



Marriage Foundation

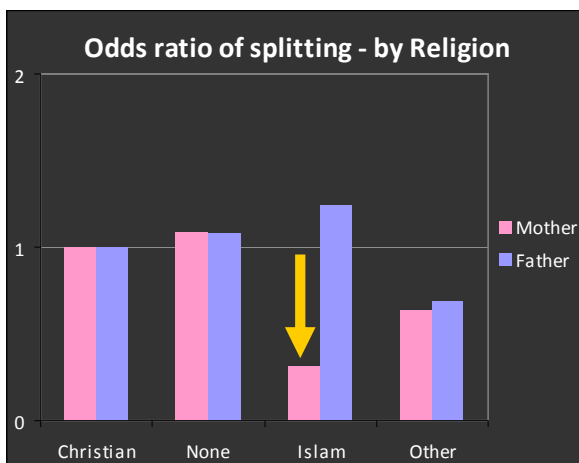
Does religion help couples stay together?

Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation

Steve McKay, University of Lincoln

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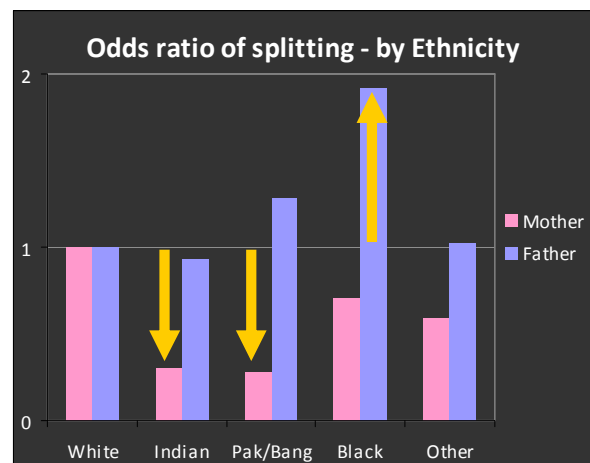
- In what may be the first UK analysis of its kind, we investigated the link between religion, ethnicity, and stability over the first eleven years of parenthood, using data from the Millennium Cohort Study.
- Our profile of the main ethnic and religious groups highlights the homogamous nature of parents, the rarity of cohabitation within Asian and Muslim families, and the low level of education among Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers and fathers, who also tend to be younger.
- Although mothers and fathers who regard themselves as Christian are more likely to stay together compared to parents with no religion, these differences are no longer significant once higher levels of education and the greater likelihood of being married are taken into account.
- Muslim mothers – but not fathers – are the only religious group whose relationships remain more stable during this period. This finding takes initial relationship happiness into account.
- In terms of ethnicity, the relationships of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers are more stable than other mothers, while black fathers are less stable than other fathers.



What role does religion and ethnicity play in family stability?

US studies present a complex picture of these associations. Those who attend church regularly are more likely to marry and more likely to be happy in their relationship. However religious attendance does not reduce divorce among black and Latino couples (*Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016*).

Arguably the most intriguing US research to date finds that it is not religion *per se* that matters, but



how couples apply their faith into their marriage that makes the difference (*Mahoney et al, 1999*).

So far as we know, our study is the first UK paper to analyse the connection between religion, ethnicity and family stability.

As well as identifying the links highlighted above, we profile each religious and ethnic group in terms of age, education, marital status, planned pregnancy and relationship happiness.

INTRODUCTION

Religion and culture provide the lens through which individuals see the world, our worldview.

It would be surprising, therefore, if such a foundation – encompassing how we see ourselves, our neighbours, and our relationships – has no effect on the way we do family.

Studies in the US have long established a positive association between religiosity and family stability, although the overall size of the link is small (*Mahoney et al, 2001*).

However the evidence from recent studies is mixed. One longitudinal study showed that greater religiosity exaggerated marital happiness and unhappiness, and also predicted greater stability for women, but not men (*Clements et al, 2004*). Another study of low income couples seemingly found the reverse, that greater religiosity predicted future marital satisfaction among men, but not women (*Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008*).

Although religion has the potential to influence family stability through positive attitudes to marriage and stability, as well as encouragement to invest in their marriage, religion may also influence family stability positively through social networks and support.

Nonetheless, there are apparent contradictions.

One of the more interesting attempts to unpick these difficulties is to look at how couples apply their faith to their relationship. Couples who see their relationship as 'sacred' or 'God-inspired' tend to do better (*Mahoney et al, 1999*). Couples who pray together also appear to have better quality relationships (*Ellison et al, 2010*).

So it is the application of faith, rather than faith – or religiosity – itself, that matters.

Recent research describes this application of faith in terms of transformational processes that bind marriages together and provide opportunities for growth. These processes include forgiveness, commitment, sacrifice and sanctification (*Fincham et al, 2007*).

Although we are some way from exploring such transformational processes in the UK, data from the Millennium Cohort Study means we can at least explore the links between self-reported religious and ethnic associations and subsequent stability.

METHOD AND RESULTS

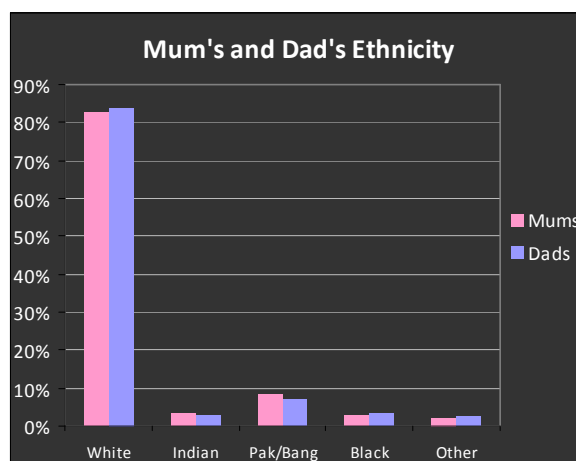
Our analysis draws on Millennium Cohort Study data from 14,562 mothers with nine month old babies. These babies were all born during 2000 or 2001. The mothers were surveyed again when their children were aged three, five, seven and eleven.

We then looked at what happened to the mothers, as couples, between the first and last of these waves, i.e. over a period of just over ten years.

At the initial wave, mothers were asked about their religious and ethnic groupings. They were also asked a variety of questions about their background – including age, education, marital status, whether their pregnancy was planned or not, and how happy they were with their relationship.

RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC PROFILES

Not surprisingly, the largest ethnic group in the UK is white, comprising 83% of mothers and 84% of fathers. The largest minority group is those of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin, comprising 8% of mothers and 7% of fathers. Indians represent 3% of both mothers and fathers, with a further 2% from other ethnic groups.

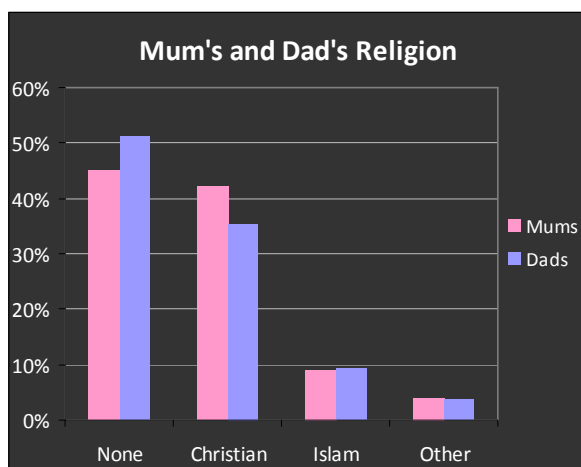


In terms of religion, the vast majority of parents are split fairly evenly between those of no religion (45% of mums, 51% of dads) and those who regard themselves as Christians (42% of mums, 36% of dads). The largest minority group are Muslims (9% of both mums and dads). Other religions comprise 4% of mums and dads.

Religious homogamy, where parents live with partners of the same religion, is high. This is especially true of Islam where 98% of Muslim mothers live with Muslim men and 93% of

Muslim fathers live with Muslim women. For other religions – mostly Hindu and Buddhist – 86% of mothers live with a man of the same religion whereas 87% of fathers live with a woman of the same religion.

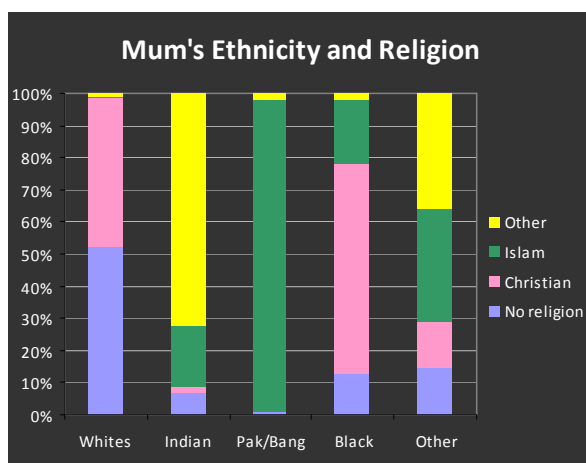
Among Christians and those of no religion, homogamy remains the norm, though less absolute. Christian fathers (70%) are more likely to live with a fellow believer than Christian mothers (59%). Non-religious fathers (66%) are less likely to live with a fellow non-believer than non-religious mothers (76%).



RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC HOMOGAMY

Within all ethnic groups except whites, association with religion is the norm.

Some 99% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers are religious, almost all of whom Muslim. Among Indian mothers, 93% are religious. Among black mothers, 88% are religious, three in four of whom are Christian and one in four Muslim. In contrast only 47% of white mothers are religious, almost all of whom Christians.

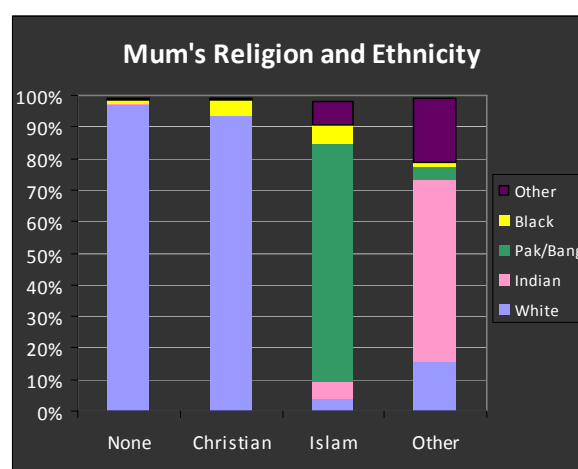


With the exception of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, fathers are slightly less likely to be religious. Among Indian fathers, 92% are religious. Among black fathers, 81% are religious, whereas only 41% of white fathers are religious, almost all of whom Christian.

Looking at this from the other direction, religion tends to be concentrated with certain ethnic groups.

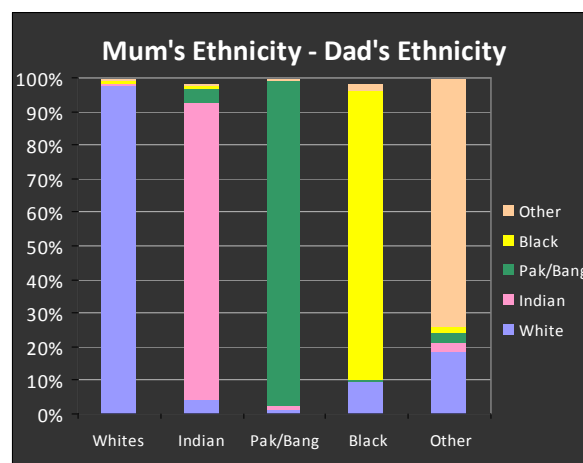
Some 97% of mothers with no religion are white, as are 93% of Christians. 75% of Muslims are from Pakistan or Bangladesh. 58% of mothers following other religions are Indians.

These figures are broadly similar for fathers.



Within ethnic groups, the degree of homogamy is even stronger. 97% of white mothers live with white men. 96% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers are homogamous, as are 89% of Indian mothers and 86% of black mothers.

Among fathers, the figures are broadly similar with the exception of black fathers, of whom 73% are homogamous. 21% of black fathers live with white mothers compared to only 10% of black mothers with white fathers.

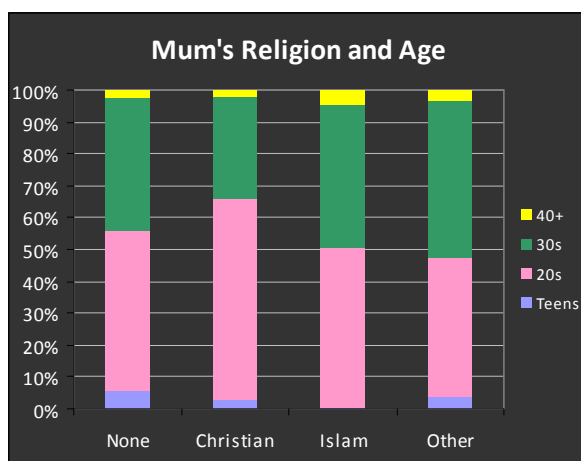


AGE

Among religious groups, Christian mothers are generally younger. Among ethnic groups, Pakistani/Bangladeshi mothers are generally younger.

Although a higher proportion of both of these groups have babies in their 20s compared to other groups, these apparent differences may be exaggerated by small changes in the number of births just before and just after age thirty.

Teen births, however, are rare among all religious and ethnic groups, accounting for just 4% of all births. They are virtually non-existent among Indian parents and most common among mothers with no religion – accounting for 5.6% of births, compared to 2.8% of births to Christian mothers and 2.9% of births to Muslim mothers.



EDUCATION

Almost one in three new parents has little to no formal educational qualifications.

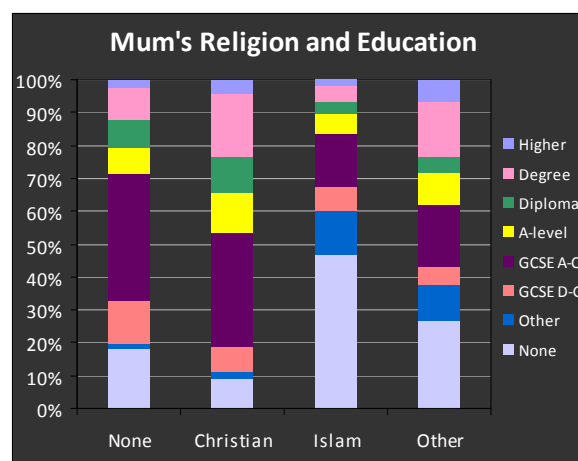
Among mothers, 10% have only GCSE grades D-G and a further 18% have no qualifications at all. Among fathers, 11% have only GCSE grades D-G and a further 21% have no qualifications at all.

Christian parents are least likely to have little to no formal educational qualification, comprising 17% of mothers and 24% of fathers.

Muslim parents are most likely to be unqualified, comprising 54% of mothers and 47% of fathers.

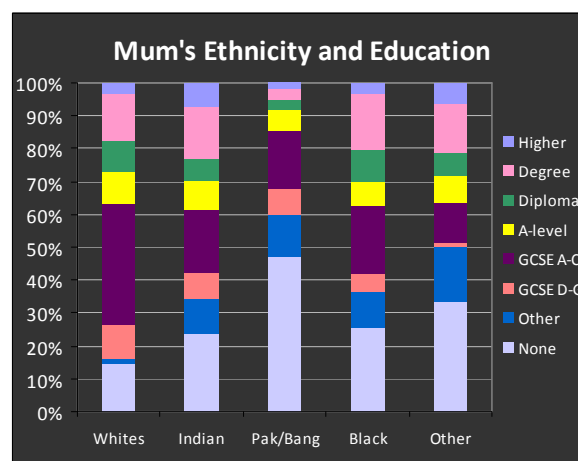
At the other end of the educational spectrum, 17% of mothers and 18% of fathers have either a first or higher degree.

Christians (23% of mothers and fathers) are most likely to have a degree, followed by non-religious mothers (12%) and fathers (15%), and Muslim mothers (7%) and fathers (14%).



Among ethnic groups, Pakistani/Bangladeshi parents are by far the least qualified group, comprising 55% of mothers and 50% of fathers. No other group exceeds 35%.

Degrees and higher degrees are most common among Indian fathers (31%), black fathers (25%), and Indian mothers (23%), and least common among Muslim mothers (7%) and fathers (14%), especially those from Pakistan/Bangladesh (5% and 11%).



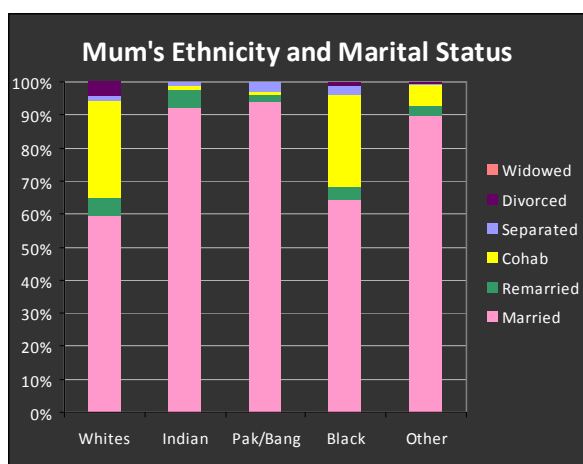
MARRIAGE AND COHABITATION

Among Muslim and Asian families, marriage is the norm and cohabitation is rare.

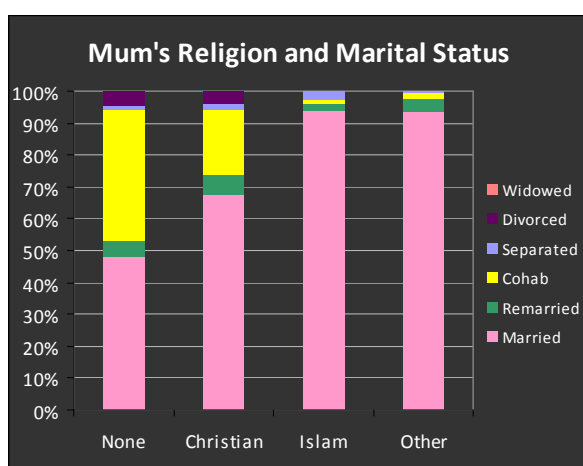
Whereas 94% of Muslim mothers and 89% of Muslim fathers are married, just 1% of Muslim mothers and 2% of Muslim fathers cohabit.

Figures are broadly similar for Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi parents, with over 90% married and less than 2% cohabiting.

Cohabitation is therefore a phenomenon almost entirely exclusive to whites and blacks, occurring among 30% of white mothers and 27% of white fathers, and 28% of black mothers and 27% of black fathers.



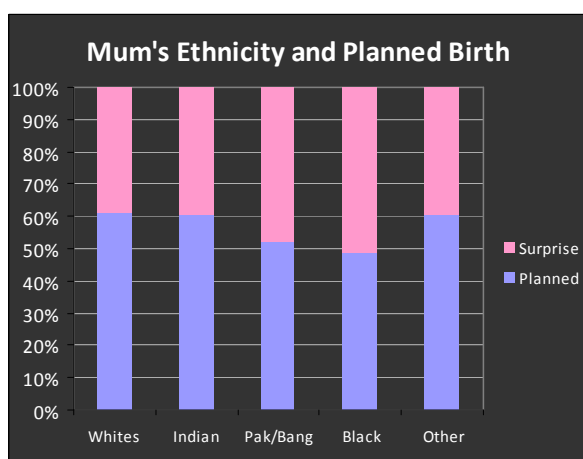
Cohabitation is most common of all among 41% of mothers and 34% of fathers who are non-religious, while accounting for 21% of both mothers and fathers who are Christian.



PLANNED BIRTH

Across the population as a whole – and most religious and ethnic groups – 60% of pregnancies are planned and 40% come as a surprise.

However among Pakistani/Bangladeshi, black and Christian mothers, the proportion of planned vs surprise pregnancies is nearer 50:50.



RELATIONSHIP HAPPINESS

Overall, most new parents are pretty happy with their relationship.

Whereas 84% of mothers are slightly happy or better, 35% are very happy.

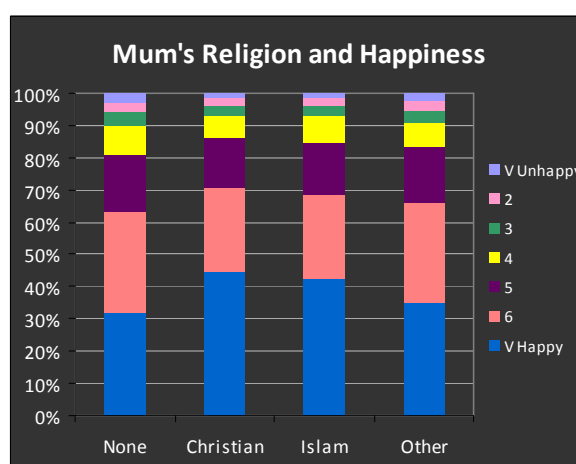
At the other end of the scale, 9% are slightly unhappy or worse whereas 3% are very unhappy.

Across religious and ethnic groups, there is little variation in overall happiness.

However, Christian (45%) and Muslim (43%) mothers are more likely to rate themselves very happy compared to those with no faith (32%).

Only Muslim (48%) fathers are more likely to rate themselves very happy compared to Christians (36%) and those with no faith (33%).

Both Pakistani/Bangladeshi mothers (45%) and fathers (47%) are more likely to rate themselves very happy compared to white (34%), black (40%) and Indian (40%) mothers, as well as white (34%), black (37%) and Indian (40%) fathers.



REGRESSION MODELS

Our regression models aim to identify the unique importance of each of these factors on whether couples would still be together or not when their child is aged eleven.

For our **Religion and Family Breakdown** models, we used data from the 8,043 mothers who had been part of a married or cohabiting couple in the original survey and who also responded to the later survey.

For our **Ethnicity and Family Breakdown** models, we applied similar principles and used data from a slightly larger sample of 8,894 mothers.

The tables at the end of this report show how the models progress, reading from left to right:

- **Model 1** looks at the frequency of *Religion* and *Ethnicity* and their effect on stability
- **Model 2** adds the background factors of *Mother's Age* and *Education*
- **Model 3** adds the *Marital Status* of the couple, whether Married or Cohabiting
- **Model 4** adds *Planned Birth* and *Relationship Happiness*, as measured by responses on a seven point scale to the question: *How happy/unhappy are you with your relationship.*

In each model, the column marked 'Sig' shows the statistical significance of each factor.

The column marked 'Odds' shows the odds ratios within each factor. These are only relevant if statistically significant (highlighted in yellow). Numbers above 1.00 mean greater odds of breaking up, all other factors being equal; numbers below 1.00 mean greater odds of staying together.

For example, using the [Religion and Family Breakdown](#) table and reading down the right hand side, labelled **Model 4**, the odds ratio for mothers in their teens splitting up is 2.44 compared to 1.00 for mothers in their 20s, all other factors remaining equal.

This does not mean that teen mothers are twice as likely to split up, rather that the odds of teen mothers splitting up are 144% higher than for equivalent mothers in their twenties.

The column marked 'Wald', shown only for **Model 4**, shows the relative importance of each factor: for example, Mother's Religion – with a Wald of 15 – is a far less important influence on subsequent stability than Relationship Happiness – with a Wald of 274.

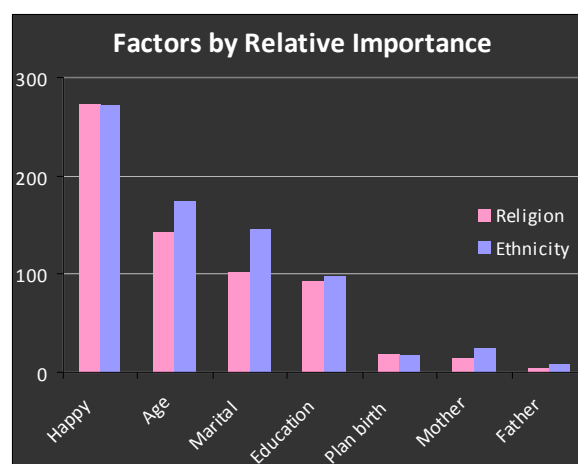
RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF FACTORS

In terms of relative importance, both Religion and Ethnicity rank at the bottom of the list of factors, based on Wald scores in **Model 4**.

Background and relational factors are all more important than Mother's or Father's Religion or Ethnicity.

Although Relationship Happiness is the strongest unique predictor of subsequent stability, this analysis provides further evidence that marriage has a unique and powerful effect on stability

above and beyond the influence of relationship quality – with which marriage also correlates.



REGRESSION MODEL RESULTS

As stated above, religion and ethnicity both have a relatively small influence on stability.

Taking [Religion and Family Breakdown](#) first, **Model 1** shows that Christian mothers and fathers have an apparent significant advantage over those with no religion. For mothers, the odds ratio is 1.51 times. For fathers, it is 1.22 times.

However, following through to **Model 3** renders these differences non-significant.

What this shows is that Christian parents only do better than non-religious parents due to the effects of age/education (**Model 2**) and marital status (**Model 3**).

A glance back at the profile of Christian mothers shows that they are more likely to be in their 20s, better educated and married, compared to non-religious mothers. The same is true for fathers.

So, more specifically, it is the combination of better education and being married that generates the greater stability Christians appear to have, rather than being a Christian *per se*.

The only religious group who maintain their advantage, regardless of age, education, marital status, planned birth or happiness are Muslim mothers. With an odds ratio of 0.31 shown in **Model 4**, their odds of breaking up are therefore 69% lower than Christian mothers with equivalent backgrounds.

The odds ratios in **Model 4** also show that both age and education show a linear relationship with stability, after controlling for the other factors.

The lack of change in odds ratios between **Model 2** and **Model 4** also suggests that the influence of age and education is largely unaffected by relational factors.

Marital status also has a significant effect on stability. Cohabiting partners and second marriages are both less stable than first marriages, with odds ratios of 1.64 and 1.86 respectively in **Model 4**.

Surprise pregnancy also reduces stability, with a higher odds ratio of 1.27 times.

Relationship happiness however shows a curvilinear link with stability.

Those who described their relationship as very unhappy, scoring 1 out of 7, appear to do as well as those who were quite happy, scoring between 5 and 6 out of 7. Those most unstable are those slightly unhappy partners, scoring 3 out of 7.

Now looking at **Ethnicity and Family Breakdown**, **Model 4** shows that the odds ratios for Indian, Pakistani & Bangladeshi mothers splitting up are 0.30 and 0.28, some 70-72% lower compared to white mothers.

A scan across to **Models 1, 2 and 3** shows that this relative advantage holds true regardless of the influence of age, education, marital status, planned birth and relationship happiness.

The main driver of this ethnicity advantage to mothers is that most of these groups are Muslim – as shown above.

In sharp contrast, the odds of black fathers splitting up are 1.92 times higher than for white fathers.

This effect in **Model 4** is only slightly reduced from **Models 1, 2 and 3** by the inclusion of the other background and relational factors.

Other factors show very similar effects and odds ratios to those shown in the previous table on **Religion and Family Breakdown**.

Age and education again have linear effects on stability, whereas relationship happiness has a curvilinear effect.

The odds of cohabiting relationships and second marriages ending are respectively 1.78 and 1.97 times higher than for first marriages.

Surprise birth is again associated with higher instability.

DISCUSSION

So far as we know, this is the first UK study to attempt to link the religion and ethnicity of individual parents with their subsequent family stability.

Our findings affirm our own and other previous UK research showing that age, education, marital status, ethnicity, planned birth and relationship happiness all have independent influence on subsequent couple stability (*Marsh & Perry, 2003; Benson, 2006; Crawford et al, 2013*).

Our findings on religion and ethnicity, applied independently to mothers and fathers, are new.

First of all, in profiling parents by their reported religion and ethnicity, we found very high rates of homogamy among all religions. Although we didn't analyse religious homogamy as a specific factor, we observed no *prima facie* evidence for a link with higher rates of marital satisfaction (*Myers, 2006*).

We also observed low to negligible rates of cohabitation among Muslim and Asian couples, and low rates of education among all groups, but especially among Muslim parents.

Indeed one of the most startling findings of this study is that 28% of all new mothers and 31% of all new fathers have GSCE Grade D qualification or less.

Christian parents are far less likely to be educationally unqualified in this way. Muslim mothers are three times as likely to be unqualified – and all non-Christians twice as likely – compared to Christian mothers.

Similarly, Christians are four times as likely to have a degree or higher compared to Muslim mothers and twice as likely compared to all non-Christian mothers.

Secondly, we found that higher rates of stability among Christians overall are in reality an artefact of education and marriage.

Christian mothers and fathers are both more likely to be better educated and married compared to equivalent non-religious parents. It is these factors – education and marriage – that make Christian parents apparently more stable, rather than a specific effect of being Christian.

This doesn't of course explain why Christians are more likely to be married and better educated. Although it seems implausible that better

education causes belief, it is eminently plausible that the Christian family worldview encourages both education and marriage.

Secondly, we found that Muslim mothers have higher rates of stability compared to any other group. This was regardless not just of the lower average level of education but also of the level of relationship happiness.

It might be tempting to imagine that Muslim mothers are only more likely to remain together with their (almost always) husband because they are in some way repressed.

Our findings rule this out as a potential explanation.

In fact, 31% more Muslim mothers report the highest level of relationship happiness compared to non-Muslim mothers. Conversely, 30% fewer Muslim mothers report either of the lowest two levels of unhappiness compared to non-Muslim mothers.

Higher stability among Muslim mothers then results in higher stability among Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers, of whom the overwhelming majority are Muslim, and also among Indian mothers, of whom a minority are Muslim.

Thirdly, we found that black fathers have lower rates of stability, even after taking into account age, education, marital status, planned birth and relationship happiness.

Somewhat astonishingly, the odds of a black father splitting up from his spouse or partner are 92% higher than the odds for a white father.

In summary, our findings reveal the significant effect of both education and marital status on subsequent stability as a couple.

But they also reveal that Muslim mothers appear to have a cultural advantage – above and beyond background and relational factors – in terms of their odds of staying together while bringing up children, whereas black fathers appear to have a cultural disadvantage.

Having revealed these differences, the challenge for further research in the UK is to explain them.

One notable avenue is to explore how the 39% of parents who identified themselves as Christian in the Millennium Cohort Study differ from the 7.6% of the population in the year 2000 estimated to attend church regularly (*Brierley, 2008*).

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RELIGION AND FAMILY BREAKDOWN

	N	MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 3		MODEL 4		
		Sig.	Odds	Sig.	Odds	Sig.	Odds	Wald	Sig.	Odds
MOTHER'S RELIGION										
(vs Christian)	3,719	0.00		0.00		0.00		15	0.00	
No religion	3,457	0.00	1.51	0.00	1.18	0.13	1.09	2	0.16	1.09
Islam	573	0.00	0.36	0.00	0.27	0.00	0.29	11	0.00	0.31
Other religion	294	0.17	0.67	0.07	0.59	0.14	0.64	2	0.14	0.64
FATHER'S RELIGION										
(vs Christian)	2,997	0.00		0.02		0.08		5	0.21	
No religion	4,157	0.00	1.22	0.01	1.16	0.05	1.12	2	0.17	1.08
Islam	598	0.17	1.54	0.55	1.22	0.33	1.38	0	0.51	1.24
Other religion	291	0.14	0.65	0.15	0.65	0.29	0.73	2	0.21	0.68
MOTHER'S AGE										
(vs 20s)	3,104			0.00		0.00		143	0.00	
Teens	154			0.00	3.15	0.00	2.59	32	0.00	2.44
30s	4,464			0.00	0.54	0.00	0.58	88	0.00	0.58
40s	321			0.00	0.47	0.00	0.44	29	0.00	0.42
MOTHER'S EDUCATION										
(vs GCSE grades A-C)	2,681			0.00		0.00		93	0.00	
Degree	1,458			0.00	0.42	0.00	0.47	60	0.00	0.49
Diploma	861			0.00	0.72	0.01	0.79	5	0.02	0.81
A levels	904			0.00	0.76	0.01	0.80	6	0.01	0.80
GCSE grades D-G	707			0.35	1.08	0.43	1.07	1	0.25	1.11
MARITAL STATUS										
(vs 1st Marriage)	5,445					0.00		102	0.00	
2nd marriage	451					0.00	1.80	31	0.00	1.86
Cohab	1,749					0.00	1.89	57	0.00	1.64
PLANNED PREGNANCY										
(vs Surprise)	2,741							18	0.00	1.27
RELATIONSHIP HAPPINESS										
(Vs Neither)	567							274	0.00	
Very unhappy	192							13	0.00	0.53
2	212							0	0.48	0.89
3	260							2	0.12	1.26
5	1,352							16	0.00	0.67
6	2,580							62	0.00	0.47
Very happy	2,880							155	0.00	0.30
CONSTANT	8,043	0.00	0.24	0.00	0.45	0.00	0.34	14	0.00	0.66

ETHNICITY AND FAMILY BREAKDOWN

		MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 3		MODEL 4		
	N	Sig.	Odds	Sig.	Odds	Sig.	Odds	Wald	Sig.	Odds
MOTHER's ETHNICITY										
(vs White)	7,855	0.00		0.00		0.00		25	0.00	
Indian	225	0.00	0.25	0.00	0.26	0.01	0.31	7	0.01	0.30
Pak/Bang	474	0.00	0.22	0.00	0.21	0.00	0.24	11	0.00	0.28
Black	150	0.02	0.54	0.02	0.53	0.07	0.62	2	0.20	0.71
Other	140	0.01	0.43	0.03	0.50	0.07	0.56	3	0.09	0.59
FATHER's ETHNICITY										
(vs White)	7,812	0.01		0.01		0.02		8	0.13	
Indian	230	0.97	0.99	0.86	0.93	0.95	1.02	0	0.86	0.93
Pak/Bang	485	0.10	1.77	0.57	1.24	0.30	1.47	0	0.51	1.28
Black	174	0.00	2.26	0.00	2.45	0.00	2.22	7	0.01	1.92
Other	129	0.99	1.00	0.86	0.95	0.82	1.07	0	0.93	1.03
MOTHER's AGE										
(vs 20s)	3,411			0.00		0.00		174	0.00	
Teens	163			0.00	2.95	0.00	2.33	27	0.00	2.18
30s	4,962			0.00	0.50	0.00	0.54	119	0.00	0.54
40s	358			0.00	0.41	0.00	0.40	39	0.00	0.38
MOTHER's EDUCATION										
(vs GCSE grades A-C)	2,951			0.00		0.00		97	0.00	
Degree	1,639			0.00	0.43	0.00	0.49	58	0.00	0.51
Diploma	945			0.00	0.75	0.03	0.82	4	0.06	0.84
A levels	990			0.00	0.74	0.01	0.80	6	0.01	0.80
GCSE grades D-G	759			0.05	1.18	0.09	1.15	4	0.06	1.17
MARITAL STATUS										
(vs 1st Marriage)	6,158					0.00		146		
2nd marriage	463					0.00	1.90	38	0.00	1.97
Cohab	1,851					0.00	2.03	87	0.00	1.78
PLANNED PREGNANCY										
(vs Surprise)	3,033							17	0.00	1.25
RELATIONSHIP HAPPINESS										
(vs Neither)	3,188							272	0.00	
Very Unhappy	208							11	0.00	0.55
2	229							2	0.22	0.82
3	278							3	0.11	1.26
5	608							16	0.00	0.68
6	1,513							62	0.00	0.48
Very happy	2,870							154	0.00	0.31
CONSTANT	8,894	0.00	0.31	0.00	0.52	0.00	0.36	16	0.00	0.67