extent to which commitment is relevant to marital stability and quality.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODS

### THE BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

All couples in my sample have husbands who were laid off from a corporation in the South around the year 2000.

Past studies indicate that a husband's job loss can be a significant challenge to marriage. Subsequently, there is typically more variation in marital stability and quality among couples whose husbands have lost jobs than in other couples in the general married population (Elder, 1999; Newman, 1988). Because it was important for me to see variation in marital stability and quality as well as commitment, I choose to utilize the job loss context.

While the job loss context was critical, I specifically chose to examine the selected corporation because of the sudden nature of layoffs. Additionally, prior to layoffs, employees were taught to think of themselves highly, and were compensated on the high end of industry standards. I felt that all of these factors contributed to a case of job loss in the extreme. Subsequently, I could potentially see many marriages that were enormously challenged under these circumstances.

By 2000, layoffs at the corporation were not altogether unexpected. However, the layoffs were more sudden and extensive than most anticipated. The abrupt way in which employees were laid off was surprising and disheartening to several of those who experienced the layoff.

Prior to the massive layoff, the corporation's employees were told that with hard work and determination they could rise to almost any rank in the company; and hard work was required of employees. It was not uncommon for employees to work over 12

hour days. Additionally, emphasis on individual merit also bred a culture of invincibility at the corporation. That is, hard work (that was required of employees) would advance employees and make them in-dispensable. For the most part, employees largely bought into this idea. So when they were laid off, many employees had difficulty accepting their fate.

While the emotional consequences of job loss can be painful, perhaps the most urgent and real consequence is the economic hardship that families face. Although couples in my sample differ in important and interesting ways, a general problem is that virtually all husbands were primary breadwinners prior to the lay offs. Husbands were not only primary breadwinners, but many wives did not work at all preceding lay offs. Additionally, the far majority of my sample also said that they received their family's health insurance through husbands' jobs; and when wives did work, most had significantly lower health insurance benefits than those available at the corporation.

### **THE SAMPLE SELECTION**

I conducted 28 in-depth interviews with former (male) employees and their wives (14 couples altogether) in the winter of 2002 and 2003 and the summer of 2004. I chose to interview male employees, because in most cases, these individuals are primary breadwinners. In addition, I chose to interview *only* male employees, to keep my research theoretically uncomplicated. Finally, couples had been married 10 years or less. I focused upon these couples, because marriages lasting this duration are more susceptible to divorce than longer-lasting marriages (Gottman and Levenson, 2000; Gottman and Notarius, 2000; Macionis, 2004, Paul, 2002), and for the purposes of research, variation in marital stability was preferable.

To obtain interviews, I first asked for participants among a lay-off support and networking group. In 2001, I attended three of their functions. I did this in order to make initial contact with potential interviewees, and to learn about additional ways in which I could obtain interviews. At these functions, I approached several potential participants and asked for interviews with them, based upon their eligibility. Upon agreeing to interviews, I asked these potential interviewees for their telephone numbers and email addresses. I also posted a request for participation over the group's on-line message board. In this request, I briefly described my study and outlined criteria for participation. The request was meant to inspire would-be participants; and, it was thought to be general enough to avoid drawing only those who exhibited homogeneous commitment to their marriages (whether high or low). My request was sent to 1,500 of the group's members. (See Appendix for this request).

In addition to requesting interviews through the support and networking group, I also contacted an additional association for laid-off employees, and asked that they send the same request for participants to their membership list. There are approximately 2,000 members<sup>1</sup> of this group, and my solicitation was sent to all these members. At the end of my recruiting efforts, I found that most participants were recruited through this email request.

### **Sample Size**

Originally, I had hoped to interview at least 40 spouses (making up 20 couples). However, all my attempts to contact interviewees yielded a smaller sample size (N = 28 spouses, making up 14 couples).

---

<sup>1</sup> Members are both past and present employees that are interested in plight of laid-off employees.

In his book *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* (1998), Irving Seidman discusses how qualitative researchers know when they have “enough” participants (48). Although there is no one way of telling what sample size is enough, Seidman does suggest using the criteria of sufficiency and saturation. Sufficiency has to do with interviewing a wide enough variety of people so that participants will exhibit somewhat different experiences or thought processes. Saturation has to do with hearing the same information enough times, so that the interviewer is no longer learning anything new. I believe that my sample size meets both these criteria.

Couples’ experiences and thought processes have been varied. Most notably, couples have viewed the job loss process and their commitment to marriage in different ways. Additionally, I interviewed enough participants to hear some of the same information multiple times. This information had to do with both objective and subjective questions. For example, I heard much of the same information on how husbands found out about the lay-offs, and about how couples dealt with the first few weeks after job losses. Based upon the criteria of sufficiency and saturation, I have found that my data accurately depict the job loss process and how it relates to marital commitment.

Seidman (1998) also goes on to say that while the criteria of sufficiency and saturation are important, oftentimes practical considerations such as time, money, and resources are more important for doctoral research. While I had hoped to have a larger, more varied sample, I feel that the sample is sufficient, given its practical limitations.

## **Non-representativeness, Self-Selection Bias, and Sample Characteristics**

The selection of my sample warrants discussion about the representativeness of my sample and sampling bias. *The sample is not random, nor is it meant to represent any larger population*<sup>2</sup>. Instead, the sample is meant to generate in-depth answers to the “how?” and “why?” questions regarding commitment, marital stability, and marital quality.

In soliciting participation in the ways I have, it is impossible to eliminate sampling bias. Sampling bias has occurred at the support and networking group’s functions, because I have not been able to undoubtedly know that I have spoken with all eligible males attending these events. Despite my concerted efforts to speak with all eligible participants, my solicitations have made it easier for volunteers to get noticed first and most. Others may have slipped out the doors without me taking note. In addition, the events I have attended have had a maximum of 300 former employees in attendance<sup>3</sup>. Thus, not all laid-off employees were represented at these functions. Email and message board solicitations are also subject to sampling bias. While messages were sent to *all* members, those interested in participating may have expressed interest because of self-selecting reasons.

Volunteering (both at events and over email) for such a study indicates something about the quality of one’s marriage. Karney, Davila, Cohan, Sullivan, Johnson and

---

<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it would be impossible to obtain such a sample using the corporation’s context. This is because there are no publicly-available lists of former employees; and those that are proprietary do not track marital status of former employees (Karen Denne, Public Relations, May 21, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Just after the lay-offs, attendance at events was high. However, as time passed, many former employees began to lose interest in the support and networking group and the events it sponsored.

Bradbury (1995) say that those who respond to mailed invitations<sup>4</sup> to participate in marital research are generally highly educated, have occupational prestige, and have high marital quality. The self-selection bias seen in my study is consistent with the self-selection bias that Karney, Davila, Cohan, Sullivan, Johnson and Bradbury (1995) discuss.

In many cases, volunteers for my study participated because they felt that their marriages were good. This is not to say that my participants' marriages are homogeneously happy or without stress and strain. Some spouses have mentioned severe problems in dealing with job loss. Some spouses have also indicated that they are unhappy and/or are not fully committed to their marriages. However, I have *not* found the overall variation I was expecting in commitment, marital quality, and marital stability; and participants have generally been very committed to their marriages.

For the most part, my participants are also highly educated. In general, husbands are college-educated, have MBA's, master's degrees, or in some cases doctoral work. While I cannot speculate on the educational levels of those who refused, participants may be more open to research because of their own educational backgrounds. Most all marriages are first marriages, and the majority of participants have gotten married in their mid-to-late twenties. Finally, most wives earn considerably less than husbands, even after lay-offs. Several wives are stay-at-home moms. Chapter 5 provides greater detail about the sample as I found them in my first wave interviews.

In addressing sampling bias, some have suggested that researchers should describe information about the population of interest whenever possible (Brauer & Bay, 1992). Unfortunately, this is impossible in my study. It is also important to account for

---

<sup>4</sup> For this study, couples' names and addresses were found on publicly-available marriage licenses.

the proportion of respondents to non-respondents (Brauer & Bay, 1992). This is also impossible for me to do, because I have no way of accounting for all *eligible* participants at the events or via the email requests.

Although my sample is subject to self-selection biases and is non-representative, I feel it is justified. The study is meant to be exploratory in nature, and the sample I have chosen has allowed for this. While the findings of this dissertation are not predictive of other married couples' commitment levels, the information I have gained is valuable because it is the first empirical data of its kind. Concepts and ideas that are explored in this dissertation can certainly be studied in other contexts in the future.

### **QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN AND MEASUREMENT**

Time 1 and Time 2 questionnaires contained both scaled and open-ended questions. Both question styles were utilized together to more fully understand concepts of interest. An added benefit of utilizing both question styles was that participants stayed engaged and interested in interviews. Finally, great care was taken so that questionnaires might measure concepts of interest without getting too personal.

Time 1 questionnaires began with asking questions about present circumstances. Questions were then asked about pre-lay-off attitudes and behaviors. Talking about the present and then the past was done in order to get more honest interpretations of the past. It was felt that if pre-lay-off questions were asked first, then participants would be inclined to answer thinking of the present. Finally, Time 1 questionnaires asked about post lay-off attitudes and behaviors.

Time 2 questionnaires also delved into attitudes and behaviors for the summer of 2003. All concepts of interest were the same for Time 2 questionnaires, and questions

about attitudes and behaviors were virtually identical to questions about these things at Time 1. Time 2 questionnaires also asked about communication skills prior to marriage. These questions were asked, because upon initial analysis of Time 1 data it became necessary to better understand whether communication induced commitment or vice versa.

Some scaled questions for Time 1 and Time 2 questionnaires were taken from previous studies. Others were devised specifically for this study. I detail scaled questions and open-ended questions with the concepts they measure next.

### **Measurement of Concepts**

Commitment. I measured commitment using the following five items: (a) How confident do you feel that you would always be married to your husband/wife? Response categories are: not confident at all (=1); somewhat confident; fairly confident; very confident; absolutely certain (5). (b) Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about the future of your relationship? Response categories are: I want desperately for my relationship to succeed, and I will go to almost any length to see that it does (=6); I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and I will do all I can to see that it does; I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and I will do my fair share to see that it does; It would be nice if my relationship succeeded, but I can't do much more than I am doing to help it succeed; It would be nice if it succeeded, but I refused to do any more than what I am doing to keep the relationship going; My relationship could never succeed, and there is nothing more I could do to keep this relationship going (1) (Dean and Spanier, 1974) (c) How often, if ever, do you think about getting a divorce? Response categories range from never (= 1) to more often than once a week (6). (d) How

committed would you say you are to your marriage? Response categories range from not committed at all (=1) to totally committed (5). (e) Now that I have asked you these very specific questions about your commitment to your marriage at that time, can you give me a better feel for your feeling of commitment at that time in your own words? (open-ended response).

Moral Commitment. I measured moral commitment using the following three items. (a) Even when marriage doesn't seem to be satisfying the individuals involved, how important is it that those individuals stay married? Responses range from not important at all (=1) to very important (5) (Feld and Rosier, personal correspondence). (b) Should someone stay married or divorce: If one or both spouses fell out of love. Response ranged from certainly divorce (=1) to certainly stay married (7) (Feld and Rosier, personal correspondence). (c) Should someone stay married or divorce: If one or both spouses were unhappy with marriage, even after getting counseling, and trying everything to make their marriage better (Feld and Rosier, personal correspondence). Response categories are the same as for question b.

#### Conditions Of Marriage

- Communication Skills. Scaled communications questions are based upon questions from Gottman's work (1994) about couples' communication. They are as follows: Generally speaking, when you and your spouse disagree, how likely are you to... (a) Express your point of view; (b) Avoid further discussions about your disagreement; (c) Listen to and try to understand their point of view; (d) Avoid dealing with your spouse for at least a brief period of time. Response categories range from not likely (=1) to almost certainly (5) (Gottman, 1994). The following open-ended questions were also

asked at Time 1 and Time 2. (e) Have your reactions to disagreements between you and your wife changed since being laid off? How were your reactions different prior to the lay off? (open-ended responses). At Time 2 the following open-ended questions were asked about communication *prior to* marriage, to get a better feel for couples' communication skills over time. (f) Next, I want to just briefly ask you about your communication even BEFORE you were married. How would you describe your communications? Would you say that the two of you communicated well, or was communication ever a problem? (g) How important was good communication to you early on in your relationship? (h) What has happened to your communication skills over time? Have these skills improved with time? If so, why do you think these skills have improved? (In other words, have you worked at them, or has communication just come naturally?)

- Quality Time Together. I measured quality time spent together by asking the following open-ended questions. Questions were designed to understand how much quality time spouses spend together, and what constitutes quality time for individual spouses. (a) Do you arrange to spend quality time together on a regular basis or in response to problems? (If yes) (b) What do you do during your quality time, and how often do you do it? (c) How often do you spend quality time with your spouse? (get hour amount) (d) How do you spend this time?

- Attractive Alternatives. At Time 1 and Time 2, the following questions were asked about relationships with potential alternative partners. Questions were designed to assess actual attractive alternatives and attractive alternatives monitoring. (a) In a typical week, how likely is it that you find yourself talking with other people about issues that you

think you should have been talking about with your spouse? (b) These days, how often do you find that people who you spend time with are in the following categories? single (same sex) (=1); happily married (same sex); unhappily married (same sex); single (opposite sex); happily married (opposite sex); unhappily married (opposite sex) (6). At Time 2, the following question was added after question b to better understand attitudes about alternatives monitoring: Out of all the people I just mentioned, is there any one group that you tend NOT to associate with because of their marital status?

- Pressures to Stay Married. Questions about pressures to stay married had to do with the degree to which financial, emotional, social, and legal barriers to divorce exist in marriages. They are as follows: (a) Just thinking in terms of finances, how much do you stand to lose if you and your spouse ever got divorced? Answer categories range from not much at all (= 1) to it would be devastating (5). (b) Just thinking in terms of feelings and emotion, how much do you stand to lose if you ever got divorced? (where answers are identical to answers for question a). (c) If you were to ever get a divorce, to what extent would this hurt your relationship with family and friends? (where answers are identical to answers for question a). (d) Can you explain how? (e) Apart from the effects of being divorced, how difficult and painful do you think it would be to experience and go through the legal process of getting a divorce? (where answers are identical to answers for question a).

Marital Quality. Marital quality was measured by asking questions about marital interaction and functioning (from Spanier's Marital Quality Scale, 1976), and marital happiness.

- Marital Interaction and Functioning. Questions from Spanier's Marital Quality Scale (1976) were also utilized to assess couples' marital quality. Questions measured spouses' agreement about finances, household tasks, career decisions, and aims and goals, where 5 = always agree, and 0 = always disagree. Questions also had to do with the frequency of leaving the house after a fight, discussing divorce or separation, thinking that things are going well between spouses, confiding in a mate, regretting ever having gotten married, quarrelling, and getting on each other's nerves, where 5 = never, and 0 = all of the time for all categories except thinking that things are going well between spouses and confiding in a mate. For these categories, scales were reverse coded.

- Marital Happiness. I measured marital satisfaction by adapting the following question from Spanier's (1976) Marital Quality Scale. (a) Which of the following best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship (now – for Time 1 and 2)? Would you say your relationship is extremely unhappy, fairly unhappy, a little unhappy, happy, very happy, extremely happy, or perfect? (where extremely unhappy = 1 and perfect = 7).

Psychological Well-Being. I utilized a seven-item version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale to assess husbands' and wives' psychological well-being. Questions assessed troubles with sleeping, loneliness, and motivation. Participants were asked how many days in the past week they had problems with these issues. Psychological well-being questions were not asked for pre-layoff scenarios.

Self-Esteem. To measure husbands' and wives' self esteem, I utilized a modified version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Questions related to

self-esteem asked participants about attitudes toward self in the area of abilities, qualities, and personal satisfaction, where 5 = strongly agree, and 1 = strongly disagree.

### **DATA COLLECTION**

The data for this dissertation were collected in the winter of 2002 and 2003, and the summer of 2004. As discussed previously, I suspected that several variables concerning marriages could change at least somewhat in unemployment. Therefore, it is critical to monitor over time. In having data at multiple time points, I also felt that I would be able to understand the extent to which attitudes and behavior are malleable under duress.

Upon completion of my Time 1 interview design, I submitted proposed interviews, informed consent forms, and a summary of my proposed study to Louisiana State University's Institutional Review Board for approval. Expedited approval was received after the submission, and I began contacting potential participants to schedule interview times.

Before Time 2 interviews, I also submitted Time 2 proposed interviews, informed consent forms, and a summary of my study to Louisiana State University's Institutional Review Board for approval. At this point in time, the review board suggested that I apply for a Confidentiality Certificate from the National Institute of Health. The Confidentiality Certificate would protect me from being forced, even under a court subpoena, to release information that could identify participants. Upon receiving this certificate, I could receive the Institutional Review Boards' full approval. I received the Confidentiality Certificate on May 25, 2004, and then immediately received full approval from the Institutional Review Board.

Prior to making contact with participants, I decided that both husbands and wives must be willing to participate, in order for them to become couples in my sample. In most cases, both spouses either agreed to interviews or refused. In three cases, one spouse initially wanted to participate and their spouses refused. Upon further consideration, both spouses decided they should not participate.

In the 24 hours prior to interviews, I contacted participants via email and/or phone to confirm interview times. When interviews were conducted over the telephone, I would read informed consent forms and would get verbal consent before beginning interviews. For in-person interviews, I collected signed informed consent forms before interviews began.

All interviews lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to two hours. Husbands and wives were interviewed separately. This was done in order to keep answers as honest as possible. At Time 1, I attempted to do all in-person interviews. It was thought that a good rapport could be established by meeting participants in-person. However, telephone interviews were conducted when participants had conflicts with childcare, or had free time at unorthodox hours because of unconventional work schedules. Also, telephone interviews were conducted in cases where participants had left the geographical area. At Time 2, all interviews were conducted over the telephone. At this point in time, it was felt that a good rapport had already been established, and thus, there was no need to meet again in-person.

All interviews were tape recorded, with the permission of interviewees. Upon completing interviews, I transcribed tapes. In general, tapes took between six and eight hours to transcribe. Tapes were stored in a locked box at my home, in which I am the

only person to have access to the key. Tapes were labeled, using only letter and number identifiers. For example, the first husband to be interviewed is “H1” on my tapes.

Transcripts also have these letter/number identifiers, and all references to spouses’ names in interviews have been recoded with the same letter/number identifiers. References to other family member’s names were deleted. All dissertation references to specific spouses do not include names or pseudonyms. Hard copies of transcripts, signed informed consent forms, copies of questionnaires, contact information, and couples’ profiles were printed and filed in an additional locked boxes, in which I am the only one person to have access to the keys. All computer files are also password-protected. Upon completion of the dissertation, I will erase all tapes and destroy all hard copies and computer copies of transcripts, questionnaires, informed consent forms, participants’ contact information, and couples’ profiles. As a part of having a Confidentiality Certificate, I am required to do this by the National Institute of Health.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Qualitative data analysis requires structure and depth (Creswell, 1998), and analysis is to ultimately meant answer the “how?”, “why?”, and “so what?” questions (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). To answer these questions, I utilized prescriptive steps for achieving these purposes, as used by past qualitative researchers (Seidman, 1998). I detail these steps next.

### **Step One – Describing Couples**

While completing transcripts, I began writing couples’ profiles. It was initially felt that profiles were a good way to get organized and get a feel for all my data. In

writing profiles, I could also begin to understand emerging themes in my data (Seidman, 1998).

All couple's profiles included a background of each couple, that described each husband's work history, and husbands' re-employment status. Backgrounds also detailed how each spouse felt about their marriage, and contained stories of how couples met. Some backgrounds also contained additional issues that spouses felt were important to tell me. Couple's profiles summarized open-ended findings for each spouse regarding commitment, moral commitment, and conditions of marriage. Finally, the profiles described happiness of spouses, their marital adjustment levels, and what couples saw for themselves in the future.

Because couple's profiles were meant to be a first step in data analysis, I summarized spouse's feelings and behaviors *in their own words*. Consequently, all couple's profiles contained many quotes, and no profiles contained my own interpretations or coding schemas. In this first step, it was felt that the data should speak for itself. My interpretations would develop more fully over time.

Some profiles are longer than others. Typically, profile length reflected the length of interviews. Also, some profiles are more compelling than others, as are some interviews. Profiles are generally at least five pages long.

In initially describing couples, I also created an excel file that contained demographic information about couples, including each spouse's race, duration of their marriage, number of their marriage, duration of husband's unemployment, husband's current employment status, and husband's educational level. In addition, this file contained scaled values for each spouse's scaled commitment, moral commitment,

marital happiness, and marital adjustment answers. I also created SPSS files, containing all answers to scaled questions and descriptor variables for both husbands and wives. I then created a couples' SPSS file with this same information.

### **Step Two -- Variables and Thematic Summaries**

Upon completing couples' descriptions, I moved on to summarizing data by variables of interest and emerging themes. In many cases, variables of interest and themes overlapped. For example, at Time 1, the ways in which spouse's described their commitment became a central theme that highlighted a variable of interest.

I also coded open-ended questions. In coding open-ended questions, my purpose was to make coding schemas as clear as possible. In most cases, open-ended responses fell into obvious categories. For example, questions about whether or not behavior or attitudes had changed since the lay-off were straightforward to code. Questions involving descriptions were more difficult. For these questions, answer categories emerged in analysis. Answer categories were considered tentative at first. As analysis progressed, categories were revised until I felt they were clear and accurate.

In this step of analysis, I also included summaries for scaled questions. In summaries, poignant quotations were included that underscored variables or themes. Finally, my own interpretations were included in these summaries.

At Time 1, I constructed summaries for commitment, moral commitment, conditions of marriage, and spousal support. I also wrote a five page, single-spaced summary of all findings to date. Between Time 1 and Time 2 interviews, I read over summaries again, and went back to the data to sometimes clarify and revise initial remarks.

Throughout this process, I continually realized the value of qualitative research. In Time 1 analysis, I began to see unexpected and interesting findings. For example, I was most struck by spouses' various notions of their commitment. In the following chapters, I detail findings for the dissertation, beginning with how spouses describe their commitment in marriage.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

All 14 couples in my sample had unique stories, and some of these stories were relevant to dissertation analysis. However, in disseminating some of these stories in their original forms, participants could be made more vulnerable or could be identified more easily (Seidman, 1998). Therefore, in some scenarios, stories are told in a way that does not distort their meaning. However, details of stories are sometimes modified or left out to protect the identity of participants.

## **PART II. RETROSPECTIVE AND TIME 1 FINDINGS**

Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 examine spouses' commitment levels and notions, their unemployment experiences, and their "work" at affecting the conditions of marriage at Time 1.

I conclude that while most spouses were highly committed, and those with slightly higher commitment than others did no more "work" than others in affecting conditions of marriage. Furthermore, there was more variation in marital quality than commitment levels, making it seem unlikely that commitment was predictive of marital quality.

## **CHAPTER 4. COMMITMENT RETROSPECTIVELY AND AT TIME 1**

In this chapter, I discuss spouses' retrospective and Time 1 commitment levels, and their notions of commitment. These findings indicate that most all spouses were highly committed. And although there were varying notions of commitment, there were no particular types of commitment that were associated with high marital quality.

### **COMMITMENT**

In Time 1 interviews, scaled questions were asked about spouses' commitment levels, and spouses were asked to describe their commitment in their own words. These commitment questions were asked retrospectively (for the summer prior to husbands' job loss), and for the current time period (winter of 2002 & 2003).

Spouses consistently had high levels of commitment. Specifically, only two wives indicated being any less than "very confident" that they would always be married to their spouses; only two wives said they would do less than "all they can" to see that their relationships succeed; only two wives thought about divorce more than "rarely"; and only one wife said that she was less than "very committed" retrospectively and at Time 1. I was initially surprised by this lack of variation. However, past commitment research demonstrates that unless marriages are really poor, spouses generally give what they feel are socially desirable answers to questions regarding commitment (Dean and Spanier, 1974). Spouses generally feel that they should be committed to their marriages, so they answer questions in terms of how committed they think they should be (Dean and Spanier, 1974).

While I found little overall variation, I found that some wives were notably less committed to their marriages. These wives thought of divorce at least once a month

retrospectively, and were less certain that they would always be married than were other spouses.

One of these wives also said she was “not at all committed” to her marriage, and explained that she felt confined in her marriage. She was from a traditional, religiously-conservative community in the Midwest, where it was normative for many women to marry young. She too had married young, and she said that the marriage she had was inconsistent with what she wanted out of life. For example, she wanted to get a college degree, and postpone motherhood. Instead, she had become a mother and was forced to stay at home.

Speaking retrospectively, the one wife who was less than very committed said that she felt helpless in her marriage prior to layoffs. This was because of her husband’s stressful job. She said that being less than very committed was “out of desperation” more than anything

So while there was little overall variation in commitment levels, two wives expressed less commitment to their marriages than the other spouses.

### **Subjective Notions of Commitment**

Spouses were also asked to describe, in their own words, their thoughts of commitment, for thinking retrospectively and for Time 1. Subjective notions of commitment were varied, and changed some over time.

When spouses described their subjective notions of commitment retrospectively, I was immediately struck by how nine spouses framed commitment in terms of satisfaction, reciprocity, or rewards (i.e. they were committed because relationships were

satisfying and they felt that they were receiving rewards by continued interaction with spouses). Three out of the four husbands who described their commitment in this way had wives who depicted their retrospective commitment in these terms as well. For example, one husband said, about his commitment:

We found a friendship, a bond, a camaraderie. That was, was only going to grow and never, never weaken or die off. And once we fell in love, and realized that we had the ability and we had made the choice to spend the rest of our life together, that we were only going to get stronger and more in love and closer as friends as that went on.

While there was unity in thoughts for many husbands and wives who framed their commitment in terms of reciprocity, rewards, or satisfaction, nine couples were composed of spouses who had varying notions of commitment. For example, some husbands (only) framed commitment in terms of family history and marriage.

Related to my definition of commitment, I found that three husbands said that they had not given much thought to commitment. However, like my definition, these husbands' thoughts about commitment were not cavalier. Instead, these husbands saw their marriages as something that they committed to initially, which gave them little need to think of commitment often or continually. For example one husband said:

Once we got married, it was one of those things like, 'OK, well that part of my life is over for right now. I've got to concentrate on my work.' So, it wasn't a whole lot of time. I didn't take a whole lot of time just to think about our relationship. So when I say, you know, that I'm totally committed, I didn't have necessarily any time to think otherwise.

Also, related to the central idea of this dissertation, three husbands described their retrospective commitment as work. For example, one husband talked about commitment in terms of actively diminishing alternatives:

Yeah, you know it's...your belly gets bigger, your hair gets gray...No, I hum, I guess I figured out a long time ago that part of your commitment and part of you

know making it work is making sure that you never get in the situations that would pull you away. And I was traveling quite a bit at that time, and I know that made [my wife] nervous. And it's just uhm something you had to be sensitive to. But uh I traveled, and the worst thing I did was go out with the guys and drink some beer. And so I'd always make sure of calling her. Yeah part of my commitment was just making sure I never got in that position. Uhm - uhm you know I just avoided those situations.

And retrospectively, one husband who recognized that his long work hours were a stressor to his marriage, said:

We were determined that we were just gonna make it. We were gonna work through whatever we needed to. Uhm, and I really think that's what helped us survive, because you know I saw a lot of stuff happen there [at the corporation] with other people where divorce was fairly common there. And so the environment was really not conducive for a family or I should say a viable family. And so I really honestly think that as much as we loved each other, just our determination is what got us through.

At Time 1, spouses were asked if their experiences with job loss had affected their commitment to marriage. All spouses initially said that job loss had no impact on their commitment. However, five wives and two husbands added that the experience had only made their commitment stronger. These subjective notions of commitment at Time 1 suggest that the job loss experience was more harrowing for wives than husbands; however, generally the experience seemed to have a limited impact for most.

A husband whose notions of commitment were related to work also said that his new emphasis on family life was a result of his commitment. And the wife who married young because of her conservative upbringing said that her commitment was still constraining. However, her lack of commitment had virtually nothing to do with the layoff experience.

## **Moral Commitment**

Retrospectively and for Time 1, spouses were asked to give their opinions about the general acceptability of divorce in certain scenarios, as a means of measuring moral commitment.

Spouses were much more varied in their answers to moral commitment questions than questions about commitment in their own marriages. For example, 13 said that staying in unsatisfactory marriages was very important at Time 1, while nine thought it was less than important. Also, eight thought couples should more likely stay married, very likely stay married, or certainly stay married at Time 1 if couples fell out of love, whereas, 13 said divorce should be considered in this situation.

Spouses generally did not like these questions, and three-to-four spouses specifically told me that these questions were too vague. In some cases, spouses wanted to specify more conditions than what the questions noted. For example, one wife wanted to know if children were involved. In her thinking, children were a central reason for staying married, under most all circumstances. Also too, as many as nine participants said they felt uncomfortable answering questions about divorce for the general population. These participants noted that divorce was a personal decision between two individuals, and they added that others should not enforce moral judgments on those who were divorcing. Still, all did answer these questions, and so in this context, they were ultimately willing to pass moral judgments on others.

These findings indicate that morality was not a central to overall commitment, and variations in moral commitment did not differentiate highly committed spouses, in terms of their expressions of commitment or in terms of the work they put into their

marriages. This is not to say that spouses were amoral, or that they did not believe in the moral sanctity of marriage. However, moral commitment was not a central force in keeping otherwise highly committed marriages together. So while spouses were highly committed, many were not highly committed in the moral sense.

While moral commitment was generally not a central reason for spouses to stay together, the wife whose conservative upbringing had been influential in her decision to marry young exhibited fairly high moral commitment. In particular, her answers to questions about moral commitment were consistent with her other discussions of marriage. She believed strongly in the moral sanctity of marriage, however, was unsatisfied and lacked commitment in her own marriage. At Time 1, it seems most likely that she remained married because of a strong cultural mandate to stay married. However, moral commitment was a part of this cultural mandate as well.

Finally, at Time 1, it appeared as if the job loss experience had little effect on spouses' answers to moral commitment questions. As many as four spouses specifically said that the experience would not have affected their attitudes about the acceptability of divorce.

### **COMMITMENT AND MARITAL QUALITY**

Upon initial analysis of Time 1 data, it became apparent that virtually all spouses with the exception of two wives exhibited strong levels of commitment, with little variation. There were interesting variations in these spouses' subjective notions of commitment, but it was difficult to tell if these variations would mean anything to marital quality over time.

I did find that marital quality at Time 1 was higher for four couples who described their commitment as reciprocal or rewarding retrospectively, and so it seemed as if those who framed their commitment in terms of positive affect were most successful; and these couples illustrated how positive affect can influence commitment. I was interested to see if long-term effects of job loss would have any impact on marital quality for those couples over time. Additionally, one husband provided an example in which commitment seemed to matter to work in marriage.

To summarize, while spouses did express varying notions of commitment, virtually all were highly committed to their marriages, both retrospectively and at Time 1. And although answers to questions about moral commitment were much more varied, moral commitment did not seem central to overall commitment levels. It would now be important to determine if the limited variation that did exist in commitment levels or notions lead to variation in marital quality.

In the following chapter, I discuss couples' unemployment experiences and responses to job loss.

## **CHAPTER 5. UNEMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES AND RESPONSES TO JOB LOSS**

At Time 1, I found that many couples were challenged in job loss. However, despite difficult times, most couples were still generally coping well at Time 1, and it appeared as if job loss was not disruptive to most marriages. Still, the challenges associated with job loss oftentimes take longer to impact marriages (Newman, 1988), and so challenges could become more important to marital quality over time.

### **COUPLES' ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES AT TIME 1**

As mentioned previously, the far majority of husbands (N=13) in my sample were primary breadwinners. In addition, five wives did not work at all, prior to layoffs. These wives were stay-at-home moms. When women did work, they typically did not make as much as husbands.

In ten cases, whole families received their health insurance through husbands' jobs. These families had to devise alternative ways of getting healthcare in unemployment. Also, four couples were either expecting children at the time of layoffs, or found out they were pregnant within a few weeks after being laid off. A husband of an expecting wife talked about the added stress of making Cobra payments<sup>5</sup> after being laid off:

When I left [the corporation], I lost all my benefits, and my wife was pregnant. So we had to go and spend at least \$700 a month on insurance. For five or six months, I was paying at least \$700 a month.

---

<sup>5</sup> "Cobra" is a health insurance plan available to those who are in job transitions, such as job loss or retirement. Through Cobra, those who became unemployed could keep their same insurance benefits, without switching doctors or health plans. However, those who chose the Cobra option had to pay the full price of their insurance each month, with the corporation no longer supplementing health insurance costs.

Three wives had also worked at the corporation and had been laid, or worked for another company and had been laid off within six months of their husbands' job loss.

These women were unemployed for a minimum of six months.

Four husbands were working again, but were making considerably less than what they made at their former jobs. In most of these cases, husbands had taken approximately 20 percent pay cuts in their new jobs.

By Time 1, one couple had started their own imports store, putting their remaining life savings into these business. Therefore, if this business failed or had difficult times, this couple would have little financial stability.

Two husbands were underemployed, and one husband was still unemployed, and wives of these husbands were either unemployed or staying at home full time.

Subsequently, these three couples had little or no income at this time.

Finally, four husbands were employed and were making virtually the same as what they had made at their former jobs. One even received about a five percent raise at his new job.

Past studies indicate that economic hardship alone does not precipitate marital disruption and instability or lack of marital success (Elder, 1999; Newman, 1988). However, as time goes on and economic hardships persist, they typically become more central to the viability of marriages (Newman, 1988). At Time 1, I saw at least three couples who had the potential to be greatly affected by their economic difficulties alone, if these difficulties persisted. Also, the couple who started their own business with their remaining savings was likely to have future economic hardship if their business did not become successful.

While cases in which extreme economic hardships (or the potential for these hardships) were limited, I believed they were important to see. Unfortunate for couples, but fortunate from a research perspective, diversity of financial resources and hardships meant that I would be able to see whether or not these hardships lead to real differences in marital stability or quality over time.

## **REACTIONS TO JOB LOSSES AND SATISFACTION WITH LIFE**

### **Husbands' Former Jobs and Their Self-worth**

Retrospectively, five couples talked about the stress that came from husbands working long hours at the corporation; and wives in these couples talked more about this stress than husbands. However, these five wives also talked positively about the fulfillment husbands got from working in an environment that valued hard work and productivity. These wives said that when jobs were fulfilling for husbands, then family life was also good. Referring to her husband's former job, one wife said:

Yeah, it was good because it gave him a lot of opportunity to move up professionally, which made him happy as a person, which made our marriage happy. I mean, if you're not content with yourself you have nothing to offer the other person.

Another wife also said:

And I think it was nice that he [her husband] actually felt productive – like he was doing something for a purpose. And I think he got a lot of satisfaction out of that. And I think it helped. (pause). It helped. I think when two people are happy, it definitely helps a marriage stay on an even keel.

These five wives also went on to say that when husbands lost their jobs, they lost an important source of fulfillment and self-worth.

## **The Challenges of Unemployment and Job Interviewing**

After layoffs three husbands found jobs within six weeks of lay offs. Husbands who experienced this short-term unemployment described the unemployment phase as much less harrowing than those who dealt with unemployment for longer periods of time. These husbands referred to job loss as “mini vacations,” or “bleeps on the radar.”

Four husbands were out of jobs for six months, and four were unemployed or underemployed for longer durations than this. These eight husbands who had been unemployed for six months or more expressed the most frustration with job loss, and said that being unemployed for this long of a duration had challenged their self-concepts. These husbands said they never thought they would be unemployed, and in unemployment, they expected to find jobs quickly. One husband, who was unemployed for six months elaborated upon this point:

Well, it – it was pretty rough for I guess the first six months. We went through a lot of hard time with going through unemployment. Because, I didn't – I didn't – not that unemployment is bad, but for me and my idea of the work place – I didn't feel that unemployment was the right thing for me and I didn't understand why I was on unemployment and all these people that I saw at the unemployment office who were underprivileged and everything else collecting unemployment. And I just never thought I'd see myself there.

The three husbands who had looked for jobs for over a year expressed the most frustration with the job hunting process, and acknowledged that their self-esteem had suffered tremendously in this experience, saying that the interview process “makes you feel worthless,” and “challenges your good thoughts about yourself.” One husband, who was unemployed for over 18 months, said about interviewing:

Every time is difficult. I can't help but get my hopes up each time. And then each time the rug is pulled out, it's more disheartening than the last. Uhm, and it's tough. [pause] You start to feel – I wouldn't say useless, but you start to have doubts about yourself. You know, ‘What am I not doing right?’ Some people

have a different mentality. ‘Oh, it’s the economy that’s coming to get me.’ But I tend to try to learn about myself by trying to focus, because you know, I can’t change the economy. So what could I have done differently that could have gotten me that job? So it’s kind-of emotionally draining. I beat myself up.

All the wives of those eight husbands who had been unemployed six months or longer also expressed frustration with the job hunting process, anxiety about their husbands’ self-esteem, and four wives who worked said that they began to question the sincerity of husband’s efforts, while those who did not work were less questioning. Still, all eight of these wives said that they were supportive of their husbands during unemployment.

The four working who became skeptical of their husbands’ job search efforts said that it was hard not to be skeptical, given that husbands should think of finding jobs as their new jobs. Also, these four wives went on to say that work ethics about job searches should be strictly adhered to, and that merely searching for jobs over the internet did not qualify as looking for jobs. One wife elaborated upon her skepticism about her husband’s job hunting efforts:

It’s really hard to go through being jobless, uhm, because his self-confidence is shot. And you know, you’re working everyday, and he’s at home everyday, and you want him to run errands for you. You want him to do this and that. And he’s trying to look for a job. You’re wondering if he’s doing all he can do. You know, you’re trying not to have these doubts, but you’re starting to have doubts and uhm, and so it was very stressful for both of us.

Additionally, two husbands sensed their wives’ frustrations with their job hunting efforts. One described this feeling:

Looking for a job was just unbelievably horrible. I mean, you’d send – I’d get frustrated and send resumes to all these people and think I’d have a lead and then that fell through. And then I’d have [my wife] coming home everyday from work and asked if I’d done anything that day and I said, ‘Well, I sent out more resumes. There’s not a whole lot I can do.’ And she’d get frustrated with me because I haven’t found a job yet, and ‘Why aren’t people hiring you,’ and ‘What’s the

problem?’ And I got frustrated because I didn’t understand why people weren’t hiring me.

Two wives who were among the four working wives who became skeptical of their husbands’ job search efforts also grew aggravated because their husbands were not taking on other “prescribed” responsibilities in unemployment. For example, one spoke about her husband not monitoring insurance policies in his unemployment, and one wife ) said that her husband had not kept up with their car maintenance, which sent their car into disrepair. Both wives said that these frustrations had lead to arguments and stress.

### **Wives’ Emotional Support**

Although one husband said that his wife’s frustrations had lead to only middling emotional support, all other 13 husbands said that their wives had been extremely emotionally supportive of them during their job search efforts. Specifically, the eight husbands who were unemployed six months or more spoke the most about this support, and these husbands said that their wives’ emotional support was critical in their negotiation of the unemployment experience. In discussing their wives’ emotional support, three husbands, who were unemployed six months or more, said that their wives read their thoughts and knew their needs in job loss. One husband said about his wife:

Initially she was supportive. Yeah. I think we spent some time talking about it [the layoff] throughout the process, and uhm, I don’t know how much detail. We’re pretty open. I don’t spill my guts with everything. Just different personalities. But she knows when I’m unhappy. Uhm, she knows when I’m sad. She knows when I’m concerned.

He went on to say that his wife’s emotional support had helped in making him feel “normal” in unemployment:

One thing she said to me was ‘Why don’t you do some things that you’ve wanted to do? You’ve got the time now. Why don’t you go enjoy yourself? Go do this or that.’ And I was like ‘Gee. You know, I don’t know how long I’ll be

unemployed. I really don't want to use my money towards doing that.' And you know, it would have been .. my comment to her was it would be a lot easier to relax if I knew I had a job. When you don't know when it's going to end, it's hard to relax. But she was extremely supportive. She's like 'You know, if this is what you really want to do, and that's what makes you happy then do it.'

Three husbands also said that their wives gave "words of encouragement" before job interviews, "told them that they loved them," or hugged them frequently. While husbands who were unemployed for six months or more did flounder in their newly-acquired roles, they did not reject wives' emotional support, and instead, anxiously received it.

Finally, wives' emotional support seemed to be most rooted in their beliefs about the permanency of marriage instead of their marital quality. As many as five wives said things like "I knew I was in it for the long haul." One wife said, "I could have left or not have been supportive of him [my husband], but what would that have said about my marriage?"

In describing couples' reactions to job loss, I was reminded of the emotional difficulty of the experience. In particular, those eight husbands who were unemployed or underemployed for six months or more seemed to be most impacted by the experience. However, all of these husbands except for one also reflected upon the importance of their wives' emotional support in seeing them through unemployment.

Undoubtedly, wives' emotional support seemed vital to husbands' negotiating unemployment. However, at Time 1, I still also wanted to know if this emotional support in difficult times could be a source of marital stability or quality in the future.

### **Stockpiles of Savings and Positive Affect**

Although I did not ask about it directly, three husbands told me that they had vast savings accounts, prior to their former jobs. Two husbands specifically told me that they had enough money in savings to live one-to-two years without being employed. These husbands said that having significant savings accounts automatically made their job loss experiences less stressful. As one husband said, “[My wife] and I realized early on that it was a damn good thing we had saved how we did prior to me loosing my job.”

In addition, approximately 16 spouses regarded their mates in affectionate ways. These spouses talked about their mates in positive ways, or mentioned enjoying being around them. For example, one husband said, “I just love being with [my wife]. She’s the most wonderful person. She’s the life of the party. Everyone loves her.” Although my findings are unsystematic, these spouses seemed to have histories of positive affect which tended to ease the tensions of job loss. For example, at least five spouses who regarded their mates affectionately said that it had never even occurred to them that their marriages could be affected by job loss.

### **UNEMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES, RESPONSES TO JOB LOSS, AND MARITAL QUALITY**

While difficult job loss experiences alone do not cause marriages to be less successful over time (Elder, 1999; Newman, 1998), it was possible that if unemployment or economic experiences continued with difficulty then they could affect marital quality.

It seemed as if those who were most vulnerable to difficult economic experiences in the future were the three couples whose spouses were still unemployed or underemployed. The couple who opened an imports store with their savings were also vulnerable if their business could not be made profitable. At Time 1, only one husband

reported middling emotional support from his wife. With time, it would be important to see if his wife's middling emotional support lead to more difficulties for this couple.

To summarize, couples' financial resources, their satisfaction with life, and wives' emotional support were expected to influence marital quality in job loss. However, at Time 1, it appeared as if these factors had limited impact upon marital quality.

In the next chapter, I discuss the presence of spouses' conditions of marriage and their "work," if any, to produce supportive conditions for marriage.

## **CHAPTER 6. CONDITIONS OF MARRIAGE AT TIME 1**

At Time 1, all couples seemed to communicate effectively, spent quality time together, have considerable pressures to stay married, and have attractive alternatives. However, with the exception of spending quality time together, few spouses worked to affect these conditions of marriage, despite most all spouses having high levels of commitment. When “work” to affect marriage conditions did occur, it seemed because marriages were in need of work. For example, one couple took steps to improve their communication skills, which caused them to discount thoughts of divorce.

So it became important for me to ask how couples came to have these supportive conditions of marriage, if the source of these conditions was not commitment. I suggest that positive affect seemed to be a particular source of effective communication and quality time together, and that all these couples seemed to have similarly high pressures to stay married and equally few attractive alternatives.

In this chapter, I detail spouses’ communication skills, quality time together, attractive alternatives, and pressures to stay married both at Time 1 and retrospectively. I also examine the extent to which couples actively cultivated conditions of marriage.

### **COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

In past research on couples’ communications, it has been said that seeing how couples argue is a way to gain insight into how effectively they communicate (Gottman, 1994). Because I could not actually empirically examine this context, I adapted questions from Gottman’s work (1994), utilizing the disagreement context. These communication skills questions were asked at Time 1 only. However, I also asked spouses if their reactions to disagreements had changed since the summer of 2000; and spouses were

asked at both times whether they made efforts to improve communications, either daily or in response to problems.

All spouses reported relatively good communication skills when disagreements occurred, with some variation in answers. Nineteen spouses said they almost certainly expressed their point of view when they disagreed; twenty spouses said they were not likely to avoid further discussions about their disagreements; and eleven said they were somewhat likely to very likely to avoid dealing with their spouses for at least a brief period of time after disagreements. Nine couples reported good communication skills. Among these couples, high commitment levels did not seem to predict effective communication. For example, four spouses were among those with lower commitment retrospectively. One wife reported the lowest-quality communication skills, especially as they related to conflict avoidance. Also, most all spouses said that their reactions to disagreements had not changed since the summer of 2000.

While there was little variation in how spouses responded to disagreements, spouses did report that they disagreed with more frequency at Time 1 than retrospectively; and eight or so spouses said that they were disagreeing more now as a result of the layoff. Specifically, these spouses were arguing more about finances. Only two couples said that they “never really disagreed,” either prior to layoffs or after layoffs. Eleven other couples said that they disagreed occasionally, and one couple said that they disagreed frequently, prior to layoffs. The couple who disagreed frequently attributed disagreements to job stress prior to layoffs. While eleven couples disagreed occasionally, eight of these couples also did not see their occasional disagreements as problematic, and

in-fact, saw some disagreements as a sign of normalcy. For example, one husband expounded upon his thoughts about disagreements with his wife:

I feel like we've got a good marriage. I mean sometimes I'll get angry and she'll get angry. I don't think it's some big global problem. I think we sometimes get pissed off. For whatever reason, I'll get pissed off. I may blow up and then it's over with and I'm fine. It's not a big global problem.

Universally, spouses said that communication skills were something that should be worked on, on a daily basis, instead of only when problems arose. However, only two couples claimed to have consciously worked hard at communication skills, either on a daily basis, or when problems arose, and these couples were no more committed than those who reported not to work at their communication. These couples said that they had worked hard at improving their communication in the time prior to layoffs by either attending marital counseling or reading self-help books.

At least seven couples said that their good communication skills had "always been there," even in dating. For example, one husband, referring to communication at Time 1 said, "Our communication skills have always been the same. I don't do anything different, like speak in a lower tone of voice or whatever it might be. No. It is status quo."

Furthermore, while couples did say that working daily at communication was important, at least four couples were bothered by me using the word "work" in this context. For example, one husband said, "There's work, as you coined the phrase 'work.' But to me it's not work, but based upon respect. Mutual respect for each other." Also, one husband said:

A good marriage does require work. And, that doesn't necessarily mean it is hard work, because there is rewarding work as well. And we do it in a very easy, laid-back sort of way. We make sure that we spend quality time together on a regular

basis daily, and we communicate about everything when it is time to communicate.

Finally, a wife elaborated: “I know I believe it [marriage] does take everyday thought about it, but it doesn’t really take work.”

Relatedly, twelve couples indicated that they made few conscious efforts to “work” at communication skills; and when conscious efforts were made, they were small. For example, one wife said that she “made efforts to never go to bed mad.” Others said that they just communicated frequently, and “talked out problems.” For example, one husband said, about Time 1 communication:

We don’t go to classes or anything. But I think as far as making sure that we communicate and make almost ... Yeah, I guess that would just be it. You know, we make sure that we communicate, and if either one of us is having, you know, an issue with something or problem with something – rather than just let it, you know, build up and cause a bigger deal like we both know ... that we both want each other to be happy so that’s gonna be easier ... easier handled if we just talk about it and get it taken care of.

Findings indicate that effective communication came relatively easily for eleven couples, and that those who were more committed did not work harder or communicate more effectively than those with lower commitment levels. I speculate that, instead of commitment affecting communication skills, effective communication facilitated positive affect early on in relationships. Thus, because spouses generally regarded their mates in positive ways, effective communication came naturally for several.

Communication had been work for some, and one couple’s work at communication was likely rooted in their commitment. However, their marriage, retrospectively, was a lower quality marriage.

Finally, one wife who had the lowest overall scores for effective communication also said that she was not actively working to improve her communication skills.

## **MARITAL COUNSELING**

At Time 1, few had ever participated in marital counseling. Four couples said that they had attended premarital counseling, as required by their ministers prior to getting married. These couples said that this counseling was helpful.

One husband added that in premarital counseling, he and his wife learned that they were “complete opposites,” especially in how “particular” they were in dealing with the workings of a household. He went on to explain that having prior knowledge about their differences made disagreements in marriage seem less grave; and occasional disagreements were attributed to personality differences.

One couple also said that they attended a weekend marriage retreat that was sponsored by their church. However, they preferred calling the retreat “marital enrichment” instead of “marital counseling.” In their eyes, attending marital counseling indicated that there were problems in a marriage. The wife elaborated: “I would imagine there would be something along those lines [of marital enrichment at the marriage retreat]. It’s not in anyway a situation where they’re trying to fix things.” Another wife also associated marital counseling with marital difficulties. She explained: “We’ve not had a very dramatic relationship. Like I can’t tell you there’s a time where it was like, ‘Oh my God. We both just needed to chunk it all and, you know, go to counseling.’”

Additionally, one couple had also talked about attending a church marriage retreat, however, they had not attended one by Time 1. This couple noted that if they paid attention to their marriage, then attending a church marriage retreat was not a necessity.

My findings for marital counseling are similar to my findings about communication skills. Utilization of marital counseling indicated that spouses were committed; however, more importantly, their marriage was in need of help. Furthermore, other spouses thought of marital counseling as something that couples do if marriages are in trouble. Therefore, while commitment can be a driving force in getting marital counseling, marital counseling is typically only thought of as necessary if marriages are in trouble.

### **QUALITY TIME TOGETHER**

Twenty-two spouses reported spending 30 hours or less of quality time with their mates per week. Only two couples saw exactly eye-to-eye about the amount of quality time they spent together. One couple both said that they spent roughly 20-to-30 hours of quality time together a week; and the other couple both said that they spent two hours of quality time with each other per week. Most other spouses reported spending varying amounts of quality time together, but reports did not vary widely within couples. Two couples and two other spouses reported spending the most quality time together, spending anywhere from 31-to-60 hours of quality time per week with their mates. However, these spouses were not differentiated in their high commitment levels retrospectively or at Time 1, with their scores ranging from 21 to 22 (where 22 is perfect commitment).

One couple reported spending virtually no time together, prior to layoffs. However, their quality time together had increased after layoffs. At Time 1, the amount of time they spent together had increased, and they were “trying a little more” to spend time together, but these efforts seemed obligatory.

Although most all couples said that they were not spending different amounts of time with each other in the post layoff time period, several couples said that they were now doing more economical activities in their quality time. For example, one couple said that they were now renting DVDs on their Friday date night, instead of going to the movies. Another couple also said that they were playing board games at home instead of going to dinner, and still another couple was now spending quality time walking their dog.

But generally speaking, these very simple activities had become rituals, and thus, had come to have significant meaning for couples. Some spouses reported only wanting to do these things with their spouses. Additionally, some spouses also said they enjoyed these activities more than prior extravagant dates. One husband elaborated upon their almost-nightly ritual of watching TV in bed:

We really spend a lot of time together. So you know, I make sure that even when I have to work late, when I get home, or she has to work late – when she gets home – you know, if the girls are already in bed, if they've already eaten dinner, we'll eat dinner together, but we won't sit at the table. You know, we'll climb into bed, we'll pull out the little breakfast trays, we'll throw dinner on there. We'll flip on some mind-numbing show, like *The Bachelorette*, and we'll just chat about what we did that day. And we spend probably five nights of seven just like that.

Generally speaking, spouses made efforts to spend quality time together, and these efforts had not changed since the layoff. However, not all couples' efforts were equal. For example, couples with children had to make more formal efforts to spend quality time together, since babysitters were needed for most date nights. But efforts could also be less conscious. For example, one husband spoke for many when he said:

So I don't say we arranged it, but I'd say it was an unspoken rule that when we'd come home were both either going to sit down and play a card game or a board game or something.

Those who spent the most quality time together seemed most differentiated in their positive affect, instead of their commitment levels. Past studies have indicated that spouses with positive affect go to greater lengths to spend quality time together, despite work obligations or other time constraints (Zuo, 1992). Oppositely, those who are less affectual tend to find more reasons for not spending quality time together. This could be said of my sample as well. For example, two spouses who seemed to demonstrate positive affect, had two or three young children at home but went to great efforts to spend quality time together, despite having obligations to children. And nine of the ten spending under 10 hours a week together had children living at home. Therefore, it is possible that children were a deterrent for those who were less inclined to spend quality time together anyway.

### **ATTRACTIVE ALTERNATIVES**

Most all spouses said that they spent the most time with happily married men and women; and these happily-married men and women were typically couple friends: five husbands and two wives said they associated with happily married men most of the time; two husbands and five wives said they associated with happily married women most of the time; four husbands and two wives said they associated with happily married men more often than not; and six husbands and two wives said they associated with happily married women more often than not. Also, most all spouses spent the least amount of time with unhappily married men and women. Six husbands and ten wives said they never associated with unhappily married men; and ten husbands and five wives said they never associated with unhappily married women. In addition, three spouses reported not knowing any unhappily married men or women, or only knowing of these people through

work. All spouses except for one couple said that they typically did not associate with single people of the opposite sex in any social context other than work, and so, answers about associating with single men and women reflected time spent with these individuals in a work context. The couple that did purposefully associate with single men, noted that these men were good friends who respected this couples' marriage vows. Two spouses also said that they did not like associating with single friends of the same sex, because of lifestyle differences that came with being single. For example, one husband said that he spent little time with his single male friends because many of these friends were divorced and were frequenting singles bars. But no other spouses made judgments about being single. Instead, spouses tended not to associate with single men or women because they were typically no longer in singles' social groups.

While questions about alternatives were specifically about attractive alternative partners, two spouses also mentioned that they had contemplated the alternative lifestyle of being single. Both said decisions to marry young sometimes made them think of being single. In this context, a husband elaborated upon transitioning from hometown norms for marrying young, to the corporate setting, and said that his reference group had changed. This change in reference groups had made him contemplate being single. He explained:

And it was one of those things that, ok. 'I know you're already married now, but did you ever think that you wanted to experience something else or do something else?' There were a lot of people that I worked with that questioned it. 'Ok. You're a 23 year old and you're married? I don't understand that.' Whereas, in my hometown, you're 23 years old – everybody's got a ring on. But it was just commonplace where I came from, and then now to go into a company like this and then see everyone around me all single and complaining. Not complaining, but saying 'You're already married. Come hang out with us. Blah, blah, blah.' And so I wasn't overly joyous, and questioned if I should be married.

While questions about attractive alternatives indicated that spouses typically were spending little time with attractive alternative marriage partners, their efforts to avoid or diminish attractive alternatives were not great. In this context, it is feasible to link commitment to diminishing attractive alternatives, but it is perhaps more feasible to think that spouses were diminishing attractive alternatives because of their normative views of marriage. That is to say, part of being married is that you do not look for attractive alternative partners. And while the subject of normative views of marriage was not broached directly, as many as five spouses said that “having a wandering eye” was just something married individuals “don’t do.” Thus, it can be rightly said that diminishing attractive alternatives is widely regarded as central to being married.

### **PRESSURES TO STAY MARRIED**

When asked about pressures to stay married, no couples had identical answers for all questions. However, some eight couples jointly said that the emotional consequences of divorce would be devastating. Two couples and one additional spouse said that they would stand to lose a lot emotionally, but that divorce would not be emotionally devastating. These spouses explained that they had been through divorce before, and they knew that they could survive emotionally if divorce ever occurred again, or that their whole emotional identity was not based upon his marriage. Thus, while divorce would be difficult, it would not be emotionally devastating.

Secondly, ten husbands and ten wives said that the legal process of getting a divorce would be devastating. However, these husbands and wives gave different reasons why the legal process of getting a divorce would be devastating. Husbands said that the emotional reality of divorce would probably just become manifest to them in the

legal proceedings. For example, one husband said that in the legal process of divorce, he would come to realize “the finality of it all.” Conversely, wives said that the legal process would be another emotionally hurdle, and in particular, dividing material possessions would be heart wrenching. However, wives said they would have realized the finality of divorce long before legal proceedings took place.

While several spouses said that the legal proceedings would be devastating, three husbands and wives also said that these proceedings would not be that difficult. In particular, two husbands said that the legal process of divorce would be just a final step in the divorce process; and one wife, who had been through a divorce before, said that by the time the legal process occurs, spouses are already emotionally disengaged.

Seven women said that divorce would be financially devastating. Four of these women were stay-at-home moms. Here, stay-at-home moms said that they were not considering property being split or child support payments. Instead, these moms talked about how a divorce would likely necessitate them having to go back to work outside the home. Regarding this issue, one wife jokingly said, “I could get a divorce, but then I’d have to get a job.”

Finally, seventeen spouses said that while they associated with friends and family who were supportive of their marriages, divorce would affect their lifestyle with friends and family or would not change their relationships with friends and family that much. Therefore, there was little social shunning associated with divorce. As many as three spouses said that continued relationships with friends and family would depend upon the circumstances of divorce. For example, one husband said that if he did something to provoke divorce, such as adultery, then he might lose friendships after divorce occurred.

When questioning spouses about pressures to stay married, many spouses said they had not thought about these pressures to stay married, to the extent that we were discussing them in this context. Even spouses who had moments in the past where they contemplated divorce, also said that they had not seriously considered the financial or emotional implications of following through with a divorce.

Finally, at Time 1, spouses had made few conscious efforts to only associate with friends or family who were supportive of their marriages, but it was generally assumed that friends and family were supportive of couples' marriages. However, in some cases, more deliberate efforts had been made to institute financial barriers to divorce. For example, four stay-at-home moms mentioned that they had sacrificed personal incomes for families' needs.

Time 1 findings regarding pressures to stay married indicate that, for the most part, spouses were emotionally invested in marriages. Additionally, nine husbands and twelve wives were invested to the extent that the emotional fallout of divorce would be excruciating. Ten husbands and ten wives also thought that the legal process of a divorce would be devastating. While legal pressures to stay married were substantial for several spouses, it is difficult to determine if these pressures were significant enough to stop divorce if other conditions were "right" for divorce. From these findings, it is reasonable to think that commitment and barriers to divorce are related. However, the strength of this relationship is difficult to determine as well.

### **COMMITMENT, WORK, AND CONDITIONS OF MARRIAGE**

At Time 1, it seemed that being highly committed did not differentiate spouses in terms of "work" at making conditions conducive to marriage, and work at conditions of

marriage was the exception instead of the rule, despite most couples being highly committed. It was possible that one couple's commitment was a source of work at communication. However, their work was perhaps more indicative of having a poor quality marriage retrospectively. Affection seemed more critical to effective communication skills and quality time together than commitment or work.

In Chapter 7, I discuss marital quality retrospectively and at Time 1.

## **CHAPTER 7. MARITAL QUALITY RETROSPECTIVELY AND AT TIME 1**

Retrospectively and at Time 1, spouses were generally apart of high quality marriages. However, answers to questions about marital quality were more varied than reports of commitment levels; and thus, it seemed difficult to say that variations in marital quality were a result of variations in commitment.

In this chapter, I detail marital quality retrospectively and at Time 1. I define marital quality as both marital happiness and marital interaction and functioning. I measured marital happiness retrospectively and for Time 1, using Spanier's marital happiness question (1976). Marital interaction and functioning was measured using 13 items from Spanier's Marital Quality Scale (1976).

### **MARITAL QUALITY**

#### **Marital Interaction and Functioning**

Some marital interaction and functioning questions were asked retrospectively and for Time 1. Questions regarding marital interaction and functioning had to do with frequency of thoughts about divorce, thinking that things were going well between mates, confiding in a mate, regretting getting married, quarreling, getting on each others' nerves, and considering divorce, separation, or terminating a relationship, and these questions were asked both retrospectively and at Time 1.

Other marital interaction and functioning questions had to do with levels of agreement or disagreement about handling family finances, a couple's philosophy of life, aims, goals, and things believed important, household tasks, and career decisions, and these questions were asked at Time 1 only.

Retrospectively, three couples had perfect or near-perfect scores for marital interaction and functioning questions that were asked both retrospectively and at Time 1, and these scores ranged from 32 to 35, where 35 was perfect adjustment. In the context of marital interaction and functioning, these couples also talked about “just enjoying being married” in the summer of 2001, with no external stresses associated with their marriages.

Other spouses had good scores overall, but retrospectively, 11 husbands and eight wives said they quarreled occasionally, and seven husbands and eight wives said that they, along with their mates, occasionally got on each other’s nerves. Answers to these questions shifted little for Time 1.

While many spouses did quarrel and get on each others nerves occasionally, spouses were also not likely to have raised the subject of divorce or separation or regret having ever gotten married. Taken together, these marital interaction and functioning questions illustrate that many spouses dealt with some frustrations of marriage, without thinking of divorce or regretting being married. Having said this, it is important to note that three spouses occasionally thought about divorce, occasionally left the house after a fight, or occasionally regretted getting married, either retrospectively and at Time 1, or at one time period. One husband elaborated on thoughts of divorce and leaving the house after a fight:

I say that I had thoughts of terminating the relationship. Here’s the – you’ve got to understand the way I work. Uhm, I say that we had thoughts about terminating the relationship. They weren’t ever her thoughts. They were always my thoughts, and most of the time, it wasn’t a thought. It was a threat. And I left the house just to kind-of prove a point, as in, I’m really pissed at the subject. Because a lot of times, [my wife] doesn’t -- I don’t feel that she understands that I’m – when I’m really mad or really upset at something. And that’s kind-of my way of ‘OK. I’m going to push it to the limit and I’m going to do this.’ I wouldn’t ever act on it,

but I do it to get a reaction out of her to let her realize that, ‘OK. That I’m not happy about this.’ Because you don’t realize my levels of discomfort or unhappiness, and this is the way I’m going to show you.

When two spouses talked about Time 1, they said that areas of marital interaction and functioning that had been problematic in the past had also improved, either because of job circumstances or longer durations of marriage.

Finally, at Time 1, one wife said that her marital interaction and functioning had diminished because of the financial strain of her husband’s (8) unemployment. She expounded:

The financial situation certainly tested us. And it’s really hard. I’m more of a realist than he is, unfortunately, and I mean I was really worried about our financial situation and to provide for our three kids and that was very hard and stressful. We were still paying for those months that he was without a job, cause every month we were in a hole, you know, a grand or two. That’s a lot of money.

When asked about areas in which disagreements occurred in marriage, overall scores were generally lower than for other marital interaction and functioning questions. The average disagreement score for all spouses was 29.9, where 35 is perfect agreement. Spouses talked the most about disagreements in handling family finances, and six wives spoke extensively about disagreements regarding handling family finances at Time 1.

Two couples also had mutually lower scores on marital interaction and functioning questions, regarding disagreements on aims, goals, and things believed important. The nature of these disagreements had to do with religious differences, and different goals for spouses’ careers.

### **Marital Happiness**

The question regarding happiness had to do with *marital* happiness only. However, at Time 1, some spouses said that their marital happiness had been so affected

by unemployment, making it impossible to distinguish marital happiness from satisfaction with life. At Time 1, spouses were very happy, and 21 spouses were as happy or happier than they were prior to layoffs. Average happiness scores were 5.64 for husbands and 5.5 for wives retrospectively and 5.78 for husbands and 5.64 for wives at Time 1, where 7 is perfect happiness. Spouses who said they were happier at Time 1 also said that the layoff had little impact on their marriage, and that their increased happiness was a result of their increasing time together as couples.

At Time 1, two couples happiness had diminished a little. Both couples unemployment or new employment had affected their marital happiness.

One husband had taken an “eight-to-five, no-brainer job,” and had come to realize that he missed the challenging, fast paced corporate environment. His wife expounded upon how his job had taken a toll on her marital happiness:

I feel like with all the things that have happened, and with the job that he's in now, he's not as happy as what he was at [the corporation]. Uhm, whether we want to or not, his happiness and enjoyment at work does reflect his attitudes once we get home. And I think that definitely has a lot – it does affect our marriage. So, he's not as happy as he was at [the corporation]. And hopefully, it will eventually change. But I- for right now, he has a lot of things that he just doesn't like about this job, and we have just decided that 'Hey, it is a job.' And until he finds something different, you know, it's just something he's going to have to stick with.

Oppositely, another couple both said that their marital happiness had improved at Time 1. They attributed positive changes in marital happiness to hard work founded in commitment; and this couple also said that unemployment had caused them to spend more enjoyable time together.

## **COMMITMENT, CONDITIONS OF MARRIAGE, EXTERNAL STRESSES, AND MARITAL QUALITY**

At the end of Time 1 analysis, it seemed unlikely that levels of commitment were predictive of marital quality over time. This is because retrospective levels of commitment were less varied than Time 1 marital quality.

The four couples who retrospectively defined their commitment in terms of reciprocity and rewards seemed to provide the strongest case that there was a connection between subjective notions of commitment and marital quality. These couples communicated effectively, spend considerable amounts of quality time together, and exhibited high levels of marital quality at Time 1, both in terms of marital interaction and happiness and marital happiness. However, retrospectively these couples had high levels of marital quality as well; and thus, their continued marital success seemed to perpetuate itself. Also, I speculate that these couples did well because of the positive affect they shared for their mates. Specifically, effective communication and quality time together were perhaps most indicative of positive affect, and these conditions of marriage seemed most predictive of marital quality.

Finally, while there was some variation in marital quality, the general rule was that spouses were successful at Time 1. However, it was quite possible that increased economic difficulties and dissatisfaction with life might affect coping with job loss over time; and thus, marital quality could be affected over time by continuing and cumulative problems brought about by job loss.

In summary, commitment seemed only weakly predictive of marital quality, and marital quality seemed much more affected by communication skills, and quality time together than limited financial resources or dissatisfaction with life. Finally, positive

affect seemed to encourage effective communication and quality time together, and therefore, positive affect seemed much more important to marital quality than commitment.

In Chapters 8 and 9, I discuss Time 2 findings.

### **PART III.**

## **JOB SITUATIONS AND HOSTILITY AT TIME 2**

At Time 2, all marriages were proceeding without divorce or separation, and many spouses' marital interaction and functioning remained fairly stable, with several who were successful over time.

However, at Time 2, two couples and one husband reported increased hostility. It was difficult to determine the source of this hostility, however, it seemed unrelated to difficult job loss circumstances at Time 2.

After discussing hostility, I conclude that while past marital interaction and functioning and commitment can be predictive of increased hostility, the more central determinant of increased hostility could be positive affect.

In Chapter 8, I describe job situations at Time 2, which indicate that many were tremendously affected by job loss over time. However, difficulties associated with job loss were not predictive of increased hostility.

In Chapter 9, I discuss hostility at Time 2 and possible sources of this hostility.

## CHAPTER 8. JOB SITUATIONS AT TIME 2

At Time 2, all husbands were reemployed, however, some were struggling in reemployment more than others. In particular, one husband was facing the challenge of making the business he had started profitable. In March of 2004, this husband had taken a night job to try to supplement the income from his business. This couple said that while they did not like his current work situation (i.e. working outside their business), it was necessary in the short-term. Despite their attempts to think of the problems as temporary and external to their marriage, both said that the quality of their marriage had diminished somewhat as a result of their financial situation.

One husband remained underemployed. He was working three part-time, low-paying jobs. He remained hopeful about getting a corporate job in his field.

One husband who was working the “eight-to-five” job had remained in this job despite his dissatisfaction with it. He was hopeful about contractual changes that were being made at his workplace, and a recent raise had brought his current salary close to his former job’s salary. He felt that these changes had the potential to alter his feelings about his job. Additionally, he was not ready to face the rejection involved in the job search process. He elaborated:

I’m open to opportunities, if they probably seek me out. ... And so I’m probably content right now. Uhm, but I still have aspirations to do other things. It’s just not as big. I think I’ve come down out of the clouds a little more than what I use to be.

He went on to say, that despite his discontentment with his current job, he tried not to bring his work frustrations home.

By Time 2, one husband who had been unemployed over 18 months had found a new job. While he had been unhappy with his former corporate setting, he was also mildly displeased with his new job, because of the extensive travel that the job required.

Four other husbands were in new jobs that they were mildly displeased with because of the travel these jobs required. These new jobs with “travel” typically meant being gone for two-to-three days a week. However, despite being somewhat displeased with their current job situations, these husbands were not actively looking for other jobs. Looking for a new job, given their current situations was considered too taxing or stressful to most. In the context of discussing dissatisfaction with their current jobs, these husbands said they felt as if they were still dealing with the negative effects of being laid off.

While all husbands were employed in some way by Time 2, at least six mentioned taking 20 percent or more pay cuts in their new jobs. One husband specifically said that he took a \$30,000 pay cut in his new job.

At Time 2, four other husbands were quite satisfied with their jobs, and said they were more happy in these jobs than they had been in their former jobs. Also, these husbands said that they were making salaries comparable to what they had made in their former jobs.

Job situations at Time 2 indicate that although most husbands did not experience protracted unemployment (lasting 18 months or more (Newman, 1988)), their difficult work experiences and some dissatisfaction with life at Time 2 were still a result of job loss. Eight husbands felt they were at least somewhat worse off in terms of finances or life satisfaction in their new jobs than they had been at their old jobs, and some of these

husbands felt they were much worse off. After finally getting settled in new jobs, all husbands felt they had passed the worst part of unemployment, but at least eight felt that they had lived through a severe challenge and were still feeling the consequences.

To summarize, by Time 2, the long-term effects of job loss were becoming manifest, and at least eight husbands were experiencing financial challenges and dissatisfaction with life by this time. Despite many difficult circumstances, only one couple said that the challenges they were experiencing had affected their marital quality; however, changes in their marital quality were minimal. Also, difficulties associated with job loss were not predictive of increased hostility.

In Chapter 9, I discuss increased hostility at Time 2.

## **CHAPTER 9. HOSTILITY AT TIME 2**

Despite the challenges of job loss, unemployment, and many accepting worse jobs, I found that all marriages were proceeding without separation or divorce at Time 2. Furthermore, my main indicators of marital quality (as seen in marital interaction and functioning and marital happiness) showed very few changes from Time 1 to Time 2. All the couples seemed to be continuing along fairly well. However, further analyses show some serious problems emerging for a few couples that were signs of marital disruption. Specifically, the problems began to appear in reports of disagreements, and became especially evident when spouses talked about the disagreements in increasingly hostile ways.

In this chapter, I present the findings regarding marital quality at Time 2, and then focus upon the spouses who became more hostile towards their mates. I consider reasons why these particular spouses may have been more hostile over time.

### **MARITAL QUALITY OVER TIME**

#### **Marital Interaction and Functioning**

Between Time 1 and Time 2, 22 spouses' marital interaction and functioning scores (i.e. leaving the house after a fight, regretting getting married, quarrelling, getting on each other's nerves, raising the subject of divorce or separation, thinking things were going well, and confiding in mates) changed one point or less. Five spouses' marital interaction and functioning changed in more notable ways. Two wives reported doing less well than at Time 1, and three husbands reported doing better at Time 2. As time passed, her marital interaction and functioning was more like it had been retrospectively. One wife said she was doing less well at Time 2 because of her heightened frustration

with her husband's job situation. Three husbands all reported doing better at Time 2 because of their efforts to make their marriages more successful. The overall impression one would draw from these reports of marital interaction and functioning would clearly be that couples were generally proceeding along as well as they had before.

### **Marital Happiness**

As with marital interaction and functioning, the major pattern with respect to marital happiness was stability. On the 1-7 scale, only two spouses changed two points; four declined one point; 21 remained the same; and one went up. All spouses were leading fairly stable secure lives at Time 2; and at least 16 said that they were enjoying economic stability at Time 2. It seemed that the lay-off experience was becoming a distant memory in the minds of many, and at least eight spouses almost sounded nostalgic in talking about the experience. While the layoff experience had been emotionally harrowing, it had caused spouses to take pause and think about or value their marriages in ways that were more difficult to do prior to layoffs. More thought had been devoted to marriages after layoffs, because the layoff experience had given spouses more time together. All husbands were working again, and the routinization of work and family life had led to some complacency about marriage. Thus, while lives were back to normal for all spouses, normalcy also seemed to indicate that less attention was being devoted to marriages, and this seems to have yielded overall lower marital happiness for some. Nevertheless, three of the five who declined went from a perfect 7 to a 6, so this hardly indicates a threat to their marriage. Only one wife reported a decline of two points, from a perfect 7 to 5, but even while formally answering this question, she said that her marriage itself was as strong as before, but she felt overwhelmed by financial difficulties.

Only one husband reported a decline (from 6 to 5). So, reports of marital happiness alone would not reveal much negative impact of job loss.

### **Disagreements**

My analysis of disagreements at Time 1 indicated much more variation among spouses in their extent of disagreements than in their marital interaction and functioning or happiness. At Time 2, there remained wide variation among the couples in the extent of their agreement, with a range from 18-to-29 on a scale that can range from 0-to-30. But answers to questions about areas of disagreements also indicated that the amount in which spouses disagreed changed little over time. Twenty-one changed one point or less; five changed two points; and only three changed more.

Although the changes in extent of disagreement were not great, the spouses' discussions of their disagreements in the interviews revealed some strong negative changes that may be extremely significant. Answers to questions about the frequency with which spouses disagreed indicated that more disagreements over time were linked to hostility.

It is interesting to examine the specific areas of disagreement that were most associated with hostility in the minds of these spouses. For example, one husband said that disagreements about finances had always occurred in his marriage, and problems in this area were more magnified at Time 2 because disagreements about money were ongoing. This husband exhibited hostility towards his wife in discussing their disagreements about money. Increased hostility in other spouses was attributed to dissatisfaction in current jobs, and disagreement in career decisions.

Also, at Time 2, one wife said that she and her husband were in less agreement about their philosophies of life, and aims, goals, and things believed important, due to her husband's current job. At Time 2, another couple almost always disagreed about career decisions. Disagreement had to do with childcare in having full-time careers.

It was interesting and important to note that the five spouses who expressed distinct hostility to their spouses at Time 2 were among those who had initially high levels of disagreements and especially among those whose disagreements increased over time. So even though many couples who disagreed did not become hostile, it was apparent that hostility was related to disagreement. It could be that high disagreement among some of the couples led to increased hostility, and that hostility may have led to further increases in their disagreements.

The 23 spouses who did not demonstrate hostility seemed to disagree in more egalitarian ways. For example, one wife said, "We may not always agree on everything, but we know we're going to agree to work through our differences." Additionally, another wife said, "It's not that we don't disagree. We certainly do. But we just don't make that big of a deal about our disagreements. And rarely am I ever mad at [my husband] when we disagree. It's mostly just about a difference of opinion."

Scholars have suggested that hostility is a strong indicator that marriages are troubled (Elder, 1999, Gottman, 1993), and hostility can precipitate divorce more quickly than neutral affect (Gottman and Notarius, 2000). Thus, I consider hostility an example of marital disruption.

In his book, *Children of the Great Depression* (1999), Elder found that heightened hostility after job loss is generally a first indication that marriages will be greatly

impacted by job loss, and possibly end in divorce. Conversely, Elder also found that several marriages in his sample were free of hostility, despite difficult economic times after job loss.

At Time 2, it was impossible to tell whether marriages in which spouses had become increasingly hostile would ever end in divorce. However, these marriages seemed much more disrupted by job loss than those that were free of hostility. In contrast, successful spouses were less affected by job loss and did not show signs of hostility. As I speculate at the end of this chapter, positive affect had likely existed for successful spouses throughout their marriage, and positive affect likely made successful spouses respond to job loss with less recrimination.

### **LACK OF COMMITMENT AND WORK AS A SOURCE OF INCREASED HOSTILITY**

Although there was not much variation in marital interaction and functioning, it now seems important to notice that those who became increasingly hostile over time were among those who demonstrated lower marital interaction and functioning at Time 1. Three spouses were also among those who had lower levels of commitment at Time 1. For two of these spouses, qualitative accounts seemed to indicate that past commitment was a result of less marital quality. And thus, lower commitment levels at Time 1 were an indication of problems from early-on in marriages. Subsequently, the larger issue for these two spouses seemed to be a lack of marital quality from the inceptions of marriages.

One wife also illustrates that commitment may follow marital quality. This wife, who had a lower level of commitment retrospectively, said that her lower commitment was a result of her low marital quality. However, with work at marriage, her marital quality increased, and higher levels of commitment resulted at Time 2.

Being married to less successful spouses also caused increased hostility for two spouses. So while their commitment levels were not low at Time 1, and they were successful at Time 1, increased exposure to less successful spouses bred hostility for them as well.

While three spouses expressed hostility and had lower levels of commitment, the more central problem seemed to be lack of marital quality. Nevertheless, generally lower marital quality among spouses with increased hostility seemed to lead them to interpret the behaviors of their spouses in negative terms.

### **SPECULATIONS ON CAUSES OF HOSTILITY**

Perhaps the most important finding to come out of my study was that job loss was not very harmful to most marriages. However, for five spouses, the job loss experience had precipitated increased hostility. This finding was paramount, given that hostility is a disruptive, marriage-threatening behavior (Gottman, 1994).

Throughout my analysis, it was difficult to establish why these five spouses had become more hostile over time. However, I speculate about another source of hostility.

In an unsystematic way, I noted over time that spouses who were free of hostility, and especially three couples demonstrated positive affect for their mates and were satisfied in their relationships. Examples of this positive affect are illustrated in these couples' notions of commitment, that were coded as reciprocal or rewarding. Several of these spouses also seemed to enjoy being around each other, and regarded each other with good will. However, not all those who had not become hostile demonstrated positive affect equally or at all in some cases.

Those who became increasingly hostile almost over time almost never expressed enjoyment from being with their mates, and two spouses also never regarded their mates with good will. In these ways, marriages that became hostile at Time 2 were obligatory but stable prior to job loss.

In *Children of the Great Depression*, Elder (1999) also speculates that historical positive affect can cause couples respond to job loss with little recrimination. He suggests that other marriages are stabilized prior to job loss because they have not been challenged. However, when job loss occurs, it often becomes overbearing for those who lacked historic positive affect. Additionally, other studies as well indicate that although job loss can negatively affect marital roles, it typically does not change spouses' positive affect towards each other (Larson, Wilson, and Beley, 1994). Thus, it is possible that positive affect can buffer the significance of job loss, and those who cope better in job loss most likely have affectual histories.

Ultimately, it was difficult to establish a source of hostility, and because my findings about positive affect were unsystematic, I could also not say with any certainty that positive affect was the particular factor that protected couples from increasing hostility.

## CHAPTER 10. CONCLUSIONS

A central purpose of this dissertation was to understand commitment as a source of marital quality. However, findings indicated that most couples were highly committed, and the small variation in commitment was not central to less marital success or increased hostility.

I also found problems with the lack of clarity of the concept of commitment. There were spouses with high levels of moral commitment who expressed relatively low levels of overall commitment. And those who expressed high levels of commitment had varied notions of commitment.

Spouses' expressed commitment seemed more a result of their success in marriage than a cause of that success.

Commitment did not seem to be a primary motivator for work in marriages. Despite high commitment levels, few actively worked at their relationships, even under duress. Most seemed to assume, and often apparently accurately, that good relationships take care of themselves without deliberate "work." When efforts were made, they seemed to come naturally.

While commitment did not seem to motivate work in most marriages, it is possible that "work" in marriage may make a difference to the marital success of some.

The results of the present study were consistent with those of past studies on marital quality and stability in job loss that indicated that many marriages remain unchanged in job loss (Elder, 1999; Newman, 1988). However, the present study hardly showed the severe impacts of job loss on some marital relationships that other researchers have found in many marriages (Elder, 1999; Newman, 1988).

Like past research on marital quality and stability in job loss, many marriages in my sample experienced great hardship and stresses as a result of job loss. So, lack of variation in marital quality and stability in my sample could not be attributed to lack of hardships and stresses related to job loss. In-fact, some marriages that experienced tremendous financial difficulties continued to do well over time.

It seems likely that the absence of severely damaged marriages was at least partially a result of self-selection bias out of the study. Volunteering for a marriage study is typically an indication that one's marriage is successful (Karney, Davila, Cohan, Sullivan, Johnson, and Bradbury, 1995). Most participants in my study were in high quality marriages from their inceptions, and so it seems reasonable to say that they volunteered in my study because their marriages were successful. Other research on marital quality and stability in job loss is not subject to this self-selection bias, and thus, it is likely that marriages in these studies were more varied in success from their beginnings (Elder, 1999; Newman, 1988). The overall success of couples in my study should not be considered typical of couples with similar experiences.

In conclusion, it seems important to ask what the findings of this study mean to future research regarding commitment and marital quality. Because of the lack of variation that I found in both commitment and marital quality, it is impossible to determine whether or not commitment is important to marital quality. I suggest that future studies should examine greater variation in commitment, to understand if variation in commitment leads to real differences in marital quality. If variation in commitment is found, then it is possible that this variation could lead to differences in marital quality. However, my study and others (Dean and Spanier, 1974) suggest that most couples at

least begin highly committed, with little variation. Lower commitment may be more a result of decreased marital quality over time.

Future findings in commitment will depend upon how commitment is defined. Future studies should continue to clarify “commitment.” However, I suggest that future definitions of commitment should emphasize the permanency of one’s marriage. This will keep commitment clearly separate from positive affect.

While this study cannot directly address the big and important problem of what causes and how one can improve the quality of marriages, it suggests that other things like affection, good communication, and quality time together may best facilitate the positive constructive approaches that make it possible for marriages to weather stressful external conditions. So future efforts to understand marital quality may be better directed in understanding effective communication, quality time together, and positive affect, which all seem more central to marital quality than commitment.

## REFERENCES

- Becker, Howard S. 1960. "Notes on the Concept of Commitment." *American Journal of Sociology* 66: 32-40.
- Brauer, Sanford L and Curtis R. Bay. 1992. "Assessing and Compensating for Self-Selection Bias (non-representativeness) of the Family Research Sample." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54: 925-940.
- Brickman, Phillip. 1987. *Commitment, Conflict, and Caring*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- Burr, Wesley R., Reuben Hill, F. Ivan Nye, and Ira L. Reiss. 1975. *Contemporary Theories About the Family: Research-Based Theories*. New York: The Free Press.
- Creswell, John W. 1998. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*. London: Sage Publications.
- Dean, David G. and G.B. Spainer. 1974. "Commitment: An Overlooked Variable in Marital Adjustment?" *Sociological Focus* 7: 113-118.
- Doherty, William J. 2001. *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart*. New York. The Guilford Press.
- Elder, Glen H. Jr. 1999 ed. *Children of the Great Depression: Social Changes in Life Experiences*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Gottman, John M.. 1994. *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail, and How You Can Make Yours Last*. New York: Fireside.
- Gottman, John M. and Robert Wayne Levenson. 2000. "Timing of Divorce: Predicting When a Couple Will Divorce Over a 14-Year Period." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62: 737-745.
- Gottman, John M. and Clifford I. Notarius. 2000. "Decade Review: Observing Marital Interaction." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62: 927-947.
- Hensley, W.E. and M.K. Roberts. 1976. "Dimensions of Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale." *Psychology Report* 38: 583-584.
- Johnson, Dennis J. and Caryl E. Rusbult. 1989. "Resisting Temptation: Devaluation of Alternative Partners as a Means of Maintaining Commitment in Close Relationships." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57: 967-980.

- Johnson, Michael P. 1991. "Commitment to Personal Relationships." In Warren H. Jones and D. Perlman (Editors) *Advances in Personal Relationships: A Research Annual*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Johnson, Michael P., John P. Caughlin, and Ted L. Huston. 1999. "The Tripartite Nature of Marital Commitment: Personal, Moral, and Structural Reasons to Stay Married." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 61: 160-177.
- Johnson, Michael P. 1999. "Personal, Moral, and Structural Commitment to Relationships: Experiences of Choice and Constraint." In Jeffrey M. Adams and Warren H. Jones (Editors), *Handbook of Interpersonal Commitment and Relationship Stability*. New York. Plenum Publishers. Pgs. 73-90.
- Karney, Benjamin R, Joanne Davila, Catherine L. Cohen, Kieran T. Sullivan. 1995. "An Empirical Investigation of Sampling Strategies in Marital Research." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 57 (4): 909-922.
- Kerns, Robert D. and Dennis C. Turk. 1984. "Depression and Chronic Pain: The Mediating Role of the Spouse." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*: 845-852.
- Larson, Jeffrey H., Stephan M. Wilson, and Rochelle Beley. 1994. "The Impact of Job Insecurity on Marital and Family Relations." *Family Relations* 43: 138-143.
- Leik, Robert K. and Sheila A. Leik. 1977. "Transition to Interpersonal Commitment." In Robert L. Hamblin and John H. Kunkel (Editors), *Behavioral Theory in Sociology: Essays in Honor of George C. Homans*. New Brunswick, N.J. Transaction Books. (299-322).
- Levinger, George. 1965. "Marital Cohesiveness and Dissolution: An Integrative Review." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 27: 19-28.
- Levinger, George. 1976. "A Social Psychological Perspective on Marital Dissolution." *Journal of Social Issues*, 32: 21-47.
- Lewis, Robert A. and Graham B. Spanier. 1979. "Theorizing About the Quality and Stability of Marriage." Pages 268-294 in W.R. Burr, R. Hill, F.I. Nye, and I.L. Reiss (Editors). *Contemporary Theories About the Family* (Vol. 2). New York. Free Press.
- Lund, M. 1985. "The Development of Investment and Commitment Scales for Predicting Continuity of Personal Relationships." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 2: 3-23.
- Lydon, John E. and Mark P. Zanna. 1990. "Commitment in the Face of Adversity: A Value-Affirmation Approach." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58 (6): 1040-1047.

- Macionis, John J. 2004. *Society: The Basics* (Seventh Edition). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Newman, Katherine S. 1988. *Falling From Grace: Downward Mobility in the Age of Affluence*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Nock, Steven L. 1995. "Commitment and Dependency in Marriage." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 57 (2): 503-515.
- Paul, Pamela. 2002. *The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony*. New York: Villard Books.
- Popenoe, David. 2002. *The Top Ten Myths of Marriage*. Retrieved August 20, 2003, from The National Marriage Project Website:  
<http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/pubmyths%20of%20marriage.htm>
- Rubin, Herbert J. and Irene S. Rubin. 1995. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Rusbult, Caryl E. 1983. "A Longitudinal Test of the Investment Model: The Development (and Deterioration) of Satisfaction and Commitment in Heterosexual Involvements." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45: 101-117.
- Sanchez, Laura and Constance T. Gager. 2000. "Hard Living, Perceived Entitlement to a Great Marriage, and Marital Dissolution." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62: 708-722.
- Seidman, Irving. 1998. *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Spanier, G.B. 1976. "Measuring Dyadic Adjustment: New Scales for Assessing the Quality of Marriage and Similar Dyads." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 38: 15-28.
- Stanley, Scott M. and Howard J. Markman. 1992. "Assessing Commitment in Personal Relationships." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54: 595-608.
- Stanley, Scott M. 1998. *The Heart of Commitment: Compelling Research that Reveals The Secrets of a Lifelong, Intimate Marriage*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

- Stanley, Scott M., Thomas N. Bradbury, and Howard J. Markman. 2000. "Structural Flaws in the Bridge From Basic Research on Marriage to Interventions for Couples." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62: 256-264.
- Staw, Barry M. 1976. "Knee-Deep in the Big Muddy: A Study of Escalating Commitment to a Chosen Course of Action." *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 16: 27-44.
- Stritof, Bob and Sheri Stritof. 2004. *Does Marriage Counseling Work?: Help for Troubled Marriages*. Retrieved August 17, 2004 from the Help For Troubled Marriages website <http://marriage.about.com/cs/advice/a/marcounsel.htm>.
- Suitor, J. Jill. 1987. "Marital Happiness of Returning Students and Their Husbands: Effects of Part and Full-Time Enrollment." *Research in Higher Education* 27 (4): 311-331.
- Suitor, J. Jill and Karl Pillmer. 1994. "Family Caregiving and Marital Satisfaction: Findings from a 1-Year Panel Study of Women Caring for Parents with Dementia." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 56: 681-690.
- Suitor, J. Jill, Rachel Reynolds, and Shirley A. Keeton. 2002. "'He Just Wouldn't Understand': Long-Term Effects of Husbands' Emotional Support on Marital Stability Among Returning Students." Unpublished.
- Surra, Catherine A. and Christine R. Gray. 2000. "A Typology of Processes of Commitment to Marriage: Why Do Partners Commit to Problematic Relationships?" 253-280.
- Thibaut, John W. and Harold H. Kelly. 1959. *The Social Psychology of Groups*. New Brunswick, New Jersey. Transaction Publishers.
- Umberson, Debra. 1995. "Marriage as Support or Strain?: Marital Quality Following the Death of a Parent." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57: 709-723.
- Waite, Linda J., Don Browning, William J. Doherty, Maggie Gallagher, Ye Luo, and Scott M. Stanley. 2002. *Does Divorce Make People Happy?: Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages*. Retrieved October 10, 2002 from the Institute for American Values website: <http://americanvalues.org>.
- Wallerstein, Judith S. and Sandra Blakeslee. 1995. *The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts*. New York: Warner Books.
- Williams, Lee M. 1995. "Associations of Stressful Life Events and Marital Quality." *Psychological Reports* 76: 1115-1122.

Whitehead, Barbara Dafoe and David Popenoe. 2001. *Who Wants to Marry a Soul Mate?: New Survey Findings on Young Adults' Attitudes about Love and Marriage*. Retrieved March 15, 2002 from the National Marriage Project Website: <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/TEXTSOOU2001.htm>.

Zuo, Jiping. 1992. "The Reciprocal Relationship Between Marital Interaction and Marital Happiness: A Three Wave Study." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 54: 870-878.

## **APPENDIX – REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION IN STUDY**

Dear XXX/XXX Members:

My name is Amy Manning, and I am working on my Ph.D. in sociology. I am currently conducting research for my dissertation, which is about job loss and marital and family stability.

I am most interested in understanding how and if marital and family attitudes change in extreme circumstances. I have chosen to use the job loss context. Because studies of this kind have not been conducted in 20-plus years, I feel that my research findings will be extremely important to the marital stability literature. You can help in making this significant academic contribution!

I still need to interview several former male employees (and their wives). Also, eligible participants must need to have been married 10 years or less. Participants so far have found interviews to be interesting and not too personal.

If you are qualified and interested in participating or know of someone who is, please contact me at [miler3@juno.com](mailto:miler3@juno.com) or at 281.359.2904 / 713.376.4693. Thanks, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Amy Manning

## **VITA**

Amy Manning completed her Bachelor of Science degree in sociology at Texas A & M University in December, 1995. She completed her Master of Arts degree in sociology at Louisiana State University in December, 1988. Her doctoral degree was conferred in May, 2005. She currently lives with her husband, son, and daughter in Houston, Texas.