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US study says divorce is linked to age and education

Feeding data into a special 'calculator' suggests the best guarantee for a long-lasting relationship is to marry later and have good schooling behind you

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Research shows that couples marrying later in life know themselves better and benefit from higher income. Photograph: Alamy

Some cite infidelity, others blame irritating personal habits, but the two key factors linked to whether a couple will split up are age at marriage and education, according to an economist who has devised a "marriage calculator" that can work out the likelihood of divorce.

"The lowest divorce rates are among people who marry late with more education; the highest ones are among those who marry young with less education," said Betsey Stevenson of the Wharton school at Pennsylvania University. "And there is a sliding scale in between."

Individuals are asked to feed their gender, the year and age at which they married and their educational background into Stevenson's calculator. It then works out what proportion of "people like them" have divorced. Stevenson argued that one reason for the age factor could be that as people became older they had a better idea of their preferences, so were more likely to find someone who matched them.

"The big questions are how to balance life across work, leisure and community. People have a better sense of that in their late 20s and early 30s. When people marry at a younger age, the match may become worse with time."

It could also be that more impulsive people were more likely to marry young and also more likely to walk away from a marriage, she added. "As for education, it is possible that people with more education have more income and that can smoothen a lot of the rough edges around a relationship," said Stevenson.

She designed the calculator to help people understand divorce rates better – and realise that the 50% average in the US disguised large variations between different groups.

Linda Blair, a clinical psychologist and author of *Straight Talking*, said she thought it was a viable argument that such research could help social policymakers, "particularly in a time of very limited resources".

But she argued that it was important any support should be offered to people and not forced on them.

She added: "It would be nice if couples who were having their first child were offered classes on how to do the best job as a parent and how to deal with the strains on the relationship, such as the sleepless nights." Other causes of strain in marriage included redundancy, buying a house, having children leave home and retiring, according to Blair.

She warned against assumptions linking divorce to age and education. Her own analysis found that the group most likely to divorce were university drop-outs. She argued that tendencies that made people more likely to drop out of college could also mean they were more likely to walk away from a marriage.

Meanwhile, new research reveals another link between university days and later life. Findings in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* show that people who fail to make much effort while studying end up doing less well at work, feeling disengaged from their job and more prone to stress.

"A high level of task-avoidance during university predicted a low level of work engagement and high level of burn-out during the early career," according to a team of Finnish researchers led by Professor Katariina Salmela-Aro, of Jyväskylä University. Such students tended to be pessimistic in outlook. By contrast those who were optimistic and task-focused at college were more likely to feel positive about their jobs. The findings emerged from studying 292 university students in Finland and tracking their work status and feelings about their jobs 10, 14 and 17 years later.

Robert McHenry, a business psychologist at Oxford University, said: "Conscientiousness is one of the big personality factors and if you are conscientious at university then you are going to be more successful at work."

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