

# IS MODERN MARRIAGE MORE FREE ?

More social freedom but higher psychological dependance

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## **SUMMARY**

*It is a common idea that modernisation has freed people from the trammels of traditional marriage; that modern marriage is more free. Surprisingly however, we see an increasing effect of marriage on people's personal well being. Survey studies in the USA and the Netherlands show a growing association between general happiness and marital satisfaction in the last twenty years. These findings are discussed in the context of the modernisation of Western society during the last few centuries. It is suggested that in the process of modernisation, marriage came to carry an increasingly heavy load of social and emotional functions, which made it both more important and more problematic for the individuals and that this development resulted in a greater psychological dependence on ones spouse.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The last few centuries have witnessed a gradual change in marital and family relationship. These changes have been amply studied for their effects on population growth, on the labour market, on socialisation processes, etc. However, studies have seldom focused on the consequences of these changes for the quality of life of the individuals concerned. Ideas on this issue are often based on unsubstantiated beliefs, ideas of policymakers not excepted. A current idea in this context is that the change in marriage and family life have made people more free. The process of change is mainly seen as a gradual decline in restrictive norms. Liberals tend to welcome this as a contribution to emancipation whereas conservatives ask whether people are able to carry the responsibility of freedom and foresee a weakening of the basic unit of society. Notwithstanding these different evaluations, everybody seems to take the increased freedom for granted.

However, another viewpoint is possible. Without denying the emergence of a greater number of accepted ways in which to model the relationship with one's life partner, we can doubt the claim of greater freedom. The plurification of marriage is not the only change that has occurred. Another aspect of the same process of change is the growing subjective dependence on marital relationships. Marriage gradually became the sole agent for affective need satisfaction and as such came to be more and more indispensable. This makes people highly dependant on their spouses, possibly more dependant than people formerly were on their parents, neighbours, priests and other people who compelled them into the traditional marriage pattern.

On the next pages this alternative view is considered in more detail. I summarize the main developmental trends in short statements printed on the left side of the page. On the right side some evidence is provided. This evidence is exemplary rather than exhaustive. It comes from Western Europe and North America. I assume that in these areas the same general changes took place during the past few centuries.

## **MORE SOCIAL FREEDOM:**

**During the last few centuries marital life gradually became less dominated by externally imposed requirements. Role models gradually became more diverse and the margin for experimentation widened.**

### *Development*

#### **Gradually marriage became less subject to social control**

In the development from a public institution to a private companionship formal to experiential) behavior became less visible and as a result less open to sanctions

#### **Growing acceptance of deviations from the traditional family pattern**

- more acceptance of love, sex, and living together without formal marriage
- more acceptance of voluntary childless marriage
- more acceptance of change of partner

### *Evidence*

Family units become smaller and more isolated. The number of nuclear families grows at the cost of extended families (Berkner 1973). The practice of boarding declines (Modell & Hareven 1973). Workshop and home become separated. The childrearing, period is concentrated (Wells 1971). Less strangers visit the house (Aries). See also Burgess and Locke 1953.

In the Netherlands more permissive attitudes (Middendorp 1975) and an increase in premarital sexuality and cohabitation (Schnabel 1975).

In the Netherlands more permissive attitudes (Middendorp 1975) as well as an increase in actual voluntary childlessness; now 4% (Libelle 1975) and an expected rise to 8% (Frinking 1975).

More permissive attitudes and continuous increase of divorce and remarriage all over the world (Goode 1970, Festy 1975).

- recently growing acceptance of alternative life-partner relations such as communes, concubines and homosexual couples

Analysis', of parish registers from 1640 to 1840 reveals that the choice of life partners tends to be less influenced by status and income, age and death of parents and age of siblings, indicating a more individual choice, less dictated by parents and tradition (Smith 1973).

### **Greater freedom in choice of partner**

- Economic and status interests of the family of origin exercise a decreasing influence

Most Western countries have lowered the legal age for marriage without parental consent during the last few decades.

### **Gradual diffusion of sex roles in marriage**

- growing independence of women
- more equality of power between sexes
- more equal sexual relations

Women became less bound to the home as a result of a continuous concentration of child bearing and -rearing period since 1750 (Wells 1971) and a gradual involvement in independent economic activities (Goode 1970).

Analysis of popular magazines in the USA from 1740 to 1825 reveals a continuous increase of overt female power at the cost of male power (Lantz 1975).

More acceptance of female sexuality. The double standard loses support after 1825 (Lantz 1975).

## **HIGHER PSYCHOLOGICAL DEPENDANCE:**

**During the last few centuries we have witnessed a concentration of social emotional functions in marital relationships. This makes marriage both more important and more problematic.**

### *Development*

#### **Partner relation gains importance**

- singleness became less common
- “being single” more often came to imply “living single”
- singleness becomes more problematic

### *Evidence*

In pre-industrial Western Europe a major part of the population was single as a result of late marriage, the high number of widows and the "stem"-family system which linked marriage to economic independence (Herlini 1972). The amount of single persons in the population gradually decreased. Nowadays in the Netherlands this trend is still noticeable. In the past few years more people have become engaged in stable life-partner relations; more people marry, people marry younger, remarry more and live together without formal marriage.

In the USA from 1790 to 1970 the number of one-person households increased from 4% to 20% (Modell & Hareven 1973). In the same time the amount of single persons decreased. The practice of taking in boarders declined. In 1790 it was 20% (mainly middle aged lower class families) and now it is fairly unusual. It also became less usual for adult children to live in the parental home (Laslett 1973).

Modernization of society has been accompanied by a decrease in facilities for socio-emotional need-satisfaction in places of public

resort; examples:

- restrictions on affectional expression in the street and in pubs, i.e. singing, embracing (Halmos 1952)
- lapse of periodical popular fetes (fair, carnival religious festivals)
- prohibition or repressive regulation of pubs, brothel-houses, public bathing establishments and activities on the public road
- rationalization of human relations in the workshop: the employer is less likely to provide a home
- emergence (and now rapid decline) of puritanical norms impeding sexual expression outside the context of marriage

Life in effect turns out to be more problematic for single persons. Compared to the married they are less happy, less healthy, exhibit more psychiatric symptoms and die earlier. This difference is strongest among males (Gove 1972, 1973).

- satisfaction with love, marriage and family life comes to be more decisive for the individual's actual well-being

Marital disorder is associated with mental as well as physical health disturbances of the partners and of their children (in the Netherlands i.e. Aakster 1972). Marital satisfaction is highly associated with happiness. This association has become stronger in the past 25 years. See appendix for longitudinal data in the Netherlands and the USA. These data shows two trends. A gradual rise in the association of marital satisfaction and happiness; also, compared to other domain-satisfactions (such as satisfaction with job, health, income etc.) marital satisfaction has become a more important predictor of general happiness.

## Life-partner relations become more problematic

The emergence of the romantic love ideal introduces serious difficulties:

- romantic love is not an innate emotion but a very special way to express affectional needs in a specific situation
- romantic love is fairly recent: Utopia in mediaeval ballads, norm for the emerging bourgeoisie and reality in present day Western society
- the romantic love ideal is in continual development: the focus

Romantic love feelings (love-sickness, love at first sight), ideas (the only one, the essence of happiness) and practices (idealization of the loved one, glorification of personal feelings) are not known in all cultures. All humans need to express and receive affection but these needs can be met in various forms, evoking different kinds of emotional experience. Analyzing changes in the use of language in Western Europe, we notice some important trends in affiliative behavior. Since the middle ages a general sense of solidarity has differentiated into specific emotional patterns for specific social situations (Luhman 1969). Devote love for God, respectful love for parents, sentimental love for children, distant friendship for colleagues and neighbors, companionable affection for siblings and older couples and romantic love for the newly elected life partner. Contrary to innate reactions such as hunger or fear, people must learn to recognize romantic emotions. For example many adolescents report that they worry about whether they really feel "in love" (Groen & Smit 1972).

The separate concepts of "friendship", "true love" and "sexuality" do not emerge until the 17th century (Schnabel 1974). Content analysis of popular magazines published in the USA from 1740 to 1825 reveals a growing interest in romantic love (Lantz 1975). See also Flandrin 1969 and Brann 1960. Nowadays, finding "true love" is one of the major goals of adolescents: their expectations are highly romantic (in the Netherlands, Cornelissen 1970).

Today, the Dutch progressives seem to seek deeper and more

of emotional interest changing from the "only one" to one's selfactualisation \*

- romantic love makes high demands\*

- marriage lost political and economic functions but concurrent "chilling ' society" made it a key institution for affective support

varied emotional experience in order "to grow". Glorification of the loved one tends to have been. superseded by the glorification of one's own emotional experience (pers. observation)

These demands were pretty high: requiring simultaneously a high degree of psychological complementarity, sexual satisfaction, mutual activity and a continuous involvement in one another. As these demands could not be met in practice a spirit of sacrifice and acceptance was considered essential to a good marriage in the past century, especially for women.

Nowadays however the promises of love seem to be claimed more. The idea of love focuses less exclusively on the period of engagement but comes to embrace later married life. The development may be influenced by the emancipation of women.

Since the early middle ages we have witnessed the rapid differentiation of society. The industrialization of society threw up new problems which needed specialized institutions do deal with them. In this process the family gradually lost several of its traditional power, status and position. New political institutions emerged which developed their own more rational allocation mechanisms. The family also lost important economic functions: place of work and home became separated and fewer wives and children worked. Nowadays even many household functions traditionally performed in the family context are taken over by special institutions. This highly complex society created socialization demands which could no longer be fulfilled by the family and required the development of schools.

However the family did not only loose functions it also began to carry new ones. As a result of the growing differentiation of society, usually described in terms of the change from



"Gemeinschaft" to "Gesellschaft", the family became pre-eminently the context for affectional expression; a development which fitted in very well with the development of the romantic love ideal. The family took over affective tasks formerly performed by the larger kin system, the neighbors, friends, colleagues, the church etc.

- greater variability in personality made people focus more on persons they feel a special fit with

The differentiation of institutions is accompanied by a differentiation of personalities. This aspect of modernization is known as "individualization". Gradually people came to be more different of each other, had more different preferences, ideas and feelings. Growing up came to take more time and became more problematic. It required no longer simple acceptance of the modal personality of the group one is born in, but demanded the development of "one own" identity.

When people became more different of each other getting along with anybody became less easy. Sharing of feelings is more difficult and predictability of behavior is lower. At the same time however, the need to talk about ones feelings, thought and actions increased. People who are developing their own identity constantly need to test their experiences and constructs to those of others. This made people focus on persons their felt a special fit with. This development fitted in rather well with the emergence of romantic love.

- the concentration of diverse and contradictory tasks in one system gives poor results\*

In the newly emerging social pattern marriage has gradually become the specialized institution for the expression of affection. However this concentration of socio-emotional functions is not without its problems. Our socio-emotional needs are often diverse and contradictory. Diversity: love, sex, companionship, being

able to express our hostility, we need self-evident security as well as other relational stimulants, etc. In any system it is difficult to perform diverse and contradictory tasks. A factory cannot produce many different products at low cost prices: a pen-knife with many gadgets on it seldom offers the satisfaction which a specially devised instrument provides. The same holds true for marriage. Marriage cannot provide the easy gaiety of the pub, the variety of the extended family, the devout solidarity of the church etc. One conflict may close all doors. This often forces people to suppress unkind feelings, which may give rise to the gradual emergence of all kinds of pathological patterns so vividly described in modern psychiatric literature.

- rising life expectancy made these problems even more oppressive

People live longer and as a result life partner relations cover a larger period. In 1730 in France the mean duration of marriage was 17 years. In 1960 this was 39 years (Fourastie 1962). This means that marriage must provide a much longer perspective and has to cope more with problems resulting from personality changes in the partners.

- today marital relations are indeed often very problematic

Divorce rates in Western society vary between 20 and 30 %. 25% of Dutch adults experienced serious relational problems in the family of origin. These problems are strongly related to mental and physical health complaints. We lack data to prove that married life was less problematic in earlier times.

\*) We lack data to substantiate these propositions: the text at the right side of the page presents plausible ideas rather than empirical evidence.

## **CONCLUSION**

Modern marriage is certainly less subjected to externally imposed social demands. However it is also true that the quality of marriage became more decisive for peoples general state of well-being, thus making them more dependant on their spouse. So we cannot simply say that modern marriage is freer. The old restrictions have been replaced by new ones and the net result of this change cannot easily be estimated.

## EVIDENCE FOR INCREASING SUBJECTIVE IMPORTANCE OF MARRIAGE

Marital satisfaction and general happiness in national samples in the Netherlands and the USA.

author/year	sample	association of happiness with marital satisfaction <sup>1)</sup>	association of happiness with other domain satisfactions
Netherlands			
NIPO 1949 (data 1940)	a-select sample of adults	G = +.40 P < .05	job economic position health G = +.64 G = +.60 G = +.55
Phillips 1966 (data 1964)	a-select sample of housewives n = 250	r = +.44	job health income r = +.34 r = +.29 r = +.21
Moser 1969 (data 1967)	big towns: a-select sample n = 300	r = +.47	health friends r = +.29 r = +.15
Bakker 1974 (data 1970)	a-select sample 25 - 65 aged population n = 1552	G = +.73 P < .05	love & relations health friends SES income neighbourhood home G = +.70 G = +.60 G = +.59 G = +.50 G = +.44 G = +.42 G = +.41
USA			
Wessman 1956	quota sample of adults n = 2377	G = +.39 P < .05 <sup>2)</sup>	job friends housework community G = +.44 G = +.43 G = +.30 G = +.34
Veroff 1962 (data 1960)	adults married with children n = 797	r = +.42 P < .01 (males .38 females .44)	job r = +.13
McKinnel 1973 (data 1972/73)	a-select sample of adults n = 1297	r = +.57 <sup>3)</sup>	standard of living income sex life job health friends r = +.51 r = +.46 r = +.45 r = +.39 r = +.36 r = +.32

- 1 happiness and marital satisfaction measured by single direct questions scored on rating scale
- 2 marital satisfaction measured by question whether one was less happy when single
- 3 marital satisfaction measured by single direct question for satisfaction with family life

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