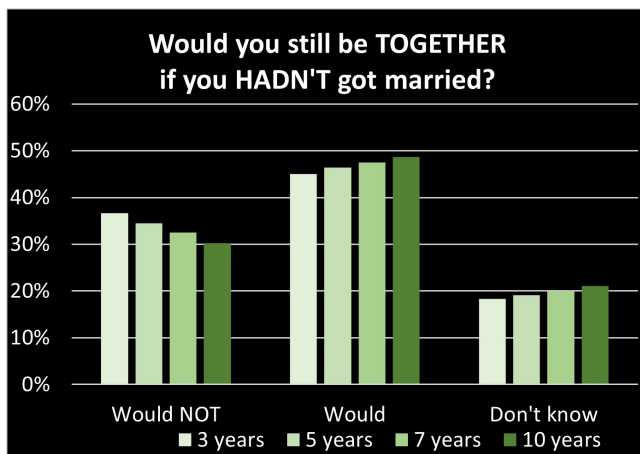




## Would you still be together if you hadn't got married?

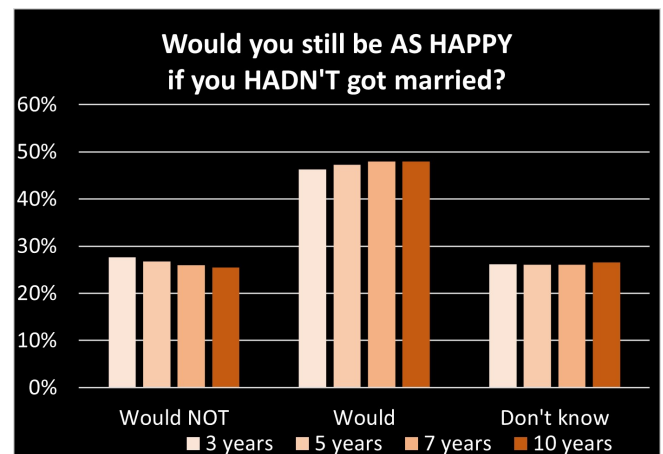
Harry Benson, December 2021

- During their first ten years of marriage, one in three couples say they wouldn't still be together had they not got married. One in four couples say they wouldn't be as happy as they are now.
- Just under half of couples married for the first time think they would still be together and as happy whether they had married or not. The remaining couples didn't know.
- Marriage Foundation commissioned Savanta ComRes to ask 2,000 ever married adults aged 30 and over what they thought would have happened had they remained unmarried.
- The results show that a significant proportion of couples attribute their success to the fact they got married rather than remained unmarried.
- We have long argued that the ingredients of success are necessarily present in the act of marriage – the deliberate decision, the clear plan that removes ambiguity, the social affirmation and accountability that motivates – but only optionally among cohabiting couples.
- This adds to the body of evidence suggesting the act of marriage itself contributes to stability and satisfaction, rather than merely being due to the 'kind of couples who marry'.
- Results are weighted to reflect characteristics of the population of the UK.



Around one third of couples said they would not still be together had they not got married. The proportion dropped slightly from 37% after three years of marriage to 30% after ten years.

Those who thought they would be together whether married or not rose from 45% after three years of marriage to 49% after ten years.



Around one quarter of couples said they would not still be as happy had they not got married. The proportion dropped slightly from 28% after three years of marriage to 25% after ten years.

Those who thought they would be as happy whether married or not rose from 46% after three years of marriage to 48% after ten years.

## Cause or effect? Does the act of marriage cause better outcomes?

It's an ongoing debate that can never be resolved beyond all doubt because I can't run an experiment. I can't randomly select some couples to marry and some not, in order to see who does better.

Do married couples and their children 'do better' in terms of stability and other outcomes because of some special quality of marriage? Or is it simply that people who would have done better anyway also happened to get married?

There's certainly merit in the latter argument. Over the past 40 years, for example, the trend away from marriage has been most pronounced among the poorest couples (Benson & McKay 2015). As marriage has become increasingly the preserve of the better-off, it's hardly surprising that married families have better outcomes.

But there is a very big 'BUT' here. Even after taking into account differences that select couples into marriage, substantial and significant differences in outcomes remain.

Our own research has explored this at length.

For example, married parents are still more likely to stay together, even after controlling for age, education, ethnicity, religion, initial relationship happiness and whether the birth was planned (Benson & McKay 2016, 2018). Their children are still less likely to experience high levels of mental health problems, even after controlling for the same factors (Benson & McKay 2017).

So what could it be about the act of marriage that makes a difference. I propose three things.

### Decision

Making a decision to do something helps people focus on the task in hand, stick at it and cope with difficulties along the way. For example, gamblers become more confident about the horse they want to win after they have placed a bet on it. The decision to bet doesn't change the horse. But it does change the attitude of the gambler (Slovic 1973).

If we were to decide to go for a walk, we probably wouldn't be too bothered by a drop of rain. But if we set off without a clear decision, seeing how things go, then the rain might be enough to persuade either of us to give up.

### Plan

Making a plan puts people on the same page, removes any lingering ambiguity and gives a clear signal of their commitment to one another (Rowthorn 2002).

Few businesses, if any, are successful without a plan. If you don't make a plan, you don't know where you are going.

### Social affirmation and accountability

There are really two factors at play here. Making a commitment to one person means closing the door on all the other options. That's a huge risk. I remember feeling more nervous in my stomach on the morning of my own wedding day than I ever did under fire as a Royal Navy commando pilot in the Falklands war. Yet as soon as I saw my friends and family, I relaxed. Great choice, Harry, they were saying. That's social affirmation.

The other factor is accountability. I signed up to run a marathon a few years ago but wasn't 100% certain I could manage it. I gave it my best shot. I decided to go for it. I made a plan and stuck to it. I lost weight and ran three half marathons in training. But it was only when I asked my friends for sponsorship that I was truly committed. Backing out at that stage became impossible.

Is it remotely possible that we marry only because we are selected into marriage?

Did I only get married because I happened to be older than an equivalent cohabiting man (actually I was 25)? Did I only get married because I happened to be better educated (actually I didn't have a degree at the time)?

It's absurd to imagine that we have no agency whatsoever over our own decisions and that we are purely the unthinking product of our environment or circumstance. Of course selection matters (although it's less obvious than you might think why it should be).

Most of all, it's truly absurd to imagine that these three factors which necessarily go with marriage have no effect.

- Making decisions matters.
- Making plans and removing ambiguity matters.
- Social affirmation and accountability matter.

Therefore so does marriage.

## References

- Benson, H. & McKay, S. (2015). The marriage gap: The rich get married and stay together; The poor don't. Cambridge: Marriage Foundation.
- Benson, H. & McKay, S. (2016). Does religion help couples stay together? Cambridge: Marriage Foundation
- Benson, H. & McKay, S. (2017). Family breakdown and teenage mental health. Cambridge: Marriage Foundation
- Benson, H. & McKay, S. (2018). Family planning. Cambridge: Marriage Foundation
- Rowthorn, R. (2002). Marriage as a signal. The law and economics of marriage and divorce, 132-156.
- Slovic P. (1973) Behavioral Problems of Adhering to a Decision Policy. Working paper, Oregon Research Institute.