Title: Marital Adjustment Over Time in Families of Children with Mild and Moderate Intellectual Disability

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Introduction: The impact of raising a child with an intellectual disability (ID) on parents’ marital well-being has been difficult to specify (Glidden, Floyd, Hastings, & Mailick, in press). Some investigations have found that having a child with ID adds strain to parents’ marital relationships, whereas others have noted that parents report their child provides the couple with a positive shared sense of purpose. Reviews of research have concluded that, overall, effects are moderately negative for both marital satisfaction and marital stability. However, there has been considerable variability across studies, which seems to depend on sample characteristics attributable to age and life course stage in cross-sectional studies, and attrition and selection effects in longitudinal samples. Also, marital dissatisfaction and marital dissolution may only partially overlap, so that studies examining only one of these factors might underestimate negative functioning. The current study examined patterns of marital status (i.e., intact, divorced, remarried) and marital satisfaction levels across time for parents raising children with intellectual disability. We compared and contrasted findings based on wave of data collection (suggesting age and life-course timing effects), and longitudinal sample retention (suggesting sample selectivity and longitudinal transitions).

Method: A total of 174 families of children with mild or moderate intellectual disability participated in a 14-year longitudinal investigation of family adjustment. Data were collected at four waves: wave 1, wave 2 (18-24 months), wave 3 (5 years), and wave 4 (14 years). At the 5-year measurement (wave 3), 29 additional families were recruited into the sample. The children were 6-18 years old at wave 1, and 14-32 years old at wave 4. On average, the parents were in their late 30’s at wave 1, and in their early 50’s at wave 4. At each wave parents reported on their marital status (married/living together, divorced, single, and widowed), and intact couples completed the Dyadic Adjustment Test (Spanier, 1976), a well-known measure of marital quality and satisfaction. Marital quality scores were transformed into three categories based on established cut-offs: “happy,” “midrange,” and “unhappy.”

Results: For marital status, cross-sectional distributions were similar at all four waves, with 68-72% currently married, 20-26% currently divorced, and 5-10% never married. However, across time there were many individual shifts in marital status (e.g., married to divorced, divorced to re-married), so that only 48% of couples were continuously married during the course of the study, and 45% had experienced divorce within the 14-year period. For marital quality, both the cross-sectional and the longitudinal data showed differences across time suggestive of life-course trends. At the first two waves, nearly 50% of the married spouses were happy and 20-24% were unhappy. At wave 3, when spouses were in early mid-life, fewer spouses were happy (35-42%) and more were unhappy (24-35%). The trend reversed at wave 4, with the majority of spouses happy (58-67%) and relatively few unhappy (11-17%). A notable portion of the continuously married spouses (14-17%) remained in unhappy marriages at all time points. Also, considering both marital status and marital quality together, the majority of couples (57%) had experienced either divorce or significant marital distress during the 14-year course of the study. There was little evidence that self-selection on marital quality affected differential drop-out from the study over time.

Discussion: The picture of marital adjustment depends on how and when it is assessed. For marital status, the longitudinal trends suggested much greater marital instability than indicated by the cross-sectional data at each time point. Thus, studies that report only current marital status do not reveal the complexity of family transitions over time. Additionally, the marital quality data showed a U-shaped trend over time, possibly due both to parents exiting unhappy marriages and entering happier relationships by the 14-year measurement, and normative developmental changes in marital quality as stable couples enter later midlife. Together, the findings regarding marital status and satisfaction suggest that the cumulative effects of marital disruption and dysfunction may be more significant for these families than suggested by earlier research reviews. Future investigations should examine influences such as stage of life, marital transitions, socio-economic factors, and child characteristics (e.g., adaptive functioning, disruptive behaviors) that might influence marital adjustment in these families.
References:


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