Sex Differences in Causal Attributions for Marital Separation[1]

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This study examined the causal attributions for marital separation from free response verbal protocols, provided by 29 men and 33 women living in New Zealand. Seven of the attributions, coded according to content (e.g., communication), showed significantly different mention rates across the sexes. In line with previous research results, women decided to leave more often than men, reported coping better than men, and gave themselves less causal responsibility than men. People who had higher levels of self esteem and gave themselves more causal responsibility reported coping better. Possible explanations for these findings are discussed.

Over the last three decades there has been a considerable amount of research by psychologists and sociologists dealing with marital separation and divorce. In the course of this research a number of sex differences have been discovered which may be related to sex role differences. For example a number of studies have reported that women initiate marital separation more often than males (Goode, 1956; Berman & Turk, 1981; Ritchie, 1980). Other research has noted characteristic sex differences in the way people cope with marital separation the personal and emotional problems being more severe for men in the early post-separation period (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1977; Bloom & Caldwell, 1981)

Sex differences have also been reported in the types of causal attributions provided for marital separation. Different studies report different patterns, though there does appear to be some commonality. For example, two U.S.A. studies reported that men more often mentioned the role of the in-laws while women more often cited the husband's violence, his drinking, and financial problems (Levinger, 1966; Kitson & Sussman, 1981). Kitson and Sussman (1981) also reported a marked tendency for women to place the bulk of the responsibility with their ex-husbands while men tended to be more even handed in their apportionment of responsibility.

The present research deals with all the sex differences noted above, being especially concerned with sex differences in the causal attributions for marital separation. These attributions were taken from free-response verbal protocols. Respondents (33 females and 29 males) were asked to say what the causes of their marital separation were with no other leading questions being supplied, and the explanatory accounts were unobtrusively tape-recorded (with the respondents' knowledge). This methodology differs from that usually adopted by research examining causal attributions for marital separation. Typically, this research uses written responses from the respondents (e.g., Newman & Langer, 1981) or verbal responses dictated to the interviewer who writes them down (Kitson & Sussman, 1982). To the author's knowledge, the only exception to this is a study by Harvey, Wells and Alvarez (1978). However, their sample was small ($n = 12$), while only 2 males were interviewed precluding the examination of sex differences. Given that explanatory accounts for marital separation are likely to be complex and both

generated and rehearsed in the verbal mode, the methodology used in this study should increase the ecological validity of the findings.

In addition to deriving descriptive data on sex differences, it was proposed to explore the relationships between the variables mentioned earlier, viz, who initiates the separation, causal attributions, and coping. Recent theorising and research suggest a number of links between these factors. People who attribute more responsibility to themselves for unexpected and traumatic accidents seem to cope better with the consequences (Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Janoff-Bulman, 1979). The usual explanation for this finding is in terms of the increased levels of perceived personal control accompanying such attributions. The implication for marital separation is that people who tend to locate the causal responsibility within themselves should cope better.

Another attributional variable that may be related to coping is the complexity of the explanation offered for that separation. Newman and Langer (1981) asked subjects for the main reason for their divorces. Subjects who made interactive attributions centering on the dyadic, marital unit (e.g., lack of communication), reported coping better than subjects who made straightforward attributions to their ex-spouses. Newman and Langer's explanation is that the making of interactive attributions enables a better, more sophisticated understanding of the complex interactive forces at work in complex human situations. Their explanation for why such an explanation should lead to better coping is (as in the previous example) in terms of the increased control attained over future interpersonal endeavours, as well as a decrease in negative feelings such as self-recrimination, resentment, etc.

If we add together the above research findings and explanations, the following predictions emerge for the present study concerning sex differences: women will, 1. decide to leave a marriage more often than men, 2. attribute less causal responsibility to themselves than men, 3. report coping better with marital separation than men, and 4. tend to produce different sorts of causal attributions

from men. The relationships among these variables will also be explored.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 29 men and 33 women residing in Hamilton, New Zealand, who had been (physically) separated from their spouses for less than eighteen months. Seventeen of the respondents were contacts (e.g. neighbours/acquaintances) of psychology students at Waikato University. Seventeen were contacted through agencies (e.g. Singles' Clubs), and advertisements in a local newspaper. Twenty-eight respondents were contacts of the original respondents; twelve of these were ex-spouses of the original respondents. (The comparison between the competing explanations offered by this sub-sample of respondents formally married to each other is reported elsewhere, Note 1). The mean time of separation was 9.7 months (range: 2 weeks - 18 months) and the mean number of years married was 10.17 years (range: 6 months - 30 years). All but 10 of the respondents had children in their marriage. Eight of the respondents were divorced, 26 were legally separated, and 28 were not legally separated.

Procedure

Fifty-four of the interviews were carried out in the respondents' homes while the remainder were carried out at Waikato University. There were two interviewers, one male (the author) and one female. The male interviewer interviewed 15 males and 17 females. The female interviewer interviewed 14 males and 16 females. After the respondents were set at their ease they were simply asked to explain in their own words why the marriage broke up, mentioning all the causes that led up to the separation. The interviewer did not ask any further questions except when clarification was required. When the respondents finished the interviewer prompted once with the question: "Can you think of any other causes involved?" The interviews were taped onto a tape recorder.

After the interview had finished, the respondents filled out an attribution and general information questionnaire. Two other personality questionnaires were left with the respondents to fill out in their own time and collected between 6 and 12 days later in the context of the second interview. All the causes from each taped protocol were transcribed by the author onto slips of paper. In the second interview the respondents discarded any of the transcribed causes they did not think were causes at all.

This final set of causes constituted the raw data.

Other data gathered in this study is not reported here, being judged not relevant enough to the present topic. The extra procedures and questions could not have affected the present data, however, as these were located after the present data was collected in the second interview. The associated data and findings are reported in Fletcher (in press).

Questionnaires

The questionnaire completed immediately after the first interview included an attribution question which required the respondent to split 100 into three parts, giving a score to the self, the ex-spouse, and external factors that reflected the importance each category had in causing the marital separation. There were also questions concerning age, educational status (1-6 scale), number of children, time since the separation, present marital status, number of years married, and a question on whether the decision to leave was the person's own, a mutual one, or the ex-spouse's. They were asked how well they thought they had coped since the separation on a nine point scale (endpoints: very well-not at all well).

The personality questionnaires consisted of Rotter's internal-external locus of control scale (Rotter, 1966) and Rosenberg's self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965). A personal control sub-scale (five items) was also derived from Rotter's 29 item scale. This sub-scale, representing personal control, was found to represent a clear factor in Gurin, Gurin, and Morrison's (1978) factor analytic study using a large national probability sample. These authors also provided evidence for the discriminant and convergent validity of this personal control factor.

Taxonomy of Causal Attributions

This content causal taxonomy was developed in an inductive fashion by the author, although based in part on attribution theory concepts and the earlier research dealing with marital separation. External factors were those operating during the marriage (e.g., work pressure started to pile up on me, her mother persuaded her to leave). Background factors were those operating prior to the marriage (e.g., He was spoiled by his parents, I got married because I wanted security). Causes were coded into one category only. Causes were coded into the abstract categories (general or specific personality characteristics, negative attitudes, actions or specific behaviours, general attitudes and beliefs) only after they did not fit into any of the specific content categories (work, finance, etc.).

To test the reliability of the taxonomy, a second rater was supplied with a description of the taxonomy which consisted of a list of the category headings with descriptions and examples. After a short training session he coded 165 randomly selected attributions, but chosen so that each category was equally represented. A reliability of 81.2% was attained which is satisfactory considering the large number of categories involved[2].

Interactive Attributions

Following Newman and Langer (1981), interactive attributions were defined as those which pointed to features of the dyadic unit itself. The number of interactive attributions in each respondent's account was expressed as a percentage of the total number of attributions. A second rater coded the attributions from 15 subjects (278 attributions) into either interactive or non-interactive attributions. The reliability correlation was .92 which is satisfactory. The author's coding was used for the analyses.

Results

Sex Differences in Attributions and Who Decided to Leave

As predicted, women tended to make the decision to leave the marriage more often than men (see Table 1). Twenty one of the women and only six of the men reported they decided to leave, while six of the women and 17 of the men reported it was their ex-spouse who decided to leave. Six respondents of both sexes reported it was a mutual decision.

Table 1: *Mean percentage of Causal Attribution Responsibility for Marital Separation Given to the Self Rather than the Ex-Spouse.*

Sex	Self	Who Decided To Leave Mutual	Ex-spouse
Males	63.41	57.31	38.17
n	(6)	(6)	(17)
Females	45.15	34.21	34.39
n	(21)	(6)	(6)

Note: The higher the percentage the more causal responsibility is given to the self rather than the ex-spouse. This percentage was derived by dividing the Self% rating by the combined total of the Self% and the ex-spouse% ratings, and multiplying by 100. *N's* for each group are shown in parentheses below each mean.

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[2] Copies of the content causal attribution taxonomy are available from the author.

Table 2: *Percentage of Respondents Mentioning Content Causal Attribution Categories.*

	Males ($n=29$)	Females ($n=33$)
Self or Ex-Spouse Attributions		
General personality characteristics	86	85
Specific behavioural personality characteristics	76	61
Negative attitudes to spouse	72	58
Actions or specific behaviours	59	39
*Extramarital sexual relationships	55	24
Desire for freedom or other unfulfilled desires	48	49
Relationships with children	41	64
Sex, physical affection	38	42
Work/Employment	35	42
Finance/Money	35	33
Love, feelings of affection	35	24
Outside activities	35	51
Communication	35	58
Platonic relationships with other people	31	55
Restriction of spouse's/own activities	24	33
General attitudes and beliefs (not towards spouse)	24	30
**Increasing awareness, sudden realizations, or changing expectations concerning marriage	21	60
Arguments or verbal fights	21	36
*Alcohol/Drinking problems of husband	17	46
Not helping around house	10	15
Depression, anxiety, etc.	7	24
**Physical violence of husband	3	30
Self-Deception/Wishful thinking	0	15
External Attributions		
*External circumstances/experiences	48	21
Influence of in-laws	41	30
Influence of job	38	30
Influence of children	31	39
Financial stress	24	15
Physical/Mental health	24	33
Influence of people other than friends or in-laws (e.g. counsellors)	17	49
Influence of friends	14	33
Influence of other person in extra-marital affair	7	15
Background Attributions		
**Attitudes to partner	41	6
Family background	35	48
Age at marriage	28	24
Reasons for marriage	21	19
Relationship prior to marriage	17	30
Miscellaneous background factors	7	27
Uncodable	14	33

Note: Causal attribution categories marked with asterisks have significant distributions of percentages across sexes, according to 2 x 2 chi squares (with a correction for continuity). External Attributions are external causes operating during marriage. Background Attributions are external causes operating before the marriage.
*$p<.05$
**$p<.01$

There were also strong sex differences discovered in the causal attribution data. Recall that one attribution question required respondents to divide 100 into three parts representing the causal responsibility attached to the self, the ex-spouse, and to external factors during the marriage. To simplify the analysis, the self and ex-spouse ratings were

converted to percentages of responsibility given to the self (these two ratings correlated −.64). A 2 (sex) X 3 (who decided to leave) ANOVA was performed on this dependent variable. The group means are shown in Table 1. There were significant main effects for sex, $F(1, 56) = 6.56$, $p<.05$, and who decided to leave, $F(2, 56) = 4.00$, $p<.05$. Women gave more causal responsibility to themselves than men while people who decided to leave gave themselves more causal responsibility than those who were left. The interaction effect was not significant.

It could be argued that the ANOVA assumption of independence between cells is not met because 24 of the respondents were formerly married to each other. The correlation between the self % ratings was, however, low, insignificant and positive (.34) suggesting that the ratings were independent. In addition, when the ANOVA was run without this sub-group the results were very similar with two significant main effects at the $p<.05$ level and no significant interaction.

The causal attributions from the free response protocols coded according to content are shown in Table 2. The males mentioned a mean number of 28.1 attributions and the females produced a mean number of 34.6 attributions. Males mentioned extra-marital sexual relationships, external circumstances/experiences, and attitudes towards partner (Background attribution) significantly more often than females. Women mentioned the following items significantly more often than males: increasing awareness, sudden realizations or changing expectations concerning marriage, alcohol/drinking problems of husband, physical violence of husband, and influence of people other than friends or in-laws.

Coping with marital Separation

It was hypothesised that self report of coping may be related to sex, personal control, who decided to leave, the tendency to produce interactive attributions and the tendency to give causal responsibility to the self. As a first step self report of coping was correlated with these variables. These zero-order correlations can be seen in Table 3. In line with predictions, women reported coping significantly better than men, people who decided to leave coped significantly

better while those who were left coped significantly worse. Against predictions, personal control was unrelated to coping. Respondents who gave more interactive attributions and more causal responsibility to themselves also tended to report coping better but these correlations were not significant. Self report of coping was also correlated with self-esteem, sex of the interviewer, number of years married, and education level. Self-esteem produced the only significant correlation, those with higher levels coping better. This variable was therefore included in subsequent analyses.

As has previously been noted a number of these independent variables are related: women decided to leave the marriage more often than men while people who decided to leave gave themselves more responsibility for the separation. In short, the independent variables are confounded thus rendering suspect any straightforward interpretation of the zero-order correlations. To determine the unique amount of variance accounted for by each independent variable, a series of simultaneous multiple regressions were run. The resultant Beta weights (which show the unique variance accounted for by each variable after partialling out the influence of the other independent variables) and Multiple R's can be seen in Table 3. For all three regressions the multiple R's were significant at the $p<.05$ level.

In the first multiple regression those variables with significant zero-order correlations (sex, who decided to leave, and self-esteem) were regressed onto coping. The results show that self esteem remained a significant factor, sex was very close to significant levels, $F(1, 57) = 3.82$, $p<.10$, but the 'who decided to leave' set of variables dropped to trivial levels (the R^2 increase of this set of variables, after the other two variables were entered, being only .012, $F<1$), i.e., women and those with higher self esteem reported coping better. Interestingly, this analysis suggests that women reported coping better for reasons that were not connected to their proclivity to initiate the marriage breakup.

In the second regression analysis the percentage of responsibility given to the self was regressed onto coping, partialling out the effects of sex and self esteem. As can be seen

Table 3: *Zero-order Correlations and Beta weights from Three Simultaneous Multiple Regressions with Coping as the Dependent Variable.*

Independent Variables	Zero-order R's	Beta Weights		
		1st Regression	2nd Regression	3rd Regression
Personal Control	.01			
Who Decided To Leave				
I Decided	.25*	.01		
Mutual Decision	.07	—		
Ex-spouse Decided	−.32**	−.14		
Sex	.38**	.26	.35**	.34**
Self-esteem	.35**	.26*	.28**	.28**
% of Self Attributions	.18		.23*	
% of Interactive	.12			.17
Multiple R^2		.24**	.27**	.25**

Note: Sex of respondent was coded male = 0 and female = 1. Dummy coding was used for the "decision to leave" set of variables where yes = 1 and no = 0. This system of coding means that all information is carried by two groups so no beta weights is shown for the mutual group (Cohen and Cohen, 1976). All other variables were scored in a positive direction. The total R^2 for each regression equation were tested for significance using the shrunken R^2 which corrects for the number of independent variables.
*$p<.05$
**$p<.01$

in Table 3 all three Beta weights are significant. Controlling for the effects of sex and self-esteem, those respondents who gave more causal responsibility to themselves reported coping significantly better.

The same analysis was carried out for the third regression using the percentage of interactive attributions that were produced, and partialling out the effects of sex and self-esteem. The beta weight for the percentage of interactive attributions is not significant (see Table 3). Hence, the prediction that respondents who produced more interactive attributions would report coping better was not supported.

Discussion

Four sex differences were predicted in this study on the basis of previous research findings, and these were all obtained. Women decided to leave the marriage more often than men, reported coping better than men, gave themselves less causal responsibility than men, and produced certain kinds of attributions in significantly different numbers from men. Note that the same asymmetrical pattern of leaving marriages

has also been found in the U.S.A. (Goode, 1956; Berman & Turk, 1981), and in a study carried out in the same city as the present research (Ritchie, 1981). This evidence supports the view that the pattern of decision making found in this research is not merely the result of our non-random sampling technique. It also suggests, somewhat remarkably, that this pattern extends across several decades and across countries. A feminist explanation for this tendency would be that marriage is a much more repressive institution for women than men so they leave more often—a view for which there is a good amount of evidence (Gove, 1972; Bernard, 1972; Bloom & Caldwell, 1981). Bloom and Caldwell, for example, reported that women were more distressed than men prior to the separation, but less distressed than men after the separation. The findings in this study that women made the decision to leave more often than men and reported coping better than men are consistent with this body of evidence. Moreover, the regression analyses suggested that women reported coping better, independently of who made the decision to leave and the level of self esteem.

Why should women give themselves significantly less causal responsibility than men? The attribution research dealing with sex differences, though generally dealing with attributions for achievement tasks in the laboratory, may offer some clues. One general finding from this literature is that in failure situations, women tend to give more causal responsibility to themselves than men (Deaux, 1976; Ross & Fletcher, in press). A common explanation proffered by attribution researchers is that men and women have different expectations concerning the probability of success (Deaux, 1976; Feather & Simon, 1975). Hence, if men have higher expectations of success than women they will tend to locate the causes for failure externally (e.g., bad luck), while women will tend to place the causes internally (e.g., lack of ability). Such an explanation in terms of expectation is certainly consistent with the finding that people who leave the marriage give themselves more responsibility than those who were left. Presumably the leavers would have a higher expectation that the marriage was about to end, immediately prior to the separation, than the people who were left. However it is not clear why men should expect marriages to end more than women do (controlling for the sex differences associated with who decided to leave). One of the most well replicated findings in the attribution field is that people who fail tend to locate the cause(s) externally, relative to people who succeed who tend to locate the cause(s) internally (Ross & Fletcher, in press). Perhaps women perceive the separation more as a "failure" than men, and so attribute the causes more externally to the ex-spouse. Further research is needed to examine such speculative explanations as well as replicate the finding.

There were some intriguing sex differences in the content of the attributions offered in the verbal protocols (see Table 2). The finding that women cited the drinking and physical violence of the husband more often than males mirror findings in the U.S.A. (Levinger, 1966; Kitson & Sussman, 1982). One could explain these differences in terms of impression management processes, i.e., men did not wish to admit their own socially undesirable behaviour to the interviewer.

Another factor may be the extra psychological significance in labelling one's own anti-social behaviour as a cause. One male, for example, readily admitted beating his wife. He did not believe, however, that this was a cause for the marital separation. Although only one male cited the presence of physical violence as a cause, a number of males (5) specified their lack of physical violence or toughness as a cause for the separation. This attitude is exemplified by one male who stated, "I think I was too soft. I think somewhere in life a man has to put his wife over his knee and give her a good spanking and keep her in line. If you can't spank someone you love and after that have a big cuddle, then there is something wrong. They appreciate you much more I'm sure."

One fascinating aspect of the attributions was the prevalence of meta-cognitions; i.e., people often cited their own perceptions, attitudes, or feelings at the time of the marriage, as causes of the separation. One class of these which included increasing awareness, realizations, changing expectations and the like, were especially common with women. Frequently, these realizations were portrayed as occurring suddenly, e.g., "After four years of marriage I woke up one morning and realized I could not conform to what I saw was the accepted norm in other marriages of the husband's boozing and screwing around." Often they were expressed in terms that suggested the person's own survival or that of their children was at stake, e.g., "I could see the symptoms of another nervous breakdown appearing. I thought no way am I going through another one for any man." "I had to control myself from hitting my daughter when she was crying one day, and when I saw this happening to me I knew I would have to get out."

Newman and Langer's (1981) finding that the tendency to give interactive attributions was significantly related to how well people report coping was not replicated here, though there are enough differences between the respective methodologies and samples to make the reasons for this uncertain. There was some relationship between attributions and coping, however. Respondents who attributed more causal responsibility to themselves than to their ex-spouses (controlling

for sex and self esteem) reported coping better with their separation, replicating findings in other real life situations such as rape (Janoff-Bulman, 1979) and severe accidents (Bulman & Wortman, 1977).

Finally, several caveats to these findings should be noted. First, all the data is correlational with all of the familiar associated problems of interpretation. Second, the coping measure lacks solid validity support. Hence the results concerning this variable should be considered provisional only. Third, the sample was non-randomly collected. Nonetheless, the general findings reported here throw up some intriguing suggestions and questions concerning the links between the cognitive processes involved in causal attributions, sex differences and marital separation. Clearly, this area provides a fertile ground for further research.

Reference Note

1. Fletcher, G. J. O. *Causal attributions for marital separation.* Doctoral dissertation, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand, 1981.

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