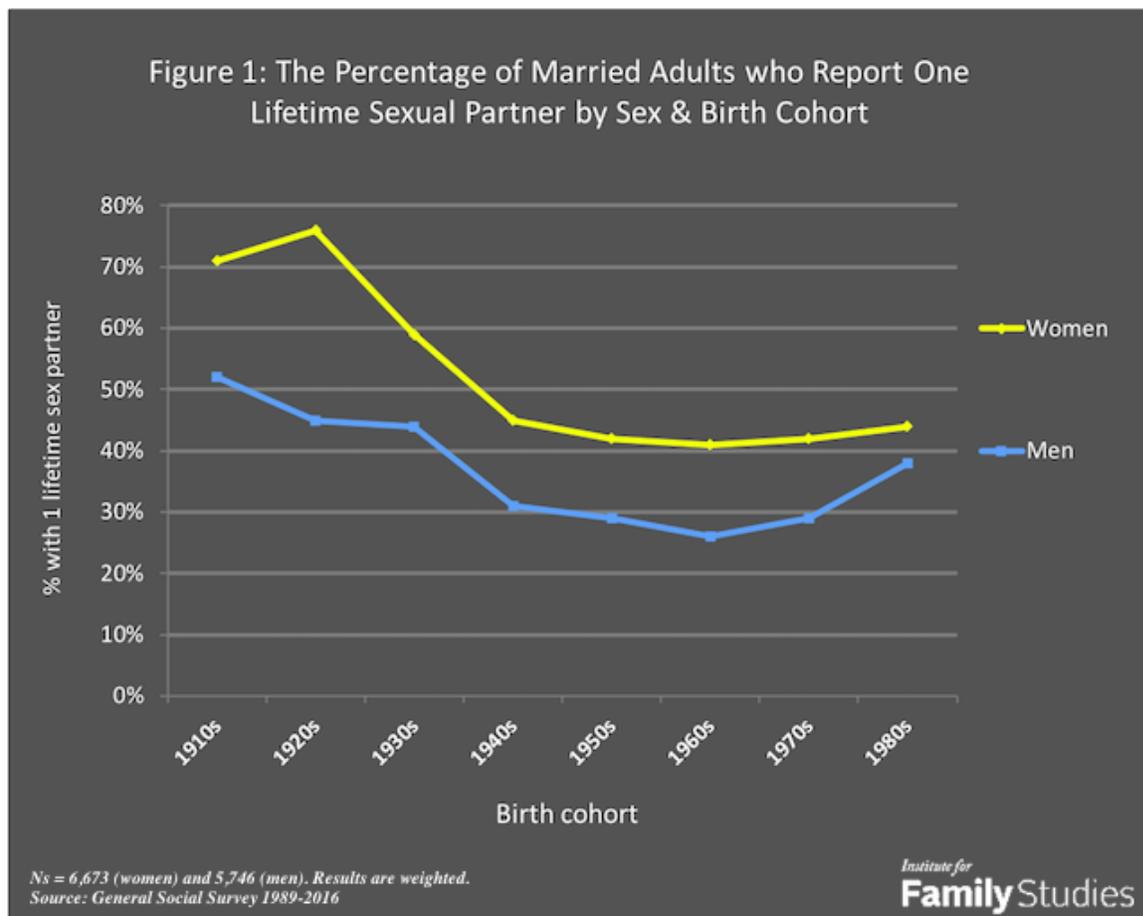# Does Sexual History Affect Marital Happiness?

by Nicholas H. Wolfinger, @NickWolfinger

The 1960s changed premarital sex. Prior to the sexual revolution, unmarried heterosexual sex partners tended to marry each other (sometimes motivated by a shotgun pregnancy); in more recent decades, first sex usually does not lead to marriage. Figure 1 shows how the odds of having only one lifetime sex partner have declined over the twentieth century for married Americans. The biggest declines occurred for people born between the 1920s and the 1940s, the latter of whom came of age during the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Since then, the chances of having only one lifetime sex partner (or, less often, marrying as a virgin) have held steady for married women at around 40%, and have actually inched up for the past couple of cohorts of married men. This is consistent with broader trends in men's sexual behavior. The 40% figure is similar to what I found using a different data set (the National Survey of Family Growth) for women marrying before the start of the new millennium (the number is somewhat lower for more recent marriages).

Figure 1: The Percentage of Married Adults who Report One Lifetime Sexual Partner by Sex & Birth Cohort

Ns = 6,673 (women) and 5,746 (men). Results are weighted.
Source: General Social Survey 1989-2016

How have our marriages been affected? In an IFS blog post from two years ago, I wrote about the relationship between premarital sex partners and the probability of divorce. Survey respondents who tied the knot as virgins had the lowest divorce rates, but beyond that, the relationship between sexual biography and marital stability was less clear. Having multiple partners generally doesn't increase the odds of divorce any more than having just a few does so.

The current post extends this research by examining the relationship between premarital sex partners and marital happiness. The obvious prediction for many IFS blog readers may well be that multiple premarital sex partners leads to unhappy marriages, but the relationship probably isn't that clear-cut. Marital happiness and divorce aren't always as intertwined as they might seem. A clarifying example is the family demography of the Great Depression. Pervasive financial hardship made marriages less happy, yet the divorce rate fell because divorce and single living seemed unaffordable. A high-conflict but intact family of origin increases the odds of having a disputatious marriage but not the likelihood of divorce. All this research suggests that the effects of one's premarital sexual biography on marital happiness may not closely follow the findings outlined in my previous post.

Previous research indeed suggests a complex story between premarital sex partners and marital quality. Psychologists Galena K. Rhoades and Scott M. Stanley found that the study respondents who had sex with other people prior to marriage reported lower-quality unions compared to couples who slept just with each other. Multiple sex partners prior to marriage reduced marital quality for women, but not men. Along similar lines, sociologist Jay Teachman showed that premarital sex between future spouses didn't make divorce more likely, but sex with other people did. A study from the 1980s reported similar findings.

Rhoades and Stanley offer two explanations for this finding, one empirically demonstrable and one speculative. Their data show that premarital sex sometimes leads to premarital fertility, and women (but not men) who have children from other relationships have lower-quality relationships. On the speculative side is their notion that having multiple partners increases awareness of spousal alternatives. It's evidence for this proposition that the divorce rate increases in regions with more single people; in other words, we're always willing to consider alternatives to our current mate. By implication, our marriages suffer when we make more comparisons.

What's missing from these studies is an exploration that considers the effects of a full range of premarital sexual activity on marital happiness using national data. I look at almost 30 years of the General Social Survey, an annual or biennial survey dating back to 1972. Starting in 1989, respondents were asked detailed questions about their sexual biographies.[1] My data analysis explores how sexual history affects marital happiness, measured with a variable that contrasts very happy marriages with all others.

Overall, 64% of respondents report very happy marriages (only about 3% say their marriages aren't too happy; the balance have "pretty happy" unions). Also, most Americans have less exciting sexual histories than the media would lead us to believe. The median American woman born in the 1980s has had three sex partners in her lifetime. The median man has had six partners, but only four if he's a four-year college graduate.

Table 1 shows how a women's sexual biography affects the happiness of her marriage.[2] The first column includes the baseline estimates. Women who've only slept with their spouses are, at 65%, most likely to report very happy marriages. Thereafter, there's a decline that's statistically-significant but modest in magnitude. The lowest odds of marital happiness, 52% in the baseline model, accord to women who've had six-to-10 lifetime sexual partners. Women who've had 11 or more lovers are a bit more likely to report happy marriages at 57 percent.

Table 1. Women's Number of Lifetime Sexual Partners and the Chances of Being "Very Happy" in One's Marriage.

	Baseline	+ divorce	+ SES	+ religion
1 partner	64%	64%	65%	65%
2 partners	60%	60%	60%	60%
3 partners	61%	61%	61%	61%
4 partners	54%	53%	53%	54%
5 partners	58%	57%	56%	57%
6-10 partners	52%	51%	50%	51%
11-20 partners	59%	57%	55%	56%
21+ partners	57%	55%	54%	55%

Source: 1989-2016 General Social Survey; N = 6,471

⬛ = not statistically significantly different from "1 partner" at the p < .05 level   *Institute for* **Family** Studies

The second, third, and fourth columns of Table 1 introduce a variety of covariates intended to account for the relationship between sexual history and marital happiness. The second column includes a measure of whether survey respondents have dissolved previous marriages; in other words, whether or they're in first or higher order marriages. The third column adds two measures of socioeconomic status, education and inflation-adjusted family income. The fourth column contains two measures of religiosity, denomination and frequent church attendance. None of these variables has an appreciable effect on the relationship between sexual background and marital happiness.

Table 2 shows how men's sexual biographies affect their marital happiness. As for women, men who report only one sexual partner in their lifetime are more likely to report very happy marriages. The benefits of one partner are slightly greater for men than for women: according to the baseline results, 71% of men with one partner are very happy in their relationship. This drops to 65% for men who report two or more sex partners. The happiness penalty for additional partners is modest, only a few percentage points. Adjusting for differences in marital history, socioeconomic status, and religion make little difference.

Table 2. Men's Number of Lifetime Sexual Partners and the Chances of Being "Very Happy" in One's Marriage.

	Baseline	+ divorce	+ SES	+ religion
1 partner	71%	71%	73%	72%
2 partners	65%	65%	64%	64%
3 partners	64%	65%	64%	64%
4 partners	63%	63%	62%	62%
5 partners	60%	60%	58%	59%
6-10 partners	62%	62%	62%	63%
11-20 partners	58%	57%	58%	59%
21+ partners	59%	59%	57%	59%

Source: 1989-2016 General Social Survey
N = 5,652. All differences from "1 partner" are statistically significant.   *Institute for* **Family** Studies

To better visualize the results in Table 1, I've taken the percentages from the full models for men and women—the models including controls for marital background, socioeconomic status, and religion—and plotted them together in Figure 1. This figure makes clear that the difference between having one and more than one, lifetime sex partner is most consequential in predicting marital quality. For men, there aren't statistically significant differences in marital quality between men who have two partners and more than two. That is the trend for women too, with two exceptions: female respondents with four partners or 6-10 partners have significantly lower odds of very happy marriages compared to those with two partners. It's not clear why these two groups of women defy the broader trend, but it should be noted that the percentage differences involved aren't great.