# The Average Length of Marriage

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- Using the same method used by Office for National Statistics (ONS) – but adjusting for the significant number of UK couples who marry overseas – I estimate that the average (median) length of a marriage beginning today is 40 years before *ending in either divorce or death*.

- This contrasts sharply with the oft-quoted figure of 12 years, which is the average (median) length of *marriages that end in divorce*.

- Previous analysis by ONS estimated that the average marriage beginning in 2010 would last 30 years. So why the big improvement?

- Part of the reason is an adjustment for overseas weddings. Since 1990, some 30-60,000 people per year have married overseas. Assuming most of these are couples, a conservative adjustment of half this number boosts the total number of 'England & Wales weddings' by 6% to 17% per year. This produces a slightly lower, but more realistic, estimate of divorce rates.

- The biggest reason is falling divorce rates. Back in 2010, ONS projected that 21% of couples would divorce within 10 years, for example. Adjusting for overseas weddings would reduce that by 2%. But with eight years data on these couples, actual divorce rates are 4% lower still. So the final divorce rate figure for 2010 couples over their first decade of marriage is likely to be 15%.

- With couples doing so much better early on, lifetime projections for divorce have also fallen as a result. The original ONS projection for 2010 couples was 42%. Adding in overseas weddings reduces this to 39%. My latest estimate for 2010 couples is now 34%.

- So for couples marrying in 2010, the projected length of time at which half of all marriages have ended through either divorce or death has thus increased from an original projection of 30 years to 35 years, or from 33 years to 38 years if I adjust for overseas weddings.

- For couples marrying in 2017, the average length of marriage is now 38 years if I don't take overseas weddings into account and 40 years if I do, which I should.

Percentage of 2017 marriages projected to end in divorce or death
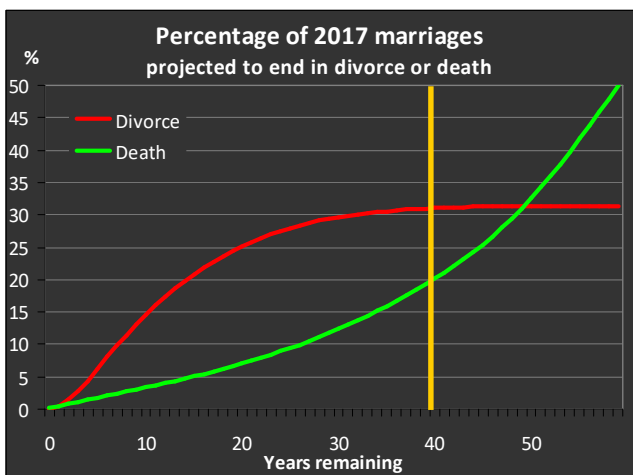
Divorce rate projections

% ending in divorce	First 10 years		Lifetime	
	Adjusted for overseas weddings			
	Without	With	Without	With
2010 marriages				
ONS original	21%	19%	42%	39%
MF estimate now	18%	15%	38%	34%
2017 marriages				
MF estimate now	15%	13%	35%	31%

Median length of marriage

| Number of years	Adjusted for overseas weddings	
	Without	With
2010 marriages		
ONS original	30	33
MF estimate now	35	38
2017 marriages		
MF estimate now	38	40

Falling divorce rates

Divorce rates are falling fast (*Benson 2012, 2013, 2019a, 2019b*).

I now estimate that projected lifetime divorce rates have fallen from a peak of 44% for couples marrying in the late 1980s to 31% for couples marrying today.

Predicted Lifetime Divorce Rates
(by year of marriage)
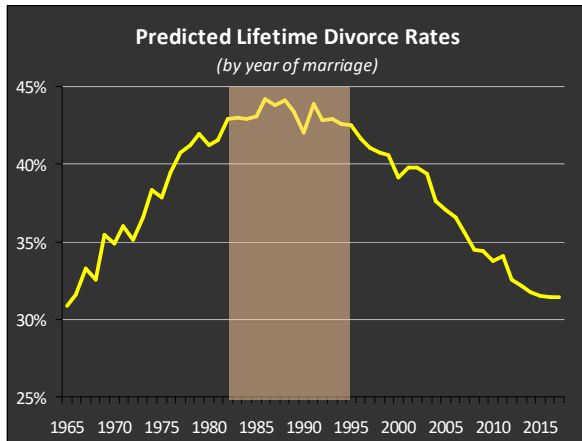
In my previous papers for Marriage Foundation, I have shown that almost all of this fall in divorce is due to fewer wives filing for divorce in the first decade of their marriage. Remarkably enough, divorce rates attributable to husbands has barely changed since the 1970s

This highly gendered shift in divorce is not adequately explained by changes in economics or social patterns, which ought to cause husbands and wives together to become both more or less divorce prone together.

Divorce rate over 10 years
(by year of marriage & party granted)
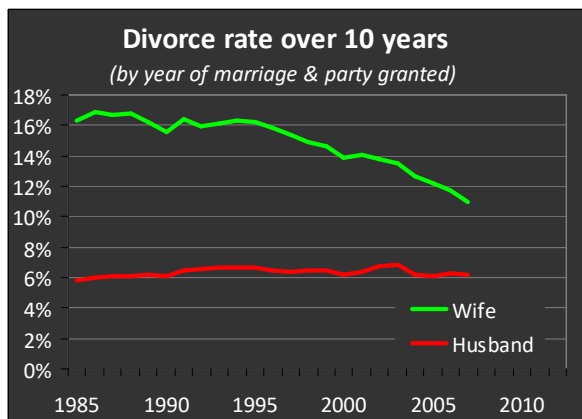
My explanation for this gender shift is that reducing social pressure to marry means those men who do marry are more intentional about it.

This fits with commitment theory research showing that men's commitment tends to be related more to decision making than women's commitment (*Rhoades et al 2006, 2009*).

In short, the proportion of newlywed men who are less committed 'sliders' – rather than more committed 'deciders' – has reduced. More committed men means fewer unhappy wives filing for divorce.

Methodology

I calculate divorce rates using the same 'year of marriage' method as ONS.

One problem is that there have been large numbers of overseas weddings since the late 1980s. Because these data are less reliable than for domestic weddings, ONS do not include them in their annual figures (*ONS 2008, 2017*).

Excluding them causes official divorce rates to be overstated. In my model, I therefore make a conservative adjustment to England & Wales wedding numbers by adding 50% of ONS's estimated overseas wedding numbers. The effect is that my figures for divorce rates are slightly lower than those from ONS.

Calculating divorce rates, by year of marriage and duration of marriage

Year of marriage	opposite sex marriages	+50% overseas weddings	Adjusted number of marriages	0-1 year	1-2 years	2-3 years	3-4 years	4-5 years
2012	263,640	23,826	287,466					1.9%
2013	240,854	31,579	272,433				1.6%	
2014	247,372	23,154	270,526			1.1%		
2015	239,020	23,048	262,068		0.6%			
2016	242,774	22,500	265,274	0.0%				
		Divorces during 2017		44	1,534	3,091	4,446	5,462

A few years back, ONS published a detailed projection of marriage survival rates for couples who married in the year 2010 (*ONS 2012*).

In order to update their model, I have assumed mortality rates remained much the same but inserted my projections on cumulative divorce rates for the 2010 and 2017 wedding cohorts.

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Projection for 2017 marriages that end in divorce or death

Duration of marriage in exact years, x (anniversary number)	Probability of divorce in interval to next anniversary	Probability of death of one partner in interval to next anniversary	Number of marriages surviving to anniversary x	Number of marriages ended in divorce in interval to next anniversary	Number of marriages ended in death in interval to next anniversary	Cumulative % of marriages ended in divorce before next anniversary	Cumulative % of marriages ended in death before next anniversary
0	0.0001	0.0025	100,000	13	250	0.0	0.3
1	0.0046	0.0027	99,737	456	269	0.5	0.5
2	0.0096	0.0029	99,011	955	287	1.4	0.8
3	0.0135	0.0030	97,768	1,331	293	2.8	1.1
4	0.0167	0.0032	96,144	1,624	308	4.4	1.4
5	0.0199	0.0033	94,212	1,901	311	6.3	1.7
6	0.0203	0.0035	92,000	1,900	322	8.2	2.0
7	0.0182	0.0037	89,778	1,670	332	9.9	2.4
8	0.0181	0.0039	87,775	1,628	342	11.5	2.7
9	0.0178	0.0037	85,805	1,575	317	13.1	3.0
10	0.0173	0.0037	83,913	1,501	310	14.6	3.3
11	0.0171	0.0039	82,101	1,464	320	16.0	3.7
12	0.0172	0.0041	80,317	1,448	329	17.5	4.0
13	0.0151	0.0044	78,540	1,249	346	18.7	4.3
14	0.0137	0.0047	76,945	1,112	362	19.8	4.7
15	0.0131	0.0048	75,471	1,053	362	20.9	5.1
16	0.0130	0.0051	74,056	1,032	378	21.9	5.4
17	0.0114	0.0053	72,646	891	385	22.8	5.8
18	0.0107	0.0056	71,369	829	400	23.6	6.2
19	0.0101	0.0058	70,141	771	407	24.4	6.6
20	0.0093	0.0061	68,963	703	421	25.1	7.1
21	0.0089	0.0065	67,839	668	441	25.8	7.5
22	0.0082	0.0069	66,731	611	460	26.4	8.0
23	0.0077	0.0071	65,660	568	466	27.0	8.4
24	0.0069	0.0077	64,625	508	498	27.5	8.9
25	0.0066	0.0080	63,620	478	509	27.9	9.4
26	0.0060	0.0086	62,632	432	539	28.4	10.0
27	0.0053	0.0091	61,662	376	561	28.8	10.5
28	0.0046	0.0096	60,724	329	583	29.1	11.1
29	0.0042	0.0101	59,812	301	604	29.4	11.7
30	0.0037	0.0107	58,907	263	630	29.6	12.3
31	0.0032	0.0114	58,014	227	661	29.9	13.0
32	0.0029	0.0122	57,125	202	697	30.1	13.7
33	0.0026	0.0128	56,227	182	720	30.3	14.4
34	0.0022	0.0135	55,325	151	747	30.4	15.2
35	0.0022	0.0142	54,427	150	773	30.6	15.9
36	0.0019	0.0152	53,504	130	813	30.7	16.8
37	0.0017	0.0157	52,561	119	825	30.8	17.6
38	0.0014	0.0168	51,617	96	867	30.9	18.4
39	0.0011	0.0169	50,653	74	856	31.0	19.3
40	0.0011	0.0176	49,723	75	875	31.0	20.2
41	0.0010	0.0188	48,773	71	917	31.1	21.1
42	0.0007	0.0202	47,785	51	965	31.2	22.1
43	0.0006	0.0220	46,769	44	1,029	31.2	23.1
44	0.0005	0.0241	45,696	37	1,101	31.3	24.2
45	0.0005	0.0266	44,558	32	1,185	31.3	25.4
46	0.0004	0.0294	43,341	30	1,274	31.3	26.6
47	0.0003	0.0325	42,037	23	1,366	31.3	28.0
48	0.0003	0.0356	40,647	19	1,447	31.4	29.5
49	0.0002	0.0390	39,182	17	1,528	31.4	31.0
50	0.0002	0.0428	37,637	15	1,611	31.4	32.6