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Is the Partner Who Decides to Divorce More Attractive? A Comparison Between Initiators and Noninitiators

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Five hundred eighty divorced individuals from Germany, Italy, and Switzerland provided retrospective reports on the perceived similarities and differences between themselves and their former partner and on their own and their partner's attractiveness. Initiators and non-initiators were compared with regard to these different variables. Results demonstrated that most divorcees perceived themselves to be quite similar to their former partner. Initiating women were more likely than noninitiating women to perceive themselves as different from their former partner in personality, norms, and needs and to evaluate their former partner to be less attractive. Initiating men were more likely than noninitiating men to perceive differences with regard to the personality between themselves and their partners.

KEYWORDS divorce, attractiveness, alternatives, initiator status

Nowadays a large proportion of marriages are projected to end in divorce (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Eurostat, 2001). To understand this phenomenon, numerous studies have already focused on the evolution of marital decline and marital dissolution (e.g., Amato & Previti, 2003; Zimmer, 2001). The

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purpose of this study was to compare the spouse who initiated divorce and his or her mate with respect to the own and partner's attractiveness (income, profession, sex appeal, social integration, moral values, ideas, etc.). Several theories and former studies provided the background for this study, including theories explaining mate selection (attractiveness of the romantic partner, similarity vs. difference between the partners), social exchange theory (Levinger, 1976), equity theory (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978), and studies that investigated characteristics of spouses who initiated divorce compared to partners who did not.

Within mate selection approaches, most studies predicted that men preferred physically and sexually attractive women (e.g., Berry & Miller, 2001) and that, in opposition, women would prefer men who had an attractive socioeconomic status (Berscheid & Walster, 1974). These differences in partner preferences were explained in terms of social role theory (e.g., Archer, 1996) and within an evolutionary perspective (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986). However, many studies on the attractiveness of romantic partners reported a strong "assortative mating." Indeed, individuals preferred partners who were physically and psychologically similar with regard to attractiveness (Buss & Barnes, 1986). In comparable lines of research, several studies confirmed that individuals were initially sorted on similarity, rather than that both partners became similar over time (e.g., Buss, 1984). In contrast, spouses' similarity on temperament (Stevenson & Fielding, 1985), attitudes and values (Feng & Baker, 1994), and intelligence (Gilger, 1991) tended to be lower than spouses' similarity on physical and psychological levels. Contradictory results were reported examining correlations between spouses' similarity and marital quality and satisfaction: Several researchers found positive correlations between partners' similarity and marital quality or satisfaction (e.g., Kurdek, 1993; Russel & Wells, 1991), but other authors could not replicate such correlations (Lewak, Wakefield, & Briggs, 1985).

According to social exchange theory developed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959), Levinger (1976) suggested that marital cohesion depends on (a) the attractiveness of the close relationship, (b) the attractiveness of alternatives, and (c) the barriers to divorce. Partners who perceived more rewards (e.g., material, symbolic, emotional) than costs (e.g., loss of freedom, responsibilities, compromises) in their marriage are expected to remain committed to the marriage and to experience relatively high levels of relationship satisfaction (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Glenn, 1990; Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Knoester & Booth, 2000) and low rates of divorce (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991). In contrast, spouses who are not attracted to their marriage (as a result of perceiving more costs than benefits in their relationship) are likely to experience distress and will remain married only in the presence of high barriers to divorce (e.g., concerns about children, moral or religious constraints; Levinger, 1976) and poor alternatives (e.g., lack of a desirable new partner; e.g., Trent & South, 2003; Udry, 1981).

Several studies based on equity theory (Walster et al., 1978) reported that both partners would be most satisfied with their relationship when it is considered equitable, meaning that each one's outcomes from the relationship are similar to each one's contributions (Cate, Lloyd, Henton, & Larson, 1982). When a partner perceives himself or herself participating in an inequitable way, he or she should feel distressed in marriage and should be prone to develop negative emotions (i.e., frustration, feelings of unfairness, depression, guilt, shame, etc.; e.g., Sprecher, 1986). Several scholars reported that the spouse perceiving less benefits (Prins, Buunk, & VanYperen, 1993), particularly women, were most "likely to engage in an extramarital relationship, often the first step to ending a marriage" (Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999, p. 125).

The fourth line of studies deals with the question of who initiates divorce. According to Pettit and Bloom (1984), making the decision to divorce is a complex dyadic process. The different steps in this process may vary from couple to couple (e.g., mutual decision to separate; a spouse decides to divorce, surprising the other partner [Goodman, 1993]; a spouse provokes the other to initiate divorce [Meyers, 1995]). Different studies affirm that in about two thirds of cases, the decision to divorce is made by the wife (Braver, Whitley, & Ng, 1993; Chang, 2000; Rokach, Cohen, & Dreman, 2004). Several theoretical models of divorce submitted that the initiative to divorce is influenced by marital unhappiness, desirable alternatives and attractions, and personality factors (Levinger, 1976; Pettit & Bloom, 1984). However, a number of recent studies (Hopper, 1993; Sweeney, 2002) found only few differences between initiating and noninitiating partners with regard to their personality and the degree of marital distress. More differences have been found on marital alternatives (Black, Eastwood, Sprenkle, & Smith, 1991; Udry, 1981). Rokach et al. (2004) reported that the initiator of divorce is described as dominant in the couple. These authors concluded that the dominant spouse (the one with the greatest power) more frequently initiates divorce because he or she is the more active partner, the more attractive, and the one with the best alternatives. Vaughan (1986) explained the difference between initiating and noninitiating partners by the fact that the initiator has more time to detect possible alternatives to the current relationship.

Our study aims to compare the partner who initiated divorce and his or her mate with respect to the own and the partner's attractiveness (i.e., income, profession, sex appeal, social integration, moral values, ideas, etc.). We expected that the spouse who decides to dissolve marriage evaluates himself or herself to be more attractive than his or her partner. Moreover we expected that women who made the decision to divorce considered themselves to be physically more attractive than noninitiating women and that male initiators evaluated themselves to be more attractive than noninitiators with respect to socioeconomic status.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 703 divorced individuals between 20 and 60 years old participated in this research. Participants were recruited with communitywide advertisements in newspapers in 2002 in Germany, Italy, and Switzerland. In this study participants who indicated they made the decision to separate were considered the initiators of divorce and those who indicated that their partner had decided to divorce were the noninitiators. We decided not to take into account the 123 participants (55 women and 68 men) who indicated that the decision to divorce was a mutual decision. We based our analyses on 580 participants (366 women and 214 men), as shown in Table 1.

Initiators and noninitiators were compared on sociodemographic variables to identify any differences between them. The decision to divorce was mostly made by the wife, $\chi^2(1, N = 703) = 52.38, p < .000$, according to the affirmations of women (72.4% of them were estimated to have initiated divorce) and to the affirmations of the men (57.9% of them reported that the decision was made by their partner).

There were no differences between initiators and noninitiators, among women and men, with regard to the age at the time of data collection, women: $t(359) = -.34, ns$, men: $t(208) = -1.75, ns$; age at the time of marriage, women: $t(360) = -.59, ns$, men: $t(212) = -1.90, ns$; duration of the engagement prior to marriage, women: $t(360) = -1.96, ns$, men: $t(208) = -.93, ns$; duration of cohabitation prior to the marriage, women: $t(272) = .42, ns$, men: $t(164) = -.32, ns$; duration of the marital relationship, women: $t(355) = -1.48, ns$, men: $t(208) = -.45, ns$; and finally to the duration since the separation, women: $t(360) = 1.72, ns$, men: $t(207) = -.46, ns$.

Moreover, there were no differences between the initiators and noninitiators, men and women, with regard to nationality, women: $\chi^2(2) = 1.22, ns$, men: $\chi^2(2) = .44, ns$; religion, women: $\chi^2(2) = 1.51, ns$, men: $\chi^2(2) = 1.51, ns$; social status, women: $\chi^2(3) = 3.08, ns$, men: $\chi^2(3) = 1.15, ns$; education, women: $\chi^2(3) = .88, ns$, men: $\chi^2(3) = 1.79, ns$; premarital cohabitation, women: $\chi^2(1) = 1.00, ns$, men: $\chi^2(1) = .30, ns$; and presence of children, women: $\chi^2(1) = 1.50, ns$, men: $\chi^2(1) = 3.88, ns$ (see Table 1).

Questionnaires

Individuals responding to newspaper advertisements were mailed a questionnaire assessing demographic variables (as listed in Table 1) and a questionnaire assessing (a) who had initiated divorce, (b) the perception of similarity between both partners, (c) the evaluation of one's own and partner's attractiveness, (d) the comparison between the attractiveness of both

TABLE 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of female and male initiators and noninitiators of the decision to divorce

	Women						Men					
	Initiators ($n = 265$)			Noninitiators ($n = 101$)			Initiators ($n = 90$)			Noninitiators ($n = 124$)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Current age	43.80	7.90	25–60	44.12	8.28	20–60	44.87	7.03	28–59	46.71	7.88	27–60
Age at marriage	24.15	4.62	16–41	24.46	4.24	17–40	27.51	5.20	20–45	28.93	5.53	18–49
Years married	13.52	8.17	0.50–38.50	14.99	9.03	1.00–36.00	12.44	7.22	0.50–30.00	12.91	7.48	1.50–34.00
Years separated	5.55	6.12	0.50–29.00	4.36	5.02	0.50–21.00	4.33	4.68	0.50–22.00	4.65	5.08	0.50–22.00
Years engaged	2.95	2.68	0.00–18.50	3.58	2.84	0.50–15.00	3.55	2.69	0.00–14.00	3.21	2.65	0.50–16.00
Years cohabitation prior to marriage	1.58	2.42	0.00–17.50	1.45	1.71	0.00–7.50	1.57	2.00	0.00–10.00	1.67	1.77	0.00–10.00
Children		87.2%			82.2%			82.0%			91.1%	
Country												
Germany		55.5%			54.5%			22.2%			8.5%	
Italy		20.0%			24.8%			21.1%			21.8%	
Switzerland		24.5%			20.8%			56.7%			59.7%	
Religion												
Catholic		39.8%			42.3%			34.8%			39.3%	
Protestant		29.0%			33.0%			46.1%			37.7%	
None		31.3%			24.7%			19.1%			23.0%	
Education												
Grade school		20.0%			19.0%			15.6%			13.8%	
High school		32.7%			30.0%			31.1%			30.1%	
College		24.2%			29.0%			15.6%			22.8%	
University		23.1%			22.0%			37.8%			33.3%	
Social status												
Low		19.5%			24.0%			21.8%			23.1%	
Medium		65.9%			63.0%			60.9%			56.2%	
High		14.6%			13.0%			17.2%			20.7%	

partners, and (e) comparison between the former partner and possible alternative partners and between the former marriage and earlier close relationship as described later.

WHO INITIATED DIVORCE?

Participants had three answer choices for this question: (a) it was my decision, (b) it was the decision of my partner, and (c) it was a common decision. Pettit and Bloom (1984, p. 589) reported that “previous studies (Asher & Bloom, 1983) have suggested that self-report of initiator status appears to have acceptable validity, in that both spouses generally agree.” Moreover, Buehler, Hogan, Robinson, and Levy (1986) noticed that divorced persons were able to identify whether the decision to divorce was initiated by themselves, by the partner, or by both of them.

PERCEPTION OF THE SIMILARITY BETWEEN BOTH PARTNERS

This variable was assessed with a five-item scale. Participants indicated if they estimated that they and their partner were similar or different with regard to (a) personality and character; (b) values, norms, and attitudes; (c) sexual needs; (d) goals, expectations, and needs; and (e) opinion regarding allocation of marital roles.

EVALUATION OF ONE’S OWN AND PARTNER’S ATTRACTIVENESS

Six items evaluated one’s own and partner’s (a) physical or sexual, (b) social, and (c) intellectual attractiveness on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very unattractive*) to 5 (*very attractive*).

COMPARISON BETWEEN ONE’S OWN AND PARTNER’S ATTRACTIVENESS

Six items compared the (a) physical or sexual, (b) intellectual, (c) social, (d) financial, and (e) professional attractiveness of the respondents compared to their partner’s attractiveness. Participants indicated if they estimated themselves to be more attractive than their partner, as attractive as their partner, or more attractive than their partner.

COMPARISON OF THE PARTNER’S ATTRACTIVENESS TO ALTERNATIVES AND TO EARLIER CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

Participants had to indicate if their former partner was attractive or unattractive at the beginning of the close relationship in comparison to alternatives and to earlier relationships.

RESULTS

To examine any differences between initiators and noninitiators we computed chi-square analyses and analyses of variance. As the initiators and the noninitiators did not differ with regard to the demographic variables, we did not control those variables in the following analyses.

Similarity or Difference Between Both Former Partners

How did divorced participants evaluate similarity or difference between themselves and their partner with regard to initiator status? As Table 2 shows, most participants (men and women) described themselves as quite similar to their former spouse. Women who initiated divorce were significantly more likely than women who did not to note differences between themselves and their partner with regard to (a) personality or character; (b) norms, values, and attitudes; (c) sexual needs; and (d) needs, expectations, and goals. Men who decided to divorce were significantly less likely than noninitiators to reveal similarity with their former wife with regard to personality or character and marginally less likely with regard to norms, values, and attitudes (see Table 2).

One's Own and Partner's Attractiveness

To evaluate the difference of perception of one's own and the partner's attractiveness for initiators and noninitiators, a 2×2 (initiative \times attractiveness)

TABLE 2 Similarity and difference between the former spouses for initiator and noninitiator participants

	Own Initiative		Partner's Initiative		χ^2
	Similar	Different	Similar	Different	
Women					
Personality, character	47.7%	52.3%	60.9%	39.1%	4.61*
Norms, values, attitudes	68.8%	31.3%	84.4%	15.6%	8.19**
Sexual needs	59.8%	40.2%	80.4%	19.6%	12.49***
Needs, expectations, goals	70.9%	29.1%	84.6%	15.4%	6.56**
Opinion regarding allocation of marital roles	79.5%	20.5%	84.8%	15.2%	1.20
Men					
Personality, character	52.4%	47.6%	66.7%	33.3%	4.03*
Norms, values, attitudes	71.1%	28.9%	81.5%	18.5%	2.86 ⁺
Sexual needs	59.5%	40.5%	66.7%	33.3%	1.04
Needs, expectations, goals	79.8%	20.2%	72.9%	27.1%	1.21
Opinion regarding allocation of marital roles	77.4%	22.6%	84.3%	15.7%	1.47

⁺ $p < .1$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted for physical or sexual, social, and intellectual attractiveness in women and men. For women, this MANOVA revealed significant effects for both factors: initiative, $F(3, 325) = 3.93, p < .01$; attractiveness, $F(3, 325) = 5.56, p < .001$, and a significant Initiative \times Attractiveness interaction effect, $F(3, 325) = 6.35, p < .001$. For men, the MANOVA revealed only a significant attractiveness effect, $F(3, 185) = 24.75, p < .001$. These results are presented in Table 3. Simple effect tests revealed that noninitiating women scored significantly higher on two subscales (physical or sexual and intellectual attractiveness), suggesting that noninitiating women perceived more attractiveness in their former couple. Moreover, women perceived their partner to be physically or sexually and socially more attractive than themselves, but intellectually less attractive. Initiative \times Attractiveness interaction effects were apparent on the three subscales. Men (independent of initiator status) perceived their female partner to be physically or sexually more attractive than themselves, but socially and intellectually less attractive. Moreover, we were able to find an Initiative \times Attractiveness interaction effect on the subscale assessing intellectual attractiveness (see Table 3).

Comparison Between One's Own and Partner's Attractiveness

As Table 4 shows, a quarter of the initiating women described their former partner to be physically or sexually less attractive than themselves, whereas only a tenth of noninitiating women did so. Women who did not make the decision to divorce were more likely than women who did to perceive their spouse to be as attractive as they were. Twice as many initiating as noninitiating women evaluated their partner to be intellectually and socially less attractive than themselves. Moreover, twice as many female noninitiators than initiators described their partner to be intellectually more attractive than themselves. Initiating women were more likely than noninitiating women to state that their partner had a lower income and a lower degree of education than themselves. Furthermore, a greater number of noninitiating women affirmed that their partner had a higher degree of education than themselves. It is noteworthy that the percentage of women who admitted that their former partner had a higher income than themselves was quite similar for initiating and noninitiating women.

Men who decided to divorce were more likely than men who did not to evaluate their former partner to be physically or sexually and intellectually less attractive than themselves. Moreover, compared to the noninitiating men, men who initiated divorce were more likely to report a lower degree of education for their former spouse (see Table 4).

TABLE 3 Own and partner's attractiveness for initiator and noninitiator participants

	Own Initiative				Partner's Initiative				Results for Simple Effects Tests				
	Own Attractiveness		Partner's Attractiveness		Own Attractiveness		Partner's Attractiveness		F		F		I * A
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	Initiative	Attractiveness	Initiative	Attractiveness	
Women													
Sexual attractiveness	3.44	1.05	3.34	1.04	3.40	1.01	3.78	.95	4.02*	3.24 ⁺	9.65**	3.24 ⁺	9.65**
Social attractiveness	3.23	1.08	3.12	1.10	3.15	1.16	3.55	1.12	2.57	3.45 ⁺	11.06***	3.45 ⁺	11.06***
Intellectual attractiveness	3.64	.88	3.27	1.03	3.75	1.00	3.77	.93	11.40***	5.33*	6.73**	5.33*	6.73**
Men													
Sexual attractiveness	3.47	.86	3.75	.88	3.41	.98	3.75	.86	.09	16.20***	.17	16.20***	.17
Social attractiveness	3.59	.88	3.01	1.03	3.36	.95	3.03	1.08	.88	26.06***	1.94	26.06***	1.94
Intellectual attractiveness	3.96	.72	3.27	.99	3.76	.87	3.40	1.02	.12	37.79***	3.64 ⁺	37.79***	3.64 ⁺

Note. Simple effects for initiative and for attractiveness were determined via analyses of variance.

⁺ $p < .1$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 4 Comparison between own and partner's attractiveness with respect to initiator status

	Own Initiative			Partner's Initiative			χ^2
	Partner Less Attractive	Partner As Attractive	Partner More Attractive	Partner Less Attractive	Partner As Attractive	Partner More Attractive	
Women							
Sexual attractiveness	27.1%	51.3%	21.7%	12.90%	60.9%	27.2%	8.66*
Intellectual attractiveness	37.8%	46.2%	16.0%	18.7%	50.5%	30.8%	14.86***
Social attractiveness	28.3%	38.4%	33.3%	12.1%	47.3%	40.7%	9.50**
Education	34.7%	46.9%	18.4%	19.8%	44.0%	36.3%	13.94***
Income	20.5%	19.2%	60.3%	13.2%	26.4%	60.4%	3.48
Men							
Sexual attractiveness	20.2%	46.4%	33.3%	8.5%	57.5%	34.0%	5.83 [†]
Intellectual attractiveness	49.4%	38.6%	12.0%	32.4%	54.6%	13.0%	5.98*
Social attractiveness	47.6%	34.5%	17.9%	40.7%	45.4%	13.9%	2.36
Education	60.2%	28.9%	10.8%	41.7%	47.2%	11.1%	7.26*
Income	62.7%	20.5%	16.9%	67.3%	23.4%	9.3%	2.29

[†] $p < .1$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Comparison of the Partner's Attractiveness to Alternatives and to Previous Close Relationships

At the beginning of the close relationship, 17.2% of women who later initiated divorce perceived their former partner to be unattractive compared to other alternatives. Only 6.5% of noninitiating women did so, $\chi^2(1) = 6.23, p < .05$. Among men, 9.5% of initiators and 6.5% of noninitiators considered their partner to be unattractive compared to other alternatives, $\chi^2(1) = .61, ns$. Compared to previous relationships, 24.3% of the initiating women and 17.0% of noninitiating women reported that their former spouse was unattractive, $\chi^2(1) = 1.92, ns$. Among men, 17.1% who decided to divorce and 15.9% who were left considered that their wife was attractive at the beginning of the close relationship compared to previous relationships, $\chi^2(1) = .05, ns$.

DISCUSSION

This study compared the similarity and attractiveness of the partner who decided to divorce with the spouse who did not. We focused on initiator status and sex differences. With regard to subjective similarity and differences between both spouses at the beginning of the close relationship, it is noteworthy that, independent of initiator status, most of the participants perceived themselves and their former partner to be rather similar. It would be captivating in further studies to observe if recently divorced people would perceive more differences between themselves and their former partner than divorcees with a longer time elapsed since divorce who had more time to "assimilate" to divorce and to be perhaps less concerned by a "resentment bias" and desire to be different, or if the recently divorced individuals perceived more similarity because they had less time to "redefine their identity as distinct from the identity of both the former couple and the former spouse" (Baum, 2003, p. 119; Duran-Aydintug, 1995; Vaughan, 1986).

Among women, initiating women were more likely than noninitiating women to report differences between themselves and their ex-spouse with regard to (a) personality or character traits; (b) norms, values, and attitudes; (c) sexual needs; and (d) expectations, general needs, and goals. Our cross-sectional data unfortunately did not permit us to consider if the perceived lack of similarity caused marital distress and triggered the decision to divorce or, instead, if the distressed spouses focused more on differences between themselves and their partner.

Male initiators and noninitiators only distinguished with regard to similarity or differences in personality or character. We were not able to observe another significant distinction between initiators and noninitiators.

How can we explain the fact that female initiators were significantly more likely than noninitiators to report differences between themselves and

their former partners in different areas and that initiating and noninitiating men only distinguished with regard to personality and marginally with regard to norms, values, and attitudes? Based on equity theory, we theorize that women are more responsive to unfairness and more oriented toward intimate features of the marital relationship (Thompson & Walker, 1989), so they may be more inclined to focus on perceived differences and be frustrated by them. Moreover, studies based on the initiator status theory reported that the partner who decided to leave can feel responsible for the end of the marriage and can develop feelings of guilt and remorse (Weiss, 1975). Focusing the differences between themselves and the partner can be a strategy to cope with this difficult critical life event by convincing themselves that the decision was appropriate. We hypothesize that women tend to ruminate more on the events and to feel more negative emotions such as culpability, remorse, and so on (Strauss, Muday, McNall, & Wong, 1997), and that they try to cope with them by focusing more often than men on differences with the former spouse. Moreover, results can be biased by the fact that most divorces were initiated by women, but could be motivated by men (infidelity, alcohol problem, violence, etc.). The categories of initiator men and noninitiator men could be confused because the second group included men who in fact indirectly initiated divorce.

Another interesting result is that initiators and noninitiators (men and women) did not differ from each other with regard to the allocation of marital repartition. We can state that at the beginning of the close relationship, and especially at the moment of creating a family, men and women openly expressed their opinion with respect to the sharing of the tasks.

On one hand, differences between women who initiated divorce and women who did not were not so relevant as far as their own attractiveness was concerned. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that women who initiated divorce perceived their partners as less physically or sexually, socially, and intellectually attractive than noninitiating women perceived their partners. It seems that women did not take into account their own attractiveness in their decision to divorce, but rather the attractiveness of their partner. Maybe initiator women developed a negative view of their former partner, and noninitiating women felt like victims.

Men, independent of their initiator status, considered themselves to be physically or sexually less attractive than their former spouse, but socially and intellectually more attractive. This corresponds with the theory saying that men offer social status and women offer physical beauty (e.g., Berry & Miller, 2001).

When women were asked to compare themselves with their former partners, initiating women were more likely than noninitiating women to evaluate their ex-spouse to be less physically or sexually, intellectually, socially, professionally, and economically attractive than themselves. More initiating men than noninitiating men perceived their partner to be less

physically or sexually, intellectually, and professionally attractive. With regard to equity theory (Walster et al., 1978), we can assume that initiators were benefited less in their relationship than their partners; with regard to the theory of Levinger (1976), we can surmise that initiators will have more alternatives in the future.

There are some limitations with this study. First, we used a retrospective self-evaluation with all biases that this methodology includes. Second, we only took into account the retrospectively perceived attractiveness at the beginning of the relationship. This perception can be biased after divorce. Third, we did not assess self-esteem, a potentially important mediator variable. Indeed, people who took the initiative to divorce could have more control over the divorce process (Duran-Aydintug, 1995; Thuen, 2000) and could develop better self-esteem. Noninitiators could feel as though they are the rejected one (Weiss, 1975) and could have more difficulties coping with divorce (Duran-Aydintug, 1995; Spanier & Casto, 1979; Vaughan, 1986; Weiss, 1975). Assuming that initiators have better self-esteem, it is also likely that they perceive themselves to be more attractive than their partners. Fourth, we did not take into account people who declared that their divorce was a mutual decision. It is also possible that we biased the differences between women and men. Indeed, 13% of the women estimated that the decision was a mutual one and 24% of men perceived the decision as mutual.

In further studies, it would be interesting to examine the links between the reasons to divorce, the barriers and the alternatives, and the perceived similarity between both spouses and the subjective attractiveness. Indeed, women who decided to divorce because their partner reported alcohol or drug problems or violence probably did not take into account their own physical or sexual attractiveness or the alternatives. For these women, living as a single woman would be a better alternative than the current relationship, even though no new partner is available.

What could be the relevance of this study for therapists and others working with couples? First, this study pointed out that people estimated that they were quite similar to their former partners at the beginning of their relationships. This result refuted the stereotype that people who divorced were partners who were badly matched and that divorce was a logical end to the love story. Second, as some researchers have already demonstrated (Pasley, Kerpelman, & Guilbert, 2001), the similarity between partners often was high at the beginning of the relationship and decreased with the years. This similarity facilitates the comprehension and the communication between the partners and diminishes the probability of conflicts (Kurdek, 1993). It would also be profitable for couples to participate in a prevention program (e.g., the Couples Coping Enhancement Training; Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004) and to maximize their communication, coping, and problem-solving skills. Moreover, in such training, the importance of equity and

fairness in the couple was discussed. Third, it is possible for therapists, at the beginning of the therapy, to focus on the previous similarity between the partners and in this way to activate some positive resources (cf. oral history; Buehlman & Gottman, 1996).

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