

# Why Marry?

## Understanding marriage in modern Britain

*Sociologists today talk routinely about change in family life, but tradition is also important and it informs the reasons why most of us still get married*

In the early 1990s Anthony Giddens proposed that major changes in working life, equal rights and globalisation trends had impacted significantly on the ways in which men and women relate to each other in their personal lives (Giddens 1992). This breakdown in traditional restrictions around courtship arguably led to more ‘experimental’ intimate ties that could be broken easily and at will: the emphasis being on flexibility, negotiation and contingency.

Others, however, suggest that it is still important to consider the stabilising influence of the ‘family.’ Carter and Duncan (2018), for example, demonstrate that there is much continuity in family life practices, such as in marriage, women’s marital name changing and weddings, and that the notion of ‘change’ is often over-stated in discussions of the family.

### **Tradition and family lives**

Despite being free to live life differently and explore individual life projects, traditions such as those passed down through the family, and beliefs influenced by friends, media and schooling still play a significant role in influencing family practices. While some people clearly choose unconventional relationships, others are rejecting this notion of family change through choosing traditional family lives; for example, the proportion of married couple families out of all family types has remained stable over the last 5 years (ONS 2015). Office

of National Statistics data from 2017 show that married couples made up 12.9 million of the 19 million families in the UK.

This article offers a critique of the notion of family change by drawing attention to the importance of tradition in informing marriage decisions. Tradition is an important sociological concept and here it will be the focus in understanding how decisions about marriage are made. I will make particular reference to: marital security; aspiring to traditional family life; and traditional fantasies. Boxes 1 and 2 outline the methodology and sampling used to investigate these themes.

### **Box 1: Methods and Sampling**

This small-scale qualitative study was designed to understand the meaning of marriage for young women in Britain. An intensive approach was adopted that suits such interpretative aims rather than the search for broad trends or patterns.

Rather than making any claims to generalisation, therefore, this paper instead presents themes that emerged from the data. Only women between 19 and 30 years old were recruited to reflect those who best have the means and capacity to forge the way in 'experiments' in personal life (Giddens 1992).

The sample of 23 women was recruited through convenience sampling methods, including leafleting and snowballing. I used semi-structured interviews to gather data and asked participants questions about their relationship history, aspirations and experiences. These topics were covered in each interview to ensure consistency, but conversations were free-flowing, allowing participants to direct the interview.

### **Marriage and security**

Many women interviewed discussed pragmatic reasons for marriage including: providing a clear line of ancestry (assuming monogamy); financial co-dependence; and ensuring legal

status of the relationship. Marriage, therefore, continues to provide certain functions: reproductive, financial and legal security. Moreover, marriage offered more security than other forms of relationships, pointing to its continued precedence over cohabitation and alternative relationships. Hermione (29, married), for example, said that being married was: ‘a more secure way of being with [her husband].’ The inference being that marriage is more secure than ‘just’ cohabitation.

Participants also emphasised the importance of marital security for future children: of the 23 women interviewed, 15 said that they would rather be married before having children.

Eleanor (26, cohabiting), for example, said:

‘I think we kind of thought if we were going to have children we should get married before we had children because it provides a bit more stability and security.’

This is despite just 37% agreeing in a recent national survey that those who want children ought to marry (NatCen, 2016). It is not that long ago that women who gave birth outside of a marriage or women who had many sexual encounters were outcasts from society. While moral judgements in other areas appear to be in sharp decline (regarding same-sex relationships, for example), the importance of marriage for children remains evident.

This view has also been reinforced by recent government policy which has supported marriage through the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 and through the promotion of the ‘Marriage Allowance’ (a small tax break for married couples). Marriage also means financial and legal security. Michelle (29, cohabiting), for example, commented:

‘You would have that security that if you lost your job that that person would support you while you looked for another job.’

Eva (23, single) linked the financial security of marriage to legal safeguards:

‘I’d like the security of it, I’d like to know legally as well knowing that our money is sort of all together in one place if he dies or something um [...] I’d be sort of in the eyes of the law part of his life sort of financially.’

The reliance seen here upon stability, certainty and legal commitment was striking. The decision to marry is clearly based, at least partly, on notions of obligation (to partners and children), and legal and financial security. Thus, marriage continues to operate as a legitimating institution that sanctions sexual relationships, financial co-dependence and child bearing.

### **Box 2: Recruiting the Sample: sexuality and social class**

Beyond age and gender, no other restrictions were placed on the selection of the sample (such as sexuality, relationship status) and respondents ranged in relationship status from single to married. Class was not openly discussed with participants, but women were recruited from a range of backgrounds stratifying through education level.

The resulting sample is varied with some participants being the first in their family to access higher education and others following parents into postgraduate study. All respondents were born and raised in the UK.

One participant identified as bisexual, and 22 as heterosexual. Some 22 respondents were White and one was Mixed Race, perhaps reflecting the ethnic composition of the locations of recruitment (a wealthy city in the North East and a provincial area in the South West of England). Interviews were then transcribed and coded thematically.

### **Aspiring to the traditional family life**

While cohabitation and ‘living apart together’ relationships are now more acceptable than in the past, they are still not as privileged as marriage, which remains the dominant family type (living alone and lone parent families are even more marginalised). This appeal of the

‘traditional’ family was reflected in many participants’ narratives. Zoe (19, single) commented,

‘I think I’d rather see like more old fashioned like families and they all sit down and have their tea at the same time [...] I’d rather it be more acceptable to be a normal family.’

Zoe at once normalises marriage whilst also placing it outside the norm within society now (‘I’d rather see...’). This illustrates an appeal to ‘traditional’ family life alongside an assumption that it no longer exists. This is a result of the contradiction between notions of family change (illustrated by declining marriage rates, growth in rates of childbirth outside of marriage, legalisation of same-sex marriage) and the continuation of important family rituals and traditions.

One important remaining family ritual is the order of relationship formation. Mandy (30, married) provides an example:

‘There still seems to be quite a traditional pattern of: we’ll meet, we’ll settle down, we’ll have an engagement, have a wedding, have a year or so, and then have children.’

Although most overt forms of pressure to marry are now invisible, this view of marriage as a stepping-stone in life, one that is actively desired, remains widely endorsed. Marriage is a practice that is fundamental to the historical identity of the UK and Western culture, which is why marriage itself and the ritual of a particular relationship order remains a strong imperative. Those who do not marry risk becoming morally excluded, since such activities distinguish between insiders and outsiders in a culture.

One notable extension of the ‘traditional’ family is the inclusion of non-married cohabitation in orders of relationship progression. Almost all participants in this cohort expected to live with their future husband before marrying. This progression is assumed to be traditional and

the 'correct' way to live life, yet cohabitation prior to marriage is a break from recent tradition. In less than half a century, this relationship process, now taken-for-granted, has changed from being almost taboo to being the norm.

### **The marriage fantasy**

Ruth (27, LAT) saw marriage and having a family as her 'life's ambition', she said:

'I want to have a husband and I want to have kids and I want to be the Mum and, you know, do the shopping and all the rest of it. And that's... that's always been a dream, that's always been a bit of a fantasy. '

Ruth idealises traditional family life and a gendered division of labour, perhaps as a means of escaping from the daily grind. The image of this exact fantasy - of the married mother and father with children - is common in popular culture, media and politics in the UK. Indeed, it is a so-called 'fairy tale' outcome, which can often be found at the end of many films and TV shows.

Disney are now synonymous with stories that have a 'happily ever after' ending; sugar coating the original, often sinister, fairy tales to produce the modern day romantic interpretation (see, for example, the original Hans Christian Anderson story for the Little Mermaid). The format of the standard fairy tale is that of a female searching for her one and only true love, falling in love, overcoming all obstacles and getting married. (Although this is perhaps changing with the hugely popular Disney film *Frozen*, with heroic and fearless Princess Anna of Arendelle as its star, representing a deviation from the traditional fairy tale ending).

This taken-for-granted fairy-tale-story naturalises marriage as the culmination of the saga, and it is reflected in a number of participants' discussions about marriage. Grace said she was influenced by, 'all the fairy tales and meeting Prince Charming and living happily ever after.' And Amy commented: 'People are still brought up with, like, Disney films and looking in the media and stuff, and there is still marriage and it's the most brilliant day of your life.'

Rebecca (24, LAT) who, from the start, positioned herself as unlikely to marry, said:

'I think most of my friends, and maybe deep down [I], have got this like little fantasy in their head, they'll just meet Mr. Right [he'll] sweep them off their feet you'll get married and live happily ever after.'

This is such a powerful story that even reluctant Rebecca could not resist the fairy tale imagery. This discourse is not only promoted through fairy tales and Disney, of course, but it is also represented in countless romantic (-comedy) films. The daily grind of married life need not be shown, perhaps contributing to young people's high expectations of marriage.

In this way, a language of love, romance and the specialness of monogamous, and preferably married couple, relationships is created, which also hides the far more mundane, pragmatic and un-romantic reasons to marry. By using romantic language and fairy tale comparisons, family life and marriage become fantasy - they become extra-ordinary.

## **Conclusion**

Marriage is desired because it is assumed, traditional, natural, and 'normal'; not to marry is undesirable and abnormal, and socially unacceptable in a culture of individuals free to 'choose to do so'. This is the paradox inherent in the culture of marriage.

Tradition is used as a legitimating ideology for the continuing practice of marriage - it justifies the continued appeal of marriage to young women in a context of declining marriage rates. Whether appealing to tradition or deciding to reject it, what is clear is that notions of tradition were still incredibly influential in these participants' behaviours and present in their language of relationships.

The accounts presented here reflect little of the processes associated with family change, with appeals to security and stability, and claims to morally appropriate 'normal' families alongside discussions of the 'fairy tale ending'.

While it cannot be denied that there is more opportunity now for couples to create the relationship that suits them, this research suggests that despite having the opportunity to experience alternative relationships, this is not that desirable and relationship decisions are still very often bound by considerations of tradition, family, obligation and convention.

Tradition can even be used to create a romantic aura around an institution that often seems cynical, commercialised and pragmatic. Since pragmatism is not romantic, notions such as legal protection and financial security are accompanied here by far more romanticised reasons to marry.

### **References and further reading**

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## **Author biography**

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