

Marriage, a history

[Family](#), [Marriage](#)



Coontz (2005) focused on historical changes in marriages from prehistoric to present times, mainly in terms of how institutional and social needs affected restrictions on the liberties of wives. Although she described historical periods as characterizing marital patterns, she carefully noted that both within and between periods, history has been cyclical.

For example, birth and divorce rates have fluctuated based on the changing needs of economies during different times, and conceptions of women as either sexually “pure” or “wanton” have varied over the ages. She takes issue with three “myths” she believes people hold: that the history of women contributing to the support of their families has a fairly short history, and that both love as a reason for marrying and couples aspiring to the marital form of husband as sole “breadwinner” have long histories.

Contrary to what Coontz believes many people think, from the beginning of human evolution, through the days of ancient Greece, until the 1950s, the majority of women were a part of what we now call the work force. In prehistoric history, she, of course, noted that men were “hunters” and women were “gatherers,” since gathering could be done while caring for the young. However, it was gathering, not hunting, that provided most of the food needed for survival, and hunters and gatherers shared within groups or “bands” (p. 38), rather than as couples. Marriages between sons and daughters from different bands served to maintain friendly between-band relationships.

The author dated the time that marriage became an institution where wives lacked power in “ancient agricultural societies” (p. 46), although “widows” would be a more accurate term than “wives.” Coontz was referring to the <https://assignbuster.com/marriage-a-history/>

choices a woman had after the death of her husband, e. g., killing herself or marrying a relative of her dead husband. These practices were a result of the development of economic inequalities, where wealthier families became more interested “ in whom their kin married” (p. 46).

Both economic theories and the fact that it is women who are able to reproduce make this interpretation convincing. In addition, although not noted by Coontz, the fact that on average men are physically larger and stronger might explain why women were not able to resist in becoming dominated.

Probably because women were the ones who gave birth, there has been a tradition of holding them accountable for failing to provide male “ heirs” for their husbands. Coontz recounted the well-known fate of Anne Boleyn in the sixteenth century (p. 133), who refused to become the mistress of Henry VIII, when his current wife Catherine failed to produce a son.

Her refusal led Henry to break ties with the pope who refused to grant him a divorce, so he could marry Anne – but he had her executed when she too failed to produce a son. People still speak of wives “ giving” their husbands sons, when anyone who has taken high-school biology knows that women have nothing to do with a child’s genetic sex – i. e., since only men have a Y chromosome, women always provide one of their two X chromosomes and the genetic sex of a child depends upon whether the father passes on his X or Y chromosome.

Prior to the seventeenth century, although married women and men might come to love each other after marriage, love was not considered necessary

or even desirable in a marriage. Indeed, early Christianity discouraged close marital or other family ties because one's first loyalty was supposed to be to God (pp. 87-88). In medieval Europe, marriages within family aristocracies were encouraged, and despite the selectively enforced rules of the Catholic Church, incest was not uncommon.

The overwhelming majority of people were not among the aristocracy, but marriages among tradespersons also were arranged for economic purposes, and the marriages of peasants generally were arranged by their masters.

In the seventeenth century, marriage based on the personal choices of those being married was sanctioned. But it wasn't until the eighteenth century "in Western Europe and North America... [that] marriage for love...[became] a cultural ideal" (p. 7), until the nineteenth century that marriage in the form of husband as "breadwinner" with a wife at home emerged, and it wasn't until the 1950s that the economy in America permitted the majority of marriages to assume this form.

It is easy to assume, as Coontz does, that those who marry for love have been happier than those in arranged marriages or those marrying for other reasons. Interestingly, there seems to be no evidence that social scientists have ever tested this assumption. We don't really know, for example, whether women who marry for love wind up any more or less happy than women in arranged marriages, such as Golde, in *Fiddler on the Roof* (Stein, 1971), who ends her description of years of caring for her husband's needs, by asking, "If that's not love, what is?"

Actually, the difference between a sexual relationship between a couple who love each other and a couple who are “in love” is not clear, and may, in fact, be a quantitative variable, rather than the qualitative one people assume. Montagu (1999), considered a major anthropologist of the last century, wrote, “Marriages between persons of character who can be friends tend to last and grow in reward and happiness” and ultimately result in love, as opposed to marriages resulting from “that frenzy miscalled ‘love’” (p. 105).

In fact, most of us know some very happily married couples who met because they were able to afford the expensive services of businesses that have replaced the “matchmakers” of days past. In fact, based on observation, “love” does not “conquer all,” in the sense that most marriages still are between those of similar socioeconomic status, who are of the same race, and even the same religion.

As for the form of marriage where the husband is “breadwinner,” as Coontz observed, the form was a goal of both husbands and wives. Presumably, the rewards husbands expected were status, i. e., being a man who could provide for his wife and children through his own efforts (or the efforts of wealthy ancestors), having his needs met by women advised to have elegant meals and spotless homes and children awaiting his return from work, and the advantages of a charming wife to help him succeed in corporate America. Women too must have expected status, i. e., snaring a successful husband through her own charms (or those perceived in women with wealthy ancestors), fulfillment in being able to devote herself to raising her children, and leisure to pursue her interests.

Coontz has noted that the male “breadwinner” model has worked and continues to work for some couples, but not for most. Men were less vocal, probably because it’s harder, or perceived as less noble, to express discontent for having sole responsibility than to express discontent about not being able to assume responsibilities. While Coontz devoted only half a page (p. 251) to male discontent, and does so in the context of rebelling against social expectations and wanting to enjoy the sexual pleasures Hugh Hefner was promoting, men were expressing the realities of the world of work they knew, as opposed to women expressing a desire to join a world they didn’t yet know.

When you think of work, as others have done, in terms of what you actually do, as opposed to how much you’re paid to do it, how much work is there that’s inherently interesting or rewarding to those doing it, how much is even a pleasant way to pass the time, and how much is so meaningless and mind-numbing that those doing it are “leading lives of quiet desperation” (Thoreau, 1854/1995)? It would be interesting to read about work and marital relationships written in the year 2050.

Coontz views the rejection of the 1950s predominant model of marriage in the context of dissatisfaction with this model. She describes *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1963/2001) as a wake-up call to women that was an important force in introducing the changes over the next thirty years that have made diverse forms of relationships acceptable.

Friedan’s book was, in fact, a wake-up call to white middle-class women, but the rejection of the 1950s model of marriage probably should be seen as part of the larger historical context, i. e., rejection of a decade of fear of <https://assignbuster.com/marriage-a-history/>

nonconformity after people witnessed lives were destroyed as a result of seeing communists under all of our beds who were out to paint America “red.” The 1950s dictated not only marital arrangements but all facets of our lives. While still oversimplified, perhaps the wake-up call that eventually resonated with many Americans was the question finally put to Joe McCarthy: “Have you no shame, sir?” (Welch, 1954, cited in Kiely, 2005).

Surprises

It should surprise no-one that wives have had a long history in the work force. If nothing else, we do know that “ladies” had maids and some of the ladies’ maids must have had husbands. We know too that some have considered prostitution the “oldest profession” and, despite the obstacles, there were at least some women who were able to become poets or scientists. However, I had never thought about the large number of women, married and single, who would have had needed to work because the overwhelming majority of people were and in some countries still are poor.

While we all know that arranged marriages were not unusual in the past, I was surprised to learn that for most of human history virtually all marriages were arranged and love was not even considered a reason for marrying. I guess my surprise is a result of our culture being saturated by stories of love. If love is not the theme of a movie, it’s hard to think of any movie that doesn’t have a “love interest” as part of the plot.

By the fifth grade, girls and boys claim they are “in love,” and, despite the changes in the ways Coontz believes young people think, most of the young people I know think, talk, and are more involved in both love and sex than in

thinking about and working on equitable and mutually rewarding relationships. Knowing now that loving before marrying wasn't even considered for most of human history, I'd like to know how the concept "in love" developed and suspect it's actually a social construction – or perhaps simply means both loving someone and wanting a permanent sexual relationship with that person.

As for the history of the "man as breadwinner" form of marriage, I did assume it had always been around, but was not surprised that it was a form that, except for the fifties, most married couples were unable to adopt. Even in the fifties, this form of marriage was affordable by only a small majority. As long as women are allowed to work and can find jobs that pay more than the cost of childcare, for most of the world, working is not an "option" that women or men "choose," but what one does in order to put food on the table, pay the rent, etc.

Coontz said in reference to the nineteenth century, "It is hard for us to grasp the slim margin that made the difference between survival and destitution for so many people in the past" (p. 174). This sentence probably surprised me more than anything else in her book. It is hard for me to grasp that anyone capable of reading a book, let alone writing one, is unable to grasp that this slim margin is true for "so many people" in the present, for many in the United States and for the majority of those living in many so-called third-world nations. Perhaps this sentence explains why I had the sense that after descriptions of her own middle-class reality, she merely felt obliged to pay lip-service to the "unwashed masses."

Sometimes, what she failed to say was more revealing than what she did say. For example, she failed to mention that a by-product of Friedan's (1963/2001) call for middle-class married women to enter the work force resulted in poor, often minority, women being poorly paid (probably in cash) for caring for the children left at home or in children being left with poorly paid and poorly trained workers at understaffed daycare centers. I also was surprised that she felt comfortable drawing conclusions without providing empirical data to support them. For example, she says that marriage “remains the highest expression of commitment in our culture.” She states this as fact, rather than as I would state my belief as an “opinion that the highest expression of commitment is between mothers and their children.”

Finally, her noting that marital history was cyclical made me realize that it was a mistake to consider current social conditions in general as either permanent or becoming more firmly established. However, Coontz herself believes that we cannot turn back from changes in patterns created by the “marriage revolution.” Why not? She does not even consider this question.

References

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