

Perspectives on the future of marriage

With marriage rates falling and cohabitation rising in many Western societies, there are concerns in some quarters that the future of marriage is bleak. What lies beneath these trends, and what are the implications for the institution of marriage?

ROBYN PARKER discusses some of the current international thinking.



When discussing the current “state of the family”, academics, politicians, and social commentators typically draw attention to trends in four key indicators across the past hundred or so years – the decline in marriage rates, the increase in divorce rates, the rise in the number of ex-nuptial births, and the growth of cohabitation. Some academics and commentators in the United States have suggested that these trends represent a retreat from marriage and, as such, marriage may be, at the very least, at a “crossroads” (Hawkins 2002). Others have declared that these trends amount to a “marriage crisis” (Blankenhorn 2003; Gallagher 2003a, 2003b).

The political and policy-related discussions about the so-called marriage crisis in the United States are vigorous, and tend to centre on whether couples and their children will be more likely to flourish within a marital or cohabiting relationship. In Europe the tenor of the discussions about these trends has a different focus, is somewhat calmer, and the concern is about how to best support all families regardless of the marital status (or sexual orientation) of the parents (Kiernan 2004). Even though the trends (if not the actual rates) in family formation and dissolution in Australia are similar to those in both Europe and the United States, there has been comparatively little debate and discussion here regarding the decline in marriage rates and the implications for Australian society.

The future of marriage was the theme of the 2003 National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) conference. Several speakers at that conference were invited to submit their papers to a special issue of the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. A group of respected scholars then commented on the issues raised in those papers and on the future of marriage in the long term. The special edition, incorporating the papers and the invited comments, appeared in November 2004. (A summary of the 2003 NCFR conference was published in *Family Matters*, No. 66, pp.60-61.)

This article in no way assumes that conditions in the United States or Western Europe are automatically applicable to the Australian context. Rather, the article aims to inform the discussion in Australia by summarising two aspects of the “conversation” in the special edition of the *Journal of Marriage and Family* – the decline in marriage and the rise in cohabitation. The article outlines the explanations for the trends offered by researchers and scholars at the NCFR conference and their views on the ways in which some of the patterns could play out in the long term.

The retreat from marriage

The concern over marriage in the United States stems from the decline in the numbers of people marrying, although evidence suggests that people still want or intend to marry (Cherlin 2004)¹. The factors underlying the retreat from marriage are complex and interwoven. It can be difficult to identify whether a given factor is a cause of the retreat or a consequence of it because most factors can be perceived as both cause *and* consequence (Smock 2004). The trend towards cohabitation is a prime example of this difficulty – it is posited as a factor contributing to the deinstitutionalisation of marriage (Cherlin 2004) but can also be seen as arising out of the changes in the meaning of marriage (Kiernan 2004). Nonetheless, it is clear that the meaning of marriage and its place in peoples’ lives has changed dramatically in the past 100 or so years. For instance, it is no longer necessary to be married to be regarded as an adult, to purchase property, or to have status in legal terms or in a public or social arena (Coontz 2004). According to Cherlin (2004), the manifold social changes over the past century have culminated in the deinstitutionalisation of marriage, wherein behaviour is governed less by social norms and more by individual concerns.

One of the advantages marriage has provided is “enforceable trust”: because a commitment made in public before family and friends, and perhaps in a religious setting, is more difficult to break, partners can feel more confident about their investment in the relationship (Cherlin 2004). However, with cohabitation becoming more common and widely accepted and acquiring many of the rights once attached only to marriage, the power of those external forces may diminish, and the capacity of marriage to strengthen enforceable trust may increasingly rely on the weight partners give to the public commitment (Cherlin 2004).

Two major, long-term transformations in cultural and material values have driven many of the changes that have impacted on the institution of marriage. The first of these transformations has been from marriage as an essentially economic and political institution in which romantic love was considered of secondary importance, if not completely irrelevant (Coontz 2004; Gillis 2004), to a relationship of companions – the “companionate marriage” described by Burgess and Locke (1945, cited in Cherlin 2004) – characterised by a degree of emphasis on emotion and sentiment that would have been unthinkable to spouses in previous centuries (Cherlin 2004).



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The emergence of love as the primary reason to marry largely began with a series of cultural, political and social changes across the 17th century in which the authority of parents and governments to determine who could or would marry whom was eroded, and the notion of spouses as friends and lovers that is so prevalent in the 20th century began to take hold (Coontz 2004, 2005). The companionate marriages referred to by Burgess and Locke were breadwinner-homemaker marriages marked by the gendered division of labour, and their success increasingly came to be measured by emotional satisfaction – the satisfaction spouses derived from being “good providers, good homemakers, and responsible parents” (Cherlin 2004: 851).

The second transformation began during the 1960s and gathered momentum through the 1970s. There was a trend towards completing education, birth rates fell, the number of dual-earner families increased as women’s participation in the workforce grew, and the measure of a marriage increasingly became each spouses’ own self-development and expression, becoming what Cherlin (2004: 852) calls the “individualised” marriage. This transition was accompanied by changes in family law, in particular the advent of no-fault divorce. Seltzer (2004) sees the impact of high divorce rates reflected in the delaying or avoidance of marriage.

In terms of the psychological needs that can be derived from social connections such as marriage, the greater propensity to separate has undermined the role of marriage in providing the type of emotional connection from which a sense of security can be derived (Cutrona 2004), and heightened the sense of risk associated with investing in a marital relationship (Kiernan 2004). The uncertainty that has come to be attached to marriage is considered by some researchers to be one of a range of factors involved in the growth in cohabitation (Cutrona 2004; Kiernan 2004).

The growth of cohabitation

A growing preference for cohabitation can also be seen as an outcome of the widespread access to contraception that eroded the connection between marriage, sexual activity, conception, childbirth and parenting (Coontz 2004; Kiernan 2004), of increased secularisation, the need for women to experience greater autonomy, and as a way of avoiding the dependence, particularly of women, perceived to be inherent in marriage (Kiernan 2004). Alternatively, Gillis (2004: 990) suggests that people tend towards cohabitation as a means of dealing with the “outsized” expectations attached to marriage.

However several authors note a more concrete reason for choosing cohabitation rather than marriage. A consistent theme throughout most of these articles is the role of economic stability and security in impeding the capacity of couples to afford to get married and stay married. Cohabitation becomes the obvious choice, being less costly in financial terms while meeting (at least) some needs for intimacy and support (Seltzer 2004). Seltzer also suggests that marriage rates may rise if couples develop more confidence in their economic future – although cohabitation rates are higher among those whose education might suggest a greater probability of economic security. Nonetheless, evidence that being better-off financially increases the likelihood of getting and remaining married can be found in literally scores of studies (Smock 2004).

Just as the meaning of marriage has altered over time, cohabitation has also been subject to changes in meaning, and its place in the family system has varied according to the degree of social, legal and policy acceptance (Seltzer 2004). For instance, several types of cohabiting relationships have been identified: casual, temporary, convenient relationships

that involve little commitment; extensions of an intimate relationship that will last only as long as the partners enjoy being together; a test of the relationship to assess whether marriage is likely to succeed; or an alternative to marriage based on views about marriage as an institution or for practical or pragmatic reasons (de Vaus 2004; Seltzer 2004). Attitudes towards cohabitation can also vary according to other life circumstances. For example, women participating in the long-running United States National Survey of Families and Households who had dropped out of secondary school were more than twice as likely as college graduates to disapprove of cohabitation that does not include plans for marriage (Edin, Kefalas and Reed 2004).

Other developments in the meaning and acceptance of cohabitation occur as the number of couples involved in the various types of cohabiting relationships changes. At the national level, cohabitation is accepted to varying degrees in different countries, and in different regions within a country (see, for example, Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2004; Seltzer 2004). Drawing on analysis of the cohabitation trends in Sweden (outlined by Hoem and Hoem 1988), Kieran (2002) suggested a four-stage process of acceptance of cohabitation at a national level: in the first stage, cohabitation is outside of, or limited to, the edges of mainstream society while direct marriage occurs for the majority of the population; in the second stage, cohabitation is seen as a way of testing the strength of a relationship before committing to marriage; acceptance of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage that may also involve parenthood occurs in stage three; and in stage four, cohabitation is indistinguishable from marriage.

Greece and Spain are considered to be in stage one, while Sweden and Denmark are clearly in stage four. It is suggested that the United States is in transition between stages two and three (Smock and Gupta 2002); Australia would probably be similarly located. Interestingly, this growth in the incidence and acceptance of cohabitation was unforeseen among scholars and researchers in the 1970s (Cherlin 2004), but it has received a great deal of attention in recent years because of the effect it has had on the formation and life experiences of couples and families.

Two key aspects of cohabitation are typically commented upon: the instability of cohabiting relationships, and the long-term implications of increasing numbers of children who are or will be born to unmarried parents.

An increasing proportion of cohabiting relationships involve children (Seltzer 2004). The relationships of cohabiting parents appear to be more stable than the relationships of those without children, although fewer cohabiting relationships now end in marriage than in the past (Wu and Balakrishnan 1995; Cherlin 2004; Seltzer 2004)². The range of reasons behind the decision to cohabit may go some way towards explaining their instability (Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2004). Stability may also be related to the perceived place of cohabitation in the kinship system. Although cohabitation is accepted to a degree within and across nations, in many countries it is not yet regarded as equal to marriage and it does not have the formal and informal support that marriage does (Seltzer 2004).

Another key element in the discussions about marriage and cohabitation is the potential long-term impact on children of being raised by unmarried parents. The weight of evidence clearly demonstrates that children do better on a

range of indicators when raised by two happily, continuously married parents (Amato 2004) and tend to be negatively affected by transient relationships (Cutrona 2004). Thus, the greater propensity for cohabiting relationships than marriages to end in separation is problematic for children (Cutrona 2004)³.

However, if there is an intergenerational transmission of values in favour of cohabitation, and a rising proportion of adults whose parents were unmarried, then a social milieu may develop in which cohabitation is acceptable in its own right, rather than as a stepping stone to marriage (Seltzer 2004; Smock 2004). If cohabitation does become the more common pathway to family formation, then might cohabiting relationships become as stable as marriages (Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2004)? Evidence from Canada suggests that this might indeed occur: in Quebec, where cohabitation is far more widespread than in the rest of Canada, the stability of direct and indirect marriages is very similar (Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2004).

Is marriage really undervalued?

Although there has been a movement away from getting married, it is not clear that marriage is regarded in a completely negative light. In fact, it may be more accurate to say that marriage is more highly regarded in contemporary society than in the past. Attitudes expressed by respondents in a survey conducted by the National Marriage Project (Whitehead and Popenoe 2001) suggest that marriage is seen as having prestige, and in Cherlin's own current work, qualitative data convey the perception of marriage as a sign of achievement rather than a rite of passage (Cherlin 2004).

In a broader, historical sense, Gillis goes so far as to suggest that marriage has been "promoted to a level once reserved for sacred callings" (2004: 990), making it much harder to achieve because the prerequisites are placed further out of reach (Seltzer 2004). This is especially so for those on low incomes, who on the surface appear to have abandoned marriage.

However, research shows that their standards for marriage are similar to those of the middle class; they want and expect as much from marriage, but their life circumstances make meeting those expectations less likely (Edin, Kefalas and Reed 2004). The unmarried parents in Edin and colleagues' study were drawn from three qualitative studies in poor neighbourhoods across six states. Participants in these studies – 162 unmarried White, African-American, and Puerto Rican mothers in Philadelphia; 460 non-custodial fathers in Philadelphia, South Carolina, and Texas; and 50 unmarried couples in Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and New York – reported that before they marry they require a mortgage and a car loan, some savings, and sufficient surplus funds to pay for a "decent" wedding, since being married by a justice of the peace is an indication that marriage is not taken seriously. (See also Cherlin 2004.)

Certain expectations remain gendered: both men and women expect that the male should be able to provide for his family (Manning and Smock 2003). But the prerequisites are not only financial. While women want a partner who is "totally devoted" and "understanding", a lack of trust that their partner will treat them well or be faithful, avoid drug or alcohol abuse, or abide by the law, drives them to delay marriage for perhaps several years (Edin et al. 2004). Edin et al. describe the values demonstrated by their respondents as a



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“complete and dramatic reversal of 1950s marriage norms” (p. 1012). To them, rushing into marriage before being “set” is irresponsible – “marrying well” (in the sense of being well prepared) is the way to avoid divorce (p. 1013).

These findings highlight the contribution of the “ecological niche” (Bradbury and Karney 2004: 872) in which couples exist – that is, the events and circumstances that couples encounter in either the short or long term, and to which they must adapt and adjust. Elements of social context, such as housing, healthcare, economic development, etc. were consistently nominated among the authors of these papers as critical elements in the development of strong and stable marriages (Smock 2004).

So what might be the future of marriage?

Several demographic trends have converged in the past three decades, leading some social scientists and commentators to warn that the institution of marriage is threatened, with severe long-term consequences for couples, families and particularly children. Certainly there seems to be agreement among most of the authors featured in the articles included here that the weakening of the position of marriage as the primary, favoured mechanism of social organisation is, to a greater or lesser degree, worrisome.

But according to Coontz (2004: 975) it would appear that for some sections of the population the retreat from marriage has less to do with marriage as an institution and more to do with not being able to ensure marital “success” – the prevailing attitudes among younger cohorts who are delaying or avoiding marriage are not so much “anti-marriage” as “anti-divorce”. Although social demographers appear to have a less than stellar record of predicting social trends – after all, none in the 1950s or 1960s predicted the current rates of cohabitation (Cherlin 2004: 857) – some authors have speculated on the ways in which current

trends, particularly with respect to marriage and cohabitation, may play out.

In the articles cited in this paper, some of the comments on the future of marriage are framed within the context of attempts to reverse the retreat from marriage underway across the United States – attempts that include an injection of federal funding for prevention and intervention programs designed to promote strong, healthy relationships. Studies currently underway by Cherlin and his colleagues, and by Edin et al. show that, for low-income groups, getting married is contingent on economic and social circumstances, and unless those circumstances improve the cohabiting couples will probably continue to avoid or delay marriage. Edin et al (2004) note that improving relationship skills for these groups may help them more effectively negotiate their everyday lives and relationships, but is unlikely to encourage higher rates of marriage if their chances of financial security and potential for pathways for a rewarding life other than having children are unchanged. On the other hand, since cohabitation is also popular among those with higher education, an improving national economy may be no guarantee of a swing towards marriage (Seltzer 2004).

Cherlin (2004) tentatively suggests three alternative futures for marriage. In the first (and least likely to occur), marriage becomes re-institutionalised. However, in order for this to happen, several trends would need to be reversed – more people marrying, more children born to married couples, fewer divorces, a reduction in women’s participation in the workforce, marital roles divided more strongly by gender, and the emphasis on the social rather than personal aspects of marriage.

The second alternative sees little change in the current situation, at least in the short term. Marriage will retain its value as a symbol of achievement and prestige, but if, or as, the legal and social gap between marriage and cohabitation

continues to close then the need for marriage will ultimately fade.

The third option would see marriage eventually becoming just one of a range of romantic, albeit fragile, relationships. That such a perception is not yet prevalent in the United States is likely to be due to “institutional lag”: people are still marrying because they have not yet formed the opinion that marriage is of less importance.

Should marriage and cohabitation come to be viewed as equal, then the third alternative is the most likely; otherwise, Cherlin believes, the second option in which marriage retains a unique status as a symbol of achievement and prestige may prevail, at least in the short term.

Coontz (2004) notes that the pace of current trends hampers the ability to determine which are part of the transition and which are outcomes. Weighing in to the more public debate, Coontz (2004: 979) states that the fundamental changes to marriage at both the institutional and the individual level are such that “there will be no turning back”. While she believes that marriage will not disappear entirely, global trends lead her to conclude that the previously dominant role of marriage in a range of social and personal domains has passed. Along with other authors, Coontz recommends that the focus of research and practice should be on strengthening *all* relationships, regardless of their form.

Given that the trends in marriage and cohabitation, divorce and ex-nuptial births in Australia are not dissimilar to those in the United States and Western Europe, do we need to consider whether marriage in Australia is at a crossroads? Indications are that the place of marriage in the Australian kinship system is changing, but the extent of that change is difficult to determine. Although 75 per cent of couples live together before marrying, cohabitation prior to marriage is less widely accepted where children become involved (de Vaus and Wolcott 1997). The legal distinctions between marriage and cohabitation have diminished in the recent past but there are still some circumstances in which married and cohabiting couples are not regarded as equal – in particular, when a cohabiting relationship dissolves (Caruana 2002). What are the long-term implications of these trends for Australian marital and cohabiting relationships?

In contrast to Coontz’s (2004) declaration that marriage as we have known it for the past two centuries has vanished, the scenarios offered by contributors to the special NCFR conference edition of the *Journal of Marriage and Family* are relatively cautious. As the authors note, the social changes contributing to the trends in marriage and cohabitation are in transition. These overseas researchers have more of the key information on which to base their conclusions than is available in the Australian context. While Australian teenagers appear to expect to marry and have a family by the end of their twenties (Smart 2002), there is little current in-depth understanding in Australia about what marriage and cohabitation actually *mean* to them – for example, their views on the purpose of marriage, its value as an institution, and whether cohabitation is perceived as a prelude, or an alternative, to marriage. Until we have this kind of data, any consideration of the future of marriage in Australia is constrained by the lack of vital information about the value of marriage and its role in the lives of those for whom it is likely to be most relevant.

Endnotes

- 1 Marriage rates in Australia have generally declined over the past 20 years, although they appear to be reasonably stable since 2001 (ABS 2004).
- 2 In Australia most convert to marriage or separation within five years (de Vaus, Qu and Weston, 2003).
- 3 Cutrona also notes that the same could be said for all childbearing unions.

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