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Divorce Stress and Adjustment Model: Locus of Control and Demographic Predictors

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Divorce Stress and Adjustment Model: Locus of Control and Demographic Predictors

Helen Smith Barnet

ABSTRACT. One hundred and seven recently divorced men and women completed a mailed questionnaire eliciting locus of control, difficulties, decision time, and divorce stress and adjustment. Public records were used to obtain demographic data. The path analysis derived final model suggests: (1) Locus of control is related to predecision stress, peak stress point, stress intensity, stress duration, and postdivorce stress and adjustment, but unrelated to decision time. (2) The relationship between locus of control and heavy stress changes over time from an inverse to a direct relationship. (3) Compared to women, men report less predecision stress, shorter predecision periods, lower postdivorce adjustment, and more external Rotter Locus of Control scores. (4) Marriage length is directly related to decision time and stress duration, but inversely related to predecision stress, point of peak stress, and postdivorce stress. (5) Childless couples report fewer difficulties, less postdecision stress, and shorter predecision intervals.

This study tests a model of divorce stress and adjustment, which predicts the impact of locus of control and the major demographic

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factors. The model depicts graphically the divorce process over three critical time periods (decision phase prior to the divorce proper, divorce proper, and postdivorce), in contrast to previous research which looks at divorce in a piecemeal fashion statistically denying that divorce is a process. In addition, the study's findings extend our knowledge of the divorce process, particularly the impact of locus of control, but also the impact of demographic variables.

Several studies have investigated the impact of locus of control on the divorce process. Using women who were receiving counseling for marital dissolution, Brown, Perry, & Harburg (1977) found a relationship between internality and lack of distress. They also reported that a woman's personal growth and adjustment over a four month span was directly related to her sense of control. Looking at women who were already divorced, Pais (1979) found that internals, as opposed to externals, were better adjusted. Together these two studies suggest that internals experienced less intense and shorter intervals of stress during the divorce proper and better postdivorce adjustment than externals. However, these studies may have underestimated the impact of locus of control, because they did not investigate situation specific locus of control (marriage locus of control) as previously suggested by Rotter (1975). Also, these researchers did not include men and did not investigate a number of important divorce reactions (e.g., decision time, predecision stress, and peak stress point).

Marriage locus of control is probably a predictor of divorce reactions for two reasons. First, marriage control includes control during the termination phase of the marriage or the beginning of the divorce process as well as entering and during the marriage. Second, perceptions of our past relationships (e.g., former marriage) probably influence our perceptions of our current and potential future relationships. As such, marriage control should measure our self perceived ability to and, therefore, our actual ability to form another close heterosexual relationship. Given the known positive impact of heterosexual intimacy and divorce recovery (e.g., Lachman, 1977; Spanier & Castro, 1979), individuals with internal mar-

riage locus of control should have both a greater expectancy for and a quicker divorce recovery than those with external marriage locus of control.

Additional research suggests other explored locus of control influences on the divorce process. Studies reporting that internals tend to spend more time deliberating difficult or skill related decisions than externals (e.g., Rotter & Mulry, 1965), suggests that internals spend more time deliberating the divorce decision than externals. Also, studies indicate that internals use vigilant problem solving methods, while externals use avoidant problem solving methods (e.g., Parkes, 1984). This research coupled with medical research showing that vigilant patients report more presurgery stress and less postsurgery stress, while avoidant patients report the reverse (e.g., Janis, 1958) implies the following in the divorce situation. Internals try to solve their marital-divorce difficulties sooner than externals and, as a result experience more predecision stress, earlier peak stress, less postdivorce stress, and better postdivorce adjustment than externals.

In addition to locus of control, a model of divorce needs to include three demographic variables and time since the divorce, because they are known to impact on the divorce process. Although the literature is at times inconsistent, women (especially during the predecision phase), couples with children, and longer married couples tend to experience the most divorce stress and adjustment difficulties. Additional studies report a decline in stress and improved adjustment with time from separation and/or divorce decree. (For review see Kitson & Raschke, 1981.)

Methodologically, a divorce model is best derived thru statistics which show divorce as a process over at least the three major time points (decision phase, divorce proper, and postdivorce). Although previous divorce research has begun to use multivariate data analysis, these studies still look at the divorce process in a piecemeal fashion. Past divorce research tends to look at one or more independent variables at one point in time and one or two dependent variables at the same or a second time point (e.g., Propst et al., 1986). Instead, a path analysis derived model, such as presented in this study, can depict graphically the divorce process over many crucial

time points. For instance, such a model could show how factors before the decision to divorce brought about by demographic and personality variables might influence the stress and problems during the divorce, and subsequently, postdivorce stress and adjustment.

In accordance with the reviewed literature, an hypothesized model was drawn using two locus of control variables (Rotter Locus of Control, Marriage Locus of Control), three demographic variables (gender, children, and duration of marriage), time since divorce, decision time, number of divorce difficulties, and six measures of stress and adjustment (predecision stress, point of peak stress, divorce stress duration, divorce stress intensity, postdivorce stress, and postdivorce social maladjustment).¹ To test the proposed model, hypotheses predicting the independent effects for each of the model dependent variables were developed. Specifically, the hypotheses were:

1. Couples from long marriages and those with children have the most divorce difficulties.
2. Internals and women experience more predecision stress than externals and men respectively.
3. Internals, women, couples who have children, and those exiting from long marriages spend the most time contemplating divorce prior to the divorce decision.
4. Externals, men, those leaving long marriages, couples who have children, people with many divorce difficulties, and those with low predecision stress, experience late peak divorce stress.
5. Externals, men, those exiting from long marriages, couples who have children, people with many divorce difficulties, those with low predecision stress, and individuals with short

1. The path analysis did not allow the entry of two or more highly correlated independent variables. Therefore, model inclusion of marriage duration and time since divorce precluded the entry of age and time since separation, respectively. Conversely, because Rotter Locus of Control and Marriage Locus of Control measure two different types of control, they were not highly correlated (.11) and were both included.

- decision intervals have the highest divorce proper stress intensity.
6. Externals, women, couples leaving long marriages, individuals who have children, those with many divorce difficulties, and people with long predecision intervals, experience the longest divorce stress intervals.
7. Externals, divorced couples from long marriages, divorced couples with children, those with many difficulties, people with relatively short, stressless predecision intervals, and those with stressful divorces, have the most postdivorce stress and social maladjustment. Stressful divorces are those with high stress intensity, long stress durations, and late peak stress.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects included 39 men and 68 women divorced in New Haven, Connecticut. They had a mean age of 32 (range 19 to 64), a mean marriage duration of 10 years (range 1 to 35 years), and a mean educational level of 13 years (range 7-20). The typical subject was white (93%), unremarried (81%), and experiencing a first divorce (91%). Occupationally, the group was 20% professional (Hollingshead 1-2), 47% skilled (Hollingshead 3-5), 20% unskilled (Hollingshead 6-7), and 17% unemployed outside the home or students. Subjects were mailed a summary of the results and paid.

The original sample included 420 individuals selected at random from Connecticut State records. Data from 3 of the 110 respondents was incomplete and, therefore, eliminated. Another 58 subjects could not be located. Public data showed that respondents and nonrespondents were similar in age, marriage length, children, and education. Compared to nonrespondents, the respondents had fewer blacks (15% vs. 7%, chi square (1,420) = 9.88, $p < .01$) and men (36% vs. 54%, chi square (1,420) = 9.88, $p < .01$).

Procedure

Four hundred and twenty men and women (210 couples) divorced 6, 12, or 18 months were drawn at random from the Connecticut Health Department Divorce Records for New Haven Superior Court. Each person selected was mailed a letter requesting completion and return of an attached multiple choice questionnaire. The questionnaire elicited six measures of stress and adjustment, decision time, divorce difficulties, current marital status, and two locus of control measures. Public records were used to obtain demographic information. Blind coding procedures were used.

Measures

Locus of Control Scales

Using an analysis conducted by Mirels (1970), the Rotter Locus of Control Scale was reduced to five items with loadings of at least .30 for both men and women. These items were converted into a Likert scale by adding five response options from strongly agree to strongly disagree after the internal statements from questions originally numbered 15, 23, and 29 and the external statements from questions originally numbered 11 and 25. Each question was scored on a five point scale from zero (most internal response) to four (most external response) and then summed with the scores on the other four questions to form a total score.

The Marriage Locus of Control Scale included seven questions each of which asked who initiated or took certain actions entering, during, or exiting from the marriage. The scale was scored in the external direction with the most internal response (you) scored zero, shared control responses (both or neither) scored one, and the most external control responses (ex-spouse) scored two. Reliability was estimated at .68 (between observer correlation using a subsample of 18 couples, $p < .001$, Pearson correlation coefficient).

Stress and Adjustment Measures

Predecision stress and postdivorce stress were each assessed on a 5-point subjective scale from 0 (no stress) to 4 (very heavy stress). Stress intensity was defined as the sum of similar 5-point stress

ratings for the following: decision to divorce, separation, filing for the divorce, and the divorce decree time periods.

Stress duration was assessed with the question "How long was your divorce process stressful?" followed by eight multiple choice options from no stress to three or more years. Point of peak stress was equivalent to the rank order of the stage of peak difficulties. Postdivorce social maladjustment was computed with answers from four multiple choice questions on current happiness level, attitude toward ex-spouse, obsessional review of the marriage, and personal growth (a modified item from the Brown et al., 1977 Personal Growth Scale).

Decision Time and Difficulties Scales

The Decision Time Scale was a question "How long did you and your ex-spouse consider or discuss getting a divorce before the decision to get a divorce?" with six multiple choice options from immediate to two or more years. The Difficulties Scale required checking the applicable 18 non-child related difficulties. The list was developed with the assistance of 13 divorced individuals and 4 divorce therapists.

Because mailed questionnaire response rate is inversely related to questionnaire length (e.g., Heberlein & Baumgartner, 1978), all measures were designed to be as brief as possible to ensure minimum subject loss. Scales were validated automatically in the data analysis, because the path analysis automatically reported expected relationships (convergent validity) and expected nonrelationships (divergent validity).

RESULTS

Path analytic procedures were used to test the predicted hypotheses and the corresponding hypothesized model. Standardized regression coefficients, obtained from running ordinary multiple regressions on each dependent variable in the hypothesized model, were taken as path coefficients. Paths with standardized beta weights less than .10 (absolute) were defined as practically insignificant (not meaningful) and, therefore, trimmed from the model.

The use of practical significance rather than statistical significance is suggested by Kerlinger and Pedhazur (1973) and is particularly appropriate in view of the applied nature of the study and the possibility of unnecessarily deleting moderately predictive independent variables, because the sample size is only 107. The criterion is higher than Land's (1969) suggested .05 criterion for research without other guidelines. The reduced path diagram or final divorce model is given in Figure 1 and further explicated next, beginning with the locus of control and demographic dependent variables and ending with the postdivorce outcomes.

Locus of Control

The hypothesized model did not predict gender differences in locus of control. As assumed, men and women did not differ on marriage control. Unexpectedly, men were more external than women on the Rotter Locus of Control ($-.24$; $F(1,104) = 6.22$, $p < .05$; $M = 1$, $F = 2$). Gender predicted 6% of the Rotter Locus of Control variance (R square = .06).

Children and Difficulties

Not surprisingly, couples from longer marriages usually have children, while couples from short marriages usually do not. The direct causal effect of marriage length on children was practically and statistically significant ($.33$, $F(1,105) = 13.19$, $p < .001$), and predicted 11% of the variance in children (R square = .11).

As expected in hypothesis 1, childless couples dealt with fewer divorce related problems than couples with children, especially minor children. The direct causal effect of children on the number of divorce difficulties was practically significant and statistically significant ($.28$, $F(1,101) = 7.56$, $p < .01$), and predicted 8 percent of the variance in difficulties (multiple R square = .08). Unexpectedly, marriage duration did not influence difficulties. Interestingly, the negligible total impact of marriage duration (.02) was the result of two opposing effects: a direct causal effect ($-.07$) and an indirect causal effect thru children (.09).

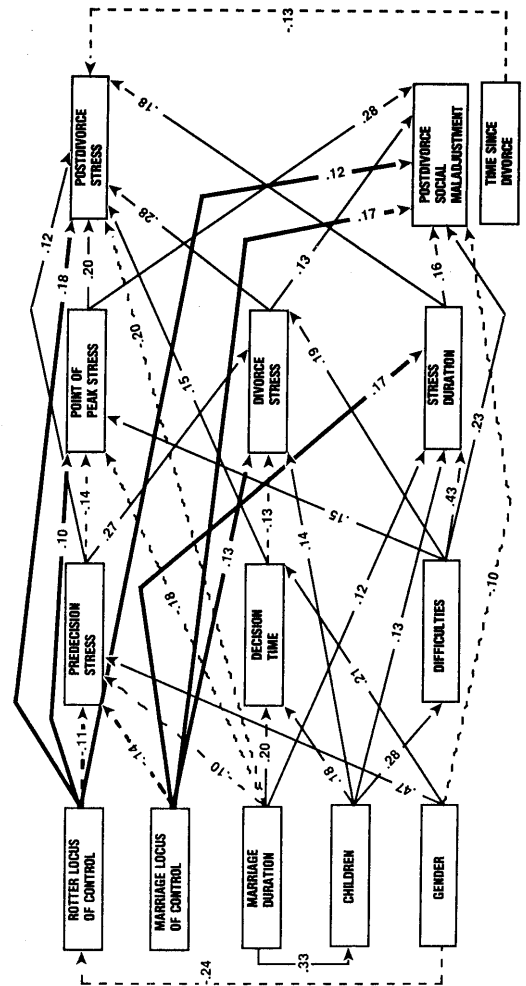


FIGURE 1. Reduced Path Diagram of Final Divorce Stress and Adjustment Model. (—) Positive standardized weights; (---) Negative standardized weights; Gender is coded M = 1; F = 2.

Predecision Stress and Decision Time

Table 1 shows the direct, indirect, and total causal effects for predecision stress and decision time. As shown in Table 1, hypothesis 2 was confirmed; internal women experienced the most predecision stress. Compared to gender (.47 direct causal effect, $F(1,101) =$

TABLE 1. Direct, Indirect, and Total Causal Effects for Predecision Stress, Decision Time, and Difficulties

| Dependent Variable | Explanatory Variable | Causal | | |
|---|---------------------------|--------|----------|-------|
| | | Direct | Indirect | Total |
| Predecision Stress (Multiple R = .55 R Square = .30) | Gender (M=1; F=2) | .47*** | .03 | .50 |
| | Marriage Locus of Control | -.14 | .00 | -.14 |
| | Rotter Locus of Control | -.11 | .00 | -.11 |
| | Marriage Duration | -.10 | .00 | -.10 |
| Decision Time (Multiple R = .38 R Square = .15) | Gender (M=1; F=2) | .21* | .00 | .21 |
| | Marriage Duration | .20* | .06 | .26 |
| | Children | .18 | .00 | .18 |
| Difficulties (Multiple R = .28 R Square = .08) | Children | .28** | .00 | .28 |

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

29.68, $p < .001$; .50 total causal effect; $M = 1, F = 2$), locus of control predicted approximately one-fourth the impact on predecision stress. This early stress period was influenced by one's sense of general locus of control (Rotter Locus of Control, $-.11$) and one's sense of control over the course of the marriage (Marriage Locus of Control, $-.14$). Surprisingly, the shorter the marriage, the more stress the individual experienced during this predecision phase ($-.10$). Together locus of control, gender, and marriage length predicted roughly 30% of the predecision stress variance (multiple R square = .30).

The demographic, but not the locus of control effects in hypothesis 3 (decision time) were confirmed (see Table 1). Childless men from short marriages have the shortest decision intervals. Gender (.21; $F(1,101) = 4.88, p < .05; M = 1, F = 2$), marriage length (.20 direct causal effect; $F(1,101) = 4.13, p < .05$), and children (.18) together predicted 15% of the variance in decision time (multiple R square = .15).

Stress Peak, Intensity, and Duration

Table 2 shows the causal effects for stress peak, intensity, and duration. As shown in Table 2, hypothesis 4 was partially confirmed. As expected, externals (Rotter Locus of Control: .10 direct effect, .12 total effect) with many divorce difficulties (.15), and low predecision stress ($-.14$) had late peak stress. Unexpectedly, individuals from long marriages experienced peak stress at an earlier divorce stage than those exiting from short marriages ($-.18$, direct effect). Also, contrary to prediction, Marriage Locus of Control, gender, and children did not influence the point of maximum stress. The explanatory variables predicted 8% of the peak stress variance (multiple R square .08).

As predicted in hypothesis 5 (divorce proper stress intensity) and shown in Table 2, externals (Marriage Locus of Control: .13 direct, .09 total) with children (.14 direct, .17 total), many difficulties (.19), and short decision intervals ($-.13$) had the highest divorce stress. Unexpectedly, divorce stress increased as predecision stress increased (.27, $F(1,98) = 5.59, p < .05$). The predicted causal effects of Rotter Locus of Control, gender, and marriage duration

TABLE 2. Direct, Indirect, and Total Causal Effects for Stress Peak, Intensity, and Duration

| Dependent Variable | Explanatory Variable | Causal | | |
|---|---------------------------|--------|----------|-------|
| | | Direct | Indirect | Total |
| <u>Point of Peak Stress</u> (Multiple R = .28 R Square = .08) | Marriage Duration | -.18 | .01 | -.17 |
| | Difficulties | .15 | .00 | .15 |
| | Predecision Stress | -.14 | .00 | -.14 |
| | Rotter Locus of Control | .10 | .02 | .12 |
| <u>Divorce Stress Intensity</u> (Multiple R = .42 R Square = .18) | Predecision Stress | .27* | .00 | .27 |
| | Difficulties | .19 | .00 | .19 |
| | Children | .14 | .03 | .11 |
| | Marriage Locus of Control | .13 | -.04 | .09 |
| <u>Divorce Stress Duration</u> (Multiple R = .54 R Square = .30) | Difficulties | .43*** | .00 | .43 |
| | Marriage Locus of Control | .17 | .00 | .17 |
| | Children | .13 | .12 | .25 |
| | Marriage Duration | .12 | .04 | .16 |

* $p < .05$ *** $p < .001$

were not found. The explanatory variables predicted 18% of stress intensity variance (multiple R square = .18).

Hypothesis 6, stress duration, was half-confirmed (see Table 2). As predicted, internals (Marriage Locus of Control .17), those with few divorce problems (.43; $F(1,98) = 22.61, p < .001$), childless couples (.13 direct, .25 total), and those from short marriages (.12 direct, .16 total) reported the shortest stress intervals. Contrary to prediction, Rotter Locus of Control, decision time, predecision stress, and gender did not emerge as explanatory variables for stress duration. The explanatory variables predicted 30% of the variance in stress duration. (multiple R square = .30).

Postdivorce Stress and Postdivorce Social Maladjustment

Table 3 shows the causal effects for the postdivorce outcomes. According to Hypothesis 7, recently divorced externals from long marriages with children, many difficulties, relatively short, stressless predecision intervals, and stressful divorces have the most postdivorce stress and postdivorce social maladjustment. Stressful divorces were those with high stress, long stress durations, and late peak stress. As indicated in Table 3, all the variables, except gender, emerged as important explanatory variables for postdivorce stress. As predicted, postdivorce stress increased with externality (Rotter Locus of Control .18, $F(1,94) = 4.13, p < .05$; Marriage Locus of Control .11 total), children (.13 total), number of divorce difficulties (.19 total), time to peak stress (.20, $F(1,94) = 5.18, p < .05$), increases in divorce stress intensity (.28, $F(1,94) = 7.62, p < .01$), increases in divorce stress duration (.18), and divorce recency (- .13). Unexpectedly, postdivorce stress increased with increases in decision time (.15, direct) and predecision stress (.12 direct; .09 total), but decreases in marriage length (- .20, $F(1,94) = 4.69, p < .05$).

As indicated in Table 3, seven variables predicted postdivorce social maladjustment. As predicted, postdivorce social maladjustment increased with externality (Rotter Locus of Control Scale .15 total; Marriage Locus of Control Scale .21 total), number of divorce difficulties (.23, $F(1,94) = 5.56, p < .05$; .31 total), stress inten-

TABLE 3. Direct, Indirect, and Total Causal Effects for Stress Peak, Intensity, and Duration

| Dependent Variable | Explanatory Variable | Causal | | |
|---|---------------------------|--------|----------|-------|
| | | Direct | Indirect | Total |
| <u>Point of Peak Stress</u> (Multiple R=.28 R Square=.08) | Rotter Locus of Control | .10 | .02 | .12 |
| | Marriage Duration | -.18 | .01 | -.17 |
| | Difficulties | .15 | .00 | .15 |
| | Predecision Stress | -.14 | .00 | -.14 |
| <u>Divorce Stress Intensity</u> (Multiple R=.42 R Square=.18) | Marriage Locus of Control | .13 | -.04 | .09 |
| | Predecision Stress | .27* | .00 | .27 |
| | Difficulties | .19 | .00 | .19 |
| | Children | .14 | .03 | .17 |
| | Decision Time | -.13 | .00 | -.13 |
| <u>Divorce Stress Duration</u> (Multiple R=.54 R Square=.30) | Marriage Locus of Control | .17 | .00 | .17 |
| | Difficulties | .43*** | .00 | .43 |
| | Children | .13 | .12 | .25 |
| | Marriage Duration | .12 | .04 | .16 |

* $p < .05$ *** $p < .001$

sity (.13), stress duration (.16), and time from the inception of divorce problems up to the point of maximum stress (.28, $F(1,94) = 9.99$, $p < .01$). Unexpectedly, men reported more postdivorce social maladjustment than women (-.11 total). Also, the predicted effects of time since divorce, decision time, children, predecision stress, and marriage duration were not found. Explanatory variables predict 36% of both postdivorce stress and postdivorce social maladjustment (multiple R square = .36).

In summary, hypothesis 2 was completely confirmed, while hypotheses 1 and 3-7 were partially confirmed. Locus of control predictions were usually supported and more frequently supported than demographic predictions. As a result, the hypothesized model was essentially confirmed and reduced to the final divorce stress and adjustment model shown in Figure 1.

DISCUSSION

The final divorce model confirms most, but not all of the hypothesized model and supports the following conclusions. First, six of the seven predicted locus of control effects were confirmed. Compared to externals, internals experience more predecision stress, earlier peak stress, shorter stress intervals during the process, less stress during the divorce proper, and less postdivorce stress and social maladjustment. Unlike previous studies, this study did not find locus of control differences in decision time and used partial correlations instead of univariate correlations.

Second, under heavy life stress such as divorce, the relationship between locus of control and stress changes over time from an inverse (predecision stress) to a direct relationship (postdivorce stress). This reversal may explain the previous inconsistencies in the findings of studies on locus of control and anxiety and stress. While most studies report that internality is related to lower distress and better outcomes, some studies either report no locus of control differences or even greater stress and/or anxiety for internal subjects than external subjects (for review see e.g., Thompson, 1981).

Third, gender, children, marriage duration, and time since divorce decree predict divorce reactions. Compared to men, women experience more predecision stress and longer predecision periods (as predicted), but surprisingly better postdivorce adjustment and

more internal Rotter Locus of Control. Within the divorce-locus of control literature, Doherty (1980) and Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1978), report greater externality for divorced women than men, but other research which states that women are more apt to report post-divorce increases in self confidence, independence and personal growth than men (e.g., Deckert & Langelier, 1978; Krantzler, 1974) suggests the reverse. As predicted, couples with children report longer decision intervals, more difficulties, later peak stress, greater divorce stress intensity, longer divorce stress, and more postdivorce stress. As predicted, longer married individuals reported longer decision and stress intervals. Contrary to prediction, longer married couples report earlier peak stress, less predecision stress, and less postdivorce stress. These ameliorative effects occurring with longer marriages may reflect a slower divorce process (Deckert & Langlier, 1978), the positive impact of maturity on stress resolution (Schmeid & Lawler, 1986), greater resources of older versus younger couples, and/or scale inadequacies. Predecision period may have been interpreted as the happy, early part of longer marriages but the unhappy, quarrelsome period just prior to the decision to divorce for the shorter marriages. Stage of peak stress may inadequately measure point of peak stress, because the divorce process and the stages within this process are probably a direct function of the marriage length. Interestingly, stress, but not social maladjustment, decreases from 6 to 18 months postdivorce.

Lastly, although longitudinal research is generally preferable to avoid memory biases, this study could not use such a design and have an unbiased sample. Many people do not know when they are in the predecision divorce phase. Most divorced individuals are unusually busy and too mobile to agree to participate in a longitudinal study. In fact, 18% of the respondents did not receive a summary of the results 19 months postparticipation, because they could not be located.

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