

THE THIRD FIELD™ · WHITE PAPER

The Promise Is Not the Moment

*Why we stage commitments as moments, and why the thing
being celebrated is a conversation that has to keep going*

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A wedding is one of the few occasions on which two people say out loud, in front of witnesses, what they intend to be to each other. It is also, for most couples, the last such occasion. Everything the promise will actually be tested by — where to live, whether to have a child, whose career bends, what happens when one of you changes — arrives afterwards, unstaged, unattended, and usually undiscussed until a decision forces it. This paper argues that the ceremony is doing something real and worth keeping, that what it does is more specific than we generally think, and that the transitions we do not mark are the ones couples end up disagreeing about. It is written for people who like the ritual and would like more of what the ritual is actually for.

AT A GLANCE

The argument in five steps

1 We measure the event to four figures and the relationship not at all.

The wedding industry publishes an average American wedding cost annually, currently \$34,000. There is no comparable measurement of what couples invest in preparing the relationship, because nobody collects it. The asymmetry in what gets counted is the argument of this paper in miniature.

2 Couples disagree about their own history, and it is not random.

Asked separately when the turning points in their relationship happened, married couples frequently gave different answers — and disagreement concentrated in exactly the transitions no ritual had marked. Discordance was associated with lower marital quality.

3 What the ceremony does is make the promise public, not expensive.

In the same study that found higher wedding spending associated with shorter marriages, having more guests present was associated with substantially lower risk. The durable variable is how witnessed the commitment was, not how much it cost.

4 The transitions that follow are larger than the one we stage.

Across 145,139 participants, relationship satisfaction falls reliably after a first child. In an eight-year prospective study the deterioration did not recover — it persisted for the remainder of the study. Nobody holds a ceremony for it.

5 Preparation evidence is weaker than the industry that sells it implies.

The best-known meta-analysis reported a large effect for premarital programmes. A later meta-analysis, co-authored by the same researcher, found the effect on relationship quality disappeared once unpublished studies were included. Communication improves; whether the marriage lasts is almost never measured.

6 The risk has moved to the years we treat as safe.

Divorce among women under 35 has fallen sharply since 1990. Among women 55 to 64 it has roughly tripled, and among women 65 and over it is nearly five times what it was. The conversation that fails is increasingly the one in year thirty.

1

What gets counted

The Knot Worldwide surveys its members annually and reports an average American wedding cost of \$34,000, excluding the engagement ring and the honeymoon.¹ The figure should be read with its provenance in view: it is produced by a wedding marketplace, from a sample of its own registered users, which means it describes couples already engaged with the wedding industry rather than all couples. It almost certainly runs high. It is also, for want of anything better, the number the entire trade works from.

Now try to find the other number — what couples spend, in money or hours, preparing the relationship rather than the event. We looked. There is no credible figure, from any source. What exists is content-farm material and the marketing pages of counselling practices. Nobody measures it, which is a reasonable indication of how seriously it is treated.

THE ASYMMETRY IS THE ARGUMENT

One side of this is measured to four significant figures, updated every year, and reported in the trade press. The other side is not measured at all. That is not because the second thing matters less. It is because the first is a transaction with vendors attached and the second is a conversation with nobody selling it.

2

Couples disagree about their own history

The most useful finding in this literature is also the least known, and it is worth stating carefully because it is the empirical core of everything that follows.

Halpern-Meehin and Tach asked 1,504 married couples, separately, when the transitions in their courtship had taken place. When did you start dating? When did you begin staying over? When did you move in? Disagreement between spouses was common. More interestingly, it was not evenly distributed: it concentrated in what the researchers call the less institutionalised stages — dating, staying over, moving in — rather than in the stages that carry a recognised marker. And couples who disagreed about their own history reported lower marital quality.²

Their interpretation is the one that matters here. Couples with differing accounts of their courtship may simply not have had clear discussions or rituals marking the turning points. Where a transition was marked — proposed to, announced, celebrated — both people came away holding the same account of what had happened. Where it was slid through, each formed a private version, and neither knew the other was holding a different one.

This is a finding about ceremony that defends ceremony. The wedding is not decoration on top of a relationship. It is one of the very few mechanisms a couple has for establishing that they both understand the same thing to have occurred. The difficulty is not that we hold ceremonies. It is that we hold one, near the beginning, for a promise whose contents will be decided almost entirely by events that come later.

3

What a ceremony actually does

If ritual produces shared understanding, it is worth asking which part of the ritual does the work. There is a partial and interesting answer, and it points away from the part the industry sells.

Francis-Tan and Mialon surveyed 3,151 ever-married American adults about their weddings and their marriages. Higher spending was associated with higher risk of divorce: couples spending \$20,000 or more faced roughly 1.6 times the hazard of the baseline group among women, and spending \$1,000 or less was associated with roughly half the hazard among men. The engagement ring showed the same direction.³

Buried in the same results is a variable moving the opposite way. Having 101 to 200 guests was associated with about a third of the baseline hazard. Having a honeymoon, at any cost, was associated with a lower hazard too. Spending more predicts worse; being witnessed by more people predicts better. These are not the same variable, and the press coverage in 2014 and 2015 reported only the first.

A separate longitudinal study by Rhoades and Stanley, following 418 people into marriage, found the same association from the other direction: more guests at the wedding, higher marital quality, holding education, religiosity, race and income constant.⁴ Their formulation is hard to improve on — building social capital trumps burning economic capital.

WHAT THESE STUDIES CANNOT TELL YOU

None of this is causal, and the authors say so. A couple that invites two hundred people may simply be a couple with two hundred people in their life, which is a different kind of advantage. Francis-Tan and Mialon note their sample is younger, whiter and more educated than the country, recruited online, and asked to recall spending from years earlier. We cite the direction of these findings, not their magnitude, and we would not tell anyone to spend less on the strength of them.

What survives the caveats is a reasonable hypothesis about mechanism. A promise made in front of people is harder to revise privately. Witnesses do not merely attend; they hold a version of what was said, and that shared version is exactly what Halpern-Meekin and Tach found missing at the unmarked transitions. The expensive parts of a wedding are the parts with vendors. The durable part may be the part with a room full of people in it.

4

The transitions nobody stages

The wedding marks the beginning of the commitment. The events that determine what the commitment actually requires are almost all later, and not one of them has a ceremony.

Take the largest. A meta-analysis pooling 49 studies and 145,139 participants found relationship satisfaction declining reliably after a first child — a modest but consistent effect, for mothers and fathers alike, in the first year and again in the second.⁵ The more revealing study is smaller and prospective: Doss and colleagues followed 218 couples across the first eight years of marriage, comparing those who became parents with those who did not. Parents showed a sudden deterioration after the birth, on observed behaviour as well as self-report, and it did not recover. It persisted for the remainder of the study.⁶

Read that alongside section two. This is a transition of the first magnitude, it permanently changes what two people are to each other, and it is marked by a shower and a hospital bag. There is no moment at which the couple says out loud, to each other and preferably to someone else, what they now understand themselves to have agreed to. So each of them forms a private account of it, and the conditions for discordance are exactly met.

The same structure applies to the other unstaged transitions: the move for one person's job, the illness of a parent, the career that quietly becomes the secondary one, the year the money changes, the children leaving. Each alters the terms. None is announced. Each is absorbed into a promise made years earlier, under different conditions, in language general enough to survive almost anything — which is precisely the property that lets two people carry different versions of it for a decade.

5

What preparation can and cannot claim

Anyone arguing that couples should prepare more has an obligation to be honest about what preparation has been shown to do. The record is more mixed than the field generally admits, and a paper that overstated it would be making the same error it is describing.

The best-known figure has been superseded

A 2003 meta-analysis reported a large effect for premarital prevention programmes, around $d = .80$. A 2010 meta-analysis of 47 studies, co-authored by one of the original researchers, found that the effect on relationship quality disappeared once unpublished studies were included. The first result was inflated by publication bias.^{7 8}

Communication does improve

A larger meta-analysis covering 117 studies and more than 500 effect sizes found effects of roughly $d = .30$ to $.36$ for relationship quality and $d = .43$ to $.45$ for communication skills in experimental studies. Real, moderate, and more reliable for skills than for satisfaction.⁹

Whether the marriage lasts is almost never measured

The authors of that meta-analysis note plainly that outcomes of most interest — relationship stability, aggression — have rarely been studied. The field can demonstrate that couples communicate better afterwards. It largely cannot demonstrate that they stay together.⁹

The intervention evidence at transitions is promising and thin

A controlled trial of a two-day workshop for couples expecting a first child found marital quality stable in the workshop group and declining in controls at one year. The trial had 38 couples. That is a hypothesis worth taking seriously, not an established effect.¹⁰

We draw a narrow conclusion from this. There is decent evidence that structured conversation improves how couples talk to each other, weaker evidence that it changes outcomes, and almost no evidence either way about the transitions that come later, because nobody has studied them. What we offer is not a treatment with a proven effect on marital survival, and we will not describe it as one. It is a structured occasion for two people to find out what each of them currently believes was agreed.

6

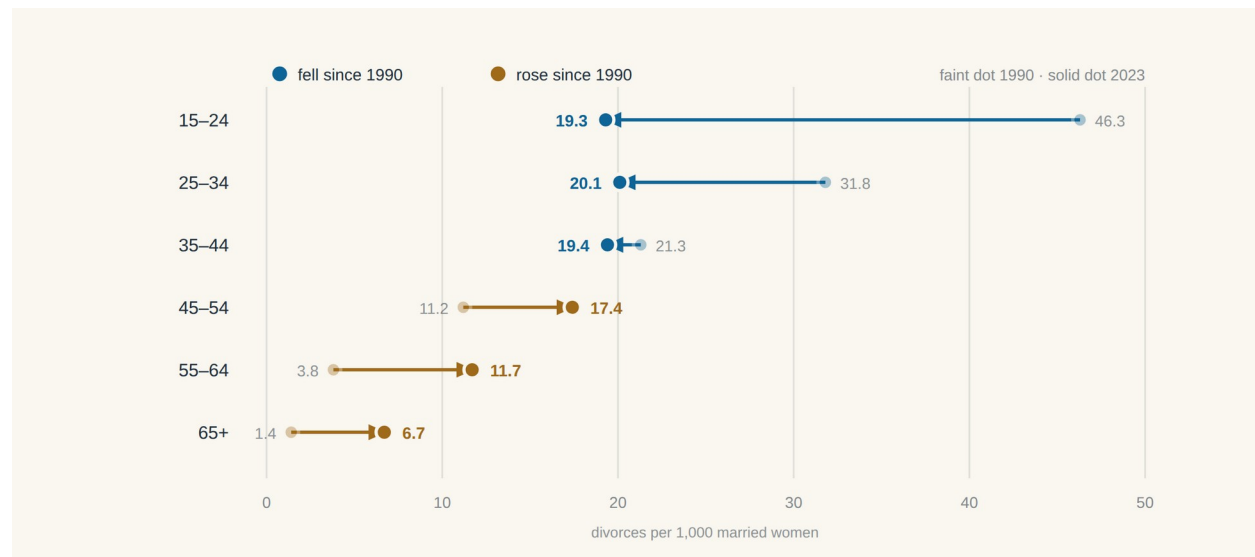
The risk has moved

One more piece of evidence changes where attention should go, and it is almost entirely absent from how the wedding and anniversary trade thinks about its customers.

First, a correction. The familiar claim that half of marriages end in divorce is a projection made for couples marrying around 1980, at the historical peak of American divorce. It was never a measured rate, it has not been updated, and it is too high for couples marrying today: the refined divorce rate has fallen from about 22.8 per thousand married women at that peak to 14.2 in 2024.^{11 12}

The aggregate decline, though, conceals a reversal underneath it.

EXHIBIT 1 Where divorce happens now



Refined divorce rate per 1,000 married women, 1990 against 2023. Among women 65 and over the rate is nearly five times what it was; among women under 25 it has more than halved.

Divorce used to be predominantly an event of the early years — a failure of a young marriage. It is becoming an event of the later ones. Among women aged 55 to 64 the rate has roughly tripled since 1990; among women 65 and over it has risen from 1.4 to 6.7 per thousand.¹³ Meanwhile the rate among women under 25 has fallen by well over half.

Two honest caveats. Some of the aggregate decline is a measurement artefact rather than a real improvement; work by Kennedy and Ruggles found that vital statistics and retrospective surveys after 1990 understate marital instability, and that age-standardised divorce actually rose between 1990 and 2008, doubling among people over 35.¹⁴ And the age bands above are cross-sectional, not a single cohort followed through life. But the direction is not in dispute, and it is the opposite of the industry's assumption.

WHAT THIS MEANS COMMERCIALLY, STATED PLAINLY

Anniversaries, vow renewals and milestone celebrations are sold as the safe, sentimental end of the market — the couple who made it. The data say this is the segment where risk is rising fastest. That is not a reason to sell them anxiety. It is a reason to make the occasion carry something more than a dinner, because a couple thirty years in has accumulated three decades of unmarked transitions and has never once been asked what each of them now thinks was agreed.

7

What a conversation can do

The proposal follows from the evidence rather than from sentiment. If discordance concentrates at unmarked transitions, then the intervention is to mark one — not with a party, but with an occasion on which both people find out what the other currently believes.

A Relational Map is a single prepared conversation. Each person answers a short set of private questions, alone; neither sees the other's answers. Each receives a private page written from their own answers and nobody else's. Then, two days later, one shared page: what the two of you seem to share, the questions that have not quite been asked aloud, and one small thing to try. It runs to about a page, because it is meant to be read aloud at a table in five minutes rather than filed.

Three things it does not do

It does not resolve the perpetual things

In the Gottmans' laboratory work, when couples were asked to discuss an area of continuing disagreement, 69 per cent of the time they raised an issue the researchers had heard from them before.¹⁵ Their own conclusion is that most conflict arises from durable differences between two people and is therefore perpetual rather than resolvable, and that the aim is not resolution but a dialogue that can be sustained. A Map is built on that premise. It is not trying to close anything.

It does not score anybody

No type, no percentile, no verdict, and no sentence that reads as a report on a partner. The Map describes the relationship, which is the only object in the room that belongs to both people equally.

It is not therapy

It is a conversation, prepared with care, and it is not treatment. Where what a couple needs is clinical, we say so and refer.

What it is for is narrower and, we think, more valuable than the category usually claims. Two people who have been together for years hold two private accounts of the same relationship, and have no occasion on which to compare them. The Map is that occasion. Whatever else it produces, it produces one thing reliably: each of them learns what the other currently believes was agreed, which is the single piece of information the research says they are most likely to be missing.

The Gottmans put the underlying principle better than we can. Relationships work, they write, to the extent that one has selected a partner with a set of perpetual problems one can learn to live with. Learning to live with them requires knowing what they are. Most couples have never been asked.

NOTES AND SOURCES

Sources

1. The Knot Worldwide, 2026 Real Weddings Study, covering weddings held in 2025. Average US cost \$34,000 excluding engagement ring and honeymoon; 10,474 couples, self-reported, recruited from The Knot and WeddingWire membership. Industry-funded and not a probability sample of US weddings.
2. Halpern-Meekin, S. and Tach, L., "Discordance in couples' reporting of courtship stages: implications for measurement and marital quality," *Social Science Research*, 42(4), 2013, pp. 1143–1155. 1,504 married couples, national online survey.
3. Francis-Tan, A. and Mialon, H. M., "'A diamond is forever' and other fairy tales: the relationship between wedding expenses and marriage duration," *Economic Inquiry*, 53(4), 2015, pp. 1919–1930. 3,151 ever-married US adults recruited online. The authors state that non-causal mechanisms could underlie the results and that a national probability sample would be preferable.
4. Rhoades, G. K. and Stanley, S. M., *Before "I Do": What Do Premarital Experiences Have to Do with Marital Quality Among Today's Young Adults?*, The National Marriage Project, University of Virginia, 2014. 418 participants who married during a five-year follow-up. A research-institute report, not a peer-reviewed article; the authors note wedding cost and parental wealth were not controlled.
5. Bogdan, I., Turliuc, M. N. and Candel, O. S., "Transition to parenthood and marital satisfaction: a meta-analysis," *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 2022, 901362. 49 studies, 106 samples, 145,139 participants. Pregnancy to 12 months, $g = -0.31$ for mothers and -0.29 for fathers. The sample is heavily weighted toward women.
6. Doss, B. D., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M. and Markman, H. J., "The effect of the transition to parenthood on relationship quality: an 8-year prospective study," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96(3), 2009, pp. 601–619. 218 couples; deterioration was small to medium and "tended to persist throughout the remaining years of the study."
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9. Hawkins, A. J., Blanchard, V. L., Baldwin, S. A. and Fawcett, E. B., "Does marriage and relationship education work? A meta-analytic study," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 76(5), 2008, pp. 723–734. 117 studies, more than 500 effect sizes.
10. Shapiro, A. F. and Gottman, J. M., "Effects on marriage of a psycho-communicative-educational intervention with couples undergoing the transition to parenthood," *Journal of Family Communication*, 5(1), 2005, pp. 1–24. Randomised trial, 38 couples.
11. Westrick-Payne, K. K., "Refined divorce rate in the U.S.: geographic variation, 2024," *Family Profiles FP-25-31*, National Center for Family and Marriage Research, Bowling Green State University, 2025. Rate of 14.2 per 1,000 married women in 2024.
12. The "half of marriages end in divorce" figure derives from life-table projections made in the 1980s for the cohort then marrying, at the historical peak of US divorce. It was a projection rather than a measured rate and has not been updated.
13. Westrick-Payne, K. K., "Age variation in the refined divorce rate, 1990 and 2023," *Family Profiles FP-25-24*, National Center for Family and Marriage Research, Bowling Green State University, 2025. Rates per 1,000 married women: ages 15–24, 46.3 to 19.3; 25–34, 31.8 to 20.1; 35–44, 21.3 to 19.4; 45–54, 11.2 to 17.4; 55–64, 3.8 to 11.7; 65 and over, 1.4 to 6.7.

14. Kennedy, S. and Ruggles, S., "Breaking up is hard to count: the rise of divorce in the United States, 1980–2010," *Demography*, 51(2), 2014, pp. 587–598.
15. Gottman, J. M. and Gottman, J. S., "The natural principles of love," *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 9(1), 2017, pp. 7–26. The 69 per cent figure measures how often couples asked to discuss a continuing disagreement raised an issue the laboratory had heard from them before. It is commonly requested as "69 per cent of problems are unsolvable," which is a different and stronger claim than the figure supports.

Figures are quoted from the sources as published at the time of writing and are cited for orientation, not as findings of The Third Field. Where a source has been updated since, the more recent figure should be preferred.

ABOUT

The Third Field™

A practice in relational intelligence, offered by Second Humanity LLC. For two people it is a single prepared conversation: a short set of private questions answered separately, a private page to each person, then one shared page with one thing to try. No score, no type, no verdict. Terroir Trails is the practice in wine country, where the day itself becomes the occasion. thethirdfield.com

A note on method

Every figure here was traced to a primary source before publication, and several widely circulated statistics did not survive that check. Where the evidence is weaker than the claim we would have liked to make, section 5 says so.

Citation

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