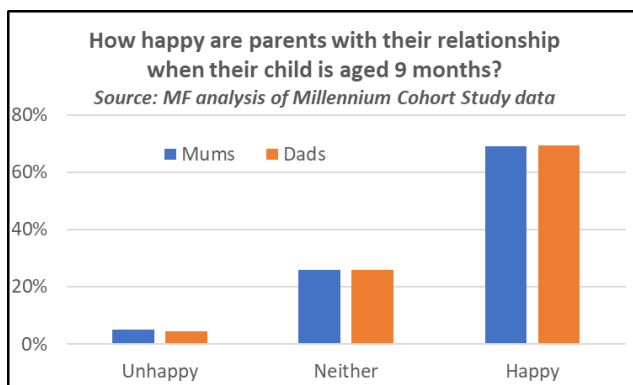




Trapped in an unhappy myth

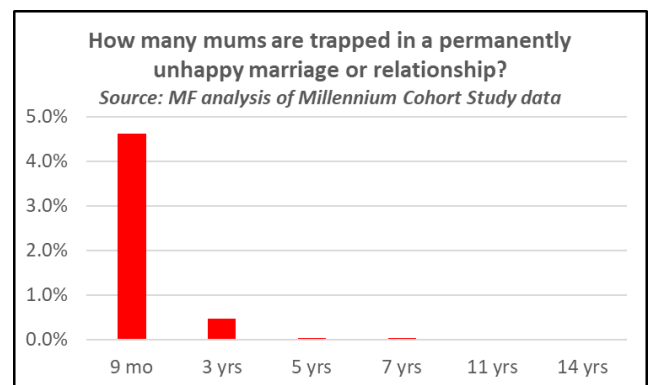
Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation

- Who today could disagree that couples should stay ‘trapped in an unhappy marriage’? The only problem with this narrative is that it’s a myth.
- Unhappiness is mercifully rare and almost never permanent. In my study covering the first fourteen years of parenthood, one in twenty mothers were unhappy with their relationship soon after becoming parents. Figures were similar for fathers. Undoubtedly some of these mothers felt ‘trapped’. But they did not stay trapped. One third split up. Among the two thirds who stayed together, not one mother reported that they remained permanently unhappy.
- I used a sample of some 3,161 couples in the Millennium Cohort Study whose children were born between 2000 and 2002. Parents were asked how happy they were with their relationship when their child was aged 9 months, 3 years, 5 years, 7 years, 11 years and 14 years old.
- I found 155 mothers* who said they were ‘unhappy in their relationship’ at the initial survey (rating 1-2 out of 7). Of these unhappy mothers, 100 mothers remained together in their relationship for the next 14 years. (*Numbers are weighted to represent the UK population as a whole)
- No mothers at all in this sample reported being persistently unhappy over 11 years of parenthood. Only one mother was persistently unhappy in the first three surveys up to five years. Thankfully she reported that she was happy at 11 years. Between 4 and 13 of these initially unhappy mothers ever reported being unhappy again in any of the subsequent surveys.



Among parents, unhappiness is mercifully rare, representing just under 5 percent of mums and dads and a mere 0.3 percent where mum AND dad are both unhappy. However, these initially unhappiest of parents are in no sense trapped. Some split up but most become happy.

Unhappiness is also rarely permanent. Fewer than 1 in 170 parents start off unhappy and ever report being unhappy in any of the later surveys.



Of the 5 percent of couples who start off unhappy with their relationship, few are still unhappy after 3 years. Only one mother in our sample was unhappy in three consecutive surveys.

While this study doesn’t cover childless couples or couples whose children have left home, it does show conclusively that being ‘trapped in an unhappy marriage’ is rare to non-existent.

Introduction

Family breakdown is arguably at the highest level in UK history. Nearly half of all UK teenagers are not living with both parents (*Kiernan, 2022*).

The main reason this is important is that family breakdown leads to lone parenthood and a reduction in parental resources, especially time and money. The consequence is that children in lone parent families tend to face more difficult circumstances that can continue into adulthood (*Maplethorpe et al, 2010*).

Both marital status and relationship happiness play important roles in distinguishing parents who stay together and avoid family breakdown (*Benson & McKay, 2016*).

It is commonly perceived that it is not good to be ‘trapped in an unhappy marriage’. This study seeks to establish the prevalence of relationship unhappiness, whether unhappiness is directly predictive of subsequent instability, and whether unhappy people remain unhappy if they stay together and become happy if they split up.

Methods

My analysis draws on Millennium Cohort Study data from 3,161 married or cohabiting couples with nine-month-old babies. Children were all first-borns between 2000 and 2002. Mothers were surveyed again when their children were aged 3, 5, 7, 11, and 14 (*UCL 2020, 2021*).

My analysis draws on the extensive work I have done to develop this dataset for use in my PhD project at Bristol University. Results are weighted to represent the UK population as a whole.

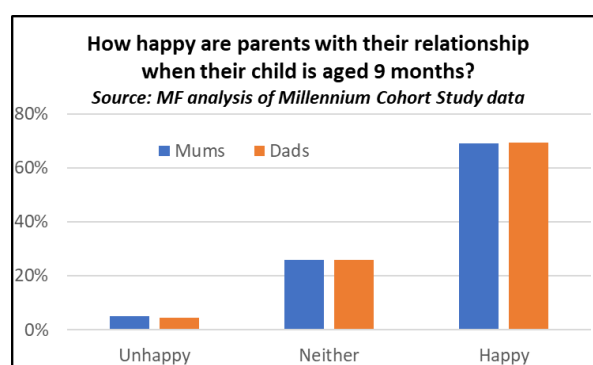
I looked at what happened to the mothers, as couples, between the first and last of these waves, i.e. over a period of nearly fourteen years. At the initial wave, both mothers and fathers were asked “how happy are you in your relationship”. Answers were scored from 1 to 7 where 1=very unhappy and 7=very happy. I then reduced these responses to three categories where 1-2=Unhappy, 3-5=Neither, 6-7=Happy.

Similar questions were asked of mothers at each subsequent wave. I also analysed changes in marital status over the fourteen-year period and how satisfied mothers were with life. I did not analyse later changes in father happiness due to technical issues with the way my analysis is set up.

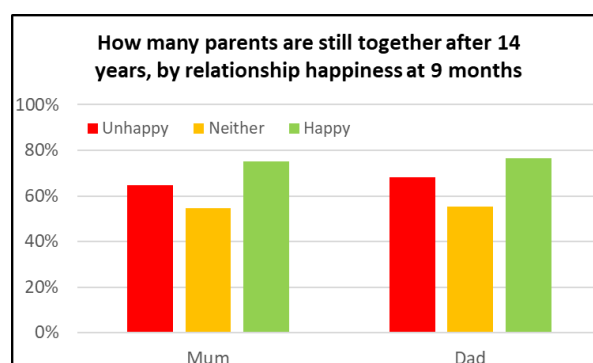
Results

Who starts off unhappy? Happiness is mercifully rare. When couples start out as parents, just 5% of mothers and 5% of fathers report being unhappy in their relationship. The majority of parents, 69% of mothers and 69% of fathers, report being happy. The remaining 26% of parents are neither happy nor unhappy. In just 0.3% of couples with nine-month-old babies are mother and father both unhappy at the same time.

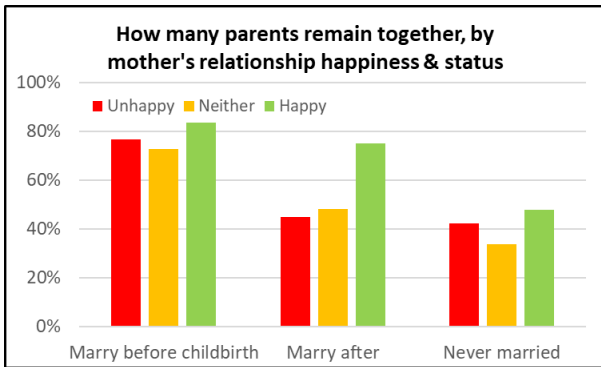
In my weighted sample, 155 of the 3,161 mothers and 134 of the 2,920 fathers are initially unhappy. These numbers differ due to more fathers not responding to the question.



Who stays together? Those who start off neither unhappy nor happy are least likely to stay together. Proportions are similar for mothers and fathers. 65% of ‘unhappy’ mothers remained together as a couple over 14 years, compared to 54% of ‘neither’ mothers and 75% of ‘happy’ mothers.

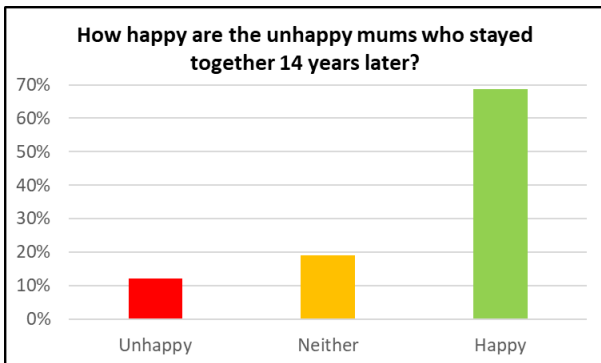


Does marriage matter? Getting married before having a baby gives parents their best chance of staying together – between 73% and 83% whether they are happy or not. The only other group in this range are those who start off happy and then get married after having their baby – 75%. Those who start off happy but never marry have the lowest probability of staying together – 48%.

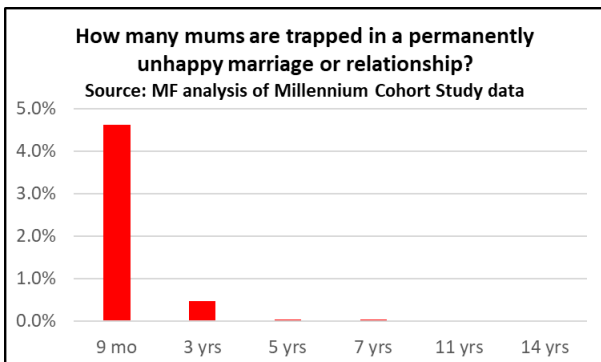


What happens to these unhappy parents who stay together for fourteen years? Are these parents who are trapped in an unhappy marriage or relationship?

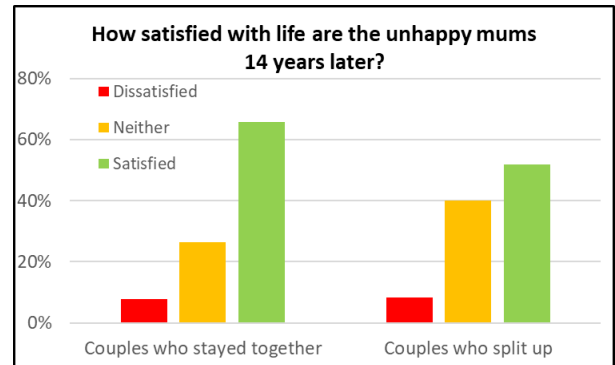
Apparently not. 69% of those who start off unhappy – and stay together – end up happy with their relationship. Just 12% are still unhappy. But note that none of these couples were permanently unhappy. All couples reported being happy at some stage in between. In this analysis, this small group represents just 13 mothers out of a sample of 2,272. This is equivalent to 1 in 174 couples.



How long do couples stay permanently unhappy? Following the fewer than 5% of all mothers who start off unhappy, only one in ten (0.5% of all mothers) are still unhappy when their child is aged three. Just one mother was still unhappy when her child was aged five and seven. No mothers at all in this sample reported being permanently unhappy beyond age seven.



Finally, how satisfied with life are the mothers with teenage children who started off unhappy with their relationship? Regardless of whether they stay together or split up, just 8% of the originally unhappy mums are dissatisfied with life fourteen years later (scoring less than 3 out of 10 on the life satisfaction scale). This works out at 1 in 283 of all mothers who were still together as a couple and 1 in 211 of all mothers who had split up along the way.



Conclusion

It is commonly argued that couples should not stay 'trapped in an unhappy marriage'. This argument is used to justify leaving any marriage, or relationship, where the happiness has gone.

While it undoubtedly true that couples go through phases of unhappiness, and during that phase may 'feel trapped', my analysis of mothers during their first fourteen years of parenthood utterly dispels the myth that this state of unhappiness is in any way permanent.

Starting off unhappy is mercifully rare. Being unhappy a second time is extremely rare. Remaining 'trapped in an unhappy marriage', in my study at least, is non-existent.

Just one in twenty mothers and fathers were unhappy at the beginning of parenthood. In most cases, this involved only one unhappy parent. Almost all these unhappy parents either split up or become happy.

Among this initial group, just one in ten mothers reported being unhappy for a second time at a later stage of parenthood. That amounts to one in over 200 mothers. Just one mother reported being permanently unhappy beyond three years. Even she reported being happy after eleven years. Not one mother in my study was permanently unhappy throughout this fourteen-year period.

References

- Benson, H. & McKay, S. (2016) *Date nights strengthen marriages*. Cambridge: Marriage Foundation
- Kiernan, K., Crossman, S., & Phimister, A. (2022). *Families and inequalities, IFS Deaton review of inequalities*.
- University of London, Institute of Education, Centre for Longitudinal Studies. (2021). *Millennium Cohort Study: First Survey, 2001-2003*. [data collection]. *13th Edition*. UK Data Service. SN: 4683
- University of London, Institute of Education, Centre for Longitudinal Studies. (2020). *Millennium Cohort Study: Sixth Survey, 2015*. [data collection]. *7th Edition*. UK Data Service. SN: 8156

I am grateful to the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS), UCL Social Research Institute, for the use of these data and to the UK Data Service for making them available. However, neither CLS nor the UK Data Service bear any responsibility for the analysis or interpretation of these data.