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What Are They Thinking?

A National-Sample Study of Stability and Change in Divorce Ideation

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Abstract

This study reports on a nationally representative sample of married individuals ages 25–50 ($N = 3,000$) surveyed twice (1 year apart) to investigate the phenomenon of divorce ideation, or what people are thinking when they are thinking about divorce. Twenty-eight percent of respondents had thought their marriage was in serious trouble in the past but not recently. Another 25% had thoughts about divorce in the last 6 months. Latent Class Analyses revealed three distinct groups among those thinking about divorce at Time 1: soft thinkers (49%), long-term-serious thinkers (45%), and conflicted thinkers (6%). Yet divorce ideation was not static; 31% of Time 1 thinkers were not thinking about it 1 year later (and 36% of nonthinkers at Time 1 were thinking about it 1 year later). Also, Latent Transition Analyses revealed 49% of Time 1 long-term-serious thinkers, 56% of soft thinkers, and 51% of conflicted thinkers had shifted groups at Time 2, mostly in the direction of less and softer thinking about divorce. Overall, divorce ideation is common but dynamic, and it is not necessarily an indication of imminent marital dissolution.

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Divorce is one of the most studied topics in the social sciences (Amato, 2010).

Researchers place the overall divorce rate at about 50%, although the risk of divorce generally declines with the length of the marriage. However, the risk appears to have increased recently for older and longer-married couples (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014; Stepler, 2017). The effects of divorce probably have been the most studied issue in this field. For instance, a large body of research documents the heightened risks to the wellbeing of more than 1 million children each year who experience parental divorce (Amato & Anthony, 2014).

Despite a large body of research on divorce, there are still important gaps in our understanding, as Amato (2010) pointed out in his decade-review article. For instance, little research has illuminated the ambiguous state of being married but thinking about divorce (Allen & Hawkins, 2017; Amato, 2010). This is an important gap because we know that thinking about divorce, or divorce ideation, positively predicts poorer marital quality and subsequent dissolution (Amato & Booth, 1997). How many people are thinking about divorce? How frequent and serious are their thoughts? How static or stable is their thinking? It is surprising that we do not have good answers to these questions given the number of couples who seek help specifically for relationship problems (Doss, Rhodes, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). Knowing more about the thoughts and experiences of those who are thinking about divorce will benefit practitioners who now are at a disadvantage to assist highly distressed couples where divorce may be imminent, or even moderately distressed couples where the possibility of divorce looms over the horizon.

There was some research interest in divorce ideation and decision-making several

decades ago (Albrecht & Kunz, 1980; Donovan & Jackson, 1990; Kitson & Langlie, 1984). Booth and White (1980) reported that 10% of Nebraskan married adults had thought about a divorce in the past two years. But this figure is isolated to one Midwestern state and is nearly four decades old. The past few decades have been mostly a latency period on divorce ideation research. Broman's (2002) study was one exception. Using a national probability sample, he found that younger people, Blacks, and parents were more likely to be thinking about divorce. But this study had only a single item tapping into divorce ideation ("I sometimes think of divorcing my spouse"), yielding a relatively thin view of the phenomenon, and the data now are nearly two decades old. Vaughn (1990) retrospectively explored turning points of marital uncoupling and proposed a universal stage model for ending a marriage. But her sample did not include individuals who decided to remain in the marriage, thus missing the perspectives of those who decided not to divorce. Moreover, this small study now is nearly three decades old.

Recently, a handful of studies have given scholarly attention to thinking and decision-making about divorce. Two reports documented evidence of ambivalence even among some who have filed for divorce, suggesting that their thinking and decision-making efforts were still incomplete (Doherty, Harris, & Didericksen, 2016; Doherty, Willoughby, & Peterson, 2011). These researchers found that among individuals attending a mandated divorcing parents class in Minnesota, about two thirds reported that they were done with the marriage and wanted a divorce, but about 25% said they were ambivalent about the divorce, and about 8% did not want it. Doherty, Harris and Wilde (2016) have developed a treatment protocol called "Discernment Counseling" specifically designed to assist directionally-uncertain couples achieve greater clarity and confidence about the future of their marriage. Further documentation of ambiguity and confusion about divorce decision-making is evident in recent qualitative work (Fackrell, 2012;

Kanewischer & Harris, 2015; Plauche, Marks, & Hawkins, 2016). For instance, Fackrell (2012) interviewed a small number of individuals who were thinking about divorce and found that the decision-making process is usually chaotic and confusing. She discovered that an unsatisfying relationship by itself does not present a straightforward path to divorce, because the marriage has its own considerations apart from the personal relationship. Similarly, Harris, Crabtree, Bell, Allen, and Roberts (2017) interviewed those individuals who were thinking about divorce and discovered that participants reported lacking clarity and confidence in their decision-making ability about divorce. These qualitative studies, of course, have their limitations. They cannot provide a demographic outline of divorce ideation; quantitative research with a nationally representative sample is needed for that. Moreover, as Allen and Hawkins (2017) recently pointed out, phenomenological, retrospective interview methods can be biased because interviewees' needs for sense-making leads them to report their experiences in ways that actually may diminish ambiguity, inconsistency, and contradiction in the decision-making process. Stories also are fluid and change over time and with the intended audience.

As we examine the phenomenon of divorce ideation in greater depth, there are valuable conceptual frameworks that can illuminate the approach and, importantly, help guide clinical work. Owen and his colleagues (2014) introduced the concept of "commitment uncertainty" to describe those embroiled in a decision-making process about the future of their marriage or relationship. They argued that the "unfolding nature of commitment uncertainty is likely a complex process in which multiple factors (e.g., length of relationship, constraints, attachment strategies) can influence its trajectory" (p. 211), and they outlined three aspects of the process: (1) onset and course of uncertainty; (2) cognitive and emotional dissonance; and (3) intrinsic pressure to reduce uncertainty. They also explored treatment implications associated with

commitment uncertainty. Perhaps their most central recommendation was to address commitment uncertainty early and directly in treatment, allowing couples to express their uncertainty to each other. They also addressed how to deal with the “chicken or egg” problem: that is, how to deal with motivations for change when commitment is in flux. In addition, the trans-theoretical model of change (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992) often has been used in clinical fields to understand how people go about deciding important changes, such as whether to divorce. This model posits stages of thinking about change, including: *precontemplation*, a stage in which people are not seriously considering change but thoughts about it intrude on their consciousness; *contemplation*, in which people are having serious but complicated and indecisive thoughts about change; *preparation*, in which people have made at least a tentative decision to change and are thinking forward to how to make the change; and *action*, in which people are moving forward actively with the change. These two conceptual frameworks suggest that to understand the dynamic nature of divorce ideation and decision-making it will be valuable to include questions such as how serious and frequent their thoughts are, how long they have been thinking about divorce, their attitude about working to fix marital problems, how much clarity they have obtained about what to do, and whether they have spoken to their spouse and filed for divorce.

General Research Aim

The aim of this study is to provide a rich description of divorce ideation with a longitudinal, national sample of married individuals. Descriptive analyses investigate the proportion of past and recent “thinkers,” with a dominant focus on recent thinkers, including frequency of thoughts, whether thoughts about divorce decline with length of marriage, whether thoughts are private or shared, major problems in the marriage, and personal attitudes about getting a divorce. Then, analyses explore whether there are distinguishable groups (latent classes) of recent thinkers

based on these descriptive divorce ideation variables. This shifts analyses from a variable-centered to a person-centered approach. While every case of divorce ideation is unique, there are still important commonalities. Many scholars find that understanding person-types of a phenomenon helps reduce its potentially overwhelming complexity and improves understanding (Laursen & Hoff, 2006). Finally, because complex phenomenon such as divorce ideation play out over time, further descriptive analyses and Latent Transition Analyses explore how divorce ideation and ideation groups changes or stays the same over a 1-year period.

Method

Procedures and Sample

We employed a large-scale, online market research company (YouGov) to collect data for this study. The firm recruits people to take online surveys a few times a year about various topics. Participants earn points by participating in online surveys. The participants eventually can redeem these points for cash, gift certificates, or merchandise. Recent research by the Pew Research Center (2016) suggests that if online panel surveys are carefully administered in terms of both sampling and weighting (as illustrated in YouGov's procedures discussed below), results may not differ significantly from traditional, probability-based surveys. The first survey was administered in early 2015, with a follow-up survey administered 12–13 months later. The Time 2 survey repeated most of the Time 1 questions, with minor additions and subtractions appropriate to a follow-up survey. The survey took about 9 minutes, on average, to complete. The first author's IRB approved the study.

The sample at Time 1 consisted of 3,000 participants. All participants were married at Time 1 for at least one year and were between 25–50 years old. These sampling parameters maximized the number of parents with minor children in the home in our study, because issues

around divorce are more salient to adults and society when dependent children are involved (Amato, 2010). Eighty percent were parents (average number of children = 1.93); 66% had children still in the household. Respondents had been married, on average, 12.04 years ($SD = 7.60$). The average age was 39.3 ($SD = 6.86$). Fifty-three percent were female. In terms of education, 34% had a high school degree or less and 36% had a 4-year college degree or more. Median family income was between \$60-69,999. Sixty-six percent were White, 16% Hispanic, 8% Black, 4% Asian, and 6% multiracial or other. Thirty-seven percent reported attending religious services weekly or a few times a month.

At the 1-year follow-up survey, 172 participants could not be reached. The number of Time 1 participants who completed the follow-up survey was 2,256. Hence, the response rate of reachable participants was 80% (75% of the full sample). There was no difference between the retained and the drop-out groups on the frequency of thoughts about divorce at Time 1. There was a slight but statistically significant difference ($t = 2.84, p < .01$) in marital happiness scores, with less happily married respondents ($M = 7.94, SD = 1.97$), on average, more likely to be retained than happier individuals ($M = 8.17, SD = 1.88$).

The respondents at both survey times were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, education, political party identification, ideology, and political interest. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file). Data on voter registration status and turnout were matched to this frame using the November 2010 Current Population Survey. Data on interest in politics and party identification were then matched to this frame from the 2007 Pew Religious Life Survey. The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases

and the frame were combined and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and ideology. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles. Thus, in the end, weighted data closely approximated a nationally representative sample. Analyses with unweighted and weighted closely converged. Nevertheless, we employed weighted data in all analyses to estimate population figures as precisely as possible.

Measures

Divorce Ideation and Related Actions. Thoughts about divorce were measured with a variety of items. All participants were asked: “Sometimes couples experience serious problems in their marriage and have thoughts of ending their marriage. Even people who get along quite well with their spouse sometimes wonder whether their marriage is working out. Have you ever thought your marriage was in serious trouble?” (Yes/No). This question is a slight modification of an item used in the Amato and Booth (1997) study. Those who indicated yes to this question responded to several more questions: “Are you glad you are still married?” (I’m glad we are still married/ I have mixed feelings about still being married; sometimes I’m glad and sometimes I’m not/ I’m not glad we are still married/ I’m just not sure how I feel about my marriage.) Another follow-up question asked about recent ideation: “In the past 6 months, have you had serious concerns about your marriage that included thinking about a possible divorce?” (No, not at all/ Yes, a few times/ Yes, several times/ Yes, a lot of times.) This item served as the key indicator of recent divorce ideation in the study. We labeled those who responded to one of the three “yes” choices in this follow-up question as “thinkers.” In addition, thinkers were asked if they had talked to their spouse about their thoughts (Yes/ No/ Maybe we sort of talked about it).

(Although we asked also if respondents' spouses had said they were thinking about divorce, respondents were only classified as thinkers when they themselves reported divorce ideation.)

Thinkers responded to several more questions, some of which were taken or adapted from other established measures (Amato & Booth; 1997; de Graaf and Kalmijn, 2006; Doherty et al., 2016; Weiss & Cerreto, 1980). Many of the items from these measures were of interest individually, not as an aggregated score. Moreover, several items from these previous scales needed simplifying and rewording, and some were not applicable for our study. Also, there were questions that we were interested in for this study that were not on these scales. Hence, we constructed a revised set of divorce ideation items for this study. Specifically, we asked thinkers to choose the attitude that most closely matched how they felt about getting a divorce: "People have different attitudes about getting a divorce. Please check the one statement below that most closely fits your own attitude right now." (I'm done with this marriage; it's too late now even if my spouse were to make major changes/ I have mixed feelings about getting a divorce; sometimes I think it's a good idea and sometimes I'm not sure/ I would consider working on my marriage and not divorcing if my spouse got serious about making some major changes/ I don't really want a divorce; I'm willing to work hard to keep us together/ None of these statements really fits my own attitude right now.) This measure was previously validated by Doherty and his colleagues (2016). We also included a measure of clarity: "I've struggled to come to clarity about my decision to divorce or stay together" (7-point Likert agreement scale). Respondents also indicated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree) "I would feel like a failure if my marriage were to end." Respondents also indicated how many months they had been thinking about divorce (0–3 months/ 4–6/ 7–11/ 12–24/ 24+).

In addition, thinkers reported on the problems they were facing. Respondents indicated

from a list of 15 potential problems whether they were a major problem, minor problem, or not a problem: “intense” problems = alcohol/drug abuse, infidelity, physical violence, emotional abuse; “instrumental” problems = handling money, working too many hours, dividing housework and childcare; “connection” problems = sexual relationship, being able to talk together, not paying enough attention to the marriage, growing apart, losing romantic feelings, commitment to the marriage, arguing too much, and mental health problems). These items were taken primarily from a scale developed and validated by de Graaf and Kalmijn (2006) in their study of reasons for divorce. We did not employ a data reduction technique such as factor analysis on these divorce ideation items for two reasons. First, we were interested descriptively in each item and did not assume that each item reflected a single underlying construct. Second, these (and other) items were included together in a Latent Class Analysis described later to explore whether there were distinct groups of thinkers. Including items independently in the LCA rather than as a factor(s) maximized its ability to differentiate classes with unique characteristics.

Relationship Happiness and Hope. Relationship happiness was measured with a single-item: “Taking all things together, on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all happy and 10 is completely happy, how happy would you say your relationship with your partner is?” This 1-item measure, used in the rigorous, Building Strong Families study (Wood, Moore, Clarkwest, & Killewald, 2014), helped us keep survey response time down to push response rates up. Also, all participants responded to a 5-item Relationship Hope Scale: (1) “I believe we can handle whatever conflicts will arise in the future”; (2) “I am very confident when I think of our future together”; (3) “I’m hopeful that we can make our relationship work”; (4) “I’m hopeful that we have the tools we need to fix problems in our relationship now and in the future”; and (5) “I feel like our relationship can survive what life throws at us” (7-point Likert scale: 1 = *Strongly*

Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). Responses to the items were averaged for the scale score. The unidimensional scale showed good psychometric properties, including a high Cronbach's alpha (.94), high CFA factor loadings, measurement invariance (for gender, first/second marriages), satisfactory ICCs using IRT models, and good construct validity (Blinded Citation, 2016).

Data Analyses

To account for missing data due to Time 2 attrition or the survey skip pattern of those not thinking about divorce, we used Lang, Chesnut, and Little's (2016) *quark* R package, conducting multiple imputation to produce 100 complete datasets for use in the analysis. The program package incorporates Howard, Rhemtulla, and Little's (2015) suggestion to use principle components as auxiliary variables to improve estimation and employs predictive mean matching (PMM; Little & Rubin, 2002) to impute missing values. Auxiliary variables are variables that are not substantively part of the model but that help improve precision of the missing data estimation because they provide information that explains the missingness. Howard, Rhemtulla, and Little (2015) suggested extracting principle components estimated from all other variables in a dataset as auxiliary variables to summarize the independent (uncorrelated) dimensions of information present in the data. They found that the principle components approach was better than including specific auxiliary variables because it reduced noise often introduced by including many variables. Once the *quark* program has extracted principal components to use as auxiliary variables in the estimation process, traditional regression methods are used to predict values for both complete and missing cases. Next, in the PMM step, these predicted values are used to substitute the most likely observed values for the missing values by randomly choosing observed values from a pool of cases with complete data and similar predicted values. The PMM approach is advantageous because it constrains the imputed values to the range of values allowed for a

given scale or variable (Little & Rubin, 2002), and—as it does not assume that the imputed values fit a multivariate normal distribution—the imputed values for continuous variables match the distribution of the observed values and may, therefore, be more accurate. Finally, because PMM uses actual values as “substitutes,” it can be used to impute ordinal and categorical variables (Vink, Frank, Pannekoek, & van Buuren, 2014).

To investigate our research aims, first, we employed descriptive analyses of the key divorce ideation questions from the Time 1 survey. We then employed Latent Class Analyses (LCA, Collins & Lanza, 2010), combining participants’ Time 1 responses to all the divorce ideation questions (described in the Measures section) to search for distinct classes or groups of thinkers. Finally, we looked descriptively at changes in divorce ideation at Time 2, and then used Latent Transition Analysis (LTA) to examine change and stability in divorce ideation over a 1-year period. LTA estimates class membership at each time point using LCA and then evaluates changes in class membership over time, producing transition probabilities (of Time 2 class membership conditioned on Time 1 membership).

To determine if those who did not respond at Time 2 did so randomly or if certain types of thinkers were more likely to drop out, we used the BCH procedure (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2015)—an alternative to the 3-step procedure which considers the uncertainty of latent classification when making between-class comparisons—to evaluate if different thinkers varied in their likelihood of dropping out by Time 2. Given these results, those who dropped out of the study at Time 2 were retained in the LTA analysis examining changes between types of thinkers.

Results

Past Ideation

First, participants responded to the question: “Have you ever thought your marriage was in

serious trouble?” (Note this analysis is truncated because our sample does not include those who already divorced.) Fifty-three percent of Time 1 respondents said yes to this question. Twenty-eight percent had such thoughts in the past but not within the last 6 months; 88% of these past-but-not-current thinkers reported that they were glad they were still married, with less than 1% (0.5%) saying they were not glad, but 11.5% reported mixed or unsure feelings.

Recent Ideation

Overall, 25% of our sample at Time 1 ($n = 745$) reported thinking about divorce in the last 6 months. Seventeen percent of our respondents reported thinking recently about divorce only a few times; 5% said several times; and 3% said a lot of times. Thus, for most thinkers (70%), thoughts about divorce were infrequent. About 40% of recent thinkers said they had talked to their spouse about their thoughts; another 40% said they had not talked to their spouse about their thoughts; 20% said, “Maybe, we sort of talked about it.” (This is the precise language used in the question.) Presumably, those who reported this last response had more vague and indirect conversations about marital prospects, perhaps without directly mentioning divorce. (Only 9% of thinkers had talked to a lawyer or mediator about a divorce.) Women were more likely than men (27% vs. 22%) to have had recent thoughts of divorce ($\chi^2(1) = 11.6, p < .001$). Otherwise, demographic differences between thinkers and nonthinkers were few and small.

Further analyses revealed that divorce ideation declined with the length of the marriage. The percentage of individuals thinking about divorce was relatively steady through the first 15 years of marriage (1-5 years = 26%; 6-10 years = 24%; 11-15 years = 23%). Then it began to decline (16–20 years = 15%; 21+ years = 12%). Those married more than 15 years were significantly less likely to have had recent thoughts about divorce ($\chi^2(1) = 26.2, p < .001$).

Thinkers were asked to select from a set of statements describing personal attitudes about

getting a divorce. Only 5% checked: “I’m done with this marriage,” and most who endorsed this response had been thinking frequently about divorce. Most *thinkers*’ responses indicated some level of openness to repairing the marriage. The modal response (43%) was: “I don’t really want a divorce; I’m willing to work hard to keep us together.” About a quarter (23%) of thinkers reported: “I have mixed feelings about a divorce.” Another quarter (23%) endorsed: “I would consider working on my marriage and not divorcing if my spouse got serious about making some major changes.” (Six percent said none of the responses matched their attitude). Moreover, many said that they were struggling to get clarity about the decision to divorce ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.79$, on a 7-point Likert agreement scale).

Recent thinkers also reported the major marital problems they were experiencing from a list of 15 potential problems ranging in intensity. About 60% reported that they were experiencing problems only with connection issues (e.g., being able to talk together, growing apart) and/or instrumental problems (e.g., handling money, dividing domestic labor); 40% reported a problem with at least one of the more intense problems such as abuse, adultery, or addiction (and they often had less intense problems, too). (Readers interested in a larger set of descriptive analyses of this and other divorce ideation questions may consult Blinded Citation, 2015.)

Divorce Ideation Profiles

Building on these descriptive analyses, we employed Latent Class Analysis (LCA) to explore whether our set of divorce ideation questions could reliably differentiate between classes of thinkers. Similar to cluster analysis methods, LCA identifies individuals that have similar scores across a range of characteristics. Statistical tests determine the number of prominent subgroups within the sample and how well the groups can be differentiated from one another. The descriptive analyses showed that many recent thinkers were thinking about divorce infrequently,

not experiencing the most intense kinds of problems, and wanted to work on their marriages. Thus, we hypothesized that LCA would identify a group of softer thinkers and another group experiencing more intense problems and thinking more seriously about divorce.

Indeed, the LCA analysis confirmed a distinct group at Time 1 of softer thinkers, but also identified two groups of more serious thinkers. Model fit indices and substantive interpretation indicated a 3-class solution was the best, given the relative trends in Loglikelihood values, AIC, BIC, and SABIC and substantive interpretability (Nylund, Asparouhov, & Muthén, 2007; note that the bootstrap likelihood ratio and Lo-Mendell Rubin tests are not available for analyses with multiple imputation). The three groups were well-differentiated (Entropy = .86). (See Table 1 for model fit information for models with different number of latent classes. Table 2.1 provides a full description of the Time1 LCAs.)

The first and smallest group (6% of thinkers, $n = 44$) reported the highest levels of relationship conflict and mental health problems affecting the relationship, and most of the more intense marital problems (see Table 2.1). One third said they thought they were done with the marriage, by far the highest endorsement of this attitude. However, 51% had been thinking about divorce only a few times and only 13% had been thinking about it for a year or more. Moreover, this small group had the highest scores among thinkers on relationship hope, feeling like a failure if their marriage ended, and struggling for clarity about the divorce decision. In summary, this group was experiencing the highest levels of intense problems, yet struggling to get clarity about a divorce, and remained hopeful about the marriage. Abbreviated labels run the risk of oversimplifying a complex phenomenon but are valuable for purposes of succinct communication. Perhaps the label “conflicted thinkers” best describes this group.

In a second group of thinkers (46%, $n = 337$), 51% had recently thought about divorce

several times or a lot and most (71%) had been thinking for a year or more, much longer than the other groups (see Table 2.1). They had high levels of connection problems (e.g., growing apart) in their marriages, but modest levels of instrumental problems (e.g., division of domestic labor) and relatively low levels of intense problems (e.g., adultery, abuse). Conflict and mental health issues were significant problems for this group (83% and 59% respectively reporting a problem). They had the lowest scores of the three groups on relationship hope. Still, only 6% said they were done with the marriage, 39% said they had mixed feelings about a divorce, and 37% were willing to work on the marriage if their spouse got serious about changes; 16% said they did not want to divorce and were willing to work hard to save the marriage, by far the lowest figure of the 3 groups. Also, they were struggling to find clarity in their decision about a divorce. In summary, serious thinkers were experiencing a significant loss of connection and substantial conflict, and they were thinking more about divorce and had been doing so for longer periods of time. Also, they were less committed to the future of the marriage, on average, and to working through their problems, although they were still searching for clarity about the divorce decision. Perhaps the short-hand label “long-term serious thinkers” best describes this group. (For the sake of brevity, we usually employ the abbreviated label “serious thinkers” hereafter for this group.)

The largest group of thinkers (49%, $n = 364$) was a strong contrast to the other two. More than 90% of this group said they had been thinking about divorce only a few times recently (see Table 2.1). They had lower levels of reported marital problems of all kinds, with connection issues being the most common problems; few reported an intense problem. Also, they were quite hopeful about the prospects for their marriage. Almost 70% said they did not want a divorce and were willing to work hard on the marriage; less than 1% said they were done with the marriage. Not surprisingly, then, this group reported more clarity about the divorce decision, likely settled

on not pursuing that course for now. In summary, this group had only occasional thoughts about divorce, fewer and less intense problems, and were more committed to working on the marriage. Perhaps the short-hand label “soft thinkers” best describes this group.

There were some significant demographic differences between the three groups, but the differences generally were small in magnitude. There were some differences by education ($\chi^2(4) = 16.5, p < .01$); respondents with college degrees were less likely to be serious thinkers; those with a high school education or less were much more likely to be conflicted thinkers. Similarly, there were some modest differences by race/ethnicity ($\chi^2(4) = 45.5, p < .001$). Black respondents were a more likely to be serious thinkers than soft thinkers and less likely to be conflicted thinkers. White respondents were a more likely to be soft thinkers; Hispanic respondents were more likely to be conflicted thinkers. Conflicted thinkers also were about 6 years younger than the other thinkers ($F(2, 742) = 16.89, p < .001$). Also, conflicted thinkers were more religiously devout ($F(2, 740) = 12.5, p < .001$) than the other thinkers, which may help explain how they could be experiencing more intense problems and more likely thinking that the marriage was done, but were still conflicted about a divorce and remained hopeful about the future. Again, most of the differences were minor, and there were no statistically significant differences by gender, length of marriage, or parental status.

Change and Stability in Divorce Ideation

Time 1 respondents were resurveyed a year later to track change and stability. The results are summarized in Table 3. Ninety-three percent of respondents were still married; 4% had separated and 2% had divorced. Among Time 1 non-thinkers, 64% were still not thinking about divorce at Time 2; 36% were thinkers by Time 2 (including 2.5% who were divorced/remarried, indicating that occasionally marital dissolution comes quickly). Among Time 1 thinkers, 69% were still

thinking about divorce at Time 2 (including 4% who were separated and 3% who were divorced/remarried), whereas 31% reported no recent thoughts about divorce.

Also, instability in divorce ideation was common when looking at personal attitudes about getting a divorce. Only one-third of thinkers at Time 1 reported the same attitude about divorce a year later. For instance, among the small number of thinkers who said at Time 1 that they were done with the marriage, just 29% reported the same attitude 1 year later. In contrast, 53% reported different attitudes that suggested more openness to staying married, including 18% who reported not having recent thoughts about divorce.

Next we conducted a Latent Transition Analysis to examine changes in divorce ideation classes over time. Because thinkers could also transition to non-thinking or divorce, we estimated two additional classes at Time 2, constraining non-thinkers and divorced individuals to be in their own respective classes. To allow for estimation of the transition probability to these statuses, non-thinkers and divorced individuals' values were imputed as described earlier. Before conducting the LTA, we considered differences in attrition rates by thinking classification using the BCH method, which accounts for imprecision in the LCA classification when predicting outcomes. As there were no significant differences between classes in likelihood of attrition from the study ($\chi^2(2) = 0.73, ns$), thinkers who dropped out of the study were retained in the LTA (using imputed data as described earlier).

In the LTA, we compared the means and thresholds of the class indicators to evaluate if the classes substantively changed over time. Based on the following results, we concluded that the latent classes were substantively similar at Time 1 and Time 2. Still, models constraining the LCA indicators to be equivalent over time resulted in significantly poorer fit. Looking at the standard errors and 95% confidence intervals for each of the indicators, we found that for soft

and serious thinkers, 4 of the 6 continuous indicators were not significantly different, with the differences being moderate decreases in participants' hopefulness and beliefs that they would be a failure if their marriage were to end. Over time there were no significant differences in the continuous indicators for the conflicted thinkers. For the thresholds for the categorical variables, only three of the 30 threshold estimates were significantly different for any of the classes of thinkers over time. For conflicted thinkers, at Time 2 a smaller percentage indicated mental health as a major reason for their divorce thoughts and a larger percentage indicated that it was not a reason or a minor reason for their divorce thoughts. For serious thinkers, a larger percentage of serious thinkers indicated that they were done with their marriage at Time 2 than did at Time 1. Thus, the decline in model fit noted above represents an aggregation of small, largely non-significant differences rather than substantive differences. To allow for small, nuanced changes in the classes over time, we used the unconstrained model rather than the poorer-fitting, constrained model. (See Table 2.2 for more details.)

The LTA showed substantial class instability across time. Looking at the transition probabilities (see Table 4), 44% of soft thinkers at Time 1 remained soft-casual thinkers at Time 2, 10% became serious thinkers; less than 1 percent were now conflicted thinkers, 41% had transitioned to non-thinkers, and 4% had divorced by Time 2. There was more stability among serious thinkers, with 51% remaining such at Time 2, 21% changed to soft thinkers, 2% transitioned to conflicted thinkers, 21% transitioned to non-thinkers, and 5% of Time 1 long-term-problems thinkers had divorced by Time 2. Among conflicted thinkers at Time 1, 49% remained such and 8% had divorced by Time 2, but 26% transitioned to non-thinkers. Interestingly, less than 1% of conflicted thinkers changed to soft thinkers, but 18% did transition to serious thinkers. At Time 2, then, 31% of Time 1 thinkers reported no recent thoughts about

divorce, with 31% now categorized as soft thinkers, 29% as serious thinkers, and 4% as conflicted thinkers (and 4% were divorced). The major transitions distinction between soft and serious thinkers was a greater likelihood of soft thinkers to become non-thinkers while serious thinkers remained such.

Discussion

In this study, our focus has been on the empirical contours of divorce ideation. Based on this longitudinal study with a nationally representative sample of married individuals (ages 25–50), we draw three general conclusions about divorce ideation. First, thinking about divorce is common, at least through the first 15 years of marriage, and common across demographic groups. More than a quarter (28%) of still-married individuals in the past had thought their marriage was in serious trouble but not recently; most (88%) of them said they were glad they were still together. (Again, note that those who divorced were truncated from the sample.) Many couples go through periods of serious marital distress but survive and even thrive. Another 25% of our sample had thought about divorce within the last 6 months. In a culture with widespread concerns about the fragility of marriage (Cherlin, 2009), thoughts about divorce intrude on many people's consciousness. A feature of modern marriages is that couples must struggle with the possibility of its demise. Within a culture of widespread acceptance of individualism, if a marriage is not fully gratifying, then questions about its viability surface (Baxter, 2010; Bellah et al., 1985). Moreover, the focus on emotional fulfillment as the primary barometer of marital health sets high expectations for marriage (Cherlin, 2009). When these expectations are not fully met, commitment uncertainty (Owens et al., 2014) and divorce ideation can result. Of course, there are other beliefs about marriage that ground the relationship in the values of social obligations and personal commitments (Baxter, 2010). But at these cognitive crossroads, beliefs

about individualism and romantic love may dominate (Swidler, 2001), so that disappointment is more likely to presage thoughts about divorce.

A second conclusion from our study clarifies implications for the first. Divorce ideation is not a clear signal of the demise of the marriage. Nearly half of divorce ideation was soft thinking, involving infrequent thoughts about less intense problems, often not even discussed with a spouse. Many soft thinkers were still happy and hopeful about the future, suggesting that divorce was not an imminent consideration, despite the marital disappointments they were feeling. These thinkers may fit in the “precontemplation” stage of the trans-theoretical model of change (Prochaska et al., 1992)—not seriously considering a divorce despite occasional thoughts. But even among the long-term-serious thinkers, 16% said they did not want a divorce and wanted to work on the relationship and only a small proportion (6%) of them said they were done with the marriage. Many serious thinkers said they were struggling a lot with the decision. These serious thinkers may fit best in the “contemplation” stage of change, with more frequent thoughts about divorce for longer periods of time, and more problems, but still with significant indecision. “I’m done with this marriage” was a modal response only for conflicted thinkers (33%) who were experiencing the most number and serious kinds of problems. Still, almost the same number (32%) reported that they did not want a divorce and wanted to work to repair the marriage and they had the highest scores on relationship hope. Thus, while some conflicted thinkers were in the “preparation” stage of change, others remained in a conflicted “contemplation” stage. Only a small proportion of all thinkers seem to fit in the “action” stage of change, moving forward actively towards a divorce.

These findings imply that divorce ideation does not straightforwardly imply divorce action. Thoughts about divorce are just thoughts, not decisions. It means ruminating on the marriage and

its prospects and whether a divorce should be considered. Many have thoughts about divorce, but the thoughts dissipate or they do not get to a decision point for years. Especially in the context of marital commitment, divorce ideation is more benign. Commitment helps reinforce marriages by promoting a longer-term view of the relationship, supporting spouses making sacrifices for the relationship, motivating more constructive responses to negative partner behaviors, and reducing monitoring of alternative partners (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010).

Our third general conclusion is that divorce ideation is dynamic. More than one third (36%) of respondents went from not thinking about divorce at Time 1 to thinking about it a year later. On the other hand, 31% of those who were thinking about divorce at Time 1 were not thinking about it a year later. And 52% of Time 1 thinkers were in a different thinking (or non-thinking) category 1 year later. Soft thinkers were especially likely not to be thinking about divorce a year later. Thus, knowing what someone is thinking about divorce at one time is valuable, but it does not mean that a divorce is imminent.

Implications

Our mapping of divorce ideation has implications for practitioners and researchers.

Marriage educators. Marriage educators strive to prevent relationship problems and the need for divorce. But perhaps their emphasis on prevention has made these programs seem less relevant to a large group of married individuals who are already having thoughts about divorce, some soft and some serious. Prevention can mean not only preventing future problems but also working on current problems before they get worse or it is too late (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). A large proportion of individuals in our study who were thinking about divorce reported wanting to work on the marriage. These individuals could be a prime target audience for educational interventions. Marriage education programs can deal effectively with the common connection

and instrumental problems reported in this study (Hawkins, 2015).

Couple therapists. An important takeaway from this study is that divorce ideation does not equal divorce action. Couple therapists can use the findings of this study to normalize divorce ideation. Statements such as, “Research tells us that more than half of currently married couples have thought their marriage was in serious trouble at one time,” could be helpful. Further, it may be beneficial to highlight that many marriages have survived serious divorce ideation and that most (still married) past thinkers report being happy in their marriages now. This may bring hope especially to a spouse who wants to work to repair the marriage.

Our follow-up survey findings demonstrate how dynamic divorce ideation can be. Thoughts of divorce fluctuate over time and serious thinkers and conflicted thinkers struggle to arrive at a place of clarity regarding this decision. Normalizing this may help thinkers realize that there does not need to be a rush to premature decision making about the future of the marriage. Distressed clients can be overwhelmed by the current state of a relationship and lose a long-term view of the marriage. Perhaps they can be buoyed by messages instilling hope as therapeutic work progresses. At the same time, successful therapy can also result in clarifying that the relationship may be dangerous to a client’s physical and emotional well-being. Also, we acknowledge the possibility that our survey captured individuals who are earlier in the divorce ideation process than the clients who couple therapists usually see.

Clinical research has found that many couples on the brink of divorce are “mixed-agenda” couples, with one partner considering divorce and the other wanting to stay in the marriage (Doherty, Harris, & Wilde, 2016). These couples may require a specific counseling approach before couple therapy could successfully begin. There is probably some benefit in helping couples articulate their divorce ideation to one another, noting our finding that many

current thinkers have not voiced their thoughts to their spouse. Discussing divorce ideation openly with each other can help both partners consider the options in front of them and may result in greater understanding. Doherty's "Discernment Counseling" model might be an appropriate intervention for these couples, where the goal is to help both partners take a good look at the marriage and gain a greater sense of clarity and confidence in a decision about their future before any therapy actually begins (Doherty, Harris, & Wilde, 2016).

Researchers. Despite the methodological strengths of our study, there are limitations. One limitation is that we only studied the perspective of one individual in the marriage. While our study shows that divorce ideation often is an intrapersonal process—recall that many thinkers had not spoken to their spouse about their thoughts—clearly there are crucial dyadic dimensions to divorce ideation and decision making. Hence, an important advance in the study of divorce ideation will be to survey its dyadic contours—what both spouses are thinking. A second limitation of our study is its focus on cognition and behavior. We have not explored in depth the essential emotional or spiritual landscape of divorce ideation, and this restricts a full mapping of the territory. Finally, qualitative studies will give a more fine-grained perspective on divorce ideation and how spouses are making decisions about leaving, staying, and working on their marriage. Hence, there remains more work for researchers to do to understand divorce ideation.

In summary, our study of divorce ideation reveals that it is common and dynamic but does not necessarily foreshadow the end of a marriage. Practitioners can use these findings to help couples come to greater clarity about the future direction of their marriage.

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Table 1: Time1 Latent Class Enumeration Fit Statistics

# of Classes	Loglikelihood	AIC	BIC	SABIC	Entropy
1 Class	-12289.67	24631.34	24751.29	24668.73	—
2 Classes	-11691.17	23488.33	23732.84	23564.55	.79
3 Classes	-11491.63	23143.25	23512.33	23258.30	.86
4 Classes	-11343.37	22900.73	23394.36	23054.60	.87
5 Classes	-11249.27	22766.55	23384.74	22959.24	.81

Notes. AIC = Akaike Information Criterion. BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion. SABIC = Sample size-adjusted BIC. LMR = Lo-Mendell-Rubin likelihood ratio test. Lower Information Criteria scores indicate better model fit. Entropy values above .80 indicate good latent class classification in the model. Note that the bootstrap likelihood ratio and Lo-Mendell Rubin tests are not available with multiple imputation. The 4-class solution suggested a subset of serious thinkers who had more connection problems and less relationship hope than other serious thinkers. We decided that this level of nuance was substantively not essential so we retained the more parsimonious 3-class solution.

Table 2.1: Time 1 Means and Categorical Responses by Latent Class

	Soft Thinkers (48.92%)		Long-term-Serious Thinkers (45.18%)		Conflicted Thinkers (5.90%)	
	(a)		(b)		(c)	
Continuous Indicators	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE
Relationship hope (1 to 7)	5.94 ^b	0.08	4.29 ^{a,c}	0.13	6.01 ^b	0.26
Connection problems (0 to 6)	2.42 ^{b,c}	0.16	4.12 ^{a,c}	0.11	5.51 ^{a,b}	0.23
Role problems (0 to 4)	1.39 ^{b,c}	0.06	1.87 ^{a,c}	0.09	3.38 ^{a,b}	0.17
Intense problems (0 to 4)	0.48 ^{b,c}	0.06	1.24 ^{a,c}	0.09	3.28 ^{a,b}	0.58
Feel failure if divorce (1 to 7)	5.00 ^b	0.14	4.13 ^{a,c}	0.14	5.97 ^b	0.66
Struggled with clarity (1 to 7)	3.75 ^{b,c}	0.13	5.12 ^a	0.12	5.82 ^a	0.78
Categorical Indicators	%		%		%	
<i>Problem - Mental Health</i>						
Not a reason	57.50% ^{b,c}		41.49% ^{a,c}		0.00% ^{a,b}	
Minor Reason	25.31% ^{b,c}		28.52% ^{a,c}		18.59% ^{a,b}	
Major Reason	17.19% ^{b,c}		29.99% ^{a,c}		81.41% ^{a,b}	
<i>Problem - Conflict as a Reason</i>						
Not a reason	35.15% ^{b,c}		17.36% ^{a,c}		0.00% ^{a,b}	
Minor Reason	37.91% ^{b,c}		32.66% ^a		25.61% ^a	
Major Reason	26.93% ^{b,c}		49.98% ^a		74.39% ^a	
<i>Attitude about Marriage</i>						
Done with marriage	0.84% ^{b,c}		5.56% ^{a,c}		32.64% ^{a,b}	
Mixed Feelings	9.17% ^{b,c}		38.90% ^a		21.08% ^a	
Consider Working	11.27% ^{b,c}		36.52% ^a		14.01% ^a	
Don't want divorce	69.29% ^{b,c}		15.72% ^{a,c}		32.28% ^{a,b}	
None	9.43% ^{b,c}		3.31% ^{a,c}		0.00% ^{a,b}	
<i>Length of Divorce Thoughts</i>						
0-3 Months	28.49% ^b		4.70% ^a		26.19%	
4-6 Months	15.80% ^b		10.81% ^{a,c}		29.84% ^b	
7-11 Months	14.86% ^b		13.49% ^{a,c}		31.21% ^b	
12-23 Months	8.88% ^{b,c}		24.99% ^{a,c}		4.64% ^{b,c}	
24+ Months	31.98% ^b		46.01% ^a		8.12%	
<i>How Many Times Had Divorce Thoughts in Last 6 Months</i>						
A few times	90.64% ^{b,c}		48.85% ^a		50.57% ^a	
Several Times	8.14% ^{b,c}		30.13% ^a		12.45% ^a	
A lot of times	1.22% ^{b,c}		21.02% ^a		36.98% ^a	

Table 2.2: Time 2 Means and Categorical Responses by Latent Class

	Non-Thinkers (31.37%) (a)		Soft Thinkers (30.85%) (b)		Long-term-Serious (28.91%) (c)		Conflicted Thinkers (4.37%) (d)		Divorced (4.50%) (e)	
Continuous Indicators	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE
Relationship hope (1 to 7)	5.69 ^{c,e}	0.09	5.40 ^{c,e}	0.15	3.22 ^{a,b,d,e}	0.32	5.11 ^{c,e}	0.56	1.93 ^{a,b,c,d}	0.32
Connection problems (0 to 6)	3.57 ^{b,e}	0.15	2.62 ^{a,c,e}	0.21	4.15 ^{b,e}	0.20	4.26 ^e	0.64	1.47 ^{a,b,c,d}	0.37
Role problems (0 to 4)	1.89	0.09	1.53 ^d	0.11	1.92	0.09	2.75 ^b	0.42	1.97	0.20
Intense problems (0 to 4)	0.91 ^{c,d,e}	0.11	0.59 ^{c,d,e}	0.11	1.47 ^{a,b,d}	0.14	3.24 ^{a,b,c}	0.70	1.66 ^{a,b}	0.25
Feel failure if divorce (1 to 7)	3.56	0.10	3.61	0.14	3.06	0.17	3.99	0.47	2.93	0.44
Struggled with clarity (1 to 7)	4.42	0.22	4.21 ^c	0.22	5.11 ^b	0.17	5.62	1.14	4.69	0.65
Categorical Indicators	%		%		%		%		%	
<i>Marital Problem - Mental Health</i>										
Not a reason	40.72%		50.71%		34.33%		2.93%		10.63%	
Minor Reason	37.88%		29.99%		34.72%		35.25%		54.11%	
Major Reason	21.40%		19.31%		30.95%		61.82%		35.27%	
<i>Marital Problem - Conflict</i>										
Not a reason	29.03%		26.38%		18.01%		0.00%		12.27%	
Minor Reason	30.59% ^e		41.20% ^e		28.24% ^e		17.19% ^e		59.88% ^{a,b,c,d}	
Major Reason	40.38%		32.42%		53.76%		82.81%		27.85%	
<i>Attitudes about Marriage</i>										
Done with marriage	1.63% ^{b,c,e}		0.00% ^{a,c,d,e}		22.81% ^{a,b,e}		33.25% ^b		61.47% ^{a,b,c}	
Mixed Feelings	20.10% ^c		20.48% ^c		40.35% ^{a,b}		37.56%		2.89%	
Consider Working	15.19% ^c		13.69% ^c		29.42% ^{a,b}		16.12%		35.33%	
Don't want divorce	57.83% ^{d,e}		61.84% ^{d,e}		5.32% ^{d,e}		13.08% ^{a,b,c}		0.31% ^{a,b,c}	
None	5.24% ^{b,c,e}		4.00% ^{a,c,d,e}		2.11% ^{a,b,e}		0.00% ^b		0.00% ^{a,b,c}	
<i>How Many Times Had Divorce Thoughts in Last 6 Months</i>										
Not at all	100.00% ^{b,c,d,e}		0.00% ^a		0.00% ^a		0.00% ^a		0.00% ^a	
A few times	0.00% ^{b,c,d}		89.62% ^{a,c,e}		33.14% ^{a,b,e}		70.54% ^{a,e}		0.00% ^{a,b,c,d}	
Several Times	0.00% ^{b,c,d}		8.66% ^{a,c,e}		26.90% ^{a,b,e}		20.03% ^{a,e}		0.00% ^{a,b,c,d}	
A lot of times	0.00% ^{b,c,d,e}		1.73% ^a		39.96% ^a		9.43% ^a		100.00% ^a	

Notes. $N = 745$. Letter superscripts indicate a significant between-class difference in the indicator; the letters in parentheses below each latent class group title correspond to letter superscripts. Non-Thinkers and Divorced values were imputed to allow for estimation of the transition probability to these statuses; mean and percent values for these groups are less meaningful.

Table 3. Summary of Change and Stability in Divorce Ideation Over 1 Year.

Divorce Ideation Time 1 ($N = 3,000$)	Divorce Ideation Time 2	Category Percent	Overall Percent
No Recent Thoughts (75%)	→ No Thoughts	64%	48%
	→ Recent Thoughts (including divorced/separated)	<u>36%</u>	<u>27%</u>
		100%	—
Recent Thoughts (25%)	→ No Recent Thoughts	31%	8%
	→ Recent Thoughts (including divorced/separated)	<u>69%</u>	<u>17%</u>
		100%	100%

Table 4. Transition Probabilities of Time 1 Thinkers to Time 2 Classes.

Original Class (% Time 1)	Transition Class (Time 2)	Transition Probability
<i>Soft Thinkers (49%)</i>	→ <i>Soft Thinkers</i>	.439
	→ <i>Long-term-Serious Thinkers</i>	.102
	→ <i>Conflicted Thinkers</i>	.009
	→ <i>Non-Thinkers</i>	.412
	→ <i>Divorced</i>	.037
<i>Long-term-Serious Thinkers (45%)</i>	→ <i>Soft Thinkers</i>	.207
	→ <i>Long-term-Serious Thinkers</i>	.507
	→ <i>Conflicted Thinkers</i>	.022
	→ <i>Non-Thinkers</i>	.214
	→ <i>Divorced</i>	.049
<i>Conflicted Thinkers (6%)</i>	→ <i>Soft Thinkers</i>	.001
	→ <i>Long-term-Serious Thinkers</i>	.175
	→ <i>Conflicted Thinkers</i>	.490
	→ <i>Non-Thinkers</i>	.257
	→ <i>Divorced</i>	.078

Notes. $n = 745$. Time 1 LCA classification Entropy = .861. LTA classification Entropy = .913.