



IN BRIEF

Love's illusions: Americans tend to be overly optimistic about their chances of marital success

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How's your marriage? When asked this question, most people give a rosy answer. But with more than half of marriages in the United States ending in divorce, how can so many people paint glorious pictures of their marriages?

Blaine Fowers, PhD, Eileen Lyons, PhD, Kelly Montel, PhD, and Netta Shaked set out to examine whether these positive illusions are "an artifact of marital satisfaction and duration" as previous studies have suggested. The results of their work appear in this month's *Journal of Family Psychology*.

They first set out to determine whether positive illusions could be identified with a quantitative standard.

"We approached this in three ways," said Fowers, et al. First, participants in each study were asked to rate their chances of getting divorced. They compared participants' estimates with the overall population's likelihood of divorce. Next, participants were asked to estimate the probabilities of other negative events in their lives such as car accidents, physical disability or early death. The researchers then compared these estimates with the participants' estimates of their divorce likelihood. Finally, because previous studies have primarily relied on volunteers who have been married more than 10 years and have high marital satisfaction--factors which "could explain rosy evaluations of one's marriage"--the researchers included a sample with "very little volunteer bias" as well as a sample of single individuals.

The researchers studied three different samples. The first group was primarily white, over 40, well educated and had been married for over 10 years. The second sample was more diverse, slightly younger, slightly less educated but also married for over 10 years on average. And the third group was the youngest, most diverse, and all unmarried.

Despite their awareness of the national divorce rate, all three groups dramatically underestimated their chances of a future divorce. The first and second groups pegged their likelihood for divorce at 10.4 percent and 11 percent, respectively, substantially below the national divorce likelihood of 43 percent.

This underestimation certainly provides "further evidence of the presence of positive illusions about marriage," the authors write. But there are other explanations for the low divorce estimates, say the researchers. These participants had all been married over a decade on average and "the longer a couple is married the lower the probability of divorce is," the researchers explain. Also, there is "mutual entailment between marital satisfaction and illusions." So, positive illusions might play a part in a happy marriage. Or vice versa.

The researchers then asked participants who were not involved in any serious relationship (but planned to marry in the future) about the likelihood of their future marriage ending in divorce. In this group, only 12 percent of the sample thought their future marriages had a 50 percent or larger chance of ending in divorce. For those marrying now, report the authors, the divorce rate is closer to 64 percent. Interestingly, unmarried respondents gave much higher estimates for the probability of others' divorce, thus showing they believe high divorce rates do exist but will not affect them. Also noteworthy, say the authors, is that the same groups overestimated their own chances of experiencing other negative events--such as car accidents or physical disabilities.

"It is rather remarkable that so many people would think that there is no possibility that their marriage will end in divorce when half or more of all marriages are terminated in divorce," the authors write. The findings support the view that "positive illusions about marriage appear to be more powerful than illusions about other aspects of life."

Ironically, point out the researchers, the presence of positive marital illusions among singles show that "overestimates of marital success are a broader phenomenon than is marriage itself."

--J. DAW

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