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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3mt5v108>

Journal

Journal of Family Psychology

ISSN

0893-3200

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Publication Date

2026-07-13

DOI

10.1037/fam0001515

Peer reviewed

Residential Moves in the Early Years of Marriage:
Stressor or Normative Transition?

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ABSTRACT

During the early years of marriage, couples will frequently move to a new residence, a transition experienced as stressful by most people. Three theoretical perspectives offer competing predictions about how residential moves may account for changes in marital satisfaction. To the extent that stress generally harms intimacy, couples who move may experience declines in satisfaction relative to those who remain in place. Yet, because moving is a common and normative stressor, couples may generally manage their experience of moving without ill effects. Alternatively, the effect of moving on satisfaction may depend on why couples are moving, the outcomes of the move, and the resources available to manage the stress. Evidence for these perspectives was evaluated with data from two independent samples of first-married newlywed couples sampled from lower-income neighborhoods and interviewed multiple times over several years (total N = 662 couples). Preregistered analyses found no evidence that moving was negatively associated with couples' satisfaction concurrently or longitudinally. Apart from a few instances, there was scant evidence for significant moderators. These results suggest that moving may indeed be a normative transition that couples generally navigate well during the early years of marriage.

KEY WORDS: Residential moves, Newlywed marriage, Family stress, Life course perspective, Normative transitions

Among the transitions that characterize the early years of married life, one of the most frequent is also consistently rated as one of the most stressful: moving to a new residence. Changing homes is a common experience in the United States (Cheung & Wong, 2022); around 40 million Americans move each year (Frost, 2020). The average individual moves 12 times in their lives (United States Census Bureau, 2021), with most of those moves occurring in early adulthood. Although moving is common, it is not easy (Brown, 2008; McNulty et al., 2015; Naeimi et al., 2025). Among workers with families who relocated for their job, 75% described moving as at least somewhat stressful and 40% said that it was very or extremely stressful (Munton, 1990). Accordingly, moving at least temporarily reduces overall well-being (Magdol, 2002) and frequent moving in childhood is associated with higher risk of depression in adulthood (Sabel et al., 2024). The prevalence of residential moves in young adulthood and the concurrent tendency for marital satisfaction to decline in the early years of marriage (Joiner et al., 2024) raise the possibility that the stress of moving may account for some of these declines in couples that change residences. Three theoretical perspectives offer competing predictions about possible associations between moving and marital satisfaction.

The Family Stress Perspective

If moving to a new residence can undermine individual well-being, it may also harm the development of intimate partnerships. Indeed, family stress theories (e.g., Conger et al., 1999; Karney & Bradbury, 1995) posit that stressful experiences and circumstances constrain couples' ability to maintain positive relationships. The ABC-X model (Hill, 1949), for example, proposes that experiencing a stressor can make relationships more difficult, especially when 1) the stressor is demanding, 2) couples lack resources to help meet those demands, and 3) they perceive the stressor to be a problem rather than a challenge to be overcome.

Moving to a new residence may meet each of these criteria. First, moving is time-consuming and requires effortful planning (Power, 2022). Whether moving to one's dream home or simply moving for work, few people enjoy the process of packing up and changing homes. Second, although social support is one of the most valuable resources that people rely on to mitigate stress (Taylor, 2011), moving often involves leaving prominent sources of social support behind. Indeed, when they are about to move, people anticipate loneliness (Oishi et al., 2012) and, as individuals move farther away, moving can impair relationships with family and friends. Third, although some people view moving as a manageable event, for many the mere thought of moving evokes anxiety and uncertainty (Oishi & Talhelm, 2012) and the concern that they do not know what their life will look like in their new home (Wang, 2022). From this perspective, then, moving to a new residence may put newlyweds, who are already traversing a vulnerable stretch of their relationship, at further risk for relationship difficulties.

The Normative Stress Perspective

Although moving can be stressful, a second perspective suggests that moving may not be particularly harmful for couples because it is frequently a *normative stressor*. The premise of this perspective is that, in contrast to unexpected stressors (e.g., natural disasters, illnesses), predictable stressors (e.g., a planned pregnancy, graduating from college) have fewer long-term negative psychological effects (Menaghan, 1983). For many couples, moving may be normative because, around the time of marriage, couples often relocate for one partner's career (Naeimi et al., 2025) or to gain new space for their growing family (Buckle, 2017; Dieleman, 2001; Naeimi et al., 2025). This perspective has its origins in Rossi's seminal 1955 work "Why families move: A study in the social psychology of urban residential mobility," in which Rossi and colleagues followed 924 Philadelphia households for a year (Rossi, 1955). The researchers attempted to

predict, from baseline data, who would move to a new residence and who would remain in place by the next interview. They found that attitudes, values, and social connections had no bearing on whether people moved. Rather, the process was entirely determined by household size and composition combined with housing conditions. When their current residences no longer met their requirements, couples moved.

Research supports the suggestion that planned, normative stressors have fewer long-term negative psychological effects than unexpected, uncontrollable stressors. When young adults move away from their childhood homes to attend college, for example, their stress subsides relatively quickly, and students who have planned better for the transition experience the least prolonged stress (Pancer et al., 2000). Although having and raising a child is stressful, couples' relationships fare better when pregnancy is planned than when it is unplanned (Kluwer, 2010), and one recent investigation found that around 80% of couples maintained at least moderately high levels of satisfaction across the transition to parenthood (Leonhardt et al., 2022). Beyond the newlywed years, couples tend to sustain intimacy through other potentially stressful transitions as well, such as children beginning school or leaving home as young adults (Menaghan, 1983). Thus, when partners can plan for a stressful event, even couples with less adaptive communication and support skills may be able to minimize the impact of that event.

The Life Course Perspective

Some scholars criticize the normative perspective for assuming a "simple, straightforward relationship between residential satisfaction, mobility intentions and actual moving behavior" (Lu, 1999, p. 467). The life course perspective (Elder, 1994, 1998), in contrast, recognizes that couples may have a variety of reasons for moving, and that not all couples with the motive to

move will be able to do so. From this perspective, couples are at risk whenever their living conditions do not match their needs or desires.

For example, because the presence of others in the household can interfere with intimacy and privacy (Coulter & Thomas, 2019), couples in the early years of marriage may be motivated to move if they do not live independently. Similarly, couples may be motivated to move when their rising incomes allow them to move from a less affluent neighborhood to a more affluent one (Coulton et al., 2012). Couples with these motivations may nevertheless be constrained from moving (Coulter et al., 2016) because, for example, they do not have the funds to relocate or they are caring for an aging or sick family member. Indeed, feeling stuck in place is becoming increasingly common in the United States, with the proportion of residents claiming they live in places they no longer wish to live increasing by 50% since the 1970s (Buttrick & Oishi, 2021).

Other couples who are not motivated to move may be forced to do so, often ending up in worse conditions. People do not move just because they need to find a bigger home to fit their growing family, but also because they were evicted by landlords or parents, they lost their job and must find cheaper housing, or they need to move closer to an ailing family member to provide care (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Such reasons may account for the fact that over a quarter of movers are dissatisfied with their new living conditions (Phinney, 2013). Couples who find themselves in cramped conditions or undesirable neighborhoods experience greater stress (Clark & Huang, 2003), a higher likelihood of adverse mental health outcomes (Cutrona et al., 2006), and difficulty accumulating social and financial capital (Thomas et al., 2018), all of which makes relationships more difficult to maintain (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

When couples do move, their relational and tangible resources should protect their relationship from the associated stress (Coulter et al., 2016). Couples vary in their

communication skills and capacity to support one another (Carroll et al., 2013), so those who communicate more effectively should be less impacted by both normative and non-normative residential transitions. Socioeconomic resources like income should also protect couples from acute stressors, as families who have greater assets experience less family disruption when confronted by acute stressors than families with fewer assets (Rothwell & Han, 2010).

In sum, the life course perspective suggests that the impact of a residential move should depend on 1) whether the couple was motivated to move, 2) whether the move has a desirable outcome (e.g., whether it relieves prior housing stress), and 3) whether the couple has adequate resources. By acknowledging the potential costs and benefits of moving, the life course perspective also raises the possibility that moving may be detrimental to the relationship in the short-term (i.e., when couples are dealing with the stresses of packing and the changing routines of a new home or neighborhood), but beneficial in the long-term (i.e., after couples have settled into their new residence). This raises the possibility that even if the *concurrent effect* of moving (i.e., how moving affects the relationship around the time of the move) is negative, the *lagged effect* (i.e., how moving affects the relationship a short time *after* the move) may still be positive.

The Current Study

Each of these models makes different predictions about how couples may be affected by residential moves in early years of marriage: family stress models predict a negative main effect, normative stress models predict a null effect, and life course perspectives predict a moderated effect. Yet despite Peter Rossi's seminal work recognizing that residential mobility has interpersonal consequences (Rossi, 1955) and decades of scholarship describing moving as a disruptive process with potentially negative effects on mental health and relationships (Oishi &

Talhelm, 2012), research documenting the effects of moving on marital processes has been scarce, and longitudinal data nearly absent (Cheung & Wong, 2022).

To fill this gap, the current work is the first of which we are aware to examine the association between moving and changes in relationship satisfaction by drawing upon two diverse samples of newlywed married couples (total $N = 662$ couples) interviewed over the first several years of their marriages. Newlyweds are an appropriate population within which to examine these issues, because the early years of marriage are a time when moving is especially likely and because studying newlyweds ensures that the most vulnerable couples have not exited the population through divorce. Using self-report data, behavioral data, and data from the US Census, our analyses address two research questions (all analyses were preregistered:

<https://osf.io/nvg7a/overview>):

RQ#1: How does residential mobility affect couples' marital satisfaction? By comparing satisfaction levels in couples who did and did not move (Study 1) and by estimating the concurrent and lagged associations between moving and marital satisfaction (Study 2), these analyses will evaluate the competing predictions of the family stress, normative stress, and life course perspectives.

RQ#2: What moderates the effects of moving on couples' marital satisfaction? Drawing on the life course perspective, we evaluated three hypotheses about moderators of the effects of moving on marriage. First, after couples move, marital satisfaction should be higher to the extent that couples have experienced circumstances that motivate moving, i.e., if they had a higher socioeconomic status relative to their neighborhood and if they lived with people other than their immediate family prior to the move. Second, after a move, marital satisfaction should be higher

to the extent that the outcome of the move is positive, i.e., when they experience greater satisfaction with their living conditions and greater satisfaction with their neighborhood following the move. Third, the effect of moving on couples' satisfaction should be more positive when couples possess greater resources to manage the stress of moving, i.e., to the extent that couples communicate with one another more positively and have higher incomes.

STUDY 1

Drawing upon four waves of data collected from first-married newlywed couples over the first three years of their marriage, Study 1 examined whether there is a between-person main effect of residential moves on marital satisfaction (RQ #1) and whether couples who communicate better and have higher income experience a more positive association between moving and marital satisfaction (RQ #2).

METHOD

Sampling

Between 2014 and 2015, recently married couples living in lower income communities were identified through marriage license applications obtained from the Recorder's Office in Harris County, Texas, the third most populous county in the United States. Because sample recruitment occurred before the legalization of same-sex marriage nationwide, all couples were different-sex. To maximize the likelihood of including lower income couples that have been often overlooked in prior research, addresses were matched with census data to identify couples living in census block groups where a minimum of 30% of households were categorized as living below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2013). Through this procedure, 4,916 couples were identified for screening on the telephone or in person. Among the couples

attempted for screening, 3,535 could not be reached and 1,157 (24%) responded and agreed to be screened for eligibility. Interviewers screened couples to ensure they had married, partners were in their first marriage, partners spoke English or Spanish, and both partners were at least 18 years old. This screening identified 506 eligible couples, and 401 (79%) agreed to participate in the study. The 231 couples who were interviewed prior to the close of the baseline assessment period comprise the baseline sample. All procedures were approved by the local IRB.

Participants

The baseline sample had been married for an average of 5.5 months ($SD = 2.0$). On average, wives were 28.1 ($SD = 7.4$) years old and husbands were 29.5 ($SD = 7.5$) years old. The majority of wives (54%) and husbands (60%) reported receiving less than or the equivalent of a high school diploma. Approximately 16% of wives and 12% of husbands reported a college degree or higher education. In terms of racial identification, 53% of wives and 52% of husbands identified as Latinx of any race, 35% of wives and 32% of husbands as Black, 9% of wives and 10% of husbands as White, and 4% of wives and 7% of husbands as Other/multiracial.

Procedure

Couples were interviewed four times at approximately nine-month intervals between 2015 and 2017. In August 2017, Hurricane Harvey interrupted data collection during the fourth assessment, limiting the study to three waves for all but 25 couples. At each assessment, trained interviewers visited couples in their homes, obtained informed consent, and verbally administered the individual interviews to each spouse in separate areas.

Measures

Study 1 analyses addressed time-invariant predictors only. Our focal independent variable – moving – was assessed at each interview after the baseline interview. Due to attrition and the

interruption of Hurricane Harvey, there were less than 2 within-person moving observations on average (i.e., on average, couples were asked about moving fewer than twice). Given that within-person effects are more difficult to detect with fewer repeated observations (Curran & Bauer, 2011), we treated the moving variable (and associated moderators) as time-invariant. We conducted power analyses using the R *mlmpower* package, which showed that there was 96% power to detect an interaction effect with an effect size of $R=.01$ (Aguinis et al., 2005).

Descriptive statistics and correlations for Study 1 variables are provided online in Table S1.

Focal independent variable: Moving. Beginning at the second assessment, spouses were asked in each interview whether they had moved to a new residence since their last interview. Of the 204 couples who provided data beyond the baseline assessment, 90 (44%) did not move during the study, 74 (36%) moved once during the study, and 40 (20%) moved more than once. Because the distribution of number of moves was highly skewed, we created two binary, time-invariant, moving variables. The first (i.e., the *0/1* variable) coded couples who moved only once during Times 2-4 as “1” and those who did not move as “0.” Thus, couples who moved 2 or 3 times were excluded from this variable. The second (i.e., the *0/1+* variable) coded couples in which either spouse indicated that they had moved at least once during Times 2-4 as “1” and those who did not move during those times as “0.”

Moderator: Income. Husband’s and wives’ individual report of their monthly income were multiplied by 12 and then summed to create a household annual income variable. These reports were solicited from each spouse at each assessment; to create a time-invariant variable, incomes from all available timepoints were averaged to create an average annual income variable. The median annual income of the sample was \$36,563.

Moderator: Observed communication. At the baseline assessment, couples participated in an 8-minute conflict discussion. Six trained research assistants coded each interaction, continuously and concurrently rating the individual partners for expressed engagement and connectedness using a computer joystick, on a scale ranging from -100 to +100. Ratings were sampled at a rate of twice per second, consistent with procedures used in previous studies (Ross et al., 2017). Although the majority of interactions took place in English, interactions that took place in Spanish were coded by bilingual coders. Reliabilities of each coded time-series were calculated each week and reviewed in weekly observer meetings. A small number of videos (25%) were rerated because of reliability falling below .60. We used an a priori rule to drop the single observer with the lowest agreement for each time-series; the moment-to-moment ratings from the remaining observers were then averaged to create the final score. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using intraclass correlations. A conservative “absolute ICC” coefficient was used for the present analyses which incorporates agreement on the level and relative patterning of rated behavior. Inter-rater reliability exceeded .65 for husbands and for wives. To create time-invariant variables, second-by-second observer ratings of engagement and connectedness for each spouse were averaged across the entire discussion, creating a variable each for husbands and wives. The average communication score for husbands was 11.73 ($SD = 22.34$) and for wives it was 16.81 ($SD = 17.97$).

Covariates: Age and race/ethnicity. Although the association between demographics such as age (Vaillant & Vaillant, 1993) or racial/ethnic identification (Bryant et al., 2008; Williamson & Lavner, 2020) and marital satisfaction has been inconsistent, we included age at baseline and race/ethnicity as controls in Study 1 analyses. Age at baseline was centered at the grand mean for

husbands and wives separately. For analyses including race/ethnicity, we created three binary variables for both husbands and wives: Latinx, Black, and Other.

Dependent variable: Marital satisfaction. At every assessment, partners rated their marital satisfaction using a 10-item scale adapted from the Couple Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007). Items addressed general evaluations of the relationship (e.g., “Our relationship is strong”) and characteristics of the partner (e.g., “How well does your partner meet your needs?”). Nine of the 10 items were on a 6-point scale, and one was on a 7-point scale. All items were recoded to a 6-point scale (i.e., 0-5) by multiplying the 7-point scores by .86., then averaged for each individual, creating a final composite measure. The average satisfaction for husbands at Time 1 was 4.25 ($SD = 0.77$) and the average for wives was 4.24 ($SD = 0.76$), with a maximum possible score of 5. Across the four assessments, Cronbach’s alpha for the 10 items ranged from .85-.94 for husbands and from .87-.92 for wives.

Analytic Plan

We conducted multilevel modeling using Restricted Estimation Maximum Likelihood to estimate random effects in SPSS using the MIXED procedure (Corbeil & Searle, 1976). We used a two-intercept approach where appropriate, which models data from both spouses, providing separate husband and wife intercepts and slopes while accounting for the covariance between husbands’ and wives’ responses (Planalp et al., 2017). Because we were interested in the individual fixed effects of the parameters of our multilevel models, we reported two-tailed p-values from t-tests. The online supplemental materials provide complete analytic models; data, codebook, and syntax are online at <https://osf.io/nvg7a/overview>.

RESULTS

Main Effect of Moving on Satisfaction

Table 1 presents results from the three focal models. First, we examined whether there was a main effect of moving on satisfaction for participants who had moved once. There was no significant main effect of moving on satisfaction for husbands ($b = 0.05$, $t = 0.43$, $p = .67$) or wives ($b = 0.18$, $t = 1.57$, $p = .12$). Second, we ran a model that used the moving variable in which participants were coded as having moved 0 times or 1+ times. There was no significant main effect of moving on satisfaction for husbands ($b = 0.01$, $t = 0.10$, $p = .92$), but there was a significant effect for wives ($b = 0.24$, $t = 2.36$, $p = .02$). Contrary to the predictions of our three perspectives, the association was positive: wives who moved one or more times were more satisfied on average than wives who did not move.

Table 1: *Study 1 Results*

	Husband Satisfaction Intercept		Wife Satisfaction Intercept	
Predictor	Beta (SE)	p-value	Beta (SE)	p-value
<i>Moving main effect</i>				
Moving (0 or 1 moves)	0.05 (0.12)	.67	0.18 (0.11)	.12
Moving (0 or 1+ moves)	0.01 (0.10)	.92	0.24 (0.10)	.02
<i>Communication moderation</i>				
Communication*Moving (0 or 1 moves)	0.00 (0.01)	1.0	0.00 (0.01)	.71
Communication*Moving (0 or 1+ moves)	0.00 (0.00)	.58	0.00 (0.01)	.83
<i>Income moderation</i>				
Income*Moving (0 or 1 moves)	0.00 (0.00)	.86	0.00 (0.00)	.42
Income*Moving (0 or 1+ moves)	0.00 (0.00)	.91	0.00 (0.00)	.20

Note. Bold values indicate statistically significant ($p < .05$) effects.

Moderators of the Effect of Moving on Satisfaction

We next assessed the possibility that the moving effect depends on couples' financial (i.e., income) and interpersonal (i.e., communication) resources. To address whether couples' communication moderated the effect of moving on satisfaction, we entered communication as a

level-2 moderator in two separate models, one for each of the moving variables. For the *0/1* variable, communication did not moderate the effect of moving on satisfaction for husbands ($b = 0.00, t = 0.00, p = 1.0$) or wives ($b = 0.00, t = 0.37, p = .71$). This association was also nonsignificant for the *0/1+* variable for husbands ($b = 0.00, t = 0.56, p = .58$) and wives ($b = 0.00, t = 0.22, p = .83$).

To address whether income moderated the effect of moving on satisfaction, we entered the couples' average income as a level-2 variable in two separate models. For the *0/1* variable, income did not moderate the effect of moving on satisfaction for husbands ($b = 0.00, t = -0.17, p = .86$) or wives ($b = 0.00, t = -0.80, p = .42$). This association was also nonsignificant for the *0/1+* variable for husbands ($b = 0.00, t = 0.12, p = .91$) and wives ($b = 0.00, t = -1.28, p = .20$).

STUDY 1 DISCUSSION

Study 1 drew upon longitudinal data from the first two years of marriage to compare levels of marital satisfaction in couples that moves and couples that remained in place. The results offered no support for family stress or life course perspectives: we observed no evidence of negative associations between moving and marital satisfaction, and no evidence that the effects of moving were moderated by income or communication. The sole significant association in Study 1 was in the positive direction, such that wives who moved one or more times reported significantly higher marital satisfaction than wives who remained in place. This finding, although unexpected, is most consistent with the normative perspective: couples appear to experience moving as a manageable and even positive feature of married life and as such may not impede couples' ability to maintain their intimacy. Yet, although Study 1 had several strengths, including leveraging a diverse, relatively large sample of couples with significant variability in socioeconomic status, it also had some limitations. For example, the sample size and small number of observations per

spouse did not allow Study 1 to examine within-subject effects, i.e., whether spouses became more or less satisfied following a move than they were prior to moving. Additionally, analyses of potential moderators were limited to couples' relational and economic resources. Study 2 addressed these limitations.

STUDY 2

Compared to Study 1, Study 2 leveraged a sample that was nearly twice as large ($n = 431$) and studied for twice as long (7 assessments over 12 years). The larger number of assessments allowed us to examine associations between residential moves and within-person changes in marital satisfaction. These within-person analyses examined both the *concurrent* and *lagged* effects of moving, addressing the possibility that the effects of moving on marital satisfaction may change over time. Study 2 also addressed potential moderators in greater depth, including within-person moderators of the effect of moving on marital satisfaction, specifically contexts that may motivate a move (e.g., living with others) and outcomes of the move (e.g., satisfaction with living conditions), as well as communication and income as in Study 1.

METHOD

Sampling

Recently married couples were identified through names and addresses on marriage license applications filed during 2009, obtained from the Los Angeles County Recorder's Office. Because sample recruitment occurred before the legalization of same-sex marriage, all couples were different-sex. The sampling procedure was designed to yield first-married newlywed couples in which both partners were of the same race/ethnicity (i.e., Latinx, Black, or White), living in neighborhoods with a high proportion of low-income residents in Los Angeles County. Addresses were matched with census data to identify applicants living in census block groups wherein the

median household income was no more than 160% of the 1999 federal poverty level for a 4-person family. Names on the licenses were then weighted using data from a Bayesian Census Surname Combination, which integrates census and surname information to produce a multinomial probability of membership in each of four racial/ethnic categories. Couples were chosen using probabilities proportionate to the ratio of target prevalences to the population prevalences, weighted by the couple's average estimated probability of being Latinx, Black, or White. Couples were screened to ensure that they were married, that neither partner had been previously married, and that both spouses identified as Latinx, Black, or White. Through addresses listed on their marriage licenses, 3,793 couples were identified for screening on the telephone or in person. Of those, 2,049 could not be reached and 1,522 (40%) responded to a mailing and agreed to be screened for eligibility. Interviewers screened couples to ensure they had married, partners were in their first marriage, partners identified as the same race/ethnicity (i.e., Latinx, Black, or White), and both partners were at least 18 years old. This screening identified 824 eligible couples, and 658 (80%) of those couples agreed to participate in the study. A final baseline sample of 431 couples completed the initial assessment of this longitudinal study within the data collection window. All procedures were approved by the local IRB.

Participants

The baseline sample of 431 husbands and wives had been married for an average of 4.8 months ($SD = 2.5$). Wives were 26.7 ($SD = 5.0$) years old and husbands were 28.4 ($SD = 5.8$) years old, on average. Approximately 85% of wives and 79% of husbands reported receiving a high school diploma or greater, with 28% of wives and 20% of husbands receiving a college degree or higher education. Of the 431 husbands and wives, 76% identified as Latinx of any race, 12% identified as White, and 12% identified as Black.

Procedure

Couples were interviewed five times between 2009 and 2014, at approximately nine-month intervals, and then were recontacted for a sixth interview in 2018-2019. This began a series of five additional interviews between 2018 and 2022. Thus, couples who participated fully completed 10 interviews between 2009 and 2022. The data examined here were obtained from the first seven interviews, ending in 2020 because the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted residential mobility (Czarnecki et al., 2023). At each assessment, trained interviewers visited couples in their homes, obtained informed consent, and verbally administered the individual interviews to each spouse in separate areas.

Measures

All predictors in Study 2 were time-varying except for communication, which was not assessed at every interview and is generally quite stable in couples (Smith et al., 2008), justifying our decision to treat it as time-invariant. Descriptive statistics and correlations for the Study 2 variables are available online in Table S2 and the main effects of Study 2 moderators on marital satisfaction are available online in Table S3. Unlike for Study 1, we did not include demographic control variables as within-person age covaries closely with time (which was already included in the models), and race/ethnicity is a between-person variable which does not possess and cannot influence within-cluster variation (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).

Focal independent variable: Moving. Beginning with the second assessment, spouses were whether they moved to a new residence since their last interview. If either spouse said that they had moved at a given assessment, the couple was coded as “1.” If both spouses indicated that they had not moved, the couple was coded as “0.” To distinguish between a concurrent moving effect and a lagged moving effect, another moving variable was displaced forward by one

timepoint, representing whether the couple had moved at the prior timepoint. Of the 395 couples who provided data beyond the baseline assessment, 106 (27%) did not move during the study, 127 (32%) moved once, 95 (24%) moved twice, and 67 (17%) moved more than twice.

Contexts for Moving

Household-to-neighborhood SES comparison. Following procedures established by Cutrona et al. (2003), we computed a household SES composite based on the following data that couples provided at Times 1-6: 1) yearly household income (adding spouses individual incomes), 2) couple education level (averaging spouses' education levels), and 3) household size. Each item was independently standardized relative to the rest of the sample, then summed (income + education - household size) to create a combined index of household SES. Cronbach's alpha for the three components ranged from .53-.66. We then computed a neighborhood SES composite, comprised of 3 items gathered from the American Community Survey at the census tract-level for each couple based on their home address: 1) median income, 2) average tract education level, and 3) average household size. Each item was independently standardized relative to the rest of the sample, then summed (income + education - household size) to create the final index of neighborhood SES. Cronbach's alpha for the three components ranged from .82-.84.

We created a household-to-neighborhood SES comparison variable by subtracting the neighborhood SES index from the household SES index. Higher values indicated couples with higher SES relative to their neighborhood. This variable was displaced forward by one timepoint to represent the household-to-neighborhood SES comparison at the *prior* timepoint, which allowed us to test our hypothesis that couples who were better off compared to their neighborhood prior to moving would experience a more positive within-person effect of moving on marital satisfaction. The average for this variable at baseline was 0.00 ($SD = 2.27$).

Living with others. At each interview, spouses were asked who lived in their household. If either spouse reported living with anyone besides their children (e.g., friends, parents, grandparents), both the husband and wife in that couple were coded as “1” (i.e., living with others). All others were coded “0.” At the baseline assessment, 43% of couples lived with others. This variable was displaced forward by one timepoint, so that a value of “1” represented a couple living with others at the *prior* timepoint.

Moving Outcomes

Satisfaction with living conditions. In each interview, spouses were asked “How do you feel about your current living situation? Would you say you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neutral, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?” Responses ranged from 0-4, with higher values indicating greater satisfaction. The average satisfaction with living conditions at the baseline assessment was 2.80 ($SD = 1.14$) for husbands and 2.82 ($SD = 1.22$) for wives.

Neighborhood satisfaction. In each interview, spouses were asked to rate whether their neighborhood is a good place to raise kids and whether their neighbors are trustworthy. For husbands, Cronbach’s alpha for these two items ranged from .71-.82 across assessments, and for wives it ranged from .73-.81. Items were averaged to create composite measures such that higher values represented more positive ratings of the neighborhood. Average neighborhood satisfaction at baseline was 2.14 ($SD = 0.99$) for husbands and 2.14 ($SD = 1.00$) for wives on 1-5 scales.

Resources

Income. At each assessment, husbands and wives reported their monthly income separately. Responses were summed across spouses and multiplied by 12 to derive couples’ annual household income. Unlike Study 1, income in Study 2 was treated as time-varying, based

on spouses' combined reports at each interview. It was displaced by one timepoint to represent income at the *prior* timepoint. At baseline, the median annual household income was \$50,000.

Communication. At the first assessment, spouses engaged in three 8-minute discussions: a problem-solving discussion, a husband social support discussion, and a wife social support discussion. These discussions were videotaped and 16 trained research assistants coded each spouse on each tape using the Iowa Family Interaction Rating Scales (Williamson et al., 2011). Spouses were coded for indicators of positivity (e.g., positive mood, physical affection), negativity (e.g., contempt, denial), and effectiveness (e.g., solution quality and quantity), each with a range of 1-9. To assess reliability, 20% of videos were coded by two randomly chosen coders. Their scores were compared, and any discrepancies greater than one point were resolved by coders working together. Thus the final set of scores included scores that matched across the two coders during their initial individual coding (when codes were off by 1 point, the score from the randomly designated "primary coder" was used); discrepant scores were replaced by the scores from the second joint coding.

Scores on each dimension were averaged across the three discussions. To create a composite and time-invariant variable, we added the positivity and effectiveness scores and subtracted the negativity scores for each spouse at each assessment then took the average across assessments. The minimum possible score was -7 and maximum possible score was 17. The average score was 4.64 ($SD = 1.60$) for husbands and 4.70 ($SD = 1.51$) for wives.

Dependent variable: Marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was assessed at each interview with an 8-item scale. Five of the eight items asked how satisfied spouses were with a specific area of their relationship (e.g., "How satisfied are you with the way he/she contributes to household chores?"). Three items asked to what degree the spouse agreed with statements about

their relationship (e.g., “How much do you trust your partner?”). Individual measures were on 4- and 5-point scales. For these analyses, the 4-point scales were recoded to 5-point scales. All items were averaged for each individual after first converting the 4-point scales to 5-point scales by multiplying the 4-point scores by 1.25, creating a final composite measure. Mean satisfaction for husbands at Time 1 was 4.58 ($SD = 0.41$) and the mean for wives was 4.49 ($SD = 0.45$). Across assessments, Cronbach’s alpha ranged from .70-.83 for husbands and from .71-.81 for wives.

Analytic Plan

We conducted multilevel modeling using Restricted Estimation Maximum Likelihood to estimate random effects in SPSS using the MIXED procedure (Corbeil & Searle, 1976) and used a two-intercept approach where appropriate (Planalp et al., 2017). The level-2 sample size ($n = 431$) and the number of within-person observations allowed us to analyze within-person effects (Curran & Bauer, 2011). We conducted power analyses using the R *mlmpower* package, which showed that there was 94% power to detect an interaction effect with an effect size of $R = .005$ (Aguinis et al., 2005). Because we were interested in the individual fixed effects of the parameters of our multilevel models, we reported two-tailed p-values from t-tests. Complete analytic models are available in the online supplemental materials; data, codebook, and syntax for all models are online at <https://osf.io/nvg7a/overview>.

RESULTS

Is There a Within-Person Association Between Moving and Marital Satisfaction?

Table 2 provides results for all Study 2 analyses. As the table reveals, within-subject analyses found no evidence of a significant within-person association between moving and

marital satisfaction for husbands ($b = 0.01$, $t = 0.68$, $p = .50$) or wives ($b = -0.03$, $t = -1.18$, $p = .24$). Spouses' satisfaction did not differ depending on whether or not they had recently moved.

Table 2: *Study 2 Results*

	Husbands		Wives	
Predictor	Beta (SE)	<i>p</i> -value	Beta (SE)	<i>p</i> -value
Concurrent Effect				
Moving (main effect)	0.01 (0.02)	.50	-0.03 (0.02)	.24
Living with others (moderation)	-0.09 (0.07)	.20	0.07 (0.08)	.38
SES comparison (moderation)	0.02 (0.01)	.18	0.01 (0.02)	.48
Satisfaction with living conditions (moderation)	0.07 (0.03)	.01	-0.02 (0.03)	.60
Neighborhood satisfaction (moderation)	0.01 (0.03)	.82	0.00 (0.03)	.98
Income (moderation)	0.00 (0.00)	.15	0.00 (0.00)	.60
Communication (moderation)	0.00 (0.01)	.82	0.01 (0.01)	.39
Lagged Effect				
Moving (main effect)	-0.02 (0.02)	.51	-0.01 (0.03)	.78
Living with others (moderation)	0.16 (0.08)	.05	0.14 (0.09)	.12
SES comparison (moderation)	-0.01 (0.02)	.67	0.00 (0.02)	.86
Satisfaction with living conditions (moderation)	0.01 (0.04)	.77	0.01 (0.04)	.83
Neighborhood satisfaction (moderation)	0.07 (0.04)	.11	0.08 (0.05)	.11
Income (moderation)	0.00 (0.00)	.81	0.00 (0.00)	.60
Communication (moderation)	-0.01 (0.01)	.35	-0.04 (0.02)	.02

Note. Bold values indicate statistically significant ($p < .05$) effects.

Subsequent analyses examined whether contexts for moving, outcomes of moving, or couples' resources moderated the within-person association between moving and marital satisfaction. With respect to contexts, Table 2 shows that neither of the contexts measured here was a significant moderator of the within-person association between moving and marital satisfaction. With respect to the outcome of the move (i.e., whether spouses were more satisfied than normal with their neighborhood or with their living conditions after moving), there was no evidence of any significant moderation for satisfaction with the neighborhood for either spouse,

but there was some evidence of moderation for satisfaction with living conditions for husbands only. The association between moving and satisfaction varied depending on whether husbands' satisfaction with their living conditions improved after the move ($b = 0.07, t = 2.49, p = .01$). Breaking down the interaction (see Figure S1 in the online supplement) shows that husbands whose satisfaction with living conditions was lower than average were less satisfied if they had just moved compared to having stayed put. This simple slope was not significant for husbands with moderate or high satisfaction with their living conditions and this interaction was not significant for wives. With respect to couples' interpersonal and financial resources, neither communication nor household income was a significant moderator of the within-person association between moving and marital satisfaction.

Does Moving Account for Lagged Marital Satisfaction?

As Table 2 reveals, these analyses found no evidence of a significant lagged within-person association between moving and marital satisfaction for husbands or wives. At the interview 6 to 9 months after a move to a new residence, spouses that had indicated a move at the prior assessment were not more or less satisfied with their relationships than spouses who had remained in place. Subsequent analyses examined whether contexts for the move, moving outcomes, or couple resources moderated the lagged association between moving and marital satisfaction. With respect to contexts, Table 2 reveals that, for husbands who were living with others prior to the move, the lagged within-person association between moving and marital satisfaction was more positive than for husbands who were not living with others prior to their move. Breaking down this interaction (see Figure S2 in the supplemental file) shows that, for husbands who did live with others, moving did not impact marital satisfaction, but for husbands

who had not been living with others, moving was associated with lower marital satisfaction 9 months after the move. For wives, this effect was nonsignificant, $b = 0.14$, $t = 1.55$, $p = .12$. Couples' SES relative to their neighborhood SES was not a significant moderator for husbands ($b = -0.01$, $t = -0.43$, $p = .67$) or wives ($b = 0.00$, $t = 0.18$, $p = .86$). With respect to the outcome of the move, neither satisfaction with living conditions nor satisfaction with the neighborhood moderated the lagged within-person association between moving and marital satisfaction for husbands or for wives. Finally, with respect to couples' resources, these analyses found no evidence household income moderated the lagged association for either spouse, but for wives, observed communication did moderate the lagged within-person association between moving and marital satisfaction ($b = -0.04$, $t = -2.33$, $p = .02$). Breaking down this interaction (see Figure S3 in the online supplement) shows that wives who did not move tended to be more satisfied if they communicated well, but for wives that moved, better communication was not associated with satisfaction nine months later. This interaction was nonsignificant for husbands.

STUDY 2 DISCUSSION

With a larger sample size and nearly twice as many assessments, Study 2 corroborated Study 1 in finding no evidence of negative concurrent or lagged within-person associations between moving and marital satisfaction. For the most part, contexts for moving, moving outcomes, and couple resources did not moderate these associations. Thus, Study 2, like Study 1, supports the view that, on average, moving may be a challenging but normative stressor that couples generally deal with effectively.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Early in their marriages, couples frequently move residences (Frost, 2020), and these moves have been described as one of the more stressful events that young couples experience

(Oishi, 2010). Given extensive support for family stress theories (e.g., Conger et al., 1999) showing that stress impedes couple functioning in a wide variety of contexts, the two studies described here examined whether residential moves in the early years of marriage accounted for some of the declines in marital satisfaction associated with this stage of life (Joiner et al., 2024).

If the stress of moving had negative effects on couples' marital satisfaction, these two preregistered studies were well-positioned to detect such effects, for several reasons. First, these studies drew upon data from couples with a wide range of socioeconomic status, including the often overlooked lower-income couples who are most impacted by residential mobility (Dieleman, 2001; Phinney, 2013). Second, these analyses were capable of evaluating concurrent associations between recent moves and marital satisfaction, as well as (in Study 2) lagged associations between moving and later marital satisfaction. Third, these analyses were capable of estimating between-person associations (i.e., were spouses who moved more or less satisfied than spouses who remained in place?) as well as within-person associations (i.e., were spouses more or less satisfied with their marriages after moving compared to before moving?). Fourth, both studies had adequate statistical power and followed couples longitudinally over a sufficient number of years to observe changes in marital satisfaction if changes occurred.

In light of these methodological strengths, it is noteworthy that on average, across these two independent samples, the marital satisfaction of spouses who moved did not suffer compared to the satisfaction of couples who did not move. In Study 1, the only significant result was a positive association between moving one or more times and wives' marital satisfaction. In Study 2, within-person analyses found that moving, on average, was not associated with positive or negative changes in satisfaction either at the time of the move or approximately 9 months after the move. Moreover, the search for moderators guided by life course perspectives (Coulter et al.,

2016) was generally unsuccessful. Few tests of moderation were statistically significant, and in general even these moderation effects were small. For the most part, associations between moving and satisfaction were unrelated to spouses' contexts for moving, the outcomes of the move, and couples' resources.

How can we reconcile the strong predictions of family stress models with the observation that an experience that many couples describe as stressful generally had no negative effects on their marriages? Overall, these findings support the normative stress perspective (Buckle, 2017; Rossi, 1955), which suggests that, when stressors are expected and predictable, most couples are able to manage stress effectively. Even though moving is experienced as stressful, for many couples moving may also be an adaptive and voluntary response to changing needs. Whereas unpredictable stressors can be cognitively taxing, reducing spouses' ability to communicate well and solve problems effectively (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013), predictable stressors evoke less anxiety and negative affect (Grillon et al., 2004). Further protecting couples is the fact that moving is a shared stressor, meaning both partners experience and must cope with the stressor together. When couples experience a shared stressor, they tend to be better positioned to support one another (Falconier & Kuhn, 2019). For example, partners who view one spouse's cancer diagnosis as a "we" problem more effectively balance emotion-focused and problem-focused support, whereas couples who treat the diagnosis as an individual problem do not support one another emotionally to the same extent (Kayser & Revenson, 2016). Finally, because moving tends to be a short-term process (Kearns & Smith, 1994), moving is likely to be experienced as an acute, rather than chronic, stressor for most couples. Acute stressors are generally perceived as more manageable than chronic stressors, evoke less stress, and have fewer negative psychological and interpersonal consequences (Randall & Bodenmann, 2017). Although the *decision* to move arises from

personal, interpersonal, and contextual factors that may develop over years (Coulter et al., 2016), the process of actually selecting a home, packing, and moving may be relatively contained. As Warner and Sharp (2016) point out, couples generally move once or a few times early in the marriage, but then find stable housing and remain there.

Although the characterization of moving as a generally well-managed stressor is consistent with our results, this conclusion must be tempered by several limits of the two studies described here. First, because neither study was specifically designed to study moving, we were only able to infer motivations and outcomes of moving rather than explicitly asking couples about their reasons for moving, the struggles they encountered while moving, and their feelings about the move before and after the fact. For example, living with others may be a greater motivation for some couples to move than others (Coulter & Thomas, 2019). Hispanic couples in particular are especially likely to live in multigenerational housing (He & Jia, 2022) and so may not be as motivated to live independently as couples from other backgrounds. A priority for future research is to assess family's motivations for moving directly. Second, because the samples in both studies were comprised entirely of different-sex couples in their first marriage who were generally younger adults at the beginning of the studies, we are cautious about generalizing our results beyond this population. Moving may have different implications for same-sex couples, for example. Same-sex couples have traditionally lived in urban areas with high concentrations of other same-sex relationships (Spring & Charleston, 2021), providing them with sources of support that can be unavailable from family (Holmberg & Blair, 2016). Thus, same-sex couples may be dependent on their social networks in ways that affect their considerations for when they move and where they move. Moving either into a neighborhood with a high concentration of same-sex relationships or, more likely in the last several decades,

out of one of these neighborhoods (Spring & Charleston, 2021), may therefore have more significant ramifications for same-sex couples than for different-sex couples. Finally, because all of the couples in both studies were newlyweds when we began interviewing them, our analyses were unable to address the possible effects of residential moves prior to marriage, i.e., during cohabitation.

Overall, these findings highlight the likelihood that other routine transitions that are commonly perceived as stressful may also have little bearing on couples' relationship quality in the long-term. For example, although having and raising a child is undoubtedly stressful, most couples maintain their relationships effectively through this transition (ter Kuile et al., 2021). Another seemingly difficult transition is moving out of the workforce and into retirement, such that AARP has advised retirees to "avoid annoying each other in retirement" (Johnston, 2023). Yet, in a study of wives with retired husbands, "the majority of wives reported that they had not been bothered at all in the last three months" (Bushfield et al., 2008, pp. 207-208) and another study found that the effects of retirement on marital outcomes were "far subtler than previously believed" (Davey & Szinovacz, 2004, p. 431). A priority for future research to distinguish between the processes that couples employ to navigate these normative, routine transitions from those couples employ to manage unexpected stressful events.

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