



# FocusFamilyINSIGHT

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**Re:** **Historical Shifts and Beliefs That Have Weakened Marriage**

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## AMERICAN BELIEFS THAT WEAKEN MARRIAGE

*What is the health of marriage in America today?*

Two key social indicators give us two very different answers:

- 1) The overwhelming majority of young people hold marriage and parenting as two “extremely important” life goals, and this majority has actually *grown* slightly in the past few years (77% for men/86% for women).<sup>1</sup>
- 2) If you look at the choices people actually make however, the choice to marry and stay married has slowly and steadily declined over the past few decades while cohabitation, non-marital childbearing and childlessness are all increasing markedly. Divorce is leveling off finally, but at a very high level.<sup>2</sup>

So why can we value marriage so strongly as a highly important life goal, but *act* as if we don't?

**What do we believe individually and culturally that weakens marriage, both in the recent past and currently?**

Of course, the answers to this question are complex, having many important and curious angles. The central reasons offered by leading family historians and sociologists are broken down below.

### A) Marriage and Individualism: Distinctly American, but Contrary Values

- 1) **Individualism** – Sociologist Robert Bellah, in his landmark study *Habits of the Heart*, states that “Individualism lies at the very core of American culture.”<sup>3</sup> It was this very spirit that led our ancestors to these shores, but in the last fifty years, it shifted from a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps type of *rugged individualism* to an *expressive individualism*. This new individualism is the pursuit of self-actualization and personal growth, in which our first allegiance is to express and act on the fulfillment of our unique needs and desires. South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford's recent comment to the Associated Press that he would die knowing he had met his “soul-mate” but that he would try to fall back in love with his wife couldn't better demonstrate this value if it had been scripted by Hollywood.

This individualism is at direct odds with our other key American value: successful marriage and family. As leading sociologist Andrew Cherlin of Johns Hopkins University explains, “Both cultural models [individualism and marriage] are so ingrained that Americans move from one set of tools to another without necessarily realizing it.”<sup>4</sup> We saw this clearly in Gov. Sanford's positioning. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead explains the impact of this conflict between our marriage/family value and expressive individualism,

Beginning in the late 1950s, Americans began to change their ideas about the individual's obligation to family and society. Broadly described, this change was away from an ethic of obligation to others and toward an obligation to self.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> L.D. Johnston., J. G. Bachman, & P.M. O'Malley, *Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire responses from the nation's high school seniors, 2005*. (Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, 2006); Arland Thornton and Linda Young-DeMarco, “Four Decades of Trends in Attitudes Toward Family Issues in the United States: The 1960s Through the 1990s,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2001) 63:1009-1037.

<sup>2</sup> Paul R. Amato, *et al.*, *Alone Together: How Marriage in American is Changing*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), p. 142.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marriage Go Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The Divorce Culture*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), p. 4.



Unfortunately but not surprisingly, the self-denial and sacrifice required for marriage and parenthood too often lose out to the desire of self. This is evidenced by the fact that 2/3s of divorces in American stem, not from abusive or seriously troubled marriages, but from “good-enough” marriages where husband and wife simply drifting apart over time.<sup>6</sup> Expressive individualism isn’t always at odds with marriage per se, but it is at odds with the *spirit* of marriage. This feeds another American belief that weakens marriage.

- 2) **Expressive Marriage** – This new form of marriage is centrally about the individual. I call these “eharmony” or “soul-mate” marriages. The concern is certainly not with eharmony as a resource, but with their advertising strategy. In their commercials marriage is primarily about *me* finding that other person out there who is just perfect for *me*: *my* soul-mate! As any older, successfully married couple will tell you, you don’t marry your soul mate. You marry a person you care for deeply and with whom you want to spend the rest of your life. And as you grow together - knocking the rough edges off each other – you forge a beautiful life together, *becoming* authentic soul-mates.

**The Ideal Marital Value** - Sociologist Ann Swidler summarizes the authentic Christian ideal of marriage as pointedly as the most capable pastor. She explains,

In the evangelical Christian view, then, love involves placing duty and obligation above the ebb and flow of feeling, and, in the end, finding freedom in willing sacrifice of one’s own interest to another. ...Christian love is, in the view of its practitioners, built on sturdier stuff than personal happiness or enjoyment. It is, first, a commitment, a form of obedience to God’s word. In addition, love rests less on feeling than on decision and action. Real love may even, at times, require emotional self-denial, pushing feelings back in order to live up to one’s commitments. Most critical in love are a firm decision about where one’s obligations lie and a willingness to fulfill those obligations in action, independent of the ups and downs of one’s feelings. ...Only by having an obligation to something higher than one’s own preference or one’s own fulfillment, they insist, can one achieve a permanent love relationship.<sup>7</sup>

Note the stark difference here from an eharmony ad-script. Even the secular Jewish psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm, is truer to the ideal of the Christian marriage script than many Christians today.

Love should be essentially an act of will, a decision to commit my life completely to that of another person. This is indeed the idea behind the idea of the insolubility of marriage. ...To love someone is just not a strong feeling – it is a decision, it is a judgment, it is a promise. If love were only a feeling, there would be no basis for the promise to love each other forever. A feeling may come and it may go.<sup>8</sup>

## B) Historical/Social Shifts

- 1) **Companionate Marriage**- In 1945, ground-breaking sociologist Ernest Burgess noted that marriage in America had been shifting “from an institution to a companionship” over the previous few decades.<sup>9</sup> This was a profound shift, reaching its peak in the 1950s, motivated by changing national economics and the rise of suburban life, leading to the single-earner breadwinner/homemaker marriage where husband and wife became companions, lovers and friends first, and then co-collaborators in etching out a living. Thus, marriage became a significant source of satisfaction for the *couple* (as opposed to the *individual* focus that would come later), rather than an institution that served as a necessary structure for community connection and survival. This new form of marriage was exemplified by the marital durability and happiness seen in the 1950s, which also resulted and benefited from the lingering institutional view of marriage. It is not difficult to see, however, how companionate marriage served as a transition point from marriage as an institution that laid claims and responsibilities upon two people to marriage as a relational vehicle focused primarily on self-fulfillment.

Marriage historian and sociologist Andrew Cherlin explains how companionate marriage led to this more modern form,

When people evaluated how satisfied they were with their marriages, they began to think more in terms of the development of their own sense of self and the expression of their feelings, as opposed to the satisfaction they

<sup>6</sup> Paul Amato and Alan Booth, *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval*, (Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 220.

<sup>7</sup> Bellah, *et al.*, 1985, p. 95-97.

<sup>8</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving: An Enquiry in the Nature of Love*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1956), p. 55-56.

<sup>9</sup> Ernest W. Burgess and H.J. Locke, *The Family: From Institution to Companionship*, (New York: American Book, 1945).

gained through building a family and playing the roles of spouse and parent. The result was a transition from the companionate marriage to what we might call the *individualized marriage*.<sup>10</sup>

And while the spread of no-fault divorce laws throughout the nation in the 1970s and 80s legally permitted easier divorce, it was this *individualized* or *expressive* view of marriage which drove Americans to seek divorce in dramatic numbers. Moving to better marriages made for happier adults and happier adults were better parents and happier parents meant happier children, or so the reasoning went. But it didn't work out as rosy as all that. Divorce is not as likely to lead to greater happiness when compared to couples who commit to improve their unhappy marriage.<sup>11</sup> And the view of divorce changed. Rather than seen as a family tragedy, divorce was now seen as a new kind of success; a bold, assertive move to take control of one's life – especially for women. This new form of divorce is referred to by sociologists as “expressive divorce.”<sup>12</sup>

- 2) **Working Women** – Companionate (breadwinner/homemaker) marriage gave way increasingly to dual-earner marriages as women's educational and work opportunities improved in the early 60s. This gave wives and single women more economic stability and independence. These developments are generally considered positive changes for women in general, but they also had a weakening effect on marriage and family.

The working wife was less dependent on her husband's income and now felt more liberty to leave a bad marriage. And the single working woman did not feel the *need* to “get a man” as quickly because she could find better employment and independence, as portrayed in the 1970's Mary Tyler Moore Show. The new working woman certainly wanted a man, but she could be more selective in finding “Mr. Right” because she felt less pressure to settle for “Mr. Good-Enough” *now*. Interestingly, after all these years, *The Atlantic* recently featured a major article authored by a single mother who encouraged her single peers to settle for *Mr. Good-Enough* because doing so is more likely, she argued, to yield greater total life happiness and contentment than holding out for the elusive Prince and never finding him.<sup>13</sup>

- 3) **The Pill** – In July 1961, G.D. Searle & Co. made available the first birth control pill. The effectiveness of this powerful pill created a significant personal and cultural psychological disconnect between the sexual act and the possibility of children. And since this pill was managed by the woman privately, and separate from the sexual act itself, a resultant child was increasingly seen by men as the woman's responsibility. If she became pregnant, the personal or cultural pressure upon him to “do the right thing by her” and get a “shot-gun” wedding was increasingly dampened because the man saw the woman as responsible for her own “protection.” The Pill's impact upon marriage in terms of sexual opportunism, father responsibility and the blessing of children has been profound.<sup>14</sup>

- 4) **No Good Men-** A greeting card asks the question, “Why are men like parking spaces?” Answer: “All the good ones are taken.” That has been the cry of twenty-something women over the past few decades. Now we hear “Why aren't their any good men to begin with?” Young women are realizing the problem is not that they showed up too late, but that there are very few “marriage material” men to be found even by those who did show up early. As one professional 26-year-old woman explained about her highly male-populated MBA program, “There's a reason those men are left in the pool. They are either drinking themselves silly on the weekends, or they want the ‘fun’ of a relationship without the commitment.” She smartly summed up the state of the game among this abundance of second-rate males, “the odds are good, but the goods are odd.”<sup>15</sup> These girls will tell you, speaking of maturity and quiet confidence, there are far more *Will Ferrells* out there than *Will Smiths*. And if women cannot find good men to marry, no marriage. So they remain single or just move in with a guy to see how it might work out.

### C) Misc. Attitudinal Shifts

- 1) **De-narrated Marriage** – Young people today do not have an over-arching narrative for understanding what marriage is or should be beyond their own personal happiness and contentment. Largely because of widespread divorce among their parents, they have no larger context for its meaning, purpose or reasons to work hard at it. Of course, this is another result

<sup>10</sup> Andrew J. Cherlin, “The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66 (2004): 848-861, p. 852.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage*, (Doubleday, 2000), pp. 148-149.

<sup>12</sup> Whitehead, 1997, p. 45-65.

<sup>13</sup> Lori Gottlieb, “Marry Him! The Case for Settling for Mr. Good-Enough,” *The Atlantic*, March 2008, p. 76-83.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Siegel Watkins, *On the Pill: A Social History of Oral Contraceptives, 1950-1970*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Cherlin, 2009, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Why Are There No Good Men Left: The Romantic Plight of the New Single Woman*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), pp. 57-58.

of individualized or expressive marriage. Novelist Douglas Coupland, the chronicler of the last two generation's fears and feelings, explains what this absence of narrative produces in young lives.

One factor that sets us apart from other animals is that our lives need to be stories, narratives, and when our stories vanish, that is when we feel lost, dangerous, out of control and susceptible to the forces of randomness. It is the process whereby one loses one's life story: denarration.<sup>16</sup>

Marriage is now denarrated. And with it, any reason that marriage itself should make demands upon us.

- 2) **Cohabitation** – The fastest growing family form today is cohabitation; the most prevalent type of relationship among twenty-somethings. Nonmarital child-bearing is its closest challenger. Many young people (and the not-so-young) are cohabiting today, not so much out of an anti-marriage attitude, but out of fear of failing at marriage. Cohabitation is a placeholder relationship until Mr/Mrs Right comes along, or to see if Mr/Mrs Right is really all that right.

Cohabitation however, rather than strengthening future marriages, is actually more likely to harm them.<sup>17</sup> One reason is that people who are cohabiting learn to negotiate with each other in less healthy ways because the relationship is less defined in terms of commitment and solidity. Therefore manipulation and power plays are more likely to be apart of negotiations.

- 3) **Sex and Gender Roles Don't Matter**- Same-sex "marriage" is a harm to marriage and this radical new relational form only makes sense if we agree that marriage is not necessarily about children nor male or female, but only exists for the satisfaction of a androgynous couple or individual adult. But heterosexuality itself is very confused about the importance of male and female in marriage. Most men do not know their role in marriage, nor do women. In fact, many groups find the previous sentence highly offensive on its face. But we are confused as to how to be *men* and *women* in the family today.

Connected to the "no good men" item above, men are at a loss for knowing how to lead and protect their families. A feminized culture sees male *leadership* as putting his wife in a subservient position? But this leadership has more to do with faithful servant hood than patriarchy. And the reticence and timidity on the part of men causes women to feel they need to fill the gap which they often do with subtle attitude and quiet resentment toward their husbands. Researchers find this male reticence moves the wife into a "gatekeeper" role in marriage and parenting, further crowding out the man.<sup>18</sup>

- 4) **Wedding as Status Symbol** – Increasingly, the wedding and marriage are status-statements of achievement, rather than about forging a life together forever. Professor Cherlin explains marriage has "evolved from a marker of conformity to a marker of prestige." Marriage is now "a status one builds up to... It used to be the foundation of adult personal life; now it is sometimes the capstone."<sup>19</sup> The wedding itself has increasingly become a symbol of one's professional and material achievements and a major step in their self-development; a sign that one *has* achieved, rather than the institution that *helps* the couple/partnership *achieve* their dreams. And those who don't think they have achieved are less likely to marry.

What is more, couples would never think of staging a wedding without elaborate plans and great forethought, but usually do exactly that with their marriage.

- 5) **Premarital Sex is of No Consequence** – For most young people, in *and* out of the Church, there is very little appreciation that premarital sex - with or without your future spouse - has a substantial impact on marital health. Research consistently shows that the most sexually satisfied adults are married couples with no pre-marital sexual history, but this is lost in our over-sexualized culture. And our sexual histories are often unwittingly brought into the marriage bed, plaguing and clouding the relationship between the husband and wife. We take early sexual experiences into our later relationships and they can cause serious trouble for the marriage.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Polaroids from the Dead*, (New York: Regan Books, 1996), p. 179.

<sup>17</sup> Amato, *et al.*, 2007, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah J. Shoppe-Sullivan, *et al.*, "Maternal Gatekeeping, Coparenting Quality, and Fathering Behavior in Families with Infants," *Journal of Family Psychology*, (2008) 22:389-398.

<sup>19</sup> Cherlin, 2004, p. 855.

<sup>20</sup> F. Scott Christopher and Susan Sprecher, "Sexuality in Marriage, Dating, and Other Relationships: A Decade Review," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62 (2000): 999-1017.