

Is infidelity a cause or a consequence of poor marital quality?

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ABSTRACT

Because sexual fidelity is a key norm regulating the institution of marriage, any occurrence of extramarital sex (EMS) could potentially contribute to marital dissolution. Although the relationship between EMS and marital dissolution has been demonstrated in past research, studies have yet to show if the occurrence of EMS causes a marriage to break down, or if an unraveling marriage prompts spouses to seek alternative sexual partners. In this 17-year longitudinal study ($N = 1,475$), we assessed whether EMS precedes or follows deteriorations in marital quality. We estimated the effects of marital happiness and divorce proneness on EMS, the effects of EMS on subsequent marital happiness and divorce proneness, and the effects of all three variables on divorce. Our results indicate that divorce proneness predicts the occurrence of EMS. Results also suggest that EMS lowers subsequent marital happiness, increases subsequent divorce proneness, and increases the odds of divorce. We conclude that infidelity is both a cause and a consequence of relationship deterioration.

KEY WORDS: divorce • infidelity • marital quality

Although people became increasingly tolerant of premarital sex during the second half of the twentieth century, attitudes toward extramarital sex (EMS) remained strongly negative (Thornton, 1989). Widespread condemnation of EMS reflects the fact that sexual fidelity is a central norm regulating and maintaining the institution of marriage (Nock, 1998). Sexual fidelity increases marital cohesion by minimizing opportunities for spouses

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to become emotionally attached to alternative partners. Sexual fidelity also guarantees that a woman's children are the biological progeny of her husband, and that a husband is not responsible for children born to women other than his wife. Most people view EMS not only as a betrayal of the marital promise, but also as a form of deviant or immoral behavior. Indeed, prior to the introduction of no-fault divorce laws, most states considered infidelity to be one of the few legal grounds for divorce.

Although infidelity no longer provides a legal justification for divorce in most states, evidence suggests that EMS is common around the time of marital dissolution. Studies consistently find that EMS is one of the most frequently cited reasons for marital breakdown (Amato & Previti, 2003; Kitson, Babri, & Roach, 1985). In a longitudinal study, Amato and Rogers (1997) reported that infidelity was a strong and consistent predictor of divorce. Similarly, in a cross-sectional study, Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) found that respondents were more likely to report EMS in marriages that had ended in divorce than in marriages that were intact at the time of the interview. Finally, South and Lloyd (1995) reported that, in over one-third of all divorces, at least one former spouse had engaged in EMS before the marriage ended. These studies indicate that EMS is bound up closely with marital instability.

Existing studies cast little light, however, on whether EMS increases the risk of divorce or whether EMS is merely a symptom of a marriage that already has come apart. Given that EMS frequently accompanies divorce, the lack of attention to the direction of influence is a remarkable omission from the research literature on this topic. Presumably, this lack of attention is due to the difficulty of getting appropriate longitudinal data, that is, data on marital quality from couples prior to and following instances of EMS. In the present study, we analyze data from a 17-year national, longitudinal study of married individuals. Our goal is to examine a model in which EMS is treated as a cause as well as a consequence of two dimensions of marital quality: marital happiness (how happy one is with one's marriage) and divorce proneness (thinking and talking about the possibility of divorce). We also consider whether the links between EMS, marital quality, and divorce differ for husbands and wives.

Literature review

Despite public disapproval and potentially detrimental effects on marriage, infidelity is not uncommon. A survey of 122 marital therapists indicated that EMS is one of the most commonly reported problems among couples seeking counseling or therapy (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson 1997). Using a national probability sample, Laumann et al. (1994) found that 24.5% of all men and 15% of all women reported having engaged in extramarital relations, either in their current marriage or in a previous marriage. Similarly, Wiederman (1997) found that 23% of men and 12% of women had been unfaithful to their spouses. The finding that EMS is more common among husbands than wives appears frequently in the research literature (Treas & Giesen, 2000; Waite & Joyner, 2001). Reports of infidelity also vary with the source, that is, whether respondents are reporting about their

own behavior or their spouses' behavior. For example, South and Lloyd (1995) found that 15% of recently divorced respondents reported that they had engaged in EMS, whereas 42% of recently divorced respondents reported that their former spouses had engaged in EMS. Despite some variation in findings, existing studies consistently indicate that sexual infidelity occurs in a significant minority of marriages.

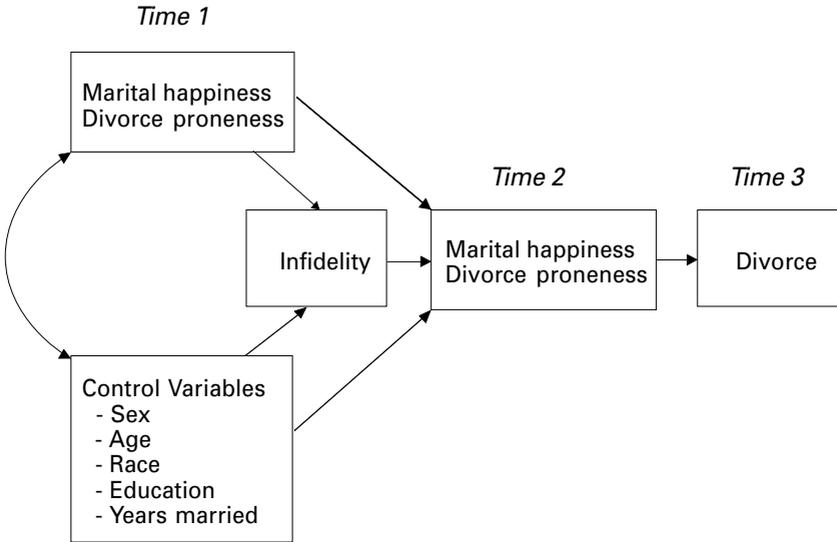
Several researchers have examined associations between EMS and dimensions of marital quality. In general, EMS is more common among individuals who evaluate their marriages negatively or who report that marital intercourse is low in frequency or quality (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Prins, Buunk, & Van Yperen, 1993; Thompson, 1983; Treas & Giesen, 2000; Waite & Joyner, 2001). Not all studies find that marital quality is related to infidelity. For example, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found no association between marital satisfaction and EMS. Moreover, some therapists argue that EMS is not necessarily detrimental to marital quality or stability. For example, Elbaum (1981) stated, 'For a small segment of the population who are able to compartmentalize between sexual and emotional fidelity, extramarital relationships may be a healthy alternative to traditional marriage' (p. 495). Despite a few exceptions, however, the majority of studies indicate that EMS is associated with low marital quality.

It is easy to see how EMS can undermine a marriage. Because the norm of sexual fidelity is bound up with trust, intimacy, and respect, an incident of EMS can damage the emotional foundation on which a marriage is built. The spouse who has remained faithful may feel betrayed, become less satisfied with the marriage, and start thinking about divorce. Correspondingly, the spouse who has been unfaithful may become emotionally attached to the new sexual partner and – with a clear alternative available – become less committed to the marriage. Given these consequences, it would not be surprising to find that EMS increases the probability of divorce. It is unlikely, however, that EMS occurs at random among married individuals. Presumably, people who are dissatisfied with their marriages are more likely than people who are satisfied with their marriages to seek sexual satisfaction elsewhere. If this is true, then EMS may be nothing more than an indicator of marital deterioration and have little significance for subsequent marital quality or stability.

One drawback of prior studies is that most have been cross-sectional and, without longitudinal data, researchers cannot determine whether infidelity precedes or follows declines in marital quality. Laumann et al. (1994) described this problem in their own research.

While it could be the case that an unexpected and unplanned sexual encounter that happened to result in an affair did in fact adversely affect the stability of a person's marriage, it could just as logically be the case that a person who was unhappy in his or her marriage and was convinced that it would soon end went looking for another sex partner while still married . . . We would probably want to conclude that the first case is one in which the extramarital sex affected the stability of the marriage and that the second case is one in which it did not (p. 214).

FIGURE 1
Conceptual model showing links among marital happiness, divorce proneness, infidelity, and divorce.



Conceptual model

We present a conceptual model that depicts the links among two dimensions of marital quality (marital happiness and divorce proneness), infidelity, and divorce (see Figure 1). The model is arranged along a time line, with marital happiness and divorce proneness measured at Time 1 (T1) and Time 2 (T2), infidelity measured between T1 and T2, and divorce measured at Time 3 (T3).

As shown in the model, both marital happiness and divorce proneness at T1 have direct effects on subsequent EMS. Both variables also have direct effects on their T2 counterparts (e.g., marital happiness at T1 is linked with marital happiness at T2), although these ‘effects’ reflect the stability of each marital dimension. Furthermore, infidelity has direct effects on marital happiness at T2 and divorce proneness at T2. Because the model takes into account the T1 scores, the T2 variables are conceptually equivalent to change scores (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). In other words, the paths between infidelity and marital happiness and divorce proneness at T2 reflect the estimated effect of infidelity on *changes* in marital happiness and divorce proneness. At the end of the time line, marital happiness and divorce proneness at T2 directly affect divorce at T3. EMS may affect divorce primarily through lowering marital happiness and increasing divorce proneness. Alternatively, although not shown in Figure 1, EMS may have a direct effect on divorce (net of happiness and divorce proneness) by increasing perceived alternatives to the marriage. The model also includes several T1 control variables (sex, age, race, education, and duration of marriage). We include

these variables because prior research indicates that they are associated with marital quality and stability (White, 1990), as well as infidelity (Laumann et al., 1994).

To test this model, we used multiple waves of data collected between 1980 and 1997. We first assessed the model using 1980 as T1 and 1983 as T2. We then replicated the analysis using 1983 as T1 and 1988 as T2. In both models, 1997 served as T3 (that is, whether the marriage ended in divorce by 1997).

Method

Sample

The analysis was based on the 17-year longitudinal study of Marital Instability over the Life Course (Booth, Amato, & Johnson, 1998). The target population consisted of all married individuals in households in the contiguous United States with a telephone, both spouses present, and both spouses 55 years of age or less. In 1980, telephone interviewers used random digit dialing to select a sample of households and a second random procedure to determine whether to interview the husband or wife. Seventeen percent of targeted individuals could not be reached after 20 call-backs. Of those individuals contacted, 78% gave complete interviews. The final sample consisted of 2,033 married persons (not couples). When compared with U.S. Census data, the sample was representative of married individuals with respect to age, race, household size, home ownership, presence of children, and urban residence. The sample was contacted again in 1983, 1988, 1992, and 1997, resulting in interviews with 78, 66, 59, and 53% of the original sample, respectively. Sample attrition was more likely to occur among respondents who were male, relatively young, did not have college degrees, nonwhite, and living in rented accommodation.

Because testing our model required longitudinal data, the first analysis included only those respondents who remained in the sample for at least two waves of data collection (1980 and 1983) and were married to the same spouse at both times. We excluded 118 cases who divorced during this 3-year period. Furthermore, because we wanted to assess whether infidelity or low marital quality comes first in a marriage, we selected only those individuals who reported no prior instances of infidelity in 1980. These individuals answered *no* to a 1980 survey question (described later) dealing with EMS. A total of 105 individuals reported infidelity prior to 1980, and these cases were omitted from the analysis. Overall, the first analysis (which focused on EMS and changes in marital quality between 1980 and 1983) was based on a sample of 1,475 respondents. The second analysis (which focused on EMS and changes in marital quality between 1983 and 1988) included only those respondents with complete survey data through 1988 and no history of infidelity prior to 1983. The sample size for the second analysis was 1,123.

Variables

Means and standard deviations for all variables appear in Table 1. To deal with missing data, we relied on imputation using the expectation maximization algorithm (Graham, Hofer, & Scott, 2000). This method of imputation gives reliable estimates of population parameters with up to 50% missing data. Table

TABLE 1
Descriptive statistics for all variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	% Missing
Marital Happiness 1980	28.78	3.75	12–33	1.83
Marital Happiness 1983	27.89	4.18	12–33	1.83
Marital Happiness 1988	27.80	4.25	12–33	2.56
Divorce Proneness 1980	0.29	0.35	0–1.36	0.33
Divorce Proneness 1983	0.31	0.38	0–1.34	1.15
Divorce Proneness 1988	0.28	0.37	0–1.34	0.77
Extramarital Sex 1980–1983	0.05	0.21	0–1	1.08
Extramarital Sex 1983–1988	0.03	0.17	0–1	0.86
Divorce 1983–1997	0.13	0.33	0–1	8.95
Divorce 1988–1997	0.08	0.27	0–1	6.42
Female	0.60	0.49	0–1	0.00
Education	13.68	2.53	3–25	0.00
White	0.92	0.40	0–1	0.14
Age	35.97	9.15	17–55	0.07
Years married	13.21	9.22	0–38	0.07

Note. Control variables were measured in 1980. Sample size is 1475 for all variables measured in 1980 or 1983 and 1168 for all variables measured in 1988.

1 reveals that the percentage of missing data was small for most variables, with the largest percentage involving whether marriages ended in divorce between 1983 and 1997 (9%). To see if data imputation affected our results, we conducted all analyses twice, once with imputed data and once with listwise deletion of missing cases. The results of the two sets of analyses were substantively identical. Because data imputation gives less biased estimates of parameters than listwise deletion, we present the results based on imputation.

Marital happiness was based on an 11-item scale that assessed the extent to which the respondent was happy with different aspects of the marriage ($\alpha = .87$). For example, respondents were asked, ‘How happy are you with the extent to which you and your spouse agree about things? . . . with your spouse as someone to do things with? . . . with the amount of love and affection you receive from your spouse?’ (1 = *not too happy*, 2 = *pretty happy*, 3 = *very happy*). This scale was administered in 1980, 1983, and 1988, with higher scores indicating greater marital happiness.

Divorce proneness was based on a 27-item scale that assessed the extent to which the respondent’s marriage was unstable ($\alpha = .91$). For example, respondents were asked, ‘Have you ever thought that your marriage might be in trouble? Has the thought of getting a divorce or separation crossed your mind in the last 3 years? Have you talked with your spouse about divorce in the last 3 years?’ (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*). This scale was also assessed at each wave of the interview, with higher scores indicating greater instability. We used the logarithm (base 10) of these scores to normalize the distribution, although the resulting scores continued to exhibit a degree of positive skewness.

Divorce was based on interviews in 1988, 1992, and 1997 in which respondents indicated whether their marriages had ended in divorce or permanent separation (0 = *no divorce*, 1 = *divorce or permanent separation*). Between 1983 and 1997, 13% of respondents ($n = 192$) reported a divorce. Given the current

high rate of divorce, this percentage may seem low. Many respondents, however, were in marriages of relatively long duration at the first interview in 1980. Because divorce rates peak in the early years of marriage, many individuals in our sample were in relatively stable marriages. Moreover, as noted earlier, our analytic sample excluded respondents who separated or divorced between 1980 and 1983.

Extramarital sex was obtained from the 1983 and 1988 interviews, based on the question: 'Have you had a problem in your marriage because one of you has had a sexual relationship with someone else?' This variable was coded 1 if respondents answered *yes* to this question, and 0 if respondents answered *no*. We also recorded whether the respondent, the respondent's spouse, or both the respondent and the spouse had engaged in EMS. In 1983, 68 respondents (5%) reported infidelity. This total included 31 who reported that they had engaged in infidelity, 29 who reported that their spouse had engaged in infidelity, and 8 who reported that both they and their spouses had engaged in infidelity. The 1988 interview revealed an additional 39 individuals who had not reported infidelity in 1980 or 1983. Note that our question misses cases in which (i) respondents were unaware of infidelity on the part of their spouses, or (ii) respondents engaged in infidelity but did not disclose the relationship to their spouses. This question, therefore, underestimates the true level of EMS in the sample. (We return to this issue in the discussion section.)

The control variables were obtained from the 1980 interview, including the respondent's sex (0 = *male*, 1 = *female*) and race (0 = *nonwhite*, 1 = *white*). The respondent's and the spouse's ages at marriage were positively correlated ($r = .85$), so we took the mean to represent age at marriage in the analysis. We used a similar procedure for the respondent's and the spouse's years of education ($r = .55$). Overall, 60% of respondents were female, 92% were white, the mean age was about 36 years, the mean level of schooling was about 14 years, and the mean duration of marriage was about 13 years.

Analysis

To estimate the paths for the T1 (1980) and T2 (1983) data, we relied on structural equation modeling with the Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) software (Arbuckle, 1997). This model simultaneously estimated the equations for three dependent variables: EMS between T1 and T2, marital happiness at T2, and divorce proneness at T2. Two halves of the marital happiness scale (odd vs. even items) served as observed indicators of a latent marital happiness variable. Similarly, two halves of the divorce proneness scale (odd vs. even items) served as indicators of a latent divorce proneness variable. This method is equivalent to using a split-half reliability to estimate measurement error (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1989).

Because marital disruption is a time-varying event, we used Cox proportional hazards modeling to predict divorce between T2 and T3 (Allison, 1984). This method involves defining an event (in this case, divorce), with time to the event serving as the outcome. For divorced couples, the outcome was the number of years (starting in 1983) until the divorce occurred. Individuals who did not divorce and who remained in the study through 1997 were treated as censored cases (that is, divorce did not occur during the period of observation), with the outcome coded as 14 years. Individuals who did not divorce but dropped out of the panel also were treated as censored cases, with the outcome coded as the number of years they remained in the panel after 1983.

The second set of analyses followed the same logic as the first set but used 1983 and 1988 waves of data (rather than 1980 and 1983) to test the model. This set of analyses was treated as a replication of the first set, with the goal of seeing whether the same causal processes could be detected using later waves of data.

Results

The structural equation model fit the data well, as reflected in a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of .999 and a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of .035. The results of the structural equation analysis appear in the first six columns of Table 2. Columns 1 and 2 indicate that divorce proneness in 1980 significantly predicted whether one or both spouses engaged in EMS for the first time between 1980 and 1983. Marital happiness was not a significant predictor of EMS with divorce proneness in the equation. However, although not shown in Table 2, marital happiness in 1980 was related negatively to EMS at the bivariate level ($r = -.14, p < .001$). This finding suggests that marital unhappiness does not increase infidelity unless marital unhappiness leads to, or is accompanied by, thoughts of divorce. No control variables were significant predictors of infidelity.

Columns 3 and 4 show that marital happiness in 1980 was a significant predictor of marital happiness in 1983. This finding indicates a high level of stability in marital happiness, that is, spouses who were happy (or unhappy) with their marriage in 1980 also tended to be happy (or unhappy) with their marriages in 1983. More importantly, EMS between 1980 and 1983 was associated negatively with marital happiness in 1983, suggesting that infidelity was followed by a decline in marital happiness.

Columns 5 and 6 show that divorce proneness in 1980 was associated significantly with divorce proneness in 1983. This finding reflects a moderately high degree of stability in divorce proneness, that is, if respondents perceived their marriages as stable (or unstable) in 1980, then they also were likely to perceive their marriages as stable (or unstable) in 1983. More importantly, EMS was positively associated with divorce proneness in 1983, suggesting that when EMS occurred between 1980 and 1983, divorce proneness increased.

The results described thus far are summarized in Figure 2. This figure shows the standardized coefficients from Table 2 superimposed on the causal model described in Figure 1. Infidelity appears to be a consequence of poor marital quality (primarily divorce proneness) as well as a cause of further deteriorations in marital happiness and increases in divorce proneness. (To simplify the figure, we omitted the control variables, along with a significant path between marital happiness in 1980 and divorce proneness in 1983.) Although the standardized coefficients from infidelity to marital happiness and divorce proneness appear to be modest, this largely reflects that fact that infidelity is a skewed binary variable. (Skewed binary variables tend to yield weak standardized coefficients.) A better measure is the effect size, or the standardized mean difference in marital outcomes between individuals who did and did not experience infidelity. Calculations (not shown) reveal that infidelity was associated with a *decline* in marital quality equivalent to two-thirds (.67) of a standard deviation. Similarly, infidelity was associated with an *increase* in divorce proneness equivalent to three-fourths of a standard deviation (.74). These are large effect sizes by any standard.

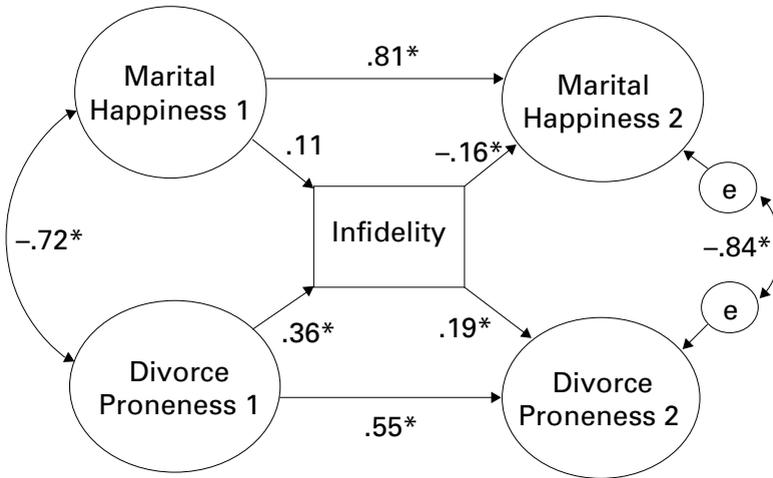
TABLE 2
Predictors of extramarital sex 1980–1983, marital happiness in 1983, divorce proneness in 1983, and divorce in 1983–1997

Predictors	Dependent Variables							
	Extramarital Sex 1980–1983		Marital Happiness 1983		Divorce Proneness 1983		Divorce 1983–1997	
	<i>B</i>	Beta	<i>B</i>	Beta	<i>B</i>	Beta	<i>B</i>	Odds ratio
Marital Happiness 1980	0.01	.11	0.91***	.81	–0.01*	–.12	0.00	1.00
Divorce Proneness 1980	0.26***	.36	1.23	.10	0.59***	.55	0.56	1.75
Extramarital Sex 1980–83			–2.80***	–.16	0.28***	.19	0.95**	2.60
Marital Happiness 1983							–0.07**	0.93
Divorce Proneness 1983							0.92**	2.52
<i>Controls</i>								
Female	–0.02	–.04	–0.19	–.03	0.05**	.07	–0.17	1.19
Education	–0.01	–.01	0.06	.04	0.00	.01	0.00	1.00
White	0.00	.00	0.27	.03	–0.01	–.01	0.01	1.01
Age	–0.01	–.01	–0.04*	–.09	0.00	.08	–0.01	0.99
Years Married	0.00	.07	0.08***	.18	–0.01***	–.23	–0.06*	0.94
R^2	.08***		.61***		.58***		166.13***	
χ^2								

Note. Sample size for all equations is 1475. Equations for Extramarital Sex, Marital Happiness, and Divorce Proneness were derived from a single structural equation analysis: $\chi^2 = 94.17$, $df = 34$, $CFI = .999$, $RMSEA = .035$. The equation for Divorce was derived from a Cox proportional hazards model. Significance tests are two-tailed.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

FIGURE 2
Standardized coefficients for paths between marital happiness, divorce
proneness, and infidelity at two points in time.



* $p < .001$.

Columns 7 and 8 in Table 2 show the results of the proportional hazards analysis of divorce between 1983 and 1997. Declines in marital happiness and increases in divorce proneness between 1980 and 1983 predicted subsequent divorce. Not surprisingly, respondents who described their marriages as increasingly unhappy and who reported thinking and talking more often about divorce were more likely than other respondents to experience marital dissolution. The results for EMS are of greater interest, suggesting that EMS increased the odds of divorce directly, as well as indirectly through lowering marital happiness and increasing divorce proneness. Even with happiness and divorce proneness in the equation, the odds of divorce were more than twice as high (odds ratio = 2.6) among individuals who reported infidelity than among individuals who did not report infidelity. This direct path may be due to a mechanism not measured in the present study, such as having an alternative partner waiting in the wings.

After examining the 1980 and 1983 data, we repeated all analyses using the 1983 and 1988 waves of data. Because only 39 new cases of EMS occurred between 1983 and 1988, the analysis had low statistical power to detect effects in the population. Nevertheless, these results were comparable, in most respects, with those obtained with the earlier waves of data. Divorce proneness (but not marital happiness) in 1983 was positively associated with EMS between 1983 and 1988 ($B = .40, p < .001$). EMS between 1983 and 1988 appeared to lower marital happiness in 1988 ($B = -.17, p < .001$) and to increase divorce proneness ($B = .26, p < .001$) in 1988. Finally, although EMS between 1983 and 1988 was positively related to divorce after 1988, the coefficient did not reach significance. The absence of a direct effect of EMS on divorce is

contrary to the result shown in Table 2. Marital happiness and divorce proneness in 1988, however, were significant predictors of subsequent divorce. Moreover, when we omitted marital happiness and divorce proneness from the equation, EMS was a significant predictor of divorce. These results suggest that EMS between 1983 and 1988 increased the odds of divorce, but this effect occurred entirely through lowering marital happiness and increasing thoughts of divorce.

With respect to the source of EMS, we conducted additional analyses that focused separately on whether the respondent or the respondent's spouse had engaged in infidelity. To accomplish this task, we combined all instances of infidelity reported in either 1983 or 1988, yielding a total of 107 cases. Of these cases, 44 involved EMS of the respondent, 53 involved EMS of the respondent's spouse, and 10 involved EMS of both spouses. This distribution revealed a slight tendency for respondents to report their spouses' infidelity more often than their own. Sex differences were more pronounced. Of all cases, 74 involved husbands' infidelity, 23 involved wives' infidelity, and 10 involved both spouses' infidelity. We used the source (respondent, spouse, or both), the sex of the respondent (husband versus wife), and the interaction between source and sex to predict changes in marital happiness between T1 and T2, changes in divorce proneness between T1 and T2, and divorce between T2 and T3. Analyses indicated no significant effects. Although the number of cases was small (and the statistical power of the tests was low) inspection of cell means revealed no noteworthy trends in absolute terms. The pattern of associations among EMS, marital quality, and divorce, therefore, did not appear to vary with the source of infidelity or the sex of the respondent.

Discussion

A number of studies have shown that marital quality is correlated with EMS, but most of these studies have used cross-sectional data and could not explore the direction of influence between variables. Our goal was to extend previous research by determining whether EMS is a consequence or a cause of relationship deterioration. Using a national probability sample, we have illustrated the likely causal role of EMS in marital quality and divorce. Our analyses indicate that, in relationships where no EMS has yet occurred, a high level of divorce proneness (thinking that the marriage is in trouble, thinking about divorce, and talking about divorce with one's spouse or others) predicts that at least one spouse will engage in EMS. The notion that EMS is more likely to occur in troubled marriages is consistent with several other investigations. For example, Buss and Shackelford (1997) found that sexual dissatisfaction and marital conflict made couples more susceptible to infidelity during the first year of marriage. Similarly, Prins et al. (1993) found that people in unhappy relationships expressed a greater desire for EMS, as well as greater involvement in EMS.

Interestingly, our analysis suggests that marital happiness does not predict EMS, at least with divorce proneness in the equation. These results imply that unhappiness does not directly affect EMS, although unhappiness may have an indirect effect on EMS to the extent that it increases divorce

proneness. Irrespective of how unhappy people are with their marriages, it appears to be only after they start thinking and talking about divorce that they (or their spouses) seek out new sexual partners. This behavior may reflect people's wish to locate (or try out) alternative partners in anticipation of the marriage ending.

Our results do not suggest, however, that EMS is merely a symptom of a marriage that is on the rocks – an event with no consequences for what happens later in the marriage. Indeed, our analysis suggests that despite prior levels of unhappiness and instability, EMS has additional negative consequences for marriage, including a further decline in marital happiness, a further increase in divorce proneness, and an increase in the risk of divorce. Most researchers studying divorce (e.g., Gottman, 1995) and marital dysfunction (e.g., Bradbury, 1998) have given relatively little attention to EMS. This lack of attention may reflect a belief that EMS does not play a causal role in relationship deterioration. Our analysis, however, suggests otherwise. Given that fidelity to one's spouse is a key norm regulating the institution of marriage, it is not surprising that EMS further erodes an already weakened relationship. Moreover, in showing that infidelity increases the risk of divorce, our results are congruent with several prior investigations (Amato & Rogers, 1997; South & Lloyd, 1995).

We did not find evidence that this process differs for husbands and wives, or depends on whether the respondent or the respondent's spouse engaged in EMS. The present study was limited, however, by the relatively small number of cases of infidelity. Consequently, we leave this issue for future studies to resolve with larger sample sizes.

Another limitation of our study is that we were unable to identify all instances of infidelity in the sample. Because infidelity is a private and proscribed act, people may not want to tell researchers about it. Furthermore, some respondents may not know about their spouses' extramarital affairs. For these reasons, reports of EMS contain a good deal of measurement error. Measurement error, combined with the relatively small number of people who admitted EMS, may have lowered the statistical power of our tests, making it especially difficult to detect significant effects. Alternatively, if infidelity became a problem (as defined in our study) in only the most seriously troubled marriages, then our study may have overestimated the strength of the association between infidelity and marital dysfunction.

Another limitation of our study involves the method of sample selection. Although our study is based on a national probability sample of married individuals, we omitted individuals who reported a prior instance of infidelity in 1980 (the first year of the study), as well as individuals who divorced between 1980 and 1983. Consequently, the analytic sample underrepresents people in short-term marriages that ended in divorce. This sample constraint may have influenced our results in ways that are difficult to predict. Nevertheless, marital duration was not related to reports of EMS in the sample (Table 2), and we found no evidence that EMS interacted with duration of marriage in predicting divorce proneness or divorce

(analysis not shown). These findings suggest that our method of sample selection did not bias the results.

Despite these limitations, our findings document the centrality of sexual fidelity in maintaining marital satisfaction and stability. Nock (1998, p. 22) argued that sexual exclusivity is the defining feature of marriage. Violations of this norm appear to be more common among individuals who doubt the long-term viability of their unions. These doubts may lead individuals to think that the traditional rules regulating marriage no longer apply to them. But once the norm of sexual fidelity is violated, prospects for the continued stability of the marriage are lessened considerably. EMS plays a central role in the deterioration of many marriages, and researchers should give greater attention to this process in understanding our current high rate of marital dissolution.

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