The significance of marriage in rural America

Recent studies have documented the shift from a more traditional to more contemporary family structure and formation patterns among rural populations. Historically, rural populations have had earlier ages at first marriage and first childbearing, larger families, and a larger share of families headed by two parents (McLaughlin, Gardner & Lichter, 1999; Fuguitt, Brown & Beale, 1989). In recent decades, however, studies have documented the shift away from more traditional family forms toward more contemporary forms, notably a higher share of nonmetro families headed by single females (Snyder & McLaughlin, 2004; Snyder, McLaughlin & Findeis, 2006). Despite these changes, several recent families of more contemporary family forms have found that nonmetro populations maintain a preference for marriage, as evidenced by earlier marriage, lower rates of nonmarital cohabitation, and a higher prevalence of marriage as a first birth context (Albrecht & Albrecht, 2006; Snyder, 2006). Recent studies also find that in addition, nonmetro women spend a greater proportion of their lives married, have lower odds of divorce following a first marriage, remarry quicker and have higher odds of remarriage (Snyder, 2011).

While these studies provide evidence of a preference for marriage among nonmetro women, they are not without their limitations. In particular, Snyder's (2011) findings had several data limitations that could have impacted the findings. First, that study relied on data from the 2002 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth, a nationally representative sample of women aged 15-44 in 2002, and asked retrospective questions about their family experiences. Second, that study was not able to completely determine residence (nonmetro, suburban, central city residence) at the time of the family events. Stating with the 2002 cycle of the NSFG, questions were omitted that allow researchers to determine where a respondent lived at the time of first marriage, divorce and remarriage. Researchers thus had to infer residence at the time of these events based on residence at the interview data. While prior studies had found this to be a reasonable estimate of residence (Snyder, Brown & Condo, 2004), this measure was nonetheless less precise than desired and most likely included significant measurement error. Third, while that study concluded that traditional attitudes and economic factors are likely explanations for the unique marital patterns found among nonmetro populations, these variables were unavailable in the 2002 NSFG, so they could only be inferred from other variables (i.e., family background variables as a proxy for attitudes).

This current study builds upon these prior studies by focusing on marriage among nonmetro populations. We ask the following research questions about residential differences in:

1. The amount of time women spend in the married state.
2. The timing of first marriage.
3. The timing of first divorce.
4. The timing of remarriage after a first divorce.

Data and Methods

To answer these questions we use data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY97). Compared to the 2002 NSFG, the NLSY79 is a better data set to answer these questions for several reasons. First, the NLSY79 is a prospective panel study of a nationally representative sample of youth who were between the ages of 14 and 19 in 1979. Prospective data is considered more reliable than retrospective data. Second, the NLSY79 has yearly measures of residence, which allows us to better examine how residence is associated with the timing of family events. Third, the NLSY79 contains attitudinal measures that allow us to examine how traditional values are associated with family behavior. Fourth, the NLSY79 has measures of the economic context that allow us to examine economic explanations for family behavior. Data for this study are coded in person-months. The full sample contributes 3,597,125 person months for analysis.

Measures

Relevant individual and family background variables are used to examine the timing of first marriage, first divorce, first remarriage, and the proportion of months spent in the married state.

Outcome Variables

Four outcomes are measured in this study. The first is a measure that describes the percent of months spent in the married state. The second is the timing of first marriage. The third is the timing of first divorce among those who had a first marriage. The fourth is the timing of first remarriage among those who had a first divorce.

Independent Variables

Residential location is the main independent variable. It is a yearly time-varying variable with the following values: nonmetro, suburban and central city residence. This measure is based on the U.S.Census codes for each year in the sample. We also include two variables that measure traditional values: Gender Role Attitudes and Frequency of Attendance at Religious Services. To measure the economic context we use the Unemployment Rate in the county of residence. In addition to these independent variables, we control for relevant measures of individual and family background characteristics.

Results

Preliminary results are presented in Tables 1—3. Table 1 provides the average ages at first marriage, divorce and remarriage by residence. We see in this table that nonmetro populations marriage about 1 year earlier than those from other residence areas, and they divorce almost one year earlier. These findings are consistent with prior studies that find earlier marriage among nonmetro residents (Snyder, Brown & Condo, 2004). Table 2 describes the percent months metro and nonmetro populations spend single, married and cohabiting. Here we see that compared to those in other residence areas, nonmetro residents spend fewer months single and cohabiting, and more months married. Nonmetro residents also have slightly shorter first marriage durations, about 5 months shorter duration compared to suburban and central city residents. Nonmetro residents

also remarry sooner than others by approximately 2 months. Thus, the descriptive results suggest that nonmetro populations spend a larger share of their lives married, due to earlier marriage and shorter duration between a first divorce and a first remarriage. While these findings are consistent with those of Snyder (2011), there are smaller residential differences in family behavior found in this study.

Table 3 provides discrete-time logistic regression models predicting first marriage, first divorce, and first remarriage. Parameter estimates and odds ratios are reported. Overall, we find significant residential differences in all three family events. Regarding marriage, both suburban and central city populations have lower odds of marrying and marry significantly later, compared to nonmetro populations. In addition, we find that more frequent religious attendance increases the odds of marriage, although gender role attitudes are not associated with first marriage. Higher unemployment rates in the county of residence increase the odds of first marriage, which suggests that couples are economically motivated to marry. The second model in Table 3 examines the odds of divorce. Here we also find some significant residential differences. Compared to nonmetro populations, those in suburban areas have lower odds of divorce, while those in central city areas have higher odds of divorce. Religious attendance is not associated with divorce, although more traditional gender role attitudes reduce the odds of divorce. Higher unemployment rates are associated with higher odds of divorce. Finally, the third model in Table 3 examines the odds of remarriage. Nonmetro residents are significantly more likely than suburban residents to remarry, but there are no significant differences between nonmetro and central city populations. More traditional gender role attitudes are associated with higher odds of remarriage, and more frequent religious attendance is associated with lower odds of remarriage. Finally, higher unemployment rates in the county of residence are associated with higher odds of remarriage. This suggests that unemployment functions to encourage marriage and remarriage, presumably for economic reasons, but also functions to destabilize marriage, as seen in the findings about divorce.

Overall, these findings are supportive of those from Snyder (2011), although the residential differences are not as distinct in this study. Additional analyses will examine the interaction between residence and attitudes, religiosity and unemployment rates. We will also explore additional measures of economic well-being of nonmetro and metro counties that we would e able to include in this study.

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Table 1. Age at first marriage, divorce and remarriage by residence

	Age at first marriage	Age at first Divorce	Age at first remarriage
Overall	25.75	33.25	34.55
Rural	25.00	32.41	34.24
Suburban	26.00	33.31	34.52
Central City	26.20	33.84	34.86

Table 2

Percent Months Spent Single, Married, and Cohabiting - Full Sample - 3,597,125 months

	All	Rural	Suburban	Central City
Single	0.48	0.45[1]	0.47[2]	0.51
Married	0.46	0.50[1]	0.48[2]	0.42
Cohabiting	0.06	0.05[1]	0.05[2]	0.06
Duration of First Marriage for Those Who Divorced	109.12	105.73	110.18	110.86
Duration from Divorce to Second Marriage	49.99	47.88	49.92	52.07

[1]Significant differences between Rural and Central City. [2] Significant differences between Central City and Suburban.

Table 3. Discrete time logistic regression models predicting first marriage, first divorce and first remarriage. Parameter estimates and odds ratios.

	First Marriage		Divorce		Remarriage	
Independent Variables	**β**	**e^{β}**	**β**	**e^{β}**	**β**	**e^{β}**
Intercept	-4.8	-	-4.11	-	-3.39	-
Residence (ref: Nonmetro)						
Suburban	-.093*	.91	-.117*	.89	-.196*	.82
Central City	-.092*	.91	.147*	1.16	-.027	.97
Religious Attendance	.017*	1.02	.001	1.00	.057*	1.06
Gender Role Attitudes	.022	1.24	-.147*	.86	-.241*	1.27
Race/ethnicity (ref: NH White)	-.084*	.92	.005	1.00	-.170	.84
NH Black	-.006	.99	-.189*	.83	-.232*	.79
Hispanic						
Educational attainment (ref: HS)	-.034	.97	.174	1.19	-.434	.65
LT High School	-.248*	.78	-.183*	.83	-.105	.90
College	-.463*	.63	-.191*	.83	.029	1.03
Graduate school						
Employment (ref: FT work)						
Not working	.190*	1.21	.013	1.01	-.062	.94
Part-time work	.122*	1.13	.048	1.05	-.031	.97
Never moved	.161*	1.17	.126*	1.13	.530~	1.70
Same residence until age 14	.071*	1.07	.043	1.04	-.154*	.85
Foreign born	-.011	.99	-.011	.99	-.437*	.65
Intact family	-.079*	.92	-.030	.97	.030	1.03
Mom's education	-.049*	.95	-.041	.96	-.067	.94
Dad's education	-.016	.98	.031	.97	-.066	.94
Total number of births	-.169*	.84	-.299*	.74	.001	1.00
Cohabited prior to marriage	-.280*	.76	-.146*	.86	.154*	1.16
County of residence unemployment rate	.014*	1.01	.053*	1.05	.038*	1.04

*=p<=.05