

Who wants the Breakup?
Gender and Breakup in Heterosexual Couples

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Abstract:

Women initiate most divorces in the US, yet the reasons why women are more likely to initiate divorce are poorly understood. In this paper, I use a new longitudinal study of relationships and breakups in the US, the How Couples Meet and Stay Together surveys. The data examine the gender of who wanted the breakup for both marital and nonmarital relationships for the first time. The results show that only in marriages are the majority of breakups wanted by the female partner. Men and women in nonmarital heterosexual relationships in the US are equally likely to want to break up. The results are consistent with a feminist critique of heterosexual marriage as a gendered institution in which wives find less satisfaction than husbands do.

Introduction:

It is a well-established fact that most divorces in the US are applied for and wanted primarily by the wife. In Goode's (1956) sample of recently divorced women from the 1940s in Detroit, about two thirds of the recently divorced women described themselves as the initiators of their divorces.¹ More recent US data shows a similar pattern, with roughly two thirds of divorces either wanted by the wife, or initiated by the wife, or filed by the wife (England and Kilbourne 1990; Sayer et al. 2011; Sweeney 2002; Pettit and Bloom 1984; Brinig and Allen 2000). Regardless of how the question is asked, the decision to divorce appears to be strongly gendered. Women appear to be the initiators of most divorces not only in the US, but in Europe (Kalmijn and Poortman 2006; Charvoz et al. 2009) and Australia (Hewitt 2009; Hewitt, Western and Baxter 2006) as well. Yet the reasons why women are more likely to want or initiate divorce are poorly understood. All of the prior literature on the gendered nature of breakup has been limited to analysis of heterosexual marriages and divorces.

The fact that wives have been more likely to want divorce implies that wives were less satisfied with their marriages than their husbands, at least among couples who divorced. Gender inequality in who wants to break up is one way to measure gender differences in satisfaction within romantic relationships. Do nonmarital relationships experience breakup in a gendered way similar to marriages? The limitation of the prior literature on the gender of breakup to heterosexual divorces has left this question unresolved. In this paper, I use a new longitudinal study of relationships and breakups in the US which asks subjects who recently experienced a relationship breakup whether they or their partner (or both) wanted the relationship breakup. I compare the data on who wanted the breakup for married couples, nonmarital cohabiting

¹ Goode (1956 p.144) reported 105 divorces initiated by the husband, 264 initiated by the wife, and 56 mutually initiated divorces. Counting the mutual divorces as 50% female initiated yields 69% female initiation (see also Table 1 below).

couples, and couples who are not married and who have not cohabited, i.e. couples who are living apart together (LAT, see Strohm et al. 2009). I examine the gender of breakup for both marital and nonmarital relationships with quantitative data for the first time.

The dimension of relationship type, which was lacking in prior studies of who wanted to divorce, helps to parse among the hypotheses that have been previously offered for why women want most divorces. Some of the prior explanations for women's predominance in wanting divorce (for instance, that women are more sensitive to relationship difficulties) apply equally well to marital and to nonmarital relationships. Alternatively, the feminist explanation for why most divorces are sought by women (explored in some detail below) is specific to marriage. The central question addressed below is whether the gender of who wants breakups in nonmarital unions is consistent with, or inconsistent with hypotheses that have previously been offered to explain women's predominance in who wants marital divorces.

Explanations for Why Women are more likely to Want Divorce

One plausible explanation offered for why women are more likely to want divorce is that women are more sensitive to relationship difficulties (Sweeney 2002; Heaton and Blake 1999). If women are more attuned to a relationship difficulty, they may be more likely to see the difficulty as requiring action, and eventually make the decision to exit from the relationship. The hypothesis that women are more sensitive to relationship problems leads to a corollary that women would be more likely to want breakups than men across all types of relationships and contexts. The corollary that women would have a leading role in breakup across all relationship contexts is consistent with research on the longevity of same-sex couples, which has usually shown that lesbian couples in committed relationships have a higher breakup rate than gay male

couples in committed relationships (Andersson et al. 2006; Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Rosenfeld 2014; Ross, Gask and Berrington 2011).

A second explanation for why women are more likely to want divorce arises from second wave feminism's critique of heterosexual marriage as an institution that women (according to the feminists) experienced as constraining, oppressive, uncomfortable, and controlling (Bernard 1972; Friedan [1963] 1974). The second wave feminists argued that marriage law originated with common law assumptions that the wife was the husband's property (Weitzman 1981). Even though coverture (the common law tradition by which wives were legally subordinated to their husbands) is many centuries old, the last vestiges of legal coverture were eliminated only recently. Spousal rape, for instance, was criminalized in the US for the first time in the late 1970s (Martin, Taft and Resick 2007). Most women in the US continue to take their husbands' surnames when they marry (Johnson and Scheuble 1995), and laws that required wives to take their husbands' surnames were in place in many states as recently as the 1970s (Scheuble and Johnson 1993).

The feminist critique of heterosexual marriage as oppressive to women is consistent with the idea that women would be less satisfied than men within heterosexual marriages. Bernard (1972 p.14) wrote: "There are two marriages, then, in every marital union, his and hers. And his... is better than hers." The feminist critique of heterosexual marriage is consistent with women's being more likely to want to divorce. The feminist critique of heterosexual marriage, however, does not apply to nonmarital heterosexual relationships. Nonmarital heterosexual relationships generally involve lower levels of commitment, fewer children, and nonmarital unions are less influenced by the legal and cultural history of marriage as a gendered institution (Cherlin 2009; Rosenfeld 2014; Poortman and Mills 2012).

A third potential explanation for who wants divorce or breakup relates to the relative power of the partners or spouses within the relationship, and the (presumably related and easier to measure) indicators of which partner or spouse is in a position to fare better (socially or economically) after a breakup (England and Kilbourne 1990; Sayer et al. 2011). The power dynamics theory of divorce (which Sayer et al. describe as having roots in social exchange theory and utility maximization theory from economics) assumes that the spouse with better prospects beyond the current relationship is more likely to want to break up.

By external measures, husbands' power has generally exceeded wives' power. Husbands tend to be older than wives (England and McClintock 2009). Husbands have always had higher earnings on average than wives (though the gender earnings gap has narrowed over time, see Vanneman 2006). Research in online dating markets shows that single women's attractiveness to men declines more sharply over the adult life course than single men's attractiveness to women (Rudder 2014). In Wallerstein and Blakeslee's (1989) longitudinal study of children and couples after divorce, they reported that older women were more likely to be "losers" in divorce because their income was lower, and their appeal to men (as middle aged single mothers) was relatively low as well. If women are most in romantic demand when they are young, and older men are more in demand as heterosexual partners as they age, the power theory of relationships implies that divorce should become more male-initiated as couples age. The realities of gendered divorce fit uneasily with power theory, however: despite men's various power advantages (being older than their wives, earning more, and ageing into greater demand as heterosexual partners), women have been the initiators of about two thirds of all divorces from the 1940s to the present.

An alternate version of the power theory of relationships suggests that women's *lack* of power within heterosexual marriages is the reason that women choose to exit marriages (England

and Kilbourne 1990). Lacking power within the relationship to give sufficient voice to their dissatisfactions, women may choose to exit (Hirschman 1970).

As Sayer et al. (2011) noted, the vast literature on determinants of divorce (with some notable exceptions cited above) has usually failed to distinguish between divorces wanted by the wife versus divorces wanted by the husband. Because heterosexual relationships are gendered, our analysis of breakup and its determinants must be gendered as well.

Equality within Marriage and Nonmarital Cohabiting Unions

In the late 1970s, Arlie Hochschild set out to study the dynamics of partner interactions, and she found that even among couples who described themselves as egalitarian, husbands expected wives to do the lion's share of the childcare and the housework (Hochschild and Machung 1989). Time use studies (Bianchi, Robinson and Milkie 2006) suggest that between 1965 and 2000, married fathers had increased their share of unpaid family caregiving substantially, but that married mothers still did about two thirds of the unpaid family caregiving (41 hours per week for married mothers compared to 22 hours per week for married fathers). The difference between mothers' family caregiving and fathers' family caregiving, a 19 hours per week difference, would add up to about a thousand hours per year difference between mothers and fathers. Wives' extra burdens for cooking and cleaning were also substantial, more than 10 hours a week more than their husbands, and therefore more than 500 hours per year more than their husbands. Frisco and Williams (2003) showed that not only were men doing less housework than their wives in the US in the 1980s, but that marriages in which the wife felt they were doing more than their share of the housework were especially likely to end in divorce.

Later ethnographic work on gender roles within marriage (Gerson 2010) suggested that more heterosexual men and women aspired to egalitarian relationships, yet many of the same men and women were resigned to a backup strategy of self-reliance (for women) or neotraditional relationships (for men) if they could not find the kind of egalitarian relationship they claimed to want. The slow pace of gender role change within heterosexual marriage is one key reason why the feminist revolution is seen as an unfinished, or stalled revolution (Gerson 2010; Ridgeway 2011; England 2010).

Research from the 1970s and 1980s suggested that nonmarital cohabiting couples in the US were less traditional ideologically (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg and Waite 1995) and more egalitarian in practice (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983). Subsequent research using data from the 1980s and early 1990s found that, at least in terms of housework, the egalitarian reputation of cohabitation was not entirely deserved. South and Spitze (1994) found that women's average weekly housework burden was substantially heavier than men's in cohabiting relationships (by 31 hours to 19 hours) as well as in married relationships (by 37 hours to 18 hours) though the gender housework gap was worse in marriage than in nonmarital cohabiting relationships (see also Davis, Greenstein and Marks 2007). Gupta (1999) found that women transitioning from independent living to nonmarital cohabitation with a man took on the same amount of extra housework per week (about 7 hours) as women transitioning from independent living to marriage with a man, whereas men did not take on extra housework after transitioning from living on their own to living with a woman. The lack of evidence for gender equality in housework among nonmarital cohabiting couples bolstered neotraditional arguments for marriage as a "better deal" for women than nonmarital cohabitation (Waite and Gallagher 2000). In the emerging literature on noncoresident, or LAT relationships, some authors see women (especially women who have

experienced divorce) choosing the LAT arrangement specifically to maintain their independence and avoid the housework burdens they associated with coresidence with a man (Haskey and Lewis 2006).

Hypotheses:

Consistent with prior literature:

Hypothesis 1: Women want the clear majority of heterosexual divorces.

Corollary 1a: Women's tendency to want divorce is robust to multivariate controls from the individual or couple level.

For nonmarital heterosexual unions, there is no prior empirical research on the gender of who wants to break up. The different theories of why women want most divorces have divergent predictions for the gender of who wants breakups of nonmarital unions, therefore:

Hypothesis 2: In nonmarital heterosexual couples, neither gender dominates in who wants breakups.

If Hypotheses 1 and 2 are both supported, that is if women predominate in who wants divorce but women do not predominate in who wants to break up in nonmarital unions, that will support the second wave feminist theory of why women seek divorces, because the feminist theory is the only prior theory of the gender of breakup that applies uniquely to marriage.

Hypothesis three tests the expectation that women are more sensitive to relationship shortcomings, and that women's dissatisfaction with relationship quality leads more directly to breakup.

Hypothesis 3: Self-reported relationship quality has a stronger effect on women wanting to break up than on men wanting to break up.

If Hypothesis 3 is supported by the data, we also expect that the divergent gender sensitivity to relationship quality would mediate the association between gender and who wants to break up.

Corollary 3a: Different gender responses to relationship quality explain (at least partly) the prevalence of women wanting breakups.

The simplest version of the power theory of relationships gives the initiative to the partner with more power or status. Therefore:

Hypothesis 4: Individuals with more power, more status, or more income are more likely to want to break up.

Data and Methods:

The How Couples Meet and Stay Together surveys (HCMST, Rosenfeld, Thomas and Falcon 2011; Rosenfeld, Thomas and Falcon 2014) started with a nationally representative survey of 2,538 adults who had partners of a different gender in 2009, and included longitudinal follow-up with the same individuals covering wave 1 in 2009, wave 2 in 2010, wave 3 in 2011, wave 4 in 2013, and wave 5 which ended in early 2015.

Unlike most Internet surveys whose participants are composed of a self-selected sample of volunteers, the Knowledge Networks/GfK (hereafter KN/GfK) panel participants were initially recruited into the panel through a nationally representative random digit dialing (RDD) telephone survey, so the KN/GfK sample is nationally representative (Chang and Krosnick 2009;

Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). Subjects who did not have Internet access at home were given Internet access. The HCMST wave 1 survey was an Internet survey, and waves 2-5 were Internet and phone surveys: internet implementation for the majority of subjects who remained in the KN/GfK panel supplemented by phone surveys and Internet surveys for subjects who had withdrawn or retired from the KN/GfK panel. Seventy one percent of KN/GfK panelists contacted for the wave 1 HCMST survey consented to participate. Including the initial RDD phone contact and agreement to join the panel (participation rate 32.6%), and the respondents' completion of the initial demographic survey (56.8% completion), the composite overall response rate for the wave 1 HCMST survey is $.71 \times .326 \times .568 = 13\%$ (Callegaro and DiSogra 2008). Despite the low overall response rate of KN/GfK surveys compared to RDD surveys, the quality of data derived from the KN/GfK panel has been shown to equal or exceed the quality of data derived from industry standard RDD surveys (Fricker et al. 2005; Chang and Krosnick 2009), in part because KN/GfK gathers information from subjects at each survey stage.

Among subjects eligible for follow-up, the response rate was 85% at wave 2, 73% at wave 3, 60% at wave 4, and 46% at wave 5. The key determinants of response to the HCMST follow-up surveys were not any factor that predicts couple longevity (such as relationship duration or marriage), but whether the respondent was still in the KN/GfK panel at the time of the follow-up survey, which is why loss-to-follow-up has been shown not to bias estimates of breakup in HCMST (Rosenfeld 2014). Over the follow-up waves 2-5, the HCMST response rate was 93% for subjects who remained in the KN/GfK panel, compared to a 29% response rate among subjects who had retired or withdrawn from the panel.

In the analyses below, of the 2,538 initially surveyed adults with different gender partners from HCMST wave 1, 2,262 individuals were followed up at least once in waves 2-5 (subjects

who did not respond to one follow-up wave were sometimes reached in subsequent waves). Seven individuals whose report of own gender varied across waves were dropped from the analysis. In the 6 years of exposure to the hazard of breakup from early 2009 to early 2015, HCMST recorded 385 breakups of heterosexual couples. Of the 385 subjects who reported breakup of a heterosexual union, all but 12 answered the question about which partner had wanted the breakup more.² The number of subjects in heterosexual unions that broke up between waves 1 and 5 of HCMST was reduced by 2 when subjects were removed from analysis for inconsistent report of own gender, yielding the final count of 371 breakups reported in Table 1, below.

In waves 2-5 of HCMST, respondents who reported that their relationship with their spouse or partner from wave 1 was no longer intact were asked: “Between you and (partner name), who wanted the (divorce/separation/breakup) more?” Respondents were offered 3 alternatives: “I wanted the (divorce/separation/breakup) more;”(Partner name) wanted the (divorce/separation/breakup) more;” and “We both equally wanted the (divorce/separation/breakup).” Based on the subject’s gender, I recoded responses to female partner wanted the breakup more, both partners equally wanted the breakup, and male partner wanted the breakup more. Literature on women’s initiation of divorce shows that the average of female predominance in divorce initiation is similar whether one examines the records of who files for divorce, or who wanted the divorce more, or who initiated the divorce (Brinig and Allen 2000; Sayer et al. 2011; Sweeney 2002), though of course in individual couples the person who initiates the breakup need not be the same person as the person who most wanted the breakup.

² Among the 12 subjects for whom the gender of who wanted the breakup was not reported, 6 subjects had their breakup status identified post-hoc from text answers in wave 5, so they did not see the ‘gender of who wanted the breakup’ question.

Pettit and Bloom (1984) showed that there was a high correlation between the spouse who wanted the divorce and the spouse who initiated divorce proceedings. Marital breakups in HCMST include both divorces and separation without formal divorce if the subject answered “No” to the question “Are you still married to (spouse name)?”

HCMST data include only one subject from each couple. Sayer et al (2011) used data from the National Survey of Families and Households, which in theory had both spouses’ report on who wanted the divorce, but because of attrition and item non-response had both spouses’ reports on less than half of divorces. Sayer et al concluded that there was enough consistency between husbands’ and wives’ reports (about who wanted the divorce more) from the same divorce that the missing data were not problematic (see also Pettit and Bloom 1984).

The measure of relationship quality is a 1-5 scale, treated as a continuous variable, measured at wave 1, with higher values meaning higher relationship quality (5 is “excellent,” 4 is “good”, 3 is “fair”, 2 is “poor”, and 1 is “very poor”). The relationship quality question in wave 1 was followed by an open-ended question, q35, asking subjects to explain why their relationship quality was excellent/good/fair/poor/very poor. In waves 4 and 5, subjects who reported breakups were asked to fill an open-ended text box to explain why their relationship ended. Relationship duration is the time varying duration, in years, since the couple first became romantically involved. Control of relationship duration is necessary to preclude the potential bias of left censored observations (Yamaguchi 1991). The income difference between partners was determined at wave 1 by the question “Between you and (partner name), who earned more income in 2008?” with the options “I earned more,” “we earned about the same amount,” and “(partner name) earned more.” Both female partner’s college degree status and the educational gap between female and male partners are based on educational attainment at wave 1.

Methodologically, I rely on discrete time multinomial logistic regression to distinguish between competing gendered breakup outcomes (Kalmijn and Poortman 2006; Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004). My multinomial logistic regressions are weighted using the weight variable “weight2,” with robust standard errors (White 1980) and clustering to account for the non-independence of repeated observations of the same couple over time (Rogers 1993). Results without weights and without clustering (not shown), yield similar substantive results.

The univariate analysis in Table 1 compares three couple types: married couples, non-marital couples who have cohabited, and nonmarital couples who have never cohabited. I group the currently cohabiting and previously cohabiting couples together because in HCMST it is not possible to know for sure whether couples who have cohabited were still cohabiting at the time of the breakup. For Table 2, the multinomial logistic regressions, I compare married couples to nonmarital cohabiting couples, and exclude the couples who have never cohabited because some aspects of the power dynamics of couples apply less well to couples who have not cohabited. Including the non-cohabiters in the models yields the same substantive results (results available from the author). The couple-month dataset used for the event history models in Table 2 begins with the month that each subject responded to wave 1 of HCMST, and ends with the month of breakup or the month of last contact. I randomly imputed the month of breakup for couples who broke up in the approximately 12 months between wave 1 and wave 2, as month of breakup was not asked in wave 2. The 3 models in Table 2 each include between 95,000 and 98,000 couple-months of exposure to the risk of breakup.

[Table 1 here]

Results:

Table 1 shows the percentage of heterosexual couple breakups in HCMST waves 2-5 whose breakup was wanted more by the woman. In Table 1, I score breakups in the following way: if the woman wanted the breakup more, that is scored as “1”; if the man wanted the breakup more, that is scored as “0”; and if both partners wanted the breakup equally, that is scored as “0.5.” Table 1 shows that women accounted for 69% of the breakups of heterosexual marriages, consistent with the approximately two thirds of divorces that are sought for or applied for by women, as reported in other studies in the US and elsewhere (England and Kilbourne 1990; Sayer et al. 2011; Sweeney 2002; Heaton and Blake 1999). Even though only 92 breakups of heterosexual marriages were recorded in the data, the 69% of marital breakups wanted by women is significantly different from 50%, with a 95% confidence ranging from 61% to 78%, with standard errors defined by $SE = \frac{sd}{\sqrt{n}}$, where sd is the standard deviation, and n is the sample size in each category. The sample size of heterosexual divorces in HCMST is small compared to other datasets that have been used to study the gender of who wanted to divorce, yet the statistical associations of interest turn out to be large enough to find significant relationships among key variables (see also Table 2, below).

For heterosexual cohabiters, Table 1 shows 76 breakups were recorded, and of these breakups 56% were wanted by the woman. The 95% confidence interval for the gender of who wanted breakup among nonmarital heterosexual unions was 47% to 65%, which includes 50%, meaning that the gender of breakup for nonmarital heterosexual couples was not significantly different from 50%. Cohabitation proved to have no effect on the gender of breakup for nonmarital couples. Among the noncohabiting nonmarital unions, 53.4% of the breakups were wanted by the woman, which was not significantly different from the 50% gender parity level

and also not significantly different from the 56% rate of female wanted breakups recorded among the cohabiting couples.

Table 1 supports Hypothesis 1 (that most divorces would be wanted by the wife) and Hypothesis 2 (that breakup among nonmarital heterosexual couples would be gender neutral). Table 1's support for Hypotheses 1 and 2 is strengthened by the observation that coresidence (and the relationship commitment that coresidence implies) appears to have had no effect on the gender of relationship breakup, whereas heterosexual marriage was firmly associated with women wanting to break up. Table 1 shows that mutual breakup was substantially more common in nonmarital breakups (32% for cohabiters and 35% for non-cohabiters) than in marital breakups (19%). The difference between the rates of mutual breakup between the married couples and the nonmarital couples is statistically significant only when the nonmarital cohabiters are combined with the nonmarital couples who never cohabited (significance derived from a weighted logistic regression, not shown).

Table 1 also demonstrates a pattern of ego bias in the reporting of who wanted the breakup, a bias which is evident in similar fashion in every prior study that has surveyed divorced individuals and asked them (after the divorce) who wanted or who initiated the divorce (Charvoz et al. 2009; Hewitt, Western and Baxter 2006; Kalmijn and Poortman 2006; Sayer et al. 2011). By ego bias, I mean that individuals magnify their own agency in the breakup, so that the rate at which women are reported to want the breakup is lower for male survey respondents compared to female survey respondents.

For the gender of nonmarital breakup, there are no published results to compare HCMST to. Is it possible that the person who wanted the breakup is recalled less accurately in nonmarital relationships? One reason that it might be easier to recall who wanted a marital breakup is that

divorces require a court petition (which one spouse alone can file), while nonmarital breakups are generally accomplished without paperwork or formalities.

Despite the informality of nonmarital breakups, the nonmarital breakups in HCMST do not show signs of being subject to greater recall bias than the marital breakups. The question of who wanted the breakup is necessarily a retrospective question, but most breakups in HCMST were recorded in the survey within a year of the breakup (a relatively short time for recollection that should limit recall bias). Second, if the true recollection of who wanted the nonmarital breakup was especially foggy, or if nonmarital breakups were subject to more recall bias, we would expect to see more ego bias (i.e. the subject giving themselves more agency over the breakup). Yet, as Table 1 shows, the ego bias appears to be strongest for the married couples, at 78-63=15%. Third, women wanting breakup is not simply a function of relationship commitment. Among the nonmarital couples, the cohabiting and the noncohabiting couples had similarly gender-neutral breakup patterns.

Lastly, subjects' open-ended reports of why they broke up (recorded in waves 4 and 5) suggest clarity on the respondents' parts about who wanted the breakup. From among the 85 breakups of nonmarital heterosexual unions recorded in waves 4 and 5 of HCMST, explanations for breakup include: "I wasn't in love with him anymore, he was selfish, immature. I was ready to move on and find better love." Or consider this report from a woman whose fiancé wanted the breakup: "...He called me home from work to say he needed to have a serious discussion with me. He told me that after almost 9 years together he could not live a lifetime with our differences, especially since he is a republican and me a democrat..." Or consider this succinct report from a man whose girlfriend wanted the breakup: "I'm not really sure. She just wanted it to end." Or consider this description from a male subject who reported the breakup as mutual:

“We had a mutual break up ..., we knew that we would never end up getting married as we belong to different religion. However, we had a nice relationship till the time we were together and she is still my very good friend.” The open ended descriptions of nonmarital breakups do not lack for specificity about who wanted the breakup.

[Table 2 here]

Multivariable tests

Table 2 shows coefficients from a series of three competing risk discrete time event history models operationalized with multinomial logistic regressions, for couples who were married or who cohabited. Each model compares competing risk outcomes: male partner wanted the breakup, mutual breakup, or female partner wanted the breakup. Model 1, the simplest model, includes only marriage and subject gender as predictors. The fourth column of Model 1 tests the difference between predictors of breakups that women wanted compared to the breakups that were wanted either by men or by both partners³. The coefficient for the gender contrast is $D=C-((A+B)/2)$, where A is the coefficient for men wanting breakup, B, is the coefficient for both wanting breakup, and C is the coefficient for women wanting the breakup. The gender difference coefficients (column D of each model) identify which factors explain gendered differences in who wanted to break up. The gender difference coefficients in columns D, divided by their standard errors yield Z scores that when squared would yield Wald tests on 1 degree of freedom, with the same P values.

³ The alternative contrast of women wanted breakups compared to male wanted breakups, ignoring the mutual breakups, has a similar coefficient size but is not statistically significant in any of the 3 models. When the models are re-run including the couples who never cohabited (which more than doubles the number of breakups), the male-female marital contrast would be significant in models 1 and 2 (results available from the author).

Model 1 shows that marriage was negatively associated with breakup, regardless of who wanted the breakup. Being married reducing the log odds of breakups that men wanted by 2.55, and reduced the log odds of mutual breakups by 2.82. Being married also reduced the log odds of women wanting to breakup, but by a smaller amount, by 1.77. The odds of women wanting breakup were $e^{0.91}=2.48$ times higher than other kinds of breakups for married couples. Table 2 confirms a finding from the bivariate Table 1, that heterosexual marriage, rather than heterosexual relationships in general, is significantly associated with women wanting to exit the relationship.

Model 2 adds a control for relationship quality (at wave 1) interacted with respondent gender. Note that control for relationship quality does not substantially diminish the gender difference coefficient for marriage (0.90 in Model 2 compared to 0.91 in Model 1). In Model 2, being married increased the odds ratio that women wanted the breakup by an odds ratio of $e^{0.90}=2.46$ compared to other kinds of breakups. Relationship quality coefficients that are more negative indicate that better relationship quality (at wave 1) depresses the log odds of breakup. The more negative the relationship quality coefficient, the more sensitive respondents are to relationship quality (in terms of better relationship quality protecting couples more against breaking up). With much greater sample size, perhaps, there would be sufficient power to detect a modest difference in men and women's sensitivity to relationship quality. Models 2 and 3 show no significant gendered effects of perceived relationship quality on which partner wanted to break up. Table 2 provides no support for Hypothesis 3 (that relationship quality has a stronger effect on women wanting to break up) and no evidence for Corollary 3a (that different gender responses to relationship quality would explain women's role in wanting divorce).

Model 3 adds controls for female partner's age, income gap, female partner's education, education gap, and relationship duration, operationalized as $\frac{1}{\text{r.d.}}$ where r.d. is relationship duration (in years)⁴. The $\frac{1}{\text{r.d.}}$ term fit the data better than the untransformed r.d. term (not shown). Model 3 includes several potential predictors of breakup that allow for tests of Hypothesis 4 and its corollaries, specifically whether individuals with more power or more status within the relationship were more likely to want to break up. Model 3 shows that females having higher income had no significant effect on which gender partner wanted to break up. Model 3 shows that female partner's age did not have a gendered effect on who wanted to break up. The lack of significance of all of the power differential coefficients in column 3d, and the similarity of the key gender difference coefficient for marriage across models (0.91 in Model 1, 0.90 in Model 2, 1.08 in Model 3) means that power differentials in education, or income between partners do not appear to explain the women's role in wanting divorce.⁵

[Table 3 here]

Relationship Quality

Given that the analysis in this paper concerns the gender of who wants breakups, and given that only a small fraction of the heterosexual couples in HCMST broke up in the period under study (371 breakups from 2,262 heterosexual couples with at least some follow-up data), it is reasonable to ask whether women's role in wanting marital breakups implies that married women are less satisfied in their marriages than are married men. Table 3 provides a simple

⁴ Additional controls for age gap between partners, and the presence of children in the household, not included in model 3 (available from the author), also had no significant gender effects on who wanted to break up.

⁵ The increase log odds of breakup for heterosexual couples with similar incomes in column 3b is consistent with the results in Weisshaar (2014).

analysis of relationship quality in heterosexual couples in HCMST. The data on relationship quality show that in nonmarital cohabiting heterosexual couples, men reported relationship quality of 4.22 (with 5 meaning best, or “excellent” relationship quality) and women reported relationship quality of 4.29, not statistically different from the men. In married heterosexual relationships, the men reported relationship quality of 4.61, significantly more than the female reported relationship quality of 4.46. Even if we exclude all 371 respondents who later broke up from their spouse or partner, the results remain the same: married men in HCMST reported higher relationship quality than married women (consistent with Waite 2000; and consistent with Corra et al. 2009; but see also Frisco and Williams 2003), whereas men and women in nonmarital unions report more similar levels of relationship quality.

One might suppose that a difference of 0.15 in a relationship quality scale that ranges from 1 to 5 would be a substantively small difference, without meaningful relevance in the real world. For respondents in heterosexual marriages at wave 1, 69.2% of the husbands and 60.1% of the wives reported that relationship quality was “excellent,” or 5 points out of 5 on the relationship quality scale, while 6.0% of husbands and 11.1% of wives reported that their relationship quality was “fair,” “poor,” or “very poor.”⁶ Note also that Table 2 above showed that neither differences in relationship quality between husbands and wives nor gender differences in the association between relationship quality and breakup explain why women seek most divorces. Table 3 provides an explanation: women’s relationship quality is slightly lower than men’s relationship quality in marriage regardless of whether the marriage later broke up.

⁶ In Table 3, the wave 1 relationship quality appears to be slightly higher for married women than for unmarried women (and substantially higher for married men than for unmarried men), a cross sectional association that might lead one to believe that marriage increases relationship satisfaction for both genders. The relationship quality question in HCMST was re-asked in wave 4. Relationship quality declined between wave 1 and wave 4, on average, for both male respondents and female respondents who married their different gender partner between wave 1 and wave 4 (though sample of subjects transitioning to marriage was 78, and the change in relationship quality was not significantly different from zero).

Discussion:

The predominant role of women in wanting divorce in heterosexual marriages is a gender-specific phenomenon that has been observed across historical time in the US, and across many countries but which has never been satisfactorily explained. In this paper, for the first time, I compare the gender of breakup in marriages to the gender of breakup in nonmarital heterosexual unions. I show that women's tendency to want divorce is not inherent to women's relationships with men. In nonmarital heterosexual relationships, men and women are equally likely to want to break up.

Neither women's supposedly greater sensitivity to relationship problems, nor income gaps, nor education gaps explain why women are so much more likely than men to desire exit from heterosexual marriage, but no more likely than men to desire exit from a nonmarital heterosexual union. While the analyses above show that women's predominant role in wanting divorce seems to be robust to power differentials between spouses and robust to perceived relationship quality, sample size limitations of HCMST should be kept in mind. The tests of the power theory of gendered breakups showed little evidence for either version of the power theory (that the more powerful partner would want to break up, or that the less powerful partner would want to break up). Of the theories under consideration to explain why most divorces are wanted by the wife, only second wave feminism's critique of marriage as an institution inherently hostile to women explains both women's leadership in wanting divorce and also the gender neutrality of who wants breakups between nonmarital heterosexual couples.

Another limitation of the HCMST data is that the HCMST does not provide clear evidence for why women as a group were particularly likely to want divorce. Subjects' open-

ended descriptions of their relationships at wave 1 of HCMST were brief, and while women wrote more than men, the open-ended text answers were not predictive of who would later break up, after relationship quality was accounted for. Most of the breakups recorded in HCMST are nonmarital breakups; only 92 breakups of heterosexual marriages were recorded in 2009-2015. A substantial proportion of married people who later divorced reported at wave 1 that their relationship quality was excellent, and described the relationship as idyllic or nearly perfect, which is consistent with Vaughan's (1990) description of divorce as often taking one spouse completely by surprise.

On the other hand, there are examples in HCMST of married women who report feeling constrained by marriage in ways that the second wave feminists would associate with the subjugation of women within heterosexual marriage. One man who later divorced wrote the following at wave 1 when he was still married: "I want a traditional marriage but she sees it as controlling." A married woman wrote in wave 5, explaining her divorce: "I used to be a very happy optimistic person and it was like he was slowly starving my soul. I didn't like the way he treated me, and finally realized that he was abusive. I didn't know that such a thing existed until I researched it. Once I realized [what] was going on was abuse, I started the proceedings for a divorce."

Nonmarital unions of men and women are a nontraditional family form that is increasing over time (Rosenfeld 2007; Smock 2000). Age at first marriage has grown more for women than for men in the past few decades, and the rate of young people living on their own has grown more for women than for men (Rosenfeld 2007), suggesting the possibility that, consistent with the second wave feminists' call for new relationship structures and forms, women are the driving force behind the rise of nonmarital unions as alternatives to marriage. Nonmarital heterosexual

unions appear in HCMST to be more gender egalitarian in both self-reported relationship quality, and more egalitarian in who wants break ups, than heterosexual marriages. The HCMST results demonstrating gender egalitarianism in nonmarital heterosexual unions are consistent with Brines and Joyner's (1999) finding that cohabiting union stability was stronger for couples with gender balanced incomes, and research that suggests that cohabiters and people in LAT relationships believe more in gender egalitarianism than do married individuals (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg and Waite 1995; Haskey and Lewis 2006; Strohm et al. 2009). In-depth interview studies of how heterosexual cohabiting couples make decisions find evidence of male privilege and male power, but the evidence suggests that male privilege in cohabiting unions was especially expressed around transitions to marriage: in who was expected to propose marriage (Sassler and Miller 2011) or in the pressure men apply to ensure that their fiancés take the man's surname upon marriage (Bass 2015).

Nonmarital heterosexual unions are dramatically less stable than heterosexual married unions (Cherlin 2009). In the HCMST data, nonmarital heterosexual unions had a breakup rate more than 10 times higher than the breakup rate of married heterosexual couples (Rosenfeld 2014). The society-wide retreat from marriage is certainly not without costs.

The apparent gender egalitarianism observed in HCMST data (in who wants to break up and in relationship satisfaction) of nonmarital heterosexual unions could be the result of selection bias. Research has shown that adults with less traditional views about family and gender roles choose nonmarital cohabitation selectively (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg and Waite 1995). Yet if adults who sort themselves into heterosexual marriage are more accepting of traditional gender roles before the marriage begins, the fact that women are more likely to want divorce is all the more puzzling.

Women's inherent interest in marriage and commitment has usually been assumed to be higher than men's inherent interest in marriage and commitment. Women's supposed preference for marriage is a central feature of the gendered assumptions of sex ratio theory (Guttentag and Secord 1983), and men's supposed preference for commitment-free sexual relationships is a staple of evolutionary psychology (Buss and Schmitt 1993). Empirical analyses of single Add Health subjects in their 20s shows that women were substantially more likely to say they wanted to be "married now" than were men, by about 33% to 20% (Falcon 2014; see also Sassler and Miller 2011).

One paradox of gender and marriage is that young single women appear to desire marriage and commitment more than men do, yet married women appear to be less satisfied by their marital experiences than married men are, and women are substantially more likely to want a divorce than men are. The HCMST data show that it is not commitment in heterosexual unions (in the form of living together) that is associated with women wanting to break up; only formal marriage is associated with women predominating among partners who want to break up.

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Table 1: Women's role in the breakup of married and nonmarital heterosexual relationships

	N of breakups	Pct reporting that both partners equally wanted to break up	weighted mean of women wanting the breakup, pct	SE of mean	95% Confidence Interval
Married	92	19	69	4.3	(61,78)
reported by women	43		78	5.8	(66, 89)
reported by men	49		63	6.4	(50, 75)
Nonmarital, have cohabited as a couple	76	32	56	5.3	(47, 65)
reported by women	40		59	6.6	(46,72)
reported by men	36		52	6.8	(39, 66)
Nonmarital, never cohabited	203	35	53.4	2.8	(47.9,58.9)
reported by women	104		60	4.1	(52, 68)
reported by men	99		47	3.9	(39, 55)

Source: How Couples Meet and Stay Together, breakups from waves 2-5, covering 2009-2015. Data weighted by weight variable "weight2." Women's role is scored as follows: 0 if the male partner wanted the breakup more, 0.5 if both partners equally wanted the breakup, and 1 if the female partner wanted the breakup more.

Table 2: Coefficients (and standard errors) from Competing Risks Discrete Time Weighted Multinomial Logistic Models for Break-Up (compared to non-breakups) for Heterosexual Couples who are Married or who have Coresided

Predictors:	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
	1a) Male wanted Breakup	1b) Both wanted breakup	1c) Female wanted breakup	1d) female-other difference	2a) Male Breakup	2b) both wanted break up	2c) Female breakup	2d) female-other difference	3a) Male Breakup	3b) both wanted break up	3c) Female wanted breakup	3d) Female-other difference
Married	-2.55*** (0.38)	-2.82*** (0.37)	-1.77*** (0.28)	0.91* (0.38)	-2.41*** (0.39)	-2.66*** (0.37)	-1.63*** (0.28)	0.90* (0.38)	-2.25*** (0.55)	-2.40*** (0.47)	-1.24*** (0.33)	1.08* (0.49)
Subject Female	-0.30 (0.40)	-0.43 (0.39)	0.22 (0.27)	0.59 (0.38)								
Her Relationship. Quality					-0.44+ (0.25)	-0.66* (0.33)	-0.89*** (0.15)	-0.34 (0.25)	-0.40 (0.27)	-0.88* (0.41)	-0.91*** (0.16)	-0.27 (0.29)
His Relationship. Quality					-1.18*** (0.21)	-0.95*** (0.22)	-0.95*** (0.18)	0.12 (0.21)	-1.21* (0.36)	-1.02*** (0.24)	-0.96*** (0.19)	0.16 (0.24)
female partner's age									-0.0024 (0.017)	-0.055** (0.020)	-0.031* (0.012)	-0.0017 (0.018)
female partner has BA									-0.39 (0.59)	-0.18 (0.45)	-0.43 (0.31)	-0.14 (0.48)
female has more education									0.44 (0.37)	-0.19 (0.42)	0.36 (0.28)	0.23 (0.39)
1/(Rel Duration)									0.11* (0.047)	-1.18 (0.96)	0.016 (0.088)	0.55 (0.47)
Same income (ref: male more)									0.012 (0.64)	1.36*** (0.41)	0.60 (0.38)	-0.085 (0.55)
Female makes more income									-0.080 (0.45)	-0.52 (0.57)	0.031 (0.36)	0.33 (0.50)
Wald χ^2 , df (a, b, and c)	145.9				274.1				407.8			
Pseudo R-square	0.067				0.107				0.126			
N of Couple-Months	97,376				97,039				95,845			

Source: HCMST, waves 1-5, for years 2009-2015. Regressions weighted by “weight2,” as the probability weight, with robust standard errors, and clustering on individuals. Models exclude 9 subjects whose self-reported gender changed across survey waves. Relationship quality (5 point scale, 5 is best), female partner’s educational attainment, and relative income of partners both measured at wave 1. Time varying variables are marriage, coresidence, living with children, age, relationship duration. The direct effect of gender (for women with relationship quality of zero, model 2 and 3), is not reported in the table. Female-Other Difference is (with letters indicating columns in the table above): $D=C-((B+A)/2)$

* $P<0.05$; ** $P<0.01$; *** $P<0.001$, two tailed tests.

Table 3: Relationship Quality at wave 1 for Married and Nonmarital Respondents in Heterosexual Unions, by Gender

all wave 1 subjects				excluding subjects who later broke up			
	Married	Nonmarital, Cohabiting	Nonmarital, Non cohabiters		Married	Nonmarital Cohabitors	Nonmarital, Non cohabiters
Men	4.61	4.22	4.25	Men	4.65	4.35	4.42
Women	4.46	4.29	4.34	Women	4.50	4.37	4.49
N	1,826	251	446	N	1,733	189	219
Male-Female Difference	0.15***	-0.07	-0.09	Male-Female Difference	0.15***	-0.02	-0.07

Source: HCMST wave 1 data, relationship quality scores weighted by variable “weight2.” Relationship quality was scored on a 1-5 scale, 5 being the best relationship quality. Relationship quality, Marriage and Coresidence were measured at wave 1, excluding individuals with inconsistent gender reports in later waves of the background survey.