

## ***How peer abuse and singlism get in the way of Happy Ever After***

**Paul Dolan, June 2019**

Last month, I gave a talk about my new book, *Happy Ever After*, at the Hay Festival. My comments about marriage and kids got a lot of attention in the media. One of things I said was “If you’re a man, you should probably get married. If you’re a woman, don’t bother. If you’re a man, you basically calm down... you take less risks<sup>i</sup>, you earn more money at work<sup>ii</sup>, you live a little longer.<sup>iii</sup> She on the other hand has to put up with that – and she dies sooner than if she had never married.<sup>iv</sup> The healthiest and happiest population subgroup are women that have never married<sup>v</sup> and never had children<sup>vi</sup> [audience laughs]... We love it when evidence confirms what we always knew. That’s called confirmation bias by the way. But that’s interesting because the narrative is something quite different.”

I have received some lovely emails and had interesting exchanges with serious scholars about the balance of the evidence. I am always willing to engage in discussion about evidence. But others, mostly in North America, have taken issue with what I had to say and, using flawed logic, and seemingly driven as much by passions as by reasons, some have sought to undermine my academic credibility in a very public manner. I generally keep out of online interactions, but when academics go beyond dispassionately evaluating evidence and bring the academy into disrepute, I feel compelled to defend my own reputation and that of the academy. I am therefore taking this opportunity to address the issues head on. I like alliterations, and so I’ll do this using six words that all start with the letter C.

### 1. Credibility

Any serious academic must take serious evidence seriously. Take another look at the text from Hay above – each statement has a reference against it. Each statement can be substantiated by evidence. Let’s deal with the issue of marriage, which seems to have caused the biggest stir. Some people might look only at one dataset but to advance knowledge we need to look at evidence from multiple sources, as I do in *Happy Ever After*, and weigh that evidence accordingly.

Let’s start with cross-sectional (one point in time) data. In a study of around 10,000 Australian women in their 70s, never married women without children were less stressed, volunteered more, were more optimistic, and had larger or similar social networks compared to other groups.<sup>vii</sup> This study did not include men, however. In another cross-sectional study of around 100,000 Swiss adults that did examine gender effects, the authors found that “women have a 1.71-year higher life expectancy being single rather than married, while men, on average, live 1.54 years longer being married”.<sup>viii</sup>

Crucially, and unsurprisingly, recent cross-sectional research has emphasised that it is important for marriages to be happy ones in order to benefit people’s health – otherwise, being never married is associated with being better off.<sup>ix</sup> Given the relatively high proportion of marriages that end in divorce (and that it is mostly women who want the divorce<sup>x</sup>), there is good reason to question the assumption that marriage results in better health for women, and to instead infer that women who are not married are, in the very least, happy and healthy, and possibly even more so than other groups. Of course, some people who divorce will subsequently remarry but any unhappiness during separation and divorce does matter and must factor into the equation. As I made clear in *Happiness by Design*, separation is a time of considerable uncertainty, which is very attention-seeking, usually in ways that significantly adversely affect the flow of pleasure and purpose over time.

Moving onto the longitudinal data (following the same people over time), in a 15 year study of around 24,000 German females and males, it was found that “even though most people

consider marriage to be a positive event ...there were as many people who ended up less happy than they started as there were people who ended up happier than they started (a fact that is particularly striking given that we restricted this sample to people who stayed married)".<sup>xi</sup> A reanalysis<sup>xii</sup> of this study including more data, and adjusting for pre-marriage cohabitation, concluded that "that individuals do not get a lasting boost in life satisfaction following marriage." No gender differences were noted.

In a study looking at health using data from a sample from the Office for National Statistics in the UK that did note differences between women and men, after adjusting for socio-economic differences between groups, "never-married women had lower odds of reporting long-term illness than women in long-term first marriages".<sup>xiii</sup> There is now diverse longitudinal evidence from several surveys in the US, Finland, Australia and Scotland to show that, when people get married, their BMI increases.<sup>xiv</sup> Moreover, data from over 400 newly married couples in the US shows that husbands' smoking behaviour influences wives' chances of relapsing into smoking but not vice versa.<sup>xv</sup>

Some of the best work investigating gender and marriage comes from Bella DePaulo, who I cite in the book, and who proposes that "people who are single – particularly women who have always been single – fare better than the ideology would predict because they do have positive, enduring, and important interpersonal relationships".<sup>xvi</sup> Relatedly, some evidence even shows that the happiness gap favouring married people versus those who are cohabitating disappears or even reverses in some countries, suggesting that social narratives (like those I discuss in *Happy Ever After*) matter.<sup>xvii</sup>

Upon reflection, and with very important caveats in mind (see context and causality below), it still seems fair to say that men benefit more from marriage than women, and I still think that an expected happiness and health maximising woman can make a very strong case against getting married. I respect that other people can reach a different conclusion about the balance of evidence and I ask that they respect my interpretation.

## 2. Contrition

One statement I made at Hay was mistaken. I misinterpreted the "spouse present" code in the America Time Use Survey (ATUS) to mean the spouse was there for the interview rather than present in the household. As soon as I was made aware of the mistake, I notified *The Guardian* and their article which prompted the media interest was amended, I informed my editor so that the book can be revised, and I publicly discussed it, including in interviews with the BBC in the UK, ABC in the US and CBC in Canada. I regret the error but am happy that it was spotted. It is one of the many advantages of analysing publicly available data. Whilst some people have sought to discredit my whole book based on this one mistake, it must be noted that it accounts for about one half of one percent of the text in *Happy Ever After* (about 400 words out of around 80,000), and it in no way affects the substance of any of my arguments about the nine social narratives discussed in the book (of which marriage is one). It is also worth saying that there are data to show that married people report happier marriages when their spouse is present during the survey interview.<sup>xviii</sup>

## 3. Context

It is important to note that my comments about the happiness of single childfree women were made in the context of a talk arguing that there are many social stories about how to live which often do not align well with happiness. It was a book talk where I was seeking to show that life choices that are socially encouraged are not good for everyone e.g. single women are very happy relative to the social narrative that they are sad and lonely. Absent of this context, and the critical point about causality addressed below, many people began interpreting my comments at Hay as if they were claims about what people ought to do. I

therefore emphasised in follow-up interviews that the data do not provide any guidance about what any one individual should do (even if we were to ignore the huge variation that exists across people, such as differences in personality<sup>xix</sup>).

#### 4. Causality

I also went to great lengths after Hay to make clear that causal inference is almost impossible from the available evidence i.e., we cannot know whether being single causes some women to be healthier. In fact, I also made this point at Hay – we do not have any randomised trials to properly determine causality – but “academic says that we cannot make causal claims from existing data” does not make for a catchy headline. There are so many ironies in the abuse I have received but one of the most alarming for any serious scholar is that those who criticise me for saying that single women are happier are seemingly making causal claims about married women being happier. Moreover, they have been doing so by drawing on much less robust evidence than I cite in my book and above and, incredulously, from cross-sectional analyses of the ATUS alone.

#### 5. Concerning

Against this background, it deeply concerns me that we appear to be living through an age where serious academic discussion can be drowned out by emotional reactions to evidence that does not conform with what some people (even those who purport to be academics) have already established as “fact”. One of the things that attracted me to the academy was to be able to inform important social issues with robust evidence. It was probably what drew me to happiness research. I am very concerned that anyone witnessing how some people have treated me after a small error in my book was drawn to public attention will think twice before putting their own heads above the parapet, especially if their arguments and evidence go against the grain. Peer-review is central to our work, but peer-abuse will make the academy a very small, boring, insular and irrelevant place.

#### 6. Confirming

The reaction to my comments at Hay confirm just how powerful, and sometimes pernicious, the social narratives about how to live can be. The hostility to my questioning of the marriage narrative confirms why a book like *Happy Ever After* is so important. It is very hard for anyone to swim against the tide of social expectations, and this clearly applies very strongly to single people, and especially to single women. I cite evidence in the book to show how we are generally suspicious of single people and don't trust that they can be truly happy. I also draw on research showing that, when people feel that the system is under threat (as many people surely do in the current political climate in North America and the UK), they cling ever more strongly to the narrative of marriage. My recent experiences show just how strongly even those who should take a dispassionate view of research evidence are wedded to it (yes, pun intended). In contrast, I make no claims about how anyone should live their lives – well, only that we should be less judgemental of those who choose to be different. And to that I would now add that we should be less judgemental of those who argue that we should be less judgemental.

Despite my recent experiences, I remain an inveterate optimist, and I trust that those of you who are interested in evidence and who do not already have a closed mind (e.g. about the kinds of relationships that people ought to be in) will be able to see the wood of serious scholarly debate from the trees of slander and personal attack. Only by upholding the integrity of the academy, through respectful dialogue and debate, will we be able to have a fruitful conversation about the role that social narratives play in shaping human behaviour and happiness.

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- <sup>v</sup>Grundy, E. M., & Tomassini, C. (2010). Marital history, health and mortality among older men and women in England and Wales. *BMC Public Health*, 10(1), 554.
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- <sup>xiii</sup>Grundy, E. M., & Tomassini, C. (2010). Marital history, health and mortality among older men and women in England and Wales. *BMC Public Health*, 10(1), 554.
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