

Marriage in the 90s:
A Nationwide Random Phone Survey

A Marital Research Poll by PREP, Inc.

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Stanley, S.M., Whitton, S. W., & Markman, H. J. (In Press). Maybe I Do: Interpersonal Commitment and Premarital or Non-Marital Cohabitation. Journal of Family Issues.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Characteristics of Polling Sample	6
Marital Happiness	7
Marriage Killers	9
Relationship Dynamics Scale	11
What Do Couples Argue About Most?	17
Commitment	19
Sex Differences	22
Housework	26
Fun, Dating, and Friendship	28
Physical Aggression	32
Premarital Counseling	35
Premarital Cohabitation	37
Background Information	43
PREP, Inc.	43
The Center for Marital and Family Studies: University of Denver	43

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Marriage in the 90s: A Nationwide Random Phone Survey

Introduction

We are researchers who study what makes marriages succeed and fail in order to develop strategies for helping couples have better marriages. In this report, you will read about key findings from a recent poll on marriages in America. Research like that in this poll can further our understanding of marriage and what can be done to help couples have stronger, happier unions. Such understanding is crucial because the quality of marriages is very important to the individuals in them and society as a whole. As background, consider the following key points validated in other research in the field:

- ▶ ***Many of society's ills can be traced to the rapidly declining status of marriages in America.***

- ▶ ***Couples marrying for the first time today have at least a 40 to 50% chance of divorce.***

- ▶ ***Premarital patterns can predict divorce with 90% accuracy, and of the factors that most strongly predict, communication and conflict patterns are the most amenable to change.***

- ▶ ***The conflict that precedes and surrounds divorce causes great mental, physical, and economic damage to parents and children alike--and these effects are more clearly documented than the even the effects of divorce, per se.***

- ▶ ***Many other couples live in stable but unhappy marriages.***

- ▶ ***The "triple threat" of marital conflict, divorce, and out-of-wedlock births has lead to a generation of U.S. children at great risk for poverty, alienation, and antisocial behavior.***

The Poll

At the end of January 1996, we conducted a random phone survey of adults in the United States who were either married, engaged, or cohabiting. This poll was conducted by randomly selecting phone numbers for the United States, calling respondents, and conducting an interview lasting approximately 10 minutes. The study was described to the respondents as being about “relationships among people who are married, engaged or living together (not just roommates, but romantically involved).”

947 people agreed to complete the interview conducted by phone. The married group made up most of this sample (85% of the sample). The average age of respondents was 37 years, and the sample included adults from a cross-section of ethnic groups, income groups, and backgrounds. The average married couple had been married for 19 years, ranging from 1 to 60 years.

We asked a variety of questions in order to gauge the perception these people had of their relationships on numerous key dimensions. Some of the key findings are summarized here. Each section of this report covers a key finding (in italics) with an explanation of the implications following.

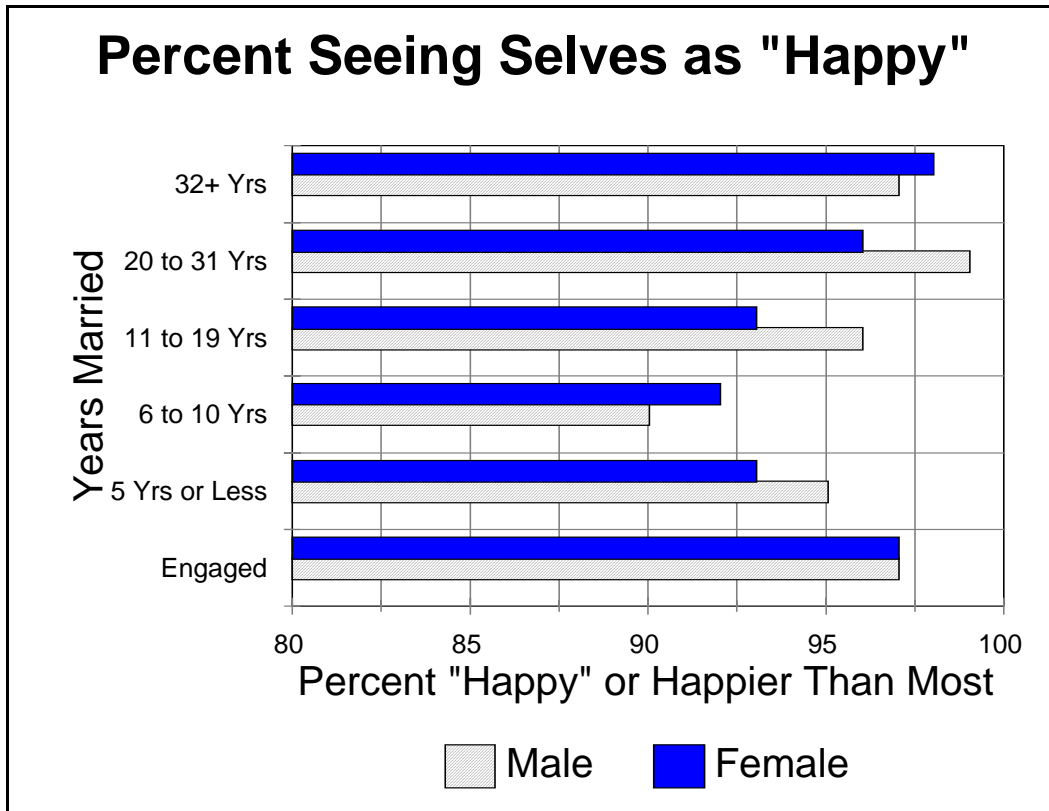
Characteristics of Polling Sample

Sample Characteristics

Average Age:	37 years old	
Gender:	56 % female, 44 % male	
Ethnicity:	80.7 %	Anglo
	8.0 %	African-American
	4.5 %	Hispanic
	1.4 %	Asian
	1.1 %	Native-American
Household Income:	Below \$20,000	10 % of sample
	\$20,000 to \$40,000	36 % of sample
	\$40,000 to \$60,000	25 % of sample
	Over \$60,000	29 % of sample
Relationship Status:	Married	85.3 %
	Engaged, not living together	2.2 %
	Engaged, living together	5.5 %
	Cohabiting, not engaged	7.0%
Average Years Married:	18.65, ranging from 1 to 60 years	
	Of those engaged to be married, or married:	
	Engaged	8 % of sample
	Married 5 years or less	18 % of sample
	Married 6 to 10 years	18 % of sample
	Married 11 to 19 years	19 % of sample
	Married 20 to 31 years	18 % of sample
	Married 32+ years	18 % of sample
Previously Divorced:	23.3 %	
Frequency of Sex:	72 % said once a week or more	
	17 % no response or "do not know"	

Marital Happiness

Key Finding: *While the chances of divorce remain very high, the number of married people who said they were "happy" to "perfectly happy" in their marriages was dramatic.*



Implications:

This kind of result is puzzling though not uncommon in surveys on marital happiness. With a divorce rate hovering in the 40 to 55% range, how can so many couples be so happy yet so many couples be at risk for marital failure? First, we would suggest that most of those older couples in the survey who are happy together are probably at very low risk for divorce. They have made it through hurdles in life that many younger couples will not survive.

Our interpretation of this finding is that, on any given day, most people are in fact happy in their marriages. However, for couples who are greater risk of divorce, there is a

steady erosion of the foundation of their marriage for years that culminates in what appears to be a fairly rapid process of disintegration. In other words, a marriage failing is often like the build-up before a mud slide. There may have been years of erosion underneath the surface of the hill that does not become apparent until a big enough rainstorm hits (stress in a marriage) to bring the whole hill sliding down. This interpretation would be consistent with other research on what erodes a marital bond over time.

It is also important to note that those couples who are somewhat less happy relative to the sample are those who are married 10 years or less, most likely because these couples are experiencing the stresses of staying afloat financially, raising children, and being busy with work and career concerns. (see more on satisfaction and other matters in section on **Sex Differences**)

Marriage Killers

Key Finding: *While people are mostly happy in their marriages, the kinds of patterns that many other studies show may lead to marital failure can be present and thriving in their marriages. Other studies suggest the keys to marital success or failure are how couples communicate, handle conflict, and preserve a sense of being a team.*

Danger Signs: There are certain patterns that are very dangerous for the future of a marriage and therefore give clues about what path a marriage may be on unless changes are made. In our book, Fighting for Your Marriage, we call these patterns “Danger Signs.” They represent patterns that can erode a marriage over time or reflect a marriage that is already going down hill.

Background: As part of the poll, we asked the 947 respondents about some key “Danger Signs.” These questions are contained in the “Relationship Dynamics Scale” which is contained here in this report. We devised these questions based on 15 years of research at the University of Denver on the kinds of communication and conflict management patterns that predict if a relationship is headed for trouble. Many studies done on marriage show that it is now possible to look at a variety of factors and predict marital stability vs. divorce with up to 90% (or even greater) accuracy.

Implications: The 8 item quiz on the next page can be used by people to do a quick check of where their marriage may be headed. While people should be cautious in interpreting their scores on these questions, higher scores mean a relationship may be in greater danger unless changes are made.

Within the polling data, the total of these 8 questions told us more about who was actively thinking about divorce than questions about happiness together, commitment, friendship together, or sexual satisfaction. These other dimensions matter a great deal, but this and other research strongly suggests that the couples most likely to have problems in the future are couples who do not handle their conflicts well or protect their sense of being a couple in ways reflected on this 8 item quiz.

The 8 Item Quiz: The next page entitled the “Relationship Dynamics Scale” contains the actual 8 items used in the poll. The page following the items contains feedback for couples who may take the quiz. Note to media: These questions and feedback may be reprinted for use by couples provided you obtain approval for the specific intended use and the quiz is reproduced with all the text from the next page intact. Results for various age groups and sex of respondents follow. (Drs. Stanley and Markman are available to discuss the implications of these questions for couples in greater detail, if desired.)

Relationship Dynamics Scale

Please answer each of the following questions in terms of your relationship with your “mate” if married, or your “partner” if dating or engaged. We recommend that you answer these questions by yourself (not with your partner), using the ranges following for your own reflection.

Use the following 3 point scale to rate how often you and your mate or partner experience the following:

- 1 = almost never
- 2 = once in awhile
- 3 = frequently

- 1 2 3 Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name calling, or bringing up past hurts.
- 1 2 3 My partner criticizes or belittles my opinions, feelings, or desires.
- 1 2 3 My partner seems to view my words or actions more negatively than I mean them to be.
- 1 2 3 When we have a problem to solve, it is like we are on opposite teams.
- 1 2 3 I hold back from telling my partner what I really think and feel.
- 1 2 3 I think seriously about what it would be like to date or marry someone else.
- 1 2 3 I feel lonely in this relationship.
- 1 2 3 When we argue, one of us withdraws...that is, doesn't want to talk about it anymore; or leaves the scene.

Who tends to withdraw more when there is an argument?

- Male
- Female
- Both Equally
- Neither Tend to withdraw

Where Are You At In Your Marriage?

We devised these questions based on 17 years of research at the University of Denver on the kinds of communication and conflict management patterns that predict if a relationship is headed for trouble. We have recently completed a nationwide, random phone survey using these questions. The average score was 11 on this scale. While you should not take a higher score to mean that your relationship is somehow destined to fail, higher scores can mean that your relationship may be in greater danger unless changes are made. (These ranges are based only on your individual ratings--not a couple total.)

8 to 12 "Green Light"

If you scored in the 8 - 12 range, your relationship is probably in good or even great shape at THIS TIME, but we emphasize "at THIS TIME" because relationships don't stand still. In the next 12 months, you'll either have a stronger, happier relationship, or you could head the other direction.

To think about it another way, it's like you are traveling along and have come to a green light. There is no need to stop, but it is probably a great time to work on making your relationship all it can be.

13 to 17 "Yellow Light"

If you scored in the 13 - 17 range, it's like you are coming to a "yellow light." You need to be cautious. While you may be happy now in your relationship, your score reveals warning signs of patterns you don't want to let get worse. You'll want to be taking action to protect and improve what you have. Spending time to strengthen your relationship now could be the best thing you could do for your future together.

18 to 24 "Red Light"

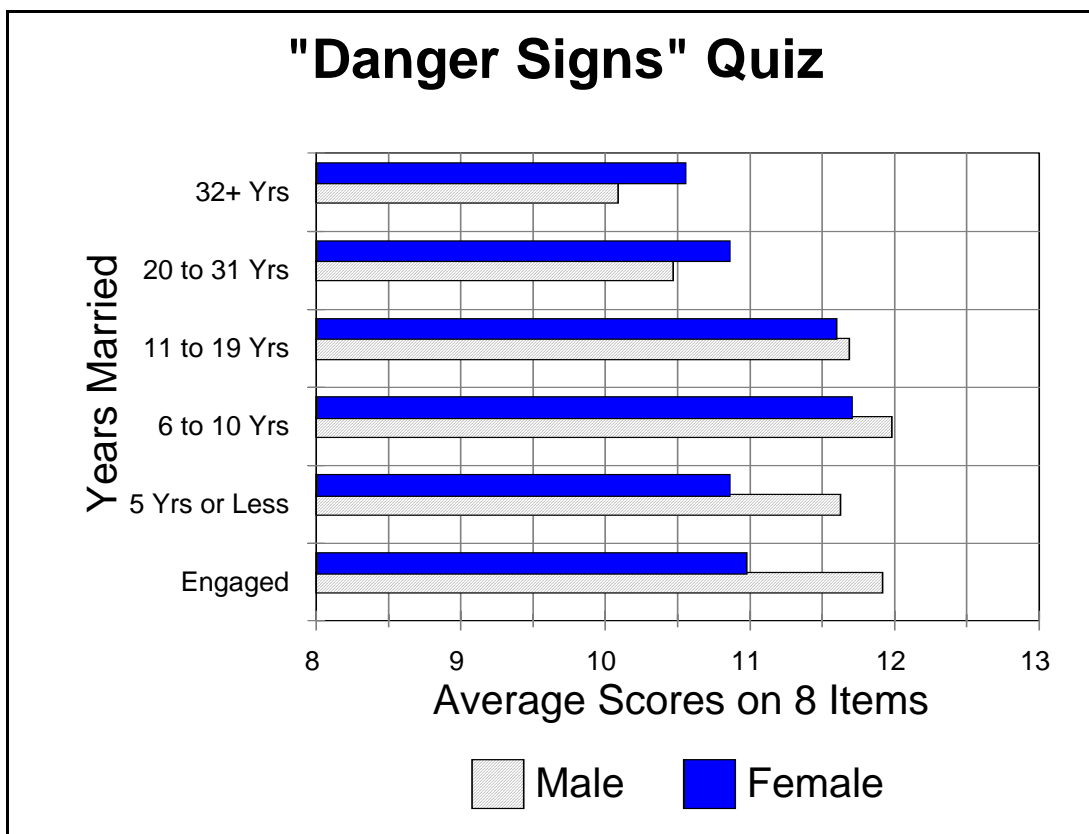
Finally, if you scored in the 18 - 24 range, it's like approaching a red light. Stop, and think about where the two of you are headed. Your score indicates the presence of patterns that could put your relationship at significant risk. You may be heading for trouble--or already be there. But there is GOOD NEWS. You can stop and learn ways to improve your relationship now!

For more information on danger signs and constructive tools for strong marriages, see: Markman, H.J., Stanley, S.M., & Blumberg, S.L. (1994) *Fighting for Your Marriage: Positive Steps For A Loving and Lasting Relationship*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, Inc. (PREP 1-800-366-0166)

Results from Survey:

The following graph displays the average response for those who took the poll. The average score for all those who were married or engaged was 11 on this quiz (possible scores range from 8 to 24). In general, the difference between men and women were statistically insignificant.

The data suggest that those who are in the earlier middle stages of married and family life are reporting the highest scores on the Relationship Dynamics Scale. Interestingly, whether or not people have children in the home has little effect on these scores, so it seems that there is something more difficult about getting through those middle stages of marriage than simply the stresses of child rearing. Those married many years represent couples who have made it through many hurdles other couples will not make it through, hence, they reflect this in having lower scores on these danger signs.



Scores on this 8 question Relationship Dynamic Scale not only showed the strongest relationship of all the polling questions with the degree to which respondents reported thinking or talking about divorce, they also showed the strongest relationship with overall relationship happiness.

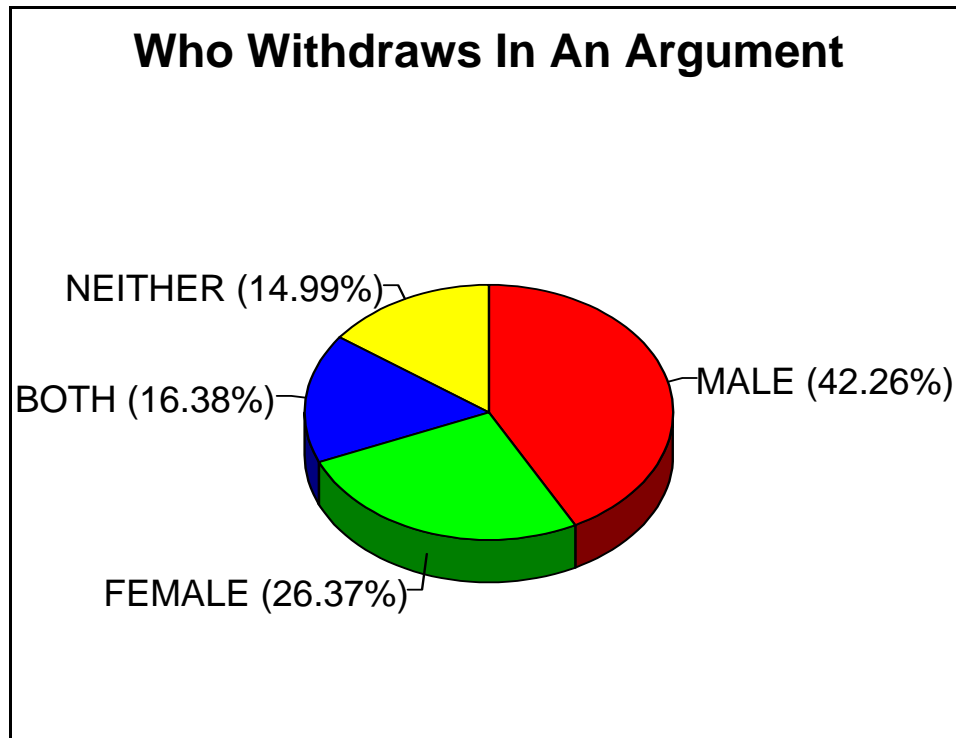
Withdrawal

As a follow-up to the question about one or the other withdrawing, we also asked the question:

Question Asked: *Who tends to withdraw more when there is an argument?*

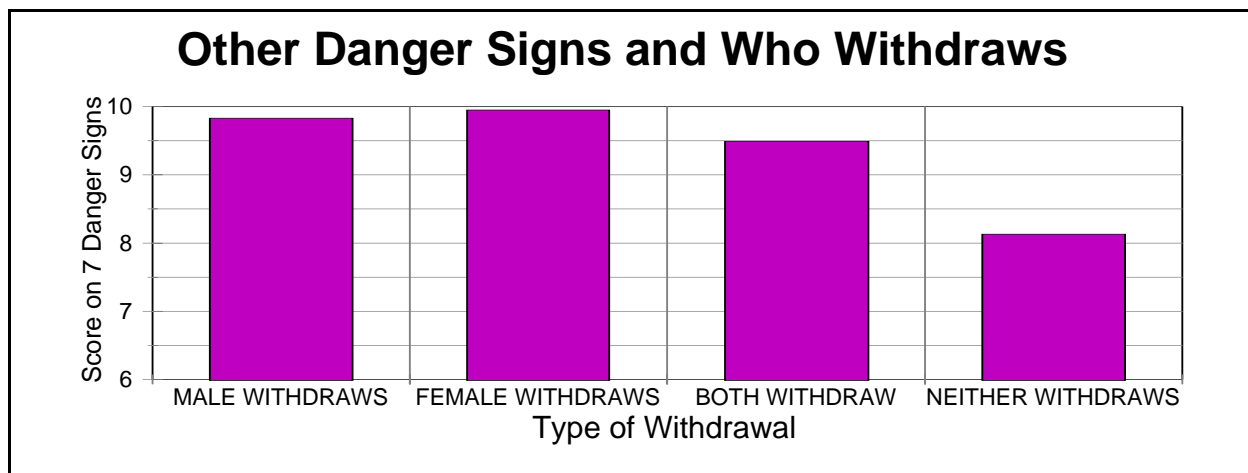
- Male*
- Female*
- Both Equally*
- Neither Tend to withdraw*

The answers given are reflected in the graph below.



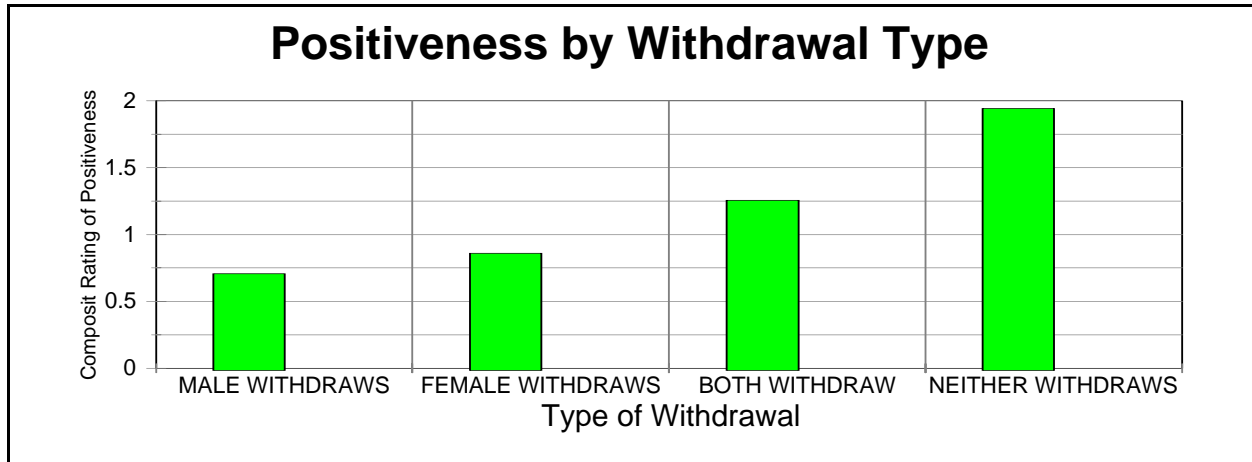
These findings on withdrawal parallel other findings in the field where it is generally found that males are more likely to withdraw when conflicts arise than women. In fact, of those where either the male or female is seen by the respondent to be more prone to withdrawal, 62% are reported to be men and 38% are reported to be women. We have emphasized in our research and work that withdrawal is generally a destructive pattern for relationships. Other studies using other methods have suggested that males are more prone to be the withdrawer, with about 60% of relationships being characterized by that pattern. We have heard of higher estimates than this, as well. This polling methodology seems likely to us to underestimate withdrawal since we are not able to actually observe what the respondents do with their partners. Furthermore, we are not asking about *avoidance* (which is trying not to talk about something in the first place) which we believe males are far more prone to do in such relationships. As with any other research, there are going to be many exceptions to the norm, as well.

Subsequent analyses reveal that respondents in relationships where either partner or both withdraw are rating their relationships as doing more poorly on a host of other dimensions. The next chart shows the differences between the withdrawal style groups on the presence of danger signs as reflected in the total score on the scale above (Relationship Dynamics Scale) minus the answer about withdrawal. ***In other words, couples where the poll respondent says one or both tend to withdraw are tending to do more poorly on the composite of all the other danger signs on the 8 item quiz compared to those where neither tend to withdraw.*** (Age was statistically controlled (eliminated) in this analysis since there was a relationship between age and type of withdrawal reported.)



Next, we compared these types of withdrawal on a measure of overall positiveness in the relationship as the respondent sees it. This overall measure of positiveness was composed of questions about overall happiness in the relationship, satisfaction with the sensual relationship, and the degree to which the respondent reported that they could

have fun with their partner and talk like friends. In contrast to the Relationship Dynamic Scale, the items reflecting positivity are getting more at measuring one's overall sense of how good the relationship is on some of the key dimensions that reflect why people want to be together.



This finding also parallels the findings of more extensive research on the patterns of withdrawal in relationships. The **key point is that, while withdrawal may be a relatively common pattern in marital dynamics, the couples where neither tends to withdraw are likely to have the most deeply rewarding relationships.**

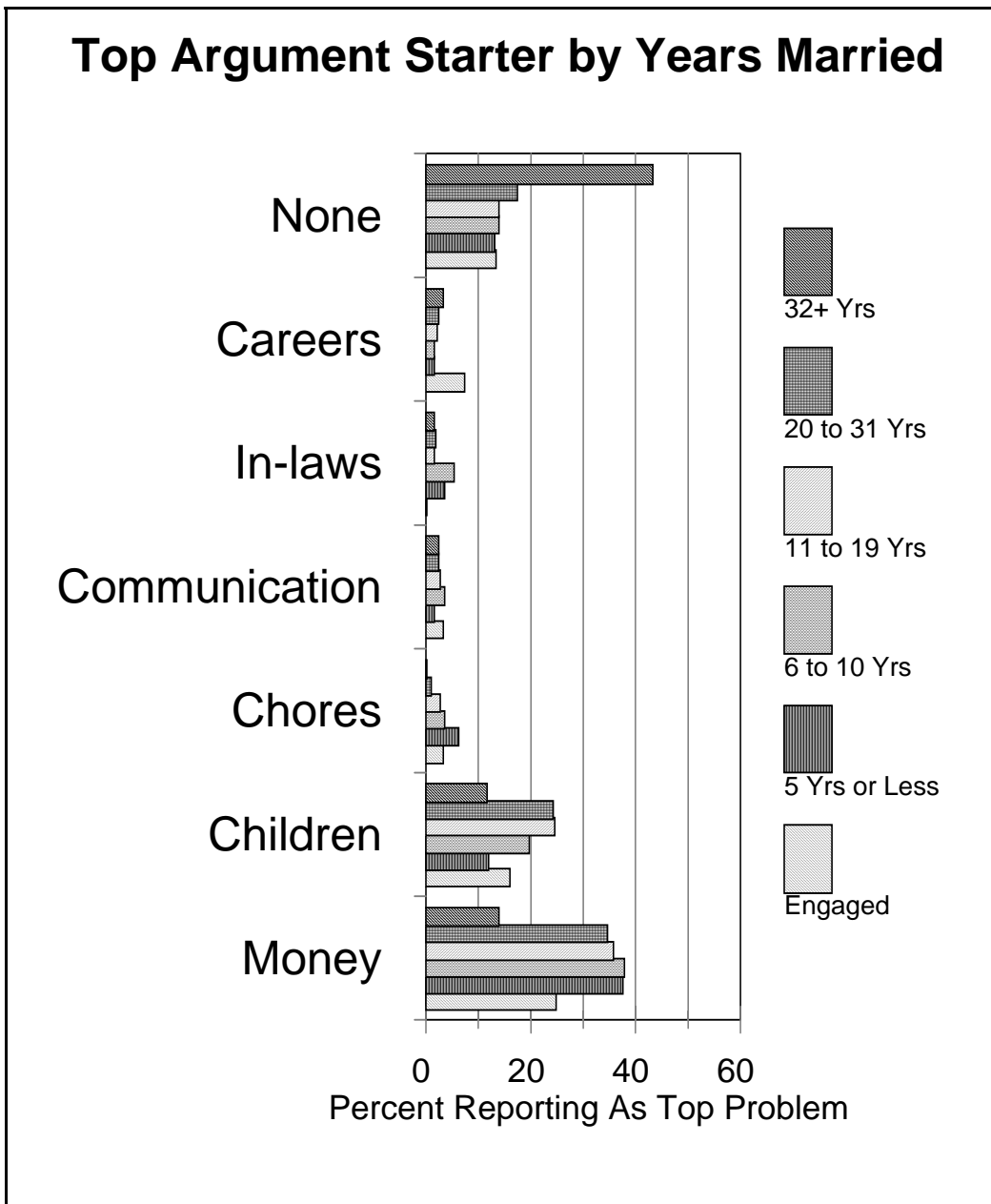
Withdrawal can reflect many things, but our view is that it most often represents a sense between the two partners (especially on the part of the withdrawer) of not feeling emotionally safe when discussing certain topics. Males, for example, seem particularly derailed by conflict in marriage, and can withdraw out of a sense of not knowing what to do that would make things better. Withdrawal can also, at times, reflect the power dynamics between two people wherein the one least interested in change regarding an issue may wish not to discuss it.

Whatever the reason, withdrawal is a destructive process, and seems to only make the intense pursuing of topics more likely on the part of the partner. The solution to this pattern is for couples to find ways to talk openly but in ways that promote respect, teamwork, and validation for each other's viewpoint. The relationships where the respondent says neither tends to withdraw when in conflict are doing the best on all other key dimensions. It is also important to note that withdrawal can be very constructive, when it is something two partners agree to do together when warranted (such as by taking a *mutual* Time Out when conflict is escalating).

What Do Couples Argue About Most?

Key Finding: *No matter how long couples have been married, what they argue about most is money. The second most frequent argument is about children.*

Question Asked: *Name the one thing that you and your partner argue about most?*



Implications:

Every couple argues from time to time. For many couples, there is not a lot of time in between arguments. Of greater importance, much **research suggests that it is more important how couples argue than what they argue about.** The kinds of patterns that are reflected on the Relationship Dynamics Scale (see earlier) are likely far more damaging to a couples over time than the particular topics of their arguments. Of course, there are exceptions. When evaluating any such research findings it is important to remember one is dealing with averages between groups of people. For any given couple things could work quite differently than the average couple.

Nevertheless, what couples argue about is important. For most couples, money is the number one topic of arguments, followed distantly by children. The only exception to this pattern was among the couples married for the longest time. They reported that the thing the argue about was “nothing,” followed by money and children. While some might interpret this as denial, it seems more plausible that, as a group, they really do not argue very much. As mentioned before, most of them represent a select group of couples that have made it through many hurdles that other couples will not survive. There are probably many couples in that group who not only do not argue about a lot at this point, but when they do argue, they probably argue less destructively and recover more quickly.

Couples argue most often about money probably because so many decisions in life revolve around money. Because of this, money is a ripe area for power and control dynamics. While couples are aware of arguing about money, it is their underlying issues (such as about power, control, and commitment) that really drive these conflicts. Of course, outright differences of opinion about which way decisions should go are in the mix. In our work (e.g., the book, Fighting for Your Marriage) we try to help couples figure out when their conflicts are being driven by deeper issues that they may not be talking about directly.

Other more detailed studies on problem areas show somewhat different results. In this poll, people were simply asked to “Name the one thing that you and your partner argue about most.” This method is efficient for phone polling work and yields a kind of response that captures peoples’ first, off the cuff response. Studies that look at key problem areas in much more detail find a greater importance placed by couples on the conflict areas of communication and sex than what was found here (Storaasli & Markman, 1990).

Storaasli, R. D., & Markman, H. J. (1990). Relationship problems in the early stages of marriage: A test of marriage: A longitudinal investigation. Journal of Family Psychology, 4, 1, 80-98.

Commitment

Key Finding: *Respondents to the poll were asked several key questions about their level of dedication (a key dimension of commitment) to their partner. Consistent with other research studies, people who are more dedicated to their partners were found to have stronger and happier relationships on many dimensions.*

Questions Asked: *The following four questions were used to assess the level of dedication.*

My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life.

I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now. (reflects lower dedication)

I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of "us" and "we" than "me" and "him/her."

I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter.

Findings and Implications:

There are two primary ways to understand commitment in marriage (and other relationships)--what we call *dedication* and *constraint*. These two dimensions are defined as follows:

Personal dedication consists of the desire or disposition to maintain or improve the quality of the relationship for the benefit of both participants. Dedication is reflected by the willingness to sacrifice for the relationship, to invest in it, to link personal goals to it, and to enhance the partner's welfare, not simply one's own. In contrast, *constraint commitment* is comprised of factors that encourage individuals to maintain relationships regardless of their personal dedication. Constraints may arise from either external or internal pressures,¹ and they foster relationship stability by making the termination of a relationship more costly--economically, socially, or psychologically. (Stanley, Lobitz, & Dickson, in press).

As mentioned, the four questions listed above reflect key dimensions of dedication to one's partner (Stanley & Markman, 1992). In essence, the items reflect a sense of *priority, desired permanence, and couple identity*. Scores on these four questions were combined to measure "dedication" in this research. When measured in this manner, the following results were found:

- ▶ *People who are more dedicated are far less likely to feel trapped in their marriages/relationships.*
- ▶ *People who are more dedicated are far more likely to be happy with their relationship.*
- ▶ *People who are more dedicated also have more confidence that they can handle their future well (with their partner).*
- ▶ *People who are more dedicated are more likely to report handling conflict well in their relationships.*
- ▶ *People who are more dedicated are less likely to report that they "think seriously about what it would be like to date or marry someone else."*

These findings are very consistent with other research on commitment and common sense understandings of what a dedicated commitment is all about. Since this research asked questions of one group of respondents at one point in time, it is not possible to say for this sample whether or not being more dedicated led to better relationships, or better relationships led to being more dedicated. Probably both directions of effect hold true in relationships in general.

As seen here, people who are more dedicated to their partners tend to think less often and less seriously about the alternatives to the relationship. In contrast, this research and other studies show that when people are less dedicated, they are more likely to report thinking a lot about the greener grass on the other side of the fence. When faced with frustration or dissatisfaction in marriage, one has the choice of either obsessing about the supposedly greener grass "over there," or choosing instead to cultivate and care for the lawn on this side of the fence.

While constraint commitment generally increases with the changes that come from being together over time (dating, to engaged, to married, to married with children), dedication is much more dynamically linked with the current quality of the relationships. For example, by choosing to act on greater dedication to one's mate, one could reasonably expect to improve the overall quality of the marriage along the lines reflected in the findings listed above. Dedication is fundamentally about the choices we make (or fail to make) that reflect the level of importance and value placed on the relationship.

While commitment expressed in this way rarely gets attention in our society, it is clear that marriages are stronger and do better when characterized by dedication. This means, in part, wanting and acting on a long term view, thinking as a team, and making decisions that reflect the great value placed on the relationship.

Stanley, S.M., Lobitz, W.C., & Dickson, F. (in press). Using what we know: Commitment and cognitions in marital therapy. In W. Jones & J. Adams (Eds), Handbook of interpersonal commitment and relationship stability.

Stanley, S.M., & Markman, H.J. (1992). Assessing Commitment in Personal Relationships. Journal of Marriage and The Family, 54, 595-608.

Sex Differences

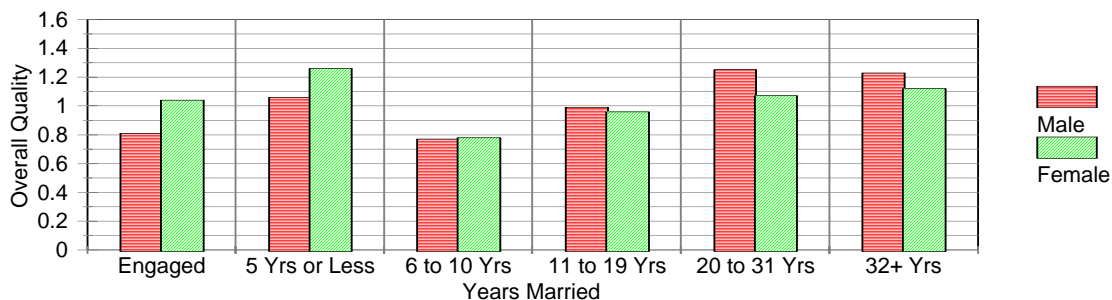
The question arises at this point in our society, “is marriage better for men or for women?” Historically, studies have suggested marriage benefits men more than women, though there are data sets that are exceptions to this. The results on this matter from this polling data can be summarized as follows:

Overall Rated Marital Quality

When comparing men and women across amount of time in the relationship on overall rated quality of their relationships, we find no differences between men and women. This overall composite of quality encompasses satisfaction, dedication, friendship, fun, sensuality, and what we call Danger Signs (as assessed by the Relationship Dynamics scale in the Marriage Killers section: negative patterns of interaction, along with loneliness and active consideration of alternatives). The data are charted below for this composite. There were no indications in the overall analysis of any differences between men and women on this composite.

It is important to note here that we did not directly ask such questions as “is your marriage better for you or your mate?” Or, “do you get as much out of being in this marriage as you expected to get?” Such questions would go at this issue more directly in some manner. However, there is no evidence here that men are getting more out of their relationships than women. Of course, it does not control for possible differences in expectations. But on the whole of it, these data suggest an overall equal sense of well-being from marriage for men and women as measured with this sort of methodology.

Overall Relationship Quality



Divorce Potential

Another strategy for addressing this question would be to look at the degree to which men or women are actively thinking about divorce or talking about divorce with the partner or others. We asked such questions in the survey. There are no differences in this sample between men and women in the likelihood of thinking about divorce or talking about divorce.

Satisfaction

Respondents were asked:

Please rate how happy you are in your present relationship with your mate (if you are married) or with your partner if you are engaged or living together. The middle point in the scale--"happy"--represents the degree of happiness that most people get from their relationships. The scale ranges from "perfectly happy" to "extremely unhappy." Which of these terms best describes your relationship?

- extremely unhappy
- very unhappy
- less happy than most
- happy
- happier than most
- very happy
- perfectly happy

When asked about overall satisfaction with their marriages, the results again are striking in that men and women were virtually as likely to report being satisfied with their marriages. Across gender, the greatest number of respondents reported being very satisfied in their marriages (see section on Marital Happiness). This is not surprising in general because people do tend to be happy with their marriages on any given day, and those who will eventually become very unhappy make up a small number of marriages on any given day.

There was, however, a non-statistically significant trend for men to report being a bit happier in their marriages. This difference also is very small (.15 on a 7 point scale). If this gender finding is interpretable, it looks like the greater differences between men and women are in the engaged and older married groups, where it appears that men are a bit happier on the scale we used. This finding could make sense as a cohort effect, wherein women in newer marriages are a bit happier than their longer married counterparts because husbands (and marriage in general) may be more responsive than they used to be to their concerns. So, there is a hint of men being happier in some groups, but this hint of a finding is overwhelmed by the much more powerful finding that

men and women are, overall, very happy in their marriages on any given day. In all of these analyses, the overall difference between the groups (how long married) is far more significant than any differences here between men and women. In other words, those reporting the lowest levels of marital quality in this survey are those in the 6 to 10 year range (yet, most of them are quite happy in their marriages).

Commitment

A key question that has been asked over the years is whether men or women are more dedicated in their marriages, to their mate. With the more recent advent of sound measures to assess commitment related constructs, this becomes easier to test for in data sets. In the poll, we asked four key questions regarding dedication. They were:

My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life.

I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now. (reflects lower dedication)

I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of "us" and "we" than "me" and "him/her."

I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter.

On a composite of these items used to assess overall dedication, we find no statistically significant difference between men and women in this sample. While some older studies have reported men being less dedicated than women on measures of dedication, that finding was not found here (and it was likewise not generally found in a study specifically looking at commitment on various dimensions (Stanley & Markman, 1992)).

Danger Signs

On the composite measure of overall Danger Signs (see Relationship Dynamics Scale earlier in section on Marriage Killers), there was no difference between men and women for total score. On the specific question about whether they deal with problems as a team or not, men and women did not score differently, suggesting that each sex was just as likely to report a sense of teamwork in their marriages.

The place where the differences in men and women emerged most strongly had to do with withdrawal dynamics, with respondents reporting men being more likely to withdraw from conflict. Further, the relationships which were rated as doing the best on all

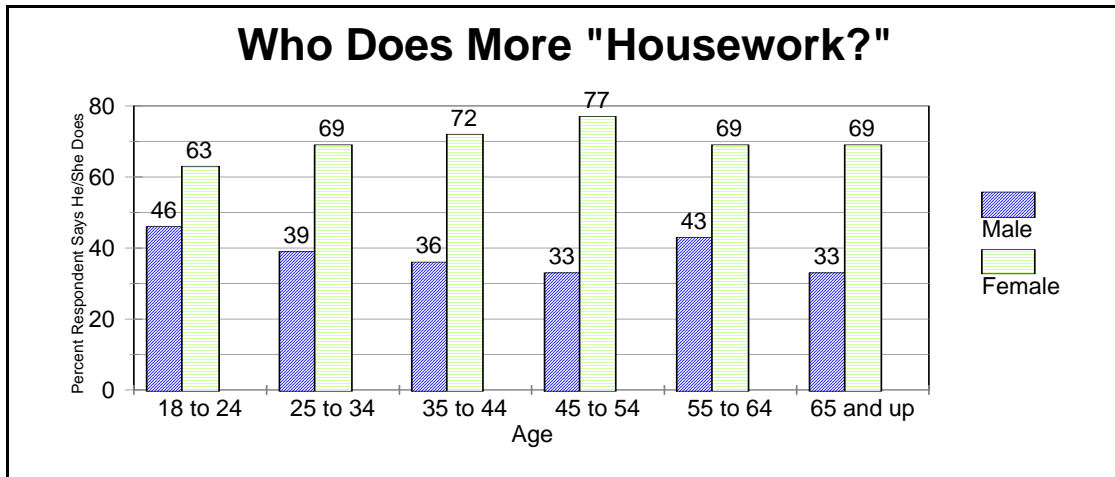
dimensions were the ones where the respondent reported neither partner being likely to withdraw (see section on Marriage Killers).

In summary, other than specific patterns associated with how conflict is handled, there is a great similarity in how men and women rated their relationships on many key dimensions in the poll. In essence, the findings here suggest that, for a vast number of men and women, their marriages are seen as good, something they are dedicated to, and something characterized by friendship. On all key dimensions here, there is no evidence of any significant difference in the perception of the quality of marriage. Certainly other questions could be asked and other methodologies could be used in assessing the question of how marriage is for men vs. women. For many marriages, it may not be as crucial a question as it may be for family theorists and philosophers.

Housework

Key Finding: *Women report doing more of the work around the house than men. Men are doing more of the work in the home than they used to do, but since this poll does not include samples over time, there are no data here about this change. The youngest men in the sample reported doing a higher percentage of housework than older men. Likewise, the younger women reported doing a lower percentage.*

Question Asked: *Please estimate the proportion or percentage of housework that you do and the proportion or percentage that your partner does.*



Implications:

It is not surprising that the younger respondents are reporting the males doing more and the females doing less housework than the older respondents. It also appears that the greatest discrepancy between men and women in terms of housework occur with those respondents aged in the 45 to 54 range. Since these data compare groups of respondents at one point in time (they do not follow one group of respondents over time), it is hard to interpret patterns in the chart above. The results could be do to a couple of key factors: 1) differences in how relationships work at different points in the life cycle; or 2) differences in how people growing up in different decades handle household tasks. For whatever reason, it does appear that respondents in the 55 to 64 age range are reporting something similar to the youngest respondents. It seems likely to us that had the same polling question been put to a similar random sample 20 years ago, all of the numbers for the males would be lower and all the numbers for the

females would be higher.

Not surprisingly, further analyses also suggest that women who work outside the home are likely to be doing less inside the home, with the males picking up some of the slack. Females who work full or part time out of the home reported, on average, that the men did about 6% more of the housework (as compared to the ratings of those who do not work out of the home).

As roles have shifted and more women work out of the home, the whole issue of “who does what?” has taken on added emphasis for many couples. Couples in this day and age are especially wise to talk openly about expectations in this and other areas in order to avoid some of the conflicts that can be triggered over the day-to-day friction about chores. This means the degree to which couples have ways to manage conflict and problem solve as a team may be more crucial than ever in having a good marriage.

Fun, Dating, and Friendship

Key Finding: *Having fun together, dating one another, and maintaining friendship are some of the core tasks of marriage. We find that how people see their marriage doing on these very positive dimensions has great bearing on their overall marital happiness and commitment. The polling data reveals that couples at varying points of life together are preserving these important elements of bonding in varying degrees.*

Friendship

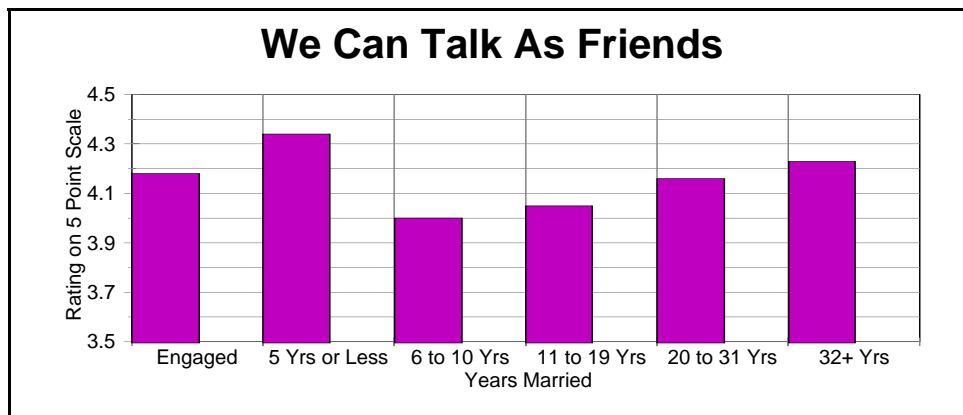
There is perhaps nothing more central to peoples' definitions of a good marriage than having a best friend. While people may define friendship many different ways, it is crucial for most people to have a sense that their spouse is a very good friend.

In the poll, we asked couples to rate their answer to the following question using this scale:

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly Agree

Question asked: *We regularly have great conversations where we just talk as good friends.*

The following graph shows the average ratings for the respondents in the poll when asked this question.



Fun

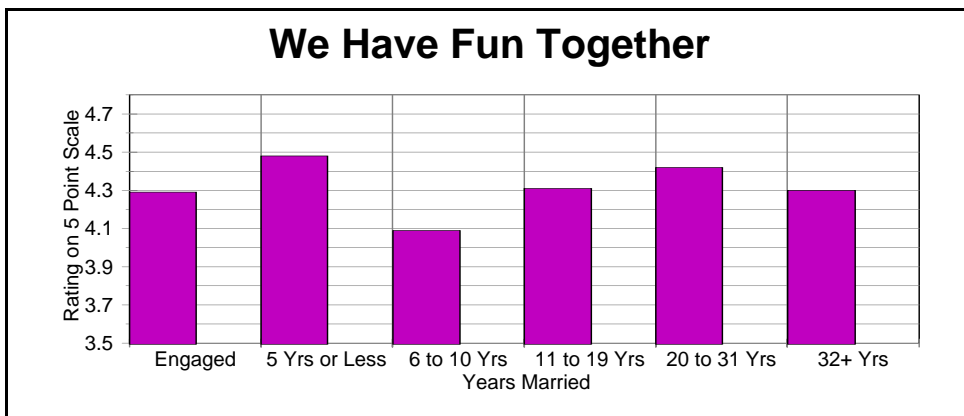
We also asked respondents about being able to have fun in their relationship. Like with friendship, being able to have fun together is one sign that a couple is maintaining a positive sense of being connected in their life together.

In the poll, we asked couples to rate their answer to the following question using this scale:

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly Agree

Question Asked: *We have a lot of fun together.*

The following graph shows the average ratings for the respondents in the poll when asked this question.

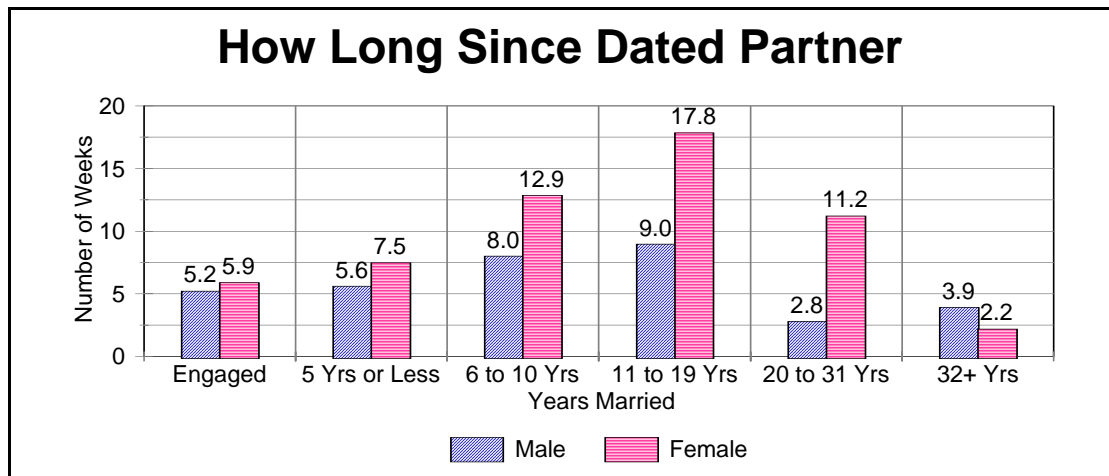


Dating

One more question asked respondents about dating in particular. We asked:

Question asked: How long (in weeks) has it been since just the two of you went out on a date (had an evening out together)?

On the questions above about fun and friendship, no differences between males and females emerged. However, on this question, great differences emerged for those in the middle years of married life.



Implications:

In general, how couples handle their conflicts and differences says the most about how they will do in the future. However, that is far from the only important thing in one's sense about how the marriage is going. It is the positive experiences of bonding together that really brings delight and energy to a marriage. The negative patterns (such as those reflected in the Relationship Dynamics Scale) can do great damage to the kinds of positive experiences being asked about here.

Essentially, most poll respondents are reporting that they are able to talk as friends or have fun with their mate. However, while averaging positive scores on these questions, those in the middle years of marriage are having a little more trouble maintaining these positive dynamics. That is probably due to the heavy demands on the marriage from family duties that would tend, on average, to be great during those years.

These findings suggest that it is important for all couples (perhaps, especially in the middle years of marriage) to work at finding time together that refreshes their marriages.

The data showing that females tend to report that it has been much longer since having a date with their mate than males. These findings suggest a general tendency for males and females in the middle years of marriage to have a very different sense of how often they are dating. There are at least three possible explanations for this pattern: 1) That one sex remembers such matters more accurately than the other. Some would give females the nod here since they have traditionally been more identified with the upkeep of the marital relationship. 2) Perhaps neither sex remembers all that accurately, with females perceiving things to be a bit worse than it really is and males perceiving things to be a bit better than they really are (when it comes to dating). This kind of bias in perception would not be unusual for males and females when it comes to marriage. 3) Perhaps males and females tend to think of different things as "dates." For example, a male may consider taking his wife to a hockey game as a date, but the standards for what a date is may be different for his wife. We lean toward this last explanation because it is both plausible and suggests a clear strategy for couples to make their marriages better--i.e., ***it is important for husbands and wives to not only date each other more often than many couples are doing, but to also talk openly together about what a "date" is.***

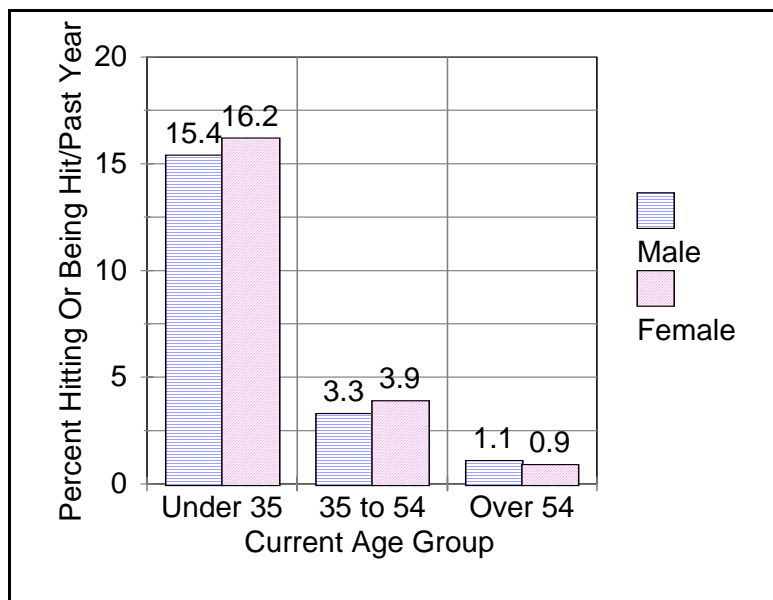
Physical Aggression

Key Findings: *As found in many other studies, a significant number of males and females report having engaged in physical aggression in their relationship in the previous year. While interpretations in this area of research are often controversial, it remains clear that physical aggression is an all too common event in relationships.*

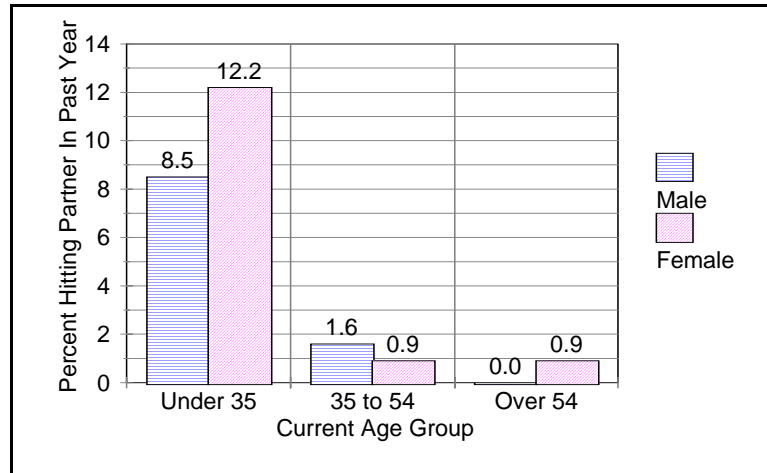
Questions Asked: *Has your partner pushed, grabbed, shoved, hit, or slapped you in the past year?*

Have you pushed, grabbed, shoved, hit, or slapped your partner in the past year?

This first chart documents whether respondents reported *committing or receiving* physical aggression in the past year.



This next chart documents the reporting of the respondent (male or female) having committed physical aggression in the past year.



The meaning of such findings are more complicated than can be discussed here though the trends parallel other studies looking into aggression. There are at least three key issues reflected in this data and other studies: 1) Domestic violence is much more likely to occur between younger people than between older people. Many studies find this. 2) Males historically tend to under-report incidents of physical aggression in their relationships, which may be reflected in the second chart above. 3) Females engage in physical aggression more frequently than is commonly assumed in our culture, and probably for a number of reasons. For example, in this survey, 31% of the females under the age of 25 reported engaging in physical aggression with their partner in the past year. Also, 28% of the females under 25 reported that their partner had pushed, grabbed, shoved, hit, or slapped them in the past year. As noted above, the rates of reported aggression go down dramatically with older respondents. Of all the items from the Relationship Dynamics Scale (earlier in this report), the one that showed the greatest relationship with reported levels of physical aggression was: “*Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name calling, or bringing up past hurts.*” Not surprisingly, this suggests that incidents of physical aggression occur for many couples as an outgrowth of conflict that is handled poorly.

Of course this simple data does not address the complex reasons why people engage in physical aggression or the effects of different levels and kinds of physical aggression on individuals and relationships.

Without getting into more detail on this controversial subject, we would note the following key points regarding domestic violence in America:

- ***Domestic violence of any sort is unacceptable, wrong, and dangerous.***
- ***There is an alarming level of domestic violence (at various levels) taking place in families in our society.***
- ***No matter what the nature of the violence, when males strike females, there is every reason to believe that females are both in greater danger and will likely suffer more long-lasting and negative aftereffects.***
- ***When there is the presence of domestic violence, the preeminent concern should be safety.***

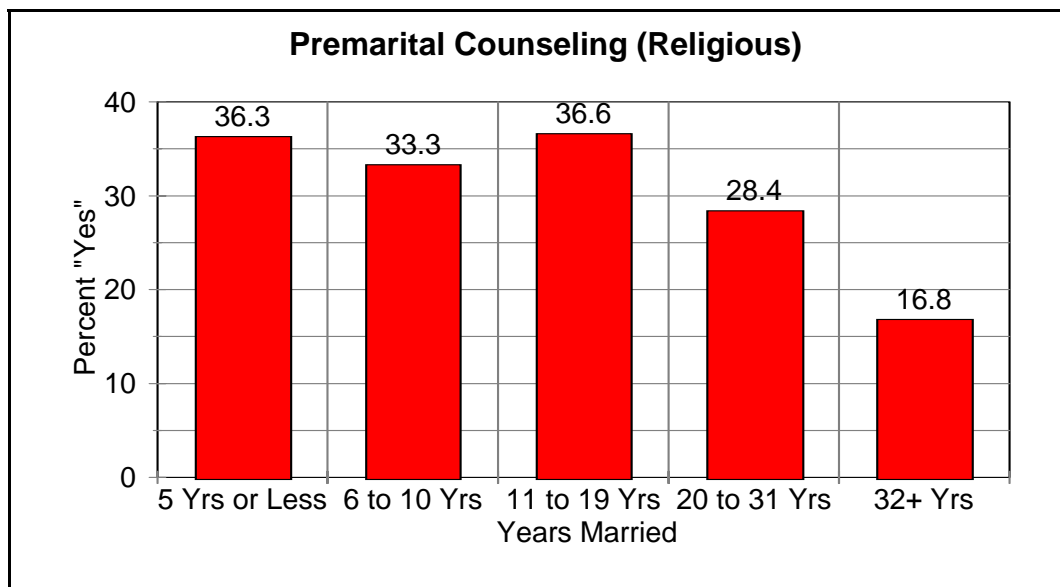
For more reading about the controversies surrounding domestic violence, we recommend the book:

Current Controversies on Family Violence which is published by Sage Publications (1993) and edited by Richard Gelles and Donileen Loseke.

Premarital Counseling

Key Finding: *Couples marrying today are more likely than those marrying many years ago to have had premarital counseling in a religious setting, but (assuming respondents are remembering accurately) the percentage having such counseling has not gone up for those marrying in recent decades. The benefits of such counseling as generally practiced are not easily tracked in a poll like this, but the benefits that do exist are strongest in the first few years of marriage.*

Question Asked: *Before you were married, did you participate in any premarital counseling through a religious organization?*



Implications and Further Findings:

In a society that faces such high rates of marital failure, premarital counseling has been suggested as one strategy for lowering the risks for couples as they marry. Since religious institutions are at the forefront when it comes to weddings, it is only natural that a great deal of such work occurs in such settings. However, these results suggest that, while the divorce rate has skyrocketed over the past few 25 years, there has been only a small increase in the amount of premarital counseling being done, over this same time span (i.e., respondents marrying in the last thirty years are reporting a similar likelihood of having had premarital counseling in this poll).

By and large, respondents reported that the premarital counseling that they did have was helpful to them. While respondents generally reported that premarital counseling was helpful, the positive effects of such counseling were harder to track. However, some effects were clear, especially in the early years of marriage:

- ▶ *While only a small number of respondents married in the past 5 years reported thinking about divorce, those who did not have premarital counseling were more likely to report thinking about divorce.*
- ▶ *Of those married in the past 5 years, those who had premarital counseling were more likely to report: 1) higher confidence in their ability to handle conflicts, 2) higher dedication to their mates, and 3) some tendency for greater positivity in their marriages (happiness, friendship, fun, and sensual satisfaction).*
- ▶ *Overall, the shorter the time since marriage, the more clear the positive differences between those having premarital counseling and those not.*

One should bear in mind that these effects could be due a selection effect: in essence, does it say more about who chooses to go through premarital counseling or the effects of the premarital counseling itself. Couples who are more committed or able on other dimensions may be more likely to opt for premarital training. There is no way to tease apart these explanations with this kind of data. For further discussion of the issue of who participates in premarital training, see Sullivan & Bradbury (1997).

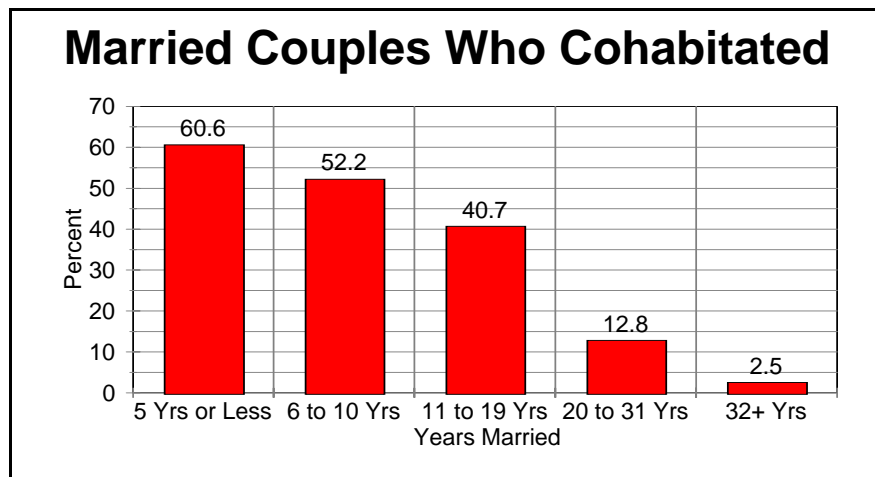
There are a variety of kinds of premarital preparation. We speculate that couples having more rigorous forms of premarital preparation would show the strongest gains in marital functioning, though the poll was not constructed to shed light on the effects of types of premarital preparation. As marital researchers, our greatest interest over the past two decades has been in studying the prediction and prevention of marital distress and divorce. In this work, we have developed a program called PREP which is described in the back of this report. PREP is a program that can be used by premarital or marital couples to strengthen their marriages. It is a program based on research and a "hands on," skills based approach to teaching couples what makes a difference for having a great marriage. The book, Fighting for Your Marriage, describes the key strategies of the PREP approach. PREP is described more in the background section of this report.

Sullivan, K.T., & Bradbury, T.N. (1997). Are premarital prevention programs reaching couples at risk for marital dysfunction? Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 65 (1), 24-30.

Cohabitation

Key Finding:

The number of couples who live together prior to marriage has skyrocketed over the past several decades. Those married more recently are far more likely to report cohabitation prior to marriage than those married decades ago.



SOME BASIC FACTS ABOUT MARRIAGE AND COHABITATION

The rate of cohabitation before a first marriage has increased from about 11% thirty years ago to somewhere around 60% in the 1990s (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Stanley & Markman, 1996).

Demographers have suggested that cohabitation has replaced what used to be early marriage as a relationship stage--the average age at first marriage has gone up steadily while the rates of cohabitation have skyrocketed (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; 1991).

Most cohabiting couples either break up or marry within a few years--i.e., cohabitation is most often a transitional state (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989).

The rate of divorce for those who cohabit before marriage is higher than for those who do not cohabit (various studies show this). The increased risk of divorce is on the magnitude of 13 percentage points. The increased risk is likely the greatest in the earlier years of marriage.

THEORIES OF INCREASED RISK

The finding that cohabitation is related to increased risk of divorce has puzzled marital theorists and couples. After all, the common perception is that people live together prior to marriage to “test out” the viability of the union. One would think that such a process would lead to lower divorce rates. While a puzzle remains, data are accumulating to explain it. In general, researchers and theorists believe that the increased divorce risk is due more to differences between those who cohabit and those who do not, as compared to the actual effects of cohabiting per se. However, Thomson & Colella (1992) mention the intriguing possibility that cohabitation increases the awareness of alternatives to marriage. If so, commitment theory suggests that increases in a sense of alternatives will generally weaken the stability of relationships (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Three theories have been suggested in explanation of the increased risk of divorce associated with cohabitation (e.g., Thomson & Colella, 1992):

Theory One: Those who cohabit prior to marriage have less commitment to the institution of marriage in the first place. Therefore, they are more likely to leave when a marriage gets tough.

Theory Two: Those who choose to cohabit prior to marriage do so as a “trial marriage,” often out of awareness of some underlying problems in the relationship. Inertia propels many of them forward to marry, and many of them were accurately picking up on patterns that do, indeed, put themselves at greater risk. Essentially, cohabitation can make it more likely some couples will marry who would not have married if they were not living together.

Theory Three: Those who cohabit prior to marriage are more likely to view such relationships as two individuals than as a couple with a unified identity (“me” more than “we”). This attitude about such relationships becomes a subsequent risk factor to the marriages of cohabiters as dissatisfactions arise.

FURTHER ANALYSES FROM THIS SURVEY

Comparing Those Who Cohabited Prior to Marriage with Those Who Did Not

The analyses conducted here used only data from those married under 5 years to reduce effects of societal and generational change. These results are very consistent with other studies in the field using different samples and slightly different questions.

Those who had cohabited were found to be very slightly less happy in their marriages than non-cohabiters.

Those who had cohabited reported significantly more problems in handling conflict than non-cohabiters--especially on an item that asks about the tendency to escalate during arguments. They also scored more highly on a composite measure of known risk factors for marriage (see attached 8 item questionnaire).

Those who had cohabited were more likely to report the use of physical aggression in their marriages over the previous year (21% compared to 8%). (There would be many exceptions to this trend, but, on average, a couple who lived together prior to marriage is more likely to have used physical violence against one another.)

Those who had cohabited prior to marriage reported that they were less religious than non-cohabiters.

Those who had cohabited prior to marriage were more likely to report actively thinking about divorce.

Those who had cohabited prior to marriage were no less dedicated to one another, nor were they less likely to report being able to talk like friends or have fun together. Further, those who cohabited prior to marriage reported slightly greater rates of sexual intercourse, though they also reported less satisfaction with the sensual/sexual relationship.

Comparing Respondents on Current Relationship Status

For the analyses reported in this section, we compared those in the sample who were married and those who were not married, not engaged, but living together. Again, we restricted the sample to those together less than five years--this time to reduce effects on the analyses of those who had been married for many years (which will tend to skew the results toward the married couples looking strongest).

Those who were not engaged but living together scored significantly lower on a measure of dedication commitment to one's partner. This finding was found even when we added statistical control for the level of happiness subjects said they had with their partner. Hence, non-engaged cohabiters were more likely to reflect lower dedication based on their answers to the following questions (and this seems to be especially true for the males):

My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life.

I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now.

I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of "us" and "we" than "me" and "him/her."

I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter.

Those who were not engaged but cohabiting were less likely to report confidence in their ability to handle conflicts they will have together in the future.

Those who were not engaged but cohabiting were less likely to report being religious, and those who were engaged and not cohabiting rated themselves as being relatively more religious.

Marrieds and cohabiters reported similar frequency of sexual intercourse, but married subjects rated themselves as being more sexually satisfied.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the our survey conducted earlier this year are quite consistent with theory and research on marriage and cohabitation. Among those who are married, a picture emerges regarding the most likely links between a history of living together and divorce. First, these couples reported more problems in handling conflict than other couples, and many other studies suggest mishandled conflict is among the very best predictors of divorce in the future.

Second, those couples who live together prior to marriage tend to be less conventional about marriage and divorce than those who do not (Sweet, 1989). In the recent data, this is partly reflected by the fact that those who lived together see themselves as less religious than those who did not. Typically, people who are more religious have somewhat greater esteem for the institution of marriage and greater disapproval of divorce. These factors may make for weaker "constraint" commitment among those with a history of cohabitation--and constraint commitment is a stabilizing force for marriages over time (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Additionally, the new data suggest that those with the history of cohabitation were a bit more likely to be actively thinking about divorce.

In summary of a number of studies, those who lived together prior to marriage seem to have more conflictual marriages and less inhibitions about divorce--a clear prescription for increased risk of divorce. While it may be harder to change peoples' attitudes about marriage and divorce, how couples handle conflict is both very predictive of divorce and quite changeable--with motivation (Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994). Since those who lived together prior to marriage have more problems handling conflict (especially in the tendency to escalate

during arguments), they would likely be able to reduce some of the increased risk by taking the time to learn better conflict management and communication skills. What is less clear is why those who live together prior to marriage might have more problems, on average, in handling conflict. One possibility is that this finding could support the theory that a significant number of those who live together prior to marriage have chosen to do so out of concern for underlying patterns that reflect a real increased risk of marital failure. However, the data are mixed and not entirely compelling on this matter.

The data comparing respondents on current relationship status highlight some differences that exist between these groups on dedication. Those who are living together and not engaged are significantly less personally dedicated to one another than married subjects. This could be part of the basis for the choice of this living arrangement in the first place. In a follow-up analysis, we found a significant difference in dedication between those who are engaged (whether or not cohabiting) and those who are cohabiting and not engaged. Regardless of views and practices regarding cohabitation, engagement represents a significantly greater dedication level than non-engagement (Stanley & Markman, 1992).

Cohabitation is becoming far more prevalent but there are no data that shows that it, as a practice, is lowering the odds of divorce in our society.

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Background Information

PREP, Inc.

PREP, Inc. is a company formed by Dr. Howard Markman and Dr. Scott Stanley to provide a vehicle for marital research and the dissemination of training and products based on PREP and university based marital research. The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP™) is a research-based approach to teaching couples (premarital or marital) how to communicate effectively, work as a team to solve problems, manage conflicts without damaging closeness, and preserve and enhance commitment and friendship. The PREP Approach is based on over 25 years of research in the field of marital health and success, with much of the specific research conducted at the University of Denver over the past 20+ years.

Drs. Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, Susan Blumberg, and a host of colleagues and research assistants across the U.S. and around the world, have been studying the factors that predict marital breakdown. The key focus of this work has been on how to take this information and teach couples skills and attitudes associated with marital success. You can reach PREP, Inc. by calling **303-759-9931** or by writing to us at:

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The Center for Marital and Family Studies: University of Denver

The Center for Marital and Family Studies is a research center in the psychology department at the University of Denver. The center is directed by Drs. Howard Markman and Scott Stanley, and is devoted to research on various dimensions of marital and family functioning, especially the prediction and prevention of marital distress and divorce. You can reach our research center by calling **303-871-3829** or by writing:

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Short Biographies

Scott M. Stanley, Ph.D. is Co-Director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver, an adjunct professor of psychology, and a psychologist in private practice. He is an expert in commitment research and theory. Dr. Stanley regularly appears as a marital expert in the media, and has published numerous scientific and popular articles on marriage. He has co-authored the book *Fighting for Your Marriage*, as well as co-produced the *Fighting for Your Marriage* video and audio tapes.

Howard J. Markman, Ph.D. is a professor of psychology and Director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver. A noted expert on marriage, he specializes in research on the prediction and prevention of marital distress. Dr. Markman has published extensively in professional journals, and regularly appears as an expert on marriage in the media. He has co-authored the books *We Can Work It Out* and *Fighting for Your Marriage*, as well as co-produced the *Fighting for Your Marriage* video and audio tapes.