

# INTEREST IN MARITAL RECONCILIATION AMONG DIVORCING PARENTS

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This study offers the first research data on the interest of divorcing parents in marital reconciliation. A sample of 2,484 divorcing parents was surveyed after taking required parenting classes. They were asked about whether they believed their marriage could still be saved with hard work, and about their interest in reconciliation services. About 1 in 4 individual parents indicated some belief that their marriage could still be saved, and in about 1 in 9 matched couples both partners did. As for interest in reconciliation services, about 3 in 10 individuals indicated potential interest. In a sub-sample of 329 matched couples, about 1 in 3 couples had one partner interested but not the other, and in 1 in 10 couples both partners were interested in reconciliation services. Findings were consistent across most demographic and marital factors. The only strong predictors of reconciliation interest were gender, with males being more interested than females, and initiator status, with far greater interest among those whose partner initiated the divorce. These findings are discussed in terms of attachment theory and future prospects of divorce services.

**Keywords:** *divorce; reconciliation; attachment; marriage; gender; court*

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In the 1960s, many family court professionals saw themselves as marriage counselors who would first try to help couples reconcile and then, if marital healing was not possible, to help them have a constructive divorce (Folberg, Milne, & Salem, 2004). This blending of roles is apparent in the history of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts ([www.afccnet.org/about/history.asp](http://www.afccnet.org/about/history.asp)) and in publications such as Nester Kohut's (1968) landmark edited volume *Therapeutic Family Law: A Complete Guide to Marital Reconciliations*. The assumption in the field at the time was that many divorcing couples could be helped to reconcile, and that the best way to assist them was to assemble a team of legal and mental health professionals.

This emphasis on "reconciliation first" was short lived. A headline in the history section on the Association of Family and Conciliation Court's website sums it up: "The 1970s: From Reconciliation to Divorce with Dignity." Court professionals began turning their attention from promoting reconciliation through marriage counseling to "helping couples end their marriages with a greater sense of dignity and self-worth and with less trauma to themselves and their children." ([www.afccnet.org/about/history.asp](http://www.afccnet.org/about/history.asp)). By the 1980s and 1990s, mediation and other forms of collaborative practice had replaced marriage counseling in working with divorcing couples (Folberg et al., 2004; Tessler & Thompson, 2007). Restoring the marriage never disappeared as a potential byproduct of a good collaborative divorce process, but was no longer an intentional focus of divorce practice in the United States. In the same way, marriage counselors came to draw a line between reconciliation efforts prior to the couple deciding to divorce, and then divorce counseling after the couple files and presumably has made an irrevocable decision to divorce (Everett & Lee, 2006; Sprenkle, 1989).

Neither the early enthusiasm for reconciliation services nor the later abandonment of these services was informed by research on the interests of divorcing couples themselves. We could find no studies that asked divorcing people if they would be interested in exploring marital reconciliation via professional services. The current study came out of the practical experience of one of the authors, a family court judge, whose meetings with divorcing couples convinced him that at least some couples would be interested in an "exit ramp" from the divorce highway to explore the reconciliation option. When he looked at his own quite progressive court system, he saw assistance for nearly every situation

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of divorcing couples (legal, financial, protection, parenting education) except for reconciliation. He then invited University colleagues to explore this issue with him, beginning with conversations with a group of divorce lawyers. Although fully committed to a constructive, non-adversarial divorce process, the group almost unanimously believed that by the time couples entered the legal divorce process, they had abandoned hope for their marriage and would have little interest in reconciliation help. Even in the situation where one party wants to preserve the marriage, the other surely does not. After these conversations we decided to shed light on this important question by gathering data from divorcing parents themselves.

The main purpose of this study is to identify how many parents in the divorce process believe that reconciliation is still possible and how many are interested in services to help them reconcile their marriage. The secondary purpose is to explore the predictors of these two beliefs; in other words, which kinds of people believe their marriage could be saved and are interested in reconciliation assistance?

### **PRIOR RESEARCH ON DIVORCE RECONCILIATION**

Most of the research on reconciliation after separation or filing for divorce is decades old. Kitson and her colleagues were among the first to study couples who began the divorce process and then either withdrew their divorce petitions or had them dismissed. She found that 23% of divorce petitions in a Cleveland study were withdrawn or dismissed (Kitson & Langlie, 1984). In a randomly conducted survey in Boulder, Colorado, 17% of those who had ever been married had been previously separated at some point; of those who had separated, 77% went on to obtain a divorce, 11% were still separated, and 12% reconciled. (Bloom et al., 1977).

Only two studies with national probability samples have reported information on reconciliation following marital separation. Using the National Longitudinal Studies Cohort of Mature Women, Morgan (1988) found a reconciliation rate of 16% of women ages 30–44 who had previously been separated from their husbands. Wineberg (1994, 1995), using data from the National Survey of Families and Households (which provides the most detailed information available on marital transitions), found that among couples who separated, an estimated one-third later tried to reconcile. About one-third of these couples (or about 10% of the total) succeed in reconciling, with success defined as being together for at least one year after the reconciliation.

Drawing together tentative conclusions from this limited body of research, it appears that about 10–15% of married couples who separate later reconcile. We found no studies on reconciliation conducted specifically with people after they filed for divorce, and no studies have focused on the perceptions of divorcing people about their own chances for reconciliation and their interest in pursuing help for reconciliation.

### **THEORETICAL APPROACH**

Although this study was not designed to formally test a theory of reconciliation, attachment theory does offer a guiding conceptual lens. Attachment theory has proved useful for understanding the presence of strong positive and negative emotions simultaneously in divorcing couples. Originally articulated by Bowlby (1969) for infant-parental relationships in which the infant seeks to maintain proximity and connection to the caregiver and feels threatened by separation, attachment theory in recent decades has been extended to adult relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Rholes & Simpson, 2006). Weiss (1975, 1976) was one of the first to use this theory to explain ambivalence and continued longing among divorcing couples: “There persists, after the end of most marriages, whether the marriages have been happy or unhappy, whether their disruption has been sought or not, a sense of bonding to the spouse. . . . Pining for the spouse may continue despite the availability of alternative relationships and despite absence of liking, admiration, or respect” (Weiss, 1976, p. 138).

Subsequent studies and clinical reports have supported Weiss's original insight that attachment processes in divorce are important and highly complex. Mazor, Batiste-Harel & Gampel (1998) found a complicated relationship between attachment and patterns of coping between ex-spouses, with individuals who had done psychotherapy being better able to integrate their feelings for their spouse into a new post-marital relationship. A study by Madden-Derdich and Arditti (1999) showed the complexities involved. Although the researchers expected to find that higher levels of coparental support would be associated with less preoccupation with the ex-spouse, they found the opposite. In this sample of mothers, more coparental support was associated with more preoccupation with the ex-spouse. In a variety of additional studies, ongoing attachment, especially when it takes the form of preoccupation, has been associated with problems such as depression, anxiety, anger, and loneliness (Berman, 1988; Masheteer, 1997; Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989).

Applied to the issue of reconciliation, attachment theory suggests that enduring emotional connections among people getting divorced will lead a subset of people to be reluctant to end their marriage and interested in working to restore it. Attachment theory can also guide the choice of predictors of interest in reconciliation services. In particular, the theory would suggest that the party who did not initiate the divorce (the "leavee") would be more likely to have a desire to try reconciliation because that person would be experiencing a greater attachment threat than the "leaver" who has often been planning the divorce for some time before announcing it (Vaughn, 1986). A longer time married would also be an attachment-based predictor of interest in reconciliation; Madden-Derdich and Arditti (1999) found that length of marriage was positively associated with preoccupation with the ex-spouse.

To explore other predictors of interest in reconciliation, we chose several demographic factors related to divorce and divorce initiation: educational level, gender, age, and number and ages of children. As summarized by Cherlin (1992, 2010), educational level is a predictor of divorce, females initiate divorce more frequently than males, younger age is associated with more divorce, and the number and ages of children have a complex relationship with the likelihood of divorce. In terms of predictors of reconciliation, Kitson et al. (1983) found that male initiation of divorce was a predictor of withdrawing the filing, and that more children predicted withdrawing of divorce filings. Wineberg (1994) reported that older couples were more likely to have successful reconciliations. We also examined prior marriage counseling as a predictor of interest in reconciliation, on the basis that couples who had sought help before might be less interested now.

## METHOD

### PROCEDURE

The study took place in Hennepin County, Minnesota, the metropolitan area of Minneapolis. The total sample consisted of 2,484 individual divorcing parents who were taking parenting classes mandated by state law and district court policy. Surveys were administered at two main educational sites, one free site for non-contested cases offered at the court building and one private facility which handled couples with contested cases where parents paid a fee. At the end of the courses, participants were asked to complete an evaluation form and the one page anonymous survey used in the present study. Court records indicated that about 60% of divorcing couples completed the classes. Of those who attended the class, 98% completed the survey. Institutional review board approval was obtained from the first author's institution.

Data gathering occurred in two phases. In the first phase we collected data on individual spouses not matched in couples because we believed that matching couples was not feasible given the anonymous nature of the surveys. However, later in the project we found a way to match couples by asking for wedding date (month, date, year) and combining that information with number and ages of the children from this marriage. Couples who matched on these three criteria were assigned a couple number and used in analyses on the couple level. (All of the matches were perfect; that is, there were

no cases where more than one man and woman matched on all three variables.) This matching procedure resulted in a sub-sample of 329 couples for separate analysis.

## PARTICIPANTS

Approximately 45% of the sample was male while 55% were female. The average age of the participants was 38.8 ( $SD = 8.2$ ) years. The average marriage length was 12.1 ( $SD = 9.0$ ) years. 19.7% of the sample had been married for five years or less while 10.7% had been married for more than 20 years. The mean number of children was 1.9 ( $SD = .92$ ). In terms of education, 5.7% of the sample had less than a high school education, 15.7% had only a high school diploma (or equivalent), and 53.6% had graduated from college.

## MEASURES

*Outcome Measures.* Belief about whether their marriage could be saved was assessed by one item: “Even at this point, do you think your divorce could be prevented if one or both of you works hard to save the marriage?” Responses were “yes,” “no” and “maybe.” Interest in a possible reconciliation service was assessed by one item asking participants “[i]f the court offered a reconciliation service, I would seriously consider trying it.” Responses were “yes,” “no” and “maybe.”

*Predictor measures.* Participants were asked a series of questions regarding their background including how long they had been married, how many times they had been married, their age, the number and ages of their children, who initiated the divorce process, and their educational background. Education was assessed by asking the participants for the highest grade they had completed. Number of children was recoded into three categories based on oldest child being either under 6, between the ages of 7–12 and 13 or older. Responses to the item regarding the initiator of the divorce were “you,” “your partner,” or “both of us together.” They were also asked if they have done marriage counseling as a couple (yes/no); 54% indicated that they had received marriage counseling.

## ANALYSIS PLAN

Basic descriptive statistics were first obtained on demographics and beliefs measures. The second phase of analysis consisted of multinomial logistic regression models run to predict responses separately for the “marriage could be saved” outcome and “interest in a reconciliation service” outcome. The reference outcome for both items was “no.” Predictors used in the models included age, gender, number of children, age of children, education, and whether the couple had received marital counseling. We analyzed the data separately for men and women because the presence of couples in the data set created problems of dependence for purposes of statistical analysis.

In the original version of the questionnaire, participants who checked “no” on the question about whether they thought their marriage could be saved were instructed to stop the survey and thanked for their participation rather than have them proceed to the section on reconciliation services. This procedure was based on our assumption that people who did not believe their marriage could be saved would not be interested in reconciliation services. However, we discovered that many participants who checked “no” on the saving the marriage item ignored the survey instructions and proceeded to answer the reconciliation item—and that some of these participants indicated an interest in reconciliation services. We subsequently decided to remove the “stop” instruction and have everyone answer all the questions. This left us with the challenge of how to handle the missing data from those who followed the instructions on the first version of the questionnaire and did not answer the reconciliation question. We decided that it was reasonable to assume that the breakdown of this group’s responses to the reconciliation question would be the same as those in the second version who were instructed to answer all the questions instead of stopping the survey. Among the 871 second-version respondents

who checked “no” to saving the marriage, 93.5% went on to check “no” to reconciliation services and 6.6% checked “yes” or “maybe.” We then imputed the missing data from the first version of the survey ( $N = 1,613$ ) using these percentages.

## RESULTS

### INDIVIDUALS: DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes the individual results for the item: “Even at this point, do you think your divorce could be prevented if one or both of you works hard to save the marriage?” Overall, 11.5% of the individual spouses responded “yes” and 14.4% responded “maybe.” Results are also separated by gender. Analyses showed significant differences based on gender ( $\chi^2 = 46.98$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Males were more likely to say they thought their marriage could be saved.

Table 2 summarizes the individual results for reconciliation item. “If the court offered a reconciliation service, I would seriously consider trying it.” Overall, 12.9% of individuals responded “yes” and 15.9% responded “maybe.” Results are also separated by gender. Analyses showed significant differences based on gender ( $\chi^2 = 69.02$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Males were more likely to indicate they would be willing to try a reconciliation service.

### COUPLES: DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

In order to explore how couples matched on the belief their marriage could be saved and on reconciliation interest, a sub-sample of matched couples was analyzed. Because the sample size was smaller and in order to simplify the presentation of results, the yes and maybe categories were collapsed. Couples were then categorized into three groups: one where both partners indicated “yes” or “maybe,” one where only one partner indicated “yes” or “maybe,” and one where neither partner indicated “yes” or “maybe.” These results are summarized in Table 3. Findings for the belief that the marriage can be saved showed that in about a third of the sample, at least one partner believed that the marriage could possibly be saved even at this point in the divorce process. In 11.7% of couples both partners independently indicated that their marriage could still be saved. For interest in reconciliation services, in 34.2% of couples one partner was interested but the other not, and in 10.5% of couples both

**Table 1**

Descriptive results for belief the marriage could still be saved (Individuals)

	<i>N</i>	<i>No (%)</i>	<i>Maybe (%)</i>	<i>Yes (%)</i>
Total	2484	74.1	14.4	11.5
Male	1124	67.7	17	15.3
Female	1360	79.4	12.4	8.2

**Table 2**

Descriptive results for “seriously consider a reconciliation service” (Individuals)

	<i>No (%)</i>	<i>Maybe (%)</i>	<i>Yes (%)</i>
Response about self			
Total	71.3	15.9	12.9
Male	64.4	17.3	18.4
Female	77.0	14.7	8.3

**Table 3**

Percent of couples matching on marriage belief and reconciliation items

	<i>N</i>	%
Belief Marriage Can be Saved		
Both Yes/Maybe	43	11.7
One Yes/Maybe	117	32.0
None Yes/Maybe	206	56.3
Interest in Reconciliation		
Both Yes/Maybe	39	10.5
One Yes/Maybe	127	34.2
None Yes/Maybe	371	55.3

indicated interest in a reconciliation service. Overall, in about 45% of couples, one or both partners expressed some degree of interest in reconciliation services.

### PREDICTION OF SAVING THE MARRIAGE BELIEFS AND RECONCILIATION INTEREST

Prior to multinomial logistic models being run, correlations between predictor variables were examined to determine any potential problems with multicollinearity. All correlations were low to moderate (the highest was .27), suggesting a low probability of misspecification due to multicollinearity. Regression results predicting responses to the marriage can be saved question showed few statistically significant predictors, and no strong ones. All the significant predictors distinguished between “maybe” and “no” responses; none predicted “yes” versus “no” for either gender. For males, attending marital counseling ( $\beta = .670$ ,  $e^{\beta} = 1.95$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and having the partner initiate the divorce ( $\beta = 1.36$ ,  $e^{\beta} = 3.88$ ,  $p < .01$ ) significantly increased the odds of “maybe” responses, and having a child in the middle childhood age range ( $\beta = -1.20$ ,  $e^{\beta} = .303$ ,  $p < .05$ ) significantly decreased the probability of “maybe” responses. For females, only one predictor was statistically significant: being in a first marriage compared to a second marriage increased the likelihood of saying “maybe” ( $\beta = -1.02$ ,  $e^{\beta} = .365$ ,  $p < .05$ ). (Tables with the regression results are available by request from the first author.)

For regression models predicting interest in reconciliation services, having a partner initiate the divorce was the only significant and strong predictor in the findings; in females it increased the likelihood of answering “maybe” versus “no” on the reconciliation item by over 500% ( $\beta = 1.67$ ,  $e^{\beta} = 5.33$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and for males by over 800% ( $\beta = 2.11$ ,  $e^{\beta} = 8.22$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Only three other variables were statistically significant predictors, but none were strong predictors. Being older ( $\beta = .049$ ,  $e^{\beta} = 1.05$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and having younger children ( $\beta = 1.04$ ,  $e^{\beta} = 2.82$ ,  $p < .05$ ) increased the likelihood that males responded “maybe” to the reconciliation item compared to “no.” Having more children increased the likelihood that females would say “yes” to the reconciliation item, but the effect was small—just a 9% increase for each child ( $\beta = .343$ ,  $e^{\beta} = 1.09$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

### DISCUSSION

This study offers the first research data on the reconciliation interests of divorcing parents. About 1 in 4 individuals in the divorce process indicated some belief (“yes” or “maybe”) that their marriage could still be saved with hard work, including about 1 in 3 men and 1 in 5 women. 1 in 3 matched couples had at least one partner hold that belief and in about 1 in 9 couples both partners did.

As for interest in reconciliation services, about 3 in 10 individuals indicated potential interest (“yes” or “maybe”) in a reconciliation service, including about 1 in 3 men and 1 in 4 women. For matched couples, the figures were about 1 in 3 couples had one partner interested but not the

other, and about 1 in 10 couples had both partners interested. Overall, in about 45% of couples, one or both partners reported holding hopes for the marriage and a possible interest in reconciliation help.

These findings were consistent across most demographic (age, education) and marital factors (number of marriage, number of children together). The only strong predictors of reconciliation interest were gender, with males being more interested in reconciliation than females, and initiator status, with far greater interest among those whose partner initiated the divorce.

The findings of the current study are generally consistent with the limited prior research. Wineberg (1994, 1995) found that about one-third of separated couples tried to reconcile and that one-third of these couples succeeded (a rate of 10% reconciliation among those who had separated). Bloom et al. (1977) reported that 23% of separated couples tried to reconcile and 12% succeeded in reconciling, and Morgan (1988) reported a reconciliation rate of 16%. Given the 10.5% rate of matched couple interest in reconciliation services found in the present study, it is plausible to suggest that around one in ten divorcing couples might be candidates for reconciliation.

Although this study was primarily descriptive, the findings are consistent with research on enduring attachment in divorced couples. Belief that the marriage could be saved and interest in reconciliation services may stem from ongoing attachment to the spouse. The lone strong predictor of this belief and interest—the spouse being the initiator of the divorce—can also be explained by attachment theory: having one's spouse unilaterally move to end the relationship would directly threaten the attachment bond and trigger strong desires to save the marriage.

There are several important limitations to keep in mind when interpreting these findings. Because parents completed the survey after taking a class that dealt with the effects of divorce on children, their responses may have been affected by the class content. Further, because participants were parents of minor children in one geographical region, the findings cannot be generalized to the whole population of divorcing couples. Although a 60% response rate is respectable for community surveys, there were still 40% of parents who did not take the classes and complete the survey; we have no information about the characteristics of this group and cannot say whether they may have responded differently to the survey. Our sample was fairly highly educated, with over 50% of participants having college degrees. Although no data is available on the demographics of the divorcing population in Hennepin County, the married population of Minnesota is well educated, with 70% having some college and 33% having a four year college degree (Ruggles et al., 2004). Thus, our sample was probably not widely divergent in educational level from the larger divorcing population in Minnesota. Furthermore, there was no relationship found in the current study between educational level and the two outcome variables.

Another important limitation is that the findings refer only to beliefs and intentions, not to behavior. The survey item on belief that the marriage could be saved by hard work did not distinguish between effort by the respondent versus effort by the spouse, creating the possibility that respondents were pessimistic about the prospects for their marriage because their spouse would not do the necessary work. On the other hand, percentage findings for this variable were consistent with the second outcome variable—interest in reconciliation—which asked about the respondent's individual intentions. We cannot estimate how many couples who express an interest in reconciliation services would follow through to access services, and research on behavior change suggests that even people who would “seriously consider” services (as the survey question indicated) would be quite diverse in how close they are to taking action (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997). Finally, the findings cannot speak to the question of how many couples would achieve a successful reconciliation.

Overall, the current study suggests that many people in the divorce process hold beliefs and interest in reconciliation that have not been taken into account in current literature and practice in divorce work. The fact that participants were well on the way to divorce (the majority took the parenting class towards the end of the divorce process) suggests the possibility that the proportion of couples open to reconciliation might be even higher at the outset of the divorce process when the divorce process itself has not caused additional strife.

This study was developed to provide data-based information on a topic that has been largely left to opinion and conjecture. The upshot has been two ongoing projects. First is a working group of divorce lawyers developing strategies for opening up the reconciliation option at the outset of the divorce process (beyond traditional questions such as, “[a]re you certain you want a divorce?” and “[h]ave you tried counseling?”). This group has developed a simple assessment tool to elicit interest in and start a conversation about the reconciliation option. Second is the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project, created at the University of Minnesota via a State appropriation, which aims to develop, evaluate and disseminate best practices for helping couples who are uncertain about whether to divorce or work on rebuilding their marriage.

Overall, this study suggests that divorce professionals may have given up on marital reconciliation prematurely in the 1970s. Although most people who enter the divorce process have probably made a final decision to end their marriages, those who are uncertain or open to reconciliation deserve more systematic attention than they receive in the current system.

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