

Chad Francour

Marriage

Marriage Takes Work

No matter how many a person has been to in his or her life, it is hard to shake the contagious optimism of a wedding. Couples vow to love one another through sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, and till death do us apart. Many marriages, however, become unhappy; some dissipate and others end in divorce. The successful ones even have their challenges. No one will deny any long-term relationship is hard, in fact, there might be evidence that those relationships are getting harder. Why? I explore the history of marriages, the radically higher expectations, and the ways we can improve our love life by asking more or less from our partners. I was listening to NPR and heard a podcast from Shankar Vedantam, <https://www.npr.org/2018/02/12/584531641/when-did-marriage-become-so-hard>, on Hidden Brain titled, "When Did Marriage Become So Hard?" So here we go...

Professor Stephanie Coontz at Evergreen State College and author of, "Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage," was looking at the history of marriage and came to a startling revelation. In the past, marriages had nothing to do with feelings and attraction of two people to one another. The marriage was more about economics and acquiring powerful in-laws (<http://www.stephaniecoontz.com/>).

Marriage originally, arose in more egalitarian societies as a way of sharing resources and establishing peaceful relationships with people one might not often see in daily life (Coontz). Marriage was a way of circulating obligations and goods; I marry my child off to you and in return we owe certain goods to each other.

The next example helps illustrate this point in history. The union between Cleopatra of Egypt and Mark Anthony of Rome was primarily over strategy (www.datehookup.com). Rome and Egypt, at that time, had been two of the most powerful empires in the world. The thinking was if someone could get those two together the empires would be unstoppable.

The story goes that Cleopatra was married to her brother, without any speculation of this; she hated it (www.datehookup.com). She had an affair with Julius Caesar of Rome. She became pregnant. When the baby was born it was named Cesarean. The child gave Cleopatra and Caesar a claim to each other's throne. It was something both wanted to do for his or her kingdom. Caesar died and then Mark Anthony comes along to take his place. Cleopatra wanted Cesarean to rule but he was too young so Mark Anthony stepped in to rule. It was a great political allegiance.

The strategy of marrying another person based on economic success was not just for kings and queens. It was a common misconception that the lower-class people married for love (Vedantam). In other words, a farmer could not manage a farm alone so farmers married other farmers and likely so

bakers married other bakers. Peasants married other peasants based on good rapport as a hard worker. The reputation of a person was more important than this frivolous idea a marriage was based on attraction.

In the 1700s and 1800s a different trend began to catch fire by this idea that love will conquer. This was depicted in Jane Austen's book, "Pride and Prejudice." The plot of the story was Mr. Darcy promised to marry his wealthy cousin but falls for Elizabeth Bennett sending his aunt into an outrage. This example is excellent because it illustrates the difference between genders. Men could marry down the social class because he could go out and earn wages, however, women had to be very cautious in that she needs to marry someone whom her parents have picked out and most likely can support her (Coontz). During this time, men were more romantic than women in regard to the courtship. By the second half of the 19th century Jane Austen's model of marriage had taken hold in the United States. The impression that marriage based on other than love was seen as old-fashioned. Another idea would come of marriage.

If marriage was seen as a unity of two people with common backgrounds and social classes, the new model began to celebrate the radical difference between two individuals. The new theory saw marriage as the union of opposites for men and women (Gee, 2014). This idea of a person only can access the emotions, abilities, and resources of the counterpart by getting married and he or she would feel incomplete without the other person. This dovetail with a changing economic status in the country resulted in men became breadwinners and women became homemakers.

The 1950s sitcom, "Leave It to Beaver," made it clear of the gender roles. The gender biases played a clear role in how one thought and acted about marriage (Vedantam, 2018). This idea of the male breadwinner was unknown until the 19th century. In other words, a dual role took place in the marriage. The husband and wife took care of the home duties. A man did not, "take home the bacon," a common phrase used during this time period. The man could have killed the pig but the woman helped to raise it, cured the bacon, and often took it to market. The thinking pattern emphasizes this new idea of a man and a woman is so different. The idea that a man had to do all the outside work and a woman had to do all the inside chores.

The concern was raised on this thinking that opposites attract when both did not have the bond of shared work or frameworks of a shared community. Advocates said men and women would stay together to feel psychologically complete. This theory was later appropriated in romantic stories and movies (Vedantam, 2018).

As the surge of divorce rates in the 1970s and 80s started to change this idea of opposites attract when we saw individuals who shared interests and values (Wilcox, 2009). It was not seen as far as marrying other farmers but people with similar educational and cultural backgrounds along with same political attitudes. It is critical to note that the definition of love itself has changed from the union of

opposites to a blending of people who share these values (Watson, 2011). The big challenges of love today are finding those people who share these things.

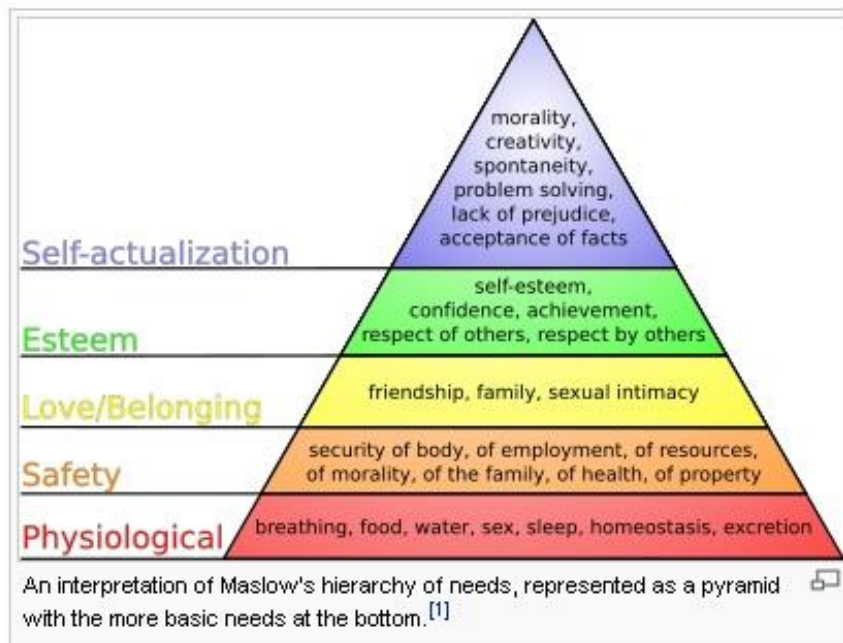
We see how marriage changed from an institution based on primarily economic partnerships and political expedience to one based on romantic love. Over the course of the 19th century, the change to love marriages becomes the norm. The craze was over how couple could make love last a lifetime. We all have seen or heard of these elderly couples who have been together for most of his or her life.

Social psychologist, Eli Finkel at Northwestern University studied the psychological effects of marriage. He wrote a book titled, "All or Nothing Marriage." He has identified a term that many couples face today. Modern marriages run the risks of suffocation (<http://elifinkel.com/allornothingmarriage/>). To appreciate this term we need to look at a time in the 1960s and 70s.

A couple wanted to complement each other through the emphasis of love with achieving a sense of personal fulfillment in the way of personal growth (Shpancer, 2014). In other words, we wanted to experience self-actualization and growth into a more authentic version of oneself. We consistently hear the stories about someone walking out on a significant other and trying to create a more meaningful life. We are all searching for our true selves and we epitomize the strengths and weaknesses to this modern contemporary approach to marriage. We are looking to our spouse for love and personal growth and fulfillment.

For the first time we see couples who are in a loving marriage and treated each other well but felt stagnant in the marriage (Finkel, 2018). A person might be willing to bear a life of heartache that he or she chooses or to end the relationship. Until this time, the only cause of divorce was serious abuse or desertion was present in a relationship to file for divorce but now in the 1970s we start seeing No Default divorce laws. The modern idea that we are in search of entitlement of real fulfillment and growth through our marriages is falling short; so we see it as a viable option to end the marriage.

We can also draw a comparison between Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of personal needs to that of marriage. Maslow's hierarchy can be thought of like a pyramid. At the bottom, we have physiological and safety which is a basic human need like breathing, food, and water. Traveling up to the middle, we see love/belonging. Some examples would be friendship, family, and sexual intimacy. At the very top there lies self-actualization. We have more high-level cognition of complex problem-solving, lack of prejudices, and morality.



A similar hierarchy as well can be drawn towards marriage. The idea is called, "Mount Maslow," hierarchy of marriage has radically changed in America to meet our needs differently than in the past when marriage met our economic/survival needs (Finkel, 2018). If we track couples through time we see more marriages had been about love. In the 1960s till today we still are looking for love but today we are at the top of the hierarchy. The esteem and actualization may be the expectations now for marriage. Our expectations of marriage have ascended from the bottom to the top over the course of history. We can then say that as we are climbing to the top of an enormous mountain we might need oxygen.

We may have some phenomenal events (e.g., children, careers, or experiences) as we travel to the top of the mountain but then the oxygen becomes thinner. We can conclude that when there is a successful experience at the top of the mountain, the event, requires you to invest a lot of oxygen. In other words, are we willing to invest our time and effort into a marriage before we experience those euphoric moments.

On the other side, if we do not bring enough oxygen in our climb we will suffocate. In his book he identifies that term as the suffocation model. The model suggests that it is lovely at the top of the mountain and that we try to achieve not only this love, connection, and authenticity through marriage but we are trying to do it on the cheap (Finkel, 2018). We are trying to reach the top without investing the time and psychological energy that are shown in every lasting and

loving relationship. We are left on the top of the mountain without the resources to make our marriage succeed. In other words, that is what gives this disconnect is our stereotypes or expectations of what marriage can offer us.

Looking at it this way, we do not wake up one day expecting to bike 50 miles and then run a half marathon without any preparation and having the ability to recognize these limitations. If we think about what we are asking of our marriages these days, in terms of ambition for these expectations when we get tired or lazy to invest in the quality of the relationship, of course, we cannot make the summit attempt to give ourselves or to our partners. We fail to meet those needs in terms of the high end of Maslow's hierarchy. How can we align with what we are asking of our partner with what the marriage is realistically and hopefully able to offer us?

Marriage was an economic institution and we were possibly given a partner, social status, and companionship, all in believed succession.

We want a best friend, trusted confidant, and a passionate lover. We come to one person; what was asked of an entire village to fulfill (Perel, 2013). We want: belonging, identity, and continuity but also given transcendence, awe, and mystery all in one. Give me comfort, give me edge, give me the innovation, give me familiarity, give me surprise, and now we arrive at the existential reality of the cause.

The analogy given by Perel in her Ted talk encapsulates this idea that a person who once turned to five different friends for support he or she needed but when the individual gets married the partner is unable to meet those needs and she or he is left feeling unfulfilled.

In the research literature on obtaining our goals, there is a term called multifinality, and it means the same cause (e.g., marriage) leads to different outcomes or goals (<http://what-when-how.com/social-sciences/multifinality-social-science/>). When I ride my bicycle, for example, to work; I simultaneously meet my need to get to work but also exercise and sunshine. In other words, the one activity can serve many different functions.

The interesting comparison to marriage is that we have done the same thing. The longest time marriage has served a set and limited functions for us. We have piled, over time, these emotions and psychological functions on one's partners instead of turning to a close friend or family member for going out or deep conversations (Finkel, 2018). Our spouses have replaced that vacancy in our lives. A person might ask, then, how we might change these hopes.

There are the expectations that we can and will unlock these characteristics from our significant other. The contemporary archetype of marriages, today, is the search for someone to make the truest version of ourselves come out with enough time and effort. To explain this idea I might have to backtrack a bit to a time when Michelangelo was alive. Michelangelo was a sculptor, and when he talked about

sculpting, he spoke in terms of unleashing his work from the rock in which it has been sleeping. The sculptor's job was not to create something new but to refine, rebuff, or polish the edges of the rock.

The Michelangelo metaphor gives a good description of how couples today try to relate to each other. In other words, we all have an actual self, the person who we currently are, and have an ideal self. The ideal self is a version that is aspirational and we look to our partners to be are sculptors and mold us into the best version of ourselves. The next question we might have is does everyone have this power of Michelangelo?

The answer is YES! We have this artistic power but it is not easy to change a person and everyone is not compatible; along with our ideal self maybe not be the ideal self your partner envisioned. Any relationship is a delicate dance we all play. The best relationships today are aligned to do just that; bring out the best in each other and connect in a way that facilitates growth and a profound emotional connection and psychological fulfillment.

Many marriage experts suggest that high expectations are the enemy of happiness in a marriage. His book says many marriages on average are unhappier than a century ago but there are ones that do meet the needs of the top of the mountain. What if a person who has high expectations and the partner is able to meet them in a marriage?

The past 100 years, emphasized a difference as erotic but now the challenge is how we put that sizzle into equality. How does a person make equality erotic? Where is the fire in compromise and consensus, child pickups and doctor appointments? What is the difference between a Subaru Outback and a Ferrari? It is true, we are asking more and more of these love and psychological based relationships then we have in the past.

Footnote: My hope is you enjoyed the topic of marriage as much as myself. What are your questions that you might have about marriage? Connect with me...

Resources

- Coontz, S. (2005). Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage.
<http://www.stephaniecoontz.com/books/marriage/#>.
- <https://www.datehookup.com/singles-content-historys-greatest-love-affair-cleopatra-and-mark-antony.htm>
- Gee, C. (2014). Does the 'Opposites Attract' Rule Really Work in Relationships?
http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/collette-gee/relationships_b_5303521.html.
- Perel, E. (2013). The Secret Desire in a Long-Term Relationship. TedSaloon, NYC 2013.
https://www.ted.com/talks/esther_perel_the_secret_to_desire_in_a_long_term_relationship.
- Shpancer, N. (2014). Laws of Attraction: How Do We Select a Life Partner?
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/insight-therapy/201412/laws-attraction-how-do-we-select-life-partner>.
- Wilcox, W. (2009). The Evolution of Divorce. <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-evolution-of-divorce>.
- Watson, J. (2011). American History: The 1960s, a Decade That Changed a Nation.
<https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/american-history-the-1960s-10-years-that-changed-a-nation-134041543/114624.html>.
- Vedantam, S. (2018). When Did Marriage Become so Hard?
<https://www.npr.org/2018/02/12/584531641/when-did-marriage-become-so-hard>.