

Living Happily Ever After: Marriage Under the Microscope

By Karlyn Bowman

How happy is your marriage? If you're like most married Americans, probably "very" or "pretty happy"—at least it should be, according to results from the latest National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey (NORC).

For 25 years, NORC has been regularly asking married people whether they are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy with their marriages. The results have been positive and stable. In no year have even 5% of married folk described their unions as "not too happy." Male-female differences in perceptions of wedded bliss are generally small. In NORC's latest offering, 64% of men and women described their marriages as very happy (see page 38). Lest readers think that the wording of the NORC question inclines people to a particularly rosy view of their marriages, results from other questions corroborate these findings. On several occasions over the past decade, ABC News in conjunction with the *Washington Post* and, separately, CBS News have asked a four-part question about satisfaction with marriage. In each iteration, more than 80% have said they are very satisfied with their marriages. In the 1997 ABC News/*Washington Post* question, 90% pronounced themselves very satisfied with their marriages, and 8% fairly satisfied.

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Marriage—A “Wellness” Elixir

Married people also appear to be happier about life than their non-married counterparts. Data on page # compare married people with those currently divorced and never married in the 1970s, the 1980s, and 1990-1998 in terms of general happiness. In each decade, married men and women were happier than those who were divorced or never married. The relationship between marriage and happiness appears consistently across nations. Using data from the 1991 World Values Study, Steven Stack and J. Ross Eshleman found that in 16 of 17 industrialized nations (Northern Ireland was the exception), marital status was significantly related to happiness.¹

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Reinforcing this picture of substantial contentment in marriage are a handful of questions that ask married people whether they would marry the same person again. In Gallup questions asked almost 50 years apart, majorities said they would marry the same person again. In both years, roughly 30% said they probably would. Only about 10% were willing to say they might not. In questions that ask for a straight up-or-down response, roughly 85% have said they would do it all over again.

A 1995 CBS News exploration of attitudes toward marriage found that 56% said their marriages were better than their parents' marriages, 36% the same, and only 3% worse. This is one of the few questions in this review that produced a sizable gender gap. Women were much more likely than men (63 to 49%) to say their marriages were better. Men didn't necessarily view their marriages as worse, instead more of them than married women felt their marriages were about the same as their parents' (43 to 29%).

These views of marital bliss exist side-by-side with long-standing belief that the institution of marriage is weaker today than in the past. Hardly anyone thinks it is stronger (see page 40). A Roper Starch Worldwide question reveals growing pessimism about “the institution of marriage and the family.” In 1974, 57% were optimistic and 19% pessimistic. When that question was repeated in 1997, 49% were optimistic, and 31% pessimistic. In both years, about two in ten were uncertain. When asked in 1995 by CBS News about most people's marital expectations, Americans were pessimistic. Fifty-five percent said most people who get married expect that they will divorce sooner or later, 36% that marriage would last forever. Although there is tentative evidence that the divorce rate in the United States is leveling off, one out of every two marriages still breaks up. The United States, which liberalized divorce laws before many other western nations, has the highest divorce rate in the Western world.³ About 10% of the US population (19 million adults) are currently divorced; around a quarter have been divorced at some time.

Over the past quarter century, attitudes about the easy availability of divorce have hardened somewhat. In NORC's 1974 question, 32% said it should be easier to split up, and 42% that divorce should be harder to obtain. In 1998, 23% said it should be easier to get a divorce, and a bare majority, 52%, harder (see page 39).

Everyday Life

'Til Death Do Us Part?'

Of course, since vows were first exchanged, infidelity has been a primary reason for marital dissolution. Perhaps surprisingly, pollsters have explored this topic since the early days of polling, though their approach in the early years seems positively quaint compared to many of the questions asked as the story of President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky's relationship unfolded. In 1998 the pace of these inquiries accelerated considerably as did the poll scrutiny of the Clinton marriage.

In the polls that ask about what makes a good marriage, sexual fidelity ranks at the top or pretty close. Its importance can be seen in the strong views Americans have about extramarital relationships. If anything, the data suggest that an already conservative public is becoming even more so. In 1973, when NORC asked about sexual relations with someone other than their marriage partner, a whopping 69% said they were always wrong, 15% almost always wrong, 12% wrong only sometimes, and just 4% not wrong at all. Unlike the trend on premarital sexual activity which shows more acceptance over time, the trend on extramarital sex, shows less. Seventy-eight percent in 1998 said extramarital relations were always wrong, 12% said almost always, 6% wrong only sometimes, and 2% not wrong at all.

Reinforcing these responses are data from Yankelovich Partners questions asked 20 years apart. In 1998, 86% said that infidelity among married men was morally wrong, up from 76% in July 1977. Infidelity among married women was also considered morally wrong, and again, the proportion was up from the late 1970s. By contrast, only 44% thought that unmarried couples living together was morally wrong, a view essentially unchanged from 1977. Just 26% in the new Yankelovich survey thought that infidelity was an unavoidable part of married life today, but 71% said it was not. Married men and women did not differ in responses. Three-quarters said it was not.

There is a long-standing belief that men are more prone to temptation than women. In 1943, in one of the first questions of its kind, Elmo Roper didn't even think to ask men about women's extramarital dalliances. In the Roper question, women were asked whether many, only a few, or practically no men were "untrue" to their wives. Some 48% of women said that many men were, 43% said only a few were, and 5% that practically none were. In 1946, when Gallup asked women to list the top faults of their husbands, thoughtlessness topped the list followed by bossiness and "other women." "Other men" wasn't even mentioned by men who were asked about their wives' faults. In 1962, when the *Saturday Evening Post* asked women about the most dishonest thing a woman could do, adultery topped the list.

Louis Harris and Associates appears to be the first polling organization to ask whether people knew anyone who had an

unfaithful partner, a subject Harris probed several times during the heyday of sexual liberation in the 1960s. In 1964, 24% said they knew someone who had an unfaithful husband or wife. The proportion rose steadily to 41% in 1969. When CBS News repeated the question in 1995, 59% did. Roughly two-thirds did in polls conducted in 1997 and 1998 (see page 40).

Are more people committing adultery or are we just more willing to talk to pollsters about it? A CBS News/48 Hours poll from September 1997 may provide an answer. Thirty-four percent said more people commit adultery today, but 57% said we were more willing to talk about it.

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In a battery of questions asked by Yankelovich Partners in 1998, virtually all men and women agreed that having sex with a prostitute constituted cheating in a marriage. Women (73%) were more likely than men (60%) to describe “kissing someone else” as cheating. So, too, “having a sexually explicit conversation with someone on the phone” (72 to 59%). There was a 10-percentage point difference on whether “holding hands” constituted cheating (47% of women thought it did, 37% of men). Thirty-six percent of women, and 31% of men felt casual flirtation was cheating. The pollsters that asked about “oral sex” during the Clinton scandal found overwhelming majorities saying it constituted adultery.

The Nation's First Couple

The public is clear about the President's behavior. Not surprisingly, then, their views about his moral standards have deteriorated sharply. In January 1998, in response to a Yankelovich Partners' question, 37% said Clinton's moral standards were lower than those of the average man, 54% about the same, and 3% higher. By September, a majority, 50% said they were lower and 44% about the same. When the question was repeated in March 1999, 61% said they were lower and a third about the same. A majority of Democrats agreed that they were lower. An August 1998 Princeton Survey Research Associates poll for *Newsweek* found that 47% thought Bill Clinton was a worse husband than the average American husband, 42% about the same, and 4% better.

Views about the Clinton marriage (or any marriage for that matter) are harder to decipher through polls, though the surveyors have asked questions about it. They've focused not only on the President, but on the First Lady as well.

From the time Hillary Clinton was introduced to the public (two-for-the-price-of-one was the way one Clinton aide described them in 1992), Americans have had mixed feelings about her. Some of this uncertainty stemmed from doubts about what a modern First Lady should be, but some of it also from her high powered partisan persona. In a Gallup poll taken in late January 1993, roughly the same proportions said she shared their values (64% said this phrase applied strongly or somewhat to her) as said she was power hungry (59%) and, separately, pushy (61%). Forty-six percent said the statement "Hillary is knowledgeable and experienced and should be actively involved in policy-making" was closer to their views, but 49% that she was not elected and should not be actively involved in policy making. During the health care debate in 1994, majorities said she had too much influence in the Clinton administration. In 1993 and 1994, when the question was asked, pluralities generally said she had about the right amount of influence. Throughout it all, majorities have pronounced her a good role model. In September 1998, 60% described her that way in a *US News & World Report* poll; 32% did not.

In 1993 Gallup data, Hillary Clinton's favorability ratings averaged two points higher than her husband's. In 1994, they were just a point lower. In 1995, after the health care debacle, the investigation of White House travel office problems, and her Whitewater testimony, the First Lady's popularity had fallen an average of 5 points below the President's. Throughout 1996 and most of 1997, her ratings trailed the President's by about 10 percentage points. However, in late 1997 the President's favorability ratings dropped, and the First Lady's rose, creating a stature gap in her favor. Today Hillary Clinton is held in higher esteem than her husband, and she enjoys record high favorability ratings.

Throughout 1998, polls showed that most people seemed to want their union to survive. The difficulty of accurately assessing the situation can be seen in the

varying responses pollsters have recorded in polls on the matter. In January 1998, after the public had observed the Clinton's marriage for six years, 26% told Fox News/Opinion Dynamic interviewers that theirs was "a typical marriage," but 61% said it was better described as a "business partnership." A third of women, but only 20% of men pronounced it typical. A question from their March poll that asked why she stayed with the President, found 19% saying that she loved him despite his behavior, but 52% said she loved the power of the presidency. Twenty percent believed she stayed with him because she believed in his innocence.

A September 1998 *US News & World Report* poll asked people to think about the marriage from Hillary's point of view. Forty-eight percent described it as a practical business and political relationship, 18% a loving marriage that has troubles, 10% a marriage that is now mainly for their daughter's sake, and 13% as a marriage held together because it is better for the country. A Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* question that asked why Hillary Clinton had stood by Bill Clinton throughout the entire Lewinsky affair found 40% believed it was because she was committed to her marriage and loved her husband, but 34% said that she likes being First Lady. Sixteen percent said she stood by him because she was committed to his policies. The *US News* poll found that people believed she had put up with her husband's action because she loves him (17%), was concerned about their daughter (18%), she likes being First Lady (30%), wants to accomplish important public policy goals (17%). When asked by *US News* to describe her role, 68% said she was someone who has purposely looked the other way in her husband's personal activities; only 20% described her as an unknowing victim of them.

In a late January 1998 Gallup poll, 30% said that if they had the opportunity to advise Hillary Clinton, they would tell her to publicly defend the President to help protect the presidency, 30% that

she should stay with him in marriage, but not defend him publicly, and 19% leave him on the basis of infidelity. When Gallup updated the question in August, a virtually identical 18% said that she should leave him, but more people (40%) felt that she should stay but not defend him than felt she should defend him (32%). An August 1998 Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll found 59% describing Hillary Clinton as "a strong woman for putting up with her husband's extramarital affairs," just 28% said that she was foolish for putting up with them. A *US News* poll from September found that 52% admired her loyalty in staying with him, while 39% questioned her judgment in doing so. In a September Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll, 29% said they would respect her more if she filed for divorce, but almost as many 25% said it would make them respect her less. Thirty-seven percent volunteered that it would make no difference one way or the other to them.

The sketchy data about the Clinton marriage show a preference for marriage, even in the most difficult of circumstances. What the data discussed on divorce also demonstrate is that people believe marriage is fragile. In Fox News/Opinion Dynamics polls in January and May 1998, slightly more than 50% said the Clintons would be married in five years. By September, the scandal had taken a toll—38% said they would still be married, but a slightly larger share, 41%, said they would not.

Endnotes:

¹ Steven Sack and J. Ross Eshleman, "Marital Status and Happiness: A 17-Nation Study," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, May 1998, pp. 527-536.

² Robert H. Coombs, "Marital Status and Personal Well-Being: A Literature Review," *Family Relations*, January 1991, pp. 97-102.

³ Constance Sorrentine, "The Changing Family in International Perspective," *Monthly Labor Review*, March 1990, pp. 41-58.



*Karlyn Bowman is resident fellow,
American Enterprise Institute*