

## **Religiosity, Marital Satisfaction, and Divorce**

### **Abstract**

*This study assesses the relationship between religiosity, marital satisfaction and divorce in the United States. Since the divorce rate is increasing it is of interest to examine what factors of one's personal life may be related to likelihood of divorce. A secondary analysis of existing survey data was conducted using data from the 1998 General Social Survey to ascertain (a) whether individuals with high levels of religiosity are less likely to divorce than those with lower levels of religiosity, (b) whether Catholics are less likely to divorce than other religious affiliations and, (c) whether there is an association between religiosity and marital satisfaction after controlling for the respondents' gender. The findings show that there is a modest relationship between religiosity and divorce in that individuals who consider themselves very religious are less likely to divorce than those who do not. The analysis also shows a modest relationship that Catholics are indeed less likely to divorce than other religious affiliations. However, controlling for gender, there is only a very small relationship between religiosity and marital satisfaction.*

**Key Words: Religiosity, Divorce, Marital Satisfaction**

## **Literature Review**

On May 27, 1996, The Los Angeles Times ran a front-page story on current efforts to reform "no fault" divorce laws. According to the Times, in approximately 20 states, "it is easier to break the marriage contract than it is to fire an employee or back out of buying a car." The United States currently has the highest divorce rate among developed countries. Of all couples married since 1970, current statistics predict that half of all marriages will end in divorce (Cherlin, 2002). The increasing access to divorce due to "no-fault" divorce laws also has had implications on the institution of marriage, possibly to the extent of lessening the value of marriage in today's society. A component of American life that still remains strong despite cultural change, however, is religion.

This study intends to examine the relationship between religion and a person's decision to divorce, as well their marital satisfaction in general. Because religiosity can be defined in a number of ways, my main focus is on personal reflections about how religious an individual considers themselves. Theoretically speaking, one might also expect to find differences in the likelihood of divorce and the extent of marital happiness that depending on religious affiliation. For example, Muslim nations have typically been fairly permissive of divorce for men. Therefore, we might expect that countries with a high Muslim population would have a higher divorce rate than those with a smaller Muslim populations (Trent and South, 1989).

A main focus of prior research regarding religiosity and divorce centers on Catholicism. The Roman Catholic Church bans divorce altogether (Trent and South, 1989). A couple cannot get divorced in the eyes of the Catholic Church, and in order for the marriage to be terminated according to Catholic religious beliefs the couple must

obtain an annulment. Annulments are not easy to receive, and most divorced couples are unable to receive annulments. Also, the Roman Catholic Church takes such a strong stance on marital issues, particularly those regarding divorce, that the church's influence is often reflected in the attitudes of individual church members (Thornton, 1985). Due to the strong position held by the Roman Catholic Church, one would predict that nations with high populations of Catholics will have lower divorce rates than those nations that have smaller Catholic populations (Trent and South, 1989).

In a study conducted to assess the relationship between religious heterogamy (i.e. each partner being of a different religious preference) and resulting marital happiness among Catholics, Sheehan, Bock, and Lee (1990) used data from the General Social Survey (GSS) in 1973-1978, 1980, and 1982-1985. They examined all married Catholic respondents in their first marriage to determine whether religiosity and heterogamy affect levels of marital happiness. The main results were that Catholics involved in interfaith marriages are no less likely than their homogamous counterparts to report being very happy with their marriages. This study did not examine levels of divorce resulting from reported marital satisfaction, however.

In a study of the structural determinants of the divorce rate, Trent and South (1989) examined the impact of several factors and their resulting prediction of divorce. These factors included socioeconomic development, female labor participation, the sex ratio, and dominant religion. The sphere of influence of religion on divorce rates at the societal level is hard to determine. Each society must be examined based on their specific religious affiliation breakdowns, and it is likely that the effect of religion on divorce in the United States could be different than the effect of religion on other countries (Trent

and South, 1989). The study examined the crude divorce rate (number of divorces per 1,000 people) in 66 countries. Religious affiliation was operationalized based on an estimated percentage of Roman Catholic's in the population. The study controlled for the average age at marriage for females, because marriage at an early age in and of itself may influence divorce. The correlations between the divorce rate and the development of the women's labor force participation were strong, but there was not a statistically significant relationship found between religion and divorce.

In an article addressing attitudes regarding separation and divorce, Thornton (1985) estimated the effects of several social, economic, and demographic factors and attitude changes regarding divorce. He studied mothers and their children and their attitudes toward divorce and separation. He controlled for factors such as religion and church attendance. Thornton gathered his data from an intergenerational panel study of mothers and children drawn from July 1961 birth records in the Detroit area. The main findings of his research were that increasing divorce rates were accompanied by more acceptance of divorce and separation in people's attitudes.

In order to provide insight into the relationship between marital satisfaction and divorce, Booth and White (1980) conducted research determining the effects of age at marriage, religiosity, marital satisfaction, and income on whether or not a couple thinks about divorce. They examined data gathered from the 1978 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey, which used telephone interviews of Nebraska residents age 18 and over. They found that each of the independent variables (including religiosity) had an effect on thinking about divorce that was independent of its effect on marital satisfaction. This implies that even when controlling for marital satisfaction, religiosity continues to

influence how one thinks about divorce. They also found that religiosity has an effect on whether or not a person couple thought about or ever considered divorce.

## **Hypotheses**

After examining the research conducted thus far on the topic of religion and divorce, I developed three hypotheses to be examined using data from the 1998 General Social Survey. The hypotheses are:

- 1.) Persons that consider themselves very religious are less likely to divorce than those who do not consider themselves very religious.
- 2.) Catholic's are less likely to divorce than other Religions.
- 3.) Controlling for gender, people who view religion as an important part of their lives will have more marriage satisfaction than those who do not.

The research I conducted is different than prior research because the data gathered from the GSS uses a larger sample that is more representative of the United States population. Instead of examining the beliefs and attitudes from one geographic location, the GSS spans more of the country. I feel that the data I am using will provide a more accurate assessment of these relationships, and may mirror the findings of some of the literature that I have reviewed.

## **Methods**

For this research, I used existing data from the 1998 General Social Survey. The GSS is part of the National Opinion Research Center, which is the oldest national non-profit research facility (Rockwell, 2003). The facility studies ongoing social trends, and has been collecting data biennially since 1994. The survey's population of interest is

<deleted>, and the sample was obtained by <deleted>. The final sample size was <deleted> individuals, and the response rate was <deleted>. The data is collected by <deleted>, which take approximately ninety minutes (Smith and Rasinski, 2003). The GSS administers questions on various subject areas of interest in social science research.

My research is concentrated on issues regarding divorce, religion, and marital satisfaction. The dependent variable for my first hypothesis is “divorce,” and was assessed by the question “Have you ever been divorced or legally separated?” The responses of interest were only “yes” or “no.” I dropped all other categories from my analysis. The independent variable for this hypothesis was how religious the respondents considered themselves. This was addressed using the question “To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?” Responses in the categories “very religious” and “moderately religious” were coded together, while the responses “slightly religious” and “not religious at all” were combined. All other possible responses were discarded.

The independent variable for my second hypothesis was religious affiliation. For this variable, I used the question “What is your religious preference?” I considered those who responded “Catholic” as one category, while all other responses for religious preference were coded together. Respondents who answered “don’t know” or “no answer” were excluded from my analysis.

My final hypothesis includes “gender” as a control variable, while the dependent variable is marital happiness. I coded male respondents as 1, while female respondents were coded as 0. To measure marital happiness, respondents were asked, “If currently married, how would you describe your marriage?” I considered those who responded with either “very happy” or “pretty happy” into a “happy” category, while responses of

“not too happy” were used as the second category. I excluded responses of “don’t know”, “no answer”, and “not applicable.” I computed cross-tabulations on the variables of interest for each hypothesis, included the results in the following section.

## Results

Table 1 displays the relationship between level of religiosity and whether or not the respondent has been divorced. As I hypothesized, people who consider themselves very religious are less likely to have experienced divorce than those who do not consider themselves religious. 22% of respondents in the “Very Religious” category have been divorced while 28% of respondents in the “Not Religious” category have been divorced. While the difference is not dramatic, this table does indicate that religiosity influences whether or not a person divorces.

	Divorce	No Divorce
Very Religious	22.1%	77.9%
Not Religious	28.4%	71.6%

Table 2 shows the relationship between religious preference and likelihood of divorce. After examining the data of those responding that their religious preference was Catholic in comparison to all other religions, there was a difference found that was consistent with my hypothesis. 13% of Catholics have ever been divorced while 26% of respondents of other religions have ever been divorced. This may be due to Catholic beliefs regarding the institution of marriage that discourage divorce.

<b>Table #2: Cross Tabulation showing Religious Orientation and Likelihood of Divorce.</b>		
	Divorce	No Divorce
Catholic	13.2%	86.8%
Other Religion	25.6%	74.4%

Tables 3A and 3B show the relationship between the importance of religion and marital satisfaction while controlling for gender. By controlling for gender, I was able to examine males and females separately in case there would be gender differences in either importance of religion or marital satisfaction. I was also able to determine whether the bivariate relationship between religiosity and marital satisfaction may be due to the fact that women tend to report higher levels of religiosity while they may also tend to report higher levels of marital satisfaction.

In Table 3A, while there appeared to be high levels of marital satisfaction in the female respondents in general, women who consider religion very important had a slightly higher level of marital satisfaction (98%) than those who do not consider religion very important (91%).

<b>Table #3a: Cross Tabulation showing Importance of Religion, and Marital Satisfaction (Females)</b>		
	High Marital Satisfaction	Low Marital Satisfaction
Religion very important	98.3%	1.7%
Religion not important	91.2%	8.8%

Table 3B displays the relationship between the importance of religion and marital satisfaction for males. The relationship for males was similar to that of females in that almost all respondents had high levels of marital satisfaction. However, there was barely any difference between the importance of religion and high marital satisfaction for males. Males who consider religion very important and males who do not consider religion very important averaged about 97% in reporting high levels of marital satisfaction.

<b>Table #3b: Cross Tabulation showing Importance of Religion, and Marital Satisfaction (Males)</b>		
	High Marital Satisfaction	Low Marital Satisfaction
Religion very important	97.2%	2.8%
Religion not important	96.9%	3.1%

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

My research provided evidence of a modest relationship between level of religiosity and likelihood of divorce. While the vast majority of respondents have not experienced divorce, of those respondents who have experienced a divorce, there was an approximate 6% difference between very religious individuals and individuals who are not religious. Therefore, highly religious individuals are slightly less like to experience divorce than those who do not consider themselves religious. This result is dissimilar from the research conducted by Trent and South (1989) regarding religiosity and divorce because they found no relationship between religiosity and divorce. However, they

conducted a cross-cultural analysis, which may account for some different findings because a relationship may not exist in other cultures like it does in the United States. The findings of my analysis do lead to the conclusion that individuals with high levels of religiosity may be less likely to experience divorce in the United States.

The strongest relationship found in my analyses was between religious affiliation and likelihood of divorce. While the number of divorced respondents was still a minority of the sample, 13% of those divorced were Catholic while 26% were of another denomination. Therefore, based on this analysis, religious affiliation may play a role in whether a couple gets a divorce because those who are of a religion other than Catholic are twice as likely to be divorced. This finding supports previous research and hypotheses by Thornton (1985) and predictions made by Trent and South (1989). The findings lead to the conclusion that the beliefs and traditions of the Catholic Church may have an influence on how an individual feels about divorce, and therefore may influence a decision of whether or not to divorce.

The hypothesis that, controlling for gender, the degree to which individuals value their religion affects marital happiness received the least empirical support. Although my analysis showed some differences in marital happiness between highly religious individuals and other individuals even after controlling for gender, the relationships were small. One possible reason for the small relationship may be that the vast majority (91-99% of both male and female respondents) reported high levels of marital satisfaction regardless of the independent variable of religious importance. However, the relationship was stronger for females than for males, which indicates that the importance of religion influences female's marital happiness more than the marital happiness of males. This

may mean that other factors of life have more of an effect on male's marital satisfaction than does religion. Females who consider religion a very important aspect of their lives were approximately 6% more likely to report high levels of marital satisfaction than those who do not consider religion an important part of their lives. For males, however, the difference was so minute, with a difference of only .3% therefore leading to the conclusion that importance of religion does not have strong effects on male's levels of marital satisfaction.

The secondary analysis of data conducted for this study is fairly consistent with prior research and theory. However, the majority of the research only finds modest relationships between religion and divorce. Perhaps the most logical explanation for this is that divorce is such a complicated issue that there are many factors that affect the occurrence of divorce for a variety of individuals. The current theory for divorce does not need modification based on the results of this study, but it may be beneficial to examine whether variables other than religiosity influence divorce.

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