

Factors affecting the importance of marriage



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As the marriage rates for 2008 in the United Kingdom were the lowest since records begin, this study sought to understand the changing importance of marriage by implementing qualitative methods consisting of semi-structured interviews and grounded theory, to attain more robust and comprehensive perspectives on this issue. Three major categories emerged from the data – deinstitutionalization of marriage, individualized marriage and the substitution of marriage. These categories revealed that marriage is no longer seen as important for economic needs but rather for personal satisfaction. All current results were in line with previous quantitative studies, and improvements to this study were discussed. The interaction between the research and the researcher was also reflected.

Getting Married:

Factors Affecting the Importance of Marriage in Today's World

Marie Corelli (1855-1924) once wrote: “ I never married because there was no need. I have three pets at home, which answer the same purpose as a husband. I have a dog which growls every morning, a parrot which swears all afternoon, and a cat that comes home late at night.” (Maggio, R., 1996). This would seem to be somewhat reflective of society's changing sentiments towards marriage. According to the Office for National Statistics (2010), marriage rates for 2008 were the lowest since records began. There were 21.8 males marrying for every 1000 unmarried males over the aged 16 and over, and 19.6 females marrying per 1,000 unmarried females aged 16 and over. People are also waiting longer to marry, with the average never-

married groom at the age of 32. 1 years old and the never-married bride 29.

9. Does society today then deem marriage to be unimportant?

Until recent times, marriage had always been more of an economic need rather than personal fulfillment (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2009). People usually get married to ensure that property rights and other viable assets were provided for family members. Marriage also ensured the ‘moral’ creation and responsible upbringing of the next generation (Ingoldsby & Smith, 2006). In today’s world however, marriage is all about the couple and love becomes the only reason for marrying (Amato, Booth, Johnson & Rogers, 2007).

Research has shown that these changes might be due to the rise of the welfare state, which had made the economic importance of marriage invalid, especially for low-income women (Murray, 1994). Supporting evidence for the findings were however, weak. The welfare benefits effect was found to be present as a potential but not substantially important factor (Lichter, LeClere, & McLaughlin, 1991; McLanahan & Casper, 1995). In the United States, the value of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (ADFC) benefits, which was a federal assistance program (1935-1996) that helped children from families with low or no income, declined alongside the rates of marriages (Schultz, 1994). Additionally, Moffitt (1994) found that the welfare effect appeared to encouraged younger unmarried women to get pregnant and set up their own households rather than remain with their own parents. More women, it would seem, were able to financially support themselves outside of marriage (Becker, 1981) and at the same time, there were declining economic prospects of young men came of age in the 1970s and

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1980s (Duncan, Boisjoly, & Smeeding, 1996; Levy & Murnane, 1992; Wilson, 1987).

Another factor that may have contributed to the decline in marriage was the changing perspectives of society towards cohabiting. Cohabiting began as an alternative to marriage. However, it has evolved to become a way for one to test one's relationship prior to marriage (Manting, 1996). It was found in the National Survey of Families and Households in the United States that many couples, who were cohabiting, expected to get married though they did not feel any normative pressures to do so. One-fifth of their respondents did not expect to get married at all (Bumpass, Sweet & Cherlin, 1991). In another study on expectations towards cohabitation in adolescents, it was found that 75% of adolescents expected to cohabit with their partner in the future (Manning, Longmore & Giordano, 2004).

Though many studies have been conducted into the changing trends of marriage, none have been done using qualitative methods. This paper believes that by asking participants qualitatively regarding their opinions and ideas towards the declining importance of marriage, better and more in-depth perspectives towards this issue would emerge. This paper therefore seek to understand the reasons behind the changing importance of marriage in today's world through the eyes of the participants.

Method

Qualitative research methods were used in this study, and data were gathered directly from participants during semi-structured interviews. This is to allow participants to share about their opinions, values, and experiences

with regard to the changing importance of marriage by sharing freely about these issues and not constrain their replies through answering predetermined questions.

Participants

5 participants were recruited using convenience sampling from friends from middle-class backgrounds. There were 2 males and 3 females, and all ranged between the ages of 21 to 35 ($M = 27.40$, $SD = 5.72$). Pseudonyms were given to the participants.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was established through prior research and textbooks on the topic of marriage. The first question focused on how marriage is seen through the average person, before proceeding on to the various issues surrounding the institution of marriage today such as compatibility and love as well as pre-marital sex (see Appendix A). These questions were asked to encourage the participants to provide a robust perspective on marriage. Additionally, a Windows laptop 'Sound Recorder' program was used to record the interview.

Data Analysis & Interpretation

The interviews took place at a time and place of convenience to the participants with the aim of making the participants feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible. They were shown the interview protocol and told that not all questions needed to be answered (refer to Ethical Issues section).

Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to analyse the data, whereby theories are derived from the data itself. This was first done through a line-by-line coding of the transcribed interview, which was the collection of key points found in the data. These key points were then further grouped into concepts through focused coding before developing categories, which was then reported to help identify the changing phenomena in marriage.

Ethical Issues

Participants were given informed consent, whereby they were told that their participation was voluntary, and were therefore allowed to withdraw from the survey or have their data removed at any given time. They were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity, whereby even though their interview would be recorded, it would not be divulged to any other third party except the experimenter and the marker of the report. On their informed consent form, participants were also given local helplines and were told that should they feel aggravated or upset by the survey, they can seek help from their General Practitioner i. e. family doctor or from the helplines of charities.

Results/Discussion

This study sought to understand the reasons behind the changing importance of marriage in today's world through semi-structured interviews. Through grounded theory, it was found that not only was the institution of marriage viewed very differently today but the ideals of marriage have also

changed. Issues regarding the substitution of marriage, pre-marital sex and social support also emerged.

Deinstitutionalisation of Marriage

All participants shared that the traditional ideology of marriage i. e. economic or power reasons for marrying had lost its importance, though the extent varied for each participant.

“... but if I didn't just to spend my life with somebody who I really loved even if we didn't marry would be enough”

Lines 152-153, Jem.

“ A marriage is just a vow you take before God...as long as they fulfill this vow...(is) a fulfillment of marriage...”

Lines 28-31, Don.

Jem and Don felt that that the institution itself was merely a contract on paper. Jem shared that what was more important was the existence of love (see Individualized Marriage) while Don saw marriage as simply a fulfillment of a vow. To Don, the concept of marriage was not as important as the vows itself. These changing views could be due to the variety of marriage options available (Thornton, Axinn & Xie, 2007), where in the United States, there are choices of going through a ritualistic wedding or one that is without an external authority. Research had also shown that the concept of marriage was used without definition - many people, including researchers, accepted

others as married when people presented themselves as being married and there was no worrying about the rituals and processes that made them married (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). It was interesting to note that only the male participants shared such opinions. The females, on the other hand, felt that the institution of marriage was of utmost important though with various reasons.

“ Marriage is important I want to experience it and go through it, it’s every young girls dream to experience it...take the relationship to the next level...”

Lines 130-131, 138, K.

“ Ahh because that’s part of life, it’s the next step in (.) to create a family...”

Lines 143-144, P.

“ It’s important because I have children, I think it’s more important because I have children and you see when you have children and they love their father or the mother. So you try to keep the family together in that sort of sense...”

Lines 136-139, B.

K & P felt that marriage was a part of human development and should be experienced as part of the human journey. They felt that it was the norm to want to get married and had binding contracts to symbolize this stage of life. B, on the other hand, felt that as a mother marriage provided a stable family unit and should occur for the sake of the children and to ensure that the children were brought up in a family of love. These findings were rather different from past studies. It was found that the declining marriage rates for women were higher than it was for men (Goldscheider & Waite, 1986), suggesting that women found marriage not as important because women were now more educated (see Introduction). However, such contradicting results may be answered by the next theme.

Individualized Marriage: Emotional Support

All participants shared that the individualized marriage (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2009), which was characterized by love, commitment, communication and emotional intimacy should occur, though to varying degrees of importance.

“(marriage) is a commitment that has got to be made by both uhm parties”

Line 13, Don

“ Love is stronger than compatibility ... (without it), you wouldn't get married with them”

Line 21 & Line 30, K.

“(compatibility) should be a prerequisite to marriage because because

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probably your chances of having a successful marriage are increased by the fact that you're compatible on multiple levels..."

Lines 9 – 11, P.

"(commitment and love) probably one of the most essential things::

in regards:: erm to marriage because (. hhh) the more compatible

you are:: the more chances that you'll have a successful marriage

(. hhh) and I think if you're not that compatible I think there's (. hhh)

erm: too much scope for unhappiness within the marriage."

Lines 37-40, Jem.

All but B viewed commitment and love as important pre-requisites to marriage, seeing them as factors that contributed to the success of a marriage. Simpson, Campbell & Berschied (1986) too found that both men and women see romantic love as a prerequisite to marriage without which, they would not get married. The researchers also found that romantic love was crucial to maintaining a marriage. The reason such ideals of a marriage exist today is because marriage is optional (Willetts, 2006), and with that comes expectations that were not present in the past. These ideals do helped couples to overcome hurdles in their marriage (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995) but because of these ideals, the bar may have been set too high, leading to disappointments (Giddens, 2007). This may also lead to participants delaying marriage until the 'right one' comes along. In light of

the previous theme, this may explain why our female participants saw marriage as vital because to them, marriage encompasses these ideals.

Individualized Marriage: Instrumental Support

Although B too felt that love was important, instrumental support especially in economic terms were foremost on her mind.

“ I, I think is so important, however I know that marriage is (.)

can work without love...love is not always everything, it's about

the future as well...”

Lines 16, 20, B.

“ You need the man that is established, a career, obviously the

finance to have a car or whatever and a credit...” Line 124-125, B.

The remaining female participants too shared similar views on this matter, though these were not as crucial as emotional support.

“...how they help out in the house and how they would treat you.”

Line 76-77, K.

“...has a lot of open communication and where the partners aren't

worried about what the other is going to say when they bring up

certain topics and where they both see eye to eye on how to raise a family...”

Lines 128-130, P.

Once again, only the female participants shared their need for instrumental support while the male participants did not mention anything of that sort except for emotional support. Prior studies have shown that instrumental support is highly sought-after in romantic partners, and this is especially so for females (Florian, Mikulincer & Bucholtz, 1995). This thus possibly explained the results found. Marriage may therefore be important but only if instrumental support occurred.

The Substitution of Marriage

In the eyes of some of the participants, cohabitation replaces marriage thus explaining the decreasing rates of marriage and its ever unimportance.

“(cohabitation) takes away from the sanctity of the marriage and that if you’re going to live with someone before getting married, then why bother getting married.”

Lines 39 – 41, P.

“ When you live with someone it’s like you married already.”

Lines 62-63, K.

“ If you live with somebody and start to get to know how they are, and it’s all an easy for you to run out of the relationship rather than work on it when you’re married...”

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Lines 47-49, B.

Interestingly, there were gender differences towards this category. P & K felt that cohabitation was marriage without the actual wedding ritual and felt that by cohabiting, it diminished the importance of marriage. B felt that cohabitation trivialized relationship-building skills as it allowed one to break away from the relationship without many consequences. Marriage, to B, enforced the relationship as it ensured that the couples do not give up while facing difficulties.

“ Cohabitation can actually be used and employed as a useful tool uhm to help couples work towards marriage because when you cohabitate with someone you inevitably get to better understand that person ...”

Lines 134-136, Don.

“(cohabitation) kinda take in that compatibility to another level where you’re actually erm seeing what it’s like living with somebody...”

Lines 86-87, Jem.

Don and Jem, on the other hand, saw cohabitation as constructive means of understanding one’s partner. Cohabitation gave them the opportunity to experience what it was like to live with another and whether their partner was suitable for them.

Rhoades, Stanley & Markman (2009a) found that males were more likely to view cohabiting as a way to test their relationships while females were more likely view cohabiting as a convenient outlet for economic reasons (Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2009b). This seemed to be reflective of this study's results. The females in this study are of middle-class, and so economic reasons may not be foremost on their mind thus cohabitation seemed to violate the values upheld by marriage. Hence to some, cohabitation undermines the importance of marriage while others, it would aid in the success of marriage.

Upon reviewing through the data and results, one can theorised that the importance of marriage today is determined by 3 factors, through the eyes of the couples involved - the extent to which marriage had been deinstitutionalized, the presence of individualised marriage along with the amount of support available, and the extent to which marriage had been substituted by cohabitation.

Reflexive Analysis

This approach was more advantageous over previous studies, which used quantitative methods to analyse the issue at hand. There were positive rapport, which was an efficient and simple way of obtaining data about such feelings and opinions. This study also had a high validity, as participants were able to speak about the issue in detail and depth. As shown by the results, questions and answers could be clarified where there may be potential areas for discussion. Additionally, data saturation was achieved, whereby no new information was found in the interviews (Pickler, 2007). However, as with any interviewing techniques, there were certain limitations

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to this method. It was not reliable because questions were not standardised. In terms of validity, respondents may be lying or have imperfect recall (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 2005).

One potential issue that emerged from this study was that of cultural differences. Although all participants were middle-class, they were not all from the same culture. This was initially thought to be not influential in the study but through the results, cultural differences may possibly explain the different perspectives held by participants. Future studies should consider either focus the topic of marriage on a specific culture or conduct an interview and compare the results between different cultures. Another possible future research topic to look into would be that of gender differences. I was very surprised that although the female participants conformed to the norms of society i. e. cohabitation in others except themselves, they harbour a rather different and almost traditional outlook towards marriage. Future studies can consider looking into the reasons for such occurrences.

As a female in a relationship, my interpretation of the data was skewed towards my perception of the issue. Majority of the data was collected by other interviewers i. e. I was not physically present, and so I cannot help but inferred from the female participants' data through the lens of a female in a relationship. It was also harder for me to comprehend the data produced by the male participants and it felt like I was entering the mind of another species. Looking back at the results, I cannot help but feel that men are indeed from Mars and women from Venus. This topic was fortunately, easy

for me to take on a third-party observant and so the material did not affect me emotionally nor personally.

Conclusion

This study began by asking how important marriage is in today's world. It ended with the possibility of answering the age-old question " Why do women want to get married?" (Angier, 1999). Along the way, it found that marriage is only deemed important if it is seen as a journey that must be experienced, if various marriage criterions such as love and support are met, and whether or not a couple cohabitates. The female participants were more in favour of marriage than males. Though the factors of this model were expected, the varying degrees of importance were unexpected, and should be analyzed in future studies.