

Determinants of a long and happy marriage

An empirical, inter-disciplinary, mixed-methods approach

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Abstract

This paper empirically investigates the question of what determines a long and happy marriage. It shows that the main components of such a matrimony are personal happiness of the wife (not necessarily of the husband) and frequently cooking and eating together. The latter effect is additionally conditioned by the times the husband brings flowers per week.

Background

Science has dealt with the most complex questions and found great solutions that changed our world entirely (e.g. Schuster et al. 2011). Yet, one of the topics relevant for the life of approximately 5.43 million people worldwide (Worldbank 2015) remains severely under-researched. It is the question of what factors determine a long and happy marriage. Studies researching this topic so far have suffered from four serious short-comings: (1) they are based on a too small number of cases ('grandma always said you just need to do X, Y, Z in order to have a healthy marriage'). Such anecdotic evidence cannot be extrapolated to a larger population. (2) Other studies focus too much on autobiographic memories (e.g. Clinton 2004; Karajan 2008) and can therefore introduce systematic bias into the results. (3) Empirical works in most cases apply too simplistic methods and/or ignore to test for potentially relevant confounding variables. An exceptionally bad example comes from a Norwegian study that

shows that "the risk of divorce (over a period of 4 years) is higher when he does as much or more housework than her" (Hansen and Slagsvold 2012). Obviously this does not mean that the husband should put his feet up and leave the housework to his wife in order to increase the duration of their marriage. The key to understand this correlation here is the confounding factor *post-modernism* vs. *traditionalism* (Inglehart and Baker 2000). A strong traditional value orientation is associated with both a more traditional understanding of household roles as well as a lower inclination to get divorced. (4) There are far too many works dealing with the topic of this paper in a far too simplistic, clearly publicity-oriented and not really scientific way (e.g. Thomas 2017). In contrast, we will tackle this complex issue by applying an adequate empirical, inter-disciplinary, mixed-methods approach.

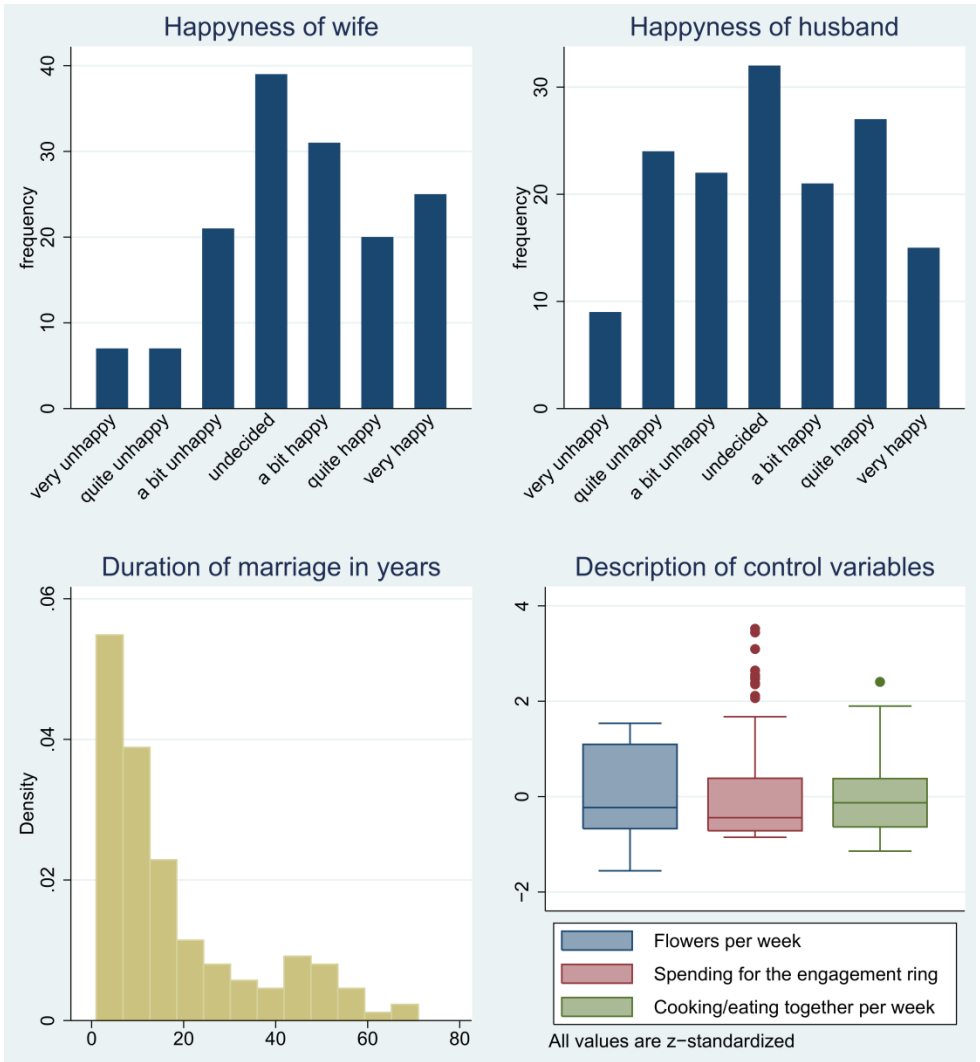
Aim

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors determining a long and happy marriage based on an empirical analysis of self-described couples.

Data

We made a survey among 150 married couples in Germany. For the recruitment of participants we followed the excellent examples of Stapel & Lindenberg (2011) and Förster & Denzler (2012). Figure 1 gives a first overview of the variables.

Figure 1: Description of variables



Methods

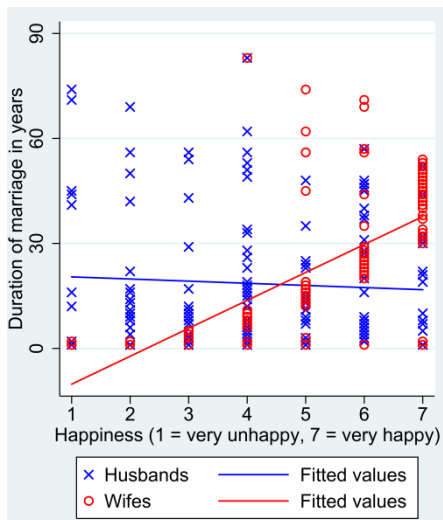
In order to perform the most accurate and cutting-edge analysis, we apply rational choice modelling as introduced by Wuffle (1984) and state-of-the-art statistical methods as put down by Bezimeni (2011). The models were estimated using the gold-standard in statistical software, Stata 13. Replication data is available from the authors upon request.

Results

Carr and her colleagues (2014) find a significant effect of subjective well-being of the wife – but not of the husband – on the overall quality of the marriage. In order to test this effect we plot the duration of marriage against individual happiness (measured on a seven-point scale). The result is obvious: the higher the wife’s happiness, the longer the

marriage (see Figure 2). For the husband however, there is apparently no correlation between his happiness and the durability of his marriage.

Figure 2: Duration of marriage vs. happiness (by gender)



Running OLS-regressions on the data we can estimate the effect of happiness. One additional point on the happiness scale for the wife extends the duration of marriage by nearly 8 years, while for the husband's happiness there is no significant effect at all (see Table 1). Although these results already indicate a certain emphasis on the wives, it is not clear to what extent this effect depends on further variables and will vanish as soon as these third factors are controlled for. Model 2 presents the results including three variables that are often tested in the context of marital studies: a) the amount of money spent for the engagement ring (see Francis and Mialon 2014), b) the number of times per week the husband brings flowers for his wife (see Valentin 2017) and c) the number of times per week the married couple cooks and eats together (see Baur 2016). On the surface, it would seem that physical appearance of the spouses – particularly their attractiveness – is

also related to the durability of a marriage. From a scientific point of view this is of course nonsense as everyone knows that true love is independent of such superficialities. The only sphere where beauty indeed helps is politics (see Jäckle and Metz 2017).

Controlling for the three variables reduces the effect of wife's happiness only marginally – it is still highly significant and the single most important predictor for a long marriage. From the controls only the cooking/eating-variable is significant. Ceteris paribus, just one more time of cooking and eating together per week increases the duration of marriage by 4.7 years. The other two controls (spending plenty of money for the engagement ring and buying flowers) fall short of significance.

Model 3 tests an interaction between flowers per week and cooking/eating together. The significant positive value for the conditional effect can best be interpreted in terms of average marginal effects (see Figure 3). As soon as cooking/eating occurs more than 3 times per week there is an additional positive effect of bringing flowers. For couples who do not cook/eat together that often, flowers do not prolong the duration of marriage.

Figure 3: Interaction Flowers * Cooking/eating together

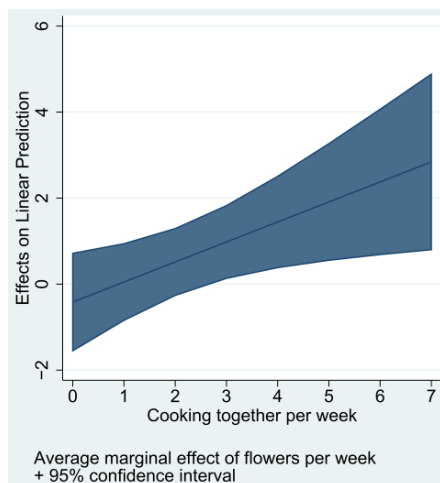


Table 1: OLS regression for the explanation of the duration of marriage

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)
Happiness husband	-0.702 (0.635)	-0.196 (0.477)	-0.127 (0.471)
Happiness wife	7.994*** (0.686)	6.543*** (0.806)	6.451*** (0.794)
Spending for engagement ring		0.0105 (0.00572)	0.00845 (0.00570)
Flowers (per week)		0.575 (0.398)	-0.417 (0.573)
Cooking/eating together (per week)		4.714*** (0.509)	2.557** (1.038)
Flowers x Cooking/eating together			0.465** (0.196)
Constant	-8.051** (3.349)	-19.05*** (4.373)	-14.75*** (4.669)
Observations	150	150	150
R-squared	0.482	0.718	0.729

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Discussion and further implications

Empirical evidence has shown that there are indeed certain factors determining a long and happy marriage. The good news for married couples is that these factors are completely under the control of the persons involved. It's particularly the husbands who can contribute to a long and happy marriage. First and foremost they have to ensure that their wife is happy – regardless whether the actions necessary to achieve this end make the husbands themselves happy or not. An excellent work of reference for the subject of happiness comes from Helliwell, Layard and Sachs (2017). Their study should not only be found on every married couples bookshelf, it's recommendations should also be adopted in everyday life.

Furthermore, the popular saying *the way to a man's heart is through his stomach* can be approved by our data.¹ The more often married couples cook and eat together the longer their

marriage will last. While expensive engagement rings have no effect, husbands can boost the duration of their marriage if they bring flowers for their wives – but only if they also cook and eat together with their wife at least three times a week. To make this point clear: flowers shall never be used as a replacement for time together but only to foster and nurture an existing good and healthy marriage. Furthermore, the return on investment in terms of a long marriage is by far higher when the married couple spends its money for wining and dining, and thus for quality time together rather than for expensive gifts.

Albeit this study has no limitations whatsoever, marriage cannot and should not only be treated as a dependent variable. Rather, the institution of marriage – and particularly a long and happy one – can also impact on other socially and macro-economically important parameters. The most obvious are for sure children. Nevertheless, leading a healthy and successful marriage is only one explanation for a large number of sons and daughters – at least equally important is the right home. As recent research on the

¹ Without any doubt, this causal relation holds for both sexes alike (see Trubel and Wrenkh 2009).

Theory of the Stork suggests, deliveries are significantly more common in areas harbouring a strong stork population (see Höfer, Przyrembel, and Verleger 2004). Married couples should clearly take this fact into consideration when searching for a home.

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