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’Til Death Do Us Part: Examining Race and Gender Differences in Perceptions of Divorce

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Abstract
Divorce is a worldwide issue that affects numerous individuals within society. As the rates of marriage are decreasing and divorce rates are steadily increasing, this issue has the ability to disrupt the basic unit of society, the family. Much of the research based on the dissolution of marriage focuses primarily on the factors contributing to divorce, the demographics of divorce, and the overall rates. While this body of research makes valid claims, there has been little exploration that examines how the factors of race and gender may cause one to perceive divorce differently. This current study differs from Gigy and Kelly’s 2008 study in that it examines the personal, psychological, and emotional reasons associated with the contemporary interpretation of divorce. The purpose of this study is to examine race and gender variances in perceptions of divorce. Such variances in perceptions are culturally and socially transmitted through family practices and social norms within public policy. This research uses evidence to support how minorities, both women and African Americans, experience economic disadvantages throughout the divorce process. This research project uses data analysis and applicable literature to examine how the perceptions of divorce may differ because of one’s race and/or gender.

Key Terms:
• Divorce
• Gender
• Perceptions
• Race
Introduction

Despite conventional wisdom that suggests that divorce rates have become a stagnated statistic, divorce continues to be a worldwide issue that affects numerous individuals on a daily basis. Research on divorce reveals that while divorce rates, specifically in America, have currently entered into the thirty-sixth percentile (Center for Disease Control, 2013), the key group who experiences the greatest effects are African American women (Schwartz & Scott, 2012). As the rates of marriage are decreasing and divorce rates are steadily increasing, this issue has the ability to disrupt the basic unit of society, the family.

Schwartz and Scott (2012) further reveal that African American women are less likely to get married, more likely to get divorced, and less likely to marry interracially compared to any other ethnic group. Based on prior research, I pose the argument that the same social structures and gender expectations that create differential marriage experiences for men and women also act to create differential perspectives of divorce. The purpose of this body of research is to examine how the factors of race and gender may cause one to perceive divorce differently. Significant sociological efforts seek to understand how variations in race and gender create and maintain social disparities within divorce. Furthermore, it is crucial for scholars to keep divorce at the forefront of discussion because when such an issue goes unacknowledged, minorities, specifically African American women, will reap some of the negative effects of divorce.

In this article, I use data analysis and applicable literature to examine race and gender differences in perceptions of divorce. The United States continues to take the lead in divorce rates compared to many other countries, as demonstrated within the last eleven years. More specifically, the U.S. has been ranked in the top five percentile among various countries throughout the world for the highest divorce rates (CDC, 2013). Research reveals that divorce is not evenly distributed across all segments of the population, thus indicating that minority groups experience the greatest vulnerability (Schoen & Vladimir, 2006). While previous research relating to marriage and family has listed numerous divorce contributors, the purpose of this study is to examine the variables of race and gender, both individually and combined to further assess whether they influence differences in perceptions of divorce. This study will further aim to associate specific social and economic disadvantages that may contribute to an attitudinal trend among women and African Americans.

Talcott Parsons’ work on the family in the 1950s-1960s from a functionalist perspective highlights the legacy of disadvantages that contribute to the variations between race and gender as it pertains to divorce perceptions. Parsons argues that a woman’s role in the family is expressive and the man’s role is instrumental. According to Parsons, stepping outside these roles lead to family instability, thus before the 1960s, researchers assumed that the entry of wives into the labor force would have negative consequences on the family, leading, for example, to the dissolution of a marriage union (Schwartz & Scott, 2012). Contemporary sociologists reject the functionalist perspective in regards to the family because the traditional family in which this framework was based, no longer adequately reflects the family experience. In response to Parsons theoretical framework of functionalism, I attribute the economic pressures that forced women into the workforce and thus strained marital relationships, to be an important factor contributing to the divorce rates over time.

Changes in divorce laws, compared to those laws decades ago, have increased marital stability by making divorce more difficult to attain. I pose the argument that because America remains a conservative society, public policies have stigmatized and penalized couples as they
choose to divorce, thus influencing their perspectives on the subject. To develop this argument, I explore the following research question: does race and gender affect the perceptions of divorce? This research is significant because such divorce laws and policies have indeed influenced the perceptions of divorce in our society. Therefore, a further examination is essential, as variances in attitudes across the social factors of race and gender will be revealed. More specifically, I ask (a) whether there are variations in perceptions of divorce across race among men and women and (b) how the factors of race and gender may cause one to perceive divorce positively or negatively. To address the aforementioned research questions, I operate within the social learning framework in relation to current divorce policies, contending that research must understand how the unequal distributions of divorce differentially affect divorce perspectives across race among men and women. This body of research widens the focus on the varying perceptions of divorce in three distinct ways.

First, although women’s experiences with divorce are well documented within the marriage and family literature, understanding the effects of divorce policies and the impacts such laws have on viewpoints across gender remains relatively unclear. Consequently, this work empirically examines whether and how there are gender and race variations in perceptions of divorce. Secondly, understanding race differences in perceptions of divorce across race and gender sheds light on the variations within divorce rates. Although this body of research does not empirically test the relationship between race/gender and perceptions of divorce, I strongly believe that my research will give policy makers a better understanding of whether men and women across race respond differently to the matter of divorce. Finally, because this research utilizes a nationally representative longitudinal dataset (General Social Survey), I argue my research assists the goals of the General Social Survey as it provides a comprehensive analysis that identifies attitudes or perceptions as a societal trend.

The subsequent paragraphs build on conceptual frameworks by assessing the effects of divorce laws/policies and the social learning model. A description of the methods, the data sample from which my results are generated, and the variables I analyze will follow. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of my research for future studies.

**Literature Review**

The social disparity of divorce draws attention to how one’s perception is affected by the factor of divorce laws and the socialization process involving social learning theory (Kapinus, 2005; Drewianka, 2008). Social phenomena, like that of divorce, differentially affects social groups’ perceptions, and such variances are often times dictated by race, gender, age, and social class (Heaton, 2002).

The social learning framework as it relates to divorce suggests that perceptions are linked to marital outcomes. Amato (2010) and Booth (1985) indicate that when couples have tolerant views of divorce they are more likely to end their marriages, but on the other hand, when couples have intolerant views of divorce they are more likely to remain married. Social learning theory further implies that attitudes towards behaviors, such as divorce, are shaped by the social norms pertaining to behavior. Moreover, U.S. society has imposed the normative principle that encourages couples to find the means to strengthen their marriage rather than resorting to divorce and thus rewards couples for conforming to this norm (Kapinus, 2005). Such rewards are evident in regards to insurance, tax benefits, and other governmental aid. Perceptions of divorce have certainly been influenced by means of the social learning model.
Divorce laws and/or policies refer to requirements and guidelines by which both the petitioner and the defendant must abide by order of the court. While divorce laws vary by state, the laws remain similar in regards to issues of alimony, child custody, and property division (Gigy & Kelly, 2008). The aforementioned issues have in some cases forced couples to remain married in order to avoid penalties that result during the divorce process. As previously discussed within this body of research, divorce laws in America have stigmatized and penalized couples as they choose to divorce. Therefore, it is appropriate to argue that because of the stigmas associated with the dissolution of marriage, couples are influenced to remain married and are likely to experience changing perceptions of divorce.

Research suggests that after divorce, many women, especially those with custody of children, become impoverished (D. Larson, Swyers, & S. Larson 1996; Schwartz & Scott, 2012). Even more so, African American women are more likely to experience impoverished conditions post-divorce even when they may not have custody of children, compared to their white counterparts (Schwartz & Scott, 2012: 391). Sociologist Lenore Weitzman (1985) analyzed 2,500 divorce cases within the state of California. Her findings reveal that for 73% of women with children, their standard of living declined noticeably following a divorce, and within that poll, African American women represent more than two-thirds of that percentage. In her study, Weitzman (1985) reveals how minorities, both women and African Americans, experience economic disadvantages throughout the divorce process. Therefore, downward social mobility has been evident in the lives of women and children, more so in African Americans due to the penalties that may result post-divorce. Research further suggests two key factors that contribute to the downward social mobility for women and children, which involves the wage earning gap between women and men and the failure of courts to enforce alimony and child support (Schwartz & Scott, 2012).

Weitzman (1985) attributes inequalities between divorced women and men to the provisions of the no-fault divorce laws, which require husbands and wives to be treated equally. Although this law seems to be fair, issues of spousal support, child custody, and division of marital property remain problematic. Traditionally, men have been better off economically post-divorce than women. This claim can be contributed to the factor that society has placed greater value on male workers and therefore pay them higher wages. Critics argue that the no-fault divorce law vastly overlooks the fact that women have historically been at a disadvantage compared to men, thus the same is true in regards to African Americans and Caucasians (Drewianka, 2008; Schwartz & Scott, 2012).

While alimony is often times granted by the courts, enforcement has remained an issue; the same remains true for child custody. Dating back to the colonial time period in America, divorce laws protected the fathers, thus father’s automatically gained custody of children if a marriage was dissolved by means of divorce (Drewianka, 2008). Such policies have remained in today’s society as well; therefore some women stay in unhappy marriages rather than risk losing their children. In many states, however, divorced men do not typically gain custody of their children, indicating how divorce policies may very well affect the perceptions of divorce within men as well, as they will also stay in unhappy marriages rather than risk losing their children.

Divorce experiences among African American women and their male counterparts do not typically vary. As previously mentioned, African Americans endure greater impacts of divorce compared to their white counterparts due to the legacy of social and economic disadvantages that this group faces. Furthermore,
it is evident within previous research that social norms and divorce laws have indeed influenced perceptions of divorce, revealing variances in perceptions of divorce among race and gender.

Research Expectations

My primary research question asks whether race and gender affect the perceptions of divorce. I start with whether there are variations in perceptions of divorce across men and women. I expect differences in perceptions of divorce (i.e., significant divorce rates among the African American community and positive perceptions among women). Specifically, I predict that African Americans will report more negative perceptions of divorce compared to their white counterparts. Because the African American community has endured negative effects of divorce due to social disadvantages (i.e., marriage squeeze, pool of eligibility, sex ratio, and economic burdens), I expect African Americans to have more negative perceptions of divorce compared to their white counterparts. The term marriage squeeze describes a condition experienced by African American women in the U.S., who find it difficult to meet and marry desirable and eligible mates (Schwartz & Scott, 2012). The eligibility pool directly affects the marriage squeeze due to the filtering process that is used to eliminate or include potential mates. Moving to gender differences in perceptions of divorce, I expect women to have more positive views of divorce compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, I expect women to report more positive perceptions of divorce due to the statistic that women are more likely to be divorced and are less likely to remarry compared to their male counterparts (Schwartz & Scott, 2012: 394).

For African American men, I do not expect a notable variation in perceptions of divorce compared to African American women. However, I do expect the legacy of disadvantages that women and African Americans have endured prior to marriage and during the divorce process, to have direct, negative effects on perceptions of divorce. Finally, I predict that social norms regarding behaviors, like divorce, have had influences on couples’ decision to dissolve their marriage union.

Method

Data for this project was drawn from the General Social Survey (GSS) to assess whether varying perceptions of divorce occur across race and gender. The General Social Survey is a longitudinal, panel study that is conducted for the National Data Program for the Social Sciences at the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) and can be accessed via web browsers. The purpose of the General Social Survey is to identify societal trends, such as those of behavioral, attitudinal, and demographical. The General Social Survey began in 1972 and continues to report data up until 2012.

For the purpose of this project, I excluded all years of the General Social Survey except 2012. I chose to only examine 2012 data because it is the most recent and the analysis of divorce perceptions across the variable of time was not being carried out in this research endeavor. By examining this particular time period, I argue the variables of gender and race influence variations in perceptions of divorce. I associate these variations with factors such as divorce laws/policies and social norms/socialization techniques.

Sample

My sample derived from GSS included 1,150 respondents, representing African Americans and Caucasians across gender that...
reported their perceptions of divorce. For the year 2012, there were a total of 633 women and 517 men. Moreover, respondents represented 82.9% Caucasian and 17% African Americans.¹

**Measures**

**Dependent Variable**

**Perceptions of divorce.** Perceptions of divorce were measured using a Likert scale. Respondents were asked whether divorce was the best solution to marital problems and reported their viewpoints [(ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5)]. Specifically, respondents were asked whether divorce is usually the best solution when a couple cannot seem to work out their marriage problems: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree. Each answer was analyzed separately per respondent.

**Independent Variables**

**Race.** While most research focuses on key contributors of divorce, this body of research concentrates on the varying perceptions of divorce across race and gender. As previously mentioned the legacy of disadvantages among the African American community is the key purpose of examining whether variations in perceptions across race occur. Respondents’ races included African Americans, Caucasians, and other. Because the “other” category did not represent a significant amount of respondents and would not greatly impact the results, this group was excluded from my analysis and coded as “missing.”² Thus, I focused only on African Americans and Caucasians. For the items of race, respondents were coded as (0) African Americans and (1) Caucasians.

**Gender.** While research has examined the gender differences in divorce, “his” and “her” perceptions of divorce have been largely unexamined within scholarly literature. Respondents included women and men and were coded as (0) women and (1) men.

**Analysis**

Within the analysis phase of my research, I employed a two-way ANOVA test to assess perceptions of divorce across race and gender. The two-way ANOVA provided a comparison of the mean differences for the variables race and gender. Furthermore, the two-way ANOVA provides an examination of interaction, and further reveals whether race affects perceptions of divorce and is the same for men and women (and vice versa).

**Results**

Table 1 highlights the descriptive statistics of the sample, thus taking into account the variables race and gender for the year 2012. African American females report (M = 2.85, SD = 1.12) and Caucasian females report (M = 2.82, SD = 1.10). African American males report (M = 2.73, SD = 1.15 and Caucasian males report (M = 2.80, SD = 1.11). Table 2 displays the degrees of frequency, mean square (variance estimate), F value, and significance levels. Table 2 further indicates whether there are significant mean differences in perceptions of divorce across race and gender. However, the findings within the data analysis do not support my argument that race and gender affect perceptions of divorce. In fact, Table 2 shows there are no significant differences between gender and race as it pertains to divorce perceptions.

¹ A total of 709 respondents are coded as missing because these individuals responded with “no answer,” “inapplicable,” and “can’t choose,” in regards to the Likert Scale. They are coded as missing because their responses do not enrich the data analysis.

² For 2012, a total of 196 respondents were coded as missing from the race variable because they were listed as “other.”
While testing the perceptions of divorce based on race, the analysis showed that the race variable was not significant, $F(1, 3)= .651, p= n.s$. The gender variable also revealed a low level of significance, $F(1,3)= .054, p= n.s$. However, the gender variable reports a higher level of significance compared to race. When the variables of race and gender are combined a main effect of testing was found, $F(2,3)= .705, p < .001$, revealing no significance.3

### Discussion

Scholars have acknowledged the gender and race differences in divorce and highlight the factors that create differential divorce experiences and outcomes. The purpose of this study was to examine differences in perceptions of divorce across race and gender. The race and gender variations in divorce constituted the framework of this study. My findings indicated that there are no significant differences between gender and race as it pertains to divorce perceptions. Although not significant, the variable gender did reveal a higher level of mean squared and f-value as compared to the variable of race. This indicates gender is more so influenced than race, as the respondents within this body of research were asked whether divorce is usually the best solution when a couple cannot seem to work out their marriage problems. The General Social Survey did not support my initial hypothesis based on prior research describing the economic and social disadvantages experienced by minorities, both women and African Americans. The findings generated from GSS did not support my hypothesis relating economic and social disadvantages to varying perceptions of divorce across race and gender.

Considering my findings, I propose that scholars further examine perceptions of divorce as this factor may vary by race, class, gender, and age. For the African American community, the existing legacy of disadvantages did not seem to be an adequate fit for explaining differing divorce perceptions. In fact, my research predictions on whether race and gender affect divorce perceptions were not supported. Thus, further examination on the social phenomenon of divorce perceptions is essential in order to reveal variations and/or commonalities.

My data, while it is useful in gaining an empirically based response on whether race and gender affects the perceptions of divorce, it is not without limitations. I consider the sample size of my research to be a limitation; likewise a larger sample size may have revealed significant differences between gender and race as it pertains to divorce perceptions. Initially, I had an interest in exploring race and gender differences in perceptions of divorce over time. However, the question examining perceptions of divorce was

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3 Values to report: means (M) and standard deviations (SD) for each group, F value (F), degrees of freedom (numerator, denominator; in parentheses by a comma next to F, and significance level (p).
only asked in the year 2012 within the General Social Survey. Therefore, this research was limited because I was not able to fulfill my initial research endeavor, as the time variable could not be included. Though my hypothesis was not supported within the research, I do believe it could be supported via a more expansive data set or to alternatively develop my own instrument in order to capture the variance.

Future research could examine whether age affects the perceptions of divorce or whether or not an individual’s current marital status affects perceptions of divorce. Drawing on qualitative approaches will provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender and race differences in divorce. While this research adds value to the marriage and family literature, it only provides a snapshot of race and gender effects on divorce perceptions. Lastly, I believe that understanding variations in perceptions of divorce will force policy makers to acknowledge the truth that the family structure is in no way universal. Thus, the implementation of policies that protect families rather than penalize them will be of much benefit, as couples will no longer suffer the effects of attitudinal socialization from social norms and current divorce laws.

References


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