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Marital Strains and Marital Quality: The Role of High and Low Locus of Control

We examine the cross-sectional and over-time effects of a domain-specific measure of locus of control (marital locus of control or MLC) on two measures of marital quality—positive marital quality and negative marital quality. We provide a preliminary test of the effect of MLC on changes in marital quality. The data are from a national probability sample of American husbands and wives. Our goal is to determine if and how locus of control may benefit the quality of a marriage. Results suggest that higher levels of MLC are associated with reports of higher positive marital quality and reports of lower negative marital quality. Spouses with lower levels of MLC are also more likely to report the presence of marital strains that are linked to lower levels of marital quality. However, the negative effects of these marital strains are reduced, even at low levels of MLC. We argue that MLC is a personal resource that buffers the deleterious effects of marital problems and may locate individuals in strong or weak marriages.

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The personality variable called locus of control emerged more than three decades ago (Rotter, 1966). Since that time, locus of control has helped us understand individual differences in many aspects of human experience, such as health (Ross & Wu, 1995), retirement (Gall, Evans, & Howard, 1997), and political participation (Deutchman, 1985). Other researchers have devised parallel concepts and have given them different names, such as mastery (Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981) and efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Locus of control has withstood the test of close scrutiny in wide applications by social and behavioral scientists. Locus of control now is regarded as one of the "big five" personality variables. What is surprising is that work on the role of locus of control in understanding marriage has been so limited. Although important work has been done by Doherty (1980, 1981, 1983), Miller, Lefcourt, and Ware (1983), Miller, Lefcourt, Holmes, Ware, and Saleh (1986), and others, locus of control is seldom called on to help our understanding of marital processes and quality. This article highlights some of the avenues through which locus of control affects reports of marital quality.

Locus of control is the extent to which individuals perceive that their actions have little influence on the life conditions that they face and the extent to which they attribute their circumstances and rewards to fate, luck, chance, or powerful others, instead of believing that their circumstances and rewards are influenced by their own actions. Rotter

(1966) argues that the way reinforcement (i.e., a reward, success, or gratification) is perceived by an individual is contingent on locus of control. Higher levels of locus of control are associated with beliefs of more control over reinforcing events. Drawing on social learning theory, Rotter contends that a reinforcement strengthens an expectancy that a particular behavior will be followed by that reinforcement in the future. That is, levels of locus of control structure the way an individual views the causal relationship between his or her own behavior and the success of the behavior. In reviewing the current research, Rotter acknowledges that individuals with high levels of locus of control are more likely to be alert to and gather information that bears directly on future behaviors. They are also more motivated and more likely to engage in behaviors to improve their situation and are more successful in controlling the outcomes of their behaviors. In addition, the belief that one has influence over events is an important part of the ability to transform stress into challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Certainly, then, we expect reports of higher marital quality in marriages in which the spouses have higher levels of locus of control. This association may be the result of four related processes. One, individuals possessing higher levels of locus of control over marital events may be more motivated and may work harder to achieve marital success. Two, individuals possessing higher levels of locus of control over marital events are more effective in negotiating marital events that affect marital quality. Three, searching for effective ways to deal with problems is more likely to result in finding a way to solve the difficulty. Four, the positive results of dealing with a problem will reinforce taking future action when new marital strains are encountered. Doherty (1981) argues that spouses with higher levels of locus of control are generally better at information gathering and are more achievement oriented. Thus, in the marriage, these individuals adopt a more assertive, task-oriented approach to marital problem solving. On the other hand, individuals with lower levels of locus of control demonstrate more passivity when confronting marital difficulties, or they even adopt an overly aggressive and reactive approach to marital situations, both of which may result in lower levels of marital quality (Doherty, 1983; Doherty & Ryder, 1979).

In this research, we pursue four goals: (a) We examine whether locus of control is associated with marital quality, (b) we investigate whether the relationship between locus of control and marital quality is partly accounted for by individual differences in vulnerability to marital strains across levels of locus of control, (c) we estimate whether a high level of locus of control enhances one's ability to deal with marital strains, and (d) we examine whether the effect of locus of control persists over time in the marriage and is associated with changes in marital quality. The data to test the hypotheses come from a panel study of a national sample of married persons.

Locus of Control

One of the debates surrounding the use of locus-of-control scales (e.g., Levenson, 1974; Rotter, 1966) is the extent to which locus of control represents a generalized personality trait. According to Rodin (1987), researchers began to question Rotter's expectancy that locus of control is a global characteristic that is stable across situations or life domains. Lefcourt (1981) reviewed extant research and found that studies convincingly demonstrated that a person who displays internally oriented behaviors (i.e., high levels of locus of control) in some situations is as likely to display externally oriented behaviors in other settings (Endler & Edwards, 1978). Indeed, we have moved to the point where evidence suggests that beliefs about control vary according to domain, that is, situation-specific areas (Connell, 1985; Lachman, 1986; Levenson, 1981; Nelson, 1993; Wallston & Wallston, 1981). Nelson indicates that research conducted with an undifferentiated, global conception of locus of control may risk confounding beliefs about different situations. Quite likely, people completing a generalized locus-of-control questionnaire use different aspects of their lives as reference points. Although people may feel little control over events removed from them (e.g., state or federal laws or a job loss), they may believe they have great control over events in their neighborhood, the local school, or their marriage (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Rotter (1975) later acknowledged that control orientations often are situationally determined and noted that some research may require the development and use of domain-specific measures—especially to achieve a high level of predictability within a particular domain, as argued by Rodin (1987). To be sure, research that compares a generalized measure of locus of control with a specific measure of locus of control finds unequivocally that the specific measure yields greater predictive power in social, cognitive, and health domains (Nelson, 1993) and health and intelligence domains (Lachman, 1986).

The findings that the power of domain-specific measures of locus of control obtain higher magnitude predictions of behavior led Miller, Lefcourt, and Ware (1983) to develop a measure of locus of control specifically for marriage. This measure examines the characteristics of marriage partners that serve to enhance the stability and satisfaction of their marriages. The result is a 44-item scale (Miller Marital Locus of Control Scale) that measures the extent to which spouses view reinforcements in the marital domain as being contingent on their own efforts and abilities or due to factors outside their control. This research uses a reduced, 20-item version of the Miller Marital Locus of Control Scale. For example, spouses are asked to what extent they agree that "couples who have a satisfying relationship are constantly trying to improve it; a good relationship doesn't just happen."

Previous Studies

Locus of Control, Marital Locus of Control, and Marital Quality

There are several cross-sectional and longitudinal studies on the association between general measures of locus of control and marital quality. Nearly all of the studies were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, used a reduced version of Rotter's (1966) Internal-External Scale, and examined a variety of marital processes and outcomes. Scanzoni and Arnett (1987) studied 450 married couples and found that both husbands and wives who had low levels of locus of control (i.e., believed their lives are controlled by fate) were weakly committed to their marriages and engaged frequently in negative tactics to resolve conflict. On the other hand, a greater sense of control was associated with more commitment to the relationship and more maintenance of the relationship, but for wives only. In a marital-vignette study of 86 recently married middle-class couples, spouses with high levels of locus of control adopted a more assertive approach to marital problem solving than did spouses with low levels of locus of control (Doherty & Ryder, 1979). Assertive problem solving included actively trying to resolve a marital difficulty and taking control of the husband-wife discussion. Madden and Janoff-Bulman (1981) sampled 32 married women aged 25–35 years and found that wives who reported high control over marital conflicts also reported higher levels of marital satisfaction than did wives with low levels of control over marital conflicts.

Overall, the studies that used a general measure of locus of control found that high levels of locus of control were associated with greater effort and more commitment to solving marital problems and to the marriage itself than were low levels of locus of control. In turn, marital quality was higher among those who reported they had greater control over marital problems, (Madden & Janoff-Bulman, 1981).

Furthermore, several longitudinal studies examined whether general high or low levels of locus of control are associated with a greater probability of divorce. It is possible that spouses with high levels of locus of control will be more likely to divorce and initiate a divorce as a result of their active control over the course of the marriage (Pettit & Bloom 1984). Testing this line of reasoning, Doherty (1983) used six waves of the National Longitudinal Survey and found no significant differences in the likelihood of divorce between individuals with low and high levels of control. Similar research with the NLS data for 892 males interviewed seven times between 1966–1973 indicated that levels of locus of control were not a significant predictor of marital stability (Constantine & Bahr, 1980). Finally, among 144 newly separated men and women, Pettit and Bloom (1984) found no association between divorce initiators and noninitiators.

Research on marriage-specific measures of locus of control and marital quality is more limited. Studying the marital problem-solving behaviors of 34 husbands, Winkler and Doherty (1983) found that those who reported low levels of control over marital problems had significantly higher levels of verbal aggression, physical violence, and angry response style. Miller and colleagues used the Miller Marital Locus of Control Scale on a nonrepresentative sample of 230 married college students (Miller et al., 1983, 1986) and on 88 couples from Canada and found that individuals with higher scores on marital locus of control were more active and direct in their problem-solving behaviors, were more effective in communicating and achieving their desired goals, and reported higher levels of marital satisfaction than individuals with lower scores. Miller et al. (1986) replicated their analyses using Rotter's generalized measure of locus of control and did not find any association between levels of locus of control and marital problem solving or between levels of locus of control and marital satisfaction. They concluded that the association between locus of control and marital quality should be conducted with

a domain-specific (i.e., marriage-specific) measure of locus of control. In sum, the findings support the argument that spouses with high levels of marital locus of control not only are more willing to engage in solving marital problems, but are more effective in solving marital problems than spouses with low levels of marital locus of control. In turn, higher levels of engagement and efficacy are associated with higher levels of marital quality.

In general, most of the research on both general and domain-specific locus of control indicates that high levels of locus of control are beneficial to marriages, compared with low levels of locus of control. The benefit comes in the form of a greater willingness to negotiate marital problems, strains, and conflicts and a greater ability to handle these issues. The result may be higher levels of marital quality. Although only one study found a difference between husbands and wives, the general literature on locus of control and marriage often finds sex differences. For example, Ross (1991) found that married women have lower levels of locus of control than unmarried women, but no differences were found between unmarried and married men. A husband's levels and a wife's level of marital locus of control may depend on other factors, such as age, income, and education (Mirowsky & Ross, 1983). In our analyses, we test for the possibility of sex differences and control for structural variables that may produce sex differences.

Research Questions

We propose and test three hypotheses. The first hypothesis states the direction of the relationship between marital quality and marital locus of control. The second and third hypotheses state the mechanism through which marital locus of control impacts marital quality.

Many of the studies reviewed analyze the relationship between locus of control and problem solving with the explicit assumption that marital quality is higher for spouses who deal effectively with marital-specific strains. Indeed, Doherty argues that the theoretical connection between locus of control and marital quality is tied directly to problem-solving behaviors. Furthermore, there should be no direct effect of locus of control on marital quality because "nothing in the theory underlying the locus of control construct suggests a clear-cut theoretical relationship between locus of control and satisfaction with particular domains of life" (Doherty, 1983, p. 169). However, it is possible that levels of marital quality vary directly as a function of levels of locus of control. Research finds that the way individuals evaluate love and marriage differs by locus-of-control orientations. For example, Dion and Dion (1973) reported that individuals with high levels of locus of control find romantic attraction and love less mysterious and less volatile and they approach love with a less idealistic view. Individuals who are less confused and less mystified by their marriage also may be happier with their marriage.

> Hypothesis 1: There is a direct association between marital quality and marital locus of control. Spouses who report more control over events in their marriage also report greater satisfaction, increases in satisfaction, and less conflict, as well as decreases in conflict in their marriages (direct model).

Research demonstrates that individuals with low levels of locus of control are more likely to experience negative events and stressors than individuals with high levels of locus of control. (See Thoits, 1991, 1995, for a review, including dissenting arguments.) Ross and Mirowsky (1989) argue that people with a high level of locus of control often take action before problems occur by shaping the environment to their advantage. A high level of locus of control appears to be a strength and an asset of individuals that operates to shield them from potential negative events. The increased exposure among individuals with low levels of locus of control may be due to them not having the means or knowledge to avoid the onset of marital strains. In addition, individuals with low levels of locus of control may be less able to recognize the precursors to marital problems.

> Hypothesis 2: The effect of marital locus of control on marital quality and changes in marital quality is partly due to fewer occurrences of marital strains (e.g., jealousy, fidelity) among spouses with high levels of marital locus of control (indirect model).

The final hypothesis follows the general coping argument: Individuals with high levels of locus of control are more willing and are better able to negotiate and effectively resolve specific events than individuals with low levels of locus of control. Indeed, Rotter (1966) argued that individuals with high levels of locus of control spend more time gathering information and more energy reinforcing behaviors. Lefcourt, Martin, and Fick (1985) found

that individuals with higher levels of locus of control are more attentive listeners, more skilled at social interaction, and more sensitive to social cues that reveal meanings inherent in social situations. In addition, the behavioral expression of locus of control reinforces successful behavior in a way that increases an individual's ability to manage adversity.

> Hypothesis 3: The effect of marital strains on marital quality and changes in marital quality is less among spouses with higher levels of marital locus of control (moderating model).

Research Procedures

Sample

Data are analyzed from a 17-year longitudinal study of a national sample of married persons interviewed first in 1980 and again in 1983, 1988, 1992, and 1997. In 1980, sample households were chosen through a random-digit dialing procedure. The husband or wife was selected for an interview using a second random process. Only married individuals younger than age 55 in 1980 were included in the original sample.

In 1980, telephone interviews were conducted with 2,033 individuals—a 65% completion rate. The 1980 sample did not differ from the national distribution of married people younger than 55 years on race, age, household size, tenure, or region. In 1983, interviews were conducted with 1,592 of the original 1980 respondents, for a reinterview rate of 78%. The third wave of the study, conducted in 1988, included 66% of the original sample (1,341), for a response rate of 84%. In 1992, the fourth wave of data included completed interviews with 1,183 individuals (58% of the original sample)—an 89% reinterview rate. The fifth wave of data was collected in 1997 with 1,040 individuals from the original sample. These response rates are similar to those for other longitudinal studies using personal interview techniques (Booth & Johnson, 1985). The second through fifth waves were slightly less representative of Blacks and Hispanics, younger respondents, renters, and those with less than a college education.

Sample Attrition

The study presented here focuses on individuals with complete information in the fourth (1992) and fifth waves (1997). The 20 items of the Marital Locus of Control Scale were asked only in 1992. The analysis is based on respondents who were married continuously between 1980–1997. The fact that the Marital Locus of Control Scale was administered in 1992 suggests that we are studying individuals who are involved in longer-term marriages. This sample provides a unique opportunity to test the enduring strength of MLC. Indeed, it would be impressive if MLC is still an effective resource in helping long-term marriages cope with marital problems.

Because MLC was measured only in 1992, we are unable to test for the presence of selective panel attrition due to individual differences in MLC between 1980 and 1992. However, using a procedure developed by Heckman (1979), we are able to test for the presence of selection bias from panel attrition due to individual differences in marital quality. Probit analyses is used to test whether our two marital-quality variables affect the probability of not being included in the follow-up waves of interviews. The results (not shown but available from the first author) indicate that neither of the marital-quality variables are significant predictors of attrition in subsequent interviews. In addition, we check to see if individual differences in MLC predicted attrition between 1992 and 1997. It did not. Although indirect, the results suggest that MLC may not have predicted attrition in the earlier interviews.

Measures of Marital Quality

We use four measures of marital quality that are already contained in the data set. Marital happiness assesses whether respondents are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy with 10 aspects of their marital relationship. Topics of evaluation include global feelings of the marriage (overall happiness, strength of love), as well as the spouse's satisfaction with specific aspects of the relationship (amount of understanding received, amount of love and affection, and the spouse as a companion). Higher scores indicate greater happiness (alpha = .87). Marital interaction is a joint property of the marriage and refers to the frequency with which husband and wife participate jointly in daily activities (eating, shopping, visiting friends, working on home projects, and engaging in social activities). Higher scores signify greater interaction (alpha = .63). Marital disagreement measures the severity and the amount of verbal and physical conflict in the relationship. Higher scores indicate greater disagreement, and this four-item scale has a reliability coefficient of

.54. Divorce proneness is defined as the propensity to divorce and includes both a cognitive component (thinking the marriage is in trouble, considering divorce) and an active component (talking to friends or spouse about the possibility of divorce, consulting a member of the clergy or an attorney, separating from the spouse). The scale is derived from 12 items, and higher scores indicate a greater propensity to divorce (alpha = .91). The measure is logged because the scale is positively skewed.

Confirmatory factor analysis indicates that marital quality is represented by two conceptually and analytically distinct dimensions: (a) a positive marital-quality measure that includes marital happiness and marital interaction and (b) a negative marital-quality measure that includes marital disagreement and divorce proneness. Happiness and interaction are z scored and added together for the positive marital-quality variable (alpha = .63). Higher scores indicate more positive marital quality. Likewise, disagreements and divorce proneness are z scored and added together for the negative marital-quality variable (alpha = .71), and higher scores signify more negative marital quality. The validity of our measures of marital quality have been previously assessed. Johnson, White, Edwards, and Booth (1986) found that the two-factor marital-quality model fits both husbands and wives. Further examination of these two dimensions of marital quality showed that they operate in distinctly different ways over forms of marital structure, including wife's employment, marital duration, and presence of children. Furthermore, the marital-quality measures contained in the data set exhibit considerable stability over time and appear to be a dyadic property that is not carried from one marriage to the next (Johnson, Amoloza, & Booth, 1992). The 1992 measures of marital quality are used for the cross-sectional analyses, the 1997 measures of marital quality are used for the over-time analyses, and the 1992 and 1997 measures of marital quality are used for the analyses that examine change in marital quality.

Marital Locus of Control

We develop the Marital Locus of Control Scale using 20 items from the Miller Marital Locus of Control Scale (Miller et al., 1983). The items were reworded slightly in the questionnaires to reflect the interview format. The Appendix contains the exact wording and response categories for the Marital Locus of Control Scale. In short, the scale measures if respondents view the events, direction, and success of their marriage as a function of their own efforts and abilities or due to factors outside their control. Items measuring internality tapped into ability (e.g., "when things begin to get rough in my marriage, I can see that I had a hand in it") and effort (e.g., "good communication in a marriage is a matter of learning and applying skills"). Items measuring externality tapped into context (e.g., "I find that day-to-day events have a lot of influence on how my husband/wife and I get along") and luck (e.g., "if my marriage were a long, happy one, I'd say that I must just be very lucky"). Answers to the externality questions are reversed coded so higher scores represent greater perceived control (i.e., internality). The 20 items are summed, and the Marital Locus of Control Scale has a reliability coefficient of .98.

Marital Strains

We use eight variables that tap into different problems possibly inherent in any marriage. Many of these variables are among the most frequently cited marital problems (Kitson, 1992). In the 1992 questionnaire, respondents were asked: "There are several problem areas in marriage. Have you had a problem in your marriage because one or both of you (a) gets angry easily, (b) has feelings that are easily hurt, (c) is critical, (d) is moody, (e) won't talk to the other, (f) has become less interested in sex, (g) has irritating habits, (h) spends money foolishly, (i) is jealous, (j) is domineering, (k) is not at home enough, (l) drinks or uses drugs, (m) is in trouble with the law, (n) has had an extramarital relationship?" Each affirmative answer is coded 1, and 0 otherwise. To create the Marital Strains Scale, we sum across all eight categories (alpha = .76). Scores range from a low of 0 (*no marital strains present*) to a high of 13 (*marital strains present in every category*). This measure of marital strains is a stable phenomena of individual marriages and does not exhibit extensive developmental change. Furthermore, there exist no sex or marital duration differences in levels of stability or developmental change (Johnson et al., 1992). Thus, we regard the Marital Strains Scale to be a valid and reliable measure.

Additional Measurement and Validity Issues

We test whether the marital-quality measures, the marital-strain measure, and MLC represent unique or overlapping constructs. That is, do some of the variables of marital quality also reflect marital

strains or MLC? To test this, we ran a factor analysis with promax rotation that allows the factors to be correlated. This is necessary to determine if one or more items load on more than one factor. The results (not shown) suggest that the scales for marital quality, marital strains, and MLC are, indeed, unique indicators and represent separate concepts. What we find are three simple structures—items that load high on one factor are significantly different from items that load low on that factor (and high on another factor).

Control Variables

Prior research illustrates that a number of variables are associated consistently with martial quality (e.g., Glenn, 1990). In addition, we find that several of these structural characteristics—education and income levels—are also associated with different MLC scores (results not shown). These results of the association between structural variables and locus of control levels are similar to Mirowsky and Ross's results (1983). To estimate a unique effect of marital locus of control on marital quality, we must remove the influence of variables that are associated with both MLC and marital quality. Therefore, we control for the following variables throughout the analysis: race (White or non-White), spouse's education in years, spouse's income, number of years married, and presence of a child in the household (1 if one or more children are present, 0 otherwise). Prior research did not find overwhelming evidence of husband-wife differences in the association between locus of control and marital quality. To test for the presence of sex differences, we ran all of the regression analyses separately for husbands and wives while controlling for structural characteristics. No significant differences emerge in the results. Thus, we analyze a combined sample and control for sex.

Analytical Strategy

The test of the direct model—MLC is associated with more positive and less negative marital quality—is examined by regressing marital quality on MLC, net of the control variables. The test of the indirect model—the association between MLC and marital quality is partly due to people with lower levels of MLC being more susceptible to marital strains—is estimated using path analysis techniques. First, marital strain is regressed on MLC and the controls. Next, marital quality is regressed on MLC and marital strain. The resulting coefficients show the way MLC exposes individuals to marital strains and then the way marital quality is affected by those strains. In addition, we compare the coefficients of MLC between the direct and mediating model to determine how much of the effect of MLC is explained by individual differences in marital strains. Finally, a test of the moderating model—the deleterious effects of marital strains on marital quality are smaller among people with higher MLC scores—is estimated with an interaction model containing a multiplicative term created from multiplying marital strains by MLC. For all analyses, we investigate cross-sectional relationships (i.e., 1992 marital quality), over-time relationships (i.e., 1997 marital quality), and change relationships (i.e., 1992–1997 marital quality).

Results

Do Spouses with Higher Levels of Marital Locus of Control Have Better Marriages?

The results in Table 1 suggests that they do. For the cross-sectional (i.e., 1992) equations, MLC is positively and significantly associated with positive marital quality and negatively and significantly associated with negative marital quality, net of control variables. The effect size of MLC is fairly large for both measures of marital quality. For example, a spouse with a MLC score that is 1 standard deviation above the mean reports a value of negative marital quality that is one-third a standard deviation below the mean and a value of positive marital quality that is two-fifths a standard deviation above the mean. For the over-time (i.e., 1997) equations, MLC is again a significant predictor of both positive and negative marital quality. The magnitude of the effect of MLC in the over-time relationships is smaller than that in the cross-sectional relationships. However, the over-time results suggest that the effects of MLC on marital quality persist for a number of years.

If MLC is a resource that spouses can use to actively solve marital problems, then we would expect higher MLC scores to be associated with increases in marital quality. Because we have information about marital quality both in 1992 when MLC is assessed and 5 years later, we conduct an analysis to estimate the extent to which MLC is related to changes in marital quality. We reestimate the model by regressing marital quality in 1997 on MLC, marital quality in 1992, and the controls. Although we have no way of knowing

TABLE 1. DIRECT MODEL: UNSTANDARDIZED OLS COEFFICIENTS FROM REGRESSION OF MARITAL QUALITY AND CHANGES IN MARITAL QUALITY ON MARITAL LOCUS OF CONTROL AND SELECTED INDEPENDENT VARIABLES FOR U.S. ADULTS, 1992–1997

	Positive Marital Quality			Negative Marital Quality		
Variable	1992	1997	1992–1997	1992	1997	1992–1997
White	.323	.288	.166	–.222	–.677**	–.464*
	(.047)	(.039)	(.022)	(–.031)	(–.090)	(–.062)
Husband	.423**	.216*	.067	–.463**	–.290**	–.251**
	(.121)	(.059)	(.019)	(–.130)	(–.080)	(–.069)
Education	–.025	–.020	.023	.041	.059*	.024
	(–.037)	(–.025)	(.029)	(.057)	(.074)	(.030)
Income	–.004	.004	.001	.001**	.002	–.001
	(–.049)	(.032)	(.038)	(.109)	(.021)	(–.009)
Years married	.013*	.017**	.011*	–.047***	–.41***	–.016**
	(.069)	(.085)	(.056)	(–.242)	(–.203)	(–.079)
Presence of child	–.330**	–.269*	–.012	.032	.044	–.012
	(–.094)	(–.072)	(–.003)	(.009)	(.012)	(–.003)
Marital locus of control, 1992	.175***	.120***	.005	–.151***	–.114***	–.022*
	(.429)	(.281)	(.012)	(–.363)	(–.267)	(–.061)
Marital quality, 1992	—	—	.717***	—	—	.609***
			(.652)			(.578)
Constant	–9.79	–6.86	–.424	8.73	6.69	1.74
R^2	.209	.102	.435	.188	.130	.402
n	982	852	852	982	852	852

Note: Standardized coefficients are in parentheses.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

whether a relationship between MLC and marital quality in 1997 is not caused by a change in MLC, a significant relationship would suggest that future research should examine the impact of MLC on changes in marital quality. We find that MLC is associated with changes in negative marital quality. That is, spouses with higher MLC scores are significantly more likely to report decreases in the negative aspects of marriage (i.e., disagreements and instability), compared with spouses with lower MLC scores. Changes in positive marital quality are not associated with MLC.

These results provide strong evidence in support of Hypothesis 1—individuals with higher MLC scores report more satisfaction and less conflict in their marriages and decreases in marital conflict over time. It appears that greater control over marital events manifests in higher levels of marital quality. Furthermore, we have evidence that the effects of MLC on marital quality persist over time and that decreases in reports of negative marital quality are associated with higher levels of MLC. Again, we stress that our results for the overtime and change analyses are preliminary. We have no measures of changes in MLC between 1992–1997. Yet, given that most personality variables, including locus of control (Pitcher, Spykerman, & Gazi-Tabatabaie, 1987), are fairly stable over time (McCrae & Costa, 1990) and that the time interval is only 5 years, we would not expect to see significant changes in MLC between the 1992 and 1997 interviews.

Are Those with Lower Levels of Marital Locus of Control More Susceptible to Marital Stains?

In this section, we examine two questions: Are spouses with lower levels of MLC more susceptible to marital strains, possibly because they don't have the means or knowledge to avoid them? Does the relationship among MLC, marital strains, and marital quality explain the relationship between MLC and marital quality?

The results of the analysis are presented in Table 2. The results in the first column are from regressing marital strains on MLC and control variables and reveal that there exists a negative relationship between MLC and the number of marital strains. Individuals with lower MLC scores report the presence of significantly more strains in their marriage.

The next step is to examine whether the relationships between MLC and marital quality found earlier still remain after controlling for the significant association between marital strains and MLC (column 1) and the possible relationship between marital strains and marital quality. In the cross-sectional analyses, higher levels of positive marital quality are associated with fewer marital strains. MLC is still a significant predictor of positive marital quality, even after controlling for the

TABLE 2. INDIRECT MODEL: UNSTANDARDIZED OLS COEFFICIENTS FROM REGRESSION OF MARITAL QUALITY, CHANGES IN MARITAL QUALITY, AND MARITAL STRAINS ON MARITAL LOCUS OF CONTROL AND SELECTED INDEPENDENT VARIABLES FOR U.S. ADULTS, 1992–1997

		Positive Marital Quality			Negative Marital Quality		
Variable	Marital Strains 1992	1992	1997	1992–1997	1992	1997	1992–1997
White	–1.22***	.193	–.054	–.067	–.032	–.223	–.219
	(–.121)	(.028)	(–.007)	(–.009)	(–.005)	(–.030)	(–.030)
Husband	–.107	.304*	.189*	.060	–.273*	–.292**	–.267**
	(–.022	(.087)	(.053)	(.019)	(–.076)	(–.080)	(–.075)
Education	–.003	–.036	–.013	.010	.059**	.052**	.028
	(–.003)	(–.052)	(–.018)	(.014)	(.083)	(.071)	(.038)
Income	–.000	–.001	.002	.001	.006*	.004	.001
	(–.028)	(–.026)	(.019)	(.022)	(.071)	(.046)	(.018)
Years married	–.026*	.003	.010*	.006	–.032***	–.032***	–.016**
	(–.093)	(.014)	(.054)	(.030)	(–.162)	(–.158)	(–.082)
Presence of child	.019	–.352**	–.270*	–.053	.052	.012	–.013
	(.004)	(–.100)	(–.074)	(–.015)	(.014)	(.003)	(–.004)
Marital locus of control, 1992	–.106***	.128***	.083***	.008	–.075***	–.071***	–.019*
	(–.178)	(.312)	(.193)	(.017)	(–.181)	(–.167)	(–.048)
		[.175]	[.120]	[.005]	[–.151]	[–.114]	[–.022]
Marital strains, 1992	—	–.254***	–.297***	–.178***	.389***	.390***	.270***
		(–.378)	(–.412)	(–.246)	(.569)	(.537)	(.374)
Marital quality, 1992	—	—	—	.629***	—	—	.422***
				(.568)			(.399)
Constant	9.96	–6.02	–3.80	.492	2.78	2.99	.621
R^2	.058	.334	.254	.485	.472	.398	.503
n	982	982	852	852	982	852	852

Note: Standardized coefficients are in parentheses. Unstandardized coefficients in brackets are from Table 1 and represent the direct effect of marital locus of control on marital quality.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

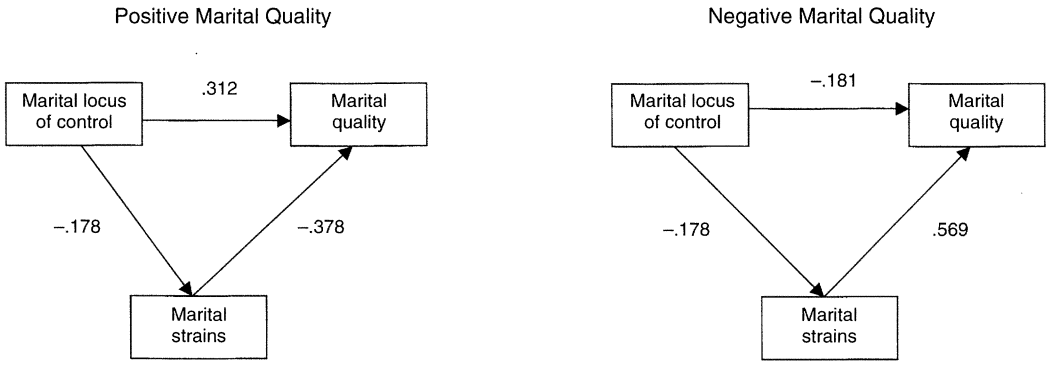
influence of marital strains. The unstandardized coefficient for MLC decreases from 0.175 in models without marital strains (Table 1) to 0.128 after controlling for marital strains. This decrease suggests that marital strains explain about 27% of the association between MLC and positive marital quality. In the over-time analyses, MLC remains a significant predictor of positive marital quality after controlling for the significant effect of marital strains on positive marital quality. Again though, the coefficient for MLC decreases from 0.120 to 0.083 between the direct and mediating equations, respectively. This represents a 31% decline. Finally, higher levels of marital strains are associated with declines in the positive aspects of marriage.

For negative marital quality, the cross-sectional and over-time analyses reveal that MLC is a significant predictor of negative marital quality, even with the positive association between marital strains and reports of negative aspects of marriage. In the cross-sectional equations, individual vulnerabilities for marital strains explain about 50% of the effect of MLC on negative marital quality. (The MLC coefficient decreases from –0.151 in the direct model to –0.075 in the mediating model.) Marital strains account for 38% of the over-time relationship between MLC and negative marital quality. The final equations address change in negative marital quality and demonstrate that higher levels of marital strains are strongly associated with higher levels of negative marital quality. Controlling for this relationship, MLC is still a significant predictor of changes in negative marital quality. Indeed, the coefficient for MLC only decreases 14%, from –0.022 in the direct model to –0.019 in the mediating model.

Therefore, even though marital quality and changes in marital quality are associated with marital strains, these associations do not fully explain the significant relationships among MLC and the measures of marital quality and marital quality changes. On average, one third of the relationship between MLC and marital quality is accounted for after taking into account that spouses with lower levels of control report more marital strains.

The cross-sectional relationship among MLC, marital strains, and marital quality is simplified

FIGURE 1. PATH MODEL DEPICTING LINKS AMONG MARITAL LOCUS OF CONTROL, MARITAL STRAINS, AND MARITAL QUALITY FOR U.S. ADULTS, 1992



Note: All coefficients are standardized and significant at $p < .001$.

and graphically presented in the path models in Figure 1. The corresponding diagrams for the over-time relationships among MLC, marital strains, marital quality, and changes in marital quality are not presented, but they reveal similar patterns. In short, two patterns emerge for the effects of MLC on marital quality. First, even after controlling for the effect of marital strains on marital quality, greater levels of MLC are associated directly with higher positive marital quality and lower negative marital quality. Second, MLC operates indirectly through marital strains. That is, higher MLC scores are associated with fewer reports of marital strains, which are, in turn, related to reports of superior marital quality.

In sum, the results for marital quality suggest that, once the strains are present, they have a powerful, adverse impact on marital quality. However, MLC continues to have a statistically significant direct effect on the different dimensions of marital quality after controlling for the strong and significant effects of marital strains. These results suggest that part of the impact of MLC on marital quality is explained by the susceptibility of individuals with low levels of locus of control to the occurrence of marital strains.

Do Effects of Marital Strains Differ by Levels of Marital Locus of Control?

Our final research question tests whether the significant and detrimental effects of marital strains on marital quality and changes in marital quality are fewer among spouses with higher levels of MLC. This test involves creating an interaction term by multiplying the marital-strain variable with MLC. The results are in Table 3.

For both positive and negative marital quality—including all cross-sectional, over-time, and change measures of marital quality—the interaction terms reach significance. That is, the negative effect of marital strains on positive marital quality and changes in positive marital quality are significantly lower for spouses with higher levels of MLC. Meanwhile, the positive effect of marital strains on negative marital quality and changes in negative marital quality are lower for spouses with higher levels of MLC. Indeed, the interaction effects are substantial. These results suggest that, once marital strains are present in the marriage, spouses with higher levels of MLC are better able to buffer or reduce the negative effects on marital quality. Over time, it appears that spouses with higher levels of MLC effectively negotiate marital strains that otherwise pose a threat to marital quality and to changes in marital quality.

To further understand the interaction relationships, we divide the sample into those with low (i.e., 1 standard deviation below the mean), average (i.e., mean), and high (i.e., 1 standard deviation above the mean) MLC scores and rerun the interaction equations. The results (available from the first author) indicate that the smallest interaction effects accrue to spouses with high levels of MLC. There are slightly larger effects to spouses with average levels of MLC. The largest interaction effects accrue to spouses with low levels of MLC. Our previous analysis indicates that these spouses (i.e., with low levels of MLC) are the ones with the most marital strains already. Therefore, the detrimental

effects of marital strains on marital quality are reduced even at lower-than-average levels of MLC.

Discussion

Our purpose in this article was to understand the relationship between locus of control and marital quality by using cross-sectional, over-time, and change measures of marital quality. MLC is a domain-specific scale that measures to what extent spouses believe that the good and bad aspects of their marriage are a result of their determination, hard work, and skills and to what extent they believe these aspects are a result of fate, luck, and chance. The analysis reveals that MLC is an important predictor of greater marital quality and improvements in marital quality and that there are two avenues by which it influences married life. Four conclusions are indicated by the analysis.

First, higher levels of positive marital quality and lower levels of negative marital quality are associated with higher levels of MLC. Thus, it appears that the most satisfactory and least conflictual marriages occur among spouses who believe they have personal control over events in the marriage. Furthermore, a stricter test of this relationship finds that MLC is associated with decreases in negative reports of marital quality.

Second, the effects of MLC on marital quality and changes in marital quality are partly explained by individual differences in marital strains. Spouses with low levels of MLC are more likely to report the presence of marital strains (e.g., moodiness, irritating habits) and, consequently, poorer marital quality. These findings support Thoits (1991, 1995), who argues that individuals with fewer resources experience more negative events and stressors. Thus, MLC is both a direct and an indirect influence on marital quality because high MLC scores insulate spouses from the onset of marital strains.

Third, the detrimental effects of marital strains on marital quality and changes in marital quality are fewer at higher levels of MLC. A greater sense of control over one's marriage appears to aid spouses in their efforts to offset the potential damage that marital strains may do to marital quality.

Fourth, by including controls for structural factors known to influence marital quality (such as educational achievement and income) and by looking

Table 3. Interaction Model: Unstandardized OLS Coefficients from Regression of Marital Quality and Changes in Marital Quality on Marital Locus of Control, Marital Strains, and Selected Independent Variables from U.S. Adults, 1992–1997

	Positive Marital Quality			Negative Marital Quality		
Variable	1992	1997	1992–1997	1992	1997	1992–1997
White	.220	−.029	−.054	−.050	−.248	−.235
	(.032)	(−.004)	(−.007)	(−.007)	(−.033)	(−.032)
Husband	.301*	.195*	.064	−.269*	−.300**	−.270**
	(.086)	(.054)	(.018)	(−.075)	(−.083)	(−.075)
Education	−.034	−.014	.009	.058**	.052**	.028
	(−.048)	(−.019)	(.013)	(.071)	(.071)	(.039)
Income	−.001.	.002	.001	.001	.004	.001
	(−.022)	(.013)	(.025)	(.059)	(.043)	(.015)
Years married	.002	.009	.006	−.031***	−.032***	−.016**
	(.011)	(.044)	(.030)	(−.161)	(−.157)	(−.082)
Presence of child	−.380***	−.285*	−.066	.067	.026	−.003
	(−.108)	(−.078)	(−.018)	(.019)	(.007)	(−.001)
Marital locus of control, 1992	.118***	.081***	.007	−.069***	−.071***	−.019*
	(.288)	(.190)	(.018)	(−.167)	(−.165)	(−.047)
Marital strains, 1992	−.239***	−.291***	−.174***	.380***	.384***	.266***
	(−.356)	(−.403)	(−.242)	(.556)	(.528)	(.369)
Marital locus of control × marital strains	.014***	.008*	.011*	−.008*	−.009*	−.006*
	(.101)	(.063)	(.054)	(−.061)	(−.051)	(−.059)
Marital quality, 1992	—	—	.628***	—	—	.421***
			(.568)			(.398)
Constant	−5.51	.154	−.333	2.49	−.116	.169
R^2	.343	.257	.486	.475	.401	.504
n	982	852	852	982	852	852

Note: Standardized coefficients are in parentheses.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

at changes in marital quality, we strengthen our estimates of the effects of MLC. Indeed, we know that MLC is part of a broader matrix of individual variables, especially social location (e.g., education and income) and that marital quality and MLC are reciprocally related.

The strength of this research is in conceptualizing and demonstrating that marital locus of control is important in understanding a social relationship that is a central building block of society. Studies of factors that affect marital quality should include a measure of marital locus of control because it may help to predict which troubled marriages are likely to remain intact. Our sample is composed of marriages that have lasted at least 17 years. So, even in these longer-term marriages, MLC persists as a resource that can help to offset marital problems. Further research needs to examine how MLC operates in younger marriages.

Another avenue for future research is to examine where role identities are located in the relationship between MLC and marital quality. According to Thoits (1991, pp. 103–105), role identities are self-conceptions based on enduring, normative, and reciprocal relationships with other people. One of the most important identities for a spouse is the role of husband or wife (Amatea, Cross, Clark, & Bobby, 1986; Bielby & Bielby, 1989; Thoits, 1992). Importance of an identity is influenced by an individual's commitment to that identity. The more important, the more that identity is included in an individual's definition of himself or herself and the more meaning, purpose, and behavioral guidance an individual derives from its enactment (Thoits, 1991). Also, because identities are the source of an individual's self-conception, the more important the identity, the more an individual is motivated to protect their self-conception by actively solving problems that may threaten this self-conception (Kielcolt, 1994). Therefore, the effect of marital locus of control on marital quality may depend on the degree to which individuals view their spouse identity as prominent. That is, a high level of marital locus of control may not be beneficial in managing marital problems if the spousal role is not important to a husband or wife. In addition, can low levels of marital locus of control be compensated by a prominent spouse identity?

We conclude, as others have argued (e.g., Thoits, 1995), that marital locus of control is a specific type of coping resource that spouses can draw on to effectively buffer the negative consequences of marital stresses and strains. This broader view of locus of control is not, in fact, far removed from Rotter's (1966) earlier definition and operationalization. Because beliefs of control begin in childhood, an important question bearing on the influence of marital locus of control is whether two generations of high divorce rates weaken the individual development of marital locus of control. That is, are children and adolescents who increasingly experience divorced families and stepfamilies less likely to develop high levels of marital locus of control? Although we cannot address the issue in this study, it warrants attention in future research.

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Appendix

Marital Locus of Control Scale

Indicate whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements about your marriage:

1. Even with the most loving couples, a satisfying relationship doesn't just happen; it is the result of a lot of work.
2. Couples who have a satisfying relationship are constantly trying to improve it; a good relationship doesn't just happen.
3. The unhappy times in our marriage just seem to happen, regardless of what I do.
4. There are always things I can do to end an argument with my spouse that leave us feeling better.
5. When I want my husband/wife to do something he/she hadn't planned on, it's often difficult to get him/her to do it.
6. Difficulties with my spouse often start with chance remarks.
7. When things begin to get rough in my marriage, I can see that I had a hand in it.
8. Something more than a couple's efforts is needed to bring about a satisfactory marriage; it's a special magic that is either there or it isn't.
9. Good communication in a marriage is a matter of learning and applying skills.
10. Putting effort into the relationship will practically guarantee a successful marriage.
11. If my marriage were a long, happy one, I'd say that I must just be very lucky.
12. How well I get along with my husband/wife depends mostly on how he/she is feeling that day.
13. At times, there doesn't seem to be any way out of a disagreement with my husband/wife.
14. Couples who seldom fight with each other have just been very lucky.
15. It seems to me that maintaining a smooth-running marriage is a matter of skill, not luck.
16. I find that day-to-day events have a lot of influence on how my husband/wife and I get along.
17. If we put our minds to it, my husband/wife and I can get along happily in the most trying circumstances.
18. When we have unpleasant times in our marriage, I can always see how I helped to bring it about.
19. Circumstances play a small role in causing marital happiness; it is largely a matter of our own doing.
20. When I look over the course of my marriage, I can't help but think that it was just meant to be the way it is.