Published in final edited form as:

Contexts (Berkeley Calif). 2010 May ; 9(2): 32–37. doi:10.1525/ctx.2010.9.2.32.

The Changing Landscape of Love and Marriage

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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 have been sounding the alarm for some time about the social 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 change we see?

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, and 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 respectively in 1960. The proportion of adults who never marry remains low but has been climbing in recent years; 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 being a socially stigmatized practice to being seen as a normal stage in the adult life course, especially as a prelude to marriage. More than half of all American marriages now begin as cohabitations. Many of the same patterns have occurred in Europe, although divorce is lower there (see Figure 1).

Two conclusions from these demographic trends seem undeniable: 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.

How and Why Intimacy Is Changing

Two prominent sociologists have offered 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,” and 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 (epitomized in the marriage vow of “till death do us part”) and complementary gender roles, is being displaced by a new model of intimacy, which Giddens calls “confluent love.” The confluent love model features the ideal of the “pure relationship,” meaning a relationship that is 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 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 the present and future of marriage. The social norms that define and guide people’s behavior within the institution of marriage are weakening, according to Cherlin. People today experience greater freedom in how to be married, and in when and whether to marry at all. Several factors have contributed to marriage’s deinstitutionalization, including 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 still 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.

The Persistent Pull of Marriage

Several 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. context. In her interview study of middle-class Americans, Ann Swidler found that when people talk about love and relationships they oscillate between two seemingly contradictory visions of intimacy. They often speak about love and relationships as being hard work, and they acknowledge 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 this pragmatic and realistic vision of intimacy would also sometimes invoke 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' 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' 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 (i.e., 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' theory of a radical transformation of intimacy ignores the rich diversity of cultural values and practices that exists even in highly modernized Western nations. And sociologist Lynn Jamieson has critiqued Giddens' 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*, Cherlin documents 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 leaders 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, President Bill Clinton endured an impeachment which many interpreted as a kind of punishment for his extramarital liaison with an intern, and more recently 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.

What Young People Want

To understand where intimacy in America is headed, we might look to youth as a harbinger of future developments. Today's mainstream media paints a picture of young people having substantially different attitudes toward intimacy compared to older generations. In some ways, young people's attitudes toward relationships today are quite similar to the attitudes of their parents. A 2001 study by Arland Thornton and Linda Young-DeMarco compares the attitudes of high school students across time from the late 1970s to the late 1990s. They find strong support for marriage among both male and female 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, and the percentage of male students 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, gender differences in mate preferences declined in the second half of the 20th century, suggesting that gender has become a less important factor in determining what young people look for in intimate partnerships.

In a recent study published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, we compared the relationship attitudes and values of lesbian/gay, bisexual, and heterosexual 18–28 year olds. Notably, people in all of these groups were highly likely to consider love, faithfulness, and life-long commitment as extremely important values in an intimate relationship. These findings indicate that romantic love is 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 in their lives. 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 life-long marriage, women assign greater value to these attributes than men.

In his recent book *The Age of Independence*, sociologist Michael Rosenfeld argues that same-sex relationships and interracial relationships both have emerged 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 unconventional 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 that nontraditional relationship choices breed further departures from tradition.

Why Intimacy Matters

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. What difference does it make if our behaviors around intimacy are changing? Some social scientists see these shifts as alarming, whereas others welcome the changes as long overdue. What does it all mean for our society, our lives and those of our children?

In 2004, sociologist Paul Amato outlined the typical positions on this “so what” question. The *marital decline position* argues that changes in intimacy are a significant cause for 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 these social ills. In short, marriage for the long haul groups people together in families where we check each other's behavior and take care of each other—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 America's most cherished values. Americans in general seem to be 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. And, almost half of people who marry use this option. But, some evidence suggests that the “carousel of intimate relationships” may be taking its toll on us. 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 may have some lasting consequences.

What about the kids? This is the question that lingers in academic and policy debates, as well as amongst friends and neighbors who are considering severing ties with their significant others. 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. Marital *happiness* is key. A number of studies have found that frequently quarrelling parents who stay married do not do their kids many favors. Children of these types of marriages have an elevated risk of emotional and behavioral problems as well. 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, what do new rules of intimacy mean for society? If social order is substantially buttressed by traditional marriage, and a new model of intimacy is weakening the norm of lifelong, heterosexual marriage, will these changes erode social cohesion and stability? If we think this is a threat, it seems a few policy adjustments could help to promote social order. 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 and therefore benefiting the adults and children in these families, and society more generally. This would bring some Americans into the marriage fold, but many who already have access choose not to enter or they enter and later exit marriage.

Can healthy, well-functioning societies be maintained without reinforcing marriage as the ideal family form? Evidence from other Western nations suggests that different models of intimacy are compatible with societal well-being, but 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. (see Figure 2). Some of these countries extend significant legal protection and recognition to nonmarital relationships, and these countries 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 of this same circumstance. Many observers argue that this is attributable to Swedish pro-family policies that grant significantly longer periods of paid maternity and sick leave and government-subsidized, high-quality childcare. All parents are eligible for these family supports, minimizing the differences in care children receive across family types.

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” that Giddens argues is the ascendant model of intimacy. Perhaps this

contradiction indicates that it is harder than ever for people to live out their aspirations in the area of intimacy. Or perhaps it suggests that 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 to the changes in their actual behavior.

Recommended Resources

1. Cherlin, Andrew J. *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*. Alfred A. Knopf; 2009. Describes how Americans' simultaneous embrace of the contradictory values of marital commitment and individual freedom has resulted in a "carousel of intimate partnerships" featuring shorter relationships and more frequent transitions
2. Coontz, Stephanie. *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*. Viking; 2005. Points out that the linkage of marriage and romantic intimacy is a relatively recent phenomenon, and one that has involved a tradeoff between marital stability and personal freedom and happiness
3. Giddens, Anthony. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Stanford University Press; 1992. Argues that romantic love is being replaced in modern societies by the ideal of the "pure relationship," in which intimacy is maintained for its own sake and only as long as both parties believe its benefits outweigh its costs
4. Gross, Neil. *The Detraditionalization of Intimacy Reconsidered*. *Sociological Theory*. 2005; 23:286–311. Challenges Giddens' account of the transformation of intimacy by suggesting that "regulative" traditions have lost influence but "meaning-constitutive" traditions remain powerful in modern intimacy.
5. Stacey, Judith. *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" and argues that most contemporary social problems are not the result of innovations in family form
6. Swidler, Ann. *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. University of Chicago Press; 2001. Uses interviews with middle-class Americans to show that people simultaneously maintain inconsistent views on love, oscillating between a romantic love ideology and a more pragmatic, contingent vision of the nature of intimacy

Figure 1.
Marriage Dissolution by Country

Figure 2.
Cohabitations as Proportion of Unions