GENDER DIFFERENCES IN COGNITIVE AND BEHAVIORAL STEPS TOWARD DIVORCE

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This study investigated the differences in cognitive and behavioral steps in the divorce process for men and women. Two studies of 589 clinical couples were analyzed comparing the responses of men and women on the 14 items of the Marital Status Inventory (MSI). Women were found to make specific plans about divorce and implement these plans. Women were also found to think more about divorce and talk to friends during the divorce decision-making process. These findings indicate that the divorce process is not the same for men and women and that statements of divorce intent are not equivalent for both. Additionally, the divorce process is probably more accurately reflected in the thoughts and actions of wives.

The prevalence of marital instability and the increasing divorce rate in the United States over the past two decades have fostered not only widespread societal concern but a renewed academic interest, both of a theoretical and an empirical nature (Booth & Johnson, 1983; Bumpass & Sweet, 1972; Crane et al., in press; Hagestad & Smyer, 1982; McRae & Brody, 1989). Of specific interest is the area of marital stability—specifically, why and under what conditions couples divorce.

Several researchers have shown differences in the way men and women perceive and react to problems in marital stability (Crane et al., 1984; Emery & Wyer, 1987; Larson & Holman, in press; Levenson & Gottman, 1985; McDonald et al., 1987). Evidence from both clinical and nonclinical
populations indicates that women are more dissatisfied with their relationships than are their male counterparts (Booth & White, 1980; Crane & Mead, 1980). If this is the case, there may be important gender-related differences in the divorce process.

Research on gender role differences shows that traditionally defined family roles are very different for men and women (Gilligan, 1982; Goldscheider & Waite, 1986). Over the past three decades, gender role orientations have been changing, with both men and women becoming less traditional (Gied, 1979; McBroom, 1987; McDonald et al., 1987). Although men and women are exposed to the issues, the role-related changes for men seem to be a more passive process than for women. However, for many women, change seems to involve their immediate life experiences, such as changes in employment, marital status, or fertility (McBroom, 1987). These changes can produce reassessment of their traditional gender roles. According to more than two decades of research, it appears that "his" marriage may be more desirable than "her" marriage in many dimensions (Fowers, 1991).

Gender differences have also been found in styles of communication and conflict (Hecht, 1984; Noller, 1993). Research shows that females generally express their emotions more frequently than males. Females are also more willing to talk to others about their problems and dissatisfaction than males, particularly in unhappy marriages (Campbell & Snow, 1992; Fuller, 1983; Gottman, 1994). Differences in such basic areas as physical and emotional responses to disagreement and confrontation have also been linked to gender (Levenson & Gottman, 1985; Lloyd, 1987; Norell & Apple, 1990; White, 1989).

Another difference in marriages with respect to gender is the source of personal fulfillment and gratification (Riessman & Gerstel, 1985). The woman may gain from a marriage financially, but give up more in terms of privacy, control over schedules, and friends. In divorce, she does not regain privacy or control of her schedule, but will suffer negative and prolonged economic consequences, while her husband's financial circumstances often improve (Fowers, 1991; Holden & Smock, 1991). If the wife seeks employment outside the home during or after her marriage, additional strain and overload are experienced because often she still has responsibility for the home in addition to her employment obligations. Also, the expectation that she nurture others despite numerous demands elsewhere may reduce the married woman's ability to provide good care for herself (Riessman & Gerstel, 1985). Men, on the other hand, have two potential sources of gratification—family and employment. These two roles do not result in a double burden for married men because their wives continue to do most of the work in the home. This difference in workload and gratification is a possible reason why several studies have shown that women report more dissatisfaction in their relationships and more thoughts of divorce than do men (Crane et al., 1984; Kitson & Sussman, 1983).

Evaluation of marriages using such instruments as the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) and Marital Status Inventory (MSI) have shown that
wives’ scores indicate more marital distress than do the scores of their husbands. In Crane et al. (1984), an effort was made to clarify the cause of the wives’ higher MSI scores by conducting an item analysis by gender. Significant differences were found on 5 of the 14 items of the MSI, suggesting that there is a difference in the thoughts and actions in the divorce process. In another study by Crane et al. (in press), the MSI was used as a predictor of divorce potential. The results indicate that the wives’ MSI scores were highly predictive of divorce and are a better indicator of divorce risk than those of husbands.

In summary, it appears that “his” marriage may be substantially different from “her” marriage. The partners come into the marriage with many differences, including expectations, roles, styles of communication and conflict, sources of gratification, and sets of criteria on which to rate the success or failure of the relationship. Some of these differences may be due to gender. Any combination may lead to marital dissatisfaction and dissolution.

The purpose of this study was to test for gender differences in the cognitive and behavioral steps toward divorce. If a therapist can determine the steps that have been taken by a couple toward divorce, he or she can design treatment programs to better fit the couple’s needs. This study examined the hypothesis that within a clinical sample, the wives express distress and proceed toward divorce with different thoughts and actions than do their husbands.

**METHOD**

**Subjects**

Two samples were available for study. Sample one consisted of 348 couples who requested marital therapy at the Brigham Young University Comprehensive Clinic in Provo, Utah. All couples completed a standard intake procedure, including an assessment packet, prior to beginning therapy. All but a few of the couples in this sample were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Consequently, the results of this sample will be compared to a second sample detailed in the Crane et al. study (1984), which was a cross-sectional, nonhomogeneous group.

The second sample was 241 couples gathered from five different clinical locations in three states and one marital enrichment sample. The intent was to compare these samples for similarity of findings across different locations and populations.

**Instrument**

The Marital Status Inventory (MSI) is a 14-item true or false test which is designed to measure divorce potential. It measures the cognitive and behavioral steps toward divorce and has been found to be helpful in predicting divorce (Crane et al., in press). Several studies (Crane & Mead,
1980; Crane et al., 1984, in press; Weiss & Cerreto, 1980) have supported the MSI as a valid and reliable instrument.

RESULTS

The analysis by gender was conducted to determine if husbands' and wives' scores differed on the MSI. The results indicate that wives scored consistently higher on the MSI than husbands (males: \( n = 348, x = 2.542, sd = 2.788 \); females: \( n = 348, x = 3.536, sd = 3.305 \); paired t-test = \(-7.28, p < .001\)).

A chi-square analysis of MSI items by gender was conducted to identify gender-specific differences in the divorce decision-making process. This analysis allowed individual comparison of husbands' and wives' responses on the 14 MSI questions. Significant differences were found on items 1, 4, 7, 8, and 14, as presented in Table 1. These items are compared with the results and significant items found in the Crane et al. study (1984), which is also presented in Table 1.

The direction of the differences between husbands' and wives' responses also proved to be interesting. On item 1, it was found that higher numbers of wives had made specific plans to discuss separation or divorce with their husbands. Item 4 determined that more wives than husbands had actually expressed to their spouses a desire to be divorced or separated. Question 7 found that higher numbers of wives reported talking to others about thoughts of divorce. Items 8 and 14 indicated that wives thought about divorce more than their husbands both after an argument and at other times. These results are almost identical to those of the study by Crane et al. (1984). The only item differences between the studies were on items 1 and 3. This study found item 1 to be significant, whereas the Crane et al. study (1984) did not. The Crane et al. study (1984) found item 3 to be significant, whereas this study did not. Of the items found to be significant in this study, items 1, 4, and 7 have the greatest clinical or practical significance (see Table 1).

These three items indicate that women make plans about divorce, carry out these plans, and talk to others about their desire to divorce approximately 24% more than do men.

DISCUSSION

This study supports previous research that indicates that men and women differ in their actions and thoughts in the divorce decision-making process. Women were more likely than men to have made specific plans to discuss divorce or separation with their spouse and to have actually carried these plans out. Women in these samples are also more likely to discuss the question of divorce or separation with someone other than their spouse. Additionally, wives tend to think about divorce more than their husbands after an argument and at other times. Women also think more about divorce and talk to others about divorce and are willing to make these thoughts and desires known to their spouse. Therefore, this
TABLE 1
Steps in the Divorce Process that Women do More Often than Men

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Number</th>
<th>Marital Status Inventory Items</th>
<th>Chi-Square Values</th>
<th>Percentage Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Study One (Crane et al., 1984)</td>
<td>Present Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I have made specific plans to discuss separation or divorce with my spouse. I have considered what I will say, etc.</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>7.08**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Thoughts of divorce occur to me very frequently, as often as once a week or more.</td>
<td>5.79*</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I have suggested to my spouse that I wish to be divorced, separated, or rid of him/her.</td>
<td>5.78*</td>
<td>22.47***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I have discussed the question of my divorce or separation with someone other than my spouse (trusted friend, psychologist, minister, etc.).</td>
<td>5.32*</td>
<td>8.46**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I have occasionally thought of divorce or wished that we were separated, usually after an argument or other incident.</td>
<td>13.39***</td>
<td>6.44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I have considered divorce or separation a few times other than during or shortly after a fight, although only in vague terms.</td>
<td>7.07**</td>
<td>5.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

This study indicates that women appear to take a more active role in preparing and planning for divorce or separation.

This study also supports previous research that indicates that marital distress is generally more apparent in wives than in their husbands. Therefore, practitioners may want to pay special attention to the MSI scores of wives and review the steps and thoughts they have had in the divorce process, since wives' scores are better predictors of divorce than are husbands' scores (Crane et al., in press).

The use of the MSI as a divorce prediction instrument can have practical use for clinicians. It can benefit the therapist and the client if there is evidence that the couple may be at risk for divorce. The results of this study showed that women make plans about divorce, carry out these plans, and talk to others about their desire to divorce. This knowledge can assist the therapist in deciding on the type of treatment that is most beneficial for the clients. For example, using this information, the therapist may discuss directly whether the couple wishes to continue marital therapy or if it would be better to proceed with divorce mediation and adjustment due to the levels of distress and steps that have been taken toward divorce.
One conclusion related to the results of this study is that wives' statements of distress or divorce intention will occur more frequently than statements from their husbands. Also, given that wives' distress levels are more predictive of divorce than are their husbands' distress levels, clinicians and husbands should pay careful attention to any such statements. Because many women know the costs of divorce in such terms as loss of social and economic status, increased responsibility for children, and custody disputes, their willingness to consider divorce should not be taken lightly.

Four of the five items found to be significant in this study were significant in the Crane et al. study (1984). This similarity, as well as concurrence with other studies of gender differences in the areas of marital satisfaction and divorce (Booth & White, 1980; Campbell & Snow, 1992; Gottman, 1994; Kitson & Sussman, 1983), suggests that the results may be generalizable to a variety of groups. Further research is, of course, necessary to firmly establish these differences.

REFERENCES

Gender Differences in Divorce


Riessman, C. K., & Gerstel, N. (1985). Marital dissolution and health: Do males or females have greater risk? *Social Science and Medicine, 20*, 627–635.
