

**THE REAL OSCAR CURSE:  
THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF POSITIVE STATUS SHIFTS**

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ABSTRACT

We examine the negative consequences of upward mobility following a sudden positive status shift. Building on sociological and social psychological research on status and happiness, we argue that status disruption and status deprivation provide different explanations of why sudden positive status shifts can have negative consequences for upwardly mobile social actors. We use the Oscar curse, the colorful belief that misfortune paradoxically befalls Academy Award winners, as our empirical context for studying the negative consequences of positive status shifts. We find no evidence of a professional Oscar curse: Male and female Oscar winners and Oscar nominees appear in more films following their Oscar experiences than other actors. We find most evidence of a male personal Oscar curse. Survival analysis shows that the divorce rates of male Oscar winners and nominees increase following the Oscars but not the divorce rates of female Oscar winner and nominees. Our survival analysis suggests also that status disruption accounts for the negative male Oscar winner effect, whereas status deprivation accounts for the negative male Oscar nominee effect. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for status theory and how our study draws attention to the negative aspects of the proliferation of tournament structures in organizations and other aspects of social life.

This study examines the negative consequences of *sudden* positive status shifts. The status of a social actor is defined by the hierarchical position the actor occupies within a social system (Gould, 2002) and a positive status shift is, accordingly, a move from a lower ranked position to a higher ranked position accorded more prestige or social esteem.<sup>1</sup> Status is important because resources and opportunities are rarely distributed equally throughout social systems but accrue disproportionately to the occupants of higher statuses (Blau, 1994; Sørensen, 1996). We focus on the negative consequences of sudden positive status shifts as opposed to moving gradually from a lower to a higher status position over a longer period of time. Winning a Nobel Prize, Fields Medal or Academy Award, for example, implies a sudden positive status shift, an entry into an elite group of laureates, whereas graduating from college represents a more gradual transition into a new status group.<sup>2</sup> Because resources and opportunities accrue disproportionately at the top of the status hierarchy, higher status is generally viewed as something desirable. It is not surprising therefore that most research on sudden positive status shifts focuses on the positive consequences of suddenly moving up the status hierarchy (Azoulay, Stuart, and Wang, 2014). Even if upward mobility grants access to resources and opportunities, status disruption and status deprivation ensure, however, that sudden positive status shifts are, paradoxically, not without problems that can limit the benefits of moving up the status hierarchy.

Status disruption occurs because the social and cultural implications of occupying a particular status position are more far reaching than simply providing differential access to resources and opportunities. With each status comes a social identity that codifies the “culturally defined expectations” (Merton, 1957: 110) to that status that are shared within the status itself and the broader surrounding

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<sup>1</sup> Defining status in terms of hierarchical positions in social systems is consistent with classical anthropological and sociological status research (Linton, 1936; Merton, 1957) but broader than, though not necessarily inconsistent with, more recent status research defining status more narrowly as a signal of quality (Podolny, 1993) or a stock of accumulated deference (Podolny and Phillips, 1996). See Jensen, Kim, and Kim (2011) for a recent discussion of status definitions, and Sharkey (2014) for a recent study showing the value of moving beyond status as a signal of quality and adopting a broader status definition.

<sup>2</sup> The implication is not that hard work and strong performance do not precede winning a Nobel Prize, for example, only that winning the prize is not guaranteed based on predetermined absolute standards and, therefore, is a more discrete and sudden event than graduating from college. Nor does a Nobel Prize always imply that winners are dramatically higher quality than close non-winners, but winning implies a symbolic consecration of quality that is difficult to obtain otherwise.

social system (Jensen, Kim, and Kim, 2011). Status provides social actors not only access to resources and opportunities but also a social identity that embeds the actor socially and culturally in the social system. The social and cultural embedding in a status position makes upward mobility within a status hierarchy disruptive, which implies that even successful upward mobility can have negative consequences. Status homophily ensures that social interactions typically occur within a given status and not between different statuses, which results in segregated social networks and demarcated cultural frameworks that reinforces the differences between statuses (Podolny, 1994). Moving between status positions, as opposed to merely attaining a particular goal, is, therefore, often a disruptive experience that involves social and cultural dislocation or disembeddedness, which can lead to anomie through a loss of social support, cultural belonging, and sense of self (Durkheim, 1897; Sorokin, 1927). The disruption associated with social and cultural disembedding and the difficulties of reembedding into a new status position should be taken into account to fully assess the consequences of sudden upward mobility.

Status deprivation occurs because the exclusivity of higher status positions ensures that most social actors within a social system cannot attain the highest status, even if the actual differences between actors in neighboring status positions are small. The exclusivity and inequity of status hierarchies have important negative social and psychological implications. An important social implication is the precarious position of social actors that aspire to become higher status by trying to “act higher status” without having the background and resources that come with actually being higher status (Blau, 1956). Having the aspiration and opportunity to ascend the status hierarchy but failing can be a particularly negative experience because failing to obtain a desired outcome is often associated with dissatisfaction and resentment (Davies, 1962; Crosby, 1976). Specifically, integrating research on relative deprivation and counterfactual comparisons (Heider, 1958; Olsen and Roesse, 2002), we argue that barely failing to move up the status hierarchy can be stressful regardless of any absolute increase in status. The disproportional attractiveness of higher status compared to lower status and the visible inequity between higher and lower status increases deprivation-induced negative affect because they make it easier for the social actors who barely failed moving up to the next status level to imagine what it would be like to be

higher status and how it ‘almost’ happened’ (Roese, 1997; Medvec, Madey, and Gilovich, 1995).

It is important to study the negative consequences of sudden positive status shifts for at least two reasons. First, the use of prizes and awards as status markers has increased dramatically not only in the arts and sciences but in organizations, markets, and society more broadly (English, 2005; Frank and Cook, 1995). The frequent use of prizes and awards as status markers has made sudden positive status shifts a more prevalent phenomenon and therefore increased the importance of studying their negative consequences. The core feature of traditional prize and award competitions, the tournament structure emphasizing relative performance as opposed to absolute performance (Lazear and Rosen, 1981), has itself become a common way of organizing competition more broadly. Indeed, Bothner, Kang, and Stuart (2007: 209) note pointedly that the core features of tournaments, the ranking of social actors by relative performance and the pairing of rewards and ranks, operate to varying extent in most status hierarchies. Most organizations, for example, resemble status hierarchies and hiring, compensation, and promotion are often decided by relative performance, not absolute performance, which amplifies the skewed distribution of rewards across organizational ranks (Lazear, 2004; Rosenbaum, 1979). The importance of tournaments and sudden status shifts extend, therefore, beyond prize and award competitions to provide important sources of social mobility and social inequality, two core areas of interest in organizational sociology and labor market research (Blau, 1977).

Second, despite the proliferation of tournaments as status markers and compensation mechanisms, little is known about the negative consequences of sudden positive status shifts.<sup>3</sup> Most research privileges the positive aspects of status including how higher status enables cost reductions (Podolny, 1993), market entry (Jensen, 2003), and higher prices (Malter, 2014). When the negative consequences of status are emphasized, focus is mainly on the negative aspects of *occupying* a high status such as status anxiety (Jensen, 2006), relational discrimination (Jensen, 2008), and complacency and distraction (Bothner, Kim,

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<sup>3</sup> Although we focus on status disruption and status deprivation, we do not argue against tournaments because their intended positive consequences may well exceed their unintended negative consequences. We intend instead to spur interest in the dark sides of tournaments and status shifts as compensation and promotion mechanisms by using a highly visible empirical context to draw attention to their negative consequences.

and Smith, 2012). More related to our focus on negative consequences, Kovács and Sharkey (2014) report that winning a book award attracts more readers but also reduces average quality evaluations because the new readers have more diverse tastes. By emphasizing that status embeds social actors socially and culturally in social systems, our study adds that it is important to be cognizant of a broader set of status effects. Specifically, our focus on status disruption and status deprivation extends research beyond the direct or indirect status effects on product quality evaluations and the simple assumption that positive status shifts providing access to more resources and opportunities are unproblematic. Finally, whereas most status research focuses on continuous status hierarchies (Podolny, 1993; Stuart, Hoang, and Hybels, 1999), we recognize that many status hierarchies, especially in tournaments, are of a more discontinuous or categorical nature (Jensen and Roy, 2008; Azoulay, Stuart, and Wang, 2014), which may amplify the social and psychological consequences of moving between different status levels.

We study the negative effects of sudden positive status shifts in the context of Academy Awards by focusing on how the Oscars affect the personal lives and professional careers of male and female elite screen actors. Luise Rainer first emphasized the negative consequences of the Oscars by blaming her Oscars for *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936) and *The Good Earth* (1937) for the rapid decline in her career: “For my second and third pictures I won Academy Awards. Nothing worse could have happened to me” (Donaldson-Evans, 2006). Following Luise Rainer, other actors have blamed their Oscars for derailing otherwise promising or successful careers, fueling public interest in an Oscar curse. Richard Dreyfuss, for example, supposedly muttered “It’s all Oscar’s fault” as he was pulled from a near-fatal car crash that marked the professional and personal decline into a serious drug and alcohol addiction after his 1978 Oscar for *The Goodbye Girl* (Donaldson-Evans, 2006). The Oscar curse is not only an intriguing piece of Hollywood folklore that continues to capture the public imagination, it provides also a vivid example of the paradox that positive events can have negative consequences. More importantly, the long history of the Oscars and the publicity surrounding elite screen actors offer a unique opportunity to trace the complete life histories of a large sample of elite screen actors (and their spouses and parents) and therefore provide a rare systematic insight into some of the long-term negative consequences of sudden

positive status shifts.

## **THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF POSITIVE STATUS SHIFTS**

We build next on sociological and social psychological research on status and happiness to describe the theoretical mechanisms, status disruption and status deprivation, through which positive status shifts can lead to negative outcomes for social actors.

### **Status Disruption**

Status positions embed social actors in cultural frameworks, that is, social norms and cognitive repertoires, and social relations, thus suggesting that sudden movements between status positions can be culturally and socially disruptive. First, status positions delineate social norms, cognitive repertoires, and role expectations (Jensen, Kim, and Kim, 2011; Jensen, Kim, and Kim, 2012). To act in a status-consistent manner, it is necessary to understand the “minimum of attitudes and behavior” (Linton, 1936: 114) and “culturally defined expectations” (Merton, 1957: 110) that defines a status position. Swidler (1986) added that cultural embedding shapes action not by providing ultimate values towards which action is directed but by providing repertoires of habits, skills, and styles from which strategies of action are constructed. Second, status positions delineate the social relations accessible to social actors. Status homophily, defined as the tendency of social actors to form relations with other social actors of similar status, ensures that more social relations occur within a status position than between status positions (Gould, 2002). Podolny (1994) showed, for example, that higher status social actors are less likely to form and maintain social relations with lower status actors than with other higher status actors because social relations with lower status actors could diminish their own status position. The delineation of cultural frameworks and social relations within status positions are mutually reinforcing processes: Social relations are more likely when shared cultural frameworks exist and shared cultural frameworks are more likely when social relations exist.

The embedding of social actors in status positions makes it harder to benefit from moving up the

status hierarchy because the cultural frameworks and social support system necessary to act successfully in their new status differ from their old status. The cultural and social disruptions that follow a sudden positive status shift may indeed counterweigh and sometimes even outweigh gains in resources and opportunities. Sociologists have long studied the negative consequences of positive status shifts.

Durkheim (1897) first argued that economic progress is not only a positive event but is often associated with higher suicide rates because it disrupts social relations and create insatiable demands for more regardless of current status position. Sorokin (1927: 523) noted similarly that social actors moving to a higher status position risk being “lonely as a socially unattached atom” because behavioral uniformity within status positions makes it difficult to form new close relations. And Blau (1956: 290) emphasized cultural and social disruption by describing upwardly mobile social actors as “marginal men, in some respects out of tune with others both in their new and original strata in the occupational hierarchy.” The cultural and social disruptions that follow positive status shifts may, in other words, result in anomie or social disintegration as expressed in a restless “thirst for novelties, unfamiliar pleasures, nameless sensations, all of which lose their savor once known” (Durkheim, 1897: 256).

In addition to the cultural and social disruptions that follow positive status shifts, suddenly gaining access to more resources and opportunities can itself lead to a decrease in happiness (Schwartz, 2004). The increase in choices that follows having access to more resources and opportunities appear initially appealing but managing choices is difficult and more choices can therefore be demotivating and result in less satisfaction with the final choice (Iyengar and Lepper, 2000; Chua and Iyengar, 2006). Even if choice overload does not have negative consequences (see Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, and Todd, 2010), it may not increase long-term happiness either. Brickman and Campbell (1971) argued that people react briefly to good (bad) events by experiencing increased happiness (unhappiness) but adapt quickly to the new circumstances and return to pre-event levels of happiness. Gaining access to more resources and opportunities is, therefore, not a guarantee of a permanent increase in happiness, as evidenced by lottery winners reverting to their pre-lottery level of happiness shortly after their win (Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman, 1978). When people seek more happiness through experiences and objects widely



assumed to increase happiness, they will likely end up disappointed because adaptation ensures that the new situation eventually ceases to elicit a positive reaction, thus suggesting that positive status shifts may mainly amount to another turn in the ‘hedonic treadmill’ (Brickman and Campbell, 1971, see also Diener, Lucas, and Scollon, 2006).

### **Status Deprivation**

Regardless of the cultural and social disruptions that follow sudden positive status shifts, the inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities in status hierarchies can itself have negative consequences. The inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities refers to the greater availability of resources and opportunities at higher status positions than suggested by the quality differences between occupants of different status positions. Rosen (1981: 846) examined an extreme form of status hierarchy, that of superstars, in which “small differences in talent become magnified in larger earnings differences” because of imperfect substitution – several mediocre screen actors, for example, do not add up to a single superstar. Gould (2002) argued slightly differently that status hierarchies emerge because individuals vary in their underlying qualities and that social interactions magnify these differences because social actors of above-average status are overvalued whereas those of below-average status are undervalued. Notwithstanding the mechanisms creating and sustaining status hierarchies, Rosen (1981) and Gould (2002) agree about an important implication of status inequity: Small absolute differences between social actors on each side of a status boundary are amplified and result in large relative differences in available resources and opportunities.

The inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities in status hierarchies can have negative consequences for upwardly mobile social actors because relative deprivation and counterfactual comparisons make it particularly frustrating to barely fail to move to a higher status position. Relative deprivation refers to the dissatisfaction experienced by people who “feel unjustly treated or inadequately compensated when they compare themselves to some standard of reference” (Crosby, 1976: 85). Rather than focusing on absolute outcomes, people focus on relative outcomes, evaluate their outcomes in

relation to standards, and feel deprived if their outcomes are below the standard. Relative deprivation is more likely when people desire particular outcomes, when other similar people have the desired outcomes, and when they feel they deserve the desired outcomes (Davis, 1959; Runciman, 1966; Crosby, 1976). Most relative deprivation research focuses on social or temporal comparison standards, defined by the outcomes of other people and own outcomes in the past, but more recent research suggests that only counterfactual comparisons, defined by the outcomes that one could have obtained but did not, are necessary (Olson and Roese, 2002: 268). Specifically, social and temporal comparisons affect dissatisfaction through counterfactual comparisons: Seeing other people possessing a desired object or having possessed the object in the past simply makes it easier for people to imagine possessing the object themselves.

Moving up the status hierarchy is generally viewed as a desired outcome. When people almost obtain a desired outcome, they sometimes become preoccupied with what almost happened and therefore particularly frustrated by its denial: “A near success leads to exasperation, heightened frustration, the feeling of being teased, of being unfortunate” (Heider, 1958: 141). The negative affect that follows barely failing provides fertile grounds for counterfactual thinking about how actual outcomes compare to imaginary outcomes that “might have been” (Kahneman, 1995; Roese, 1997). When outcomes are difficult to control, counterfactual thinking amplifies and prolongs negative affect because ruminations about how things could have turned out better makes the comparatively deprived current state more salient (Roese, 1994). Relative deprivation through counterfactual thinking can therefore lead social actors in higher status positions that barely missed an even higher position to be more frustrated and less happy with their situation than social actors in lower positions even if they have not experience an actual status loss. In a study of the Olympics, for example, Medvec, Madey, and Gilovich (1995) showed that bronze medalists on average appeared happier receiving their medals than silver medalists. They explained the paradox by arguing that bronze medalists generated downward counterfactuals: “I might have not won a medal, but I did.” Silver medalists, on the other hand, generated upward counterfactuals that made them feel deprived: “I almost won the gold medal, but I did not.”

## **Status Disruption versus Status Deprivation**

Status disruption and status deprivation are both important aspects of status hierarchies but they nevertheless provide different explanations why positive status shifts have negative consequences. According to the status disruption arguments, the more social and cultural disruptions that positive status shifts entail, the more negative consequences ensue. Assuming *equal distance* between low, medium, and high status, moving from low to high status is therefore more disruptive than moving from low to medium or medium to high status and moving from low to medium status is more disruptive than not moving at all. According to the status deprivation arguments, it is less the amount of status disruption and more the failure to reach a desired status that matters. Specifically, barely failing to move to a higher status position when given the opportunity can have negative consequences because of counterfactual comparison: Moving from low to medium status but failing to move to high status is therefore more upsetting than moving from low to high status or not moving at all. We explore these arguments in the context of Academy Awards by examining the negative personal consequences for screen actors winning an Oscar (high status) or being nominated but failing to win an Oscar (medium status) as compared to not being nominated (low status).

### **THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF ACADEMY AWARDS**

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences granted the first Oscars in 1929, creating what is today the oldest, most visible, and most prestigious awards in the film industry. The Academy Awards (now officially The Oscars) has changed little since 1929: The nominees and winners are still decided by the members of the Academy, the nominees are revealed a month or two before the awards ceremony, and the winners are announced at the ceremony (which has been a major television event since the 1950s). The Oscar is the most important mechanism to ascend the screen acting hierarchy and to symbolically consecrate having already risen to the top (Rossman, Esparza, and Bonacich, 2010). The Oscar provides entry into a very elite group of the most successful and distinguished screen actors and important personal reassurance for actors that they actually are considered worthy members of the elite. As noted by Levy

(2001: 44): “What makes the Oscar such an influential award is its peculiar combination of the three evaluations – and audiences. Through the Oscar, the Academy functions as peers, critics, and tastemakers. No other award so well combines critical and popular judgment.” Even if John Wayne had no reason to doubt his position in the screen acting elite and used to deride awards, he tellingly recanted when he finally won an Oscar for *True Grit* in 1969: “The Oscar is a beautiful thing to have. It symbolizes appreciation of yourself by your peers. The Oscar means a lot to me, even if it took the industry 40 years to get around to it” (Levy, 2001: 245).

### **Status Deprivation, Status Disruption, and Divorce**

Although the Oscar curse referred originally to the belief that the Oscars ruin professional careers, we focus mainly on the belief that the Oscars have negative marital consequences, as widely conjectured when Helen Hunt, Reese Witherspoon, and Sandra Bullock divorced shortly after their Oscars (O’Neil, 2010). Status disruption and status deprivation plausibly account for the increases in divorce following the Oscars through professional stress and dissatisfaction, both of which affect marital satisfaction and conflict and, therefore, divorce (Marshall, Chadwick, and Marshall, 1992).

For actors winning an Oscar, status disruption from moving to a higher status with more opportunities but also higher expectations to acting quality can manifest itself in professional stress. As expressed by Humphrey Bogart: “You’ve seen what happens to some Oscar winners. They spent the rest of their lives turning down manuscripts while searching for the great role to win another one. Hell, I hope I’m never even nominated again” (Levy, 2001: 295).<sup>4</sup> Winning an Oscar can be stressful also because the sudden abundance of opportunities can strain the ability of actors to decide what opportunities to accept. As experienced by Gwyneth Paltrow after her first Oscar for *Shakespeare in Love*: “I became insouciant about the things that I chose. I thought ‘Oh, I’ll try this, it’ll be fun or I’ll do that for the money’”

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<sup>4</sup> Merton (1968: 57) noted a similar increase in professional stress in Nobel laureate scientists: “More and more is expected of them, and this creates its own measure of motivation and stress.” And Kets de Vries (2005: 112) observed that some managers in senior executive positions feel like “fakes” unworthy of their promotions and therefore “set excessively high, unrealistic goals” that create even more stress.

(Donaldson-Evans, 2006). In addition to professional stress, winning an Oscars can damage relationships with peers, friends, and family. Winning an Oscars risk damaging existing social relationships simply because increased professional expectations and popular attention force actors to devote even more time on their careers, which can make it hard to deal with conflicting feelings of superiority/inferiority, pride/jealousy, and importance/neglect that often emerge within a relationship. As Oscar winner Joan Fontaine commented: “A picture taken after the Oscar banquet of Brian (Aherne) sitting alone in an empty room, feet up on a chair, my fur coat over his arm, awaiting patiently for the photographers to finish with the winners, graphically illustrates the plight of marriage when the wife is more successful than the husband” (Levy, 2001: 294-295).

In sum, according to the status disruption arguments, the negative personal consequences of the Oscars are stronger, the more status disruption caused by the Oscars. Winning an Oscar, in particular in the first nomination, represents a dramatic status shift for screen actors. Based on the status disruption argument, we hypothesize therefore that winners are more likely to experience negative personal consequences in the form of divorce following the Oscars than actors not nominated for an Oscar.

*Hypothesis 1: Compared to not being nominated for an Oscar, winning an Oscar increases the likelihood of divorce.*

The non-winning Oscar nominees may, however, be susceptible to stress-inducing status deprivation because of counterfactual comparisons. Although an Oscar nomination is a great accomplishment and a positive status shift in itself, it can also be a constant reminder of a painful failure to win, a salient form of status deprivation. Despite the poise and grace that losing Oscar nominees show when the winner is announced, the disappointment from having lost what could be the chance of a lifetime is painful. As expressed by Dustin Hoffman, the Oscars “put very talented and good people against each other and they hurt the hell out of the ones that lose” (Levy, 2001: 247). It is uncertain whether and when the nominees will come across another equally great role that could help give them another chance at winning the most prestigious award in the film industry. And as in other situations in which it is easy to imagine alternative outcomes but the outcomes themselves are uncontrollable (Roese,

1997), being nominated but not winning is the type of situation for generating upward counterfactuals that lead to more disappointment and negative affect. To the extent that nominees think of themselves as being similar to winners but eventually realize the real difference between being ‘only’ a nominee and a real winner, the discrepancy between the actual-self and the ideal-self likely increases feelings of depression and anxiety (Higgins, Klein, and Strauman, 1985), feelings that are likely stronger shortly after the Oscars. A failed Oscar nomination could, in other words, be a poignant source of professional stress and dissatisfaction that can lead to marital conflict and dissatisfaction and therefore divorce (Marshall, Chadwick, and Marshall, 1992) even if it simultaneously represents a coveted acknowledgement of acting quality.

In sum, according to the status deprivation arguments, the negative personal effects of Oscars are stronger, the more the Oscars make screen actors feel relatively deprived through counterfactual comparisons. Based on the status deprivation argument, we hypothesize therefore that screen actors nominated for an Oscar but failing to win the Oscar are more likely to experience negative personal consequences in the form of divorce following the Oscars than actors winning an Oscar and actors not nominated for an Oscar.<sup>5</sup>

*Hypothesis 2: Compared to (A) not being nominated for an Oscar and (B) winning an Oscar, being nominated but not winning the Oscar increases the likelihood of divorce.*

It is important to note that the status disruption and status deprivation arguments provide different but not mutually exclusive explanations for why the Oscars could have negative consequences for Oscar winners and nominees. Simply comparing the relative likelihoods of divorce between Oscar winners and nominees cannot necessarily adjudicate between status disruption and status deprivation because winners could experience negative consequences due to status disruption while nominees could simultaneously experience negative consequences due to status deprivation or status disruption. Our empirical approach

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<sup>5</sup> Some elite actors may be disappointed if they do not receive an Oscar nomination. We do not predict, however, that this will lead to significant personal consequences: Not being nominated does not attract much external attention and is therefore not as salient an event as failing to win after being nominated and the probability of being nominated is much harder to assess and generally lower than the probability of winning among the five nominees.

is therefore to first test our hypotheses for evidence of an Oscar curse and then provide additional evidence that the mechanisms accounting for the hypothesized winner and nominee effects are status disruption and status deprivation respectively.

### **Gender Differences in Status Disruption and Status Deprivation**

In developing our main status disruption and status deprivation arguments, we have implicitly assumed that all actors react similarly to status disruption and status deprivation. The impact of status disruption and status deprivation may differ, however, depending on how certain groups respond to upward status shifts. Research on differences in how males and females react to stress, missed opportunities, and disappointments discussed below shows that male actors may be more susceptible to status disruption and status deprivation. We argue accordingly that Oscar induced status disruption and status deprivation may increase the likelihood that male actors experience divorce but not necessarily the likelihood that female actors experience divorce.

First, ascending the status hierarchy by winning an Oscar can be disruptive because it provides access to more attractive resources and opportunities including attractive spousal alternatives, an important determinant of divorce (South, Trent, and Shen, 2001). As noted by a Hollywood marriage counselor, professional success and domestic disruption are connected: “When you win an award like that, you get more offers than you could possibly deal with. It’s hard not to get caught up in it and to keep yourself grounded in a relationship” (Mackenzie, 2002). Although both male and female actors are likely to get more attractive spousal alternatives following the Oscars, male actors tend to respond differently to the new opportunities in a way that disrupts their personal lives. Roese et al. (2006: 779) report that males, more than females, emphasize regrets of inaction over action within romantic relationships and that the difference is substantively larger for sexual activity: “Men are vastly more likely than women to regret not trying harder to have sex or to regret missing an opportunity for sex.” Indeed, research on sexual infidelity among married couples shows that males tend to engage in more extramarital sex than females (Munsch, 2012; Treas and Giesen, 2000) and sexual infidelity is among the most common and strongest

determinants of divorce (DeMaris, 2013; Amato, 2010; Petersen and Hyde, 2010). The causal linkage between Oscar induced status disruption and divorce may, in other words, be particularly strong for male actors.

Second, failing to ascend the status hierarchy by not winning an Oscar nomination can trigger counterfactual comparisons that make actors feel relatively deprived. Male actors are not only more likely to feel relatively deprived, however, they may also *respond* differently to feeling relatively deprived than female actors. Males tend to be more stressed by work and financial events, whereas females tend to be more affected by exposure to family-related events (Conger et al., 1993; Matud, 2004). Moreover, the mental health of males but not females tends to be positively affected by earnings increases and social status (Kessler and McRae, 1982; Klose and Jacobi, 2004). Males are generally more likely than females to respond to disappointments by acting physically and verbally aggressive (Archer, 2004) and they are more likely to lose control after being exposed to a negative emotional cue (Card and Dahl, 2012). Card and Dahl (2012) report, for example, that male-to-female violence increases following an unexpected loss by the local professional football team but not female-to-male violence. Not surprisingly, domestic violence and frequent conflicts are, together with infidelity, the most important reasons for divorce (Amato, 2010). Male actors may, in other words, simply be worse at handling disappointments such as failing to win an Oscar nomination (even if failing to win does not result in domestic violence) and they are therefore particularly likely to experience divorce following professional and personal disappointments.

In sum, because male and females likely react differently to status disruption and status deprivation, we hypothesize that the Oscars increase the divorce rate of male actors but not necessarily the divorce rate of female actors.

*Hypothesis 3: Compared to not being nominated for an Oscar, (A) winning an Oscar and (B) being nominated but not winning an Oscar increases the likelihood of divorce for male actors but not for female actors.*



## METHODS

### Screen Actor Sample

The screen acting profession is extremely stratified and porous. Most self-identified actors never participate in a credited role in a feature film and most actors that have appeared in a credited role never participate in another feature film. The stratified and porous nature of the screen acting profession makes random sampling problematic. First, the lack of formal entry requirements makes it impossible to unambiguously define the population of screen actors. Anybody can self-identify as an actor and even if we limit the population to include only actors with at least one credited film role, the result is still a very high number of actors, most of which would hardly be considered real screen actors (according to [imdb.com](http://imdb.com), for example almost 9,000 credited actors appeared in the 290 films produced in the U.S. in 2000 with known box offices). Second, given the relatively low number of Oscar nominees and winners, a random sample of a manageable size of the entire population of credited screen actors from 1930 to 2005 would most likely not contain any nominees and winners not to mention enough for statistical analysis. Third, given that most screen actors in a random sample basically would be unknown bit players, it is impossible to collect the relatively detailed demographic data discussed below and there would be no cross-sectional and longitudinal variance in their acting experiences (most would have only one acting credit). We focus instead on the top of the screen acting hierarchy where actors' careers are comparable and use elite actors sampled from two different types of films to test our arguments.<sup>6</sup>

We sampled all the actors that played the lead male and female roles in 1,023 top commercial and top artistic films from 1930 to 2005. For top commercial films, we identified the box office top ten films from 1930 to 2005, using [Worldwide Box Office](#), [Box Office Report](#), and [Box Office Mojo](#) (the box office rankings for the 1930s and 1940s are less comprehensive than later years). For top artistic films, we identified an equal number of films that were nominated for Academy Awards for Best Picture or Best

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<sup>6</sup> By using a sample of elite actors, we risk, like [Azoulay, Stuart, and Wang \(2014\)](#), to underestimate the Oscar effects, in particular the status disruption effects, because the magnitude of Oscar-induced status shifts are likely less for elite actors. Our Oscar-effect estimates are therefore best viewed as conservative estimates.

Director. To sample the actors that played the lead male and female roles in the 1,023 top films, we focused on the first credited male and female actor in each top film (cast members were listed in order of appearance in a very few films in which case we simply sampled the actors in the dominant roles). Based on this approach, we identified 811 elite screen actors, which, after accounting for missing data, resulted in a sample of 808 actors comprised of 165 Oscar winners, 227 non-winning Oscar nominees, and 416 non-nominees. Our distinction between higher status and lower status screen actors is therefore relative to the Academy Awards: The lower status actors in our sample are obviously not lower status in the overall population of actors but actors that at the minimum appear in a lead role in a top commercial or artistic film at least once during their career.<sup>7</sup> For each of the actors in our sample, we use IMDB and Wikipedia as our main source for collecting information on their careers and personal lives but do a more extensive search using other electronic sources and actor biographies whenever information is missing or inconsistent.

We analyze male and female elite actors separately because the labor markets and Oscar success criteria for male and female screen actors are different. Female actors tend to start their acting careers earlier and receive their first Oscar nomination at a younger age than male actors (Gilberg and Hines, 2000). Female actors appear in fewer films than male actors throughout their career, however, because fewer roles exist for females, in particular older females (Levy, 1989; Bazzani et al., 1997; Lincoln and Allen, 2004). Moreover, because the Oscars distinguish between male and female Oscar nominees and winners, different informal Oscar success criteria for male and female actors have emerged over time including age, physical attractiveness, and film role (the most common role for female actors winning an Oscar are wife, mother, sister, daughter, and girlfriend, whereas it is historical figure for male actors)

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<sup>7</sup> An alternative approach is to sample *all* the Oscar nominees and winners from 1930 to 2005 and combine the Oscar sample with our elite sample. The disadvantage of the Oscar approach is that the estimated Oscar effects could be biased if the Oscar nominees (treatment group) are systematically different from the non-nominees (control group). To reduce bias in the treatment effects it is necessary to include a propensity score in the estimation of the treatment effects (D'Agostino, 1998; Rosenbaum and Rubin, 1983). A propensity score is the conditional probability of assignment to the treatment condition (Oscar nomination) given a vector of covariates that are thought to be related to both the treatment and the outcome (divorce) (Berk and Newton, 1985). The results are similar across the two sampling approaches.

(Gilberg and Hines, 2000; Hollinger, 2006; Diehm, 2014). The different Oscar success criteria for male and female actors have led to suggestions that all Oscar award categories should be segregated (Flanigan, 2013) or, in contrast, that equal treatment can only be ensured by desegregating segregated Oscar categories (Elsesser, 2010). In sum, to avoid that unobserved gender differences in Oscar success criteria affect our results, we distinguish between male and female actors in our empirical analyses (we present full sample models before distinguishing between male and female actors).

### **Dependent Variables**

We define the personal curse in terms of marital divorce. Divorce is a repeated event for many actors: Zsa Zsa Gabor tops the list with eight divorces; Mickey Rooney and Lana Turner are second with seven each. The 333 (372) married male (female) actors in our sample experienced a total of 420 (523) divorces from 1930 to 2005. We include all divorces and use repeated event history analysis to model the complicated marriage and divorce history of each actor.<sup>8</sup> Humphrey Bogart, for example, as shown in Figure 1, is coded as married from 1926-27 (first marriage), 1928-37 (second marriage), 1938-44 (third marriage), and 1945-57 (fourth marriage). The outcome of a divorce is obviously not always negative. An Oscar nomination or win could empower an actor to divorce an abusive spouse, for example, which implies that divorce could be a positive, not negative, outcome. Nevertheless, most divorces among this elite group of actors are not empowering events but at the minimum unintended events that are socially and emotionally distractive for the actors involved. Indeed, the downsides of divorce are well established. Divorcees generally experience more stress than married individuals (Johnson and Wu, 2002) and marriage is associated with more happiness (Stack and Eshleman, 1998) and less long-term illness (Murphy, Glaser, and Grundy, 1997).

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<sup>8</sup> A few heterosexual actors had long-term relationships with children without marrying and a few homosexual actors had long-term relationships without being able to marry. We included both whenever possible.

## Independent Variables

The main independent variables are the Oscar nominee and Oscar winner status of a screen actor. We use time-varying Oscar variables to assess the effects of the Oscars on future film appearances and to avoid time-dependent or survivor bias in our divorce analyses (Sylvestre, Huszti, and Hanley, 2006; Beyersmann et al., 2008).<sup>9</sup> Although we track the acting career of all actors accordingly from birth until death (or 2005), a given actor enters the risk set only once he or she is married. We use two binary variables to indicate when an actor moved into the nominee status by being nominated for an Oscar and when an actor moved into the winner status by winning an Oscar. Humphrey Bogart, for example, entered the Oscar nominee group in 1944 for his role in *Casablanca* and then moved to the Oscar winner group in 1952 for his appearance in *African Queen* (See Figure 1). Because we treat the Oscar nominee and winner groups as mutually exclusive, the estimated Oscar winner coefficient represents the *joint* effect of being an Oscar nominee and a winner (because Oscar winners are also Oscar nominees), whereas the *incremental* effect of winning is the difference between the Oscar winner and nominee coefficients. In the case of Humphrey Bogart, the Oscar Nominee variable is coded as one from 1944 to 1951 (zero otherwise), whereas the Oscar Winner variable is coded as one from 1952 to 1957 (zero otherwise). We do not distinguish between winning or being nominated in a lead role or a supporting role because the criteria used to determine lead and supporting roles are unclear (Levy, 2001: 58) and unreported robustness checks show similar patterns for lead and supporting Oscars.

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Insert Figure 1 around here.  
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## Control Variables

We use different control variables to rule out alternative explanations for the Oscar effects. We control for age decade using binary variables (binary decade variables avoid competing ‘clocks’ in our

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<sup>9</sup> Redelmeier and Singh (2001) reported that Oscar winners live longer than Oscar nominees (a positive consequences of the Oscars) but a subsequent reanalysis of their data correcting for survivor bias found no positive effect of Oscar wins on longevity (Sylvestre, Huszti, and Hanley, 2006). Our data confirms the reanalysis.

cox models) and a comprehensive set of variables to capture different aspects of actors' screen acting experiences (not all control variables are included in the divorce models because they are either not relevant or are impossible to estimate because, for example, few actors divorce at high ages). We control for screen acting tenure (years since first movie) using binary variables for short tenure (less than or equal to five years), long tenure (more than 25 years but less than 50), and very long tenure (more than 50 years). We control for the number of film appearances (linear and squared) in the five years before the focal year to account for (curvilinear) effects of current film appearances on future film appearances as well as the number of appearances in high quality films in the focal year (no curvilinear effects).<sup>10</sup> A film is counted as a quality film if it was nominated (or won) one of the following Best Film (including Foreign Film and other subcategories) or Best Director awards: Academy Awards, National Board of Review of Motion Picture, Golden Globes, New York Film Critic Circle, Los Angeles Film Critics Association or if it opened in main competition at Cannes Film Festival, Venice Film Festival, or Berlin Film Festival. We mix binary and continuous variables to avoid the high collinearity between age, tenure, and film experiences, a problem that tended to render the age variables difficult to interpret (the main independent variables are robust to these alternative specifications).

We control for early child acting experiences before the age of twelve and for early exposure to the acting profession through screen actor parents. Having early acting exposure may affect both the likelihood of divorce, and the extent to which actors have easier access to acting opportunities and potentially receive an Oscar. We control also for whether an actor's spouse is an Oscar nominee or winner (too few Oscar spouses to separate nominees and winners) because spouses of Oscar nominees and winners may benefit from the visibility of their spouses. We control for actor specialization in action and comedy because more films are produced in these popular genres (we controlled for drama specialization in unreported analyses but found less specialization in drama and robust results). Action specialization *includes* action, adventure, crime, fantasy, sci-fi, and war, whereas comedy specialization *includes*

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<sup>10</sup> We use last five years film appearances because recent film appearances are more likely to affect future film appearances than older film appearances and it result in significantly higher model fit compared to cumulative film appearances.

comedy, musical, and romance. For each film, we collected the genre assignments published on imdb.com, and for each actor, we summed up the total number of genre assignments of a certain genre, such as action, and divided it by the total number of genre assignments up to the focal year. We calculated the specialization index for all genres but focus on action and comedy in our analyses because these two genres have continuously been dominant in the film industry and, relative to other genres, action and comedy actors tend to experience more typecasting (Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa, and von Rittmann, 2003). Finally, we control for film era by distinguishing between the Studio System (1930-1949), Post War (1950-1965), New Hollywood (1966-1979), and Blockbuster (1980-) eras using the Blockbuster era as comparison (Thompson and Bordwell, 2003).

Summary statistics and bivariate correlations for male and female screen actors are in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 around here.  
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### **Statistical Approach**

We used a repeated-events Cox proportional hazards with robust actor-level standard errors approach to estimate the divorce rates of actors (Cox, 1972; Box-Steffensmeier and Jones, 2004). To accommodate our time-varying covariates, we split the divorce history of all actors into (calendar) year spells and used years in marriage as the clock. The effects of the Oscars on divorce could depend on time in two different ways. First, the Oscar effect could be stronger immediately after the Oscar event and then decrease over time. To account for this possibility, we depreciated the Oscar variables linearly (and non-linearly) over five and ten years but found no support for linear (or non-linear) Oscar depreciation effects. Second, the strength of the Oscar effects could depend on the duration of the marriage itself. To account for this alternative possibility, we interacted the Oscar winner and nominee variables with time (years) in marriage. Specifically, we interacted the Oscar variables with  $\exp(-xt)$  where  $x$  is a depreciation constant and  $t$  is time in marriage using the *tvc* option in Stata. Using a depreciation constant of 0.25, for example, the Oscar effect in a two-year-old marriage would be depreciated with a factor of 0.61 ( $\exp(-0.25 \times 2)$ ), whereas the effect would be depreciated with a factor of 0.37 ( $\exp(-0.25 \times 4)$ ) in a four-year-old

marriage.<sup>11</sup> Since no theoretical reason exists to favor *a priori* a particular depreciation constant, we performed sensitivity analyses using depreciation constants ranging from 0.00 to 0.50 to identify the Cox models with the highest *overall* model fit.

We used two approaches to handle repeated divorces. First, we used a ‘conditional gap time approach’ to account for repeated divorces according to which the estimated robust standard errors are clustered on actor, each strata (marriage) has its own baseline hazard rate of ending in divorce, and each observation (actor) is not at risk for a later event (divorce number three) before all earlier events (divorce number one and two) have occurred (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones, 2004). Second, rather than stratifying the data using marriage number, we also used a continuous variable to control for marriage number, which has the advantage of controlling for occurrence dependence (we could not control for both marriage and divorce number because divorce number equals marriage number minus one) (Heckman and Borjas, 1980). The results are robust regardless of approach, thus suggesting that we report the results using the more informative second approach. Finally, Cox proportional hazard regression avoids restricting the shape of the hazard, which is appropriate because our focus is the effects of the Oscars on the baseline divorce rate rather than estimating the baseline divorce rate itself (Cleves et al., 2008). We nevertheless re-estimated our models using parametric regressions and found the results comparable to the Cox results. Of the alternative parametric models (exponential, weibull, gompertz, lognormal, loglogistic, and gamma), the lognormal and gamma models provided the best fit, whereas the exponential and gompertz models provided the worst fit (these results are available from the authors).

## RESULTS

Our main focus is the personal Oscar curse but we begin our statistical analyses by establishing that actors nominated for an Oscar or winning an Oscar on average appear in *more* films following their

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<sup>11</sup> The Oscar Winner hazard ratio ( $\beta_{ow}$ ), for example, should therefore be interpreted as the proportional change in hazard when the marriage-time adjusted Oscar effect ( $\beta_{ow} \cdot \exp(-xt)$ ) increases by one. In reporting our results, we refer to a newly married couple for simplicity because  $\exp(-x0) = 1$  in the first year of marriage.

Oscars than other actors to eliminate career decline as a *general* explanation for the personal Oscar curse. The random- and fixed-effects negative binomial regressions in Model 1 (Random) and Model 2 (Fixed) in Table 2 show that male actors appear in more films than female actors and that the positive Oscar winner and nominee effects are stronger for male actors.<sup>12</sup> Splitting the sample by gender in Model 3 and Model 5 (random effects) shows that male (0.14;  $p < 0.001$ ) and female (0.09;  $p < 0.001$ ) Oscar nominees and male (0.25;  $p < 0.001$ ) and female (0.36;  $p < 0.001$ ) Oscar winners appear in *more* films in the five years after their Oscars than other male and female actors. Model 3 and Model 5 show also that male (0.25 > 0.14;  $\Delta\chi^2 = 15.24$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and female (0.36 > 0.09;  $\Delta\chi^2 = 73.13$ ;  $p < .001$ ) Oscar winners appear in more films than male and female Oscar nominees. Comparing the full models with the split sample models, we find that analyzing male and female actors together masks important differences including opposite effects of action specialization and divorce, thus confirming the appropriateness of using split samples.

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Insert Table 2 around here.  
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Figure 2 provides additional evidence of the positive professional consequences of the Oscars. Male and female Oscar winners and nominees experience less of a decline in average yearly film appearances throughout their remaining career. Our study thus confirms the positive professional consequences of sudden positive status shifts observed in research on status-conferring prizes in the sciences (Azoulay, Stuart, and Wang, 2014).

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Insert Figure 2 around here.  
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We move next from examining the consequences of the Oscars for the professional lives of actors to examining the consequences for their personal lives. Table 3 presents the results (in the form of hazard

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<sup>12</sup> We use negative binomial regression due to over-dispersion and random-effects because some independent variables are time-invariant and the dependent variable is time-invariant for some actors (Long, 1997). The results are robust to using a Poisson approach. We also re-estimated the models using high-quality films (defined when discussing our control variables) as the dependent variable and found similar, although weaker, results.



ratios) of Cox proportional hazard regression analysis of actor divorce rates. Starting with the full sample of male and female actors, Model 7 and Model 8 show that male actors on average are twenty percent less likely to divorce than female actors. The divorce rate of Oscar nominees and Oscar winners in Model 8 are, however, not significantly different from non-nominees, thus showing that neither Hypothesis 1 nor Hypothesis 2A and 2B are supported in the full sample including *both* male *and* female actors.

To examine why Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 are not supported in the full sample, we split the sample by gender and examine the impact of the Oscars on the divorce rate of male and female actors separately. Model 10 and Model 12 suggest that the Oscars affect the divorce rate of male and female actors differently, explaining the insignificant Oscar effects in Model 8. The divorce rates of male Oscar nominees and male Oscar winners are 96 percent (1.96;  $p < 0.05$ ) and 205 percent (3.05;  $p < 0.01$ ) *higher* than the divorce rate of male non-nominees in the first year of marriage. The divorce rates of female Oscar nominees and female Oscar winners are, in contrast, 68 percent (0.32;  $p < 0.10$ ) and 85 percent (0.15;  $p < 0.01$ ) *lower* than the divorce rate of female non-nominees in the first year of marriage. The increased divorce rates of male Oscar nominees and male Oscar winners *and* decreased divorce rates of female Oscar nominees and female Oscar winners provide support for Hypothesis 3A and Hypothesis 3B: Compared to non-nominated male and female actors, male Oscar winners and nominees are more likely to divorce, whereas female actors are *less* likely to divorce. Finally, male and female actors respond differently to Oscar events depending on how many years they have been married. Specifically, the optimal depreciation constants in Model 10 and Model 12 are 0.15 for male actors and 0.40 for female actors, which suggests that the Oscars affect females for a shorter period of time than they affect male actors.<sup>13</sup>

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Insert Table 3 around here.  
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Table 3 also shows that although the Oscar winner effect appears to be stronger than the Oscar

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<sup>13</sup> The effects of the Oscars only depreciate with a factor of 0.47 ( $\exp(-0.15 \times 5)$ ) after five years of marriage for male actors, for example, but depreciate with a factor of 0.14 ( $\exp(-0.40 \times 5)$ ) for female actors.

nominee effect for male actors, the male Oscar winner and nominee effects are not statistically different ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 1.51; p > 0.22$ ) from each other (nor are the female Oscar winner and nominee effects statistically different from each other ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 0.83; p > 0.36$ )). Table 3 provides, in other words, support for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2A for male actors but not for Hypothesis 2B because male Oscar nominees are not more likely to divorce than male Oscar winners. Table 3 does not, however, allow us to determine if the higher divorce rate of male Oscar nominees and male Oscar winners compared to male actors not nominated for an Oscar reflects status disruption or status deprivation. For male Oscar winners there is no reason to expect that their higher divorce rate reflects status deprivation, thus suggesting that their higher divorce rate is best explained as a consequence of status disruption, as argued in Hypothesis 1. However, because we cannot assume equal distance between low, medium, and high status and because Oscar winners always are Oscar nominees, we must examine if the Oscar winner divorce effect mostly reflects status disruption at Oscar nomination (moving from non-nominee to Oscar nominee) or status disruption unique to winning after nomination (moving from Oscar nominee to Oscar winner).

We distinguish therefore between Oscar winners who won their first nomination and Oscar winners who won a later nomination to determine in which stage (non-nominee to nominee or nominee to winner) status disruption is most impactful. If status disruption comes mostly from the nomination, the increase in status between nomination and winning should be minimal and thus, we should expect that actors that won at first nomination (moving from non-nominee to nominee to winner almost simultaneously) to experience more status disruption and therefore have higher divorce rates than actors that win at later nomination (moving more incrementally from nominee to winner). If status disruption comes mostly from winning, however, the increase in status from being non-nominee to being nominee should be minimal and thus, we should not expect a difference in status disruption and divorce rates between Oscar winners who won their first nomination and those that won a later nomination. Model 13 in Table 4 shows that, in the first year of marriage, male actors winning an Oscar in their first nomination ( $3.04; p < 0.05$ ) and male actors winning an Oscar in a later nomination ( $3.07; p < 0.05$ ) are basically

*equally* more likely to divorce than male actors not nominated for an Oscar. Winning an Oscar is, in other words, equally disruptive for male actors regardless of whether they win in the first nomination or in a later nomination. We conclude therefore that the disruption that follows winning is more impactful on average than the disruption that follows being nominated, which supports the observation that “[t]he Oscar’s effects are much more dramatic for the winners” (Levy, 2001: 282) and the status-disruption-from-winning argument behind Hypothesis 1 for male actors.

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Insert Table 4 around here.  
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For male Oscar nominees, the higher divorce rate could reflect status disruption following the nomination, although less likely as shown above, and status deprivation following not winning the nomination, as implied by Hypothesis 2A. To corroborate that status deprivation is the most likely theoretical mechanism behind the male Oscar nominee effect, we shift focus from being an Oscar winner or a nominee (as in Table 3) to distinguishing between the number of won Oscar nominations and the number of lost Oscar nominations. Because status deprivation is triggered by each lost nomination, showing that each lost Oscar nomination increases the divorce rate would indicate that the mechanism behind the male Oscar nominee effect is status deprivation. It is unlikely, however, that each lost nomination triggers status disruption because another lost nomination would not entail a significant change in status position. Model 15 in Table 5 shows that an additional *lost* nomination increases the male divorce rate 34 percent (1.34;  $p < 0.01$ ) in the first year of marriage, whereas an additional *won* nomination does not increase the male divorce rate significantly (1.58;  $p > 0.10$ ).<sup>14</sup> Together, Table 4 and Table 5 provide consistent evidence for the theoretical mechanisms behind the key findings: Male Oscar winners, compared to non-nominees, are more likely to divorce due to status disruption, whereas male Oscar nominees are more likely to divorce because of status deprivation. Specifically, status deprivation is likely the theoretical mechanism behind Hypothesis 2A even if we found no support for Hypotheses 2B,

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<sup>14</sup> We also examined curvilinear specifications but found no evidence of curvilinear effects (nor did we find that the effect of the first lost nomination was substantively different from the effects of subsequent lost nominations).

an outcome we argued above could easily be explained by status disruption and status deprivation not being mutually exclusive theoretical mechanisms. Finally, the results show also that the Oscars do not increase the likelihood of female divorce but rather, although less stable than the male results, decrease their likelihood of divorce, a somewhat surprising result that awaits further research to fully explain.

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Insert Table 5 around here.  
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Some of the divorce control variables merit attention as well. Table 3, Table 4, and Table 5 show that the divorce likelihood increases, the more times male and female actors have been married but that the negative effect is significantly stronger for females. Female actors are also more likely to divorce the more film appearances they have had in the last five years, whereas the number of film appearances does not affect the male divorce rate. The film appearance results point to an interesting dynamic for female actors: The Oscars increase the number of film appearances, more film appearances increase the divorce rate, and being divorced increases film appearances. Having actor parents increases the likelihood of divorce for both male and female actors, perhaps because divorce has been a common and uncontroversial factor during their childhood. Male actors specializing in action roles are also more likely to divorce whereas action specialization does not affect female divorce rate, a result that might reflect male action heroes being particularly attractive and stereotypical expectations of action heroes as more adventurous even in their personal lives. Male actors appear also to be more susceptible to marital Oscar deprivation than female actors. The divorce models show that male actors *married* to actors who are Oscar nominees or winners are more likely to get divorced than male actors not married to Oscar nominees or winners. Together, the lost-nominations and Oscar-spouse results suggest that male actors are more susceptible to the negative consequences of the Oscars, perhaps because males tend to be more affected by work related events (Conger et al., 1993; Klose and Jacobi, 2004; Matud, 2004) and deviations from traditional gender roles (Kessler and McRae, 1982; Menaghan, 1989).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Building on sociological and social psychological research on status and happiness, we argued in this study that sudden positive status shifts can have negative consequences for the social actors that experience status shifts due to status disruption and status deprivation. Using the Oscar curse as our empirical case, we distinguished between negative professional (fewer film appearances) and negative personal (higher divorce rates) consequences of the Oscars for male and female screen actors. Our results provided no evidence of negative professional consequences for male or female actors: Oscar winners appear, on average, in more films than Oscar nominees, who, in turn, appeared in more films than non-nominees. The professional Oscar curse is, in other words, only a Hollywood myth. The personal consequences of the Oscars are different. We found that the Oscars increase the divorce rate of male actors but, if anything, decrease the divorce rate of female actors. Exploring the increased divorce rate for male Oscar winners and Oscar nominees, we found that status disruption accounts best for the negative Oscar winner effects, whereas status deprivation accounts best for the negative Oscar nominee effects. Our results suggest, in other words, that the Oscars have positive professional consequences for male and female actors but more enduring negative personal consequences for male actors, thus emphasizing an important conundrum for male actors: The Oscars can help your career but also ruin your marriage.

Our study extends status theory and empirical research in a number of different ways. First, as discussed briefly in the introduction, most status research focuses on the positive consequences of status and assumes that moving up the status hierarchy is unproblematic (e.g., Podolny, 1993; Jensen, 2003). By returning to the classical definition of status as a hierarchical position in a social system, by emphasizing that status positions embed social actors in cultural frameworks and social relations and not only function as a signal of quality, and by focusing on the negative consequences of positive status shifts, we broaden and deepen status research by arguing that status affects a wider set of outcomes than previously thought. Our study confirms, like most status research (e.g., Azoulay, Stuart, and Wang, 2014), that positive status shifts are beneficial when status mostly works as a signal of quality for third-party resource providers such as producers, directors, and casting directors making decisions about film roles. But our study

suggests also that positive status shifts can simultaneously be problematic due to status disruption and status deprivation when the importance of status derives less from its function as a signal of quality and more from the cultural and social embedding that follow occupying a particular status position, as is the case for the marital lives of screen actors. We argue, in other words, that our theoretical framework with its emphasis on status positions, status disruption, and status deprivation provides a promising complement to current status research by opening up for more multifaceted status research.

Second, we draw attention to the importance of studying the long-term behavioral consequences of positive status shifts and not only focusing on the long-term societal consequences of tournaments (Frank and Cook, 1995) or their short-term psychological consequences (Medvec et al., 1995). Knowing that silver medalists at the Olympics appeared to be less happy than bronze medalists when they received their medal is important (Medvec et al., 1995) but it is also important to know the long-term behavioral consequences of actually moving up and barely failing to move up. To the extent that the relative unhappiness of silver medalists motivates them to work even harder, for example, feeling unhappy not being the winner may actually be beneficial for the silver medalist in the long term. By focusing on long-term professional performance and marriage dissolution, we illustrate the importance of taking a long-term perspective on the consequences of sudden positive status shifts and complement research on the immediate effects on perceived happiness with more enduring behavioral outcomes. Moreover, our split-sample approach illustrates the importance of focusing on differences in long-term reactions among seemingly similar male and female tournament participants based on different hard-to-observe factors such as identification with tournament and perceived importance of social mobility.

Third, we draw attention to the negative consequences for individual participants in tournaments, thus complementing research on societal consequences such as increased disparity between status groups and glorification of winner-take-all professions (Frank and Cook, 1995). The negative consequences of sudden positive status shifts would not matter if only Hollywood screen actors were susceptible to negative consequences of positive status shifts. The ubiquity of tournament structures outside prize and award competitions, however, ensures that sudden positive status shifts occur in numerous other settings

as well. Organizational outcomes ranging from lower level employee promotion and compensation decisions, for example, to higher-level executive appointments resemble tournaments. We suggest that it is important to focus more explicitly on the social actors experiencing sudden positive status shifts and how they react to the shifts. The positive status shift itself can bring about negative behavioral changes and thus, lead to negative performance outcomes. CEOs that achieve superstar status by winning awards for their work, for example, start devoting more time to external activities, which in turn decreases the performance of the firm (Malmendier and Tate, 2009). Expecting to move up the status hierarchy but failing to actually move up has negative consequences outside the Oscars as well. Executives that fail to become CEOs (Cannella and Shen, 2001) or employees promoted later than their cohorts (Rosenbaum, 1979) may be discouraged, withdraw, and suffer long-term consequences throughout their career.

Important theoretical boundary scope conditions suggest that status disruption and status deprivation may not be equally important in all empirical contexts. First, status disruption and status deprivation are more important in discontinuous status hierarchies than continuous status hierarchies because clearly defined categorical status groups and boundaries likely reinforce actual and perceived between-group cultural and social differences and provide salient objects for counterfactual comparisons. Second, status disruption and status deprivation are likely more important when social actors identify more strongly with the status-stratified social system because the cultural and social embedding are likely to be more deeply rooted and because negative counterfactual comparisons are more painful. Screen acting is obviously an empirical setting in which the professional and personal spheres of screen actors are tightly intertwined, which increases the self-identification of screen actors with their profession and makes them more susceptible to status disruption and status deprivation. Third, status deprivation is likely more important when status shifts are public events that are visible to all the occupants of a status hierarchy and external audiences because widespread public awareness of status shifts makes it easier to engage in counterfactual comparisons triggering negative feelings of status deprivation.

We realize that our study has several limitations. By focusing on the entire life histories of a large sample of screen actors and how the Oscars affect film appearances and divorce, it is impossible to clearly

specify, observe, and measure exactly how the theoretical mechanisms of status disruption and status deprivation account for the empirical findings. We presented theoretical arguments why positive status shifts may have negative consequences and discussed specifically why the Oscars may have negative marital consequences, drawing on rich anecdotal evidence that suggests that actors actually experience the negative consequences. And while our results point to the critical role of Oscar nominations in increasing the divorce rate of male actors, we agree that it would be useful to be able to systematically quantify the mechanism connecting Oscars and divorce directly. Many of the actors in our sample have already passed away, however, and it is not feasible to systematically interview all the living actors, a necessary step to fully account for the intervening processes. We believe that future research should begin exploring the exact nature of the theoretical mechanisms behind the negative consequences of positive status shifts. We are happy to have begun this important research by drawing attention to the importance of studying the negative consequences of tournaments and, more specifically, having dispelled the myth of the professional Oscar curse and identified the real personal Oscar curse: The increased likelihood of divorce for males following the Oscars.



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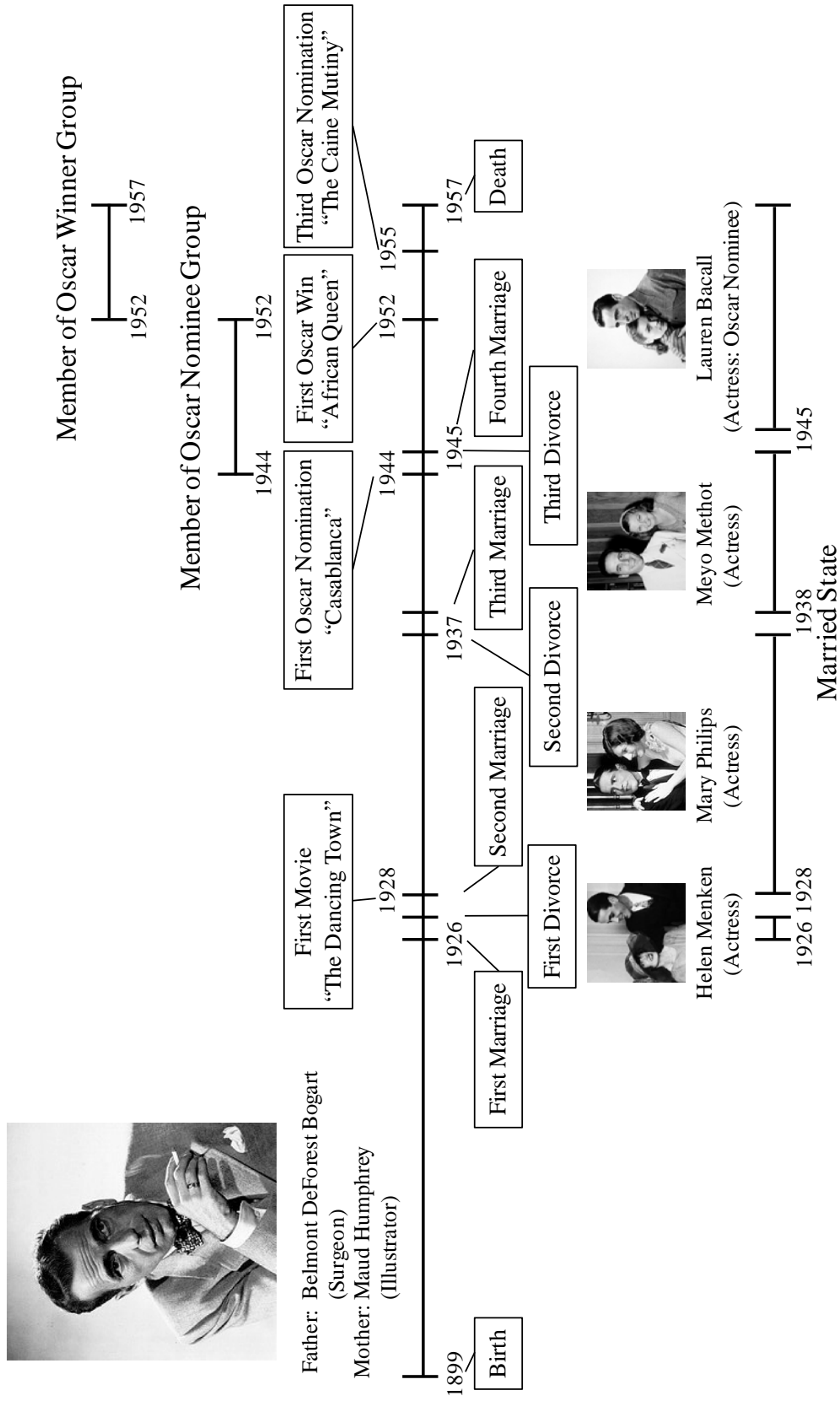
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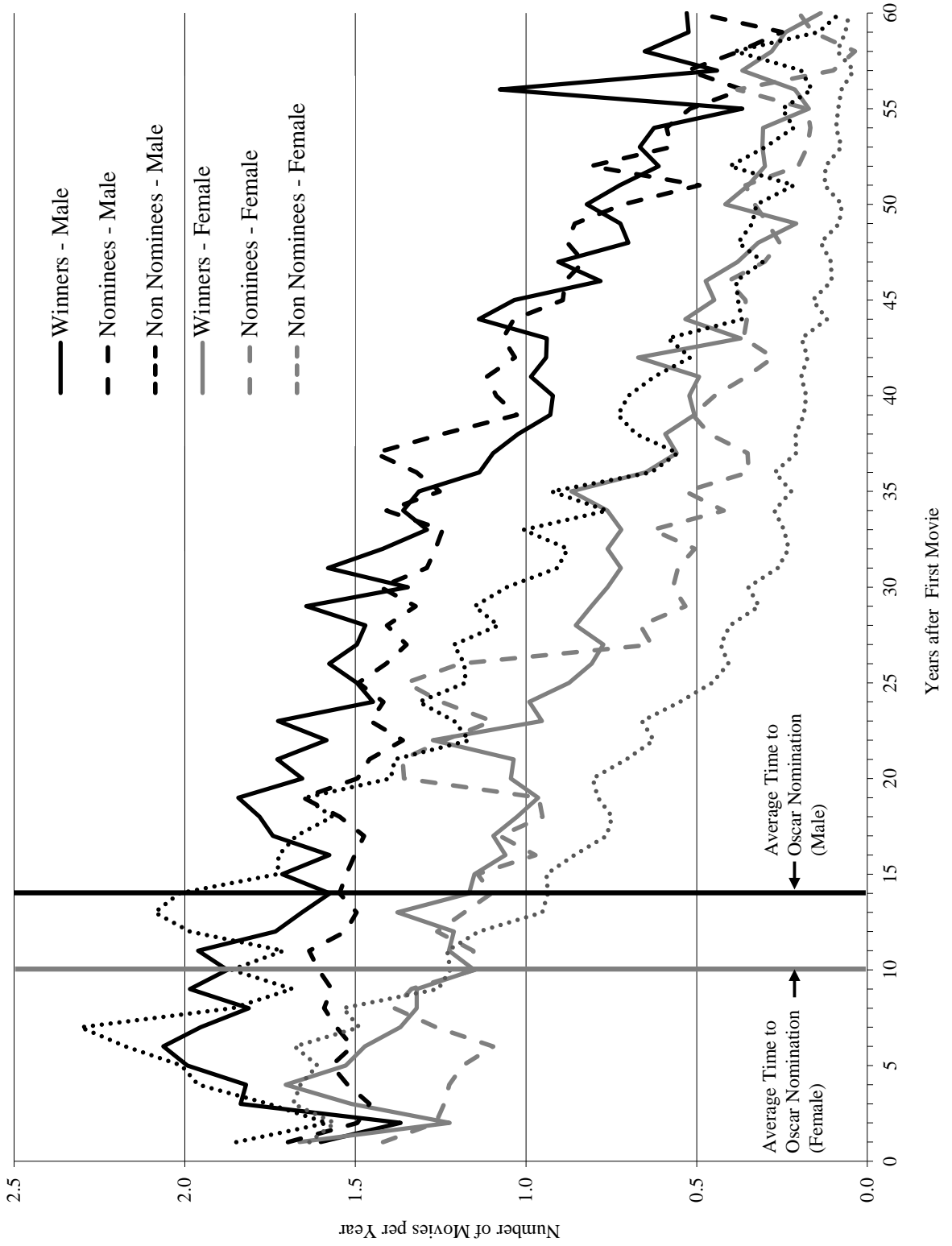
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**FIGURE 1**  
**The Life of Humphrey Bogart**



**FIGURE 2**  
**Career Developments of Oscar Winners, Nominees and Non Nominees - Male vs. Female**





**TABLE 2**  
**Negative Binomial Regression of Number of Film Appearances in the Next Five Years (Random and Fixed Effects)**

	Full		Male		Female	
	Model 1 (Random)	Model 2 (Fixed)	Model 3 (Random)	Model 4 (Fixed)	Model 5 (Random)	Model 6 (Fixed)
Oscar Winner	0.13*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.02)	0.25*** (0.03)	0.25*** (0.03)	0.36*** (0.03)	0.37*** (0.03)
Oscar Nominee	0.30*** (0.02)	0.30*** (0.02)	0.14*** (0.02)	0.15*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.03)
Male	0.30*** (0.03)					
Number of Quality Films	0.06*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.08*** (0.01)	0.07*** (0.01)
Past 5-year Movie Experience	0.09*** (0.00)	0.09*** (0.00)	0.07*** (0.00)	0.07*** (0.00)	0.09*** (0.00)	0.08*** (0.00)
Past 5-year Movie Experience Squared	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)
Action Specialization	-0.02 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.06)	0.17* (0.08)	0.17* (0.08)	-0.25** (0.09)	-0.25** (0.09)
Comedy Specialization	-0.16*** (0.04)	-0.16*** (0.04)	-0.23*** (0.05)	-0.23*** (0.06)	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)
Age: Under 20	0.44*** (0.03)	0.46*** (0.03)	-0.20*** (0.06)	-0.16** (0.06)	0.64*** (0.04)	0.64*** (0.04)
Age: 20-29	0.28*** (0.02)	0.28*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.11*** (0.02)	0.35*** (0.02)	0.36*** (0.02)
Age: 40-49	-0.24*** (0.01)	-0.25*** (0.01)	-0.21*** (0.02)	-0.23*** (0.02)	-0.30*** (0.02)	-0.31*** (0.02)
Age: 50-59	-0.44*** (0.02)	-0.45*** (0.02)	-0.42*** (0.03)	-0.44*** (0.03)	-0.57*** (0.04)	-0.59*** (0.04)
Age: 60-69	-0.79*** (0.03)	-0.81*** (0.03)	-0.78*** (0.04)	-0.83*** (0.04)	-0.96*** (0.05)	-0.98*** (0.05)
Age: 70-79	-1.37*** (0.05)	-1.37*** (0.05)	-1.52*** (0.06)	-1.59*** (0.06)	-1.26*** (0.08)	-1.30*** (0.08)
Age: 80 and Up	-2.17*** (0.10)	-2.17*** (0.10)	-2.55*** (0.15)	-2.61*** (0.15)	-1.97*** (0.13)	-2.02*** (0.13)
Tenure: 5 Years or Less	0.16*** (0.01)	0.17*** (0.01)	0.13*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.02)	0.20*** (0.02)	0.19*** (0.02)
Tenure: 25 to 50 Years	-0.19*** (0.02)	-0.19*** (0.02)	-0.12*** (0.02)	-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.25*** (0.03)	-0.23*** (0.03)
Tenure: More Than 50 Years	-0.62*** (0.06)	-0.66*** (0.06)	-0.41*** (0.08)	-0.42*** (0.08)	-0.82*** (0.09)	-0.77*** (0.09)
Era: Studio System (1930-1949)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.08* (0.04)	0.07† (0.04)	0.12** (0.04)
Era: Post War (1950-1965)	-0.27*** (0.02)	-0.27*** (0.02)	-0.23*** (0.03)	-0.27*** (0.03)	-0.30*** (0.03)	-0.26*** (0.03)
Era: New Hollywood (1966-1979)	-0.34*** (0.02)	-0.34*** (0.02)	-0.30*** (0.02)	-0.32*** (0.02)	-0.39*** (0.02)	-0.37*** (0.03)
Spouse Nominee	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)
Child Actor	-0.50*** (0.05)		-0.48*** (0.08)		-0.45*** (0.07)	
Actor Parents	0.06 (0.05)		0.09 (0.08)		0.09 (0.07)	
Divorce	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.05* (0.02)	-0.05** (0.02)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.06** (0.02)
Constant	1.00*** (0.04)	1.16*** (0.03)	1.42*** (0.05)	1.48*** (0.05)	1.14*** (0.05)	1.14*** (0.05)
$\chi^2$	20316***	19649***	7647***	7346***	13444***	13121***
Observations	30,125	29,871	13,624	13,525	16,501	16,346
Number of Actors	808	795	378	371	430	424

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05, † p<0.10



**TABLE 3**  
**Cox Proportional Hazard Model on Divorce Rates**

	Full		Male		Female	
	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12
Oscar Winner		1.10 (0.10)		3.05** (1.15)		0.15** (0.11)
Oscar Nominee		1.11 (0.09)		1.96* (0.63)		0.32† (0.21)
Male	0.79*** (0.05)	0.80*** (0.05)				
Marriage Number	1.26*** (0.05)	1.25*** (0.05)	1.15** (0.06)	1.14* (0.06)	1.35*** (0.07)	1.37*** (0.07)
Number of Quality Films	1.10 (0.08)	1.08 (0.08)	1.04 (0.11)	0.98 (0.10)	1.12 (0.11)	1.17 (0.11)
Past 5-year Movie Experience	1.02*** (0.01)	1.02*** (0.01)	1.01 (0.01)	1.01 (0.01)	1.03** (0.01)	1.03** (0.01)
Action Specialization	2.14** (0.62)	2.17** (0.63)	2.51* (1.01)	2.52* (1.04)	1.35 (0.62)	1.31 (0.59)
Comedy Specialization	1.49* (0.26)	1.52* (0.26)	1.42 (0.37)	1.44 (0.39)	1.42 (0.33)	1.40 (0.32)
Era: Studio System (1930-1949)	0.97 (0.10)	0.98 (0.10)	0.96 (0.15)	0.97 (0.15)	0.93 (0.13)	0.91 (0.13)
Era: Post War (1950-1965)	1.02 (0.09)	1.02 (0.09)	1.07 (0.14)	1.07 (0.14)	0.93 (0.12)	0.93 (0.12)
Era: New Hollywood (1966-1979)	1.27** (0.11)	1.27** (0.11)	1.39** (0.18)	1.36* (0.17)	1.15 (0.14)	1.15 (0.15)
Age: Under 30	1.58*** (0.15)	1.61*** (0.15)	1.37† (0.22)	1.52* (0.26)	1.63*** (0.19)	1.52*** (0.19)
Age: 40-49	0.70*** (0.06)	0.69*** (0.06)	0.81 (0.11)	0.76* (0.11)	0.61*** (0.08)	0.62*** (0.08)
Age: 50-59	0.53*** (0.07)	0.52*** (0.07)	0.69† (0.13)	0.62* (0.12)	0.39*** (0.09)	0.39*** (0.09)
Age: 60 and Up	0.29*** (0.06)	0.28*** (0.06)	0.43*** (0.11)	0.38*** (0.10)	0.15*** (0.06)	0.15*** (0.06)
Spouse Nominee	1.30* (0.14)	1.29* (0.14)	1.53* (0.27)	1.49* (0.26)	1.10 (0.15)	1.13 (0.16)
Child Actor	1.03 (0.15)	1.02 (0.15)	1.01 (0.24)	0.99 (0.24)	0.99 (0.18)	1.00 (0.18)
Actor Parents	1.30* (0.14)	1.30* (0.14)	1.42* (0.24)	1.45* (0.25)	1.27† (0.18)	1.30† (0.18)
$\chi^2$	175.79***	178.42***	47.57***	57.43***	108.06***	121.15***
Observations	20,837	20,837	11,106	11,106	9,731	9,731
Number of Actors	705	705	333	333	372	372
Depreciation Constant (x)		0.00		0.15		0.40

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05, † p<0.10

**TABLE 4**  
**Cox Proportional Hazard Model on Divorce Rates**  
**(First vs. Later Nomination Wins)**

	Male Model 13	Female Model 14
Oscar Win at First Nomination	3.04* (1.33)	0.12** (0.09)
Oscar Win at Later Nomination	3.07* (1.54)	0.61 (0.42)
Oscar Nominee	1.96* (0.63)	0.47 (0.22)
Marriage Number	1.14* (0.06)	1.35*** (0.08)
Number of Quality Films	0.98 (0.10)	1.17 (0.11)
Past 5-year Movie Experience	1.01 (0.01)	1.03** (0.01)
Action Specialization	2.52* (1.04)	1.35 (0.61)
Comedy Specialization	1.44 (0.39)	1.43 (0.33)
Era: Studio System (1930-1949)	0.97 (0.15)	0.90 (0.13)
Era: Post War (1950-1965)	1.07 (0.141)	0.92 (0.12)
Era: New Hollywood (1966-1979)	1.36* (0.17)	1.15 (0.15)
Age: Under 30	1.52* (0.26)	1.53*** (0.19)
Age: 40-49	0.76* (0.11)	0.62*** (0.08)
Age: 50-59	0.62* (0.12)	0.40*** (0.09)
Age: 60 and Up	0.38*** (0.10)	0.15*** (0.06)
Spouse Nominee	1.49* (0.26)	1.14 (0.16)
Child Actor	0.99 (0.24)	0.99 (0.18)
Actor Parents	1.45* (0.25)	1.27† (0.18)
$\chi^2$	57.60***	125.06***
Observations	11,106	9,731
Number of Actors	333	372
Depreciation Constant (x)	0.15	0.30

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05, † p<0.10

**TABLE 5**  
**Cox Proportional Hazard Model on Divorce Rates (Lost Nominations)**

	Male Model 15	Female Model 16
Lost Nominations (#)	1.34** (0.14)	0.76 (0.24)
Won Nominations (#)	1.58 (0.60)	0.31† (0.19)
Marriage Number	1.14* (0.06)	1.38*** (0.07)
Number of Quality Films	1.00 (0.10)	1.16 (0.11)
Past 5-year Movie Experience	1.01 (0.01)	1.03** (0.01)
Action Specialization	2.58* (1.06)	1.28 (0.59)
Comedy Specialization	1.45 (0.39)	1.39 (0.32)
Era: Studio System (1930-1949)	0.97 (0.15)	0.92 (0.13)
Era: Post War (1950-1965)	1.07 (0.14)	0.93 (0.12)
Era: New Hollywood (1966-1979)	1.37* (0.17)	1.15 (0.15)
Age: Under 30	1.46* (0.24)	1.56*** (0.19)
Age: 40-49	0.78† (0.11)	0.62*** (0.08)
Age: 50-59	0.64* (0.13)	0.39*** (0.09)
Age: 60 and Up	0.40*** (0.10)	0.15*** (0.06)
Spouse Nominee	1.50* (0.26)	1.13 (0.15)
Child Actor	0.98 (0.23)	1.01 (0.18)
Actor Parents	1.42* (0.24)	1.31* (0.18)
$\chi^2$	67.66***	117.65***
Observations	11,106	9,731
Number of Actors	333	372
Depreciation Constant (x)	0.20	0.40

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05, † p<0.10