

The Risk of Divorce as a Barrier to Marriage among Parents of Young Children*

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Abstract

Drawing on data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, we examine how unmarried parents' risk of divorce influences their decision to delay marriage. We first use the sample of initially married mothers in the study to estimate their probability of marital dissolution as a function of individual, relationship, and contextual variables. We then use the parameters from that logistic regression to calculate a 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. Regression results show that unmarried parents with a high predicted probability of marital dissolution had significantly and substantially lower odds of marriage even after taking into account the quality of their relationship and other factors expected to influence marriage transitions. Because our dissolution propensity also includes a measure of the local divorce climate, our results provide empirical support for the argument that high rates of divorce in the population have led to a fear of divorce among unmarried parents of young children which reduces their probability of marriage.

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 increasing rates of non-marital 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 choosing not to marry, including increased earnings of women and poor marriage markets (Ellwood and Jencks 2004). In this paper we examine an additional explanation for the decline in marriage: 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, Edin and McLanahan 2005), few studies have attempted to estimate its importance empirically.

We use data from Fragile Families 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 when their current partner has undesirable characteristics or when the relationship is of lower quality (e.g., Brown 2000; Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004). However, our analysis goes further by showing that unmarried mothers with a higher dissolution propensity are less likely to marry, 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.

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.¹ The married sample is necessary to estimate the parameters of the dissolution propensity index that we then calculate for the nonmarried sample, and the relationship characteristics are essential to be able to control for factors that are confounded with the dissolution propensity. One limitation of these data is that we are confined to a sample of mothers, and our results may not generalize to the population as a whole. However, our select population is of interest, in and of itself. Unmarried parents have 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

¹ The National Survey of Families and Households has partner characteristics and relationship quality for co-residential unions (marriage and cohabitation), but not for other types of relationships. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 also has a limited number of partner characteristics, but, again, only for co-residential unions.

programs. Our results contribute to this policy debate by documenting an additional reason why these parents may be reluctant to marry.

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.

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 over half of all marriages established in the 1980's projected to end in divorce (Castro-Martin and Bumpuss 1989; McLanahan and Casper 1995). 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 socio-economic status, given large race disparities in marital dissolution and recent increases in educational differences in divorce (Raley and Bumpass 2003).

The literature that attempts to explain falling 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 explanation is particularly salient for explaining the low marriage rates among poor African American women living in urban inner city areas.

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 Wildalvsky 1982; Clarke and Short 1993; Tulloch and Lupton 2003).

Why do we expect the risk of divorce to matter for unmarried parents' decision to delay 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 relationships, whether cohabiting or not. For example, a divorce may be more disruptive for families and lead to greater social stigma than dissolving a nonmarital relationship. Couples may also incur legal expenses and hassles as part of the divorce process. One empirical study (Lichter, Graefe and Brown 2003) finds that disadvantaged women who marry and subsequently divorce have higher poverty rates than their counterparts who never marry, suggesting that the economic cost of divorce may be high for these women. Thus, if parents of young children believe that there is a high probability of

divorce, they may be hesitant to convert their current relationship into a marriage. At the same time, is possible that higher exposure to divorce could reduce rather than increase the fear of divorce by normalizing this experience.

Our expectation that unmarried parents' fear of divorce will diminish their willingness to marry their child's other parent is informed by qualitative evidence. In two studies of unmarried mothers and fathers (author citation), parents often explained their decision to delay marriage in regard to the high risk of divorce and the potential consequences of divorce to themselves and their children. Parents suggested that their high exposure to divorce had eroded their own confidence in having a successful marriage, and they referred to personal anecdotes, as well as publicly available information, to highlight particular costs of divorce they hoped to avoid.

Although parents regarded a stable marriage as an ideal environment to raise children, they often thought that their children would be worse off if they married their partner and subsequently divorced than if they remained unmarried. Of particular concern were the lasting emotional and psychological harm children could suffer as a result of divorce, which some had experienced first-hand when their own parents' marriages ended (author citation). Parents also felt divorce could have personal and moral consequences for them, given the cultural significance they attributed to marriage. Because parents said they felt marriage should be permanent and "last forever," divorce was regarded as a personal failure and a violation of a serious religious commitment (author citation).² Finally, parents seemed to want to avoid the legal conflicts and entanglements associated with divorce, which they viewed as both personally difficult and detrimental to children. They typically preferred to make informal rather than legal parenting and child support agreements when their relationships ended and had a higher likelihood of doing so if they did not legally marry (author citation). Because they viewed

² See also, Edin and Kefalas 2005.

divorce as emotionally, morally, and economically costly, parents were hesitant to marry, particularly if they saw the “warning signs” of divorce in their own relationships.

Because the question we address links marriage decisions with expectations about divorce, we briefly review the existing empirical evidence about factors related to both of these outcomes. Although both individual characteristics and relationship quality are likely to affect unmarried couples’ relationship transitions, we expect their predicted risk of divorce to have an independent influence on their decision to marry.

Factors Related to Relationship Transitions. Previous research and theory indicate that the transition to marriage is inversely related to several of the same factors that predict marital dissolution. For example, Becker (1991) argues that divorce may occur when new information or changed circumstances over time cause a substantial reduction in a married couple’s assessment of the gains to marriage. The greater the expected gains are at the beginning of the relationship, the more likely the couple is to marry, and the less likely it is that changes in circumstances will cause a large enough reduction in marriage gains to lead to divorce.

Empirical evidence consistently shows a strong, inverse relationship between male earnings and marital dissolution (Becker, Landes, and Michael 1977; Hoffman and Duncan 1995; Ruggles 1997). Men’s earnings are also positively related to marriage (Oppenheimer, Kalmijn and Lim 1997; Sweeney 2002), the transition from cohabitation to marriage (Sanchez, Manning and Smock 1998; Smock and Manning 1997), and marriage following a nonmarital birth (Carlson, McLanahan and England 2004). The evidence for women’s earnings is mixed (Oppenheimer 1997). However, an increasing number of studies suggest that women’s earnings have a positive influence on marriage (White and Rogers 2000). There is some evidence that

women's economic characteristics may be more important for recent cohorts entering marriage (Sweeney and Cancian 2004; Sweeney 2002).

Other personal characteristics that have been found to affect marriage and its dissolution include family structure when growing up, age, and cultural factors. A large body of research indicates that adults who experienced a parental divorce in childhood are themselves more likely to divorce (e.g., McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; Bumpass, Castro-Martin, and Sweet 1991; Amato 1996), and to cohabit rather than marry in their first union (Thornton 1991). Economic theory would suggest that age would matter because it captures the time spent searching for a suitable mate (Becker 1991) and serves a proxy for emotional maturity (Morgan and Rindfuss 1985). Empirical evidence from large scale demographic studies shows that divorce is more likely when couples marry young (Bumpass and Sweet 1972; Becker, Landes, and Michael 1977; Teachman 2002). Both divorce and delays in marriage have been associated with individual risk factors like substance use and incarceration (Amato and Rogers 1997; Lopoo and Western 2005). Research further points to cultural factors, such as religious attendance, that may dissuade couples from divorcing (Thomas and Cornwall 1990; Amato and Rogers 1997) and encourage marriage (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2002).

The characteristics of couples' relationships may also influence the likelihood of marital dissolution and marriage. For example, previous research has found that a destructive conflict style among spouses predicts early marital instability (Hatchett, Veroff, and Douvan 1995), while positive characteristics of couples' relationships such as social network integration, may help stabilize relationships (Booth, Edwards, and Johnson 1991). Unmarried parents with higher quality relationships are also more likely to make the transition to marriage (Carlson,

McLanahan and England 2004; Osborne 2005), whereas marriage is considerably less likely among women who have experienced abuse as adults (Cherlin et al. 2004).

Other Factors Related to Divorce Previous research also points to factors related to divorce but not directly to the quality of a specific relationship. It is these factors that will help us identify in the empirical work the separate effect of the dissolution propensity from that of the personal and relationship characteristics that directly affect marriage propensities. For example, the state's divorce rate is highly predictive of whether or not a couple will divorce and gives us some indication of the cultural tolerance for divorce or other unobserved state specific characteristics that may be associated with divorce (author citation). Research shows that some laws that liberalized divorce procedures are associated with higher rates of divorce, but the evidence about the effect of no-fault divorce laws is inconclusive (Stetson and Wright 1975; author citation; Friedberg 1998; Gruber 2000, and Wolfers 2003). Although little research has examined the association between custody arrangements and the likelihood of divorce, we would expect laws favoring joint custody to increase the perceived cost of union dissolution for married mothers because these arrangements could reduce their authority over, and time spent with, their child following a divorce.³

Data Description

The analysis draws on data from the Fragile Families Study, which follows a new birth cohort of children in 20 U.S. cities. The total sample in the Fragile Families Study includes 4,898 births, 3,712 of which occurred to unmarried parents and 1,186 occurred to married

³ Most states authorize joint custody in cases of divorce, but eleven states express a statutory preference for this arrangement. Courts in these states will grant joint custody to parents unless there is proof that this would not be in the best interest of the child (Atkinson 1996, Katz 2003). See American Bar Association, Table 4: State Laws Regarding Joint Custody online available at: <http://www.abanet.org/media/factbooks/cht4.html>).

parents. The weighted data are representative of nonmarital births to parents residing in cities with populations over 200,000.⁴ Although our primary interest is in understanding whether expectations about marital dissolution lead unmarried mothers to delay or avoid marriage, we also use data from mothers who were married at the child's birth to estimate the marital dissolution regression used to create the dissolution propensity index. Because births to marital parents were selected from the same cities and hospital as unmarried parents, the married sample can be used as a comparison group.

New mothers were initially interviewed in person at the hospital, and the fathers of their children were interviewed either at the hospital or someplace else as soon as possible after the birth. The response rate at baseline was about 87% for unmarried mothers and 82% for married mothers; response rates were about 76% for unmarried fathers and 88% for married fathers. Mothers and fathers were also interviewed when their child was about 12-18 months and 36 months. The survey has completed and retained more interviews with mothers than with the fathers. Because mothers are asked questions about the fathers of their children, however, the survey has information about fathers who were never interviewed or who dropped out of the study. Our sample in this paper includes 4,182 cases in which mothers participated in the survey at baseline and Year Three, had data for the dependent variables used in our analysis, and in which the father was still living. This represents about 85% of the baseline sample of cases in these cities.⁵

Table 1 presents the means of individual and relationship characteristics for the samples of parents in the survey who had marital (column 1) and nonmarital (column 2) births. Although

⁴ See Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel and McLanahan (2001) for more information about the study's methodology.

⁵ Of the total number of 4,898 cases, we drop 669 cases in which the mother did not report data at year three. Of these cases, we exclude 31 cases in which the father was deceased by year three and 16 cases in which the mother did not report her relationship status with the father.

the two samples were drawn from births that occurred in the same hospitals, means tests show that there are statistically significant and substantively large differences in many their socioeconomic characteristics. We discuss the implications of these differences for our analyses in a later section.

Dependent Variables. To estimate the parameters used to create the dissolution propensity index, we use the marital birth sample, and we measure the probability of marital dissolution within three years of the birth. The data do not allow us to distinguish divorce from separation for this sample. To simplify the exposition in subsequent discussion, we will refer to both states as marital dissolution. Column 1 shows that about 11% of that sample had experienced a dissolution of their relationship. Because most parents married about 4 to 5 years before the baseline survey, they would have been married 7 to 8 years by Year Three. Previous research suggests that more than one-half of the marriages to women with young children that will ever dissolve are likely to dissolve by this time.⁶

We use the unmarried sample for the primary analysis in this paper that looks at the probability of marrying within three years of the child's birth. Column 2 shows that about 14% of unmarried parents had married by Year Three.⁷ Of those parents who were unmarried at the time of the birth, the majority of parents were living together (49%) or romantically involved, but living separately (35%). Only 16% of unmarried mothers had no romantic relationship with the child's father at the time of the child's birth.

Parents' Personal Characteristics at the Time of Their Child's Birth. Table 1 shows that mothers with a marital birth were about 5 years older than those who had a nonmarital birth (29

⁶ Women with a child born more than 7 months after marriage had an 8% probability of divorce within 3 years of marriage, 14% within 5 years, 26% within 10 years, and 36% within 15 years, with the probability of divorce after 15 years very low (http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_23/sr23_022.pdf, Table 21).

⁷ For both measures of marital transitions, we use women's reports of their relationship status, because the sample of mothers is more complete than that of fathers.

vs. 24). We include a dummy variable measuring whether the mother lived with both biological parents at age 15 as a proxy for whether their parents divorced -- about 66 % of married mothers compared to only 35% of unmarried mothers. African Americans are over-represented among families with nonmarital births (Ventura and Bachrach 2000) and have higher rates of divorce (Cherlin 1992; Ellwood and Jencks 2004), despite some recent convergence in the likelihood of divorce among African-Americans and whites (Teachman 2002). Our analysis treats parents' race and ethnicity both as a demographic characteristic and as a measure of homogamy. We include separate indicators for couples in which both partners are black, non-Hispanic (the reference category), both are white, non-Hispanic, both are Hispanic, and couples of mixed or other race/ethnic groups. We use parents' own reports of their race or ethnic status, and use mothers' reports of fathers' race/ethnicity for those men who were not in the survey. About one-fifth of married (20%) and unmarried parents (23%) were both Hispanic, and similar proportions were from different race or ethnic groups (19% vs. 17%). However, married parents in the study were more likely to be white (39% vs. 9%) and less likely to be black (22% vs. 51%) than unmarried parents.

We examine men's employment with a variable indicating whether the father was employed in the week before the baseline interview, according to mothers' reports. We also include a dummy variable when information about fathers' employment was not available. The majority of fathers in both groups were employed, but employment rates were higher among fathers who were married at the birth of their child (91%) compared to those who were unmarried (68%). We measured father's hourly wage at baseline for those fathers who reported this. For fathers who reported weekly, biweekly, monthly, or annual earnings, an hourly wage was calculated by dividing fathers' reports of average hours worked per week by the average

number of weeks worked per year. We predicted an hourly wage for fathers who did not report earnings based on their race, age (and age squared), educational characteristics, the metropolitan median service sector wage rate, and local unemployment rate. Married fathers had a higher wage at about \$16.90 per hour compared to unmarried fathers at about \$9.40 per hour.

Because mothers were not asked whether they were working the week prior to the birth, the variable measuring women's participation in the work force is based on whether or not they had earnings in the last year. We see that about 73% of married mothers and 68% of unmarried mothers were employed sometime during the 12 months preceding childbirth. A dummy variable is used to compare mothers who have attended college to those who report receiving a high school degree or less education (the reference category). On average, married mothers have higher levels of education than do unmarried parents, with 61% of married mothers reporting at least some college education compared to 24% of unmarried mothers.

We also include dichotomous measures of other individual characteristics which previous studies predict will influence early union transitions. About 52% of married mothers and 34% of unmarried mothers attended church at least several times each month, a characteristic which may be positively related to marriage and union stability. Previous research also points to multipartner fertility and other risk factors which may work in the opposite direction (Carlson, McLanahan and England 2004). We see that similar share of mothers and fathers had children with other partners as reported by mothers at the 12-18 follow-up, with unmarried parents about 2 ½ times more likely to report multipartner fertility than married parents. At the first follow-up survey, mothers reported that about 9% of married fathers and 35% of unmarried fathers had spent time in a correctional facility. A smaller proportion of mothers (2-3%) and fathers (3-6%) had substance use problems that interfered in their daily lives, as reported by mothers at baseline.

Parents' Relationship Characteristics at the Time of Their Child's Birth. Conflict in the relationship is captured by an index that sums mothers' responses to six questions asking how often she and the father argue about money, spending time together, sex, the pregnancy, drinking or drug use, and being faithful. Scores on this index range from 6, for mothers who report never arguing with the father about these issues, to 18, for mothers who report arguing often about each issue.⁸ We measure physical abuse with a variable from the one year follow-up interview that asks mothers whether they had been cut, bruised, or seriously hurt in a fight with the father and a variable from baseline that asks whether the father has hit or slapped them in an argument. Mothers are considered to have experienced abuse if they report violence at either wave.⁹ Unmarried mothers report only slightly higher levels of conflict with their child's father, but the reported incidence of abuse is higher for unmarried mothers (4% vs. 11%). We also include a question asking mothers whether couples visited together with friends in the last month to indicate positive social interactions and shared social networks. More married mothers reported visiting friends together (86%) than did unmarried mothers (68%).

Divorce Laws and Climate. To capture the climate of divorce in the parents' place of residence, we calculate the percent of females 18-44 who are divorced in each city (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). On average, 9% of women 18-44 were divorced in the 20 cities included in the Fragile Families data.¹⁰ We also include a measure of whether parents reside in a state with no fault divorce procedures that allow either party to initiate divorce unilaterally (about 45% of

⁸ Chronbachs' alpha for this index is .65. Factor analysis suggests there is one factor underlying the index.

⁹ Although the follow-up question is a more direct indicator of physical abuse, 17% of mothers (n = 814) had missing data on this variable. Therefore, we use both measures and create a dummy variable to indicate if mothers' responses were missing on both of these questions. A dummy variable is also included to indicate missing information about conflict.

¹⁰ The percent divorced in these cities ranges from 6% to 13%.

cases in the married sample)¹¹ and a dummy variable measuring whether parents live in a state with a presumption of joint custody (about 18% of the married sample).¹²

Empirical Strategy and Results

The analysis strategy follows a two stage procedure to examine how unmarried parents' risk of marital dissolution is related to the transition to marriage. The first step is to create an index that measures a women's probability of marital dissolution as a function of individual, partner, and relationship characteristics, and contextual measures of the legal and social climate relating to divorce in her place of residence. We can only observe a marital dissolution for women who marry, but we assume that unmarried women assess the likelihood of their own divorce by observing the experiences of married women with similar characteristics. Thus we begin by estimating a logistic regression to examine how personal and relationship characteristics are related to marital dissolution in the sample of parents who were married at the time of their child's birth. We also include state divorce laws and the percentage of women divorced in each city to capture contextual factors that might be expected to affect an individual's probability of marital dissolution, independent of individual and relationship characteristics.

In the second stage of the analysis, we use the estimated parameters from the first stage regression to calculate a dissolution propensity index for parents who were not married at the time of the birth. We then include this index in a regression estimating the probability of marriage. Individual and relationship characteristics are also included in the second stage marriage regressions, but we exclude the contextual divorce climate variables, because they

¹¹ We use the classification documented in Gruber (2000).

¹² See American Bar Association, Table 4: State Laws Regarding Joint Custody online available at: <http://www.abanet.org/media/factbooks/cht4.html>).

should only affect the likelihood of marriage indirectly through the dissolution propensity. By calculating the dissolution propensity as a function of observables, we eliminate the correlation between the actual dissolution propensity and the unobservables in the marriage equation.

Results from the first stage are presented in Appendix, Table A1. We find that individual characteristics of both partners significantly affect the probability of marital dissolution. In particular, the odds of couples dissolving their marriage within three years of their child's birth are significantly lower for mothers who are older and have more education, and the odds are higher when the father has been incarcerated.¹³ However, neither mothers' employment the year preceding the birth nor fathers' employment at the time of birth were significantly related to marital dissolution. This is perhaps not surprising for the sample of married fathers, because less than 10% of these men were unemployed. For mothers, education is probably a better indicator of their employment potential than employment in the last year, since this time period coincided with their pregnancy.

The characteristics of parents' relationships also matter for marital dissolution. We find that couples' likelihood of dissolving their marriage increases with greater levels of argument reported. Conversely, couples who report having visited with friends together in the last month, a positive indicator of relationship quality, are less likely to dissolve their relationships than other couples. Finally, measures intended to capture the policy and cultural climate of the respondent's place of residence were expected to affect dissolution propensities. We find that the odds of marital dissolution are significantly higher for couples who live in cities where

¹³ Although age at marriage is a better measure of the theoretical construct, mothers were not asked their age at marriage in two cities in the survey. Age at the birth of the child is positively correlated with age at marriage, but it is not a perfect proxy, because but mothers who delay their births or those with higher parity births will also be older.

divorce is more common, but we do not find evidence that state joint custody and no-fault divorce laws are strongly correlated with marital dissolution.

In the second stage of the analysis, we use the estimated parameters from the first stage to predict a dissolution propensity for parents who were not married at the time of the birth. Specifically, to calculate unmarried couples' probability of marital dissolution, we took the β 's from the logistic model predicting marital dissolution among married parents and multiplied them by the X variables that represent characteristics of individuals in the unmarried sample ($X\beta$). We then used the logistic probability formula to calculate the dissolution propensity: $P = 1/(1+e^{-X\beta})$.¹⁴ The predicted dissolution propensity variable for the never married sample has a mean value of .326, and ranges between .002 and .98, with observations skewed to the lower end of the distribution, indicating a lower dissolution propensity.¹⁵

We noted earlier that the mean characteristics of sample of parents who were married and those who were not married at their child's birth differ. However, the predicted propensities will be unbiased as long as there are no omitted variables in the regression predicting marital dissolution that are correlated with the included variables.¹⁶ Our analysis minimizes this potential problem by including measures of relationship quality and individual risk factors, which in many studies are not observable.¹⁷ Later we describe sensitivity analyses that reduce

¹⁴ This procedure is similar to switching regression models in the econometrics literature (Maddala 1983).

¹⁵ Unmarried mothers may assess their likelihood of divorce not only by looking at women who have had a marital birth but also at women who married after having a marital birth. We would expect the divorce propensity to have a similar effect in a sample that included only parents who married after their child's birth, and our models control for several observable characteristics to make the comparison group as similar as possible. However, we cannot be certain what the comparison group is for unmarried parents and acknowledge that the divorce propensity variable is measured with some error.

¹⁶ Possible misspecification includes both omitted variables that are not available in the data and non-linearities or interactions among variables that are included in the regression.

¹⁷ It is also important to note that the Fragile Families data were collected in such a way that the initially married sample might be used as a comparison group for some types of analyses. In particular, the sample of married mothers is drawn from the same cities and the same hospitals in the exact same time period as the unmarried mothers. Some unobservables may be related to an individual's location and to

the impact of one type of specification error by using a comparison groups that are more closely matched on observables.

Table 2 presents our main results from logistic regression models that estimate the impact of the predicted risk of marital dissolution and other variables on the probability that unmarried parents will marry within three years of their child's birth. Model 1 shows the simple bivariate relationship between marriage and the dissolution propensity, and model 2 includes only the parents' relationship status at the time of the birth of the child, which is a strong predictor of subsequent marriage. Because we expect the relationship status at birth to be correlated with dissolution propensities and with personal and relationship characteristics, models 3-5 include initial relationship status as a control. Note that models 4 and 5 also include some of the same measures of unmarried parents' personal and relationship characteristics as were included in the first stage to predict marital dissolution, because they are also expected to directly affect individuals' willingness to marry, as well as indirectly influencing that willingness through their effect on the dissolution propensity. Measures of the percent female divorced in each city, and divorce and custody laws, are the only variables from the first stage not included in the second stage because they are expected to be directly related to the likelihood of divorce and its cost, but not to the likelihood of marriage. We identify the independent effect of the dissolution risk index both through these exclusionary restrictions and by functional form.¹⁸

the social, economic, and other support institutions that are common to a given location. Although it is not a panacea, the sampling strategy used by Fragile Families minimizes the impact of unobservables that are due to location specific variables, and in some literature (e.g., the evaluation of job training programs), controlling for location has been found to be critical.

¹⁸ In additional analyses, we also included interactions between the predicted dissolution propensity and several variables that might be expected to increase mothers' sensitivity to divorce or increase their perception of the cost of divorce such as growing up in a disrupted household, religiosity, and parents' race/ethnic characteristics. Although our results suggest that mothers who attend religious services and couples who are white or of mixed race/ethnicity may be more sensitive to divorce, these interactions are

Table 2

Our results indicate that parents' risk of marital dissolution as measured by the dissolution propensity significantly and substantially decreases their odds of marriage even after controlling for partner and relationship characteristics. Looking across the columns, we see that the dissolution propensity is highly statistically significant in all models as parents' relationship, demographic, socioeconomic, and other characteristics are included. Because the impact of the dissolution propensity falls somewhat (the odds ratio moves closer to one) as other explanatory variables are added, this implies that the dissolution propensity is mediated, in part, by these indicators of the couples' relationship and partners' socio-economic characteristics. In the full model (Model 5), the effect of moving from zero risk to certain marital dissolution reduces the likelihood of marriage by 85%. To put this magnitude into perspective, our numbers imply that all else constant, an unmarried mother with a dissolution propensity that is one standard deviation above the mean would have a likelihood of marriage that was 3.4 percentage points lower than a mother with the mean dissolution propensity.¹⁹

Turning to the effect of other variables, in Model 4, we see important differences in the propensity to marry by couples' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. Couples in which both partners are white have about double the odds of marrying within three years of their child's birth than Black couples, whereas the odds are about 1.7 times higher for Hispanic and mixed race or ethnic couples. Marriage is also much more likely when fathers are employed at the time of the birth and have higher hourly wages. Note that these effects are present even after controlling for their indirect effects through the predicted dissolution propensity. Although

less strongly related to marriage than other variables in the models and do not attain statistical significance.

¹⁹ This number is calculated by converting the odds ratios into marginal probabilities and multiplying by the standard deviation of the dissolution propensity, .224.

marriage is positively related to mother's education, women's employment and educational characteristics do not significantly influence this transition after other variables are taken into account.

The results do not change notably in Model 5 which adds indicators of multipartner fertility, fathers' incarceration, substance use problems, conflict, abuse, shared activities, and religiosity. In the full model, we see that the dissolution propensity, couples' relationship status at the birth, their race/ethnic characteristics, fathers' employment and wages, and mothers' religious attendance are the best predictors of whether unmarried couples will marry within three years of having a child together.

Sensitivity Analysis

In further analysis, we examined whether it was appropriate to use a sample of initially married mothers who have different characteristics than unmarried mothers for the regression that generates the divorce propensity. One way to mitigate this problem is to restrict the initially married sample to those who are most similar to the initially unmarried sample, and use that restricted sample to estimate the regression that generates divorce probabilities. If the results using the full sample of initially married women are similar to the results using the restricted sample, then we can assume that any specification problems are not likely to be large. If the results are different, however, this suggests that our results may not generalize to those with more advantaged backgrounds.

To check the sensitivity of our results, we used several different criteria to create comparable samples of initially married and unmarried parents. For example we ran four different logit models to estimate the propensity of being in the initially unmarried sample. Each

model used a different subset of characteristics: a) all demographic, socio-economic, and relationship characteristics, b) all demographic and socio-economic characteristics c) race, age, education, and employment, or d) race and age. The samples of initially married and unmarried parents were then restricted to those which were most similar on propensity score matches from these logits, and these restricted samples were used for estimating the divorce and marriage regressions. In addition to matching the samples on different subsets of variables, we also examined propensity scores at different cut-offs (such as .4 and .5). Furthermore, as an alternative strategy to using a propensity score approach, we restricted the sample by doing an exact match on variables that had distributions which differed between the two samples, such as education. These sensitivity analyses show that the results in the restricted samples are very similar to those in full samples, particularly on our main variable of interest - the predicted probability of marital dissolution (results available upon request).

Discussion and Conclusions

Recent cohorts of adults grew up during a time when divorce was common in American society. Many young men and women have experienced the divorce of their own parents, and others have been exposed to divorce indirectly. Although divorce and marriage propensities are negatively correlated in aggregate U.S. time-series data, little prior research has investigated the connection between divorce and marital decisions holding constant other confounding determinants of marriage such as individual characteristics, those of the current partner, and the relationship quality. Results from Fragile Families data indicate that unmarried parents with a higher predicted probability of marital dissolution had significantly and substantially lower odds of marriage within three years of their child's birth. The magnitude of dissolution propensity

diminished only slightly and remained significant even after other factors highly associated with marriage, such as parents' demographic, socioeconomic, and relationship characteristics were taken into account. Our results indicate that the risk of dissolution works independently of these factors. In particular, since our dissolution index is also a function of the percent divorced in the respondent's city of residence, our results are consistent with the argument that the high prevalence of divorce has produced a fear of divorce, leading some unmarried parents of young children to delay or avoid marriage.

Because the necessary information to calculate divorce propensities is not available in other data sets, our analysis of marriage is restricted to the sample of initially unmarried parents in the Fragile Families study, and we are not able to test whether our results apply to unmarried individuals, more generally. However, our data has the important advantage of allowing us to assess the role of divorce expectations, holding characteristics of the specific partner and relationship quality constant. In a broader analysis of marriage decision of parents and non-parents, many respondents would not currently be in a relationship, and the relevant controls would be characteristics of potential partners, which are very difficult to capture with any specificity. In addition, our sample of unmarried parents is a group that is of significant academic and policy interest.

In light of a large body of evidence on the negative consequences of divorce, particularly for children (e.g., McLanahan and Sandefur 1994), an important goal of policies aimed at strengthening two-parent families has not only been to encourage marriage but also to prevent marital dissolution. For unmarried couples, this goal has often been advanced through marriage education and preparation programs that focus on building partners' relationship skills and, to a lesser extent, assessing their compatibility before marriage (Dion 2005). We suggest that new

policies aimed at strengthening marriage should consider the long-term viability of the marriages that unmarried parents would enter into since couples themselves seem to be selecting out of marriages that are most likely to end in divorce. In these high risk cases, supporting parents' choice to heed the warning signs of marital instability may often be more consistent with the objective of preventing divorce than encouraging marriage (Huston and Melz 2004).

One limitation of our study is that we can only observe couples' relationship transitions within three years of their child's birth. We would expect more couples to marry and to dissolve their relationships after this time. Another limitation is that these survey data do not allow us to distinguish couples that legally divorced, making it difficult to tease out the effects of laws regulating divorce in the regression results. It is possible that if the legal process for divorce was less adversarial, couples may be less hesitant to risk marriage. Future research should further examine how the legal climate for divorce influences couples' marital decisions. Although the stigma of divorce seems to have decreased, our findings suggest that unmarried parents' caution about marriage is related to a strong fear of divorce. Future research should also examine how widely these beliefs are shared by other young, unmarried adults in contemporary society who do not have children as well as the emergence of these beliefs.

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Table 1. Sample Means by Marital Status at Child's Birth

	Married at Child's Birth	Unmarried at Child's Birth
Marriage Dissolved within 3 Years (%)	11.4	---
Married within 3 Years (%)	---	13.5
Cohabiting with Child's Father (%)	---	48.9
Romantically Involved Child's Father, Not Cohabiting (%)	---	35.4
No Romantic Relationship with Child's Father (%)	---	15.6
Mother's Age	29.3 (5.7)	23.8 (5.5)
Mother Lived with Both Biological Parents at Age 15 (%)	65.5	35.4
Both White (%)	39.1	9.4
Both Black (%) (Omitted)	21.9	51.4
Both Hispanic (%)	19.9	22.5
Mixed Race or Ethnic Couple (%)	19.0	16.6
Mother Has at Least Some College Education (%)	61.1	23.6
Mother Employed in Last 12 Months (%)	73.1	68.3
Father Currently Employed (%)	91.0	68.4
Father's Hourly Wage	16.9 (14.3)	9.4 (8.1)
Mother Has Children with Another Partner	15.5	41.3
Father Has Children with Another Partner	18.2	42.0
Father Has Been Incarcerated	8.9	35.2
Mother Has Substance Use Problem	1.5	3.3
Father Has Substance Use Problem	2.5	6.1
Conflict Index	7.9 (1.8)	8.8 (2.4)
Mother Abused by Father (%)	3.6	10.7
Mother and Father Visited Friends Together in Last Month (%)	86.0	67.5
Mother Attends Religious Services Several Times a Month (%)	51.7	34.2
Percent Female Divorced in City (%)	8.6 (1.8)	
No Fault Divorce (%)	45.3	
Presumption of Joint Custody (%)	17.7	
Sample Size	1009	2994

Note: Standard deviations are reported in parentheses. All variables are measured at baseline except for marriage and marital dissolution which are measured 36 months after the birth, incarceration and children with other partners which are measured at 12-18 months, and abuse which is based on baseline and retrospective reports at 12-18 months. We generally use mothers' reports, occasionally supplemented by fathers' reports.

Table 2. Odds Ratios from Logistic Regressions of Determinants of Marriage at Year Three for Those Unmarried at the Birth of the Child

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Predicted Probability of Divorce (PDIVHAT)	.02 (.000)		.04 (.000)	.08 (.000)	.15 (.045)
Cohabiting with Child's Father ^a		12.17 (.000)	8.0 (.000)	7.23 (.000)	6.95 (.000)
Romantically Involved with Child's Father, Not Cohabiting ^a		3.95 (.000)	3.14 (.000)	3.38 (.001)	3.21 (.001)
Mother's Age				.99 (.276)	.99 (.349)
Both White ^a				2.10 (.000)	2.30 (.000)
Both Hispanic ^a				1.72 (.000)	1.90 (.000)
Mixed Race or Ethnic Couple ^a				1.68 (.002)	1.78 (.001)
Mother Has at Least Some College Education ^a				1.12 (.427)	1.22 (.231)
Mother Employed in Last 12 Months ^a				1.03 (.827)	1.03 (.802)
Father Currently Employed ^a				1.93 (.000)	1.77 (.002)
Father's Hourly Wage				1.02 (.01)	1.02 (.005)
Mother Lived with Both Biological Parents at Age 15 ^a				.90 (.378)	.91 (.468)
Mother Has Children with Another Partner ^a					1.20 (.174)
Father Has Children with Another Partner ^a					.92 (.600)
Father Has Been Incarcerated ^a					.91 (.608)
Mother Has Substance Use Problem ^a					1.07 (.863)
Father Has Substance Use Problem ^a					.68 (.324)
Conflict Index					.99 (.846)
Mother Abused by Father ^a					1.01 (.958)
Mother and Father Visited Friends Together in Last Month ^a					1.05 (.756)
Mother Attends Religious Services at Least Several Times a Month ^a					1.31 (.033)
Likelihood Ratio	167.32 (.000)	182.33 (.000)	270.64 (.000)	327.10 (.000)	338.23 (.000)
Pseudo R-Squared	.07	.07	.11	.14	.14
Sample Size	2994				

Note: p-values are in parentheses. All variables are measured at baseline except for incarceration and children with other partners which are measured at 12-18 months and abuse which is based on baseline and retrospective reports at the 12-18 month survey. We generally use mothers' reports, occasionally supplemented by fathers' reports. In addition to the above variables, the regression model includes dummy variables that represent missing data for fathers' employment and incarceration, children with other partners, substance use, relationship conflict, and abuse that are not shown in the table.

^a Dichotomous variable

Appendix

Table A1. Odds Ratios from Logistic Regressions of the Determinants of Marital Dissolution at Year Three for Those Married at the Birth of the Child

Explanatory Variables	Odds Ratios	P-value
Mother's Age	.95	.021
Both White ^a	.74	.379
Both Hispanic ^a	.66	.241
Mixed Race or Ethnic Couple ^a	1.01	.978
Mother Has at Least Some College Education ^a	.49	.005
Mother Employed in Last 12 Months ^a	1.05	.850
Father Currently Employed ^a	1.40	.400
Father's Hourly Wage	.99	.240
Mother Lived with Both Biological Parents at Age 15 ^a	.81	.375
Mother Has Children with Another Partner ^a	1.24	.458
Father Has Children with Another Partner ^a	1.60	.099
Father Has Been Incarcerated ^a	1.89	.046
Mother Has Substance Use Problem ^a	.75	.710
Father Has Substance Use Problem ^a	1.40	.559
Conflict Index	1.24	.000
Mother Abused by Father ^a	1.49	.372
Mother and Father Visited Friends Together in Last Month ^a	.55	.036
Mother Attends Religious Services at Least Several Times a Month ^a	.72	.152
Percent Female Divorced in City	1.19	.045
No Fault Divorce ^a	.69	.214
Presumption of Joint Custody ^a	.60	.203
Likelihood Ratio	128.76	.000
Pseudo R-squared	.18	
Sample Size	1009	

Note: All variables are measured at baseline except for incarceration and children with other partners which are measured at 12-18 months and abuse which is based on baseline and retrospective reports at the 12-18 month survey. We generally use mothers' reports, occasionally supplemented by fathers' reports. In addition to the above variables, the regression model includes dummy variables that represent missing data for fathers' employment and incarceration, children with other partners, substance use, relationship conflict, and abuse that are not shown in the table.

^a Dichotomous variable