

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
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FOR RICHER OR POORER, AS LONG AS YOU BOTH SHALL LIVE:
GENDERED EFFECTS OF MARITAL STATUS CHANGE
ON WAGES OVER THE LIFE COURSE

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A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iv
List of Tables	vi
List of Figures	vii
Abstract	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Review of Literature	6
Does Marriage Matter?	6
Chapter 3: Changes of Heart— When Change in Marital Status Changes Wages	19
Methods	20
Results.....	27
Discussion.....	31
Chapter 4: Pathways of Partnership.....	42
Methods	43
Results.....	48
Discussion.....	53
Chapter 5: Which Pathways of Partnership Pay Off?	59
Methods	60
Results.....	63
Discussion.....	66
Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion	74
Summary of Contributions	74
References.....	90
Appendix.....	108

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1. Marital Change Indicator Coding	35
Table 3.2. Descriptive Statistics across Marital Change Categories.....	36
Table 3.3. Within/Between (Hybrid) Effects Regression on Hourly Wages across Marital Change Indicators by Gender	38
Table 3.4. Predicted Wages with First- and Second-Order Wages Difference Comparisons	40
Table 4.1. Descriptions of Marital Status Trajectories.....	56
Table 4.2. Descriptive Statistics of the Marital Status Trajectory Groups by Gender.....	57
Table 4.3. Multinomial Logistic Risk Models (log odds) of Factors on Marital Status Trajectories	58
Table 5.1. OLS Linear Regression Models of Marital Status Trajectories on Log Hourly Wages 2014–2022.....	70
Table 5.2. Gender-Wage Comparisons, Calculated from Average Predicted Wages across Marital Status Trajectories.....	73
Table A.1a. Model Fit Statistics for Group-Based Trajectory Models with 1–10 Marital Status Groups.....	108
Table A.1b. Model Fit Statistics for Group-Based Trajectory Models with 6–7 Marital Status Groups: BIC.....	109
Table A.1c. Model Fit Statistics for Group-Based Trajectory Models with 6–7 Marital Status Groups: APPA.....	110

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.4. Predicted Wages across Marital Change Categories for Within/Between (Hybrid) Regression Models, by Gender	41
Figure 4.1. Marital Status Trajectory Groups of Men and Women Across the Life Course.....	56
Figure 5.1. Predicted Wages by Gender with Race/Ethnicity and Gender with Religious Frequency.	71
Figure 5.2. Predicted Wages by Trajectory and Gender.....	72
Figure A.1. Marital Status Trajectory Groups of Men and Women Across the Life Course	111

ABSTRACT

Marriage remains a normative experience for adults in the United States today, despite substantial changes in family formation and dissolution patterns in recent decades. Such persistence offers a valuable opportunity for identifying informative patterns that affect families over time. This dissertation focuses on the connection between marital status and marital status change on wages, as well as how gender, race and ethnicity, and frequency of religious attendance impacts this connection. I first examine proximate wage effects of marital status change using Current Population Survey Merged Outgoing Rotation Groups data from 2000–2023. Using within- and between-effects analyses, I find that the short-term effects of marital status change are far greater for men than they are for women, and that for men, having been married—or what might be called *marriageability*—matters more than actually being married. Second, I use group-based trajectory models and 30 waves of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 to identify seven discrete trajectories of marital status change that differ according to the timing, duration, and frequency of transitions between marital statuses that individuals experience from ages 18 to 65. I find that Black individuals are far less likely to enter marriage at any point in their adulthood compared to other ethno-racial groups, women are more likely to remain unmarried following marital dissolution compared to men, and those who frequently attend religious services are more likely to be married later in life compared to those with infrequent attendance. In my third set of analyses, I investigate the association of trajectories on wages and find substantial variation across marital status trajectories, paying particular attention to gender variation. I find that women experience far less variation in wages according to marital status trajectory compared to men, that marriageability in men seems to pay significant dividends, and that a sizeable gender pay gap is present for all trajectories except for individuals

who never marry. Together, these findings offer support for a life course of marriage framework to aid in counting the ways marriage can have stratifying effects. By treating marital status as a dynamic process rather than a one-time event, this life course of marriage framework adds depth, breadth, and temporal understanding of how inequality can shape and be shaped by marital status.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The institution of marriage has experienced monumental changes over the last century, wherein the timing, stability, legality, expectations, and participation in marriage have transformed in fundamental ways (Amato 2010; Cherlin 2010b; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Furstenberg 2014; Kamp Dush et al. 2019; Manning, Brown, and Payne 2014). Despite—and perhaps due to—this reality, the contexts and consequences of marriage remain a topic of general interest to scholars and laypersons alike. Research on marriage has provided valuable insights into many aspects of marriage, including marriage expectations (Gerson 2009, 2015), who is most likely to marry (Qian 1999; Sassler and Miller 2017; Wilcox et al. 2021), the quality of marriages (Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach 2000; Kamp Dush, Taylor, and Kroeger 2008a; Karney and Bradbury 2020), and predictors and consequences of marital instability (Amato 2010; Amato and Cheadle 2005; Bratter and King 2008). Moreover, the significance of marital status on the trajectory of one's life continues to be hypothesized, decried, extolled, and debated. Historical mistrust of unmarried men as a “dangerous element” (Cannon [1854] 1878:7) and unmarried women pejoratively referred to as “old maids” or “spinsters” reveals social judgments regarding one's marital status that have evolved over time but are certainly not eliminated (DePaulo 2023; Popenoe 1993; Wilcox 2024). In empirical studies, the effects of marital status have largely centered on mortality (Dupre, Beck, and Meadows 2009), physical (Mikucka, Arránz Becker, and Wolf 2021) and mental well-being (Kamp Dush et al. 2008a), and financial resources (Cha, Weeden, and Schnabel 2023; Ludwig and Brüderl 2018). Yet far less is known about how *being* and *staying* married impacts individuals over time, when those impacts are manifest, and how those impacts differ from those who do not marry or do not stay married. In short, what are the characteristics of the marital life course?

The life course perspective (Alwin and McCammon 2003; Elder 1977, 1998) provides a useful framework for conceptualizing research questions and greater understanding of human lives within a larger context (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003). This paradigm incorporates the study of transitions, turning points, and trajectories that result in accumulated advantages or disadvantages, which in turn profoundly impact outcomes for different individuals and groups (Conger, Conger, and Martin 2010; Harkness 2022; McLanahan 2004; O’Rand 1996). The five core principles of life course theory (lifelong development, agency, historical time and place, timing, and linked lives; Elder et al. 2003) all have particular applicability to the experience of marriage. According to Cheng, “Marriage is not a one-time event, but a major turning point that shapes an individual’s life trajectory in all subsequent years” (2016:30). During the years of marriage, associated roles, norms, and expectations powerfully shape succeeding life choices and experiences, often in profoundly gendered ways (Blair-Loy 2001; Daminger 2019; England 2010; Hochschild and Machung 1989; Thébaud, Kornrich, and Ruppanner 2021).

In this dissertation, I propose a marital life course framework to recognize the consummately linked lives of married people. Incorporating the life course principles of lifelong development, timing, and linked lives, I apply this framework to conceptualize the effects of marriage as *proximate* or short-term, intermediate, and *distal* or long-term. In essence, the marital life course framework shifts research questions from asking “how does marriage affect outcomes?” to “when are the effects of marriage actualized?” My dissertation comprises three studies that each investigate the significance of marital status, changes in marital status, and the timing of such changes to understand the *sui generis* effects of marriage—that is, the unique effects marriage itself. After a review of the literature in Chapter 2, I describe methods and results

in the three subsequent empirical chapters, after which I offer a discussion of my contributions, limitations, and conclusions.

Entitled *Changes of Heart: When Marital Status Change Changes Wages*, Chapter 3 examines the proximate effects of marital change on wages and how this is gendered. Although studies on the wage advantages of being married are plentiful (Ahituv and Lerman 2007; Cha et al. 2023; Cheng 2016; Killewald and Gough 2013; Ludwig and Brüderl 2018), not only are causal hypotheses to explain the phenomenon still up for debate, but the temporality of marriage effects on wages has not been adequately explored. Previous work has found that, while men's work hours increase after marriage and can thus boost wages, actual increases in wage only occur after married life continues for some time (Ahituv and Lerman 2007). More recent research asserts that the wage benefits of marriage grow over time for white men as well as black men and women but not for white women (Cheng 2016), indicating that race and gender matter in understanding the effects of marital status. Continued gender wage gaps and other wage inequalities emphasize the importance of parsing out marital status as both a mechanism of wage change as well as how the timing of marital status changes may augment or curtail economic increase. Because studies on the effects of marital status on wages often use samples of only men or only women, and because many of these studies do not account for change over time, I bridge this gap using two waves of Current Population Survey–Merged Outgoing Rotation Groups data to compare the wages of those whose marital status changes with those whose marital status remains steady, as well as the within- and between- gender differences among those groups.

In Chapter 4, *Pathways of Partnership: Marital Status Trajectories over the Life Course*, I identify distinct marital status trajectories that visualize and concretize marital timing, transitions, and durations across a period of over 50 years. A preponderance of research on the

relationship between marital status and various outcomes uses what Cheng (2016) calls a “static approach,” treating marital status as an invariant state despite increasing changes in age at first marriage, marriage rates, cohabitation, divorce, and remarriage (Smock and Schwartz 2020). The resultant oversimplification of the multidimensional effects of marital status limits our ability to provide a fuller understanding of important family-related determinants over the life course. A few studies of mortality and health have utilized partnership histories to add complexity to the treatment of marital status (Barrett 2000; Peters and Liefbroer 1997) and refer to these histories as trajectories. Others employ hazard models to plot hazard rates over time, classifying timing and durations of marriages as well as incidence of divorce to illustrate the effects of marital status (Dupre et al. 2009; Dupre and Meadows 2007). However, to my knowledge, I am the first to use changes in marital status to identify marital status trajectories over the life course. Adding to other applications of trajectories such as labor force participation (Damaske and Frech 2016; Weisshaar and Cabello-Hutt 2020) and criminal activity (Neil and Sampson 2021), I outline features of seven marital status trajectory groups and describe demographic characteristics of each group.

Building on Chapter 3’s analysis of the proximate effects of marital status change on wages, Chapter 5 employs the marital status trajectory groups identified in Chapter 4 to examine distal effects of marriage patterns. Titled *Which Pathways of Partnership Pay Off?*, this chapter tests the explanatory power of the marital status trajectory groups in the case of hourly wages in pre-retirement years. Looking at long-term outcomes capitalizes on the utility of trajectories and their ability follow processes that can change over time, such as marital status. As mentioned above, different marital statuses are associated with variations in wages, but far less is known about the temporality of these effects. Previous studies have found that the wage penalties of

divorce and widowhood (Gadalla 2008; Holden and Kuo 1996; Tach and Eads 2015) can be mitigated by remarriage (Wilmoth and Koso 2002), suggesting not only that marital status changes can impact wages but also that the sequence matters. Moreover, these effects have been found to vary considerably by gender and race (Lin and Brown 2021; Streeter 2020; Wilmoth and Koso 2002). By applying marital status trajectory groups to the outcome of wages, I can identify a more precise understanding of these dynamics over time as well as within- and between- group variations.

Together, this dissertation provides additional insight into the marriage-wage debate, asking how different marital status trajectories affect wages change over time. More broadly, examining proximate and distal outcomes of marital status change provides compelling support for outlining a life course of marriage framework to scaffold future research questions that can better identify the temporal variation in the effects of marriage throughout the life course, to provide more granular understanding not just of *how* marriage impacts individuals but *when*.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

DOES MARRIAGE MATTER?

Much of the United States' current factious social and political debates over moral values and national identity center on families. Questions of who can and should marry, if someone should have children and how many, what family structure is best for children, and how family decisions impact society, are all based on the assumption that one's marital choices have individual and societal consequences. Correspondingly, family formation and dissolution patterns have continued to diversify (Cherlin 2010b; Furstenberg 2014; Lundquist, Lin, and Curington 2024; Smock and Schwartz 2020). These attendant complexities require family researchers to provide reliable information on the determinants of family formation decisions, past and current family trends, and consequences of these decisions at micro and macro levels. In this review of literature on the significance of marital status, I describe current empirical understanding of the effects of marital status on individual outcomes and what we know about the timing of those effects. I further expand on the effects of marital status on wages, the key outcome of this dissertation. I also outline theoretical background of so-called marriage advantages (DeMaris 2018) and conclude this chapter with my broad research questions and expectations.

Marital Effects over Time

To better understand the temporal effects of marital status and marital status change, I describe the current literature on several outcomes that have been found to operate differentially according to marital status. Numerous scholars have examined the effects of being married compared to remaining single. Such work can arguably be considered attempts to answer the

question: does being married change one's life in ways that would not have occurred outside marriage? In criminology, a "marriage effect" is often considered a significant factor in desistance (Bersani and Doherty 2013; Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006). Marriage is also associated with political participation, with one's partner exerting significant influence on political engagement (Stoker and Jennings 1995). Being married has also been found to substantially alter one's social networks (Ermer and Proulx 2020; Kalmijn 2012; Nock 1998). These examples point to behavioral and social effects of marital status, but perhaps the most studied effects of marriage center on health and mortality. Epidemiological research on the effects of marital status consistently indicates lower mortality and better physical health among married people compared to those who are single (Drefahl et al. 2020; Dupre et al. 2009; Lawrence et al. 2019; Schoenborn 2004). Among social scientists, however, research on the marital health advantage is often less clear-cut.

Rendall and colleagues (2011) used pooled panel survey data for a large-scale study of the "marriage protection" hypothesis, concluding not only that married Americans indeed experience lower mortality rates compared to unmarried Americans, but also that divorced/separated and widowed Americans did not significantly differ from their never-married counterparts in terms of mortality. In contrast, Mikucka, Becker, and Wolf (2021) found that, in a large-scale panel sample in Germany, marriage was associated with improved self-rated health for men, a phenomenon not applicable to other measures of physical and mental health or for women. Moreover, additional U.S. studies indicate that, when fixed-effects models are applied, the health protective-effects of marriage only benefit women from earlier cohorts who remain in longer-term marriages (Tumin 2018), while others have found that such advantages are short-lived (Musick and Bumpass 2012). Williams and Umberson's (2004) work indicates that health

disparities are more closely associated with short-term crises during the time surrounding marital dissolution, after which reports of health remain statistically similar across marital statuses.

Additional research on the potential beneficial effects of marriage over time has examined outcomes of mental health and other measures of well-being. Marriage has been associated with greater well-being compared to singlehood (DeMaris 2018) and cohabitation (Kim and McKenry 2002). Utilizing panel data to assess levels of happiness, Qari (2014) found that life satisfaction of single individuals increases substantially in the years leading up to marriage, after which happiness declines but stays above pre-marriage levels for five years. This supports other findings indicating that much of the mental and physical health benefits of marriage might occur largely in anticipation of the wedding, rather than because of married life (Huntington et al. 2022). Other work following couples over the first four years of marriage has found that self-control and forgiveness increase in the context of marriage (Pronk et al. 2019).

Marital Status Effects on Income

Beyond the health and well-being benefits of marriage, marital status is also associated with economic advantages. Married individuals in the United States tend to earn higher wages compared to single individuals, at least for some groups. This marital wage premium (MWP) is most consistent and pronounced for white men (Ahituv and Lerman 2007; Cheng 2016; Killewald and Gough 2013; Ludwig and Brüderl 2018; McDonald 2020), while women and racialized minority groups have less consistent experiences when it comes to marriage effects on wages (Budig and Lim 2016; Cheng 2016). Divorce and widowhood are conversely associated with a penalty for wages, with white men experiencing the smallest penalties and women experiencing greater penalties, particularly as the number of children increases (Angel, Jiménez, and Angel 2007; Gadalla 2008; Herbst-Debby, Endeweld, and Kaplan 2021; Holden and Smock

1991; McKeever and Wolfinger 2001; Zick and Smith 1991; Zissimopoulos, Karney, and Rauer 2015). Although these effects of marital change on wages occur in different directions, they offer robust evidence that marital change has significant effects on wages.

Research on the effects of marital change on wages tends to focus on why marital status matters (or does not matter) to explain wage gaps (Chun and Lee 2001; Killewald and Gough 2013; Ludwig and Brüderl 2018; McDonald 2020) or how wages differ according to marital status (Ahituv and Lerman 2007; Avellar and Smock 2005; Endeweld, Herbst-Debby, and Kaplan 2022; Glauber 2018). Less common are studies investigating when such marital status effects on wages occur. Of these, some have examined the time periods before and after marital status change (Killewald and Lundberg 2017; Tach and Eads 2015), while others use a life course perspective to identify the emergence and persistence of family wage gaps (Kahn, García-Mangano, and Bianchi 2014; Van Winkle and Fasang 2020). Such research provides valuable insight into the MWP debate by acknowledging temporal variability in the effects of marital status change. Yet even these studies have a narrower explanatory focus when it comes to changes in marital status, examining only entering marriage or dissolving a union, or by limiting samples to parents.

Gender, race/ethnicity, and religious differences. The fact that men are more likely to experience an MWP has consequences for gendered differences in wages and long-term economic well-being. Particularly for white women, the motherhood penalty, or the decreased wages associated with being a mother (Budig and England 2001), explains a significant portion of the gender wage gap (Cha et al. 2023). This motherhood penalty is less pronounced among women of color, largely due to ethno-racial groups earning significantly less than whites to begin with (Cha et al. 2023; Cheng 2016; Glauber 2007; Killewald and Gough 2013). Moreover, the

motherhood penalty also varies across the wage distribution, with the penalty practically disappearing among the highest-earning women while it remains a reality for lower-earning women (Glauber 2018). Religiosity has also been found to heighten gender pay gaps, with highly religious women earning less and highly religious men earning more than their less religious counterparts (Schnabel 2016; Sitzmann and Campbell 2021). Though less often studied, the effect of religion on the marital status–wage relationship is an essential factor to consider, as religiosity increases the likelihood of marriage (Colaner and Giles 2008; Wilcox et al. 2021), especially early marriage (Uecker and Stokes 2008). Thus, intragroup variation is a major factor contributing to inequality as well as intergroup variation.

In contrast to marriage, divorce is associated with a significant decline in wages, at least in the short term (Gadalla 2008; Hogendoorn, Leopold, and Bol 2020; Tach and Eads 2015), and these declines also affect different groups in varying ways. Black women have been found to experience the greatest economic consequences following divorce (Smock, Tzoc, and Carr 2023). Additionally, lower-earning men experience significant reductions in income following divorce while high-earning men may even experience an increase in income post-divorce; women in all earning categories always lose (Endeweld et al. 2022; Gadalla 2008; Hogendoorn et al. 2020; Smock et al. 2023). Divorcing later in life (i.e., “gray divorce”) also has more devastating financial consequences for women, particularly as they are less likely to repartner (Davies and Denton 2002; Lin and Brown 2021). Religiosity is not typically included in wage studies, but the lower likelihood of divorce among the highly religious (Lehrer 2004; Wolfinger 2016) as well as greater gender traditionalism in highly religious couples (Gallagher and Smith 1999) supports the idea that religiosity can play a role in the economic consequences of divorce. Though anticipatory behaviors in the time leading up to divorce can complicate measurement of

wage changes (Duncan and Hoffman 1985; Gerner, Montalto, and Bryant 1990), marital status change out of marriage has significant effects on wages. Moreover, the timing of divorce or separation also likely impacts the magnitude of these effects.

Another type of marital status change is widowhood. Most research on income and widowhood focuses on the impact of spousal death on women's wages. This research has found that women uniformly experience negative economic consequences (Schmauk and Kridahl 2024; Zick and Smith 1991). Women are more likely than men to decumulate wealth to supplement income following death of a spouse (Streeter 2020), and widows have been found to be at as great a risk of poverty as divorced individuals (Holden and Kuo 1996). Further, women of color experience the greatest negative economic consequences of widowhood (Angel et al. 2007).

In sum, these marital changes and their effects on income have garnered much research. Yet many studies focus solely on men (e.g., Ahituv and Lerman 2007; Killewald and Gough 2013; Ludwig and Brüderl 2018; McDonald 2020) or on women (e.g., Budig and Hodges 2010; England et al. 2016; Smock, Manning, and Gupta 1999), limiting direct comparisons across gender groups. The reality of an MWP and other gendered effects of marital status are generally accepted (Juhn and McCue 2016; though not unanimously so; see Ludwig and Brüderl 2018) as a contributor to the gender wage gap (Cha et al. 2023; Chun and Lee 2001; Misra and Murray-Close 2014). Some scholars and other family advocates point to the MWP to attempt to encourage marriage, particularly in light of declining marriage rates. These arguments assert that because marriage is associated with greater financial gains for both men and women, single individuals would increase their economic standing by getting married (Waite and Gallagher 2001; Wilcox 2024). In essence, if one changes their marital status to enter the highest earning

group, higher wages are sure to follow. Yet why and for whom the MWP exists remains a robust scholarly debate that has generated a number of theories to describe the phenomenon.

Theories of Marital Effects

Although theorization of marital effects often depends on the outcomes being studied, two general theories offer some guidance. Protection theory suggests that certain mechanisms are present in marriage that are not otherwise enjoyed by those in other marital statuses. And selection theory postulates that marriage itself does not lead to advantageous outcomes so much as those who are healthier, wealthier, and happier (or have the potential become so) are simply more likely to enter marriage. I briefly describe these two perspectives below.

Protection theory. The public, legally binding commitment of marriage offers a level of institutional recognition and support that sets it apart from other marital statuses, creating a unique level of “enforceable trust” (Cherlin 2010b:138). According to proponents of protection theory, this substantial commitment and built in social support offers greater security and trust that allows for reduced depression and anxiety (DeMaris 2018). And the sense of belonging and obligation that a marital commitment entails leads to fewer risky or health-averse behaviors and more healthy behaviors (Carpenter et al. 2021; Musick and Bumpass 2012; Nock 1998). Moreover, pooling economic resources provides greater economic stability as well as better access to healthcare and lower levels of stress (DeMaris and Oates 2022).

In these and other intuitive ways, the assumed companionship inherent in a marriage can protect individuals from the negative impact of isolation and loneliness that may be more common among those who are not married. But other branches of research have identified various ways marriage might actually harm health through reduced physical activity (Nomaguchi

and Bianchi 2004), weight gain (Teachman 2016), and reduced nonfamily social support (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006). Plus, an important but frequently overlooked aspect of marital advantage research is the assumption of a healthy, supportive relationship. A contentious or low-quality marriage lacks many of the aforementioned protective effects and can lead to deteriorating mental and physical health (Miller et al. 2013; Williams and Umberson 2004). Although marriage certainly may offer protective benefits, many of these mechanisms are in no way guaranteed for married couples, nor are unmarried people precluded from them.

Selection theory. In contrast to protection theory, a theory of selection suggests that the physical, emotional, social, and financial benefits of marriage are also the characteristics of those who are likely to fare better in the marriage market. Some findings indicate that healthier individuals are more likely to marry (Lipowicz 2014), as are happier people (Qari 2014; Stutzer and Frey 2006) and those with greater earning power or potential earning power (Killewald and Lundberg 2017; Ludwig and Brüderl 2018). Conversely, other research suggests that those with poor health might have greater incentive to secure a partner, indicating negative or adverse selection into marriage (Lillard and Panis 1996).

Selection effects of marital advantages in wages are frequently tested to identify if marriage itself does not independently impact wages (Barg and Beblo 2009; Mari 2019; Xie et al. 2003). Indeed, proponents of selection theory have utilized various methods to argue that the MWP is simply a spurious association. Using relaxed assumptions on fixed-effects models, Loughran and Zissimopoulos (2009) found that marriage and childbearing have no significant effect on men's wages when controlling for wage growth, providing support for selection theory. Ludwig and Brüderl (2018) expound further on testing selection theory using fixed-effects models with individual-specific slopes on a sample of men and find no causal effect of marriage,

concluding that “arguments postulating a wage premium for married men should be discarded” (Ludwig and Brüderl 2018:744). Selection theory would therefore indicate that “marriageability” (Wilson 1987) plays a larger role in men’s economic advantage than the state of being married itself. Using a selection lens, so-called marriage effects on income are then likely to occur in tandem with marital success.

Other theories of income advantages. More specifically regarding income advantages, there are alternative theories to selection that are commonly postulated to explain a marital wage premium: specialization and employer preference. Becker's (1985) specialization hypothesis posits that in heterosexual marriages, married men and women specialize differentially due to men’s comparative advantage in the labor market and women’s comparative advantage in the home. This allows men to increase human capital and improve their job performance while women provide unpaid work at home. Though based on a model of marriage that is increasingly anachronistic (Coontz 1992), specialization theories have often been referenced in studies attempting to explain the gender wage gap (Chun and Lee 2001; Korenman and Neumark 1991).

In fact, more recent studies have found that specialization is less applicable today. Budig and Lim (2016) compared Baby Boomer participants with Millennial respondents and found that for younger cohorts, while households that specialize with a male breadwinner experience the greatest MWP, both partners in dual earner households also experience a MWP, regardless of gender, complicating gendered assumptions of specialization and providing some support for a unique marriage effect. Similarly, Killewald and Gough (2013) have found that both men and women experience wage gains associated with marriage while they are childless, and though parenthood increases those gains for men, marriage does not have a significant moderating effect on the link between motherhood and wages. These authors assert that “specialization is a two-

gender theory” (2013:496), so such mixed results for men versus women provided little support for the specialization hypothesis. Moreover, specialization theory does not specify when changes in productivity are likely to manifest following a change in marital status, leaving a critical gap in explanatory power.

Theories of employer preference indicate that the MWP exists simply because employers prefer married men and compensate them accordingly (Beutel and Schleifer 2022; McDonald 2020). Although few studies directly test this hypothesis, the persistence of the MWP and the related “fatherhood bonus” after controlling for specialization/productivity effects and selection effects lead some to theorize the existence of such employer preferences (e.g., Hersch and Stratton 2000). Further, research on masculinity and organizational structures (Acker 2006; Connell 1987) indicate that markers of “workplace hegemonic masculinity” (e.g., heterosexuality, authoritativeness, traditional gendered division of labor at home, and fatherhood status; Hodges and Budig 2010:723) are associated with the greatest wage premiums. These studies show that institutional and occupational contexts can produce dividends according to family status, particularly for married men (McDonald 2020; O’Herron, Schneider, and Harknett 2025; Schechtl and Kapelle 2024), while working mothers suffer from discriminatory attitudes regarding their work, which is more likely to be viewed as less competent and committed (Benard and Correll 2010; Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007). Though these comparisons provide valuable insights into experiences of employment dependent on marital or family status, whether individuals who change marital status experience benefits or penalties remains to be seen.

Life Course Theory

This review of theoretical and empirical background demonstrates both that marriage has effects on a number of outcomes, but more centrally for this project, that temporality matters in

assessing such outcomes. Yet temporality has been examined in limited ways. Studies that rely on cross-sectional data may identify interesting patterns but provide limited understanding of causal effects or changes over time (Ludwig and Brüderl 2018). My primary theoretical basis for examining the temporality of marriage effects comes from life course theory (Elder et al. 2003). Life course theory incorporates various concepts that address the historical and biographical contexts of individuals in society, particularly over time. These concepts include examining different life trajectories, timing and impacts of role transitions, and important turning points (Alwin 2012; Elder 1998; Elder et al. 2003). Under a life course framework, marital status and marital change play a pivotal role in understanding social phenomena, as movement into and out of marital statuses can be a significant turning point that leads to and contextualizes various role transitions and trajectories (Aisenbrey and Fasang 2017; Amato and James 2018; Schoon 2015; Zhang and Ang 2020). Moreover, marital status has implications for a multitude of outcomes that likely play out differently over the course of each type of marital status (i.e., single, married, divorced, widowed, separated) as well as moving into or out of marriage. The five core principles of life course theory (lifelong development, agency, historical time and place, timing, and linked lives; Elder et al. 2003) all have important applicability to the experience of marriage. In particular, the principle of linked lives—which Elder (1994, 1995) emphasizes is the principle most central to the life course—highlights the interdependence of individuals, especially in close relationships. While all individuals in a society experience interdependence with others, the nature of marriage imposes a sense of mutuality beyond nearly all other relationships between adults.

The life course principle of timing is another consequential aspect of examining marital status change. As age at first marriage continues to increase at a rapid pace (Manning et al. 2014;

Mayol-Garcia, Gurrentz, and Kreider 2021) and divorce remains a commonplace occurrence (Smock and Schwartz 2020), the timing of marital transitions can likely change the magnitude or direction of marital effects. Whether marital effects take place quickly after the wedding day, or if an extended period of living life as a married person is part of the manifestation of marital effects, greater understanding of the timing of these effects can aid in explaining the health and wealth disparities that characterize marital statuses. Indeed, as lifelong singlehood becomes increasingly common (Carr, Wang, and Smock 2024), identifying the mechanisms of differences according to marital status will only carry greater significance.

Research Questions and Expectations

Informed by the literature and a life course perspective, this dissertation is driven by three primary questions: When do the effects of marital status change occur? What are the specific patterns of marital status change over the life course? And how do these effects and their timing differ according to gender, race/ethnicity, and religious frequency? I address the first question in Chapter 3, where I use the case of hourly wages to examine short-term effects of marital status change, that is, effects that occur within 12 months of a marital status transition. I expect to find significant marriage premiums and divorce penalties in the short-term. I address the second question in Chapter 4. Given momentous changes in family formation patterns in recent decades, I expect to find several distinct marital status trajectories, with some characterized by stability and others by change, and that the probabilities of following a particular trajectory will vary according to gender, race and ethnicity, and religious frequency. Finally, I address the third question in Chapter 5, where I return to the outcome of wages—this time examining wages later in life—to identify long-term effects of marital status trajectories. I expect that trajectories with steady marital status will be associated with higher wages compared to trajectories characterized

by change. Further, I anticipate that women and racial/ethnic minority groups will earn lower wages compared to men and non-Black/non-Hispanic individuals and that religious frequency will be associated with higher wages for men but not for women.

CHAPTER 3: CHANGES OF HEART— WHEN CHANGE IN MARITAL STATUS CHANGES WAGES

As indicated in the literature reviewed in the previous chapter, the effects of marriage over time suggest that sharing a life together within the bonds of marriage provides a unique context in which certain measurable impacts tend to manifest, with the implication that these impacts are less likely to arise in other family structures. To add to extant literature, this study leverages longitudinal data to identify proximate effects of marital change on wages to compare the differential impacts of these events on men and women. I will examine both entering and leaving marriage to directly compare the magnitude of difference between types of marital change. I use three primary marital statuses between which change can occur: single, married, and divorced/widowed/separated (hereafter referred to as DWS).¹

This study is guided by three primary questions. First, what are the proximate wage effects of changes in marital status (e.g. single to married, married to DWS, DWS to married)? Second, how does entering marriage affect wages compared to leaving marriage, re-entering marriage, or not changing marital status at all? Third, do the patterns of wage effects of marital status change vary by gender? To answer these questions, I leverage the Current Population Study-Merged Outgoing Rotating Groups (CPS-MORG) data to identify proximate effects of marital status change on wages, compare the magnitudes of wage differences according to type of marital status change, and identify how these effects are gendered. I have three expectations for this study. First, I expect to find that consistently married men will enjoy the highest wages compared to other marital status groups, while consistently married women will not experience a

¹ These marital status categories do not directly differentiate between first marriage and remarriage per se, but the analytical strategy used in this study allows for some distinct comparisons.

similar marital wage dividend. Second, I expect to find divorce, widowhood, and separation will be associated with lower wages, and that women will experience a greater penalty compared to men. Third, I expect that entering or staying married will be associated with higher wages compared to exiting marriage or remaining single.

METHODS

Data

In order to determine whether change in relationship status has any proximate effects on wages, I turn to the Current Population Survey (CPS) Merged Outgoing Rotation Groups (CPS-MORG) dataset.² The CPS is a monthly survey of the United States population collected by the U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and is the primary source of labor force and unemployment statistics in the U.S. (Flood et al. 2024). The CPS interviews each household for four consecutive months, rotates them off interviews for eight months, and then collects information for another four months. During months 4 and month 16, the CPS collects additional information from respondents in this outgoing rotation group. This allows me to construct two-wave panels by matching individuals who were interviewed in the same month in consecutive years.³

² I downloaded the CPS-MORG from the National Bureau of Economic Research database (NBER Public Use Data Archive n.d.) Examples of research using the CPS-MORG to examine proximate change in wage inequality include Wesselbaum and Owen (2026) Luo and Schleifer (2023), Schleifer and Chaves (2016), Rosenberg and Kleykamp (2012), and Mouw and Kalleberg (2010).

³ Madrian and Lefgren (1999, 2000) have proposed a matching algorithm using household ID, race, education, gender, and marital status to match household informants in months 4 and 16. I have modified this approach to matching by removing the marital status as a condition, allowing me to treat a change in marital status as a substantive change of interests. Individuals who are not matched (i.e. individual who do not have the same race or gender between wave) are excluded from the analyses. Matching methods using maximum likelihood (Feng 2008) and Bayesian approaches (Feng 2001) have shown that the Madrian and Lefgren approach is quite robust. Madrian and Lefgren provide the Stata code for implementing their algorithm at: http://www.nber.org/data/cps_match.html.

For each month in the calendar year, the outgoing rotation group accounts for about one-fourth of the total monthly sample, totaling around 20,000 respondents each month. This amounts to roughly 220,000 individuals each year and includes detailed information about respondent wages, family characteristics, and labor force information. Because the CPS-MORG does not include information about the number of children in the household from 1994 and 1998 and uses a different occupational coding system before 2000,⁴ I focus the sample on the years from 2000 to 2024. I construct 24 two-wave panels over this period—the first one for 2000/2001 and the last for 2023/2024—by matching respondents interviewed in the same month in consecutive years (months 4 and 16 of the interview cycle). These panels provide information about individuals entering and leaving their marriage, as well as information about those who are stable in terms of their relationship status.

Key Independent Variable: Relationship Status

The CPS-MORG collects information about marital status at the time of interview. This includes the response categories (since 1988) of “Married civilian spouse present” (1), “Married A[rmed] F[orces] spouse present” (2), “Married spouse absent or separated” (3), “Widowed” (4), “Divorced” (5), “Separated” (6), and “Never Married” (7). I recode this information into three categories for those “Currently Married” (1-3=1) and “Divorced/Widowed/Separated” (4-6=2, hereafter DWS), all compared to those who are “Not Married” (7=0). Overall, 71.8 percent of the sample is currently married, 11.5 percent is in the DWS categories, and 16.7 percent is not currently married.

⁴ The Census occupational coding system has continued to change. However, the shift across 2000 took the Census code from a three-digit to a four-digit code scheme. This makes harmonizing the occupational coding across these time spans much more difficult.

My main interest in these marital status indicators is not respondents' current status, but whether the respondents changed their marital status across panel waves. To capture this, I create a series of change indicators for each of the three recoded marital status categories. For example, I create a binary variable for those who were stably single ($Marital\ Status_{t1} = 0 \ \& \ Marital\ Status_{t2} = 0$) as well as those who enter marriage ($Marital\ Status_{t1} = 0 \ \& \ Marital\ Status_{t2} = 1$) across panel waves. Table 3.1 shows the full coding approach for the marital change variable. By including these nine indicators of two-wave marital status combinations, I am able to capture both the effects of marital stability and all possible forms of marital change available in a two-wave panel to see if I can detect any short-term effects of marital change on wages.

[TABLE 3.1 ABOUT HERE]

Dependent Variable: Natural Logarithm of Wages

The outcome for the models is the natural logarithm of individual wages standardized to 2024 dollars. The CPS-MORG collects information on the hours worked in a typical week and dollars earned in a typical week. To create the wage measure, I divide the dollars earned in a typical week with the hours spent working in a typical week. The CPS truncates the top of the wage distribution to protect respondents' identity, and I multiply this top-coded value by 1.4, following the rule-of-thumb adjustment (Burkhauser, Feng, and Jenkins 2009; Feng, Burkhauser, and Butler 2006). I adjust the wage information to 2024 dollars using the consumer price index⁵ and

⁵ <https://cps.ipums.org/cps/cpi99.shtml>

finally, to account for skew in the wage distribution, I take the natural log of this variable before including it in regression models.

Additional Independent Variables

Time-Varying. The models that I pursue below treat variables that can change over time differently from variables that are stable over time. For time-varying variables, I include controls that capture within-individual changes as well as between-individual differences. For between-individual differences, I calculate the individual means across panel wave for each time-varying control variable ($\frac{x_{it1} + x_{it2}}{2} = \bar{X}_i$). In order to isolate within-individual differences, I calculate individual deviations from their personal means ($X_{it} - \bar{X}_i = \Delta X_{it}$). When placed into a random-effects model framework (described below), this variable coding isolates both individual change and comparative difference between individuals (Allison 2009).

To capture potential effects of additional family characteristics, I include time-varying indicators for the number of respondents' own children in their home. I include indicators for those with "One Child", "Two Children", and "Three or more Children" in one's home, all compared to those with no children in their home. To capture educational differences in wages, I control for those with a "High School Degree", "Some College", "Bachelor's Degree", and "Advanced Degree" compared to those with "Less than a High School Degree". To control for age, I include a continuous measure for age that runs from 18–65 to capture age's effects on wages.

Additional time-varying controls capture labor force characteristics that may affect individual wages. I include an indicator for those who work part-time (defined as working 35 hours per week or less) as well as an indicator for those in the private sector (compared to the

public sector).⁶ To capture occupational differences, I include indicators for “Professionals”; “Services”; “Sales”; “Office and Administrative”; “Farming, Fishing, and Forestry”; “Construction and Extraction”; “Installation, Maintenance, and Repair”; “Production”; and “Transportation and Moving”; all compared those working in “Management, Business, and Financial” occupations.

Time-Invariant. Some of the items that I believe may shape wage patterns do not vary across time, either due to general stability or because the data collection process does not allow these measures to change over time. Both gender and race are part of the Madrian and Lefgren (1999, 2000) algorithm for creating the CPS-MORG panel and therefore are time-invariant measures in these data. I include an indicator of women workers compared to men⁷ and indicators for “Black, non-Hispanic”, “Hispanic”, “Asian, non-Hispanic”, and “Other Race, non-Hispanic” compared to “White, non-Hispanic” workers to control for race/ethnic differences. I expect wages to vary across place, and I include time-invariant controls for “living in a city,” as well as indicators for each state captured in the sample (with Alabama as reference). Since the CPS sampling focuses on households, these are both functionally time-invariant measures in these data. Finally, I include indicator variables for each survey year to capture changes across time in these processes. Descriptive statistics for all variables are displayed in Table 3.2.

[TABLE 3.2 ABOUT HERE]

⁶ I exclude self-employed individuals and those working in the military

⁷ Due to data restrictions, gender is limited to a binary measure.

Analytical Strategy

Traditional approaches to capture change using two-wave panels pose some significant limitations. For example, fixed effects or within-unit regressions rely on mean deviation to partial out time-invariant effects and focus on within-individual change across panel waves (Allison 2009). To illustrate, the effects of marriage on wages takes the following form:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_i + e_i$$

where Y_i is the natural log of wages for individual i , X is a binary indicator for marriage taking on the values of 0 or 1, β_1 captures the difference in wages for married and unmarried individuals, β_0 is the model intercept, and e_i is any residual variation not captured by these marital differences. A fixed/within-effect regression changes this basic model by taking the mean deviation for each measured component of the model. This regression now takes the form:

$$(Y_{it} - \bar{Y}_i) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 (X_{it} - \bar{X}_i) + e_i$$

where the outcome is now the mean deviation of income for the individual—i.e., the individual's income at a particular panel wave (Y_{it}) minus that individual's average income across all panel waves ($\bar{Y}_i$). This is a function of some model intercept (β_0), the effect of mean deviation of marriage ($X_{it} - \bar{X}_i$) on wages (captured by β_1), and some residual variation. This basic panel model has some advantages; in particular, it partials out all time-invariant conditions, both observed and unobserved, through model specification (Allison 2009). It is limited, however, in that it treats stability in marriage as undifferentiated (i.e., treating those who stayed married and those who stayed unmarried as the same) and treats changes in marriage as symmetrical, so that the wage gains for those who get married are equivalent to the wage losses for those who leave

marriage.⁸ Based on the literature, I have every reason to expect that those who are stably single are different from those who are stably married. Moreover, I also expect that the effects of entering a marriage will be different from the effects of leaving a marriage.

In order to model the change variable, I cannot rely on fixed/within effects modeling, because the change in marital status variable is time invariant across panel waves. Instead, I implement a within/between (or hybrid)-effects regression (Allison 2009). This approach includes mean deviations for all time-varying covariates to focus on within-individual change while also the individual means across panel waves for all time-varying covariates to isolate between-individual differences. Using this coding strategy and a variant of a random-effects model, my analytical approach takes the following form:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(X_{it} - \bar{X}_i) + \beta_2(\bar{X}_i) + \beta_3(Z_i) + e_{it}$$

where Y_{it} is the person-specific wage at time t , X is some vector of time-varying independent variables that are mean deviated ($X_{it} - \bar{X}_i$) to capture within-individual change (β_1) and also include individual panel means ($\bar{X}_i$) to capture between-individual difference (β_2). Finally, I include a vector of time-invariant controls (Z_i) and the associated coefficients (β_3). The change measure for marriage is included among the Z variables and will be interacted with another Z measure, gender, to see how the effects of marriage stability and change are gendered. This approach allows for a sophisticated treatment of the time-varying measures while also helping to isolate the effects of the change in marriage measure on individual wages.

⁸ Given a two-wave panel and the simple example of a binary measure of married (coded 1) and not married (coded 0), mean deviation will produce three possible values for this binary measure. Those who are stably single ($Mar_{t1} = 0; Mar_{t2} = 0; \overline{Mar} = 0; T1 Dev. \rightarrow 0 - 0 = 0; T2 Dev. \rightarrow 0 - 0 = 0$) and who are stably married ($Mar_{t1} = 1; Mar_{t2} = 1; \overline{Mar} = 1; T1 Dev. \rightarrow 1 - 1 = 0; T2 Dev. \rightarrow 1 - 1 = 0$) will both have a value of 0 after mean deviation. Those who get married ($Mar_{t1} = 0; Mar_{t2} = 1; \overline{Mar} = .5; T1 Dev. \rightarrow 0 - .5 = -.5; T2 Dev. \rightarrow 1 - .5 = .5$) will have a -.5 for time 1 and a 0.5 for time 2. The opposite is true for those who leave a marriage. Under these conditions, and because I treat these as continuous measures, the -.5 and 0.5 act as perfect mirror images, producing symmetrical results for both getting married and leaving a marriage.

I include robust standard errors that account for individual clustering in the data for each of the models reported below. There is relatively little missing information in the CPS-MORG, with 13.57 percent missing on number of children, followed by 3.87 percent missing on occupation. I use a listwise deletion strategy to account for any missing information in the data. To test whether this approach to missing information affected results, I reran the base model using full-information maximum likelihood (FIML) approaches, which produced qualitatively similar results. This approach, however, makes it much more difficult to calculate predicted wages, and given the similarity in results, I prefer listwise deletion, which provides more options in reporting results. To aid in interpretation, I calculate predicted wages from each of the two main models.

RESULTS

Table 3.3 presents the results of two within/between regression models of change in marital status on wages using the two-wave CPS-MORG panel data. The first two columns show the between effects and accompanying standard errors from the first model that includes all the covariates with no interactions. The third and fourth columns are from the same model and show within effects and standard errors. The first and third columns show the coefficients from a single model and are directly comparable; I place them side by side to aid interpretation.

[TABLE 3.3 ABOUT HERE]

Focusing on the change in marital status indicators, we can see that relative to those who are stably single, all stable and time-varying marriage configurations show significantly higher

earnings. To make these differences clearer, I calculate⁹ the predicted wages for each group and plot these values on the top row of Figure 1. For the stable categories in cell A, we can see that those who are stably single, on average, earn around \$27.37 per hour, holding a wide array of time-varying and time-invariant factors constant. Those who are stably married earn around \$31.04 per hour, for a marital wage advantage of \$3.67 ($p = 0.000$). Interestingly, the predicted wage for stably DWS is around \$30.00 per hour. This is a \$1.04 ($p = 0.000$) difference compared to those who are stably married and a \$2.63 ($p < 0.001$) difference compared to those who are stably single. This shows a residual effect of marriage on wages. Although previous research has found that marriage can carry wage premiums (Ahituv and Lerman 2007; Cha et al. 2023; Cheng 2016; Killewald and Gough 2013) and divorce can carry penalties, (Endeweld et al. 2022; Hogendoorn et al. 2020; Tach and Eads 2015) these results suggest that never having married is a qualitatively different experience than being previously married, at least in terms of wages. Since traditional approaches to capturing marital differences in wages historically lump the DWS individuals in with never married individuals, we have been inflating the wages of never married individuals and thereby deflating the marital advantage in wages. After disaggregating these differences by gender, I will show that these processes are quite different for men and women.

[FIGURE 3.1 ABOUT HERE]

Cell B from Figure 1 focuses on the predicted wages for change in marital conditions. The highest-earning individuals are those who are married at time 1 and DWS at time 2, earning

⁹ Predicted probabilities, alternatively called margins or predictive margins, calculate the hypothetical results of a previously fit model involving certain conditions or averaged across all sample observations (Williams 2012). These can be graphed for easy, intuitive interpretations of complex models.

around \$31.18 per hour. Indeed, these are the highest predicted wages for all marital categories, though formal differences tests show that these individuals are not earning significantly higher wages than stably married individuals ($Diff. = \$0.14$; $p = 0.458$).

Cell C formally compares those who change marital status to those who are stable. For example, compared to those who are stably single, those who are single at time 1 and married at time 2 (first bar in Cell C) show a \$1.25 higher wage, a significant increase. Those who leave the single category show a large wage advantage on average, while those who leave the marriage category show a decrease if they identify as single at time 2 or no significant change if they identify as DWS at time 2. Leaving the DWS category also shows differential effects. For these individuals, those who get remarried earn around \$0.75 more per hour, and those who move from DWS to single earn around \$1.43 less per hour, holding several additional factors constant. (This inscrutable change from DWS to single is both an idiosyncrasy of my coding decisions as well as a reflection of the ambiguous category “single,” discussed later in this chapter. I refer to such examples as “strange change.”)¹⁰

Model 2 from Table 3.3 (presented in columns 5–8), replicates Model 1 but now includes an interaction between the change in marriage indicator and gender. I plot the predicted values for men and women across these categories in the bottom row of Figure 1. In all categories, men earn significantly more than women. Cell F further shows that men who change marital status show meaningful wage differences relative to men with stable marital status across most categories (except for married individuals who become DWS). In contrast, in only one

¹⁰ I thank Elizabeth McElroy for her feedback and clever turn of phrase.

uncommon change (DWS to single) do women show a significantly different wage relative to stability.¹¹

To compare gender variation in the stability differences, I include wage predictions across groups for men and women, along with first- and second-order differences. First-order differences are calculated with the predicted wage for stability subtracted from the predicted value for the relevant change, and the second order difference compares the stability difference for women to the stability difference for men. I present these comparisons in Table 3.4. Focusing on the second-order difference, we can see the change premium for men who go from single to married (\$2.42 per hour, labeled A) is \$2.02 greater than the change premium for women (\$0.40 per hour, labeled G). I find a similar advantage for men leaving the single category for DWS (another example of strange change) compared to women making the same change. Men leaving the single category experience a significant boost in wages while women do not experience any meaningful increase in wages for making the same change in marital status. Leaving marriage adversely affects men, but only if they report identifying as single during wave 2. While the effects of leaving DWS for men varies on whether they get remarried or begin identifying as single, for women only shifting from DWS to single seems to show a significant difference in reported wages.

[TABLE 3.4 ABOUT HERE]

¹¹ Women who change from Single to DWS as well as DWS to married show a marginally significant difference when compared to stably DWS ($p = 0.091$ and $p = 0.079$, respectively).

DISCUSSION

Marriage wage premiums have long been observed and debated, particularly as a plausible function of the gender wage gap and other economic inequalities. Though the causes and details of the MWP have mixed results in the literature, I find support for the existence of a men's marriage premium and offer three central insights into the phenomenon. First, I identify single individuals as an economically distinct group from both married individuals and from previously married individuals, with single people reporting significantly lower wages than those who are married or DWS. Importantly, this pattern remained even when respondents reported being previously married or DWS in the first wave. In other words, while stably single respondents had the lowest wages, those who transitioned from marriage or DWS to single also experienced lower wages than those who transitioned into marriage or into DWS—strange change indeed. I can only speculate about the process of transitioning from married to single within a 12-month period, as well as what it means to move from DWS to single. It is possible that, after divorce, widowhood, or separation, considering oneself single represents readiness to re-enter courtship. This process likely varies from person to person and could occur within a 12-month frame or take much longer. Yet the larger point remains that, even with a history of marriage, single respondents appear to earn lower wages.

Second, and perhaps most notably, I find that men who *are* married, *become* married, or *have been* married and identify as DWS all enjoy higher wages than their single counterparts, contrary to my expectations. More specifically, the highest earners were men who were stably married, men who transitioned from marriage to DWS, and men who transitioned from DWS to marriage. This suggests not only a proximate effect of marriage for men, but it also suggests that these effects carry over even after the marriage has ended, at least for a time. In contrast,

women's wages, consistently lower than those of men, were far less influenced by marital status or marital status change. The only exceptions were of women moving from DWS to single, in which case wages were significantly lower than all other groups of women who did not report single status in the second wave. For women, neither current marital status nor marital change appears to make a discernable difference in wages. For men, marital status matters a great deal. Although this study does not directly test the selection hypothesis (Barg and Beblo 2009; Ludwig and Brüderl 2018), my results offer partial support for the claim that the MWP is driven by selection effects, effects that could be termed *marriageability* (Wilson 1987). Rather than marriage itself leading to higher wages, higher-earning men may be more likely to marry and sometimes divorce. However, my finding that previously married men who report their marital status as single report significantly lower wages compared to their previously or currently married counterparts casts some level of doubt on selection explaining their wages. In terms of wages, single marital status appears to operate in some strange, counterintuitive ways.

With selection effects failing to fully explain the wage patterns of those who become single, the possibility of a residual effect of marriage on wages brings with it some fascinating questions: if the positive effect of marriage on wages for men continues even after the marriage ends, how long does that effect last? Is the effect further influenced by an eventual remarriage or by an extended period of post-marital singlehood? At the other end of a marital timeline, my results support a proximate effect of marriage on wages, indicating that within a 12-month period, men who enter marriage already enjoy higher wages than when they were single. Is this a temporary bump in wages, or does it continue throughout the marriage, even beyond the marriage? Duration of the marital effect is beyond the scope of this study, but my findings provide a compelling case for further research into the dynamic process of wage change and its

relationship with the dynamic process of marriage and other marital statuses, as I will explore in Chapter 5. Cheng (2016) argues that most studies on the MWP or divorce/widowhood penalties use a “static approach,” treating marital status as a binary indicator of a discrete event rather than acknowledging the extended and temporally varying effects of linked lives. Even studies that use a longitudinal approach tend to average population-level effects over time, potentially obscuring important heterogeneity within the population (see Cha et al. 2023; Cheng 2014, 2016; Glauber 2018).

The case of wages examined in this study has some limitations. First, the available gender categories in the CPS necessitate a binary treatment of gender that excludes or obscures those whose gender identity does not neatly fit into a binary structure. Similarly, although present use of marital status categories are not specifically restricted to a heteronormative definition, the realities of legal restrictions on same-sex marriage during much of this study’s time frame limits identification of individuals and unions that defy heteronormative assumptions and thus have limited utility and generalizability for LGBTQ+ couples.

Previous studies investigating the marital wage premium have frequently sought to identify its causal antecedents or to disprove these theorizations. The current study instead investigated the temporal nature of marital status and marital status change effects on wages. My findings of both a MWP for men as well as proximate wage gains for men who enter marriage illuminate an additional facet of the gendered story of wage disparities in the United States. While marital status and marital status change are associated with significant wage differences for men, such changes have minimal effects for women, providing valuable insights into how the marital life course can vary by gender. Moreover, I find that men whose marital status transitions between marriage and DWS experience high wages similar to continually married men,

suggesting that certain effects of marital status change take place over some period of time beyond the initial transition. Though the scope of my analyses did not specifically measure such temporality, this unanswered question compels not simply a future research project but a new conceptualization of marital status effects over time. These findings offer support for moving beyond a static examination of comparing married individuals to those who are single.

Using a marital life course approach as outlined in Chapter 2 can more fully acknowledge important interactions between family status and other social experiences, including this study's example of wages. In the following two chapters, I investigate marital status over the life course to undertake a dynamic analysis of marital status change. Complicating typical static treatment of marital status by identifying marital status trajectories over a 50-year period, I provide descriptive information regarding demographic groups and their association with various marital pathways. Furthermore, I will extend the current study's findings on proximate effects of marital status change to include long-term, or distal, effects, thus extending our understanding of the lifelong realities of family relationships.

Table 3.1. Marital Change Indicator Coding

		Wave 1 Coding	Wave 2 Coding	<i>N</i>	%
Stable Categories					
Stably Single (S)		<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>1} = 0	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>2} = 0	213,062	16.1
Stably Married		<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>1} = 1	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>2} = 1	932,614	70.5
Stably DWS ^a		<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>1} = 2	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>2} = 2	143,763	10.9
Change Categories					
Single to Married	(S → M)	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>1} = 0	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>2} = 1	2,915	0.2
Single to DWS	(S → D)	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>1} = 0	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>2} = 2	1,737	0.1
Married to Single	(M → S)	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>1} = 1	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>2} = 0	11,113	0.8
Married to DWS	(M → D)	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>1} = 1	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>2} = 2	6,833	0.5
DWS to Single	(D → S)	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>1} = 2	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>2} = 0	1,921	0.1
DWS to Married	(D → M)	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>1} = 2	<i>Marital Status</i> _{<i>t</i>2} = 1	8,429	0.6

Source: Current Population Survey–Merged Outgoing Rotation Groups, 2000–2024

^a Divorced, Widowed, and Separated category capturing those who are formerly married.

Table 3.2. Descriptive Statistics across Marital Change Categories

	Full Sample		Stably Single		Stably Married		Entered Marriage		Exited Marriage		Linear Diff. Tests	
<i>N</i>	1,373,168		380,527		962,273		18,715		11,653		Single v	Marr. v
Wage Measures (Outcome)	Mean/%	(SE)	Mean/%	(SE)	Mean/%	(SE)	Mean/%	(SE)	Mean/%	(SE)	Enter Marr.	Exit Marr.
Hourly Wages (2023\$)	\$32.81	(.02)	\$27.28	(.03)	\$35.07	(.03)	\$31.02	(.16)	\$30.10	(.19)	\$3.74***	\$-4.96***
Median Wages	\$27.00	(.02)	\$21.91	(.04)	\$29.25	(.02)	\$25.58	(.16)	\$24.53	(.21)	\$3.67***	\$-4.73***
Marital Status												
Single	17.10%	(.03)										
Currently Married	71.35%	(.04)										
Widowed/Divorced/Separated	11.55%	(.03)										
Number of Children in Home												
No Children	54.24%	(.04)	73.64%	(.07)	46.37%	(.05)	67.62%	(.46)	48.79%	(.46)	-6.02%***	2.42%***
One Child	18.93%	(.03)	14.77%	(.06)	20.60%	(.04)	16.57%	(.38)	20.90%	(.38)	1.80%***	.30%
Two Children	18.29%	(.03)	8.14%	(.04)	22.43%	(.04)	10.29%	(.37)	20.24%	(.37)	2.15%***	-2.19%***
3 or more Children	8.55%	(.02)	3.46%	(.03)	10.60%	(.03)	5.52%	(.28)	10.07%	(.28)	2.06%***	-.53%†
Women	50.00%	(.04)	56.43%	(.08)	47.39%	(.05)	49.48%	(.37)	55.59%	(.46)	-6.94%***	8.20%***
Highest Degree Completed												
Less than High School	6.17%	(.02)	6.80%	(.04)	5.89%	(.02)	5.75%	(.27)	9.42%	(.27)	-1.05%***	3.53%***
High School	25.94%	(.04)	28.35%	(.07)	24.99%	(.04)	23.97%	(.42)	29.13%	(.42)	-4.38%***	4.15%***
Some College	28.96%	(.04)	33.28%	(.08)	27.23%	(.05)	29.55%	(.42)	29.25%	(.42)	-3.73%***	2.03%***
Bachelors	24.40%	(.04)	21.34%	(.07)	25.60%	(.04)	26.81%	(.38)	21.00%	(.38)	5.46%***	-4.60%***
Advanced Degree	14.53%	(.03)	10.23%	(.05)	16.29%	(.04)	13.92%	(.29)	11.19%	(.29)	3.70%***	-5.10%***
Part-time Worker	16.88%	(.03)	21.64%	(.07)	15.09%	(.04)	13.17%	(.25)	15.87%	(.34)	-8.47%***	0.78%*
Work Sector												
Public Sector	19.48%	(.03)	16.23%	(.06)	20.84%	(.04)	16.49%	(.36)	18.06%	(.36)	.26%	-2.78%***
Private Sector	80.52%	(.03)	83.77%	(.06)	79.16%	(.04)	83.51%	(.36)	81.94%	(.36)	-.26%	2.78%***
Occupational Categories												
Management, Business, & Financial	17.17%	(.03)	13.67%	(.06)	18.59%	(.04)	16.88%	(.33)	15.24%	(.33)	3.21%***	-3.35%***
Professional	26.49%	(.04)	22.16%	(.07)	28.22%	(.05)	26.99%	(.39)	23.66%	(.39)	4.83%***	-4.56%***
Service	13.11%	(.03)	18.56%	(.06)	10.91%	(.03)	13.91%	(.34)	16.02%	(.34)	-4.65%***	5.11%***
Sales	8.64%	(.02)	9.84%	(.05)	8.17%	(.03)	8.50%	(.26)	8.38%	(.26)	-1.34%***	0.20%
Official and Administration	13.78%	(.03)	15.01%	(.06)	13.31%	(.03)	12.50%	(.32)	14.06%	(.32)	-2.52%***	0.75%*
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	0.61%	(.01)	0.66%	(.01)	0.59%	(.01)	0.52%	(.08)	0.76%	(.08)	-0.14%*	0.16%*
Construction & Extraction	4.42%	(.02)	4.04%	(.03)	4.56%	(.02)	4.72%	(.20)	4.77%	(.20)	0.68%***	0.21%
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	3.63%	(.02)	3.00%	(.03)	3.88%	(.02)	3.91%	(.17)	3.69%	(.17)	0.91%***	-0.19%
Production	6.56%	(.02)	6.67%	(.04)	6.51%	(.03)	6.60%	(.24)	7.42%	(.24)	-0.06%	0.92%***
Transportation and Moving	5.59%	(.02)	6.39%	(.04)	5.26%	(.02)	5.47%	(.22)	6.01%	(.22)	-0.93%***	0.74%***

Table 3.2., continued

	Full Sample		Stably Single		Stably Married		Entered Marriage		Exited Marriage		Linear Diff. Tests	
	Mean/%	(SE)	Mean/%	(SE)	Mean/%	(SE)	Mean/%	(SE)	Mean/%	(SE)	Single v Got Married	Mar. v Left Marriage
Age	42.92	(.01)	38.99	(.02)	44.63	(.01)	36.04	(.10)	41.48	(.10)	-2.95***	-3.15***
Race/Ethnicity												
White, non-Hispanic	74.29%	(.04)	65.83%	(.08)	77.68%	(.04)	74.14%	(.42)	71.63%	(.42)	8.32%***	-6.05%***
Black, non-Hispanic	7.10%	(.02)	12.44%	(.05)	4.98%	(.02)	6.91%	(.25)	7.89%	(.25)	-5.53%***	2.92%***
Hispanic	11.82%	(.03)	14.70%	(.06)	10.64%	(.03)	12.53%	(.33)	14.61%	(.33)	-2.17%***	3.98%***
Asian, non-Hispanic	4.95%	(.02)	4.34%	(.03)	5.22%	(.02)	4.39%	(.18)	3.78%	(.18)	0.06%	-1.44%***
Other Race, non-Hispanic	1.83%	(.01)	2.69%	(.03)	1.48%	(.01)	2.03%	(.13)	2.08%	(.13)	-0.67%***	0.60%***
Lives in a City	80.47%	(.03)	83.03%	(.06)	79.44%	(.04)	82.33%	(.28)	79.07%	(.38)	-0.70%*	-0.37%

Source: Current Population Survey Merged Outgoing Rotation Group, 2000–2024. † p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

^a Linear difference tests come from a formal comparison of the mean/proportional values for Marital Change category minus the mean/proportional value for marital stability category. A negative amount indicates a stability advantage and a positive value indicates a change advantage.

Table 3.3. Within/Between (Hybrid) Effects Regression^a on Hourly Wages across Marital Change Indicators by Gender

	Model 1				Model 2			
	Between Effects		Within Effects		Between Effects		Within Effects	
	β	(SE)	β	(SE)	β	(SE)	β	(SE)
Main Effects (Time Invariant)								
Change in Marital Status ref. Stably Single								
Stably Married	.126***	(.002)			.201***	(.002)		
Stably DWS ^b	.092***	(.002)			.139***	(.003)		
Single → Married	.045***	(.010)			.082***	(.013)		
Single → DWS	.059***	(.011)			.092***	(.018)		
Married → Single	.096***	(.005)			.130***	(.006)		
Married → DWS	.130***	(.006)			.197***	(.009)		
DWS → Single	.043***	(.012)			.069***	(.020)		
DWS → Married	.117***	(.006)			.185***	(.009)		
Women	-.211***	(.001)			-.099***	(.002)		
Interactions								
Stably Married*Women					-.144***	(.002)		
Stably DWS*Women					-.093***	(.004)		
S → M*Women					-.066***	(.019)		
S → DWS*Women					-.068**	(.023)		
M → S*Women					-.066***	(.009)		
M → DWS*Women					-.126***	(.012)		
DWS → S*Women					-.059*	(.025)		
DWS → M*Women					-.127***	(.012)		
Time Varying Controls								
Children in Home ref. none								
One Child	.059***	(.001)	.011***	(.003)	.052***	(.001)	.011***	(.003)
2 Children	.089***	(.001)	.017***	(.004)	.083***	(.001)	.017***	(.004)
3 or more Children	.073***	(.002)	.027***	(.005)	.064***	(.002)	.026***	(.005)
Highest Degree Completed ref Less than High School								
High School	.182***	(.002)	.018***	(.004)	.183***	(.002)	.018***	(.004)
Some College	.285***	(.002)	.027***	(.005)	.284***	(.002)	.027***	(.005)
Bachelor's Deg.	.464***	(.002)	.058***	(.006)	.462***	(.002)	.058***	(.006)
Advanced Deg.	.623***	(.003)	.095***	(.008)	.620***	(.003)	.095***	(.008)
Part-Time Worker			.040***	(.002)			.040***	(.002)
Private Sector	.015***	(.001)	-.009***	(.003)	.014***	(.001)	-.009***	(.003)

Table 3.3., continued

	Model 1				Model 2			
	Between Effects		Within Effects		Between Effects		Within Effects	
	β	(SE)	β	(SE)	β	(SE)	β	(SE)
Time Varying Controls (cont.)								
Occupational Categories ref. Management, Business, and Financial								
Professional	-.130***	(.002)	-.003	(.002)	-.127***	(.002)	-.003	(.002)
Service	-.500***	(.002)	-.055***	(.003)	-.500***	(.002)	-.055***	(.003)
Sales	-.353***	(.003)	-.044***	(.003)	-.355***	(.003)	-.044***	(.003)
Official and Administration	-.342***	(.002)	-.031***	(.002)	-.338***	(.002)	-.031***	(.002)
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	-.612***	(.007)	-.085***	(.009)	-.609***	(.007)	-.085***	(.009)
Construction and Extraction	-.171***	(.003)	.007	(.004)	-.171***	(.003)	.007	(.004)
Installation, Maintenance, & Repair	-.193***	(.003)	-.016***	(.004)	-.196***	(.003)	-.016***	(.004)
Production	-.309***	(.002)	-.016***	(.003)	-.309***	(.002)	-.016***	(.003)
Transportation and Moving	-.390***	(.003)	-.036***	(.003)	-.388***	(.003)	-.036***	(.003)
Age	.006***	(.000)	.009***	(.000)	.006***	(.000)	.009***	(.000)
Time Invariant Controls								
Race/Ethnic ref White, non-Hispanic								
Black, non-Hispanic	-.089***	(.002)			-.094***	(.002)		
Hispanics	-.144***	(.002)			-.145***	(.002)		
Asian, non-Hispanic	-.063***	(.003)			-.062***	(.003)		
Other Race, non-Hispanic	-.047***	(.003)			-.049***	(.003)		
Live in City	.108***	(.001)			.108***	(.001)		
State of Residence Indicators	✓				✓			
Year of Survey Indicators	✓				✓			
Intercept	2.792***	(.006)			2.743***	(.006)		
N								1,373,168

Source: Current Population Survey Merged Outgoing Rotation Group, 2000–2024. † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

^a Within/Between (Hybrid) Effects Models are a variant of a Random Effects panel model that include individual panel mean between effects, individual deviation from personal mean within effects along with Time-invariant Effects within the same model framework

^b DWS = Divorced, Widowed, or Separated

Table 3.4. Predicted Wages with First- and Second-Order Wages Difference Comparisons

	Point Estimates ^a		First-Order Difference ^b			Second-Order Difference ^b		
	Marital Status		Gender Diff. in Marital Diff.			Gender Diff. in Marital Diff.		
	Stability	Change		Marital Diff.	(% Diff. ^d)		Diff.	(% Diff. ^d)
Men								
Stably Single (S)	\$28.51							
S to M		\$30.93	A	\$2.42***	(8.5%)			
S to D		\$31.26	B	\$2.75***	(9.7%)			
Stably Married (M)	\$34.85							
M to S		\$32.46	C	\$-2.39***	(-6.8%)			
M to D		\$34.72	D	\$-0.13	(-0.4%)			
Stably DWS (D)	\$32.75							
D to S		\$30.56	E	\$-2.19***	(-6.7%)			
D to M		\$34.31	F	\$1.56***	(4.8%)			
Women								
Stably Single (S)	\$25.81							
S to M		\$26.21	G	\$0.40	(1.5%)	G–A	\$-2.02***	(-83.5%)
S to D		\$26.43	H	\$0.62 [†]	(2.4%)	H–B	\$-2.13**	(-77.5%)
Stably Married (M)	\$27.33							
M to S		\$27.53	I	\$0.19	(0.7%)	I–C	\$-2.19***	(-91.9%)
M to D		\$27.71	J	\$0.38	(1.4%)	J–D	\$0.25	(199.8%)
Stably DWS (S)	\$27.02							
D to S		\$26.08	K	\$-0.93*	(-3.5%)	K–E	\$-1.25 [†]	(-57.3%)
D to M		\$27.35	L	\$0.34 [†]	(1.2%)	L–F	\$-1.23**	(-78.5%)

Source: Current Population Survey Merged Outgoing Rotation Group, 2000–2024. [†] p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

All formal tests of difference here are linear combination tests with the appropriate delta method standard error for these calculations.

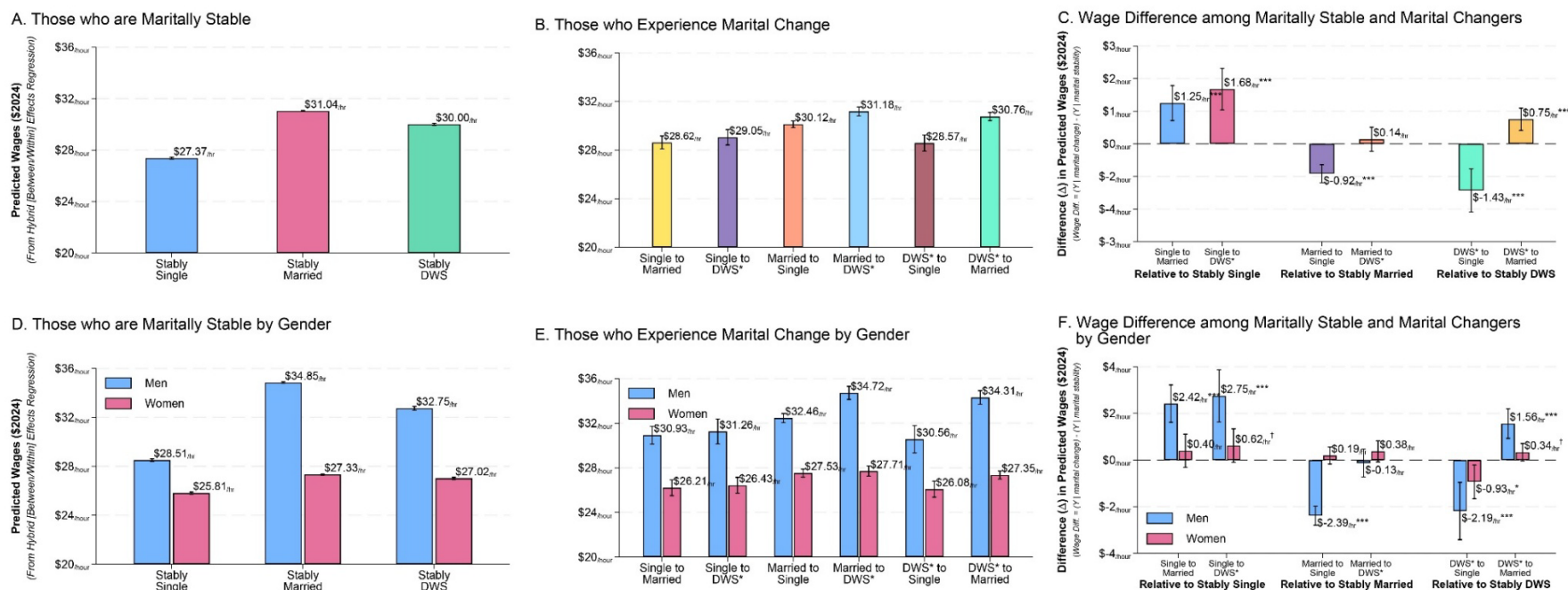
^a Predicted income for men and women by various two-wave marital change groups from Model 2 in Table 3.

^b We subtract the predicted income for stable categories from the predicted income for change categories by gender. Negative values indicate that stability shows higher income, positive value that change shows higher income. Significance tests tell us this difference is statistically greater than zero.

^c For the second-order gender differences in the marital difference, we take the absolute value of the marital difference for women and subtract the absolute value of the marital difference for men. A positive second-order difference shows that the marital gap is greater for women and a negative second-order difference shows that the marital difference for men is greater.

^d Relative percent differences are calculated as follows: $\left(\frac{(\text{Predicted Income Group of Interest} - \text{Predicted Income Comparison Group})}{\text{Predicted Income Comparison Group}} \right) * 100$. For the first-order marital differences, this would be: $\left(\frac{(\text{Marital Change Predicted Income} - \text{Marital Stability Predicted Income})}{\text{Marital Stability Predicted Income}} \right) * 100$ for men or women respectively.

Figure 3.4. Predicted Wages across Marital Change Categories for Within/Between (Hybrid) Regression Models, by Gender



Source: Current Population Survey Merged Outgoing Rotation Group, 2000–2024.

CHAPTER 4: PATHWAYS OF PARTNERSHIP

Although proximate effects of marital status change provide valuable information regarding disparities in family experiences, most marriage and family experiences—and the possible effects of those relationships—take place over many years. Moreover, the substantial changes in marriage and divorce in the United States over the last half century warrant a clearer understanding of when, how long, and how often individuals change marital status, as well as who is likely to follow which paths. This chapter expands on the proximate effects of marital status change found in Chapter 3 by identifying possible pathways of marital status throughout the life course. Using group-based trajectory models (Nagin 2005) on close to 50 years of longitudinal data, I find seven distinct trajectories of marital status that vary in probability of marriage, change or steadiness of marital status, and the timing of marital status change.

In line with existing scholarship on variations in patterns of marital status changes (Aisenbrey and Fasang 2017; Amato and James 2018; Ammar, Gauthier, and Widmer 2014; Roberson et al. 2018), I expect to find at least four marital status trajectories. I first anticipate one or more trajectories of early, steady marriage, characterized by marrying during young adulthood and remaining married throughout the life course. Secondly, I anticipate at least one pathway of later, steady marriage, which involves marrying ten or more years after the early group and remaining married. Third, I expect to find one or more trajectories of multiple changes, characterized by both entering and exiting marriage at least once. Finally, I expect to find one trajectory in which individuals never marry.

METHODS

Data

To examine marital status trajectories over the life course, I use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79), a nationally representative survey that has followed a cohort of individuals since 1979, beginning with a large initial sample of individuals born between 1957 and 1964 ($N = 12,686$).¹ Respondents were recruited through a multi-stage stratified area probability sample, at which point they began participation at ages 14–22, with eligible respondents interviewed annually through 1994 and then biennially from 1996 to the present. Retention rates are considered high, with retention over the course of almost 50 years of data collection remaining over 65 percent.² An analysis in 2017 concluded that attrition has not led to biased estimates of labor market outcomes (Aughinbaugh, Pierret, and Rothstein 2017).

The NLSY79 is used in many studies on family transitions and wages (e.g., Budig and England 2001; Cheng 2016; Doren and Lin 2019; Hodges and Budig 2010; Killewald and Gough 2010; Weisshaar and Cabello-Hutt 2020). Spanning over four decades, this dataset follows respondents over a time frame when marital status changes are most likely to occur, providing thorough information regarding wage trajectories and family transitions. I exclude the military and poverty supplementary subsamples that were dropped by NLSY79 in 1984 and 1990, respectively (2,923 respondents), and those who reported no wages in 2013–2021 (3,672 respondents).³ After further adjusting for missing data on covariates, the final analytical sample includes 4,979 individual persons. This analysis includes 30 waves of NLSY79 data from 1979

¹ The NLSY79 survey is sponsored and directed by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and managed by the Center for Human Resource Research (CHRR) at The Ohio State University.

² See www.nlsinfo.org/content/cohorts/nlsy79/intro-to-the-sample

³ I limit the sample to those with 2013–2021 wages in anticipation of my companion analysis found in Chapter 5.

through 2022, with respondents ranging in age from 18 to 65. Although some respondents were younger than age 18 in initial waves, their data is not included until the first wave after they turn 18 (1983 at the latest).

Analytical Strategy

Most analyses of earnings that include marital status involve a tacit assumption that marital status is an unchanging circumstance, despite increasing fluctuations between singlehood and marriage today, including opting out of marriage altogether (Cheng 2016). To better capture the endurance as well as the fluidity of marital status over time, I use group-based trajectory models (Jones and Nagin 2013; Nagin 2005) to identify marital status trajectories that were experienced by the sample across ages 18–65. Group-based trajectory modeling (GBTM) is a particular variety of finite mixture modeling used to identify groups of individuals whose marital status changes follow similar trajectories over the life course (Nagin, Jones, and Elmer 2024). GBTM relies on maximum likelihood estimation of model parameters rather than identifying groups through cluster analysis, thus retaining consistency and asymptotically normal distributions (Nagin 2005).

In contrast to standard growth curve modeling, which focuses on the population-mean trajectory and how predictors relate to individual variation from the mean, GBTM focuses on empirically identifying the shapes of different trajectories and the probability of trajectory group membership. This difference is particularly useful for studying phenomena for which individuals in a sample are not expected to follow a similar trajectory (Andruff et al. 2009). The case of marital statuses over the life course exemplifies qualitatively different possible paths that cannot be predicted based solely on measurable characteristics, a type of problem Raudenbush (2001) describes as “multinomial.” For instance, some marry young and remain married, while others

eventually divorce. Similarly, others might marry later in life but find that relationship to be short-lived, while others may remain married throughout their lives. Still others might move in and out of marriage multiple times, along with some who remain lifelong singles. The multinomial modeling strategy of GBTM aligns well with these varied pathways.

GBTM is based on the assumption that individual differences in trajectories can be clustered into a finite number of different polynomial functions of age or time. The distribution of trajectory groups is denoted by $P(Y_i|Age_i)$, where P is the probability of the random vector Y_i , representing an individual i 's age at each measured time point, conditional on the number of groups J . This distribution of outcome trajectories takes the following form:

$$P(Y_i|Age_i) = \sum_{j=1}^J \pi^j \times P(Y_i|Age_i, j; \beta^j)$$

where π^j is the probability of membership in group j , and the distribution of Y_i conditional on membership in group j . The unknown parameter vector β^j categorizes membership in group j and determines the shape of the trajectory of the group, which can be modeled with up to a fifth-order polynomial function of age. Each group j has assumed conditional independence for sequential observations of Y_i and y_{it} over T periods of measurement. This model is written as

$$P(Y_i|Age_i, j; \beta^j) = \prod_{t=1}^T p(y_{it}|age_{it}, j; \beta^j)$$

where $p(y_{it})$ is the distribution of y_{it} conditional on membership in group j and the age of individual i at time t . Stata 19.5 allows for the specification of $p(y_{it})$ as a binary logistic distribution to analyze longitudinal data on a binary measure of marital status. Age is scaled to 10 percent for added computational accuracy but displayed to scale for ease of interpretation.

Group-based trajectory models can fit a wide array of shapes and any number of groups. In addition to modeling the shapes of trajectory groups, GBTM identifies the probability of membership in each trajectory group, from which the probability that each respondent will follow a particular trajectory (known as the posterior probability of group membership) can be calculated (Nagin 2005). These posterior probabilities of group membership lend themselves to identifying risk factors of group membership, providing valuable explanatory information for both trajectory groups and subsequent outcomes. According to recommended procedures outlined by Nagin (Jones and Nagin 2013; Sánchez-Gelabert 2023), the number of groups and optimal shapes are determined based on model fit using Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), averaged predicted probabilities (APP) of group membership, and the size of the smallest trajectory group. I systematically tested one to ten groups with up to quintic age terms to identify the best model fit and chose a seven-group model with quadratic and cubic age terms as well as a zero-order age term to account for individuals who never marry. BIC tends to improve with each added group, while APP can fluctuate with different orders of age terms (Nagin 2005).

Model tests showed APPs to be consistently well above the recommended standard of 0.70, and the smallest trajectory group in the seven-group model included more than five percent of total respondents (7.93%), as recommended (Andruff et al. 2009). Formal statistical criteria indicate good model fit, but as Nagin (2005) emphasizes, trajectory groups are statistical approximations of which there is no absolutely correct model. More bluntly, a trajectory group is “...a convenient system of statistical fiction. It’s not a state of being” (Nagin 2013:22:52). This model balances improved BIC, high APP, a reasonably sized smallest group, and high relative entropy (see Appendix Tables A.1a–1c), and I also exercise judgement informed by the literature to identify distinctive, parsimonious group patterns.

After identifying seven marital status group trajectories and summarizing their descriptive statistics, I perform multinomial logistic risk models to identify links between individual characteristics and membership in a marital status group (Nagin 2005). I use four key time-invariant predictors measured in Wave 1 to estimate predicted probabilities of group membership: gender, race and ethnicity, mother's level of education, father's level of education, and religious frequency.

Measures

Marital status. NLSY79 asks about respondents' marital status with six options: never married, married, separated, divorced, remarried, and widowed. Starting in 1993, the "remarried" option was dropped, leaving five possible options. I collapsed these options to create a binary indicator of marital status, with married (1) compared to not married (0).

Gender. The variable for gender is a binary indicator of women (1) compared to men (0). This sample includes 50.1 percent women.

Race and ethnicity. I include a set of binary race and ethnicity indicators for Black (25.1%) and Hispanic (18.2%), with non-Black/non-Hispanic (56.7%) as the reference category. Respondents coded non-Black/non-Hispanic include those reporting identification as "white" or "other"; the other category includes individuals who might otherwise identify as Asian, Native American/Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, or others. Respondents of mixed descent were assigned according to their father's race, unless either parent reported Hispanic ethnicity, in which case Hispanic descent was given preference.⁴ This small number of categories is an artifact of NLSY79's long-running survey and are a limitation of the study.

⁴ See <https://nlsinfo.org/content/cohorts/nlsy79/topical-guide/household/race-ethnicity-immigration-data>

Mother's level of education and father's level of education. To capture a measure of socioeconomic status, I include two separate continuous variables for mother's education, measured in years in 1979, as well as that of father's education. Sample means (for the analytic sample) are 11.14 years for mother's education and 11.15 years for father's education.

Religious frequency. Marriage patterns in the U.S. have long been associated with religious devotion (Allison 2023; Ellison, Burdette, and Glenn 2011; Xu, Hudspeth, and Bartkowski 2005). As an indicator of religiosity, I include a dichotomized measure for how frequently respondents attend religious services in 1979 (Wave 1), with frequent (1) including those who attend religious services more than once per month compared to infrequent (0) including respondents who attend services once a month or less.

RESULTS

To illustrate the results of the group-based trajectory model, Figure 4.1 displays the seven identified marital status trajectories. Table 4.1 provides brief descriptions of each group, classified by probability of marriage, change in probability of marriage, and timing of change relative to age. Each trajectory represents the group's mean estimated probability of marriage from age 18 to 65.

[FIGURE 4.1 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 4.1 ABOUT HERE]

The largest group (19.8%) exhibits low probability of marriage across the life course. I call this group *always low* probability (AL). Gender distribution for this group is similar to that of the whole sample, comprising 50.5% women and 49.5% men.

I find two groups with a steady and very high probability of marriage through the majority of the life course, though they differ in timing of change in marital status. The *early steady high* probability group (ESH) includes 15.9% of the sample. Their developmental path moves from low probability of marriage before age 20 to a very high probability of marriage in their early 20s. Further, this very high probability remains steady for the remainder of the study period. The ESH group includes 51.2% women and 48.8% men. The *middle steady high* probability group (MSH) is the second largest group (16.2%), with a substantial difference in gender distribution of 39.3% women and 60.7% men. Although similar to ESH in moving quickly from low probability of marriage to high and remaining steady into later years, the MSH group experiences this transition in their mid to late 20s.

The remaining four groups follow different patterns of change according to timing and magnitude of change. The *early change* group (EC; 12.3%) experiences change from a very low probability of marriage to a moderately high probability early in adulthood, but the probability declines in their 30s to reach and remain at a very low probability by their mid-40s. This indicates two phenomena: First, EC individuals experience a lower probability of marriage compared to ESH and MSH individuals that is nonetheless much higher than AL individuals. Second, this moderately high probability of marriage is short-lived, declining to very low levels over the course of about 15 years. More concretely, members of the EC group tend to enter short-lived marriages as young adults and remain unmarried thereafter. The EC group's gender

distribution is most heavily skewed toward women, with women representing 63.5% of the group and men at 36.5%.

The *centered change* group (CC) is the smallest group in this model (7.9%), with an even gender distribution of 51.5% women and 48.5% men. The probability of marriage for respondents in the CC group increases into their mid-30s, then declines throughout their 40s to settle at very low levels by their mid-50s. According to this model, the CC group tends to marry later than the EC group (and ESH and MSH groups) and exit marriage as they approach retirement age. The group classified as *slow change* (14.2%) begins with the highest probability of marriage in very early adulthood. Their probability increases gradually for roughly two decades, peaking around age 40 at a moderately high probability before a slower drop in probability by age 60. The SC group, comprising 58.8% women and 41.2% men, exhibits the smallest magnitude of change and the slowest rate of change of all groups. Though not visually apparent in Figure 4.1, average probability at each time point for SC individuals indicates two subtle peaks in the overall trajectory, the first around age 28 and the second around age 48 (see Appendix Figure A.1). It is possible that these subtle peaks are indicative of a relatively brief exit from marriage followed by a subsequent remarriage, which together keep the probability of marriage moderately high despite multiple marital status changes. Finally, the *late change* group (13.7%) follows a path with the longest duration of low probability of marriage in early adulthood. LC respondents' probability of marriage increases throughout their 30s and 40s, with the highest probability of marriage at the latest ages of the study period. This group contains the largest proportion of men, with 38.5% women and 61.5% men.

Descriptive statistics for each marital status trajectory group, separated by gender, are shown in Table 4.2. Women are overrepresented in EC (63.5%), suggesting marital dissolution

early in life, with prolonged singlehood thereafter. In contrast, women are underrepresented in MSH (39.3%) and LC (38.5). MSH aligns with existing literature regarding increasing age of first marriage (Cherlin 2020; Sassler and Lichter 2020; Smock and Schwartz 2020), though the disproportionate number of women in MSH warrants further study. The LC group as a whole represents a counterintuitive marital trajectory, though the underrepresentation of women in a group whose probability of marriage *increases* later in life is consistent with current understanding of marriage patterns in later life (Carr and Utz 2020; Jalovaara and Fasang 2020; Lin et al. 2018).

[TABLE 4.2 ABOUT HERE]

Black respondents are overrepresented in the AL group (51.3% for women, 41.3% for men) and are underrepresented in ESH and MSH (11.8 and 18.4% women, 11.7 and 15.3% men, respectively) but are roughly proportional with the total sample for most other groups. Hispanic respondents are overrepresented in EC (22.3% of men and 26.2% of women).

Although differences in means of mother's and father's education do not differ substantially across groups, EC is perhaps the most disadvantaged group according to parents' education, with mother's education averaging to 10.4 years for women and 10.7 years for men. MSH men and CC women have the highest level of parental education among groups (12.2 and 11.8 years, respectively).

Marital status trajectory groups show greater heterogeneity in frequency of attending religious services. The highest proportion of men reporting frequent religious attendance is in the ESH group (48.5%), while the lowest proportion of men reporting frequent religious attendance

is in the EC group (36.6%). In contrast, the highest proportion of women reporting frequent religious attendance is in the MSH group (63.0%) and the lowest is in the AL group (47.3%).

To summarize, three of the seven marital status trajectory groups have close to equal gender distributions (AL, ESH, CC; 43.6% of the total sample), with women overrepresented in EC and SC (26.5%) and underrepresented in MSH and LC (29.9%). Race and ethnicity do not appear to make a significant difference for trajectory group assignment, with the exceptions of AL for Black respondents and EC for Hispanic respondents. Parent education is relatively similar across all groups, and religious frequency exhibits greater variation in terms of gender, though no groups vary wider than around a 60/40 split.

Predictors of Marital Status Trajectory Groups

Table 4.3 displays results from the multinomial logistic risk models predicting membership in each marital trajectory group. Using AL as the reference group, women have a lower likelihood of membership in MSH, CC, and LC but a higher likelihood of membership in EC and SC.

Women's likelihood of membership in ESH is not significantly different from men's relative to AL. Despite the apparently moderate differences in trajectory membership according to race, the risk models show that the log odds of Black respondents following the ESH trajectory group is over 2 times lower than non-Black/non-Hispanic respondents. Indeed, Black respondents have a significantly lower likelihood of membership in any non-AL trajectory group. Hispanic respondents are similarly significantly less likely to follow the ESH, MSH, SC, and LC trajectories compared to non-Black/non-Hispanic respondents.

[TABLE 4.3 ABOUT HERE]

Religious frequency has a significantly positive effect on membership in ESH, MSH, and LC. In general, parent education does not have significant effects on marital status group trajectory, with the exception of a small increased likelihood of membership in LC compared to AL as father's education increases. A small, positive effect of father's education on membership in MSH approaches significance ($p = 0.057$).

In sum, race and ethnicity have the greatest influence on marital status trajectories of the risk factors modeled in this analysis. This finding is in line with existing research on racial and ethnic differences in age at first marriage as well as propensity to marry at all (Lopez and Copeland 2026). I also find that religious frequency significantly increases the likelihood that individuals follow a trajectory that includes a very high probability of marriage, whether that high probability occurs in one's early 20s, later 20s, or late in life. The high probability for marriage groups of MSH and LC are also the two groups in which men far outnumber women, though women outnumber men in the third high probability group of ESH, consistent with the enduring trend of women marrying at earlier ages than men (Mayol-Garcia et al. 2021).

DISCUSSION

This chapter modeled seven distinct marital status trajectories that provide new understanding of the fluidity of marital statuses throughout the life course. As anticipated, I identified a group that followed a pathway of early, steady marriage (*early steady high*); a similar group composed of those who marry somewhat later and remain married (*middle steady high*); a bell-shaped trajectory characterized by both entering and exiting marriage (*centered change*); and a group including those who remain single throughout adulthood (*always low*). Further, three more groups provide added nuance regarding marital status changes: a group that enters and exits

marriage early in adulthood (*early change*); a group characterized by gradual shifts over the entire adult life course, likely attributed to following a pathway of marriage–divorce–remarriage (*slow change*); and an unanticipated trajectory of late entry into marriage (*late change*).

Identifying these groups provides discrete, easily interpreted categories that can be productively applied to a host of relevant covariates and outcomes.

Not only do these trajectories offer a useful framework for description and research on the diversity of marital status patterns over the life course, but they also advance understanding of demographic characteristics that are significantly associated with each trajectory group. Most notably, Black respondents are least likely to follow any pathways with high probabilities of marriage. As such, any positive effects of marriage as discussed in Chapter 2, including better physical health, lower mortality, greater happiness, and higher wages, are least likely to be enjoyed by Black individuals. Results are similar for Hispanic respondents, though with much smaller effects. Though these findings do not indicate causality, they offer additional insights into increasing racial disparities in life outcomes. Relatedly, women are more likely to experience marital patterns characterized by a marital dissolution that occurs in particularly disruptive phases of life, such as when children are likely to be very young or during prime earning years. These trajectories also indicate that women are more likely than men to live their later years unmarried, truncating opportunities to reap the dividends of pooled resources and other marital benefits. The results for religious frequency exhibit some intriguing patterns in that trajectories that include being married later in life are positively associated with religious frequency, while trajectories of change with decreasing probabilities of marriage do not significantly differ by religious frequency. Although the idea that religious people are more likely to be married does not come as a surprise (Allison 2023; Uecker and Stokes 2008), religious

frequency does not appear to diminish one's chances of following a marital trajectory that includes marital instability.

This study has some limitations to keep in mind. As valuable as the long-running NLYS79 panel data remains, the unfortunate drawback of data collected over so many decades is that the cohort of respondents likely held very different family formation attitudes and expectations in their youth than young adults do today. This cohort came of age on the heels of the gender revolution in the workplace (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015), following peak divorce rates (Mayol-Garcia et al. 2021), and during the tipping point of women's college degree attainment surpassing men's (DiPrete and Buchmann 2013), which surely impacted their marital status trajectories in distinctive ways. Thus, the marital status trajectories identified in the current study may not directly apply to other cohorts, especially younger cohorts whose conceptions of marriage and family have shifted quickly and dramatically (Aragão 2024; Braga 2025). As an additional constraint, the categories for race and ethnicity are limited to only three general categories, likely obscuring additional variations according to race. This data limitation prevents identification of marital status trajectory characteristics for Asians, American Indians/Alaska Natives, mixed-race respondents, and other categories whose experiences of marital status pathways certainly warrant future research. And as will be further discussed in Chapter 5, the sample is limited to those who reported wages in 2014–2022, resulting in lost information about those outside the workforce, who are most likely to be women (Hipple 2016). It is possible that including nonearners would substantially change trajectory shapes and groupings, which can be addressed in future research.

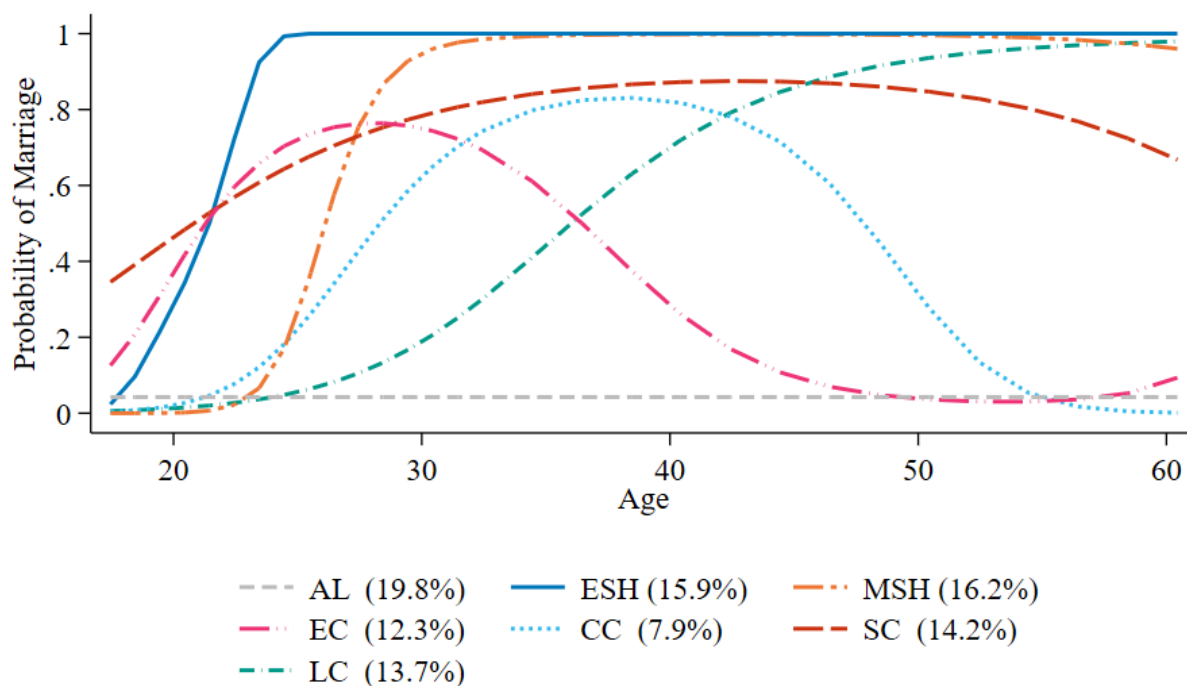


Figure 4.1. Marital Status Trajectory Groups of Men and Women Across the Life Course.
Source: NLSY79, 1979–2022 surveys.

AL = always low, *ESH* = early steady high, *MSH* = middle steady high, *EC* = early change, *CC* = centered change, *LC* = late change, *SC* = slow change

Table 4.1. Descriptions of Marital Status Trajectories

Name		Description
Always Low	(AL)	Low probably of marriage throughout study period
Early Steady High	(ESH)	Marriage in early 20s; steady marital status
Middle Steady High	(MSH)	Marriage in late 20s; steady marital status
Early Change	(EC)	Moderate, early probability of marriage; probability declines in 30s
Centered Change	(CC)	Marriage probability highest in 30s; drops by 50s
Slow Change	(SC)	Moderate probability of marriage throughout adulthood; peaks in 40s
Late Change	(LC)	Slow, steady increase in probability through study period

Source: NLSY79, 1979–2022 surveys.

Table 4.2. Descriptive Statistics of the Marital Status Trajectory Groups^a by Gender

	AL		ESH		MSH		EC		CC		SC		LC		Total	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Gender Distribution (%)	49.5	50.5	48.8	51.2	60.7	39.3	36.5	63.5	48.5	51.5	41.2	58.8	61.5	38.5	49.9	50.1
Race/Ethnicity																
Non-Blk./Non-Hisp. (%)	40.5	31.7	68.4	71.6	68.4	65.9	50.0	49.1	54.2	57.9	60.2	68.4	57.0	56.1	57.3	56.1
Black (%)	41.3	51.3	11.7	11.8	15.3	18.4	27.7	24.7	28.4	24.8	20.8	12.1	28.0	29.2	24.7	25.5
Hispanic (%)	18.2	17.0	19.9	16.6	15.7	15.7	22.3	26.2	17.4	14.3	19.0	19.4	15.0	14.8	18.0	18.4
Mother's Education	11.0	11.1	11.1	11.2	11.8	11.6	10.7	10.4	11.3	11.6	11.1	10.8	11.3	11.4	11.2	11.1
Father's Education	11.0	10.6	11.1	11.2	12.2	11.6	10.6	10.1	11.4	11.8	10.9	10.8	11.4	11.5	11.3	11.0
Religious Frequency																
Infrequent (%)	54.8	52.5	51.5	42.2	51.6	37.0	63.4	47.6	61.1	50.5	58.1	49.0	56.1	46.2	55.5	46.7
Frequent (%)	45.2	47.3	48.5	57.8	48.4	63.0	36.6	52.4	38.9	49.5	41.9	51.0	43.9	53.8	44.5	53.3

Source: NLSY79, 1979–2022 surveys.

^a *AL* = always low, *ESH* = early steady high, *MSH* = middle steady high, *EC* = early change, *CC* = centered change, *LC* = late change, *SC* = slow change

Table 4.3. Multinomial Logistic Risk Models (log odds) of Factors on Marital Status Trajectories (ref. = Always Low)^a

	ESH	MSH	EC	CC	SC	LC
Woman	0.120 (0.109)	-0.485*** (0.107)	0.495*** (0.103)	-0.357** (0.120)	0.337** (0.106)	-0.499*** (0.296)
Black	-2.212*** (0.150)	-1.811*** (0.136)	-1.006*** (0.120)	-0.480*** (0.134)	-1.774*** (0.134)	-1.465*** (0.148)
Hispanic	-0.821*** (0.164)	-0.545*** (0.159)	-0.233 (0.153)	-0.248 (0.188)	-0.616*** (0.158)	-0.716*** (0.189)
Mother's Education	-0.007 (0.024)	0.020 (0.024)	-0.012 (0.022)	0.017 (0.027)	0.001 (0.023)	0.003 (0.027)
Father's Education	-0.029 (0.019)	0.035 [†] (0.018)	-0.022 (0.017)	0.027 (0.021)	-0.028 (0.018)	0.042* (0.021)
Religious Freq.	0.449*** (0.109)	0.454*** (0.106)	-0.026 (0.102)	-0.119 (0.120)	0.100 (0.105)	0.467*** (0.121)
Constant	0.550	-0.163	0.428	-0.625	0.572	-0.523

Note: Reference group for race and ethnicity is non-Black/non-Hispanic. Mother's and Father's education is measured in years. Reference group for religious frequency is infrequent attendance. Standard errors are shown in parentheses.

^a *AL* = always low, *ESH* = early steady high, *MSH* = middle steady high, *EC* = early change, *CC* = centered change, *SC* = slow change, *LC* = late change

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

CHAPTER 5: WHICH PATHWAYS OF PARTNERSHIP PAY OFF?

Despite extensive literature on marriage, the economic and health payoffs of marriage are often discussed without thoughtful consideration of timing, duration, or frequency of entering and exiting marriage. As decades of decline in marriage rates suggest (Loo 2024; Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson 2018), marriage over the life course involves far more complex dynamics and consequences than might be the case if simply entering marriage offered unilateral benefits. Indeed, the increasing inequality and polarization of family life warrants careful examination of *how* and *when* marital status is associated with cumulative advantages and disadvantages (Dannefer 2003).

The current study addresses this question by testing the explanatory power of the marital status trajectory groups identified in Chapter 4 on the case of hourly wages in later life. Given substantial variation in the pathways of partnership, and mindful of protection and selection theories, I expect to find that, overall, nonsteady marital status trajectories (i.e., those with multiple status changes) will be associated with lower wages relative to steadier trajectory groups (Hypothesis 1a). Further, continued gender and race disparities in wages and occupational segregation result in greater financial precarity for women and racialized minorities (Cha et al. 2023; Misra and Murray-Close 2014; Van Winkle and Fasang 2020), so I anticipate that lower wages for the nonsteady marital status trajectories will be greater for women than for men (Hypothesis 1b), as well as being greater for Black and Hispanic individuals (Hypothesis 1c). I also expect that religious frequency will have gendered effects, with men who attend religious services frequently earning higher wages than men who attend infrequently, but that the effect will be reversed for women (Hypothesis 1d).

The life course principle of timing asserts that the sequencing of life transitions and events can have lifelong consequences (Elder et al. 2003). Though the average timing of first marriage has shifted considerably in recent decades (Mayol-Garcia et al. 2021), non-normative timing for transitioning into marriage may have economic consequences. I therefore expect that marital status trajectories with non-normative timing into marriage (i.e., marrying close to teen years or marrying in middle age or later) will be associated with lower wages compared to those who marry in normative years (Hypothesis 2a) and that these penalties will be greater for women (Hypothesis 2b). Lastly, the results of Chapter 3 showed that marital status changes assert much larger wage effects for men compared to women, whose wages varied minimally according to marital status. I therefore anticipate that the interaction of gender and marital status trajectory will reveal greater disparities among men than among women (Hypothesis 2c).

METHODS

Data

The data for these analyses come from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79). As described in Chapter 4, the NLSY79 is a nationally representative sample of over 12,000 individuals born between 1957 and 1964 who have been interviewed annually through 1994 and then biennially from 1996 to 2022. I exclude the military and low-income subsamples that were not followed after 1984 and 1990, respectively (2,923 respondents), and I adjust for missing data on covariates using listwise deletion (1,112 respondents). I further restrict my analysis to those who reported wages in 2013–2021 to capture wages in later life, resulting in a final analytical sample of 4,979 individual persons.

Measures

Key independent variable: Marital status trajectories. The key explanatory variables for the present study are marital status trajectories. Group-based trajectory models utilized in Chapter 4 resulted in seven distinct trajectories, or groups: *Always low* (AL = 1), *early steady high* (ESH = 2), *middle steady high* (MSH = 3), *early change* (EC = 4), *centered change* (CC = 5), *late change* (LC = 6), and *slow change* (SC = 7). These trajectories indicate substantial heterogeneity in experiences of marital status change over the life course in terms of probability of marriage, changes in probability of marriage, and timing of change. Three trajectory groups, representing half of the sample (51.9%), show steady marital status through the majority of adulthood. Individuals in these groups follow a pathway with only one marital status change relatively early in adulthood (ESH at 15.9% and MSH at 16.2%) or no marital status change at all (AL at 19.8%). The remaining four groups (48.1%) follow pathways characterized by changes in marital status that occur more than once or with non-normative timing, such as a first marriage late in life: EC (12.3%), CC (7.9%), SC (14.2%), and LC (13.7%). (See Chapter 4, Table 4.2 for additional descriptive statistics.) As the largest group and the only trajectory exhibiting no change over time, AL serves as the reference group for all analyses.

Dependent variable: Wages. I compare effects of the seven marital status trajectories on the outcome variable of logged hourly wages in 2013–2021 (mean = 3.13, SD = 0.82). In the most recent five waves of data collection (even numbered years 2014–2022, for which respondents report the income from wages and salary from the previous year), respondents are all between 49 and 65 years of age, incorporating peak earning and pre-retirement years. I divide reported annual income, adjusted to 2022 U.S. dollars, by the number of hours worked each year. The NLSY79 top codes unusually high incomes, and I top code hours worked per week at 100; I

assign hourly wages that fall below \$1 and above \$200 as missing due to data inconsistency. As the final step, I construct a variable of mean annual wages for 2013–2021 to account for wage variation from year to year (see Weisshaar and Cabello-Hutt 2020 for a similar coding strategy).

Gender. Gender is coded as a binary indicator of women (1) compared to men (0). The analytical sample has an even gender distribution, with 50.1 percent women and 49.9 percent men.

Race and ethnicity. Race and ethnicity are measured with a set of binary indicators for Black respondents (25.1%), Hispanic respondents (18.2%), and non-Black/non-Hispanic respondents (56.7%), who serve as the reference category.

Mother's level of education and father's level of education. Each parent's level of education, measured in years at the first survey wave in 1979, is included as a proxy for family socioeconomic background. Analytic sample mean for mother's education is 11.14 years (SD = 3.15), and mean for father's education is almost identical at 11.15 years (SD = 3.92).

Religious frequency. I measure frequency of religious service attendance in 1979 with a binary indicator of frequent attendance (1), or attending religious service more than once per month, compared to infrequent religious attendance (0) for those who attend services less than or equal to once per month.

Analytical Strategy

To analyze the effects of marital status trajectory on wages, I employ a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models, using the trajectory groups identified in Chapter 4 as explanatory variables and logged hourly wage from 2013–2021 as outcome. After an initial bivariate model to identify total effects of marital status trajectories on wages, I test how these

effects vary according to gender, race and ethnicity, mother's and father's level of education, and religious frequency.

RESULTS

Table 5.1 presents results from OLS models predicting hourly wages according to marital status trajectory groups. I find in Model 1 that every trajectory is associated with significantly higher wages in 2013–2021 relative to AL, except for EC, which was not significantly different. Of the trajectories with significant results, the three trajectories characterized by marital status change (CC, SC, and LC) are characterized by 27%, 32%, and 55% higher hourly wages compared to AL, respectively ($= 100 \times (e^{\beta} - 1)$). ESH respondents earn approximately 52% higher wages than AL. The largest effects are enjoyed by the MSH group, which is associated with 83% higher wages relative to AL. These findings indicate not only that marital status trajectories significantly predict wages later in life, but also that AL and EC groups experience far lower wages compared to other groups, suggesting that those with low probabilities of marriage through middle age and later experience a substantial economic disadvantage.

[TABLE 5.1 ABOUT HERE]

For Model 2, I introduce control variables of gender, race and ethnicity, mother's education, father's education, and religious frequency. Controlling for these characteristics reduces the magnitude of trajectory effects for all groups, but the previously nonsignificant effects of the EC group is significant in this model. EC respondents exhibit 10% higher wages than AL respondents. Model 2 also shows a 23% gender wage gap. Additionally, there is a 10% wage gap for Black respondents compared to non-Black/non-Hispanic respondents, though

Hispanic respondents are associated with 10% higher wages. The effects of parent education are small but significant, with every additional year of both mother's and father's education increasing respondent wages by approximately 3%. The wage effects of religious frequency are not significant in this model.

To test for racial, class, or religious frequency differences in gender effects of trajectory groups, Model 3 includes interactions effects for gender with race/ethnicity, gender with mother's/father's education, and gender with religious frequency. Because interacted variables are complex to interpret, I plot predicted wage values for race and ethnicity as well as religious frequency by gender in Figure 5.1 for clearer interpretation. (Mother and father education are not included in the figure because of their minimal impact in the model.) The left panel of Figure 5.1 shows that a significant gender wage gap is present across all racial/ethnic categories. Within racial/ethnic groups, Black respondents have the smallest gender wage gap at \$1.90 ($p = 0.046$), and non-Black/non-Hispanic respondents' is largest at \$9.16 ($p = 0.000$), with the Hispanic wage gap at \$5.94 ($p = 0.000$). Non-Black/non-Hispanic men and Hispanic men's wages are not statistically different from one another and are predicted to earn the highest wages at \$28.89 and \$29.29 per hour, respectively, net of the effects of trajectory groups. These men's wages are significantly higher than Black men's wages ($p = 0.000$ for both group comparisons). In contrast, Hispanic women are predicted to earn the highest wages among women at \$23.35 per hour, significantly higher than both non-Black/non-Hispanic women ($p = 0.001$) and Black women ($p = 0.013$), who do not significantly differ from one another.

[FIGURE 5.1 ABOUT HERE]

In the right panel of Figure 5.1, we see that a gender gap is also expected according to religious frequency, with frequently attending men earning \$28.54 per hour, all other factors held constant, compared to frequently attending women earning \$20.09, an earnings gap of \$8.45 ($p = 0.000$). Somewhat less dramatically, infrequently attending men are expected to earn \$26.46 per hour, compared to infrequently attending women, who earn \$20.90 per hour, indicating an earnings gap of \$5.56 ($p = 0.000$). Moreover, men who frequently attend religious services earn significantly higher wages than those who attend infrequently, while religious frequency is not associated with wage differences for women.

In my final model (Model 4), I estimate my full model to include all covariates in Model 3 and add an interaction for gender and marital status trajectory. Figure 5.2 presents estimates of predicted hourly wages for each marital status trajectory, separated by men and women. The reference group of AL does not show a disparity by gender, the only trajectory without a gender wage gap. For all other trajectories, gender disparities in wages are statistically significant. MSH men are the highest earning group, commanding \$36.17 per hour. The highest earning women in the sample (MSH women) earn only 63% of MSH men's predicted wages, a \$13.27 difference ($p = 0.000$). Even the next highest earning men, those who follow the ESH trajectory, only earn 88% of MSH men's average predicted wages, with a difference in hourly wages of \$4.19 ($p = 0.017$). Men in the AL group earn less than half of what MSH men earn, with a difference of \$18.54 ($p = 0.000$). Among women, although the pattern across trajectory groups is similar to that of men, differences between groups are far smaller. If women's predicted wages for each group are ranked from highest to lowest, hourly wage differences between consecutively ranked groups only vary by about \$1.00 or less and are not statistically significant, except between ESH (\$21.48) and SC (\$19.45; a difference of \$2.03), which is only marginally significant ($p = .059$).

Put another way, the lowest earning women (EC) earn 76% of the highest earning women (MSH), indicating substantially less variation compared to men. Despite these modest differences, there are some significant differences between women from different trajectories. There is a clear distinction in wages between women who follow pathways in which they are married later in life (MSH, ESH, and LC) and those in groups who are less likely to be married in later years (SC, CC, EC, and AL). Among groups in these two tiers, wage differences are not statistically significant, but across tiers, all higher earning groups differ significantly from the lower earning groups. Table 5.2 summarizes the average wages for men and women according to trajectory, the gender wage gap within each trajectory, and both men's and women's relative wage penalty compared with the MSH group.

[FIGURE 5.2 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 5.2 ABOUT HERE]

DISCUSSION

The current study examines how pathways of partnership that individuals experience can have long-term implications for earnings. Using seven marital status trajectories identified from NLSY79 data in Chapter 4, I documented gendered variation in hourly wages later in life according to trajectory. I find support for Hypothesis 1a, that trajectory groups have significant effects on earnings, with pathways characterized by marital longevity and consistency associated with much higher hourly wages. I also find that these effects vary according to gender, race and ethnicity, and frequency of religious attendance early in life, in line with Hypotheses 1b and 1c. While holding effects of marital status trajectory constant, these analyses show that Black men

earn significantly less than other racial groups, while non-Black/non-Hispanic women and Black women earn similarly reduced wages. Men who attended religious services frequently in their youth are more likely to earn higher wages than men with infrequent attendance, and both categories of men earn significantly higher wages than women, whose wages do not vary according to religious frequency, partially supporting Hypothesis 1d.

I then demonstrate that wage payoffs for following marital status trajectories vary by gender. By examining significant differences in men's wages according to marital status trajectories, groups can be roughly divided into four levels, with statistically similar trajectory groups categorized together. At the top, MSH men are the runaway wage leaders, suggesting that remaining married after marrying relatively young—but not *too* young—pays off. In the second level, ESH, LC, and SC men, who spend perhaps the highest earning years of their lives married, earn statistically similar, moderately high wages. These findings differ somewhat from expectations in Hypothesis 2a, because while marrying early or late does indeed correlate with comparatively lower earnings, being married later in life still pays off for men. The third level is comprised of EC and CC men who were married but no longer are, suggesting that exiting marriage without a subsequent remarriage can have economic penalties for men that are akin to being a stably married woman.

These findings indicate that trajectories characterized by steady marriage (i.e., MSH and ESH groups) are associated with economic benefits for both men and women, but the benefits to men far outweigh the benefits to women, in support of Hypothesis 2b. Also as hypothesized (2b), only when men remain unmarried throughout the life course do they experience the level of wage reductions that most women experience, independent of marital status. For men, being unmarried later in life (like for EC, CC, and AL groups) is associated with significantly lower

wages, and lifelong singlehood predicts significantly lower wages than ever having been married. Yet for women, trajectories involving more than one change in marital status that occur after young adulthood (that is, both entering and exiting marriage as in EC, CC, and SC pathways) are linked to wage consequences that do not statistically differ from the economic realities of never having married (AL), and entering and exiting marriage early in life portends the lowest wages in later years, though wage differences compared to other trajectories are comparatively small. Together, these within-gender differences support Hypothesis 2c.

This study sheds new light on an old phenomenon of economic benefits to marriage, but some limitations should be mentioned. Marital status trajectories for the NLSY79 cohort of late Baby Boomers may not readily apply to different cohorts. Notable economic changes, such as the decline in manufacturing jobs, the Great Recession, and the COVID-19 pandemic have likely affected wages for younger cohorts in ways that may not be as connected to marital status trajectories. Further, the transition to a more service-based economy, increases in women's educational attainment, and rapid technological advances that have coincided with increases in age at first marriage are likely to shift the role of marital status trajectories on economic outcomes.

These analyses were limited to four general sociodemographic categories frequently associated with marital status: gender, race and ethnicity, social class, and religion. The social class and religion variables in particular were simple measures that provided useful but modest insights about marital status trajectories, so more complex measures will no doubt provide additional useful insights in future research. Also, there are additional covariates that can be included in further studies to better explicate the role of marital status trajectories on wages. The transition to parenthood and the presence of children at home, respondent education, as well as

work characteristics such as occupational prestige and job tenure would add valuable insight into understanding the role of marital status trajectories. Moreover, information on cohabitation was not included in this study. A monumental shift in public acceptance of cohabitation as a precursor to or replacement of marriage adds a dynamic layer to the study of marital status that future research should certainly explore.

Despite some limitations, this study provides new insights into distal outcomes of marital status change and provides compelling support for further investigations into effects and antecedents to marital status pathways. Some positive interpretations of these findings include new evidence that marrying late in life does not preclude attaining economic dividends, especially for women, and that marital instability does not inevitably result in major wage penalties if remarriage takes place, a finding that holds true for both men and women. Less optimistically, staying single, whether following dissolution of marriage or never marrying to begin with, is associated with significantly lower wages for men and women. This effect is especially pronounced for lifelong single men.

Table 5.1. OLS Linear Regression Models of Marital Status Trajectories on Log Hourly Wages 2014–2022

	Model 1: Trajectories	Model 2: 1+Controls	Model 3: 2+Gender Interactions	Model 4: 3+Gender-Trajectory Interactions
Trajectories (ref. = AL) ^a				
Early Steady High (ESH)	0.416*** (0.038)	0.365*** (0.037)	0.380*** (0.037)	0.595*** (0.052)
Middle Steady High (MSH)	0.607*** (0.038)	0.487*** (0.038)	0.491*** (0.038)	0.719*** (0.050)
Early Change (EC)	0.066 (0.041)	0.100* (0.040)	0.105** (0.040)	0.254*** (0.061)
Centered Change (CC)	0.235*** (0.048)	0.179*** (0.046)	0.196*** (0.046)	0.337*** (0.065)
Slow Change (SC)	0.279*** (0.039)	0.266*** (0.039)	0.283*** (0.039)	0.519*** (0.057)
Late Change (LC)	0.439*** (0.040)	0.363*** (0.038)	0.375*** (0.038)	0.552*** (0.050)
Individual Characteristics				
Woman (ref. = man)		-0.261*** (0.022)	0.001 (0.102)	0.348** (0.112)
Black (ref. = non-Black/non-Hisp.)		-0.107*** (0.028)	-0.251*** (0.038)	-0.204*** (0.039)
Hispanic		0.093** (0.033)	0.014 (0.046)	0.027 (0.046)
Mother's Education		0.033*** (0.005)	0.038*** (0.007)	0.037*** (0.007)
Father's Education		0.026*** (0.004)	0.034*** (0.005)	0.035*** (0.005)
Religious Freq. (1979; ref. = infreq.)		0.021 (0.022)	0.076* (0.031)	0.071* (0.031)
Woman × Black			0.293*** (0.053)	0.175** (0.055)
Woman × Hispanic			0.155* (0.066)	0.118† (0.065)
Woman × Mother's Education			-0.011 (0.010)	-0.010 (0.010)
Woman × Father's Education			-0.017* (0.007)	-0.017* (0.007)
Woman × Frequent			-0.116** (0.043)	-0.091* (0.043)
Gender × Trajectory				
Woman × ESH				-0.442*** (0.074)
Woman × MSH				-0.501*** (0.076)
Woman × EC				-0.311*** (0.080)
Woman × CC				-0.293** (0.091)
Woman × SC				-0.465*** (0.077)
Woman × LC				-0.373*** (0.077)
Constant	2.837***	2.350***	2.215***	2.052***
<i>N</i>	4,979	4,979	4,979	4,979
<i>R</i> ²	0.066	0.141	0.153	0.163

Source: NLSY79, 1979–2022 surveys. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

^a AL = always low, ESH = early steady high, MSH = middle steady high, EC = early change, CC = condensed change, SC = slow change, LC = late change

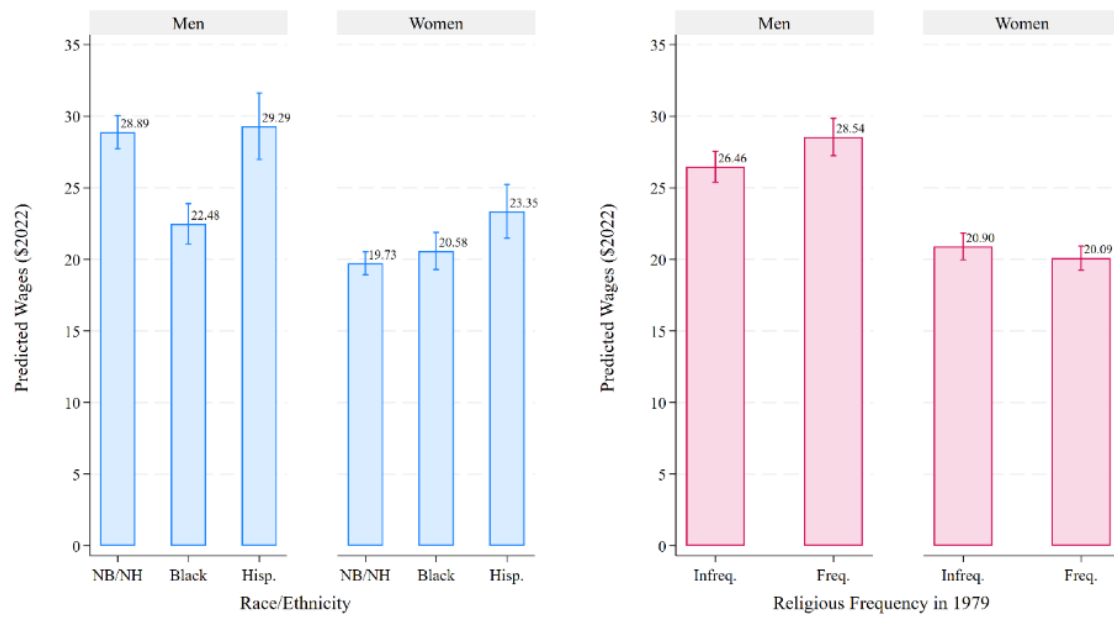


Figure 5.1 Predicted Wages by Gender with Race/Ethnicity and Gender with Religious Frequency. Data are estimated from Model 3, Table 5.1. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

NB/NH = Non-Black, Non-Hispanic

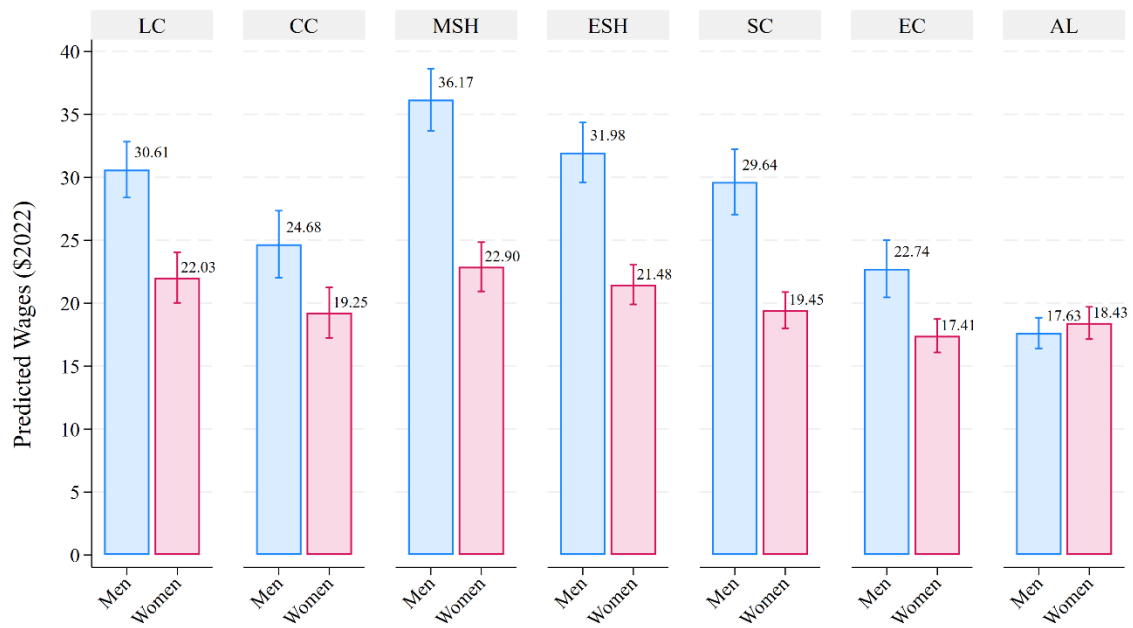


Figure 5.2. Predicted Wages by Trajectory and Gender. Data are estimated from Model 4, Table 5.1. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

AL = always low, *ESH* = early steady high, *MSH* = middle steady high, *EC* = early change, *CC* = centered change, *SC* = slow change, *LC* = late change

Table 5.2. Gender-Wage Comparisons, Calculated from Average Predicted Wages across Marital Status Trajectories

Traj. ^a	Men's Predicted Wages (\$)	Women's Predicted Wages (\$)	Women's Wages as % of within- Trajectory Men's	Men's Wages as % of MSH Men's Wages	Women's Wages as % of MSH Women's Wages	Women's Wages as % of MSH Men's Wages
AL	17.63	18.43	104.54	48.74	80.48	50.95
ESH	31.98	21.48	67.17	88.42	93.80	59.39
MSH	36.17	22.90	63.31	100.00	100.00	63.31
EC	22.74	17.41	76.56	62.87	76.03	48.13
CC	24.68	19.25	78.00	68.23	84.06	53.22
SC	29.64	19.45	65.62	81.95	84.93	53.77
LC	30.61	22.03	71.97	84.63	96.20	60.91

Note: Calculations are based on estimates from Model 4, Table 5.1. With the exception of AL, all within-trajectory estimates are significantly different ($p < 0.001$).

^a *AL* = always low, *ESH* = early steady high, *MSH* = middle steady high, *EC* = early change, *CC* = centered change, *SC* = slow change, *LC* = late change

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTIONS

As family formation patterns continue to evolve, some have documented the waning influence of marriage (Cherlin 2020; Coontz 2006) or fully questioned the value of marriage altogether (Chambers 2017; Lewis 2022; Stacey 1993). Nevertheless, marriage continues to be associated with a host of institutionalized benefits, from tax breaks and investment advantages to medical decision-making. In the social sciences, marriage is often found to have positive correlations with physical health and lower mortality (Dupre et al. 2009; Mikucka et al. 2021), mental health (DeMaris 2018; Qari 2014), and overall happiness (Kamp Dush, Taylor, and Kroeger 2008b; Wilcox 2024). And an apparent economic marriage advantage for some demographic groups continues to inspire research and debate (Ahituv and Lerman 2007; Glauber 2018; Killewald 2012; Ludwig and Brüderl 2018). Indeed, the increasing inequalities associated with family structure (Furstenberg 2014; McLanahan 2004; Williams and Baker 2021) add increasing urgency to better understand the mechanisms underlying who becomes a forfeiter or beneficiary of marital status advantages.

Accordingly, this dissertation offers a substantive contribution to our current understanding of the patterns of marital status change and their effects on wages. There are a few studies that have used terms similar to “marital status trajectories” (e.g., Ammar et al. 2014; Barrett 2000; Dupre et al. 2009; Zhang and Ang 2020), and additional studies that discuss trajectories of other characteristics associated with marriage, such as well-being (DeMaris and Oates 2022), work-family patterns (Aisenbrey and Fasang 2017), relationship quality (Carlson and VanOrman 2017; Don and Mickelson 2014; Jackson et al. 2017), and income (Willson 2003). But, as far as I am aware, this is the first study to clearly identify trajectories that follow

ontogenetic marital status changes over the life course. This intuitive but nascent representation of common life phenomena offers both conceptual, analytical value for future research and easily understood visual depictions for presenting results (Nagin 2005). By supporting continued research on the stratified outcomes of marital status experiences, these marital status trajectories are a fitting response to Dupre's observation, "Despite the enormous volume of research, the empirical evidence and prevailing discourse is rooted in static conceptions of marital status. In light of dynamic changes to the American family, current marital status has become less informative about long-term marital experiences and their associated risks" (2009:546).

In the preceding three chapters, I have presented three analyses that address this need for a more informative means of understanding the life course of marriage. Chapter 3, *Changes of Heart*, offers three key contributions. First, it adds to the substantial extant literature on gendered effects of family status on wages by directly comparing both entering and exiting marriage, asserting that marriageability may play a larger role than actual legal married status. Though these findings do not explicitly disentangle arguments regarding selection effects of marriage, they provide some evidence that marital instability does not disqualify individuals—particularly men—from the marital wage premium (MWP). Second, I find that, while some studies pool single and divorced/widowed/separated (DWS) respondents into one category, single and DWS respondents experience significantly different realities in terms of wages. DWS respondents are no more a monolith than any other group, yet these findings emphasize distinct economic experiences for the previously married compared to those who have never married. Third, this study provides motivating findings for further development of a framework for the life course of marriage. The 12-month panels of CPS-MORG data only allowed analysis of proximate effects, but these results point to possible longer-term effects. A life course of marriage framework

provides fruitful opportunities for further exploration of marriage effects on wages as well as countless other outcomes that can enhance current understanding of the uniquely linked lives of married people.

In Chapter Four, *Pathways of Partnership*, I present two overarching findings that add to scholarship on union formation and dissolution. First, the seven identified marital status trajectory groups create a profile of marital status experiences that go far beyond static approaches to better represent the fluctuations or constancies that can characterize the life course of marriage. Even in a purely descriptive, exploratory form, the marital status trajectory groups offer an easily digestible taxonomy with significant potential for future research. Second, the seven trajectory groups operate differently according to social location in ways that are likely to increase disparities in various outcomes. Most markedly, Black and Hispanic respondents are less likely to follow marital status trajectories characterized by extended periods of marriage, and Black respondents are more likely to remain single throughout life than any other racial/ethnic group. Compared to men, women are more likely to remain single following a relatively early marital disruption, and those who attend religious services more frequently are no less likely to follow those disruptive trajectories than less religiously active individuals. Although not a part of Chapter Four's analyses, applying outcomes to these varying associations with marital status trajectories have major potential for new insights on diverging destinies (McLanahan 2004).

Chapter Five, *Which Pathways of Partnership Pay Off?*, describes the first application of my seven marital status trajectories on a distal outcome; in this case, annual hourly wages. These analyses reveal three important contributions. Similar to Chapter 3, the first major finding is that marriageability appears to play a significant role in wage advantages for men. More specifically, men who are married in later life—even after prolonged singlehood or previous marital

dissolution—experience higher wage returns than men in other trajectories and women in all trajectories. Second, gender plays an important role both in patterns of wages across trajectory groups as well as in within-group variation. Men’s wages varied considerably between the highest earners and the lowest earners, and only the very lowest-earning men earned less than women in the highest-earning group. Conversely, women’s wages only vary to a marginally significant level across groups. Although some prior studies indicate that within-gender variation is an important factor for understanding women’s wage penalties (Glauber 2018), these results suggest that marital status does not determine substantial wage variation for women. Third, the specific features of each marital status trajectory group provide a rich, quantitatively driven profile of the life course of marriage that is worth additional discussion. Reminiscent of Bourdieu’s famous words, “The difficulty, in sociology, is to manage to think in a completely astonished and disconcerted way about things you thought you had always understood” (1991:207), the seven marital trajectory groups I identified, shed light on a family experience—marriage—that most think they already understand.

Marital Status Trajectories

Trajectories are an essential concept of the life course perspective (Elder et al. 2003), describing the patterns or pathways of events that individuals experience over time. Moreover, an informative trajectory includes four central features: *sequencing*, or the order of events; *timing*, referring to the age at which an event occurs or when a transition occurs relative to other events; *transitions* into or out of roles or statuses; and *durations*, or how long a role or status is experienced (Dupre and Meadows 2007). The marital status trajectories identified in Chapter 4 provide a vivid depiction of these features, highlighting important nuances of marital experiences.

Always low. The *Always low* (AL) trajectory group is the largest group in this sample (20 percent of respondents), with the simplest features: no transitions at all. Nevertheless, the preceding analyses and comparison with other groups reveal that, despite a flat, linear trajectory, the timing and duration of being unmarried are salient aspects of the AL experience, especially for men. For men, extended singlehood did not preclude moderately high wages as long as they married by around age 50. The lowest earners among men shared the feature of being single later in life, but the combination of late life timing of singlehood plus the duration of singlehood seem to contribute to AL men being the lowest earners in the sample—statistically similar to the lowest-earning women. Though they share some characteristics, AL women’s experiences differ from that of men’s in that AL women do not appear to be the most disadvantaged. In the case of women, timing and duration of lifelong singlehood also impact wages, but to a much lesser extent than for men. The AL trajectory group reveals that, despite previous findings of similar experiences of discrimination between men and women (Dupuis and Girme 2024), the wage penalties of lifelong singlehood are particularly severe for men.

Early steady high. Early steady high (ESH) trajectory group members (16 percent of the sample) experience one transition early in adulthood and then the longest duration of steady marriage of all groups. This pattern is associated with one of the highest-earning groups in the sample. Although ESH women’s earnings do not statistically differ from women in other high earning groups, it may be worth noting that ESH men earn the second-highest wages, while ESH women earn somewhat less than both MSH and LC women (*middle steady high* and *late change*, respectively, which are discussed below), placing these women’s earnings in third place among women. The ESH gender gap is one of the widest in the sample, suggesting that wage benefits of early, steady marriage are especially steep for men. The finding that religious frequency has a

positive association with ESH is in line with previous research that has found highly religious individuals are more likely to marry early (Allison 2023; Uecker and Stokes 2008). The importance of the timing for transitioning into marriage is further highlighted below.

Middle steady high. The *middle steady high* (MSH) trajectory (16 percent of the sample) has many similarities with the ESH group, with one notable exception: the timing of their transition into marriage occurs roughly five years later than for ESH members. This seemingly small difference carries a sizeable payoff—MSH group members stand alone as the highest earners by far, at least for men. MSH women earn the highest wages among women, but their wages are not statistically different from women in other higher earning groups. For men who remain married throughout the vast majority of their lives, marrying just five years later can mean the difference between a good wage and a great one. Though I can only speculate, this difference in timing is likely related to additional years of educational training that are completed before the transition to marriage. As median age at first marriage continues to rise (U.S. Census Bureau 2025), it is possible the significance of marrying just a few years later has lessened for more recent cohorts. Further, MSH is one of only two trajectory groups with a significant majority of men within the group (the other group being *late change*, discussed below). The shrinking gap between men's and women's ages at first marriage (Fry 2024) could indicate that the wage returns of marriage may have smaller gender disparities among younger cohorts.

Early change. Individuals who follow the *early change* (EC) marital pathway (12 percent of the sample) marry early and spend the shortest duration of their lives married, among those who marry at any point. The timing of both marrying early and leaving marriage after a relatively short duration is associated with negative economic consequences for both men and women. EC men earn close to the lowest wages among men, second only to AL men. But for women, the EC

trajectory group earns the lowest wages of all. Although men are clearly not exempt from wage disadvantages after an early, relatively rapid sequence of marital transitions, women are especially vulnerable. Gender distribution in the EC group is the least balanced of all groups, with a significantly larger proportion of women, suggesting that women are both more likely to enter this financially precarious group and more likely to experience financial disadvantage. Much of the literature on the experience of women in financial hardship center on women foregoing marriage (Cherlin et al. 2008; Edin and Kefalas 2005), but the findings of this study offer an additional layer of complexity. For women, having been married in early adulthood may have greater financial penalties than never marrying in the first place.

Centered change. The *centered change* (CC) trajectory (eight percent of the sample) involves marrying in mid- to late-20s but then leaving marriage around age 50. Despite the timing of their first transition into marriage occurring with similar timing to the MSH group, the duration of time spent in marriage is curtailed for CC individuals. This difference in marriage duration is consequential for wages: CC men and women earn far lower wages than most other trajectory groups. It is possible that marital dissolution resulted in reduced wages that are never recovered (Endeweld et al. 2022; Gadalla 2008; Harkness 2022). On the other hand, it is also possible that financial difficulties contributed to the demise of the marriage (Dew, Britt, and Huston 2012; Lowenstein 2005). Though the current analyses do not identify whether lower wages or marital dissolution came first, comparison with other trajectories provides some support for the idea that marital history has less bearing on wages than being married at later ages. This finding is discussed further below.

Slow change. A *slow change* (SC) marital status trajectory (14 percent of the sample) has perhaps the most distinctive shape of all the trajectories. Rather than having clear transition

points like most other marital status patterns, the SC pathway appears to grow slowly, plateau for about 20 years, and begin a slow descent. As mentioned in Chapter 4, examining average probabilities of marriage for the SC group reveals a subtle dip in the middle of the SC trajectory, which may indicate a transition out of marriage and another transition back into marriage (see Appendix Figure A.1). Under this assumption of multiple transitions, the SC group's wages falling in the middle of the distribution for both men and women brings up interesting questions. For women, even though the difference between SC wages and ESH wages (the group with the next-highest wages) is only marginally significant, it is nonetheless the largest dollar difference in wages between consecutively ranked groups (a difference of \$2.03). Perhaps re-entering marriage staves off greater wage penalties for women, a protection that was not present for CC, AL, or EC women. For men, although following the SC pathway is associated with wages that are significantly lower than MSH men's, their wages are statistically similar to other high-earning men in the ESH and LC groups. Together, these patterns reveal an interesting story for marital transitions and wages: multiple marital transitions are associated with greater negative impact on women's wages compared to men's wages. As other researchers have found, the disadvantages of divorce hit women harder than men, even when they have successfully repartnered (Qian and Lichter 2018). Even so, it appears that being married later in life, despite a history of multiple marital transitions, keeps SC individuals somewhat insulated from larger economic consequences.

Late change. The *late change* (LC) group (14 percent of the sample) was an unexpected addition to the set of identified marital status trajectories. The LC trajectory is most similar to ESH and MSH, except that the first transition into marriage occurs far later in adulthood, around age 40. LC singlehood extends for a longer duration than other trajectories involving marriage,

yet this duration of singlehood does not impact wages to the extent that one might assume based on the AL group's low wages. As speculated for the MSH group, it is possible that late entry into marriage is due to extended educational training, conceivably for professional training that takes many years, or to establish one's career before marrying. Though beyond the scope of this study, professional training may explain higher wages despite extended singlehood for LC respondents and offers some support for the fact that women in the LC group are the second-highest earning group among women. Marrying after achieving financial stability is more common—even typical—for young adults today (Cherlin 2004; Hawkins et al. 2022). But this conception of a “capstone marriage” (Cherlin 2020) was likely less common for the NLSY79 cohort.

Interestingly, previous research on so-called “late marriage” categorized a marriage as late if it occurred more than two years after the median age at first marriage (Johnson, Krahn, and Galambos 2017) or after age 30 (Glenn, Uecker, and Love 2010), yet the LC trajectory appears to indicate marriage entry that can be substantially later than those cutoffs. The LC group may have been the vanguards for the “top tier of well-educated and affluent Americans” in Furstenberg's (2014:18) two-tier family system, a striking contrast to the black teens that Furstenberg observed as having foreshadowed trends in family formation (cohabitation, delayed or declined marriage, nonmarital childbearing) that much of the United States was soon to follow. This vanguard hypothesis also supports the higher wages enjoyed by the LC group.

The Life Course of Marriage

The marital status trajectories outlined in Chapter 4 and discussed above provide dynamic portraits of the patterns of marital status over the life course. Furthermore, this study identified short-term wage changes associated with marital change and the unintuitive effects of both DWS and singlehood from Chapter 3, along with compellingly rich portraits of the long-term wage

effects of marital status trajectories. These findings provide a powerful springboard for advancing a framework that incorporates the lifelong development that occurs but is rarely studied in marriages. Expanding on the life course perspective, I propose a *marital life course* perspective, positing that the temporal course of marriage itself has its own effect on consequential outcomes.

A marital life course framework contextualizes social phenomena that differ according to the timing, duration, and transitions associated with marital status. This framework specifically seeks to identify when, and how long one's relationship status impacts important economic, psycho-social, health, or other outcomes. By providing a foundation to identify the specific effects of marriage on an individual's life, such effects may be characterized as *proximate* or short-term, intermediate, and *distal* or long-term. Previously established benefits of marriage can be reconceptualized through this framework and classified according to the timing of their occurrence and their duration. For instance, past research has found proximate effects of getting married on happiness, with various studies indicating that this "honeymoon" period wanes and returns to baseline within a couple of years (Lucas et al. 2003; Zimmermann and Easterlin 2006), though more recent work suggests a longer duration (Qari 2014). In contrast, research using longitudinal data from Germany suggests that men experience a proximate wealth premium upon entering marriage, while women's marriage premium has a more intermediate timeline (Kapelle and Lersch 2020). These examples indicate that the temporal aspects of marriage effects already have already garnered scholarly interest, and a life course of marriage framework can provide a useful unifying structure for organizing and conceptualizing such work.

Returning to the five core principles of life course theory, I briefly expand on each principle and how they might operate within a marital life course perspective. The principle of

linked lives provides the strongest scaffold for the marital life course perspective. Rather than using simple, static assumptions about marital status, a marital life course perspective recognizes that sharing life experiences with another person, especially in close contact, will impact an individual and the various trajectories of their lives. Conversely, an extended period or a lifetime that is lived more independently as a single person likely impacts an individual and their trajectories differently. Moreover, a period of married life followed by an end to that marriage could interrupt marriage effects, or it is possible that marriage effects last past the marriage, as the current study suggests. Identifying these varying trajectories will shed light on the significance of linked lives as a marital life course principle to ameliorate the fact that life course researchers frequently discuss the importance of linked lives without necessarily acknowledging this importance in the ways their research is conducted (Settersten 2018).

Life-span development is another valuable life course principle that has salience for a marital life course framework. The work of Elder and other notable life course researchers (Aisenbrey and Fasang 2017; Elder 1998; Elder et al. 2003; Min, Silverstein, and Lendon 2012; O’Rand 1995) emphasizes that human development continues far beyond childhood and unfolds throughout one’s life. Nearly all marriages occur in adulthood, and although the benefits of marriage are frequently researched, it is less common for the developmental processes of these benefits throughout adulthood to be specifically examined. The time spent within marriage may provide a different developmental path compared to that of an adulthood spent single. One instance of comparing different experiences of life-span development is Carr and colleagues’ work (2024) on the long-term economic consequences of lifelong singlehood. Their work highlights that men who spend their lifetimes single experience the lowest accumulation of wealth and are at greatest risk of poverty compared to men who experienced marriage, as well as

when compared to women who remain single. On the other hand, women with the least wealth and greatest poverty risk are those who experienced marriage followed by divorce. These findings illustrate that marital status can be a pivotal turning point for the developmental pathways of adults. A marital life course framework can offer grounding principles for identifying how family structure contributes to social stratification during adulthood.

The life course principle of timing also has clear relevance for a marital life course framework. The timing of marriage, divorce, or widowhood has some well-understood ramifications for adult life, including the increased risk of divorce for those who marry young (Amato 2010), the growing trend of “gray divorce” (Lin et al. 2018), and the unique experiences of young widowhood (Anderson et al. 2023). Situating such events within a marital life course framework provides a backdrop for identifying the meaning of such events within the trajectories of adult lives and how timing and marital status can alter such trajectories. The temporal variations in marital life events, including recurring episodes of singlehood, can be more clearly conceptualized within a more consistent, structured framework. Similarly, the life course principle of historical time and place acknowledges that the realities of marital effects will vary according to the historical era and geographical areas in which life events occur. Within a marital life course framework, the profound changes that have occurred in family formation behaviors and patterns over the last several decades (Cherlin 2010a; Furstenberg 2014) can be further explored, expanded, and understood. Indeed, some studies have identified cohort (Budig and Lim 2016) and geography (Mari 2019) as important factors for gender and family wage gaps, suggesting the importance of not only a life course perspective but also for a specific consideration of the marital life course within these varying contexts.

Finally, the life course principle of agency provides a uniquely powerful lens for understanding the marital life course. Compared to childhood, parenthood, and aging, marital status carries a distinctively prominent possibility for agentic action, the existence of which continues to increase in recent decades through expanded access to divorce (Amato 2010), the decreasing stigma of lifelong singlehood (Bergström and Brée 2023) and cohabitation (Sassler and Miller 2017), and increasingly individualistic views of marriage (Amato 2009; Cherlin 2010b). While recognizing the significant ways societal circumstances constrict agency, as well as cultural differences across groups, the choice to marry, divorce, or stay single is more available for more people now than ever before. Because of the uniquely choice-based aspect of choosing a life partner compared to other family relationships, a marital life course framework can add focused depth to a distinct facet of the larger life course perspective that acknowledges and examines if, how, and why different marital statuses alter life course trajectories.

A marital life course perspective acknowledges both the dynamic evolution people experience over their adulthood as well as the variations in those experiences according to marital status. This preliminary extension of life course theory has here been applied to the case of wages, which provides an intriguing instance of the gendered disparities in the effects of marital status change.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. Cohabitation is not included in my measurements of marital status changes, despite it being a common and important part of relationships today (Manning, Smock, and Fetto 2019; Sassler 2010). Though questions that can be used to measure cohabitation are included in both the CPS-MORG and the NLSY79, these measures were not consistently included until 2007 and 2002, respectively. Including this information would have

significantly reduced the breadth of analysis. Further, the varying functions and meanings of cohabitation for different groups (Sassler and Miller 2017) would make interpretations of trajectories involving cohabitation and their effects less discernible.

The “single” category used in the analysis described in Chapter 3 involves similar ambiguity, another limitation of this study. Though I attempted to differentiate between single–never been married and single–previously married, the CPS survey does not specify this distinction, so the variable was included unchanged. As a result, I include some categories of “strange change” (married→single, DWS→single) that make little intuitive sense, except to underscore the subjective limits of survey wording as well as the power of respondents’ personal interpretation. Depending on the circumstances surrounding divorce, widowhood, and separation, perhaps some respondents seek to distance themselves from their previously married state by opting for “single,” while other might desire to maintain a symbolic connection to their previous marriage through selecting a DWS category. Or perhaps shifting from DWS to single involves the passage of time, when one has lived post-marriage long enough to feel fully distinct from the previous relationship. Or it could be a mistake somewhere in the data collection process. These unresolvable possibilities complicate my interpretations, but the overall patterns identified in my findings are robust and accurate given imperfect parameters.

As discussed in the preceding chapters, this study is limited to using gender as a binary variable, and the race/ethnicity categories similarly only include three options. These limitations of the data unfortunately maintain the underrepresentation of trans and nonbinary individuals as well as those who identify as Asian, Pacific Islander, Indigenous, mixed race, and other rich and varied categories in research. Moreover, all findings and implications should be interpreted with the understanding that the cohort(s) and individuals included in these samples may have limited

generalizability today. Future research can improve on these limitations by using more specific gender and race categories, including cohabitation more consistently, and specifying marital status options that are exclusive and exhaustive.

Conclusion

When Cherlin (2004) originally wrote about his now-famous notion of marriage as a capstone, he stated, “Marriage’s place in the life course used to come *before*...investments [in living together, starting a career, saving money] were made, but now it often comes *afterward*. It used to be the foundation of adult personal life; now it is sometimes the capstone” (2004:855, emphasis mine). His observation deftly highlights the shifting sequence of the marital life course, at least for some groups. As I have shown, certain patterns in the sequence, timing, and duration of marital status transitions are more likely to be experienced by specific demographic groups. Likewise, certain marital status trajectories impact outcomes such as wages differently than others. Research on the payoffs of marriage are nothing new, but of particular note is my finding that the timing and duration of singlehood matters more for wages than the status of singlehood itself. This finding offers support for expanding research of singlehood to better understand a portion of the population that is increasing through marital disruptions, unwanted circumstances, or through life-long choice (Manning et al. 2019; Smock and Schwartz 2020). Indeed, recent studies have offered other unique aspects of lifelong singles’ economic experiences, urging researchers to question the standard use of married individuals as a reference category (Carr et al. 2024). Moreover, the intragroup variability of singles evident in the findings offer additional support, at least in some instances, for Bergström and Brée’s (2023) emphasis on recognizing singlehood less as a population and more as a recurring phase of the life course.

Though opting out of marriage is more acceptable today than ever before (Aragão 2024; García-Manglano 2015), many experiences of being single are not necessarily freely chosen. Free choice is a hallmark of modern marriages in the U.S. and many other societies, yet choosing to share a life with someone, especially over extended periods of time, inexorably means sharing life with others who can and will choose differently from one's own preferences and desires. Given this reality, social constraints such as wage penalties associated with gender and race are especially valuable to understand. Policies that aim to reduce wage inequalities both at company levels and governmental levels can provide key support to increasing one's agency so that a marital status that does not match one's expectations does not invariably result in economic instability. Furthermore, true freedom to enter, stay in, or leave a marriage is only possible when marital status is less closely linked to economic advantages.

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APPENDIX

Table A.1a. Model Fit Statistics for Group-Based Trajectory Models with 1–10 Marital Status Groups ($N = 4,979$)

# of groups	BIC (persons)	BIC (person-years)	% in smallest group
1	-92971.99	-92975.34	
2	-69308.5	-69316.87	47.19
3	-63210.43	-63223.81	33.39
4	-58093.77	-58112.18	19.8
5	-56460.63	-56484.05	14.15
6	-54635.43	-54663.87	13.04
7*	-53633.47	-53666.93	10.88
8*	-52778.35	-52816.83	7.16
9*	-52420.20	-52463.70	5.67
10*	-52091.33	-52139.85	4.55

Note: Table displays Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) statistics for marital status trajectories using linear age terms. Selected models are in bold.

* Asterisk indicates that at least one polynomial function was not statistically significant

Table A.1b. Model Fit Statistics for Group-Based Trajectory Models with 6–7 Marital Status Groups: BIC ($N = 4,979$)

Model	Polynomic Function	BIC (persons)	BIC (person-years)	% in smallest group	Entropy
6.1	1 1 1 1 1 1	-54635.43	-54663.87	13.04	0.93
6.2	2 2 2 2 2 2	-50525.63	-50564.11	13.00	0.81
6.3	3 1 3 3 3 3	-50102.04	-50147.22	15.08	0.94
6.4*	4 1 4 4 4 4	-49839.55	-49893.09	13.56	0.94
7.1	1 1 1 1 1 1 1	-53633.47	-53666.93	10.88	0.84
7.2	1 1 1 1 1 1 0	-53631.04	-53662.83	4.86	0.93
7.3	2 2 2 2 2 2 0	-49463.96	-49505.79	8.52	0.93
7.4*	3 3 3 3 3 3 0	-58102.24	-58154.11	13.86	0.92
7.5	2 2 3 3 2 3 0	-49110.21	-49154.06	7.93	0.94

Note: Table displays Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) statistics for marital status trajectories using different polynomic terms for each model. Selected model is in bold.

* Asterisk indicates that at least one polynomial function was not statistically significant

Table A.1c. Model Fit Statistics for Group-Based Trajectory Models with 6–7 Marital Status Groups APPA ($N = 4,979$)

Model	Polynomic Function	Averaged Probability of Assignment into Each Group							Odds of Correct Classification						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6.1	1 1 1 1 1 1	0.907	0.837	0.897	0.912	0.875	0.917		30.56	17.72	43.60	69.94	44.75	96.83	
6.2	2 2 2 2 2 2	13	0.954	0.931	0.981	0.944	0.953	0.952	108.27	56.46	195.00	78.16	130.45	131.39	
6.3	3 1 3 3 3 3	15.08	0.958	0.979	0.944	0.951	0.948	0.950	117.69	184.92	87.25	102.93	91.18	107.40	
6.4*	4 1 4 4 4 4	13.56	0.959	0.979	0.948	0.942	0.963	0.954	111.34	173.67	116.91	85.70	113.78	129.07	
7.1	1 1 1 1 1 1 1	0.825	0.914	0.902	0.902	0.881	0.906	0.927	15.82	88.73	45.75	48.08	49.62	48.58	21.17
7.2	1 1 1 1 1 1 0	0.955	0.960	0.950	0.921	0.940	0.925	0.963	158.53	141.05	94.73	56.69	87.79	101.26	160.11
7.3	2 2 2 2 2 2 0	0.936	0.956	0.931	0.944	0.936	0.947	0.980	71.15	142.28	101.11	105.81	80.40	190.78	195.33
7.4*	3 3 3 3 3 3 0	Model did not converge													
7.5	2 2 3 3 2 3 0	0.955	0.917	0.960	0.950	0.942	0.943	0.979	134.89	128.86	122.84	101.05	98.02	117.37	187.19

Note: Table displays average probability of assignment (APPA) into each group and odds of correct classification (OCC) for marital status trajectories using different polynomic terms for each model. Selected model is in bold.

* Asterisk indicates that at least one polynomial function was not statistically significant

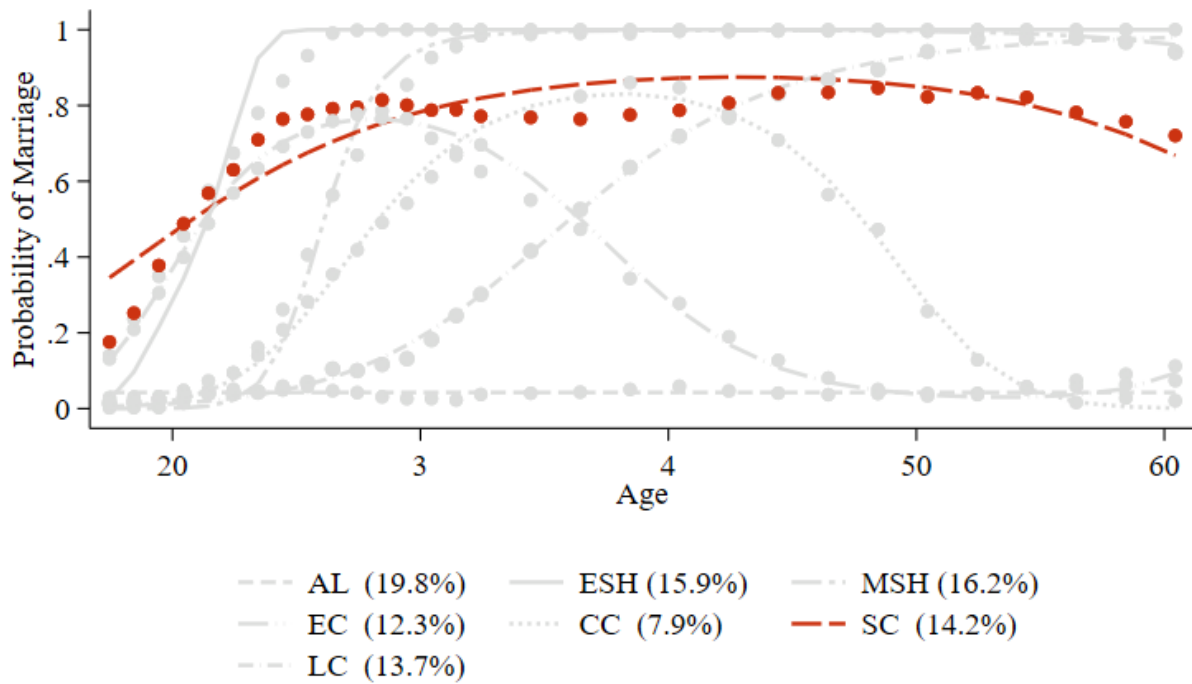


Figure A.1. Marital Status Trajectory Groups of Men and Women Across the Life Course; average values for *Slow Change* group highlighted

Source: NLSY79, 1979–2022 surveys.

AL = always low, ESH = early steady high, MSH = middle steady high, EC = early change, CC = centered change, LC = late change, SC = slow change