

Marriages of equally dependent spouses (MEDS) are those in which each partner generates between 40% and 59% of the total family earnings. The author argues that such marriages will become increasingly common. Currently, about a fifth (22%) of all marriages are MEDS. This article shows that when marriages become MEDS, wives become less committed to the union although husbands do not. When marriages become MEDS, the odds of divorce also increase. Such divorces are more often at the wife's initiative than are divorces among other couples. These findings are interpreted to suggest that wives are more sensitive to the quality of their marriages than husbands are. This is because men benefit from the status of being married (i.e., being a husband) regardless of the emotional quality of their relationship. The benefits that wives derive from marriage, however, appear to depend on the quality of their unions.

The Marriages of Equally Dependent Spouses

STEVEN L. NOCK
University of Virginia

Two closely related themes have dominated research and thinking about marriage and the family in the past three decades. First, marriage is increasingly treated as simply another form of intimate relationship. Second, there has been sustained interest in analyzing and interpreting distinctions in marriage that are based solely on gender. In this article, I briefly review these two trends and related scholarship. Then I turn to an analysis of what I propose is the emerging form of American marriage, a relationship in which couples are equally dependent on one another's earnings.

In *The Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (Christensen, 1964), first published in 1964, special chapters are devoted to "Marital and Non-marital Sexual Behavior" (Ehrmann, 1964), "The Premarital Dyad" (Burchinal, 1964), and "The Adjustments of Married Mates" (Bernard, 1964). Other than a brief section in a chapter on the legal and procedural aspects of marriage and divorce (Kephart, 1964), there is no significant consideration of divorce. Indeed, nowhere is divorce given more than five

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consecutive pages of text in the entire handbook. There is virtually no discussion of cohabitation, same-sex unions, dual-career couples, the problems of coordinating work and family, and very little on remarriages. The 23 male and 3 female contributors hardly mention gender. Neither is there a single index entry for the subject, although male-female differences are listed six times. Although the word *gender* was seldom used by social scientists in the early 1960s, we find no serious consideration of social scripts, norms, ideals, or roles associated with being male or female in this book. Attitudes or beliefs about gender are not even considered as a factor in the prediction of "marital success" (Bowerman, 1964). In her extensive discussion of "The Adjustments of Married Mates," Jessie Bernard (1964) failed to include gender issues as a possible source of conflict in marriage.

The second edition of the *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (Sussman, Steinmetz, & Peterson, 1999) includes specific chapters on "Gender and Family Relationships" (Walker, 1999), "Marital Dissolution" (Faust & McKibben, 1999), "Families and Work" (Haas, 1999), "Postmodernism and Family Theory" (Doherty, 1999), and substantial treatments of cohabiting and homosexual couples as alternative forms of family relationships (DeFrain & Olson, 1999; Miller & Knudsen, 1999; Walker, 1999). There is also attention given to ethnic/racial diversity (Aponte, 1999). There are 61 references to gender in the index, and the topic is a conspicuous theme throughout the handbook. Moreover, the contributors include 21 females and 21 males.

The two editions illustrate significant changes in how marriage is studied and understood. Three or four decades ago, *marriage* and *the family* were virtually synonymous. To consider one was to consider the other. Today, in sharp contrast, whereas marriage is clearly central to the study of much family life, it competes with other types of relationships, including cohabitation and same-sex unions. Remarriage is now regarded as rivaling first marriages in significance. And marriage per se is now recognized to include many problems related to issues of gender or gender ideals. Between the publication of the first and second editions of the *Handbook*, gender emerged as a dominant theme in family scholarship and in the study of marriage specifically.

A thorough review of literature on marriage is beyond the scope of this article. Excellent reviews of related issues may be found in the decade review issue of the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (Milardo, 2000). The following examples are offered as illustrations of more general themes.

By 1980, the significant influence of differences in gender ideals on marital dynamics was quite obvious, although it did not yet dominate

scholarly research. In *The Future of Marriage*, Jessie Bernard (1973) argued that husbands and wives' marriages are not the same and that his marriage is better than hers. In *The Marriage Contract*, Lenore Weitzman (1981) analyzed existing laws with respect to gender in marriage. She began her book by quoting Justice Black (concerning the legal concept of *marital unity*), who wrote, "This rule has worked out in reality to mean that though the husband and wife are one, the one is the husband" (p. 1). The rest of the book is a detailed analysis of the ways in which domestic relations laws were (by 1981) gradually changing to accommodate the need for greater equality between the sexes in marriage.

Ten years later, the centrality of gender in marriage was detailed and highlighted in Goldscheider and Waite's (1991) extensive treatment of the subject in *New Families, No Families? The Transformation of the American Home*. The authors' stark question (new families or no families?) is based on their assessment that we must have more egalitarian and sharing unions or else women will simply stop getting married. Still, these authors were uncertain about the new families they envisioned for our futures. As they concluded, "Are more egalitarian and sharing families possible? This is largely uncharted territory. Will 'new families' be so bad for men and for children that they will offset the benefits for women who want both family and economic lives?" (pp. 4-5).

My own work on marriage has stressed its institutional aspects. More specifically, I have looked at marriage from men's perspectives and argued that marriage is the venue in which mature masculine identity is developed and maintained (Nock, 1998). I concluded my most recent work on marriage by arguing that we are returning to a more traditional form of marriage than we have had for the past century. Marriage was historically based on extensive dependencies by both partners. Husbands and wives mutually depended on each other to maintain the family enterprise, whether it was a farm or a small business. These dependencies sustained marriages even in the absence of strong affection. In an agricultural setting or in small family-run businesses, neither marital partner was expendable. Each was fundamentally dependent on the other. At the same time, legal and social arrangements placed wives in inequitable positions where they had little choice and little power. Husbands may have depended on their wives, but wives had little legal or social power. The newly emerging form of marriage, I argued, is traditional in making each partner dependent on the other, but such dependencies are no longer as formally (by law or convention) structured by gender. Many people believe that women have accepted such a model of marriage. Men, however, still seem to struggle

with the new arrangement (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991; Hochschild, 1990).

The underlying theme of my recent work is that there are significant consequences of marriage. Marriage is more than simply a selection mechanism that rejects the losers in favor of the winners. Rather, marriage actually changes people. Most of those changes, I argue, are positive, but the benefits of marriage flow unevenly. Whereas both sexes appear to benefit from marriage, men are greater beneficiaries than women. This is because men benefit from the status of being married (i.e., being a husband) regardless of the emotional quality of their relationship. The benefits that wives derive from marriage, however, appear to depend on the quality of their unions (Nock, 1998). Recent research by Sayer and Bianchi (2000) confirmed this basic point. Their research, based on both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households, found that the wife's satisfaction and happiness with the relationship is a significant factor in predicting divorce. The husband's satisfaction and happiness with the marriage, however, is not. Wives respond to the quality of their unions. When the marriage sours or becomes otherwise unsatisfactory, women derive little benefit from remaining in the marriage. If they stay, it is probably due to various constraints that are well known such as religious conviction, concern for the children, or economic insecurity. Indeed, the so-called independence effect (Sayer & Bianchi, 2000) of income earned by wives who have entered the labor force in increasing numbers may account for much of the increase in divorce rates seen throughout the decades of the 1960s and 1970s (Cherlin, 1992). A conventional argument, in short, is that women are better able to leave unsatisfactory marriages now that they have greater earning capacities. And that is why they leave (because they are unhappy with the quality of the marriage).

A full understanding of how marriage has changed in the past three decades requires that we consider both demographic changes and the related family dynamics associated with them. The purpose of this article is to focus on married people and examine a form of marriage that is the consequence of recent demographic trends. I refer to these as *marriages of equally dependent spouses* (MEDS). Such marriages represent the cumulative consequence of many ideological and demographic trends. I strongly believe that such marriages are the future for most Americans due to significant increases in married women's paid labor force involvement and earnings in the past two decades (Spain & Bianchi, 1996). Understanding the implications of the move toward equally dependent marriages should be a central concern of researchers now.

DEPENDENT SPOUSES

I define *dependency* in purely economic terms. Although there are many other ways to think about the type of dependencies that arise in marriage (see Nock, 1995), my focus here is on the type of dependency that sustains a lifestyle. Quite simply, I define equally dependent spouses as those who earn no less than 40% of total family earnings. Equally dependent spouses, therefore, are in marriages where each partner generates between 40% and 59% of the total family earnings. I use earnings rather than income for ease in identifying the contribution of each partner. The sum of spouse's earnings correlates .98 with total family income, so there is little consequence of using one or the other measure. I believe this definition is as close to earnings parity as we need to observe equal economic dependency. In the following sections, I first present a demographic portrait of such couples. Then I conduct two exploratory analyses to investigate the possible consequences of equal dependency.

My evidence is taken from two sources. First, I rely on the 1999 March Demographic Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS is a monthly survey of approximately 50,000 households conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. It has been conducted for more than 50 years. Each March, the CPS includes a special demographic supplement. It is this supplement that I used for the current research. To analyze the CPS, I selected married couple households and then merged the records of husbands and wives. Then I selected couples in which both partners are between 25 and 60 years old because those younger or older are considerably less likely to be in the labor force. The results are based on 19,321 married couple records. Comparable analysis of the 1989 CPS was also conducted for purposes of comparison (detailed results are not presented) although earlier years lacked the detailed information necessary for this work.

The second source of information is both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The first wave was conducted in 1987-1988, and the second was conducted with the same individuals in 1992-1994. The NSFH is a nationally representative survey of 13,007 respondents (10,007 of whom completed interviews in the second wave). One adult per household was randomly selected as the primary respondent for in-person interviews (including self-administered portions for sensitive topics). Self-administered questionnaires were completed by the spouse or cohabiting partner. Using similar definitions and restrictions, I rely on a sample of 3,599 married couples in which each partner provided information in both waves. Appropriate weights for both the NSFH and

CPS were applied as necessary (i.e., to compensate for intentional oversampling of minority or cohabiting couples in the NSFH and to render the CPS generalizable to households rather than individuals).

DEMOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT OF MEDS

In 1999, both partners in most marriages were earners. The 1999 CPS results show that 73% of couples had two earners (compared with 70% in 1989). In 21% only the husband was employed, in 4% only the wife was employed, and in 2% neither partner was employed. MEDS are a little less than a third (30%) of dual-earner married couples. They are about a fifth (22%) of all married couples. In sum, about one in five married couples of working age in America meet my definition of equally dependent spouses.

MEDS are found at all income levels. For convenience, I group all married couples by family earning quartile. This shows that MEDS are least common at lower incomes where married couples are also least likely to be dual earners. However, the percentage of two-earner couples that are MEDS is between a quarter and a third regardless of family income. As Table 1 shows, working wives' earnings are a relatively constant fraction of total family earnings at all income levels. Working wives today produce about 29% of total family earnings.

Pursuing the demographic portrait a bit further, consider the differences between MEDS and others on selected socioeconomic indicators. As Table 2 shows, MEDS husbands are less likely to be college graduates. For wives, those in upper-income MEDS families are more likely to be college graduates. MEDS husbands and wives are generally younger than their non-MEDS counterparts (although the opposite is true among couples in the lowest income quartile). MEDS are more likely than non-MEDS to be Black (all such differences are statistically significant). In sum, equally dependent spouses are somewhat younger and more likely to be Black than other couples at comparable incomes. MEDS husbands are less likely to be college graduates, whereas the reverse is true for MEDS wives. There are also notable differences in total family earnings. Overall, MEDS have median total family earnings of \$65,600 compared with \$55,000 for non-MEDS couples (not shown in table).

THE CONSEQUENCES OF BECOMING MEDS

In this section, I focus on whether it matters if spouses are equally dependent. This is clearly the most important question we can ask if MEDS are our future. If so, we would like to know whether such couples differ as

TABLE 1
Equally Dependent Spouses by Earnings
Quartile (total family earnings): 1999

<i>Family Earnings Quartile</i>	<i>Percentage Two Earners</i>	<i>Percentage MEDS</i>	<i>MEDS as Percentage of Two-Earner Couple</i>	<i>Wife's Percentage of Total Family Earnings</i>	<i>Median Total Earnings</i>
Top quartile	86.1	24.8	28.9	29.3	\$109,460
Second quartile	84.2	29.0	34.5	30.7	\$68,800
Third quartile	76.6	21.8	28.4	29.0	\$47,000
Lowest quartile	43.8	11.3	25.9	26.7	\$23,300
Totals	73.1	21.6	29.9	29.0	\$58,000

SOURCE: 1999 March Current Population Survey merged husband-wife file.

NOTE: MEDS = marriages of equally dependent spouses. *N* (unweighted) = 19,321 merged husband-wife records.

a result. To answer this question, I turn to the National Survey of Families and Households. Using both waves of the NSFH and selecting for cases where both partners completed interviews, I characterized all married couples in first unions as MEDS or not in Wave 1 in the same way I did for the CPS. I then ask two questions. First, is equal economic dependency related to perceptions of commitment? And second, is equal economic dependency related to the odds of divorce?

Commitment. To tap a sense of commitment, I relied on a standard procedure that asks about the consequences of leaving a relationship (see Nock, 1995, for a discussion of this and alternative measures of the concept). Commitment is an explanation for why people engage in a consistent line of activity (Becker, 1960). Two elements characterize commitment as a source of consistency. First, individuals do something that creates an interest in his or her following a consistent line of action. Some interest that was initially unrelated to a particular line of action is now linked to it because of something that person has done. Second, the individual becomes aware that his or her continued action has implications for the originally extraneous interest(s). When a person marries, for example, this action creates a stake in the continuation of the union. If it fails, then there will be consequences that would not have occurred without the marriage. It is the awareness or recognition of such exit costs that the concept of commitment implies.

To put the concept of commitment in perspective, it is a subjective assessment of the likely consequences for ending the relationship. This

TABLE 2
Marriages of Equally Dependent Spouses (MEDS) by
Education, Age, Race, and Earnings by Earnings Quartile

<i>Family Earnings Quartile</i>	<i>Percentage</i>		<i>Average</i>		<i>Percentage</i>		<i>Median Husband Earnings</i>	<i>Median Wife Earnings</i>
	<i>Husband College Graduate</i>	<i>Wife College Graduate</i>	<i>Husband Age</i>	<i>Wife Age</i>	<i>Husband White</i>	<i>Husband Black</i>		
Top quartile								
MEDS	57.7	64.9	43.5	41.6	88.2	7.4	\$53,000	\$50,000
Not MEDS	61.3	49.2	45.5	43.2	90.7	4.1	\$82,000	\$24,800
Second quartile								
MEDS	32.3	40.6	41.5	39.6	86.4	10.0	\$35,000	\$33,000
Not MEDS	36.5	29.0	43.7	41.6	89.5	6.4	\$50,000	\$15,000
Third quartile								
MEDS	15.7	18.6	40.1	38.6	83.0	11.5	\$24,500	\$22,300
Not MEDS	22.5	18.4	42.1	40.0	88.0	7.9	\$35,000	\$9,412
Lowest quartile								
MEDS	9.9	9.4	44.2	41.8	79.8	10.3	\$14,000	\$13,000
Not MEDS	13.1	11.1	42.4	40.4	84.3	8.7	\$15,000	< \$1,000
TOTALS	32.7	29.0	43.1	41.0	87.4	7.9	\$36,000	\$15,000

SOURCE: 1999 March Current Population Survey merged husband-wife file.

NOTE: N (unweighted) = 19,321 merged husband-wife records.

means that commitment may also be described as *perceived dependency* on the relationship or the other spouse. I refer to the concept being measured as commitment because perceived dependency is the typical definition of commitment (see Becker, 1981, p. 224, concerning marital specific capital). Whether one views the concept being measured as perceived dependence or commitment is irrelevant so long as it is understood as a measure of how much one imagines his or her life would change were the marriage to end. Because I use the term *dependent* to refer to economic relationships between spouses, I prefer to use the term *commitment* for the imagined exit costs for leaving the marriage to avoid terminological confusion.

The logic used in this research is that when separation or divorce implies little negative consequences, there is little commitment to (or perceived dependency on) the marriage. Both partners were asked the following question: "Even though it may be very unlikely, think for a moment about how various areas of your life might be different if you separated. For each of the following areas, how do you think things would change?" The following four items were included in this question in both waves: (a) your standard of living, (b) your career/job opportunities, (c) your sex life, and (d) your overall happiness. Answers to these questions ranged from *much worse* (1) to *much better* (5). I created a simple additive index of these items. Possible scores ranged from 4 to 20, with higher scores indicating that a separation would be associated with things being better. As an indicator of commitment, lower scores mean greater commitment. A total of 3,350 couples provided sufficient information for analysis of this question. Alpha reliabilities for the measures of commitment were consistently good—.730 (husbands, Wave 1), .732 (wives, Wave 1), .752 (husbands, Wave 2), and .761 (wives, Wave 2).

The basic strategy I used is to treat the commitment measure at Wave 2 as the dependent variable in a regression equation. Then, the corresponding measure of commitment from Wave 1 is entered along with indicators of whether the couple was MEDS at each wave. I also include race, age, total family wages, husbands and wives' educational attainment, the number of children in the household, and the total number of hours each spouse spent at work in the last week. Separate equations are estimated for husbands and wives. These static-score change models indicate the extent to which a change in equal dependency is associated with a change in commitment. In short, they are designed to determine whether becoming equally dependent changes perceptions of commitment. This approach allows me to draw inferences about the causal effect of equal dependency on commitment. The primary focus in these equations is the measure for

MEDS in Wave 2. The sign and magnitude of this coefficient indicate how much, on average, commitment changed following a change (between waves) in the couple's dependency. A positive value indicates that when married couples become MEDS, there is less commitment (things would be better if the marriage ended).

As Table 3 shows, when married couples become MEDS, wives become less committed to their marriages. In contrast, there is no statistically significant change in commitment for men (although there is weak evidence that husbands may become minimally more committed; the coefficient is significant at $p = .08$). To put the change for wives in perspective, the standard deviation of the commitment index for wives in Wave 2 is 2.6. The average change in commitment (.343 points), therefore, amounts to only about .13 standard deviations. This small change is enormously significant in its implications. Quite simply, whereas husbands do not appear to be influenced by equal dependency (or may in fact become somewhat more committed), wives become less committed to their marriages as a result. Regardless of how much less committed wives become, the direction of the effect is quite provocative. If equally dependent marriages are our future, then we should anticipate greater independence (i.e., lower commitment) among wives even when husbands are indifferent to the situation or become even more committed as a result. Why the spouses respond these ways to equal dependency will be discussed in the concluding section.

The constants in these equations differ in an interesting way. The constants represent the average level of commitment once all other factors have been controlled. Table 3 shows that wives are more committed than husbands to their marriages. The (relative) constants are 5.92 (husbands) and 4.88 (wives). If equal dependency makes wives somewhat less committed to their marriages and has either no effect or the opposite effect on husbands, then we might anticipate somewhat greater similarity between spouses in commitment as more couples become MEDS. In short, equally dependent spouses are likely to be more equally committed spouses. But this simple observation must be conditioned by the fact that each partner in a marriage is also influenced somewhat by his or her partner's commitment.

Perceptions of commitment by spouses are not highly correlated. The correlation between husbands and wives' commitment is only .172 (Wave 1) and .241 (Wave 2). Nonetheless, changes in one partner's commitment influence the other's. For example, the coefficient for a wife's commitment in Wave 2 indicates how much a change in that variable influences her husband's commitment. As the table shows, when wives become less committed to their marriages (i.e., higher scores on the commitment index),

TABLE 3
Static-Score Change Regressions for Each Spouse

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Dependent Variable</i>	
	<i>Husband</i>	<i>Wife</i>
	<i>Commitment</i>	<i>Commitment</i>
	<i>Wave 2</i>	<i>Wave 2</i>
Wave 1		
Husband commitment	.332**	.001
Wife commitment	-.021	.314**
Family total earnings (1,000s)	.002	-.002
Number of children in household	-.003	-.003
Hours husband worked last week	.001*	-.004*
Hours wife worked last week	.003	.008**
Is couple marriage of equally dependent spouses (MEDS)?	.049	.004
Wave 2		
Husband commitment	—	.104**
Wife commitment	.120**	—
Family total earnings (1,000s)	.002	-.009
Additional children since Wave 1?	.001	-.019
Hours husband worked last week	-.001	.0005**
Hours wife worked last week	.001	.0001
Is couple MEDS?	-.178*	.343**
Controls		
Husband/wife Black	.718**	.853**
Husband/wife Hispanic	.301*	.658**
Husband/wife Asian	-.616	.844**
Wife American Indian	1.580**	-.820
Husband/Wife White (deleted)	—	—
Husband education (years)	.009	.001
Wife education (years)	-.020	-.003
Husband/wife age	-.006	.004
Constant	5.924**	4.881**
<i>N</i>	3,599	3,599
<i>R</i> ²	.129**	.172**

NOTE: In equations for husbands, race and age are those of the husband. In equations for wives, race and age are those of the wife.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$.

husbands change in the same direction (becoming less committed). The same is true for wives. When their husbands become less committed to the marriage, they also become less committed. Still, the magnitude of these effects is quite modest (regression coefficients of .120 for changes in wife's commitment and .104 for changes in husband's commitment).

Clearly, partners in the same marriage respond to common changes and to one another, although the extent of similarity in responses is quite modest. These results suggest that husbands and wives appear to perceive somewhat differing consequences for ending their relationships, as I argued elsewhere (Nock, 1995). This finding is consistent with the perspective that marriage has different meanings for men and women.

To understand how becoming MEDS might influence spouses, it helps to consider the typical ways couples currently change into this status. In 73% of changes to MEDS in the NSFH (i.e., where the couple was not MEDS in Wave 1 but was in Wave 2), the wife's relative earnings increased (i.e., her earnings rose or his dropped). In only 27% of changes did the husband's relative earnings rise. I investigated separately the consequences of a wife's changing income and those of a husband's changing income. This analysis (not shown) revealed that wives' increased earnings lowered their commitment, whereas changes in husband's earnings had no effect. In short, the consequence for commitment of becoming MEDS is due to the increased earnings of wives. This is understandable because greater relative earnings reduce women's economic dependence on their marriages (the well-known independence effect). Apparently, they also reduce women's perceived dependence on the other aspects of their unions captured by the measure (e.g., sex life and overall happiness).

Chances of divorce. I turn next to an analysis that considers the likelihood of divorce. Here I relied on working-age (25 to 60 years old) husbands and wives in their first marriages in Wave 1. I restricted the analysis to first marriages to avoid the complications that often result from combining families in remarriage. The question I asked is whether equally dependent spouses are more likely to divorce than comparable couples who are not equally dependent. I used proportional hazards regression to indicate the relative risk of divorce. I included the well-known risk factors for divorce in this equation and focused on the coefficient for being in an equally dependent marriage. Therefore, the equation includes cohabitation prior to marriage, parental divorce, education, age at first marriage, presence of preschool children, total number of children in the household, hours worked, race, and earnings. Each of these has been found to influence the chances of divorce (see Sayer & Bianchi, 2000, for a review of these factors). It also includes a variable to indicate whether the couple was in an equally dependent marriage at Wave 1.

I estimated this equation in three steps. First, I considered only the effect of equal dependency on the chances of divorce. Then, I entered a range of control variables known to predict divorce. In the third step, I

added hours spent at work by each partner. The reason for the third step is to show how time at work strongly conditions the effect of equal dependency. The effect of equal dependency on the chances of divorce appears largely dependent on the time wives spend at work.

Given the findings about commitment, it is not immediately obvious what to predict about the effect of equal dependency for divorce. On one hand, equal dependency seems to make wives less committed to their marriages. On the other hand, it has either no effect on husbands or it increases their commitment very slightly. Depending on the relative importance of each effect, divorce might be more or less common among MEDS.

The results in Table 4 show that equally dependent spouses have higher chances of divorce. The first model in Table 4 shows the relative risk of divorce for MEDS and non-MEDS marriages. The hazard ratio of 1.572 indicates the factor by which the (monthly) risk of divorce is altered. A ratio of 1.0 means that the risk is unaffected, a ratio less than 1.0 indicates that the risk is reduced, and a ratio greater than 1.0 indicates that the risk of divorce is increased as a result of the variable in question. For the variable indicating that the couple is MEDS, the hazard ratio of 1.572 indicates that such couples have a 57% greater (monthly) risk of divorce than do non-MEDS. In Model 2, I introduced controls for household composition, race, age at marriage, education, parental divorce, and prior cohabitation. The introduction of all such factors leaves the relative risk associated with being equally dependent basically unchanged (1.519 in Model 2 vs. 1.572 in Model 1). Being equally dependent, that is, increases the chances of divorce. So the question is why? The third model offers clues. Here the introduction of hours worked by each spouse (last week) reduces the effect of equal dependency to nonsignificance. But only the hours worked by wives are a significant predictor of divorce. It would seem that equal dependency takes its toll on marriages in the hours wives but not husbands commit to work in the name of producing the income that produces equal dependency.

If this is so (i.e., if becoming MEDS influences wives but not husbands), then the divorces that are predicted by these equations should be more often at the wife's initiative. To determine whether this is so, I focused on a question asked of respondents who got divorced during the 5-year course of the NSFH. Each divorced primary respondent was asked who most wanted the divorce. For most of American history, wives rather than husbands have filed for divorce. Although rates vary by state, for most of the 19th century about 60% of cases were filed by wives. By the mid-20th century, the figure was approximately 70%, as it is now (Allen & Brinig, 2000; Chused, 1994; Friedman & Percival, 1976). Some

TABLE 4
Proportional Hazards Regression Predicting
Divorce by Wave 2: First Marriages (*N* = 2,400)

	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>		<i>Model 3</i>	
	<i>b</i>	<i>Hazard Ratio</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Hazard Ratio</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Hazard Ratio</i>
Independent variables						
Equally dependent spouses?	0.452*	1.572	0.418*	1.519	0.270	1.309
Couple cohabited			1.529*	4.614	1.489*	4.434
Husband's parents divorced			0.849*	2.237	0.881*	2.412
Wife's parents divorced			0.657*	1.929	0.641*	1.898
Preschoolers in household?			1.220*	3.386	1.274*	3.574
Number of minors in household			0.237	1.268	0.266	1.304
Total family earnings (1,000s)			0.001	1.000	0.001	1.000
Wife Black			-0.339	0.712	-0.414	0.661
Wife Hispanic			-0.093	0.911	-0.136	0.873
Wife Asian			-9.718	0.000	-10.176	0.000
Wife American Indian			1.397*	4.043	1.362*	3.902
Wife White (omitted)						
Husband education (years)			0.007	1.007	0.007	1.007
Wife education (years)			-0.003	0.997	-0.009	0.991
Husband age first married			0.033*	1.034	0.033*	1.033
Wife age first married			0.015	1.016	0.023	1.023
Hours wife worked last week					0.011*	1.011
Hours husband worked last week					-0.001	0.999
-2 log likelihood (baseline) =	2243.36					
-2 log likelihood (model) =	2438.29*		2222.89*		2216.87*	

* $p < .05$.

ethnographic research suggests that decisions about who initiates a divorce are almost random, but once initiated, divorcing individuals adopt a consistent vocabulary to describe the process (Hopper, 1993). Even if individuals inaccurately recall the actual events that led to a divorce, however, women are more likely than men to initiate the legal procedures. The question I asked is whether women in MEDS are more likely than women in other marriages to be remembered as the one who most wanted the divorce.

I coded the answers into two categories. The first indicates that the wife most wanted the divorce. The second indicates that the husband wanted it most or both wanted it equally. My goal here is to determine whether divorces from MEDS are more likely to be initiated by wives.

The results are shown in Table 5. This table controls for the same factors used to predict divorce in Table 4. The first row shows that divorces among equally dependent spouses are considerably more likely to be at the wife's urging than are divorces from other marriages. That is, when marriages of equally dependent spouses ended by divorce, the wife was the one who more often wanted it. The exponentiated regression coefficient indicates that the odds of a wife most wanting the divorce were 2.63 times greater if she was in an equally dependent marriage. Taken together, the evidence suggests that equal dependency lowers wives' commitment to their marriages and increases the chances that they will want a divorce. Men, in contrast, seem largely unaffected by equal dependency or become marginally more committed to their marriages as a result.

DISCUSSION

I began this article by noting that recent scholarship on marriage has focused on the changes in gender inequalities, their implications for marital relationships, and the likely growth of equally dependent marriages. Although there is good evidence that significant inequalities have been eliminated or reduced, there is much less certainty about what this means for marriages today or in the future.

To place the results of this research into a larger perspective, I return to a theme introduced at the outset. Men benefit from marriage more than women do because men benefit from the status of being married regardless of the emotional quality of the marriage. Wives' benefits, however, appear to depend more on the quality of their unions. Alternatively, we might say that the internal dynamics of the relationship have greater consequence for the way wives experience their marriages than they do for husbands.

The status of being married (i.e., of being a husband) benefits men because of the signal it sends to others. Alternatively, men benefit from the assumptions others make about them because they are married. To understand what those assumptions are, I first developed a normative definition of marriage. This is a list of the ideal or desired aspects of marriage and represents what Americans generally agree about in respect to the institution of marriage. By consulting public opinion, religious doctrine, and state and appellate domestic relations laws, I developed such a normative definition (Nock, 1998). The normative elements of American marriage include the following:

TABLE 5
Logistic Regression Predicting
Which Spouse Most Wanted a Divorce

<i>Dependent Variable</i> ^a	b	e ^b
Equally dependent spouses?	0.968**	2.633
Couple cohabited	0.581*	1.789
Husband's parents divorced	-0.244	0.784
Wife's parents divorced	0.485	1.592
Preschoolers in household?	-0.263	0.768
Number of minors in household	0.318	1.375
Total family earnings (1,000s)	0.001	1.000
Wife Black	1.418**	4.130
Wife Hispanic	-0.571	0.565
Wife Asian (constant)		
Wife American Indian	-0.124	0.883
Wife White (omitted)		
Husband education (years)	0.051	1.052
Wife education (years)	-0.093	0.912
Husband age first married	-0.007	0.993
Wife age first married	-0.040	0.961
Hours wife worked last week	-0.008	0.992
Hours husband worked last week	-0.013*	0.987
Constant	1.775	5.902

NOTE: $N = 218$ (divorces). Model chi-square = 24.43 ($df = 16$), significance = .08.
a. 1 = wife wanted divorce most; 0 = husband wanted divorce most, equally desired.
* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$.

1. Marriage is a free personal choice based on love.
2. Maturity is a presumed requirement for marriage.
3. Marriage is a heterosexual relationship.
4. The husband is the head and principal earner in the family.
5. Sexual fidelity and monogamy are expectations for marriage.
6. Marriage typically involves children.

Each of these normative dimensions of marriage is generally and consensually prominent in American culture. In public opinion, large majorities of adults endorse each ideal. In religious doctrine, each ideal is prescribed in most Western denominations. And in law, we find clear support for all ideals except the one prescribing husbands as heads and principal earners in marriage (the abolition of this ideal in domestic relations law is a work in progress, although largely completed) (see Glendon, 1989).

My argument is that others assume that married people conform, more or less, to these core themes of marriage. Regardless of the quality of the

particular union, therefore, the presumption of maturity, heterosexuality, fidelity, and love inform others' behaviors toward married mates. These institutional ideals are more significant for men than they are for women because marriage is the primary way most men demonstrate their mature adult masculine status.

The elementary requirements for adult masculinity are well known. Seemingly universal, masculinity requires three things of males (Gilmore 1990). First, he must be the father of his wife's children. The man who cannot sire children is generally viewed as inadequate in certain respects of mature masculine identity. Because illegitimacy is everywhere proscribed, this essentially limits the role of fatherhood to marriage for normative purposes. Second, males must provide for their families. The adult man must work to support his family. Not working is simply not an option in this construction of adult masculine identity. Finally, males must protect their families. When necessary, a man is expected to stand up for his family, to show courage and loyalty to them. He is expected to defend his pride, his honor, his name, and that of his family. Men are always responsible for military defense even when women may participate in warfare. No society relies primarily on females to be soldiers or warriors.

The development of adult masculine identity involves self-definition and display of masculine status. I argue that marriage is the most elementary way for most men to demonstrate and define their masculine identities. In their roles as fathers, providers, and protectors, men viewed as good husbands are seen as good men. Alternatively, men who conform to the traditional model of normative marriage come to see themselves and are seen by others as mature adult males. Their marriage validates and sustains their claims to adult masculinity.

Nothing about the quality of the ongoing marriage is involved in the normative definition of the institution. The finding that men benefit from marriage *per se* regardless of marital quality makes sense when we realize that it is the reflected appraisal of others (and the corresponding definition of self produced in those reflected appraisals) that husbands enjoy (see Nock, 1998, for a review).

How do such ideas help explain the findings about equally dependent spouses? I believe the answer is found in the meaning of relative earnings for men. Normative marriage requires that men be the principal earners. This means that a husband's labor-force involvement is mandatory. The husband who cannot work may be pitied, but the husband who will not work is scorned. He is not only a bad husband, he is not fully a man. It is the mandatory nature of his work that defines it. Why does this make men the head of households? Because anything that is mandatory is of greater

value than anything that is optional. Wives' employment, no matter how significant and valuable it may be, is still socially optional. The wife who decides to stop working may pay in lost wages, as will her family, but she is unlikely to pay in esteem. Her labor is optional. His labor is mandatory. As a result, regardless of the relative earnings of each partner, husbands' labor satisfies the normative expectation that men are the heads of households. If a man's wife earns as much or more than he does, his conformity to the normative expectations of marriage are still intact. When his wife's earnings increase relative to his own, nothing changes in this respect. He is still doing what he must regardless of what his wife is doing. As a result, the value of his marriage has not changed for him.

Things are different from the wife's perspective. Focused on the relationship more than the status of being a wife, her greater earnings change the value of her marriage. She spends more hours in paid labor and likely sees little increase in her husband's domestic labor contribution. Her greater earnings lower the economic barrier against leaving the marriage. The evidence presented in this article shows that the hours wives commit to paid labor reduce their commitment to their marriages. This means that wives see fewer negative consequences of divorce when they are working longer hours. Their marriages become less valuable. And they are considerably more likely than wives in unequal relationships to seek and obtain divorces. In short, equal dependency changes wives' marriages. But it has little or no effect on men's marriages and may even increase their commitment.

Admittedly, the evidence in this article is quite limited. First, to determine whether MEDS make spouses more or less committed to their marriages, I looked at changes in economic dependency. I found that a change to equal dependency causes lesser commitment for wives. What is unknown and what we need to know is whether marriages begun as MEDS fare differently than those that become MEDS. I suspect they do not because the evidence I have presented about divorce takes equal dependency as exogenous (predetermined). Whether couples have always been MEDS or only recently became MEDS, they still have higher chances of divorce. And when they divorce, wives are considerably more likely to be the ones who initiate the dissolution.

What are the implications of these findings for the future of marriage in America? The answer to that question depends on why wives in MEDS differ from other wives. The clue may lie in my findings about how the hours required to produce equal dependency make wives less committed to their marriages. There are two plausible interpretations.

First, such wives may come to resent the arrangement that casts them in the excessively demanding roles of breadwinner and homemaker—the second shift problem (Hochschild, 1990). I believe there is more to the story, however. Recent work Margaret Brinig and I have conducted shows that hours spent in household production are related to the chances of divorce. In short, the performance of routine, traditional housework takes a toll on marital stability regardless of which spouse does it. However, a more important factor is how that labor is understood and interpreted. The arrangement that produces the lowest chances of divorce once all known divorce risks are controlled is when both married partners agree that the organization of paid and unpaid labor is unfair to the wife (Brinig & Nock, *in press*). Thus, it is not the housework *per se* that takes the toll. Rather, it appears to be the failure of husbands to acknowledge that the arrangement is unfair. When husbands fail to acknowledge the gift of labor provided by their wives, the marriage suffers. This may be what is going on in the lives of the wives who become disaffected from their MEDS. Their greater efforts in the name of higher earnings do not change the marriages of their husbands. That is, their husbands are unlikely to recognize the greater efforts expended by their wives in the name of more equal earnings, they are unlikely to respond by doing additional housework, and they are unlikely to express gratitude for the wife's greater efforts. This leads me to the more likely consequence of greater equality in marriage.

If there is a problem with equal dependence, it is related to the fact that marriages are experienced very differently by husbands and wives. Marriages are likely to be less stable so long as this marital dynamic continues. Therefore, the implications of the growth of MEDS depend on whether husbands change. Will married men become more responsive to the efforts of their wives? Will married men more closely resemble married women in how they experience and understand the marital relationship?

I believe the answer to these questions is yes for several reasons. First, we are still at the early stages of a fundamental realignment of gender in our society. Many existing marriages include partners who grew up in different times with different assumptions about marital roles. But for the past few decades, fewer and fewer marriages have been formed in which wives are not also breadwinners. Second, fewer boys are growing up in households with unemployed mothers. As Goldscheider and Waite (1991) showed, young men with nontraditional gender ideals marry earlier than do their more traditional counterparts, presumably because they are in shorter supply. Third, marriage is increasingly a less distinctive domestic arrangement. The growth of cohabiting relationships, later ages at marriage, remarriages, divorces, changes in domestic relations laws, and cor-

responding changes in other social institutions such as churches, workplaces, and schools render marriage more and more an alternative intimate lifestyle. To the extent that this happens, the benefits men derive from the simple status of being married will decline. Finally, only one in five marriages today is MEDS. The arrangement is still atypical statistically. Problems associated with them may possibly be the price we pay as part of the transition to a time when most couples are in such neotraditional unions.

If my speculations are correct, then the growth of equally dependent spouses need not have negative implications for the stability of unions. For several years, I have been intrigued by the long-term declines we have seen in divorce rates since 1983. I have wondered why marriages are in fact more stable today than they were three decades ago. The leveling of the divorce rate in the United States is not an artifact of increases in cohabitation or other compositional aspects of the population. Recent marriages truly are more stable (Goldstein, 1999). Why? I believe that the recent increases in marital stability reflect the gradual working out of the gender issues first confronted in the 1960s. If so, this implies that young men and women are forming new types of marriages that are based on a new understanding of gender ideals. And if so, the growth of equal dependency that we are likely to see in the next few decades bodes well because it is another dimension of marital quality.

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