

People's Reasons for Divorcing: Gender, Social Class, the Life Course, and Adjustment

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We used national panel data collected between 1980 and 1997 to classify 208 people's open-ended responses to a question on why their marriages ended in divorce. Infidelity was the most commonly reported cause, followed by incompatibility, drinking or drug use, and growing apart. People's specific reasons for divorcing varied with gender, social class, and life course variables. Former husbands and wives were more likely to blame their ex-spouses than themselves for the problems that led to the divorce. Former husbands and wives claimed, however, that women were more likely to have initiated the divorce. People who attributed the cause of the divorce to the relationship itself, rather than to internal (self) or external factors, tended to have the best postdivorce adjustment.

Keywords: divorce; gender; life course; social class

Divorce is a complex event that can be viewed from multiple perspectives. For example, sociological research has focused primarily on structural and life course predictors of marital disruption, such as social class, race, and age at first marriage (Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; White, 1991). Psychological research, in contrast, has focused on dimensions of marital interaction, such as conflict management (Gottman, 1994), or on personality characteristics, such as antisocial behavior or chronic negative affect (Leonard & Roberts, 1998). One limitation of these approaches is that neither considers the individual's perceptions about why the divorce occurred. Indeed, when explaining what caused their marriages to end, people appear to give relatively little credence to widely studied factors such as age at marriage or conflict resolution skills. In this article, we use a third approach to studying divorce—one that considers the subjective accounts of recently divorced individuals. Examining the accounts of divorced individuals provides a useful complement to more objective methods and is necessary for a full understanding of the divorce process. This approach to

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studying marital dissolution, however, is relatively uncommon, and only a few studies of this topic (e.g., Hopper, 1993) have appeared in the research literature during the past decade.

The study reported in this article had three goals. The first was to describe and categorize the perceived causes of divorce, as reported by a sample of recently divorced individuals. The second goal was to see how the reported causes of divorce varied with structural factors (such as gender and social class) and life course variables (such as age at marriage, duration of marriage, and having children). The third goal focused on a topic rarely addressed in the research literature: links between the perceived causes of divorce and subsequent adjustment. In particular, we examined people's causal attributions for divorce (whether the perceived cause was located within the respondent, the spouse, the relationship, or forces external to the relationship) and how these attributions related to divorce adjustment, attachment to the former spouse, and general appraisals of life. We use national longitudinal data collected between 1980 and 1997 for this purpose.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior research on people's accounts of divorce has focused primarily on variations by gender, socioeconomic status (SES), and the life course. Table 1 summarizes these trends.

GENDER

Compared with men, women tend to monitor their relationships more closely, become aware of relationship problems sooner, and are more likely to initiate discussions of relationship problems with their partners (Thompson & Walker, 1991). Men, in contrast, are more likely than women to withdraw from discussions of relationship problems (Gottman, 1994). Perhaps for these reasons, wives are more likely than husbands to initiate divorce (Albrecht, Bahr, & Goodman, 1983; Goode, 1956; Kitson, 1992). Given that marital discord and divorce are gendered experiences, it is not surprising that researchers have documented differences between men's and women's accounts of divorce. For example, several studies have shown that former wives provide longer and more complex explanations for their divorces than do former husbands (Cleek & Pearson, 1985; Kitson, 1992; Levinger, 1966).

TABLE 1
Summary of Reported Causes of Divorce From Prior Studies

	<i>Gender</i>	
	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
Kitson (1992)	Commitment to work Problems with in-laws External events Wife's extramarital sex Don't know	Personality Drinking Out with the boys Husband's extramarital sex Sexual problems Economic nonsupport Untrustworthy or immature
Bloom, Niles, & Tatcher (1985)	Own physical abuse Own drinking or drug use	Husband's physical abuse Husband's drinking or drug use
Cleek & Pearson (1985)	Own alcohol abuse "Women's lib"	Basic unhappiness Incompatibility Husband's emotional abuse Husband's physical abuse Husband's infidelity
Levinger (1966)	Problems with in-laws Sexual incompatibility	Physical and verbal abuse Financial problems Drinking Neglect of home and children Lack of love Mental cruelty
	<i>Socioeconomic Status</i>	
	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>
Kitson (1992)	Too young at marriage Lack of communication Changes in interests or values Incompatible Commitment to work Gender role conflict Partner self-centered	Physical or emotional abuse Out with the boys/girls Neglect of home duties Gambling or criminal activities Financial or job problems No sense of family Sexual problems due to health
Levinger 1966)	Lack of love Excessive demands	Financial problems Drinking Physical abuse
Goode (1956)	Personality Value conflict	Husband's economic nonsupport

(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)

	<i>Duration of Marriage</i>	
	<i>Longer</i>	<i>Shorter</i>
Kitson (1992)	Changes in interest or values No sense of family	Problems with in-laws Sexual problems due to health
Bloom, Niles, & Tatcher (1985)	Infidelity	
Goode (1956)	Drinking Infidelity Lack of interest in family	Personality Value conflict
	<i>Age at Marriage</i>	
	<i>Older</i>	<i>Younger</i>
Kitson (1992)	Drinking No sense of family Conflict over children Gender role conflict	Too young at marriage Out with the boys/girls Infidelity Lack of communication

With respect to perceived causes of divorce, women appear to be more likely than men to refer to relational or emotional issues, such as basic unhappiness and incompatibility (Cleek & Pearson, 1985), former spouses' personalities (Kitson, 1992), and a general lack of love (Levinger, 1966). Former wives also are more likely than former husbands to refer to a cluster of negative partner behaviors, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, substance use, going out with "the boys," and neglect of home and children (Bloom, Niles, & Tatcher, 1985; Cleek & Pearson, 1985; Kitson, 1992; Levinger, 1966). In contrast, men, more often than women, blame the divorce on external factors, such as work or problems with in-laws (Kitson, 1992; Levinger, 1966). Former husbands also are more likely to report that they do not know what caused the divorce (Kitson, 1992).

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

In addition to gender, SES, usually measured by education and income, has been a focus of divorce research. Prior studies indicate that education and income facilitate marital success (Voydanoff, 1991). Education promotes more effective communication between couples, thus helping them to resolve differences. In contrast, the stress generated by economic hardship increases disagreements over finances, makes spouses irritable, and

decreases expressions of emotional support (Conger et al., 1990). Partly for these reasons, SES is inversely associated with the risk of divorce (White, 1991). Nevertheless, well-educated individuals may hold especially high standards for marriage and expect a substantial level of emotional support, companionship, and personal fulfillment from their spouses. Because of these high standards, relationship problems may trigger thoughts of divorce relatively quickly among well-educated individuals.

Several studies suggest that SES is correlated with people's reasons for divorce. Kitson (1992) found that high-SES individuals, following divorce, were more likely to complain about lack of communication, changes in interests or values, incompatibility, and their ex-spouses' self-centeredness. In contrast, low-SES individuals were more likely to complain about physical abuse, going out with the boys/girls, neglect of household duties, gambling, criminal activities, financial problems, and employment problems. Similarly, Levinger (1966) found that low-SES divorced individuals complained about financial problems, physical abuse, and drinking, whereas high-SES divorced individuals complained about lack of love and excessive demands from their spouses. Goode (1956) found that high status divorcees tended to report personality problems and conflict over values as reasons for divorce, whereas low status divorcees tended to report lack of economic support from their former husbands. These results suggest that as SES increases, individuals are less likely to report instrumental reasons and more likely to report expressive and relationship-centered reasons.

LIFE COURSE VARIABLES

The life course perspective (Elder, 1994), with its emphasis on the timing and duration of events, incorporates factors such as age at marriage, duration of marriage, and the presence of children. With respect to age at marriage, individuals who marry at younger ages tend to report more marital problems and experience a greater risk of divorce than individuals who marry at older ages (Bumpass et al., 1991). The negative consequences of marrying at an early age may be due to psychological immaturity, unstable employment, and a truncated spousal-search process. With respect to duration of marriage, divorces occur more often in the early rather than the later years of marriage (White, 1991). Becker (1991) argued that people generally have imperfect information about their partners during courtship but learn substantially more about their spouses after marriage. Consequently early divorces are disproportionately due to the discovery of basic incompatibility, conflict in values, and personality clashes. Nev-

ertheless, couples in marriages of long duration face challenges (such as raising children, boredom with the relationship, and gradually diverging interests and attitudes) that differ from those of individuals in marriages of short duration. Indeed, studies have shown that marital duration is associated with long-term declines in marital happiness (Johnson, Amoloza, & Booth, 1992).

Are life course variables associated with the perceived causes of divorce? Kitson (1992) found that individuals who married at a young age were more likely to report difficulties in "settling down," such as going out with the boys/girls and infidelity. In addition, Kitson (1992) noted that people married for a longer time were more likely to mention changes in interests or having "no sense of family," whereas people married for a shorter time were more likely to mention in-laws or sexual problems. Goode's (1956) research revealed that complaints of infidelity, drinking, and the general quality of home life increased with duration of marriage, whereas complaints about personality and value conflict decreased. Bloom et al. (1985) found a positive correlation between length of marriage and infidelity. Although the underlying pattern is not entirely clear, it appears that long-term marriages are especially likely to be disrupted when people seek out new sexual partners (perhaps out of boredom) or become aware of changes in themselves or their partners due to the passage of time.

CAUSE OF DIVORCE AND ADJUSTMENT

In addition to understanding the specific reasons people give for divorcing, it is also important to know whether these reasons are linked with postdivorce adjustment. Divorced individuals experience higher levels of depression, lower levels of life satisfaction, and more health problems than married individuals (see Amato, 2000, for a review.) It is not clear, however, whether people's perceived reasons for divorce are related to postdivorce adjustment. Although little research has addressed this issue, Kitson (1992) found that individuals who cited extramarital sex reported especially high levels of subjective distress following marital disruption.

Attribution theory (Fletcher & Fincham, 1991; Graham & Folkes, 1990; Weiner, 1986) provides a useful framework for understanding how the perceived causes of divorce might relate to postdivorce adjustment. If people attribute the cause of a problem (such as being unemployed) to internal factors (such as one's lack of ability), then they are likely to experience negative views of the self and distressing emotions. However, when

people attribute the cause of a problem to external factors (such as fluctuations in the economy or bad luck), these negative outcomes are less likely. This principle also may apply to divorce—that is, former spouses may have a more difficult time adjusting to divorce when they make internal rather than external attributions about the cause of marital disruption. In particular, attributing causality to the spouse or to external factors should result in the least distress, and attributing causality to oneself should result in the greatest distress. Attributing causality to the relationship itself (thus implying that one is at least partly responsible) may result in an intermediate level of distress. These considerations suggest that it is not the specific cause of divorce as much as the underlying attribution of blame that affects people's subsequent adjustment.

In this context, it is useful to distinguish between attributions of responsibility for the problem and attributions of responsibility for the solution to the problem (Brickman et al., 1982). Attribution theory assumes that people often engage in self-serving attributions. Consequently, ex-spouses are unlikely to see themselves as being solely responsible for the problems that led to the breakdown of the marriage. On the other hand, because feelings of control help people to cope with difficult events, ex-spouses may see themselves as having taken the initiative in seeking the divorce (that is, as having accepted responsibility for the solution to the problem). In general, although attributing the cause of the divorce to internal factors should be associated with poorer adjustment, wanting the divorce more than the spouse should be associated with better adjustment, and individuals who attribute the cause of the divorce to their former spouses and the initiation of the divorce to themselves should have the most positive adjustment of all.

HYPOTHESES AND ANALYTIC STRATEGY

Although few studies have focused on people's subjective accounts of divorce, existing research suggests several hypotheses. First, we hypothesize that women will be more likely than men to refer to relationship quality, feelings, and problematic behavior on the part of their spouses as causes of divorce. In contrast, we hypothesize that men will be more likely than women to refer to external factors or to express uncertainty about the cause. Regarding SES, we hypothesize that indicators of SES, such as education and income, are positively associated with reports of expressive or relationship-centered causes of divorce (such as lack of love or incompatibility) and negatively associated with reports of instrumental factors and

problematic behavior (such as financial problems or physical abuse). With respect to life course variables, we hypothesize that an early age at marriage is associated with perceptions of immaturity and difficulty in settling into the marital role. We further hypothesize that duration of marriage is associated with problems that tend to emerge over long periods of time, such as changes in interests or opportunities for infidelity. Turning to adjustment, we hypothesize that adjustment to divorce is most difficult for those who attribute blame to themselves, less difficult for those who attribute blame to the relationship, and least difficult for those who attribute blame to the spouse or to external factors. On the other hand, being the partner who most wanted the divorce (rather than being the partner who caused the problems that led to the divorce) should be positively associated with adjustment.

This study has the advantage of testing these hypotheses with a randomly selected national sample of divorced individuals. Previous studies of divorced individuals have used a variety of sampling methods, including the use of legal records (Goode, 1956; Kitson, 1992), divorce counseling lists (Cleek & Pearson, 1985; Levinger, 1966), and individuals participating in divorce workshops and seminars (Hopper, 1993). Some researchers have restricted their samples to couples with children (Cleek & Pearson, 1985; Goode, 1956; Levinger, 1966), former wives (Goode, 1956), or those separated but not yet divorced (Bloom et al., 1985). Geographically, previous studies have been restricted to samples from specific parts of the United States, such as western or midwestern states (Albrecht et al., 1983; Bloom et al., 1985; Cleek & Pearson, 1985), or a particular county (Kitson, 1992; Levinger, 1966). Goode (1956) limited his sample to women between the ages of 20 and 38 in urban areas. Because this study is not restricted to a particular demographic group or geographical area, our results can be generalized more broadly than the results of prior investigations.

We began by developing a category scheme for open-ended descriptions of the causes of divorce, allowing multiple codes per respondent. To test the hypotheses, we examined associations between reported causes and sex, education, income, age at marriage, marital duration, and having children. For exploratory purposes, we also included three attitudinal variables—attitudes toward divorce, marital happiness, and religiosity—measured prior to divorce. Finally, we investigated the linkages between attributions of causality and adjustment, including whether respondents perceived themselves as having caused the problems that led to divorce, as well as whether respondents claimed to have initiated the divorce.

METHOD

SAMPLE

Our analysis was based on the 17-year longitudinal study of Marital Instability Over the Life Course (Booth, Amato, & Johnson, 1998). The target population consisted of all married individuals in households in the contiguous United States with a telephone, both spouses present, and both spouses 55 years of age or younger. In 1980, telephone interviewers used random digit dialing to select a sample of households and a second random procedure to determine whether to interview the husband or wife. Of the targeted individuals, 17% could not be reached after 20 callbacks. Of those individuals contacted, 78% gave complete interviews. The final sample consisted of 2,033 married persons (not couples). When compared with U.S. Census data, the sample was representative of married individuals with respect to age, race, household size, home ownership, presence of children, and urban residence. The sample was contacted again in 1983, 1988, 1992, and 1997, resulting in subsequent interviews with 78%, 66%, 59%, and 53% of the original sample, respectively. Between 1980 and 1997, 274 individuals reported that their marriage ended in divorce. Of these individuals, 63 (23%) provided information on marital status when we contacted them again but declined to provide interviews (and hence, were classified as nonrespondents). Of those individuals who provided full interviews, an additional 3 (1%) preferred not to answer the particular question on why the divorce occurred. The analysis described in this article, therefore, is based on the 208 individuals for whom we had complete interview data following divorce. Factors associated with losing data on the reasons for divorce were identical to the factors associated with attrition from the panel study more generally. In particular, sample attrition was more likely to occur among respondents who were male, relatively young, did not have college degrees, were non-White, and were living in rented accommodations.

VARIABLES

Cause of divorce. Individuals who divorced between interviews were asked, "What do you think caused the divorce?" People's open-ended responses were transcribed by the interviewers, and these responses were later coded into a set of categories for analysis. Previous studies have used anywhere from 10 to 36 categories, although it is not always clear how

these were derived. Some studies appear to have used predetermined categories (Bloom et al., 1985; Cleek & Pearson, 1985; Kitson, 1992), whereas other studies appear to have derived categories after examining the data (Albrecht et al., 1983; Goode, 1956; Levinger, 1966). We created categories inductively, allowing them to emerge from the open-ended responses. To accomplish this task, we read all responses, placed responses together that appeared to form naturally occurring clusters, and created preliminary labels for these categories. We then independently coded data from a random selection of 40% ($n = 83$) of the cases and obtained a Kappa (reliability) value of 0.90. After a discussion of the discrepancies, we refined the categories, and the second author coded the comments of the remaining 125 respondents, allowing up to three responses per individual. This procedure resulted in 18 categories, such as infidelity, incompatibility, and lack of communication. Brief definitions and examples of all categories are shown in Table 2.

Locus of cause. In addition to the 18 specific categories described previously, we coded people's reports into five broad categories that reflected who was responsible for the divorce: spouse only, self only, the relationship, external factors, and cannot be determined. These classifications were generally straightforward. For example, the spouse category included responses such as "Unfaithfulness on my husband's part. He had so many women." Examples of the self category included "The divorce was caused by many years of things that I did wrong. I was not a good husband. My own insecurities meant not being able to show love to my wife." A typical response in the relationship category was "Incompatibility. We were too young. We needed to go our separate ways." Causes external to the relationship are reflected in responses such as "My first wife died and my daughter moved in with us. It was hard for my second wife to handle the additional responsibility of the child. And I was working part-time because I lost my other job." Finally, responses including "A lot of things. It's hard to say" and "I'm still trying to figure that out" were classified as undetermined. Individuals who referred to problems such as "an affair" but refused to elaborate were also placed in this category. In a few cases (9%), respondents' attributions appeared to fit into two categories, so we determined the primary code through discussion. Cases involving mixed attributions also were considered separately in supplementary analyses.

Demographic variables. Most of the demographic variables were obtained from the 1980 interview, including the respondent's sex (0 = male, 1 = female) and race (0 = White, 1 = non-White). The respondent's and the

TABLE 2
Definitions and Examples of Reported Causes of Divorce

<i>Category</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>
Infidelity	Cheating on a spouse, leaving spouse for another partner	I wouldn't put up with her boyfriend.
Drinking or drug use	Any problems with alcohol or other drugs	He drank a lot.
Physical or mental abuse	Physical or emotional abuse to respondent or children	He broke my son's nose in front of me.
Incompatible	Couple cannot get along, has little in common, has unresolved differences or disagreements	We didn't agree on sex, friends, goals, mutual ideas, or anything.
Grew apart	Interests, values, or goals changed, causing couple to grow apart	Our lives and priorities changed.
Personality problems	Problems with personality or behavior that cause conflict in marriage	He was selfish and only thought of himself.
Communication	Couple has difficulty communicating	We didn't talk to each other.
Immature	Immature behavior, married too young or not ready for marriage	Too much responsibility at an early age.
Personal growth	Respondent or spouse has a midlife crisis, re-evaluates life, feels not enough time left	I went through therapy and realized who I was.
No love	Love and affection were no longer present	I guess I didn't love her anymore.
Unhappy	Respondent unhappy in marriage or looking for more satisfying alternatives	He wanted to do other things, see other women.
Not meeting obligations to family	Not helping out with family needs, such as breadwinning, housework, or child care; not spending time with the family	She had a lack of household skills.
Work problems	Work interferes with marriage	He worked too much.
Financial problems	Problems caused by lack of money	Not enough money.
Illness	A mental or physical illness that the respondent could not cope with but was not the spouse' fault	He became a different person after he had a stroke.
Interference from others	Former spouses, children, parents, kin, or friends interfere with the relationship	I couldn't cope with his ex-wife's kids.
Don't know	Respondent does not know what caused the divorce	I was so bitter at the time that it's hard to remember.
Other	Any other reported cause	It just was a sign of the times.

spouse's ages at marriage were positively correlated ($r = 0.85$), so we took the mean to represent age at marriage. We used a similar procedure for the respondent's and spouse's years of education ($r = 0.55$). Income was the sum of the respondent's and spouse's earned income in the interview prior to the divorce. Presence of children under the age of 18 in the household (0 = no, 1 = yes) also was based on the interview prior to the divorce. Duration of marriage (at the time of divorce) was obtained from the interview following the divorce. In general, the sample was 63% women, 91% White, and had about 13 years of education. Slightly less than one half (43%) of respondents had children living in the household prior to the divorce. The median age at divorce was 45, and the median duration of marriage prior to divorce was 16 years.

Attitudinal variables. Religiosity was based on a rating in 1980 of how much religious beliefs influenced the respondent's daily life (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *a great deal*), as well as the daily life of the spouse. The two items were averaged to yield a total religiosity score ($\alpha = 0.82$). Divorce attitudes were measured in 1980 with a 6-item scale ($\alpha = 0.71$). Sample items included "Marriage is for life, even if the couple is unhappy," and "The personal happiness of an individual is more important than putting up with a bad marriage" (1 = *strongly agree*, 4 = *strongly disagree*). Items were scored in the direction of conservative attitudes toward divorce and the mean response served as the scale score ($\alpha = 0.71$). Marital happiness was based on an 11-item scale that assessed the respondent's happiness with different aspects of the marriage ($\alpha = 0.87$). For example, respondents were asked, "How happy are you with the amount of love and affection you receive from your spouse? . . . with the amount of understanding you receive from your spouse?" (1 = *not very happy*, 2 = *pretty happy*, 3 = *very happy*). This variable was measured at the time of the interview prior to divorce.

Divorce initiation. The interview contained three items reflecting divorce initiation: the person who most wanted the divorce, the person who first raised the topic of divorce, and the person who filed for the divorce (1 = the spouse, 2 = both equally, 3 = the respondent). The three items were positively correlated and yielded similar results in analyses. We relied, therefore, on the item referring to who wanted the divorce. This question was included in the interview following the divorce.

Divorce adjustment. We relied on two scales (based on a factor analysis of nine items) to measure the respondent's adjustment to divorce. All nine

items were taken from the interview immediately following divorce. Items on the first scale, general divorce adjustment, referred to feeling happy with the divorce, whether the divorce was a good or a bad idea, and how the divorce affected the respondent's social life, financial situation, and peace of mind. Each item was scored on a 3-point scale, with high scores indicating better adjustment ($\alpha = 0.77$). Items on the second scale, attachment toward the ex-spouse, referred to wondering about the ex-spouse, thinking about the ex-spouse, having a hard time accepting the divorce, and feeling that one would never get over the divorce ($\alpha = 0.76$). Each item was scored on a 3-point scale, with high scores indicating less attachment to the former spouse. (For further details on these scales, see Wang & Amato, 2000). The correlation between the dependent variables was moderate rather than large ($r = -0.44$), suggesting that although the variables were correlated, each was measuring a different aspect of divorce adjustment.

In addition, interviews in each survey year contained a series of items that explored how people assessed their lives. Examples of statements included "I've pretty much gotten what I expected out of life," "When I think about the things I really want to achieve in life, I'm worried that I don't have enough years left to get them done," and "When I look back at my life, I am fairly well satisfied" (1 = *disagree strongly*, 4 = *agree strongly*). Items were scored in the direction of positive life appraisals, and the mean response served as the scale score for that year ($\alpha = 0.82$). To take advantage of the longitudinal nature of our data, we calculated the difference between each person's scores in the interviews preceding and following the divorce, with a positive score reflected a more positive view of one's life following divorce and a negative score reflected a more negative view of one's life following divorce. Scores on the life appraisal scale correlated at $r = 0.15$ ($p < .05$) with general divorce adjustment and $r = -0.26$ ($p < .001$) with attachment to the former spouse.

RESULTS

CAUSES OF DIVORCE

Table 3 shows the percentage of responses falling into each category, as well as the percentage of individuals reporting each cause. (Because some individuals provided more than one cause, the percentages for individuals sums to more than 100.) The most commonly reported reason for divorce was infidelity, followed by incompatibility, alcohol or drug use, growing

TABLE 3
Percentage of Responses and Respondents Referring to Reported Causes of Divorce

<i>Category</i>	<i>% Responses</i>	<i>% Cases</i>	<i>% Cases (Men)</i>	<i>% Cases (Women)</i>
Infidelity	18.4	21.6	15.6	25.2
Incompatible	16.4	19.2	19.5	19.1
Drinking or drug use	9.0	10.6	5.2	13.7
Grew apart	8.2	9.6	9.1	9.9
Personality problems	7.8	9.1	10.4	8.4
Lack of communication	7.4	8.7	13.0	6.1
Physical or mental abuse	4.9	5.8	0.0	9.2
Loss of love	3.7	4.3	6.5	3.1
Not meeting family obligations	2.9	3.4	1.3	4.6
Employment problems	2.9	3.4	2.6	3.8
Don't know	2.9	3.4	9.1	0.0
Unhappy in marriage	2.5	2.9	2.6	3.1
Financial problems	2.0	2.4	1.3	3.1
Physical or mental illness	2.0	2.4	1.3	3.1
Personal growth	2.0	2.4	3.8	1.5
Interference from family	2.0	2.4	2.6	2.3
Immature	1.6	1.9	2.6	1.5
Other	3.3	3.8	6.5	2.3
Total percentages	100.0	117.3	113.0	120.0
<i>N</i> cases		208	77	131
<i>N</i> responses	244		87	157

apart, personality problems, lack of communication, and physical or mental abuse. The remaining causes were reported by less than 5% of individuals. The table also shows distributions separately for men and women. Women were more likely than men to report infidelity, drinking/drug use, or abuse as reasons for divorce. In contrast, men were more likely than women to report poor communication or that they did not know what caused the divorce.

To test the hypotheses, we calculated correlations between each of the causes of divorce and the demographic and attitudinal variables described earlier. For example, a variable referred to as "infidelity" was coded 1 if a respondent reported infidelity as a cause of divorce and 0 otherwise. The results of this analysis are summarized in Table 4. Because of the small sample size, we focused on results at the .10 as well as the .05 level of significance. (The table excludes categories with a relatively small number of cases.)

TABLE 4
Correlates of Reported Causes of Divorce

<i>Cause of Divorce</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>r</i>
Infidelity	Religiosity	0.14**
	Wife respondent	0.11*
Incompatible	Age married	0.20***
	Education	0.17**
	Years married	-0.16**
	Religiosity	-0.15**
Alcohol or drugs	Children in household	0.20***
	Age married	-0.14**
	Wife respondent	0.13*
Grew apart	Years married	0.17**
	Age married	-0.14**
Personality	Years married	-0.13*
	Predivorce income	0.11*
Communication	Conservative attitudes	0.14**
	Wife respondent	-0.12*
Abuse	Wife respondent	0.19***
	Predivorce income	-0.18**
	Children in household	0.17**
	Conservative attitudes	0.16**
	Predivorce marital happiness	-0.15**
Don't know	Wife respondent	-0.24****

NOTE: $N = 208$. Significance tests are two-tailed.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

Gender. The results in Table 4 indicate that women were more likely than men to report infidelity, mental or physical abuse, and alcohol or drug use as reasons for divorce. Further inspection of the data (not shown) indicated that women who reported these causes were more likely to refer to their former husbands' behavior than their own. Table 4 also shows that women were significantly less likely than men to report communication problems or to claim that they did not know what caused the divorce. Although the former finding appears to contradict the notion that women are more concerned with communication in marriage, the latter finding is consistent with research showing that men have a more difficult time articulating relationship problems.

Socioeconomic status. With respect to SES, predivorce income was negatively associated with reports of abuse and positively associated with reports of personality clashes. In addition, education was positively associated with reports of incompatibility. These results are consistent with the

notion that high-SES individuals are more likely than low-SES individuals to report relationship-centered (rather than instrumental) reasons for divorce.

The life course. All the life course variables were associated with people's perceptions. Those who married at younger ages were more likely than those who married at older ages to report alcohol or drug use as a cause of divorce. Growing apart was less common among those who married at older ages and more common among those had been married for a relatively long time. This result suggests a tendency for spouses to become less similar over time, especially those who marry at young ages—presumably at a time when their attitudes, interests, and goals are still forming. Age at marriage was positively associated with incompatibility, although the interpretation of this finding is not clear. Years married was negatively associated with complaints about incompatibility and personality, suggesting that these problems are more likely to disrupt short-term than long-term marriages. Respondents with children in the household were more likely to report mental or physical abuse, as well as substance abuse, as a reason for divorce. In most cases (not shown), these women complained that their ex-husbands exhibited these problems. The presence of children, therefore, appears to increase the motivation of mothers to leave marriages in which husbands are behaving badly.

Attitudinal variables. The attitudinal variables measured before divorce did not reveal many consistent associations. Religiosity was positively associated with reporting infidelity as a cause of divorce. This finding, however, does not necessarily mean that religious individuals are more likely to have affairs, only that it takes a relatively serious violation of marital trust to trigger a divorce among religious couples. This interpretation is consistent with the finding that religiosity is negatively related to incompatibility, which may not be a sufficient justification for divorce among those who see marriage as a sacred institution. Holding conservative attitudes toward divorce was positively linked with reports of abuse, although, as previously noted, this association may exist because it requires a relatively serious problem to end a marriage among individuals who do not support divorce in general. This interpretation is not consistent, however, with the finding that conservative individuals were more likely to cite communication problems as a cause of divorce. The last attitudinal variable, predivorce marital happiness, was negatively related to abuse, indicating that those who were especially unhappy with their marriages prior to divorce tended to be in abusive relationships.

Multivariate analysis. To adjust for the correlations between independent variables, we conducted a series of multivariate logistic regression analyses. In these analyses, the causes of divorce in Table 4 served as dependent variables, and the independent variables entered the equation in a stepwise fashion using a .10 probability value for the entry criterion. Because the correlations between independent variables generally were low, the results of the multivariate analyses did not differ substantially from the results presented in Table 4. The only exceptions involved the associations between abuse and having children in the household, and between substance use and the respondent's gender, which were no longer significant in the multivariate models ($p = .18$ and $.19$, respectively). All other significant results were replicated. In addition, the association between gender and infidelity, which was marginally significant, became fully significant in the multivariate model ($p < .05$).

Cause of divorce and adjustment. As a final step in this part of the analysis, we examined associations between the reported causes of divorce and the three measures of adjustment to divorce. Individuals who reported infidelity scored lower on the general adjustment to divorce scale ($r = -0.23$, $p < .01$) and higher on the attachment to former spouse scale ($r = 0.21$, $p < .01$). Further inspection of the data indicated that, compared with other causes, infidelity on the part of the respondent or the respondent's spouse were associated with relatively poor adjustment, although adjustment scores were lowest when the respondent's spouse was at fault. No other specific causes of divorce were related to adjustment. We also considered associations between the number of causes people reported and adjustment, but no significant findings emerged.

ATTRIBUTIONS AND ADJUSTMENT

As noted earlier, we collapsed the 18 specific categories in Table 2 into five general categories reflecting the locus of causation: the respondent's spouse, the respondent, the relationship, external factors, and undetermined. Overall, 33% of responses referred to the partner as the cause of the divorce, 5% referred to the self, 27% referred to the relationship, 9% referred to external causes, and 26% were too ambiguous to classify. These results are consistent with the expectation that people tend to avoid accepting responsibility for marital failure and are more inclined to attribute problems to their former spouses.

TABLE 5
Divorce Adjustment by Reported Cause of Divorce

Cause of Divorce	General Divorce Adjustment ^a		Attachment to Former Spouse ^b		Change in Life Appraisals ^c	
	\bar{X}	(S)	\bar{X}	(S)	\bar{X}	(S)
1. Spouse	2.30	(0.61)	2.01	(0.66)	0.09	(0.44)
2. Self	2.22	(0.68)	2.28	(0.65)	-0.15	(0.32)
3. Relationship	2.47	(0.48)	1.76	(0.54)	0.08	(0.48)
4. External factors	2.10	(0.69)	2.16	(0.58)	-0.16	(0.38)
5. Undetermined	2.48	(0.53)	1.88	(0.49)	0.02	(0.35)
<i>F</i>	2.27		2.99		1.92	
<i>df</i>	4/203		4/203		4/203	
<i>p</i>	.06		.02		.10	

NOTE: a. Significant differences ($p < .05$) for general divorce adjustment: 3 vs. 4, 4 vs. 5.
 b. Significant differences ($p < .05$) for attachment to former spouse: 1 vs. 3, 2 vs. 3, 2 vs. 5, 3 vs. 4.
 c. Significant difference ($p < .05$) for change-in-life satisfaction: 1 vs. 4, 3 vs. 4.

Gender and causal attributions. The demographic, life course, and attitudinal variables were not associated with the causal categories, with the exception of gender. Women were about twice as likely as men to refer to their former spouses as having caused the divorce (40% vs. 21%). Furthermore, women were only about one seventh as likely as men to refer to themselves as having caused the divorce (1.5% vs. 10%). Although not as dramatic, women were less likely than men to refer to relationship problems (24% vs. 33%), and women were about as likely as men to refer to external factors (10% vs. 8%). The overall gender difference was significant ($\chi^2 = 14.94$, $df = 4$, $p < .01$). These results indicate that individuals of both genders were more likely to attribute the origin of the problem to the former spouse than to themselves, but this tendency was stronger for women than for men.

Causal attributions and adjustment. Table 5 reveals how scores on the general divorce adjustment, attachment, and life appraisal scales varied with the five causal categories. The overall difference across means was marginally significant for general divorce adjustment ($p = .06$), fully significant for attachment to the former spouse ($p = .02$), and marginally significant for changes-in-life satisfaction ($p = .10$). Given that overall differences were either fully or marginally significant, we used *t* tests to deter-

mine the particular pairs of means that differed significantly. We assumed, based on attribution theory, that attributing the cause to oneself would be associated with the poorest adjustment, attributing the cause to external factors or to the spouse would be associated with the best adjustment, and attributing the cause to the relationship would be associated with a moderate level of adjustment. The results, however, did not conform to this pattern.

With respect to general divorce adjustment, individuals who attributed causality to external factors had the lowest level of adjustment—a level significantly lower than those who attributed causality to the relationship itself or who gave ambiguous responses. The results for attachment to the former spouse were comparable in certain ways. Individuals who referred to external factors had a high level of attachment to their former spouses in general and were significantly more attached than those who referred to the relationship. However, individuals who attributed causality to themselves had the strongest attachment to their former spouses. These individuals were significantly higher in attachment than individuals who attributed causality to the relationship or to ambiguous factors. Respondents who referred to the relationship itself appeared to be least attached to their former spouses. A similar pattern appeared with respect to changes-in-life appraisals. People who saw themselves or external factors as causes viewed their lives more negatively, whereas people who saw their partners or factors intrinsic to the relationship as causes viewed their lives more positively. Contrary to predictions based on attribution theory, these results suggest that former spouses who attributed blame to themselves or to external factors had the poorest adjustment, whereas former spouses who attributed blame to the relationship had the best adjustment. In a supplementary analysis, we considered the 9% of individuals who gave mixed attributions as opposed to a single attribution. These individuals, however, did not differ significantly from those who gave single attributions on any adjustment outcome.

WANTING THE DIVORCE

We expected individuals to blame their former partners, rather than themselves, for the problems that led to the divorce—an expectation that was confirmed (as noted earlier). However, we also expected individuals to see themselves, rather than their former spouses, as the person who most wanted the divorce. Contrary to this expectation, however, the majority of ex-husbands (53%), along with the majority of ex-wives (70%), reported that the wife had wanted the divorce more. (The same pattern

held for first talking about divorce and filing for divorce.) Nevertheless, individuals who claimed that they wanted the divorce more than their spouses scored higher on general divorce adjustment (2.49 vs. 2.11, $t = 4.34, p < .001$), scored lower on attachment to the former spouse (1.83 vs. 2.12, $t = 3.20, p < .01$), and were more likely to report increases in satisfaction with life (0.09 vs. $-0.05, t = 2.32, p < .05$). These results are congruent with the assumption that accepting responsibility for the problem that led to the divorce is related to poorer adjustment, but being the partner who most wanted the divorce (that is, initiating a solution to the problem) is related to better adjustment.

DISCUSSION

Our study, based on a national sample of individuals followed for 17 years, replicates several findings from earlier studies based on less extensive samples. For example, in this study, infidelity emerged as the most commonly reported cause of divorce—a finding noted in an early review by Kitson, Babri, and Roach (1985). This finding is also consistent with a longitudinal study showing that infidelity among married couples is the strongest predictor of later divorce (Amato & Rogers, 1997). Present research cannot determine whether infidelity is a cause or a consequence of estrangement between spouses, and trying to solve this issue is beyond the scope of this article. The important point is that many people think that infidelity is the cause of divorce. Infidelity appears to play a central role in many people's understandings of how their marriages unravel, and individuals who cite infidelity as a cause of divorce show poorer adjustment than individuals who cite other causes.

Along with infidelity, complaints about the general quality of the marital relationship—incompatibility, growing apart, personality clashes, and lack of communication—figure prominently in people's accounts of divorce. These perceived causes are similar to the general category of irreconcilable differences (or some equivalent term) which is the only grounds for obtaining a no-fault divorce. Other commonly reported causes of divorce refer to drinking, drug use, mental cruelty, and physical abuse. Although nearly all the divorces in this study occurred after the passage of no-fault divorce laws, these perceived causes are similar to the legal grounds for divorce that existed in most states under the earlier fault regime. It appears, therefore, that even in an era of no-fault divorce, fault-based reasons continue to feature prominently in many people's subjective accounts of marital breakdown.

Our study indicates that people's accounts of divorce vary with gender, SES, and life course variables. Consistent with expectations, women in this study were more likely to report problematic behavior on the part of their former husbands (infidelity, substance use, mental and physical abuse), and men were more likely to report that they did not know what caused the divorce. These gender differences replicate findings from several prior studies (Bloom et al., 1985; Cleek & Pearson, 1985; Kitson, 1992; Levinger, 1966). Contrary to expectations, however, men were no more likely than women to refer to external causes, and men were more likely than women to report problems with communication. The latter finding appears to clash with the assumption that women are more relationship centered than men (Thompson & Walker, 1991) and that wives are more sensitive than husbands to marital problems involving emotions and communication (Cleek & Pearson, 1985). Nevertheless, this result is consistent with a study showing that communication problems (such as avoiding problem-solving discussions) predict marital unhappiness more strongly among husbands than wives (Roberts, 2000). Although it is possible that men are becoming more sensitive to relationship dynamics in marriage, we suspect that some men used general references to poor communication and other relationship problems to avoid admitting that their own misbehavior undermined the marriage.

The education and income variables suggested that SES is positively associated with reports of relationship-centered causes (such as incompatibility and personality problems) and negatively associated with reports of problematic behavior (such as abuse). These findings are consistent with prior research (Goode, 1956; Kitson, 1992; Levinger, 1966) and underscore the continuing importance of class differences in marriage. Low-SES individuals are not only more likely than high-SES individuals to end their marriages in divorce but also tend to divorce for different reasons.

People's accounts of divorce also varied with age at marriage, duration of marriage, and having children. For example, references to growing apart were more common among individuals who had married early and who had been married for longer periods. In addition, people who married relatively early disproportionately reported problems with alcohol and drug use. Contrary to several prior studies (Bloom et al., 1985; Goode, 1956; Kitson, 1992), this study did not find that infidelity is more often a cause of divorce in marriages of long duration. We did find, however, that individuals with children were more likely to report abuse and substance use as causes of divorce. It seems likely that children increase the motivation of spouses (primarily wives) to leave abusive or substance-dependent

spouses, perhaps to protect the children. In general, these results support the utility of adopting a life course perspective in understanding people's reasons for divorce.

Consistent with the assumption that attributions about the causes of events are often self-serving, individuals tended to attribute the cause of the divorce more often to their former spouses than to themselves—a finding noted in one prior study (Gray & Silver, 1990). We also found that causal attributions were associated with adjustment to divorce, although not always in the manner anticipated. Curiously, individuals who blamed themselves for the divorce reported the strongest attachment to their ex-spouses. Accepting primary responsibility for the disruption of a marriage is likely to engender feelings of guilt and remorse. These individuals may be preoccupied with their former spouses and even hold lingering fantasies of reconciliation (“Take me back”). However, although we expected only a moderate level of coping among those in the blame-relationship category, these individuals had the most positive general adjustment, the lowest level of attachment to former spouses, and experienced increases (rather than decreases) in their appraisals of life. Moreover, although we assumed that blaming external factors (or the former spouse) would facilitate adjustment, these individuals had the lowest level of adjustment and a relatively high level of attachment.

With respect to divorce, the key attribution may not be whether the problem is internal or external (my fault or not my fault), but the extent to which the divorce was avoidable. In terms of external attributions, people who believe that the marriage broke up because of problems with erratic work schedules (for example) also may believe that there was little intrinsically wrong with the relationship itself. This belief may lead people to speculate, “What if my job had not been so demanding?” A sense that the marriage could have survived under other circumstances may make it difficult to establish closure and accept the finality of the divorce. Correspondingly, people who blame the spouse may believe that the marriage could have been salvaged were it not for the spouse's bad behavior. Attributing blame to a former spouse, therefore, is likely to generate feelings of anger and resentment, making it more difficult for people to let go of the former spouse.

In contrast, people who blame the relationship itself believe that irreconcilable differences made the breakup unavoidable. Because neither partner is to blame for this incompatibility, people are likely to have few regrets (neither remorse for their own actions nor hostility toward their former spouses) and may find it relatively easy to develop a lifestyle and identity apart from the marriage. In summary, we suggest that attributions

that avoid blame and define the divorce as an unfortunate but unavoidable event are likely to generate the fewest negative emotions, and hence, best facilitate adjustment. Of course, it also is possible that people who adjust well to divorce tend to adopt attributions that blame the relationship rather than a particular person or set of circumstances. Although it is not possible to disentangle the direction of effects in this study, the two processes may reinforce one another.

We also hypothesized that initiating the divorce is positively associated with adjustment, and the analysis supported this assumption (see also Gray & Silver, 1990.) This finding reinforces the importance of distinguishing between accepting responsibility for the cause of a problem (which appears to impede adjustment) and accepting responsibility for the solution to a problem (which appears to facilitate adjustment)—a distinction often made in therapeutic settings (Brickman et al., 1982).

Moving beyond the specific hypothesis, our study is not able to address the general issue of whether people's reports represent the real causes of marital breakdown or merely post hoc reconstructions of events (Hopper, 1993). There may be some truth in both interpretations. Women who left abusive husbands, for example, may be able to give straightforward and unambiguous answers to this question—answers that correspond closely to objective events. Other people, however, may convince themselves that they were not to blame even when most objective observers would conclude otherwise. Nevertheless, because people's subjective accounts are bound up with their postdivorce adjustment, these accounts are worth studying in their own right. Indeed, helping people to cognitively reconstruct the cause of the divorce may be a useful therapeutic intervention.

This study is not without limitations. First, like all longitudinal studies, our sample suffered from attrition over the years. Nevertheless, the longitudinal nature of our study made it possible to incorporate variables (such as life appraisals) measured prior to marital dissolution. Second, because we used telephone interviews, it was not possible to get extensive, detailed accounts of people's explanations. Instead, most people provided a single reason for the divorce, although this reason probably was the most salient one. Third, because the interview schedule did not contain questions regarding blame, responsibility, and fault, we had to code people's attributions from open-ended responses. Using more detailed questions that measure attribution constructs more precisely would eliminate many of the undetermined responses in our data. Finally, we had data from one spouse only, so it was not possible to compare the reports of former husbands and wives to determine the extent of convergence.

In spite of these limitations, our study makes several useful contributions. Based on a national probability sample, we demonstrated that people's accounts of divorce are related to gender, SES, and life course variables in predictable ways. Moreover, we showed that people who blame themselves, external causes, or their former partners tend to be less well adjusted following divorce than people who blame factors intrinsic to the relationship itself. Finally, we found that people who believe that they had control over the divorce process (i.e., that they initiated the divorce) tend to show relatively positive divorce adjustment. This information could be useful to counselors and therapists working with divorced clients. More generally, these results suggest the utility of incorporating people's subjective understandings into research designs to provide a richer understanding of the divorce process.

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