



Marriage Foundation

Get married BEFORE you have children

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- In the first study of its kind in the UK, we find that the odds of staying together are greatest among couples who marry before having children. This finding is independent of mothers' age and education.
- One quarter of couples who married before having children split up, compared to more than half of couples who married later and two thirds of couples who never married at all.
- Staying together boosts family income by almost exactly the same amount as if the mother has a university degree.

We analysed the family history data of 1,783 mothers with 14 or 15 year old children, sourced from wave 1 of Understanding Society in 2009-10

We re-classified mothers into three new categories – couples who married before their child was born, couples who married after their child was born, and couples who never married – looking at whether both parents were still living together or not 14 or 15 years later.

76% of mothers who married before giving birth remained intact compared to 44% of those who married later and 31% of those who never married.

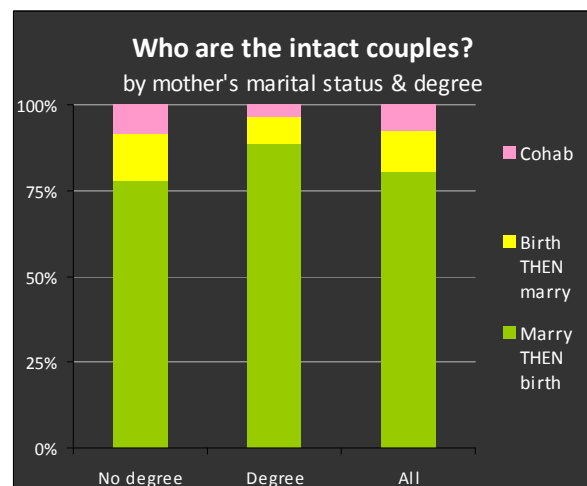
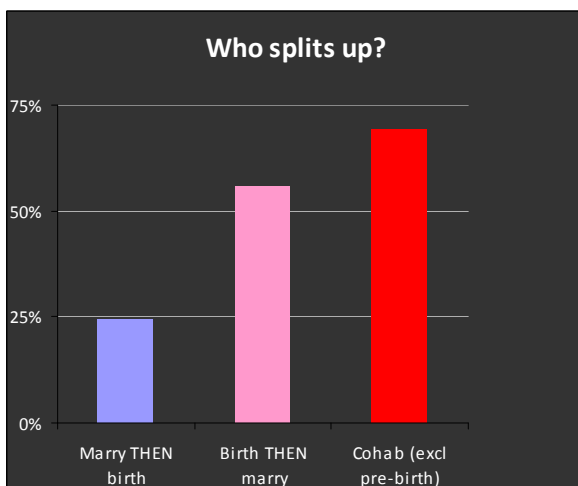
In other words, a clear majority of couples were not married when their child was born split up.

The result was that almost all intact couples with teenagers were married – 81% before their child was born plus another 12% afterwards – leaving just 8% of intact couples who had never married.

There were some initial differences between these groups. Mothers who were married before having their child were on average four years older and more likely to have a degree.

Nevertheless, neither factor had any meaningful effect on stability. Age had no effect. Having a degree had only marginal impact. The biggest effect was not being married at the child's birth.

Staying together was also found to have the same positive impact on subsequent income as having a degree.



My thanks to Professor Stephen McKay, University of Lincoln, for his analysis of data from Understanding Society

Marriage Foundation Briefing Note

Introduction

Family breakdown is estimated to cost the taxpayer £47 billion per year (*Ashcroft, 2015*), equivalent to more than the defence budget and around half of the education budget.

Despite the enormous cost of picking up the pieces, it is hard to discern any government policy whatsoever aimed at bringing this rising problem under control.

Part of the problem is the widespread assumption that family breakdown is inevitable. Policy papers talk of improving relationship quality (e.g. *Field 2010, Relationships Alliance 2014*). Yet it is far from obvious how this could be achieved on any kind of meaningful scale and whether it would have the desired impact anyway.

Research has long identified the structures within which families begin their journey of parenthood. The Office for National Statistics produce excellent annual data on births to married couples, to dual registered parents with either the same or different addresses, and to sole registered parents (*ONS 2014*).

Research has also identified what families look like when their children become teenagers. Large scale surveys, such as the Census and Understanding Society show the proportion of children living with both natural parents, whether married or not (*Benson 2013*).

However gluing these two sets of data together is not always possible. For example, a couple recorded as married with teens in a current survey may have begun family life as a married couple, a cohabiting couple, or as a couple with a somewhat looser arrangement. With the exception of *Kiernan (1999)*, whose study was limited to parents of five year olds, few if any research papers have tracked the stability of couples into their children's GCSE years.

For the first time – using 2009-10 data from wave 1 of Understanding Society – this paper analyses the source of family stability and breakdown affecting children, in terms of who marries, who doesn't, and who stays together, from birth of a child until they become teenagers.

Understanding Society

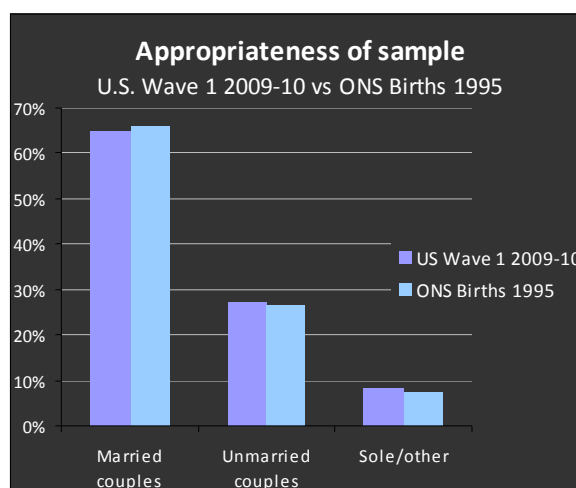
Understanding Society is the largest ongoing household panel survey in the UK, comprising 40,000 households, significantly boosting and expanding upon the old British Household Panel Survey (*University of Essex et al, 2014*).

This analysis uses data from the first wave of interviews, taken during 2009 and 2010, looking only at mothers with children aged 14 or 15 (the two year age span effectively doubles the available data).

Understanding Society classifies marital status in at least eleven different, and often overlapping, categories – such as “*married to current partner, post birth*” and “*divorced or separated*”. These classifications were reduced to the desired groupings of those who married before their child was born, those who married after their child was born, and those who never married at all. Where there was doubt, line by line analysis usually clarified the situation. (*14 mothers, 0.8% were excluded owing to too much missing information on status or dates*)

The distribution of the sample by marital status at birth corresponds almost exactly to official birth data from ONS 14/15 years earlier in 1995.

In the Understanding Society sample of 1,783 mothers, using our classification, 64.8% of mothers were married when their child was born, corresponding closely to the 66.1% of actual births in 1995 to married mothers. Similarly, our classification identified 27.0% of mothers as unmarried couples, close to the 26.5% of dual registered births in 1995. Finally, we identified 8.2% of mothers as having no partner at time of birth, again close to the 7.4% of births to sole registered mothers.



Who marries?

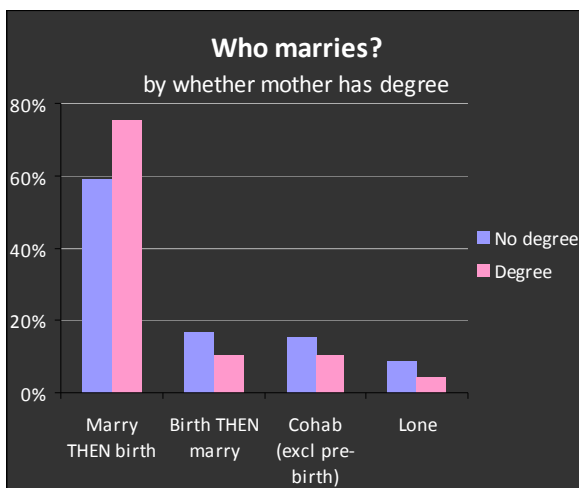
In our sample of 1,783 mothers, we identified 1,155 who were married before the birth of their child, 250 who married subsequently, 232 who began as a couple but never married, and a further 146 who did not have a partner at time of birth.

The analysis takes account of the 'weights' applied to the data by the data collectors, to deal with initial non-response and the over-sampling of some groups.

In order to illuminate potential selection effects, we subdivided each of these groups by whether the mother had a university degree or not. Previous research has identified mothers' education as a selection factor into marriage (*Goodman & Greaves 2010*).

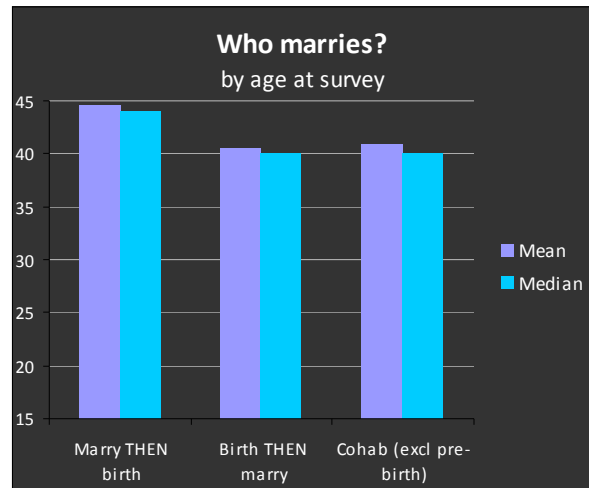
We found evidence that better educated mothers were more likely to have married before their child was born. Nonetheless this reflected a tendency rather than an absolute distinction.

59% of mothers without degrees married before their child's birth, compared to 75% of mothers with a degree. Altogether 24% of mothers without a degree never married, compared to 14% of mothers with a degree.



Other research from Understanding Society has shown that one third of cohabiting mothers (with children of all ages) are aged under 30, compared to one in ten married mothers (*Berrington & Stone, 2015*).

Among only those mothers with 14 or 15 year old children in our sample, we found that the median age of those who married before having children was four years older than those who married later or never married at all.



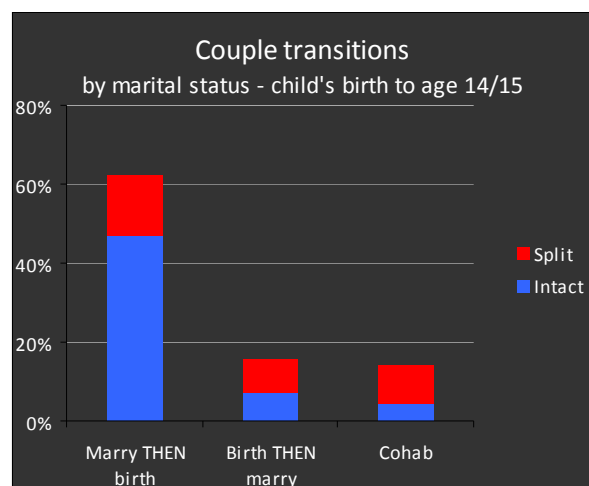
Who stays together & who splits up?

The charts below show that all groups experience some level of both stability and breakdown.

Altogether 58% of the entire sample remained intact as two parent families while bringing up their children, compared to 42% who did not.

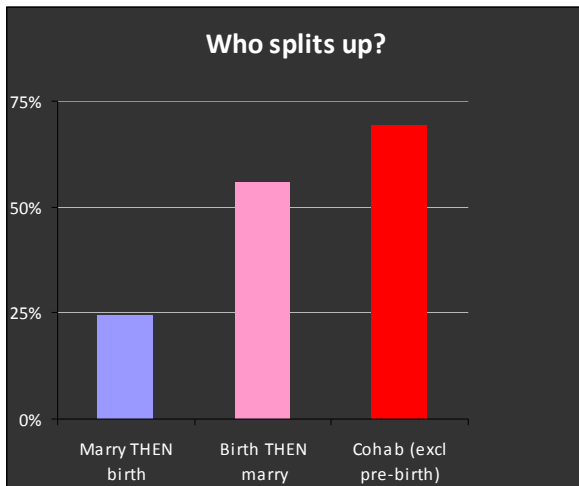
- 47% of the 62% parents who married before their child's birth remained intact.
- 7% of the 16% parents who married after their child's birth remained intact.
- 4% of the 14% parents who never married remained intact.
- A further 8% parents did not establish a relationship after their child was born.

One brand new finding was that just over half of unmarried couples subsequently married, meaning that a total of 78% of the entire sample of mothers eventually married, whether before or after the birth of their child.



In terms of stability within each group, mothers living as unmarried couples when their child was born were far more likely to split up, regardless of whether they married later on or not, compared to mothers who were initially married.

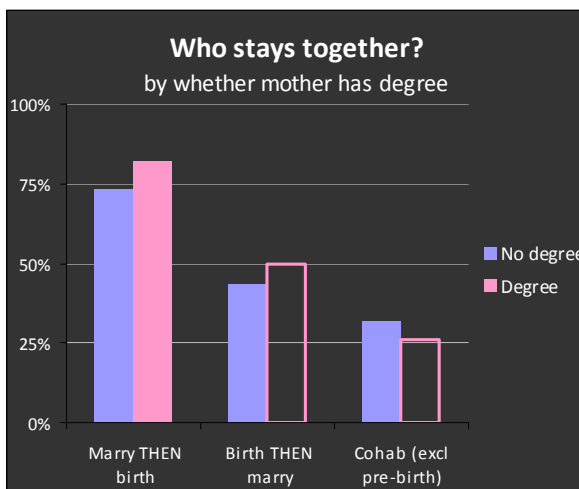
- 24% of initially married mothers split up.
- 56% of later married mothers split up.
- 69% of never married mothers split up.



Subdividing these groups by education, initially married mothers were more likely to remain an intact couple if they had a degree (82% intact) compared to no degree (74% intact).

The small number of mothers with a degree in each of the other two groups made further comparisons indicative at best.

For those without a degree, 44% of mothers who married later were intact compared to 32% who never married.



How do intact couples differ?

One of the key effects of family breakdown is that it divides economic resources. As a result, lone parents are far more likely to require financial support: for example, 63% of lone parents receive Housing Benefit compared to 10% of couple parents (*DWP 2014*).

At the same time, household income also influences the ability of couples to remain together. Couples on low income are more likely to split up (*Benson 2006*).

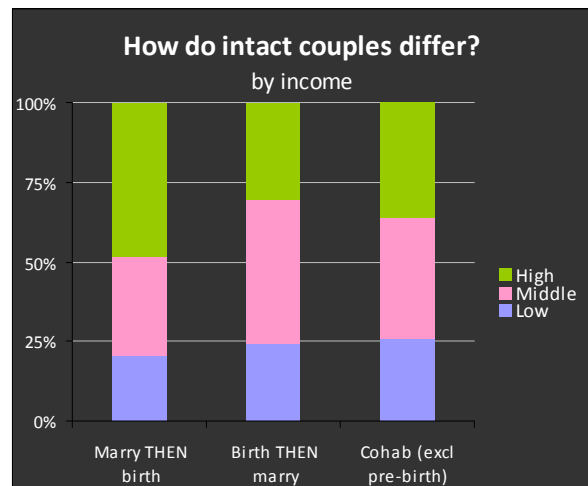
So using current household income as an indicator of stability needs to be treated with caution.

In our analysis, income has been divided into equal tertiles (three groups).

Intact couples who had married before their child was born were disproportionately likely to be in the high income group. This could either reflect higher earnings to begin with, or the positive effect on work of starting off parenthood with a clearer sense of future.

For both of the other intact groups, whether they married later or not at all, there was a more even spread of income.

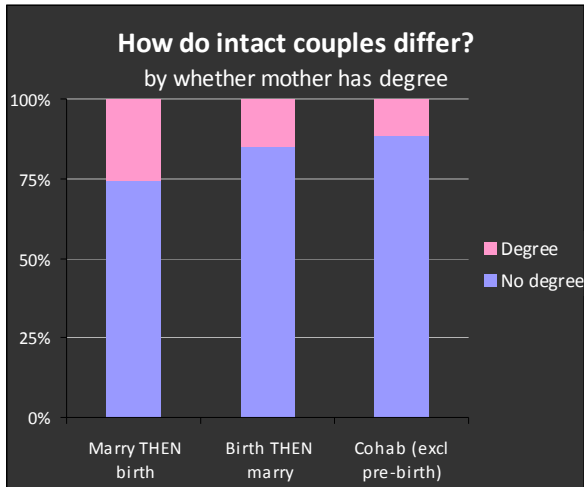
Alas, our data does not allow us to draw any terribly useful conclusions.



However it is notable that the vast majority of all groups who remained intact did not hold a university degree.

74% of intact mothers who married before they had their child did not have a degree. This compares with 76% of all mothers who married before having a child and 80% of all mothers.

Although the proportion of intact mothers with a degree in the other two categories is higher, at 85% and 89% respectively, the numbers are once again small and indicative at best.



Who ends up where?

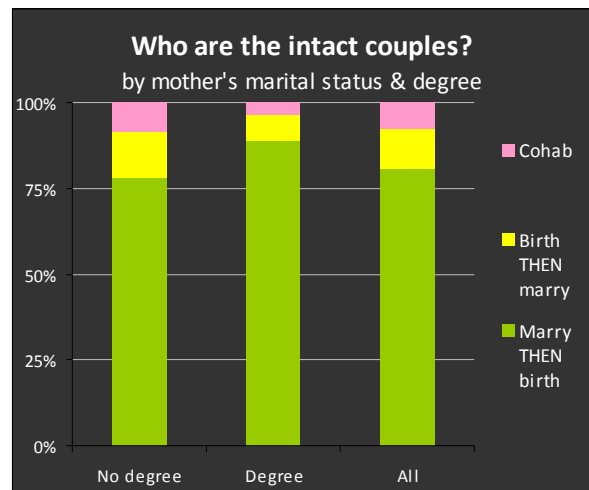
Previous research, using second wave 2010-11 data from Understanding Society (Benson 2013), showed that 93% of intact couples with 13 to 15 year old teenagers were married.

Unsurprisingly, our sample of parents of 14 and 15 year old teens from the first wave 2009-10 produced a similar finding: that 92% of intact couples were married. This comprised 81% married before having a child and 12% married later.

(Numbers don't add up to 92% due to rounding)

- Among mothers without a degree, 78% were married before their child's birth and 13% afterwards, making a total of 91%.
- Among intact couples with a degree, 89% were married before their child's birth and 75% afterwards, totalling 96%.

Therefore whereas 9% of intact couples without a degree never married, only 4% of intact couples with a degree were unmarried.

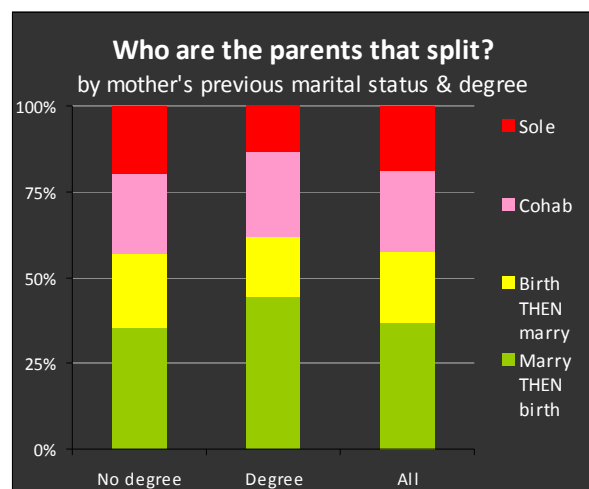


The source of family breakdown includes the 8% of all mothers who did not begin parenthood as a couple.

- They account for 19% of parents not living together when their children are aged 14 or 15.
- Parents who were married when their child was born account for 37% of subsequent breakdown.
- Unmarried couples account for the remaining 45%, with 21% coming from those who marry later and divorce and 24% from those who never married and separated.

Because non-degree holders comprise 85% of all breakdowns, their figures look broadly similar to the overall totals.

Figures for degree holders are also similar but can only be indicative due to the low numbers.



What difference does marriage make?

In our final two models, we controlled for age and education in order to establish the unique influence of marrying before having a child and of staying together as an intact couple.

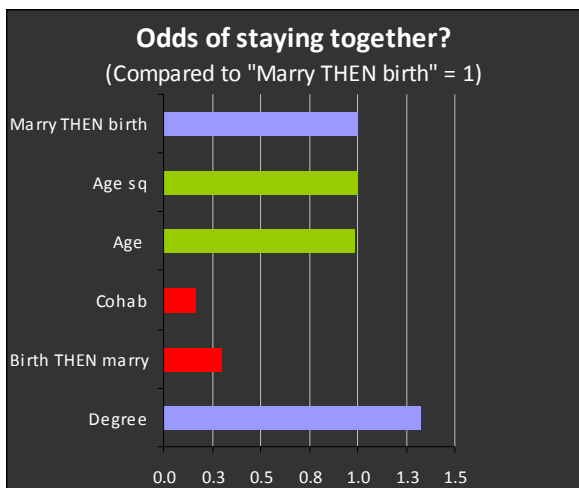
Perhaps surprisingly, age – using two different methods – was found to have no effect whatsoever on the odds of staying together. So even though couples who married before having a child were on average four years older than couples who married later or not at all, that age difference had no effect on whether couples stayed together.

Also surprisingly, although less clear cut, the odds of staying together as a couple were only slightly greater for mothers with a university degree, regardless of age and marital status. At $p=.09$, even this effect was only marginally significant.

What did make a big difference was not marrying before having a child.

- The odds of staying together for those who marry after their child's birth – rather than before – were more than 3:1 against.
- For those not marrying at all, the odds of remaining together were 6:1 against.

Both of these findings were independent of age and education and both statistically significant, $p<.001$.



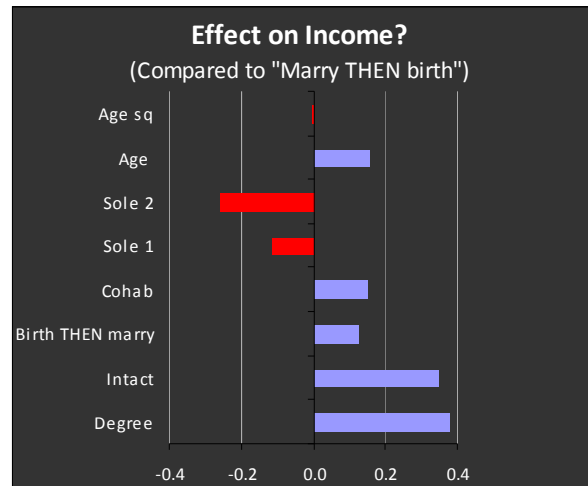
In our regression model, we looked at the unique influence of each factor on subsequent income (using the logarithm of equivalised income as the dependent variable).

This time, age and education influenced income in the expected direction. Being older and having a degree were both linked to higher income.

Compared to those who married before their child was born, unmarried couples who married later or not at all were likely to have 12% to 15% higher income.

However this excludes the influence of staying together, which had as large an effect on income as having a degree. Staying together increased income by 35% whereas having a degree increased income by 38%.

The only factor that had a unique negative effect on income was being a sole parent at birth.



Summary

- To our knowledge, this is the first study to look at couples who are married or not when their child is born and find out what happens to them by the time their child is aged 14 or 15.
- We used an up-to-date sample of 1,783 mothers from Wave One 2009-10 of Understanding Society, which allowed us to re-classify mothers into three different groups – mothers who married before having a child, mothers who married later and mothers who never married at all.
- Those who married before their child was born tended to be a few years older and more likely to have a degree, compared to mothers who began parenthood unmarried. Half of the unmarried couples went on to marry later.
- Mothers who married before having a child, especially those with a degree, were most likely to have stayed together compared to both other groups. However the vast majority of those who did stay together, in all three categories, did not have a degree.
- In our sample, altogether 42% of mothers who started parenthood as a couple had split up by the time their children were in their early teens.
- Put another way, 24% of mothers who started off married split up, compared to 56% of those who started off unmarried and later married and 69% of those who never married.
- The most stable group were mothers who began parenthood both with a degree and married. Only 18% of these split up.

(All of these figures exclude mothers who started parenthood as a lone parent)

- Among couples who remained intact, 92% were married (81 of 92 before their child was born) and 8% had never married. Among degree holders, only 4% had never married.
- The odds of staying together were lowest for those who married after their child was born or never married at all. Unexpectedly, age made no difference. Having a degree made only a marginal difference.
- Finally, staying together had the same positive effect on income as having a degree.

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Acknowledgments

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