

Changes in Spousal Relationships Over the Marital Life Course

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The social scientists began to study marriage in the early decades of the 20th century:

Burgess and Cottrell (1939)

Terman et al. (1938).

We know a great deal about

- the correlates of marital happiness.
- the predictors of divorce.
- the consequences of marital unhappiness and divorce for health and well-being.

We know surprisingly little about how spousal relationships change over the marital life course.

Basic question: How do spousal relationships change over the marital life course?

Several short-term longitudinal studies (2-5 years), but few long-term (5 years or more) longitudinal studies

Three General Theoretical Perspectives

Marital relationships are stable

Vulnerability-stress-adaptation (Karney & Bradbury, 1995)

People bring stable traits to marriage (personality, social skills, attachment styles, values) that set the stage for relationship dynamics.

Enduring dynamics (Huston et al., 2001)

Relationship problems emerge early

Marital relationships begin happily but deteriorate

Disillusionment (Huston et al., 2001)

Romantic illusions fade.

Emergent distress (Huston et al., 2001)

Inevitable problems create wear and tear on relationships.

Growing incompatibility (Pineo, 1961)

Couples become less similar over time.

Marital Resilience

Spouses bring positive traits to marriage, including capacity to learn, adapt, and grow.

Life events (having children, moving, changing jobs, retirement) can create stress or provide opportunities for people and their marriages.

Time can lead to estrangement or deeper levels of appreciation and contentment—decline is not inevitable.

What do existing studies show?

Pineo (1961)

- 400 couples married in the 1930s
- Followed up 20 years later (34 divorced)
- Marital adjustment, love, and shared activities declined
- Declines similar for husbands and wives
- Decline steepest for spouses headed for divorce

Vaillant and Vaillant (1993)

- 268 Harvard college students and their wives in the 1930s and 1940s
- Followed for 40 years (n = 169)
- Husbands' marital adjustment declined during first 15 years then stabilized
- Wives' marital adjustment declined continuously (resolving disagreements)

VanLaningham et al. (2001)

- 1,479 married individuals in 1980 (national probability sample)
- Followed for 17 years (n = 1,479)
- Marital happiness of husbands and wives declined modestly but continuously

Biddit et al. (2012)

- 373 newlyweds in 1986
- Followed for 16 years (n = 320)
- Wives' happiness declined through year 7
- Husbands' happiness declined continuously
- Spouses followed multiple trajectories
- Spouses headed for divorce showed steeper declines

James (2015)

- 2,604 married women NLSY 1979
- Followed from 1992-2010
- Happiness and communication declined modestly but continuously through year 30
- Conflict increased, then declined after the first decade
- Heterogeneity in all three trajectories

Conclusion: Most studies support the “marital decline” perspective

Heterogeneity – not everyone declines.

Number of available studies is small.

Few studies have used national, representative samples.

My goal: Examine trajectories of three relationship dimensions across the marital life course using nationally representative data.

1. Average trajectories

2. Trajectories based on known subgroups

divorce

gender

marriage order

education

Marital Instability Over the Life Course study

2,034 married individuals < age 56

1980, 1983, 1988, 1992, 1997, 2000 waves

1,617 individuals participated in two or more waves (7,076 observations)

782 continuously married

313 divorced (89 remarried)

77 experienced death of spouse

445 dropped out

Relationship characteristics: Marital happiness

10 items, alpha = .87

How happy are you with

...the amount of understanding you receive
from your spouse?

...the love and affection you receive?

...your sexual relationship?

(1 = not too happy, 2 = pretty happy, 3 = very
happy)

Relationship characteristics: Shared activities

5 items, alpha = .63

How often do you engage in the following activities with your spouse?

eating dinner, shopping, visiting friends,
working on projects around the house, going
out for recreation

(1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, 4 = almost
always)

Relationship characteristics: Marital discord

Composite of 3 scales, alpha = .85

conflict (5 items),

relationship problems (13 items)

perceived instability (13 items)

Means (or proportions) for all variables

Marital happiness (1980)	2.59
Shared activities (1980)	3.14
Marital discord (1980)	0.13
Years married (1980)	12.84
Divorced (1980-2000)	.19
Wife respondent (1980)	.60
Remarried (1980)	.14
College graduate (1980)	.19
Wave 1980	.23
Wave 1983	.22
Wave 1988	.17
Wave 1992	.15
Wave 1997	.13
Wave 2000	.11
Attrition	.28

Duration of Marriage in Years: 1980 and 2000

<u>Years married</u>	<u>% 1980</u>	<u>% 2000</u>
0-4	22	2
5-9	23	3
10-14	15	3
15-19	13	1
20-24	13	18
25-29	9	20
30-34	5	15
35-39	0	12
40-44	0	13
45-49	0	10
50 +	0	3
Total	100	100
N	1,616	781

Statistical models (random effects models)

Years married

Years married²

Divorce

Gender

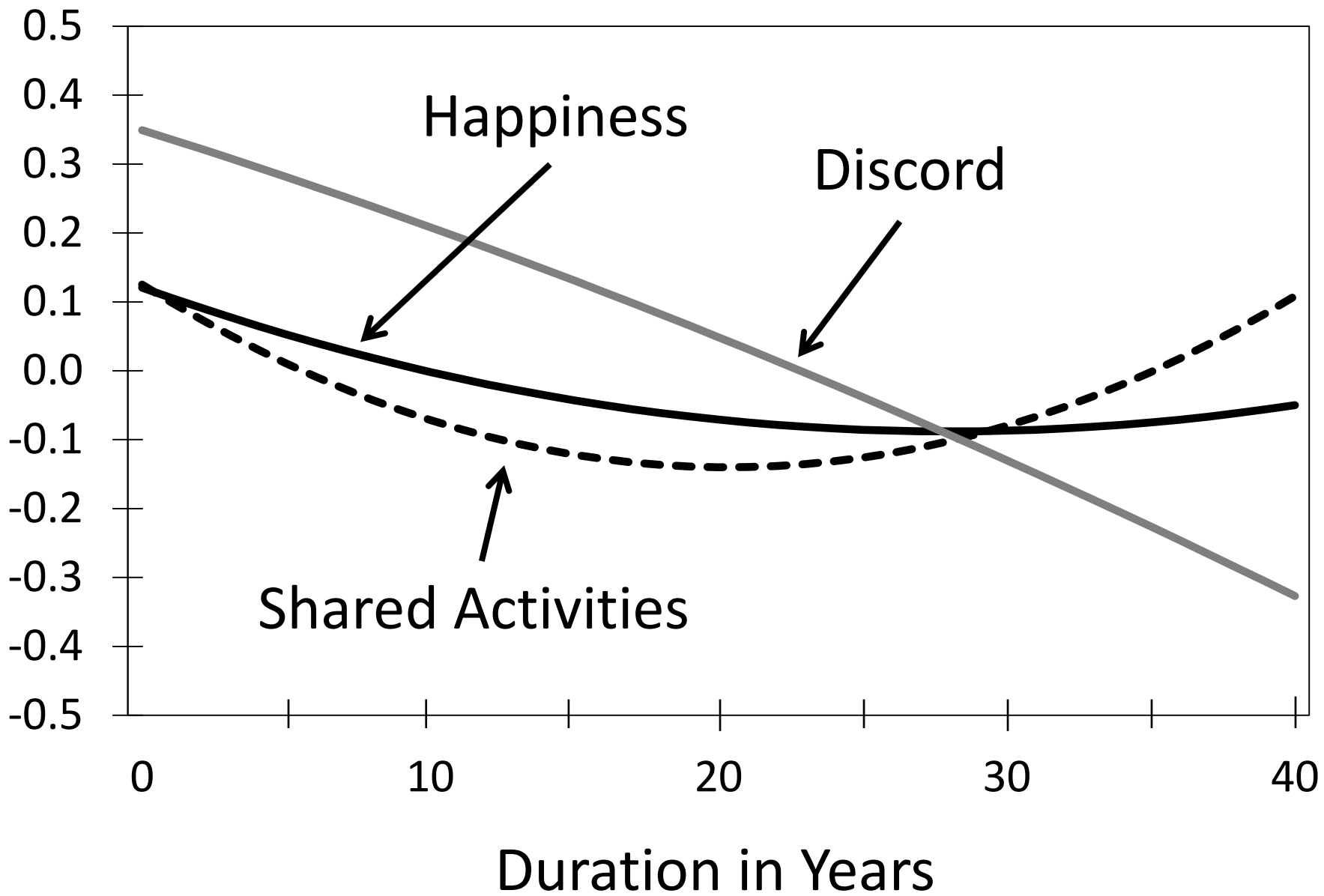
Marriage Order (1 versus 2+)

Education (college graduate)

Year of survey (period effects)

Attrition (p of dropping out of panel)

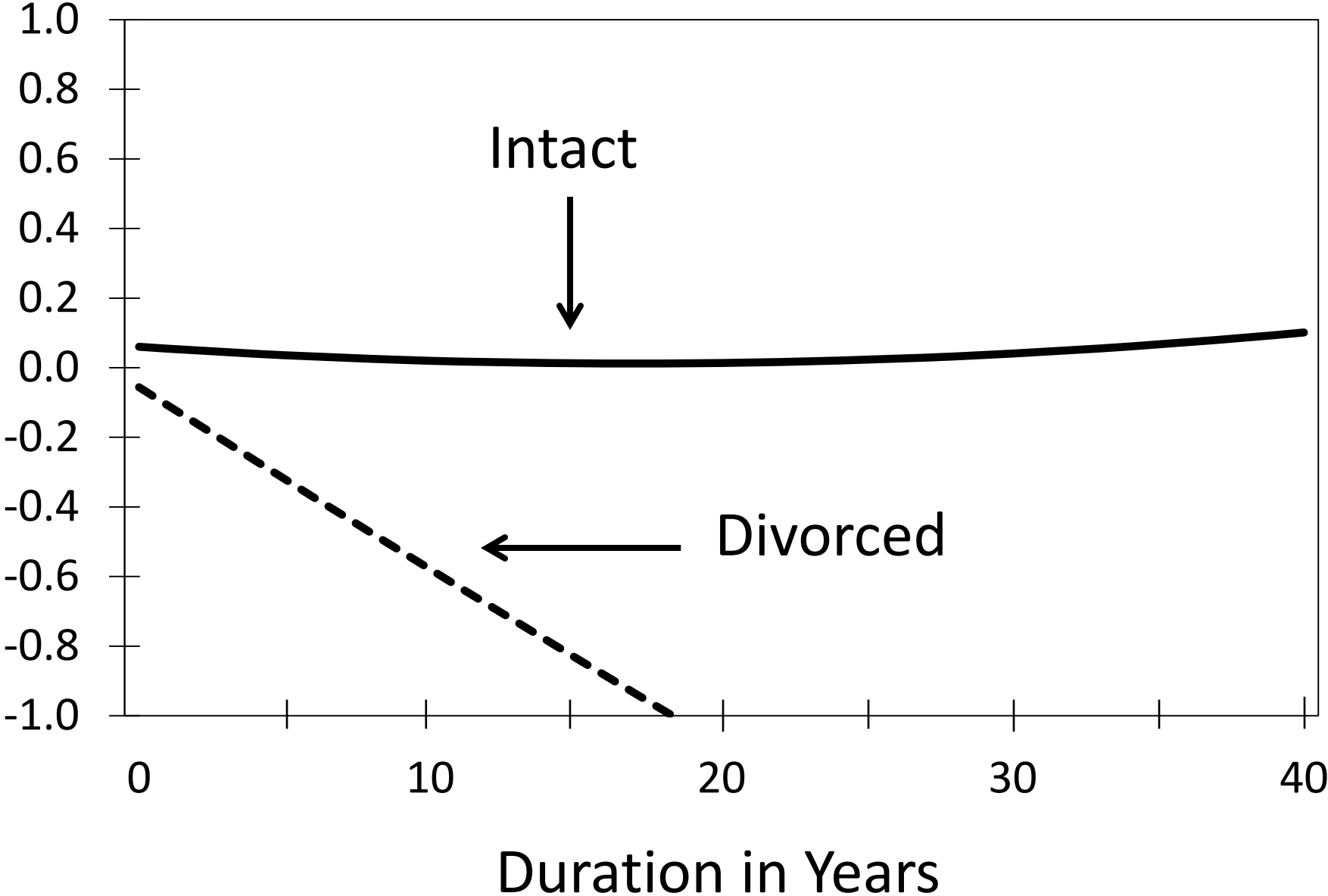
Relationship Dimensions by Marital Duration



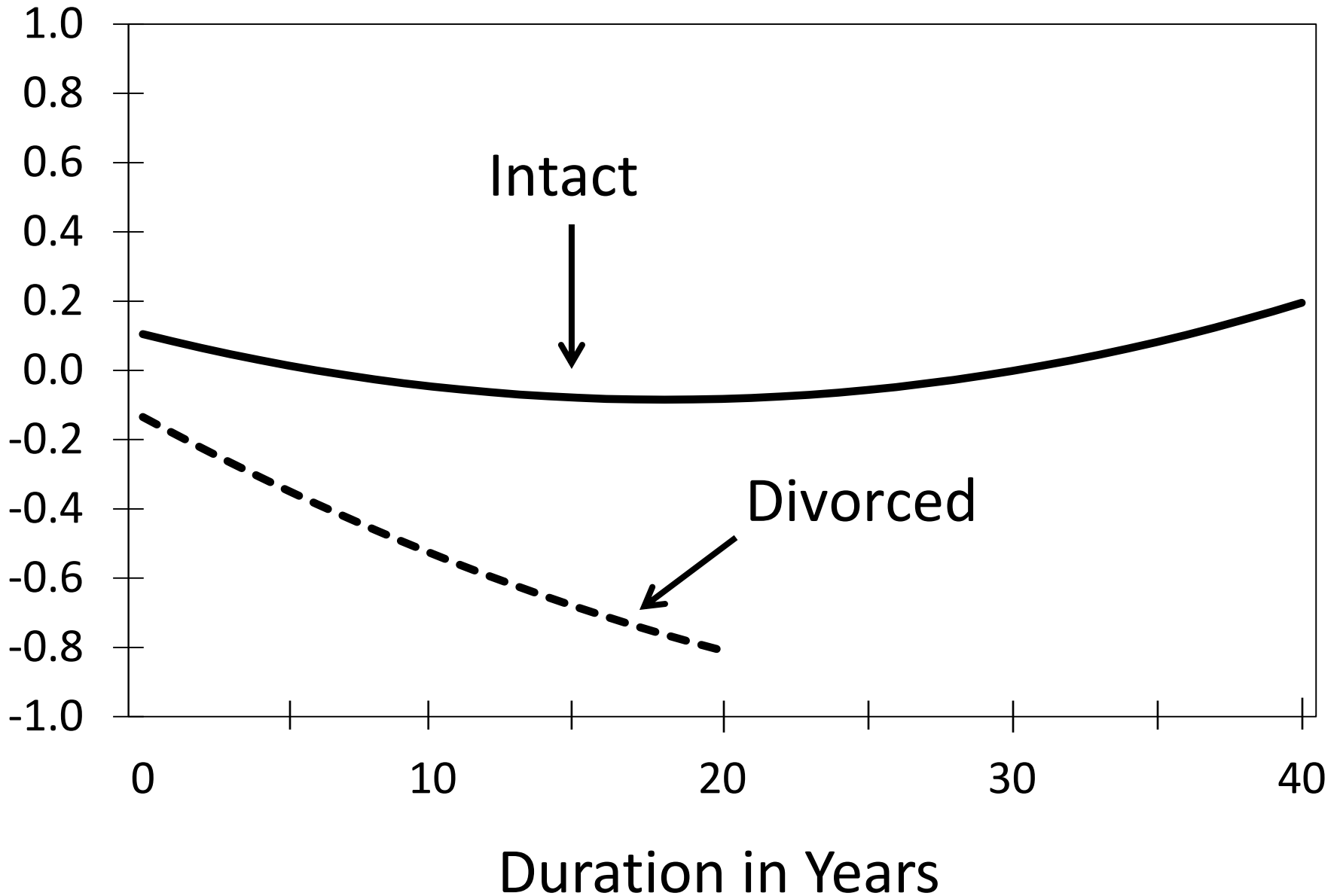
Divorce interacts with years married for all relationship outcomes.

Marriages that end in divorce are very different from marriages that remain together!

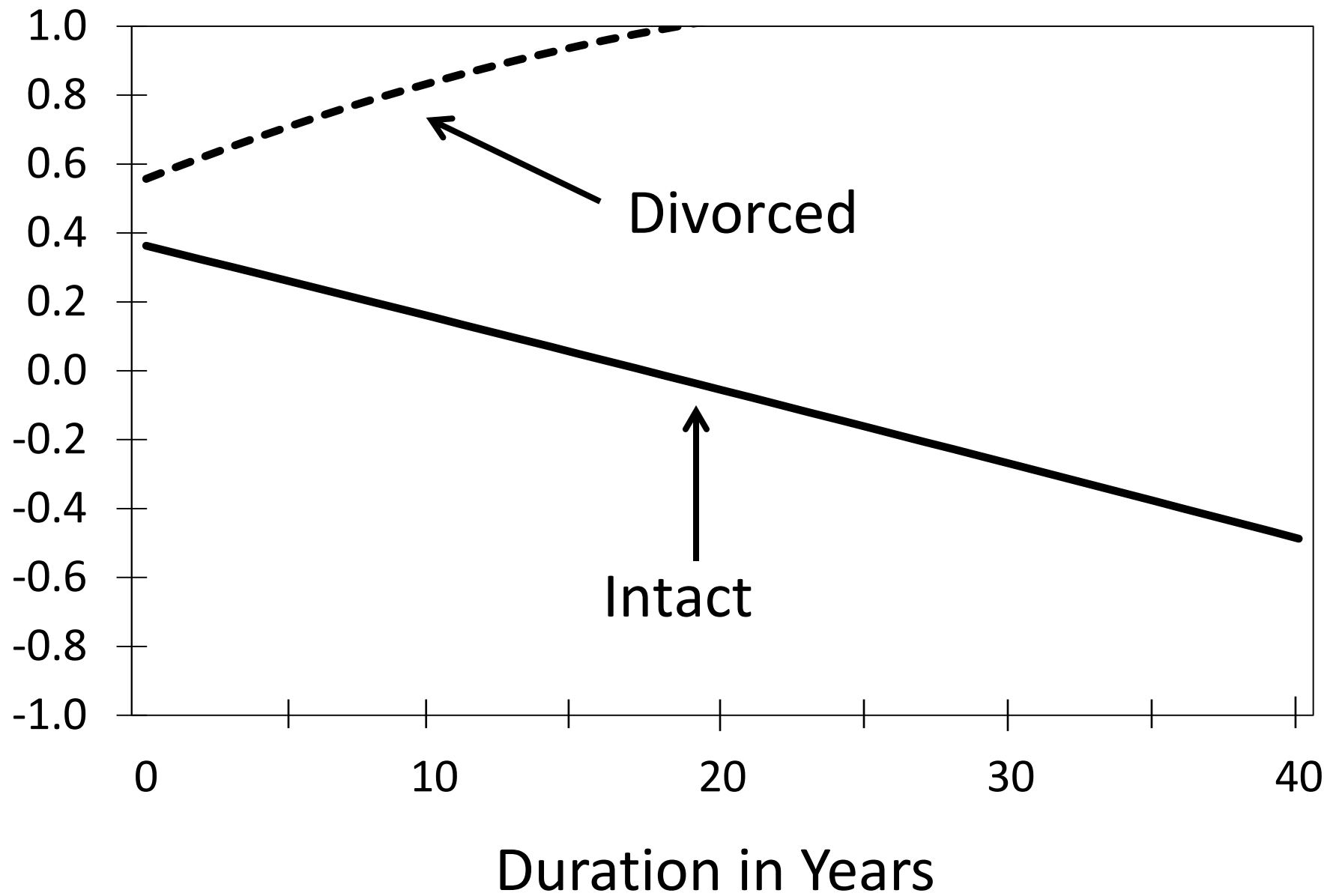
Happiness by Marital Duration and Divorce



Shared Activities by Marital Duration and Divorce



Discord by Marital Duration and Divorce



Gender differences?

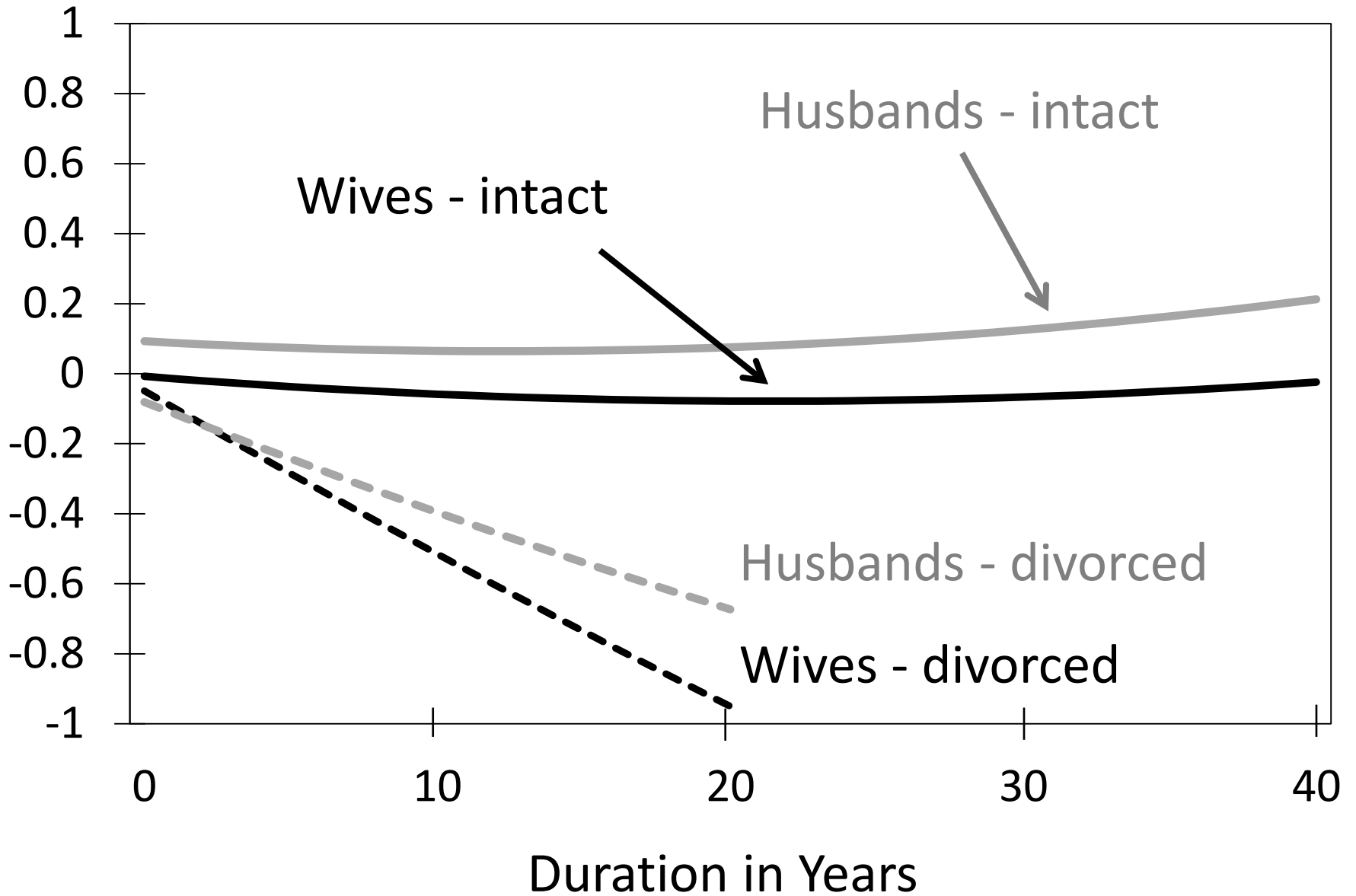
Three way interaction

gender x divorce x duration

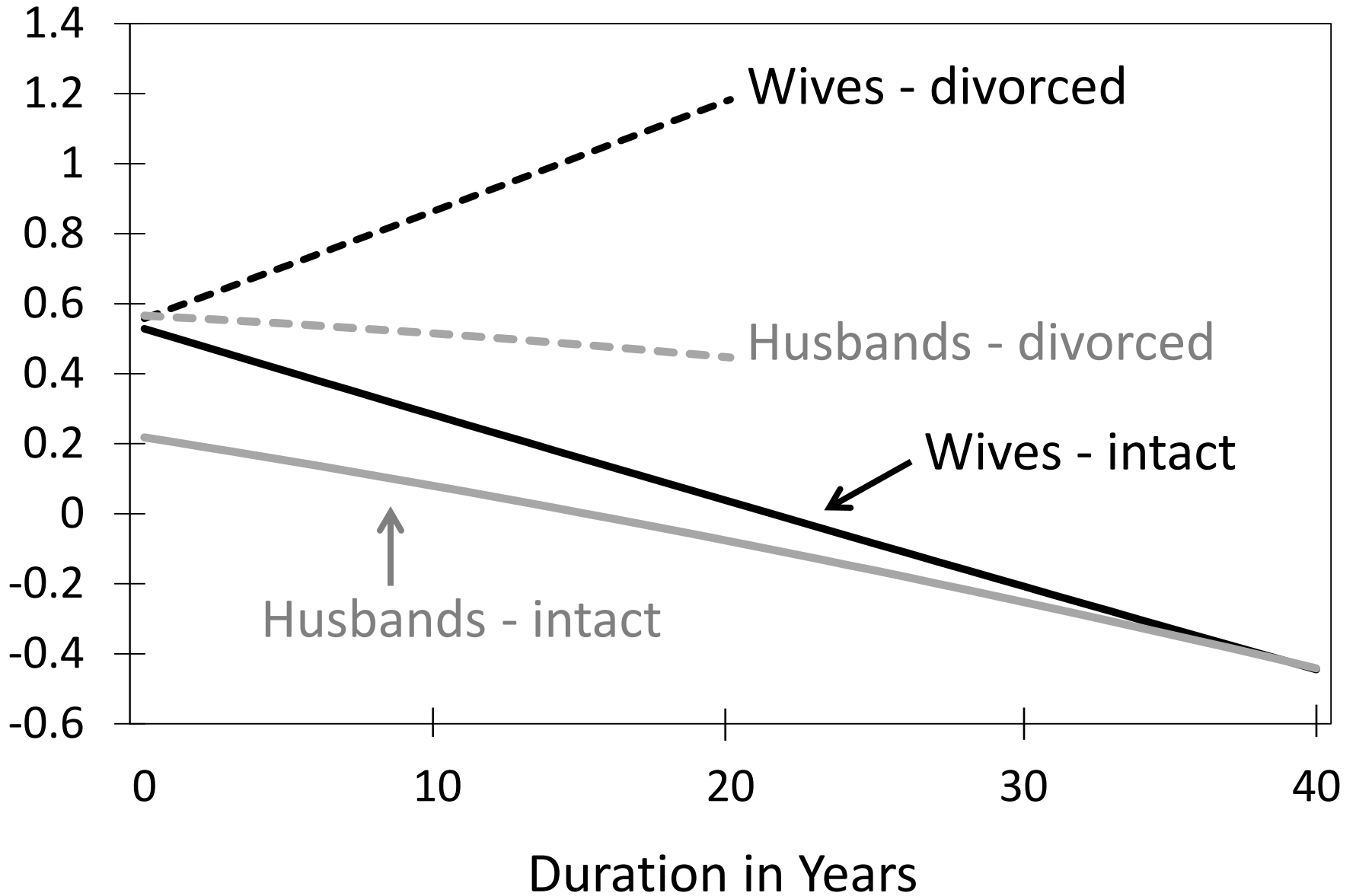
for marital happiness ($p < .05$)

and discord ($p < .001$).

Marital Happiness Z Score



Discord Z Score



Trajectories do not vary with marriage order or college education

No interactions between divorce and marriage order or college education

Fixed Effects Models

For spouses headed for divorce

- steep decline in marital happiness.
- steep decline in shared activities.
- steep increase in discord.

Consistent with random effects models.

Fixed Effects Models

Among spouses who remained married:

Marital happiness is stable (consistent with random effects model)

Shared activities continue to decline and discord changes little (different from the random effects models)

Fixed Effects Models

Fixed and random effects models are consistent in showing that among spouses who do no divorce, happiness does not decline and conflict does not increase.

Decline in relationship quality is not the norm for couples that avoid divorce.

A more optimistic view of marriage?

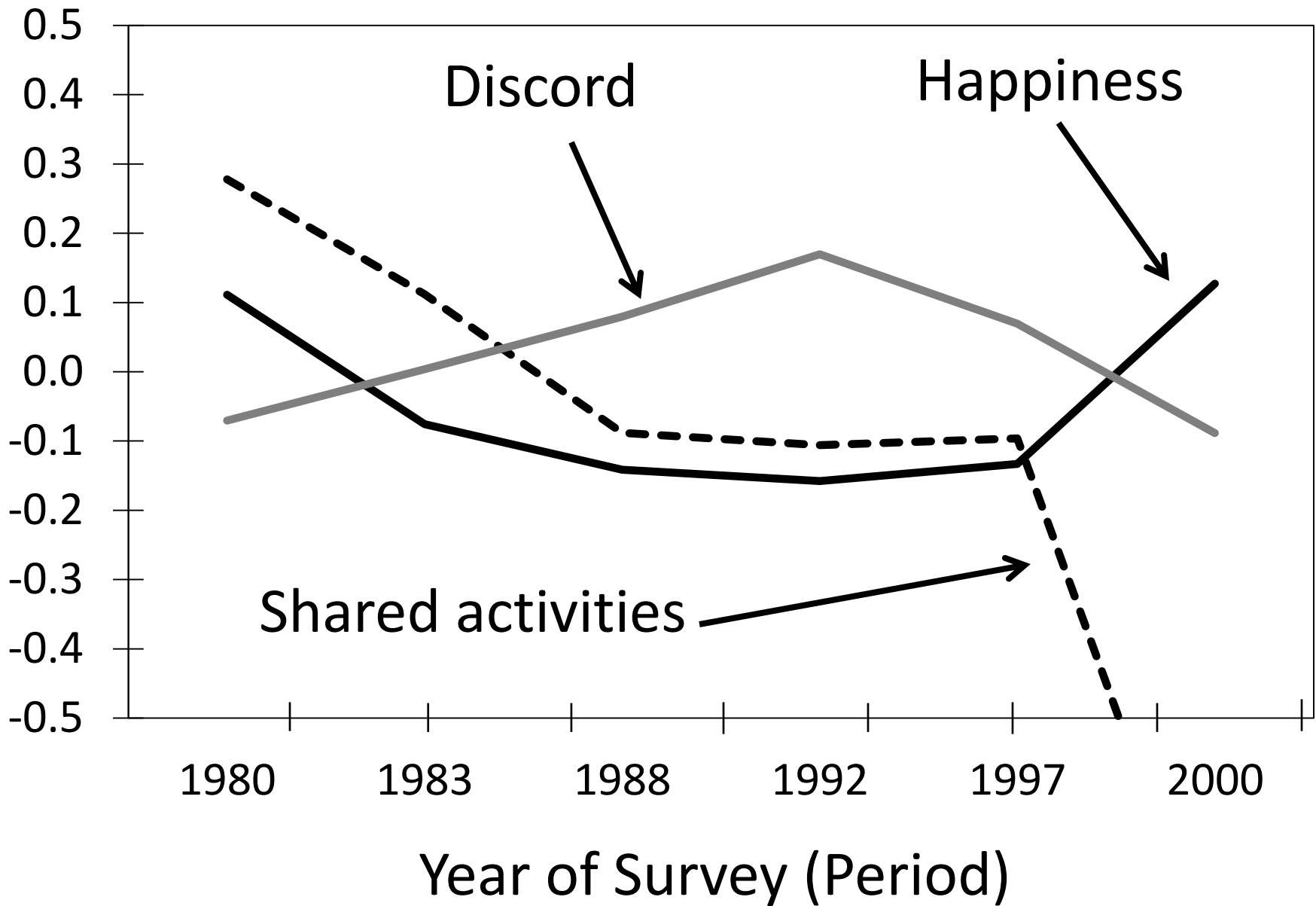
Period effects

Marital happiness declined during the 1980s and recovered by 2000

Shared activities declined continuously.

Discord increased during the 1980s and declined again by 2000.

Relationship Dimensions by Year of Survey



Reasons for Period Effects?

Economic recessions of 1980-82 and 1990-91? And growth of late 1990s?

Decline in men's earnings (especially men with college degrees)?

Increase in wives' employment and conflict over gender roles?

Growing individualism?

Thank you