



WITH THIS RING...

A NATIONAL
SURVEY
ON
MARRIAGE
IN AMERICA



National
Fatherhood
InitiativeSM

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A LETTER FROM NFI'S PRESIDENT

Dear Readers:

I am pleased to share with you *With This Ring...A National Survey on Marriage in America*, one of the most comprehensive surveys ever conducted on American attitudes towards the institution of marriage. This timely report provides important data that will serve to inform opinion leaders, policy makers, marriage educators, and scholars as they grapple with strategies to strengthen marriages in our country.

There is little doubt that marriage is one of the most venerable and significant institutions in American culture. However, there is also little doubt that, despite the fact that Americans generally value marriage and desire to have happy marriages, there are some troubling trends that should alarm us. The prevalence of divorce is one such troubling trend, particularly if one is concerned about the well-being of children.

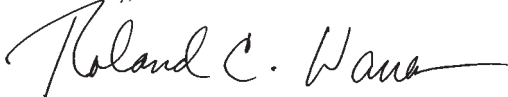
Given National Fatherhood Initiative's (NFI) mission is to improve the well-being of children by increasing the proportion that grow up with involved, responsible and committed fathers, NFI was especially interested in providing the public with invaluable insights into a variety of issues that affect children. Because when fathers and children are disconnected, children fare worse, on average, across every measure of physical, economic, educational, and psychological well-being.

With one out of three American children living in father-absent homes, it is important for us to understand how the public views marriage, which arguably is society's best "glue" to connect fathers to their children, heart to heart.

On the fatherhood front, this report certainly provides some encouraging news. Specifically, 97% of the survey respondents said that fathers are just as important as mothers for the proper development of children, and 89% said that, all things being equal, it is better for children to be raised in a household that has a married mother and father.

In closing, I am confident that you will read this report with great interest. I am also confident that some of the data will surprise you and that you will be inspired to continue to find ways to strengthen the institution of marriage so that our nation's children can grow up in secure, stable homes with the love, nurturance, and support that they so desperately need.

Sincerely,



Roland C. Warren
President
National Fatherhood Initiative

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Because when fathers and children are disconnected, children fare worse, on average, across every measure of physical, economic, educational, and psychological well-being.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A national telephone survey of 1,503 Americans age 18 and older conducted late in 2003 and early in 2004 that asked questions about attitudes toward marriage, aspirations for marriage, and past experiences with marriage yielded the following findings:

Americans clearly are not rejecting marriage.

One of the most surprising and important findings of the survey casts doubt on the widespread belief that persons can increase their chances of having good marriages by postponing marriage until their late twenties or their thirties.

1 Although only 60 percent of the respondents were married at the time of the survey (virtually the same percentage as shown by recent Census surveys), Americans clearly are not rejecting marriage. Most of the older respondents were married or had been married (96 percent of those age 60 and older), and most of the unmarried younger respondents said they wanted to marry. Only two percent of the respondents had never married and said they did not want to marry. In spite of much talk about a “retreat from marriage” among African Americans, only three percent of the black respondents had never been married and said they did not want to marry.

2 One of the most surprising and important findings of the survey casts doubt on the widespread belief that persons can increase their chances of having good marriages by postponing marriage until their late twenties or their thirties. Although respondents who married after their mid-twenties were only about as likely to have divorced as those who married in their mid-twenties, they were much more likely to be in intact first marriages of poor or mediocre quality.

3 A very large majority of the respondents to the survey expressed pro-marriage attitudes and a very small minority expressed attitudes that could reasonably be considered “anti-marriage.” For instance, most of the respondents to the survey said that marriage should be a lifelong commitment (88 percent) and that fathers are just as important as mothers for the proper development of children (97 percent). A substantial majority (71 percent) disagreed with the statement that “Either spouse should be allowed to terminate a marriage at any time for any reason,” thus expressing their disapproval of unilateral no fault divorce (though that term was not used in the question).

4 Although the respondents were not asked specifically about healthy marriage initiatives and similar governmental and private efforts to strengthen marriages, most of them expressed agreement with the goals of such efforts and confidence in some of the methods being used. For instance, 94 percent agreed that divorce is a serious national problem, and 86 percent agreed that all couples considering marriage should get premarital counseling. Furthermore, almost half (47 percent) thought that premarital counseling should be *required*.

5 Although very few of the respondents agreed with such anti-marriage statements as “Marriage is an old-fashioned, outmoded institution,” such sentiments were expressed more frequently by younger respondents than by older ones (possibly indicating a trend), by poorly educated than by better educated respondents, and by secular than by religious ones.

6 Sentiments that some observers consider a threat to marriage, though they are not clearly anti-marriage, were expressed more frequently by younger than by older respondents. These include approval of cohabitation as a means of testing compatibility for marriage, believing that divorced parents can parent just as effectively as married ones, and rejection of the notion that, in the absence of violence and extreme conflict, parents should stay together until their children are grown. These age differences almost certainly reflect a trend toward less traditional attitudes toward marriage.

7 In contrast to widespread aspirations to marry among unmarried young persons, a large percentage of the unmarried but once married middle-aged and elderly respondents said they did not want to remarry. This includes 82 percent of those age 60 and older and 49 percent of those ages 35 through 59. At each age level, men more than women, and divorced persons more than widowed ones, were likely to say they wanted to remarry. However, the persons who had rejected marriage for themselves still generally expressed pro-marriage attitudes.

8 The responses of the married respondents to questions about their marriages indicate a generally high level of marital quality. Sixty-nine percent said their marriages were “very happy,” and 88 percent said they were either “completely satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their marriages. Survey respondents may tend to exaggerate the quality of their marriages, but 73 percent of all of the respondents agreed that “Most married couples I know have happy, healthy marriages.” An astounding 97 percent of the married respondents said they expected to be married for life, and 93 percent said they would marry their spouses if they had it to do again.

9 High levels of marital happiness and satisfaction do not, by themselves, mean that the institution of marriage is healthy, and other indicators of marital health are less positive. For instance, of those respondents who first married 15-25 years before the survey, 44 percent had divorced, two percent were separated, and another 21 percent were in intact first marriages they reported to be less than “very happy.” This leaves only 33 percent of the marriages that can be considered successful, in the sense of being both stable and of high quality. Another negative indicator of the health of marriage is that fewer than 40 percent of the survey respondents age 25 and older were married and reported their marriages to be “very happy.”

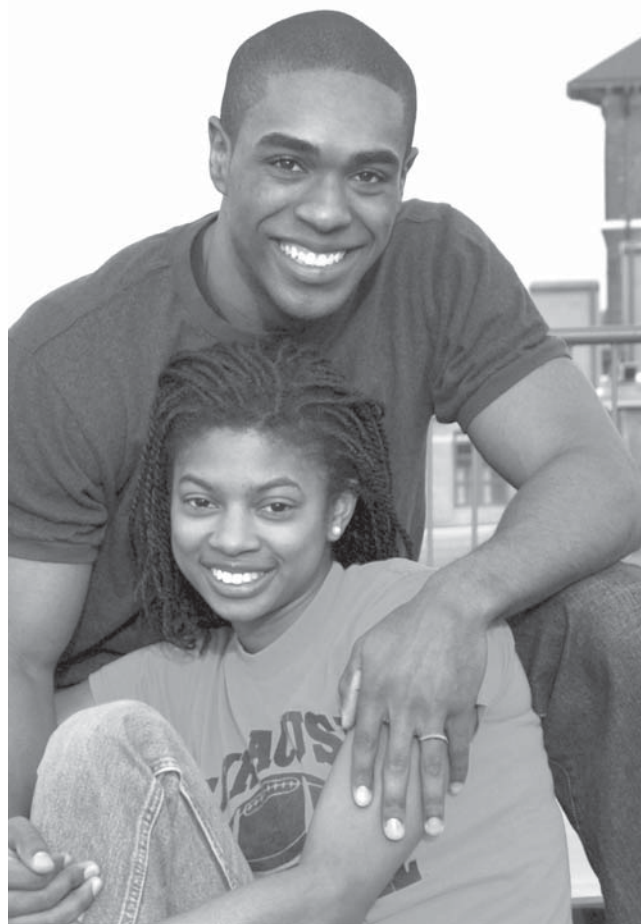
10 A Relative Marital Success Index based on both the stability and quality of the first marriages of the survey

respondents reveals substantial differences in marital success among different portions of the American population. Among the people with unusually poor average marital success are those who have little education, who have little or no religiosity, who live in the South and West, whose parents divorced before they were age 16 (females only), who lived with their spouses before marrying, and who married before age 20. These findings identify portions of the population whose marriages warrant special attention from policymakers and others concerned about American marriage, and they suggest,

but by themselves cannot prove, some of the reasons for marital success and failure.

11 The ever-divorced respondents reported what they considered to be major reasons for their divorces by selecting from a list of reasons thought to be important by marriage researchers. “Lack of commitment” of one or both spouses was the most frequently selected reason, followed by “too much conflict and arguing” and “infidelity.” “Married too young,” “unrealistic expectations,” “lack of preparation,” and “inequality” were among the other frequently selected reasons. Many of the frequently given reasons can be addressed by the kinds of interventions included in healthy marriage initiatives and similar programs. The reason on the list that probably can be least effectively addressed by such programs, “financial problems,” was not often chosen.

12 Two questions on the survey asked ever-divorced respondents (a) if they wished that they, themselves, had worked harder to save the marriage, and (b) if they wished their ex-spouse had done so. Only about a third of the respondents answered no to both questions, and 62 percent of both the ex-husbands and the ex-wives answered yes to the question about their ex-spouse’s efforts. Neither this finding nor the fact that “lack of commitment” was the most frequently chosen reason for the respondents’ divorces is consistent with the claim made by some commentators on American marriage that most divorces occur only after the spouses have done their best to make the marriage work.



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Americans' Views of Marriage

Pro-Marriage Attitudes

Americans, according to what they say in response to survey questions, believe that marriage is very important—for themselves, for children, and for the society as a whole. The results from the National Fatherhood Initiative Marriage Survey (NFIMS) reported here add to an already large body of evidence that most adult Americans express distinctly pro-marriage attitudes and that very few espouse views that reasonably could be considered “anti-marriage.”

For instance, among the respondents to the NFIMS, large majorities agreed that, “All things being equal, it is better for children to be raised in a household that has a married mother and father” (89 percent), that “Fathers are as important as mothers for the proper development of children” (97 percent), and that “Couples who marry should make a lifelong commitment to one another, to be broken only under rare circumstances” (88 percent). Furthermore, large percentages *disagreed* with such statements as “Marriage is an old-fashioned, outmoded institution” (88 percent), and “Given how long people are living these days, it is unrealistic to expect a couple to remain married to one another for life” (78 percent). Given these sentiments, it is not surprising that most respondents expressed negative attitudes toward divorce. For instance, 94 percent agreed that divorce is a serious national problem and 71 percent *disagreed* that “Either spouse should be allowed to terminate a marriage at any time for any reason.” The latter percentage is especially important, in that it shows widespread disapproval of unilateral no-fault divorce, which exists by law in most states and exists *de facto* in most if not all of the others.

The minority positions on each of these seven attitudinal questions are arguably “anti-marriage,” though it is likely that some persons who hold these attitudes would object to that label. At least, these attitudes show a lack of support for the institution of marriage that includes a strong norm of marital permanence. Persons concerned about the state of American marriage often complain that these “anti-marriage” attitudes are held and promulgated by a “cultural elite,” who predominate in intellectual, academic, and media circles. This perception may be correct, but nevertheless, these attitudes are most common at the lowest educational levels (see Figure 1). And even among persons with less than 12 years of education, the average number (out of seven) of these attitudes expressed is just above one and well below two (see Figure 1). Aside from education, the two strongest predictors of these attitudes are age and degree of religiosity (Figures 2 and 3). Young adults are more likely to embrace “anti-marriage” attitudes than older ones, and as would be expected, persons low in religiosity are more likely to hold anti-marriage views than are persons higher in religiosity.

Figure 1

Mean Number of “Anti-Marriage” Attitudes
(Out of a Possible 7)
Expressed by Survey Respondents, by Educational Level

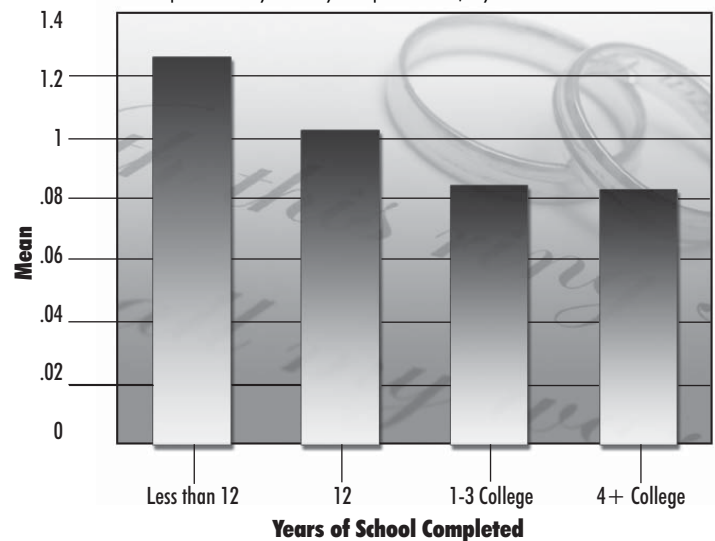


Figure 2

Mean Number of “Anti-Marriage” Attitudes
(Out of a Possible 7)
Expressed by Survey Respondents, by Age

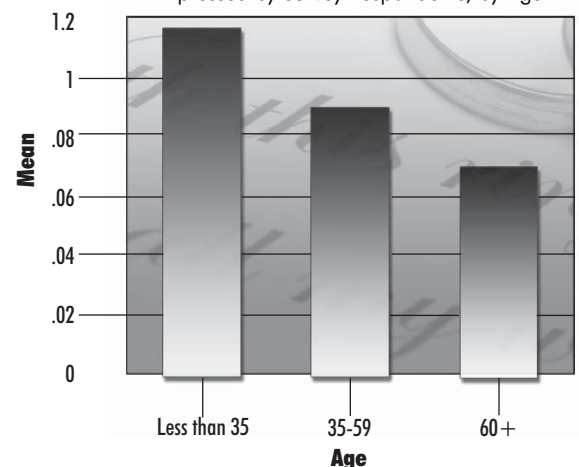
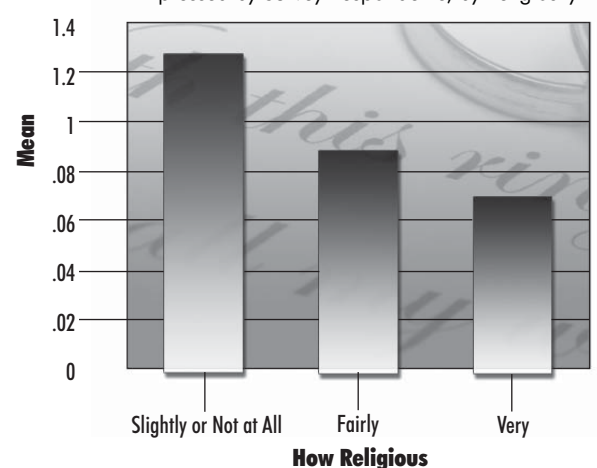


Figure 3

Mean Number of “Anti-Marriage” Attitudes
(Out of a Possible 7)
Expressed by Survey Respondents, by Religiosity



That few adult Americans admit to anti-marriage attitudes is of course good news to the supporters of marriage, but the news may not be as good as it at first seems. It is likely, though not certain, that the greater rejection of marriage by young adults than by their elders indicates a trend. (These young adults may become less “anti-marriage” as they grow older.) Furthermore, if, as is commonly believed, cultural elites generally reject marriage, it is important to recognize that their visibility and influence are greatly disproportionate to their numbers.

Attitudes that May Harm Marriage

...a large majority of adult Americans seem to reject unilateral no-fault divorce...

...a smaller majority of the survey respondents (59 percent) agreed that, “Society would be better off if divorces were harder to get” ...

It is also the case that a large percentage of American adults hold attitudes that, while not anti-marriage, are disturbing to supporters of marriage. For instance, while a large majority of adult Americans seem to reject unilateral no-fault divorce, a smaller majority of the survey respondents (59 percent) agreed that “Society would be better off if divorces were harder to get” (which suggests that a good many persons do not know how easy it is to get a divorce). Only 41 percent of the respondents agreed that it should be harder to get a divorce if you have children, and only 44 percent agreed that, in the absence of violence and extreme conflict, parents should stay together until their children are grown. Forty-seven percent agreed that divorced parents can parent as effectively as parents living together, and 40 percent of the respondents agreed that couples should live together before they decide to marry. Obviously, the widespread support for marriage is not without qualifications.

These qualified attitudes about marriage vary by age and religiosity in a fashion similar to the way that more clearly anti-marriage attitudes do; that is, they are more common among younger persons and the less religious. However, they do not relate in a consistent manner to education. College-educated respondents were less likely than those with less education to say that living together before marriage is a good thing, and they were more likely to say that parents should stay married until their children are grown. In other respects, however, responses differed little by education.

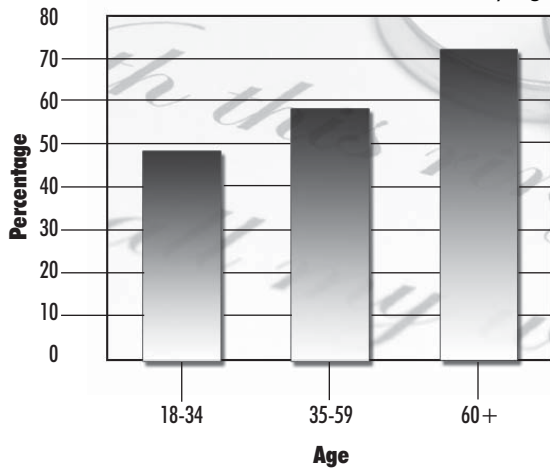
The age differences in responses are especially notable, both because they are large and because the difference in responses to the question on living together before marriage is known to reflect a trend toward acceptance of nonmarital cohabitation (see *Figures 4 through 8*). Data on high school seniors from the Monitoring the Future Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan show a steady increase in approval of nonmarital cohabitation over the past quarter of a century, except for an apparent slight reversal of the trend since 2000.¹ There are no such trend data on the other attitudes covered here, but it is likely that the age differences in them also reflect recent changes in their prevalence.

There has been much discussion of a so-called “retreat from marriage” among African Americans, among whom the percentage married has declined substantially in recent decades.² The NFIMS data on African Americans must be viewed with caution, because there were only 118 black respondents to the survey. However, if these respondents are reasonably representative of all adult African Americans, this segment of the population is by no means anti-marriage in its attitudes, though it is less pro-marriage than whites. The mean number of “anti-marriage” attitudes expressed by the black respondents is 1.3 compared with a mean of .9 expressed by whites. On several of the questions, the responses of blacks were only slightly less pro-marriage than those of whites. For instance, 96 percent of the African American respondents (versus 98 percent of whites) agreed that fathers are as important as mothers for the development of children and 84 percent (versus 90 percent of whites) agreed that it is better for kids to be raised in a household with married parents. There were greater racial differences in responses to a few other questions, including in agreement that couples with children ought to be married (62 percent of blacks versus 76 percent of whites) and that society would be better if divorce were harder to get (47 percent of blacks versus 60 percent of whites).

Overall, distinctly anti-marriage attitudes seem to be rare, but attitudes that some observers consider harmful to the institution of marriage are common and have almost certainly increased substantially in recent years.

Figure 4

Percentage of Survey Respondents Who Agreed that
"Society Would Be Better Off
if Divorces Were Harder to Get," by Age



verall, distinctly anti-marriage attitudes seem to be rare, but attitudes that some observers consider harmful to the institution of marriage are common and have almost certainly increased substantially in recent years.

Figure 5

Percentage of Survey Respondents Who Agreed that
"For Parents of Children Under Age 18 It Should Be Harder to Get
a Divorce than It Is for Couples Who Do Not Have Children
Under Age 18," by Age

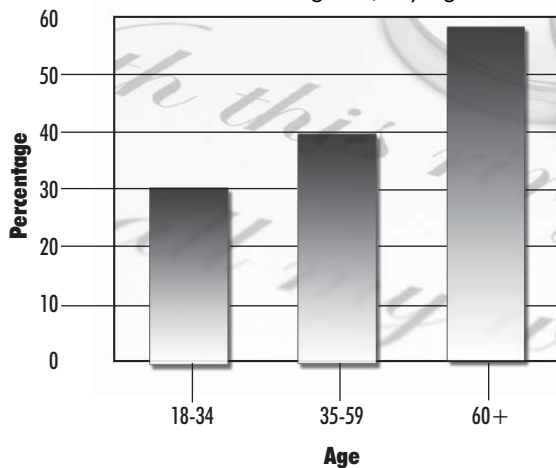


Figure 7

Percentage of Survey Respondents Who Agreed that
"Divorced Couples Can Parent as Effectively as Can Most
Parents Who Live Together," by Age

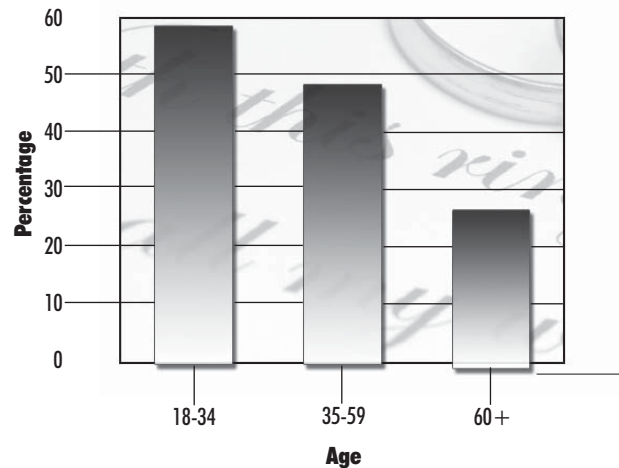


Figure 6

Percentage of Survey Respondents Who Agreed that
"In the Absence of Violence and Extreme Conflict, Parents Who
Have an Unsatisfactory Marriage Should Stay Together Until
Their Children Are Grown," by Age

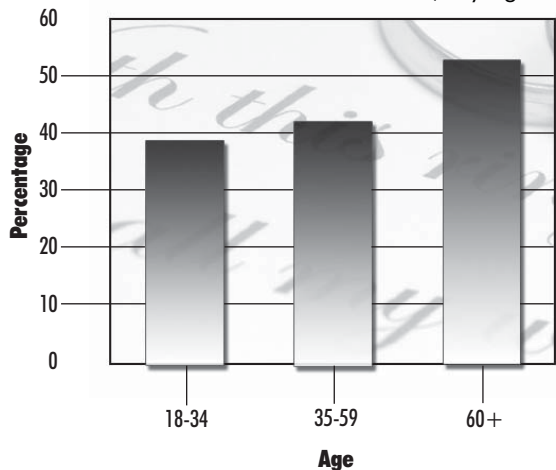
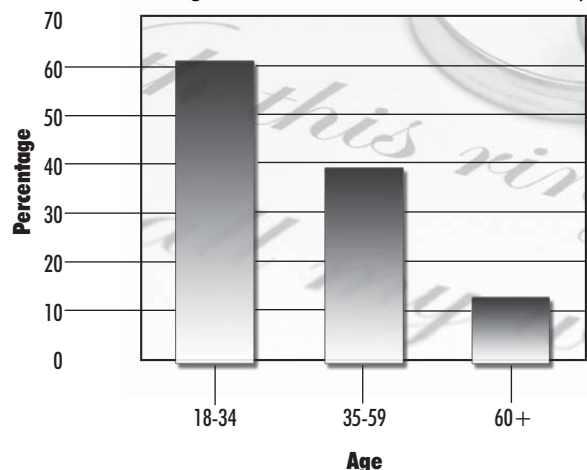


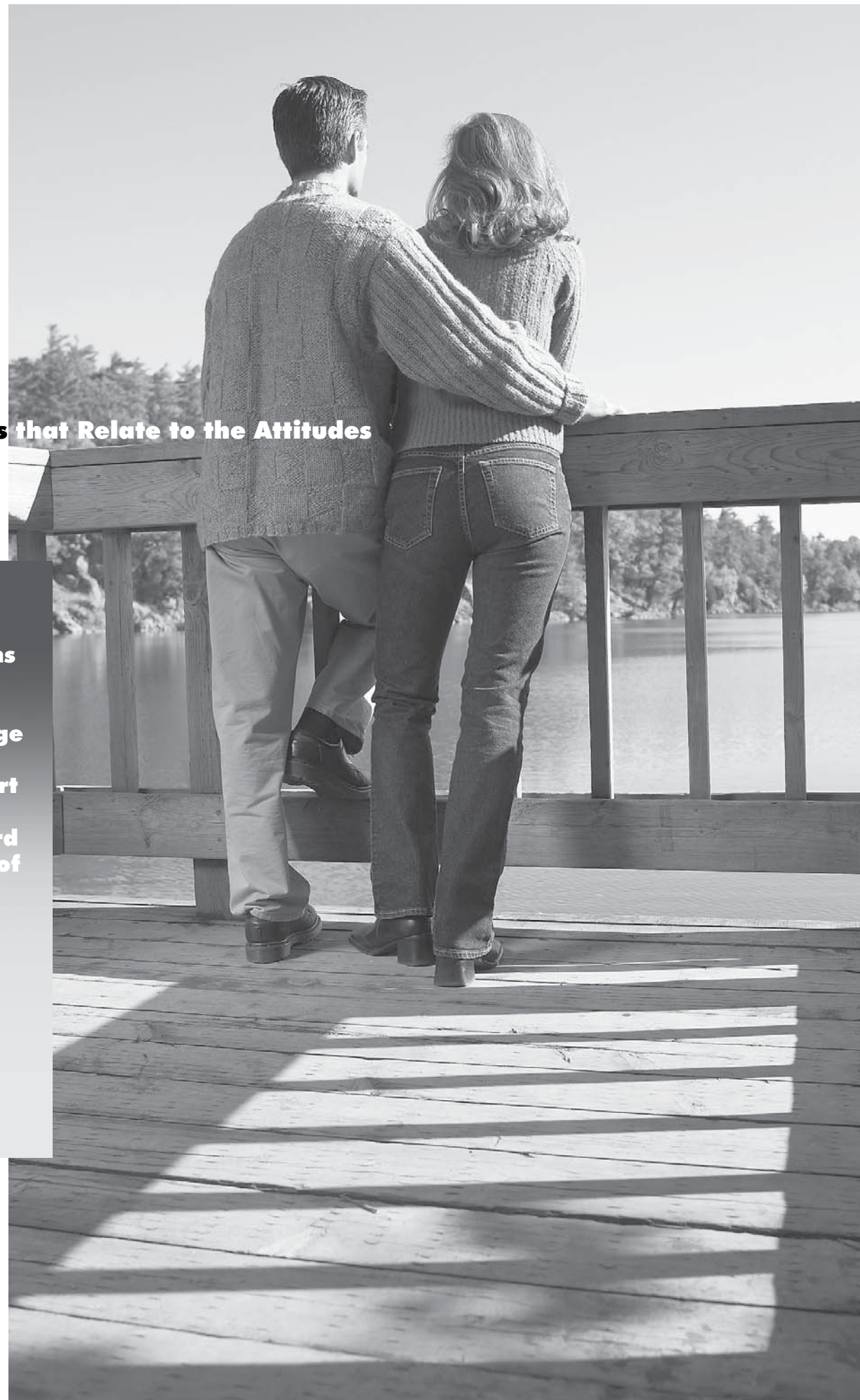
Figure 8

Percentage of Survey Respondents Who Said that
"It Is a Good Idea for Couples Considering Marriage to Live
Together in Order to Decide Whether or Not They Get Along
Well Enough to Be Married to One Another," by Age



Actions that Relate to the Attitudes

Even the previously married persons who have rejected the goal of marriage for themselves generally report favorable attitudes toward the institution of marriage.





How Americans view marriage for themselves is indicated by actions as well as by expressed attitudes. Although only 60 percent of the National Fatherhood Initiative Marriage Survey respondents were married when they were interviewed (a percentage quite close to that shown by U. S. Census Bureau surveys)³ 82 percent were or had been married. Among respondents age 40 and older, that percentage was 92, and among those ages 60 and older it was 96. Of the respondents who had never been married, 86 percent said they would like to marry. This leaves a minuscule 2 percent of all of the respondents who had not been married and did not aspire to marry. Even among the African American respondents, this percentage is only three (and 93 percent of the never-married black respondents said they would like to be married). Clearly, Americans have voted for marriage with their actions.

It would be negligent, however, to report the information in the previous paragraph without adding that a substantial proportion (61 percent) of the survey respondents who had been married but were not married at the time of the survey said they did not want to remarry. This percentage was especially high (82 percent) among persons age 60 and older but was 49 percent among those ages 35 through 59. Apparently, a good many middle-aged and elderly Americans have a been-there-done-that attitude toward marriage. At each age level, a larger percentage of divorced than of widowed persons, and a larger percentage of men than of women, said they would like to remarry. The reasons for these differences are not clear, but the low level of aspiration to marriage among unmarried middle-aged and elderly women may be an adaptation to a low level of opportunity. The sex ratio among unmarried persons becomes increasingly unfavorable for women beyond age 40, there being almost twice as many unmarried women as unmarried men at age 60 and more than three times as many unmarried women as unmarried men above age 75. This unbalanced sex ratio

may depress aspirations for marriage among men as well as among women, because it provides men with an abundance of opportunities for female companionship outside of marriage.

Even the previously married persons who have rejected the goal of marriage for themselves generally report favorable attitudes toward the institution of marriage. For instance, only 16 percent agreed that marriage is an old-fashioned, outmoded institution, and 88 percent agreed that it is better for children to be raised in a household with married parents. Previously married respondents who did not want to remarry expressed very few “anti-marriage” attitudes on the average, though the mean for divorced respondents (1.12) is well above that for widowed ones (.76).

Attitudes reported by survey respondents should always be viewed with some skepticism, because some respondents have a tendency to give the responses they think they should give rather than ones that reflect their true attitudes. Genuine support for the institution of marriage in America may be somewhat less than what the survey results indicate. However, reducing the pro-marriage responses by ten percent or so to allow for possible “social desirability response bias” would still leave a picture of solid support for marriage, and respondents’ feeling that they should give pro-marriage responses would in itself indicate strong pro-marriage cultural norms.

Most of the reported pro-marriage attitudes and values are probably real, but that does not mean that people will always act in terms of these attitudes and values. Persons who value marriage hold other values that may override the pro-marriage ones in influencing behavior and decision-making. These include the values of consumerism, individualism, and careerism, to name just a few. Nor are pro-marriage attitudes and values, regardless of how strong, sufficient to bring about healthy marriages, which require knowledge, skills, favorable community and societal influences, and the availability of eligible potential spouses.

P

robable Support for Marriage Initiatives

The National Fatherhood Initiative Marriage Survey did not attempt to assess attitudes toward the various healthy marriage initiatives and other governmental programs proposed and in place to promote successful marriages. Few Americans are well informed about the details of these programs, and it is not possible to describe the programs to respondents in a short telephone interview without unintentionally biasing responses to be either favorable or unfavorable toward the programs. However, some of the NFIMS questions did elicit information about the public's probable receptiveness to such programs.

...86 percent agreed that all couples considering marriage should get premarital counseling...

All of the programs that are proposed or in place include a strong educational and/or counseling component, toward which the survey respondents expressed favorable attitudes.

For instance, 86 percent agreed that all couples considering marriage should get premarital counseling, 57 percent of the married respondents said they would attend a free marriage education class if one were available, and 73 percent of the unmarried persons searching for someone to marry said they would attend a free pre-marital education class. On the other hand, only 47 percent of all of the respondents thought that couples considering marriage should be *required* to get premarital counseling—an indication that there will be considerable opposition to any coercive elements in healthy marriage programs.

Recently, marriage initiatives and pro-marriage programs in general tend to be associated with the Republican Party. The pioneering state marriage initiative, the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, was started by a Republican governor (though it continues with the support of a Democratic governor), and marriage initiatives are now being promoted by the Bush Administration. It is not surprising, therefore, that the NFIMS shows a greater prevalence of pro-marriage attitudes, and a smaller prevalence of anti-marriage attitudes, among Republican than Democratic respondents. A few of the differences are fairly substantial. For instance, 57 percent of Democrats, as opposed to 31 percent of Republicans, agreed that divorced parents can be as effective as those living together. And only 68 percent of Democrats, compared with 87 percent of Republicans, agreed that couples with children ought to be married.

Still, the expressed attitudes of the Democratic respondents as a whole can hardly be characterized as anti-marriage. Ninety-seven percent agreed that fathers are as important for children as mothers, 92 percent agreed that divorce is a serious national problem, and 84 percent agreed that marriage should be a lifelong commitment. Eighty-eight percent said that all couples should get premarital counseling, and 49 percent agreed that all couples should be required to get premarital counseling—slightly higher than the 47 percent agreement by Republican respondents. The mean number of “anti-marriage” attitudes expressed by the Democratic respondents is just above one (1.1), which can be considered high only in relation to the Republican mean (.59).



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The Health of American Marriage

General Assessment

No one survey—not even one much longer and more elaborate than the National Fatherhood Initiative Survey—is sufficient for diagnosing the health of marriage in America, but the NFIMS provides a useful increment of information about the vital signs and symptoms of the institution.

Consider, for instance, the disagreement among scholars who study marriage as to the meaning of the generally high reported levels of marital happiness and marital satisfaction in the United States. The levels found by earlier studies are similar to the ones shown by the NFIMS, in which 69 percent of the married respondents said their marriages were “very happy” and 88 percent said they were either “completely satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their marriages. An astounding 97 percent said they expected to be married for life, and 93 percent said they would marry their spouses if they had it to do again. To some observers, these reported levels of marital quality are unbelievably high, being due to something akin to social desirability response

bias—perhaps a social norm that marital problems should be concealed from outsiders, including survey researchers. Other observers, however, are inclined to take these reports of high marital quality at their face value, or at least to consider them to be only moderate distortions of reality.

One of the questions on the NFIMS provides evidence relevant to this debate. The respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement: “Most married couples I know have happy, healthy marriages.” Of course, a norm of privacy about marital problems could make agreement with this statement artificially high, but many married persons do talk about their marital problems with friends and relatives, and tensions between married couples cannot always be well concealed. Thus, a high level of agreement with this statement is at least tentative evidence that the high levels of reported marital happiness and satisfaction are not grossly in error. And that level of agreement was moderately high among the NFIMS respondents, being 73 percent, and only two percent of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. This finding is in sharp contrast to many statements made by media commentators, which are often on the order of “I know no one who has a good marriage.”

A generally high level of marital quality is to be expected in a society, such as the United States, in which persons in unsatisfactory marriages are able, and often willing, to resort to divorce to deal with the situation. If poor

marriages tend to end quickly, the average quality of intact marriages will be high, as is apparently the case in this country. Thus high levels of marital happiness and satisfaction are not, by themselves, strong indications that the institution of marriage is healthy. Marital failures weaken the institution and of course have a host of negative consequences for adults, children, and the society as a whole even if they do not lower the average quality of existing marriages.

A high divorce rate also tends to lessen variations in marital quality among different categories of the married population, and thus these variations are not necessarily good evidence as to the causes of marital success and failure. For instance, there are reasons to think that religiosity is

Marital failures weaken the institution and have a host of negative consequences for adults, children, and the society as a whole...

...persons who are very religious report only moderately higher marital happiness and satisfaction than persons who are not religious at all.

typically conducive to marital success, but persons who are very religious report only moderately higher marital happiness and satisfaction than persons who are not religious at all. The apparent reason is that many forms of religiosity tend to prevent persons in unsatisfactory marriages from divorcing, or at least from resorting quickly to divorce.

An alternative to reported marital happiness or satisfaction as a measure of marital success is whether or not the marriage has ended in divorce. However, this measure is not adequate by itself either, because some marriages that do not end in divorce are not “successful” by any reasonable standard.

There is a need, therefore, for a measure of marital success that is based both on whether or not the marriage is intact and, if it is, on its quality. One such simple measure is whether or not the marriage is intact *and* is reported to be “very happy.” An intact, happy marriage is scored 1, and a dissolved marriage *or* one that is less than happy is scored zero. This measure, known as the Marital Success Index, has been used in academic research and can easily be computed for the first marriages of nonwidowed respondents to the NFIMS⁴. When this index is computed for a population of ever-married, nonwidowed persons, it is expressed as the percentage of those persons who have, by the definition used for the index, a “successful” first marriage.

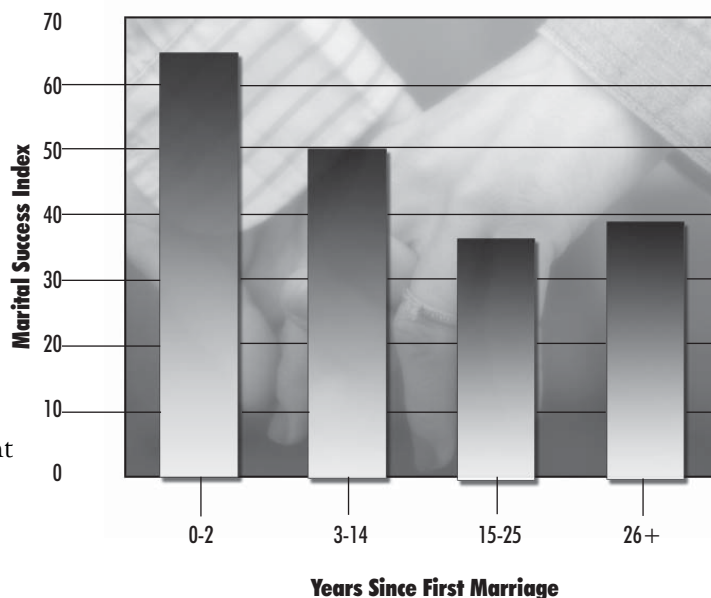
This percentage is presumably near 100 at the time of marriage, but it declines steeply in the few years following marriage before leveling off below 40 after about 20 years (see Figure 9). There is no evidence that it ever increases within a marriage cohort (the marriages that were formed within a given period of time), the slightly higher index value for 26+ years since first marriage than for 15-25 years shown in Figure 9 apparently reflecting greater success of the marriages that occurred several decades ago than of the more recent ones. That the percentage of “successful” first marriages is under 40 after about 20 years is hardly good news, though the rate of success could be considerably lower.

Some observers of American marriage take the position that the high failure rate of first marriages is not reason for concern, given that many persons whose first marriages fail enter into successful second (or subsequent) marriages. This view ignores the effects of divorce on children, and it also fails to take into account the fact that remarriages are, as a whole, less successful than first marriages. Many remarriages that are satisfactory for a while turn out to be unsatisfactory in the long-run. However, it is important to take into account not just what happens to first marriages but the percentage of all adults, or all adults above a certain age, who are in good marriages. Among the respondents to the NFIMS,

43 percent of those ages 25 or older were in marriages they reported to be “very happy,” the remaining 57 percent being either unmarried or in marriages of lesser quality.

The distinction between those in and not in “very happy” marriages is somewhat arbitrary, in that the line between good and not-so-good marriages could be drawn in some other way. Nevertheless, this distinction separates the adult population into two portions that differ immensely in personal happiness and in satisfaction with many aspects of their lives—these differences being much greater than those between blacks and whites, wealthy and poor persons, and persons in good and poor health.⁵ These differences are not necessarily caused entirely by good marriages affecting personal well-being, but it is well established that good marriages contribute to well-being⁶. Although there are some adults who should not be married, and who might not benefit even from being in a good marriage, the apparent fact that fewer than half of Americans age 25 and older are in good marriages is reason for concern. Even more disconcerting is the fact that from 1973 to 2002, the proportion of Americans age 25 and older who were in marriages they reported to be “very happy” declined by 20 percentage points, according to the General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.⁷ This change came about partly because of an increase in the average age at first marriage, but it also came about because of (a) an increase in divorce, (b) a decrease in remarriage of divorced persons, and (c) a slight decrease in the reported quality of intact marriages.

Figure 9
Marital Success Index (for First Marriages),
by Years Since First Marriage



Whose Marriages Are the Healthiest?

Healthy marriages are quite unequally distributed through the American population, and it is useful to examine the inequalities both to identify portions of the population that need help with their marriages and to gain tentative evidence about what contributes to healthy marriages. For this purpose, the simple Marital Success Index described above is not adequate, because some of the differences in that index simply reflect differences in the average amount of time that has elapsed since persons entered their first marriages. Statistical adjustments can be made to remove differences caused by differences in time since first marriage, but the resulting data are not as easily understood as are simple percentages. Fortunately, readers without a statistical background can understand the general meaning of the adjusted data without understanding the statistical procedures. These data, in the form of values for the Relative Marital Success Index, are presented in Figures 10 through 16. (In statistical terminology, the numbers are “odds ratios,” the definition of which need not concern us here.)⁸

Family scholars have long known that college graduates, as a whole, have more successful marriages than other persons...

but there is not agreement as to why that is true.

All one needs to know in order to understand these data is that the numbers represented by the bars in the figures are not meaningful in themselves. The value for one of the compared categories is set at 1.0, and the values for the other categories indicate the extent to which marital success in them is higher or lower than the marital success in the category for which the value is set at 1.0. For instance, the adjusted proportion of persons with successful marriages in a category with a value of 2.0 is twice that in the category with the value of 1.0. In other words, the values have meaning only in relation to one another (hence the name *Relative Marital Success Index*).

The Relative Marital Success Index for persons with different levels of education is shown in Figure 10. The greater the amount of education, the higher the index values, but only the value for persons with four or more years of college is substantially higher than the others. Family scholars have long known that college graduates, as a whole, have more successful marriages than other persons, but there is not agreement as to why that is true. The mere experience of going to college may not have much effect on one's ability to have a successful marriage (note the relatively low index value for persons who started, but did not complete, college). Rather, it may be that the characteristics conducive to successfully completing college (for instance, persistence, dependability, and intelligence) are also conducive to having a good marriage. That is, the college graduates with good marriages might have had just as much marital success if something external to themselves had prevented them from starting or finishing college. The percentage of adult Americans who have completed college has gone up substantially in recent decades, but there is no evidence that the increase in college graduates has contributed to the overall level of marital success in the country. On the other hand, further education that would improve the earnings and financial stability of persons with very little education should improve their prospects for healthy marriages.

The index values in Figure 11 show a substantially higher degree of marital success for respondents who are very religious than for even the fairly religious ones. It has long been known that highly religious persons are less likely to divorce than other persons, but there has been some disagreement about the extent to which religiosity contributes to marital success and not just to marital stability. These index values, based on both the stability and quality of marriages, suggest, though by themselves they cannot prove, a strong positive effect of religiosity on marital success. Belief in such an effect is buttressed by the fact that the values espoused by most religions *should* promote good marriages and good family relations in general. Americans as a whole are more



religious than people in most, if not all, other modern industrialized societies,⁹ which augurs well for efforts to promote healthy marriages in this country.

The NFIMS findings in Figure 12 corroborate earlier findings indicating that females whose parents divorced before they reached adulthood have unusual difficulty with their marriages. Male “children of divorce,” on the other hand, have only moderately lower prospects for good marriages than males whose parents did not divorce, though a recent study has shown that this is true only for those whose wives are not also children of divorce.¹⁰ Explanations for the unusual divorce-proneness of the children of divorce abound, but one of the most credible ones is that persons whose parents divorced are fearful of marriage and thus have trouble making the kind of commitment to marriage necessary for marital success. A once popular explanation—that the children of divorce have high divorce rates only because they are less willing than others to tolerate poor marriages—is inconsistent with the findings reported here. If that explanation were correct, the relative marital success index, which takes into account marital quality, should be similar for the children of divorce and persons from intact families.

Figure 10
Relative Marital Success Index (Adjusted for Time Since First Marriage), by Educational Level

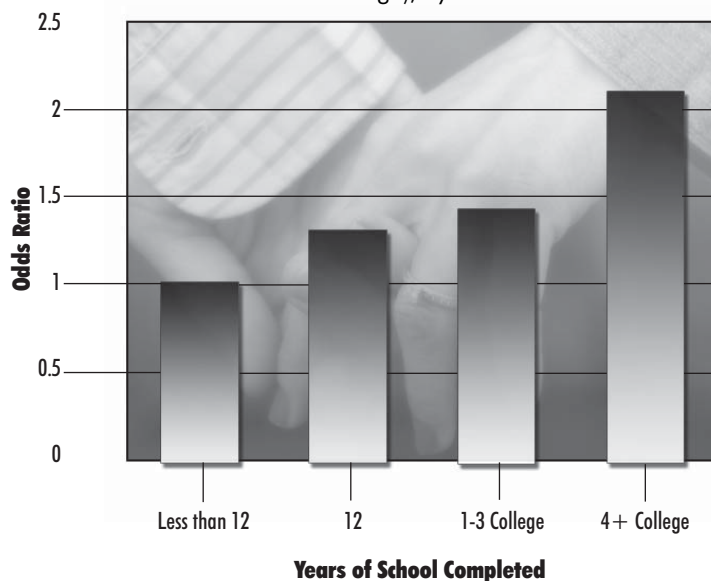


Figure 11
Relative Marital Success Index (Adjusted for Time Since First Marriage), by Religiosity

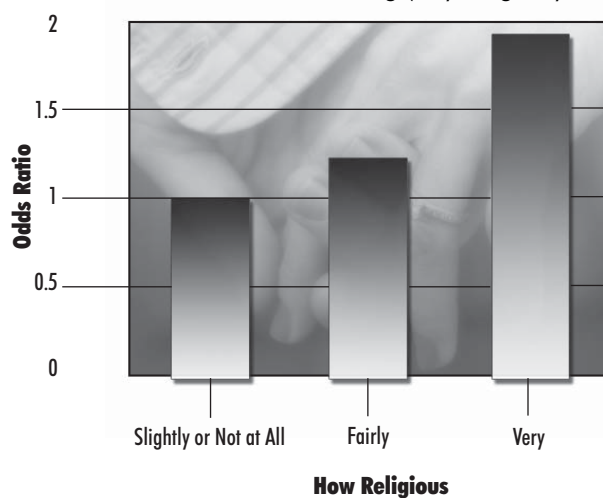
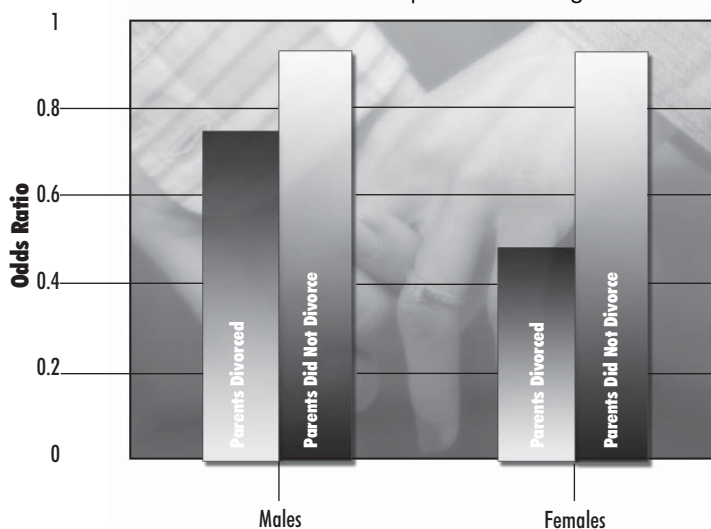


Figure 12
Relative Marital Success Index (Adjusted for Time Since First Marriage), by Sex and Whether or Not Parents Divorced Before Respondent Was Age 16





During the past several years, a majority of American couples who married were living with one another before they married,¹¹ and the belief that it is a good idea to live with someone before deciding to marry that person has become widespread. The reasoning is that if couples test their compatibility by living together before they marry, many bad marriages will be prevented. It is indeed likely that a good many couples have decided not to marry after discovering that they do not get along well in a cohabiting relationship. Nevertheless, numerous recent studies have shown that couples who live together before marriage are more likely to divorce than those who do not cohabit premaritally.¹² The NFIMS findings shown in Figure 13 add to the findings that premarital cohabitation is not associated with marital success, though the marriages of those who live together only after they have decided to marry apparently turn out better on the average than the marriages of couples who decide to marry while they are cohabiting. There is agreement among researchers who have studied this topic that the marriages of persons who live together before marriage turn out poorly on the average partly because of the kinds of persons who cohabit. These persons tend to be nontraditional in their attitudes, and nontraditional attitudes are not conducive to marital success. It is also possible that the cohabitation itself has negative effects on marriage. For instance, a casual decision to live with someone may start a process that ends with marriage to that person, even though more suitable partners are available. That is, cohabitation may often be a form of “premature entanglement,” which limits the person’s ability to circulate “on the marriage market” to test his or her desirability on the market and to find a highly suitable partner.

The probability of divorce goes down with increased age at marriage up to the mid-twenties.

Numerous studies have shown that marriages formed before the spouses are age 20 are very likely to end in divorce within five years.

Marital success also varies by region of the country, as shown by Figure 14. Marriages are the most successful on the average in the Northeast, followed by the Midwest, the West, and finally the South. The difference between the South and the West can be explained partly by the greater proportion of the population that is African American in the South, but among whites only, the lowest average marital success, according to the NFIMS findings, is still in the South. The reasons for the regional differences in marital success are not entirely clear, though the lower average age at marriage in the South can explain much of the marital

failure in that region. Some family scholars believe that rapid population growth and a consequent low level of what sociologists call “social integration” (strong social ties) explains some of the marital failure in the West.¹³ Another reason for the relatively low marital success there may be that values tend to be highly individualistic and/or nontraditional in some parts of the region, such as Nevada and urban California.

Numerous studies have shown that marriages formed before the spouses are age 20 are very likely to end in divorce within five years or so and that the probability of divorce goes down with increased age at marriage up to the mid-twenties. Results from different studies are not consistent for marriages formed by persons in their late twenties or older, the range being from moderately more to moderately less likely to end in divorce than marriages formed by persons in their mid-twenties.

When the quality of marriages is taken into account, however, first marriages of persons in their mid-twenties emerge as distinctly more successful than those entered into either earlier or later in life (Figure 15). For the female respondents to the NFIMS, the Relative Marital Success Index is even lower for those who married after age 27 than for those married before age 20. The reason for the low indicated marital success of the respondents who first married after age 27 is that an unusually large proportion of them were in stable marriages not reported to be of high quality. Of those who had never divorced, more than 45 percent were in marriages they reported to be less than “very happy,” a much larger percentage than was the case for respondents who married younger (Figure 16).

Figure 13
Relative Marital Success Index (Adjusted for Time Since First Marriage), by Whether Respondent Lived with Spouse Before Marriage

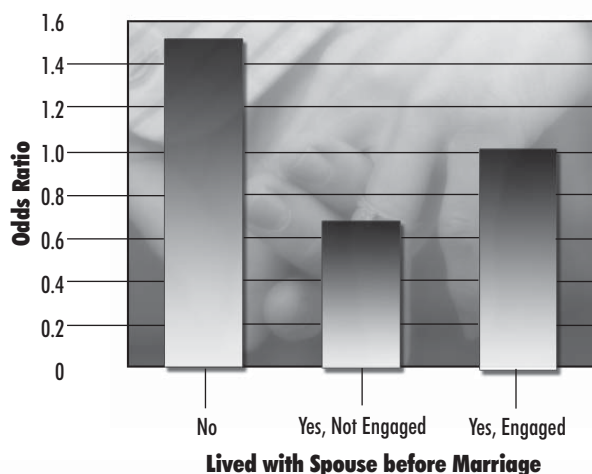


Figure 15
Relative Marital Success Index (Adjusted for Time Since First Marriage), by Sex and Age at First Marriage

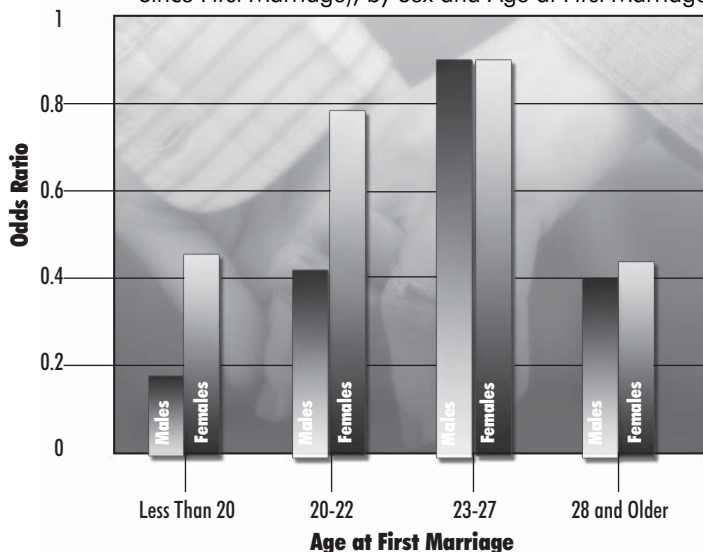


Figure 14
Relative Marital Success Index (Adjusted for Time Since First Marriage), by Region

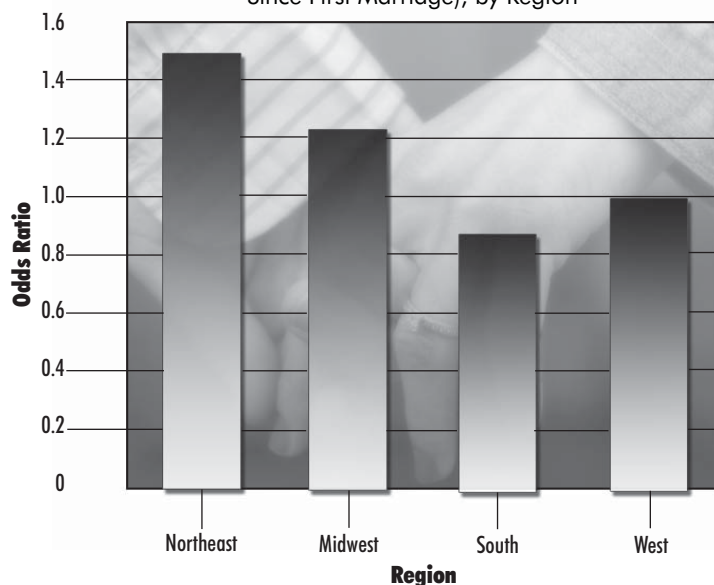
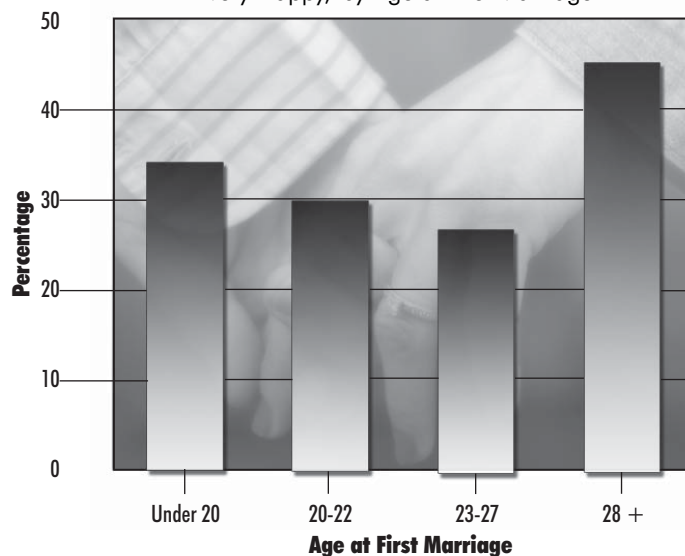


Figure 16
Percentage of Married, Never-Divorced Survey Respondents Who Said Their Marriages Were Less Than “Very Happy,” by Age at First Marriage



That the marital success of persons who first marry at older ages is distinctly lower than that of persons who marry in their mid-twenties has not been previously recognized, so of course it is not known why later marriage and poor marital outcomes tend to go together.¹⁴ It is not certain that marrying late causes low marital success, because the late marriers could tend to have characteristics that cause them both to marry late and to have relatively poor marriages when they do marry. Such characteristics might include unrealistically high standards for a spouse and poor social skills. If marrying late does tend to cause poor marital outcomes, it might be the relatively old age itself that has the effect or it might be marrying later than most other persons near one's age. Living alone for many years may tend to make persons "set in their ways" and thus impede their adjustment to marriage, or having a succession of low-commitment relationships, with or without cohabitation, may make it harder for persons to commit to marriage. Marrying later than most of one's age mates gives a person a more limited selection of potential spouses to choose from and may lessen the chances of a good marital match.

That the marital success of persons who first marry at older ages is distinctly lower than that of persons who marry in their mid-twenties has not been previously recognized, so of course it is not known why later marriage and poor marital outcomes tend to go together.

A long-standing belief among family scholars and practitioners is that many couples marry without knowing enough about one another to avoid unpleasant surprises after marriage. It was this belief that led these professionals a couple of decades ago to be receptive to the belief that it is a good idea for a couple to live together before deciding to marry. Living together before deciding to marry has not turned out to be predictive of marital success, but a rather long period of romantic involvement apparently is. The NFIMS findings on this topic (*Figure 17*) are consistent with findings from other studies conducted over a period of seven or eight decades, the only surprise being that the differences shown in *Figure 17* are not very large.

One of the least surprising findings of the NFIMS is that respondents who had premarital counseling had more successful marriages than those who did not (*Figure 18*). Of course, there are reasons to think that the counseling itself is conducive to marital success, but the main reason for the difference may be that couples who have premarital counseling are more highly motivated to have good marriages than those who do not do so. It is also relevant that couples who have premarital counseling have a pre-established relationship with a professional they can turn to when problems arise in their marriages.

Other findings from the NFIMS are so commonsensical that there is no need to dwell upon them. For instance, the ever-married respondents were asked how they met their spouse (first spouse in the case of those married more than once). The responses are of some interest in and of themselves, but in general they are not predictive of marital success. The two exceptions are that the small percentage of respondents who met in church have had unusually successful marriages, and the small percentage who met in bars have had unusually unsuccessful ones.

These are hardly newsworthy findings.

Perhaps the most widely discussed inequality in marital success in the United States is between African Americans and whites. Unfortunately, the number of ever-married African American respondents to the NFIMS (75) is too small for reliable estimates of the characteristics of African American marriages. The difference between the Relative Marital Success Index for black (1.0) and white (2.8) respondents to the survey is generally consistent with evidence from other sources but should not be considered a very accurate measure of the real difference in the success of the marriages of black and white Americans.



Figure 17
Relative Marital Success Index (Adjusted for Time Since First Marriage), by Time Romantically Involved Before Marriage

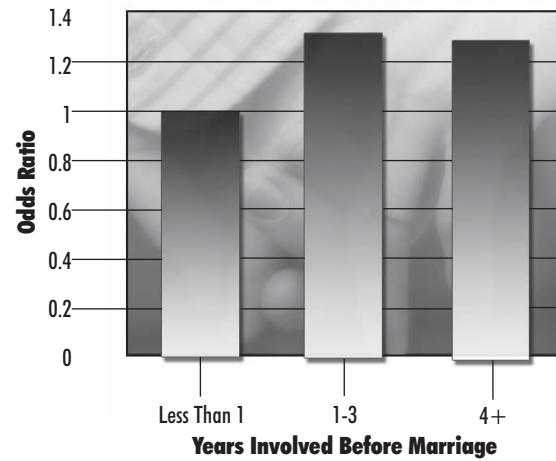
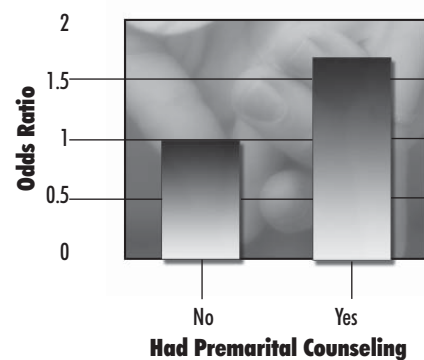


Figure 18
Relative Marital Success Index (Adjusted for Time Since First Marriage), by Whether Had Premarital Counseling





WITH
THIS RING...
A NATIONAL
SURVEY ON
MARRIAGE
IN AMERICA

Ever-Divorced Respondents Give Reasons for Their Divorces

Family scholars have given a huge amount of attention to trying to explain why divorces occur, but they have rarely asked divorced persons to give reasons for their divorces. The assumption has been that divorced persons do not necessarily understand why their divorces occurred, and that even if they do, they will not necessarily honestly report the reasons to researchers. This skepticism is well founded, but is it nevertheless useful and interesting to look at the reasons the NFIMS respondents gave for their divorces.

The respondents were read a list of commonly given reasons for divorce and were asked if each was a major reason for their divorce (first divorce if they had been divorced more than once). They could choose more than one major reason and were allowed to give reasons not on the list. The results, except for the few “other” reasons, are shown in Figure 19. The reasons are listed from the most to the least frequently given (by ex-husbands and ex-wives combined).

The most obvious aspect of the responses is that the ex-wives gave more major reasons for their divorces than the ex-husbands. Only “financial problems” was chosen more frequently by the male than by the female respondents. The ex-husbands gave an average of 4.1 reasons for their divorces while the ex-wives on average reported 5.1 reasons. Most of the male-female differences are fairly small, but that in regard to “domestic violence” is quite large, being even greater than that in regard to “lack of equality.” Of the twelve reasons for divorce, domestic violence ranked eighth in frequency among the ex-wives but last among the ex-husbands. Only 9 percent of the ex-husbands but 42 percent of the ex-wives gave domestic violence as a reason—almost exactly replicating for the nation as a whole the findings from the Oklahoma Baseline Survey on Marriage and Divorce conducted in 2001, which yielded percentages of 8 and 44, respectively, for ex-husbands and ex-wives.¹⁵

There is a danger that the media will over interpret this intriguing and admittedly disturbing finding, for instance by translating “a major reason for divorce” into “the major reason.” It is important to emphasize, therefore, that on the average the women who gave domestic violence as a major reason for their divorce gave 5.4 additional “major” reasons. If the women had been asked to give only the one most important reason, or even the three most important reasons, mentions of domestic violence would have been considerably less frequent. Only four women, less than two percent of all ever-divorced female respondents, gave domestic violence as the only reason for their divorce.

It is also important that there is no information from the survey about the severity of the domestic violence or whether it was long-term or arose only as conflict escalated prior to the divorce. However, indirect evidence on this issue can be obtained by seeing what other reasons given for divorce are associated with saying that domestic violence was a reason. In the jargon of social science research, it can be asked what other stated reasons “predict” giving domestic violence as a reason, and the answer is given by a kind of analysis called logistic regression. The reader does not need to understand this technique to be able to interpret the results, which are given in Figure 20. Of the eleven other reasons for divorce presented to the respondents, only three (the ones represented in the figure) significantly “predict” saying that domestic violence was also a reason. The odds ratios in Figure 20 are measures of how strongly the other reasons are associated with domestic violence. The reader needs only to know that an odds ratio of 1.0 indicates no association and that a ratio of 3 or higher indicates very strong association and “predictive” strength.

Only “too much conflict and arguing” very strongly predicts saying that domestic violence was a major reason for divorce. This finding suggests, but by itself does not prove, that a great deal of the violence that was cited as a reason for divorce grew out of pre-divorce escalation of conflict and was not long-term. It is likely that as the conflict increased, one or more incidences of violence, perhaps often fairly minor ones, pushed the marriage beyond the “point of no return” on the way to divorce. This could help explain the male-female difference in citing domestic violence as a reason for divorce. For ex-wives, the violence may often have been the “straw that broke the camel’s back,” while ex-husbands may have been inclined to focus on the conflict that led up to the violence. Of course, it is also possible that a great deal of “social desirability response bias” is involved in ex-husbands’ low level of reporting violence as a reason for their divorces. That is, ex-husbands may be reluctant to admit that violence was involved in their divorces.

Figure 19
Percentage of Ever-Divorced Respondents Who Gave Selected “Major” Reasons for Their Divorce, by Gender¹

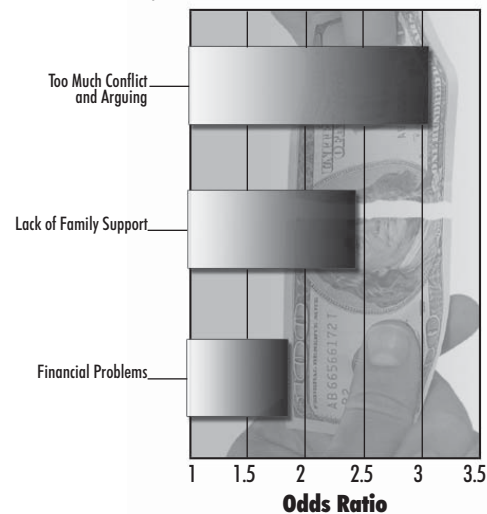
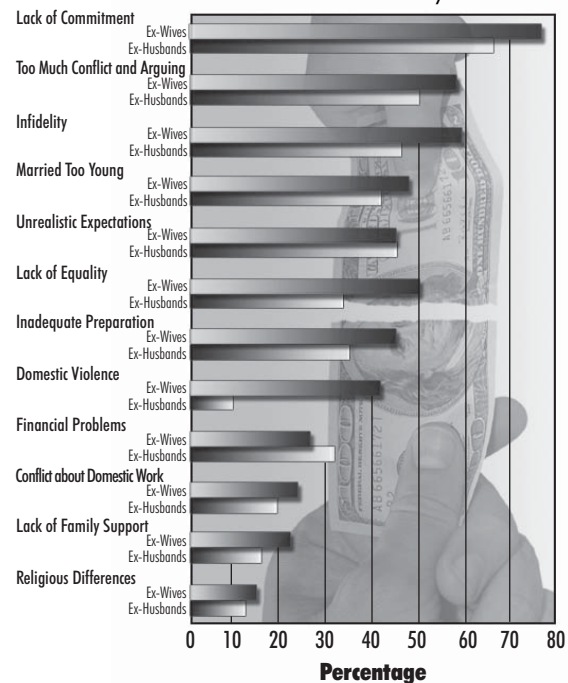


Figure 20
Extent to Which Other Stated Reasons for Divorce Predict Saying That Domestic Violence Was a Major Reason, Ex-Wives Only





...“lack of commitment,” “too much conflict and arguing,” and “infidelity”...

are the three most common reasons for divorce...

The kind of domestic violence of primary concern to feminists is what they call “patriarchal terrorism,” or the use of violence by husbands to enforce what they (the husbands) perceive to be their rightful dominance in the relationship. That there is some such domestic violence is undeniable. However, if it had been the usual kind of violence that was cited as a reason for divorce by the ex-wives, reports of “lack of equality” in the relationship should have been highly predictive of giving domestic violence as a reason for divorce. In fact, giving lack of equality as a reason for divorce was virtually unrelated to saying that domestic violence was a reason.

The three most common reasons for divorce given by both ex-wives and ex-husbands are, in the order of the frequency with which they were chosen, “lack of commitment,” “too much conflict and arguing,” and “infidelity.” That “too much conflict and arguing” and “infidelity” are commonly given reasons for divorce is not surprising, but “lack of commitment” is less expected and is therefore deserving of discussion.

A claim often made by commentators on American marriage is that couples generally resort to divorce only after they have tried very hard to make their marriages work. The fact that “lack of commitment” was the most frequently given reason for the divorces of the NFIMS respondents casts doubt on that claim, as do the responses to two questions that asked ever-divorced respondents whether or not they wished that they and their spouses had worked harder to save the marriage. Sixty-two percent of both the ex-husbands and ex-wives said they wished their spouses had worked harder, and 35 percent of the ex-husbands and 21 percent of the ex-wives said they wished they, themselves, had worked harder. Hardly any of the ex-wives, but ten percent of the ex-husbands, took full responsibility for the lack of harder work on the marriage. Only around a third of the respondents of each gender apparently thought that both ex-spouses had worked hard enough (*Figure 21*).

It is important that four of the frequently chosen reasons for divorce – “too much arguing,” “unrealistic expectations,” “married too young,” and “inadequate preparation” for marriage – can be addressed quite directly by the kind of premarital education that is being incorporated into healthy marriage initiatives across the country. It is equally important that the reason for divorce that may be least effectively addressed by healthy marriage programs, namely, financial problems, was not very often selected by the respondents. Furthermore, if the domestic violence cited as a reason for divorce by the respondents is often what it seems to be, namely, the outgrowth of pre-divorce arguing and conflict, the conflict resolution component of marriage education should be able to reduce that violence.

That the responses of the ex-wives and ex-husbands should not necessarily be taken at their face value is illustrated by the responses to the two questions on the NFIMS about who filed for and wanted the divorce (*Figures 22 and 23*). According to the responses of both the ex-husbands and the ex-wives, the wives filed for divorce in a majority of the cases, but according to the ex-husbands it was only about 60 percent of the time while according to the ex-wives it was about 80 percent (*Figure 21*). It is impossible for the male and female responses both to be correct, because even though the ex-husbands and ex-wives in the sample were not married to one another, they represent populations that were married to one another. Obviously, a good many of the respondents had faulty memories or deliberately misreported who filed for their divorces.

The male-female discrepancy in reports of who was more motivated to end the marriage is even more striking (Figure 23). According to the male respondents, ex-wives and ex-husbands overall wanted the divorce to about an equal extent, whereas according to the female respondents, the ex-wives were more than three times as likely as the ex-husbands to be the ones who more strongly desired the divorce.

These findings are interesting and indicate that reports by ever-divorced survey respondents about how and why divorces occurred should be viewed with more than a little skepticism. However, their meaning and their utility for practice and policymaking are not entirely clear. They may reflect little more than a reluctance of ever-divorced respondents to surveys to admit to have been rejected lovers. Or they may reflect communication problems between spouses in troubled marriages that could be addressed by counseling and marriage education.



Figure 21
Percentage of Ever-Divorced Respondents Who Said They Wished They and/or Their Ex-Spouse Had Worked Harder to Save the Marriage, by Gender

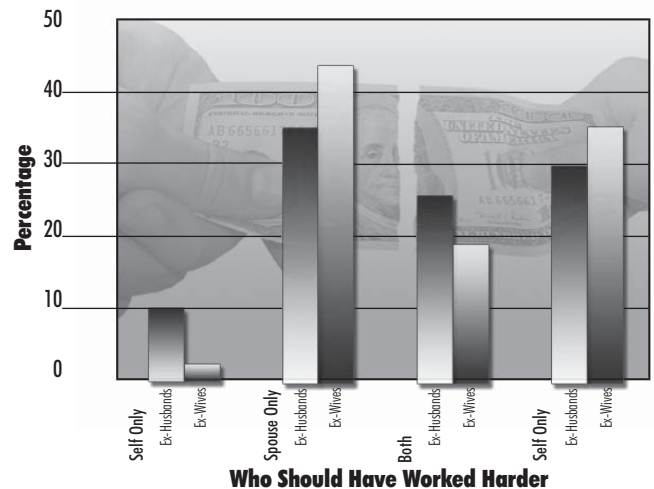


Figure 22
Percentage of Ever-Divorced Respondents Who Reported That Ex-Husband and Ex-Wife Filed for Divorce, by Gender

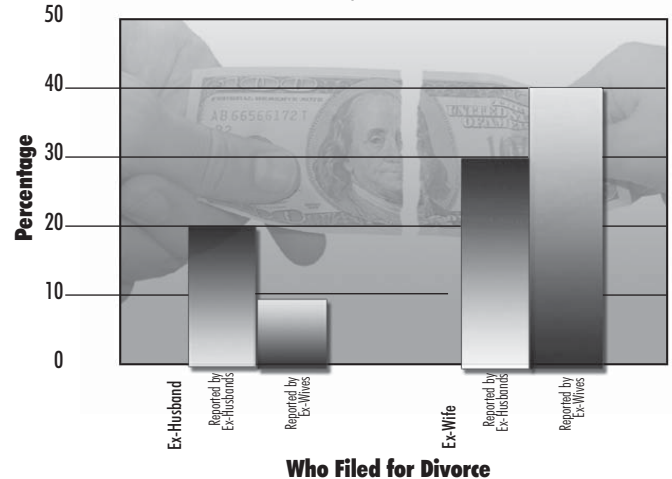


Figure 23
Percentage of Ever-Divorced Respondents Who Gave Each Response About Who Wanted Divorce More, by Gender





Implications

The most important implication of the National Fatherhood Initiative Marriage Survey findings is that there is a large reservoir of pro-marriage sentiment in America that can be drawn upon by persons and organizations interested in promoting healthy marriages. The frequency of these sentiments varies by age, education, religiosity, race, and political party identification but apparently is not really low in any major portion of the population. This of course does not mean that the pro-marriage attitudes shown by the study are sufficient by themselves to assure strong public support for marriage initiatives and similar programs, but agreement with the goals, if not the methods, of such efforts is widespread.

The assessment reported here of the health of American marriage is mixed, but overall it indicates that efforts to improve that health are needed, especially efforts targeted at certain portions of the population. Married persons generally report positive feelings about their own marriages, and most respondents to the survey said that most married couples they know have good marriages. However, fewer than 40 percent of first marriages seem to be reasonably successful after 20 years, and the proportion of the population age 25 and older who are in good marriages is substantially lower than it used to be and is arguably well below what it should be. Furthermore, marital success is unusually low in several portions of the population. These include blacks, persons with little education, residents of the South and West, persons low in religiosity, women whose parents divorced before they were age 16, and persons who married before they were age 20. Surprisingly, the respondents who married after age 27 also have had relatively low average marital success.

This last finding, which has not been previously reported, deserves special attention. The average age at first marriage has gone up by about five years over the past quarter of a century, and many young people, especially well educated ones, feel that it is wise to wait until their late twenties or early thirties to marry. Parents, teachers, and other older adults often advise young people not to marry too young. Although the relatively low marital success among

...beyond a certain age, postponing marriage is unlikely to improve the chances of having a good marriage.

late marriers does not prove that late marriage causes poor marriages, it does indicate that, beyond a certain age, postponing marriage is unlikely to improve the chances of having a good marriage. While discouragement of teenage marriage is wise, advising against marriage in the mid-twenties may not be. Even if

waiting until one's thirties to marry does not lower the chances of eventually having a good marriage, it entails forgoing the benefits of marriage during the decade of the twenties. Among persons in their mid-to-late-twenties, married persons are happier and healthier than unmarried ones,¹⁶ apparently at least partly because they are married. Therefore, the increase in the average age at first marriage probably has had a negative impact on the well-being of young adults.

It is important quickly to add that the finding of relatively poor marital success among late marriers should not cause unmarried persons in their late twenties and thirties to panic. Indeed, a possible reason for the finding is that many late marriers make hasty and unwise decisions to marry growing out of a feeling of desperation. Staying unmarried is almost certainly a better alternative for most people than marrying in a state of panic.

The reasons the ever-divorced survey respondents gave for their divorces should be interpreted for what they are, namely, attributions that may not be correct. Nevertheless, they have important implications for a debate among family scholars and researchers about the major reasons for divorce. The debate is about the extent to which the reasons for divorce reside within the individuals who divorce and the extent to which they are broad social forces over which the individuals have no control. Adherents to the individual-characteristics school of thought emphasize values, behavior, relationship skills, and the like, while adherents to the social forces school of thought emphasize economic factors and demographic conditions such as the relative numbers of males and females in the population.

The list of possible major reasons for divorce presented to the respondents consists almost entirely of factors that reside within the individual or the couple ("lack of family

support" being the one clear exception), and thus there was no encouragement to think about broad social forces. However, one of the reasons, "financial problems," has an obvious connection to economic forces outside the couple, while "lack of commitment" is clearly a characteristic of individuals. It is important, therefore, that "lack of commitment" was the most frequently chosen reason for divorce while "financial problems" was one of the least frequently chosen ones. Other frequently chosen reasons, such as "unrealistic expectations" and "inadequate preparation" are also clearly characteristics of individuals.

All of the individual-level characteristics given by the respondents as reasons for their divorces are affected by broad social and cultural influences, of course. For instance, a lack of commitment to their marriages by husbands could grow in part out of an abundance of sources of female companionship outside of marriage. Whatever the ultimate sources of divorce may be, however, immediate causes that reside in the individual, or the couple, can be affected by individual-level interventions, such as those being used by the various marriage initiatives and similar governmental and private programs across the country. The evidence on this issue from the NFIMS, while not conclusive, is consistent with the view that the individual-level interventions are appropriate rather than largely futile, as some critics have claimed.



END NOTES

WITH THIS RING... A NATIONAL SURVEY ON MARRIAGE IN AMERICA

1. The State of Our Unions, 2004: The Social Health of Marriage in America. Piscataway, NJ: National Marriage Project, 2004.
2. This percentage went from 51.4 percent in 1980 to 42.1 in 2000, according to Census surveys (U. S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2001, Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 2001, Table 49).
3. This percentage for 2000 is 59.5 (*Ibid.*, Table 49).
4. An example of its use is in Norval D. Glenn, "The Course of Marital Success and Failure in Five American Ten-Year Marriage Cohorts," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Volume 60, 1988, pp. 569-576.
5. Norval D. Glenn, "Is the Current Concern About American Marriage Warranted?" *Virginia Journal of Social Policy and the Law*. Volume 9, 2001, pp. 5-47.
6. Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*, New York, Doubleday, 2000.
7. According to tabulations conducted for this report.
8. The adjustment for time since first marriage was accomplished with the Logistic Regression Program of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.
9. Ronald Englehart, Miguel Basanez, Jaime Diez-Medrano, Lock Halman, and Ruud Luijkx, *Human Beliefs and Values: A Cross-Cultural Sourcebook Based on the 1999-2002 Values Surveys*, Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, Mexico, 2004.
10. Nicholas H. Wolfinger, "Family Structure Homogamy: The Effects of Parental Divorce on Partner Selection and Marital Stability," *Social Science Research*, Volume 32, 2003, pp. 80-97.
11. Half of the NFIMS ever-married respondents under age 40 lived with their spouse (first spouse if married more than once) before they married.
12. For a summary of much of the evidence, see David Popenoe and Barbara Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage*, New Brunswick, NJ: National Marriage Project, 1999.
13. Norval D. Glenn and Beth Ann Shelton, "Regional Differences in Divorce in the United States," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Volume 47, 1985, pp. 641-652.
14. Although the finding that persons who marry after the mid-twenties have relatively poor marital success on the average has not been reported in the literature, two data sets other than the NFIMS have yielded this finding. These are the American General Social Surveys and the Oklahoma 2001 Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce.
15. Christine Johnson, Scott Stanley, Norval Glenn, Paul Amato, Steve Nock, Howard Markman, and Robin Dion, *Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce*, Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Marriage Initiative.
16. This statement is based on unpublished tabulations of General Social Survey data conducted for this report and evidence for American adults as a whole concerning the effects of marriage (see Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*, New York: Doubleday, 2000).

Appendix A

MARRIAGE QUESTIONNAIRE WITH RESPONSES

Attitudes Toward Marriage and Divorce

I am going to read you a list of statements. After I read each statement, please tell me whether you strongly agree with it, somewhat agree with it, somewhat disagree with it, or strongly disagree with it.

In the absence of violence and extreme conflict, parents who have an unsatisfactory marriage should stay together until their children are grown.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	157	10.9
Agree	473	32.1
Disagree	565	39.1
Strongly Disagree	250	17.3
Total	1,445	100.0

Divorce is a serious national problem in the United States today.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	638	43.5
Agree	735	50.1
Disagree	85	5.8
Strongly Disagree	10	0.7
Total	1,468	100.0

Society would be better off if divorces were harder to get.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	250	17.5
Agree	588	41.2
Disagree	484	33.9
Strongly Disagree	106	7.4
Total	1,428	100.0

Couples who marry should make a lifelong commitment to one another, to be broken only under extreme circumstances.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	579	39.3
Agree	715	48.5
Disagree	151	10.2
Strongly Disagree	30	2.0
Total	1,475	100.0

Couples who have children together ought to be married.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	469	32.2
Agree	612	42.0
Disagree	321	22.0
Strongly Disagree	56	3.8
Total	1,458	100.0

(Note: Respondents who refused to answer, who said "don't know" in response to the question, or for which the question was not applicable are excluded from the base for percentages.)



Given how long people are living these days, it is unrealistic to expect a couple to remain married to one another for life.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	44	3.0
Agree	274	18.7
Disagree	721	49.3
Strongly Disagree	424	29.0
Total	1,463	100.0

Fathers are as important as mothers for the proper development of children.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	899	60.1
Agree	559	37.3
Disagree	33	2.2
Strongly Disagree	6	0.4
Total	1,497	100.0

If they are determined to do so, divorced couples can parent as effectively as can most parents who live together.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	106	7.3
Agree	569	39.4
Disagree	611	42.3
Strongly Disagree	157	10.9
Total	1,443	100.0

It should be harder for parents of children under age 18 to get a divorce than it is for couples who do not have young children.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	91	6.5
Agree	481	34.3
Disagree	660	47.1
Strongly Disagree	169	12.1
Total	1,401	100.0

Either spouse should be allowed to terminate a marriage at any time for any reason.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	55	3.8
Agree	362	24.8
Disagree	715	49.0
Strongly Disagree	326	22.4
Total	1,458	100.0

Most married couples I know have happy, healthy marriages.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	160	11.0
Agree	902	61.9
Disagree	361	24.8
Strongly Disagree	35	2.4
Total	1,458	100.0

There should be a waiting period of about a year between divorce filing and the time when a divorce can be granted to give the couple a chance to reconsider their decision to divorce.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	222	15.3
Agree	842	57.9
Disagree	319	22.0
Strongly Disagree	70	4.8
Total	1,453	100.0

All things being equal, it is better for children to be raised in a household that has a married mother and father.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	528	35.8
Agree	783	53.1
Disagree	141	9.6
Strongly Disagree	22	1.5
Total	1,474	100.0

Marriage is an old-fashioned, outmoded institution.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	25	1.7
Agree	158	10.7
Disagree	722	48.9
Strongly Disagree	572	38.7
Total	1,477	100.0

All couples considering marriage should be encouraged to get premarital counseling before they marry.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	482	32.5
Agree	795	53.6
Disagree	185	12.5
Strongly Disagree	21	1.4
Total	1,483	100.0

All couples considering marriage should be required by law to have premarital counseling before they marry.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	192	13.1
Agree	493	33.6
Disagree	593	40.4
Strongly Disagree	189	12.9
Total	1,467	100.0



It is a good idea for couples considering marriage to live together in order to decide whether or not they get along well enough to be married to one another.

	#	%
Strongly Agree	114	7.9
Agree	458	31.7
Disagree	603	41.7
Strongly Disagree	270	18.7
Total	1,445	100.0

Which of the following is in your opinion the more important characteristic of a good marriage. It:

	#	%
Promotes the happiness and well-being of the married individuals.	186	12.7
Produces children who are well-adjusted and who will become good citizens.	141	9.7
The two are about equally important.	1,077	73.7
Neither is an important characteristic of a good marriage.	57	3.9
Total	1,461	100.0

(Note: Respondents who refused to answer, who said "don't know" in response to the question, or for which the question was not applicable are excluded from the base for percentages.)



M arital and Relationship History

Did your two biological parents marry one another?

	#	%
Yes, before I was born	1,358	91.2
Yes, after I was born	59	3.9
No, never married	73	4.9
Total	1,489	100.0

If yes, before or after respondent was born...

Have your parents divorced one another?

	#	%
Yes	316	22.8
No	1,072	77.2
Total	1,388	100.0

If yes...

How old were you when your parents divorced? (Exact age recorded in data set)

	#	%
Under age 16	232	74.8
Age 16 or older	78	25.2
Total	310	100.0

If parents divorced before respondent was age 16...

How much stigma did you feel as a child because your parents divorced?

	#	%
None, or hardly any	84	38.2
Some, but not a great deal	75	34.1
A great deal	61	27.7
Total	220	100.0

Are you currently married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married?

	#	%
Married	896	59.8
Widowed	139	9.3
Divorced	171	11.4
Separated	28	1.9
Never married	265	17.7
Total	1,499	100.0

If widowed, divorced, separated, or never-married...

Are you now romantically involved with someone, a man or a woman you think of as a steady, a lover, a partner, or the like?

	#	%
Yes	232	38.9
No	364	61.1
Total	596	100.0

If yes...

Do you live with that person?

	#	%
Yes	89	38.4
No	143	61.6
Total	232	100.0

If married, widowed, or separated...
Have you ever been divorced?

	#	%
Yes	249	23.4
No	814	76.6
Total	1,063	100.0

If yes, or if currently divorced...
How many times have you been divorced?

	#	%
Once	314	75.3
Twice	73	17.5
Three times	20	4.8
Four times	7	1.7
Five times	1	0.2
Six times	2	0.5
Total	417	100.0

Think about your divorce (or your first divorce if divorced more than once).

Who filed for the divorce, you or your spouse?

	#	%
Respondent	261	65.6
Spouse	137	34.4
Total	398	100.0

Who was more motivated to end the marriage, you or your spouse, or was the motivation about equal?

	#	%
Respondent	223	53.6
Spouse	86	20.7
Equal motivation	107	25.7
Total	416	100.0

About how many years were you married before you separated? (Exact number recorded in data set)

	#	%
Fewer than seven	188	45.2
Seven to nineteen	181	43.5
Twenty or more	47	11.3
Total	416	100.0

I'm going to read you a list of reasons why marriages fail. Tell me whether or not each factor was a MAJOR reason your marriage (or you first marriage if divorced more than once) failed. Select as many factors as apply.

	#	%
Getting married too young	189	45.7
Little or no helpful premarriage preparation	168	41.1
Financial problems or economic hardship	118	28.4
Religious differences between partners	55	13.2
Conflict about who should do what around the house and/or with children	89	21.6
Domestic violence	121	29.1
Infidelity, extramarital affairs	226	54.6
Too much conflict and arguing	228	55.6
Lack of commitment by one or both persons to make it work	301	73.2
Lack of support from family members	77	18.7
Unrealistic expectations of marriage by one or both spouses	181	45.3
Lack of equality in the relationship	178	43.7

Looking back at your divorce (or first divorce) do you wish that it had been more difficult—from a legal standpoint—to get a divorce?

	#	%
Yes	82	19.8
No	333	80.2
Total	415	100.0

Do you ever wish that you, yourself, had worked harder to save your marriage?

	#	%
Yes	107	26.0
No	305	74.0
Total	412	100.0

Do you ever wish that your spouse had worked harder to save the marriage?

	#	%
Yes	256	61.8
No	158	38.2
Total	414	100.0

If married, widowed, divorced, or separated...
How old were you when you first married? (Exact age recorded in data set)

	#	%
Under age 20	338	27.5
20-22	333	27.0
23-27	368	29.9
28 and older	192	15.6
Total	1,231	100.0

How long before the marriage had you been romantically involved with the person you married?

	#	%
Six months or less	181	5.0
Less than a year, more than six months	147	12.2
A year to three years	651	53.9
More than three years	228	18.9
Total	1,207	100.0

How did you meet the person you married (select as many as apply)?

	#	%
We grew up together	154	12.5
We lived near one another when we met	409	33.2
We met in school (high school or lower level)	273	22.1
We met in college	173	14.0
A mutual friend introduced us	548	44.6
We met at work	184	14.9
We met at a party	185	15.0
We met at a bar	76	6.1
We met at church, temple, synagogue, or other religious organization	94	7.6
We met over the internet	5	0.4
Met in other ways	178	14.5

Did you live with the person you married before you married?

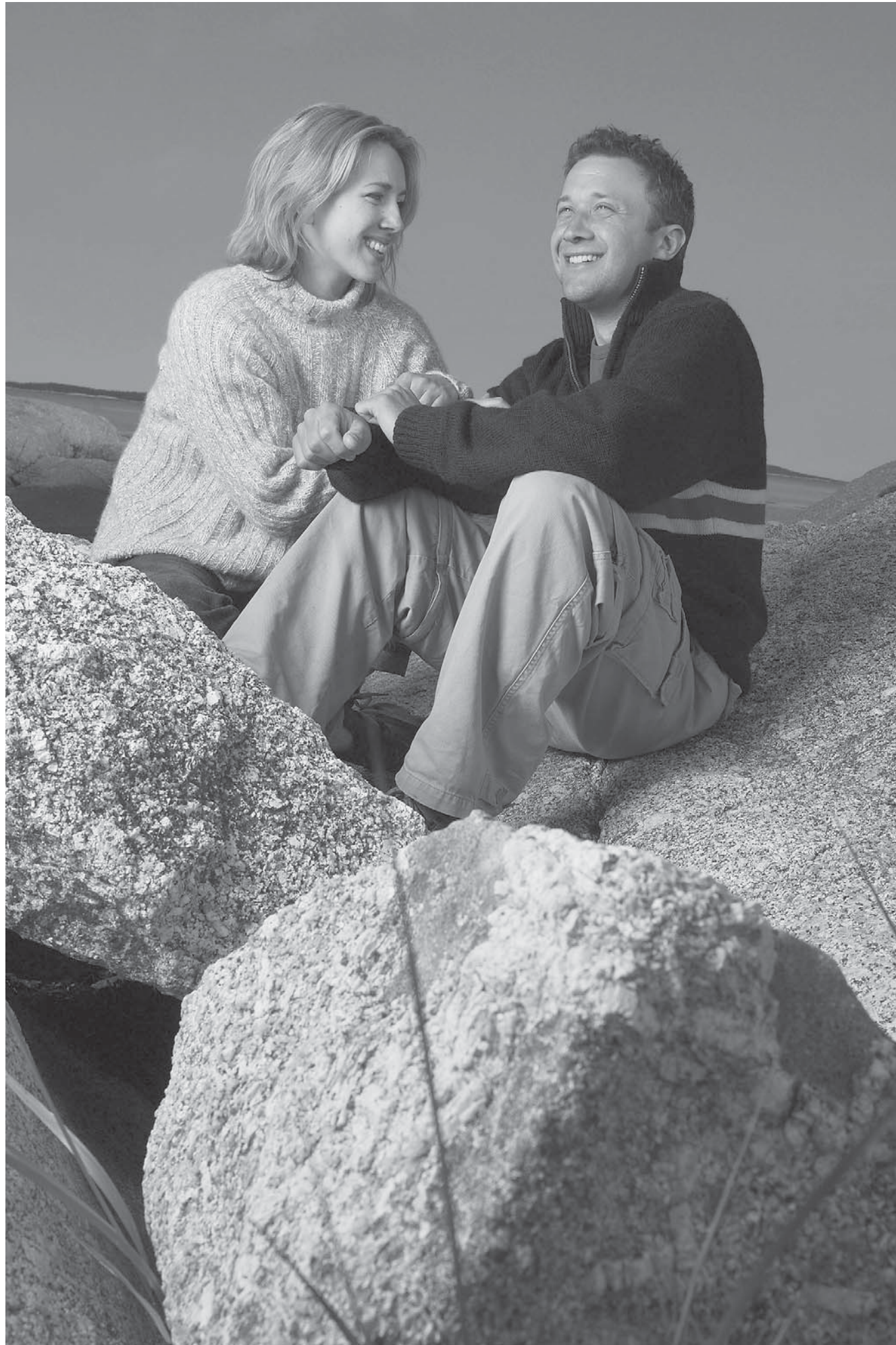
	#	%
Yes	361	29.3
No	872	70.7
Total	415	100.0

If yes...
For how long?

	#	%
One year or less	218	60.9
Longer than a year	140	39.1
Total	358	100.0

Had you and your spouse-to-be decided to marry when you started living together?

	#	%
Yes	173	48.3
No	185	51.7
Total	358	100.0





When you decided to marry your spouse (first spouse), did you have feelings of romantic love toward him/her?

	#	%
Yes, very strong	936	76.5
Yes, fairly strong	198	16.2
Yes, but not strong	46	3.8
No	44	3.6
Total	1,224	100.0

Did you have any kind of premarital counseling before you married?

	#	%
Yes, provided by a church or other religious organization	419	34.0
Yes, provided by a secular marriage counselor	37	3.0
No	777	63.0
Total	1,233	100.0

If currently married...

I'm going to ask you a few questions about your marriage.

How long have you been married to your spouse (current spouse)?
(Exact number of years recorded in data set)

Taking things altogether, how would you describe your marriage? Would you say it is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?

	#	%
Very happy	610	68.5
Pretty happy	248	27.9
Not too happy	32	3.6
Total	890	100.0

All in all, how satisfied are you with your marriage? Are you completely satisfied, very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied?

	#	%
Completely satisfied	442	49.7
Very satisfied	342	38.4
Somewhat satisfied	80	9.0
Not very satisfied	17	1.9
Not at all satisfied	9	1.0
Total	890	100.0

Would you marry the same person if you had it to do over again?

	#	%
Yes	803	92.8
No	62	7.2
Total	865	100.0

Do you expect to be married for life?

	#	%
Yes	852	97.0
No	26	3.0
Total	878	100.0

Since you married (married your current spouse), have you ever seriously considered filing for divorce?

	#	%
Yes	115	12.9
No	777	87.1
Total	892	100.0

Would you attend marriage strengthening classes if they were made available to you at no cost?

	#	%
Yes	489	57.3
No	365	42.7
Total	854	100.0

If never-married...

Would you like to be married someday?

	#	%
Yes	215	86.3
No	34	13.7
Total	249	100.0

If widowed or divorced...

Would you like to remarry?

	#	%
Yes	110	38.7
No	174	61.3
Total	284	100.0

If yes to either of the previous two questions...

Are you now searching for someone to marry?

	#	%
Yes, definitely	87	27.0
Yes, tentatively	60	18.6
No	175	54.3
Total	322	100.0

If yes, definitely or tentatively...

How do you feel about your opportunities to meet and get to know prospective persons to marry? Are they:

	#	%
Very good	34	29.1
Fairly good	48	41.0
Rather bad	20	17.1
Very bad	15	12.8
Total	117	100.0
Not applicable, I'm in a romantic relationship.	28	

Would you attend pre-marital education classes if they were made available to you at no cost?

	#	%
Yes	107	73.3
No	39	26.7
Total	146	100.0

Demographics and background

What was the last grade in school you completed?

	#	%
None or only kindergarten	2	0.1
Grades 1-8	49	3.3
Grades 9-11	123	8.2
Grade 12 or GED	418	27.9
College 1-3	398	26.5
College Graduate	510	34.0
Total	1,500	100.0

How old are you? (Exact age recorded in data set)

Are you of Hispanic or Spanish origin?

	#	%
Yes	174	11.7
No	1,319	88.3
Total	1,493	100.0

What is your race?

	#	%
White	1,298	88.1
Black	118	8.0
Asian	18	1.2
Pacific Islander	2	0.1
Native American	19	1.3
Other	18	1.2
Total	1,473	100.0

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or other?

	#	%
Republican	491	35.8
Democratic	426	31.0
Independent	431	31.4
Other party	24	1.7
Total	1,372	100.0

Last year was your total family income before taxes:

	#	%
Under \$25,000	285	22.4
\$25,000 to under \$45,000	307	24.1
\$45,000 to under \$75,000	342	26.9
\$75,000 to under \$100,000	169	13.3
\$100,000 or more	170	13.4
Total	1,273	100.0



What is your religious preference?

	#	%
Catholic	345	23.7
Baptist	291	20.0
Methodist	85	5.8
Lutheran	54	3.7
Other Protestant	361	24.9
Jewish	15	1.0
Mormon	21	1.4
Agnostic	4	0.3
Atheist	3	0.2
No preference	211	14.5
Other	64	4.4
Total	1,454	100.0

How religious do you consider yourself to be? Are you:

	#	%
Very religious	476	32.4
Fairly religious	565	38.4
Slightly religious	307	20.9
Not religious at all	122	8.3
Total	1,470	100.0

Census Region:

	#	%
Northeast	260	17.3
Midwest	341	22.7
South	602	40.1
West	300	20.0
Total	1,503	100.0

Appendix B

TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION OF SURVEY

The survey for this report was designed to be representative of the United States resident population age 18 and older and was conducted by telephone by the Office of Survey Research at the University of Texas at Austin in December of 2003 and January and February of 2004. The sample of phone numbers for the survey was provided by Survey Sampling, Inc., the leading firm for providing samples for telephone surveys. Respondents were selected within households by taking the adult with the most recent birthday. The response rate was 89 percent according to the most commonly used method of calculating response rates for telephone surveys (number of interviews/number of interviews + refusals), and there were 1,503 completed interviews. The questionnaire was designed by Dr. Norval Glenn in consultation with advisors at the National Fatherhood Initiative. Many of the questions were taken from other surveys, including especially the 2001 Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce conducted by the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative.

The basic demographic characteristics of the National Fatherhood Initiative Marriage Survey respondents are compared in Table 1 with the characteristics of the United States resident population age 18 and older as shown by the 2003 Current Population Survey conducted by the United States Census Bureau (the data are either from the March CPS or the March survey and some later monthly surveys). In common with many telephone surveys, the NFIMS substantially under-represents males, and it also under-represents persons with little education and those who have never married. However, weighting the NFIMS data to the demographic characteristics shown by the CPS makes little difference in the response distributions for most of the attitudinal and behavioral questions; thus the data in this report are not weighted. Weighting leads to important differences only for the few questions for which there are large male-female differences in responses, and the responses to those questions are shown separately for males and females in the body of the report.



WITH
THIS RING...
A NATIONAL
SURVEY ON
MARRIAGE
IN AMERICA

Table 1
Comparison of Basic Demographic
Characteristics Shown by the National
Fatherhood Initiative Marriage Survey and by
the 2003 Current Population Survey for Persons
Age 18 and Older

	NFIMS	2003 CPS¹
	%	%
Gender		
Male	38.9	48.5
Female	61.1	51.5
Age		
18-39	39.2	41.4
40-64	45.2	42.1
65+	15.6	16.5
Marital Status		
Married ²	61.7	61.1
Widowed	9.3	6.6
Divorced	11.4	10.2
Never Married	17.7	22.1
Education³		
Not High School Graduate	11.0	15.4
High School Graduate/ Some College	53.2	57.3
College Graduate	35.8	27.3
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	8.0	11.8
Hispanic	11.7	12.1

¹Data are either from the March survey or the March survey and later monthly surveys, as reported in U. S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2004-2005, Section 1.

²Includes separated.

³Persons age 25 and older.

(Footnotes)

¹ Percentages add to greater than 100 because respondents could give more than one "major" reason for their divorce.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Norval D. Glenn is Ashbel Smith Professor and Stiles Professor in American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is affiliated with the Department of Sociology and the Population Research Center. He has done research on marriage and family relations in the United States for thirty years. He is a former editor of the *Journal of Family Issues* and has served on the editorial boards of such journals as the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, the *American Sociological Review*, the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *Demography*, and *Social Science Research*. He is Chair of the Research Advisory Group for the Texas Healthy Marriage Initiative and is a member of the Research Advisory Group for the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative.

ABOUT NATIONAL FATHERHOOD INITIATIVE

The National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) was founded in 1994 to stimulate a society-wide movement to confront the growing problem of father absence. NFI's mission is to improve the well-being of children by increasing the proportion of children growing up with involved, responsible, and committed fathers.

A non-profit, non-partisan, non-sectarian organization, NFI pursues its mission through a three-e strategy of educating, equipping, and engaging all sectors of society on the issue of responsible fatherhood.

NFI educates and inspires all people, especially fathers, through public awareness campaigns, research, and other resources, publications, and media appearances centered on highlighting the unique and irreplaceable role fathers play in the lives of children. NFI's national public service advertising campaign promoting fatherhood has generated television, radio, print, Internet, and outdoor advertising valued at over \$360 million.

NFI equips fathers and develops leaders of national, state, and community fatherhood initiatives through curricula, training, and technical assistance. Through its National Fatherhood Clearinghouse and Resource Center, NFI offers a wide range of innovative resources to assist fathers and organizations interested in reaching and supporting fathers.

NFI engages all sectors of society through strategic alliances and partnerships to create unique and effective ways to reach all fathers at their points of need. NFI seeks partnerships through the three pillars of culture - business, faith, and government - to create culture change around the issue of fatherhood.

For more information on the contents of this booklet, or for general information about NFI, call 301-948-0599 or visit www.fatherhood.org.

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