the changing landscape of love and marriage

by kathleen e. hull, ann meier, and timothy ortyl

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Celebrities breaking up, making up, and having kids out of wedlock. Politicians confessing to extramarital affairs and visits to prostitutes. Same-sex couples pushing for, and sometimes getting, legal recognition for their committed relationships. Today's news provides a steady stream of stories that seem to suggest that lifelong love and (heterosexual) marriage are about as dated as a horse and carriage. Social conservatives continue sounding the alarm about the consequences of the decline of marriage and the rise of unwed parenting for children and for society at large. Are we really leaving behind the old model of intimacy, or are these changes significant but not radical? And what are the driving forces behind the changes?

In the United States, marriage historically has been an important and esteemed social institution. Historian Nancy Cott argues that, since colonial times, Americans have viewed marriage as the bedrock of healthy families and communities, vital to the functioning of democracy itself. But today, nearly half of all marriages end in divorce. People are getting married later than they used to; the median age at first marriage is now 28 for men and 26 for women, compared to 23 and 20 in 1960. The proportion of adults who never marry remains low but is climbing; in 2006, 19% of men and 13% of women aged 40-44 had never married. Roughly one-third of all births are to unmarried parents, and unmarried cohabitation has gone from a socially stigmatized practice to a normal stage in the adult life course (more than half of all American marriages now begin as cohabitations). Many of the same patterns are seen in Europe, although divorce is lower there.

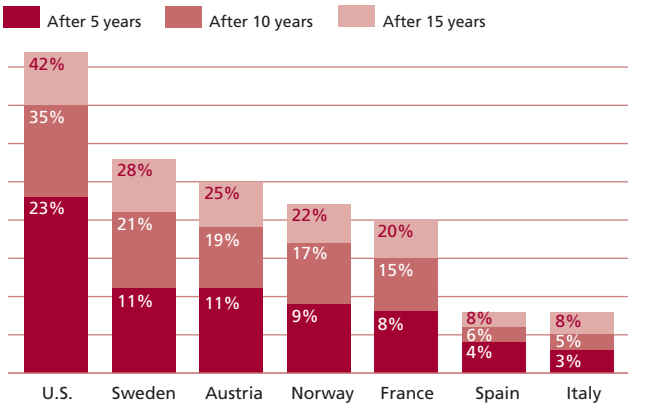
These demographic trends raise two seemingly undeniable conclusions: marriage has lost its taken-for-granted, nearly compulsory status as a feature of adult life, and, as a result, both adults and children are experiencing more change and upheaval in their personal lives than in the past. Sociologists have entered the fray to try to make sense of these trends, both by offering causal explanations and by predicting the depth and future direction of changes in intimacy.

rethinking commitment

Prominent sociologists offer two different but related theories about what is happening to intimacy in modern Western nations today. The British theorist Anthony Giddens argues that we are witnessing a "transformation of intimacy," while the American family scholar Andrew Cherlin suggests that we are witnessing the "deinstitutionalization" of marriage.

In his 1992 book *The Transformation of Intimacy,* Giddens observes that intimacy is undergoing radical change in contemporary Western societies. The romantic love model, which emphasizes relationship permanence ("till death do us part") and complementary gender roles, is being displaced by what Giddens calls "confluent love." The confluent love model features the ideal of the "pure relationship," one that's entered into for its own sake and maintained only as long as both partners get enough satisfaction from it to stick around. Partners in a pure relationship establish trust through intense communication, yet the possibility of breakup always looms. Giddens sees the rise of confluent love resulting from modernization and globalization. As family and religious traditions lose influence, people craft their own biographies through highly individualized choices, including choice of intimate partners, with

Marriage dissolution ca. 2000



Source: Gunnar Andersson and Dimiter Philipov (2002), "Life-Table Representations of Family Dynamics in Sweden, Hungary, & 14 Other FFS Countries," Demographic Research 7:67-145

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the overarching goal of continuous self-development. Giddens argues that pure relationships are more egalitarian than traditional romantic relationships, produce greater happiness for partners, and foster a greater sense of autonomy. At the same time, the contingent nature of the relationship commitment breeds psychological insecurity, which manifests in higher levels of anxiety and addiction.

Cherlin's deinstitutionalization argument focuses more specifically on marriage now and in the future. The social norms that define and guide people's behavior within the institution of marriage are weakening, he writes. There's greater freedom to choose how to be married and when and whether to marry at all. The deinstitutionalization of marriage can be traced to factors like the rise of unmarried childbearing, the changing division of labor in the home, the growth of unmarried cohabitation, and the emergence of same-sex marriage. These large-scale trends create a context in which people actively question the link between marriage and parenting, the idea of complementary gender roles, and even the connection between marriage and heterosexuality. Under such conditions, Cherlin argues, people feel freer to marry later, to end unhappy marriages, and to forego marriage altogether, although marriage stills holds powerful symbolic significance for many people, partly as a marker of achievement and prestige. The future of marriage is hard to predict, but Cherlin argues it is unlikely to regain its former status; rather, it will either persist as an important but no longer dominant relationship form or it will fade into the background as just one of many relationship options.

Americans still place a high value on traditional, romantic love ideals like lifelong marriage. Yet, all evidence suggests that many of us do not follow through.

marriage's persistent pull

Recent empirical studies suggest that the transformation of intimacy predicted by Giddens is far from complete, and the deinstitutionalization of marriage described by Cherlin faces some powerful countervailing forces, at least in the U.S. In her interview study of middle-class Americans, sociologist Ann Swidler found that people talking about love and relationships oscillated between two seemingly contradictory visions of intimacy. They often spoke about love and relationships as being hard work, and they acknowledged that relationship permanence is never a given, even in strong marriages. This way of talking about intimacy reflects the confluent love Giddens describes. But the same people who articulated pragmatic and realistic visions of intimacy also sometimes invoked elements of romantic love ideology, such as the idea that true love lasts forever and can overcome any obstacles.

Swidler speculates that people go back and forth between these two contradictory visions of love because the pragmatic vision matches their everyday experience but the romantic love myth corresponds to important elements in the institution of marriage. In other words, the ongoing influence of marriage as a social institution keeps the romantic model of intimacy culturally relevant, despite the emergence of a newer model of intimacy that sees love very differently. Swidler's findings at least partially contradict the idea of a wholesale transformation of intimacy, as well as the idea that marriage has lost much of its influence as a cultural model for intimate relationships.

Other studies have also challenged Giddens's ideas about the nature and extent of change occurring in intimate relationships. A 2002 study by Neil Gross and Solon Simmons used data from a national survey of American adults to test Giddens's predictions about the effects of "pure relationships" on their participants. They found support for some of the positive effects described by Giddens: people in pure relationships appear to have a greater sense of autonomy and higher relationship satisfaction. But the survey results did not support the idea that pure relationships lead to higher levels of anxiety and addiction. A 2004 British interview study of members of transnational families (that is, people with one or more close family members living in another country) found that people often strike a balance between individualistic approaches to marriage and attention to the marriage values of their home countries, families and religions. Study authors Carol Smart and Beccy Shipman conclude that Giddens's theory of a radical transformation of intimacy overlooks the rich diversity of cultural values and practices that exists even in highly modernized Western nations. And sociologist Lynn Jamieson has critiqued Giddens's theory for ignoring the vast body of feminist research that documents ongoing gender inequalities, such as in housework, even among heterosexual couples who consider their relationships to be highly egalitarian.

In his recent book *The Marriage-Go-Round,* even Cherlin acknowledges the fact that the deinstitutionalization of marriage has not gone as far in the U.S. as in many other Western countries. Americans have established a pattern of high marriage and remarriage rates, frequent divorce and separation, and more short-lived cohabitations, relative to other comparable countries. The end result is what Cherlin calls a "carousel of intimate partnerships," leading American adults, and any children they have, to face more transition and upheaval in their personal lives. Cherlin concludes that this unique American pattern results from the embrace of two contradictory cultural ideals: marriage and individualism.

The differing importance placed on marriage is obvious in the realm of electoral politics, for example. The current lead-

ers of France and Italy, President Nicolas Sarkozy and Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, have weathered divorces and allegations of extramarital affairs without any discernible effect on their political viability. In the U.S., by contrast, the revelations of extramarital dalliances by South Carolina governor Mark Sanford and former North Carolina senator John Edwards were widely viewed as destroying their prospects as future presidential candidates.

broader horizons

Mainstream media paints a picture of different generations holding substantially different attitudes toward intimacy. In some ways, young people's attitudes toward relationships today are quite similar to the attitudes of their parents. A 2001 study by sociologist Arland Thornton and survey researcher Linda Young-DeMarco compares the attitudes of high school students from the late 1970s to the late 1990s. They find strong support for marriage among all students across the two-decade period. The percentage of female students who rated "having a good marriage and family life" extremely important was roughly 80% throughout this time period, while for males, it hovered around 70%.

Some studies track changes in young people's specific expectations regarding intimate partnerships. For example, a study by psychologist David Buss and colleagues examined college students' preferences for mate characteristics over a period of several decades. They found that both male and female students rank mutual love and attraction as more important today than in earlier decades. Changing gender roles also translated into changes in mate preferences across the decades, with women's financial prospects becoming more important to men and men's ambition and industriousness becoming less important to women. Overall, differences in the qualities men and women are looking for in a mate declined in the second half of the 20th century, suggesting that being male or remale has become a less important factor in determining what young people look for in intimate partnerships.

We compared the relationship attitudes and values of lesbian/gay, bisexual, and heterosexual 18-28 year olds in a recent study published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family.* Notably, people in all of these groups were highly likely to consider love, faithfulness, and lifelong commitment as extremely important values in an intimate relationship. Romantic love seems to be widely embraced by most young adults, regardless of sexual orientation, which contests stereotypes and contrary reports that sexual minorities have radically different aspirations for intimacy. Yet, we also found modest differences that indicate that straight women are especially enthusiastic about these relationship attributes. They are more likely to rate faithfulness and lifelong commitment as extremely important compared to straight men and sexual minorities. Our findings are similar to other studies that consistently show that while both men and women highly value love, affection, and lifelong marriage, women assign greater value to these attributes than men.

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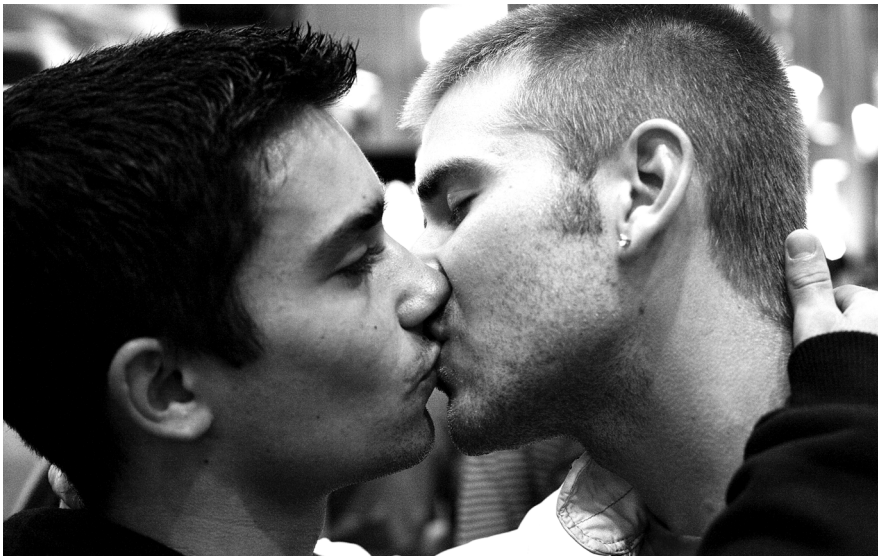
Sociologist Michael Rosenfeld argues in *The Age of Independence* that both same-sex relationships and interracial relationships have become more common and visible in the last few decades in large part because of the same social phenomenon: young people today are less constrained by the watchful eyes and wishes of their parents. Unmarried young adults are much less likely to be living with their parents than in generations past, giving them more freedom to make less traditional life choices. And making unconventional choices along one dimension may make people more willing to make unconventional choices along other dimensions. Thus, while people's aspirations for romantic love may not be changing substantially, partner choice may be changing over time as taboos surrounding a broader range of relationships erode. In our study, we find that sexual-minority young adults report being more willing to date someone of a different race or enter into less financially secure relationships than heterosexual young adults, lending support to Rosenfeld's claim.

Americans value the security of a lifelong partner, but we also want the option of an exit.

weighing our options

If the ideas of today's young adults are any indication, Americans still place a high value on traditional, romantic love ideals for their relationships, including the ideal of lifelong marriage. Yet, all evidence suggests that many of us do not follow through.

In 2004, sociologist Paul Amato outlined the typical positions on whether that shift matters. The *marital decline position* argues that changes in intimacy are a significant cause for



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concern. From this perspective, the current decline in lifelong marriage and the corresponding increase in single-parent and disrupted families are a key culprit in other social ills like poverty, delinquency, and poor academic performance among children. This is because stable marriages promote a culture in which people accept responsibility for others, and families watch over their own to protect against falling prey to social ills. In short, marriage helps keep our societal house in order.

The *marital resilience perspective,* in contrast, contends that changes in family life have actually strengthened the quality of intimate relationships, including marriages. From this perspective, in the past many people stayed in bad marriages because of strong social norms and legal obstacles to exit. Today, however, no-fault divorce provides an opportunity to correct past mistakes and try again at happiness with new partners. This is a triumph for individual freedom of choice and opportunities for equality within intimate relationships.

Perhaps today's intimacy norms dictate more individualism and a corresponding reduction in the responsibility we take for those we love or loved. Maybe we are better for it because we have more freedom of choice—after all, freedom is one of America's most cherished values. Americans in general seem willing to live with mixed feelings on the new norms for intimacy. Most of us value the commitment and security of a lifelong partner, but we also want the option of exit (tellingly, almost half of people who marry use this option).

Some evidence does suggest, though, that the "carousel of intimate relationships" may be taking its toll. Sociologists Mary Elizabeth Hughes and Linda Waite recently compared the health of middle-aged Americans who were married once and still with their partner to those who were never married, those who were married then divorced and remarried, and those who were married, divorced, and not remarried. They found that those who experienced divorce reported more chronic conditions, mobility limitations, and depression years later, and remarriage boosted health some (particularly mental health), but not to the level of those who never divorced in the first place. Those who divorced and did not remarry had the worst health, even after accounting for many factors that may make one more likely both to have poor health and to divorce. Having loved and lost appears to have lasting consequences.

Sociologist Andrew Cherlin concludes that a "carousel of intimate partnerships" results from the embrace of two contradictory American ideals: marriage and individualism.

Academic and policy debates, as well as conversations among friends and neighbors, often hinge not on adults, but on what's best for children. A fair amount of research suggests that kids are more likely to avoid most social ills and develop into competent, successful adults if they are raised by two happily and continuously married parents. But marital *happiness* is key. A number of studies have found that frequently quarrelling parents who stay married aren't doing their kids many favors. Children of these types of marriages have an elevated risk of emotional and behavioral problems. But with the notable exception of parents in high-conflict marriages, most children who are raised by caring parents—one or two of them, married or not—end up just fine. Further, if our social policies provided greater support to all varieties of families, not just those characterized by lifelong heterosexual marriage, we might erase the association between growing up with happily married parents and children's well-being. More family supports, such as childcare subsidies, might translate into

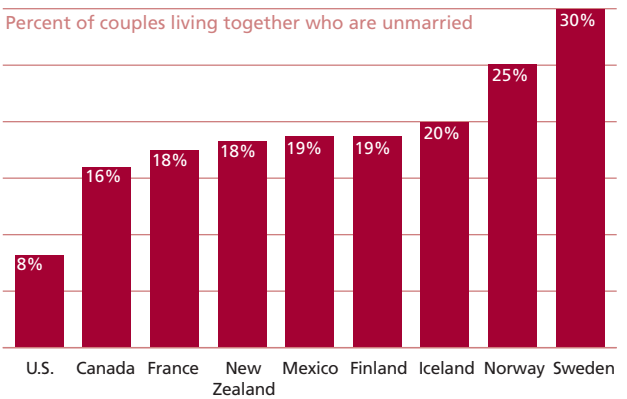
happily-ever-after for most kids regardless of family form.

Finally, the new rules of relationships have societal implications that go well beyond family life. If social order is substantially buttressed by traditional marriage, and a new model of intimacy is weakening the norm of lifelong, heterosexual marriage, logic suggests that we're eroding social cohesion and stability. If we think this is a threat, it seems a few policy adjustments could help to promote social order. For example, if marriage has the benefits of status, institutional support, and legitimacy, granting the right to marry to same-sex couples should bolster their relationships, making them more stable and long-lasting. Therefore, same-sex marriage would bring some Americans into the marital fold, benefiting the adults and children in these families and society more generally.

In the meantime, there'd still be legions of those who already have access to the rights and protections of marriage, and either chose to divorce or never marry at all. Without reinforcing marriage as the ideal family form, some question whether healthy, well-functioning societies can be maintained. Evidence from other Western nations does suggest that different models of intimacy are compatible with societal well-being, but they also show that social policy must be aligned with the types of relationships that individuals choose to form. Many comparable countries have lower marriage rates and higher cohabitation rates than the U.S.

Those that extend significant legal protection and recognition to nonmarital relationships seem to do as well as, or sometimes better than, the U.S. on key measures of social and familial well-being. For example, Swedish children who live with only one parent do better, on average, than American children in the same circumstance, possibly because of Sweden's pro-family policies including long periods of paid maternity and sick leave and government-subsidized, high-quality childcare. Since all Swedes are eligible for these family supports, the differences in care received by children across family types are minimized.

Cohabitation prevalence ca. 2000



Source: Statistics Canada (2002), "2001 Census Analysis Series: A Profile of Canadian Families and Households"

In the end, current research suggests a paradox. Most people, including young adults, say things to researchers that suggest they hold fast to the ideal of an exclusive, lifelong intimate partnership, most commonly a marriage. Yet often people behave in ways more aligned with the "pure relationship" Giddens argues is the ascendant model of intimacy. Perhaps it's harder than ever for people to live out their aspirations in the area of intimacy. Or perhaps we are indeed in the midst of a transition to a brave new world of intimacy, and people's willingness or ability to articulate new relationship values has not yet caught up with their behavior.

> Perhaps we're in the midst of a transition to a brave new world of intimacy.

recommended resources

Andrew J. Cherlin. *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2009). Describes how Americans' simultaneous embrace of of marital commitment and individual freedom has resulted in a "carousel of intimate partnerships."

Stephanie Coontz. *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (Viking, 2005). Offers a historical look at the linking of marriage and romantic intimacy.

Anthony Giddens. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford University Press, 1992). Argues that romantic love is being replaced by the ideal of the "pure relationship."

Judith Stacey. *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age* (Beacon Press, 1996). Examines the fluid and contested nature of the "postmodern family condition," arguing that most contemporary social problems are not the result of innovations in family form.

Ann Swidler. *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (University of Chicago Press, 2001). Uses interviews with middle-class Americans to show that people oscillate between a romantic love ideology and a more pragmatic, contingent vision.

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