

PRESS RELEASE

RISKY BUSINESS

Landing that great job at a multinational, 10,000 employee-strong software giant may promise great things for your career, and your bank account. But it could be risky for your marriage. In research to be published in the August *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Drs. Scott South, Dr. Katherine Trent, and Research Assistant Yang Shen, at the State University of New York Albany, found that working with a large number of potential partners may put your marriage at risk. The authors conclude "... that satisfied and dissatisfied spouses alike remain, consciously or not, 'in the marriage market'."

In their study, researchers South, Trent, and Shen cite previous work showing that at least one-third, and perhaps even more, of recently dissolved marriages were preceded by an affair involving one of the spouses. Engaging in an adulterous relationship is probably a strong indicator that a married partner has encountered a desirable alternative to his or her current spouse. In other words, one partner has decided to make a romantic change. If this partner works in an environment or lives in an area with a large number of eligible people of the opposite sex, the likelihood of a divorce is increased.

Exposure to many alternative partners increases the risk of divorce separate from other risk factors such as length of marriage, age at marriage, number of children, and metropolitan area residence. Given a large number of

choices in their community or workplace, spouses in long-term marriages and with children were just as likely as recently married, childless spouses to dissolve their marriage. The more opportunities the environment provided for a change in partners, the more likely spouses were to divorce.

Other studies of marriage dissolution have examined internal causes such as communication style, love and affection, and abuse. According to Dr. South, his study suggests that researchers and counselors should also turn their attention to factors outside of the marriage, especially opportunities for each spouse to meet other possible romantic partners.

Dr. Lynn White, researcher in divorce at The University of Nebraska's Department of Sociology, commented, "The authors make a strong case that the likelihood of divorcing depends not only on personal and relationship characteristics but also on the social and economic environment in which they live. They demonstrate that marriages are more likely to dissolve when the community sex ratio makes either husbands or wives a hot prospect."

Author South suggests that marriages might have a better chance of success if each partner works in a same-sex environment. However, Dr. White cautions, "To use these findings as a basis for choosing occupations would send us back to a situation where women and men are restricted to sex segregated occupations. Contemporary marriages have to be sustained in a climate of increased risk." It seems the workplace is just one of those risks. –30–

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Changing Partners: Toward a Macrostructural-Opportunity Theory of Marital Dissolution

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We merge marital history data for respondents in the National Survey of Families and Households with census data describing the sex composition of their local marriage markets and occupations to examine the impact of the availability of spousal alternatives on marital dissolution. Proportional hazards regression models that adjust for left truncation reveal that the risk of divorce is highest in geographically defined marriage markets where either husbands or wives encounter numerous alternatives to their current partner. Couples are also more likely to divorce when the wife works in an occupation having relatively many men and few women, but husbands' occupational sex ratio has no effect on the risk of marital dissolution. The destabilizing effects of the availability of spousal alternatives in the local marriage market and in wives' occupations are equally strong among couples with many and few other risk factors for divorce. Our findings suggest that spouses' structural opportunities to form alternative opposite-sex relationships are an important factor in explaining why some couples divorce.

Keywords: alternatives, divorce, occupation, sex ratio.

Despite recent declines, the current divorce rate in the United States remains quite high relative to both earlier in the century ([Goldstein, 1999](#)) and to other countries ([Goode, 1993](#)). The vast social science literature on the determinants of divorce and separation has generally taken four approaches. Demographers tend to focus on the influence of sociodemographic factors and family background characteristics, particularly as these might indicate successful preparation for marriage ([Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991](#)), and on how divorce rates vary across individual and historical time ([Thornton & Rodgers, 1987](#)). Economists explore the effects of a couple's financial situation, especially wives' labor-force participation and earnings, frequently with the goal of testing hypotheses derived from the New Home Economics ([Becker, 1991](#)). Sociologists also tend to emphasize the impact of economic factors ([Brines & Joyner, 1999](#)), as well as characteristics of the couples themselves, such as the presence of children ([Waite & Lillard, 1991](#)) and the types of marital problems and internal marital dynamics that might precipitate a divorce ([Amato & Rogers, 1997](#)). Psychologists focus on how personality variables, marital processes, and conjugal interaction styles influence marital

happiness and, through this, the risk of divorce ([Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998](#)).

What all of these empirical approaches—and the theories that guide them—have in common is an emphasis on the characteristics of couples (and individual spouses) as predictors of marital dissolution. By and large, each of these perspectives locates the main causes of divorce in factors intrinsic to the couple. Thus, generally absent from these frameworks is a consideration of features of the social structural environment that might affect marital disruption. One characteristic of the marital environment that might be particularly destabilizing for marriages is the relative number of attractive marital partners who might serve as alternatives to one's current spouse. There is some evidence that the number of spousal alternatives in the local geographic area influences the risk of divorce ([South & Lloyd, 1995](#)). However, prior research has ignored the supply of spousal alternatives in environments other than broad geographic areas or marriage markets. Furthermore, no study has attempted to determine under what conditions, and for what types of couples, the supply of spousal alternatives is most likely to influence marital disruption.

In this article we develop and test a perspective on marital dissolution that gives primary emphasis to the volume of attractive spousal alternatives as a key determinant of the risk of divorce. We label this approach a *macrostructural-opportunity* perspective because it directs attention to the opportunities for spouses to form potentially destabilizing opposite-sex relationships that are embedded within macro social structures. Empirically, we have three main objectives. First, using both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), in conjunction with geocoded census data, we examine the impact of the supply of spousal alternatives in local geographic areas on the risk of marital dissolution. Second, we extend prior studies in this area by exploring the impact of the relative supply of spousal alternatives in husbands' and wives' occupations. Third, we develop and test hypotheses about how the effect of spousal alternatives varies by duration of marriage, age at marriage, the number of children present in the household, and geographic residence.

Although theoretical frameworks for the study of divorce occasionally invoke the concept of *marital alternatives* ([Levinger, 1979](#)), the concept admits multiple meanings and, with few exceptions ([Udry, 1981, 1983](#); [White & Booth, 1991](#)), has rarely been treated empirically. A macrostructural-opportunity theory considers the numerical availability of alternative, attractive spouses—that is, spousal alternatives—to be one key dimension of the broader concept of marital alternatives.

The macrostructural-opportunity perspective on the determinants of marital dissolution rests on two main premises. The first premise is that many marriages, even fairly happy ones, dissolve because one or the other partner either finds a mate who is more attractive than the current spouse or perceives a high probability of doing so. This premise is consistent with [Becker's \(1991\)](#) analogy of marital bargains with international trade: Just as trading relationships dissolve when one of the parties locates a more profitable trading partner, many marriages dissolve when one of the spouses locates a more attractive marital partner. In a social climate increasingly tolerant of divorce ([Thornton, 1989](#)) and skeptical of the ideal of marital permanence ([Glenn, 1991](#)) and in which even married persons remain at least tentatively in the marriage market ([Farber, 1987](#)), many wives and husbands will opt to dissolve their current partnership upon encountering a more attractive mate. Supportive, albeit indirect, evidence for this premise comes from several areas of research.

For example, at least one third—and likely considerably more—of recently dissolved marriages were preceded by the formation of a nonmarital romantic relationship involving one of the spouses ([Kitson, 1992](#); [South & Lloyd, 1995](#)). Divorced persons frequently cite marital infidelity as a reason for the dissolution of the marriage ([Kitson, Babri, & Roach, 1985](#)), and sexual infidelity is a strong predictor of divorce. Indeed, of the 12 marital problems considered by [Amato and Rogers \(1997\)](#), including such domains as drug use, lack of communication, hypercriticism, and financial profligacy, sexual infidelity on the part of either the husband or the wife is one of the most powerful predictors of whether a couple will divorce. Admittedly, in and of itself, engaging in nonmarital sexual relations does not necessarily indicate that a married partner has located a more attractive potential mate than his or her current spouse; some

extramarital affairs may be so fleeting as not to threaten the stability of the marriage. But engaging in an adulterous relationship is probably a strong indicator that a married partner has encountered a desirable alternative to her or his current spouse. Moreover, some partners may have located a potential spousal alternative but have yet to engage in an extramarital affair, and some spouses may decide to divorce based only on their perceptions of ample opportunities to form a postmarital relationship. Both [White and Booth \(1991\)](#) and [Udry \(1981\)](#) find that married persons who perceive a high likelihood of remarrying in the event of divorce are indeed more likely to divorce than those who perceive lower remarriage potential. Overall, then, the limited evidence is consistent with the presupposition that many marriages dissolve because one of the spouses is attracted away from the current partner by a more desirable mate or because one of the spouses perceives a high probability of encountering such a mate.

The second main premise of the macrostructural-opportunity theory of divorce, and one that makes it quintessentially macrosociological, is that the real or perceived opportunities to form postmarital relationships are largely a product of the social structure, conceptualized here as the “multidimensional space of different social positions among which a population is distributed” ([Blau, 1977](#), p. 4). Like first marriage partners, potential remarriage partners are of the opposite sex and tend to be of the same race and approximate age. Thus, the “positions” most relevant for the formation of heterosexual, marital (or quasi-marital) relationships are, of course, the two sexes—male and female. The opportunities to form cross-sex associations are determined primarily by the numerical distribution of men and women in the population, that is, by the social structure, defined in Blauian ([Blau, 1994](#)) terms. The population sex distribution (and, to a lesser extent, race and age distributions) determines the availability of spousal alternatives. The relevant “population” may be at the societal level, or at some subunit, such as the local marriage market or the workplace.

Prior studies of the effect of the population sex composition on marital behavior have focused on the local marriage market as a predictor of marriage rates. Numerous studies find that both men and women are more likely to marry when their geographic area contains a relatively

large number of desirable opposite-sex members ([Kiecolt & Fossett, 1995](#); [Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992](#); [Lloyd & South, 1996](#)). Although these studies do not directly examine divorce, they provide support for the general proposition that the population sex distribution significantly shapes opportunities for the formation of cross-sex association that might destabilize extant marriages. Perhaps the most supportive evidence for the hypothesized impact of spousal alternatives on marital dissolution comes from [South and Lloyd \(1995\)](#) who, using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, report a significant curvilinear (U-shaped) effect of the sex ratio of unmarried White persons in their 20s in the local marriage market on the risk of divorce. The curvilinear effect was anticipated because, in areas characterized by very low sex ratios (where eligible women outnumber men), husbands face unusually favorable remarriage prospects and thus would be more likely to seek a divorce. Conversely, in areas with very high sex ratios (where eligible men outnumber women), wives encounter greater spousal availability, and under these conditions they would be more likely to seek a divorce. The lowest divorce probabilities are found in areas where the numbers of eligible men and women approach parity.

Theoretical and Methodological Extensions

Although prior studies thus provide suggestive evidence of an effect of spousal alternatives on marital dissolution, their analysis of this issue is limited in at least three important ways. First, only [South and Lloyd \(1995\)](#) use an objective measure of spousal alternatives, but their analysis is limited to couples who have been married on average only 3 years. Accordingly, the impact of the supply of available spouses on the risk of dissolution among couples married for longer lengths of time is unknown. We examine the effect of spousal alternatives on marital dissolution using a more representative sample of married couples.

Second, and perhaps more important, prior studies ignore the availability of spousal alternatives in social settings other than the local geographically circumscribed marriage market. An alternative context that is potentially important in mate selection—including the selection of remarriage partners—is the workplace or, more generally, the occupational situs. Marriage partners ([Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994](#)), as well as other types of friends and associates ([Marks, 1994](#)), are frequently

chosen from the workplace. As with other social contexts, such as voluntary organizations ([McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1986](#)), schools ([Hallinan & Williams, 1989](#)), and neighborhoods ([Huckfeldt, 1983](#)), the population composition of the workplace may create opportunity structures that promote or constrain associations between different types of people. Consistent with [Blau's \(1977\)](#) theorem regarding the effects of outgroup size on the frequency of contact between ingroup and outgroup members, patterns of intergender contact and social support are strongly influenced by the relative numbers of men and women in the workplace. Where men work with many women, they have more frequent contact and more harmonious relations with their female coworkers ([South, Bonjean, Markham, & Corder, 1983](#)). Further, although numerical tokenism might lead some women to be shunned by their male colleagues ([Kanter, 1977](#)), in general, women workers have more frequent contact with and receive more support from their male coworkers when they work in groups that contain a comparatively large number of men ([South, Bonjean, Markham, & Corder, 1982](#)).

Thus, like more expansive marriage markets, the sex composition of occupations might have important implications for divorce by providing the opportunities for the formation of cross-sex relationships. Indeed, [Levinger \(1979\)](#), p. 58) suggests specifically that occupational differences are likely to account for varying exposure to alternative partners. We hypothesize that the greater the relative number of men in married women's occupation, the higher the couple's risk of divorce. Analogously, we hypothesize that the risk of divorce among married men increases along with the percentage of workers in their occupations who are female.

A third limitation of prior studies is the failure to consider how the supply of spousal alternatives might moderate, or condition, the impact of established risk factors for divorce. For example, we might expect the impact of spousal alternatives on marital dissolution to vary by marital duration and age at marriage. Recently married spouses may be more likely than others to remain “in the marriage market” and thus to be attuned to the potential supply of spousal alternatives available to them ([South & Lloyd, 1995](#)). The accumulation of admittedly imperfect information about “divorce markets” ([Becker, 1991](#)) might be particularly rapid during the first few years of marriage.

Remarriage opportunities and alternative sexual liaisons should be particularly attractive to younger persons, who have the most to gain from dissolving the current marriage and beginning a new relationship ([Levinger, 1979](#)). Moreover, to the extent that persons who marry young have spent insufficient time exploring the marriage market for a suitable spouse, they may be particularly prone to divorce upon encountering attractive potential remarriage partners ([South, 1995](#)). Thus, it is possible that the impact of the availability of spousal alternatives on divorce might weaken with increasing marital duration and age at marriage.

The presence of children in the current marriage might also attenuate the effect of spousal alternatives on divorce. As one form of marriage-specific capital, children cannot be easily transferred from one partnership to another. Indeed, the presence of stepchildren in remarriages is a destabilizing influence ([White & Booth, 1985](#)). Hence, couples with children may be less likely than childless couples to be affected by the availability of spousal alternatives. In addition, couples residing in metropolitan areas might be more susceptible than residents of smaller communities to the destabilizing influence of marital alternatives both because of the greater acceptance of divorce in urban areas and because the sheer size of metropolitan communities increases the likelihood of finding a spousal alternative who is well matched on other traits.

Alternatively, the supply of spousal alternatives might be a powerful determinant of divorce even among couples having few risk factors for marital dissolution. In this view, all married persons, regardless of their other characteristics that might predispose them to divorce, remain in a state of “permanent availability” for a new marital partner ([Farber, 1987](#)). Even couples who do not have any other risk factors for divorce will separate when one or the other spouse encounters a more attractive alternative partner. If the impact of spousal alternatives is indeed invariant across couples, we would expect to find few if any interactions between the supply of spousal alternatives and other risk factors in their effects on marital dissolution.

The NSFH is a two-wave panel study of a representative sample of the adult U.S. population. The first wave of interviews was collected in 1987–1988 and the second wave in 1992–1994 ([Sweet & Bumpass, 1996](#)). For this analysis, we select those respondents who, at the first interview, were married, were living with a spouse who completed the spouse questionnaire, and who were subsequently interviewed in the second wave. The average age of the respondents is 41 years. We further limit the analysis of the effects of spousal alternatives in the geographically delimited marriage market to non-Hispanic White couples. High levels of census undercount and the relatively high rates of exogamy among African Americans and Hispanics make it difficult to specify the pool of eligible mates for these groups ([Oropesa, Lichter, & Anderson, 1994](#)). Thus, for this part of the analysis, we use a sample of 3,745 married couples, 11% of whom divorced or separated between the first and second wave of interviews. Because our analyses of the impact of national-level measures of spouses' occupational sex ratios are less likely to be compromised by exogamy or undercount, we use couples of all races for these models. To maximize our sample sizes, we examine separately couples in which the wife is employed (and thus has an occupation for which a sex ratio can be computed) ($n = 3,030$, 13% of whom divorced) and couples in which the husband is employed ($n = 3,823$, 12% of whom divorced). Our regression models focus on the impact of the supply of spousal alternatives in the couple's local marriage market and in each spouse's occupation on the risk of divorce between the first and second interviews, controlling for other established predictors of marital dissolution.

Measuring Spousal Alternatives

We use 1990 census data to measure the availability of spousal alternatives in two different social contexts: the local marriage market and the occupation. Following prior studies, we use labor market areas (LMA) to geographically circumscribe the local marriage market. Delimited primarily by journey-to-work patterns, LMAs are multicounty entities that are believed to encompass the geographic boundaries from which potential spouses are selected. The 394 LMAs identified by the 1990 census average about a half million in population ([U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992](#)). Using each NSFH respondent's LMA of residence as of the first interview date, we attach 1990 census data from the Summary Tape Files (STF; [U.S.](#)

[Bureau of the Census, 1993](#), Table PB24) that describe the numerical availability of potential alternative partners. Following [South and Lloyd \(1995\)](#), we measure the availability of spousal alternatives by the ratio of men to women in the LMA. Because most marriages (and remarriages) involve persons of the same race, we make these sex ratios race specific. Further, because most marriages (and remarriages) occur to persons in the young adult years, we limit these sex ratios to persons 18 to 44 years old. Although it would be possible to refine the age range of the relevant sex ratios to more closely fit the age of each NSFH respondent, prior research suggests that there is little gain—and considerable cost—to using such detailed age categories ([Fossett & Kiecolt, 1991](#)). Constructing the appropriate age-specific sex ratios would be particularly problematic for couples in which the spouses are of quite different ages.

Somewhat similarly, we measure the volume of spousal alternatives in the occupational sphere by the ratio of men to women in the occupations of the NSFH wives and husbands. Specifically, we link 1990 STF census data ([U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993](#), Table PB63) to each spouse's occupation as reported at the first interview. This procedure involved, first, transforming the 1980 three-digit codes used for categorizing occupations in the first NSFH interview into their three-digit 1990 equivalents ([Nakao & Treas, 1994](#)), and second, collapsing the three-digit occupational codes into the 94 categories used in the 1990 census STF. We measure the occupational sex ratio at the national level rather than at the LMA level in order to maximize stability in these measures, particularly for the smaller occupational groups. In the smaller LMAs, the observed sex ratios in these sparsely populated occupational categories can fluctuate considerably because of sampling error. Although sex differences in occupational distributions vary slightly across local geographic areas ([Cotter, DeFiore, Hermsen, Kowalewski, & Vanneman, 1997](#)), it is clear that most of the variation occurs across the occupations themselves. For example, in every local economy, most physicians are men, and most elementary school teachers are women.

Ideally, we would also like to have included a measure of the sex composition of each NSFH respondent's workplace; unfortunately, the NSFH did not ascertain this. However, to some extent the sex composition of occupations (as well as

industries) proxies for the sex composition of the workplace ([Wharton & Baron, 1987](#)). Moreover, given that people of the same occupation but working for different organizations frequently interact with each other, for example, college professors from different universities interacting at professional meetings, or skilled trade workers from different companies meeting at a job site or assembling at the union hall, it may well be that shared occupations are as important as, if not more important than, shared workplaces in generating the cross-sex associations that might destabilize existing marriages.

We measure the sex composition of the respondents' local marriage market and occupation using sex ratios rather than the absolute numbers of men or women for three reasons. First, using sex ratios acknowledges that there is competition from same-sex persons for opposite-sex marriage partners or, in our case, remarriage partners ([Goldman, Westoff, & Hammerslough, 1984](#)). Second, daily activities in the local marriage market and the workplace are constrained by time—interacting with members of one sex generally means less time available to interact with members of the other sex. And third, the absolute number of men and women in the local marriage market is highly correlated with overall marriage market size, which could influence the risk of divorce for reasons unrelated to spousal availability. For example, attitudes toward divorce appear more liberal in urban than rural areas ([Trent & South, 1992](#)).

Control Variables


Prior studies have identified several determinants of marital dissolution that we use as control variables in this analysis ([White, 1990](#)). These include the age of the respondent at the initiation of marriage, whether the couple owns their home, the number of children present in the household, marriage order (a dummy variable distinguishing first marriages for both spouses from a remarriage for either spouse), whether the couple cohabited before marriage, whether the couple resides in a metropolitan area, the proportional share of total couple earnings earned by the wife, whether the wife and husband are employed in managerial or professional occupations, whether the wife and husband have at least 16 years of schooling, and the number of weeks worked by the wife and husband. It might be especially important to control for wives' economic characteristics when examining the impact

of occupational sex ratios on divorce; women who work in male-dominated occupations may have greater socioeconomic resources, which might increase the risk of divorce—the so-called independence effect ([Greenstein, 1990](#)). All of the control variables are measured using data from the first interview.

Analytical Strategy

Following most recent research on the determinants of marital dissolution, we test our hypotheses using proportional hazards regression models ([Allison, 1984](#)). We measure the duration of marriage in months from its inception. Marriages that survive to the second NSFH interview are censored at that time. Marriages that end in widowhood between the two waves are censored at the time of death of the spouse. Because we first observe the marriages in our sample at the initial NSFH interview, and because the values of our explanatory and control variables come from this interview, all of the observations are left truncated ([Guo, 1993](#)). We adjust for this left truncation using the procedures described by [Allison \(1995\)](#). In essence, adjusting for left truncation involves estimating the impact of the explanatory variables on the hazard of divorce only during the period between the first and second waves of interviews. The coefficients in these models give the predicted change in the log of the hazard of marital dissolution for a one-unit change in an independent variable, controlling for the other variables in the model.

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[Table 1](#)  presents descriptive statistics for the explanatory variables in the proportional hazards models. The typical White couple in our sample resides in an LMA with an even sex ratio—100 White men per 100 White women—at ages 18 to 44 years. The LMA sex ratio ranges from a low of 90 to a high of 117.

There is substantially greater variation—and sharp sex differences—in the occupation sex ratios. The typical wife in our sample has an occupation in which there are 120 men per 100 women. These occupational sex ratios for wives range from a low of two (for the occupational category of secretaries, stenographers, and typists, of which there are 275 in our sample) to a high of 5,912 (for carpenters, of which there are two in our sample). The typical husband in our sample works in an occupation that

has about 900 men for every 100 women. Although the minimum value of the husbands' occupational sex ratio is the same as wives' (our sample contains four married male secretaries), the maximum value of 6,980 (for plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters) is greater than the observed maximum for wives. The reason for this difference in maxima is that our sample contains no wives who work in this occupational category.

[Table 2](#) presents the results of a series of proportional hazards regression models designed to examine the impact of the LMA sex ratio on White couples' risk of marital dissolution. Model 1 includes only the LMA sex ratio and its square as explanatory variables. We use this flexible polynomial specification of the sex ratio because the theory stipulates that the risk of divorce should be higher where either wives or husbands encounter relatively numerous spousal alternatives. The coefficients for both variables are statistically significant, and their signs reveal the hypothesized U-shaped relationship. The risk of divorce is highest among couples residing in LMAs having either comparatively low sex ratios (relatively more women than men) or comparatively high sex ratios (relatively more men than women). In contrast, couples residing in LMAs in which the numbers of men and women approach parity experience the lowest risk of marital disruption.

The U-shaped curve describing this relationship reaches its nadir at a sex ratio of 102 ($102 = 0.68736 / [2 \times 0.00336]$), with the coefficients here taken out to more decimal places than are shown in the table). This value falls slightly above the sample mean of 100. A somewhat simpler and more intuitive specification of the effect of the LMA sex ratio on divorce is to use the absolute value of the deviation of the sex ratio from the sample mean. Taking the absolute value of the deviation of the LMA sex ratio from the mean assigns low scores to LMAs with sex ratios near parity and equally high scores to LMAs with comparatively low or comparatively high sex ratios. This new variable, which we term the *LMA sex ratio: absolute value deviation*, has a mean of 2.04 and a standard deviation of 2.45. One advantage of capturing the nonlinear effect of the sex ratio with a single term rather than the polynomial specification is that tests for the hypothesized interactions can be accomplished with a single (and more interpretable) product term, rather than two terms.

Model 2 of [Table 2](#) substitutes the LMA sex ratio: absolute value deviation for the sex ratio and its square. The coefficient for this variable is positive, as hypothesized, and statistically significant.

Model 3 of [Table 2](#) adds the control variables to Model 2. Of the controls, age at marriage, home ownership, number of children, and husband's educational attainment are significantly and inversely related to the risk of divorce. In addition, the risk of divorce is significantly higher for remarriages, for couples who cohabited prior to marriage, and for residents of metropolitan areas.

Controlling for these variables attenuates slightly the effect of the LMA sex ratio: absolute value deviation, but its coefficient remains statistically significant. Exponentiating the coefficient for the LMA sex ratio: absolute value deviation implies that a one-unit change in the deviation of the LMA sex ratio from the sample mean increases the risk of marital dissolution by about 3.3% ($3.3 = 100 \times [e^{0.033} - 1]$). Moving out two standard deviations from the mean in either direction increases the hazard of divorce by 17% ($17 = 100 \times [e^{(0.032)(2.45)(2)} - 1]$). At the extremes of the sex ratio distribution, moving to the minimum observed sex ratio of 90 increases the predicted risk of divorce by 38% ($38 = 100 \times [e^{(0.032)(90-100)} - 1]$), and moving to the maximum sex ratio of 117 increases the risk by 72 percent ($72 = 100 \times [e^{(0.032)(116.89 - 100)} - 1]$). Thus, although the sex ratio does not exert an overwhelming influence on the risk of marital dissolution, its effect is not trivial.

This conclusion is reinforced by estimating marriage survival functions for three values of the LMA sex ratio, shown in [Figure 1](#). Holding constant the control variables at their means, the predicted probability that a marriage continuously exposed to the value of the sex ratio at the sample mean (100) will survive 15 years is about 0.67. In contrast, in LMAs with a sex ratio of 90, the probability that a marriage will survive 15 years is slightly less than 0.60, and this probability drops to about 0.50 for marriages continuously exposed to the maximum observed sex ratio of 117. Generally similar differences are observed at later marital durations.

The hypotheses guiding our study suggested that the availability of spousal alternatives might have different effects for different types of couples. Specifically, we

suggested that the impact of spousal alternatives might vary by marital duration, age at marriage, number of children, and metropolitan-area residence. Model 4 of [Table 2](#) adds the appropriate product terms for testing the hypothesized interactions. None of the coefficients for these product terms is statistically significant.

Supplementary analyses also revealed that the effect of the sex ratio on the risk of divorce does not vary significantly by the other explanatory variables used in Model 3. Thus, there is no evidence that the effect of the availability of spousal alternatives on the risk of marital dissolution varies by other predisposing risk factors. Residing in an area with a relatively large number of spousal alternatives appears to increase the risk of divorce equally among couples with several other risk factors for divorce and those with few.

Occupational Sex Ratios and Divorce

[Table 3](#) examines the effect on marital dissolution of spousal availability in a different venue—the occupation. In Models 1–3, we examine the impact of the occupational sex ratio on couples in which the wife works outside the home (and thus has a valid occupational sex ratio); Models 4–6 are estimated for couples in which the husband is employed. Estimating the models separately for couples that have employed wives and employed husbands makes maximum use of our data on spouses' occupational sex ratios and eliminates the need to impute values for nonworking spouses. To reduce skewness in the occupational sex ratios, they are transformed into their natural logs.

Model 1 of [Table 3](#) includes only wives' occupational sex ratio (logged) as an explanatory variable. As predicted, this coefficient is positive and statistically significant. Couples in which the wife works with many men and few women are more likely to divorce than couples in which the wife works with many women and few men. Model 2 adds the control variables, and the effect of wives' occupational sex ratio remains positive and significant. To illustrate this effect, the predicted risk of divorce among couples in which the wife works in an occupation at the 95th percentile of the sex ratio (e.g., physicians, with a sex ratio of 387; $\log = 5.958$) is about 38% higher than the risk for wives in occupations at the 5th percentile (e.g., secretaries, with a sex ratio of 2; $\log = 0.693$) ($38 = 100 \times [e^{(0.062)(5.958 - 0.693)} - 1]$). At the extremes of the distribution, the predicted risk of divorce among couples in which the wife

works in an occupation at the maximum observed sex ratio (5,912, for carpenters; $\log = 8.685$) is about two thirds greater than the risk for couples in which the wife works in an occupation that has the minimum observed sex ratio (2, for secretaries) ($64 = e^{(0.062)(8.685 - 0.693)}$).

Model 3 of [Table 3](#) adds the product terms representing the hypothesized interactions between wives' occupational sex ratio and the control variables. None is significant. Thus, like the impact of the LMA sex ratio, we observe no evidence that the effect of spousal availability for wives in the occupational sphere is contingent upon other characteristics of the couple that might increase the risk of divorce.

Models 4–6 of [Table 3](#) examine the impact of husbands' occupational sex ratio (logged) on the risk of divorce. The bivariate effect of husbands' occupational sex ratio is nonsignificant (Model 4). Moreover, contrary to our hypotheses, its sign is positive rather than negative. Controlling for other factors causes the coefficient for husbands' occupational sex ratio to take on the predicted negative sign, but it remains far from attaining statistical significance (Model 5). And, as was the case for wives' occupational sex ratio, there is no evidence that the effect of husbands' occupational sex ratio varies by other characteristics of the couple that might predispose them to divorce; the coefficients for the interaction terms in Model 6 are all statistically nonsignificant.

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Although various theoretical frameworks for the study of marital dissolution invoke the idea of marital alternatives, few theories or empirical studies have treated this concept with much rigor. We attempt to develop and test a macrostructural-opportunity theory of marital dissolution that gives special emphasis to one dimension of marital alternatives—the numerical availability of potential alternative spouses that husbands and wives encounter in their daily routines. The theory is predicated on two main premises: that many marriages dissolve because one or the other spouse leaves the marriage for a more attractive partner, and that the likelihood of encountering a more attractive partner is determined largely by the opportunities to meet opposite-sex persons that are embedded in the social structure of the groups to which spouses belong. One

advantage of this macrostructural theory of divorce over other frameworks is that it aligns distal characteristics of the marital environment with the reasons individuals give for the dissolution of their marriage ([White, 1990](#)). Although few divorced persons cite conventional sociodemographic predictors of divorce—for example, age at marriage or wife's employment—as part of their personal account for the breakup of their marriage, a substantial number attribute its demise to marital infidelity or to one of the spouses' having found another, presumably more desirable, mate ([Kitson, 1992](#)).

Our empirical analysis of marital history data from the NSFH, combined with census data on the sex ratios in spouses' residential areas and occupations, provides at least moderate support for the theory. We find that couples are more likely to divorce when they reside in geographic areas that have either an unusual surfeit of women or an unusual surfeit of men. Presumably, in marriage markets characterized by low sex ratios, husbands are particularly likely to encounter an attractive partner, whereas in high-sex-ratio marriage markets, wives are especially apt to find a more attractive mate. We also find that couples are more likely to divorce when the wife works in an occupation having a disproportionate number of men relative to women, suggesting that secular declines in occupational sex segregation may have played a causal role in the rise in divorce. However, contrary to the theory's predictions, we find no evidence that couples are more apt to divorce when husbands work with a larger than average number of women. Perhaps husbands, more so than wives, encounter spousal alternatives outside of occupation-related venues, such as bars, recreational arenas and events, and voluntary associations.

Admittedly, the observed effects of spousal availability on marital dissolution are not striking in magnitude. Furthermore, nothing in this macrostructural-opportunity theory negates the strong influence of established predictors of divorce that are emphasized in other theoretical traditions. Indeed, the multiplicity of factors that appear to influence the decision to divorce might explain the relatively moderate effect of spousal availability. At the same time, however, we suggest that it is considerably more difficult to measure the opportunities to establish opposite-sex relationships than it is to measure the individual-level risk factors that dominate other theories.

More refined measures of opportunity structures, including perhaps the sex composition of the workplace, neighborhood, voluntary associations, and other contexts and organizations, might yield stronger findings. In addition, more detailed occupational (and industrial) classifications than are used here might capture greater variation in spouses' exposure to alternative marriage partners.

We also find that the impact of spousal availability on marital dissolution is not limited to couples whose other characteristics predispose them to divorce. Some observers have suggested that the impact of the availability of marital alternatives will be most pronounced—or perhaps only evident—among marriages that are already predisposed to dissolve ([Spanier & Lewis, 1981](#)). However, we find that the availability of spousal alternatives appears to increase the likelihood of divorce among both high-risk and low-risk couples. This result is consistent with studies showing that the impact of perceived marital alternatives does not vary by reported level of marital happiness ([Udry, 1983](#); [White & Booth, 1991](#)). It also suggests that satisfied and dissatisfied spouses alike remain, consciously or not, “in the marriage market.”

Note [Return to TOC](#)

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Explanatory Variables in Models of Marital Dissolution: National Survey of Families and Households, 1987–1994

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
LMA sex ratio	100.34	3.18	90.05	116.89
Wife's occupational sex ratio	120.55	324.58	2.04	5,911.95
Husband's occupational sex ratio	901.42	1,401.30	2.04	6,979.90
Respondent's age at marriage	24.79	8.11	9.33	88.08
Couple owns home (1 = yes)	.78	.41	0.00	1.00
Number of children in household	1.09	1.22	0.00	11.00
Remarriage (1 = yes)	.31	.46	0.00	1.00
Cohabited before marriage (1 = yes)	.24	.43	0.00	1.00
Metropolitan-area resident (1 = yes)	.68	.46	0.00	1.00
Wife's earnings share	.25	.27	0.00	1.00
Wife is manager or professional (1 = yes)	.22	.41	0.00	1.00
Husband is manager or professional (1 = yes)	.31	.46	0.00	1.00
Wife has 16+ years of school (1 = yes)	.22	.41	0.00	1.00
Husband has 16+ years of school (1 = yes)	.28	.45	0.00	1.00
Wife's weeks worked	30.08	22.72	0.00	52.00
Husband's weeks worked	42.90	17.98	0.00	52.00

Note: Descriptive statistics for all variables except the occupational sex ratios are based on all White couples (n = 3,745). Statistics for wife's and husband's occupational sex ratio are based on all couples with employed wives (n = 3,030) and employed husbands (n = 3,823), respectively. LMA = labor market area.

Table 2. Coefficients from Proportional Hazards Regression Models of Marital Dissolution: White Couples in the National Survey of Families and Households, 1987–1994

Independent Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
LMA sex ratio	-.687*	.330						
LMA sex ratio squared	.003*	.002						
LMA sex ratio: absolute value deviation			.038*	.016	.032*	.016	.072	.091
Respondent's age at marriage					-.039**	.009	-.041**	.010
Couple owns home					-.241*	.111	-.248*	.111
Number of children in household					-.082*	.049	-.101*	.061
Remarriage					.375**	.123	.373**	.123
Cohabited before marriage					.285**	.109	.291**	.109
Metropolitan-area resident					.182*	.110	.315*	.155
Wife's earnings share					.085	.251	.083	.251
Wife is manager or professional					-.151	.138	-.152	.138
Husband is manager or professional					-.208	.130	-.210	.130
Wife has 16+ years of school					-.126	.155	-.130	.155
Husband has 16+ years of school					-.430**	.150	-.419**	.151
Wife's weeks worked					.004	.003	.004	.003
Husband's weeks worked					-.004	.004	-.004	.004
Interactions of LMA sex ratio: absolute value deviation with								
Marital duration							-.000	.000
Respondent's age at marriage							.001	.002
Number of children in household							.008	.015
Metropolitan-area resident							-.059	.045
-2 log likelihood		5,454		5,454		5,361		5,359
n		3,745		3,745		3,745		3,745
% marriages dissolving		11.24		11.24		11.24		11.24

Note: LMA = labor market area.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. One-tailed tests.

Table 3. Coefficients from Proportional Hazards Regression Models of Marital Dissolution: Couples With Working Wives and Working Husbands: National Survey of Families and Households, 1987–1994

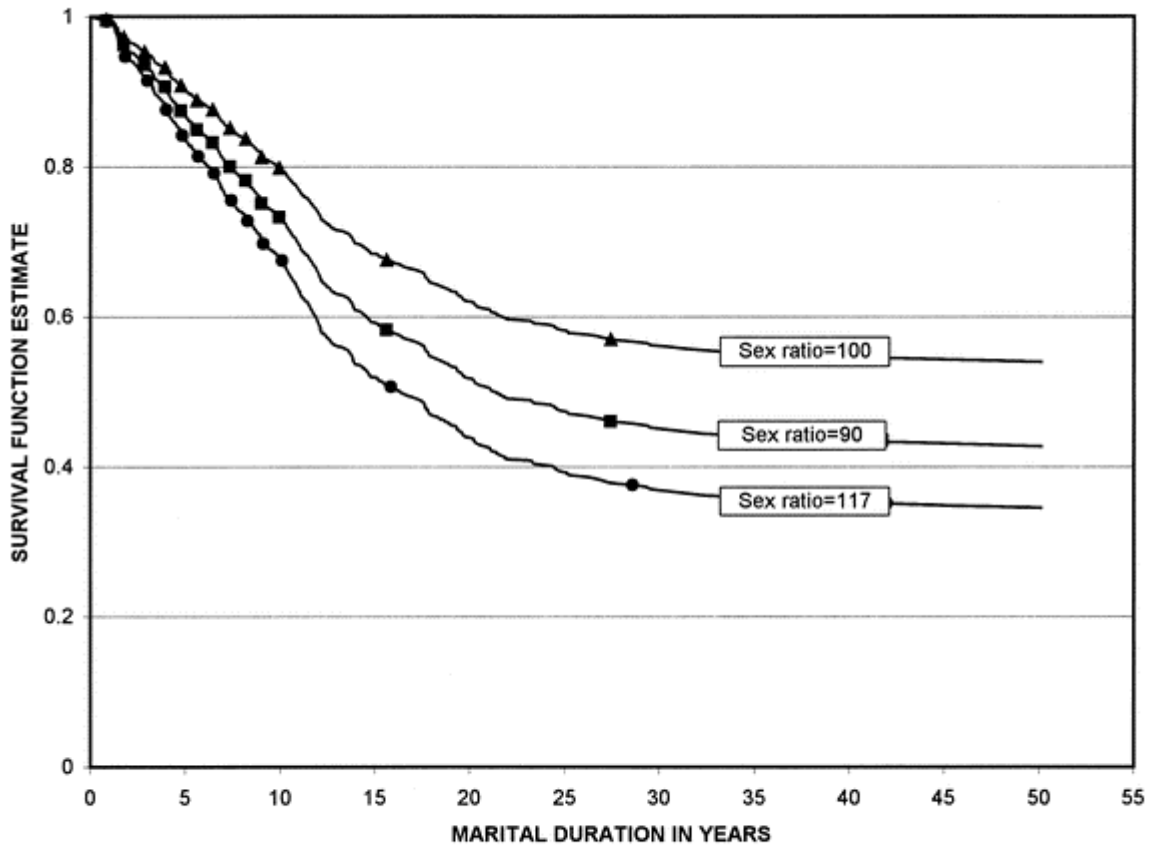
Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Wife's occupational sex ratio ^a	.059* (.034)	.062* (.033)	.027 (.063)			
Husband's occupational sex ratio ^a				.034 (.033)	-.025 (.034)	-.016 (.080)
Interactions of occupational sex ratio ^a with						
Marital duration			.000 (.000)			-.000 (.000)
Respondent's age at marriage			.000 (.000)			.000 (.000)
Number of children in household			.000 (.000)			.000 (.000)
Metropolitan-area resident			-.000 (.000)			-.000 (.000)
-2 log likelihood	4,991	4,925	4,924	6,137	6,056	6,055
n	3,030	3,030	3,030	3,823	3,823	3,823
% marriages dissolving	12.97	12.97	12.97	12.16	12.16	12.16

Note: Models 2, 3, 5, and 6 control for respondent's age at marriage, couple owns home, number of children in household, remarriage, cohabited before marriage, metropolitan-area resident, wife's earnings share, wife and husband are managers or professionals, wife and husband have 16+ years of school, wife's and husband's weeks worked, and respondent's race (a dummy variable for Black respondents). Entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

^aTransformed into natural logs.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. One-tailed tests.

Figure 1. Estimated Survival Curves for National Survey of Families and Households Marriages Continuously Exposed to Selected Values of the Labor Market Area Sex Ratio



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