



A Longitudinal Study of Marital Problems and Subsequent Divorce

Author(s): Paul R. Amato and Stacy J. Rogers

Source: *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Aug., 1997), pp. 612-624

Published by: [National Council on Family Relations](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/353949>

Accessed: 22/12/2010 14:33

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ncfr>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



National Council on Family Relations is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

A Longitudinal Study of Marital Problems and Subsequent Divorce

This study investigated the extent to which reports of marital problems in 1980 predicted divorce between 1980 and 1992, the extent to which these problems mediated the impact of demographic and life course variables on divorce, and gender differences in reports of particular marital problems and in the extent to which these reports predicted divorce. Wives reported more marital problems than husbands did, although this was due to husbands' tendency to report relatively few problems caused by their spouses. A variety of marital problems predicted divorce up to 12 years in the future. A parsimonious set of marital problems involving infidelity, spending money foolishly, drinking or drug use or both, jealousy, moodiness, and irritating habits mediated moderate proportions of the associations between demographic and life course variables and divorce.

Researchers trying to determine the causes of divorce have approached the problem in two ways. Some researchers have focused on demographic and life course variables that affect the risk of divorce, variables such as age at marriage, social

class, race, religiosity, and parental divorce. Others have adopted a subjective perspective and asked previously married individuals why their marriages ended. In her 1990 review of the previous decade's research on predictors of divorce, White (1990) noted the relatively small number of studies in the latter group (e.g., Bloom, Niles, & Tatcher, 1985; Burns, 1984; Cleek & Pearson, 1985; Kitson & Sussman, 1982; Spanier & Thompson, 1987). She argued that personal accounts are useful and provocative, but "because these studies only include divorced respondents, they can tell us little about the extent to which these factors predict divorce" (p. 908). She also pointed out that there is little integration between studies of personal accounts of divorce and studies that focus on demographic and life course predictors of marital dissolution. Finally, she recommended more research that focuses on marital processes as predictors of divorce.

The study presented here responds to White's call for more research on the links between marital processes and marital dissolution. Our study goes beyond prior research in three ways. First, in contrast to previous studies that used divorced people's retrospective accounts of marital problems, we use panel data from a nationally representative sample of married persons to investigate the extent to which marital problems in 1980 predict divorce between 1980 and 1992. In doing so, we address questions about the validity and usefulness of people's self-reports of marital prob-

Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska—Lincoln,
P.O. Box 880324, Lincoln, NE 68588-0324 (pamato@
unlinfo.unl.edu).

Key Words: divorce, gender, longitudinal studies, marital problems.

lems as predictors of divorce. Second, we integrate data on specific marital problems (which we view as proximal causes of divorce) with data on the demographic and life course predictors of marital disruption identified in most prior sociological research (which we view as distal causes of divorce). To accomplish this, we assess the extent to which particular marital problems in 1980 mediate the associations between demographic and life course variables and divorce. Finally, because previous evidence suggests that men and women experience marriage and divorce differently (Bernard, 1972; Kitson, 1992; Thompson & Walker, 1989), we consider gender differences, both in the frequency of reports of marital problems in 1980 and in the extent to which these problems predict divorce between 1980 and 1992.

MARITAL PROBLEMS AND DIVORCE

Marital Problems as Predictors of Divorce

Despite the substantial body of research on marital disruption, few prospective studies illustrate the extent to which specific characteristics of a relationship predict divorce. One exception is the work of Gottman and his colleagues, who have investigated some of the linkages among marital interaction, conflict resolution, and divorce (Gottman, 1994). In the present research, we focus on the existence of various types of problems in people's marriages and the extent to which these problems increase the risk of marital disruption.

Research indicates that ex-husbands and ex-wives consistently refer to certain problems as having played a key role in the dissolution of their marriages. The most frequently cited marital problems involve communication difficulties, general incompatibility, infidelity, not spending enough time at home, and disagreements over money (Burns, 1984; Cleek & Pearson, 1985; Kitson, 1992). Extramarital sex was prominent in eight of the nine studies summarized by Kitson, Babri, and Roach (1985), making it the most commonly cited cause of marital dissolution.

Although the accounts of divorced individuals seem straightforward, previous researchers have argued otherwise. For example, Goode (1956) claimed that individuals' reports of marital problems are not the underlying causes of divorce. Although Goode asked his respondents why they had divorced, he stated, "We did not at any time believe . . . that we would thus obtain an answer

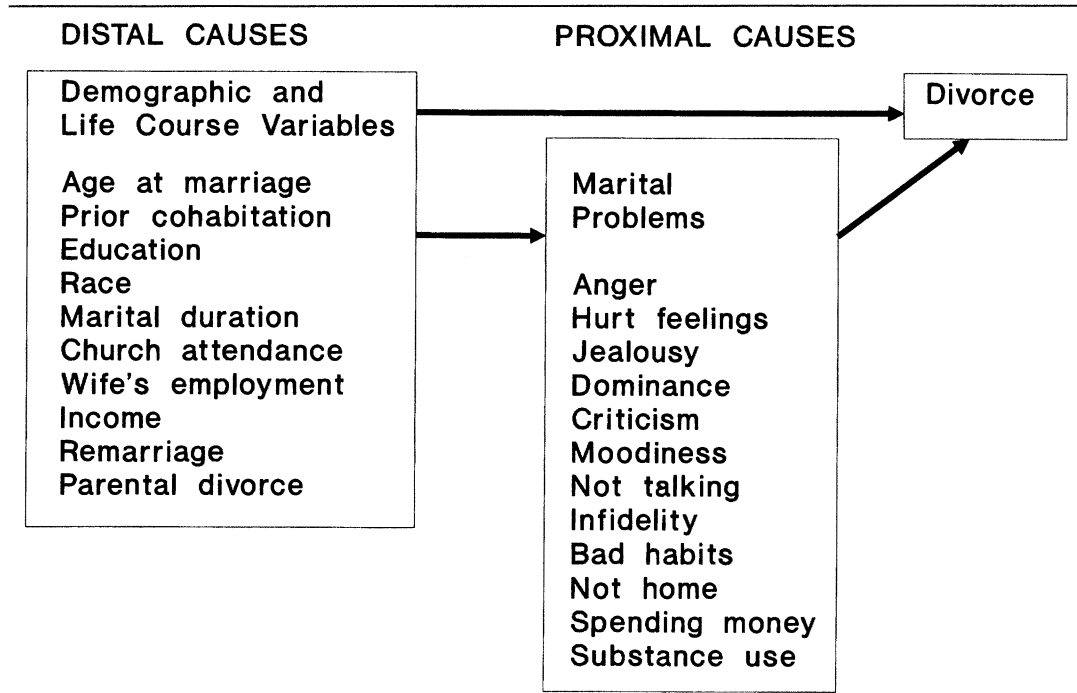
to the question, 'What caused the divorce'" (p. 114). Individuals' reports of marital problems are useful, Goode argued, for understanding people's subjective experiences of divorce and their post-divorce adjustment, but differences in the views of husbands and wives, as well as shifts in perceptions over time, suggest that these accounts are not reliable indicators of the true causes of marital disruption. Similarly, Rasmussen and Ferraro (1979) argued that individuals' post hoc explanations of divorce result from redefining what had previously been acceptable (or at least tolerable) marital behavior in an attempt to reduce cognitive dissonance associated with the decision to end the marriage.

Because previous studies have relied on retrospective accounts from divorced individuals, it is impossible to determine if perceptions of marital problems change after divorce. We are able to overcome this limitation by using prospective, longitudinal data in which marital problems are measured before a divorce occurs. However, merely showing that problems predict divorce would not be strong evidence that problems are a cause of divorce. It is possible that spouses define certain behaviors as problems only when they have already given up on their marriages and are about to break up, anyway. If this is true, then reports of problems would predict divorces that occur shortly after the interview but would not predict divorces that occur many years later. We test this possibility in our analysis.

Proximal and Distal Causes of Divorce

Our second goal is to integrate research on marital complaints as causes of divorce with research on demographic and life course determinants of divorce. The conceptual model that guides our research is presented in Figure 1. We assume that specific marital problems—similar to those revealed in prior studies based on people's retrospective accounts—directly increase the likelihood of divorce. We view these as proximal factors associated with divorce because they represent features of the ongoing relationship. Our model also indicates that commonly studied demographic and life course variables affect marital problems, as well as divorce. We view these as distal factors because they represent characteristics that individuals bring to their relationships. Finally, we assume that some of the impact of background characteristics is mediated through specific marital problems. In other words, the conceptual

FIGURE 1. CONCEPTUAL MODEL SHOWING DISTAL AND PROXIMAL CAUSES OF DIVORCE



model proposes that distal factors (demographic and life course characteristics) affect the likelihood that certain problems arise within relationships and that these proximal relationship problems, in turn, increase the likelihood of divorce.

Previous research has produced a relatively clear understanding of the links between demographic and life course characteristics and divorce. Variables that increase the risk of marital dissolution include marrying at an early age (Booth & Edwards, 1985; Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991), cohabiting prior to marriage (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Booth & Johnson, 1988), being African American (Cherlin, 1992), being in a marriage of short duration (Booth, Johnson, White, & Edwards, 1986; Thornton & Rodgers, 1987), having low religious participation (Thomas & Cornwell, 1990), having low education or income (Martin & Bumpass, 1989), being in a second rather than a first marriage (Martin & Bumpass, 1989; White & Booth, 1985), and experiencing parental divorce as a child (Bumpass, et al., 1991; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988). In addition, although contradictory findings exist, some studies show that women's employment and income increase their thoughts about divorce (Booth, Johnson, White, & Edwards, 1984) and the likelihood that their marriages will end in di-

vorce (Spitze & South, 1985). We could add other variables to this list. However, our aim is not to formulate an exhaustive list of the predictors of marital disruption. Instead, our goal is a more modest but realistic one: that is, to assess the extent to which specific marital problems mediate the impact of some of the most widely recognized predictors of divorce.

We do not expect the effects of demographic characteristics on divorce to be completely mediated by specific marital problems. This is because many demographic variables, in addition to increasing the risk of certain marital problems, also affect alternatives to the marriage and barriers to leaving the relationship. For example, an early age at marriage may increase the risk of divorce not only because it leads to certain relationship problems, but also because young adults have relatively good chances on the remarriage market. Similarly, religiosity may not only affect the quality of the marital relationship, but also increase the stigma associated with leaving a marriage.

Gender Differences in Reports of Marital Problems

Our third goal is to consider differences in the linkages between marital problems and marital

disruption by gender. Consistent with Jessie Bernard's (1972) argument that husbands and wives experience "his and her marriages," studies indicate that they also experience "his and her divorces." This is reflected in consistent gender differences in the number of marital problems that people identify as causes of marital disruption. Levinger (1966) was one of the first to find that divorced women report more marital problems than divorced men. This finding has persisted, despite changes in gender roles and perhaps in the nature of marriage itself (Burns, 1984; Cleek & Peterson, 1985; Kitson, 1992; Kitson & Sussman, 1982; Spanier & Thompson, 1987). Indeed, some studies show that men have more difficulty than women in identifying and articulating the specific problems that contributed to their divorces (Kitson, 1992).

Furthermore, men and women consistently report different types of marital problems as the causes of divorce (Bloom et al., 1985; Burns, 1984; Cleek & Pearson, 1985; Kitson, 1992; Kitson & Sussman, 1982; Levinger, 1966). Women emphasize the personality characteristics and behaviors of their spouses more than men. In particular, women often cite the husband's use of authority, his cruelty, drinking habits, immaturity, untrustworthiness, infidelity, poor money management, values, and lifestyle as causes of divorce. Although husbands often cite their wife's infidelity as the cause of divorce, they also refer to their own drinking, drug use, and physical abusiveness, as well as external causes such as a family death, work commitments, and problems with in-laws.

Research by feminist scholars and others suggests that differences between women and men in the number and types of marital complaints are rooted in the gendered nature of intimate relationships. For example, compared with men, women have greater responsibility for and spend more time responding to the emotional and psychological needs of their spouses and children. They also spend more time monitoring the status of intimate relationships (Rubin, Peplau, & Hill, 1981; Thompson & Walker, 1989). These differences reflect experiences of gendered socialization—girls learn to be more relationship-oriented than boys. In addition, feminist scholars argue that wives are in subordinate positions within marriage and, consequently, find it necessary to monitor closely the status of their marital relationships (Ferree, 1991; Goode, 1982; Thompson & Walker, 1989). Furthermore, gender arrangements ben-

efit women less than men in many marriages. For example, evidence that many employed wives do a "second shift" of household work and child care at home after working a full day (Hochschild, 1989) suggests that they have more to complain about within marriage than do husbands. Perhaps for these reasons, women are more likely than men to terminate unsatisfactory intimate relationships (Rubin et al., 1981) and to initiate divorce (Kitson, 1992). Based on these arguments, we hypothesize that wives report more marital problems than do husbands and that wives' reports of marital problems are better predictors of divorce than are husbands' reports.

In addition to gender differences in the number and types of marital problems that divorcing individuals cite, research also suggests that individuals (especially women, but also men) are more likely to blame their former spouses for divorce than to blame themselves (Kitson, 1992; Kitson & Sussman, 1982). This is particularly likely in the case of infidelity; people often cite the infidelity of the spouse but rarely cite their own infidelity as contributing to divorce (Cleek & Pearson, 1985; South & Lloyd, 1995). This difference in the perceived source of problems (self vs. spouse) may reflect a social desirability bias, with people neglecting to report their own problematic behavior. Furthermore, attribution theory (Fiske & Taylor, 1992) suggests that because of self-serving biases, people tend to attribute problems to external, rather than internal, causes. This leads us to hypothesize that husbands and wives are more likely to report marital problems caused by their spouses than by themselves.

METHOD

Sample

Our data come from the Panel Study of Marital Instability over the Life Course (Booth, Amato, Johnson, & Edwards, 1993). In 1980, telephone interviewers used random-digit dialing to locate a national sample of 2,033 married persons (not couples) 55 years of age and under. Seventeen percent of individuals in the target sample could not be reached after 10 or more callbacks. Of those individuals contacted, 78% completed the full interview. The overall response rate compares favorably with other studies using random-digit dialing (Groves & Kahn, 1979). The 1980 sample, when compared with data on married individuals from the United States census, is representa-

tive with respect to age, race, household size, presence of children, home ownership, and region.

In 1983, telephone interviewers successfully contacted 1,592 of the original respondents (78%)—a rate comparable with panel studies that use face-to-face interview procedures (Booth & Johnson, 1985). We obtained information on marital status from an additional 150 respondents via a short, mailed questionnaire, so we had information on subsequent divorce for 86% of the original sample. In 1988, we completed telephone interviews with 1,341 respondents and obtained marital status information from an additional 94 respondents (71% of the original sample). In 1992, we interviewed 1,189 respondents by telephone and obtained marital status information from an additional 45 people (61% of the original sample). The analysis is based on individuals for whom information on marital status existed at two or more points in time (that is, the 86% of the original 1980 sample).

Due to sample attrition, the second, third, and fourth waves slightly underrepresented African Americans, Hispanics, young respondents, renters, and those without a college education. It is difficult to predict the effects of differential attrition on our results. However, because attrition tended to occur in groups with higher than average divorce rates, this may lead to a slight attenuation of associations between the explanatory variables and divorce. If this is true, then the estimates of effect sizes and significance tests obtained in the present study err on the conservative side. This interpretation is consistent with simulations we carried out with the present data set.

Variables

Marital problems. The 1980 data set included a series of questions dealing with relationship problems similar to those frequently reported in retrospective studies of divorced individuals. Respondents were asked: "Have you had a problem in your marriage because one of you (a) gets angry easily, (b) has feelings that are easily hurt, (c) is jealous, (d) is domineering, (e) is critical, (f) is moody, (g) won't talk to the other, (h) has had a sexual relationship with someone else, (i) has irritating habits, (j) is not home enough, (k) spends money foolishly, (l) drinks or uses drugs?" If respondents reported that a problem existed in their marriage, they were asked which person had the problem: the respondent, the respondent's spouse,

or both the respondent and the respondent's spouse. (We also had an item dealing with spouses being abusive to children. But because few people reported this problem, we did not use it in our analyses.)

Divorce. In 1983, 1988, and 1992 respondents indicated if they had divorced or separated permanently since the previous interview. Like many divorce researchers (e.g., Bumpass et al., 1991), we view permanent separation as a form of marital disruption similar to divorce. In contrast, we did not count separations that ended in reconciliation during the course of our study as instances of marital disruption. During the 12 years of our study, 231 divorces and 33 permanent separations occurred; permanent separations, therefore, represented 12.5% of the cases of marital disruption. We carried out all analyses twice, once with separations included and once with separations excluded. Because the findings for the two sets of analyses were virtually identical, we present the results with separations and divorces combined into a single dependent variable.

Demographic and life course variables. Age at first marriage was based on the respondent's and the spouse's ages at marriage. Because they were moderately highly correlated ($r = .46$), we took the mean of the two ($M = 21.5$, $SD = 2.8$). Fifteen percent of respondents reported that they had cohabited with their spouse prior to marriage (1 = cohabited, 0 = did not). Education was based on the respondent's and the spouse's years of education in 1980. These variables were highly correlated ($r = .61$), so we took the mean of the two ($M = 13.6$, $SD = 2.4$). Because African Americans have a particularly high divorce rate, we compared Blacks (7%) with all other racial and ethnic groups (1 = Black, 0 = other). Duration of marriage in 1980 was measured in years ($M = 13.0$, $SD = 9.2$).

Church attendance was based on the question, "How often do you and your spouse attend church together?" (1 = once a year or less, 4 = weekly; $M = 2.6$, $SD = 1.2$). Sixty percent of wives were in the paid labor force (1 = employed, 0 = nonemployed). The mean income of husbands in 1980 was \$22,337 ($SD = \$12,611$); among employed wives, the mean income was \$8,235 ($SD = \$5,989$). To make the regression results easier to interpret, we divided both income variables by 10,000 prior to analysis. In 81% of cases, both spouses were in their first marriage (0 = first mar-

riage for both, 1 = second marriage for one or both). We also created a four-category variable to represent husbands in a second marriage, wives in a second marriage, both spouses in a second marriage, and both spouses in a first marriage. However, preliminary analysis revealed that this procedure did not yield more information than the simple dichotomous version of this variable. In relation to parents' marital status, we created four categories: the husband's parents divorced (10%), the wife's parents divorced (11%), both the husband's and the wife's parents divorced (3%), and neither spouse's parents divorced (77%).

RESULTS

Reports of Marital Problems

Our first goal was to examine the percentage of husbands and wives who reported various marital problems in 1980, as well as whether each problem was perceived as being caused by the respondent or by the respondent's spouse. In Table 1, men's and women's reports of problems due to the husband's behavior are in the first two columns. The first two columns indicate, for example, that 20% of husbands and 20% of wives reported problems in the marriage due to the husband's anger. Husbands were significantly more likely than wives to report that their own hurt feelings, criticism, moodiness, and absence from the home contributed to problems in the marriage. Wives were significantly more likely than hus-

bands to report that their husband's jealousy and irritating habits contributed to marital problems. To summarize these results, we calculated the total number of marital problems caused by husbands, and the means for this variable appear at the bottom of the table. Husbands and wives reported similar numbers of marital problems caused by husbands (1.7 vs. 1.6), overall, and the difference was not significant. These results suggest that although husbands and wives tended to emphasize different problems, they were similarly aware of the extent to which the husband's behavior caused problems in the marriage.

A different pattern emerged when we considered wives' contributions to marital difficulties. These results are presented in the last two columns of Table 1. Compared with wives, husbands were less likely to report that the marital relationship was suffering because their wives got angry easily, had feelings that were easily hurt, were critical, were moody, and did not talk to them. The only exception was that husbands were more likely than wives to report that the wife's jealousy caused marital problems. This difference in reporting also was reflected in the mean number of problems. Husbands reported significantly fewer marital problems caused by wives than did wives ($t = 4.57, p < .001$). This represents a difference of .18 of a standard deviation—a modest, but nontrivial, effect size.

This pattern is consistent with our hypothesis that wives report more marital problems than do husbands. Unexpectedly, however, the difference

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE OF HUSBANDS AND WIVES REPORTING PARTICULAR MARITAL PROBLEMS DUE TO THEIR SPOUSE'S OR THEIR OWN BEHAVIOR

	Husbands' Behavior Reported by		Wives' Behavior Reported by	
	Husbands	Wives	Husbands	Wives
Gets angry easily	20	20	13	23*
Feelings are easily hurt	14	11*	35	42*
Is jealous	10	13*	13	11*
Is domineering	13	13	7	9
Is critical	18	14*	9	14*
Is moody	23	17*	19	27*
Does not talk to the other	18	18	12	16*
Has had sex with someone else	4	4	2	2
Has irritating habits	12	18*	8	10
Is not home enough	19	15*	4	4
Spends money foolishly	11	12	8	7
Drinks or uses drugs	6	7	1	1
Total number of problems	\bar{X} (SD)	1.7 (1.9)	1.6 (1.7)	1.3 (1.6)
		1.6 (1.7)	1.3 (1.6)	1.6* (1.7)

Note: Sample size is 821 husbands and 1,213 wives.

*Significant difference in husbands' and wives' reports at $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

TABLE 2. HUSBANDS' AND WIVES' REPORTS OF PARTICULAR MARITAL PROBLEMS IN 1980 AS PREDICTORS OF DIVORCE BETWEEN 1980 AND 1992

	Husbands' Behavior Reported by		Wives' Behavior Reported by	
	Husbands	Wives	Husbands	Wives
Gets angry easily	24	65**	46	62**
Feelings are easily hurt	64*	7	38	20
Is jealous	90*	130***	101**	65**
Is domineering	49†	85***	63†	6
Is critical	59*	98***	93*	25
Is moody	69**	77**	29	34*
Does not talk to the other	60*	46*	21	22
Has had sex with someone else	90†	299***	363**	164**
Has irritating habits	35	92***	127***	101***
Is not home enough	10	105***	-17	121**
Spends money foolishly	139***	187***	77*	68*
Drinks or uses drugs	156**	183***	216*	388*

Note: Table values are percentage change in the odds of divorce based on logistic regression: $(\exp(B) - 1) \times 100$. Sample sizes are 6,329 person-years for husbands and 9,612 person-years for wives. Significance tests are one-tailed.

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

is due mainly to wives reporting more problems caused by themselves. It appears that, although husbands are aware of their own contributions to marital problems, they are less aware of (or less willing to report) their wives' contributions. Given that many of the significant differences involved emotions (anger, hurt feelings, and moodiness), it may be that husbands have difficulty perceiving their wife's internal sources of distress that contribute to her experience of the marriage as problematic.

Our hypothesis that husbands and wives report more marital problems caused by their partners than by themselves was not supported. Wives were as likely to attribute problems to themselves as to their husbands. Indeed, husbands reported fewer problems caused by their wives than by themselves (column 1 vs. column 3). A paired t test revealed that this difference was significant ($t = 6.68, p < .001$). This represents an effect size of .23 or a difference of nearly one fourth of a standard deviation.

Marital Problems as Predictors of Divorce

Our second goal was to assess the extent to which men's and women's reports of various problems (both their own and their spouse's) predicted divorce between 1980 and 1992. The data were right-censored because the survey ended in 1992 and because some people dropped out of the panel prior to this. To analyze these data, we used a discrete-time hazard model estimated with logistic

regression (Allison, 1984). Following standard procedures, we constructed a data set of person-years, with each year in which a person was at risk of divorcing representing one unit of observation. Individuals were no longer at risk and were removed (censored) from the data set if they divorced, lost a partner through death, or dropped out of the study. This technique allowed cases to contribute what information they had to the analysis.

Table 2 shows the percentage increase (or decrease) in the odds of marital disruption between 1980 and 1992 associated with each marital problem, based on discrete-time hazard models. The first two columns show the results for problems caused by husbands. Because we hypothesized that problems increase the likelihood of divorce, we used one-tailed significance tests. Column 1 reveals that husbands' reports of marital problems due to their own behavior are generally associated with increases in the odds of divorce. Of the 12 coefficients, seven are significant, two are marginally significant, and all are positive. Similarly, column 2 reveals that wives' reports of problems due to their husband's behavior are associated with divorce in all but one case. Although more coefficients are significant for wives, this partly reflects the larger sample size. Indeed, tests for interactions between each problem and the gender of the respondent revealed no significant results. It appears that both husbands' and wives' reports of marital problems caused by husbands are good predictors of future marital dissolution.

TABLE 3. HUSBANDS' AND WIVES' REPORTS OF MARITAL PROBLEMS (SUMMARY SCORES) IN 1980 AS PREDICTORS OF DIVORCE BETWEEN 1980 AND 1992

	Year of Divorce			
	1980-1992	1980-1983	1984-1988	1989-1992
Husbands' reports				
Sum of husband's problems	21***	14*	26**	27*
Sum of wife's problems	22***	24**	17†	21†
Sum of both spouses' problems	19***	15*	17*	19*
Wives' reports				
Sum of husband's problems	30***	14***	21**	21**
Sum of wife's problems	18***	20**	13†	23**
Sum of both spouses' problems	22***	41***	13**	17**
Husbands' and wives' reports				
Sum of husband's problems	26***	29***	22***	22**
Sum of wife's problems	20***	22***	15*	23**
Sum of both spouses' problems	21***	32***	15*	18***

Note: Table values are percentage change in the odds of divorce based on logistic regression: $(\exp(B) - 1) \times 100$. Sample sizes are 6,329 person-years for husbands and 9,612 person-years for wives. Significance tests are one-tailed.

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

The third and fourth columns in Table 2 show the results for wives' problems. Of the 12 problems, six are significant predictors of divorce, and one is marginally significant, when husbands provided the data. Correspondingly, eight problems are significant predictors when wives provided the data. Although the table values differ somewhat for husbands and wives, interaction terms revealed only one significant interaction: Not being home enough was a better predictor of divorce for wives than for husbands ($p < .05$). Overall, these results indicate that both husbands' and wives' reports of problems caused by wives are positively associated with future divorce.

Looking across the rows of Table 2 reveals that jealousy, infidelity, spending money foolishly, and drinking or using drugs were the most consistent predictors of divorce. These problems appeared to increase the odds of divorce, regardless of which spouse was perceived as having caused the problem and regardless of whether husbands or wives were the respondents. Consistent with prior literature, infidelity was associated with an especially large increase in the odds of divorce.

We also used the summary problem scores to predict divorce, and these results are shown in the first column of Table 3. Turning first to husbands' reports, each of husbands' own problems increased the risk of divorce during the course of the study by 21%. Similarly, each problem they reported for their wives increased the risk of divorce by 22%. A single score, based on the num-

ber of problems attributed to either spouse, was also positively related to divorce. Turning to wives' reports, problems reported for their husbands increased the risk of divorce by 30%, whereas each of their own problems increased the risk of divorce by 18%. Again, a summary score, based on problems due to either spouse, was significantly related to divorce. Although wives' reports of husbands' problems (row 4) appeared to be a better predictor of divorce than husbands' reports of husbands' problems (row 1), the interaction was not significant. (The differences between rows 2 and 5 and between rows 3 and 6 were also not significant.) Consequently, we combined husbands' and wives' accounts into a single variable, and these results are available in the last three rows of Table 3. The pattern, however, is much the same.

It is possible that an elevated number of problems prior to divorce reflects marriages in which spouses have already decided to abandon the relationship. In other words, reports of problems might be short-term reactions to marriages that are on the brink of breaking up anyway. To determine the predictive utility of these reports, we examined divorces that occurred in three periods: 1980-1983, 1984-1988, and 1989-1992. These results are in the second, third, and fourth columns of Table 3, respectively. It appears that for both husbands and wives, reports of marital problems in 1980 predict divorces between 1989 and 1992 almost as well as they predict divorces between 1980 and 1983. For example, when we

TABLE 4. DEMOGRAPHIC AND LIFE COURSE PREDICTORS OF MARITAL PROBLEMS IN 1980

	Jealousy	Moodiness	Infidelity	Irritating Habits	Spends Money Foolishly	Drinking, Drug Use
Couple's age at marriage	-11***	-1	-21***	3	-4	-7 [†]
Prior cohabitation	5	38*	-3	28	35	36
Respondent Black	55*	-4	22**	34	100***	81*
Years married	-2*	-3***	2	1 [†]	-1 [†]	1
Church attendance	-18***	-14***	-33***	-20***	-24***	-27***
Couple education	-12***	-3	11 [†]	-3	-1	-13**
Wife employed	15	9	55	-2	6	2
Husband's income	1	3	5	-1	0	2
Wife's income	0	-10 [†]	-1	2	2	13
Remarriage for one or both	-10	-6	48	9	-6	38
Husband's parents divorced	42*	39*	46	-1	20	73 [†]
Wife's parents divorced	80***	23	92*	98***	53*	149***
Both spouses' parents divorced	20	65 [†]	-49	21	162**	-25
Female respondent	3	13	20	52**	10	2
χ^2	108.9***	75.5***	63.8***	68.4***	93.7***	82.9***

Note: Table values are percentage change in the odds of reporting each marital problem based on logistic regression: $(\exp(B) - 1) \times 100$. Sample size is 1,742 for all equations. Significance tests are two-tailed.

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

pool husbands' and wives' reports of problems caused by either spouse (Table 3, row 9), we see that each problem increases the risk of divorce by 32% in 1980–1983, 15% in 1984–1988, and 18% in 1989–1992. These results indicate that the association between marital problems and divorce is not due to marriages that are on the brink of breaking up at the time of the 1980 interview.

We also checked to see if certain problems in 1980 predicted the number of years until the divorce occurred among respondents whose marriages ended during the study ($n = 264$). Wives' reports of their husbands' problems with jealousy and spending money foolishly in 1980 were negatively associated with the year of divorce ($r = -.19$, $p < .05$, and $-.27$, $p < .01$, respectively). These findings indicate that jealousy and spending money foolishly were followed by divorce relatively quickly, compared with other problems. No significant associations emerged when husbands served as respondents.

Due to the absence of interactions between gender and reports of problems in predicting divorce, we pooled the responses of husbands and wives to simplify our final analysis. We then used a stepwise logistic regression procedure to find the most parsimonious set of marital problems in 1980 that predicted divorce during the course of our study. Although not appropriate in testing causal models, stepwise regression can be useful as a data reduction technique, which is its purpose in the present context. This analysis revealed that six problems made independent contributions to

the prediction of divorce. These six variables, reported in their order of entry (and with the unstandardized coefficients from the final model), consisted of infidelity ($b = .66$), spending money foolishly ($b = .56$), drinking or using drugs ($b = .53$), jealousy ($b = .40$), having irritating habits ($b = .31$), and moodiness ($b = .27$). In other words, once we know if any of these six problems existed in a marriage in 1980, then information on additional problems does not increase our ability to predict divorce.

Distal and Proximal Causes of Divorce

In the final step of the analysis, we examined the extent to which marital problems mediated the estimated impact of the demographic and life course variables on divorce (see Figure 1). To accomplish this, we first examined the extent to which the variables that frequently predict divorce also were associated with the six marital problems noted above. Logistic regression analyses (based entirely on 1980 data) revealed a number of significant linkages, and these are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4 shows that age at marriage was negatively associated with three problems. Each year that couples delayed marriage was associated with an 11% decline in reports of problems due to jealousy, a 21% decline in reports of problems due to infidelity, and a 7% decline in reports of problems due to drinking or drug use. Being African American was associated with an in-

creased likelihood of reporting problems with jealousy, infidelity, spending money, and drinking or drug use. Church attendance was negatively associated with all six problems. In addition, parental divorce generally increased the odds of reporting each problem. Other predictors yielded less consistent findings. Nevertheless, these results indicate that many of the variables that predict divorce also predict the occurrence of specific marital problems.

Next, we carried out logistic regression analyses in two steps. On the first model, we regressed divorce on the demographic and life course variables; in the second model, we included the six marital problems that represented the most parsimonious set of divorce predictors. These results are shown in Table 5.

Model 1 shows that six background variables were associated with divorce between 1980 and 1992: age at marriage, years married, church attendance, the wife's income, being in a remarriage rather than a first marriage, and parental divorce. In relation to the last variable, if the wife's parents were divorced, then the odds of divorce were marginally higher, but if both the husband's

and the wife's parents were divorced, the odds of divorce were considerably higher.

Model 2 includes the six marital problems. The increase in chi-square values between Model 1 and Model 2 was significant ($p < .001$). This indicates that adding the marital problems to the equation resulted in a significant improvement in our ability to predict divorce, relative to an equation that contained only demographic and life course variables. Furthermore, with marital problems added to the equation, several of the significant associations in Model 1 were reduced. The coefficient for age at marriage declined 18%, the coefficient for church attendance declined 25%, the coefficient for remarriage declined 10%, the coefficient for wife's parents divorced declined 79%, and the coefficient for both spouses' parents divorced declined 54%. However, adding marital problems to the equation did not decrease the coefficients for years married or wife's income. Nevertheless, consistent with our hypothesis, these declines suggest that marital problems mediate modest (and occasionally large) proportions of the estimated effects of many background variables on divorce.

DISCUSSION

This research provides insights into a question that has puzzled family scholars for the last four decades. Researchers have investigated recollections of marital problems among divorced individuals, but whether these perceptions precede, rather than follow, divorce has remained unclear. Consequently, previous research has been unable to determine if specific marital problems predict divorce and, if so, which problems are better predictors than others. Furthermore, most of these studies have been based on small and geographically restricted samples.

Our findings, based on a prospective design and a nationally representative sample of married persons, provide clear evidence of associations between the problems that individuals report in their marriages and the likelihood that these marriages end in divorce. More specifically, the study contributes to our understanding of the relationship between marital problems and divorce by addressing (a) gender differences in perceptions of marital problems, (b) the extent to which particular marital problems predict divorce, and (c) the extent to which proximal marital problems mediate the impact of the distal demographic and life course variables that family sociologists usually study.

TABLE 5. PREDICTORS OF DIVORCE BETWEEN 1980 AND 1992 FOR COMBINED SAMPLE OF HUSBANDS AND WIVES

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2
Distal variables		
Couple's age at marriage	-11***	-9***
Prior cohabitation	17	12
African American	3	-18
Years married	-5***	-6***
Church attendance	-24***	-18***
Couple education	-1	0
Wife employed	5	3
Husband's income	0	0
Wife's income	2**	2**
Remarriage for one or both	31*	28†
Husband's parents divorced	7	-1
Wife's parents divorced	29†	6
Both spouses' parents divorced	137***	63*
Wife respondent	16	12
Proximal variables		
Jealousy		15
Moodiness		17
Infidelity		100***
Irritating habits		39*
Spending money foolishly		45**
Drinking or using drugs		49*
χ^2	163.5***	204.3***

Note: Table values are percentage change in the odds of divorce based on logistic regression: $(\exp(B) - 1) \times 100$. Sample size is 15,941 person-years. Significance tests are one-tailed.

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

Gender Differences in Reports of Marital Problems

By illustrating that women and men differed in the frequency with which they reported certain problems, our findings contribute to the knowledge of the ways in which men and women experience marriage differently. We found support for the hypothesis that women report more marital problems than men. Unexpectedly, however, this difference is because husbands are less likely than wives to report on wives' contributions to marital problems, especially problems related to emotions such as anger, being easily hurt, and moodiness. In contrast, husbands and wives appear to be equally aware of husbands' contributions to marital problems. It is useful to interpret this finding in the light of feminist thought about women's subordinate position in many marriages. A number of observers (Ferree, 1991; Goode, 1982; Thompson & Walker, 1989) have argued that because women have less power than men and because they remain largely economically dependent on their husbands, it is necessary for wives to monitor closely and interpret the state of their marital relationships. Because husbands do not monitor their wives' behavior as closely as wives monitor their husbands' behavior, husbands may underestimate the number of marital problems generated by their wives.

We found no support for the hypothesis that men and women report more problems caused by their partners than by themselves. Indeed, contrary to our expectation based on attribution theory, husbands reported more problems caused by themselves than by their wives. Nevertheless, we see this as a useful finding: The fact that respondents did not appear to be affected by a self-serving bias provides support for the validity of their reports.

Marital Problems as Predictors of Divorce

We found that individuals' reports of marital problems in 1980 are good predictors of divorce between 1980 and 1992. Even though, as just noted, men and women differ in the types of problems reported, men's and women's reports of problems predict divorce equally well. Marital problems such as sexual infidelity, jealousy, drinking, spending money, moodiness, not communicating, and anger appear to increase the odds of divorce. Extramarital sex is a particularly powerful predictor of divorce. This result is consistent with South and Lloyd's (1995) finding that in at least one third of divorce cases, one or both

spouses had been involved with another person prior to marital disruption.

These conclusions about the role of marital problems, based on prospective longitudinal data, are consistent with previous research based on retrospective data (Bloom et al., 1985; Burns, 1984; Cleek & Pearson, 1985; Kitson & Sussman, 1982). Some observers have argued that individuals' explanations for divorce are merely post hoc justifications. In other words, in trying to resolve cognitive dissonance associated with the decision to break up, spouses may redefine previously acceptable features of the relationship as problems (Goode, 1956; Rasmussen & Ferraro, 1979). However, our use of prospective data casts some doubt on this interpretation. We find that people whose marriages eventually are disrupted report an elevated number of problems as early as 9–12 years prior to the divorce. Because awareness of these problems precedes divorce by a long time, these problems are not post hoc justifications for decisions to end the marriage. Readers should keep in mind, however, that because respondents' postdivorce reports of marital problems are not available in the data, we were unable to compare people's postdivorce reports with their predivorce reports. Indeed, it is possible that our respondents' pre- and postdivorce perceptions differ considerably. Nevertheless, in spite of this limitation, our findings reveal that individuals' perceptions of problems during the marriage are good predictors of future divorce, and the problems that people report prior to divorce are similar to those noted in studies that have relied on retrospective data. These considerations suggest that people have a reasonable degree of insight into the problems that eventually cause their marriages to fail.

Our analysis, of course, contains several limitations. For example, we have only one partner's reports of marital problems. Furthermore, we do not have information on the person who initiated the divorce, so we are unable to discern whether spouses who perceive the most problems are also the ones who initiate the divorce. It would also be useful to know the extent to which problems associated with violence between spouses—a variable not included in our data—contribute to divorce. Each of these ideas would be useful starting points for future research.

An Integrated Model of Proximal and Distal Causes of Divorce

Our research has also attempted to integrate two bodies of literature. The first focuses on personal

accounts of marital problems, which we see as proximal causes of divorce, and the second focuses on demographic and life course variables, which we see as distal causes of divorce. As White (1990) observed, "Although there remains a need to monitor demographic and life course trends as they affect divorce, our primary need for the future is to show *how*, through what mechanisms, these variables affect divorce" (p. 910). Following this recommendation, our analysis suggests that variables such as age at marriage, church attendance, remarriage, and parental divorce affect the odds of divorce, in part, by contributing to certain constellations of marital problems, which, in turn, predict divorce.

For example, when marriage occurs at younger ages, spouses are more likely to report marital problems associated with infidelity and jealousy. This suggests that these marriages tend to be unstable because young spouses are readily drawn into extramarital relationships. Similarly, frequent church attendance appears to lower the likelihood of divorce, in part, by decreasing a range of marital problems. People who attend church frequently may be especially well behaved because they have internalized behavioral norms through religious socialization or because they are monitored and supported by the church community. Furthermore, parental divorce appears to increase the risk of a number of problems, including jealousy, infidelity, irritating habits, and spending money foolishly. These problems mediate most of the estimated effect of parental divorce on offspring divorce. Experiencing parental divorce as a child may interfere with learning dyadic skills that facilitate successful marital relations, thus leading to a general increase in problems and an increased risk of divorce (Amato, 1996).

Marital problems do not mediate all of the estimated effects of demographic and life course variables. This is to be expected for two reasons. First, we may have omitted certain key marital problems. Although we considered a wide range of marital problems, we were not able to address a number of other potentially important sources of distress, such as styles of conflict resolution, physical abuse, children's misbehavior, and the household division of labor. Future research should examine the role of these and other factors in predicting marital problems and subsequent divorce. Second, some demographic and life course variables affect the likelihood of divorce, not by affecting the nature of the marital relationship,

but by affecting alternatives to the relationship or the barriers to leaving the marriage. Consequently, even with a complete list of problems, we would not expect complete mediation.

Nevertheless, in spite of modest evidence of mediation, our research represents an initial attempt to combine elements of two research traditions: (a) studies that focus on marital processes and (b) studies that focus on demographic and life course characteristics. We encourage additional longitudinal research that considers not only the proximal relationship characteristics that predict divorce, but also the manner in which these characteristics mediate the impact of distal demographic and life course variables.

REFERENCES

- Allison, P. R. (1984). *Event history analysis: Regression for longitudinal data*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Amato, P. R. (1996). Explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 58, 628-640.
- Axinn, W. G., & Thornton, A. (1992). The relationship between cohabitation and divorce: Selectivity or causal influence. *Demography*, 29, 357-374.
- Bernard, J. (1972). *The future of marriage*. New York: World.
- Bloom, B. L., Niles, R. L., & Tatcher, A. M. (1985). Sources of marital dissatisfaction among newly separated persons. *Journal of Family Issues*, 6, 359-373.
- Booth, A., Amato, P. R., Johnson, D., & Edwards, J. (1993). *Marital instability over the life course: Methodology report for fourth wave*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Bureau of Sociological Research.
- Booth, A., & Edwards, J. (1985). Age at marriage and marital instability. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 47, 67-75.
- Booth, A., & Johnson, D. (1988). Premarital cohabitation and marital success. *Journal of Family Issues*, 9, 255-272.
- Booth, A., & Johnson, D. (1985). Tracking respondents in a telephone interview selected by random-digit dialing. *Sociological Methods and Research*, 14, 53-64.
- Booth, A., Johnson, D., White, L., & Edwards, J. (1986). Divorce and marital instability over the life course. *Journal of Family Issues*, 7, 421-442.
- Booth, A., Johnson, D., White, L., & Edwards, J. (1984). Women, outside employment, and marital instability. *American Journal of Sociology*, 90, 567-583.
- Bumpass, L. L., Martin, T. C., & Sweet, J. A. (1991). The impact of family background and early marital factors on marital disruption. *Journal of Family Issues*, 12, 22-42.
- Burns, A. (1984). Perceived causes of marriage breakdown and conditions of life. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 46, 551-562.
- Cherlin, A. (1992). *Marriage, divorce, remarriage* (Rev. ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Cleek, M. G., & Pearson, T. (1985). Perceived causes of divorce: An analysis of interrelationships. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 47, 179-183.
- Demo, D. H., & Acock, A. C. (1994). *Family diversity and well-being*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ferree, M. M. (1991). Feminism and family research. In A. Booth (Ed.), *Contemporary families: Looking forward, looking back* (pp. 103-121). Minneapolis, MN: National Council on Family Relations.
- Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1992). *Social cognition*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Goode, W. J. (1956). *After divorce*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Goode, W. J. (1982). Why men resist. In B. Thorne (Ed.), *Rethinking the family: Some feminist questions* (pp. 287-310). Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Gottman, J. M. (1994). *What predicts divorce? The relationship between marital processes and marital outcomes*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Groves, R., & Kahn, R. (1979). *Surveys by telephone: A national comparison with personal interviews*. New York: Academic Press.
- Hochschild, A. (1989). *The second shift*. New York: Avon.
- Kitson, G. C. (1992). *Portrait of divorce: Adjustment to marital breakdown*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Kitson, G. C., Babri, K. B., & Roach, M. J. (1985). Who divorces and why: A review. *Journal of Family Issues*, 6, 255-293.
- Kitson, G. C., & Sussman, M. B. (1982). Marital complaints, demographic characteristics, and symptoms of mental distress in divorce. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 44, 87-101.
- Levinger, G. (1966). Sources of marital dissatisfaction among applicants for divorce. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 32, 803-807.
- Martin, T. C., & Bumpass, L. L. (1989). Recent trends in marital disruption. *Demography*, 26, 37-51.
- McLanahan, S., & Bumpass, L. L. (1988). Intergenerational consequences of marital disruption. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, 130-152.
- Rasmussen, P. K., & Ferraro, K. J. (1979). The divorce process. *Alternative Lifestyles*, 2, 443-460.
- Rubin, Z., Peplau, L. A., & Hill, C. T. (1981). Loving and leaving: Sex differences in romantic attachments. *Sex Roles*, 7, 821-835.
- South, S., & Lloyd, K. M. (1995). Spousal alternatives and marital dissolution. *American Sociological Review*, 60, 21-35.
- Spanier, G. B., & Thompson, L. (1987). *Parting: The aftermath of separation and divorce*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Spitze, G., & South, S. J. (1985). Women's employment, time expenditure, and divorce. *Journal of Family Issues*, 6, 307-329.
- Thomas, D. L., & Cornwall, M. (1990). Religion and family in the 1980s: Discovery and development. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52, 983-992.
- Thompson, L., & Walker, A. J. (1989). Gender in families: Women and men in marriage, work, and parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51, 845-871.
- Thornton, A., & Rodgers, W. (1987). The influence of individual and historical time on marital dissolution. *Demography*, 24, 1-22.
- White, L. K. (1990). Determinants of divorce: A review of research in the eighties. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52, 904-912.
- White, L. K., & Booth, A. (1985). The quality and stability of remarriages: The role of stepchildren. *American Sociological Review*, 50, 689-698.

We've Expanded Our Product Line!

Midlife, Aging, & Families

Midlife, Aging, & Families

Current Widowhood: Myths & Realities (B)

Helena Znaniecka Lopata

Provides an overview of the major themes that have characterized the study of widowhood in recent decades. Ann Martin Matthews, University of Guelph, Ontario states, "There is a richness and depth to the discussion which draws on a large body of research not only on widowhood but also on such related topics as later-life marriage, caregiving roles, friendship ties, employment patterns, and the changing roles of wife and mother." ISBN: 0-8039-7396-9, 251 pages. Paper.

XX0002 NCFR Member \$23.95 Non-member \$28.95

New Families & Aging (B)

Vision 2010 Series, Volume 4

Timothy H. Brubaker, CFE, Issue Editor; Sharon J. Price, Series Editor. Addresses the impact of divorce, health, housing, ethnic/racial diversity, disabilities, economics, and caretaking on the elderly and their families. The 26 contributors stimulate interest in family policy, family-based problems, and offer suggestions for strengthening later life families' coping skills. Each two-page brief highlights trends, policy, programming, and assessment issues. Ideal for educators, students, policymakers, and writers. ISBN: 0-916174-53-0, 44 pages. Paper.

OP9607 NCFR Member \$15.95 Non-member \$22

Families in Later Life: Dilemmas and Choices

Wicki L. Schmall. Examines societal trends impacting family of family decision-making, and the role of family members. Approx. 90 min.

Midlife, Aging, & Families

Midlife, Aging, & Families

Current Widowhood: Myths & Realities (B)

Helena Znaniecka Lopata

Provides an overview of the major themes that have characterized the study of widowhood in recent decades. Ann Martin Matthews, University of Guelph, Ontario states, "There is a richness and depth to the discussion which draws on a large body of research not only on widowhood but also on such related topics as later-life marriage, caregiving roles, friendship ties, employment patterns, and the changing roles of wife and mother." ISBN: 0-8039-7396-9, 251 pages. Paper.

XX0002 NCFR Member \$23.95 Non-member \$28.95

Over 270 products arranged by topic:

- Children, Adolescents, & Families •
- Diversity • Family Life Education • Family Policy • Family Therapy • Grief, Death, & Loss •
- Health • Work • Midlife & Aging, • Violence •
- Relationships, Marriage, Families, & Divorce •

Send for your FREE copy.

Special discount prices for NCFR members.



National Council on Family Relations
3989 Central Ave. NE, Suite 550, Minneapolis, MN 55421
Toll Free: 888-781-9331 • Phone: 612-781-9331
Fax: 612-781-9348 • E-mail: ncfr3989@ncfr.com

JMF897