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The Rhetoric of Motives in Divorce

Kenneth Burke and C. Wright Mills urged sociologists to see motives as rhetorical constructs that impose meaning onto social interaction. Motives are not inner springs of action, they claimed, but normative vocabularies by which actors define situations. This article gives evidence to their claim by examining vocabularies of motives in divorce. First it documents the indeterminacy and complexity of marital situations from which divorces arose; then it documents a distinct vocabulary of motives used by divorce initiators and an opposing vocabulary of motives used by noninitiators. The two vocabularies do not match up with the complexities of the preceding marital situations, suggesting that they were indeed rhetorical devices constructed after divorces began. The evidence further suggests that sequential models of divorce in which one stage of dissolution leads to the next are simply artifacts of the motives-as-rhetoric phenomenon.

Sociologists have long argued that we need to reconceptualize our common sense notion of motives. Beginning with the insights of Kenneth Burke (1935/1954), and then with the influential statement on motives by C. Wright Mills (1940), we have been urged to see motives not as inner dispositions that cause action, but rather as rhetorical constructs that define action with respect to particular social contexts. While these insights have led to fruitful lines of analysis and empirical inquiry, many researchers working in the area of

motives tend to assume that Burke and Mills were right. In this article, I offer evidence that they were right by showing two vocabularies of motive that emerged after the events that the vocabularies purportedly explained. I examine ethnographic data on divorce and show that the motives people used to explain their divorces can only be understood as rhetorical devices that imposed a sense of order onto situations that were otherwise fraught with ambiguous and contradictory events, emotions, and inclinations toward behavior. With this evidence on motives, I also argue that efforts to characterize divorce as an orderly, sequential process in which one stage of dissolution leads to the next may be mistaken.

RESEARCH ON VOCABULARIES OF MOTIVE

Burke (1935/1954) set the task for an interpretive sociology of motives when he noted: "A motive is not some fixed thing, like a table, which one can go and look at. It is a term of interpretation, and being such it will naturally take its place within the framework of our *Weltanschauung* as a whole. . . . The few attributions of motive by which a man explain[s] his conduct . . . [are] but a fragmentary part of this larger orientation" (p. 25). Motives, he argued, are not mental or biological states that somehow impel action; rather, motives are social constructs through which actors impose meaning onto situations. Saying "I married him because I wanted his money," for example, makes certain behaviors intelligible in particular social and historical contexts (Mills, 1940), and the pecuniary motive reflects more upon those varied contexts where it makes sense and less upon any presumed mental disposition of the

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actor. Social theorists have since pushed these insights even further. Foote (1951), for example, links the rhetorics of motive with the problematic nature of self and identity, saying that motives are "symbolic constructs which not only organize . . . acts in particular situations but make them recognizably recurrent in the life-history of any person" (p. 15) (see also Campbell, 1991). Blum and McHugh (1971) discuss the grammatical "deep structures" in social life to explain how and why motives are proffered in the first place. Additionally, Scott and Lyman's (1968) influential article on accounts has generated several lines of theoretical refinement and speculation (Blumstein, 1974; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Nichols, 1990; Stokes & Hewitt, 1976), as has Garfinkel's (1967) work in ethnomethodology.

The problem is that, while many sociologists use this new rhetorical conception of motives in their empirical work, many do not test whether the conception is warranted in the first place. They do not show, for example, that the motives actors give do not "match up" with the situations that the motives are intended to explain. Too many researchers take it for granted that motives are rhetorical constructs that function in social interaction, and so they proceed to describe the structures, categories, and interactional techniques of account making used by their research subjects. Consider a few examples. Ray and Simons (1987) classify the range of vocabularies used by convicted murderers, but they fail to show that the motives given have less to do with "inner dispositions" impelling action and more to do with persuading an audience. Blumstein (1974) describes conditions under which accounts are honored, but in doing so he abandons the question of whether accounts are rhetorics in the first place. Other empirical studies offer typologies and descriptions of accounts (Croghan & Miell, 1992; Kalab, 1987; Sarat & Felstiner, 1988; Scully & Marolla, 1984; Weinstein, 1980), but unless these studies show some disparity between the accounts given and the situations they purportedly explain, why should we suppose the motives proffered to be anything but indicators of the causes of behavior? Ethnomethodologists and discourse analysts, for their part, do the same. They purposefully eschew any concern with "motives" and take up instead the analytical problem of "motive attributions" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Sharrock & Watson, 1984).

Such analyses are usually insightful enough, and they at least demonstrate the heuristic value

of Burke's and Mills' conception of motives. As several sociologists have argued (Bruce & Wallis, 1983, 1985; Campbell & Wallis & Bruce, 1983), contemporary research too often shifts the problem away from motive-talk, without ever proving that it is one and the same thing, or without ever showing that there is no necessary connection between the two. Thus, as Yearly (1988) notes, the problem remains: Are "accounts of interest as explanations of action or only as part of a performative repertoire?" (p. 582). The current notion of motives is problematic, because the most research has simply failed to provide the procedures through which social actors make their actions accountable, giving up entirely the search for reasons and intentions" (p. 582). Sure, this is an important analytical technique that yields "empirical dividends" (p. 587), but to prove that motives are rhetorical constructs, then data about motives must be subject to rhetorical analysis; but most studies fail to establish that motives are rhetorical constructs.

Here I offer an empirical demonstration that motives do not necessarily correspond to complex situations that motives are intended to explain. In examining the vocabularies that divorcing people offer, my purpose is to show that motive-monger or seek the "real" cause of divorce, either psychological or social. My purpose to argue, along with the ethnographers, that we should abandon the search for motives and focus only on the structures of interaction and motive imputation. Rather, my purpose is to offer empirical evidence that vocabularies of motive are indeed rhetorical constructs that they function to impose order upon sets of actions, circumstances, and events that would otherwise seem chaotic.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DIVORCE RESEARCH

The motives-as-rhetoric thesis has not been sufficiently proven, nor has it had much impact in the area of family studies (McLain & Gubrium, 1979). But if proven, it would give further evidence that social order in family life is so accomplished largely through interpretive practices (Eheart & Power, 1988; Gubrium & Gubrium & Buckholdt, 1982; Gubrium & Lynott, 1985; Gubrium & Lynott, 1985; LaRossa, 1988; Lynott, 1983; Miller

Weigert & Hastings, 1977). Burke and Mills argued that the orderliness of social life comes about because we endow it with order, and that one way in which we do this is by assigning motives to ourselves and to others. This would throw into doubt any processual, developmental models of social phenomena that ignore the essentially interpretive nature of social life.

Over the past twenty years, scholars have tried to go beyond correlating social and psychological variables with divorce in order to delineate the orderly process through which divorce happens. Most of this research conceptualizes divorce as a series of definable stages in what might be called a sequential or developmental view of divorce. Vaughan's (1986) findings best exemplify this view. She outlined a detailed step-by-step process by which two people slowly uncouple: One partner harbors a secret discontent, slowly shifts activities, then drifts even further from her spouse and so confirms the discontent; she begins talking with others, making the secret public, and finally confronts the partner. Then the process shifts into a series of back-and-forth maneuvering between partners, and so on. In the end, both "initiator" and "partner" successfully split as they have slowly become autonomous and separate from each other. Other family researchers have delineated a similar process of divorce, one that begins with secrets, revelations, and then moves on to the dynamics of separation (Duck, 1982; McCall, 1982; Ponzetti & Cate, 1986). Or they have offered some other variation of a multistage, linear model of the course of dissolution (Ahrons & Rogers, 1987; Crosby, Gage, & Raymond, 1983; Crosby, Lybarger, & Mason, 1986; Federico, 1979; Kersten, 1990; Kessler, 1975; Price-Bonham & Balswick, 1980; Salts, 1979). Exchange theorists, too, typically conceptualize the process as a sequential one in which rational considerations of costs and benefits begin shifting, moving one or both partners away from commitment and towards divorce (Levinger, 1979; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Palisi, 1984; Scanzoni, 1979; Sprecher, 1992; Yoder & Nichols, 1980).

But as divorcing people think about, articulate, and explain what happened in their marriages (and even as they fill out formal questionnaires), it may be a rhetorical accomplishment that they organize the whole series of events. If Burke and Mills are right, then key elements of these stories—motives, intentions, and causes—are constructs that generate meaning for both teller and audience . . . and if motives are rhetorics, what

else might be? The motives-as-rhetoric thesis begins to suggest that the course-of-relations stories divorcing people tell are also defining rhetorics; as such, developmental views of divorce may be artifacts of the ways in which divorcing people make sense out of chaos and ambiguity.

A second purpose in examining the vocabularies of motive, then, is to suggest that divorce may be an essentially disorganized process rather than a patterned series of stages. The divorcing situations I learned about were immensely complex—so complex and indeterminate, in fact, that any number of outcomes could have resulted. Yet divorcing people almost always explained their situations by invoking one of two distinct vocabularies of motive.

RESEARCHING VOCABULARIES OF MOTIVE AMONG DIVORCING PEOPLE

In the spring of 1991, I began a broadly defined ethnographic research project on divorce. I attended divorce information workshops, met with directors and counselors of social service agencies, and attended a single father's support group through one of the agencies. I also began working with a divorce resource and training center based in Colorado, and through this center I began attending a 10-week divorce seminar along with thirty women and men who were recently divorced or soon to be divorced. In all of these settings, I gathered information about divorce through participant observation, and I began finding people who agreed to discuss their relationships and subsequent divorces with me. I interviewed people from every setting and supplemented these with interviews obtained through personal contacts and telephone responses from fliers.

I asked 32 people for interviews, 30 of whom agreed. Most interviews were conducted in the participant's home or in my home, several were done over the telephone, and a few were conducted in a restaurant or at my university office. Most interviews lasted about 2 hours; a few went as long as 5 hours. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Additionally, I kept detailed notes from conversations with many people whom I met and talked with but did not interview formally, and I updated these notes regularly with new facts and impressions from ongoing conversations. Elsewhere I have detailed the methods, the settings, the procedures, and the sample of this study (Hopper, 1993), so here I

will focus on key methodological issues associated with the problem of motives.

After 10 interviews and 3 months of work on the project, I began to focus explicitly on the phenomenon of nonmutual divorce. From the start, I noticed that nearly all divorcing people could identify themselves as either the "initiator" of the divorce or as the "partner" who was left, and I was struck by the fact that no one described divorce as a mutual decision even though in most cases noninitiating partners, as well as initiators, had been considering divorce. Thus I began directing my discussions and interviews around this topic. Among other things, I began asking questions about motives: I asked initiators why they decided to leave the marriage and to speculate on why their partners had not; I asked noninitiating partners why they opposed their divorces (which they almost always did) and why they had not initiated their divorces.

As the research progressed, I discovered a pattern: Nearly all divorcing people invoked one of two themes when describing their motives, and which of the two they invoked depended upon whether they were initiators or noninitiating partners. At the same time, however, I could find no such pattern among the events, intentions, and feelings that had happened during the relationship and immediately prior to one person deciding to initiate a divorce. In other words, I could find little correspondence between the motives that divorcing people articulated and the earlier experiences that they drew upon to explain those motives. Hence I began to document two incongruous aspects of the divorcing experience: First, I documented the two dominant vocabularies of motive that divorcing people used to talk about their divorces in interviews and in other formal and informal group contexts; second, I documented the chronology of "what happened" in each case, recording in detail the bewildering complexity of events, actions, and intentions that each divorcing person described as having occurred throughout marriage and divorce.

Documenting these two incongruous aspects of the divorcing experience raised two important methodological issues that deserve brief mention here. First, certain limitations were imposed by not having truly longitudinal data. Thus, in order to compare motives furnished after divorce with the happenings before divorce, I attempted to extrapolate a longitudinal perspective by piecing together information gathered through informal conversations, participant observation, and in-

depth interviews. I did this in a number of ways. In each interview, for example, I attempted to get an accurate historical account of the marriage by soliciting retrospective narratives, probing for facts and documentation of facts, and returning to important events several times during the course of an interview. I often cross-checked interview data with in-field notes from conversations in order to verify the reliability of reported events. Another way in which I pieced together longitudinal information was by gaining a broad sample through which to infer and substantiate general temporal phases in the divorcing process—for example, by comparing the account of one person who was six months into a divorce with the account of another person who was just beginning a divorce. This was possible because interviewees were in several different phases of the divorcing process: Many were in the very midst of their divorces, others were 3 to 4 years out of their divorces, and one woman was 17 years out. Finally, in one man's case I was able to document the entire dissolution process that began with generalized confusion about his relationship, that moved toward his partner's decision to leave, and then ended with the traumatic aftermath of divorce. I kept notes on our informal conversations throughout the process, and conducted a formal taped interview after the divorce. The longitudinal data that I gathered in this case, even though it constitutes a small portion of the whole, helped to confirm many of the impressions and conclusions that I had generated from other sources.

The second methodological issue had to do with problems inherent in comparing the events before divorce with the seemingly constructed, rhetorical nature of motives. Admittedly, I was unable to know about events before divorce except via the words and accounts of those getting divorced. But I was able to discern that these accounts of predivorce experiences revealed ambiguities and contradictions that were almost never present once divorcing people moved into a discussion of motives. Again, I probed for facts and accurate historical accounts, and I cross-checked interview data with in-field notes. People did not seem to change their stories about their experiences substantially over time, nor did they seem to selectively reveal or conceal information during lengthy interviews. They described failings on both sides, along with a fundamental uncertainty and indeterminacy in their marriages. In contrast, when they described their motives, they seemed

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to communicate a remarkably unidimensional stance toward those multifaceted experiences.

EMERGENT VOCABULARIES OF MOTIVE IN DIVORCE

In this section I describe the two main vocabularies of motive that divorcing people used to explain their divorces: Whatever the specifics of their situations, initiators generally articulated a vocabulary of individual needs and noninitiating partners invoked a vocabulary of familial commitment. Before describing these vocabularies of motive, however, I document the ambivalence, the discontent, and the back-and-forth complexity of marital relationships before divorce. Ostensibly, these divorcing people used the two vocabularies to explain why they had either initiated or opposed their divorces; but here I demonstrate the incongruity between what was happening before the divorce and the explanatory motives that were invoked afterwards. The two vocabularies *emerged only after a decision to divorce had been made*, and only as partners gained a clear sense of their respective roles in divorce as either initiators or noninitiating partners.

Before Divorce: Indeterminacy and Ambivalence

Once divorce begins, people usually identify themselves as either the one who wants the divorce or as the partner who does not want the divorce. Indeed, other studies have noted that most divorcing people describe their divorces as non-mutual and that they have no difficulty specifying who decided on a divorce and who did not (Buehler, 1987; Buehler, Hogan, Robinson, & Levy, 1986; Goode, 1956; Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1979; Nevaldine, 1978; Pettit & Bloom, 1984; Spanier & Thompson, 1984).

In this study, the motives that divorcing people attributed to their actions cohered around their identities as either initiators or noninitiating partners: They described what led them to seek a divorce or, conversely, they described why they opposed a divorce. However, nothing prior to a divorce seemed to predict who would become the initiator and who the partner. Thus, I found little to substantiate the subsequent claims that divorcing people made about their motives for either initiating or opposing. I found no antecedent pattern of behaviors, feelings, or social processes that matched up with the two vocabularies that later emerged. Instead, I found consistent evidence that predivorce experiences were not differ-

ent and that most relationships were characterized by three things: a long period of discontent, multiple complaints, and ambivalence. Furthermore, the feelings and intentions that initiators described were precisely the same feelings and intentions that noninitiators described. Hence, as I document the discontent, the multiple complaints, and the ambivalence in the following paragraphs, I provide paired quotes: One quote exemplifies how initiators described their marriages, and the other quote exemplifies how noninitiators described their marriages.

First, all divorcing people described themselves as having been keenly aware of their marital problems for a long time, and many had seriously contemplated divorce at other points in the marriage. Even among those who first described themselves as surprised by divorce, the road to divorce was a long one: They admitted that the dissolution had been happening for at least a few years, sometimes for 10 to 20 years. Moreover, it seemed clear in my interviews that the problems divorcing people described were not being identified merely in retrospect because most were able to recall specific events, thoughts, or comments that demonstrated such awareness. Several detailed past conversations with friends; a few mentioned early proposals that their spouse live in a separate house; some told about discussing separation with marriage counselors on and off throughout the relationship. One initiator recalled, for example:

I can remember talking to friends quite a while before we split up, and wondering out loud whether it could ever work, whether it really ever should work. And we talked about it. We had fights and threatened to break up before. Probably for the last 2 years before we broke up, we'd had fights. At least on a couple of occasions, we'd all but broken up, and at the last minute decided not to.

And as a noninitiating partner in the midst of her divorce after 25 years of marriage said:

Eleven years back I was ready to take steps. Yeah, I was ready to leave. And he was the one that convinced me, "No, I'm worth fighting for, and the relationship is worth fighting for, and let's work on it." I was ready to leave then, and he knew it, and I was real serious.

Second, as they looked back and described the long history of marital trouble, all of these divorcing people described multiple complaints that they had about their marriages, which they fac-

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tored into explanations as to why their marriages fell apart. They were quick to describe their frustrations, their pain, and the widening distance that developed between them and their spouses. They listed basic differences in sociability, with one person wanting a wide circle of friends and the other not. Women often described gender roles that became more unequal over time, fueling a slow, building resentment. Both women and men talked about infidelity, physical and emotional abuse, isolation, trouble with in-laws, alcoholism, codependency, disagreements about children, intellectual and political differences, violence, differences in hobbies, conflicts over television, and sexual tensions. And as Riessman (1990) found, nearly all divorcing people traced their problems to "a lack of communication." The list of complaints that any one person furnished was extensive: Most enumerated at least four or five complaints, and most insisted that the many problems had made their marriages irrevocably unworkable. Again, this was true for both initiators and noninitiators.

At the same time that they listed complaints, however, divorcing people easily reported good things about their marriages. They liked having someone at home, someone to talk with about their day. They described camping trips, holidays and birthdays, the dream of having one's own family and home. They loved their children. They described feelings of security, safety, and comfort. Even the marital roles themselves—being a wife, husband, father, or mother—were sources of contentment and stability for them (Hagestad & Smyer, 1982; Levinger, 1979). As one woman summed it up, "Even with all the tough times that we've had, there have been some real positive times, too."

The third thing that all divorcing people described, then, was intense indecisiveness and ambivalence about their marriages. They had numerous complaints that they believed condemned their marriages to failure, while at the same time they treasured the good things. For example, one man who later opposed his divorce pulled out his journal for me and read from two lists that he had composed several months before his wife left him. The two lists outlined five things that he liked about his wife and five things that he disliked—all of which documented his own ambivalence and the fact that he had been weighing his alternatives and considering divorce even before his wife left. Another man who described himself as an initiator recalled this episode:

I went to Alaska for a while about 4 months before [my son] was born. And I remember thinking all the time that I was there, "Well, when I get back we're going to work out some way of being together. Because we really need to live together to have a child." And then I remember thinking one day, I don't know how it came to me, that it was just ludicrous. It was just ridiculous for me to think that.

Likewise, a noninitiating partner told me about her ambivalent feelings during the 6 months that preceded her husband asking for a divorce, and during which she traveled around the country deciding what to do:

It was a very sad time. When I was away from him I missed him terribly and wanted to be back together. And couldn't wait to see him, call him, and write him letters. When I got back with him, I could be back less than 24 hours and I needed to go. I needed to absolutely get away from him again. And then the same thing would happen. I would go away, I'd miss him, I'd just feel terrible, I'd want to be near him. It was just on and on.

Prior to nearly every divorce, then, there was a long period of assessment, with both initiators and noninitiating partners describing similar experiences and feelings of indecision and ambivalence. They described pain, dissatisfaction, and feelings of being trapped; at the same time, they described good things that they did not want to forgo. This is what made divorce such an agonizing decision and process, no matter what side of divorce they were on. Additional evidence that predivorce experiences are similar for both initiators and partners comes from two quantitative survey studies: Pettit and Bloom (1984) have demonstrated that initiators and partners tend to report similar patterns of marital dissatisfaction and stress prior to their divorces; similarly, Black, Eastwood, Sprenkle, and Smith (1991) have reported that both groups of people see the same attractions to marriage and the same barriers to leaving prior to their divorces.

The point here is that whatever the "real" motives behind the subsequent actions in divorce, I found no antecedent patterns by which to discern motives for one partner initiating and the other opposing. Given the uncertainty and ambivalence that both partners felt, and given the circumstances in which divorcing people described both fatal flaws and good things about their relationships, it seemed that many outcomes were possible in nearly every marriage that I learned about.

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divorce, then, there was a point, with both initiators describing similar indecision and ambivalence, dissatisfaction, and at the same time, they said they did not want to divorce such an agonizing no matter what side of additional evidence that is similar for both initiators from two quantitative studies and Bloom (1984) have shown that partners tend to find marital dissatisfaction in divorces; similarly, Black, and Smith (1991) have reported that people see the same attitudes and the same barriers to divorces.

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The partners might have stayed together, for example. Or the noninitiating partner might have been the one to call the marriage off. The reality was that both partners felt confusion and ambivalence, and this complex mixture of events and intentions seemed to make the outcome of any particular marriage largely uncertain.

The Initiator's Vocabulary of Motives

Despite the uncertainty before divorce, divorcing people knew immediately who had initiated their divorces. An initiator, they said, was simply the one who made the final decision to end a marriage. And once the initiator's identity had been established, a discernible vocabulary of motives emerged that helped make the initiator's decision seem reasonable and "motivated." This vocabulary cut through the complexity of what was happening before and made sense out of the initiator's transition from ambivalence.

Before describing the initiator's vocabulary of motives, it is worth contrasting once again the complexity of the predivorce situations with the easy and unambiguous designation of the initiator. Despite other events prior to the divorce, during the divorce, or afterward, and despite the back-and-forth bickering about who did what to spoil the marriage, the initiator was decisively identified as the person who finally declared, "I want out." One or both partners might have had an affair; one partner might have started feeling depressed and sought counseling where marital problems were discussed; one partner might have gotten a lawyer to assess the legal and financial possibilities of a divorce. But despite my efforts to trace the initiator's position back to these critical events happening prior to divorce, and hence despite my efforts to discern the motives for one person rather than another making the decision, I found nothing that necessarily determined who initiated the split. Additionally, I found that once the dissolution began, the initiator was not necessarily the one who filed the papers in court nor the one who moved out of the home. The initiator was simply the partner who made the decision to leave.

Whatever the factors that led to divorce, though, initiators began articulating a common vocabulary of motives. They began seeing their situations in a new way, selecting out certain information and interpreting that information in order to make their decisions seem legitimate and inevitable, and they did this by articulating a vo-

cabulary that emphasized individualism. They began negating the good things and emphasizing the bad. In doing so, they began to emphasize the importance of individual needs over commitment. They described marriage as a functional arrangement, and they explained their divorces in terms of emotional and practical needs being unfulfilled. The needs varied among the people I talked with: Some people wanted more emotional closeness, some wanted less; some wanted a more extensive social life outside the marriage, others wanted less; several people wanted more room for personal growth, autonomy, and individual career goals. Whatever their needs, the many complaints described earlier took on new shades of meaning, now being articulated around a rhetoric of self-need. Complaints about alcoholism making a marriage unworkable turned into: "I just couldn't stand the alcohol anymore. It was ruining my life." Complaints about lack of communication turned into: "I never got any support and intimacy from her, which is what I needed." A lesbian woman, for example, first described all sorts of personality and lifestyle conflicts with her lover that she believed doomed her relationship to failure. When I asked about why she finally decided to leave, she answered:

I'm just thinking now of the official reason that I broke up. It was like we were doing more what she wanted than what I wanted. And that didn't feel good. She was doing a PhD. And I wanted to be doing a PhD. And I was feeling frustrated, like I was giving up some of my stuff. It was kind of like I wasn't sure: When she's through with it, is it then going to be my turn? Some of that . . . I guess I was being a bit selfish, to an extent.

Other initiators talked in more general terms about self-fulfillment:

I was just feeling kind of discontented like there was something wrong. That my needs weren't being met, I guess.

I wanted to take care of me. And I knew as long as I stayed in the relationship that I would always take care of somebody else because that's just the way I was. It's probably stupid, but I felt that I couldn't grow and I couldn't be independent as long as I was in that position.

I was feeling bad about myself, and what did I really want to do with my life. Because there was some real dissatisfaction that I wasn't feeling fulfilled myself.

Every person described multiple frustrations and discontent in the years leading up to divorce;

Good instigating "motives"

but when initiators began describing the divorce itself and the patterns of interaction that ensued, they talked with a one-sided and forceful emphasis on personal needs. Perhaps what most highlighted this before-and-after contrast was the decisiveness that they felt about having initiated divorce as opposed to the uncertainty they had expressed earlier. In the following excerpt, for example, an initiator describes her husband moving out and how she coped in the days immediately following. Her story captures the sense in which disorganization and uncertainty were transformed into surety:

I walked into the bedroom and it was a total mess in there, and I just stood there and tears rolled down my face. It was really hard. He came over and we just held each other for a while. Then he got all the rest of his stuff that he could take in the truck, and left. I was really depressed. I guess I was depressed for about a day and a half. Particularly the very next day . . . walking around . . . and my house was a total disaster area. Nothing was in its place. And I felt very disorganized. And I didn't have a bed. It was just a mess. Then Wednesday morning I woke up and I was ironing and I was thinking, "Cynthia, you've got to get your stuff together here. You've got to get your act together. Why are you feeling this way?" What I had to do was think about the reasons why I was wanting this. And about that time George called and there was some problem with something. As I hung up I thought, "This is exactly why I want it. What just happened, this is exactly why." Then I just had to think about all the different reasons why, and get mad again, and think, "Yes, you have done the right thing."

And another initiator said:

I feel a great sense of relief that I know it's over, that I don't have any hesitations at all about ending it. There isn't a question in my mind as to whether I would go back with him ever. I know that I would never do that. I don't have any hesitations left—where I did for some time.

Even initiators were sometimes perplexed by their previous doubts; when asked about why they decided to get a divorce, they would turn my question around and say, "The real question is why I stayed in the marriage as long as I did." As they established their motives for initiating divorce by highlighting their discontent, the happy moments shifted to the background and became fragments that were recalled piecemeal over the course of a lengthy interview.

In sum, initiators began emphasizing the negative aspects of marriage and they framed that emphasis within a discernable vocabulary of motives that allowed them (and their partners) to interpret their status as initiator. Despite the myriad events characterizing and leading up to each individual divorce, most initiators articulated this common vocabulary of motives by which they subsequently understood and talked about their divorces. And because this vocabulary derived more generally from a "socially valid" discourse (Garfinkel, 1956) about personal needs and self-gratification, the motives that initiators furnished made their decisions seem reasonable and justifiable. Furthermore, it seemed clear that these descriptions emphasizing personal fulfillment were formulated after the decision to initiate.

The Noninitiating Partner's Vocabulary of Motives

In most cases, partners who did not initiate their divorces maintained forceful and bitter opposition to the efforts of their spouses who did. This section describes the vocabulary of motives that emerged among most noninitiators. Again, a striking fact about noninitiators' opposition and their emergent vocabulary was that neither the opposition nor the proffered motives derived in any simple way from longstanding antecedent marital dynamics. It is important to reiterate, then, that noninitiating partners were not characterized by a peculiar set of actions and feelings prior to the breakup; as other research (Jones, 1986) has shown as well, noninitiating partners typically acknowledged their marital problems and described themselves as unhappy. Most non-initiating partners even told me that they had been contemplating a divorce themselves.

When initiators seized control of the process by declaring the marriage over, however, partners responded by articulating an opposition that made the divorce painful and contentious. Sometimes they pleaded with the initiators, asking for another chance at making the marriage work. Several arranged for joint counseling, though the counseling usually manifested opposing efforts with the initiator attempting to smooth the divorce transition and the partner hoping to save the marriage. Sometimes the partner harassed the initiator with frequent phone calls and uninvited visits. A few became violent, destroying property or attempting to kill or hurt the initiator. The level of hostility and hatred astonished even divorcing people; al-

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most in disbelief, they would relate sensational and lurid stories about violence, sabotage, and vandalism. Not every partner was aggressively hostile towards the initiator, but in most cases the partner played a decisive role in transforming the relationship from one of mutual ambivalence and unhappiness into one of deep antagonism.

Partners thus found themselves in a paradoxical situation: While having felt ambivalent and uncertain about the relationship prior to the divorce, now they found themselves resolutely opposing any effort to dissolve it. One partner, for example, recalled an incident in which she had been nearly ready to leave the marriage herself:

I walked into the room where he was and he wouldn't even look at me. And I said, "I can't live like this. This is killing me." And he said, "I don't care, whatever you want you can have, you can have the house, you can have all the money, I just want out." And I fell apart. I literally fell apart. I thought I was just going to die. I begged him not to go, and can't we please work on it, and we'll go to a counselor and we'll do all this stuff.

Yet noninitiating partners managed to smooth over the disjuncture between confused frustration during marriage and resolute opposition during and after the divorce. Here the data consistently reveal one way in which they did this: They invoked a common vocabulary of motives that helped make sense of having been left, and that helped explain and justify their subsequent opposition to divorce. Just as initiating was most characterized by a particular stance toward marriage and divorce, so too was opposing, and this stance was clearly manifested in a vocabulary of motives that emphasized family and commitment.

Whereas initiators worked to resolve ambivalent feelings with a one-sided emphasis on negative aspects of the relationship, partners responded by laying claim to the other side of ambivalence and began emphasizing the good. They began comparing their relationships with those of friends and relatives, emphasizing the ways in which their own were superior. They began seeing their marriages in a new light, selecting out certain information and interpreting that information in order to make their opposition seem legitimate and inevitable. To be sure, they still acknowledged the complaints that they had about their marriages, and most even admitted that some of these complaints were grounds for believing that their marriages were irreconcilable. But they began articulating their complaints with-

in a larger rhetorical context in which commitment and family were primary. They invoked the vows they had made and talked about the sanctity of promises. They talked about persistence, about sacrifice, about working through tough times, and about responsibility. In sum, they invoked a moralistic vocabulary about commitment and about not giving up.

As an example, consider the following verbatim dialogue from an interview that I conducted with a man who had been separated from his wife for 6 years. He detailed the many problems in his marriage, and he described an agreement that he had with his wife about finalizing a divorce "when the time was right." To his surprise, however, she decided to initiate the divorce on her own. The dialogue begins with a question from me:

JH: When she said she was ready to split up, that was OK with you?

INFORMANT: No. No. I had been working my butt off trying to keep our relationship together. Trying everything I could. I say, "Boy, you fight this thing. You do something to keep your relationship together, especially if you have kids. You do something to keep this relationship going." Our grandparents—they didn't get along all the time. There's just no way in the world that they got along together all the time. But it's a struggle, they were able to work something out between themselves to maintain a relationship.

JH: You would have stuck it out?

INFORMANT: Oh yeah, I'd still be right there.

Another woman detailed a litany of complaints with such angry forcefulness that I was surprised when she said that her spouse, rather than she, initiated divorce. She described and explained her subsequent opposition:

In a lot of ways I think a lot of it's from my dad. My mom treated my dad like shit. But my dad believes in honor and a sense of duty. I think I somehow got those values. You tell someone you're going to be there forever, then you're going to work on it. You're going to be there. And you may have really shitty times, but you're going to be there. You work on these things. We fucking got married, you know? I mean we did the rings and everything. And said forever. And that to me meant, OK, that's what you're going to do. Work on that.

And another noninitiating partner explained her opposition to divorce despite not even liking her spouse anymore:

Did you always like your mother? Did you always like your dad? So to me commitment was about that. That you could say to someone, "I don't really like you very much, but I'm going to stay here a while and hang out, and see how it's going." There are times that you need to commit to something that you don't like.

In several interviews I pointed out the obvious disparity between noninitiators' ambivalent intentions and feelings before divorce and their resolute opposition during divorce. I pressed them to explain these contradictions, and they gave fascinating answers—answers suggesting that even they could see the after-the-fact, constructed, and rhetorical nature of their motives. One woman, for example, told me a long story about the emotional turmoil she felt in her marriage, recognizing clearly that divorce seemed like a good idea given a realistic assessment of the marriage. Nevertheless, she ended up opposing her divorce, and she talked at length about commitment. When I pointed out the incongruity, she puzzled over it:

Yeah, I know. It's another contradiction. But I do think you should try and try and try and work through these things. But maybe it's the only way I can think about these things. You do a lot of thinking and rewording to make the pain go away or to make it make some kind of sense, somehow.

On one level, then, even noninitiating partners acknowledged that their motives were retrospectively assigned, and interview data like these provide further confirmation of the hypothesis that motives are rhetorical constructs that assign meaning to events after they happen.

CONCLUSION

Beneath the intelligibility of social life lies a messy reality full of what Burke calls "discrepant and conflicting stimuli" (p. 30). Nevertheless, social actors manage to coordinate their activities by ascribing meaning to the events and objects and people around them, and by mutually negotiating patterns of social life through which the world becomes intelligible. Burke's and Mills' critical insight was that motives are social constructs that serve to ascribe meaning to the goings on of social life, and that one way in which humans create order out of chaos is by imputing motives. Whatever the true causes of action (if we can even conceive of such a thing), and whatever the "inner springs" that impel individuals to behave as they do, when we talk about motives we

are talking about an order of symbolic reality through which social life is negotiated. As Blum and McHugh (1971) assert, "To give a motive is not to locate a cause of the action, but is for some observer to assert how a behavior is socially intelligible. . . . [A motive] is to be understood grammatically (as part of the meaning of an action) rather than as a factual report on some contingent, antecedent event" (pp. 100-101).

The data presented here give evidence that the motives humans routinely ascribe to their own behaviors and others' behaviors have no essential and necessary connection to antecedent events. When the people I talked with reflected upon the events leading up to divorce, most acknowledged the almost accidental nature of who became the initiator and who became the noninitiator. But once those positions emerged, they became the basis on which divorcing partners invoked one of two typical vocabularies of motive. The implication, of course, is that the motives by which divorcing people interpret their behaviors have less to do with actual events leading up to divorce and more to do with an emergent symbolic order structured around the initiator and noninitiator identities.

As startling as this conclusion may seem, it should not be misinterpreted as arguing that motives are merely fabrications used cynically by social manipulators, or that motives are merely rationalizations used unwittingly by social dupes. I want to propose, along with another recent interpreter of Mills and Burke (Marshall, 1981), that motives are in some sense "true." They are not true in the sense of being causes of behavior, but rather in the sense that social actors derive them from actual prior events even though they rhetorically constitute and use them afterwards. It helps to keep in mind Burke's notion that motives are "shorthand words for situations" (p. 31)—situations that are characterized by "discrepant and conflicting stimuli." In divorce, even though motives come into play only after the two positions in divorce are designated and identified, nearly everyone describes an agonizing ambivalence beforehand: They want to leave their marriages and at the same time they want to stay. They feel unhappy, frustrated, and personally unfulfilled in their relationships, but they desperately want to be married and to have a supportive and satisfying home life. Whatever would make for a subsequent vocabulary of unfulfilled needs is already there for either partner to seize upon; and whatever would make for a subsequent vocabulary of commitment

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is already there for either partner to seize upon. Once partners reach the almost arbitrary designation of who is the initiator and who is not, it is a simple matter for the initiator to see and to believe that personal frustration was the motive for initiating; likewise, it is a simple matter for the noninitiator to see and to believe that commitment was the motive for opposing divorce.

Thus our strong sense that motives are not merely "made up" *ex post facto* is a good one. They aren't, at least not entirely. In divorce, the events, feelings, facts, and "motives" that would explain one line of action over another were present antecedent to the divorce. But just as many events, feelings, facts, and motives that would explain numerous other possible outcomes were there as well. The motives were there to be discovered, whether a person initiated divorce or opposed it. Thus noninitiators really were committed all along (as were initiators) and initiators really were personally frustrated all along (as were their partners). As sense-making, symbol-using creatures, one way that we sort through these complex situations is by ascribing motives, and by identifying the elements "all along" that led to certain patterns of behavior.

The data presented here also have important implications for divorce research. First, the data suggest that divorce may be a more disorganized and more random unfolding of events than many researchers presume, and yet it becomes organized and takes on meaningful order once motives are assigned. Researchers who try to delineate the patterned stages through which dissolution happens, then, may be learning more about interpretive processes than they are about any presumed inner dynamics of marital dissolution. Because of this, the data strongly recommend that future research turn full attention toward the meaning-producing activities of divorcing partners—an interpretive approach that raises a whole set of intriguing questions. One task, for example, would be to specify more fully which elements from the antecedent situations will be drawn upon and used to formulate vocabularies of motives, for which audiences, and under what circumstances. Mills (1940) noted that certain rhetorics rather than others are used, that vocabularies of motive are historically and socially located, and that different social groups in different historical periods will use different sets of motives to explain their actions. What, then, are the sources and bases of legitimacy of the divorcing vocabularies of motive? Are they organizationally embedded, conforming to the professional

and organizational needs of counselors, lawyers, and even researchers (Gubrium, 1992; Gubrium & Holstein, 1990; Miller, 1991)? Are they emerging out of the profusion of self-help groups and pop-psychology? In this regard, it is worth noting that linear stage models of divorce are common among therapists and self-help groups—suggesting that both the content of divorcing vocabularies (the rhetoric of self-need, for example) and the form of divorcing vocabularies (a developmental sequence of stages, for example) are socially derived. A second task would be to expand the analysis of divorcing vocabularies in order to capture more fully the variations and subtleties, and in order to give a more rounded account of what it means and what it feels like to be getting divorced. Here I have emphasized the two dominant vocabularies that divorcing people used in explaining their divorces; further research and analysis would probably reveal several other vocabularies. Legalistic, economic, and religious rhetorics are also embedded within the dominant vocabularies of motive, and they, too, are likely to vary among different groups of people and according to the contexts in which they are proffered.

Divorce research is an ideal place from which to begin interpretive studies of the family. Divorce is becoming increasingly commonplace, and in some sense it is becoming a taken-for-granted part of family life. Yet divorce is one domain where the constructed, rhetorical, and hence contested nature of motives is unmistakably clear. Partners fight bitterly over who did what to whom and why; they describe intense quarrelling, passionate anger, and in disbelief they describe at least two opposing versions of reality. Meanings do not inhere in the behaviors or events themselves but are imposed onto them by social actors; and because in any divorcing situation a number of possible motives are out there to be discovered, having one vocabulary of motives accepted over another is always a matter of persuasion and negotiation. Thus the "rhetoric of motives" (Burke, 1950), here and in other domains of social life, is all about getting one plausible vocabulary rather than another accepted as the "real" one.

NOTE

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