



Psychotherapists’ Endorsement of Myths about Marriage: A cross-disciplinary study

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In discussion, you may hear us refer to a 2004 study of MFTs in California. It was published as:

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Psychotherapists' Endorsement of Myths about Marriage: A cross-disciplinary study
Executive Summary

Surveys were mailed to a random sample of clinical members of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and the American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA). A total of approximately 4,000 invitation postcards were mailed.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire. In addition to standard demographic variables, respondents provided information on professional variables, such as degree, years of experience, and primary theoretical orientation; and family of origin variables, including parental marital status.

Myths survey. An instrument was developed to assess therapists' knowledge of current marriage and divorce research. Several myths persist in spite of research debunking them (see Appendix), and belief in these myths may foster changes in attitudes toward marriage and divorce. For the purposes of this study, marital myths were collected from reviews by Popenoe (2001, 2002), Larson (1988), and Waite and Gallagher (2000). While other worthwhile reviews are certainly available (e.g., Lazarus, 1985), these four reviews were chosen because of their specific focus on marital myths, their emphasis on empirical research, and when known, the popularity of those myths among the general population. A total of 40 myths are discussed in the four reviews. After overlapping myths were removed and one myth identified by Popenoe (2002, ¶ 8), "Married people have less satisfying sex lives, and less sex, than single people," was split into two separate myths, 32 remained. Of those, 21 were selected for use in this study. Selection was based upon the definitiveness of current research indicating the statement was a myth, the degree to which the false belief was held by the general population (when known), and the degree to which the myth could be objectively evaluated. (A brief summary of research debunking each myth appears in the Appendix.) Those 21 myths were combined with four "common knowledge" items, included as filler in the manner of Larson's (1988) study, to produce an instrument of 25 statements about marriage with which respondents could agree, disagree, or provide a response of "unsure/don't know."

Results

A total of 209 usable responses were received (45 LCSWs, 91 LMHCs, 73 MFTs). This amounts to approximately a 5% response rate, which is common for single-contact, web-based surveys but does present questions of response bias. The demographic profile that emerged of each professional group was largely similar to the known demographics of the profession overall (for MFT demographic data, see Doherty & Simmons, 1996; Northey, 2002; Riemersma, 2004).

Respondents provided correct (i.e., consistent with the preponderance of current research) responses to an average of 12.19 of the 25 items. MFTs provided correct responses to an average of 12.88 of the 25 items. Participants' item responses are summarized in Table 1.

The present group was much more likely than Larson's (1988) to endorse mythological statements. Unlike in Larson's study, respondents were offered an "unsure/don't know" option and were presented statements with which to agree or disagree. (Larson presented statements in the form of true/false questions.) In addition, California MFTs surveyed in 2004 (Caldwell & Woolley, 2008) performed significantly worse than MFTs across the nation in this study.

Neither degree level (masters versus doctorate) nor the number of classes one had in graduate training emphasizing marriage and divorce research appeared to have significant influence on knowledge about marriage. On several statements, however, MFTs' responses differed significantly from those in other professions.

Discussion

Psychotherapists' poor performance on the myths questionnaire must not be interpreted as a display of competence (or lack thereof). No evidence exists suggesting that endorsement of myths about marriage, generally or specifically, links to therapeutic outcomes. (However, given the overwhelming body of research showing that other beliefs influence therapy process and outcome, it seems possible that marital therapy would be affected by beliefs about marriage.) It would be most accurate to say these results reflect the limited exposure some therapists have to current and ongoing research regarding marriage and divorce. The mean age of therapists in this study was about 50; for many of them, their graduate training may have taught several of the myths studied here, reflecting the best research available at the time.

Some may argue that the research findings discussed in the myths questionnaire are normative, reflective of general trends among married and divorced families, and these are not as important for therapists to be aware of as methods for working with each unique couple. However, training programs frequently emphasize the importance of normative knowledge in providing a framework for therapy. Cross-cultural education in particular is based on the notion that "the culturally competent mental health professional must possess specific knowledge and information about the particular group with which he or she is working" (Sue & Sue, 2003, p. 21). Without normative knowledge on marriage and divorce, knowledge in other areas such as theory, treatment planning, family development, and personality lack an important foundational element that would seem essential to the effective practice of marital therapy. Couples seeking therapists would be well-advised to question prospective therapists on their attitudes toward marriage, in order to make a fully informed choice (Doherty, 1995).

Table 1
Item Responses on Marriage Questionnaire

Statement	True / False^a	n	% correct	%mft correct
1. Couples who marry under the age of 18 are more likely to eventually divorce than those who marry later. ^b	T	209	82	82
2. The divorce rate in America increased from 1960 to 1990. ^b	T	207	83	79
3. At least half of the couples getting married this year will eventually divorce. ^b	F	208	20	31
4. Most young, single, never-married people in the United States will eventually marry. ^b	T	209	58	58
5. Having children usually improves marital happiness.	F	209	79	84
6. Men reap far greater benefits from marriage than women.	F	209	36	32
7. College-educated women are more likely to marry than women with less education.	T	209	7	7
8. Married people have more sex than single people.	T	209	36	47
9. Married people consider their sex lives more satisfying than single people consider theirs to be.	T	209	44	51
10. The high divorce rate weeds out unhappy marriages, leaving the average marriage happier than 30 years ago.	F	209	58	60
11. Couples who live together before marriage are more likely to divorce.	T	207	41	55
12. The majority of couples who divorce are high-conflict couples (at least 3 major arguments in a month).	F	208	56	58
13. Divorce proceedings are usually initiated by women.	T	208	36	39
14. Children do better in stepfamilies than single-parent homes.	F	207	55	59
15. If divorced parents put forth positive attitudes about relationships, their children are no more likely to divorce than children of married parents.	F	208	24	26
16. Husbands' marital satisfaction is higher when wives are full-time homemakers than when they are employed.	F	209	54	52
17. Wives' marital satisfaction is higher when they are full-time homemakers than when they are employed.	F	209	65	62
18. The more someone gives their spouse information, both positive and negative, the greater the marital satisfaction of both partners.	F	208	20	19
19. Following a divorce, the economic standard of living drops roughly the same amount for both partners.	F	208	88	90
20. "Until death do us part" means significantly more time today than it did 60 years ago, due to higher life expectancies.	F	208	22	24
21. Husbands make more life style adjustments in marriage than wives.	F	208	75	76
22. Single women are at greater risk for violence than married women.	T	207	16	18
23. The factors most often cited by long-married couples as reasons for their successful marriages are romantic love and good luck.	F	207	71	80
24. Children are better off with divorced parents than with parents who are unhappily married.	F	208	22	29
25. The quality of a married couple's sex life is the single best statistical predictor of overall marital satisfaction.	F	208	77	81

Notes: ^a Based on the preponderance of current research. Respondents could either mark "agree," "disagree" or "unsure/don't know" in response to each item. A correct response would be to agree with a true item or disagree with a false one. ^b "Common knowledge" item in Larson (1988).

Myths and Misconceptions about Relationships: Recent research findings

Recent studies have discounted several ideas about marriage that were supported by older research or less sophisticated research methods. Several of these myths persist, however, and when believed, they may foster changes in attitudes toward marriage and divorce.

Marital myths were collected from reviews by Popenoe (2001, 2002), Larson (1988), and Waite and Gallagher (2000). While other worthwhile reviews are certainly available (e.g. Lazarus, 1985), these four reviews were chosen because of their specific focus on marital myths, their emphasis on empirical research and, in the case of Larson (1988), the availability of information about the popularity of those myths among both professional marriage educators and undergraduate college students. A total of 40 myths are discussed in the four reviews. After overlapping myths were removed and one myth identified by Popenoe (2002, ¶ 8), “Married people have less satisfying sex lives, and less sex, than single people,” was split into two separate myths, a total of 32 remained. Of those, the following 21 myths were selected for use as part of this study. Selection was based upon the definitiveness of current research indicating the statement was a myth, the degree to which the false belief was held by the general population (when known), and the degree to which the myth could be objectively evaluated.

Please note: Some statements are reverse-keyed; that is, they are stated as the truthful opposite of the commonly-believed myth. The statements shown here are phrased as they were on the survey.

1. Couples who marry under the age of 18 are more likely to eventually divorce than those who marry later.

>>> TRUE based on current research.

- Couples who marry under the age of 18 are about twice as likely to divorce as those couples who marry after age 25 (based on bride’s age; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

82% of all respondents, and 82% of MFTs, answered correctly.

2. The divorce rate in the United States increased from 1960 to 1990.

>>> TRUE based on current research.

- The divorce rate in the US **increased significantly** during that 30-year span, and has since appeared to level off (National Marriage Project, 2004).
- **Divorces** per 1,000 US married women age 15 and older by year:
- **1960: 9.5 --- 1990: 20.9 --- 2002: 18.4**

83% of all respondents, and 79% of MFTs, answered correctly.

3. At least half of the couples getting married this year will eventually divorce.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- Most estimates of lifetime divorce risk for couples getting married this year are around 40%. The 10-year divorce rate has declined appreciably since 1970.
- "Lifetime probability of divorce *or separation* remains close to 50%" (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2004, p. 18), but many couples who separate do not divorce.

20% of all respondents, and 31% of MFTs, answered correctly.

4. Most young, single, never-married people in the US will eventually marry.

>>> TRUE based on current research.

- While the overall marriage rate is declining, the overwhelming majority of young, single, never-married people will eventually marry (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; US Census Bureau, 2001).
- "For the generation of 1995... several demographers projected that 88% of women and 82% of men would eventually marry" (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2004, p. 17)
- Significant differences exist between ethnic groups. The marriage rate for African-Americans, for example, is falling much more quickly than for Caucasians.

58% of all respondents, and 58% of MFTs, answered correctly.

5. Having children usually improves marital happiness.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- The arrival of the first child usually decreases marital satisfaction for both partners, as they struggle with increased stress and responsibility and have less time to spend on the marital relationship (Heaton, 1990; Waite & Lillard, 1991).
- This myth continues to be debunked by recent studies (e.g. Schulz, Cowan, & Cowan, 2006) but has been around for a long time: Larson (1988) cites six separate studies from the 1970s supporting the contention this statement is a myth.
- Research reflects averages. There are significant differences based on demographics. Further, children often can improve one's global happiness, even as they erode relationship satisfaction (Angeles, 2009).

79% of all respondents, and 84% of MFTs, answered correctly.

6. Men reap far greater benefits from marriage than women.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- Men and women both benefit substantially from marriage, with men enjoying greater health benefits and women greater financial benefits.
- “Both men and women live longer, happier, healthier and wealthier lives when they are married” (Popenoe, 2002, ¶ 1).
- The longevity difference appears to be about 6 years for men, 2 years for women.

36% of all respondents, and 32% of MFTs, answered correctly.

7. College-educated women are more likely to marry than women with less education.

>>> TRUE based on current research.

- Thirty years ago, women were less likely to marry if they were college-educated.
- That trend has reversed. College-educated women are now more likely to marry than their less-educated counterparts (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001).

7% of all respondents, and 7% of MFTs, answered correctly.

8. Married people have more sex than single people.

>>> TRUE based on current research.

- Weak methodology in earlier studies led to myths about sex in single life and marriage.
- Married people have sex more often than single people (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael & Michaels, 1994).

36% of all respondents, and 47% of MFTs, answered correctly.

9. Married people consider their sex lives more satisfying than single people consider theirs to be.

>>> TRUE based on current research.

- Married people find their sex lives more physically and emotionally satisfying than single people (Waite & Joyner, 2001).
- May be driven primarily by differences among women (Warehime & Bass, 2008).

44% of all respondents, and 51% of MFTs, answered correctly.

10. The high divorce rate weeds out unhappy marriages, leaving the average marriage happier than 30 years ago.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- Today's average marriage is no happier. Couples today experience more conflict, less interaction as a couple, and more work-related stress than couples in the 1980s (Rogers & Amato, 1997, 2000).

58% of all respondents, and 60% of MFTs, answered correctly.

11. Couples who live together before marriage are more likely to eventually divorce.

>>> TRUE based on current research.

- Couples who cohabitate prior to marriage divorce more often than couples who do not (DiMaris & Rao, 1992; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003). While some studies have been inconclusive, no study has demonstrated cohabitation reducing divorce.
- The difference may be due largely to cohabitators with nonmarital births (Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2009).
- As cohabitation has become more common, other countries are seeing reductions in the "divorce gap" between couples who did cohabitate before marriage and those who did not (Hewitt & de Vaus, 2009).

41% of all respondents, and 55% of MFTs, answered correctly.

12. The majority of couples who divorce are high-conflict couples (at least 3 major arguments in a month).

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- Divorce is often not preceded by significant overt conflict. In one study, less than one third of divorcing parents had high conflict marriages (Amato & Booth, 1997).
- A variety of problems (e.g. infidelity, drug use) predict divorce, with conflict per se not on the list (Amato & Rogers, 1997).
- Legal process of divorce may make couples more conflictual (Friedman, 2004).
- How couples resolve conflict, rather than mere frequency, is predictive of divorce.

56% of all respondents, and 58% of MFTs, answered correctly.

13. Divorce proceedings are usually initiated by women.

>>> TRUE based on current research.

- Women initiate about two-thirds of divorces (Brinig & Allen, 2000; Mather, 2003).
- Reasons could include child-custody laws favoring women in some states, and likelihood that men will be spouses involved in problematic behaviors such as drinking (Brinig & Allen, 2000).

36% of all respondents, and 39% of MFTs, answered correctly.

14. Children do better in stepfamilies than in single-parent homes.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- While stepfamilies offer advantages over single parents in terms of household income and role models of both sexes, children seem to do no better in stepfamilies than in single parent homes after divorce by a variety of measures (including mental health, substance use, and academic performance; Kerr & Beaujot, 2002; Ram & Hou, 2003). They may even do worse (Jeynes, 2000; Popenoe, 1994).

55% of all respondents, and 59% of MFTs, answered correctly.

15. If divorced parents put forth positive attitudes about relationships, their children are no more likely to divorce than children whose parents stayed married.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- Children of divorce report more negative attitudes toward marriage, and appear more likely to divorce, regardless of what attitudes toward marriage parents attempt to communicate (Gibaldi & Rosen, 1992; Inman-Amos, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1994; Jennings, Salts, & Smith, 1991; McDonald, 2001).

24% of all respondents, and 26% of MFTs, answered correctly.

16. Husbands' marital satisfaction is higher when wives are full-time homemakers than when they are employed.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- Early studies showed a wife's employment would decrease marital satisfaction of both partners (Axelson, 1963; Hoffman & Nye, 1974).
- Research from the mid-1970s onward fails to find a consistent or significant link (Larson, 1988; Schoen, Rogers & Amato, 2006).

54% of all respondents, and 52% of MFTs, answered correctly.

17. Wives' marital satisfaction is higher when they are full-time homemakers than when they are employed.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- See information on #16 above. References examined satisfaction of both spouses.
- Note the performance on this item relative to the last; most masters-level psychotherapists (and most of our respondents) are women.

65% of all respondents, and 62% of MFTs, answered correctly.

18. The more someone gives their spouse information, positive and negative, the greater the marital satisfaction of both partners.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- Studies in the 1970s showed a curvilinear relationship. Studies in the early 80s appeared to show a linear relationship (Larson, 1988). Research from then on finds quality matters, not quantity (Gottman, 1999; Holman & Brock, 1986; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Lovine, 2005).

20% of all respondents, and 19% of MFTs, answered correctly.

19. Following a divorce, the economic standard of living drops roughly the same amount for both partners.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- Men's standard of living stays the same or increases after divorce; women's falls (Gadalla, 2009; Popenoe, 2001).
- The economic gender gap in divorce has not changed substantially in recent years (Gadalla, 2009; Peterson, 1996).

88% of all respondents, and 90% of MFTs, answered correctly.

20. "Until death do us part" means significantly more time today than it did 60 years ago, due to higher life expectancies.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- Since 1950, US life expectancy at birth has increased 9 years. Life expectancy at age 20, however, has increased only 6.5 years (CDC, 2002).
- Average age at first marriage has increased about 5 years in the same span (Center for Family and Demographic Research, 2002), effectively negating the life expectancy increase (Glenn, 1997). The average marriage "until death do us part" is, at most, one to two years longer than it was in 1950.

22% of all respondents, and 24% of MFTs, answered correctly.

21. Husbands make more life style adjustments in marriage than wives.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- "Men tend to be less involved in their marriages than women" (Larson, 1988, p. 9).
- Most women are open to influence from their spouses, while many men are not (Gottman, 1999).
- Women make more adjustments in marriage than men and find marriage more stressful (Bell, Daly, & Gonzales, 1987; Chickering & Havighurst, 1981; Kurdek, 2005).

75% of all respondents, and 76% of MFTs, answered correctly.

22. *Single women are at greater risk for violence than married women.*

>>> *TRUE based on current research.*

- This myth appears in Waite and Gallagher's review of marital myths (2000). Popenoe (2002) also discussed the issue, narrowing it specifically to domestic violence. Overall, women who are married are at less risk for becoming victims of violence than their single counterparts (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). This has been verified by data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, a nationally representative sample of 100,000 United States residents, which treated marriage as a dichotomous variable (married vs. nonmarried) and found nonmarried people of both genders at much greater risk of violence ($p < 0.0001$; Lauritsen, 2001). In a separate review of earlier NCVS data, the US Department of Justice found "females and males who had never married were nearly [four] times more likely to experience violent victimization than those who were married" (Craven, 1997, p. 4). Both studies involving NCVS data included instances of violence within the home. Additional studies from Australia and Canada have reached the same conclusion: married women are at much lower risk of becoming victims of violence than their unmarried counterparts (Coumarelos & Allen, 1998; Federal/Provincial Territorial Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women, 2002).
- This myth is particularly persistent, largely because of the attention domestic violence has received in the MFT literature. Violence against women remains a major public health concern in the US, and most violence committed against women is intimate partner violence (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). In a well known paper on the topic, Stets and Straus (1990) compared a marriage license to a hitting license, arguing that marriage was an inherently risky venture for women. Waite and Gallagher (2000) sought to dispel this notion, arguing that marriage actually creates a greater investment on the husband's part in the wife's well-being. "So powerfully entrenched is the idea that marriage aids and abets domestic violence that in several states, legislators have proposed—or actually passed—legislation affixing warning labels about domestic violence to marriage licenses" (Waite & Gallagher, 2000, pp. 151-152). Waite and Gallagher note the propensity of elected officials to speak of domestic violence as "wife abuse" and curbing such abuse as arresting "violent husbands," terms which both imply marital relationships. However, research shows domestic violence occurs at substantially higher rates for both separated (Craven, 1997) and unmarried, cohabiting couples (Magdol, Moffitt, Caspi & Silva, 1998) than for married couples. Married couples have an even lower occurrence of intimate partner assault than the general population (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). While this may be in part due to underreporting, there is also a substantial body of literature demonstrating that marriage increases men's investment in their families and curbs men's violent tendencies (Popenoe, 2002).

16% of all respondents, and 18% of MFTs, answered correctly.

23. The factors most often cited by long-married couples as reasons for their successful marriages are romantic love and good luck.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- As indicated in a number of studies, some decades old, "Most couples do not identify romantic love as the kind of love that helps maintain marital satisfaction over the life span" (Larson, 1988, p. 10). Couples' perception of the quality of their friendship is most predictive of long-term marital success (Gottman, 1999).

71% of all respondents, and 80% of MFTs, answered correctly.

24. Children are better off with divorced parents than with parents who are unhappily married.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- Effects of divorce in and of itself can be pervasive and long-lasting (Cherlin, Chas-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998; McLanehan & Sandefur, 1994). This is true even when pre-divorce characteristics like psychological well-being and economic status are taken into account.
- We are discussing averages. Most unhappy marriages are not abusive (Waite et al., 2002). In abusive marriages, of course children are better off in a safer environment.
- *Whether this is "true" or "false" is more debatable than some other myths.*

22% of all respondents, and 29% of MFTs, answered correctly.

25. The quality of a married couple's sex life is the single best statistical predictor of overall marital satisfaction.

>>> FALSE based on current research.

- Established in the literature for almost 30 years. In a study comparing overall marital satisfaction with nine other variables, the quality of a couple's sex life ranked fourth, behind affective and problem-solving communication, common interests, and amount and quality of leisure time together (Snyder, 1979).
- This is consistent with more recent research confirming that the quality of a couple's friendship is far more essential to their marital satisfaction and success than the quality of their sex life (Gottman, 2000).

77% of all respondents, and 81% of MFTs, answered correctly.

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