

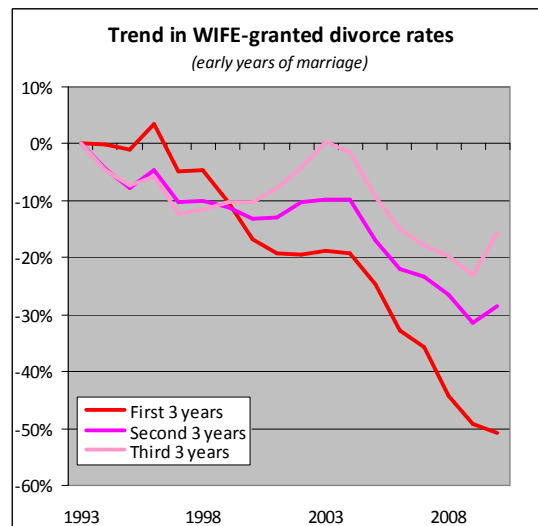
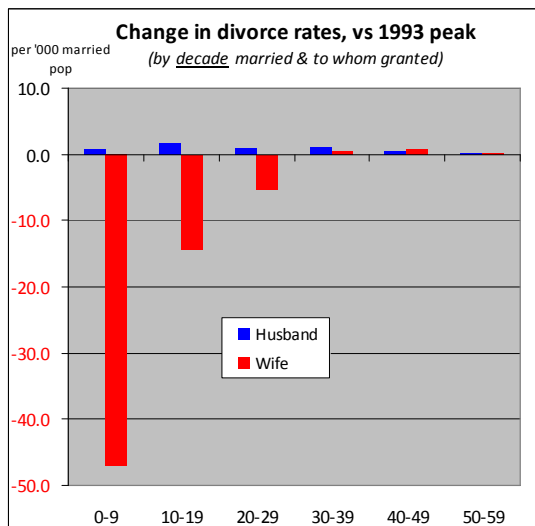


Divorce rates have halved for new brides. Why?

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- From their peak in 1993, the *number* of divorces in England and Wales has fallen by 27% from 165,018 to 119,589 per year. More importantly, divorce *rates* – the proportion of marriages ending in divorce – have also fallen by 22% from 14.2 to 11.1 divorces per '000 marriages per year.
- New analysis of Office for National Statistics data commissioned for the Marriage Foundation shows that the lower divorce *rate* is due to fewer divorces granted to wives – but not husbands – during the early years of marriage.
- The *rate* at which wives have been granted divorce has fallen 27% during the first ten years of marriage compared to a rise of 1% for husbands. The most striking reduction is a 51% fall in the *rate* at which divorces are granted to wives during the first three years.
- This gender-specific finding strongly suggests men are doing better in the early years of marriage. It is consistent with recent studies showing that men – much more than women – tend to be more dedicated if they “decide” rather than “slide” through major relationship transitions. As social and family pressures to marry reduce, those men who do marry are increasingly likely to be “deciders”, rather than “sliders”, and therefore more dedicated.



INTRODUCTION

Since family breakdown began its upward rise in the 1960s, scholars have been interested in the factors that influence relationship stability. Stability is important because of the well-established link between lone parenthood and negative outcomes (Coleman & Glenn, 2009), due in large part to the reduction in resident parent resources and non-resident parent involvement. The cost to the taxpayer of supporting lone parent families is estimated at £44 billion per year (Ashcroft, 2012)

Marital status has been shown to be a major factor in predicting family stability and other outcomes (e.g. Marsh & Perry 2003; Kiernan & Mensah, 2009). Amongst new parents, where family breakdown is most concentrated, marital status has been found to be the largest unique factor in predicting stability (Benson, 2006).

Some studies conclude that it is not marital status that changes outcomes but background factors that select couples in or out of marriage (e.g. Goodman & Greaves, 2010). But this conclusion is less clear cut because factors that correlate with marital status are often included as controls – such as relationship quality, father involvement, or planned birth. Many other studies show that selection effects provide an inadequate account of relationship outcomes (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009).

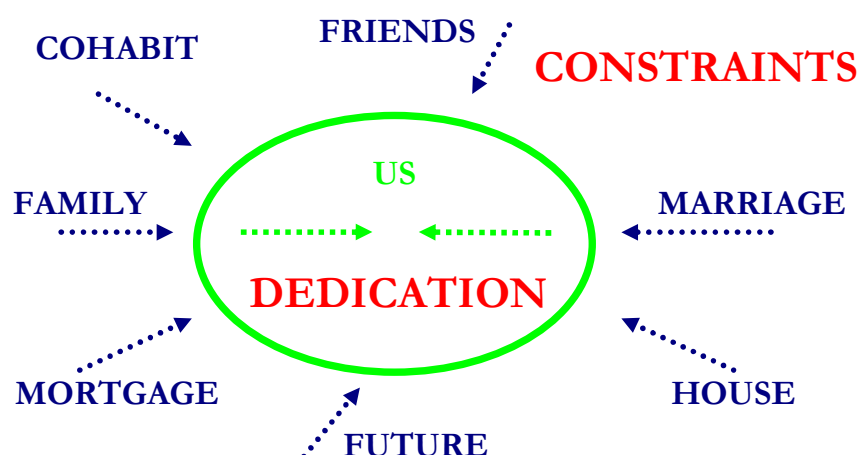
A conclusive answer to this debate remains elusive in the absence of a definitive study that can somehow randomly assign some couples to marriage and others not.

Commitment theory

Commitment theory is an increasingly robust explanation for how individuals form, maintain and dissolve couple relationships (Stanley et al, 2010). Most importantly it promises to cut through some of the ideology and bias surrounding the marriage debate.

Commitment theory proposes two key factors in a relationship.

- **Dedication** is the internal bond that turns “you” and “me” into “us”, providing a sense of identity as a “couple with a future”, acting as a driver of time and priority given to “us” as a couple, and also motivating the willingness to forgive and sacrifice.
- **Constraints** are the external bonds that make it harder to leave, such as family, friends, living together, being married, having children.



Constraints feel positive whilst dedication is strong, precisely because they affirm a couple’s dedication towards one another, how they see themselves as a “couple with a future”. But

when dedication dips, constraints that make it harder to leave can start to feel negative, more trap than affirmation.

In the early years of a relationship, constraints can be added either by deliberate intent – “deciding” – or by happenstance – “sliding”. But whether deliberate or not, every important relationship transition – such as sleeping together, moving in together, having a baby, getting married – adds an extra constraint, crucially making it marginally harder to leave and easier to stay even if things are not going well. This short term pressure to stay in a less than ideal situation is usually called “inertia” (*Stanley et al, 2006*) but can also be thought of as “premature entanglement” (*Glenn, 2002*).

Two important predictions from commitment theory and the inertia hypothesis are as follows.

- First, relationship stability is directly dependent on levels of dedication. Whether couples feel affirmed or trapped by their constraints depends on how they see themselves as a “couple with a future” (*Stanley et al, 2010*).
- Second, relationship stability is also influenced by whether relationship transitions occur, or constraints are added, through “sliding” or “deciding” (*Stanley et al, 2006*). Couples who “decide” are likely to see additional constraints as an affirmation of their dedication. Couples who “slide”, allowing relationship transitions to occur without a deliberate choice, may experience the constraint either as an affirmation or as a step too far.

Two remarkable pieces of US research test this theory but also add the dimension of gender. Men’s commitment is especially dependent on decision-making.

- Amongst couples who had been married for five years, men who cohabit before getting engaged (some “sliders”, some “deciders”) tend to have consistently lower levels of dedication compared both to men who get engaged before cohabiting (“deciders” only) and also to women in both categories. The order of events — moving in and getting engaged — thus appears to matter in some way a lot more to men than to women (*Rhoades et al, 2009*). The researchers concluded that some men were “sliding” into a relationship, getting stuck because of the “inertia” of cohabitation, and thus not fully “deciding” even when they got married. In other words, men’s commitment is specifically dependent on “deciding” whereas women’s commitment is relatively independent of “sliding” or “deciding”.
- Amongst young unmarried couples, the factors which predicted whether the couple were together a year later all involved deliberate decisions about being a “couple with a future”. The best predictors were having a pet together, taking out a joint phone contract or club membership together, and buying a home together. The two factors that did not predict stability were whether the couple lived together or had a baby together (*Rhoades et al, 2010*). Both of these events can occur more by happenstance than deliberate intent. Remarkably, a pet is therefore a more reliable indicator of stability than a baby. You cannot “slide” into buying a pet.

(Note: although these findings are from studies of US couples, there is no known reason to think the principles might not apply equally well to UK couples)

Stability in the UK

Divorce rates in the UK have been fairly consistent over the last thirty years, averaging between 11 and 14 divorces per ‘000 married population per year (*ONS, 2012a*). In spite of this family breakdown has increased, driven by the trend away from marriage (relatively stable) and towards unmarried cohabitation (relatively unstable).

In 1980, just 12% of births were to unmarried couples. Today the figure is 47% (ONS, 2012b). Many studies have shown cohabitation to be more unstable than marriage, even after controlling for background factors such as income and education (Kiernan et al, 2011). More cohabitation translates directly into more family breakdown. The net result is that lone parent family formation has increased from 1 million in 1980 to 2 million today (ONS, 2012c).

However this paper is concerned with divorce *rates* in the context of commitment theory. As a key relationship transition and constraint, getting married can involve either “deciding” or “sliding”. On the whole, individuals who get married will mostly comprise “deciders” who enter marriage as a deliberate choice to affirm their already high levels of dedication. However some individuals getting married will do so in part due to family and social pressures and expectations. Some marriages will therefore include “sliders” who have lower levels of dedication. For them, marriage will seem like a trap. Divorce *rates*, at least in the early years of marriage, should reflect the balance of “deciders” and “sliders”.

Based on the replicated findings of Rhoades et al, 2009 in the US, the dramatic increase in pre-engagement cohabitation in the UK during the 1970s and 1980s is consistent with the continued rise in UK divorce *rates*.

However the hypothesis of this paper is that as cohabitation has become normalised (even if it remains relatively unstable), and attitudes to cohabitation have become more liberal (Park et al, 2010), cohabiting couples will become less inclined to be pushed into marriage for social or family reasons. In other words, those who do get married are increasingly likely to have made clear and deliberate decisions

Fewer “sliders” and more “deciders” should therefore produce a drop in divorce *rates* in the early years of marriage at the very least. And as dedication is more dependent on whether men “decide” rather than “slide”, a higher proportion of male “deciders” should therefore produce a fall in the *rate* of wife-instigated divorces.

METHOD

The annual dataset of marriages used in this paper has been taken from online resources provided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2012a). The annual dataset of divorces – by duration of marriage and by party to whom granted – has been especially commissioned from ONS by The Marriage Foundation.

Divorce rates reflect the proportion of married couples that divorce within a given population of married couples over a period of time. Divorce *rates* depend on the number of people already married rather than, is sometimes assumed, the number of people getting married. ONS routinely publish divorce *rates* per year for men and for women based on the total *number* of divorcing men or women compared to the estimated total married population of men or women. Annual divorce *rates* in 2010 were 11.0 per ‘000 married couples for men and 11.1 for women – i.e. 1.1% per year (ONS, 2012c).

ONS also publish data on the *number* of divorces by duration of marriage. As a reasonable estimate, the divorce *rate* for any particular duration of marriage can therefore be calculated – using ONS data – from the *number* of divorces of that duration divided by the number of marriages in the relevant comparison calendar years.

Calculating the divorce *rate* during a single year of marriage assumes that the number of people who have been married for that duration equates to the number of people getting married in a particular year. This is the only time where divorce *rates* depend directly on the *number* of people getting married.

For example, divorce *rates* in 2010 are calculated as follows: the *number* of divorces of 0-1 year duration is divided by the *number* of marriages in 2009; the *number* of divorces of 1-2 years duration is divided by the *number* of marriages in 2008; and so on.

There are a number of potential errors with this methodology. The divorces of any specific one year duration will not correspond exactly with the marriages in the comparison calendar year. And, over time, the comparison figure for marriages will increasingly be affected by deaths, immigration and emigration, cumulative divorces and remarriages, and therefore become less reliable.

However this paper is predominantly concerned with divorce during the early years of marriage where the matching error should be negligible and year-to-year comparisons and trends will be more reliable and accurate.

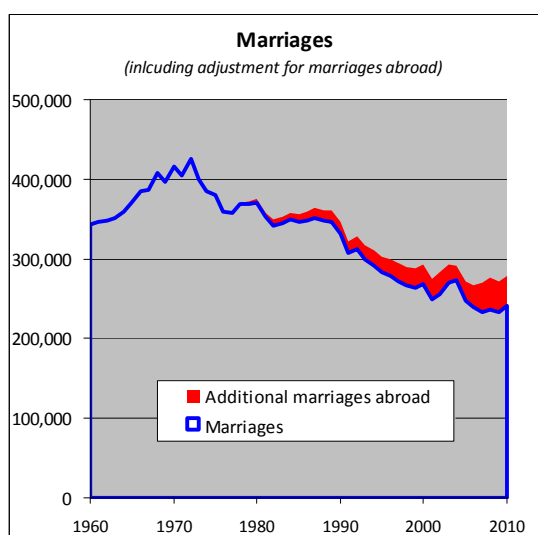
Marriages abroad

The largest potential error is the omission of overseas weddings from UK marriage data.

Overseas weddings have grown in popularity in recent decades. ONS estimate that there were a net 74,000 “marriages abroad” in 2010 – UK residents marrying overseas less overseas residents marrying the UK (ONS, 2011). In an earlier discussion paper, ONS estimated that “additional marriages” equate to 40-80% of “marriages abroad” (ONS, 2008). In effect, this means the official figures for UK marriages understates the true figure by between 10% and 20%.

For the purposes of this study, a figure of 50% of the ONS estimate for “marriages abroad” has been added to all annual marriage data from 2002 onwards. Prior to 2002 where there is no reliable data for “marriages abroad”, the figures for “additional marriages” have been tapered back to zero in the 1970s.

For all calculations of “divorce *rates* by duration of marriage”, this paper therefore includes “additional marriages” in order to improve the estimates for “divorce *rates*”. It should be noted that all calculations have been replicated with and without “additional marriages”. None of the essential trends or conclusions is affected.



RESULTS

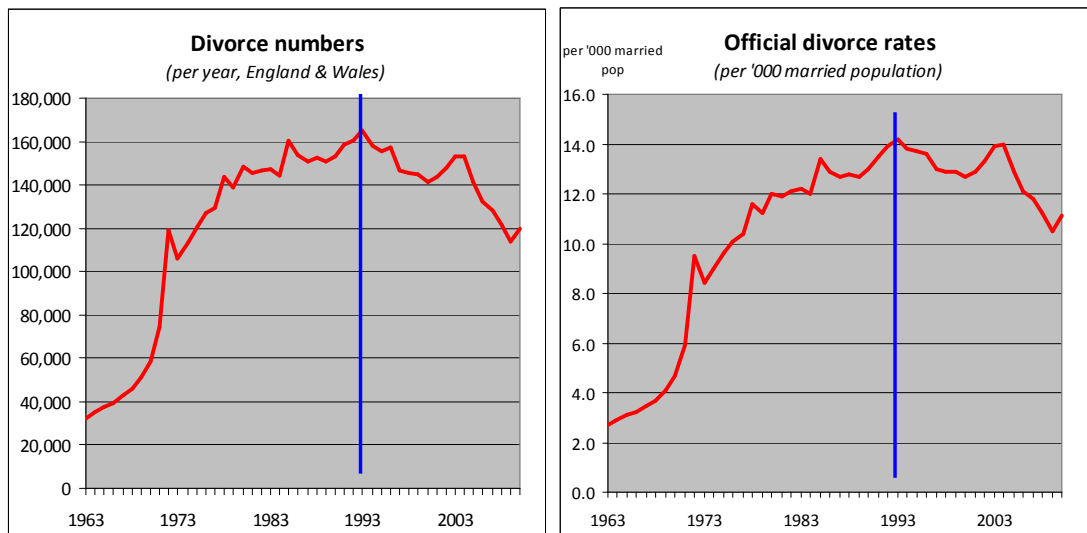
Official divorce numbers and rates

Following the rapid rise during the 1960s and 1970s, divorce *rates* in England & Wales fluctuated within a narrow range throughout the next two decades. However in recent years, both divorce *numbers* and *rates* have since fallen from their peak in 1993.

From 1993, the *number* of divorces has fallen by 27% from 165,018 in 1993 to 119,589 in 2010. More importantly, the divorce *rate* has also fallen by 22% from 14.2 to 11.1 per '000 married couples.

The fall in divorce *rates* establishes that the fall in divorce *numbers* is not merely an artefact of fewer marriages.

(Note: ONS have confirmed by email that their published data on divorce rates for 1993 and 1994 were subject to a transposition error. The error gives the impression that divorce rates peaked in 1994 whereas in fact they peaked in 1993. The data used in this paper are correct)



Estimated divorce rates by decade of marriage

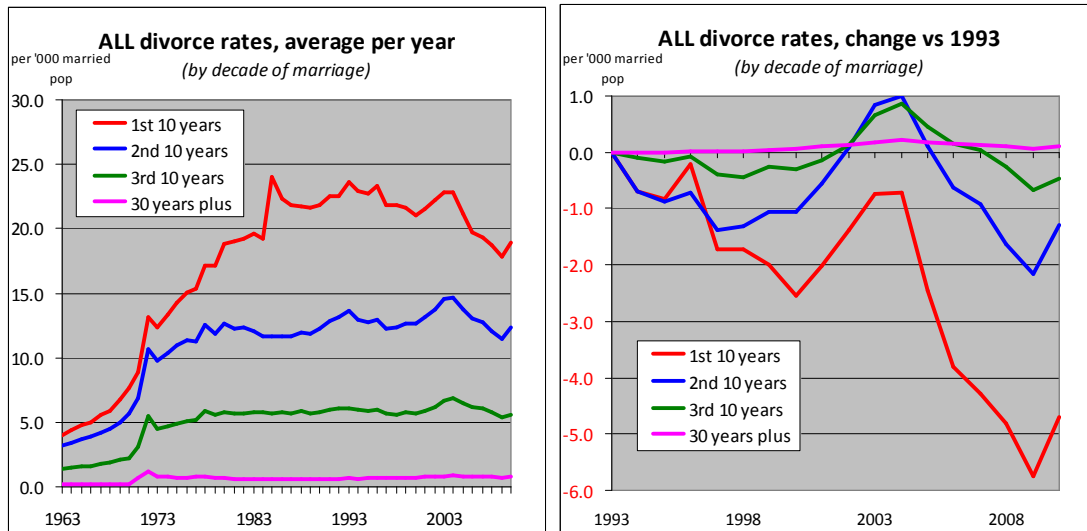
Using the new ONS data on the annual *number* of divorces by duration of marriage, an initial comparison was made of “divorce *rates*” across all durations of marriage by year. As discussed in the METHOD section, there are limitations to the reliability of the calculations for marriages of longer duration.

With this proviso in mind, the charts below show how the main downtrend in annual divorce *rates* took place amongst marriages lasting less than ten years.

Between 1993 and 2010, the average annual divorce *rate* during each of these first ten years dropped from 23.6 to 18.9. In other words, the cumulative risk of getting divorced during the first decade was 4.7% lower, reducing from 23.6% in 1993 to 18.9% in 2010.

Amongst marriages in their second and third decades, the risk of divorce was 1.3% and 0.5% lower respectively. Amongst marriages lasting more than thirty years, the risk of divorce was 0.1% higher.

These initial findings demonstrate that the overall reduction in annual divorce *rates* is predominantly due to the improved stability of new marriages in particular.



(Note: In these and subsequent charts that estimate "divorce rates" as "divorces by duration of marriage" divided by "marriages by year", the term "marriages by year" includes an estimate for overseas weddings based on ONS data (ONS 2008, 2011).)

Estimated divorce rates in early marriage

The left chart below shows how divorce is concentrated into the early years of marriage. Various urban myths are easily dispelled. There is no seven year itch. And there is no big increase in divorce rates during the later years of marriage.

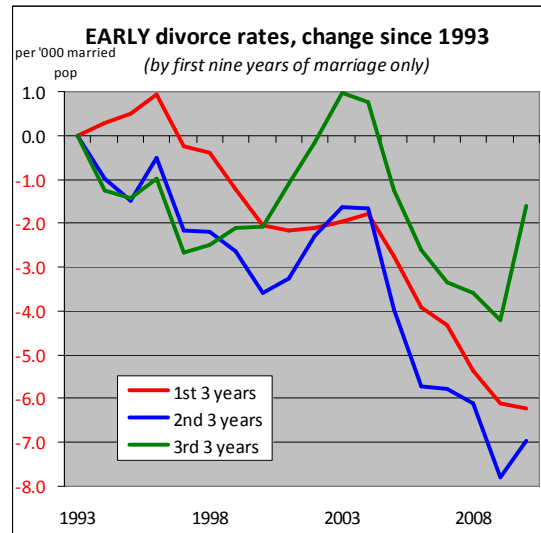
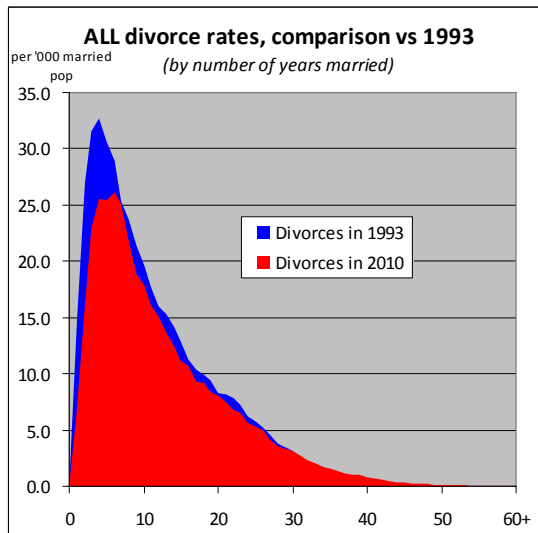
Instead, the risk of divorce increases smoothly and rapidly during the first few years before decaying equally smoothly and rapidly. The time of greatest risk peaks around the fifth year of marriage. About one third of all divorces take place between the second and seventh anniversaries. After 40 years of married life, the risk of divorce has become negligible.

In 1993, peak divorce rate was 3.2% of couples who split during their fifth year. In 2010, peak divorce rate was 2.5%. The two lines showing divorce rates in 1993 and 2010 shows how the fall in divorce is concentrated in these earlier years.

The right chart below looks at change in average divorce rates during these earliest years, specifically looking at the first nine years of marriage, sub-divided into three year periods.

Across all three periods, divorce rates have fallen from their 1993 peak.

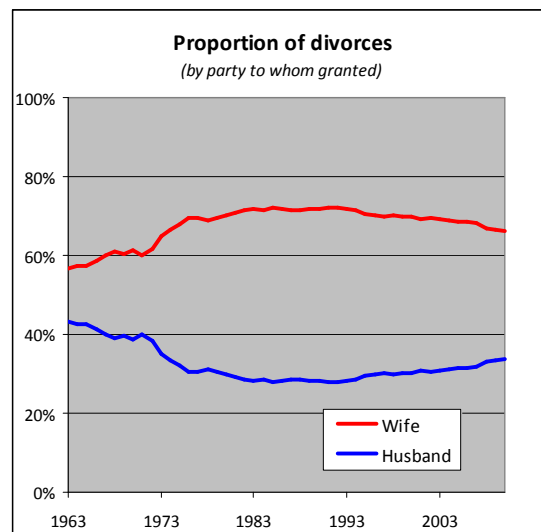
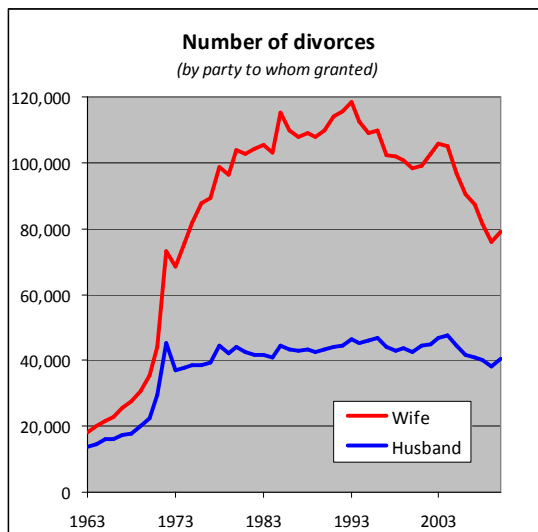
- During the first three years of marriage, divorce risk dropped by an average of 6.2 divorces per '000 married couples per year, from 13.9 to 7.7, a percentage reduction of 45%.
- During the second three years of marriage, divorce risk dropped by an average of 7.0 divorces per '000 married couples per year, from 31.6 to 24.4, a percentage reduction of 22%.
- During the third three years of marriage, divorce risk dropped by an average of 1.6 divorces per '000 married couples per year, from 26.0 to 24.4, a percentage reduction of 6%.



Divorce by party to whom granted

Historically, only about 5% of divorces have been granted to both parties. Almost all divorces have been granted either to the husband or to the wife. Since the 1960s, wives have been consistently more likely to be granted divorces than husbands, accounting for around two thirds of divorces.

These next two charts below show how this imbalance has been maintained during the huge increase in divorces of the 1960s and 1970s. The left chart in particular gives a clue that the *number* of divorces granted to wives has fallen disproportionately in recent years whereas the *number* of divorces granted to husbands has remained relatively steady.



Divorce rates by duration of marriage & by party to whom granted

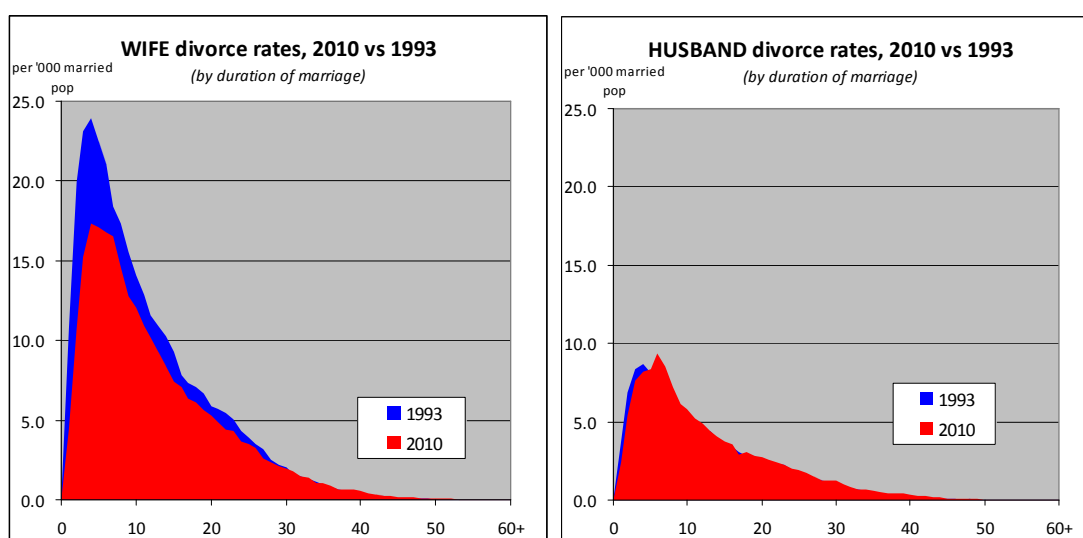
ONS publish annual divorce data either by length of marriage or by party to whom granted. Although the data are recorded, they do not routinely publish the data using both. The Marriage Foundation therefore commissioned a new dataset using this combination of variables in order to generate – for the first time – what amounts to husband-granted and wife-granted divorce rates.

The charts below show the estimated annual divorce *rates* for wife-granted and husband-granted divorces. Added together, they make up 95% of the total annual divorce *rate* – given that 5% of divorces are granted to both parties.

By using the same scale for both charts, it is immediately apparent how wife-granted divorces are roughly double husband-granted divorces. It is also apparent that the overall pattern of divorce is similar for both wife-granted and husband-granted divorce, with a high concentration in the earliest years and a long tail-off into the later years.

The key difference is how divorce *rates* have changed between 1993 and 2010.

- For wives, there has been a clear and substantial reduction in divorce throughout the early years.
- For husbands, the reduction is far less obvious and is only apparent at all during the first few years of marriage. Thereafter, husband-granted divorce *rates* have actually increased very slightly throughout most or all later years.



Change in divorce rates

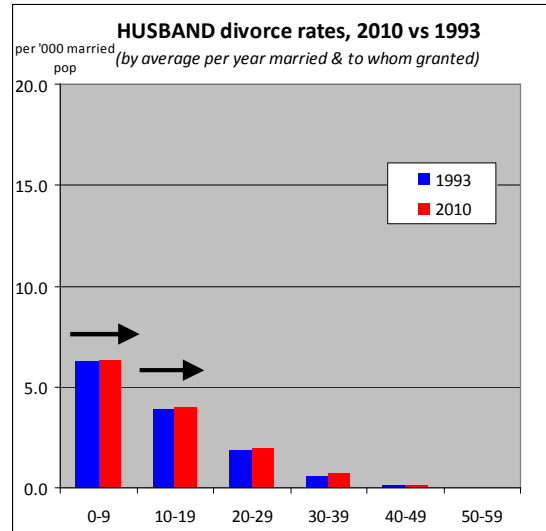
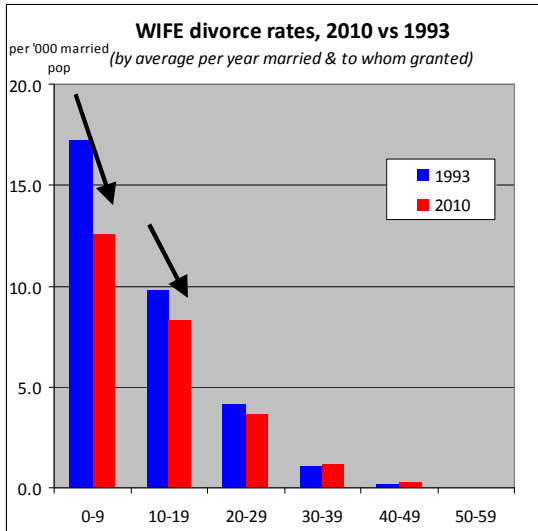
The next two charts below look at how average annual divorce *rates* have changed from 1993 until 2010 by decade of marriage.

In the left chart, the first two groups of columns show how the average *rate* of divorces granted to wives has fallen. In the first decade of married life, divorce *rates* fell from 17.3 to 12.6. In the second decade, they fell from 9.8 to 8.3.

In other words, the cumulative risk of divorce granted to wives during the first ten years of marriage was 17.3% in 1993. It had fallen to 12.6% in 2010. And so on.

In the right chart, the average *rate* of divorces granted to husbands remained relatively unchanged between 1993 and 2010 for all decades of marriage. Cumulative divorce risk during the first decade of marriage remained more or less unchanged at 6.3%.

This finding provides confirmation that the overall fall in divorce *rates* between 1993 and 2010 took place only during the early years of marriage and only amongst divorces granted to wives. The left chart on the front page of this paper illustrates this even more clearly.

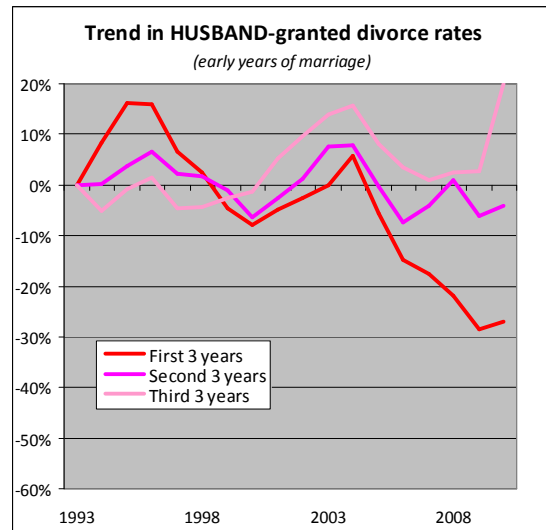
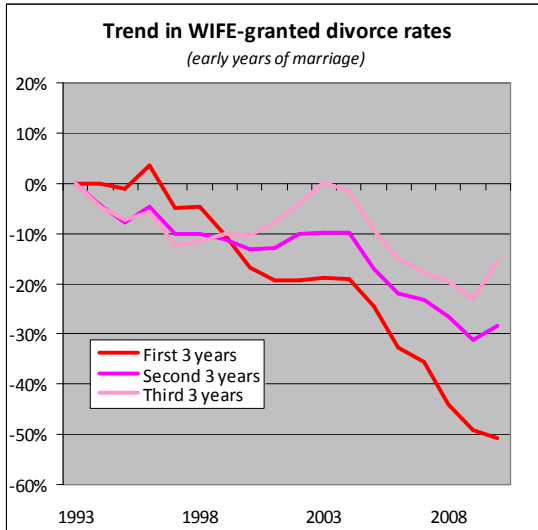


Trend in divorce rates during early marriage

The final two charts contrast how divorce rates have varied for wife-granted and husband-granted divorce since 1993, again looking only at the earliest years of marriage broken up into three year blocks.

What is immediately apparent is that wife-granted divorces have consistently trended down since the 1993 peak. The most dramatic fall has been the 51% reduction in divorce rates during the first three years of marriage.

In contrast, husband-granted divorces have been much more variable since 1993, trending 27% down during the first three years but actually increasing by 20% during the third three years.



DISCUSSION

New data, especially commissioned from the Office for National Statistics by the Marriage Foundation, permits the first ever analysis of divorce *rates* by “*duration of marriage*” and by “*party to whom granted*”, whether wives or husbands.

The main finding of this study is that the 22% fall in average annual divorce *rates* since their peak in 1993 is predominantly due to improved stability during the early years of marriage.

However this reduction in divorce *rates* only applies to divorces granted to wives. Divorces granted to husbands have remained more or less unchanged.

Amongst couples in their first decade of marriage, wife granted divorce *rates* have fallen by 27% since 1993 whereas husband-granted divorce *rates* have actually risen slightly by 1%. Most strikingly, amongst couples in the first three years of marriage, wife-granted divorce *rates* have fallen by 51%.

Had divorce *rates* fallen since 1993 by similar amounts for both wife-granted and husband-granted divorces, any number of factors could have been responsible. For example, much of the fall in average annual divorce *rates* has taken place since 2005. This doesn't line up exactly with the recent periods of economic recession. But it points to recession as a possible explanatory factor.

In addition, divorce *rates* in the earliest years of marriage have been on a downward trend since the mid 1990s. This could be explained by greater commitment amongst newlyweds. With marriage *rates* falling, it could be that those who marry are increasingly committed.

But when marriage *rates* have been in decline since 1970, it's not clear why stability during the early years of marriage should have begun to improve only after the mid-1990s, and particularly since 2003. Nor is it especially obvious why couples getting married in the decade before 1993 were less committed than couples marrying in the decade before 2010.

What makes the finding in this paper so distinctive is that divorce *rates* have varied so much by gender. Wife-granted divorces have reduced since the 1993 divorce peak whereas husband-granted divorces have remained more or less unchanged.

Because it is almost entirely the reduction of wife-granted divorces concentrated into the early years of marriage that accounts for the overall 22% reduction in divorce *rates* since the 1993 peak, any explanation for this phenomenon has to account for wives being less prone to divorce. By far the most plausible explanation relates to wives perception of husbands.

In other words, husbands are doing better during the early years of marriage.

The best current theory of commitment holds a plausible explanation for why this might be the case. Commitment theory proposes that men – but not women – who “decide” rather than “slide” through important relationship transitions are more dedicated and therefore have more stable relationships (Stanley *et al*, 2010). Although the act of marriage would seem to involve a deliberate decision by definition, some couples do “slide” into marriage as a consequence of social and family pressures and “inertia” (Stanley *et al*, 2006).

Attitudes to both cohabitation and marriage have undoubtedly become more relaxed in recent decades. For example, 78% of couples getting married in the mid-2000s had previously cohabited compared to 38% of couples getting married in the early 1970s (Beaujouan & Bhrolchain, 2011). The British Social Attitudes Survey reported that the proportion of adults who thought “*people who want children should get married*” had fallen from 71% to 51% between the 1980s and 2000s (Park *et al*, 2002).

The gender-specific findings in this paper are consistent with the proposition that falling social and family pressures to marry means that the proportion of men who “slide” rather than “decide” into marriage is reducing.

The fall in divorce *rates* since 1993 is therefore plausibly explained by commitment theory and social trends. The average man who gets married today is more committed than the average man who got married 20 years ago.

Increased stability during the early years of marriage – when divorce risk tends to be highest – reinforces the distinctiveness of marriage as a more stable family form than cohabitation and the benefit to a woman of a man who can make clear decisions about being a “*couple with a future*”.

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