Demographic Research: Volume 30, Article 18
Descriptive Finding

When one spouse has an affair, who is more likely to leave?[1]

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Abstract

OBJECTIVE
We examine whether having an affair around the time a marriage broke up is associated with being the person who wanted the divorce more or the person who was left. We also examine predictors of having an affair around the end of the marriage.

METHODS
We use the National Survey of Families and Households, using each ex-spouse's reports of which spouse wanted the divorce more and whether either was having an affair around the end of the marriage. We combine latent class models with logistic regression, treating either spouse's report as a fallible indicator of the reality of whether each had an affair and who wanted the divorce more.

RESULTS
We find that a spouse having an affair is more likely to be the one who wanted the divorce more. We find little gender difference in who has affairs preceding divorce.

CONCLUSIONS
Results suggest that it is more common to leave because one is having an affair, or to have an affair because one has decided to leave, than it is to discover one's spouse having an affair and initiate a divorce.

[1] We acknowledge funding from National Institute for Child Development of the U.S. National Institutes of Health and the U.S. National Science Foundation.
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1. Background

Despite trends toward permissiveness in premarital sex, most Americans disapprove of extramarital sex. In a 1992 American survey, 77% declared it "always wrong," and only 25% of married men and 15% of married women claimed to have ever engaged in it (Laumann et al. 1994). Extramarital sex has been found to be more common among those who married young, divorced previously, had parents who divorced, attend church less frequently, or are black or male (Treas and Giesen 2000; Amato and Rogers 1997). Extramarital sexual affairs often foreshadow divorces, and longitudinal analysis suggests that they can be both cause and consequence of other marital problems that predict divorce (Previti and Amato 2004). While we know that affairs precede some divorces, past research has not examined which is the more common scenario—that the person having the affair leaves to form a union with their new-found partner, or that one spouse discovers the other's affair and leaves as a result. Our analysis speaks to this question, using data on a sample of U.S. couples who divorced to assess whether one spouse having an affair around the end of the marriage predicts which spouse wanted the divorce more. We also examine the distinct predictors of husbands and wives having affairs toward the end of marriages that ended in divorce.

2. Data and methods

We use waves 1, 2, and 3 of the National Survey of Families and Households. The NSFH started from a probability sample of U.S. households, with interviews in 1987–88, 1992–24, and 2001–02. In households containing a married couple at Wave 1, if spouses separated or divorced, each ex-spouse was interviewed separately at the next wave and asked about the divorce. We started with a sample of all Wave 1 married couples in which neither spouse was over 55 and use all 747 cases of separation and/or divorce that occurred between Waves 1 and 3; we consider marriages to be dissolved at the point of separation.

Our key dependent variable is which spouse wanted the divorce more. At the next wave after separation, each ex-spouse was asked which person wanted the divorce more. We collapsed categories to 3: he wanted it more, they wanted it equally, she wanted it more. (On item wording and the degree of disagreement between spouses, see Sayer et al. 2011.) The person who wanted the divorce more might plausibly be the one who left, or who initiated the divorce, but we do not know this for certain. We use each partner's report of who wanted the divorce more, a latent class analysis, and logistic regression to estimate how much either spouse having an affair around the time the marriage ended is associated with which spouse wanted the divorce more.

Whether each partner was having an affair was measured by two questions asked in the separate interviews of each ex-spouse: "Was your husband/wife involved with someone else just before your marriage ended?" and "Were you involved with someone else just before your marriage ended?" In addition to using these measures, along with other covariates, to predict who wanted the divorce more, two additional analyses assess the net association of the other covariates with whether the husband and whether the wife had an affair before the end of the marriage. (We cannot include marriages that did not dissolve in our analysis of predictors of affairs because the questions about affairs were asked only of those who divorced.) These additional two models are also latent class analyses; they treat his and her report of whether the husband was having an affair as alternative indicators of whether he actually was, which is the dependent variable, and analogously for the model predicting whether the wife was having an affair.

Covariates in our models include spouses' relative age (wife greater than three years younger, wife greater than three years older, or within three years), wife's age at marriage, the duration of the marriage in years at the point of separation, whether either spouse was black, whether his/her parents divorced while s/he was growing up, whether s/he ever cohabited, whether s/he was previously divorced, whether the first birth to the couple was conceived before marriage, their number of children under 18 at the most recent wave before the divorce, whether there were children present that are the wife's but not the husband's (and vice versa) at Wave 1, his and her education at Wave 1 in years, his and her annual earnings at the most recent wave before the divorce, and the number of months that he and she had been employed (part- or full-time) out of the two year period ending 12 months before the separation. We also include reports of each partner's religious attendance, whether each believes marriage is for life, whether each reports disagreements about household tasks, and whether each thinks their finances are unfair to the other spouse at the most recent wave.

Our first regression model predicts who left the marriage from the various reports of whether each had an affair and other covariates. Although the survey gave each ex-spouse the option to say that each partner wanted the divorce equally, our modeling procedures make the simplifying and plausible assumption that one partner wanted the divorce more than the other, even if only slightly so. Therefore the latent class software uses the information available to assign each case to one of the two categories—she or he wanted the divorce more. This means that, when one person said the divorce was equally wanted, the other partner's report is used by the model to assess which partner wanted it more, and the values of other variables are also used, insofar as the model shows them to be correlated to who wanted the divorce more. Thus, we treat the outcome as a dichotomy (he left or she left) that is measured with two fallible indicators of the true status. The true status is modeled as a logistic regression with the several

covariates. In this regression, reports of affairs by self and other are treated as separate observed independent variables, not as fallible indicators of latent variables.

Next we seek to predict whether husbands and whether wives had affairs, among divorcing couples. For this we use two logistic regression models predicting whether he had and whether she had an affair, respectively, each embedded in a latent class analysis that treats each spouses' report of whether he (she) was having an affair as a fallible indicator of whether he (she) was involved in an affair.

For each regression, we estimated the latent class and logistic regression models simultaneously by maximum likelihood (with robust standard errors) using methods described by Yamaguchi (2000) and implemented in Mplus software. Missing data on the dependent variables were handled by full information maximum likelihood. Missing data on predictors were multiply imputed under a multivariate normal model, under the missing-at-random assumption, using PROC MI in SAS. The units of analysis for all regressions are the 747 divorcing couples. (No imputation is used for the descriptive proportions in Tables 1 or 2.) All analyses are unweighted.

3. Results

Table 1 shows how prevalent reports of affairs are among these 747 divorcing couples. If we use each spouse's own self-report we conclude that only 13.8% of divorces involve wives having an affair toward the end of the marriage, and 12.9% involve husbands having an affair, with a trivial gender difference. If we use each spouse's report of whether the other was having an affair, we conclude that 33.3% of the men and 30.8% of the women had affairs, much larger numbers, also with a small gender difference. In the aggregate, gender differences are trivial, but within couples they are large as each spouse is more likely to say that the other had an affair than that they themself did. We suspect that this difference reflects that 1) having an affair is stigmatized, so individuals under-report their own affairs more than they under-report their partners' affairs, and 2) individuals know for certain if they weren't having an affair, but may suspect that their spouses were having affairs even if they actually weren't having affairs. Table 1 also shows the proportion of divorces in which each spouse reported that both had affairs, neither did, just the other person did, or just the spouse himself or herself did. Whether we use men's or women's reports, approximately 45% of the divorces involved no one having an affair. Reports that both had an affair are quite rare (4.1% of women and 7.1% of men say this).

Table 1: Proportion of divorces after which husbands and wives made various claims about whether self or spouse had an affair around the end of the marriage

Responses regarding one spouse's affair (irrespective of report about other spouse):	
Wife said she had affair	0.138
Husband said she had affair	0.308
Wife said he had affair	0.333
Husband said he had affair	0.129
Responses regarding both spouse's affairs:	
Wife said he and she both had affair	0.041
Husband said he and she both had affair	0.071
Wife said she but not he had affair	0.131
Husband said she but not he had affair	0.341
Wife said he but not she had affair	0.382
Husband said he but not she had affair	0.137
Wife said neither had affair	0.446
Husband said neither had affair	0.450

Table 2 shows a strong association between claims that a particular spouse had an affair and that this spouse was the one who wanted the divorce more. For example, men claim that they wanted the divorce more in 41.7% of divorces in which they admit to having had an affair, but in only 28.0% of those in which they say their ex-wife had an affair. Women claim that the husband wanted the divorce more in only 4.2% of the cases where they admit to having had an affair, but in 69.7% of cases where they say that their ex-husband had an affair.

Table 2: Proportion of divorces after which husband said he left, husband said she left, wife said he left, wife said she left; for all divorces and subsamples defined by ex spouses' reports of affairs

	Proportion of divorces in which:			
	Husband said He Left	Husband said She Left	Wife said He Left	Wife Said She Left
All divorces (747)	0.186	0.297	0.190	0.454
Subsample:				
Husband said she had affair (230)	0.280	0.563	0.148	0.348
Husband said he had affair (96)	0.417	0.059	0.282	0.073
Wife said she had affair (103)	0.065	0.176	0.042	0.236
Wife said he had affair (249)	0.504	0.230	0.697	0.286

Note: Statistics not shown for cases where either spouse said both wanted the divorce equally, or did not answer the question. Thus, the proportion of divorces in a given row for husband said he left plus husband said she left do not add to 1; and the analogous statement for wives' reports is true.

Turning to the regressions in Table 3 to see if this association between having an affair and being the one to want the divorce more holds in multivariate models containing controls, the basic answer is yes; all associations are in the predicted direction, and three of the four are significant. Our models predict whether she versus he wanted the divorce more from both measures of whether he had an affair as well as both measures of whether she did, controlling for covariates. When either he or she reports that he had an affair around the end of the marriage, the wife is between 70% and 80% less likely to have been the one who wanted the divorce more (OR=.241 for husband's report; OR=.221 for the wife's report). Despite much disagreement regarding whether he had an affair (with only 12.9% of husbands admitting this but 33.3% of wives saying that their husband did, Table 1), his and her report of his affair both significantly predict him being the one who wanted the divorce, with similar OR sizes. In the case of reports of the wife having an affair, only the husband's report has a significant positive association with her (versus him) wanting the divorce more (OR=4.166). Women's report that they had an affair is not significant but nonetheless shows the predicted positive sign (OR=1.395). (This corresponds with the one exception in Table 2 to the overall pattern of bivariate association; the proportion of marriages in which women said they wanted the divorce more is not higher when she says she had an affair than when she says he has an affair.) Despite this one exception, overall, the evidence suggests that when one partner is having an affair and a divorce occurs, the much more likely scenario is that the partner having an affair leaves, rather than their partner. This further suggests either that those who want to leave seek out

affairs or that those who have affairs often decide to leave to be able to form a union with the new partner. Initiating a divorce because you discover a partner having an affair appears much less common.

Table 3: Odds ratios from latent class logistic regression model predicting that wife (versus husband) wanted divorce more among couples who divorced

Independent Variables	OR	Two-tailed P-value
Husband Reports He had Affair	0.241 *	0.014
Wife Reports Husband had Affair	0.221 ***	0.000
Wife Reports She had Affair	1.395	0.582
Husband Reports Wife had Affair	4.166 *	0.018
Relative age (reference=within 3 years)		
Wife >3 years older than husband (0, 1)	0.803	0.705
Wife >3 years younger than husband (0, 1)	1.968 *	0.038
Wife's age at marriage	0.942 *	0.048
Duration of marriage (years)	0.988	0.663
Either spouse Black (0, 1)	2.989 *	0.026
Husband's parents divorced (0, 1)	0.882	0.704
Wife's parents divorced (0, 1)	1.374	0.367
Husband ever cohabited (0, 1)	0.757	0.439
Wife ever cohabited (0, 1)	1.904	0.068
Husband previously divorced (0, 1)	0.662	0.248
Wife previously divorced (0, 1)	4.297 **	0.005
First birth conceived before marriage (0, 1)	1.373	0.446
Number of Children < 18	0.982	0.893
Child(ren) present not husband's (0, 1)	0.866	0.771
Child(ren) present not wife's (0, 1)	0.327 *	0.033
Husband's Education (years)	0.922	0.223
Wife's Education (years)	0.971	0.708
Husband's Annual Earnings ($)	1.020	0.912
Wife's Annual Earnings ($)	1.094	0.447

Table 3: (Continued)

Independent Variables	OR	Two-tailed P-value
# months husband employed last 2 years[1]	1.023	0.175
# months wife employed last 2 years[1]	1.000	0.979
Husband's Religious Attendance	1.057	0.536
Wife's Religious Attendance	0.886	0.166
Husband Believes Marriage is for Life	0.679	0.251
Wife Believes Marriage is for Life	1.477	0.258
Husband Reports Disagreements re: Household Tasks	0.977	0.867
Wife Reports Disagreements re: Household Tasks	1.025	0.845
Husband Thinks Finances Unfair to Wife	1.000	1.000
Wife Thinks Finances Unfair to Husband	1.723	0.227

***=p<.001, **=p<.01, *= p<.05, +=p<.10, two-tailed tests.
[1]The two year period ends 12 months before the month of the separation.

The models also show other predictors of who wanted the divorce more (net of whether either spouse was having an affair). The wife is approximately twice as likely to be the one wanting the divorce more when she is younger than the husband (OR=1.968); put another way, the husband is much less likely to leave a wife who is younger than himself. In marriages where either spouse is black, the woman is approximately three times as likely to be the one who is leaving than is true for spouses of other races (OR=2.989). (Results not shown reveal that in most of these couples where at least one partner is black, both partners are black, and in cases where only one is black, it is generally the husband.) Women who were married and divorced from a previous husband are approximately four times more likely to be the one wanting the divorce more in the more recent marriage (OR=4.297); but whether men were divorced before does not affect whether they were the one wanting the current divorce. This may be because women initiate a much higher proportion of divorces than men; consequently, the fact that a woman is previously divorced may be a stronger indicator of general willingness to leave a marriage. If the wife was older (than other wives) when she entered this marriage, she is less likely to be the one who wanted the divorce more (OR=.942). She is over 65% less likely to be the one wanting the divorce (OR=.327) when the household contains one or more of his children that are not also hers.

We now turn to Table 4, with separate models predicting whether the husband and whether the wife had an affair near the end of the marriage. Only one variable is a

significant net predictor of whether the wife has an affair; women who married at older ages are less likely to have affairs. The model predicting whether men have affairs contains more significant predictors: Men are almost nine times as likely to have an affair if their wife is more than three years older than themselves (OR=8.706), and about 70% less likely to do so if their wife is more than three years younger than themselves (OR=.289). For each year the marriage has lasted, men are 6.2% more likely to have had an affair (OR=1.062). Men are nearly four times more likely to have affairs in couples where one or both partners are black (OR=3.999); given that husbands are black in most of these couples, this suggests that black men are more likely than other men to have affairs. Men are nearly 25% less likely to have an affair if the couple has children under 18 (OR=.766). The remaining significant coefficients have no obvious interpretation; men are less likely to have affairs if the wife reports that they have had disagreements about household tasks and less likely if the wife cohabited with anyone before the marriage.

Table 4: Odds ratios from latent class logistic regression models predicting husband having affair and wife having affair, among couples who divorced

	Predicting Husbands' Affairs		Predicting Wives' Affairs	
Independent Variables	OR	Two-tailed P-value	OR	Two-tailed P-value
Relative age (reference=within 3 years)				
Wife >3 years older than husband (0, 1)	8.706 **	0.006	0.348	0.670
Wife >3 years younger than husband (0, 1)	0.289 **	0.006	1.621	0.179
Wife's age at marriage	0.948	0.201	0.890 *	0.025
Duration of marriage (years)	1.062 **	0.006	0.965	0.104
Either spouse Black (0, 1)	3.999 **	0.007	0.828	0.752
Husband's parents divorced (0, 1)	0.857	0.662	1.397	0.419
Wife's parents divorced (0, 1)	0.832	0.551	0.805	0.569
Husband ever cohabited (0, 1)	2.056	0.172	1.155	0.763
Wife ever cohabited (0, 1)	0.523 +	0.090	1.107	0.771
Husband previously divorced (0, 1)	1.680	0.264	0.861	0.784
Wife previously divorced (0, 1)	1.266	0.681	0.967	0.957
First birth conceived before marriage (0, 1)	1.026	0.942	1.070	0.856
Number of Children < 18	0.766 +	0.063	1.094	0.552

Table 4: (Continued)

Independent Variables	Predicting Husbands' Affairs		Predicting Wives' Affairs	
	OR	Two-tailed P-value	OR	Two-tailed P-value
Child(ren) present not husband's (0, 1)	0.527	0.188	1.436	0.613
Child(ren) present not wife's (0, 1)	0.610	0.431	0.926	0.912
Husband's Education (years)	0.984	0.821	1.073	0.318
Wife's Education (years)	0.944	0.512	0.934	0.545
Husband's Annual Earnings ($)	0.897	0.347	1.020	0.891
Wife's Annual Earnings ($)	1.146	0.288	1.169	0.175
# months husband employed last 2 years[1]	1.025	0.157	1.007	0.697
# months wife employed last 2 years[1]	1.011	0.520	0.979	0.194
Husband's Religious Attendance	0.949	0.533	1.001	0.993
Wife's Religious Attendance	1.171	0.131	0.868	0.260
Husband Believes Marriage is for Life	0.549 +	0.088	0.660	0.589
Wife Believes Marriage is for Life	0.954	0.879	1.069	0.900
Husband Reports Disagreements re: Household Tasks	1.210	0.254	0.925	0.714
Wife Reports Disagreements re: Household Tasks	0.738 *	0.036	1.057	0.691
Husband Thinks Finances Unfair to Wife	1.404	0.475	0.362	0.232
Wife Thinks Finances Unfair to Husband	1.481	0.320	0.948	0.917

***=p<.001, **=p<.01, *= p<.05, +=p<.10, two-tailed tests.
[1]The two year period ends 12 months before the month of the separation.

4. Discussion

Divorces are sometimes preceded by affairs. By either men's or women's reports, almost half (45%) of divorces involve neither person having an affair, but it is rare for either spouse to report that both had an affair. It is difficult to estimate the proportion of cases in which men versus women had an affair because both sexes are much more likely to think the other was having an affair than to state that they were; 13–14% of either men or women say that they themselves were having an affair, whereas approximately a third of each sex said that they think their partner had an affair. Past

findings not limited to divorcing couples suggest that men have more affairs than women. Our finding of no aggregate gender difference between men or women having affairs around the end of a marriage suggests that women who do have affairs may be more likely to leave than men; future research should study this directly.

Among spouses who divorced, when the woman is younger than the man, he is less likely to have had an affair, and he is less likely to be the one who wanted the divorce; by contrast, men have affairs more and are disproportionately the ones wanting the divorce more when the wife is older than the husband. Men's preference for younger wives has been found in studies of mate selection (England and McClintock 2009); our results suggest that this preference affects decisions to have affairs and divorce as well.

We find that the person who has the affair is most often the one who wanted the divorce more. We have avoided causal language, as we cannot be sure whether this means that one is more open to affairs because of having decided to leave a marriage, that having an affair makes one decide to leave to live with the new partner, or that both affairs and divorce are driven by the same antecedents. However, our results do strongly suggest that the usual scenario involving affairs is not that one spouse discovers the other having an affair and leaves because of it.

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