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# Marriage: The Good, the Bad, and the Greedy

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# marriage: the good, the bad, and the greedy

*Even good marriages can have some bad side effects, taking people away from other social connections.*

Few academics and even fewer politicians are critical of marriage today. Instead they lament the retreat from marriage, emphasizing the poverty and sadness, exhaustion and stress of single and divorced women and men—especially unwed mothers. Often forgotten are the costs that marriage imposes—on individual husbands and wives as well as on wider community ties.

Many, bemoaning the retreat from marriage, also mourn the loss of community—imagining Americans who bowl alone. What these nostalgic discussions do not recognize, ironically, is that marriage and community are often at odds with one another. Instead of bolstering community involvement, marriage diminishes ties to relatives, neighbors, and friends.

## the defense

We hear about the benefits of marriage from diverse sources. Welfare reformers, both Republicans and Democrats, emphasize marriage as a way out of poverty for young single mothers and a route to responsibility for young unmarried fathers. The current administration and Congress want to redirect millions of dollars each year to marriage initiatives and incentives, workshops, and classes intended to turn the tide back toward marriage. Likewise, many gay and lesbian groups have placed marriage at the center of their political agenda.

After decades of criticizing marriage, many academics have joined politicians in loud support of it. Advocates such as David Popenoe and Linda Waite assert that marriage is good for one's pocketbook, health, happiness, sex life, and kids. Both men and women who are married tend to have higher incomes, more wealth, better health, and more property than those who are not. More surprisingly, researchers have documented sexual benefits of marriage: Married couples cozying up at home have sex more often than singles who party until dawn. Then there are the physical and mental health benefits of marriage—especially for

men but also for women. Marriage, or at least a good marriage with little conflict, protects against everything from cavities to murder and suicide. Some also note that marriage keeps adult men out of crime and their kids out of delinquency. Earlier research suggested that marriage is more beneficial to men than women, but recent advocates insist that the benefits of marriage accrue to both women and men.

Skeptics dismiss these benefits as “selection effects.” Marriage itself, they claim, has no salutary effects; those who are healthier, wealthier, sexier, and more law abiding are more likely to find and keep spouses. Men with higher earnings are more likely to marry. Those in trouble with the law are less likely to go to the altar. The sick and the poor are more likely to divorce. Proponents, however, insist that marriage itself creates most of these beneficial effects. As Linda Waite recently suggested, married people's healthier state likely springs from both self-selection into marriage and the protective, stabilizing effects of marriage itself. So what is there to criticize about marriage?

## the critique

Although recent discussions often ignore their critiques, feminists in the 1970s and 1980s insisted on the oppressive character of marriage. Some researchers still identify costs, especially for women. Women's housework increases (and men's decreases) after marriage. There is the domestic violence—physical, sexual, emotional—that all too many married women endure, and the isolation that violent husbands impose. In addition, according to Barbara Wells and Maxine Baca Zinn, marriage brings fewer benefits to the poor than the affluent. Indeed, sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas find that poor young women do not see many benefits to marriage. They have babies but do not get married because potential husbands impose limits and often cost money but do not make enough even to share the expens-

es of marriage and parenthood (see “Unmarried with Children,” *Contexts*, Spring 2005).

Critics point out that only marriages with low levels of hostility and conflict offer the health benefits touted by advocates. In contrast, bad marriages are hazardous to mental and physical health, increasing suicide, stress, cancer, and blood pressure—and even slowing the healing of wounds. Critics point out that lots of marriages involve conflict and hostility, and many deteriorate over time. This debate generally focuses “inward”—both proponents and critics discuss marriage’s benefits and costs for the wives, husbands, and children. But the full effects of marriage include social consequences for kin ties and community life.

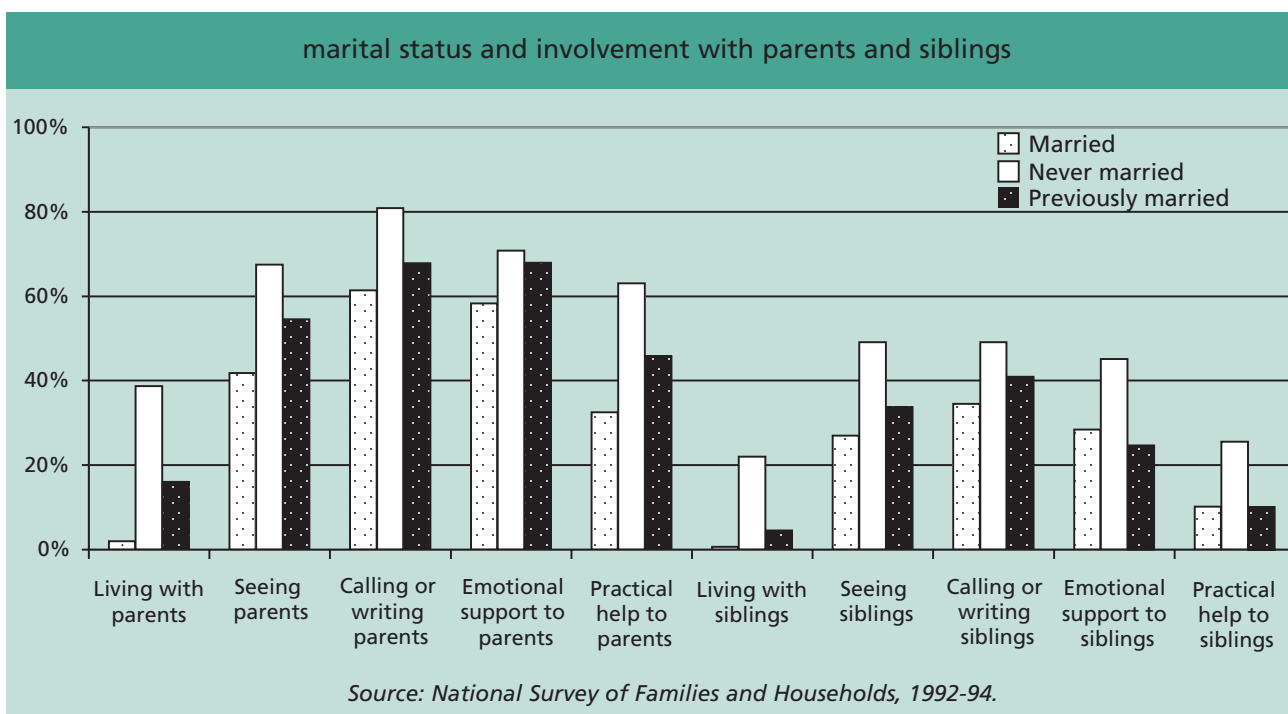
A few theories of family and kinship suggest that modern marriage competes with, and even undermines, relations in the wider community. Forty years ago, Phillip Slater noted that couples’ withdrawal into intimacy reduced group solidarity, although he viewed marriage as a solution to this problem. In contrast, Lewis and Rose Coser described mar-

riage as a “trap” or a “prison”—an exclusive relationship that harmed other relationships. More recently, Vern Bengtson argued that marital instability will increasingly make extended kin ties more central in people’s lives. Research on the costs and benefits of contemporary marriages largely ignores these theoretical suggestions.

### is marriage greedy?

We used two national surveys, the 1992–94 National Survey of Families and Households and the 2004 General Social Survey, to compare ties to relatives and friends of those never married, currently married, and formerly married.

Married people—women as well as men—are less involved with their parents and siblings. Not surprisingly, they are much less likely than singles to share a household with their parents or siblings. But the married are also less likely to visit, call, or write these relatives. They are also less likely to give emotional support or advice and less likely to



riage as a “greedy institution” demanding “undivided commitment.” In their book *The Anti-Social Family*, feminists Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh went further, suggesting

*Naomi Gerstel's current research examines gender and racial differences in care given to relatives and friends as well as the processes shaping work hours and schedules. Natalia Sarkisian's research focuses on the effects of race, gender, and class on family experiences as well as on the links between nuclear and extended family ties.*

provide practical support such as help with household chores or transportation.

We might expect these differences to result from the different ages or economic positions of married versus unmarried people. Or the number of young children might explain the differences. But this is not the case. These differences in contacts and assistance emerge even if the married, never married, and previously married are the same age and have the same class position (similar amounts of income and edu-

cation, and similar employment status). And differences between the married and unmarried exist both among parents of young children and among the childless. They also exist among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics.

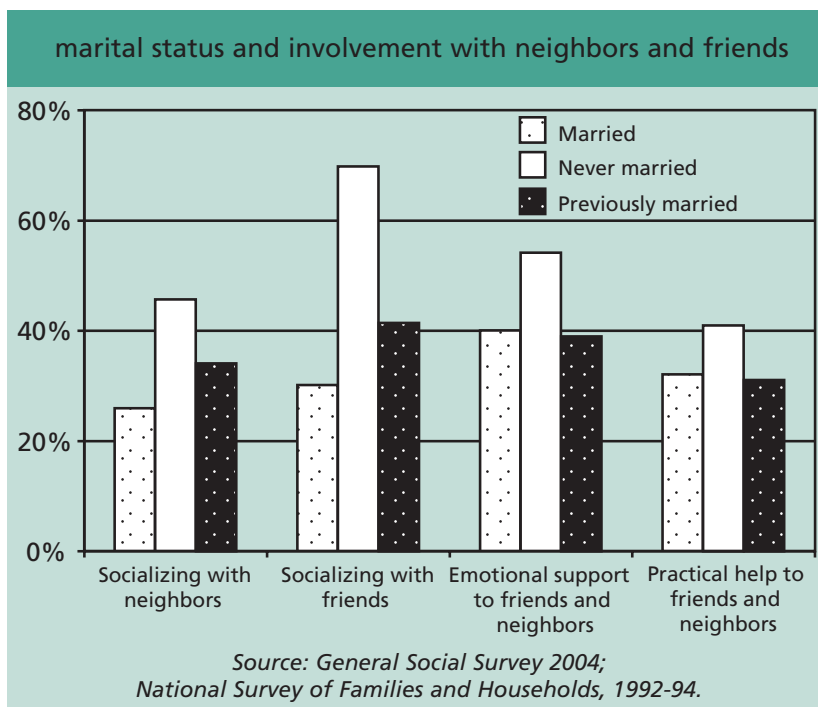
Further, these differences exist for both women and men. In some cases, however, the effects of marriage are greater for men than for women. For example, married women talk on the phone to their parents and siblings less often than those who never got married, or who left or lost a husband. But the difference in phone talk is more dramatic for men: many husbands rely on wives to call their relatives, while men without wives make the connection themselves. For both men and women, the diminished ties to relatives persist even after marriages dissolve; the previously married—on most counts—are less involved with parents and siblings than those never married (but more than the married).

Modern marriage might provide companionship in the form of a spouse, but it deters companionship with relatives other than the spouse. We do not want to overstate. To be sure, most Americans—married or not—still live near extended kin. They want relationships with their elderly parents, siblings, and cousins, see them occasionally, and feel guilty when they cannot visit or help them. They bemoan their inability to maintain stronger ties. Yet today these ties are voluntary and easily lost amid the more pressing demands of marriage.

### other connections

What about other people in the community, like friends and neighbors? From *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and *Full House* to *Sex in the City*, *Friends*, and *The OC* to “reality shows” like *Laguna Beach* and even cartoons like *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*, television offers us images of singles who hang out with their coupled buddies. TV friendships outlast or at least coexist with romantic relationships, even marriage.

The data show the reverse of what television would have us believe. Compared to those never or previously married, married couples disengage from neighbors and friends. They are less likely to socialize with neighbors and less likely to hang out with friends. And the never married are more likely than the married to offer a hand or an ear—to give either practical help or emotional support.



These patterns look the same for women and men. Marriage separates each of them from neighbors and friends. The differences appear especially large when those currently married are compared to those who have never married. The previously married, though still experiencing the effects of marriage, seem to be on the path of returning to their nonmarital state, especially when it comes to socializing. But because friends, like property, are often split when marriages end, it is difficult for the previously married to catch up to those who never got married.

As with relatives, differences in relationships with friends are not due to age, income, education, or employment. The marriage gap in practical help to friends, however, exists only among whites, not among African Americans and Hispanics.

Children help involve the married in networks of friends and neighbors. Married parents provide as much emotional and practical help as single parents or childless singles; it is the married without children who give less. As Karen Hansen argues in *Not-So-Nuclear Families*, dual-earner parents, searching for ways to make child-rearing feasible, turn to friends, neighbors, and extended kin. And in the case of friends and neighbors, getting help typically means giving it in return. But help is only one kind of interaction. Single and married parents alike “hang out” less with neighbors and friends. Combining these effects, we see a “marriage penalty” on relationships with friends and neighbors, but it is larger for the childless than for those with young children.

To be sure, marriage intensifies social connections in

some ways, especially for men. It increases men's (though not women's) participation in church and religious life. It also increases some forms of political engagement—those that are not particularly demanding, such as signing petitions. For women, in contrast, we find no differences in religious involvement between the married and not married. And women are more involved politically when they do not have a mate. Compared to married women, single women are more likely to attend political meetings or rallies, sign petitions, and raise money for political causes.

On balance, marriage weakens both women's and men's ties to those other than the spouse. Why?

### why is marriage greedy?

Marriage is greedy for material, emotional, and cultural reasons. Marriages obviously take time and energy—whether for partners to spend time with each other, or to create and maintain the family home. This detracts from investments in other relationships, especially, perhaps, for dual-earner couples already strapped for time by the demands of two jobs. Some of this time and energy is redirected to children, who also require their parents' time. But it is among the childless that the marriage penalty is particularly large. The married also tend to have more money than the unmarried; as a consequence, the married need less help from family and friends. A norm of reciprocity means they then give less in return.

Marriage can also demand a kind of intense emotional involvement that by itself detracts from collective life. As Phillip Slater wrote, "An intimate dyadic relationship always threatens to short-circuit the libidinal network of the community and drain it of its source of sustenance." This is most obvious with the newly connected couple, all wrapped up in one another with little interest in others. We have all experienced the difficulty of being around such starry-eyed couples. But as our findings suggest, the short-circuiting of community ties characterizes not just oblivious "young" lovers but also stable married couples. Spouses are expected to be confidants and the main source of emotional support, so the married are less likely than singles to call a sibling, parent, or friend to recount their day at work or their problems with kids. The married are also less able to spontaneously get together with friends without worrying that their spouse will feel emotionally deprived. And friends and family may feel less inclined to just "drop by" due to the risk of "interrupting

something."

What's more, marriage today carries cultural expectations of self-sufficiency. Americans believe couples should be able to make it on their own—both practically and emotionally. This does not mean that kin or friends refuse to help the married when asked. It means that, when they get married, couples think they should be able to support and care for themselves. Many even postpone getting married until they know they can "make it on their own," even if that means not getting married at all.

The greed of marriage is hardly universal—it is primarily a contemporary phenomenon. Anthropologists of so-called primitive societies—those hardly touched by industrialization or globalization—find that marriage is often used to expand rather than limit community ties. They observe that rules prohibiting incest and promoting "marrying out" extend to distant relatives. This ensures that family members of married couples can rely economically and politically on a broader array of relatives. Such rules emphasize the communal integration that marriages ensure in such societies. Weddings are clearly community events in this context—they celebrate newly formed kin alliances rather than the special relationship of the marital pair. Banning the withdrawal of husbands and wives, such societies do not have honeymoons—it is not appropriate to leave the community behind to go off on some private adventure.

Modern marriage is different—from the very outset. As

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**As they go off on their honeymoon adventure, the starry-eyed couple is supposed to leave all the other loved ones behind—the first step toward communal withdrawal.**

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a recent Gallup poll finds, 94 percent of unmarried young women and men say their primary goal in marriage is finding a "soul mate" (compare this not only to "primitive societies" but also to the 1950s aspiration of finding a mate who would fit the breadwinner or homemaker mold). Finding a soul mate means turning inward—pushing aside other relationships. In line with these expectations, contemporary

weddings place more emphasis on individuals than community. As Andrew Cherlin argues, weddings today celebrate romance—a decidedly private experience. Contemporary wedding rituals promote self-development, individual display, and personal achievement rather than the approval and alliances of kin.

Then comes the honeymoon. Although the wedding may still have elements of a community ritual, the honeymoon is a decidedly private one. Honeymoons, in fact, first developed in the 19th century when the idea of marriage as a private intimate relationship, set off from community life, began to take hold. Today, honeymoons of some kind are a

nearly universal experience in the United States. Recent surveys estimate that approximately 85 percent of all weddings, and 99 percent of traditional weddings, culminate in honeymoons. As they go off on their honeymoon adventure, the starry-eyed couple is supposed to leave all the other loved ones behind—the first step toward communal withdrawal. When they return, they are expected to no longer rely on relatives for jobs, education, or welfare assistance. And the expectation for self-sufficiency of married couples in the contemporary United States generates the effect that we observed: namely, marriage threatens ties outside itself.

## communities and marriages

Political and religious movements have often recognized that marriage can undermine other relationships. Communal societies, like Oneida in the 19th century, rejected marriage and family because they viewed the “marriage spirit” as inimical to community life. If any couple exhibited



*“Today I’m announcing I’ve decided to get out of my family so I can devote more time to politics.”*

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the marriage spirit, the community worked to break it up. More recently, kibbutzim have emphasized that the strength of the collectivity depends on a weakened marital and family life. Sociologist Jeff Goodwin showed how the Huk rebels in the Philippines imposed limits on marriage to assure that their members would remain committed to the cause. Or take the Catholic Church’s stance on the celibacy of monks and nuns; as Coser writes, “[The Church]...stressed that ministers should abstain from marriage because the multiplicity of distractions originating in family life rendered it desirable for those in the service of the Church to be

relieved from family care and anxiety.”

In the recent past, some pointed to the vitality of African-American communities—whether on street corners, in churches, households brimming with extended kin, or civil rights movements. In her classic study of poor black families, *All Our Kin*, anthropologist Carol Stack found that the bonds of marriage can be incompatible with other relationships: “Black families and the non-kin they regard as kin have evolved...social controls against the formation of marriages that could endanger [them].”

People who are immersed in relationships with relatives and friends may thus be less likely to get married. One reason is that to prevent the weakening of community ties, some communities may discourage marriage. Or those with deep community ties may have less need for marriage because those ties satisfy some of the same needs. Alternatively, intense community ties may reduce the opportunity to meet a marital partner. Someone who hangs out all the time with close relatives and friends may have little chance to meet a new mate. So the reduced community ties of the married likely result both from self-selection into marriage and from the effects of marriage itself.

These reduced ties may even have some favorable effects. Just as we should not romanticize marriage, we should not romanticize community ties. Putnam has recently noted that there can be a “dark side of social capital,” including gangs and criminal networks. The reduction of relationships outside marriage may then also be associated with a withdrawal from such dangerous networks. Still, sociologists and politicians agree that community ties are generally a positive force.

## what does marriage promotion do?

Politicians and social commentators talk a lot about the value of the family as well as about its much-lamented decline. But they often assume a very narrow family: married couples and their young children. Many even blame the decline in community involvement on the decline of that traditional nuclear family. Robert Putnam began with this assumption in his popular book, *Bowling Alone*. But after looking at his data, he dismissed this explanation: “The evidence is not consistent with the thesis that the overall decline in civic engagement and social connectedness is attributable to the decline in the traditional family. On the contrary, to some extent the decline in family obligations ought to have freed up more time for social and community involvement.”

Putnam’s conclusions, as well as our findings, suggest that the growing advocacy for marriage—from both the right and the left—may unwittingly undermine community.



This holds for both the initiatives to promote heterosexual marriages and the movements to allow gay and lesbian marriages. Gays and lesbians, once noted for their vibrant culture and community life, may find themselves behind picket fences with fewer friends dropping by.

But few policymakers today acknowledge that marriage might have detrimental effects. Quite the reverse: pushing marriage, especially on the poor, is popular in mainstream political circles. To be sure, marriage-promotion initiatives often fail. But when they succeed, they have some unanticipated ill effects. They increase domestic violence and marital conflict. As Andrew Cherlin wrote in this magazine several years ago, "The problem is that it is hard to support healthy marriages without concurrently supporting unhealthy marriages." But whether they promote healthy or unhealthy unions, marriage initiatives are likely to produce a decline in community engagement. Ties to relatives and friends, like intense political and religious engagement, may depend on an unfettered life.

### recommended resources

Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh. *The Anti-Social Family* (Verso, 1982). Analyzes the oppressive nature of marriage and

the nuclear family and suggests that it cuts off ties to family and friends, especially for women.

Andrew J. Cherlin. "Should the Government Promote Marriage?" *Contexts* 3 (Fall 2003): 22-29. Criticizes governmental marriage-promotion initiatives for their ineffectiveness and unresponsiveness to the realities of family life.

Karen Hansen. *Not-So-Nuclear Families: Class, Gender, and Networks of Care* (Rutgers University Press, 2005). Shows that although mothers and fathers believe in the importance of nuclear family independence, they end up relying on kin, neighbors, and friends for child care.

Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling Alone* (Simon and Schuster, 2000). Over the last 25 years, Americans have become disconnected from family, friends, and social institutions, including the church, recreational clubs, and political parties.

Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher. *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (Doubleday, 2000). Argues that marriage protects both women and men, making them happier, healthier, and wealthier.