



# Marriage Foundation

## Attitudes to marriage and commitment

Harry Benson, October 2022

- With the polling firm Savanta ComRes, we conducted a survey of 2000 adults who had ever married. Of these 905 married for the first time after the year 2000. We asked them how much they agreed or disagreed with each of twelve reasons for why they might have got married. We then looked at which reasons were associated with whether they subsequently stayed married or not. Here's what we found.
- Five reasons stood out after taking into account gender, age at marriage, occupation, where the couple met, whether they had done some form of marriage preparation or signed a prenup, how much their wedding cost, how many guests they had, and whether one of them earned more than the other or was better educated than the other.
- Those who said they wanted to (1) "build our life together as a married couple" had significantly LOWER divorce rates overall. Those who (2) "wanted to declare our commitment and plan to each other" or thought it (3) "was important that our children had parents who were married" also had LOWER divorce rates but only in the early years of marriage.
- Those who felt they (4) "had to marry due to family pressure" or who thought their marriage (5) "just kind of happened" had significantly HIGHER divorce rates overall.
- In terms of dedication, the internal bond of commitment, thinking of your marriage as the CORNERSTONE of life together and as a SIGNAL to one another are big positives. SLIDING into marriage is a clear negative, showing a lack of deliberate intent.
- In terms of constraints, the external bonds of commitment, marrying because of SOCIAL PRESSURE is a big negative but marrying for your CHILDREN is a big positive.
- These findings confirm that the attitudes behind each marriage reveal the influence of both kinds of commitment.

### FACTORS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

#### Protective factors

**CORNERSTONE:** We wanted to build our life together as a married couple

**SIGNAL:** We wanted to declare our commitment and plan to each other

**CHILDREN:** It was important that our children had parents who were married

#### Risk factors

**SOCIAL PRESSURE:** We felt we had to marry due to family pressure

**SLIDE:** It just kind of happened

### FACTORS THAT MAKE NO DIFFERENCE

**DECIDE:** We made a deliberate decision to marry

**CAPSTONE:** We felt we were now established enough as a couple to get married

**RECOGNITION:** We wanted public acknowledgement of us as a couple

**COMMITMENT:** We wanted to declare our commitment and plan to the world

**SOCIAL NORM:** It was what you did if you wanted to live together

**TRADITION:** We wanted to marry because it's what couples do in our family

**BELIEF:** We believe sex outside of marriage is wrong

## The Survey

Last summer we commissioned the polling firm Savanta ComRes to conduct a survey of 2,000 adults who were either married now or had been married at some stage. This will be the last of five analyses, in this case focusing on the responses from the 905 adults who married for the first time after the year 2000.

Our sample has a good spread of sex, age, employment, year of marriage and stability.

Respondents were:

- 51% female
- a minimum of 21% in each of four age group from 30s to 60s with 13% among over 70s
- 75% in paid work spread over five employment groups with 6% at home or unemployed and 19% retired; 21% were in social class DE
- a minimum of 16% in each of five decades of first marriage from the 1970s to the 2010s with an 8% balance before and after
- 64% still in a first marriage

Our sample slightly oversampled those who have ever divorced, particularly those who married in the 1980s. Comparing divorce rates in the sample with my own estimates of divorce rates based on ONS data from England & Wales, 36% of the sample had ever divorced compared to 32% nationally. Of those who married in the 1970s, the respective divorce rates were 41% for the sample versus 38% nationally. For the 1980s, 53% versus 42%. For the 1990s, 41% versus 38%. For the 2000s, 33% versus 25% of those who married in the 2000s.

In our previous analyses I identified the following findings using this sample:

- One in five weddings now begin with a prenup (Benson 2021a)
- One in four married couples now meet online and face higher divorce risk in the first three years (Benson 2021b)
- One in three married couples in their early years of marriage say they wouldn't still be together if they hadn't married (Benson 2021c)

- The average wedding cost is in the range £5-10,000, far below the £30,000 commonly touted by wedding magazines (Benson 2022)

In these analyses I also identified the following factors to be associated with higher divorce risk in the early years, all other factors being equal:

- Having met online or at work, rather than meeting through family and friends
- Having less than 10 guests at the wedding
- Having an expensive wedding costing more than £20,000

## The analysis

In each of our analyses I used 'logistic regression analysis'. What this type of analysis does is hold every other factor constant so that I can see the unique effect of each individual factor on the likelihood of divorce, independent of all other factors, and whether it is 'statistically significant', i.e. unlikely to be due to mere chance.

In each equation, I included the following factors:

- sex
- age when first married
- occupation
- where they met
- whether they did marriage preparation
- whether they signed a prenup agreement
- what they spent on their wedding in today's prices
- how many guests came to their wedding
- who earns more
- who has more education

I also included twelve statements reflecting reasons why they got married with which they could agree or disagree:

- DECIDE: We made a deliberate decision to marry
- SLIDE: It just kind of happened
- BELIEF: We believe sex outside of marriage is wrong
- SOCIAL NORM: It was what you did if you wanted to live together

- **TRADITION:** We wanted to marry because it's what couples do in our family
- **SOCIAL PRESSURE:** We felt we had to marry due to family pressure
- **COMMITMENT:** We wanted to declare our commitment and plan to the world
- **SIGNAL:** We wanted to declare our commitment and plan to each other
- **RECOGNITION:** We wanted public acknowledgement of us as a couple
- **CHILDREN:** It was important that our children had parents who were married
- **CORNERSTONE:** We wanted to build our life together as a married couple
- **CAPSTONE:** We felt we were now established enough as a couple to get married

## Marriages after 2000

In this analysis I looked only at the sub-sample of 905 adults who married for the first time after the year 2000.

I did this for three main reasons:

- First, that this is a period during which divorce rates and social pressure to marry have both been in decline;
- Second, couples meeting online only became a factor from the 2000s onwards;
- And third, so that any findings are relevant to today's marriages.

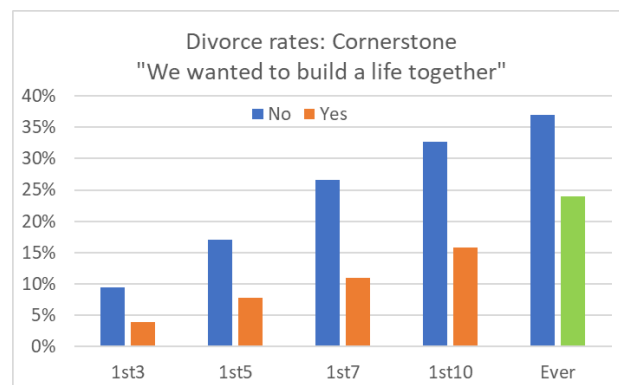
## Overall factors

Just three out of the twelve reasons for marrying were uniquely associated with an overall change in divorce rates 'ever', after taking all of the background factors into account.

Couples who agreed that they married in order to build their life together – i.e. as the **CORNERSTONE** of life together – were more likely to stay together.

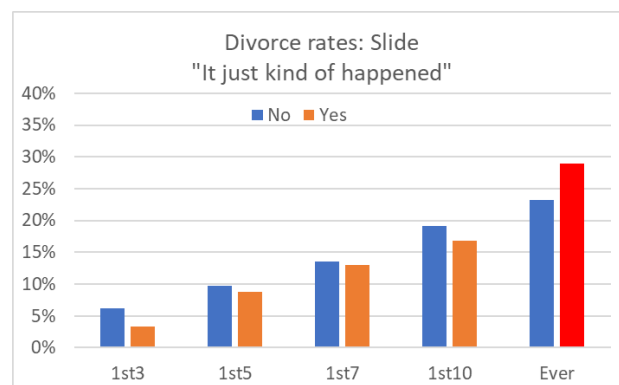
The chart below shows a raw divorce rate of 24% for those who agreed versus 37% for those who disagreed. However taking background factors into account, the probability of divorce for the average person among this sample was 23% for

those who agreed versus 33% for those who disagreed. This difference was statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .



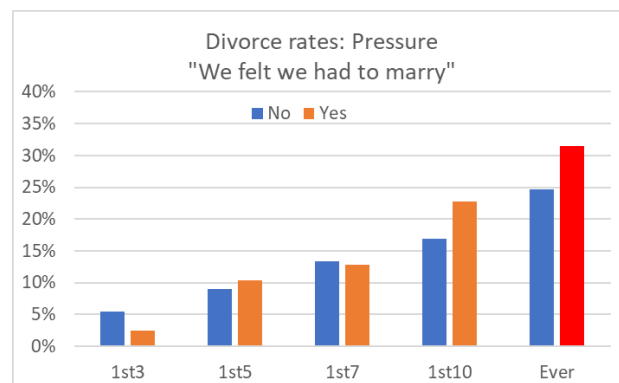
Couples who agreed that their marriage “just kind of happened” – i.e. **SLIDE** into it – were less likely to stay together.

The next chart shows the raw divorce rate of 29% for those who agreed versus 23% for those who disagreed. Taking background factors into account, the probability of divorce for the average person was 29% for those who agreed versus 22% for those who disagreed ( $p < .05$ ).



And finally couples who agreed that they “felt they had to marry due to family pressure” – i.e. they married under **SOCIAL PRESSURE** – were less likely to stay together.

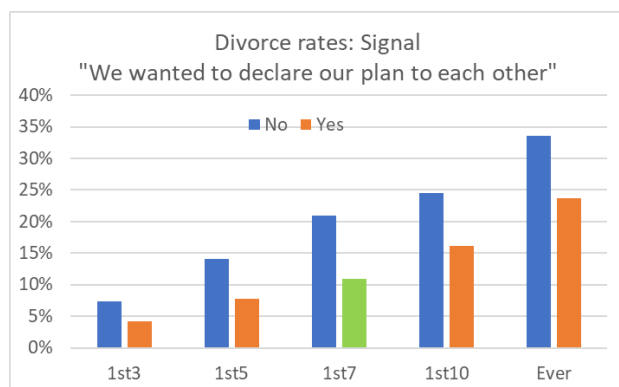
The raw margins in this case were 32% versus 25% and the average probability of divorce was 34% versus 23% ( $p < .05$ ).



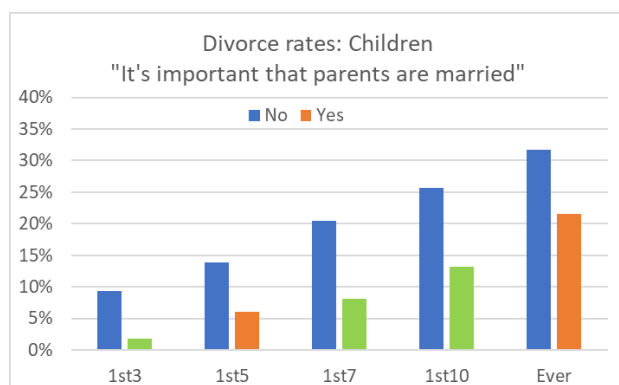
## Temporary factors

Two other factors were also associated with a significant change in divorce risk but only over specific durations of marriage.

Couples who “wanted to declare our commitment and plan to each other” – i.e. **SIGNAL** their commitment – were less likely to divorce during the first seven years, with a raw divorce rate of 11% versus 21%.



Couples who agreed that it’s “important that our children had parents who were married” – i.e. marry for the sake of the **CHILDREN** – were less likely to divorce during the first three years (with a raw divorce rate of 2% versus 9%) the first seven years (8% vs 21%) and the first ten years (13% vs 26%).

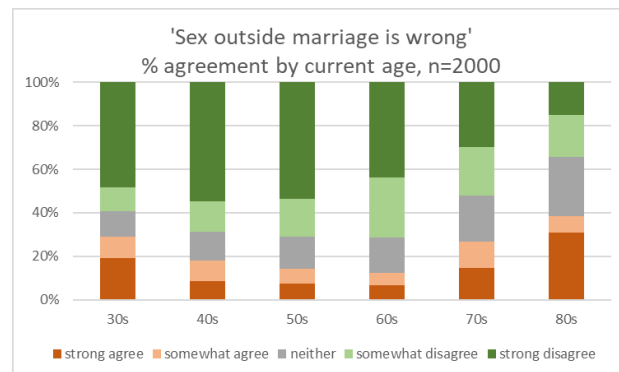


## Sex outside marriage

Attitudes to sex outside marriage did not influence the probability of divorce. However it is noteworthy that across the entire sample of 2,000 ever married adults, attitudes to sex outside marriage appear to have become more conservative.

The most conservative group were those in their 80s, among whom 38% somewhat or strongly agreed that “sex outside marriage is wrong”. The most liberal group were those in their 60s, among whom just 12% agreed.

However among those in their 30s, those who thought “sex outside marriage is wrong” had risen to 29%, similar to the 27% proportion among those in their 70s.



## DISCUSSION

In our survey of 2,000 adults, who were either married now or had been married at some stage, we were able to ask how much they related to twelve particular reasons for getting married and then see whether any of these reasons were linked to their chances of staying together or splitting up.

Although I did analyse the links with divorce for those who married before the year 2000, this briefing note covers the results for those who married after the year 2000. This was important as it takes in the era of the internet and online dating, it comprises a period when divorce rates have been falling, and it’s a more relevant group for today’s marriages.

The main finding is that there are clear signs of a unique link between certain aspects of commitment and subsequent stability.

The fact that any of these reasons are linked to divorce at all is pretty remarkable considering that my model already takes into account factors such as age, occupation, wedding size, whether they did marriage prep or signed a prenup, and any difference in earnings or education within each marriage.

The model then also adds in all twelve reasons so that if any one reason is to stand out it has to include some unique characteristic that is not covered by the other eleven reasons.

In summary, those who view their marriage as a **CORNERSTONE** of life together tend to do better and those who **SLIDE** into marriage or marry because of **SOCIAL PRESSURE** tend to do worse.

The difference in probabilities is non-trivial. Again taking into account all of the other reasons and factors, CORNERSTONE marriages were more likely to stay together. The probability of divorce for the average marriage in our sample was 23% if they agreed compared to 33% if they disagreed.

Those who SLIDE into marriage tended to do worse, with a 29% probability of divorce for the average marriage that agreed and 22% for those who disagreed, as did those who married under SOCIAL PRESSURE where the difference in probabilities was 34% compared to 23%.

There were also signs that those who married as a SIGNAL of their commitment to one another tended to do better, as did those who married for the sake of their CHILDREN.

This latter finding needs to be interpreted with some caution as couples may be staying together for the sake of their CHILDREN in the short-term but to the detriment of their longer term marriage. In my analysis of the pre-2000 weddings, I found a statistically lower risk of divorce in the early years but a statistically higher risk overall.

The main point however stands. Couples who are intentional about their marriage do better. Couples who slide into their marriage do not.

## References

- Benson, H. (2021a). One in five weddings now start with a prenup. Romford: Marriage Foundation.
- Benson, H. (2021b). Relative Strangers: The Importance of Social Capital for Marriage. Romford: Marriage Foundation.
- Benson, H. (2021c). Would you still be together if you hadn't got married? Romford: Marriage Foundation.
- Benson, H. (2022). Wedding guests and costs. Romford: Marriage Foundation.