



# The risk of divorce as a barrier to marriage among parents of young children<sup>☆</sup>

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 14 July 2008

### Keywords:

Barriers to marriage  
Divorce  
Fear of divorce  
Fragile families  
Transition to marriage

## ABSTRACT

Using data from the Fragile Families Study, we examine how unmarried parents' risk of divorce influences their decision to marry. Regression results show that unmarried parents with a high predicted probability of marital dissolution (based on estimates of marital dissolution for a sample of initially married mothers with similar characteristics) had significantly lower odds of marriage to the father of their child even after controlling for individual and relationship characteristics expected to influence marriage transitions. The dissolution propensity we examine also includes a measure of the local divorce climate. As such, our results provide support for the argument that high rates of divorce in the population have led to a fear of divorce among unmarried parents which reduces their probability of marriage.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past four decades, the marital behavior of Americans has changed in significant ways. A steep increase in divorce occurred in the 1960's and 1970's, followed by a period of leveling off and slight decline by the late 1980's (Ellwood and Jencks, 2004). During the same period, the median age at first marriage increased substantially. Between 1965 and 1998 the proportion of unmarried women in their early twenties more than doubled, and the proportion of unmarried women in their late twenties more than tripled (Ventura and Bachrach, 2000). The delay in marriage also contributed to the rising rates of nonmarital childbearing by increasing the period of risk. By 1999, about one third of all births were to unmarried women. These changes in marital behavior are particularly consequential for children, and studies have estimated that half of all children born in the U.S. will spend some time living in households headed by a single parent (Castro-Martin and Bumpass, 1989; Ellwood and Jencks, 2004).

A number of hypotheses have been put forward to explain why more men and women are postponing marriage, including increased earnings of women and poor marriage markets (Ellwood and Jencks, 2004). In this paper we examine an additional explanation for marital delays: the fear of divorce which reduces confidence in the institution of marriage. Although this explanation has been mentioned by scholars and pundits, alike (e.g., Wilson, 1996; Whitehead and Popenoe, 2002; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005), few studies have attempted to estimate its importance empirically.

<sup>☆</sup> The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and a consortium of agencies and foundations. Previous versions of this paper were presented at the National Poverty Center Conference, Washington, DC, September 4–5, 2003, the National Welfare Research and Evaluation Conference, Washington, DC, May 26, 2004, and the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, August 14, 2004. We thank Suzann Eshleman, Jean Knab, Dan Lichter, Jamie Rubenstein, Joe Sabia, and Ning Zhang.

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We use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to address this issue directly. We first create a dissolution propensity index derived as a function of individual, partner, and relationship characteristics and contextual variables, using estimated parameters from a regression of the probability of marital dissolution in the sample of initially married mothers in the study. We then calculate the dissolution propensity for parents who were unmarried at the time of their child's birth and examine the association between the dissolution propensity and these parents' transition to marriage within three years. Some studies have shown that women are less likely to marry a partner who has undesirable characteristics or when the relationship is of lower quality (e.g., Brown, 2000; Carlson et al., 2004). However, our analysis goes further by showing that unmarried mothers with a higher dissolution propensity are less likely to marry their child's father, even after controlling for partner and relationship characteristics. One of the variables that enters into our dissolution propensity index is the percentage of women who are divorced in the respondent's city of residence. Higher exposure to divorce may create a more generalized fear of divorce that is independent of the current relationship characteristics. In other words, a fear of divorce may increase the threshold that defines who is an acceptable marriage partner and may reduce the likelihood of marrying someone with a given set of characteristics.

The Fragile Families Study is particularly well suited to our analysis, because it is the only large scale data set that has detailed measures of current partner and relationship characteristics for *both* married and unmarried women. The married sample is necessary to estimate the parameters of the dissolution propensity index that we then calculate for the unmarried sample, and the relationship characteristics are essential to be able to control for factors that are confounded with the dissolution propensity. Unmarried parents have also been the focus of considerable academic and policy attention, including efforts to promote marriage, because of their disproportionate risk of poverty and participation in public assistance programs. Our results contribute to this policy debate by documenting an additional reason why these mothers may be reluctant to marry the father of their child.

The discussion begins by reviewing previous research on determinants of divorce and marriage. We then examine the association between unmarried parents' predicted risk of marital dissolution and their transition to marriage during the first three years of their child's life.

### 1.1. Marriage decisions and the risk of divorce

Although divorce is no longer on the rise, the United States continues to have one of the highest rates of marital dissolution among Western, industrialized countries, with as many as half of all marriages established in the 1980's projected to end in divorce (Raley and Bumpass, 2003; Schoen and Standish, 2001). The likelihood of growing up in a family that experienced divorce and of interacting with divorced adults and children of divorce has also increased for recent cohorts as marital dissolution has become more common. At the same time, delays in marriage have led to a decrease in the ratio of married people relative to divorced people (McLanahan and Casper, 1995). As a result, young men and women now observe a larger number of divorces relative to stable marriages than in the past. The exposure to divorce also varies by socioeconomic status, given large race disparities in marital dissolution and recent increases in educational differences in divorce (Raley and Bumpass, 2003).

Recent demographic forecasts suggest that about 90% of U.S. women will eventually marry but are waiting longer to do so than in previous years (Goldstein and Kenney, 2001). However, women who have had a nonmarital birth and African-American women are less likely have married by age 40 than other women (Ellwood and Jencks, 2004; Lichter and Graefe, 2001).<sup>1</sup> The literature that attempts to explain declining marriage rates generally focuses on two main factors. First, the increasing labor market attachment and earnings of women lead to an independence effect that allows women to remain unmarried. Second, the literature suggests that poor marriage markets (characterized by a shortage of marriageable men) will reduce marriage rates for women. The latter hypothesis is particularly salient for explaining the low marriage rates among poor African-American women living in inner city areas following recent declines employment and increases in incarceration among men in their marriage market (Mincy, 2006).

In this paper we argue that an additional factor that may lead young adults to delay or avoid marriage is a reduced confidence in marriage (or fear of divorce) which may result from being exposed to high levels of marital dissolution. We assume that individuals observe others' experiences of divorce and use that information to predict their own likelihood of divorce. In particular, we suggest that they are likely to assess their own risk of divorce by considering factors that lead to marital dissolution among people they encounter or who have similar attributes. This is a form of rational expectations that is commonly used in the economics literature (Sargent, 2002). In addition, previous sociological and anthropological scholarship on risk reminds us that individuals' perceptions of risk are socially constructed and reflect the concerns of the cultures in which they live (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Clarke and Short, 1993).

Why do we expect the risk of divorce to matter for unmarried parents' decisions about marriage independent of their personal characteristics, the quality of their relationship itself, and the risk of breakup that entails? We suggest that the emotional and financial costs of divorce are higher than the costs of breakup from a nonmarital relationship, whether cohabiting or not. For example, a divorce may be more disruptive for families and lead to greater social stigma than dissolving a

<sup>1</sup> Data from the 1995 NSFG show that 27.1% of Black women between the ages of 35–44 have never married compared to 8.5% of White women (Graefe and Lichter, 2007).

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