

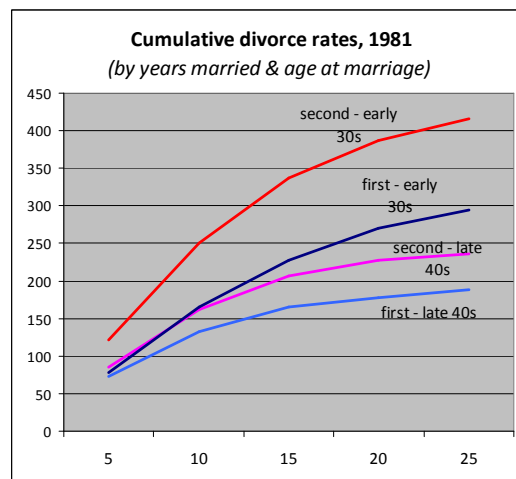
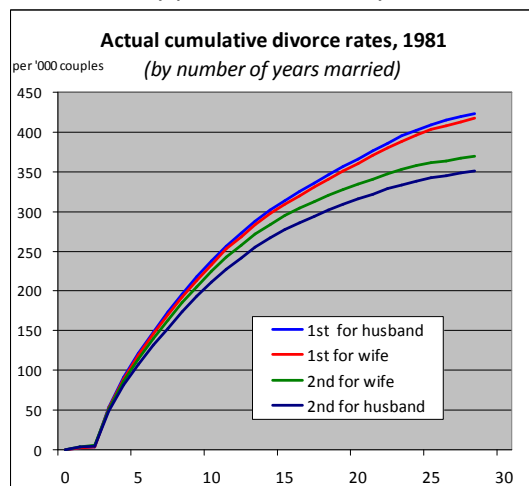


## Second marriage. Triumph of decision over hope?

Harry Benson, The Marriage Foundation

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- It is often assumed that second marriages are riskier than first marriages. “The triumph of hope over experience” as popularised by Samuel Johnson in 1791. A new analysis of data commissioned from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) challenges this assumption.
- Second marriages overall do consistently better than first marriages. Where one or both spouses are marrying for the second time, couples marrying today face an estimated 31% risk of divorce during their lifetime, compared to an estimated 45% risk of divorce amongst couples where both spouses are marrying for the first time.
- Increasingly, second marriages overall do better during the early years of marriage. Husbands overall also tend to do better second time round, although this gender difference has become less apparent in recent years.
- However the key word in this study is “overall”. When comparing couples of similar age, previous ONS research shows that second marriages do consistently worse across all age groups. These differences are illustrated well in the two charts below, involving couples who married in 1981. The present finding is thus an artefact of age. It is not that second marriages do better. It is that couples who marry later, whether first or second time round, do better.
- The simplest explanation for this is consistent with commitment theory. Couples who marry at an older age are more likely to be “deciders” than “sliders”. And the particular gender advantage for second time husbands has become less apparent as reduced social and family pressure to marry means fewer first time “sliders”.



## ARE SECOND MARRIAGES MORE UNSTABLE THAN FIRST MARRIAGES?

- Do people learn from their mistakes?
- Or are people condemned to repeat the past?

It is widely assumed that second marriages are less stable than first marriages. The main explanation behind this assumption is that divorced individuals tend to repeat the patterns of behaviour that disrupted their first marriage. An alternative assumption is that people do learn from their mistakes. In which case, second marriages should do better.

In the US, studies consistently show greater instability amongst second marriages (e.g. *Booth & Edwards, 1991; Whitton et al, 2013*). In the UK, second marriages are consistently more unstable when comparing couples of similar age (*Wilson and Smallwood, 2008*).

However no UK study has yet looked at the overall risk to remarriages compared to first marriages and the trends in divorce rates amongst remarriages compared to first marriages.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS), who routinely publish national data on UK divorce rates, does not distinguish *divorce rates* by previous marital status. Calculation of divorce rates requires comparison of the *number of divorces* within the relevant population of married people. However UK population data does not distinguish between first time married and second time married populations.

Nevertheless ONS do publish annual data on *marriages by previous marital status* and *divorces by previous marital status*.

Using new data especially commissioned from ONS by Marriage Foundation, I mapped the divorces taking place for each duration of marriage against the relevant year in which couples married.

		First marriage for both spouses					
	Marriages	Divorces by duration			Divorce rate		
		< 1 year	< 2 years	< 3 years	< 1 year	< 2 years	< 3 years
2007	A	...	...	...	...	...	...
2008	B	...	...	...	...	...	...
2009	C	...	...	...	...	...	...
2010		X	Y	Z	X / C	Y / B	Z / A

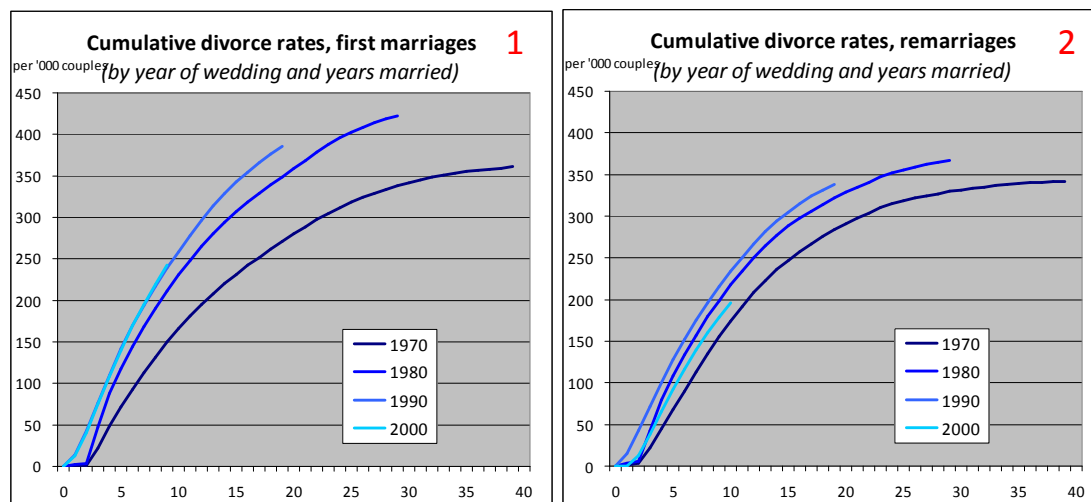
With this methodology, Marriage Foundation now has a database of actual divorce rates for every year of wedding, every duration of marriage to date, separated respectively into first marriage for both spouses, first marriage for husband only, first marriage for wife only, and re-marriage for both spouses. In some of the analyses, remarriages combine these latter three categories. The text should make it clear.

As far as we know, this is the first overall analysis of divorce rates for first and second marriages in the UK.

## CUMULATIVE DIVORCE RATES – FIRST MARRIAGES & RE-MARRIAGES

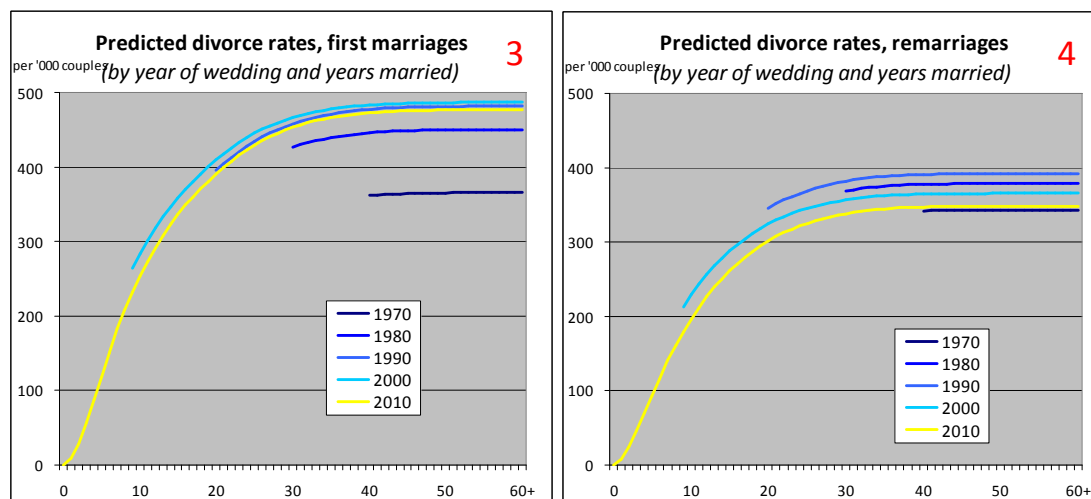
Cumulative actual divorce rates for both first and second marriages have generally increased since the 1970s. Amongst couples where both spouses married for the first time, 36% of those marrying in 1970 have already experienced divorce compared to 42% of those marrying in 1980 and 39% of those marrying in 1990. *Fig 1* shows this increasing trend levelling off for couples marrying in 2000.

Amongst couples where one or both spouses married for the second time, *Fig 2* shows that divorce rates have followed a similar pattern, with two notable differences. (1) Cumulative divorce rates for remarriages are consistently lower than for first time marriages. (2) Divorce rates for remarriages in 2000 have dropped back to levels seen in the 1970s.



To estimate the full lifetime risk of divorce for first marriages and remarriages means taking actual rates for each wedding year and extrapolating them forwards using the most recent calendar year of actual divorce data. Whilst this will always give an estimate of lifetime risk that depends on what happened last year, this method will be reliable for all marriages that have already lasted a decade since almost all of the variation in divorce rates takes place during that first decade (*Benson, 2013*).

*Figs 3 & 4* show that 48% of today's first marriages will end in divorce compared to 34% of second marriages. Note that these projections overestimate divorce rates by about 3% (*Benson, 2012*) if ONS estimates for overseas weddings are included (*ONS, 2008*). ONS divorce data includes overseas weddings but marriage data does not.



## TRENDS IN FIRST MARRIAGE AND REMARRIAGE DIVORCE RATES

A direct comparison of first marriage and remarriage divorce rates shows which is riskier.

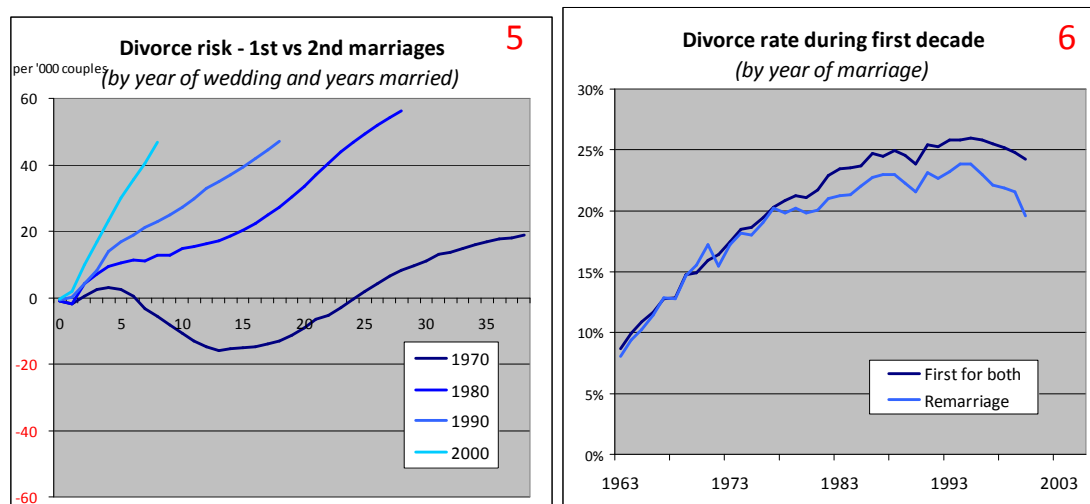
For 1970 couples, for example, *Fig 5* shows how the cumulative divorce rates for first marriages and remarriages have tracked one another within plus or minus 2%. So after 39 years of marriage, 36% of first marriages for both spouses have ended in divorce compared to 34% of remarriages where one or both spouses married for the second time (see *Figs 1 & 2*).

From the mid-1970s onwards however, remarriages have consistently experienced 5% fewer divorces than first time marriages (*Fig 5*). More recently, this difference has appeared earlier in married life.

So for 1980 couples, the 5% advantage for remarried couples has taken 20 years to open up. This gap is unlikely to widen much beyond 6% simply because of the infrequency of divorce after 20 years of marriage.

For 2000 couples, the 5% advantage has appeared within just 5 years. Whether this suggests a further widening is unclear.

Given that most of the variation in divorce rates occurs during the first decade of marriage, *Fig 6* shows that this change has taken place because divorce rates are falling more for remarriages in the early years of marriage than for first marriages.

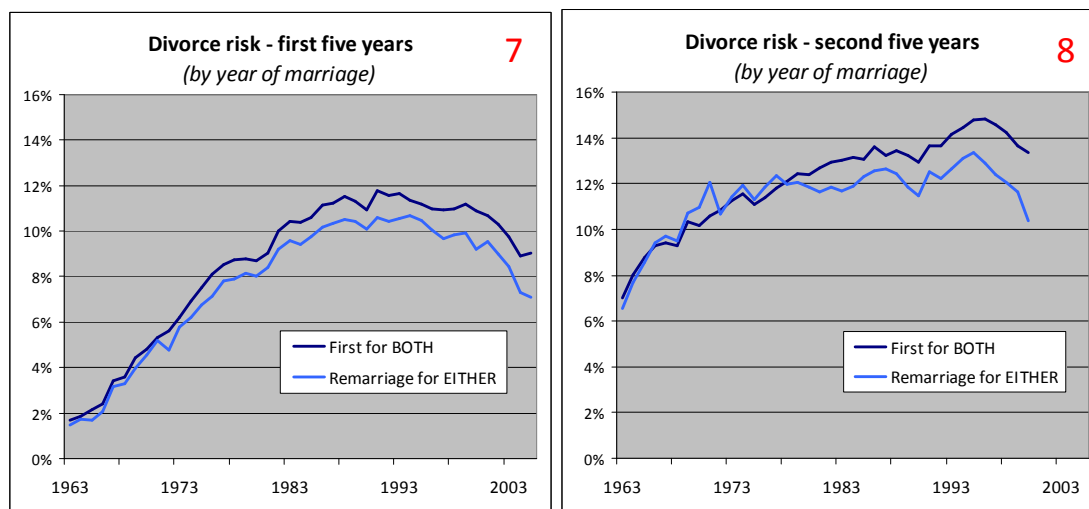


## TRENDS IN EARLY MARRIAGE - FIRST AND REMARRIAGES

Since the first decade of marriage is where most variation in divorce rates occurs, Figs 7 & 8 compare levels of divorce during the first and second five years for first marriages and remarriages.

The general pattern of divorce trends is broadly similar for first marriages and remarriages – in this case where either or both spouses are remarrying. Divorce rates are higher during the second five year period for all couples. And there is a clear downtrend in divorce rates for all couples from their 1990s peak.

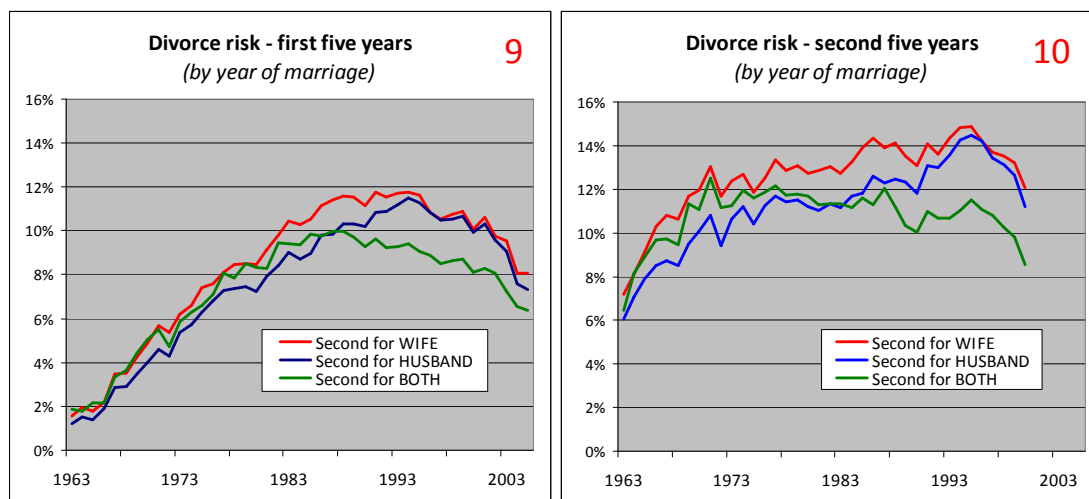
But there are also clear differences. Remarriages have had consistently lower divorce risk than first marriages during both of these early periods. And the downtrend in divorce risk appears to be more pronounced amongst remarried couples.



Today roughly two thirds of weddings involve first marriage for both spouses. Remarriages divide roughly evenly between remarriage for husband only, wife only and both spouses.

For all three remarriage categories, once again the patterns are similar: higher divorce rates during the second five years; and a clear downtrend in divorce rates since the 1990s.

Again there are clear differences. Second marriages for both spouses have had consistently lower divorce rates since the 1980s. Second marriages for husbands only have also had consistently lower divorce risk than second marriages for wives only. However this gender difference has been less apparent in recent years.



## DISCUSSION OF SECOND MARRIAGES AND THE GENDER GAP

This new analysis has produced two striking and potentially surprising findings.

- Overall, second marriages generally do better than first marriages, and this has been more evident in recent years.
- Overall, husbands generally do better second time round, although this has been less evident in recent years.

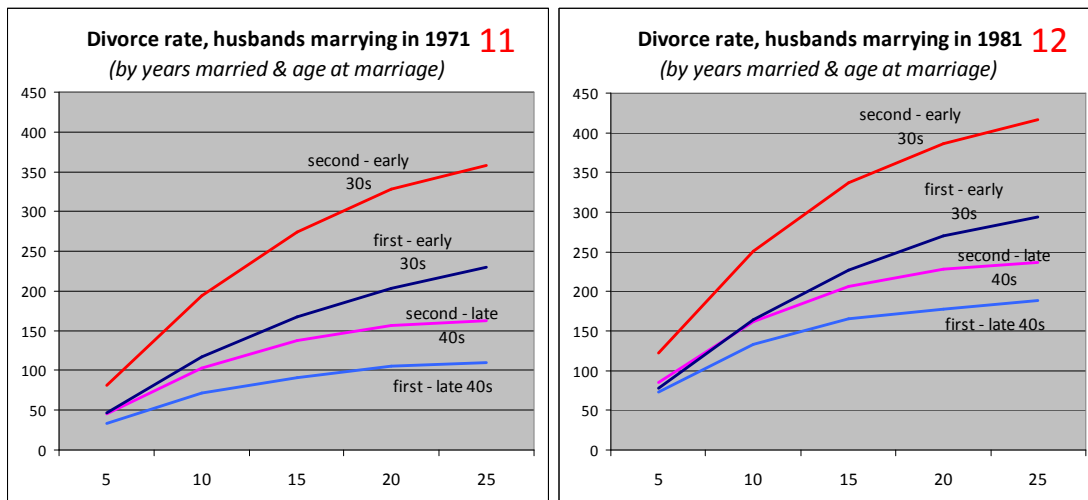
The findings are surprising because previous reports from ONS have shown that previously divorced men who remarry have a higher percentage of marriages ending in divorce compared to bachelors and widowers (*Wilson & Smallwood, 2008*). ONS report that these differences are generally the same for divorced women and across age groups, although the rates of divorce are lower as age at marriage increases.

The key word in this study is “overall”.

Using ONS data from *Wilson & Smallwood (2008)*, *Fig 11 and 12* below illustrates how cumulative divorce risk varies between first and second marriages for husbands, depending on age at marriage. *Fig 11* looks at couples marrying in 1971. *Fig 12* looks at couples marrying in 1981.

For both 1971 and 1981 year groups, and for both first and second marriages, divorce risk reduces substantially with age at marriage.

But for both year groups, it is also clear that second marriages appear to do better than first marriages when comparing second marriages in their late 40s with first marriages in their early 30s.



If the average remarriage took place at the same age as the average first marriage, then overall divorce rates amongst second marriages would look much higher. By definition, remarriages take place later on. Hence the apparent discrepancy that second marriages overall have lower divorce risk than first marriages.

Normally when assessing outcomes, it is essential to compare like with like, as far as possible. But since remarriage can only take place after the divorce of a first marriage, it may not be entirely reasonable only to compare first and second marriages between couples of the same age.

This begs the question as to what it is about age that might make older second marriages more stable?

In the UK, my own research on marital stability during early parenthood using Millennium Cohort Study data highlights marital status, age, income, education, race and benefits as unique risk factors (*Benson, 2006*). US research specifically on second marriages shows that age, race, parents marital status, presence of children from a prior relationship, and living in a low income community, are all factors that raise the risk of divorce (*CDC, 2002*). Other factors that influence first marriages – education, prior cohabitation – appear less influential second time round.

One possibility is that higher age is itself a proxy for higher income. Since the cost of wedding was found to be the biggest reported barrier to marriage in our 2013 Seddons/Marriage Foundation survey, it is plausible to suggest that second marriages tend to involve those with higher incomes. Higher income acts as a buffer against some of the everyday difficulties faced by most couples. Nonetheless both of the studies cited above show that age has unique influence on stability above and beyond income. Another possibility is that higher age means fewer young children from prior relationships. However the reverse may equally well apply.

The simplest explanation for increasing stability with age is consistent with commitment theory, a robust explanation for how individuals form, maintain and dissolve couple relationships (*Stanley et al, 2010*). Lower divorce rates amongst couples who marry later simply reflect greater intentionality of decision. Couples who are “deciders” – those who decide to be a couple with a future – rather than “sliders” tend to be more committed (*Stanley et al, 2006*). And couples who marry later may be more likely to be “deciders”.

As to why husbands in particular have tended to do better second time round, this reflects the proposition that men who marry second time round are also more likely to be “deciders” than “sliders”. However falling social and family pressures to marry means that the proportion of men who “slide” rather than “decide” into marriage first time round is reducing (*Benson, 2012*). This would account for a reduction in the gender gap.

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