Theorizing the decision-making process for divorce or reconciliation

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Divorce is commonplace in the United States, with an abundant scholarship on the phenomenon. Most research has focused on predictors of divorce, associations between divorce and family member well-being, and interventions and policies for divorcing couples and children. Although this scholarship tells us much about why couples get divorced and the impact divorce has, it has little to say about how individuals think about and couples talk about and make meaning of their decision-making process regarding divorce or reconciliation. The purpose of this article is to examine and critique existing theoretical frameworks used to understand decision-making processes both generally in the field and specifically in the context of divorce ideation. Our goal is to propose future research and theory directions that are better suited to capturing the complexity of decision-making processes within the liminal space of the lives of individuals who are married but facing the proximate possibility of divorce.

Demographers estimate that half of marrying couples in the United States will divorce, a trend spurred over the past 30 years by breakups among individuals older than age 35 and in longer-term marriages (Kennedy & Ruggles,

2014). Today an estimated 50% of American children will experience their parents' divorce at some point during their childhood, an event that affects more than 1 million American children per year (National Center for Health Statistics, 2008).

Scholarship on divorce is abundant. For instance, Amato's (2010) decade-review article summarized research on the interpersonal, demographic, and economic predictors of divorce. There is also voluminous work on the effects of divorce on the well-being of children, with recent work having become more methodologically sophisticated (Amato & Anthony, 2014). Some scholarship has focused on factors that affect children's adjustment to divorce (Emery, 2006). Another line of research examines adults' variability in divorce adjustment (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Scholars also have analyzed interventions and policies for divorcing couples and children, such as the impact of divorce education on postdivorce outcomes (Fackrell, Hawkins, & Kay, 2011) and court-ordered shared-parenting agreements (Warshak, 2014). New conceptual perspectives have been explored as well, such as framing divorce as a multiple-family transition or chronic strain rather than a single event or crisis (Cherlin, 2009), or as an opportunity for personal growth (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Despite the volume of research and a wealth of knowledge, Amato (2010) pointed to several gaps. The research gap most relevant to our line of inquiry here is the psychologically

and socially ambiguous state of being "not quite married and not quite divorced" (Amato, 2010, p. 661). Many questions arise within this liminal space of betwixt and between for couples who are seriously considering or engaged in the process of divorce but still not officially such. What catapults couples into considering divorce? Why do some couples reconcile and others divorce? Our primary focus is less on the what and why of this complex process and more on the how. How do couples navigate this territory and make sense of their experience? How do they talk about their decision-making process regarding divorce or reconciliation? How do family researchers, practitioners, and professionals theoretically frame this process? The purpose of this article is to critique existing theoretical frameworks used to understand decision-making processes both generally in the field of family studies and in the context of divorce ideation and decision making. Our goal is to propose future research and theory directions that are better suited to capturing the complexity of decision-making processes in the liminal space of the lives of married individuals who are facing the proximate possibility of divorce.

Why Theorize About Divorce or Reconciliation Decision Making?

Deciding whether to divorce is not only one of the most stressful decisions one may encounter over the life course but also one of the most difficult. The Holmes and Rahe (1967) Stress Scale ranks divorce stress as second only to the death of a spouse. The behavioral economists Thaler and Sunstein (2009) argued that the kinds of situations in which individuals perceive decisions as difficult and are least likely to make good choices are those that (a) involve choices that have delayed effects (choice and consequences are separated in time); (b) are infrequent and rare; (c) provide poor, unclear, or not-prompt feedback; and (d) involve ambiguous or confusing relationships between the choice alternatives and experience. Deciding whether to divorce meets all of these criteria. Ideally, individuals who possessed complete information on past, present, and future events; had unlimited cognitive abilities; were not physically, mentally, and economically stressed; and exercised full self-control would not make poor decisions (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). However, as decision makers are human, their probability of creating these circumstances is low, and so the decision remains difficult.

In addition to the decision to divorce being stressful and difficult, it is also common. As the statistics cited earlier make clear, millions of individuals have or will face a divorce decision. Yet these statistics substantially undercount those affected by divorce ideation. A recent study of a national sample of married Americans found that 25% had recent thoughts about divorce, and another 28% reported having thoughts in the past but were still married, indicating that many more people than those who actually divorce face these kinds of decisions (National Divorce Decision-Making Project, 2015). Consequently, a better understanding of the divorce or reconciliation decision-making process may help family professionals assist, support, and guide millions of individuals through a difficult decision and potential transition in the life course.

It is important to note from the outset the limitations of the phrase "divorce or reconciliation decision-making process." Using the term *divorce or reconciliation* could be interpreted as a somewhat arbitrary polarization of the many possible choices, actions, and trajectories embedded in the process that move beyond the choice of staying in or leaving a relationship. Using the term *reconciliation* to capture the broad range of "not divorce" choices that result in staying together does not capture the processes of resignation, denial, coping, tolerance, or convenience that may lead to staying together and does not represent a process of marital repair. As such, although the phrase "divorce or reconciliation decision-making process" is used throughout, it does not suggest an either–or choice, but rather a range of choices that fall between the two polarities.

Theorizing about divorce and reconciliation decision making matters because many of our past models and assumptions about how individuals, families, and couples make decisions are heavily influenced by paradigms of rationality that may not fully reflect the lived experience of most families. According to basic economic theory, the individual is a rational and selfish agent expected to know his or her preferences (both present and future) and whose logic of choice is based on elementary rules of reason (Kahneman, 2011). Individuals are expected to make good decisions that will maximize those interests. Rational agents are assumed to make important

decisions carefully, have adequate information on which to base rational decisions, and use all the available information.

Abundant research from other disciplines, however, suggests that humans are neither fully rational nor completely selfish. To account for the ways in which human decision makers deviate from the rules of rationality, Tversky and Kahneman (1981) proposed an alternative to the economic mainstay of rationality that views humans as guided by the immediate impact of gains and losses. Their assertion of the failure of rationality in the field of economics presented a deep challenge to two long-held assumptions about human nature: (a) that humans are generally rational and their thinking normally sound, and (b) that emotions such as fear, love, affection, and hatred explain most of the occasions when people depart from rationality (rather than being an integral part of the decision-making process itself). Tversky and Kahneman's (1981) work asserted that distinctive and systematic errors or patterns in the everyday thinking of normal people recur predictably. The overwhelming evidence that reasonable humans cannot be deemed rational by the standards proposed by economists and decision theorists does not mean that humans should be branded as irrational creatures. The biases and heuristics in our thinking recur predictably and are a normal and expected part of our humanity that can be traced to the machinery of cognition rather than to the corruption of thought by emotion (Kahneman, 2011). Also important to note are the physical, social, and economic contexts that can constrain human decision making, creating what economists call bounded rationality. The goal in our theoretical models of decision making, therefore, should be to recognize and engage rather than ignore this. Ignoring biases in our process, or pretending we operate otherwise by constructing models that emphasize our rationality at the expense of our emotions, negates our humanity.

Daly (2003) argued that much of what appears in academic journals is rooted in positivist science that has resulted in a set of theoretical assumptions and explanations that accept that families act in rational and predictable ways. Many of our surveys and interview protocols are thoughtful, rational documents that demand reasoned, consistent, and coherent answers, and which consequently portray the families we study as rational entities. Incompatible experiences, clashing meanings, and difficult concepts often recede to the background of our research reports, if they are mentioned at all. The result is that reason in family life tends to dominate the other, less recognized human characteristics of emotion, intuition, will, and experience within family process (Daly, 2003). This imbalance is often so great that the importance of reason obscures all else and distorts our conclusions from empirical research. For example, belief, inspiration, intuition, gut feelings, instinct, and superstition each play an important role in how families make a wide variety of daily decisions, but these elements are largely unaccounted for in our theorizing about family decision-making processes (Daly, 2003). Perhaps we could benefit from Lynott's (1983) advice: "Formal model makers … with analytic interests in decision-making … would do well to take everyday practice more seriously and build models accordingly" (p. 573).

The entrance and exit to marriage are not entirely rational processes. Nobel Prize–winning economist and decision-making theorist Kahneman (2011) maintained that emotions are an important part of human reasoning. He argued that people can reason and deliberate indefinitely, but if there are no emotions attached to the options, they will never reach a decision, because convictions typically do not come through cool rationality. Instead, they require caring about others and intuitive feelings about right and wrong. Family experiences are imbued with many feelings (e.g., goodness or badness, urgency or lack of urgency) that influence individuals on fundamental and emotional levels to approach or avoid certain situations. These emotions play a crucial role in decision making and typically unconsciously bias the reasoning process with somatic markers before it even begins (Slingerland, 2014). Thus, it may be only after a decision is made that the rational mind is called on to construct a logical explanation for one's primarily emotional response and assessment of a situation. In fact, the psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2001, 2012) has argued that moral judgments and decisions are typically the result of hot, fast, and visceral emotional reactions to social scenarios, suggesting a decision-making process driven in large part by emotions rather than the slow, deliberate, effortful, and conscious workings of a rational mind. Likewise, Garrett-Peters and Burton (2015) recently argued that "human beings are not so much rational or fully planning actors,

but *rationalizing* actors, necessarily responding to situations and events after the fact and making sense of their actions and those of others'' (p. 248).

Overall, creating better theorizing on divorce decision making matters for three main reasons: (a) the decision to divorce is stressful and difficult and many people may need help; (b) divorce ideation is common, and millions will face a decision with powerful consequences for themselves and their families; and (c) scholarship needs to humanize rather than sanitize or rationalize the process. Addressing these points has theoretical utility and value. If our decision-making models and theories better reflect the very human ways in which we make sense of the world, family scholars not only can better understand, and hence represent, lived experience but also can better design interventions that account for the predictable and inherent biases embedded in the decision-making process.

Recent Research and Theory in Family Studies on Decision Making

The discipline of family studies has used several theoretical approaches to understanding decision-making processes in a wide variety of substantive areas. A systematic review of scholarship from 2000 to the present in relevant, top family journals in the field (*Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *Family Relations*, *Journal of Family Issues*, *Family Process*, *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, *Journal of Family Psychology*, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, and *Journal of Family Theory & Review*) with the term *decision*, *decide*, or *deciding* in the title produced 48 articles (Table 1). Decision making was explored in a variety of substantive areas, including reproductive issues (e.g., childbearing, parenthood, infertility, adoption, childlessness), household decisions (e.g., purchasing decisions, household maintenance), life course decisions (e.g., retirement, migration, caring for aging parents), health decisions (e.g., life-sustaining treatment, breast-feeding duration, institutionalizing family members with a mental illness or Alzheimer's), and institutional decisions (e.g., workplace policies; judicial decisions on contested custody, family visitation, and foster care).

Decision-making scholarship with a relational focus explored a range of intimate relationships. Most research related to the decision to enter into marriage focused on cohabitation issues. Scholarship on decision making relating to exiting marriage tended to focus primarily on characteristics of the initiator of the divorce, factors that influence the decision to divorce, or decisions relating to custody, mediation, postdivorce living arrangements, how children are informed of a divorce, or women's postdivorce surname choices. When scholarship addressed decision making to reconcile and stay married, the focus was on women in abusive relationships or men and women in involuntarily celibate relationships. Only one study (Kanewischer & Harris, 2015) gave partial attention to the divorce decision-making process and experience. Overall, most of our research on decision making in family studies has not necessarily been about decision-making processes at all, but a rendering of family judgments about decision-making outcomes, an exploration of the types of decisions made, or the characteristics of who the decision maker was (Bell, Baron, Corson, Kostina-Ritchey, & Frederick, 2014).

The broad theoretical frameworks used to frame decision-making processes in many of these substantive areas often included social exchange theory (Donnelly & Burgess, 2008), rational choice theory (Shu, Zhu, & Zang, 2012), resource theory (Szinovacz & Davey, 2005), bargaining models (Abraham, Ausburg, & Hinz, 2010), or the theory of utility maximization (Shu et al., 2012), although more interpretive frameworks—including symbolic interactionism (Garrett-Peters & Burton, 2015), dialogical theory (Bell et al., 2014), and relational dialectic theory (Baxter, 2010)—have also been used to understand decision making.

Theorizing About Divorce or Reconciliation Decision-Making Processes

In the next several sections we examine and critique the dominant decision-making approaches and theories used both generally in family studies and specifically within the substantive domain of divorce ideation and decision making, with the goal of proposing future avenues for research and theory that more closely align with lived experience. Before engaging in

Table 1. *Articles in the Systematic Review of Decision Making*

Author(s), Year	Focus	Decision-Making Area	Theory, Framework, or Perspective
Abraham, Ausburg, & Hinz, 2010	Life course	Migration, dual earners	Bargaining
Allen, Baucom, Burnett, Epstein, & Rankin-Esquer, 2001	Relational	Marital, first marriage vs. remarried	Power, autonomy, communication
Allen, Husser, Stone, & Joral, 2008	Reproductive	Sexuality, adolescent	Critical feminist, developmental
Ansay & Perkins, 2001	Institutional	Visitation, risk evaluations	Family bonding
Bell, Baron, Corson, Kostina-Ritchey, & Frederick, 2014	Relational	Parent–adolescent issues	Dialogical, narrative co-construction
Branden, 2014	Life course	Migration, couples	Gender ideology and behavior
Burkemper, 2002	Institutional	Ethics, therapist	Critical evaluative, ethical decision making
Castaneda, Zambrana, Marsh, Vega, Becerra, & Perez, 2015	Institutional	Work–family policies	Intersectionality, family impact analysis
Ceynar & Gregson, 2012	Institutional	Legal name change	Narrative, identity
Chabot & Ames, 2004	Reproductive	Lesbian motherhood	Ecological, feminist
Charvoz, Bodenmann, Bertoni, Lafrate, & Giuliana, 2008	Relational	Divorce initiation	Social exchange, equity, dyadic process
Donnelly & Burgess, 2008	Reproductive	Celibacy, stay or leave	Social exchange
Few & Rosen, 2005	Relational	Dating violence, stay or leave	Risk and resilience, vulnerability
Gierveld & Merz, 2013	Household	Living arrangements, postdivorce or death	Ambivalence, boundary ambiguity, life course
Gumina, 2009	Relational	Divorce communication, parent–child	Narrative
Hank & Kreyenfeld, 2003	Reproductive	Child care, fertility	Multilevel
Hardesty & Ganong, 2006	Institutional	Custody, coparenting, abusive partner	Narrative, feminist
Hewitt, Western, & Baxter, 2006	Relational	Divorce	Gender ideology, feminist Bargaining, decision-making power
Hiller & McCaig, 2007	Life course	Migration, couples	
Himmelweit, Santos, Sevilla, & Sofer, 2013	Household	Resource allocation	Rational choice, bargaining, collective
Holtzman, 2011	Institutional	Custody	Legal, judicial
Ishizawa & Kubo, 2013	Reproductive	Adoption	Mate selection, endogamous
Jacobson, 2014	Reproductive	Adoption, international	Media framing
Johnson & Johnson, 2009	Reproductive	Infertility	Health behavior, help seeking
Kanewischer & Harris, 2015	Relational	Staying married	Narrative
Kpoor, 2014	Household	Maintenance, single parent	Systems
Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014	Reproductive	Voluntary childlessness	Narrative, dyadic process
Lowenstein, 2011	Institutional	Child custody; contact	Legal, judicial
McWey, Henderson, & Alexander, 2008	Institutional	Foster care	Ecological
Mills & Wilmoth, 2002	Health	Treatment, life-sustaining medical	Life course, intergenerational transmission
Morison, 2013	Reproductive	Parenthood	Gender-relational
Newfield, Newfield, Sperry, & Smith, 2000	Institutional	Ethics, therapist	Moral reasoning, justice vs. care
Pecchioni, 2001	Life course	Family caregiving	Implicit decision-making style

Table 1. *Continued*

Przybyla-Basista, 2008	Relational	Divorce mediation, spousal	Mediation choice
Rempel & Rempel, 2004	Health	Breast-feeding duration	Multilevel
Rose, 2008	Household	Child care	Consumer choice
Schweingruber & Kalil, 2000	Life course	Teen-parent families	Life course, multigenerational
Sheinberg & True, 2008	Institutional	Treatment, relational trauma	Recursive decision dialogue
Shu, Zhu, & Zhang, 2012	Relational	Power, marital	Gender, resource, utility maximization
Shuey & Hardy, 2003	Life course	Assistance, aging parents	Kinship system, gender ideology, resource allocation
Smith & Moen, 2004	Life course	Retirement, couples	Life course, gender ideology
Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005	Relational	Marrying	Economic
Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006	Relational	Marrying	Commitment
Stamps, 2002	Institutional	Child custody	Legal, judicial
Szinovacz & Davey, 2005	Life course	Retirement	Resource
Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2012	Relational	Cohabitation; childbearing, pre- and nonmarital	Marital quality
Wallace & Koerner, 2003	Institutional	Child custody	Legal, judicial
Ziol-Guest, 2009	Household	Purchasing	Gender ideology

that analysis, however, it is important to be clear how various levels of theory construction and research continuously interact. Lavee and Dollahite (1991) have identified systemic interactions among three components of scientific activity: (a) broad theoretical frameworks (e.g., social exchange theory), (b) midrange theories rooted in specific substantive areas (e.g., a theory of marital dissolution), and (c) specific empirical research. These three levels represent key components of an ongoing dynamic interaction between the theorizing and research activity necessary for scientific progress, which can begin at any level—whether in the form of building and refining general theoretical approaches, building better midrange models, or conducting empirical research. This article examines the interaction between broad theoretical frameworks identified as rational or interpretive and the midrange theoretical models they produce.

Broad Theoretical Frameworks That Inform the Creation of a Midrange Theory

The intellectual roots of much of what we know about the divorce or reconciliation decision-making process can be traced to two overarching theoretical frameworks or paradigms for thinking about family process: rational and interpretive. Both make certain fundamental assumptions about the social world

as being either rationally explainable or interpretively understood. Rational approaches often assume that social life can be measured independent of context in ways that are replicable and comparable, whereas interpretive approaches tend to emphasize constructed meaning and subjective experiences, and seek to understand how people give meaning to their experience (Goodsell & Zvonkovic, 2015). The midrange theories about divorce decision making that flow from these rational or interpretive frameworks often fall into similar categories, although the lines may not be as rigidly demarcated. Some research and theory work may not be readily classified as either entirely interpretive or entirely rational and may already demonstrate elements of theoretical integration. As such, identifying two distinct theoretical frameworks is a somewhat arbitrary and clumsy intellectual classification, because crossover does exist. However, it remains a useful way to organize major trends at the meta-level in our theorizing and helps trace midrange theory construction back to its intellectual roots. This process also has the advantage of revealing potential blind spots in our thinking. Inadvertently invoking or employing the unquestioned assumptions regarding reality that exist at the broad level of the theoretical framework when engaging with midrange theories can unintentionally and unnecessarily place blinders on family scholars and consequently influence how they represent

family processes at the midrange level. These blind spots could potentially be ameliorated if a hybrid theoretical approach to the divorce or reconciliation decision-making process at both the meta-level and the midrange levels were more explicitly explored and developed.

In this article, we do not argue for the superiority of one broad theoretical approach over the other. Rather, we identify some links between broad theoretical frameworks and the specific midrange theories and models of divorce processes and decision making they produce in order to propose a theoretical hybrid that better represents the complexity of divorce ideation and decision making. We hope that finding creative ways to compare diverse theoretical frameworks and applying that analysis to our midrange theorizing will create theoretical pluralism commensurate with the complex experiences of real families as they make decisions about the future of their marriage. Thus, our goal is to build a case for a theoretical hybrid model by emphasizing the limitations of both rational and interpretive theoretical frameworks of understanding the divorce or reconciliation decision-making process as they are used at the level of midrange theorizing. From this critique, we propose key elements of a preliminary midrange theoretical model to better capture the complexity of the divorce or reconciliation decision-making process and move research and theory forward in this domain.

Rational Theoretical Frameworks

Meta-Level Theorizing on Decision-Making Processes

By far, the most common theory used to understand decision-making processes within the rational theoretical framework has been some variation of social exchange theory. The central premise of social exchange theory is that individuals act in utilitarian ways that seem rational to them. In any social interaction, individuals are considered primarily motivated by self-interest in the pursuit of maximizing rewards and minimizing costs to obtain the most profitable outcome. In the context of a couple relationship, rewards and costs are evaluated using several reference points—comparing what individuals believe they should get from a relationship to what they believe they could get from an alternative relationship, as well as comparing whether the distribution of rewards and costs is

fair between themselves and their partner (Byrd, 2009; Donnelly & Burgess, 2008).

If the relationship is distressed, or the balance of rewards is too heavily weighted in the partner's favor, individuals may bargain or negotiate for a new balance by attempting to limit costs, seek rewards, find alternative satisfactions, or leave the relationship. Perceptions of rewards and costs vary from person to person and may shift over time. This may explain why some people stay in a relationship that, according to this model seems inequitable, because the long-term investment of time and resources may shift the perception of costs and benefits. In this framework, marital commitment, or lack thereof, can be seen as a subjective assessment of three key elements: attraction (the rewards associated with a particular relationship), alternatives (comparison points—the potential rewards of a different relationship), and barriers to marital dissolution (costs) (Levinger, 1980). In a satisfying relationship, barriers to marital dissolution may carry less weight, but they can become significant in troubled relationships, possibly compelling people to stay in unhappy or even unhealthy relationships (Byrd, 2009; Donnelly & Burgess, 2008). Decision-making models informed by social exchange theory often divide the process into sequential stages: (a) appraising the challenge, (b) surveying alternatives, (c) weighing alternatives, (d) deliberating about commitment, and (e) adhering despite negative feedback (Janis & Mann, 1977).

In summary, research and theory grounded in rational frameworks tend to privilege or center the decision-making discourse on minimizing costs, maximizing rewards, individual self-interest, comparisons, alternatives, bargaining or negotiation patterns used to gain power, investments of time and other valued resources, resources accrued, distributions of costs and resources, perceptions of fairness, relative power or authority, structural and normative bases of power relating to cultural norms and gender roles, strategies used to maximize the overall, combined, and common welfare of the family members, and individual preferences, satisfaction, and motivation, as well as individual, systemic, societal, and cultural barriers or supports. Although these ideas are firmly rooted in a social exchange perspective, elements of this way of thinking can also be found in similar approaches, including rational choice theory (Shu et al., 2012), resource theory

(Szinovacz & Davey, 2005), bargaining models (Abraham et al., 2010), and the theory of utility maximization (Shu et al., 2012).

Midrange Theorizing on Divorce or Reconciliation Decision-Making Processes

Currently, little research has focused on the decision-making process involved in divorce ideation (Kanewischer & Harris, 2015). Consequently, no midrange theories or models unique to divorce or reconciliation decision-making processes exist within the rational theoretical frame. As such, there are simply no midrange models to critique. A high number of stages-of-divorce models produced between the late 1960s and early 1990s were formative in mapping the overall general uncoupling process of divorce itself, but not the actual decision making embedded in that process. Much can be learned, however, from this midrange theory work of uncoupling found in the general stage models of divorce that can inform future conceptualizations of the divorce or reconciliation decision-making process.

The foci of the divorce stage models vary. Some focused on the period, factors, or conditions leading up to the decision to terminate the relationship (Levinger, 1980); others described the critical events of the uncoupling process itself and the move toward singlehood (Lee, 1984; Vaughn, 1990). Likewise, some models focused on sequences of an extended process that go far beyond the decision to leave (Rollie & Duck, 2006), and others focused on one aspect of the process, such as strategies for handling the breakup or the types of consequences following relationship endings (Bohannan, 1968).

Challenges and Considerations for Theory Development in the Rational Theoretical Framework

Many critiques of the stage models of divorce exist on which future theory development can build. For example, most stage models represent the divorce process as a linear progression through a series of events (beginning from initiation of the divorce to coping and moving on) but say virtually nothing about the internal decision-making process that catalyzed the movements from stage to stage. Because most stage models reduce relational processes to their most basic and universal components, they also tend to lose their ability to describe complex processes adequately. As such, it is likely that the portrayed linear dissolution progression may simply be a function of the reporting of the process rather than the actual experience (Rollie & Duck, 2006). In fact, Lynott (1983) argued that "the rational model is not as representative of the decision-making process as it is a practical artifact" (p. 559).

Assuming a linear progression in marital dissolution also tends to present divorce as a singular event (with its subsequent focus on the causes leading up to or predicting the event) rather than a process that moves far beyond legal recognition that the relationship has been terminated (Rollie & Duck, 2006). Relationships with former partners rarely truly end or fully dissolve. Rather, they change, transform, and are redefined under different relational rules and expectations as part of their development over time. Therefore, many arguably dissolved relationships reemerge in different forms, such as a coparenting relationship, and some divorced couples eventually reconcile (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993; Wineberg, 1994). This kind of long-term fluidity and complexity in relationship trajectories is rarely captured in stage models.

Another limitation of the stage models of divorce is their tendency to focus on a single end point (divorce) that ignores an alternate outcome that is also possible within divorce ideation, such as staying together. Perhaps models that minimize or ignore nondivorce trajectories are focused only on trying to understand divorce and not the decision-making process of whether to end or continue a marriage. If so, then it may be unfair to criticize them for the singular focus. However, the lack of attention in stage models of divorce on the possibility of reconciliation means that family scholars and practitioners are missing a crucial dynamic that is also important to understand. Knowing how couples come back from the brink of divorce may be just as important as knowing how divorced couples got there. Models open to the reality of reconciliation may better inform actual decision-making processes because they move beyond descriptively outlining the stages of marital dissolution. Thus, models that can accommodate alternate outcomes and shed light on how individuals and couples choose them are as important as models that begin with a predetermined outcome and detail how people get there. Placing those who stay together outside our models leaves the

models applicable only to those who decide to end a marriage and limits our ability to understand and help those who do not. Moreover, these models should be open to the decisions or actions involved in the outcome of staying together when it may not include repair or reconciliation. Models should accommodate alternative trajectories where individuals and couples decide—actively or passively—to stay in the relationship without resolving problems.

Interestingly, many empirical studies also leave out those couples who decide to remain together, although a large proportion of those continue to engage in divorce ideation (National Divorce Decision-Making Project, 2015). Exceptions to this are the work done by Kanewischer and Harris (2015) on married women who were considering divorce but decided to remain married, as well as a variety of articles on individuals who decide to stay married in challenging marital contexts such as abusive relationships (Few & Rosen, 2005; Khaw & Hardesty, 2009), or involuntary celibacy (Donnelly & Burgess, 2008).

Another limitation of divorce stage models is that they tend to focus on the decision-making spouse and do not account for the reality that many divorce decisions are not mutual. That is, in many cases one spouse is making a decision to terminate the marriage while the other spouse is resisting that outcome. Current models cannot accommodate well the reality that some spouses are not deciding to divorce but rather are receiving a spouse's decision to end the marriage. Hence, for a large number of people, "the divorce decision-making process" is a poor way to describe what they are actually experiencing. Similarly, relational dissolution tends to be modeled from the perspective of the individual initiating the breakup, with the assumption that both individuals are at the same stage at the same time and move through the model at the same speed (although most models simply ignore the noninitiating spouse). Consequently, most models may poorly depict relational and couple processes (Rollie & Duck, 2006). Finally, Rollie and Duck (2006) also argued that reliance on data from heterosexual college romances or established White, middle-class marriages places severe limitations on the generalizability of the stage models of divorce these samples produced.

In summary, it is paramount to recognize that much of the midrange theory work done on divorce modeling has much more to do with describing a general process of uncoupling and much less to do with the actual decision making involved in the uncoupling (or recoupling) process. This oversight cannot be emphasized enough, and future research and theory construction in this domain could benefit from a better understanding of what people are thinking and how they make decisions when considering divorce, because midrange stage models have little to say explicitly about the divorce or reconciliation decision-making process. The implicit conceptualization of decision making that attempts to reduce uncertainty, increase predictability, and create the idea of a linear, somewhat rational relationship over a short-term period has clear limitations. In addition, the models' White, middle-class bias tends to ignore the ways in which decision making is profoundly influenced by values and identity firmly located in the social context perpetuated through race, class, and gender relations. The primary critique of the available midrange theories informed by a rational framework on divorce decision making, however, is the paucity of theory on the decision-making process itself.

Interpretive Theoretical Framework

Meta-Level Theorizing on Decision-Making Processes

Some family scholars have chosen to examine general decision-making processes within a more social constructionist or interpretive theoretical framework. Helpful approaches include dialogical theory (Bell et al., 2014), relational dialectic theory (Baxter, 2010), and symbolic interactionism (Garrett-Peters & Burton, 2015). The main assumption of dialogism is that sense making is dynamic. Thus, decision making must be viewed as composed of actions rather than states, and as being inherently social, interactive, and intersubjective. As such, decisions are considered constrained or afforded within a dynamically changing context and interdependent with discursive worlds mediated by language, perceptions, habits, and artifacts (Linell, 2009). Relational dialectic theory is similar to dialogism in that it focuses on relationship processes, the mutuality and individuality of meaning construction in relationships, the dialectical tensions in meanings, and the interchange between meanings and the larger context. It highlights a decision-making process driven by multiple individuals (e.g.,

partners, religious and family groups, siblings, possible affair partners) in active collaboration and communication with one another, in an attempt to create an understanding of the situation by incorporating multiple, potentially conflicting points of view (Baxter, 2010). Important within any dialogical or dialectical examination of decision making is positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990). Who initiates the discussion? How is information gathered? What strategies are used to obtain goals? Positioning helps keep the focus on the decision-making process and a relational co-construction analysis rather than the outcome. The emphasis on transactional processes and emergent meanings within the interaction between partners and among interested parties shifts the questions from the what to the how of decision making. Similarly, symbolic interactionist theory views decisions as ongoing, negotiated, and socially constructed interactional accomplishments that take place in everyday interactions and adaptations to constraining social circumstances (Garrett-Peters & Burton, 2015).

In summary, interpretive decision-making theories tend to emphasize a socially interactive and intersubjective meaning, real and imagined dialogues, multiple and potentially conflicting points of view, incongruence, particular decision-making contexts, and the importance of positioning. Most important to the interpretive framework in understanding decision making is the idea that narration itself is a type of decision making. For example, the ways in which people choose to narrate and make sense and meaning out of events helps them understand events, justify actions, and negotiate identities, which is integral to the decision-making process itself. As such, how individuals choose to tell the story of their marriage to themselves and others may closely mirror the embedded decision-making process.

Midrange Theorizing on Divorce or Reconciliation Decision-Making Processes

Only a few family scholars to date (Honeycutt, 1993; Hopper, 2001; Kanewischer & Harris, 2015) have used interpretive approaches to explore, albeit somewhat indirectly, divorce decision-making processes. All three used interpretive approaches where the establishment of a socially, as well as personally, valid account of the ending or reconciliation of one's marriage is

important. Because of their qualitative methodologies (grounded theory or phenomenological study), they do not argue for the same level of generalizability found in the midrange stage models of divorce critiqued earlier. However, they remain midrange theories because they include abstract renderings of specific social phenomena grounded in a systematic analysis of data particular to a specific substantive area. For example, Hopper (2001) used grounded theory analysis to explore the transition from believing marriage is a sacred institution to dissolving the sacred, to constructing the marriage that never was, and ending with the idea that the marriage was a lie. Hopper's analysis focuses primarily on the symbolic origins of conflict in divorce, and Kanewischer and Harris (2015) used phenomenology to explore the role of therapy in women's decisions not to divorce. Honeycutt (1993), in contrast, took a more theoretical approach to exploring the ways in which individuals organize cognitions about relational change either toward growth or toward decline. None of these authors explicitly attempted to build a midrange theory of the divorce or reconciliation decision-making process, but they all produced midrange theories regarding marital dissolution that certainly could benefit such an endeavor.

Challenges and Considerations for Theory Development in the Interpretive Theoretical Framework

Despite the strengths of interpretive and narrative approaches in pursing paradox, contradiction, and nuance (Goodsell & Zvonkovic, 2015; Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2003), many challenges present themselves for consideration in future theory development. Many of these challenges remain theoretically abstract in that they could be applied to a number of studies that use an interpretive approach. One such clear limitation in narrative approaches is the centrality of the self as the storyteller and the inherent biases that presents. The self, for example, may choose to rework and reframe potentially stigmatic elements in one's past relational life in ways that can present the self as a valuable and viable future partner for someone else (Honeycutt, 1993). Likewise, differences in story construction may depend on whether one was the initiator of the divorce. Hopper (2001) found that for the initiators of the divorce to neutralize their

culpability for the violation of their marriage, they had to come to see their marriages as being bad from the start, fundamentally and irrevocably flawed, and suffering from long and deeply rooted structural issues. The story can also shift depending on the audience for the story and the storyteller's assessments of that audience's values, investment, and relationship to the story. Overall, this renders the story less stable and more fluid as the individual narrative changes over time and is dependent on the intended audience (Honeycutt, 1993).

The need to make sense of one's experience also profoundly shapes retrospective, individual narrative constructions of divorce because of the tendency to leave out or diminish ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction, and turmoil experienced throughout the process (Rollie & Duck, 2006). This omission tends to smooth out the confusion and report with certainty things that were much more unclear when they happened, which creates an illusion of a somewhat linear relationship between events and characters from beginning to end. As Garrett-Peters and Burton (2015) observed, this propensity to be "rationalizing actors" allows one to respond to situations and events after the fact and make sense of what happened through the telling of a story. The "peak end rule" often ensures that the story is represented by markers of a clear beginning, peak, and end (Kahneman, 2011) rather than the more convoluted way it was actually experienced.

Retellings of narratives are often selective. For example, when asked to reconstruct former beliefs, people often retrieve current ones instead (an instance of substitution) and have a hard time reconstructing past states of knowledge or beliefs that have changed (Rollie & Duck, 2006; Kahneman, 2011). Thus, when an unpredicted event occurs (e.g., the discovery of an affair), people tend to adjust their view of the world to accommodate the surprise and lose much of their ability to recall what they used to believe before their mind changed, making it hard to recall what the marriage was like before the affair happened. Similarly, when telling a story, it is much easier to remember the bad, difficult, and stressful experiences instead of the positive ones, because these emotions are more thoroughly processed and most readily available for recall when asked for a narrative of the divorce (Kahneman, 2011). Consequently, individuals often give the good and bad parts of their marriage equal weight, even though the good part may have lasted 10 times as long as the bad.

Likewise, we tend to pay attention to large and memorable events rather than the small non-events when telling a story. This kind of "duration neglect" is normal and means that elements of "non-choice-making" and "non-events" are often rendered invisible because of their prosaic nature (Kahneman, 2011; Morison, 2013; Morson, 2010; Murdoch, 1970). The seemingly insignificant choices made over the duration of a marriage can carry tremendous cumulative weight, although they may rarely be recalled as pivotal moments when deciding whether to get a divorce. Thus, "at crucial moments of choice … most of the business of choosing is already over" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 37). This may not mean that everything leading up to a major life decision was passive but simply that decision making is a "small piecemeal business, which goes on all the time and [is] not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments" (p. 36). This suggests that decisions to dissolve a marriage may occur within the scope of the numerous nonevents embedded in pedestrian behaviors and prosaic communications that may never garner the attention of participants or researchers (Rollie & Duck, 2006).

Finally, individual narratives always take place in a much larger social context. Morson (2010) argued that it is impossible to tell one's own story about love and marriage because much of what one says depends on what society has taught one to say and the language available to express it. Thus, individual stories of marriage often refer to much larger, more powerful, and culturally accepted scripts for love, marriage, and marital dissolution. Honeycutt (1993) found these scripts to be helpful in organizing the chaotic experience of marital dissolution in a way that conforms to societal beliefs and expectations. But he also argued that the reports given to researchers about marriage may tell less about the process of dissolution and more about how participants processed the event according to accepted, socially scripted means of sense making inflected with already-spoken traces of the broader cultural narrative of marriage (Baxter 2010; Honeycutt, 1993).

Several scholars (Baxter, 2010; Cherlin, 2009; Morson, 2010; Swidler, 2001) have explored these macrocultural discourses on love that govern the entrance, engine, and exit of

marriage. They argue that these broad cultural narratives not only powerfully shape, guide, and frame the appropriate or approved story of marriage (and its potential dissolution) but also create a cross-current of multiple and conflicting perspectives that present simultaneously competing and conflicting viewpoints.

In summary, despite the many strengths of interpretive approaches, inherent biases embedded in the way individuals tell stories provide considerations for future research and theory development. Narrative explorations of the divorce or reconciliation decision-making process are vulnerable to the ways in which individuals reframe, reinterpret, and retell events in ways that make sense with their current understanding of the situation and the audience to which they are telling the story. This might mean leaving out potentially stigmatic elements, reframing events, shifting foci, reducing or removing ambiguity and inconsistency, not including small issues or nonevents, or being unaware of how broad cultural scripts are dictating what is being said. It is imperative that future theory development in this domain be able to understand and account for these very human ways in which we make sense of our experiences.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Future Research and Theory: Proposing a Preliminary Model

Thus far, we have (a) provided a rationale for understanding why the divorce or reconciliation decision-making process matters, (b) explored how decision-making processes within family studies (both generally and specifically in the context of divorce ideation) have been researched and theorized, and (c) examined numerous challenges and considerations embedded in these approaches for future theory development in divorce or reconciliation decision-making processes. Our critical review of the research and theory guiding the field in this domain suggests that to move forward, future theory development needs to be attentive to the possibility of alternative choice trajectories, including deciding to stay together; interpretive, interactive, and intersubjective relational dialogic and narrative processes in individuals and between partners; complex processes of relational change that evolve over time; and the role of emotions, incongruities, and bias in decision-making processes. This analysis suggests the need for a midrange theory that not only is aware of the limitations of both rational and interpretive theoretical frameworks but also address them by using the strengths of divergent approaches.

Interestingly, this challenge requires both methodological and theoretical innovation. From a methodological standpoint, to model complex relational change over time, one needs to collect data at multiple points in time. Using a longitudinal qualitative design not only would facilitate theory development that retains the strengths of interpretive approaches but also could address some of the challenges associated with the narrative constructions that can be traced back to the inherently retrospective nature of the study design. For example, in a typical qualitatively designed study, participants are often asked to make sense of something that has happened to them in the past and as such, the narrative they construct is susceptible to the predictable biases of hindsight, affect availability, focusing illusions, and the peak-end rule discussed earlier. In contrast, a methodological design that is more prospective in nature (e.g., a longitudinal qualitative design) allows for researchers to move beyond contextualized snapshots of processes and people to a more continuous mapping of changes in process, emotions, beliefs, and actions in real time. The latter has the advantage that participants have less time to retrospectively construct a narrative, because they are asked at multiple points in time to construct that narrative. Of course, those accounts are subject to distortion due to inherent narrative biases, but having a record of what a participant shared at Times 1 and 2 on the same topic may better enable researchers to detect and inquire about the distortion. This methodological practice would address many of the existing challenges in the interpretive approach.

In addition to methodological innovation, theoretical innovation is also needed—particularly innovation that addresses the identified limitations of the rational framework. We propose that adopting a fundamentally dialectical structure to future theory building will help remedy this problem. Several scholars have used dialectical thinking to better understand processes relevant to family life (Allen, 2008; Baxter, 2004, 2010; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996;

Blume & Blume, 2003). The central premise of dialectical theory is that encounters with contradiction and opposing perspectives create a state of constant negotiation and change. Dialectical modeling tends to bring to the foreground underlying tensions, ambiguities, dissonance, uncertainty, and ambivalence, and complements the identified limitations of the rational framework.

Hegelian dialectics often use dualities where movement from thesis to antithesis is resolved with a synthesis. More recent critiques and scholarship by Baxter (2004) and Blume and Blume (2003), however, suggest that these paradoxical elements cannot easily be reduced to dualities or resolve in synthesis, because their intersections are unstable and indeterminate. Therefore, rather than focusing on a resolution of tensions, one can only hope to "create fleeting moments of wholeness in which competing fragments and disorder are temporarily united" (Baxter, 2004, p. 186). This dialectical framework is well suited to better understanding the strategies used in negotiating and managing tensions over time and the emergent meanings and practices that arise as tensions within the decision-making process interact and challenge each other. In addition, this "messy dialogue of competing discourses" (Baxter, 2004, p. 186) may allow for our theorizing on divorce or reconciliation decision making to capture a more complicated, inconsistent, unpredictable, irregular, incoherent, fluid, and changeable process than previous theories could demonstrate.

DIALECTICAL TENSIONS EMBEDDED IN THE DIVORCE OR RECONCILIATION DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

To explore the potential of dialectical modeling within the substantive area of divorce or reconciliation decision making, examples in this section are drawn from a qualitative study derived from the National Divorce Decision Making Project (2015).[1] Preliminary findings

suggest that the experience of divorce or reconciliation decision making emerges from a dialectical interaction among a number of polarities that are in parallel and simultaneous process with each other. These tensions are the catalyst for constant balancing and rebalancing behaviors that act as a mechanism for marital change toward growth, entropy, or status quo. Although the dialectical elements of the decision-making process are woven from multiple threads, we have identified four key interdependent strands of meaning that animate the process: time, space, logic, and dialogue (these four strands are the result of grounded theory data analysis using open, axial, and selective coding). These are modeled in Figure 1, along with some of their corresponding dialectical elements. Strauss and Corbin (1998) argued that when building theory, one needs to examine not only the representativeness of key concepts but also how the concepts vary dimensionally. Thus, although we discuss each of these strands separately, they comprise multiple dialectical tensions that provide dimension to the concept and form an overall interdependent whole.

Time

The divorce or reconciliation decision-making process operates within the constraints of time, and as such, it evidences multiple contradictory experiences of time that include recurring issues, patterns of difficulty, temporary issues, chronic issues, and future forecasting of the relationship. Divorce ideation, therefore, unfolds in reflections on the past, present, and future of the relationship, with special attention to the timing or pacing of particular events or actions and their consequences. For example, participants often explored questions that were time based, such as, "Where am I in my life? How much time have I spent in this relationship? How much longer can I stand to be in it? Should I wait (for major life events such as when the children leave) before making a decision to end this marriage?" Dialectical tensions within the temporal dimension could explore these diverse experience of time—for example, tensions between time as

FIGURE 1. DIALECTICAL TENSIONS EMBEDDED IN THE DIVORCE OR RECONCILIATION DECISION-MAKING PROCESS.
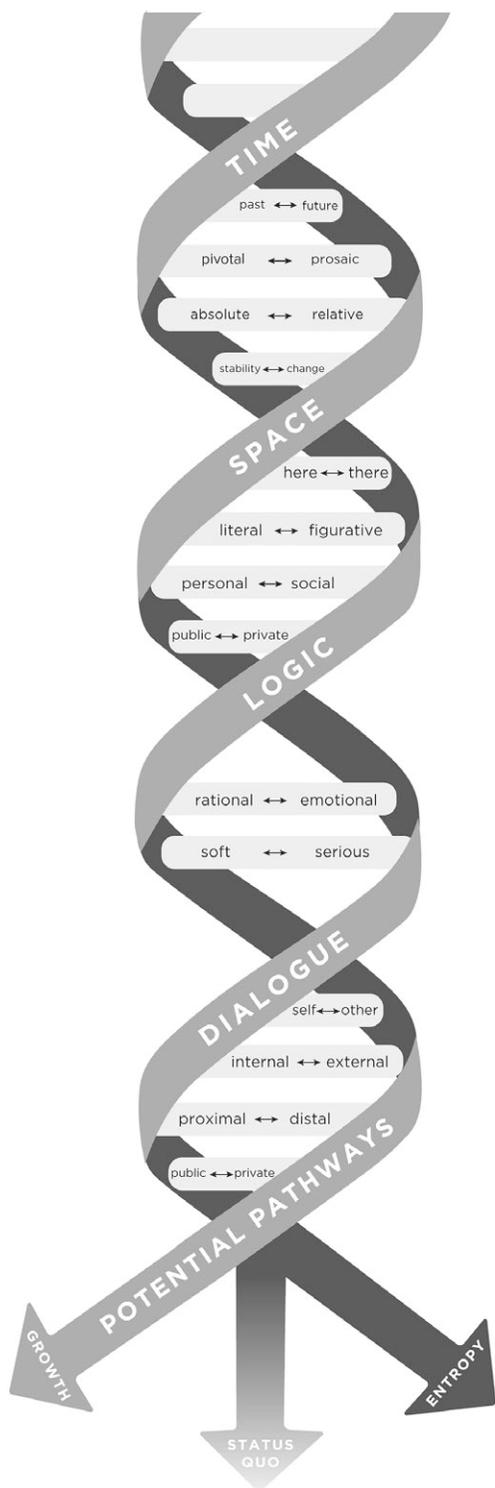
being circular or linear, chronic or acute (see Figure 1 for other possible tensions).

Dimensionalizing time in a dialectical manner moves decision-making processes outside the traditional frame of clock time flowing forward in a linear, incremental, and sequential fashion to a much broader array of possibilities. This more dynamic conceptualization of time fits with Kanewischer and Harris's (2015) finding that the decision not to pursue a divorce and remain married did not occur at a specific time. Rather, it involved a gradual process that slowly evolved as participants felt themselves and their spouse changing but also cycled backward to thoughts about divorce when things got difficult. Thus, continued thoughts about divorce were common, although participants learned in time to trust the changes they were seeing in themselves and their partner.

Likewise, decisions relating to relationship dissolution are likely nonlinear processes that double back, returning to earlier stages, or go over the same ground multiple times in a non-recursive pattern. The decision whether to divorce, therefore, is made multiple times, because the outcome of that decision is, in many instances, to stay together, although that decision is not final. Consequently, an individual may have to decide multiple times whether to divorce before the formal legal divorce is finalized or the marriage is stable.

Space

Bakhtin argued that social life can be fully understood only locally and concretely and that contradictions are best understood in situ (see Baxter, 2004). Grounding decision making in time and space, therefore, is important. For example, when Garrett-Peters and Burton (2015) explored low-income mothers' decisions to marry, they found that research often presented a "relatively static, one-dimensional and often atheoretical perspective of low-income mothers divorced from their everyday interactions and adaptations to constraining social circumstances" (p. 246). The social and physical environment and context can profoundly affect how people make decisions regarding the future of their marriage and cannot be ignored. For example, in our research, spatial issues, such as shared versus separate bedrooms, the logistics of shuttling children between two residences, switching school districts, and the availability

and affordability of adequate separate living arrangements and household furnishings were all important spatial considerations.

In addition to the social and contextual location of the decision-making process, spatial considerations can also refer to the metaphoric and figurative emotional geography of marriage. For example, in our research participants referred to being in "a better place," getting to the "other side," going through a "rough spot," or getting "out of a rut" to signify moving to a new place in their marriage. Figure 1 suggests potential dialectical tensions embedded in the spatial dimension.

Logic

The decision-making process simultaneously engages a rational and emotional logic that is in constant dialectical tension. In our research, negative emotional experiences and perceptions often prompted a rational examination of the future of the relationship that involved participants listing the reasons their marriage appeared to be in trouble. Reasons included the dialectics of soft–serious, prosaic–pivotal, simple–extensive, and moderate–severe. Participants were often caught between a rational and an emotional logic when attempting to understand their situation. For example, participants rationally weighed rewards, costs, alternatives, fairness, and investment in the relationship (as the major tenets of social exchange theory suggest) against other powerful emotions less conducive to such calibrations, such as love, happiness, rejection, and betrayal, and they struggled with how to make sense of it all. Dialectical tensions important in this domain would include rational–emotional and soft–serious.

Dialogue

Divorce ideation is marked by several internal and external dialogues. For example, in our research, participants did much of the thinking about divorce internally, without sharing any of their thoughts with others, including their spouse. Internal dialogues included affirming or questioning commitment, identifying areas of dissatisfaction, repetitively running through possible future scenarios, evaluating the relationship, engaging in self-reflection, examining personal identity and values, and having imagined conversations with others. In contrast, external dialogue involved a conversation (either real or imagined) with something outside the self—either proximal (e.g., friend, coworker, family member, clergy member, therapist) or distal (e.g., imagined conversation with the much broader cultural narrative on love and marriage) to the participant—and represented a variety of significant reference points (e.g., a parent's or friend's marriage). Elements of thinking, reflecting, evaluating, and questioning are also found in the external dialogues, the only difference being that one dialogue is private and the other, public. Figure 1 suggests some dialectical tensions important within this domain.

NAVIGATING DIALECTICAL TENSIONS: BALANCING ACT

This proposed theoretical modeling suggests that the divorce or reconciliation decision-making process can be typified as an attempt to simultaneously balance contradictory dimensions as they constantly shift and interact. Part of the balancing involves a constant examination of what one thinks and what one feels, a consideration of the needs of the self and others, a reflection on the weight of the past on the present and future possibilities of the relationship, and a number of internal and external conversations. Attempting to find the perfect balance helps identify thresholds or tipping points that can pull the dialectical tension so far out of line that it necessitates or catalyzes strategies for change.

Potential Pathways Forward

The process of navigating dialectical tensions embedded in the decision-making process acts as a catalyst for change resulting in the selection of strategies for marital growth, entropy, or maintenance. This process is not unlike the Garrett-Peters and Burton (2015) finding that low-income women's decision to marry often waxed, waned, and wavered. Likewise, strategies to navigate dialectical tensions and attempts to resolve or balance them (if only temporarily) can put partners on transient, unstable, and fluctuating trajectories of growth (typified by further investment in the relationship), entropy (typified by lessened investment in

the relationship), or further ambivalence (typified by maintaining a limited status quo). In addition to using terms such as *waxing*, *waning*, and *wavering* to represent pathways of growth, entropy, and maintenance, other terms, such as *leaning in*, *leaning out*, and *holding on*, or *approaching*, *avoiding*, and *ignoring*, also capture a similar process. Dialectical tensions active in this domain include using strategies that are active–passive, overt–covert, conscious–unconscious, intentional–unintentional, and direct–indirect.

Conclusion

A midrange model of divorce or reconciliation decision-making processes grounded in dialectical tensions can help remedy some of the challenges found in previous theorizing that was situated in primarily rational or interpretive paradigms. If family scholars want to better understand how individuals make decisions within the liminal space of being married but facing the proximate possibility of divorce, we need to create theoretical frameworks that can capture the process's evolving complexity in ways that are attentive not only to its many rational elements but also to the nonrational, nonlinear, and emotional—that is, fully human—ways in which individuals make sense of their lives.

Although many challenges still remain, methodological and theoretical innovations can lead to the creation of midrange theoretical models that reflect the decision-making process and incorporate the voice of reason found in rational theoretical frames as well as the inherently social, interactive, intersubjective, and sometimes conflicting elements of narrative construction. Despite the numerous difficulties embedded in the stories we use to make sense and meaning out of our lives, a longitudinal qualitative design that explores dialectical tensions in the divorce or reconciliation decision-making process is perhaps our best window on the messy and fleshy ways in which families live out their complicated lives.

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