A RE-EVALUATION OF THE ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF DIVORCE*

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Over the last 20 years, researchers have focused considerable attention on the economic consequences of divorce. One book, Weitzman's The Divorce Revolution *(1985), reports a 73 percent decline in women's standard of living after divorce and a 42 percent increase in men's standard of living. These percentages, based on data from a 1977–1978 Los Angeles sample, are substantially larger than those from other studies. I replicate* The Divorce Revolution*'s analysis and demonstrate that the estimates reported in the book are inaccurate. This reanalysis, which uses the same sample and measures of economic well-being as* The Divorce Revolution, *produces estimates of a 27 percent decline in women's standard of living and a 10 percent increase in men's standard of living after divorce. I discuss the implications of these results for debates about divorce law reform.*

Over the last 20 years, researchers and policymakers have focused considerable attention on the economic consequences of divorce. Interest in this issue has been driven by several concerns. The number of people affected by divorce has increased dramatically—the divorce rate has risen and the economic well-being of women and children after divorce has become a significant problem. Most states have enacted no-fault divorce legislation, and some also have established new guidelines for dividing property, awarding alimony, and assigning custody of children. As these reforms were introduced, researchers and policymakers became interested in evaluating their effects. Also, scholars began to examine the differential economic consequences of divorce for men and women.

For several reasons, one book, Weitzman's *The Divorce Revolution* (1985), stands out among studies of the economic consequences of divorce. First, Weitzman reported that the decline in women's standard of living after divorce was much worse than was previously thought. Prior studies had reported an average decline for women of between 13 percent and 35 percent. Weitzman reported that the average standard of living for women who divorced in Los Angeles in 1977 declined by 73 percent after divorce, which is particularly striking when one considers that the *maximum* possible decline is 100 percent. Second, the gender gap in standards of living after divorce was much greater than previously thought. While the average decline for women was 73 percent, Weitzman reported that men's standard of living improved by 42 percent. Finally, she argued that these economic consequences of divorce are due to no-fault divorce and other reforms introduced in California in 1970. These re-

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forms eliminated fault-based grounds for divorce, based alimony awards on financial need, required equal division of marital property, and included new procedures to reduce hostility and conflict. Because those supporting reform had claimed that no-fault divorces would place men and women on an equal footing, Weitzman's book has raised serious questions about no-fault legislation.

The Divorce Revolution received considerable attention in academic, legal, and popular publications. It was reviewed in at least 22 social science journals, 12 law reviews, and 10 national magazines and newspapers. The book received the American Sociological Association's 1986 Book Award for "Distinguished Contribution to Scholarship" (Weitzman 1986). From 1986 to 1993, it was cited in 348 social science articles (based on a search of the Social Science Citation Index) and in more than 250 law review articles (based on a search of legal periodicals indexed in Westlaw). *The Divorce Revolution* was also discussed widely in the popular press: It was cited over 85 times in newspapers and over 25 times in national magazines from 1985 to 1993. Remarkably, *The Divorce Revolution* has also been cited in at least 24 legal cases in state Appellate and Supreme courts (based on a search of legal cases indexed in Westlaw), and was cited once by the U.S. Supreme Court (Abraham 1989).

Much of the attention received by *The Divorce Revolution* focused on the contrast between the 73 percent *decline* in women's standard of living and the 42 percent *rise* in the standard of living of men. Most reviews reported this as a major finding, describing it as staggering, startling, or dramatic. A legal history of American women cited Weitzman's results and concluded ". . . it is difficult to exaggerate the economic problems created by no-fault reform of divorce" (Hoff 1991; also see Hewlett 1986). A review by Polikoff (1986) concluded ". . . the serious research in this book should form the basis for moving forward with much needed legal reforms" (p. 116). In fact, the findings on the economic consequences of divorce did affect subsequent divorce law reforms and debates about those reforms. For example, the California State Senate Task Force on Family Equity was formed in response to *The Divorce Revolution*, and some of its recommendations were enacted in 1987 and 1988 (Weitzman 1992).

The most cited statistic from *The Divorce Revolution* is the finding that women's average standard of living declines by 73 percent in the first year after divorce. While this finding continues to be cited, some scholars began to question it soon after the book was published (Thornton 1986; Furstenberg 1987; Sugarman 1990). Some raised questions about the sample, which consisted of 228 individuals who received a divorce in Los Angeles in 1977. Among the criticisms were assertions that the sample was too small (Furstenberg 1987; Abraham 1989), that the sample was not representative of Los Angeles because of the low response rate (42 percent) (Thornton 1986; Hoffman and Duncan 1988; Abraham 1989), and that California is not representative of the U.S. because few states have similar divorce legislation (Jacob 1988). Others noted that the findings were inconsistent with results based on representative national samples (Thornton 1986; Peterson 1989; Morgan 1991). Analyses based on such samples found that women's standard of living declines between 13 percent and 35 percent in the first year after marital disruption (Nestel, Mercier, and Shaw 1983; Duncan and Hoffman 1985; David and Flory 1989; Peterson 1989; Stirling 1989; see Holden and Smock 1991 and Sørenson 1992 for reviews). Similarly, estimates based on national samples showed that men's standard of living increases by 11 to 13 percent after marital disruption (Duncan and Hoffman 1985; David and Flory 1989). These percentages are not nearly as large as those reported by Weitzman.

One of the most serious critiques of Weitzman's book was whether the 73 percent decline reported for women in Figure 3 (1985:338) is consistent with other data Weitzman presented. Using income data for subsets of the sample presented in other tables in the book, Hoffman and Duncan (1988) estimated that the decline in the standard of living for divorced women in the sample is about 33 percent. They concluded that if the data in the other tables were accurate, Weitzman's estimate of a 73 percent decline for women is probably in error.

Faludi (1991) highlighted and defended Hoffman and Duncan's findings. However, considerably more attention has been given to the findings in *The Divorce Revolution* than to critiques of those findings.

In spite of numerous questions and critiques, many still accept Weitzman's estimates. The findings continue to be cited without question in some social science articles (e.g., Lonsdorf 1991; Seiling and Harris 1991; Butler and Weatherly 1992; Haffey and Cohen 1992), law review articles (e.g., Fineman 1986; Melli 1986; Woodhouse 1990; Allen 1992), and newspapers and magazines (e.g., Mansnerus 1995; Thurow 1995). Okin (1991) defends the findings, arguing that they "are far less surprising than is the fact that people have been so surprised by them" (p. 384). Critics of no-fault legislation cite the 73 percent decline reported for women as evidence that no-fault has had disastrous economic consequences for women and children (e.g., Hewlett 1986; Okin 1991; Parkman 1992).

Why have some scholars and journalists continued to cite Weitzman's findings on the economic consequences of divorce? Some may not be aware that the accuracy of the findings has been questioned. Others may continue to believe that the controversy is unresolved, since no one has reanalyzed Weitzman's data. Sørenson (1992), after reviewing questions about the data, concludes there is "no clear and simple answer to the question of the magnitude of the economic consequences of marital separation" (p. 280). While Hoffman and Duncan (1988) demonstrated that a 73 percent decline for women appears to be inconsistent with other data presented in the book, this conclusion is based on unweighted income data reported for selected subsamples. Furthermore, Hoffman and Duncan did not evaluate the estimate of a 42 percent rise in men's standard of living. The latter figure is particularly important because it provides evidence of a large gender gap in the economic consequences of divorce.

I reanalyze Weitzman's data and demonstrate that the results reported in *The Divorce Revolution* are in error. I also find that the erroneous results cannot be attributed to weaknesses of the sample or to errors in the dataset.

DATA

I analyze the dataset used by Weitzman (1985) in *The Divorce Revolution*. The original sample was drawn from the court dockets of divorces recorded in Los Angeles County between May and July 1977. Interviews were conducted in 1977 and 1978 with respondents from 228 of these couples. Only one member of each couple was selected for interviewing. Respondents were selected to yield a final sample with equal numbers of men and women (114 each). Long-married couples and high-SES couples were oversampled and weights were used to correct for this oversampling.

The data I analyze are derived from the computer files and paper records of the original interviews as provided by Weitzman to the Murray Research Center at Radcliffe College. Two computer files are available: one is an SPSS system file and the other file contains the raw data. Weitzman (personal communication) and the staff of the Murray Research Center reported that each computer file contained inaccurately transcribed data, and that there were numerous inaccuracies in the data for the income variables. I compared data for selected variables from each computer file to the original paper records to determine which computer file most accurately duplicated the data in the paper records. I found that the raw data file contained fewer discrepancies than did the SPSS system file.[1] Because the raw data file was more accurate, I used it to create a third data file, corrected using the information from the paper records.

To create this corrected file of raw data, I compared the raw data in the computer file to the responses from the paper records of the original interviews. Coding from the paper records focused on the approximately 100 variables needed to analyze the economic consequences of divorce. Whenever data in the computer file differed from information in the paper records, I corrected the data in the computer file.[2] Errors were found

[1] In addition to errors in the income data, over 450 variables were incorrectly coded for 67 cases in the SPSS system file because they had been merged into the file using incorrect ID numbers.

[2] Paper records were missing for 11 of the 228 cases. Data for these cases were drawn entirely

in one or more income variables for 27 cases. Except where otherwise noted, all analyses in this paper are based on the corrected raw data file I created.

MEASURES

Measures were created to replicate the original analysis as described in Weitzman (1985, chap. 10). However, because Weitzman did not explain how she handled a variety of measurement problems, I describe in detail the procedures I used to create the measures.

Like Weitzman, I use the *ratio of income to needs* as a measure of the standard of living. Respondents were asked to report their own and their spouse's income in the year before their separation, as well as their own and their ex-spouse's income at the time of the interview (i.e., within one year of the divorce). Weitzman's findings are based on three measures of the income/needs ratio for each divorced couple: one for the couple's household in the year before separation, one for the husband's post-divorce household, and one for the wife's post-divorce household. Although only one member of each couple was interviewed, each respondent was asked to report information about his or her ex-spouse as well as for him- or herself. Therefore data on husbands' post-divorce households are based on reports from the male respondents for 114 couples plus reports from the female respondents about their ex-husbands for the other 114 couples. Data for women's post-divorce households were similarly derived.

Also like Weitzman, I measure *changes in the standard of living* over the period between the year before the couple separated (stopped living together) and the year after a legal divorce was granted. Since the time between separation and divorce is longer for some couples than for others, the change in the income/needs ratio was measured over different lengths of time for different individuals. For most couples (81 percent), this time period was three years or less, and for virtually all couples (96 percent), the change was measured over a period of seven years or less.

Predivorce income is the sum of the incomes of the husband and the wife for the year prior to their separation. Those who were not working for pay and who reported no other sources of income were coded as having no income. Predivorce income was coded as missing for 33 cases who mistakenly reported income from a year *after* their year of separation. Because the year of separation varied, I adjusted predivorce income for inflation and converted to 1977 dollars.

Husband's post-divorce income is his income at the time of the interview after *subtracting* the annual amount of any awards for alimony and/or child support. The wife's post-divorce income includes her income at the time of the interview after *adding* the annual amount of any alimony and/or child support awards.[3] Weitzman used (and I use) the amount of *awards* rather than the amount of actual *payments* to estimate the effects of full compliance with court-ordered payments.

In Weitzman's study, questions on post-divorce income of husbands and wives did not ask about any income provided by a new spouse or by any other adults in the household. Because many respondents remarried or had live-in partners (31 percent of men and 14 percent of women), this income measure underestimated the income of some households. Although they were not asked, 26 respondents did include income from spouses or other adults in the household when reporting post-divorce income. These amounts were subtracted from the post-divorce income they reported, because this information was not available for all respondents in the sample.

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from the computer file containing the raw data. This may introduce small errors in the analyses. Also, paper records for a section of the questionnaire concerning child support were missing for 40 of the 119 respondents who had children at the time of the divorce. These data were also derived from the computer file containing the raw data. While this procedure may cause some error, it is likely to be small—for the 69 cases where paper records on this section of the questionnaire are available, only 4 errors were found in the computer records.

[3] Because 51 respondents (mostly women) reported their income *after* taking alimony and child support payments into account, the post-divorce income data for these respondents was corrected before making the adjustments described here.

When annual income data were missing, data on weekly, bimonthly, or monthly earnings were annualized and used to estimate annual income. Although I made every effort to identify an accurate measure of income from the data available in the questionnaire, predivorce and/or post-divorce income data remained missing for 66 men and 67 women. These cases are excluded from the analyses I report in this paper. Weitzman did not report how missing data were handled in her analysis of income/needs ratios.

The measure of economic need used by Weitzman is based on the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Lower Standard Budget for an urban family of four in 1977 (Weitzman 1985: 481–82). She adjusted for family size, age of the household head, age of the oldest child, and whether one or both spouses lived in the household. Making these adjustments with this dataset is problematic, however, due to inconsistencies in the type and quality of available data. Among those respondents for whom income data were available, age of the household head was missing for one male respondent. Since economic need could not be computed for this case, I excluded it from the analysis, increasing the total number of men with missing data to 67. The adjustments for family size and age of the oldest child are subject to error because some information on household composition was not available. For the predivorce household, no questions were asked about the presence of stepchildren or of adults other than the parents. The measure of predivorce need therefore assumes that the household includes only the married couple and their own children, if any. For the post-divorce household, data is available on the presence of a new spouse or cohabitor.[4] However, information about the number of stepchildren and other adults in the post-divorce household is available only for respondents' households (not for their ex-spouses' households). I use the procedure employed by Weitzman (1985)—I include all available information about household composition in calculating measures of post-divorce need.[5] However, as noted earlier, information on post-divorce *income* provided by new spouses, cohabitors, or other adults in the household was *not* available. In Weitzman's study, and in this paper, new spouses, cohabitors and other adults are included in the calculation of economic need, but are *not* included in the calculation of income.

RESULTS

Weitzman (1985) reports results on the change in the average income/needs ratio from the time of separation to one year after a legal divorce was granted (Weitzman 1985: 323). Although she does not specify whether the "average" she uses is the median or the mean, she describes her analysis (Weitzman 1985:337) as following the method used by Hoffman and Holmes (1976). As they report changes in the mean income/needs ratio, I present my results based on the mean.

Results based on the corrected raw data file using the measures of the income/needs ratio described above show that the effects of divorce are not nearly as large as those reported by Weitzman (1985) (see Table 1, Panel A). The mean income/needs ratio is 10 percent higher for men in the year after divorce than it was in the year before separation; for women the mean income/needs ratio was 27 percent lower.

These findings represent as exact a replication of the original analysis as is possible. They are based on data coded from the original interviews, the results are weighted, and the analysis replicates all the key methodological decisions described by Weitzman in *The Divorce Revolution*. The measures of post-divorce income exclude income of new spouses or new partners. New spouses or partners, however, are counted as members of the post-divorce household and therefore increase economic need. Post-divorce income measures assume full compliance with alimony and child support awards. Based on the findings reported here, it is clear that the results reported in *The Divorce Revolution*

[4] For women in the sample who remarried or are cohabiting, data on the age of their spouse or partner is not available. In such cases, the woman's age was used as a proxy for age of household head.

[5] When age of oldest child was missing (N = 18 for men, N = 7 for women), economic need was based on the typical level of need for a family of the same size and type.

Table 1. Changes in Income/Needs Ratio for Men and Women: Divorced Individuals Sample, Los Angeles, 1977–1978

Variable	Men	Women
PANEL A Income/Needs Ratio and Percent Change Based on Corrected Raw Data File		
Mean income/needs ratio in year prior to separation	4.42	4.58
Mean income/needs ratio in year after divorce	4.88	3.34
Percent change	+10%	−27%
Number of cases	161	161
PANEL B Percent Change Based on Uncorrected Raw Data File		
Percent change	+7%	−28%
Number of cases	155	157
PANEL C Percent Change Based on Uncorrected SPSS System File		
Percent change	+7%	−20%
Number of cases	135	140

Note: See text for a description of the three data files. Means and percentages are weighted; unweighted Ns are reported to reflect true sample size.

for the change in the average standard of living are in error. They could not have been derived from the data and methods described in the book.

The results presented here for both men and women are within the range of results reported from analyses of representative national samples. Thus, while the quality and representativeness of the Los Angeles sample are still open to question, the differences between Weitzman's results and those of other studies cannot be attributed to problems with the sample. The result for women reported here (−27 percent) is also reasonably close to the −33 percent estimated by Hoffman and Duncan (1988) who used the incomplete income tables presented in Weitzman's book.

To explore the likelihood that the data could have produced Weitzman's reported results, I examined changes experienced by individuals in the sample. Approximately 10 percent of the weighted sample of women experienced a decline in their standard of living of 73 percent or more. While this suggests that a subgroup of women do experience the severe economic consequences Weitzman described, the small size of this group indicates that the *average* decline cannot be 73 percent.[6]

To determine whether Weitzman's findings on changes in standard of living were affected by her methodological decisions (which I have replicated here), I re-estimated the results under a variety of assumptions using the corrected raw data file (results not shown). Results for the median income/needs ratio differ only slightly from results based on the mean. Because respondents' reports of post-divorce data for their ex-spouses are likely to reflect some guessing and errors, I also examined results based solely on respondents' reports of their own income and household composition. Results based on respondents' self-reports show that the mean standard of living increased by 11 percent for men after divorce, and declined by 34 percent for women. Because adjusting post-divorce income to reflect alimony and child support *awards* may overstate the amount of income actually transferred, I adjusted the post-divorce income of men and women based on the reported amounts of alimony and child support *actually paid*. This analysis produces little change in the results.[7] Since data on the income of new spouses and cohabitors were not available in the dataset, I also conducted an analysis to determine the consequences of excluding these household members from the estimation of economic need. If new spouses and cohabitors are not

[6] Interestingly, about 9 percent of men also experienced a decline in standard of living of 73 percent or more after divorce. Weitzman did not address this finding.

[7] That little change was observed can be explained by three factors: First, in many divorces, alimony or child support was not awarded. Second, when alimony and child support were awarded, many ex-husbands were paying the full amount of the award or more. Finally, when ex-husbands paid less than the amount of the award, the difference between the amount of the payment and the award was not usually large.

counted as contributing to post-divorce economic need, the mean standard of living for men increases by 20 percent after divorce, while the mean for women declines by 25 percent.

I also attempted to assess the effects of alternative ways of handling missing income data (results not shown). If cases with imputed estimates of annual income based on weekly, bimonthly, or monthly income data are removed, men's standard of living increases by 15 percent, while women's declines by 28 percent. To determine whether having income data for all cases in the dataset could substantially change the results, I made some radical assumptions. For men, I imputed $0 of income to all those for whom pre-divorce income was missing. For women, I imputed $0 of post-divorce income to all those for whom post-divorce income was missing. This approach maximizes the gender disparity in results. Under these extreme (and unrealistic) assumptions, men's standard of living increases by 23 percent, while women's declines by 34 percent. These results suggest that even having complete income data from all respondents would not produce substantially different results.

Taken together, all of these alternative analyses suggest that the findings I report are stable across different estimation methods. In other words, analyses based on a variety of different assumptions do not produce results substantially different from those I report in Table 1, Panel A.

As described above, examining the paper records from Weitzman's study revealed that both the raw data file and the SPSS system file contained inaccurately transcribed data. Since an analysis of one of these uncorrected data files may have produced the erroneous results reported in Weitzman (1985), I conducted analyses using each of the uncorrected data files. Estimates of changes in the standard of living based on the uncorrected raw data file (Table 1, Panel B) are similar to those based on the corrected raw data file (Table 1, Panel A). The mean standard of living increases by 7 percent for men after divorce, while the mean for women declines by 28 percent. Estimates based on an analysis of the SPSS system file, which contained more errors than the uncorrected raw data file, actually show a *smaller* decline for women (Table 1, Panel C). The mean standard of living increases by 7 percent for men after divorce, and declines by 20 percent for women. These analyses indicate that the data errors in the two computer files do *not* account for the incorrect results reported by Weitzman.

I tried to replicate Weitzman's analysis as closely as possible with the information she presented in her book. I also examined reasonable alternative approaches for analyzing the corrected data file, and I examined the two uncorrected data files. I have been unable to discover how Weitzman's results could have been obtained. The most likely explanation is that errors in her analysis of the data were responsible for producing her results.

CONCLUSION

I have used the same data analyzed in Weitzman's (1985) *The Divorce Revolution*, have replicated the procedures she reported as closely as possible, and have demonstrated that her reported results are in error. Weitzman's much-cited estimate of a 73 percent decline in women's standard of living after divorce is inaccurate and the estimate of a 42 percent increase for men is inaccurate as well. The figures based on the corrected data are –27 percent and +10 percent, respectively, for women and men.

Although I have shown that the economic consequences of divorce are not as severe as those described by Weitzman, this reanalysis is not intended to minimize the significance of a 27 percent decline in women's standard of living after divorce. The gender gap in economic outcomes after divorce is a significant problem and must be addressed through legal reforms and public policy. However, as Weitzman acknowledges, others reported the gender gap in economic outcomes after divorce long before she did (Hoffman and Holmes 1976; Espenshade 1979). Yet others' estimates of the economic consequences of divorce did not receive much attention, while the inaccurately large estimates reported by Weitzman were widely publicized.

The estimates I report, as well as estimates from previous research, provide a more solid basis for considering policy remedies to address the serious economic problems women face after divorce. For example, the severe economic consequences of divorce described in *The Divorce Revolution* have been used to campaign against no-fault divorce in the United States (see Faludi 1991:19). The inaccurate findings have distorted the debate over no-fault legislation because some critics attributed differences between Weitzman's results, based on a California sample, and those of other studies to California's no-fault divorce laws. These critics argued that the economic consequences of divorce for women were much more severe in California than elsewhere in the United States because of California's no-fault divorce legislation. In fact, I have demonstrated that the findings reported by Weitzman were inaccurate. The corrected findings reported here do not support the argument that the economic consequences of divorce for women were more severe in California than elsewhere.

Clearly, Weitzman is not responsible for all the arguments made by those who cite her data—she did not argue in *The Divorce Revolution* that states should return to fault-based divorce laws. However, extreme findings are likely to be noticed and to be used to support extreme points of view. When extreme results are in error, they distort discussions of public policy and social issues (Cherlin 1990).

Social scientists must draw conclusions and develop new research projects based on reliable results from prior studies. Weitzman's findings have unnecessarily raised questions about the results of other studies and have diverted attention from more reliable estimates of the economic consequences of divorce. I hope the corrected results I report here resolve these questions and redirect our attention to more reliable data for developing policy recommendations.

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THE ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF DIVORCE ARE STILL UNEQUAL: COMMENT ON PETERSON*

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Peterson (1996) undertook the difficult task of trying to reconstruct a segment of the Divorce Law Research data files to determine the accuracy of the datum on the gender gap in post-divorce standards of living I reported in *The Divorce Revolution* (Weitzman 1985). I congratulate him and thank him for this effort because I myself tried to track down or recreate the project's original data files used in my book. Unfortunately, these files do not exist. The two files now stored at the Murray Center are a "dirty data" raw data file and a mismatched SPSS system file, as I explain below.

In this limited space I address three issues raised by Peterson's article: (1) I explain what happened to the original data files, what I tried to do to make them usable, and the results. (2) I hope to put in perspective the 73/42 percent datum that Peterson focuses on. It is one statistic in a 500-page book. In any case, *The Divorce Revolution* did not win scholarly awards or attention because of the magnitude of that single statistic. What was unique was the analysis of how specific features of the law (in action) *were creating a major social problem.* (3) I note that the policy impact of *The Divorce Revolution* was not caused by the magnitude of the reported gap, but by the fact that disparities between former husbands and wives were being created by a legal system pledged to equality.

First, let me begin with Peterson's implied question: Was this responsible research and did I meet professional standards in analyzing these data? My research was supported by substantial grants from NSF and NIMH and I worked with a scientific advisory board that included experts in social science methodology. The data collection was subcontracted to the UCLA Survey Research Center which did the interviews (in 1978), coded the data, and subjected them to a rather elaborate verification and retrieval procedure. Such procedures are typical with survey data on income and economic issues because respondents at times provide incomplete or inconsistent answers that require clarification. Changes to the original raw data file resulting from this data cleaning process were made by a series of programming statements on a master SPSS system file. *The raw data file that is stored at the Murray Center is the original "dirty data" file and does not include these cleaning changes.*

Unfortunately, the original *cleaned* master SPSS system file no longer exists. I assumed it was being copied and reformatted as I moved for job changes and fellowships—from the project's original offices in Berkeley to Stanford (in 1979), then to Princeton (in 1983), back to Stanford (in 1984) and then to Harvard (in 1986). With each move, new programmers worked on the files to accommodate different computer systems.

Before I left Stanford I instructed my programmers to prepare all my data files for archiving. I know now (but did not know then) that the original master SPSS system file that I used for my book had been lost or damaged at some point and was not included among these files. The SPSS system file that I thought was the master SPSS system file was the result of the merging of many smaller subfiles that had been created for specific analyses. It later became apparent that a programming error had been made, and the subfiles were not "keyed" correctly: Not all of the data from each individual respondent were matched on the appropriate case ID number, and data from different respondents were merged under the same case ID. At present it is not possible to disentangle exactly what mismatch occurred for any specific respondent. Nevertheless, when I left Stanford I believed this mismatched

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SPSS system file was a complete master SPSS system file.

When questions were raised about the 73/42 percent statistic I went back to what I believed was the master SPSS system file to rerun the analysis. (I now report, with chagrin, that I myself had questioned the 73 percent decline in women's post-divorce standard of living when the figure was first computed and asked my computer expert on three separate occasions to verify it . He said he had done so, with the same result, and I accepted that.)

When I could not replicate the analyses in my book with what I had mistakenly assumed was the archived master SPSS system file, I hired an independent consultant, Professor Angela Aidala from Columbia University, to help me untangle what had happened. She reviewed all of the project files, documentation, and codebooks, as well as the available data and programming files to determine a possible computational error in the standard of living statistic. But she could not do this without an accurate data file to work with. We then went back to the original questionnaires and recoded a random sample of about 25 percent of the cases. There were so many discrepancies between the questionnaires and the "dirty data" raw data file, and between the questionnaires and the mismatched SPSS system file, that we finally abandoned the effort and left a warning to all future researchers *that both files at the Murray Center were so seriously flawed that they could not be used.* It was a very sad, time consuming, and frustrating experience.

Second, the problematic 73 percent decline in women's post-divorce standard of living may have resulted from a sample weighting error. My sample intentionally oversampled people in longer marriages and those with higher incomes where differences between husbands' and wives' post-divorce standards of living are the greatest. It may be that the weighting system used to reconstitute a representative sample was either not applied or was applied incorrectly. The statistics presented in other figures and tables in *The Divorce Revolution* parallel national data—which I systematically used and cited as an anchor for the California sample.

However, neither the scholarly awards nor the legal impact of *The Divorce Revolution* arose from any one table, but rather from my conclusion that the decline in women's standard of living after divorce was (and still is) a major social problem. My book also focused attention on the direct effects of this decline on the innocent victims of divorce—the children.

Third, *The Divorce Revolution* had a real impact on public policy and resulted in the passage of 14 new laws in California, not because of the specific statistics, but because it —unlike the prior sociological research—focused on the participants' experience of the law in action and showed the direct link between *specific* features of the law and the economic hardships experienced by women and children after divorce. For example, the equal division of property required under the no-fault divorce law led to increased sales of the family home, which disrupted children's lives at the very time when they most needed continuity and stability. The first new law inspired by the book gave California judges the power to delay the sale of the family home in the interests of minor children. Other new laws changed the provisions for alimony, child support enforcement, attorney's fees, and judicial education in California.

In conclusion, I urge that we not lose sight of the major finding of *The Divorce Revolution*—and of all other research in this area—that women and children are unfairly and disproportionately burdened economically by divorce. While it is likely, as I stated above, that the gender gap is less than I reported, even if the post-divorce standards of living, as Peterson contends, drop an average of *only* about 30 percent for women, and rise *only* about 10 percent for men, *that is still a 40 percent difference between the two—and that outcome is unconscionable for a legal system and a society committed to fairness, justice, and equality.*

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STATISTICAL ERRORS, FAULTY CONCLUSIONS, MISGUIDED POLICY: REPLY TO WEITZMAN*

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Lenore Weitzman (1996) and I agree that there is a significant gender gap in the economic consequences of divorce, that this gap results in financial hardship for many divorced women and their children, and that legal reforms and public policy must address this hardship. I made these points not only in the article published here, but also in my book (Peterson 1989), which examines in-depth the economic problems women face after divorce. I share the concerns of Weitzman and many other scholars who have addressed these problems, and I hope that no one reading our exchange will ignore these very important points of agreement between us.[1]

In this rejoinder to Weitzman, I develop three points. First, none of the issues she raises regarding the computer files or the sample weights change my conclusion that her estimates are inaccurate. Second, my results lead to different conclusions about the effect of no-fault divorce legislation on divorced women's standard of living. Finally, Weitzman's inaccurate estimates have seriously distorted policy discussions about no-fault divorce.

Weitzman (1996) now concedes that her estimates of changes in standard of living after divorce are incorrect. She claims that mistakes were made by computer experts, who botched the original analysis, did not properly check the data or analysis, incorrectly constructed the data files, and finally lost them. Her discussion of these problems may lead readers to conclude that it is now impossible to use the data to draw any conclusions about the magnitude of changes in standard of living after divorce. This is not the case. Because I had access to the paper records from the original interviews, I was able to reproduce a "clean" data file. In doing so, I discovered all the problems she mentions, and I was able to resolve them satisfactorily.

The Murray Research Center archives include virtually all of the paper records of the original interviews. Note 2 in my paper (Peterson 1996:530–31) describes what was missing; these materials are missing because Weitzman did not archive them at the Center. Using these paper records, supplemented by information from the computer file of raw data, I created a corrected raw data file. I was able to clarify incomplete or inconsistent responses by examining the answers to related questions and the explanations that were sometimes written in the margins of the questionnaires. This corrected raw data file reconstructs the (lost) "cleaned" data file Weitzman refers to.

Weitzman's (1996) claim that the errors resulting from mismatched ID numbers cannot be corrected is inaccurate. As I explained in note 1 (Peterson 1996), I examined the paper records to determine which ID number was correct, and corrected the errors that had been created by mismatching files.

Weitzman's (1996) reference to "dirty data" in two computer files might suggest to some readers that the erroneous figures in her book were the result of analyzing these "dirty" data files. Yet I analyzed these two "uncorrected data files" and could not reproduce the erroneous results (Peterson 1996: 533, table 1, panels B and C).

Weitzman (1996) suggests that her erroneous findings may have resulted from a sample weighting error. I conducted unweighted analyses using the corrected raw data file to determine whether failure to apply weights could produce the erroneous figures. The unweighted results showed a 43 percent decline for women's standard of living and a 26 percent increase for men. While these results

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[1] Weitzman's (1996) concluding sentence may lead readers to misinterpret how I view my results. She states, ". . . the post-divorce standards of living drop, as Peterson contends, an average of *only* about 30 percent for women, and rise *only* about 10 percent for men . . ." (p. 538, her italics). I never used the word "only" to characterize my findings (Peterson 1996), nor did I imply that such changes in the standard of living are insignificant.

are larger than those based on weighted analyses, they are not nearly as large as those reported in *The Divorce Revolution* (Weitzman 1985). It is also unlikely that an incorrect application of the weights could have produced the –73 percent figure, since only 15 percent of the women in the unweighted sample experienced a decline as large as 73 percent. In summary, none of the problems or alternative explanations discussed in Weitzman's (1996) comment explains how the erroneous findings were arrived at.

Second, my results lead to different conclusions about the impact of no-fault divorce legislation on the gender gap in economic outcomes after divorce. In *The Divorce Revolution,* Weitzman (1985) concluded that her findings on changes in men's and women's standards of living after divorce ". . . make it clear that, for all its aims at fairness, the current no-fault system of divorce is inflicting a high economic toll upon women and children" (p. 401). However, my reanalysis of Weitzman's data shows that the changes in standard of living after divorce in California were similar to those reported in other studies conducted both before and after Weitzman's. This suggests that no-fault legislation and related reforms did *not* increase the gender gap in economic outcomes. Rather, the gender gap remained as serious as it had been under the fault-based system. This significantly undermines the argument that specific features of the no-fault legislation resulted in larger declines in women's standard of living after divorce than had been prevalent under the fault-based system.

This brings me to my final point—Weitzman's inaccurate estimates were widely circulated, and the conclusions drawn from them have seriously distorted policy discussions about no-fault divorce. Weitzman (1996) contends that her analysis of the law in action, not her erroneous statistics, were responsible for the attention *The Divorce Revolution* received. Certainly Weitzman's analysis of the legal system was reported as a major finding. However it is misleading for her "to put in perspective the 73/42 percent datum" by arguing, "It is one statistic in a 500-page book" (Weitzman 1996:537). These figures are featured prominently on the book jacket, as well as in the introduction and the concluding chapter. Most reviews of her book cited the figures as a major finding, *as did Weitzman herself* in testimony at a Congressional hearing (Weitzman 1986), and the figures propelled *The Divorce Revolution* into the eyes of the public and policymakers.

Furthermore, even if Weitzman believed that these results were not a major finding, she must have been aware that they were receiving considerable publicity. Yet when she realized that there were problems with her figures, she did not publish or disseminate a warning that she could not replicate them.

Weitzman (1996) takes credit for what she and I agree are some beneficial policy changes resulting from *The Divorce Revolution,* and neither she nor I support a return to fault-based divorce. However, Weitzman's erroneous results have lent support to those seeking to restrict access to no-fault divorce (see Faludi 1996). Whether or not one agrees with those restrictions, and whether or not the incorrect figures influence the passage of new restrictions, policy arguments about no-fault legislation should not be clouded by the use of the erroneous figures reported in *The Divorce Revolution.* While social scientists cannot control how results are reported or used in policy debates, we need to take responsibility for correcting errors that may lead to faulty conclusions or to misguided policies. I hope that my article contributes to a clarification of the conclusions that can be drawn from Weitzman's data and to a redirection of the policy debate to address what Weitzman and I agree is an unfair and unjust gender gap in the economic consequences of divorce.

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