



Article

Who's Afraid of Divorce? Sexual Minority Young Adults' Perspectives on Divorce

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Abstract: Research suggests that young adults commonly approve of divorce but still feel anxious about the possibility of divorcing themselves due to anticipated emotional and financial repercussions. However, the existing research focuses exclusively on heterosexual young adults, which is a significant oversight given the recent legalization of same-sex marriage. As such, we rely primarily on qualitative data from an online survey of unmarried sexual minority young adults (n = 257) to examine how they think about divorce. Our results suggest that sexual minority young adults have somewhat distinct perspectives compared to heterosexual young adults. In particular, they anticipate being quite willing to divorce under a broad set of circumstances, and they report minimal anxieties regarding the prospect of divorce. Given documented associations between attitudes toward divorce in young adulthood and subsequent relational behavior (e.g., cohabitation, marital delay), we conclude by discussing what our results suggest about sexual minority young adults' relationships in the era of marriage equality.

Keywords: sexual minorities; LGBT; young adulthood; divorce; life course theory



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1. Introduction

Although divorce rates have leveled off since their height during the “divorce revolution”, married couples in the US continue to divorce more often than married couples in many other countries (Cherlin 2009). As a result, divorce continues to be a relatively common family experience in the US. In turn, many young adults—defined here as those between the ages of 18 and 35—have seen divorce up close, in their own families (i.e., their parents) and/or in their broader social networks. It is likely unsurprising, then, that young adults today often report being anxious or worried about divorce (e.g., Edin and Kefalas 2005; Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Miller et al. 2011; Perelli-Harris et al. 2017; Reed 2006; Silva 2013; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001; Waller and Peters 2008; Willoughby et al. 2020). To be sure, most say that they generally approve of divorce (Eickmeyer 2015; Dugan 2017), but there is still anxiety surrounding divorce due to anticipated emotional and financial repercussions (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Eickmeyer 2015; Dugan 2017; Miller et al. 2011; Reed 2006; Willoughby et al. 2020). Furthermore, researchers have found that this anxiety or fear leads many young adults to pursue cohabitation before marriage and ultimately to delay marriage (Miller et al. 2011).

To date, however, existing research on young adults' views on divorce has focused exclusively on heterosexual young adults. This is a significant oversight given the recent legalization of same-sex marriage across the US in 2015. As a result of marriage equality, all sexual minority young adults can now think about marriage, and divorce, not only as global issues but also with respect to their personal lives. However, very limited research has been done thus far on the marital aspirations of sexual minority young adults, and even less on their thoughts and feelings regarding divorce. In this paper, we begin to address this gap in the research by asking the following exploratory questions: How do young adults who identify as sexual minorities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, etc.) think and feel

about divorce? Given the anxieties or worries reported by heterosexual young adults, we pay particular attention here to whether and in what ways sexual minority young adults may report similar thoughts or feelings. To this end, we primarily analyze qualitative data from an online survey of unmarried sexual minority young adults ($n = 257$) administered via Qualtrics in early 2021.

2. Literature Review

2.1. (Heterosexual) Young Adults' Perspectives on Divorce

How young adults think and feel about divorce is important for researchers to understand in part because these thoughts and feelings can significantly influence subsequent relationship behaviors and outcomes (e.g., [Arocho 2019](#); [Miller et al. 2011](#); [Perelli-Harris et al. 2017](#)). For example, as we discuss below, young adults who report being apprehensive about divorce often delay marriage, or avoid it altogether, in order to prevent getting a divorce ([Edin and Kefalas 2005](#); [Gibson-Davis et al. 2005](#); [Miller et al. 2011](#); [Perelli-Harris et al. 2017](#); [Willoughby and James 2017](#)). Similarly, [Arocho \(2019\)](#) shows that young adults who say that they would be likely to divorce tend to marry later than do those with lower divorce expectations. Despite these findings, relatively little research has examined young adult views on divorce.

Much of the existing research on this topic looks at general attitudes toward divorce, including whether young adults feel that getting a divorce is morally acceptable and/or whether divorce laws should be more or less stringent (e.g., [Hatemi et al. 2015](#); [Kapinus 2005](#); [Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001](#)). Overall, this research suggests that young adults generally hold permissive or supportive attitudes toward divorce. For example, according to [Dugan \(2017\)](#), 76% of young adults (18–34) say that divorce is morally acceptable. Given that the transition to marriage often leads individuals to place greater emphasis on the permanence of marital relationships ([Hall and Adams 2020](#)), it is unsurprising that young adults, who are less likely to be married, tend to hold such attitudes. However, it is also important to note that there are no significant differences by age, as survey research shows that older adult attitudes tend to be just as permissive or supportive ([Eickmeyer 2015](#); [Dugan 2017](#)).

Furthermore, research has identified several key sociodemographic factors that shape young adults' attitudes, with sex/gender and parental relationships being the most dominant. When it comes to sex/gender, females appear to have more positive or accepting views of divorce than males overall (e.g., [Axinn and Thornton 1996](#); [Kapinus and Flowers 2008](#); [Kapinus and Johnson 2002](#)). However, [Kapinus and Flowers \(2008\)](#) show that females are more likely than males to support making divorce more difficult to obtain. With respect to parental relationships, research suggests that young adult attitudes are impacted both by their parents' marital quality ([Cunningham and Thornton 2006](#); [Kapinus 2005](#)) and by whether their parents divorced ([Axinn and Thornton 1996](#); [Kapinus 2004](#); [Wolfinger 2005](#)). On average, young adults who perceive that their parents have high-quality marriages are less supportive or approving of divorce than those who perceive that their parents have low-quality marriages ([Cunningham and Thornton 2006](#); [Kapinus 2005](#)). Furthermore, young adults whose parents actually divorced have, on average, more supportive or approving attitudes toward divorce than do those whose parents remained married ([Axinn and Thornton 1996](#); [Kapinus 2004](#); [Wolfinger 2005](#)).

Beyond simple attitudes toward divorce, a consistent finding in this area is that unmarried young adults are often quite apprehensive about divorce (e.g., [Edin and Kefalas 2005](#); [Gibson-Davis et al. 2005](#); [Miller et al. 2011](#); [Perelli-Harris et al. 2017](#); [Reed 2006](#); [Silva 2013](#); [Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001](#); [Waller and Peters 2008](#); [Willoughby et al. 2020](#)). Indeed, while young adults may generally approve of divorce in principle, they also see divorce as a difficult experience, and one that most would strongly prefer to avoid. Fear of divorce does appear to be heightened among those who have experienced parental divorce ([Willoughby et al. 2020](#)). As one young adult in [Willoughby et al.'s \(2020, p. 725\)](#) study put it, "My parents were divorced when I was younger and it's not something that I want to

put myself through, to put my family through". However, many young adults are afraid of divorce because of what [Hackstaff \(1999\)](#) terms a "divorce culture". In essence, because the divorce rate remains relatively high, and because social acceptance of divorce is quite broad, many assume that divorce is a possibility that simply comes with marriage. For example, according to [Arocho and Purtell \(2020\)](#), 44–49% of unmarried young adults say that there is at least "some chance" they will eventually divorce, and another 10–20% estimate that their chances of getting a divorce are "50% or greater." Similarly, [Miller et al. \(2011\)](#) report that two-thirds of the cohabiting young adults in their sample expressed some concern about getting divorced. Furthermore, they show that this "spectrum of divorce" leads many young adults to place a greater emphasis on "doing marriage right", while also making others reluctant to marry in order to avoid divorce ([Miller et al. 2011](#)).

Not surprisingly, then, research has linked such fears of divorce to marital delay (e.g., [Arocho 2019](#); [Gibson-Davis et al. 2005](#); [Miller et al. 2011](#); [Perelli-Harris et al. 2017](#); [Waller and Peters 2008](#)). Aside from simply making young adults more reluctant to marry, being apprehensive about divorce also leads some to pursue cohabitation as a way of first "test driving" or "divorce-proofing" the relationship ([Arnett 2015](#); [Manning et al. 2007](#)). This connection appears especially strong among poor and working-class individuals, who often perceive divorce as a significant financial risk ([Gibson-Davis et al. 2005](#); [Silva 2013](#)), and among single or unmarried parents, who often see divorce as a risk to the well-being of their children ([Edin and Kefalas 2005](#); [Reed 2006](#)).

Overall, there is significant worry or anxiety among unmarried young adults about whether they may one day get a divorce, and these feelings have been linked to changing behaviors related to marriage and marital timing in young adulthood. However, most of the existing research in this area has focused only on heterosexual young adults. Although some research has been based on samples that appear to include some sexual minorities (e.g., [Silva 2013](#); [Willoughby and James 2017](#)), there is a clear gap in the research with respect to how sexual minority young adults think and feel about divorce.

2.2. Sexual Minorities and Divorce

Research on the dissolution of sexual minority marriages only recently began to emerge, in large part because same-sex marriage only became legal nationwide in the US in 2015. To be sure, not all sexual minorities enter same-sex relationships or marriages. For example, those who identify as bisexual often form relationships with, or marry, different-sex partners (see [Jones 2017](#)). Still, following the legalization of same-sex marriage, most of the limited evidence available suggests that same-sex couples divorce at approximately the same rate as different-sex couples (e.g., [Badgett and Mallory 2014](#); [Rosenfeld 2014](#)). For example, [Badgett and Mallory \(2014\)](#) use administrative data from New Hampshire and Vermont (both of which legalized same-sex marriage prior to 2015) to show that approximately 1.1% of married same-sex couples divorce each year, compared to 2% of different-sex couples. [Rosenfeld \(2014\)](#) reports that married same-sex couples and those in "marriage-like" relationships (e.g., domestic partnerships, civil unions) "are not statistically distinguishable" from married different-sex couples in terms of the risk of divorce. Still, it is worth noting that some recent research does report contradictory evidence. For example, research in other national contexts shows that same-sex couples may actually divorce more often than different-sex couples, including research from Sweden showing elevated rates of divorce, especially among lesbian couples ([Kolk and Andersson 2020](#)). Research from various national contexts shows that same-sex couples with children are more likely than different-sex couples with children to see their relationship dissolve (see [Schumm 2020](#)).

Aside from how often they divorce, early qualitative evidence suggests that sexual minorities may have unique experiences with marital dissolution, owing in part to the fact that same-sex marriage was only recently legalized (e.g., [Goldberg and Romero 2019](#); [Hoy 2018, 2019](#)). In one study, [Hoy \(2018\)](#) shows that a small convenience sample of gay men and lesbians who had ended a same-sex marriage received minimal or no support from their families, friends, and even the legal system because, as they saw it, their divorces

were “invisible” and “illegible.” That is, because the dominant image of divorce remains heteronormative, same-sex divorces are often overlooked or ignored. Although research is beginning to emerge on the experience of dissolving a same-sex marriage, it remains unclear how unmarried young adults who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, etc., think and feel about divorce. To address this, in this paper, we explore whether sexual minority young adults would be willing to divorce and if so, under what circumstances.

2.3. *The Life Course Perspective*

Like the other articles in this special issue, our analysis speaks to several key themes from the life course perspective (e.g., [Elder 1985, 1994](#); [O’Rand 2003](#); [Settersten 2017](#)). According to [Elder \(1994\)](#), the life course perspective draws attention to several themes, including the importance of historical time and place, linked lives, and human agency. First, reflecting the theme of historical time and place, our focus on sexual minority young adults is prompted in large part by the fact that same-sex marriage only recently became legal across the US. As noted above, this historic change in state and federal law has enabled sexual minority young adults to think about marriage, and thus divorce, within the context of their own lives. Beyond the law, public attitudes may make it more likely for the individuals in our sample to say that they would consider divorce for themselves. Research does suggest that attitudes toward sexual minorities have liberalized in recent years (see [Baunach 2012](#); [Compton 2015](#); [Hart-Brinson 2018](#)), and attitudes toward divorce remain relatively permissive ([Dugan 2017](#)). Still, couples in the US tend to divorce at a relatively high rate. For example, [Cherlin \(2009, p. 17\)](#) reports that, “After only five years, more than one-fifth of Americans who married had separated or divorced, compared to half that many or even fewer in other Western nations.” Given that exposure to divorce is associated with increased fear of divorce (e.g., [Waller and Peters 2008](#)), the relatively high divorce rate of the US may contribute to greater reluctance among our sample respondents.

Second, reflecting the theme of human agency, we focus on our participants’ willingness to divorce. As we discuss above, much of the existing research in this area focuses on general attitudes toward divorce (e.g., [Dugan 2017](#); [Hatemi et al. 2015](#); [Kapinus 2005](#); [Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001](#)). However, in our analysis, we explore how sexual minority young adults think about divorce within their own lives and, more specifically, whether they would exercise their agency in such a way as to end a marriage through divorce. To be sure, agency involves more than mere willingness but also various constraints on individual agency ([Elder 1994](#)). For example, individuals may be willing to divorce but still cannot do so due to social, financial, or other constraints. However, because we asked unmarried sexual minority young adults about their willingness to end any future marriages through divorce, they were unable to know what constraints they might face on their agency when actually considering divorce.

Finally, the life-course theme of linked lives is also relevant for our analysis. This refers to the idea that individual lives simultaneously affect and are affected by others. Sexual minority young adults, like their heterosexual peers, may point to a parent or others who have shaped the ways they think about divorce. As noted above, parental divorce appears to have a significant influence on heterosexual young adults’ views of divorce (e.g., [Willoughby et al. 2020](#)).

3. Methods

To address our research questions, we analyzed qualitative data from an online survey, containing both closed- and open-ended questions, administered via Qualtrics between February and April of 2021. To be eligible for the survey, respondents had to be (a) living in the United States, (b) between the ages of 18 and 35, (c) unmarried, and (d) non-heterosexual (i.e., gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual). We opted to conduct an online survey for several reasons, including the affordability and efficiency of the method (see [Braun et al. 2021](#)). As we note below, conducting an online survey also allowed us to recruit a larger, more diverse national sample than would have been possible had we used

a different method of data collection. In addition, online surveys are well-suited to research on vulnerable populations and have been used widely in research on sexual minority populations specifically, including for qualitative analyses (e.g., [Jowett and Peel 2009](#); [Peel 2010](#)). Still, there are several trade-offs associated with online surveys, including, as we discuss below, an inability to probe respondents for additional details or clarity, which is especially salient for a qualitative analysis. Furthermore, compared to face-to-face methods of data collection, online surveys face a greater risk of misreporting by respondents. Research suggests that this most often takes the form of respondents providing information that is convenient and potentially incomplete due to fatigue and a lack of oversight ([Revilla and Ochoa 2015](#); [Sue and Ritter 2012](#)). Although this risk is present with other methods, including in-depth interviews and paper surveys, it appears greatest in online surveys and may be even greater in our case considering the financial incentive to participate (see below).

Respondents were recruited to complete the survey via Facebook and Twitter. As a way of thanking them for participation, upon completion of the survey, respondents were allowed to submit an email address to be entered into a random drawing to win one of 21 Amazon gift cards each worth \$50. In total, after removing those who were ineligible to participate (e.g., over the age of 35), 257 individuals completed the full survey. The recruitment flyer included a link to the survey. After clicking or tapping the link, individuals who were interested in participating were redirected to the survey page in Qualtrics, which first showed them information regarding informed consent, including the eligibility criteria, what their participation would entail, and their rights as participants in a research study. After reading this information, individuals were prompted to confirm their eligibility and their consent to participate in the study, at which point they were redirected to the survey itself.

The survey contained 94 questions in total: 86 closed-ended and eight open-ended. In this paper, we focus primarily on responses to one of these eight open-ended questions: "If you get married someday, do you think you would ever be willing to consider getting a divorce? Why or why not? And if so, under what circumstances would you consider it?" The survey and all other study protocols were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

As noted above, our sample included 257 sexual minority young adults. Our respondents ranged in age from 18 to 35, with a median age of 26. In terms of their sexual identities, 114 (44.5%) of our respondents reported identifying as bisexual and 79 (30.7%) as either gay or lesbian. Respondents were also given the option of self-describing their sexual identities, and of the 64 (24.9%) who did, most reported identifying as queer, although a few identified as pansexual or asexual. In terms of sex/gender, our sample was disproportionately female, with 150 respondents (58.4%) saying that they identified as female compared to 57 (22.2%) saying that they were male and 36 (14%) identifying as non-binary/third gender. Another 14 respondents chose to self-describe their sex/gender, with most identifying as genderqueer or a combination of various sex/gender identities. Notably, transgender individuals were well represented within our sample. Although most respondents (208, or 80.9%) reported identifying as cisgender, a sizable subset (49, or 19.1%) reported identifying as transgender.

In terms of race/ethnicity, 191 (74.3%) respondents reported identifying as white, 21 (8.2%) as Hispanic or Latinx, 14 (5.5%) as Asian or Asian American, 11 (4.3%) as Black or African American, and two (0.8%) as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. In addition, 18 (7%) respondents opted to self-describe their racial or ethnic identity. Of those respondents, all but three (83.3%) reported identifying as multiracial (e.g., "black and Latinx", "Asian American and white", "half white and half Mexican"), with the remaining three (16.7%) identifying as Middle Eastern. Finally, in terms of relationship status, approximately half of our respondents (127, or 49.6%) reported being single at the time of survey completion. Another 100 (39.1%) reported being in a committed (but non-marital) relationship, and 18 (7%) reported seeing someone casually. Although we did

not ask separately about polyamory, several respondents who opted to self-describe their relationship status made some reference to being in a polyamorous or open relationship. Given the eligibility requirements, none of the respondents were married at the time of survey completion, and none of them indicated having been previously married. Although this does mean that our respondents were commenting on what they currently imagined they would do in the future, this approach is in keeping with the research to which we are aiming to contribute, much of which focuses specifically on unmarried (heterosexual) young adults (e.g., [Arocho and Purtell 2020](#); [Miller et al. 2011](#); [Willoughby et al. 2020](#)).

We compiled respondents' answers to the open-ended survey question about divorce into a single document and then used grounded theory techniques to analyze the data (e.g., [Charmaz 2006](#)). We began by each reading carefully through respondent answers to gain a holistic understanding of their thoughts on divorce. During this process, we each noted emergent themes and then used these themes to create broad codes. For instance, codes at this stage included "reluctance" and "not a big deal." We then reapplied these codes and further refined them by noting variation and complexity within each. We also wrote analytic memos to clarify the meaning of our codes and the patterns we observed within and among them. This process resulted in two rounds of inductive coding by each author. In each round, each author coded the data file independently, and we met as a group to discuss and resolve any discrepancies between us.

Overall, using open-ended survey data to address our research questions has both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, qualitative interview data may have been preferable given our concern with how sexual minority young adults think about divorce. Indeed, such methods are ideally suited to understanding "where people live imaginatively" ([Lamont and Swidler 2014](#), p. 159). Furthermore, although many respondents answered the open-ended questions in vivid detail, many more were relatively short and did not include the details that we likely would have been able to elicit through follow-up questions or probes had we conducted interviews instead. On the other hand, because our recruitment flyer was widely shared on social media, we were able to obtain a larger sample than we anticipated, especially given the time commitment involved in completing the survey (respondents averaged approximately 30 min spent on the survey) and the low completion rates associated with online surveys. In addition, our sample included greater diversity in terms of sexual and gender identity than we likely could have obtained otherwise. Ultimately, we likely sacrificed some degree of richness in our qualitative data in return for a larger and more diverse sample than is typical for a qualitative analysis.

4. Results

To present the results of our analyses, we begin by describing our respondents' anticipated willingness to divorce, and we illustrate that although some would be quite reluctant to divorce in ways that are similar to their heterosexual counterparts, most respondents would be quite willing to divorce and report relatively few worries or concerns about their prospects of one day experiencing a divorce. In the section after that, we then describe our respondents' "deal-breakers", or the specific circumstances in which they say they would seek a divorce. Borrowing language from our respondents, we organize this part of our discussion around the distinction between violations of the marital contract and signs that the marital contract has simply expired.

4.1. Willingness to Divorce

In response to the statement, "There are some circumstances in which I would consider getting a divorce", 99.6% reported that they either agreed or strongly agreed; only a single respondent indicated that they disagreed. Furthermore, 80.9% indicated that they strongly agreed, while 18.7% reported that they agreed. Overall, then, if they were ever to marry, our sample as a whole expected that they would be quite willing to divorce.

Still, in their written responses to our open-ended questions, several respondents made clear that although they would be willing to divorce, they would be reluctant to do so.

These were the respondents in our sample who came the closest to expressing the type or degree of divorce anxiety that is documented in the literature (e.g., Edin and Kefalas 2005; Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Miller et al. 2011; Perelli-Harris et al. 2017; Reed 2006; Silva 2013; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001; Waller and Peters 2008; Willoughby et al. 2020). For these respondents, divorce was something they would pursue under a limited number of extreme circumstances. Otherwise, they would strongly prefer to avoid divorce. As one respondent wrote, “I would really not want to get divorced. However, if the marriage was failing and we could not make it work, then I would consider divorce” (22, bisexual, cisgender, female, white). Similarly, another respondent, who reported working in the legal field and being familiar with divorce proceedings, wrote, “Yes, I would consider divorce. I know how messy it is, so it’s not an option I would want, but if the relationship wasn’t working, divorce would absolutely be an option” (34, bisexual, cisgender, genderqueer, white). A smaller subset of respondents stated that they expected to be willing to divorce “only when there is no other choice” (25, bisexual, transgender, male, Black/African American). For instance, one wrote, “I look at divorce as the ultimate last-resort solution to a troubling marriage. I would want to avoid it at all costs possible whether by attempting marriage counseling with my spouse, talking things out, [or] giving each other some space” (30, gay, cisgender, male, Hispanic/Latino).

Relatedly, a number of respondents noted that they would make a concerted effort to save the marriage before pursuing divorce. As one respondent put it, “I would turn to divorce as a final resort if nothing else worked to fix the problems in the marriage” (22, lesbian, cisgender, female, white). Among these respondents, marital therapy was often mentioned as a potential resource. For example, one respondent said that “Relationship counseling is an important resource” (30, panromantic asexual, transgender, non-binary/third gender, white), and another wrote, “I suppose if the relationship reached a point where we were just really unhappy together and things like couple’s counseling weren’t working, I would consider a divorce in that situation” (32, biromantic homosexual, cisgender, male, white).

Still, respondents were far more likely to express little reluctance to divorce, or even no reluctance at all. In our sample, most respondents made clear that if they were ever to marry, they believed they would be quite willing to divorce under a broad set of circumstances. Far from fearing divorce or avoiding it at all costs, most made comments like the following:

I would absolutely get a divorce, and I don’t see it as a last-resort, ‘Break glass in case of emergency’ type of thing. If it’s not working and two people are no longer in love or simply don’t want to be married anymore, then they should split. (30, bisexual, cisgender, female, white)

To be clear, these respondents were not *eager* to divorce, and most said that they would be willing to work through relationship challenges before ending the marriage, possibly including marital therapy. However, many described themselves as having a relatively low threshold at which they would pursue divorce. In fact, the same respondent who gave the comment above indicated that her threshold for divorce was the same as her threshold for ending a non-marital relationship. She wrote:

You should, of course, try to work on your relationship for a while, just like you would before breaking up if you were unmarried, but I don’t see the point in persevering in a situation where people are unhappy just because of a ring and a piece of paper. (30, bisexual, cisgender, female, white)

Why, then, are respondents so willing to divorce? Especially in light of evidence that heterosexual young adults would be quite reluctant to divorce, why do the sexual minority young adults in our sample have, overall, a low threshold for pursuing divorce? In general, respondents explained their anticipated willingness to divorce in several significant ways. First, and most often, respondents simply explained that they wanted to be happy in life and did not regard marriage as something for which they would be willing to sacrifice their happiness. These respondents would be willing to divorce because they were unwilling to maintain a relationship, even a marriage, if it did not make them or at least allow them

to be happy. As one respondent put it succinctly, “I would not stay with someone if I am not happy. Life is too short” (22, bisexual, cisgender, female, white). One participant who echoed this theme went somewhat further, adding that to remain in an unhappy marriage was “incredibly damaging”. She continued, “If the ‘want’ for each other is gone, then divorce is the only logical conclusion. It should never even have to come to drastic causes like abuse or something” (23, aromantic and asexual, cisgender, female, white).

Somewhat separately, other respondents indicated that they would be willing to divorce because what they feared was not divorce but rather being “trapped” or “stuck” in a bad marriage. In other words, these respondents anticipated being willing to divorce because, for them, even divorce, which some acknowledged would likely be difficult, was nevertheless preferable to an unhappy marriage. For instance, one respondent wrote, “I would consider divorce . . . I don’t ever want anyone to feel trapped” (27, gay or lesbian, transgender, non-binary/third gender, white). Another wrote, “Absolutely [I would get divorced]. If the relationship isn’t working, if I lose trust in the person, etc., I wouldn’t want to feel stuck in a bad relationship” (30, queer/bisexual, cisgender, non-binary/third gender, white).

In addition, a smaller subset of respondents indicated that they would be willing to divorce because they rejected the social construction of marriage as a lifelong commitment. These respondents understood marriage in terms that did not necessarily involve lifelong commitment. As one respondent wrote:

The concept of committing to someone for your life is nice in theory, but no one should be forced to live unhappily because they said they’d stay decades ago. I think when you get married, you’re not promising to stay until the end, you’re saying that at that time you want to, and you want to try. So, if it’s a time later, and everyone involved has tried and it’s not working, then yeah, time for it to be over. (21, queer and sapphic, cisgender, female, Asian)

Similarly, another respondent wrote that “the longevity of a relationship is not the indicator of its success” because, as she explained, “being married for two years and being happy for most of that time seems way better than being married for life and only being happy for the first year and a half” (27, bisexual, cisgender, female, white). For these respondents, the commitment involved in marriage appeared to be a commitment to *try* to make the marriage work, not to maintain the marriage under any circumstances. As one respondent explained:

The possibility of divorce is part of marriage. Relationships are rarely 100% happy and there may be down spots that could be worked through. But I would never completely take divorce off the table. It’s not failure, just time to change the structure and expectations of a relationship. (32, gay/lesbian, cisgender, female. (but gender non-confirming in expression), white)

Some respondents explained that they would be willing to divorce because, to them, marriage did not involve a level of commitment above and beyond what is involved in a non-marital relationship anyway. For instance, one wrote, “Yeah! I’d have no qualms getting a divorce, I’d do it for any reason, like a breakup—even if I just wanted a change of scene” (23, bisexual, cisgender, female, white). Another wrote, “Yes—I don’t think people should stay together if they don’t want to be together just because they’re married, any more than people who are dating” (28, pansexual, transgender, genderqueer, white). Finally, a small number of respondents explicitly tied their rejection of lifelong marriage, and thus their anticipated willingness to divorce, to their sexual identities. For instance, one wrote, “[I would get divorced because] it’s no longer marriage = ownership. My marriage is going to be queer because I am queer, and that means we don’t have to adhere to society’s expectations” (27, gay or lesbian, transgender, non-binary/third gender, white).

Given the ways that they understand marriage, these respondents were quite willing to divorce, perhaps more so than any other subset of our sample. However, it is worth emphasizing that these respondents made up a relatively small share of our sample as a

whole. Indeed, only 9.8% indicated that they either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “I would see my own marriage as a lifelong commitment”, with another 13.7% saying that they neither agreed nor disagreed. On the contrary, 76.6% of respondents indicated that they either agreed or strongly agreed with the same statement. Furthermore, in response to the statement, “Divorce would be a last resort for my own marriage”, 55.1% reported that they either agreed or strongly agreed. As we note above, most respondents explained their anticipated willingness to divorce in terms of personal happiness.

4.2. Deal-Breakers

If the sexual minority young adults in our sample generally expected to be quite willing to divorce—because they were unwilling to sacrifice their personal happiness for a marriage, because they rejected the idea that marriage involves lifelong commitment, or for a different reason altogether—under what specific circumstances did they think they would they be willing divorce? In other words, what circumstances would, in their view, justify or even demand getting a divorce? Respondents often listed a series of specific “deal-breakers”, citing several at once as possible reasons why they would get a divorce. To borrow language used by several respondents, most of these were what can be considered *violations* of the marital contract, or specific actions taken, or not taken, that contradicted the terms of the marital relationship, whether these were explicitly agreed upon or not. For instance, one respondent explained that, “I’d only marry after having well established boundaries and negotiated expectations, so breaking that contract would be ground for divorce” (29, bisexual, cisgender, female, white). However, other respondents described circumstances that were better understood as a sign that the contract had simply *expired*. As another respondent wrote, “Ultimately, if I no longer wanted to spend my life with that person. There are no specific ‘deal-breakers’ but there are lots of individual things, large and small, which could contribute to such a situation” (29, bisexual, transgender, questioning, white). Many respondents explained that they would be willing to divorce if they no longer felt in love, grew apart from their spouse, and/or experienced persistent unhappiness in the relationship. In this section, we organize our discussion of “deal-breakers” around the distinction between violations of the marital contract and circumstances in which the contract had simply expired.

Among those deal-breakers that we categorized as violations of the marital contract, the most commonly mentioned revolved around respondents’ spouses becoming abusive or violent. Throughout their written comments, the word “abuse” was repeated on 126 separate occasions. In fact, a number of respondents answered our open-ended question about divorce with a quick mention of abuse and/or violence, and nothing else. For example, one reads simply, “Domestic violence in all forms” (29, bisexual, transgender, non-binary/third gender, Asian). Another reads, “I would get a divorce if I was enduring abuse” (25, gay, cisgender, male, Black or African American). Although these responses suggest that abuse and/or violence may have been the only certain deal-breaker for these respondents, others specified as much. As one wrote, “My only full on deal-breaker is abuse” (24, gay/lesbian, transgender, non-binary/third gender, white). In their brevity, such responses made clear that the person did not expect to tolerate abuse and/or violence within a marital relationship. One respondent explained that this was because, in their view, abuse and/or violence were “incurable”, writing, “Physical and mental abuse are not relationship features, they are incurable flaws” (24, gay/lesbian, cisgender, non-binary/third gender, white).

Like this respondent, many others also specified that they would be willing to divorce if they experienced abuse of any kind, not only physical abuse. These respondents often mentioned mental or emotional, sexual, verbal, and other forms of abuse as deal-breakers. For example, one respondent wrote, “If my physical and mental well-being were regularly threatened, no question about it [I would get a divorce]” (28, queer, transgender, female, white). Another listed “physical abuse (of myself or our children), sexual abuse, [and] verbal abuse” among her deal-breakers (27, bisexual, cisgender, female, white). Furthermore, a small number explained that they would pursue divorce if their spouse ever became

abusive or violent toward anyone, including those outside the relationship or family unit. For example, one explained that she would consider it “instant grounds for leaving” if she “[found] out they abused another human being” (27, lesbian, cisgender, female, white).

The second most common deal-breaker mentioned by respondents was cheating or infidelity. The words “cheat” and “cheating” were repeated 50 times throughout the responses, and it was mentioned as grounds for divorce 44 times. Likewise, the word “infidelity” was mentioned 59 times, and 54 respondents mentioned it as a deal-breaker. As with abuse and/or violence, many respondents answered the open-ended question about divorce by simply listing cheating or infidelity. For example, one respondent replied, “Yes—cheating” (28, bisexual, cisgender, female, Black/African American).

However, many respondents who listed cheating or infidelity as a deal-breaker were also careful to qualify that they could or would tolerate their spouse’s non-monogamy to a limited extent or under certain circumstances. For some of these respondents, a few isolated episodes of cheating or infidelity would be difficult but ultimately forgivable. For example, one respondent explained that, “With infidelity, I think there may be some level of working through it, depending on the circumstance. If it is a case of serial cheating or children outside of the marriage, I would not stay” (23, bisexual, cisgender, female, Black/African American). Similarly, a number of respondents expressed this idea by simply including words like “serial” or “persistent” in front of “cheating.” As one wrote, “Yes, if there was persistent infidelity” (33, bisexual, cisgender, female, white). Whereas these respondents were willing to tolerate cheating or infidelity if it was infrequent, a separate subset of respondents explained that they would only tolerate their spouse’s non-monogamy if they and their spouse had agreed to it in advance. These respondents were at least open to the possibility of practicing consensual non-monogamy and thus would be willing to tolerate their spouse engaging in a sexual relationship outside of the marriage. As one respondent put it, “Of course, things like betrayal are deal-breakers . . . by betrayal I don’t necessarily mean infidelity, consensual non-monogamy is fine with me” (28, bisexual, transgender, non-binary/third gender, white). Another wrote, “Infidelity if it violates the agreement of the relationship at that time. Not traditional infidelity because I occasionally enjoy ethical non-monogamy” (27, bisexual, cisgender, female, Middle Eastern).

Still, these respondents were generally adamant that they would tolerate their spouse’s non-monogamy only if it was agreed upon in advance. In the absence of an agreement that one or both parties could engage in consensual non-monogamy, such behavior would violate the terms of the marital contract and thus be grounds for divorce. As one respondent clarified, “I think cheating in a monogamous relationship is divorce-worthy. These people knew what they were doing when they said, ‘I do’ and chose not to follow their words” (22, bisexual, cisgender, female, white).

Another frequently mentioned deal-breaker was being disrespected by their spouse. In some cases, respondents specified what their spouse could do to lead them to feel disrespected. For example, some said that they would feel disrespected if their partner tried to control them somehow. As one respondent wrote, “If they don’t respect me as an independent being. I’m not their property and so if they thought that, that would be a deal-breaker for sure” (20, asexual, cisgender, female, white). A few respondents mentioned that they would feel disrespected if their spouse did not support their career. One wrote, “If my spouse did not respect my career aspirations and was not supportive of me, I would consider a divorce” (22, lesbian, cisgender, female, white). However, most respondents did not specify any actions or circumstances that would lead them to feel disrespected. When mentioning disrespect as a deal-breaker, respondents often wrote comments like the following: “I absolutely won’t stand for disrespect in my marriage. If I am not respected and admired as much as I admire them, it would certainly mean an end to the marriage” (19, pansexual, cisgender, female, Asian). Another wrote, “I think if there is a systematic feeling of not being respected or belonging in the relationship that persists over a period, that’s when I would consider it” (18, gay, cisgender, male, Asian). For these respondents, feeling as though they were not respected by their spouse,

or respected equally, was sufficient reason to get a divorce, irrespective of what specific actions, or inactions, precipitated those feelings.

Each of these three—abuse and/or violence, cheating or infidelity, and feeling disrespected—were deal-breakers because, according to the respondents in our sample, they would violate the terms of the marital contract. However, as we note above, some respondents also listed deal-breakers that are better understood as signs that the marital contract has expired. In such cases, respondents pointed not to specific actions or events that would justify ending the marriage (such as an incident of domestic violence, an act of infidelity, or a disrespectful act on the part of their spouse) but rather circumstances or dynamics within the relationship that would signal to them that the marriage had, in effect, run its course. For example, references to falling out of love and/or disaffection were common. As one respondent wrote, “I think people can change over time and, if my partner and I were no longer meant to be, or we started to fall out of love, I don’t think there is anything wrong with getting a divorce” (25, asexual, cisgender, female, white). Another wrote, “In case we just don’t work anymore, or we grew too apart. I don’t need to have a big fight; I just won’t stay in a loveless marriage” (20, gay, cisgender, male, white). As both of these quotes suggest, respondents tended to portray this possibility as one that would not be as difficult for them. One respondent addressed this directly, explaining that, “I don’t believe divorce is always a conflictive process, I believe people can fall out of love respectfully, and that a part of your relationship ending isn’t always a bad thing” (28, pansexual, non-binary/third gender, Hispanic/Latino/a).

Similarly, many respondents indicated that they would get divorced if they and/or their spouse changed in ways that made them no longer compatible. For example, one respondent wrote that she would seek a divorce if she “felt my partner and I weren’t on the same page anymore”, suggesting that if their lifestyles or goals somehow changed and they could not settle on a compromise, she would rather end the marriage than “[make] each other’s lives difficult” (22, bisexual, cisgender, female, white). Another wrote, “If we grew apart as people and no longer had much, if anything in common, I would be willing to get a divorce” (29, gay, cisgender, male, white). For these respondents, sharing a lifestyle or goals with their spouse was important, and the absence of that would signal that the marriage was over.

Whether the expiration of the marital contract was signaled by falling out of love or becoming incompatible, this warranted getting a divorce for our respondents because, as they saw it, they could not be happy in either circumstance. Building on the theme of personal happiness discussed above (as a reason why sexual minority young adults are willing to divorce), respondents emphasized that they would be unwilling to tolerate prolonged periods of unhappiness within their marital relationships. Indeed, many said that they would not sacrifice their happiness for the sake of “saving” the marriage. For example, one wrote, “I’d rather deal with the repercussions of now being a divorced person on my own than stay somewhere I knew would no longer bring joy” (25, lesbian, cisgender, female, Hispanic/Latina). Another said, “If there is great unhappiness between the partners and finding any good memories together is either impossible or doesn’t elicit any positive response”, they would be willing to pursue divorce (27, bisexual, cisgender, female, white).

5. Discussion

A sizable body of research makes clear that although unmarried heterosexual young adults today are generally approving of divorce, they are also worried and anxious about the possibility that they may someday get divorced themselves (e.g., [Edin and Kefalas 2005](#); [Gibson-Davis et al. 2005](#); [Miller et al. 2011](#); [Perelli-Harris et al. 2017](#); [Reed 2006](#); [Silva 2013](#); [Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001](#); [Waller and Peters 2008](#); [Willoughby et al. 2020](#)). Reflecting the relatively high divorce rate and the widespread acceptance of divorce, or in some cases experiences of parental divorce, heterosexual young adults often perceive that divorce is a “specter” that hovers over and complicates their romantic relation-

ships (Miller et al. 2011). As a result, some pursue cohabitation and/or delay marriage in order to avoid divorce (e.g., Arocho 2019; Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Miller et al. 2011; Perelli-Harris et al. 2017; Waller and Peters 2008). However, our results suggest that sexual minority young adults may have somewhat distinct perspectives on divorce. In particular, they anticipate being more willing to divorce, and report less anxiety about the prospect of getting a divorce, than do heterosexual young adults. As we note above, all but one of our respondents indicated that they would seek out a divorce under at least some circumstances (99.6%). Although some of them stressed that they would only get a divorce if they had no other choice or under extreme circumstances, most respondents reported that they would be willing to divorce under less pressing circumstances.

In their written responses to our open-ended survey questions, most respondents expressed little to no reluctance with respect to getting a divorce, which stands in stark contrast to the overarching theme of anxiety found in the literature on heterosexual young adults. Connecting back to the life course theme of human agency, the sexual minority respondents in our sample expressed a broad willingness to end a marriage through divorce, although, as we note above, the constraints they may face in any future marriage were unknowable at this point. Most explain their anticipated willingness to divorce in terms of personal happiness, saying that they were unwilling to remain in a marriage if it did not make them happy, or if it did not at least allow them to be happy. In fact, some reported more of a fear of feeling “stuck” in an unhappy marriage than fear of divorce itself. Some respondents also said that they would be willing to divorce because they did not see marriage as a lifelong commitment anyway. These respondents appeared to reject the social construction of marriage as involving unconditional commitment to the relationship and instead defined marriage in terms that allowed for far greater freedom to exit or dissolve the relationship. Although these respondents made up only a small subset of our sample, it is worth noting that Meier et al. (2009) found that sexual minority young adults were less likely than heterosexual young adults to say that lifelong commitment is a key component of marriage. Still, very few of these respondents explicitly tied their rejection of lifelong commitment to their sexual identities, which may be somewhat surprising given the ways that many sexual minorities describe their views on marriage as explicitly queer (e.g., Green 2010).

Furthermore, we show that sexual minority young adults appeared quite willing to divorce under a broad set of circumstances. In their written responses, our survey respondents pointed to many different “deal-breakers” that they say would warrant a divorce. Some of these, such as abuse, cheating, and disrespect, would, as respondents put it, violate the terms of their marital contract, as they and their spouse would define it. Others, like falling out of love or no longer being compatible, would instead signal that their marital contract had simply expired.

Still, our results should be interpreted with caution given several noteworthy limitations to our research design and sample. Although the respondents in our sample spent approximately 30 min, on average, completing the survey and providing detailed responses, with an online survey, there may be an elevated risk that the data are incomplete or inaccurate, which may be especially so in our case given that respondents had a financial incentive to complete the survey. Furthermore, our sample was limited by the fact it was disproportionately female, white, and well-educated. Research suggests that divorce anxieties are most pronounced among poor and working-class young adults (Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Silva 2013), so the fact that we observed relatively little divorce anxiety in our sample may be, in part, because as a group, they had a relatively high level of educational attainment. Similarly, the fact that more than half of our sample (58.4%) was female may explain why we observed a broad willingness to divorce among our respondents, given that in young adulthood, women are more likely than men to hold tolerant or accepting views of divorce (e.g., Axinn and Thornton 1996; Kapinus and Flowers 2008; Kapinus and Johnson 2002).

With these limitations in mind, the fact that we did not detect in our data the same type or degree of anxiety about divorce that is now well-documented for heterosexual young adults raises the obvious question of how sexual identities might shape perspectives on divorce in young adulthood. Our data do not allow us to address this important question directly, but connecting back to the life course theme of historical time and place, we suspect that our results speak to the ongoing processes by which sexual minorities are “dually socialized” (Green 2010). Building on Gross (2005), Green (2010) argues that in the contemporary North American context, sexual minorities are simultaneously socialized in the dominant, heteronormative culture, which continues to celebrate and valorize marriage as a lifelong relationship, and in a distinctly queer culture in which individual autonomy and equality are both prioritized within relationships. On the one hand, most of our survey respondents made clear that they would not want to divorce, and most would undertake considerable efforts to avoid ending a marriage through divorce. However, given the importance they placed on personal happiness, and the relative lack of importance they placed on maintaining a marriage through life, they anticipated, on the whole, being quite willing to divorce. Thus, in the ways they thought about divorce, these sexual minority young adults may have balanced competing aspects of their ongoing socialization. If this is so, we might also conclude that participation in queer culture appears to help young adults relieve some of the anxieties that they otherwise tend to experience with respect to relationships and marriage in particular. Although our respondents did not generally connect their responses to their sexual identities, the emphasis on individual autonomy found within queer culture may offer young adults a kind of license to end unhappy relationships that, for young adults themselves, has the effect of making relationships less fraught with risk, at least with respect to divorce. Of course, this is only one possible interpretation among many others, and future research should explore in more detail how and why sexual identities may shape perspectives on divorce in young adulthood.

Furthermore, we believe that our results raise larger questions for future research about the role of marriage, and divorce, in the lives of sexual minority young adults today. Given the limitations associated with our data and the fact that our analysis is exploratory, future research should continue to examine how sexual minority young adults think and feel about divorce, including by directly measuring the extent to which they are, or are not, apprehensive about divorce. Future research might also take up questions about how parental marriage and divorce might impact sexual minority young adults’ views on divorce. Research on heterosexual young adults shows that parental divorce is associated with more positive attitudes towards divorce in general (Axinn and Thornton 1996; Kapinus 2004; Wolfinger 2005), but will we see similar patterns for sexual minority young adults? Due to the complexities of coming out and the ways that doing so can reshape parent–child relationships, perhaps parental marriage and divorce matter differently, or not at all, for sexual minority young adults?

Beyond this, our results raise questions about how relationship behaviors prior to marriage might be different in young adulthood for sexual minorities. We note above that how heterosexual young adults think about divorce can significantly affect their subsequent relationship behavior and outcomes (e.g., Arocho 2019; Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Miller et al. 2011; Perelli-Harris et al. 2017; Waller and Peters 2008). As such, if sexual minority young adults hold unique perspectives on divorce, as our results suggest, what might this mean for those who are looking to get married one day? For example, do they follow patterns of cohabitation similar to those observed among heterosexual young adults? Given that divorce anxieties lead many heterosexual young adults to pursue cohabitation first or even instead of marriage, might cohabitation play a different role in the relationship trajectories of sexual minority young adults since, as we show here, they appear to have far fewer anxieties or worries concerning divorce? Looking ahead to same-sex marriages, because acceptance of divorce is associated with lower levels of marital quality in heterosexual samples (Amato and Booth 1991; Amato and Rogers 1999), will these same associations hold for sexual minorities? In other words, if, as our result

suggest, sexual minority young adults are quite willing to divorce, will this negatively impact the quality of their marriages? Or might their views on divorce change as they enter into marital relationships?

Despite various limitations, our results offer, to our knowledge, the first snapshot of how sexual minority young adults are thinking about the role of divorce in their personal lives in the era of marriage equality, and they raise these and other important questions that future research will hopefully seek to address.

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