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Motherhood and Marriage: A Response

We are grateful for the thought-provoking commentary and critique of our study of marriage and the transition to motherhood (Dew & Wilcox, 2011) provided by Milkie (2011); Clements, Martin, Cassil, and Soliman (2011); and Perry-Jenkins and Claxton (2011). Indeed, we hope that their commentary will spur further research and reflection on this important topic.

To wit, we heartily agree with Milkie (2011) that contemporary scholarship (and journalism) spends too much time focusing on the modest dip in marital happiness experienced by a large minority of wives (40% according to our study) rather than on a broader array of psychological outcomes associated with the transition to motherhood—from the “deep and profound meaning most women” gain from becoming mothers to the reduced risk of depression mothers face as compared to childless women (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). We also acknowledge, as Clements et al. (2011) point out, that our study used blunt measures of marital quality and no direct measures of emotional intimacy, and it did not focus on variations in wives’ experience of the transition to motherhood by race, ethnicity, and nativity (see also Perry-Jenkins & Claxton, 2011). For those reasons, among others, we welcome their call for more “nuanced” and

“fine-grained” research on this important topic. Moreover, Perry-Jenkins and Claxton (2011) were right to point out that our study did not address husbands’ experience of the transition to fatherhood; this is an important oversight because fathers now spend more time in child care and housework than they used to (see also Milkie, 2011) and because husbands’ marital happiness across the transition to parenthood is bound to affect their wives’ marital happiness across the transition to parenthood. We hope that future research on the transition to parenthood will address these important limitations in our own study.

CHANGE VERSUS INITIAL LEVELS

We were particularly struck, however, by our commentators’ desire to have us consider the effect of baseline differences in religion and socioeconomic status on wives’ transitions to motherhood and by their reflections on the possible impact of work for the marriages of new mothers. Accordingly, we reanalyzed data from the first two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to determine whether baseline religion and socioeconomic status moderates the impact of the transition to motherhood for wives and to determine whether mothers who are employed full-time with young children are more likely to avoid a decline in marital happiness than mothers who are employed part-time or who are stay-at-home mothers. These new analyses also enable us to speak to issues of social isolation or solidarity, stratification, and gender equity that the commentators raised.

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Specifically, Clements et al. (2011) and Perry-Jenkins and Claxton (2011) both suggest that we explore the “main effects of initial levels of potentially important variables,” such as religious attendance and socioeconomic status. Likewise, Milkie (2011) hypothesizes that higher status women might have access to more resources—both in terms of money and in terms of help from friends and family—that would make the transition to motherhood easier for them. Moreover, we think that the social and emotional support religious institutions provide to families and mothers in particular (Manning, 1999; Wilcox, 2004) may make the transition to motherhood easier for women who regularly attend religious services. Accordingly, in this commentary, we explore the possibility that religious attendance and an important marker of socioeconomic status—education—moderate wives’ experience of the transition to motherhood.

Milkie (2011) and Perry-Jenkins and Claxton (2011) also reflect on the role that labor-force participation may play in the lives of new mothers. Milkie (2011) hypothesizes that paid work may make new mothers’ marriages “more fun and fair” by giving mothers access to financial resources that, among other things, increase their capacity to successfully bargain for a fair division of labor in their marriages. By contrast, Perry-Jenkins and Claxton (2011) note that one study of new mothers found that a quick return to work after becoming a mother was associated with higher rates of depression among new mothers (Perry-Jenkins, Goldberg, Pierce, & Sayer, 2007). Moreover, our own research indicated that most married mothers in the United States would prefer to work part-time (46%) or stay at home (36%); only 18% wished to work full-time (Wilcox & Dew, 2010). Thus, we predict that mothers are happiest across the transition to motherhood if they do not work full-time when their child is younger than 5 years old (we focus on mothers with children younger than 5 because most of the mothers in our NSFH sample had children younger than 5).

To examine initial levels of these variables, we had to use an analysis other than a change-score regression because change-score analyses allow only time-varying covariates in the model. Covariates that do not vary over time can be introduced to the model only if they are interacted with the change scores. We used two logistic regressions because this still allowed

us to examine declines in marital satisfaction while using both time-varying and Wave 1 covariates. In addition to the fact that we used baseline variables, another major difference we should note is that logistic regressions and change-score regression use variance differently. Logistic regressions use within-person and between-person variance, whereas change score analyses analyze only within-person variance. This may explain any differences in the findings between our reanalysis and the original study.

RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE

Table 1 indicates that religion did play a role in moderating the transition to motherhood. Specifically, new mothers who attended religious services regularly before becoming mothers were significantly less likely to experience a decline in their marital satisfaction than were new mothers who attended infrequently or not at all (see Table 1, Model 2). For example, women who became mothers and attended religious worship services weekly were actually less likely to experience declines in marital satisfaction than their equally religious counterparts who did not become mothers (see Figure 1). By way of contrast, new mothers who rarely attended religious services were most likely to experience marital satisfaction declines (Figure 1). These findings corroborate the marginally significant findings in the original study. As Milkie (2011) and Clements et al. (2011) note, wives seem to find the transition to motherhood more difficult when they are isolated. By contrast, religious institutions offer new mothers access to social networks of other mothers and adults who provide them with social and emotional support, as well as guidance and encouragement in establishing their new role as mothers (Manning, 1999; Wilcox, 2004). This support and encouragement is likely to make women’s experience not only of motherhood but also of marriage across the transition to parenthood a better one (see also Cowan et al., 1985). In summary, Table 1 suggests that religious wives were less likely to experience a decline in marital quality across the transition to motherhood.

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND EMPLOYMENT

Table 1 does not provide any evidence that education moderated the odds that wives would experience a decline in marital happiness after

Table 1. Logistic Models of the Motherhood Transition, Moderators, and Declines in Marital Satisfaction (N = 545)

	Declines in Marital Satisfaction					
	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE b</i>	<i>e^b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE b</i>	<i>e^b</i>
Intercept	-.01	.52		.01	.52	
Motherhood transition	.54*	.22	1.72	.50*	.22	1.65
W1 religious attendance	-.05	.04	.95	-.05	.04	.95
Motherhood transition × W1 religious attendance				-.20*	.08	.82
W1 wife education	.11*	.05	1.12	.11*	.05	1.12
Motherhood transition × W1 education				.09	.10	1.09
W2 full-time work ^a	.05	.20	1.05	.06	.21	1.06
Motherhood transition × W2 full-time work				.29	.42	1.34
W1 income	-.06	.11	.94	-.06	.11	.94
W1 marital duration	-.05	.03	.95	-.04	.03	.95
African American ^b	-.01	.50	.99	-.01	.50	.99
Other race/ethnicity ^b	-.02	.37	.98	-.10	.37	.90

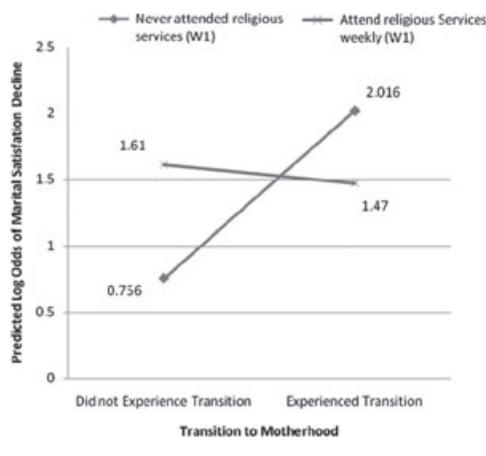
Note: We centered W1 religious attendance and education before creating the interaction terms.

^aOmitted category is not working full-time.

^bOmitted category is White, non-Hispanic.

* *p* < .05.

FIGURE 1. THE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE TRANSITION TO MOTHERHOOD AND RELIGION ATTENDANCE ON THE LIKELIHOOD OF MARITAL SATISFACTION DECLINES.



becoming a mother. That is, highly educated women were no less likely than less educated women to experience declines in marital happiness across the transition to motherhood (see Table 1, Model 2). Ancillary analyses (not shown) indicated that income—another proxy for socioeconomic status—also did not buffer wives’ marital happiness across the transition to motherhood. Further, the focal study itself (Dew & Wilcox, 2011) suggested that increases

in income were associated with declines in relationship satisfaction. Moreover, Table 1 also indicates that highly educated wives are more likely to experience declines in marital quality than are less-educated wives from Wave 1 (1987–1988) to Wave 2 (1992–1994) of the NSFH (Table 1, Model 1). These results are curious, given that college-educated women are markedly less likely to divorce than are less-educated women (Martin, 2006). Perhaps highly educated wives, including mothers, are more likely to remain married, even when they are less happy in their marriages, than are less-educated wives because marriage provides them with access to greater income and assets, or status in their communities, than does marriage in poor and working-class communities (Cherlin, 2009; Dew 2009).

Table 1 also does not provide any evidence that full-time work played a role in moderating the odds that new mothers would experience a decline in marital quality after having a baby (Table 1, Models 1 and 2). Thus, Table 1 provides no support for our hypothesis or for Milkie’s (2011) hypothesis about the role of work in the lives of new mothers. In today’s society, what may matter more for new mothers is the correspondence between their ideal work-family strategies and their real work-family strategies—whatever those strategies are (Wilcox & Dew, 2010). But Table 1 suggests

that work in itself was unrelated to the odds that wives experienced a decline in marital happiness across the transition to motherhood. Moreover, Table 1 is congruent with our study's results, which indicated that declines in women's work hours were unrelated to their odds of experiencing a decline in marital happiness.

In conclusion, we are grateful for the thoughtful commentary Milkie (2011), Clements et al. (2011), and Perry-Jenkins and Claxton (2011) provide. They identified limitations in our work and outlined important new avenues for future work on marriage and the transition to parenthood. Their commentary also prompted us to revisit our NSFH analyses of marriage and the transition to motherhood. The new analyses indicated that religion appears to be a resource that buffers against declines in marital quality for women. However, and somewhat surprisingly, the new analyses indicated that education and work were not related to the odds that a new mother would experience a decline in her marital quality. Nevertheless, judging by our study in this issue (Dew & Wilcox, 2011), perceptions of equity played a central role in influencing the odds that new mothers experience a decline in their marital quality after having a baby. So, even though a new mother's labor-force status does not appear to be important in shaping the quality of her marriage, our research suggests that her experience of marital equity is of paramount value in shaping the quality of her marriage in today's society.

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