

A Comparison of High- and Low-Distress Marriages That End in Divorce

We used data from Waves 1 and 2 of the National Survey of Families and Households to study high- and low-distress marriages that end in divorce. A cluster analysis of 509 couples who divorced between waves revealed that about half were in high-distress relationships and the rest in low-distress relationships. These 2 groups were not artifacts of the timing of the interview or of measurement error. Irrespective of marital quality, couples who divorced shared many risk characteristics, such as having divorced parents. Individuals in high-distress marriages reported increases in happiness following divorce, whereas those in low-distress marriages reported declines in happiness. These results suggest two basic motivations to divorce: poor relationship quality and a weak commitment to marriage.

Why do married couples get divorced? Many people assume that a trajectory of relationship deterioration typically underlies this decision. According to this scenario, couples disagree and fight frequently, partners become increasingly disengaged from one another emotionally, and each partner's marital happiness declines. Eventually, one or both partners decide that the marriage has eroded to the point where it cannot be salvaged. As a result, one partner, often

with the consent of the other, files for marital dissolution.

Although this description undoubtedly describes the trajectories of some marriages that end in divorce, it is not the only pattern. In a series of publications, Amato, Loomis, and Booth (1995); Amato and Booth (1997); Booth and Amato (2001); and Amato (2002) presented evidence that many couples do not experience high levels of discord and marital unhappiness prior to divorce. Contrary to the pattern described above, these couples appear to end their unions for reasons that only partly reflect the quality of the marriage.

Studies that support this conclusion have relied on a single data set: the Marital Instability Over the Life Course Study (Booth, Amato, & Johnson, 1998). In this article, we explore this issue with a different data set: Waves I and II of the National Survey of Families and Households. Our study has several goals. We use longitudinal data to estimate the percentage of couples who have high- and low-distress relationships prior to divorce. We use several methods (described below) to determine whether these two groups may be methodological artifacts. We then use data from Wave I (when all couples were married) to see how couples in high- and low-distress marriages that end in divorce differ from couples who remain together, as well as how these two types of unstable marriages differ from each other. Finally, we consider the possibility that individuals in high-distress marriages experience improvements in subjective well-being following divorce, whereas those in low-distress marriages experience declines in subjective well-being. Although our study is largely exploratory, we

Department of Sociology, 211 Oswald Tower, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802 (pxa6@psu.edu).

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develop some theoretical ideas that make the distinction between the two types of divorce plausible.

THEORY

Scholars have frequently applied social exchange theory to understand why relationships form, continue, and dissolve (Homans, 1950; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Levinger's (1965, 1976) commonly applied theory of divorce is based on this theoretical tradition. This theory contains three basic components: *attractions*, *barriers*, and *alternatives*. First, attraction to a spouse is proportional to the rewards received from the relationship minus the costs involved in the relationship. Rewards include positive aspects of the relationship, such as love, sex, companionship, emotional support, and everyday assistance. Costs reflect negative aspects of the relationship, such as dealing with verbal or physical aggression. In general, people are motivated to remain in marriages when relationship rewards are high and relationship costs low. Second, although a low level of rewards may lead to thoughts of divorce, spouses who wish to end their marriages must overcome a variety of barriers. Barriers include moral or religious values, concerns about social stigma, legal restrictions, and financial dependence on one's spouse. Spouses in a troubled relationship, for example, may decide to stay together because divorce is against their religious beliefs. Third, the presence of alternatives to the marriage can undermine marital stability; conversely, the absence of alternatives can reinforce stability. According to this perspective, people who are moderately happy with their marriages may be tempted to leave their spouses if they believe that a different relationship would bring even greater rewards. Correspondingly, unhappily married individuals may remain with their spouses if they believe that no viable alternatives to the marriage exist. Of course, some spouses may view being alone as a desirable alternative to being in an unrewarding marriage.

Another central construct in exchange theory is the *comparison level for alternatives*. Spouses enter marriage with varied expectations for personal fulfillment. According to this view, given a certain level of rewards, a spouse with modest expectations may be happy, whereas a spouse with high expectations may be unhappy. In other words, the critical factor is not the abso-

lute level of rewards in a relationship but how these rewards compare with people's expectations, as well as how these rewards compare with people's perceptions of rewards that might be obtained from alternative relationships.

Although Levinger's theory focuses primarily on factors that affect marital stability, it is similar to perspectives that focus on relationship commitment (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1992). For example, Johnson et al. (1999) distinguished between three forms of commitment. *Personal commitment* is based on the rewards that partners receive from their relationships. When partners enjoy each other's company and obtain multiple benefits from being together, relationship commitment is strengthened. *Moral commitment* is based on feelings of obligation, moral beliefs that one should remain in a relationship, despite the existence of problems. Finally, *structural commitment* is based on constraints, that is, the existence of barriers to leaving the relationship and the absence of good alternatives to the current partner. Even when spouses are unhappy, they may remain committed to the marriage because of barriers to leaving (e.g., not wanting to give up their homes, concerns about their children's well-being) or because no viable alternative partners are available. From this perspective, rewards, moral beliefs, barriers, and the absence of alternatives are all factors that promote relationship commitment.

Sabatelli and Ripoll (2004) argued that recent historical, economic, and cultural changes in American society have affected the attractions, barriers, and alternatives that determine marital commitment and stability. For example, evidence suggests that people's expectations for marriage have increased in recent decades. Surveys of college students in the 1950s and early 1960s indicate that marriage was valued because it provided a home, a stable and economically secure lifestyle, and the opportunity to raise children. In contrast, more recent surveys indicate that college students value marriage because they expect it to provide a deep source of love and emotional fulfillment (Barich & Bielby, 1996; Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001). Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) and Cherlin (2004) argued that people's views of marriage became more individualistic after the 1960s. According to this perspective, many people now expect marriage to serve as a vehicle for personal growth and

self-actualization. Marriages that do not meet these deeply personal needs may be seen as failures, despite other benefits that these unions may provide. Contemporary wives, in particular, expect more equity and fairness in their marriages than did earlier generations of wives. All things being equal, as people's expectations for marriage increase, an increasing number of people will be unsatisfied with their marriages.

People's perceptions of barriers to leaving marriage have also changed. Attitude surveys reveal that the public became more accepting of divorce between the 1960s and the 1990s (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Surveys also reveal decreases in the extent to which people have confidence in religious answers to important questions, place trust in religious authorities, and pray or read religious materials (Glenn, 1987). This decline in religious influence is likely to have undermined people's beliefs about the sacred nature of marriage and its importance as a religious commitment. Moreover, the massive shift of married women into the paid labor force made spouses less economically dependent on one another and hence made it easier for women to leave unhappy marriages (Nock, 2001). Finally, the laws regulating marital dissolution became more lenient throughout the 20th century, and this trend culminated with the spread of no-fault divorce to all 50 U.S. states during the 1970s and 1980s (Amato & Irving, 2005). Because of these historical and cultural trends, obtaining a divorce is less stigmatizing, costly, and time-consuming today than in the recent past.

Social change is also likely to have affected spouses' perceptions of marital alternatives. The high divorce rate in the United States means that a large number of previously married individuals are on the marriage market at a given time. In an early statement, Farber (1964) argued that our society was moving toward a pattern of "permanent availability" in which anyone, irrespective of current marital status, is considered to be available for marriage with anyone at any time. In addition, growing levels of affluence for those with college educations, real growth in women's wages during recent decades, and the destigmatization of sex outside marriage suggest that many married people may see singlehood as a viable and attractive alternative to being unhappily (or even moderately happily) married.

Given these considerations, we propose that couples who divorce form two basic groups. On the one hand, some people obtain divorces

because their marriages are seriously troubled. These couples fight a great deal, may have disagreements that end in violence, engage in few positive activities together, see many problems in their relationships, and are unhappy with their marriages. These couples break up primarily because their relationships are costly and unsatisfying. Indeed, a large number of studies have shown that the absence of marital attractions, as reflected in people's reports of marital unhappiness and frequent conflict, predict subsequent marital dissolution (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Glenn, 1991; Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Although many of these spouses face barriers and an apparent lack of alternatives, most people who find their marriages to be unrewarding eventually find ways to overcome these structural obstacles (Previti & Amato, 2003).

On the other hand, some spouses may fight infrequently, feel moderately happy (rather than unhappy) with their marriages, continue to engage in some positive interaction with their spouses, and perceive a few but not a large number of problems in their marriages. These spouses may seek a divorce, not because the quality of their marriages is at rock bottom but because they have low levels of commitment to marriage as a lifelong relationship, hold high expectations for marriage, perceive few barriers to leaving their relationships, and believe that viable alternatives to their current partners are available. In these cases, standard marital quality indicators will not be good predictors of subsequent marital dissolution. On the basis of our reasoning, these types of divorces probably were relatively rare in the past but have become more common as the social, cultural, and economic context of marriage has shifted. Few studies, however, have considered these types of divorces or how common they currently are in the population.

GOALS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

Our study has several goals. First, we use Waves I and II of the National Survey of Families and Households to estimate the percentage of couples who have high- and low-distress marriages prior to divorce. We rely on cluster analysis for this purpose. Cluster analysis is a person-centered approach (as opposed to a variable-centered approach) that assigns people to groups on the basis of their similarity across a set of relevant variables. In the present context, we view cluster analysis as a convenient tool for distinguishing

between groups of individuals on the basis of the quality of their marriages prior to divorce.

Second, before proceeding with further analyses, we consider the possibility that the distinction between these two groups may be a methodological artifact. Specifically, in a longitudinal study, high-distress couples who divorce between waves may have been interviewed shortly before the divorce occurred, at a time when marital quality was at its lowest ebb. Correspondingly, low-distress couples who divorce may have been interviewed several years before marital dissolution, at a time when the quality of the relationship had not yet deteriorated. To establish the validity of these two groups, we examine the length of time between the Wave I interview and divorce. If the distinction between these two groups does not depend on when they were interviewed, this strengthens our assumption that these two groups are real and not an artifact of the timing of the interview.

We also consider the possibility that some people may underreport problems in their marriages prior to divorce, either because they are influenced by social desirability concerns or because they are in denial about the state of their marriages. If reports of marital quality contain more measurement error among low-distress couples who divorce than among high-distress couples, then the correlates of marital quality should be weaker among the former group. This assumption follows from the fact that measurement error attenuates the magnitude of correlations. If the correlates of marital quality are comparable in magnitude for the two groups, however, then measurement error is probably no higher among low-distress couples who divorce than among high-distress couples. This latter outcome would indicate that the distinction between the two groups is not an artifact of measurement error.

Third, we examine a number of risk factors that may distinguish between the two proposed groups. For example, we include the following risk factors: a young age at marriage, marital heterogamy, having children, holding strong religious beliefs, believing that divorce would not seriously lower one's quality of life, and infidelity. Some of these risk factors, such as young age at marriage and marital heterogamy, may increase the likelihood of disagreements and hence lower the attractions of marriage. Other variables can be interpreted as barriers to divorce (such as having children or holding strong religious beliefs) or as alternatives to marriage (such as the anticipated quality of life

after divorce or infidelity). Our choice of variables was based on comprehensive reviews of the correlates of divorce and marital discord by Lewis and Spanier (1979) and White (1990).

Fourth, we consider the implications of divorce for personal well-being. A number of studies indicate that divorced individuals have lower levels of subjective well-being than do married individuals (Amato, 2000). Nevertheless, studies suggest that leaving an unsatisfying marriage improves some aspects of mental health, at least in the short term (Wheaton, 1990; Williams, 2003). Consequently, we hypothesize that spouses in seriously troubled marriages experience improvements in self-reported life happiness following divorce. Correspondingly, we hypothesize that spouses in moderately happy marriages who divorce experience declines in self-reported happiness following divorce. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that individuals in moderately happy marriages that end in divorce may not fully anticipate the difficulties and stresses that often accompany and follow marital dissolution.

METHOD

Sample

We used data from the first and second waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996). The first wave of data collection in 1987–1988 included 6,877 married respondents. Interviews were also conducted with 82% ($n = 5,646$) of the spouses of the main respondents. In 1992–1994, 81% ($n = 4,574$) of the main respondents were reinterviewed. We excluded 114 couples (2%) from the sample because one or both partners were missing data on all five marital relationship variables in the first wave, resulting in a final sample size of 4,460 couples. Of these couples, 11% ($n = 509$) had separated or divorced by the second wave.

Missing Data

Because cases with missing data tend to differ from those with complete data, listwise deletion usually makes a sample less representative of the population from which it was drawn. For this reason, we used the expectation maximization (EM) procedure to impute missing data. The first step in this procedure involves a series of

regression analyses to estimate missing values, with all variables in the data set serving as predictors. The algorithm replaces missing values with the estimated values, and the regressions are run a second time. The algorithm then replaces the original estimated values with updated estimates, and the procedure continues in an iterative fashion until changes in the estimated values are minimal. A limitation of the EM procedure is that it tends to underestimate standard errors, which increases the chances of making Type I errors in significance testing. In preliminary analyses, however, we found few differences in substantive results when we compared results with listwise deletion and the EM procedure. The similarity of results was attributable to the fact that the amount of missing data was small for most variables. Moreover, given the exploratory nature of our study, we felt that it was preferable to adopt a liberal rather than a conservative approach to significance testing. (For a general discussion of these issues, see Acock, 1997; Allison, 2001.)

Variables

Marital quality. Variables used to assess the marital relationship included marital happiness, interaction, conflict, violence, and the perceived chance of divorce, all of which were measured at the first wave. Separate variables were created for husbands and wives, thus allowing for the responses of both spouses to be included in the cluster analysis. Missing data ranged from 36 to 248 cases, depending on the variable (<1% to 6% of the sample).

Marital happiness was a single item that asked respondents to describe their marriages from 1 (*very unhappy*) to 7 (*very happy*). Interaction was also a single item that asked how often respondents spent time with their spouses talking or sharing an activity, from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*almost every day*). Conflict represented the mean of six items: how often the respondent argued with the spouse about housework, money, time together, sex, having a(nother) child, and in-laws, from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*almost every day*). The alpha reliability coefficient for this scale was .72 for wives and .71 for husbands. Violence was a single item that asked how often during arguments the respondent hits or throws things at the spouse, from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Finally, respondents were asked to rate their chances of divorcing in the next year, from 1 (*very low*) to 5 (*very high*).

Risk factors for divorce. Variables that reflect risk factors for divorce were obtained from the initial interview. (Two exceptions are noted later.) We measured each variable at the couple level by combining the risk factors of both spouses. Because marriages can be ended by a single spouse in most states, we wanted to ensure that risk factors for both spouses were included in the analysis. We assessed spousal dissimilarity using a heterogamy index. Assessing dissimilarity in each area, however, was not practical, given the large number of variables involved.

We organized variables into three groups: (a) variables that may affect the rewards and costs of marriage, (b) variables that represent barriers to leaving the marriage, and (c) variables that represent alternatives to the marriage. Of course, some variables fall into more than one group. For example, growing up with divorced parents may increase the risk of divorce because offspring reach adulthood with poor conflict resolution skills (which makes marriage less rewarding) or more accepting attitudes toward divorce (which lowers the barriers to leaving the relationship). Our grouping, therefore, is meant only to simplify the presentation of variables and does not reflect a theoretical judgment about the causal role of each factor. Across these variables, missing data ranged from 0 to 342 cases (0% – 8% of the sample).

We begin with variables that may affect the rewards and costs of marriage. Age represented the mean of the ages of the husband and the wife. Young age at marriage was a binary variable that indicated whether one or both spouses were teenagers at the time of marriage. We created a binary version of this variable because marrying as a teenager is one of the strongest predictors of divorce. Once individuals are in their 20s, the risk of divorce declines substantially. Race or ethnicity was based on two dummy variables: one for marriages in which both spouses were Black and a second for marriages in which both spouses were Latino. The omitted group contained couples in which both spouses were White, as well as a small number of couples who did not share race or ethnicity. Education was the average of the two partners' level of attainment: 1 = *less than a high school diploma*, 2 = *high school diploma or GED*, and 3 = *some postsecondary education*. Heterogamy was based on three variables: age (spouses differing by more than 5 years), race, and education. This index yielded scores ranging from 0 (*homogamous in all three*

areas) to 3 (*heterogamous in all three areas*). Income was the log of the sum of the wages and salaries reported by the husband and wife. Wives' employment was a binary variable that compared wives who earned any income during the previous year versus those who earned no income. With respect to cohabitation, one binary variable indicated whether the couple cohabited premaritally, and a second binary variable indicated whether one or both spouses had cohabited with someone else other than the spouse prior to the current marriage. An additional binary variable indicated whether either partner had children from another union, either coresident or living elsewhere. Finally, a binary variable was based on whether either spouse reported that they or their spouse had a problem with alcohol abuse.

With respect to barriers to leaving the marriage, one binary variable indicated whether one or both spouses had divorced prior to their current marriage, and a second binary variable indicated whether one or both spouses' parents had divorced. Duration of marriage was the time in years from the wedding date to the date of the first interview. Two binary variables reflected religiosity: whether the marriage involved a religious versus a civil ceremony and whether one or both spouses attended religious services weekly or more. Another binary variable indicated whether minor children lived in the household. Disapproval of divorce was measured by two variables. The first measured the average response of husbands and wives to the following statement: "Marriage is a lifetime relationship and should never be ended except under extreme circumstances" (responses from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The second measured the average response of husbands and wives to the following statement: "A couple with an unhappy marriage should avoid getting a divorce if their youngest child is under five" (responses from 1 = *strongly agree* to 7 = *strongly disagree*). Conservative family attitudes represented the average response of husbands and wives to 12 items, with high scores indicating more conservative beliefs. Example of these items include "It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family" and "It is all right for an unmarried couple live together even if they have no interest in considering marriage" (responses from 1 = *strongly agree* to 7 = *strongly disagree*). The alpha reliability

coefficient for this scale was .80 for husbands as well as for wives.

Perceived alternatives to marriage was based on a series of questions asking respondents about their expected quality of life if they were to divorce. (Note that all respondents were married at Wave 1 when they answered these questions.) The five items asked about standard of living, social life, career opportunities, overall happiness, and sex life, with response options ranging from 1 = *much worse* to 5 = *much better*. The average of the responses of husbands and wives formed the variable, with higher scores indicating a better quality of life after divorce and thus more alternatives. The alpha reliability coefficient for this scale was .88 for husbands as well as for wives.

In addition, couples who separated or divorced between Wave 1 and Wave 2 were asked to report on their own and their former spouse's involvement with someone else before the marriage ended. We coded extramarital involvement if either person reported in Wave 2 that they or their spouse were involved with someone else. Research suggests that infidelity can be a cause as well as a consequence of marital distress. In a longitudinal study, Prevetti and Amato (2003) found that unhappily married individuals were more likely than happily married individuals to report that they or their spouses had engaged in extramarital sex. Nevertheless, after an incident of extramarital sex, marital happiness declined even more. Moreover, extramarital sex predicted divorce even with earlier levels of marital quality held constant. In the present study, we viewed infidelity primarily as an alternative to the marriage. Former spouses were also asked to report on how soon they began to date someone after the separation (1 = *one month*, 2 = *one to six months*, 3 = *six months to one year*, 4 = *one year or more*, and 5 = *never dated*).

Life happiness. Life happiness was measured at both Waves 1 and 2 with a single item that asked respondents to describe their lives overall. Both spouses responded to this item, and response options ranged from 1 (*very unhappy*) to 7 (*very happy*).

RESULTS

Cluster Analysis

The first step involved a cluster analysis using the five marital quality variables described

earlier: marital happiness, interaction, conflict, violence, and the estimated chances of divorce. The reports by wives and husbands were included in the analysis, resulting in 10 marital quality variables. We standardized each variable across the entire sample (including divorced and nondivorced cases) to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 prior to analysis.

We then used the Two-Step Clustering procedure, available in SPSS (release 13.0), to cluster the 509 divorced couples. During the first step of this procedure, each case is either merged into a previously formed subcluster or starts a new subcluster, depending on the mean and variance of each of the variables used in the categorization process. During the second step, SPSS uses a hierarchical clustering method to cluster the subclusters. Both steps were based on a log-likelihood distance measure, with the distance between two clusters defined as the decrease in log likelihood if the two clusters were combined into a single cluster. The algorithm also calculates the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) for a variety of clustering solutions and uses this value to find an initial estimate of the optimal number of clusters. This estimate is then refined by finding the largest increase in the distance between cluster centers at each step.

Table 1 shows the results of this procedure for solutions with 1 – 10 clusters. Note that the BIC value declined substantially between the one- and two-cluster solutions, declined gradually up to the four-cluster solution, and then increased for five- and higher order cluster solutions.

Table 1. Information on Cluster Solutions 1 Through 10

Number of Clusters	BIC	BIC Change	Ratio of Distance Measures ^a
1	3,282.99	—	—
2	2,727.15	–555.84	2.93
3	2,611.10	–116.05	1.62
4	2,582.06	–29.04	1.44
5	2,596.23	14.17	1.21
6	2,627.67	31.44	1.13
7	2,668.31	40.64	1.01
8	2,709.45	41.13	1.12
9	2,757.88	48.44	1.15
10	2,814.49	56.61	1.09

Note: BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion.

^aThis statistic represents the distance between clusters' centers as additional clusters are added to the solution. A high value indicates that the clusters are well separated.

Because low values of BIC are desirable, this criterion would suggest that the four-cluster solution was optimal. The ratio of distance measures, however, was particularly high for the two-cluster solution. (In general terms, for a one-cluster solution, each case's distance from the cluster center reflects the sum of the differences between the case's mean on each variable and the corresponding means for the full sample. In higher order solutions, the case's distance from the cluster center reflects the sum of the difference between the case's mean on each variable and the corresponding means for the cluster to which it has been assigned. Another way of viewing this outcome is to say that as cases fit better into their assigned clusters, the clusters became more distinct.) The ratio of distance measures indicated that shifting from one to two clusters improved the fit of the typical case to its assigned cluster by threefold. Higher order solutions did not produce better results. The SPSS algorithm chose the two-cluster solution as optimal, using the large decline in the BIC value *and* the high ratio of distance measures. (For more information on this method, see SPSS Corporation, 2001.)

Columns 1 and 2 of Table 2 show the means and standard deviations for the 10 variables (five measures of marital quality \times two spouses) for the two clusters of divorced couples. For comparative purposes, we also included the means and standard deviations for the 3,951 couples who did not divorce. (Note that these cases were *not* part of the cluster analysis.) The couples in Cluster 1 (Column 1) reported high levels of marital distress prior to divorce. For example, wives in this cluster reported a mean level of marital happiness that was 1 and one-third standard deviations below the mean for the entire sample (-1.32). The corresponding mean for husbands was -1.16 . Comparable results appeared for interaction, conflict, violence, and the chances of divorce. Across all these variables, husbands and wives in Cluster 1 reported scores that differed substantially from spouses in the overall sample. Husbands as well as wives in Cluster 1 appeared to be experiencing a high level of marital distress prior to divorce.

In contrast, the couples in Cluster 2 reported average levels of marital quality across most indicators. (Because all variables were standardized, the means across the entire sample were 0.) For example, the mean marital happiness scores of wives and husbands in Cluster 2 were 0.17 and

Table 2. Means of Marital Quality Variables by Marriage Type and Gender

Marital Dimensions	(1) High-Distress Divorced Couples	(2) Low-Distress Divorced Couples	(3) Continuously Married Couples	Significant Differences ($p < .05$)
Marital happiness				
Wife	-1.32 (1.26)	0.17 (0.75)	0.07 (0.94)	1 < 2; 1 < 3
Husband	-1.16 (1.22)	0.30 (0.59)	0.05 (0.96)	1 < 2; 1 < 3; 2 > 3
Interaction				
Wife	-0.95 (1.21)	0.10 (0.81)	0.05 (0.97)	1 < 2; 1 < 3
Husband	-0.71 (1.18)	0.11 (0.81)	0.04 (0.98)	1 < 2; 1 < 3
Conflict				
Wife	1.17 (1.29)	0.03 (0.74)	-0.07 (0.95)	1 > 2; 1 > 3
Husband	1.17 (1.29)	0.03 (0.74)	-0.07 (0.95)	1 > 2; 1 > 3
Violence				
Wife	0.95 (1.88)	-0.07 (0.66)	-0.05 (0.91)	1 > 2; 1 > 3
Husband	0.72 (1.78)	-0.05 (0.75)	-0.04 (0.93)	1 > 2; 1 > 3
Chance of divorce				
Wife	1.77 (1.46)	-0.01 (0.83)	-0.11 (0.87)	1 > 2; 1 > 3
Husband	1.50 (1.28)	-0.21 (0.63)	-0.08 (0.92)	1 > 2; 1 > 3
<i>n</i>	242	267	3,951	

Note: National Survey of Families and Households, $N = 4,460$. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

0.30, respectively. Similarly, the mean interaction scores of wives and husbands in Cluster 2 were 0.10 and 0.11. Correspondingly, husbands and wives both scored close to the mean of the entire sample with respect to conflict, violence, and the chances of divorce. In general, couples in this group did not appear to be experiencing a high level of marital distress prior to divorce.

Of the 509 cases of divorce, 242 (48%) were classified into the high-distress group and 267 (52%) into the low-distress group. Weighting the data to make them nationally representative changed the percentages only slightly. (Note that clustering algorithms require unweighted data, although the data can be weighted once the clusters are formed.) The weighted results indicated that 49% of cases fell into the high-distress group and 51% into the low-distress group. Overall, it appears that about half of all divorces are preceded by relatively low levels of marital distress. Although not shown in a table, we also conducted the analysis separately for husbands and wives and came up with a virtually identical two-cluster solution.

Table 2 also summarizes the results of a series of *t* tests that assessed whether the differences between means in each row were statistically significant ($p < .05$). For each marital quality indicator, the means for the high-distress group were significantly different from those for the low-distress group. This result was anticipated

because the marital quality variables defined the two clusters in the first place. This result does inform us, however, that all the 10 variables contributed to the formation of the two clusters. More importantly, Table 1 also shows that the means for the high-distress group were significantly different from those for the bulk of the sample of couples who did not divorce (Column 3). Comparing Columns 2 and 3 indicates that low-distress couples (who later divorced) generally did not differ from those who remained married, with one exception. Husbands in low-distress marriages that ended in divorce reported somewhat higher levels of marital happiness than did those who remained married. Although this finding is counterintuitive, the magnitude of the difference was modest.

The results given in Table 2 suggest that marital quality indicators were not good predictors of divorce for couples in the low-distress group. To confirm this conclusion, we conducted a discriminant analysis in which membership in the three groups (high-distress divorce, low-distress divorce, and continuously married) was predicted by the 10 marital quality variables, shown in Table 1. The discriminant analysis correctly predicted that 53% of couples in the high-distress group would divorce. In contrast, the analysis predicted that *no* couples in the low-distress group would divorce. (The analysis also incorrectly predicted that 4% of continuously

married couples would divorce.) These results demonstrate that standard marital quality indicators are not good predictors of divorce for many couples.

Higher Order Cluster Solutions

Although the two-cluster solution was selected because it provided the optimal combination of a low BIC value and a high ratio of distance value, it is useful to consider briefly the higher order solutions. The three-cluster solution essentially splits the high-distress groups into two subgroups. Both subgroups reported a high level of conflict, a high chance of divorce, a low level of marital happiness, and a low level of interaction. The two groups differed primarily with respect to marital violence, with one group reporting little violence and the second reporting a high level of violence. This result indicates that some high-distress marriages are relatively violent, whereas others are not. Among high-distress marriages, 43% were in the high-violence group and 57% in the low-violence group. Reports of violence in these subgroups did not differ for husbands and wives.

The four-cluster solution essentially splits the high-distress group into three subgroups. All three groups reported a high level of conflict and a low level of marital interaction. The first and second groups, compared with the third group, reported an especially low level of marital happiness and an especially high chance of divorce. With respect to violence, the first group reported an especially high level, the second group reported an especially low level, and the third group reported a moderate level. These results are difficult to interpret, although it appears that the groups differed on overall distress, with the first group being highly distressed, the second group being moderately distressed, and the third group being less distressed (but with some violence). Despite the fact that there was some variability within the high-distress group, we preferred the two-cluster solution for the sake of parsimony.

Timing of Interviews and Divorces

One explanation for the two divorce clusters is that they are an artifact of the timing of the interview. Perhaps, high-distress relationships were reported by couples who were interviewed just before they divorced. Correspondingly, low-distress relationships may have been reported

by couples who were interviewed many years before they divorced. Had these couples been interviewed closer to the time of divorce, they may also have reported high levels of marital distress.

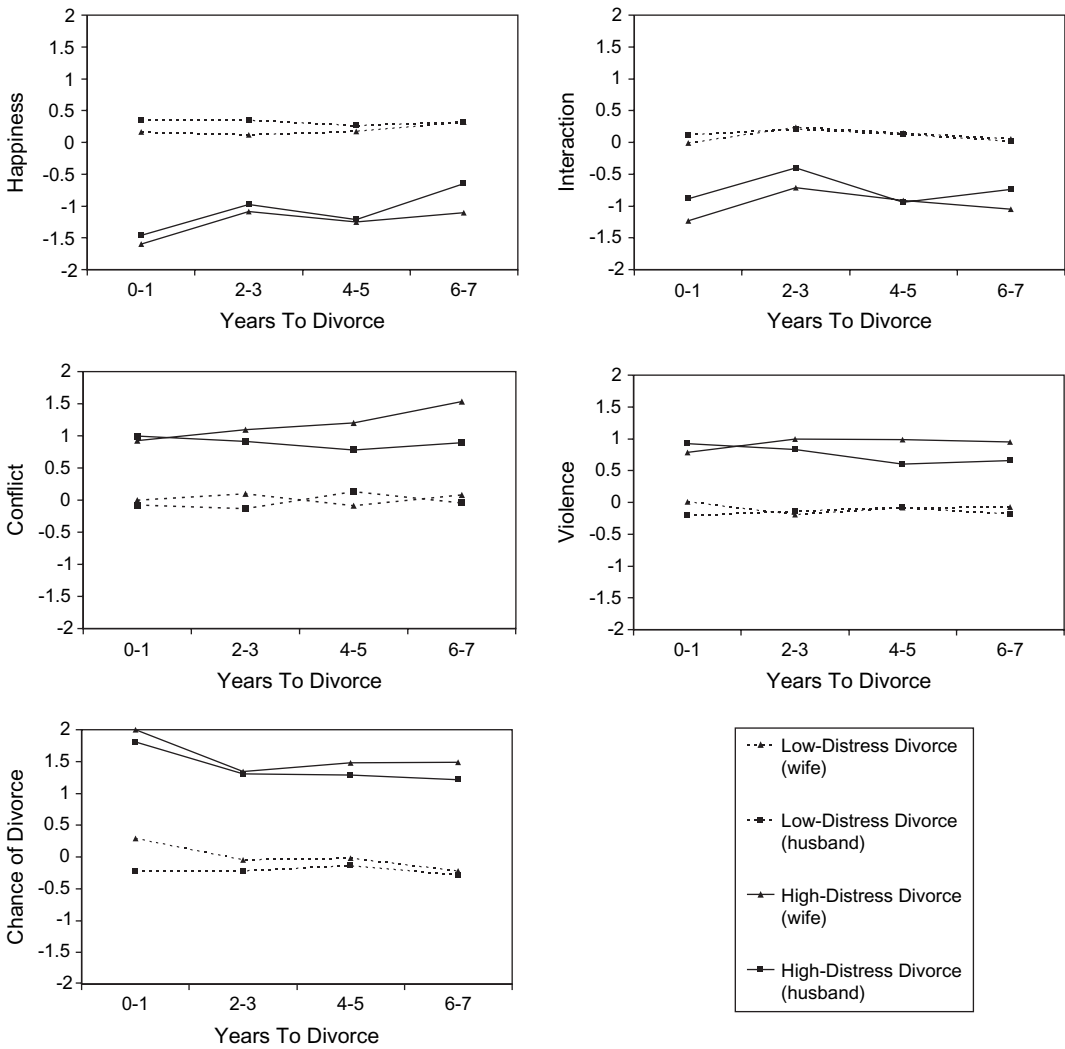
We investigated this possibility by observing the mean of each marital quality variable by the time from interview to divorce, as shown in the five panels of Figure 1. Couples were grouped by whether the interview took place 0–1 year prior to the divorce, 2–3 years prior, 4–5 years prior, or 6–7 years prior. Responses of husbands and wives are shown separately for the low- and high-distress divorce groups. If the temporal artifact explanation is correct, levels of reported conflict, violence, and the chance of divorce should increase as the time of divorce grows closer. Similarly, levels of reported happiness and interaction should decline. We see this pattern somewhat for the high-stress group, particularly for the chance of divorce variable (Panel 5). For the low-stress group, however, there was little change across time in any dimension of marital quality. These results mean that regardless of when low-distress couples were interviewed, they reported better quality relationships than did couples in high-distress marriages. These findings suggest that the differences between high- and low-distress couples who ended their marriages in divorce were not an artifact of the timing of the interview.

Measurement Error

As we noted earlier, couples in the low-distress group may have given inaccurate answers to marital quality questions, perhaps because of social desirability concerns or a lack of insight into their relationship quality. If this possibility is correct, then the reports of individuals in low-distress marriages headed for divorce should contain a relatively high degree of measurement error.

Numerous studies have found that aspects of marital quality are consistently associated with measures of subjective well-being (Glenn, 1991; Marks & Lambert, 1998; Williams, 2003). To cast more light on this issue, we calculated the correlations between the five marital quality variables and spouses' reports of overall life happiness at the first wave. Correlations were calculated separately for husbands and wives in each of the three groups in Table 1. In other words, we generated five correlation coefficients separately for husbands and wives in each group. We then calculated the root

FIGURE 1. MARITAL QUALITY INDICATORS BY YEARS FROM INTERVIEW UNTIL DIVORCE.



Note: National Survey of Families and Households—high distress, $n = 242$; low distress, $n = 267$. All variables are standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Regression analyses indicate that no slopes were significant, except the happiness of high-distress husbands and reported chance of divorce by high-distress wives and husbands.

mean square of the correlations for each spouse, using the following formula:

$$\text{Root mean square} = \sqrt{(r_1^2 + r_2^2 + r_3^2 + r_4^2 + r_5^2)/5}.$$

The average correlations between the five dimensions of marital quality and life happiness were .26 for husbands in high-distress marriages that ended in divorce, .20 for husbands in low-distress marriages that ended in divorce, and .27 for hus-

bands in marriages that remained continuously together. For wives, the corresponding correlations were .34, .29, and .31. Across both genders, the correlations between life happiness and marital quality were lowest in the low-distress group. Nevertheless, the differences between pairs of correlation coefficients were not significant (all $p > .10$). We observed comparable patterns of results when we used the risk factors (described above), rather than life happiness, as criterion

variables. These results do not support the assumption that the reports of spouses in the low-distress group contained significantly more measurement error than did the reports of spouses in the other two groups. Instead, these results suggest that spouses in the low-distress group were not seriously affected by social desirability bias, a lack of self-awareness, or other factors that might affect the validity of their reports.

Risk Factors for Divorce in the Three Groups

Having established that the two divorced groups were not artifacts of the timing of measurement or measurement error, we next examined how a number of background variables often related to divorce in previous studies differed among the three groups in our study. Table 3 contains details of this analysis.

Table 3 indicates that high-distress marriages that ended in divorce were different in many ways from marriages in which the couples remained together (Column 1 vs. Column 3). Compared with couples who remained married, high-distress couples who divorced were younger, had higher incomes, were more likely to have an employed wife, were married for a shorter time, were more likely to have cohabited prior to marriage, were more likely to have cohabited with another partner prior to marriage, married at an earlier age, were more likely to have grown up with divorced parents, were more likely to have experienced a divorce prior to the current marriage, were more likely to have stepchildren, scored higher on the marital heterogamy index, were less likely to have been married in a religious setting, had less conservative family values, held more liberal attitudes toward divorce, were more likely to believe that their quality of life would improve following divorce, and were more likely to report problems with alcohol abuse. These findings are generally consistent with a large number of studies that have examined the demographic and attitudinal predictors of divorce (Lewis & Spanier, 1979; White, 1990). The one exception involved family income. The higher level of family income among couples who divorced, however, was attributable largely to the fact that most of the wives in this group were in the labor force. Consequently, the economic independence of spouses in these marriages is consistent with being divorced.

Table 3 also reveals that couples in low-distress marriages that ended in divorce reported many of the same risk factors for marital dissolu-

tion (Column 2 vs. Column 3). Compared with couples who remained continuously married, low-distress couples who divorced tended to be younger, had more family income, were more likely to have employed wives, had shorter duration marriages, were more likely to have cohabited with their spouses prior to marriage, were more likely to have cohabited with someone else other than their spouses, were more likely to have grown up with divorced parents, were more likely to have stepchildren, were less likely to have had a religious wedding, were less likely to attend religious services together, held less conservative family values, were more likely to believe that divorce is acceptable when children are in the household, and were more likely to believe that life after divorce would be satisfying. In other words, low- and high-distress couples who divorced exhibited a similar profile of risk factors for marital dissolution.

Compared with high-distress marriages that ended in divorce, low-distress marriages that ended in divorce tended to be of shorter duration and the couples were less likely to have children, attended religious services more frequently, and held less positive views about their lives following divorce (Column 1 vs. Column 2). In general, however, the two groups were more similar than different in their profile of background characteristics.

Although not shown in Table 3, we also used Wave II data to see if the two divorced groups differed with respect to having extramarital affairs or in the length of time before dating began. Extramarital affairs suggest the presence of alternative partners, and in fact, more than two thirds of all couples who divorced reported instances of infidelity around the time the marriage was breaking up. Couples in low-distress divorces, however, were no more likely to have extramarital involvements than were those in high-distress divorces (72% vs. 73%, respectively). Similarly, a quick initiation of dating would suggest that a new partner was known to the spouse before the marriage ended. Once again, however, we found no significant differences between the two clusters, with 38% of high-distress divorced partners and 42% of low-distress divorced partners dating within 1 month of separation. It appears that alternatives to the current marriage were common among both divorced groups.

In summary, for most characteristics, the two divorce clusters were not different from one another and showed more risk factors for divorce

Table 3. *Couple Characteristics by Marriage Type*

Couple Variables	(1) High-Distress Divorced Couples	(2) Low-Distress Divorced Couples	(3) Continuously Married Couples	Significant Differences ($p < .05$)
Divorce risk factors				
Couple age	33.30 (8.67)	32.91 (8.95)	43.10 (14.46)	1 < 3; 2 < 3
Young age at marriage (either spouse) (%)	36	29	27	1 > 3
Both Black (%)	13	10	9	
Both Latino (%)	3	6	5	
Couple education	2.23 (0.63)	2.28 (0.61)	2.28 (0.65)	
Heterogamy index	0.82 (0.72)	0.83 (0.73)	0.67 (0.70)	1 > 3; 2 > 3
Couple income (log base 10)	4.00 (0.75)	4.06 (0.77)	3.81 (1.22)	1 > 3; 2 > 3
Wife has job (%)	77	78	67	1 > 3; 2 > 3
Duration of marriage	8.12 (7.20)	6.76 (6.86)	17.16 (14.53)	1 > 2; 1 < 3; 2 < 3
Stepchildren (%)	17	21	9	1 > 3; 2 > 3
Cohabited before marriage (%)	45	40	22	1 > 3; 2 > 3
Alcohol problem (either spouse) (%)	21	7	5	1 > 2; 1 > 3
Barriers to divorce				
Married in church (%)	67	70	81	1 < 3; 2 < 3
Attend religious service weekly (either spouse) (%)	24	34	46	1 < 2; 1 < 3; 2 < 3
Minor children in household (%)	78	66	55	1 > 2; 1 > 3; 2 > 3
Divorce disapproval: marriage is for life	3.68 (0.92)	4.02 (0.86)	4.09 (0.81)	1 < 2; 1 < 3
Divorce disapproval: no divorce if young children are present	3.83 (1.38)	3.89 (1.46)	4.07 (1.48)	1 < 3; 2 < 3
Conservative family attitudes	3.08 (0.41)	3.15 (0.44)	3.35 (0.49)	1 < 3; 2 < 3
Prior divorce (either spouse) (%)	41	43	29	1 > 3; 2 > 3
Prior cohabitations (either spouse) (%)	38	29	14	1 > 3; 2 > 3
Parental divorce (either spouse) (%)	33	29	16	1 > 3; 2 > 3
Alternatives to marriage				
Expected quality of life after divorce	2.97 (0.53)	2.37 (0.41)	2.30 (0.53)	1 > 2; 1 > 3; 2 > 3
<i>n</i>	242	267	3,951	

Note: National Survey of Families and Households, $N = 4,460$. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

than did the continuously married group. Moreover, both divorce groups reported high levels of infidelity, and a substantial percentage of former spouses in both groups began dating within 1 month after the separation. These risk factors, combined with the availability of alternative partners, appear to have influenced the decision to divorce among low-distress couples, despite the absence of a seriously troubled relationship.

Multivariate Analysis

We also conducted a multivariate analysis that considered all the background variables given in Table 3 simultaneously. Because many of the variables shown in Table 3 are correlated, a multivariate analysis results in a more parsimonious set of predictors.

Table 4 presents the results of multinomial logistic regression models that compare the groups. The first comparison (shown on the left side of the table) reveals that couples in high-distress marriages that ended in divorce, compared with those who remained continuously married (the omitted comparison group), were more likely to be young at the time of the first interview, to have married at a young age, to have a dependent child, to report problems with alcohol, to have cohabited with someone other than the current spouse, to have divorced parents, and to hold positive views of life after divorce. They were also less likely to be Latino.

The middle set of columns in Table 4 indicate that couples in low-distress marriages that ended

Table 4. Multinomial Logistic Regression Analysis Showing Predictors of Membership in the High- and Low-Distress Divorce Groups

Characteristics	High-Distress Divorced Couples vs. Continuously Married Couples			Low-Distress Divorced Couples vs. Continuously Married Couples			Low-Distress Divorced Couples vs. High-Distress Divorced Couples		
	Coefficient	SE	Odds Ratio	Coefficient	SE	Odds Ratio	Coefficient	SE	Odds Ratio
Age	-0.06**	0.02	0.94	-0.04***	0.01	0.96	0.01	0.02	1.01
Young age at marriage	0.66**	0.21	1.93	0.49**	0.19	1.64	-0.16	0.27	0.85
Both Black	-0.25	0.25	0.78	0.24	0.24	1.27	0.49	0.32	1.63
Both Latino	-1.19*	0.48	0.30	0.09	0.29	1.10	1.29**	0.54	3.62
Education	-0.09	0.15	0.91	-0.21	0.13	0.81	-0.12	0.18	0.89
Heterogamy index	0.20	0.11	1.22	0.23*	0.10	1.26	0.03	0.14	1.03
Income (log)	0.00	0.03	1.00	0.00	0.02	1.00	0.01	0.03	1.01
Wife employed	0.16	0.20	1.18	0.12	0.17	1.13	-0.04	0.25	0.96
Duration of marriage	0.00	0.02	1.00	-0.05**	0.02	0.95	-0.04	0.02	0.96
Stepchildren	-0.03	0.23	0.97	0.27	0.21	1.31	0.29	0.30	1.34
Cohabited prior to marriage	0.02	0.18	1.02	-0.12	0.16	0.88	-0.14	0.23	0.87
Problem with alcohol	1.04***	0.21	2.82	0.23	0.26	1.26	-0.80**	0.31	0.45
Religious wedding	-0.16	0.17	0.85	-0.31*	0.16	0.73	-0.15	0.22	0.86
Attend church weekly	-0.30	0.18	0.74	0.06	0.16	1.07	0.36	0.23	1.44
Resident child	0.37*	0.19	1.45	-0.24	0.16	0.79	-0.61**	0.24	0.54
Disapprove of divorce	-0.18	0.10	0.84	0.05	0.09	1.06	0.23	0.12	1.26
Disapprove of divorce with children	0.08	0.06	1.08	0.02	0.05	1.02	-0.06	0.08	0.94
Conservative family attitudes	-0.14	0.22	0.87	-0.41*	0.19	0.67	-0.27	0.28	0.76
Prior marriage	0.40	0.22	1.49	0.46**	0.20	1.58	0.05	0.28	1.05
Prior cohabitation	0.74***	0.19	2.09	0.17	0.17	1.18	-0.57**	0.24	0.57
Parental divorce	0.39*	0.17	1.48	0.26	0.15	1.30	-0.13	0.21	0.88
Positive view of life after divorce	2.08***	0.16	7.98	-0.13	0.14	0.87	-2.21	0.20	0.11
Intercept	-6.04***	1.10		0.93	0.94		6.97***	1.38	
Likelihood ratio χ^2 (df)			784*** (44)			784*** (44)			784*** (44)

Note: National Survey of Families and Households, N = 4,460.

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

in divorce, compared with those who remained continuously married (the omitted comparison group), were more likely to be young, to have married at a young age, to be in heterogamous marriages, to have been married for a comparatively short time, to have had a secular (rather than a religious) wedding, to be in a second- or higher order marriage, and to have less conservative family attitudes.

Finally, the set of columns on the right side of Table 4 show that couples in low-distress marriages that ended in divorce, compared with those in high-distress marriages that ended in divorce (the omitted comparison group), were more likely to be Latino, to have a child living with

them, to report alcohol problems, to have cohabited with another partner prior to the current marriage, and to hold positive views about the quality of life after divorce. Despite these differences, the multivariate analysis like the bivariate analysis shown in Table 3 indicates that both groups of couples who ended their marriages in divorce were more similar to one another than to couples who remained continuously married.

Divorce and Life Happiness

A large number of studies have shown that subjective well-being tends to decline following divorce (see Amato, 2000, for a review). No

doubt, divorce tends to be a stressful experience for most individuals. Many former wives experience a decline in standard of living, are forced to move to less expensive accommodation, and (for mothers) raise their children without the daily support of their children's fathers. Many former husbands, if they are fathers, see their children less frequently and find that emotional ties with their children become weaker. For many spouses, irrespective of gender, there is a sense of loss, feelings of regret, and the challenges of adapting to a single lifestyle.

Nevertheless, spouses in high-distress marriages are likely to experience a sense of relief when an unrewarding and perhaps abusive, relationship ends. Indeed, stress perspectives suggest that leaving a role in which one is unhappy can result in an improvement in subjective well-being (Wheaton, 1990; Williams, 2003). For this reason, we assumed that individuals in high-distress marriages are likely to experience an increase in life happiness. The situation is likely to differ for individuals in low-distress marriages that end in divorce. Irrespective of the reasons for which these individuals ended their marriages, they may have underestimated the extent to which marital dissolution is a stressful process. Consistent with this notion, a recent study by Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, and Elder (2006) found that stressful life events accumulate more quickly over time among divorced individuals than among married individuals.

Table 5 shows the mean reported life happiness of men and women prior to and following divorce. The first row indicates that at t_1 , wives in high-distress marriages that ended in divorce reported less happiness than did those in low-distress marriages that ended in divorce and those in marriages that did not end in divorce.

The second row indicates that at t_2 , wives in high-distress marriages that ended in divorce continued to report the lowest level of happiness. Nevertheless, their happiness ratings increased between t_1 and t_2 , and the change score in Row 3 indicates that this increase was statistically significant. In contrast, wives in low-distress marriages that ended in divorce did not differ from continuously married wives at t_1 . At t_2 , however, these wives reported a lower level of happiness than did those who remained continuously married. Row 3 indicates that the decline in happiness for this group was statistically significant. These results indicate that divorce was followed by an increase in life happiness for women in high-distress marriages and a decrease in happiness for those in low-distress marriages.

The data for husbands' happiness appear in the lower half of Table 5. These results were similar to those for wives. Row 6 indicates that high-distress marriages that ended in divorce were followed by an increase in men's reported happiness, whereas low-distress marriages that ended in divorce were followed by a decrease in men's reported happiness. For spouses of both genders, these results are consistent with the notion that leaving a troubled relationship promotes subjective well-being, whereas leaving a moderately happy relationship erodes subjective well-being. The decline in happiness following divorce for spouses in the low-distress group suggests that they may have overestimated the rewards of alternatives to the current marriage.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis indicates that there are two distinct groups of married couples who divorce. The

Table 5. Changes in Life Happiness Between t_1 and t_2 by Gender and Type of Marriage

Life Happiness	(1) High-Distress Divorced Couples	(2) Low-Distress divorced Couples	(3) Continuously Married Couples	Significant Differences ($p < .05$)
Women (t_1)	4.49 (1.32)	5.81 (1.18)	5.71 (1.22)	1 < 2; 1 < 3
Women (t_2)	4.91 (1.30)	5.18 (1.18)	5.49 (1.20)	1 < 2; 1 < 3; 2 < 3
Women ($t_2 - t_1$)	0.42*** (1.69)	-0.63*** (1.47)	-0.22*** (1.29)	1 > 2; 1 > 3; 2 < 3
Men (t_1)	4.68 (1.23)	5.68 (1.16)	5.67 (1.20)	1 < 2; 1 < 3
Men (t_2)	4.92 (1.23)	5.01 (1.29)	5.48 (1.11)	1 < 3; 2 < 3
Men ($t_2 - t_1$)	0.24* (1.78)	-0.67*** (1.54)	-0.19*** (1.54)	1 > 2; 1 > 3; 2 < 3
<i>n</i> Couples	242	267	3,951	

Note: National Survey of Families and Households, $N = 4,460$. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

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

high-distress group combines many risk factors for divorce with an unhappy, conflicted relationship. The low-distress group, by contrast, combines a similar set of risk factors with a moderately happy, low-conflict relationship. Some of the risk factors held in common by the two divorce groups—and distinct from couples who stayed married—include marrying at an early age, cohabiting with other partners prior to the current marriage, having divorced parents, having stepchildren in the household, holding liberal family values, and believing in the acceptability of divorce. Members of both divorce groups also appear to have had access to alternative partners, as reflected in high levels of infidelity and early dating following separation.

Although the two divorced groups are similar in their pattern of risk factors and potential alternatives, they differ dramatically in relationship quality. High-distress couples who divorce report extremely low levels of happiness and marital interaction and extremely high levels of conflict, violence, and perceived instability. Low-distress couples who divorce, in contrast, report essentially average levels of each indicator of marital quality.

We are confident that these two groups are distinct from one another. These groups do not appear to be artifacts of interview timing or measurement error. Moreover, group membership appears to have consequences for well-being after divorce. As predicted, those in high-distress marriages experienced an increase in life happiness after the divorce, whereas those in low-distress marriages experienced a decrease in life happiness following divorce. These findings support the validity of the distinction between these two groups of couples. Support for the existence of these two groups, from the National Survey of Families and Households, is consistent with earlier research from the Marital Instability Over the Life Course Study (e.g., Booth & Amato, 2001).

The reasons why couples experiencing high-distress marriages seek divorce are obvious. These couples are unhappy with their relationships, rarely engage in positive activities with their spouses, have frequent disagreements with their spouses across a range of issues, have a high risk of experiencing violence, and perceive their relationships to be unstable. In contrast, the motivations for couples in the low-distress marriages to divorce do not appear to be driven primarily by relationship quality. As we noted earlier, standard indicators of marital quality, such as marital hap-

piness and reports of conflict, do not predict marital disruption among this group. Although further research will help us understand more fully the factors that predispose low-distress couples to divorce, we offer several tentative theoretical ideas here.

Exchange theory provides one set of ideas (Levinger, 1965, 1976). A completely happy couple will perceive a high level of rewards and hence will have little motivation to leave the relationship, irrespective of barriers and alternatives. In contrast, most truly miserable couples eventually find ways to end their relationships, irrespective of the existence of barriers or the lack of alternatives (Previti & Amato, 2004). For a couple with a moderate level of happiness, however, the existence of barriers and the availability of alternatives may determine whether the marriage continues or ends. In the present study, many of the risk factors for divorce found among low-distress couples who ended their marriages reflect weak barriers (such as low levels of attendance at religious services and liberal attitudes toward divorce) or alternatives to the present relationship (such as involvement with other partners prior to divorce). The absence of barriers and the availability of alternatives may entice some moderately happy individuals to leave their marriages and to seek greater happiness with different partners.

We also believe that the construct of relationship commitment is relevant to understanding the phenomenon of low-distress marriages that end in divorce (Johnson et al., 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Indeed, it is precisely when couples are not particularly happy or unhappy that relationship commitment comes into sharp relief. After all, happily married couples are likely to be highly committed to their relationships if only because these relationships are rewarding. Correspondingly, unhappily married couples are likely to be weakly committed to their relationships because few rewards are forthcoming. Consistent with this view, standard measures of marital happiness and marital commitment tend to be highly correlated. Couples with an average level of happiness who divorce, however, can be viewed, almost by definition, as having a low level of commitment. These couples may have begun their relationship with a relatively low level of commitment or their commitment may have been eroded by events that occurred during the marriage or simply by the passage of time.

We argue that risk factors commonly associated with divorce (such as a young age at marriage, growing up in a divorced family, being in a heterogamous marriage, or having stepchildren) can undermine marriage in two ways. On the one hand, these risk factors may result in marriages that are prone to conflict, multiple problems, and general unhappiness. On the other hand, these risk factors may result in low level of relationship commitment, which increases the likelihood that even moderately satisfying relationships will end in divorce. For example, an individual whose parents divorced may enter marriage without the relationship skills (such as knowing how to resolve conflict amicably, reach mutually acceptable compromises to disagreements, and show social support) that are necessary for the maintenance of a long-term, rewarding union. Alternatively, an individual whose parents divorced may believe that divorce is a normatively acceptable way to find even greater happiness with an alternative partner. Indeed, research has shown that more positive attitudes toward divorce predict marital dissolution, even after controlling for measures of marital quality (Amato, 1996).

In this context, it is worthwhile to recall that in about three fourths of low-distress couples who divorced, one or both spouses were involved with another partner at the time the marriage ended. Although this percentage seems high, it is consistent with the notion by Nock (1998) that sexual fidelity is one of the central defining norms of marriage. Irrespective of marital quality, extramarital sex may lead to the quick demise of many marriages. It is also possible that infidelity means something different for individuals in the two groups. Individuals in high-distress marriages may seek out alternative partners because they receive little emotional support from their spouses. In these cases, infidelity would primarily be a result of low marital quality. (Once infidelity occurs, however, it could lead to even further relationship deterioration.) In low-distress marriages, however, infidelity may be the factor that causes an otherwise stable marriage to unravel relatively quickly, with one spouse feeling betrayed and the other spouse feeling drawn to a new partner with whom an emotional bond has been formed.

The conclusions we can draw from this research are limited by our data. We did not know, for example, the specific expectations of each spouse for the marriage. It is possible that

one or both partners in low-distress marriages that ended in divorce had especially high expectations for a successful marriage. Similarly, either or both spouses could have expected a high level of self-actualization or deep personal fulfillment from the marriage, expectations not captured by the current survey instrument. In addition, it would be useful to have interview items that reflect boredom with the relationship.

Although we were unable to determine precisely why low-distress marriages ended in divorce, it is clear that not all divorcing couples have seriously distressed marriages. Indeed, only about half of all divorces fit the stereotype of a wretched couple, continuously fighting and driven to divorce by the need to escape an aversive relationship. The other half of divorces involves relationships that most outside observers would probably think of as being reasonably untroubled.

This conclusion has implications for researchers. Future studies need to consider that divorced couples are not a uniform group and include this insight in their theories as well as in their data collection efforts and analyses. We need a better understanding of divorce-prone marriages, particularly when children are involved. Studies show that when parents exhibit chronic, high levels of conflict and hostility, children benefit by escaping from aversive home environments. In contrast, when parents have "average" marriages, children derive few benefits from divorce because they were living in what appeared to be relatively calm and happy households prior to marital disruption. This latter group of children is especially likely to show long-term problems following marital dissolution (Amato et al., 1995; Booth & Amato, 2001; Hanson, 1999; Jekielek, 1998). Thus, a better understanding of why low-distress marriages end in divorce can help us understand more clearly how divorce affects some children negatively and other children positively.

Our findings also have implications for marital therapy and counseling. Couples who seek therapy because they are contemplating divorce may have two different underlying sets of issues to resolve. For high-distress couples, interventions that focus on conflict resolution skills and reinforcing positive interpersonal behaviors are likely to be most successful. For low-distress couples, however, interventions that focus on building and maintaining commitment to the marriage, as well as establishing healthy but realistic expectations for marriage, are likely to be most

successful. For couples at risk of divorce, one type of intervention may not be appropriate for all cases.

In conclusion, we suspect that the greater social acceptance of divorce, combined with the greater ease of obtaining divorce, has increased the proportion of divorces that occur among couples with average (rather than low) levels of marital quality. It is possible that many of these couples have been influenced by the belief that a good marriage should provide a high level of personal growth and self-actualization, criteria that many, perhaps most, marriages cannot meet. Unfortunately, we cannot demonstrate this possibility with the present data. Nevertheless, we hope that our findings will stimulate other researchers to explore these possibilities with new analyses and data collection efforts. Given the continuing high rate of divorce in the United States and the implications of divorce for the economic and social well-being of parents and children, such efforts are clearly warranted.

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