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Most recent studies of marriage are concerned principally with describing and explaining stability rather than change in the character of relationships. Anthony MacMahon's (1999) excellent book, *Taking Care of Men* is a case in point. That study draws on overseas as well as Australian research to demonstrate convincingly that despite the entry of wives into the paid workforce men are still leaving their partners with the greater part of the domestic workload. He argues that change is not occurring because it is in men's interests to maintain the status quo.

The theme of continuity also characterises the recent batch of studies of perceptions of fairness of the division of housework. These seek to explain why women appear to accept rather than rebel against the institutional arrangement that MacMahon describes and which many scholars argue treats women inequitably, and some say exploits them (Baxter 2000; Demaris and Longmore 1996; Dempsey 1997a; Thompson, 1991)

Notwithstanding the emphasis of most research on the structural and cultural factors preserving the status quo there are a few studies which indicate that some

Women's and men's consciousness of shortcomings in marital relations, and of the need for change

Are women more or less satisfied with their marriage than men? Are they more interested than men in pressing for change in their relationship? A recent study collected information on men's and women's positive and negative feelings about their partners and their relationships.

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change is occurring in the division of housework and child care in some marriages (Sullivan 2000). However, any change in the division of unpaid work does not usually extend to an equitable sharing of overall responsibility between husbands and wives, particularly employed wives. Rather, what the research shows is that in response to pressure from wives a minority of husbands are assisting with some tasks and a few are taking or sharing responsibility for one or more tasks (Benjamin and Sullivan 1996; Bianchi et al. 2000; Dempsey 2000; Sullivan 2000).

Turning to the matter of continuity and change in the expressive (or emotive) quality of marital relationships, most studies have described a situation where women want more intimacy and emotional support in the relationship than men are willing or able to provide. For example, Lyn Segal (1990) speaks of "men's wretched fear" of exhibiting the feminine qualities of dependence, intimacy and closeness instead of being sufficiently male. The men who let women down by failing to validate them emotionally also dominate them. In *Love in America*, Francesca Cancian (1987) argues that women should accept that men's expression of love (principally through practical help and sexual intercourse) is as valid as women's (through emotional closeness and self-disclosure). She argues that a good relationship requires of both partners the combination of feminine and masculine styles of loving: an androgynous love.

How is change achieved?

Studies of both the persistence of an inequitable division of domestic labour and of unsatisfactory emotive relationships show that change is unlikely to be initiated by those who benefit by current arrangements, or by those who feel threatened psychologically, socially, or materially by possible changes (Duncombe and Marsden 1993; Komter 1989). The American family researcher Linda Thompson (1993) argues that for change to occur in any major domain of marriage it is essential for the consciousness of those who stand to benefit from the change to be raised sufficiently for them to press for change through entering into negotiations with their partner. Orly Benjamin and Oriel Sullivan (1999) argue that change will only occur if there is a consciousness of inequality or other problems in specific aspects of the



relationship such as the division of childcare. If, instead, there is only present a diffuse awareness that things should be different then change is most unlikely to occur.

Unfortunately, there has been little research directed at establishing whether women or men are conscious of the need for change to occur in one or more aspects of their marriage (see, however, Dempsey 1997b; Komter 1989). Nevertheless, there are a number of studies of the marital problems cited by divorcees in their former marriages that are of considerable use. In particular, the specific complaints made by respondents about their former partner or relationships can serve as indicators of the consciousness of a need for change. They can suggest to those researchers questioning men and women in intact marriages about aspects of the marriage where they should direct their inquiries.

Reports of the self-described causes of marital breakdown reach back to William Goode's (1956) celebrated study of Detroit women's adjustment to divorce research,

and include Ilene Wolcott and Jody Hughes' recent Australian study, *Towards Understanding the Reasons for Divorce* (1999). In Goode's study complaints about former partners covered both instrumental issues (for example, material support, practical help) and expressive issues (for example, communication of thoughts and feelings and display of affection). In recent years divorcees have indicated less concern with instrumental issues and increased concern with the inability of a relationship to provide emotional fulfilment, personal growth and sexual satisfaction (Kitson, Babri and Roach 1985; Wolcott and Hughes 1999).

Among the problems frequently cited by respondents in the various studies of divorcees are poor communication, lack of affection and love, insufficient time spent at home, and extra marital sex (Amato and Rogers 1997; Kitson 1992; Spanier and Thompson 1987; Wolcott and Hughes 1999).

Two studies report that disputes over housework and child care contributed to marital breakdown (Kitson 1992; Spanier and Thompson 1987).

The failure of more studies to indicate that the division of housework or child care is a major source of complaints could be, in part at least, a function of research design. Respondents are presented typically with a checklist of possible marital problems and asked to indicate how important each of these was in the breakdown of their marriage. Housework and child care are not usually included in the list of factors.

Most studies that have elicited responses from both women and men show that women are more conscious of specific difficulties than men and more likely to blame partners for the breakdown of the marriage. For instance, Jill Kitson (1992) reports that she found some men had difficulty in citing problems in their previous marriage; at the same time, men were more likely to blame themselves (see also Amato and Rogers 1997; Spanier and Thompson 1987).

As mentioned earlier, there is a paucity of comparable inquiries aimed at gaining from participants in intact marriages their perceptions of problems in the relationship. A thorough search of the literature uncovered only one recent study in which perceptions of relational problems were sought from a sample of participants in intact marriages. This study was carried out in the United States in 1980 as the initial stage of a longitudinal study of marital problems and marriage breakdown (Amato and Rogers 1997). The researchers used a checklist rather than open-ended questioning. Featuring

prominently in the list of reported problems were expressive rather than instrumental issues. This reflected at least in part the bias of the research instrument which did not provide respondents with any opportunity to comment on such potentially disruptive matters as gender differences in opportunities for leisure and disputes over family work.

It is unfortunate that there has been so little attention given by researchers to the perceptions of participants in intact marriages. It cannot be assumed that their perceptions will be the same as those of divorcees. "Spouses define certain behaviour as problems only when they have already given up on their marriages and are about to break up . . ." (Amato and Rogers 1997: 13, cited by Wolcott and Hughes 1999). Further inquiries concerning the perceptions of men and women who are currently married may indicate whether participants of either sex are more likely to believe there is a need for change in their marriage and, if there is, what specific changes they wish to occur. It may

also indicate whether they are sufficiently dissatisfied or resentful to confront their partners.

The Melbourne Marriage Survey

This paper takes the form of a preliminary report of findings from one small study of the perceptions of a sample of currently married men and women. It was undertaken to establish the existence of a consciousness in both a general and specific sense of the need for change in the relationship.

This was done, in part, by asking respondents if they had attempted to change their marriage in specific ways, but also by seeking from respondents their perceptions of the quality of their marriage in several major instrumental and expressive spheres. Because it was assumed that action is driven by feelings as well as by cognitive processes, information was collected on positive and negative feelings respondents revealed about their partner and their relationship. The study sought to establish whether women were more (or less) satisfied with their marriage generally than men and, if so, were more interested in achieving change.

The arguments put forward by a variety of feminist writers (Delphy and Leonard 1992; Hartmann, 1981) the findings from a substantial body of research on inequalities in marriage (Bittman 1995; Hochschild 1989; Sullivan 2000), and the perceptions offered by divorcees of problems in previous marriages (Amato and Rogers 1997; Wolcott and Hughes 1999) all strongly suggested that women will be more likely than men both to report they were unhappy about one or more aspects of their marital

relationship. Women classified as working class were employed as shop assistants, cooks, packers, and process workers. One-third of both men and women had a tertiary educational qualification. Women contributed, on average, a little less than one-third of a couple's income (30 per cent).

The interview schedule was comprised of both structured and open-ended questions. It took approximately 90 minutes to administer. All respondents were questioned about expressive as well as instrumental (practical) aspects of their marriage relationships.

A wide range of specific topics were covered which provided data that facilitated understanding similarities and differences in the experience and interpretation of men and women of their marriage as a totality, and of several specific domains of their marriage. Respondents were asked to indicate how happy they were with their marital relationship. A five-point scale was provided and the choices ranged from very happy to very unhappy. Responses to this question could serve as an indicator of the presence or absence of a diffuse but not necessarily well defined gender consciousness. In an attempt to uncover evidence of specific dissatisfactions and of a conscious-



Many women cited poor communication as a major source of disappointment and annoyance.

relationship, and to indicate that they would like to see some change occur. This research also suggested that women would display strong feelings about the need for change.

The Melbourne Marriage Survey, conducted in 1999, questioned 85 respondents (45 women and 40 men) about various aspects of their marital relationship. No two respondents came from the same households. The interviews were carried out by students participating in an undergraduate course on marriage at La Trobe University. Students were free to choose respondents from their own circle of acquaintances of married people. Interviews were taped and fully transcribed. The author designed the interview schedule, trained the interviewers, and took responsibility for the coding and analysis of the data. As the sample was unrepresentative the findings are only suggestive.

Socio-demographic data were collected for respondents and their spouses. Women's age averaged 33 years and men's 37 years. There was at least one dependent child present in about two-thirds of the households (68 per cent). Couples had been married, on average, for 11 years.

All of the men and three-quarters of the women had paying jobs. Women were engaged in paid employment for an average of 31 hours per week compared to men's average of 47 hours. Men were more likely to have a middle class job¹ (66 per cent versus 50 per cent). The typical middle class jobs for men were teaching, computer programming and engineering, middle management positions in finance and planning, retailing, and the hospitality industry, and small business ownership. For women the more common middle class jobs were nursing, self employment in retailing, work as receptionists or secretaries, employment in customer service, as a flight attendant and in social work. Men in working class jobs were employed as tradesmen (for example, fitter and turner), drivers, maintenance men, and

ness of a need for specific changes, respondents were questioned as to how pleased or satisfied, or resentful, they were with their marriage in several specific areas (for example, leisure activities, companionship, and the distribution of housework). They were also asked about the specific changes, if any, they would like to see, and what steps, if any, they were taking to achieve change.

RESULTS

Specific complaints about partners

A majority of both men and women reported that they were happy with their marriage. However, women were less likely than men to say they were very happy with their marriage relationship (47 per cent vs 65 per cent). They also indicated less satisfaction than men by lodging far more complaints about their partners (Table 1). These made reference to a number of key instrumental and expressive aspects of the relationship. They included the following: insufficient assistance with housework and child care; partner too demanding; less leisure opportunities than partner; inadequate communication; and insufficient emotional support from and companionship with partner.

Strong negative feelings including those of resentment, frustration, anger, and injustice were expressed frequently by women when commenting on these matters.

"He's got his little Sunday morning break to play squash with his friends, and he can go off and do things after work, but I don't get these opportunities. If I want to do something I have the responsibility of finding a baby sitter and I can't always do that so I can't go."

(Clinical psychologist married to a man in middle management, both in their late 20s.)

“He just wants his sport and everything must function around that. He is selfish.” (Shop assistant married to a fitter and turner, both in their mid 40s.)

“I just want to do things with him, go out more – I’m so bored. But he wont cooperate. I’ll say I want to go out with friends and he’ll say ‘all right just make sure you find a baby sitter’. He can just go – he doesn’t have to babysit like me.” (Full-time homemaker with two pre-school children married to a security guard, both in their late 20s.)



Some of the women made it clear they not only found husbands’ demands for personal care aggravating but that they wanted their partner to take responsibility for much of his own care.

“I come home and I’ve had a big day at work and I’m tired, and he wants me to iron something he wants to go out in. I want him to do his own stuff!” (Travel consultant employed full-time, aged 28. Her husband, aged 35, held a managerial position in car retailing.)

Many women cited poor communication as a major source of disappointment and annoyance.

“Communication is the biggest problem in the marriage. Sometimes he’ll open up, but often I will approach him with a problem (for example, family finances) he will take it personally, as if I am blaming

him for the problem – and I’m not. But he gets his back up and he wont talk.” (Consultant on waste management married to a retailer with small business, both in their late 30s.)

For some women poor communication was but one of a sheath of problems with their relationship. Several of the accounts strongly suggested that women perceived a significant power imbalance across a number of spheres in the marriage. This asymmetry generated strong feelings of anger, hostility, frustration and powerlessness.

“We cannot get together to discuss any problems. He wont discuss anything. I want to talk about lots of things.”

Interviewer: “What kinds of things?”

“Why I am left at home on my own all the time while he gets the right to go wherever he wants to go. Why he wont support me properly financially. He’s the type of man who just puts a woman into a house to play her role and he doesn’t seem to care. He leaves me to work it out. He expects me to bring home the money every day. He expects me to keep the place clean. But he wont allow me to go out.” (A cook married to a bus driver, both in their early 50s.)

One woman made 28 separate complaints about her partner. Several women made more than ten complaints. Only one man made as many as six complaints. Two-thirds of the women compared to a little more than one-quarter of the men made at least three complaints (Table 1).

Women were more likely than men to complain about each of the following aspects of a partner’s behaviour:

being too busy with his own interests; failing to take the initiative in organising joint activities; making too many demands for housework to be carried out; and sending a child to his/her mother for help rather than tend to the child’s needs himself.

There were other ways in which women signalled less satisfaction with their marriages or with their partners than did men. For example, women were less likely than men to agree with the statement: “Every new thing I learn about my partner pleases me” (47 per cent vs 75 per cent). When asked which they found the most rewarding – caring for children, doing other jobs at home, and caring for one’s partner – women were much less likely than men to choose caring for one’s partner (12 per cent vs 44 per cent).

Perceptions of marital inequity

Women also indicated their greater dissatisfaction with their relationship by proving far more likely than men to report that the following were unfair to them: the divisions of housework (71 per cent vs 10 per cent); child care (64 per cent vs 4 per cent); and the opportunities for leisure (40 per cent vs 5 per cent).

Their sense of inequity was consistent with information gathered during interviews concerning women’s domestic workload and opportunities for leisure away from home. Male and female respondents (N=85) acknowledged that women carried out about 80 per cent of both the inside tasks (such as cooking, cleaning, washing clothes) and of the child care (see Glezer 1991 for comparable findings). Men did carry out most of the outside tasks (76 per cent). The latter tasks, however, have been shown repeatedly to take much less time than either inside tasks or child care (Bittman 1995). They have also been shown to interfere less with activities away from the home, including leisure (Dempsey 1997a). In this instance, only 14 per cent of respondents said wives had the most leisure outside the home. Just under half the sample said husbands had the most external leisure, and the remainder said husbands and wives had about the same.

Gender consciousness and the desire for specific changes

At the time of the interview, another indicator of a marked difference in gender consciousness of the need for change was the fact that 70 per cent of the men compared to only 42 per cent of the women wanted their marriages to go on the same as in the past.

Table 1 Perceived Problems in Marriage

Specific problems	Females N=45 per cent	Males N=40 per cent
Partner does not provide enough emotional support	53	15
Communication a problem	38	18
Partner makes too many demands	25	15
Insufficient time with partner	51	23
Insufficient interest in physical love making	2	33
Too busy with work or outside interests	71	30
Insufficient initiative in planning joint activities	76	48
One or more facets of the marriage reported as unfair to respondent	76	15
Making 3 or more complaints about partner	67	28
Wanting to change one or more aspects of marriage	58	30

Source: The Melbourne Marriage Survey 2001.

Women were much more likely than men to display a consciousness of the need for specific change in their partner's behaviour in both instrumental and expressive domains. The changes they wanted were as follows: increase partner's participation in housework and child care, and in joint leisure activities; improvement in the level of intimacy in their relationship and the quality of communication; and an increase in the willingness of the partner to listen to respondent's personal problems.

Concerning emotional disclosure, many of the women in the Melbourne Marriage Survey revealed, as did many of the women in Penny Mansfield's and Jean Collard's (1998) UK study, that their husbands did not want to discuss intimate emotions. In fact, a majority of the female respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement: "Men are as loving and connected to others as women". In offering their explanations for their judgement many women cited the attitudes and behaviour of their own partner.

Physical love making was the one aspect of marriage about which men were more likely than women to want to change in the future (Table 1), with men complaining that their wives were not sufficiently interested in sex (see Komter 1989 for a similar finding).

DISCUSSION

Women make more complaints

These results confirm the prediction that women will find more faults with their marriage and their partners than will men. They also show that women's consciousness of inequalities or problems in specific spheres of the marriage was more palpable than men's. They were much more likely than men to reveal feelings of anger, frustration and resentment about the perceived shortcomings in their marriage. Women's criticisms embraced both the instrumental and expressive aspects of marriage. They focused especially on men's failure to assist sufficiently with, or take some responsibility for, tasks that have traditionally been performed by women. They were dissatisfied with their partner's display of affection, provision of companionship, and habit of spending too much time away from home, or with male friends.

There was a fair degree of similarity between these complaints and those offered by female divorcees about their former marriages. However, there was a greater tendency

well as insufficient assistance with housework, these can include a failure to gain the emotional outcomes they regard as desirable or essential to a satisfactory or worthwhile marriage: a high level of companionship and intimacy; and sufficient emotional support.

In short, the finding that such a large proportion of women regarded the division of housework as unfair is consistent with the view that, compared with men, these women were less satisfied with the degree of companionship, intimacy and emotional support their marriages were providing.

Women's feelings about achieving change

Women's heightened gender consciousness was also reflected in the fact that at the time of the interview about two-thirds of them compared to less than half the men wanted to change at least some parts of their marriage. Some women were looking for instrumental change, some for expressive change, and still others for both.

Perhaps most importantly, a number of them were displaying sufficient powerful feelings (such as a sense of injustice, and feelings of resentment and anger) to motivate them to press for change. Men were less likely than women to be seeking change in the future, or to display feelings of anger or annoyance over present arrangements.

These findings strongly suggest that men generally were more satisfied than women with their marriages. This result is consistent with the finding cited earlier: male divorcees have difficulty citing problems with their former marriage or wife.

Trying to change the relationship

When women have acted on their gender consciousness and attempted to bargain with their husbands for change, husbands have typically proven resistant and often only limited or no change has occurred (Dempsey 2000; Hochschild 1989; Komter 1989). The reasons for this are complex and there is not space to pursue them comprehensively here.²

However, it is important to draw attention to two things: the roles played by women's employment, and by ideology in the form of traditional and egalitarian family discourses. Many feminists assumed that once women entered the paid workforce and once women's consciousness of the inequities they were experiencing in marriage was raised

Women were much more likely than men to display a consciousness of the need for specific change in their

for the women in the study to stress their dissatisfaction with men over their failure to provide more assistance with housework and child care than reported in previous studies of the complaints of divorcees.

This finding could reflect a difference in research design: respondents were questioned directly about this issue whereas in most studies of the perceptions of divorcees, respondents are usually not given an opportunity to offer their perceptions on this matter. It could also be that dissatisfaction over family work looms larger for those who are currently married than for those whose marriages terminated some time in the past.

Perhaps the finding that was the most surprising was the high proportion of women declaring that the division of housework was unfair. Only about one-third of wives typically declare the division unfair to them (Baxter 2000; Demaris and Longmore 1996). Women are most likely to declare the division of housework unfair if the marriage is not yielding them outcomes they regard as valuable (Dempsey 1997c; Dempsey 1999; Thompson 1991). As

they would press for and obtain equitable marital relationships. This has not happened. Nevertheless, as Benjamin and Sullivan (1996) stress, women's full-time employment has been shown in previous research to be an important although not conclusive condition for achieving an egalitarian distribution of a family's unpaid work. In the present instance, 33 per cent of the women in the Melbourne Marriage Survey were engaged in full-time employment, but their marriages were only slightly less inequitable than those of full-time homemakers, or women employed part-time.

Egalitarian family discourses have been disseminated, but up to this point of time it appears that in only a small minority of marriages do they influence significantly the division of either physical or emotional labour (Benjamin and Sullivan 1999). Men's resistance to change is facilitated by the continuing ascendancy of a traditional family discourse. This discourse supports a hierarchical marital structure and privileges men, their preferences, and interests (Benjamin 1998).

At the beginning of the second millennium the normative structure of the institution of marriage still encourages

women, *not* men, to take responsibility for a larger workload at home, and to be the main providers of emotional care. In this study there were numerous examples of men invoking these norms to avoid carrying out housework. For example, many men demanded explanations from wives for not having carried out household or personal care tasks for them, such as having a meal ready the moment they walked in the door from work. The wives themselves had often been engaged in full-time employment.

Change will only occur if individual husbands are prepared to set the power bestowed on them by the traditional discourse to one side and enter into an open marital conversation with their wives (Benjamin and Sullivan 1996). Men, it seems, are unlikely to initiate such change themselves. In the present study, for example, there were women married to men who were prepared to cooperate with their wives and, say, assist with housework, or engage in more disclosure of their feelings. However, there were far more women who found their husbands largely or completely resistant to their overtures.

The research of Benjamin (1998), Komter (1989) and others, strongly suggests that if women are going to gain the kind of marriage they seek they must be prepared to assert their own needs, display rather than hide emotions such as anger and resentment, and bargain effectively. It was encouraging that most of the women in the Melbourne Marriage Survey were not only conscious of the need for specific changes to occur, but that they felt strongly enough to commence negotiating with their husbands to achieve such changes. In many instances the women were motivated sufficiently to keep trying in the face of a partner's resistance.

In order to increase the likelihood of progressing change towards more equal marriages and ones that are less stressful and more rewarding for both sexes, it would be helpful to have more research that focused on interactional processes in marriage. Such research needs to encompass the expressive as well as instrumental dimensions of interaction and negotiation.

Achieving more equal and rewarding marriage must include, but go beyond, redressing the imbalance in the division of housework and child care. There remains a considerable gulf between women and men's views about intimacy, providing emotional support, caring and nurturing. Women continue to believe that marriage is not delivering them what it should emotionally. Future research should focus more than in the past on

participants' expressive priorities and interpretations of their marital experience. As Wolcott and Hughes (1999: 7) have stressed, the overall aim of such research should be to help "men and women develop the knowledge and skills that may enable them to achieve more satisfying couple and family relationships, and ameliorate the tensions and distress that can lead to relationships breaking down."

Endnotes

1. Classes are defined here as aggregates of people sharing similar market situations, as indexed by occupation and employment status (Jones and Davis 1986).
2. See Komter (1989) and Dempsey (2000) for accounts of the impediments to change husbands put in the way of their wives.

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