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Wandering in the Wilderness: A Grounded Theory Study of the Divorce or Reconciliation Decision-Making Process

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Wandering in the Wilderness: A Grounded Theory Study of
the Divorce or Reconciliation Decision-Making Process

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A Dissertation submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

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the Divorce or Reconciliation Decision-Making Process

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In this study, I present grounded-theory analyses of the decision-making process surrounding divorce or reconciliation based on in-depth interviews with 31 individuals thinking about divorce. The overall model of the divorce decision-making process included negative experiences leading to a bad relationship or an unsustainable marriage, the wilderness crossroads, the vast wilderness, and a development of an exit strategy. Repair attempts that were made are what helped the couple move towards a sustainable marriage or closer to divorce. The findings of the present study suggest that the decision-making process to divorce or reconcile can be a chaotic and confusing one—a wilderness—yet the participants sensed that it was necessary for themselves and others to endure this process before leaving the vast wilderness. The study discovered that a bad relationship does not present a straightforward path to divorce because the marriage has its own characteristics and considerations apart from the relationship. Within the vast wilderness there emerged seven key considerations in the decision-making process, namely: (1) the emotional and physical impact (on self); (2) children; (3) friendship and positive memories with spouse; (4) religion, prayer and hope; (5) commitment to marriage; (6) social impact and support of family and friends; and (7) finances. These considerations were focused on the marriage and were conceptually distinct from the romantic relationship of the couple. Marriage considerations were more salient and important than considerations of the spousal relationship, and they were crucial in the decision-making process to stay married or to divorce. I concluded by discussing implications of the study for individuals, clinicians, policy makers, and researchers.

Keywords: divorce, reconciliation, decision-making, and children of divorce

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Wandering in the Wilderness: A Grounded Theory Study of the Divorce or Reconciliation Decision-Making Process

Today an estimated 50% of American children will experience their parents' divorce at some point during their childhood, an event which impacts over one million American children per year (National Center for Health Statistics, 2008). In the year 2004, over 49 million Americans reported that they had been divorced, and there was an initial filing of divorce for 1.1 million couples (Munson & Sutton, 2005). An estimated 44 percent of marriages end in divorce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

Divorce is commonplace in the United States, yet surprisingly little research has been done on the decision-making process at the crossroads of divorce. For the purposes of my study, crossroads refers to a time when people are seriously considering divorce and still in the decision-making process rather than in a post-decision stage where the decision is already absolute and/or a finalized decree of divorce has been issued by the court. My study will focus specifically on understanding the decision-making processes surrounding a serious consideration of divorce, including exploring how individuals make a decision to divorce or try to preserve a marriage.

Not only is there a lack of empirical work regarding decision-making at the crossroads of divorce, there is also a lack of conceptual work. Thus, I will overview the divorce literature without discussing an over-arching conceptual theory. An additional purpose of my study is to move forward conceptual work through a grounded theory methodology.

The next few sections of this introduction overview the effects of divorce, followed by a review of the scant research on reconciliation at the crossroads of divorce. Then I discuss the current public policy and legislative efforts regarding divorce and reconciliation. Next, I marshal

evidence suggesting that some divorces may be unnecessary. Finally, I review the scant research on the divorce process.

Financial Effects of Divorce

Divorce has a large financial impact upon our nation. Research estimates that the cost of family breakdown in the United States, including divorce and unwed childbearing, exceeds \$100 billion per year (Scafidi, 2008). In a Utah-based study, it was estimated that the average cost of one case of divorce on Utah taxpayers is approximately \$18,000 (Schramm, 2006). This cost to taxpayers may be a result of the fact that one in five women who divorce becomes impoverished (Grall, 2003).

Further, the individual who is divorcing is impacted financially. One study estimated that individuals who divorce will need a 30% increase in income to maintain the same standard of living that they experienced prior to their divorce (Sayer, 2006). The financial consequences are especially pertinent to women and children. One study showed that five out of six children live with their mother after divorce (Grall, 2001). Therefore, the financial consequences that confront women consequently fall on children, as well. Approximately one in three women who own a home and have children at home lose their homes after they divorce (Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1998). Also, about 75% of women do not receive the full amount of child support owed them from their ex-husbands (Grall, 2003).

Men also suffer financially due to divorce. Research shows that most men experience a 10%-40% loss of financial well being after a divorce (Sayer, 2006). The core factors that contribute to this loss for men are the loss of the wife's income and the payment of child support, alimony, and debt payments he may acquire after the divorce.

Thus, there are negative financial consequences of divorce to the men, women, and children who experience the divorce. Government and taxpayers also are impacted by the increased poverty that frequently occurs in the wake of divorce.

Effects of Divorce on Adult Well-being

Beyond the financial consequences enumerated, divorce leaves few emotionally and relationally unscathed. Amato (2000) reports that divorce has a negative impact on almost everyone who experiences it. Some who divorce have transitory set backs while others find that divorce is just the beginning of negative outcomes that fester and grow after divorce (Amato, 2000). On average, divorce does not improve the lives of individuals. One long-term study of divorce found that about two in ten were able to improve their lives after divorce, about three in ten did worse after divorce and about four in ten tended to have the same type of problems they had when married (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Of course, there are exceptions to the general rule. Studies have shown that divorce has long-term benefits regarding personal well-being for children and individuals who are enduring abusive marriages or high levels of ongoing marital conflict (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). About half of all divorces appear to end high-conflict marriages.

Overall, those adults who are divorced are generally less happy than those who are married (Aseltine & Kessler, 1993). Further, divorced individuals tend to have more visits to the doctor and more illness (Booth & Amato, 1991). Those who are divorced consume more alcohol and thereby account for the highest proportion of heavy drinkers, especially men (Umberson & Williams, 1993). Those who are divorced are also more likely to be depressed, especially women, and have lower levels of psychological well-being and poorer self-esteem (Amato, 2000). Divorce has negative consequences for the individuals involved. Of course, children can

be impacted by their parents' decision to divorce, and children are perhaps the primary reason why many are concerned about reducing the need for divorce.

Effects of Divorce on Children

In a meta-analysis of the divorce research from 1990 to 1999 examining effects on children, Paul Amato (2001), a leading scholar on divorce, found that children of divorce, when compared to children of married parents, have lower self-esteem, lower achievement levels at school, more behavioral and emotional problems, and more troubles with their interpersonal relationships. Moreover, he found that the differences between children of divorce and children of married parents had grown larger in the 1990s than in the 1980s.

In a longitudinal study, Amato and Booth (1996) found that divorce had a greater negative impact on the father-child relationship than the mother-child relationship. This, in part, may be due to the fact that mothers are often awarded primary custody of the children. Further, parents reported problems in their relationships with their children as much as eight to twelve years prior to the divorce. Amato explains that this may be due to the deteriorating marriage relationship influencing the parent-child relationship. Other studies substantiate that adult children of divorce have less contact with their parents and also less affection for their parents than other adults (Amato & Booth, 1991; Booth & Amato, 1994).

Children of divorce are less likely to develop important social skills, such as compromise, cooperation, and negotiation, which are central skills to successful conflict management (Amato & Keith, 1991). Children of divorce who are exposed to moderate-to-high levels of conflict during and after the divorce then begin to expect conflict long-term and may model the negative communication they see demonstrated by their parents. In the meta-analysis done by Amato (2001), he found that children of divorced parents have a more difficult time forming secure and

stable adult relationships. Similarly, Wolfinger (2005) found that children of divorce are twice as likely to divorce compared to children from intact families. In a marriage where both spouses are children of divorce, they are three times more likely to divorce.

The evidence of the aftermath of divorce demonstrates potential for negative outcomes. Thus, those couples that make efforts to reconcile and repair their marriage should be supported.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a willingness on the part of both spouses to stay together and to repair the marriage. In a national sample, Wineberg (1994) found that of those married couples who separated, one-third attempted to reconcile and overall about 10% of the sample was successful at reconciliation. In Utah, 10%-15% of couples who file for divorce do not complete the legal process within 2 years (Nosanchuk, 2007), suggesting that a reconciliation may have occurred.

A current study by Doherty, Willoughby, and Peterson (2011) found in a Minnesota sample of 2,484 parents taking a mandated divorcing parents class, that 1 in 4 people felt that their marriage could still be saved; 3 in 10 individuals indicated an interest in a reconciliation service. In a subsample of 329 matched couples, 1 in 3 had one spouse wanting to reconcile but not the other; 1 in 10 of the subsample of matched couples had both spouses interested in a reconciliation service. A small number of marital and demographic factors predicted reconciliation interest. The strong indicators for reconciliation were gender (male) and initiator status (non-initiator). The other interesting fact to note regarding this study is that these are couples in the latest stage of divorce where the participant had to take the court-mandated course; interest in reconciliation could be higher for individuals earlier in the divorce process.

A number of studies suggest more potential for reconciliation than is commonly thought; at least some divorces seem to be unnecessary. Many people express regret after making the

decision to divorce (Weiner Davis, 2001). In one study, approximately 50% of those individuals who have divorced report that they wish that their ex-spouse would have tried harder to work through their marital problems (New Jersey Family Policy Council, 1999). A Utah study (Schramm, Marshall, Harris & George, 2003) exploring the same question found that 31% of men who had divorced wished they had tried harder to work through marital differences and 74% of those men wished their wives would have made more efforts to save their marriage. For women, 13% wished they had tried harder to work through marital differences and 65% wished that their ex-spouse would have tried harder. Recently collected, unpublished data by Dr. David Schramm at the University of Missouri asked several questions to 515 individuals who recently divorced and had to take a co-parenting education class. 30% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they wished that would have had more information about what divorce would be like before they divorced. When asked about their confidence that divorce was the right decision, 20% of the sample reported that they were not sure. Seventeen percent of the sample reported that they would have tried harder to fix their marriage, if they had known how hard divorce was going to be. Twenty-four percent of the sample agreed or strongly agreed that they had regrets about getting divorced. These studies seem to suggest that some may make hasty decisions that are not well thought out when divorcing. Accordingly, efforts to encourage a consideration of reconciliation of marriages headed toward divorce may be worth exploring.

Public Policy and Legislation Regarding Divorce and Reconciliation

Originally divorce in the United States had to be for “cause.” A for “cause” divorce could be granted for grounds such as abandonment, habitual drunkenness, adultery, etc. (Phillips, 1991). In 1969, California passed the first “no-fault” divorce statute which gave legal significance to the term “irreconcilable differences” (Adams & Coltrane, 2007). By late 1983,

all the states except for South Dakota and New York had passed no-fault divorce laws. South Dakota followed in 1985 (South Dakota Code §25-4-2). New York adopted no-fault divorce in 2010 (New York Domestic Relations Law Article 10).

In the United States, 44% of all first marriages end in divorce (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2007). Second marriages have an higher divorce rate of approximately 60% (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Divorce has always been a part of America, but has become more prevalent in the last fifty years. The highest divorce rates were in the 1970s and early 1980s (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2007). The divorce rate has decreased modestly since then.

In response to high divorce rates and the known effects of divorce on children, in the early 1990s, state legislatures and courts began to mandate or encourage divorcing parents education programs for the parents who file for divorce (Geasler & Blaisure, 1996). These courses were designed to help in understanding the child's adjustment after the divorce and to encourage more cooperative and effective co-parenting between parents (Geasler & Blaisure, 1996). A recent survey reported that 46 states have some type of divorce education program for parents; about 30 states mandate these programs (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008).

In addition to the divorce education program for parents, in 2007 Utah was the first state to mandate a divorce orientation course, which is intended to help participants understand the known general effects of divorce and explore the potential of reconciliation. In addition, the course provides resources for potentially repairing the relationship and also encourages alternatives to divorce litigation such as mediation and collaborative lawyering (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2009). This law requires those who are over the age of 18 and divorcing with dependent children to take this one-hour course before obtaining a divorce. Minnesota has also recently passed legislation that assesses a surcharge of \$5.00 for each marriage license. These

funds are appropriated to the University of Minnesota to support public programs designed to help divorcing couples explore possible reconciliation (SF No. 2383 Minnesota). These programs are designed to help individuals and couples make wise decisions about divorce, including the possibility of preserving the marriage. But what is known from research about the decision-making process to divorce? This next section explores this question.

Research at the Crossroads of Divorce

The divorce process is often described in divorce scholarship as the risk factors that make it more likely for a person to divorce. Those risk factors include marrying as a teenager, less education, low income, premarital cohabitation, premarital pregnancy, unemployment, marrying someone from a different race, and parent's divorce (Amato, 2010). In this study, I am interested in the divorce and reconciliation decision-making process, which I define as the emotional and cognitive processes of decision-making that occur to end or continue the marriage.

There is scant empirical research regarding the decision-making process at the crossroads of divorce. Several self-help books, mainly written by social workers and therapists, offer practical advice regarding the separation process (e.g., Buchicchio, 2006; Gadoua, 2008; Raffel, 1997). One prominent therapist and author (Weiner Davis, 2001) gives examples of regret for couples in their decision to divorce and encourages couples to be cautious when telling their unhappy narrative to friends and family members. One author (Bohannon, 1968) set a foundational framework and outlined six elements of a divorce. These include: 1) an emotional divorce when the couple grows apart; 2) the legal divorce process which legally divides the marriage; 3) the economic divorce which divides the property and assets; 4) the co-parental divorce which delineates the time-sharing for the children; 5) the community divorce which includes restructuring of the social network; and 6) the psychological divorce where each person

develops an autonomy from one another. This process assumes mutuality and does not differentiate an initiator from a non-initiator. And it seems to assume the divorce rather than the possibility of reconciliation.

One qualitative study (Vaughan, 1986) explored the turning points of uncoupling. Vaughan's study is now over two decades old, however, and it included couples in many different kinds of relationships (e.g., cohabiting, married, homosexual partners) who were interviewed either in the midst of separating or reflecting back after decades. Some stayed together and some divorced, although no specific figures were given. In her study 103 people were interviewed, some twice. Thus, this study, while providing some important information, lacks the focus and rigor to understand clearly the decision-making process of couples thinking about divorce.

Vaughan's study proposes a stage model of uncoupling. The first stage is the secret, where the initiator begins to feel dissatisfied with the relationship and begins to define the relationship in negative ways. The second step is the display of discontent. This is a stage where the initiator begins to give hints to the partner that the relationship is in trouble. The initiator almost always finds a transition person whether it is a lover, counselor, or confidant to support him or her in this decision. The third step in Vaughan's study is mid-transition. This phase involves the initiator exploring the world of uncoupling through magazines, media, or other means. The fourth step is signals, secrecy, and collaborative cover-up. In this step the initiator has a contrived participation in the relationship and is waiting for the right time to uncover his or her desire to uncouple. Initiators are often waiting for their partner to make a mistake so the blame can be shifted to the partner. The fifth step is the break down of cover-up. The initiator may have a direct confrontation with the partner regarding the end of the relationship. At this

point, the relationship is often over and there is nothing the partner can do to salvage the relationship. The sixth step is trying. This phase involves the partner trying to work out the problems. However, often there is no hope for the relationship at this point. The initiator may engage in counseling in order for the partner to be convinced that they have tried everything and the relationship is over. The seventh step is going public. This involves separating and telling others about the potential break up. Family members are usually told with care. The legal process is initiated for those who are married. The final phase is uncoupling. This is where the individuals go through processes to gain a new identity and to make sense of what happened. Vaughan's study identifies the differences between the initiator and the non-initiator in the decision-making process to divorce, the importance of social support in divorce, and the reconstruction of a new identity.

The Vaughn study implies a fairly linear process for thinking about and choosing to end a marriage. Rollie and Duck (2006) found that retrospective stories of divorce give an organized account as the individual has already "made sense" of their experience potentially leaving out or diminishing ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction, and turmoil in the process. Thus it is important in the current study to limit the investigation to those who are at the crossroads and not reflecting back.

Research Questions

Given the long-standing problem of divorce in America and the ramifications for individuals, children, and society, the lack of scholarship exploring how individuals and couples go through the decision-making process to divorce or to preserve the marriage is surprising. To begin to fill this void of empirical data, the current study will focus specifically on the decision-making process at the crossroads of divorce. Broadly stated, my research seeks to understand the

thinking processes surrounding a serious consideration of divorce. How do individuals make a decision to divorce or stay together? What are the critical aspects of the decision-making process? I will employ in-depth, qualitative interviews with individuals currently at the crossroads of divorce. Methodological details of my study are presented next, after a brief section on reflexive practice to clarify my professional and personal connections to the research question.

My Professional and Personal Connections to the Research Question

Daly (2007) encourages greater visibility of reflexivity in reports of qualitative research. Reflexivity or reflexive practice acknowledges that the researcher is the instrument through which studies are designed and research results are produced. “Reflexivity, therefore, becomes the means by which we scrutinize the mediating role of the self in the production of research results” (Daly, 2007, p. 189). Accordingly, it is important for me as the researcher and for the reader to clarify my personal and professional connections to the research question.

I am a divorce attorney and domestic mediator and have performed several hundred cases. My philosophy surrounding divorce is for a person to “fight for their family” and make every possible effort to save their marriage before they initiate the divorce process. When divorce clients come to me as an attorney, I always probe and ask about the possibility of reconciliation and confirm their decision-making. However, I have found by the time the parties come to my office as an attorney, there is little that I can do to help them salvage their marriage. I have seen very good reasons for divorce. I have also seen couples with very resolvable reasons for divorce. I have experienced first-hand the heated and emotional battle over custody, assets, and alimony. My experience as a divorce attorney and mediator spawned my interest in receiving further education to be involved in more prevention of divorce at an earlier stage.

In this study, I expected to find a logical, linear process of divorce decision-making, not only because of the previous studies but also because of the process that I bring clients through when they come to my office for divorce. I ask them in a matter-of-fact way about their children, assets, and financial needs. I make their emotional process linear and organized. I send out thorough packets with worksheets on various issues to prepare my clients before their initial consultation so they are prepared to move forward efficiently and effectively. Even with all of my experience in the divorce arena, or perhaps because of it, I was surprised at many of the findings in my grounded theory study. I present the study next.

Method

Participant Selection and Interview Procedure

I recruited 31 participants through various means, including an ad campaign, word of mouth, social media such as blogging and Facebook, and various Internet sites for those at the “crossroads of divorce.” Interested respondents were invited to participate in an in-depth interview in person, by phone, or Internet (type answers to questions on a website). I allowed the participants to choose their preferred method. This study was approved through Brigham Young University’s Institutional Review Board.

Screening. Individuals interested in participating in the survey first filled out an initial, brief, quantitative survey to help screen interviewees (See Appendix 1). The screening survey probed whether individuals were at an early or later stage of thinking about divorce, and 57 participants filled out the initial screening. Knowing the stage of divorce helped me to choose participants who were truly at the crossroads of divorce, that is, still in the decision-making process rather than in a post-decision stage. Some of my participants had a spouse who had already done an initial filing for divorce, but they still hoped that the marriage would be

reconciled. Questions about educational level and gender also were included. Screening questions also helped me to select a more diverse group of interviewees, with special attention given to gender (Doherty et al., 2011) and initiator status (Vaughan, 1986).

There were three main questions that helped me to screen potential participants. First, all potential participants had a screening question about experience with domestic violence in the marriage. I did not include those that have experienced serious domestic physical violence. Those who have experienced domestic violence may have a unique pathway to divorce. The studies show that those who have domestic violence in marriage generally are better off when they divorce (Amato & Booth, 1997). Three participants of the initial 57 participants were excluded due to reporting that they had experienced domestic violence in the marriage. Although all of the participants selected in the current study did not have serious domestic physical violence in their marriage, some comments refer to emotional abuse that occurred in marriage. The second screening question asked if the participant was willing to do the interview. Obviously, those who did not opt to do the interview were excluded. The third question asked a question regarding the formal legal process. Those that responded that, "The legal process of divorce has begun and things are pretty far along now," were eliminated from the study. I acknowledge that the sample is likely biased because only certain types of people going through divorce would be willing to submit to an in-depth interview regarding their decision-making. Regardless, my analysis of the interviews from this sample of 31 people provided valuable emergent themes that were grounded in the data and fairly represent my sample.

Respondents chose different formats for the in-depth interview. For those that chose the web-based interview format, a web address was given to them for the interview. Informed consent for them was done through an electronic signature on a website. Informed consent was

received from all 57 participants when they took the initial screening. For those participants who engaged in the phone-interview for the full interview, the informed consent was read to them again and the participants agreed on the phone.

Interview Procedures. One participant chose a face-to-face interview that lasted two hours. This participant was used as a “pilot interview” and a semi-structured format was used to be able to adjust the question set for the web-based and phone interviews. After the pilot interview was completed and the structured questions were adjusted, six participants chose a phone-based interview, and the remaining 24 participants elected to utilize the web-based format. For the phone-based interviews, the interview time was approximately 90 minutes. The web-based participants were allowed access to the interview site from any personal computer to type in their answers to questions, and then submit the survey. For the web-based survey the average time was 1 hour and 58 minutes.

Using grounded theory as a guide, I used a semi-structured format for the pilot interview and then followed by a structured interview format for the other participants. The structured interview format means that the interviewer (or web site questions) guided responses around a list of topics that were relevant to the research (See Appendix 2). These topics included questions about their feelings and attitudes about marriage and divorce, the thinking processes that were influencing their thinking about the decision to divorce or stay together, and attempts at reconciliation and intervention. The phone interview results did not vary greatly from the results on the web-based interview. I found more variation in the length and comprehensiveness of the participants’ answers to the questions because of their education level rather than their method of answering the questions.

Remuneration. Each person who was interviewed received a \$60.00 gift card for

participation in the interview.

Participant Demographics. The sample consisted of 31 individuals at the crossroads of divorce who were still married at the time of the analysis. There were 7 males and 24 females in the sample. Sixteen were Caucasian (52%), 2 were Latino (6%), 10 were African American (33%), 2 were Biracial (6%), and 1 identified as “other.” In terms of education, 19 of the respondents had received a bachelor’s degree or higher (62%), 10 had some college (33%), and 2 had completed a high school education or less. For religious orientation, 9 participants self-identified as Protestant (30%), 4 as Mormon (13%), 6 as Catholic (19%), 11 as other (35%), and 1 as none. Regarding household income, 2 made \$0 - \$20,000 (6%); 9 made \$20,000 - \$40,000 (29%); 12 made \$40,001 – \$70,000 (39%); 4 made \$70,001 - \$100,000 (13%), and 4 made more than \$100,001 (13%). The range for the years married was 1 to 35 years and the average marriage length was 12 years. Regarding geographic location of the participants, there was representation from every region in the United States although there was particular concentration in the South East; Georgia had seven participants and Florida with six participants.

Thirteen of the participants reported that they were initiators for the divorce (42%); 4 were non-initiators of the divorce (13%); 14 were mutual initiation for the divorce (45%). Eight of the participants reported their spouse first spoke the word divorce (26%); 19 themselves first spoke the word divorce (61%), 2 said the couple spoke it at the same time (6%); and 2 hadn’t spoken the word divorce (6%).

The sample in my study is less Caucasian, somewhat more educated, and more female than a representative sample. Also, there were more initiators of divorce than non-initiators of divorce in the study.

Analyses

In this study, I followed guidelines of grounded theory analyses (Corbin & Strauss, 1998) which has for main phases:

Stage 1: Broad Coding. The first phase was broad coding in which I read through all of the original interviews to address the issues of the divorce decision-making process. Every interview was coded in regards to the divorce decision-making process. The main goal of this phase was to break down the data into manageable parts and to begin the formation of common codes that can connect concepts and shared characteristics.

Stage 2: Initial Coding. In the second stage of analysis, “creating categories,” I went through all of the references in the broad coding and began to create categories to look at the emergent themes of the data. In this phase, a memorandum was done on every participant to pull out the emergent themes.

Stage 3: Data Linkage. In the third phase of analyses, I made linkages in the data. In this phase, I performed axial coding (building an explanation of how the parts work with one another) to look at the relationship between categories and within categories. Similar or significantly overlapping categories were collapsed into one category where appropriate and categories that were unique to a participant or only experienced by a small minority were eliminated as key factors. Influenced by Vaughn’s (1986) model of uncoupling, I explored in the data such categories as communication avoidance and cover-up. However, these issues were only identified in very few of my interviews and thus I did not include it in my model because it was not grounded in the data. After the axial coding, a model began to emerge that was grounded in the data and highlighted seven key factors in the decision-making process. Each of these seven factors was experienced by a significant majority of the participants.

Stage 4: Creating a theoretical story line. This phase involved generating a substantive theory by telling the stories the participants have shared. Through this phase, selective coding (integrating and refining the theory) was used. Selective coding requires a core or central category, which is the combination of the categories. The core category generates a central explanation and is grounded in the data through a variety of indicators. My study produced a descriptive model grounded in the data of the thinking processes involved in the decision to divorce or reconcile.

Steps were taken throughout the analyses to make certain there was rigor and validity. I went through each of the four phases. I used NVivo 8 to provide a coding context so that I could code the data and review the context in which the comments were made. When the coding needed explanation, I reviewed the original interview in order to understand the context of the response. In addition, I met frequently with my advisor to discuss the progress of the analysis, the model, and included my advisor in reading the Stage 2 memos. I further re-analyzed all of the data in light of my themes to explore the comments that didn't fit the general theme. I went back through the paper and gave the minority counter examples when it was appropriate.

Findings

Conceptual Model

“Being at the crossroads is the same as being lost. Where do you go? Who do you talk to? What happens if you leave? Will you ever be happy again?”

I found that ending a marriage is much more complex than ending a relationship. Due to the prior research of Vaughan (1986) and Bohannon (1968), I expected the decision-making process to be relatively linear, straightforward, and rational. In contrast, I was overwhelmed with the data when I did my initial coding and memoranda because the decision-making process

grounded in my data was a complex, emotional, and chaotic process. Even the phrases, “decision making” and “crossroads” became problematic. Because of imagery used by the participants regarding being lost and confused, I chose to define the core construct as the “vast wilderness.” The *Wilderness* is the term I use to describe the core organizing concept, which was grounded in my data, for the decision-making process surrounding divorce or reconciliation. The Webster’s II New College Dictionary (1999) provides one meaning of wilderness as follows: “*Something likened to a wild region in its bewildering vastness, perilousness, or unchecked profusion.*” The decision-making process is representative of a tangled, bewildering wilderness. The decision-making process itself is non-linear, confusing, and unorganized. As one interviewee said, “*I don't really have a process.... Maybe I need a process, maybe I should take the time to write down all the good things and all the bad things and see which list is longer.*”

The decision-making process to divorce is a series of small quasi-decisions rather than a distinct one-time decision to divorce. Although some people have made serious steps toward divorce, such as long separation or rarely speaking with one another, some were still shocked when formalized initiation of the divorce occurred. This was also a surprise to me as a researcher, because from an objective point of view, these couples were clearly headed toward divorce from the narrative of the participants. One phone interview participant, who was married for 27 years and separated for more than a year, was still shocked at her husband’s actual decision to divorce, “*Well, to be honest it's so fresh because I got an e-mail from him saying...you know the “d-word.” I think he said he was pursuing divorce and so I really, really was just kind of going along, which is stupid on my part. But honest to goodness, two weeks ago was the first time I ever met with an attorney. It's still pretty fresh.*” This quote demonstrates the

participant's surprise at the formal initiation of divorce even though their separation had been lengthy and their communication sparse.

When preparing for this research, I anticipated that the decision-making process surrounding divorce could be conceptualized as a "crossroads," a distinct turning point. While performing the qualitative analysis, I was surprised that the decision-making process is not just a simple "crossroads" where a person makes a rational and timely decision to divorce. Rather, the process was lengthy, complex, chaotic, unorganized, irrational, and yet carefully considered by the participants. After understanding the data, I then chose to define the crossroads as the decision a person made to *seriously* consider divorce as it usually occurred through a decision point. The decision-making process is not a one-time decision, rather a myriad of considerations over time not only for the individual and the spousal relationship, but more significantly for the impact on their children and their marriage.

The model, as shown in Appendix 3, depicts the following elements of the decision-making process: Negative experiences leading to a bad relationship or an unsustainable marriage, the wilderness crossroads, the vast marriage wilderness, and development of an exit strategy. Repair attempts were made throughout the model, which can aid a participant in moving in or out of the wilderness depending on the success of the attempt. Because my study focuses on the decision-making process, I will focus mostly on the central part of the model and how a person gets into the vast wilderness and out of the vast wilderness, and the components of the core construct of the vast wilderness.

Negative Experiences and Broken Trust. *"It used to be we were not on the same page, but now I got this feeling we don't even have the same book in our laps. You know I'm reading Shakespeare and she's reading a math book. Shakespeare compliments any field of study other*

than mathematics.”

The couple moves from a “sustainable marriage” to a bad relationship and/or unsustainable marriage through negative experiences and/or broken trust. In contrast to the vast wilderness, the sustainable marriage has open, familiar, comfortable terrain, with paved roads and road signs; it has relative certainty, stability, satisfaction, trust, and fulfilled expectations. Negative experiences begin to lead individuals from the open terrain of the sustainable marriage to the tangled wilderness crossroads. Some negative experiences were compiled over time until the small grievances turned into a seemingly unsolvable web of problems. Other times the negative events were sprung on a spouse due to secrets that existed such as infidelity, an addiction, or unrevealed financial ruin. This often leads to broken trust, which is very difficult to repair. One participant explained her struggle with trust in the relationship, *“So I can actually forgive all the other stuff. It’s the lying and the deceitfulness that has actually ruined the trust and that’s what I don’t know how I can get back.”* Another participant who learned of infidelity secrets commented, *“I will never love another man the way I love [my husband], but I just don't think I will ever be able to trust him again. If we stay together, I will always wonder if he is out with some woman, if he is online talking to someone he met there....I don't think I can live my life that way, but then again I don't think my life would be the same without him. It's a very confusing time for me right now.”* Spouses can be brought to the wilderness crossroads by broken trust and negative experiences in the relationship. It is important to note that although the negative experiences lead to the bad relationship or unsustainable relationship, that does not always mean that a person is seriously considering divorce.

Wilderness Crossroads. For most of my participants, a combination and culmination of negative experiences led them to the wilderness crossroads. After entering through the

crossroads, they will move into the vast wilderness. The wilderness crossroads is a triggering event such as a breaking point, heated argument, separation, or the revealing of secret affairs or addictions, which make the person *seriously* consider divorce. This is more than just simply threatening divorce in an argument. The wilderness crossroads is actually entertaining the thoughts of divorce as a viable possibility. One participant commented, *“In the first two years of our marriage... my husband brought up divorce every time we fought. It was awful. I told him many times over not to bring it up if he wasn't serious. I honestly never thought I'd be considering divorce. I fought against it time and time again.”* Yet the reality is that she is seriously considering divorce at this time.

A common experience was an individual reaching a “breaking point” which throws the person into a crossroads. One participant explained how she reached a “breaking point”:

“After the trip I told him that I had reached my breaking point. Emotions of [the] trip were too much for me. My husband sensed something was wrong. I came home from work and talked to him. This time I expressed that I felt that I didn't have what he needed, nor could I give him what he wanted. Explained that I felt like a constant failure to him and that no matter what I did, it was never good enough. I always could have done it better or done something different. Told him I was a constant disappointment to him and explained that he can't save up and lay a ton of heavy stuff on me like he did. It was at this point that I knew I couldn't take it even one more time. I couldn't stuff one more emotion.”

This quote illustrates the culmination of events over time and the spouse reaching a point where she thinks she has reached her limit in the relationship and she began to seriously consider divorce.

Another way an individual reached the wilderness crossroads was simply by experiencing a gradual breakdown of connection. This is demonstrated in the following comment from a participant:

“While there was not a significant major event that happened over these years...there has been a continued gradual distancing that has occurred between us. I think it was accelerated during this time as I worked long hours. Her world became more centered around the children and being an aunt and daughter; whereas my world became increasingly focused on work and being a father. We continued to do things as a family; but spent little time as a couple.”

This participant demonstrates through this quote his dedication to providing for the family and to the children, yet a gradual decline of their relationship as husband and wife. Even though they spent time together as a family, rarely did they spend time together as a couple. This breakdown had led the participant past the wilderness crossroads.

For other participants the wilderness crossroads was issuing a choice for change or divorce. One interviewee explained, *“We have had terrible verbal arguments when I demanded he stopped seeing this other woman. He flat out refused to. That was when I voiced my desire to divorce. At first he regarded it as an ultimatum.”* This quote demonstrates how a spouse demands a change in the behavior of their spouse or considers the option of divorce. Many other participants expressed their desire to divorce to their spouse, inviting their spouse to join them in the wilderness, as a way to express the serious and fragile state of the relationship and the marriage.

One participant discussed how failed repair attempts moved her into seriously considering divorce: *“Drug relapse - Done! Tired! Can't keep doing this.”* Another participant

tells of moving beyond the wilderness crossroads upon learning about an affair: *“I first thought of it when I learned of the affair. It was non-negotiable and I thought our covenant had been broken and it was my ticket out.”* Even though she had thought an affair was non-negotiable, she still did not make an abrupt decision to divorce. She made an attempt to work out the marriage and thought through several considerations in her marriage wilderness.

Other participants who were non-initiators were shocked at the potential loss of their marriage and being thrown involuntarily through the wilderness crossroads into the wilderness. A non-initiator participant commented,

“I first thought about divorce when I received the divorce papers. My heart fell out. It was a kick in the pants. I was amazed that this was really happening to me. I couldn't believe that this was really what my spouse wanted. I was scared of being alone and starting over. I couldn't imagine going through court, custody, division of assets and debts. The feeling and thoughts in my head were overwhelming.”

This participant shows her despair and trepidation that occurred after learning of her husband's desire to divorce. She was forced to move beyond the wilderness crossroads. This issue regarding non-initiators' non-voluntary “push” through the crossroads into the wilderness will be explained in greater depth in a later section.

Due to the negative events, the relationship is either very bad and/or the marriage becomes unsustainable. The wilderness crossroads does not usually lead to a quick decision to divorce; it simply leads individuals into the vast wilderness that accompanies a serious consideration of divorce. Often the wilderness crossroads led to a discussion of attempts to repair the marriage and some people engaged in counseling or marriage workshops.

Vast Wilderness Introduction. *“I have cried and been mad for the last 6 years. I have*

gained weight and lost weight. I have not slept for long enough periods. I have just been a mess. I have tried to understand what about me was the reason for not showing concern or love. I have gone through every level of understanding or not understanding.”

Some of the participants describe themselves as being lost with no path to follow and no compass to help them know the future. The person considering divorce has an uncertain future, which leads to much indecision and emotional heartache. On the edge of the wilderness is a bad relationship or unsustainable marriage in which repair attempts can move the couple to a sustainable marriage. On the opposite end of the wilderness is the Exit Strategy that leads to divorce.

There were seven key factors to consider in the wilderness: (1) the emotional and physical impact (on self); (2) children; (3) friendship and positive memories with spouse; (4) religion, prayer and hope; (5) commitment to marriage; (6) social impact and support of family and friends; and (7) finances. These seven factors were experienced by a significant majority of the participants, both initiators and non-initiators. These seven factors are the central findings of this study and will be explained in depth in the next section after finishing an overview of the model.

Exit Strategy. How does one exit the vast wilderness and transition into divorcing? Most participants who were seriously considering divorce began to develop an exit strategy. They plan for themselves and their children financially, emotionally, and physically for the divorce to begin. The person starts to imagine life as a divorced person and makes preparations. One participant explains,

“I’ve made contingency plans. Even little things like slowly arranging our home so if I had to rent out the basement to pay the mortgage I could do so. Being apprehensive (and

unwilling to some extent) to take on his business debt (it's in his name only, so if he died I wouldn't be left with his debt - or if we divorced I wouldn't have to share his bad choices.) Feeling an urgency to finish my education.”

This quote demonstrates how the spouse is carefully preparing for the possibility of divorce in the future even without having made a firm decision for the future.

Others feel relieved to get out of the wilderness, even if it means going through with the divorce. The indecision is very difficult to live with. One participant laments, *“I was extremely depressed and had lots of anxiety in the early days of thinking about this. I started seeing a psychiatrist to deal with panic attacks. Now, I'm healthier, I'm happier just because it feels good to make some decisions.”* Although she is still tentative in her decision, this participant demonstrates the emotional roller coaster of the initial decision-making process and the difficulty of making decisions in the vast wilderness of uncertainty.

Financial preparation seems to be one of the most important considerations in the exit strategy. An interviewee said, *“My husband really has tried his best. I am overwhelmed with guilt about divorcing him. However, I have a vision of the future with someone who is more creative and artistically inclined. I often think financial reasons have kept me bound to my husband. Now that I have some of my own money in hand, I am feeling more secure about striking out on my own.”* Once she received money and knew more certainty about her financial future, it allowed her the security to plausibly consider the option of divorce even though she had not initiated the legal process.

After developing the exit strategy, the logical next step in the model would be the initiation of the legal divorce process although more research needs to be done to develop the post-decision model. I do not focus on the divorce event since a pre-requisite for the study was

still having a possibility of reconciliation in the marriage. Although the data did not cover the post-decision process, some non-initiators in the study had a spouse who had filed for divorce, but they did not want the divorce and desired to try to reconcile the marriage. For those who were non-initiators, they were still entrenched in the wilderness yet their hands were tied regarding the actual decision to divorce.

Non-decision Path.

“[My husband] always talks about not quitting and I feel like you try things until everything’s been exhausted and we never even went to counseling together. That’s kind of why I was not talking divorce. But I think he alone knew. He planned this far more, you know. It was a shock to me, but you know it was something that I think he planned.”

Does everyone go through the wilderness? In my study, it seemed that the wilderness had left none unscathed. There was a general exception that got a person on the “Non-Decision Path” in the wilderness. When the person was the non-initiator not desiring the divorce, although the divorce was most likely in their near future, the person lacked the decision-making power to stay in the wilderness and continue back into a sustainable marriage. The person experienced many of the same issues that came with wandering in the wilderness. Each one of the seven considerations in the wilderness was still experienced by the non-initiator, although perhaps with a non-voluntary end in sight. The non-initiator still had emotional pain, confusion, and physical affects. The non-initiator still had the considerations regarding their children and the loss of friendship. The non-initiator still had to reconcile the decision of their spouse to divorce with their religious and moral values. The non-initiator still had to tell the news to their family and friends and still had decisions regarding their finances. The wilderness still existed. However, there were differences due to the fact that the decision to divorce was made for them

and there was already a likely end in sight that was out of their control. This loss of control over decision making made the wilderness even more confusing for some. One woman explained her journey in the wilderness after her husband told her of wanting to divorce because he was unhappy in the marriage.

“At first I was so distraught I could not speak or function. I forced myself to go to work and carry on, but I was in a very bad place emotionally. I went through denial. I currently have moments of anger and depression. I have an overall feeling of malaise. I have great embarrassment. At first I could not tell anyone other than my parents and sister and a few very close friends. I have started to tell people, but it is still difficult to talk about. I struggle with ‘how could he do this’ and feel like I need to know a reason other than ‘I am not happy.’ But, wiser people have told me to let it go because it is unlikely that I will get any other reason. I am having a hard time letting go because I do not understand how he could just walk out on our marriage.”

Another husband tells us of his battle after learning his wife planned to divorce him with no chance of repair:

“Can't sleep, laid in bed for weeks, couldn't work, mad at the world, couldn't eat and lost 30 pounds and even thought about suicide (but I sought counseling with my pastor and my God and I'm a better person now) but it took approx 5 months to get my life back on track or at least it's 85 percent better now!!”

Non-initiators also have difficulty coping and linger in the chaotic wilderness after learning of their spouse's plans.

Another participant talks about how her husband's indecision in the divorce causes her hope yet sorrow and she desires time within the wilderness, *“He is not as consistent as I wish he*

was. I think he wants a divorce, but at times when he is alone he misses me and tries to talk about it but, then he says that he knows we will not ever decide on anything together. So no I do not think I have had enough information but I have no more time or choices in my situation.”

The non-decision path still has people wade through the wilderness in a chaotic and non-linear way, but the timing of the stay in the wilderness is either faster or simply out of their control.

Repair Attempts. *“The best advice I received was that ‘a long term relationship is worth fighting for.’”*

How does a couple reconcile and return to a sustainable marriage? The repair attempts for the marriage relationship is the most important part of the wilderness if a person would like to exit it and go back to a sustainable marriage. Many tried various ways of communicating, counseling, and other efforts to make their marriage work. The repair attempts seem to compete directly with the negative experiences that continue after passing through the wilderness crossroads. One woman talks of her desperate attempts to save her marriage.

“I have asked to spend the weekend away to discuss, I have offered to go out to dinner to discuss, I have asked to let [us] see a counselor his choice of whom we see. He refuses to do anything or attempt at anything...I have tried to talk, email, scream, and cry. I have tried to cook his favorites, ask him to come straight home. Anything and nothing helps.”

This quotation shows the desperation that comes after failed attempts to repair the relationship. When the repair attempts are rejected and the other spouse refuses to participate, this adds to the negative experiences and overall negative sentiment of the relationship.

There were a variety of methods for repair attempts. One participant told about her husband’s apology,

“My husband apologized for all the times that he hurt me and admitted to his wrong doings and I finally forgave him. This was a big step in repairing our marriage, this is how I knew he had changed. This was a big step for us, because I was finally able to fully forgive him and I knew at that point that he changed and appreciated family and what he had.”

The most common repair attempts were religious or secular counseling or some type of marriage education. Some participants found that counseling was very successful in making them move towards a sustainable marriage: *“Well, I again sought counsel in the church environment and I sought reconciliation to her. She pretty much agreed, so I said, well, if she [will] have me then I'm willing to work it out and try to be a better person.”* Some spouses accepted the conditions or changes requested to repair the marriage. This enabled the couple to move closer to a sustainable marriage. Likewise, here was the approach of another participant with the repair attempt of counseling: *“In April 2010 I told my husband that I was no longer in love with him because we had grown apart. Since then, we have sought marital counseling and I have sought individual counseling to attempt to get our marriage back on track.”* Counseling was a solution for some participants to help get their relationship back on track. However, other participants found that their repair attempts of counseling had failed.

For those who were not successful in counseling, the decision to divorce or stay in the marriage was still not easy. One wife explains, *“My husband and I have tried counseling-didn't work. It's just a difficult decision and I am still at a crossroads.”* Even though there were failed repair attempts, most individuals did not then make a hasty decision to divorce. There were many considerations surrounding the marriage that would have them linger in the wilderness of uncertainty.

Some spouses desired to pursue repair attempts while the other spouse refused to engage. One participant explains his failed attempts at repair due to the non-participation of his wife, *“I have tried to get her to go to counseling--she has refused. I have introduced reading material/self-help material on relationships--she has refused to read them.”*

Repair attempts are very important to the model because that is what moves the couples back to a sustainable marriage. Some individuals were successful in their repair attempts that led towards a sustainable marriage, but even then the decision to leave the wilderness is not immediate. For many of my participants the repair attempts failed and little hope was left for the relationship. Still for other participants, their repair attempts failed, but they continued to try.

Seven Marriage Considerations in the Wilderness

“I feel like one of those gofers [sic] on that hammer game. Every time I hold my head up a hammer slams down and knocks me back to the ground.”

When considering the decision-making process to divorce while wandering in the vast wilderness, the participants weighed several considerations. The seven main considerations in this study included: (1) the emotional and physical impact (on self); (2) children; (3) friendship and positive memories with spouse; (4) religion, prayer, and hope (5) commitment to marriage; (6) social impact and support of family and friends; and (7) finances. These considerations were made in a non-linear, non-rational psychological place with ineffective thinking, confusion, and anxiety about the uncertain future.

Marriage v. Relationship. The reason that the vast wilderness exists is primarily because the dynamics of marriage have some protections and considerations beyond the romantic relationship. One may surmise that a bad relationship itself should lead to divorce. However, for these interviewees, it was clear that “marriage” itself is a separate entity from a relationship and

a bad relationship is not the core consideration for divorce. This theme came as a surprise to me also. Like most, I suspect, I had thought of the decision-making process to divorce or reconcile to be focused on the problems of and prospects for the relationship. Instead, the data gradually oriented my thinking more to considerations other than the quality of the relationship.

For instance, one wife expressed her sorrow after hearing of her husband's infidelity, "*I need to talk to a shrink because after all of this, I still love this man and living without him would be hard.*" This statement demonstrates the juxtaposition that many participants faced when the romantic relationship had broken, but yet many other aspects of the marriage entice them to stay. Another participant expressed her commitment to the marriage even after her husband had moved in with another woman. "*When I discovered my husband moved in with his lover, even though he was unfaithful, I still wanted my marriage to work.*" Clearly, the romantic relationship was not working, yet marriage is more than just a romantic relationship.

The participants who were initiators in my sample did not walk naively into divorce. They did not idealize the divorce. The divorce decision does not seem to be an abrupt, immediate decision for those who were initiating divorce. The participant has confusion due to the protection of the "marriage" entity even when a bad relationship exists. The participants in the study seemed to differentiate a bad relationship and the choice to divorce. One participant commented speaking about her marriage, "*We knew it was in trouble but we never did anything. We just let it all sit and marinate per say.*" The consequences of the decision to divorce are far-reaching. "*When the news got out we were separated, friends and family have become his and mine. We had many friends that weren't his and mine. Relationship loss was more than a marriage.*"

The wilderness is tangled and bewildering much more by "marriage" considerations than

“relationship” considerations. This will be illustrated as I review the seven key considerations in the decision-making process.

Emotional and Physical Impact (on self). *“I’m a total wreck. (laughs). What do you do? Just keep plugging along.”*

The decision-making process to divorce has a large emotional impact. The participants describe a “roller coaster” of emotion. *“I’ve gained weight, and have problems sleeping. I am battling depression daily, and have mood swings occasionally. I am very uncomfortable in my own home when [my husband] is here.”* This demonstrates the difficult emotion and physical impact the decision has upon participants. This emotion makes the wilderness a place lacking a foundation due to the emotional shifting and confusion. Other participants explained their range of emotions. *“I have feelings of anger, resentment, embarrassment, shame, guilt, betrayal, loss and despair.”*

Regarding the physical impact, most participants talked of weight gain or loss, sleep problems, and depression. One participant commented regarding the physical aspects, *“The physical? It’s been harder to sleep at night. I usually lay awake for hours before I can fall asleep. Or I’ll have to distract, I can’t make my mind shut down, it thinks about ‘what if’ or if I’m making the right decision. I think it’s probably mostly been sleep and definitely my mood swings.”* One participant explains, *“Physically, the depression, anxiety and panic attacks took their toll. I lost 30 pounds. I wasn’t eating or sleeping.”* Another participant related, *“My health is terrible. It’s just not good. I tried to be strong but I just feel shaky and I’m nauseous most of the time.”* The physical and emotional impact creates a challenge to move forward in the decision-making process. In my sample of interviewees, all participants reported physical and/or emotional health challenges in the wilderness.

Thus, it may be considered a major factor which leaves individuals feeling like their life is unorganized, chaotic, and difficult. The emotional and physical impact complicates the decision-making process. It is difficult to make a good, rational decision when dealing with the emotional and physical challenges of the vast wilderness.

Children. The individuals interviewed expressed many concerns about the impact of divorce on the impact of the children in the marriage. For those that had children, these concerns seemed to be one of the largest factors for staying in the marriage regardless of the fact that the romantic relationship may be broken. In the current study, twenty-six participants had children and five participants indicated that they did not have children. However, when reading further in the interview, two of the five didn't have children with their spouse, but their spouse had children from a previous relationship. It is also interesting to note that two of the participants without children were considering divorce due to the fact that there was a disagreement on whether or not to have children.

Needs of the Children. For those who did have children, they seemed to be one of the largest reasons to stay in the marriage. One mother of four explains, *"I personally feel like individually I would be happier divorced, but it's not about me...I have kids who have this whole heart ache to carry around. So I don't know if it's really about me."* Another participant speaks of her commitment to the children, *"I also don't want to put my kids through a divorce if I can just endure."* These quotes demonstrate a sacrifice of their own individual interest in the divorce, putting their own desires below the perceived benefits to their children of an intact family.

Access to children. Other participants felt that the marriage is the best way for them to have full access to the children. One husband talked about the impact the children have had on his decision: *"I am scared of missing events in my children's life and want to be there as much*

as I can.” He states the biggest influence in his decision whether to divorce is “*my children. I love when I come home and they run to me and hug me. I am very close to my boys and am in lots of fear of being away.*” Parents have more access to their children when living in the same home with them. The thought of becoming a non-residential parent brings special challenges to the decision-making process to divorce.

A husband contrasts the benefit of being a married parent versus a divorced parent:

I believe a central component of my decision-making process has been a focus on the children. I have wanted to maintain a home for the children with two parents since the beginning. I think part of the way I've sorted through these issues is immersing myself in the literature of what non-residential fathers experience; as well as what children in divorce homes experience... While I understand that there are many healthy pathways through this process, and that children can be amazingly resilient, the thought of what a divorce would do to the children always was at the forefront. It might be cliché to say that I've stayed together for the children--in this case it really is a primary factor.

Many participants expressed a similar sentiment that currently they were only together for the children or that the children were the most important factor in preserving the marriage.

Single Parenthood. Other participants imagined the difficulty of being the residential parent with the children on their own. Even though they have a bad relationship with their spouse, there is still stability financially for the children and joint efforts to help parent them. “*I don't think I can deal with [my child] on my own. He [son] has already [been] acting up since [my husband] is not here so I can only imagine what I would have to deal with if [my husband] moved out.*” Many other participants talked about how although their spouse was not fulfilling their expectations as a spouse, they were a good parent.

Another participant explained: *“I see divorce as a way to end the problems between us. I am very concerned about the impact it will have on my children. This concern is a huge emotional weight on me. I am very scared about our physical wellbeing. My income isn't sufficient and I worry how I will support the three of us.”* For those that would be a residential parent, the financial concerns of providing adequately for the children are an important one.

Remarriage. The option of divorce also brings the uncertainty of remarriage and the influence this would have on their children. One participant described, *“I could meet a nice guy but he is still not going to care about the kids as much as their father does.”* The uncertain future may bring remarriage and a consideration is how the children would be influenced by the remarriage or accepted by the new partner.

Considerations about the children have a large impact on the decision to stay married or to divorce. Many participants felt that their children would benefit from having parents in an intact marriage. Considerations of the children relegate the spousal relationship of the couple and individual happiness to a subordinate role. Children, of course, are a central component of most marriages, and even when romantic relationships sour, an important part of the marriage - the parental subsystem- remains.

Friendship with Spouse and Positive Memories. Friendship, spending time with their spouse, and positive memories were a large part of people's thinking as they wandered through the divorce wilderness. This consideration is different from a romantic relationship; it is a friendship and the combination of positive past events. When asked the question, “Is he your best friend?” one participant responded as follows: *“Yes he still is and that is what sucks. This is a recent change. Since March when we had lunch to celebrate his birthday, I have been focused on just being friends. Most painful thing has been losing the friendship.”* Other participants

explained that their friendship is what has kept them in the marriage. *“I feel he is a friend...maybe not my best friend...but a good friend...likely we felt that way is why I stayed with him so long too.”* Beyond the romantic relationship the companionship with the other person and friendship played a part in the decision-making process.

The wilderness even helped strengthen the friendship of some couples. One participant expressed, *“My husband and I remain friends. As a matter of fact, we are getting along better now than ever.”*

The friendship and companionship of the spouse is a large loss to be considered. *“I considered my spouse my only true friend and I am really hurt that he would put me through this. I feel anger and resent now but I cannot stop loving him not yet anyway.”* Another participant explained, *“To stay together: He's my friend and I don't want to see him destroy his life. I care about him. Although we don't feel passion for each other like a normal husband and wife, our friendship is good and is worth preserving.”* These quotes show the preservation of the friendship as an important part to consider within the vast wilderness, and that the friendship is distinct from the romantic relationship.

Another participant explains how losing the friendship of the marriage adds to the confusion and loss of the wilderness: *“I did consider him my best friend. He's not now. That's another loss. I feel like not only did I lose my husband, but I've lost my best friend. There's a lot of emptiness.”* The loss of friendship is a consideration for her separate from the loss of her husband. The loss of the friendship can add to the difficult dynamic of wandering in the wilderness.

Many participants explained the importance of positive memories and spending time together. One participant commented, *“We both loved to travel. We took lots of trips. We went to*

the beach. We enjoyed going to the movies together. We both liked a lot of the same things... in terms of movies (action/drama) and places to visit.” These experiences brought common interests to the marriage and made the participant think carefully about her decision to divorce. Another spouse commented, *“I enjoyed dating, volleyball, board games, camping, family activities/meals with him. He seemed more interested in me and working on our relationship then. We enjoyed work and coming home for a meal together, relaxing for the evening. We would camp, backpack, do yard work, watch TV together. We enjoyed our time apart, as well as our time together.”* The activities spent together in the past are also a consideration in the vast wilderness.

Others talked of regret for failing to spend more time to develop the relationship, *“Most of our marriage was rich with good times and positive experiences. I should have done better at finding time to escape with her and vacationing more.”* Time spent nurturing the marriage through positive experiences was reflected upon in the vast wilderness.

None of the participants said their positive memories were non-existent. Yet a small minority of the sample had friendship or positive memories at one time but the friendship and good times had diminished so significantly that it was not a consideration in the divorce wilderness. One participant related, *“I did consider my spouse to be my best friend a long time ago. He is now a total stranger to me.”* Thus, a few participants found that the bonds of friendship and time spent together were in the past and were not a significant consideration for divorce.

Friendship and positive time together is one consideration that was important to participants. The friendship involved made the participant evaluate the relationship beyond the romantic involvement of the couple.

Religion and Prayer. For those participants who were religious or spiritual, some were clinging to God and their religion for guidance in the wilderness. Some found that their religious convictions confused the decision to divorce. One interviewee who felt like her husband had emotionally abused her stated, *“You stay together no matter what. God hates divorce [is] hard to hear. Makes me feel like I am going to hell. How much abuse will I take. Does God want me to take abuse? It is very confusing.”* Because of her belief that God would not accept her decision to divorce, it made her uncertain in her decision to move forward despite feelings of emotional abuse.

Other religious participants felt that their spiritual convictions were what held the marriage together: *“It's been positive, it's only reason that we are together now. I mean without the spiritual influence in my life, I would not I would not even be married. It plays a theory all important part to still be here subjecting myself to someone some of the stuff that I've had to deal I would never would have even considered it had I not thought about spirituality or tried to walk with God.”* He goes on to explain the importance of his faith: *“My faith tells me I should work to save the marriage and that is important to me.”*

Another participant shares her deeply rooted commitment because of the covenant made in marriage. This religious conviction gives her hope for the marriage: *“We shared and received as one the holy sacrament of matrimony and that is what keeps me hoping we can save our marriage. I hope he can find love and strength in our relationship with this sacrament we share but if not then us living apart is too hard on me and I will get a divorce and decide to live the rest of my life either alone till he dies or until he decides to come back.”* Another participant said that the habit of going to church together as a couple was a strength to him in the wilderness. When asked how faith was involved he commented about *“going to church together for all those*

years.” Other participants looked to their religious leaders for guidance: *“My pastor told me to think about my vows before I make my decisions and suggested that we get some marriage counseling. I might consider that, I'm not sure yet.”* There were many sources of help that people had from their faith.

Prayer was also a common activity in the wilderness for participants. Prayer helped to guide them in the direction that they should start heading. Some talk of the solace God has given them to help them move towards divorce: *“I pray every day, morning and night, to make me aware of why I need to stay with him, and what is the reasoning behind me leaving. When I am done with my prayers, it is like Heavenly Father answering my prayers with the warm spirit saying that I understand what your going through and you need to move on with your life.”* This quotation shows how her prayers gave her peace in the decision to divorce. Others speak of the mental health benefit prayer gives them on a day-to-day basis.

Prayer plays a part in my sanity...I do have this sense that in prayer I can talk to God and will actually be listened to so there are times when it's two in the morning and I can't really call anybody because I don't want to drag people out of bed to listen to me when I feel like prayer always available to me. That hasn't been so much about figuring out my own decision as just going from feeling like I'm overwhelmed and can't face the next twenty-four hours of my life to getting back to a okay I'm going to get through tomorrow.

Some participants did not use prayer in their considerations: *“While I consider myself a spiritual person/religious person I guess I haven't taken these issues to prayer in a concerted effort.”* Some participants did not feel that prayer helped them in their decision. And some participants were not religious so that God and prayer were not considerations in the wilderness.

Religion, spirituality, and prayer helped some participants have peace in the midst of the bewildering divorce wilderness while some found that their faith caused confusion in their decision-making process to divorce. Some participants were not spiritual and it had no bearing on their decision. Spirituality also moved some to work harder on their marriage and recommit themselves in the marriage. Prayer also helped individuals to sense a direct communication with God about their decision-making in their marriage. Thus for many, but not all, faith was a prominent factor in their decision-making about divorce or their coping with the wilderness. But note that this element of the wilderness is not so much about the quality of the couple relationship as it is about the marriage and their beliefs about marriage and divorced derived from their faith.

Commitment to Marriage. Commitment to marriage was also an important consideration. For some people this is closely tied to their religious convictions. One participant explained her commitment as it related to her relationship with God, *“Myself I have thought about divorce for years but I have been dedicated to this marriage as God doesn't like divorce and I took a commitment to marry for better or for worse and that we both are Christians and we should not divorce...!!!”*

While for some commitment to marriage was fortified by religious beliefs, for others commitment came from other sources. One participant, although she indicated she was religious, communicated that her commitment was not connected to her religious beliefs but rather with her moral character. *“My commitment level will not change. It is a core value.”*

Some people felt that their commitment was conditional. If their spouse was willing to re-engage in the relationship, they were willing to work through the issues. If their spouse was going to continue the status quo in the marriage, they felt divorce was the best option. *“At this*

point my commitment level to preserving the marriage at all costs is extremely low. My commitment to preserving the marriage with confidence that we would be able to improve our relationship, that commitment is very high.... I'm at two different extremes." This shows the juxtaposition of extremes for the commitment level. If there is a change they will be fully committed, but without a change then they are ready to move on to divorce. Although this type of commitment is based on action of the other spouse, a conditional commitment can still be an important consideration in the divorce wilderness.

Some participants explain that their commitment to the marriage is in the "middle" range. One participant explains her commitment to the marriage versus to the relationship, *"I believe in marriage and all the things that go with it, but my husband had committed an unforgivable sin. I should be able to forgive and forget for the sake of the marriage and to keep my family together but I don't know if I can."* The commitment to the "marriage" creates confusion when the relationship is in disrepair.

It is interesting to note that most of the participants commented that their commitment level to the marriage would go higher if there were successful repair attempts like counseling or a genuine change in behavior from their spouse. Other participants felt that their commitment to the marriage was low because of failed repair attempts: *"I've given up trying to work on the marriage. My efforts to try and address issues are unsuccessful. I approach issues and she backs away. After time, you get tired of being the one putting things on the table."* Failed repair attempts lessened their commitment to the marriage.

A person's commitment to the marriage was another important consideration in the wilderness. Although religion was intertwined with marriage commitment for some participants, others had commitment to marriage as a personal core value. Yet others exerted a conditional

commitment to the marriage desiring a change in the status quo before making a strong commitment to the marriage. Those with middle or low commitment levels desired successful repair attempts for the commitment to go higher. After several failed attempts, some participants had lost hope that even their marriage could be salvaged.

Social Impact and Support of Family and Friends. The social impact of divorce was also a consideration. There were some participants who had not told anyone about their desire to divorce, not even their spouse. In my sample, this occurred for 10% of the participants. Nineteen percent of the sample had told their family and friends and not their spouse. Six percent of the sample had told their spouse but not others. Sixty-five percent of the sample had told both their spouse and others. For those that decided to tell friends and/or family, there were mixed reactions.

Some participants had full support of their family and friends in the divorce who helped them to become more confident in their thoughts about divorcing. One participant commented, *“My family knows about the situation and have been very positive and supportive... So they just ask me to pray and make sure that I make the right decision for me. They will be here to support me no matter what decision I make.”* The family and friends gave full support in whatever the person decided. This eases the burdens felt within the wilderness when others support them in their decision-making process.

Others did not have family support for their decision, which made them become more cautious in their decision-making process. *“However, when I mentioned it to them my sisters made me feel more guilty saying that my husband really loved me and I would regret it.”* The influence of family can also make them seriously re-consider divorce and cause guilt and regret. This causes the wilderness to become more confusing and chaotic for them because it is difficult

to step in the world of divorce without support of others. Divorce seems a task that is too large to bear alone.

Yet other participants had a mixture of responses regarding their decision-making process to divorce. *“I have some friends that are very supportive with me getting a divorce and moving on with my life. However, I have other friends that say why? You need to work it out and see how it goes!”* This mixed support can cause more confusion in the wilderness. Some participants indicated that their connection was hampered with those friends and family that did not support their decision, whatever choice they were leaning towards. So the participants would start to rally support in the direction that they wanted to head; either towards a sustainable marriage or towards divorce.

Some participants learned from their friends’ experiences with divorce. *“My two closest friends have gone through a divorce. For each it has been a long hard process. I hear/see the challenges they have had in maintaining a relationship with their children; and the financial costs they have incurred--all of which confirms those that I hear about in the workshops.”* Divorce experiences that friends and family had gone through gave participants a frame of reference for their potential divorce and helped them to begin to organize the considerations within the wilderness.

Another group of participants was very selective in who they told about their thoughts about divorce. They would often share with a friend but not family. One participant describes it this way: *“I didn't share much as if the relationship worked, I did not want my family to harbor any ill thoughts toward my husband. I didn't want to also have that lasting impact on top of everything else.”* Some participants were very cautious in who they told the situation to. This helped them to be able to save face if reconciliation did occur.

The input of family and friends and their support in the decision to divorce or stay married is important. There was a wide variety of input from family and friends. Some had family and friends that were supportive, while others did not. Yet others had a mixture of responses. Moreover, social support was a double-edged sword. For some it helped them gain confidence in a decision to leave the wilderness, yet for others it made them more confused and lonely in the wilderness.

Finances. Financial considerations were a large consideration in wanting to divorce or stay married. One consideration is the benefit in marriage for having the other spouse be the provider or having two incomes within the household. Others looked at the benefit that the health insurance offered through the marriage. Others were tied to the marriage due to bad financial decisions the couple had made. One participant lamented, *“I trusted him when he suggested to refinance the house [in order to] pay off both cars, pay off credit cards and put the house in both our names. He suggested it so in case something happened to me, he would have a place for the girls. It seemed like a good thing to do at the time, but hindsight is 20/20.”*

Financial conditions in the marriage are a consideration in the vast wilderness. One participant explains that an inheritance allowed her the possibility of divorce:

“Having the money to afford a divorce is a major factor. I want to be confident I can make it on my own. Now that I have the money my grandmother left me and we have our debts paid off it is looking like the right time. Also, in this real estate market getting a good deal on another place to live is easy to do.”

For some, divorce was not possible due to the financial burden of living on their own.

One spouse explained it this way: *“Out of all the events that I have listed I think the most important decision factor is to keep a roof over my head and food on the table.”* Others just talk

about the expense of the divorce proceeding as a barrier to divorce. *“If I had the money right now...it would be done.”* Others talk about the issue of attorney costs: *“If my husband fought me with an attorney, I would have to think about staying married...”*

Finances in the marriage and the condition of finances if the couple divorced seemed to play a large role in the uncertainty of the vast wilderness. Living in two separate homes is more expensive. Some worried that they may not be able to make it on their own financially. Others worried about their children’s financial futures. Some participants had many financial ties to their spouse which would make their divorce complicated and would have financial ties to their spouse for many years. A few felt that they had the financial resources to survive a divorce.

Timing in the Wilderness. The wilderness is a scary place, yet most participants did not easily or hastily leave the wilderness. This was a surprise to me because of the research on the existence of reconciliation at the latest stage of the divorce process and the embedded assumption that many individuals probably make hasty decisions in divorce that are not well thought out. In fact, the most common advice that the participants in my study gave to others who were considering divorce was to take their time in the decision-making process to divorce. One participant urged, *“Pray. Talk with your pastor or counselor or both. Don't rush yourself. Think things through. Have you considered all your options?”* Likewise another participant commented, *“Repair the marriage if you can, and don't be in a rush to decide.”* The participants seem to understand the importance of the decision: *“Take your time and make sure you are not making a decision you will regret later.”* Short visits to the wilderness seemed to be sparse. Most people knew that divorce is a decision that should be well thought out, and that takes time.

Time in the wilderness varied widely from 15 years to just several weeks. Many had made lengthy efforts to preserve marriage because once the divorce is in process, the options are limited.

“Make sure you understand it’s not all about you. That there is long term and far reaching consequences for everybody involved... I’m not saying it’s not never an option....Just take your time and be patient because I can still always wait and get a divorce, but once I’ve gotten a divorce I can never go back.”

Most of my participants followed their own advice and were taking time to consider their options while in the divorce wilderness. The participants suggested others in similar situations think through all of the possible options. This can be a cumbersome process to think through all of the options when chaotic emotions and bad health interfere with the process. Some of my participants lingered in the wilderness for years and even decades. Although the wilderness is a scary place, the participants weren’t trying to escape it prematurely. They understood that it would take a while and encouraged others who would have to encounter the vast wilderness to not rush through. This is the irony of the wilderness. On one hand, the participants were lost and confused in the wilderness. On the other hand, they had an intuitive understanding that being lost for a season was necessary in the process. Thus, their intuition led them to a rational way of thinking regarding the timing in the vast wilderness, even when other aspects of the decision-making process left them bewildered.

Discussion

Summary

The overall model of the divorce decision-making process included negative experiences leading to a bad relationship or an unsustainable marriage, the wilderness crossroads when

participants seriously began to think about divorce, the vast wilderness in which participants struggled, often chaotically, to think through considerations related to losing the marriage, and development of an exit strategy. Repair attempts helped to repair the relationship and helped the couple to move closer towards a sustainable marriage, or, more often, when they failed, closer to divorce. The findings of the present study show the decision-making process surrounding divorce is a chaotic and bewildering one, yet the participants understood that it was necessary for themselves and others to engage in this process before exiting the vast wilderness. The study discovered that for some a bad relationship alone does not necessarily push a person to divorce, because the marriage has its own characteristics and considerations. Within the vast wilderness there emerged seven key factors in the decision-making process to divorce, namely: (1) the emotional and physical impact (on self); (2) children; (3) friendship and positive memories with spouse; (4) religion, prayer and hope; (5) commitment to marriage; (6) social impact and support of family and friends; and (7) finances. These considerations of the marriage were distinct from the spousal relationship of the couple. The seven considerations were crucial in individuals' thinking about the decision to stay married or to divorce.

My findings demonstrated a very different model from the stage model presented by Vaughan (1986). My findings showed significant variation for participants, yet Vaughan's model seems to suggest that the stages are applicable to all that are uncoupling. Vaughan did not discuss the emotional turmoil and physical impact, nor any distinction between the marriage and the relationship. Unlike Vaughan, I found that some participants did not have a support person and some people only told their spouse about the problem or no one at all. Vaughan presented a very logical way to explore the transition into divorce through an exploration of divorce, media, and other sources. She seems to simplify this process. She further implies that all people

initiating uncoupling have secrecy and cover-up, when my study found mutual initiation to be common. In her model, the fifth step indicates that there is no hope in the relationship even though the sixth step is “trying,” an insincere attempt to reconcile the marriage. My study showed many sincere attempts of reconciliation throughout the process. My findings suggested that the entity of marriage—distinct from the quality of the marital relationship—offered a viable protection and covering for the negative events that were taken into consideration in the decision-making process. Overall, my findings significantly diverged from the findings of Vaughan’s mixed sample of uncoupling relationships (cohabitating, married, and homosexual partners).

In the next several sections, I explore the implications of my findings for individuals, practitioners, as well as for research and theory.

Implications

Implications for Individuals. Individuals thinking about divorce can benefit from understanding the process of decision-making for divorce or reconciliation identified in my findings. Understanding the vast wilderness and its seven considerations can help normalize their experience and perhaps even guide their own thinking in more systematic ways. Similarly, understanding the timing of the wilderness can benefit individuals. The decision-making process was most often lengthy and the participant sensed that the unrushed decision was a necessary part of the wilderness due to the myriad of considerations of the marriage. This can also help family and friends who are supporting those in the decision-making process to understand the time that is needed in the wilderness.

Individuals thinking about divorce—and those concerned about them—can also benefit from the understanding that a “bad relationship” is distinct from an unsustainable marriage, and that

the former does not easily lead to a quick decision to divorce. (Remember, however, that this sample did not include spouses who experience serious physical abuse.) While change in the spousal relationship and repair attempts can help lead to a sustainable marriage, when they don't, there are still many considerations related to the marriage that individuals must deal with before arriving to a final decision.

Clinical Implications. The findings of my study have potential implications for clinical work. Clinicians may need to consider a two-prong approach for helping couples who are considering divorce. Obviously, one task is to help couples repair the romantic relationship. In addition, however, clinicians should also focus on the marriage considerations. Clinicians can help those in the divorce decision-making process with the difficult emotional, physical, social, financial, and spiritual considerations of the wilderness so their minds can be clearer to make the decision. For example, the clinicians could help with the emotional and physical impact by suggesting coping techniques to deal with the “roller coaster” of emotions and physical ailments that occur during this time. Clinicians could help individuals to think through and organize the social and financial impact of the divorce upon their client and their children. Clinicians would serve their clients well by helping them work through these marriage considerations, perhaps buying more time and space for the relationship to heal. Or if not, making the transition to divorce better because the marriage issues, beyond the relationship, have been dealt with more effectively. Individual counseling may be needed to help a spouse deal with the considerations of the marriage, while couple counseling is best suited to help with repair attempts for the relationship.

Policy Implications. Utah is currently the only state with a divorce orientation education mandate (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2009). This mandate requires those who have filed for a

separation or divorce and who have minor children to participate in a 1-hour class. The purpose of the class is to help individuals that are considering divorce think carefully about their options, understand the consequences of divorce, and understand their legal options (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2009). My findings demonstrate that these types of educational programs could be helpful for the decision-making process in divorce, especially if the educational course is taken before the legal filing begins. If the educational course is taken before the legal process begins, individuals can benefit from the educational information given to help them confirm their decision before the initiation of the legal process. The course could include information regarding the seven considerations of the wilderness, including the emotional and physical impact of divorce, the impact upon children, the role of friendship, faith-based considerations, commitment to the marriage, social support systems during the decision-making process, and finances. If these programs were available on-line and before filing, the participants could review the material at their convenience, be given valuable information, and refer to the material many times while wandering in the wilderness. Legislators should consider adding divorce orientation education to co-parenting education mandates already in place in most states.

Research Implications. My study had a one-time interview design. (A 6-month follow-up interview with most of the participants has been completed but has not been analyzed yet.) There are strengths and weaknesses to this one-time design. On the one hand, a one-time interview inhibits the exploration of the longitudinal course of the decision-making process to divorce. On the other hand, according to Rollie and Duck (2006), those who divorce and tell retrospective stories give an organized account as the individual has already “made sense” of their experience and leaves untold the ambiguity, turmoil, and inconsistency of the process. Reflecting back upon the decision-making process may yield a more rational process of decision-

making and leave out the details of uncertainty and confusion in the wilderness or the entire wilderness altogether. This study was able to capture the bewildering nature of the decision-making process at one, crucial point in time. Longitudinal qualitative studies need to explore the long-term process of decision-making to divorce or stay married.

Larger quantitative studies should be conducted to explore whether the descriptive model identified in my grounded-theory study is observable in broader contexts and with a representative sample. The current study had 24 women and 7 men, a higher level of education, and a geographic concentration (Southeast) that are not representative of the United States. Moreover, self-selection into an in-depth study on a highly personal topic likely yields a sample with different psychological and personality characteristics. The findings should be investigated with a more representative sample to confirm or refine the findings in my research.

In addition, my study eliminated those who had been in the wilderness before but had now thoroughly repaired the relationship and were no longer thinking about divorce. Further quantitative research should be done on the post-decision process for both those who reconciled and those who divorced to develop a more comprehensive model of the process over time.

Theoretical Implications. The findings of my grounded theory study can shed light on some existing theories in the field. For example, Scott Stanley (2005), a prominent marriage scholar, has developed a mid-range theory of relationship commitment. Stanley differentiates two types of commitment in relationships: constraint commitment and personal dedication. Personal dedication is a purposeful devotion to the other person and the relationship, a personal investment to move the relationship forward and to give a best effort to maintain the relationship, probably because of the mutual benefits and satisfactions. In contrast, constraint commitment involves a sense of obligation and an awareness of factors that make breaking up hard to do even

when someone would prefer to end the relationship (Stanley, Whitton & Markman, 2004). Both kinds of commitment are reflected in my model. Issues of constraint commitment were central in the wilderness; even though the quality of the relationship was poor and ending the marriage seemed the most rationale course, spouses still considered staying together for the children or finances or other reasons. Stanley (2005) asserts that constraint commitment can have short-run benefits to preserve the relationship during rough times but is not likely to keep a marriage together long term. My findings suggest that constraint commitment may have more strength than is implied in Stanley's commitment theory, at least for married individuals experiencing serious difficulties. Many participants described long, twisted journeys through the wilderness with little more than constraint commitment to sustain them. At times the dedication commitment would drive attempts to repair the relationship, but even unsuccessful repair attempts left constraint commitment still operational for many.

Attachment theory also has emerged as an important lens to understand the bonds between spouses. Johnson and Whiffen (2003) have demonstrated the importance of emotional bonds or attachment between spouses. The power of marital attachment was demonstrated in the participants of my study feeling closeness and connection with their spouse even after secret events such as affairs or addictions were revealed or other negative events occurred. Even in the face of problems that would likely lead to divorce, marital bonds were still strong—and a source of confusion. Further, the importance of attachment can be seen in many of the participants' struggles with the loss of friendship and the positive memories of the relationship. Perhaps my study can enrich the concept of marital attachment to open up the possibility that attachment may go beyond attachment to the relationship—to the spouse—but also include attachment to the marriage, the many other considerations that go with the bonding of two lives.

Finally, my findings regarding the wilderness that individuals wander through during the decision to divorce or reconcile may question the applicability of social exchange theory to this particular situation. Social exchange theory is one of the most common theoretical lenses used to understand decision-making in families (Collett, 2010). At least in its simpler formulations, social exchange theory emphasizes economic decision making by individuals who rationally weigh costs and benefits in relationships. Unquestionably, participants in my study were trying to weigh costs and benefits and make decisions. But they were constrained in their rationality by health challenges, emotional bonds, fears, belief systems, and above all, uncertainty. My findings point out the need to acknowledge that individual human decisions sometimes are made in chaotic times that do not lend themselves easily to the assumptions of rationale, economic decision making.

There is a lack of research regarding the decision-making process to divorce or to reconcile when seriously considering divorce. My findings begin to fill the empirical void in the literature regarding the decision-making process by identifying a core construct of the wilderness, a necessary but difficult period of time filled with uncertainty, turmoil, confusion, and non-rational thinking. The study further uncovered that the wilderness is focused not so much on thinking about relationship issues but rather thinking about the other aspects of the marriage that would be affected by the decision to divorce.

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APPENDIX 1

Default Question Block

This research study seeks to understand the crossroads of divorce. The questions focus on aspects of the decision making process. This first survey is a general survey to choose participants for our one and half hour in-depth survey.

There are minimal risks to participation in this study which could include some potential discomfort in discussing the personal issues of divorce and family life. There is no benefit to you as a research participant. Other families may benefit from the knowledge gained from this research regarding ways to better understand the crossroads of divorce.

Participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate and the right to withdraw before completing the interview without penalty. Strict confidentiality will be maintained. No individual identifying information will be disclosed. All interviews will be stored in a secure area and access will be given to only people associated with the study. You are free to decline to answer any question you do not wish to answer and at any time you wish you can end the interview with no penalty.

The phone, Skype and face to face interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. The internet surveys will already be transcribed. Each individual who participates in the one and a half hour in depth survey will receive \$60.00 for the interview as a token of appreciation for their participation.

If you have any questions regarding this study you may contact Tamara Fackrell at myattorneymediator@gmail.com. If you have questions concerning your rights as a participant in a research project, you may contact the IRB at 801-422-1461, A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah 84602, irb@byu.edu.

CONSENT: I, acknowledge that I have had the purposes of this project explained to me and I hereby give my consent to be interviewed for this research project. I understand that the research project I am involved in is interviewing persons who are at the crossroads of divorce. It has been explained to me that there are minimal risks and no benefit to me from my participation in this research. I understand that my privacy will be protected by the researchers in the following ways: (a) my name and the name of my family member will never be used when the experiences I share are discussed in written publication based on this research (unless I specifically and in writing request that my name be used), (b) during the interview, I may request the interviewer to delete from the written transcript of the interview any statements I make that I would prefer not be part of the transcript. I understand that I am free to decline to answer any question I do not wish to answer and that at any time I wish, I can end the interview without penalty. I understand that I will receive \$60.00 if selected for the in-depth interview.

I have read, understood, and desire of my own free will and volition, to participate in this research study.

-
- Agree (By Clicking This You Agree to the Above Conditions and Agreeing Acts as Your Electronic Signature)
- Disagree

I agree to the terms explained in the foregoing question. Please type your name as an Electronic Signature.

Have you EVER experienced serious physical abuse in your marriage?

-
- Yes-- Studies show that the process of divorce is unique for those who experience serious physical abuse, and those people will not be part of our study. However, if you have experienced serious physical abuse we encourage you to contact your local domestic violence center or you can go online to get some help at the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence: <http://www.nrcdv.org>
- No

Gender

- Male
 Female

Do you have children?

- Yes
 No

Please list the ages of your children?

Household Income

- 0- \$20,000
 \$20,001- \$40,000
 \$40,001 - \$70,000
 \$70,001 - \$100,000
 \$100,001 or above

Religious Affiliation

- Protestant
 Mormon
 Catholic
 Jewish
 Buddhist
 Islamic
 Other
 None

Ethnicity

- Caucasian
 Hispanic
 African American
 Asian
 Native American
 Biracial
 Other

What is your educational level?

- Some High School
 High School Graduate/GED
 Some college
 College Graduate

- Advanced Degree

How many years have you been married?

How long did you date/court before marriage? (months and years)

Which of the following best describes your situation?

- I am thinking about divorce, but my spouse is not.
- My spouse is thinking about divorce, but I don't think I want it.
- Both: my spouse and I are both thinking about divorce.

Who spoke the word "divorce" first?

- My spouse
- Me
- We spoke it at the same time
- We haven't spoken the word "divorce"

Which ONE of the following statements best describes your current situation:

- Divorce has crossed my mind several times, although I haven't talked to my spouse about it or others.
- Divorce is something I have seriously considered. I have talked to others (friends, family, counselor) about it, but have not yet talked to my spouse about it.
- Divorce is something I have seriously considered. I have talked to my spouse about it, but I have not talked to others (friends, family, counselor) about it.
- Divorce is something I have seriously considered. I have talked to my spouse about it, and I have talked to others (friends, family, counselor) about it.

Which ONE of the following statements best describes your current situation?

- The formal legal process of divorce has not begun.
- The formal divorce legal process has begun in some way (consulted an attorney or filed legal paperwork).
- The formal legal process of divorce has begun and things are pretty far along now.

Please answer ALL the questions below.

	Not Applicable	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
If applicable, how often have you thought about issues regarding your children and divorce?	<input type="radio"/>				
How often you have thought about the financial considerations (ie child support, alimony, debt division) of divorce?	<input type="radio"/>				
How often have you spoken about marital problems or divorce with family, friends,	<input type="radio"/>				

divorce with family, friends, or acquaintances?					
How often have you attended any religious or secular counseling about your marriage?	<input type="radio"/>				
How often have you gathered information from any source (books, Internet, magazines etc.) regarding divorce?	<input type="radio"/>				
How often have you spoken to those who are divorced to gather any specific or general information regarding divorce?	<input type="radio"/>				
How often have you sought connections with people who are supportive of you divorcing?	<input type="radio"/>				
How often have you talked about with your spouse about your desire to divorce?	<input type="radio"/>				
How often have you kept secrets regarding any part of your life from your spouse?	<input type="radio"/>				

Please fill in the appropriate answer below

	Yes	No
Have you seriously considered divorce?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you contacted an attorney or searched websites about the specific legal ramifications of divorce?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you stopped or added to any of your social interactions because of your thoughts of divorce?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you had any changes in your religious activities because of your thoughts of divorce?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you identified signs of negative behavior in your spouse that existed previous to marriage or earlier in the marriage?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you thought about yourself being happier getting out of the marriage than staying in the marriage?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Are you willing to participate in our 90 minute in-depth interview

- Yes
- No

Which method would you like to use to take our survey?

- Phone Interview
- Online Survey
- I am not interested in taking the in-depth survey

Please put below your email address, phone number (or text number), and/or address (your preferred method and contact information) to be contacted about the in-depth interview. If you are not interested type None.

APPENDIX 2

Default Question Block

This research study seeks to understand the crossroads of divorce. The questions focus on aspects of the decision making process. This survey is a one and a half hour in-depth survey.

There are minimal risks to participation in this study which could include some potential discomfort in discussing the personal issues of divorce and family life. There is no benefit to you as a research participant. Other families may benefit from the knowledge gained from this research regarding ways to better understand the crossroads of divorce.

Participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate and the right to withdraw before completing the interview without penalty. Strict confidentiality will be maintained. No individual identifying information will be disclosed. All interviews will be stored in a secure area and access will be given to only people associated with the study. You are free to decline to answer any question you do not wish to answer and at any time you wish you can end the interview with no penalty.

The phone or in-person interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. Each individual who participates in the one and a half hour in depth survey will receive \$60.00 for the interview as a token of appreciation for their participation.

If you have any questions regarding this study you may contact Tamara Fackrell at myattorneymediator@gmail.com. If you have questions concerning your rights as a participant in a research project, you may contact the IRB at 801-422-1461, A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah 84602, irb@byu.edu.

CONSENT: I, acknowledge that I have had the purposes of this project explained to me and I hereby give my consent to be interviewed for this research project. I understand that the research project I am involved in is interviewing persons who are at the crossroads of divorce. It has been explained to me that there are minimal risks and no benefit to me from my participation in this research. I understand that my privacy will be protected by the researchers in the following ways: (a) my name and the name of my family member will never be used when the experiences I share are discussed in written publication based on this research (unless I specifically and in writing request that my name be used), (b) during the interview, I may request the interviewer to delete from the written transcript of the interview any statements I make that I would prefer not be part of the transcript. I understand that I am free to decline to answer any question I do not wish to answer and that at any time I wish, I can end the interview without penalty. I understand that I will receive \$60.00 for my participation in the in-depth interview.

I have read, understood, and desire of my own free will and volition, to participate in this research study.

- Agree (By clicking this you agree to the above terms and conditions)
- Disagree

I agree to the above terms and conditions. Type your name below as an electronic signature.

The answers to this survey are very important for the current study. Please plan on taking about 90 minutes for the following survey and answer the questions thoroughly. A gift card of \$60.00 will be sent to you. Please tell us the physical address where you would like your gift card sent.

You volunteered to be interviewed because you are in a situation now in which you or your spouse or both of you are thinking about divorce, something I call the "crossroads of divorce" because it is an important decision time about moving toward a divorce or deciding to stay with the marriage and try to repair the relationship. Can you give me a brief idea of what's going on and what you are thinking right now?"

What are the reasons that you chose to marry your spouse?

Please list below a chronology (numbered by date) of significant **NEGATIVE** events throughout your entire relationship with your spouse that have contributed to your current situation at the crossroads of the divorce and your decision to **DIVORCE**

Now tell me about the details of each event listed in the above question and why it was **NEGATIVE** and how it has influenced your decision at the crossroads of divorce.

Please list below a chronology (numbered by date) of significant **POSITIVE** events throughout your relationship with your spouse that have contributed to your current situation at the crossroads of the divorce and your decision to **SAVE THE MARRIAGE**

Now tell me about the details of each event listed in the above question and why it was **POSITIVE** and how it has influenced your decision at the crossroads of divorce.

Of all of the events you have listed, what event have you considered to be the most central or most important regarding your decision to stay together or divorce? Please explain.

On a scale from 0% to 100%, what do you think the likelihood is you will divorce?

	0-10%	11-20%	21-30%	31-40%	41-50%	51-60%	61-70%	71-80%	81-90%	91-100%
Likelihood you will divorce	<input type="radio"/>									

What would have to happen for you to be more likely to divorce?

What would have to happen for you to be more less likely to divorce?

Have you or your husband/wife ever seriously suggested the idea of divorce within the past three years?

- Yes
- No

Tell me about your previous situations when you have thought your marriage might be in trouble?

Tell me generally about the decision-making process you have engaged in while you have been heading towards divorce:

When did you first think about divorce? Tell me about your first thoughts of divorce? What caused those thoughts? What has changed those thoughts?

What factors have influenced your decision to divorce?

From your perspective, tell me generally about the decision-making process that your spouse has engaged in.

When did your spouse first think about divorce?

What factors have influenced your spouse's decision?

If you have children, how have your children influenced your decisions?

Commitment Level: How would you rate your commitment level to the marriage?

	Extremely Low	Low	Middle	High	Extremely High
Commitment Level to Marriage	<input type="radio"/>				

Tell me more about your commitment level to the marriage.

What would need to happen for your commitment level to go higher?

What would need to happen for your commitment level to go lower'?

How was the idea of "divorce" communicated to you or your spouse by the spouse "initiating" the divorce? Please give specific details.

Explain the emotional impact this decision has had on you?

Explain the physical impact this decision has had on you?

Have you noticed that your family and your spouse's family has taken sides? Please Explain.

What advice, role, or influence regarding your decision to divorce have you had from your FRIENDS?

What advice, role, or influence regarding your decision to divorce have you had from your FAMILY?

Have you noticed that your friends and your spouses friends have had a division (taken sides)? Please explain.

What advice, role, or influence regarding your decision to divorce have you had from OTHERS? Who else has played a role and why? What advice have they given you?

How has it influenced your relationship with those who are NOT supporting your current decision?

How has it influenced your relationship with those who are currently supporting your current decision?

Have you ever had an informal or formal separation with your spouse? Please explain.

Do you feel like you have had enough good information to help you think carefully about divorcing or staying together? Please explain.

Do you wish you had better information for your decision at the crossroads of divorce?

- Yes
- No

What kinds of things would you like better information about OR what kinds of things could other people at the crossroads benefit from?

What is the best way, in your opinion, for people in your situation to access such information?

Did you consider your spouse to be your best friend at any time? How do you feel about them now?

Was there a time when you enjoyed spending time with your spouse? What made the time enjoyable? What has led to a deterioration of that time?

Have you and your spouse tried some things to try to repair your relationship?

a. What kinds of things? Please explain

How long have you been considering divorce (years and months)

Explain the communication patterns between you and your spouse.

Have you tried any professional or religious counseling? Please Explain. What have you liked or disliked about the counseling?

Has prayer played a part in your decision making? Please Explain

Has spiritual or religious influence been a part of your process? Please Explain. Has it been positive or negative for you? Why?

Have you read some good books about divorce or marriage? If so, which ones? What concepts have influenced you?

Have you gone online for helpful information? Please list relevant websites or relevant information

Have you attended some education programs or workshops? If so, which ones? What has been helpful? What has been a hindrance?

What other efforts have you made to try to repair your relationship?

Have you contacted an attorney or engaged in any legal process (i.e. on-line divorce paperwork?)

Did you access any websites regarding the legal issues surrounding divorce? Please Explain

If applicable, did the attorney help you carefully consider your decision to divorce? (if not applicable type NA)

If applicable, did the attorney ask about the possibility of reconciliation? What steps were taken by the legal professional to help reconciliation if any? (if not applicable type NA)

Have you contacted a divorce mediator or considered divorce mediation? Please Explain. If yes,

what was your experience with the mediator?

How has the legal field influenced your decision to divorce or stay together?

If you could explain and list characteristics your ideal marriage, what would it be like? Why are those ideals important to you?

What are your thoughts in general about divorce, not your specific situation, but in general? For instance, what circumstances do you think justify a divorce?

Now let's talk a little about the family you grew up in. Please describe your parents' marital relationship with one another during your early childhood.

Were your biological parents ever divorced?

- Yes
- No

How much contact or parent time did you have with each parent? Tell us about the interactions with each parent or time spent with each parent.

What do you remember about how your parents resolved conflict?

Did your parents ever bring you into their conflict or conflict resolution in any way? Please explain.

How do you think your parent's marriage/relationship has affected you as an individual?

How do you think your parent's marriage/relationship has affected the way you relate with your spouse?

What advice would you give to another person at the crossroads of divorce?

If you could go back in time, what would you do differently?

What do you wish your spouse would have done differently?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

If I have questions, is it okay to contact you for clarifications?

- Yes
- No

What is the best way to contact you? Please list below your phone number and email and specify the best way to reach you.

Are you willing to participate in a follow up survey for an additional \$40 gift card?

- Yes
- No

Thank you for your time. If you have any questions or concerns about the interview or think of additional things to add, please contact Tamara Fackrell at myattorneymediator@gmail.com.

APPENDIX 3

MODEL: Wilderness Crossroads of Divorce or Reconciliation

NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES

REPAIR ATTEMPTS

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MARRIAGE WILDERNESS
LAND OF UNCERTAINTY

- Emotional and Physical Impact
- Children
- Friendship And Positive Memories
- Religion, Prayer, Hope
- Commitment To Marriage
- Social Impact and Support of Family and Friends
- Finances

Non-Decision Track

“Sustainable”
Marriage

Bad Relationship
And/or
Unsustainable
Marriage
And/or
Precipitating
Event

