



Marriage Foundation

Happy Families: Men Behaving Better

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- According to the Office for National Statistics, overall crude divorce rates are down by one third from the peak levels in the early 1990s and 2000s. However comparing total divorces from one year to the next ('year of divorce') tells us little about underlying trends. Our method looks at the trend in divorce rates over time for each individual year of marriage ('year of marriage').
- Analysis of new data specially commissioned by Marriage Foundation reveals that almost all of this fall in divorce rates is due to fewer divorces granted to wives during the early years of marriage – strongly suggesting that today's newlywed husbands are doing better.
- Compared to 1986, the worst year in which to have married, cumulative divorces granted to wives have now fallen by half during the early years of marriage. In sharp contrast, cumulative divorce rates granted to husbands have changed little, if anything rising slightly.
- This gender shift was not apparent ten years ago. The simplest explanation is reduced social and family pressure for men to marry. Newlywed husbands within the last decade have become more intentional about their entry into marriage, leading to happier wives and lower divorce.

Most analysis and commentary on divorce rates attempts to make sense of changes to the number of divorces in one year compared to the previous year. However this simple comparison conflates marriages of short and long duration.

Our method follows the track of all marriages that begin in the same year, thus allowing a much more interesting comparison of couples who married in, say, 1970 with couples who married in 1980, 1990, or 2000.

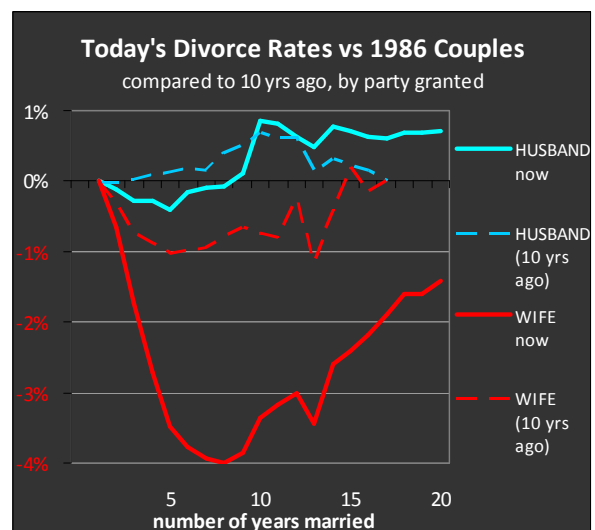
Our analysis shows that 1986 – coincidentally my own wedding year – was the worst year in history to marry in terms of divorce rates. After 26 years of marriage so far, 41% of 1986 weddings have already ended. On present trends, a further 3% are likely to do so.

This month, we commissioned new data from the Office for National Statistics that distinguishes between divorces granted to husbands or wives.

Compared to the track of 1986 couples, divorces granted to wives have fallen by half in the early years of marriage, reducing by a peak of 4% for marriages lasting eight years. In sharp contrast,

the change in divorces among husbands ranges from a maximum fall of 0.4% to a maximum increase of 0.9%. This gender difference was not apparent ten years ago.

Explanations for the fall in divorce rates must account for this gender effect. Our account, outlined above, is consistent with commitment theory showing men's – but not women's – commitment is based on decisions.



Discussion

This new analysis reveals a big shift that has taken place during the last decade in the way couples either stay married or get divorced in their early years of marriage. Comparing the latest divorce rates for couples who married one, two, three, years ago etc with only the couples who got married in 1986 – the worst year in UK history to get married in terms of subsequent divorce rates – a striking gender difference emerges.

Whereas there has been no appreciable change in the rate at which husbands are granted divorces today compared to the 1986 intake of couples, divorces granted to wives have fallen sharply (see Table 1). Had we been investigating this phenomenon ten years ago, we might have noticed the very first signs of such divergence but nothing terribly meaningful (see Table 2).

In other words, something specific has changed in the last decade to make fewer women file for divorce during the early years of marriage.

Presented differently, and highlighted by the orange oval in this chart, the biggest fall in divorce rates for wives has taken place between the second and fifth years of marriage.

The net effect of this is to reduce the peak years of divorce – years three to six have consistently been the worst since the 1960s – and now produce a flatter peak between years five and ten.

What might explain this shift? Have wives become more tolerant of their husbands in these early years of marriage during the past decade?

It's not at all obvious why shifts in work patterns or perhaps a continued increase in age at marriage should have affected women only in such a dramatic way. These shifts would presumably have affected men equally. Yet they haven't.

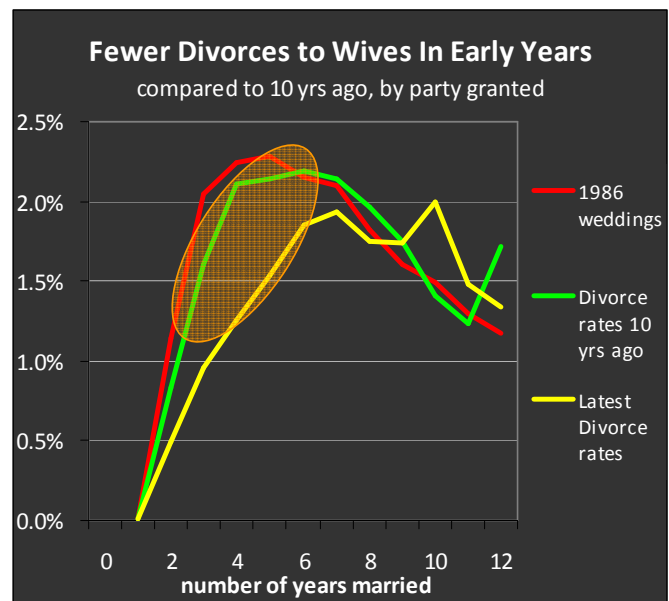
The most plausible explanation comes from reduced social and family pressure to marry. This would especially affect the level of commitment among men, which is much more dependent on making clear and deliberate decisions about the future. Those men who do marry today do so with clear intent.

Here's how it might work.

Imagine a man who marries in the 1990s under social pressure from his family or friends. *Do the right thing*, they say. *Make an honest woman of her. Tie the knot.* So he enters marriage under a certain amount of duress, without ever fully buying in. His sense of dedication is weaker than that of his wife. However, so long as things are good, he is broadly content with his new arrangement. But over time, and perhaps with the arrival of a young baby, inevitable little conflicts emerge between him and his wife. Instead of dealing with them responsibly, he feels less constrained in the way he behaves because he knows he never really bought in to a long term plan in the first place. But just as he was sucked into marriage without making the decision for himself, inertia and indecision keep him in the marriage. His behaviour appears increasingly indifferent and disrespectful to his wife. After only a few years, she has become well aware of his indifference. Fed up with treading on eggshells around him, it is she who pulls the plug.

Imagine now a man who marries in the 2000s. He is under no such family or social pressure to marry. So when he does commit to his wife and his marriage, he commits with all his heart. When the conflicts emerge, he knows that he has a responsibility to sort them out. There is a long term plan at stake here. His wife appreciates the effort he makes to sort things out and thus knows he is fully committed to her. Serious difficulties are therefore much less likely to materialise in these early years.

Almost the entire fall in divorce rates over the last ten years can be explained by this: a few less men half-heartedly 'sliding' into marriage and a few more men 'deciding' into marriage with real intent.



Data

**TABLE 1: SNAPSHOT OF DIVORCE RATES [TODAY](#)
COMPARED TO COUPLES WHO MARRIED IN 1986**

YEAR OF WEDDING	YEARS MARRIED	GRANTED TO HUSBAND			GRANTED TO WIFE		
		1986 COUPLES	LATEST COUPLES	LATEST VS 1986	1986 COUPLES	LATEST COUPLES	LATEST VS 1986
2012	1	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
2011	2	0.3%	0.4%	-0.1%	1.2%	0.5%	-0.7%
2010	3	0.8%	1.0%	-0.3%	3.2%	1.5%	-1.7%
2009	4	1.5%	1.8%	-0.3%	5.4%	2.7%	-2.7%
2008	5	2.2%	2.6%	-0.4%	7.7%	4.2%	-3.5%
2007	6	3.2%	3.4%	-0.2%	9.9%	6.1%	-3.8%
2006	7	4.1%	4.2%	-0.1%	12.0%	8.0%	-3.9%
2005	8	4.7%	4.8%	-0.1%	13.8%	9.8%	-4.0%
2004	9	5.5%	5.4%	0.1%	15.4%	11.5%	-3.9%
2003	10	6.9%	6.0%	0.9%	16.9%	13.5%	-3.4%
2002	11	7.3%	6.5%	0.8%	18.2%	15.0%	-3.2%
2001	12	7.6%	7.0%	0.6%	19.4%	16.3%	-3.0%
2000	13	7.9%	7.4%	0.5%	20.4%	17.0%	-3.4%
1999	14	8.6%	7.8%	0.8%	21.4%	18.8%	-2.6%
1998	15	9.0%	8.2%	0.7%	22.3%	19.9%	-2.4%
1997	16	9.3%	8.6%	0.6%	23.2%	21.1%	-2.2%
1996	17	9.6%	9.0%	0.6%	24.1%	22.3%	-1.9%
1995	18	10.1%	9.4%	0.7%	25.0%	23.4%	-1.6%
1994	19	10.4%	9.7%	0.7%	25.7%	24.1%	-1.6%
1993	20	10.7%	10.0%	0.7%	26.4%	24.9%	-1.4%

**TABLE 2: SNAPSHOT OF DIVORCE RATES [TEN YEARS AGO](#)
COMPARED TO COUPLES WHO MARRIED IN 1986**

YEAR OF WEDDING	YEARS MARRIED	GRANTED TO HUSBAND			GRANTED TO WIFE		
		1986 COUPLES	10 YR AGO COUPLES	10 YR AGO VS 1986	1986 COUPLES	10 YR AGO COUPLES	10 YR AGO VS 1986
2002	1	0.0%	0.0%	-0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-0.0%
2001	2	0.4%	0.4%	-0.0%	1.2%	0.8%	-0.3%
2000	3	1.0%	1.1%	0.0%	3.2%	2.5%	-0.7%
1999	4	1.8%	1.9%	0.1%	5.4%	4.6%	-0.9%
1998	5	2.6%	2.8%	0.1%	7.7%	6.7%	-1.0%
1997	6	3.4%	3.6%	0.2%	9.9%	8.9%	-1.0%
1996	7	4.2%	4.3%	0.2%	12.0%	11.0%	-0.9%
1995	8	4.8%	5.2%	0.4%	13.8%	13.0%	-0.8%
1994	9	5.4%	5.9%	0.5%	15.4%	14.7%	-0.7%
1993	10	6.0%	6.7%	0.7%	16.9%	16.1%	-0.7%
1992	11	6.5%	7.1%	0.6%	18.2%	17.4%	-0.8%
1991	12	7.0%	7.6%	0.6%	19.4%	19.1%	-0.3%
1990	13	7.4%	7.6%	0.1%	20.4%	19.3%	-1.2%
1989	14	7.8%	8.2%	0.3%	21.4%	21.0%	-0.4%
1988	15	8.2%	8.5%	0.2%	22.3%	22.5%	0.2%
1987	16	8.6%	8.8%	0.2%	23.2%	23.1%	-0.2%
1986	17	9.0%	9.0%	0.0%	24.1%	24.1%	0.0%

Source: MF analysis of ONS data commissioned July 2012 and updated December 2015

Summary of Our “Year of Marriage” Method for Calculating Divorce Rates

MF DIVORCE RATE METHODOLOGY

Year of marriage	Marriages	Divorces, by duration			Divorce rate		
		<1 yr	<2 yr	<3 yr	<1 yr	<2 yr	<3 yr
2010	A	...	...	...	...	...	...
2011	B	...	...	...	...	...	...
2012	C	...	...	...	...	...	...
2013		X	Y	Z	X/C	Y/B	Z/A

Note that our overall “Divorce rate” estimates will be slightly lower than those produced by the Office for National Statistics. Our “Marriages” data represents the number of weddings in England and Wales in any particular year PLUS an additional 50% of the annual ONS estimate for “weddings overseas”. This has the effect of boosting the number of “Marriages” in recent years by 10-15%, which effectively reduces “Divorce rates” by duration of marriage by some 10-15%. This has no effect whatsoever on the gender differences I describe in this note.

Top tips for making sure your marriage stays intact

A full article is available at marriagefoundation.org.uk under ‘Get Help’

1. **Choose to value your marriage** – it all boils down to attitude. You need to buy in to the importance of your marriage and put your spouse first. Everything else will follow.
2. **Get properly informed** – find out what you are doing wrong and what you need to do right. Read a top relationship book, such as The Marriage Book or Let’s Stick Together.
3. **Get properly skilled** – learn the skills that make up a happy marriage and put them into practice. Go on The Marriage Course.
4. **Get properly supported** – the very best help comes from your own married friends who will have been through their own troubles. You don’t have to do this on your own.