

## **When marriages die: Premarital and early marriage precursors to divorce**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reviews a series of studies addressing the question of whether loss of love and affection early in marriage and long-term marital instability have roots in couples' premarital relationships. The findings summarized in this paper suggest that loss of love and affection early in marriage and later marital instability can be traced back to couples' courtship experiences; findings also suggest that the courtship dynamics of couples who are likely to divorce early in marriage are different from those who are likely to divorce later in marriage. Also, compared to couples who remained stably married over a period of 13 years, couples who divorced had courtships characterized by more extremes regarding the passion and pace of their courtship. Implications of the findings for premarital education are presented.

**Keywords:** courtship, dating, divorce, marriage, premarital education

## Introduction

Most people in the United States marry a loving, affectionate, and caring partner (Huston, Niehuis, and Smith 2000; Simpson, Campbell, and Berscheid 1986). Yet, nearly 50 percent of these first-time married couples will one day find themselves divorced (Kreider and Fields 2002).

Working under the assumption that "The basic cause of divorce ... is faulty mate selection and inadequate preparation for a companionship type of marriage" (Waller 1938, 247), social scientists and mental health professionals have tried for many decades to identify factors during courtship that predict marital stability. (For reviews of the literature, see Cate and Lloyd 1992; Holman 2001; Larson and Holman 1994; and Niehuis, Huston, and Rosenband 2006). Under which circumstances do people make bad choices when selecting a marriage partner? Are dating partners who (a) are young, (b) fall in love quickly and deeply, (c) become sexually intimate with one another early in their relationship, (d) feel very passionately about one another, (e) idealize each other, and (f) commit to marriage soon, more likely than others to maintain an affectionate, loving marital bond? Or, are such couples more prone to have their romance dissipate early in marriage and to eventually become divorced? In the present paper, we report the findings of a series of research studies that have addressed these questions. Most of these studies are based on one major research project. Where appropriate, we will point out any discrepancies between our research findings and those of other studies.

In the next sections we will approach the topic of premarital and early marital predictors of divorce in a reversed order. We will start out by presenting research that shows that it is possible to predict whether couples will remain married or become divorced within the first 13 years of their marriage based on the experiences couples bring into their marriage and the changes they experience during the first two years of marriage. Next, we will differentiate between those couples who divorced relatively early and those who divorced relatively late, and we will provide a portrait of their courtships and early marriage relationships. Because changes early in marriage are predictive of subsequent divorce, we will also review research in which these changes are traced back to couples' courtship experiences. Finally, using data from a different sample, we will provide additional information about the role that idealization and passion play in dating relationships, concluding with implications of the findings presented here for pre-marriage education.

## The prognostic importance of dying love and affection

Waller, a pioneer in marriage research, suggested that it is the erosion of spouses' feelings of love and the waning of their affection that cause divorce (Waller 1938). This researcher assumed that courting couples are generally blissful, optimistic lovers who, in order to sustain their

romance, draw attention to their desirable qualities, suppress thoughts and behaviors that might weaken their romance, and try to see the best in the other person. After they are married, however, spouses may no longer be as motivated to "put their best foot forward" to impress their marriage partners; moreover, the intimacy of marriage makes sustaining such idealized images difficult. When idealized images give way to more realistic ones and the intense romance of early marriage weakens, as it usually does, marriage partners may be disappointed by the changes.

Waller's (1938) ideas about the effects of disappointment and disenchantment on marital stability were explored by research following 168 newlywed couples over a period of 13 years (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, and George 2001). At yearly intervals over the first two years of marriage, spouses were asked how much they loved one another, how often they showed affection toward one another (e.g., saying "I love you," complimenting each other, and initiating sexual relations), and how responsive they thought their partner was to their needs. Couples who remained married over a period of at least 13 years (60 percent of the sample) experienced very few changes over the first two years of marriage in their feelings of love for their spouse, the amount of affection they expressed toward their spouse, and the extent to which they perceived their spouse as responsive to their needs. In contrast, those who divorced (27 percent of the sample) experienced steep declines in affection and love over the first two years of their marriage, and came to see each other as much less responsive to each other's needs.

Thus, we can conclude from this research that a decline in love, affection, and the perception of one's partner's responsiveness during the first two years of marriage is predictive of divorce. But is it possible to predict how soon couples will divorce? Using data from the same sample, Huston and his colleagues (2001; Huston, Niehuis, and Smith 2000; Niehuis and Huston 1998; Niehuis and Huston 2000a) detected different courtship and newlywed dynamics between those who divorced earlier in their marriage, the Early Exiters, and those who divorced later in their marriage, the Delayed-Action Divorcers.

### **The Early Exiters**

Couples whose marriages lasted more than two but less than seven years were termed Early Exiters (Huston, Niehuis, and Smith 2000). When the Early Exiters married, they were not particularly in love or affectionate toward one another. Perhaps because they realized that it was impossible to improve an unpromising relationship, their marriages began to unravel soon after their wedding.

The courtship experiences of the Early Exiters suggest that these couples were aware of some of the problems in their relationship. They were less in love than most courting couples (Niehuis and Huston 2000a). They also had extraordinarily long courtships and, unlike most couples who

quickly enter into a regular dating relationship, they often dated each other casually for a long period of time. In fact, by the time the Early Exiters agreed to date each other exclusively, the Delayed-Action Divorcers were already engaged (Huston 1999; Huston, Niehuis, and Smith 2000; Niehuis and Huston 1998).

One can imagine partners in an Early Exiter couple dating for a long time, not being particularly in love with one another or happy with their relationship. This couple might proceed toward marriage - even though problems in the relationship are clearly evident - because close friends are getting married or because the partners have already invested a great deal into their relationship. Partners in an Early Exiter couple may also have had an on-off relationship, going back and forth between dating each other exclusively and having a break from one another, possibly casually dating others in the meantime. They likely would go back to dating each other exclusively hoping that their relationship might improve or fearing that they would not be married if they let go.

### **The Delayed-Action Divorcers**

Couples who had been married at least seven years before their divorce were called the Delayed-Action Divorcers (Huston, Niehuis, and Smith 2000). Like those of the Early Exiters, the relationships of the Delayed-Action Divorcers also began to unravel over the first two years of marriage, but their marriages were much more promising at the outset. Unlike the Early Exiters, these couples entered marriage on a high note. They were deeply in love and highly affectionate when they entered marriage, but like the Early Exiters, they became considerably less affectionate and loving over the first two years of marriage compared to couples who would remain stably married. They only reluctantly gave up on their marriage long after their romance had faded.

The courtships of Delayed-Action Divorcers were particularly romantic compared to those of the Early Exiters and stably married couples (Huston 1999; Niehuis and Huston 1998). They were deeply in love and usually courted for a relatively short (less than 12 months) period of time (Huston, Niehuis, and Smith 2001). These couples rarely cohabited, but they had the highest percentage of premarital pregnancies - with more than half of the women in this group being pregnant on their wedding day (Huston 1999). Interestingly, their commitment to becoming married also wavered relatively often, given their short courtship (Niehuis and Huston 2000b).

One can imagine the partners in a Delayed-Action Divorcer couple to be two people who are passionately attracted to each other, possibly because of superficial characteristics such as good looks. These two people may get along well because they do not address or challenge things that they may not like about each other. They may profess their love toward each other within a couple of months of meeting and progress toward exclusivity and a sexual relationship within a

very short time. When problems arise, the partners might convince each other that the issues have little significance, or they might ignore the problems altogether. The two may quickly move towards an engagement, perhaps because the female partner became pregnant, and closer to marriage. In fact, one of the individuals may be pushing the other to get married, and not examining the reasons for the delay on the part of the other person.

### **What predicts steep declines in love and affection early in marriage?**

Given that steep declines in love and affection early in marriage are indicators of divorce, what courtship experiences predict couples' loss of love and decline of affection early in marriage? Early scientists, such as Waller (1938), suggested that dating partners who feel a strong sense of enchantment, who have an idealized perception of their mate, and who are apt to put their "best foot forward" suppress negative emotions or behaviors which might undermine their romantic feelings for each other (Huston, Niehuis, and Smith 2001; Waller 1938). They, therefore, may become disappointed in and disenchanted with their partner early in marriage.

In line with this thinking, Niehuis and Huston (2000a, 2002) found that courtship patterns foreshadow the loss of love and affection during the early years of marriage. Affectionate behavior early in marriage declined for both husbands and wives when partners, especially husbands, were very young when the couple got married, and for the husband only, when he felt little ambivalence about the relationship before marriage. Feelings of love early in marriage declined for the husbands only when the development of couples' commitment to marry was very turbulent and when the couple experienced frequent conflict in their premarital relationship. Feelings of love early in marriage declined for wives only when they felt ambivalent about their husbands and their relationship prior to marriage.

Niehuis and her colleague (2002) also found some seemingly contradictory findings. Partners were likely to experience a steeper decline in affection during the first two years of marriage when the couple dated for either a shorter or longer than average (27 months) period of time and when partners had a courtship driven forward by either extreme or little passion (assessed by how quickly partners fell in love with each other, how soon they had sexual relations, and how soon they were certain that they wanted to marry one another; Niehuis and Huston 2005). These seemingly contradictory findings suggest that loss of affection early in marriage results from two different courtship experiences.

In Courtship Experience 1, some premarital partners may blindly rush into marriage, because they have very passionate but short courtships. These couples may experience loss of affection early in marriage because of discoveries about their partner and the quality of their relationship.

In Courtship Experience 2, premarital partners seem to have been aware of problems in their premarital relationship as indicated by partners having a very long courtship characterized by very little passion. For these couples a crushed hope of a better relationship after marriage may be the primary reason for loss of affection early in marriage.

It has also been argued that many couples may face disappointment and disenchantment in marriage because they fail to make a connection between faults detected in the partner and the meaning of these faults for the quality of their future relationship (Waller 1938). More than 60 years ago, Waller made a statement that continues to be relevant today: "Many young people of today seem to be perfectly aware of the imperfections of those whom they love," but they fail to recognize "the meaning of those faults. . . . The idea is admitted to consciousness, but its emotional meaning is excluded" (1938, 202).

Some support for this notion comes from the finding that for those couples who experienced divorce, regardless of when they divorced, the level of premarital conflict they reported was unrelated to the intensity of love during courtship (Huston, Niehuis, and Smith 2001). In contrast, among those who would remain married, premarital conflict and love were strongly and inversely associated (Huston, Niehuis, and Smith 2001). Thus, compared to the couples who would subsequently divorce, stably married couples' feelings about each other during courtship seemed to be more grounded in the day-to-day reality of their relationship.

### **What predicts feelings of passion in dating partners?**

Both high and low levels of passion predicted greater loss of love and affection during the first two years of marriage. But what predicts whether people experience a great deal or very little passion during courtship? According to social scientists, passion is likely rooted, at least in part, in the idealization of one's partner (Sternberg 1988). Some research also suggests that people who experience strong emotions or who are otherwise under stress may be particularly vulnerable to becoming involved in a passionate romance (Hatfield 1988). Learning new information about a partner is a process that can be at once delightful and stressful. How do partners deal with new information, and what effect does it have upon their relationship, especially if some of this information is negative? Will it influence the degree to which they idealize their partner and the extent to which they feel passion for this person?

Using a sample of 82 college students in dating relationships, a recent study (Niehuis 2006) found that idealization of the partner predicted passion in dating partners. That is, people who idealized their dating partner were more likely to experience passion than those who did not idealize their partner. Whether people idealized their partner was a function of the dating partner's age. Younger partners were more likely to idealize each other than older partners. Idealization was also a function of how people processed information about the partner.

Idealization was higher when the beliefs about the partner were relatively negative and mentally kept separate from positive knowledge about the partner. This suggests that people with relatively high negative information about the partner may manage to keep this negative information relatively isolated (Showers and Zeigler-Hill 2004), possibly because they have accepted it or become resigned to it, or because they harbor hope that some of these negative partner characteristics will change in the future.

## Conclusions

The findings presented here suggest that loss of love and affection early in marriage, which have been found to be predictive of later divorce (Huston, Niehuis, and Smith 2001), have their roots in couples' premarital relationships. Given the Early Exiters' low levels of love toward their partner and their extremely long courtships, we have to conclude that these couples knew that their premarital relationship was seriously troubled, but that these couples married despite these problems.

The picture we get of the Delayed-Action Divorcers is one in which both partners seem to follow the romantic ideal that "love conquers all." While these couples experienced problems during courtship (as expressed by the large number of changes in the chance of marriage), both partners seemed to have been so infatuated that they did not realize they were having these problems. In fact, this group of couples had the least consensus about the course of commitment. This group, then, did not seem to be communicating very well about the course of their premarital relationship; instead, they were individually propelled through a short, sweet courtship that left little room for intimate knowledge of one another. Other research, too, has indicated that some couples planning to get married might be blinded by romance and might focus on the wedding rather than the marriage (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, and Willoughby 2004).

Finally, we can form a picture of the stably married couples as being more realistic and moderate in their feelings and behaviors toward their partner and of having a better sense of where they stand in their relationship and as to where their relationship is headed than either of the two groups of divorced couples (Huston, Niehuis, and Smith 2000). To the extent that loss of affection and love early in marriage predict divorce, the findings presented here also suggest that extreme feelings of passion (either very high or low levels) and pace of courtship (very short versus very long courtships) are predictors of divorce, and that moderate feelings of passion (Niehuis and Huston 2005) and an average length of courtship may be characteristic of stably married couples (Niehuis and Huston 2000a). Moreover, dating couples who marry at an average age (men 24 and women 21 years old) and who idealize their partner only somewhat, may be less likely to experience extremely high or low levels of passion during courtship (Niehuis 2006), subsequent loss of love and affection early in marriage (Niehuis and Huston 2005), and

ultimately divorce (Huston et al. 2001). In other words, moderate courtships, though they may seem mundane, may lead to longer lasting marriages.

### **Implications for premarital education**

The findings reported in this paper support previous research that showed that premarital success and failure can be predicted from couples' premarital relationships (for reviews of this literature see Holman 2001; Larson and Holman 1994; Niehuis et al. 2006). Thus, couples planning to get married may benefit from information that may help them have stable marriages. The findings described in this paper about extremes in courtship patterns could be included in premarital education programs. Couples might profit from being made aware that extremes regarding passion and pace of the courtship are not necessarily conducive to marital stability. Rather, extremes in these areas might indicate that partners contemplating marriage have not optimally explored those dynamics of their relationship that likely have implications for subsequent marital problems. Couples who fall into the extremes might be encouraged in premarital education to communicate about their strengths and challenges in greater depth.

The research presented here also suggests that professionals providing premarital education may want to pay particular attention to signs of idealization in the couples and to help those idealizing individuals examine their partner and their relationship more closely. While it may not be possible to change how deeply and passionately people feel about their partner, it is possible to help dating partners have a more realistic perception of one another and their relationship.

Helping partners perceive one another in a more realistic light could be accomplished by providing activities that would give couples opportunities to talk about problem areas. Couples may also be encouraged to take one of several marital inventories such as *Prepare-Enrich* (Life Innovations, Inc.) and *Relate* (Relate Institute). These inventories allow couples to better understand the strengths and challenges in their relationships. Couples receive feedback on their results, which can then be used by the partners to talk with each other and with a clergy person, educator, or other professional about potential problems in the relationship. The results can also stimulate thought and discussion as to how these problems may be addressed in ways that enhance, rather than cause, problems for the couple. *Prepare-Enrich* and *Relate* would be useful in that they identify potential problem areas that may come up in the future such as raising children, difficulties with finances, or issues with in-laws.

As the research presented here shows, premarital conflict is a behavioral pattern that exerts its influence both during courtship and during marriage. Many marriage preparation programs, such as PREP (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) (Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg 1994) address problem areas and try to teach couples how to deal effectively with



conflict during courtship and, with hope, later on in marriage. The findings presented here support the idea that it would be useful to address premarital conflict in such programs.

Information about courtship issues may benefit many couples planning marriage, and may be especially relevant and timely for young people in high school who are just beginning to have and understand romantic relationships. During this time young couples might be easily enticed into relationships based upon passion and romantic ideas about marriage. Their cognitive skills are not likely to be developed to the point where they can abstractly think about the future and may get engaged or married thinking passion is all one needs for a stable marriage.

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