

Who Decides? The Social Characteristics of Who Initiates Marital Separation

BELINDA HEWITT¹, MARK WESTERN² and JANEEN BAXTER

¹ *The University of Queensland*

² *The University of Queensland Social Research Centre*

Abstract

This study investigates gender differences in the associations between social characteristics and men's and women's reports of which spouse initiated marital separation. Using retrospective data on 9,147 first marriages from the Household Income and Labor Dynamics in Australia survey (2001), we find that some social characteristics differentiated between separations initiated by wives compared to husbands, but few differences were statistically significant. The main gender difference is that wives are more inclined than husbands to initiate separation on the basis of their husbands' as well as their own social characteristics. Our findings indicate that taking account of which spouse initiates separation is important for improving our understanding of gender differences in the processes of marriage breakdown, but more research is required.

Keywords: event history analysis, gender, marital separation.

One of the main influences of feminist perspectives on family research has been to highlight differences in men's and women's experiences of marriage and family life (Ferree, 1990; Thompson & Walker, 1995). Researchers have found gender differences in the divisions of paid and unpaid labor and child care (Baxter, Hewitt, & Western, 2005; Bittman, England, Folbre, Sayer, & Matheson, 2003), in the importance of intimacy and emotional qualities of relationships (Steil, 1997), and in some aspects of the divorce process (Heaton & Blake, 1999). Many studies find that wives are more likely to end their marriage than husbands (Amato & Previti, 2003; Braver, Whitely, & Ng, 1993) and that men are more likely to indicate they "don't know" why their marriage ended (Amato & Previti, 2003). These gender differences in marriage dissolution further suggest that the processes associated with marital separations initiated by wives are different from those initiated by husbands, but little research has examined the factors that predict who initiates a separation (Rogers, 2004).

Most research on who initiates a marital breakup examines people's perceptions and attitudes toward their previous marital relationship after they have already separated or divorced (Black, Eastwood, Sprenkle, & Smith, 1991; Kincaid & Caldwell, 1995; Pettit & Bloom, 1984). From these retrospective reports, we know that compared to non-initiators, the spouse who initiated the breakup has more positive attitudes to divorce, perceives more alternatives to the marriage (Black et al., 1991), and gives more reasons for why their marriage ended (Kincaid & Caldwell, 1995). The only reported gender difference is that wives who initiate separation cite more reasons for their marriage breakdown than do husbands who initiate separation (Pettit & Bloom, 1984). Yet husbands and wives also bring different resources to marriage and anticipate different financial and custodial experiences after divorce (Poortman & Seltzer, 2005). Consequently, men and women experience different constraints when leaving marital relationships, constraints shaped by their sociostructural characteristics (Breen & Cooke, 2005). In this article, we develop and test several hypotheses about the conditions whereby women's and men's sociostructural characteristics may be differentially associated with their reports of who initiated separation.

BACKGROUND

Social characteristics associated with marriage breakdown include temporal influences, family background characteristics, relationship and fertility histories, socioeconomic characteristics, beliefs, and attitudes (Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Hewitt, Baxter, & Western, 2005). Overall, these factors can either increase or decrease the likelihood of marital disruption through normative and cultural mechanisms concerning the durability of

marriage, psychosocial processes that facilitate or undermine the negotiation of relationships, and social and economic variables that represent barriers to terminating marriage. As these factors positively or negatively influence the perceived costs and benefits of the marriage versus divorce, they are likely to be associated with who initiates separation. More-over, research has indicated that men and women have different experiences of marriage and family life, and therefore some of these divorce mechanisms may operate differently for wives and husbands, changing the likelihood of which partner initiates a separation.

Normative and Cultural Mechanisms

Social characteristics that influence marriage breakdown through normative and cultural beliefs include religiosity, cohabitation, birth cohort, and ethnic background. Men and women with higher levels of attachment to religion are less likely to divorce because they tend to have stronger commitment to, and more traditional views of, marriage (Call & Heaton, 1997). People who cohabit prior to marriage have an increased risk of marriage breakdown partly because they have lower levels of commitment to the institution of marriage than those who do not cohabit (Lillard, Brien, & Waite, 1995). Previous research shows that older and younger birth cohorts are less likely to divorce than those in middle cohorts (Bracher, Santow, Morgan, & Trussell, 1993). Among older cohorts, low rates of divorce reflect historically specific norms and values about the permanence of marriage, and for younger age cohorts, lower rates of divorce reflect shorter marriage durations and less time at risk of marital disruption. Ethnic background is also associated with marriage breakdown. Australian research has shown that compared to those born in Australia, immigrants from non-English-speaking countries are less likely to experience marriage breakdown, whereas immigrants from English-speaking countries are more likely to experience marriage breakdown (Bracher et al., 1993; Hewitt et al., 2005). In contrast, U.S. research finds racial differences in rates of marriage breakdown, where Blacks are more likely to divorce than Whites (Tzeng & Mare, 1995). All these normative and cultural influences change the likelihood of marital disruption, but there is little evidence to suggest they will differ for men and women and so are unlikely to change the likelihood of one partner initiating rather than the other.

Hypothesis 1: Social factors that operate through normative and cultural influences on marriage breakdown will not vary the likelihood of wife-or husband-initiated separation.

Psychosocial Disruption

Other social characteristics undermine the successful negotiation of relationships and thereby increase the risk of marriage breakdown. For example, compared to adult children of parents who remained married, adult children of divorced parents have an increased risk of marriage break-down because they are more likely to exhibit interpersonal behaviors (such as jealousy, anger, poor communication) that interfere with the successful negotiation of relationships (Amato, 1996). In addition, those who marry at younger ages tend to have less maturity and life experience to negotiate a marital relationship, which in-creases the risk of marriage breakdown (Bumpass et al., 1991). And finally, premarital or unplanned pregnancies and births increase the risk of marriage breakdown because a couple may decide to marry when they otherwise would not or the presence of a young child early in marriage may add stress and strains in the developmental stages of the relationship (Waite & Lillard, 1991). These characteristics that undermine the successful negotiation of marriage may increase the likelihood of a wife initiating separation because wives monitor their relationships more closely and their marital satisfaction depends more than their husbands on intimacy and emotional qualities of the marriage (Steil, 1997).

Hypothesis 2: Social factors that disrupt marriage through psychosocial processes will increase the likelihood of wives initiating separation compared to husbands.

Constraining Factors

Social factors that represent barriers to ending a marriage include children born within marriage and access to economic resources. The decision to have children signals a commitment to the marriage and the relationship (England & Farkas, 1986), and most research finds that children born within marriage reduce the likelihood of separation and divorce (Heaton, 1990; Waite & Lillard, 1991). The number of children and the presence of young children, however, may influence wives and husbands differently in their decisions to remain married. For example, when preschool-aged children are present, wives may be less likely than husbands to initiate separation because women typically take on the role of primary carer for young children and have an increased dependence on husbands for financial security during this intensive childrearing phase (Heaton, 1990). Similarly, larger numbers of children would restrict women's ability to leave.

Hypothesis 3: The presence of younger children and a greater number of children will reduce the risk of separation initiated by wives compared to husbands.

One of the main explanations for the growth in marriage breakdown is the improvement of women's socioeconomic position relative to men's over the last century. A specialization and trading model promotes an idealized view of household production where the male head of household specializes in paid employment and the female head of household specializes in domestic labor (Oppenheimer, 1997). Any deviation from this household model, such as women's participation in the paid workforce, results in lower returns to marriage and therefore destabilizes the marriage. Hence, within this framework, a husband's lack of economic resources or a wife's access to economic resources is destabilizing (Oppenheimer, 1997). Studies consistently find that husbands of high socioeconomic status are less likely to experience marriage breakdown than husbands of low socioeconomic status (Ono, 1998; South, 2001). By extension, husbands of low socioeconomic position may be more likely to experience separations initiated by their wives because, for women, there are reduced benefits to staying married. Empirical evidence is less conclusive on whether wives' workforce participation and income increase the risk of marriage breakdown, some studies finding a positive association (South, 2001), some finding no association (Bracher et al., 1993), and others reporting a negative association (Ono, 1998). The association also varies depending on which indicator of socioeconomic position is used, for example, higher levels of education are consistently found to be negatively associated with marriage breakdown for both husbands and wives (Jalovaara, 2003; South, 2001). Despite the mixed evidence, if the specialization-trading model holds true, wives of stronger socioeconomic position may feel they would cope financially should their marriage end and therefore be more inclined to initiate separation. In addition, wives who have a stronger economic position are less likely to be satisfied with unequal divisions of household labor and power within marriage (Rogers, 2004). Even though it could also be argued that a wife's high socioeconomic position frees her husband to initiate separation if he thought his wife would be financially secure, the specialization-trading model views women as the major active agents; therefore, we argue it is wives who under these circumstances will be more likely than husbands to initiate separation (Rogers, 2004).

Hypothesis 4: Men's lower socioeconomic position and women's higher socioeconomic position will increase the likelihood of wife-initiated separation.

In this study, we use retrospective information on 9,147 first marriages from an Australian national household panel survey. Our outcome is a measure of women's and men's reports of who initiated separation in their first marriages; in the event of marriage breakdown, we identify three possible "types" of separation: wife initiated, husband initiated, and jointly initiated. Some of the theoretical arguments imply an increase or decrease in the likelihood of one type of separation rather than remaining married, but other arguments imply an increase or decrease in the likelihood of one type of separation compared to another. We investigate both of these possibilities. First, we use competing risks event history modeling to investigate whether men's and women's social characteristics, including birth cohort, parental divorce, ethnic background, cohabitation, age at marriage, children, religiosity, and education, are associated with their reports of whether they stayed married or experienced a wife-, husband-, or jointly initiated separation from their first marriage. Second, we investigate whether social characteristics are differentially associated with separations initiated by wives compared to those initiated jointly or by husbands.

METHOD

Data

The data come from the first wave (2001) of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey, a panel survey comprising 7,692 households and 13,969 individuals. Households were selected using a multistage sampling approach, and a 66% response rate was achieved (Watson & Wooden, 2002). Within households, data were collected from each person aged over 15 years using face-to-face interviews and self-completed questionnaires, and a 92% response rate was achieved (Watson & Wooden, 2002). Overall, the sample is representative of Australian households, but women are overrepresented, and unmarried people and immigrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds are underrepresented. These discrepancies are not large and are unlikely to compromise the overall quality of the data.

Analytic Sample

Our initial sample includes all respondents who report being married at some time prior to the survey ($n = 9,632$). We also apply further restrictions to the sample. First, people whose marriages ended in separation less than 1 year prior to the survey are excluded ($n = 97$, 1%) because previous research indicates that most marriages that

reconcile tend to do so within the first 12 months of separation and we may overestimate marriage breakdown by including this group (Bumpass et al., 1991). Second, we exclude people who married in the year of the survey ($n = 163$, 1.6%) because the smallest time unit of marriage duration observed in this study is 1 year. Third, only first marriages are considered because the processes leading to separation in higher order marriages are different from those associated with first marriage breakdown (Booth & Edwards, 1992). Finally, respondents with missing data on their marital history or current marital status were dropped from the sample ($n = 225$, 2.3%). The analytic sample comprises 9,147 first marriages from 4,173 men and 4,974 women.

Our analytic sample is also limited because we do not have information on the respondent's former spouse. Therefore, although the breakdown of a marriage inevitably involves two people and the characteristics of both may be relevant to the marriage dissolution, we are only able to include the respondent's characteristics. Nevertheless, this limitation does not affect our ability to explore the association between social characteristics and men's and women's reports of who initiated separation.

Outcome Measure

We use retrospective marriage histories to construct a measure of who initiated separation. In the event of separation, respondents were asked, "Whose decision was it to finally separate?" The response categories were mostly mine, mostly partner's, and joint. We coded these responses into three types of separation. Men who answered mostly partner's were coded 1 = wife *initiated*, and those who answered mostly mine were coded 2 = husband *initiated*. Women who responded mostly mine were coded 1 = wife *initiated*, and women who answered mostly partner's were coded 2 = husband *initiated*. If either men or women answered joint, that response was coded 3 = *jointly initiated*. In this final category, both spouses were considered to play a major role in the final decision to separate from the marriage. People still in their first marriage were coded 0 = *still married*.

Two methodological issues relating to the measurement of initiator status have been identified in the literature. First, defining initiator status is difficult, and several aspects of the breakdown of a marriage can potentially be construed as "initiation." Prior studies use a variety of measures for initiator status, but a study by Braver et al. (1993), which examined three different measures of initiator status, found that they are not necessarily interchangeable. For example, the spouse who first suggested divorce is not necessarily the same spouse who filed the legal papers for divorce. Our measure indicates the partner who made the final decision to separate from the marriage, and this person is not always the same partner who filed for divorce, physically left the relationship, or first raised the issue of divorce.

A second methodological issue is the potential for systematic bias in the reporting of initiator status. Research finds an ego-enhancing bias in reports of who initiated separation, with respondents more likely to report they initiated the separation than their former spouses (Amato & Previti, 2003). Further, research investigating the level of consistency in the reporting of initiator status between former spouses shows that there is close, but not perfect, agreement between reports; Braver et al. (1993) found that 70% of former spouses agreed on who initiated the marriage breakdown, and Sweeney (2002) found agreement in 80% of cases.

Overall, 23% of men and 25% of women in our sample have separated or divorced from their first marriage. Of these, men report a wife-initiated separation in 35% of cases, a husband-initiated separation in 27%, and a jointly initiated separation in 38% of cases. Women report a wife-initiated separation in 58% of cases, a husband-initiated separation in 17% of cases, and a jointly initiated separation in 25% of cases. These reports suggest some bias, with each gender claiming they initiated separation more than the other gender claims and men reporting joint separation more frequently than women. Overall, however, both men's and women's reports suggest that more wives than husbands initiated separation.

These discrepancies support the possible existence of an ego-enhanced reporting bias. To the extent that this measurement error is random, it biases the associations between the covariates and initiator status toward 0, making it more difficult to find statistically significant associations. The bias thus works against rather than in favor of our expectations. Further analysis was under-taken to better understand the nature of the bias in our sample. On the basis of the assumption that recall bias would be greater for those who had been separated longer, we examined the effects of time since separation on the differences between male and female responses to who initiated the separation. Our results showed no significant differences in the reporting of initiator status for men and women who had separated within 2 years prior to the survey, but there were significant differences between men and women separated longer than 2 years prior to survey. To adjust for this bias, we include a dummy control, coded 1 = *separated fewer than 2 years* and 0 = *not separated or separated 2 or more years*, in our analysis.

Analyses

We estimate a discrete time event history model with competing risks; the competing risk is who initiated separation. To do this, we constructed a marriage year data set where each respondent contributes one person year to the data set for every year of marriage. The dependent variable is coded 0 in years that a respondent is married

and coded 1 = wife initiated, 2 = husband initiated, or 3 = jointly initiated in the year they separate. The model is estimated using a multinomial logistic regression. For each dependent variable, the other types of initiator status are treated as a competing event (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones, 2004). Respondents who remain married until surveyed are coded 0 on the dependent variable and treated as censored. If a respondent's marriage ended in an interval because of widowhood, the case was treated as censored. We also adjust standard errors for clusters associated with having repeated observations for each respondent.

Explanatory Variables

Birth cohort is measured in 5-year cohorts, with the oldest cohort born before 1925 and the youngest born after 1971; the middle cohort (1946 – 1950) is the reference category. We include respondent's ethnicity, coded 1 = Australian born, 2 = overseas born—English-speaking country, and 3 = overseas born—non-Englishspeaking country, with Australian born as the reference group. An indicator for whether a respondent's parents had divorced, against a referent of parents who had not, was also included. The indicator for whether the respondent cohabited is coded 0 = no and 1 = yes. Age at marriage is a continuous variable. We have several children measures. First, we indicate whether the respondent had a premarital birth against a referent category of not having had a premarital birth; second, we have a similar indicator for an early birth (first child born the same year as marriage). We include three time-varying child measures. One indicates when the first child was born in the marriage, another indicates the number of children aged 5 years and under, and the third indicates the total number of children. Our final child measure is a control for respondents with missing values for children, coded 0 = no and 1 = yes. To examine the importance of religion to the respondent, we include a scale ranging from 0 = religion not important to 10 = religion very important. Finally, we capture socioeconomic position with highest level of education attained, using four categories based on the Australian Standard Classification of Education (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001): 1 = Year 12 or less (high school diploma or less), 2 = trade or certificate (attained a trade qualification or certificate beyond high school), 3 = undergraduate or associate diploma (tertiary qualification beyond high school but not bachelor level), and 4 = bachelor degree or higher. Year 12 or less is the reference group, and a dummy for missing values is included.

Divorce is a time-dependent event. In our sample, the association between the probability of separation and marriage duration increases in the first 5 years of marriage and then declines at a decreasing rate (Hewitt et al., 2005). To control for this change in probability, we include a quadratic term in all models. Further, as indicated earlier, we include a control for time since separation. The descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1.

RESULTS

The results presented in Table 2 show the associations between men's and women's social characteristics and their reports of who initiated separation relative to staying married. We present relative risk ratios, which have a similar interpretation to odds ratios. When the relative risk ratio is greater than 1, the risk of divorce is increasing as the covariate increases; conversely the risk of divorce is decreasing when the relative risk ratio is less than 1.

The first three columns of Table 2 present results relating to women's reports. Overall, the results indicate that few women's characteristics are associated with their reports of husbands initiating separation; only birth cohort and parental divorce are associated with women's reports of separations initiated by husbands. In contrast, all factors (except number of preschool children) are associated with women's reports of wife-initiated separation.

Of the social characteristics that operate through normative and cultural mechanisms, birth cohort, religiosity, and ethnic background are associated with women's reports of who initiated separation. Consistently, regardless of who initiated separation, women in older cohorts are less likely to experience marriage breakdown than those in younger cohorts. Cohabiting prior to marriage increases the risk of wife- and jointly initiated separation. Religiosity is significantly associated with separation initiated by wives and jointly. Relative to staying married, the odds of wife- and jointly initiated separation decline with women's increased religiosity. The results for ethnic background indicate that, compared to Australian-born women, immigrant women from English-speaking countries are at significantly greater risk of a wife- or jointly initiated separation, relative to staying married. Women's ethnicity is not significantly associated with husbands initiating separation.

Factors that operate through psychosocial processes are all associated with who initiates separation. Parental divorce and premarital and early births all increase the risk of separation. Women whose parents divorced have an increased risk of reporting all types of separation, and those who had a premarital birth or early birth have significantly increased odds of a wife- or jointly initiated separation relative to staying married. In contrast, older age at marriage significantly decreases a woman's reports of separation initiated by herself or jointly.

Having a first child born within marriage reduces the likelihood of women reporting separations initiated by wives. Similarly, the number of children born within marriage reduces the likelihood of separations initiated by wives or jointly. The number of preschool children is not associated with who initiates separation. In general,

women with higher levels of education are more likely to experience marriage breakdown, but few of these associations are significant. Women’s education is only significantly associated with wife- and jointly initiated separation, where women with tertiary qualifications (a bachelor’s degree or diploma) are more likely to report a wife-initiated separation and women with trade or certificate qualifications or a bachelor’s degree report a greater risk of jointly initiated separation than women with Year 12 or less education.

The results for men are presented in the last three columns of Table 2. In contrast to women’s reports, men’s social characteristics are more evenly associated with their reports of separations initiated by wives and husbands. Of the normative and cultural factors, birth cohort, religiosity, and cohabitation are associated with who initiates separation reported by men. Ethnic background, however, is not. Men born in older cohorts have a lower risk of experiencing a marriage breakdown than those in younger cohorts, and this does not differ depending on who initiated separation. Men who cohabited before marriage are more likely to initiate separation than men who did not, but cohabitation is not related to reports of wife- or jointly initiated separations.

TABLE 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Social Characteristics for Women and Men

	Women (<i>n</i> = 4,973)			Men (<i>n</i> = 4,173)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Normative and cultural						
Birth cohort						
<1925	0.07	0.25		0.06	0.23	
1926 – 1930	0.05	0.23		0.06	0.24	
1931 – 1935	0.06	0.23		0.06	0.24	
1936 – 1940	0.07	0.25		0.08	0.27	
1941 – 1945	0.08	0.28		0.09	0.30	
1946 – 1950	0.10	0.30		0.11	0.32	
1951 – 1955	0.11	0.32		0.12	0.32	
1956 – 1960	0.13	0.34		0.13	0.34	
1961 – 1965	0.13	0.34		0.13	0.33	
1966 – 1970	0.11	0.31		0.10	0.30	
>1971	0.09	0.28		0.06	0.23	
Cohabited prior to marriage ^a	0.28	0.45		0.30	0.46	
Religiosity ^b	5.52	3.55	1 – 10	4.49	3.58	1 – 10
Ethnicity	0.72	0.45		0.70	0.46	
Australian born						
Overseas born: English-speaking country	0.11	0.31		0.13	0.33	
Overseas born: non-English-speaking country	0.17	0.37		0.17	0.38	
Psychosocial disruption	0.16	0.37		0.14	0.34	
Parents ever divorced						
Age at marriage	22.81	4.57	16 – 53	25.42	4.96	16 – 62
Premarital birth	0.07	0.25		0.06	0.24	
Early birth	0.06	0.24		0.07	0.26	
Missing values for children	0.09	0.28		0.06	0.23	
Constraining factors	0.96	0.20		0.96	0.20	
First child born in marriage ^c						
Number of preschool children ^c	0.28	0.60	0 – 5	0.28	0.60	0 – 5
Number of children ^c	2.44	1.54	0 – 14	2.35	1.58	0 – 14
Highest level of education	0.47	0.50		0.34	0.47	
Year 12 or less						
Trade or certificate	0.22	0.41		0.35	0.48	
Undergraduate diploma	0.09	0.28		0.09	0.30	
Bachelor’s degree or higher	0.19	0.40		0.20	0.40	
Missing	0.03	0.18		0.02	0.13	

^a0 = no, 1 = yes.

^bScale indicating the importance of religion, ranging from 0 = not important to 10 = very important.

^cMeasure is time varying, the mean and standard deviation are expressed as a proportion (or mean) over total marriage years.

TABLE 2. The Association Between Social Characteristics and Men’s and Women’s Reports of Who Initiated Separation Relative to Still Married

	Women’s Reports						Men’s Reports					
	Wife Initiated		Husband Initiated		Jointly Initiated		Wife Initiated		Husband Initiated		Jointly Initiated	
	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	SE
Normative and cultural												
Birth cohort												
<1925	0.36***	0.09	0.44*	0.18	0.16**	0.09	0.30**	0.11	0.41*	0.17	0.27***	0.10
1926 – 1930	0.35***	0.09	0.16**	0.09	0.65	0.20	0.39**	0.12	0.54	0.19	0.29***	0.10
1931 – 1935	0.54**	0.11	0.51	0.19	0.52*	0.17	0.82	0.22	0.83	0.24	0.40**	0.12
1936 – 1940	0.62*	0.11	0.90	0.27	0.67	0.19	0.70	0.17	0.77	0.22	0.83	0.18
1941 – 1945	0.86	0.13	1.07	0.30	0.47*	0.14	0.89	0.20	1.05	0.24	0.73	0.15
1946 – 1950	1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00	
1951 – 1955	0.82	0.12	1.27	0.32	1.27	0.27	1.28	0.20	1.05	0.24	1.00	0.19
1956 – 1960	1.06	0.15	1.42	0.37	1.02	0.22	1.11	0.23	0.93	0.22	1.06	0.21
1961 – 1965	1.20	0.18	1.04	0.32	1.04	0.26	1.51	0.32	0.99	0.25	1.28	0.26
1966 – 1970	1.09	0.19	0.95	0.36	1.62	0.41	1.28	0.33	0.88	0.27	1.12	0.30
>1971	1.61*	0.31	0.52	0.34	1.64	0.52	1.19	0.59	0.91	0.49	2.19*	0.81
Cohabit prior to marriage ^a	1.31**	0.13	1.33	0.27	1.40*	0.23	1.54**	0.23	1.65**	0.29	1.34	0.20
Religiosity ^b	0.95***	0.01	1.00	0.02	0.96*	0.02	0.99	0.02	0.93***	0.02	0.95**	0.02
Ethnicity												
Australian born	1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00	
Overseas born: English-speaking country	1.64***	0.17	1.26	0.26	1.54**	0.25	1.01	0.16	1.17	0.21	1.13	0.18
Overseas born: non-English-speaking country	0.97	0.11	0.78	0.16	1.11	0.19	0.98	0.16	1.20	0.22	1.10	0.17
Psychosocial disruption												
Parents ever divorced	1.71***	0.16	1.43*	0.26	1.49**	0.22	1.49**	0.21	1.20	0.21	1.37*	0.20
Age at marriage	0.91***	0.01	0.97	0.02	0.95**	0.02	0.98	0.02	0.95**	0.02	0.96*	0.01
Premarital birth	1.97***	0.32	1.53	0.52	2.14**	0.51	1.19	0.31	2.61***	0.67	0.87	0.23
Early birth	1.46**	0.20	0.81	0.24	1.74*	0.36	1.62**	0.30	1.57*	0.34	2.33***	0.41
Constraining factors												
First child born in marriage ^c	0.76*	0.09	1.01	0.25	0.88	0.18	0.67*	0.12	0.89	0.19	0.53***	0.09
Number of preschool children ^c	1.04	0.08	1.15	0.16	1.16	0.15	0.86	0.09	1.05	0.14	0.85	0.10
Number of children ^c	0.88*	0.05	0.84	0.08	0.80*	0.07	1.00	0.04	0.84*	0.07	0.93	0.05
Highest level of education:												
Year 12 or less	1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00	
Trade or certificate	1.15	0.11	1.31	0.31	1.49*	0.23	1.17	0.15	0.82	0.13	0.99	0.13
Undergraduate/associate diploma	1.31*	0.18	1.27	0.23	0.90	0.23	1.06	0.21	1.39	0.16	1.07	0.20
Bachelor degree or higher	1.30*	0.14	1.28	0.27	1.97***	0.33	0.73	0.13	0.78	0.16	0.82	0.14
<i>n</i>			4,974						4,174			
Marriage years			101,891						85,534			
Number of separations		706	211		299		334		258		360	
Goodness of fit LR χ^2 (df)			1,146.34 (96)						1,156.47 (96)			

Note: Table does not report dummies for missing values, the quadratic expression for marriage duration, or the control for reporting bias. RRR = relative risk ratio. LR = likelihood ratio. ^a0 = no, 1 = yes. ^bScale indicating the importance of religion, ranging from 0 = not important to 10 = very important. ^cMeasure is time varying. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Men’s religiosity is significantly and negatively associated with husband- and jointly initiated separations, but not their reports of separations initiated by wives.

All the psychosocial disruptive factors are associated with who initiates separation for men. Men whose parents divorced report an increased risk of wife- and jointly initiated separations compared to men whose parents stayed married, but parental divorce is not linked to men’s reports of husband-initiated separation. Older age at marriage significantly reduces the risk of husband- and jointly initiated separation for men. A premarital birth increases the risk of separation initiated by husbands, and early birth significantly increases the risk of all types of separation.

Of the barriers to ending marriage, having a first-born child in marriage, number of children, and education are significantly associated with men’s reports of who initiates separation. Men whose first child is born within marriage have a significantly lower likelihood of reporting separations initiated by wives or jointly. Each additional child significantly reduces the risk of men reporting either a husband- or jointly initiated separation. Overall, men with bachelor’s degrees or higher are less likely to experience marriage breakdown than those with Year 12 or less, but none of the associations are significant.

The results presented in Table 3 show the associations between men’s and women’s social characteristics and their reports of a husband-or jointly initiated separation relative to a wife-initiated separation. For brevity, we present only statistically significant results. The results for women’s reports are presented in the first two columns; comparing husband- and wife-initiated separation, only religiosity and age at marriage are statistically different. Older age at marriage and greater religiosity for women increase the risk of a husband initiating separation. There are also significant differences by women’s education levels. Compared to women with Year 12 or less education, women with bachelor’s degrees have significantly greater odds of reporting jointly initiated separations; hence, more educated women are more likely to report jointly initiated separations. The results for men’s reports are presented in the final two columns of Table 3. The only factors that significantly distinguish between wives or husbands initiating separation are religiosity and premarital birth; compared to reporting a wife-initiated separation, more religious men are less likely and men who had a premarital birth are more likely to report a husband-initiated separation

TABLE 3. Social Characteristics Significantly Associated with Husband- or Jointly Initiated Separation Relative to Wife-Initiated Separation

	Women’s Reports				Men’s Reports			
	Husband Initiated		Jointly Initiated		Husband Initiated		Jointly Initiated	
	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	SE
Normative and cultural								
Religiosity ^a	1.05*	0.02	1.02	0.02	0.93*	0.03	0.96	0.02
Psychosocial disruption								
Age at marriage	1.08**	0.03	1.04	0.02	—		—	
Premarital birth	—		—		2.20*	0.79	0.74	0.27
Constraining factors								
Highest level of education								
Year 12 or less	—		—					
Trade or certificate	1.13	.23	1.29	.23	—		—	
Undergraduate/associate diploma	0.97	0.28	0.68	0.20	—		—	
Bachelor degree or higher	0.98	0.24	1.52*	0.31	—		—	
<i>n</i>		4,974				4,174		
Marriage years		101,891				85,534		
Number of separations		211		299		258		360
Goodness of fit LR χ^2 (df)		1,146.34 (96)				1,156.47 (96)		

Note: Table only reports covariates that significantly differentiated between wife-initiated and either husband- or jointly initiated separation. Table does not report dummies for missing values, the quadratic expression for marriage duration, or the control for reporting bias. RRR = relative risk ratio. LR = likelihood ratio.

^aScale indicating the importance of religion, ranging from 0 = not important to 10 = very important.

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

CONCLUSIONS

Prior research investigating gender differences within marriage and family life finds that men's and women's experiences vary across a range of social and marital factors, and so it is also likely that husbands and wives end their marriages under different circumstances. Using retrospective Australian data, we assess which socio-structural characteristics differentiate between separations initiated by wives as compared with husbands. Overall, we find little support for our hypotheses. Our findings indicate that even though most sociostructural characteristics are associated with who initiates separation, they do not consistently predict whether it is the husband or wife who initiates the breakup.

As expected, we find few gender differences in normative and cultural factors, although men's religiosity is associated with a reduced likelihood of husband-initiated separation and women's religiosity is associated with a reduced likelihood of wife-initiated separation. These results imply that religious beliefs and practices shape an individual's but not their spouses' marriage decisions. Consequently, these are not gender differences per se.

Our expectation that the social factors that influence marriage breakdown through psychosocial disruption will increase the likelihood of separations initiated by wives rather than husbands was not supported. Even though women who marry at younger ages are significantly more likely to report a wife-initiated compared to a husband-initiated separation, the general trend is that older age at marriage reduces the risk of separation for both men and women. In contrast to our expectations, for men, a premarital birth increases the risk of reporting separation initiated by husbands compared to wives. This finding suggests a selection effect, where men who have a premarital birth also have certain traits that predispose them to initiate marital separation such as a lack of commitment to relationships (Bracher et al., 1993).

Our third hypothesis that more and younger children will reduce the likelihood of wives initiating separation compared to husbands is also not supported. Rather, we find that children are not associated with women's reports of separations initiated by husbands, but according to men's re-ports, premarital birth, early birth, and number of children are all associated with husband-initiated separation. This pattern of reporting is also repeated more broadly in our results. Women's characteristics are strongly associated with their reports of wife-initiated but not husband-initiated separations, but this trend is not mirrored in men's reports. Men's characteristics are relatively evenly associated with their reports of both husband- and wife-initiated separation. Hence, our results suggest that separations initiated by wives are associated with both men's and women's characteristics, but separations initiated by husbands are primarily associated with men's characteristics.

This result is consistent with findings from qualitative research that in some circumstances wives initiate separation because their husbands are unhappy or because they do not want their children to be exposed to a bad marriage, not because they themselves are necessarily unhappy with the marriage (Hackstaff, 1999; Walzer & Oles, 2003). Thus, it appears that wives' greater monitoring of and responsibility for the quality of relationships paradoxically extends to taking responsibility for ending the marriage in circumstances where they perceive that their husband or children are being adversely affected (Walzer & Oles, 2003). It is also worth noting that part of the failure to find significant predictors of wife-rather than husband-initiated separations for women may be because only a small number of separations initiated by husbands were reported by women in our sample.

Finally, using education as our indicator of socioeconomic position, we find little or no support for a specialization-trading argument. This finding should be viewed cautiously, however, as education may not be the best indicator of economic resources. Previous research indicates that education operates differently in predicting divorce than other indicators such as employment status, actual income, or partner's relative incomes (Jalovaara, 2003; South, 2001). Because employment status and income are more direct measures of economic resources, using these measures would provide a more robust test of the specialization-trading model.

There were some limitations to the current research. We used retrospective cross-sectional data for marriages that had ended prior to survey, and we had data only from one spouse. The use of longitudinal couple data would allow characteristics of both spouses to be taken into consideration when predicting which partner initiates the marital breakup. It would also enable a better understanding of, and allow us to better control for, the reporting bias evident in our dependent variable. Our study was also limited by the range of covariates included in the models, and our findings suggest two important directions for future research. First, a more direct investigation of the association between psychosocial aspects of marriage, such as relationship satisfaction and quality, and which partner ends the marriage would give further insight into whether wives are more likely to initiate separation when their husbands are unhappy. Second, examining the association between socioeconomic characteristics not included in this study, such as employment status and income, and who initiates marital separation will develop our knowledge of the circumstances whereby economic resources increase or decrease the likelihood of one partner initiating the breakup over the other.

As the nature of gender relations within marriages and families continues to change, it remains important for researchers, counselors, and policymakers to better understand gender differences in the correlates of marriage break-down. Currently, very little is known about which partner initiates marital separation and under what circumstances, but understanding those processes is essential to developing our understanding of why marriages

break down. The findings of this study suggest that sociostructural factors are important predictors of which partner initiates separation, but the main gender difference we find is that wives are more likely to initiate separation on the basis of their husbands' as well as their own social characteristics. Our findings only complete a small part of the puzzle. A great deal more research is needed to better understand why women, compared to men, are twice as likely to initiate marital separation.

NOTE

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