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Poortman, Anne-Rigt; Seltzer, Judith A.

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## Parents' Expectations About Childrearing After Divorce: Does Anticipating Difficulty Deter Divorce?

*Divorce is costly for parents because of the challenges of meeting children's economic and socioemotional needs after separation. Using the National Survey of Families and Households (N = 1,935), we investigate whether expected economic and parenting costs deter divorce. Mothers expect higher economic costs than fathers, whereas fathers expect more parenting difficulties. Most parents, however, expect high economic and parenting costs. In a large minority of families, mothers and fathers differ in their expected costs. Parenting costs deter divorce, but economic costs do not once other family characteristics are controlled. When parents disagree, mothers' parenting concerns are a greater barrier to divorce than fathers' concerns. Finally, parenting costs are a greater barrier to divorce for unhappy than happy couples.*

Having children together is one way that married couples demonstrate their long-term commitment to each other and their relationship. Once they have children, the responsibilities of providing for their needs create additional barriers to divorce. Couples with children, particularly young children, are less likely to separate than childless couples (Heaton, 1990; Waite & Lillard, 1991; but see Chan & Halpin, 2002). Both economic and social-psychological theories suggest that adults' decisions about whether to remain married depend on their alternatives to marriage, in particular, whether being single would make their lives better or worse than remaining married (Becker, 1991; Levinger, 1979). For parents, decisions about whether to divorce also take into account what they think would be better for their children, although mothers and fathers may disagree on what children need.

Expectations about whether they will be able to provide for their own and their children's material needs as well as concerns about fulfilling children's socioemotional needs and being a good parent are potentially serious barriers for parents considering divorce. The gendered nature of the divorce experience, however, suggests that mothers and fathers may differ in the kinds of costs they expect to encounter if they were to divorce. Given that children of separated parents are still much more likely to live with their mother than with their father (Cancian & Meyer, 1998; Fox & Kelly, 1995; Halle, 2002), the most salient costs

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Department of Sociology/ICS, Utrecht University, P.O. Box 80104, 3508 TC, Utrecht, The Netherlands (a.poortman@fss.uu.nl).

\*Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles, 264 Haines Hall, Box 951551, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1551.

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for fathers are likely to be parenting costs, whereas mothers are more likely to face economic costs (Kalmijn, 1999). Nonresident fathers face many childrearing challenges after divorce because of the difficulties of arranging time with children through their former wife and the resulting loss of daily contact that is important for children's socialization (Manning & Smock, 1999; Seltzer, 1994; Stephens, 1996). Resident mothers experience relatively large financial declines after divorce because of the loss of their husband's income and the mother's role as primary caregiver (Bianchi, Subaiya, & Kahn, 1999; Smock, 1994). If couples are less likely to divorce when the perceived costs are higher (Becker, 1991; Levinger, 1979), children may reduce the risk of divorce primarily because mothers expect economic costs and fathers expect parenting costs after divorce.

To date, most research on the association between divorce and parenthood or number of children has adopted a demographic approach building on the assumption that children deter divorce because of the higher costs. The more sophisticated of these studies on the association between children and divorce take into account that some of the same factors that affect divorce also affect whether a couple has children; those who are not committed to their relationship may forego having children, and among couples who become parents concerns about their children may prevent divorce (Lillard & Waite, 1993).

Few studies have used data in which parents themselves report about their expectations about the likely costs of divorce. Instead, studies use indirect indicators of expected costs typically focusing on either economic costs for mothers or parenting costs for fathers. For example, Dechter (1992) investigates the effects on divorce of women's expected economic costs. She assessed costs by estimating women's postdivorce economic well-being using a statistical model with longitudinal data on the economic consequences of divorce for women who do divorce, taking into account differences between women who remain married and those who divorce. Kalmijn (1999) explores the effects on perceived marital instability of fathers' expected parenting costs by treating fathers' involvement in childrearing as a proxy for these costs, assuming that highly involved fathers will face higher parenting costs in the event of divorce.

A more general line of research on the perceived barriers to divorce has used direct meas-

ures of perceived costs, such as respondents' reports on the factors that keep their marriage together (Knoester & Booth, 2000; Previti & Amato, 2003) or their perceptions of postdivorce life (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991). Although these subjective evaluations usually include both anticipated economic and parenting costs, previous research has not explicitly focused on parents but has instead combined parents and childless persons. Perhaps, as a result of combining parents and nonparents, these studies have found only weak support for the relevance of expected economic and parenting costs (Heaton & Albrecht; Knoester & Booth). Parents are likely to attach greater weight to the possible costs of divorce when they decide to separate because they are concerned about their children's well-being as well as their own. Dechter (1992), for example, shows that expected economic costs affect mothers' risk of divorce, but these costs do not affect the chances that childless women separate.

This study seeks insight into the effects on divorce of parents' expectations about economic and parenting costs if they were to separate. We extend prior work in four respects. First, we focus only on parents to enable a straightforward evaluation of the effects of their anticipated costs. Second, we examine parents' reports about both economic and parenting costs to determine whether mothers and fathers actually expect different costs and to assess which types of cost weigh more heavily in the decision to divorce. Although the common assumption is that children deter divorce because mothers expect economic costs and fathers expect parenting costs, it is likely that both parents face both costs. Because of changes in the sociolegal environment, mothers are less likely to obtain sole custody of their children at divorce and children have become somewhat more likely to spend significant time in each parent's household or only in their father's home (Buehler & Gerard, 1995; Cancian & Meyer, 1998; Garasky & Meyer, 1996; Meyer & Garasky, 1993). Hence, mothers are increasingly unsure of gaining custody beforehand, and the costs of losing contact with the children might have become more salient to them. As a corollary, when fathers are more likely to have their children living with them after divorce, they are more likely to anticipate large declines in their standard of living.

Even in the still most common case in which mothers have sole custody, mothers are likely to face parenting costs and fathers economic costs.

The noncustodial parent may expect economic costs, for example, because of future child support payments, the loss of economies of scale of a larger household, and the costs of helping to maintain two households instead of only one. In fact, differences in the economic costs of divorce between noncustodial fathers and custodial mothers depend on assumptions about fathers' economic needs and their direct expenditures on children. Gender differences in the costs of divorce to parents are smaller once a broader definition of father's needs and his direct expenditures on children are taken into account (Braver, 1999; but see Melli, 1999). The custodial parent may face parenting costs because of increased responsibilities and pressures as a lone parent or worries about children's sadness and anxiety resulting from the separation and other possible adverse effects of divorce for children (Waite & Lillard, 1991). Concerns about children's well-being are parenting costs that both mothers and fathers are likely to anticipate.

Although the greater salience of economic costs for mothers and parental costs for fathers would suggest that mothers' expected economic costs may matter more for divorce than their expected parenting costs and vice versa for fathers, parents' shared concerns about children's well-being posit the primacy of expected parenting costs. The special bond between parents and children may cause both mothers and fathers to attach more weight to concerns about their roles as parents than to economic difficulties. As a result, both mothers' and fathers' expected parental costs may be greater deterrents of divorce than their respective expected economic costs. Brinig and Allen (2000), for example, argue that each parent's expectations about whether they will get custody are critical determinants of whether the wife or husband is the divorce petitioner. Their study of divorce records suggests that expectations about parenting and children's needs are primary concerns affecting parents' decisions at the time they have decided to divorce. We build on this effort by examining how parents' reports about expected costs affect whether they decide to separate in the first place.

A third contribution of this work is our use of reports from both parents in the same family. Most previous studies have used information from only one spouse. Notable exceptions are studies using data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), the data we use in this article. Sayer and Bianchi (2000) and

Heaton and Blake (1999) show that wives' attitudes have larger effects on marital stability than husbands' attitudes, findings they interpret as support for the view that wives manage marital relationships and, as a consequence, may have a better sense than husbands when the marriage is in trouble. Nock (1995) and Godecker (2002) also use both spouses' reports about the marriage, but neither compares parents' assessments of different types of costs, an important factor if parents respond to expected costs of divorce differently than couples without children, as Dechter's (1992) findings suggest.

We build on past work by using both parents' reports to assess the extent to which the mother and father agree about the expected costs and examine whose expected costs matter more in the divorce decision. Divorce often involves a long decision-making process during which spouses may each evaluate and discuss the costs and benefits of divorce. Parents are likely to treat the decision seriously and to discuss each others' concerns before they separate. The divorce decision is more easily arrived at when parents expect similar costs because their objections to divorce are alike; when both expect high costs, they will be less likely to divorce than if both agree that costs are low. Parents in the same family are likely to have some common ground in their anticipation of how a divorce would affect them and their children initially because of assortative mating and later because of their shared economic assets and debts and their awareness of their children's needs. When the parents' expectations about costs do not coincide, however, the issue is whose considerations matter more for the outcome. Literature on the gendered division of emotional labor in relationships and studies showing that women more often initiate divorce suggest that the mother's expected costs may weigh more heavily than the father's in this case (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Bernard, 1976; Pettit & Bloom, 1984; Thompson & Walker, 1989). Hence, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that when the mother anticipates greater economic or parental costs than the father, divorce is less likely than when the father anticipates higher costs than the mother.

Prior research offers suggestive evidence: Fathers' participation in childrearing, likely to be correlated with their expected costs of divorce, has little direct effect on couples' perceptions of marital stability. Instead, fathers' involvement in childrearing affects marital stability primarily

through mothers' satisfaction in the marriage (Kalmijn, 1999). That women's expectations about the parental costs of divorce are more closely related than men's expectations to perceived marital stability also suggest that mothers' concerns matter more than fathers' (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991). Unfortunately, the latter finding is based on data from only one spouse instead of both spouses.

Finally, we contribute to an understanding of how expected costs deter divorce by distinguishing between happy and unhappy couples to examine whether expected costs deter divorce more when parents are unhappily married. Although it seems likely that unhappy couples on average expect fewer costs than happy couples because the alternatives to marriage become more attractive when the marriage itself is not going that well, expected costs are likely to be a greater barrier to divorce for unhappy couples because of the greater salience of these costs in further stages of the divorce process. People's concerns about what their lives would be like if they divorced may be salient only when the option to divorce has become more than hypothetical, as is the case when a couple is not happily married. Such worries are likely to play less of a role in deterring divorce in happy marriages when the spouses are not actually considering divorce (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991; Knoester & Booth, 2000; Levinger, 1965; Previti & Amato, 2003). Unhappy couples may thus evaluate costs differently or may give a more realistic and reliable assessment of the costs, leading to a stronger association between costs and divorce for unhappy than happy couples. Because there is more at stake for couples with children, the conditioning effect of marital unhappiness might be particularly strong. Prior findings from studies combining parents and nonparents provide mixed evidence for the hypothesis that expected costs are stronger deterrents of divorce in case of an unhappy marriage: Heaton and Albrecht find a stronger effect of expected costs on marital stability for unhappy couples, whereas Knoester and Booth do not.

To gain a better understanding of the effect on divorce of parents' anticipated costs, it is important to control for characteristics of parents and children that affect divorce and may be correlated with parents' perceptions of the economic and parenting costs of divorce. We therefore take into account parents' socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., individual educational attainment, employ-

ment, and wage rates) as well as family characteristics, such as the number, age, and gender composition of children. The analyses we report also adjust for other well-documented social-demographic correlates of divorce, including race-ethnicity, coming from a divorced family, age at marriage, and marital duration.

## METHOD

### *Data*

We use two waves of the NSFH (NSFH1 and NSFH2), a panel survey of adult members of households in the United States (<http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/nsfh/>). During the first wave in 1987 – 1988, 13,007 randomly selected primary respondents were interviewed face-to-face and received a self-administered questionnaire. In addition, the spouse or cohabiting partner completed a less detailed self-administered questionnaire. The sample of primary respondents consists of an oversample of some minority groups, one-parent families and stepfamilies, cohabiting couples, and recently married persons. The response rate for primary respondents at Wave 1 was about 74% (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988). Between 1992 and 1994, members of the original sample were reinterviewed. Current and former spouses and cohabiting partners as well as some other family members were also interviewed. The response rate for primary respondents in Wave 2 was approximately 82% (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996).

Given our research purposes, we limit our analysis to respondents who were married at the first interview ( $N = 5,354$ , excluding 51 respondents or .01% with ambiguous information about their marital status at the second interview) and who had at least one biological child who was still younger than 18 years at the second interview (remaining  $N = 2,706$ , i.e., 49% of the respondents who were married at the first interview are excluded by this requirement). We restrict our attention to families with minor children at the second interview because of our focus on parents for whom the consequences of divorce for children are most salient. The analysis uses 1,935 cases in which both mothers and fathers answered the Wave 1 questions about what their lives would be like if they were to divorce.

The restriction to families in which both parents reported their expectations about their post-divorce lives excludes 28% of the sample that met

other eligibility requirements. Just over half of the omitted cases are excluded because the spouse did not participate in Wave 1 of the study ( $n = 420$ , 54% of the omitted eligible cases). The remainder is lost because of missing or incomplete information about expected costs on the self-administered questionnaire that included questions about sensitive topics, such as marital happiness and expectations about divorce ( $n = 351$ , 46%). For the remaining sample of 1,935 cases, fewer than 2% of the cases had missing data on other variables used in the analyses except for income data (about 11% missing). We assigned the mean for continuous variables or the most common category for discrete variables when data were missing. We include in the multivariate analyses a dummy variable indicating whether data on family income are missing.

Respondents whose spouses did not participate in the study at Wave 1 reported much lower levels of marital happiness than those whose spouses did participate (Sweet, 1989), suggesting that the subsample we use in our analysis underrepresents parents who are at the greatest risk of divorce. Within our sample, 258 families separated or divorced (12% of the weighted sample) between 1987–1988 and the follow-up interview in 1992–1994. Our analysis uses weighted data. We use the NSFH weight designed to adjust the Wave 1 sample of married couples to the age, gender, and race-ethnic composition of the U.S. married population. Results of extensive preliminary analyses of unweighted data are consistent with the major findings we report.

#### *Measures of Parents' Expected Costs, Marital Unhappiness, and Control Variables*

Parents' expected economic and parenting costs were reported in the self-administered questionnaire at Wave 1 in response to the 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?* Parents evaluated six aspects of life: standard of living, social life, career opportunities, overall happiness, sex life, and being a parent. Respondents chose from the answer categories: 1 = *much better*, 2 = *better*, 3 = *same*, 4 = *worse*, and 5 = *much worse*. To measure parents' expected economic and parenting costs, we use respondents' answers about *stan-*

*dard of living and being a parent*, respectively. In preliminary analyses, we found that including other dimensions of expected costs did not alter our substantive conclusions. We restrict our attention to these dimensions because of their importance for theories about parents' divorce decisions. The use of single items reduces the reliability of our measures for economic and parental costs but is not uncommon in research on subjective barriers to divorce using survey data (e.g., Heaton & Albrecht, 1991; Knoester & Booth, 2000). Although the phrase *standard of living* does not refer explicitly to economic costs, this phrase is frequently used to refer to economic welfare in common parlance about the effects of divorce. Parents' concerns about being a parent may also take into account worries about whether they can provide for the children's material needs. Nevertheless, we think it is likely that parents distinguished these concerns about childrearing and economic welfare because of the close proximity on the questionnaire of the standard of living and being a parent items.

Wave 1 of the NSFH provides information about how happy each parent was in their marriage as well as a variety of social and demographic characteristics associated with marital disruption. Marital happiness is measured by responses to the self-administered question: *Taking things all together, how would you describe your marriage? Circle the number that best describes your marriage.* Respondents had a choice of 7 points on a scale anchored by 1 = *very unhappy* and 7 = *very happy*. Responses were highly skewed. We constructed a composite dichotomous variable indicating whether either spouse described the marriage as *less than happy* (scores of 1–5) under the assumption that only one spouse's unhappiness with the marriage is sufficient to prompt discussions about divorce, leading to greater salience of the expected costs. Empirically, the effects on marital disruption of mothers' and fathers' reports of marital happiness did not differ at a statistically significant level (not shown). Of the 1,935 marriages in our sample, 743 (38%) were described by either spouse as less than happy and the remaining 1,192 as (very) happy. We refer for convenience to our constructed dichotomy as a distinction between unhappy and happy marriages, although the category of unhappy marriages may also include marriages in which either spouse gives the marriage a score that

might be considered moderately happy (but note that only the end points of the response scale are labeled). We experimented with other cutoff points to distinguish happy from unhappy couples, a continuous measurement of unhappiness, and other measures for the stage of the divorce process, such as spouses' assessment of the probability of divorce, with similar results to those reported below. Couple relationships are multidimensional, so that even happy couples have some chance of divorce, although it is considerably less than for unhappy or only moderately happy couples (Booth & Amato, 2001; Booth, Johnson, White, & Edwards, 1985; Sayer & Bianchi, 2000).

Our multivariate analyses also take account of parent and family characteristics that affect divorce and are likely to be associated with parents' perceptions of the expected costs of divorce. We control for socioeconomic status (i.e., parents' educational attainment, employment status, hourly wage rates, and family income) and children's characteristics (i.e., number of biological children younger than 18 years, the gender composition of the couple's biological children, age of youngest child, and whether there are stepchildren in the household) because these variables are particularly likely to be correlated with parents' perceptions of economic and parental costs. The control variables also include well-known social-demographic correlates of divorce: race-ethnicity, age at marriage, duration of marriage, coming from a divorced family, church attendance, prior cohabitation, whether the parents had experienced divorce previously, and the time interval between the two NSFH interviews. When data were available for both spouses' characteristics and correlations between them were high, we controlled for only the mother's characteristics (e.g., race-ethnicity, age at marriage, and prior cohabiting relationship). When correlations were not very high, for instance for coming from a divorced family, we tested whether the effects for the mother and father differed. When differences between the coefficients for the separate mothers' and fathers' variables were not statistically significant, we constructed composite variables for parsimony except for socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., education, employment status, and wage rate) because theory predicts gender differences in their effects (Becker, 1991).

We explored whether the association between duration of marriage and marital disruption was

nonlinear. Although the risk of divorce in the general population increases during the first years of marriage and declines at later marital durations (Morgan & Rindfuss, 1985; Ono, 1998), our preliminary analyses support a linear specification. This is probably because most couples in our sample had already passed the period in marriage when the risks of disruption are particularly high. The mean duration of marriage at Wave 1 was over 11 years. Details about measurement, means, and standard deviations for all control variables are shown in Table A1.

## RESULTS

The upper panel of Table 1 shows that both parents expect their standard of living to be (much) worse. Only a minority of mothers (about 4%) and fathers (about 10%) think that their standard of living would improve if they were to separate. In contrast, over half of the fathers and almost three quarters of the mothers think their standard of living would be (much) worse after marital dissolution. Mothers expect higher economic costs than fathers and this difference is statistically significant. Although this gender difference is not surprising in light of the well-known difference in the economic consequences of divorce (e.g., Bianchi et al., 1999; Smock, 1994), a considerable percentage of fathers (54%) also expect a decline in their standard of living.

The lower panel of Table 1 shows that about 60% of the mothers and 70% of the fathers think parenting would be worse. Fathers' expectations are consistent with the more common pattern of mothers receiving physical custody of children at divorce and evidence from studies in which fathers express concerns about losing their children (Braver & O'Connell, 1998). Although perceived parenting costs are significantly higher for fathers than for mothers, the difference is smaller than for economic costs. Both mothers and fathers anticipate that divorce would make it more difficult to fulfill their responsibilities to children. When the two types of costs are compared, it also shows that mothers expect significantly higher economic than parenting costs, whereas the reverse holds for fathers.

Table 2 shows the extent to which parents in the same family anticipate the same costs. We compared parents' reports about expected costs using dichotomies for each dimension indicating whether the parent thought life would be worse or

Table 1. *Married Mothers' and Fathers' Expectations About Standard of Living and Parenting if They Were to Divorce*

Expectation	Mothers (%)	Fathers (%)
Standard of living		
Much better	.4	1.7
Better	3.8	8.4
Same	24.1	35.7
Worse	46.8	42.1
Much worse	24.9	12.1
<i>M</i>	3.92	3.54 <sup>a</sup>
% worse or much worse	71.8	54.1 <sup>a</sup>
Parenting		
Much better	1.0	1.4
Better	4.1	2.5
Same	34.8	27.0
Worse	32.2	34.9
Much worse	28.0	34.3
<i>M</i>	3.82 <sup>b</sup>	3.98 <sup>a,c</sup>
% worse or much worse	60.2 <sup>b</sup>	69.1 <sup>a,c</sup>

*Note:* Sample is parents who were married at first interview and who had at least one biological child younger than 18 years at the second interview. Percentages may not equal to 100 because of rounding. Data are weighted. Unweighted  $N = 1,935$ .

<sup>a</sup>Difference between mothers and fathers is significant ( $p \leq .05$ ). <sup>b</sup>Difference between expected economic and parenting costs is significant for mothers ( $p \leq .05$ ). <sup>c</sup>Difference between expected economic and parenting costs is significant for fathers ( $p \leq .05$ ).

much worse compared to much better, better, or the same. The cross classification of the reports from mothers and fathers is shown in Table 2. In a little over half of the families ( $13.8 + 39.7 = 53.5\%$ ), the mother and father agree in their assessments of the likely economic consequences. Most of the parents who agree on the expected economic consequences of divorce think that their lives would be (much) worse. About a quarter of those who agree about the economic consequences, however, think that their lives would be about the same or (much) better ( $13.8/53.5$ ). Table 2 also shows substantial differences between mothers and fathers in the same families; in about 46% ( $32.1 + 14.4$ ) of the families, mothers and fathers have different perceptions of their likely economic costs. In these families, more than twice as many mothers as fathers expect their standard of living to be (much) worse ( $32.1\%$  compared to  $14.4\%$ ).

Table 2. *Agreement Between Married Mothers' and Fathers' Expectations About Standard of Living and Parenting if They Were to Divorce*

Agreement	Standard of Living (%)	Parenting (%)
Both expect it will not be worse	13.8	16.4
Both expect it will be worse	39.7	45.7
Mother expects worse, father does not	32.1	14.5
Father expects worse, mother does not	14.4	23.4
Total	100.0	100.0

*Note:* Sample is parents who were married at first interview and who had at least one biological child younger than 18 years at the second interview. Data are weighted. Unweighted  $N = 1,935$ .

Parents in the same family tend to expect the same consequences for being a parent. Gender differences in parents' roles notwithstanding, parents in the same family are responding to their shared children and other common circumstances of their family life. Sixty-two percent agree about the consequences, and, as with economic costs, about a quarter of those who agree think that being a parent would be the same or better if they were to divorce. Among the nearly 40% of families in which mothers and fathers assess the costs of divorce differently, fathers are much more likely than mothers to think that being a parent would be (much) worse ( $23.4\%$  compared to  $14.5\%$ ). For both dimensions of life, standard of living and being a parent, parents in a substantial percentage of families anticipate different costs of divorce. These differences in expected costs reflect spouses' conflicting interests in whether to remain married.

The next steps in the analysis investigate the effects on divorce of parents' expected costs. We first examine which costs constitute greater barriers to divorce and whose costs matter more in case of conflicting interests. The analysis takes account of objective characteristics of families, such as income, employment, and age and gender composition of the children, which are likely to be correlated with subjective assessments of expected costs of divorce. In this first step, we include all couples, regardless of marital quality, to assess the effects of perceived costs on marital



stability in light of past research showing that even happily married couples sometimes divorce (Booth & Amato, 2001). The analysis, however, controls for the level of marital happiness. In the second step, we investigate whether expected costs are greater deterrents of divorce in unhappy (or less happy) than in happy marriages.

Table 3 shows the results from a series of weighted logistic regressions of marital dissolution on expected costs. The first two models show the zero-order associations (i.e., no control variables included) between divorce and separate measures for each parent's expected economic and parenting costs (Model 1) and the similarity between parents in the same family in their expected economic and parenting costs (Model 2). Both types of costs are simultaneously included in these logistic regressions for parsimony. Preliminary analyses (results not shown) reveal that the effects on divorce of perceived costs become slightly larger if economic and parental costs are analyzed separately with minor changes in statistical significance. The smaller effects if both types of costs are included are because the two dimensions of costs are correlated, as might be expected (Pearson's  $r = .30$  for mothers and  $.26$  for fathers).

From Model 1, it can be seen that mothers' expectations that their standard of living would be worse if they divorced reduce the likelihood of subsequent marital disruption. The odds of divorce are 33% lower for those who anticipate economic costs. The effect of fathers' expectations about their standard of living is smaller, with the odds of divorce 17% less than for fathers who do not expect economic costs, but the effect for fathers is not statistically significant. When mothers and fathers anticipate parental difficulties, the risk of divorce is reduced even more than for anticipated economic difficulties, and the effects of parenting costs are significant. The odds of divorce are 54% lower when mothers expect that parenting would be worse, and 35% lower if fathers expect parenting to be worse. It appears that perceptions of parenting costs may be a greater deterrent of divorce than economic costs, and that mothers' costs may weigh more heavily in the divorce decision than fathers' costs. We compared the coefficients for the two types of costs and for mothers and fathers using Wald tests for the equality of parameters (not shown). For both mothers and fathers, the effect of parenting costs does not differ significantly from the effect of economic costs. In addition, for both types of

costs, the effects of mothers' costs are not significantly larger than the effects of fathers' costs.

To assess whose costs matter more, however, it is better to focus on couples where parents' expectations about the costs diverge because the question about whose costs matter more is particularly relevant when parents have conflicting interests. The results for Model 2 show that parents who agree that their standard of living would be worse if they divorced are almost two times less likely to divorce than when both parents think their standard of living would be better or at least no worse. Similarly, divorce is more likely if only one parent thinks their standard of living would be worse. Contrary to our expectation that the mother's anticipated costs would matter more than the father's, there is only a small and insignificant difference between families where the mother expects higher economic costs than the father and families where fathers anticipate greater costs (test statistics not shown). There is a similar pattern for the effects of parenting costs. When both parents or when one parent anticipates high costs, divorce is much less likely than when parents agree the costs are not as severe. When parents disagree, mothers' expectations that being a parent would be worse seem to deter divorce more than fathers' expectations, but the difference is not statistically significant (not shown).

In Models 3 and 4, we examine whether these patterns persist once other characteristics that affect the likelihood of marital disruption and perceived costs of divorce are taken into account. Because our focus is on the role of expectations and the control variables are primarily added to examine whether parents' expected costs continue to deter divorce when controls are included, we do not discuss the effects of the control variables in detail. They are generally in line with findings from prior studies. Note that whether a couple is unhappily married has a very large effect on divorce. Unhappy couples are more than twice as likely as happy couples to experience divorce.

The results for Model 3, including separate measures for each parent's costs, show that neither mothers' nor fathers' anticipated economic costs are barriers to divorce once other well-known divorce determinants are taken into account. In contrast to the results for Model 1, the net effect on divorce of mothers' expected economic costs is not statistically significant once socioeconomic status and other individual and

Table 3. Odds Ratios From Logistic Regression of Marital Dissolution on Parents' Expectations and Family Characteristics

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Expectations about standard of living				
Mother expects worse (1 = yes)	.673*		.780	
Father expects worse (1 = yes)	.828		.972	
Both expect life will not be worse (omitted)				
Both expect worse		.536**		.721
Mother expects worse, father does not		.529**		.586*
Father expects worse, mother does not		.600*		.659
Expectations about being a parent				
Mother expects worse (1 = yes)	.461**		.584**	
Father expects worse (1 = yes)	.646**		.640**	
Both expect life will not be worse (omitted)				
Both expect worse		.299**		.377**
Mother expects worse, father does not		.417**		.486**
Father expects worse, mother does not		.606*		.570*
Control variables				
Unhappy marriage (1 = yes)			2.372**	2.417**
Mother's age at marriage (years)			.944*	.945*
Marital duration at Wave 1 (years)			.907**	.907**
Years between Wave 1 and 2			1.871**	1.876**
Mother is African American			.922	.893
Mother high school or less			.851	.855
Father high school or less			1.227	1.245
Mother ever cohabited			1.073	1.072
Either parent experienced divorce in childhood			1.359	1.361
Either parent divorced prior to current marriage			1.596*	1.618*
Number of biological children younger than 18 years			1.333*	1.331*
Youngest biological child younger than 5 years			.678	.677
All biological children younger than 18 years are sons			1.316	1.316
All biological children younger than 18 years are daughters			1.791*	1.799*
Stepchildren in household			.784	.776
Mother attends church at least weekly			.655*	.658*
Mother is employed			1.457*	1.474*
Father is employed			.562	.569
Mother's hourly wage rate			.991	.990
Father's hourly wage rate			1.001	1.001
Family income (in \$10,000)			1.041*	1.041*
Family income is missing			1.151	1.164

Note. Sample is parents who were married at first interview and who had at least one biological child younger than 18 years at the second interview. Cases with missing data on wage rates were recoded to the parent-specific mean. Data are weighted. Unweighted  $N = 1,935$ .

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ .

family characteristics are controlled statistically. We investigated whether the decline in statistical significance was because parents in happy marriages perceive higher costs than those in unhappy marriages. Taking account of marital happiness alone, however, does not explain the decline in the effect of mothers' expected eco-

nomie costs on divorce. Mothers' economic concerns continue to be a significant barrier to divorce when unhappiness is the only control variable (results not shown).

In contrast to economic concerns, parents' expectations about the difficulties of being a parent after divorce do have a net effect on whether they

actually divorce. When mothers expect that parenting will be worse, couples have a 42% lower odds of divorce than when the mother does not expect parenting to be worse. Fathers' expected parenting costs reduce the odds of divorce by 36%. Although these results suggest that parenting costs weigh more heavily than economic costs in the decision to divorce, the differences in the effects of economic and parenting costs for mothers and for fathers still are not large enough to be statistically significant (mothers' costs  $F = 1.22$ , *ns*; fathers' costs  $F = 2.41$ , *ns*). In addition, mothers' anticipated difficulties in parenting are not greater deterrents of divorce than fathers' parenting concerns; the effects of mothers' and fathers' expectations about postdivorce parenting do not differ significantly ( $F = .16$ , *ns*). We investigate this further in Model 4, which considers parents' agreement about expected costs.

Model 4 in Table 3 shows the net effects of similarity between parents in their assessments of the costs of divorce. Compared to parents who agree that economic costs would not be that high, families where one or both parents expect economic difficulties have lower odds of divorce. Only when mothers expect the economic costs to be high and fathers do not, however, is the likelihood of divorce significantly less than when parents agree that divorce would not be costly. The coefficient for the other type of disagreement, when the father expects the economic cost to be high but the mother does not, is insignificant and somewhat smaller than when mothers expect high economic costs. The test for equality of coefficients, however, does not support our hypothesis that mothers' expected costs would matter more than fathers' when parents disagree ( $F = .23$ ). Parents' expectations that being a parent would be worse if they divorced have a consistent negative net effect on divorce whether mothers and fathers agree about this cost of divorce. The parameters for Model 4 show that compared to families in which both parents do not expect high costs, all other types of families in which at least one parent expects parenting to be worse are significantly less likely to divorce. Families in which both parents expect high parenting costs are least likely to divorce. Compared to families in which both parents anticipate few costs, when parents disagree about the likely parenting costs, the odds of divorce are 51% lower when the mother expects higher parenting costs than the father expects,

and 43% lower when the father expects higher costs than the mother. Although this pattern is consistent with our hypothesis that mothers' parental concerns matter more for divorce than fathers', the difference between mothers' and fathers' concerns when they anticipate different parenting costs is not statistically significant ( $F = .37$ ).

One reason for the general lack of statistical support for our hypotheses in the full sample is that expectations about the likely costs of divorce may be more salient and therefore more important barriers to divorce when at least one spouse is unhappy in the marriage. Table 4 shows the results of weighted logistic regressions in which we interacted marital happiness with parents' reports about expected costs and each of the control variables to determine whether expected costs are more likely to deter divorce when a couple is unhappily married. Model 1 treats each parent's expectations separately, and Model 2 takes into account when mothers and fathers anticipate different costs. These models parallel Models 3 and 4, respectively, in Table 3. The results for Model 1 in Table 4 show that neither mothers' nor fathers' expected economic costs deter divorce in either happy or unhappy couples at a statistically significant level. These effects do not differ significantly between happy and unhappy couples.

A different pattern emerges for parenting costs than for economic costs. When couples are happily married, mothers' expected parenting costs do not affect the chance of divorce, whereas fathers' costs do. For unhappy couples, the pattern reverses. Mothers' expected parenting costs strongly deter divorce, whereas fathers' do not. The difference in the effects of mothers' expectations between happy and unhappy couples is statistically significant. The greater effect of mothers' expected parenting costs for unhappily married couples is in line with our hypothesis that expected costs are stronger deterrents of divorce in unhappy than in happy marriages. The seemingly larger effect of fathers' parenting costs in happy couples compared to unhappy couples is opposite of our expectations, but the effects do not differ significantly by parents' marital quality. The greater deterrent effect of fathers' expected parenting costs than mothers' in happy marriages is statistically significant ( $F = 5.98$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ). In happy marriages, fathers' anticipated parenting costs may deter divorce more than mothers' because fathers' expectations reflect both anticipation of difficulties

Table 4. Odds Ratios From Logistic Regression of Marital Dissolution on Parents' Expected Economic and Parenting Costs by Whether Couples Have a Happy Marriage

Expected Costs	Model 1		Model 2	
	Happy	Unhappy	Happy	Unhappy
Standard of living				
Mother expects worse	.810	.703		
Father expects worse	.945	1.026		
Both expect worse <sup>a</sup>			.682	.724
Mother expects worse, father does not <sup>a</sup>			.599	.580
Father expects worse, mother does not <sup>a</sup>			.599	.804
Being a parent				
Mother expects worse	1.387	.311** <sup>b</sup>		
Father expects worse	.558*	.670		
Both expect worse <sup>a</sup>			.774	.221** <sup>b</sup>
Mother expects worse, father does not <sup>a</sup>			1.312	.206** <sup>b</sup>
Father expects worse, mother does not <sup>a</sup>			.541	.555*

Note: Sample is parents who were married at first interview and who had at least one biological child younger than 18 years at the second interview. Analyses controlled for variables in Table 3. Data are weighted. Unweighted *n* for happy marriages is 1,192 and for unhappy marriages 743. Tests of coefficient differences by marital happiness are from pooled models with all variables interacted with marital happiness.

<sup>a</sup>Omitted category is both parents do not expect life to be worse. <sup>b</sup>Coefficient differs significantly between unhappy and happy marriages ( $p \leq .05$ ).

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ .

in being a parent after divorce as well as greater satisfaction derived from fathers' current interactions with their children. Parents, especially mothers, are more satisfied with their marriage when fathers are involved with their children, and involved fathers are those most likely to be aware of the potential costs of divorce (Kalmijn, 1999).

Additional analyses (not shown) indicate that married fathers indeed anticipate higher parenting costs if they play more frequently with their children and when parents have fewer disagreements about their children. In further work not shown here, we added two variables to Model 1 (Table 4), fathers' involvement with children and parents' disagreement about their children. Although the effect on divorce of mothers' anticipated parenting costs remains approximately the

same, for happy couples, the effect of fathers' anticipated costs becomes statistically insignificant; the direction of the effect remains the same. For unhappy couples, however, fathers' anticipated parenting costs significantly deter divorce once fathers' involvement in childrearing and parental disagreement about the children before divorce are taken into account. Our data are too sparse to address this issue conclusively, but these results suggest that fathers' expectations about postdivorce parenting costs may mean something different in happy than in unhappy marriages.

The parameters for Model 1 also show that, for unhappy couples, mothers' expected parenting costs weigh more heavily in the decision to divorce than mothers' expectations about their standard of living ( $F = 5.18, p \leq .05$ ). We also find that mothers' perceived parental costs are greater barriers to divorce than fathers' parental concerns ( $F = 5.50, p \leq .05$ ).

The results for Model 2 in Table 4 showing the effects of similarity in parents' expected costs provide additional evidence that the effect on divorce of anticipated economic difficulties is limited. Even for unhappily married couples, the data indicate no significant effect on divorce of either parent's expectations that their standard of living would be worse if they divorced, whether or not they agree about the costs, compared to families in which both parents expect no costs. Contrary to our hypothesis, the effects of economic costs are no greater for unhappy than for happy couples. The results for parenting costs are more in line with our expectations. Whereas parents' concerns about taking care of children after divorce do not affect the likelihood of divorce among happily married couples, these concerns strongly deter divorce when the couple is unhappy. If either spouse in an unhappy couple thinks that being a parent would be worse if they divorced, divorce is less likely than if parents agree that this aspect of their lives would be the same or better if they separated. Compared to couples in which neither parent expects parenting costs, divorce is much less likely when both parents expect high costs or when the mother expects higher parenting costs than the father. These effects are significantly different for couples in happy and unhappy marriages, consistent with our expectation that costs are more salient for unhappy couples.

Finally, Wald tests indicate that, for parents in a happy marriage who anticipate different

parenting costs of divorce, fathers' expectations that being a parent would be worse are a significantly greater barrier to divorce than mothers' expectations ( $F = 5.26, p \leq .05$ ). The coefficients for parenting costs in happy marriages, however, were not significant initially. Part of the stronger effect of fathers' parental costs in happy marriages might be because parental costs measure more than costs alone when couples are getting along well. In contrast, for parents, in unhappy marriages who disagree about the likely costs of divorce, mothers' expectations that being a parent would be worse if they divorced are a greater deterrent of divorce than fathers' expectations ( $F = 5.90, p \leq .05$ ). The greater importance of the mother's parental concerns than the father's when parents in unhappy marriages disagree confirms our expectation that mothers' anticipated costs weigh more heavily in the divorce decision.

#### DISCUSSION

Economic and sociological theories suggest that children lower the risk of divorce because both parents anticipate difficulties in postdivorce childrearing. Yet, the gendered nature of family roles means that mothers and fathers face different costs of divorce. Differences between mothers' and fathers' economic well-being and custody arrangements at divorce suggest that mothers may be more concerned about the high economic costs of divorce and fathers may be more concerned about the difficulties they would face in being a parent after divorce. We elaborated upon this common, but rarely tested, assumption that children deter divorce because mothers anticipate economic and fathers parenting costs at divorce.

First, we argued that both mothers and fathers may expect economic as well as parenting costs, and we examined which costs matter more in the decision for mothers and fathers. We find that mothers and fathers do expect different costs. Mothers generally expect greater economic difficulties than fathers, whereas higher percentages of fathers than mothers expect parenting costs. Although this gender difference is consistent with the predominant practice of children living with their mothers after divorce, we also find that the majority of mothers expect high parenting costs, just as about half of the fathers expect considerable economic costs. Most mothers and fathers anticipate that divorce

would worsen both their economic situation and their ability to fulfill the responsibilities of being a parent. The salience of concerns about both standard of living and parenting for both mothers and fathers raise questions about which costs matter more for divorce, economic or parenting costs. Results from our multivariate analyses suggest that expected parental costs tend to be more important deterrents of divorce than economic costs. Parents' economic concerns were of little importance, whereas parents' concerns that being a parent would be worse if they divorced reduced the likelihood of marital disruption, although the differences in the effects of expected economic and parenting costs did not always reach statistical significance. Despite the greater salience of economic costs for mothers, the special bond between parents and their children apparently leads mothers, as well as fathers, to attach greater weight to their concerns about their parenting role and the effects of divorce on children than to the possible adverse economic consequences.

Furthermore, we argued that parents' expectations about costs may not always coincide, and we hypothesized that mothers' concerns about life after divorce would override fathers' concerns when their perceptions about costs differ because of women's role as emotional caretakers in families and the related finding from past research that wives are more likely to initiate divorce than husbands (e.g., Bernard, 1976; Pettit & Bloom, 1984; Thompson & Walker, 1989). We find that only in some families do parents anticipate similar costs of divorce. Not surprisingly, most who agreed expect that their standard of living and parenting role would be worse than if they remained married. In a substantial percentage of families, however, mothers and fathers anticipate different costs, suggesting the possibility of conflicting interests if they were to face a decision about whether to divorce. Findings as to the question of whose concerns, mothers' or fathers', are more important when parents have conflicting interests are in line with our hypothesis about the gendered division of emotional labor. We found that the mother's expected costs weigh more heavily in the decision to divorce than the father's when parents assess the costs of divorce differently. In nearly all instances, we found that when the mother expects greater costs than the father, divorce is less likely than when the father expects greater costs than the mother. Mothers' worries about parenting

costs in particular matter more than fathers' parenting concerns. This is not to say that fathers' concerns are irrelevant, but when parents differ in their perceptions of costs, mothers' concerns are more likely to delay or prevent divorce than fathers' concerns.

Finally, we expected that anticipated costs would be more important among couples who are unhappy in their marriages, a time when divorce is more likely. Our results suggest that the potential costs of divorce have a greater effect on marital dissolution when divorce is already more likely because of other aspects of the marital relationship. We found that anticipated difficulties in being a parent deter divorce more when the couple is less happily or unhappily married than when the couple is happy together. The greater effect of parenting costs in unhappy marriages supports our claim that perceptions of potential barriers to divorce become more salient and easier to articulate when the possibility of divorce is more than hypothetical (e.g., Levinger, 1965). Although earlier findings on this issue were inconsistent (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991; Knoester & Booth, 2000), evidence from our study helps clarify this claim by focusing on parents, for whom more is at stake than for childless couples.

Taken together, our findings challenge the common notion that children deter divorce because mothers expect high economic costs and fathers high parenting costs. First, gender differences in anticipated economic and parenting costs are not as great as is assumed according to this line of reasoning because the majority of both mothers and fathers expect to face economic and parenting costs in the event of divorce. That both parents expect a decline in their standard of living is consistent with the higher costs they would face simply because of the legal expenses of divorce and the costs of establishing two separate households. Fathers, who are likely to become nonresident parents, also face the expected costs associated with the loss of direct control over the portion of their earnings they would expect to pay to the children's mother as child support (Braver et al., 1993).

Second, and more importantly, we found that economic costs were less important than parenting costs for deterring divorce, once mothers' and fathers' economic resources, such as wage rates, employment, and income, were taken into account. The unexpectedly small, and sometimes insignificant, association between mothers' sub-

jective economic concerns and divorce is contrary to received wisdom and to divorced wives' own reports about the financial difficulty of adjusting to divorce (Kitson, 1992). Mothers' concerns about economic costs were, however, a more important predictor of divorce than fathers' economic concerns. That mothers' expected parental costs trump their concerns about economic costs is consistent with mothers' greater involvement in childrearing before divorce, with findings from other studies that expectations about custody influence whether the wife or husband files for divorce (Brinig & Allen, 2000), and that in the extreme, mothers are willing to trade economic resources for custody of their children (Arendell, 1986; Weitzman, 1985). Fathers' concern about the difficulties of being a parent if they were to divorce also matter for marital stability, but their concerns are less important than mothers' when parents differ in their perceptions of the consequences of divorce.

That expected costs are a greater deterrent for couples in which one spouse is relatively unhappy, suggests a process by which happily married couples think very little about what life would be like if they were not together. Once one spouse considers potential alternatives, this increases the salience of likely costs (and benefits) to the current relationship. If our speculation is correct, an important question for future research is to identify when and why couples or individual spouses begin to explicitly consider what life would be like if they were no longer married.

Our study is one of the first to use subjective reports of both parents from the same family about anticipated economic and parental costs. Weighed against this strength, however, are some weaknesses. Most notably, our measures of marital quality and anticipated costs were based on single items, which makes them less reliable than would be ideal. In addition, the wording of the questions about what life would be like if they were not married might have been misinterpreted by respondents because the phrase *standard of living* does not refer explicitly to economic costs, and because concerns about being a parent may refer to economic concerns about being able to provide for the children. Although other research has relied on similar measures of anticipated costs (e.g., Heaton & Albrecht, 1991; Knoester & Booth, 2000), future research would benefit from a more nuanced approach to how women and

men understand their likely costs and benefits of marriage and divorce.

Our analysis also uses longitudinal data in which expected costs are reported prior to when the outcome, divorce or marital stability, is observed. This is a great improvement over some previous research, which has had to rely on cross-sectional data or on information about parents who have already filed for divorce. This improvement notwithstanding, one must still be cautious about drawing causal inferences about the relationships among the key variables. For instance, we argue that happiness in the marriage affects the salience of alternatives to the relationship. Recognition of alternatives to the marriage, however, such as meeting another person who is an attractive potential new spouse, might also predict how happy someone is in a marriage. We also do not consider whether perceptions of anticipated costs of divorce affect the characteristics of husbands and wives that we treated as control variables, such as mothers' employment and family income. Finally, we do not take account of other characteristics, for instance religious beliefs, that might affect both perceptions of the likely costs of divorce and the probability of divorcing, although we do include a wide array of individual and family characteristics in the analysis, including mother's frequent church attendance.

Keeping these limitations in mind, our findings contribute to an understanding of divorce by identifying the conditions under which parents' costs deter divorce, taking into account that mothers and fathers may disagree on the type of costs they anticipate and the degree to which each parent's attitudes affect divorce. Future work should consider the extent to which parents differ from those who do not have children in their conflicting perceptions of the likely costs of divorce for aspects of postdivorce life that are common to parents and nonparents. Our study also provides further evidence that, on the face of it, women's attitudes affect marital stability more than men's do. Like other studies that rely on survey reports, our research suffers from an absence of information about the dynamics of couple relationships, particularly aspects of men's behavior that may motivate women to end their marriages (Brinig & Allen, 2000). Thinking critically about how to improve survey designs and combine survey data with observational and in-depth interview data will help address this gap.

## NOTE

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Table A1. Means and Standard Deviations of Control Variables

Control Variables	M	SD
Unhappy marriage (1 = yes)	.384	—
Mother's age at marriage (years)	22.139	4.363
Marital duration at Wave 1 (years)	11.031	6.936
Years between Wave 1 and 2	5.838	.495
Mother is African American (1 = she describes herself as African American and 0 = otherwise)	.106	—
Mother high school or less (1 = yes)	.493	—
Father high school or less (1 = yes)	.447	—
Mother ever cohabited (with current or other partners; 1 = yes)	.296	—
Either parent experienced divorce in childhood (1 = yes)	.218	—
Either parent divorced or separated prior to current marriage (1 = yes)	.237	—
Number of biological children younger than 18 years	1.871	.978
Youngest biological child younger than 5 years (1 = yes)	.549	—
All biological children younger than 18 years are sons (1 = yes)	.337	—
All biological children younger than 18 years are daughters (1 = yes)	.298	—
Stepchildren in household (1 = yes)	.111	—
Mother attends church at least weekly (1 = yes)	.414	—
Mother is employed (1 = yes)	.648	—
Father is employed (1 = yes)	.940	—
Mother's hourly wage rate for current or last job	9.129	6.120
Father's hourly wage rate for current or last job	13.956	13.758
Family income (in \$10,000)	4.299	4.174
Family income is missing (1 = yes)	.107	—

Note: Sample is parents who were married at first interview and who had at least one biological child younger than 18 years at the second interview. Cases with missing data on wage rates were recoded to the parent-specific mean. Data are unweighted (N = 1,935).