

Strengthening Malay/Muslim Marriages: From Risk to Resilience

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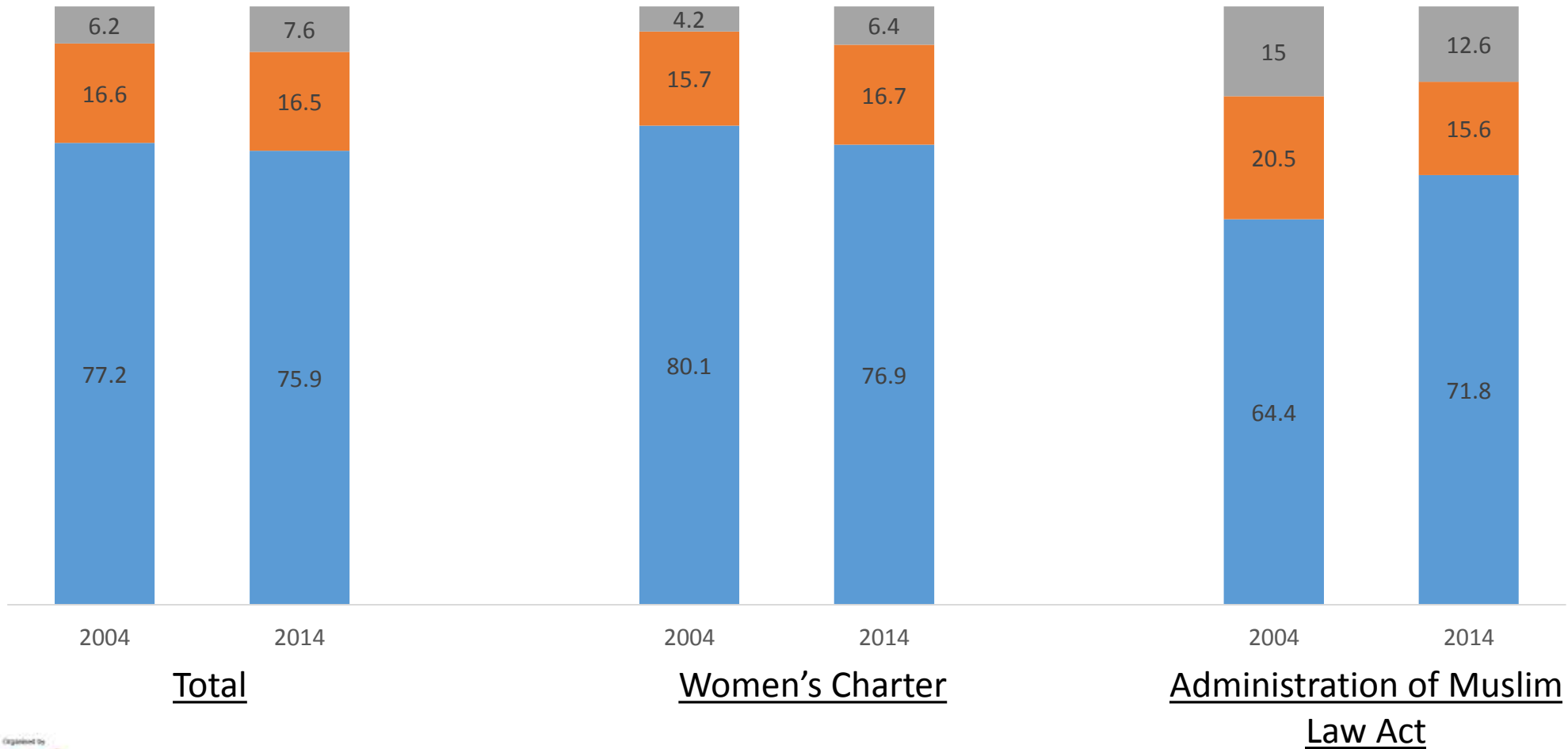
Overview

- Marriage and Divorce Trends Among Muslims in Singapore
- Review of International Research on Divorce and Marital Satisfaction/Interventions
- Are there cultural elements in the experience of marital satisfaction?
- What accounts for marriage resilience?
- Implications

MARRIAGES AND DIVORCE TRENDS AMONG MUSLIMS IN SINGAPORE

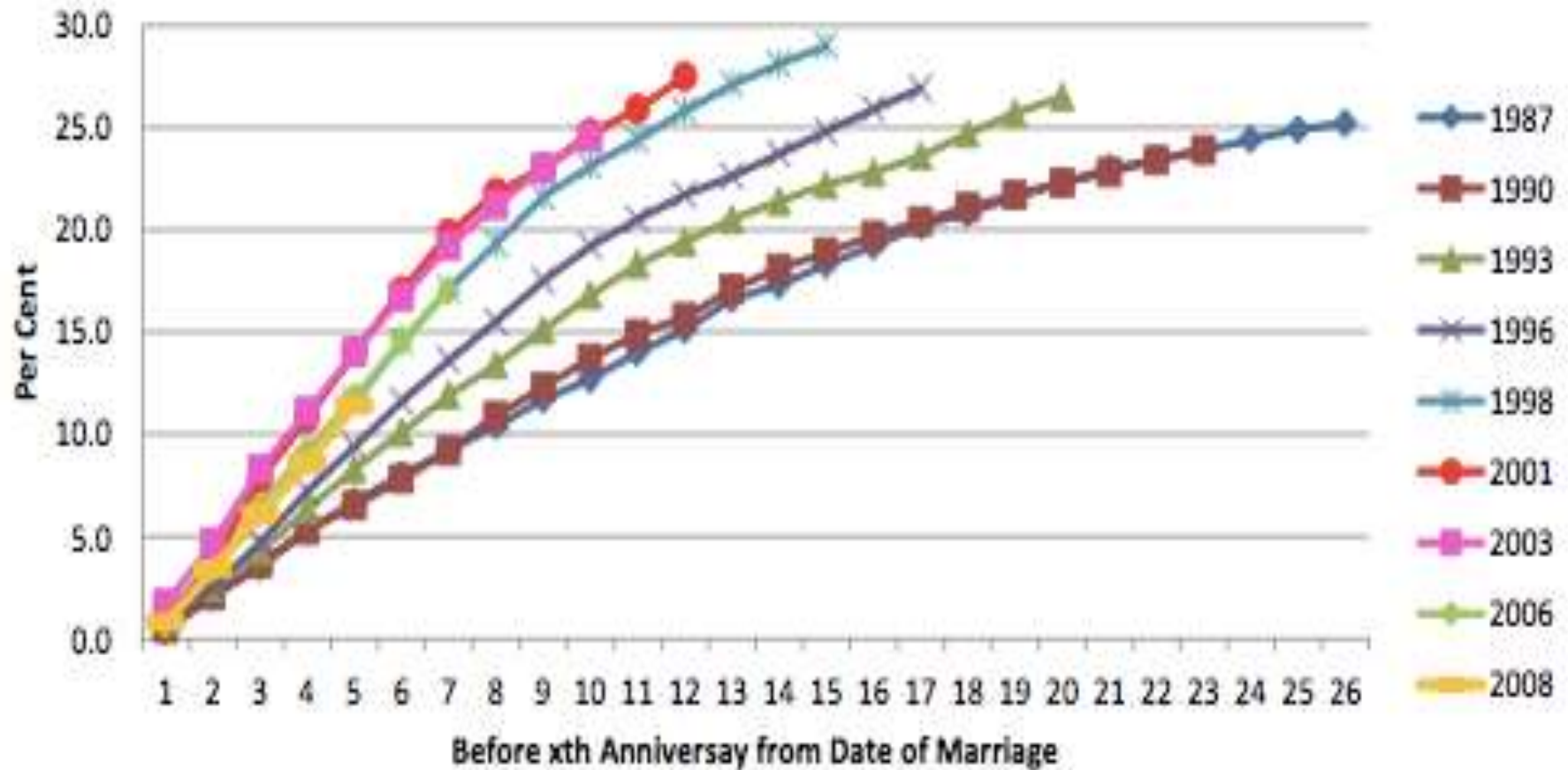
Proportion of Marriages by Marriage Order, 2004 and 2014

■ First marriage, both partners ■ Remarriage, one partner ■ Remarriage, both partners



Cumulative Proportion of Dissolved Marriages before Xth Anniversary

Muslim Marriages



Source: *Dissolution of Marriages across Cohorts, MSF, 2015*

Cumulative Proportion of Dissolved Muslim Marriages for Males by Age Group of Marriage

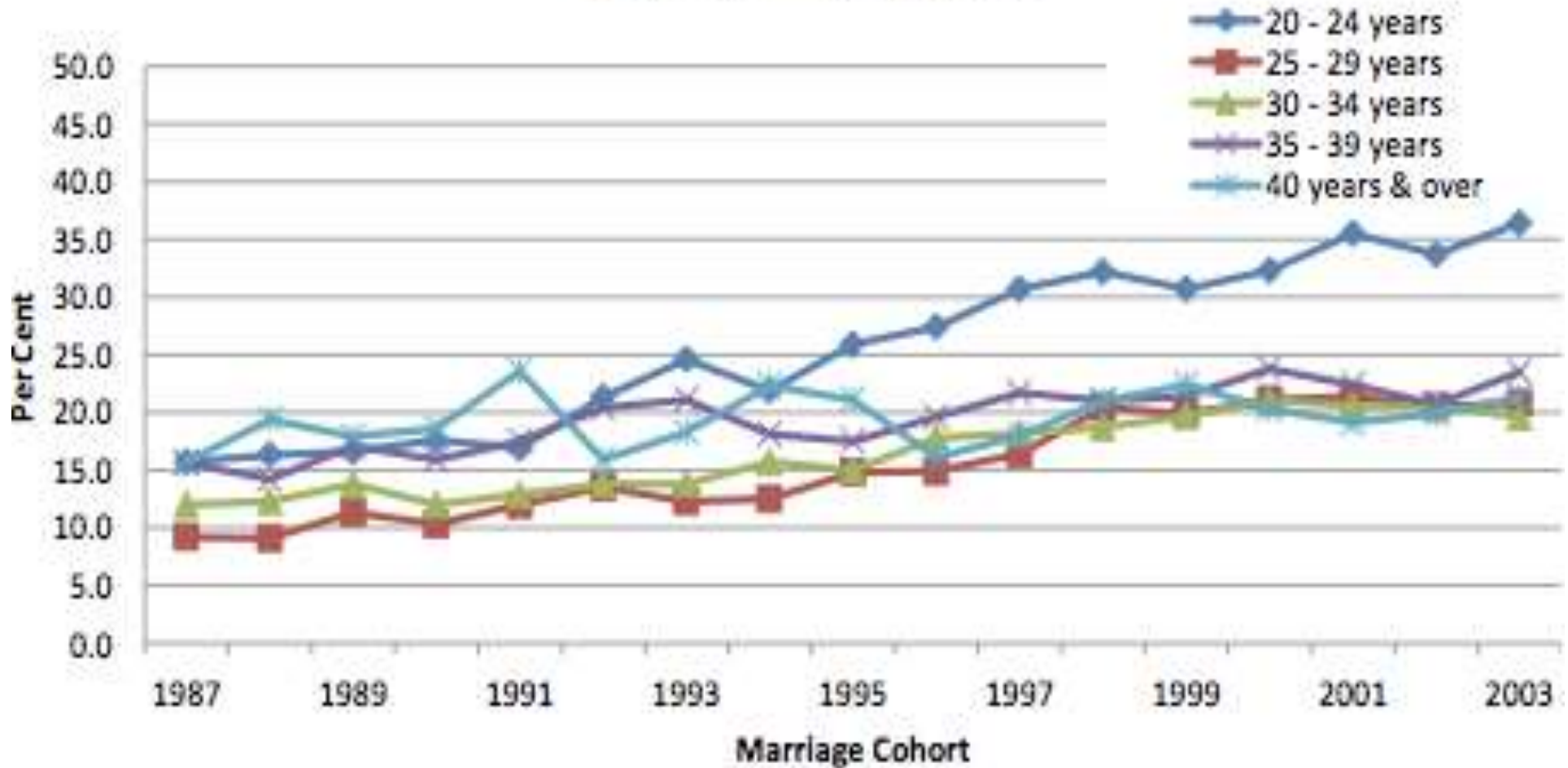
Before 5th Anniversary



Source: *Dissolution of Marriages across Cohorts, MSF, 2015*

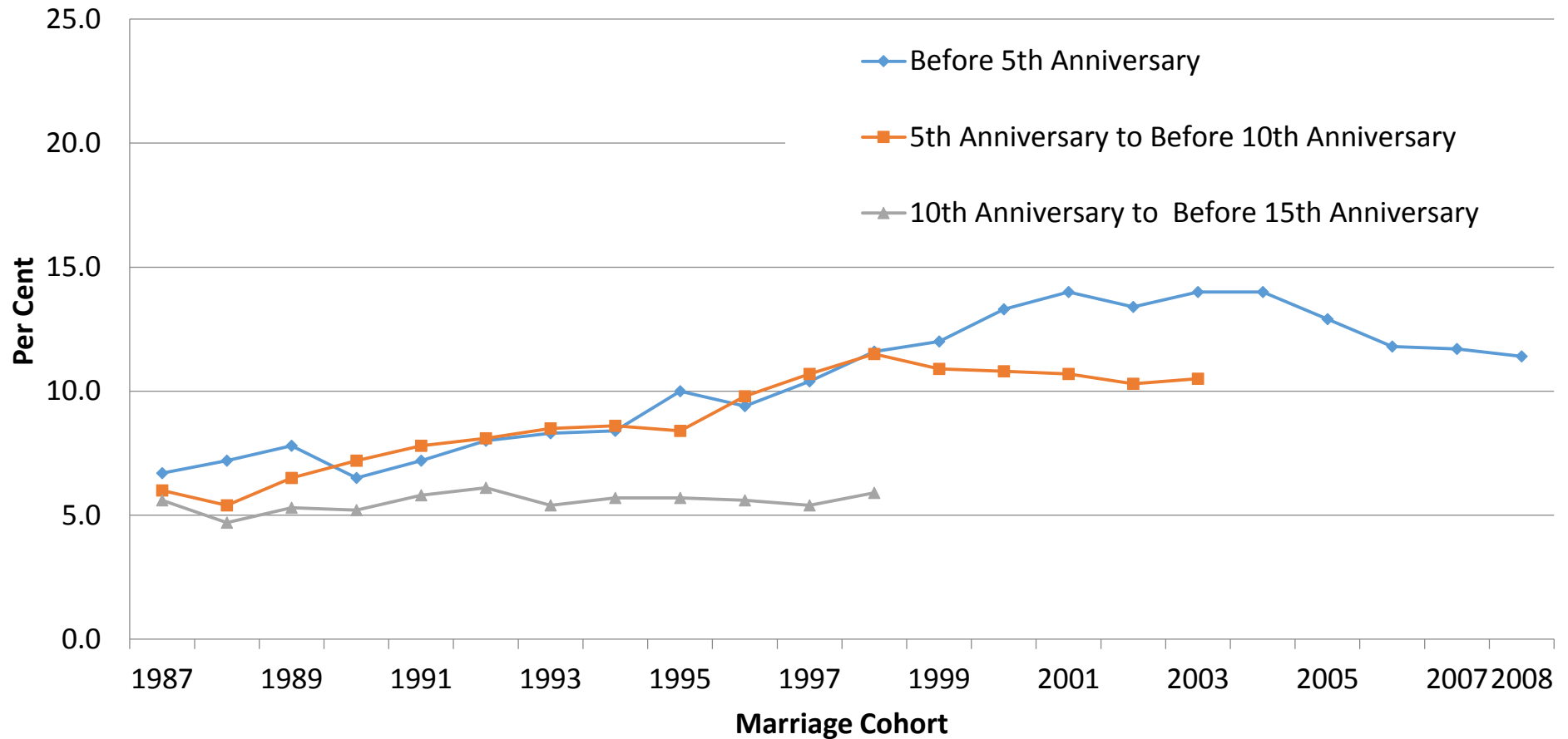
Cumulative Proportion of Dissolved Muslim Marriages for Males by Age Group of Marriage

Before 10th Anniversary



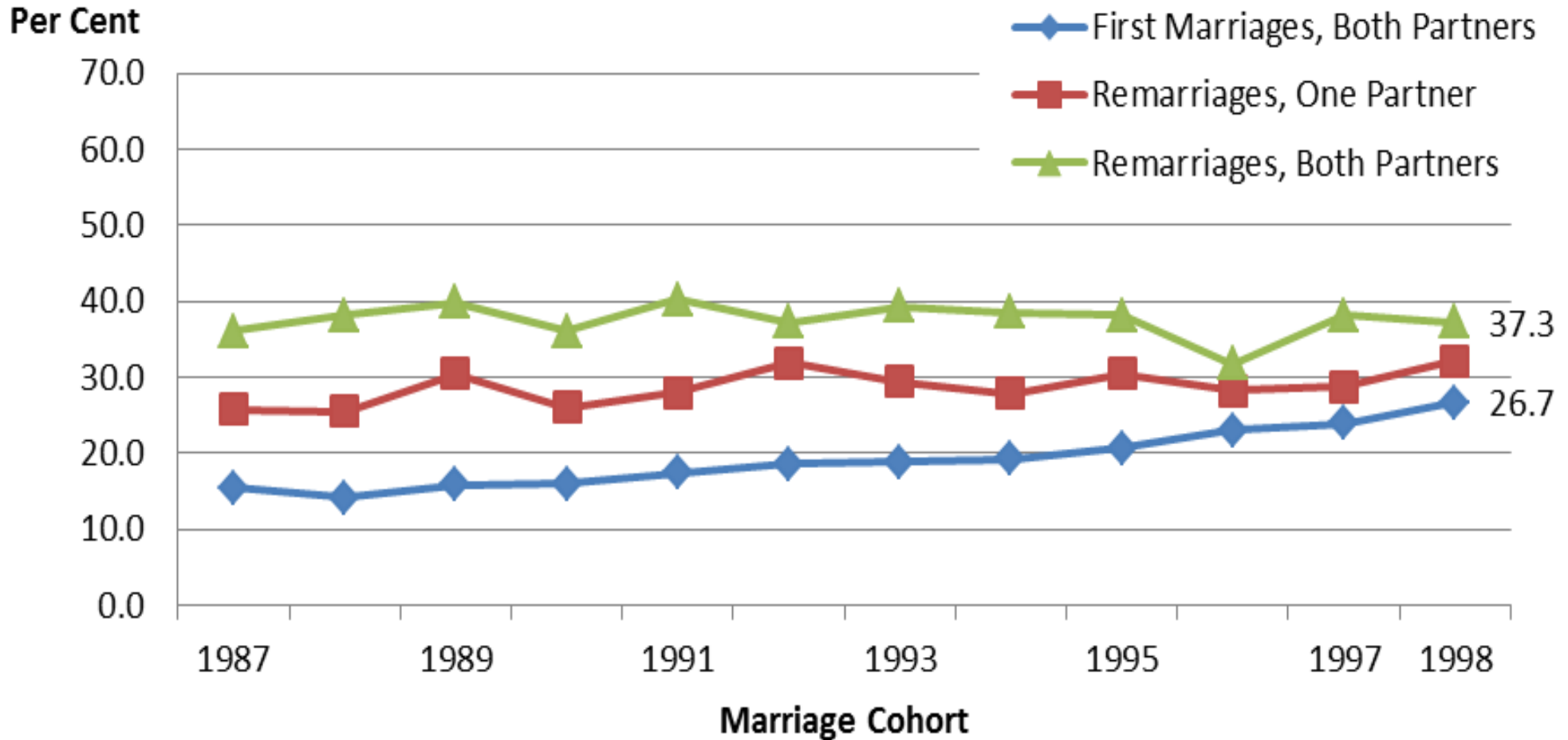
Source: *Dissolution of Marriages across Cohorts, MSF, 2015*

Cumulative Proportion of Dissolved Muslim Marriages by Duration of Marriage



Source: *Dissolution of Marriages across Cohorts, MSF, 2015*

Cumulative Proportion of Dissolved Muslim Marriages before 15th Anniversary, by Marriage Order of Couple



Source: *Dissolution of Marriages across Cohorts, MSF, 2015*

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH ON DIVORCE, MARITAL SATISFACTION & MARRIAGE INTERVENTIONS

International Findings: Divorce and its effects

- Poorer educational outcomes
- Poorer psychological well-being
- Poorer relationship with non-custodial parent
- Decline in standard of living
- Better outcomes for children when parents remained married even when the relationship was conflictual.

International Findings: Adults with divorced parents

- “Greater unhappiness, less satisfaction with life, a weaker sense of personal control and more symptoms of anxiety and depression’
- Less satisfied with their own marriage
- More likely to see their marriage end in divorce
- Intergenerational transmission of divorce

Facilitators of staying married (1)

- **Demographic**
 - SES, religion, age when married
- **Ability of couple to achieve**
 - agreement
 - balance and equity
 - balance work and family
 - Positive communication
 - Intimacy in relationship

Facilitators of staying married (2)

- **Personal dispositions/traits**
 - Commitment
 - Optimism
 - Propensity to forgive
- **Skills**
 - Stress coping
 - Problem solving

Facilitators of staying married (3)

- **Beliefs**

- Gender role/ideology
- Permanence of marriage

- **Availability of social support**

- Family
- Friends
- Work place
- Religion

What “forces” couples to stay together?

- Inertia
- High social, psychological and economic costs of divorce
- Moral constraints
- Parenting needs

What Accounts for Declines in Marriage Satisfaction?

- Caregiver stress – re-organisation of the family system with new child or ailing older person
- Stress is moderated depending on whether the family is blended
- In-law relationships
- Conflicts about the vision of a marriage and marital roles
- Lack of social support

The Value of Intervention

- Well established results in terms of short term value for couple's marital satisfaction
- Recent study (Rogge et al, 2013)
 - Using properly controlled experimental groups shows that over 3 years, those with any intervention dissolved at 11% compared to those with no intervention (24%)
- Type of intervention did not matter

Rogge, R.D., Cobb, R.J., Johnson, M.D., Lawrence, E., & Bradbury, T.N. (2013). Is skills training necessary for the primary prevention of marital distress and dissolution: A 3-year experimental study of three interventions. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 81*, 949-961.

ARE THERE CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN MARITAL SATISFACTION?

Predictors of Marital Satisfaction among Malays

- I used an academic study on marriage and parenthood led by A/P Paulin Straughan (Department of Sociology, NUS) completed in 2008.
- Sample is nationally representative of about 1500 married respondents below 45 years
- My analysis focused on the Malay sub-sample (approx. 200 respondents)

Agreement to Statements on Marital Satisfaction By Race

Agreement to Statements	Malay	Overall
I know what my spouse expects of me in our marriage	91.8%	86.7%
I feel that I am fully able to handle the demands of my marriage	92.6%	86.8%
My life would seem empty without my marriage	83.3%	75.3%
I have to look outside my marriage for those things that make life worthwhile and interesting	36.5%	45.0%
I expect my marriage to give me increasing satisfaction the longer it continues	92.7%	91.3%

Agreement to Statements on Marital Satisfaction By Race

Agreement to Statements	Malay	Overall
I worry a lot about my marriage	30.9%	24.8%
I can always trust my spouse	90.8%	89.9%
I become upset, angry, or irritable because of things that occur in my marriage	17.2%	25.1%
If I can start all over again, I would marry someone other than my spouse	9.2%	10.8%
I have definite difficulty confiding in my spouse	17.4%	20.6%

Agreement to Statements on Marital Satisfaction By Education

Agreement to Statements	Lower sec & below	Completed Sec	Dip/ Deg
I know what my spouse expects of me in our marriage	89.2%	89.9%	100.0%
I feel that I am competent and fully able to handle the demands of my marriage	87.9%	92.8%	90.6%
My life would seem empty without my marriage	83.3%	79.8%	93.8%
I have to look outside my marriage for those things that make life worthwhile and interesting	41.7%	38.5%	26.7%
I expect my marriage to give me increasing satisfaction the longer it continues	83.8%	94.7%	96.9%

Organized by



Agreement to Statements on Marital Satisfaction By Education

Agreement to Statements	Lower sec & below	Completed Sec	Dip/ Deg
I worry a lot about my marriage	51.4%	27.8%	15.6%
I can always trust my spouse	86.5%	89.7%	96.9%
I become upset, angry, or irritable because of things that occur in my marriage	29.7%	11.6%	18.8%
If I can start all over again, I would marry someone other than my spouse	17.9%	8.7%	6.3%
I have definite difficulty confiding in my spouse	35.1%	15.2%	10.0%

Who reports greater marital satisfaction among Malays?

- Based on regression analysis of survey data, for Malays after controlling for age of marriage, education, number of children, work status etc those who reported greater marital satisfaction:
 - Women;
 - Those who held more traditional gender role beliefs
 - Those who rated religion as important to their lives

Gender Role beliefs (Malay females) By Education

Agreement to Statements	Lower sec & below	Comp Sec	Dip/ Deg
It is better for the husband to be the breadwinner and the wife to be the homemaker	84.2%	76.0%	55.6%
Ideally, the mother should take care of her children full-time	84.2%	80.4%	61.1%
No matter how hard they try, men will never be good at housework	57.9%	51.0%	22.2%
Even if the wife works, her job should be supplementary to her husband's	84.2%	79.6%	66.7%
It is perfectly fine if a wife works and her husband stays home to take care of the children.	15.8%	20.0%	41.2%

WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR MARRIAGE RESILIENCE IN SINGAPORE?

Observations of Marital Problems

- Although problems were highly complex, couples did not divorce.
- Major couple crisis were often the result of gradual relationship breakdown.
- Couple problems often compounded by external stressors.
- Couples experience greater difficulty resolving problems when the problems are perceived as trust issues.
- Marital problems as disappointment with ideals.

- Study commissioned by MCYS in 2012, I was the PI
- The findings of this study is based on in-depth interviews with 185 people representing 100 local marriages
- Complemented with 408 surveys
- Not representative of the population
- Respondents were diverse in terms of ethnic and religious identity.
- Respondents were varied in terms of their social economic status - housing type, income and profession, age and the length of marriage.
- Findings I present here are of the entire sample although the Malay-Muslim respondents were not too different

Areas of Couple Disagreement

- Based on the survey, respondents who often thought about divorce— had many more disagreements in various areas such as:
 - Family finances
 - Recreation
 - Friends
 - Conventionality (correct or proper behaviour in different settings)
 - Philosophy of life
 - Ways to handle parents/in-laws
 - Aims, goals and important things
 - Amount of time spent together
 - Making major decisions
 - Household tasks
 - Leisure time, interests and activities
 - Career
 - Children
- This group was less likely to calmly discuss things and have meals together, more likely to leave the house after a fight, tend to view their partners and relationship less positively.

Seeking Help for Marital Woes

- Preference among couples to resolve conflicts on their own.
- Seek advice from family and friends.
- Enroll in community based marriage education programmes

Seeking Professional Help

- A good proportion did not use professional counselling help.
- Those who did were often persuaded by family members.
- More accepting of counselling when they realize that separation may be imminent
- Court system
- Those who attended marriage education programmes before were less apprehensive about seeking counselling help.
- Prior positive encounters with counsellors in marriage education programmes.
- While some benefitted from marriage counselling, a number of couples reported receiving little help from counselling although counsellor was well trained.
- Some tried a second counsellor and this time they were more satisfied
- Main issues – lack of connection with counsellor

Trigger Points for Positive Change

- Wives were more aware of the deterioration of the relationship compared to husbands.
- Recognition that their children would be unnecessarily affected by their crisis.
- Some couples had heard their young children's pleas for them to be on better terms.
- Short-term separation to allow for cooling and reflection.
- For some men, the possibility of losing their wife.
- What a counsellor/significant person said which provided a new way of approaching the relationship.
- Confronting themselves with the realities of life after divorce.
- One partner as the main catalyst for change.

What helped couples continue in their marital commitment despite marital problems?

- Children
- Mitigating qualities of partners
- Deep connection couple had built over the years
- Accepting partner by taking collective responsibility for the problem
- Value of commitment
- Social support and network
 - Family and friends
- Marital counselling
- New coping methods – changing expectation of their spouse, the marriage
- Practical considerations – difficulties in obtaining a divorce (e.g. splitting the house, alimony, maintenance, etc)

Constraints or Dedication to Keep People together

- Based on quantitative analysis, couples stayed on in their relationship not because of the constraints (from moral persuasions, social pressure, lack of availability of alternatives or the structural investment) but because of their dedication:
 - Dedication to the couple identity.
 - Dedication to the relationship agenda.
 - Dedication to the broader ideal of commitment
 - Dedication to the ideal of sacrifice and finding fulfillment in this
 - Dedication to not look for other alternatives

There is inevitably a deep connection that married couples feel which makes them dedicated to stay on in their relationship.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications

- Need for culturally nuanced approaches when working with marriages
- Need to tailor intervention for more vulnerable groups - young marriages, grooms who are younger, remarriages, those of lower income
 - Need a more integrated and coordinated supportive ecosystem.
- Programme content/delivery approaches to take into account gender, education levels etc.

Implications

- Cannot ignore the role that social networks – family, friends and the community have in strengthening marriages
- For Malay/Muslims, the community is very important and community based interventions might prove very valuable
- Ultimately it is important to inculcate good norms in marriages – eg building dedication to the broader ideals of marriage; seeking help when there are problems