



Marriage Foundation

Out Of The Blue: Family Breakdown in the UK

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- Our new analysis of data from the UK survey Understanding Society shows that *high conflict* warring couples are a rarity among couples who split. The vast majority of family breakdown involves *low conflict* couples, who are largely indistinguishable before they split from couples that remain together. Most of this involves *happy* couples and therefore comes out of the blue.
- Among 22,770 men and women living as a couple, only 19 of 210 (9%) married couples who split one year later, as well as 11 of 247 (4%) unmarried couples who split, could be categorised as *high conflict* couples who had reported *quarrelling a lot* in the year before the split.
- In sharp contrast 60% of the married couples who split, and 80% of the cohabiting couples who split, were *low conflict* couples who had also reported some degree of *happiness*. The remainder were *low conflict* couples who had reported they were *unhappy*.
- These findings are important for two reasons. (1) Previous research shows the most damaging separations to a child involve *low conflict* couples. (2) The remarkable lack of conflict or unhappiness immediately prior to divorce or separation suggests a great deal of family breakdown today may be a lot more salvageable than is commonly assumed.

It is commonly assumed that couples who split up do so because they are either unhappy or at war with one another.

The UK's largest household panel survey Understanding Society has twice included questions on both happiness and quarrels, during Wave 1 (2009-10) and Wave 3 (2011-12).

By comparing the marital status of couples at each wave and again one year later, it is possible to investigate the relationship quality of couples depending on whether they are still together or not one year later at Waves 2 & 4 respectively.

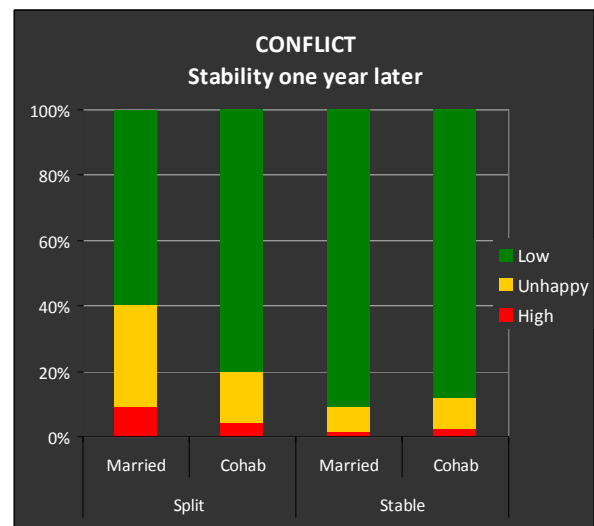
Both unhappiness and conflict are far less prevalent among couples who are about to split than one might reasonably expect.

Whereas 40% of married couples who split reported they were *unhappy* beforehand, just 9% could also be described as *high conflict* couples.

Among cohabiting couples who split, only 20% had been *unhappy* and just 4% *high conflict*.

These findings show that the overwhelming majority of UK couples who split up – whether married or not – are *low conflict* couples.

Most of these also involve couples who were previously *happy*, strongly suggesting that – for them – family breakdown comes out of the blue.



Introduction

A wide body of literature shows that the impact of parental separation or divorce is, on average, bad news for children.

Whether through the drop in income, loss of contact with one parent, or psychological impact of parental divorce, children living in lone parent families tend to fare worse on almost any negative social indicator (Amato, 2005; Brown, 2004; Panico et al, 2010).

Part of the reason is the increased likelihood that parents fall into poverty following separation and thus need additional levels of state support. For example, in the UK, 60% of lone parents receive housing benefit compared to just 10% of couple parents (DWP, 2015; ONS, 2015).

However studies that take background factors such as income and education into account still find a negative effect on children's development. For example, a recent study of 2,952 urban mothers and children showed that instability especially affected children's socio-emotional development (Lee & McLanahan, 2015).

The absence of a father also plays an important role. Younger children not living with their fathers show more socio-emotional problems post-separation which can then lead to teenage behavioural problems and subsequent reduced educational achievement. An increased risk of mental health problems can persist on into adulthood (McLanahan, Tach & Sneider, 2013).

One of the underlying explanations for this is the greater difficulty of parenting alone. Whether or not lone parents are trying to overcompensate by being more strict or more loving, lone parents are less likely than couple parents to use the authoritative 'love and boundaries' style of parenting that is typically associated with better outcomes for children (Chan & Koo, 2011).

Although the overall effect sizes of family breakdown on children are typically modest, they are remarkably consistent. For example, a well-publicised OECD meta-analysis found negative effects in 88% of US studies and 94% of non-US studies surveyed (Chapple & Richardson, 2009).

Nonetheless, there remains a great deal of variation in outcomes following family breakdown. Although children on average tend to do worse, many appear to cope well with separation and some may even do better.

One compelling explanation for this is the nature of the parental relationship prior to separation.

Among children living with parents who remain together, low levels of conflict tend to produce the best outcomes whereas high levels of conflict produce the worst.

However the reverse is true following separation. Children tend to do better if their parents exit a *high conflict* relationship and worse if they exit a *low conflict* one (Booth & Amato, 2001).

This potentially counterintuitive finding in fact makes great sense. The break-up of a *low conflict* relationship comes largely out of the blue for the children. They are then left to conclude either that relationships are profoundly unpredictable or that they are somehow responsible. It's easy to see how either of these conclusions can then undermine and sabotage their own future prospects of a loving committed relationship (Amato & DeBoer, 2001).

It is therefore important to establish the prevalence of separations that involve the end of *low conflict* relationships, not just because of the particular negative impact on children but also because of the potential for these relationships to be salvaged.

Studies in the US (Booth & Amato, 2001; Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007) have long suggested that around half of couples separate following *high conflict* relationships and half from *low conflict* relationships.

However, in the most comprehensive recent analysis of the trajectory of marriages prior to divorce, this study's co-author (James, 2015) demonstrated that high conflict marriages are even less common. Only 14% of couples headed for divorce showed high levels of conflict, 13% showed a sharp decline in communication, and 26% showed a sharp decline in marital happiness.

In a UK survey of 3,500 divorced individuals, 40% said *drifting apart* was the reason they had divorced (YouGov, 2005). However incongruity between male and female responses suggests post-divorce responses are biased.

So what actually happens before divorce in the UK is little known. We therefore believe our analysis to be the first UK study to investigate the prevalence of *high* and *low conflict* relationships among couples and parents who subsequently stay together or split up.

Method

Understanding Society is a longitudinal study of over 40,000 households in the United Kingdom about how social and economic circumstance, attitudes and behaviours, and health are changing in the 21st century.

In the first (2009-10) and third (2011-12) waves of the study, participants were asked how happy they were with their relationship and also how often they argued. This gave real time indicators of relationship quality.

For arguments (*How often do you quarrel with your partner?*), responses were given on a 6-point scale from *Never* to *All of the time*. We collapsed these to a 3-point scale of *Never*, *Some* and *A lot*.

For happiness (*How happy are you in your relationship?*), responses were given on a 7-point scale from *Perfect* to *Extremely unhappy*. Again we collapsed these to a 3-point scale of *Happy*, *Somewhat* and *Unhappy*.

Using measures of marital status, we could identify individuals who were either still married or cohabiting, or who had split up, between the 1st & 2nd and 3rd & 4th waves.

We then combined data from either the 1st & 2nd waves or 3rd & 4th waves, whilst not measuring the same person twice. We also widened the analysis to include all couples, married and cohabiting, and not just those with children.

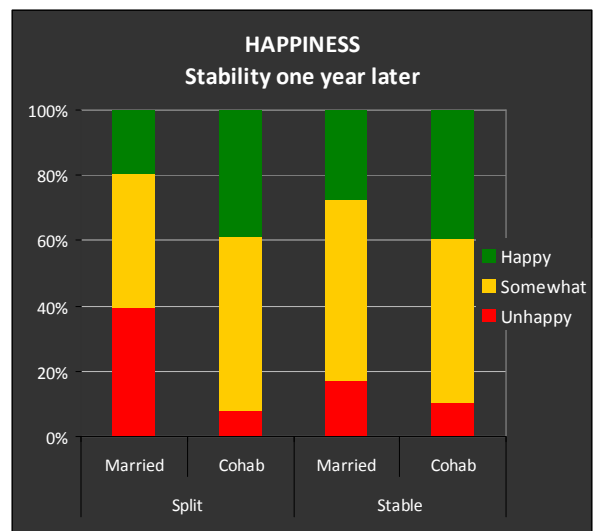
The main effect of using groups of waves (rather than one) was to boost the numbers of those who had split to 457 men and women out of a total sample of 22,770.

Results

Among couples who split, 40% of those formerly married and 8% of those formerly cohabiting reported that they were *unhappy in their relationship* within a year of splitting up.

Somewhat surprisingly, 20% of the married couples and 39% of the cohabiting couples also reported that they were *happy* before their split.

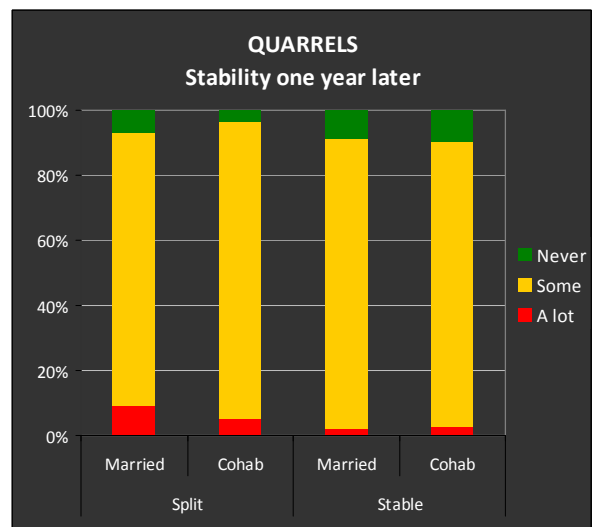
Overall, almost all couples (91%) reported they were *happy* to some extent. Just 9% of all couples said they were *unhappy* at the time of the survey.



Whether couples stay together or split up, the prevalence of frequent quarrelling is low.

Just 2% of all couples reported quarrelling *a lot* at the time of the survey. The overwhelming majority (89%) said that they have *some* quarrels and 9% *never* quarrel.

Among married couples who split, only 9% reported quarrelling *a lot* within a year of splitting up. For cohabiting couples who went on to split, the proportion was lower at just 5%.



Combining these measures together, we regrouped couples into three conflict categories.

Where couples argued a lot and were anything less than fully *happy*, we labelled them *high conflict*. Where they argued little and were at least somewhat *happy*, we labelled them *low conflict*. For the remainder who didn't argue much but were *unhappy* – along with a handful of *happy* arguers – we labelled them *unhappy*.

A full set of combined results can be seen in the table below.

COMBINED TABLE - MARITAL STATUS AT WAVES 2 & 4

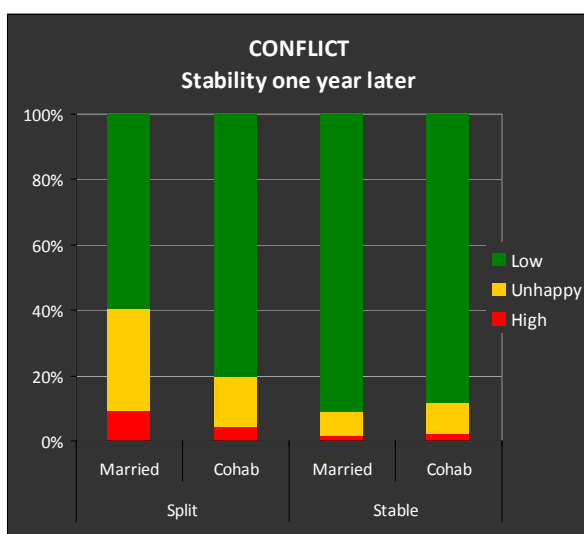
QUARRELS		A lot	Some	Never	n=
Split	Married	9%	84%	7%	210
	Cohab	5%	91%	4%	247
Stable	Married	2%	89%	9%	19,035
	Cohab	3%	88%	10%	3,278
All		2%	89%	9%	
n=		476	20,278	2,016	22,770

HAPPINESS		Happy	Somewhat	Unhappy	n=
Split	Married	20%	41%	40%	210
	Cohab	39%	53%	8%	19,035
Stable	Married	28%	55%	17%	247
	Cohab	40%	50%	10%	3,278
All		38%	53%	9%	
n=		8,760	12,015	1,995	22,770

CONFLICT OVERALL		High	Unhappy	Low	n=
Split	Married	9%	31%	60%	210
	Cohab	4%	15%	80%	247
Stable	Married	2%	7%	91%	19,035
	Cohab	2%	10%	88%	3,278
All		2%	8%	90%	
n=		424	1,817	20,529	22,770

The result is that the overwhelming majority of couples, whether they stay together or split, can be categorised as *low conflict*. Just 2% of all couples are *high conflict* and a further 8% are *unhappy* but not especially conflicted.

Among those who do split up, 60% of those previously married and 80% of those previously cohabiting were *low conflict* couples, whereas only 9% of those previously married and 4% of those previously cohabiting were *high conflict* couples.



Finally, the proportion of couples who split is low across all categories. Those in the *high conflict* and *unhappy* categories are more likely to split.

For previously married couples, these proportions are 6% and 4% respectively. For previously cohabiting couples, the risk is doubled to 13% and 11% respectively.

Among *low conflict* couples, fewer than 1% of the previously married split compared to 6% of the previously cohabiting.

SPLITS AS % OF ALL COUPLES

	High	Unhappy	Low	n=
Married	6%	4%	1%	19245
Cohabiting	13%	11%	6%	3525
All	7%	6%	2%	
n=	30	104	323	22770

Discussion

Our analysis of up-to-date data from Understanding Society reveals for the first time that the overwhelming majority of family breakdown in the UK can be described as *low conflict*. These findings are in line with US findings (James, 2015).

Among married couples who split, sixty percent were neither quarrelling a lot nor especially unhappy in the year prior to their divorce. More remarkably, only nine percent had *high conflict* relationships involving both unhappiness and a lot of quarrelling.

For cohabiting couples who split, the proportions are even more surprising. Eighty percent involved the dissolution of *low conflict* relationships while only four percent were *high conflict* relationships.

All of this matters for two reasons.

First, previous research from the US shows that *low conflict* break-up is the most damaging for children. It comes out of the blue and makes no sense to them. This can go on to profoundly sabotage and undermine their own view of commitment as they progress into adult life. Further research is now needed to establish whether this is as true in the UK.

In a separate analysis (not shown) we found that the kind of *happy low conflict* family breakdown that comes completely out of the blue is up to nine times more prevalent among unmarried couples than married couples.

Second, our finding offers real hope that the current high levels of family breakdown are far from inevitable.

Despite an overall fall in divorce rates, the number of lone parents in the UK has doubled since 1980 (Benson, 2015). The best explanation for this is the trend away from relatively stable marriage and toward relatively unstable cohabitation.

Establishing for the first time that the vast majority of breakdown also involves couples in *low conflict* relationships now makes it plausible to imagine a scenario where overall breakdown rates return to 1980 levels or below.

Although it is easy to understand both why the handful of *high conflict* couples and the minority of unhappy *low conflict* couples split up, it is a lot harder to identify with the reasons why the majority of couples who split – both men and women – appear to be both *low conflict* and somewhat *happy* with their relationship just months before it implodes.

Recent US research by this study's co-author (James, 2015) identified possible reasons as the decline of the importance of permanence in marriage, changing norms about whether individuals need to stay in a relationship that isn't working, and creeping consumerism that increasingly identifies marriage and relationships as a disposable good.

Similar UK research on the trajectory of marital quality prior to divorce and separation needs to be conducted.

If the reasons identified in the US also prove to be the case in the UK, the question then becomes what kind of changes in individual attitudes and national policies are needed to improve stability.

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Acknowledgments

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